

Endless 241

Chapter 241: Original Sins

When Bologue returned to the base room, Palmer was already snoring on the single bed, as if he had completely made himself at home, showing no signs of vigilance.

Bologue glanced around the room, which was very full. His single bed was in another corner of the room, right next to the boxes. If Bologue lay down quietly, standing at the door, it would be hard to notice his presence.

He brought over a chair, sat down at the table, and laid out the documents he got from Teda. These were research materials left behind by Teda while studying the Alchemy Matrix of Overlord Xilin.

Bologue didn't immediately start reading the documents. He felt a bit muddled, possibly because of the events he experienced today. He was somewhat exhausted and needed to rest.

"Ah..."

Leaning back against the chair, Bologue pressed hard against his temples, hoping to alleviate the fatigue in his heart.

The strong sense of exhaustion spread from the inside out. According to Teda, the Philosopher's Stone contains echoes of humans from their lifetime. They call this phenomenon Mind Projection. It seems that when Adelle's Philosopher's Stone was distinguished from so many others, it was due to this technique.

Aimou was influenced by the Mind Projection, becoming increasingly like Teda's daughter, even though she was not Alice at all.

Belli's concerns were justified. Teda was in a dire state; he was already blurring the boundaries between Aimou and Alice. Even worse, besides keeping a close eye on Teda, Bologue had no solution to any of this.

Bologue excelled at solving problems with violence, but many things cannot be influenced by force. Even if you beat someone to a pulp, some thoughts won't change.

Like an unsolvable puzzle, it seemingly had no answer from the start.

This dilemma made Bologue very irritable. Fortunately, he was good at controlling his emotions and needed to do something else to divert his attention, like writing a report.

Bologue checked the door; it was tightly closed with no gaps. After making sure no one else was around except for the snoring Palmer, Bologue sat back down at the table, picked up a pen and paper, and began to write while pondering.

This wasn't a report for Lebius. Once work stabilized and there were no unexpected events, Bologue only needed to submit a report once a week to reduce workload pressure.

The current report was for Nesanel, documenting today's encounter with the Corruption Cult.

The Ninth Group had close ties with Nesanel, who might already know what happened in Qiushang Town today. Bologue needed to fill in a key piece of this puzzle.

In the report, Bologue withheld nothing, writing down the abnormalities he sensed through Mind Projection, the enigmatic woman, and speculations about the Devils.

This is a bizarre and frenetic world. Sometimes, Bologue alone cannot defeat all enemies; he needs allies... like a powerful Seeker of Glory.

After writing a whole page full, Bologue read it over several times, thinking it was detailed enough, but just as he was about to stop, he hesitated and continued writing.

"Interesting, the Devils can extend the existence of faith. Even if this faith is so insane, some still choose to plunge into the flames."

Upon writing this, Bologue stopped. He took a booklet from inside his jacket, its cover red with a strange greasy feel, like some skin smeared with oil.

This was found on Belli's body, filled with mad praises, but whenever a revered name was involved, the names were smeared with blood, as if they were a taboo, unable to be written, meant only to reside in memory.

Logically, Bologue didn't know the true name stained with blood, but under that weird influence, he instinctively called out the true name.

"Crimson Queen."

With his fingertips brushing against the coarse paper, Bologue spoke softly.

The true name of the Devil cannot be recorded on paper; thus, the Corruption Cult used another title to refer to the Devil they worshiped—the name being Crimson Queen.

"Faith is not fixed. Perhaps wandering paths may present another form of sect for the Tyrant, and the name Tyrant might just be a pseudonym, similar to Crimson Queen," Bologue analyzed, writing down this hypothesis.

From Bologue's peculiar network, he had currently interacted with three Devils. The one he traded his soul with, about which he had no knowledge, was completely enveloped in mist. Then there were the Crimson Queen and Tyrant.

Pulling down his collar, Bologue looked at his chest. A woman's handprint was clearly visible, neither painful nor itchy, without any strange sensation, like a tattoo etched on his skin, even Resurrection couldn't heal it.

Bologue also wrote about this in hopes that Nesanel might know something. The deputy director always gave Bologue the impression of a Devil expert, seemingly knowing everything.

Sometimes you have to admit that among the Devils Bologue has encountered, the Tyrant is actually the easiest to deal with. Though bizarre and mysterious, the rules he follows are extremely rational, creating a unique sense of order even in wandering paths.

From behind came the sound of snoring again, Palmer turned over, holding the quilt, and continued to sleep.

On the first day of moving in, Palmer was like this. If time goes on, Bologue is not sure if Palmer will make this place like his home, piled with various personal belongings, completely unlike a workplace.

Hmm... it feels okay, when dealing with his own people, Bologue is a very tolerant person, and his expert requirements are only directed at himself.

Turning his attention back to the report in front of him, Bologue's expression became serious.

"Gluttonous... Beelzebub."

Bologue silently mouthed the name, almost calling it to the void. Then every muscle in Bologue's body tensed, remaining vigilant of his surroundings. Fortunately, nothing abnormal happened.

"I'm not a believer, but through Adelle's words, I somewhat understand the content of those beliefs, like how in the eyes of these believers, humans are inherently sinful.

I don't know what kind of connection exists between them, but that bizarre woman is given the prefix of Gluttony... Does this mean the Devils name themselves after such original sins?

Seven deadly sins, seven madly howling Devils."

Bologue stopped writing, gazing at his text. The more he understood this world, the more he realized its grandeur and the insignificance of individuals.

He's searching for the truth bit by bit, believing that in this world, there are others on the same path, who surely know something, but all remain silent, as if they've compromised.

The figures of Serey and Wei'Er flashed before his eyes. These Undead are witnesses of history, and compared to their long years, Bologue finds himself particularly young.

He stuffed the papers into a file bag, picked it up, and then woke the sleeping Palmer.

"It's time to clock out, Palmer."

Bologue said to the bleary-eyed Palmer.

"Huh?" Palmer rubbed his eyes, sitting up from bed with a look of confusion.

Bologue waited a few minutes, and while tidying up his things, Palmer cleared his head.

"How does it feel to be here?" Bologue asked.

"At least I slept pretty well," Palmer suggested, "We can live here long term in the future, there's no need for rent, and it's close to our workstations. More accurately, we sleep right at the workstations."

About this, Palmer was very serious, as he weighed the pros and cons.

"The only bad thing is, the environment here isn't great. The room is a bit narrow, and we two have to be roommates... are you interested in being my roommate?"

"Are you referring to when the faucet suddenly bursts while brushing teeth, or the bed suddenly collapses?" Bologue was well aware of Palmer's misfortune, and he firmly refused, "Work is work, life is life, don't mix the two."

"Alright, alright, alright."

Palmer waved his hand. He's the kind of person who, if conditions permit, would live in the Field Operations Department's activity room, and the Order Bureau wisely forbade having beds in the activity room.

"Did you finish writing the report?" Palmer saw the file bag in Bologue's hand.

"Yes, I need to head back to the Order Bureau to submit this," Bologue said, "If you're in a hurry, you can go ahead."

"I don't have anything urgent."

Palmer looked at the tightly closed door, then stretched his body lazily.

"How are things, like with Teda, and Aimou?" Palmer asked again.

This time Palmer was serious, and it's rare for this guy to be serious, but often, when Palmer is serious, he's talking about important matters.

"There are some anomalies, but all within expectations." Bologue said.

"That's not too bad, I wouldn't want to live in the same building as a potential enemy." Palmer said as he pulled out a Flying Knife from under his pillow and put it back into the knife pouch he wore.

Bologue looked at Palmer with a peculiar gaze, while Palmer did not understand and said.

"Didn't your family teach you? When sleeping at someone else's place, you must remain vigilant."

Chapter 242: Fog Abyss Fortress

The Great Rift, Fog Abyss Fortress.

Jia Meng stood in the silent corridor, with stone pillars supporting the dimness. Beyond the pillars lay the rolling Sea of Mist, its dense fog occasionally surging like ocean waves, creeping onto the corridor and submerging Jia Meng's feet.

He walked to the edge of the corridor and looked down at the murkier Sea of Mist below, as if he were high in the sky. But he knew well, this was not the sky; on the contrary, it was the deep underground.

The Shield Guards called this place the Fog Abyss Fortress, a secret fortress located in the Lower Section of the Great Rift, almost entirely submerged in the Sea of Mist.

It seems that the Shield Guards secretly constructed this place. The hidden Void Realm shielded it, along with the cover of the Sea of Mist. Since the secret war, they have been lurking here, undetected by anyone, not even the Order Bureau.

Jia Meng had fantasized about the scene beneath the throne, but his experiences of late left him feeling dreamy, as though trapped in a dream, unable to distinguish between illusion and reality.

Sometimes Jia Meng felt as if he had returned to the Pillar of Royal Authority. The ambiance of this building was eerily similar, with deathly silence and quietness amassing schemes.

But he quickly cast aside these chaotic thoughts, leaving the edge of the corridor and proceeding deeper into the fortress.

Jia Meng was no longer the King's Secret Sword; he now served as a Shield Guard under the Shadow King. He needn't doubt anything; he only needed to loyally execute orders until the King he served touched the true throne and reclaimed the usurped royal power.

Stepping into the deep darkness, Jia Meng once again arrived at the area where he first met the Shadow King. But this time, under the glass dome, the presence of the Shadow King was absent. Instead, it was the Third Seat waiting there, his head lowered, gazing through the glass at the Sea of Mist below.

Looking at that familiar figure, the Third Seat's posture was unchanged from the memory, even though seven years had passed.

His body was covered in cold Iron Armor, his face obscured by the shadow of his helmet, but the trajectory of his gaze could still be observed.

Gazing at the Sea of Mist.

Inside the Fog Abyss Fortress, Shield Guards could often be seen staring at the Sea of Mist. Initially, Jia Meng didn't understand what was so fascinating about it, but since he learned what lay beneath it, he couldn't help but stare as well.

