

Winter 821

Chapter 821: Louis's Strength

The sunlight was completely blocked by steel, and the blood and wreckage that had been surging due to the explosion were immediately pressed into a cold and dark gloom.

"Thud."

The gangplank hit the ground with a heavy, muffled sound.

A team of fully armed Red Tide Knights quickly dispersed.

Louis walked at the forefront, his steps steady, not like he was landing in enemy territory, but rather inspecting his own backyard.

The air on this island was simply unbearable.

The smell of blood, burnt flesh, and an overly ripe sweetness mixed together, like a bunch of fruits and corpses thrown into a sealed jar to ferment for a month.

Pink mist slowly flowed between the broken walls and towers, visible mental pollution.

If an ordinary soldier stood here, in less than three breaths, their brain would turn to mush.

The knights' breathing became noticeably heavier.

Cold sweat dripped down from the edges of their helmets, and occasionally a double image would flicker on their retinas, but no one stopped.

Louis, however, remained unaffected.

The Primordial Heart within him turned slowly and steadily, a platinum starry radiance flowing through his veins.

The illusions trying to invade his mind disappeared like snowflakes on a furnace, the moment they touched that light.

He didn't need a map, the repulsive malice, like a beacon, guided his way.

Through corridors, over stone steps, until he pushed open the extremely heavy oak door.

The door's bearings emitted a shrieking sound of disrepair.

The scene inside the hall made the knights behind him tense up instantly.

In the center was a throne.

Not wooden or stone, but entirely made of human skulls.

Polished smooth but assembled crookedly, hundreds of hollow eye sockets staring at the entrance, giving a chilling look.

Beside the throne stood two "people."

One was Balk, this guy wasn't wearing a hat, half of his skull neatly sliced off, exposing the pink brain tissue to the air, rhythmically pulsing.

Several thin tendrils burrowed into the brain grooves, emitting a sticky water sound with each contraction.

The other was Meryl, draped in a black robe, with no shadow beneath her.

Or rather, her shadow had come to life, with several wet, slick tendrils crawling along the ground, leaving shimmering slime trails.

Balk turned around.

In that instant, the air pressure in the hall seemed to be vacuumed away.

No killing intent, not oppressive, just sheer... disgust.

The inherent repulsion a lower creature feels when seeing a predator, or something that shouldn't exist.

The pupils of several Extraordinary Knights shrunk to needlepoints, their hearts racing, cold sweat soaking through their inner linings.

This was no longer a question of winning or losing.

This was a biological instinct, the body screaming at them to turn and flee.

Just as this chilling pressure was about to suffocate them...

"Haaa—!!" A burst of roar exploded.

Weir stepped forward, his motion like he was about to crush the floor.

The Bloodline Power within him was entirely ignited.

A faint red radiance burst forth from his body, instantly expanding into a semi-transparent sphere with an eight-meter radius, enveloping Louis and the knights behind him.

This red light looked thin like a layer of water film, but extremely resilient, capable of resisting the attack of a Peak Knight.

The aura that drove people mad crashed against the shield, like waves crashing on a reef, forcibly repelled.

The whispering sound that caused tinnitus vanished. Even the dust floating in the air came to a halt.

Absolute silence.

Weir stood at the forefront, arms slightly spread, the veins on his neck bulging like worms, sweat dripping from his chin.

He stared fiercely at the two monsters, his voice hoarse, each word squeezed out through clenched teeth: "Protect the lord! These two... are not right! Form up!!"

Even though he was already a Half-Step Peak Knight, he could perceive the terror of the two on the throne.

The knights' formation was still adjusting.

The red shield, like a taut drum skin, kept the sticky malice of the hall outside, the air pressure so low it was suffocating.

Just as Weir was about to risk everything, a hand in a black leather glove rested on his shoulder.

"Don't tense up, Weir." Louis's voice was soft, without much inflection.

Weir's body stiffened.

He abruptly turned his head, watching as Louis stepped forward, as if the room was too stuffy, and he wanted to open a window to let in some air.

Under the terrified gaze of all the knights, Louis took the initiative to step out of the red light they considered their lifeline.

He walked alone towards the throne.

Then Balk moved, without any starting motion or charging process.

One second he stood by the pile of bones, the next the air tore with a crisp ripping sound.

That speed was abnormal.

Muscle fibers forcibly overloaded, bones under extreme pressure, bursting into inhuman speed.

When he reappeared, his sharp claw was already at Louis's throat.

Less than half a hand's width away.

Weir's pupils shrunk to pinpoints, but the warning "Watch out" stuck in his throat, unable to be uttered.

But to Louis, it was all too slow.

Time hadn't slowed down.

His Bloodline Talent, called [Trajectory], had long broken this moment down into countless static blueprints.

From the moment they entered, Balk's left leg's muscle twitch frequency, spine's forward angle, brain parasite signal delay... all data had run through Louis's mind.

Chapter 822: Louis's Strength (Part 2)

This is not an ambush at all, it's cooperation.

Louis didn't even lift his eyelids, and softly said: "Too noisy."

His tone was as calm as scolding a barking dog.

Just before the claw was about to touch the skin, Balk's movement experienced an extremely slight pause.

That was the signal disconnection generated at the extreme speed between the parasitic brain and the body's nerves.

A physiological BUG of 0.1 seconds that only Louis could foresee.

This is the flaw.

Louis raised his left hand, and dark red Fighting Energy exploded from under his sleeve, muscles instantly blood-filled and swollen.

At the same time, a wisp of greedy dark purple mist slipped through his fingers like a snake opening its mouth.

"Snap."

A crisp sound, and the claw that could cut through steel stopped mid-air.

Louis's hand, unknown since when, had precisely gripped Balk's throat.

Position, angle, force, perfectly, as if Balk had delivered his neck to Louis's palm, the tremendous charging momentum immediately cut off.

"Down." Louis's wrist pressed down.

"Boom!"

The granite floor shattered like a cookie, rubble scattering everywhere.

Balk didn't even have time to grunt, his whole body was slammed into the ground with one hand.

His body embedded in the cracked pit, with spinal bones snapping like firecrackers.

The claw hung in the air, only a few centimeters from Louis's face.

But it could no longer move.

Louis looked down at the monster underfoot, fingers slowly tightening, eyes cold.

At that moment, Balk finally experienced true fear.

What he was proud of, the "Illusion Energy" bestowed by the Deep Sea Dominator, should have corroded all steel and will.

But now, the moment the energy surged out, it was swallowed whole by the purple mist leaking from Louis's fingers.

Balk felt like a punctured abscess, his strength, life, and even the consciousness of the parasitic brain flowing madly out through the hand on his neck.

"No...what is this..."

