

Winter 751

Chapter 751: Madness

When dusk fell, Grey Rock Castle had not yet been torn open by artillery fire.

Outside the city wall, the Red Tide Legion's vehicle phalanx had already fully deployed.

Steel lined up in a row, engines idling at the lowest speed, a low rumble rolling along the ground like thunder pressing down on the chest.

They didn't advance quickly, only switched on the searchlights simultaneously.

The cold white beams swept over the city walls, moats, and arrow towers, finally coming to a calculated stop on the towering castle; this deliberate pause was more torturous than any siege.

Grey Rock Castle plunged into dead silence; the soldiers stayed at their posts, but no one knew what they were waiting for.

Attack delayed, negotiations unseen, even death itself had been postponed.

Kael Remont stood on the tower balcony, his eyes bloodshot, fingernails digging into his flesh.

The wind crept into his ears, gradually changing tune, like a whisper at the back of his head.

"Kael." The voice was calm and collected, as if it had long been standing behind him, "I can see your every move."

Kael whipped around, the balcony empty, only the fractured outline of the castle sliced by searchlights.

This auditory hallucination had begun after the defeat at Blackstone Canyon.

It would come at night, and when he closed his eyes.

Kael staggered into the council chamber.

The heavy oak door closed behind him, letting out a muffled echo.

That sound was stretched long in the empty hall, like a misplaced funeral toll.

The long table was filled with people.

The nobility, commanders, and quartermasters of Gray Rock Province were all present.

Candles were arranged in two rows, the flames wobbling slightly, casting every face in a waxy pallor of fatigue.

Commander Baron stood near the head of the table, his forehead slick with sweat, hand resting on the hilt of his sword.

This was an instinctive reaction to tension, guarding against the siege horn that could sound at any moment from outside.

Some nobility murmured in prayer.

Some officers stared at the table, as if silently calculating how much longer they could hold out, whether they could last until the Duke returned.

This was reality, but Kael could no longer discern it.

In his perception, the world had completely distorted.

The dim candlelight stretched everyone's shadows long and thin, crookedly crawling over the stone walls like a pack of snarling beasts.

In his eyes, there were no colleagues or subjects.

Every face was a spy planted by the Red Tide.

Every subtle movement was a signal preparing to strike.

Commander Baron's hand on the hilt was, in his eyes, no longer out of tension, but a stance ready to draw.

The twitch at the corner of that baron's mouth in the corner, just a twitch, transformed into a sinister smile in his view.

The murmured prayers were no longer pleas to God, but codes for mutual confirmation.

He heard it, not with his ears, but directly in his mind.

"Tie him up..."

"Louis only wants his head..."

"Tonight... now..."

The voices layered upon one another, as if all speaking simultaneously inside his skull.

Kael began to lose control of his breathing, fringes of fine dark shadow appeared at the edges of his vision.

Traitors.

They were all traitors.

He stood in the midst of a wolf pack.

Commander Baron was the first to notice something was wrong.

The old general, who had fought alongside Duke Remont for thirty years, saw Kael's face was unnaturally pale, his gaze unfocused, pupils constricting uncontrollably.

He hesitated for a moment, then stepped forward.

"Young Master." His voice deliberately low, with a hint of fatigued rasp, "You don't look well, perhaps we should..."

Before he finished speaking, in Kael's ears, the words had already turned into something else.

"You want to kill me?!" Kael suddenly looked up, emitting a shriek almost inhuman, "Dream on!!"

He didn't even think, his hand had already moved first.

The longsword drawn, the gray fighting energy tracing a chilling arc in the candlelight.

"Thud." The sound wasn't loud, but clear enough to chill.

The blade pierced through Commander Baron's chest, passing completely through.

The stalwart old general stood frozen.

He looked down at the rapidly spreading bloodstain on his chest, then slowly raised his head to look at Kael.

There was no anger in his eyes, only confusion.

"Young..." Blood foamed from his mouth, "Master..."

He couldn't finish his words, Commander Baron collapsed backward, striking the ground heavily.

The council chamber erupted in chaos.

Someone accidentally knocked over a chair, others staggered back into their companions, a goblet crashed to the floor, wine spilling along the stone seams.

Several nobles instinctively backed against the walls, not daring even to lift their heads, as if another glance would bring calamity.

But in Kael's eyes, the scene completely transformed.

The retreat wasn't fear, but a coordinated dispersion.

The overturned chairs weren't accidents, but clearing an attack path.

The crisscrossing figures were sealing his escape route.

Kael fiercely withdrew his blood-stained longsword, its tip dragging along the ground, producing a screeching friction, the dark red bloodstain lengthening.

"Don't come any closer!" he screamed, his voice sharp and distorted, like a beast cornered, "I see you all!"

His gaze darted among the faces, rapid and chaotic, as if counting enemies.

"You're all Red Tide people!"

In Kael's understanding, this wasn't sudden madness, but the finally confirmed truth.

The failure at Meat Gorge was not a coincidence.

The granary precisely blown up, detonation points cut off early, every step of his plan seemingly pre-read; these weren't things explainable by superior tactics.

Even earlier, the Red Tide had hovered like a ghost on the edges of Gray Rock Province.

Chapter 752: Madness (Part 2)

They always managed to appear in the least expected places.

The supply convoy had changed routes, yet it was ambushed just before the torrential rain...

All actions went against intuition.

They didn't seize the nearest target, didn't chase the routed soldiers, didn't expand their victories, but instead, repeatedly avoided the most rational choices.

It was as if someone already knew what he would think.

It felt like someone was standing behind Kael, watching him give orders, only to take the opposite step.

If it had happened just once, Kael could have chalked it up to luck.

But when such things kept happening, when all coincidences pointed in the same direction.

There was only one explanation left.

The castle had long been infiltrated like a sieve.

Scouts, quartermasters, nobility, even those old retainers whose names he could call out, all could have sent the information out.

Otherwise, how could Red Tide possibly know where he hid the grain?

How could they accurately anticipate the rain, the wind direction, and even know exactly when he would issue orders?

Their current silence, to him, was not fear but guilt, their retreating was not evasion but creating distance, waiting for their companions to act.

Baron's corpse lay on the ground, blood seeping through the cracks in the stone.

Kael didn't spare it another glance.

That body, which had accompanied the Remont Clan for thirty years, had long since lost its meaning in his eyes.

"Whoever dares to move, I'll kill first!" Kael frantically waved his longsword, forcing everyone to retreat repeatedly, "I am Raymond!"

He shouted loudly; as long as his identity remained, as long as fear remained, they wouldn't dare to rush him immediately.

"None of you think about handing me over!!" He stepped backward, his back slamming heavily against the cold stone pillar, with no more space to retreat.

In Kael's vision, the pack of wolves was converging.

And the people in the council hall could only watch helplessly as their young master, surrounded by self-imagined enemies, collapsed completely in uncontrollable fear.

Just as the nobility was stunned by the bloody scene, Kael confirmed one thing—they were scared, and he had survived.

This was a narrow escape from death.

