

Winter 721

Chapter 721: Death of the Regent King? (Part 2)

It was the Chief Steward Lin Ze, who had served three Emperors and was rumored to have lived for over two centuries as the head of the council.

He remained stooped, yet steady like an ancient tree.

Arens' lips trembled, his voice fractured into breaths like the cold wind: "All of you, leave..."

The doctors turned pale, hurriedly retreating as if pardoned.

The heavy door slowly closed behind them, the vibrations echoing in the depths of the bedchamber.

In the end, the vast room was left with only two people—the dying Regent King, and the old man who had always stood in the deepest shadows of imperial power.

Arens could feel the cold seeping from his limbs, climbing to his chest like a tide.

Knowing he would not last the day, he mustered his final strength to grasp Lin Ze's wrist.

The grip was feeble, yet it was like clutching a useless straw while drowning.

"Lin Ze..." Arens' muddled pupils trembled slightly, "I tried my best... really... will Father... blame me..."

This was the most vulnerable question of a dying man, not a Regent King's inquiry, but a son's fear.

Lin Ze's face showed no sorrow; it remained impassive as ever, as if nothing in the world could stir a ripple in his heart.

He lightly reversed his grip on Arens' cold hand, leaning down to bring his timeworn face close to the Regent King's left ear.

He whispered softly, words that did not seem like comfort.

Arens' pupils, which had almost scattered, suddenly constricted to pinpoints, glaring hard at the old man who had raised him.

His frail chest heaved violently, emitting guttural sounds from his throat as if trying to shout something, but unable to form complete syllables.

Yet Lin Ze only looked back with those indifferent eyes.

Then, the seemingly hunched and emaciated old man gently lifted the Regent King's body, his movements as tender as cradling a baby.

"Let's go, young master Arens."

The next moment—boom!!

Lightning tore the night sky, white light slashed through the window into the bedchamber.

When the thunder subsided, the two in the chamber had vanished without a trace.

Only the candle flame continued to flicker, illuminating the empty bedchamber, as if nothing had ever existed.

.....

Outside, the thunder roared, as if trying to tear a wound into the night sky, and the rain pounded the eaves, dense as war drums.

Yet inside the banquet hall of the Fourth Prince's residence was an entirely different world.

The imperial orchestra sat in a corner, strings and flutes gracefully intertwining, performing elegant court suites.

The sound of the instruments firmly suppressed the fury of the thunder outside, creating an illusion, as if this space were completely isolated from the rest of the Imperial Capital.

The air was filled with the aroma of rare red tea, carrying a faint floral scent.

Lain disliked strong alcohol; in such settings, he preferred tea, which kept him sober and appeared more restrained and graceful.

The guests able to stand here tonight were themselves symbols of status.

At least a Count or a true Lord wielding organized military force was required to step into this banquet hall.

They were not wealthy from money alone but were those who could influence the lifeblood of a domain on the empire's map.

Because of this, their demeanor carried a restrained yet unmistakable tension of ambition.

A few old aristocrats bowed slightly, as if preemptively currying favor with the future, their posture on the brink of obsequiousness.

Some from military families with broad shoulders and upright postures occasionally glanced at Lain.

They were accustomed to following the strong, and the current powerhouse in the Imperial Capital was evidently the Fourth Prince.

Duke Simmons stood at the center of the banquet hall, meticulously dressed for the evening.

The deep purple and gold embroidered tiger robe of his family draped over his shoulders, symbolic of the head of the Simmons family among the Eight Great Clans, worn only for truly significant events.

His face displayed uncontainable joy, like some release after years of repression.

After all, he had bet on the Fourth Prince not just for one or two years.

Now, the returns were finally arriving.

Simmons raised his teacup, his voice resonating with an unlikely vigor for an elder: "Gentlemen! Let us raise a toast to the new era approaching! To the new era led by His Highness the Fourth Prince! The Empire shall return to the path of reason!"

The surrounding civil servants and nobility nodded in agreement, their tones tinged with fervent adulation.

The entire banquet was like a warm and bright stage, where every noble conducted themselves with cautious displays of loyalty and anticipation.

From the look of it, this was nearly an early enthronement banquet.

Sitting at the main seat, Rhine held his cup of tea, speaking humbly: "Duke, you flatter me."

But in his eyes lay a clear delight, as if he had just heard a melody that resonated deeply with him.

Duke Simmons took a few cautious steps forward, though unable to hide his pride: "Your Highness, the succession documents for the Inspectorate are ready."

Once the bell tolls, those few hesitant among the Eight Great Clans... I've already given them a nudge. They know where to stand now."

The confidence in his tone came from successfully garnering much support for the Fourth Prince, marking the proudest political gamble of his life.

Rhine lifted his gaze slightly, a gentle encouragement in his eyes: "You've worked hard, Simmons. The future of the Empire will certainly have a very important place for you."

Duke Simmons felt a weight lift off his shoulders, and couldn't help but chuckle softly: "To earn Lord Emperor's trust is my honor."

Rhine's fingers slightly tightened, and the teacup shook lightly but didn't spill a drop.

He clearly relished that address.

A thunderclap boomed again, causing the window frames to tremble slightly, yet the heavy curtains kept it firmly outside.

In the banquet hall, glasses clinked, whispers continued, laughter and flattery intertwined.

The atmosphere seemed to tell every guest that the future power of the Empire was firmly in the hands of the Fourth Prince.

At that moment, a personal guard slipped silently through the side door.

His movements were ghostly quiet, disturbing none of the guests, as he moved through the candle shadows to Rhine's side.

He leaned down and whispered, only audible to the Fourth Prince: "Your Highness, urgent news... The Second Prince's and Fifth Prince's residences are empty."

The weight of the news could have caused many nobles to lose composure on the spot, but Rhine's hand didn't so much as twitch, as he smoothly held his teacup.

This was within his expectations.

Prey sensing a crisis would naturally flee, yet the more urgent their flight, the more it indicated that the balance of control had fully tilted in his favor.

The guard shifted his feet nervously: "Your Highness... shouldn't we seal the city gates and pursue them?"

Rhine lifted his teacup, taking a light sip. "Now that city defense is in my hands, they have no supplies, no soldiers. Even if they escape, what upheaval could they cause? Let them run, the farther the better, further cement the charge of absconding out of guilt."

The guard accepted the order and withdrew.

In less than ten minutes, the guard returned briskly, his demeanor visibly more frantic, his voice trembling as he approached Rhine.

Rhine smiled: "Caught the two mice?"

The guard struggled to speak: "Your Highness... no. It's... the Regent King."

"Oh?" Rhine raised an eyebrow, "Out of breath?"

"No... gone." The guard swallowed, "Regent King Arens and Lord Chief Steward Linze... vanished into thin air in the sleeping chamber. When we entered, we only saw lingering flashes."

Rhine's hand finally trembled, causing the teacup to lightly sway.

He stared at the guard to confirm: "Truly disappeared?"

The guard nodded.

Within the banquet hall, music continued as guests remained immersed in the bustling congratulations, unaware of the storm brewing at the throne's edge.

Rhine suppressed the unexpected unease in his chest, quickly regaining his calm.

"The truth doesn't matter," he reminded himself internally, "What matters is what everyone believes."

So he ordered quietly, speaking quickly but with clarity: "From now on, Regent King Arens died of illness ten minutes ago. Physicians and guards can testify."

The guard hesitated: "But... the body..."

"Find one," Rhine said coldly, "Just similar in build. Use alchemy potion on the face, make it unrecognizable, say the illness caused it to rot."

The guard's pupils shrank: "Your, Your Highness, but this..."

Rhine looked up, repeating each word: "The Regent King died tonight, that's the only truth. In the announcement in the next days, he must be a corpse lying in the coffin. You must accomplish this."

Though the last sentence wasn't finished, the guard realized the consequences, turning pale, replying in a trembling voice: "Yes... I will make it happen."

As the guard hurriedly left, the guests at the banquet noticed the commotion.

Dozens of eyes simultaneously turned toward the main seat.

Rhine slowly stood, regaining composure, speaking in a voice filled with sorrow: "Everyone... I've just received word. Regent King Arens... has just passed away."

Chapter 722: Coronation Ceremony

On the seventh day after the Regent King's death, the clouds over the Imperial Capital still hadn't dispersed.

The continuous rain seemed intent on washing away a truth hidden within the royal city, but only pressed the oppressive air lower and lower.

