

Winter 851

Chapter 851: Over Ten Minutes of Battle (Part 2)

The surface of the tracks was clean and cold, without any debris.

Behind it, the Red Tide Knights began to advance.

Their speed was not fast, yet they maintained a steady rhythm.

Scattered remnants of the Thorn Knights were still twitching; some were being dragged by roots trying to get up, while others attempted to support their bodies with broken weapons.

The Red Tide Knights did not stop; the longsword pressed down, directly piercing into the side of the neck and joint gaps.

Soon, the twitching on the ground came to a stop one after another.

After the Thorn Knights' figures disappeared one by one, the battlefield did not immediately quiet down.

In front of the town entrance, the defensive line formed by intertwining roots, bones, and soil was still active.

The living thorn wall stood at the road's end, almost as high as the city wall.

Dark red and black-brown stems layered upon one another, continuously fluctuating on the surface.

Those roots were not still, writhing slowly, like a mouth that had yet to close.

The tank tracks stopped at a safe distance without continuing to press forward.

The thorn wall sensed the approaching weight, its roots suddenly quickened.

Dense spines emerged from the surface, accompanied by a low friction sound, spraying outward.

The venom traced a brief path through the air before landing on the dirt, immediately corroding into a patch of black marks.

Gray gave a brief command: "Fire Lizard, advance."

The flamethrower tank slowly moved out of the lineup.

The vehicle was not tall, its shape low and heavy, with heat-resistant armor installed at the front.

The fuel tanks on both sides swayed slightly as it moved, the alchemical fuel inside continuously pressurized, emitting a subtle yet dangerous hum.

The nozzle lifted, flames spewed forth.

Bright orange flames drew a low, steady arc in the air, like a straightened fire snake, rushing toward the thorn wall along the ground.

This was not ordinary fire, composed of Fire-Scaled Viper oil, the fuel clung to the roots' surface the instant they made contact, rapidly spreading.

The flames did not get extinguished but continued to spread along the stems, penetrating inwardly along the texture.

The thorn wall contracted violently.

Following that, a sharp screech burst from inside the wall.

It was piercing and continuous, echoing at the town's entrance, instinctively tensing people's nerves.

Flames kept moving forward, sharply carbonizing the roots under high temperature, the outer layer cracked, and the inner moist tissues instantly evaporated.

The burning extended downward along the main roots, deep into the underground, igniting the buried flesh and nutrients along with it.

The thorn wall began to collapse, the originally towering structure losing its support within minutes, large sections peeling off the surface, turning into rolling ashes.

The ejected poisonous spines were burned into bent charcoal by the flames, breaking before they hit the ground.

The screeching gradually became intermittent and then completely vanished.

Only the low hum of burning flames remained.

The flamethrower tank stopped its spraying, retreated to the line.

The heatwave slowly dispersed, leaving only a burning wreckage ahead of the town entrance, ashes scattering in the wind.

Steam excavators moved forward thereafter.

A massive shovel lowered, its edge pressing into the ground, the engine roared louder, and the steel structure advanced.

The burning wreckage was easily pushed aside.

Roots and bones that once devoured countless bodies and formed the core of the defense line were treated as ordinary obstacles, shoveled up, removed, piled to the sides of the road.

In no time, a path leading to the town center was cleared.

Steel continued advancing, leaving behind only a newly opened avenue after the flames extinguished.

The battle the small town had prepared for half a month ended in just ten minutes.

Flames at the town's entrance were still smoldering, burned thorns kept collapsing, making slight sizzling sounds.

Meanwhile, logistic convoys began to enter.

Several field kitchen trucks, boxy in shape with tall chimneys, rolled along the newly cleared road and into the square ruins.

After coming to a stop, the metal structures unfolded outward, side panels lowered, revealing neatly arranged steam boxes and pressure cookers inside.

"Hiss—" White steam blasted out.

A rich and genuine aroma of food exploded in the air, like an unreasonable wind, instantly dispelling the bloody smell and the lingering sweet and strange odor.

The medical health camp on the other side unfolded simultaneously.

Temporary tents erected swiftly, security lines drawn.

Soldiers set up makeshift spray disinfection gates at the square's edge.

Dazed residents from the battlefield were carried over.

The nozzles opened, warm water mixed with medicine fell from above, washing away dirt, bloodstains, and the lingering gold soup from their bodies.

Then came injections, bandaging, warmth preservation, everything proceeded following the Red Tide Health Department's protocols, without unnecessary ceremonies.

And rescue operations in the muddy grounds to the north were ongoing simultaneously.

To prevent tools from injuring the children, soldiers discarded them, directly kneeling into the icy mud.

Hands in tactical gloves madly dug through the dirt.

"There's still air over here!"

"Medic! Quickly!"

"Life potion!"

The Frost Leaf Bullet indeed sent them into deep sleep, without causing an explosion.

But the Church Court buried these thinly dressed children in the permafrost for too long while setting up the defense line.

Deputy Corps Commander Vance personally pulled out the little girl named Amy from the mud.

Her lips were purple, limbs cold, her body hard as if lifeless, only a faint and rapid heartbeat proving she was still alive.

A medic immediately took over, wrapping her in a warming blanket, carried away.

Vance didn't stop, turned to continue digging.

When touching the adjacent boy, his movements slowed.

The boy still clutched explosives, his body completely stiff, stuck to the permafrost as if cast into the ground.

Vance turned to dig the next one, needing no further confirmation.

The count continued, children were pulled out of pits one by one.

One alive, three dead, one alive, two dead...

Out of nearly a thousand pits, less than half still breathed.

Old Hans crawled out from the mill's chimney, just landed, pressed against the wall by a team of Red Tide Knights clearing remaining threats.

"Don't move! Hands up!" The gun barrel pressed against his forehead.

Knight Ron roughly pried open his eyes, letting sunlight hit his pupils directly.

Those who drank gold soup had pupils diffused in a gray golden color, reacting to bright light.

However, Hans let out a short screech under the bright light, instinctively closing his eyes tightly, tears uncontrollably streaming, body shaking violently out of fear and cold.

Ron forcefully pinched a piece of rotten flesh on his arm.

"Ouch! It hurts!" Hans screamed, curling into a ball, "Don't kill me! Don't kill me!"

Ron froze for a moment.

He lowered his gun, removed his helmet, revealing a youthful and surprised face.

"Damn..." he murmured, "Captain! There's a living person here. I mean... a real person."

Nearby knights gathered around.

They stared at Hans, as if witnessing someone intact for the first time deep inside a fallen zone.

"Old man," Ron inquired curiously, "How did you hold out?"

Hans continued trembling but straightened his back, an instinct left from his days as an Apprentice Knight long ago.

He pulled out a small handful of raw wheat grains from his pocket, spreading his palm covered in black ash.

Ron did not ask further, reaching from his field bag, retrieving his ration pack, tearing open the oil paper.

A soft white loaf emerged.

"Take it." He stuffed the bread into Hans' hand.

Hans cradled that piece of bread, made of fine flour without any mixture.

He took a bite, long-lost wheat fragrance exploding in his mouth.

"Sob, sob..."

Holding the bread, he cried unabashedly before a group of young knights.

He sobbed, shoving it into his mouth desperately, choking as his eyes rolled back but refused to stop, fearing the bread might vanish the next second.

On the other side of the square, kitchen trucks' chimneys billowed white smoke.

Rows of awakened people wrapped in thick military blankets, holding stainless steel lunch boxes, mechanically drinking steaming hot vegetable and meat soup.

Hans sat on the ruins' stone steps.

He wiped his face dry, glanced at the half bread in hand, and then looked up towards the flag rising in the square center.

The emblem of the Sun gently unfolded amidst the smoke, underfoot the shattered Holy Emblem of the Church was trampled into the mud.

