

Endless 74

Chapter 74: Flexible Loyalty Boundaries

"Palmer Clarks."

Lebius picked up the Crow's Nest's file, which bore the name of the new team member.

"Born into the illustrious Clarks family of Condensers.

As the family's eldest son, he received comprehensive elite education from an early age and attended the Rhine Alliance Military Academy during university.

During Palmer's university years, his performance was astonishing; whether in theoretical classes, practical combat, or physical training, he maintained extremely excellent grades and graduated top of his class."

Seeing this, the resume seemed almost "perfect," but Lebius knew well that this "perfection" was just an illusion. If Palmer were truly this outstanding, the Crow's Nest wouldn't have let him go so easily, and Ivan wouldn't have had such an attitude toward his nephew, the future heir of the family.

"Due to the Clarks family's long-term cooperation with the Order Bureau, he joined the Order Bureau after graduating from university. He passed all assessments with full marks, and in his first year of work, he even won the Best New Employee of the Year award."

Lebius's voice paused.

"But in subsequent work, Palmer's unfavorable traits gradually emerged. Through multiple missions, it was discovered that Palmer had an extremely 'flexible' bottom line of loyalty. When necessary, he would choose to betray the organization, yet, equally, after ensuring his own safety, he would continue to carry out missions and serve the organization."

As Lebius recited this, his gaze swept over to Ivan. For the first time, the stern Ivan appeared somewhat ashamed, avoiding Lebius's gaze.

Given that the Intelligence Department relies most on loyalty, recruiting someone like this was a disgrace to the entire department. The Crow's Nest's willingness to release him so straightforwardly was probably because of this.

"Afterward, Palmer underwent several loyalty tests, all of which he passed satisfactorily. During the subsequent observation period and multiple mission executions, Palmer displayed his outstanding talents, yet there were still several instances of defecting to the enemy, which he argued were 'expedient measures.'"

"Enough, he's simply a disgrace to the Clarks family. I can't understand why you chose him, is it just because he's a Debtor?"

Ivan couldn't help but speak, his cold words tinged with anger.

Palmer Clarks, once the shining star of the Clarks family and the future heir, was so perfect, but everything changed once he started working.

He finally shed the guise of a good student, becoming a disgraceful figure like this.

"No, he's actually very talented. Haven't you noticed? In so many critical missions, he successfully completed tasks and kept himself safe. Although there were instances of defecting to the enemy, he ultimately handled those people with his own hands.

Palmer's loyalty isn't the issue; otherwise, the Order Bureau wouldn't have chosen him. It's just that this guy seems to enjoy using defection as a means to cope, right?"

Lebius said, looking at Ivan, pausing for a few seconds before Ivan, resigned, spoke.

"Later, we conducted an extreme test on him that nearly cost his life, but it did affirm his loyalty.

As you mentioned, he just prefers using defection as a tactic. In his words, why endure torture when you can avoid it by revealing some non-essential information."

Upon hearing about the extreme test, Geoffrey and Yas's expressions bore slight horror; they knew very well what it was. In fact, Bologue had also undergone an extreme test, albeit in a different direction. Yet, after hearing Ivan's latter words, they all almost wanted to laugh.

"But extreme tests aren't publicly disclosed. Palmer's antics are well-known, and since then, everyone knows the Clarks family produced such a clown."

This time even someone as cold as Ivan had a complaint written all over his face.

Fingertips brushing lightly over the paper, feeling its rough texture, Lebius said.

"This is his façade, disguising himself as such a person... I can sense it."

Looking at the photo, at that unlucky face, Lebius showed high admiration for Palmer.

"What we need is not the strongest, but the fittest."

"Only the fittest can survive, only the fittest can win in the end, just like this."

Lebius glanced at the final paragraph of the document and read aloud.

"A misjudgment by the Crow's Nest led to Palmer's Iron Whistle squad mistakenly entering the site of an evil ritual, surrounded by enemies. They were surely doomed, but Palmer saved everyone in the squad and also managed to deal with the enemy.

First, he used defection, engaging in endless chatter and delay with the enemy. Realizing that even defecting would render him a sacrificial offering, he straightforwardly facilitated the progress of the ritual and usurped its power."

This line was marked with three red lines, visible only to those with third-tier clearance; anyone with less than this clearance would see only blurred words.

Lebius read.

"It was a Devil-summoning ritual; Palmer facilitated its completion, called forth the Devil, and struck a bargain with it."

