

Endless 511

Chapter 511: Cold Jokes

The gifts possessed by debtors often do not provide evident enhancements to them. Some are given by the Devil as a form of malicious amusement, such as Palmer's "Gambler," while others fulfill certain desires, like Aimou's "Doppelganger."

Aimou's situation is even more special than the debtors. To be precise, she is merely the beneficiary of the debt, while Teda has already repaid it for her. Combined with Aimou's true nature as an Alchemy Puppet, this makes her difficult to categorize, and in the end, the Order Bureau decided to simply regard her as a debtor.

A debtor without debt.

Under the influence of the Blessing-Doppelganger, Aimou possesses two forms that can overlap. For the recent important work, Aimou has been in the state of an Alchemy Puppet, her mechanical body making her tireless and imbuing her with all sorts of traits of an Alchemy Puppet.

"What should we do?"

Looking at Belli's serious expression, Aimou knew something was wrong, and she was extremely tense.

Her gaze shifted back and forth between Belli and Bologue's faces, causing even her pupils to slightly glow. The halo within them quivered and deformed, symbolizing Aimou's complex emotions.

Belli furrowed her brows; even without looking at Aimou, she could sense Aimou's agitation because Aimou was simply too noisy.

Amidst excessive worry and tension, a mechanical hum faintly whispered beneath Aimou's frame, resembling a washing machine running at full capacity.

Belli lowered her head, arms crossed, biting her fingernails.

"The Lost phenomenon" is indeed too bizarre, and it is connected to the Secret Source, which is a mystery completely shrouded in mist for all alchemists.

After thinking for over a dozen seconds, Belli contemplated all possibilities, ultimately negating them one by one.

This matter has surpassed Belli's control.

"This is truly a terrible timing, the ascension ceremony is a soul interference, and now Bologue is undoubtedly at his most fragile state, yet he has faced the 'Lost phenomenon'..."

Belli slowly lifted her head, looking towards the darkness above, where aside from the dome's light, there was the only dim light source.

A window glowing in the darkness.

Belli grabbed the communicator and said to the elders behind the observation window, "Everybody, you've been watching for so long, it's time to do something."

Belli never doubted her talent and skill, but she had to occasionally acknowledge that even though she could surpass those old geezers in these aspects, there were still things she couldn't overcome.

Experience.

The alchemists in the Scholars' Hall are considered living fossils of the Order Bureau; they witnessed its rise and have driven the research on the Secret Source.

In their long lives, these alchemists have seen all kinds of oddities and experienced numerous Extraordinary Disasters. Compared to them, Belli is still too young.

This is the first encounter with the "Lost phenomenon" for Belli and the Sublimation Furnace Core department in recent years. It's unknown whether it was deliberately obscured or is actually the case, as there is no official record of handling the "Lost phenomenon", only rumors circulated among people.

Belli believes they must have a method to deal with it.

Even if they don't, they should have one.

Aimou also looked towards the observation window; within that glowing window, she could see shadowy figures, like the dead isolated beyond the worldly dust, observing the affairs of the living.

After a long pause, a response echoed, an aged voice answering.

"Continue."

Belli tightly gripped the communicator. Although she was the minister, her authority was equal to these ancient scholars and was even subtly suppressed by them. She couldn't refute anything and could only watch the sleeping Bologue, continuing the ceremony and waiting for him to awake.

Aimou anxiously watched Bologue, the golden liquid completely permeated his body, and the few scattered light trails became robust like growing vines, with finer curved lines stretching outward from the main ones, extending from Bologue's arms to his chest, covering most of his back.

Gradually, the high-pitched ether subsided peacefully, and the surrounding restless instruments also quieted down. Belli knew the ascension ceremony had successfully concluded, but Bologue had yet to awaken.

"I have an idea," said Belli, "I'm not sure what consequences it might have, but right now it seems like the only solution."

Aimou asked, "What's the solution?"

Belli provided the answer with her actions; she lifted her clothes and pulled out a scalpel from the inner lining.

This scalpel wasn't made from Belli's Secret Energy but was a product of the Sublimation Furnace Core, forged entirely from Fine Steel. During medical tasks, it was a practical surgical instrument, while in combat, it was a deadly dagger.

"Let the Time Reversing Axis reset all of this."

Belli had read Bologue's reports and was well aware of his Blessing.

However, there was one thing Belli wasn't entirely certain about: the Time Reversing Axis returns to the most optimal state, and now that Bologue has just completed the ascension ceremony, the Alchemy Matrix is currently at the stage where it needs molding tendencies. If he were to die at this moment, what would happen to Bologue?

"Whatever! Let's try it!"

Belli raised the scalpel, ready to strike at Bologue's heart, hoping to restore his consciousness. But a hand stopped her, a cold iron hand firmly grasped the scalpel.

"Now he's like a child sleeping too deeply, needing someone to wake him up, right?"

With a sudden question, Aimou's aura froze in her eyes.

"I guess so..."

"I might be able to wake him up. If this method doesn't work, then it's your turn."

As Aimou spoke, her body already began to fade, leaving only a glowing phantom in its place.

Belli had the chance to stop Aimou, but she didn't; she only nodded gently. Then Aimou resolutely reached out to touch Bologue.

The Shared Chord Body can share each other's sensations. If Bologue hasn't fully succumbed, Aimou should have a chance to awaken him.

With her intense emotions.

...

Bologue tightly gripped the giant ship's anchor, his palm keenly feeling the anchor's patterns, upturned rust, and that chilling cold.

He was shuttling at high speed through the darkness, with the sound of whistling wind coming from within, followed by torrents of pouring rain.

Cold raindrops beat against Bologue's body... though he wasn't entirely sure what it was, he simply perceived them as raindrops.

Bologue felt as if he was traveling through rain clouds, beaten by countless "raindrops." He glimpsed faint light, which next fully bloomed like explosive fireworks, swallowing every scenery.

When Bologue regained his sight, he found himself half-kneeling in a gray-white open field; the previous storm and anchor had vanished, leaving only him in a desolate and empty world.

In essence, at this moment, Bologue is merely a manifestation of "heart" and "spirit," yet he adhered to the body's instincts, gasping heavily, not that it would comfort him much, but at least his tense spirit relaxed somewhat.

Bologue hunched his body, feeling something churning in his stomach, or perhaps the journey's ups and downs led his mind into disarray. He retched several times, but nothing emerged from his throat.

Striking his chest forcefully, Bologue's breath stirred large amounts of gray-white dust.

Too painful.

Painful in every sense.

Bologue began to comfort himself, speculating that the unexpectedness of this promotion ceremony was likely linked to the incomplete soul of his debtor. If worse came to worst, the blame could be shifted onto Palmer; this guy's bad luck seemingly transferred to him.

Bologue chuckled to himself, just joking. He wasn't unreasonable; he merely felt that after enduring such madness, he ought to ease himself with a bit of humor.

"If you were dying, what would you say?"

This was one of Bologue and Palmer's casual conversations. Faced with Bologue's question, Palmer thought for a moment, then answered.

"A dark joke."

"A dark joke?"

"Yeah, terrifying death is about to descend, yet you're not afraid, but instead mock death... how elegant, composed, romantic."

"If you recited some poem before dying, I'd find it composed and romantic, but telling a dark joke... why does that feel like being neurotic unto death?"

Palmer stubbornly replied, "Close enough, close enough, you simply can't understand my romance."

Oh, how Bologue laughs tirelessly when remembering these things. He briefly forgets his current predicament, pondering why Palmer talks so easily about these strange, amusing philosophies, and wonders if Palmer ever truly feels sadness.

Bologue believes Palmer does feel sadness since everyone does, just that Palmer shelters himself where others can't see when sadness hits.

Bologue halted his random thoughts. After a brief rest, he had replenished his strength and stabilized his spirit, swaying as he stood up, facing the bizarre world.

It was a gray-white desolate land, featuring only cold rocks and lifeless dust; life here had perished, and above Bologue's head, massive stones floated in the air like mountains, colliding, crushing each other, with serpentine thunder sweeping through, painting an apocalyptic picture.

Bologue was stunned; it wasn't an unfamiliar place at all; on the contrary, it was land Bologue knew very well.

The world after death, the void world.

Bologue harbors many secrets never revealed to others, such as "previous life" and "absorption"; the world after death is one of Bologue's secrets.

Others arriving in the so-called post-mortem world tend to panic endlessly, but Bologue feels relaxed, like a car racing down a highway, finding a fuel station before the tank runs dry.

Returning here feels like returning home; as long as he waits here a while, Bologue can re-enter the living world.

But this time, the world after death felt somewhat amiss, and upon realizing this, a crisp snapping sound echoed behind Bologue.

That person shattered the silence and deliberately exposed their presence.

Chapter 512: Astronaut

Fear.

For Bologue, fear is a somewhat unfamiliar emotion; throughout his past experiences and the constant impacts of the Face of Horror, Bologue's will has long been unwavering.

Only when he learns the hidden truths of the past does Bologue's will ever slightly falter due to the astonishing facts, and when others face misfortune, he feels fear stemming from concern for their fate.

After many years, Bologue once again retrieves that pure sense of fear at this moment, his body feels frozen, and every inch of muscle no longer obeys his command, silently screaming.

In this post-death world, another presence awaits him.

This feeling is unbearable—a presence appears in a world where there should absolutely be none.

The world after death is lonely and vast, but for Bologue, it is a place far safer than the Order Bureau; in this peculiar space, he returns to the earthly world, and here, Bologue can fully relax, filled with an absolute sense of security.

But now the sound of snapping fingers breaks this safety, in this lonely world, Bologue is not alone... perhaps he has never been alone, as there is always a mysterious presence hiding in the shadows, watching every time Bologue resurrects.

Bologue struggles to control his emotions, forcing himself to calm down. As an expert, negative emotions don't affect Bologue for too long, and he begins to contemplate one plan after another in his mind.

Anger and delight overwhelm fear, and Bologue realizes one thing: this post-death world is intimately connected to his Blessing—the Time Reversing Axis, and further linking the two is the devil who snatched away Bologue's soul and whose identity remains unknown.

Ah... you have finally appeared.

The debtor is a deputy of the devil interfering in the present world, and one day the devil will seek out the debtor, making them fulfill the debt they carry.

