

Endless 481

Chapter 481: Prologue: The Woman with Fire Opal Eyes

The sky was a murky gray, and the ancient castle stood silently amidst the pattering rain.

Trees and weeds grew wildly, ivy covered the cold stone walls, and small patches of greenery spread through the crevices. If it weren't for the faint light coming through the stone windows, the castle would seem to have been abandoned many years ago.

More than the castle itself, its name seemed to have vanished into the annals of time. It is said that the castle's origins trace back to before the Scorched Earth Fury, but the truth of the story is something no one can verify.

Many years later, this nameless castle had a new owner and a new name. The locals often referred to it as Daisy Castle, simply because, amidst the chaotic greenery, the owner had planted vast fields of daisies. They surrounded the castle, forming a sea of white and yellow, and whenever a breeze blew, the floral sea would play a melodious tune.

That sea of flowers left a deep impression on Dudel. Having lived in the gloomy steel jungle of Oubos for so long, he hadn't seen such beautiful natural scenery in ages.

Stepping over the dust-covered stairs, Dudel soon met the owner of the castle in the grand library.

From what Dudel knew about the castle owner, he was an old fellow, yet at first glance, Dudel didn't think he was aged at all. Instead, he read boundless vitality in those spirited eyes.

The castle owner, dressed casually in pajamas, welcomed Dudel with a smile. This friendly gesture took Dudel by surprise, as he recalled the rumors about the owner.

People said he was a reclusive oddball, who, despite having such a vast estate, never tended to it. There were no servants in the grand castle; only he lived here alone.

Dudel never quite believed the latter part of the rumors, but on his way here, he observed that the castle was indeed covered in dust, with some areas even rain-soaked. Only in areas frequented by the owner did one feel traces of life, like in this library filled with countless books.

Dudel felt this was not just the owner's library but also where he worked and lived.

Not far away, he could see the owner's desk, with a typewriter on it, and drafts piled nearby. In the corner, there was a blanket spread out, with a pillow and a shotgun beside it.

Noticing the shotgun, Dudel raised his eyebrows slightly, recalling an interview in which the owner was asked how he ensured his personal safety living alone in this isolated, empty castle.

The owner had laughed and said he carried a shotgun, and uninvited guests would get a full meal of bullets.

At the time, Dudel thought it was just the owner's jest, but now it seemed he was serious. Considering the owner's past experiences, Dudel found it reasonable.

"Mr. Dudel, is it?" The castle owner glanced at Dudel, then at his watch, "You're very punctual."

The owner was very particular about time, Dudel knew that.

Taking a deep breath, Dudel worked to calm his nerves and then spoke.

"Hello..."

As soon as he spoke, Dudel felt nervous again, suddenly realizing he didn't know how to address the owner.

Indeed, part of why the owner was seen as a reclusive oddball was that for many years, no one knew his real name. At least not publicly.

"Just call me Blue Jay."

The owner smiled. He knew what Dudel was hesitating about; this scenario had happened many times before, and he was used to it.

Dudel swallowed and cautiously said, "Blue Jay?"

On his way here, Dudel had done his homework. He knew what a Blue Jay was—a bird with beautiful lavender-blue plumage.

The owner had mentioned in an interview that there were very few blue entities in the animal kingdom, and the Blue Jay was one of them. Its plumage was so unique and beautiful... The owner appreciated such rare uniqueness.

"What else? You're interviewing an author now, and addressing me by my pen name isn't a problem, is it?"

Blue Jay smiled at Dudel, wrinkles gathering at the corners of his eyes.

Dudel gradually got used to talking to Blue Jay and chuckled self-deprecatingly, "Sorry, this interview is very important to me, and I'm also a devoted reader of yours..."

"It's okay, it's okay."

Blue Jay waved his hand, stood up from the sofa, and poured a drink for Dudel and himself. The glasses clinked gently.

"Don't be so nervous, relax. Just treat it like an afternoon chat," Blue Jay said, patting Dudel on the shoulder.

Dudel looked at this mysterious and solitary author, feeling a mix of emotions: the pressure of work, the excitement of meeting the real person, the difference between rumor and reality... Dudel adjusted his mindset and got into work mode.

"Mr. Blue Jay, I'm here on behalf of 'Gray Mist, Industry, and Delicious Shrimp Crackers' radio show to interview you."

"I know, I've been listening to your program, and I quite like it," Blue Jay praised, "In that sense, I guess I'm your fan too, Mr. Dudel."

Blue Jay's friendliness left Dudel a bit flustered, but then he completely relaxed and murmured, "There is after all a gap between rumor and reality."

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"Just like fantasy and reality, the deviation between them is precisely the stage for us creators."

The Blue Jay sat back in his seat, crossed his legs, and his furry thighs peeked out from his pajamas, completely unconcerned about his image, "Please hurry up, Mr. Dudel, I have other things to deal with later."

"Yes, okay."

Dudel took out his pre-prepared notebook, where he had already listed a few questions he wanted to ask the Blue Jay, and he proceeded to ask them one by one in sequence.

"In all of your works, there is always a woman, a woman with Fire Opal eyes. I want to know why that is. Does she have some symbolic meaning?"

Dudel hurriedly added, "I know many people have asked you this question before, and you haven't provided an explanation. If you don't wish to answer, we can skip this question."

"It's alright, I can answer this question," the Blue Jay explained, "One of the reasons I accepted your interview is that I feel it's time to talk about these things."

Dudel was dumbstruck, taking several seconds to comprehend the meaning behind the Blue Jay's words, his emotions uncontrollably erupting with excitement.

The woman with Fire Opal eyes.

In all of the Blue Jay's works, there would always be such a character. She did not participate in the main plotline, like an abrupt shadow weaving through the pages and words.

Omnipresent, eternal.

Critics once lambasted this meaningless character, yet as the Blue Jay crafted one astounding work after another, the woman with Fire Opal eyes gradually became a spiritual icon, a hallmark of the Blue Jay's creations.

There was even a joke: how to determine if a work was by the Blue Jay—just check if there was a woman with Fire Opal eyes in the book.

As time went by, past criticisms faded away, and everyone wanted to know what meaning Fire Opal eyes truly represented.

Over the past decades, countless individuals had interviewed this solitary eccentric, attempting to glean some insight into the woman from his words, yet the Blue Jay remained tight-lipped, no matter the promised value or threats to his person, utterly indifferent.

Until today.

"Sorry, I lost my composure... I have been curious about her since I started school, having read your books, she has long existed within me."

Dudel repeatedly apologized; as a radio host who speaks eloquently past midnight, he considered his social skills quite adept, yet faced with the Blue Jay, he kept showing his shortcomings.

The Blue Jay smiled and waved his hand, "It's alright."

"So, who exactly is she?"

Dudel picked up his pen and notebook, earnestly listening to every word the Blue Jay would say.

People had many speculations about the woman with Fire Opal eyes, the most credible being that she represents a woman the Blue Jay sought but never attained in his youth.

From an external perspective, the Blue Jay had never married, and at fifty-nine still remained single, which made this speculation even more convincing.

"It remains an unspeakable secret."

The Blue Jay raised a finger, placing it in front of his lips, "But what I want to tell you is, my new book will explain everything about her."

"Your new book? You mean a new book!"

Dudel almost choked again; it's been a decade since the Blue Jay released his last work, people thought he wouldn't write anymore, given he already had enough fame and wealth, that his life should only be about enjoyment now.

"Exactly, I've been preparing for ten years... no, far more than ten years, and what I can reveal is, this will be a... well..."

The Blue Jay, undecided about how to describe the book's content, contemplated for a while before settling on the book's type.

