

Winter 811

Chapter 811: The Villains' Round Table

The council chamber on the top floor of Skull Castle was like a deep well overturned onto the reefs.

The heavy granite walls sealed every side completely, leaving only a narrow air vent in the center of the dome.

Moonlight leaked in through that gap like an elongated silver needle, listlessly stabbing into the floor.

The round table sat in the middle, with three sea-beast oil lamps burning on it. Their flames did not flicker, but rose straight up, burning with an eerie, ghastly green.

The lamplight was stretched without end, thrown onto the walls, twisting the seated figures into clawing, raving monstrosities.

Rosa sat in one of the seats, her single eye sweeping coldly around the round table.

The first to crash into her line of sight was the bone-crusher Kane.

The brute had planted both feet—boots studded with spikes—right on the tabletop, one hand clutching a raw lamb shank that was still oozing blood, tearing at it meat and bone together.

Blood trickled through his tangled beard, dripping onto the table with a clear, maddening sound.

Drip, drip.

Rosa sneered inwardly. Brainless idiot. Knows nothing but eating and killing. Once I get the formula for the poison, this kind of beast should be the first to be cleaned up.

Her gaze shifted away. Viper Sanders was hunched into his chair like a sick snake coiling in on itself.

He was wiping that toxin-soaked dagger over and over with deerskin, his motions meticulous, but his eyes were always wandering, darting back every few seconds to the dark corners of the hall, as if an assassin might spring out at any time.

Rosa snorted. If something really goes wrong, what the hell is that little knife going to stop?

Beside him, the old God-stick Moro was muttering some kind of prayer that no one could understand.

He rolled a few yellowed divination shells back and forth between his fingers, now and then leaning toward the lamp to study the direction of the patterns on the shells.

Babbling lunatic. Always has been. In Rosa's eyes he was nothing but trash trading mad talk for a meal.

Rosa's eye swept rightward over the few empty chairs at the round table. Aside from those already dead, there were still two cowards who hadn't shown up.

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Second by second, time crawled past, and that clammy, death-cold stillness was slowly grinding away her patience.

Rosa suddenly shot to her feet and drew the rapier at her waist, its jeweled guard glinting.

Clang—!

The tip drove hard into the tabletop, wood chips flying. The blade was still buzzing with the impact.

She swept her gaze around, her voice sharp and caustic, bouncing again and again off the enclosing stone walls:

"This place is as cold as a morgue. Is there seriously not even a single serving girl to pour the wine?"

"That old bastard Balk had better haul himself out here fast." Rosa gave a cold laugh, fingers tightening around the hilt. "If I find out he's playing games with me, or that he doesn't actually have a poison that can melt an iron ship..."

The words had barely left her mouth.

The old God-stick Moro, who had been huddled in the last seat, suddenly let out a shrill, inhuman scream.

"Aaah—!!"

It didn't sound like a cry of surprise, more like a wail being forced out of his chest by something crushing him from the inside.

He flung the divination shells in his hand, scattering them all over the table.

"Wrong... wrong..." His voice shook, as if something cold and wet were strangling his throat. "There's no money on them... no poison... and no road..."

Moro lurched to his feet, knocking over his chair, his voice suddenly pitching higher, edged with a hysterical shriek:

"It's all water!! Below is water, above is water too! We're at the bottom! In a fish's belly! Run!! This isn't a banquet... it's a sacrifice!!"

When his shout died, the council chamber went briefly, utterly still.

Then the jeers began.

Kane split his blood-smeared mouth in a huge grin and burst out laughing, pointing the lamb shank at Moro. "Old bastard losing it again? Smelled my mutton and started having nightmares?"

Sanders lifted his lids a fraction, his tone cold and impatient. "Put away your scare-tactics, Moro. If your readings were really that good, you wouldn't be stuck in the last seat."

A few dry chuckles bounced off the stone walls, forcibly smothering what was left of the eerie mood.

Moro, however, no longer heard anything at all.

All he could feel was the ground under his feet rising and falling slowly, like the belly of some huge creature breathing.

Like a madman he shoved aside the chairs blocking his way and staggered toward the tightly shut oak doors.

Just as his hand was about to close around the handle—

The door slid inward without a sound.

Unable to stop himself, Moro crashed straight into a rigid, icy embrace.

Balk finally made his entrance.

He stood in the doorway, one hand bracing the old God-stick by the shoulder with steady strength, as if supporting a drunk old friend.

Rosa's single eye narrowed slightly. The man before her was in a state of health that was downright unsettling.

The old man who'd needed a cane, whose face was blotched with age spots, who looked ready to drop dead any minute—that man was gone.

Now Balk's back was straight, his figure wrapped in a perfectly tailored blood-red formal coat.

His hair was thick and black, his hairline implausibly even; his face glowed with color, his skin so taut it didn't belong to someone his age.

Moro shuddered hard in his arms.

His whole body went rigid in an instant, even his scream clogging in his throat, unable to get out.

Balk was smiling, the corners of his mouth pulled into a slightly too-wide arc, but in that full minute his eyes did not blink even once.

His other hand was hooked around a woman. She was veiled in layers of heavy black gauze, her steps utterly soundless, her hem gliding along the floor, the tips of her feet nowhere to be seen.

Balk gently pressed Moro back into his chair, his movements excessively tender, yet he left stark purple bruises on the man's arm.

"What are you running for, Moro? The banquet's only just begun. My apologies, my friends. To prepare this..."

Balk paused, his smile unchanged. "Feast, I had to spend a little time carefully choosing the ingredients."

Chapter 812: The Villains' Round Table (Part 2)

The ghastly green lamplight flickered behind him, casting his face in an excessively youthful glow.

The smoothness of that skin wasn't due to meticulous care but rather resembled a corpse soaked in cold water for too long, swollen to the limit, smoothing out all wrinkles.

Gazes from around the round table, one after another, fell on Balk.

The Viper Saunders squinted, twirling the dagger swiftly between his fingers, the blade leaving a remnant shadow under the ghastly green light.

As a High-tier Extraordinary Knight, he could clearly perceive the life force inside that old thing across from him, surging in a way that defied common sense.

That wasn't the restoration of a dead tree coming to life. It seemed more like something foreign had forcibly filled his skin.

Saunders licked his dry lips, his voice cold and slimy: "Hey, old Balk.

Looks like you not only found a weapon against the iron ships but also snagged a bucket of succubus bathwater?"

He laughed unreservedly, his gaze like a knife scraping across Balk's face.

"This skin is so tender... I almost want to peel it off entirely to make myself a pair of new gloves."

As his words ended, a few low grunts of laughter echoed in the conference hall, and the killing intent flowed unabashedly in the air.

Balk seemed completely unaware of the malicious gazes.

He picked up a silver fork, the tines piercing into a piece of still slightly quivering raw viscera on the plate.

Dark red juice dripped along the shining fork tines, falling onto the white napkin like a blooming blood flower.

He put the piece into his mouth, his jaw barely opening, his Adam's apple moving up and down with a slick swallowing sound.

"Gulp."

That was the sound of a mollusk sliding down the esophagus, swallowed whole.

Then he looked up, revealing that constant smile that hadn't even changed at the corners.

"A blessing from the deep sea, Saunders." His voice carried a murky echo, "As long as you all behave, everyone can... transform."

As those words fell, the air seemed to freeze instantly.

Suddenly, Kane the Bone Crusher stood up abruptly.

As a Half-Step Peak Knight who had roamed this sea for thirty years, his patience had reached its limit.

He was never good at listening to riddles, nor could he tolerate being treated like a fool.

"Enough!" This roar was like a thunderbolt.