Not giving anyone more time to react, he suddenly turned, and like a startled beast, charged toward the side door.

The heavy wooden door was forced open by his shoulder, and he staggered out.

Everyone remained dumbfounded, watching Kael's frantic escape.

"Thinking of exchanging my head for bounty? Dream on." He panted heavily, his voice shattered yet excited, "I still have one last card.

What father left, even if destroyed, will not be given to Louis."

He stood up against the wall, dragging his blood-stained longsword, stumbling deeper into the castle.

As the stairs began to descend, the air grew damp and thick, with a pungent smell of sulfur mixed with the scent of blood wafting up from the depths.

That was the Remont Clan's true last resort.

The massive door at Grey Rock Castle's lowest level slowly opened before him.

The light suddenly spread out.

The underground hall was even brighter than the surface, with rows of alchemy lamps illuminating the entire space.

In the center was a nearly twenty-meter-diameter blood pool, the dark red liquid reflecting a bizarre silver light under the lamps.

In the blood pool lay the remains of an Ancient Dragon like an opened mountain ridge.

Skeletons bleached white, shattered bone wings hung from chains and sunk into the blood again.

Inside the open chest cavity were densely inserted alchemy pipelines; pumps beneath the dragon's chest rose and fell heavily, emitting rhythmic, low roars as if breathing for this dead monster.

Around the hall, rows of blackened iron cages were lined up.

Hundreds of children huddled inside the cages.

Thin metal tubes protruded from their bodies, with medicament flowing slowly along the pipes.

Some twitched faintly, some no longer moved, while others let out hoarse groans that couldn't form words.

They had no names, only numbers.

"Young Master!" The Chief Alchemist approached; he was unaware of what had happened above the laboratory, assuming a routine inquiry, he began his report.

"The suppression field has entered the red zone! The fully-formed units haven't completed their taming, and the semi-finished ones are in a strong rejection period! Releasing them now..."

Before he could finish, a flash of the sword passed.

The Chief Alchemist's voice abruptly stopped as his body was felled by one strike, blood splattering on the talisman array on the ground.

"Get out of the way." Kael's voice was unusually calm.

He stepped over the fallen body, ignoring the other alchemists' screams, and climbed onto the master control console beside the blood pool.

Countless indicator lights flashed madly before his eyes, with alarm runes glowing a crimson red.

His hands grasped the red gate symbolizing ultimate authority.

"Come out." His mouth twisted into a nearly hysterical smile, "Children, go and kill all those bad people above."

The gate was forcibly pulled down, and piercing alarms instantly echoed underground.

The iron cages burst open one after another.

The first ones out were sixty fully-formed units.

They stood over two meters tall, bodies covered in gray-black scales, limbs bent at reverse joints, and eyes with vertical pupils, cold without any emotion.

Then came hundreds of semi-formed Dragon Blood Youth.

Their mutations were incomplete, bodies torn and reshaped repeatedly in agony and fury, charging at the light with roars.

Kael stood above, spreading his arms wide, laughing wildly.

This was his army, his final trump card; they obeyed only the Remont.

At that moment, one fully-formed unit, numbered 3373, suddenly leapt onto the control console.

It landed silently, vertical pupils constricting, watching Kael without any fluctuation.

Ignoring orders, showing no signs of submission.

Chapter 753: Madness (Part 3)

Kael's laughter froze on his face.

In the next instant, the monster had already moved.

The sound of splitting air exploded at close range, and the figure of 3373 transformed into a gray shadow, its claws directly aiming for the throat.

"Get lost!" Kael roared, forcibly activating the fighting energy within him.

Gray fighting energy burst from around him, enveloping his body like a coarse shell.

He swung his sword horizontally and upwards, the blade clashing directly with the claws.

"Chang—!"

A piercing metallic scraping sound echoed throughout the hall.

was forcibly cleaved by this sword from shoulder to abdomen, its scales and flesh torn apart together, the body thrown into the air, crashing heavily against the edge of the blood pool.

Kael staggered to stand firm, his chest heaving violently.

"Did you see clearly?" he screamed hoarsely, his eyes bloodshot, "I am your master!"

lay on the ground, its body twitching slightly, yet it did not die.

The broken body wriggled in the pool of blood, its vertical pupils still locked fiercely on Kael.

What Kael did not see was that more figures were already closing in.

Fully formed figures leap up from all around; half-formed Dragon Blood Youth surged wildly out of the iron cages.

They cared not for their companions' corpses or for collisions with each other, only obeying that most primitive command.

Kill.

Tear apart.

The first youth pounced forward, its neck severed by Kael in one stroke.

The second grabbed his cloak, only to be sent flying by the fighting energy.

The third, the fourth...

Strength lost its meaning in the face of sheer numbers.

Sharp claws tore open the armor, teeth sunk into shoulders and arms.

Kael's fighting energy swiftly dissipated under continuous impacts, his steps starting to retreat.

"I am Raymond!" he roared, his voice already distorted, "I am..."

The voice was drowned out.

moved again, its broken body springing up in an impossible manner, arms tightly wrapping around Kael, dragging him into the monster wave.

Claws, fangs, twisted limbs pressed in simultaneously.

The sound of flesh being torn was unending.

Kael's figure quickly vanished beneath the surging black shadows, leaving only fragmented screams and the muffled sound of breaking bones.

When the monsters scattered again, only a blurred mass of flesh remained before the control panel.

Kael Remont died at the hands of monsters crafted by his father.

Yet his death did not halt the chaos; instead, it acted like a broken dam gate.

After a brief stagnation, the monsters' attention shifted from the mass of flesh, beginning to seek new targets.

And those targets were not in the upward passage.

The nearest sounds, the nearest scent, were right inside the hall.

The researchers in alchemy robes, who had just been operating valves and recording data, finally realized what was happening.

They retreated, turned, fled, some falling by the blood pool, others trying to hide beneath the control panel.

Too slow.

The first Alchemist was knocked to the ground by a half-formed youth.

Claws tore open the robe, directly plunging into the abdominal cavity. The youth lowered its head, tearing at the still twitching innards with its teeth, letting out a satisfied and hoarse growl.

On the other side, two researchers were simultaneously pinned down by a fully formed figure.

The jointed limbs pinned their bodies, scales scraping against the ground.

In the next instant, the neck bones were snapped, the sound crisp as breaking thin twigs.

Here there was no hatred, no hesitation.

These monsters made no distinctions of master, command, or status.

In their incomplete and simple cognition, there was only one criterion: whether something blocked their way.

The screams of the Alchemists were quickly drowned out by the roars.

Blood flowed into the blood pool along the talisman array, dyeing the surface in circles of dark red ripples.

Dragon Blood Youth stepped over their bodies, moving as if crossing obstacles.

When the last researcher fell, the hall was left with only the heavy, rhythmic breathing of the pump.

The monsters below ground roared, surging up through the passage.

Gray Rock City and its residents faced their true apocalypse.

Chapter 754: Monsters

The council chamber was filled with an indescribable scent, a mix of sweat, candle wax, and lingering blood.

