

Endless 331

Chapter 331: The Imprisoned Object

After leaving the Black Prison, Bologue wandered aimlessly through the streets, indifferent to the surrounding clamor, as his gaze fell upon nothing but unfamiliar sights.

Sixty years were enough to change so many things, not only Bologue himself but also the land he once fought for.

The scorched earth was gone, replaced by the steel jungle of Oubos, where everything Bologue once knew had disappeared with the city's expansion. He trudged forward in confusion until he reached the edge of the Great Rift, gazing into the deep darkness below.

Bologue had pondered more than once about the true origins of the Great Rift.

Perhaps it was forged by some kind of weapon, but Bologue knew that humanity's current arsenal couldn't possibly create such terrifying changes in terrain. Later, as a Condenser, he learned of the secrets of this Extraordinary World, and a different possibility came to mind.

In the Fall of the Holy City, it wasn't just ordinary soldiers like him fighting, but also those exalted beings bearing Glory. If it was a war between Seekers of Glory, then twisting the land into this shape wasn't out of the question.

And then...

A beam of light.

A dazzling light pierces the sky and earth.

From the Pillar of Royal Authority in the Kagader Empire, to the end of the Rhine River, starting at the Free Port and ending at the Wind Source Highlands, no matter where one stood, lifting their head would reveal that light splitting the heavens and earth.

Light, Great Rift, ash, King Solomon's death, Fall of the Holy City...

Bologue faintly felt he'd captured something, those clues dispersing in the wind. As he randomly reached out, he was about to grasp them all, piecing together a forgotten truth.

"Ashes? Why is there ash here?" Aimou asked at that moment.

The ash here was alarmingly abundant, nearly filling every corner and completely burying the black rock. Looking ahead, the hazy gray continuously stretched into the darkness, as if the bottom of the Great Rift was entirely covered in ash.

Carrying Aimou on his back, Bologue stood straight, discarding his wilderness survival mindset. Vigilant, his gaze was stern.

"Ash... the product of material combustion," Bologue murmured to himself, "What exactly is burning to create such a large amount of ash?"

With a flick of his folding knife, he scattered some ash into the air, where it fragmented into countless fine particles and lightly fell.

Bologue took a step forward, stepping completely into the world of ash, where it piled high, concealing all the rock. Meanwhile, the surrounding temperature continued to rise, unable to be pierced even by winter's chill.

"Stay sharp, Aimou. This place is not as simple as we thought," Bologue whispered to Aimou.

To everyone living in Oubos, the Great Rift was a nearby enigma, perhaps too close for people to avoid discussing it daily as they lived within it.

Qiushang Town, Wandering Crossroads, Mine...

Too close, so close that the mystery and folklore of the Great Rift became idle chatter during tea and meals, its mystique and reverence faded to merely a topic for entertainment.

But this change only affected people's attitudes toward the Great Rift, not its essence. No matter how people viewed it, it remained here silently, embracing everything thrown into it.

The Great Rift was the most mysterious and uncanny presence in Oubos, far surpassing all other mysteries.

Whether it was the current disputes or secret wars, everything traced back to the Fall of the Holy City sixty-six years ago. The Great Rift appeared after that fall, and after that light.

Bologue was convinced there was a direct connection between them, and this connection, the deliberately hidden secret, might be buried in this deep darkness, at the end of these endless ashes.

Stopping his steps, the ash beneath Bologue's feet was quite soft, as if just recently accumulated. He bent down, vigorously clearing away the ash, soon encountering a slightly harder layer.

Who knows how long these existed, with the ash consolidating into a layer of gray-white ash, like dry, decayed tree bark, which crumbled under the blow of the folding knife.

After breaking, there was another layer, and then layer upon layer.

"Have you found anything?" Aimou inquired.

Bologue gazed at the pit he had dug out and the layers of fractured ashes, pondering for a moment before he spoke.

"The outer layer of ash is quite loose, but further down it solidifies. It seems it formed from prolonged compression."

Bologue picked up the folding knife, and the glow of the Alchemy Matrix faintly lit up.

In the Ether vacuum, the Ether within himself was extremely precious, used sparingly, but in pursuit of the truth, Bologue summoned the swarm of serpents onto the folding knife, then stabbed downward into the ash layers.

The folding knife penetrated completely into the ash layers, and the serpents continued their descent, burrowing through layer upon layer. After several meters, the hardened obstruction disappeared, the serpents' movements quickened, seemingly breaking through the solid mass, then reaching the limits of Secret Energy release.

Bologue was preparing to recall the serpents, but just then, a mutation occurred.

Through the swarm of snakes, Bologue could sense the faint unrest coming from below, as if something else were swiftly moving through the ashes, approaching the snakes. Suddenly, in Bologue's perception, a snake disappeared, along with the etheric reaction Bologue had left on it, as if swallowed by some monstrous predator.

Before Bologue could react or make a judgment, a wave of intense madness crashed through the thick layer of ashes, striking at Bologue's mind.

In an instant, Bologue's vision was plunged into darkness, and in a moment he heard it.

A cacophony of voices, raspy cries, wails... a deluge of sound battered his eardrums, leaving bloodied traces upon them.

Then came the unbelievably insane and bizarre hallucinations, flashing and cycling before his eyes like a cursed kaleidoscope, reflecting the sinister into shattered fragments.

Pillars of jagged spines intertwined, webs of scarlet flesh spreading, a massive heart exposed and beating forcefully, pumping tidal waves of blood outward, while at the end of the darkness, gaping mouths of crimson opened like hungry fledglings, emitting shrill wails.

Intense pain erupted in Bologue's mind, and he lost control of his body, staggering backwards as if drained of all bones.

"Damn it..."

Bologue gritted his teeth, resisting fiercely, with his steadfast will maintaining a sliver of clarity amidst the madness.

He could distinctly perceive that the snakes were dying one after another, devoured by an even more terrifying predator. Bologue used the last bit of his strength to call back the remaining snake and then collapsed heavily.

The malevolent force attempted to continue its intrusion into Bologue, but with the snake's return, the connection between them was severed, and the force could only roar angrily, grudgingly locked back into darkness, granting Bologue a brief respite.

Bologue crawled up from the ground, gasping for breath, and only after a while did he recover. The silver-scaled snake crawled on his arm, silent, its azure eyes filled with gravity, as if it had discovered some astonishing secret.

Buried beneath the ashes here.

"What's wrong?"

Aimou couldn't comprehend Bologue's feelings, but she also noticed the unusualness in Bologue's actions.

Bologue took deep breaths repeatedly, not mentioning the madness he felt. His connection with the Devil was deeply rooted, causing him to perceive inexplicable things at peculiar times.

Bologue had begun to grow accustomed to his heart racing sporadically, maintaining his composure, he murmured.

"It's not right below..."

As the snakes penetrated through the hard ash layers, their movement quickened, Bologue originally thought the ground below consisted of soft soil, but recalling the terrain of hard rocks, Bologue felt that rather than soil, it was more like... ashes.

Ashes not yet compressed and solidified into ash layers.

This doesn't make sense. The internal parts should be compressed into hard ash layers, so why is the interior soft while the exterior is hard?

Bologue said this as he touched the snake on his arm, his fingertips feeling a sharp burning sensation, and he immediately withdrew his hand from the heat.

The little snake slowly lifted its head, and after a few seconds of pause, Bologue reached out again, feeling a significantly lower temperature, now warm.

"What the hell is this place,"

Bologue realized what was going on and couldn't help but curse out loud.

"What happened?"

Aimou's voice was somewhat anxious. She had been asking since earlier, but Bologue hadn't responded to her, focusing only on his own assessments.

"The outer ash layers here are hard, but the internal ashes are extremely soft. This is unreasonable, but when I retrieved the snakes, I found they carried high temperatures with them, which means..."

Bologue said to Aimou.

"It means that something is burning beneath these ash layers, continuously emitting high temperatures, driving away the cold, and transforming into ashes as well, filling the interior, while being compressed to the outermost layers to form the current ash layers." Aimou continued for Bologue.

"That's right," Bologue swallowed, "I wasn't able to explore that thing. The limit range of my secret energy is ten meters."

Bologue's gaze fell on the ashen earth beneath his feet, where the burning thing was located. Its exact depth unknown, core temperature uncertain; then Bologue slowly lifted his gaze, looking into the depths of this rift.

"Something is burning below this Great Rift. I don't know how vast it is or how long it has been burning..."

Bologue's words were like a curse, with chaotic hallucinations flashing repeatedly before him.

Scarlet, bizarre, frenzied, forever hungry, never satisfied...

Chapter 332: Free Will

Bologue didn't tell Aimou about the hallucinations he saw... perhaps it wasn't a hallucination, but something that truly existed. Bologue felt little pressure, as a Debtor, he often dealt with bizarre things and had grown accustomed to what appeared in hallucinations.

As for why he didn't tell Aimou about this, Bologue felt the current situation was bad enough, and telling Aimou wouldn't change anything; it's better to let her be at ease.

Sometimes ignorance is bliss. Thinking of this, Bologue began to reminisce about himself before becoming a Condenser, when his perception of the world was so naive. Reflecting on it now, the stark contrast made Bologue give a bitter smile.

Just...

Bologue glanced at the ground beneath him, recalling the mysterious fourth group.

The Order Bureau was aware of the anomalies within the Great Rift; the fourth group likely existed to deal with these anomalies. As for the ether vacuum environment surrounding them, it might have been orchestrated by the Order Bureau.

And this Great Rift...

At this moment, Bologue actually felt a bit excited, as he was very close to a secret, close enough to touch.

"A piece of good news, and a piece of bad news."

Carrying Aimou, Bologue advanced forward, the terrain increasingly opening up until Bologue felt he was strolling on a gray-white wasteland.

"The bad news," Aimou said.

"There's something strange here, a very strange kind," Bologue said. "The good news is, I have a plan and it might help us escape."

"What plan?"

"The Order Bureau has a task force stationed within the Great Rift; they might be nearby. As long as we find them, we'll be saved. Even if we can't find them, I have a worst-case scenario plan, but unless we're at a dead end, I suggest not initiating it."

The ash here was much softer, like piled snow, with Bologue stepping deep then shallow, warm ash pouring into his shoes.

Bologue reached the edge of the gray-white wasteland, before him was a Cliff. Below the Cliff stretched the gray-white ground, followed by another Cliff, like a giant's staircase, continuing forward.

Bologue thrust the folding knife into the Cliff face, moving downward arduously.

Usually, at such heights, Bologue would jump down directly, protected by Ether, he could easily withstand impacts, even if injured he could heal quickly.

But now, Bologue reverted to a mortal's body, everything required caution. Like a mountaineer, he painstakingly climbed down the two Cliffs, then was exhausted and out of breath.

"I think we should rest a while, don't you think?" Bologue said.

"I trust your judgment."

Aimou now resembled an ornament, carried on Bologue's back, fully trusting Bologue and leaving all actions to his judgment.

Bologue crawled along the craggy edge, finding a protruding spot, narrow and concealed. Until now, they hadn't encountered another living creature, but out of caution, Bologue decided to rest here a while.