"It will be a self-referential fantasy novel."

All the secrets you care about will be answered within this book."

Dudel's breath quickened; he didn't understand what a self-referential fantasy novel meant, but he knew the importance of this news, "This is big news, is this considered an exclusive report for us?"

"Of course not," the Blue Jay raised his brows at Dudel, "I wrote letters to all the major newspapers about this, and you merely happened to ask."

Upon hearing this, Dudel felt a bit disappointed, but disappointment quickly gave way to excitement.

Dudel pursued further, "When will your new book be released?"

The Blue Jay earnestly explained, "It should be some time away; I've finished the first half of the story, but not the second half. Once I've sorted it out, perhaps it could be published in two volumes."

Dudel pursued again, "What about the title of the new book?"

The Blue Jay showed a helpless smile, shook his head, and replied, "Sorry about that, I haven't thought of a name for it yet."

"Is there nothing else you can share?" Dudel asked persistently.

"No, I want to present this work as a surprise for my readers; too many words would just dull that sense of surprise."

Dudel understood and subsequently sighed, "For a reader like me, the release of your new work is already the greatest comfort."

"Then please wait patiently, I trust it won't disappoint you."

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Crown Blue Jay was very confident about his new book and made a promise to Dudel.

The two continued to talk for a while until Crown Blue Jay stood up, bringing the interview to an end.

"Alright, it's time to end this, Mr. Dudel. I have matters to attend to next."

"Okay, but I still want to ask..."

Dudel glanced at his notebook; there were still a few questions he hadn't asked. He looked up at Crown Blue Jay, whose expression suddenly turned solemn, the previous friendliness vanished completely. He stared directly at Dudel, his gaze filled with an undeniable authority.

"Time is up, Mr. Dudel."

Crown Blue Jay raised his wrist and tapped the watch face.

Crown Blue Jay was a very punctual person; Dudel knew this, but the various information he gathered from Crown Blue Jay made him completely forget about it.

"Sorry... sorry, I truly apologize."

Dudel stood up, bowed apologetically. Crown Blue Jay had no intention to exchange pleasantries with him, just gestured with his eyes that he should leave.

A while ago, they were talking merrily, but now they appeared exceptionally unfamiliar, even somewhat hostile.

At this time, Dudel realized that the rumors weren't without reasoning; in some aspects, Crown Blue Jay was indeed an unusual person.

Gathering his belongings, Dudel bid farewell a few more times and left hurriedly, while Crown Blue Jay remained standing until the sound of Dudel's footsteps gradually faded in the castle, dispersing, and he finally moved.

Walking toward the blanket he used for sleeping, Crown Blue Jay picked up the shotgun; after ensuring it was loaded with ammunition, he dragged it with one hand while holding a wine glass in the other, wobbling in his slippers through the silent hallway.

Descending the spiral stone stairs toward the castle's cellar, Crown Blue Jay sipped his wine, randomly placed the wine glass on the ground, took the candle holder from the wall rack, using the weak flame to illuminate the encroaching darkness.

The surrounding temperature gradually dropped, with Crown Blue Jay's breath, wisps of white fog appeared; the cold air also carried a faint scent of blood, as if it led to some slaughterhouse filled with broken bodies deep within the darkness.

Soon, a mottled iron door stood before Crown Blue Jay; he leaned the shotgun against the wall and took a string of keys he always carried from his waist, unlocking multiple sealed locks, the ancient iron door slowly opened, and the stench of blood became even more pronounced.

Crown Blue Jay was already accustomed to the smell, calmly walked in, and casually closed the iron door behind him.

The weak flame illuminated the dim cellar; this was considered another workspace for Crown Blue Jay, an undisclosed workspace.

The walls were covered with various notes, newspaper clippings, black and white photographs, and some pages torn from books...

Crown Blue Jay's gaze swept across another wall filled with photos related to him.

If someone carefully studied the content, they would discover that Crown Blue Jay was once a sailor, a train conductor, and he not only wielded most firearms but also understood combat and swordsmanship.

In fact, these experiences of Crown Blue Jay were not a secret; those who were more attentive knew about his exciting past life.

For a long time, being an author for Crown Blue Jay was merely a sideline; his real profession was a wandering adventurer, but people couldn't comprehend what he pursued now, as the current world had been explored by humanity, adventurers had withdrawn from the stage of history, so what was Crown Blue Jay chasing now.

Crown Blue Jay's hand brushed along the edge of the table, opening the ancient book; the pages blank spaces were filled with hasty handwriting, all information integrated, summarized in the thick notes.

From the darkness came heavy breathing, followed closely by the sound of chains dragging across the ground, as if something was confined within a cage.

Crown Blue Jay did not pay attention to those, he picked up his notebook, his fingertips lightly brushing over the dark words, uttering one forbidden term after another from his mouth, resembling a spell being recited.

"Secret Source and Devil, Condenser and Demon..."

In reality, Crown Blue Jay no longer needed the notes; he spent his lifetime investigating that extraordinary world, during the prolonged excavation, these hidden knowledge had been engraved into his memory like a steel stamp.

A bookmark was tucked in the final page of the notebook; although called a bookmark, it was essentially a train ticket, from a train thirty-three years ago according to the marked time.

Thirty-three years passed, this ticket in Crown Blue Jay's careful preservation remained intact except for the paper yellowing slightly; even creases were few and far between.

Crown Blue Jay stared deeply at this ticket which changed his life, until the disturbance from the darkness interrupted his thoughts, his eyes flashed displeasure, lifted the shotgun heading toward the depths of the darkness.

"Crown Blue Jay... Crown Blue Jay..."

Enticing moaning came from the darkness, a woman affectionately calling Crown Blue Jay, as if she was his long-lost lover.

Crown Blue Jay stood before the cage, gazing at the women imprisoned inside, her majority body hidden in the murky darkness, the exposed skin smooth and fair.

She noticed Crown Blue Jay's arrival, crawling with her hands to the cage's edge; under the dim light, one could see iron nails driven into her joints, these nails had been there for many years, dried blood solidified into dark stains, mixed with the rough rust.

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The azure-winged magpie gazed at the woman in the cage. She didn't feel pain because of the injuries on her body; instead, she met the magpie's gaze with a dreamy expression and alluringly licked the corner of her mouth.

"It's useless on me, you should have known this many years ago." The magpie spoke coldly.

The woman didn't respond, just emitted a soft laugh, which didn't surprise the magpie. The woman rarely answered his questions, nor did she seem to care about her predicament. As for the seductive gestures, given the magpie's understanding of this group, it seemed more like an instinctive hunting behavior.

"I'm so hungry, Mr. Magpie, I can smell the scent of living people. Did you bring me new food?"

The woman stretched her hand out of the cage, twisting her waist voluptuously, showcasing herself to the magpie.

"No, I sent them away," the magpie shook his head, "and I think there's no need for that anymore."

The woman was slightly confused by the magpie's words, "No need?"

Something felt wrong, but as she thought about it, a deep-seated hunger in her mind tormented her.

She had been suffering for many years, ever since she had infiltrated Daisy Castle intending to hunt the magpie's soul. In the end, she was countered and imprisoned, losing her freedom and surviving only on the magpie's occasional benevolence.

Everyone has an unspeakable side, and the magpie was no different. Those who trespassed into his castle with ill intentions eventually died at his hands, then delivered to the woman, prolonging her pitiful existence.

This was essentially a deal between the magpie and the woman, a symbiotic relationship, but from today, the magpie felt it was time to end this twisted connection.

"I remember you said, you... as the Demon, you recognize the scent of your creator, right?"