The place where Baron fell had been hastily cleared, but no one cleaned the bloodstains on the ground.

That sword strike was too sudden, too bizarre.

Everyone realized one thing, that Kael Remont was no longer the Young Master who could be reasoned with.

The nobility stood around the long table, no one dared to sit down.

Someone whispered arguments, someone rambled prayers, and others repeatedly emphasized "the gates still have guards," as if saying these words could still control the situation.

"We must stabilize the Knight Order first."

"Isolate the Young Master, at least... at least don't let him hold a sword again."

"No, he just killed Baron! Who dares approach him now?"

Panic fermented in their words.

No one noticed the change in the air in the distant corridor.

The first to sense something unusual was a young Viscount standing by the wall.

He suddenly stopped talking and listened closely.

There were footsteps, but not human ones.

It sounded like nails scraping on stone walls, or a heavy body being dragged on the ground, intermittently, yet rapidly approaching.

"Did you... hear that?"

As soon as he spoke, the heavy council chamber door shook violently.

In the next instant, a crack was torn open in the center of the wooden door.

Iron hoops twisted, wood splinters flew, and a cold wind mixed with the scent of blood and alchemical potions blew in.

A noble let out a scream of terror.

Shadows surged in from outside the door.

The knights in the council chamber reacted quickly.

Several knights in heavy armor immediately formed a formation, pointing their long spears forward, their armor lit up with fighting energy.

Two Extraordinary Knights had even charged up their fighting energy, their sword blades humming, ready to engage the enemy.

When the first monster collided, the formation indeed held.

The spear pierced through its chest cavity, the sword blade shattered its shoulder bone. The monster was cut down on the spot, blood splattered all around.

As someone retreated, they murmured, "Those are from underground..."

"They can be killed!" someone shouted these two words, but their voice immediately changed tone.

The second, third, fourth creatures kept coming.

No formation, no coordination, not caring about the corpses of their companions, not even their own lives.

The pierced monsters kept crawling forward, the ones with severed arms used their teeth to bite.

Fighting energy slashes could send them flying, but couldn't stop them.

An Extraordinary Knight was tackled by three creatures at once.

He roared, bursting with fighting energy, shattering one body by force, only to be hugged around the waist by another monster in the next instant.

Claws pierced through armor seams, scales scraping against metal, making a teeth-gritting sound.

The Extraordinary Knight kept swinging his sword to break free, until a fourth creature bit into his throat.

The line began to collapse.

The knights in the city weren't cowardly or incompetent, they were fighting, using every skill and strength.

But the sheer numbers and madness were devouring everything.

The nobility began to retreat.

Tables and chairs were overturned, candelabras fell to the ground, flames quickly spreading along the carpet.

Some fell, some were dragged underfoot. The council chamber once used for discussing taxes and fiefs turned into an inescapable slaughterhouse.

Only the approaching shadows and the ever-closer screams remained.

When the last knight was overwhelmed, the fate of the castle was already sealed.

Only then did someone finally think of the gates.

They rushed out of the council chamber, running frantically along the corridor, bashing open one heavy wooden door after another, boots skidding on stone floors, armor clashing, creating a frantic and urgent sound.

Someone ran while shouting to lower the drawbridge, others hoarsely ordered guards to gather.

But the orders were meaningless now.

The inner mechanism leading to the gate had been locked since dusk.

That was an order from Kael himself, to prevent insiders from betraying and surrendering, all keys outside were retracted, the winch sealed, the drawbridge axle fixed with an alchemical wedge.

Even if generals still lived inside the castle, they couldn't unlock this defense system in time.

Someone dashed to the winch, hacking with swords, smashing with hammers.

Sparks flew, but the iron chains didn't budge.

The structure originally designed to withstand siege hammers and magical cannons now indifferently denied all survival desires within the castle.

The city gates remained silent, a silence more cruel than any roar.

The stairway leading to the city wall was quickly lost as well.

Those narrow spiral passageways, once an advantage of defense, now turned into a nightmare.

The fleeing crowd was jammed together here; those in front stopped, while those in back kept desperately pushing.

If someone fell, they never stood again.

Flames spread along the corridors, burning everything flammable.

Thick smoke was trapped by the heavy stone walls, unable to disperse, and soon pressed down to breathing height. Some lost direction in the smoke, crashing into dead ends, forced into corners.

The stone walls that once symbolized safety now cut off all roads to survival.

The defense design of Grey Rock Castle was meant to make the enemy pay with blood.

Every door, every sluice, every spiral staircase was meant to slow down the besiegers and buy time for the defenders.

But it was never designed to leave a way out for those inside when disaster burst from within.

Flames spread between corridors and towers, illuminating the shadows of people frantically running, as well as the outlines of monsters crouching on beams, window sills, and castle walls.

They weren't in a rush to chase, just steadily pushing all living beings into the depths without exit.

Grey Rock Castle was no longer a stronghold.

It became a hell sealed by its own hand.

Night was dyed red by the flames; screams echoed within the heavy walls, never reaching outside.

By dawn, there would be no more order here, only destruction.

Interrupted screams became sparse, swallowed by flames, choked off by thick smoke.

But the disaster hadn't ended.

The unrestrained dragon-blood monsters still roamed inside the castle.

They surged through corridors, stairways, and towers, repeatedly crashing into closed gates and sluices.

Heavy iron gates trembled, stone walls echoed, the whole castle was like a trapped beast, rumbling softly in the night.

Yet those gates, made from precious mines, held for the moment.

Everything Kael fortified against internal chaos, inner sluices, drawbridges, lock wedges, now became the only barriers.

The monsters were trapped inside, unable to surge into the residential areas outside the castle, for now.

But each impact made those outside clearly aware that this wasn't safety, just a delay.

Night was dyed red by the flames; by dawn, Grey Rock Castle was utterly silent.

No flag of surrender, no cries from survivors.

Only charred walls, and the sulfur and blood stench seeping from the crevices.

The vanguard of the Red Tide neared shortly before the disaster occurred.

Louis stood on a high slope outside the city, watching this fortress that should have been impregnable.

The gates were closed tight, yet covered in dents from impacts; the walls intact, yet a deep rumble consistently echoed, as if something wandered inside.

A knight hurried forward, kneeling on one knee, his voice extremely low.

"Sir, inside the castle... there are no signs of life."

He paused, his Adam's apple bobbing.

"But there's still movement below. A large number, trapped inside. The garrison, the nobility... all wiped out."

Louis did not speak immediately, just watched that silent castle.

In this morning's Daily Intelligence System, he already knew the castle's fate.

Sixty complete, along with hundreds of semi-formed dragon-blood monsters.

When they are wounded, the torn flesh will automatically heal.

More importantly, they possess Fighting Energy, unstable yet truly there, blood-red energy intermittently surging through gaps in scales.

This was the monstrosity wrought by that mad dog Raymond.

He knew all this information in advance, but that was the extent of it.

He didn't know the details of the chaos or its duration.

But those weren't questions he needed to speculate on.

