

Winter 871

Chapter 871: Monster (2)

Lava flowed among these skeletons like veins, delivering the blazing light to every joint.

The entire basin was instantly illuminated.

At that moment, Kaelin finally understood that this was never just terrain; it was a curled-up body.

As that gigantic body stretched, the air was forcibly compressed, emitting a deep explosive sound.

The edges of the basin began to move, and what was thought to be ridges were actually its coiled limbs.

Then, a head so enormous it defied perception descended from the night sky.

The head was a polyhedral structure composed of countless precision-cut diamond facets, each angle reflecting molten gold light.

It looked down upon the five thousand Heavy Knights struggling and melting in the golden liquid in the center of the basin, without anger or disdain.

Just as humans look at food that has fallen into a bowl.

Kaelin's sanity shattered entirely at that moment.

He saw familiar flags melting, saw Personal Guard Knights frantically beating within their armor yet unable to escape, saw generals who once charged alongside him being gradually sealed by the steel they once prided upon.

"Enough—!!" he roared hoarsely, as if tearing his throat.

Thanks to the high proportions of precious metals in the Royal ceremonial armor, and his own formidable fighting energy, he barely broke free from the terrifying gravity targeting iron.

He chose not to flee but turned around to look behind him.

In that not yet completely submerged area, nearly a thousand Extraordinary Knights were standing with difficulty, having broken free from constraints.

Their armors were burned red hot, their fighting energy was nearly out of control, some had cloaks already on fire, and some had steeds fallen with mourning.

This was the Empire's final edge.

Kaelin raised the sword he held before it broke, lifting it high above his head.

"Those who can still move," his voice was hoarse but exceptionally clear, "charge with me!"

There were no grand speeches, no chants of Empire long live, only a cruel order.

Hundreds of Extraordinary Knights lifted their heads.

They saw the diamond head covering the sky, saw the terrifying body spanning the earth, and also saw their comrades being melted alive in the center of the basin.

Fear still existed, but more was a determination with no retreat.

They raised their weapons simultaneously, the remaining fighting energy entirely ignited at this moment.

Hundreds of figures started together at the edge of the rolling golden sea of corpses, charging towards that gigantic entity for the final assault!

"Kill!"

Kaelin led at the forefront, advancing on melting steel and flesh, burning his fighting energy to the limit, and losing life with each breath.

He drew the sword that had accompanied him for years in battle, its blade engraved with the emblems of royal authority and glory.

Squeezing out all the fighting energy he could muster, his blood vessels bulged, the energy burned uncontrollably, and crimson light exploded around him.

This was his strongest strike in life.

"Monster—!!" His voice was pitifully small in the vast basin, yet carried a sense of dying heroism.

The Extraordinary Fighting Energy transformed into a strike condensed to the extreme, tearing through the air, slashing fiercely at the lower limb of that mountain-sized figure.

It hit, the moment the sword's edge contacted the leg structure made of high-purity diamond.

"Ding." A crisp, clear sound.

The energy strike that could cleave rock was completely nullified the instant it made contact, not even leaving a white mark.

The recoil traveled back along the sword, and Kaelin felt his arms numb, with excruciating pain in the arm he once lost.

The next second, the sword that had accompanied him for years began to fracture from the tip, inch by inch, with fragments falling into the golden liquid, instantly swallowed.

He stood there, with only a broken hilt left in his hand.

The entity did not even lower its head because of this; it merely continued its action of standing up.

Then, the diamond head slightly leaned forward.

A not-completely-regular fissure opened between its facets, and in the depths of the fissure, darkness began to swirl, manifesting a visible distortion forming in the air.

A deep vibration sound came from within its body, like billions of pieces of metal being drawn towards a single center.

In the center of the basin, those knights who could no longer move, flesh welded into armor, broken weapons and barding, were forcibly pulled from the gold liquid by an irresistible force.

Some struggled frantically in the air, futilely trying to unfasten buckles long fused with flesh.

Some screamed in a dissonant wail in the moment of weightlessness, calling out for mother, wife, or commands to a legion no longer hearing.

Others clung tightly to a comrade's corpse, as if by not letting go they could fall back to the ground together.

The entire legion was dismantled into pieces, or ground into fragments, transforming into a black storm that rolled and collided mid-air, then was dragged into that slowly opening huge mouth.

Kaelin stood still.

He watched as layers of his legion were swept away, saw flags burn in the air, saw each figure of Extraordinary Knights struggled at the vortex's edge for a moment before disappearing completely.

Finally, his body too abruptly lightened, losing contact under his feet, pulled skyward by that irresistible force.

In the moment of losing weight, he saw below only a rolling sea of molten gold, devoid of any living soldiers.

The last Prince, in the final moment before being drawn into the diamond maw, had only one thought flash in his mind.

This world is doomed...

Chapter 872: Monster (Part 3)

"Crunch! Crunch! Crunch!"

The sound of a diamond structure grinding through tempered steel, bone, and flesh echoed through the night sky...

...

The night wind blew down from high above, carrying mine dust and the bloody stench of scorched metal.

The terrace jutted out over the Obsidian outer wall, with a bottomless Abyss beneath his feet, while the distant basin was lit by an unnatural golden radiance as bright as day.

The Duke gripped the high-magnification alchemy telescope mounted on the railing with both hands.

He saw Kaelin standing in the golden molten flow, saw the sword that symbolized imperial authority shatter the moment it swung out.

He saw five thousand Imperial Knights lifted like scattered iron filings, men and armor alike torn into that Abyssal maw made of diamond.

Every act of devouring was accompanied by the screech of metal and the snapping of bones.

The veins on the back of Raymond's hand bulged, as if he were about to crush the telescope tube.

His stomach churned, a sour burn rose in his throat, but he forced it down.

What was that?

A living creature? An alchemical construct? Or a God deliberately raised and fed?

He had once thought that the Dragon Blood Youth hidden in his secret chamber was a trump card enough to steer the course of the world.

But before that thing which used a mountain range as its body and an army as its snack, all his scheming looked like a tower of wooden blocks built by a child.

All it needed was the lightest breath, and it would come crashing down.

"I must not show fear." Raymond forced this thought on himself.

He raised his wine, using the motion of tilting his head back to hide the uncontrollable twitch at the corner of his mouth.

The crystal glass gave off a faint sound between his fingers; a nearly invisible crack had already appeared along the wall of the cup.

The Federation councilor standing beside him gently swirled his wine, yet his gaze never left the distant golden light, as if he were enjoying a grand fireworks display.

"Duke, you seem quite surprised?" The councilor's voice was mild and casual. "Do you feel our ultimate weapon... is a bit too lively?"

Raymond did not answer immediately.

The councilor walked two steps forward and leaned against the railing, a near-reverent look coloring his tone.

"Please don't misunderstand; it is no mere weapon. It is the bedrock of the Jade Federation, the guardian God we have worshiped for a full three hundred years.

In these three hundred years, we have sent the purest mana stones and the most expensive metals into its mouth, batch after batch."

The councilor lightly raised his glass toward the distant, slowly lifting colossal silhouette. "Today, to welcome our guests from afar, it has finally awakened."

He turned his head to look at Raymond, his smile still gentle.

"In this world, no one can stop an awakened God from feeding—be it the steel of the Empire, or Louis Calvin, who is rising in the South."

A chill ran down Raymond's spine.

He set down his glass and, with elegant motions, dabbed away the cold sweat beading on his forehead, taking a deep breath to slowly steady the trembling in his chest.

When he looked up again, his expression had returned to calm as he remarked, "Truly impressive. The Federation's alchemy... lives up to its reputation.

That idiot Kaelin deserved to die; all he took with him was the vanguard. The Empire's main Legions, its logistical system, and the provinces controlled by the Remont Clan remain intact."

Raymond adjusted his cravat, straightened his back, and assumed the posture befitting a Duke.

"I will not present myself on a platter the way he did. I know how to read the situation.

I am willing to bring the remaining Imperial Legions, as well as the complete intelligence on the Empire's defense system, and fully join the Jade Federation.

In exchange, I expect a place for my family within the Federation's new order."

The councilor stared at him for a few seconds, his gaze like that of someone appraising an asset about to be added to a vault.

Then he nodded slightly. "A clever choice."

He snapped his fingers. A waiter appeared soundlessly, carrying two glasses of blood-colored red wine.

"Then it's a deal, Councilor Remont." The councilor raised his glass in salute.

