

Endless Debt

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Until he boarded the tram home, he could still see the towering obelisk through the window, as if it were the mythical Tower of Babel. No matter where Bologue was in Opus, as long as he raised his head, he could always see this giant occupying a corner of the sky.

...

After a long two-hour commute, Bologue returned home.

Upon opening the door, he saw a jet-black box placed on the sofa.

Closing the door behind him, Bologue checked the doors and windows. There was no sign of forced entry, as if this black box had appeared out of thin air.

Examining the black box closely, its surface was engraved with two symbols: one of chains and swords, the emblem of the Order Bureau, and the other of a door, with a twisted vortex inside, leading who knows where.

"A department in charge of logistics, perhaps?"

Bologue sat beside the black box, memorizing the symbol of the Vortex Gate.

He recalled Geoffrey's use of the Key of the Crooked Path in the morning and guessed that this delivery might have been sent using the same method.

Trying to open the black box, Bologue couldn't find a way to access it. The surface was smooth, devoid of any seams, with a texture similar to metal.

Instinctively, he picked up the badge of Rupert's Tail, just as Geoffrey had cleared a seal in the corridor at that time. As the badge was removed, a texture of faint light erupted upon the black box's surface, which then cracked open with a straight line.

"This thing makes for a good safe."

Bologue marveled, gradually realizing what Geoffrey meant about the expensive nature of the field staff equipment—even a box can be adorned so lavishly.

There wasn't much inside the black box. First, there was a gray-black coat, which looked rather simple in appearance, its tone resembling that of the city.

"Field staff standard equipment, one 'Concealer' coat," Bologue picked up a small booklet from inside the black box, which appeared to be an inventory list, and read aloud, "It's embedded with an Alchemy Matrix, the Secret Energy effect conceals presence, facilitating stealth, reducing ordinary people's and even Condensers' perception of it..."

Bologue's voice froze; he had not expected this coat to be an Alchemy Armament as well.

Breathing slightly erratically, he looked at the remaining items in the black box.

Unpacking deliveries is always thrilling, especially when that joy overlaps with obtaining new equipment.

Following the inventory list, Bologue continued to inspect the items in the black box.

Next was a Hook Gun, which is very convenient for navigating the complex urban architecture and the Great Rift, allowing easy crossing of hazardous terrains.

Afterwards were regular medical emergency supplies which Bologue wouldn't need, so he didn't pay them much attention, just gave them a quick glance and set them aside.

After the miscellaneous items, Bologue found the last item in the black box, which was also the second and only other Alchemy Armament.

A hammer.

Bologue held up the Iron Hammer, carefully examining it. From its appearance, there's nothing special about it—metal sheep horn hammerhead, wooden handle, on which the mark of the Sublimation Furnace Core can be seen. The mark of the serpent and fruit, which is also found within the Concealer coat.

"Is a hammer part of the standard kit?"

Bologue murmured to himself, feeling skeptical about the hammer being standard issue. It didn't seem right, and then he noticed a detached tag in the corner.

"I know you don't like using guns, so I had them swap out the gun for something else."

This was Geoffrey's handwriting. Having been together for so long, Geoffrey understood well what Bologue needed—something that was seemingly decided long ago.

Checking the inventory list, indeed, the last entry was for a standard handgun. The Secret Energy effect was to enhance bullets, but these words were crossed out and replaced with another scribbled note.

"Shock Hammer, Secret Energy is Vibration."

A very brief phrase, clearly illustrating the author's impatience while writing this note.

Bologue could envision the scene—these standard pieces of equipment are mass-produced uniformly. After passing the assessment, Geoffrey applied for equipment for him, while those people seemed impatient, swapping out the gun for a hammer upon Geoffrey's request, and documented the information about the hammer.

"Vibration... How does it vibrate?"

Bologue swung the Shock Hammer, producing a gust of wind. During waving, a faint light could be seen shimmering on the sheep horn hammerhead, but beyond that, there were no additional effects.

Does it need to hit a target?

Bologue looked at the wall on the other side, then vigorously shook his head to dismiss this absurd thought.

Rather than testing new weapons at home, it's better to try them out at work, using enemies' blood and flesh.

Piling the items to one side, Bologue then picked up the documents obtained from Lebius, which described intelligence on the Man-eater. Unfortunately, the Order Bureau didn't have much understanding of it either, and the described intelligence didn't contain much truly useful information.

"Norm Ward."

Bologue looked at the black-and-white photograph in the document, which reflected a bald strong man, covered in menacing tattoos.

According to the intelligence from Lebius, Norm was ostensibly an alchemist traversing the Great Rift, making a living selling illegal drugs in this Land of Chaos. Secretly, he was an underling for the Man-eater, using potions to sedate patients, and performing Condensation, exchanging Philosopher's Stone for high rewards with the Man-eater.

Death, disappearance... Such things are common in the chaotic and grey Great Rift, hence Norm hasn't garnered much attention until the Order Bureau set its sights on the Man-eater, consequently targeting him.

Bologue repeatedly reviewed the data in the document, almost imprinting every word in his mind.

Releasing the document, he stood up and picked up the coat, standing before the mirror to change clothes. Everything as usual, a white shirt with a black tie, wearing a leather tactical harness, hanging several folding knives in the slots, while filling the remaining gaps with several small flying knives, inserting them one by one.

Adjusting his attire with a bit of ceremonial feeling, Bologue put on the gray-black coat. The garment fit well, under its outline, Bologue resembled a straight sword, paired with his sickly pale skin, appearing like a demon returning from the night.

The Hook Gun and Shock Hammer were inserted at his waist, the hem of the coat passed over his knees, just right to cover them, concealing their sharp edges.

Bologue examined himself in the mirror carefully. The moment he donned the coat, its embedded Secret Energy was triggered, with slight light flowing across the fabric—so faint that if one didn't deliberately focus, it would be hard to notice.

"Feels like something's missing..."

Bologue combed his hair. His hair was somewhat soft and, if not groomed, would all hang down messily, obscuring his face like a rain-drenched stray dog.

He forcefully combed it back and tied a small braid at the back of his head with a hair tie, finally feeling much more comfortable.

His gaze drifted towards the coat rack nearby. Bologue retrieved a similarly gray-black hat, which had collected some dust from disuse, vigorously shaking it off before placing it on his head, then standing again in front of the mirror.

"Much better this time."

Bologue looked at himself in the mirror, thoroughly satisfied.

He enjoyed this sense of ceremony, whether attending a meeting or seeking revenge, wanting to do it with utmost elegance, preferably with some music to accompany, like a grand performance—dancing energetically and, at the pinnacle of the song, driving the sharp blade into the sinner's throat.

Pushing open the door, a gust of cold wind blew in; Bologue could hardly wait.

Chapter 32 - 16: Hesitant Crossroads

Oubos, Great Rift.

This is a massive rift whose origin no one can truly explain, like a scar struck by the Celestial God, stretching across Oubos, sagging into a deep trench that divides the city into two vast areas. Besides the connected parts, they can only communicate with each other via several bridges spanning the rift.

There are many mysterious legends about it, but legends are just legends, nothing more. Nowadays, various companies have occupied the Great Rift. They have established numerous mines along the extending rift, incessantly excavating the Great Rift, causing the scar to slowly expand. The complex mine tunnels and extending rift make the internal environment of the Great Rift increasingly dangerous and complex.

Worse still, they also dump various industrial waste deep into the bottomless rift. Gradually, toxic gray fog spreads inside the rift. Sometimes, this gray fog erupts, turning into a gray tide that envelops the entire city, and this is known as the disaster called "Gray Tide Smog."