Leaning in the shadow, the tense nerves faintly relaxed, soon pain and hunger surged in his heart.

Previously, Bologue could divert attention through actions, but after calming down, all these chaotic things came knocking.

Bologue was someone adept at endurance. He closed his eyes, enduring the torment, breathing steadily as if nothing had happened.

"Bologue, have you ever wondered what the world after death looks like?"

Suddenly, Aimou asked softly.

She lay to one side like a puppet, head askew, eyes glimmering with a faint light.

"Why ask this?"

"Just curious," Aimou said.

"The world after death?"

Bologue pondered for a few seconds, then said, "It's a world of void, placed in the boundless and deep starry sky, everything looks dead, lifeless, everywhere there are shattered boulders colliding.

There... it feels like a dream where anything can happen, occasionally you can even see Thunder streaking across."

Bologue endeavored to describe that bizarre and abstract world in comprehensible language to Aimou.

"Sounds indeed like a dream, but why do you think the world after death is like this?" Aimou continued to ask.

"No particular reason, because I can indeed reach the world after death... if it can be considered as such."

Aimou thought Bologue was artistically imagining according to his ideas, but in reality, this was exactly what Bologue could see after death. Hardly anyone had such an experience, thus talking about these things, Bologue surprisingly felt a tinge of pride.

Bologue continued explaining.

"Every time after I die, I briefly reach that world of void and then am banished back to the mortal world," Bologue hesitated for a moment. "I don't quite understand that place either; I thought about thoroughly exploring but each exploration requires death. Dying multiple times in a short term makes my dormancy period longer, so I had to temporarily give up."

Aimou was silent for a long time, trying to digest what Bologue said. This guy not only couldn't die but could also personally reach the world after death.

"Sounds really terrible, Bologue." Aimou sighed deeply.

"What's wrong?"

"You've shattered people's faith," Aimou said, "for instance, people believe they'll go to the Celestial Kingdom after death, but then an Undead comes and tells them there's nothing after death, just a void, maybe with some rocks bumping around."

"Don't overthink it, 'the world after death' is just how I refer to that environment. It could also be called something like 'Void World' or 'Between Nothingness.'"

Bologue didn't expect Aimou to take it so seriously, so he quickly explained.

From a human perspective dealing with Aimou, Aimou was at the stage of forming a worldview, and Bologue tried his best to prevent her from becoming a freak like himself.

Hmm... Bologue couldn't guarantee it, but he tried to avoid it.

"To be precise, it can't be considered a true afterlife, it's more like a place where my consciousness briefly lingers when I'm in a state of revival."

After a long time, Aimou softly said "Hmm," allowing herself to hold onto a bit of fantasy about the world after death.

Seeing her like this, Bologue smiled and continued, "You remind me of Palmer."

"Why do you think of him?"

"Our daily patrols are actually quite boring, and on the road Palmer and I chat about all sorts of odd things, sometimes even guessing what's in each other's pockets."

"That sounds so childish."

"I also think it's quite childish, but it's a good way to pass the time."

Bologue muttered, with Palmer around, it's never boring, as long as you can handle his jinxed luck... to be precise, it's precisely because of that jinxed luck that it's never boring.

Aimou found it hard to understand the camaraderie between these two guys, and she wasn't willing to waste Ether to emphasize it, so she just said "Hmm hmm hmm," continuing to listen to Bologue's story.

"Once Palmer brought up a similar question to you, he asked me where people's souls go after they die?"

"How did you answer?"

"I didn't answer him," Bologue nonchalantly waved his hand, "It's too childish."

"Huh?"

Before Aimou could question, Bologue burst into laughter, finding it amusing to tease Aimou. In this eerie place, such fun was rare.

"Okay, okay, I really didn't answer him. That guy is such a chatterbox, once he starts, he never stops... this time was no exception, seeing no response from me, he just talked to himself."

Bologue recounted the memory.

"Palmer said that after people die, they sit in a car, hands gripping the steering wheel, driving on an endless highway.

The vehicle never breaks down, the fuel never runs dry, and the radio plays your favorite music. Maybe your best friends are with you, sitting in the passenger seat, the back seat, or even the trunk. It's a rather joyful scene.

It's like going on a picnic, stepping on the gas, facing the howling wind, chasing the sunset, with laughter and cheer, but you'll never reach the end, always driving on that long road."

Bologue's voice came to a stop, and after a brief silence, Aimou sighed.

"That sounds really... romantic."

"It's not romantic at all, it's just this guy piecing together elements he loves," Bologue exemplified, "driving, racing, radio music, plus some audience to listen to his endless cold jokes, for Palmer, that's his Celestial Kingdom."

"Palmer is really easy to satisfy, huh." Aimou didn't know how to respond.

"Probably, after all, being an heir of the Clarks, he's had enough of material wealth, he just wants some spiritual pursuit."

At this point, Bologue paused and continued.

"Palmer's spiritual pursuit is quite pathetic..."

This time it was Aimou's turn to laugh, she said, "You're rarely this humorous, Bologue."

"Just saying appropriate words in an appropriate environment, in this spooky place we indeed need some humor to relieve mental stress," Bologue replied.

The blue halo slightly rotated, Aimou couldn't understand if Bologue was genuinely humorous, or if his professional manner made him rationally think he should lighten up now.

They seemed indistinguishable, yet vastly different.

But one thing Bologue said was right, they all needed some light-hearted words, to ease their tense feelings.

Aimou relaxed, her tense emotions were like ice, slowly melting into warm water.

"Bologue, I have a secret." Aimou suddenly said.

"I'm listening."

Surrounded by dim darkness, when Bologue was silent, he merged into the shadows.

Hearing Bologue's words, Aimou felt much at ease, and then she continued.

"I seem... to have no free will."

Chapter 333: Chopping People, or Being Chopped

"Free... will?"

Bologue looked at Aimou curiously.

This scenario, at this moment, an alchemy puppet is discussing free will with him, Bologue found it odd, yet somehow reasonable.

This is an absurd and bizarre world, everyone should get used to it, whether it's Aimou or Bologue.

Bologue's body relaxed, like the warmth after a bonfire party, everyone gathered around the dying fire, as darkness gradually swallowed everything, casually chatting in peacefulness.

"You ask me what kind of impact replacing the Philosopher's Stone will have on me, regarding this, specifically what will happen, I truly don't know, I haven't yet experienced a replacement."

The Constant Motion Core runs smoothly, behind heavy metal, the brilliant and pure Philosopher's Stone remains still inside, emitting a gentle glow, stirring the residual ether.

Aimou continued, "But I can vaguely guess."

"Guess what happens afterward?"

"Yes," Aimou paused for a moment, then asked, "Bologue, do you think my personality is innate, or influenced by someone?"

Bologue didn't respond immediately, regarding this matter, Bologue knows more than Aimou herself, some time ago, Bologue discussed all of this with Teda.

Aimou's personality is not innate, she is influenced by someone, a new life constantly emerging from the shadow of her death.

Due to this influence, Teda's understanding of Aimou is also gradually distorted, making it difficult to distinguish between the two.

"Is it Alice?" Bologue said coldly.

The halo in Aimou's eyes trembled for a moment, soon stabilizing again, she knew such matters couldn't be concealed from Bologue and quietly affirmed.

"Yes."

"I've never seen Alice, the teacher never talked about her, but I always felt I knew her well, whether it's her thoughts, personality, or way of doing things..."

Aimou's voice started to become intermittent, she couldn't clearly describe the relationship between herself and Alice.

"I am like... a shadow, Alice's shadow."

"You feel like you don't possess a complete self, it's more like being influenced by Alice, giving birth to this, right?"

Bologue used a questioning tone but he knew very well that this is indeed the case, Aimou is influenced by Mind Projection, her behavior continuously leans towards Alice, but no matter what, she is not Alice, and cannot become Alice.

"Yes."

"Do you find it awful?" Bologue asked again, "Do you feel like you're becoming someone you don't want to be?"

The atmosphere fell silent, Aimou didn't respond immediately, the glow of the ether slowly wandered beneath the body, Aimou regained control of her body, the rigid alchemy puppet made slight movements.

"No, I think it's good," Aimou murmured, "Alice is a good person, I like her, I like this version of myself."

"But if you replace the Philosopher's Stone... you might become another person, right?" Bologue asked.

"I think so, I will be influenced by another Philosopher's Stone, transforming into the likeness of that person in life, it feels like dying."

"Dying?" Bologue couldn't understand.

"Alice's Aimou is gone, replaced by other Aimou, like different models of a machine, that indeed is me, yet also not me," Aimou kept shaking her head, "I don't want to become like that."

Bologue let out a long sigh, he muttered to himself.

"The shell remains, but the soul is replaced."

Bologue deeply gazed at Aimou, she was shimmering with faint light, making some weak movements.

Aimou's words were cold, but Bologue could always sense a hint of sadness beneath this icy shell.

Aimou possessed human will and cognition but was bound by an iron shell, and now even her inner soul and will are merely projections of others, as if everything about Aimou was pieced together by others, forming a twisted and awkward form composed of countless desires.

"Don't think about those things, Aimou," Bologue comforted, "Free will is too illusory."

"Do you think I have free will?"

Bologue countered, before Aimou could answer, he went on, "When thirsty, you'll want to drink water, when tired, go to sleep, when hungry, eat something."

"Sometimes you feel my self is leading all of this, sometimes under this self-leadership, actually, some other things are influencing, my suggestion is not to think too much about it, life is not easy, it's unnecessary to trouble yourself."

Aimou looked at Bologue with suspicion, "Are you avoiding the problem?"

"I'm optimizing my life, do you think I'm an idle person? I have to go out every day to chop demons, sometimes it's chopping condensers, I'm always chopping people, or being chopped, from morning till night, from Monday to Friday, and when it's finally the weekend, I might still run into some trouble."

I don't particularly hate chopping people or being chopped, but sometimes I want to do something else, like learning the guitar, systematically understanding how to make a film or something.

I feel my life shouldn't just be about hacking and slashing, that's too dull, but I don't have time to do these things, naturally, I don't have time to think about these messy troubles."

Bologue rambled on a lot, finally concluding.

"Aimou, you're just too idle. When people become idle, they start overthinking and doubting their own existence. You need to do something to enhance your self-identity and make your existence feel more tangible."

The aura slightly expanded, resembling the diffused pupil of a human. Aimou found it difficult to accept Bologue's long-winded speech all at once; she needed some time to process it.

But halfway through processing, she thought of Bologue's philosophical ideas derived from the act of killing, and felt a wave of absurdity. She realized that even taking this seriously was a problem in itself.

The atmosphere became stagnant; Aimou nodded as if she understood, not fully grasping it, and Bologue added further.

"Of course, my suggestion is to do something you enjoy. There's no need to feel you have to go out killing like I do to find meaning."

After pondering for a while, Bologue realized he might have set Aimou off on a wrong path and tried to remedy it.

"That is to say, you should cultivate some stress-relieving... hobbies?"

