

Winter 861

Chapter 861: The Fifth Mysterious Godly Mist

The moment the green mist fused into his consciousness, Louis's actions paused for an instant.

It wasn't because of pain, but due to an extremely jarring sensory mutation.

It was an acrid sensation so intense that it made his teeth ache, suddenly exploding in the depths of his mind like countless invisible needles, probing madly.

Probing every subtle crevice of his soul, seeking any possible loose interface.

Meanwhile, whispers began to emerge, endlessly overlapping and replaying.

"What gives you the right... that should be mine..."

"You just got lucky..."

"You're merely a chosen vessel..."

"Pull him down..."

"Let him taste the feeling of rotting in the mud..."

Amidst this noise, the sea of consciousness itself began to change.

The jade green toxic fog, like wildly growing thorns, spread from the void.

They did not rush directly towards the platinum primordial heart in the center of the sea of consciousness but instead bypassed it.

They seemed to be imitating, with the green mist twisting and reshaping frantically, attempting to construct a similarly structured island within the sea of consciousness.

The outline was repeatedly adjusted, layers continuously stacked, even the rhythm of energy flow was roughly aligned with the rotational frequency of the primordial heart.

Just as the false island was about to stabilize into form...

The primordial heart stopped spinning, and the sea of consciousness fell into a brief silence.

Immediately, the platinum starlight cut along the edge of the false island's structure like an extremely precise scalpel.

Stripping away all the layers of luster used for disguise.

The façade constructed by the green mist instantly collapsed.

What was exposed was merely a hollow and chaotic core of thorns.

The red force then pressed down, transforming into a slowly rotating gigantic millstone.

Scarlet patterns spread across the bottom layer of the sea of consciousness, engulfing the root systems of thorns attempting to flee.

The deep purple aura followed, turning into countless invisible mouths that opened in the sea of consciousness, precisely gnawing at the high-energy remnants that had been stripped and shattered.

The pink force descended last, like a gentle and dense net, covering the remaining agitation.

The sharp fluctuations were slowly wrapped and smoothed over.

The sharpness was dulled, the desire to resist suppressed.

The jade green thorns were decomposed and reprocessed one by one.

The sea of consciousness returned to stability.

Familiar with the process, Louis did not rush to open his eyes but allowed himself to drift into the dark current formed by the remnants of old memories.

It wasn't a complete timeline, more like a river shattered and reassembled, with blurred fragments beneath the surface.

He slowed down his breathing, gathering all extraneous thoughts, and began to capture them one by one.

The first scene that emerged was of a charred sky.

Huge winged creatures perched above the clouds, their shadows engulfing the entire land.

With each beat of their wings came a storm; each breath, a collapse of climates.

On the ground, humans lay naked in the mud, trampled like ants, flung by the gusting air currents, only to crash down into a mangled heap.

The scene abruptly switched.

On a temporarily constructed rock platform, a black-haired man in strange robes stood at the center of an array.

The array's structure was complex and ancient, its lines entwined with a kind of block script, rather than usual demon pattern logic of this world.

An ancient dragon was forcibly bound at the center of the array.

It roared and struggled, dragon might pressing down like a tangible mountain, yet was dismantled layer by layer by the array.

The black-haired man thrust a sword into the dragon's chest cavity, forcibly extracting the still-pulsing magic core.

Behind him, a somewhat younger blond man awkwardly assisted in adjusting the array's patterns.

The scene jumped again.

The blond man had aged.

He lay beside a furrow, upon freshly turned earth, with the scent of crops nearing maturity in the air.

He died peacefully, with no fear or regret on his face.

That emaciated hand tightly clutched a key.

The people around were kneeling on the ground weeping, with heartfelt grief and gratitude.

To commemorate him, the survivors gathered spontaneously, initially in just a simple stone house.

Later the stone house became a church.

Time was fast-forwarded here.

Louis saw a pope obsessed with art and symbolism, standing alone in a secret chamber.

He opened the sealed box that had been passed down through generations.

Inside the box were two jade green eyeballs preserved in liquid.

The pope did not retreat.

He didn't even feel fear.

In his eyes, they were relics left by God, treasures from the primordial era.

"It's too lonely," the pope murmured softly, with a near-fanatical devotion in his tone, "It needs to see the light again."

The scene began to distort.

The Golden Thistle Crown, which was originally just a decoration, was placed on the white throne; at first, it was merely symbolic, an extension of faith.

Then it began to grow, small golden thorns pierced through the inside of the crown, silently embedding into the pope's scalp, burrowing into his brain.

"As long as it can make the Church Authority Country great again..." the previous pope knelt on the ground, his voice trembling with pain, yet he did not flinch, "I am willing to sacrifice everything."

The thorns slowly and patiently siphoned away brain matter and consciousness.

The scene collapsed again, forcibly pieced together.

The last fragment emerged.

Eduardo stood there, trembling all over, with sweat soaking through his back.

He was pinned to the spot by an irresistible pressure.

Louis could even feel through the memory remnants the searing pain that pierced the soul.

Countless thorns cascaded like waterfalls from the dome, swiftly enveloping Eduardo's body.

Fear was frozen in his eyes.

The scene completely shattered.

Louis suddenly opened his eyes.

Reality returned to his senses, everything regaining clarity.

A fleeting, deep jade green flashed briefly in his pupils, then quickly disappeared.

The thoroughly tamed green power flowed back along his consciousness, merging once again into the sea of awareness.

The fifth halo quietly took shape.

It did not approach the core, instead hovering at the outermost layer, like a circular defensive line bristling with thorns.

Louis could clearly feel the changes it brought about.

The first ability was that nothing appeared whole in his eyes, only as structures.

The connective points of a creature's tendons, the obstructions in energy circuits within an array, overlooked gaps in tactical systems... all fragile points would be instinctively marked.

And the thorns on the mental plane could be projected outward.

They were invisible and silent, yet could pierce the energy core, disrupt spellcasting, and forcibly block the operation of a particular ability.

On a deeper level, in close proximity, he could even temporarily borrow one of the opponent's traits, resistances, or specializations.

Of course, like other mists, this wasn't all it could do; other abilities needed to be slowly developed by Louis.

Louis didn't immerse himself in the feedback from the power; his attention immediately shifted to the newly acquired memories.

In those fragmented scenes, the symbols written by the black-haired man were not this world's universal script, but the Chinese characters he was most familiar with.

He also thought of the pronunciation of the spell, its essence resembling the phonetic structure of Chinese more closely.

A conclusion naturally formed in his mind.

The so-called Primordial Mage was likely not a native of this world either.

He might have come from the same place as Louis.

It's just that the memories about that person were still incomplete.

Many clues had already been gnawed away by the long history.

Louis slowly exhaled a breath.

The truth was not yet complete, but he was one step closer.

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Weir's crimson shield had persisted for too long.

Under high-frequency oscillation, the Fighting Energy began to heat up, like red-hot iron repeatedly forged.

Thudding impacts continuously reverberated on the shield surface, each strike sending ripples across the light membrane, and heat waves backfiring along the Fighting Energy circuits made his arm slightly numb.