The city sounds utterly terrible, but perhaps because it is squeezed between two enormous forces, no matter how bad Opus gets, it continues to operate stably, up to today.

Bologue stepped off the tram, furrowed his brows suddenly, and gazed ahead. Not far away stood a warning sign, and behind the sign lay a grayish world. He had approached the Great Rift.

When the "Gray Tide Smog" breaks out, the poisonous smog penetrates every crevice, like a sandstorm stirred up by a fierce wind, swallowing the entire city. But the residents of Opus have long been accustomed to these. The buildings near the Great Rift all have additional sealing measures or air raid shelters for emergencies, and gas masks have also become daily necessities in this city.

When abnormality becomes daily routine, it holds no special significance anymore.

Sinister steel jungles loomed nearby, toxic gray mist sometimes cast out from the earth, quickly dispersing into the air, mingling with the gloomy sky.

The location where Bologue currently stands is only the peripheral region of the Great Rift. This area is occupied by industrial companies and impoverished people. One giant operational machine after another towers, crisscrossed cable cars span the sky like towering metal trees. Below are countless shabby houses, eerie-colored liquids flowing across the barren soil, gathering and pouring into sewers, destinations unknown.

Bologue could see that many of the impoverished wore worker's attire and walked towards the constructed cable car station. Everyone's figure was blurry; beneath the hazy smog, only shallow shadows were left.

This scene is common within the Great Rift. Poor people can only reside beside the Great Rift, and to make money, most would directly become the workers of the Great Rift. Similarly, there are those foreigners who have come from afar. They also dive into this, as the harsh environment of the Great Rift, when compared to their hometown, undoubtedly allows them to earn far more money.

Bologue paused for a moment; despite having Undying Body, inhaling toxic gas resulted in an unbearable, persistent burning sensation. He put on a gas mask, his view obscured by its thick lenses.

Striding forward into that gray world, converging with those advancing figures. No one spoke; the surrounding silence was terrifying, leaving only the deep sound from breathing valves intersecting together, akin to a group of ghosts crawling up from the grave.

The current view was relatively clear. Amidst the obscured gray, Bologue could see many silhouettes in varying shades of color, rising densely along the horizon. As he drew closer, numerous gray-white buildings emerged before his eyes; the roads beneath his feet were muddy, mixed with unknown liquids.

Like an abandoned dead city, yet many people still thrived here. Everyone on the street wore gas masks similar to Bologue, advancing silently, leaving only indifference in the air.

Others not only wore gas masks but also donned waterproof suits. These should be workers venturing into the depths of the rift. In the deep of the rift, there wasn't just high concentration of toxic gray mist, but also industrial wastewater dripping from uncertain sources. Such unknown liquids often proved more deadly than the gray mist.

The further forward he went, the more chaotic the view became. Gone was the daylight; only dim gray mist remained all around. But very soon, bright lights started appearing, hanging high to guide those lost in the mist in their path, then the roaring machinery slowly became audible.

Bologue accelerated his pace. Though he had not visited the Great Rift many times, he wasn't entirely ignorant of this place.

Soon, he saw rows of fences, rusty iron bars hung with prominent warning signs. Standing beside them, Bologue looked ahead. Before long, the roaring machinery sounds grew clearer, as if those massive objects akin to mountains were right in front.

A strong airflow surged from beneath the fence, one wave after another, pouring through blade-filled pipes, stirring a gust, casting toxic fumes into the sky. But quickly, they settled again, forming a semi-arch gray dome over the Great Rift.

As the air current erupted, the view gradually became clearer. Bologue saw the rift akin to an Abyss emerging from the mist. Platforms were built along its edge, rusty fences circled one after another, countless figures moving amidst long corridors and cables.

"Exhaust port number three is about to open, please avoid!"

The screeching sound mingled with electrical noise broadcasted from a loudspeaker. Shortly after, the rushing water sound came from beneath the gray mist.

Bologue looked down, the inner walls of the rift were covered with man-made platforms. The aerial corridors extended to distances beyond Bologue's sight; cable cars slowly passed by, laden with the same gray ghosts.

The long boots clanged on the metal floor, one team after another walked past him, carrying mining tools on their backs, boarding the large elevator leading to the depths of the rift, like sinking into the deep sea, gradually merging into the mist.

The clamor of steel, endless broadcasts, and the occasional sound of sirens, for a moment Bologue felt like he had entered another world, a cold, silent world where there was no conversation, only slowly dissipating fog, and beneath the respirator valve, the whimpering was like the cries of someone drowning.

This is the Great Rift. Bologue walked down the stairs and saw huge mechanical arms rising from the fog below, taut cables stretching, uncertain of what they were supporting beneath.

The immense canyon before him is the main body of the Great Rift; it extends outwards with numerous small rifts, where people are active deep within. Gradually, this place became the gray area of Opus, where various criminal activities are common. The city government tried to govern the area, but they couldn't even control the companies occupying the rift alone, let alone those shadowy vermin lurking in the darkness.

But the Great Rift is not entirely chaotic, such as the mining area occupied by companies; it's considered safe. These ruthless guys never allow anyone to affect their profits, not even criminal gangs. Therefore, crime syndicates surviving in the Great Rift wisely avoid interfering in company territories.

And so, inexplicably, the Great Rift gradually developed its own ecosystem.

"Norm, Norm... where are you?"

Bologue muttered, his voice transformed into meaningless whispers through the respirator valve, like a demon whispering in the dark.

Surveying around, Bologue continued descending the long ladder along the canyon's outer wall. Below, the Sea of Mist roiled, emitting faint glimmers. Bologue's destination was deep within this Sea of Mist, the place known as the Wandering Intersection.

It was an abandoned mine, connected to several other rifts; many travelers pass through, and slowly, people inhabited it, naming it the Wandering Intersection.

Initially, some workers used discarded materials from the mine to construct platforms and buildings hanging on the cliff face. Over time, more people joined in, gradually expanding its size, becoming the most populated area in the Great Rift besides company-managed mining zones.

Now, the Wandering Intersection is the primary gray area within the Great Rift, a mix of all sorts, with Norm's pharmacy located there.

The road reached its end; Bologue stood before an elevator shaft. After waiting for a while, a raspy grinding sound emerged, and the rust-covered elevator cage rose. The iron gate opened, and several dust-covered miners stepped out.

With respirator masks covering their faces, Bologue brushed past them, entered the cage, pressed the button, and after a few seconds, the cage descended, slowly sinking into the thick fog.

It felt like diving into the deep sea. Bologue stood in the diving bell while waves of fog seeped through the crevices. He felt uneasy, his muscles tense, eyes vigilant beneath the lens, observing his surroundings.

The Wandering Intersection is vast, so much so that some once considered it a new district. For a long time, the citizens of Opus couldn't understand why a place like the Wandering Intersection would exist. Even as a gray zone, what interests maintain its existence? Why do so many risk danger to enter it?

Bologue used to not understand either, but after joining the Order Bureau, he somewhat grasped the reasons.

With the Order Bureau's control, the Demons and their adversaries wanting a place of freedom were left with only the Great Rift wrapped in gray mist. Like banished vermin rat swarms, only this dark and narrow crevice could accommodate their existence.

The clanging of metal rang out, the elevator cage reached the end. The iron door opened, and Bologue stepped again onto the dimly lit path. From now on, he had to remain extremely vigilant; no one knew whether behind those respirator masks lay human or demon.

Raising his wrist slightly, Bologue felt a chill. A folding knife was strapped to his wrist, ready to flick out and grasp, then slash with a mere exertion of force.

