

Endless 501

Chapter 501: Unfettered Poetry Society

Eventually, apart from this absurd story, Bologue didn't get a bit of useful information from Serey... though in a way, at least Bologue knew that Serey had been this neurotic for hundreds of years.

Bologue muttered, "But this guy Serey has really been around for quite a while."

Serey got excited as he told stories, and several people gathered around a blood-stained head, listening to his decades-long experiences.

After running with that group of lunatics for a while, Serey gradually felt bored. He needed new amusement, so he left the camp alone on a dark night.

"All the way, I couldn't figure out what those madmen were doing, but at the moment I left the camp, I suddenly understood. They, like me, were a group of walking dead consumed by emptiness, seeking a bit of pleasure to give their numb lives a glimmer of fluctuation."

Serey showed a puzzled expression, "But what I don't understand is, I am an undead who has lived through countless years, and they are just a group of mortal beings with limited lifespans.

It was an ignorant, primitive era, where everyone believed in the King and Knights. The kind of thoughts we have now didn't even have a bud in that time. I don't think these people were believers of the void; they seemed more like doing things for someone's view, providing entertainment to someone."

I know similar things like this, maybe some deviations, but there's no other choice. After all, so much time has passed, memories are inevitably blurry."

The only intelligence Serey offered was just this. This fellow got drunk so badly that after a brief greeting with the two, he fell asleep soundly on the table. It was Bode who passed by and carried him back to his room.

Bologue and Palmer walked through the empty corridor, their eyes on the ground ahead, reminiscing over Serey's past experiences.

Suddenly, Bologue realized something; if it's Serey, he must know something.

The Night Race originated from the ignorant ages of thousands of years ago. At that time, there was no Kagader Empire or Rhine Alliance, only hidden societies and hidden clans lurking beneath the dust of the world.

Among them, the Alchemists were the first to perceive Ether and study the Secret Source. They developed alongside the Night Race. Humans, limited by their lifespan, kept dying, relying on books to teach the next generation endless knowledge.

But the immortal Night Race was not subjected to such constraints, which means, as a Night Race Lord, Serey very likely witnessed the gradual increase in Ether concentration.

With the passing years, Extraordinary Power gradually seeped into every inch of land, allowing the Secret Energy, which only slightly affected reality in the past, to possess the power to move mountains and fill seas today.

The Night Race secretly developed for thousands of years, during which they frequently conflicted with secret societies until the Dawn War a hundred years ago. When the Night Race was about to create the Eternal Night Empire, the coalition army of secret societies completely defeated them.

Then came the brief peaceful years and the rise of the Kagader Empire. To resist this expanding royal power, countries united and formed the current Rhine Alliance, followed by Scorched Earth Wrath, Fall of the Holy City, Secret Wars, and even now...

Bologue recalled the ancient history he knew, in this long span of time, countless powers emerged and equally countless powers perished. Only the Devil persisted, lingering in the shadows of people's hearts.

"I always feel the past of this world isn't that simple, at least the part concerning the Devil is like that," Bologue muttered.

"If you have an interest in history, when you get to Wind Source Highlands, you can check out my family's library."

Palmer said beside him, "Because Condensers need to hide in the shadows of the dust, the history of the Extraordinary World is quite fragmented. Each secret society records differently, with their own limitations. Even if the Order Bureau unified some of the forces, for various reasons, everyone would somewhat hide some secrets, making this historical scroll riddled with holes. Therefore, sometimes the Order Bureau's records aren't comprehensive."

Bologue nodded. He felt as if he were a detective, facing a conspiracy so vast and borderless that traverses through ancient and modern times.

Palmer whispered, "And... Bologue, could you pay attention to your image?"

"Image? I think my image is okay, what's wrong?"

Bologue looked down at his attire. All this while, he dressed in the uniform of the Order Bureau. Even his personal clothes were mostly gray-black tones. Coupled with Bologue's indifferent and aloof gaze, his first impression on people was like that of a stern and high-standing stag.

Palmer stared at Bologue's hand, and Bologue followed his gaze, realizing he was still carrying a human head wrapped in an outer garment. Although covered by clothing, in the Order Bureau, everyone counted as professionals, recognizing the contents at a glance.

The worst part was, the filthy blood soaked through the fabric, dripping thick blood along the way, leaving striking traces on the white ground.

Now this stag's antlers were adorned with the enemy's corpse, guts intertwining among the branches.

...

The suspended auxiliary arms fell one after another, and Lebius looked up, with a complex gaze, at Bologue and the blood-stained head he carried.

Lebius had long been aware of Bologue's character's kind of obsession, but this obsession, at times, would make one feel helplessly amused.

Lebius said, "In my impression, you're the first employee to bring a human head into the office."

"First case? Not bad, this gives me a special sense of accomplishment."

This cold stag was actually quite passionate. After acting with Palmer for so long, in the end, he picked up on telling some jokes too.

Lebius asked, "What's going on?"

Bologue didn't hold back and directly recounted the anomalous sensations of these past few days, as well as his conversation with Serey, to Lebius.

Lebius's expression was extremely calm, unwavering from start to finish. After Bologue finished speaking, he picked up a pen, gently tapping the tip against the desk.

"I see..."

"Do you have any thoughts? I always feel like someone wouldn't target me for no reason, let alone a group of strange lunatics like this."

Bologue was quite troubled by this, "They give me the impression of being a bunch of perverts, it's really disgusting."

Hearing such words from Bologue's mouth, even Lebius couldn't help but smile a little, then his expression turned serious.

"Are you saying their eyes are like cameras?"

"Exactly."

With Bologue's affirmation, a hint of the observer flickered in Lebius's eyes.

After the Order Bureau rejected the observer's request, he indeed began taking action, using those followers to obtain Bologue's gaze.

Lebius's eyes gradually turned icy. If his guess was correct, the observer is now watching Bologue through his own eyes, sitting under that giant screen, grabbing handfuls of popcorn and stuffing them into his mouth.

Then, everything he says and does will inevitably be observed by the observer...

Lebius knew the observer was a lazy guy, coldly watching worldly affairs for thousands of years without ever taking any proactive action. Even if he knows what's happening now, he would merely view it as an "entertainment" story without any response.

In other words, he is harmless.

No matter how harmless, it can't change his essence as a Devil. Even if he doesn't take any action, this feeling of being spied on and losing privacy still fills Lebius with aversion.

Bologue asked, "Do you know who this person is?"

"Hmm..."

Lebius hesitated for a moment, but still gave a definite answer, "Just like the Plague sect, they are a group of Devil worshipers."

"Just like the Plague sect's persistent pursuit of flesh, they have very distinct characteristics, which are those eye-like cameras."

Lebius narrated the information he had about the observer and his loyal followers.

"Honestly, our Order Bureau doesn't know much about them, only barely know that this group currently calls themselves the 'Crew.'

"Crew?"

This overly modern term confused Palmer, "I thought these Devil worshipers were all like the Plague sect."

"Full of ancient cult overtones?" Lebius shook his head, "Every Devil has different groups of followers, and these groups evolve into different forms based on the Devil they worship."

"The 'Crew's uniqueness lies in that this is just their name in recent years."

Bologue asked, "Are you saying they have many other names throughout history?"

"According to the Order Bureau's records, this group changes with time.

With the rise of the film industry in modern times, their eyes have become like cameras, and they've since called their community a 'Crew.' Within them, there's a clear division of labor - director group, photography group, lighting group, location, props..."

"Sounds like they genuinely want to make movies."

Palmer sighed, after intimate exchanges with the Plague sect for a long time, the "Crew" seemed to be a breath of fresh air among cultists.

"Movies, huh? Something like that."

Lebius continued discussing the past, "Before movies existed, when only words and pictures were conveyed, they viewed themselves as minstrels, and at that time were seen as a poet group.

Now that poets have met their end and movies have risen, they are undergoing a replacement... But it doesn't change their essence, no matter how many names they go through, so in the Order Bureau's official records, we still habitually use that ancient term to call them."

Lebius retrieved that dusty name from memory.

"Unfettered Poetry Society."

Chapter 502: Endless Poems

The crew, or rather... the Unfettered Poetry Society.

Bologue looked at the blood-stained head, even as death approached, the man's face still held an expression of immense joy, as if what awaited him was not death, but a kind of sacred Celestial Kingdom.

"Tell me more about the part concerning the Unfettered Poetry Society."

Bologue was already being watched by the Unfettered Poetry Society, even experts couldn't understand what these unrestrained lunatics wanted to obtain from him.

"Sorry, the Order Bureau... no, the entire Rhine Alliance's Secret Societies don't know much about the Unfettered Poetry Society, even about the Devil lurking behind them, whom they worship, we are unclear."

Lebius told a lie, a benevolent lie; they knew which Devil controlled it all.

"We only know that the Devil, much like the name of the Unfettered Poetry Society, changes his honorific with the passage of history.

World Observer, Connoisseur, Bystander, Grand Recorder..."

One revered title after another was uttered by Lebius.

"Many Devils have interfered in the mundane world, and through these traces, we can track their existence, but... the Bystander is different."