He gritted his teeth, sweat sliding down his forehead into his eyes, too busy to wipe it away.

Beside him, Sacco was already in a sorry state.

The guy had dulled two Greatswords, with dark reddish Fighting Energy enveloping the blade, each swing accompanied by the dull sound of flesh being torn.

He was covered in green monster blood, with broken bones wedged in the crevices of his armor, looking like a bloodied man emerging from a swamp.

They were advancing, yet it seemed more like an endless grind.

For every step forward, three more layers of corpses had to be paved beneath their feet.

Severed limbs writhed on the fleshy ground, and half-dead stitched monsters tried to drag the knights' ankles with teeth and remaining arms.

While not life-threatening, it was an exhausting siege akin to torture.

"Damn it!" Sacco kicked away a twitching half-body creature, his roar echoing in the corridor, "These things are endless! How long has the Lord been inside?!"

"Shut up! Maintain formation! Accelerate the advance!"

Weir took a deep breath, squeezing orders out from his throat: "Even if we pave the way with bodies, push forward."

The knights made no response, but all were gritting their teeth as they progressed.

They didn't fear dying here; they feared for the Lord who had already ventured alone into the depths of the darkness.

Just as Sacco was about to once again burst his Fighting Energy and forcibly break through the wall of flesh and bone, a mutation occurred.

The oppressive, nauseating sensation that had been pressing on their chests suddenly vanished.

As if the source had been directly severed.

"Buzz—!"

A low resonance swept across the air, then quickly returned to dead silence.

The charging horde of stitched monsters suddenly froze in unison.

The next second, they began to collapse, the points of unnatural splicing losing support, like puppets with their strings cut.

Six-legged centaur monsters, their upper and lower halves simultaneously dislocated and fell to the ground, turning to ash.

The flesh chunks on the walls rapidly withered and shrunk, peeling off the skeletons in large patches, splattering onto the ground like rotting mud.

Thousands of monsters lost their vitality in the same instant, disintegrating into a nauseating mess of parts, leaving only the sound of viscous fluid flowing.

Sacco's sword almost toppled him as it swung through empty air.

He stood there, staring dumbfounded at the mountainous pile of rotting flesh debris, his Adam's apple bobbing once.

"Damn, did they just commit mass suicide?" Weir also froze for a moment.

The next moment, Weir sharply lifted his head, in his crimson eyes a nearly uncontrollable gleam bursting forth.

"No." His voice trembled, yet he couldn't suppress the surge of joy, "It's the source."

Weir gripped the sword hilt tightly, speaking almost gritting his teeth: "The Lord resolved the source."

"Everyone, listen up!" He suddenly turned around, his voice abruptly rising, "Release the defense formation!"

The crimson shield dispersed with a roar.

"Charge! Go to support the Lord! Now! Immediately!"

And so one hundred Red Tide Knights, disregarding conserving their strength, and the slippery muck underfoot that made it hard to stand firm, sprinted forward like mad.

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After the last corner, ahead was the flesh-like giant door leading to the central hall.

Louis walked out from the shadows at an unhurried pace, his black army coat neat as new, without a single crease.

His white gloves were glaringly white, immaculate and starkly out of place with everything around, as though some invisible force repelled all external filth from coming near.

His expression was calm, as if he had just taken a stroll in a garden.

Weir's rush almost made him stumble and fall to his knees.

He looked up, his voice noticeably trembling: "L-Lord? Are you injured?"

But Louis carelessly laughed, "What could possibly happen to me, let's go, we'll talk on the ship."

Chapter 862: The Continuation of the Calvin Clan

Rachel sat on the soft sofa in the study, her hands tightly twisting the handkerchief in her hands.

Beside her, her husband, Viscount Ronald, stood straight, yet appeared extraordinarily uneasy.

Ronald's gaze dared not linger long on the view outside, yet he couldn't help but drift in that direction.

In the direction of the port, the outline of the steel fleet nearly obscured the horizon, the black hulls looming in the mist like rows of silent giants.

Ronald swallowed, his legs faintly tense, although he was an elite knight, he was inevitably somewhat fearful of such intimidating monsters.

Rachel's thoughts, however, were far from the outside view; her memories were tugging back and forth in her mind.

In her memory, her brother Louis was still a youth, always lowering his head, hesitating for ages before speaking.

At the family banquet, he sat in the farthest corner, yet still worked hard to maintain etiquette.

When she first learned he was chosen to be the Baron of Expansion in the Northern Territory, she thought it was doomed. She genuinely worried about her weak brother being sent to the Northern Territory, fearing he wouldn't survive the first winter.

She pleaded with her husband to give him more gold coins and secretly sent him her Life Potion, hoping for even the slimmest chance of survival.

But the news from the Northern Territory returned increasingly mad.

At first, there were only scattered rumors and humble letters from Louis.

The scorned child who was abandoned by the family and sent to the wasteland unexpectedly held his ground in the Northern Territory.

Starting as a Baron of Expansion with barely a decent territory, he survived amid the permafrost and insect tide and won Duke Edmund's daughter.

Then the news became specific.

Duke Edmund died in battle, and originally independent border lords were brought together by him in an extremely cruel yet efficient way, and those deemed undefeatable, the alien races, were buried in batches in the permafrost.

Afterwards, Gray Rock Province was annexed by him in a short time.

Finally, he drew his sword against the Church Court and won.

And so those scattered titles were pieced together by people one by one.

Sun of the North, Conqueror of Gray Rock, Destroyer of the Church Court, Creator of Miracles, Great Calvin...

"Is he still that Louis?" This thought flashed through Rachel's mind.

She glanced down at her own dress, now her most presentable one, not new in style nor luxurious in fabric, yet it was all the dignity she could muster.

Ronald noticed her silence, gently walked beside her, and softly comforted, "Don't worry too much, dear. The knights of the Red Tide are very courteous to us, not a hint of neglect, which means... Lord Louis still holds you dear in his heart."

As he spoke, he himself couldn't help but wipe the sweat from his palms once more.

The door was pushed open at this moment.

Rachel almost instinctively raised her head.

Louis walked in, dressed in neat casual attire.

He deliberately restrained his aura, the suffocating pressure suppressed to an extremely low level, like a young lord returning home after a long absence.

Even so, Rachel was still stunned.

The brother before her had grown much taller than she remembered.

Standing there with his shoulders straight, he naturally became the center of the entire room.

It wasn't a deliberate display of authority, but a quietly compelling presence, long cultivated from issuing commands, quietly commanding respect.

"He's changed." Rachel's heart gently trembled. "Changed to be like Father..."

She instinctively prepared to stand up, to perform a formal noble salutation.

Given Louis' current status, such a gesture was unremarkable.

But before she could steady herself, Louis had already briskly walked over, offering a helping hand.

"Sister." His touch was gentle, yet profoundly natural, "These years, you've been burdened."

The voice was warm, sans any trace of condescension from a higher position.

And within that tone, still carried the excessively familiar, slightly reliant softness that Rachel knew so well.

In that instant, all the tense emotions seemed to be gently pierced.

