

Endless 231

Chapter 231: Stepping Into the Evil Path

In the blood-soaked, corpse-filled church, Palmer clearly heard Bologue's voice in his mind, followed by a strong release of ether reaction and roaring noises.

Bologue had already engaged with the enemy, from the waves of combat, it looked like two madmen had clashed.

In fact, Palmer quite enjoyed fighting with madmen, that way you don't have to worry about guessing anything, just find every possible way to kill the opponent.

But now in the deserted church, Palmer's intuition told him that there was an invisible assassin hiding among them, and he had to find him before he was killed.

The wind howled, and the ether-filled gusts filled the room. It's said that the old men back home, when their secret energy is fully unfolded, can determine their enemies' positions and states through the flow of their breath.

Unfortunately, Palmer was only a First Stage Condenser; he couldn't advance in controlling and sensing the wind. He could only hope the surging wind could temporarily interfere with the enemy, and in this storm-gathering state, Palmer could also release secret energy more quickly.

"Ethereal Concealment?"

Palmer couldn't temporarily guess the opponent's secret energy faction, after all, many factions could conceal their whereabouts, such as Commanding Light and distorting it, or the Ascension faction, where they conceal themselves.

But he was sure that the opponent must have mastered Ethereal Concealment, otherwise, the surging ether reaction would easily expose them.

Thinking of this, Palmer felt a bit troubled, ever since becoming a Debtor, he had become somewhat slack and even put aside his own advancement.

Now things were finally on track...though in his view, this track was entirely crooked, but it could be considered a stable job, and he should take it seriously.

"Such a hassle..."

As Palmer complained, a cold arrow sliced through the air silently, yet it still caught his attention.

The fierce wind was his domain, and slight disturbances within it would hardly escape his notice, but such a rapid and deadly approach could not be ignored.

But realizing it took time, and in the moment Palmer sensed and responded, the cold arrow was already at his face, Palmer twisted his body with all his might, and the howling wind hindered the arrow's advance.

Ultimately, the cold arrow that was supposed to pierce his body merely grazed past him, his clothing was torn, sparks flew from the point of contact, it was his Iron-Repelling Armor that shielded him from injury.

The cold arrow nailed itself onto the statue behind, its tip exuding a black aura of death, coated with poison.

Palmer wasn't surprised by this, poisoning was standard procedure for assassins, for those hidden in the shadows, silent cold arrows paired with poison were the perfect combination.

But this also meant one thing, once the assassins exposed their trail, their threat significantly diminished.

Palmer immediately used a short knife to pick up a cultist's corpse, which was hacked in half mid-air, then the fierce wind corroded the body, spilling crimson blood onto the ground.

Thanks to Bologue's violent actions, the place was piled with fresh corpses, when Palmer was on alert, cutting one corpse after another, a large amount of fresh blood was slapped onto the walls by the gust.

The already sinister crimson church now became even more eerie, the red rain scattered until a few drops of blood remained suspended in the air, unable to descend.

"Found you!"

Palmer happily shouted, pulling the trigger, thunderous sound erupted.

The large-caliber projectile was driven by gunpowder, the wind instantly shifted as if an invisible air wall slammed towards the assassin.

Secret Energy·Wind Source lacked direct destructive power, but like Secret Energy·Summoning Hand, it was highly extensible with great potential extending to different subfields.

The incoming fierce wind made it hard for those inside to breathe, and it blew eyes too shut to open, even if overcoming all this, the wind dragged debris across the ground, causing the enemy's vision to become chaotic, making it difficult to detect the projectile's trajectory.

The assassin swiftly shifted his position, realizing Palmer's intent as blood adhered to his body.

The bullet struck the wall behind, creating a crater, imagining the damage if that projectile hit flesh.

The assassin thought he was safe, but another gunshot followed immediately, tracking his steps.

He tried to see Palmer's figure, but he was the core of this hurricane, thousands of blood droplets and debris swirling around him, and now the previously invisible wind was given tangible form by this debris.

Subsequently, the gun barrel once again aimed at him.

The assassin understood why he was exposed, the surrounding violent wind gained a tangible form, and in Palmer's eyes, a volumetric object appeared cutting through the drifting blood droplets and debris.

"Being born into a great family has its advantages!"

Palmer shouted as he pulled the trigger for the third time, and thunder erupted.

As the heir of the Clarks, ever since Palmer implanted the Secret Energy·Wind Source, he underwent extensive training specific to Secret Energy·Wind Source.

From the inception of the Clarks, they have been entrenched in the Wind Source Highlands, chasing the howling winds. The Secret Energy·Wind Source has been passed down from then to now, with each generation of the Clarks documenting their experiences with the Secret Energy·Wind Source to educate future generations.

Thus, during his training, Palmer became adept at using the Secret Energy·Wind Source to combat different types of enemies.

The third bullet grazed the assassin, slicing his skin and drawing a large amount of blood. It also briefly flickered his own secret energy, a faint silhouette appearing amidst the gale.

Palmer frowned. It was clear the assassin knew he couldn't kill Palmer, and he was preparing to change positions. The most troublesome part was that this guy was much faster than Palmer anticipated. Even though he suppressed the assassin, his gunfire couldn't land a hit.

He decisively made up his mind, stepping forward to close the distance between himself and the assassin, aiming his revolver at the rapidly moving figure.

Suddenly, the assassin turned. He was originally planning to escape through the door, but abruptly he turned back, raising his hand crossbow, and their gazes intersected.

Releasing a cold arrow and pulling the trigger.

The two actions intersected and then separated. The cold arrow whistled past Palmer's ear, severing a few strands of hair, and blood blossomed on the assassin's shoulder. The projectile didn't hit completely, only grazing him, yet it still drew a large amount of blood.

"Looks like luck is on my side today."

Palmer said nonchalantly, though he felt a slight panic inside. If luck hadn't been with him just now, that cold arrow might have embedded itself in his chest.

The cylinder rotated, and the fifth bullet was in position.

The assassin realized he was outmatched and stopped making any counterattacks. At this point, he was very close to the door. With his speed, Palmer's gunfire was unlikely to hit, but suddenly he heard a slight unusual sound.

Amidst the sonata of the gale, there was a hint of discordant tone, which then became high-pitched and piercing, flashing past his side.

The assassin's figure tilted, uncontrollably falling to the ground. He didn't understand what had happened, and then he saw his severed tendon and the blood-stained flying knife embedded in the ground.

When did that happen?

The assassin didn't understand, but soon recalled the moment the gale roared, limiting his vision. From that moment, this flying knife had stealthily lurked within the wind.

The fifth gunshot rang out, and the assassin was struck as if by an invisible heavy punch. After a brief shudder, the bullet pierced through his body, breaking through.

He rolled several times on the ground, seemingly dead, and the glow of the Alchemy Matrix dimmed along with him.

One more bullet remained in the revolver, the expensive Alchemy Warhead.

It seemed Palmer had saved this bullet, but his expression was not relaxed. Recalling his earlier judgments about these cultists, he sensed that this was far from over.

Approaching the corpse cautiously, Palmer kept his gun raised, the muzzle aimed at the head of the corpse. Even without the Alchemy Warhead, the revolver's power was enough to turn his head into a bloody mist.

A hint of mania swirled around the corpse, unseen in other cultists. Palmer could even faintly hear the sound of flesh writhing.

In the next moment, the assassin suddenly sprang up. Palmer should have pulled the trigger, but thinking of how it was essentially half a month's wages, he grimaced and, with sheer determination, used the gun butt to bash the assassin's head, making it bleed profusely.

The assassin drew a sharp short knife, and Palmer swung his folding knife. Metal collided, sending forth a shower of sparks.

During the engagement, the sense of mania became increasingly clear. At that moment, Palmer clearly saw the assassin actually consuming something. He was gnawing on crimson flesh, which he had bitten off from the corpse beneath him when he fell.

The flesh seemed to be a delicacy to him, and as he ate, his own injuries began to heal rapidly, even the fatal wounds eased.

This phenomenon strengthened Palmer's suspicion that he truly encountered those bastards from the Cult of Decay.

Before he could curse, the assassin advanced with his knife. But then, a booming vibration occurred, causing the entire church to tremble. The ceiling collapsed, massive bricks falling.

Their battle momentarily paused, no words were needed. Palmer kicked at the assassin's chest, catching him by surprise and flipping him to the ground. By the time the assassin rose, Palmer had disappeared without a trace, and the heavy bricks fell, completely burying the assassin.

As the billowing dust dispersed, Bologue stood atop the ruins, beneath his feet a Howling Bear pierced completely by silver nails.

Chapter 232: The Sect of Rotting Orangutans

Secret Energy-Summoning Hand is indeed quite convenient; not only can it easily dismantle walls and barriers, but it can also quickly clear debris. When Bologue moved the rubble, the unlucky assassin had already been crushed into a pulp, even if he could restore his body by consuming flesh and blood, he now lacked a complete mouth to chew.

As for Belli, he was somewhat lucky, the nature of his Secret Energy allowed him to survive Bologue's violent hammering, besides being in a poor state, everything was relatively normal... perhaps.

The church's ceiling collapsed, creating a large hole underneath with a pile of bricks and stones. Dim light fell down, illuminating Belli's blood-stained body. His eyes were dazed, devoid of any resistance.

It wasn't that he didn't want to resist; it was just that the eerie silver nails happened to pierce every joint, hindering his movement. The most fatal part was that Belli vaguely sensed these silver nails were alive.

This saying is somewhat strange, but in Belli's perception, it truly was so. These silver metallic nails, like seeds with life, began expanding once embedded in his body, metal roots firmly digging into the flesh, wrapping around his organs, wandering beside the blood vessels.

Nothing could be seen from the outside, but inside Belli's body, metal rampaged through him, and as soon as Bologue gave the order, it could grind his organs into blood stains. Despite having a physique as strong as a beast, he could not resist the Sharp Sword from within.

This feeling was like being broken through the Rectangular Soul Critical, only Belli's protection was broken in his flesh, placing his life entirely in Bologue's hands.

Now, only Bologue and Belli were in the church. Palmer had been sent by Bologue to search the church for any escaped fish or suspicious items, and to call the Logistics Department to handle the battlefield.

Bologue could already imagine the resentful expressions of the Ferryman; not long ago, they had just taken the subway to Qiushang Town together, and not long after separating, he ambushed this wicked ritual.

Bologue felt he should be glad, for from now on, all the headaches would be handled by the people in the Logistics Department.

Moving to one side, Bologue laboriously found a somewhat intact chair and sat it in front of Belli, responsible for guarding this Condenser and, incidentally, interrogating some matters.

"Anything you want to say?"

Bologue surrounded by dim radiance, his Secret Energy still in activation, strange silver threads extending from his sleeve, connected to the silver nails on Belli.