Chapter 852: Attack on the Golden Feather Flower Religious Authority Country

Louis woke up with a slight tremor, sat up from the bed, walked to the porthole, raised his hand to turn the shade open, and outside the thickened round porthole, the night had not yet faded.

The sea was as calm as if there were almost no waves, with only the occasional flying fish leaping from the water in the distance, leaving a fleeting silver line on the surface, quickly swallowed by the darkness.

The ship was sailing on a path away from the mainland battlefield.

The campaign of the Holy Eastern Empire no longer needed his personal oversight.

The frontline command had been entirely entrusted to Lambert and Gray.

The former was responsible for order and takeover, while the latter managed advancement and cleanup, each fulfilling their roles without overlap or need for repeated confirmation.

Louis stayed here because more important matters awaited him.

He withdrew his gaze, walked to the washstand, splashed his face with cold water, and his sleepiness quickly faded.

Louis raised his head and casually waved his hand in the air.

A pale blue light screen unfolded on his retina.

[Daily intelligence update completed]

[1: The First and Second Corps of the Red Tide completed their encirclement of the Holy Eastern Empire's capital late last night.]

Louis merely glanced over it: "As expected."

This piece of intelligence had almost no informational value for him.

The rhythm, advancement route, and nodes of the entire campaign were originally deduced by him and then handed over to Gray for execution.

If the Red Tide Regular Army, equipped with Demon Marrow rifles, steam tanks, and Magic Explosion Bullets, still encountered unexpected issues against a group of disorganized and poorly armed religious forces, it would only indicate a problem with the command system itself.

He was even more concerned about the efficiency of the subsequent takeover.

"Hurry up, save some lives," Louis murmured to himself.

The text on the light screen continued to scroll.

[2: The former imperial forces led by Kaelin heavily damaged the invading forces of the Jade Federation in the Battle of Sunset Canyon and subsequently launched a counterattack, with their vanguard currently advancing into the Gem Corridor within Federation territory.]

Louis's gaze halted, with a slight raise of his eyebrow.

When the Red Tide moved south with a clear target towards the Holy Eastern Empire, the shrewd merchant councilors of the Jade Federation evidently saw this as a rare window of opportunity. They believed that with just a little more push, they could take over that land along with its resources.

Yet, a skinny camel is still bigger than a horse; they underestimated Kaelin.

Louis exhaled lightly: "Greed indeed distorts judgment easily."

He had no intention of feeling sorry for the Federation's losses.

The bloodletting of both sides there conveniently gave Red Tide enough time to deal with more troublesome directions.

The light screen flashed slightly, refreshing to the next entry.

[3, Due to the front line collapse, the highest council of the Jade Federation panicked and passed a resolution unanimously last night, forcibly launching the Chimera Plan to prepare for deploying artificial dragon experimental units on local battlefields.]

Louis's breath noticeably paused: "Artificial... dragons?"

The term itself carried an inappropriately heavy weight.

Dragons had long disappeared from the continent's history for over a thousand years, leaving only the dragon remains at Gray Rock and incomplete legends.

Were the so-called artificial dragons an alchemical patchwork abomination, or had they unearthed some ancient ruin?

Louis couldn't immediately provide an answer, but a sense of crisis had clearly emerged.

If such a strategic unit were proven controllable, the existing power balance would be directly disrupted.

Whether the armored forces of Red Tide had sufficient means to counter it still needed verification.

"To remain unconquered under the Empire's shadow for a century, there must be evidence of a trump card."

Louis took a deep breath, temporarily suppressing the issue in his mind.

Wars had to be fought one at a time, and problems solved one by one.

He closed the intelligence interface, and the pale blue light screen dissipated accordingly.

Louis straightened the collar button, then pushed open the cabin door.

Outside, Weir stood guarding one side of the corridor like a statue.

The sea breeze flowed in from the ventilation vent, fluttering his cloak, but unable to shake his hand resting on the sword's hilt.

Upon seeing Louis come out, Weir immediately stood at attention, performing a standard and restrained knight's salute.

"Where are we, Weir?" Louis asked.

Weir turned then pointed into the distance.

Through the open cabin door, at the edge of the sea horizon, an unnatural golden halo appeared, like a boundary forcibly inserted between the sky and sea.

"Sir, the lookout tower has confirmed that it is their shield."

He paused for a moment, then added: "Ahead is the Golden Feather Flower Religious Authority Country."

Louis walked to the railing, placing his hands on the cold metal edge.

He looked at the continent's outline shrouded in the golden light curtain, feeling an aura not belonging to the living slowly seeping from beyond that light, even across the sea.

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Three steel giants arranged in a triangular formation steadily propelled forward.

When the bow of the Fernan broke the waves, there were no unnecessary splashes; the wave crests were directly crushed and slid along the armor shell to the sides.

The flagship Fernando was at the forefront, with the second ship, Unyielding, and the third ship, Thunderbolt, positioned left and right, maintaining a distance precise to the meter.

Behind them, thirty hunter-class destroyers and supply ships expanded in sequence, forming several stable lines of navigation, with radar and sonar continuously at work, like an invisible net, firmly enveloping the entire fleet.

And after spotting the continent, the voyage lasted not much longer before the color of the seawater began to change.

Even a newly recruited sailor on a supply ship, Billy, noticed something amiss. He held onto the railing, looking at the churning colors beneath the waves, unsure for a moment whether it was a lighting issue or if he was seeing things.

Chapter 853: Attack on the Golden Feather Flower Religious Authority Country (2)

"Do you see it... is the sea turning red?" His voice was somewhat tense, instinctively lowered, yet it still betrayed his unease.

At first, it was only the edges that turned red, as if something was slowly stirring it open.

Then that red color quickly deepened, becoming murky and thick, with the waves reflecting a dim shine.

A fishy-sweet smell began to mix in the air.

On the supply ship at the rear, a new sailor, Billy, gulped: "This smell... something's wrong, isn't it?"

Beside him, a weathered old sailor spat, reaching out to press the brim of his hat down: "What are you panicking for."

The old sailor squinted his eyes, watching the white flocculent objects gradually floating up on the sea surface, his tone somehow confident.

"Remember, lad. If something really happened, we'd have been ordered to turn back by now. The fleet still sailing forward means this thing..."

The old sailor grinned, showing his smoke-stained yellow teeth: "Can't stop steel."

Almost as soon as he finished speaking, two abnormal feedback signals appeared.

A deep and urgent alarm sounded along the pipes, echoing repeatedly within the ship's hull.

The white floating objects were no longer scattered.

They began to slowly gather, their outlines becoming clearer.

Transparent umbrella-shaped bodies stretched out underwater, each the size of a millstone, with highly acidic tissue enclosed beneath the membrane.

The tentacles dragged in the water, extending over tens of meters, like flexible yet deadly rigging, instinctively seeking targets to entangle.

It was a fusion of thorns and jellyfish, moving sluggishly yet densely enough to cause anxiety, like a closing minefield.

Even though Billy wasn't at the rear of the battlefield, the sheer number of monsters made his legs cramp.

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In the armored bridge of the battleship Fernando, General Commander Arwin stood calmly at the command seat, the area ahead almost completely occupied by monsters.

"Maintain course." His voice spread through the ship via speaking tubes, "No need to evade."

The bridge fell silent for a brief moment before the order was fully executed.

The spray pipes on both sides of the battleship were simultaneously activated.

The metal valves opened with a low echo, and a large amount of alchemical fuel was atomized under high pressure, spreading along the outside of the hull, then ignited.

"Whoosh—"

Flames ignited along the spray paths, with two hundred-meter-long fire walls rising simultaneously on both sides of the three warships.

Orange flames rolled against the steel hull, illuminating the surrounding sea.

The thorn jellyfish reacted instantly to the flame's contact.

The transparent umbrellas quickly contracted, the internal acid lost stability, then exploded and evaporated.

The tentacles curled and carbonized in the high heat, breaking off before they could entangle.