"You don't need to worry," Louis finally spoke. "There is already a plan. Send the orders, blockade the perimeter, evacuate nearby residents, allow no one near the walls."

Thus, the vanguard knights dispersed, blocking roads, driving people away, pulling them off.

"Move back, don't stop, go now."

Some wept, some struggled, saying they had relatives inside the city, but those who refused to cooperate were grabbed by the Red Tide Knights, dragged away, shoved into carts, and removed.

There was no time left for explanations.

The isolation line was quickly erected, one layer after another, anyone nearing the walls would be dared and driven away.

Grey Rock Castle was completely isolated, the living were removed, the city sealed.

Louis withdrew his gaze, turning to leave the high slope: "Begin the plan."

Chapter 755: Grand Finale

The wind on the hillside was cold.

Thomas knelt on one knee amidst the rubble, raised his hand as a signal, and the White Night Squad scattered and lay low behind the slope line.

Several searchlight beams pierced into Grey Rock Castle from the hillside, like shadowless lamps on an operating table, peeling away layers of darkness from the castle gate hole.

As the beams swept across, dust and the not-yet-dissipated blood mist surged simultaneously, and the air in the distance presented a murky dark red color.

Then Thomas heard a sound of chewing.

"Chomp... chomp..."

The sound of sharp teeth crushing bones and tearing flesh echoed across the empty castle square, amplified and reflected by the walls, sounding like countless mouths feasting simultaneously.

"Shit." Someone in the White Night Squad cursed softly.

That sound was light, yet it couldn't suppress the discomfort welling up from their throats.

Even these extraordinary knights, long used to fighting amid piles of corpses, couldn't remain indifferent to such a sound.

The searchlights continued to sweep, illuminating the mountain of corpses piled up in the center of the square.

Broken armor, blood-stained silk, and trampled bodies mixed together, like a repeatedly trodden grave mound.

And on top of that, things crouched there.

Hundreds of them.

Thomas squinted, Fighting Energy slightly vibrating at the edges of his retinas, allowing him to see more clearly than most.

Those figures could hardly be called "human" anymore.

Their limbs were disproportionate, joints bent backward, and their bodies were covered with gray-black scales, twisted forcibly into illogical shapes.

They were monsters generally taller than two meters, with unusually large skeletons, yet moving with extraordinary stability.

Their vertical pupils showed no emotional fluctuation under the strong light, merely mechanically bowing their heads, biting, and swallowing.

And around them were hundreds of incomplete ones.

The mutation in these individuals was obviously not yet complete.

Their bones formed strange contours beneath their skin, and their muscles occasionally twitched unnaturally.

Some would suddenly freeze while eating, as if enduring some continuous painful stimulus, but in the next moment, they would tear at the flesh before them even more frenziedly.

"...Still evolving," Thomas judged in a low voice.

What unsettled him more was that they were not without power.

Dark red Fighting Energy intermittently surged between the gaps of their scales.

When a few were torn and trampled by their peers, their visibly damaged bodies began writhing and bonding on their own in a short time, as though forcibly mended by some power.

Someone in the White Night Squad instinctively gripped their weapon tighter, an instinctual repulsion.

"Captain." The deputy whispered, "These are no longer human."

Thomas did not respond immediately.

He just stared at the scene in the castle gate, watching those things move slowly, eat, and stack atop the pile of corpses.

They were utterly unresponsive to the bright searchlights and oblivious to the distant watchers.

Thomas exhaled slowly, as if suppressing a disturbance in his stomach.

"Record the numbers and characteristics, do not approach, and immediately alert if any leave the gate area."

Thomas knew well that even if the entire White Night Squad comprised extraordinary knights, this was not a place they should venture into.

He averted his gaze from the chaos in the gate, instinctively turning backward to look at the scene behind the hill.

The view there starkly contrasted with the chaos inside the gate.

Outside the gate, there was a death-like order.

A cluster of black Steam Tanks was spread out in a fan shape along the slope, their treads deeply embedded in the muddy ground, completely blocking all exits leading to Grey Rock Castle.

The steel armor was scoured bright by the rain, resembling a solid block of cooled Obsidian.

The gun barrels retained residual heat, where falling rain evaporated into wisps of white steam.

Behind the tank formation were thousands of Red Tide Knights.

They stood quietly in the rain, their cloaks hanging down, with the red insignias on their armor appearing particularly cold and hard amid the rain.

There was no conversation, no restlessness, everyone was waiting for Louis's command.

On one side was a biological disaster spreading like a plague.

On the other was industrial civilization, precisely assembled to unleash the most efficient slaughter at any time.

Thomas stood between the two, this was not traditional warfare.

He looked again at the illuminated castle gate, his stomach still uneasy but no longer wavering.

Not because he underestimated those monsters.

Quite the opposite, because he saw clearly enough to be certain, this was not a battlefield meant to be filled with knights' lives.

Thomas trusted Lord Louis.

This trust stemmed neither from blind obedience nor titles or nobility, but from consistently proven outcomes.

Over the years, in the face of choices that seemed unwinnable, even mistaken in everyone's eyes, Louis consistently picked the most effective path from countless options.

Even if no one understood at the time, post-event analyses would reveal that Lord Louis always chose the optimal solution.

Therefore, he wasn't worried.

Even if the scene inside the gate was a hellish tableau, even if those things kept evolving.

As long as Louis stood here, it was all part of a bigger plan, with the optimal solution identified.

Thomas believed this time would be no exception.

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Rain drummed dully and rhythmically on the steel hulls of the war machines.

Louis sat at a folding table, his fingers resting on the edge of a map, quietly watching the sketch images transmitted from the front.

Inside the castle gate of Grey Rock Castle, those distorted figures crawled slowly under the searchlights.

Chapter 756: Grand Finale (Part 2)

Some crouched on piles of corpses to eat, others pushed and trampled each other, while some suddenly froze during the biting, then continued with more frenzied movements.

Dark red fighting energy flickered intermittently on their bodies, like unstable flames forcibly burning within their flesh.

No one spoke inside the command vehicle; they all looked at Louis, waiting for his order.

Louis showed no hint of surprise.

The scene from half a year ago surfaced in his mind.

That morning, the [Daily Intelligence Update Complete] light screen unfolded as usual, with one piece of information squeezed between resources and military intelligence, seemingly inconspicuous.

There are significant flaws in the Remont Clan's dragon blood formula.

In pursuit of ultimate combat power, the alchemist removed all metabolic safety valves.

The heart of a dragon blood warrior is essentially an engine with no braking system.

An engine without brakes means...

If you attempt to stop it, the cost is much higher.

The truly reasonable approach has never been to brake, but to push to the limit, letting it self-destruct at an unbearable speed.

This idea was merely a hypothesis back then.

Until he handed the concept over to Merian.

The lights in the alchemy room were blinding in the memory, Merian stood at the operation table, holding a sealed glass tube, with the liquid inside an unnatural bright red.

