

Endless 211

Chapter 211: Law-Abiding Citizens_2

"I don't know anything!" Jello insisted.

"Oh?"

Evil Spirit glanced at Jello with doubt, then used Jello's clothes to carefully wipe the bloodstains off the Sheep Horn Hammer and continued speaking.

"I'm actually quite reasonable," Evil Spirit said earnestly, "I don't like solving problems with violence."

Jello glared at him fiercely, even though fear radiated from the terrifying mask, he still mustered the strength to glare back.

Doesn't like solving problems with violence?

Jello still remembered the cold and efficient moves, Evil Spirit had brutally broken his arm and shin, and now he was saying he didn't like violence.

If it were an ordinary person, the moment Evil Spirit appeared, they would probably spill all their secrets. In fact, Jello did too, but he couldn't speak. Once he let those secrets slip, he would no longer have a foothold in the Wandering Crossroads.

To him, that was no different than being dead.

"Alright, if you don't want to talk, so be it," Evil Spirit said, standing up as if ignoring Jello and addressed the black hood next to him, "Any plans after work?"

"Does going to a club for a drink count?"

"I don't think so, and it's not even the weekend tomorrow. Getting wasted would make you unfit for duty."

The two casually chatted, leaving Jello aside. He couldn't understand these two people, let alone this strange Evil Spirit.

In Will's legend, he was so sinister, but when he appeared before him, there wasn't much to worry about.

A slight tremor shattered Jello's thoughts. He slowly moved his gaze, eyes trailing along the tracks, and at the blurred end, a steel beast surged forth.

"Oh... by the way, a new store opened next door."

The two stood outside the tracks, continuing their chat, as if it all had nothing to do with them.

In an instant, Jello understood, Evil Spirit really wouldn't use violence to interrogate him, because there was something even more violent barreling down the path, it would crush him into pieces.

Jello's eyes were bloodshot; he wriggled his body desperately, managing to move away from the tracks, only to be kicked back by Evil Spirit.

This bastard was even humming a tune, as if he'd just kicked away a soda can.

"Are you crazy?" Jello screamed, "If I die, you'll get nothing."

"This guy's logic is a bit flawed, as if he were alive, we'd get something," Evil Spirit shrugged at the black hood.

"Yeah, and he doesn't want to talk, can't really force someone, right?" the black hood nodded.

Jello struggled harder, but the intense pain throughout his body rendered him powerless to resist. Even if he moved, Evil Spirit would kick him back instantly.

The tremor of the tracks grew increasingly intense, to the point where it matched the rapid beating of Jello's heart, repeatedly striking his nerves. The train was now in sight, rumbling forward with the chill of death.

Jello gasped for air. The more critical the moment, the more he couldn't panic. He knew these two were gambling on his courage.

The train drew nearer, and the two kept chatting. Jello held his breath, and at the brink of life and death, Evil Spirit suddenly lifted his foot and kicked him off the tracks.

He had bet right. These people needed the secrets in his head; they wouldn't kill him.

Indeed, these so-called Evil Spirits were nothing much.

Jello's upper body was off the tracks, but his lower body remained. At this moment, Evil Spirit paused, and Jello didn't understand what he was going to do, when Evil Spirit spoke.

"See, this way, it'll only crush his legs; the upper body can be crushed again later."

"Oh, really? So you can crush him twice," the black hood responded in a deliberately childlike tone.

Jello was stunned for a second, then cursed loudly.

"You perverts! Madmen! Murderers!"

He used the most vicious words he could think of to curse them, but the two didn't care at all, instead, they laughed heartily.

"Thank you for acknowledging our role as villains."

Evil Spirit even bowed respectfully, as if Jello were an appraiser who just gave them a favorable review, and indeed, for a villain, the best appraisal might just be those vicious words.

The vibrating tracks kept urging Jello's nerves. He widened his eyes, blood vessels spreading across the whites, then focused intently on his legs.

He wouldn't die, but his lower life might be bound to a wheelchair.

"I'll tell! It's those merchants! They've returned!" Jello screamed.

"See, I said this middleman must know something," the black hood boasted to Evil Spirit, "Didn't think we'd actually get those 'Gray Trade Association' people to surface."

Jello was dumbfounded, then a great sense of humiliation washed over him. These two were tricking him, these damn bastards were tricking him, but he had no time to reprimand them; he shouted.

"Let me down!"

The two exchanged glances and laughed again.

"I told you this guy's logic is flawed. You telling us what you know and us letting you down, what direct connection is there?" the black hood said, even kicking Jello's face.

Jello broke down into tears. He realized that myths have their credibility; Evil Spirit wasn't a monster, but rather a downright psychopathic killer. Comparatively, being straightforwardly killed might have been a relief.

"Please! Spare me! I'll tell everything I know!"

Jello made this final struggle, but the two didn't care at all. Evil Spirit hummed a tune, looking at the sky, while the black hood went to a parked sidecar motorcycle nearby.

"Yes! It's those Gray Trade Association people! They brought a lot of goods to the Wandering Crossroads! Rumor has it they also brought a mysterious item, but I don't know any more than that!"

Jello nearly shouted these words. He had many other messy secrets in his mind, but he thought this would be the most persuasive to the two.

The train thundered past, Jello was being dangled by Evil Spirit. He looked coldly at the rushing train, just a bit more and he would've been crushed.

Jello stared blankly forward, his emotions completely numb. At this moment, Evil Spirit's voice sounded again, no longer with a hint of humor, but in a chilling tone.

"So, are you now willing to cooperate with our work, Jello?"

Jello nodded numbly, his mind shattered by the capricious Evil Spirit.

"Wow! I kind of wanted to see the train run over him," the black hood revved the engine, the motorcycle rumbling below.

"We are law-abiding citizens, don't trouble the railway operations."

Dragging the battered and fractured Jello, Evil Spirit righteously addressed the black hood.

Chapter 212: Daily Work

Order Bureau, Special Operations Group Office.

As the office door swung open, Bologue was the first to step inside. He yanked off the Face of Horror from his face and collapsed onto the sofa, worn out. Next came Palmer, who was too drained even to remove his mask, slumping beside Bologue and leaning back as if lifeless.

Seeing the two, Lebius set down the document in his hand, intending to speak, but Bologue preempted him by raising his hand.

"Let us catch our breath first."

Lebius nodded, saying nothing more. The efforts of these two over the past period were evident, and it was clear they were utterly exhausted.

Their responsibilities didn't involve just any urban paths but rather the entirety of the Great Rift. Even though Lebius mentioned that the current operations targeting the Great Rift were merely at the experimental stage and the two need not bear any psychological burden, in practice, the treacherous location of the Great Rift was still daunting.

Apart from the harsh and complex environment, it was a mix of various teachings and characters that necessitated constant vigilance against hidden dangers while seeking their targets in this chaotic land.

After two weeks of operation, the persistent fatigue began to wear on even the experts.

The only solace was that within this chaotic land, filled with bloodthirsty demons, Bologue managed to replenish quite a few Soul Shards thanks to these unfortunate creatures.

Although Bologue still felt a pang of hunger, it was far better than when he first awoke in the Border Sanatorium.

Bologue had once asked Palmer, a fellow debtor, how he resisted Bulimia Nervosa. Unlike Bologue, who constantly devoured Soul Shards to maintain self-fulfillment, Palmer utilized something called Concentration Potion.

This was an alchemy potion; its effect, as the name suggests, is to focus the mind and stay awake, alleviating pain to a certain extent. In Palmer's words, it's akin to adrenaline for the spirit.

The potion's mental effects are incredibly potent, hence its use in treating Bulimia Nervosa. It allows debtors to remain conscious amidst agitation. Besides this, Palmer also regularly complements with "Mang Silver Soul" to ease his gnawing hunger.

To avoid arousing suspicion, Bologue later also requested these supplies from Geoffrey. For debtors, the Logistics Department provided specific aid.

"Have you rested enough?" Lebius asked.

"Yes. There's progress in the investigation. We can now confirm it's the Gray Trade Association causing disruptions at the Wandering Crossroads," Bologue said as he straightened.

"In the past fortnight, we apprehended many suspicious merchants, but there was no substantive breakthrough. We only knew some folks arrived at the Wandering Crossroads, but their identities remained unclear. But today, I nabbed an unfortunate fellow and coaxed the mention of the Gray Trade Association from his mouth."

The "unfortunate fellow" in question was, naturally, Jello in Bologue's words.

"Where's that unfortunate fellow now?" Lebius asked.

"Handed over to the Crow's Nest. I suspect they're interrogating him as we speak," Bologue replied. "Lately, I've been on good terms with the folks at the Crow's Nest."

After receiving Nesanel's endorsement, Bologue was thoroughly integrated into the Field Operations Department. Coupled with his excellent performance on that stormy night, many staff became aware of Bologue's presence. Some even placed bets on whether he'd be named the best new employee of the year.

Bologue paid no mind to these predictions. As work fell into rhythm, he inevitably interacted with other departments; so far, things were going smoothly.

"Yes, it's the same at the Crow's Nest. Ivan thinks highly of you, saying you've alleviated a lot of their workload," Lebius couldn't help but admire the expert's prowess, managing to win Ivan's respect.

Hearing Ivan's name, Palmer remained expressionless, but upon catching the part about reduced workload, a smile crept across his face.

Palmer understood why Ivan framed it that way.

Bologue had changed; since that stormy night, his eyes were no longer clouded with dark violence, which was good in one sense, but aggravated his condition in another.

For instance, his overly dramatic persona and its accompanying role play.

Recently, Bologue adopted a role called "Evil Spirit." Each time after capturing a target, he'd intimidate the person in this guise. Though a few, like Jello, tried to play tough, under the expert's influence, they all eventually crumbled.

Compared to Bologue, the Crow's Nest's interrogation methods were considered mild. When sent to the Crow's Nest, these people generally confessed all their information without much pressure, leaving the Crow's Nest to focus on documenting.