The three steel giants maintained their original speed, sailing straight through the flames.

The firewalls gradually extinguished behind the ships, leaving a charred pathway on the sea, the dark red water roiling without any living creatures surfacing again.

The mist ahead began to thin.

The view broadened again, revealing an unnatural outline slowly appearing on the horizon.

It was a white forest.

Hundreds of bio-ships lay quietly on the sea, not arranged neatly, yet possessing an unsettling sense of order.

Their hulls were not wooden but composed of a ghastly white, bone-like structure, covered in layers of eerie thorns, like faintly pulsing blood vessels.

Their sails were not made of cloth but vast white membranes spread out, resembling bat wings, pulled by thick, dark red thorns, fixed as masts onto the hulls.

There were no sailors bustling on the decks, replaced by rows of immobile figures.

Golden Feather Guardians, their lower bodies fused with the deck, bones intertwining with the boards, boundaries indistinct.

Their upper bodies retained a human shape, yet pale and rigid, like deliberately placed sculptures.

The roots extending from their feet directly pierced into the mothership, drawing nutrients and receiving commands.

As a white bone ship slowly adjusted its course, the rest of the fleet almost simultaneously reacted.

Hundreds of bio-ships turned in unison, moving so uniformly they seemed less like independent entities, more like extensions of some shared consciousness.

They began to accelerate, like a swarm of piranhas smelling blood, heading straight along the shortest path.

The destroyer at the forefront of the Red Tide fired its secondary guns first.

Shells tore through the air, accurately hitting the bow of a white bone ship.

The explosion tore apart the bone structure, fragments flying in all directions.

Yet the ship did not slow down.

The fractured part started to wriggle, and dark red thorns grew rapidly from the bone seams, pulling the shattered structure like sutures.

Within seconds, the hull was reassembled, its form twisted but sufficient to continue sailing.

The white bone ship rejoined the formation, as if nothing had happened.

Behind the binoculars, Louis watched the entire process calmly.

"Good regeneration speed." He put down the binoculars, his expression unchanged, "Tell Arwin to resolve it quickly."

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A Red Tide Knight rushed through the bridge, kneeling on one knee: "Commander Arwin, a message from Lord Louis."

Arwin's gaze returned from the sea.

The knight continued: "The lord says no need for probing, resolve it quickly, time is not on our side."

Arwin nodded, asking no more, lifting his hand from the armrest.

"Full rudder to port." The order was swiftly transmitted through the speaking tubes, "Speed, two knots."

The steering gear emitted a low, stable meshing sound, and the three battleships almost simultaneously began to turn.

Chapter 854: Assault on the Golden Feather Flower Religious Authority Country (Part 3)

The massive hull traced a smooth arc on the sea surface as the ship's side armor sliced through the waves, which quickly closed up behind it.

The formation completed without any hesitation.

When the fleet finished its turn, the broadside of the three battleships was fully deployed, aiming at the incoming column of the Bone Fleet.

The heavy turrets locked on in sequence, and the gun angles were swiftly adjusted.

"All crew, load high-explosive incendiary shells! If they can regenerate, then we'll burn them to ashes!"

The loading mechanism began to operate, sending the heavy shells into the chamber, with latches clicking shut one after another, like a series of steel joints being tightened.

The next moment, a salvo commenced.

Twenty-seven main guns roared simultaneously.

The tremendous recoil reverberated through the hull, causing the steel behemoth to visibly shift laterally on the sea, the deck vibrating slightly, with all fixed objects emitting brief metallic echoes.

"Boom—!!! Boom—!!!"

The air tore apart, and the flames from the gun barrels almost lit up the entire sea surface.

The first high-explosive incendiary shell fell into the center of the Bone Fleet.

The fireball expanded the moment it touched the sea, with the shock wave spreading in all directions, flattening the waves within a 300-meter radius, which then evaporated into a roiling white mist from the high temperature.

The so-called regenerating thorns failed to retain their form upon reaching the core blast area.

The ossified hulls were torn apart instantly, with the bonded guardians and spore launchers being swept into the flames, foregoing even the decomposition process.

The green body fluids barely splashed out before drying up rapidly in the high heat, turning to ash.

The second and third salvos followed in quick succession.

The entire charge line was repeatedly covered.

When the smoke and flames dispersed slightly, a huge gap had appeared in the once densely packed Bone Fleet.

All that remained on the sea were rolling debris and still burning fragments, resembling a violently plowed slaughterhouse.

Dozens of abnormally large Bone flagship-class ships still emerged from the edge of the blast zone.

Rough tentacles grew on their hulls, far more numerous than ordinary ships, with several bone spurs wrapped in dark red veins protruding from the bow, carrying a clear corrosive nature.

They did not slow down, instead accelerating amidst the chaos, like irrational beasts, charging straight at the side of the No. 2 ship, the Unyielding.

Their intent was clear, to board and tear open the steel plates, dragging the battlefield into melee range.

"Thud—!!!"

The collision sound was dull and piercing.

The bow of the Bone ship underwent a catastrophic fracture the moment it touched the steel.

The bone spurs snapped, and bone fragments scattered, with the entire hull bouncing back from the recoil.

The hardened steel plate of the Unyielding only bore a shallow scratch, not even damaging the structural layer.

The hull maintained its speed, and the Unyielding stayed on course, crushing forward with its massive steel body.

The rotating propeller stirred up a violent vortex underwater, dragging the Bone ship and the deformed creatures on deck under the hull.

Bones, tentacles, and still-struggling bodies were shredded, becoming a rapidly dispersing red and white mixture.

The battleship continued onward.

Just then, an abnormal vibration suddenly appeared on the hull, with alarms suddenly blaring inside the Thunderbolt's engine room.

"Speed down!"

The voice of the chief engineer came through the internal intercom, with a clear sense of urgency.

"The propeller's jammed!"

The sea surface churned.

Several massive shadows appeared from the depths, bringing up large splashes.

It was the deep-sea kraken parasitized by thorns.

Their size was akin to small islands, with gray-white skin surfaces covered in barbs, tentacles reaching out from the water, tightly coiling around the battleship's hull.

The strong acid secreted by the suckers created white smoke on the armor surface, corroding the anti-rust coating.

The massive force started pulling downward.

Elwyn's lips slightly lifted: "Do they think they've grabbed hold of a wooden ship? Want to drag us down? Their strength is not enough."

He raised his hand to give the order: "All ships, take note, launch Deep Water Shock Bombs, detonate!"

The moment the order was issued, the outer destroyers swiftly moved in.

Rows of deep water bombs were released, sinking into the water, trailing a series of short and sharp bubble tracks.

A few seconds later, a muffled vibration came from below.

It wasn't the roar of an explosion but the muffled thud of being crushed by water.

"Thud—thud—thud—"

The sound waves propagated along the seafloor, continuously overlapping, resembling slow and steady drumbeats.

The body of the deep-sea kraken suddenly stiffened, their exterior still intact, the skin even unmarked.

But their internal organs, nerves, and centers turned into unstructured pulp under the squeeze of the shock wave.

The massive corpses slowly floated to the surface, suckers opening and closing but unable to exert any more force.

Green body fluid continuously seeped from cracked parts, quickly spreading in the dark red sea.

The Thunderbolt's vibrations gradually subsided, and the propeller resumed its speed.

But the sea surface didn't fully quiet down.

Scattered Bone ships still floated outside the burn zone, some hulls torn apart, yet dragging forward with remaining roots.

There were also sea monsters not fully dead yet, thrashing in the water, tentacles twitching, trying to approach the fleet once more.

Elwyn didn't halt his orders: "Continue with the Magic Explosion Bullets."

The brief command was conveyed across all ships through the voice pipes.

The secondary gun chambers moved quickly, sending the alchemy shells, specially tailored for clearing abnormal targets, to the gun positions, with runes on the shell casings lighting up during loading and extinguishing upon locking.