Emerging from the darkness, his view expanded. Bologue looked afar, where the twisted corridor extended, seeing dazzling lights penetrating through the mist.

The twisted, bizarre architecture seemed alive, growing wildly along the steep cliff face, entwined and overlapped like a mass of overgrown seaweed, bloated and hanging on the hard rock. Steel cables and aerial walkways connected them, with numerous scaffolds visible on the periphery. Following the sound of hammering echoes, pieces of steel plates were hoisted up, reinforcing the bloated cluster of buildings.

Towers rose from the cluster, like sun-loving plants. Below numerous neon signs could be seen, though obscured by the fog, Bologue couldn't discern what they said. Further down, along narrow roads, rows of pipes poured waste water, turning into a downpour, cascading deeper into the rift.

"Wandering Intersection."

Bologue softly said its name, the entire Wandering Intersection seemed like a fortress suspended in the air. At its base was an enormous archway from which cable cars slowly moved outwards, traversing fixed cables, linking to different intersections.

Without pausing long, Bologue headed toward the gently swaying aerial corridor, advancing towards the Wandering Intersection.

These are the main routes into the Wandering Intersection. Upon ascending the aerial corridor, the surrounding crowd visibly increased. Everyone remained silent, bearing different intentions as they advanced towards this strange and twisted fortress district.

Chapter 33 - 17 Tyrant

Bologue had not visited the Hesitant Crossroads many times. His knowledge of this place was not much different from that of ordinary people, so locating the Nom Clinic, despite the intelligence indicating its position, proved to be quite difficult for him.

The Hesitant Crossroads seemed to possess a life of its own, with all manner of strangely shaped buildings continuously sprouting. They cavorted along the steep cliff walls like a towering tree emerging from underground, their metal branches spreading with abandon, thanks to the aid of cable cars and elevators.

In this Land of Chaos, Bologue guessed there was no such thing as urban planning, no street signs, no addresses, and certainly no accurate maps.

Gangs, contraband, demons lurking in the shadows, and adversaries unknown to Bologue existed here.

The buildings here changed daily, collapsing and rebuilding, an endless cycle, never tiring.

Chaos was the only order here.

"The air is filled with an evil ambiance."

Bologue sighed. Even with the isolation of the gas mask, he could still smell the strange odors in the air.

Not just the pungent smell of chemical waste, but deeper, darker aromas.

The scent of demons.

That rotten and decaying smell rooted deeply in the land, merging with the thick fog. It's unimaginable how many demons hide in these shadows and things dirtier than demons.

Bologue felt no fear. On the contrary, the pressure within him began to ease, swiftly transforming into an indescribable emotion... like excitement?

Under the lenses of the gas mask, his azure eyes scanned everyone passing by; even Bologue himself didn't notice the trace of glimmer that passed through his eyes, like a hunting beast joyfully returning to the savage jungle.

Entering the Hesitant Crossroads went smoothly, with no obstacles, and the guards at the gate paid little attention to Bologue, as if he were a mere specter.

Bologue guessed this was the effect of the "Concealer." This gray-black trench coat would lower others' awareness, distorting their perception.

The roads inside the Hesitant Crossroads were uneven and extremely narrow. Various shops were stacked together like a High Tower. The neon signs Bologue saw outside emanated from these.

The people on the streets were not many, yet each looked fierce; just now, Bologue noticed a burly man, whose huge physique made the gas mask on his face resemble a mere mask, with exposed arms full of bulging muscles, exuding strength.

It's reasonable to think that in such a hellish place, if you are not fierce enough, you might be tossed into the depths of the chasm below the next second.

Death was common in the Hesitant Crossroads, but people usually wouldn't bluntly say "death," instead, it was called disappearance.

Countless bodies were thrown into landfills every day, merging along with other waste through waste disposal channels, and then cast into the deeper fog below.

Even the bodies could not be found.

Suspended walkways connected various chasms; they crisscrossed, swaying slightly in the Sea of Mist. Nobody knew how long it had been since their last maintenance, making ominous creaking sounds, with pieces of metal occasionally slipping off.

Bologue walked carefully past them. On the elevated walkways, he could see many people lingering around, holding golden coins, whispering something before throwing them into the Abyss below.

Bologue knew a little about this. It was a sort of belief in the Hesitant Crossroads, yet not precisely a belief.

It was known as the existence of the "Tyrant."

Rumor had it that the Hesitant Crossroads was originally founded by the "Tyrant" who constructed this Shadow City in the deep, dark crevices to house those unable to live in the daylight.

Of course, Bologue was unclear of the truth behind all this. The story of the "Tyrant" was one of the well-known urban legends within Opus.

According to legend, residents of the Hesitant Crossroads needed to occasionally throw coins into the chasm's Sea of Mist below as a tax paid to the "Tyrant," who in return would protect them.

Thus, such a scene was common in the Hesitant Crossroads—a group of people tossing coins toward the Sea of Mist below, while those who did not pay tax to the "Tyrant..."

Those who did not pay taxes could not linger long in the Hesitant Crossroads. If they insisted on staying, the "Tyrant's" envoys would appear to drag them into the Sea of Mist.

It sounded like a horror story, yet in the Hesitant Crossroads, this Land of Chaos, anything was possible.

Bologue dug into his pocket and fished out a Weng Coin, tossing it straight into the Sea of Mist below; the coin flashed by and vanished without a trace.

"Just going with the flow,"

Bologue muttered, glancing to the other side. The aerial corridor extended to the horizon's edge, where chaotic buildings grew wildly on the surrounding cliffs.

Nom's Clinic was hidden among them; despite having the information provided by Lebius in his mind, it was still too difficult to pinpoint.

Lebius realized this too, mentioning within the intelligence that when Bologue couldn't find the target, he could go to a specific place for directions, which had collaborative ties with the Order Bureau, serving as the one barely trustworthy spot within the Hesitant Crossroads.

Chapter 34 - 17 Tyrant_2

Hardly... worth it, yes, that's right.

Even in a partnership, it's not set in stone. In this Land of Chaos, the other party might betray you for greater profit at any moment.

Unlike Norm's clinic, the place Lebius mentioned was quite easy to find. Bologue looked up to see tall, twisted buildings shrouded in a faint mist, with flickering neon signs faintly visible behind it.

In the dazzling glow, one sign stood out the most, positioned the highest, hanging like a morning star.

"Web Bar."

Bologue uttered its name, and suddenly a strong wind swept through, temporarily dispersing the mist above, revealing the twisted building's true form.

Countless lines protruded from the darkness in all directions: wires, steel cables, ropes... they tangled together and ultimately converged atop the building, densely and grotesquely hanging like a bizarre spider web, filled with birds standing atop, though Bologue couldn't make out their forms, only gray-black silhouettes.

Bologue guessed this was why it was called the Web Bar as he proceeded along the narrow path, soon reaching the building wrapped in cables.

Near the Web Bar, the crowd noticeably increased, and the deathly stillness came to life a bit. Bologue could vaguely hear bursts of singing echoing between the skyscrapers.

Moving across the street, he could see the main entrance close at hand, with colorful lights spilling through the gaps.

Just like entering the Desolate Crossroads, Bologue experienced no obstacles entering the Web Bar. As he pushed open the door, the clamor hit him like a tidal wave, enveloping Bologue.

Upon entering, there was a massive dance floor. Under dazzling, psychedelic lights, countless people danced and laughed, with bursts of jarring singing drifting over.

Bologue removed his gas mask, and the mixture of alcohol and a peculiar scent rushed into his nostrils, with a familiar aura of decay still present.