"This was derived from the idea you provided." The Great Alchemist's voice was somewhat tense, "I added inducing factors, which forcibly amplify the blood's active response... In theory, it can cause the blood of Magical Beasts to break through its original stability threshold in an extremely short time."

Merian didn't know what this was used for, only that Louis paid special attention, having experimented on quite a few Magical Beasts, but apart from making their blood boil, it had no apparent effect.

This was not a technology that could be verified repeatedly, nor did it need widespread applicability.

It only needed to be used at the right time, facing the right target.

Now, that time had come.

On the hillside, the searchlight beams slowly advanced, casting the castle square in a ghastly white.

The monsters showed no reaction to the light, still immersed in the cycle of feeding and mutation.

Louis withdrew his gaze and finally spoke: "Array the troops to prevent monsters from breaking out of the castle."

The signal operator immediately repeated the command, and the order was relayed in sections. Outside the vehicle, the tank formations began to align synchronously; tracks crushed the mud puddles with orderly, restrained movements, without any superfluous noise.

The second command was issued immediately after.

"Heavy artillery battalion, load boiling blood shells, special type three, target, castle center square, cover fire."

The communication signals transmitted layer by layer, and the heavy artillery positions began adjusting their angles.

Loaders pushed rounds marked with red patterns into the barrels, the sound of metal grinding was particularly clear in the rainy night.

Louis leaned back into his seat, his gaze once again falling on the viewfinder.

If these rounds were ineffective, steam tanks would still be able to advance, with armor and firepower sufficient to crush everything inside the castle gates.

They would win.

But such a victory would come at too high a cost.

Even sacrificing the life of just one Red Tide Knight in exchange for these uncontrollable monsters seemed like a bad deal to him.

On the castle square, those monsters were still writhing, feeding, stacking.

Louis looked up, through the viewfinder, at the white area cut out by the spotlight.

"Tonight," he said coolly, "we'll deliver the Remont Clan a funeral."

In the rainy night, the first round of shelling fell.

"Poof, poof, poof," several muffled and short thuds sounded.

Dozens of specially made shells flew over the broken walls of Gray Rock Castle, like tin cans casually tossed, consecutively hitting the castle square.

The rounds didn't even bounce upon landing, rolling briefly on the stone ground before the outer shell spontaneously cracked open, like a crushed rotten fruit, emitting a crisp and nearly negligible sound.

In the next second, scarlet mist seeped out from the cracks.

It didn't diffuse but flowed along the ground.

The mist was dense and heavy, seemingly drawn by something, quickly spreading along the gaps between stones, bloodstains, and bodies.

It avoided the high places, converging in the center of the square, the color appearing extraordinarily vivid under the searchlights, as if still carrying heat.

The castle was originally filled only with sounds of chewing.

Soon, other noises emerged, the monsters atop the corpses paused.

Hundreds of distorted heads lifted almost simultaneously, nostrils flaring wildly.

Vertical pupils constricted sharply in the bright light, then quickly expanded.

"Roar?" A low growl filled with confusion and yearning.

Even the individuals gnawing on severed limbs unhesitatingly released their bite.

The half-eaten thigh rolled onto the ground, stained with rain and blood, yet not a single one turned back for a second glance.

A suppressed "gurgling" sound emanated from deep within their throats.

It was a sound reminiscent of the sucking noises made by young beasts.

In the next moment, the square moved.

Hundreds of twisted shadows simultaneously surged forward, their movements lacking any formation, yet strangely synchronized.

They shoved, trampled, climbed over one another's bodies, all to get closer to the area where the red mist was densest.

Some bent down directly, bringing their noses close to the ground, and inhaled deeply.

They opened their mouths as if they wanted to swallow the entire atmosphere into their lungs.

The scene resembled a pack of beasts starved to the extreme, rushing towards a sole water source.

The red mist was swiftly diluted, constantly being inhaled.

In the center of the square, a brief, surging scarlet vortex formed.

Chapter 757: The Grand Finale (Part 3)

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The other side of the slope, Eagle's Beak Rock Watchtower.

Thomas lay in the damp and cold grass, motionless, his eyes pressed against the high-magnification alchemy telescope, his breath held extremely low.

The scene in the lens slowly furrowed his brow: "They're... not quite right."

The monsters inhaling the red mist did not fall.

Instead, they sped up, an acceleration beyond reason.

The trajectory dragged a brief afterimage on the retina, as if the delay between body and power had been forcibly smoothed.

Then came a more noticeable change.

The black dragon scales covering their bodies stood upright one by one, the edges rubbing against each other, producing dense and piercing "kaka" sounds, like a pine forest exploding.

Veins bulged under the skin.

Dark red patterns rapidly spread along the limbs and torso, bright enough to almost penetrate the body.

In a very short time, body temperature rose to an uncontrollable degree, rain falling on them didn't even have time to slide off the scales, it was directly evaporated.

White steam rose from the square, a vapor forcibly expelled by intense heat.

This energy overload did not cause them to collapse.

At least not yet.

They fell into an almost manic state of excitement.

Some monsters started crazily scratching their bodies, claws scraping on scales made ear-piercing noise.

Some lunged directly at their kind, biting, tearing off limbs, while others swung their arms aimlessly, pounding the ground.

Thomas's Adam's apple rolled: "If we engage them head-on now..."

He didn't finish the sentence.

But everyone who heard understood.

In such a state, the power these monsters possessed was already enough to tear apart a Steam Tank barehanded.

The air in the center of the square suddenly changed.

It wasn't sound, but a more direct sense of oppression.

Thomas's gaze was tightly fixed on the telescope as he instinctively held his breath.

In the lens, those originally frenzied monsters showed a very brief hesitation in movement at the same instant.

As if something had been pushed to the limit.

"Dong."

The first muffled sound rang out, from inside those monsters.

Followed by the second, and third sound.

"Dong. Dong. Dong."

The sound was deep and dense, like hundreds of giant drums pounding simultaneously.

Even the Knights outside the city could feel the slight tremor of the earth beneath their feet, the rhythm completely lost the heartbeat of life, leaving only mechanical and frenzied repetition.

Thomas's pupils slightly contracted, he saw an incomprehensible scene.

Hundreds of hearts forcibly catalyzed by dragon blood were wildly beating within the chest cavity at a frequency exceeding structural limits.

In the lens, the monster's bodies began to swell.

Muscle fibers like steel cables overstretched snapped one by one.

Dark red light sprayed from gaps between scales, blood no longer flowed but boiled.

Rain falling on them instantly evaporated.

Steam mixed with blood mist, making the whole square look as if placed into a gigantic pressurized furnace.

"...Reached the critical point." Thomas said in a low voice.

The next second, the largest body in the center of the square shuddered violently.

It was the existence that first completed the transformation, also the "Zero" that devoured Kael's corpse.

It opened its mouth, seemingly trying to make a sound.

But the sound never formed.

"Boom—!"

A complete detonation, like a flesh bomb forcibly ignited, high-pressure blood plasma, innards, and shattered bones were thrown outward in an instant.

This explosion became the signal.

"Boom!" The second sound.