The destroyers opened fire first.

Several Magic Explosion Bullets skimmed low over the sea, landing among the remaining Bone ships.

Magic power forcibly detonated at the impact point, forming a brief and violent vacuum area, followed by a delayed shock.

The remaining Bone hulls silently tore apart, thorny roots appearing as if ripped from the inside, their entire structure losing support, collapsing and sinking.

Several struggling sea monsters were affected.

Their shells weren't burned away, yet imbalance was evident the next second.

Nerve signals were disrupted by magic power, tentacles stiffening, movement completely losing coordination.

Subsequently, the second wave of Magic Burst struck down.

This time, the target was closer.

The explosions were completed beneath the water, with the impact amplified by the sea.

The still-breathing creatures were ripped open instantly, disintegrating internally without even a chance to roll.

Minutes later, only scattered remnants remained on the sea surface.

No regeneration, no repair.

All moving objects had been cleared.

Elwyn adjusted his military cap, his gaze sweeping over the floating remnants on the sea.

"Clear the propellers, full speed ahead."

Pausing for a moment, he added: "Report to Lord Louis, the door has been kicked open."

Chapter 855: The Eerie Island

Three Fernan-level battleships crushed over the remnants on the sea surface and continued to advance forward.

The main island was already in sight.

The entire island was enveloped in a layer of translucent golden light cocoon.

The light was not glaring, yet carried an oppressive aura that instinctively made one hold their breath.

Runes slowly flowed on the surface of the light curtain, the protection personally descended by God, at least it should be in the eyes of ordinary people.

Inside the bridge, Alwyn issued a probing order: "Fire a high-explosive shell."

The turret adjusted its angle, loading completed.

"Boom——!"

The shell exploded the instant it touched the light curtain.

Yet the flames spread along the barrier surface, the Shock Wave was completely absorbed, forming only a ripple on the golden light layer, like a pebble falling into the center of a lake.

The light curtain wasn't damaged; instead, it absorbed energy and became more radiant.

Louis stood by the side window and picked up the high-powered binoculars.

The sight pierced through the light curtain, revealing the island's true coastline.

Tens of thousands of white-robed believers densely knelt on the shore, from rock to tide line, layer upon layer.

Their lower bodies had already merged into the land, below the knee transformed into tree root-like golden veins, deeply embedded in the sand.

Hands raised high, heads leaned back, lips silently moving.

Each time the rhythm of the prayer fell, a faint golden light briefly brightened on the surface veins.

Life Force was drained away, along the roots into the earth, drawn by some force and ultimately infused into the light curtain above.

They were emaciated and hollow, yet maintained in a state of abnormal excitement by Golden Feather Flower, like kindling that wouldn't extinguish until exhausted.

Sacco, standing beside Louis, subconsciously gripped his handguard, his voice carrying a distinct anger: "What do they take people for? Worse than livestock."

Alwyn spoke softly: "This is a faith shield, as long as these believers live, the barrier won't fail, if we attack head-on, we need to spend half our ammo reserves, at least continuously bombard for three days."

Louis put down the binoculars, gently shaking his head: "Don't be fooled. They're not believers, nor soldiers. They're single-use fuel."

Someone in the bridge subconsciously swallowed.

Louis turned around: "Load Deep Blue Type Four, air burst."

The order was quickly transmitted, side turrets adjusted elevation.

"Poof—poof—poof—"

Shells traced arcs, exploding one after another in the high air outside the light curtain, but without fire.

Deep blue mist spread in the air, slowly descending with the sea breeze.

It carried no momentum, flowing silently with the air, seeping into the golden light curtain's interior.

Cold aura quickly covered the entire coast.

A believer loudly praying on the shore inhaled the first breath of blue mist.

His body slightly stilled, pupils dilated, then quickly lost focus.

The resonance maintaining the fervent state was forcibly severed, nerve signals suddenly cooled.

His raised hands dropped, the prayer turned into broken murmurs, and then he fell forward.

Then came the second, the third...

The figures began losing their support en masse.

From the bridge's view, the crowd originally like nails on the beach, tidily pressed downward the instant the blue mist swept over.

Just like a mature wheat field, swept across by an invisible scythe from end to end.

Tens of thousands of people simultaneously fell into a deep sleep within seconds.

Golden vein light quickly dimmed, shrinking along the roots, finally extinguishing completely.

The light curtain in the sky started to flicker.

"Ping——" A crisp and short breaking sound rang.

That layer of golden shield that had once repelled the salvo of cannons shattered like a broken eggshell, turning into specks of light scattering in the wind.

The island lay bare before the steel fleet.

Louis put down the binoculars: "Prepare to land."

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Steam landing craft rushed the shore, the hull emitted a dull thud in the shallow water.

The heavy iron ramp dropped, clashing onto the beach, sounding hollow and crisp.

Knights of the Red Tide held Demon Marrow rifles equipped with bayonets, stepped onto the beach one after another, quickly spreading apart, forming a fan-shaped line.

The Frost Leaf Gas Bombs left mist not yet dispersed, blending the air with a dry dust smell, like flipping through years-old ash in an old warehouse.

Reynold, Vanguard Knight Captain, was first off the boat, taking two steps out, slipping underfoot, sharply pitching forward, nearly falling.

What tripped him wasn't stone, but a human figure.

The white-robed believer held a kneeling posture, side fallen on the sand.

Below the knee no longer existed, only a bundle of coarse roots extended from the broken leg, deeply planted in the ground.

The Frost Leaf mist plunged him into a deep coma, green tinted saliva oozed from the corner of his mouth, chest faintly rising, proving he lived, but actually, not for long.

Reynold stepped around him, continued forward.

Across the entire beach as far as the eye could see were these half-human, half-tree entities lying full.

Varied in posture, yet excessively quiet, like eerie crops uprooted by a storm.

Walking on white sand, underfoot sensation made him stop.

No soft sinking, instead a series of crisp sounds, clearly transmitted beneath his boots.

Reynold frowned, hairs on his back slowly rising, shouted: "Aik, come here."

The accompanying alchemy apprentice quickly ran over, gaze tense behind the goggles.

He didn't touch the ground with his hand, but drew a folding shovel, scooping up a shovelful of white powder.

The powder excessively fine, barely taking shape on the shovel.

Chapter 856: The Eerie Island (Part 2)

Aik took out a glass test tube from the leather pouch at his waist, unscrewed the cap, and carefully dripped a drop of purple development liquid.

The moment the liquid touched the powder, it boiled furiously.

"Sss——" A puff of black smoke rose, accompanied by the stench of burnt feathers.

Aik made a retching sound in his throat, which was muffled by the gas mask.

He stared at the rapidly discoloring reaction liquid in the test tube, his fingers trembling slightly.

"Captain..." His voice tightened, "This isn't sand, there is soul remnants."

He used the tip of the trowel to brush away the surface powder, revealing the same stark white beneath: "This is bone ash."

A brief silence spread through the team.

Aik took a breath and finished speaking, "The whole expanse is paved with ground-up dead people, these plants drain the living and will decompose the corpses along with them; this place really eats people without spitting out bones."

Several knights instinctively lifted their feet, as if fearing the ground beneath them might suddenly come alive.

The team continued to advance inland.

Passing through that somnolent crowd of root-carved humanoid figures, the scenery suddenly broadened.

Towering trees lined either side of the path, their bark presenting a uniform and pure golden hue, the leaves rustling softly in the breeze like layers of thin gold foil.

A young knight couldn't help but speak softly, "It's quite beautiful..."

Reyno smacked his helmet with a backhand slap, "Shut up."

He drew a dagger and walked to the nearest tree, "Inspect the sample."

The blade cut into the bark, and warm crimson fluid sprayed out violently, covering Reyno's visor and flowing down through the cracks in his armor.

The trunk convulsed intensely, erupting with a piercing and distorted shriek, like a person having their throat slit while screaming.