Belli remained silent, simply glaring at Bologue with reddened eyes, a beast-like growl lingering in his throat.

"Hmm? I know you cultists don't particularly fear things like death, after all, you yourselves are a bunch of lunatics serving those aberrant beings."

Bologue wasn't clear if the gods truly existed in the world, but what was certain was the Demon did exist, albeit with different names in different people's eyes.

Just like these cultists view the Demon as their god to serve.

But soon Bologue would make him understand, there are many things in this world more terrifying than death, they just had never ventured into them.

Raising his hand, making a fist gesture, in an instant, the silver nails pierced into Belli moved further, even losing their solid form, turning into a deadly snake devouring his flesh, traveling within.

This unprecedented eerie sensation rapidly heightened the terror in Belli's heart, amidst piercing pain, deadly snakes coiled around his bones, wandered between vital organs, even touching his heart.

After obtaining the Deceitful Snake Scale Liquid, Bologue imagined several ways of using it, the current scene being one.

As merely a Condenser, Bologue couldn't break through others' Rectangular Soul Criticals, yet could use this method to break free of the flesh's constraints, as long as maintaining the connection with the Deceitful Snake Scale Liquid, the Summoning Hand could willfully twist these deceitful snakes.

While the body conveyed abnormal sensations, Bologue didn't forget to lean closer to Belli, pressing another hand against his face, forcefully squeezing the skin, causing Belli's eyes to uncontrollably open, pupils visible through the fingers.

"What do you worship these things for?" Bologue inquired in confusion, "Having known a certain death fate, do they pin hopes on the world post-death?"

Saying this, Bologue's voice sounded more puzzled and confused, he mocked.

"What awaits you should be Hell, right?"

With the injection of Ether, the eerie terrifying mask also came to life, Face of Horror twisting into the most frenzied visage in this world, reflecting in Belli's eyes, he tried to avert his gaze, close his eyes, yet failed, only able to helplessly watch it unfold.

Bologue wasn't clear what Belli saw under Face of Horror's influence, yet when he stopped the Ether injection, calming Face of Horror, this fanatical cultist's eyes were vacant, looking like he lost his mind, akin to a dead corpse.

This caused Bologue to feel a bit troubled, through several jobs he realized Face of Horror was fitting for interrogation, but varied enemy types yielded differing interrogation results.

Like Jello, the second-hand dealer easily revealed his secrets with a slight force, whereas stubborn cultists like Belli required increased dosage, but once overdosed would result in the current situation.

Unclear whether his consciousness crashed into collapse or temporarily fainted, now Belli showed no response to Bologue.

This didn't make Bologue relax his vigilance, as a Debtor, he could sharply sense the insane intention and corrupt breath emanating from Belli.

It seemed Belli was also a Debtor, granted a Blessing from the Demon; yet, it seemed the Demon had little regard for him, as the blessing given was extremely sparse.

"Devil?"

Bologue judged by instinct.

He had killed many Demons, but most of them were ordinary people who had transformed. This was the first time Bologue encountered a Condenser turned into a Demon.

Condensers could also mutate into Demons, but as their souls were fully traded away, their Alchemy Matrix could no longer grow, thus these Condensers could never advance, forever frozen at this Tier One stage.

Bologue judged this was the source of the corruption emanating from Belli, but what was the story behind his bizarre self-healing ability?

Palmer should know about these things, as my partner has deep ties with the cultists, but just as Bologue was about to call for Palmer, he remembered Palmer wasn't there.

Without the establishment of the Heart Core Net, the communication range of the Whistle was extremely limited. Bologue called out a few times but received no response; Palmer must have completed his search, left the cathedral area, and gone to call the Logistics Department.

Turning his gaze back to Belli lying before him, Bologue quickly searched his body and found a small booklet, filled with aberrant writings.

Bologue's expression grew solemn. Amidst the mad ramblings, there were countless words of praise, yet he managed to find some useful clues within the nonsensical text.

"The employee manual never mentioned these things..."

Bologue whispered, discarding the booklet, looking at the unconscious Belli, he clenched his fist again.

The Deceitful Snake Scales lurking within his body surged violently, wrenching pain tore through every nerve in Belli, his eyes widened, his face flushed, veins bulging.

His entire body curled up as he vomited blood, bright red intermixed with strands of Silver Threads.

"Who are you?" Bologue asked coldly.

Belli didn't respond, but soon the maddening hallucinations flashed before him, intertwining with the pain, utterly crushing his sanity.

"The Scarlet Corruption Sect."

Belli groaned in agony. This term wasn't unfamiliar to Bologue; he had already seen it in the booklet he found on Belli.

You could say, Bologue had already acquired the information he needed from that booklet, but more than cold ink, he wanted to hear it straight from Belli's mouth, to verify the truth of the information.

"Who are you?" Bologue continued to question.

"Belli...is a Carnivore."

Belli spoke with dull, empty eyes and a voice void of emotion, his remaining consciousness crushed and shattered.

Carnivore? Not a Condenser... Could this be an internal rank division within the Scarlet Corruption Sect?

"Then...who is the Mistress of Gluttony?"

The most frequently appeared term in the booklet was this Mistress of Gluttony. It seemed to be the god worshipped by the Scarlet Corruption Sect, yet this god had no name, only an honorary title, as if speaking its true name was forbidden, only to be referenced by this epithet.

There were no gods in this world, only cruel, heartless Devils, masquerading as false gods.

Bologue was well aware of this; this Mistress of Gluttony was a Devil, but which Devil was it? Could it be the same Devil that took his soul?

Facing Bologue's pressing questions, Belli's body couldn't help but shake, as if a fear beyond all else had descended upon him, large amounts of blood seeped from his wounds, pooling into a wide bloodstain beneath him.

"No...names have Magic Power, we are not prepared for the sacrifice."

Belli muttered frantically, refusing to reveal any secrets about It.

But Bologue lowered his head, looking at the blood pooled like a mirror, vaguely seeing something entwining around him.

It was a umbilical cord, bloody as intestines, a dripping umbilical cord.

The sense of eeriness appeared once more, just like when he first read the "Devil and Electric Guitar Operation Guide," that chilling sensation of being watched reemerged.

In the mirrored blood pool, Bologue's face reflected—and soon his visage shattered into countless fragments, reflecting in the massive compound eye emerging from beneath the blood.

A voice whispered; It was beside him, guiding him to speak its true name.

"Gluttonous...Beelzebub."

In the hopeless eyes of Belli, Bologue involuntarily uttered the name, and then a woman's soft laughter resonated, pale, grasping limbs crossed the blood mirror, bridging the gap between illusion and reality.

Chapter 233: Umbilical Cord

In the "Devil and Electric Guitar Operation Guide" written by Nesanel, this mysterious and powerful deputy chief has mentioned the importance of names more than once.

Names have magic power.

By writing both human and devil names on that forbidden blood contract, precious souls can change owners.

"If you want to summon a devil, first, you need to know its name."

In a trance, Nesanel's whispers lingered by the ears, then shattered by pale limbs, which stretched out from a thin pool of blood, as though this blood connected to another space.

He heard the name Bologue called, thus finding his position in the darkness.

The fury of madness surged to the extreme, and the rational world gradually fell into collapse, everything in sight seemed to possess life force, slowly writhing like flesh.

The terrifying pressure almost made Bologue unable to breathe, as if an invisible giant hand was choking his throat.

An ear-piercing scream erupted from Belli's throat, he shouted.

"It shouldn't be like this... everything should have ended!"

Bologue attacked the ritual, all preparations went to waste, logically speaking, the ritual should have been interrupted, but now it started running again.

This... this seems unrelated to the ritual.

Belli looked at Bologue with red eyes, the light on Bologue's surface surged, bizarre silver liquid overflowed, enveloping Bologue's body and solidifying into strong metal.

Tiny pains released from Belli's body, he saw countless silver snakes struggling to escape his body, all rushing towards Bologue, merging with the silver Iron Armor.

"It's you!"

Belli roared loudly, his twisted face filled with madness.

He heard such words inside the sect, some people at some opportune moments, merely whispering their names can easily summon their arrival.

But everything has a price.

Bologue wasn't crazy like Belli, he remained calm, composedly dealing with everything before him, pale limbs squeezed stretching out from the mirror-surface of the blood pool, pounding the walls and destroying the ground while wildly dancing.

Colliding with the Iron Armor, the metal surface instantly caved in, Bologue fiercely rammed into the pile of benches in the corner, and the limbs didn't continue attacking, but instead rolled up Belli.

In Belli's wailing, the limb easily twisted Belli's body, flesh did not fall but firmly adhered to the surface of the limb.

Strange chewing sounds arose.

The surface of the limb wasn't smooth and flat skin but countless, squeezed together, almost indistinguishable, barnacle-like tissues that split open with the blood's soaking, revealing small mouthparts that hungrily gnawed at flesh.

Corresponding with the name of gluttony.

In the blink of an eye, Belli was devoured clean, not a trace of residue remained, as if he never existed. If not for Bologue interfering with the ritual's progress, maybe now the one being eaten would have been the unfortunate Bane.

After devouring Belli, the limb still remained unsatisfied; accurately speaking, from its very birth, it didn't know what satisfaction was.

The end of the limb split open, a huge compound eye emerged amidst the blood, it gazed at Bologue, then let out a woman's soft laughter.

Bologue knew clearly; the next one was himself.

Even experts couldn't predict such a scenario; Bologue could only attribute everything to his own umbilical cord.

The devil that took his soul valued him exceptionally, gaining the Undying Body while the connection with the devil became incredibly deep.

It was this deep connection that allowed Bologue to ignore the ritual's absence, and thus summon this bizarre existence; also due to this nightmare curse, Bologue fell into such a predicament.

Should he surrender?

Bologue is an Undead, but facing this bizarre devil, no one knows what might happen; even an Undying Body might be imprisoned, and he didn't want to experience the Black Prison again.

Blood surged, almost filling the entire church; the limb struck again, aiming to devour the room's only life.

Bologue struggled to move his body under the severe pressure; for ordinary people, facing this maddening oppression, few would be able to resist, yet using Face of Horror more had accustomed Bologue to act under such pressure.

Palmer often said, Bologue was like a horror film enthusiast; seeing weird things more often led even his brain to become distorted.

Slinging the hook rope, embedded into the broken ceiling overhead, Bologue soared into the air, avoiding the limb's grasp.

According to these cultists' thoughts, he should have summoned the devil, but unlike the Tyrant, who bore reason and carried some grace, the devil before him was evidently more violent, like a beast acting purely on instinct.

Or maybe what he saw was not the true devil, merely an illusory incarnation? Or a manifestation of power.

No... it's not like this.

Transaction and cost.

The frenzied attack of the tentacle is actually demanding its due. It is so furious because the madman Bologue who summoned it now refuses to pay the cost of flesh.