In front of the Imperial Hall, a massive array of nobility and civil servants stood in line, their cloaks billowing in the wind and rain, yet they still maintained their composure.

Today was the day to bid farewell to the Regent King Arons, supposedly a solemn, glorious imperial ceremony.

Yet everyone could see that there was a strange gap between the scale of the funeral and the level it should have been.

The priest's prayers were hurriedly recited, the ceremonial officer's steps were faster than usual, and the coffin was almost hastily sent to the crypt under the escort of several guards.

The nobles exchanged secretive glances; some frowned, others whispered...

It had only been seven days since the Regent King's death, and the body was hurriedly buried, which was not in accordance with the rites.

Too fast, as if to cover something up.

Moreover... no one had really seen the state of the body.

It was said that the Regent King's condition had worsened before his death, his face festering, and to avoid disturbing everyone, the coffin should not be opened.

But this explanation only made most people more uneasy.

The Fourth Prince Rhine stood below the altar, cloaked in black, his expression pained.

Karen at his side quietly reported the guest list, confirming no absent family would cause trouble.

Rhine only nodded slightly, as if he had everything under control.

At least on the surface.

In fact, during these seven days, he had hardly spent a single night in full sleep.

He was busy appeasing the Eight Great Clans, making them believe the Empire remained within a controllable scope.

He purged the opposition, replacing or detaining a number of key officials under various pretexts.

He took control of the city defense, shifts, arrests, and commands with lightning speed, adopting all the powers left by the Regent King.

More importantly, the Second Prince and Fifth Prince completely disappeared, and the troops Rhine sent out only found the Second Prince's army, which then broke through their enclosure.

More troubling to him was the Regent King himself...

He indeed died, but the body was missing.

Rhine could only select a prisoner from the dungeons of similar build, emaciated to skin and bones, and use alchemical potions to corrode the face, convincing everyone it was the Regent King who had died of illness and rot.

He knew this was a gamble, but without a body, the funeral could not proceed, and without the funeral, he could not move on to the next step of his plan: choosing a new Regent King.

And he must become that Regent King.

At this moment, the prayers ended, the coffin was slowly pushed deeper into the crypt, the ceremonial officer announced the completion of the funeral, and the dignitaries and nobles turned towards the Imperial Hall.

Rhine stepped forward, with Karen closely following, whispering, "Your Highness, the Eight Great Clans are all seated, waiting for you to host the regency ceremony."

Rhine nodded, "Very well. The longer they wait, the more it shows that I am the only choice to bring stability to the Empire."

Karen quietly suppressed his excited breath.

During these seven days, he was the one most acutely aware of the pressure and power struggle Rhine faced.

Those opposed were quietly replaced, those hesitant were appeased, and those opportunistic were now eager to swear allegiance in the Imperial Hall.

Rhine walked up the Imperial Hall's white jade steps, rainwater dripping from the eaves, splashing at his feet.

He softly said, "After today, the Empire will welcome true order."

Karen looked up at him, his voice trembling, "Your Highness... you have already won."

Rhine did not smile, only spoke lightly, "No, there's one final step."

Having just returned from the Royal Cemetery, Rhine hadn't even had time to return to the mansion.

In a side hall of the palace, the attendant stripped off his rain-soaked black mourning attire, piece by piece, changing into the robes symbolizing the Empire's highest ruler.

His fingers trembled slightly, not from sorrow, but from the adrenaline coursing through his body.

As he had the attendant fasten the last button, he muttered, "Hurry up. Has Simmons arrived? What about those from the Inspectorate?"

The attendant nodded nervously, cloaked his shoulders, and Rhine stepped toward the Imperial Hall.

When he pushed open the massive doors of the Imperial Hall, the sounds of rain and wind seemed instantly cut off.

The temple-like hall was vast and solemn, the high ceilings held a blue flame that illuminated the marble floors but gave no warmth.

Twelve massive relics stood on either side of the walls: the broken Dragon Shield of Dragonbreath City, the Crescent Lance of Gloomy Wind Ridge, the cracked battle helmet of the Iron Fortress Knight Order...

They stood like silent giants, looking down from above on this small and ambitious usurper.

At the highest step, the black obsidian throne carved in its entire form, loomed in shadow.

Rhine glanced up at it; that was the position he had yearned for half his life.

Within the hall, the Eight Great Clans and civil and military officials were all gathered, every gaze fell sharply on Rhine.

The Regent King was dead, the Empire needed a new helmsman.

And everyone knew, the young prince now entering the Imperial Hall, even with the Emperor's absence, and the Imperial Throne nominally vacant, viewed himself as the sword that would sooner or later be firmly embedded in the Dragon Throne.

Yet below in the Imperial Hall, the eight core seats around the New Moon Table appeared particularly desolate.

These were the eight chairs symbolizing the Empire's highest noble power, which should have been filled during major decisions, now only seated four.

Duke Simmons sat at the forefront, his face glowing with joy.

He kept standing up amidst the seats, conversing quietly with the surrounding officials, as if tonight was a celebration he personally arranged.

He was a die-hard loyalist of Rhine, betting everything on him, and now reveling in his fortune.

Chapter 723: Coronation Ceremony (Part 2)

Duke Diaz was dressed in the deep-patterned robe of the Inspectorate, with a sullen expression.

His family's hereditary rights were still in the hands of the Royal Family, and he had to keep a close watch, no matter which way the wind blew.

The representative of the Holden family looked as withered as a piece of half-dead wood.

With a huge old debt owed to the treasury, they faced a dead end if they did not attend, and so they could only grit their teeth and sit at this table, symbolizing the power of the Empire.

The representative of the Beres family continuously rubbed his cuff, his face full of hesitation.

They were the most typical fence-sitters; whichever way the wind blew, there their knees would bend.

Now he appeared here, only because the trend seemed to favor the Fourth Prince.

The Kadari Family's representative was absent; a family once personally purged by the former Emperor and stripped of their permanent seat in the Noble Council, now temporarily reinstated to make up the eight-seat requirement for the Fourth Prince.

Seated at the last position, with an expression of humility, at least outwardly appearing grateful.

And the three empty chairs, like tombstones, reminded everyone:

Duke Calvin was silent, even withdrawing his representative Eleanor from the Imperial Capital in advance.

Duke Raymond, the mainstay of the Second Prince's faction, did not appear.

The Edmund Clan, though a name in the Northern Territory, was practically extinct, and even Louis sent no emissary.

The empty seats themselves were a form of provocation.

Mei Si, the Inspectorate Director, stood in the center of the long table, clad in a silver-insignia robe. Due to the absence of the Minister of Internal Affairs, he was temporarily assigned to preside over this grand ceremony. Although his authority was temporary, it made his presence seem exceptionally heavy.

His voice echoed coldly and hollowly through the array:

"In light of the Regent King's unfortunate passing, the nation cannot be without a leader even for a day. It is now proposed to restore the system of the Electoral Prince, with His Highness, the Fourth Prince Rhine, as the inaugural Imperial Guardian."

The hall fell into an awkward silence.

According to ancestral customs, such a weighty matter required a unanimous vote from the Eight Great Clans, but now only five were present.

No one spoke. No one was willing to take on the responsibility of speaking first.

Rhine stood on the steps, raising his chin, his voice chillingly cold: "Silence is consent." He slowly scanned below: "Absence is abstinence."

He then turned to the most compliant person: "Duke Simmons, what is the count now?"

Simmons, eager and impatient, raised the scepter representing nobility's decision, his voice loud and clear:

"Five votes in favor! More than half, it's passed!"

The attendant unfolded a parchment scroll, the gold patterns of the "New Imperial Charter" shimmering faintly in the firelight, the rules rewritten personally by Rhine.

Duke Simmons was the first to sign, his pen quivering across the paper, trembling with excitement beyond control.

Next was Diaz, Holden, Beres, and Kadari.

With each name inscribed, Rhine's smile grew deeper.

When the fifth name was securely pressed upon the parchment scroll, he finally exhaled.

He raised a teacup, lightly toasting the imaginary storm outside the window.

The motion seemed calm, but more like a coronation ceremony for himself.

Father... if you were here, surely you would mock me. He murmured in his heart, even carrying a hint of barely detectable disdain.

But you never understood that politics should be elegant, not flowers watered with blood.

In those years, he watched his father purge dozens of families, his method brutal and direct, causing the entire Empire to succumb in terror.

That was not governance, just a butcher's knife hanging over everyone's head.

And I will not do so; true power should have the subjects kneel voluntarily, not be forced into a corner.