The cartilage in his throat creaked, desperately trying to struggle, but his body honestly went limp as the energy drained away.

Louis still maintained his one-handed pressing posture.

His gaze was faint, the golden light in his pupils like reading a gauge.

"Too noisy." He softly said, fingers suddenly tightening.

"Crack!"

It was a teeth-grinding, moist crunch.

No beautiful magic collision, no earth-shattering move.

Louis simply applied an unbearable physical pressure.

Balk's cervical vertebra shattered like brittle cookies.

Next was the pink brain parasitized outside the cranial cavity.

Under the tremendous grip, it didn't even have time to launch a final mental impact before it was squeezed like an overripe tomato.

"Pfft."

Pink pulp exploded, immediately blocked by the purple mist outside Louis's glove.

Balk's body convulsed violently, and then fell limp as though its bones had been pulled out.

Louis let go of his hand, shaking it disdainfully.

Balk's headless corpse lay there like a pile of trash.

Meryl, standing in the shadows, didn't retreat, nor did she glance at the corpse.

"Screech—!"

A sharp noise crept out of her throat.

The sound didn't seem human, more like two wet pieces of rubber being frantically rubbed together, making one's scalp tingle.

The originally loose black robe was directly burst open, fabric fragments flying everywhere.

Underneath the robe, there was no woman.

It was just a mass of tangled pink flesh and tentacles, like a pulsating giant heart, gushing continuously.

Where the head was, there was only a mouth with bright red lipstick, hanging on that pile of rot, looking both comical and disgusting.

"Boom!"

Pink mist exploded.

The air instantly became sticky, like a bucket of expired honey had been dumped.

A scent of overly ripe flowers mixed with the stench of corpses rushed up the nose.

Weir groaned, even several meters away, his vision began to blur.

The surface of the red shield rippled layer upon layer.

This thing doesn't harm the body, it harms the mind.

It wrapped around like warm water, whispering in your ear, persuading you to put down your sword, to walk over and merge with the warm, moist meat nest.

Louis stood at the center of the mist, not even frowning.

The Primordial Heart within his body spun steadily, like a cold platinum star.

He shook his hand, flicking off the remaining brain matter, a gesture as casual as if he had just washed his hands.

"Stop this trickery." His voice was not loud, directly cutting through the seductive sound, "I am not interested in aroused soft-bodied creatures."

"Buzz—!"

A platinum starlight rippled out with him at the center.

The pink mist trying to invade his pores sizzled as soon as it touched the starlight, like snow landing on hot iron, disappearing instantly.

Louis no longer held back.

A crimson wave surged from him, like wearing a roaring blood cloak.

Simultaneously, dark purple light scrambled at his fingertips, turning into invisible mouths, clacking sharply.

He raised his eyelids, the pale gold vertical pupils in his eyes fully opened.

Meryl's meat nest shivered violently.

Dozens of pink tentacles with barbed suckers shot out fiercely, like a forest of spears, tearing through the air towards Louis.

Chapter 823: Louis's Strength (Part 3)

Louis moved, a burst of crimson power erupted instantly, leaving a trail of afterimages in the air, so fast that even those tentacles couldn't react.

"Get out."

With this low growl, the pressure of the Ancient Dragon at the top of the food chain crashed down like a heavy hammer.

Those tentacles meant to kill shrank visibly in mid-air, exhibiting the prey's instinct upon encountering a predator.

A thick tentacle slammed down in front of him.

Louis reached out with his right hand, his five fingers wrapped in purple mist directly dug into the slimy flesh.

Meryl let out a terrified scream.

She felt it, the purple power climbing wildly up the tentacle, greedily gnawing at her body.

The pink energy was forcibly extracted, like water into a vortex, continuously pouring into Louis, then crushed, purified by the Primordial Heart, becoming clean fuel.

Louis dragged the rapidly withering tentacle, moving step by step forward.

Three-colored light intertwined around him, making him resemble an unseeable statue of a God.

"You're nothing more than a pile of rotten flesh." His voice echoed in the hall.

The crimson fist rose.

"Boom!!"

A shock wave pierced through the entire pink flesh nest the next second.

Meryl's screams were abruptly silenced.

The massive body exploded like a balloon punctured.

The pink slime in the air hadn't even hit the ground before the purple mist devoured it completely.

The sweet, pungent smell dissipated.

The hall reverted back to its cold, empty gloom.

Louis stood in the midst of the wreckage, the light around him slowly subsiding, leaving only a platinum starlight retreating into his body.

He adjusted his cuffs, still looking like the well-dressed young nobility, his coat pristine, not a crease.

Weir's arm was still twitching slightly from using his bloodline talent.

What happened in those few seconds?

Couldn't see, really couldn't see.

To those battle-hardened knights, the scene was missing as if someone had crudely cut a piece from a film strip.

Only a few haunting shadows remained on their retinas—a crimson afterimage tearing through space, a swirling purple mist, and that fleeting gold.

The sound even lagged.

Only after Louis began to straighten his cuffs did the explosion and monster's screams land belatedly, stubbornly piercing their ears.

Weir slowly canceled, his throat dry.

As a knight close to peak, he knew the worth of those two monsters.

Balk, just his presence was enough to render him immobile, whereas Meryl was more monstrous.

But now?

One was crushed into the ground like a cigarette butt, the other vanished without a trace.

Instant kill, utterly complete instant kill.

"Lord Louis actually..."

Weir watched the back slowly cleaning the gloves, his gaze turning from dazed to fervent, his mouth uncontrollably grinning ear to ear.

Lord had gone so long without action, long enough for them to make the illusion that he was just a commander needing protection.

But today, this sword, sheathed for years, was merely drawn an inch.

The world changed.

Weir took a deep breath, pulled out the greatsword stuck in the ground, holding it inverted, the tip pointing down.

"Thud."

He knelt heavily, his knee cracking the stone slab.

Immediately, uniform kneeling sounds echoed in the hall.

No one cared about the lingering metallic scent or the scattered rubble on the ground.

All knights looked up, staring intently at the figure, their eyes gleaming brightly.

It's a joy that only appears when believers witness true miracles.

Chapter 824: The Fourth Mysterious Godly Mist

In the deepest part of the Broken Isles, the waves here seemed to have lost their sound.

The entrance to the sea erosion cave, known as the Tranquil Eye, quietly stood between the reef walls. The entrance was narrow and vertical, its outline resembling a half-opened pupil.

Inside the cave, there was no wind. The black seawater clung to the rock walls and extended inward, as smooth as a mirror without any reflection.

The air was unnaturally still.

Just as Louis stopped in his tracks, hurried and suppressed sounds came from behind him.

"Please wait, my Lord." Weir was already blocking his path.