"I didn't sign anything!"

After realizing this, Bologue shouted and called out to the ceiling. The bricks collapsed and turned into a giant sword, crashing onto the tentacle and bursting into flying dust.

The dust stirred, something was coming, and then countless threads of blood pierced through the dust, the gentle liquid turning into scarlet thorns, whipping towards Bologue.

There was no space to evade mid-air; the Deceitful Snake Scale Liquid fully unfolded, silver-white metal continuously proliferating, enveloping Bologue in heavy armor.

Blinding sparks erupted as Bologue slammed into the ground, the armor shattered, leaving half his body a bloody mess.

Blood filled his throat; the opponent was far stronger than Bologue had imagined, rendering him powerless with just one strike. The excruciating pain invaded his nerves, his body gradually numb, even struggling to maintain the output of Ether. The crumbling Iron Armor dissolved into scattered mercury, spilling everywhere.

The tentacle slowly approached, scarlet thorns entwining, Bologue could clearly see the tiny barnacles opening their mouths on the surface of the tentacle, ready to feast on his less-than-pleasant flesh.

Suddenly, the tentacle's movement halted, then in Bologue's eyes, it lost its blood color, turned into an eerie gray-white, and then collapsed.

Ritual... is it over?

In Bologue's doubt, the tentacle disintegrated and annihilated, turning into large smears of dust and dispersed. It was only then that Bologue noticed that the bodies piled on the ground, the blood-drawn patterns had all disappeared, along with the tentacle.

Everything disappeared; it seemed that every moment of the tentacle's existence rapidly consumed this flesh, and at the moment the flesh was completely consumed, the ritual was completely ended.

Bologue was stunned for a few seconds, relieved at the end of it all. He staggered to his feet, with injuries rapidly healing, the scattered mercury reassembled, crawling back onto Bologue.

Aside from the remaining madness, Bologue now distinctly felt another anomaly; he thought the intense pain caused him to lose control over the Deceitful Snake Scale Liquid, but now it seemed, that wasn't the case.

He could clearly feel the Ether around had thinned considerably, as if the tentacle not only gnawed on flesh but also constantly devoured the scattered Ether, and when he was struck heavily, it managed to breach his Rectangular Soul Critical in a bizarre way, eroding his Ether, causing the Alchemy Armament to go out of control.

"Really crazy..."

Bologue said with a touch of fear.

After taking a few steps forward, Bologue saw the booklet fallen on the ground, picked it up, and opened the pages, its text clearly reflected in his eyes.

After a while, Bologue lifted his head again, looking at the collapsed ruins, he now only wanted to escape from this eerie place.

Complex matters should be handled by professionals, which is why this world needs experts.

Bologue was adept at killing enemies, but faced with this bizarre evil ritual, his experience was somewhat lacking. This kind of thing should be handed over to the Ninth Group, remember the Ninth Group is specifically responsible for dealing with these evil rituals.

With thoughts slightly relieved, Bologue was about to leave this ghostly place, but suddenly felt a cold, clammy touch on the back of his neck, then extending to his throat, a scent wafted in, accompanied by lazy moans, as if a woman who had just bathed embraced him with a body full of steam.

Bologue couldn't move, it seemed his entire body was frozen.

"You have an odd scent about you."

A light voice lingered by his ear, the woman embraced him from behind, her pale hands extending along Bologue's collar, reaching inside his clothes, touching his chest.

Cold sweat dripped into his eyes, yet Bologue kept his eyes wide open, staring into the void ahead.

"I've remembered you."

This should have been a statement of hatred, but the woman spoke as if she was flirting with Bologue.

The woman disappeared.

Bologue stood stiffly in place until the madness completely dissipated. Then, he abruptly knelt, hands supporting the ground, with large drops of sweat dripping and heavy panting continuously echoing.

Overwhelming pain surged from his chest, which was beyond the tolerance of willpower. Bologue's body began to convulse as he struggled on the ground.

Frantically reaching out, he tore open his clothes, exposing his chest, vainly attempting to cool the flesh that felt as if it was burning.

After some time, Bologue gradually calmed down from this extreme state, leaning against the broken walls to support himself up.

Looking down, only to see a shallow handprint at the heart's position, eternally engraved like a scar there, even the Undying Body could not heal it.

Bologue slowly lifted his head, his gaze pierced through the ruined building, towards the chaotic gray-white overhead.

He recalled the woman's voice, her scent, and... her name.

Chapter 234: Atheist

When Palmer returned to the church, everything was over. The church was teetering, crumbling bricks smashing the deity statue, and Bologue sat beneath the ruins with a gloomy expression.

In fact, from the Devil's arrival to its departure, it was not even a few minutes, yet the horrific pressure and ominous feeling made Bologue's perception of time infinitely sluggish.

The pain in his chest gradually subsided, but the handprint showed no signs of fading. This was the first time since Bologue became a Debtor that he encountered such an unhealable injury.

This might not be an injury but a curse, an irremovable curse.

"What happened?"

Palmer, who had returned, questioned Bologue. He hadn't been gone long, yet it seemed like a great battle had taken place here, and judging by his partner's state, Bologue seemed to have lost.

Belli?

Palmer wondered, trying to find Belli's body, but he noticed that the corpses previously piled in the church, the blood-colored drawings, and other flesh-stained objects had all disappeared without a trace.

Palmer realized the issue and looked at Bologue with a serious expression.

"Was the ritual successful?"

It shouldn't have been possible. He and Bologue had saved Bane, the human sacrifice, and slaughtered all the cultists, sending them to Hell. The ritual should have been stopped.

"The ritual didn't succeed... it was just that the Devil found its way here on its own."

Bologue responded. He still remembered that mysterious feeling, a voice tempting him from within, prompting him to call out that name, allowing the Devil to see his figure amidst the void.

The feeling was terrible.

Bologue picked up the booklet in his hand, evidence proving what he saw wasn't an illusion. From Belli's words and the booklet's description, Bologue had roughly understood the existence of the Vermilion Corrosion Sect.

This was an evil cult worshipping the Devil, serving a devil named "Gluttonous Beelzebub."

If Bologue guessed correctly, the ethereal woman who left a handprint on his chest was that Devil. The reason she remembered him might be related to him disturbing her ritual.

No... that's not it.

There are many Extraordinary Organizations in this world, and most of them maintain a hostile attitude towards the Devil. In the Order Bureau's records, a long time ago, the Order Bureau even joined forces with the King's Secret Sword to destroy the cultists' ritual, showing the vigilance people have towards the Devil.

Bologue felt that the woman wasn't someone petty. She wouldn't oppose everyone who disturbed her ritual. The reason she targeted him might be his special identity.

"I am looking for someone, been searching for a long, long time."

The Tyrant's words echoed in his ears. From the Tyrant's attitude towards him, it could be felt that, in the eyes of the Devils, he was also a relatively special existence.

"A strange scent."

The woman also mentioned a so-called "scent," and the Tyrant had said something similar before. Bologue had a scent familiar to the Tyrant, but he was sure he wasn't that person.

Bologue felt a bit of a headache. Excluding the Devil who took his soul, he had already encountered two Devils and wasn't sure if he was lucky or unlucky.

"Do you know about the Vermilion Corrosion Sect, Palmer?" Bologue asked.

"The Vermilion Corrosion Sect? An old acquaintance," Palmer came over and responded to Bologue's inquiry.

Bologue looked up to see Palmer with a bitter smile.

"Could it be such a coincidence?" Bologue said.

"It's fate, or perhaps... bad luck!"

Palmer loudly complained, then sat beside Bologue, his voice slowly resounding.

"I talked to you about how I became a Debtor, right?" Palmer asked.

"I know, you stumbled into an evil ritual site but managed to seize the ritual and made a deal with the Devil," Bologue guessed. "Could it be the ritual site you encountered was related to the Vermilion Corrosion Sect?"

"You guessed right, but unfortunately, there's no reward." Palmer nodded in affirmation.

So it was indeed like this, and for a moment, Bologue didn't know what to say. Palmer then continued.

"Logically speaking, Opus... no, the entire Great Rift is the Forbidden Land for the Vermilion Corrosion Sect. The Order Bureau can tolerate the King's Secret Sword intruding into Opus but would never allow the Vermilion Corrosion Sect near the Great Rift."

Palmer talked about the Order Bureau's trivial matters. Bologue, who wasn't long in the job, didn't know much about these things.

"I don't understand why the Order Bureau's attitude is so firm, but at least in Opus, I've never seen anyone from the Vermilion Corrosion Sect, nor have I encountered anything related to them, so I didn't think it was those lunatics at first."

"Why is it forbidden for them to enter the Great Rift?" Bologue asked.

"I don't know about that. We're just Condensers, our knowledge is quite limited. But Lebius and the others should understand why, right?"

Palmer didn't continue this conversation but turned to Bologue and asked him.

"Then what? The Devil arrived in reality; what happened next?"

Bologue told Palmer truthfully about what happened next: the tendrils devoured Belli, the appearance of the woman, and the handprint on Bologue's chest.

Judging by the connection to the umbilical cord, Palmer should have a deeper link with the woman, yet she targeted him, which made him feel uneasy.

"Do you have any ideas?" Bologue buttoned up his coat, covering his chest.

"No ideas," Palmer shook his head, "I don't know much about the Devil either. More information will be revealed to us once we advance to Prayer Believers."

"And then there's the Putrid Sect..."

Palmer was about to tell Bologue about his understanding of the Putrid Sect and the eighth Sect of Secret Energy, which had been deliberately forgotten and hidden.

The surge of Ether interrupted Palmer's words, both reacted instantly and looked alertly toward one corner of the ruins, where a shaky door stood, the panel and frame barely maintaining the "door" stance.

Dense light trails appeared out of nowhere on the surface of the door panel, intertwining and twisting together to form a vortex of engulfing waves.

A sudden sense of familiarity hit Bologue's mind; he recognized this pattern in the vortex roaring in the door...

The solitary standing door was pushed open, behind it connected not to Qiushang Town but to another void space, oppressive breathing sounds came from behind the door, as if hungry hounds were ready to break free.

Before Bologue and Palmer could say anything, a storm was stirred among the ruins by the Ether, it was called forth, making the surrounding thin Ether rich again.

As Bologue summoned the Deceitful Snake Scale Liquid, forging his Iron Armor to protect himself, one silhouette after another appeared in front of the radiant door.

They just appeared out of nowhere, like an army descending from the sky.

The newcomers' eyes swirled with bright light, their bodies clad in armor resembling Protective Clothing, some wielded knives and swords, others held rifles, each exuding a murderous aura, Ether surged, Secret Energy ready to burst forth, seeming prepared to tear the two apart alive at any moment.

Bologue was somewhat confused by the current situation; he recognized the pattern on the door but was unsure whether the opposing identities were friend or foe. Palmer, however, had reacted, seeing the markings on these people's attire.