Scanning the surroundings with sharp eyes, all he could see was faces painted by lights into colors, filled with intoxication and hallucination.

He navigated through the crowded masses and arrived in front of the bar, recalling the procedures and codes from the intel as he sat down, observing the busy bartender.

The bartender was a muscular fellow with a neatly shaved head, wearing a crisp, tight white shirt. His skin was dark, with a tattoo of a venomous snake etched on his body, crawling up his neck, with the snake's head emerging from the back of his skull, stopping at his smooth forehead.

"Give me a 'Fortune'."

Bologue said to the bartender, whose movements paused for a moment, then he turned his head, carefully scrutinizing Bologue.

"Are you sure?"

The bartender asked seriously.

"I'm sure."

Bologue nodded, this was the "code" Lebius had mentioned.

The bartender seemed to ponder for a moment, then resumed his work without saying anything, earnestly preparing the drink for Bologue. Bologue was somewhat puzzled, wondering if he had asked the wrong person. Shouldn't they now directly exchange intel? Why was he still working?

With no response, Bologue maintained his silence until the bartender pushed a strangely colored drink in front of him, making a gesture of "please."

Bologue glanced at the bartender, who remained unsmiling and cold-faced, then at the glass with its complex liquid components.

Hesitating for a few seconds, Bologue chose to trust Lebius, believing his new employer wouldn't deceive him or make such a ridiculous blunder.

He picked up the glass and downed it in one go.

Contrary to his worst expectations, the drink seemed safe enough, though its taste was peculiar, lacking any alcohol flavor. Instead, it boasted a pungent mint taste, making his mouth feel stuffed with ice cubes, and every breath brought a painful chill.

"Haha."

A hearty laughter erupted, the bartender looked at Bologue with amusement and then asked.

"How's the taste?"

"Awful, I feel like I just drank a cup of bubbly laundry detergent." Bologue coughed.

"That's because you don't know how to savor... So, how's Lebius been lately?"

The bartender said, and upon hearing Lebius's name, Bologue took a deep breath and looked at the bartender vigilantly.

"Don't worry, 'Fortune' is part of the hidden menu here, only that fellow Lebius has ever had this drink," the bartender said nonchalantly, "He likes this drink a lot, just hasn't been around to have it for years."

"Old acquaintance?"

"Sort of, when I knew him, I was just a server here, and he was just an ordinary Field Staff."

The bartender answered, he was the barely trustworthy guy Lebius had mentioned.

"Oh, I see."

Bologue whispered, this wasn't some plant from the Order Bureau, but an old friend of Lebius, a friend living in the Desolate Crossroads.

Seems like Lebius used to do field work too, but considering his crippled appearance... could it be that Lebius wasn't born handicapped but suffered an accident, resigning him to life in a wheelchair and thus ending his field career?

The bartender's words cut short Bologue's thoughts.

"You can call me Vika... so, is there anything you need?"

Vika gestured for others to tend bar as he stood in front of Bologue, hands resting on the counter.

"Norm Ward," Bologue pushed aside his jumbled thoughts. Task execution was paramount now, "I want to know where his clinic is?"

Vika was silent for a few seconds, seemingly recalling intel related to Norm Ward. After a brief thought, he said.

"Then what will you exchange for this information?"

Bologue was stunned, and Vika seemed to read Bologue's expression; he chuckled a few times and said.

"You think this information should be free, don't you?"

"It's just an address."

Bologue felt slightly troubled, as Lebius hadn't mentioned any of this. Or was it that this guy actually had a grudge against Lebius, intentionally making things difficult for him?

"Hmm... you don't quite understand the rules of the Desolate Crossroads yet." Vika maintained a friendly demeanor.

"Rules? Is there such a thing as rules in this Land of Chaos?"

"Of course."

Vika replied, and just then another person approached, glanced at Bologue, then Vika, and placed a coin on the counter, pushing it toward Vika.

"Vika, here's your tax money back, thanks for last month."

After saying that, the person left without looking back. Bologue was puzzled by the scene, looking at the coin, and he asked, "Paying tax? Just one coin?"

Vika said nothing but pushed the coin towards Bologue.

Bologue picked up the coin, and unlike familiar currency, this coin was not in circulation but something akin to a commemorative coin.

The front of the coin depicted countless threads converging together, forming a burdensome ball of yarn, seemingly nurturing something within it.

"This is for paying 'tax' to the Tyrant," Vika said with profound meaning.

Chapter 35 - 18 Becoming a Legend

For paying taxes to the "Tyrant," Bologue knew this story.

"Isn't it just about throwing in some coins?" Bologue wondered, "Why specifically use this?"

It was clear that this coin was extraordinary, as if specially made for paying taxes to the "Tyrant."

"The 'value' you invest is different, and the 'Tyrant's' protection varies," Vika explained, "He doesn't need ordinary wealth, but something of greater 'value.'"

Bologue's heartstrings were touched; Vika's words seemed to awaken something, giving Bologue an inexplicable sense of familiarity, yet he couldn't quite describe what that feeling was.

"Just this commemorative coin?" Bologue mocked.

"Don't underestimate this coin; it's called the Mammon Coin," Vika turned the coin over, "It's said the name comes from this person, named Mammon."

The back of the coin was printed with a mountain of gold coins, and a person greedily embraced these coins, but no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't gather all the wealth into his arms, like the sand slipping away from clenched fists.

"This Mammon Coin is part of the legend, and to this day no one knows how this currency became circulated within the wanderer's crossroad. People searched various mints in Opus but found no trace of it, as if it just appeared out of thin air.

Some say it's minted by the 'Tyrant,' and the circulation of the Mammon Coin signifies that the 'Tyrant' is still alive, he's real, and this currency always maintains a stable quantity in the market, with each method of obtaining it being quite peculiar."

"How do you acquire it?"

Bologue's interest was piqued by Vika; clearly, within the wanderer's crossroad, there is a different version of the legend of the "Tyrant."

After coming into contact with the Extraordinary World, Bologue paid close attention to so-called "urban legends," perhaps they were all real, just existing in the Extraordinary World, beyond the reach of ordinary people.

"It's simple, create 'value' for the wanderer's crossroad, and mysteriously you'll receive Mammon Coins, maybe you'll find one on the roadside, or perhaps open your mailbox to discover an unsigned letter with a Mammon Coin inside."

Vika shrugged and explained.

"If the Weng Coin represents regular equivalents, then the Mammon Coin is the equivalent for the wanderer's crossroad. The more Mammon Coins you hold, the greater your contribution to the wanderer's crossroad. The more Mammon Coins you throw into the Great Rift, the more favor you receive from the 'Tyrant.'"

"This sounds more like some kind of ghostly faith."

Saying this, Bologue nonetheless became interested in all of it; considering the story he knew, it seemed that those who could linger long in the wanderer's crossroad were, to some extent, people who produced value for it.

Void faith was given form like a sect that transformed into a commercial company: the more money you earn, the more devout you are.

"There's no choice, living in this ghostly place; if just tossing 'valueless' commemorative coins can ease one's mind, I imagine many would be willing to do so."

Vika rubbed the Mammon Coin; outside it had no value, but within the wanderer's crossroad, it was an extraordinary equivalent.

"Alright, here you go, this is what I owed Lebius, let's consider it repaid."

Vika handed the Mammon Coin to Bologue, then spread his hand and said.

"Now, give it back to me."

Bologue looked at the Mammon Coin in his hand, then at Vika, and couldn't help but laugh.

"What is this? Just going through the motions?"

