

Winter 841

Chapter 841: The Rapid Collapse of the Holy Eastern Empire

The air inside the cathedral was filled with a layer of white smoke.

That was the priceless deep-sea scented incense.

Incense burners lined up one after another, and the incense was thrown into the brazier regardless of cost.

The billowing white smoke spiraled under the dome, trying to create an atmosphere of sacred solemnity that was nearly aggressive and could not be desecrated.

Seldon knelt at the front of the coffin, his black mourning attire fitting perfectly.

He was the center of everyone's gaze and the rightful heir to the Duke.

In front of the coffin kneels a mass of black veils.

Duke Calvin believed in the philosophy of strength in numbers all his life, leaving behind nearly thirty children.

At this moment, these pure-blooded filial sons and grandsons are lined up according to their age, creating a grand scene, yet one that has a touch of the absurd that makes one want to laugh and cry.

The cries come one after another, some real, some fake.

Seldon's gaze swept among them, quickly losing patience.

He slightly turned his head and lowered his voice to ask the old butler next to him, "Who is it that's crying and fainted...?"

The old butler glanced in the direction of his gaze, pausing with a subtle expression, "Sir, that would be the fourteenth young lady."

"Fourteenth?" Seldon raised an eyebrow slightly, "I remember she's not yet twelve years old."

"Yes." The old butler's voice became even lower, "She actually... didn't see the old Duke much, probably scared by the grand scene."

Seldon withdrew his gaze, the corner of his mouth twitching imperceptibly.

Crying out of fright, he sneered inwardly.

This child who can hardly distinguish who their father is now has to kneel here, waiting to inherit.

A bunch of swine, only I am the sole heir.

.....

The mourning music subsided.

Seldon stood up, walked slowly toward the central podium of the church.

This was the moment he had waited for too long.

His steps were calm and steady, even deliberately letting his shoulders slightly sag for a moment, as if bent by grief.

Then he straightened again at the next step, the best posture of assuming responsibility while in mourning, everything perfectly fitting.

He stood firmly, raising his eyes to look around.

Countless eyes focused on him, expectant, scrutinizing, calculating, awed...

Nobility, church court clergy, officers, trade guild representatives... everyone of real weight from the Southeast Province was here.

Seldon spoke, his voice deep and restrained, "Father, was a lion entrenched on this land his entire life."

He turned to the side and touched the cold coffin, pausing for exactly three seconds, the recommended optimal duration by the etiquette officer.

"He taught us loyalty and also taught us responsibility. But he belonged to the old era." He turned to face the crowd, "The lion is gone, but winter has not descended.

On the contrary, the holy light will illuminate the Southeast."

A brief pause.

"I, Seldon Calvin" he raised his right hand, under the lights, the seal ring on his thumb reflecting a dazzling light.

"Hereby swear by the blood of the family, I will take on this heavy crown. This is not merely a transfer of power...

But the starting point of a sacred covenant between the Calvin Family and the supreme Church Court!"

He felt the texture of the ring clearly.

The real patriarch ring, made of deep-sea silver, whereas the one clasped on his thumb now was a hastily crafted gold-plated imitation, like a cold dead thing.

"Damn old thing..." A moment of irritability surged from Seldon's heart, "To disgust me once more before death, where did you hide the ring?"

His gaze flickered subtly toward the main seat.

Yet Solomon's gaze did not fall on his hand at all, those gray eyes were looking over the crowd, unsure of where they were directed.

Seldon's tension eased instantly, even a hint of mockery arose: "As long as the treasury is in my hands, as long as those millions of gold coins remain, I am the real one."

The ring might be fake, but as long as the power is real, it is enough.

He straightened his spine again, amidst the thunderous applause, his face showing the perfect blend of grief and determination.

.....

After the funeral, the clouds outside the cathedral had not yet dispersed, but the Duke's residence was already brightly lit.

The banquet was arranged in the most luxurious main hall.

Crystal chandeliers layered down, candelabras and alchemy light balls mixed, lighting up the entire hall as if it were daytime.

The long table was covered with silver plates and gold utensils, red wine swirled gently in the goblets, reflecting a warm gloss.

Seldon sat in the main seat, holding a wine glass, with a perfectly poised smile at the corner of his lips, watching batches of Southeast nobles bow to toast.

"To the new Regent King."

"To the glory of the Calvin Clan."

"To the future of the Church Court and the Southeast."

Toasts came one after another, like gentle waves lifting him to the heights of power.

Seldon responded one by one, smiling, enjoying the moment.

Father was dead, and the Emperor is like a caged bird controlled by the nobility and the church court.

And the church court requires him, needing him, who understands how to silence the nobility and make the common people obey, as a worldly agent.

"I am not a puppet forced up here." Seldon concluded calmly in his heart, "I am the only one who can maintain balance, the operator."

The banquet was in full swing.

The musicians played a lively yet hollow melody, the noblewomen whispered, the air mixed with the aroma of wine, roasted meat, and spices.

At this moment, the Knight Captain approached him, bending down, voice extremely low.

"Sir... His Majesty Lampard..." He paused for a moment, as if deliberating his words, or as if he dared not finish, "has disappeared."

The wine glass in Seldon's hand trembled sharply, his breath momentarily faltered, then forcibly steadied.

Chapter 842: The Rapid Collapse of the Holy Eastern Empire (2)

"Disappearance?" Seldon lowered his voice, almost squeezing the words through his teeth, "What do you mean, dead or imprisoned?"

The Knight Captain's Adam's apple bobbed. "The Imperial Palace has already sealed off the news, the official statement is that he was guided by the Holy Light and has entered a period of silent prayer and meditation.

But our informant says... it has been half a month since anyone last saw His Majesty."

The clamor in the banquet hall continued, the nobility apparently not hearing the whispered report, still immersed in the illusion of alcohol and power transition.

But Seldon's world had already quieted down.

His gaze slowly lifted, passing over the long table, the flickering candlelight, and landed on the guest seat to the right.

Bishop Salomon was elegantly cutting his steak, his movements calm, as if all of this had nothing to do with him.

"Guided by the Holy Light?" Seldon's thoughts raced, "Such nonsense, only the Church Court could concoct. Father just died, and now the Emperor disappeared?"

They are clearing the field, they are removing every uncontrollable piece from the board, one by one."

Just a few minutes ago, he thought he was an ally.

A secular fulcrum used by the Church Court to balance the royal power.

Seldon suddenly realized a chilling fact.