On the white Protective Clothing was a symbol of authority representing divine power, but that authority was circled by dark graffiti and marked with a hefty X, denying it.

"Brothers of the Ninth Group!"

Palmer put down his weapon, raised his hands, and shouted hoarsely.

"Our own! Spare our lives!"

Under Palmer's howl, the Ninth Group's rising murderous aura paused, and each felt a sense of absurdity at having witnessed a ghost; they've raided so many ritual sites, yet this was a first.

But it only made them hesitate for a moment; according to the Ninth Group's operational regulations, they never listen to cultist nonsense, always executing immediately, especially when involved with the Great Rift.

Just as they were about to open fire and gun the two down, the leading man suddenly raised his hand, stopping the action.

The man removed his helmet; he was of similar age to Lebius, but from appearances, he looked much more fierce than Lebius, his face covered with scars, the most striking one ran from the corner of his mouth.

Due to this scar, the man's gums slightly showed, giving his appearance an extremely fierce look.

"I remember him, the unlucky guy from the Clarks."

Looking at Palmer, man spoke, which sounded humiliating, but Palmer couldn't believe that such a nickname had saved his life.

"Yes, that's me! Palmer from the Field Operations Department Special Operations Group," Palmer forcefully patted Bologue's shoulder, his voice panicked, "This is my partner Bologue."

"Special Operations Group, consisting of Debtors? No wonder they stink."

The man didn't hold back his disdain for Debtors, but even with such words, others didn't lower their weapons, as if even as colleagues, at the man's command, they would swarm and chop the two Debtors into pieces.

"You arrived first, and resolved the situation here?"

Said the man as he glanced at the chapel, the ruins not showing any trace of blood, as the woman took all the flesh and blood when she left.

"Ah... is that so?"

Their headstart on the mission displeased the man greatly, his gloomy gaze briefly scanning around; he looked at Bologue and Palmer who had stood up, and reported his name.

"Captain of the Ninth Group, Carnegie Dunbar."

It was Bologue's first meeting with Carnegie, but he had long since understood their identities.

The Ninth Group, responsible for handling events related to devil worship and similar, with the code name, Atheists.

Chapter 235: Contract School

Within the Field Operations Department, there are many action groups, each responsible for different specific matters. For instance, the Violence Suppression Action Group led by Yas is responsible for numerous extraordinary emergencies, and all its members are Condensers from the Origin School, highly adept at countering other Condensers.

Then there's the Third Group, Wall-Breaking Blade, which handles unknown Void Realm incidents. Every member is not only outstanding in combat but also experts in the Void Realm, extremely skilled at resolving spatial anomalies brought by the Void Realm.

Under Nesanel's arrangement, the significance of the Special Operations Group lies in utilizing the connection between Debtors and Devils, continuously digging out intelligence about Devils to understand these mysterious enemies.

From this perspective, Bologue and Palmer are undercover scouts arranged by Nesanel within the Devils, while the Ninth Group is Nesanel's most sharp Blade against the Devils.

In this world, there are many madmen who worship Devils, giving rise to numerous bizarre sects. To keep the world rational and prevent it from being dragged into madness by these people, the Ninth Group was established. They are responsible for hunting down these cultists, denying these false deities.

The Ninth Group's work involves Devils. These mysterious entities are best at deluding hearts, causing destruction from within.

For this, the members of the Ninth Group are strictly selected, each a staunch atheist, possessing high priority within the Field Operations Department.

Bologue and Palmer sit obediently to the side, like innocent civilians wounded, while the personnel from the Ninth Group are busy investigating the scene. Beyond them are people from the Logistics Department, who received Palmer's information to handle the scene, only for the Ninth Group to shut them out, saying they had to wait until the inspection was complete, for the Ferryman to handle it.

The reputation of the Ninth Group seems poor, with Ferryman waiting outside, each face full of resentment, but unable to say anything about these people.

"It seems they knew about this ritual, just arrived late." Palmer mumbled, looking at these people.

"No... They didn't know as early as we did," Bologue denied Palmer's guess, looking at the wooden door used by the Ninth Group when they arrived, "Such a sudden appearance can probably only be used in emergency situations, more like they detected what happened here and made a hurried assault."

Early on, when using the Key of the Crooked Path, Bologue wondered if there was a power that could allow rapid long-distance movement, not limited like the Key of the Crooked Path, truly allowing one to reach wherever they want.

It seems such power exists, but he has not yet touched the ability.

"So... Palmer, these people gained their power through Contractors forming contracts with Devils?" Suddenly, Bologue asked.

Palmer thought he had misheard, looking suspiciously at Bologue, only to hear him continue.

"I know this intelligence isn't open to us, don't bother asking how I know," Bologue continued, "Anyway, is it like this, right?"

"Really surprising."

Palmer quickly accepted the situation; after all, Bologue is an expert, no surprise he knows something.

"Correct, you can understand the Carnivore Sect as a group forming contracts through Contractors with Devils. They worship Devils, who grant them Protection after collecting appropriate sacrifices."

Recalling the strange Recovery Power of the person he faced with, Palmer continued.

"The devil worshipped by the Carnivore Sect, the Protection granted is 'Bloodthirsty Healing,' selling souls through Contractors to gain the ability to devour flesh and blood to heal oneself, even attaining near immortality, an undying body."

"Sounds like Debtors." Bologue said.

"It's different. As Debtors, we are seen as honored by the Devils. They, on the other hand, are merely humble entities begging for the Devils' favor." Palmer's voice even had a touch of pride.

Bologue felt no pride in this, on the contrary, immense pressure.

The Secret Energy School has eight types, but most Condensers only know the first seven, unaware of the existence of the eighth. The reasons are simple, its existence has been deliberately erased, only those at a certain Tier can know its secrets.

Ordinary Condensers cannot possibly know of it; Palmer, as the heir of the Clarks family, received elite education since childhood, knowing these is natural. Bologue learned of the Secret Energy School's eighth intelligence through a gift from Nesanel.

The book "Devil and Electric Guitar Operation Guide."

Ordinary people can only see the Electric Guitar Operation Guide when flipping through that book, but when Bologue, a Debtor deeply connected to the Devils, touches it, the intelligence related to Devils opens up.

The eighth Secret Energy School is called the "Contract School." It does not possess direct power like other Secret Energies; the main strength of the Contract School is communication with Devils, borrowing their power, using their mighty, binding Power of Contract, to establish contracts between different consciousness.

It is said the ritual of the Rhine Alliance and Kagader Empire swearing vows on the wasteland was hosted by Contractors, with Devils as witnesses, binding these two giants with the Power of Contract, thus preventing the rekindling of war in subsequent days.

This was a positive use of the Power of Contract, but the Contract School is ultimately too close to Devils. Many Contractors became obsessed with the power of Devils, eventually offering their souls to them.

Since then, the Contract School has been categorized as forbidden. They remain active but hide beneath the ice, with few knowing their whereabouts.

"What we're dealing with is the Carnivore, a Tier within the Ape rot Sect, which corresponds to the Condenser," Palmer added.

Footsteps sounded, a tall shadow shading the two of them, Carnegie came over. This Ninth Group leader, like Bologue, always wore a stern face, though Bologue didn't have quite as many scars.

With the added scars, Carnegie carried with him a palpable hostility, as if he was always in the calm before the storm.

"You were the ones who experienced it firsthand. Talk to me about what happened here."

Bologue and Palmer glanced at each other. It was clear who was in charge between them, then Bologue stood up and began recounting the events to Carnegie.

From the sensing of the umbilical cord to the ambush ceremony, Bologue said everything he knew, except for the part where he had actually summoned the Devil.

It wasn't that he felt the need to hide anything; from a safety standpoint, Bologue decided to tell Nesanel about it personally.

Bologue gradually realized his own peculiarity, even if the ceremony was interrupted, he could still summon the Devil by calling its true name. Who knows if speaking of these things here would cause that woman to appear again.

If Nesanel were here, having a Seeker of Glory around made talking about these sinister secrets unexpectedly comforting, after all, if the sky falls, there's a deputy director to hold it up.

Carnegie furrowed his brow, after hearing Bologue's recount, he said nothing, but instead looked around worriedly, seemingly more concerned over something else than the Ape rot Sect.

"You're the leader of the Ninth Group, in charge of all matters related to the Devil, you should know a lot about the Devil, right?" Bologue asked.

Carnegie couldn't be bothered to reply to Bologue. Other team members were surveying the area, some still clearing the ruins left by the battle, trying to find something useful.

"Gluttonous..."

Suddenly, Bologue's voice rang out. These unprovoked words raised Carnegie's vigilance, he looked fiercely at Bologue, who was smiling as he held a booklet obtained from Belli.

Bologue didn't continue speaking, he simply wanted to gauge Carnegie's reaction.

"I have a friend who's a devout Cultist, she always tells me about humanity's Original Sin... Gluttony is one of them."

Bologue was striving to dig out those hidden secrets, things not recorded in the "Devil and Electric Guitar Operation Guide," possibly not written by Nesanel.

With Nesanel's lively personality, he certainly hadn't reviewed it properly when writing, so the intelligence Bologue gathered was fragmented, often needing to extract relevant information from others to piece together the whole.

There are no gods in this world, but the Devil truly exists. Maybe the earliest doctrines were extended from the Devil, except some chose to fall, while others denied the Devil and fabricated gods of Glory to scorn the Devil's existence.

Some hold these secrets tightly. To know more, one must find ways to climb higher.

"If you weren't part of the Special Operations Group, I should arrest and detain you all on the spot, even if you are my colleagues."

Carnegie lowered his voice as if discussing some sort of forbidden secrets.

"Oh? Seems like I guessed right."

Bologue remained calm; an expert couldn't show panic.

"Your words sound like the style of the Inquisition hundreds of years ago, all who touch forbidden knowledge shall face the flames," Bologue commented.

"If this maintains world stability, I wouldn't mind others calling me that," Carnegie ultimately didn't do anything out of line. "Human will isn't reliable, no one knows if your resolute allies will be swayed by the Devil at a crucial moment."

"So you try to isolate knowledge of the Devil as much as possible? Don't know, then don't exist, don't exist, then won't be swayed," Bologue thought this was self-deception.

"Anyway, this has nothing to do with you Debtors, you're already swayed, and the Devil holds you in high regard."

Carnegie did not hide his disdain for the Debtors.

"Then... everything that needed explaining has been explained. Can we leave?"

Palmer said inappropriately, checking his watch before speaking to Bologue.

"We're almost late."

Chapter 236: Favored

After another round of questioning, Carnegie let the two go, while Bologue subtly tried to extract information from him.

Such as why the Ninth Group, which is specifically responsible for such events, was a step too late. If Bologue hadn't keenly discovered this place, the cultists would have already completed the ritual.