Apart from these, Bologue also commissioned the Crow's Nest to assist in handling these targets afterward.

The Crow's Nest undertakes voluminous intelligence processing and sometimes has to distort information. Many individuals sent here undergo brainwashing and memory alteration before release.

Bologue entrusted them with embedding the terror of the Evil Spirit into these people's minds, ensuring they remain ensnared in an endless nightmare.

Palmer once asked, "Do you truly have some mental disorder?"

"No, I'm implanting fear. Once they're back at the Wandering Crossroads, they'll continue whispering the Evil Spirit's name, and dread it," Bologue explained.

Palmer couldn't understand Bologue's thinking. Bologue said it was part of his plan to hunt down evildoers, but Palmer always felt he was too immersed in role playing.

But... it wasn't all bad.

After two weeks of work, Palmer also started to enjoy the process, the two working in concert to torment these villains to the brink of death.

"The Gray Trade Association has brought in a large amount of extraordinary materials, which will inevitably cause turmoil. Do we need to take care of them next?" Bologue asked.

Apart from the King's Secret Sword and the Order Bureau, there are many extraordinary organizations in this world, and the Gray Trade Association is one of them. It is a group of merchants operating outside all organizations, closely linked to the Order of Truth, often handling dangerous items for those insane alchemists.

They peddle alchemical materials and weapons everywhere, and these items are banned in areas controlled by extraordinary organizations. A large influx of extraordinary materials into the market will only cause chaos and could destabilize regions.

Many extraordinary organizations dislike this group, but much like the Order of Truth, sometimes these merchants are indeed quite useful, bringing unexpected surprises, such as extraordinary materials that are difficult to obtain through conventional means.

"These merchants are annoying, but after all, they are just merchants," Lebius shook his head to reject, "Don't pursue them too hard, the truly important ones are their customers."

The Gray Trade Association never stays in one location; they roam between nations like nomads, plundering wealth and leaving endless turmoil wherever they go.

"Rather than merchants, it's more fitting to call them arms dealers," Bologue continued, "Is there anything else you need to tell me?"

"Hmm..."

Lebius pondered for a while, and after a long contemplation, he pulled out a document from a thick pile.

"On a stormy night, Geoffrey and I captured a King's Secret Sword squad. They are currently under interrogation at the Crow's Nest, but progress is slow, as their minds are protected, making it difficult to pry information from their heads."

"So?" Bologue didn't understand why Lebius suddenly mentioned this.

"That night, there was actually one person who escaped. The individual is a Prayer Believer and possesses a Secret Sword, which is a Contract Object. Its effect seems to be exchanging blood for the ability to teleport."

"I guess he used the Contract Object to escape from you, and he's fled to an area where you can't easily pursue him... did he hide in the Great Rift?" Bologue understood what Lebius meant.

"In all of Opus, aside from the Great Rift, he has nowhere to hide. But since he's a Prayer Believer, it's uncertain if he has any connections inside the Great Rift. Just stay alert," Lebius said.

"I thought you'd send me to hunt him down."

Just staying alert left Bologue somewhat disappointed.

"Don't rush things. You two are like pioneers, exploring the chaotic Land of Chaos. Being too eager will only ruin things."

Lebius glanced at Bologue and Palmer. Despite being exhausted, Bologue was full of energy, while Palmer was completely deflated. Normally, he would talk back a bit, but now he was utterly silent.

"Yeah, I got it."

Bologue nodded. After two weeks of work, the more he knew about the Great Rift, the more he understood the chaos of this land.

Monsters and devils ran rampant, and there were sinister cults hidden deep within. The thought of this chaotic land being so close to Opus, intertwined and expanding together, gave Bologue a new understanding of the madness in reality.

The office door opened, and Geoffrey walked in. Seeing Bologue and Palmer, a smile appeared on his face.

"What a coincidence, you're both here. Of course, it's mainly you I came to see," Geoffrey's gaze fell on Bologue.

"Wh-what's up?"

Bologue felt a bit uneasy under Geoffrey's gaze.

"It's nothing, Bologue, you can slow down your work a bit these days, and Palmer can take a break too," Geoffrey said.

"A holiday?" Hearing this, Palmer sprang up. The recent work had exhausted him, and he became lively again.

"Something like that," Geoffrey's voice hesitated for a moment, then he said to Bologue, "Belli is looking for you. She wants to meet you tomorrow at the Sublimation Furnace Core."

The atmosphere instantly fell into silence.

Bologue's face gradually darkened, his entire body exuding strong resistance, but he knew he couldn't avoid it.

Indeed, that day had come.

Chapter 213: Habits

According to Geoffrey, this damned place, the Great Rift, has been in chaos for decades. No matter how hard you try, you can't change it in just one or two days, nor will it completely slide into the Abyss just because you didn't put in enough effort for a day or two.

Order is an interesting thing; even in a madhouse, it has its corresponding rules, even if those rules are bloody.

After saying these words to himself, Geoffrey showed that damn smile and then rejected Bologue's overtime request.

"This is a rare opportunity, Bologue, you must seize it."

Geoffrey's hellish words kept swirling in his mind.

Bologue sat in the sidecar of the motorcycle, looking blankly at the night view of Opus, letting the cold wind blow through and scatter his thoughts.

"Relax, Bologue, Belli isn't a monster; she won't eat you," Palmer shouted loudly while riding the motorcycle, trying to cover the engine noise, "Tomorrow is not some experiment; she just asked you to pick up the gear."

"Will you go with me?" Bologue countered.

"Me? I'll pass."

"I thought you didn't care about anything. Why are you afraid now?" Bologue mocked.

"It's not about being afraid or not," Palmer said somewhat embarrassedly, the motorcycle slowed down and stopped at the red light, and he lowered his head to speak to Bologue, "How should I say it... I've been banned from the Sublimation Furnace Core."

"Banned?"

"Mm-hmm, Belli issued a harsh warning that if I dared to go to the Sublimation Furnace Core again, she'd sink me into Furnace No. 4."

"Why?"

Bologue didn't understand. Palmer was a cheerful and very easygoing guy; Bologue thought he got along well with people, but over time he found the situation to be quite different.

Every time he went to the Crow's Nest, people showed him sympathetic eyes whenever they heard Palmer was his partner. A few times he even encountered Church, Palmer's former partner, who seemed surprised to see him alive and kicking.

"Are you doing okay lately?" Church asked with concern.

"Hmm? Pretty good." Bologue couldn't understand what he was asking about.

Not only did Palmer have conflicts with the Crow's Nest, but he also seemed to have made an enemy of Belli, which made Bologue infinitely curious about his partner.

"What's going on?"

Faced with Bologue's questioning, Palmer appeared somewhat embarrassed, pondering before stammering.

"Just... went to the Sublimation Furnace Core once and accidentally... caused some... minor problems," Palmer's tone suddenly became firm, "Yes, minor problems, just some experiment failures, after all, exploring unknown truths, failures are quite common, right?"

Bologue was stunned for a few seconds until the green light came on, and the motorcycle roared forward, awakening him.

"Oh my..."

Bologue sighed, face in hands.

"I didn't want it either, but I'm just this unlucky, what can I do?" Palmer yelled loudly, "If I could find that damned Devil, I would definitely stab them a few times."

Bologue's expression was complicated, unsure of what kind of face to make.

Lately, he and Palmer had been operating within the Great Rift, encountering many unfortunate events, like the sudden break in the aerial corridor a few days ago. Thankfully, both wore the Arm of Adaptation, and the grappling hooks were particularly useful in the complex environment of the Great Rift.

Or fighting hordes of Demons on a cliffside building when suddenly the twisted structure collapsed.

Such things are quite common in the tuzzling crossroads; these bizarre buildings have no stability at all and may collapse anytime, but when Bologue crawled out of the rubble, relying on the Secret Energy-Summoning Hand to open a hiding spot on the cliffside, he couldn't help but glance at Palmer.

Within two weeks, these incidents were countless; Bologue was already used to them, and later didn't even see it as unlucky, just as unexpected situations encountered during field missions.

Right, unexpected situations, that's it.

Only now did Bologue realize that perhaps all of this was Palmer's "Blessing" at work, and in endless misfortune, he had become accustomed to it all, even viewing it as normal.

"Habits are truly a terrifying force."

Bologue shook his head, muttering to himself.

The motorcycle gradually stopped, Palmer glanced at Bologue, then asked.

"Are you getting off here? Is that okay?"

"Yes, today's purchasing day," Bologue got up and stepped out of the sidecar, took off the helmet, and returned it to the sidecar, "Are you planning to rest tomorrow?"

Palmer wasn't planning to go with him to the Sublimation Furnace Core; letting him act alone in the Great Rift wasn't realistic. This guy was exhausted; he'd probably sleep at home all day.

"Yeah, sleep all day, no one can make me get up."

Palmer said determinedly; the actions in the Great Rift were somewhat interesting, but besides interesting, it was endless torment: complicated terrain, rampaging demons and devils, poisonous gases...

The mind needed to remain taut every second, maintaining this state for long made Palmer feel like he was nearing a mental breakdown. Comparing it to before, he loved his previous job, at least he was working in the city, and when tired he could take a rest at the coffee shop on the street corner.

"See you the day after tomorrow!" Bologue waved to Palmer.

The motorcycle gradually disappeared into the street, Bologue recalled his previous fantasy about the assigned vehicle, but he was directly arranged into this damned place, the Great Rift, where cars wouldn't work.

Stepping into "Charlie's House," which was the old goods store Bologue frequently visited, his so-called purchasing day was to come here and select some items.

"Yo! Charlie."

Pushing the door open, Bologue greeted the shopkeeper behind the counter.

"Long time no see, Bologue, you haven't come for half a month, right." Charlie recognized Bologue at a glance.

Charlie couldn't fail to recognize Bologue; his demeanor was truly unique. When Bologue was in a crowd, it was hard to pick him out, but when he was alone, the sharpness of his aloof aura was palpable, striking your eyes.