"If even the Emperor can be erased by them... then what am I? A Regent King who still needs their public coronation, in their eyes... am I even inferior to a dog?"

An unprecedented fear climbed icily up his spine.

He tasted the weight of the phrase "lips are gone, teeth will be cold."

As if sensing his gaze, Salomon put down the knife and fork, lifted his head across the long table, and locked eyes with Seldon.

In that moment, time seemed to stretch.

Then Salomon simply raised his wine glass, offering a distant toast to Seldon.

The corner of his mouth curved into a gentle yet emotionless smile, as if to say: "Do you have any other choice?"

Seldon's throat tightened, forcing out a smile, and he averted his gaze, tilting his head back to drain the wine in his glass.

The liquor burned his throat but couldn't suppress the chill surging from within.

Soon, he forcibly cut off his emotions, closed his eyes, and quickly rebuilt logic in his mind.

"The Church Court eliminated the Emperor to monopolize the benefits. And where are those benefits? In taxation, in gold coins, and who holds these?"

The answer surfaced almost instinctively: "It's me."

"Without me, they can't open the enchanted vault, without me, the group of nobility below won't cooperate with tax collection.

If they kill me, all they will get is a Southeast Province in administrative paralysis and cash flow disruption.

But if they keep me... they will gain a steady stream of gold coins and stable faith."

This deduction convinced him, allowing his breathing to become steady once more.

He straightened his bow tie, thoroughly suppressing the remnants of unease back into his chest, raised his wine glass, and proactively walked towards the main guest's seat.

Salomon was elegantly wiping the corner of his mouth with a napkin.

"Bishop," his voice was deep and restrained, "I am forever a loyal steward of the Church Court."

Salomon did not look at him, as if he had only heard an inconsequential report: "Very good."

.....

The Duke's funeral had just ended a few days ago, when the main door of the administrative hall was kicked open by the newly appointed Holy Tax Commissioner of the Church Court.

He was draped in a golden-embroidered red robe, followed by fifty scribes, each holding a new, blank ledger.

In his vision, this place should have neatly stored the Empire's tax records and cadastre accumulated over fifty years, the vascular map of the Southeast Province, a place to draw blood directly.

What greeted him, however, was a black snow.

The heavy filing cabinets were pried open, empty inside.

Those recordings of land ownership, population movement, and shop water current in the "Land Measurement Records" and the "Real Tax Source List" now only remained as a layer of black ash on the ground.

The Tax Commissioner knelt down, scooping up a handful of ashes.

That was the foundation of fifty years of rule over the Southeast Province.

The Church Court occupied this land, yet they did not know where there was grain, where there was money, they held the scepter, but lost their eyes.

Of course, this did not stop the collection.

The orders from the Holy City were simple and brutal, to tax at the highest standards.

So-called administration quickly degenerated into robbery draped in sacred robes.

The tithe was quickly renamed as atonement money.

If one could not produce money, it proved impure faith, impure faith needed to be repaid with the body.

When people could not come up with money, the crime was swiftly defined as heresy for maliciously concealing divine property.

The church turned into a labor camp and slave warehouse, every copper coin stained with blood.

In another district, a leather merchant long bankrupt knelt on the ground.

The tax officer, leafing through records from ten years ago, coldly declared he owned three workshops, pleading was pointless.

"Poverty is not an excuse, it's fraud." A knight dragged away the old man's granddaughter in the street.

Amid the cries, the ledger was turned to the next page, the record filled in: "Deducted tax of three hundred gold coins, entered into the Holy Maiden's convent."

And to quell the fear of devaluation of the Holy Certificate, Seldon personally presided over the opening of the Duke's underground main vault.

A thousand citizens and believers were gathered to witness the moment of trust.

But when the searchlight pierced the darkness, the stone chamber was empty, only a few starved rat carcasses scattered on the ground.

"How could this be..." The smile on Seldon's face froze, as if someone had publicly plunged him into ice water.

His mind went blank, yet his ears buzzed, as if all the sound of the world was fading away.

Chapter 843: The Rapid Collapse of the Holy Eastern Empire (Part 3)

Bishop Salomon just looked at him, slowly revealing a gentle yet distant smile, as if observing prey that finally realized it had no way out.

The Holy Certificate completely collapsed on the same day.

Without the backing of gold, those counterfeit coins adorned with thorn patterns became worthless.

In the morning, they could still buy an apple, by noon just a grape, and by evening, too stiff even to wipe one's behind.

Civilians piled up mountains of money in the streets, setting fire to these holy tokens for warmth.

The firelight reflected on gaunt and numb faces.

Beyond the disappearance of money, the greater horror was the absence of food—under the manipulation of the deceased old Duke, sunken ships in the canal severed the western grain route.

The grain stores, opened for public display, contained nothing but sand mixed with moldy husks, most of the grain had been taken by the Church Court.

Bark was chewed bare, rats swallowed alive, hunger teaching people again to see kin as food.

Amidst this despair, Archbishop Salomon issued the "Great Purification Decree".

He did not speak of when food would arrive, only offered an explanation enough to grasp for the desperate: the food had not vanished, it had been stolen.

"Why don't we have bread? Because witches stole it with black magic."

"Why does plague run rampant? Because heretics hide among us, blaspheming God."

This logic was simple and required no evidence.

The hungry did not need truth, only an enemy upon whom to unleash their fury.

A black iron box, called the Truth Box, soon appeared in front of the church.

Rules written on a wooden sign were straightforward and cruel: reporting a hidden heretic verified by the Judicial Court would earn five pounds of flour.

Hunger shattered the last fragments of humanity overnight.

For a child's bowl of porridge, a wife accused her husband of hoarding gold coins for devil worship.

Neighbors reported mid-night lit candles across the street as witchcraft.

Some even pointed to their elderly mother, crying that her sleep-talking was possession by evil spirits.

Every day, the inquisitor in red robes bore thick stacks of denunciations, kicking in doors as if ordering food.

Arrests no longer aimed at trials, but served as outlets for the hungry mob's savagery.

The number of stakes for burning grew.

The first to burn were not the poor, but those who still dared think.

Scholars, scribes, former officials, who, for their literacy, questioning golden broth's content, or attempting to document events, were labeled faith-shaking tumors.

Next came the old wealthy merchants, their properties confiscated and themselves dragged to the flames.

Centers of public square stakes increased from ten to fifty, never ceasing, night or day.