The terrifying feeling Bologue experienced when facing the woman made it unimaginable what anomalies would occur once the ritual was completed.

Furthermore, why was the Order Bureau so cautious about the Scarlet Rot sect appearing in the Great Rift? Their level of response was even more intense than the King's Secret Sword.

If Palmer hadn't called out quickly, judging from the murderous aura of the Ninth Group, they seemed truly prepared to kill without hesitation.

Carnegie, being an old fox, dodged Bologue's questions one by one, not forgetting to warn him harshly.

Now, the Ninth Group and the Logistics Department were handling the scene and the follow-up matters, while Bologue and Palmer, as key witnesses, needed to write a report related to the event after returning to the Field Operations Department.

From Carnegie's reaction, it seemed the reason the two were let go so easily was because of their status as Debtors and members of the Special Operations Group.

"Don't mind it, the Devil's temptation is a headache for every organization," Palmer explained.

"Even the Clarks will secretly conduct a large search to see if anyone has sold their soul to the Devil, thus falling into becoming a Demon... Of course, worse still is like the Scarlet Rot sect, protected by the Devil through Contractors, becoming its faithful slaves."

The Devil does not directly influence the world, but the promises of beauty it offers can drag more people into madness.

The identity of a Debtor is between black and white, like being caught between dawn and dusk. This uniqueness is what allows people like Bologue and Palmer to have a place within the Order Bureau.

"What if you hadn't become a Debtor back then and had simply traded your entire soul, falling into becoming a Demon?" Bologue asked curiously.

"Ah... then I'd probably already be dead, right?" Palmer replied earnestly.

"You should also feel it from these maniacs of the Scarlet Rot sect, how difficult it is to gain the Devil's favor. For this, some people fall into becoming a Demon, and some offer their soul to the Devil through Contractors to gain protection.

But this is like dogs begging for food, utterly vile."

Palmer's words took a turn again, taking on a ghastly sense of pride.

"Debtors are different. We are favored by the Devil, regarded as their deputies in the human world."

"One seeks actively, the other receives blessings passively?" Bologue commented.

"Something like that, so the identity of a Debtor is quite special," Palmer's tone grew strange, uncertain whether it was joy or sadness, "That's what the old folks in my family always say."

"Although Palmer is getting closer to the Devil, this proves that this heir is truly remarkable! Even the Devil likes him!"

Palmer lowered his voice, pretending to be old.

In the past, hearing this might have surprised Bologue a bit, but as he grew more aware of the Clarks, he no longer attached any mysterious awe to the family that could nurture someone as peculiar as Palmer.

Participating in the Dawn War against the Night Race, maintaining world stability while eyeing a hefty profit, Palmer's strange decision-making and the ghastly coming-of-age ceremony...

The two walked to the edge of Qiushang Town, below the massive cliff rolled the Sea of Mist. Corridors extended into the mist before them, and massive, tumor-like buildings clung to the steep cliff face.

Bologue did not immediately climb the long ladder but stood at the cliff's edge, pondering.

The Ninth Group was a shield against the Devil, minimizing the influence of the Devil and its followers on reality, while the Special Operations Group resembled a Sharp Sword, with these Debtors delivering deadly backstabs to the Devil when necessary.

In fact, ever since his meeting with Nesanel ended, Bologue had been pondering; Nesanel must be plotting something, a conspiracy hidden in the Land of Extreme Darkness against all Devils.

Or perhaps Nesanel isn't the planner, but merely the executor of the conspiracy. The true planner might be that mysterious, never-seen Director of the Order Bureau.

Bologue recalled Nesanel's words. Initially, he wasn't assured by Bologue, but because his friend trusted him, Nesanel decided to observe him for a while.

Who could be called a friend by Nesanel and be trusted by him, besides the Director of the Order Bureau? Bologue couldn't imagine anyone else with such power and qualification.

What exactly are they trying to do?

Besides, another thought troubling Bologue was the information he obtained from Belli's booklet.

The booklet was filled with eerie prayers, something akin to the doctrine of the Scarlet Rot sect.

This world has not just one Devil, and those groups that worship different Devils should also be distinct.

Looking into the misty haze, dark silhouettes walked the aerial corridors; some advanced, some conversed, and others threw gold coins into the deep mist below, praying softly.

Tyrant.

A shock seemed to run through Bologue's body, tightening every muscle. Although nothing had happened, his heart pounded more violently, roaring as it pumped blood throughout his body.

Bologue suddenly realized, if the Scarlet Rot sect worships their Devil through blood and flesh, then the act of residents at the Forked Crossroad paying taxes to the Tyrant, could it be seen as another form of sacrifice?

Just like human preferences, some demons prefer flesh and blood, while others appreciate values, whether humble or noble.

If my thoughts are correct, the entire Wandering Fork in the road is Tyrant's territory, filled with his believers, and this land spans the Great Rift, under the watchful eyes of the Order Bureau.

"Palmer, do you remember the description of demons?" Bologue asked abruptly.

"I remember, what's up?"

Palmer couldn't figure out what Bologue was thinking. After spending time together, Bologue got used to Palmer's misfortune, and Palmer got used to Bologue's slightly neurotic style.

Sometimes Bologue would stand silently aside, seemingly deep in thought, or just daydreaming, and sometimes he would suddenly break the silence and say something completely illogical.

Like now.

"Demon forms are ever-changing, and their ways of forming pacts with humans vary wildly," Bologue murmured, "so worshipping a demon doesn't necessarily have to appear in the form of a sect."

Reaching out to touch the cross on his chest, Bologue didn't continue thinking and instead said to Palmer.

"Let's go, don't keep Teda waiting too long."

The two climbed onto the aerial corridor, heading towards Teda's secret alchemy workshop.

Today is the day they officially move into the alchemy workshop, and there are many tasks to do, like installing equipment and organizing supplies. According to Geoffrey, the Logistics Department has already shipped the supplies over in advance, just waiting for them and Teda to connect.

If it weren't for the events encountered today in Qiushang Town, the two should already be in the alchemy workshop by now, but such is life, with surprises catching one off guard.

"Speaking of which, Palmer, the demon that made you a debtor back then, is the one worshiped by the Corrupt Apes sect, right?" Bologue asked.

"Yeah, why are you asking?" Palmer appeared very calm.

"Nothing... nothing."

Bologue didn't say more, after all he couldn't just tell Palmer...

"Hey, Palmer, if you'd returned a bit earlier, you'd have met an old acquaintance. Who's the old acquaintance, you ask?"

Well...

In terms of relations, she should be considered your creditor?"

That can't be right, it sounds too bizarre.

The conversation ended, now it's work time, both are busy with many things to do.

Currently, their situation seems odd, even though Lebius isn't rushing them to achieve anything remarkable, or to bring order to the Great Rift, yet secretly, it's chaotic here with various messy forces leaving traces, accompanying them.

What does Bologue have? A misfortunate partner, and then?

Nothing, nothing at all.

Even if Bologue wants to kick the Tyrant aside and become the sovereign here, he needs some time to keep accumulating, until the opportunity matures.

"By the way, at Teda's place, we should be able to arm ourselves with quite a bit of alchemy equipment, right?"

Palmer had apparently forgotten the recent thrills, turning instead towards imagining a bright future.

"Palmer, do you ever understand what stress is?" Bologue couldn't help but ask, "The Corrupt Apes sect appeared in the Great Rift, now we have one more potential enemy."

"What can thinking about it now solve? Can we make those guys drop dead, or can you and I leap over the Triple Law and rise to Prayer Believers?"

Palmer's tone suddenly became philosophical.

"Nothing can change except increasing anxiety, right? You're suffering from severe mental exhaustion, partner!" Palmer said, patting Bologue's shoulder with a heartbroken look.

"Then what will you do when the problem arises?" Bologue retorted.

Palmer paused for a second or two, then said, "I'm actually quite lucky."

"Are you sure?"

Bologue chuckled, Palmer actually relies on his "blessing," that's ridiculous.

"Even if my luck runs out, but... isn't there still you?"

Palmer spoke solemnly, his gaze unwavering as he looked at Bologue, then spoke in a deep voice.

"That's when you come into play, expert!"

Chapter 237: The Outpost Hut

"You are late."

As the door opened, Teda looked at Bologue and Palmer with a sullen expression, his voice devoid of emotion, "I don't like people who are not punctual."

"We encountered some minor problems on the way."

Bologue tried to explain, shaking his clothes as he spoke.

The coat was tattered, emitting waves of a bloody smell. From the damaged holes, one could glimpse the Iron-Repelling Armor Bologue wore inside, which seemed to be entwined with a snake-like presence.

"The Great Rift is a place full of surprises, isn't it?"

Upon hearing Bologue's explanation, Teda didn't pursue the matter further. As a former member of the Order Bureau, he knew well what these Field Staff represented.

Field Staff were the Blades of the Order Bureau, sent wherever judgment needed execution, a group living on the edge of life and death.

If not for the study of Overlord Xilin's Alchemy Matrix, Teda wouldn't actually want to share his Alchemy Workshop with them as a base.

This would only drag him, a recluse Alchemist, into the turmoil of the Field Operations Department.

"The supplies have arrived. I've cleared out a room for you. You can rest and prepare there. Here's the key."

Teda said as he handed them two sets of keys, one to Bologue and one to Palmer.

"We'll try our best to solve the troubles outside." Bologue said, taking the key.

"You know not to bring troubles in here, don't you?"

Teda replied disdainfully, still seemingly irritated, with a surprising adherence to punctuality.

"Another function of the base is as a safe house. When a safe house is used, it means we are facing an overwhelming enemy, and there's no immediate support... Although I won't die, who can say I won't encounter a similar situation?"

Bologue explained as he took out another key, its surface shimmering faintly.

"But I still have this Key of the Crooked Path, which I can use to leave in desperate times."

Despite saying this, Bologue didn't want to take his work to the Undying Club if possible. These Undead are detached from the Extraordinary World, entirely absorbed in indulgence, and likely unwilling to revisit nightmares.

In fact, Bologue kind of liked this group of companions and didn't want to bring trouble to the members of the Undying Club.

"The Key of the Crooked Path cannot be used within the Great Rift." Teda's words shattered all of Bologue's thoughts.

"What... did you say?"

Holding the Key of the Crooked Path, Bologue always regarded it as the ultimate solution to problems, capable of saving him from any peril as long as there was a door.

On the way here, Bologue even discussed with Palmer the possibility of taking a door with them into the Great Rift, touching bottom, and then using the Key of the Crooked Path to open a door and thereby return.

"The Alchemy Matrix embedded in the Key of the Crooked Path belongs to the Deceitful Structure School. All unclassifiable Alchemy Matrices fall under this category, and spatial folding is clearly one of them."

