

Endless Debt

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Norm's dealings with the Order Bureau were few, but each encounter was nerve-racking, yet none were like the current situation.

No conspiracies or tricks, just a straight-up intrusion.

Thick scent of blood wafted from the front; pale lights fell one by one, illuminating bloody operation tables, alongside which lay some people on hospital beds, seemingly asleep, without any response.

"We can't just flee, all the goods are here; if they're destroyed, the 'Man-eaters' will kill us."

Norm opened the cabinet, revealing a safe inside, lined with rows of crimson crystals, vivid as blood.

For a moment, both stopped breathing.

These were like treasured gems, seemingly glowing by themselves; even in the dimness, they sparkled brightly.

This was the material form of the soul, "Golden Soul's" Condensation.

Like magic power, upon seeing them, their thoughts emptied instantly, leading to the most primal desire birthed from the void, to grip them tightly in their palms, to own these holy, "Golden Soul" forever.

"Philosopher's Stone..."

Reid took a deep breath, slowly extended his slender, angular hand, reaching towards the blood-like beauty.

"Reid."

A calm voice sounded, carrying a piercing venomous resentment.

Reid snapped awake, his panicked gaze meeting Norm's icy eyes.

"S-sorry."

Reid breathed rapidly, hastily pulling back his errant hand, rubbing it nervously.

"Though the purity isn't high, this batch of goods is still exceptional."

Norm took out a Philosopher's Stone; upon close inspection, it showed some impure cloudy streaks within the red crystal, disrupting its purity.

"Besides these goods, what matters more are these things."

He said while placing the Philosopher's Stone back in the safe, opened the cabinet below, dragging out a heavy suitcase, within which were neatly arranged potions, the dark red liquid visible through transparent glass containers.

"So many?" Reid exclaimed.

"Indeed, these things can't be lost just like that," Norm's gaze flickered with determination as he spoke to Reid, "Wake those guys up."

Upon hearing the command, Reid was momentarily stunned, trembling all over.

"But... but those guys have been hungry for a long time."

"With me here, what are you afraid of?" Norm countered.

Reid swallowed hard; under such circumstances, his opinion was meaningless; he could only nod with difficulty and rushed to the hospital beds, awakening the slumbering patients on them.

Norm took all the Philosopher's Stones from the safe, stuffing them into the empty slots in the suitcase.

Reid arrived at the bedside; a heavy, rotten stench emanated from the bed, as if what lay upon it was not a person, but a corpse decaying for years.

In fact, that wasn't wrong; these guys' bodies were alive, but their souls long decayed and perished.

Demons, the people in deep sleep on the beds were demons, different from ordinary demons; these guys were trapped by Bulimia Nervosa, hadn't fed on souls for an incredibly long time, their entire minds and consciousness entirely warped by the void of hunger.

Ordinary demons retain some level of awareness, but these demons have become complete beasts.

Norm kept these dangerous fellows here only to test new potions; otherwise, even he would choose to cast them into the Great Rift's Abyss.

Now these hungry demons were rendered comatose by potions; Reid trembled as he inserted the needle into the intravenous tubes, administering awakening potions one after another.

"In about three minutes, these guys will wake up."

After finishing, Reid shouted to Norm.

"Alright, head to the escape passage."

Upon hearing Reid's response, Norm grabbed the suitcase.

In this line of business, thorough preparation was vital, and these were what Norm had prepared for.

Just then, a thunderous metallic clanging sounded, overwhelming the auditory sense, the ground shook beneath their feet, dust swirling in the air.

The custom iron door trembled, its coarse surface slightly bulged, as if a beast was pounding on it; yet, it failed to break through, barred outside.

"At least we bought the right iron door."

Seeing this, Norm remarked.

Saying no more, both rose to head toward the escape passage; with the custom iron door and soon-awakening demons as hindrance, Bologue would struggle to catch up quickly, given he was alone.

The Order Bureau was powerful and mysterious, yet even rats have their survival methods; this was why they survived in the gutters until now.

Everything seemed fine, quite smoothly, but then a violent tremor hit.

Boom—Boom—

Explosive roar erupted, as if a giant was pounding the building, walls and iron plates all shuddered in agony, like a disturbed swarm of bees.

The overhead lights flickered erratically, choking dust fell heavily, veiling the view like fog.

The iron door remained unbroken; this tremor came from all directions, and Norm couldn't discern what was happening.

"Move!"

Norm shouted at the stunned Reid.

The clinic space was ultimately limited, whether the hidden passage or secret lab, it was all cramped here like organs, hence the escape passage was not far, right behind the door.

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As long as they passed through this door, they could follow the downward staircase to the outside world. With the complex structure of the wandering crossroads, even those from the Order Bureau would find it hard to catch up with them.

Norm stepped forward, a violent tremor shadowing him. He abruptly looked up, the source of the tremor coming from above, continuously pursuing them.

Earth shook and mountains trembled.

The buildings let out an eerie cry; there was no talk of designers or engineers in the wandering crossroads. Every building here was an illegal construction. So-called earthquake-resistant design was non-existent; this was merely a sandcastle shaped out of steel and mud, teetering on the brink of collapse under the vibrations.

Finally, like thunder striking, a deafening roar completely shattered the ceiling above, sending concrete, metal, and wood collapsing and disintegrating.

"Stop! Reid!"

Norm shouted, reaching out and grabbing the swiftly advancing Reid. Thanks to this pull, Reid's steps faltered for a moment, and then countless debris collapsed, blocking their path.

Reid stared blankly at the spectacle, looking up as layer after layer of the ceiling above collapsed, seeing murky light cascading down from above the Great Rift.

Dust filled the air, Reid rigidly turned his head, his face pale as a corpse. He looked at Norm, seemingly wanting to say something in gratitude.

"Uh... Uh..."

Reid uttered a few words, only to find himself unable to speak, casting a pleading gaze to the side. Norm, however, had a grave expression and continued to slowly step back, distancing himself from Reid.

What happened?

Reid couldn't understand, but soon a searing pain penetrated his mind, blood gushing from his throat, staining his pale face.

"Can't open a door, then break a window."

The cold words sounded in his ear, and a sharp folding knife pierced through from behind his neck, the deadly steel jamming into Reid's throat, forcing him to utter a painful wail. His hands clawed helplessly at his throat, only to open more wounds from the blade.

"Who are you?"

Norm's face turned somber.

Under his gaze, the folding knife that pierced the throat began to twist, shredding bone and nerve, then abruptly withdrew, slicing the entire head clean off.

As Reid's head fell, the bloody cross-section revealed the man hiding behind Reid, his visage fitting perfectly where the head once was, his figure overlapping, exuding a chilling aura.

The headless corpse stood rigidly in place, increasingly bright light looming in its eye sockets, like a burning, azure ghost fire atop the severed neck.

"Norm Ward."

Bologue did not answer Norm's question, instead voicing his name.

He retreated, shrouded in his re-worn gray-black trench coat. Under the power of the "Concealer," Bologue's figure began to blur, disappearing into the swirling dust, leaving no trace.

Norm angrily scanned the surroundings, pulling a handgun from his waist, vigilantly watching all around.

There was no time for hesitation, invisible forces echoed and surged in the darkness, imbuing Norm's body, granting magnificent power to a mere mortal.

Intricate, artisan-like patterns appeared on Norm's skin, radiating a faint glow, as if tattoos etched into his body.

"The time for punishment has arrived."

Bologue's voice echoed in the darkness, accompanied by deep, low growls. The demons that should have been dormant stirred awake. They struggled, breaking their chains one by one.