The Knight knelt on one knee on the slippery rock surface, raising his head to look directly at Louis.

It was a gaze mixed with fear, responsibility, and shame.

"The aura in there... is strange." His voice was hoarse, as if battling against his own instincts.

Weir clenched his teeth, the words were almost forced out from his throat: "Please allow us to accompany you. Even if it means walking in front, even if... as a meat shield."

The extraordinary knights behind him also knelt on one knee, not speaking, yet simultaneously gripping their sword hilts tightly.

Letting the Lord walk alone into the unknown abyss was in itself a dereliction of duty for them.

Louis slowly tidied his black gloves, gently smoothing out the small wrinkles on the leather with his fingertips, and smiled: "I understand your desire to stand in front, and I know you are not afraid."

Weir's breath paused slightly.

"But the things inside are not enemies that can be resisted with will and courage." Louis continued, "It will silently invade your thoughts and make choices for you."

"If you get used by it, I must personally end you." He said this without avoiding eye contact, "That is not a price I am willing to bear."

The air remained heavy yet no longer sharp.

Louis's gaze returned to Weir, carrying an undeniable command: "So, stay here. This is also an order and my trust in you."

"Anything living that comes out from inside..." He paused, his voice lowering, "End it."

Louis walked past Weir, his back showing no hesitation.

Only when his figure fully submerged into the darkness of the cave's entrance did Weir swing a fist against the nearby reef with a thud.

The dull sound of impact echoed outside the cave.

Blood flowed through his fingers and dripped onto the cold rocky surface.

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The world inside the cave seemed completely severed from the outside.

The moment Louis stepped into the cave, the light behind him felt as if it was wiped away by an invisible hand.

As he ventured deeper, the colors on the rock walls began to change.

On the originally pitch-black surfaces, extremely faint pink dots emerged, like phosphorescence embedded in the rock, resembling some sort of slow-breathing biological tissue.

It was eerily quiet here, so quiet that Louis could distinctly hear his own heartbeat.

The sound was amplified endlessly, strikingly abrupt in the silence, as if the entire cave subtly contracted with the rhythm.

The next moment, a smell assaulted him.

It was overwhelmingly sweet, thick and sticky, carrying a warmth that lulled vigilance.

Just one breath, and the body instinctively craved more, yearned to stop walking, hungered for no further thought...

But Louis's steps didn't hesitate, his eyes remained clear.

The Primordial Heart within him vibrated gently, isolating those components that tried to infiltrate his consciousness through smell, emotion, and instinct.

The sweetness persisted, but could no longer touch his will.

In this rotting gentleness, Louis moved toward the deeper cave like an unmelted cold iron.

About three hundred meters into the cave, the terrain suddenly opened up.

The black rock walls retreated to the sides, revealing an underground shoal formed by long-term ocean erosion.

The ground was uneven, with tiny bone fragments interspersed in the damp rocky sand, and the air echoed with a low, hollow sound.

A dozen massive stalactite pillars hung from the dome, resembling upside-down city wall supports, partitioning this space into a natural cage.

They emerged almost simultaneously from the gaps between the stone pillars and darkness.

Twelve enormous figures stepped onto the shoal, their footsteps sinking into the rock sand with a muffled thud.

Deep sea tyrant warriors, each clad in thick pink bone armor, with overlapping layers like shells stripped directly from an abyssal giant beast.

The giant axe, as large as a door, dragged on the ground, with sawtooth alchemy structures embedded on the edges, making a screeching noise as they scraped the rock.

Their muscles were knotted and bloated, their chests heaving like bellows with each breath.

Their oppressiveness was indistinguishable from that of the rampaging Balk in the past.

Behind them, four figures slowly rose.

The high-tier deep sea priests hovered in mid-air, their emaciated bodies wrapped in magic robes, with bone staffs deeply embedded into the ground.

Faint yet continuous pink-purple light lines lit up between the bone staffs, connecting them together, silently weaving a curse field covering the entire shoal.

If they were on the surface, they would be called a natural disaster.

And now, they faced only one person.

Dozens of clouded, greedy eyes simultaneously focused on Louis, carrying a cruelty, waiting for this human to show fear or attempt to retreat.

Louis didn't halt his steps, lightly sighed, and raised his hand to draw the silver nobility decorative sword from his waist.

The sword's blade was slender and elegant, embedded with sapphires, and its edge thin to the point of transparency.

This kind of sword should appear at banquets to adorn one's status, not for killing.

Chapter 825: The Fourth Mysterious Godly Miasma (Part 2)

The blood-red mist first wrapped around them.

It wasn't a gentle adherence, but rather, it clamped onto the blade like high-voltage electricity, forcibly stabilizing the mundane iron to prevent it from shattering the moment the power surged through.

Immediately, a purple ethereal light extended silently from the blade, elongating into an invisible light blade nearly two meters long.

The air was cut.

The silver decorative sword emitted a faint, piercing wail, with a slight tremor in the blade, as if it would melt under the high pressure at any moment.

The monsters advanced.

Twelve berserker warriors stepped forward simultaneously, moving so swiftly that they left afterimages on the retina.

Giant axes swung up, axe blades tearing through the air, stirring heavy wind pressure.

The priest in mid-air raised his staff at the same time, his mental scream like an invisible tsunami, crashing down.

This was a tightly packed ambush, sealing off all possibilities with no room for evasion.

In this moment, Louis looked up, the pure golden vertical pupils in the depths of his eyes fully brightened: "Kneel."

The pressure wasn't targeted at any singular entity, but rather covered the entire space like an invisible curtain.

In the next instant, time seemed to be forcibly paused.

Dozens of figures charging at high speed froze simultaneously in midair.

Axe blades halted, spells fractured, and even the flow of air experienced an exceedingly brief delay.

In this blank frame, Louis's figure vanished.

A stream of interwoven red and purple light wandered silently among the swarm of monsters.

Two seconds later.

Louis reappeared tens of meters away, his back to the center of the shallows.

The silver decorative sword in his hand emitted a light, crisp sound.

"Snap."

The blade shattered into countless tiny metallic particles, sprinkling down from his fingers.

It had finally completed its mission.

Behind him, the sixteen deep-sea monsters, capable of ruling a domain, remained in their attack stances.

In the next moment, thin, straight blood lines simultaneously appeared on their bodies.

"Swoosh—!"

The heads, arms, and torsos of the tyrant warriors slid off neatly, the cuts smooth as mirrors.

The priest in midair failed to even leave a corpse, instead exploding into clouds of purple mist, swiftly consumed until vanishing.

The blood didn't even have time to spray out but disappeared into the air.