Teda looked at Bologue uncomprehendingly and asked, "Didn't the person who gave you the key tell you about the Key of the Crooked Path's limitations?"

"I only know its limitation is that it can only open fixed doors," Bologue said.

"Is that so? In fact, such spatial folding Alchemy Armaments require quite harsh activation environments, like the surrounding Ether needing to maintain a certain concentration and Ether fluctuations not being too chaotic."

Teda warned, "You wouldn't want to open a door only to find half your body reached the destination, would you?"

"The Deceitful Structure School is like this: special, mysterious, and difficult to understand. But this has nothing to do with the Great Rift. You can't use it inside the Great Rift because there is a... indescribable force interfering."

Teda walked to the side, poured himself a cup of tea, and then gestured for the two standing at the door to sit down.

"When I first came to the Great Rift, I also thought of establishing a door directly connected to the 'Transfer Station,' but the Key of the Crooked Path couldn't open a door within the Great Rift. After some research, it might be related to the fog within the Great Rift."

"Fog?" Palmer asked in confusion.

"You guys know about the peculiar nature of the Great Rift. People throw all sorts of stuff into it, including Alchemists like me living inside," Teda said, somewhat embarrassed, "Handling alchemical residue is troublesome, and most Alchemists choose to dispose of it directly into the Great Rift."

"I suspect that years of accumulation, the mixing and reaction of different alchemical residues, created this peculiar environment within the Great Rift. The fog affects the use of the Key of the Crooked Path, and even a forced Curved Path Breakthrough is impacted."

Bologue nodded and put away the Key of the Crooked Path, his wariness and suspicion of the Great Rift deepening further.

From Teda's words, he surmised that the Ninth Group's method of appearance might have been the so-called forced opening, the Curved Path Breakthrough. Bologue doubted they would have prepared a Key of the Crooked Path to open a church door in advance.

These people had reasons for being late; the Great Rift impacted the Curved Path Breakthrough, causing them to be a few minutes behind.

"Alright, I understand now."

Bologue stood up and moved towards the supplies at the side, calling Palmer to help organize them.

"By the way, this part is yours, and the other part is mine," Teda said.

"But... aren't these our supplies?"

Palmer pointed at himself, then at Bologue, looking at Teda warily, who now resembled a bandit about to rob them of their supplies.

"You all have felt the peculiarity of the Great Rift, and here, I not only have the protection of the Void Realm but also a Negative Power User at your service, even though I'm an Alchemist and not adept at combat."

Teda was amused by Palmer's cautious reaction and said.

"This is your rent, but there's nothing to worry about, the Order Bureau has already paid for you."

Bologue and Palmer really didn't know what to say, they could only nod and carry their supplies into their room.

"Aimou, come help these guys, don't let them damage my stuff."

Teda then shouted loudly, and soon a quick series of footsteps came from the stairwell.

"Do you need any help?"

Quickly, Aimou appeared before them, wearing a lab coat similar to Teda's. It seemed like all these Alchemists each had a lab coat, and they were all the same style.

Teda's lab coat looked like it had been worn for many years, the white fabric had turned grayish, the edges of the cuffs were frayed, and threads protruded messily. Aimou's, however, looked very new, like it had just come out of the washing machine.

"Where is our room? Please show us the way."

The space inside the Alchemy Workshop was larger than the two had imagined, with various pipes interwoven in the corners, different instruments buzzing, and both of them needed some time to get familiar with the place.

"Okay."

Aimou seemed very excited, the halo in her eyes spun rapidly back and forth; she seldom interacted with living beings other than Teda, so Bologue and Palmer seemed like precious animals to her.

The Silver Snake crawled out from under Bologue's clothes, with Ether infused, the Deceitful Snake Scale Liquid began to proliferate, and in the blink of an eye turned into a silvery-white giant serpent, swallowing all the supplies whole.

Bologue carried a few boxes by hand, following behind Aimou, from another perspective, it was as if a silvery-white tail extended from under Bologue's clothes, wrapping around these boxes and dragging them along.

The base's room was located in a corner of the first floor of the Alchemy Workshop, the space inside was quite large and relatively tidy, already cleaned by Teda beforehand.

Bologue and Palmer unpacked the boxes, filling the room with their contents.

The Order Bureau had sent a lot of gear, like conventional armaments and medical supplies. In this ghastly place of the Great Rift, to maintain emergency communications with the outside, they had also prepared a miniaturized Secret Core Ceremony device for the two of them.

If necessary, they could use this to extend the communication range of Whistle and even connect directly to the Order Bureau. Unfortunately, it was just a shrunken version, with communication time and stability far inferior to the original. The advantage was that it did not require a communicator to maintain operation.

There were also some intelligence documents about the Great Rift, which Bologue directly locked in the safe that had been sent along."

Actually, they didn't need to prepare these things at all, in Teda's Alchemy Workshop, any kind of demand would be met, but Bologue didn't want this.

They were maintaining a cooperative relationship with Teda, and a certain boundary had to be drawn, even if it would bring some troubles.

But what really made Bologue unable to let go of his guard against Teda was the call from Belli that night, her commission to him.

It wasn't that there were any other emotions involved, but Bologue believed that when a madwoman became serious and solemnly commissioned him, the matter must have already developed to a disastrous stage.

Belli suspected that Teda was overly obsessed with his research, on the verge of madness.

She did not explicitly inform him of the more in-depth matters nor handed this over to the Field Operations Department, she just privately entrusted it to him. She knew full well that if the Order Bureau took notice and got involved, the matter would not be settled easily.

Although Belli always seemed to have that rebellious attitude, she did genuinely care about her mentor.

It didn't take long to tidy up the room, and soon the two had turned it into a base, with shelves hung full of weapons, medical boxes placed below, and on the other side were potion boxes, containing important Alchemy Potions, some were for saving lives, others for quickly replenishing Ether.

The miniaturized Secret Core Ceremony device was placed under the table by Bologue, and when not activated, its appearance looked just like a black cube, and there were some less important intelligence documents nailed to the wall by Bologue, with a large red web strung across.

Looking at his information network, for a moment Bologue felt as though he had returned home.

"Palmer, are you done?"

Bologue wiped the sweat off his forehead. He appeared to be relaxed, but it still made him sweat.

"All done?"

Behind him, Palmer's voice sounded, Bologue turned around, only to see a single bed placed on the other side, with a mattress and bedsheet spread on top, the blanket neatly folded, and a pillow placed on top.

Palmer was lying leisurely on the bed, and he had hung a rack on the wall, filled with books to pass the time.

"Is this what you applied for?" Bologue was stunned.

"Is there a problem? Aren't we supposed to rest here?"

Palmer felt he did nothing wrong, the atmosphere fell into an eerie silence, and after a few seconds, Palmer showed a suddenly enlightened expression.

"Oh, oh, oh, don't worry, I applied for two single beds, got mattresses, blankets, and pillows, but you'll have to make yours yourself."

Palmer didn't forget to remind at the end.

"I suggest you put your bed over there, it's a bit cramped, but if you set the bed next to mine, it would seem like we're sleeping in the same bed. Although we're comrades through life and death, it still feels rather weird, you know?"

Bologue really wanted to draw his gun and shoot Palmer, to see whether his lousy marksmanship was worse, or if Palmer was luckier.

Chapter 238: Traces

After experiencing many twists and turns, the two finally managed to set up a basic post that fully meets the Field Operations Department's requirements for a base.

Palmer said he wanted to enjoy the fruits of his labor, and rested on a single bed. In reality, he just didn't want to work. He would never miss a chance to blatantly become a salary thief.

Bologue took a stroll around the Alchemy Workshop to understand the environment, while Aimou followed beside him, explaining things.

"The rooms on the first floor are mostly warehouses, storing many supplies, also considered as part of the living area, including the kitchen and such."

Aimou explained carefully to Bologue like a guide, "The second floor is the experimental area. It's best not to come here often since many experiments are conducted here."

"The third floor is the teacher's private domain. Without his consent, he doesn't allow anyone to step onto the third floor," Aimou supplemented, "But usually, the teacher himself doesn't go to the third floor either; he typically rests in the experimental area on the second floor."

"Is there anything on the third floor?"

Bologue asked, thinking that if Teda had any secrets, they must be hidden on the third floor.

"I don't know, I haven't been there." Aimou shrugged, and the halo in her eyes dimmed.

The two arrived at the center of the first floor, and looking up, they could see the ceiling above them being pierced through, reaching the top of the third floor. Within it stands a thick black spire, shimmering brightly, accompanied by the surge of Ether, and mechanical buzzing sounds coming from inside the spire.

"This is the hub tower. It penetrates the entire building, providing energy for experiments while also maintaining the stability of the Void Realm," Aimou introduced.

"Unless necessary, please do not get close to here, especially your partner."

Aimou stood with arms akimbo, becoming serious. When she's serious, the halo in her eyes stops rotating and solidifies in place.

"Are you warning me?"

Bologue looked at her confusedly. From her words, Aimou was indeed warning him, but paired with her actions and cold tone, it gave Bologue a strange feeling.

"Hmm? Isn't this warning enough?"

Aimou consulted with the demeanor of an actress who botched her performance, seeking the director's opinion.

"If you want to warn me, your tone should be stronger, not cold." Bologue said.

"I see..." Aimou touched her throat, "My vocal cords are still being optimized, so I can only use this tone for now."

This sounded rather fascinating, as for Aimou, everything in her body could be adjusted.

"Also...why did you stand akimbo?"

Bologue continued, Aimou's posture resembled an angry female character from a romance drama.

"I read in novels that when female characters are angry, they stand akimbo and scold," Aimou said.

"What kind of novels are you reading?"

"Using your human classification, it should be romance novels," Aimou scrutinized Bologue up and down and continued, "Such courtship-filled novels should be quite suitable for handling a man like you, right?"

"Ah..."

Bologue felt a headache. He felt like he was dealing with a strange being. Although she had a human appearance and thought similarly to humans, it was clear she hadn't been in this world for long and her cognition mostly came from various books.

It could be said that while her theoretical knowledge was sufficient, her practical experience was entirely lacking.

"Theory requires practice." Bologue said.

"I am practicing now, what about the practice effect?" Aimou asked excitedly.

"Failed, utterly failed."

Bologue gave Aimou's human imitation behavior a big cross.

However, Bologue didn't dislike Aimou. She indeed was like a creature newly born into this world, with zero practical experience. Her actions sometimes seemed foolish and awkward, but Bologue quite liked this naive feeling.

He had witnessed too much dreadful darkness; sometimes a healthy mind needs something warm to balance.

"Is that so?"

With the halo in her eyes dimmed low, Aimou leaned against the side, feeling a bit down.

"It's alright, you can learn slowly, we'll be staying here frequently."