Ultimately, Lebius chose to call him "the Bystander".

"All our understanding of the Bystander comes from the Unfettered Poetry Society. As for the Bystander himself, no one has ever seen him with their own eyes... at least that's how the records describe it."

Lebius said, "Some people even doubt the Bystander's existence, believing he is merely a figment of the imaginations of the madmen from the Unfettered Poetry Society, yet these madmen, or rather poets, indeed bear traces of demonic power."

The story he told was true, at least until Lebius was allowed to know of the Bystander's existence, he also thought the Bystander was merely a fanciful legend.

The Bystander is not a legend; he exists in reality, hidden deep within the Order Bureau, in an inn bathed in daylight, observing the war between humans and Devils, and with his siblings, as the ultimate Bystander.

Bologue recalled Serey's story, where those madmen completely ignored wealth and power; what they yearned for was a perfect play, collecting countless poems, chanting tales from afar...

Poetry, paintings, books, and even movies today are all carriers of stories.

"Just as the Crimson Sect sacrifices flesh and blood to please the Crimson Queen, the Unfettered Poetry Society is sacrificing 'stories' to the Bystander, right?" Bologue calmly analyzed.

"You're quite right; that's indeed the case. You can view this world as a massive stage, with the Bystander being the only member in the audience, and all the Unfettered Poetry Society seeks to do is devise and perform exquisite stories to earn the audience's applause."

As Lebius explained to Bologue, he also murmured to himself inwardly.

"That's why the Bystander chose to cooperate with the Order Bureau; in order to see the grand show the Order Bureau presents for him, he doesn't even mind opposing his siblings, even though they have never been united."

The existence of the Bystander, within the Order Bureau, is top secret, and few know or even believe that as a Devil, he chose to remain there due to the Order Bureau's empty promises.

Unfortunately, neither Lebius nor Nesanel knows what exactly the Order Bureau promised him, the only informed person being the current Director.

The current Director...

Thinking of this, Lebius felt a headache coming on. He tried hard to recall the appearance, name, everything related to the current Director, but his mind was blank, followed by a shrill buzzing.

When Lebius escaped the stinging pain, his gaze turned a bit dazed. Bologue waved his hand, "Boss?"

"I... I'm sorry, I got distracted."

Lebius rubbed his head; he couldn't remember what he had just been thinking, nor did he understand why he had gotten distracted.

"Where were we?"

Bologue reminded, "The Unfettered Poetry Society's purpose."

"The purpose of the Unfettered Poetry Society? This involves their concern with 'stories.' In order to weave satisfactory 'stories,' the Unfettered Poetry Society acts like Devils; they rarely take the initiative to intervene in anything and are more like a minstrel, photographer, recorder, observing the occurrence and end of events.

Therefore, among the devotees derived from Devils, the Unfettered Poetry Society is considered relatively gentle, unlike the Crimson Sect which is violent and insane."

Lebius's voice turned severe, "But that doesn't mean they're not threatening; sometimes they will stop at nothing for the sake of an impeccable story."

"Like spying on me, right? They think I possess some kind of narrative potential?" Bologue asked; being targeted by such a group was no good thing.

"Perhaps, due to the Unfettered Poetry Society's kind of frenzied nature, our records about them are few, not even their internal structure is clear."

Lebius shook his head, "There are still many unsolved mysteries in this world, and the Order Bureau doesn't have a definitive understanding of every force."

Seeing Bologue's solemn, serious expression, Lebius proceeded to comfort him, "Focus your energy on the promotion ceremony; this part I will inform the Crow's Nest to see if they have any recent discoveries."

"No... nothing, I just find life so wonderfully strange."

Bologue was silent for a moment, then revealed a smile.

"It's only been shortly after the holiday, and work has found me, inevitably making me suspect if I'm truly destined for a life of toil."

"An Undead against a busy life, huh? Then you'll have plenty to keep busy with," Lebius said, reminding him, "Take that head with you, and just find any place to dispose of it."

Bologue and Palmer left the office, yet Lebius's expression remained solemn. He picked up the landline phone and dialed a number.

"Minister, in order to appease the observer, the Unfettered Poetry Society's actions have already commenced. I want to know..."

"This matter has nothing to do with the observer."

Nesanel's voice was indisputable.

Lebius's words paused, his eyes gleaming, he retorted, "Are you certain?"

"I'm certain, if you don't believe me, feel free to ask the observer yourself."

The receiver emitted a crackling sound, shortly thereafter another familiar bizarre voice emerged, he said, "Yo, Lebius."

Lebius's expression froze.

"I admit, I truly desire Bologue's gaze, but I won't betray my rules, which means... it's just the Unfettered Poetry Society wanting to do this themselves, I will bestow a blessing upon them according to the rules, as for how you wish to handle them, do as you please.

Whether it's killing them all, or locking them in the Black Prison, or using more cruel methods... don't hesitate! I have no objection, don't worry too much about my thoughts."

If it weren't for knowing beforehand that the other party was a sinister devil, Lebius might have thought he was chatting with a kind friend.

Devils seem to be like this, indifferent to their followers, just like the Tyrant's attitude towards the Gray Trade Association and the wayward paths.

Devils don't exist because of followers, but rather the followers need devils for support.

"Is there anything else? Lebius."

The observer's words carried a hint of amusement, he never masked his fondness for Lebius, among his many "gazes", the observer always deemed Lebius as the finest.

Lebius silently hung up the phone, leaned against the chair back, lifted his head, brows furrowed together, his heart lingering with unresolved worries.

"He is a devil... a disgustingly sinister devil..."

Like an incantation, Lebius continuously whispered, reinforcing his hatred for the devil within his heart.

...

"So... does this really have nothing to do with you?"

Inside the cinema, Nesanel released the receiver, the landline subsequently vanished into the shadows.

This cinema, and even the entire House of the Rising Sun belonged to the observer's domain, just like the Tyrant extending the wayward paths, within his domain, these devils were truly omnipotent.

"Indeed."

The observer turned his head, myriad faces flickered across his visage, they all wore a strange smile together.

"You know me, Nesanel, I've always been too lazy to manage my followers, their devoutness stems merely from our aligned thoughts.

As for the protection I provide to my followers, you know the rules, this isn't within my control."

Nesanel reached out from the observer's embrace and snatched a handful of popcorn, unceremoniously stuffing it into his mouth, few dared to snatch food from the mouth of a devil as he did.

The observer boasted, "Unlike my frenzied siblings, my protection is still quite attractive."

Devils bestow two types of powers upon mortals, those who offer part of their soul and are deemed valuable by devils, they become debtors, receiving the devil's "blessing."

Debtors are recognized by devils as possessing value.

The other type of power is "protection," through the Contract School condensers, these contractors establish a link between mortals and devils, gaining the devil's power as a form of protection by worshipping and offering their soul.

For instance, the Corrupted Sect's Protection·Bloodthirsty Healing, relying on the consumption of flesh, grants flesh a strong self-healing ability, even reaching the extent of an Undying Body.

"Rather than protection, I'm more concerned with the so-called... aligned thoughts?"

Nesanel didn't know much about the observer, this devil was too indolent, resulting in few traces left in the mortal realm, probably only the director barely grasped his entirety.

The idea of humans and devils having aligned thoughts sounded too intriguing.

Nesanel faintly recalled something similar, he tentatively asked, "Are you referring to the thing the Unfettered Poetry Society has pursued from ancient times? Not only them, it's also something you desire."

The observer smiled and nodded, myriad visages nodded along with him.

Nesanel's inquiry might clarify what exactly the observer desires, "What exactly is it?"

The observer fell silent for a moment, he turned to gaze at the large screen, chaotic images whirled, stretching from hundreds of years ago to the present, transitioning from dark alleys to gilded halls.

His voice was solemn and dignified, proclaiming that singular true name.

"It is... the Endless Poems."

Chapter 503: Promotion Ceremony

Order Bureau, Sublimation Furnace Core.

Aimou led the way in front, with Bologue closely following behind. Even though he had mentally prepared himself these past few days, when truly facing it all, Bologue couldn't help but feel nervous.

The Unfettered Poetry Society was just a minor episode for Bologue. Since the encounter on the street, Bologue hadn't sensed that sticky, sinister gaze again.

He guessed that maybe the Unfettered Poetry Society had given up tracking him, or perhaps his encounter with them was purely accidental.

These thoughts didn't bother Bologue for long. He dismissed all distractions, leaving only one goal in his mind.

The surrounding lights gradually dimmed, an eerie white light shone from above, and then a heavy gate obstructed his path, flashing with blood-red warning lights.

Colorful lights painted Bologue's face like pigments; behind the grid walls, the noise of fans spinning was like the buzz of a crowded hive.

After a brief wait, the gate slowly opened, a cold draft seeped through the gap, and as the gate fully opened, a fierce wind struck Bologue.

Bologue raised his hand to shield his eyes; the wind stopped after a few seconds. Through the gaps between his fingers, Bologue saw the vast space beyond the gate.