Raymond took the glass. Even with all his effort to control it, the wine still trembled slightly within.

From this moment on, he was no longer a Duke of the Empire, but a Federation sheepdog at the feet of this monster.

Chapter 873: Dragon

Deep in the underground palace, the air was so thick it was almost heavy.

A blood pool, with a diameter of a hundred meters, stretched across the core of the underground, its surface shimmering with a sickly yet sacred dark golden hue.

Around the blood pool, five thousand imposing figures knelt on one knee.

They once belonged to the three most central and untouchable forces of the Empire—the First Legion of the Imperial Capital, the Dragon Blood Legion symbolizing the soul of the Empire, and the Emperor's personal Imperial Guard.

But now, they no longer retained the complete contours of humanity.

Their thick armor was no longer a defense; the exposed skin showed a rough, dark gray covered with bizarre scales, beneath which dark red veins faintly flowed, moving slowly like magma crawling beneath a cooling crust.

Unnatural bones protruded at their necks and spines, some breaking the skin to form half-unfolded bone wings.

Some had grown incomplete wings, others had arms transformed into claw-like limbs covered with scales, but without exception, they all maintained the same posture, silently kneeling, motionless.

Like five thousand living stone statues.

And in this inhuman hell, Lin Ze seemed out of place.

He still wore a perfectly tailored black-and-white butler's attire, with not a speck of dust on the hem, standing at the edge of the blood pool, calmly glancing at the pocket watch in his hand.

The hand ticked slightly, and with an almost inaudible "click," the air of the entire underground palace seemed to tighten abruptly as if gripped by an invisible hand.

At the center of the blood pool, the dark golden liquid that had been flowing slowly suddenly halted.

In the next instant, ripples exploded.

Wave after wave of dark golden ripples spread sharply outward, crashing against the edge of the blood pool, splashing waves several meters high.

Accompanied by a dull roar.

"Boom—!"

Each pulse reverberated through the earth's veins to the surface.

Then the blood water began to recede, slowly making room from the center of the pool outward.

Something massive was rising from within.

The spine appeared first, a spine stretching dozens of meters, each bone covered with dark golden glazed scales with a red glow flowing within, like magma yet to cool.

Next came limbs, torso, unfolded wing bones...

An enormous beast, nearly a hundred meters long, slowly stood upright.

It was not one of the Federation's bloated and ugly alchemic pseudo-dragons, but a true ancient form.

Smooth and powerful lines, with a structure so precise it was almost cruel, every muscle, every bone seemed made for destruction.

At this moment, five thousand Half-Dragon Guards bowed their heads simultaneously.

The enormous dragon head slowly lowered, its eyes finally focusing on the small but upright figure at the edge of the blood pool.

Lin Ze did not retreat; he closed the pocket watch, raising his head to meet the dragon's eyes calmly.

"Lin Ze..." the beast's voice was low and slow, as if reacclimating to this world, "Now, outside... how is it?"

Lin Ze put away the pocket watch, took a step forward, and made a perfect bow.

His movements were meticulous, as if reporting a pre-written annual account, not declaring an Empire's death.

"Your Majesty, the era has changed; the Empire is no more than a name."

He raised his head, not meeting those amber eyes directly, but instead focusing on a point in the void, as if reciting a predetermined fact.

"Second Prince Kaelin, in his decisive battle with the Jade Federation, led twenty legions... all perished. He himself has been confirmed dead.

Moreover, Fifth Prince Lampard has been personally executed by the rising northern power—Louis Calvin."

He paused for a moment, as if giving time for the information to be processed.

"In other words," Lin Ze added softly, "your offspring have all perished, and the Empire you personally forged... is now a ruined wasteland, only in name."

The dark golden dragon eyes contracted slightly.

Then, a dismissive and bored snort came from the Dragon Emperor's nostrils, with red sparks bursting into the air, scorching the nearby rock faces with mottled marks.

"...Useless."

The enormous dragon head slowly bowed, its shadow completely engulfing Lin Ze.

In those golden slit eyes, there was not a trace of sadness for the end of his lineage, only an aversion as if seeing rotten meat.

"I have been gone for less than ten years, and the flawed bloodline can't even guard the home?"

It let out an almost inaudible cold laugh.

"Of course, the Empire gone is gone. It was merely a stepping stone for me on the path to eternity."

It gazed across the entire underground palace, its voice filled with denial of all worldly prosperity.

"In this world, aside from this singular supreme power, all order, civilization, honor, are illusions."

As the words fell, the Dragon Emperor unfurled its sky-obscuring wings.

A booming sound resonated from the dome, the heavy rock unable to withstand this mighty force, displaying countless cracks, the cold wind rushing through the gaps.

"It doesn't matter anymore; tonight I've returned. I will let every ant on this continent understand that their so-called pursuit throughout life is no more fragile than a piece of paper before a true dragon."

Under this soul-shattering proclamation, Lin Ze still stood straight.

He did not kneel like the five thousand Half-Dragon Guards, nor did he tremble before the dragon's might.

On that ever-calm face, instead, appeared a meaningful smile.

Chapter 874: Dragon_2

"As you wish, Your Majesty." Lin Ze spoke, his voice still restrained, "The five thousand Dragon Blood Guards have long thirsted for blood.

Your triumphant return will mark the end of this world."

The old Emperor raised his dragon head.

The next moment, a dragon's roar pierced through the sky, erupting from the depths of the catacombs.

The sound emerged from the ground, and all magical beasts prostrated themselves simultaneously, trembling in fear.

A chill from the top of the food chain.

It was as if something ancient had finally opened its eyes after a long slumber.

"A mortal's sideshow..."

In the aftermath of the dragon's roar, the last whispers echoed.

"It ends here."

.....

Southeast Province, Calvin Castle.

Sunlight streamed through the ancient stained glass windows, casting mottled shadows on the stone floor.

Louis slowly awakened on the broad bed.

The Southeast Province had just been pacified, new order still in the making, and he was forced to stay in this castle, a symbol of old Calvin power, waiting for the next move to take shape.

Emily was already on her way, and at this moment, the entire Calvin Castle had only one true master, him.

The sun was bright outside, even the flags in the courtyard unfurled in the breeze, as if the world had resumed its peace.

But a sudden ill-timed chill rose in Louis's chest.

Without hesitation, he lifted his hand, and a pale blue screen quietly unfurled before his retina.

[Daily Intelligence System Update Complete]

[1: The pseudo-dragon Mammon of the Jade Federation has completed feeding in the Crystal Rock Basin. Ten thousand knights under Kaelin's command have been confirmed entirely devoured, with confirmation of a high-intensity metal attractive field within a radius of about five hundred meters.]

Louis paused mid-breath.

Ten thousand knights, not defeated, but eaten.

This was no longer within the scope of warfare.

Louis slowly sat up, leaning against the headboard, his gaze fixed on the cold text.

The core of the Red Tide Legion is steel and steam.

Tanks, artillery, armored trains, heavy engineering machinery, the whole system, built on absolute reliance on metal.

If that pseudo-dragon named Mammon can truly forcefully attract all metals within five hundred meters...

Then, before it, the heavy units of Red Tide would no longer be an army, but instead, a pile of snacks actively flying into the dragon's mouth.

"A natural enemy specifically against industrial civilization..." Louis concluded inwardly.

A troublesome issue, one that must be resolved.

But he didn't allow his thoughts to linger long on this point, forcing himself to continue reading.

The second piece of intelligence appeared.

[2: The old Emperor, Ernst August, missing for ten years, awakened in an ancient tomb outside the Imperial Capital, confirmed to have absorbed high-purity dragon blood, completing a rebirth and becoming a true dragon.]

This time, Louis's eyebrows furrowed noticeably.

When others mention dragons, perhaps only legends, poems, or exaggerated silhouettes on murals come to mind.

But not for Louis; he knew too well, from those fragmented memories not belonging to this era, what that meant.

It was a walking cataclysm.

A true dragon, in the complete sense, possessing a full structure of wisdom and power, was enough to reshape the world's power structure on its own.

Louis quickly calmed himself, beginning to conduct geopolitical deductions.

The nearest to the Imperial Capital wasn't Gray Rock, Southeast, or the Northern Territory, but the Jade Federation.

"A greedy stomach, an arrogant tyrant..." Louis coolly assessed within himself.

If these two entities truly collide first, it would be best if they could fight to mutual ruin.