The magpie spoke while taking out an envelope, suspending it over the woman's head.

"So, can you determine its authenticity?"

The woman stared blankly at the envelope, able to sense the power contained within the paper, a power both familiar and terrifying. Even a faint trace of the aura was enough to prove its reality.

"What can I get?" The woman struggled to maintain her reason, resisting the hunger, and asked the magpie.

"You will gain freedom."

The magpie kept his cold demeanor.

"Don't worry that I'll go back on my word. I bring you souls as food, you provide me clues to the Extraordinary World; we've cooperated for decades, so I think there should be a certain degree of trust between us."

The woman hesitated, then revealed a charming smile with her face pressed against the cage's front.

She affirmed, "It's her, it's her power."

She knew what the magpie intended to do and continued.

"Should I congratulate you, magpie, after so many years of effort, you've finally found her trace."

The magpie's cold expression lasted for a few seconds, then a frenzied smile bloomed on his face. He grinned, laughing silently.

"You should release me now, magpie. You won't break your promise."

The woman pleaded, her gaze pitiful and affecting.

The magpie thought few men could refuse such a woman, and then he considered that this might be the power of the Demon. Even after all these years, the woman remained youthful and enchanting, while he had transformed from a robust youth into an old man.

"No..." The magpie shook his head, and before the woman could angrily rebuke him, he reached out and gently lifted her face, "We've been together for so many years, haven't we?"

His icy gaze was suffused with warmth, and the woman was somewhat bewildered, reading such emotions in this oddball's eyes for the first time.

"If I release you, you would no longer belong to me."

The magpie smiled at the woman, approached the cage, holding a shotgun in one hand, and pulling open his pajamas with the other. His muscles lifted the aging body, along with those scars, under the dim light, he resembled an ancient bronze statue.

"Close your eyes, lift your head."

The magpie leaned down as if to kiss the woman, his voice entered her ears. She hesitated for a moment, repeatedly confirming the magpie's intent through his aged eyes, seeing only sincerity.

The woman quietly mocked, "I thought you were different, magpie."

"There's no helping it; humans are emotional creatures. No matter how rational a person is, it's inevitable to develop feelings for someone they spend each day with... Are you the same? Even being a Demon, you used to be human; don't you feel anything for me?"

The magpie lifted the woman's chin, "Close your eyes."

Smiling, the woman closed her eyes. She guessed it was either time that corroded the magpie's will, or the joy of impending success made him relax his guard. Having been tormented by the magpie for so many years, she had been seeking an opportunity for revenge, and now the opportunity was right in front of her.

She cooperatively prepared to posture for a kiss, in her mind forming plans for the forthcoming attack. After all, she was a Demon, and the magpie was merely an old man. If not for the constraints of the cage and long spikes, killing him would be effortless.

As she thought this, the thunderous sound of a gunshot shattered all her thoughts.

The magpie put down the shotgun, the woman's body lay across the cage, her entire head blasted into a bloody pulp, evenly smeared in the darkness.

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Looking at the dead corpse, Blue Crow once again raised his hunting rifle and fired at the body's abdomen, blasting it in half.

"You're free now..."

Blue Crow said coldly. He wanted to say something more, perhaps mention the woman's name for a more ceremonial farewell, but at that moment, Blue Crow realized he didn't know the woman's name.

It wasn't that the woman was hiding anything from him; Blue Crow had never asked. In his memory, the woman seemed to have mentioned her name a few times, but Blue Crow never cared.

Blue Crow grabbed a body bag and spent some time cleaning up the woman's corpse. Gathering the pieces of flesh together was a troublesome task, but without cutting these Demons into bits, Blue Crow couldn't feel at ease.

Since he came into contact with this Extraordinary World, Blue Crow had been extremely cautious. The world was filled with sinister Demons and the Condensers who wield Extraordinary Power. He was just an ordinary person who stumbled upon the shadows of the world, so being overly cautious couldn't hurt.

Hoisting the body bag over his shoulder, Blue Crow walked through the dim, dark underground corridor, flanked by sealed iron doors. Stained with mottled blood marks, the nauseating scent of blood filled the air.

Blue Crow had thought about cleaning up this place, but as the only person within Daisy Fortress, it was ultimately too much trouble, so he let it continue as it was.

The buzzing of mosquitoes and flies reached his ears as Blue Crow walked forward, his gaze sweeping over the iron doors, muttering the numbers on each one.

Finally, he reached the depths of the underground. The faint firelight illuminated only his feet. Beyond the stairs lay an unfathomable darkness.

As the owner of Daisy Castle, Blue Crow was taken aback when he first discovered such a vast underground space. He originally thought it would remain forever unused, but not long after, Blue Crow made perfect use of it.

"The last one."

Blue Crow counted, tossing the body bag on his shoulder into the darkness; a few seconds later, he heard it hit the ground.

Blue Crow intended to leave immediately, but he remembered the characters he'd written. Every murderer returns to the scene of their crime to relish their work.

With this thought, Blue Crow threw his candle into the abyss.

The fire danced a few times in the darkness, the flickering light outlining grim and twisted shadows, vaguely showing the mountain of body bags.

Blue Crow unconsciously smiled, turned around, and left. The iron door slowly closed, blocking all light, leaving the place eternally forgotten.

Upon exiting Daisy Castle, Blue Crow had changed his attire. He looked like he was going on a trip, dragging a suitcase behind him.

Blue Crow paused by the field of daisies; the gentle breeze carried a rich floral fragrance.

The sweet scent seemed to turn the air into honey. Blue Crow hadn't felt such joy for a long time. He recalled the last time he felt this way was thirty-three years ago, on that never-ending train.

Blue Crow took out an envelope and shook out a brand new train ticket. The ticket was peculiar; it noted the departure time but not the destination, and the train's name was elusive too.

Intertwined in black text, Blue Crow murmured softly.

"Joyful Garden..."

In a daze, Blue Crow heard the whistle in the distance. The train roared in; it had no starting station, no terminal, only tracks that went on forever.

Chapter 486: Prayer Believers

It's been nearly a month and a half since the timeline disruption event, and while winter is gradually leaving this land, the cold and gloomy state of Oubos endures, but fortunately, the citizens are long accustomed to it.

Time trickles by, days leaping and skipping on the calendar, and thus the dates shift from Rhein Calendar 1244 to 1245.

A new year had begun, and in the frigid city, everyone held hope in their hearts, as this was the end of winter, and warm spring was just around the corner.

Inside the Sublimation Furnace Core, Bologue sat on a chair in the corridor, with Aimou sitting beside him. Ever since Aimou joined the Special Operations Group, Bologue had been taking her out on missions. The intensity of the missions wasn't high, mostly involving small tasks of chasing Demons.

Oubos falls under the Control of the Order Bureau. It's not every day that life-and-death events transpire within the city. After weeks of slashing away at Demons, Aimou's initial enthusiasm for the job had also started to wane.

Like many employees, Aimou would wake up groggy each day, clock in at work, and patrol her assigned areas to see if reckless individuals were committing offenses.

There were some twists, but with Bologue present, everything was smoothed out, and things continued moving in a positive direction.

With Aimou's joining, she also bridged the communication gap between the Special Operations Group and the Sublimation Furnace Core, relying on her close reputation with Belli to finally liberate Geoffrey, allowing him no longer to deal with those guys.

Daily life thus calmed down, with days passing by until today.

Bologue glanced at Aimou beside him, then around the hallway, which was now crowded with people, turning the originally spacious area unexpectedly narrow.

This was initially supposed to concern only the Special Operations Group, and the presence of its members would suffice, but due to Palmer's broad social circle, members from other operations groups also gathered.