The ground beneath his feet let out a dull groan, spiderweb cracks spreading crazily from the center beneath his boot.

The earth-colored Fighting Energy erupted violently from his body, like a volcano suppressed for too long.

That was pure strength-type Fighting Energy, thick, brutal, with enough power to crush rocks, filling the entire conference hall in an instant.

He kicked at the edge of the round table.

"Boom—!"

The heavy solid round table was directly overturned.

Sauce, entrails, and grease splashed through the air, spattering against the stone walls and lamp stands with a crackling sound, causing the ghastly green firelight to flicker violently.

Kane threw his head back and roared, his voice exploding beneath the dome, hurting eardrums with piercing pain: "To hell with your transformation!! I came all this way, not to see your wax-painted dead face!"

He stepped forward, raising his massive fist high.

Fighting Energy was forcefully compressed in front of his fist, squeezing the air into an ear-piercing boom.

This punch gathered all his life's power, even an armored rhinoceros would be smashed into pulp.

"Hand it over! Or I'll crush your faux youth head!!"

The fist swung down.

The wind pressure was like an invisible battering ram, crashing toward the main seat.

Yet Balk did not dodge, not even blinking that thin layer of eyelid.

That overly young face still wore a perfect and stiff smile, as if the coming iron fist was nothing more than a trivial breeze.

Just as the punch was about to touch his nose.

He simply raised his swollen left hand, which had been hidden in his sleeve.

Boom— —!

Fist and palm collided.

A wave exploded in the confined conference hall, like compressed thunder.

The ghastly green lamp flames were instantly stretched into twisted lines, the surrounding decaying tapestries unable to withstand the impact, ripping apart, mold stains and stone chips scattering like torrential rain.

But Kane's fist, which carried the power of a Half-Step Peak Knight and could smash a city gate, stopped.

Stopped an inch from Balk's swollen left palm, as if hitting an invisible wall.

Balk's arm was chillingly steady, with not even a muscle twitch.

The air compressed forcibly between them, releasing a low moan.

In the turbulent currents stirred by the collision shock, the wide captain's tricorne on Balk's head was entirely blown off.

The hat tumbled a few times through the air, lost direction, and fell with a "clap" into a dark corner.

Kane was stunned for a moment, and in a life-or-death struggle, that moment was fatal.

In the conference hall, deathly silence descended.

All eyes involuntarily lifted, staring fixedly at the top of Balk's exposed head.

There was no hair, not even... any scalp.

The upper part of his skull seemed to be neatly cut off by some precise alchemical instrument, forming an open bone bowl.

And within that hollow bone bowl, a pink, pulsing soft-bodied creature resided.

It was semi-transparent, moist, shimmering with a sort of sickly greasy luster.

Like a giant mutated brain exposed to the air, or a soft-bodied octopus forcibly crammed into the cranium.

Countless tiny, semi-transparent tendrils extended from its edges, like plant roots, deeply embedded into Balk's cerebral cortex, even penetrating the cranial base, entering behind the eyeballs.

With every breath, the mass of flesh lightly contracted, emitting a viscous yet clear moist sound.

"Squish, squish."

Rosa gasped sharply, her stomach churning, acidic bile rushing to her throat.

That was no miracle of rejuvenation. It was live parasitism.

This body, known as Balk, was just a carefully maintained skin, a vessel maintaining basic functions... a fresh culture dish.

Kane, being the closest, could even smell the sweet metallic scent emanating from the mass of flesh, noticing every twitch of its microvessels.

In an instant, the rage in the brigand's eyes was completely drained, leaving only the most primal fear.

Balk tilted his head slightly. The movement was a bit stiff, causing the mass of flesh atop to wobble slightly.

"Oh dear..." His voice rang out, carrying a hint of feigned regret: "The hat fell, and I'm untidy before the guests... How impolite."

Before he finished speaking, the fingers on the left hand gripping Kane's fist suddenly tightened.

"Crack!"

Without any warning, a teeth-grinding shattering sound erupted.

Kane's proud Fighting Energy armor shattered like fragile glass.

Immediately after, his fist, that iron fist honed over thirty years, was crushed like a rotten tomato within Balk's palm.

"Aaaah—!!"

The shrill scream had just burst from his throat before it abruptly stopped.

Because Balk's right hand moved as fast as a red lightning bolt, clamping onto Kane's screaming face, fingers deeply embedding into his facial bones.

"Too noisy." Balk smiled, fingers gently closing.

"Squish!"

Like cracking a ripe watermelon, red and white matter sprayed out instantly.

Thick blood splashed onto Balk's face, also onto the pink parasitic brain atop his head.

The previously sluggish soft creature vibrated excitedly upon contact with the hot blood.

Countless tiny tendrils danced frantically, greedily sucking up the nutrients that splattered onto it.

The moist blood flowed along the tendrils, making the creature appear even more vibrant, glowing with fullness, even emitting pleased "squelching" sounds.

In that nauseating sucking sound.

The headless corpse twitched twice, then collapsed weakly at Balk's feet.

In the hall, silence reigned, as still as death.

Chapter 813: Silent Manipulation

When Kane's body fell, the sound was muffled.

The once tall and strong body seemed to have its bones instantly emptied, crashing heavily onto the ground.

From the broken neck cavity, a column of scalding blood struck the edge of the round table, splattering back onto the stone floor, quickly spreading into a scarlet carpet.

The intense smell of blood instantly overwhelmed the cloying fishy sweetness of the sea beast oil lamps.

The hall was deathly silent.

The head, said to be able to smash a mast, was so cleanly crushed.

It didn't even have time to let out half a complete scream.

Kane's eyes were still open, the bulging eyeballs hanging from the sockets, pupils already dilated, frozen with the last confusion and fear.

The remaining three moved almost instinctively.

Losa, Sanders, and Moro, the pirate leaders who usually wished to sink each other into the sea, displayed astonishing synergy at this moment.

In an extremely short time, they stood back-to-back in a stiff triangle, exposing their most vulnerable backs to each other.

Dark red, ink green, pale white.

Three different colors of fighting energy and spiritual energy erupted in the narrow conference hall.

The aura of high-tier transcendents collided wildly, distorting the air with pressure.

The heavy stone table produced a screeching sound from the vibrations, mold spots on the walls crumbled off like gray snow.

They were using strength to forcibly open the doors of sanity.

The battle hadn't started yet, but Moro was already breaking down. As a Spirit Medium, his perception was far more acute than a Knight's, and for that reason, he saw much more of the truth than others.

"Get out!!" He clung to his head tightly, his fingernails embedded deep into the scalp, etching out streaks of blood, "Get out of my mind!! Don't think about turning me into water too!!"

While Losa and Sanders were still trying to fight back with fighting energy, Moro's mental defenses had completely shattered ahead of his physical ones.

Under the gaze of that pink brain tissue, he felt his soul being slowly liquefied.

Moro bit down fiercely on the tip of his tongue, spraying a mouthful of hot essence blood onto the deep-sea beast bone necklace at his chest.

As soon as the blood touched the bone, it emitted a slight "sizzle," as if it had fallen onto a red-hot iron plate.

"Bang!"

The beast bone exploded. The fragments paused for a moment in mid-air, then transformed into dozens of pale white ghostly shadowy spirits.

They lacked complete human form, faces twisted and elongated, mouths and noses hollow, trailing long, gray-white tails, emitting a piercing mental wail in the air.

"Wuu!!"

This was an impact powerful enough to tear through consciousness; an ordinary Extraordinary Knight wouldn't even have a chance to scream under such an assault, their brains would turn directly to mush.

"Die! Just die—!!"