Endless white light fell from above, blocking Bologue's vision. The entire space was circular, cold grid iron plates covered the floor, and faintly, pipes lurking in the shadows could be seen. Vines of pipes hung densely on the towering iron walls, massive tracks traversed the upper space, crowded with hooks, and various indicator lights blinked incessantly. Employees wearing protective clothing were busy.

The style here was consistent with that of the Sublimation Furnace Core, maintaining a wild industrial aesthetic. In the center of the venue stood an operating table Bologue was extremely familiar with; it was there that he had undergone the implantation ritual initially.

Three days passed quickly, and Bologue faced his ascension ceremony.

Turning his head, the gate was slowly closing; in the dim corridor, he saw Palmer whistling towards him, Hart waving, while Church silently stood by, watching Bologue.

Bologue muttered, "Now, the one giving birth has changed."

"What?"

Aimou turned her head; she hadn't heard what Bologue said clearly.

Bologue shook his head, "Nothing, just talking to myself."

"That's good, don't be too nervous."

Aimou thought Bologue might be nervous, pulled at his sleeve, and led him aside.

The researchers had already been waiting here for quite some time, and before arriving at the Sublimation Furnace Core, Aimou had also explained a general procedure. Bologue knew what to do next and cooperatively took off his coat, revealing his upper body.

"You won't die, but your Alchemy Matrix is too special and still requires careful treatment."

A familiar voice sounded. Bologue looked up, seeing a figure wrapped tightly in protective clothing.

"Balder?"

"Hmm? What's the matter?"

Balder spoke while wiping Bologue's arm, then inserted an injection needle into it.

"Nothing, just feels like I haven't seen you in a long time."

Bologue recalled he hadn't seen Balder for a while, or perhaps he had but Balder didn't greet him. After all, Balder was always in protective clothing, and without carefully checking the nameplate, it was hard to distinguish him from the crowd.

Balder said, "Aimou has been sharing my work, and recently, I've been focusing on my research."

Beside him, Aimou nodded; when mentioning the "shared work" part, a hint of fatigue appeared in her eyes.

Even a person as tough as iron would become exhausted after many days of work, not to mention that Aimou essentially had two jobs, one in the Field Operations Department and another in the Sublimation Furnace Core.

Well, she indeed was like iron, and that expensive Alchemy Metal at that.

"These potions will make you feel more comfortable and provide considerable stability for the ascension ceremony."

Balder injected a few more potions into Bologue's neck. His medical case held numerous prepped Mang Silver Souls.

"Based on previous implantation rituals, you would suffer from Bulimia Nervosa after the ceremony, so we are well-prepared this time."

Balder took out a few potions, shaking them in front of Bologue. Inside the transparent glass containers, liquid resembling mercury swirled, and within the shiny silver glimmer, countless small light spots flickered.

The Golden Soul is only bound by the Devil's Blood Contract; even if condensed into a Philosopher's Stone, it will eventually fade away. But the souls from plants and animals, the Mang Silver Soul, are different. This soul can be bound by the Condensation Ceremony and subsequently used. Its effects are much inferior to the Golden Soul, but this is the only means for debtors to supplement their soul without violating ethical guidelines.

It's not just one.

Bologue whispered in his heart; he possessed the ability to "absorb," allowing him to seize Soul Shards from those decaying demons.

All along, Bologue had been pondering the source of this power, for which he had made numerous guesses.

For instance... is this a "Protection" granted by some Devil?

Much like the Protection·Bloodthirsty Healing obtained by the Contracted members of the Corrupted Sect from the Devil's hand.

Just as Bologue was about to continue pondering, a surge of pain came from the back of his neck. Aimou realized she had applied too much force and apologized.

"I'm sorry. This is a Concentration Potion, which will help you stay awake from now on."

Bologue nodded slightly; he had used the Concentration Potion before, just like the Mang Silver Soul, to suppress the Bulimia Nervosa Potion.

The Concentration Potion allowed Bologue to stay awake, preventing him from falling into a coma, but Bologue wasn't overly hopeful about the potion. Once he died, no potion could awaken him from the slumber of death.

After completing these preparations, the entire space was strictly sealed, with some unnecessary personnel being dispersed, leaving just a few to maintain the operation of the scene.

"Do I need to leave as well?" Aimou asked Balder.

Balder hesitated for a moment and, after much thought, advised Aimou, "You can, but everything you see next must remain secret."

Aimou nodded firmly, unaware of why mere ascension ceremony required such secrecy, but since it involved Bologue, she was quite attentive, always ready to respond to the call.

Bologue was also somewhat bewildered as to why everyone was acting as though facing a formidable enemy. Then, the armor covering the circular walls shifted to the sides, revealing an observation window. Beneath the thick glass, numerous silhouetted figures could faintly be seen flickering.

"There's nothing we can do; the Scholars' Hall has to be involved."

Belli approached Bologue, who almost didn't recognize her at first glance, as Belli, usually dressed lightly, had unexpectedly donned protective clothing.

Bologue looked at the blurry figures behind the observation window. During his triple trial, they were observing, and this time was no different, as if Bologue was some rare species in their eyes.

Bologue had no objections to this, following Belli's instructions, he came to the center of the surgical table... or rather, the ceremony platform, lying flat within it, where cold iron frames locked and bound him one by one.

Bologue said to Belli, "Is there anything you want to say?"

"Why do you say that?"

"I feel today's atmosphere is somewhat off; is it because of the Scholars' Hall?"

"Not entirely."

"Then what is it?"

Belli replied with action; she raised her hand and snapped her fingers. Balder began instructing others, and a cargo covered in black cloth was carried over the overhead track. Simultaneously, several people in gray clothing appeared quietly, attracting no one's attention.

She asked, "Have you decided on your auxiliary sub-sect?"

"I have."

Bologue intended to nod but found his head was tightly bound to the ceremony platform, unable to move.

"Without knowing the sub-sect of Secret Energy, I'm ready to take a closer step, advancing along the path of polarization, further lifting the restrictions of the Summoning Hand."

"Sounds pretty good."

Belli nodded and showed an unwilling smile, "Then it seems I was unnecessary."

"What did you do?"

Belli didn't answer; then, Bologue saw it. Though his head couldn't move much, he still saw the glowing light, like burning gold.

The black cloth was uncovered by the gray-clothed people, and the gilded color instantly spread over the areas illuminated by the light, instilling everything with a thin golden layer, like an amber container. The Celestial God's figure remained unchanged, suspended within, unable to awaken from the unending slumber.

"Xilin Kagader..."

Looking at the familiar yet strange silhouette, Bologue murmured.

Chapter 504: Blood Fire Price

Watching Xilin's figure, Bologue's eyes revealed a multitude of surprise, but when he thought of the connection between himself and Xilin, along with the myriad mysteries he carried, Bologue felt that all of this was indeed inevitable.

"For some reason, every time I see him, I always feel that he isn't dead... Just trapped in some kind of deep sleep."

Bologue tilted his head and whispered softly.

"Deep sleep, huh? Then I hope he never wakes up."

While talking with Bologue, Belli was busy as well, as numerous electrode patches extended from the ceremonial platform. Belli briefly wiped Bologue's body surface and attached them one by one.

"The Overlord of Glory sleeps deeply within the Order Bureau, and one day will awaken. It sounds like a bomb hidden inside, which, when ignited, will devour us all."

Belli shook her head, her words full of vigilance and disgust.

She too was a personal witness to the secret warfare; she was present when Xilin raided the Cultivation Room. If it weren't for the protection of Teda and Balder, the moment Belli stared at Xilin, she would have been breached by the Rectangular Soul Critical and subsequently completely dominated and killed by that tyrannical kingly power.

Belli both loved and hated Xilin; as a scholar, Xilin was an endless treasure waiting to be mined for Belli, but as Belli Yiyeta, she just wanted to push Xilin's corpse into the incinerator, scattering the grey ashes into the depths of the Great Rift.

"What are you going to do with it?"

Bologue examined Xilin inside the container. Under the golden glow, the liquid inside the container was reflected in an orange amber hue, with Xilin enveloped within, time eternally stagnated at the moment of death.

Xilin tightly closed his eyes, curled up with hands hugging his knees, like a larva in a cocoon. It's unclear if the Order Bureau's containment is exceptionally perfect, or if the Seeker of Glory's power is incredibly strong. His body still brims with potent life force, the muscle lines clearly visible, as if a masterpiece sculpted by a master.

"A reference. As the tier ascends, the Condenser's own Alchemy Matrix grows and maps onto our body surface. When we drive the Secret Energy, the 'Initial Activation Phenomenon' will reveal these lines."

Belli elaborated, her eyes glimmering as glowing lines extend across her arm, her hand gripped in mid-air, grabbing a scalpel forged from light trails.

Bologue recalled the Initial Activation Phenomenon, where every Condenser, when driving Ether and activating Secret Energy, displays the glow and tracks on their body surface, precisely constituting the Initial Activation Phenomenon, a sign indicating the Condenser engaging in combat.

The Ethereal Concealment, an Ethereal Skill, can effectively obscure or even completely conceal the Initial Activation Phenomenon, preventing enemies from detecting the activation of Secret Energy.