He couldn't help but mock himself inwardly: "Is this the resurgence of spiritual energy? Why are monsters all starting to awaken one after another?"

Despite saying so, he felt no relief.

The crisis wasn't emerging at a single point but was systematically surfacing.

His time for leisurely farming had ended.

He continued to read further; the third piece of intelligence quietly hovered at the bottom of the interface.

[3: The Supreme Mage will arrive at Calvin Castle within twenty-four hours, to guide Louis to the Mage Forest, completing the Primordial Magical Power inheritance ceremony.]

Louis's gaze lingered longer on this line of text.

Finally, it's a piece of not-so-bad news.

He slowly closed his eyes, then quickly opened them.

The first two pieces of intelligence were already clear enough to indicate a fact...

With the current level of technology and armament of the Red Tide, it might not be able to confront those two levels of existence head-on.

Whether it's the fake dragon that devours steel, or the true dragon emperor that has completed nirvana.

He needs a higher level of power.

And the Mage Forest may very well be the path to completing himself.

Whether from the resonance reaction of the Primordial Heart or from the long-term intelligence from the Intelligence System about the Mage Forest, it's a faction inclined towards good order and naturally compatible with him.

Risk is certainly present.

But in the current situation, it is a controlled risk.

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Lambert originally thought Louis was going to celebrate their phased victory in the Southeast Province, but when he pushed the door, he was stunned by the cold oppressive aura emanating from Louis's body.

Louis did not exchange pleasantries, nor did he invite him to sit: "I'm giving some orders. All front-line legions, heavy knights, immediately remove their full plate armor and change to thickened magical beast leather armor. Execute immediately, no delays."

At that moment, Lambert even thought he misheard.

For a knight, plate armor is a second life, losing it means being exposed in the face of arrow rain, shrapnel, and explosive bullets.

This is common sense even the most reckless recruits understand.

His pupils contracted violently, instinctively wanting to speak, but ultimately not saying a word.

Because in Louis's eyes, there was not a hint of hesitation, and he couldn't be wrong.

Louis spread a densely marked map on the table, his fingertip slowly sliding along the border line of the Jade Federation.

"Second thing, transport all low-purity iron scraps and waste rust powder from the warehouse, cooperate with the alchemy team to make new weapons, and then bag them all up to be distributed with the army."

Lambert finally couldn't hold it in, his voice lowered a bit: "My lord... what can these things do?"

"Bait," Louis said, "over on the Jade Federation side, it's already confirmed that an abnormal individual has appeared. It's large—you all need to be careful—and it forcibly pulls metal on the battlefield."

Lambert's breath suddenly halted.

"Armor and weapons, as long as they're within a certain range, will be forcibly pulled away, so remember..."

Louis lightly tapped on the map.

"Once there's an abnormal tremor on the front line, or an irresistible pull, do not try to hold the formation. Immediately scatter all iron scraps in the opposite direction."

Louis's tone carried a hint of cold irony: "Don't think those iron scraps are just waste. I've already ordered the Alchemy Workshop to mix high concentrations of magnetic storm dust and directional collapsing crystals into them.

Since that monster likes to devour steel, we'll give it a dessert potent enough to burn its stomach. The faster it absorbs, the more intense the alchemical reaction inside it."

"The alchemy team is still experimenting. I want these iron scraps to become a fatal bait that the beast cannot resist."

After issuing the orders, Louis walked around the long table, coming to stand before Lambert.

He reached out and placed his hand on the other's shoulder armor, the strength was light, yet it made Lambert instinctively tense his body.

"I need to leave for a while," Louis said softly.

"In the coming days, you might see things you've never seen in your life. The army will be under your full command, with Gray in charge of tactical coordination.

"Remember one thing, do not stubbornly hold your ground. If that thing appears, take your people and retreat into the deep mountains. Wait for me to return."

Lambert's chest shook, he pounded his chest heavily, making a proper knight's salute: "As you command."

Louis nodded and let him go.

Afterwards, the office was abuzz with activity as administrative orders were issued like a stream.

The populace within thirty kilometers of the border was orderly moved inland.

All large metal processing workshops were closed, wartime control took immediate effect.

Under the prestige suppression of Lord Calvin, the unrest was quickly quelled.

The entire administrative system of the Southeast Province was twisted into a taut rope, ready at any moment.

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Night fell, on the terrace of Calvin's castle, cold winds swept past the stone railings.

Louis was standing in the darkness when Weir came quickly: "Reporting, my lord, the Supreme Mage has arrived."

The next moment, the air gently vibrated.

An elderly man in a magic robe walked through the void, runes gently swirling around him.

When he saw Louis already fully prepared, with not even any extra luggage, his eyes clearly showed a hint of surprise.

The explanation and prelude he had prepared were all stuck in his throat.

Louis didn't give him the chance to speak: "Let's go, Mage, time is not on our side."

Chapter 875: The Empire's Fall

The collapse of the Empire began to spread from the moment the report of Kaelin's death arrived.

At first, this piece of news only circulated in low voices among the senior officers, all of them somewhat unable to believe it.

Soon a second message followed. Duke Remont had defected to the Jade Federation.

This time, the order within the barracks disintegrated within a few breaths, and the front line that had barely been held together lost its framework as if its bones had been pulled out.

Kaelin still had an heir, but to continue holding out seemed to have lost all meaning.

By the night of the third day, the first fully formed unit abandoned its position without orders and defected toward the Jade Federation.

That was like a signal, and what followed was rout turning into a flood.

The Knights no longer marched in formation, but scattered in twos and threes, running back along any road they could remember, or simply turning toward the Southeast.

They no longer cared about the borders of the Empire, only about where there might still be a way to live.

The Empire became a stretch of land without an owner; cities once controlled in a radial web by the Central Administrative District fell silent one after another.

And the Jade Federation did not waste this opportunity.

The instructions from the board of directors were simple: ignore cost, consider only efficiency.

The Federation's siege columns advanced along the Old Empire's official roads.

It was not the marching formation of a legion, but a disposal unit intermixed from Alchemists, accounting officers, and Knights.

Heavy alchemy wagons moved slowly along the center of the road, their carriages reinforced with riveted steel plates, the marks of various Guilds engraved on their sides.

When they reached the first town that refused to surrender, there was no encirclement, and no attempt at persuasion.

The Alchemists opened the sealed valves on the carriages and released the prepared alchemy poison gas, letting it spread with the wind from higher ground.

The toxic fog slowly diffused along the streets, flowing close to the bases of the walls, seeping into window cracks and drainage ditches.

A Knight on garrison had just rung the alarm bell; the bell tolled only twice before his body went limp and collapsed inside the tower.

On the street, a merchant was pushing a half-loaded cart, trying to flee, but he tripped at the corner and never got up again.

In barely a quarter of an hour, the entire town was left with nothing but alchemical gases slowly settling in the air.

The buildings remained intact, the warehouse doors stood open, and not a single item was missing from the shelves.

Next into the city came the takeover team.

Wearing filter masks, they counted assets, sealed land deeds, and directly entered the still-intact city into the Federation's ledgers.

If they encountered a fortress that refused to surrender, the Federation's method was even more straightforward.

Tens of thousands of refugees were driven to the base of the walls.

These people had been pre-filled with unstable Alchemy Potions, their minds dulled, their steps stiff.

A young refugee stopped at the foot of the wall, seemed to briefly regain clarity, raised his head to look at the ramparts, his lips parting slightly, yet no sound managed to come out.

The next moment, a whip cracked behind him; he was shoved forward and pressed together with the others against the base of the wall.

When the first body struck the wall, the explosions began.

Flesh and stone flew together, and a breach was torn open by force in an extremely short span of time.

The fortress's defenses were not broken through; they were spent away.

And behind all of this, Mammon began to move forward.

Its body sprawled across the plain, and the tremors of its movement made the surface of the earth feel as though it were being rolled over again and again.

As it neared the first fortress, the garrison was still trying to shut the iron gate.

The next instant, a shrill grinding tore through the air.

The heavy gate warped on its own within the intense magnetic field; steel beams twisted and snapped, forcibly stripped from their original structure and hurled toward the interior of the city like runaway projectiles.

The metal fittings on the towers were torn down and smashed into the plaza.

The cannons began to lose control in the calibration phase: some barrels were forcibly bent off-axis, some exploded on the spot, fragments flying backward and blowing away whole sections of the wall.

The first to fall were not those standing atop the ramparts.

They were the Knights encased in armor.