The ground split open, bundles of golden aerial roots burst forth, crazily entwining around Reyno's legs and joints.

The ends of the roots split open, revealing fleshy sucking mouths that gnawed on the alloy leg armor, making a teeth-clenching hiss.

Reyno's heartbeat accelerated for a moment, burning the roots on his legs with Fighting Energy, and looked at Aik.

And Aik swallowed and immediately responded, "Carbon-based structure, high lipid content, alchemy flame will do!"

Reyno stepped back half a step, making way for the firing position, a heavily armed flamethrower soldier stepped forward.

Orange-red alchemy flames roared out, instantly engulfing the screaming golden tree.

A dense cracking sound emanated from the flames, the smell of burning grease was nauseating.

A few seconds later, the trunk ceased its convulsions, collapsing into a charred mass, the roots entangled around Reyno's legs quickly withered and fell off.

Reyno kicked away the ashes at his feet, shook his boots, and looked back at the team, "Remember, burn on sight, don't skimp on fuel, keep moving."

.....

When the assault team left the scorched forest, the air temperature noticeably rose.

It wasn't the heat of the sun, but a stifling humidity often felt in an enclosed space repeatedly breathed through.

The building area emerged ahead, but the atmosphere was exceedingly strange.

It appeared soft and bloated, like a whole mass of flesh forcibly ripened.

The houses weren't constructed, but grown.

Huge body-like contours interwove, resembling thighs, arms, and some undeveloped organs, bound together by thick roots, swelling into oval fleshy pods.

The surface was covered with a translucent membrane, slightly undulating with breath.

The so-called windows were just narrow slits.

The tissue around the slits would occasionally contract and close, resembling blinking eyelids.

Warm and humid air carried a sticky, fishy smell, as if stepping into the body cavity of a giant creature.

A thick layer of semi-congealed mucus coated the ground, each step caused the boot soles to stretch out fine threads before breaking, creating a slight but discomforting sound.

The street sides were filled with residents, their lower halves fused with the architecture, their bodies fixed to the walls, showing only their upper torsos.

Heads hung low, motionless, resembling rows of forgotten wax figures.

Reyno raised his hand to signal a slowdown, just as the team closed in within twenty steps, those wax figures simultaneously moved.

Heads lifted, faces originally blank began to writhe violently, muscles shifting and regrouping under the skin, as if an invisible hand were kneading soft clay.

Within seconds, the first face completed its morphing.

It was Reyno's face, not only the features, but even the old scar below his left eyebrow was perfectly replicated.

Seeing this, Reyno's breath paused.

Then, the change spread.

Tens of thousands of faces simultaneously formed, turning into familiar faces known by the knights, fallen comrades, distant family members, even the knights themselves.

The air began to vibrate.

"Buzz——"

Tens of thousands of mouths opened and closed at once, like countless chaotic tones layered together forming a low-frequency resonance.

"Why..."

"Give yours... to me..."

"I also want... I also want..."

The sounds reflected and echoed down the street, mixing into an indiscriminate babble storm.

A young knight's gun muzzle dropped, staring at the familiar face ahead, throat tightening, "Mom..."

The roar drowned out everything at this moment.

Just then, the armored command vehicle rolled over the ground's mucus, forcibly squeezing to the front of the lines.

The tread's vibration interrupted the eerie resonance.

The bulletproof turret atop the vehicle rose, activating the alchemy amplification array.

"Woooo— — — —!!!!"

The sharp high-frequency whistle tore through the air with a clear physical impact.

Aerosol deterrent mixed with frost leaf extract and sound frequencies specifically designed to disrupt mental resonance.

Chapter 857: The Eerie Island (Part 3)

"Ah— — ! Ah— — !"

The residents on the street simultaneously let out piercing wails.

Their faces, just freshly formed, melted like waxworks under high heat, quickly softening and collapsing, reverting to faceless lumps of flesh.

The knights suddenly regained clarity, cold sweat sliding down their backs.

Louis's voice boomed through the loudspeaker: "It's an illusion, they're just monsters envious of your human appearance.

Three hundred meters ahead, unleash full-coverage fire! Burn!"

Flames advanced along the street.

The fleshy buildings rapidly carbonized in the intense heat, a smell of burning spreading through the air.

The city lost its form in the blaze, leaving only twisted, collapsed ruins.

Just as they were about to finish clearing, the ground suddenly began to tremble.

The mist was torn open from the front, and a cavalry corps charged out from between the ruins and scorched earth.

More than three hundred stitchers linked by thorns advanced in unison.

Their bodies were forcibly expanded, eradicating the line between human and beast.

Their limbs were crudely stitched to places not their own, thick threads oozing dark red liquid as they ran.

The monster at the forefront was a head taller than its kind.

Six arms grew from its shoulders and back, with a forcibly assembled centaur structure for the lower body.

Its four main arms wielded jagged Heavy Swords the size of doors, while the other two arms hung back, swaying as it ran.

It let out a chaotic and ear-piercing roar, yet moved with unnatural swiftness.

A light reconnaissance tank from the Red Tide vanguard adjusted its direction, and the turret-mounted machine gun fired.

The bullets densely peppered the monster, only raising a few blood splatters on the half-meter-thick layer of stitched fat.

The next moment, the monster was already upon them.

Four stout arms simultaneously grabbed the tank's turret base.

With a screeching metal tear, the turret was forcibly wrenched from its mount, swung up and smashed into the side.

The tank lost its armament and flipped heavily onto its side.

This scene caused a brief pause in the infantry line at the rear.

Reynold had already rushed to the forefront.

"Knight Order, move up for the kill!"

He drew his Chain-saw Sword, the teeth growling deeply as they engaged.

Over a hundred Red Tide Knights, clad in standardized dark red plate armor, stepped forward from the ranks.

The Fighting Energy ignited simultaneously.

Scarlet, azure, gray, and other hues erupted from their bodies, like tangible flames, distorting the air in the heat waves.

A stitcher swung a Heavy Sword overhead.

The advancing Red Tide Knight held his sword in both hands, unflinching and unwavering.

"Boom!"

The huge sound reverberated, spider-web-like cracks appeared under the knight's feet, yet he did not take a single step back.

The scarlet Fighting Energy on his body surged instantaneously, withstanding the overwhelming brute force.

"Too slow."

The Greatsword swung, stretching the scarlet blade light out several meters, cleaving the bloated figure in half down the centerline.

Organs shattered in the explosive Fighting Energy, the corpse twitching even as it fell, with more stitchers pressing forward.

Severed limbs writhed on the ground, attempting to reattach, quickly turning the battlefield into a chaotic melee zone.

"Clear a path!"

The roar of engines drowned out all else.

Over a dozen heavy Steam Tanks charged into the battlefield from the flank, crushing ruins with their thick armor.

The six-armed centaur turned, trying once again to upend the steel.

As its palm touched the armor's surface, blue-white lightning flashed abruptly.

The alchemical electric shock reactive armor activated.

Under the high voltage, the monster's muscles instantly charred and convulsed, its movements rigid.

The crushing roller at the tank's front spun to life, the spiked cylinder drawing in the monster's lower half.

The horse-leg structure was shredded in an instant, blood and flesh scattering into the air.

Reynold surveyed the battlefield: "They have too many limbs, adhesive rounds, lock their movements."

White alchemical foam launched from the rear, covering the front.

Excessive arms and legs entangled rapidly in the adhesive.

The more the monsters struggled, the tighter their limbs entwined, with some binding themselves into immobile flesh balls.

Reynold sheathed his Chain-saw Sword: "Artillery, scour the area."

White flames descended from the sky.

The adhesive and fat simultaneously ignited, white phosphorus fire burning through the skin, penetrating the marrow.

The bound monsters, unable to roll, could only howl in the raging fire.

Minutes later, nothing was left on the road but a field of charred, carbonized remains.