Moro screamed hysterically, blood streaming from his seven orifices, pouring all his remaining spiritual energy into this mutually destructive attack.

The vengeful ghosts surged like a tide towards Balk, who stood at the doorway.

Yet Balk stood there, without even raising a hand to defend, merely lifting his head slightly, opening his mouth to take a deep breath.

The next instant, a strange suction, as if from the depths of an ocean trench, emanated from deep within his mouth.

The screaming, sharp-crying spirits, once touching that suction, were like bubbles swept into a storm.

They struggled frantically, clawing at the air but could not even find a direction to escape, their bodies stretched into thin white smoke, dragged directly into Balk's not-so-large mouth.

"Gulp." Like slurping noodles smoothly.

All the screams, curses, and mental impacts vanished completely the moment they entered his mouth.

Balk closed his mouth, his Adam's apple bobbed once, and in front of everyone, he burped contentedly.

The pink soft tissue exposed to the air on top of his head quivered gently with satisfaction, secreting a layer of transparent mucus.

"Not bad taste." He extended a scarlet tongue, licking the corner of his mouth, "Just a bit salty, old men's souls are always too bitter."

The madness on Moro's face froze, his brain felt like it had been struck with a heavy blow, rendering all thoughts into a void within a moment.

This was his strongest trump card, a definitive strike obtained by exhausting his life force.

Yet it became the opponent's... appetizer?

And at that moment, Balk moved, covering the five or six meters between them in an instant.

A hand gently landed on top of Moro's head.

"Bang!"

It wasn't loud, but it was exceptionally crisp.

Moro's head, filled with insane babble, burst like an overinflated balloon directly under the palm.

Fragments of bone, flesh, and white brain matter mixed together, forming an eerily semi-liquid state, splattering on the door panels and the floor.

The headless body swayed, like a puppet losing its strings, slipping down limply, blocking the only exit.

And just as Balk crushed Moro's skull, Sanders and Losa moved in unison.

This was the perfect opportunity, no need for eye contact; those who lived this long on the man-eating sea knew when it was time to risk it all.

Sanders' figure vanished first.

The ink green fighting energy blazed furiously around his body, compressing his whole form into an almost imperceptible fine line, a speed too fast for even retinal afterimages to form.

He skimmed over the blood-soaked floor, extending his hand holding a knife sharp enough to erode bones, aiming straight for Balk's back.

Meanwhile, Losa stepped to the flank.

Pale blue fighting energy coiled around his rapier, like a layer of thin ice, targeting the most vulnerable bloodline at the neck's side.

Chapter 814: Silent Manipulation (Part 2)

She abandoned the fantasy of a single fatal blow and chose the most reliable route of weakening, cutting off nerves and blood supply.

The dagger was already nearing the fabric.

Just as Sanders was certain that in the next instant he would pierce the heart.

"Crack! Crack! Crack!" A series of bone-crunching sounds that set one's teeth on edge echoed.

Balk's lower body remained motionless, while his upper body rotated 180 degrees backwards in a manner completely contrary to human spinal structure.

That face with a stiff smile instantly appeared in front of Sanders.

That hand, still stained with Morrow's red and white brain matter, stretched out as if foreseeing.

Precisely grabbed Sanders' face.

The speed was so fast that the word "rapid" itself couldn't describe it.

Sanders only had time to gaze into a pair of hollow, dead eyes.

"Too slow." The voice was flat, as if evaluating a crawling snail.

The next instant "boom!"

The emerald green protective Fighting Energy shattered like a crisp sugar shell.

The skull shattered under irresistible force, and a mist of blood blossomed in mid-air tragically.

Sanders' headless body continued to rush forward due to inertia, crashing heavily against the stone wall, dragging out a long, slippery blood stain.

Almost simultaneously, Rosa's rapier pierced the target.

The sword's tip sunk into Balk's left chest.

However, there was no sound of metal ripping through flesh, nor the expected resistance.

The sensation was disturbingly odd, causing her heart to abruptly sink; it didn't feel like stabbing into human tissue, more like plunging into an over-fermented dough, or a bucket of sticky glue.

The Fighting Energy was swiftly consumed, without even a ripple of recoil.

Balk lowered his head, glancing at the sword in his chest as if confirming an irrelevant triviality.

He waved casually, like shooing away a fly.

Snap!

A tremendous force retaliated along the sword, causing the steel rapier to shatter into pieces on the spot.

Rosa was sent flying by this terrifying power, like a kite with a broken string, crashing heavily into the debris of the round table.

Wood splinters flew, stones cracked.

The council hall fell silent again.

Rosa lay on the ground, coughing violently, her throat full of the taste of blood. Her vision shook intensely, and she barely managed to lift her head.

Three headless bodies lay on the ground.

Kane, Morrow, Sanders.

In less than a minute, the top fighting power in this region was annihilated.

Heavy footsteps approached.

Balk walked up to her, slowly crouching down. Above, the pink parasitic brain writhed vigorously at close range, its tendrils probing the air, emitting a subtle, sticky "squish" sound.

"Only you remain until the end, Ms. Rosa." His tone carried a hint of eerie admiration, "Then I will give you a reward."

He extended both hands, gently cupping her cheeks. The palms were cold, slippery, yet carried an indescribable suction.

A nauseatingly sweet aroma instantaneously penetrated the nasal cavity.

The residual Fighting Energy within Rosa dissipated in an instant, even the thought of resistance became distant and vague.

She heard her skull emit fine cracking sounds.

"Crunch."

She closed her eyes, awaiting the arrival of intense pain.

But the pain did not come; instead, a warm, viscous fluid forcefully poured into the brain through the cracks.

An ecstasy exploded instantaneously, the soul was gently enveloped, and consciousness swiftly melted into the pink tide.

In the last second before consciousness completely disintegrated, Rosa's mouth involuntarily curled up into a grin more grotesque than crying.

What she emitted was not a scream, but a satisfying sigh.

In the next instant.

Boom!

Her head burst in ecstasy.

There was no pain, only release, as a bewitching mist of blood slowly dispersed under the ghastly green lights, concluding this slaughter with an absurd flourish.

The hall fell into an eerie stillness, with four headless corpses scattered messily on the ground.

Strangely, the blood pools on the floor stopped spreading.

The broken necks seemed to be instantly sealed by some invisible force, the spurting blood halting abruptly after the initial burst.

The pungent smell of blood was rapidly being replaced by another scent.

Sweet, mixed with the saline of the deep sea and the cloying sweetness of rotting flesh fermentation.

A few seconds later, the transformation began.

The first to change was Kane's massive body.

Within his rough, broken cervical spine, countless tiny pink growths began to wriggle frantically.

They seemed like seeds buried prematurely in the bone marrow, finally welcoming a frenzy of growth after the host's head was lost.

The growths quickly divided, extended, intertwined, and the surface reflected a sickly greasy sheen.

"Squish."

Accompanied by a wet muffled sound, a translucent pink soft mass suddenly expanded out of the neck cavity.

It had no distinct facial features, but a vague, semi-translucent outline resembling a jellyfish or an octopus could be discerned.

The central area throbbed rhythmically, like a heart exposed to the air, or a lung breathing.

Then, the necks of the other three bodies completed the same supplement at the same time.

No more blood flowed, the heads were replaced by foreign objects.

With a series of bone-crunching sounds that set one's teeth on edge, the bodies that were supposed to be dead began to twitch slowly.

"Crunch, crunch."

Joints emitted stiff creaks, spines straightened again, the four headless bodies staggered upright.

Balk bent down, picking up the tricorn captain's hat blown off from the ground stained with wood chips and blood.