Aimou thought for a moment and asked, "Is your hobby killing people?"

"No, it's my job. Work and hobbies don't conflict," Bologue said nonsensically.

Aimou giggled, and after a while, she spoke again.

"Bologue, sometimes I see her."

"See what?"

"Alice."

Bologue was stunned for a second, as though he hadn't understood Aimou's words, intently watching Aimou's pupils.

"You say... you can see Alice?"

"That's right, like a hallucination. She appears now and then, talking to me," Aimou said, "but I think it's just a hallucination because Alice is already dead."

"A hallucination?"

"Yes, just a hallucination. People always see all sorts of hallucinations, right?" Aimou replied with a smile.

"Yes, hallucinations, endless hallucinations."

Bologue recalled the things he saw beneath the ashes, a pain twisting through his mind again.

"Aimou, there's something wrong with you." Bologue rubbed his head, blurting out.

"What's wrong?"

"Just an intuition, intuition tells me something's off about you. You're like a child; children don't worry about these things unless they've encountered some trouble."

Bologue looked at Aimou, probing further, "Aimou, have you encountered any trouble?"

"No, we just happened to talk about it. I'm just really curious about all this."

Bologue drew closer to Aimou, examining her pupils carefully. This was Aimou's only channel of communication with the outside world. Unfortunately, Bologue couldn't see through the layers of steel and couldn't reach the Philosopher's Stone hidden beneath her chest.

"Forget it, take a good rest, Aimou. We still have a long way to go."

Bologue retreated, slumped in a corner, continuing to endure hunger and pain.

Aimou's eyeballs shifted, staring at Bologue for a moment before another voice echoed with a trace of anger.

"Are you going to betray us!"

Fair hands grasped Aimou's neck, the other party exerting all their strength, attempting to strangle Aimou, but she was ultimately just a phantom, unable to affect reality.

Aimou looked at the figure in front of her. In this dire situation, Alice appeared angelic, dressed in a white gown, emitting a faint glow. Yet, this angel was incredibly angry at the moment.

This was a secret between her and Aimou, but Aimou had just shared it with Bologue. Even though Aimou didn't reveal any key information, it still stirred unease within Alice.

Aimou remained motionless, like a corpse, not because she didn't want to respond to Alice, but because Bologue was right nearby. He was like a sleeping tiger, seemingly relaxed but alert to any disturbance.

Unable to get feedback from Aimou, Alice turned to look at Bologue. She circled him like a true phantom, without causing any disturbance.

The anger in her eyes gradually faded as if she realized something. She spoke with a cheerful smile.

"Is this what you intend, Aimou?"

She came to Aimou's side, cupping Aimou's face in her hands.

"Oh, look at you in this pathetic state. Is this how you managed to fool everyone?"

Alice laughed even louder.

"Naive Aimou? That's ridiculous. You're the one full of schemes."

Aimou didn't respond, but Alice didn't mind. She stubbornly embraced Aimou, whispering softly into her ear.

"Don't forget your wish. If you waver easily for this, it proves your wish is worthless."

Chapter 334: Curiosity

Bologue struggled forward on the ashen ground, the sharp blade now pitted and dented, clutched in his hand like a trekking pole.

This was the seventh day since Bologue had fallen into the Great Rift... or maybe the eighth; Bologue no longer cared about the passage of time.

His stamina was continuously being depleted, and the ethereal amount within him was steadily decreasing in this ether vacuum, making Bologue feel like a balloon with several holes, leaking air with a rustling sound.

Aimou remained silent, like a lifeless corpse carried on Bologue's back, and it had been a long time since the two of them last spoke, the silence lingering between them.

Bologue considered himself somewhat talkative; if he wanted, he could chat with Aimou about random topics, like movies, music, or even the ultimate questions of life.

Unfortunately, this dreadful environment was slowly crushing their spirits, and no matter how much Bologue wanted to relax, the harsh conditions afforded him no such opportunity.

Bologue needed to conserve his energy to travel further.

As he moved along, Bologue continuously explored the bottom of the Great Rift, hypothesizing that it wasn't always like this.

Bologue was referring to the state after the Great Rift had formed, speculating that it should have been filled with countless rocky protrusions, but at some point, endless ash began to pour into the Great Rift, covering the original landscape at the bottom, burying everything deep beneath the ash.

Something vast inhabited the depths of the Great Rift, filling every crevice, and from the day it arrived, it has been endlessly burning; one day, the rising ash will fill this deep rift.

Bologue stopped, gazing profoundly at the ash beneath his feet; the coverage limit of his secret energy was ten meters, but that didn't mean the ash layer was only ten meters thick; it could be several dozen or even a hundred meters deep.

Recalling that intense heat at the time, Bologue could scarcely imagine the temperature at the deepest point of the ash layer.

Perhaps there was a blazing sun intentionally buried and forgotten there.

Bologue climbed down along layers of cliffs, like giant steps, continually advancing deeper under the piled ash.

The further he went, the more complicated Bologue's feelings became, with a mix of panic and endless... curiosity.

Just like explorers at sea striving to see what's beyond the horizon, Bologue wanted to know what lay hidden in the dark depths of the Great Rift.

Bologue wasn't sure what awaited him there, but he had a vague premonition in his heart.

Ever since he used the swarm of snakes to explore what lay beneath the ash layer, Bologue had constantly felt a lingering, sinister frenzy around him, which, like a specter, hovered by his side, never leaving since the moment he stepped onto the ashen land.

No one had given Bologue an answer, but relying on the connection through the umbilical cord, Bologue had begun to link the birth of the Great Rift with the Devils.

"Bologue, what about the things that fell into the Great Rift?" Aimou asked into the silence.

Calculating the distance, they had come quite far, yet they still hadn't discovered anything along the way.

This world was lifeless, devoid of any life, and even the trash thrown into the Great Rift was nowhere to be found, as the monotonous scenery repeated incessantly; if not for Aimou feeling the ether's drift, she would almost believe time itself had stopped.

"I don't know," Bologue shook his head, "it's my first time here too."

Bologue suddenly laughed, continuing, "To be honest, such an experience of falling into the Great Rift is quite rare."

"Are you proud?"

"I just think such an experience is rather interesting, don't you?"

"Huh?"

Aimou found it hard to understand Bologue's train of thought, while Bologue continued onward.

Descending along giant steps-like cliffs, fine ash pervaded the air, with everything around shrouded in mist, causing even the dim light overhead to grow dimmer.

Bologue felt he was walking into a boundless night; by another massive cliff, Bologue paused for a few seconds and summoned the Deceitful Snake Scale Silver.

Aimou, with her arms crossed in front of Bologue's chest, reinforced by the entwining swarm of snakes once again.

After completing all this, Bologue grabbed the folding knife and continued to climb down; this descent was much longer than the previous ones, with the rock surface incredibly smooth, as if it had been cleanly sliced by some malicious force.

When Bologue climbed down from the cliff, the surrounding light had grown exceedingly dim, with pitifully narrow visibility; after only a few steps, a blurry shadow emerged in front of him, causing Bologue to become alert.

As he approached, Bologue saw clearly what it was—a broken stone column.

This stone column seemed to have been there for years, its surface covered with a thick layer of ash, and the base was deeply embedded in the ash layer below.

Looking ahead, more blurry shadows appeared before his eyes; it seemed he had arrived in a Ruins District.

"Did it fall from above?" Aimou said.

"Maybe, around the Great Rift there are often buildings collapsing... and wandering paths," Bologue answered.

The current situation is still within expectations. To this day, the Great Rift continues to expand slowly, with buildings collapsing into it continuously. Bologue guessed that this ruins might have fallen into it at some time in the past.

But Bologue felt something was off. Upon closer inspection, he found that these buildings were adorned with exquisite carvings, as if they were from a Divine Hall. However, in Bologue's understanding, neither around the Great Rift nor within the wandering paths should there be such buildings.

The history of this Ruins District is even more ancient than Bologue had anticipated.

"There's light!"

Aimou's exclamation sounded out.

Bologue cautiously looked up. Strands of ethereal blue light streaked across the top, like woven silk, casting a hazy aurora in the depths of the earth.

"No Ether reaction."

Bologue carefully sensed around and found that the surroundings were still in an Ether vacuum, with nothing unusual.

"It's beautiful."

Aimou didn't care about this at all. She kept exclaiming like a child.

Bologue wandered through the ruins, the hazy glow gradually grew more abundant. They seemed to possess life, shaping different forms in the darkness, undulating amidst stillness.

This is not a product of Ether. Bologue guessed it to be the glowing gas formed by various Alchemy Potions mixed together and evaporated in the air.

This kind of scene is often seen in the wandering paths—colorful glows floating amidst hazy mists, adding an enchanting touch to that sinister land.

Aimou admired the faint light, while Bologue used the illumination to move forward in the dimness, occasionally wiping off ashes to observe the contour of these ruins.

Time had eroded the surfaces of these buildings, but Bologue could still see from the intricate carvings how exquisite these buildings once were, how the entire architectural complex was once glorious.

It seemed to be some kind of temple-like architecture, yet neither Opus nor the wandering paths had anything similar.

Bologue faintly thought of something but deemed it unlikely. Then Bologue realized that he might be slightly closer to a secret hidden in this darkness.

"Did you hear anything, Bologue?" Aimou suddenly said.

"Hear what...?"

Before Bologue could finish, he heard the sound as well, slowly coming from afar, like a thunderous roar.

It was as if a giant was slumbering in the darkness, its snoring reverberated between the rifts, combining into a roaring thunder, accompanied by a storm whipped up by its breath.

Bologue felt like he was facing a natural disaster. In the moment the sound was heard, at the edge of his vision, a vague dark shadow arose in the dimness, and then a looming, cloud-like mass blotted out the sky.

A strong sense of danger surged in his heart. Bologue leaped toward the side of the ruins, clutching Aimou, and the two curled up in a corner.

In the next second after the two hid in the shelter, the thunder mixed with the storm swept the ashes in a tempest across the ruins.

Like an avalanche, the vast ashes swallowed the surrounding buildings in an instant. Without the shelter of the buildings, Bologue and Aimou would likely be easily picked up and hurled into the depths of darkness.

Even with the protection of the buildings, the infiltrating ashes nearly buried them completely, and more importantly, a burning sensation of severe pain spread across Bologue's body.

To conserve Ether, Aimou had shut down most of her sensing abilities. She couldn't perceive these anomalies, but Bologue, in his flesh and blood, could clearly feel the residual heat carried by these ashes, almost scalding his flesh after just a brief touch.

Bologue could only endure the pain until the avalanche subsided minutes later, before he wearily crawled out from the pile of ashes.

His skin was burned red and swollen, but aside from further consuming Ether, the injury had little impact on Bologue. He dug Aimou out from the ashes and once again carried her on his back.

"At least we now know why these things are buried," Bologue muttered quietly.

"Are you planning to continue forward?"

Aimou was a bit scared, the darkness was too deep, clawing at her inner fears.