His gaze carried a hint of curiosity, but mostly it was fear—a fear of being so close to such things, even having to feed on its flesh.

Thinking of this, phantom pain emerged in Jia Meng's hand, a reminder of his lost limb.

He remembered the bizarre flesh he once fished out of the Sea of Mist, unimaginable that such things could be hidden beneath the Great Rift.

"Third Seat."

Jia Meng lowered his head slightly and spoke in a deep voice.

Upon hearing the call, the Third Seat retracted his gaze, turned, and looked at Jia Meng, listening to his report.

"The Gray Trade Association is gathering inside the Crossroads of Hesitation, preparing to hold an auction to acquire more value, paying taxes to the Tyrant."

Jia Meng recounted the intelligence in his mind. Every time he grasped such information, he felt an overwhelming sense of insignificance and fear.

Once, Jia Meng was quite arrogant, having become a Prayer Believer and bestowed with a Secret Sword. In his eyes, the world was no longer vast and grand but rather small and within reach.

However, as he served the Shadow King, more and more knowledge, considered forbidden, flooded into his mind. Only then did Jia Meng realize the world was far more magnificent than he had imagined. The former him was like a prisoner inside a cave, mistaking the shadows cast from outside as the entirety of the world.

"It's confirmed that the Gray Trade Association obtained the 'Immortal Heart,' the Holy Relic of the Scarlet Rot Sect, and those cultists have also infiltrated the Great Rift, intent on reclaiming the Holy Relic."

Observing the Third Seat's reaction with peripheral vision, Jia Meng continued.

"The Order Bureau has already noticed traces of the Scarlet Rot Sect, but they are not yet aware of the existence of the Immortal Heart. Once they find out, they will undoubtedly launch an extensive operation, even purging the Great Rift."

After a brief silence, the Third Seat's voice sounded.

"Naturally, the Order Bureau will never allow the Immortal Heart to fall into the Great Rift. Even approaching the Great Rift is not allowed," the Third Seat's gaze hidden in the shadows, "in the end, our conflict is nothing but differing interests. However, if the Immortal Heart awakens that thing, it will lead to absolute destruction."

"Those lunatics from the Scarlet Rot Sect will never miss this opportunity... They probably never planned to reclaim the Immortal Heart but to release it on the spot," Jia Meng said. There was no need to guess; those lunatics would certainly do just that.

"Should we tip off the Order Bureau?" Jia Meng tentatively asked.

As the Third Seat mentioned, often conflicts between different organizations were merely about interests. When interests aligned, they didn't mind lending a hand to the other party.

"No need, our target is also the Immortal Heart. Informing the Order Bureau would only attract their attention," the Third Seat stated.

"They are already paying attention. The outpost of the Fourth Group is entrenched right at the throat," Jia Meng remarked.

"The Order Bureau knows about the appearance of the Scarlet Rot Sect, but anyway, they never guessed that the Immortal Heart would also be here, let alone in the hands of the Gray Trade Association."

Hearing the Third Seat say this, Jia Meng fell silent, then asked.

"What's next? During the Gray Trade Association's auction, should we raid the venue and seize the Holy Relic?"

"I'm still contemplating," the Third Seat pondered, "those guys from the Gray Trade Association have brought a lot of good stuff this time, reportedly even a precious 'fruit.'"

"Fruit?" Jia Meng queried, intrigued.

"I don't know for sure either. Our intelligence network struggles to penetrate the Gray Trade Association, but one thing is certain: these wandering merchants must have brought exceedingly expensive goods to offer to the Tyrant as tribute... or perhaps as tax."

The Third Seat quickly settled on a plan and instructed Jia Meng.

"I can't act directly. It seems like the Order Bureau doesn't regulate the Great Rift, but for a Defender like me, evading their surveillance is still too difficult."

"Most importantly, we cannot be exposed," Jia Meng said.

"Yes, my power is too recognizable. The Order Bureau would easily figure out what's going on, even... deduce who he is."

The Third Seat deliberately emphasized "he," and Jia Meng knew who he was referring to.

The Shadow King.

As a member of the Shield Guard, Jia Meng understood who was hidden beneath the Shadow King's robes.

He had long been mentally prepared, but when it was truly confirmed, the intense shock still swept through his heart, first with daze and confusion, followed by an almost overwhelming joy.

He was still alive and was plotting an attack to reclaim the usurped power.

"I understand." Jia Meng responded.

Every time he thought about this, Jia Meng's heart was engulfed by an inexplicable sense of fervor, feeling that even dying for that person wouldn't be bad.

"Don't worry too much, Nade will take care of everything. With a Negative Power User involved, there shouldn't be any mistakes," the Third Seat said.

Upon hearing Nade's name, Jia Meng nodded with greater determination.

Led by a Negative Power User, accompanied by several Prayer Believers and Condensers, such a force had reached a certain level of strength, and in some small countries, they could even overthrow a regime overnight.

Just then, a wailing sound arose, and a blood-soaked figure was dragged over, as if deliberately abused, the skin of the man had been evenly cut open, countless wounds covered his body, blood constantly seeped out, but none of the wounds were enough to be fatal, keeping the man alive.

Jia Meng knew what was about to happen next, he slowly retreated, standing at one side of the glass round bottom, while the Third Seat gestured to the other Shield Guards, who dragged the man bit by bit to the Third Seat's feet.

The winch slowly turned, an iron hook dangled from above, fitting seamlessly through the round center opening of the glass bottom, appearing to be the true fishing tool.

"It likes them alive, don't let him die too easily." The Third Seat said.

The Shield Guard nodded, directly taking out a syringe and injecting it into the man's body, he groaned again, his face flushed red, his life force fully awakened.

This potion had very severe side effects, but for the man, the side effects were unimportant, after all, he wouldn't survive long enough for them to manifest.

The Third Seat dragged over the iron hook, mercilessly impaling it through the man's abdomen; amidst the intense pain, the man's eyes were bloodshot, fresh blood dripped down.

Afraid the iron hook might tear the man's body apart midway, he was bound with iron chains, tying up his limbs and then hanging him on the hook's chains.

"No... Don't."

The man barely made this sound, unable to utter a complete sentence.

"A pity, if you were a Condenser, you would be far more appealing to it." The Third Seat shook his head regretfully, then lowered his arm, the winch spun rapidly, and the man plunged into the dense Sea of Mist.

The sensation was akin to falling from a building, but the man's experience was far more painful than that; as he descended into the Sea of Mist, his vision was completely obscured by iron-gray dense fog, followed by a burning sensation spreading from his skin.

The corrosive mist bit into the man's body, scorching the skin, his sight began to blur, and the toxic gas filled his throat, leaving him unable to make a sound.

Under the potion's effects, the man still maintained a robust life force, these pains weren't enough to kill him completely.

Under the pull of the hook's chain, the man fell for nearly forty seconds, breaking through the Sea of Mist.

Through blurred vision, he saw the iron-gray ground, then after a dozen seconds, the hook's chain extended to its limit, the man's figure swayed in mid-air before stopping just about a meter above the ground.

The momentum of the fall caused the iron hook to tear apart his internal organs, but the chains bound him, keeping his body intact without shattering it in mid-air; the remaining consciousness was sustained by the potion, allowing him to observe his surroundings with the limited vision.

He couldn't see, nothing was visible, there was only a pervasive grayness, like the world after death.

Absolute silence persisted for a while, then a rustling sound emerged from beneath the man, soon the noise became lively, as if all things were coming to life.

The man didn't know what was happening; at the last moment of his life, he only saw blinding scarlet stretching out from the darkness, like blooming flowers, engulfing him in the heart of the blossom.

...

Scarlet, writhing vine-like tendrils resurrected from beneath the earth, they stretched out, creeping over the man's corpse, the surface of the flesh dotted with tiny mouths, devouring the fresh flesh ravenously.

Slight vibrations came from all directions, soon more scarlet broke through the soil, emerging from their slumber, in an instant, the rugged depression of the dark rift was filled with a tidal wave of scarlet.

Chapter 243: The Crimson Night

As he opened his eyes, even after a sleep, the rest did not alleviate Bologue's fatigue. He sat up from the single bed, eyes staring blankly at the slightly narrow base.

A week had passed since moving into Teda's Alchemy Workshop, and during this period, the interaction among the people was fairly harmonious.

For the majority of the time, Bologue and Palmer wandered within the paths of disarray, inspecting this Land of Chaos.

In order to obtain accurate information, Bologue even went to the Spider Web Bar to meet with Vika once.

Earlier, Bologue thought Vika was just an ordinary bartender, but after that stormy night, Bologue realized that Vika has a deep connection with the Tyrant, and perhaps Vika is also a debtor, except Bologue didn't detect a kindred spirit in him.

Indeed, debtors are quite rare. If his speculation is correct, the paths of disarray are a variant of a religious group, then Vika might have forged a contract with the Tyrant through a contractor.

Yet until now, these thoughts remain mere speculation. Despite writing so many pages of reports and submitting them, there has been no response from Nesanel. Asking Lebius yielded no results; this deputy director's whereabouts are always mysterious.

Bologue's conjectures ended here, but another matter had progressed, which was the trail of the Gray Trade Association.

From Vika's mouth, it was learned that recently the paths of disarray had grown increasingly dangerous, with crime rates soaring, most being extraordinary crimes.

Bologue spent a few Mammon Coins to extract deeper information from Vika; these disturbances were caused by the Gray Trade Association, these peculiar arms dealers always bring chaos with them.

The Alchemy Armament and alchemy materials circulating into the market strengthened the desperadoes in the paths of disarray to some extent, making them even more perilous.

Thus, over the week, though the two seemed to be roaming leisurely, mostly they were searching for traces of the Gray Trade Association. Even though they caused such a great uproar, in the paths of disarray they seemed invisible, leaving not a trace to be found.

This made Bologue feel rather vexed. He considered a carpet search, but the Great Rift was too vast and too intricate, hiding within it would render even the Order Bureau powerless.