Within that zone, metal no longer obeyed human will.

The armor rapidly contracted under the pull of the field, joints were locked rigid, and bones cracked with the sound of a burden they could not bear.

Some had not even drawn their swords before their own protection crushed them to the ground.

Longswords flew from their hands, changed direction mid-air, and drove back through their wielders' chests.

Raymond's banner remained at the very front of the column.

He led the Federation Army through the provinces he had once ruled, deftly pointing out routes, supply points, and which cities were best suited for direct takeover and which could be treated as expendable.

Mammon advanced slowly behind.

Wherever it passed, no troops needed to be sent to mop up.

This army led by Mammon, guided by Raymond, and scoured clean with alchemy poison gas cut through the Empire's heartland at a speed that bordered on the unreasonable.

The outline of the Imperial Capital had already appeared at the far edge of the horizon.

And in that city, there was no longer anyone capable of issuing a single truly effective order.

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In Crystal Rock City, the council chamber of the Supreme Board hovered in the sky.

Clement, chairman of the Bihui Guild, lifted his wine glass, his fingertip giving it a light swirl, and cast his gaze at the image projected at the center of the round table.

In the picture, Mammon's massive body was slowly moving across the plain.

"Better than the figures on paper." Clement's tone was casual. "I originally thought it would take a month to digest Kaelin's legion; now it seems that a single day already counts as dragging down efficiency."

When he spoke, it sounded as if he were merely commenting on a return on investment that had exceeded expectations.

Isabella, chairwoman of the Silver Plate Guild, did not look up. She was using a silver table knife to cut off a small piece of foie gras, her movements impeccably elegant.

Chapter 876: The Empire's Fall (2)

"The things left by our ancestors were heavily underestimated by us." She put the piece of foie gras into her mouth, chewed it lightly, then continued speaking.

"But since even Kaelin has become fertilizer, then Louis's Red Tide Territory in the north... at best, it's just a harder piece of dry bread."

Her tone was gentle, yet left no room for compromise.

Low laughter sounded around the round table.

Detailed intel came from the front, the Empire Army's line being erased segment by segment under Mamon's feet.

The first fortress lost its gate on the seventeenth breath after contact with the magnetic field, the main cannon misfired on the twenty-ninth breath, the fortifications became unstable on the thirty-fourth breath...

"They didn't even have time to launch an effective counterattack." A director glanced at the timeline, with noticeable impatience in his tone, "From entering the effective range to total dysfunction took on average less than half an hour."

He raised his wine glass, as if confirming a trivial data point.

"The Empire's way of fighting is too outdated."

"They're still trying to stabilize their formations, only to become a beautifully arranged platter."

"Raymond's defection was a surprise gain, a quality managerial talent familiar with the old system and adaptable to current circumstances, low cost of introduction and short return cycle."

"It's more cost-effective than training new people."

The topic naturally shifted to the next agenda item.

Someone mentioned food pressure, someone mentioned public security issues, as if the entire Empire was already in their pocket.

"Migration of low-end labor." Isabella flipped through the ledger, her tone steady, "If properly guided, it's enough to fill the mining area's gaps for the next five to ten years."

The scene switched, the Imperial Capital appearing old and gloomy in the night, contrasting sharply with Crystal Rock City's lighting.

They began discussing the increasing number of refugees within the Empire's borders.

"That place is too old." Isabella glanced up, "High maintenance costs, yet the symbolic meaning has long devalued. When Mamon moves past, flatten the foundations, I will personally press the directional blasting button."

Clement took over the conversation: "Demolish the Imperial Palace, and establish the largest magic stone and futures trading center on the continent at the original site. Turn that throne of royal power, which has been sat on for a thousand years, into a counter for merchants to bid."

He paused slightly, with a hint of undisguised pleasure in his tone.

"We want future historians to understand, the end of the August family was brought by a settled account, not the sword of a hero."

Laughter around the round table, this time not restrained.

"For greed."

"For an empire that no longer has inheritance value."

Crystal glasses were raised, the crisp sound of clinking reverberating in the silent conference hall.

Finally, someone casually started a small betting pool on the table, chips being pushed around, numbers constantly changing.

The bet was simple.

How many hours could Louis Calvin withstand in front of Mamon?

In their eyes, this Lord with the largest territory was not an opponent.

"It seems our previous caution was somewhat redundant, we should revise our assessment of Louis. Continuing to treat him as a variable will only slow down our pace."

"Indeed." Clement nodded.

...

The walls of the Imperial Capital glowed pale in the sunset, now devoid of its edge, leaving only heaviness and age.

Raymond stood on the plains outside the city, looking at the stone wall that had stood for a thousand years, somehow feeling an illusion.

It was not as invincible as imagined, more like a piece of wind-dried bone that would shatter with a few taps.

Mamon's enormous body stretched across the plains, like an entire mountain range lifted off the ground.

As it slowly stood upright, its diamond-structured spine rising into the sky, the sunlight was completely blocked.

The shadow swept over the city walls, swept over the tall towers of the Imperial Palace, and swept over the already ruined square.

This was a confrontation far from equal.

On the walls, the only ones left standing were Kaelin's son leading a troop of the Royal Guard.

His voice was hoarse, yet he still issued the order to volley.

The crossbow bolts left the strings, but as soon as they flew out, they began to deviate.

Mamon opened its mouth.

It was not a conventional giant mouth, but a cavity composed of polyhedral diamond structures.

Gravity was redefined at that moment, metal on the walls began to emit a deep hum.

The steel crossbows first broke loose from their fixtures, forcibly stripped from the battlements. Then came longswords, long spears, and the heavy armor tightly clasped to bodies.

The garrison even passed away without time for a complete scream.

The armor was pulled and deformed, joints emitting a harsh cracking sound, flesh crushed and stirred within the steel.

People and equipment were dragged away from the walls, torn into indistinguishable shapes in mid-air.

Black iron shavings and blood mist mixed together, sucked into the wide-open mouth.

The city gate of the Imperial Capital lost its shape within a few breaths.

The heavy metal components collapsed like wrinkled paper, instantly.

This ancient capital, which had lasted for a thousand years, completely lost its defenses before making a decent resistance.

In the sky, the Federation's frontline command platform hovered above the Imperial Capital.

Duke Remont stood at the edge of the platform, looking down at the familiar yet unfamiliar city district below.

His cloak fluttered in the wind, fingers slowly rubbing the ruby ring, the corners of his mouth inadvertently lifted.

"I should have done this long ago." He said, with undisguised satisfaction in his tone, "The August family's bloodline has long rotted. Clinging to those fake honors will only drag one into the grave."

He turned his head, looking at the Federation's frontline commander General Batuer beside him: "Gold coins and power are the things that are eternal."

General Batuer held a cigar, its ember flickering in the wind.

"There are quite a few valuable things in this city." He slowly spoke, "Antiques, books, artworks... Tonight all will be sent into the Federation's warehouse."

He paused there, casually blowing out a puff of smoke: "As for that Louis."

Raymond's smile instantly faded.

His gaze turned cold, fingers unconsciously tightened, the ruby slightly swayed in the ring.

"The Northern Territory thief, using some sordid tricks, took away the territory and glory that should have belonged to me." Raymond's voice gradually sharpened.

"Once we've digested the Imperial Capital, I will have Mamon march east, flatten his Red Tide Territory, and have him kneel to serve the Federation."

General Batuer chuckled softly.

"High-end alchemy slave." He commented, "Perhaps a decent usage."

Before they could finish speaking, a commotion suddenly arose in the previously orderly marching formation below the platform, with horses simultaneously emitting low-pitched neighs.

Raymond frowned, instinctively holding onto the railing of the platform.

Mamon stopped its actions, the gates of the Imperial Capital where it hovered heavily fell.

The gigantic creature's previously focused feeding posture was interrupted, it slowly raised its head, its diamond-structured head turning towards a direction outside the Imperial Capital.

There lay the ancient tombs where generations of the Royal Family ancestors rested.

The air changed instantly.

All sounds disappeared simultaneously, even the wind was suppressed, it was a higher order existence descending.

The ground began to tremble.

The mountains outside the Imperial Capital experienced a violent collapse, rock layers torn apart, a dark golden beam of light shot skyward, piercing the clouds.

In the next moment, a dragon roar tore the sky.

"Roar——!!!"

The explosive roar pierced the eardrums, directly striking the depths of the soul, carrying unabashed arrogance and displeasure.