Rachel's eyes grew hot.

The little boy who once hid behind her had not disappeared.

Louis personally poured her tea and casually asked, "The knights sent to pick you up, were they not impolite? And the kids at home... the little ones have they been trouble lately..."

He didn't discuss war details or interests' division, simply small talk.

Rachel answered while secretly observing his expressions.

Louis was smiling, his demeanor relaxed, yet through his eyes, she noticed a slight unease.

But so long as he acknowledged her as his sister, it was enough.

As the pleasantries waned, Louis' gaze turned towards the gentleman beside, "Viscount Ronald."

He nodded, his tone solemn, "Thank you for caring for my sister these years, and when I was sent to the Northern Territory, your family was the only one that extended a hand."

Ronald instinctively straightened his back, responding earnestly, "Rachel is my wife, caring for her is my duty. As for what happened back then... she insisted, I merely did what ought to be done."

A barely perceptible glint of approval flashed through Louis' eyes.

Perhaps lacking in ability, but this man was sufficiently sincere.

He reached for a document on the table, already prepared, and casually pushed it across.

"The Southeast Province is now awaiting full recovery, the several estates originally belonging to the Seldon lineage, along with the trade monopoly surrounding White Rock Port, are vacant."

His tone was as indifferent as discussing a piece of idle land.

"I intend to integrate that area into a new Earl's Domain. Would you like to manage it for me?"

Chapter 863: The Continuation of the Calvin Clan (2)

Ronald's hand clearly trembled for a moment.

The Earl's Domain, exclusive trade rights—he knew all too well what that meant.

In that brief instant, wealth, status, the family's future all exploded in his mind.

He took a deep breath, forced down the surge of emotion, and bowed solemnly: "It is my honor to serve you, my lord."

Louis merely waved his hand: "You're not serving me. And there will be Red Tide officials assisting you as well."

After the meeting ended, the Attendant stepped forward to guide Rachel and her husband out.

Just before leaving the room, Rachel couldn't help but look back.

Louis had already sat back behind his desk, head lowered as he opened a report.

The gentle smile had vanished from his face, replaced by a stranger's calm and focus.

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After Rachel left, that deliberately maintained gentle air dispersed as well.

The old butler Bradley, who had been waiting in the corner, finally took a step forward: "Patriarch."

Louis did not look up; he only let out a light "Mm."

Bradley placed a file on the desk, its cover printed with a line of words—"Current Status Register of Members of the Calvin Clan."

His voice dropped a shade lower, yet remained clear: "The tally is finished. Aside from Miss Rachel, all direct blood relatives have... withered away.

The only remaining survivors are a few collateral branches with rather distant ties. They were usually ignored by the family and mostly hid in country wineries or on the edges of old lands, so they avoided the purge."

Louis's gaze lingered for a moment on those red crosses, his expression unchanged: "For the surviving collateral branches, ensure basic food rations, shelter, and medical care—enough so they don't starve to death."

"But no titles, no stipends, and no inheritance privileges of any kind. I don't feed parasites."

Bradley's pen paused slightly, then continued to move.

Louis raised his eyes to him: "If they want a good life, they can sit the exams for the Red Tide civil service system, or become Knights. Same rules as for outsiders."

Bradley lowered his head in reply: "Yes, my lord. I will not grant any special favors."

He looked at Louis sitting behind the desk, and overlapped his silhouette with that of another Duke Calvin.

He recalled his years in the Southeast Province, when the Calvin Clan had still been the most illustrious family there.

The banquets blazed with light, the halls packed with relatives and vassals, everyone scrambling to mingle, terrified of being overlooked.

And that young master sitting quietly in the corner, always watching it all in silence.

Back then, no one would have imagined the family would collapse so quickly, that nearly all of them would end up dead.

Yet it was that most inconspicuous child who personally raised the Calvin banner to the highest point in this world.

While Bradley was lost in his memories, Louis rose and walked to the massive world map on the side wall of the study.

The metal map was lit to a cold, hard clarity; the mountains, sea routes, and power borders of each region were precisely etched, like a chessboard.

His fingertip tapped lightly twice on the map, stopping over a region that had just been marked as occupied.

The Avalonia Islands—originally the main territory of the Golden Feather Flower Religious Authority Country—were now entirely shaded in the deep gray that signified "cleared."

"This land is ruined." Louis wasn't exaggerating.

Standing beside him, Bradley understood all too well what that sentence meant.

Though the Church Authority Country had been utterly destroyed, centuries of parasitism had already seeped into every layer of this land.

The soil, the groundwater, even the microorganisms in the air had undergone irreversible alienation.

In preliminary postwar surveys, engineers had already reported: fleshy fungi were continually sprouting from the surface; some plant life showed skeletal traits; even insects were showing tendencies toward deformity.

This wasn't the kind of place you could just rinse off and move back into.

"Send in the engineer corps," Louis went on, his eyes never leaving the map. "Flamethrowers, steam shovels, white phosphorus shells—use everything."

"Plow everything within three meters below the surface."

Bradley was slightly taken aback, but raised no objection; he only hurriedly noted the orders on the pad he carried.

Louis paused for a moment, then added, "After the cleanup, establish a naval blockade line. Declare it an absolute forbidden zone. No one lives there for at least a hundred years."

Bradley lowered his head: "Understood, my lord."

Louis's finger then moved northward.

Beyond the islands, it came to rest on the vast expanse of the Southeast Province. The colors there were uneven, with most towns marked as "mildly infected zones."

It hadn't completely fallen into a land of monsters, yet it was just as ravaged.

For years, millions of civilians had habitually inhaled Golden Feather Flower pollen, forced or willing, to connect themselves to that divine network.

Even though the network had been severed, its aftereffects remained etched on them: spiritual enervation, dulled reactions, atrophied limbs...

Like a crowd of addicts whose crutch had suddenly been yanked away.

Bradley hesitated slightly, but still spoke: "My lord, the condition of that segment of the population... is very unstable. If we don't apply some form of comfort, I fear there will be large-scale riots, even self-harm and suicide."

Louis listened, then the corner of his mouth twitched: "Comfort?"

Bradley was stunned.

Louis's gaze remained on the map, but his tone hardened: "Their minds are broken, not because they're underfed. It's because they think too much and do too little."

"Then make sure they don't have time to think." He raised his hand and tapped several of the hardest-hit areas. "Use Frost Leaf Sedative in coordination, and start with forced detox. Cut off all residual sources of poison."

Chapter 864: The Continuation of the Calvin Clan (Part 3)

"Then organize them. The Empire is shattered, ruins are everywhere. Integrate these people into the post-war reconstruction corps to build roads, erect bridges, clear silt, and mine..."

Louis's voice was not loud, but each word was clear.

"During the day, they do heavy labor; at night, enroll them in night school to learn literacy, Red Tide laws, and how to survive in a world without God.

Make them sweat, tire them until they have no energy left to pray. When the sweat dries up, the poison in their minds will be cleansed."

Bradley closed the clipboard and solemnly saluted, "Understood, sir. If there are no other instructions, I'll proceed with the arrangements."