"I thought that if you didn't know which direction to ascend, you could observe Xilin's Alchemy Matrix, find some traces within it," Belli said, "but it seems you don't need them anymore."

"Regarding the choice of inclination after the ascension, I assume you are prepared too?"

Bologue nodded. Currently, his Secret Energy-Summoning Hand is inclined towards "Narrow and Sharp," acquiring the low consumption and rapid activation of Secret Energy at the cost of embodying many limitations.

After ascending, Bologue can guide his own Alchemy Matrix for a secondary growth, and then he will once again decide his inclination.

Remembering the previous battles, Bologue already has a plan in mind. Just like the extreme path he intends to pursue next, in terms of inclination, Bologue still intends to continue "Narrow and Sharp," to further enhance his Secret Energy.

This will make Bologue concentrate more on the power of summoning all things, rendering the effect of his Secret Energy singular, unable to be as deceptive and complex as other Condensers who possess derived sub-schools.

But Bologue does not care about these; he believes Secret Energy doesn't need to be overly eerie; it's just fine as long as it suits him. Moreover, there are too many interference factors in battle; unless the power is transcendent, there will always be variables.

For instance, during the disordered timeline against the Silver Knight, the Silver Knight, as the Third Seat among the Defenders, utilized the unrestricted power of Tier Four openly, theoretically making it impossible for Bologue and the others to stand a chance.

Yet under the erosion of the Immortal Heart, the Silver Knight's shell was damaged, causing the Ether strength to continually weaken as the shell collapsed.

The reinforcement bestowed by Aimou upon Bologue, combined with the collaborative hunt with Lebius... amid all these factors interfering, even the mighty Silver Knight ultimately fell.

"Narrow and sharp, like a throat-cutting dagger."

Bologue silently chanted in his mind, wondering how Xilin made his choices during his ascension, and which path he ultimately walked?

Was it the same polarized path as himself? Was it "Broad and Blunt" or "Narrow and Sharp"?

"Aimou, come help me!"

Belli was busying herself beside the ceremonial platform, and seeing the daydreaming Aimou, she waved to him.

"Okay."

Aimou ran over swiftly, following Belli, his gaze still fleetingly wandering towards Xilin, deeply curious about this mysterious presence.

"Who is he?"

Bologue replied, "Xilin Kagader."

"Oh... huh?"

Aimou's hand trembled, causing the needle to skew and stab into Bologue's muscle. This sudden prick wasn't very painful, but it made Bologue frown slightly.

"Sorry! Sorry!"

Aimou hurriedly pulled out the needle, massaging Bologue's arm.

"Overlord Xilin?"

Aimou swallowed nervously, his eyes filled with a touch of fear as he peeked at that celestial figure, unable to look directly.

The Overlord of Glory, Xilin Kagader.

Just like Bologue, Aimou's fate was intertwined with Xilin's. If Xilin hadn't attacked the Cultivation Room, destroying everything along the way, then none of these events would have happened, and Aimou would not have been born.

From a dark and ruthless perspective, it was Xilin who facilitated Aimou's birth.

At the cost of blood and fire.

Aimou was extremely tense; even though Belli repeatedly emphasized that Xilin was already dead, and what she saw was just a corpse, Aimou and Bologue shared a similar feeling; she also felt that Xilin was not dead.

"So that's why we need to clear the area, to keep it confidential?" Aimou understood why Balder had just cleared the people.

"Stop thinking about those things, the sooner we finish, the sooner we're off work."

Belli was like the chief surgeon in the operating room, with Aimou acting as her assisting nurse, and others gathered around at this moment, the trolley clattering as it was pushed over, bringing bottles and jars.

Bologue asked, "Is there any last advice?"

"Still the same words, be careful of 'losing yourself,' don't sink into it."

Belli's voice softened, leaning close to Bologue's ear, as if sharing an unknown secret.

"Within the Sublimation Furnace Core... to be precise, within the Scholars' Hall, those old undead have proposed such an interpretation."

Bologue wasn't sure why Belli was bringing this up at such a time, but he listened attentively nonetheless.

Belli was considered a person who matched her inner self—if she appeared leisurely, then she was in a leisurely playful state; if she looked serious at you, then one had better listen carefully to what she will say next.

"Bologue, where do you think our Golden Soul goes after humans die?"

Belli questioned Bologue.

"The soul truly exists, then after it fades away, it must have an unknown destination, right?"

"You think..."

Belli interrupted Bologue, "In the advancement ceremony, the most important thing is not those auxiliary alchemy materials, nor chaotic factors like soul capacity.

All these seem more like a key that opens the door to the Secret Source, allowing you to gain recognition from it, a certificate to discard mortality and undergo sublimation, a credential to reach higher realms."

Bologue had heard similar explanations, from Teda, who told him that everything about the advancement ceremony was meant to open a path to the Secret Source.

As the Condensers ascend, they draw closer to the Secret Source itself, even facing it directly.

King Solomon.

The enigmatic name flashed through Bologue's mind.

"A very few Condensers, during the advancement process, experience numerous illusions and even some kind of... completely unfamiliar experience, as if living through someone else's life, even sinking into it."

Lost.

Bologue knew what Belli was talking about; he was a clever person.

He turned his head and looked at the innocent Aimou; after humans die, their Golden Soul is condensed into the Philosopher's Stone, and through special means, Alchemists can glimpse the memories of the deceased within that exquisite gem.

Bologue connected these clues, piecing together an incredible outcome.

"Are you suggesting... the Secret Source might be a collection of our souls?"

"I don't know, it's only a hypothesis," Belli said, "You have a deep connection not only with the Devil but also with the Secret Source, Bologue."

"I have never seen anyone fall into a 'lost' state just after undergoing triple trials, and now as you proceed with the advancement ceremony, you are very likely to encounter 'lost' again.

Be cautious, Bologue, if you sink into it, even if you are an undead, ultimately you will just be an unending corpse."

Belli stood up, like a boxing coach, even patted Bologue's cheek, encouraging him.

"Enough talking nonsense, find a way through it!"

Belli snapped her fingers, the light around dimmed and faded into darkness one by one, followed by the brilliant golden rays arising.

Along with the initiation of the ceremony, the concentration of ether around gradually rose, golden dust precipitated from the air, quickly assembling together, turning into large golden raindrops, bathing everyone within.

Bologue took a deep breath, trying not to think about what Belli said, but instead focusing all his energy on the present.

"Let's begin!"

Chapter 505: The Lost Path

In the boundless darkness, golden raindrops danced and tumbled, gliding gracefully under Belli's command, tracing paths, extending, and twisting like molten gold.

Belli picked up the bottles and jars from the cart, opening them one by one, and casually tossing the prepared alchemy materials into the air.

At this moment, the concept of gravity seemed to disappear; the alchemy materials didn't fall but floated mid-air, free for Belli to manipulate.

Aimou stood to the side, assisting Belli in her work. Having participated in numerous implantation and ascension rituals back at the Alchemy Workshop with Teda, she considered herself quite experienced, yet facing Bologue, she couldn't help but feel nervous.

"One hundred grams of Moon Dust, thirty grams of Red Mercury, a suitable amount of Star Antimony..."

Aimou meticulously placed the alchemy materials into the air, looking much like a nurse, arranging them, while saying to Bologue, "Relax, quite a few of the alchemy materials are ones I refined myself, there's definitely no problem."

Bologue now understood what Aimou had been busy with, she had been tirelessly working day and night for his ascension ritual.

Luckily, Aimou's essence remained that of an Alchemy Puppet, otherwise, she might have had to be admitted to the Border Sanatorium by now.

Various alchemy materials floated, engulfed by materialized liquid Ether, burning and surging, crushed and recombined into a new substance.

Dark residues emerged from the liquid gold as substance transformed, subsequently shedding. This was the mundane material being eliminated.

At an unknown time, Aimou had already left the ritual platform, disappearing into the boundless darkness, her task now complete, leaving the rest to Belli.

Bologue tilted his head upward, he never liked this feeling, like a corpse under a cold light, as if angels would descend and reach out to him.

Celestial Kingdom?

Bologue never pondered matters post-death; an Undead considering death? It all sounded rather amusing.

Even if he were to truly perish, Bologue doubted he'd reach the Celestial Kingdom; he was a villain punishing villains, a greater villain, his self-perception unwavering.

The villain's destiny shouldn't be the Celestial Kingdom but Hell... or someplace akin to Hell.

Bologue recalled his dear friends, they should be waiting for him in the Celestial Kingdom; thinking of not reuniting with them made Bologue somewhat sad, yet considering the villainous fate, he felt elated.

Bologue vowed to eternally torment those villains, this time, they'd have nowhere to escape.

The liquid Ether, mingled with alchemy materials, began to agitate, dazzling light erupted within the liquid like colorful glass, faint arcs of electricity could be glimpsed.

Belli waved her hand, the liquid seemingly imbued with Life Force, split into sections cascading down, a cold sensation spread across Bologue's skin as if snakes crawled across him, cold dense scales rubbing, he could distinctly feel the uneven texture.