He didn't speak these words aloud but etched them in his heart deeper than any vow: no need for butchers, no need for bloodshed, no need to purge dozens of families.

Just rules, just legitimacy on paper, just a few signatures, and he could make the Empire willingly place its power into his hands.

Tonight is the first step.

Though the throne is not vacant, the true Emperor? He has been missing for so long, perhaps never to return.

Even if he did return, it would be only to hold my coronation.

He set down the cup, turning to show the civil servants in the room a gentle, composed smile:
"Gentlemen, a toast to the new order."

The crowd responded in unison, their voices resounding beneath the dome: "To His Majesty Rhine!"

.....

Torrential rain poured into the valley, the sound of the water like countless iron arrows striking simultaneously.

The Second Prince Kaelin brought his last 800 loyal personal guards to this place.

They had just broken through from the western suburbs, their armor full of knife marks, many still bearing unbandaged wounds, yet gritting their teeth and holding on, not one groaned.

As they passed through the last checkpoint and arrived deep in the valley, the sight before them caused even Kaelin to hold his breath tight.

Over ten thousand troops, including Raymond's Greyrock Cavalry and the 10th, 31st Border Legions... stood solemnly in the rain.

Rain flowed down their helmets, washing the mud from their faces, but they stood unwavering, like rows of iron monoliths standing in the storm.

Kaelin rode past these knights.

Their eyes bore no confusion or expectation but a fierce gleam of being cornered.

Months without provisions had forced them to eat grass roots, boil leather, even kill horses with their own hands to survive.

This extreme pressure did not destroy but pushed them from men toward beasts.

They needed neither drugs to control nor oaths to bind them; hatred itself was the purest battle spirit.

Kaelin's lips curved upwards slowly.

"This is not an army." He murmured, satisfaction laced with coldness in his tone, "This is a wolf pack."

He scanned the distance: "Rhine, that bookworm, has driven the Empire's watchdogs mad with hunger... now, let him taste being torn apart personally."

Just as the words fell, Duke Raymond rode out from the other end of the rain, his cloak billowing in the storm.

He exchanged no pleasantries, simply lifted a hand in signal.

At once, hundreds of supply wagons covered in oilcloth were simultaneously unveiled by the knights.

As the oilcloth hit the ground, a manic gleam flashed through the eyes of knights standing in the storm.

The wagons held no magic glows, no ceremonial decorations, only the most direct spark for the army's morale:

—Chests of Imperial Gold Coins, blazing gold under the torchlight's reflection.

Raymond, like a generous master, half raised his chin, his tone calm, even a bit contemptuous:

"Your Highness, Rhine thinks withholding the treasury can force your surrender." He gestured to the supply wagons, "But he forgot a 300-year accumulation of the Raymond family can't be stopped by such petty palace tricks."

He raised a hand to suppress the rain: "These... are enough for this army to turn over every flagstone in the Imperial Capital."

Kaelin was silent for a moment, then stepped slowly onto a rain-exposed platform, his armor shining in the lightning's glare.

He unsheathed the sword symbolizing imperial authority, the blade slicing a cold arc through the rain.

The sound of rain seemed, for an instant, muffled.

Kaelin's voice was loud and forceful, carrying an inherent arrogance of royal blood: "Knights!"

His sword pointed towards the direction outside Greyrock Valley: "I know you're hungry —! I also know you've been wronged!"

The knights' eyes glowed red under the lightning.

Kaelin's voice suddenly dropped, yet it was more chilling than a roar:

"Rhine! That coward hiding in the Imperial Hall, only playing with ink!

He poisoned the Regent King! He cut off your provisions! He treated the Empire's heroes like beggars!"

Thunder roared, lending a cold edge to his words.

He raised his longsword high, its tip stabbing at the night sky.

"I don't want you to abide by rules, I want only one thing from you." He enunciated each word, his voice like striking steel, "Enter the city, reclaim your wealth! Reclaim your glory!"

The wind swept the rain towards them.

In the next moment, lightning tore through the night sky, illuminating Kaelin's side profile as cold and stern as wrought iron.

He shouted: "In two days, I want to drink Rhine's blood in the Imperial Hall! And you shall drink fine wine on Victory Avenue!!"

He suddenly swung the Sword of Punishment downwards, landing it on the rock.

"Troops—move out!!"

The response was not chaotic cheers, but the simultaneous metallic rasp of thousands of weapons being drawn.

The sound was heavy, cold, like a giant beast awakening in the pouring rain, baring its fangs.

Kaelin slightly raised his chin, his chest heaving with fierce satisfaction.

The hunters set off on their nocturnal march into the city.

Chapter 724: Battle of the Heirs

Seventy-two hours after the Fourth Prince Rhine ascended to the position of Regent King, the air in the Imperial Capital was as tense as a bowstring drawn to the full.

The storm had yet to strike, but the wind outside the west city was already lifting the dust.

From afar, the mountains echoed with a rumble akin to war drums, as Duke Raymond and the Second Prince Kaelin's coalition army approached.

Meanwhile, the west city wall of the Imperial Capital had been completely locked down.

All drawbridges retracted, the three-layer gates descended, streets emptied, and the Forbidden Army along with the academy guards were armored and ready.

The entire city resembled a giant beast, curling up and waiting for the first bite of the impending tear.

Rhine stood atop the highest command tower of the west city wall, with a thick crimson carpet underfoot, contrasting absurdly with the muddy battlefield outside the city.

One hand held a cup of red tea, its scent oddly prominent in the damp cold air before the rain, while the other hand wielded a silver-plated telescope, overlooking the densely packed coalition army below the city.

The tower was crowded with civil servants and nobles of the Imperial Capital.

They were all draped in light armor styled like ceremonial attire, most faces turning pale at the sight beyond the city.

Duke Simmons stood behind Rhine, gripping a cane with both hands.

His eyes were fixed on the horizon's seething shadow: "Your Highness... that... it seems it's more than just an army..."

Rhine turned his head slightly, giving him a steady look almost to the point of casualness: "Duke, be calm."

He gestured for Simmons to look outside the city wall.

Outside the city wall, a faint golden light shield shimmered intermittently, as if covering the entire city with a slightly trembling protective barrier.

"Do you see it?" Rhine gently swirled his tea cup, "This is the sacred protective array of the Imperial Capital, burning two thousand gold coins every minute.

The array is maintained by fifty-seven court Grand Mages, and their costs along with the costs of the magic crystals are personally borne by me. Even the magic crystals have recently risen in price."

Simmons swallowed: "Your... Your Highness, spending so much money is really..."

"Of course, it's worth it." Rhine interrupted him, continuing to gaze outside, "Unless the coalition has the Hammer of God, it won't break through this layer today."

He gestured for an official to open an observation window.

On the city wall, rows of newly installed heavy crossbows and arc-shaped giant shields glinted with metallic shine under the light.

Gears and chains connected large catapults, the stones engraved with demon patterns, weighing three times more than regular rocks...

Rhine remarked indifferently: "Each weapon is more expensive than those old-style knights' lances of Raymond by a whole Baron's Domain."

Then he glanced at another spot within the city.

"The Fifth Knight Order garrisons the Inner City District." Rhine stated softly. "The Eleventh Knight Order guards the city wall. The Eighth Knight Order arrays on both sides of the royal road."

Rhine continued: "These three orders total seven thousand men, the Empire's most elite knights. They originally had no fondness for me, but after hearing about my generous reward system... their loyalty became surprisingly strong."

The nobles in the tower visibly breathed a sigh of relief.

Simmons bowed his head respectfully: "Your Highness... How exactly did you manage to win these knights' hearts? Indeed... only you can achieve this."

This flattery, angled with a hint of ingratiation, was evidently not natural, yet it perfectly suited Rhine's pleasure.

Rhine tapped the cup softly with his fingertips, seemingly savoring the taste of recognition.

"It's very simple." He raised the cup in a gesture, his gaze calm yet sharp, "I told them that with me, loyalty can be bought."

As these words fell, the nobles in the tower nodded, smiles spreading on their faces, as if they had just heard some brilliant political wisdom.

The air was filled with agreeing flattery, yet it ironically suffocated even more.

Through the telescope, the dense coalition army was trying to adjust their formation before the storm, like a giant beast ready to strike.

Rhine slowly closed the scope, his tone light as a casual chat: "They look formidable."