"Are you ready?"

The blue-eyed evil spirit proclaimed in the darkness.

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Norm took a deep breath, slowly released his hand, and set down the briefcase he was holding. One hand gripped a handgun, and the other pulled out a short knife from his waist, striking a pose like a falcon ready to swoop.

This scene resembled a theatrical play; Bologue smashed through the ceiling, and dim light filtered through the mist of the Great Rift, perfectly illuminating Norm.

The audience in the darkness gradually awakened, their bloodthirsty breaths constant, and the heavy scent of decay seemed to fill every corner.

Norm maintained external calm, but his heart churned like a storm; he was not a Demon but a whole human being. Once these Demons awoke, these ravenous beasts would indiscriminately attack, drawn to the deliciousness of souls.

This weapon was originally meant to stall Bologue, but now it dragged Norm into a mire.

As for Bologue, Norm's mind was already full of speculation. From this brief encounter, Bologue had some concealment abilities that allowed him to easily blend into the darkness, to the extent that Norm struggled to pinpoint his location. On the other hand, there was Bologue's destructive power.

Thinking of this, Norm's gaze slightly shifted upwards; never did he expect that, when the door wouldn't open, Bologue chose to tear down the wall to break into the room.

It was Norm's oversight, but it was essential intel: Bologue's power couldn't open the specially crafted iron door, yet could shatter this fragile building, giving Norm a rough estimate of Bologue's strength.

"It's not that bad yet."

Norm reassured himself. He had a vague understanding of Bologue, but now Bologue knew nothing about him or his powers. This was Norm's advantage.

"Are you from the Order Bureau? Since when did the Order Bureau recruit someone like you? I remember their operations are always cautious and secretive."

Norm scanned the surrounding darkness, not acting rashly.

In memory, the Order Bureau's field staff were like silent Death Gods; they rarely spoke unnecessary words, cold tools executing orders. When you saw them, you were already dead.

"I just joined today."

A response rang out, prompting Norm to raise his handgun without hesitation and shoot confidently in the direction of the voice. After the gunshot, the slow return of metal clashing was heard.

"Joined today? So eager to carry out missions?" Norm knew the shot didn't hit and continued, "You really are dedicated."

"Love what you do... Honestly, I quite like this job."

Bologue knew Norm was probing him, and similarly, Bologue was probing Norm.

The two, one in the light and one in the dark, reminiscent of a Hunter with prey. The difference was, any slight mistake could reverse their roles.

Seeing the glowing patterns on Norm, no explanation was needed; Bologue was aware it was the "Alchemy Matrix," signaling Norm as a Condenser.

So, what is his "Secret Energy"?

Bologue pondered; he could rely on "Blessing" for trial and error, but as Geoffrey said, Bologue didn't wish to overly depend on this power...

No, rather than dependence, it's a poor sense of pride. The first step towards revenge required constant death to make progress, showcasing Bologue's incompetence.

Bologue was an expert; experts could not be so incompetent.

As for the identity of the Condenser opposite?

Bologue was indifferent to these factors; he enjoyed challenges that re-ignited his heart.

The "Concealer" provided shelter, with the Shock Hammer being Bologue's killing tool—more practical than expected, simple yet brutal, its fierce strikes causing walls to tremble and eventually collapse.

With the hammer, Bologue forcibly created a path from the roof down; it made him feel like a raging construction worker.

Tightening his grip on the folded knife and Shock Hammer, a hoarse roar suddenly broke the standoff between Bologue and Norm, as hungry Demons rushed out from the darkness, seeking the deliciousness of souls.

Perhaps due to soul deficiency and the shelter of the "Concealer," most Demons did not notice Bologue's presence, primarily rushing toward Norm, tormented by Bulimia Nervosa, leaving them with only animalistic instincts.

Feeding, greedily and frantically feeding.

Only a few Demons seemed to notice Bologue's presence, gazing blankly at his location.

Bologue remained unmoved; he completely ignored those Demons and carefully watched Norm to observe how he would combat them.

The sound of gunfire echoed.

Norm fired continuously at the approaching Demons. His aim was precise, each bullet striking accurately, exploding the Demon's skull into a mist of blood.

Ferocious figures fell one after another during the charge, their corpses chaotically piled together.

However, ammunition was ultimately limited, and Norm was constantly vigilant of Bologue, which prevented him from focusing entirely on the battle.

Running out of ammo, with Demons closing in, Norm swung the short knife decisively, precisely severing the Demons' limbs, then turning to slice their necks open.

He wanted to conceal his "Secret Energy," but as the pressure mounted rapidly, such concealment wouldn't last much longer.

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The faint glow of the "Alchemy Matrix" on his body began to fluctuate, synchronized with Norm's rapid breathing, yet resembling the blood vessels surging with blood. With each fluctuation, an extraordinary power was infused into his body.

"Hiss-ha!"

Suddenly, footsteps erupted as another demon charged out from the darkness, heading towards Norm. Norm holstered his handgun and drew another short knife from his waist, sworn to swiftly dispatch it.

The distance between them constantly decreased, but Norm's focus wasn't entirely on the demon before him. His peripheral vision was on alert in the darkness, wary of an ambush from Bologue.

He was unsure what kind of force Bologue used to smash the ceiling, but once such power struck flesh, even with "Secret Energy," he would be gravely injured.

The short knife swung up, and in that instant, Norm felt it.

As if enveloped by some pitch-black viscous liquid, numerous sharp tiny spikes pierced his skin, reminding him with a near-death dread.

Something's not right, something's wrong.

His wandering gaze solidified as he looked at the approaching demon. Its hideous and fearsome figure began to shatter, revealing the ghastly green glow of the evil spirit behind it.

"First strike!"

Bologue laughed crazily as he flicked out a folding knife, sweeping the sharp blade towards Norm. Norm could barely parry with his short knife, but in the next second, Bologue released the folding knife, evading the short blade's block, and let his body spin wildly.

He swung a heavy hammer.

Norm saw an iron hammer speeding toward him, trailing a ghostly light as it swung.

The shock hammer slammed onto the short knife, triggering the attached "Vibration," enhancing and expanding the already violent hammer strike. The short knife shattered instantly upon contact, its shards flying like shrapnel, and then the shock hammer continued downward, striking Norm.

Like being rammed by an enraged bull, Norm's figure froze for a second before being knocked out under the crashing hammer sound and the falling radiance.

He was swept into the darkness, with Bologue maintaining his swinging motion, replacing him in the spotlight.

Agonizing, ceaseless pain radiated from the hand holding the knife. The shattered blade cut into his flesh, the impacted arm twisted, bones fractured, and pale bone spikes protruded from the wound.

Norm coughed blood, desperately and swiftly scrambled up from the ground, his figure staggering, seemingly ready to collapse any moment.

What's going on?

Pain and thoughts collided in his mind as he lifted his head to look at Bologue standing under the light.

He saw Bologue wearing tattered clothes—stripped from the demon—through the worn seams, showing a gray-black trench coat like a hazy night covering all sharpness.

Norm tried to see Bologue's face, but what he saw was an even more terrifying scene.

Bologue's face was dripping blood—it wasn't his face, but a sliced, decaying, twisted visage—the demon's countenance.

The demon's face hung like a mask over Bologue's face, blood pooling and dripping along his jaw, with an indescribable smile on what should be a tormented grimace.

Bologue had hidden his presence, misleading Norm.

Meanwhile, behind Bologue, a series of faint footsteps echoed, followed by a mournful whimper.