"Remember, stay awake, don't succumb,"

Belli reminded him again. Bologue wanted to respond, but before he could speak, all light vanished.

Bologue didn't understand what happened; this abrupt change occurred in an instant, and where Belli had just been before him, now darkness enveloped his sight.

Confusion didn't trouble Bologue for long; he promptly realized this was the start of the ascension ritual.

According to data, the ascension ritual from Condenser to Prayer Believer was the least risky and simplest; most Condensers experienced nothing odd during the process, besides approaching the Secret Source for recognition, the other parts felt as ordinary as a general anesthesia surgery.

Bologue stood alone in the pitch-black world, noise from unknown darkness emerged, reminiscent of the sound of wind and snow, conveyed from a distant place.

"Is it the gathering of souls?"

Bologue mused aloud, Belli's final hypothesis necessitating his serious contemplation.

After humans die, where does that Golden Soul ultimately return?

Might it relate to the Secret Source; if so, then in the grand cycle of this world, what role does the Secret Source play?

If the Secret Source is the amalgamation of all souls, then the so-called "lost" might be an individual glimpsing the memories within the storm, mistakenly perceiving them as their own life, thus succumbing?

This isn't impossible; within the Philosopher's Stone there are projections of past lives, even faded into the void of souls, echoes should exist.

Bologue didn't understand but thought he soon would experience it firsthand, the sound of the wind and snow grew louder, closer, until faint light tore through the darkness.

Cutting cold engulfed Bologue as dim light touched him, covering his body in thick ice; accompanying the arrival of the light, he saw many frozen figures like him in surroundings.

"Is this my body?"

Bologue suddenly wondered; his true body should be on the ritual platform within the Sublimation Furnace Core, and what stood here should be the manifestation of his spirit.

Are these frozen figures the same as well?

Bologue didn't ponder for long; familiar scenes were replaying before his eyes. Through the hazy glow, he saw the storm, which carried countless gales and waves, slowly advancing. It was like the fierce sun of the storm, banishing darkness wherever it went.

The darkness he was in earlier was merely too far from the storm. Now, it was coming towards Bologue, driving away all shadows.

Everything was replaying.

All that Bologue had experienced during the Triple Test was being replayed before him; he had returned here once again.

He once thought it was some kind of hallucination, but Bologue didn't think a hallucination could replay so precisely, leaving only one answer.

Bologue was in "迷失" (Lost). He still had clear self-awareness, not yet fully submerged.

What to do?

Bologue tried to move his body. After several painful struggles, he shattered the ice that bound him, struggling to move. But compared to the advancing storm, he was like an escaping ant, unable to escape the crushing wheels.

With his back to the blazing white storm, boundless darkness unfolded before him. Eerie, disorderly laughter came from deep within the darkness. One by one, scarlet eyes opened in the darkness, densely packed, forming clusters, piling into mountains, transforming into figures like mountain ridges.

They were high above, watching Bologue's futile struggle.

Bologue couldn't tell what those shadows were, but he was sure they were nothing good. Even though he couldn't see them clearly, he instinctively felt intense disgust.

If Bologue had to choose an end, he would choose to throw himself into the blazing white storm behind him rather than join these shadows.

A crisp cracking sound rang out, like the sound of glass being pulverized. Bologue looked at his arms; this sound was coming from his body. The cracking sound became more frequent, and fissures appeared on Bologue's body, like afterimages.

The cold shell froze in place, while the illusionary body continued to struggle, slowly separating the two.

Bologue repeatedly reminded himself that his body wasn't here. What he could see now was merely the manifestation of his mind...

Trinity.

This word suddenly arose in Bologue's mind. It was often mentioned during the Triple Test.

"Salt, sulfur, mercury," Bologue muttered to himself, "body, mind, soul..."

At the moment, Bologue's body wasn't here. The body he observed and could interfere with was more like the embodiment of the mind and soul, the manifestation of spirit and soul. Looking at his continuously separating afterimages, was his spirit and soul being divided?

Those who sunk into "迷失" (Lost), they hadn't died, yet they never woke up. Their bodies and souls were intact, but their spirits no longer existed.

"Am I so unlucky?"

Bologue couldn't help but question his luck. He was just advancing to Prayer Believers, yet encountered such troublesome events. If it were future Negative Power Users, Defenders, what awaited?

Struggling to move his body, Bologue didn't think about distant things; if he couldn't escape the current predicament, he had no future to speak of.

Bologue ran with all his might, trying to distance himself from the blazing white storm, but no matter how he struggled, the distance between them continued to decrease.

At a certain moment, Bologue suddenly felt his body become much lighter, as if it had detached from the freeze. He took several steps forward and looked back, only to see another familiar face.

His own face.

Another self was frozen into an ice sculpture, standing right behind him, the resolute face carved with incredible detail.

At that moment, Bologue suddenly realized that the shattering sound that had been accompanying his ears disappeared. Then, Bologue was startled to realize it wasn't that the sound had disappeared, but that he had completed the division.

The ice sculpture frozen in place was Bologue's soul, and standing before the ice sculpture was the spirit that struggled out from within.

The blazing white storm was close, leaving Bologue no way to retreat. His body felt so light, and as the storm approached, he could no longer maintain his stance, as if in the next second, he would be drawn into the storm.

Dark shadows spread over; a hand completely constructed from darkness appeared next to Bologue. It opened its palm to Bologue, scarlet eyes splitting open in the palm, staring bloodily at Bologue.

Bologue's serious gaze took on a hint of disdain. He waved away the dark hand, his scornful voice drowned out by the wind and snow.

"I refuse."

A powerful suction captured Bologue, and in an instant, the blazing white storm engulfed Bologue, leaving only the cold sculpture standing in place for a long time.

Chapter 506: Beyond the Mountains

The events encountered during this promotion ceremony have already exceeded Bologue's control, yet Bologue still maintained his composure. He knew very well that panic would only hasten his defeat.

Bologue tried hard to control his emotions, observing everything with an absolutely rational perspective. He didn't understand the situation he was experiencing at that moment and could only analyze it with his limited knowledge.

At this moment, Bologue's soul was frozen into an ice sculpture, standing on the earth, while his mind was soaring. Caught in the scorching white storm, he was swept into the howling wind almost in the blink of an eye, like a fallen leaf.

As he approached, Bologue forced his eyes open to observe the core of the storm. It was an absolutely scorching white light. After a brief glance, Bologue felt a burning pain in his pupils. Helplessly shifting his gaze away, he saw the figures swirling around with it.

They were thousands of souls, souls similar to Bologue. Countless souls surrounded the edge of the storm, forming a part of this vast destruction.

Bologue found it hard to comprehend the scene before him; it was entirely beyond his imagination. Bologue couldn't even discern if this was a real occurrence or a symbol of some power, much like his body, mind, and spirit.

He became part of the storm, pulled into a vortex, while the scorching white storm continued to advance on the icefield, devouring the towering ice sculptures. Most of the ice sculptures disintegrated into dust the moment they touched the storm, merging into it.

With its slow progression, Bologue's ice sculpture, the manifestation of his soul, would also be consumed by the storm. Bologue grew nervous, uncertain of what would happen if the storm swallowed him... but to Bologue, it was definitely not a good thing. His soul was already incomplete and couldn't afford any more mistakes.

Like a drowning man, Bologue flailed his hands, trying to grasp something tangible, but only caught the swirling snowdust. Then, several spirits brushed past him, echoing with cheers. Soon after, Bologue collided head-on with another spirit.

Bologue didn't crash with this spirit; instead, they intertwined and overlapped. In that instant, Bologue saw thousands of shattered images pouring onto his memory like a storm.

The continuous cries of a newborn baby learning to speak and take clumsy first steps, until like a fawn, following behind the adults...

Bologue was experiencing another's life in a miraculous way, observing the stranger gradually growing up.

The stranger lived in a time long before Bologue's era, when Kings and Lords still ruled this land. There were no railways, no newspapers, transportation was blocked, and people were ignorant.

Different from those numb adults, the stranger longed for the outside world since he was young. He often sat on the grass, gazing at the distant mountains, curious about what lay beyond them.

Whenever he mentioned these to his father, his father would only vaguely reply, "Beyond the mountains are still mountains."

"Then what beyond that? There must be something beyond all those mountains, right?"

The child looked at his father with anticipation. His father remained silent; this weary man had never been that far, those towering mountains were insurmountable walls to the villagers.

The father ruffled the child's hair, "Don't think about those things; what's beyond the mountains is meaningless. You should learn my craft."

The father was a Blacksmith, and as his son, he was expected to be a Blacksmith too.

The young child didn't understand what that meant; he only smiled, unaware that as he grew, his curiosity beyond the mountains grew day by day, as the constraints from his father grew increasingly suffocating.

"You should forget about what's beyond the mountains and honestly learn the craft from me, become a Blacksmith, only then can you sustain yourself!"

The father looked at him, covered in mud and weeds, instantly knowing what he had been up to.

Climbing over the mountains.

He had always been trying to climb over the mountains, but every attempt ended in failure.

In the face of his father's reprimands, he initially retorted a few times, but gradually he fell silent.