The black, foul smoke of burning corpses mingling with the sweet, thick aroma of golden broth from charity kiosks, blanketed the whole city.

The golden broth from charity kiosks was holy water bestowed by the Church Court.

Salomon, standing atop a high platform, overlooked the emaciated figures in the square, voice merciful:
"Hunger is a lie of the flesh, proof of spiritual poverty, come, partake of the golden gift."

Huge copper cauldrons fumed, golden broth boiling.

The starving rushed to drink.

Soon, they no longer felt hunger, their faces flushing with a sickly blush.

They danced and cheered around the stakes, as if celebrating a festival.

Flames lit up their emaciated yet smiling faces, illuminating the city's graveyard.

Inside the Duke's mansion, Seldon locked himself in the study.

Outside, the cries for witch hunts, inside, dead silence.

Seated at the table, he tightly clutched the key to the underground treasury.

He could not comprehend, millions in gold coins cannot disappear into thin air.

"An insider? Impossible, emptying the treasury would need hundreds of carriages, too noisy."

His father's image flashed in his mind, instantly dismissed.

"The old man was too sick to leave bed, too breathless to speak, how could he pull this off under my nose?"

"Was it the Church Court? Surely Salomon, dealing with me on one hand, secretly tunneled to transport the money, then pinned the blame on me."

The conclusion formed; this was a case of the Church's black-on-black crime.

In desperation, an absurd thought struck him: as long as he held the Duke's mansion, waited for the Northern Territory to march south... Louis wouldn't miss this chance.

He was still an indispensable chip.

Yet Salomon merely cut the Duke's mansion's water and supply.

The Holy Hall Knights shouted from street corners: "Seldon eats roast meat inside while you eat dirt outside."

On the tenth night, Seldon was still in his bedroom polishing his sword, preparing to deliver another speech.

The door was smashed open, not by a mob, but by the family knight order.

With sunken eyes, green irises, hunger drool at the corners of their mouths.

The leading Knight Captain dropped the sword, holding only a bone-cleaver.

"My lord," his voice hoarse, "we had no choice, it has been half a month without food."

Before Seldon could argue, he was pinned down, silk nightgown torn, fake ring severed with the finger.

He was dragged through the long corridor, tossed into the jubilant crowd outside the Duke's mansion.

In the square, the mob chanting like a tsunami after drinking golden broth.

"Heretic!"

"He's the one who stole our grain!"

Seldon was hoisted upside down on the tallest stake.

As the flames devoured him, understanding dawned on what he had lost, and what he never truly possessed.

Chapter 844: The Rapid Collapse of the Holy Eastern Empire (4)

"Ahhhhh!"

The fierce burning sensation swept through his entire body.

Through the distorted flames, he saw the cold silhouette of Solomon atop the bell tower, and also the grotesque smiles of the nobility below who once toasted to him.

The screams continued for ten minutes.

In the end, only a charred, curled-up corpse remained.

.....

The night had completely enveloped St. Peter's Cathedral.

At the very top of the bell tower, there was no wind, only a suffocating stillness.

Solomon stood alone on the edge of the terrace, without any railing beneath his feet.

The entire Southeast capital stretched out beneath him like a painting recolored by flames.

Neighborhoods lit up one by one with orange-red light, the flames of the stakes flickering, and the screams were diluted by the height, leaving only a vague vibration, as if the earth were softly groaning.

Solomon did not feel cruelty, nor pleasure.

He knew someone was scheming behind the scenes, but he didn't care. In fact, he thought it might be good for this land.

"Too many weeds." His thoughts were calm and coherent, like reviewing a gardening task.

"The dragon's leftover bloodline, the old nobility's rotten honor, and mortals' obsession with self and desire... they entangle this land like thorns, vying for the nutrients that should belong to the Lord."

"This is the root of suffering. Because there is self, there are differences, and because there are differences, there is inequality."

He slowly raised his right hand.

In his palm lay a dragon scale amulet taken from the old nobility's secret chamber.

The amulet had been polished smooth by time, the edges of the scales glowing with a dark red sheen, carrying the residual warmth of a thousand years old Dragon Ancestor Faith.

It once symbolized lineage, power, and the chosen qualification.

Solomon looked down at it without hatred, only a cold indifference assessing a flawed item.

"The Dragon Ancestor... was arrogant. It allowed some people to be born with Fighting Energy, others with surnames and territories. It divided the world into strong and weak, noble and base.

This disparity is inherently unclean, and when everyone's foreheads are pressed to the earth, no one is nobler than another.

To achieve true equality, everyone must first be made to obey, without need for thought or judgment, only to listen to the voice of the Lord.

When the masses operate around the queen bee, there will be no more disputes in this world."

"Crack." His fingers suddenly tightened.

The dragon scale amulet, once regarded as a sacred relic, was crushed into fine golden powder.

The dust slipped through his fingers, carried away by the night wind, scattering over the burning city.

"Under the shade of the Golden Feather Flower, no bloodline is needed. As long as they drink the golden liquid, beggars can ascend, and nobles will go mad. In the upcoming Divine Country, all things will be equal."

Solomon lowered his head, looking toward the square in front of the distant cathedral.

The hungry crowd knelt on the stone steps, faces upturned, cracked mouths open, waiting for the next pot of golden soup.

Then Solomon turned around and walked back to the depths of the bell tower's secret chamber.

The stone door closed silently, sealing off the flames and clamor outside.

In the center of the secret chamber, a Golden Feather Flower seedling grew in dark red soil.

The seedling's leaves were semi-transparent, with veins flowing thin golden light. Each pulsation was accompanied by a faint yet steady pulse.

Solomon knelt before the seedling, his forehead touching the ground in a gesture of reverence.

"The old roots have rotted, the new soil is prepared, great Lord... descend upon us..."

After the prayer, he slowly stood up.

As he straightened his body, the skin on his neck wriggled slightly, as if something small was crawling beneath.

His gaze briefly lost focus, a moment of blankness, as if the signal was interrupted for a second.

In the next moment, the blankness vanished, replaced by familiar wise coldness.

Solomon adjusted the sleeves of the cardinal's robe and turned to leave the secret chamber.

Outside the bell tower, the flames continued to burn.

Chapter 845: That Demon Named Louis

A few years ago, on a sunny afternoon, but for the town of White Stone, it was the beginning of a long night.

It wasn't a large-scale army siege; it was a missionary corps dressed in white robes, including a hundred fully armed knights of the faith.