Bologue clenches his fist and slowly turns around; an absurd scene greets his eyes.

The vision is wholly occupied by ashen stone; there are no mountains or ridges, only boundless wilderness and sunken ring mountains, some so massive they stand like basins.

Not far from Bologue, the person uses a snapping gesture to draw Bologue's attention and waves at him to come over; to him, it's just an idle gathering with friends.

Bologue scrutinizes the figure, and buried memories rise to the surface.

His breathing becomes rapid, and Bologue recalls a certain mechanism in this post-death world; after each resurrection, he struggles to retain memories from the post-death world.

Much like a dream, when Bologue awakens, memories related to his post-death world quickly fade.

Now Bologue understands; they haven't disappeared, but are sealed away.

Only when Bologue returns to this post-death world do these memories become clear, and he realizes he isn't meeting the figure beckoning him for the first time.

Even back when he became a Condenser during the implant ceremony, Bologue had seen him.

Before Bologue appears a simple open-air cinema; a huge screen stands ahead with chairs scattered about, and the person sits in the middle seat. Seeing Bologue approach, he pats the chair beside him, signaling Bologue to sit by his side.

Bologue gradually approaches the figure; during the implant ceremony, he had seen him in the post-death world, yet later failed to recall any of it upon awakening.

Unlike before, when Bologue struggled to discern the figure's visage and perceived him as an incomprehensible distorted silhouette, akin to static snow on a television.

Now it's different; the figure assumes a visible form, a bizarre form.

At first glance, Bologue imagines the figure in a bloated diving suit, appearing like a giant compared to the chair, with a spherical helmet enclosing his head, his entire face hidden behind a golden glass visor.

This is not a diving suit.

The thought arises in Bologue's mind; he recalls the memories of his "past life" and his understanding of the "present world."

He had heard on the radio that, following the development of technology, bomber planes ravaged the battlefield during the Fury of Scorched Earth, and with time, humans had conquered the skies, where eagle-like airliners easily ferry people across nations.

Now humans aren't satisfied with being confined beneath the sky; they desire to break through this blue dome, crafting spear after spear to tear through the heavens, powered by iron fire.

Yet those in the present world have not succeeded, but in "past life" memories, humans achieved it; driven by fierce flames, they sent spears carrying castles to the celestial vault.

In that vacuum of deathly silence, clothed in heavy "armor," they protected fragile bodies against the limitless darkness.

It shouldn't be...

Bologue stares vacantly at the figure on the chair, bloodshot eyes.

In this world, space exploration is but a vague hypothesis, theoretically, such an object shouldn't exist here, yet it appears in Bologue's vision, emerging through the barrier from Bologue's "past life" memories.

This isn't a diving suit; it's a spacesuit.

What appeared before Bologue was an astronaut, someone who should only exist in his "past life" memories, and should not appear in this era!

— — In this world after death.

Bologue found it difficult to describe his own feelings. He had always viewed the memories of his "past life" as his ultimate secret, while he was merely a ghost from the Otherworld.

Now, things were different. Another being, seemingly aware of the "past life," had appeared.

The world as Bologue knew it began to fracture, and rearrange, sketching out a twisted oil painting.

Dragging his numb body, Bologue sat down next to the astronaut, who kindly offered Bologue a bucket of popcorn. Bologue didn't refuse, numbly accepting the popcorn and clutching it to his chest.

The astronaut casually tossed the empty bucket behind him, which rolled back and forth on the gray-white ground, before falling into a sunken Ring Mountain, eventually mingling with the pile of empty buckets forming a hill.

The astronaut spoke, "You don't look so good, Bologue."

"Perhaps..."

No matter how rational and smart Bologue was, under the continuous impacts, he fell into a mental stiffness, as if in a daze.

Gazing at the screen ahead, the projector was showing a familiar scene — a time distortion event. Under the indiscriminate might of the Immortal Heart, Bologue and Aimou found a chance to severely injure the Silver Knight, and later became the ultimate winners amidst the chaos.

The astronaut had been watching Bologue all along, and from this moment, Bologue felt he could confirm the other's identity.

"Which one of the Original Sin are you?"

Bologue tried not to think about the "past life" matters. He already had enough mysteries of his own. Rather than causing himself intense pain, he decided to tackle them one by one.

The astronaut lifted the glass faceplate, revealing a space of darkness underneath, as if the spacesuit enclosed not a physical entity but some void presence.

He took a drink, biting strongly on the straw to gulp the cold liquid down, before expertly tossing the empty beverage behind.

In the open-air cinema, a guest like the astronaut was least welcome, always making a mess of the place. Luckily, this was the astronaut's domain, and no one could boss him around.

"Rather than talking about who I am, why not discuss yourself first?" The astronaut directed the conversation towards Bologue, "You impress me greatly, Bologue."

"How dreadful!"

Bologue began to adapt to the current state of things, considering this as a terrible encounter... or perhaps a long-planned scheme.

That rustic, storm-torn anchor, if this was an embodiment of the astronaut's power, then he had acted more than once before.

The sensation was intriguing, like surviving a car accident, only to have your detested boss saving you, discussing your recent performance amidst the crash site.

"No need to fret, I always believed you are wonderful, full of potential!"

The astronaut gave Bologue a thumbs up.

"So... all of this is not a coincidence, right?" Bologue questioned, "I have died countless times, only to see you when it's about soul ascension."

"Is this your summons, or can I only meet you under such special circumstances?"

The astronaut shook his head, "Don't overthink things. Each time you die, you can see me. But often you return to the mortal realm before you even find me."

The time of resurrection.

Whenever Bologue found himself in the world after death, his time to act was short. Before taking a few steps, he would return to the mortal world. But now, during soul ascension, he received more time to act and recalled memories only remembered in the world after death.

Only deep within the soul.

"Where to start..."

The astronaut pondered for a moment, then snapped his fingers. Their seats spaced apart slightly, a small table appeared between them, followed by a chessboard, black and white pieces...

The other seemed to want to play chess with Bologue, at the moment most unsuitable for chess — a damned game of black and white chess. Bologue screamed inside, yet understood he had no right to refuse. Then, the astronaut spoke.

"Shall we play a game?"

The astronaut gestured invitingly, handing over the white pieces to Bologue.

"Your move."

...

Chapter 513: King Yi Abandons His Army

Black and white chess, black and white chess again, this ancient board game seems to hold some deep significance in this treacherous and chaotic Extraordinary World, one that Geoffrey is yet to comprehend.

Geoffrey gazed at the Astronaut, the golden glass visor emitted a piercing light, and Geoffrey couldn't help but let the corners of his mouth curve upward.

The Astronaut asked, "What's the matter?"

"Just thinking how absurd this all is, absurd enough to be laughable."

The pressure had reached its limit, and instead, Geoffrey relaxed; if the Astronaut before him truly was the Devil who traded for his soul, the immortal power the Astronaut granted him showed enough of his favor.

Yes, he had immeasurable value to the Astronaut before him, and before his value was drained dry, Geoffrey wouldn't be abandoned.

Thinking this, Geoffrey felt incredibly relieved, saying, "In this afterlife, amidst this bizarre scene, I find myself playing chess with a Devil... It's utterly insane, like something out of a movie."

"A movie scene? Well, you're not wrong, we are indeed filming a movie."

The Astronaut looked toward the screen ahead, the timeline disorder event had concluded, and what surfaced on screen was a grayscale, lifeless world; soon another screen appeared within the screen, continuously overlapping and collapsing, stacking into a vortex resembling an Abyss.

Geoffrey averted his gaze, but the screen's image didn't change; the picture wasn't from Geoffrey's sight but from some invisible camera recording everything in real-time.

Geoffrey had enough of strange experiences today; the real-time filming before him stirred little emotion.

He had encountered similar anomalies before, but it seemed the Astronaut and those lunatics from the Unfettered Poetry Society weren't of the same ilk.

"I'm starting to hate the afterlife."

Geoffrey muttered to himself, once believing the afterlife was his absolute safe haven, only to realize it was the most treacherous realm.

The Devil he had long pursued awaited him here.

"The afterlife? You mean Between Nothingness?"

The Astronaut mused over Geoffrey's words, laughter echoing beneath his helmet; he hadn't expected Geoffrey to interpret it as an "afterlife" scenario, but technically it wasn't incorrect, considering Geoffrey briefly arrived here each time he died.

He murmured to himself in a low voice, "So that's how you understand it?"

Geoffrey didn't notice these anomalies, and every time he left the afterlife, it was through self-resurrection; now, Geoffrey wasn't even sure what his "body" had been through, having not resurrected for so long. Besides, he didn't possess any means to actively leave the afterlife – at least for now, it seemed this way.

He couldn't escape, nor did he need to; Geoffrey had always been chasing this Devil, hoping to gather more useful intelligence from it.

Geoffrey retorted, "Between Nothingness? Is this place called Between Nothingness, then?"

The Astronaut silently nodded, snapping his fingers again; these Devils loved using such graceful yet frivolous means to interfere with reality.

In the blink of an eye, a drink appeared in Geoffrey's hand, slightly shaking, the sound of ice cubes colliding heard within.

Geoffrey processed this massive amount of information, feeling his brain could explode.

His gaze landed on the chessboard between them; Geoffrey, playing white, picked up the White Pawn in front of the White King, moving it forward two squares.

The Astronaut picked up the Black Pawn in front of the Black King and, like Geoffrey, advanced it two squares.

Geoffrey slightly raised his head, the golden glow from the visor reflecting in his eyes; Geoffrey placed his hand on the White Pawn on the King's side, pushing it forward two squares, aligning with the first pawn, resembling a shield wall erected at the center of anticipation.

"King's side pawn sacrifice? I like this ancient opening."

The Astronaut's voice carried a tone of intrigue, "I didn't expect you'd start with that."

"Just basic knowledge."

Geoffrey replied while seriously observing the chessboard, his gaze splitting the board along the center, the King's side known as the King's Wing, the Queen's side as the Queen's Wing.

The first time Geoffrey encountered black and white chess was shortly after joining the Order Bureau, when Palmer played a match with him, explaining the tiers of Condensers on the black and white board.