Louis nodded, "Go."

The old butler saluted and turned to leave.

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The doors closed again. Louis finally found himself alone, beginning to survey this study, one of the legacies left by the old Duke.

This was the first time since his arrival that he truly stepped into the power core of the Calvin Clan, this study.

Unexpectedly, it had not been looted.

On the walls hung portraits of the Calvin Clan's patriarchs through the ages.

Some wore armor, some wore suits, others had a hand resting on a scepter.

The styles varied, yet their gazes were remarkably similar—sharp and greedy, like a group of merchants calculating profits from behind the frames.

Louis's footsteps halted before the last painting.

It was the old Duke.

The elder in the painting sat upright, his spine straight, hands folded on the scepter.

His gray hair was meticulously groomed, with an eagle-like gaze seemingly scrutinizing everyone who entered the study.

Louis looked at him for a few seconds, then shifted his gaze, lifted his glass towards the portrait slightly.

"To be honest," he said softly to himself, "I feel no affection for you."

No admiration, nor hatred for being exiled to the Northern Territory.

"You wanted to use me as a pawn, a tool to appease the Emperor, but I gained freedom and my own land.

And without the subsequent financial support, I wouldn't have risen so easily. In that regard, I owe you."

Louis tilted his head back, downing the wine in his glass, and without looking at the painting again, turned back to the desk.

A sheepskin map was already spread out.

He picked up a red pen, letting its tip wander across the map.

Southeast Province.

He drew a complete red circle around this area.

This is the breadbasket and port of the Empire, also one of the most densely populated regions.

In the past, it supplied blood to the Imperial Capital; now it will provide materials and manpower to keep the Red Tide running.

The Northern Territory's industrial system is already established, while the agriculture and ports in the South will become its most stable support.

Industrial North and Agricultural South, forming a natural closure under his pen.

With the death of his father and brothers, and the seal ring on his hand, he is now the undisputed sole master of this land.

Louis drew a prominent cross in the center of the map.

"Here, no new Lord is needed," he said calmly. "Only factories, farms, and the Red Tide administration office are required here."

Power will no longer be divided but embedded directly into the system.

Following the shipping routes, he connected the north and south waterways on the map.

Once this line is fully opened, the Southeast Province will be wholly integrated into the Red Tide's military, logistics, and trade loop, never to be isolated again.

As his thoughts were about to continue delving deeper, the door of the study was knocked.

Weir pushed the door open, "Sir."

Louis didn't look up, "Speak."

"That pseudo-emperor, Lampard," Weir paused, a hint of irrepressible excitement in his voice, "has been intercepted by our patrol boat."

Louis closed the map, drank the remaining wine in one gulp, and a faintly ambiguous smile curled at the corner of his mouth, "Good."

Chapter 865: Shocking News

Louis sat behind a long table, reviewing a document labeled "Site Selection for Alchemy Industrial Park."

The sound of shackles dragging across the carpet broke the silence.

Weir brought the man to the center of the study, pressing on his shoulder to stop him.

The silk robe that once symbolized regential authority was now tattered beyond recognition, its edges blackened by seawater and mud.

His boots had split open, with only half of the gold thread decoration remaining.

The only thing he held tightly in his arms was a gilded redwood box.

Even so, he still tried to straighten his back, chin slightly raised, his gaze slightly elevated—this was a posture trained through repetition.

"Louis Calvin." Lampard spoke, his voice hoarse, deliberately projecting authority, "In the name of the Emperor, I demand to be treated in a manner befitting my status."

Louis turned a page in the document, not looking at him: "You have two minutes; after that, I have another meeting."

Lampard's Adam's apple moved faintly.

This sentence was more deadly than any insult, as if he was merely a distraction before the meeting, but that was indeed the reality.

So he stopped beating around the bush and quickly placed the redwood box on the table, opening it.

Inside was a well-preserved parchment scroll and a heavy royal seal.

"Imperial Power Transfer Document." Lampard's voice quickened, "Once I sign it, you will have legal legitimacy of the Empire. Those old nobility, former legions, and local councils recognize only this."

He stared at Louis's face, trying to find a hint of wavering in those calm eyes: "Without it, you will forever be a rebellious force relying on brute strength."

Louis still did not look at the scroll.

He merely made a mark with his pen on the edge of the document in front of him, as if confirming the location of a certain factory area.

The silence made Lampard's breathing rapid; he knew this card was losing its effectiveness.

"And this—" he continued through gritted teeth, "This is what your father owed me."

Louis's pen tip paused for a moment.

Lampard immediately seized on this, his voice urgent:

"Old Duke Calvin made a sacred contract with me to obtain my political support, promising to create chaos in the Empire. Without my help, you wouldn't have been able to seize the Church Court so quickly...

He promised to grant one of the Avalonia Islands as my permanent domain."

He took a deep breath, almost pleading, yet almost threatening:

"I don't want the throne anymore; fulfill your father's promise. Give me that island, and I will take my attendants, treasures, and disappear from your world completely."

Upon hearing this, Louis finally put down his pen.

The pen made a crisp "snap" against the edge of the document folder.

He closed the "Site Selection for Alchemy Industrial Park" document, pressing his brow as if he had just listened to a lengthy and absurd report.

"Prince Lampard, your thinking is still stuck in the last century."

Lampard instinctively wanted to refute, but before he could speak, Louis raised his hand to interrupt.

Louis stood up, adjusted his cuffs, and for the first time truly set his eyes on this Regent King, with a hint of mockery.

"You seem to misunderstand the source of power." Louis slowly walked to one side of the study, stopping in front of the Empire's full map on the wall.

"My power is not bestowed by that parchment; it comes from my knights, my artillery, my fleet."

He turned around, as if stating a common fact, "When tanks roll into the Imperial Palace, who dares question the legitimacy?"

Lampard's lips trembled, his face visibly grew paler.

"As for the contract you mentioned..." Louis walked to him, looking down upon him, "You demand me to fulfill a promise made by a dead man.

And that dead man was pushed onto the altar by you personally; you colluded with the Church Court to plant a curse in his body."

Louis tilted his head slightly, as if seriously contemplating the issue: "Go, ask my father if he is willing to give you that island."

At this moment, all of Lampard's facade shattered completely.

"Don't... don't do this..." His voice lost all tone, cracking into sobs, stumbling as he knelt down, his knees scraping against the carpet as he crawled forward in despair.

"I didn't kill Duke Calvin... I also have royal blood... I can work for you... I still have money, I have connections..."

He attempted to grab Louis's boot, like clutching the last straw.

Louis, however, stepped back, glanced down at Lampard, then turned to Weir who had been standing aside: "Take care of him."

The tone was as casual as giving instructions for routine cleanup.

Weir stood at attention, responding briefly, "Yes, sir."

Lampard's scream erupted in the study, quickly becoming distant and blurring.

The door closed, and the study returned to silence.

"I thought there'd be some interesting amusement, but there wasn't any preparation at all."

Louis returned to sit at the desk, picked up his cup of coffee, which had grown cool, and took a sip.

He reopened the "Site Selection for Alchemy Industrial Park" document: "Building the fertilizer plant downwind is a good plan."