They arrived at the ancient stone shrine dedicated to the Dragon Ancestor in the town center.

This was the spiritual sustenance for generations of townspeople, as the old priest Cohen was telling the children stories of the dragon knights.

Bishop of the Golden Feather Flower smiled as he approached and spoke in a tone full of pity and compassion: "Poor children, you have been blinded by the beast's lies for too long. The dragon is a greedy reptile, and the Golden Feather Flower is the only truth."

The old priest Cohen raised his magic staff in anger to resist: "False gods are not welcome here!"

The bishop merely sighed: "Heretic, your soul is already rotten and needs fire to purify it."

The knights behind drew their swords and rushed forward.

The old priest's head was severed, and his blood sprayed onto the stone statue of the Dragon Ancestor.

Immediately, the stone shrine was toppled, and the knights smashed every dragon-engraved slab.

They planted a golden thorn flag among the ruins, declaring that this place henceforth belonged to the throne of God.

That night, the townspeople wanted to resist but were suppressed and massacred by the knights, who then took control of the water source and granaries.

The former shrine of the Dragon Ancestor was rebuilt into a magnificent Golden Feather Cathedral, and the town began to change.

The Church Court didn't plunder directly; they invented a new term, holy quota.

The bishop gently said, "The land was created by God, and the sunlight was bestowed by God. The grains grown by the farmers should be offered, half of the fullest, as rent to God."

"But we'll starve to death!" someone shouted.

The bishop showed a sad expression: "That's because you are not devout enough. Hunger is the practice of the flesh; only by offering more will God grant abundance."

Thus the warehouse was taken over, and every sack of flour leaving storage had to bear the Church Court's red stamp.

The fur caught by the hunter had to be offered first to the church, and the cloth woven by the farmer's wife had to be made into robes for the clerics first.

The first intense resistance erupted logically.

The town's strongest blacksmith, Baron, went mad when he saw his pregnant wife fainting from hunger.

He picked up his blacksmithing hammer and rushed to the church doors.

"Give our food back!" he roared, followed by dozens of townspeople with pitchforks.

Of course, these townspeople could not be a match for the knights, but the blacksmith was not killed on the spot.

The bishop said, "He is possessed by a demon; we need to exorcise him."

The next day, the blacksmith was hanged alive on the bell hammer of the clock tower.

Every time the bell rang, the huge copper hammer would strike his spine

"Dong—Crack." accompanied by the blacksmith's shrieks.

The whole town was forced to watch this exorcism ceremony in the square.

The screams continued for a whole day until they became intermittent moans, finally fading into silence.

The bishop prayed under the platform: "Look, pain has cleansed his sins; he is finally quiet, and God forgives him."

From that day on, the light in the townspeople's eyes was extinguished, leaving only fear.

As the resisters were eliminated one by one in the name of heresy, White Stone Town grew quieter.

For example, the owner of the grocery store, who hid a bag of beans under the bed, was reported by a neighbor because the informer could get half a bowl of flour.

The knights did not rudely arrest people; they politely knocked on the door: "You have hidden God's property, which is disrespectful to God."

That night, the entire family of the grocery store was taken to the church's basement for contemplation, never to be seen again.

Thus hunger became the sole ruler.

The people in the town stopped discussing right or wrong, only where to find something to eat.

The bark was gnawed off, edible earth was dug out, and people became inhuman, like wolves maddened by hunger.

When despair reached its peak, when all dignity had been worn down by hunger, the Church Court presented the final remedy.

A large pot was set up in the square.

The bishop spread his arms wide: "God cannot bear to see His people suffer, behold this golden soup, a blessing sent from the Holy City, flowing with gold and honey."

Initially, no one dared to drink it, but hunger is undefeatable; the first vagrant crawled over, took a sip, and his eyes lit up.

He no longer trembled, no longer felt cold, and a warmth and smile never before seen appeared on his face.

"Not hungry... really not hungry!" He knelt on the ground, kissing the bishop's shoe tips, "Praise God!"

People's psychological defenses crumbled, and from that day onward, White Stone Town was utterly dead, and those who drank the soup became docile livestock.

They no longer complained about taxes, no longer yearned for the Dragon Ancestor, and didn't even care about their own children.

Their only purpose in life every day was to wait for the meal bell to ring.

The white church, like a giant blood-sucking spider, perched on the town's carcass, drained the last drop of blood, yet the corpses were grateful.

.....

Hans looked out through the dust-covered window of the mill.

The street was crowded with people, yet there was no conversation, no quarrels, not even footsteps sounded real.

They lined up, holding broken bowls, waiting for the golden soup.

The plump aunt who could scold half the street a few years ago stood in line. At this moment, her eyes were cloudy, with a layer of gray-gold luster, her pupils dilated, like a fish dead for several days.

The cleric ladled soup into her bowl.

She immediately devoured it; the soup dribbled down her mouth, even dripping onto her collar, and she didn't even wipe it off.

Chapter 846: That Demon Named Louis (Part 2)

Hans was also in the line, his back hunched into a bow, eyes vacant, perfectly mimicking those around him.

When the ladle of sweetly scented thick soup was poured into his battered bowl, he clenched his fingers abruptly, like an animal guarding its food.

The priest gave him a glance and, satisfied, looked away.

But Hans didn't drink it. He carefully returned to the dead-end alley behind the mill and poured the golden soup into an abandoned rat hole.

A rat emerged from the hole and took a lick.

At first, it shook frantically, its eyes shining as if drunk, spinning in place before it froze, limbs straightened, unmoving.

Hans stared at the puddle of golden muck, cold sweat trickling down his spine.

.....

Deep into the night, in the mill's basement.

The massive stone millstone turned slowly overhead, emitting a low, rhythmic rumble, like a slumbering beast.

The search team pried open the floor, overturned barrels, but found nothing, and after a few times, they stopped coming.

Hans, however, knew its secret—he had carved a hollow space at the bottom of the two-ton millstone in the clumsiest way possible.

There, he hid his last half-bag of coarse wheat and a few pieces of dried salted meat, as hard as rocks.

Hans reached into the lining of his boot and found the thin, rough token of the dragon scale.

It was a low-quality token he picked up many years ago when he was an Apprentice Knight with the Imperial Border Army.

The metal was icy, yet it calmed his heart.

"The Dragon Ancestor taught people to stand with strength," he whispered in his mind, "not by drinking soup."

To survive, he began calculating each bite of food like a beast.