Bologue and Aimou sat on the chair, with the large-framed Hart beside them. Across from Hart was a face both unfamiliar and familiar; were it not for the person greeting him proactively, Bologue would not have recognized him.

The unfamiliar yet familiar face belonged to Church. Bologue remembered him as a member of the Crow's Nest and Palmer's former partner. Bologue had met him once during the surprise assault on the Man-eater.

As for Church, Bologue held a rather rough impression of him, mostly derived from Palmer's words.

Church specialized in infiltration, leveraging his Secret Energy powers, needing to converse with the enemy, understanding their psychological state and past experiences.

Thinking back now, Bologue found Church somewhat like an assassin with strange quirks.

"I feel like we're a bunch of anxious husbands waiting outside the ward for Palmer's delivery."

In the lengthy silence, Hart first broke the calm, though his words rendered the already quiet atmosphere even more solemn.

Aimou and Church shot Hart a ghostly look, unable to comprehend what he was saying; on the contrary, Bologue smiled silently, enjoying Hart's terrible dry humor.

"How much longer will it be? Did he die in there?"

Bologue spoke up, also feeling the atmosphere was too dreary, as if they were awaiting news of Palmer's death. Today should be an important day, and everyone should be happier.

"Die inside? With his luck, it's certainly not impossible," Church nodded in agreement. "Anyway, whether he succeeds or fails, it's a good thing for me."

"Does this person have a grudge against Palmer?"

Hearing Church's response, Hart whispered to Bologue, showing concern, willing to help Palmer fend off this hostile stranger if necessary.

Due to his own beast-like appearance, Hart lived within the Order Bureau for years, even needing to wear thick garments when acting outside to conceal his appearance.

He hadn't gone for a stroll in years, which made him somewhat introverted. Knowing this, Palmer enthusiastically dragged Hart to a bar that could accept him.

Serey showed extreme affection for this furry new friend, and Wei'Er even considered using Hart's large furry body as a nest.

This led to Hart and Palmer becoming close, drinking together daily.

"He's Church, Palmer's former partner," Bologue introduced. "Because of Palmer's Blessing, he's had his share of misfortunes following him. Eventually, it just..."

After hearing Bologue's explanation, Hart's gaze towards Church showed more sympathy and understanding.

Church, affected by those ghostly eyes, momentarily didn't know what to say, as if both were pitying him.

Church tried to ignore the odd looks and turned towards Bologue, "Didn't expect you to remember me?"

"I have some impression," Bologue scrutinized Church closely. "But it feels like you've changed quite a bit since I last saw you... I can't quite put my finger on it."

Bologue could sense Church's peculiarity; he didn't have this feeling at their first meeting, but upon the second meeting, this sense of oddity became increasingly apparent.

He vaguely felt that the last time he saw Church, he definitely didn't have this face. At least there was a certain difference with the face before him now. Outside the differences, the sole point of similarity allowed Bologue to recognize Church's identity. If those similarities were also to disappear, Bologue wouldn't dare confirm Church's identity.

Faceless man.

Bologue suddenly recalled Palmer's nickname for Church and subtly perceived the meaning behind this appellation.

Church was somewhat surprised by Bologue's observation, unexpectedly finding Bologue to be so perceptive, but he had no intention of further explanation, merely offering a friendly smile.

Bologue said, "It seems you don't dislike Palmer too much, otherwise you wouldn't be here."

"Palmer was my former partner, after all. Before he became a Debtor, he was actually quite nice."

Church said this while looking toward the tightly shut door at the end of the corridor.

"I find your description quite appropriate," Church said to Hart. "This place really does resemble the entrance to an operating room."

Everyone was silent for several seconds before they all chortled together. Aimou was caught in the middle, completely clueless about what they were discussing, as if their conversation was encoded.

Waves of Ether emanated from behind the closed door, causing them to cease their laughter and look toward the door with anticipation.

After waiting several minutes, the tightly closed door swung open, and a figure emerged, staggering, drenched in sweat, looking utterly exhausted as if having just completed a marathon.

Physically worn out, yet his spirit was exceedingly high, his eyes gleaming brightly. Upon seeing Bologue and the others, he rallied his meager strength, jumping in place in celebration.

"Ha! I've succeeded!"

Palmer shouted to the group, then sprinted over with a running start.

Bologue sidestepped, while Church leaned against the wall with disdain. Only Hart was left bewildered, and soon enough, Palmer crashed into Hart, the two of them linking arms.

Although they seemed to be linking arms, Hart's size was too big; it was more like Palmer hugged Hart's neck and was hanging onto Hart's body.

"Control yourself!" Hart yelled, pulling Palmer off him.

Hart hadn't spent much time with Palmer yet. Were it Bologue and Church, they would have been prepared for Palmer's eccentric moves.

"Haha!"

Palmer was only concerned about laughing, pressed into a chair by Hart. He was like an overly excited puppy, wanting to lick everyone he saw.

Then Palmer turned and saw Aimou gazing warily at him, their eyes locked. Aimou silently raised a fist, flesh turning into steel, the dull metal exuding a cold sheen.

After joining the Special Operations Group, Bologue gave Aimou comprehensive training, allowing her to undergo complete combat training.

Palmer gulped, turned to Church, smiled as he walked over, "I knew my good brother, you'd definitely come!"

Church dodged, Palmer's hand missing its target. "It's only for the sake of old friendships."

Unfazed by Church's indifference, Palmer moved closer, "I totally understand you, good partner. You're just cold on the outside but warm inside."

Finding Palmer insufferable, Bologue grabbed Palmer's shoulder and restrained him.

"So, what's the result?"

"I'm lively enough now; what do you think?"

Palmer said to Bologue, his eyes glimmering with light. Breezes swirled through the hall, and Bologue suddenly felt a suffocating sensation. Immediately, a strong pressure came from all directions.

This strange feeling lasted but a moment, dissipating along with the glow in Palmer's eyes.

"I'm now one of the Prayer Believers."

Palmer completed the ascension ritual, becoming a Prayer Believer with the arrival of this warm spring.

Chapter 487: New Life

After the time disorder event, Palmer did not immediately start his long vacation but continued with the triple trials and then prepared for the promotion ceremony of the Prayer Believers.

These days, life was quite peaceful for them, with no major events occurring, the serene life felt unexpectedly tranquil.

Perhaps due to the prolonged adrenaline-filled lifestyle, this calm period even made Bologue feel a bit surreal.

There were no sudden visitations from Devils, no unexpected attacks from enemies while walking on the street, nor were there any raids on their homes halfway through the night...

When Aimou heard Bologue's description, she looked at him with eyes that seemed to say, "What kind of life were you living before?"

"Promoted to a Prayer Believer? Not bad."

In the office, Lebius commented indifferently, but unlike before, this time Lebius at least glanced at Palmer to show some acknowledgement.

After a period of rehabilitation, Lebius had been discharged from the hospital half a month ago. His arm still required periodic treatment, but regular document processing was no longer an issue.

Interestingly, Lebius had grown somewhat fond of these auxiliary arms.

Now in the office, those arms driven by the Spirit Wolf surrounded him like a humanoid octopus machine, efficiently handling work.

These arms greatly reduced Yuriel's workload, but also added new tasks for her, such as maintaining these auxiliary arms.

"It's been pretty quiet recently, do you guys have any thoughts?" Lebius asked, looking down.

"No work to carry out?"

Bologue ignored Palmer's eye gestures and asked directly.

"Not for now, the Field Operations Department hasn't assigned any tasks, and as for your previous Great Rift patrols, they can be temporarily put on hold."