Feigning calm on the surface, Geoffrey already felt slightly tense; ever since Palmer explained the ranks to him, Geoffrey hadn't touched black and white chess again; his knowledge of it came only from rulebooks, as for King's side pawn sacrifice, Geoffrey could only attribute his memory to being good.

Geoffrey recalled the rulebook's explanation of King's side pawn sacrifice in his mind, "Sacrificing the White Pawn for advantage on the King's Wing."

"It's a good choice, yet a bad choice."

The Astronaut placed his hand on the Black Pawn isolated before the white shield wall, "Advancing to gain advantage, risk and benefit coexist."

The Black Pawn advanced diagonally, colliding with the White Pawn, which disintegrated into ash and scattered across the board.

"I accept your pawn sacrifice."

As the Astronaut spoke, the Black Pawn and White Pawn stood side by side, like Knights about to face off.

Looking at the dust on the chessboard, Geoffrey's mind couldn't help but conjure strange fantasies, as if the board itself were a real battlefield, and Geoffrey had just sacrificed someone...

It was Geoffrey's turn to make a move, yet this time, Geoffrey hesitated, unable to recall the subsequent moves no matter how much he tried to remember.

But Geoffrey had to act.

Picking up the white Knight on the rear wing, it leaped forward.

The Astronaut immediately saw through Bologue, "I was mistaken, you're actually a novice."

"Am I a novice, can't you see?"

Bologue gestured to the screen on the side, no longer pretending.

"I don't constantly watch you... at least I don't when you're living your personal life," the Astronaut shook his head, making his words seem somewhat humorous in this scenario, "Not like my brother, who's obsessed with 'stories' to a crazy degree."

The Astronaut picked up the black Empress and continued, "But it's reasonable, given his natural disposition."

The black Empress charged at the corner of the King's wing, losing the protection of the white Pawn, leaving the portal to the White King wide open, locked by the black Empress.

"General."

The Astronaut's voice struck Bologue's heart; now Bologue understood the risk of rushing forward.

Bologue raised his hand and pushed the white Pawn forward a square in front of the white Knight on the King's wing, blocking the attack route of the black Empress, saving the White King.

"You should practice this game more; I find it quite interesting."

The Astronaut said lightly, then the black Pawn continued to advance diagonally forward, crushing the white Pawn Bologue had just maneuvered, scattering gray-white dust and a few drops of blood this time.

"I find it rather boring."

Bologue lifted and placed down the white Knight again, this time entering the attack range of the black Empress, with faint hoofprints hovering above, waiting to strike fiercely.

"Our interests unfortunately don't align."

The Astronaut advanced the black Pawn further forward, now only a step away from the baseline.

Bologue had already sensed the Astronaut's intention, but it was too late. As the Astronaut said, Bologue was a complete novice, and under all these bizarre and intense pressures, Bologue's energy was almost depleted.

There was no choice; Bologue moved the white Knight, choosing to capture the black Empress. At the moment the pieces collided, Bologue vaguely heard the roar of a Knight drawing a sword and the wailing of a woman dying in pain.

The black Empress disintegrated into dust and disappeared, but at its original position and now the position occupied by the white Knight, a crimson blood hole appeared there, with fresh blood gushing out, staining the King's wing side.

Beneath a heavy helmet, a mad laugh echoed. The black Pawn continued to advance diagonally forward, this time crushing the white Rook in the corner and killing to the baseline.

The Astronaut and Bologue whispered in unison.

"Ascension."

This time, no bizarre, bloody anomaly appeared, instead a touch of golden brilliance covered the black Pawn, the white Rook shattered into dust, and this dust rose up, covering the black Pawn, amidst faint psalms, forging it into a new black Empress.

"I concede."

Bologue gave up, his King's wing had been breached, and the pieces were in disarray. Continuing was just adding to the Astronaut's amusement.

Bologue didn't want to satisfy the Devil so easily.

"Bullying a novice isn't fun."

The Astronaut nodded, and the entire chessboard dissolved into dust returning to the earth.

The two returned to their original states, only the chairs were spaced considerably apart.

Bologue had fantasized countless times about what he would do when confronted with this Devil, draw his sword and shout... these things he had considered, but facing the Devil truly, Bologue rationally realized he was powerless to act.

At least, for now, it was like this.

Bologue felt the Astronaut wouldn't mind if he punched and kicked him a bit, but that seemed like a child's impotent rage, and Bologue didn't want to become so pathetic.

The silence between them lasted for a long time. In the silence, Bologue remembered the Tyrant, that rare Devil he could rationally converse with, then he thought of Palmer.

If Palmer were here, what would he do?

Bologue sighed deeply, speaking to himself, "If you're my boss, then I'm an employee owing you a lot of money. But I can't understand how I got into this relationship with you."

"Hmm... I know," the Astronaut nodded, "Are you asking about the trade part?"

"Of course," the conversation between them was smooth, Bologue began to see the Astronaut as another Tyrant, one who liked chess, more mysterious, "but before that, there's one thing."

"What?"

"How to address."

The Astronaut froze, Bologue was sure he had completely frozen, the Astronaut's movements halted entirely, the bulky helmet turned to him, and after a long pause, an uncontrollable laugh echoed.

"You really are the most interesting one, Bologue!"

The Astronaut laughed heartily, and the chair beneath Bologue uncontrollably bumped towards the Astronaut, bringing their positions closer once again. He pulled Bologue into an embrace, the helmet even bumped into Bologue's head, pressing closely as if they were long-lost good brothers.

Chapter 514: Chosen One

The astronaut laughed enough, and a calm voice rang out.

"No... it's not the time yet. Names hold magic power, and I still can't say mine, as it would draw others' attention."

To summon a devil, you must first know his name.

Bologue noticed this, realizing that the astronaut had reasons not to be discovered.

"But rest assured, I'll soon see the light of day again... with your help, Bologue Lazarus."

The astronaut gently patted Bologue on the back, like a treacherous boss encouraging his employee.

Bologue was fed up with this damned unfolding. In his imagination, seeing the devil should lead to a battle. But now, he was caught in a strange conversation and a game of chess with him. Bologue didn't want to follow the devil's rhythm any longer and pushed the astronaut away, keeping a safe distance between them.

Bologue questioned, "Who the hell are you?"

The astronaut said nothing, just tilted his head, watching Bologue. Through the golden glass visor, Bologue could sense a sinister face smiling at him with a mocking look.

"Your attire doesn't belong to this era but rather to memories of my 'past life'... Surely, my birth is also related to you, isn't it?"

Bologue questioned again. His crossing over wasn't a mysterious coincidence but part of some grand scheme, and now he finally glimpsed a dark corner of it.

"You took my soul and bestowed upon me such a blessing..."

The more he spoke, the more an indescribable fear pressed on Bologue, a fear stemming from the absolute unknown...

Like standing in a dark, obscure alley, where flickering yellow light can't illuminate what's lurking in the shadows, no matter how hard you look, you can't capture its hazy outline.

Bologue suddenly stopped, looking around this desolate dark world, an utterly unfamiliar, transcendent knowledge of the afterlife world, where an astronaut leisurely watched a movie.

In the ultimate death appeared the ultimate pioneer in human exploration of the unknown.

"What exactly do you want to do!"

Bologue unleashed all the questions in his heart, with lingering anger.

The astronaut was silent for a moment, and just like before, he did not directly respond to Bologue's question. Instead, he asked Bologue another thing.

"Bologue, do you think there's an omniscient and omnipotent existence in this world?"

"Are you referring to yourself and your brothers and sisters?"

Bologue tried to control his emotions, facing the astronaut, even the always rational he could not help losing control.

In this afterlife world... Between Nothingness, he did not possess the power to harm the devil. Besides venting his anger, all his attacks were meaningless.

Bologue did not like doing meaningless things. What he needed was information, more information related to the astronaut, at least trying to figure out which of the seven deadly sins the astronaut was, so he could continue his target.

The astronaut countered Bologue, "Me? Why do you think so?"

Bologue mocked, "You are devils, omnipotent devils. Look at me, am I not your work?"

The mockery didn't last long. Bologue remembered his previous speculations about the devil, and under the astronaut's words, Bologue realized that what he thought might be correct.

Devils couldn't interfere with reality, relying instead on debtors to act. Rather than omniscient and omnipotent beings, devils were more like the embodiment of laws.

Bologue's voice became low, "You are not omnipotent... you are but slaves, slaves of some power."

Sudden laughter rang out, and Bologue's eyes carried a hint of madness; his mood swings were like a roller coaster.

"It reminds me of a fabled story."

"What story?"

Bologue showed an arrogant look, "Beg me."

The astronaut simply said, "Please."

Bologue's expression froze. A devil was begging him, but unfortunately, Bologue felt no pleasure, only an indescribable emptiness.

Bologue murmured, "It's meaningless."

"As long as you know, such things are meaningless to us." Like a tyrant, the astronaut was extremely casual.

Devils are not humans, and Bologue's provocation was meaningless.

The game continued, and Bologue began to tell a story, "In legend, a boy found a lamp pot, inside which lived a powerful lamp god who could grant the boy three wishes. But after the three wishes were fulfilled, the lamp god would gain freedom."

Moving his body, Bologue leaned on his head, looking at the astronaut with a face of ease and mockery, "You and your brothers and sisters are like imprisoned lamp gods, but unlike the lamp god, the wishes you can grant are unlimited, except they require the price of a soul."

"Continue."

"With the power to change heavens and earth, but having to rely on others' wishes to act, how is that different from a prisoner?"

Bologue continued according to his speculation, "Therefore, you need a batch of deputies, to intervene in reality for you, and I am your deputy, your debtor."

"All my actions directly or indirectly help you, but these purposes ultimately lead to one result - freedom."

The astronaut clapped, praising, "You really are the best, Bologue."

"Why me? Why did you choose me?"

The astronaut tacitly acknowledged Bologue's speculation, yet Bologue's mind still had many unanswered questions.

This damned Devil before him seemed to fear something, remaining silent about his own identity, selectively answering Bologue's questions, as if, just as he said, certain words should not be spoken, lest they be discovered by something even more sinister.

Even the astronaut felt reverence, so what was it that he revered?

Slave.

Indeed...

Since the Devil is a slave, what they revere must inevitably be the master who rules them.