He ate only a small handful of raw wheat each day, chewing it slowly in his mouth until it turned pale and bitter before swallowing it with saliva.

To avoid letting anyone smell the wheat scent on his breath, he would deliberately chew a few bitter tobacco leaves to mask the flavor.

He hadn't even ruled out the idea of escape.

In the dead of the night, Hans would sit on the steps behind the mill's back door, gazing at the dirt road leading out of town.

As long as he crossed the hills behind Whitestone Town and walked for two more days, he could leave the direct control area of the Church Court, or so the rumors said.

But he couldn't take that road; the road out of town had long been sealed shut.

Patrol teams bearing the Holy Emblem, ostensibly there to prevent heretics from escaping, would actually stop anyone who dared take a step out of town without a chance to explain.

Moreover, his body, marred by old injuries from years of grinding work, cut into his bones like a dull knife on rainy days.

Relying on that little bit of raw wheat every day, he could barely gather the strength for a day's walk, let alone cross mountains and rivers.

Even more frightening was that not all who managed to escape stayed gone.

Some were caught and brought back, hung up at the town entrance as a spectacle.

Some were allowed to repent and were dragged off to drink a whole bucket of golden soup.

The next day, they stood at the front of the line, chanting hymns with euphoric expressions, pointing at their neighbors' doors, saying, "They didn't pray last night."

There's no escape.

He withdrew his gaze, shut the mill door, and hid himself again within the millstone's rumble.

As long as that little bit of grain remained undiscovered, he could continue to live— though it would merely be existing.

Surviving by playing the fool, by the mill, and by the grain he had secretly hidden away, enduring day by day.

But suddenly, one day, a turning point came.

In the thin mist that had not yet fully dispersed, the town entrance, outside the mill, the church walls, and the market stalls were all plastered with crimson parchment.

The images on the paper were extremely exaggerated, even carrying a crude and malicious childlike flair.

The Red Tide Lord from the north was depicted as an upright beast with curved ram horns on his head, beast-like fangs in his mouth, and eyes burning with black flames.

He sat in an iron chariot breathing fire, its iron wheels rolling over wheat fields, over churches, over twisted human forms.

Old Hans stood at the mill's entrance, looking at the picture, and his stomach churned.

By the time the morning bell tolled, the square in front of the church was already packed with people.

The old priest, who usually prayed in whispers and spoke slowly, was nowhere to be seen.

In his place stood a stranger dressed in a crimson robe.

On his chest hung a metallic emblem of judgment, reflecting a cold light in the sun.

"The mechanical demons from the north are here!" The voice was amplified by an alchemy amplification array, "They don't grow crops; they only eat human flesh!"

The crowd instinctively tensed, a child cried out in fear, quickly silenced by its mother covering its mouth tightly.

"Anyone who believes the northern lies is a hound of the demons!" The inquisitor raised his hand sharply, the crimson robe sleeves flapping in the wind, "Only God can save you! God will lead you to resist them! Resist these demons!"

The moment the words fell, the square fell into dead silence—after years of oppression, no one dared speak.

Hans stood on the edge of the crowd, chills running down his spine.

.....

And so, from that day forth, the Church Court began leading them to build defensive fortifications in preparation for the Red Tide Army that was marching south.

The first to be stationed were dozens of Thorn Knights.

The warhorses looked as though they had been skinned entirely, their dark red muscles exposed to the air, still twitching slightly.

The knights atop their backs wore heavy armor, from which dark red thorns emerged from the seams, piercing into their necks and jaws, rising and falling with each breath.

A townsman accidentally blocked the road, possibly because too much gold water had dulled his reactions.

A Thorn Knight didn't even rein in his horse; its chest suddenly surged forward in a violent charge.

Chapter 847: That Devil Named Louis (Part 3)

The man was sent flying on impact, the sound of shattering bones sharp and clear, and once he hit the ground, he never got up again.

The Knight did not look back.

The column kept moving, hooves trampling through blood as if over a puddle of water.

Hans had once served in the Border Defense Army and had seen real elite Cavalry, but compared to these terrifying Knights, they were nothing.

This kind of unit was not meant to suppress riots; it was meant to empty out a city.

The townsfolk stood along the road, every head bowed, as if afraid that thorn-like gaze would sweep over them.

The priest quickly gave the order: tear down the houses.

The houses beside the mill were marked, roof beams hacked through, walls shoved over; stones were pried out one by one and piled by the roadside as materials to build a cheval-de-frise wall...

Hans stood at the mill door, watching the familiar street have its bones peeled out bit by bit.

The Blacksmith's son was hauling stone too.

The boy was only sixteen, thickset, and before the Church came he always laughed loudly.

Now he was barefoot, shouldering a block of cut stone nearly half a man's height, shuffling forward step by step.

Suddenly his foot slipped, the stone tipped, and crashed down.

Hans clapped a hand over his mouth almost on instinct.

But the boy just lowered his head and glanced at his own foot, smashed to pulp.

The bone was a blinding white, flesh stuck to the flagstones.

There was no expression on his face at all; he didn't even frown.

Then another Thorn Knight walked over and, without hesitation, drove the Longsword in from the side, cleanly and neatly piercing the boy's heart.

The boy fell with his eyes still staring, empty, as if even in death he hadn't realized what had happened.

The Knight waved his hand.

A few townsfolk with the same ashen eyes came over, dragged the corpse away, and threw it into that writhing pit of bramble roots outside the town.

Dark red tendrils surged up from deep in the soil like an Insect Swarm that had scented blood, coiling around the corpse's limbs and torso.

The skin collapsed the instant it touched them, blood and flesh drawn out with a fine, sticky sound.

That body shriveled at a speed visible to the naked eye; in less than a moment, all that remained was a white skeletal outline wrapped in thorns.

Hans saw those brambles, once they had drunk their fill of flesh and blood, turn a deeper, heavier shade, strange patterns crawling across them.

A few thick roots rapidly extended outward, weaving into a barbed mesh along the pit wall, like a naturally grown cheval-de-frise.

Others curled and twisted together, finally hardening into sharp thorn stakes, which the Thorn Knights pulled up and planted between the road and the trench as new defensive obstacles.

That corpse, along with the life he'd lived, took less than a quarter of an hour to be completely converted into part of the fortifications.

The brambles in the pit slowly contracted, writhing in what looked like satisfaction, as if waiting for the next offering.

Through the whole process, no one screamed; it was quiet as the grave.

In the last few days, the bell in the square was rung.