"Work has been busy lately; I finally had time to come and check," Bologue went straight to the shelves, "Any new goods?"

"All over there; better pick quickly, I'm closing soon." Charlie said.

Bologue waved his hand, signaling he heard.

Covering his nose, he dusted off the dirt and selected several records from the lot, also spotting some strange things in the corner.

"What are these, dolls? Are you collecting this kind of stuff too?" Bologue picked up a rabbit doll from the carton; it should've been white but had become gray with dust from sitting in the corner for too long.

"Guess how I got these goods." Charlie didn't directly answer Bologue's question but countered.

"Someone sold you old goods... I remember there's a centralized second-hand market in Opus; besides these, you should source there too." Bologue said.

"Pretty much, but you know, Bologue, many goods aren't really second-hand; more like the belongings of the dead."

"Belongings of the dead?" Bologue asked, puzzled.

"When someone dies, their family doesn't know how to handle their belongings. Some are kept as mementos, while less important things are sold as second-hand. Many goods come this way."

Charlie shrugged, wearing a peculiar smile as he addressed Bologue.

"Of course, when selling, people don't say they're the belongings of the dead; it's all just second-hand goods. How does it feel, are you scared?"

"No." Bologue shook his head.

Charlie was somewhat surprised; many customers gave different evaluations when knowing this, but unanimously, everyone felt some unease. However, from Bologue's face, Charlie couldn't see any emotional fluctuation.

No fluctuation is good; Charlie didn't know about Bologue's work. Leave aside belongings of the dead; even if the room were full of corpses now, Bologue wouldn't even blink; he might even carefully inspect to see if there are any living people, then dart them with a knife.

"Sold second-hand goods, huh? Selling off one's belongings sounds like dying another time." Bologue said softly.

"It's a necessity," Charlie said helplessly, "Some people need money; some need to escape pain. Everyone makes different choices."

"Some might keep these things, maintaining the illusion nothing has changed." Bologue said.

"Who knows? If there are such people, I don't know them; after all, I'm a second-hand goods dealer."

Charlie said, laughing heartily, as he reached for the item Bologue had picked, then said,

"But such a person must be trapped in a whirlpool of grief, unable to extricate themselves."

Bologue pondered for a moment, said nothing.

Chapter 214: Spoils of War

Back home, everything was as usual, arguments came from next door, and the television noise from the other side. Just like being used to Palmer's misfortune, Bologue was also accustomed to this noisy life. If one day he returned home and everything around him was silent, he would feel a bit uncomfortable.

He put the old vinyl records he had found to one side, took off his coat, hung it on the coat rack, tidied himself briefly, and then sat back on the sofa.

The stormy night seemed to change something, yet it felt like nothing had changed. Bologue's life went on as usual, after work he listened to music, then fiddled with the war sandbox.

The sandbox replicated the battle that changed Bologue's life, the battle known as the Fall of the Holy City.

It was during this battle that Bologue lost his soul and gained resurrection, and it was after this that his destiny was completely rewritten, setting him on an irrevocable path.

Since being released from prison, Bologue had been contemplating these matters. He suspected the deal he made with the devil back then might be related to the Fall of the Holy City, a battle shrouded in mystery that ended the Fury of Scorched Earth.

"A light."

Bologue murmured softly.

Sulfur and fire streaked across the sky, and under that intense light, everyone was turned into pillars of salt.

On the crimson battlefield, only Bologue remained alive, and this was the scene Bologue saw in the Face of Horror, his deepest, most terrifying nightmare.

In fact, Bologue didn't really know what happened during the Fall of the Holy City. The "a light" people spoke of was just a rumor he gathered from consulting various sources.

When Bologue awoke on the battlefield, everything had ended. He remembered feeling infinite pain, as if his body was being scorched by fire.

He didn't maintain his sanity for long, then fainted into a painful nightmare and repeated cycles of life and death. When Bologue awoke again, possessing awareness, it was already ten years later, and by then he had left the battlefield and was in a place called the Black Prison.

Sometimes Bologue pondered why he was afraid of such a nightmare. Over the long years in the Black Prison, he gradually realized that perhaps he was the cause of it all. He couldn't say why, but he had a vague feeling of this, and he attributed all the crimes to himself.

After being released from prison and learning about extraordinary knowledge, Bologue found no relief; instead, he was engulfed by deeper troubles.

The deal with the devil was an absolute exchange of value for value.

What did he do to deserve such an undying body? What exactly did he pay in the deal? Was the Fall of the Holy City related to him, and if so, what role did he play in it?

Bologue couldn't understand, not one bit.

He still remembered, decades ago, his conversations with the Prison Warden while incarcerated. That mysterious fellow would only greet him once every few years. Many times, Bologue thought the Warden was dead, but this guy, seemingly an undead too, accompanied him until he was released.

"It actually has nothing to do with you."

This was what the Warden often said. Bologue could tell he wasn't trying to absolve himself of anything, but rather speaking from the heart. After all, someone like him wouldn't need to lie to Bologue.

But... is it really so?

Bologue felt a headache as he looked at the layout on the sandbox, slowly leaned back, and collapsed into the sofa.

His lingering attachment to the city also hid another purpose. Bologue always felt that things weren't that simple. Perhaps in this Oubos of the Oath City, he might find the answers he needed, just as the Tyrant had said.

"Pay attention to the ground beneath your feet."

What was there to pay attention to? All Bologue could think of was the Great Rift.

Bologue didn't continue thinking. He glanced at the new old records he had bought, placed them on the record player, and as the song began to play, it carried a hint of hoarseness, as if an old person was singing with deep emotion.

Returning to the bedroom, Bologue picked up his diary, opened a page, and wrote down today's date.

Bologue didn't write in his diary every day. Sometimes life was quite boring, and he didn't like recording such messy trivialities. Only when there were noteworthy things, or when he developed some thoughts, would Bologue put pen to paper.

"I went to Charlie's house today and chatted with Charlie for a while. It seems that every profession comes with its thoughts. Today, Charlie shared some rather interesting ideas.

When people leave, some choose to leave behind something as a keepsake, to commemorate the traces of their existence. Others throw everything away, as if they never existed, to numb themselves. There are also those who stubbornly keep all their belongings, trying to disguise everything as if they still exist.

I think each choice represents a different mindset. I think my feelings for Adelle fall into the first category."

Bologue calmly wrote down his thoughts.

"I will not fall into eternal grief, nor will I force myself to forget these things, pretending nothing happened. I believe I will accept it calmly and live on with her blessings. This should also be what she wants, and what I should do."

After finishing writing, Bologue flipped a few pages forward in the diary.

From the words in the diary, it was clear that Bologue had indeed moved on from grief. In the very first entries, when he mentioned her, he didn't use her name but referred to her as "you".

As if it wasn't a diary, but a letter to Adelle, one that would never receive a reply.

Closing the diary, Bologue opened the drawer, which was filled with paper money and coins.

After the stormy night, Bologue made a significant achievement, and the Field Operations Department awarded him a substantial bonus. Besides that, Bologue also acquired two trophies.

A Bright Light Blade confiscated from Kedening. This short sword could transform into a lethal Ethereal Sword when infused with a large amount of Ether, which was quite a valuable alchemy armament for Bologue, who lacked a sure-kill method.

The Misty Secret Sword confiscated from Sandbox was not kept by Bologue, but instead, he handed it over to the Field Operations Department.

Within the Order Bureau, due to the special nature of the Secret Swords, each one carried significant meaning. Every confiscated Secret Sword was considered an insult to the King's Secret Sword, and the Field Operations Department offered a substantial price for them.

Bologue didn't refuse. After careful consideration, he felt that his abilities didn't pair well with the Misty Secret Sword, and the Ether consumption of this Secret Sword was also enormous.

Geoffrey mentioned he didn't apply for a bonus with the Secret Sword since Bologue already had enough money to last him a while. Instead, he applied for some alchemy armaments for himself. He said mysteriously that Bologue would definitely like this new thing. It seemed that he'd be able to get it tomorrow when he met with Belli.

Bologue's expression turned a bit somber. Despite his hundred unwillingness, there was no other way. He planned to apply to Lebius sometime later to recruit new team members. Preferably recruiting someone to link with the Sublimation Furnace Core, so he wouldn't have to trouble himself.

"Debtors, huh? Reliable debtors are hard to come by these days."

With that thought, Bologue murmured to himself.

According to Nesanel's plan, the actual purpose of the Special Operations Group was to uncover the Devil's secrets. For this, debtors were needed as team members, making the recruitment plan extremely rigorous, and it was uncertain when new members would be recruited.

Bologue stopped thinking about these matters. The work day was over, so there was no need to worry about work-related things anymore. He had a long life ahead, plenty of time to toil.

Now, Bologue lay comfortably in bed, enjoying this brief tranquility, letting every muscle relax, waiting for the arrival of the next day amidst the gradually rising music.

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Order Bureau, Pillar Courtyard.

Bologue appeared with a somber expression amidst the hasty crowd, perhaps because he thought of visiting that woman today. His sleep last night wasn't great; although there were no nightmares, he still felt tired upon waking, with no energy in his body.

Looking up, outside the towering structure supporting the dome, elevators moved up and down. Bologue moved past the crowd and entered an elevator, pressing the button to the Sublimation Furnace Core.

Bologue was the only one in the elevator. Just as the elevator doors were about to close, a hand reached in through the gap, causing the closing doors to reopen, and then she squeezed in.

"Almost missed it."

Leaning against the side, she was panting heavily. Once she caught her breath, she was about to press a button but noticed that the button for the Sublimation Furnace Core was already lit.

"You're going to the Sublimation Furnace Core too?"

Belli turned to look at the other person in the elevator, only to see him standing in the corner with a somber face, eyes filled with worry and annoyance, arms crossed defensively in front of him.

Of course, Belli never cared about such matters.

"Yo! What a coincidence, Bologue!"