Seeing the following words, even Lebius couldn't help but reveal a smile.

"Palmer attempted to trick the Devil. He made a wish but signed someone else's name—his superior's name."

Ivan's face darkened, and without needing Lebius to say it, everyone else knew exactly whose name Palmer had signed.

"This trick was too simple, practically insulting the Devil's intelligence. The Devil saw through it at once but was not enraged. Instead, it found Palmer very amusing and bestowed upon him a 'Blessing,' making him a Debtor. Relying on that 'Blessing,' he led the team to successfully break out."

Reading the description of Palmer's 'Blessing,' Lebius looked up at Ivan.

"Is that why your Crow's Nest wanted to drive him out, not because of loyalty tests or his carefree attitude, but because of this deadly 'Blessing'?"

Ivan fell silent, ultimately sighing in resignation.

"Yes, as you said, Palmer is brilliant. He's naturally gifted in intelligence work, able to find hope in any complex scenario... although most of the time, he opts for defection, a simple and efficient tactic.

Yet intelligence work requires 'stability,' absolute 'stability.' We could tolerate all of Palmer's previous antics, but his 'Blessing' is simply too dangerous; a chance collision could trigger a disaster."

As the conversation progressed, Ivan's whole demeanor became increasingly despondent, a clear testament to the profound impact Palmer had brought to the "Crow's Nest".

"However... since you want it so much, we can only reluctantly let it go."

Finally, Ivan gave Lebius a wretched smile.

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"What intelligence do you want to know?"

"The location of the Order Bureau," Eugene asked.

For a Condenser like Eugene, who existed outside the major forces, the Order Bureau was like a mysterious legend. They were well aware that this colossal entity was stationed within Opus, yet no one knew its exact location, as if it existed in another dimension.

"Well..."

Palmer glanced aside, the walls of this building were not yet sealed, making it easy to view the scenery outside, and thus, Palmer saw it at once.

The towering black-gray monolith among the steel buildings, almost supporting heaven and earth.

This is a sight only visible to those recognized by the "Cultivation Room", otherwise the strong cognitive distortion would affect anyone who dared to peer into the "Cultivation Room".

"Spirit District 77!"

Palmer declared without hesitation.

"Really?"

Eugene was stunned, never expecting to obtain the Order Bureau's address so effortlessly.

"Really, I wasn't lying."

Palmer thought to himself, "Only a partial lie."

Silence.

Eugene and his henchmen were all silent, exchanging glances and answering without words. Then Eugene gripped Palmer's head with both hands, squeezing forcefully.

"Ouch ouch ouch! My head! My head!"

Palmer screamed, feeling as though his head was caught in a hydraulic press, ready to explode.

"Are you really with the Order Bureau?"

Palmer was indeed with the Order Bureau, Eugene knew this well. In the current situation, only the Order Bureau would trouble them, yet Palmer's straightforward words made Eugene doubt.

Eugene had dealt with the Order Bureau many times, having narrowly escaped death, so he knew what kind of people they were.

But now Palmer crushed his nightmare completely, turning it into a farcical performance.

What did the Order Bureau recruit here, a guy like Palmer? Even if Eugene were recruiting his own henchmen, he wouldn't want such a person. Was this guy here through connections, entering the Order Bureau through the back door?

Reflecting on his experience of capturing Palmer, Eugene even began to suspect whether this was all a plot against him.

"Really! Really! I have a 'Pass' in my pocket!"

Palmer screamed.

Eugene slowly released Palmer's head and gestured to the henchman nearby. He put down the long knife, walked over, and rummaged through Palmer's pocket, finding an emblem.

An emblem of chains and a sword.

"See, the emblem of the Order Bureau, you'd recognize it, right?" Palmer said.

Silence again.

Eugene had seen this emblem before, recalling that when he first entered the Extraordinary World, the person who guided him said that if he saw such an emblem, he'd be best to keep his distance.

"Looks like the Order Bureau really recruited a lousy guy."

Eugene probably believed Palmer, consoling himself inwardly—even if there were a few traitors within the Order Bureau, it seemed quite plausible.

Palmer continued to show a pleasing smile, a look of eagerness to answer anything.

"So... who are you? So easily betraying the Order Bureau, I'm curious about your name."

Eugene toyed with the spring knife in his hand, looking coldly at Palmer.

Palmer did not hesitate, responding almost instantly as Eugene asked.

"Ivan."

Palmer said unflinchingly.

"My name is Ivan Clarks."