Bologue's job progression met numerous obstacles, making his mood increasingly restless lately. He began to long for the simple, day-to-day brawls and battles.

No conspiracies or detective pursuits, just the time, location, and number of enemies, perhaps also whether to capture dead bodies or bring them in alive.

After dressing, Bologue decided not to dwell on work matters. He had other things to attend to.

Today was the weekend, a rare day off, but Bologue did not wake from his own bed; instead, he awoke in the base within the Alchemy Workshop.

This was due to Teda's needs; on weekends, he had to assist him in researching the Alchemy Matrix. To save time, after much consideration, Bologue decided to temporarily stay here over the weekend.

Unquestionably, Bologue hadn't expected Palmer's single bed to actually come in handy.

This was the first day of research, and Bologue was unsure what Teda would discover; he was filled with anticipation.

Thinking of this, Bologue reached into his pocket and took out a rough mechanical watch.

In fact, it shouldn't be called a mechanical watch, as it merely had the casing of one, with the inside cluttered with gears thrown together haphazardly, rough parts carrying some burrs, and a surface neither smooth nor even, riddled with bumps.

At first glance, people would question what this piece had gone through.

This was the result of Bologue's week-long training. Whenever he had time, he would play with the metal, attempting to mold it into a mechanical watch, and it was during such molding attempts that Bologue realized his control over Secret Energy wasn't precise enough.

Fortunately, diligence made up for weaknesses. Bologue learned quickly, even honing his control over Ether a bit.

Ether is a mysterious energy; by burning this energy, the Alchemy Matrix can burst forth miracles surpassing reality. As his command over Ether improved, Bologue could reduce much meaningless Ether consumption when activating Secret Energy and perform more complex drives with Ether.

During the mechanical watch training, Bologue's perception of Ether grew increasingly keen, as molding such fine components required his focused attention, harnessing Ether for solid shaping.

This allowed Bologue to gradually notice previously unperceivable ethereal fluctuations. At this training pace, Bologue believed he would soon master the threshold of Ethereal Perception, learning one more of Ethereal Skills he had acquired.

Aside from this, the gain is Teda's early research on Overlord Xilin.

In the documents, Bologue first roughly understood Xilin Kagader's life events, which were recorded by Teda more detailedly than the information Bologue found within the Order Bureau.

Even still, the information on Xilin is considered extremely scarce.

Just like Palmer said to Bologue, the Kagader Royal Family is very secretive; aside from the King's intelligence, all the royal family members seem to be shrouded in mist, making it difficult to discern their identities.

As if from the moment they are born, royal family members live within the Pillar of Royal Authority, never stepping outside the palace, imprisoning themselves in that splendid cage.

Xilin, who did not inherit the throne, lived most of his childhood within the Pillar of Royal Authority until an event erupted that changed everything.

When Xilin was ten, his father, the current ruler of Kagader, Austin Kagader, held a grand banquet.

He summoned all royal blood relatives, regardless of the thickness or thinness of their bloodlines, to the Pillar of Royal Authority to partake in that jubilant banquet.

According to records, thousands arrived at the Pillar of Royal Authority, and the bands kept playing music from dawn till nightfall, continuously; even at the edge of the Royal City, the melodies could still be heard, and looking up, one could see the brightly lit, seemingly burning High Tower.

No one knew why Austin held such a banquet, nor what he was celebrating, but revelry requires no reason, and everyone joined in the dance.

This crazy banquet continued for seven days. The revelry of the first six days left everyone entirely exhausted, and on the seventh day, Austin suddenly ordered the Pillar of Royal Authority completely sealed off. Guards stood at every exit, and then Austin picked up a sword and, in a crazed manner, began slaughtering every person with Kagader blood before him.

The massacre erupted on the seventh night; music turned into endless wails, and the guards stood outside the Pillar of Royal Authority, none daring to step inside.

Some recalled that it felt as though Hell descended upon the palace, with Demons crawling from the lava, devouring everyone's life.

To escape this mad Hell, countless figures jumped from the Pillar of Royal Authority, smashed to pieces on the ground, blood soaking the palace steps, cascading like a tide, paving a long crimson carpet.

When the morning of the eighth day arrived, everything was over. Blood-soaked Austin sat on his throne; under his Sharp Sword, all related to the Kagader bloodline were slaughtered, save for one—Xilin, at the time only ten years old.

No one knows how Xilin survived, nor what Austin intended; he not only massacred all royal family members but also killed Xilin's six siblings — Austin's own children.

That night was called the Blood Night, leading Austin to be known as the King of Slaughter, with Xilin becoming his sole bloodline continuation. Following that night, the grand Pillar of Royal Authority became deathly silent.

Reading these, Bologue felt madness seeped between every character.

After the Blood Night, Xilin became much quieter, and Austin returned to sanity, as if the Blood Night were merely an illusion, taboo-like, no one dared speak of it.

Later, Xilin's experiences became quite ordinary; after becoming a Condenser, Xilin joined the King's Secret Sword, continuously gaining ranks, and his status within the King's Secret Sword rose alongside.

Until Xilin became the youngest Seeker of Glory in royal history, appointed as the Sword Holder for the King's Secret Sword, subsequently initiating a secret war against the Order Bureau.

One point caught Bologue's attention: after the Blood Night, Xilin left the Pillar of Royal Authority and, until his death in the Cultivation Room, never returned.

Now it seems that Xilin's aggressiveness during the secret war carried an air of courting death. After his death, only the current King of Slaughter, Austin, remains in the Kagader Royal Family, now facing an extinction crisis.

Documents also mention that given Austin's madness during the Blood Night, no one could predict if he, unable to resolve the extinction crisis, might launch an extraordinary war against the Order Bureau, mutually destructive.

This is all the information on Overlord Xilin. No one knows what triggered the Blood Night, nor what Austin thinks, as with Xilin.

Bologue pushed open the door and walked in the Alchemy Workshop, surrounded by mechanical resonations.

Now Overlord Xilin's body is preserved within the Order Bureau, and Bologue bears his Alchemy Matrix, resembling some strange continuation; now this power has fallen into Bologue's hands.

Chapter 244: The Triple Rule

Walking into the Alchemy Workshop's living quarters... it probably counts as a living area. There's a dining table, a kitchen, and Palmer's favorite fridge, with the aroma of food wafting through the air, the constant clanging sounds, and people bustling around, fiddling with pots and pans.

Teda sat at the head of the dining table, picking up a knife and fork, slicing the sausage on the plate. Opposite Teda was an empty chair, with Bologue seated on it.

"How did you sleep?" Teda asked.

"Pretty well."

After a week of interaction, Bologue was less reserved, blending into the environment.

"That's good."

Aimou's voice sounded as she approached with a tray, placing breakfast on the table in front of Bologue.

"Did you make this?"

Bologue glanced at the food on the plate, then at Aimou, who was dressed like a chef, wearing an apron.

"Uh-huh." Aimou nodded.

The conversation that day ended with Aimou leaving angrily. Bologue didn't understand why Aimou was upset, as if this cold alchemy puppet understood life quite well.

Following this, Bologue pondered how to ease the tension between them. After all, keeping the relationship sour wouldn't be good for continuing the investigation.

Surprisingly, the next day Aimou seemed to have forgotten all about it, her attitude unchanged, as if the alchemy puppet bore no grudges.

This was what made Bologue feel helpless. Facing other issues, such as battles between Condensers, he had plenty of resources to learn from, but when facing the alchemy puppet, everything was unknown.

Towards this brand new lifeform, Bologue somewhat understood the feeling of adventurers discovering a new continent, driven by pure curiosity, attempting to comprehend the will beneath the metal shell.

"Don't worry, Aimou's cooking is pretty good," Teda said with a smile.

"I have no sense of taste and can't eat, but as long as I rigorously follow the instructions, I can make decent food," Aimou added appropriately.

Bologue nodded. Even if Aimou hadn't mentioned it, he had no plans to refuse. During the war, he had chewed on tree bark, so no matter how bad this food tasted, it wouldn't surpass the bark.

Forking the food, Bologue chewed a couple of times. Just as Teda said, Aimou's cooking was quite good.

And then... a scene both warm and strange appeared.

On a quiet Saturday morning, inside the peaceful room, Teda and Bologue discussed upcoming matters while enjoying the food Aimou had prepared, harmoniously resembling a normal family's daily life.

But upon deeper thought, an Undead Debtor, a fervent truth seeker, and an alchemy puppet, the three calmly coexisting in one room.

Most importantly, they were not in a normal person's residence but surrounded by the mist of the Great Rift.

Normalcy amidst oddity, everything seemed absurdly out of place.

"You've been a Condenser for a few months now, right?" Teda asked.

"Pretty much?" Bologue calculated the date, not far off from Teda's estimation.

"Are you ready for the next ascension?" Teda asked again.

"Not yet... I don't understand the power well enough. My soul hasn't stabilized yet, not to mention crossing the Triple Law."

As Bologue spoke, he remembered that mechanical watch, realizing his grasp of power was not yet proficient.

In the Condenser's ascension system, after implanting the Alchemy Matrix, the soul, which undergoes a transformation, becomes unstable. It requires waiting for the soul to gradually stabilize and for the cornerstone to become solid again before proceeding with the next tier's ascension.

Apart from these, ascension requires three prerequisites, also known as the Triple Law.

In alchemy theory, the human soul is divided into desire, will, and reason, corresponding to the three substances of salt, sulfur, and mercury, metaphorically referring to the human body, mind, and spirit.

A Condenser aiming to ascend to the next stage must first closely condense each aspect of their soul into a more resilient form. After all three aspects undergo ritual condensation, the crafted cornerstone will elevate the human soul overall, thus touching higher tiers of authority.

Bologue had only recently become a Condenser and was still in the stage of stabilizing his soul, requiring some time before he could conduct the ceremony of the Triple Law.

"That's not bad, at least the Order Bureau will foot the bill for your ceremony," Teda nodded after hearing this. "Many Condensers want to ascend but are first crushed by the alchemy materials consumed by the Triple Law."