Chapter 815: Silent Manipulation (Part 3)

Dust clung to the black felt hat, along with starry spots of dried-up brain matter.

He took out a handkerchief, patiently wiping away the stains bit by bit, his movements gentle and meticulous, as if he were tending to a rare treasure.

Then he held the hat with both hands and placed it back atop his head.

The wide brim hung down, casting a shadow that conveniently covered the exposed pink brain outside.

Balk adjusted his collar, raised his head, and looked at the four newly born in front of him.

The smile on his face had completely shed the earlier deliberately mimicked human emotions of falsehood.

In its place was a pure satisfaction akin to that of a creator.

"Look." His voice echoed in the empty council hall, tinged with a resonance as moist as seawater:

"Without those brains filled with distractions, fear, and foolish desires... how perfect, how delightful you have become."

The four headless figures did not respond, but those clusters of pink soft tissue all lightly trembled simultaneously, secreting a layer of excited mucus.

It was as if they were nodding, also as if they were cheering.

Balk turned around, his scarlet cape sweeping across the blood-stained floor behind him.

"Let's go, assemble the fleet." His steps were unhurried, "We are to set sail, to give this dying world..."

He paused for a moment, the corners of his mouth splitting to his ears: "...a grand feast."

The green flames of the oil lamps flickered without wind, projecting five elongated shadows on the walls, clawing and sprawling.

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Late night.

The sea was like a pool of thick, dead ink, even the starlight swallowed up by the heavy gray fog.

Miller stood at the door of the captain's cabin, where a lone wind lamp swayed, wiping his scimitar for the tenth time.

The blade reflected his sinister half-face, yet did not show a hint of blood color. *freewe&novel.com*

Rosa had been inside for a full eight hours.

The distant castle had completely melted into the night, like a giant beast crouching at the mouth of the Abyss, without a trace of light coming through.

Only the scent had changed.

As the night wind turned cold, the sweet, cloying scent in the air grew ever stronger.

It was like a damp, cold serpent's tongue, intruding into the lungs through the nose, bringing a hypnotic drowsiness.

The deck was deathly silent.

By the dim mast lamp, Miller saw all the sailors on night duty collapsed on the ground.

Their postures twisted bizarrely, like a pile of randomly discarded rotten flesh.

Some let out foolish laughter in their dreams, others drooled bright and shiny saliva at the corners of their mouths, glinting eerily in the dark.

"A bunch of useless wretches."

Miller cursed under his breath, yet his heart pounded violently against his ribs.

A chill as if he were being stalked by a predator made the hair on his body stand on end.

Just at that moment.

"Plop."

A wet, viscous sound, clear in the deathly silent night like thunder.

It wasn't the sound of boots on the wood. It was the noise of some wet, squishy lump of flesh slapping onto the deck.

Miller spun around, his pupils constricting.

In the darkness at the edge of the ship, a slick hand silently extended.

Gray-green skin shone with an oily sheen under the lamp, semi-transparent webs between the fingers, and hooked claws deeply carved into the wooden railing.

Then, countless pairs of green eyes lit up in the darkness.

They made no roar, like a legion of spectres emerging from ink-black waters.

The second, the third, the tenth... Densely packed, slick shadows silently climbed up the ship's side.

Before Miller could draw his scimitar, the nearest deep-sea creature had already pounced on the sleeping bosun.

Its movement was as swift as a bolt of black lightning.

The monster straddled the bosun, forcibly prying open his jaw, the force so strong that it shattered his teeth.

"Crunch." The bosun awoke from the agony but couldn't utter a sound.

The creature's face split open, and a mucus-covered, faintly glowing pink tubular proboscis darted from the depths of its throat, plunging hard into the bosun's mouth, piercing straight down his esophagus.

"Mm—!!!"

The bosun convulsed violently in the dark, legs kicking wildly, the heels scraping the deck in frenzied friction to express his pain.

With the dim light, Miller clearly saw a pink fleshy sac being forcibly squeezed into the living man's stomach along that transparent tube.

The convulsions abruptly stopped.

The bosun's eyeballs rolled back, then turned ash gray.

In the next second, he sprang up like a puppet on strings, grabbing the rope beside him, emitting a non-human growl, joining the rank of monsters.

"Enemy attack!!!" Miller finally roared, the sound sharp and off-key in the dead of night.

Without hesitation, he raised his musket and fired at the nearest shadow.

"Boom—!" The muzzle's flame instantly tore through the darkness.

The momentary flash illuminated a suffocating scene on deck...

Densely packed deep-sea creatures had already swarmed the deck, perched on every sleeping pirate, conducting their nauseating feeding ritual.

"Ahhhhh!!" The gunshot-woken pirate let out a despairing scream.

But as he tried to get up, a deep-sea creature pinned his chest, its claws instantly ripping open his throat.

Hot blood splattered, staining the monster's scales red.

The slaughter began, the midnight deck turned into a meat grinder.

The awakened pirates barely had time to find their weapons, fumbling blindly in the dark like headless flies, only to be dragged into shadow to be dismembered, or pinned down and forcibly infested.

Chapter 816: Silent Manipulation (Part 4)

"Stop fucking sleeping! Kill!!!"

Miller kicked over a new recruit blocking his way, slashing wildly in the darkness with his scimitar wrapped in Fighting Energy.

A massive deep diver leader leapt down from the mast, bringing a stench as it aimed straight for Miller's head.

Miller's eyes were vicious. Without thinking, he grabbed a nearby screaming helmsman and shoved him out hard.

Thud!

The helmsman's chest was instantly pierced by claws, hanging on the monster's claws.

"First mate, you..." Using even a second of opportunity gained by the human shield, Miller roared and slashed down.

Half of the monster's head was sliced off, splattering Miller's face with its foul black blood.

He didn't care at all about the helmsman's life or death, kicking the corpse and the monster away with one sweep.

"Get out of the way!" He was covered in blood, charging toward the cannon position like a madman.

If we can't live, then no one gets to be comfortable.

Rosa's orders exploded in his mind.

Stir the waters!

"Reload! Reload it for me!!" Miller raced to the cannon position and slashed down an ammunition loader who was mutating.

The remaining two pirates were terrified, fumbling in the dark to load the powder packs and solid shot into the cannon.

All around were screams and chewing sounds, the slick footsteps of the monsters drawing closer.

Miller could even feel the putrid breath behind him.

He grinned fiercely, thrusting the torch harshly onto the fuse.

The fuse hissed and burned, the firelight illuminating his twisted face.

"Boom—!!!"

The first cannon shot echoed in the dead of night.

The immense recoil shook the deck, sending wood chips flying.

The fiery blast of the cannon instantly lit up dozens of meters of the sea surface, also illuminating the terrified, retreating faces of the monsters.

"Boom! Boom!" Immediately, the second and third shots followed.

Cannonballs, trailing red-hot marks, tore through the pitch-black night sky, smashing toward the distant fortress.

The fire from the explosions surged toward the fortress, like a burning beacon erected in this black night.

All the monsters halted.

They instinctively feared the loud noises and fire, turning their heads toward the blasts.

"Cut the anchor! Hoist the sails full!" Taking advantage of this brief moment, Miller's voice thundered across the deck, like a whip striking near everyone's ears.

No nonsense, and no one dared to confirm.

The boatswain swung the War Axe, the iron chain bursting in a shower of sparks with a tooth-aching snap.

The Scorpion jolted sharply, its bow struggling to face the open sea in the surging waves.

Too slow.

The deck beneath Miller's feet shuddered as if the ship were being dragged back by something, groaning with each step forward.

He gloomily gazed over the ship's side.

There, it was hung with people.