He realized the mountains were too vast, so grand that no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't see the end. Maybe he should heed his father's words, become a Blacksmith, and spend a quiet life in this remote village.

The stranger compromised, and the ordinary days continued, unremarkable. He grew from a child into a young man, taking over his father's Iron Hammer, becoming the most outstanding Blacksmith in the village.

He thought that this would be his life, continuously hammering steel in the scorching forge, until his own child replaced him, but one day, the arrival of a traveler broke all of this.

This remote village rarely had outsiders; only during a fixed time every year would caravans pass by, or tax collectors from the Lord.

That day, the villagers all gathered in the tavern, observing the strangely dressed fellow. The traveler, with an unruly look, drank heavily, speaking of strange and new stories.

Minstrel.

The villagers called the traveler this. The moment he saw the Poet, he was deeply captivated, unclear of what the emotion was, but within this decaying and ancient village, the Poet's vibrancy was so alive.

The Poet wasn't a young man; his face was weathered, hair streaked with gray, but when he smiled and recounted stories of far-off lands, he was so youthful, far beyond anyone else.

The stranger chatted with the Poet in the tavern, lingering until late into the night. It was the first time he talked to someone for so long. He spent his savings to buy the Poet one drink after another. The Poet said he wouldn't stay long here, leaving in a few days.

So, for the past few days, the stranger hadn't been working. Instead, he closed the blacksmith's shop and indulged in drunken revelry with the Poet. They talked a lot, extending their conversations beyond the mountains.

The stranger asked, "Do you know what's beyond the mountains?"

The Poet, drunk, replied, "Beyond the mountains? More mountains."

The stranger felt a bit disappointed. This was the same answer his father had given, but he persistently asked, "And beyond the layers of mountains?"

This time, the Poet fell silent. He put down his wine glass and answered earnestly, "It's an endlessly vast world."

"There are boundless plains, mighty rivers flowing through various lands, mountain peaks that stretch like high walls, and highlands where the fierce winds rage ceaselessly."

The Poet's voice suddenly softened, and with a mischievous smile, he painted a picture of such a world for the stranger.

"It is a colorful world, far more interesting than this village. There are many things you've never experienced, never known, never possessed..."

The Poet grabbed the stranger with a boisterous and drunken breath.

"That is life, that is truly living, my friend!"

"But all this comes at a price, doesn't it?" The stranger was no longer a child, "You wander aimlessly, your journey no different from vagrancy save for poetry. You possess nothing; even the drink money is on me."

The Poet shook his head, "No, I have everything. When I set foot in that vast beauty, the vast beauty is mine. When I slumber in the wilds, this boundless earth is my bed... I can see it, friend, there's longing hidden in your eyes. You yearn for such a world too, don't you?"

The stranger said nothing.

"Why not listen to your heart voice? Is it that you can't let go of this comfort?"

"I'm bound here, no! I willingly stay here."

The stranger's father died shortly after he took over the Iron Hammer, and his mother had left early in his childhood. In this remote village, there was nothing worth loving, no one he cared about, yet it seemed as if there was a force anchoring him here, unable to leave.

The Poet smiled faintly, saying no more. The stranger looked at him, and despite the heavy drinking, the Poet's eyes held no haze, only wisdom and clarity, as if only his body was intoxicated, not his soul.

He picked up the book tucked at his waist, its cover was of cracked leather, and the thick pages were interspersed with slips of paper, filled with scribbled writing.

The stranger asked, "What's this?"

"I am a Poet," the Poet said, "This is my poetry."

Opening the pages, the Poet started to write, occasionally glancing at the stranger as he wrote.

"What are you writing?"

"The stories I have lived through... In the ancient, decayed land, I encountered a heart of freedom obscured by dust. Unfortunately, I came too late; he had already integrated with all that decay."

"What good does it do to write all this?" The stranger knew the Poet was alluding to him, "You will eventually die, and so will your poems, returning to the dust of old, with no one left to remember."

"No, they won't," The Poet's eyes shone as he refuted the stranger's words, "This won't end."

"Poetry is endless... The poem has no end!"

"Just the ravings of a madman!"

The stranger was provoked. He didn't even know why he was angry. Was the Poet too perfect?

Yes, the Poet was living the life he longed for, he had extended an invitation, but he lacked the courage to embrace change, safeguarding his pitiful dignity by denying all of the Poet's existence.

He thought how clever the Poet was; surely, he had seen through him long ago. So, how ridiculous must he appear in the Poet's eyes?

The stranger locked himself in his room for several days, trying hard not to think about the Poet, or what's beyond the mountains. He only hoped the Poet would leave quickly and return his peaceful life.

And then...the peaceful life returned.

The Poet was dead.

Chapter 507: The Poet's Final Path

The Poet has died.

There was no sinister murder, nor a regrettable accident, only the capriciousness of fate.

In the morning, the Poet was preparing to leave this village and continue his journey, but under the wear of alcohol and time, his life had already reached its end, and the leisurely days of late were nothing but a final gleam before death.

The Poet wobbled to a large tree with lush branches. He thought he only needed a short nap, but this time, he never woke up again.

The villagers stood not far away, unsure how to deal with this strange outsider until they thought of the stranger.

The stranger had been drinking and carousing with the Poet these past few days. They thought the stranger might be a friend of the Poet, so they called him over and entrusted him with the Poet's final affairs.

The stranger arrived at the tree near noon. The Poet still sat beneath it, eyes tightly closed, as if he had not died, only fallen asleep.

With the Poet's closed eyes, the stranger only now discovered the Poet's old age. Having lost those vibrant, dazzling eyes, he looked like a centenarian.

Perhaps the Poet was always an old man, but his incredible vitality always misled others about his age.

The Poet's collar was open, and his pockets were turned inside out. Before the stranger arrived, someone had already searched the Poet's body, but sadly, found nothing but bread crumbs. He truly was a wanderer, penniless.

The crowd was like vultures feeding on carrion; finding nothing on the Poet, they dispersed after the stranger arrived, uncaring about how he would deal with the Poet's body, for it held no value.

The stranger stood before the Poet's corpse. After a brief shock, he was horrified to find no sorrow in his heart, but rather a touch of... glee.

"So what if you had freedom and witnessed countless beauties?"

The stranger hoisted the Poet's body. "In the end, you still died, died in this unknown place, along with your poems."

A faint laughter sounded from behind. The stranger turned around warily, but found no one, then looked at the Poet. But he was already dead, his decayed face full of death.

The stranger quickened his pace. He didn't even know what he was thinking. The Poet's death brought him immense joy. The beautiful things were destroyed, yet he, despicable as he was, still lived. This time the stranger had won; he had triumphed over the Poet.

He wanted to turn and leave, letting the wilderness devour the Poet's corpse, but as he thought of leaving, an uncontrollable thought arose in his mind.

He couldn't leave the Poet here; he had to take him away!

The stranger's whole body resisted, but his body, against his will, picked up the Poet's corpse and carried it away, returning to his dark little room.

All along the way, the stranger had a strange feeling that someone was following him, as if a certain specter was lurking in his shadow, drawing closer with every step he took.

The stranger placed the Poet's body in the corner of the room, then sat in a chair, head down, tearing at his own face.

He couldn't understand what he was doing. When he looked up, the Poet's body was hidden in the shadow, silent and still.

"Haha..."

That familiar laughter resounded again, from within the shadows.

The stranger lifted his head, eyes bloodshot.

"Death is the ultimate end for everyone, but unlike you, before death came, I had already seen much beauty..."

In the darkness, the Poet tilted his head, gazing emptily as he spoke.

"Shut up!"

The stranger grabbed the Iron Hammer and slammed it down. The Poet's body was struck down, lying sideways on the ground.

"You're already dead!"

The stranger shouted, affirming within himself that the Poet was dead, that he should not continue pondering those chaotic thoughts, for he had much work to do.

Grasping the Iron Hammer, he swung down. Day after day.

"Of what use are your poems? One day they will be consumed by a great fire, reduced to dust!"

The stranger lit the forge. The scorching heat and bursting sparks filled his heart, and the fatigue from labor brought him peace.

"What I forge is different; it is far more resilient than poems, unafraid of water or fire."

The stranger picked up a red-hot Blade, the fiery glow reflecting in his eyes.

"But I am still alive, my friend."

A deep voice echoed, as if a specter was confiding in him.

The stranger turned his head, looking toward the dark corner, which was too black, as if devouring all light, connecting to another vast, dark world.

"This is immortality. My spirit and will, my poems will echo endlessly in your thoughts."

The stranger's heart trembled. He grasped the burning Iron Sword through thick gloves, flames still raging upon it, illuminating the darkness.

"No, you're already dead."

The stranger examined the Poet's corpse, now beginning to rot, large patches of decay appearing, an unbearable stench filling the air, maggots crawling within the body.

The blazing Fire Sword easily pierced into the Poet's chest. The stranger, cold and heartless, listened to the sizzling of flesh burned by flames.

"Why? What are you afraid of, my friend?"

The Poet smiled at him, ignoring the burning Fire Sword in his chest. Suddenly, he reached out, grabbing the stranger's head, forcing him to look at himself.