Another figure staggered out of the darkness, waving its hands wildly, trying to grasp some lifesaving straw, but only touching dust drifting with the wind.

The demon whimpered, its face a bloody mess, leaving only hollow, pitch-black eye sockets, their depths seemingly leading straight to the abyss.

The folding knife flashed, and the demon's movement paused for a second before collapsing straight down, ending the prolonged agony.

"Madman."

Norm cursed furiously, not hesitating anymore. He stopped hiding, with the faint glow on his body surging. The fractured, twisted arm seemed reinforced with steel, muscles bulging, forcing broken bones to meld together.

His physique swelled instantly, towering like a stag, with his skin emitting a faint red glow.

Clenching his fists.

"Body enhancement type 'Secret Energy,' huh?"

Bologue assessed, and in the next second, Norm shot out like a cannonball, sprinting forward with another short knife waving sharp blade light aimed at Bologue's face, as if to tear apart this deceitful mask and see Bologue's true self.

The moment the shock hammer hit Norm, presumably, Norm also guessed the power of the shock hammer, and such a trick wouldn't succeed a second time easily.

Yet Bologue was always adept at trickery.

He swung the shock hammer, but this time Bologue's target wasn't Norm. Instead, he slammed it to the ground, shattering it instantly.

The ground trembled violently, cracked, and the surface of mud and stone began to collapse, kicking up dust.

The intense shaking caused Norm's steps to stagger several paces, with the kicked-up dust obscuring Bologue's figure. As Norm swung the blade light, dispersing the dust, Bologue was nowhere to be seen.

Norm roared angrily. He had been toyed with, completely dancing to Bologue's rhythm. He tried to break free but didn't know how.

This was clearly his turf, yet under Bologue's demolition-like onslaught, it had forcibly become Bologue's domain.

A whistling sound came from behind his head, Norm ducked and leaned forward, grabbing a chain scattered on the ground, originally used to bind the demons, now wielded in his hand, swinging it towards the direction the sound came from.

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Under the release of "Secret Energy," Norm's strength and speed increased significantly, with the chains in his hands like iron whips, emitting a clear and resounding sound.

Blood splattered down, what was coming wasn't a sword, it was a Demon thrown by Bologue.

This unlucky creature was lashed by the chains, flesh mangled, and shortly after, a sharp whistling cut through the air as several flying knives skimmed past the Demon, hitting Norm's body.

The wounds varied in depth, but under the enhancement of "Secret Energy," they were merely surface wounds. Norm struggled to quell his anger; he needed to stay calm—there was still hope for victory, as long as he could hit Bologue, even if just once...

He removed the flying knife from his body, stained with his blood.

Suddenly, Norm snapped out of the battle's rage, recalling something crucial, far more important than the ongoing fight.

Scanning his surroundings, he found the suitcase, which had been knocked over beside the Demon's corpse from Bologue's impact on the ground.

Norm immediately swung the chains, trying to hook the suitcase over, but several flying knives skimmed by, knocking down the chains.

Without hesitation, he got up and ran toward the suitcase. Just then, a hook shot out from the darkness, accurately hitting the suitcase, and quickly reeled it back.

Following the direction from which the suitcase was being retrieved, Norm saw Bologue standing in the dark, one hand holding the hook gun and the other holding the suitcase.

"This thing looks quite important."

He said, still wearing the Demon's visage on his face, with blue ghostly flames flickering in the gaps of his eyes.

"You'll know once you open it."

Norm remained calm, plotting something unknown in his heart.

"Oh?"

Bologue seemed intrigued. He released the hook gun, letting it fall to the ground, but just as he was about to open the suitcase, his actions halted, looking mockingly at Norm.

"It must be full of Philosopher's Stones, not very interesting."

He said, tossing the suitcase aside, once again gripping the folding knife and Shock Hammer in his hands.

The two faced each other like knights of old dueling, astride their steeds, lances held high.

Norm gripped the chains and flying knives tightly, stained with his blood, the blood simmering on the metal's surface like a potent acid, yet all this was obscured by the pervasive dust, invisible to Bologue.

Bologue's hands hung low, a relaxed demeanor, as if from the start, he knew the outcome of the battle, now just savoring the villain's last struggles before death.

One second, two seconds...

At a moment no longer able to suppress the tension, they acted, galloping forward, thrusting their lances.

Bologue strode forward without any deceit, rushing Norm head-on, while Norm swung out flying knives and chains using every means to block Bologue.

The chains turned into wildly dancing Silver Snake, whipping the ground and walls, and the corpses in its path were lashed into bloody mist and shredded flesh, yet it could never touch Bologue's figure, who moved like a true specter through it all.

Raising the folding knife, it scraped against the chains, sparking a brilliant trail of sparks, like riding on a meteor.

Yet within this wild dance of the Silver Snake, the deadly flying knives advanced silently. Bologue noticed these knives' presence, but like Norm, Bologue paid them little mind.

He possessed the "Blessing"—that terrifying "Resurrection."

This formidable healing ability was enough for Bologue to deal with most non-lethal injuries, and here lay the corpses of Demons, the blue Soul Shards providing him with endless power.

Bologue dodged most of the flying knives, but just as he neared Norm, finally, one knife silently grazed, slicing Bologue's index finger.

One could clearly observe something starting to spread along the wound, the fine blood vessels turning from bright red to pitch black, losing all sensation soon after.

As if by instinct, Bologue turned and shifted, abandoning the attack on Norm altogether, while his folding knife severed the finger before it turned entirely black, quickly dodging out, with bloodied Silver Snake trailing after him until Bologue retreated back into the darkness.

Thus ended their clash, with Bologue and Norm maintaining a safe distance, precisely at the chains' maximum reach.

He thrust the folding knife into the ground, raised his hand, and examined where the finger was severed, the blood bright red, untainted.

"Is this your 'Secret Energy'?"

Through multiple encounters, Bologue finally tested out Norm's trump card, whispering.

"Blood and poison..."

Norm saw this and calmly admitted it. He withdrew the chain, sheathed the short knife at his waist, and with his blood-stained palm, he caressed the chain, letting his blood evenly soak into every corner of the chain.

"In legends, Dragon Blood can make one strong, but it also carries deadly poison."

Norm said casually, as the "Alchemy Matrix" on his body also erupted with splendor. The blood smeared on the chain seemed to boil, with tiny bubbles emerging and bursting on it.

Secret Energy - Dragon Blood.

This was Norm's "Secret Energy," his blood would transform into the toxic "Dragon Blood," and enhancing physical strength was merely part of the power of "Dragon Blood."

The chain seemed as if it had been poisoned, and Bologue was highly aware of the fatal toxin. Just at the moment of being scratched, his index finger already showed signs of death.

"So... is that it?"

Bologue asked with a hint of disappointment.

He freed his left hand and bit down on the folding knife like a wolf gripping a blade.

His right hand fell, gripping the Shock Hammer, his entire body crouched.

Bologue could see the blue shards swirling around him. As they merged into his body, Bologue's strength increased segment by segment.

Soul determines the flesh.

As the Soul Shards filled him, it was as if he could temporarily enhance himself, amplifying his strength.

Breaking the shadow.

Norm saw only a streak of blue coming at him. He swung the chain with effort, the poisonous Silver Snake biting at Bologue. If it struck him, the poison would spread throughout Bologue's body via the wound. As long as he landed a hit, Norm could claim victory.

The Silver Snake drew a curved trajectory, flying towards Bologue from one side, but his speed suddenly increased, and the coiling Silver Snake bit into a patch of empty air. It turned its head and pounced at Bologue again, tangling heavily together.