Bologue's breath hitched, looking anxiously at the astronaut, who held up a finger as if knowing what Bologue was thinking.

"Shh..."

Bologue could sense the astronaut smiling at him, the golden visor closing and then opening again, revealing the deep darkness beneath, now filled with many things.

Scarlet hundreds of eyes, within which Bologue's visage reflected.

"Who exactly am I?"

Since the astronaut refused to answer anything about the "master," Bologue hoped to gather more information about himself.

"Why do you shield me like this?"

Having received the Blessing of the Time Reversing Axis, an almost perfect undying body, Bologue must play a crucial role in the astronaut's scheme for these

"Why is it me?"

Facing Bologue's series of questions, the astronaut, as always, asked Bologue another question.

"Amongst my siblings, we are not united; for thousands of years, we've fought amongst ourselves, ceaselessly in strife. As you know, none of us can take down the other nor interfere in reality; in such a predicament, how do you think we can determine victory?"

Bologue whispered, "Proxy war."

"Agents, deputies, debtors, believers... whatever, call them what you will. They're as numerous as cattle, their value extracted completely. Do you think they're truly able to affect the strife between us?"

The astronaut extended his hand, placing it on Bologue's shoulder.

"I take from them coldly, or based on equivalent exchange, but you're different.

Bologue Lazarus, you are unlike them; you represent me, you are my 'White King' on this chessboard, while everyone else are mere sacrificial pawns.

I place my bets on you, if you lose, it means I lose too."

Gradually, the astronaut tightened his grip, Bologue felt himself restrained by steel clamps, flesh and bones compressed, immense pain unceasing, as meanwhile sinister words infiltrated his ears, perpetually impacting Bologue's psyche.

"You are the 'Chosen One' representing me in this strife."

The astronaut articulated Bologue's mission.

"End this conflict, bring victory to me."

The astronaut was seeking something from him, yet Bologue was somewhat doubtful he had misheard. A scornful expression emerged in his eyes, "You think I will cooperate with you so easily?"

"Hm? Why wouldn't you?" the astronaut said, "You are full of hostility towards me, but have you forgotten? Bologue, it was you who voluntarily chose this Blood Contract."

"The Devil never lies nor forces; every choice is in your hands. You willingly chose all this, why now blame it all on me?"

The astronaut's words made Bologue feel as if plunged into an icy abyss; Bologue had always struggled to avoid pondering this issue, but now the astronaut laid it bare and bloody before him.

Bologue wanted to say something more, yet in a daze, he heard someone calling to him, incessantly chanting his name.

"Bologue!"

The voice was very familiar, Bologue whispered her name softly.

"Aimou?"

"It seems time is up, Bologue."

The astronaut slowly rose, bidding farewell to Bologue, "I look forward to our next meeting."

"What do you..."

Bologue reached out to grasp, thinking the astronaut was about to flee, but in the next second, Bologue's pupils became vacant, losing consciousness.

He maintained the last gesture, his body turning ashen-white, and before falling, the astronaut seized Bologue, observing the colorless, statue-like visage, he remained silent, merely dragging Bologue towards the faraway Ring Mountain.

Upon reaching the edge of the Ring Mountain, the astronaut hurled Bologue into the shadow-shrouded pit, joining the mound of corpses.

Between nothingness, a new Bologue was born again; after a brief delay, he was extracted from this void, returning to the mortal realm.

Chapter 515: Tired of Conflict

After seeing Bologue off, the astronaut once again found himself with free time. To be precise, he had always been quite idle. Over the years, the only thing he needed to do was clean up the corpses left behind in the void every time Bologue resurrected.

On one hand, the astronaut actually quite liked the dead and desolate scenery, not wanting corpses to ruin the beauty; on the other hand, he considered Bologue more.

Every time Bologue arrived in the void, it was after death. When Bologue opened his eyes, he found himself alone in this vast world—along with those corpses like a sea of sand.

That was terrible, undoubtedly a strong shock to Bologue's mind, even though Bologue's mental fortitude was extremely resilient.

Thinking of these, the astronaut chuckled to himself, slowly walking back to his open-air cinema. After laughing, he became serious again, knowing it was merely a ridiculous lie. The real reason he did it was just to reduce Bologue's suspicions.

Abnormalities naturally incite suspicion. What the astronaut had to do was minimize the occurrence of abnormalities, such as these corpses piled into mountains.

If Bologue saw these corpses, with his temperament, he would inevitably question endlessly, even attempting suicide repeatedly just to meet with the astronaut.

The Devil never lies... But sometimes, one can make a kindly joke.

The astronaut controlled this territory, truly able to govern Bologue's activities here. It was like his living room, and Bologue was just an invited guest who could be kicked out at any time.

"Sigh... It feels like the progress is too fast, doesn't it?"

The astronaut sat back in his chair, picking up a thick book from the void. This was the screenplay he had written. Clearly, the filming progress had already somewhat surpassed the script's outline.

"You are truly outstanding, Bologue."

The astronaut murmured, attributing this situation to Bologue.

This protagonist was too excellent; the astronaut initially thought Bologue would need a year or two to preliminarily understand the existence of the Devils, but now Bologue had witnessed many of his siblings and another Chosen One.

Continuing to turn a few more pages, the astronaut conjured a pen from mid-air, jotting down notes and making appropriate modifications on the screenplay.

Halfway through writing, he suddenly sensed a certain anomaly—a peculiar laughter.

"You actually did it, didn't you, Bologue?"

The astronaut raised his head, gazing at the floating massive stones over his head with roaring thunder shuttling incessantly between them.

Surprised, the astronaut gained new insights into Bologue. In certain moments, Bologue indeed could seriously do something foolish.

Comfortably stretching, the astronaut looked at the screen before him. The scene remained the same, layers upon layers collapsing into a bottomless pit.

The camera of the void had not departed due to Bologue's return to the dust. It was still here, watching the screen.

"The world after death, huh? From your perspective, this place truly can be called the world after death..."

The astronaut gently waved his hand, and the image on the screen began to switch.

First, it crossed the floating mountains, and a vast, clear blue planet gradually appeared, then traversed thick clouds with a cold and strange steel jungle towering over the earth...

As the astronaut admired the various scenes, reaching the peak of joy, an immense void captured him.

Deep whispers echoed, like the last words of the deceased.

"I am weary of the conflicts, it's time to end all this...

Together with us."

...

Opening his eyes, stark white light entered his vision. Bologue sat up abruptly, as if awakened from a nightmare, then shouted loudly.

"What do you mean!"

The shout echoed in the empty darkness, with a faint glow emerging on Bologue's body. Aimou detached from him, falling by the ritual platform.

Bologue's head throbbed with pain; he remembered the life of the Poet, the storm and the anchor, and his conversation with the astronaut in the void.

Now, his memory of the astronaut started to yellow and fragment, just as when Bologue previously returned from the void. Bologue found it difficult to retain memories of the void in reality, as they would quickly fade like dreams upon waking.

Like retreating tidewaters, the sea disappears at the view's end, yet there are always things left behind on the soft sands during low tide.

Bologue didn't completely forget everything related to the astronaut; his memories simply became fragmented and withered.

Nervously observing his surroundings, the experience in the void had given Bologue a massive impact, with overwhelming information exploding in his mind—he momentarily even forgot he was undergoing the promotion ritual.

"Promotion successful!"

Belli's cheer interrupted Bologue's thoughts, and Aimou nearby also gleefully jumped in, hugging Bologue.

Bologue didn't pay much attention to Belli; as the Minister of the Sublimation Furnace Core, she always found strange reasons to take everyone to the Logistics Department for team-building, eating, drinking, and cheerfully shouting out.

"You're now a Prayer Believer, Bologue!"

Aimou looked at Bologue with a mix of excitement and fear; it seemed something bad had happened during Bologue's unconsciousness, and soon Bologue noticed Aimou's difference.

Her clothes were piled on the ground, and she was covered in a peculiar and dark luster, looking like a tight-fitting garment.

To resolve the trait of Secret Power·Shared Chord Body that penetrates all clothing, Belli had been designing a garment to better accommodate Aimou's Secret Power usage for a long time.

The black tight-fitting outfit Aimou was now wearing was the result of Belli's research, similar to the Cloak of Concealment. This was also an Alchemy Armament, named "Second Skin" by Belli.

The Second Skin employed many technologies from the Border Sanatorium, where during dangerous field operations, many Field Staff would suffer extensive skin injuries. To compensate for skin loss, artificial skin was developed using Alchemy.

Now, the black tight-fitting suit covering Aimou could be understood as a layer of wearable artificial skin, which would be voided along with the Shared Chord Body when activated.

Besides its numerous necessary functions, its greatest role was as clothing.

Indeed, it was meant to be used as clothing.

Bologue had no time to comment on Aimou's nearly perfect figure, instead turning to Belli nearby.

Belli had a delighted expression, holding a Fine Steel Scalpel in a reverse grip, appearing from Bologue's view like a mad doctor murderer.

Seeing Bologue awake, Belli sighed in relief, amidst many unexpected events, Bologue had ultimately successfully promoted.

Noticing Bologue's gaze, Belli pointed to the scalpel in her hand, about to explain its purpose when Bologue suddenly snatched it from her hand, and then, amidst everyone's horrified gaze, stabbed it into his own heart.

"Don't think you can rid me this way!"

As he pierced his heart, Bologue spouted harsh words.

Pulling out the scalpel, he tossed it aside carelessly, and as his heart was pierced, a torrent of blood sprayed out like a small fountain, evenly covering the two beside the ritual platform.

Bologue heavily fell onto the ritual platform, returning to the void again, finally finding clues—Bologue couldn't let the astronaut go so easily.

Belli and Aimou stood frozen in place, unable to process the bizarre situation before them, until the warm blood slid across their faces, and mournful cries began to gather and rise in Belli's throat.

After the successful promotion ritual, the seals inside were lifted, with the container holding Xilin long gone, as were the mysterious gray-robed figures. Then, the gate opened, and Palmer, who had been waiting behind it, burst in with cheers.

"Bolo... Gue!!!"

Palmer hadn't finished shouting the name before he witnessed Bologue stabbing himself.

His expression seamlessly changed from joy to horror, his expression switch so smooth that even veteran actors would be impressed.