The soundwave swept across.

Federation flags in the air instantly turned to powder, the cigar slipped from General Batuer's fingers.

Duke Remont felt his legs weaken, his consciousness yet to respond before his body uncontrollably knelt on the platform.

He looked up, face pale.

At the end of that dark golden beam of light, something was slowly opening its eyes.

Chapter 877: Dragon Battle (Part 1)

On the outskirts of the Imperial Capital, the clusters of ancient tombs exploded in an instant.

Sarcophagi, pillars, and heavy layers of earth were violently thrown into the air by a force from within, as a dark golden beam pierced the ground and shot into the clouds.

The air within a ten-mile radius was forcibly evacuated.

At first, there was an eerie silence so surreal, then the compressed air rebounded sharply, with explosive sounds spreading across the ground, shaking people's eardrums and making their minds go blank.

August stepped out from the beam of light.

Dark gold dragon scales covered his entire body, presenting a cold, hard texture under the light.

Between the scales, a blood-colored fighting energy slowly flowed, like molten lava yet to cool, forcibly bound within its shell.

Behind him, five thousand Dragon-man Guard Army members emerged from the glow.

Their steps were orderly, landing without excess motion, as if accustomed to walking under such heavy pressure.

Among them, five had once stood at the pinnacle as Peak Knights of the old era.

Their forms were larger than the other dragon-men, exuding an undeniable air of oppression even when standing still.

August's eyes swept across the battlefield.

The shattered city walls in the direction of the Imperial Capital, the advancing formation of the Federation Army, and the giant pseudo-dragon lurking on the plains—everything quickly aligned within his perception.

Then he spoke: "To think they've pushed all the way to the Imperial Capital... what a bunch of unworthy descendants."

As his words fell, he slightly exerted force on his legs.

His wings unfolded, the air forcibly torn apart as August's figure vanished from where he stood, sweeping toward the direction of the Federation's formation and Mamon.

"Roar—!"

An invisible wave covered the entire battlefield, directly affecting the depths of one's bloodline.

Within the Federation Legion, the first to lose response were the steeds, their limbs going limp and collapsing to the ground.

Then the knights' hands holding weapons began to tremble, their knees buckling uncontrollably as they attempted to stand firm, only to find their bodies unwilling to obey, forcing them to kneel into the mud.

They raised their heads.

In the sky, a true dragon of incredible size obscured the light.

It was not an alchemic construct or a pieced-together monster, but an archetype from legend.

Light and shadow glided over its scales without lending it any warmth.

General Batuer, the supreme commander of the Federation front, was frozen in place, his cigar long fallen from his mouth, unnoticed.

As the Federation's calmest and most risk-calculating tactician, his mind momentarily went blank.

Instinctively, he wanted to issue commands, moving his lips without knowing what to utter.

For any order at that moment had lost its meaning.

Beside him, Raymond had already knelt down.

His movements were almost instinctual, as his knees touched the ground, he wasn't even aware of what he was doing, only feeling a pressure from the depths of his soul crushing all his pride.

This was the gap in bloodline, Raymond's pupils contracted violently.

Impossible... absolutely impossible...

His mind raced frantically, trying to deny everything before his eyes.

This was the true dragon.

The dragon corpse he had spent his life studying, the refined Dragon Blood Warrior, was less than a millionth of this existence, merely a failed product borrowing dregs of power.

Not long ago, he thought allying with the Federation was standing at the world's pinnacle.

He now realized he was just a fool, self-assuredly safe at the feet of a behemoth.

On the other side, Mamon issued its response.

The pseudo-dragon, nurtured by the Federation for four hundred years with magic stones, did not back down.

Dense luminous patterns lit up on its crystalline surface, producing a harsh screech from within its structure, like a mining vein being forcefully squeezed.

A powerful magnetic field expanded fully to resist the oppressive bloodline pressure.

Its body was more than triple the size of August.

In purely bodily terms, it was like a moving mountain range.

Next, Mamon emitted a low gravitational roar.

The space around them vibrated.

The edge of the domain August released was shattered with a violent blow, causing brief chaos and tearing in the air.

It was a relentless face-off.

Even under suppression, Mamon still displayed the terrifying mass capable of contending with a true dragon.

Two completely different beings faced each other for the first time beneath the sky of the Imperial Capital.

The dominator of the old era versus the malformed creation of the new century.

August descended swiftly.

Dark golden claws tore the air, landing heavily on Mamon's diamond shell.

Its crystalline surface was scratched open forcibly, with glaring sparks erupting upon impact.

"Roar—!" Mamon let out a deep, resonant low sound.

It was not a roar, more akin to the resonance of a deeply buried vein under immense pressure.

A several-hundred-meter-long dragon tail swung out, this strike devoid of technique, containing only sheer mass and speed.

The air compressed and twisted along the tail's path, then exploded with a deafening bang.

August judged a moment too late.

Dark gold dragon scales shattered in large swathes under the direct impact, scattering like rain.

His massive dragon form was flung aside like a runaway meteor, slamming into the ground with force.

The earth caved in.

Rock layers erupted outward at the point of impact, forming an unfathomable rift, the earth's veins sagging under the weight, rumbling as dust was cast high into the sky.

Before August could fully rise, Mamon pressed down upon him, mouth suddenly opening wide to bite fiercely at his flank.

Chapter 878: Dragon Battle (Part 1)

The layers of crystalline structures interlocked, emitting a grating sound.

Terrifying magnetic fields expanded fully inside the giant mouth, like countless invisible claws, directly probing into Austin's body, forcibly stripping away the dragon's blood within.

The dark golden blood was dragged, rushing towards the wound, the light that was stable under the scales began to disarray.

"How dare you." Austin's roar exploded on the battlefield, carrying undisguised rage.

The sound waves themselves formed an impact, causing the space around to tremble once again before it stabilized.

"Mere counterfeit dares to desecrate the true dragon?"

Yet the only response was Mamon's even heavier hum, the crystal face flashing frantically, the magnetic field intensity pushed even higher.

Austin no longer tried to break free; instead, he actively released his defenses.

The dark golden dragon blood spilled on the ground ignited at the same moment.

The blood flames did not spread outward but quickly condensed into chains of dark gold.

The chains surged along the magnetic paths set by Mamon, invading its internal structure at the bite point.

"If the emperor does not permit..." Austin seemed to be pronouncing a judgment, "your existence is all void."

The chains suddenly tightened.

Mamon let out a more resonant wail, the crystalline structure emitted a piercing sound of shattering, the magnetic field experienced a brief disruption.

But it still did not let go, its massive mouth clamped tightly, attempting to complete the separation before the chains fully formed.

The dark golden blood flames and cold crystals eroded and tore at each other at a very close distance.

The two colossal beings stood firm over the torn earth, the true dragon's roar intertwining with the pseudo-dragon's low hum, causing the whole battlefield to tremble.

.....

On the other side of the battlefield, the Half-Dragon Guard stepped in.

Their appearance was almost without any forewarning.

The dragon-scaled bodies seemed particularly rigid amidst the dust, each footfall calculated repeatedly.

Within the Federation Army, attempts were made to adjust formations, and poison gas was swiftly released.

The gray-green mist spread along the ground, following the wind direction into the Half-Dragon corps' marching route.

Alchemical reactions quickly formed in the air, meant to take life within moments.

Yet the moment the mist touched the half-dragons, it changed.

A layer of extremely faint dark red gloss lit upon the surface of the scales, the poison gas directly evaporated under the high temperature, emitting a dense, sharp sound, like water droplets falling on a red-hot iron plate.

The Half-Dragon corps did not pause, quickly surpassing the poisonous mist, and at the moment of contact with the Federation front ranks, the formation was torn open.

A Federation Heavy Knight didn't even have time to fully deploy his shield before his chest was penetrated straight through by a claw.

Alchemical steel plates dented and shattered upon impact, the reinforced internal structure did not provide any buffer, bones fractured, the body thrown forward, crushing companions behind.

The half-dragon's moves were brief and direct.

But each strike resulted in a body losing its ability to act.

Soon the Federation knight formations could not hold, starting to retreat and collapse.

Someone turned and ran, yet stumbled by the crowded ranks behind, someone tried to ignite explosives, only to have their wrist shattered the instant they lifted it.

A half-dragon grabbed a knight's head, fingers clenched, helmet and skull shattered together.

The corpse was tossed aside carelessly, incomplete upon landing.

The formation continued advancing.