Belli extended a hand and draped it around Bologue's shoulders. She was tall, almost as tall as Bologue, and with a yank, Bologue nearly lost his balance. She then placed her hand on the back of Bologue's neck, pushing his head down.

They looked like a pair of miscreant friends on the street, conspiring which unlucky house to burglarize that evening, one picking locks, the other prying doors, with clear division of labor and great efficiency.

Fresh fragrance wafted around. Having stayed in a place like the Great Rift, akin to a stinky gutter, this kind of fresh scent was truly enchanting. With such a beautiful figure beside him, any normal man in this environment would inevitably have some pleasant fantasies...

Bologue considered himself a normal man, just that the woman beside him wasn't quite normal.

He didn't entertain any pleasant thoughts because this beautiful figure wore a sly smile, speaking like a greasy old man.

"Cutie, I told you you'd be back, didn't I?"

Watching the flamboyant Belli, Bologue's face turned ashen, remaining silent.

Chapter 215: Golden Thesis

The heavy gate slowly opened, a scorching wave rushing in, making Bologue squint his eyes. Once the gate fully opened, a figure in protective clothing appeared behind it, having seemingly waited there for quite some time.

Bologue looked at the name tag on the figure's chest to determine his identity.

"Balder?"

"Good morning, Mister Lazarus," Balder nodded to Bologue.

"Hey! Balder!"

Belli waved to Balder before passing by him, energetically greeting everyone around.

"Good morning, everyone!"

Only at times like these did Bologue feel that Belli was like a department head. He wondered how she managed to call out each person's name despite not seeing their name tags, as if she were a lion overseeing her territory.

"I thought you all never left the Sublimation Furnace Core," Bologue said, surprised to encounter Belli outside of it.

"We rarely leave," Balder replied, quickly adding, "But in some special cases, we do go out in groups."

"Such as?"

"For emergencies needing technical support from the Sublimation Furnace Core, and when a project succeeds, we go out to celebrate and have a drink."

Bologue hadn't encountered the former situation yet, but the latter brought back memories for him.

It happened shortly after he joined the Field Operations Department—once, while heading to the cafeteria with Palmer, he saw a large group of lab coat-clad individuals rushing by, mixed with a few people in protective clothing.

They were shouting and waving bottles, turning the public cafeteria into a party venue.

"Let's go. The equipment requested by the Special Operations Group is ready. Come sign off, and I'll have someone deliver it later."

Belli approached; everyone was in protective clothing except for her, wearing casual attire.

In the elevator, to avoid an awkward silence, Bologue casually chatted with Belli, including a mention of the current situation. Belli explained, saying, "Ignoring protocol is a privilege of a department head."

Damn it, can no one actually reprimand her?

Bologue nodded and followed Belli, Balder also walking beside them. Bologue was already used to Balder's silence and elusive nature.

He was like Belli's external brain, the two inseparable.

Doors opened one after another in the winding corridors, finally reaching a large door that Belli opened, revealing a warehouse filled with stacks of boxes, almost filling the entire view.

"These were custom-made according to your work needs."

Speaking, Belli forcefully pried open a box with a crowbar, sending wood and dust flying. Her movements were swift and clean, showing a bit of the spirit of a heroin.

Balder showed no intention of helping, suggesting this was not the first time this had happened.

"Although the minister is an unreliable Alchemist, she received excellent swordsmanship training before. If her talent in Alchemy weren't outstanding, she might have been part of the Field Operations Department."

Balder explained timely, pausing for a second or two, then continued, "Perhaps she might have even been your colleague."

Sound of breaking continued, as Belli leisurely set down the crowbar, not a drop of sweat on her face.

Bologue thought she could pry open a grown man's skull with a crowbar easier than prying open a wooden box.

"Aside from the Fourth Group within the Field Operations Department, you should be the second group to operate long-term within the Great Rift. This batch of equipment is based on the custom gear for the Fourth Group, modified specifically for you."

Upon opening the wooden box, among the cushioning fragments, Belli unveiled an iron chest hidden inside, tossing an Arm of Adaptation towards Bologue.

"Upgraded Arm of Adaptation. Compared to the original, this version uses tougher Alchemy materials, and the hook range has been doubled, making it easier for you to swing around in the Great Rift."

Bologue nodded, as the regular hook was indeed not very useful in the Great Rift. Doubling the range gave Bologue much more freedom in his movements.

"This set is Iron-Repelling Armor."

Belli said as she took out an object resembling a bulletproof vest. Bologue received the Iron-Repelling Armor, feeling it was very light. It appeared to be some sort of fabric, yet felt metallic, like chain armor woven with threads.

"The surface... is it Iron-Repelling Paint?" Bologue asked.

"You recognize it; the outer layer is indeed Iron-Repelling Paint. For flexibility, much of the defense has been sacrificed, but even so, it can somewhat resist cutting. However, be cautious..."

Bologue interrupted Belli's explanation, and he said, "It can't block piercing."

"Well, but it's not that it completely can't block piercing. It's just that compared to other protective powers, it's much less effective against piercing."

Belli took out another item. From the model of the Iron-Repelling Armor, it seemed to be prepared for Bologue and Palmer.

"In that haunted place, the Great Rift, accidents happen all the time. This thing is of limited use in battles against Condensers, but it's still better than facing a blade with just flesh and blood." Belli's tone was rarely tinged with some concern.

"And then... huh?" Belli's voice became strange. She glanced at the list, then at the contents, and picked up a Sheep Horn Hammer in confusion, "Is this also what you wanted?"

"Yes." Bologue affirmed.

"Alright, alright, the Sheep Horn Shock Hammer, the effect is literal, vibration... we use this to forge steel."

"I'm very handy with it." Bologue affirmed again.

Belli's gaze at Bologue became strange. Come to think of it, she only knew Bologue was from the Field Operations Department, but she was completely ignorant of Bologue's style and method of work.

"You don't like to use firearms?" Belli asked.

"I'm a bit nearsighted. If I want to focus on a target, it takes some time," Bologue frowned. Actually, he couldn't really be considered nearsighted; it was just a bit of a struggle to see things clearly, "Plus, my marksmanship is terrible, but my throwing technique is superb, my accuracy with a flying knife is incredible."

Bologue was very skilled in throwing flying knives and even in the use of all projectiles. He felt it was like an instinct—anything in his hands could be thrown out at a deadly speed.

"Then this is very suitable for you. You don't need to aim; as long as you're in a rough shooting range, it's fine."

Belli said as she pulled out a short-barreled shotgun, "From what I see in the requirements, you guys also need to be discreet. This kind of weapon is easy to hide."

Bologue took the short-barreled shotgun. During the hunt on the stormy night, he had already used this kind of weapon and, from an expert's perspective, Bologue quite liked this weapon.

"This doesn't look like an Alchemy Armament." Bologue observed, noticing that the metal surface lacked that faint light trajectory.

"This is just a regular firearm. What we've prepared for you are these Alchemy Warheads," Belli said while taking out box after box of ammo, "As for the specific effects, you can look at the list yourself, I won't introduce them one by one."

"Yes, use them sparingly. The most expensive things here are these warheads and the Iron-Repelling Armor," Belli said.

Bologue walked up and quickly checked the contents of the box, then glanced at the list. He said, "These are all for Palmer and me. What about Lebius and the others?"

"They are Third Stage Negative Power Users. This kind of equipment doesn't have much significance for them," Belli said, "Alchemy Armaments that are useful to them are at least of the 'Pure White' level. And for that kind of Alchemy Armament, no matter how you sell your male charm, it requires approval procedures."

Belli suddenly paused, leaned against the wooden box, and her eyes scrutinized Bologue up and down. She spoke again.

"Of course, if you choose to join the Sublimation Furnace Core, it's not impossible to just obtain 'Pure White.'

Joining the Sublimation Furnace Core? That's certainly impossible. If he could, Bologue wouldn't even want to come. He ignored Belli's words and instead spoke softly.

"Alchemy Armaments of the Pure White level? I have never seen such a thing."

Over the past two weeks, Bologue had been so exhausted because, apart from his duties at the Great Rift during the day, he spent his after-hours reading, cramming knowledge related to the Extraordinary World.

To this end, Lebius recommended a few books to him, one of which was an introductory book on alchemy, titled 'Golden Thesis.'

Developments have led alchemists' research into three major schools: one on the qualitative change of metal sublimation to transform base metals into noble metals, another on exploring the Alchemy Matrix, and the third is to create new life. They believe all three will guide alchemists deep within the "Secret Source" to explore the truth.

After centuries of research and evolution, the first one on metal sublimation, the "Iron Stone School," evolved into the subsequent research on Alchemy Armaments.

In the ideology of alchemists, the qualitative transformation of metal sublimation can be divided into four major stages, each named after a color: dissolution and corruption of matter, termed "Blackening;" followed by decomposition and purification, termed "Whitening," the third stage—"Yellowing"—combines the refined materials, and finally through "Red Transformation," condenses into the Philosopher's Stone.

To this end, the degree of qualitative change in Alchemy Armaments is divided into four levels according to these four stages, carrying different strengths of Alchemy Armaments to release varying degrees of power.

The full name of Pure White is "Purifying White." The Alchemy Armaments of this stage correspond to the tier of Negative Power Users.

For one-stage condensers like Bologue, the Alchemy Armaments they use are untransmuted Alchemy Armaments. If Bologue wants to use transmuted Alchemy Armaments, he would at least have to become a Prayer Believer before he could use Alchemy Armaments of the "Corruption of Black" level.

"The Pure White level, indeed, you won't see it. After all, it's used by Negative Power Users."

Belli's smile suddenly turned weird, and she scrutinized Bologue with that peculiar gaze again, then said.

"But now you have an opportunity to see the Rot Black level. Interested?"

After a brief silence, Bologue, with an unchanged expression, said.

"Speak, what's the price?"

Chapter 216: Deceitful Snake Scale Liquid

Geoffrey agreed with one point they made, very few people can refuse the Sublimation Furnace Core, there's no way, they offer too much.