Heavy tanks rolled over them, tracks producing crisp cracking sounds underneath.

The Fighting Spirit Knights reformed their ranks, their breathing not yet fully steady.

The command car's armored door opened slowly, Louis's voice projecting over the battle's aftermath: "The surrounding threats have been cleared, leave the rest to the follow-up troops."

His gaze passed over the still-smoking ruins, settling on the Holy City in the distance, bathed in a golden glow: "Vanguard, continue with me, straight to Avalonia."

Chapter 858: Holy Hall

The rest of the Red Tide Legion was still outside the Holy City, clearing out the remaining monsters and spore organisms, and the pace of advance was deliberately slowed down.

Louis, however, led a hundred Red Tide elites, clad in red standard armor, to be the first to step through the gates of the Holy City.

There were no streets inside the city; underfoot was a layer of soft, slippery pink tissue. With each step, the soles of their boots encountered a sticky pull, making an almost inaudible yet discomforting sound.

The air was heavy and murky, filled with a pungent fragrance meant to mask the continuous seeping stench of corpses and rotting flesh below.

The crimson armor of the Red Tide knights stood out conspicuously in this alien space. Nearly a hundred Extraordinary Knights advanced at standard intervals, with the muzzles and long-handled weapons always aimed forward and to the sides. Their steps were deliberately subdued, creating a dangerous mismatch with the pulsating fleshy floor.

Meanwhile, the filters beneath the visors of the Red Tide knights operated simultaneously.

The Frost Leaf Type-III gas masks emitted a slight but steady hissing sound, with a faint blue glow illuminating the dim, fleshy corridors; without them, they would have gone insane by now.

Suddenly, the corridor ahead trembled, and the fleshy wall at the end was forcibly torn open.

A torrent of gold-green gushed forth—it was the stitched monster cavalry, and they were obviously stronger than those outside the Holy City.

They trampled the soft ground, splashing pink mucus with each step. The roars echoed repeatedly in the corridor, as if approaching from all directions simultaneously.

The Red Tide formation did not retreat; red shields were raised simultaneously, with heavy tower shields interlocking to form a tightly-knit wall.

The shield faces were lowered, rifle stocks braced against shoulders, and long-handled weapons thrust through the gaps, blades aimed at the approaching grotesque figures.

Weir stood at the forefront, drawing out his heavy sword and stabbing it backhand into the slippery pink fleshy surface beneath his feet.

As the blade sank in, the ground twitched slightly, like pierced entrails.

"Form up."

The next second, the Fighting Energy circuits within him lit up simultaneously.

Crimson light spread out from his chest like a compressed heatwave suddenly released, forming a semi-transparent, hemispherical shield around him.

The first wave of stitched monsters crashed in.

"Boom!!!"

A dull, thunderous noise echoed through the corridors, ripples visible to the naked eye spreading across the shield's surface.

The massive impact traveled through the ground, causing even the knights in the rear to feel a tremor beneath their feet.

However, Weir did not take a step back, his feet seemingly welded to the ground, the Fighting Energy shield absorbing all the frontal kinetic energy.

Conversely, the few stitched monsters that hit first lost their balance from the recoil, their bones cracking with a clear, breaking sound, like flies smashed head-on, sliding down the outside of the shield.

Weir's gaze remained calm: "Thrust."

From behind the shield, the Red Tide knights stepped forward in unison, thrusting their long lances forward.

The Demon-breaking spear tips accurately pierced the most uncoordinated parts of the monster's bodies.

As the spear tips penetrated flesh, the struck stitched monsters convulsed and fell, their limbs losing control. The intent to regenerate was abruptly interrupted by the Demon-breaking attribute, then instantly consumed by flames spewed from the flamethrowers.

The battle line advanced steadily. Suddenly, a deep blue figure sprang from the side of the shield.

Sacco wielded a greatsword, the deep blue Fighting Energy coiled around the blade like a beast, with an irregular vibration trajectory.

An eight-armed stitched monster attempted to close its arms and crush Sacco in its grasp.

The thick fat and muscle were tough enough to withstand heavy machine gun fire.

Yet, Sacco stepped inside before it could close, getting so close they were nearly touching.

"Sizzle—"

The sweeping blade directly severed the two supporting legs at the monster's lowest point, causing its enormous body to lose balance and topple forward.

Sacco took the opportunity to step back and turn, bringing his blade down. The erratically stitched head split open, like an overripe melon, as blood and mucus splattered, only to be instantly vaporized by the Fighting Energy.

Surrounding Red Tide knights quickly followed suit. They couldn't manage to kill monsters as effortlessly as Sacco.

They didn't seek individual kills, strictly adhering to a three-man battle array.

One blocked upfront, stabilizing the monster's center of gravity, another severed the lower limbs, crippling mobility, and the last dealt the final blow, beheading or destroying core nodes.

Before long, the battle array centered around Weir had effectively become a meat grinder.

The corpses of monsters piled layer upon layer on the ground.

Broken limbs, sliced torsos, and still-twitching fragments mixed together, trampled repeatedly by the Red Tide knights, squeezing out turbid and viscous fluids.

However, even with this, the number of monsters did not decrease at all; they still kept coming, endlessly, as the fleshy walls on either side bulged and then burst under internal pressure.

New stitched monsters were squeezed directly out of the building structure, with blood vessels and fascia that hadn't completely separated, continuously charging forward, attempting to tear open gaps through chaos.

"Hold the formation!" Weir's voice cut through the battlefield's clamor, "Don't spread out!"

The crimson Fighting Energy shield remained stably unfolded, repeatedly blocking frontal assaults.

Although there were no casualties among the Red Tide knights, the advance speed had noticeably slowed.

They were forced to repeatedly clear the ground, like moving upstream in a narrow river constantly inundated with silt.

Every step forward required an exponentially increasing time to clear the area.

The monsters of this living city seemed endless, with stitched monsters crawling out from every crack like cockroaches.

"Damn..." Weir gritted his teeth, the sword hilt making a slight friction sound in his palm, "Sacco! Clear the right side! Don't let them get close to the commander!"

Chapter 859: Holy Hall (2)

In the midst of this scorching standoff, Louis always stood at the center of the team.

He could feel that something was taking shape deeper within the Holy City.

The aura instinctively filled him with disgust, yet it precisely triggered the resonance of the Primordial Heart.

Louis murmured to himself: "Sure enough... everything here also extends from there."

He stepped forward, directly crossing the edge of the shield that Weir was desperately maintaining.

A brief confusion arose at the rear of the line.

"Lord Louis!"

Weir turned abruptly, the Fighting Energy shield violently oscillating: "It's too dangerous up ahead, I..."

"You stay here." Louis's voice came through the protective mask, with no emotional fluctuation.

He just calmly took that step, walking out of the absolute defensive circle that the crimson shield could cover.

Weir's pupils contracted suddenly: "My Lord—!"

Several giant stitched creatures lurking at the edge of the shield immediately sensed this isolated target.

They let out an excited and piercing shriek, as three bone scythes the size of doors slashed toward Louis's head from above, the left, and the right.

But Louis did not dodge, nor did he even lift an eyelid, not noticing the danger at all.

He merely tilted his head slightly, and a molten gold vertical slit glowed in those originally deep eyes.

It was the gaze from the primordial era, the absolute overlooking of a top predator at the apex of the food chain upon lesser lives.

Louis's lips moved slightly: "Scram."

An invisible ripple spread out with him at the center.

The soul-level impact descended at this moment, and the movements of the three giant stitched monsters pouncing midair instantly froze, then their bodies exploded into a foul stench of green bile.

They were not hit by any physical attack.

It was just their nervous systems, unable to withstand this fear from the depth of instinct, that overloaded and self-destructed.

"Plop."

The three massive bodies, like puppets with cut strings, fell heavily at Louis's feet, akin to dolls drained of will.