Louis released the remaining sword hilt, letting it fall to the ground, and stepped over the scattered dismembered limbs, continuing towards the depths of the cave.

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Crossing over the steaming ground of scattered corpses, Louis pressed on.

Underfoot was no longer hard stone, but a vast altar constructed entirely from bones.

Human skulls, fishman spines, and ribcages from some species long indiscernible were forcibly fused and compacted by some power, interlocking to form a bizarre yet sturdy structure.

It was as if all emotions and life had long been drained, leaving only a husk after extraction.

And at the center of the altar, that thing was growing.

A gigantic, translucent pink crystal coral.

It was not still; an internal ebb and flow seemed to pulse through the coral, its glow dimming and brightening like the lung's expansion and contraction.

Each breath expelled pink mist into the surroundings.

The mist was not glaring but rather gentle and warm, carrying a sweet aroma that instinctively relaxed the body.

Louis halted his steps, his gaze resting upon the coral.

In the next instant, ripples appeared on the coral's surface.

Countless faces surfaced, of unparalleled beauties reaching out their arms, their skin flowing in the light;

No wars, no responsibilities, no cold loneliness, only prolonged peace and satisfaction.

The aroma suddenly thickened.

It no longer lingered in the air but sought to infiltrate deep into Louis's consciousness through the gaps of breath, skin, and emotions.

Whispers arose in his mind.

Not a single voice, but countless whispers overlapping.

"So tired..."

"Let go..."

"Melt... become a part of us..."

"Here, there is no pain, only ecstasy..."

The voice was gentle to the point of compassion.

In the sea of consciousness, pink tides came surging overwhelmingly.

They were not impatient, not fierce, just slowly and steadily rising, trying to completely drown the island named "Sanity."

Just as the crest was about to touch the edge of consciousness, platinum light ignited.

The Primordial Heart in the center of the sea of consciousness suddenly accelerated its rotation.

The next moment, a grand platinum starlight descended from above, stretching across the pink tides like a celestial chasm.

And three forces responded simultaneously.

Crimson power turned into blood-colored vines, growing from the depths of consciousness, tearing apart those illusions composed of desire.

Dark purple power surged forth like an insect swarm, greedy and cold, gnawing, devouring the pink energy, decomposing it into the most primitive mental residue.

And that trace of pale gold, suspended above everything else, like the shadow cast by a throne.

The pink mist was forcibly pulled, recoiled, turning into a pure energy torrent, surging into Louis's body, yet it was purified and crushed under the brilliance of the Primordial Heart.

Louis's consciousness was drawn by a more ancient remnant force, plunging into time itself.

The first scene emerged with extreme clarity.

In a dim hall, Balk was kneeling on the ground.

He had his eyes closed, his expression tranquil, like he was waiting for a long-overdue forgiveness.

A translucent brain jellyfish slowly descended from the shadows, its soft tentacles gently touching the back of his head, its movements gentle to the point of reverence.

The tentacles pierced, scalp and bones seemed to melt away in some warm solution, silently making way.

Balk's body completely relaxed, the corners of his mouth uncontrollably lifted, revealing a childlike innocent smile.

The light in his eyes went out in that instant, a tear halted at the corner of his eye, not falling, already losing its meaning.

The scene shattered immediately.

The second memory was like a condensed elegy.

On a storm-covered sea, a massive ark was slowly sinking.

Its bulk far exceeded the Fernando, with complex and elegant lines on the hull, covered with intricate demon pattern arrays and unknown material armor.

This was not a creation of this era.

The enemies besieging it were not irrational monsters.

It was an army of fishmen, but completely different from the crazed fishmen of the present.

Their formations were orderly, knowing how to cover, feign attacks, and divide the battlefield, using complex tools and tactics in coordination.

On the bridge of the ark, a captain in ancient uniform stood on the broken deck.

His face full of fatigue, yet not hysterical.

"I'm sorry..." he spoke softly into the void, his voice torn apart by the wind and rain, "Teacher."

The next moment, he drew a short dagger, without hesitation, piercing his own heart.

Pink mist seeped from the wound, mingling with the sea breeze.

The third memory came most indistinctly, as if through countless layers of water surfaces and years.

A black-haired young man, sitting on a throne formed by giant tree roots.

He held a swaddled infant in his arms.

Though in the highest position, his face bore no glory, only unfathomable sorrow.

It was an expression of foresight into the future, yet powerless to prevent it.

The scene became thoroughly blurred here, as if forcibly broken off by some will, all illusions simultaneously disintegrated.

Louis abruptly opened his eyes.

The cave remained silent, the white bone altar unmoving, as if nothing had happened.

The pink mist, now purified, was no longer restless.

It flowed meekly into Louis's sea of consciousness, forming a fourth aura, rotating slowly around the Primordial Heart together with crimson, dark purple, and pale gold.

Louis only wavered briefly, then regained his footing.

He did not faint, meaning his body and soul could already bear these remnants and memories from the past.

The abilities brought by the pink power naturally surfaced in his cognition.

Ordinarily, his words would carry an almost imperceptible mental suggestion, making people unconsciously lower their guard, creating trust and closeness toward him.

In battle, with just a thought, he could detonate the opponent's sensory nerves, causing them to fall into a brief yet fatal ecstatic paralysis, or create a lethal cognitive distortion.

After all this, Louis stood in the dead center of the cave, not leaving immediately.

He finally vaguely pieced together a silhouette.

These powers were not independently existent; they were remnants left from a great existence's death.

And the Primordial Heart within him...

Perhaps it is the only key to reassembling this corpse or inheriting its legacy.

"Even my crossing might be related to these," Louis muttered softly, his tone calm, yet no longer relaxed.

"Three and a half left." He raised his head, his gaze penetrating the darkness of the cave, "When I gather them all... perhaps the answer will reveal itself."

Chapter 826: Holy Eastern Empire

Seldon Calvin sat in the black-gold carriage adorned with the family crest, fingers clutching an "Autumn Harvest Statistical Report" still smelling of ink.

Inside the carriage, an expensive dragon scent burned, but even so, the strange smell seeping in from outside stubbornly penetrated the wooden walls.

Seldon frowned slightly, pulling the velvet curtain of the window to open a gap.

The street outside was more bustling than ever.

Heavy grain carts lined up one after another, forming a long line, the ruts making the cobblestones creak.

From the split openings of the burlap sacks spilled golden grains, so plump they seemed ready to overflow—an authentic harvest, devoid of any exaggeration.

He glanced down at the report in his hand.

A 30% increase in production over the previous year, yet only a 15% warehouse entry rate.

"Damn it." The quill pen scraped harshly across the paper, leaving a glaring red line.

This wasn't an error in accounting; Seldon knew very well that the grain hadn't disappeared.