Then, screams in various styles—male and female—filled the air.

Chapter 516: Moved

When Bologue awoke again, the familiar gray-white ceiling greeted his eyes. Turning his head, he saw the open window, with a breeze carrying the scent of flowers into the ward.

Bologue immediately recognized this familiar place; it was the Border Sanatorium.

What's going on?

Bologue remembered being at the Sublimation Furnace Core for the ascension ritual, and then...

An intense pain surfaced in his mind, and then those mad and bizarre memories surged back like a tide; Bologue could see those cracked and fragmented memories, with the figure of the Astronaut fading, blurring within them.

Ah...that damn Devil, Bologue saw him!

Bologue tried to recall other information, but apart from the Astronaut saying "End the disputes" and that strange chess game, Bologue couldn't remember anything else.

A dull ache arose in his chest, and Bologue suddenly recalled his mad acts after resurrection. To once again return to the void and confront the Astronaut, Bologue mercilessly killed himself.

What happened next...

Nothing happened. Bologue's mind held no memory about the space Between Nothingness. It seemed, as he deduced, only during the ascension ceremony or in the deep exploration of the soul, could he possess the ability to act there for an extended time; or maybe, the Astronaut controlled that space and rejected his visit.

What was that bastard plotting? Himself, the Time Reversing Axis, memories of a past life... All these were part of his conspiracy.

Bologue slammed his fist on the bed frame; he finally found some clues so close to him, yet regardless of what he did, he couldn't reach them. Moreover, the broken sense of safety was terrifying; the afterlife, once considered a safe haven by Bologue, now felt less reassuring than the Undying Club.

"Chosen One..."

Bologue gradually quieted down, savoring this unfamiliar term.

He was different from other debtors; those people bore debts to the Devil, while in carrying his debt, he also possessed the stakes wagered by the Devil.

Others were pawns, while he was the White King who needed to win. If he lost, the Astronaut would lose too.

In a dispute unknown to Bologue.

"Prisoners bound by power."

Bologue murmured softly. He couldn't let himself soak in this oppressive emotion for long; a few seconds later, the room's door was pushed open vigorously. Several familiar figures stood behind it, each with different expressions on their faces.

"Bologue!"

The first piercing cry came from Bologue's dear partner.

Palmer's face was full of sorrow as he ran toward Bologue with tears and snot, but before he could throw himself onto Bologue, Bologue kicked him down with one quick move.

Hart followed closely. He too intended to give Bologue a big hug, but seeing Palmer's condition, he slowed his pace, tucked away his excited grin, then obediently stood by the bed, lifting his hand to greet Bologue.

"Good morning," he said.

Bologue nodded to Hart and, as if compelled by some unseen force, greeted him back.

Hart glanced out the window; it was nearly afternoon, so where did the morning come from?

Church entered quietly and stood aside, nodding to Bologue. Just as Bologue was about to speak, another set of hurried footsteps rushed up.

The newcomer slowed upon approaching the room. Bologue could hear the screeching friction between shoe soles and the ground, followed by a slow and steady rhythm.

Aimou appeared at the door, struggling to control her expression, but the continuously shifting halos in her eyes betrayed her tumultuous emotions without a doubt.

She looked hesitant, wanting to greet Bologue warmly, but with so many people around, she felt a bit embarrassed. Fortunately, Aimou only dwelled on this briefly; she knew there was something else more important than these concerns.

"Congratulations! You successfully ascended to Prayer Believer," she announced.

"Ascension?"

Bologue's dull expression began to brighten. He had gone through so many deadly events that day; he had completely forgotten about the ascension ceremony.

Summoning the Ether, intricate patterns of light spread over Bologue's body. This time, the Alchemy Matrix not only covered his arms but extended, spreading over his chest and shoulders.

Power far surpassing before was now filling Bologue's body, and once again, he felt that he could influence the growth direction of the Alchemy Matrix.

It was time to decide on his inclination, to complete the ascension of the Summoning Hand, and to obtain more powerful Secret Energy.

With everyone waiting around him, Bologue sensed something was amiss. He asked, "Where's Belli?"

He was very annoyed with the crazy Sublimation Furnace Core Minister, but it must also be acknowledged that since becoming a Condenser, Belli had always provided him with complete support, her presence interwoven in his path to ascension.

Bologue was reluctant to admit it, but in some sense, Belli was also one of his few friends.

The power of Xilin Kagader continued in his hands. As a scholar, Belli would not miss the moment he decided his inclination, but now she wasn't here.

Faced with Bologue's inquiry, the expressions of several people were somewhat complicated, as was Aimou's. Her mood sank in an instant, and she looked at Bologue with some pity and concern.

She walked closer, reached out, and ruffled Bologue's hair, like she was petting a large dog.

"Bologue... It's okay, as long as you get treatment, everything will be alright."

When Aimou said this, she looked like she was about to cry.

"Huh?"

Bologue was dumbfounded.

"Yeah, yeah, Bologue, just listen more to the guidance of a psychologist and undergo medication treatment, and there's no obstacle that can't be overcome."

Palmer also got up at this time, looking at Bologue with a sad expression.

Aimou looking at Bologue like this was alright, but when Palmer's pitiful gaze fell on him, Bologue felt a nameless anger. When did he need this unlucky guy to feel sorry for him? This was undoubtedly a kind of humiliation.

"Wait a minute, what's going on with you guys?"

Bologue scooted back a bit and maintained a safe distance from the others.

This feeling was very weird, extremely weird, like waking up to a group of people surrounding your bed, watching you with tearful eyes as if you had some terminal illness and they were ready to help you enjoy the last of your joyful life.

It's really nice to have such a group of friends...

The problem is, Bologue is an Undead! Don't mention terminal illness, even if he shot himself in the head again now, it would only be a few minutes' affair.

"Bologue... Sorry, I went too far before."

A familiar voice sounded at the door; Belli had appeared, her eyes red as if she had just cried a lot.

Bologue was completely stunned, the way this plot was unfolding had surpassed his imagination. He rubbed his eyes, doubting whether he was seeing things wrong.

"What are you all doing?"

Bologue profoundly understood what was called "bizarre."

If he woke up surrounded by a group of demons, Bologue would find that normal, and he would remain calm, smashing their heads in one by one.

But now it's different, he clearly felt he was in great condition, yet from these people's eyes, it seemed he had encountered some tribulation.

If the meeting with the Astronaut counted as tribulation, Bologue thought that it made sense, but how did they know about the matters Between Nothingness?

"Bologue, it's alright, everyone knows you're under a lot of pressure, don't pretend to be strong anymore, and don't try to commit suicide again."

Aimou looked at Bologue with a face full of indignation, placing a hand on his shoulder.

"We found the best psychologist for you," Hart also nodded vigorously.

Most of us have been through numerous battles, seen big waves and storms, but really haven't seen someone commit suicide during a promotion ceremony, it scared everyone, even the white-robed master and apprentice behind the observation window were stunned.

In an emergency rescue, Bologue was sent to the Border Sanatorium; during the process, no one understood why Bologue did this. As a rational expert, he made the most insane move at the most crucial moment.

Hart slowly raised his hand and talked about the scene he saw of Bologue's suicide in the combat room, and then there's Palmer, who also spoke about Bologue's self-destructive tendencies.

After several exchanges, fueled by everyone's imagination, Bologue was clearly portrayed as someone who seemed strong on the outside but was internally on the verge of collapse, a poor soul.

"Oh, Bologue..."

Palmer actually wiped his eyes, but Bologue clearly saw that this guy wasn't crying, this bastard was faking it! He must have known the situation, misleading the others.

Bologue wanted to loudly denounce all of this, but still couldn't resist these people's self-touched sentiments.

Aimou was the first to hug him, offering Bologue care, then Hart, feeling the muscle motion, Bologue thought he was going to be squeezed to death, Church also leaned over, placing a hand on Bologue...

Soon, in the ward, everyone was in a group hug, Bologue in the center, amidst everyone's emotions, looking bewildered and dazed, as if he shouldn't have been here.

Chapter 517: Knight of Prayer

Amidst the crowd's blooming flowers and singing and dancing, Bologue deeply felt everyone's care for him. He exchanged glances with Palmer, forced a smile, and accepted everyone's goodwill.

This feeling was terrible. Bologue couldn't explain to everyone why he committed suicide. He certainly couldn't tell them that damned devil was hiding in the afterlife, between nothingness?

No, he couldn't.

No one said this to Bologue, but he vaguely felt he shouldn't disclose these secrets, as if speaking them would bring disaster.

Like... the gaze of a mysterious force.

From his conversations with the astronaut, Bologue perceived that even as the embodiment of rule power, the all-powerful devil that the astronaut represented was still deliberately avoiding something.

Some kind of "omniscient and omnipotent" existence?

If Bologue narrated secrets that should be kept, it would draw the attention of that existence, and for this reason, the astronaut dared not reveal his identity.

Who could he be?

Another stronger devil opposing the astronaut? Or... the master of the devils?

Bologue couldn't figure these things out. He knew very little about the astronaut and the grand scheme he was plotting. Bologue felt he needed to find someone to talk to.

Slowly closing his eyes, Bologue leaned against the headboard, expression solemn, as if deeply contemplating something.

The others remained crowded around the hospital bed, partly discussing Bologue's poor mental state, partly debating how to help alleviate his internal pressure.

In the midst of the noisy chatter, Aimou was the first to notice Bologue's abnormality. Green light tracks sparkled on his skin, the arcs fluctuating with his breathing.

"Bologue..."

Aimou softly called. She suddenly realized that everyone was bewildered by Bologue's mad suicide attempt, completely overlooking that he had just completed an ascension.

Deep within Bologue, above the empty soul, a seed had taken root and sprouted. It extended a trunk, and under the impetus of the ascension ceremony, branches sprouted, chaotically growing, supporting the grandeur of the soul.

At first, there were only slight ethereal fluctuations, then more ether gathered, weaving into streams, many streams converging into rivers, flowing straight into the ocean.

Ether surged like tides, condensing visibly around Bologue, and then light arcs danced.

Everyone's actions halted, collectively observing Bologue's transformation.

At this moment, Bologue was releasing a significant amount of ether, highly concentrated ether unfurled and rolled, forming tentative solid entities. The condensed radiance flickered continuously, like fireworks.