"But to capture this city..." He raised his head, gazed at the golden array shimmering in the sky, his voice low and assured:

"It would take months, but within half a month, other knight orders stationed outside will come to support us. All we need is to hold our ground, and this Imperial Capital is the Empire's strongest fortress."

He gently sipped the red tea.

"Don't worry, Simmons." Rhine chuckled, "The Imperial Capital is unbreakable. At least not today."

As soon as he finished speaking, the shadow outside the west city suddenly began to surge. The sound of war drums thudded heavily against the rain, as if some colossal beast was awakening.

The nobles held their breath, peering outward.

Rhine raised the telescope again, reflected within the lenses was a legion detaching from the coalition formation, stepping through mud towards the Imperial Capital.

He sneered lightly: "Raymond finally willing to make a move?"

Karen stepped closer, his brow slightly furrowed: "It's the Tenth Frontier Legion, Your Highness. They seem to be testing the city's defenses."

"Cannon fodder." Rhine uttered coldly two words, his tone both mocking and carrying a hint of anger towards rebellion, "These border mongrels dare not guard the frontier properly, yet dare come to the Imperial Capital for treason."

The nobles in the tower immediately nodded in agreement.

"Your Highness speaks the truth!"

"Such uncouth wretches don't even have the right to set foot in the Imperial Capital!"

Rhine heard this to his satisfaction, a slight grin forming at the corner of his mouth.

"I needn't give orders." He set down the telescope, gave the tea cup a gentle swirl, "The defense system is already prepared."

In that instant, a thunderous roar echoed from below the city wall, as if the entire Imperial Capital was taking a deep breath.

The faint golden light shield suddenly brightened, dazzlingly bright, like cleaving a rift in the night.

Dense lightning patterns emerged on the shield's surface, each flashing with turbulent electric light, like a swarm of golden serpents clinging to the city wall's periphery.

Chapter 725: Battle of the Heirs (Part 2)

More than twenty Grand Mages stood at the nodes of the array, their magic robes fluttering in the wind.

They placed their hands on the guiding magic stones, with magic energy flowing like molten steel along the demonic patterns, pouring into the shield and causing the air to shudder.

Some nobility couldn't help but exclaim: "Holy Shield... has begun!"

Outside the shield, the air was stirred by high-pressure magic power, continuous thunder lined up like heavenly thunder guarding the Imperial Capital.

The layer of magic was compressed like an invisible giant wall, causing any fighting energy that approached to become chaotic.

Any knight stepping within thirty steps of the shield would cause the outer membrane to violently shake, their breath disorderly, vision darkening, as if being toppled by the roar of a giant beast, completely unable to approach.

Meanwhile, the mechanisms on both sides of the city gate were activated, heavy chains rolled with sounds of metal clashing, sparks flying.

Then, dropping from the top were rock burst stones compressed by alchemy and solid energy.

Engraved with swirling demon patterns on the surface, inside sealed with shock bomb potions.

They were specifically designed to deal with knights shielded by fighting energy, and while ordinary stones couldn't penetrate fighting energy, these alchemy stones could explode into hundreds of shards containing magic power upon impact.

The sound of breaking wind was like a pack of hungry wolves pouncing, tearing the first knights attempting to approach directly into a blood mist, broken armor and limbs flying chaotically in the mud.

However, the drawback was that they were extremely cumbersome and expensive, but on this city wall, it wasn't a drawback.

As for what was poured from the battlements, it was not the common boiling oil, which was practically meaningless against fighting spirit knights.

What splashed was a dark green, resin-like sticky alchemy solution: Green Dragon Saliva.

"This stuff... a few barrels could buy a castle..." a young noble's voice trembled.

The green liquid hit the knight's fighting energy membrane, making it immediately emit a piercing screech as if being corroded alive.

In the next breath, the green solution penetrated the shield, invaded the armor, with metal melting rapidly as if licked by flames, flesh rotting and sliding off. The knight fell screaming, rolling in the mud, unable to find a place to escape the corrosion.

In front of the shield, the once charging line collapsed within a few breaths.

Fighting energy was restrained, armor corroded, the knights of the Tenth Border Legion seemed to crash into a breathing slaughter machine.

After several probes, the ground was already covered with turbid mud and bloodwater.

Hundreds of knight corpses lay stacked in front of the shield, like layers of harvested wheat.

Finally, amid the chaos, they sounded the retreat horn.

In the rain, rows of dark shadows wobbled backward, pushed, tripped, dragged by their own people, as if invisible fear was pressing toward them from the electricity spilling from the shield.

The retreating figures staggered in the rain, as if torn by some invisible fear.

The city wall erupted in deafening cheers.

The nobility laughed loudly, some even raised their cups in celebration.

Rhine merely sipped his tea lightly, his expression composed as if appreciating an opera.

"War... ultimately, is business." He lifted his cup slightly, letting Simmons see the joy in his eyes. "When the investment is large enough, it's hard to lose."

He waved his hand, and the commander immediately took the order and left. "Tonight, send roasted meat and ale to each legion, let them eat their fill. Tell them to continue killing beggars tomorrow."

Night fell, Rhine fulfilled his promise, bonfires ignited on the city wall, turning the entire defense line bright as a festivity.

Carts brought up whole roasted cattle, grease sizzling in the firelight.

Barrels of chilled ale were opened, knights ate meat heartily, punched loudly, as though they weren't guarding the city but on a picnic.

Even more enticing was the gold coins handed to them, each received a substantial amount.

Rhine stood at the peak of the firelight, overlooking it all.

He was in no rush, as long as the wall wasn't breached and the array kept running, he could hold out for three days, five days, ten days... until other legions around the Imperial Capital arrived for rescue.

"Let them try." His voice was as light as the wind, yet it overshadowed the bonfire noise.

"The Imperial Capital isn't that easy to invade."

.....

Outside the Imperial Capital, the night rain was heavy, yet inside the tent, it was hot as if a fire burned in the darkness.

The candle flame swayed in and out from the wind, shadows twisting into uneasy shapes on the canvas walls.

Second Prince Kaelin sat beside the chest, his knees apart, slowly wiping his sword with cloth.

The blade reflected candlelight, cold and straight, like his suppressed emotions at the moment.

His actions were calm, yet deep in his eyes lay a hint of disappointment.

Not towards the defeat, but towards the city that should represent the Royal Family's majesty, now armed like a steel prison by Rhine with money and arrays.

The adjutant lifted the curtain and entered, his voice low: "Your Highness... the Holy Shield array has no solution for now. The Eleventh Legion... lost three hundred and thirty-one knights."

Kaelin paused in his sword wiping, gently exhaling: "I know."

He placed the sword on his knees, lifting his eyes to ask: "Was the message delivered inside?"

The adjutant immediately straightened his body: "Delivered, Your Highness."

Kaelin nodded but didn't continue to inquire further. Just as he was about to speak, a guard's announcement came from outside the tent:

"Your Highness! Duke Remont requests an audience!"

Kaelin's eyebrows twitched slightly, his expression first tense, then relaxed into a smile.

"Let him in."

Duke Remont lifted the curtain and entered, his cloak dripping with continuous raindrops.

He glanced at Kaelin's face, a trace of insight flashing in his eyes; it wasn't fear of battle but impatience with the stalemate.

Remont bowed: "Your Highness, the conventional siege methods are indeed useless. Rhine has turned the Imperial Capital into a prison, and without a key... no one can get in."

Kaelin sighed, "We don't have a key."

The corners of Remont's mouth slowly curved up: "I have one."

He raised his hand and snapped his fingers.

A knight pushed in a heavy iron cage, the wheels leaving wet marks on the ground.

The cage was covered with a black cloth, vaguely showing something inside moving slightly.

Kaelin frowned, "What is this?"

Remont stepped forward and uncovered the black cloth.

At the moment the cloth fell to the ground, Kaelin instinctively took a step back.

Kaelin whispered, "What... is this ghostly thing?"

Remont revealed a satisfied smile.

"This is the battering ram I've prepared for you."

He took an iron key from his bosom and handed it to Kaelin, his tone respectful yet carrying a bewitching force: "You decide whether to use it or not."

The tent fell silent.

The sound of rain pounded on the tent, like countless chaotic heartbeats.

Kaelin looked down at his once broken right hand.

After a long time, he softly said, "This is war."

He raised that hand, clutched the key, "I'll bear the sin."

.....

In the deep night, the city walls were lined with alchemical candles, their flames misty blue, dispersing moisture but unable to dispel the dense, unyielding darkness outside the city.