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A few months ago, when the Holy Eastern Empire was still bleeding in civil strife and reckoning, the gold coins of the Jade Federation had already struck the border first.

Numerous mercenaries, hireling groups, and armed forces wearing the banners of trade guilds crossed the boundary stele, like a serpent fed by money, attempting to tear off a piece of meat from the weakened Empire.

Their calculation was clear, the Empire was decaying, taking advantage of Louis heading south to the Eastern Empire, to seize Kaelin's territory.

Chapter 866: Shocking News (Part 2)

But they underestimated one thing, the war prowess of Emperor Kaelin.

In the first few weeks, the Imperial Army was forced to defend.

The Federation's mercenaries relied on mobility and numerical advantage to probe continuously, even cutting off several supply lines at one point.

Just as the border nobles were preparing to compromise again, trading land for time, Kaelin took over command.

Without rushing to counterattack, he first compressed the lines, using the near-stubborn organization of the Imperial Legion to pin each army in its rightful place.

No matter how the Federation's mercenaries interspersed and harassed, those legion soldiers in outdated plate armor never retreated.

Then, at Sunset Canyon, Kaelin completed the first perfect counterattack.

He deliberately showed weakness, luring the Federation's main forces into the narrow terrain and cutting off their retreat in the dark.

By the time the mercenaries hired with Gold Coins realized something was amiss, the canyon exit was already sealed by the Imperial heavy infantry.

From that moment, the situation reversed.

The Imperial Knights Legion began to advance. Step by step, like an old sword sharpened anew, slow but unstoppable.

The border was pierced, supply lines laid in reverse, the front line thrust deep into the heart of the Jade Federation, the Jewel Corridor.

The Federation panicked, and thus a large number of alchemical beasts were deployed to the battlefield.

Sewn Beasts, forcibly stitched together from various Magical Beasts' limbs, were pushed to the front as flesh-and-blood tanks.

Slaves infused with unstable potions were turned into self-exploding puppets that only charged forward.

The battlefield became dirty and chaotic, like a plague tainted by Gold Coins.

But these things did not stop the Imperial Army.

Just the day before, the Jade Federation finally wagered their still-immature trump card.

The Federation released three "prototype alchemical dragons" at once.

They are not real dragons but monsters pieced together from various things.

The first's torso came from a mountain giant lizard, with a restless alchemy furnace forcibly stuffed into its thorax.

The second retained the skull of a dragonling but was sewn with a composite wing membrane of bat and pterosaur, shading half the sky when wings spread.

The third was most grotesque, with four hind limbs from different Magical Beasts, its gait chaotic, yet kept in a frenzy of charging instinct by forcibly injected potions.

The stitching lines of their scales were distinctly visible, green preservative fluid dripped down the bone seams, evaporating in the air with a pungent alchemical stench.

Their roars were not unified, sounding more like the howls of several different creatures crudely mashed together, making one's skin crawl.

The battlefield went completely mad at that moment, and many Knights realized for the first time that the Federation had gone insane.

Yet Kaelin did not retreat; he urged his horse forward, drew his sword, the blade casting a cold light under the torches.

"Those are not dragons." His voice was not loud but firmly overshadowed the monsters' screeches, "Follow me and slay these blasphemous beasts."

The order was issued extremely quickly.

The Personal Guard Cavalry split into several groups, feigning a frontal assault to lure the dragons to dive.

Ballistae and grapplers acted simultaneously, thick hook ropes with iron spikes nailed into the wing roots and shoulders.

The first dragon lost balance in mid-air, its alchemy furnace shook out of order, its spewed flames burning through its own wing membrane instead.

Kaelin personally led the team to cut in, alchemical petroleum was splashed, torches were thrown.

The blaze erupted between scales and potions, the instinctive fear of fire overcame the alchemical control, and the dragons' movements showed an obvious delay.

"Now!"

Lances aimed at the joints, the sound of breaking bones was distinctly audible.

The second dragon broke its hind limbs upon landing, rolled frantically, the third attempted to take flight again, but was forced closer by Kaelin on horseback, a spear piercing through the nerve bundle at its neck.

What followed was no longer a battlefield, but a slaughterhouse.

The Fighting Spirit Knights gathered, using axes, swords, and fire to dismantle these struggling amalgamations piece by piece.

The muffled blasts of alchemy furnaces echoed repeatedly through the night, green flames shot up to the sky and extinguished swiftly.

When all was over, only three giant twitching carcasses remained on the battlefield.

Kaelin dismounted, stepped onto one of the pseudo-dragons' skulls, and forcefully pulled out the longsword, green mucus dripping down the blade.

The surrounding Imperial Knights were silent for a moment, then erupted into nearly wild cheers.

He pointed the sword tip towards the distant direction of Jade City: "Creatures piled with money have no soul."

Victory brought fervor.

The Imperial Army occupied a prosperous mining town and held a victory feast that night.

Torchlight illuminated the square, wine and spoils were continuously brought out, young officers gathered around Kaelin, eyes blazing with passion.

In a corner of the feast, Duke Remont sat alone.

He held a glass of fine red wine produced by the Federation, yet never drank.

He was acutely aware that something had changed.

Previously, all military orders required his signature — logistics, provisions, bounties... the lifeblood of the Imperial Army was firmly grasped in his hands.

Now, Kaelin was starting to issue orders directly to the legion commanders.

The young generals had no objections to this. They preferred to follow the Prince who could lead them to victory rather than a Duke who existed only in ledgers and Gold Coins.

Remont could clearly feel his purse being slowly emptied.

He looked at the high-spirited Kaelin, the unease in his heart coiling like a viper.

"The wolf cub has grown up, once he swallows the wealth of the Jade Federation completely, the first throat he wants to bite through..." Remont tightened his grip on the glass, "Will probably be that of his benefactor."

Chapter 867: Shocking News (Part 3)

At that moment, the tent flap was suddenly lifted.

Cold wind rushed in, making the flames in the brazier flicker violently.

A knight of the Empire's highest rank rushed in.

He didn't even bow, staggering forward as if chased by something, collapsing to his knees after two steps.

"What's wrong?" Kaelin raised his head, frowning slightly, "Did the Federation send some new monster? Even if there are two alchemical dragons, I can kill them."

The knight's throat moved, as if forcing himself to speak.

He prostrated on the ground, voice hoarse: "Your Highness... it's not the Federation."

The tent went silent instantly.

"It's from the Southeast." The knight raised his head, his eyes filled with pure terror.

"It's Louis Calvin."

The moment this name fell, it was as if something silently shattered within the military tent.

"Latest urgent report." His voice began to tremble, yet he gritted his teeth and finished speaking.

"Louis has simultaneously conquered the Avalonia Islands and the homeland of the Holy Eastern Empire, the Golden Feather Flower Church Court... completely annihilated, the Eastern Empire's royal system has been completely taken over."

Everyone instinctively inhaled sharply.

The knight's voice lowered, as if stating a fact that shouldn't exist in reality.

"He killed that so-called god... and burned the entire island to ashes, it's now a desolate land."