The half-dragons maintained fixed distances between each other, needing no communication.

Each individual was like a segment of activated commands.

The center of the Federation Army formation began to collapse.

The counterattacks that could be barely maintained were swiftly severed.

Heavy lances were broken, alchemical shields embedded with magic stones shattered upon frontal impacts, uncharged devices were directly crushed, expensive magic stones losing their luster in the soil.

Yet these things couldn't halt the advance.

A single half-dragon in a short advance, successively devastated over a dozen Federation knights.

Those knights clearly had High-tier Elite Knight strength with well-equipped gear, yet still couldn't alter the outcome.

Claws stained with blood, yet not even a scratch remained on the scales.

When the formation pierced through the Federation Army ranks, only a void was left behind.

Those still alive were not enough to compose a complete unit.

This was a slaughter without suspense.

The Federation Army ranks at the forefront were completely cleared.

The region traversed by the Half-Dragon formation was left with only crushed equipment, severed limbs, and lingering heat.

The moment the front row vanished, the rear completely collapsed.

The Federation Knights, who had yet to engage the enemy, witnessed the entire process. They were well aware that those who fell were not weaklings but rather on par with themselves, if not stronger.

Yet, they saw the entire line being sliced into emptiness within mere seconds, saw officers, once regarded as the core of the front line, crushed before they could even issue commands.

At that moment, panic spread rapidly through the crowd, like a lit fuse.

Some dropped their weapons and turned to flee, some were trampled beneath by the retreating soldiers before they could climb back up, and still others were frozen in place, lips trembling, losing even the courage to run.

The formation was completely undone.

From a distant high platform, Raymond stared blankly at the scene.

This was the army he had never imagined even in his dreams, so powerful and so perfect.

The strength of the knights, the fine equipment, the expensive alchemy technology—all seemed futile in the face of such an existence.

He had once thought the Federation wielded a more efficient force, now realizing it was nothing but child's play.

A chill raced up his spine.

Raymond took no more second glance; he turned abruptly, almost stumbling off the high platform.

Leave this place.

This thought roared repeatedly in his mind, overpowering all dignity.

He was an Extraordinary Knight, running away posed no issues—his fighting energy burst within, legs powered, his figure shot off the platform edge like an arrow, racing along the broken path backwards.

But barely a hundred steps out, wails and cries closed in from behind.

Raymond's heart sank sharply.

At the moment he turned back, he glimpsed only a Half-Dragon Knight.

Dark scales, cold hard lines—no longer resembling any Imperial Knight he remembered, the face reshaped by draconian transformation, devoid of human features.

Yet rationality told Raymond he was no match for this one at all.

In that instant, the Half-Dragon Knight moved.

Space forcibly compressed into a line, lighting up with brief and dangerous brightness.

As the first sword light swept by, Raymond could not even discern the action.

From the side, a Federation Extraordinary Knight was sliced open directly.

Armor, fighting energy, and flesh all severed on the same trajectory; the body had yet to fall, and the second light already pierced through.

Another knight attempted to deploy a fighting energy defense, but failed...

The blade did not pause.

One after another...

Within mere seconds, multiple Extraordinary Knights had fallen.

These individuals far surpassed Imperial Extraordinary Knights in strength or equipment, yet lacked the qualification to make the opponent pause.

Raymond did not stop running; conversely, his burning fighting energy and life force propelled him to escape the battlefield.

But the Half-Dragon Knight swept past him, the airflow brushing Raymond's cheek—he wasn't even able to lift his sword again.

The next moment, the opponent already stood before him.

The distance was so close, Raymond finally saw those eyes, carrying a familiarity that chilled his spine.

It was a gaze he'd seen only in one person.

Raymond opened his mouth, wanting to utter that name.

The sword light descended first.

Two strokes.

The first stroke broke the defense.

The second stroke ended life.

The Extraordinary Knight's body fell forward, heavily striking the ground.

In the final moment of consciousness's descent, Raymond finally recalled the title erased by time—the Blade of the Empire.

Yet none of this mattered anymore; the Half-Dragon Knight sheathed his sword and continued forward.
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Soon, no standing Jade Federation Knights could be found on the battlefield.

Remaining resistance was extinguished completely. Whether Transcendent or elite, no matter how costly the alchemy armor, all had fallen on the battlefield.

Bodies and equipment mixed, trampled into the mud, leaving little value for retrieval.

The Half-Dragon Imperial Guard did not linger, immediately changing direction, formations shifting naturally, advancing towards the central horror of the battlefield.

The horizon ahead was collapsing; two massive entities clashed head-on in the central area, overwhelming forces incomprehensible.

Dark gold dragon-blood flames and cold crystal light patterns intertwined, every impact drawing low mournful groans from the earth veins.

That was not their level of battle.

Yet, these Half-Dragon Knights did not stop but pressed swiftly and directly towards the two beasts tearing the world apart.

Chapter 879: Dragon's Battle (Part 2)

When two colossal beasts tear and tangle at the center of the battlefield, the earth no longer maintains a stable form.

The dark gold blood scattered by August on the surface suddenly shines, transforming into chains of burning red, coiling upward, invading internally along Mammon's biting path.

Mammon increases its magnetic output, its crystal surface flickering madly, attempting to crush the invading foreign matter inside.

The two forces collide head-on internally, causing a secondary collapse on the surface as the rock layers are compressed into irregular folds.

Amid this chaos, five thousand dark red figures sprint out along the crevices and faults, their speed pushed to the limit within seconds.

Scales and the surface friction create short sparks, yet their steps are consistent, spacing precise, the whole legion resembling a frontline compressed to the extreme.

The dragon blood scattered by August draws dark gold trails in the air, like burning chains guiding their path.

As they approach, the Dragon Guard begins to climb.

Hundreds of figures leap simultaneously, landing on Mammon's diamond body of thousands of meters long.

To this pseudo-dragon, these existences are so insignificant they can be nearly ignored, insufficient to draw attention.

Until the first dragon bone spear pierces the crystal surface gap.

This is no random attack.

The Dragon Guard share the old Emperor's perspective through a bloodline link.

The spear tip accurately wedges into the smallest misalignment of the crystal structure, sliding into the fissure.

Dozens of Dragon Guard exert force simultaneously, their fighting energy bursting forth, as they mercilessly cut their own scales.

Dark red blood flows along the spear shafts, resonating with the dark gold dragon blood, forcibly amplifying the power.

Ear-piercing cracking sounds echo successively.

Those gigantic diamond plates, capable of resisting forbidden curses, are pried loose piece by piece.

Mammon begins to roll in agony.

The magnetic field shakes violently, trying to fling off these intruders.

The crystal surface sparks eye-piercingly, the earth rupturing in response.

Some Dragon Guard under close energy recoil have their scales explode, their figures lose control, directly flung off the body and fall into the surging ravine below.

But more Dragon Guard remain firmly anchored.

Their limbs embed into the crystal surface, spears penetrate structural nodes, their bodies emitting muffled bone creaks amidst the tremors, yet none let go.

August sees this.

Mammon's giant mouth still firmly bites his flank, tearing the dark gold scales, dragon blood continually dripping.

But he does not struggle free; instead, he deliberately turns his head, letting the fangs pierce deeper.

He lets out a low laugh.

The laughter emanates from his chest, not sharp but with a kind of arrogance, as if mocking a long-flawed object that finally reveals a flaw.

He gazes directly into those lifeless diamond eyes, speaking slowly and clearly:

"Can you feel it? The weight you pride in, your traction, the power you've devoured..."

Dark gold blood slides down his scales, sparking small flames in the air.

"Now, all nourishment for the Emperor."

Under August's gaze, the Dragon Guard completes the final prying.

Mammon's chest is forcibly opened.

The Federation-proud "physical immunity" defense, like shelled ore, scatters on the ground.

The dazzling core within, almost too bright to look at, is fully exposed to the air.

August speaks lowly: "You are strong but before my will, not even a speck of dust."

The moment his voice falls, all suppression vanishes.

August suddenly tightens his broken dragon wings, locking Mammon's neck firmly.

His right claw shines, claws penetrating the chest.

"Roar——!!!"

A booming scream expands, as if the entire continent is struck with a heavy hammer.

August slowly retracts his arm.

In his claws, he holds a massive core.

Mammon begins to collapse, its body spanning thousands of meters rapidly losing structural support.

The once transparent diamond loses its luster, turning into gray waste mineral.