Rain and fog swirled in the distance, like the breaths of some giant creature.

A knight leaned on the battlement, his armor open as he idly tossed the Gold Coins handed out last night.

The Gold Coins jumped between his fingers a few times, catching the moonlight, flashing as if alive.

"Want to bet?" he said to a few knights beside him, "Will there be an attack tonight? If they come, this coin is yours."

"His Highness has already filled our bellies; they'd be courting death if they came," someone yawned.

As they were chatting away, a faint noise came from below the city walls.

It was a dense, fine, nerve-grating... rustle.

The Knight Captain frowned, leaned over, and looked down: "What the heck...?"

The thick fog parted slightly in the wind, and in that instant, he saw it clearly.

A dense mass of pale bodies.

Thousands of dragonblood youths with bare upper bodies clung to the base of the city wall, their spines bent like they were broken, limbs twisted in reverse joints, moving bizarrely and swiftly.

Their nails dug deep into the crevices of the dark steel stone like animal claws, each exertion causing a fine cracking sound in the stones.

They were silently wriggling upward.

Like a whole skin of living flesh... climbing up.

The moonlight shone on their eyes; they were not human eyes but strange vertical pupils, blank and cold, staring like a predator.

In their mouths, they all held short daggers, not making a sound.

The knight who had been playing with the Gold Coins dropped it with a "ding" at his feet.

His throat felt stuffed, and he only managed to squeeze out a sentence: "What... is this ghostly thing?"

The Knight Captain suddenly reacted, slamming the stone parapet: "Quick! Quickly call for support!"

But below the city wall, the wave of pale flesh had already climbed halfway up.

Silent, swift, deadly.

Chapter 726: Monster

He was originally named John, a very common name.

He vaguely remembered living in a small village outside Graystone Fortress.

The house leaked wind, his mother coughed heavily, his father died in a mine collapse that winter.

Later, when famine struck, people in the village began sending their children to the "Charity Garden", saying that at least they could eat enough there.

He was among the last batch sent in, by then his mother had only a breath left, telling him to be obedient and live well.

At that place, indeed there was good food and drink for a while; back then he still believed that the people in white robes under the lamp were kind.

Until one day, he was pressed onto a metal table.

Cold instruments, restraining rings, a needle piercing his spine... his screams were stuffed into his throat, as if plunged underwater.

Later, even the voice disappeared.

Pain was cut off, memory was hollowed out, name was erased.

Only the number was left: No. 2371.

His world was pared down to just a few words:

Climb upward, kill everything in the way, destroy...

Early today, he was pulled out of the cage, a metal tube was inserted between the joints of his chest and collarbone, when the liquid was pushed in, his whole body felt like it was being ignited from within.

A bottle of dark red potion, murkier than ever before.

The tubes trembled under his skin.

Blood seemed filled with something unfamiliar.

Heartbeat forcibly accelerated, stomach convulsed, smell and hearing thrown into chaos.

This was just a completed sample of the last process.

The command buzzed loud in No. 2371's mind: Climb upward, climb upward, climb upward...

So he climbed the black steel stones of the Imperial Capital wall, limbs splayed in reverse joints, moving like a giant gecko stripped of vocal cords.

Fingernails embedded in the rock seams, the sound of "kak-kak" was light almost to unaidability.

No. 2371 smelled the scent of blood... the smell stirred the black mist inside his chest into agitation.

Red thin mist seeped from beneath his skin, coursing along the veins to his limbs, surging like a living thing.

It was thoroughly twisted blood-colored fighting energy.

With each heartbeat, the red mist would spread half an inch around him, painting the shadows of the wall crimson.

The muscles of his forearm tightened, deformed, and faintly beneath the skin, structures resembling scales attempted to grow.

Like a remnant soul of some ancient dragon race, low-roaring within him.

The potion's heat continued to burn upward.

His chest would occasionally feel a brief sensory void, like a heart forgetting to beat for a moment.

Breathing became shallower, back and shoulders occasionally twitched slightly.

These were manifestations of the "Terminal Agent".

At this dosage, survival would last no more than two days.

But this knowledge, he did not comprehend; he did not need to understand.

He only needed to execute the commands Raymond had personally nailed into his consciousness.

Climb upward.

Kill everything in the way.

Destroy.

So he continued to climb, knuckles grinding out sparks on the black steel stones.

Suddenly, a scorching liquid was poured from above.

Acidic liquid, saliva of a green dragon, a normal human would not even have time to scream in this stuff, turning into a pool of bloodwater; even the fighting energy of elite knights would be corroded by this acid.

Yet No. 2371 did not move.

No, it's only that this minor attack couldn't even activate his surface instincts.

The acid fell on his back and shoulders, his skin giving off an ear-piercing hiss.

But the next instant, the hidden power within him boiled as if enraged, bones creaking...

Under the cover of the blood-colored fighting energy, gray-black keratin scales rapidly proliferated, like the residual shadow of ancient dragon blood awakening beneath the skin.

The scales not only hardened but slightly reflected a metallic sheen, like a second layer of exoskeleton born for battle.

Acid met the surface only to be forcefully repelled, leaving behind only faint white smoke.

A scale was corroded, then immediately another grew.

Corroded again, regrown.

No. 2371 felt no pain, he simply executed the orders... continued climbing.

Light suddenly flared at the top of the wall.

That was the sign of the array's activation.

Holy protection's golden lightning exploded above his head, magic power scorched his scales, sizzling like meat on a roast.

Thunder pierced from his back through his whole body, any knight would've been disrupted, senses collapsing, bleeding from orifices.

Yet No. 2371 paused for less than half a heartbeat.

His muscles and bones swiftly adapted, strengthened under lightning, even memorizing the electrical paths to further reduce the damage of the next bolt, but his movement didn't stop.

He didn't even know what pain was.

Scales burnt by lightning quickly bloomed anew, harder than before.

Closer.

The holy protection array node lay above, a silver device embedded in the wall, inscribed with intricate patterns.

No. 2371 raised his hand; it wasn't called nails anymore, but the embryonic form of a dragon claw.

"Kacha!" Breaking off the metal latch fixed to the node.

He raised his head and bit onto the exposed magic conduit stone.

Sharp fangs bit deeply, "Kala!" magic exploding in his mouth.

The array node was bitten off forcibly.

In that instant, the magic power in surrounding nodes felt like a beast had bitten through its spine, entirely paralyzed.

The mage on the wall stood stunned: "Mon... Monster—!"

His scream rushed out of his throat, No. 2371's vertical pupils already locked onto his position.

.....

The knights were initially horrified by the dragonblood youths climbing the wall, but fear was swiftly swallowed by deeper waves...

Because the darkness outside the wall was being torn open by newer, more orderly hoofbeats.

It was the rhythmic march of the knight legion.

Thousands upon thousands... more and more armor reflecting the faint light under the night, like tides pressing toward the Imperial Capital walls.

Chapter 727: Monster (Part 2)

An elderly knight stood behind the battlements; his eyesight was not as sharp as it once was, but his instincts honed on the battlefield were more accurate than any eagle eye.

He grabbed the arm of the knight beside him abruptly, his voice trembling: "Look... over there!"

The thick fog was dispersed by the air currents created by the cavalry charge.

Below the city, a banner burned and mottled by flames yet still imposing unfurled in the wind.

The dark golden dragon pattern, dragon wings spread, dragon claws clutching the Imperial Longsword.

Only the royal family's lineal personal guard had the privilege to hoist it.

Instantly, the city wall fell silent.

The banner was raised personally by a tall knight.

He removed his helmet, revealing a face that no elderly knight in the Imperial Capital would forget.

Years had engraved deep marks on his face, yet his gaze remained as sharp as a blade.

He roared, his voice piercing through the rain: "I am — Kaelin August!"

That name exploded like thunder on the city wall.

"When I stood at the border blocking the beast tide years ago! Many of you stood behind me!"

Pointing to the dragon banner in his hand, his voice sliced through the air: "And now for a few bloodstained gold coins given by that beast! You plan to shoot arrows at this banner?"

On the wall, a knight's fully drawn bowstring abruptly loosened, the arrow strayed, grazing past the battlement.

The deputy commander of the Fifth Legion stood high up on the city wall; his armor was intricately adorned, his greed more radiant than the gleaming light.

He took the money from Rhine, and received a death order, shouting, "Don't listen to his nonsense! He is a traitor! I order you to shoot! Whoever kills him, will be rewarded with ten thousand gold!"

Yet the rain of arrows... remained sparse.