Pirates who couldn't squeeze onto the ship clung desperately to the rope net, like clusters of grapes about to rot.

Some were half in the water, their legs torn to shreds by shadows beneath, yet they dared not let go.

"Pull me up!"

"First mate! I can work too! Don't leave me behind!"

The crying mixed with the wind enveloped his ears.

Miller walked to the side of the ship and looked down at them.

These faces were familiar to him, drinking at the same table just yesterday, sharing Gold Coins, sinking prisoners from merchant ships with stones together.

But the look in his eyes now was as if he were seeing a bunch of barnacles.

"Overloaded." He said quietly, no one heard, nor needed to hear.

The scimitar slid out of its sheath, a cold gleam scraping along the ship's side, snapping a rope.

The line of people hanging there silently plunged into the churning sea without even a scream.

The Fishmen below swarmed instantly, the water surface turning frothy red.

Next, the second rope, the third... Miller's motions were steady, like pruning unnecessary branches.

A nimble pirate already had his hand on the railing, half his head peeking up, face covered in blood:
"Miller! I..."

A boot sole stamped directly on his face.

"Don't dirty my deck." Miller pressed down hard with his foot.

The man fell backward, and as he splashed into the sea, three Fishmen dragged him into the deep water.

The deck wasn't much better.

Low-ranking sailors, loaders, idiots who hadn't dropped their rum barrels, all packed into a chaotic mess.

Some were even clutching onto small crates of Silver Coins, their life's savings.

Miller swept over those terror-filled eyes.

No emotion, only calculation.

"Clear it out." He pointed to the excess cargo.

Before the others could react, his trusted followers had already drawn their swords and rushed up to clear the deck.

Anyone who couldn't wield a sword, was injured, or burdened with heavy objects was all pushed to the ship's edge.

"No—!"

"The ship can still take more! I have strength left!"

The wails were quickly silenced by sword hilts and boots.

A chest filled with Silver Coins was kicked over, the coins scattered into the bloodbath like raindrops, and soon after, the chest's owner was thrown overboard as well.

Barrels of fresh water, spare sails, and companions with broken legs followed.

The Scorpion, like a drunkard spewing out filth, slowly rid itself of the burdens inside its belly.

The ship finally felt lighter.

The propeller spun madly underwater for a couple of turns before biting into the water and pushed the scarred ship through the wreckage ahead, forcing its way out of the chaotic inner bay.

Only after leaving the screams behind in the mist did Miller exhale the stale breath from his lungs.

He turned to look behind, and the sight made his scalp prickle with a chill.

The gunfire gradually ceased, and the shouts of killing were as if choked off.

By the dim light of dawn, he saw Kane's massive flagship, the Bonecrusher, swarming with those slick black Fishmen.

They weren't in a hurry to slaughter.

The pirates on the deck were pinned to the ground, and no matter how they struggled, the Fishmen held their limbs firmly.

One Fishman pried open a burly man's mouth, its body twitching grotesquely and spit a limp object into the man's throat.

The pirate convulsed violently, retching and rolling, his fingernails leaving bloody marks on the planks.

A few seconds later, he went still.

When he stood up again, his eyes were left with nothing but a dull, grey emptiness.

No commands, no communication.

The reanimated pirate turned and walked toward the capstan, his movements stiff but precise.

Then came the second, the third...

The once chaotic deck became orderly.

Hundreds of pirates who were just now on the brink of life and death moved like puppets on strings, silently raising sails, steering, and adjusting the rigging.

Their synchronized movements were nauseating.

Splash—!

With some invisible signal, hundreds of pirate ships in the harbor adjusted their course simultaneously.

The oppressive sense of uniformity was more despairing than chaotic slaughter.

The entire fleet seemed taken over by one singular mind, transformed into a massive, silent horde of creatures.

Miller felt his throat go dry.

Is this the truth of these seas?

"Go... hurry up!"

He turned back, shouting hoarsely at the helmsman, his voice a bit distorted.

No matter what those things were, he didn't want to see them a second time.

Even fleeing to the ends of the earth was better than becoming one of those walking dead.

The Scorpion fled desperately toward the open sea.

In the east, the sky lightened to the color of a fish's belly.

The sea breeze dispersed some of the mist, and Miller instinctively looked north.

There was a shadow.

At first, he thought it was a dark cloud or a moving island.

But it was moving.

A low rumble traveled across the sea; it wasn't the whistling of a sail filled with wind, but a heavier, rhythmic thrum.

"Thump, thump, thump."

Like the heartbeat of a giant.

Two black smoke plumes pierced the dawn fog, glaring against the grey sky.

Then it broke through the mist.

A giant steel battleship without any sails.

It was enormous, its dark steel hull like a fortress moving across the sea, cold and harsh, exuding a barbaric industrial aura.

Two smokestacks leaned back, belching thick smoke into the sky, the smell of burning coal mixed with sulfur, instantly overpowering the salty tang of the sea.

It needed neither favorable winds nor cared for waves.

The ship's sharp prow cleaved through the sea, forcing white spray to crumble against the steel hull on either side.

Around it were a dozen escort ships belching similar black smoke.

There were no unnecessary decorations, no fancy figureheads.

They formed an impeccably precise wedge-shaped formation, each ship spaced as if measured with a ruler.

The overwhelming sense of suffocation was entirely different from the eerie Fishmen behind.

This was a wall, a moving high wall made of steel, steam, and cannons.

In that moment, Miller forgot to breathe.

It was the flag of the Red Tide Territory; Louis's fleet had arrived.

Chapter 817: The Fleet's Glory

The mist hasn't fully lifted.

Dozens of pirate speedboats rocked in the gray-white waves, like a pile of broken wood shattered by breakers.

But suddenly, some invisible string tightened.

The bows twisted, and the rigging creaked with tension.

The commotion wasn't like a fleet changing formation; it was more like a pack of sharks suddenly turning at the scent of blood.

Without any hesitation, they bit fiercely into the approaching squadron.

At this moment, the scene on the sea was bizarre.

On one side, gray steel, with black smoke spewing from chimneys, drawing straight lines in the air.

The vanguard ships of the Red Tide sliced through the ocean at a constant speed, like precisely calibrated scalpels.

On the other side, decayed wood, with tattered canvas hanging on crooked masts, and figures densely packed on the decks, like a nest of exploded ants.

No shouting could be heard over the sea, only a sticky sound surging in the mist.

It was a "clucking" sound squeezed from thousands of throats, intermittent, like drowning people bubbling underwater.

On the high rear decks of each ship, a few dark green shadows stood out.

Those fishmen were taller than the regular kin, with a greasy sheen on their dark scales.

They neither touched the rigging nor tended to the cannons; they just stood there like shepherds.

The pulsating tumor in their hands was squeezed into deformation, and with each squeeze, a high-frequency tremor filled the air.

It was a command drilling directly into the mind.

The protruding eyes of the fishmen fixed on the distant steel warships.

In their murky eyes, those black smoke-emitting iron ships were not war machines but the most perfect nestbeds, sacrifices to the deep sea.

Smash them and lay eggs inside!

And in the hold, the real "fuel" was burning.

Hundreds of shirtless pirates were tightly bound to their seats with belts, and rough wooden oars flew in their hands at an unreasonable speed.

It was a frequency that human muscles could no longer endure.

Some had shoulder muscles that tore directly, blood dripping down their elbows; others had broken forearm bones, the splintered edges piercing through skin, glaringly white.

But no one screamed or stopped.

The same expression was fixed on their faces, mouths stretched to the ears, drool dripping from chins to the boards, eyes unfocused yet brimming with joy.

The voice in their heads kept ringing.

Faster! Even faster! Crash into that iron wall!