Its rhythm was strange, neither fast nor slow, yet it made hearts clench.

At the sound of the bell, people came out of their houses one after another, their movements so uniform it was as if unseen strings were pulling them.

Hans blended into the crowd and saw the priest handing things out.

Not swords, not spears, but bundles of alchemy explosives.

The muddy ground north of town was dug up, opening a row upon row of shallow pits, only waist-deep on a grown man.

The priest ordered those numbed parents to put their own children into the pits.

Black explosive boxes were stuffed into the children's hands, their fuses tied to thorn-lines and buried in the earth.

Hans saw Amy.

The little girl who had always been the quickest to cry now had half her body buried in the cold soil, clutching explosives in her arms.

She wasn't crying, and she didn't move; her gray-gold eyes were wide open, staring straight toward the north.

The red-robed priest walked back and forth among the children like he was inspecting crops.

The priest told them these were holy fireworks, and that if they ran toward the Red Tide's iron wagons holding them, they would get to see angels.

On the last morning, Hans was still alive.

Not because he was lucky, but because he was too old; he was assigned to haul the so-called holy candles—those heavy Alchemy Explosive Packages.

He watched batch after batch of neighbors, drenched in holy water, driven into the trenches at the northern edge of town.

Hans knelt in the mud, hands trembling, and lifted his head to look north.

On the horizon, a black line was pushing closer.

That was the army of the Red Tide.

In that moment, he suddenly realized he was no longer afraid of the Lord of the North who had been painted as a monster.

Tears ran down his face as he uttered, in his heart, the most venomous yet most sincere prayer of his life: "That devil called Louis... I beg you, even if you kill me too.

Please, kill every last one of these animals."

Chapter 848: The Infuriating Trap

The morning fog pressed down outside the town of White Stone, the Church Court's line of defense silent and still, the entire battlefield resembling a swamp made of piled bodies, with a quiet that chilled the heart.

At the top of the mill, there was a long-forgotten chimney vent.

It was a safety structure from an old era, designed to prevent flour dust explosions, now long devoid of purpose.

The inner walls of the flue were thick with accumulated black soot and moldy flour grime, the color like festering scabs.

Old Hans was stuck in this narrow flue.

This was a place the Church Court's search parties would never glance twice at.

First, there was the smell, the sourness of rotting grains fermenting, the stench of dead rats, grease and soot mixed into a nauseating reek, perfectly masking the scent of living beings.

Even the most sensitive-nosed hounds would wrinkle their noses and turn away upon catching this scent.

Just to be safe, Hans covered himself entirely in soot and waste oil, leaving only his eyes exposed.

Through a barely discernible crack in the chimney, he looked out at the wasteland beyond the town, wanting to see for himself the town's fate, no matter what it might be...

At this moment, Old Hans's body was trembling, as he was witnessing Hell.

To the north of the town, in that muddy expanse, the massive line of flesh and blood was completed by defensive structures formed from various thorns.

Several hundred other children were neatly buried in the soil, some from the town, others from whereabouts unknown.

The spacing was deliberately maintained at even strides, arranged almost reverently.

Only their upper bodies were exposed, like crops waiting to be harvested, or like some carefully arranged sacrificial offerings.

Hans instinctively began to count, but quickly gave up.

His gaze began to subconsciously search for familiar faces.

The blacksmith's young son, the baker's daughter, the chubby neighbor aunt's grandson.

One by one, names surfaced in his mind, kids he'd watched grow up, their past smiles still vivid, and yet now they were turned into traps, long stripped of their own consciousness.

The children clutched black alchemy explosive packages in their arms.

Those packages were too large for them, and some kids had to clasp them tightly with both arms.

Rough fuse wires extended from the explosives, collectively buried by the Church Court's craftsmen into the soil behind, resembling ugly, cruel umbilical cords.

The Church Court knew very well about Louis and his army's characteristics; war chariots could crush Thorn Knights, ignore mobs, and answer any threat with artillery fire.

But they could never open fire on a whole line of children.

If explosives were just buried underground, the Red Tide had other solutions; if replaced with adult believers, the Red Tide would unhesitatingly eliminate the target.

Only by placing the explosives in the children's arms and tying the fuses to their heartbeats would they forcefully turn the battlefield from a military issue into a moral dilemma.

The children did not cry or make a fuss, not even trembling in the cold wind.

Each pair of eyes widened, their pupils displaying a murky gray-gold, unfocused, gazing blankly northward.

"Animals..."

Hans bit hard into his own hand, teeth sinking into flesh.

But he dared not make a sound, only allowing tears to silently stream down, washing away the soot on his face, leaving pale streaks on his skin.

Beasts cloaked in human skin.

They used children as shields, as landmines, as roadblocks to force Red Tide tanks to halt.

Suddenly, the earth began to tremble.

A black line slowly appeared on the northern horizon.

At first, it was just an outline, then gradually divided into colossal steel beasts.

They were the vanguard tank group of the Red Tide.

Their tracks ground against the earth, emitting a deep, rhythmic rumble, like the heartbeat of an ancient beast, one beat after another.

Hans watched those cold steel figures, a nearly tearing contradiction surging within his heart.

He'd heard from northern minstrels and Church Court propaganda about the immense power of these things, perhaps capable of defeating those Church Court beasts; he hoped they would.

But as soon as they opened fire, the children on this land would be instantly reduced to flesh and blood fragments.

And if they didn't open fire, merely approaching would ignite the fuses, and the vehicles would be blown to pieces.

The Church Court was gambling, betting that the Northern Territory Lord named Louis still retained human compassion.

Indeed, the Red Tide's army halted, only a few hundred meters away from the children.

Hans closed his eyes, unable to bear watching any longer: "It's over... all over."

.....

Red Tide's Second Corps Deputy Corps Commander Vance, behind the war chariot, unconsciously found his breathing growing shallow.

Through the lens, the forward position was cut by the morning mist into slices of gray and white jigsaw puzzles,

The Church Court had transformed the whole land into a living trap.

The muddy ground was filled with cheval de frises woven from dark red thorns.

Those thorns were not dead plants, but slowly writhing, their surfaces bristling with barbs, like forcibly straightened, hardened blood vessels.

Among the thorns were stakes soaked in alchemical liquid, which upon being pressed by heavy objects, would automatically tighten, locking the tracks and tripping up the warhorses.

Further back was a layer of creeping gray-white mist adhering to the ground.