Lebius did not continue, but Bologue and Palmer knew what he meant; to be precise, this matter was no secret within the Field Operations Department anymore, as all mobilizable action groups had been activated.

After the time disorder event, to prevent any omissions, various action groups cooperated to thoroughly cleanse the Great Rift, eradicating the Calamity-flesh while disposing of numerous Demon corpses into the Sea of Mist.

One might say the Great Rift has never been cleaner, but this cleanliness is only temporary. As long as there are desperados in the world, they will eventually gather in this dark place again... but at least Bologue and the others now had some downtime.

This major cleansing held a deeper significance, one that could be traced back to Bologue's initial patrol task.

On the surface, it was to guard against an Extraordinary Disaster caused by Calamity, but beneath it, this was an act of deterrence against the Tyrant, with the cleansing even sparing not a single bypass, conducting a round of population optimization there.

Moreover, the cleansing also sought traces of the King's Shield Guard. During the time disorder event, the power displayed by the King's Shield Guard had already drawn the Order Bureau's attention. Even more perplexing was the fact that the Third Seat, supposedly dead from the Secret War, was actually alive and part of the King's Shield Guard.

The Special Operations Group had already played its part in the time disorder, and the tasks moving forward were to be taken over by other action groups. When everyone else was busy, these individuals now found themselves idle.

"Is that so?"

Hearing there was no work, a hint of disappointment flashed in Bologue's eyes.

"No, no, no, don't listen to him, we still have plenty of personal matters to handle!"

Palmer intercepted the conversation, aware that it was his time to act. If Bologue kept talking, who knows what tasks he might take on.

Palmer was currently in love with this leisurely life, and he didn't want Bologue ruining it for him.

"We still haven't finished handling the rental issues over there, and isn't Bologue also preparing to be promoted to a Prayer Believer? We're quite busy as it is!"

Palmer rattled off non-stop.

Lebius paused his work, looked up at Palmer, then at Bologue.

In Palmer's pile of excuses, Lebius only cared about one thing.

"Have they set the date for the Sublimation Furnace Core over there?" Lebius asked Bologue.

"Not yet. They've just held the promotion ceremony for Palmer and need some time to remelt the Alchemy Materials."

Bologue continued, "They said my Alchemy Matrix is special and needs special attention."

"Hmm... I'm not worried about your promotion ceremony; you won't die anyway. What's surprising is how smoothly you are getting promoted."

Lebius's gaze fell on Palmer.

Palmer shivered as if his body had been pricked by needles.

In transactions with Devils, when humans lose their entire soul, a ravenous void is exposed, and humans thus transform into Demons.

Those who fall to demons do not inherently possess the ability to implant an Alchemy Matrix. After all, upon losing the soul, the soul—serving as a carrier for the Alchemy Matrix—vanishes without a trace.

If one transformed into a demon in the state of a Condenser, their Alchemy Matrix would remain in the void. Although still possessing Extraordinary Power, without a soul, the Matrix loses its ability to continue growing and advancing.

As Debtors, who have only partially lost their souls, they can implant and promote the Alchemy Matrix like normal people, but due to the incompleteness of their souls, the implantation and promotion ceremonies are filled with unknown risks and are extremely dangerous.

As an Undead, Bologue's soul is in a deficient state, yet the promotion ceremony poses no danger to him; at most, he might die a few more times. But for Palmer, the situation is entirely different.

Palmer could have undergone the promotion to a Prayer Believer long ago, but those familiar with him knew that later Palmer had some minor accidents—Palmer became a Debtor.

Blessing·Gambler.

Due to this blessing from the Devil, Palmer's luck was exceptionally pitiful, not to mention the soul deficiencies of a Debtor, which inherently made the promotion ceremony fraught with numerous unknown risks.

These factors combined made Palmer hesitant for a long time about the promotion ceremony, as stepping into it might mean his unlucky demise on the ceremony platform.

Before undergoing the promotion ceremony, Palmer was so anxious that he considered consulting a psychologist. The Sublimation Furnace Core was aware of Palmer's uniqueness and fully prepared for him.

After all, Palmer was the heir to the Clarks, one of the founding families of the Order Bureau. If Palmer were to die in the Sublimation Furnace Core, it would inevitably be cumbersome to handle.

Belli had been dealing with the Decision Room's investigations during all this, as Lebius, the straightforwardly diligent guy, had indeed reported her embezzlement of funds. She had enough worries already, and for the sake of mental health, Palmer must not die...

At least not in the Sublimation Furnace Core!

The final outcome was cause for celebration, as Palmer made it through and became a Prayer Believer.

"Then go ahead and deal with your personal matters; there's nothing pressing work-wise at the moment, and... Aimou, you stay and take these documents; Sublimation Furnace Core needs you to make a trip."

Lebius gave instructions, "As for you, Palmer, remember to write a report on the effects of your Secret Energy after promotion, we need to document it."

"Okay, okay."

Palmer nodded repeatedly, Bologue and Aimou waved goodbye, and the two of them left the office. Just as they were leaving, Geoffrey walked in.

Geoffrey entered the office, not forgetting to glance at the corridor, watching Palmer and Bologue depart.

Aimou was also preparing to leave, but Geoffrey suddenly closed the door carefully, and when Aimou looked at him confused, a mischievous grin appeared on Geoffrey's face.

Geoffrey, animated, said, "This time I hit the jackpot."

"What happened?"

"The Sixth Group and some Crow's Nest people bet with me; they bet that Palmer, the unlucky fellow's promotion ceremony, would surely go wrong, while I bet it would go smoothly."

Geoffrey plopped onto the sofa, "I made a killing off them this time."

Aimou thought, no wonder Geoffrey waited for them to leave before saying it. If Palmer overheard, he'd surely be mad... or maybe not, Aimou thought it more likely that Palmer would pounce on Geoffrey and demand a share.

Geoffrey went on chatting about miscellaneous things with Lebius, while Aimou quietly left, walking down the quiet corridor, holding a large stack of documents in her arms.

Aimou occasionally felt a sense of vagueness, realizing she had unconsciously integrated into this new life, a smile naturally appearing on her face as she joyfully stepped forward.

Chapter 488: Night Hunter [Thanks to Leader Night Hawk 307 for the additional update]

Oubos, Shenbei District.

During this idle time, Bologue was on one hand conducting various onboarding trainings for Aimou, and on the other hand moving into a new home.

After much consideration, Bologue and Palmer settled in an apartment in Shenbei District, which was very close to the Order Bureau, only a few streets away, similar to the distance from the Undying Club.

The new home was a two-bedroom, one living room, one bath, which was a very standard rental room. What tempted Bologue the most was that the landlord left a lot of good stuff, like a video recorder and a lot of movie tapes in the drawer, bringing Bologue's dream of a home theater closer to reality.

Besides this, the living room of the new home was also very spacious, enough to fit a long sofa and Bologue's war game board.

Due to the fullness of life, Bologue hadn't played with those pieces for a long time. During the move, he ordered a custom glass cover to enclose the board, which became a decorative coffee table topped with various yet-to-be-organized clutter.

After finishing work at the Order Bureau, Bologue and Palmer went directly back to the new home. The packing had been intermittent, and the house was still piled up with cardboard boxes. They planned to take advantage of the leisure today to tidy up properly.

Palmer didn't care much. In this short roommate period, Palmer had fully demonstrated his carefree lifestyle to Bologue, who felt that if given a few pieces of cardboard, this guy could manage to sleep a night under a bridge.

Actually, Bologue could do the same, but he felt that if basic living conditions could be met, there's no need to make himself uncomfortable. It was better to clean up as soon as possible if it could be done quickly.