They overused every last breath to push this heap of broken wood to its limits.

The ship's keel groaned under the unbearable strain, the entire vessel lurching uncontrollably like a wayward cannonball towards the indifferent steel.

The smoothbore cannons on the deck were already scorching hot.

In order to fire one more round before contact, the heat waves from the gun barrels would sear eyebrows from afar.

A loader, annoyed by the wobbling of the cannon, threw himself upon it, wrapping his arms tightly around the scorching copper.

"Sizzle—!"

Skin and flesh instantly burnt and smoked rose with a scent of roasting meat.

He didn't flinch; instead, he shuddered with excitement.

Those murky eyes looked at the skin from his hands sticking to the barrel, lips twitching uncontrollably in a grateful smile.

Even though his hands were ruined, he numbly braced his body against the cannon to finish the last aim.

At this moment, he wasn't a person; he was a disposable part.

The puppet-like captain on the bow stretched his arms, welcoming the sea breeze.

The main guns of the Red Tide vanguard had already turned, the dark barrel enlarging in his vision.

Even in his eyes, it wasn't death; the flare from the barrel was a pink, warm door.

"How beautiful..." he drooled, like a child seeing candy, piously crashing into it.

.....

On the other side, the air inside the armored command tower was a bit stuffy, carrying the scent of machine oil and heated brass.

Special glass filtered out the sound of waves, leaving only the constant humming of engines, like a massive steel beast snoring below.

Cortez stood in front of the command console, reaching out to touch the nearby speaking tube; the coolness of the copper pipes reassured him.

This ship was too good.

Sometimes he'd wake up at midnight, instinctively worrying if the hold was leaking or if the mast would break in a storm.

After all, in his previous sailing years, he had only piloted those rickety wooden vessels that creaked all over when the waves got high.

Back then, when encountering pirates, the first reaction was to check the wind direction, and the second was to calculate the load; if escape was impossible, he had to be ready to toss the cargo overboard to save his life.

Until the people of the Red Tide found Cortez and asked, "Dare to sail a ship that doesn't watch the wind?"

And so, here he stood.

Steel underfoot, steam-driven, wielding firepower sufficient to send any navy from the old era to the seabed.

Cortez glanced at the Red Tide emblem hanging on the bulkhead.

"Red Flame." He chewed on the name in his mind.

Lord Louis gave him this ship; he had to prove that this investment was worth it.

"Sir, the target is within range." The voice of the first officer pulled him back from his thoughts, "There are forty-two of them, still accelerating."

Cortez didn't turn around; through the observation window, he could see everything clearly.

Those lunatics were coming.

In the mist, dozens of ramshackle wooden ships were madly rushing forward.

Sails full of wind, bows cutting the waves, those freaks on the decks waving rusted swords and bone clubs, mouths wide open, shouting who knows what.

Chapter 818: The Fleet's Glory (Part 2)

Not even a decent formation.

This isn't a charge, it clearly looks like a rush to die.

Cole leisurely drew his command sword, lightly tapping the tip on the sea chart table, "Don't let filthy things get close."

His tone was like ordering the sailors to scrub the deck, "Free fire, send them off."

"Boom—!"

Immediately followed by the second shot, the third shot...

The twelve vanguard ships acted like a cold execution squad, with their side cannons firing one by one.

The sound was rhythmic, bang, bang, bang, with a mechanical sense of rhythm.

The high-explosive bullets carved orange-red arcs through the mist, diving into that pile of rotten wood.

There were no tentative exchanges.

A cannonball plunged into the hold of a pirate ship, and after a muffled explosion, the entire ship burst from the inside like a blown-up balloon.

Broken masts with burning sails flew into the air, and when they fell, they crushed a group of still-laughing fishmen, turning them instantly into a rain of shredded meat and wood splinters.

Cole watched this scene, his face showing no sign of disturbance.

So-called courage is worthless in front of the industrially manufactured explosives.

"Truly miserable." he muttered softly, but there was no trace of pity in his eyes. "These days, you can't win just by shouting."

At that moment, several abnormally fast, narrow fast boats darted out from the dead corner of the smoke.

They skimmed across the sea surface, their tattered sails stretched almost to the point of tearing by wind magic.

Just a few hundred meters, and they'd be there in the blink of an eye.

Grappling combat.

This was the pirates' only chance for a comeback, and it's the trick they excelled at.

A dozen scaly abominations had already rushed to the bow, their hook ropes with barbs howling like banshees.

The grappling hooks clanged against the hull of the Red Flame, making an ear-piercing metallic scraping noise.

But that's all it was, as those hooks couldn't grip the smooth steel armor, with most slipping off directly and falling into the sea.

A few that barely caught the railing were snapped before anyone could climb up.

No one in the command tower panicked.

Cole frowned, his expression akin to seeing a few cockroaches scuttling across his dining table at home.

"Too filthy." He sheathed his command sword, "Open the valves. Burn it clean."

The boatswain pulled down several red levers without a trace of emotion.

"Sss—!"

The hidden nozzles below the hull opened instantly.

Out came not water, but a thick, dark red, gelatinous substance.

It was the Alchemy Workshop's special fuel, raining down like a downpour on those fast boats and the pirates ready to climb up.

No time for them to react.

The igniter lit up.

"Whoosh—!!!"

A wall of fire suddenly rose.

The wood soaked in oil began to char instantly, their structures making a tooth-aching cracking sound.

As for those abominations, they were burned to black cinders without even having time to scream, maintaining their menacing postures as they rolled into the sea.

The sea boiled for a while, releasing large clouds of white steam, before quickly swallowing the remains.

Cole straightened his collar and refocused his gaze forward, "I said, don't let filthy things touch Lord Louis' ship."

He ordered into the voice tube: "Maintain speed. Crush them."

The Red Tide's vanguard fleet didn't pause, nor did they perform any unnecessary maneuvers.

One by one, the steel warships formed a neat wedge formation, with boiler pressures at the red line, massive propellers churning the sea into a frothy mess.

They advanced through the gun smoke, crushing the wooden debris and bodies on the sea surface like a bulldozer.

In front of this moving iron wall, the pitiful remnants of the old era didn't even qualify as stumbling blocks.

.....

On that now blurred sea, the Scorpion, like a wild dog with a broken spine, was desperately crawling toward the open sea.

Miller stood on the aft deck, his hand-held monocular shaking uncontrollably.

Even from this distance, the sound of bones grinding seemed to crawl into his ears.

In his view, the situation should have been one-sided.

Nearly a hundred pirate ships in total.

Even pieced together from rotten wood, densely scattered across the sea, they appeared as an unyielding wall.

Moreover, those ships were crawling with those undying abominations, incapable of feeling pain and possessing immense strength, the most terrifying nightmare Miller had ever seen.

And across from them were only thirteen ships, with the largest one even trailing behind.

With numbers of one hundred to twelve, this should have been an ant swarm engulfing an elephant into a tragedy.

"Huh?" Miller let out a distorted cry.

No clashes, no grappling, not even a slowdown.

Those twelve steel warships, spewing black smoke, sliced through the rotting butter like twelve red-hot dinner knives.

"Boom——!"

In the view of the monocular, wood fragments exploded like a fountain.

The leading pirate ships were directly shattered into pieces.

Those deep-sea monstrosities, impervious to blades and bullets in Miller's eyes, were fragile as paper toys before thousands of tons of steel momentum.

They tried to hook the deck with ropes, tried to block with their bodies.

But the iron ship didn't even flinch.

It just rolled straight through.

The prow's ram split the keel, the steel hull crushed the ship's structure, and at the stern... Miller witnessed the most terrifying scene.