The mountain-like body disintegrates within seconds, the rising dust covering half the Imperial Capital.

August stands atop the corpse remains, directly swallowing the core.

Golden light bursts forth.

The broken dragon wing instantaneously reassembles, wounds disappear, aura transitions completed.

The scattered diamond fragments are drawn into the air, instantly forged in high-temperature dragon breath, adhering outside the dark gold scales, forming a new outer structure.

A fully evolved dark gold dragon body stands amidst the ruins.

August ignores the collapsing Imperial Capital beneath him.

In fact, that wasteland didn't even linger in his sight for a moment.

His anger is surging.

These ants daring to desecrate the dragon's authority, a fake god piled together with money and scheming, has wasted so much of his time.

He doesn't even glance back at the third of the Dragon-man Guard Army slain.

In his eyes, this war is long over; it's time to settle accounts with those backstage pests.

August raises his dragon head, unleashing a roar carrying pure fury into the sky.

Dark gold wings suddenly flap.

The dragon body directly breaks the sound barrier, the air roughly parted.

Due to the speed, vacuum shock waves crush downward, instantly overturning and ripping the forests on the ground.

The dark gold figure transforms into a lightning bolt piercing the sky, not slowing at all.

His wrath finds the next host.

Crossing the border, the city built upon wealth, Crystal Rock City has entered his killing intent range.

.....

The lights in the council chamber at the top of the floating island remain bright.

Under the crystal dome, the directors of the seven guilds suddenly gathered around the round table.

Clement, the Speaker, swirled his wine glass and glanced at the crowd, "Don't get too excited. Although the Empire's resistance is like a mantis trying to stop a cart, we should still give them some respect."

Everyone chuckled, as if they had heard a funny joke.

"I bet five million magic stones," Clement said casually, "three minutes, it won't last any longer than that, the so-called glory of the Empire might just last that long."

One director laughed and added, "Three minutes is too conservative. The walls are still made of old metal and broken stone, I give it two and a half."

Another shook his head, "Two and a half is unrealistic. Mamon needs time for complete devouring, and cleaning up debris. Or it will affect the purity of recovery."

Laughter spread around the table.

Someone noted an entry in the ledger, someone raised a glass in salute, and others had already started discussing how to divide the warehouses and population quotas of the Imperial Capital after the battle.

In their context, it was not the end of a nation, but earnings already entering the settlement process.

Suddenly, the music stopped.

The musician in charge of accompaniment paused, looking down at his fingers.

Blood was oozing from his fingertips, several alchemy strings silently snapped, as if being pulled to the limit by some invisible force.

Before he could speak, the red wine on the table ceased to swirl.

The liquid detached itself from the glass wall, slowly floated upward, and condensed into blood-red beads in the air.

A director frowned and instinctively looked up, "...Why has the sky darkened?"

Outside the dome, the starry sky disappeared.

Instead, there was a thick, cold, dark golden scale covering the entire sky.

A gigantic dragon eye slowly descended.

Golden flames swirled in the pupils, illuminating every face in the chamber pale.

Those eyes, once filled with Gold Coins and ledgers, now were left with nothing but fear.

Clement was the first to react.

He suddenly stood up, fingers trembling, initiating the highest defense array.

The dome and walls simultaneously lit up with complex runes, encasing the chamber in layers of shields.

"Great Dragon Race!" His voice lost its usual composure, "I am the Speaker of the Jade Federation! We possess half of the world's wealth! We can act on your behalf, just name your price..."

Before he finished speaking, a voice was already resonating within the bones of everyone present.

"Name a price?" The voice was deep and calm, yet impossible to ignore, "Your so-called wealth, is nothing but crumbs that slipped through my fingers while I slept."

The chamber fell into dead silence.

"You dare use my crumbs to buy your lives from me?"

Anger took shape in that instant.

It wasn't rage, but complete contempt.

To August, the true sin of these merchants was not greed, but the audacity to sit at a negotiation table with a god using money.

The dark gold claw descended, ripping open the supposedly unbreakable composite shield as if it were a piece of waste paper.

The dome shattered, a whirlwind poured in, ledgers, antiques, platters, and wine glasses were swept into the air, turning into falling fragments amidst screams.

Isabella screamed, activating the teleportation array.

Just as the light flared, a wisp of dragon breath descended.

Her body abruptly stiffened in mid-air, skin, clothes, bones were plated with a thick layer of pure gold in an instant.

The unbalanced statue fell from the floating island's edge.

Moments later, a dull crash emanated from the slum below.

Golden shards splattered, embedding into the streets along with flesh.

And Clement hadn't stepped back yet when a dragon toe already pressed against his chest.

"Since you love magic stones so," August's voice was as cold as metal, "I shall satisfy you."

Clement opened his mouth, but no sound came out.

His blood began to crystallize.

Translucent clusters of high-purity magic stones pierced through his skin, growing, branching, penetrating bones.

The agony lasted but a short time before consciousness was completely submerged.

Moments later, the human form had disappeared.

In its place was a gem flower composed of blood-red crystals, standing quietly at the center of the shattered chamber.

August did not stop, the small-scale slaughter did not appease his anger.

He raised his head, roared a sound that shook the entire continent.

The dragon body continued to expand, fueled by the core of greed, dark golden scales filled the view.

August wasn't in a rush to end it all, he hovered high in the sky, coldly overlooking Crystal Rock City as one would inspect a precious artifact awaiting disassembly.

In the next half-day, the Jade Federation met its true reckoning.

Towers fell, streets collapsed, fleeing crowds scattered under the dark golden shadow, unable to find an exit.

As the last light curtain fell, the city finally lost its original shape.

Streets, towers, workshops, and still-struggling lives were all engulfed in dark golden molten streams.

Having ended it all, August had lost interest in staying.

Slowly he rose, dark golden scales grating against the plateau with a low sound.

The dragon eye turned east, towards the direction where the Empire's old territory stretched, and the land he personally left behind yet trampled by mortals.

"Time to reclaim it."

This statement wasn't a declaration, but more of a confirmation of reality.

Next moment, wings unfolded.

The wind pressure swept across the dark golden plateau, lifting stones and mineral dust simultaneously.

August soared, his dragon body tearing through the clouds, heading east.

Everything temporarily overseen by mortals was to be reclaimed.

Under his will, a nation founded on the dragon's brilliance was about to take shape.

Not a return to the Old Empire, but an erasure of all past, a divine kingdom molded by his own hands.

Let this world finally realize... the one true Emperor has returned.

Chapter 880: Where Is the Forest Guardian?

Louis followed behind the Supreme Mage Aurelian, stepping into the Mage Forest.

The outermost area already revealed an entirely different aura from the outside world.

Tall yet humble Mage Towers were scattered among the woods, their towers covered in the marks of time's erosion.

There was no bustling, nor could one speak of affluence here.

Louis could see mages in magic robes busying themselves, some transporting materials, some recording runes, while others stood on open platforms repeatedly calibrating arrays.

When they saw Aurelian appear, their conversations immediately ceased.

Whether it was the older High-tier Mages or the Magic Apprentices who had just stepped into the field of alchemy, they all simultaneously stopped their work, cleared the path in the center of the road, placed a hand on their chest, and bowed their heads in genuine respect without any concealment.

Aurelian merely nodded slightly in response, his pace unaffected.

Louis followed closely, and as he stepped into the Mage Forest, he distinctly felt the change in magic power.

The air was filled with highly purified energy flows, more concentrated than any place he had ever been.

This was truly a sacred land of magic.

But soon, he sensed another layer of peculiarity; the air seemed unusually thick, with an indescribable sense of delay.

Even the sunlight passing through the canopy and spilling down appeared slowed by something, the light and shadow lingering on the ground longer than usual.

Louis instinctively slowed his breathing.

The time here seemed not to fully adhere to the outside world's rules.

Aurelian did not explain.

He just led Louis forward, passing through one Mage building after another.

The outer workshops and towers gradually fell behind, replaced by core structures simpler in design yet subtly exuding a sense of danger.

The further they walked, the more pronounced the sense of time dilation became.

The sound of footsteps became blurred, the wind seemed compressed into the distance, even the rhythm of heartbeats started to feel unreliable.

Ultimately, they stopped before a Teleportation Gate.

It was a circular door frame standing in a clearing in the woods, without any superfluous decoration.

Runes quietly hovered inside the gate, slowly rotating as if waiting to be awakened.

Aurelian paused here.