"It's the observance of 'value' and 'value,'" Vika was unexpectedly rigid on this point.

"You look like followers of the 'Tyrant,' just that the form of your sect is quite odd," Bologue said as he returned the Mammon Coin, completing the transaction with Vika.

"Say what you like, I've also said this to Lebius, unfortunately, he, like you, you outsiders, won't understand here."

Vika had anticipated Bologue's reaction; he pulled out a small box from under the bar, opened it, and it was filled with Mammon Coins. Vika added the new Mammon Coin to it, increasing his accumulation.

With Vika's credentials in the "Web," plus his "devotion," if the "Tyrant" truly existed, with Vika's accumulation, he might as well be a Cardinal.

"What is that?"

Bologue noticed the coins in the box; aside from having "Mammon" consistently on their backs, some coins had different designs on their fronts.

"These designs are different; are there denominations of Mammon Coins as well?" Bologue asked.

"The designs on Mammon Coins all have meanings; to put it simply, they represent mysterious urban legends."

Vika thought for a moment and explained to Bologue, while taking out several representative Mammon Coins and placing them in front of Bologue.

"It's another compelling evidence of the 'Tyrant's' real existence; he's always watching us, and through this crafted different coins, and these designs represent those events and people noticed by the 'Tyrant.'

Some urban legends we speak of can't be proven."

Bologue examined the coins and identified their designs.

"The House under the Sun" "Amusement Park" "Wolf Pack" "Crown" etc...

"This 'Tyrant' is truly quite leisurely," Bologue thought of something, curiously asking, "If I catch his attention, will there also be, representing me, Mammon Coins?"

Vika glanced at the Mammon Coin with the "Wolf Pack" and said.

"Of course."

"Oh?"

Bologue's interest was completely piqued, representing his Mammon Coin circulating between the wavering crossroads, like a legend gradually on the rise.

For someone slightly narcissistic like him, this was quite an enticing allure.

"Sounds not bad."

Indeed, it wasn't bad, but Bologue didn't have time to waste on these things anymore. He had an undying body with a seemingly endless life. He had plenty of time to waste on all this trivial stuff, but first was his grand vendetta.

"So, back to Norm's clinic, our deal is done, right? Can you take me to meet him?" Bologue asked.

"I still have business."

Vika gestured to the crowded dance floor, this place trapped in eternal revelry as if never sleeping day or night.

Bologue's gaze turned slightly cold. Just as he was about to say something, whether soft or hard, Vika spoke again.

"Nelli! Take this gentleman where he wants to go."

Vika waved his hand, signaling to the waiter named "Nelli."

Seeing this, Bologue swallowed back the words he had prepared and glanced at Vika a few more times, softly speaking.

"How did you know Lebius?"

"Just like you and me now, back then he was lost here, held a knife to my neck, and made me guide him."

Vika, wiping a glass, unexpectedly frank as he recalled the terrible past, a smile lingered on his lips.

"Your so-called legends... they're actually real, aren't they?" Bologue said once more.

Since Vika said he could also appear on a Mammon Coin, Bologue noticed it. It sounded terrifying, yet exhilarating.

Souls, Devils, Daimons, Debtors... This brief time after being released made Bologue fully aware of one thing, those called legends often have real existence.

"Actually... you've already met someone who exists only in legend."

Vika spoke words that Bologue couldn't understand.

Bologue paused for a few seconds, without saying much more, he turned his head preparing to follow Nelli away, a flash of the Mammon Coin appearing before him.

"Becoming a legend? Sounds not bad."

Bologue turned his head, tossing words towards Vika.

"Forgot to introduce myself, Bologue Lazarus. I think we'll meet again."

After saying this, Bologue turned to follow Nelli away.

Watching Bologue's departing back, Vika placed the cleaned glass to the side, picking up the Mammon Coin of the "wolf pack," as if recalling something, his gaze deep and distant.

...

Leaving the "Web", Bologue, led by Nelli, walked for a while, sensing that the wavering crossroads were far from simple on the surface. Naturally, there were still too many

unknowns in this world, even the secrets within the Order Bureau Bologue hadn't fully investigated, not to mention the outside world.

At the edge of the wavering crossroads, Bologue bid farewell to Nelli, thanking him for the guidance. Only then could Bologue find his target in this labyrinthine city.

Under his direction, Bologue advanced along the winding corridors, this journey not an easy one, the planks underfoot lined with gaps through which the unending rift below could be seen. With each light step, the entire corridor swayed slightly, dust falling.

During this progression, Bologue saw his destination, Norm's clinic.

This building rose from the extended platform, windowless and with only an iron door, its outer wall tattered, pieced together by countless sheets of iron.

Knocking on the door, after a few seconds of waiting, Bologue pushed open the iron door. Inside, it was dim, only a few weak beams of white light from the counter barely illuminating a corner of the room.

From the unlit darkness came breathing sounds. Vaguely, the outlines of humanoid figures could be seen, but everyone's faces were cloaked in shadows—they couldn't see Bologue clearly, nor could Bologue see them.

In front of the counter, a frail figure noticed Bologue's arrival, a somewhat sickly guy, bearing a pallor and a greasy feel like a rat surviving in the sewers.

"Oh, a new face," the person made a strange, twisted sound from his throat, like a cold sly laugh, "What do you need?"

"I'm looking for someone," Bologue approached the counter, "Norm Ward."

He looked at the rat-like guy in front of him, then looked around the dark surroundings.

"Is he here?"

The voice resounded in a chaotic boom, like the trembling cold wind skimming over a window, like a ghost pounding on a door, creaking eerily.

Chapter 36 - 19: Villains

"Norm Ward?"

Upon hearing the name, a flicker of an unusual expression crossed the pale face, but the man quickly concealed it, pulling a strange smile as his hands pressed against the counter. His skin looked like a thin film wrapped over his knobby finger bones, his fingers long and branch-like, constantly rubbing together.

Like a hairless, pallid rat living in the sewers.

"He's not here right now," the man replied.

"Where is he?"

"Out practicing medicine."

Bologue stared at the man, using the gas mask for concealment, his gaze sweeping toward the corners.

The interior lighting was dim, the fan blades on the ceiling spinning continuously, emitting a series of annoying noises. Aside from the counter and the medicine cabinet behind the man, Bologue couldn't see many useful items. However, he sensed that something was amiss in this clinic.

As he walked from the corridor to the clinic, he had noticed the clinic's architecture—it was like a giant metallic tumor hanging off a cliff. Logically, the interior space should be vast, but the area Bologue was in was excessively cramped, with more space likely hidden in unseen darkness.

"When will he be back?" Bologue asked.

"I am not sure, really, considering the place is called Wandering Crossroads, unexpected things always accompany it, don't they?"

The man chuckled, his face displaying a slight distorted morbidity.

"Do you need anything else? If it is to prescribe a potion, you only need to pay," the man continued as his slender fingers brushed over the bottles and jars on the medicine cabinet, "If you have come to the wrong place, then please leave as soon as possible."

Bologue didn't respond. Relying on the power of the Concealer, his figure was quite hazy, like a blurred mist in the dim environment. When he remained silent, he was like a speechless ghost.

"Alright, I understand, sorry for the interruption."

Bologue said, turning around to head toward the iron door.

But as he reached the doorway, Bologue halted, like a wall blocking the passage to the outside world. Facing away from everyone, a chaotic, hoarse voice emerged from the shadows beneath his top hat.

"I've always wanted to play a role like this."

The man's expression changed slightly behind the counter, his hand reached for the hilt below the counter, and a slight sound came from the darkness, as if someone had stood up from a chair, gearing for action.