Some knights merely hesitated, while others lowered their heads, not daring to face the dragon banner; some had quietly taken arrows off the strings.

During that brief hesitation.

A ground-shaking rumble sounded from outside the city.

Over ten thousand border knights pressed onto the Imperial Capital like a tide!

The Dragon Blood youths climbed silently, while the true steel storm charged from the front.

"Charge!"

Kaelin swung the dragon banner, his voice exuberant as if declaring war against the heavens.

His warhorse reared, neighing in the dark.

Over ten thousand knights roared and charged with him, fighting energy igniting like flames in the darkness, illuminating every wavering face on the city wall.

Chaos reigned on the atop the city wall.

.....

The first batch of Dragon Blood youths had already climbed over the wall's edge.

They moved swiftly, as if propelled silently by strings, driven by nothing but bone-chilling bloodlust.

As soon as they landed, the blood-colored fighting energy around them erupted.

Like a bucket of fresh blood splashed around them, the mist-like blood aura swept through the air, tightening the knights' throats nearby, leaving them gasping as though gripped tightly.

These youths... clearly no older than fifteen or sixteen.

Yet their blood-colored fighting energy was as dense as that of elite knights who survived a hundred slaughtering.

They appeared as if hailing from a cursed abyss, with gray-black scales covering the sides of their faces.

Their eyes were lifeless with vertical pupils, razor-sharp teeth visible on the corners of their mouths, black rune patterns vaguely pulsating under their skin.

All of this told the Imperial Capital knights, that these were no longer human.

A knight reacted quickly, slashing horizontally to cut a rushing youth in half.

Yet the moment the blade pierced his body, the youth astonishingly grabbed the sword.

Scales flew as the sword drew blood.

But he felt no pain, hesitated not, retreated not.

Instead, leveraging the anchoring force of the sword embedded in his body, he pushed forward: "Urgh—!"

He threw himself onto the knight's chest, his razor-sharp teeth sinking into the artery on the knight's neck!

A pillar of blood spurted out, drawing a terrifying arc through the air.

The knight's fighting energy burst despairingly but couldn't shake off this frenzied flesh.

Three nearby knights simultaneously rushed up yet moved a moment too late.

The youth, like a ravenous wolf, tore the knight's throat out.

Blood splattered his face, intensifying his blood-colored fighting energy.

"A... monster!!" someone screamed.

Someone retreated, knocking over comrades; more couldn't hold their weapons, their hands shaking.

Another Dragon Blood youth directly charged at a lance.

The spear pierced his abdomen, but he didn't halt for a single step.

His intestines were churned out, yet he slid closer along the lance, gripping the knight's helmet with both hands with force.

"Cra—!"

The knight's armor split apart, his skull twisted.

The next second, he pulled out the lance from his abdomen, swinging it like a club to sweep a nearby knight off the wall!

Blood rain fell, howls resounded.

As the tide of monsters continued to surge, the psychological defenses of the Imperial Capital's defenders were ripped open with a gigantic breach.

"I wasn't here... to sacrifice..."

"Stay away! Stay away!!"

Someone, breaking down, threw away weapons and ran, some prayed on their knees, others stumbled back and fell, being trampled by companions.

But the Dragon Blood youths displayed no elation.

They simply continued executing their implanted commands.

Go up, kill, destroy... and increasingly frantically until expending the last bit of life.

.....

And the city wall of the Imperial Capital, at this moment, truly began to crumble.

Amidst the chaos on the rampart, the prince's personal guard set up a scaling ladder under the wall, with the Second Prince first to leap onto it, sword in hand.

An arrow grazed his cheek, pierced through his ear, yet he didn't even blink.

Then the commander of the Fifth Legion, observing the blood-soaked, demonic-like Second Prince, dared not look further, recalling the boiling blood from charging alongside the Second Prince at the border.

He also realized that the check given by the Fourth Prince would likely never be cashed.

The storm howled over the wall, arrow feathers flew chaotically in the dark rain and mist, but what truly shattered this segment of defense was not the enemy's offensive, but the fear ripped open in the defenders' hearts.

A defending knight finally crumbled.

He tossed away his Imperial Longsword, kneeling heavily in the bloody water, tears rolling down mingled with rain.

"Your Highness! We can surrender! Spare us... I charged with you before!"

The voice wailed like a dying beast.

He thought the Second Prince would pause, would pardon his sins like before, for he was just a regular knight swept along.

But it wasn't the Second Prince who came.

Three Dragon Blood youths landed in front of him unannounced.

Their actions were light as shadows, yet bore nauseating power.

They didn't comprehend surrender; their world contained only one command... kill!

The knight hadn't screamed before three Dragon Blood youths lunged simultaneously, nails, razor-sharp teeth, brutal tearing sounds in the rain conspicuously cruel.

Flesh exploded between armor crevices, fragmented bone fragments splattered on stone bricks, like discarded remnants.

His pupils dilated right before death, turned upward, seeking the Second Prince's pardon for one last glance.

Kaelin traversed past his corpse without a glance,

His boots stepping onto the warm blood muck, continuing to climb, as if ascending his own staircase.

The supervisory squad drew swords seeking to create a blockade, one shouting: "Stop them! Block—"

Before they finished shouting, Kaelin was already there.

His Fighting Spirit Sword Light sliced through the rain like a silver line.

A diagonal slash, three supervisors' bodies split instantly from chest to abdomen.

Armor shattered, blood sprayed in the rain, segments of corpses rolling down the slope.

Kaelin lifted the broken sword tip, his voice cold and hard, like iron drawn from the furnace: "Charge in."

His voice wasn't loud, yet it drowned out all wind and rain.

"Leave none alive!"

The phrase ignited gunpowder.

The next moment, Dragon Blood youths, frontier iron riders, defected knights, all pressed toward the breach like a flood.

The entire defense line collapsed with a hum, stone surfaces vibrated beneath trampling.

Scaffolding was pushed up against the wall, metal hooks biting firmly into the battlements.

Hundreds of knights began to climb, iron armor constantly collided, emitting heavy clashing sounds.

Rain flowed down their armor plates, yet couldn't wash away the bloodlust or killing intent.

Chapter 728: Breaching the City

On top of the palace tower, the wind and rain lashed against the glazed windows, producing a faint "pitter-patter" sound.

The entire Imperial Capital trembled under the night sky, while the silhouette of the new Regent King, Rhine, was reflected on the alchemical copper wall behind the window, appearing increasingly thin and sinister.

In his hand, he held a delicate alchemy telescope, and its lens revealed a scene on the city walls that chilled his soul...

The dark gold dragon flag was being soaked in blood and rainwater, slowly raised atop the main castle tower.

It rustled fiercely in the wind.

That was the flag of the Imperial Army's spirit... and now it represented the return of the Second Prince.

Rhine's breath became disordered.

He witnessed his heavily armed elite knights retreating like a tide.

He saw those dragon-blood youths massacring in the blood mist, with the defenses being torn apart piece by piece.

The teacup in his hand shattered with a "crack".

Glass shards pierced into his palm, and blood slowly trickled down through the gaps between his fingers.

Yet he seemed to feel nothing, with only uncontrollable rage and an unacceptable reality in his eyes.

"Madmen..." Rhine muttered through gritted teeth. "All madmen... Kaelin has gone mad... Daring to bring the border army into the Imperial Capital... He doesn't consider the Empire at all... Traitor! Rebel! Scoundrel!!"

The curses poured out along with his emotions.

The nearby guards were frightened and kneeled: "Your Highness... What should we do now? The Second Prince has already breached the city wall..."

Rhine took a deep breath.

When he raised his head again, his gaze had transformed from rage to a cold venom like a snake.

"What to do?" he repeated softly.

"Since my brother chose to become a monster..." his fingers stroked the cold metal of the telescope, "then don't blame me for not showing any brotherly affection."

He abruptly stood up and shouted: "Order all Knight Teams in the inner city to press forward! The Fifth Legion, the Eleventh Legion, the Eighteenth Legion—all troops mobilize!

Tell the Legion Commanders, if they hold out tonight! I will grant them the title of Count! The title of Duke!! Grant them each one! Open the national treasury, move the gold bars to the frontlines..."

He raised his blood-stained finger, pointing to the dark battlefield outside the city.

"Kill now, settle now!!"

The guards inhaled sharply.

Rhine was completely absorbed in his logic, still believing: under lavish rewards, there will be brave men.