"The view is nice."

Palmer pulled open the curtains in the living room, allowing the light to pour in and illuminate all the dim corners.

The new home was located on the top floor of the apartment, offering an easy view of the streets, watching over the traffic, and seeing the light rail weaving between the buildings, as well as the distant, towering cold grey tower that seemed to support the heavens and earth.

From the moment he saw the cold grey tower, Palmer's expression completely drooped.

"The view indeed is nice, open the curtains and you can see the company... Do you think if we wave here, the people in the Observation Tower can see us?"

Bologue, holding a cardboard box, murmured beside Palmer.

Palmer rolled his eyes at Bologue and angrily closed the curtains, as if by not seeing, that massive Cultivation Room would cease to exist.

"Tonight I've invited Hart and Church to the Undying Club for a drink," amidst the busy tidying, Palmer said to Bologue, "to celebrate my successful promotion to Prayer Believer."

"Sure, let's go together then."

Bologue glanced at the time, realizing there was still a while before evening.

Palmer continued, "Are you ready for what comes next?"

"Ready for what?"

"Your promotion ceremony, haven't you already passed the Triple Trials and applied for promotion to the Sublimation Furnace Core?"

Bologue's work paused for a moment as he recalled the Alchemy Matrix attached to his fractured soul and its mysterious origin.

Overlord Xilin.

Bologue still remembered the abnormality during his implantation ceremony and Geoffrey's warning to him.

"There's nothing I need to prepare for, remember? I'm an Undead."

"That's really something to envy." Palmer stretched his words, showing no hint of actual envy.

For Condensers, the soul serves as the carrier for the implantation of the Alchemy Matrix that masters Extraordinary Power. This implantation ceremony requires the human soul to be condensed from nothingness into a tangible, interferrable entity, allowing the Alchemy Matrix to attach to it and then sublimating back to void.

When a Condenser is promoted, their soul, as the foundation for the growth of the Alchemy Matrix, needs to stabilize, followed by the strengthening of the soul, further triggering the growth of the Alchemy Matrix.

This is somewhat akin to human growth. After intense training, growing muscles may stretch the skin, causing many growth lines to appear on the surface; the soul, fortified through the ceremony, experiences the same.

The Order Bureau provides free alchemy materials necessary for employees to be promoted from Condensers to Prayer Believers. However, on the journey from Prayer Believers to Negative Power Users, the required alchemy materials need to be procured by the employees themselves.

Apart from the necessary alchemy materials, just like the mandatory Triple Trials required for promoting from Condensers to Prayer Believers, there are unique transitional stages at each tier, which is also true for advancing from Prayer Believers to Negative Power Users.

The remaining part is certain requirements for Ether affinity, and these indicators are steadily increased as Condensers gradually familiarize with Secret Energy.

Bologue had been a Condenser for nearly half a year now and was preparing to be promoted to Prayer Believer. This promotion speed was not uncommon among Condensers.

Palmer opened a cardboard box, which was filled with his collection of records, and asked, "Do you have any plans after the promotion?"

"No plans."

Bologue shook his head. He lived a simple life, with leisure activities such as listening to music and watching movies being his only pursuits besides work.

"Are you interested in taking a long vacation with me? And take a look at the Wind Source Highlands?" Palmer continued, "After all, I'm your partner. If I leave, it would be hard for you to carry out a lot of work, wouldn't it?"

"Aimou learns things quickly. When you're not around, I can team up with her..."

"Bologue!"

Palmer sternly interrupted Bologue, put down what he was holding, hurriedly walked up to Bologue, and emphasized to him.

"I am your partner, understand?"

Bologue nodded silently, recalling Church, possibly having been kicked out by Church once, Palmer was extremely concerned about changing partners.

Indeed, Palmer is a thorough unlucky fellow. If I don't partner with him, he'll just pass his bad luck onto others.

Bologue suddenly felt a spontaneous sense of selflessness. By sacrificing himself to mix with Palmer, how many people had he invisibly saved?

Palmer didn't know about Bologue's strange psychological activities, and he couldn't be bothered to guess. As Bologue's partner, Palmer knew very well how complex Bologue's mind was. Rather than guessing his thoughts, it was easier to guess the weather in Opus today.

He glanced at the gap in the curtains, and the gloomy sky revealed a dim light.

Overcast.

You see, how easy it is to guess, just one glance and you know what's going on.

"What's this?"

Bologue pulled out a piece of black fabric. It felt somewhat hard, unclear if it was due to the textile.

"A scarf Hart gave me," Palmer glanced at it and said, "Hart's quite nice. His family seems to be in the textile business. Every winter, he gives a few pieces like this to his friends."

Palmer took the scarf and hung it on the rack.

Bologue took another look at that black scarf for some reason, it felt somewhat familiar, but hard pressed to think, he couldn't come up with a specific reason.

The two of them continued tidying the room until evening. The scenery outside was quite nice, with half the city swallowed by the gloomy darkness, while the other half of the sky was stained with fiery orange-red.

Bologue thought that the rent being quite steep had its own reasons.

After tidying up, the living room became more cluttered, filled with various types of books, records, and videotapes.

None of this was Bologue's stuff. Bologue's personal items were pitifully few, the only big piece being that war sandbox used as a coffee table.

In other words, Bologue had been cleaning up Palmer's stuff during this time, and this guy's things were just too much.

The two of them took a rest, sitting at opposite ends of the sofa. Bologue looked ahead, thinking at least there's a TV at home now, which was left by the landlord, saving Bologue quite a bit of money. Also, there was a bathtub in the bathroom, Bologue couldn't even remember when was the last time he had a bath.

Bologue reclined comfortably in the soft sofa, with no lights on inside, only relying on the light coming through the floor-to-ceiling window to illuminate a dim corner.

The room was very quiet, so quiet that many small sounds were incredibly clear, the dripping water from the tap in the washroom, a gentle breeze bringing coolness into the room, Palmer squinting his eyes, emitting the sound of calm breathing.

Bologue looked at the room filled with objects, feeling a long-lost sense of... life.

He felt having Palmer as a roommate wasn't bad, Palmer relieved Bologue from that lonely ascetic life, allowing him to enjoy a serene tranquility.

Checking the time, it was still a while before the appointed time with Hart and Church, so Bologue decided not to disturb Palmer's nap. The guy just finished a promotion ceremony today and should be pretty exhausted.

Bologue stood up quietly and randomly picked a book from Palmer's pile and took it into his room to pass the time.

Following the principle of whoever pays more rent gets to live in the bigger room, Bologue used his good financial condition to occupy the master bedroom. It wasn't that he didn't want to yield to Palmer, but Palmer's things were just too many. If he didn't take the master bedroom, Bologue's stuff would have to be crammed in the living room, which Bologue didn't want to do.

Just like when he lived in Shenbei District, Bologue prepared a desk for himself, with drawers containing a diary he occasionally scribbled in.

He sat at the desk, flipping through the book he picked from the pile, glancing at its cover, and recalled this book, realizing he seemed to have come across it many times in different places.

When transporting goods to the Desperate Outpost, this novel was among the goods. In the small cabin of the stronghold, Palmer was reading this book. During the Vow Festival, Bologue and Aimou also saw the adapted movie of this book.

"Night Hunter..."

Bologue softly murmured the name of the novel, with a bit of curiosity, he turned the book's pages, then saw the author's name in the corner.

A peculiar name.

Blue Jay Crown.

Chapter 489: Needlework

When Bologue closed the novel, the sky had already darkened. He didn't read quickly, but he roughly understood part of the novel's content.