"Punisher, abuser, executor..."

Word after word was uttered, echoing in the darkness. The man stared intently at Bologue's back, momentarily seeing Bologue turn his head in the deep shadows with a pair of blue eyes staring right at him.

"Punisher."

A voice firm as iron lingered at the man's ear.

...

"By now, Bologue should have reached the Wandering Crossroads, right?"

In the Order Bureau's cafeteria, Geoffrey forked a piece of steaming beef sausage, his eyes looking skyward, pondering over Bologue, who was executing the mission.

"Almost,"

Yas sat across from Geoffrey, the two sharing a dinner. Ideally, Yas would rather dine at home than work overtime at the Order Bureau.

"This can be considered another kind of assessment, right? Leaving him to complete this task alone without any veteran. Does Lebius still not trust him?" Yas thought aloud.

Missions outside the Order Bureau always contain risks. For a newcomer like Bologue, regulations dictate that an experienced member should accompany him on tasks.

"Bologue has roughly been interning for about a year, it's just his first time facing a potential Condenser. This shouldn't be a problem," Geoffrey said, taking a big bite of sausage and bread, "Besides, rather than not trusting him, I feel Lebius is trying to test Bologue."

"Test?"

"Yes, test this guy, to see what he can accomplish. After all, assessments and real combat differ somewhat."

Geoffrey paused his eating, pondering, as if recalling something amusing, revealing an odd smile on his face.

"Yas, if it were you, how would you capture the target?"

"If it were me... I'd survey the terrain first, then find a way to infiltrate and hold a dagger to his neck."

Yas waved his hand as he spoke, and a shiny silver dagger appeared in his hand. No one saw how the dagger materialized, and as his hand dropped, the dagger vanished.

"That's your style, so think about how Bologue would do it?" Geoffrey asked.

"I can't say. Maybe like me, secretly infiltrate and then capture him," Yas replied, admitting he hadn't had much interaction with Bologue.

"Hmm... That approach is pretty standard; those solutions are a bit too boring," Geoffrey said, with Yas failing to comprehend his words.

"Then how do you think he'll do it?" Yas inquired.

After a two-second thought, Geoffrey looked at his plate, where the sausage had been cut into pieces, with the sauce resembling blood, covering the scattered minced meat.

"Rather than answering that, I'd like to say something else first... "

Geoffrey furrowed his brows, not directly answering Yas's question, instead beginning a discussion about Bologue himself.

"As I said before, Bologue has spent too long in the Black Prison, which has taken a mental toll on him. Worse still, I think Adelle's death has stirred something within him, exacerbating his condition."

Chapter 37 - 19 The Villain _2

"What condition?"

Yas put down his knife and fork. He was always vigilant about anything related to the Demon. At the Order Bureau, he was also firmly against employing Debtors. If Bologue showed the slightest possibility of losing control, it would catch his attention.

"Role-playing?"

Geoffrey said uncertainly. The term was unexpected. Before Yas could inquire further, he continued explaining.

"Bologue Lazarus... this person is somewhat paranoid and narcissistic. He extremely adheres to his so-called 'law of axioms.' Lebius thinks Bologue imagines himself as the 'Savior,' but compared to a 'Savior,' I actually think Bologue's idea is much simpler."

Geoffrey arched his brows, recalling.

"One day, Bologue suddenly told me that he understood the true meaning of life," Geoffrey said. "At that time, Adelle had just passed away. I thought he was merely overtaken by grief, rambling madly. But thinking back now, he might have been serious."

"What did he say?" Yas grew curious.

"He said Adelle was a person of faith. She had been a field medic years ago, went to the battlefield to save lives, and chose to do good even after retiring, serving her God... A person like her should rightly ascend to heaven, enjoying glory and warmth...

Yet her God gave her such an end.

Bologue believes that what they call God either doesn't exist, or if it does, then it's an extremely apathetic God."

There was a slightly helpless smile on Geoffrey's face as he continued.

"Bologue often uses peculiar metaphors to describe some things and frequently speaks many questionable fallacies, but there's one thing he wasn't wrong about.

Someone has to uphold that sacred 'law of axioms.'

If God doesn't respond to His believers, then Bologue will respond instead."

Geoffrey's voice became stern.

"Bologue Lazarus will correct it all."

"What does he want to correct?" Yas asked.

"The law of axioms.

Bless the good, bring down fire upon the evil, that is the 'law of axioms,'" Geoffrey said. "That's his 'role' in the 'role-playing.'"

"He says 'Good' and 'Savior,' 'Hero'... these terms are too noble for him. He can't be as great as the 'benevolent.' He is despicable and lowly, best at killing, fighting fire with fire.

So he calls himself the 'villain.'

"The villain?"

"That's right, the villain.

If God is unwilling to punish those who've sinned, then let Bologue Lazarus, the bigger villain, punish and do evil."

Geoffrey took a deep breath, squinting his eyes as if telling a terrifying tale.

"At the crossroads of hesitation, in the shadowy realm of Oath City · Opus, filled with filth and malevolence, demons lurk in every unreachable corner... It's full of villains there."

Thinking of it, Geoffrey chuckled as though worried for those villains.

"Now, a somewhat mentally disturbed Undead, obsessed with role-playing, is humming a tune, heading there fully armed.

Bologue isn't just venting his rage; he is also upholding his 'law of axioms.' He is his own god, a tyrannical and obsessive god.

Someone has to pay a blood debt for the death of his friend."

Yas understood Geoffrey's words. Just imagining that scene brought him an inexplicable pressure, as if he could smell the deep scent of blood at the tip of his nose.

"A group of villains facing another... bigger, more brutal villain," Yas whispered.

Geoffrey took a sip from his glass, trying to soothe his parched throat, and softly spoke.

"Back to the previous question, by what means will Bologue kill his way in? I think his means are... to have no means at all."

Geoffrey stared at Yas and asked.

"Now he represents the Angel of holy judgment, the folding knife in his hand is a blazing Fire Sword... Do you think an enraged Angel would sneak in for an assassination?

He wouldn't, Yas. Bologue isn't that gentle of a person.

He would only fiercely knock down the doors of villains with his sword, announcing God's verdict amidst their shrill wails."

Geoffrey laughed, like telling a bad dark joke.

"Death sentence, executed immediately."

...

In the dim clinic, as Bologue's words fell, the atmosphere completely solidified. The man behind the counter gripped the knife handle tightly, ready to draw for a kill. Meanwhile, the lurking figures in the darkness were all prepared for battle.

Bologue noticed this, but he did not prepare to confront. Instead, he closed a partly opened iron door and then latched the adjacent security door tightly.

Noticing Bologue's actions, the man behind the counter paused for a second, then let out a burst of derisive laughter, echoing in the darkness. The murmur of whispers could be heard, as they discussed Bologue and his apparent self-destruction.

"This is a new outfit..."

Bologue muttered, taking off the gray-black trench coat to reveal a white shirt and the array of blades hanging from his body.

With the protection of the 'Concealer' gone, the menacing hostility grew stronger. Although Bologue seemed quite ordinary, everyone couldn't help but feel the pressure's presence.

No one dared to act rashly.

Folding the gray-black trench coat and placing it on the adjacent chair, he took off his hat and set it on top of the coat. Bologue leisurely turned around to face the myriad of evil in the darkness, finally removing his gas mask.

Chapter 38 - 19 Villain_3

The repressed breathing became smooth, blinking, and a cyan glimmer rose in his eyes. Taking a deep sniff around, a hint of disgust flashed across Bologue's face as he casually remarked.