The clattering chain surrounded Bologue, leaving no space to evade, nor did he need to evade. Bologue extended his left hand, clamped the chain, and then tightened it, strangling the frenzied Silver Snake.

It hit the mark!

Joy flashed in Norm's eyes. Bologue was ultimately a mere mortal. The chain's whipping and friction easily scraped the skin, the poison instantly flooded into the palm.

Within seconds, Bologue could no longer feel his left hand, as if it had turned into a heavy lead weight. In truth, it was so, the color drained from his palm, replaced by a bizarre gray-black, yet it still tightly grasped the chain, rendering the poisonous Silver Snake useless.

Norm's only long-range attack method was restricted, he knew this, but he also knew the poison would soon spread from Bologue's palm to his arm, even throughout his body.

"Dragon Blood" can paralyze nerves, it's also why Norm had the ability to restrain those Demons, they were paralyzed by "Dragon Blood," becoming lambs awaiting slaughter, soon Bologue would be among them.

The sound of flesh tearing was heard.

Norm's eyes were dull, unable to believe the scene before him.

Bologue had sacrificed his left hand to restrain the chain's agitation, causing the affected area to be only the left hand, while advancing toward Norm, he bit down the folding knife and slashed towards the blackened left hand.

The palm severed, along with the chain regaining freedom, Bologue thus cut off the poison's spread. Meanwhile, he leapt high, swinging the Shock Hammer, the dark shadow enveloping Norm.

Decisively, resolutely, without any hesitation, as if Bologue was not cutting off his own hand, merely some burden hindering his enemy-killing.

In the blazing blue eyes, there was only the deathly silence of a winter day.

"Time to pronounce judgment, Norm!"

Bologue shouted.

Norm roared, drawing out the short knife, swinging the chain, making a final counter attack, but he knew in his heart, he lost, Bologue was too close, the earth-shattering Iron Hammer had already been raised high.

The sound of anger resounded through the darkness.

"Punishment for the punished! Judgment for the judged!"

Like a divine punishment descending, the gavel falling during the judge's conviction.

Smashing the chain, shattering the short knife, grinding flesh into pulp, tearing bones into countless fragments.

A decisive blow.

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After the roaring dust, in the dim light of the ruins, only a single figure remained standing, signaling the final victor.

"Cough, cough..."

Norm groaned in pain, lying on the ground, as the fierce blow from the Shock Hammer had sunk the surrounding ground considerably, embedding him into it.

Thanks to the enhancement of "Dragon Blood," the blow from the Shock Hammer didn't kill him but left him utterly powerless, his chest had caved in, ribs were completely broken, and every breath brought the pain of a sharp blade cutting through, with blood gushing out.

His arms were completely twisted and broken, and the glow of the "Alchemy Matrix" on his body had dimmed, as if it would extinguish at any second.

"Ha... Ha..."

Norm took deep breaths, although in such a miserable state, he knew Bologue must be in no better condition.

Bologue had lost his left hand, and when he smashed Norm's chest, the poison from his own "Dragon Blood" must have splattered onto himself.

The poison would spread throughout his body, and eventually, Bologue would die from heart paralysis and respiratory failure.

The surrounding dust gradually dispersed, and a ghostly figure appeared beside Norm.

"Ah... is it over just like that? It seems somewhat incomplete."

A ghostly voice resounded, and Norm widened his eyes, watching Bologue walk out of the smoke.

His head hung low, and the demon's face was ragged, overlapping with his original appearance.

Evil and reality intertwined.

Bologue tore off the sticky skin from his face, threw aside the demon's visage, revealing a face covered with dirty blood yet ghastly pale, eyes glowing with a sharp azure hue.

"How... is this possible?"

Norm began to breathe rapidly, struggling to get up, but he couldn't, and soon the "Alchemy Matrix" on his body faded completely, the restless "Dragon Blood" coming to a halt.

"Nothing is impossible, just like I never thought I'd love this job so much."

Bologue spoke to himself, raising his left hand, where bones were rapidly reconstructing, followed by veins and muscles, flesh kept growing until new skin enveloped them once more.

"Good as new!"

Bologue excitedly waved his hand, showing Norm his newly regenerated palm.

Fear gradually filled Norm's eyes.

"Don't worry, friend, the boss wants you alive, so you won't die... at least not here."

Bologue reassured Norm with a friendly tone.

He ripped off the tattered rags hanging from his body, revealing the gray-black trench coat beneath, which had remarkably little stained blood thanks to Bologue's careful protection, only around the collar and cuffs was there some bloodstain.

He adjusted the tight tie around his neck to ease his breathing, under the tie, the shirt was entirely dyed red.

Bologue shrugged his shoulders, even in Hell, one must maintain the dignity and elegance due.

The scene in front of him unexpectedly turned harmonious; Norm lay on the ground, barely alive, while Bologue stood beside him adjusting his attire, then walked to the side to pick up a suitcase.

Opening the case, unsurprisingly, a sparkling Ruby lay in the corner of the suitcase; the rest of it contained various dark red potions that surprisingly remained undamaged throughout the fierce battle.

"Truly beautiful."

Bologue casually picked up a Philosopher's Stone, despite the fibrous impurities within, its clarity and soul's deliciousness remained utterly captivating.

It was like solidified blood.

"You can take these things away; no one would refuse them, whether for the souls they contain or their inherent value."

Norm slanted his gaze at Bologue, ensnaring him with temptation.

Bologue did not respond, simply holding up the Philosopher's Stone, observing it calmly.

Just like that time with Reid, the Philosopher's Stone emitted a strange magic power, seizing all of Bologue's attention.

Within its clear crimson color, the sediment-like fibrous matter seemed to wriggle slowly, just like smoke trapped within the gemstone.

They slowly transformed, like a vortex, devouring Bologue's will, awakening his most primal and fervent desires.

Norm noticed the now completely composed Bologue, a hint of excitement rising in his heart.

Having handled Philosopher's Stones before, Norm was well aware of the peculiar power of these "Canyin's physical forms."

These most precious "Golden Souls" belonging only to humans were endowed with magic power.

The kind of magic power that drove one insane.

Demons would use it to fill the hungry void, while humans would foster dreadful greed due to the brilliant crimson, desiring to possess it forever.

In Norm's eyes, it was clear that Bologue had likely never come into contact with a Philosopher's Stone and was easily beguiled by its magic power. What Norm didn't know was that Bologue was a Debtor, and his soul was already flawed, such potent magical allure would be further magnified on Bologue.

Swallow the Philosopher's Stone, satisfy the restless void.

Small, dense whispers sounded by the ear, they seemed to be reciting or perhaps praising something, sung since unknowable times, continuing to this day, and even into the future.

Yes, just like that, succumb further to the temptation.

Norm watched all of this with anticipation; all he needed was a little more time to recover some of his strength, to release the "Secret Energy" once more, and perhaps he would have the chance to strike back at Bologue.

Bologue raised the Philosopher's Stone, inching it closer until it was almost touching his face...

"Crunch."

A strange sound echoed, and Norm froze, then screamed.

"What are you doing!"

"Oh, nothing, nothing... I've always wanted to try it," Bologue spat out the Philosopher's Stone from his mouth, still covering it with his hand, complaining, "This thing is really hard, how do demons eat it? Swallow it whole?"

Norm didn't answer, but looked at Bologue with the eyes of someone watching a madman.

"As expected from something formed by the condensation of souls, it looks quite impressive."

Bologue toyed with the slobbery Philosopher's Stone, glancing at Norm, as if mocking him, then tossed the Philosopher's Stone at him, hitting him on the head.