Belli looked at Geoffrey slyly, and after thinking for a moment, she said.

"Call me sister and let me hear it."

"Huh?"

Geoffrey was taken aback, looking at Belli in confusion. From appearances, Geoffrey and Palmer were about the same age, they seemed to be around twenty-two or twenty-three.

After meeting Belli previously, Geoffrey had gone back to look through Belli's introduction. He remembered that this minister seemed to be around twenty-six, which indeed qualified her as a sister, but...

"Do you know? Despite how I look, I'm actually almost a hundred-year-old man."

Geoffrey wasn't lying. If he weren't an Undead, the current Geoffrey should be an almost dying elder.

"I know, I've mentioned it before, I've seen you in some documents, but it's clear that physical age is one thing, but psychological age is another," Belli said casually.

Talking about psychological age, Geoffrey thought of Nesanel. Considering carefully, Geoffrey felt that he indeed didn't have the mindset of a centenarian and was still full of youthful vigor.

Geoffrey blamed it all on the Black Prison, the experience there was like a wild nightmare. After waking from the dream, Geoffrey returned to his former self, the soldier who set foot on the battlefield sixty-six years ago.

Geoffrey's expression struggled for a moment, and just as he was about to collapse, Belli waved her hand and said, "I was kidding, let's go."

Geoffrey took a deep breath, his expression becoming more complex.

Balder was organizing the goods, directing others to move them to the Field Operations Department, while Geoffrey followed Belli, once again stepping into the deep corridor.

All the way, Geoffrey was silent, while Belli continued muttering.

"Is it surprising? That I would spare you."

Geoffrey nodded stiffly, seeing this, Belli laughed uproariously. Geoffrey couldn't figure her out, and she said again.

"Seeing you struggle is what's interesting, if you'd said it aloud, it wouldn't be fun anymore."

Geoffrey was stunned by this, wondering what was wrong with this person.

Geoffrey's upbringing disallowed him from being rough with women, even refraining from swearing, but now the usually composed Geoffrey was starting to find it hard to hold back.

"Bologue Lazarus..." Belli suddenly whispered his name, she turned around looking at him, "Do you know? Many years ago, we already knew your name."

"Many years ago?"

Geoffrey didn't understand, Belli's words intrigued him, even dispelling his previous complaints.

"A data report, containing... many experimental records, and the name of the subject was Bologue Lazarus, which is you."

Geoffrey recalled his years in the Black Prison, the shock of the Scarlet Wasteland, Geoffrey fell into an almost collapsing emotional state. Driven by the thought of doing something for others, Geoffrey didn't refuse the various demands of the Prison Warden and cooperated with them to complete many experiments.

The limit tests of his "Blessing" were conducted during that time, the process being somewhat crazy, Geoffrey rarely reminisced about those.

"Have you seen my limit test report?" Geoffrey asked.

After becoming a Condenser, Geoffrey always wanted to see his test report. From when Geoffrey said his resurrection would diminish the Ether Fluctuation, he felt his resurrection wasn't that simple, there must be a report detailing it all, but Geoffrey never let him see it.

"No, it was some other experimental records. You were probably called a legend at the time because you were the first Undead we had encountered, though in such form," Belli said.

"We?" Geoffrey grew increasingly confused.

"Mmm-hmm, Balder and I were implanted with the Alchemy Matrix as soon as we came of age, becoming Teda's students. During our studies with him, we saw your experimental records."

"Does Teda only have you two as students?"

Speaking of Teda, Geoffrey held a lot of respect for the Alchemist who hosted his implantation ceremony. In his view, Teda was a legitimate Alchemist, while someone like Belli was just an unfortunate disciple.

"Yes, just the two of us," Belli hesitated briefly before continuing, "actually, there was supposed to be another junior sister."

"Junior sister? Then why isn't there one?" Geoffrey asked.

"Very simple, she died... probably died," Belli said uncertainly.

"I'm sorry."

Geoffrey didn't expect the topic to shift so quickly, reaching into sad past events.

"It's nothing, she died during the secret war. That day should have been her welcoming ceremony, but Overlord Xilin invaded the 'Cultivation Room,' and the oppressive regime indiscriminately drafted everyone. Many Condensers died, not to mention ordinary people."

Belli appeared somewhat despondent, her tone unexpectedly honest, continuing to speak.

"It was that time when I personally became acquainted with death, realizing how terrifying it truly is."

No matter how much time has passed, that nightmare-like day remains so clear, as if it were just yesterday.

"Is that why you are interested in the Undead?" Bologue asked.

"Probably. On one hand, I'm indeed envious of your immortality; on the other hand, you're honestly excellent experimental material—not only do you not deteriorate, but you also describe your feelings during experiments in detail."

Discussing experiments again, Belli became lively, his words carrying the peculiar mania of a researcher.

The two stopped before a door, and Belli picked up the badge hanging on his chest, adorned with the insignia of the Sublimation Furnace Core, entwined with the Wisdom Fruit's serpent.

Strange power surged, and the "Cultivation Room" opened this door.

"Technically, this kind of Alchemy Armament shouldn't be handed to you. After all, you're just a First Stage Condenser with limited Ethereal Amount, but the 'Decision Room' decided to make an exception for you as a reward for your outstanding actions and the Secret Sword you captured."

Belli suddenly changed topics, but Bologue quickly understood the meaning in the words, realizing that he had just been duped by Belli, yet excitement and joy soon overshadowed these feelings.

Looking at the dimness beyond the door, this was also a warehouse, albeit much smaller than the one they had just visited, containing only one item.

It was a precision iron box, covered with several clasps, like tightly clasped hands, holding the box securely, and the side bore the mark of the Sublimation Furnace Core—a black emblem indicating the Quality Change Level of the Alchemy Armament it contained.

Corruption of Black.

"A teacher once said that sometimes regulations must yield to genius."

Belli opened the clasps one by one, carrying the authority of the Sublimation Furnace Core department, allowing her to undo nearly all seals.

Bologue ignored Belli's words, focused entirely on the contents of the iron box.

Layer by layer, metal panels opened, raising a glass container, within which rolled mercury-like substance, a Corruption Black Level Alchemy Armament.

"What is this?" Bologue inquired.

The contents of the container, at first glance, appeared indistinguishable from mercury, but upon closer inspection, a faint halo floated, and dense lines weaved like tiny fish swimming through the mercury, fleetingly.

"Hmm? An Alchemy Armament that can't be called an Alchemy Armament, that's why it's been exceptionally handed over to you."

While speaking, Belli took out the glass container, signaling Bologue to reach out and take it.

"Unlike conventional Alchemy Armaments, it has some special properties. For most, it's merely useless, but for you, its compatibility with your Secret Energy should be quite excellent. Try injecting Ether."

Following Belli's direction, Bologue reached into the container, feeling an icy touch, as if dipped in ice water, and with the injection of Ether, the light tracks in the mercury intensified.

"Some substances, after undergoing Quality Change, become Alchemy Armaments upon Alchemy Matrix implantation; others present peculiar properties and are used as Alchemy Materials post transformation," Belli explained from the side.

"You know Iron-Repelling Paint, then you should also know it's refined from Mercury after its first Quality Change,"

Bologue nodded, recalling what he had read in the Border Sanatorium's "Basic Alchemy Materials Atlas" about Iron-Repelling Paint.

"Iron-Repelling Paint is the product of Mercury's first Quality Change, typically a liquid metal, but once it covers an object, it quickly solidifies into hard metal."

As Belli elaborated, Bologue injected Ether into the mercury, causing it to boil, seemingly shaping itself into a silver-white sword, and the liquid metal solidified completely into a rapier.

Raising the rapier horizontally, Bologue noted its surface wasn't smooth, but densely patterned like snake scales—as if formed by a convergence of serpents.

"What is this?" Bologue questioned.

"Advancing Iron-Repelling Paint's Quality Change and applying some... I'm unclear of the exact operation, leading to this Alchemy Material," Belli replied.

"You don't know either?"

Increasingly puzzled, Bologue found it surprising that Belli, the Sublimation Furnace Core department head, would be stumped.

"This is a distortion product, often occurring unexpectedly in Alchemist research, its creator calling this Alchemy Material the 'Deceitful Snake Scale Liquid.'

Belli stepped closer, scrutinizing the Snake Scale Rapier in Bologue's hand.

"In Alchemy, Mercury or Silver symbolizes a serpent."

"The serpent is the seeker of truth."

Bologue softly responded, recalling what he read in the "Golden Thesis"—understanding the meaning of the Sublimation Furnace Core insignia from that book.

"Bologue, now release your Secret Energy, attempt to command this Deceitful Snake Scale Liquid."

No longer waiting for Belli's instruction, Bologue felt a surge of impatience, his eyes glowing blue, his arm emanating intense light tracks, serpent-like, they rapidly traversed the Snake Scale Rapier.

After a brief calm, the rapier's form shattered, the Deceitful Snake Scale Liquid danced wildly, twisting into a roaring serpent swarm.

Chapter 217: Junior Sister

In the not-so-spacious interior, Bologue and Belli stood together, surrounded by countless greenish-blue glimmers. Despite everything he had experienced, Bologue couldn't help but marvel at the sight before him, and clearly realized that this world was far vaster than he had ever imagined.

Driven by the Summoning Hand, the Deceitful Snake Scale Liquid in his hand crumbled from solid form, transforming into a soft liquid that soared and danced wildly.

In the lingering Ether, the silver-white mercury twisted into silver snakes covered with scales, swirling around the two, biting each other, with brilliant greenish-blue radiance bursting from the gaps between the scales.

In a particular moment, Bologue felt as if he were in the depths of the sea, sunlight piercing through layers of deep water, casting only such dim glow, yet even so dim, it still illuminated the swarming snakes in the dark.

A strange sensation kept emerging. In the past, when Bologue summoned substances, he had to extend the Alchemy Matrix onto the material through his hands to distort the substance's form.