Bologue didn't respond, stubbornly moving his steps. The further he moved, the clearer the invisible connection became.

Something was waiting for him.

Bologue believed that in the depths of darkness, some existence was calling to him.

Chapter 335: The Hungry Earth

From the outer edges of the cold rocks, to stepping onto the ashen land, until now, encountering the distant rumble... Bologue is sure that he is steadily approaching the core of the mystery.

The surrounding temperature has noticeably risen, the prior chill is gone, replaced by an almost unbearable heat, and the ruins sighted earlier have become more frequent; Bologue feels as if he is walking through a forgotten city.

A city buried in ash, existing in this deep Abandoned Land.

Regrettably, after ages of change and erosion, Bologue gains no useful information from these withered structures and can only continue moving forward with Aimou.

As the temperature rises, that intangible connection within Bologue grows increasingly tight, like a rope twisted tight, weaving into a rough line.

"Why can't we see those things that were thrown into the Great Rift?" Aimou speaks up, lingering behind Bologue.

Aimou, living amidst crossroads of uncertainty, during her limited free time, often sees people tossing things into the Great Rift, especially those gleaming Mammon Coins.

Yet, despite their deep exploration, there's nothing to be seen, only ash and ruins.

"Maybe they were eaten by something," Bologue murmurs in response.

"In this damned place, it doesn't seem like there's a stable food source. If anyone were imprisoned here, they'd probably be starving, praying daily for something to drop from the sky, preferably corpses or something."

"Why would anyone be imprisoned here?" Aimou doesn't understand, "A cell would suffice, why lock someone in such a place."

Bologue is silent for a moment, his gaze sharpens. Despite all the information gathered so far being fragmented, the solidifying internal connection, the umbilical cord linking him to the sinister...

He faintly perceives the root of the issue and whispers in an extremely soft voice.

"Perhaps that's not a person..."

Suddenly, a rumbling sound echoes again from the distant darkness ahead, the storm is coming.

"Bologue!"

Aimou raises her voice, loudly warning Bologue, who reacts promptly, already dashing towards a shelter on the other side upon hearing the sound.

As soon as he dives into the cover, a fierce ashen storm sweeps past, bringing both of them closer to the storm's source. Bologue struggles to keep his eyes open, spotting, amidst the grey storm, embers that haven't extinguished yet.

The reddened ash whirls and strikes the buildings, scorching the mottled walls, forming thick grey-white hard crusts, repeatedly washing over.

The scorching airwave lurks overhead, leading Bologue to doubt whether the entity sleeping in that darkness is not a giant but a gigantic Fire Dragon; its mere unintentional breaths akin to scorching dragon breath.

What's more perplexing for Bologue is that when the reddened ash lands on his body, the flames don't die out but continue to burn. Bologue has to forcefully pat several times to extinguish the stubborn fire.

The ashen storm persists, the blazing ash burying half of Bologue's body; amidst the burning pain, Bologue surprisingly feels a vaguely familiar sensation.

Bologue can confidently assure that he is no masochist, but he's damned to sense a trace of familiarity from this agony.

It seems at some point in the past, Bologue had suffered a similar punishment, though he can scarcely recall the details.

There aren't many things that can make Bologue forget, but regrettably, now is not a suitable time for reminiscing.

Amidst the roaring rumble, a fine cracking sound emerges, Bologue abruptly raises his head. Under the ceaseless havoc of the ashen storm, the wall above begins to tremble, fine cracks spreading through, causing the decayed grey layer to crumble altogether.

Bologue finds himself unable to shout any warnings; the heat wave hits him head-on like a powerful punch, thrusting him hard against the building behind. Holding his breath, Bologue twists himself around, thrusting a folding knife to pin himself onto the wall.

He successfully stabilizes himself, but with the protection of the wall gone, Bologue is directly exposed to the scorching storm, flames vaguely igniting on his body followed by charred skin, yet he grits his teeth and perseveres through it all.

At this moment, the folding knife in his hand starts to tremble, and the wall beneath Bologue begins to loosen.

The rumbling blade doesn't cease, Bologue steadfastly raises his head, facing the heat wave and opens his eyes, whether they be scorched blind he has to see that entity clearly.

Bologue sees it.

With the deep breathing sounds accompanying it, countless embers and heat waves are hurled high, forging a burning dim light column in midair, which soon collapses, scattering with a flurry toward the surroundings merged with the boiling heat wave storm.

Bologue imprints that direction firmly in his mind, afterward releases his grip, his entire body lifted by the heat wave, slammed repeatedly amidst the chaotic buildings until driven into a corner, where Bologue's collisions finally come to a halt.

Not waiting to catch his breath, layers of ash bury Bologue once again; not long after the storm ceases, Bologue digs through the searing ash, collapsing painfully onto the ground, his whole body trembling incessantly.

Thanks to the Undying Body, otherwise Bologue would have died countless times already; his present state is akin to just crawling out of an oven, laboriously getting up, his flesh and blood slowly healing, yet accompanied by the consumption of Ether, this self-healing speed is becoming increasingly sluggish.

"Twenty-two minutes," Aimou's voice rang out, "The interval of the storm is twenty-two minutes."

"Thanks, Aimou."

Bologue expressed his gratitude, he hadn't expected Aimou to actually record this, so now he knew that the next twenty-two minutes were safe, and he needed to move quickly and then find shelter.

After deciding on the next course of action, Bologue turned his head to glance at Aimou, and a dreadful face came into view.

In the recent onslaught of hot waves, Aimou hadn't escaped unscathed either; the skin-emulating coating on her face was damaged, exposing cold metal, and on Aimou's torso, the soft, semi-transparent gelatinous material had melted under the high temperature, resembling scabbed wounds all over her body.

She was like a bizarre sculpture, some kind of imperfect craftsmanship.

"The core components remain undamaged."

Aimou coldly responded, the halo in her eyes flickering.

Bologue felt that Aimou might be trying to comfort him, but evidently, she wasn't very good at it.

"I will find a way back."

Bologue could only promise, every minute was extremely important, but just as he was about to set off, the ground began to shake slightly.

In just a few seconds, the tremor intensified continuously, and Bologue couldn't understand what was happening; he wanted to flee, but in this damned place, he didn't know where to escape to.

"Wait a moment..."

Bologue saw something—a piece of ash soaked with his blood—and as the ground's vibration continued, the blood-stained ashes began to collapse into the earth one by one. Soon, all traces of blood vanished, as if devoured by the land.

The ominous feeling in his heart rose to its peak, and in a trance, Bologue heard a certain sound.

A wicked, frenzied voice whispering beside his ear.

"Fresh blood... The flesh of blood..."

Unquenchable hunger."

The howling of the wind suddenly arose above, and something was coming. Bologue led Aimou away from this place, heading toward the edge of the Great Rift, and at this moment, shadows fell into view, crashing heavily onto the ground.

They were bodies, one after another thrown into the Great Rift.

They fell from the sky, shattering upon the earth.

Bologue swallowed hard, vaguely guessing what was about to happen, and as he expected, the earth trembled, crimson tendrils broke through the scorching ash, tightly entangling the corpses, their sharp mouthparts voraciously gnawing on the flesh, filthy blood everywhere.

This was not a cessation, but rather the beginning of another feast.

Crimson flowers bloomed from beneath the ashes, their petals edged with sharp fangs, the stamens in their centers extending out, grasping every chunk of flesh.

Under the entwinement of flesh, they appeared like flowers blooming on thorns, swiftly transforming the ashen ground into a sea of crimson flowers.

The flower sea spread continuously, about to reach Bologue's feet, and bodies continued to fall from above, turning into nourishment of flesh and blood, gradually devoured.

Skin, viscera, blood... even the bones were not spared by these sinister things, their sharp teeth grinding against the bones, the grating sound making one's teeth ache, until the bones were crushed into fragments, completely swallowed, leaving no trace.

Bologue leaned tightly against the rock wall behind him, holding his breath, only hoping not to be discovered; he certainly didn't want to be consumed by these monsters. But as the feast ended, these hellish things still seemed unsatisfied, their empty stomachs yearning for something to satiate them.

Bologue focused entirely on what was in front of him, unaware that from the crevices in the rock wall, crimson entities were also slowly extending, following the scent of blood, creeping toward Bologue.

With his nerves stretched to the limit, at a certain moment, as the flesh attacked, Bologue also became aware of them, forcibly slicing through a few tendrils with his battered knife.

Bologue dodged to another empty area, taking deep breaths to control his internal pressure.

The sight of this flesh was too familiar; not too long ago, Bologue had been slaughtering them non-stop, but Bologue was sure that this flesh was completely different from the ones he faced inside the venue.

Similar to the rotten roots and tendrils but far more terrifying and sinister than those.

"Is this why the Order Bureau is so resistant to the infiltration of the Scarlet Corruption Sect?"

Bologue murmured to himself, gripping the knife in his hand tightly, slicing the approaching flesh into thousands of pieces.

Chapter 336: Calamity of This World

Like decaying roots and sprouts, the blood and flesh creatures erupted from beneath the ashen ground, scarlet tendrils and blooming flowers layered over the earth, transforming the rift into a breathtaking floral sea in an instant, though the scent wafting through the air carried a nauseating stench of decaying blood.

Bologue was certain these ghastly things weren't the decaying roots and sprouts. He could sense it from their previous encounters, where, under Nade's fiery assault, the decaying roots and sprouts retreated step by step.

But the blood and flesh that drilled out from beneath the ashes were different. They crawled out from the scorching depths of the earth... perhaps it was these very blood and flesh being seared by the intense heat.

With Aimou on his back, Bologue briskly fled. Now was not the time to tangle with these ghastly things. If he died here, it would be of no consequence, as he would eventually awaken. But if Aimou died here, she might truly perish.

These monsters were so ravenous, they would devour and decompose everything they touched.

Exactly, just like those fallen corpses, everything that plunged into the Great Rift, whether blood and flesh or steel and brass, was cleaned up by these monsters. They had been famished here at the bottom of the Abyss for who knows how many years.

No wonder these creatures were so excited. In an instant, the dense blood and flesh covered the entire rock wall, countless slender tendrils reaching out, like a thousand outstretched arms trying to grab Bologue.

In the eyes of this monster, he must be one of the few living creatures it encountered over the years.

Bologue flipped over a protruding rock and simultaneously turned back, slashing out an arc that severed the approaching blood and flesh.

Thus far, the pressure this monster exerted on Bologue wasn't much, whether in attack frequency or force, it was considerably less threatening compared to the decaying roots and sprouts.

Bologue recalled the high temperatures beneath the layers of ashes; piecing these clues together, he felt there must be an eternal flame burning in the depths of the earth, and this monster had likely been scorched by the flames for countless years.

Perhaps from the very birth of the Great Rift, it and the flame had existed here.

"Crimson Sect."

Aimou's voice sounded beside his ear. While Bologue was engaged in a battle of wits and courage with these blood and flesh creatures, she was also observing them with her limited Perception.

"That's right, I guess these things must have been created by the Crimson Sect."