This shocking news caused a brief void, leaving everyone at a loss for words.

Clang.

Kaelin's proud sword slipped from his fingers, hitting the ground with a jarring sound that echoed within the tent.

He had just been standing atop the corpse of an alchemical pseudo-dragon, listening to the cheers of the soldiers, believing he stood at the pinnacle of his era.

And now, someone had told him...

Louis had slaughtered the Church's "god" in short order.

And casually annihilated two countries.

This chasm-like disparity in combat power made Kaelin realize something brutally harsh in that instant.

He was like a child waving a wooden sword before adults.

He spoke quietly, as if asking others, or perhaps himself: "Is he... really human?"

No one answered, because no one knew the answer.

On the other side of the tent, Duke Remont reacted faster than anyone else.

The wine glass in his hand lost its strength the moment "Church Court annihilated" was uttered, spilling wine, the cup slipping and shattering on the ground.

The clear sound drew numerous glances.

But Remont didn't look back, his mind was already in frantic operation.

If Louis was powerful enough to achieve this...

Then regardless of whether the war was won by the Empire or the Jade Federation, the ending would be the same.

Everyone standing on the chessboard would be cleared away.

For the first time, Remont felt fear.

Not the fear of defeat, but the fear of being erased from history.

His original plan was to place wagers between the Empire and the Federation, using logistics, gold coins, and connections to secure a safe distance for survival regardless of the victor.

But now, an entity not following the rules had appeared outside the chessboard.

An entity currently digesting the Southeast Province in the East.

Time, suddenly, was not enough.

Kaelin bent down to pick up his sword, the cold blade stabilizing his hand once more.

Fear didn't crush him, rather, it forced him to make a clearer judgment.

"Continue the advance." He lifted his head, his gaze sweeping across all the commanders, tone colder and firmer than ever before, "The Jade Federation must end swiftly.

I want their money, mines, ports, alchemists, and any usable people."

If Louis had already reached that stage...

His only choice was to swallow the Jade Federation whole before the opponent turned fully.

Not for glory, but to survive, to secure even a single chance for negotiation in the future.

Meanwhile, Remont's gaze also fell on the front line extending deep into the Federation's heartland on the map.

His expression gradually returned to calm, even a hint of almost indifferent composure surfaced, but it was merely a facade forced over his emotions.

Beneath this brief calmness, hatred had long been fermenting.

He remembered well when Louis marched south to Gray Rock, leaving no escape route for the Remont Clan.

Manor seized, lands confiscated, family crests burned.

Those once dependent on him, living off him, including distant branches and in-laws, were thoroughly purged.

That wasn't a political failure; it was being uprooted.

And Kaelin?

This prince whom he had raised to the battlefield, nourished with gold and logistics, was now circumventing him to issue orders, to command troops, even to distribute spoils amid victory cheers.

The wolf pup had learned to bite.

And the first thing it aimed to bite was the hand holding the leash.

Remont understood clearly that once Kaelin truly devoured the Jade Federation, mastering the Federation's wealth, mineral veins, and alchemical system, the next one to be reckoned with would definitely be him, the kingmaker.

Thus, he had only one choice left...

Remont lifted another glass of wine, the map's blood-red offensive line reflected in the glass.

Chapter 868: The Jade Federation's Trump Card

The second month after the end of the Holy City War, the Jade Federation's capital, Crystal Rock City, remained brightly lit.

The city resembled a bisected mineral, presenting distinct layers from top to bottom.

The deeper you go, the muddier the color; the higher you rise, the calmer the light.

The top-floor meeting room hovered above the city, like a crystal embedded in the clouds.

The huge floor-to-ceiling windows held the entire Crystal Rock City beneath, permitting only those inside to gaze downward.

Yellow-green toxic mist churned between streets and factory districts, resembling a sea of miasma that would never disperse.

Millions of mine slaves and low-level craftsmen crawled within it, their lungs long eroded by crystal dust and metal scraps, coughing up blood considered just another part of their work.

Scalding pipelines traversed the district, silhouettes climbing, tripping, being dragged away.

Some voluntarily signed organ transfer contracts for a piece of stale bread.

The hiss of leaking steam, the roar of pistons, the wails of the dying, condensed into a low and continuous noise, surging from the depths of the city.

Yet cut off completely before reaching the top floor.

Inside the meeting room, silence prevailed, expensive soundproof barriers kept all noise at bay.

The air passed through multiple layers of alchemical filtration, carrying a fragrance of mint and gold powder, smooth to breathe.

Clement, Speaker of the Bihui Guild, stood by the floor-to-ceiling window.

His deep purple velvet gown fit his form, the primitive magic stone atop his cane refracting cold light.

Lady Isabella of the Silver Plate Guild sat at the other side of the long table.

Black gauze concealed her exquisite face yet failed to hide the unnatural pallor, her hands adorned with gem rings, each sufficient to buy a frontier Kingdom.

Around the round table, other board members had also taken their seats.

Someone used a pure gold knife to slice a still-bloody steak, the motion elegant as though dissecting an art piece;

Someone tasted refined magic stone powder, savoring that brief and costly pleasure with closed eyes. They conversed, chuckled, like diners about to feast.

In the center of the meeting table, a precise mechanical sand table operated smoothly.

Red game pieces represented the Empire, orderly arranged, steadily advancing.

Blue flags symbolized the Jade Federation, retreating step by step.

The intelligence officer stood aside, reporting in a monotone.

"Attention, Board of Directors, the bait plan has achieved its set goals. The Third Mercenary Regiment, five thousand one hundred and twenty-three men, have perished entirely in Sunset Canyon, holding on till the last moment, successfully creating the illusion of a collapsing defense line."

Clement slightly adjusted his monocle: "How about the pension clause?"

"Circumvented through force majeure and accidental insurance terms."

"Very good." Clement nodded slightly, "Died quite cost-effectively, not only held back the Imperial Army but also happened to clean up a few mercenary leaders long in arrears."

Isabella chuckled lightly, voice gentle yet hollow: "Remember to recover the bodies. The Alchemy Workshop has recently been short on organic fertilizer. Assets must not be wasted."

The red tin soldiers on the sand table continued their advance.

The intelligence officer turned the page: "Under Kaelin's command, twenty Knight legions have penetrated the core area, now positioned at the forefront of the feeding zone."

A moment of subtle change arose in the meeting room, a few directors' eyes unconsciously brightening.

Isabella closed the ledger, leaning forward slightly: "Such perfect ingredients, the taste of ordinary minerals is too coarse, He has complained for a long time.

Only iron tempered by repeated flames of war, and the blood of heroes filled with anger, unwillingness, and survival instinct, is worthy of the main course."

She lifted her eyes, smiling graciously: "This is why we don't use forbidden curses. If it explodes, it won't be fresh."

Clement turned around, back facing the rolling toxic mist outside the window, facing the floor beneath.

He placed his palm on his chest, a standard gesture, voice solemn and deep, as if reading from holy scripture:

"Poor Kaelin, he thinks he is conquering a country, unaware that this is a blind pilgrimage.