This process seemed swift, yet it was very strenuous, like a forceful invasion. However, when summoning the Deceitful Snake Scale Liquid, Bologue felt no obstruction at all. His Ether had so effortlessly conquered the material, as if the Deceitful Snake Scale Liquid were merely an extension of his body.

What surprised Bologue the most was that the Deceitful Snake Scale Liquid in his hand could switch between solid and liquid states at any time. One second it was a solidified rapier, the next it shattered

into countless liquid droplets. In theory, Bologue's "Narrow and Sharp" restricted him to solid materials, but the mercury-based properties of the Deceitful Snake Scale Liquid seemed to cheat this boundary, helping Bologue surpass it.

Bologue rotated his wrist, and the swimming snakes all retreated into their lair, coiling layer by layer around his arm. The flowing liquid instantly solidified into arm armor, but in the next moment, it began to flow again, the snake swarm crawling over Bologue's body surface.

Just like when Sandbox used Iron-Repelling Paint, this eerie metal protected Bologue's body, yet stronger than Iron-Repelling Paint, the Deceitful Snake Scale Liquid can transform at any time and isn't a one-time use item.

"You seem very satisfied with this alchemy material."

Belli noticed the excitement in Bologue's eyes. People from the Field Operations Department were like this; as soon as they got new equipment that felt just right, their eyes would turn childlike. Belli guessed that Bologue's next step was to head to the combat room to thoroughly test this new weapon.

"Alchemy material? Shouldn't this be an alchemy armament? And of Corruption Black Level," Bologue asked.

"Hmm... how should I put it? It's very special, just like mercury is unique among metals, it exists in a curious state between solid and liquid.

Its strength lies in its metallic properties, so calling it alchemy material isn't wrong. As for alchemy armament, it truly is implanted with the Alchemy Matrix and can be considered as an alchemy armament."

Belli looked at Bologue, the rustling sound emanating from Bologue's clothes. A small silver snake poked its head out from his sleeve, its eyes gleaming the same greenish-blue as Bologue's. Under Bologue's precise control, it appeared to have genuine life.

"But this alchemy armament can only be used by you; in others' hands, it's merely alchemy material."

Belli reached out and stroked the silver snake, which stuck out its tongue, licking her fingers with a cold touch.

"You also felt it, the Deceitful Snake Scale Liquid has excellent Ether extensibility. With the injection of Ether, it's simply an extension of your body."

Bologue nodded in affirmation. This wondrous metal greatly reduced his Ether consumption and improved his control.

"And its hardness after solidification is only slightly inferior to Iron-Repelling Paint. Yet the expensive Iron-Repelling Paint is a one-time use, while it can repeatedly oscillate between solid and liquid."

"Sounds like it's indeed a very precious alchemy material," hearing Belli speak, the functionality of the Deceitful Snake Scale Liquid far exceeds its demonstrated combat power, "what Alchemy Matrix is implanted in it?"

Bologue toyed with the silver snake in his hand, the silver snake coiling around his fingers, weaving through like a shuttle in a dense forest, its movements fluid and without the slightest stiffness, showcasing Bologue's steadily advancing mastery of Secret Energy.

"The Illusion Creation school, as long as it is injected with a large amount of Ether, it can perform self-illusion creation and continually proliferate," Belli added, "but it is just an illusion creation. After a while, the Ether will dissipate on its own, and the creation will vanish accordingly."

"Sounds like a useless invention."

Bologue nodded. Based on the information so far, the Deceitful Snake Scale Liquid indeed had no combat strength, merely possessing enough bizarreness.

Belli had kept it sealed here, likely because she couldn't think of a way to utilize it, which allowed him to scoop it up.

"Pretty much, many aberrant products are like this, strange enough but hard to put into combat. But for you, it's not the same; this thing is almost a perfect match for you," Belli said.

Bologue didn't deny it, as he was fascinated by the manipulation of the Deceitful Snake Scale Liquid. The silver snakes kept splitting as they crawled, soon becoming a dense snake swarm. When he tried to inject more Ether, the swarm began to proliferate wildly, quickly covering Bologue completely.

Belli took a few steps back; the snake swarm climbed all over Bologue's body, solidifying into a ferocious and sturdy armor, the surface of which was not smooth but bore many scratches, as if marked by invisible snakes swimming over it.

The armor collapsed, turning once again into a swarm of snakes that plunged under Bologue's clothes, disappearing from sight. As his mastery of Secret Energy-Summoning Hand increased, this seemingly mundane secret energy shone brilliantly in Bologue's hands.

The Summoning Hand does not have powerful direct lethality, but it is cunningly versatile, able to swiftly respond in fast-changing battlefield situations.

Even someone as strong as Sandbox, even with the help of Liquid Spirit Potion and Fog-Shrouded Secret Sword, was still slain by Bologue on the stone bridge, mostly attributed to the flexibility of the Summoning Hand.

An expert wouldn't be limited by something, nor would his Secret Energy.

"Is this thing just given to me like this?"

Bologue had already considered the Deceitful Snake Scale Liquid as his own. Now Belli couldn't go back on her word, and this alchemy armament would help Bologue break through the limitations of 'Narrow and Sharp' to some extent. In a cunning battle, this would be a lethal strike.

"Hmph."

Belli nodded, not making any demands, which made Bologue even more uneasy. Nobody knew what he might have to repay with later for this free gift.

"Rest assured, giving you this involves many factors, such as rewards for you, and because this item is especially suitable for you."

"Is that really the case?" Bologue was highly skeptical. "Even if it's useless, just judging by value, it's beyond what I can afford."

"Yes, but its inventor doesn't care about wealth. She thinks this aberrant creation is very intriguing and just gave it to us to archive in the Sublimation Furnace Core," Belli waved her hand dismissively.

"Is this really okay?" Bologue didn't expect it to have such an origin.

"What's not okay? The samples are preserved, and the record is logged. Rather than letting it gather dust in the warehouse, it's better given to you,"

Belli said earnestly. She seemed to have noticed Bologue's doubts and burst into laughter immediately.

"To you, this thing is priceless, but to us, it's just experimental material at most. If you really feel uneasy about it, then..."

Bologue put his hand over Belli's mouth, interrupting her nonsense right there.

"Cough, cough."

Belli coughed loudly, choking due to Bologue's sudden move.

Disabling the Secret Energy, Bologue put away the Deceitful Snake Scale Liquid. Once the Ether dissipated, the group of snakes didn't revert to their previous liquid form but instead solidified like chain armor on his torso.

"Who is its inventor? I'd like to thank her in person if I get the chance," Bologue asked.

The Deceitful Snake Scale Liquid was extremely important to Bologue. It enabled him to overcome the limitation of 'Narrow and Sharp', something only achieved by Prayer Believers. In other words, under the effect of the Deceitful Snake Scale Liquid, Bologue could temporarily elevate the effect of Secret Energy to the level of a Prayer Believer.

"She lives in the Fork of Hesitation, not in the Sublimation Furnace Core," Belli said, then recalled something and suggested, "You're in charge of the Great Rift now, right?"

"Why?"

"I remember when the Field Operations Department is in charge of an area, don't they usually establish a stronghold? Have you found a place yet?" Belli asked again.

"Not yet. The Great Rift is too chaotic; it's hard to find a safe zone."

Each operational team establishes a secret base in the area they're responsible for, allowing them to rest within that area instead of frequently returning to the Cultivation Room. The base also serves as a safehouse to avoid dangers when necessary.

In the past two weeks, Bologue and Palmer had scouted many places, but after careful filtering, they found that perhaps the safest place might just be the Cobweb Bar. Yet, thinking of establishing the Order Bureau's stronghold there seemed odd no matter how they looked at it.

Palmer protested a few times, thinking it was a great idea to use the bar as a stronghold. Unfortunately, Bologue couldn't tell him who the boss of Vika was; otherwise, his reaction would be entirely different.

Reflecting on the known information, there were Demons hiding in the Great Rift whose purpose was unclear, forces coming from afar, the Gray Trade Association, the Sovereign of the Fork of Hesitation, and also a King's Secret Sword who had fled inside.

In comparison, even the Demons seemed more amiable than these entities.

While Bologue was racking his brains over this, Belli handed him a slip of paper with an address written on it.

"What's this?" Bologue asked.

"It's the teacher's address. He might be able to help you with this," Belli continued, "Oh, and the inventor is also there."

"The inventor is Teda?"

"No, the inventor is my junior apprentice sister, well, sort of a junior apprentice sister." Mentioning this junior apprentice sister, Belli's expression became troubled.

"Huh? Didn't she pass away?"

Bologue was confused, while Belli gave him a look as if he were an idiot and then said.

"Can't the teacher take on another student?"

Chapter 218: Autumn Sadness

Great Rift, Wandering Path.

On the suspended corridor, Palmer and Bologue stood side by side, overlooking the peculiar structure below. It resembled giant tumors growing on the cliffs, rising and falling, extending into the fog below.

"Speaking of which, Bologue, since you won't die anyway, want to jump down and give it a shot?"

Palmer took a can of drink, drank a big gulp, then said.

"Why jump down?"

Bologue frowned, looking at the blueprint in his hand. It was a map of the Great Rift summarized by the Field Operations Department. However, the Great Rift was an area with immense depth, and the map appeared quite complex. This spooky place was constantly being updated, and no one knew if their map was outdated.

"Don't you want to know what's down there in the Great Rift?"

Palmer finished his drink, tossed the can into the Sea of Mist, and without any sound, it was engulfed by the mist.

"Those who jump into the Great Rift don't come back, but you won't die. Maybe you can find out what's underneath," Palmer gazed at the Sea of Mist, "and you have the Key of the Crooked Path. If you're lucky enough to find a door, you might return to the Undying Club directly."

"If you're really curious about what's below the Great Rift, you could ask those people in the Fourth Group."

Bologue focused on the map, dismissing Palmer's odd talk.