As the carriage slowed at an intersection, he saw the grain carts turning not towards the commerce district of the Calvin Clan, but uniformly into the harbor area, owned by the Church Court.

Docked at the pier were white grain ships from the Holy City, their hulls so white they were almost blinding, like a row of sea beasts quietly baring their fangs.

The grain was unloaded bag by bag, disappearing into the depths of the ship's hold.

Seldon was not angry about the grain being taken away.

What angered him was that the grain hadn't passed through his hands, allowing him to make a profit.

The carriage continued forward, entering the busiest main thoroughfare of the capital.

Along both sides of the street, every fifty steps, stood a brand-new Golden Feather Flower statue.

The statues were entirely gilded, the leaves spread gracefully as if in eternal bloom.

But as Seldon peered through the curtain gap, he couldn't shake off an inexplicable chill in his heart.

The roots of the flower weren't simply embedded in the stone base.

He distinctly saw some kind of dark red vein extending down from the base, disappearing beneath the ground.

Occasionally, the golden leaves would barely move, like lungs, expanding and contracting.

As the carriage passed the statues, the commoners on the street slowed their actions uniformly as they passed by these flowers.

They no longer bowed in prayer as in the past, nor did they show any reverence.

It was a kind of animalistic rigidity.

Just like a herd of herbivores instinctively drawing back at the scent of predators near a water source.

Seldon let out a cold snort, pulling the curtains shut.

"Tasteless decor," he commented inwardly, "that old zealot Salomon turned a good commercial city into a nouveau riche's garden."

Suddenly, the carriage slowed down, a clamor of voices rising, mixed with prayers, cries, and a near-ecstatic murmur—it was the Church Court's soup distribution tent.

Seldon leaned forward, seeing the street jam-packed, impassable.

Under the simple white cloth tents, rows of nuns passed bowls of golden soup to the common folk.

He instinctively glanced around.

In a year of overflowing warehouses, yet the people on the street were emaciated, their eyes sunken, as if long drained of moisture like withered grass.

What they scrambled for was not bread, nor wheat cakes.

It was just that bowl of soup.

Seldon was about to sneer, but the next scene froze his expression.

A tattered dock laborer took the bowl of soup and greedily gulped it down.

One moment, he hunched his back, struggling to stand upright.

The next moment, he suddenly straightened.

His pupils dilated, his complexion quickly flushing an abnormal red.

The previously withered muscles swelled as if inflated, veins bulging beneath the skin.

He tilted his head back, letting out an ecstatic roar, "Praise the Crown! I can do the work of ten men!"

The surrounding crowd burst into a near-worshipful cheer.

Seldon's back broke out in a fine layer of cold sweat; even after seeing it several times, it still sent chills down his spine.

What was this?

Alchemy Potion? Divine liquid? Or some sort of modified drug?

What about the cost? Was the formula complex? Could it be mass-produced?

If the Calvin Commerce Association could get hold of the formula, sell it to miners, loggers, construction crews...

How many times the profit of grain trading would it be?

At that thought, the chill in his heart was quickly replaced by a familiar irritation.

Irritation that such a thing hadn't gone through the market, through the commerce association, through himself.

"Giving such a good potion to these consumables is a complete waste," Seldon muttered under his breath, with not a trace of pity in his tone.

The carriage continued to slowly roll down the bustling avenue, the wheels crunching rhythmically over the cobblestones.

Just then, a soft, restrained knock came from outside the carriage.

"Young Master." It was the voice of the family steward.

The carriage made a brief stop by the roadside, the window pushed open slightly from outside, and a gloved hand passed in a small wooden box. The box was sealed with the Church Court's wax, a thorn crest clearly visible.

"This is the payment just settled by the Church Court," the steward's voice was low, carrying a hint of hesitation, "personally overseen by Bishop Salomon."

Seldon did not respond immediately, signaling the steward to leave.

The window closed again, the velvet curtain falling, sealing off the noise from outside.

Only then did Seldon reach for the box, placing it on his knee and unlocking the clasp.

No crisp sound of gold coins clattering.

The box was neatly stacked with a pile of coins.

Neither Gold Coins minted by the Empire nor consistently valuable Silver Coins.

Chapter 827: Holy Eastern Empire (2)

The coin was unnaturally light, as if it had no weight at all. Its surface was made of some bone-like material, smooth to the touch yet carrying a faintly unpleasant chill.

On the face of the coin were etched twining thorn patterns, and from the depths of the lines there seemed to seep a layer of extremely faint golden halo.

Seldon picked one up and slowly rolled it between his fingertips.

He knew very well what this was—a bad coin.

This kind of thing could not circulate anywhere outside the districts under the Church Court's control. It was just a heap of scrap metal—no, not even worthy of being called scrap metal.

Reason issued a clear warning at that moment.

This was a trap; this was the Church Court using another system to replace the Empire's monetary arteries.

Once accepted, it would mean abandoning control over prices, circulation, and settlement.

Seldon closed his eyes for a moment.

Yet he could not stop the image of Bishop Salomon's mild face from surfacing in his mind.

He had no right to refuse; the grain had already been intercepted by the Church Court.

The ports were in their hands.

The soup kitchens controlled the lowest rung of the labor force.

And now even the method of settlement was being rewritten.

This was not a negotiation; it was notification that the rules had already changed.

Seldon slowly let out a breath and opened his eyes. He pressed down the lid of the chest, producing a soft thud. "Take it."

Outside the carriage window, the butler bent down once more.

Seldon went on, his gaze already shifting to the street scene beyond the window. "Also, pass down my order: starting tomorrow, all grain and oil shops under the family's name..."

He paused, as if confirming that he no longer had any way back.

"Will refuse to accept Imperial Gold Coins and will give priority to accepting Holy Certificates."

The butler's pupils contracted ever so slightly, but he did not object, only lowered his head in assent.

The carriage started up again.

Seldon knew exactly what he had done. He had personally severed the last unrotted artery between the Calvin Clan and the Empire's economic system.

He had voluntarily stretched his neck into the Church Court's invisible financial noose.

But he was equally clear that he, in fact, had no choice.

From the far end of the street suddenly came a wave of orderly, fanatical shouting.

"Praise the Crown!"

"Praise the Golden Feather Flower!"

The commoners who had drunk the golden broth lined up in ranks, raising the Church Court's banners high, their steps in unison, faces wearing smiles that were almost blissful.

Golden sunlight poured over them, making the entire street shine with a disturbing brilliance.

Seldon's brows tightened sharply.

A nameless irritability surged up from deep within his chest.

He lifted his hand and yanked the velvet curtain shut, closed his eyes, and silently repeated a sentence in his heart—a sentence he himself did not fully believe.