"Everyone, don't you think the stench here is a bit too much?"

Gripping the folding knife, Bologue gazed coldly into the darkness.

"Does anyone want to do some cleaning?"

Before he finished speaking, the man behind the counter pulled out a long knife, intending to leap and chop Bologue, but Bologue was faster. The clear sound of steel sang, the sharp folding knife extended in his hand, and a silver bright flying knife was thrown, trailing a piercing whistle.

The flying knife grazed the man's wrist holding the knife, precisely shaving off a vast patch of flesh, drawing a large swath of blood as it nailed into the counter behind, smashing bottles and jars.

The excruciating pain made it difficult for the man to hold the long knife, which clattered to the ground. His expression twisted as the flying knife severed his wrist, causing continuous bleeding.

"Kill him!"

The man shouted, though he didn't need to give orders. The moment Bologue threw the flying knife, the surrounding darkness began to wriggle, shadow after shadow emerged wielding blades, spears, and staves.

Bologue swung the folding knife, flinging his arm as if in a dance, throwing out deadly flying knives one after another, like a pouring rain, leaving shining silver strands in the air.

Cutting arms, slashing bodies, slicing throats...

Cries of pain and screams continued, weapons and bodies fell to the ground, turning into dull drumbeats. Someone managed to approach Bologue, only to have their head split by the descending folding knife.

With the folding knife piercing through the heart, Bologue embraced the corpse, spinning and leaping with it as if it was his dance partner, performing a duet with Bologue.

Gunshots rang out, blood flowers bloomed on the dance partner's body, and the villains surrounded, clashing blades, shredding the corpse into a bloody mess, while Bologue dodged all attacks amidst the dance steps, merely getting his tunic soaked in blood.

Spinning around, one face after another flashed before Bologue's eyes. They were hideous and extremely greedy, their corrupt aura difficult to mask even by blood.

The dance steps ended, Bologue swung up the dance partner and hurled it to another corner. The fallen corpse crushed a few people, and Bologue stomped on the body, leaping high to bring down the thunderous blade, slashing diagonally towards someone's neck, sending the head flying.

Turning back, in the dim light, everyone was bathed in blood, their grotesque faces bearing a non-human mutation.

Demon, every one of you here is a demon, wicked beings awaiting judgment by fire.

"Great, this way I can slash without any burden."

A smile appeared on Bologue's face, the blood completely dyed the white robe red, clinging to his body, outlining the taut muscles beneath the tunic.

Breathing heavily, the demon's corrupt scent mixed with potion and blood formed an indescribable but nauseating breath, like a monster's corpse lying in a swamp, decaying and rotting.

It was a terrible smell, yet like a peculiar trait, Bologue instead liked this scent, deeply intoxicating him.

"You know, perhaps it's from staying in the Black Prison too long, I've always thought I had some mental issues... A desire to crush everything to powder, to pour out all my scorching rage."

Bologue soliloquized, his expression twisted and sickly, blood dripped on his pallid face, like crimson war paint.

"Geoffrey thought so too. He always suggested I see a doctor, and I thought it was a good suggestion. After all, I shouldn't bother others, right?"

He spoke words that the demons couldn't understand.

"But then I realized your existence, all of you demons, all you great villains!"

Bologue said and laid down the folding knife, stabbing it into a corpse, his hands like offering flowers, joyfully facing the demons.

"It's absolutely wonderful that there are demons in this world!"

He said sincerely.

"As long as I release this twisted desire on you, there shouldn't be any problem, right? After all, you all swallow souls, demons destined to be eradicated, so why can't I be the one to do it?"

A gleam flashed in Bologue's eyes.

Slaughtering demons not only fulfilled his twisted desires but also adhered to his "law of justice," even accomplishing the Order Bureau's duty. More importantly, he could absorb the fragments of souls from demon corpses to fill his void and suppress the outbreak of Bulimia Nervosa.

Bologue thought there was nothing more delightful in the world than slashing demons.

"It's truly wonderful!"

Bologue, empty-handed, looked at the demons with fervent eyes, rubbing his fists, signaling to them.

After a brief silence, the demons understood Bologue's intention. An immense sense of humiliation surged in, and they roared, brandishing swords towards the unarmed Bologue.

They surged fiercely, yet in Bologue's eyes, they were full of flaws. The distance constantly shortened until they were face to face, the bright blade light raised high.

Bologue sidestepped, took a step, and crashed into the demon's arms, elbowing the chest with a burst of bone-cracking sound.

The high-raised blade light slowed for a second from this blow, the elbow quickly lifted and smashed down, crashing into the throat, and then lifted again, slamming against the chin.

Chapter 39 - 19 Villain_4

Retract, turn, punch, Bologue's fist whistled past, slamming towards the Demon's head. With each blow, the Demon's body trembled violently and retreated, the sound of shattering ongoing, until the final punch struck, and the Demon fell, its face a bloody blur, as if drained of strength, while Bologue's fist was also covered in blood.

He ducked his head, dodging another incoming blade. After witnessing Bologue's ferocity, the opponent didn't hold back. Missing the strike, he drew a Short Dagger, attempting to continue stabbing Bologue.

Both hands clasped the opponent's wrists, controlling the sword and Short Dagger. This Demon's strength was much greater than Bologue anticipated, and for a moment, they were at a standstill, neither able to overpower the other.

The Demon roared and headbutted Bologue, causing his nose to bleed. Expecting Bologue to recoil from the pain, instead, he laughed amidst the agony.

Footsteps approached, another Demon picked up a blood-stained long knife, chopping towards Bologue's head from behind.

At the critical moment, Bologue released his grip, evading the Short Dagger. The Demon, unable to control its strength, accidentally stabbed itself in the thigh. Bologue lifted his foot, fiercely kicking the Dagger, piercing through flesh, the blade tip emerging from the thigh.

Amidst screams and blood, the Demon collapsed weakly. Bologue took the opportunity to step on its thigh and shoulder, leaping briefly, delivering an elbow strike from above, smashing into the Demon's head.

Its eyes immediately filled with blood, and amidst the sound of breaking, the Demon's head visibly dented, its vision engulfed as if swallowed by a snowstorm, leaving only a blinding white chaos.

The long blade approached, whistling through the air.

Bologue, holding the unconscious Demon, fell to the ground, evading the long blade attacking from behind, and then fiercely kicked the unconscious Demon, its body sliding on the bloody ground, crashing into the Demon holding the long blade.

As it tried to get up, a shadow enveloped it. After a short run-up, Bologue delivered a flying knee, crushing its face, and immediately the two rolled together, struggling with each other.

The Demon growled, pinning Bologue beneath it, and drew a pistol, ready to end Bologue's life.

The narrow and dim interior restricted the use of firearms, but at this range, just a light pull of the trigger, it could kill the uninvited guest.

A sharp pain came from the elbow. Bologue drew a Flying Knife, deeply stabbing it into the joint, and before the Demon could howl, the irritating sound of bone grinding arose, Bologue twisted and broke its elbow, then seized the pistol meant to point at him.

"Smile, friend."

Below the blood-covered face was a clear azure glow.

After the gunshot, Bologue kicked over the Demon, now with half its head, slowly rising.

"Black as night, black as coal."

Humming his favorite tune, he stepped over corpses and pulled out the folding knife stuck in one, once again leaving knife marks on each corpse's throat.

After all this, Bologue turned his gaze to the only Demon still standing amidst the bloody pool.

Unlike the other Demons, it was completely frightened by Bologue's violence, frozen in place, doing nothing until Bologue looked at it, then, as if waking from a dream, it let out a sharp scream and ran towards the iron door.