Bologue leaped, avoiding another coiling tendril. Exhausted and pained, his movements were far less agile than before, like a wounded lone wolf, stumbling as if about to collapse any second.

But no one could catch him.

"Scarlet blood and flesh, undead-like nature, combined with the Order Bureau's resistance to the Crimson Sect's arrival, I guess this ghastly thing must be a creature-like existence of the Crimson Sect, only that many years ago, it was imprisoned here by the Order Bureau."

As he ran, Bologue responded, trying to piece together any clues he could think of as reasonably as possible.

"Damn it, so the fourth group was watching this thing? Why couldn't they give us a heads-up?!"

Bologue cursed repeatedly. If he had known there was such a ghastly thing here, he and Aimou would've obediently waited for rescue at the edge of the Great Rift.

Deafening rumbles continued unabated as the blood and flesh seemed to gradually awaken from a long slumber. More formidable power merged into their bodies, causing tendrils to strike forcefully, stirring up clouds of dust and smoke.

Bologue's mind was fully taut. The more this monster awoke, the more tangible the thread that linked Bologue to the malevolent force became. Bologue was very aware that the anomaly that had summoned him earlier was this monster.

An avalanche was erupting within the rift valley. Bologue fled ahead, with tendrils surging behind him, sweeping up vast amounts of ash. The gray snowstorm advanced rapidly, and once submerged in it, Bologue would be instantly shredded to pieces by the countless mouths.

Countless thoughts flurried through Bologue's mind. He once again recalled the flames beneath these layers of ashes and this frenzied monster.

From the birth of the Great Rift, this monster had existed, and the flame coexisted with it, burning eternally, causing the monster to die continuously. Its charred body turned to ashes, gradually filling the entire rift valley.

His thoughts continued racing, breaking through layers of constraints. Suddenly, Bologue realized places that previously seemed unreasonable had all pieced together.

The flame and monster beneath this ashen land lead up to the wandering crossroads dominated by the Tyrant, then to the Order Bureau.

They were like sealing layers, forever binding this Abandoned Land in darkness.

Familiar words constantly flickered beside his ear, words that Teda had told him.

"Within the Great Rift, the Key of the Crooked Path cannot be used."

Was this really just caused by the environmental impact of Alchemy Waste? Or was the Order Bureau deliberately creating such an environment to prevent anyone from using the Key of the Crooked Path to bypass the Order Bureau's heavy defense and delve deep inside...

To release this monster.

Yes, they feared someone would release this monster, especially the Crimson Sect, which is why the Order Bureau was so concerned about everything.

Then what role does the Tyrant play in all of this?

Bologue had long felt something was amiss. The Tyrant assisted the Order Bureau in winning the mysterious warfare, and the Order Bureau was supposed to pay a price, which was allowing the Tyrant to occupy a region within the heartland of the Order Bureau, becoming his territory.

Becoming a cold arrow buried within the Order Bureau.

Under normal circumstances, Bologue felt the Order Bureau would never allow a Devil to be so close and blatantly operate their territory.

Unless the Tyrant's role was more than that and he was also part of the defense sealing this monster.

So... what exactly is this monster?

What kind of existence can make the Order Bureau so vigilant, laying multiple seals, just to make the world forget it forever?

The ground beneath started to tremble, interrupting Bologue's thoughts; then the ashen layers collapsed, revealing crimson flesh at Bologue's feet.

Bologue leapt high with force, and the flesh beneath cracked into a giant mouth, almost swallowing Bologue whole.

Leaping toward the rock wall on one side, Bologue forcefully drove the folding knife into it; the weapon produced by the Sublimation Furnace Core indeed had excellent quality and could be used even now.

Bologue was hanging onto the rock wall, with the tumultuous crimson sea below.

As he had guessed before, this monster's body covered the entire rift, with all the ashes just the waste it shed after burning itself.

It usually slumbers beneath the ashen layers, enduring the scorching fire, but awakens when it senses the presence of food, devouring flesh with large bites.

Ultimately, everything thrown into the Great Rift will meet such a fate.

"Calamity..."

The voice softly brushed past Bologue's ears; for a moment, Bologue thought he misheard it, but then realized that Aimou had spoken.

"Do you know what this is?" Bologue shouted.

"Just a suspicion."

Aimou couldn't be certain either; most of her understanding of this world came from books, yet there's a gap between books and reality.

"Speak up!"

Bologue stepped onto a rock protrusion, drew the folding knife, and using the explosive force of his body, leapt a few feet higher to secure himself further up.

The flesh below was restless and agitated. After briefly avoiding them, they failed to detect Bologue's trace, evidently clumsier compared to the decayed root sprouts he encountered.

Perhaps they had not fully awakened.

Bologue glanced over the vast rift; compared to this creature's gigantic body, what he faced was merely a strand of hair.

It seemed that Bologue had been moving over the body of this monster all along, and he even tried to sense the creature's presence using a swarm of snakes...

"This worldly Calamity embodies all the world's sinister and evil, manifesting into existence."

Aimou briefly explained; she had discovered this information while reading various books but never expected they'd be used someday.

"Are you saying this monster is an embodiment of evil, just like Devils?"

Bologue recalled those Devils representing Original Sin; the Calamity indeed seemed somewhat similar to them.

"No, Calamity is birthed and urged by Devils," Aimou continued.

"What?"

Bologue was momentarily stunned, only hearing Aimou continue.

"You know about the Contract School, right? Through Contractors, people offer their souls to Devils, seeking their Protection, and consequently fall to become Demons."

"Just like those Crimson Cult guys?"

To Bologue, the Crimson Cult had become quite familiar; all recent events were caused by these lunatics.

Condensers who offer their souls become so-called Carnivores, gaining strong Recovery Power solely by eating, while Negative Power Users like Latis even possess the ability to merge with decayed root sprouts, thus acquiring Undying Power.

Yet these guys all have a final collective term: Demons.

Those who lose their entire soul gradually transform into Demons, and Condensers who lose their souls also become Demons with Extraordinary Power, even more sinister and terrifying.

"Yes, have you ever considered, what if a Seeker of Glory offers their soul to Devils, seeking Protection, and falls to become a Demon?"

Aimou's words stabbed into Bologue's heart like a sharp knife; suddenly, he felt his blood turn cold, a chilling sensation climbing up his spine.

Bologue lowered his head, gazing at the restless crimson flesh in the ashen smoke, its madness growing stronger as it awakened.

"It originated from a Seeker of Glory falling."

Deep beneath the surface, under layers of defense, the Order Bureau detained a Seeker of Glory who had offered their soul to the Crimson Queen, gaining Undying Power.

Or perhaps... this worldly Calamity.

Chapter 337: The Bet

The Seeker of Glory who offers his soul and descends into becoming a Demon.

Bearing all sins and sufferings, transforming into a hated and twisted existence in this world.

This world's Calamity.

Bologue's movements became increasingly swift and skillful; the moment Aimou mentioned the Seeker of Glory, Bologue had a fleeting illusion that this might be the most challenging day of his career.

Something felt off. Bologue always had the feeling that "the most challenging day" had been mentioned many times before, but that's life for you; surprises always lie in wait.

You think that after enduring suffering, an easy path lies ahead, but perhaps it's just the beginning of another storm.

"The Order Bureau kept such a beast locked up without any word; these people are all madmen! Lunatics!"

If Palmer were here, he'd surely curse out loud in this manner.

Bologue didn't have the time to criticize anything, not that the folks from the Order Bureau could hear it anyway.

Bologue's heart rate skyrocketed, and at this point, there was no need to conserve Ether. In his hand, a swarm of snakes molded another Sharp Sword.

The folding knife and Sharp Sword weaved back and forth as Bologue moved swiftly along the rock wall, trying to get as far away as possible from the turbulent sea of blood below.

No matter what, Bologue never imagined that his first confrontation with the Seeker of Glory would happen under such circumstances.

The good news was that this guy probably couldn't be considered a Seeker of Glory, the bad news was that this guy was even trickier and more terrifying.

"How do you know all of this, Aimou?"

As Bologue moved, he didn't forget to question Aimou.

After a brief panic, Bologue roughly understood the Order Bureau's thinking. Such twisted existences should be forgotten by everyone; the Ether vacuum environment here might also be part of the Calamity's seal.

He had no right to know this information, so how did Aimou, who had always been confined in the Alchemy Workshop, find out?

"Teacher's books," Aimou said, "There was a time when the teacher was always collecting similar information. I found it in one of the books."

"Blessed and protected by Gluttony, thus gathering the disaster and chaos of the sin of Gluttony, causing hunger and eternal life to coexist."

Aimou softly recited the obscure and difficult text from the book.

Recalling all the experiences along the way, the bloody battle with the Crimson Rot Sect, the pursuit of the Corrupted Roots, and the contest for the Immortal Heart.

Aimou had little understanding of this world, but she wasn't stupid. Just like Bologue, stitching together a vague outline using those clues, she too weaved a blurry truth based on the known information.

"Teda studied this creature?" Bologue became wary upon hearing it related to Teda.

"Rather than studying it, it seems more like researching a product born of it," Aimou said tentatively, "For example..."

"The Immortal Heart."

Bologue spoke.

His own navel had a certain sense of connection whether it was for Calamity or the Immortal Heart, which inevitably led Bologue to start pondering the connection between the two.

The Immortal Heart was regarded as a Holy Relic by the Crimson Rot Sect, so what about the Calamity locked deep underground? For the Crimson Rot Sect, it should be considered a Divine Son, right?

Perhaps the Immortal Heart is part of the Calamity's body, such as... the heart?

"Is this the reason Geoffrey has a demeanor of facing death?"

Bologue muttered to himself, stabbing the Sharp Sword again. He had climbed quite high, and the sea of blood below had become blurred, leaving only a mass of crimson.

They hadn't given up on searching for Bologue. To the Calamity, it was immortal and undying, accompanied by that maddening hunger.

All these years, it was like a scavenger, devouring everything that fell into the Great Rift, and now, encountering fresh blood like Bologue, it had no reason to easily let go.

In their final battle on the Long Bridge, the Delusional realized the presence of the Calamity and knew the Calamity was at the bottom of the Great Rift. He conjured an Illusion Creation of the Calamity and deceived Geoffrey.

No wonder Geoffrey was so terrified; everyone faced with this creature had no way to escape.

"Bologue! Find cover quickly!"

Aimou suddenly realized something and shouted to Bologue.

"Cover?"

Bologue glanced around; he was clinging to the rock face, with the turbulent sea of blood below, and there was no cover in sight.

For a moment, he didn't understand why Aimou said that, but soon enough, Bologue remembered another threat and became angry at his own negligence.

The information about the Calamity was so shocking, that for a moment, Bologue had forgotten about the heatwave that struck every twenty-two minutes.

Bologue guessed that it was probably the breath of the Calamity, each inhale and exhale caused such catastrophic disaster, not knowing what kind of destruction it would cause if it was left free.

There was no time to find cover, Bologue hesitated for a second, then shouted back at Aimou.

"Don't worry! I will always wake up!"