Louis ignored it and continued moving forward, with each step he took, that circle of invisible golden aura pressed forward one more step.

The swarming, bloodthirsty stitched creatures ahead, like a horde of rats meeting a natural predator.

They let out low, broken whimpers, scrambling to retreat to both sides.

The slower ones disintegrated directly under the pressure, their internals exploding, turning into an unshapable pulp.

The originally congested corridor was forcibly parted.

A straight and broad passage formed under Louis's feet.

Behind him, Weir's hand maintaining the shield froze in midair, and that layer of crimson Fighting Energy screen seemed unprecedentedly redundant at this moment.

He looked at that figure ahead, the nonexistent airflow around Louis slightly swayed, driving all monsters back in his path.

The surrounding Red Tide Knights also stopped their actions, gripping and releasing their weapons subconsciously.

Sacco muttered under his breath, his voice almost completely swallowed by the helmet: "...What exactly is our Lord?"

Weir took a deep breath, forcibly suppressing the surging emotions in his chest.

"Don't stop." He steadied the shield again, his voice returning to its usual cold hardness, "Push forward, follow Lord Louis's path."

However, even though the Red Tide Guard was giving their utmost to advance, even though Weir's crimson Fighting Energy shield remained steadfast as ever, the distance between them and Louis continued to widen.

It was not a difference in speed but in level.

The place Louis was heading to was never a battlefield they should set foot on.

.....

Before stepping into the Holy Hall, Louis briefly paused.

From afar, it was a massive structure composed of white and gold, standing in the heart of the entire city.

The towering dome still existed, yet layers of intertwining golden thorns tightly ensnared it.

The thorns squirmed slowly, climbing along the once precise architectural lines, accurately replicating the ancient symmetrical aesthetics of the Holy Hall.

This cold, restrained religious aesthetics had not disappeared but was transplanted entirely into flesh and plant.

Louis's gaze lingered on that architecture for a moment before turning away.

He reached out and pushed open the door before him.

The door that was once the most immense white stone gate of the Holy Hall was now thoroughly alienated, covered by countless white bones and chunks of flesh.

The touch was warm, with a regular pulse, as if responding to the touch, as though the entire door was still performing some sort of welcoming duty.

This holy sanctuary, once renowned for its white stone columns, platinum arches, and infinitely extensive dome, had utterly lost the concept of architecture, collapsing into a vast living chamber instead.

Not a metaphor—the entire grand hall was breathing.

Through the membrane, one could even see murky golden blood flowing within.

The liquid circulated along established pathways, with shadows occasionally flitting deep within, like yet-to-be-awakened organs reflecting.

Louis's gaze moved along the sides of the hall.

The spot where the Holy Order and doctrine reliefs once hung was now thoroughly transformed; most distinctively, like dolls displayed on a store counter, twenty-four desiccated corpses were neatly nailed to the flesh wall.

They wore Magic Robes symbolizing authority, whose gilded embroideries had long lost their luster, yet the patterns that once represented power and glory could still be discerned.

Numerous glowing green thorns grew from within the flesh wall, piercing their limbs, securely fixing the corpses midair.

These people were evidently long dead.

Yet their facial muscles had not relaxed.

Every face was frozen in the same expression—extreme pain and overwhelming jealousy that couldn't be suppressed.

These were the frozen emotions left by failed candidates at the last moment, permanently preserved by this living sanctuary.

Louis's gaze bypassed these collections, landing at the end of the hall.

Where the white throne was supposed to be.

Now, there was only a twisted golden tree growing from the ground.

The trunk was robust, covered in a morbid golden sheen, as if forcibly plated with a holy exterior.

Beneath the sheen, countless dense thorn-shaped patterns spiraled along the trunk.

These thorns contracted at an extremely slow pace, with tips occasionally oozing light green sap, seemingly conducting some internal circulation.

In the gaps between the thorns, one could see golden liquid coursing along fixed pathways, maintaining absolute synchronization with the whole hall's neural network.

Eduardo was in the center of the tree; Louis took a moment to recognize his formerly somewhat plump brother.

His lower half had vanished, his body from the waist down now entirely transformed, broken down into numerous slender golden thorns, growing backward into the tree trunk.

His upper half still retained a humanoid form, yet appeared extraordinarily fragile.

Fine golden veins spread along the thorn paths, resembling forcibly attached wires interlocking with the tree trunk's pathways.

Atop his head, that Golden Thorn Feather Crown was the core of the entire Holy Curtain Hall.

Its roots had long pierced Eduardo's scalp and skull, embedding deep into his brain, completing the final integration with the hall's countless golden nerve fibers.

The thorny wings opened and closed at a sluggish frequency, each motion causing a synchronous tremor throughout the entire chamber.

His eyes were open, yet unfocused, and what flowed from his eye sockets wasn't tears, but slowly seeping golden pus, trailing down his cheeks.

The whole grand hall fell into an oppressively suffocating stillness.

Only the sound of the flesh membrane's pulsation, the low hum of the nutrient liquid flow, and the continual and patient growth of that golden tree.

Louis stood in place, observing it all.

Suddenly, the Golden Thorn Feather Crown burst into brightness!

A blinding emerald green poison light erupted from the depths of the crown, causing the entire living hall to contract violently.

The twenty-four corpses nailed to the walls suddenly opened their eyes wide!

Chapter 860: Louis vs Eduardo

The Crown of Golden Thorns suddenly lit up, a blinding emerald green poisonous light bursting from deep within the crown.

Like a flare forcibly ignited, the entire Holy Curtain Hall responded in turn.

The pink moss-like floor beneath Louis's feet suddenly lost its form, the surface collapsing and melting in an instant, transforming into a high-viscosity digestive fluid.

At the same time, the golden ribs on both sides began to close inward at sharp angles, as if trying to nail the intruder directly in the center.

Scarlet fighting energy burst from Louis's feet, forcibly pushing the viscous mucus away, rolling around him yet unable to touch the soles of his boots.

He then pressed against the contracting bone walls, using the immense inward pressure to accelerate in reverse.

"Boom——"

The scarlet footprints exploded into cracks on the golden rib bones.

Louis's figure shot like a cannonball, aiming directly at the twisted golden tree in the center of the hall.

However, at the moment he was airborne, the Holy Hall completed the next stage of its defense switch.

A low, resonant hum emanated from deep within the ceiling.

Countless semi-transparent emerald green thorns descended, piercing the back of the necks and spines of twenty-four withered corpses on the flesh walls on either side.

The corpses suddenly convulsed.

Hollow eye sockets ignited with ghostly green flames, the thorny wires taunt, transforming them from displays into weapons.

Twelve corpses first detached from the flesh wall, and as they landed, their bones pierced through their withered skin, their movements stiff but imbued with past instincts.

In life, they had been the strongest Holy Hall Knight Captains, Sword Saints, Adjudicators...

All were the most elite talents of the Church Court, but now they were just battle puppets repeatedly called upon.

The other twelve remained embedded in the walls, their remaining chest cavities expanded, throats opened by thorns, emitting chants not of human origin, resulting in a spiritual attack.

The air changed in quality, corrosive toxic fog and compressed light bullets formed around them, beginning to predict landing points.

The first close-combat puppet was already closing in, previously a Sword Saint of the Church Court, unrivaled in the world, yet now broken beyond dignity.

But even so, he still possessed the strength of a Peak Knight.

The instant the dual swords swung, they sealed all possible landing points for Louis, an inescapable golden whirlwind.

But at this moment, the world stood still in Louis's eyes.

[Bloodline Talent · Trajectory] activated.

Colors stripped away, leaving only lines and expected paths.

All trajectories within the next few seconds unfolded simultaneously on his retina, like a pre-drawn anatomical diagram.

In mid-air, he made an almost imperceptible side shift.

Only one centimeter.

The golden sword energy swept past his temple, slicing off a few strands of hair.