Bologue silently agreed, as Teda's point was valid. Conducting the Triple ritual requires a vast amount of alchemy materials, and as the tier increases, the consumption grows correspondingly.

The expansive Order Bureau provides free resources for the ascension ritual of Condensers to Prayer Believers, but beyond the stage of Prayer Believers, individuals must strive on their own. Many alchemy materials, even for the Order Bureau, are extremely scarce.

Fortunately, very few can ascend each year, and the time it takes for each soul to stabilize varies. Some need months, others years, and the process of the ritual is fraught with high risk. Not everyone blindly pursues power.

But these challenges do not exist for Bologue. He is a debtor. Although his soul is not complete, making the ascension ritual difficult, he does not die; he merely has to attempt it multiple times.

"You also provide the implantation of Alchemy Matrix for many people... Do you offer them ascension ritual services?" Bologue asked suddenly.

Teda will implant Alchemy Matrix into ordinary people, charging a high price to keep his Alchemy Workshop operational.

"How could I? My equipment can barely support the implantation ritual, let alone involve the ascension ritual, and it's difficult to gather even alchemy materials," Teda said. "The critical materials are secretly controlled by many Extraordinary Organizations and rarely circulate in the market."

"Indirectly controlling the number of Condensers, is that it?" Bologue said.

"Exactly, it's a consensus among many organizations. They can allow a large number of Condensers to roam outside, but not higher tiers. Rather than spending massive manpower to maintain order, it's better to make ascension difficult." Teda explained.

Bologue understood that even a First Stage Condenser is a formidable existence that ordinary people cannot resist. If they were Prayer Believers or Negative Power Users... if their power were sufficient, they could easily conquer a city.

"But the appearance of the Grey Trade Association changes everything. These people not only bring alchemy armaments but also provide Condensers struggling with ascension enough alchemy materials—if they are willing to pay the price."

Bologue thought of all this, his expression grew serious, and he questioned Teda, "Do you have any connections with the people from the Grey Trade Association?"

"You want to investigate them through me?" Teda understood Bologue's intention. He shook his head, "I am not connected to them, honestly. And even if I were, I can't disclose much to you, right?"

"Indeed."

Bologue realized he was still too naive. Since Teda left the Order Bureau, even though he sat in Teda's home, eating meals made by Aimou, accepting Teda's guidance, cooperating in his research... no matter what he did, it couldn't change the fact that they weren't allies.

They belong to different factions, temporarily linked by the same interest. When the interests no longer align, no one knows what will happen.

"Are you done eating?" Teda asked.

"Yes, shall we start?"

"Yes, let's go to the second floor."

Teda said, picking up the lab coat hanging on the back of the chair, its white hem reaching past his knees.

...

The facilities in the Alchemy Workshop cannot compare to those of the Order Bureau. Under the peculiar attributes of the "Cultivation Room," Bologue could destroy anything as he wished, but here he is restricted.

"Control your power; don't affect the surrounding buildings," Teda repeatedly warned.

The Alchemy Workshop is an enclosed self-circulating entity, with the Void Realm enveloping it. Bologue's Summoning Hand is very suitable for destroying buildings; any damage might cause the enclosed Void Realm to collapse.

Teda had invested a lot of effort here. If Bologue recklessly played and caused a collapse, the old man would definitely kill him, even though Bologue is an Undead.

"I understand," Bologue assured.

Seeing Bologue's serious attitude, Teda felt slightly relieved and then said, "In fact, you should have realized that when your Summoning Hand activates, your Alchemy Matrix needs to extend out first."

"Yes, due to this, there is a brief delay in the activation of my Secret Energy."

Bologue said, summoning the Silver Snake, which crawled along his fingertips, carrying a green trace between its silver scales.

"Actually, we can think of it this way: you are not controlling the substance you touch, but by extending the Alchemy Matrix, you turn those covered substances into part of your body, thereby distorting or modifying that part... like giving orders to your limbs, commanding the extended body part."

Teda observed the Silver Snake and suddenly shared such a theory. From this perspective, the Summoning Hand is akin to the Ascension School.

"Is that so? An interesting idea."

Bologue puzzled over his palm, where the Silver Snake writhed. Suddenly he thought of something and continued.

"Actually... can this be understood as my Alchemy Matrix spreading to the soul of those substances?"

Bologue shifted his gaze and locked eyes with Teda.

"The Alchemy Matrix is rooted in the soul, and these substances also possess a soul, correct?"

Chapter 245: The Mystery of Secret Energy

Soul.

The most mysterious and noble unknown presence among all things, maintaining the shackles of human nature, and the cornerstone for Condensers to embark on the Path of Transcendence.

Since humans recognized the existence of souls, research on the soul has never ceased.

Judging the boundary between humans and Demons by the amount of soul stock, the pale void left after soul removal, the instinctive Bulimia Nervosa driven by the soul longing, the blood-colored Philosopher's

Stone formed through Condensation, and even the memory echoes remaining within the Philosopher's Stone...

Soul, a splendid and beautiful thing.

After Bologue finished this sentence, he fell silent, his blue eyes observing Teda's expression, trying to capture all his reactions within his sight.

"Soul?"

Teda whispered, plunged into contemplation due to Bologue's judgment. After a while, he smiled and shook his head.

"Who knows about such a thing?"

"You don't know either?" Bologue was somewhat surprised, thinking Teda would know more.

"How could I know? You are the first Condenser to successfully seize the Power of Dominator in seven years. Before you appeared, all our research materials came from those surviving memories and Overlord Xilin's corpse."

Teda sighed, but soon he perked up, looking at Bologue like he was observing a treasure.

"You should have learned about Xilin's life, right?" Teda continued, "In the King's Secret Sword privy to the bloody night, someone once called Xilin a fugitive, his whole life escaping from his father, fleeing the nightmare of the bloody night."

Bologue nodded, having thoroughly studied the materials Teda had provided him before coming.

The impact of the bloody night was enormous, and once the mad truth was exposed to the public, it would only incite turmoil. Therefore, the King's Secret Swords spent a long time sealing and modifying the information.

Under layers of lies, the truth of the bloody night was finally covered up, and those who died vanished silently into history.

"During his lengthy escape, Xilin joined the King's Secret Sword, constantly advancing and raising his status. There were several times King of Slaughter tried to recall him, but Xilin refused... he defied the king's orders," said Teda.

"But he's the only heir of King of Slaughter. Even though he defied the orders, the king wouldn't kill him; at most, he would just confine him like an animal," Bologue stated.

"That's right, but interestingly, the King's Secret Swords all support Xilin. Although they directly serve the royal family, now there's only two people left in the royal family, and in many of their eyes, young Xilin is far more worthy of allegiance than the mad King of Slaughter."

Teda continued to speak of the unknown secrets.

"According to intelligence, Xilin's conflict with the Pillar of Royal Authority was ongoing, but as he grew stronger, the Pillar of Royal Authority's restraint on him weakened daily until Xilin became a Seeker of Glory. Even King of Slaughter had to admit he could no longer control his child."

"I've read all this in the materials... is there anything noteworthy?" Bologue asked curiously.

"Didn't you notice the contradiction in it?"

Teda expressed his surprise slightly, thinking Bologue would notice this point.

Bologue fell silent for a few seconds, a strong sense of astonishment rising in his heart, and spoke.

"We still don't know why King of Slaughter wanted to initiate the bloody night, nor do we understand why only Xilin survived within the entire Kagader Royal Family.

But if King of Slaughter wanted to confine Xilin, the simplest way would be to have Xilin live as an ordinary person rather than implanting him with the Alchemy Matrix, making him a Condenser."

Silver Snake coiled around the palm, its exquisite scales scraping against Bologue's skin, bringing a slight chill.

"In that case, Xilin couldn't possibly become a Condenser, nor bear such bizarre power, let alone become a Seeker of Glory."

Listening to Bologue's words, Teda nodded with satisfaction, affirming.

"This is a judgment circulating within the Order Bureau. Perhaps Xilin and King of Slaughter are opposing forces, and within this opposition, another power helped Xilin... Keep in mind during the bloody night, he was just a child. Even if someone within the King's Secret Sword favored him, they couldn't protect him under King of Slaughter's hand."

"Overlord Xilin is the most powerful Sword Holder in the history of the King's Secret Sword. The Alchemy Matrix he carried was, until my appearance, an unsolved mystery," Bologue murmured, "If the Order Bureau's judgment is correct, King of Slaughter definitely wouldn't hand such power over to Xilin..."

"We hypothesized another mysterious and powerful existence that protected Xilin, nurtured his growth, and bestowed upon him this Alchemy Matrix."

Teda's expression became excited, the frenzy completely released on his aged face, as he reached out his hand, pointing at Bologue.

"We don't know who that existence really is, but now... this power has been transferred to you."

...

Their excited discussion didn't last long, as Bologue and Teda both preferred hands-on practice over theoretical discussions. As a result, the empty workbench was suddenly filled with various metal products.

Bologue, like a blacksmith, repeatedly hammered the metal with Secret Energy, shaping the material he touched. As bursts of blue light erupted, Teda put on thick goggles and watched from the side.

It felt like a construction site, with Bologue as a skilled master using a welding gun to repair the metal in his hands, while Teda was a diligent apprentice wearing a protective visor, observing the master's work.

Alright, Bologue had to admit that Palmer had a strange infectiousness. After working with him for a long time, one's thoughts seemed to deteriorate, and sometimes would suddenly come up with some lame jokes.

Bologue could effectively control these impulses, so during work, he remained the cold expert, taking all of his partner's jokes as if he was talking to himself.

The goggles Teda wore were not protective visors for vision protection; they were a type of alchemy equipment known as "Ether Flow Goggles."

Ether, like air, permeated the world and was omnipresent. Correspondingly, it also had its flow trajectory like air currents. Driven by a few Condensers, Ether could even stir up invisible storms.

The Ether Flow Goggles were a type of alchemy weaponry that allowed these invisible forces to possess color and form.