Aimou didn't understand the meaning of Bologue's words, and in the next second, Bologue punched the rock face in front of him.

Secret Energy·Summoning Hand.

Bologue drained the last remaining ether, causing the rocky terrain to cave in, layer by layer forming a narrow cave, just big enough to shelter him and Aimou.

He first tossed Aimou inside, while simultaneously, the rumbling of thunder echoed from the darkness ahead, and Bologue could perceive the star fire being flung high up, forming a hazy column of light in the dark, which then suddenly dispersed, melting into the scorching heatwave.

Before the roaring heat reached them, Bologue struggled to crawl in; the Deceitful Snake Scale Liquid shaped into a round shield, blocking the cave's entrance. Seconds later, the intense heat swept across the metal, causing the cold steel to glow faintly red.

In the deep crevice, the burning wind blew layers of ash, sweeping over the wildly dancing flesh, producing a continuous hoarse burning sound, akin to the wailing of flesh.

Most of them turned into black charred shells, and then were extinguished into a sky filled with ash, yet soon new flesh resurrected, repeating the cycle.

Underneath layers of ashes, one could see flesh and flame entangled with each other, the speed of the flame's burning matching the flesh's resurrection, continuously wearing each other down, causing the ashes to gradually fill the crevice.

In the narrow darkness, Bologue curled up to the side, gasping painfully. The exhaustion of ether felt awful, like all the strength was being drained from his body, followed immediately by the effects of Bulimia Nervosa, his head aching fiercely.

Aimou could only spectate from the side, Bologue's pain stemming from the loss of his soul left her powerless to help.

His consciousness swayed between lucidity and fainting, soon Bologue was completely unconscious, as if dead.

Aimou stared vacantly at all this; after a long time, the faint light of ether extended back to the shell. Aimou attempted to move, but the damage to her body made her movements extremely slow, and a fair amount of ash had permeated the mechanical structure, further wearing the metal down.

"What are you going to do now?"

Alice appeared beside her like a specter, her voice laden with mirth, "But whatever you intend to do, starting now seems a bit too late, doesn't it?"

"When you saw that book, you knew what would happen, didn't you?" Alice sneered, "Teda only had concern for his poor daughter, not a spot for you. For all this, he was even willing to seize the Immortal Heart."

"Oh? Should I be grateful that he achieved so much for a dead person?" Alice murmured.

Aimou glanced at her, her mechanical pupil devoid of emotion.

She approached Bologue hesitantly, and then Alice pounced, placing her hands on Aimou's shoulders, whispering into her ear.

"Whatever you planned, this is the perfect opportunity, isn't it?"

As if under a spell, Aimou felt a semblance of human perception, able to sense the warm breath from the neck, just like Alice, who was no longer a spectral ghost but a living being.

Ordinary cognition began to twist, blurring the lines between reality and illusion, making distinction difficult.

"This guy is extremely wary, but you succeeded Aimou, you made him let down his guard," Alice's voice continued to echo, "He truly believes you two share some sort of life-and-death bond; this is the perfect chance."

Aimou lifted her trembling hands, placing them on Bologue.

"Yes, that's it, you've realized it too, this guy is incredibly perceptive, anything related to the Devil cannot escape his attention.

If you hope your fantasies become reality, eliminating Bologue Lazarus is imperative."

Alice tempted Aimou, yet Aimou's motions halted, like a statue, rigidly frozen.

"What are you waiting for?"

Alice asked puzzled, then her tone turned stern.

"You attempted before, didn't you? Gray used every piece of Alchemy Armament yet still couldn't kill him, nor slow him down... only here, only in this ether vacuum, he will truly perish."

Aimou grasped Bologue's shoulders, laboriously dragging him.

"Yes, that's right, throw him down, let Calamity consume him; even if he revives one day, by then our goal will be accomplished."

Alice reassured Aimou, whispering softly, "You haven't killed him, he is inherently immortal, you simply allowed him... a brief slumber."

Aimou was about to drag Bologue to the cave's edge, but suddenly she stopped, out of control, she fell backwards, leaning against the wall and sat down.

"What do you ultimately intend to do?"

Seeing this, Alice grew furious, loudly questioning Aimou, yet Aimou did not respond, merely hugged her knees, head down like a scolded child.

"Do you want to again leave the choice to others? Aimou."

Aimou did not reply. Alice paused for a moment, she herself lowered down, embracing Aimou, whispering near her ear.

"Remember, Aimou, apart from me, no one else will unwaveringly choose you."

Aimou lifted her head, with a hint of hope in her words.

"No, there will be others."

Alice hadn't anticipated Aimou would oppose her one day; instead of anger, she smiled.

"Was it him? Or him?"

Alice said cryptically, holding Aimou's face, her pupils seemed to writhe with something, generating subtle sinister waves.

"Since you believe in all this so strongly..."

How about a wager, Aimou?"

Chapter 338: Friends

Bologue slowly opened his eyes, intense sharp pain lingering in his mind. After waking up, he didn't immediately move his body but squinted and pondered some matters.

He no longer remembered the visage of that void world, leading Bologue to surmise that he hadn't died, merely fainting due to ether exhaustion.

Bologue's condition was terrible, but he personally felt it was manageable. The prolonged time in the Black Prison had trained Bologue's willpower to be exceedingly strong, just as he often mentioned.

Focus, endurance, tenacity...

After a few deep breaths, Bologue squeezed out a sliver of strength from his battered body. He raised himself, panting heavily, and looked to his side.

Aimou lay beside him, faint glimmers lingering atop her shell. However, for some unknown reason, these lights only covered her upper body, leaving her lower body shrouded in darkness.

Recalling his memories before fainting, the two of them had fallen prey to the Calamity. Countless writhing crimson tendrils stirred up a storm of ash, followed by scorching winds engulfing all living things in flames.

Even thinking back, Bologue's steadfast heart would ripple ever so slightly... The bastards at the Order Bureau actually kept a Calamity here.

Once the Calamity awoke and broke free, the entire Oath City, Opus, would become its feast, allowing it a grand indulgence.

Bologue didn't dwell on this too long. He was just a Condenser, and he was trapped in this damned place, uncertain if he could even escape.

Such matters about the Calamity should trouble someone like Nesanel, and for now, it seemed the multiple seals set by the Order Bureau remained intact. The Calamity was calm, and his previous attack was merely its sleep-talk.

With these thoughts clear, Bologue began pondering another question.

How many Calamities were there in this world?

Bologue didn't think the Calamity he faced was unique. It was once a Seeker of Glory, offering its soul to the Crimson Queen, receiving her Protection, and ultimately falling to become this world's Calamity.

This world has more than one devil like the Crimson Queen; she has numerous siblings. Perhaps the Calamity is the same.

"Aimou, are you okay?"

Bologue ceased thinking about these matters and, showing concern to Aimou beside him, asked.

Aimou seemed a bit off.

As an Alchemy Puppet, Aimou didn't express emotions with every detail like a human; more often, she was like a corpse, sitting quietly with only the light in her pupils flickering.

Logically, Bologue shouldn't be able to penetrate the steel shell to explore Aimou's emotions and thoughts directly, yet he somehow instinctively sensed it.

Aimou seemed a bit off.

To Bologue's concern, Aimou didn't offer much response. Her eyes flickered a few times as acknowledgment before falling into deep thought.

Bologue struggled to move his body. With ether exhausted, he was no different than an ordinary man, incessant pain coursing through him. Thankfully, Soul Shards were at work here.

Invisible glimmers rose around Bologue, providing him with a meager amount of ether at an excruciatingly slow pace to counterbalance his injuries.

"How long was I unconscious?" Bologue asked.

"Three scorching winds swept outside, roughly over an hour."

Aimou calculated the time by the number of scorching winds passing by.

"Really? Not too bad."

Bologue exhaled deeply, fearing Aimou would tell him he'd been unconscious for several days again.

Not knowing if the flesh outside had calmed down, Bologue didn't intend to leave now. He needed to properly rest, even if he couldn't recover much strength, just to ease his mind a bit.

As well as dealing with... some team members' mental states.

During his training days, Geoffrey taught him many things, not only various coping strategies but also methods to handle teammates.

Of course, Geoffrey didn't teach him to kill teammates when necessary but how to inspire them when they've lost motivation.

Bologue didn't really listen to this part because he felt he didn't need teammates, although later, when paired with Palmer, despite Palmer often acting like a deserter, he never shrank back from battle.

Bologue laboriously moved his body closer to Aimou's side. The two lying together didn't create any warm scene. It was more like a dead man and a dying person huddled together, whispering about whether to go to the Celestial Kingdom or to Hell.

"Aimou?"

Bologue continued to call out, but Aimou still didn't respond.

The current feeling was a bit odd; Bologue felt like a teacher comforting a withdrawn child.

In fact, Bologue had some guesses earlier, but due to the urgent situation, he didn't have time to discuss these matters with Aimou. But now, he thought it might be a good time.

"Aimou? Aimou, listen to me."

Bologue repeatedly called out to Aimou, an unfamiliar patience in his voice.

Reaching out to hold Aimou's head, Bologue felt like he was handling a life-sized doll, slowly turning her head to meet her blue-tinted pupils in a gaze.

"So, Aimou, did you feel what death really is?"

Bologue asked, serious.

During his fall into the Great Rift, to ensure Aimou wouldn't break from the fall, he and Aimou remained in a Shared Chord Body state until he hit bottom, bloodied and maimed, while Aimou safely detached from him at that moment.

Everything was going smoothly, except for one thing.

In the Shared Chord Body state, Bologue and Aimou were in Empathy. Aimou could sense Bologue's pleasure and detect his pain... even his death.

At the moment Bologue hit bottom and died, Aimou felt that same sense of death and experienced a real death herself.

Bologue was already accustomed to death, but it didn't mean he wasn't afraid of it, not to mention a creature like Aimou. From earlier conversations, Bologue could sense that Aimou was sensitive to death.

This probably explains why Aimou's emotions were so out of control when Bologue woke up; she not only thought she really died but also experienced death alongside him.

Aimou still didn't respond, and Bologue didn't continue to press her but sat quietly beside her, awaiting the next round of scorching wind to start acting, unsure of what exactly to do.

Perhaps to continue delving deeper inside, hoping for luck to find the Fourth Outpost, or possibly trying to escape to the periphery, where the land was desolate, and going there would just mean waiting to die.

"Nothing truly belongs to me."

A faint voice sounded, Aimou's voice was so low that even Bologue couldn't hear it clearly.

Seeing Aimou finally respond, Bologue turned his head, looking at Aimou with anticipation, pondering what could be wrong with this alchemy puppet.

Aimou slowly raised her head, her azure halo gazing at Bologue, her emotions were somewhat complex, saying such words wasn't easy.

"Are we friends, Bologue?"

"Of course, we've been through life and death together."

Bologue joked, this was something Palmer often said to him, every time Palmer needed his help, that's when this guy remembered he was his partner, a good brother who went through life and death together.

"Are we friends?"

Aimou repeated again, she didn't care about Bologue's flowery adjectives, she was very serious, as if the next words would be a sacred vow.