In the moment of crossing, Louis's wrist flicked.

The longsword brushed with a faint purple mist, precisely sweeping past the back of the Sword Saint's neck.

"Snap." The sound was faint, the iron-hard emerald green thorn instantly snapped.

The puppet, still maintaining a charging stance, fell forward due to inertia, then crashed face-first to the ground, completely losing control.

Almost simultaneously, the emerald green spiritual tendrils extended through the air.

The Crown of Golden Thorns began a direct intervention, attempting to read Louis's thoughts.

The next moment, a layer of platinum starlight lit up on Louis's surface.

The spiritual tendrils crumbled upon contact with the light curtain, like snowflakes into magma, leaving no trace.

His consciousness was calm and closed, with no emotional anchor available to grasp.

Louis did not sever the link; instead, he followed the mental path, directly injecting a pink feedback back.

The twelve magic puppets in mid-air convulsed simultaneously.

The chanting abruptly ceased, twisted faces showing expressions of extreme ecstasy, as if fulfilling a lifelong unattainable wish in an instant.

Their spiritual network completely shorted out in the next second, bodies losing support, falling from the flesh wall like kites with broken strings.

Yet, it brought Louis no relief, as heavy armored puppets took the stage at the other side.

Three massive figures clad in thick golden bone armor collided in a triangular formation, devoid of technique, purely an accumulation of force, causing the Holy Hall's floor to heave violently under their stomp.

Trajectory instantly found the optimal solution, Louis gripped the hilt tightly, directly channeling scarlet power into the blade.

The metal emitted a mournful cry under the load, yet Louis swung it like a baseball bat.

"Get lost."

A sweeping strike sought no technique, only results.

The shock wave detonated in the air, shattering the bone armor of the three heavy armored puppets simultaneously, their bodies flung back, deeply embedded into the flesh walls on either side, like specimens nailed into the wall.

And the rest of the attacks followed in quick succession.

Toxic rain, bone spikes, self-destructing entities, assassin-type puppets emerging from the ground... all the crown's means poured down in a barrage.

Louis lifted his left hand, dark purple mist swirling into a micro vortex, swallowing all the attacks in mid-air.

He actively stepped into the puppet army, beginning a smooth counterattack.

Every sidestep, every strike, falls precisely at the critical points.

The sword blade traced a purple light through the air, severing the green thorn vines controlling them.

The puppets froze in attacking stances behind him.

Half a second later, a dense sound of breaking lines resounded.

All the puppets fell simultaneously.

Yet Louis had not even taken a breath.

Louis's gaze lifted, landing on the somewhat similar face within the golden tree: "If they were still alive, perhaps they might have stalled me for a while."

He casually tossed the already cracked longsword to the ground, the metallic clatter echoing in the spacious chamber.

"But these things you're controlling..." Louis removed his gloves, tossing them at his feet, "aren't even enough to make me use my full strength."

Sitting in the center of the throne, Eduardo did not react with the expected rage.

In contrast, his expression gradually relaxed, and on that wax-yellow face, there emerged an extreme, unsettling sincerity.

His features seemed like wax figures softened by high temperatures, slowly and unnaturally displaced, the corners of his mouth curling into a gentle arc, as if trying hard to recall an expression long forgotten.

He opened his arms, his voice tender and almost affectionate: "Brother, you're too tired, the outside world is too noisy, too dirty, too unfair."

His gaze fell upon Louis, and within those eyes, the distinction between pupil and iris blurred, leaving only a murky gold-green.

"Become one with us."

Yet starkly contrasting with the tenderness on Eduardo's face, the feather crown began to convulse madly.

The thorny wings no longer kept their original rhythm, instead trembling rapidly, emitting sharp sounds akin to teeth grinding, as if crushing something unseen.

Louis didn't even react but merely watched coldly at the entity on the throne.

Eduardo's hands suddenly clasped together.

"Buzz—!!" A distorted rumble exploded within the hall.

The golden ribs supporting the space structure began to rotate entirely; the originally stable chamber was forcibly twisted into a mass, everything in view starting to spin.

The pink coating on the ground was the first to be torn open.

Soon, all matter within the palace was simultaneously thrown into the air, mingling in the chaotic gravitational field, forming an ever-expanding vortex of flesh and blood.

Countless golden thorns reached out from the vortex, trying to drag the person standing at the center into it.

But facing this frenetic hellish spectacle, Louis didn't even adjust his stance.

The crimson Fighting Energy underfoot abruptly burst, pinning his body firmly to a fixed coordinate.

No matter how the space spun and twisted, he remained perpendicular to the ground that he recognized beneath him.

Meanwhile, the Primordial Heart slowly released a platinum light screen, thin as a cicada's wing.

The flying rotten flesh, acid, severed limbs, and thorns were forcefully repelled less than three centimeters from his body.

The entire world was spinning and tearing apart.

Only the point where Louis stood remained quiet and tidy, as immovable as a mountain.

This discordance caused the golden thorn crown to utterly lose control...

Eduardo's face, struggling to maintain a gentle expression, finally couldn't hold anymore.

His mouth twitched, his voice ripping into shapeless shrieks: "Why?! Why are you different?!!"

The golden thorn crown trembled wildly, green light surging.

"Since I can't destroy you..." his voice suddenly lowered, filled with hysterical greed, "Then I'll become you!!"

In the next moment, Eduardo's body swelled violently.

"Bang—!"

The wax-yellow shell exploded like a deflated sack.

Countless golden-green thorns shot out simultaneously from the trunk and feather crown, like uncontrolled pythons, lunging straight at Louis.

The tips of the thorns rapidly changed during flight, appearing with a familiar and unsettling outline... a multitude of faces resembling Louis.

They opened their mouths, lunging at Louis, as even a brief proximity could complete the final substitution.

Only at this moment did Louis finally raise his hand, calmly spreading his fingers, his palm facing the monsters that grew alike him.

A dark purple mist burst out instantly.

When the first thorn touched his palm, it did not pierce the skin.

It directly melted, and the purple mist rapidly spread backward along the thorn.

The light within the hall suddenly distorted.

The purple mist spread swiftly, forming a black hole devouring everything around.

Even the scarcely remaining Life Force that originally belonged to Eduardo couldn't escape, dragged into the dark purple void.

"Sizzle—" A deep and continuous sound echoed through the air, akin to an unsettling chewing noise.

Only then did the golden thorn crown begin to fear, as the pervasive thorns trembled violently.

Louis raised his head, his pupils no longer retaining a human form, molten-gold slitted eyes cold and cruel against the backdrop of the dark purple mist.

The frantically retracting thorns froze instantly.

The remaining body of Eduardo lost support in mid-air and fell heavily to the ground.

Louis retracted the purple mist and walked forward.

On Eduardo's face, a twisted expression of half-cry and half-smile remained.

But as his sight finally met Louis, deep within his eyes, there was a brief restoration of clarity, an expression resembling a belated relief.

Louis lifted his right hand, red light gathered at his fingertips, forming a thin and sharp light blade like a scalpel.

"It might hurt a little."

He spoke lightly, reaching into the still writhing thorns, accurately grasping the frenetically beating green core.

"Rip—!!!"

Louis expressionlessly tore out the core of the golden thorn crown violently.

At the moment the core was lost, all maintained within the hall simultaneously failed.

Flesh, bones, membranes, and ribs lost support in mid-air, rapidly collapsing like ashes burned away.

Only a rainfall of falling debris remained.

Louis stood in the center of the ruins, bowing his head to look at Eduardo, whose swift desiccation could be seen.

That body could no longer maintain its form, flesh peeling from bones like sand, scattered by the wind.

Louis reached out, gently closing his eyes for him.

Then he looked at the green core in his palm, which continued to faintly pulse.

Without hesitation, Louis clenched his fingers.

"Crack."

The core in his palm was crushed into fragments.

Green mist seeped out, slowly merging into his mind.