Bologue observed his hand, witnessing the burning of the flame. He gently waved, the green flame in his hand swiftly spread, and in the blink of an eye, enveloped the surrounding material, covering the entire ward.

Aimou turned to survey the ward, green flames flourished, the places where the flames scorched were filled with green light tracks, extending from Bologue's alchemy matrix.

Hart displayed some fear upon seeing the flames. His fur, susceptible to flames, quivered briefly. Yet, in his momentary panic, he realized these flames weren't hot; they lacked temperature and seemed like mere flames without the ability to burn material.

"Ether fire," Belli softly said, extending her hand to touch the flames, "This is an ether phenomenon. When the ether concentration reaches a certain threshold, the intangible ether becomes visible. Often it produces dazzling light, merging together to form effects similar to flames."

These weren't genuine flames but manifestations of ether, like the often-seen ether arcs, and the Origin School, employing ethereal blades to fight.

"Continue," Belli gestured.

Without Belli's prompting, Bologue was ready to proceed. He slowly clenched his fist, and in the next moment, the materials covered by flames began to undergo changes.

As if entering the cultivation room, the smooth walls started to shift rapidly. Neat cracks surfaced, transforming into countless cubes, interlocking, reassembling. Between the gaps, steel bars embedded in cement were visible, cross-sections neat, resembling a giant Rubik's cube.

Under Bologue, the hospital bed began to alter as flames enveloped it. All structures began to fracture and change. They gently lifted Bologue, stone steps appeared, softly supporting his feet.

Bologue strolled leisurely; more stones rose, forming disks beneath him. He needn't move himself; the disk turned him, facing a side wall.

A gentle wave, and the entire wall began to shatter, like retreating squares, interlocked openings led to the garden.

"No longer restricted by 'touch' anymore?"

Palmer's expression turned serious. As Bologue's partner, he was well aware of Bologue's secret energy nature. The Secret Energy-Summoning Hand was highly practical, but its biggest flaw was requiring material contact to be effective.

Now Bologue broke this limitation, employing the spreading ether to command distant materials.

Unfortunately, Palmer's seriousness didn't last long. He mused internally, Bologue dismantling the ward, would the people from the Border Sanatorium come soon?

Rubble flew and danced around Bologue's body, suddenly he turned, gaze fixed on Palmer, gently flicking his fingers, stones hurtled toward Palmer. Yet before they neared him, they were diverted by another force, crashing into the ground before Palmer.

The light in Palmer's eyes faded, simultaneously, the green light in Bologue's eyes vanished. The hovering rubble lost its supporting power, plummeting down.

Under the warm light, Bologue bowed his head and crossed his arms. As if deep in thought, his musings accompanied the branching tree upon his soul, envisioning the end of this road.

The image of Xilin Kagader.

In front of Bologue appeared the black soldier battling on the chessboard, passing through layers of lines, slaughter reaching the baseline.

If he ascended to higher tiers, breached the baseline, completed the "ascension"...

"Does the power I possess also come from your scheme?"

Bologue whispered, as his understanding of the world gradually deepened, the broken mysteries pieced together, revealing the truths beneath the sands of time.

Currently, the path of ascension was the ancient path of polarization, Bologue's secret energy nature was further amplified. Under more extreme "narrow and sharp" tendencies, Bologue could clearly perceive the ability for more precise, intricate manipulation.

The limitation of "hand touch" was broken. Now Bologue could release ether, high-concentration ether created effects similar to flames, and the material touched by the flame would fall under Bologue's command.

Bologue glanced at the distorted ward, now completely remodeled, dotted with protruding cubes like a piece of avant-garde design artwork.

Raising his arm, his palm slowly opened. Bologue again released his secret energy, ether spread from the alchemy matrix, like diffuse smoke, though expanding much faster than smoke.

Blue flames ignited on Bologue's arm, rapidly climbing onto the room, sweeping the twisted hospital bed; they began decomposing, reconstructing. Bologue extracted the metal, discarding impurities.

Within the burning flames, deformed metal slowly rose, breaking free from gravity's bonds, controlled entirely by ether.

Bologue gestured to it, swiftly beckoning it into his hand, clenching the metal tightly within the burning flames. In the flame, it seemed countless invisible heavy hammers fell, pounding the metal, shaping it into a slender, narrow sharp sword.

Amidst the blazing light, Bologue felt akin to a blacksmith, forging steel with ether.

"Flame of the Cauldron."

Bologue named this secret energy with transformed quality.

Chapter 518: Angry Wind Pardon

"Is this secret power the next stage of the Summoning Hand?"

Geoffrey read the report written by Bologue, which was an explanation of his own secret power. However, no matter how detailed Bologue's description was, it wasn't as intuitive as a demonstration in actual combat.

So Geoffrey raised his head to look at the two people below the platform. In the wide space of the combat room, Bologue looked expressionlessly ahead, while his opponent appeared excited, stretching his muscles and occasionally casting provocative glances.

"Flame of the Cauldron... why did he choose such a strange name?" Geoffrey asked the person beside him.

"He said that when using secret energy to forge steel, he felt like a war blacksmith, wielding a red-hot iron sword to kill enemies, hence the name."

Lebius had already seen the report. As an expert, Bologue had even included the profound meaning of the name with meticulous detail, making Lebius feel amused and helpless at such excessive rigor.

"Why are you here as well?"

Lebius looked to the other side, where Belli watched the two below eagerly preparing to fight, accompanied by her assistant Aimou, and the inseparable Balder.

"Of course, it's to record data. On one side there's the power of Overlord Xilin, and on the other, the perfect path of the Clarks family... You want to know how they measure up too, right?"

Belli spoke with excitement, like a spectator watching a duel, craving for blood and death to stimulate dull nerves.

Lebius was silent for a moment; hosting this combat, he just wanted to observe firsthand how Bologue's secret power performed in action, never having considered this aspect.

Belli's words piqued the interest of several people. On one side was the Undead who had usurped the absolute power of the Kagader Empire, and on the other was the heir of one of the founding families of the Order Bureau, the Clarks family.

This sort of duel was endlessly fascinating, only Aimou appeared somewhat flustered, not understanding why they were engaged in battles again after the promotion ceremony had barely concluded.

Geoffrey said, "Palmer has no chance of winning. In a one-on-one situation of the same tier, few can defeat the Undead."

"I'm not expecting Palmer to win; I just hope he doesn't lose too badly," Belli raised an eyebrow, "want to place a bet?"

Lebius had no interest in this, but Geoffrey's eyes wandered at the mention of betting, and Belli knew she succeeded, nudging Aimou beside her with her elbow, "Want to join?"

Aimou, innocent and sincere, found it challenging to fit into these old foxes' schemes, but she understood there would be a winner between Bologue and Palmer.

"I'm betting on Bologue."

Such matters weren't worth hesitating over.

Below the platform, Bologue's gaze shifted from the people above to focus on Palmer.

Bologue said, "I guess they're betting on who between us will win."

"I think so too," Palmer took a deep breath, feeling inevitable pressure facing Bologue, "this makes us feel like warriors in the arena."

Bologue nodded, "At least we don't have to fight to the death among us."

"Well... actually, not necessarily. After all, you're the Undead. If you die, and I live, that's still possible." Palmer maintained his humorous style even at times like this.

"Usually, I might agree with you, but not this time."

Bologue shook his head, warming up his hands.

Yesterday, he exerted great effort to escape from the Border Sanatorium. The situation was much as Bologue had imagined; these people thought he had mental illness, partly due to his suicide, and partly due to Palmer's instigation.

Thanks to that bastard's nonsense, Bologue completed several pages of psychological tests and was only released after confirming his temporary mental stability.

Bologue needed to vent his anger on Palmer, even though he's his partner and roommate.

"Why did you commit suicide? You don't seem like someone who would commit suicide on impulse just for fun."

Palmer knew Bologue too well, while others were unaware of this point, Bologue easily deceived them, only Palmer noticed and kept questioning him.

"If you win, I'll tell you."

Bologue didn't intend to tell Palmer about the astronaut or any related intelligence, nor did he plan to inform Lebius.

In Bologue's understanding, the only person he could discuss this intelligence with was Deputy Director of the Order Bureau, now the Minister of External Affairs, Nesanel.

As a Seeker of Glory, Nesanel possessed sufficient power to handle any unforeseen events.

"Speaking of which, since you got promoted to Prayer Believer, you haven't told me the nature of your secret energy after promotion, have you?"

Bologue probed Palmer, even during training, he was committed.

"Rather than explaining it, you can experience it yourself." Palmer slowly retreated, recalling his experience as a sparring partner for Bologue. After acquiring secret power, this guy pursued and tormented him, and now it was a chance for a counterattack.

Bologue flipped open his coat and took out a folding knife from the inner pocket. The metal extended bit by bit, the blade reflecting the distant image of Palmer.

Until now, Bologue still deeply misses his Deceitful Snake Scale Liquid. After losing this powerful alchemy armament, all he can use are the folding knife and the Shock Hammer.

Palmer also struck a pose, his hands reaching behind his back, gripping the cold metal like a taut arrow.

Almost at the same moment, a brilliant light burst forth from both of their eyes, and the Alchemy Matrix expanded, stirring up a turbulent ether.

Palmer swung his hands, releasing dozens of cold blade lights. Bologue barely caught sight of the flying knives thrown into the wind; they flashed and vanished, leaving Bologue unable to trace their path, only hearing the sharp whistling as they sliced through the gale.

Bologue's body arched, the Ethereal Amplification enhancing him, and he surged forward several meters in an instant, cyan flames entwining the folding knife. Under Bologue's reconstruction, the hollow gaps inside the folding knife were filled, making the blade a bit narrower.

The cyan flames journeyed with Bologue, like a shower of fire, leaving a trail of flames behind.

"Damn it!"

Palmer jumped back, already feeling intense pressure from Bologue. When Bologue brandished his knife and charged fiercely, it was like facing an enraged cyan tiger.

Even though he wasn't wearing the Face of Horror, the dread he invoked still relentlessly assaulted Palmer. Could it be said, losing oneself in blood for so long that one becomes stained with the same aura?

"Keep your distance! Bologue!"