Apart from the two, the Fourth Group was also present within the Great Rift. This Special Operations Group was very mysterious, stationed within the Great Rift for a long time. Even members of the Field Operations Department rarely saw them.

Bologue had previously heard information from Lebius. It was said that they had established an outpost deep within the Great Rift. Most of the time, members of the Fourth Group were active there, directly beneath Bologue, within the rolling Sea of Mist.

But the Great Rift was simply too vast, and the outpost too small. These were just verbal statements; if one really fell down, no one knew what might happen.

More importantly, why establish an outpost in this eerie place?

Bologue shifted his gaze from the map to the gray-white Sea of Mist below. The mist here was filled with poison, yet occasionally birds could be seen flying across, like schools of fish swimming in the Sea of Mist.

"Let's go, Palmer."

Bologue put away the map, having barely determined the direction from the complex drawing.

"Where to? Trouble those merchants?"

Palmer rubbed his fists. Recently, he had either been beating up gangsters or demons, which lacked any challenge for him.

"Just the chance to try these new things."

Palmer was particularly excited, even drawing out the revolver at his waist.

After enduring Belli's torment, Bologue returned to the Special Operations Group with a batch of equipment. The Sublimation Furnace Core supported different gear for both of them, such as Palmer's new revolver, known as "Thunderbolt".

The Thunderbolt Revolver used large-caliber bullets. Each trigger pull sounded like thunder, and its implanted Alchemy Matrix effect was penetration, greatly enhancing the bullet's power.

Throughout the journey, Palmer kept looking around, hoping for an unlucky fellow to appear so that he could test the new gun.

"No, we're visiting Teda," Bologue said.

"The former head of the Sublimation Furnace Core?" Palmer recalled the name.

"Yes, he also resides in the Great Rift, at the edge of Qiushang Town, near the Wandering Path," Bologue led the way, crossing the long suspended corridor, "we need a base, and he might be able to help us."

Bologue thought for a moment and added, "We might even stay at his place."

"Turn his house into a base? Is that possible?"

"Why not? He's left the Order Bureau and joined the Order of Truth, but it's clear he still has connections with the Order Bureau, maybe some private agreements. At least within the Great Rift, Teda's place is relatively safe."

This was a decision Bologue made after careful consideration.

"Moreover, he is an Alchemist, his home is his Alchemy Workshop. Establishing oneself in the Great Rift isn't simple; perhaps it's protected by some small Void Realm. This is far safer than digging a cave as a base."

Secret Energy-Summoning Hand is quite skilled at digging holes, and Bologue really considered whether to dig a complex cave as a base, but Palmer adamantly rejected it, not wanting to become a caveman.

"And what's more, he's an Alchemist, the former Sublimation Furnace Core minister. You understand what I mean, right?" Bologue said, stopping in his tracks to speak to Palmer.

"I get it, I get it, the old guy is loaded. If we manage to rob him, we'll hit the jackpot!" Palmer said, eyes sparkling with excitement.

"According to Belli, that old guy is a Negative Power User."

"But he was once a member of the Order Bureau. We can't go too far with this, can we? Helping him out sometimes might earn us some extra cash."

Palmer showed no embarrassment, handling everything smoothly, the very model of an opportunist.

...

As they crossed the aerial corridors over the complex buildings, the two gradually left the area of the Wandering Paths, heading towards the corner of the Great Rift. In that direction lay a small town within the Great Rift, widely referred to as Qiushang Town.

Through the dense fog, Qiushang Town could be seen from afar. Unlike those structures clinging to the cliffs, Qiushang Town sat on a flat piece of land within the Great Rift. Aside from a gloominess, it seemed no different from other small towns outside.

Qiushang Town wasn't originally located within the Great Rift. Initially, it was on the surface at the edge of the Great Rift, but during an earthquake, the entire area collapsed into the Great Rift, inhabitants and all.

It happened in the autumn, and because the Great Rift was also called the scar of the earth, the incident became known as the Autumn Scar Event. Over the years, the sunken area developed into a town, which was eventually named Qiushang Town.

Compared to the chaotic Wandering Paths, Qiushang Town was undoubtedly more orderly. Many ordinary people lived here, and the town featured large elevators connected to the surface, as well as a subway system that could reach any area in Opus through Qiushang Town's station.

Qiushang Town brought a touch of liveliness to the Great Rift, along with a great supply of resources. The Wandering Paths maintained a mutual understanding, with few troubling Qiushang Town. Both existed in peace.

Bologue initially also wanted to establish a base in Qiushang Town, but when considering the dangers his upcoming work might involve and the hard-won peace in Qiushang Town, he abandoned the idea.

Teda likely held similar thoughts, choosing to live on the outskirts of Qiushang Town, detached from various zones.

"Bologue, what are your thoughts on that Secret Sword?"

Palmer also gazed distantly at Qiushang Town beyond the fog, then at the cliffs afar, covered with corridors and stairs, twisted buildings crowding one after another.

"If he wants to hide in the Great Rift, just finding him will be exceedingly difficult."

"He's on his own now, completely detached from the organization. Whatever he plans to do, he'll need resources and help," Bologue analyzed calmly. "Who do you think will help him in this Great Rift?"

"No one in this Great Rift can help him."

Palmer said, the Order Bureau had not ventured into the Great Rift, but that didn't mean the Order Bureau wasn't watching it.

The reason the Order Bureau allows the Great Rift to exist isn't clear to Palmer, but he knows one thing: if necessary, the Order Bureau can suppress the Great Rift completely. This means the Order Bureau would never tolerate any power exceeding its control within the Great Rift.

The remaining forces can only tear each other apart in the Great Rift, powerless against the Order Bureau.

Except for one.

"No, there's still someone who can help him, those Gray Trade Association folks, I think those blasted arms dealers wouldn't mind stirring the Great Rift into more chaos," Bologue had already made a plan, "and whatever that Secret Sword aims to do, he will need supplies. Finding those merchants presents a chance to capture that Secret Sword."

Palmer nodded in agreement; Bologue was right. Internal forces had already solidified, but now there's an influx of external power. No one knows exactly what goods these merchants bring.

"I'm still concerned about what Jello said," Palmer continued, "he mentioned the merchants brought a mysterious item."

"Don't worry about it; once we find those merchants, we'll interrogate them one by one."

Speaking, Bologue picked up a map, glanced at it, then at the other side of the fog. He pulled out an address given by Belli from his pocket, the words now glowing faintly.

"Looks like Teda's place is indeed protected by a small Void Realm."

The note burned in Bologue's hand, a subtle power momentarily attaching to his eyes, dispersing the obscure fog. A twisted corridor nailed to the cliff appeared, extending into the mist below, faint outlines of buildings barely visible.

"Let's go, we're there."

Bologue said, putting on a gas mask as he stepped into the thick fog.

Chapter 219: Teda Yzhede

Stepping on the rusty staircase, the building shrouded in mist gradually became clear. Like many structures suspended over cliffs, it also resembled a grotesque tumor. However, unlike others, its surface glimmered with a dim light that distorted onlookers' vision. Without Belli's note, Bologue would find it challenging to see through the illusion and discover this place.

Palmer followed closely behind Bologue, currently affected by the Void Realm's influence, unable to perceive the building and resorting to Bologue for guidance.

At the end of the staircase, Bologue felt like he was standing in front of a giant bird's nest, its shell covered with iron plates corroded by the mist, some even showing a state of collapse.

Knocking on the iron door, Bologue felt slightly nervous. He hadn't informed Teda beforehand and didn't know if he'd be mistaken for an intruder. Recalling Teda's fully unleashed Secret Energy during the implant ceremony, Bologue's nerves were taut.

Footsteps sounded from behind the door. Without a password or identity verification, the iron door opened, revealing Teda's face, muttering as he appeared.

"I don't remember having an appointment today?"

He was about to voice some complaint but was surprised when he saw the visitor's face.

"Bologue Lazarus."

He remembered Bologue's name well, couldn't forget it as Bologue bore the Alchemy Matrix of Overlord Xilin.

"Hello..."

Bologue was momentarily at a loss on how to address Teda—former department head? Teacher Teda?

Among so many acquaintances, Bologue had special respect for this former head of the Sublimation Furnace Core, albeit he'd had little contact with him. Perhaps, it was under Teda's craftsmanship that Bologue rose on the Path of Transcendence.

As for the other person? From the first moment they met, Bologue felt he would never hold Belli in esteem again.

"Teda, just call me Teda."

Teda glanced at Bologue and then at Palmer behind him, his voice more surprised.

"Palmer?"

"You know each other?" It surprised Bologue that Teda could call out Palmer's name.

"The unlucky one from the Clarks family, he's quite famous," Teda explained.

"What?"

Palmer hadn't caught their conversation, his attention wholly on the building.

A low humming emanated from inside, with Ether swirling along fixed paths. As Teda opened the door, a gap appeared in the previously enclosed ring. The sealed Silence of power began to seep out slightly, continuously pricking Palmer's senses.

"Is this your Alchemy Workshop?" Palmer asked.

"Yes, hmm?"

Teda stared at Palmer. Bologue sensed a hint of hostility in Teda's eyes, but it didn't last long. Teda sighed.

"Oh well, both of you can come in."

"Oh, thank you."

Palmer was oblivious to Teda's reasoning. Bologue, however, understood and looked somewhat helpless.

"Please don't let it collapse," Bologue quietly prayed.

...

"I didn't expect the Order Bureau to actually plan on intervening in the Great Rift."

Teda frowned after hearing their intentions, "So, you need a safe place as a base?"

"Yes."

Bologue nodded in affirmation, withholding too much information from Teda.

He had previously discussed Teda's stance with Palmer, but Bologue was cautious. Since Teda had left the Order Bureau, regardless of any private agreements or previous assistance from Teda, Bologue decided to conceal some information.

He still remembered why Teda left the Order Bureau—his research violated ethical regulations. Whatever Teda studied, he undoubtedly crossed the line.