In the story of "Night Hunter," lurking in the shadows of the human world are creatures known as demons. They are bloodthirsty and hungry, feasting on the flesh of the living. To battle these monstrous beings, a group of people gathers to become Night Hunters, hunting evil in the shadows.

Bologue felt the story had some resemblance to reality. In reality, there is also a group of evil existences, but compared to the demons in the book, these beings called Devils are much more chaotic and insane. In this comparison, the Condensers are akin to Night Hunters.

Putting the novel aside, Bologue opened the door and woke up Palmer, who was still sleeping. He was curled up on the sofa, and when Bologue woke him, he sat there looking bewildered.

The body was awake, but the soul was still struggling to rise. Palmer stared blankly ahead, and this state lasted for a full minute before he slowly got up.

"My head hurts from sleeping."

Palmer clutched his head, wailing in pain. After the excitement, the overwhelming fatigue from the promotion ritual consumed Palmer. He struggled to open his eyes and wobbled to the restroom to freshen up with cold water.

Bologue had already dressed, "Do you need a rest?"

"I'm fine. It's rare for everyone to have time today, so I can't stand them up."

Palmer waved his hand dismissively. Currently, the Field Operations Department is relatively idle, with only the Special Operations Group being busy. Hart had time because he had just been rotated for rest after a week of overtime by Yas, and it was similar for Church. The intensity of work at the Crow's Nest, Palmer had personally experienced.

Bologue nodded, then took out the Key of the Crooked Path, "Are you sure?"

The Key of the Crooked Path is a very convenient means of spatial transfer, but the side effects after each use are dizziness and nausea. Bologue doesn't mind since the Undead is quite hardy, but Palmer isn't necessarily the same.

Palmer hesitated for a while and then shook his head vigorously. Bologue put away the Key of the Crooked Path, opened the door, and made a "please" gesture.

Palmer grabbed the black towel Hart gave him, wrapped it casually around his neck. Although it's already the end of winter, Opus's damn weather is still terribly cold.

In the parking lot downstairs, a bright blue car was parked in the corner. Due to his outstanding performance in the Time Axis Disarray incident, Geoffrey provided Bologue with a new car identical to his previous one.

Palmer took the wheel, and Bologue sat in the passenger seat. Unless required for action, Bologue generally let Palmer drive, not because Palmer liked driving or was more skilled than Bologue, but mainly because Palmer had a driver's license.

The new home isn't far from the Order Bureau, but during rush hour and the endless red lights, the car got stuck in the crowded streets, and it took a long time before it slowly drove back to the Order Bureau.

...

At the Order Bureau, many employees choose to live in the Cultivation Room's dormitories, firstly because rent and utilities are free, and secondly because it's convenient for work.

Hart is also one of those living in the dormitory. Due to his excellent work performance, he has a single room in the Cultivation Room, rather than sharing with others.

Initially, Hart didn't live in the Cultivation Room but rented a place outside. His reasons were similar to Palmer's – living in the dormitory was indeed much more convenient, but staying in the Cultivation Room for a long time inevitably felt oppressive.

Later, Hart encountered an accident. Although he didn't die, he transformed into his current furry Beastman form due to the corruption of the Alchemy Potion.

If Hart appeared directly in the outside world and was treated as a doll, it would be fine, but if he was seen as a monster, it would certainly cause panic. So after that, to avoid trouble, Hart moved into the dormitory and basically never left the Cultivation Room unless necessary.

This lifestyle had a significant impact on Hart's mental health. It took him a long time to adjust to the situation and eventually reembrace life in time.

During breaks, Hart liked to soak comfortably in the bathtub. Because he's all furry, bathing takes a long time and is quite exhausting.

First, he dampens all his fur thoroughly, then grabs an entire bottle of shower gel and pours it all over himself, cleansing while combing along the grain of his fur. The entire bathroom is covered in suds. Hart feels like he's washing a car.

Once the shower gel is rinsed off, he picks up a bottle of conditioner and rubs it all over, ensuring his fur is smooth and tangle-free.

He rinses repeatedly until all the foam is washed away, then leans against the bathtub, panting from exhaustion. He sometimes wonders if he could go to a pet store to bathe. Given his appearance, he somewhat resembles a large dog. If necessary, Hart is even willing to pay extra.

Of course, this is just a thought.

Hart roughly dries himself and wraps a towel around his body. With his amount of fur, drying himself is quite a challenge, but there are always solutions to problems.

Leaving a trail of water, Hart, wrapped in a towel, twists and turns into a secret door. The surrounding light dims, leaving only the blaring noise of the chosen fan.

Hart stands in a ventilation duct just wide enough for one person, spreading his arms and letting the hot, dry wind from the front gradually dry him out.

This is the normal drying speed. If Hart is in a hurry, he usually goes to the Sublimation Furnace Core's ventilation duct, where he can dry in a few minutes, regardless of how wet he is. However, it's not good for his fur, leading to split ends and dryness.

After drying himself off, Hart's silhouette seems to grow several sizes, his black fur all fluffy. Back in his room, he begins to comb his fur from top to bottom, collecting the fur he sheds into clumps and stuffing it into a drawer.

Hart always felt that shedding all that fur was a waste to just throw away. So he learned how to collect and process it. Whenever he had time, he'd roll them into yarn balls, finding it incredibly stress-relieving.

He glanced at the time; there was still plenty before Palmer was supposed to meet him. Hart put on his glasses, opened the cabinet, and took out a ball of black yarn.

It was quite an odd scene: a sturdy Beastman sitting in a chair, humming a tune while knitting a scarf with yarn.

For Hart, knitting a scarf was an extremely stress-relieving activity, helping to dispel his worries. His therapist highly recommended it, and over time, it became a hobby for Hart.

As he knitted more items, Hart simply gave them to his friends, spinning a benign lie like saying his family was in the textile industry.

He looked just like the big bad wolf playing the granny in a fairy tale, completely unaware that a crisis was creeping closer.

"Yo! Hart!"

Palmer kicked open Hart's door, waving excitedly, but upon getting a clear view of the scene inside, the excited grin on his face suddenly froze.

Hart's hand, knitting the scarf, trembled. Though his beastly features deprived him of the delicate, expressive human face, Bologue, standing behind Palmer, could still clearly see Hart's complex emotional reaction.

The joy from stress relief shifted to astonishment, then turned into panic and shame, until finally carrying a faint hint of anger.

Palmer was completely stunned, not because he was stupid but because he had instantly understood the reason for this damned scene at first glance.

"Ha... Hart..."

Palmer placed a hand on the scarf around his neck, his expression complex and twisted.

Hart's mind almost crashed due to the excessive discrepancy between this hobby and his image. It could be said that no one had ever known this side of Hart. He had always hidden it perfectly, but...who knew this bastard Palmer wouldn't knock?

Palmer felt the warmth on his neck, and the thought of this yarn coming from Hart...

Bologue slightly held his forehead, leaning against the wall. Even as serious as he was, he couldn't help but want to laugh at this bizarre scenario. But he knew that laughing out loud would definitely provoke the two of them to wrath.

This awkward atmosphere persisted for a long time until Palmer couldn't resist making a joke.

"So, would this count as having 'Hart' wrapped around me?"

"Remember to knock, you jerk!"

Hart stood up and grabbed a chair, hurling it toward Palmer.

Chapter 490: Invisible Infiltrator

As night falls, the festivities continue unabated inside the Undying Club, where these undead revel without end... at least for the time being.

"Barila~ Barila~"

Under the dazzling lights, Serey freely displays her dance on the steel pole, performing one exaggerated move after another, perfectly showcasing her muscular contours.