"Boom! Boom! Boom!" One after another, without interval.

The chain reaction was completely ignited.

In just a few seconds, all monsters on the square, whether fully transformed or still in an unstable phase, disintegrated at their respective limit points.

They didn't even have time to realize what happened.

The center of Grey Rock Castle, like a crazy switch was pressed.

Countless masses of blood mist, shattered bones, scales, and innards were thrown high in the air by the intense light formed by blood overload.

They exploded amidst the night and storm, layer upon layer, like a deliberately arranged scarlet celebration.

Scarlet and splendid.

The airwave of the explosion spread outward, shattering all remaining glass on the surrounding towers.

The sound of shattering echoed in the rainy night, quickly swallowed by even louder roars.

Then blood rain fell, viscous and warm, mixed with yet to dissipate steam, poured from the sky over the entire castle.

Every brick, every remaining wall, was painted anew with a thick layer of scarlet.

It was a dead city.

Also a thoroughly emptied container.

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Several kilometers away, at the refugee settlement, the storm continued.

The temporary rain shelter swayed slightly in the night wind, the canvas pressed down by rainwater, droplets dripped continuously along the ropes, creating small pits in the muddy ground.

A woman stood at the edge of the shelter, tightly holding a child in her arms.

The child was already asleep, face against her soaked cloak, breathing evenly, yet occasionally twitching lightly due to distant tremors.

She didn't return to the shelter.

Like her, many refugees stood outside.

Their gaze crossed the dark wilderness, looking toward Grey Rock Castle.

That city was glowing.

"...Look." Someone whispered first, "Such a red glow."

At this distance, the details of the explosion had long been swallowed by the night and rain.

From here, no blood, no shattered bones or innards could be seen, only the outline of clouds illuminated, layer upon layer, like the sky ignited.

The glow even carried a strange warmth, as if a grand bonfire party was held there.

There was no cheering in the crowd.

Nor crying.

Only oppressive and chaotic breathing.

An old man, face full of dust, leaned on a crutch, standing at the outermost part of the crowd.

He squinted, watched for a long while, seeming to be recognizing something, or confirming a long-anticipated outcome.

"That's not fire." His voice was hoarse, yet exceptionally clear, "It's blood."

People around instinctively looked at him.

The old man slowly exhaled: "It's demon's blood burning."

After saying it, he fell silent for a moment, then whispered: "Lord Louis... is purifying that city."

No one refuted.

To these people who didn't know what happened inside the city, the pervasive red light was explanation enough.

It was the color of the end of nightmares.

The sign of the old era burned away.

In their hearts, they saw this scene as a divine punishment, punishment for the Remont Clan.

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Five minutes later, the last muffled sound vanished into the rainy night.

Grey Rock Castle completely fell silent.

Within the city, no shadows of activity remained.

The searchlights steadily advanced but failed to reveal an outline that could still stand.

On the square, no complete corpse could be found.

Nor complete skeletons.

Only a thick half-foot layer of dark red mush remained, slowly emitting heat.

Steam mixed with the smell of blood, rolling in the rain like freshly cooled furnace residue.

Those creatures once seen by Kael as invincible trump cards, enough to overturn the Empire's order, were crushed and wiped out under the siege of intelligence and technology, along with the Remont Clan's decades of sin.

On the hillside, Louis lowered the telescope.

He didn't look again at the square, now devoid of meaning, merely adjusted his cuff. The action was restrained as always, as if just ending a routine inspection.

"It's over, all forces enter the city, use flamethrowers to cleanse the streets..."

Orders were recorded, repeated, executed.

The engines of Steam Tanks restarted, their deep roars merging in the rainy night.

The tracks slowly moved forward, crushing through the marsh-like thick blood plasma without hesitation.

Steel armor reflected cold, hard light under the searchlights.

They drove into the city gate.

Into this fortress that had lost its master.

The Gray Rock Province, the Remont Clan's era.

After this short yet grand scarlet fireworks display, came to a complete end.

Chapter 758: The Power of the Dragon Remains

The downpour had just ceased.

The clouds had torn open a slit, through which cold daylight poured down, illuminating the broken walls of Grey Rock Castle.

Rainwater trickled continuously through the cracked stone, mingling with dark red liquid, forming tiny streams in front of the city gate.

The steam tanks of the Red Tide Legion roared as they drove into the gate.

The heavy steel armor crushed the ground, and the sound of the treads turning was an unsettling mushy squeezing, as if the wheels were driving through an unfrozen mire.

The streets, towers, and squares were all deathly silent.

There were no living people here anymore.

In the center of the square, the ground had completely lost its original color.

There were no intact bodies to be found, not even complete skeletons.

Dark red flesh pulp, half a foot thick, covered the entire area, and as the rain fell on it, it roiled slowly, still steaming continuously.

Traces of explosions were evident everywhere.

Every wall was repainted with blood rain, crimson flowing down the stone patterns like an undried mural.

Every breath inhaled into the lungs carried a nauseating sweet stickiness.

The inner walls of the gate were densely pocked with impact dents, the stone surface blackened, leaving behind traces of high-temperature scorching.

Louis sat in the command vehicle, observing it all through the window.

Weir stood half a step behind him, his gaze also falling on the repeatedly trampled square inside the city.

Even for someone who had followed Louis for many years, such a scene was rare to witness.

"They sealed the door." Weir spoke with a discernible chill, "They intended to block us out, but in the end, they blocked their own escape."

Louis did not respond immediately.

When the artillery fell and the Dragon Blood lost complete control, the end was already determined.

All the forcibly stacked forces completed a chain reaction in the confined space. There was no escape route, nor any chance of luck.

He did not feel elated about it all.

"The people inside went insane, leaving themselves no way out." Louis finally spoke.

The cleansing operation began simultaneously.

The knights of the Red Tide advanced in several ranks, deploying shoulder-mounted flamethrowers and high-pressure water guns simultaneously.

Fiery tongues swept the ground, incinerating the uncoagulated flesh completely, followed by high-pressure water streams flushing the remaining filth into the gutters.

Inside the command vehicle, Louis remained seated, watching through the glass as tanks and soldiers steadily advanced through the city.

This was not a picture worth celebrating.

This was a Hell crafted by the Remont Clan, and also the finale ignited by his own hands.

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The steam tank stopped in the castle courtyard, with the engine's residual heat yet to dissipate, the blood slurry beneath the treads was continuously compressed, slowly flowing back into depressions.

Louis opened the car door and got out.

Only a few people followed behind him.

Weir walked on the left, his hand never leaving the sword hilt.

Sacco and a few other personal guards spread out, forming the most basic guard formation.

As they stepped on the ground, the soles of their boots sank into the layer of still-warm viscous matter, making a faint yet clear sound.

The air still carried a pungent smell, the scent of blood mingling with burnt, instinctively tightening the throat.

Louis did not halt, heading straight towards the shadows of the castle's main building.

The entrance to the underground was hidden behind a collapsed arch.

Stone steps extended downward, with each step resulting in a drop in the surrounding temperature.