And he is a diligent worker ant, traversing thousands of miles, carrying the sharpest fangs, the most precious possessions, piece by piece onto His table.

For the Federation's property, for our immortality, and also for the great Lord of Greed, to have a hearty meal, this is a necessary sacrifice."

The wine was raised.

Seven crystal goblets at the center of the long table tipped slightly, golden alchemical liquid flowing under the chandelier's reflection, like tamed sunlight.

"To Greed."

Glass rims clinked, crisp, pleasing, clean and neat.

That sound echoed within the soundproof barrier, processed to near perfection.

And in the city's deepest reaches, beyond countless pipes and rock layers, a huge, hungry existence emitted a barely audible swallowing sound.

Music began.

Flowing soothingly and elegantly, classical melodies spread throughout the meeting room, covering the tiny anomaly just now.

Forks and knives descended, entered the tender calf steak, juices seeped out, carrying a bloody hue.

The topic naturally shifted to the future.

They began discussing how to redistribute the Empire's mining districts and routes after Kaelin's death, which nobles' estates were suitable for acquisition, which population could serve as new labor quotas.

Right then, without any warning.

"Buzz—!"

The entire row of crystal screens on the south wall simultaneously emitted an ear-piercing low-frequency hum.

The music was instantly suppressed.

The directors' movements froze mid-air.

The originally stable flowing green curve completely vanished within a second.

Chapter 869: The Jade Federation's Trump Card (2)

In its place came a kind of crimson that made one's heart tremble.

That red wasn't a single point of Burst, but spread like a plague.

Beginning from the southeastern seas, it started to engulf the Holy Eastern Empire's plate.

Then, at a speed visible to the naked eye, it stained every southeastern trade node, mining marker, and sea lane coordinate red.

The conference room doors slid open at once.

The Federation's Chief Intelligence Executive all but fell inside.

He had lost one shoe, his hair was a mess, the uniform that was always impeccable now drenched through with sweat; he stood at the door, took two gasping breaths:

"Directors, the East... has collapsed... Louis Calvin has completed total occupation of the Holy Eastern Empire and the Golden Feather Flower Church Country!"

Dead silence; the air felt as if it had been sucked out.

Lady Isabella shot to her feet, both hands pressing down hard on the table: "How can it be this fast..."

Her voice had lost its usual composure: "It's only been a few months since he went south... We had originally estimated his war with the Eastern Empire would drag on at least two to three years, but now..."

Her gaze swept over that region already completely dyed red, her throat tight: "He not only won, he took that sacred island as well."

Vulcan Director of the armaments and metallurgy Guild suddenly leaned forward, the mechanical prosthetic eye set in his socket zooming in and out wildly:

"Impossible, I know the Church Authority Country's fleet all too well; that's a defensive system even the Federation Navy steers clear of, and the bastions on that island..."

He raised his head, the prosthetic eye flickering with a dangerous red light.

"You're saying he flattened the entire island in three days? Even if we concentrated all our Magic Burst cannons to bombard it, we'd need a year!"

He suddenly realized a fact: the Federation's vaunted city defenses might, in the other side's eyes, be nothing but fragile glass.

Gorgon Director of the Blackridge Guild suddenly stopped chewing, looked down at the meat on his plate, his face turning green.

The next second, he bent over sharply and vomited all the expensive food he had just eaten onto the carpet.

"And he annexed the Eastern Empire..." His voice carried a fear he could no longer hide. "There are tens of millions of people there—how did he digest it? Once he finishes digesting, his next move will definitely be to push west."

The calmest one in the room was instead Clement, Speaker of the Bihui Guild; he closed his eyes, rapidly reconstructing the map of the East in his mind.

The formerly shattered, chaotic countries that capital could pry apart had vanished, replaced by one whole expanse of glaring scarlet.

"Everyone." He finally spoke, his tone enough to chill the bone. "We made a fatal mistake. We always thought he was a presence that could be valued and priced.

"But now... once he finishes digesting the East, his next target will inevitably be us."

At the center of the mechanical sand table, the red arrow representing Kaelin was completely covered by a deeper shade of shadow.

That shadow rose from the eastern seas like a gaping maw, devouring everything on the map.

Lady Isabella collapsed back into her chair, her voice trembling: "Then what do we do? Give him money? Make him honorary Speaker?"

Vulcan Director slammed a fist hard on the table: "Can't you see it yet? He wants it all!"

Speaker Clement raised his head, his alchemy prosthetic eye lighting up in the gloom, emitting a cold gleam.

"Since we cannot trade with him, then we can only destroy him." He paused for a moment. "Have our God awaken at once.

No matter whether Kaelin's twenty legions are enough to feed it or not, we first raise this defensive line."

This was their final trump card, and their only choice.

.....

The Imperial Army's offensive, as it neared the Jade Federation's core region, for the first time showed obvious drag and sluggishness.

On the main avenue, the Federation seemed to have changed its tactics overnight.

Every heavy gun that could still operate was piled along that single line of passage, tier upon tier, like a high wall cast from steel and flame.

The gun muzzles roared day and night, fields of fire overlapping; any probing advance was immediately answered with mass casualties.

This wasn't defense. This was a slaughterhouse forcing people to chew through it head-on.

At the military council, the map was spread open and folded again and again, yet the mood grew heavier each time.

Duke Remont spoke first, his tone cautious, even somewhat weary, as if genuinely concerned for the Imperial Army's safety.

"Your Highness, the frontal defenses are too dense," he said. "Our supply line is already stretched to the limit. If we continue to attack, we'll only be wasting our elite troops.

It would be better... to pull back for now, reorganize the army, and wait for reinforcements and the next batch of supplies to arrive before making plans."

The moment he finished, Kaelin's face darkened.

Retreat? The word itself was like denying all the victories he had won over the past few months.

"Pull back?" Kaelin repeated coldly, his gaze sharp as a blade. "Louis is devouring the Empire in the south. If I retreat a single step now, I'll be handing myself to him personally!"

He slammed his palm on the table. "We must attack."

The conference room fell into silence.

Just as the argument was stuck in deadlock, a Knight outside delivered an unexpected result: a captured high-ranking Federation deserter.

The man was covered in dust, his spirit hollowed out, as if he had been completely wrung dry. Among his belongings, they found a roll of yellowed old drawings.

It was the "Federation Mining Area Abandoned Tunnel Map."

The moment the map was spread out, Kaelin's eyes lit up.

It showed a route marked "Old Crystal Vein Tunnel," excavated a century ago and long since abandoned due to complex terrain, lingering toxic gas, and an exhausted lode.

The map showed it bypassed the frontal fortress clusters, like a needle hidden underground, pointing straight at Crystal Rock City's underbelly.

"No garrison?" Kaelin immediately gave the order. "Send Royal Scouts to confirm at once."

The Scouts' report came back very quickly: "Your Highness, it's accurate.

The tunnel is rugged, but indeed passable. There are no troops stationed along the way, most alarm mechanisms have failed, only a few rusty warning signs remain."

Everything was going smoothly to the point of absurdity.

Remont stood by the map, brows knit tight, continuing to play the role of the cautious old vassal.