The sea turned dark red.

The propellers churned at high speed underwater, turning all the wood, ropes, and the flesh of those creatures into a thick stew of gore.

Chapter 819: Glory of the Fleet (3)

That was a true meat grinder.

"A hundred ships... nearly a hundred ships..."

Miller's teeth were chattering, making a rattling sound.

He saw a two-masted ship crawling with Fishmen attempting to flank, only to be blasted in half by a broadside cannon and subsequently rammed and sunk by an approaching steel battleship.

Floating debris and limbs were everywhere on the sea, while those twelve black smoke columns remained straight and indifferent.

They didn't even pause for the slaughter.

They merely passed by, crushing anything in their way, then kept moving forward.

An unprecedented chill shot up from his tailbone to his skull, leaving Miller slumped against the broken mast.

Earlier, he thought those flesh-eating Fishmen were monsters.

But now he understood that compared to those beasts who only knew how to tear at flesh, these cold machines that ground everything into powder... were even more terrifying.

Before Miller could finish inhaling, that desolate horn blared.

His pupils, which had widened in shock, instantly shrank to the size of pinpoints.

The telescope nearly slipped out of his hands.

.....

A horn sounded from deep within the fog.

The sound was muffled, carrying a damp tremor, as if played directly from underwater.

It even pierced through the roar of steam engines, making each steel plate on the deck resonate slightly.

Cole's eyes tightened slightly.

Those dozens of broken ships blown to smithereens earlier were just a layer, meant to feed the cannons and consume the barrel heat—cannon fodder.

Now comes the main course.

The waves were violently torn apart as three massive shadows broke through the mist, carrying an overwhelming stench and oppressive aura, they pushed into the battlefield.

They could no longer be called ships.

They were monsters sewn together forcibly, combining ancient shipbuilding techniques with deep-sea flesh.

The largest one charged forward, absurdly big—it was the Tyrant.

Its freeboard was even higher than that of the Red Flame, with the original ship hull enveloped by heavy gray-white rocks.

And now, the crevices between the rocks were filled not with mortar, but countless writhing deep-sea soft-bodied creatures.

They served as a living adhesive, firmly attaching the rock armor to the ship's hull.

The steel ram at the ship's head was engraved with earth-element runes, while the base was surrounded by coiling thick tentacles, rhythmically pulsing.

"Concentrate fire on that big guy." Cole's command was calm, even tinged with a bit of disdain.

Twelve hunter-class frigates quickly adjusted their cannons, delivering a broadside salvo.

Boom! Boom!

High explosive shells hit the bow, erupting into orange-red fireballs.

Debris flew, and the layer of living rock armor was pocked with craters, slime and blue blood splattered everywhere.

But it didn't stop; the runes on the rock armor and those soft-bodied creatures simultaneously exerted force, bluntly absorbing the energy of the explosions.

It advanced like a thick-skinned deep-sea rhinoceros, pressing forward step by step under the fire.

Next, the second ship slid out close to the water's surface, its sleek black hull coated with light-absorbing grease.

That was the Shadow Serpent, and just as the shells aimed at it, black ink clouds burst out all around it, the hull twisting bizarrely, allowing the shells to narrowly pass and dive into the sea.

When the third ship emerged, the stench in the air became overpowering.

The sails were stitched together from human and fish skin, and the mast hung with dried human heads and giant fish gills.

Hundreds of totem poles lit up on the deck, each pole topped by a kneeling mutated Fishman Priest, their mouths agape in a silent scream.

The Death Whisper unleashed a psychic assault across the sea.

The Red Tide sailors felt a stabbing pain in their minds, but the rigorous daily discipline training took effect.

No one kneeled to beg for mercy; they just gritted their teeth, staring down the sights and continued loading.

"The distance is too close." Cole furrowed his brow slightly as he glanced at the approaching ram, "Full speed reverse, open up a firing window."

The command was given, but the steel giant did not nimbly retreat as usual.

The ship jolted violently with a muffled growl.

That was the transmission shaft wailing at the brink of overload.

"Sir! We can't increase the rpm!"

The chief engineer's voice shouted from the voice tube, accompanied by the background roar of the boilers, "There's clutter beneath us! They're jamming our propeller!"

Under the water, thousands of grotesque deep-diving Fishmen were frantically wedging themselves into the propeller.

Covered in thick anti-inflammatory mucus, they braved leaking alchemical petroleum, using their bodies, bones, and the corpses of their comrades to clog the spinning blades layer by layer.

Crunch—!

The grating sound of grinding flesh was incessant.

The steel propeller kept turning, mincing the drawn-in flesh into pulp, but the layer of pulp was too thick, too viscous.

Hundreds of corpses wedged between the bearings and blades, forming a high-density flesh brake pad.

The steam engine's torque remained powerful, yet this resistance severely impacted the warship's maneuverability.

The previously agile hunter-class became sluggish, like a giant with legs laden with blood-sucking leeches.

The shadow of the Tyrant had already overshadowed the bridge of the Red Flame.

The ram, strong enough to shatter city walls, was aimed at the starboard of the Red Flame, slowly closing the gap.

"Trying to drag us into a muddy brawl..."

Cole glanced irritably at the blood-stained sea and the grotesque rock warship.

Though mobility was impaired, his turret could still turn, and his boiler hadn't blown.

The warship of the Red Tide wouldn't sink because of such an obstacle, only feeling disgraced by letting this filth get close.

"Since you're so keen on sticking close, let's oblige you." Cole tidied his collar, turned to the signalman, "The hound is bitten, let the hammer fall, overturn this table completely."

Chapter 820: The Power of the Fernando

The battlefield's shrieks, cannonades, and crashing waves were swallowed by an even more domineering sound.

"Wooooo—!"

It was a deep rumble, so low it made your teeth ache.

The mist was torn open, and what emerged first was the bow.

It was basically a moving black cliff face.

As it pushed forward, an extremely pungent stench instantly rolled across the battlefield.

This was the smell of industry, proclaiming its sovereignty over these waters.

A hapless pirate brig just happened to be crossing its path.

That ship had once been a hulking predator before merchantmen, but now it didn't even qualify as a speed bump.

The Fernando didn't blow its whistle, didn't slow down, didn't even bother to turn.

"Crack."

The wooden keel turned to powder the instant it touched the steel bow, and tens of thousands of tons of steel kept surging forward on inertia.

Splintered planks, rotten canvas, and dozens of pirates who hadn't even figured out what was going on were sucked under that massive black hull in a heartbeat, leaving only pale streaks of blood in the wake.

Before absolute mass, all technique, all courage, are a joke.

.....

Inside the armored command tower, it was as quiet as an air bubble in the deep sea.

Thick bulletproof glass sealed out every trace of the destruction outside; the only sound was the low-frequency thrum of the steam engine coming up through the floor like a heartbeat.

The air was dry and warm, even faintly scented with black tea.

Fleet commander Arwin stood at the Sea Chart table.

His dark blue double-breasted naval uniform was pressed razor-sharp, every button fastened up to the very top.

He held a command sword in one hand, tapping it idly against his palm.

Louis stood beside him, cup in hand, as if watching a play that had been rehearsed a hundred times, though in truth he was quite curious just how far this ship could go.

Orland, on the other hand, had lost his composure a little.

The chief engineer's fingers were shaking; his face was pressed to the glass as he stared, unblinking, at that enormous black silhouette of a ship outside.

Arwin saw the signal flags rising from the vanguard squadron, and through the fog he also made out the three big fellows trying to close in.

He turned, didn't raise his voice, and spoke into the voice-tube in the tone of someone ordering in a restaurant: "Shipwide, first-class battle configuration."