"As long as it makes money... as long as I can sit in that seat, or higher still..."

A barely perceptible curve tugged at the corner of his mouth. "To hell with what god it is."

.....

Inside the provisional council hall of the Imperial Palace in the Southeast Province.

Lampard stood on one side of the long table, a freshly delivered intelligence report clenched in his hand.

The paper gave a faint rustle between his fingers.

More clearly than anyone, he understood what this regime above his head, named the "Holy Eastern Empire," really was.

To the north, Louis was clearing the sea; pirates were being wiped out in swathes, sea routes redrawn, the warships of Red Tide Territory were using live targets to calibrate their guns, and a blockade line had already been cast across the sea.

To the west, Kaelin's army was advancing—an undisguised military invasion that couldn't even be bothered to find a pretext.

And at his side, this so-called Holy Eastern Empire, burdened with a grandiose title, was more like an infant afflicted with gigantism.

A hulking body with brittle bones.

Layer upon layer of golden shell piled upward, yet inside was still unformed soft tissue.

Lampard took a deep, slow, deliberate breath, then adjusted the muscles of his face.

He lowered his brows, tightened his jaw, pressed some anger and impatience into his gaze—that was the face of a volatile Monarch, driven into a corner yet still forcing himself to stand firm.

This performance was for two people: one was Salomon, robed in clerical vestments at the far end of the long table, the other was Seldon, seated a little farther away.

Lampard suddenly raised his hand and slammed the newspaper down hard on the redwood table.

"Bang—!"

The crash echoed through the council hall; the candlesticks trembled slightly, the flames stretching long then shrinking back.

He took a step forward, voice rising, the tone tinged with anger that was both forcibly restrained and on the verge of slipping its leash.

"Louis's warships are already using pirates for test firing!"

His gaze swept over Salomon, then over Seldon, as if in accusation and in protest both.

"Off the northern ports, unidentified fast ships are prowling every day! And my army?" Lampard slammed a fist into the edge of the table. "They haven't even been fully issued their armor yet!"

He paused for a heartbeat, as if finally unable to hold back, letting long-pent-up fury spill out.

"This is the God-blessed land you promised?!"

Lampard planted both hands on the redwood table, leaning forward, his gaze locking onto the red-clad bishop in the shadows.

"Salomon! The pretender in the west is assembling three heavy divisions. I need money, I need grain, I need those laborers building churches dragged off to build fortresses."

He no longer bothered to disguise the threat in his tone.

"If the Southeast Province is lost," Lampard said, enunciating each word, "where is the Church Court going to collect the faith of these millions?"

But the red-clad Bishop Salomon merely unhurriedly removed his monocle and, with a piece of golden velvet, gently wiped the lens, as though dealing with some matter that had nothing to do with him.

"Your Highness, you are far too anxious." His voice was remote. "The Jade Federation is no more than a mortal army, while the Holy Eastern Empire is God's Divine Country upon the earth under the Crown."

As he spoke, he drew a new list from his sleeve.

Chapter 828: Holy Eastern Empire_3

"As for the military funding... regrettably, the white ships of the Holy City encountered a storm last night, leaving a significant material shortage. According to the Holy Seat's will, this month's tithe needs to be increased by twenty percent and should be prioritized for delivery to the Holy City through the inland waterways."

Lampard's heart sank completely at that moment.

He understood.

From the very beginning, the Church Court never intended to hold the Southeast Province.

In their eyes, this was not territory, not citizens, nor even the foundation of their faith, but merely a livestock prepared for slaughter at any time.

The only thing they cared about was whether they could squeeze out the last drop of blood, the last piece of meat, the last bit of oil before the knife fell.

This thought was like an ice needle pierced into Lampard's mind.

But his face could not show the slightest flaw.

He suddenly slammed a fist onto the mahogany long table, the dull sound echoed in the council chamber, causing several gilded candelabras to sway.

"What are the knights on the frontline supposed to eat?" he almost roared, his voice filled with the frustration of being driven to desperation, "Dirt?!"

After speaking, he seemed drained of energy, slumped back into the chair symbolizing imperial power, but didn't belong to him, with his shoulders slightly collapsed.

At the end of the long table, Seldon Calvin never looked up.

As the royal financial advisor, he was as quiet as a backdrop, but behind the heavy lenses, his gaze moved subtly without a hint of expression.

He watched the farce clearly.

"The Fifth Prince is not foolish," Seldon made a judgment in his heart, "The way he slammed down just now was very imposing. He wants to use the pretext of resisting foreign threats to force the Church Court to release military supplies and grain."

Unfortunately, cleverness aside, he doesn't have any cards worth playing."

His gaze swept over the bishop's unhurried departing figure, and his lips tightened for a barely noticeable moment.

"As for that old charlatan..." Seldon's evaluation was simple and ruthless, "He doesn't place the imperial power in his eyes at all."

This wasn't a guess, but an instinctual merchant's sense of risk.

The Church Court likely anticipated long ago that this land could not be held, so they intended to pack up all the grain, gold coins, people, and faith before the war truly burst out, and ship them away.

Seldon looked down at the deficit sheet in his hand, those alarming numbers seemed to mock his professionalism.

He handed the final judgment to the ship named the Holy Eastern Empire; it was sinking.

When he looked back at Lampard, the awe in his gaze was gone, replaced by calm and detached assessment.

He must find a way to survive before the ship completely sinks.

.....

The bishop excused himself with the reason of 'prayer time has arrived'.

The heavy council chamber doors slowly closed, cutting off the footsteps from outside.

At the moment the door closed, all of Lampard's exaggerated rage seemed to be wiped away by an invisible hand, leaving only a shadow of weariness.

He did not speak immediately, just leaned back in his chair, closed his eyes, and when he opened them again, his gaze fell on Seldon: "Seldon."

This time, his voice was no longer a roar, but weighed low, almost pleading: "The Calvin Clan's trade routes in the west... are they still usable?"

Seldon's hand holding the quill paused slightly.

This was a signal as clear as could be.

Lampard wanted to bypass the Church Court, to establish a rear logistic line solely for himself.

"The price is negotiable," Lampard added.

Seldon closed his notebook, calm in his movement, and an impeccable professional smile appeared on his face.

"Your Highness, you know," his tone was gentle yet detached, "Since my father fell ill, many of the trade routes... haven't been operating smoothly."

He paused, as if weighing his words.

"Moreover, without the bishop's signature, goods can't even pass through checkpoints."

Lampard stared at him for a full three seconds.

The gaze held no anger, only a penetrating weariness that saw through the heart.

He saw through.

Saw through Seldon's reservations, and also saw through that this merchant had already started preparing for his own retreat.