Run, run fast.

That was the only thought left in its mind, but no matter how it tugged at the iron door, it wouldn't budge, and then it saw the security bolt was latched.

"Damn it! Damn it!"

It cursed, overwhelming fear causing its hands to tremble. Such a simple action, yet it couldn't accomplish it, metal in its hands making a trembling, sob-like sound.

Seeing this, Bologue laughed, leisurely raised the blood-stained pistol, furrowed his brow, contorted his expression, as his blurry vision cleared, pulling the trigger.

Gunshots sounded one after another.

Bologue's shooting was bad enough, all bullets hitting the iron door, leaving one dent after another.

"You can't be serious!" Bologue complained loudly.

The Demon ignored it all, the gunshots like chords of death, extreme panic pursuing it.

Footsteps approached.

It dared not turn back, nor had the chance. An arm wrapped around its neck, holding it tightly.

"Take a deep breath, friend."

The monster's whisper sounded beside its ear, the Demon felt the air brushing against its skin, warm with a lingering scent of iron, like a bloodthirsty beast in the darkness behind it, baring its fangs.

"No... no..."

It patted the arm, but its strength was so weak, not enough to shake the tightening noose.

Breathing became difficult, the chest feeling like it was being crushed by a boulder, whether it was tears or blood, its vision blurred into gray and white void. Until a clear sound of breaking came from beneath its flesh, the Demon's head twisted, its face turning an iron blue.

Bologue released his grip, letting the body fall into the bloody pool, looking at his blood-stained hands.

Trembling, trembling with excitement, like a great shark smelling blood, the flame was kindled and would not be quenched until the darkness was shattered to pieces.

"Where are you?"

Bologue made a pose, inquiring among the corpses.

That rat-like man had vanished, fleeing into the darkness at the first sign of battle, and Bologue was tracking his trail, knowing that this rat would lead him to Norm Ward.

"Norm, where are you?"

Bologue walked to the counter, used the folding knife to pry open a hidden door, from the dark depth came a chilling wind full of vengeful souls.

"Oh, are you here?"

Bologue chuckled.

Faintly, the wailing of thousands of souls could be heard, but Bologue was unafraid. He relished in the Demons' suffering, yet everything here was not enough, still not enough.

Bologue was not satisfied.

It was like a sacrifice to an unknown entity.

He did not need the penitence of evildoers or their sincere repentance. What he required was the proper price paid by evildoers.

The blood of the wicked, the flesh of the wicked, the pain of the wicked.

He never got enough.

Bits of starlight rose from fallen corpses, gathering into silk-like strands of light, twining around Bologue. He devoured the soul fragments, and the azure glow in his eyes burned even more fiercely.

"Run fast! The Evil Spirit will catch you!"

He laughed out loud.

Nightmares stepped out from stories, into deeper darkness, carrying brutality and spreading fear that pierces the bone.

Chapter 40 - After modification: Chapter 20 Time of Punishment

Reid withdrew back behind the counter, took off his shirt, and wrapped it around his wrist, barely stopping the bleeding.

The sound of steel clashing was incessant, dense and thick with the scent of blood, filling the entire room.

Reid no longer wanted to look outside; it must be filled with brutal scenes. He looked up and spotted a brass button beneath the counter. Without thinking, he pressed it, then stretched out his hand, straining to pry open the wooden plank, revealing a pitch-black hidden passage.

Seizing the moment while others occupied Bologue, he crawled into the passage in disgrace. Before closing the hatch, more harrowing screams echoed, as if a massacre was happening inside the clinic.

Who exactly is this guy?

The question stormed through Reid's mind, but he lacked the courage to ask Bologue. From the very first moment of the conflict, Reid, relying on his years of life-and-death experiences, realized that Bologue was different from ordinary people, beyond what they could handle.

This suffocating oppressive force, terrifying yet extremely familiar.

Having roamed the Wandering Crossroads for so long, Reid instantly realized who the opponent was.

The Great Rift is a chaotic land, but within the chaos lies a basic understanding, or perhaps a form of order.

It might sound ridiculous, a land of chaos having order, but that's reality. Even the most chaotic "ecology" has an absolute powerhouse to establish necessary rules.

Reid paid taxes to the "Tyrant," so generally speaking, no one would trouble him in the Wandering Crossroads. Therefore, there's a high chance Bologue came from outside.

But few outsiders would come here to execute justice; to have such leisure and be so fearsome, it could only be those people.

"Order Bureau's lackeys."

Reid cursed with pain, moving awkwardly through the narrow hidden passage, hugging the walls closely.

"Have I been noticed after all?"

He muttered to himself. As a member of this clinic, Reid was very aware of the kind of business being conducted here. He had considered being targeted by the Order Bureau, and although he was mentally prepared, the reality of such a nightmare was still deeply unsettling.

This was beyond what Reid could handle; for the moment, only that guy could resist even slightly.

"Open up! Norm! People from the Order Bureau are here!"

The passage reached its end, blocked by a heavy, specially-made iron door. A second or two later, the iron door swung open, a sturdy arm reached out, grabbing Reid, pulling him in.

"Stop shouting, I received the alarm."

Such a sound echoed in the dark. When Reid pressed the alarm beneath the counter, the signal had already been received here.

Reid fell onto the ground, the heavy iron door shut tight again. After a few crisp clicks, multiple locks tightly secured it, making the door solid.

This measure was prepared early on. The specially reinforced iron door could withstand a lot of firepower, and the narrow passage further restricted the invader's actions.

Even those Order Bureau guys would need some time to break through such a specially made iron door.

"Norm, time to escape!" Reid struggled to stand up, gasping for breath.

The Order Bureau, that mysterious organization akin to an urban legend, couldn't even be compared to shadows like Wandering Crossroads, let alone their bunch trying to sneak and survive in the shadows.

Reid's first thought was to run; he never thought about resisting anything, not even having the courage to fight back.

"Escape? Where to?"

A contemptuous voice sounded, and Reid looked toward the direction of the voice, seeing Norm emerging from the darkness.

Just like the photo, Norm was a burly bald man, his exposed skin covered in complex tattoos.

"How many people are there on the opposite side?"

"One person, only one!" Reid answered hurriedly.

Norm dragged him into the depths of darkness, where curtains hung down everywhere, rows of beds placed in the dim light, the air filled with the heavy scent of disinfectant and a slight decaying stench.

"One person?"

Norm's eyes sparkled with strange light, and he continued to ask.

"Does he have anything unusual? For instance, does he have glowing patterns on his body?"

"What... what is that?" Reid couldn't understand.

"So there's none?" Seeing Reid's reaction, Norm stated directly, but soon he hesitated, mumbling.

"Maybe those guys are too weak, not forcing him to use 'Secret Energy.'

"'Secret Energy'? What's that?"

Reid heard the unfamiliar term and couldn't resist asking.

Ultimately, Reid was just one of Norm's employees, helping maintain the clinic's facade business. He was aware of the Demon's existence and knew Norm was dealing with Condensed Philosopher's Stone business, but Reid didn't know much more information. His knowledge of the Extraordinary World came from Norm; Reid wasn't a Demon but a complete ordinary person.

Initially participating in such business terrified Reid. He never imagined that demons existing only in stories could be real, but as business thrived, he perhaps got used to it or became numb, becoming part of the madness.

"No... this isn't right. This style of doing things doesn't resemble the Order Bureau," Norm didn't respond to Reid's question, fully immersed in his own thoughts. "The Order Bureau is always secretive and lethal, while this guy seems like a rising murderer."