Chapter 508: The Poet's End_2

"Oh, I see, you are afraid of change, aren't you? You have been complacent for so long, so long that you don't want to think about what's beyond the mountains anymore... You even hate what's beyond the mountains.

You have sunk into your comfort, and whenever you think of what's beyond the mountains, you try to restrain the agitation in your heart to prevent your familiar life from being disrupted."

The Poet discovered the truth and laughed aloud, twisted and strange maggots crawled in his throat, rubbing against each other with a rustling sound.

"Shut up!"

The Stranger berated, stabbing the Fire Sword deeper until it pierced the ground.

"That's why you are so eager to destroy me. I am like a fire, igniting the desires in your heart, and you must find a way to extinguish it, but all of this... is too late."

The Poet looked like his scheme had succeeded, singing loudly.

"The fire has started!"

The Stranger roared, withdrawing the extinguished Blade, hacking madly at the Poet's corpse until it was chopped into pieces.

When the Stranger regained his senses, he was kneeling before a pool of filthy blood, the Poet's pale face lying to the side, eyes dilated and cloudy, his abdomen mangled, bones shattered into fragments, bloody intestines spilled out, and blood slowly flowed, soaking beneath the Stranger.

There were no words from ghosts, nor any abnormal movements. The Poet was long dead, and everything just now seemed like an illusion.

The Stranger stumbled and climbed up, eyes filled with fear, unable to understand what had happened. The Stranger picked up some fire and threw it onto the corpse.

The fire ignited in an instant, burning the Poet's corpse, the bright light illuminating all the darkness.

The firelight brought warmth and peace, calming the Stranger's restless heart. He sat on a chair, breathing deeply.

The flames would turn everything to ashes, extinguishing that rising desire once again.

The Stranger laughed to himself, but his laughter soon froze. Not far from the burning flames, a book of poems quietly lay on the ground.

The Stranger walked over slowly, breathing uneasily, heart pounding. He hadn't felt this way for many years, emotions of excitement and fear intertwined.

Thinking back carefully, the last time he had such feelings was many years ago.

Ah, the Stranger still remembered that day. It was the day when he picked up the Iron Hammer, ready to inherit the family business, but he didn't show up at the Blacksmith shop. Instead, he prepared his luggage and quietly left home before the dawn.

The Stranger had had enough of his father's control. He didn't want to spend a mediocre life in front of the forge. The Stranger wanted to see what lay beyond the mountains.

That was not a good day for departure. The Stranger encountered a giant bear in the mountains. At that moment, he wasn't overly scared. He thought dying on the path of pursuit wouldn't be so bad, but someone unexpected appeared.

The father knew the Stranger too well. When he left home, the father followed him from afar.

"Why did you come? Are you still trying to stop me?"

During the escape, the Stranger couldn't help but shout at his father. All these years, the mountains weren't the only barrier he wanted to overcome, but also the walls named after his father. He thought he had escaped, yet his father still chased him.

"No... it's not like that."

The father shook his head, always firm, but his attitude unexpectedly softened—perhaps because death was approaching.

"I've always known. I can't change your mind. One day you will leave me, but I just feel you're not ready yet."

The Stranger was stunned.

"Today is a good day. I intended to see you off."

The father said, suddenly stopping. He was old now, and the short run left him panting, with bloodthirsty growls drawing closer behind.

"But..."

The father didn't continue. He just smiled at the Stranger, waved at him, and his dark silhouette swallowed him.

The Stranger couldn't remember how he escaped. He only knew he kept running, even when his legs were exhausted, numb to the extreme, never stopping until he returned to the familiar village.

Since then, the Stranger no longer thought about what's beyond the mountains.

The Stranger looked at the book of poems before him. He intended to burn it along with everything else. Suddenly, a gentle breeze blew, swaying the flames, and opened the pages, revealing all its beauty to the Stranger.

He instinctively picked up the book, gazing at its contents. The Stranger had never read books nor knew words, but he could see the rough drawings—the Poet had sketched one breathtaking picture after another with simple lines.

The book of poems held Magic Power that made it hard for the Stranger to look away, forcing him to stare at its contents, his breath gradually a pant, sweat streaming down his forehead.

The Stranger walked towards the blazing fire; it burned the Poet's corpse and warmed the Stranger's body. The light illuminated the darkness, reflecting the illustrations and text.

The outside world at this moment broke the mountains' barriers, appearing before the Stranger.

"A Poet should not be shackled."

In the glaring firelight, the Poet's voice rang out again, standing amidst the flames.

The Stranger seemed not to hear his words, continuing to flip through the pages until they showed blank sheets. He turned a few more pages, and yet they continued to be empty.

The Stranger seemed to comprehend something, lifted his head, and met the Poet's gaze.

Chapter 509: The Poet's Downfall_3

The Poet's voice carried a hint of a smile, "Do you understand now?"

The stranger nodded, half-comprehending.

"As long as there is someone who can read this book, you are not truly dead. And when I record my story within it, I will, like you, gain eternal life.

I will die, but I will also live, living within the heart of every reader, guided by them to the distant future."

A hateful smile appeared on the face within the flames as he affirmed everything about the stranger, speaking like a chant.

"Unbound, eternal circulation."

The stranger responded, words like a child's dream-talk.

"Endless poetry."

A raging fire erupted from the Poet, scorching the earth, climbing up to the roof, in an instant devouring everything inside, dragging the entire house into the flames, transforming into a soaring torch, illuminating the village and the mountains.

"Now you are a Poet too."

The figure in the flames collapsed and was extinguished, turning into ashes with smoldering embers.

The Poet dropped the Iron Hammer, clutched the poetry tight, and ran towards the mountains without looking back, never to return.

...

The scene began to blur and dissipate, Bologue returning to this bustling world.

The overlap between the ghost and Bologue was but an instant, yet for Bologue, that instant felt indescribably long, as if he truly lived the stranger's life, then bid farewell to it.

Bologue's mind was somewhat dazed, his head splitting with pain, various thoughts crashing wildly in his mind, self-awareness beginning to deviate, in a brief moment, he even thought he was the stranger.

Fortunately, this did not affect Bologue for long; after all, Bologue was a tough character who spent a long time in the Black Prison. His will was unimaginably strong, and in less than a minute, Bologue completely severed himself from those mixed memories.

"Lost..."

Bologue murmured, Belli's warnings to him were coming true, one by one.

The spirits flying around the storm seemed to be the "heart" of individuals, containing their memories of this life. The "soul" is frozen on the ground, waiting to be destroyed into dust by the storm, returning to the blazing white core of the storm, while the "body" is abandoned in the world, returned to the dust.

This might just be death.

Bologue didn't have time to think about the "endless poetry" in his mind; his "heart" was being pulled toward the storm's core, while the "soul" on the ground remained frozen, still standing firm amidst the storm's fury.

This should be Bologue's Blessing; the Time Reversing Axis was taking effect. His "body" in the mortal world had not yet died, firmly locking the "soul," so the frozen ice sculpture was undestroyed by the storm; yet, Bologue's "heart" was returning to the storm.

Damn, how did a promotion ceremony end up like this!

Bologue's heart screamed, unable to resist all this. Just as he was about to be swept into that blazing white core, a pulling force emerged.

As if a taut bowstring was released in an instant, Bologue's vision began to twist, pulled into glowing lines.

Bologue fell uncontrollably toward the ground, crashing hard into the frozen sculpture, merging once more with his "soul."

The frost on his body crumbled one by one. Before Bologue understood the situation, a melodious voice came from afar, and Bologue turned his head as a familiar scene played out again.

A rusty ship anchor broke through the storm's fury, crashing in front of Bologue, chains tightened, plowing through heavy dust on the ground.

Without hesitation, Bologue lunged with all his strength, grabbed a corner of the massive ship anchor, and was dragged into boundless darkness.

Chapter 510: Ethereal Realm

Bologue quietly lay on the ritual platform, liquefied ether enveloping various alchemy materials, covering his body and continuously seeping into him, thus nourishing his soul to further strengthen it.

Aimou softly asked, "Is he okay?"

Bologue had maintained this state for several minutes now, it looked like the ritual was proceeding smoothly, but even in its smoothness, Aimou was still filled with worry.

"Still... okay, I guess."

Belli wasn't entirely sure, in her view, Bologue wasn't like Palmer, who was clearly entangled with misfortune and blessings, but sometimes he also always encounters some bizarre occurrences.

Thinking of this, Belli realized a problem; Bologue himself is extremely special, surviving as the undead from the Fall of the Holy City, about all things past, Bologue himself does not know the truth.

Bologue Lazarus himself is a mystery.

Belli realized she might be too familiar with Bologue, the everyday routine of many days made her overlook these things.

Aimou looked at Bologue with concern; since the time axis disorder event, Aimou's affection for Bologue had been increasing day by day...

In a sense, Aimou experienced rebirth three times, the first was naming herself, the second was when Bologue helped her break free from the prison of her mind, and the third was when Teda's sacrifice bought Aimou's rebirth.