He seemed to be addicted to the game, holding a suitcase in one hand while tossing the Philosopher's Stone back and forth, the precious Philosopher's Stone scattering all over the ground like a child's cheap toy.

"You look a bit surprised, don't you? What? Did you think I'd clutch these gems and lick them endlessly?"

Bologue looked at Norm with contempt.

Though he had been carefree when throwing the Philosopher's Stones, he now had to obediently pick them up again.

He wasn't sure how to release these poor souls; he had to bring these items to Lebius.

"Are you pretending? Pretending to be tempted, just to humiliate me?"

Norm was utterly hopeless, no longer thinking about resisting.

"No, I truly am somewhat... 'bewitched'?" Bologue said nonchalantly, collecting the Philosopher's Stones and placing them back next to the dark red potion, then locking the suitcase tightly.

"You can't... escape this easily."

Norm didn't understand; he remembered his first time being tempted, cutting himself, relying on the sharp pain to crawl out of that stupor, but Bologue before him was so at ease, as if he had no desires.

"Yes, everyone lives for something, tempted and driven by various things," Bologue agreed with Norm's words; escaping one's desires is difficult, "like wealth, fame, status, power..."

"Looking at it this way, humans are really complex, and desires are incredibly diverse."

He said as he pulled Norm up from the ground, the intense pain causing Norm to let out low growls, his twisted and broken limbs drooping helplessly, chains binding him, dragged like a dead dog by Bologue.

"But, my desires are a bit different from everyone else's."

Bologue held the suitcase in one hand and dragged Norm with the other, leaving a long trail of blood on the ground.

"I seek to punish the wicked, villains like you, watching you suffer, watching you endure torment, watching you wail endlessly..."

Norm couldn't see Bologue's face, only the gray and black silhouette, with fierce and terrifying words spilling from his mouth.

This was a moody monster, who would comically bite the Philosopher's Stone and also violently slay enemies, seemingly approachable, able to chat even with foes, yet beneath his words hid hatred and anger.

"This hatred burns too hot, too hot for those illusory promises to ever beguile me... After all, you're right here beside me, aren't you?"

Bologue let out a chilling laugh.

"But... do you think there are gods in this world?"

Norm didn't answer; he began to realize Bologue's mental issues; nothing could change his fate by talking with such a madman.

"I hope for a god of brutality and terror."

Bologue kept the conversation with Norm going.

"If such a being existed, I might really believe in them, much like the work I'm doing now."

Stopping before a wall, Bologue couldn't stop muttering.

"Wow, to legally and rightfully sanction you wicked ones from Monday to the weekend, earning money for it, with meal expenses, travel subsidies, and legal holidays to rest, even a year-end bonus..."

Bologue babbled about things Norm couldn't comprehend at all.

"What a wonderful job, isn't it!"

Seeing Norm not responding, Bologue kicked him twice, making the heavily injured and bleeding man a bit more alert.

"Stop playing dead; as a Condenser, you shouldn't die that easily."

Norm's face was pale; Condensers might not die easily, but that didn't mean they couldn't die.

Bologue squatted down, looking at Norm, then at the wall beside him, he asked.

"What do you think should be engraved on a commemorative coin?"

Excitedly rubbing his hands, Bologue imagined that beautiful scene, then grasped a folding knife and walked towards the blank wall.

A sharp and complex sound arose, like a sharp knife scraping against the wall, using scars as a pen, blood as paint.

Bologue moved with a cheerful gait, each footstep striking like a drumbeat on Norm's heart.

It was the most eerie and sinister sound Norm had ever heard in his life, clear footsteps treading upon a pool of blood, with a slippery and sticky sensation, as if some unspeakable entity danced there.

It had an unstable form, capricious, sometimes with countless appendages, sometimes with a carapace as hard as blades, it was the howling wind of a fierce winter, the blazing sun of a scorching summer.

It was terror, brutality, rage...

Chapter 47: Chapter 23 Evil Spirit

The changes in time are not evident within the Wandering Crossroads. Sunlight pierces through the haze of the Great Rift and reaches the Wandering Crossroads in the ravine, its feeble rays barely illuminating the dimness. As a result, the lights within the Wandering Crossroads remain almost perpetually lit, their harsh white glow slicing through the fog like the enormous eyes of monsters, watching the comings and goings of people.

Time here seems frozen; whether it's noon or midnight, there is only greyness and pallor, transforming it into a monster's den.

Deep within the den, Vika bustles behind the bar. Glancing at the clock, it is nearly midnight. Every night around this time, business is bustling.

All sorts of mythical creatures emerge from the shadows of the Wandering Crossroads. Gathered here, some drink and make merry, while others exchange secretive information, then proceed towards various ends.

The sound of music and alcohol is intoxicating, almost saturating the tables and chairs, engulfing everyone's minds.

Observing all this, Vika is long accustomed to the scene. Drunken patrons collapse slowly along the edge of the bar like corpses, sprawled aside. And there are plenty of such 'corpses' in the bar.

Vika rubs his eyes. Though he is used to this, perhaps due to old age, in his younger days he could dance to the restless music, but now he finds it all just noisy.

After mixing a new batch of drinks, Vika signals for someone else to take over for a while. He needs a break in the back, not forgetting to take the small box under the bar with him as he leaves. This is Vika's treasure, which he carries everywhere, filled with Mammon Coins.

As he leaves the bar, those customers still conscious raise their glasses to salute Vika, indicating the respect everyone has for this bartender.

Inside his office, he shuts the door, sealing away the noise and the intoxicating scent of alcohol. Vika finally feels a bit more relaxed. In this ghostly place, even quiet is especially precious.

He picks up a cigarette and smokes it calmly. Without turning on the lights in the office, the glow of the cigarette embers faintly illuminates blurred outlines.

Vika pulls open the cabinet under his desk, where a safe sits. He has opened it countless times, and using touch alone, he turns the lock open, then deposits all the Mammon Coins from the small box inside.

In the darkness, only the cigarette serves as the light source. This faint glow falling upon the Mammon Coins causes them to shimmer.

Relying on this meager light, the lustrous golden sheen dances along the edges of the Mammon Coins like a Philosopher's Stone, emanating some unknown magic power, transforming Vika's eyes into a golden hue, like molten gold lacquer.

Vika's gaze remains calm, unaffected as he prepares to close the safe, but a Mammon Coin slips out, rolling to Vika's feet.

Picking it up, the back shows Mammon embracing the gold, while the front depicts a howling wolf pack.

Seeing this, Vika's gaze becomes slightly unfocused, and he utters the nearly forgotten name.

"Lebius."

Vika closes the safe, not returning the Mammon Coin to its place, but instead clutching it in his hand, rubbing its surface with rough fingers, polishing it until it gleams.

"Seven years have passed in a flash. I nearly forgot about you, so why have you suddenly reappeared?"

Vika ponders deeply with a sense of unease. For seven years, Lebius has been low-key, with no news emerging. Vika once thought he had left Opus, returned to his hometown in the Rhine Alliance, and led a retired life.

But now he reappears, dispatching his emissary.

Recalling the image of Bologue, Vika furrows his brow.

Having mingled in the Wandering Crossroads for so long, he has encountered countless demons and devils, his nose even sharper than Bologue's. From Bologue, he can smell that scent.

A faint, decaying stench, as if the soul beneath that shell is rotting and collapsing, yet his scent isn't as strong and distinct as a Devil's.

Like a soul struggling between continuity and collapse...

"Debtor..."