Finally, Lampard just let out a bitter laugh, waving his hand: "Dismissed."

The council chamber emptied out.

Lampard sat alone on that temporarily pieced-together 'imperial throne,' his body sinking into the soft yet cold cushion.

This chair never belonged to him.

He stood up and walked to the high window, drawing the drapes.

In the square, the massive Golden Feather Flower sculpture shone with false radiance in the sunlight, casting a shadow that perfectly covered the entire Imperial Palace.

Like a net slowly tightening.

"Louis is building ships in the north," Lampard muttered to himself, "That's for conquest, the second elder brother is assembling troops in the west, that's for unification."

His voice gradually lowered.

"And I... I am merely a watchdog for this bunch of monsters."

He was acutely aware that once the frontline crumbled, or the Church Court deemed him useless.

He would be quietly abandoned.

Lampard's fingers slowly clenched, "If I don't act... I will die without a sound."

Finally, a trace of dangerous determination flashed in his eyes.

He decided to make a risky move.

Chapter 829: Inquisition

The Central Square of the capital of Southeast Province seemed as though it had been dragged into a melting Alchemy Furnace.

The sky was no longer blue; thick smoke from burning wood and grease had turned the dome a sickly wax yellow, making even the sunlight appear murky and hesitant.

The air was filled with a nauseating odor, a mix of the burnt smell of roasted meat, the acrid scent of charred fabric, and the overpowering fragrance of Golden Feather Flower.

This fragrance, originally meant to mask the stench of corpses, had now become the prelude to death, causing one's stomach to convulse upon the first sniff.

In the center of the square, three black iron gallows stood tall.

Beneath the gallows, piles of wood processed through alchemy lay scattered, with their grain painted a uniform dark brown, clearly reused for such occasions.

Bound to the gallows were three elderly men.

Despite their disheveled state, with tangled hair and faces covered in soot and sweat, their dignified contours, characteristic of the Nobility, remained visible.

The torn ceremonial attire clung loosely to their bodies, despite its shredded fabric, some corner still retained ancient patterns.

A medal symbolizing generations of family honor hung on each of their chests, a symbol exclusive to the old Nobility, glimmering dimly yet defiantly amidst the dust.

At their feet lay evidence collected from the secret rooms of various families.

The old Dragon Ancestor stone sculpture had its nose broken off; scrolls made from dragon skin were trampled into the dirt, and several ancient dragon scale talismans once revered across generations were carelessly tossed onto the woodpile, reflecting a weak cold light.

These items, once deemed sacred vestiges of honor and protection, were now trampled like garbage, used as kindling.

There was no judge's seat in the square, nor was there any defense.

Only one Judicial Court priest in a golden robe stood before the gallows.

His robe glowed with a gentle golden sheen in the firelight, his face displaying an almost compassionate indifference.

In his hand was a long-handled golden spoon, filled with viscous golden grease, flowing slowly in the light.

A spell amplified his voice, spreading it across the entire square, every word clear and solemn.

"Fire shall not burn the innocent," the priest declared, as if stating a truth, "If the Dragon Ancestor you speak of is a true God, it shall extinguish this mortal flame."

He paused briefly, allowing the words to ferment in the air.

"If it does not come, it proves it is a false god, a lie woven by demons."

With those words, the priest raised the golden spoon.

Golden grease poured down from above, flowing gently over the Count's grayed hair, across their wrinkled cheeks, seemingly coating them with a false radiance before their death.

The grease dripped onto their attire and the wood, creating a faint and sticky sound.

The crowd in the square roared in response.

The vast throng of tens of thousands seemed divided by an invisible wall.

On the side closer to the gallows was a sea of fanaticism, filled mostly with young people or lightly clothed plebeians.

Many among them had drunk the gold soup bestowed by the Church Court, with pupils reflecting an unnatural golden glow, their emotions heightened to an almost frenzied state.

They waved the branches in their hands, like celebrating a festival.

"Burn them!"

"Purify the Southeast!"

"Sweep the garbage of the old era into Hell!"

The chants grew louder wave after wave.

In their eyes, having the once high Nobility bound to the gallows was a sweet revenge.

Yet on the edge of the crowd, there was a starkly different presence.

These were mostly older people, or the covert worshippers of old gods.

They pulled down their hat brims, huddled their necks, trembling uncontrollably, yet dared not utter a sound.

An elderly woman with a face full of wrinkles stood on the outermost edge of the crowd.

Her hand hidden in her tattered sleeve tightly gripped a crude wooden dragon amulet.

The firelight reflecting in her clouded eyes, she dared not cry aloud, allowing tears to silently slide down.

Her lips moved slightly, yet uttered no sound.

"Dragon Ancestor... open your eyes and see..."

The prayer was yet unfinished when it was killed by the power beside her.

A hand reached from the side, pressing firmly on her shoulder.

Her daughter whispered harshly into her ear with fear and anger, "Are you out of your mind? Want to doom the whole family?!"

Not far away, someone subconsciously stepped forward, trying to break out from the crowd, but was immediately pulled back by several hands.

There were even young faces fiercely covering their parents' mouths, eyes filled with terror.

"Boom—!"

What rose was not regular crimson flames but a dazzling gold fire.

This was a peculiar flame modulated by the Church's Alchemist, emitting a distorted hum at high temperature, bleaching even shadows white.

The flames seemed to contain a low thrum, as though directly licking at souls.

All three gallows ignited simultaneously.

"Ahhhh!"

Cries of agony burst forth, yet were unlike any sound humans could make.

Even those who had been cheering fanatically just moments ago faltered for an instant, smiles frozen on their faces.

Beneath the gallows, the ancient dragon scale talisman, once seen as symbols of honor and faith, began to change under the blaze of the golden fire.

The scales, previously hard and proclaimed resistant to blades and arrows, first tinged with a strange dark red at the edges, then began to soften, curl, squirm like a living thing.

Ultimately, they could no longer maintain their shape.

Black, viscous fluid dripped from the talisman, hitting the scorching stone floor with a faint "sizzling" sound.

Chapter 830: Inquisition (Part 2)

That scene was like a pair of invisible eyes weeping.

Among the onlookers, those old nobility who hadn't been accounted for lost all color in their faces instantly.

Some staggered backward, others covered their mouths tightly, afraid of making even the slightest sound, becoming the next target.

.....

Just two streets away.

In front of Duke Calvin's Mansion, there was a stark silence, contrasting the plaza.

The heavy ironwood door was tightly shut, like an enormous sealed mouth, rejecting all sound.

On the stone stairs, knelt more than a dozen figures.

They were all relatives and allies of the condemned Count.

Their foreheads were already bruised and bloodied, with blood flowing down the cracks of the stone steps, staining the Calvin Clan's wolf head emblem embedded in the ground.