"Your Highness, this route is too dangerous," he said. "Once we're discovered, the narrow terrain leaves no room to deploy. If our line of retreat is cut, it will mean total annihilation."

But Kaelin showed a look of firm conviction. "It is precisely because it's dangerous that the enemy won't think I'd take it."

He looked at Remont, his tone edged with undisguised sharpness. "Duke, you're old. This is blitzkrieg, not your kind of slow, dragging Nobility war."

The final deployment was quickly decided.

Kaelin would personally lead ten thousand of the finest Knights, break through via the tunnel, and launch a surprise strike on Crystal Rock City.

Remont would take the main forces and logistics units, continuing a grandiose feint on the front to draw all of the Federation's attention.

The moment the orders were issued, Remont lowered his eyelids, but inside he felt nothing but ice.

In the dead of night, the ten thousand iron cavalry set out; they moved like a silent black current, slipping into that deep, dark tunnel.

On both sides rose steep black rock walls, and the air was thick with a pungent stench.

The march went unnaturally smoothly—no patrolling Magical Beasts, no cave-ins, no traps. The smoothness was unsettling, yet it only made Kaelin all the more convinced this was fortune's gift.

When, on the far horizon, the glimmer of Crystal Rock City finally floated up in the night, he even allowed himself a smile.

In the darkest hour before dawn, the vanguard burst out of the narrow tunnel.

The view opened up before their eyes.

It was a vast basin plain, low-lying, like a natural bowl.

Crystal Rock City stood on the rim of the basin, its lights still burning, looking utterly unguarded.

Almost at the same moment, from the direction of the frontal battlefield in the distance, came the thunder of artillery.

Remont had begun his feint.

Kaelin felt hot blood surge through him.

"Do you see it?" He drew his Longsword, pointing at the city ahead. "That is our reward."

"Charge! Crush them! Let the Federation's gold pave the road for the Empire's revival!"

The horns sounded.

Ten thousand Knights, burning with longing for victory, poured down from the heights.

Like a runaway black mudslide, without a second thought, they surged into that platter of a battlefield that had long since been set for them.

Chapter 870: Monster

The darkness before dawn had yet to retreat, and the basin lay like a closed giant bowl, quietly waiting for its prey to fall inside.

Five thousand fully armed Heavy Knights charged down the slope at Kaelin's roar.

It was a torrent of force that could not be ignored, with lances and longswords held high, like a steel forest advancing forward.

Kaelin rode at the forefront, his cloak billowing behind him.

He could feel his blood roaring in his ears, his chest filled with an almost suffocating excitement.

Crystal Rock City lay ahead; as long as they charged through, the heart of the Federation would stop beating this morning.

"Accelerate!" His order was swallowed by the battle cries.

"For the Empire!"

Five thousand knights roared in unison, their voices echoing repeatedly in the basin, as if trying to tear the night sky apart.

However, when the force reached the lowest point of the basin, nothing expected appeared.

No rain of arrows, no explosions, no dazzling Magic, no ambushers leaping from the shadows, not even the wind.

The world seemed to have been muted, leaving only the harsh breathing of warhorses, piercing in the empty basin.

At that moment, he noticed something was wrong. Kaelin raised his hand, just about to command the troops to regroup.

Suddenly, the feel beneath the horse's hooves changed. What was once a hard, cold rock that clearly responded with vibrations.

In just a few breaths, it became soft and sticky, with an abnormal scorching heat.

His warhorse let out a sharp whinny, a sound stemming from instinctual fear.

The first row of knights began to slow down, followed by the second row.

The breathing of the horses became rapid and chaotic; some began to turn in place, some even tried to retreat, but were pushed forward by the flow of knights behind them.

"What's going on?! A trap?!" A knight's voice, overtly panicked, exploded in the ranks.

"Your Highness! The ground is moving!"

"Is this... a swamp?!"

Kaelin looked down, his pupils suddenly contracting.

The ground of the basin had not sunk into a mire but was slowly undulating.

Like a giant muscle breathing.

Golden liquid spread from the steeds' hooves, revealing fine and regular patterns on the surface.

These were not cracks but more like... scales not yet fully opened, or pulsating veins beneath the skin.

For the first time, a chilling thought flashed through Kaelin's mind.

They hadn't charged into a basin but were stepping onto something's body.

"Boom—"

An almost inaudible, dull roar echoed from the depths of the earth.

Kaelin's pupils shrank fiercely.

He hadn't sensed any Magic Power fluctuation or Fighting Energy burst.

Nothing, yet all the metal suddenly became heavier.

Not just a little, but as if pulled by an unseen weight, the gravitational force targeting steel multiplying dozens of times in an instant.

The knights didn't even have time to comprehend what was happening.

The front legs of five thousand armored warhorses emitted dense and clear cracking sounds simultaneously.

"Crack, crack, crack—"

The sound of bones being crushed under unbearable weight.

The formation in charge disintegrated instantly.

The knights were pressed into the ground, uniformly and indistinguishably, like an invisible giant hand falling from the sky.

The heavy steel armor smashed into the liquefied ground, splattering the scalding golden liquid.

One knight was practically flung off, his knees hitting the ground hard, his vision stunned into whiteness.

He propped himself up with his sword, trying to stand, only to find the sword that had accompanied him through countless battles was now as heavy as a nail, dragging his arm firmly to the ground.

Steel had become an instrument of torture here.

The armor, originally meant to protect, now turned into iron coffins weighing thousands of pounds.

The knights struggled desperately, attempting to undo the clasps, remove the armor, but their actions were rendered completely meaningless.

The more terrifying transformation came as the temperature of the golden liquid increased rapidly.

Metal, being the best conductor, led the heat through the armor, mercilessly branding into flesh and blood.

"Ah! Ah! Ah!" The knights let out heart-wrenching wails.

Their skin sizzled under the iron plates, muscles spasmed, nerves burned, consciousness torn apart by the searing pain.

"Can't... can't get it off!"

"The armor is jammed!"

"The skin... skin is sticking to the iron... ah ah ah!!"

Desperate screams rose one after another, quickly weaving into a single sound.

The "For the Empire" that had shaken the valley minutes ago fully dissipated at that moment.

In its place was the wailing of five thousand men, welded in steel at the original spot.

The sound reflected in the narrow arc structure of the basin, with no escape, and no end.

The basin began to vibrate, at first with minute tremors, like the earth turning in its sleep.

Then this vibration became clear and heavy, carrying an indescribable rhythm, as if something colossal was slowly stretching its limbs underground.

Kaelin looked up, he saw the outlines of the surrounding basin, once rolling like black mountains in the night, were changing.

Dirt, gravel, large rock slabs slid off the mountain surface in pieces as if they had lost their grip, crashing into the still-churning golden molten liquid below with dull and abrupt sounds.

With the shedding of the outer shell, what lay beneath was no longer rock layers.

But a whole swathe of black, smooth structures glinting coldly under the reflection of molten gold.

Composed of Obsidian-like substance, thick, sharp, interlocking to form a massive framework beyond the measure of common sense.