"We are friends."

Bologue repeated seriously this time.

"Friends shouldn't lie to each other, right?"

"Yes."

"We have absolute trust in each other, right?"

"Yes."

After a series of monotonous and repetitive dialogues, Aimou's lifeless demeanor became much lighter, while Bologue comforted himself that Aimou was an alchemy puppet, her cognition was slightly different from humans.

But what Bologue didn't expect was that the childlike dialogue just now had an extraordinarily powerful binding force on Aimou.

"Yes, I experienced death, and the feeling of death is terrible."

Aimou whispered, like a child scolded.

"It's dark, cold, like walking in a lightless wilderness, no matter which direction you go, there's no end, only eternal loss."

Listening to Aimou's words, Bologue said nothing, he had experienced countless deaths, logically Bologue should be the most qualified to speak of death, but Bologue would never die, no matter how severe the punishment was, it was meaningless to him.

"But still very lucky."

"Lucky for what?" Bologue asked.

"I finally understood what death is, such opportunities are rare," Aimou's voice had a hint of laughter, "death is no longer an unknown fear for me, it can be understood and accepted."

Bologue didn't understand what Aimou meant, next Aimou drove her body, and opened her arms to Bologue.

"What are you doing?" Bologue asked.

"Hug," Aimou said, "we're friends now, shouldn't we hug?"

"Are you sure?"

Bologue looked skeptically at Aimou, indeed, the cognition of the alchemy puppet was still different from humans.

"Shouldn't we hug?"

Aimou questioned Bologue, she spoke of her understanding of hugging.

"Animals only expose their belly when they're relaxed, humans are the same, after opening their arms, the chest loses the protection of the arms, exposing many important organs to others."

Aimou remained in the open-arms position, waiting for Bologue's response.

"Hugging is a proof of trust, I expose my important organs, even my heart, to you, letting down all guards, you can choose to attack now, pierce my heart, tear apart the trust... or you can choose to expose your important organs, and hug me back, a complete proof of mutual trust."

Bologue's gaze was slightly dazed, he was stunned by Aimou's words, never expecting that in Aimou's eyes, hugging had such a notion.

"Don't you trust me, Bologue?" Aimou didn't understand Bologue's hesitation.

"No... just..."

For a moment, Bologue didn't know what to say, hugging was normal, but Aimou's explanation seemed somewhat odd.

But odd as it was, in such a situation, Bologue felt it was very reasonable.

Yes, very reasonable, after all this was Aimou, the unique Aimou.

Without thinking, Bologue initiated the hug, Aimou, like a big doll, was embraced in his arms, Bologue didn't feel anything special, just somewhat cold, heavy.

Thunderous roars swept across, scorching winds engulfed the silent rift, sweeping up massive ashes, but all this had nothing to do with the two, they hid in the cave in the rock wall, hugging each other, like travelers warming themselves in winter.

When the violent tremors ceased, Aimou whispered in Bologue's ear.

"Alright, you can let go."

Bologue noticed that Aimou's emotions were a bit off, he let go of Aimou, only to see fine cracks spread over Aimou's body, the reason why the lower half turned dull was because the body's structure was completely damaged.

"Aimou, you..."

"It's alright, I'm not afraid of death anymore, it's no longer unknown to me, and... it seems I don't have any so-called 'death,' for me, it's more like 'damage.'"

Aimou leaned back, unconcerned.

"To put it in terms you understand... I'm out of power."

Her voice was cheerful, but beneath the body, the ether storage units were either broken or depleted, the ghostly blue light in her eyes flickered incessantly, seemingly about to go out any second.

Bologue remained silent, his face darkened.

Chapter 339: Defending Assets

Aimou is about to run out of power, to be precise, Aimou's ether is about to be depleted, the operation of the Mind Projection will cease, and thoughts will return to lifeless silence.

"Will you die without ether? Or will your consciousness fade away?" Bologue coldly asked.

"I'm not sure, but since I gained consciousness, I've never encountered this situation."

"Because you're also afraid of not waking up, aren't you? Just like death."

Facing Bologue's inquiry, Aimou didn't respond; her ether reserves were running low, with only an hour left to remain active.

Aimou didn't think any miracles would happen within this hour, nor did she believe the two of them could escape in such a short time.

"You can consume the Philosopher's Stone, isn't the energy of the Constant Motion Core reliant on the sparse ether emitted when the Philosopher's Stone fades away?"

Bologue asked, he felt there was always a way that could work.

"It's impossible, this is Alice's Philosopher's Stone, my body has its own protection mechanism; in such instances, the Constant Motion Core automatically seals itself."

As much as she didn't want to admit it, the fact remained that, in Teda's eyes, Aimou was merely a tool to revive Alice; what truly mattered was never Aimou herself, but Alice's Philosopher's Stone inside her Constant Motion Core.

Aimou comforted Bologue, she said, "It's nothing, perhaps I'm simply going into hibernation? After a while, when you escape, come back to save me, and I'll awaken once more..."

"Do you believe that?" Bologue asked, "Aimou, you don't even believe that yourself, do you?"

"You're afraid of hibernation; you fear waking up as someone other than yourself, just as you fear replacing the Philosopher's Stone. You're terrified of such self-extinction... Even though the self you have now is merely someone else's shadow projection."

This is all you have now.

Bologue whispered in his heart.

Aimou did not refute this but asked Bologue, "Then what will you do? If you waste your strength and ether on me, perhaps both of us will die here."

"You're an Undead, but if you're consumed by a Calamity, wouldn't reviving take a long time? Months, years, decades?"

Aimou's attitude grew remarkably firm; she accused.

"Besides, that's a Calamity; if you're eaten by it, even the Order Bureau would find rescuing you difficult."

Aimou's words were quite reasonable; in an hour, she would have depleted all her ether, the Mind Projection would halt, the Constant Motion Core would seal, and she would become a thoroughly useless heap of scrap metal.

Bologue had no reason to leave carrying this iron shell; it would be better to leave Aimou here...

"Bologue, you're my first friend; I hope you can leave here."

Aimou sincerely said.

"Don't worry, I'll enter hibernation mode, fully shield and protect myself completely."

The atmosphere turned silent; Bologue leaned aside, seemingly lost in thought, perhaps wanting to accompany Aimou for a while longer in their final moments.

Aimou didn't bother with Bologue; she felt she had done what she needed to do, meanwhile, Alice's voice persistently churned in her ears.

"Such good acting, he must be completely deceived by you, right?"

Alice sat beside Aimou, inspecting Aimou's cold expression.

"Oh... My Aimou, seeming so innocent and naive, everyone lowers their guard around you, offering hugs and friendship, this guy must have been utterly conquered by you, right?"

Alice mocked the poor Bologue, the man who fancied himself an expert, believing he could control everything, never realizing that he had been deceived by Aimou from the start.

"He should leave reluctantly, and when he escapes and returns to find you, he'll discover you're no longer here... By then, we will have realized our dream and lived the life you long for."

Alice was satisfied with the situation; everything was proceeding as anticipated, initially feigning death to escape everyone's notice, then secretly continuing their plan.

"Next, we'll see what choice Bologue makes."

Alice grew tense, for in her perception, Bologue was a peculiar individual capable of taking any action.

Bologue might be moved by Aimou and leave sorrowfully, or he might cold-heartedly excavate Aimou's Constant Motion Core and leave with the Philosopher's Stone, the scenario Alice least wanted to see, hence why Aimou had to say so much, subtly influencing Bologue.

Not only the defense mechanism of the Alchemy Puppet itself and the sealing of the Constant Motion Core but if Bologue invested emotion into Aimou, he would not damage Aimou's "corpse."

Just like Teda, even though Alice was already dead, she stubbornly kept her corpse merely because it was evidence of her existence.

This is human weakness, the weakness named emotion.

Bologue moved; he turned around, his gaze no longer cold but with traces of anger, always having this angry look, as if wanting to smash everything to pieces.

"Have you decided?" Aimou asked.

"Yes, I've decided." Bologue said.

"Oh? He's about to bid his final farewell to you."

Alice stood like a spectator, watching Aimou's performance and the mocked Bologue.

The anticipated farewell did not occur; Bologue straightforwardly asked, "Where is your Ether storage unit?"

"Below the heart."

Aimou didn't understand why Bologue was asking these questions, but she replied nonetheless.

"Alright."

With that, Bologue reached out, inserting his hand into the opening along Aimou's abdomen. The cold metal made his hand ache.

Alice's heart grew tense; the most unstable factor in this plan was Bologue's high likelihood of directly taking the Philosopher's Stone.

She slowly raised her hand, an illusory specter, yet capable of disrupting reality, prepared to realign everything back to origin if Bologue derailed the story.

Bologue didn't touch the Constant Motion Core; instead, he dutifully placed his hand on the Ether storage unit, leaving Aimou bewildered. Soon, streams of Ether began releasing, injecting into the storage unit.

"This..."

Aimou couldn't believe it; Bologue was supposed to be Ether exhausted, where was he getting so much Ether?

Bologue paid no attention to Aimou's reaction, merely gritting his teeth as he released Soul Shards, forcing them to burn into intense Ether, gradually filling the storage unit.

Azure glimmers were rising; this was a phenomenon only Bologue could see. The brilliant azure lights danced like fireflies, fading away, while Alice, as if sensing it, stared keenly around Bologue, attempting to see through the illusion.

To Alice, the burning of Soul Shards seemed more important than the current events.

"You don't have to do this!" Aimou panicked, "It's unnecessary to go this far for a friend."

"Firstly, it's necessary."

Bologue raised a finger, signaling Aimou to be quiet.

"Secondly, this has nothing to do with whether we are friends."

With that, Bologue raised a pocket knife, eager and ready.

"Aimou, you need to understand something; you're not just my friend, you're also an important asset of the Order Bureau.

As an excellent Field Staff, and someone preparing to win this year's Best New Employee award, protecting important assets of the Order Bureau is part of the job."

Bologue aimed at Aimou's mechanical joint gaps, speaking comfortingly.

"Next, you might think I'm a psychotic killer, but there's no choice; you mentioned it yourself, my stamina is almost out, so I just need to lighten the load a bit from you."

At times like this, Bologue would ramble on. In Aimou's puzzled gaze, the pocket knife came down instantly.

Twenty-two minutes later, another wave of intense heat swept through. After a brief burn, the lifted dust returned to earth, the intense temperature receded under the ash.

On the pitch-black rock wall, Bologue opened the sealed Round Shield, plunged the pocket knife fiercely into the rock wall, hanging himself on it.

This time, Bologue's movements were much more nimble; after simple handling, he relieved quite a bit of burden, just that the person relieved was now feeling quite complex and dazed.

"Don't you want to say something?"

Aimou asked behind Bologue, her expressions and schemes had all turned into the setup for this joke under Bologue's erratic actions.

"Say what? Praise myself for having good skills, perfectly fit for being a killer?"

Bologue was too lazy to say much else, "Just lie there, I'll get you out."