That was not naturally occurring fog but a low-altitude toxic mist mixed with hallucinogenic pollen and anesthetic agents.

Even fully armored knights, upon inhaling a few breaths, would become disoriented and lose the sense of time, turning into living targets.

Most terrifying was their path of advance, a line of children with only their upper bodies exposed.

Planted in the mud like stakes, they hugged black alchemical explosives in their arms.

Chapter 849: An Infuriating Trap (Part 2)

A coarse fuse extended from the shell of the explosive, converging on the ground behind, forming a unified whole with thorns, blast-proof piles, and fog zones, like a meticulously woven trap waiting for them to enter.

Vance's palms were sweaty; he saw not an enemy array, but an entire defense system built around children.

The bodies of those children were frail, their faces youthful yet gaunt.

Each of their eyes was open, gray-golden pupils appearing unusually murky in the mist.

Occasionally, one would blink, but it was mechanical, like broken gears idling.

In that moment, Vance's teeth made a slight yet piercing sound as they clenched; he was furious to the extreme.

He had seen the most tragic piles of corpses in the snowy fields of the Northern Territory and had personally ordered artillery strikes on enemy formations, causing countless casualties.

But all that happened within the rules of war, while this scene before him wasn't even worthy of being called war.

It was sacrilege, the most complete trampling on humanity.

Vance's Adam's apple rolled violently once.

"Sir... let's find another way around." His voice trembled, not out of weakness, but suppressed to the extreme anger, "Seven hundred meters away. But if the tanks keep advancing..."

As he said this, his gaze never left the binoculars.

"Those are hundreds of children." Vance almost squeezed out the words through clenched teeth, "In the eyes of the heretics, they're not even considered human, but to our knights..."

Before he finished his sentence, the air around the command car seemed to freeze.

The knights of the Red Tide stood between the armored vehicles and the tanks; no one spoke, but their thoughts were almost in unison.

The knights of the Red Tide could accept death, could accept sacrifice, could even accept failure.

But they could not accept children being used as weapons.

Vance finished the last sentence softly, his voice almost hoarse: "These lunatics... they don't even see those children as people."

Beside the command car, Legion Commander Gray spoke calmly, "Lord Louis expected something like this to happen long ago."

Gray turned, looking at the artillery position, and gave the order, "Special Shell No. 3, Frost Leaf Bullet, airburst fuse, height fifteen meters."

Vance was stunned for a moment and then his eyes lit up, standing at attention, he responded, "Understood."

Gray raised his hand, "Execute."

"Puff—Puff—Puff—" The position emitted a dull and restrained roar.

The shells left the chamber, tracing a gentle arc.

They didn't fall on the battlefield but exploded above the children's heads.

Dark blue cold mist suddenly blossomed in the air, like a torn night curtain, cluster after cluster, quickly spreading across the entire front.

The mist was so dense it couldn't dissolve, carrying the unique cold scent of the Northern Territory, the smell of mint and wormwood rapidly dispersing in the air.

"The effect is even faster than expected."

Vance lowered the binoculars, looking at the human bombs who had fallen into deep sleep, his expression complex.

This wasn't a new weapon; as early as the pioneering days of the Red Tide Territory, this blue liquid extracted from the Frost Leaf Vine was merely used as a simple sedative to suppress the rage instinct of the Fire-Scaled Viper.

But Lord Louis keenly perceived its strategic potential to stabilize magic power and cut off spiritual resonance.

Over the past decade, Alchemy Master Hillco had frequently complained about this formula.

As he grumbled, "Great alchemy should not be reduced to a potent sleeping potion," he was nevertheless forced to undergo more than a dozen technical iterations under the lord's strict orders.

From the initial prototype that could only daze a Furious Rabbit for a few seconds to later versions isolating the Nest's spiritual pollution, and finally to today's deep blue No. 5, which could instantly cool the neural centers of thousands through the respiratory system.

This isn't just a potion; it's the only antidote Lord Louis offered for this mad war.

Old Hans, hiding in the mill chimney, slowly opened his eyes.

He instinctively tensed his body, waiting for the anticipated explosion and screams.

But nothing happened.

After the cannonade, the world instead fell silent.

The blue mist, like a massive blanket, slowly descended, covering the entire contaminated land.

Hans saw the red-robed priest who had been holding the detonation rope abruptly stop moving.

His hand froze in the air, as if someone had removed all support.

The next second, the priest's eyes rolled back, and he toppled backward heavily into the mud.

And the children in front fell even faster, piece by piece.

Those human posts, upon contact with the blue mist for a few seconds, seemed to have been switched off.

The once stiff and upright bodies instantly lost strength, heads drooped to chests, and slender shoulders collapsed forward.

The black explosives fell from their arms, rolling into the muddy water.

Hans stared intently at the battlefield, his fingers digging into the brickwork of the flue.

He saw the children's backs gently heaving; they weren't dead, just asleep.

The deep blue mist quietly flowed over the battlefield, swallowing all sound, nearly halting the wind.

At that moment, the whole world seemed to have been put on pause.

Old Hans's chest inflated and deflated rapidly, a sensation akin to surviving a catastrophe.

"The children made it out alive..." he repeated the words over and over in his heart, as if confirming reality to himself.

The blue mist, like a layer of calming snow, covered over madness, even giving birth to the momentary absurd notion that perhaps this would all really end.

But such a thought lived for less than a single breath.

From deep within the mist, the ground suddenly began to tremble dully.

At first, it was a slight shake, akin to a massive creature turning underground.

But in just a few seconds, this tremor became endless thunder.

The echo of tens of thousands of iron boots simultaneously striking the earth.

Old Hans stared through the chimney cracks, pupils contracting sharply.

That heavy, deep blue cold mist was forcibly torn apart.

The Thorn Knights broke through the mist, surging in from all directions.

Their numbers were overwhelming, hundreds, perhaps thousands?

Forming dense phalanxes, they resembled a black tsunami advancing.

Every knight's armor seemed to have been re-sewn with living thorns, with dark red tendrils emerging from the joints, crawling along shoulders and spines, piercing into the flesh of the warhorses.

Those warhorses lacked skin, only covered in bright red textures of vine thorns, nostrils exhaling not white vapor but yellow smoke laced with a putrid moisture.

This massive army maintained a deathly silence, only the "creaking" of metal friction and root tendrils squeezing.

They advanced from all sides, even including that hypnotically induced children's minefield.

Those children still slept in the blue mist, heads resting in the muck, clutches of explosives scattered beside them.