With three Imperial Official Knight Orders pressing forward, the wall of human and equipment advantage could wear down the Second Prince.

With sheer numbers on his side, as long as they hold... they can wait for the outer city legions to arrive for support. Just endure another half-month, and they can reverse the situation.

The alarm bells wailed throughout the city, but the three lines of defense already flickered like dying fire, illuminating weakly and extinguishing swiftly.

In the inner square, three heavy-armored formations were hastily mobilized, the Eighth Legion, the Eleventh Legion, the Fifth Legion.

Their armors were neat, formations strict, yet their demeanor differed markedly...

The Eighth Legion, with severe discipline and excellent equipment, had been loyal to the Fourth Prince from the start.

The Eleventh Legion, an ancient legion, most of whose officers had followed the Second Prince in the Southern Territory blood battles.

The Fifth Legion had just earned merits on the city wall, with pockets bulging with Rhine's rewarded gold coins.

The three armies formed an Iron Wall, attempting to block the breached gap.

But in the next moment, the ground trembled.

The Second Prince Kaelin rode a warhorse, striding into the square from the dust and blood mist.

His armor was shattered, his cloak stained almost black with blood, his face full of scars.

Rain slid down the blood marks, making him look like a god of slaughter emerging from a massacre.

Behind him were the ferocious dragon-blood youths and the Border Army Knight Order.

That sight was like a moving hell wall, making anyone in front of it feel tightness in their chest.

An Eleventh Legion Knight Commander, braving fear, raised his longsword: "By order of the Regent King, eradicate the rebel army! All troops... charge!"

But his voice only carried halfway because the other two formations remained motionless.

Kaelin raised the dragon flag, red blood drips slid down the flagpole, slowly sweeping toward the Eleventh Legion's ranks.

Lifting his arm, his voice tore through the rain curtain:

"Eleventh Legion!! Your legion's banner, Broken Sword and Red Heart, was personally hung by me twenty years ago in the Southern Territory!! Is your sword now aimed against this banner?"

The Eleventh Legion's commander felt his grip on the sword hilt tremble slightly.

He looked at Kaelin's face, almost insane from blood and fire, but another image flooded his mind.

On the Southern Territory battlefield years ago, he had followed this man, carving out a path from mountains of corpses and seas of blood.

And now... he turned his gaze towards the palace's direction.

Rhine hid deep within the tower, daring only to command from behind the telescope, merely scattering gold coins and shouting slogans.

The overseer officer noticed the troops wavering and roared: "Eleventh Legion! Do you intend to disobey orders?! How much gold did His Highness Rhine spend on you?!"

"Gold?" The Eleventh Legion Commander's mouth twitched, as if hearing some absurd joke.

The next second, he drew his sword, not pointing it at the Second Prince...

But instead, slashed the sword fiercely into the overseer's shoulder and neck!

Blood splattered, the overseer fell to the ground twitching.

The commander spun his horse around, raised his longsword high, his roar shattered the chaotic air in the inner square:

"Eleventh Legion!! Welcome the Marshal back to the palace!! Whoever dares to block—kill without mercy!!"

Thousands of knights turned toward Kaelin, uniformly raising their spears, instantly becoming allies of the Second Prince.

This sudden reversal made the Eighth Legion Knight Commander turn pale.

He abruptly looked toward the Fifth Legion.

The Fifth Legion Commander bowed his head, looking at the bulging gold coins in his pocket.

He closed his eyes... the money was plentiful, but life only comes once.

Rhine... is probably already a dead man.

He slowly raised his head and revealed a relieved smile: "Sorry, old pal."

Chapter 729: Breaking the City (Part 2)

His sword's light pierced through the overseer's back, blood splattering on the armor.

"Fifth Legion, heed the order, full retreat!! Protect the Second Prince!!"

However, their retreat direction was not to support the Second Prince, but to rush toward the nobility district, to plunder, to seize wealth, exploiting the instability to the fullest.

The frontline of the Eighth Legion was suddenly isolated and helpless.

In front was Kaelin's vengeful army and the dragonblood youth, on the left the defected Eleventh Legion, on the right the Fifth Legion leaving chaos under the guise of retreat.

The commander of the Eighth Legion slowly turned his head, looking towards the palace tower, his eyes revealing despair.

"Your Highness... please grant us a miracle..."

But the tower was empty. Not even a shadow of a person.

Duke Raymond rode through the rain, his armor shimmering with a cold silver under the lightning.

His words were merciless, like judgment: "Leave none alive. Let everyone see the fate of those loyal to Rhine."

The slaughter began.

The dragonblood youth tore through the heavy armor of the Eighteenth Legion like paper.

The Eleventh Legion's spears pierced the chests of those who were just comrades from the flanks.

The Second Prince charged, slicing off the front legs of the Eighteenth Legion commander's warhorse with one sword stroke. The warhorse neighed as it knelt, and he leapt forward, stamping the commander's chest cavity.

Blood flowed across the square, forming streams in the cracks of the stone bricks.

Less than an hour.

The iron triangle that Rhine had pinned high hopes on—Eighth Legion, Eleventh Legion, and Eighteenth Legion—completely collapsed.

The entire Eighteenth Legion was annihilated, the blood mist enveloped the inner square, dyeing it like a pool stained after a dragon slaying.

Blood meandered down the steps, pooling at the foot of the palace tower.

.....

The top floor of the tower still had the expensive red gold carpet, though now it had lost all symbolic meaning.

Red tea spilled from an overturned porcelain cup, mixing with the pulp on the ground, trampled into a mash.

The color was murky, like a pool of darkening blood.

A gold coin still rolled slowly, finally hitting the corner of the wall, making a crisp yet piercing ding.

The inside of the tower was deathly silent.

Outside were sounds of killing, screams, armor shattering, and the rumbling hooves shaking the ground, like dozens of storms tearing in from all sides.

The captain of the personal guard staggered before Rhine, kneeling down, his knee landing on the scattered gold coins, making a series of metallic clinks.

He gripped Rhine's pant leg, his voice shattered and trembling.

"Your Highness... it's over... all over..." He pointed outside: "The Fifth Legion, they took your money and withdrew..."

Rhine blinked, as if he had misheard: "Withdraw...?"

"They said..." The guard choked, "The contract only included defending the city, not dying. They're robbing the commercial street now... saying they need to make the money back."

Rhine's throat felt blocked, he squeezed out a dry voice: "Tell... tell them, I'll add another hundred thousand... no, two hundred thousand! Have the commander come to see me!"

"It's no use, Your Highness." The guard quivered.

Rhine's eyes jolted, as if stabbed by a needle.

The guard continued to stammer like his tongue was twisted by malice, spilling the most fatal words:

"And... the Eleventh Legion..."

Rhine closed his eyes, using all his strength to maintain his composure: "What happened... I gave them double the payroll..."

"Your Highness..." The guard's voice nearly collapsed, "The Second Prince shouted once and they turned... they threw the payroll on the ground, saying it was blood money... then led the way in hacking our overseer into minced meat..."

Rhine's gaze was blank, as if he didn't understand: "What about the Eighteenth Legion? Have them hold... They're Imperial Capital's... last line of defense..."

The captain of the personal guard shook like a sieve: "Your Highness... the Eighteenth Legion... annihilated, completely surrounded and cut clean! No one lasted! No one survived!"

Rhine seemed drained of his spine, collapsing onto the carpet.

He then crawled to the window, his hands trembling as he braced against the window's edge, pulling himself up with effort.

In the night of the Imperial Capital, where rain mist crossed with blood light, he saw that scene.

The Second Prince, Kaelin, covered in blood, stood at the center of the corpse-mound-like inner square.

His warhorse snorted white fog, its hooves stepping on the shattered body of the Eighth Legion commander.

He held the broken Imperial Longsword aloft, roaring skyward: "Kill your way in!"

That roar prompted the defected Eleventh Legion, border Knight Order, and even dragonblood monsters to respond in unison, their murderous intent and frenzy forming a black tide that overshadowed the sky.

That sound made the entire Imperial City tremble.

Rhine's eyes lost focus.

There was no glow of gold coins, no illusionary power, no promise, contract, or leverage he labored hard to build.

There was only a prince with military talent, imperial blood, and real prestige.

And Rhine... never possessed such things.

He had never been trusted by any legion like this. Never had any knight entrust their life to him.

He suddenly laughed.

The laughter that squeezed out of his throat sounded worse than crying.

The Avenue of Triumph, once symbolized the Empire's prosperity and glory, was swallowed by night and bloodfire at this moment.