Under pressure, Palmer revealed the same feverish smile. As Bologue charged forward rapidly, he was unaware, but the next second he felt as if he'd plunged into a mire.

An overwhelming pressure came from all directions, squeezing his body, restraining his movements. Bologue found his breathing was becoming difficult, his lungs pressed with great force, nearly choking.

Bologue held his breath stubbornly, raising his head. Palmer was above him; as a Condenser, Palmer possessed a brief levitation ability, which was further enhanced when he became a Prayer Believer.

"This is part of the wind too!"

Palmer cheered as an intense buzzing rapidly approached Bologue, the bright blade lights mingled like a school of fish swimming through the wind, their scales shimmering.

Bologue attempted to move, but the gradually increasing pressure made him feel trapped in a cage.

Pressure, isn't it?

Bologue faintly sensed the source of the pressure, having entered the range influenced by Palmer's secret energy and a dense air pressure.

Cyan flames expanded and released, scorching the ground beneath, which began to collapse. Countless stones rose, orbiting Bologue and blocking the route of the flying knives, followed by relentless metal clashing.

After Palmer's promotion, his secret energy was further intensified, allowing him not only to manipulate air currents but also to command air pressure, slowing his targets...

Not only slowing.

Palmer picked up a flying knife and hurled it at Bologue. Despite using Ethereal Amplification, the slender knife struggled to breach Bologue's layered defenses.

But under Bologue's gaze, the flying knife's outline blurred. The next second, as if materializing, it appeared before Bologue's eyes.

The sound of tearing slowly arrived as the stones shattered, countless fragments constructing a broken path, dust swirling.

This path was precisely the attack route of the flying knife.

A piercing screech of friction arose, Bologue raised his folding knife, clashing with the incoming blade, incessant sparks flying. Bologue felt he was wrestling with a brute beast, soon deflecting the knife, though the folding knife bore a deep scratch.

Palmer's face showed a confident smile. Previously, he was at an absolute disadvantage against Bologue; now, he finally felt more assertive.

"How does it feel? Bologue."

Palmer's arrogance was palpable.

Bologue nodded in acknowledgment, "A good application, but it doesn't feel like something you could conceive. It's a Clarks family technique, isn't it?"

Palmer's arrogance diminished partly; the advantage of coming from a prominent family was evident. The ancestors had already taken the trial-and-error, distilling numerous techniques.

Palmer didn't need to develop secret energy himself. Once he acquired it, the knowledge learned in childhood at the Clarks could be applied.

Bologue roughly guessed the power of Palmer's attack. Using the wind as a path, the air pressure propelled the flying knife, letting it release like a musket.

Now, this bastard was practically a human cannon.

While Bologue speculated, Palmer, like a conductor, elegantly waved his hand, sweeping before him, leaving behind flying knives upheld by the whirlwinds, cold metal reflecting the ether's glow.

Secret Energy·Furious Wind Pardon.

Palmer raised his fist, seemingly striking the bullet's primer, launching it with a yell in accompaniment.

"All guns blazing!"

The flying blade lights raced forward, nearly slicing through space like meteors. The time left for Bologue to react was brief, yet he faced the incoming rain of light with his usual composure.

Stepping forward, the intense cyan flames surged up, engulfing everything around.

Chapter 519: Flame of the Cauldron

Palmer felt as if he were facing an exploding sun; in the blink of an eye, a storm of flames erupted, and the surging fire enveloped the combat chamber.

After his promotion, Bologue's Secret Energy influence expanded significantly and freed itself from the constraint of requiring hand contact.

During his sparring with Palmer, Bologue gradually became familiar with his Secret Energy, discovering that although he broke away from the hand-touch limitation, he still needed to disperse his Ether, covering other substances with the form of this high-concentration Ether flame.

This indicated that Bologue's Secret Energy still had some imperfections. Just as he needed a moment to let his Alchemy Matrix cover himself during the Condensation stage, now, as a Prayer Believer, the

transition from release to Commanding Matter for Bologue also required a brief moment for the flames to burn.

But compared to his former self as a Condenser, Bologue's release speed was without a doubt much faster now, almost completing the coverage in an instant.

Fierce flames engulfed the surrounding substances, a bright Alchemy Matrix extending upon them, with Bologue standing amidst the inferno, while the rapidly approaching blade light also pierced into the sea of fire.

Bologue raised his hand to attempt to Command Palmer's Flying Knife, but it was wrapped in Palmer's Ether, making it difficult for Bologue to invade and Command under the Ether Mutual Exclusion.

If Palmer's Ether could be visualized, the clash between the two now would resemble two colliding ocean currents, repelling each other yet intertwining under high pressure.

Amid countless vanishing moments, Bologue detected a hint of anomaly. Under the interference of his Ether with the Secret Energy, the hurling Flying Knife began to wobble slightly, as if deviated by some force.

Bologue didn't have much time to think. It all happened quickly, almost simultaneously, with air pressure and violent winds pushing through, a sharp shriek tearing through the eardrums, followed by continuous stone walls rising from the ground.

In their previous exchanges, Bologue had already witnessed the intensity of Palmer's series of attacks. During the Condenser stage, Palmer always lacked effective offensive means; after advancing to a Prayer Believer, Palmer, through his application of air pressure and fierce winds, had perfectly compensated for this shortcoming.

The Perfect Path of the Clarks, Path of Wind Fury.

Bologue remained vigilant as the stone walls were repeatedly built, and then thunderous collisions continued, with the sturdy stone walls instantly pierced through with several large holes, like being hit by cannonballs.

Palmer cheered loudly, for in the Clarks' records, this Secret Energy application technique was referred to as the Wind Gun.

Bologue was not only combating Palmer but also confronting the Clarks' century-old accumulated knowledge and techniques.

The horror of the Perfect Path was gradually revealing itself. In the swirling dust, stone spears erupted from the ground, enormous and immediate, transforming the reachable ground into a dense forest of spears, stabbing towards Palmer in the sky.

Bologue took a deep breath, such large-scale terrain transformation was a significant drain on him, with Ether evaporating from his body, an intense withdrawal sensation lingering in his nerves.

These expenditures were necessary. Palmer could not remain airborne indefinitely; he would eventually descend, and these towering spears concealed Bologue's figure, causing him to vanish from Palmer's sight.

"Do you think you can escape?"

Palmer shouted, thinking Bologue underestimated him. Despite not seeing Bologue, from the disturbed air currents, Palmer could sense Bologue's route of action.

Touching the strap on his waist, Palmer counted his remaining Flying Knives. Palmer's Wind Gun required "ammunition," which was a flaw for him, but in battle, his ammunition supply was already sufficient.

Palmer was like the King of the Wind, with the winds heeding his commands to conquer or pardon.

Secret Energy·Furious Wind Pardon.

Palmer went all out. Bologue was an Undead, so there was no need to hold back. The Wind Gun roared, ready to launch the Flying Knife, but just before it was thrown, the airflow disturbance that Palmer had been monitoring suddenly split.

The orchestration of Secret Energy came to an abrupt halt. From Palmer's perception, Bologue split into two in a flash, and this division continued, with Bologue turning into a multitude in places Palmer couldn't see.

Palmer instantly realized that Bologue was misleading him. As partners, they both understood each other's Secret Energy and style too well.

Gazing over the spear-studded ground, Palmer was certain that Bologue was already on the attack. But where would he come from?

Palmer remained on high alert, striving to perceive the fluctuations of Ether, finally tracing some anomalies amid the noisy clamor.

Swiftly turning around, Palmer didn't hesitate at all, throwing a Flying Knife, and the Wind Gun burst forth, hammering a deep pit in the side wall.

On the path of the resounding advance, Palmer didn't see Bologue's shattered, scattered body, but rather another withering stone puppet, with crumbling suspended steps beneath its feet.

After advancing to a Prayer Believer, Bologue's Ether intensity and Ether capacity had both received further upgrades. Now, he could even spend a vast amount of Ether to have the Commanded matter float to a certain degree.

Another feint! Palmer understood Bologue well. When Palmer thought he had discovered Bologue and launched an attack, he was already at a loss.

Without the slightest hesitation, Palmer shouted.

"Hold on! I admit defeat!"

As soon as the words were spoken, Palmer belatedly felt the breeze brushing past, his gaze darting around as burning stone spears floated before him, nearly sealing off all possible escape routes, densely packed, like a fiery rain of arrows.

The Flame of the Cauldron burned wildly.

If this weren't combat training, but a real fight to kill, Palmer believed he'd already be smashed into a gory corpse.

Bologue has always been like this; even when delivering harsh words, he likes to beat the enemy half to death before arrogantly mocking him.

Palmer swallowed hard. The flames extinguished, and the stone spears fell, shattering upon the ground.

Bologue sauntered out, his leisurely demeanor carrying a hint of fatigue. Having grown accustomed to the limited Command of the Summoning Hand, suddenly acquiring such a wide range of Command made Bologue a bit uneasy.

He had just grasped this new Secret Energy and needed time to train and familiarize himself with this power. Thus, in several large-scale Commands, he made many unnecessary expenditures—a situation that required further practice for Bologue to manage the Flame of the Cauldron efficiently and swiftly.

Bologue envied Palmer once more; he had the experience of predecessors, needing only to diligently follow and learn, whereas Bologue had to explore everything himself, slowly.

The Flame of the Cauldron could easily alter large-scale terrain, move mountains, and fill seas, but corresponding costs would increase. Ideally, what suits Bologue best for Commanding Matter is Deceitful Snake Scale Liquid, that kind of Alchemy Armament.

It inherently possesses excellent Ether conductivity, making manipulation smooth and significantly reducing his own consumption.

Thinking of this, Bologue considered whether he should find Aimou to help him transmute another Deceitful Snake Scale Liquid—this strangely characterized Alchemy Armament is recorded within the Sublimation Furnace Core, so recreating one shouldn't be too difficult.

But he couldn't let Aimou work for free; Bologue pondered how he could commission her and offer related gratitude.

During Bologue's contemplation, the Cultivation Room stirred, and the expansive live combat room started to revert, the warped and reshaped earth returned to level, cleanly rectangular bricks were laid one by one, and shattered debris seamlessly fused back together.

This bizarre building was alive and possessed Life Force; its restoration returned everything to the beginning as if the battle between the two hadn't happened at all.