The surface heat and moist air were left behind, replaced by a bone-chilling cold seeping into the marrow.

The torches along the walls had long extinguished, leaving only a few flickering alchemy lamps, their light dim and unstable.

The deeper they went, the more apparent the intangible pressure became.

It was not from sight but from deep within the body.

The heartbeat slowed unconsciously, the flow of Fighting Energy became sluggish, as if the entire passage itself repelled the existence of living beings.

Weir's brows gradually furrowed; he could feel that some extraordinary power had long existed here, its traces not yet completely dispersed.

He subconsciously slowed down and spoke in a low voice, "This smell... it's not just blood."

Sacco, slightly behind, glanced at the unnatural marks on the walls and floor, lowering his voice further, "It's alchemy mixed with blood."

He paused, then added, "If the monsters in the city came from here, it makes sense."

The passage continued downward, the pressure intensifying.

Louis did not respond, continuing his descent.

At the bottom of the stone steps was a heavy iron door violently torn open, the door hinge twisted, edges lined with outward curling fractures, as if forcibly broken from within.

Sacco glanced at the door, his breath visibly pausing, "To tear open such a door from inside... it must be the power of an Extraordinary Knight."

Louis stopped, took a look inside, and then stepped in.

The underground space was broader than imagined.

The dome soared high, with support structures exposed, massive metal beams spanning between.

The alchemical equipment that should have been neatly arranged was toppled and shattered on the floor, glass containers broken, the remnants of reagents drying into varying depths of stains on the ground.

The air was filled with an ancient, cold scent, like long-congealed blood.

In the center lay a dried up blood pool.

Chapter 759: Power of the Dragon's Remains (Part 2)

The walls of the pool were covered with marks of scratches and collisions, and the bottom was coated with a thick layer of dark residue that had long lost its fluidity.

Beside the blood pool, a few shredded researcher robes lay scattered around.

The remnants of runes on the fabric were blurred, and the edges had the appearance of being repeatedly pulled by claws.

Sacco paused at the edge of the blood pool, his gaze sweeping back and forth between the marks on the walls and the ground, his Adam's apple visibly moving.

And as his eyes passed the blood pool, settling into the deeper shadows, the next instant his breath clearly hitched.

Beyond the blood pool, a gigantic skeleton lay sprawled on the ground.

Even from a distance, the oppressive sense of its mass instinctively made one halt their steps.

"This..." Sacco spoke subconsciously, unable to finish the sentence.

Weir followed his line of sight, and his pupils contracted sharply.

"You've got to be kidding..." he whispered, as if afraid of disturbing something, "This is... a dragon?"

The underground space remained silent, only the skeleton lying there.

It was the remains of an ancient dragon.

The bones were enormous and ancient, their surfaces full of deliberate cuts, holes, and implanted devices.

The spine was fixed in segments, the chest cavity had been forcibly opened to connect to some complex and cruel alchemical structure.

Even devoid of life, the skeleton still exuded an unsettling presence.

"There really is such a thing..." Weir muttered.

"They actually dared to..." Sacco's words trailed off, realizing any words to describe the Remont Clan at this moment would be redundant.

Louis stood in place, looking at the skeleton, showing no emotional fluctuation.

To him, this was not the first time he knew of it.

In his mind, several records from the [Daily Intelligence] surfaced naturally.

About the Remont Clan's longstanding dragon blood experiments.

About the purification of power regardless of the cost.

About those repeatedly sacrificed failed samples.

This information had long been confirmed by him through papers and words.

Now it merely had a physical form.

This was the source.

Also, it was Kael's final card.

Louis's gaze slowly moved between the skeleton and the dried blood pool, his expression almost indifferent.

There was no glory here.

Only an old path that had come to an end.

From this moment, the name of the Remont Clan would no longer be brought up as nobility.

It would only be written into footnotes as a failed experiment.

He took a few steps forward to see more clearly.

At the instant of approaching that ancient dragon skeleton, a familiar yet entirely different chill suddenly pierced Louis's consciousness.

Not coming from the line of sight, but a direct oppression on the mental level.

Louis's steps halted.

"... Here it comes again." The thought flashed through his heart.

This feeling, he was all too familiar with.

By Titus's corpse, the crimson mist, the purple mist on the nest's remains, Louis had felt the same warning.

It was a warning of crisis beyond the physical, coming from a deeper existence.

But the nature was entirely different from the previous two intrusions.

From the pale and huge bone crevices of the ancient dragon, slowly seeping out, was an almost transparent golden mist.

It wasn't ostentatious, not even having any obvious aggressiveness.

Just silently dispersing there, overlooking itself.

A kind of condescending gaze, as if a god lowered its eyes, scrutinizing the dust beneath, attempting to make his soul instinctively bow, kneel, and admit its own insignificance.

The air in the underground space solidified along with it, a silent yet unavoidable command.

Louis's vision dimmed slightly, and from deep within the sea of consciousness came a violent tremor.

The Primordial Meditation Technique ran at full speed in the same instant, the boundaries of consciousness rapidly closing, forcibly blocking the invading will.

However, the golden presence did not retreat.

It still hung there, naturally waiting for submission.

At this moment, the Primordial Heart responded.

In the center of the sea of consciousness, platinum starlight burst abruptly.

Like the slowly rotating core of a star, stable, calm, yet possessing absolute dominion.

The brilliance spread like a galaxy, re-stabilizing Louis's consciousness.

Subsequently, two other subdued forces were simultaneously awakened.

The crimson mist surged at the edge of the platinum brilliance, transforming into a furious blood vine, emitting a deep and angry hum from the blood-colored tendrils.

The purple shadow converged in the light, condensing into insect silhouettes, densely packed, emitting an uncomfortable screech, as if wanting to devour everything.

Under the dominion of the Primordial Heart, they no longer conflicted with each other, like tamed hunting dogs, simultaneously locking onto the new target.

The crimson and purple both pounced, tearing at the golden aura attempting to become the master.

And the platinum starlight, like an invisible shackle, forcibly bound the three forces on the same track.

Louis's consciousness suddenly sank, and fragments of memory poured into his mind once more.

In the pitch-black mine pit, torches flickered.

An old miner in tattered clothes swung a pickaxe, with a "clang" striking something hard.

He brushed away the dirt to reveal a section of pale dragon bone.

Just that one glance.

The old miner's pupils instantly lost focus.

No scream, no struggle.

He seemed to be overwhelmed by some irresistible presence, freezing in place, then slowly kneeling, his heart ceasing to beat in an incredibly brief moment.

The scene before his eyes shattered and reassembled.

An ancient tomb long buried by time.

The dome collapsed, stone walls mottled, ancient runes vaguely visible in the dust, the air filled with deathly silence after the decay of ages.

The ancient dragon's remains quietly rested in the center of the burial chamber, not yet dismembered, bones intact and majestic as if merely slumbering.

The burial chamber held only one figure.

A person clad in a mage's robe.

The hood was low, the face obscured, the robe's patterns ancient and unfamiliar, inconsistent with any known alchemical system.