In Aimou's short life, Bologue counted as one of her most important people; after the time axis disorder event, even though Bologue acted as usual, rarely mentioning the various incidents from the disorder event, but Aimou always harbors a sense of guilt for Bologue in her heart.

Bologue didn't care about Aimou's actions; he treated it as a child's tantrum, but Aimou couldn't accept it this way; she felt she had done something wrong.

With all these factors, Aimou was particularly attentive and concerned about Bologue; as for Bologue's response...

"Bologue, want to have a drink?"

"No, I don't really like drinking."

"Bologue, want to go out shopping?"

"No, the uniform from the Field Operations Department is sufficient."

"Bologue... um... really thank you for all you've done for me..."

"It's okay, protecting colleagues and maintaining the Order Bureau's property is also part of an expert's duty."

After a few conversations, Aimou was somewhat stunned; she couldn't understand Bologue... very few people can understand him; sometimes Bologue is astutely able to see through her thoughts, sometimes he's so oblivious it makes people grit their teeth.

Over time, Aimou also let it go, returning to the present, Aimou looked with concern at Bologue on the ritual platform, as the ritual progressed, her inner unease was gradually magnifying.

Belli's expression also gradually became solemn; she glanced at the time; logically, by this point, it should have ended.

On the ritual platform, Bologue had already absorbed the liquefied ether, the alchemy materials as a medium had fused into his body, making his soul stronger, and Bologue should be awakening now.

"Something's not right."

Belli walked to the front of the ritual platform, directly ignoring various protocol rules, raising her hand to pry open Bologue's eyelids, a strong light pierced down, to which Bologue made no response.

Looking towards Balder in the shadows, Balder pressed the instrument switch, the electrode patch reading various data, Bologue's metrics all stable.

Everything was normal yet he couldn't wake up.

"Lost... you brat wouldn't have encountered it again!" Belli grew nervous, "Comparing with this, you are the less fortunate one!"

Palmer's ascension ceremony hadn't encountered such a thing!

A Condenser who encounters 'lost', the flesh remains intact, the soul perfectly confined within the flesh, but the will never awakens again.

Belli didn't know how to handle this situation, to be accurate, no one knew what to do; the probability of encountering 'lost' was too low, this seemed more like a rumor existing within ascension ceremonies, Belli was witnessing it for the first time.

Behind thickened observation windows, elders watched the ceremony below, whispering quietly.

"Seems like Bologue encountered 'lost', should we use some special means, Teacher?"

The old Morgan showed a mischievous smile, leaning into the white-robed elder and suggested.

The white-robed elder did not respond immediately, just deeply stared at Bologue, then he began recounting, "During the ascension as a Seeker of Glory, I also experienced 'lost'."

Morgan gathered up his smile; he knew of that secret rumor, seriously asked, "What did you see?"

The dazzling storm flashed in the white-robed elder's mind; he didn't answer Morgan, continuing his narrative.

"We know enough about the material world, but regarding that higher-than-material world, more elusive and mysterious tier, we still know nothing."

Morgan tentatively asked, "Are you referring to... the Ethereal Realm?"

Ethereal Realm.

For most Alchemists, this is an entirely unfamiliar term; this is normal, since Alchemists hypothesized that higher tier and named it 'Ethereal Realm', this knowledge has only been circulated within the Scholars' Hall, never leaked out.

"Yes, the Ethereal Realm," the white-robed elder said, "Since then, I started researching all of this."

"Based on the hypothesis of the Ethereal Realm, I proposed more assumptions," he said, "If Secret Source truly exists, then why have we pursued it for a thousand years yet have never touched upon it?"

Morgan continued his words, in a very low voice answering, "Because Secret Source does not exist within the material world but resides in a higher tier, the one we hypothesized the Ethereal Realm."

As the teacher's most outstanding student, Morgan knew this part of knowledge, had to know when the white-robed elder conducted the hypothesis of the Ethereal Realm, Morgan was his assistant.

If the Ethereal Realm is exclusive knowledge within the Scholars' Hall, then Morgan's understanding of it is second only to the white-robed elder.

The white-robed elder lightly nodded, "This perhaps also provides an explanation for where our souls return to."

This was the same question Belli raised to Bologue: After humans die, where exactly do our souls go?

Belli proposed the hypothesis of the Secret Source, but the white-robed elder offered a more specific hypothesis.

"Souls, like the Secret Source, do not exist in our reality's dimension. They are far above us, residing in the Ethereal Realm. When we die, the 'heart' is extinguished, the 'body' decays and dies, and the untethered 'soul' returns to the Ethereal Realm."

Morgan added, "We are like projections of souls in the Ethereal Realm."

The white-robed elder softly said, "It's also possible that the reverse is true."

"Now Bologue has crossed that boundary; he is within the Ethereal Realm, facing the Secret Source, lost..." Morgan glanced at Bologue on the ritual platform, "Meaning, his connection with the Ethereal Realm, with the Secret Source, runs very deep, does it not?"

Morgan posed his own question, "Yet now he is merely a Condenser, not even a Prayer Believer Condenser."

In the series of hypotheses related to the Ethereal Realm, Morgan clearly remembered this part about the Secret Source connection. The Condenser's perception of Ether is equivalent to perceiving the Ethereal Realm, thus detecting the power of the Secret Source.

The Ethereal Realm and the material world run parallel, and Condensers are people who simultaneously inhabit the overlap of two worlds. Yet the vast majority... nearly all Condensers, prefer the material world, struggling to sense the deeper realms of the Ethereal Realm.

Even if there is some overlap, the connection between them is exceedingly thin.

Only through the Ascension Ritual, exploring the depths of the soul, can they, under the influence of the ritual, delve into the Ethereal Realm and touch the Secret Source, which is part of the Ascension Ritual.

When diving into the Ethereal Realm and gazing at the Secret Source, due to varying depths of connection between the Condenser and the Secret Source, some perceive nothing, while others glimpse fragments of scenery.

Such a connection is akin to the "umbilical cord" between Devil and Debtor. Thus, the white-robed elder referred to the connection between the Condenser and the Secret Source as "entanglement."

Much like the material world's projection in the Ethereal Realm, the deeper the Condenser's "entanglement", the more defined their form and complete their self within the Ethereal Realm.

Like Palmer during ascension, driven by the ritual, Palmer's "heart" and "soul" detached from the material world, reached the Ethereal Realm, and perceived the existence of the Secret Source.

However, due to Palmer's lowly tier and shallow "entanglement," Palmer could not form a complete projection in the Ethereal Realm. To him, the ritual process felt like an anesthetic surgery, perceiving nothing but the power of the Secret Source.

Bologue is different; his "entanglement" is exceptionally deep, easily forming a projection within the Ethereal Realm, confronting the storm of the Secret Source.

But therein lies the issue: historically, Condensers with "entanglement" as deep as Bologue's are not unheard of, but in their Low Tier state, they often encounter accidents within the Ethereal Realm, unable to awaken, which is referred to as "lost."

The white-robed elder had also experienced "lost." At that time, he was ascending to be a Seeker of Glory, already possessing great strength, allowing him to break free.

"Just at this First Stage, possessing such deep 'entanglement' as Condensers," Morgan recalled the Field Operations Department report, "he also has an exceptionally deep 'umbilical cord' with the Devil."

"Teacher, are you hiding something from me?"

Morgan's face lost its reverence, looking solemnly at his teacher.

The appearance of Bologue, and the return of the teacher, he didn't think it was a coincidence, more like a meticulously designed conspiracy.

The white-robed elder merely gazed long at the ritual platform, murmuring, "Ethereal Realm, projection, entanglement... all these hypotheses we proposed are unverified fantasies.

If that's the case, we might ascertain the truth of all this through Bologue Lazarus."

"But now he has already fallen into 'lost.' If we don't act, he won't ever awaken."

Morgan controlled his emotions, abandoning his questioning of the teacher; he knew his teacher's nature well, forcing him would yield nothing, and he lacked the strength to interrogate the teacher, considering that he was a Seeker of Glory, even aged, still wielding noble power.

"No... we need do nothing. First, I must ascertain something more vital than proving the 'Ethereal Realm hypothesis'.

The white-robed elder said expressionlessly.

"I need to know whether Bologue Lazarus is a product of Albert's plan. If he is, then he won't be 'lost'... at least not until he achieves Albert's aim."

"If not?"

Morgan and the teacher's biggest difference might be their fervor for the Secret Source. Morgan was a rational person, always facing everything this way.

"If not? Then I will personally rescue him."

The white-robed elder's voice was calm, beyond doubt.

Morgan remained silent; from the teacher's words, he had already sensed the anomaly.

The teacher prioritized discerning whether Bologue is part of Albert's plan over disproving the Ethereal Realm, knowing the Ethereal Realm was the teacher's lifelong work, yet compared, he was more concerned with Albert's plan.

Albert's plan...

Albert.

There was only one Albert within the Order Bureau.

First Director Alberto Alfredo.

Morgan recalled everything related to this name, and his final actions.

Despised, detested, yet admired and pitied.

Alberto Alfredo was a difficult guy to evaluate, whether in life or death.