In the eyes of some Condensers who mastered Ethereal Perception, Ether was vaguely visible. Still, that demand was too high for Alchemists, so most used Ether Flow Goggles to observe Ether.

At this moment, Teda could clearly see the ghostly blue trails winding around Bologue's body. The denser the Ether, the more vivid and bright the color, even turning into blinding daylight. The thinner the Ether, the dimmer the color became, nearing a grayish-white colorless state.

Upon learning about this device, Bologue's first reaction was to think if it could be used in combat, but Teda quickly dispelled Bologue's idea.

The observation of Ether Flow Goggles had some delay and would interfere with vision, making them unsuitable for combat. However, this was not absolute. According to Teda, some Condensers from the Origin School would use such equipment in combat.

"Hearing you describe it is one thing, but actually seeing it is really interesting... First, the Alchemy Matrix extends into the material, then Ether is infused, causing it to distort."

Teda took off the Ether Flow Goggles and rubbed his slightly sore eyes, speaking to Bologue.

"It reminds me of my apprentice days when there was something new waiting for me every day, and curiosity was like an unquenchable flame."

"That sounds nice," Bologue said, releasing the Secret Energy, and the brilliance emanating from him dimmed, "Did you discover anything?"

"Hmm... Actually, it's my first encounter with someone like you from the Commanding School," Teda thought for a moment and said something rather perplexing.

"What do you mean?"

"The Commanding School uses Ether as a medium to command the substance, but you're different. You need to extend the Alchemy Matrix over before issuing commands," Teda explained, "Remember your partner? He was also from the Commanding School, but you didn't see the Alchemy Matrix's glow covering the storm during combat, did you?"

"Of course, you can't say it's so definitive. The distinction among schools is merely our way of categorizing based on the characteristics of Secret Energy, thus making it easier for us to understand.

The schools have evolved over the years, from the original six schools to the current eight, so seeing a few peculiar exceptions is not impossible either."

Teda pulled over a chair and sat down, turning his back to Bologue as he began writing something resembling experimental records on the workbench.

"Do you mean I'm an exception in the Commanding School?"

Bologue didn't feel much about it, having already become accustomed to the mysteries and strangeness of Overlord Xilin. He no longer thought his Alchemy Matrix was that simple.

"Probably... maybe you're not even from the Commanding School," Teda said something astonishing.

"What did you say? Not from the Commanding School," Bologue was stunned.

"Didn't you hear what I said? The division of schools is merely the classification of different nature Secret Energies. Sometimes there are such exceptions; they fit multiple school classifications. When it's undetermined, this kind of Secret Energy is classified as from the Deceitful Structure School."

Teda continued, elaborating on his thoughts.

"Of course, your current Secret Energy traits are still primarily from the Commanding School, but with your advancement, this power will gradually reveal its full nature, at which point its true essence will be known."

Teda turned his head, looking at the slightly surprised Bologue, and said with a profound tone.

"I hope I have the chance to witness that day."

Chapter 246: Alive

The research on the Alchemy Matrix didn't last long. After completing the preliminary data collection, Teda buried his head on the workbench, writing and sketching, calculating something that Bologue couldn't understand anyway.

Free now, Bologue didn't disturb Teda. Instead, he returned to the small outpost, lay on his single bed, and both thought about the recent discussion and shaped the rough metal blank in his hand.

Initially, multitasking like this was difficult for Bologue, but he quickly adapted after overcoming the challenging early learning phase.

The metal in his hand constantly changed and twisted along with Bologue's thoughts.

Since learning about Overlord Xilin's life, Bologue has felt something indescribable inside—like he possesses the same power as Xilin, as if some mysterious heritage has been transferred to him in this strange way.

If possible, Bologue would want to see Xilin again, but after the implant ceremony, those gray-robed men took Xilin away into the Order Bureau. Given Xilin's terrifying power, even after he died and was sealed in a container, the security level was the highest.

Bologue thought that unless he had Nesanel's permission, it would probably be difficult to see Xilin again.

Stopping the shaping of the metal, Bologue placed the rough iron block on a nearby box, then took an Ether Flow Spectacles out of his pocket.

He got this from Teda and was very interested in the kind of thing that could directly observe Ether. Putting on the Ether Flow Spectacles, Bologue looked around.

Deep blue mist filled the room, and faintly visible Ether flows followed their predetermined paths, moving between the walls.

These Ether flows permeated every corner of the Alchemy Workshop; if Bologue opened the door, he would see all the Ether flows converging on the central High Tower, thus maintaining the Void Realm's operation.

Apart from these, the few pieces of equipment placed in the outpost booth had Ether concentrations noticeably higher than the surrounding environment.

A sudden knock interrupted Bologue's observation. He stuffed the Ether Flow Spectacles back into his pocket and called out loudly.

"Come in."

Bologue knew who it was. Though the Alchemy Workshop was big, there were only a few people living here.

The door was slowly pushed open, and Aimou tilted her head in, blinking as she surveyed Bologue with a halo in her eyes.

"Is the work done?" she asked.

"Yes, it's temporarily finished," Bologue replied.

In the research on the Alchemy Matrix, he could offer little contribution and often felt more like an experimental subject under Teda's various tests.

"Oh... Would you like some fruit?"

Aimou entered fully, steadily holding a fruit tray.

"Sure, thank you."

Bologue did not refuse Aimou's offer, taking the tray and placing it on the table. Turning back, he saw Aimou had no intention of leaving but stood in the room, curiously looking around.

Since the outpost was established, this seemed her first time inside, like a wild cat wandering into a new area, eagerly inspecting every new thing.

Bologue had considered that, being in the same room, Teda and Aimou might enter the outpost. Thus, he remained somewhat cautious of them, locking many important things in a safe.

Sitting in the chair, Bologue realized that Aimou still had some differences from real humans, or rather, she had many contradictory aspects.

For instance, Aimou silently surveyed everything within the room, reminding Bologue of a scene from a drama where a mother disregards her child's opposition and tidies up the house.

Aimou did not seem aware of any of this, perhaps because the books she read didn't mention these scenarios.

"Want to... sit down?"

Bologue broke the silence, feeling Aimou standing there wasn't quite right.

"Okay."

Aimou might have felt Bologue was considerate, yet she was entirely unaware of how peculiar her actions seemed.

Fortunately, Bologue had enough patience for this unique life form. Communicating with Aimou bore a special experience, difficult to find with others.

She seemed like a complex contradiction, both innocent and mature, naively yet clearly recognizing everything around her.

Bologue thought Aimou might genuinely need more interaction with humans—at least she should spend more time in human environments, as her entire understanding within this enclosed Alchemy Workshop came from books, and no matter how sufficient theoretical knowledge was, she still needed some practical experience to verify it.

As for why Bologue suddenly thought this, it was because since Aimou sat down, she had been staring at him without shifting her gaze, not even blinking.

Initially, Bologue could tolerate this scrutinizing gaze, naturally eating sliced apple chunks under it, swallowing the fruit, and flipping through documents.

But nearly five minutes passed, and Aimou's gaze had not shifted. Bologue awkwardly ate all the fruit on the tray.

"Um..."

Bologue couldn't hold back, turning to say something, but Aimou responded faster.

The halo in her eyes quickly contracted, and Aimou's tone sounded like a sudden realization, stepping in front of Bologue and picking up the tray.

"Want some more, right?"

Bologue understood. While feeding him, she conveniently observed him. Yet seeing Aimou's observing manner, he reckoned she might overfeed him.

As an Undead, Bologue has experienced numerous ways to die. If he wanted, he could write a horror novel about it. Yet among all these methods, he hasn't tried dying from overeating.

"No, no, no, I've had enough," Bologue said.

"Huh?"

Hearing that Bologue was full, Aimou seemed a bit flustered, as if Bologue had disrupted some plan of hers.

"What exactly are you trying to do?" Bologue asked seriously, "Say it directly."

Perhaps Aimou was shy, or maybe embarrassed; from her slightly contrived body movements and the restless changes in the halo of her eyes, Bologue could sense it.

Ever since he learned that she uses Alice's Philosopher's Stone as an energy source and potentially influenced by its Mind Projection, Bologue kept observing her every detail.

For example, when the halo in her eyes reflects back as stars, it means she's happy; if it turns into waves, she's feeling uneasy.

"Are you...really an Undead?" Aimou questioned.

"Do you want me to die to prove it?"

As Bologue spoke, he pulled out the Short-barreled Shotgun from his waist, using this thing for suicide would blast his brain to pieces.

"No, that's not it."

Aimou quickly waved her hand in refusal; she felt Bologue was a peculiar fellow, as if death was already mundane for him.

To be exact, both of them were peculiar.

An Undead indifferent to death after having died too many times, and a strange and new life born in this world, odd and exotic.

Bologue and Aimou are too special to be categorized into any specific group of people, even whether they are truly human might be doubted by some.

"I want to know, what does it feel like not to die?"

It seemed like a forbidden secret, Aimou asked cautiously.

"What does it feel like...it doesn't feel like anything."

Bologue didn't know how to answer Aimou; ever since becoming a Condenser, it had been a while since he last experienced death.

"If I had to say what it feels like, it's a heart-wrenching pain, then your consciousness falls into peace, akin to falling asleep, followed by awakening."

Bologue explained without mentioning that he sees that empty and desolate scenery every time he dies.

"Like sleeping?"

Aimou's voice dropped; she didn't comprehend what sleep meant; for an Alchemy Puppet, there is only dormancy.

"Do you think I'm 'alive' then?"

Aimou suddenly asked, Bologue's image reflected in her azure pupils, the halo slightly tightened as if imprisoning Bologue within.

"Probably; for humans, being alive means the brain is thinking, the heart is beating. For you, your Constant Motion Core is running, and your thoughts haven't ceased."

Bologue gradually began to follow Aimou's line of thinking, as this fellow always suddenly discusses some inexplicable issues, one moment talking about what a movie is, the next discussing life and death.

"But my heart isn't beating." Aimou tapped her chest.