He approached the remains alone, without hesitation or reverence.

The glow of magic arose, precise and calm.

The sternum was separated in an almost perfect manner.

The large heart, long ceased to beat yet still radiating brilliant golden light, was extracted intact.

It was sealed into a black gold box engraved with ancient seals.

Before the burial chamber returned to darkness completely, a deep and indistinct whisper echoed through time.

"The heart returns to the master, the bones and blood return to dust."

The final scene was an even older picture.

A dark, damp underground altar, surrounded by a circle of pale candles.

A young man knelt in front of the altar, holding a neatly severed human hand aloft, his lips moving soundlessly, reciting some sort of oath.

The illusion fractured abruptly, and Louis abruptly opened his eyes.

By now, the faint golden mist had been completely drawn into his body, suppressed in a corner of the sea of consciousness by the Primordial Heart, becoming the third force after crimson and purple.

But Louis clearly sensed that this force was incomplete, yet still strong enough.

In the depths of Louis's pupils, a faint flash of gold flickered.

He could clearly feel a new passive pressure forming, a new ability brought by the golden mist, just by being looked at, lower-tiered wills would instinctively crumble.

"... My lord?" Weir's voice was noticeably lowered, "Are you alright?"

Louis raised his hand, pressed his forehead, and then shook his head.

Unlike the previous three times, this was a brief daze, without fainting.

This gave him a slight confirmation deep down.

This is a fragmentary power, and its true main force is that heart that was excavated.

"I'm fine." His tone returned to its usual calm.

Louis looked again at the now entirely lusterless skeleton turned into ordinary bones, his gaze steady.

The Remont Clan thought they'd unearthed a treasure, but in reality, they just picked up someone else's leftovers.

Although there was no evidence yet, Louis instinctively felt it might be related to the missing Emperor.

But Louis had no lead to follow, so he could only hope the Daily Intelligence System would come through efficiently.

Louis withdrew his gaze: "Seal this place temporarily and notify Merian to have his alchemy team come over as soon as possible."

Chapter 760: Raymond's Decision

The freezing rain in Gray Rock Province during winter was relentless.

Rain mingled with unformed wet snow fell layer by layer from low-hanging gray clouds, turning the roads at the edge of the Mist Swamp into a mess of cold mud.

The gray mist reduced visibility to an extremely low level, where even the torchlight at a slight distance would be swallowed, leaving only a vague shadow swaying in the wind.

The marching line stretched long.

The heavy wheels repeatedly sank into the mud pits, followed by suppressed curses.

The wounded were placed in the middle of the formation, wrapped in soaked cloaks, leaning against the edge of the wagon, their breaths betraying evident pain.

Occasionally, a sharp and short whistling sound would come from afar, ripping through the fog, and quickly disappearing.

That was the sound of Magic Explosion Bullets cutting through the air.

Each such whistling would take away several knights.

Every occurrence made the entire line involuntarily tense up.

Duke Remont's army had long lost its elite appearance.

The knights' armor was coated with mud, their faces pale and weary.

The formation remained, but few dared to look forward directly.

More eyes instinctively diverted to the reeds and woods on either side of the road, as if something unseen might leap from the fog at any moment.

Duke Remont stood on the command wagon, his brows furrowed, the harsh weather and the occasional appearance of the Red Tide Knights wearing on his spirit.

The higher vantage did not offer him much comfort.

As his telescope scanned the section of road deliberately slowed ahead, he quickly realized that continuing like this would only lead to gradual erosion.

"We can't drag this out any longer." He put down the telescope, summoned an adjutant, and explained the carefully devised plan.

The bait was soon set up.

Over a dozen carts loaded with provisions were deliberately positioned at a bend in the road, their axles breaking in full view, forcing the convoy to halt.

Only a few dozen knights, looking utterly exhausted, escorted them, with a defense so loose it was almost perfunctory.

Meanwhile, beneath the mud on either side of the road, hundreds of elite knights in heavy armor had already taken cover.

They were forced to abandon their horses, lurking as heavy infantry in the frigid mud and water, their armor soaking cold water, the weight pressing on their bodies, making each breath slow and laborious.

Duke Remont stared at the supply cart: "Come on, Louis."

His voice was full of gritted teeth.

In the mist, hoofbeats were soon heard.

Remont's body leaned slightly forward, his hand already on the hilt of his sword.

Yet, the hoofbeats did not approach the bait cart.

They sped past the flanks' woodland, moving so quickly, they didn't even change direction.

The supply carts were completely ignored.

Remont's pupils suddenly contracted.

Almost simultaneously, he realized the true target of the opponent.

It was a low-lying area to the army's right rear, seemingly safely distant from the main road.

The tents of the Black Vulture Knights' scout camp were stationed there, responsible for providing intelligence and alerts for the entire army.

The hoofbeats stopped there.

Lambert, with his knights, reined in at a hidden spot 700 meters away, without approaching closer.

They didn't draw their swords.

Instead, they took out silver spheres from their pouches, which were the seventh-generation portable Magic Explosion Bullets.

The portable Magic Explosion Bullets, engraved with dangerous runes, were swiftly loaded into simple alchemy grenade launchers.

Without commands, these knights were incredibly skilled.

Dozens of spheres were simultaneously thrown, tracing graceful parabolas through the mist, and landing precisely within the scout camp's tent area.

"Boom! Boom! Boom!..."

In the next instant, blue-black alchemy flames abruptly burst out.

The shock wave spread through the low-lying area, engulfing tents, stakes, and scouts who hadn't managed to armor up.

The air was violently stirred by magic power, with turbulent waves hurling mud, water, and remnants in all directions.

Screams existed for only a fleeting moment, quickly erased by the aftermath of explosions.

And the knights who threw these Magic Explosion Bullets had already vanished with the sound of explosions.

Remont stood there, watching that lowland turn into a rolling sea of fire.

The baited cart still stood safe at the bend.

Yet, the two hundred heavy-armored knights lying in mud and water remained in place.

The long period of lying still had let the cold water seep into their joints.

Without waiting for any orders, some had already begun to shiver uncontrollably, even losing sensation.

All of it was absurdly cruel.

The adjutant nearly stumbled as he ran to the command wagon.

His face was mixed with mud and bloodstains, his voice trembling ceaselessly due to the cold and fear.

"Your Grace... the Black Vulture Camp, all gone."

He took a deep breath, as if mustering all his courage to continue:

"Just received an urgent report from the vanguard, they were blasted off the floating bridge when crossing it, a whole company of heavy cavalry... fell into the swamp."

Remont remained silent.

The adjutant lowered his head, his voice near breaking point.

"This is the thirtieth attack. Five days... just five days. We haven't even seen Gray Rock Province's boundary marker, and a third of our forces are already lost."

Around the command wagon, silence reigned.

Remont slowly spread out the marching map.

At that moment, he finally understood.

Every arrangement he made, every thought he had, even every seemingly safe corner was as if seen through by some invisible gaze in advance.

"He knows..." Remont murmured softly, "He knows everything... no wonder..."