An old term arises in his mind, and Vika's gaze grows somber.

For a moment, even breathing becomes stifling, as if the air indoors grows heavier, with a roaring storm approaching the Wandering Crossroads.

Vika knows full well that Oath City, Opus is far from what it seems on the surface.

He feels something is about to happen. Undercurrents stir, and after seven years or even longer centuries of recuperation, the monsters hiding in the dark have once again amassed strength, sharpening their teeth, thirsting for blood, attempting to break free from the shadows and continue the unfinished war.

A wave of helplessness and melancholy wells within him. Vika knows all too well that such a peaceful life will not last forever, but when it is truly about to be shattered, he feels a reluctance, wishing to prolong this way of life.

He closes his eyes as darkness descends, trying to calm his thoughts, but they're interrupted by rapid knocking. Vika opens his eyes, the door pushed ajar, and light floods in. It's Nelli.

"Something's happened."

Nelli appears somewhat anxious.

"What happened? Someone causing trouble?"

Vika stands up. He has been able to hold his ground in the Wandering Crossroads for so long, relying not only on connections and relationships but also his own formidable strength to protect himself and intimidate adversaries.

Chapter 48: Chapter 23 Evil Spirit_2

"No, it's not that bad, but it's not that simple either."

For a moment, Nelli didn't know how to explain, so he just gestured for Vika to come over quickly.

Leaving the office and returning to the restless bar, Vika could clearly sense a change in the atmosphere. The intoxicating joy had vanished, and suddenly, it seemed everyone was sober, whispering in the darkness, discussing something.

"What's going on?" Vika asked.

"There's been an incident at Norm Ward." Another person stepped forward and whispered to Vika.

Vika maintained a calm exterior. This situation didn't surprise him.

He was well aware of the kind of business Norm was running and knew about the so-called "Man-eaters." More importantly, he knew that Bologue represented Lebius, the Order Bureau.

What would happen when these two groups met was all too predictable.

"Is Norm dead?" Vika asked calmly.

"It could be worse than that. Do you want to take a look?"

The person continued, catching Vika's attention. He looked at Nelli.

"I'll leave this to you for now. I'll be back soon."

"Alright."

Nelli nodded.

Some people left the bar with Vika. They formed a crowd, and the usually deserted street became uncharacteristically crowded. Along the way, Vika noticed others heading toward Norm's clinic.

Wandering Path had been quiet for too long, with no sensational events happening for a while, except for the business that Norm operated.

The demons hidden in Wandering Path were all Norm's clients. They were anxiously eager to know about Norm's situation, not out of concern for him, but because they cared about those sweet Philosopher's Stones.

These demons lingered in Wandering Path, lacking the courage to leave and face the ironclad Order Bureau. They could only survive here, seeking the slightest bit of soul to fill their hungry void.

Before long, Vika arrived at Norm's clinic, where some people had already gathered. They stood at a distance, watching everything that was happening.

Vika walked up the rugged path and entered Norm's clinic.

In an instant, the stench of blood hit him, almost overwhelming his senses. He focused his gaze and saw a layer of dried blood covering the floor, each step producing a sticky resistance.

The demon's corpse lay sprawled to one side, its face frozen in the terror of its final moments, mouth agape, with the faint cries of its departed soul echoing.

"It was like a massacre; these people didn't stand a chance."

Someone said from the side, accustomed to the presence of demons. In the depths of Wandering Path, there were far stranger things than demons. What truly shocked them was how easily these demons were killed.

Like lambs, they were effortlessly slaughtered.

"The secret door is up ahead, but there's a heavy iron door at the end, and we can't open it."

The person continued.

Vika didn't speak but instead ventured into the dark passage. The iron door loomed before him, covered in dents, as if someone had tried to force their way through, ultimately failing.

He reached out, pressing his hand against the edge of the iron door frame. Vika inhaled deeply as a strange energy coursed through him, enveloping his body. He struck the frame with both hands, and immediately, a violent rumble ensued. Dust and debris fell as the iron door trembled a few times and then toppled backward.

After a series of metallic clangs, the door opened, revealing an even bloodier hell.

"Is this how he got in?"

Vera looked up, seeing the large hole that Bologue had smashed through. The ceiling collapsed in segments, crushing everything in its path.

"That's Reid; he's dead too."

Someone found Reid's head in a corner and kicked it a few times, revealing a ghastly, terror-stricken face, akin to the other corpses.

After the initial shock, people became curious about what these victims had seen before they died.

"Where's Norm? Has anyone seen Norm?"

Vika asked loudly, determined to figure out what was going on. Was the Order Bureau preparing to act against the "Man-eaters"?

Or was it... that another colossal force had returned, and this was merely a forewarning of their return?

Vika felt a chill in his heart.

"No, we haven't found his body. He might have escaped."

Someone responded, but Vika didn't think so. The Order Bureau had come knocking, and they wouldn't let it go so easily.

The others were busy searching, their interests aligned with Vika's. Though Wandering Path was a Land of Chaos, it was also their last sanctuary, and they couldn't tolerate its destruction.

Thus, under these many dark aspirations, more and more people living in the shadows of Wandering Path began to revere the name "Tyrant."

"Evil Spirit!"

A piercing wail suddenly rang out, and Vika's gaze snapped in the direction of the sound. In the collapsed ruins, a scarred hand reached out, its face completely covered in grayish-white dust, resembling a frozen sculpture.

It was the sole survivor, pinned beneath the rubble, its flesh torn and mangled, but it had survived the claws of the Evil Spirit.

The madness brought on by Bulimia Nervosa should have driven it to complete insanity, but even beasts possess instincts. In the face of extreme fear, its instincts had summoned back a sliver of sanity, like a deranged patient, it kept wailing.

"The Evil Spirit is here! It will devour everyone!"

The nightmare lingered at its ears, endless whispers repeatedly murmuring as if to tear through its eardrums, marching through the ear canal into the brain until the flesh beneath the skull boiled completely.

Vika quickly walked over, trying to pull it out of the rubble. But after moving a few pieces of debris, what he saw was a body pierced by steel, blood mixed with dust, forming dark red clots.

There's no saving it.

Vika squatted down immediately, urgently asking.

"What happened?"

"Evil Spirit... the green-eyed Evil Spirit."

The demon clung to Vika's clothing, its eyes filled with terror reflecting Vika's face. It repeated the name of the Evil Spirit, the cloying stench of blood spewing from its throat, striking Vika's face.

"It's here; we're doomed."

Fear consumed its entire being, mechanically repeating this refrain.

Soon, its body stiffened, its grip loosening, lifelessly dropping as its gaze froze, like a murky crystal within which a blue apparition was encapsulated.

It was dead.

"Evil Spirit..."

Vika murmured, the unease in his heart growing stronger until the echoing collapse reverberated.

Under Bologue's violent demolition, this place was no longer safe, the buildings cracked and were on the verge of collapse.

At this moment, the remaining ceiling, centered on the huge hole, continued to crumble, with bricks and steel falling, engulfing the blood and corpses.

The collapse didn't last long. The rumbling gradually subsided, and Vika stood, surveying his surroundings in the dense dust. Others also stood up; it seemed no one was injured.

More light poured in, illuminating the decay-filled dimness. Vika turned around, his body stiffening, standing motionless for a long time; the others were the same, their gaze fixed on a corner.

It was a wall hidden in the shadows, noticed by more people after the ceiling's collapse.

Vika stepped over the corpses and rubble, approaching the wall, reaching out to gently touch it.

His fingers traced the knife marks carved onto the wall, entwined with dried blood, forming a mural of blades and blood.