Leading them was the one-armed Baron Cas.

The missing arm was the price he paid thirty years ago, blocking a stab meant for the Duke.

At this moment, with his remaining hand, he clutched the iron gate of the mansion, roaring toward the inside, with a voice hoarse and near breaking:

"My Lord Duke! Open the door! He's been your brother for forty years! He's the Count Green who carried you out from a pile of corpses!"

His voice echoed down the empty street, yet received no response.

"I don't ask you to save them..."

As he roared, his voice suddenly dropped, as if something caught his throat, leaving only humble and desperate pleading.

"I know the Church Court is powerful... at least... at least ask the bishop for mercy, give them a swift death..."

"Don't burn them... I beg you, don't burn them..."

All that answered him was the faint sound of screams from afar.

The sound, torn to shreds by the wind, pierced into the heart of everyone kneeling on the steps like rusty nails.

The knights of the Duke's Mansion stood straight at the door.

Their armor was fine, and their spears long, supposedly the most reliable protectors of this city.

Yet at this moment, their heads were bowed, none dared to meet the one-armed Baron's eyes.

A young knight's hand trembled slightly, tears welling up in his eyes, but never falling.

Until the flames in the square gradually died down, and the terrifying screams ceased entirely.

The gates of the Duke's Mansion still did not open.

The one-armed Baron Cas slowly released his grip on the railing.

He stood, his movements stiff, and the light in his eyes faded.

He spat a mouthful of bloody saliva at the tightly closed door.

Then turned and left.

.....

The heavy curtains were tightly drawn.

No sunlight ever entered the master bedroom, the air murky and dense, the bitterness of repeatedly boiled herbs mixed with the unique decay of the elderly, lingering in every breath and stubbornly refusing to disperse.

Seldon stood behind a screen on one side of the room.

Nominally, he was there to visit his father's illness.

In truth, he resembled a patient hyena, lingering by the carrion, waiting for the final confirmation.

In his hand, he clutched a blood-stained letter just delivered from outside.

The pages were soaked in blood, clearly pressed repeatedly with a wounded finger.

Every line bore familiar surnames, familiar pledges, familiar pleas.

He didn't even need to unfold it to know what it said.

Seldon had no intention of handing over this letter.

Duke Calvin lay in a reclining chair covered with a thick plush blanket.

His body had visibly thinned, yet didn't appear disheveled.

The large robe was meticulously arranged, the shoulders still straight but looking much emptier.

Sunken eye sockets and skin with the pallor peculiar to the long-ailing, yet retaining a degree of the old nobility's restraint and composure.

Outside the window, vague heart-wrenching cries drifted in.

It was the voice of the one-armed Baron.

The man who once blocked blades on the battlefield for the Duke, once hailed as the "loyal dog" by the whole Calvin Family.

That voice, hoarse and broken, crashed repeatedly against the thick walls of the Duke's Mansion, only to be bounced back.

The old man in the recliner was not entirely unresponsive; his eyelashes quivered slightly, yet he ultimately said nothing.

His eyes remained half-open, half-closed, gaze muddy and profound, as if seeing beyond the window's cries and into dusty memories.

Seldon initially had a sliver of worry.

He feared his father would suddenly awaken, rise in defiance, make some foolish yet honor-driven decision in keeping with the old times.

But now he was completely reassured, and completely disappointed.

He stepped out from behind the screen, treading lightly, standing by the recliner with a slight bow, maintaining a demeanor without a hint of disrespect.

"Father." He spoke in a low voice, the tone deferential, like a son fulfilling his duty at the bedside, "It's a bit noisy outside."

He reached to straighten the edges of the Duke's blanket, his movements skilled and patient, as if practiced countless times.

"It's the old subordinates... losing control of their emotions. I've already told people to calm them, you won't be disturbed again."

The old man in the recliner gave no response.

Seldon straightened up, still maintaining that impeccable demeanor, as though everything before was just everyday routine.

In his heart, however, another voice emerged, cold and somber.

Did you hear?

The old man outside who has fought for you half his life, is crying and begging.

You were once called the "Fox of the Southeast," whose name even the Emperor weighed carefully.

And now, you can't even muster the strength to open your eyes and make a choice.

These thoughts rippled through him like cold waves, expanding in circles, quickly settling again into silence.

Seldon straightened up.

He took a last glance at his father in the recliner, confirming that steady, restrained breathing remained unchanged, then turned and walked toward the door.

Before opening the door, he paused, leaned toward the waiting old servant beside him, and whispered: "Keep two men on watch tonight, father sleeps lightly."

The door closed quietly behind him, sealing the dimly lit bedroom away.

It wasn't until he walked through the corridor, back to his bedroom, ensuring no one else could see him, that Seldon stopped.

He retrieved the blood-stained letter from his sleeve, glanced at it, and gently rubbed a finger over the dried bloodstains.

Then he crumpled the paper into a ball.

The flames in the fireplace were burning vigorously.

Seldon threw the ball of paper in.

The flames immediately consumed the bloodstains, the paper curling, blackening, turning to ash.

The flickering firelight cast on his face, distorting the already cold and hard visage.

Outside, the cries continued.

.....

At the very top of the cathedral bell tower.

The fierce wind battered the exposed stone walls, enough to cast an ordinary person down from such great heights.

The whole city's clamor, prayers, and cries were torn apart by the wind, becoming a distant and chaotic noise.

Bishop Salomon, however, stood at the edge of the bell tower.

His red robe billowed fiercely in the wind, like an unfurled battle flag, yet his body remained immobile, feet planted firmly on the stone, as if he stood not in the high air but upon the carpet in his own study.

He held a slender crystal wine glass in his hand.

The pale golden liquid inside remained unperturbed by the wind, reflecting the firelight dancing in the square below, the residual warmth of the golden strange fire not yet fully extinguished.

Salomon looked down, thousands writhed, knelt, cheered in the square, falling into fleeting, hollow silence after the pyres extinguished.

His lips held no smile, his gaze was one of cold detachment.

Behind him stood a Church Knight donned in a white cloak with platinum emblems.

The fierce wind forced the knight into a slight bow, yet he maintained a standard posture of austerity, eyes beneath the helmet not daring to surpass the bishop's silhouette by even an inch.

Salomon swirled the wineglass, finally turning around.

"Inform Seldon Calvin." His voice was not loud, yet pierced clearly through the wind, as if the command held its own weight, "Have him come up."

He paused a moment, his gaze cast once more to the distant smoke-yellowed sky.

"There are things I need to discuss with him in person."

The knight instantly knelt on one knee, responded in a low voice, then turned and retreated into the shadows of the bell tower.