Aimou went silent, truly unsure of what to say even if she were to speak, eventually letting out a puzzling laugh.

There's nothing funny, but indeed worth a chuckle; from any perspective, all of this was too strange.

Too bizarre.

Under Bologue's deft craftsmanship, Aimou's cumbersome limbs were severed, unnecessary mechanical structures disassembled mostly by Bologue, only the most basic mechanisms maintained for Aimou's normal operation, leaving her just half a body now, like a trophy caught by the Cannibal Race.

Regardless of how you think about it, the scene was somewhat ghastly, but recalling the causes and aftermath, Aimou simply found it all absurd beyond measure.

She began not understanding what on earth was going on in Bologue's mind; such difficult decisions lacked the tragic sense of farewell in his hands, instead, were bizarre beyond reason.

"Did you imagine he would do this?"

In an extremely low voice, Aimou spoke to the phantom Alice.

Alice merely shook her head, eyes deeply fixed on Bologue, flashes in her vision showed Bologue burning the Soul Shards, azure lights rose, extinguished, turning into the purest Ether pouring into his body.

Bologue's figure gradually overlapped and snugly fit with another.

Chapter 340: Holy City of Remongedon

This time, Bologue truly went all out, burning all the accumulated Soul Shards. Part was supplied to Aimou, providing her with Ether, while another part roared and echoed within his own Alchemy Matrix.

After regaining his Extraordinary Power, Bologue's speed was swift, moving quickly on the rock wall like an agile monkey.

Time was not on Bologue's side; he silently counted down in his mind. Since leaving the cave, his life had only twenty-two minutes left.

Gazing into the far-off darkness, Bologue could already see faint firelight flickering within.

The Calamity was sealed by the Order Bureau in this pitch-black underground and subjected to blazing fire, keeping it in a perpetual state of dormancy. Even if flesh resurrects, it would swiftly be scorched to ashes by the flames.

The devastating searing wind was merely the breathing of the long-sleeping Calamity, an old breath exuding from its broken shell, mixed with scorching sparks, rampaging through this dark rift.

Merely breathing, merely a tortured part of the long slumber.

The more Bologue understood all this, the more he felt awed by the existence of the Calamity and how it was born because of the Devil transferred this awe onto the Devil as well.

"These lunatics messed up the world."

Bologue complained as he leapt forward; the rock wall ahead became uneven, with massive rock protrusions interweaving, turning the rift into a giant mouth of some kind of monster, only its flesh and teeth had been petrified.

Sticking a folding knife into the rock wall, Bologue slipped into the interwoven teeth, minutes later the distant rumble of thunder arrived, and scorching winds swept past the edges, slightly singeing them red.

Bologue held his breath, getting closer to his destination, and the temperature had risen significantly. Fortunately, the area was full of such rock protrusions that could be used as cover.

Aimou, carried on his back, remained silent. After Bologue's absurd behavior, she felt a sense of guilt inside.

Aimou deceived Bologue; her Ether wasn't depleted at all. Aimou was cooperating with Alice, finding a way to get Bologue out so they could proceed with the next step of their plan.

As for whether Aimou could escape from this dreadful rift...

Aimou believed in Alice, who was indeed an illusion to her, yet this illusion was, at times...omnipotent.

Alice was right; Aimou was good at disguise, deception; Bologue was being run in circles by her, these humans arrogantly thought Alchemy Puppets were just children, not knowing what lies in children's hearts.

Aimou trusted no one, other than Alice, Aimou had never revealed her true thoughts, but now Aimou was wavering, even Alice's layered temptations beside her, she did not heed.

Bologue indeed did not abandon them; like magic, he conjured Ether out of thin air, then kept charging in this Hell.

Aimou wanted to hear Alice's opinion; after all, she was about to be stripped clean, in a very passive position, but since just now, Alice remained silent, looking at Bologue with a complex gaze.

Alice seemed like an illusion, yet perhaps not; Aimou couldn't tell anymore.

"It's over."

Bologue whispered as the searing wind dissipated; he immediately leapt out from cover, leaping and moving amidst these protruding rocks.

Without the Soul Shards replenishment, the hunger inside grew unbearable, even for Bologue's willpower.

Luckily, everything was about to end, Bologue was nearing the destination, and if the Desperate Outpost was doing its job well, they would notice him.

As for dereliction of duty? Bologue thought that unlikely, for here was a captive Calamity, and those dispatched to the Desperate Outpost, if not the elite of elites, must be dedicated individuals like Lebius.

"Bologue, a question."

Aimou suddenly spoke after being silent.

"What question?"

As Bologue responded, he stepped onto a tall rock protrusion, these rocks spread across the rock wall's surface like massive staircases, allowing Bologue to advance and avoid falling into the ashes below.

After witnessing the scarlet flesh beneath the ashes, Bologue never wanted to touch that land again.

"These searing winds come from the breathing of the Calamity's slumber, right?"

"I think so, why?"

"Wouldn't it have just breath..."

Before Aimou could finish, Bologue already sensed it, unlike the previous thunder, this was an imperceptible rustle, followed by wisps of wind brushing by Bologue's side, dragging the pervasive ashes, outlining threads of gray silk.

"We're too close, Bologue!" Aimou exclaimed.

By this time Bologue understood her meaning too, all kinds of negative statuses affected Bologue's thoughts, staying clear-minded was extremely difficult for Bologue, he simply couldn't think about these.

The Calamity had been constantly breathing, blowing the scorching searing wind before, the judgment of twenty-two minutes was because they were too far from the destination, the searing wind took twenty-two minutes to reach; as they got closer to the destination, time shortened accordingly.

The searing wind was coming! But before then, the Calamity needed to inhale to exhale.

Bologue turned his head and ran towards the protruding rocks, but by then the immense suction had already captured him, the strong wind breezed past him lifting him directly into the air.

Now Bologue understood, this damned place was a death zone; ordinary Condensers, Prayer Believers, once caught, would have their power continually sapped by the Ether vacuum, and the flesh that serves to hunt for the Calamity would keep attacking, as well as these periodic searing winds.

Various mechanisms were interlocked to form this life-critical place.

The folding knife struggled to embed in the rock, yet Bologue's figure kept being dragged backward, leaving dense sparks on the rock until he lost grip on it and was entirely sucked into the air.

Bologue tried to hurl Deceitful Snake Scale Liquid, but he was moving too fast, for an instant all the rocks he could grasp had been out of Secret Energy's range limit.

As if a storm had swept Bologue away, his figure endlessly rotated in mid-air, his view spinning wildly.

His body ascended to the skies, and in a daze, he saw the burning fire in the darkness, like an eye of flame growing from the earth, with an endless sea of fire beneath its pupil.

Bologue struggled to see everything clearly, then he saw something, something that made him momentarily forget to think.

The powerful suction disappeared, a large amount of air mixed with ash was sucked into the sea of fire, Bologue began freefalling; seconds later, it was as if he exhaled, the scorching fiery wind would push him away, even burn Bologue into a charred shell.

After a brief daze, a cyan light flashed in Bologue's eyes, and he fell towards the earth, adjusting his posture in mid-air, heading towards the core area.

From high above, aided by the burning light, Bologue finally saw the hidden thing in the gloom, an extremely vast Ruins District, densely clustered buildings filled the entire view, ashen like a sea of sand swallowed them, covering every corner in gray-white.

Just before hitting the ground, Bologue threw out strands of Silver Hand, firmly grasping those towering buildings, standing long like stone monuments.

The dense silver web held Bologue back, unfortunately, Bologue's Ether was difficult to sustain, these silver webs broke at the critical moment, and Bologue harshly landed in the ashes.

Luckily, he managed to slow down, Bologue did not suffer any fractures aside from severe pain, he gasped for a few seconds, then struggled to crawl up, immediately evading towards another building.

Roaring thunder rang from behind heavy buildings, scorching fiery winds swept through the Ruins District, as if a giant was breathing and spitting flames, ravaging this city.

"This city must have been glorious once,"

Aimou murmured to herself, she too saw this massive ruin from high above, even though it was burned by fiery winds and buried in ashes, one could still witness the former glory amidst the broken walls.

Bologue said nothing, until the fiery winds subsided, he stepped out of the shadows, wandering in these ruins.

Strangely, Bologue seemed as if he had been here before, he turned onto a straight avenue, ascending the ash-covered steps.

Bologue stood for a long while.

"So you are here..."

Bologue thought the shock Calamity gave him was enough, yet after witnessing these ruins, Bologue suddenly felt Calamity was nothing.

For Bologue, this ghost traveling through eras, nothing touched him more than seeing familiar things.

It felt as if that period in Bologue's memory was not truly buried by time, it still left some traces, declaring its existence.

"Something's wrong, how could there be such a vast ruin here?"

Aimou couldn't understand, "Was it built by the Order Bureau? A city built to detain Calamity?"

"No, you got the sequence wrong."

Bologue took a step forward, walking along the straight avenue towards the source of the fiery wind, behind those towering city walls.

"Whether it's Calamity or the Order Bureau, they are outsiders, while it was the original master of this land."

Bologue looked at the gray-white city walls covered in ashes, also the towering spires behind the walls, with sculptures of Angels on them, watching the mortal world with sorrow.

The scene twisted and writhed before flickering, Bologue couldn't hear Aimou's voice anymore, replaced by endless noise.

The soldiers' roars, the mechanical sound of trigger pulling, the booming sound of bullets firing...

The sky burned into a deep red blood color, Bologue wore a rough military uniform, charging forward with his comrades on the smoky battlefield.

The army had flattened the defenses on the city's outskirts, their sole goal now was to open that city gate, to barge into that palace made of gold.

Bologue gazed at the magnificent city, on the towering walls were huge carvings of ghosts and gods, further behind arose spires, with sculptures of Angels on them, watching the mortal world with sorrow.

The grand walls isolated everything, outside the walls, blood soaked the soil, corpses piled upon the ground, faintly inside, one could hear the strains of string music and sounds of people's merriment.

Bologue suddenly felt he was like a traveler suffering in Hell, reluctantly charging towards those walls, attempting to knock on the gates of the Celestial Kingdom.

If only that gate could be opened, if only that wall could be destroyed.

If only...

Bologue blinked, the frantic war vanished, surrounding him was only gray dead silence, the once exquisite carvings buried under layers of ash, Angel sculptures also crumbled and ruined, absent was the string music from the Celestial Kingdom, only the Calamity-like, hellish calling howl remained.

"Upon release, I've been thinking, it was so grand, even destroyed, there should have been some remnants, not completely vanishing from this land."

Bologue spoke as he took steps forward, feeling exhilarated with his current state, resisting death.

"This is..."

Aimou faintly thought, she had read about the history of Oubos, but no matter how she tried, she couldn't imagine its site would be here, at the bottom of the Great Rift, accompanied by Calamity.

"This is where my fate began."

Bologue stood under the magnificent city wall, tiny as an ant, and everything was exactly like sixty-six years before, the city gates tightly closed.

"King Solomon's Holy City."

Bologue called out its former name.

"Remongedon."