"Evil Spirit, the green-eyed Evil Spirit."

Vika whispered, slowly retreating as the grotesque painting before him gradually came into focus.

It was as if a monster had swung against the wall, slender and hateful scratches spreading like lightning streaking across the sky. And beneath this lightning lay piles of demons' corpses, heaped like trophies.

Later on, tales spread through Wandering Path, of a time unknown when an Evil Spirit emerged out of nowhere in Opus. No one knew where it came from or what its intent was; the only known fact was that it was hunting.

Hunting relentlessly, without end.

Chapter 49: Chapter 24: Playing with the Demon

"So, this is Norm Ward?"

"I think he is Norm Ward."

"Really?"

"Really, do you think I could lie to you?"

The atmosphere in the interrogation room was supposed to be quite serious, but due to the conversation between Bologue and Geoffrey, it was inexplicably lively.

Geoffrey glanced at Bologue next to him, then at the photo of Norm Ward in his hand, and finally at the poor devil being treated by a doctor while being interrogated at the table.

Unlike the fierce image in the photo, the "Norm Ward" in front of them had a dim look in his eyes and was slouched in the chair, his hands cuffed behind the chair, displaying a chest covered with blood and wounds, and beneath the skin were faint protrusions of broken and misaligned bones.

The doctor stood beside him, wiping away the bloodstains while injecting some strangely colored potions. With each injection, Norm's body convulsed as if enduring some kind of agony.

He was on the brink of death, teetering on the edge of unconsciousness, uttering only meaningless whimpers, occasionally vomiting blood.

"Is he really?" Geoffrey asked softly.

According to the records, Norm was a Condenser, but this mysterious and powerful Condenser was now reduced to a pile of breathing flesh.

"What else!"

Bologue retorted loudly.

Seeing Bologue's firm attitude, Geoffrey nodded, verbally acknowledging it all, but he found it somewhat hard to accept in his heart.

It had only been half a day since he and Bologue had parted, and Geoffrey was getting ready to end his overtime and head home to sleep, but Bologue had dragged Norm out of the night at that very moment.

A Condenser was so easily taken down by Bologue's hand, so quickly and without any chance to fight back.

"Is this the speed of a specialist?"

Geoffrey seemed a bit worried, not knowing whether to be thankful for Bologue's efficiency or to blame him for being so effective that he couldn't go off work yet.

"Naturally, I am an expert."

Bologue was quite adamant about being an expert.

"Sigh..."

Geoffrey wanted to say something, but in the end, it turned into a helpless sigh, his gaze falling onto the half-dead Norm, and he asked again.

"What's his condition?"

"Multiple fractures, internal organ damage, major blood loss, some brain concussion... he needs to be treated for a while before he can be interrogated."

The doctor replied, and while doing so, he glanced at Bologue several times.

The Order Bureau certainly had missions to capture targets, but cases like Bologue's—beating a person half to death and then bringing them back—were indeed rare.

Geoffrey felt a headache and gestured Bologue to step out with him. The two left the interrogation room and headed out into the hallway, walking towards the lounge not far away.

"This time... it was done pretty well, considering the opponent was a Condenser, one can't be too cautious." Geoffrey said.

"So when can we pry information out of him, I can't wait to hunt the next one."

Bologue urged, having slain numerous Demons, the soul fragments filled his body, like a fuel-filled war chariot, ready to push forward relentlessly.

"Woohoo! The expert's diagnosis is here! The recommendation is euthanasia!"

Bologue exclaimed excitedly, like a madman who loved telling cold jokes.

Pushing open the door to the lounge, it was empty inside, as expected. Apart from the staff on duty, everyone else had finished their shifts.

Although it was off-duty time, the lights in the Order Bureau were always on, with a fixed number of personnel on duty. The only difference from the daytime was probably that the Order Bureau was much quieter at night, with fewer people moving around.

Geoffrey and Bologue sat opposite each other, with a small table between them where people often gathered to play cards during breaks.

"You heard what the doctor said, we can't extract words from a dead man's mouth, you'll need to wait," Geoffrey calculated the dates, "just right, the 'Sublimation Furnace Core' seems to be ready, in these few days, they will start the 'Alchemy Matrix' ritual for you."

"To grant me 'Secret Energy'?"

Hearing this, a light sparked in Bologue's eyes.

From his encounter with Norm, Bologue had already sensed the power and cunning of 'Secret Energy.' If not for possessing 'Resurrection,' allowing him to sacrifice his body without worry to restrain Norm's offensive, perhaps he would be dead now.

Under the poison of 'Dragon Blood,' his whole body would be paralyzed, then slowly suffocate amidst respiratory failure.

The scariest part was not this death, but not realizing the poison was Norm's 'Secret Energy' before you were contaminated.

Cunning and mysterious, like a villain's gambling game, nobody knows what kind of hand the opponent holds.

"Yes, after that, you will be promoted to be counted among the Condensers," Geoffrey said, "but don't get too arrogant, Bologue, there's a difference between one Condenser and another."

"What do you mean."

"Like positions, like soldiers and generals, like... the ladder of power."

Geoffrey reminisced about the solemn long ladder, every step had its own guardian.

"Condenser is actually just one of many titles, but given its frequent use, it gradually became our moniker," Geoffrey continued to ask, "Have you ever played Othello?"

"I know about it, but I've never played it."

Bologue replied, unsure of what connection 'the ladder of power' had with Othello.

"Then do you know its rules?"

"I've actually looked into this."

Hearing this, Geoffrey nodded, making it less difficult for him to explain. He then drew out a black-and-white chessboard from the small table beneath him and placed it on top.

"This is considered a fixed project within the Order Bureau, and we even hold regular chess king tournaments."

Geoffrey said casually, then picked up the chess pieces and placed them on the chessboard.

Bologue quietly watched all this, and at a certain moment, like an illusion, the chessboard suddenly became vast, almost overlapping with the entire world.

The black and white squares were interlaced, accompanied by a loud, ancient bell tolling from distant years. The sky darkened, and then countless pieces, like towering mountains, fell. Each move brought the sound of mountains collapsing, causing the earth to tremble.

"Bologue."

The call startled Bologue awake, looking up at Geoffrey, who was staring at him in confusion.

"Were you daydreaming?"

"No... nothing."

"Let's continue then."

Having arranged the pieces, like armies at odds, Geoffrey occupied the white side, while Bologue was the black side.

Black and white were assembled, ready to head to the battlefield and engage in slaughter.

"Regarding 'Secret Energy,' its tier levels somewhat resemble black and white chess, so we often use the naming conventions from black and white chess to refer to the different tiers of 'Secret Energy.'"

"For example?"

Bologue inquired, sounding as if the relationship between the two was exactly why black and white chess was popular within the Order Bureau.

"For example, this piece."

Geoffrey said, picking up the "pawn" piece.

"It represents the Condenser, and the full name of the Condenser is 'Condensed Guard.'

Bologue said nothing, listening carefully, looking at the other pieces, vaguely aware that these pieces represented different tiers with different names.

"The 'knight' piece is the second stage of the Condenser, 'Knight of Prayer,' or 'Prayer Believers.'

Geoffrey went on, picking up the "knight" piece, referring to the meaning each piece held behind it.

"The 'bishop' is the third stage of the Condenser, it is called 'Negative Bishop,' which means 'Negative Power User.'

Geoffrey toyed with the "bishop" piece in his hand for a while, then continued, "Negative Power Users are the backbone of the Order Bureau, they undertake numerous important duties."