Looking at the two below with their arms around each other's shoulders, the light in Geoffrey's eyes faded. During their battle, Geoffrey had been watching the battlefield intently, ready to freeze them in case of unexpected incidents.

Geoffrey asked Lebius, "What do you think of it?"

"As the heir of the Clarks, with the Perfect Path: Wind Fury Way..." said Lebius, "I'm looking forward to Palmer's future growth."

"Wind Fury Way, huh? Truly fitting for an ancient Extraordinary Clan; this is indeed worthy of admiration."

Geoffrey nodded in agreement. As a Prayer Believer, Palmer's current power wasn't yet terrifying, but he had already preliminarily demonstrated his versatility. When he reaches a higher Tier, the accumulated strength will mold him into a formidable force.

Geoffrey asked again, "What about Bologue?"

Observing the effect of Bologue's Secret Energy: Flame of the Cauldron ultimately turned into praise for Palmer.

"Bologue? He's brilliant; I can't think of words to evaluate him," Lebius unexpectedly straightforward.

"Did you notice anything unusual during his battle? Particularly his actions against the Wind Gun assault."

Lebius continued, "The Clarks' power isn't much of a secret within the Order Bureau, so many can recognize the tactics of the Wind Gun."

Geoffrey recalled but shook his head, "I didn't pay much attention; I was more concerned about ensuring neither of them ended up dead or injured."

Mainly Palmer, that guy is downright unlucky, and his opponent, the violent Bologue—if Bologue accidentally kills Palmer, the Clarks will undoubtedly come knocking.

Thinking of that peculiar family located on the Wind Source Highlands gives Geoffrey a headache. They maintain a laissez-faire attitude toward Palmer, but if someone really kills him, these folks definitely won't let it go easily, and Geoffrey couldn't hold Bologue accountable either.

Having an Undead pay a life feels like a provocation to the other party.

"Alright, I just think the Flame of the Cauldron isn't that simple; after all, it's Xilin's power. As Bologue advances, the mysterious veil of this power will gradually be unveiled..."

Lebius's voice gradually lowered. His proficiency in Ethereal Skill far exceeded others, allowing him to sense that, in the moment their offensives clashed, the Flame of the Cauldron broke through Palmer's Ethereum Mutual Exclusion, mildly interfering with the trajectory of the Flying Knife.

If Bologue were given the necessary time and adequate Ether support...could he break through the constraints of Ethereum Mutual Exclusion and directly Command the opponent's commanded matter?

Lebius didn't continue pondering this; Belli excitedly slapped a few of them, signaling the spoils distribution after the bet.

Chapter 520: Board Games

The sunset dyed the clouds a crimson red, the entire sky seemed ablaze, the scorching sun hung at the horizon's edge, making it hard to look directly at. In the parking lot outside the Order Bureau, Palmer sat in the driver's seat, while Bologue took the passenger seat.

"That's pretty much it, next there's a small gathering to celebrate our successful promotion, and also to help you vent some inner gloom, make you a bit more optimistic..."

"Alright, alright, just drive already."

Bologue waved dismissively, looking indifferent. He could only bear half of Palmer's nonsense; without Palmer's ramblings, he wouldn't be considered someone with psychological problems.

"Haha!"

Palmer laughed non-stop, this guy always found amusement in odd places, no wonder he got along so well with Serey.

Palmer said, "Speaking of which, we also invited Aimou, but she refused."

Bologue shifted his gaze from the scene outside to Palmer's face, "What happened?"

"She said she's busy, nobody knows what she's busy with, so she declined."

Palmer scrutinized Bologue curiously, "You two don't have any conflicts..."

Before he could finish his sentence, Bologue shot him a signature stern look, and Palmer's rambling got stuck in his throat.

Awkwardly coughing a few times, Palmer started the car.

Feeling the vibration of the engine, Bologue reached out and buckled his seatbelt.

"Are you serious?"

Palmer shouted loudly, Bologue's act of buckling his seatbelt made him feel insulted.

Bologue remained unmoved and said, "Traffic regulations. Didn't your instructor mention these when you took driving lessons?"

"You..."

Palmer halted his words, almost unable to criticize anything. He couldn't just say, "You fear getting unlucky with me," as that would admit he's the jinx.

Regarding the self-awareness of being a jinx, Palmer was always flexible. When convenient, he called himself a jinx to dodge responsibility; when not, he resisted the label, saying others misjudged him.

Bologue couldn't care less about this, turned on the radio, listening to the noise, and looked at the scenery outside.

Bologue indeed felt some oppression; even though he was promoted to a Prayer Believer, the cheerful sentiments hardly diluted this oppression.

His mind continually replayed the image of the astronaut and various aspects of his "past life." Those memories for Bologue seemed too distant. Reflecting on them now carried an unreal sensation.

Was that real, or some fabrication?

His life was the same.

Does Bologue Lazarus truly possess free will or is he merely a character penned by someone?

He couldn't comprehend, Bologue wanted to chat with Nesanel but realized he lacked the capability to contact this Minister of External Affairs. Asking Lebius, Lebius indicated Nesanel often goes missing, and he frequently couldn't contact him either.

No one provided answers for Bologue, nor could Bologue uncover them himself, so he could only strive to forget these chaotic matters, to make his current life more comfortable.

"I'm the Undead..." Bologue muttered to himself, "I have endless time to seek the truth."

"What did you say?"

Palmer turned and asked, Bologue ignored him, pretending not to hear.

Bologue didn't know the exact location of the gathering; anyway, he left it to Palmer. If Palmer wasn't unlucky, he was actually quite reliable.

Watching the bustling traffic, stopping and going at intersections, Oubos in Oath City was vast, so large that it branched into various districts, many people spent a significant amount of time on commutes.

Palmer disliked silence, so he started a conversation topic with Bologue, "Bologue, what's up with your Secret Energy?"

"You mean Flame of the Cauldron?"

Bologue perked up a bit. Unlike Palmer, who inherited a perfect path, Bologue's path to promotion was completely unknown, including naming, information recording, and so on. All were entirely led by Bologue himself.

"Mm-hmm, during the bout, I felt my Flying Knife was disrupted by you... Given the nature of your Secret Energy, it shouldn't be, but that's what happened."

The car halted at a red light. Palmer carefully pondered, "It's as if you broke through the limitations of Ethereum Mutual Exclusion, thus affecting me."

"Breaking Ethereum Mutual Exclusion? That sounds a bit incredible."

Bologue hadn't noticed these things, during the bout he constantly thought about how to bypass Palmer's observation to deliver a fatal blow.

"You and I are of the same Tier, wanting to break through the nature of Ethereum Mutual Exclusion is somewhat too presumptuous."

Bologue provided the denial.

In the disputes among Condensers, Ether from different Condensers interferes and repels each other, which is Ethereum Mutual Exclusion. Among them, Ethereum Mutual Exclusion manifests most obviously, protecting the Condenser's own shield, which is the Rectangular Soul Critical.

Under the protection of Rectangular Soul Critical, Condensers themselves won't be disturbed by external forces, but when the Tier difference is too great, or the injury too severe, the self-protective Rectangular Soul Critical will gradually collapse, and then be influenced by the opponent.

Palmer didn't continue talking and stepped on the brakes; they arrived at the destination.

"Oh? It's here, you really know how to pick."

Bologue glanced at the surrounding environment, immediately recalling his experiences here.

Here, in Landling District, is not far from the dock. Initially, he and Palmer's first operation was around here, he remembers it was a raid on a Man-eater's warehouse.

Bologue also remembers, around this bar, he encountered Afeiya from the flower shop and even helped her solve some troubles.

Palmer patted Bologue's shoulder, signaling him to follow. Familiar feelings from memory kept surfacing as Palmer led Bologue to the bar where he met Afeiya back then; Bologue didn't expect it would actually be here.

When the two arrived, the sky had already turned dark. Lingna District was quite far from here, and they spent considerable time on the way.

Nightfall had just descended, and there weren't many people inside the bar. A person was already seated at a table near the bar, waiting for the two.

"Yo! Church!"

Palmer waved at the figure; Church turned his head and nodded at them.

After sitting down, their gazes intertwined briefly.

"Is it just us?"

Bologue felt deceived by Palmer again; instead of a promotion ceremony celebration, this felt more like a few of them grabbing a drink after work. If so, they didn't need to come all this way. They could have had a good drink at the Undying Club.

"Temporarily, it's like this."

Church checked the time. This time his appearance was still as Bologue remembered, unremarkable, hard to notice in a crowd.

With several encounters, through chatting with Church, Bologue also roughly understood Church's Secret Energy.

Secret Energy-Faceless Man belongs to the Body Ascension school of Secret Energy; it doesn't have offensive abilities, just modifies the Condenser's appearance and physique.

Since joining the Order Bureau, Church has been working at Crow's Nest, hence when choosing Secret Energy as a Condenser, he opted for this perfectly fitting intelligence personnel Secret Energy.

"What do you mean temporarily?"

Bologue felt something was amiss, then immediately understood why.

When night falls, those who can only live in shadows emerge. The bar's door was forcefully pushed open, a mysterious stranger appeared at the entrance, dressed in a pitch-black long coat, completely concealing his physical characteristics.

Bologue was just getting a bit wary, then the stranger took off his hat, revealing ruby-like eyes.

"What a coincidence! Everyone!"

Serey casually seated, animated in front of everyone.

"Is this all?"

Bologue looked at Palmer coldly; he already wanted to go home.

"Don't rush, mainly here for some special activities."

Palmer spoke mysteriously, his eyes signaling Serey; Serey seemed to understand, lifting a pitch-black box onto the table.

Under Bologue's curious gaze, Serey opened the box in one swift motion.

No surprising events occurred; inside the box was just a pile of dices, cards, chess pieces, and a large map.

Serey efficiently spread the map, occupying more than half the table, and selected several chess pieces from it, asking everyone to pick.

Bologue was a bit puzzled, "What are you up to?"

Serey enthusiastically said, "Bologue, you're a bit ignorant here!"

After the preliminary setup, a complex and grand chess board structure appeared before Bologue, resembling a war game board.

Serey picked up a twelve-sided dice, speaking mysteriously.

"You've never played tabletop games?"