"Of course not, you're an Alchemy Puppet." Bologue raised his voice a bit.

Aimou seemed even more puzzled, then suddenly reached out to touch Bologue's face.

Bologue was stunned, and even more unexpected was when Aimou stepped closer, her cold hands grasping Bologue's face, squeezing his expression forcefully under the cold touch.

"Strange."

Aimou seemed to have encountered a problem, and the halo deflated.

"Hmm? So that's how human skin feels..."

Aimou murmured to herself while squeezing, Bologue evidently became the guinea pig in her hands.

After a brief panic, Bologue somewhat understood Aimou's thoughts; human common sense clearly didn't apply to her, and since she gained consciousness, she lived in this isolated Alchemy Workshop, her only contact being Teda, who harbored extreme aversion toward Aimou.

This was Aimou's first intimate contact with a human; she tried to obtain as much information as possible through her rough perception, learning about humans from Bologue.

Suddenly Aimou reached out her hand toward Bologue.

Unlike her torso, Aimou's torso was a transparent gel-like substance, soft like human skin, but her limbs carried a metallic chill as they pressed firmly against Bologue's chest.

Feeling the faint tremor beneath his chest, Aimou muttered.

"Is this...being alive?"

Chapter 247: Strange Life

Bologue Lazarus, a debtor who has lived for nearly a century.

In his extraordinary life, Bologue has experienced many thrilling and strange things, from wars to games with the Devil, he has wandered between life and death, witnessing the various sins and cruelties of the world with indifference.

It can be said that Bologue has experienced far more than most people ever have, but in careful comparison, while gaining this legendary life, Bologue has also lost some of his ordinariness.

He still remembers his initial thoughts when he joined the army; he simply wanted to earn some tuition fees for himself.

Since then, Bologue's life took a path difficult for ordinary people to comprehend. He ultimately failed to get into a university and did not live an ordinary life like most people, let alone any so-called youth or love stories.

Calculated by age, Bologue's youth was dedicated to war and the Black Prison.

Aimou pressed her hand against Bologue's chest in a contemplative manner, the two were very close, and Bologue could clearly feel the ether flowing inside Aimou and the faint mechanical humming.

She now resembled Teda, with a similar curiosity, while he was the unlucky test subject.

Aimou's entire understanding of humanity almost entirely came from books, and he was the first human she could touch and understand up close.

It seemed as if she wanted to satisfy all her curiosity and thirst for knowledge through him—a peculiar lifeform exploring and understanding another lifeform.

Suddenly, Bologue realized that in Aimou's eyes, perhaps humans were also strange, just as she once said, she didn't understand why humans needed to eat periodically or spent their precious time sleeping.

In the eyes of this Alchemy Puppet, perhaps humans, who created her, were the pitiful ones, whereas Aimou had escaped the constraints of fragile flesh, transforming into a powerful Steel Body.

"Hmm, your heart rate is normal, and so is your blood oxygen..." Aimou suddenly spoke.

Bologue was taken aback and only after a while did he slowly say, "Are you giving me a check-up?"

"Just checking the human data, what's wrong?"

"..."

The novel did not include those beautiful scenes that inspire fantasy, but only showed Aimou judging whether the upright naked ape before her was healthy.

Bologue suddenly thought of something interesting, hesitated for a moment, and then asked.

"Aimou, what type of... human do you like?"

If he were to say this to Belli, she would probably beam, with a mischievous grin, patting his shoulder while saying those awful words.

"Although Bologue, you look quite good, you're not my type, but if you really want, I can barely make an exception, but you understand the cost, right?"

Saying it with Belli's characteristic laugh, like a mad scientist achieving a conspiracy.

But it was entirely different with Aimou; she moved her hand away from Bologue's chest, crossed her arms, and thought carefully.

"Hmm... hmm?"

The halo stretched out again, Aimou thought.

"Body weight, height, hemoglobin, white blood cells, platelets, transaminase, albumin, serum creatinine, serum potassium, and other human metrics should all be within normal ranges."

Aimou explained earnestly.

If these words came from someone else's mouth, Bologue would think the person was a parasite, preparing to find a suitable host, but from Aimou's lips, Bologue understood she was serious, because that's what the books say—such humans are healthy and good.

Bologue rubbed his forehead slightly, indeed, as he expected, this peculiar lifeform views the world differently from humans, at least for now.

"What's wrong, you seem troubled."

Forcing Aimou to think like humans is still difficult at the moment, she is completely unaware of Bologue's worries.

"Sick? Speaking of which, I am quite similar to humans in this regard," Aimou said while twisting her wrist, "my wrist joint always makes a friction sound, no matter how it's maintained."

"Could you do me a favor?"

Suddenly, Aimou said again, and she and Bologue were very close, almost head-to-head.

"What are you going to do?"

Bologue remained calm; not living a normal life indeed brings some regret, but after experiencing many storms, Bologue's mentality is such that few can shake him.

"I want to understand humans, your thoughts, everything about you." Aimou whispered, as if it were some unspeakable secret.

"Why do you suddenly want to understand humans?" Bologue asked.

"Hmm? Does it need a reason?"

After pausing for a moment, Aimou continued speaking, giving Bologue an unexpected answer.

"I've read similar stories in books; some humans believe in the existence of God, thinking God created humans, thus God is the creator of humanity."

"You were created by humans. Do you consider humans your creator, your God?" Bologue retorted.

"I'm not sure. Maybe the teacher is my creator, but in terms of human relationships, he could be seen as... my father?"

At this point, Aimou hesitated for a while, carefully observing Bologue's reaction.

"Who knows?"

Bologue's voice was somewhat pale, though he wanted to use a firmer tone to tell Aimou that Teda is not your father, but your creator.

He was very aware that once such ethical relationships occur, it inevitably involves emotional investment, which is fatal to anyone among them, and this is what Belli has always worried about, entrusting Bologue to be vigilant against.

But when he truly voiced such words, the usually cold Bologue unexpectedly showed a trace of mercy.

Aimou possesses self-awareness, perhaps influenced by Alice's echo, carrying the shadow of another person. Yet when she truly appears before you and interacts, it's hard to view her as a cold Alchemy Puppet.

Aside from this metallic shell, sometimes Bologue feels Aimou is a real human, a peculiar and naive life.

Bologue couldn't bear to tell Aimou, you're merely a cold tool, a means to fulfill Teda's desires. This was too cruel for Aimou, even if she couldn't comprehend the complex emotions of humans.

The chaotic thoughts flashed through his mind, and Bologue suddenly became alert, looking at the harmless Aimou before him with a gaze that somehow carried some hostility.

Humans sometimes have a destructive urge towards cute things to keep themselves calm and safe, avoiding falling into them; Bologue felt he was in such a state now.

Bologue made a mistake. When he felt this was cruel to Aimou, he unconsciously projected his emotions, and everything happened like this, silently.

The most rational judgment should tell Aimou this is absolutely impossible.

Aimou keenly sensed the change in Bologue's emotions; she is always like this, dull in some aspects, yet very perceptive in others.

"Did I... do something wrong?"

Aimou appeared somewhat helpless, cautiously trying to please Bologue, "Would you like some more fruit?"

She doesn't have the ability to eat and digest, but from books, humans feel satisfied and happy when eating. As long as she follows what the books say, there can't be a mistake, just like the breakfast she made herself, even though she can't smell the food's scent, she still manages to make delicious food.

Bologue shook his head, feeling a bit helpless at her clumsy way of trying to please, then he told Aimou.

"Nothing, just thinking about some work issues."

Bologue didn't want to vent any anger on Aimou, making him feel like he was bullying a child, and this child still had very simple thoughts, merely wanting to understand herself more.

If facing a thug, Bologue could throw a heavy punch; but facing a child, Bologue really didn't know what to do... he hasn't taken care of a child before.

"Oh... okay, then I'll leave first."

Aimou became much more reserved, putting away the plates, turning around to flee and closing the door.

In the small cabin of the base, Bologue was again left alone. Enjoying space didn't bring much relief to Bologue; instead, he became even more troubled.

The troubled appearance of Teda flashed before him, and Bologue suddenly felt a bit understanding of Teda.

Controlling emotional release, this sounds good, but who can execute it perfectly? Even spending a long time with a dog inevitably results in emotional development, let alone Aimou, who is so human-like.

The more he understands these things, the harder it is for Bologue to fathom Teda's thoughts.

When he sees Aimou, who incredibly resembles his daughter, even carrying the shadow of her personality, what kind of feelings does he hold?

Does he view Aimou as a replacement for Alice, satisfying his pitiful inner self, or coldly see her as a tool completely ignoring human nature?

Bologue finds it hard to comprehend; even experts have areas they aren't good at. This problem that can't be solved through violence is exactly what Bologue finds difficult to handle.

He forcefully leaned back, trying hard to relax his nerves, comforting himself by saying it's just messy entanglements of emotions, identity, and ethics.

As long as it doesn't involve life and death, such matters are not considered problems.

Yes, as long as it doesn't involve life and death.

Bologue squinted his eyes, appearing to thoroughly relax, but suddenly a turbulent Ether flow surged indoors, followed by the black box under the table unfolding, emitting a glow of Ether.

Bologue was stunned for two seconds, then Ether violently stabbed into his body, and the whistle by his ear was activated by another force, with Lebius's voice echoing in his mind.

"Bologue, urgent situation."

Chapter 248: Crossing the Abyss

Scorching bullets ricocheted within the enclosed room, punching holes after holes into the walls, shattering wooden boards and windows. The icy wind carrying toxic mist surged in, swirling violently around noses and mouths.

Kemp pressed tightly against the cover behind him, checking the remaining ammunition in his pistol. Scorching light flickered in his eyes. With a deep breath and gathering courage, he swiftly leaned out, firing back at the enemy at the end of the corridor.

Fire quickly, retreat quickly; just as he had learned in training. Yet even so, a stray bullet grazed him, tearing his fabric and leaving a shallow blood mark on his calf.