Such a scene, deemed a "spectacle," is something Bologue and Palmer have grown accustomed to. They completely ignore Serey's presence and chat casually.

Aimou sits beside Bologue. During her time at the Order Bureau, she has been busy learning a plethora of knowledge, leaving her little time to visit here, so the place still feels somewhat unfamiliar to her.

Bologue has also roughly figured out some of Aimou's personality. She's prone to getting carried away in front of familiar people but becomes extremely quiet in new company.

Palmer is seated next to Hart, who retains a touch of awkwardness. Yet, in the dim-witted atmosphere of the Undying Club, his embarrassment doesn't last long.

After all, Serey's performance is much more awkward.

It's clear that Serey is striving to present her graceful dancing, but unfortunately, the audience lacks the ability to appreciate such avant-garde art. Everyone avoids looking at Serey, lest their eyes be sullied.

"Besides the regular undead gatherings, it's been a while since it was this lively here."

Bode stands behind the bar, mixing drinks for several individuals while speaking.

Thanks to Bologue's membership, an increasing number of new friends have come either voluntarily or involuntarily to the Undying Club. It has even become Palmer's off-hour haunt, given the free drinks, which Palmer finds hard to resist.

During this leisurely period, Hart has been brought here by Palmer several times, so he doesn't feel out of place. However, Church, who counts this as his first visit, appears quite tense.

Church looks around warily, especially at the Night Race Lord sporting a silly grin. Despite a calm facade, every muscle is taut. Church suspects there might be something wrong with the drinks, but then Palmer beside him gulps them down.

"Relax, the folks here are all good people!" Palmer heartily pats Church's back.

Good people?

Church's eyes betray doubt. He's not well-versed in the Undying Club's details, let alone the pasts of these undead, but no matter how he thought about it, beings that transcend life and death hardly seem to match up with "good people," especially the Night Race Lord.

As a member of the Crow's Nest, Church has always handled intelligence work. Through various related documents, he's somewhat aware of Serey's existence.

Recalling those documents brings Church a deep sense of dread.

Church doesn't fully understand Serey's essence, but from those fragmented descriptions, he has already conjured a detestable image in his mind.

Now, Serey's performance demolishes the sinister depiction Church had painted in his mind. Who would have thought that the Night Race Lord, who orchestrated the Dawn War conspiracy, is now embodying this dancing figure?

Yet, unlike others, Church's professional instincts warned him never to mistake Serey's steel pole dance or even if he mimics a dog's bark, for his true nature.

Serey Villeries' essence as the Night Race Lord.

"You're so much furrier than me, how do you do it?"

"Wet it with warm water, then use plenty of conditioner."

While Church was exceedingly tense, Hart had already begun chatting with Wei'Er. Both sport a furry appearance; Wei'Er noticed Hart from his first day, and like kindred spirits, their relationship quickly warmed.

Thanks to Wei'Er's hospitality, Hart quickly blended into the Undying Club's ambiance. But not long after blending in, he realized that apart from hosting undead, this place isn't much different from any other bar.

Bologue chatted with Aimou about recent work, while Palmer animatedly interacted with Church.

"Hey hehe, good brother, what a surprise, I've become a Prayer Believer!" Palmer beams a cheeky grin at Church.

Church remains expressionless, "That surely is unexpected... I always thought you'd end up dead out there due to bad luck."

"Do I need to reiterate my Blessing? It's not only about misfortune; there's a hint of luck on my side too." Palmer emphasized.

"Are you serious?"

Church gave Palmer an eye-roll. From Church's perspective, Palmer seems perpetually unlucky, and his life appears infinitely arduous.

Everyone continued their respective conversations, like any other day, as if celebrating Palmer's ascension to Prayer Believer had already become a thing of the past.

Perhaps intoxicated by alcohol, Palmer hadn't realized this fact. He hugged both Hart and Church alternately, waving at Bologue occasionally.

Sometimes Bologue envied Palmer, who seemed tireless and perpetually vigorous, akin to a lively pup.

The joyous scene persisted a while longer until Hart sighed, steering the gathering towards a complaint session.

"It's exhausting lately, I worked overtime for a week just to take one day off, only to resume work tomorrow," Hart lamented while sipping gloomily.

Bologue, attentive to the Field Operations Department, queried, "Is your Sixth Group that busy?"

"Kind of, we have to thoroughly clean inside and outside of the Great Rift. Besides those internal factors, other threats have recently closed in," Hart explained.

"Do you mean Joyful Garden?" Church interjected, meeting Hart's gaze.

"Your Crow's Nest received the news too?" Mentioning Joyful Garden, Hart's tone turned serious.

"Yes, recently our Crow's Nest has been busy gathering information, then supplying it to the Third Group. It's said the Third Group was tracking Joyful Garden from deep within the Rhine Alliance right to the Narrow Countries, yet they're always a step late."

Discussing work, Church showed a gloomy expression. It seemed this unexpected emergence of Joyful Garden had left them all deeply troubled.

Bologue silently drank his orange juice, recalling his memories.

Joyful Garden isn't unfamiliar to Bologue. He learned of this threat long ago from Geoffrey.

According to records, Joyful Garden is an extremely mysterious anomalous Void Realm, an extranormal space phenomenon similar to a Cultivation Room. However, unlike Cultivation Room, Joyful Garden's location isn't fixed, appearing randomly between cities.

Records of Joyful Garden surface from the Rhine Alliance to the Kagader Empire, be it Narrow Countries or Boundless Sea.

Regarding the internal situation of Joyful Garden, there aren't detailed records within the Order Bureau, as most who entered the Joyful Garden vanish and never return.

The intelligence the Order Bureau possessed came from the rare few who managed to return, and those guys surviving was already a miracle, let alone bringing back any intel.

Previously, Geoffrey mentioned he and Lebius handled Joyful Garden events before the secret war, yet neither deeply delved into the Joyful Garden, simply driving it away from Oubos in Oath City.

"Whenever Joyful Garden emerges, it triggers an Extraordinary Disaster. From the Third Group's assessment, despite Joyful Garden's erratic movements, its ultimate goal seems highly likely to be Oubos in Oath City. Therefore, Field Operations Department resources are inclined towards the Third Group, aiming to nip the danger in the bud."

Church sighed, "In a few days, I'll likely be incorporated into the action group to investigate Joyful Garden."

"Incorporated into the action group?" Bologue curiously asked, "I thought Crow's Nest isn't on the same sequence as the action group."

Hart explained, "Church refers to the Seventh Group, the Infiltrator. When necessary, the Seventh Group merges with Crow's Nest for external intelligence infiltration. It's akin to the cooperation between the Third Group, Wall-Breaking Blade, and the Observation Tower."

Bologue nodded, understanding his point.

Joyful Garden appears randomly across regions, and to chase it by vehicle would be exceedingly slow. Hence, the Observation Tower is aiding this operation, providing passage through various Crooked Path nodes.

Bologue recalled his first arrival at the Order Bureau, the dark space containing infinite doors. Within those infinite doors lay many belonging to the Order Bureau's continent-wide bases, each counted as a Crooked Path node, available for rapid transports through the Key of the Crooked Path when necessary.

Palmer unexpectedly showed concern, "Incorporated into the action group? Are you up for it?"

Ultimately, Crow's Nest is an intelligence group, and the Iron Whistle's Secret Energy is more functional rather than suited for direct combat like the action group.

"Should be fine, it's just investigation without engaging the frontline," Church nonchalantly replied, "Besides, I excel at finding advantages and avoiding harm."

Palmer remembered something, looking slightly dispirited while silently raising his glass, clinking softly with Church.

"All's well, then."