Bologue's eyes scanned over to the piece named "rook," which was the fourth stage of the Condenser. His breathing quickened, his blood turned hot, shouting incessantly.

"The 'rook' is the fourth stage, 'Defensive War Chariot,' for those who are Defenders have progressed further. As for their whereabouts, I don't know, it's confidential."

For such existence, Geoffrey also expressed his ignorance. The hierarchy within the Order Bureau was strict, and being unable to reach that tier meant ultimately not being privy to all the secrets.

"And then there's... the 'Queen.'"

Though he was talking about it, Geoffrey picked up the "pawn" piece, showing a face of doubt.

"The 'Queen' is an exceptionally special stage. If you're familiar with the rules of black and white chess, you should know about 'Ascension,' right?"

"The 'Ascension' of a piece, I know."

Bologue said, picking up the black "pawn," moving it relentlessly along the chessboard.

The "pawn" advanced bravely, rising from the lowest tier, pushing aside all obstructing pieces, finally reaching Geoffrey, the white side's back rank.

"When the 'pawn' reaches the opponent's back rank, it can 'Ascend' to any piece except the 'King,' but everyone typically chooses to 'Ascend' to the powerful 'Queen.'"

"The ceremony for advancing from the fourth stage to the fifth stage is very special. The Alchemists call it 'Ascension.' After the 'Ascension' ceremony, one steps into endless glory."

Geoffrey's voice was solemn, filled with anticipation and reverence.

"This is the fifth stage of the Condenser, also currently the known, most supreme power, 'Queen of Glory,' bathed in radiance and holiness, the 'Seeker of Glory.'"

"Currently known?" On hearing this, Bologue's gaze shifted to the 'King,' "Then what about the 'King'?"

The core of black and white chess, the King, which countless pieces fight to protect with sword and blood. So what about it? What position does it hold in this system of extraordinary power, what does it represent?

"The 'King,' a stage that only exists in theory. Has anyone truly reached this stage? I'm not sure... no, no one knows. It's like an unknowable enigma, an unbelievable tale nobody believes."

Geoffrey explained, up to now, there's no concrete record proving that a Condenser has truly reached the 'King' stage.

"Therefore, among various forces, the top-tier power is the 'Queen of Glory.'

"Then what is the 'King' called? Even if it's hypothetical, within this long hierarchy of power, you've certainly left a place for it, right?"

Bologue abruptly asked, eyes fixed intensely on the crown on the chessboard, it stood silently among the pieces, displaying an illusory, mesmerizing color.

"The Crowned King."

Geoffrey's voice paused for a moment, devoid of any emotion.

"At the end of that supreme ladder, wielding the authority to command a thousand armies, bestowed with a crown of justice.

It is absolute, and also the only one... the Crowned."

The pieces remained silent, like towering tombstones, watching indifferently as the world's conflicts seemed never-ending.

Chapter 50: Chapter 25: High Above the Sky

"This is the ladder of the Extraordinary World, the cruel food chain, strength against strength, sword against sword."

Geoffrey released the chess piece in his hand, letting it fall onto the board, tumbling and crashing, making a complete mess of the board, with pieces lying horizontally, vertically, and rolling all over the place.

Bologue said nothing but kept staring at the chessboard. It was unclear what he was thinking, his hand squeezing the pawn piece, rubbing it fiercely, almost crushing it.

The chess piece stands lonely on one side, then advances with no way back, either dying on the path or reaching the base line, achieving the sacred "Ascension."

"Bologue, whether there's new information about the Man-eater or the initiation of the implant ceremony, I will inform you."

Geoffrey made arrangements for the future and continued speaking.

"There are no tasks for you right now; you might as well go home and rest, relax your mind, and maintain a good state, which will help improve the success rate of the implant ceremony."

Bologue lifted his gaze, glanced at Geoffrey, placed the pawn piece down, and then sighed deeply.

"You're right, impatience only leads to anxiety; I really might need a break."

A Condenser like Norm Ward is just the starting point of this Extraordinary Ladder, the most humble and lowest tier, while he himself has not yet stepped onto this Extraordinary Ladder.

No one knows what is truly hidden in Opus's shadow. Bologue still remembers the forces opposing the Order Bureau mentioned earlier. They also have Condensers, and before formally confronting them, Bologue can't know their Tier.

This world is millions of times larger than imagined, and at this moment, Bologue is still very weak.

"Oh, right, there's one more thing." Geoffrey suddenly remembered something.

"What is it?"

"Do you remember asking me about the Soul Shards before? Back then, you weren't aware of the existence of Condensers, so I didn't say much, but now it seems there might be another possibility."

Upon hearing Geoffrey say this, Bologue listened carefully. "Resurrection" has a definite source; only the mysterious absorption of shards is unclear to Bologue.

"Do you know of Ether?"

Geoffrey revealed that unfamiliar term.

Bologue shook his head, seeing this, Geoffrey continued.

"This is proposed by Alchemists. Initially, they believed everything in the world was composed of four elements: earth, water, air, and fire.

But later, with the evolution of Alchemy, someone introduced a new hypothetical element, believing that besides the four elements, there should be an element high above the sky.

This element high above the sky is called Ether, and Ether is hypothesized as power from the Secret Source."

"Secret Source..."

Bologue whispered, the sacred "Secret Source," the source of all mysterious power, the endpoint where truth resides.

"Ether truly exists. It is the unknown force that fills the world, driving the energy of the Alchemy Matrix, and the release of the Condenser's Secret Energy requires this omnipresent Ether, which some Alchemists believe is the material that constitutes the soul.

The soul is the purest form of Ether."

"Soul Shards are a form of pure Ether," Bologue said quietly.

"Exactly, but these are merely theories. The soul is mysterious and unfathomable, let alone the even harder to observe Soul Shards.

Currently, this knowledge comes from some Alchemists' papers, but no one truly knows the facts."

Geoffrey explained, "I only noticed it because you're so interested; if you want to know more, you can visit the library of the Order Bureau and borrow *Soul Science* and *Ethereal Theory*, but I feel you might find it tough to understand."

Ether.

Bologue recalled the unknown strange feeling experienced when passing through the Key of the Crooked Path, the burst of power from the Shock Hammer, Norm releasing his Secret Energy...

Those inexplicable feelings all came from the surge of Ether.

"Ether is a very convenient power; some Condensers can operate on Ether beyond their Secret Energy, thus learning many techniques called 'Extreme Techniques.'"

Geoffrey looked at Bologue expectantly, "I think you're quite gifted; learning Extreme Techniques should be quick for you."

"Extreme Techniques? What are those?" Bologue felt a peculiar sensation, as if he was about to receive an answer.

"Ether is an extremely convenient power. Besides driving Secret Energy, some people can directly drive Ether.

For example, making Ether fill the body, amplifying one's strength; this Extreme Technique is called 'Ethereal Amplification.' Apart from 'Ethereal Amplification,' there are many other Extreme Techniques, but learning each is very difficult; a Condenser mastering any of them is considered gifted."

Geoffrey's words instantly cleared Bologue's confusion. He controlled his excited emotions to remain calm.

"However, for you, not yet a Condenser, it's a bit premature; you have plenty of time to understand these in the future."

Geoffrey did not continue with the details, and the remaining Extreme Techniques were not fully discussed.

Bologue also nodded; he had obtained the information he wanted and shifted the topic to something else.

"However... Geoffrey, the implantation of the Alchemy Matrix should be a rather complex technique, requiring deep knowledge accumulation and immense resource supply. Does the Order Bureau hold such power to maintain the emergence of Condensers?"