Hans had thought the knights would bypass them or at least slow down.

But they didn't; the front-rank Thorn Knights didn't even lower their heads.

Their gaze fixated on the distant Red Tide tanks.

To them, the children beneath their feet weren't lives, not even obstacles.

"Squish—"

It was a chilling, muffled sound.

Like a ripe watermelon smashed by a hammer.

Red and white matter splattered onto the knight's greaves, quickly absorbed by the writhing roots, leaving not a trace.

Then the second, the third...

"Crunch, crunch, squish..."

Dense sounds of bones shattering, mixed with the rumble of marching, like an accompaniment from hell.

In just a few seconds, a blood-and-gore-filled red carpet had been created.

Hans's stomach violently churned, a metallic sweetness rising in his throat.

He bit his lip hard, blood flowing into his mouth until his lip was torn.

The mist continued flowing, the Thorn Knights treading on that layer of flesh-and-blood mire, moving faster, like a wall of despair covered in thorns, pressing towards the Red Tide's position from all directions.

Old Hans curled up in the chimney flue; he no longer wanted to pray, faced with such a spectacle, God was of no use.

He only wanted to see fire, the kind capable of burning all this sin to ashes, with the fiercest flames.

Chapter 850: A Battle of Over Ten Minutes

After the Frost Leaf Bullet was fired, the brief silence lasted only a few breaths.

Then the earth began to tremble, not from the front, but simultaneously from all around.

Deep in the woods, behind the ruins, from the opened cellar entrance, and even beneath the soil, came heavy and dense sounds.

Thorn Knights appeared from all directions, and an Iron Wall-like encirclement was completed.

The warhorses accelerated, each step causing mud and water to explode, rapidly closing the few hundred-meter distance.

Some knights could even leverage vines to climb the ruined walls, run against the nearly vertical surface, and redirect mid-air, pointing their lances at the Red Tide Battle Array.

These monstrous knights, their strength mostly close to High-tier Elite Knights, any one of them on a regular battlefield would be enough to tear open the line.

And now they appear in droves, spreading rapidly within view, with dark red figures moving simultaneously, like an unreasonable tide from all sides.

Yet, the Red Tide's phalanx showed no signs of commotion, not even any extra movements.

Second Legion Commander Gray stood beside the armored vehicle, his gaze sweeping calmly across the entire battlefield.

Upon confirming no new points of breakthrough, he raised his hand.

"Beep—!"

The sharp and clear whistle pierced through the noise of the battlefield.

The knight line began adjusting, a few fine lateral displacements.

The boots stepped into the muddy ground again, heels pressed firmly, and the Demon Marrow rifles were tightened, their pressure valves emitting a low hum.

Thorn Knights continued advancing, in their judgment, these were just weak prey.

Two hundred meters.

Gray's hand fell.

The first salvo sounded, the entire swathe of air simultaneously torn open.

"Boom! Tear——ah——"

A Thorn Knight mid-leap was struck.

Dozens of Armor-Piercing Bullets hit him almost simultaneously, entering at different angles through the seams of the armor.

Upon the first impact, the roots on the symbiotic armor immediately contracted inward, barely wrapping around the impact point.

But the second and third impacts followed closely.

Roots were torn, armor was lifted, and the impacts converged within the body.

That body in mid-air lost its integrity.

Limbs were shattered, flesh and blood scattered outward, broken armor tumbling and flying out, losing any form even before hitting the ground.

Immediately, the steam-powered Gatling guns on the war vehicles began operating.

Metal torrents swept across the forefront along the ground.

"Clatter—clatter—rat-tat-tat!"

The most fierce charging unit of knights hit the fire coverage area head-on.

Their speed was abruptly severed the moment they entered the kill zone.

Men and horses tangled in vines were shattered together, a mist of blood spread over the charge line.

The expected close-range clash didn't occur, nor did the sound of blades hitting armor.

Everything happened too quickly.

Those elite individuals close to Extraordinary Knights, before even reaching effective range, were blocked by stable and dense firepower, crushed within the rolling dust two hundred meters away.

Hans, atop the distant ruins, opened his mouth wide yet could emit no sound.

After a moment, his throat squeezed out a faint whisper: "It shouldn't be like this..."

He anticipated a fierce fight, blade clashes, people rolling and roaring in the mud.

But what lay before him was completely different from the battlefield in his memory, beyond understanding.

Amidst the gaps between smoke and fire, a few Thorn Knights still pierced through the barrage.

They moved through the shadows of the ruins, no longer an orderly charge, but driven by an almost instinctive stubbornness.

Collapsed walls became temporary cover, broken beams used as platforms, roots spread among the rubble, forcefully tearing open several pathways.

Dozens of dark red figures approached from various directions.

They no longer cared about the battle lines, nor tried to regroup their formations.

Their sole target remained the steel behemoths halted at the forefront.

A knight was the first to charge to the front side of a tank.

A deep, twisted roar squeezed from his throat, his lance held high, then fiercely thrust towards the structure outside the track.

At the moment of metal collision, sparks exploded.

The lance tip merely grazed a shallow white mark on the armor, numbing the knight's arm, yet unable to penetrate any layer of structure.

Another knight simultaneously leaped, attempting to climb the vehicle body.

Thorns grew madly from the gaps of the armor, barbs plunged into the steel plate, trying to entwine and lock.

Roots crawled along the welding seams upwards, as if searching for joints to gnaw.

The side-mounted submachine guns immediately opened fire.

A short tongue of flame sprayed close to the vehicle body, the nearby gunfire sounding exceptionally muffled.

The knight attempting to climb was hit in mid-air, crashing heavily to the ground. *freewebnovel.com*

Inside the driver's seat, the throttle was pressed down.

The engine's roar suddenly intensified, the tracks began turning, without any hesitation, directly rolling forward.

"Crack—splat—"

The sound of bones breaking was crushed by the thick steel.

Flesh lost shape under the weight, the roots not fully hardened were ground into the mud.

The mass of dozens of tons continued advancing forward, without pause.

Steel rolled over the blend of red and white flesh and dark red roots, the tracks re-engaged the ground without a trace of deviation.

On the other side, the coaxial machine guns swept across the remaining figures.

Bullets swept across the ground, breaking roots, lifting armor.

Bodies losing support rolled and fell, immediately swallowed by the advancing steel.

The tank moved along the preplanned path.

It drove over a muddy patch repeatedly flattened, the once-struggling figures now unrecognizable.