Vision dim, amidst the violent gunfire, Kemp leaning against the wall, faintly heard the wail of the enemy, seemingly hit by his gunfire.

But soon more footsteps came, several guns were set up again at the end of the corridor, closely watching his position.

For Kemp, this should be the worst day in his brief career, and if he was any unluckier, it might as well be his last day of service.

"Shelley, are you alright?"

Kemp asked nervously, holding onto his gun, to the partner beside him.

"I'm okay, it should be manageable."

Shelley's voice came, sitting on the ground, pressing wooden boards against her injured calf, tearing her clothes into strips, tightly wrapping them around to fix the injured leg.

She struggled to stand up, though every movement brought intense pain, she gritted her teeth to hold on, for compared to dying here, this pain was nothing.

"These lunatics," Shelley cursed, her pale face covered with sweat.

"I'm sorry, it was my mistake."

Kemp apologized briefly; the current scenario was insufficient for him to express more apologies. They had to think of a way to survive.

"It's all because of the Alchemy Armament sold by the Gray Trade Association, which makes these guys troublesome." Shelley also picked up a pistol, ready to throw into battle again.

In the past, dealing with these thugs was not difficult for the two of them, even if the opponent had a Condenser, ending the battle was just a matter of time. But this time was different, these thugs took out one strange Alchemy Armament after another. The nature of these weapons was not strange, but like explosives, each had tremendous power, forcing the two of them to keep their heads down.

In comparison, their counterattack seemed so powerless, but there was nothing they could do about it. Kemp and Shelley were Origin School Condensers, inherently lacking means of direct kill, even if they could use Ether to launch some impact. But as First Stage Condensers, the strength and distance of attacks were strictly limited.

The most important thing was that according to the plan, the two were just here to gather intelligence and had no preparation for direct confrontation with the enemy. But with Kemp's mistake, they got exposed during the operation, attempting to flee, they got trapped here, with no retreat.

"Leader, how long until you arrive? If you don't hurry, you might need to collect our corpses soon." Shelley muttered to herself.

In the dim tunnel, the subway whizzed past, in the swaying carriage, the fully-armed Yas responded with a grim look.

"I'm on my way, hold on."

Yas' voice echoed in her mind, Shelley smiled bitterly, then the strong Ethereal Fluctuation made her gloomy emotions vanish. The rushing flow of Ether gathered together, as if accumulating something.

"Get down!"

Shelley shouted, pressing Kemp to the ground. At some point, the suppressing gunfire disappeared, replaced by gradually rising high temperatures, as faint sparks emerged in the dark hallway.

Spark expanded and enlarged within breaths, as if a Red Dragon roared loudly, spewing out scorching dragon breath. The soaring flames illuminated the darkness, engulfing everything around.

High temperatures and heat waves rushed into the room instantly, Shelley struggled to raise her hand, an ethereal white shield wrapping around her and Kemp. Countless fine pure white lines whirled crazily, isolating the flames and heat.

This was Shelley's mastered Ethereal Skill: Ether Barrier, capable of creating a shield through Ether control, either around her or outside, to fend off external attacks.

Blinding currents flashed on the barrier, accompanied by constantly erupting sparks, until Shelley couldn't sustain it anymore, the barrier shattered, the remaining flames roared out the window, spitting massive black smoke with sparks.

The room was completely filled with black smoke, burnt odors filled the nostrils, making Kemp cough violently. He looked at the barely alive Shelley beside him, laboriously lifting her onto his shoulder.

The two stumbled, leaping out of the window, repeated battles had left them exhausted. Rolling in the thick smoke, they fell onto the muddy ground, surrounded by swirling mist, each breath brought a slight burning sensation.

"Kemp, are you still alive?" Yas' voice echoed in his mind.

"Still alive... but almost dead."

Kemp dragged the injured Shelley; during the fight, Shelley had released the Ether Barrier several times, each time only ending when she couldn't sustain it anymore.

At this moment, Shelley's Ether was nearly depleted; in such case, she was no different from an ordinary person.

Kemp didn't plan to leave Shelley behind, as this operation blunder was caused by him. He had underestimated the opponent's vigilance, leading to the current predicament.

Chapter 249: Crossing the Abyss_2

"We might not hold on until you get here."

Kemp could hear the approaching footsteps, but more importantly, he could clearly sense the surge of Ether. A Condenser was getting closer, along with some weaker etheric reactions belonging to those lethal Alchemy Armaments.

With the arrival of the Gray Trade Association, a large amount of Alchemy Armament flooded the market, arming these thugs to the teeth.

"Don't give up, you're very close to the Great Rift; the rescue team is heading towards you," Yas said.

"The Great Rift?"

Kemp quickly surveyed the surroundings. The two unlucky souls weren't exactly in the Great Rift but at the edge where it bordered the surface. Mist drifted here, and there were twisted and malformed buildings, marking this place as the transitional zone between the Great Rift and Opus.

The Fourth Group?

Kemp remembered the mysterious Special Operations Group, always roaming the Great Rift, seldom seen within the Order Bureau. They were probably the only ones who could come to the rescue from within the Great Rift.

"Sorry, it's my dereliction of duty." Kemp continued to apologize.

The mist inside the Great Rift had a bizarre interfering ability. In such a critical situation, even a Curved Path Breakthrough would take some time to open a passage, and the passage would be very unstable.

"Stop the chit-chat and find a way to survive," Yas' voice grew firm. If possible, he didn't want to lose any team members.

The chaos brought by the Gray Trade Association to Opus meant that the Sixth Group was tasked with dealing with these thugs, investigating their actions and preparing to wipe them out.

In theory, Kemp and Shelley's actions, even if they went wrong, should have allowed them to retreat unscathed. But clearly, these two rookies underestimated the danger posed by the thugs armed with Alchemy Armament.

Alchemy Armament was extremely expensive, beyond what these thugs could afford. However, the Gray Trade Association thoughtfully prepared different goods for different clients.

They sold these people a large amount of inferior Alchemy Armament, each weapon carrying deadly firepower, correspondingly lacking stability, but the thugs didn't care at all.

For ordinary people who weren't Condensers, the merchants sold items like Alchemy Warheads, Alchemy Armament that didn't require Ether activation. Although they were consumables, with these added firepowers, not only the thugs but even ordinary people could become deadly.

The two found themselves in such a sorry state under the barrage and the fierce attacks from the hostile Condensers.

This is the daily life of a Field Staff, dancing on the edge of life and death.

"Head towards the Crossing Abyss Bridge."

Suddenly, another unfamiliar voice joined the Heart Core Net, directly echoing in Kemp's mind.

"Who are you?" Kemp asked.

"Follow his instructions!" Yas' voice rose, dispelling all of Kemp's doubts.

Indeed, in such a life-threatening situation, as long as they could survive, following a stranger's instructions wouldn't be an issue, even if a ghost or a god offered a hand, he wouldn't mind grasping it tightly.

The distorted buildings resembled a dark forest growing wantonly. Maniacal laughter and gunfire resounded from behind, immediately followed by a thundering explosion, blinding flames roaring forth.

Kemp thought he was under attack, but it seemed more like the Alchemy Armament had exploded uncontrollably. He dismissed such chaotic thoughts and instead looked up at the gray shadow standing above the dense fog.

It was a bridge spanning the Great Rift, like a miraculous man-made construct, connecting the urban areas on either side of the Great Rift. The bridge was bustling with traffic, with light rail trains speeding beneath it.

The people of Opus called it the Crossing Abyss Bridge, a name that simply meant the Long Bridge across the abyss.

There were three such bridges over the Great Rift, connecting urban areas sliced apart by the Great Rift and playing an extremely important role in the city's traffic and logistics.

The mist rising from within the Great Rift enshrouded them, making it difficult for anyone to see the full view of the Crossing Abyss Bridge. From a distance, it appeared as a fortress rising from the abyss.

Kemp didn't understand the intention of that unfamiliar voice, but he earnestly executed the command, arduously heading towards the black silhouette spanning the Sea of Mist, step by step.

"I am very close to it."

Kemp said, setting Shelley down. They both lowered their breathing, hiding behind a low house, praying to stay hidden a little longer. Every extra minute survived enhanced their chance of survival.

"Do you still have Ether?" the voice asked.

"I do, why?" Kemp asked.

"Release it all, create as strong an Ethereal Fluctuation as you can, otherwise I can't find you."

"What? I'll die!"

Kemp's voice rose. Releasing all his Ether would not only bring him to Ether depletion but also reveal his position to the hostile Condensers.

No matter how close the rescue team of the Fourth Group was, after the Ether burst, the thugs would certainly find them first.

"Trust me."

The other's words were extremely cold, as if indifferent to his life and death.

Kemp looked at Shelley beside him. She nodded at him, affirming the situation.

"Alright... fine!"

Kemp decided to trust the mysterious voice this once. If he couldn't survive, it would also be the last time.

Taking a deep breath, he summoned the remaining Ether within his body, calling upon the surging Ether around him, intertwining them and injecting them into the Alchemy Matrix, bursting forth with heavy brilliance, invisibly stirring a storm.

Kemp's pupils were covered by a blazing white, this was the purest Ether.

There was no need to kill, no need for defense, just release, blooming with all his might like a flower.

The thugs in the mist were like a pack of wolves smelling blood, all looking towards the spot where Kemp was hiding, cheering yet cautiously closing in.

Gunfire roared, Kemp's ears filled with the sounds of intense gunfire.

"Where are you?"

Kemp demanded, while continuing to fire back, trying to buy time.

"I'm here."

"You're here? Where are you! I don't see you!"

Upon hearing the voice's reply, Kemp's heart surged with uncontrollable joy, but the joy was shattered by gunfire. In this grayish surrounding, he saw no sign of reinforcements, just he and Shelley were waiting for death.

His voice grew hoarse, even carrying a tinge of anger, feeling as though he were being toyed with before dying.

"Look up."

The voice replied.

"I'm above you."

Kemp looked up, gazing at the overcast sky.