Upon hearing Bologue's words, the deflated halo was propped up again. Though Aimou's facial fluctuations were minimal, her mood was easily speculated through the changes in the halo.

To Bologue, Aimou was like a child kept by Teda for too long, filled with curiosity about the outside world, repeatedly reading the world's brilliance in books, then awkwardly learning and mimicking.

Just like someone born in a desert, learning how to operate a sailboat.

Today, Aimou was very joyful and lively. In this closed little world of the Alchemy Workshop, there's rarely any change, and the arrival of Bologue and Palmer undoubtedly stirred waves like a falling meteor striking a silent atmosphere.

"Speaking of which, you have a familiar scent on you."

Aimou suddenly leaned close to Bologue, making a sniffing gesture.

Bologue instinctively became alert, then slowly relaxed, with a somber gaze.

Recently, too many people have been mentioning "a familiar scent" to him, and each instance was terrible to the point that Bologue had developed a conditioned response to those words.

"Can you show it to me?" Aimou extended her hand, inquiring.

She didn't explicitly state what it was, but Bologue understood her meaning directly, and the thing Aimou referred to also began to stir strangely at that moment, even though Bologue hadn't summoned it.

Bologue raised his hand, and a small silver snake peeked out from his sleeve, coiling around Bologue's fingertip, extending its tiny body.

With the injection of Ether, it became increasingly lively, like a real snake.

"This is your creation." Bologue said.

"Hmm-hmm, I didn't expect to see it again."

Aimou seemed happier; she reached out to stroke the Silver Snake. Despite it being a cold, ether-driven lifeless object, in Aimou's eyes, it seemed to possess real vitality.

"Actually, the day you arrived, I sensed it, but you and the teacher had important matters to discuss, so I didn't interrupt."

Strangely, Aimou seemed ignorant and naive in some aspects, but in other aspects, she was truly like a human, she could even read the atmosphere.

Bologue really wished Palmer could also learn to read the atmosphere.

"This thing is quite good, thank you."

Bologue thanked Aimou; he really liked this Alchemy Armament. It was versatile and deceitful, and it significantly helped Bologue solve the issue of carrying metal with him.

The Summoning Hand could only manipulate substances that physically existed, which made Bologue highly susceptible to the environment during battles. To compensate for this shortcoming, he often carried a pile of steel plates with him to serve as the metal for summoning.

But with the Deceitful Snake Scale Liquid, it was different. This bizarre aberration, coupled with its own propagation ability, allowed Bologue to always be in a metalliferous paradise, swinging deadly Iron Swords and hurling swarms of Iron Spears.

The only defect was that the proliferation of Deceitful Snake Scale Silver also required Ether, and the more it proliferated, the greater the Ether consumption. Even though Bologue was a Condenser with a "Narrow and Sharp" tendency from the Commanding School, during high-intensity battles, the Ether often fell into depletion.

Most importantly, the depletion of Ether would also limit his Resurrection.

"You're welcome. This thing only shows its value when placed in the hands of a suitable person." Aimou said.

"I'm quite surprised that a creation would also try to create something," Bologue stared into Aimou's eyes, gazing at the halo in the blue eyes, "This thing is your creation."

The halo quivered slightly, and Bologue thought she might be raising an eyebrow.

"Why did you want to create this thing? Was it just to learn Alchemy?"

Bologue continued to inquire, finding Aimou very intriguing, remarkable in many senses. She not only had a self-awakened consciousness, believing she needed a name, but she was also continuously learning, optimizing herself, and even creating her own creation.

Teda was probably immersed in the joy of research and teaching and had not realized these things. But in Bologue's eyes, except for the physical shell, Aimou was almost indistinguishable from a human.

Learning, using, and creating.

This inevitably intrigued Bologue limitlessly about Aimou and made him start to ponder what was hidden under her cold cheek.

"Hmm..."

Aimou began to think, while Bologue continued to stare into her eyes.

Bologue realized that when Aimou operated stably, the halo in her eyes would move back and forth slightly, and when she was thinking, the amplitude of the halo's motion and the speed of back and forth would gradually increase.

Now the halo in Aimou's eyes was moving back and forth rapidly, and suddenly the speed dropped drastically, returning to its normal state, Bologue knew she had finished thinking.

"Humans are very fragile."

Aimou said, still with that expressionless face, her tone cold, and the halo also solidified.

"A fragile life composed of fragile bones, fragile flesh, fragile nerves, fragile will.

Humans need to eat periodically to sustain life, and in their short life span, a considerable part of time is spent sleeping, needing oxygen for the flesh to breathe. Once separated from oxygen for a time, they suffocate and die."

Under Aimou's narrative, the human flesh appeared so feeble.

"Yet even with such a shell, they still created so many interesting things... and me." Aimou looked down at her pitch-black hands.

"I think humans create so many interesting things, probably in the hope of leaving traces in this world?"

"Traces?"

"Traces proving their existence."

Aimou worked hard to use vocabulary to express her thoughts, which was somewhat difficult for her.

"Every life is bound by the destined shackles of death, all things decay, but the world remains like the engravings on a tombstone; as long as these traces remain in the world, life has not truly perished."

"Did you create it? You want to leave a trace. Do you think you will die?"

Bologue seriously asked, during the long years in the Black Prison, Bologue had seriously contemplated many things, like a philosopher.

Sometimes Bologue thought that maybe humans are the only beings aware of their inevitable death, but now Aimou also understands the existence of death.

For an Alchemy Puppet, death doesn't exist, awaiting Aimou was only destruction, cessation, but she regarded this fate as death.

"Nothing can be eternal, not even me shaped by multiple Alchemy materials, nor the traces humans desperately try to leave, everything will vanish."

Aimou embraced the Silver Snake with both hands, her voice carrying a touch of joy.

"But I still want the traces to last a little longer, just a little longer."

Chapter 239: Perfect Path

The feeling of communicating with Aimou was even more peculiar than Bologue had anticipated.

This feeling is hard to describe; Aimou is like a strange combination, sometimes appearing very mature, and at other times very childish and innocent. She is like an ignorant new life, with great enthusiasm and curiosity for everything. She is quirky and can suddenly say things that sound philosophical.

Yet Bologue did not feel much relief from this, for this brand-new life had only a book-based understanding of humanity, without touching upon the darker and deeper aspects, let alone realizing she herself was caught in the vortex.

"To let the traces of existence continue?" Bologue smiled, his voice carrying a touch of comfort, "I am an Undead. If I'm lucky, I will carry your traces until the world's end."

The Silver Snake swiftly retreated into Bologue's sleeve, then crawled out from his collar like a small animal hiding in a cave, slightly sticking its head out to peer at Aimou.

"Undead? You mean... you cannot die?"

Aimou could not understand; every life is bound by destined death. She could not conceive of someone evading the end of death.

Her eyes lit up, literally lit up, as Bologue could clearly perceive the increased brightness in the halo within Aimou's eyes.

"Something like that. No matter how many times I'm killed, I can stand up again... Want me to demonstrate for you?"

The Silver Snake coiled around Bologue's neck, ready to strangle him.

With Bologue's personality, he wouldn't do such a meaningless thing, let alone such a meaningless death. Yet he suddenly wanted to test Aimou.

To observe what this artificial life would do upon witnessing another's death, even knowing in advance that he wouldn't die.

"Don't."

Aimou crossed her hands in a gesture of strict refusal.

"I won't die," Bologue said.

"Whether you will die or not, don't die."

Aimou held a serious attitude towards life and death, even if Bologue spoke about it as if it were a joke.

To her, death is a matter of extreme seriousness and cannot be joked about, even though Aimou herself is not human, and her existence as life is questionable.

"I need to maintain myself now."

After stopping Bologue's action, Aimou turned away and left. She seemed upset, and though as an Alchemy Puppet, she couldn't make expressive facial expressions, her emotions were still easy to guess.

It was like a quarrel with a little girl; Bologue couldn't comprehend if this counted as a quarrel or why Aimou suddenly got angry.

But he had confirmed some matters, some very important matters. Now he needed to find Teda for a talk as what these Alchemists were doing was more complex and terrifying than he had imagined.

When Bologue found Teda, he was in the second-floor experimental area. After a brief wait, the sealed iron door opened. Teda was side-facing to him, his whole body bent over the workbench, wearing a monocle like a watchmaker, tensely processing a piece of metal.

Bologue did not disturb him but waited by the door. After a long while, Teda finished his work. He removed the monocle, and since he had worn it for a long time, there was an indentation around his eye socket.

"All tidied up?" Teda asked.

"Yes, it's just some physical work," Bologue pressed the button by the door, and the iron door sealed itself again, "Then... shall we talk about my matters?"

Bologue also had dealings with Teda, assisting Teda in researching his Alchemy Matrix. During the research process, Teda might also help Bologue further master Secret Energy and even plan his path.

After a Condenser's promotion, different sub-disciplines will emerge. They balance between "Narrow and Sharp" and "Broad and Dull." Every decision leads to different changes in the Condenser's Secret Energy, making it increasingly elusive and mysterious.

The different choices in promotion are pieced together and called a "path," like the growth trajectory of a tree that needs continual pruning and optimization until it becomes perfect.

Palmer is considered the best successor in the history of the Clarks, largely because the Clarks, after countless generations of effort, have thoroughly researched Secret Energy-Wind Source.

In countless records, historical members of the Clarks have traversed different paths. Some carried "Narrow and Sharp" to the end, some reached extremes in "Broad and Dull," and others balanced in between.

Aside from the orientation of Secret Energy, let's not forget the sub-disciplines these people developed.

The mix of main and sub-disciplines causes a qualitative change in Secret Energy, and different combinations evolve into different powers.

Integrating these diverse paths together, the Clarks created a near-perfect path known as the "Path of Wind Fury."

The Clarks, using unknown testing methods, determined Palmer as the most suitable candidate for the Path of Wind Fury. Therefore, as long as Palmer lived well and continued to ascend, his potential was tremendous.

Of course, provided this unlucky guy could fortunately survive until then.

Many Extraordinary Organizations, Secret Societies, and Hidden Clans, with the bolster of their long histories and innumerable predecessors' trial and error, have crafted perfect paths. Even if not optimized to perfection, their ample data can provide future generations with adequately useful advice.

But all these have nothing to do with Bologue. The Alchemy Matrix he implanted belonged to Overlord Xilin; this matrix was extremely mysterious and powerful. Before Bologue's appearance, the Order Bureau had never successfully implanted it.

Bologue was a guinea pig, the first to make mistakes, and during his advancement, he couldn't find any examples to determine his next direction.

This troubled Bologue for quite some time, so he could only pin his hopes on Teda. Before confirming his path, he needed to understand his own powers sufficiently, and Bologue hoped Teda could help him.

"It's the weekend, come to me during your weekend rest. Our research requires a lot of time, but as a token of sincerity, you can take these materials back to look over."