"Unlock the main batteries." He lifted the command sword and pointed it toward the window. "Those three rocks blocking the way... clear them out."

The Tyrant moved. In that brain which had already degraded into a fleshy tumor, there was only one rigid directive.

Unleash the crust of the earth, smash everything!

Dun-colored runes flared madly; stone swelled and bred like something alive, and in an instant a translucent spherical force field unfolded around the hull.

This tortoise shell had once tanked three broadsides from the Royal Navy and slipped away unscathed.

With that so-called absolute defense wrapped around it, it charged straight in like a rhino with no concept of death.

That was the tragedy of a puppet: it doesn't know the era has changed.

"Armor-piercing high explosive—peel its shell off!"

"Boom—!"

The Fernando gave a crisp shudder, and two specially made pointed shells ripped through the air.

That much-vaunted earth barrier, supposedly immune to physical attacks, was as fragile as a sheet of wet toilet paper before the spiral kinetic energy of the Armor-Piercing Bullets.

"Puff."

With a dull thud, the shell drilled through the rock without the slightest resistance, burrowing straight into the deepest magazine in the hull, where its fuse detonated.

The Tyrant was forced into a glowing sphere by the energy that blew out from its belly.

The next second, the entire ship simply vaporized.

Stone, steel, and all the disgusting soft-bodied things parasitizing inside it were erased in an instant in three thousand degrees of heat.

All that remained on the sea was a vast pit steaming white, without even a single decent plank left floating.

Legendary defense? In the face of yield, it's all hot air.

The Shadow Serpent burst out right after, cutting wild S-shapes across the water. Black mist billowed out, spawning a dozen or so lifelike phantoms.

It wove among the illusions, fast as a streak of black lightning, thinking it could dance circles around that lumbering ironclad.

"Idiot..." Orland watched the ship darting around and couldn't help but laugh.

On the second deck, twelve secondary guns elevated in unison.

No need to aim, no need to predict—just fill that patch of sea.

"Klang klang klang klang klang—!"

The ejection ports opened and scalding shell casings spilled onto the deck like a waterfall, chiming out a deliciously crisp metallic music.

Thirty rounds a second.

The dense shells pushed forward like a solid wall, covering every sector where the Shadow Serpent could move, with no blind spots.

The dozen illusions were shredded in an instant.

Then came the real body.

Its vaunted speed meant nothing in a bullet-screen so dense it was almost solid.

The first shell snapped its keel, the second tore its sails to rags, the third, the fourth... the hundredth.

In half a second that ship was hacked apart into fragments.

It didn't even manage to get within a kilometer of the Fernando before it was reduced to a slurry of rotten planks bobbing on the waves.

Last came the Death Whisper. This necro-ship had never planned on going home alive.

The thousands of misshapen Fishmen on board screamed at once, their psychic Shock Wave surging out like a tsunami.

At the same time, its Catapults hurled countless flesh sacs packed with corrosive venom and plague up into the air, a green rain coming down.

It meant to drag them all to hell together.

Even if we die, we have to splash plague and Curse all over the deck of the Fernando.

"Too filthy." Louis frowned, as if he'd just seen someone spit on a pristine white dining table.

Zzzzzz—!!!

On both sides of the bridge, four multi-barrel rotary cannons let loose a scream like cloth being torn apart.

The six barrels spun into afterimages.

An orange-red metal storm wove itself into a web of fire in midair.

Those flying Fishmen attempting a suicide charge never even got close to the rail; they were shredded into a blood mist in the air.

Meat sacs, venom glands, Curse media—everything was blasted apart midair by the dense hail of rounds.

Right after that, the flame ports under the rail opened.

High-pressure alchemized Petroleum roared out.

Whoom—!

A hundred-meter-tall wall of flame flared up around the Fernando in an instant.

The venom that slipped through fell into the fire, hissing and crackling as it burned away to nothing.

The flames even rolled back with the wind, like a gigantic whip of fire lashing viciously across the face of the Death Whisper.

The sail made of human skin went up in a flash.

That ship steeped in Curses and resentment turned into a colossal torch on the sea under the burn of industrial alchemy flame.

The Fishmen's screams shifted from psychic attacks to pure howls of agony, then finally sank into silence.

Three minutes, just three minutes.

Three old-era legends strengthened by the power of the deep sea were reduced to ash and char.

The Fernando glided slowly across that still-smoldering stretch of sea.

Its black hull was spotless, not so much as a smear on it.

Suddenly, the surface went quiet.

The rhythmic slap of waves against the hull vanished; the black seawater thickened like boiling tar, bubbling and burping.

Then came a stench like a corpse dragged up from a trench after stewing for centuries.

The black water heaved, first thrusting up a tangled mass of soft tissue, then the shattered hull of a ship, brutally jammed into the tentacles of a gigantic octopus.

Wood and rusted iron had long since fused with flesh; there was no telling where the ship ended and the monster began.

The place where the mast should've stood was now whipping a few dozen massive tentacles, each suckered coil pulling up clouds of murky black water with every flex.

On the hull, countless eyes snapped open.

Large as Shields, small as coins, they rolled with a wet, rasping friction, boring into the steel leviathan ahead.

Then it opened its mouth.

The original bow simply split into a black maw bristling with fangs.

Its low-frequency roar slammed into the armor plating, making people's bones ache.

In the armored command tower, Louis stood before the bulletproof glass, watching that swaggering lump of rot, frowning: "That's disgusting."

Alwin wasted no words. "Engine group, supercritical overload. Main gun, charge."

Red alarm lights strobed like mad across the bridge.

The deck underfoot began to quake violently—that was the bellow of four vertical steam engines being forced past their limits.

The pressure gauges' needles slammed straight into the red; superheated steam in the pipes shrieked, like countless beasts trapped in iron cages, hurling themselves against the bars.

The Fernando's main gun lifted its head.

Blue-white arcs of electricity raced rabidly along the runes etched into the barrel; even the air around it warped in the heat.

Fire.

A massive Magic Explosion Bullet blasted from the muzzle, like a Light Blade with no thickness at all, stabbing straight into that roaring mouth.

The seawater along its path vaporized in an instant, the steam scattered before it could even rise.

The fusion abomination that had just been so arrogant didn't even have time to scream.

On contact, tentacles, eyes, planks, flesh—every structure disintegrated in a single millisecond.

They were erased from the physical world by sheer heat.

Like someone taking an eraser and grinding it hard across the canvas.

The light faded.

All that remained on the surface was a hundred-meter-wide void; the surrounding sea held for a few seconds, then came crashing back in with a roar, colliding to throw up spray tens of meters high.

As for the Black Reef Prince? Not even dust remained.

On the distant deck of the Scorpion, there was a deathly silence.

The telescope slipped from Miller's hand and smashed into his foot; it hurt like hell, but he didn't react.

He slid down the rail like a sack of rotten meat, mouth gaping, lungs dragging at the air, but he couldn't pull in a single breath of oxygen.

He stared at that black warship, still resting quietly where it was.

Hull black as ink, lines cold and sharp, not a single flake of paint missing.

What was that just now?

Was that Magic? Or divine punishment?

He'd always thought a pirate's end was the gallows, or being swallowed by something stronger.

It had never occurred to him, not even in his nightmares, that something like this would be what finished them.

"This isn't a battle at all..." Miller's voice rasped like two sheets of sandpaper grinding together, loaded with despair.

Those so-called legendary pirate kings, those deep-sea monsters that made the Northern Territory tremble—before this steel flood, they didn't even qualify as a proper tragedy.

They were just stains.

And being wiped away was the only ending they were ever going to get.