Gray mist cloaked the Crossing Abyss Bridge in a dark shadow. On it, signal lights flashed, barely sketching out the bridge's shape, followed by waves of metallic agitation.

Something was coming. Kemp didn't know what it was, but he sensed it was a terrifying monster tearing through the metal path, swirling with cyclones and carrying a heavy hum and heat.

It was here.

Dazzling headlights cut through the darkness as a silver-white light rail like a serpent broke through the mist, rumbling past beneath the bridge, its carriages faintly echoing with screams, passengers terrified by the blade piercing in from outside the carriage.

Outside the carriage, the uninvited guest gripped the hilt to anchor himself, arriving through the mist with the light rail. He gazed at the dense fog below, then removed the Ether Flow Goggle worn over his eyes.

He drew the folding blade.

In Kemp's gaze, a shadow descended from the sky, the wind lifting his cloak like an owl perched on a dead tree. It spotted its prey, spreading its wings, descending with deadly talons and a deathly howl.

"Rupert's Tail, Special Operations Group."

A cold voice resounded within the Heart Core Net, the newcomer introducing himself.

"Bologue Lazarus."

Pulling the trigger, a scorching trail of fire fell from the sky, illuminating death and the gloomy scene, slicing through the battlefield over Kemp and Shelley's heads.

Chapter 250: Ignorance and Cruelty

Kemp seldom forms a specific impression of any day in his life. To him, each day is exactly the same: waking up in bed, getting dressed, going to work, killing time, returning to his bed, and then ending the day.

Looking back over his past, Kemp's short life seems to have been spent in this mundane manner, as if life is inherently dull and uninteresting.

In the midst of this boredom, becoming a Condenser was one of the rare days worth remembering. It was the day he stepped into the Extraordinary World. Fortunately, these days now include one more.

In the dull hues, a blinding light lit up Kemp's face, even Shelley, who was injured beside him, strained to lift his head and look at the fiery rain falling through the fog.

The blazing fire rain illuminated the ground like flares. Inside the light rail tram, passengers saw this burning light. People curiously leaned against the windows, watching the burning light in the fog, and speculating what might be happening there.

The fog blocked all sight, isolating logic and madness, even though they were so close.

The rioters were also shocked by this sudden firelight, coming to a halt, their shadows stretched long and thin, like clawing shrubs.

Bologue landed steadily, standing on the low building where Kemp was hiding, his eyes flickering with green micro-light, intricate trajectories emerging along his hands.

"Special Operations Group?"

Kemp snapped back from the shock, realizing that the rescue team was not the fourth group, but the Special Operations Group.

Over time, the Special Operations Group was no longer a secret within the Field Operations Department. Many knew of their existence, but few had seen them.

This sounded somewhat similar to the fourth group, but in reality, the two were different.

The Special Operations Group was low-key simply because there were too few members. Including Yuriel, the entire Special Operations Group consisted of just five people. Sometimes Palmer joked that when he and Bologue went out, it took half of the group's strength.

With recent operations in the Great Rift, the two rarely returned to the "Cultivation Room," which made the Special Operations Group even more mysterious.

But these are not the reasons that make the Special Operations Group so notable. What truly makes every field staff remember them is their bizarre identity.

Debtors who signed a Blood Contract with the Devil to receive a "Blessing."

"Just you alone?"

After a brief shock, Kemp realized that only Bologue had descended. He had believed a powerful backup force was coming to his rescue, yet now, only Bologue was here, alone.

"Today is a rest day, and there were no scheduled arrangements, so my partner is on vacation."

Bologue replied earnestly, seemingly oblivious to the implication in Kemp's words.

"You? A Condenser!"

Kemp's voice raised. As a Condenser of the Origin School, he could keenly perceive the Ether reaction from Bologue. To his surprise, he had waited for someone just like himself, a First Stage Condenser.

"Is there a problem?"

Bologue continued speaking to himself, not even glancing at Kemp.

He had already seen the rioters through the fog, stepping on the muddy ground, their heavy breaths escaping through their gas masks, like the panting of wild beasts.

Bologue didn't like entering high-profile, becoming the focus of attention would limit his actions. He preferred to be an invisible Evil Spirit, silently hunting the rioters one by one.

But Kemp's and Shelley's conditions were poor. To prevent the rioters from executing them first, Bologue had no choice but to enter ostentatiously, drawing all the attention.

The effect was very successful. Bologue felt like a rock star at a concert, making a dazzling entrance amid the flames on stage.

"No problem, we're on our way."

The same voice echoed in everyone's minds. Knowing that Bologue had arrived on site, the anxious Yas finally felt relieved.

After a few seconds' pause, Yas spoke again.

"Thanks, Bologue."

Kemp and Shelley thought they misheard, but their team leader actually thanked Bologue. Before they could understand the situation, Bologue silently took out the Sheep Horn Shock Hammer, as indistinct mist swirled around him.

In an instant, a bizarre and evil fear surged in both their hearts. They couldn't understand why, as they turned their gaze to the figure standing on the low building, harder-to-describe emotions emerged.

Bologue seemed strange, becoming something they couldn't comprehend or had never seen before, and that which lay beneath his flesh casing was about to break free.

"Well then... I'll begin."

A steady voice sounded within the Heart Core Net, carrying an inexplicable joy amidst its echoes.

Before the voice faded, Bologue's figure transformed into an eerie cyan silhouette driven by Ethereal Amplification, charging toward the marauders in the mist.

"You're insane!"

Kemp flipped out from cover, raising his gun to attempt to protect Bologue. To Kemp, Bologue's actions seemed like a suicidal charge, but after a few scattered gunshots, an incomprehensible scene unfolded for him.

Tiny sparks flickered in the mist, followed by roaring flames rushing toward Bologue.

It was an alchemy armament known as the "Fire-Calling Staff," with a simple effect—creating scorching flames. Alchemists often used it as a staff to conveniently heat metals at will. However, after modification by the Gray Trade Association, its power and instability were greatly enhanced, resembling a flamethrower without the need for a fuel tank.

Bologue did not evade, and the scorching stream of fire engulfed him in an instant, the cyan silhouette dissipating. Kemp could already imagine Bologue's charred corpse.

But soon, in the continuous stream of fire, shadowy traces appeared within the fiery core, gradually expanding into a blurred human figure.

The red-hot Sheep Horn Shock Hammer smashed through the fire stream, and along with it, burst open the marauder's head.

The flames abruptly ceased, and as the rising black smoke cleared, the armored knight slowly lifted the Sheep Horn Shock Hammer, standing before the marauder who had already become a headless body, collapsing powerlessly onto the muddy ground.

Bologue turned around, the red-hot iron armor resembling snake scales cooled down, turning into gray-white iron.

The snake scales quickly receded, like a swarm of snakes slithering back beneath Bologue's collar. His cyan eyes scanned the marauders present, with an eerie breathing sound echoing in everyone's ears, as if a bloodthirsty beast was watching them from their backs.

Silence was broken by frenzied shouts, as marauders swung long knives and pulled triggers, with multiple Ether reactions erupting. It was unclear if they were hostile Condensers or activated alchemy armaments.

But none of this could disrupt Bologue's steps. A grappling hook, originally meant for escape and repositioning, was swung by Bologue and precisely nailed into a marauder's arm before retracting to drag him swiftly toward Bologue.

Bologue raised the Sheep Horn Shock Hammer, but instead of swinging it toward the marauder, the marauder himself lunged into the hammerhead.

Bodies intertwining, the marauder's corpse bent unnaturally under massive force, spine shattered and losing support, folding into a strange angle, and rolling silently on the ground before dying.

Without any harsh words or necessity for speech, Bologue rushed toward the nearest Ether reaction, and after dealing with these Extraordinary Powers, the remaining marauders were no different from hunting Demons—leisurely yet gratifying, even somewhat relieving.

Relieving?

Indeed, he's been under some pressure lately, not due to deep-seated hatred, just too many chaotic things piling up, making him quite annoyed.

Thinking of this, the image of Aimou flashed across Bologue's mind.

Sometimes Bologue thought Aimou was like a... kitten? Perhaps. She curiously wanted to approach humans and understand their various facets but felt anxious due to not understanding humans and their behaviors.

Bologue didn't know how to solve this issue. While he somewhat understood Aimou's thoughts, he couldn't outright say to Aimou: "You're just a tool, don't try to get close to humans," which would be too cruel.

Aimou understood humans but not enough; she failed to comprehend human ugliness and wickedness, nor human desires and madness.

He swung the hammer, smashing another marauder into a mess of bloody flesh, foul remains splattering onto his clothes.

Cruel?

In terms of cruelty, Bologue was precisely the most ruthless Butcher.

By rights, carrying out such cruel acts wasn't difficult for Bologue, but he soon realized that his pressure-free violence was due to these people deserving such punishment—he was merely hastening it under the guise of a greater villain's authority.

Aimou hadn't done anything wrong, or perhaps she was inherently wrong, born from Teda's forbidden, mad fantasies.

Trying to think from Aimou's perspective, Bologue quickly felt powerless.

This sense of helplessness made Bologue more irritated, even manic.

The Fire-Calling Staff reignited, numerous streams of fire covering Bologue from different angles, yet it still couldn't hinder his steps as he strode boldly out of the inferno, into the hail of bullets.

Dense bullets struck him, but only sparks erupted, and snakes quickly crawled over Bologue's surface, with dense scales easily deflecting all bullets.

He reached out and seized a marauder's throat, who screamed and slashed at Bologue's body, but could only hear metal clanging sounds. Another marauder struck from the side, trying to save his companion by holding Bologue's other hand.

But it was in vain. Under Ethereal Amplification, Bologue crushed the marauder's throat, his hand bloody as he clenched it, then landed a punch that caved in another marauder's skull.

The feeling of fulfilled violence was truly wonderful, even alleviating much of the internal agitation. Bologue threw the Sheep Horn Shock Hammer, knocking down yet another marauder, and seeing him covered in blood, Bologue laughed with a touch of madness.