"Belli suggested... we could stay here temporarily as a base," Bologue relayed Belli's words, observing Teda's reaction.

"If you guarantee not to wreck the place, you're welcome to stay."

Teda gave an unexpected answer that left Bologue momentarily speechless. He hadn't expected Teda to agree.

If he and Palmer stayed here permanently, they would act like the Order Bureau's surveillance, observing Teda's every move. Yet, Teda didn't seem to mind being watched; he was more concerned about Palmer's "Blessing" possibly ruining his Alchemy Workshop.

"Palmer, I remember you, the heir of the Clarks." Teda conversed further with Palmer.

"Rather than an heir, I'm better known as the unlucky one," Palmer unexpectedly admitted self-awareness, standing at the doorway, refraining from entering.

"If necessary, I can leave," Palmer looked at the complex equipment and pipelines inside with curiosity yet restrained himself, "Since becoming a Debtor, I'm no longer allowed into Alchemy Workshops."

"It's fine. You can have a look around, but remember not to touch the Alchemy Equipment in the center of the building. It's the core that maintains the Void Realm."

Teda's unexpected leniency stunned not only Bologue but also Palmer, who even doubted his own ears.

"Are you serious?" Bologue asked. If Palmer had any bad luck, the precise Alchemy Workshop might explode into a fireball.

"It's nothing," Teda replied with an indifferent attitude.

"Oh, oh, oh!"

Palmer crowed like a rooster, babbling incoherently, then slipped inside.

With Palmer's departure, Bologue's expression turned cold, and he whispered.

"Palmer is a jinx. Aren't you afraid he'll blow this place up just to get rid of him?"

"You'll be coming here often anyway, better to get used to it early."

Teda showed the cunning look of an old fox.

"I have one condition. If you agree, I'd be happy to provide any support for your operations within the Great Rift."

Teda's words were full of allure, truly a master-apprentice dynamic, Bologue realized from whom Belli had learned those damned negotiation skills.

"Aren't you afraid we'll be watching you if you keep us here?" Bologue admitted frankly.

"What's there to fear?" Teda replied dismissively. "The Order Bureau letting me go is proof I pose no threat, right?"

Bologue remained silent, his teal eyes fixed on Teda. Perhaps due to his aura, whenever Bologue looked at someone in silence, they always felt immense pressure and a chilling sensation, as if they were facing a spirit monster wearing human skin.

Teda was no exception. He avoided Bologue's gaze and said.

"You're really vigilant, Bologue."

His demeanor was relaxed; privately, Teda was not as imposing as he once was, and his aging eyes glimmered with wisdom.

"What is your condition?" Bologue asked.

"Let me study you, study your Secret Energy, your Alchemy Matrix, study the Power of Dominator Xilin... In a way, you're practically a walking masterpiece."

The wisdom in his eyes was partially replaced by fervor, as Teda continued to speak to Bologue.

"I've been researching this power for many years. I might even help you master it better."

"It seems there's no reason for me to refuse."

After a few moments of contemplation, Bologue accepted Teda's proposal.

As Teda mentioned, at least from the upper echelons of the Order Bureau's perspective, they still trusted Teda. Not only did they let him leave, but they also involved him in the takeover of the Power of Dominator. Yet even so, Bologue found it hard to fully trust him.

After the Kedening incident, Bologue was reluctant to trust his first impressions of people; everyone wore masks, and all he could do was maintain absolute vigilance.

Apart from these, Teda's conditions were indeed hard for Bologue to refuse. An Alchemy Master providing backup, a base protected by the Void Realm, and many more potential benefits...

"Can I ask you something?" Bologue suddenly inquired.

"What?"

"What initially caused you to violate the ethical regulations," Bologue asked curiously, "I want to know the reason why you left the Order Bureau."

"You've really hit the nail on the head," Teda fell silent for a moment or two, then showed a helpless smile, "Have you read the 'Golden Thesis'?"

"I have. That book is fundamental knowledge, understandable even without knowing Alchemy," Bologue said.

"Then you should know the three main schools in Alchemy: the transformation of metal sublimation, the exploration and pursuit of the Alchemy Matrix, and the creation of new life."

Teda began explaining these basic concepts, then shifted the topic.

"But research always needs to break taboos; only by throwing away all rules and constraints can we progress further."

"That sounds very much like the style of the Order of Truth," Bologue commented coldly.

"Haha, indeed, once you abandon your bottom line, all that remains is fervor," Teda put away his smile, speaking seriously, "The school I researched was the third one."

"Creating new life..."

Bologue murmured softly. In 'Golden Thesis,' the creation of life was viewed by Alchemists as the research for usurping divine power—the most mysterious and maddening study.

"Creating life is absolute taboo within the Order Bureau. They handled many such crises. Under the Alchemists' madness, they created one deformed monster after another, bringing endless calamity," Teda said.

"But you violated all that... What did you create? Were you successful?"

Bologue's tone also carried curiosity. The creation of life was indeed utterly fascinating.

"I still have some bottom lines, not performing inhumane experiments or concocting Philosopher's Stones-like atrocities, so the Order Bureau's treatment of me was relatively lenient. Naturally, the main reason they let me off so easily was that I did indeed achieve results."

With that, Teda smiled confidently, though his smile carried a hint of madness, completely at odds with his previous authority.

"As for my results... She should be back."

As soon as he finished speaking, there was a knock on the door. Bologue turned his head, looking at the dark iron door.

Chapter 220: Aimou

The visitor seemed like a somewhat reserved person, even considering this place was her home. She would knock first to signal to anyone inside that she had come back, whether or not anyone was actually there.

Bologue gazed at the pitch-black iron door; with the crisp mechanical sound of a key fitting into the lock cylinder, the door was pushed open, revealing a figure Bologue absolutely did not expect.

"Is it a guest?"

A cold, hard voice sounded. She glanced at Bologue, then at Teda, her azure blue eyes featuring layer upon layer of light rings, like luminous gears embedded within her pupils.

"Field staff from the Order Bureau will be staying with us for a while, using this as a base." Teda explained.

The girl nodded, picked up the bag in her hand, and headed to another room.

"Wait a minute."

Bologue furrowed his brow and called out to the girl. She cooperated by stopping in place, the light rings in her icy blue eyes shrinking and rotating. She seemed to want to reveal a sense of doubt, but to Bologue, this appeared exceedingly strange.

Getting up and walking towards her, Bologue observed her closely; she was shorter than him, her petite frame fully hidden beneath an ink-green cloaked coat. Unlike their first meeting, this time she wore a similarly ink-green hat, concealing her face in shadow.

"I seem to have seen you before at Border Sanatorium."

Bologue looked at the girl. He could clearly feel the Ether surging within her, along with the faint mechanical sounds, like the internal workings of a watch. Complex mechanical structures supported her body, operating under the drive of Ether.

She tilted her head slightly, causing the light rings in her eyes to droop, Aimou asked puzzledly.

"Are you trying to strike up a conversation?"

Bologue was taken aback, momentarily unable to respond.

"Isn't this what humans do? When talking to a strange opposite gender, they usually start the conversation this way to establish a deeper connection. After all, similar actions occur in the animal kingdom where males showcase various courtship behaviors to attract females. Humans are merely advanced animals."

Contrary to her cold exterior, Aimou was quite talkative, seizing control of the dialogue in an instant. Yet, what she said left Bologue bewildered and continuously stirred his thoughts.

"What's strange though..." Aimou's light rings drooped into ovals, signaling her distress and frowning, "the act of striking up a conversation is typically carried out when there's an attraction to the opposite gender."

As she spoke, she tapped her shoulder, producing a faint metal clang. Aimou looked at Bologue, her light rings nearly collapsing into a line.

"I understand humans have many peculiar preferences ... you wouldn't?"

The deflated rings resumed their rounded shape, rotating rhythmically back and forth.

Suddenly, the rings stopped turning, as if widening her eyes; they enlarged slightly. Aimou covered her mouth slightly, feigning a surprised expression on her otherwise cold face.

"Oh wow, mister, are you serious? You actually..."

"Wait a minute!"

Bologue's voice rose a few notches, interrupting Aimou's words. A familiar yet uncanny feeling rose within him, one he last encountered during his first visit to the Undying Club.

The moment Aimou spoke, the situation began slipping from Bologue's control. This strange individual effortlessly seized the initiative, leaving him unsure of how to react.

The atmosphere fell into an eerie calm until Teda couldn't help but laugh.

"Border Sanatorium? Then that must be Aimou. She needs regular inspections and maintenance at the Border Sanatorium," Teda hadn't expected this wasn't their first meeting, "I'm skilled with the cold, sacred Alchemy Matrix, but for deeper matters involving the soul, medical department assistance is needed."

"Aimou?"

Bologue murmured, assuming this must be the girl's name.

Hearing her name, Aimou removed her hat, revealing a pale, delicate face. Her skin had a peculiar texture, appearing human, yet lacking much of the blood color compared to human skin, resembling an exquisitely crafted mask.

"Hello, I'm Aimou."

Aimou took off her gloves and extended her hand. As Bologue saw at that moment, it was the cold pitch-black metal.

"Bologue Lazarus."

Bologue grasped her hand, feeling the icy metal sensation instead of human warmth.

"Don't mind me, I was just joking earlier. Humans do love those with a sense of humor, right?"

Aimou suddenly became serious. Her face showed little expression, yet the rings in her eyes shifted rapidly, signaling emotional fluctuations.

"Is this humor?" Bologue wondered.

"Huh? Isn't it?" Aimou sounded surprised, clasping her hands to her chest as if deliberately performing, mimicking human gestures, before apologizing, "I rarely converse with others; these ideas are derived from books."

"Theory and practice often differ, don't they?"

Aimou was seemingly raising her brows at herself. Bologue noticed her light rings briefly twisted into star shapes and began to be curious about how many shapes Aimou's light rings could form.

"May I ask if there's anything else?" Aimou inquired.