Teda said, pulling a document out from a pile and handing it to Bologue. He had prepared it long ago. "This is some research I did at the Order Bureau about Overlord Xilin, along with numerous speculations."

From that time, Teda had started his research. In some aspects about this power, he understood even more than Bologue.

"I still have a lot of research to deal with now, but based on my previous experience, if you want to better master Secret Energy, you need a lot of training, constantly getting familiar with your Secret Energy, making your own control over it more precise to align with Ether."

Teda was like a teacher to Bologue, instructing him.

"Training, huh? I've done quite a bit of training," Bologue said, in terms of diligence, few could surpass him.

"What does your training entail?"

"Using your Secret Energy to shape various small objects?" Teda asked.

"Pretty much, I often shape things using Secret Energy."

"How accurate is it?"

"It's alright."

"What about complexity?"

Bologue didn't reply. Under Teda's persistent questioning, he was somewhat perplexed, unclear about the kind of training Teda was referring to.

"In the theory of Alchemists, the more aligned you are with Ether, the closer you are to the 'Secret Source,' and the most obvious improvement this brings is mastery of other Ethereal Skills."

Teda turned around, searching for something on the workbench, while making sure to continue speaking.

"Your training doesn't really count as training, it's at most familiarizing with Secret Energy... Do you know? People from the Clarks are all skilled at throwing knives. From the moment they implant Secret Energy-Wind Source, they have to control airflow to drive flying knives in the harsh weather of Wind Source Highlands, through extremely complex environments, and precisely hit their targets."

Teda took out a damaged mechanical watch, covered in dust and rust.

"Take it to train."

"Repair it with Secret Energy?"

Bologue took the mechanical watch, knowing that to shape an object, he must first understand its structure, just like when he shaped weapons initially. Once familiar with the mechanical structure, Bologue might be able to summon something suitable.

"No, use your Secret Energy to reshape a mechanical watch out of metal and ensure it can operate normally."

Teda even deliberately provoked him.

"This shouldn't be too difficult for you, right?"

Bologue was silent for a few seconds, then put away the mechanical watch. An expert is never defeated by difficulty; if defeated by difficulty, it only shows a lack of professionalism.

The two confronted each other again for a while, Bologue said nothing, as if he didn't understand the atmosphere due to low emotional intelligence. Teda, on the other hand, was sizing up Bologue, thinking that Bologue should leave, but he didn't, hiding things in his eyes.

Bologue was actually hesitating, unsure how to broach the topic, and the previous conversation was him looking for the right moment to insert it.

"She... Aimou, she's even more special than I imagined." Bologue finally spoke up.

"Of course, she's my finest work."

Teda smiled, thinking Bologue just wanted to say this, but the subsequent words froze Teda's smile.

"I don't know much about Alchemy Puppets, nor about the history of your research, and I don't understand what kind of power created Aimou..."

Bologue was sorting out his words, launching a verbal attack towards Teda.

"But I've met many people, all kinds of chaotic, diverse people. Aimou is a naive life form, yet she not only has consciousness but further has... personality?"

Aimou was too lively, almost like a real person.

"How did you do it, Teda? How did you 'activate' her?"

Bologue stood in front of Teda, blocking the iron door behind him, leaving no room.

Chapter 240: Echo

Alchemists can create perfect shells, but cannot create the soul to move them.

Teda's research not only pushed the progress of the world, but it also completely shattered the high walls that obstructed all alchemists; he made this cold shell move, not only with human consciousness but also capable of self-learning and generating its own personality through constant interaction with humans.

Bologue even speculated that perhaps Aimou possessed a true soul.

An artificial soul.

This sounds too terrifying, as unique souls are no longer singular, and no one knows what kind of changes this will bring to the world.

But... Did Teda really achieve it?

Bologue was skeptical. If Teda could truly endow a shell with a soul, then the one standing here should be Nesanel, not himself.

"I need to know the truth... at least understand what's going on." Bologue's voice lacked any emotion.

"Hmm? Why do you think she has a personality then?"

Teda posed another question, as if encountering a difficulty, while analyzing the data sheet stuck beside him.

"Logically speaking, Aimou doesn't possess such a thing as personality; it's just her imitation of human behavior."

"But I feel like I'm facing a real person. If I only hear the voice, I can't even think that Aimou is not human."

The more Bologue thought about it, the more he felt a silent terror. The boundary between human and machine blurred in Aimou's presence.

"As if... as if Aimou truly possesses a soul, hiding the shadow of another person beneath the steel shell."

Bologue said involuntarily, and after he spoke, he found himself stunned, and the sense of familiarity in his heart grew stronger.

According to Teda, if Aimou doesn't possess a personality and everything is just an imitation of humans, then from start to finish, Aimou has been imitating the same person, someone Bologue doesn't know, but Aimou is absolutely familiar with and imitates that person perfectly in both overall and detailed aspects.

Until she is indistinguishable from that person.

"You based Aimou's likeness on your daughter, didn't you?" Bologue whispered.

Teda didn't have much of a reaction to Bologue's words. He found a chair for Bologue, gestured for him to sit down, and then Teda pulled up a whiteboard, covered in complex diagrams with several sheets of scratch paper attached.

At a glance, it seems to be some kind of Alchemy Armament design, far more complex than the mechanical watch in Bologue's pocket, with a precise Alchemy Matrix spreading across every corner of the metal.

"Do you know about the Perpetual Motion Machine?"

Teda asked, and in this scenario, Bologue felt like he was in a class.

"I know," Bologue said.

"That's good, the Perpetual Motion Machine, a fascinating device, can operate indefinitely with a certain input of energy. But every alchemist knows it absolutely does not exist as its properties directly contradict the most fundamental rules of alchemy."

The aged gaze fell on Bologue, and Bologue continued Teda's words.

"It violates the principles of equivalent exchange and energy conservation."

This knowledge is written in the "Golden Thesis," and Bologue believed every Condenser should read this book, which nearly serves as a primer on alchemy.

"When designing Aimou, I was constantly troubled by how to keep her running stably and continuously. She needed a stable Ether source, for which I designed something close to a Perpetual Motion Machine.

Of course, it's not a Perpetual Motion Machine and cannot run indefinitely without maintenance and supplementation, but its nature is closer to that of a Perpetual Motion Machine."

Teda picked up a mechanical structure resembling a heart from his workbench, fixed on a base as if it were a keepsake.

"This is the first generation Constant Motion Core I designed. It uses an extremely small amount of Ether to drive it and absorb large amounts of Ether from its surroundings, injecting it into the Constant Motion Core to provide Ether for Aimou's actions.

In this manner, it continually draws Ether, absorbing more Ether into its reserves, nearly achieving perpetual motion."

"That sounds quite like my Resurrection. When I die, I also need Ether to be resurrected. If Aimou were in an Ether vacuum, when her Ether reserves completely disappear, she would also enter a dormant state, right?"

Bologue examined the Constant Motion Core in Teda's hand, not surprised that Teda, once head of the Sublimation Furnace Core, could design such a thing.

"Yes, the Constant Motion Core needs Ether to draw Ether, and it will halt when there's no Ether," Teda said.

"But what does this have to do with Aimou's 'soul'?" Bologue asked.

Teda surprisingly had patience, gently explaining, indicating he had long prepared to tell Bologue all of this, or perhaps knowing Bologue would inevitably question everything.

"Because Aimou's soul is within her heart, inside this Constant Motion Core."

Raising the Heart of Steel, the splendid alchemy matrix shone on Teda's body. As Ether was injected into the Constant Motion Core in his hand, Bologue felt the Ether around them stirred.

The Ether's undulation wasn't fierce but calm and soothing, like a babbling stream, gradually drawing Ether into the Constant Motion Core.

"Aimou's... soul."

Bologue gazed intently at Teda, as Teda actually admitted to all this.

"The Constant Motion Core requires absolute stability, so its 'start key' is crucial. What could be more stable than the Philosopher's Stone?"

Teda opened the Constant Motion Core. The precision mechanics unfolded, like the structure of a heart chamber, with a small groove that originally held a Philosopher's Stone.

"It was a Philosopher's Stone personally Condensed by me. Theoretically, it would take hundreds of years to completely Fade Away naturally. To prevent damage, I even painstakingly applied a layer of Protection."

Teda's voice rose with frenzied joy, as he cradled the Constant Motion Core, affectionately caressing the cold metal.

"The initial energy that drives the Constant Motion Core comes from the Philosopher's Stone when it Fades Away, scattering its Canyin power."

Alchemists believe that the human soul is an extremely pure form of Ether, and when the Philosopher's Stone Fades Away, it returns to the heavens in the form of voided Ether.

Teda based all of this to design Aimou's power source.

The Constant Motion Core.

Even if the Constant Motion Core will eventually halt one day, that would be at least a hundred years later, and it itself can be replaced, perpetually carrying on this beating heart until reaching true eternity.

"Then, whose Philosopher's Stone was it?"

Bologue observed the fervor in Teda's eyes as if embracing gold like a prospector, his extreme desire displaying a bizarre, pathological feeling in both spirit and flesh.

"It's from your daughter, Alice Yazhede, isn't it?"

Teda was completely frozen, taking a long time to relax his muscles, putting down the Constant Motion Core, looking at Bologue with a gloomy gaze.

"The Philosopher's Stone is the solid form of a Condensed soul, containing secrets far beyond our comprehension, but it has been forbidden from study by ethical regulations.

But was it really because it violates ethics that it's forbidden, or did someone discover something in the Philosopher's Stone and wish to bury that secret forever?"

Teda's expression remained calm, but his tone was filled with madness, and his aura momentarily shocked Bologue.

Not fear, but an almost insane fervor for the pursuit of truth and knowledge.

"You know, actually, we can barely see its traces of life, the echoes of memories, as if it were a human's tombstone after death, recording everything."

"Indeed, the mysterious soul contains our thoughts and memories, and after we die and separate from our shell, the solidified Philosopher's Stone should also record all of this."

Upon hearing this, Bologue understood everything and said softly, "Is that why Aimou resembles her so much?"

"Yes..."

Teda awoke from his frenzied state, leaning against the workbench, looking down at the mechanical heart in his hands.

"I don't know why, maybe using her Philosopher's Stone as the power source caused the echoes in the Philosopher's Stone to affect Aimou, making Aimou's behavior increasingly resemble her... even though Aimou has never met her."

"She has the shadow of your daughter within her," Bologue said.

"But she's not my daughter, she's just... too much alike."

"That's why it's more important to control your investment of emotions in a tool, yet you couldn't help yourself, making her your student, which is self-deception." Bologue coldly remarked.

"But she truly is adorable, isn't she?"

Teda lifted his head and questioned back, showing a lost soul expression.

Bologue was uncertain to whom he referred, Alice or Aimou, and likely even Teda himself didn't understand.