He stepped aside to clear the way, leaving the position directly in front for Louis.

"I can only go this far," the Supreme Mage said to Louis, "Please, Duke Calvin, you proceed on your own."

Louis crossed the hallway beyond the Teleportation Gate.

As his foot fell, he instinctively thought he would again step into the forest.

Yet before his eyes lay an ancient city completely enveloped by huge mushroom caps.

Gray-white stone towers and arch bridges were frozen within translucent amber; streets, plazas, Mage Towers retained the contours from millennia past.

The once-flowing magic patterns now stagnated in the air like preserved specimens of time.

This was once the most flourishing city of mages, now only frozen remains.

Deep within the city, a giant tree soared upward.

Its massive trunk pierced through the surface and the dome, branches growing along fallen towers, firmly locking the entire city within its roots.

Louis paused before the tree, where an old man grew.

Half of his body had already entirely turned to wood, skin merged with bark, the rhythm of his chest rising almost in sync with the tree trunk's pulse.

Only one side of his face still retained the outline of a human.

As Louis approached, the old man slowly opened his eyes.

They were eyes so serene they seemed almost drained.

The wooden mouth struggled slightly, revealing an incomplete smile: "Hello Duke Calvin, you may call me Forest Guardian, I've waited for you a whole age."

Louis nodded, unsure what to say.

"You may not be the teacher, but you've brought his heart here." The Forest Guardian's gaze fell upon him, as if piercing through flesh and blood, "It seems you're the chosen one."

The leaves of the giant tree swayed slightly overhead.

"Before leaving a thousand years ago, the teacher spoke a prophecy," the Forest Guardian's sight turned far away, "When the roar of the Ancients Dragons resounds from deep within the earth's crust, the prophesied one will arrive across the wind and snow."

Louis was silent for a moment, then shook his head: "I don't believe in destiny. I've come to gain leverage against the Dragon Emperor."

Louis raised his head, meeting the Forest Guardian's gaze: "Since you mentioned the prophecy... what is this prophecy?"

The Forest Guardian observed him for a long while, then his gaze shifted again towards the depths of the city.

"The old Emperor is not truly a dragon, nor can he be a Dragon Emperor; he's merely a half-dragon in the developmental stage."

The Forest Guardian's tone remained steady.

"Once he absorbs sufficient knightly vigour, he will unravel the shackles upon himself, complete the transformation, becoming a real dragon."

Louis said nothing.

"The Ancient Dragon Race were once the true masters of this land," the Forest Guardian continued, "Humans were merely their livestock."

"The so-called Fighting Spirit Knight and breathing methods are, in essence, breeding programs the Dragon Race embedded into human genes."

His tone lacked mockery or pity.

"These made humans stronger, more durable, and more... palatable."

Louis finally spoke: "You're saying that now all the knights are nourishment for the resurrection of the Dragon Race?"

"Indeed." The Forest Guardian nodded.

"The higher the knight's rank, the deeper the dragon blood's erosion in their bodies," his mouth twitched slightly again, "making them more delicious."

He looked at Louis, with a trace of almost imperceptible complexity in his eyes.

"For example, in the eyes of a dragon, you are an excellent main course."

Louis did not look away.

The Forest Guardian continued, "When the teacher descended upon this land, he saw ruins twisted by dragon violence; all things were food for the dragon race."

His voice lowered, carrying a touch of reverence, "So he borrowed the power of original sin, taming those forces meant to devour the world in the apocalypse into a power source, writing a set of new world operating rules."

Louis listened, his face showed little disturbance, but rather, he seemed enlightened.

Those scattered memories and fragments all confirmed this point.

The dragon catastrophe, humans becoming slaves and food, the Primordial Mage leading humans in rebellion...

"I see," Louis murmured, "This is the essence of magic."

"Yes." The Forest Guardian nodded, "Every magic thereafter evolved from this foundational layer."

Louis felt a stirring inside; during his study of magic, he noticed irregularities. Those phonetics and symbols had a subtle resemblance to the languages and texts in his memory.

The Forest Guardian seemed to sense his thoughts, but did not point them out.

He simply continued, "Of course, borrowing the power of original sin was not without cost. After humanity won that war, true peace did not come to the world.

The Dragon King fell, and the power once suppressed and guided suddenly lost its sole outlet. Dragon blood fighting energy lost foreign enemies, Primordial magic lost its bounds; they began to flow inward.

No longer was it confrontation or expansion, but self-consumption; humans began to destroy one another.

A knight's blood energy ran rampant within, a mage's spell broke structure, conflicts erupted between cities, schools purged each other. Victory lasted a brief moment, then turned into more thorough chaos."

"The teacher was the first to realize the problem." The Forest Guardian seemed to be recalling a slice of history he was unwilling to touch again, "Power itself is neither good nor evil, but when it loses direction, it only keeps demanding. The dragon died but humans began to turn into new dragons, and true dragons would resurrect in the knights.

Thus the Primordial Mage made the final choice.

He sealed most of the original sin into the flesh, dividing it into seven parts each balancing the others. Each part of original sin corresponds to an extreme, and we seven individuals each bear one."

The Forest Guardian lifted his already wooden arm, tapping his fingers against the tree trunk, emitting a dull echo.

"This is sacrifice, not only him but including us.

We seven disciples dispersed across the continent, using a long time to wear down the erosion of original sin. Not fighting, but enduring.

The portion I received was the smallest in cost."

As he spoke these words, his tone was very calm.

Louis looked at his semi-wooden body, silent.

"It is sloth, hence time stagnates here." Louis asked, "Isn't it?"

The Forest Guardian nodded.

"This place was once the lighthouse of continental civilization. City of mages, researching and inheriting the knowledge left by the Primordial Mage, the light of civilization radiating outward from here; later, I had no choice but to seal sloth here."

The air seemed to grow heavier.

"Sloth prevents things from losing direction. It makes people linger, makes things stop changing."

Sunlight filtered through the giant mushrooms' caps, yet seemed to slow down.

"The air ceases to flow, time loses its vector." The Forest Guardian whispered, "In order to prevent the seal from spreading across the world, I can only completely isolate the city."

Louis's gaze went past him, looking into the distance.

The former main road was covered by tree roots, the Mage Tower twisted into the shape of a dead tree, buildings encased in mycelium, frozen in an unfinished moment.

"Mage Forest." The Forest Guardian enunciated the name, "Not rebirth, but a millennium of slow decay. I'm merely the last Tomb Guardian on this corpse."

He was silent for a moment, then continued.

"The other original sins are the same... most of my senior brothers and sisters died in pain.

Some were corrupted, some chose self-destruction, but before falling, they tried their best to consume and suppress the original sin they bore.

If there was no follow-up intervention, they could have remained sealed for a few hundred more years."

The Forest Guardian's gaze grew complex, "But in recent years, the seal has been broken."

Louis looked up, thinking of the disasters he experienced over the years, the Nest, barbarian invasion, Church disaster...

"Perhaps it was Loken." The Forest Guardian said softly, "The teacher's son, our junior disciple.

He gave the Primordial Heart to you, detonating all the original sins. I don't know why he did it, but it's also written in the prophecy."

The Forest Guardian looked at Louis, "And you, guided, began to gather these forces."

Louis's breathing slightly halted, suddenly understanding.

It is the Daily Intelligence System, searching for new carriers for original sin in this way.

The Forest Guardian slowly stood.

The giant tree trembled with it, amber streams of light emerged from deep within the trunk, gathering at his fingertips.

"Louis." His voice turned solemn for the first time, "Do not evade... you already stand here."

Your task is to prevent the Dragon King's true arrival, and use the heart within you to regroup all the rampant original sins."

He paused, "As for the further future... that is beyond our knowledge, wish you good luck..."

At this point, he raised his withered hand, placing it on Louis's forehead.

The entire Mage Forest responded at this moment.

The magic power accumulated over a millennium in the entire city surged into Louis like a tide, without gentle guidance, unreservedly poured.

Louis's consciousness was stretched to the limit, the whispers of original sin crisscrossed within him, forcing himself to compress everything into the Primordial Heart.

Finally, the original sin belonging to "sloth" was wholly entrusted to him.

Unsure of how much time passed, the world returned to silence.

Louis opened his eyes, the giant tree already completely withered, amber light faded, and the Forest Guardian's figure disappeared at some unknown time.

All that remained here was a true relic.

Louis stood up, peacefully, "I know what to do now."