Rain couldn't wash away the stench of blood, firelight couldn't illuminate despair.

With no walls to block, the order Rhine established crumbled like paper under violence.

The loyalty maintained by contracts, bounties, diplomatic rhetoric was no match against iron and bloodlust.

The heartland of the entire Imperial Capital, transformed into Purgatory within moments.

The border legions were not the first to charge the palace.

They, like a pack of wolves led into a pasture filled with meat, headed straight into the wealthy district and commercial streets on either side of the Avenue of Triumph.

"Smash it open!"

The iron door of the gold shop was hammered until it dented, deformed, then collapsed.

Knights with broken armor and soaked in blood rushed into the shop like mad dogs, looting.

Priceless oil paintings were torn apart, just to scrape off the gilding decorating the frames.

A noblewoman fled from a side alley, fell to the ground begging for mercy, diamonds and gems glimmering faintly in the dark.

A knight stooped to grab her hand: "Pretty."

A flash of the blade, four fingers dropped to the ground.

Blood was quickly diluted by rain. The knight arrested the fingers with his foot, pulled off the ruby ring from the severed digits, and casually stuffed it into his pocket.

"Keep robbing!" he roared back, "The Duke said, tonight the Imperial City is our hunting ground!!"

Tortured endlessly by potions, the dragonblood youths could no longer tell friend from foe, orders, or purpose.

They only possessed the most primal hunting instinct.

In the center of the Avenue of Triumph, three dragonblood youths surrounded an injured warhorse.

The first youth lunged at the horse's leg, tearing open skin and flesh with his fangs.

The second youth grasped the horse's tail, ripping a large sheet of bloody skin off.

The third youth knelt in the blood puddle, clawing at the horse's entrails like a beast, blood continuously dripping from his chin.

Passing civilians were frightened to their knees, vomiting, convulsing, yet the instinct to flee was crushed by terror.

In the next moment, the dragonblood youths' eyes turned towards them.

Vertical pupils contracted, red light flickered at the bottom.

In this instant, they found new prey.

In such chaos, only two forces still maintained purpose, namely the diehard personal guard of the Second Prince, and Raymond's grayrock cavalry.

In their hands were rolls of parchment, filled densely with names.

Every name signified a family that once stood behind Rhine during his enthronement.

"Next, the Castor Mansion."

The grayrock cavalry smashed open the gates with a warhammer, the door panel shattered.

The nobles inside had no time to hide, dragged outside to the stone pillars at the entrance.

"Mercy! My... my family was forced to attend the ceremony, not wholeheartedly supporting!"

No response was given.

A knight wielded a hook-ended spike, nailing it through the noble's shoulder blade.

Blood flowed down the stone pillar, mixing with the steps and rain forming dark streams.

No trials. No extra charges or explanations.

Only naked revenge. Another layer to the nature of war.

Kaelin's command was simple: "Round up all collaborators."

Thus, the nobles' once costly, dignified lives crumbled entirely tonight, blood flowed down the steps, staining the doors.

The Empire Capital's most prosperous streets, adorned by death, like a sacrificial passage.

Chapter 730: Endgame

The final line of defense to the main entrance of the palace had been shattered by blood and fire.

On the rainy night, the stone steps were slippery, and the bodies of the fallen personal guards lay in disarray.

Only the last group of personal guards still tried to form a formation to block the blood-stained sword as the Second Prince Kaelin pressed forward step by step.

The captain of their personal guard, covered in wounds, with his armor shattered, held up his giant hammer and roared, "Your Highness! We're defeated! Can you spare the Fourth Prince's life?"

Kaelin did not answer.

He merely lifted his eyes, his gaze like a beast crawling out from a pile of corpses, with a bone-chilling coldness in the void.

The captain's heart turned cold, but he still braced himself to swing his hammer forward.

Clinging to the last thread of hope, he yelled fiercely and smashed down his giant hammer.

"Ha—!" The hammer fell like thunder.

Yet Kaelin did not dodge.

He directly withstood this fatal blow with his fighting energy, and in the next moment, his heavy sword drew out a merciless arc of light.

"Puff—!"

The captain's head soared into the sky, spinning down onto the stone steps.

Kaelin kicked away the headless corpse, his voice hoarse like sandpaper grinding against metal, "Where is Rhine? I want to strip him alive."

"Boom!!"

The giant doors of the Imperial Hall burst open.

Outside the door, two figures stood in stark contrast.

Duke Raymond rode a tall horse, his armor shining, his cloak untouched by even a speck of dust.

He stepped aside, looking more like an elegant sightseer than someone participating in a coup in the royal capital.

On the other side, Kaelin was covered in blood, his armor shattered, blood dripping from his hands.

Stepping over fragmented corpses, he entered the Imperial Hall like a demon returning from hell.

In the vast Imperial Hall, sheepskin scrolls, documents with gold embossed crests, unfinished orders of the New Charter, Funding Allocation Orders, Troop Deployment Orders—

These were core policies that Rhine had meticulously planned and schemed for years before becoming Regent King, hoping to reshape the Empire's order, his starting point for grand ambitions.

Now, like a broken dream, they were easily trampled by blood and iron hooves.

Several civil servants, terrified, soiled their pants, hiding under tables, shivering, not daring to make a sound.

Rhine stood alone before the Dragon Throne.

He was still wearing that pure white regency ceremonial dress, but in the midst of the blood-drenched scene, it looked extremely ironic, like a choir boy who had strayed into a slaughterhouse.

Seeing Kaelin approach, Rhine did not draw his sword.

He frantically grabbed the contracts, ledgers, and dossiers from the ground and hurled them at Kaelin's face.

"Don't come any closer!!" he shouted hysterically, "If I die, you are rebels! The Empire's law will judge you! The civil servants will strike! The entire nation will come to a halt!!"

Like a drowning man clutching the last piece of wood, he used the law and interests he had always believed in to build his last line of defense.

But against blood and fighting energy, these voices were pathetically weak.

Raymond rode forward, the sound of hooves echoing in the empty Imperial Hall.

He looked down at Rhine, like gazing at a pathetic clown.

"Your Highness," Raymond said lightly, "You are still too naive.

The words of civil servants are nothing compared to absolute strength."

He leaned down to pick up the New Empire Charter embossed with the Empire's crest.

With a single stroke of his sword, the thick Charter was casually sliced in half.

"As for the law..."

Raymond tossed the half-sheepskin piece carelessly, letting it fall at Rhine's feet.

"It's nothing but waste paper."

The Second Prince Kaelin wasted no more words.

He threw down his blunted heavy sword, charging up the steps like a beast driven to despair.

At this moment, his vision held only blocks of red and black.

Rhine's always composed face, now twisted in fear.

The contrast sent a wave of violent pleasure surging from deep in Kaelin's chest.

So this brother who had cornered him was still only human in the face of fear.

"Bang!"

Rhine's back slammed against the cold stone base of the Dragon Throne with a dull thud.

As he tried to get up, Kaelin's iron arm was already clamped around his throat.

Rhine's hands scratched wildly, his fingertips grating against the armguard with a screech, but failed even to spark a flicker.

His legs kicked wildly in the air, the soles slapping the tiles like a drowning man clawing at the void in his final despair.

Kaelin watched his struggle, the thrill in his chest finally released, the string tightened for years in his heart finally snapping...

Severed arm tormenting pain.

The numb gaze of old comrades when the border was cut off from supplies.

The old army generals, forced to their knees by civil audits, begging for mercy.

Kaelin needed no evidence. He had long understood: "Rhine wants me dead."

This was not a sudden murder plot but a death by steps, from military authority being usurped, finances cut off, and pressure from the civil servants.

Finally achieving revenge today, tears fell down Kaelin's blood and grime-covered cheeks.

Rhine's face had turned a ghastly dark purple, bloodshot eyes still filled with confusion.

This wasn't logical.

Why didn't money work? Why did civilization lose to brute force?

"Why?" A final whisper croaked from his throat.

The crack.

The sharp sound of a throat bone shattering.

Rhine's eyes instantly lost focus, and all his blueprints for reshaping the Empire collapsed along with his life.

His body crumpled like a soulless husk at the foot of the Dragon Throne.

The Empire's "civilized faction," dead at the feet of the symbol of royal power.

"Ah-ah-ah-ah!"

Kaelin released his grip, his screams echoed in the dome of the Imperial Hall, shuddering the souls of civil servants trembling behind pillars.