

# SORCERER'S HANDBOOK

## Chapter 571: Neither Are You

Some might believe that once Truth mages and other academic sorcerers are unable to harness spirit and spellforce, their combat prowess would be far inferior to that of martial sorcerers who hone their skills and strengthen their bodies through rigorous training.

This belief holds true in other Kingdoms, and even in the former Senlo Kingdom. However, it no longer applies in the Senlo wasteland of the past two hundred years-where even the Physical cult has gained popularity, a testament to the immense survival pressure in the Senlo wasteland.

Ashe and his companions did not have a smooth journey during the day either. The roads between towns were infested with Choking Green creatures. These creatures took on various forms depending on the race they had transformed from. Humans often became beastly and grotesque, growing rotting wings. Orcs decayed into mud-like masses. Goblins, on the other hand, grew tall and alluring, sprouting multiple arms and heads. Murlocs developed numerous mouth-like appendages capable of long-range attacks through sound... If a sorcerer were to be transformed, the mutations would be even more unpredictable and bizarre.

The most terrifying aspect was that the Choking Green creatures did not attack Ashe and his group.

Even though Ashe and his companions displayed no sorcerer abilities, the Choking Green creatures only dared to observe them from a distance. Even when they stopped to rest, no monsters dared to approach them. However, when they encountered a group of short-distance Travelers who were ambushed by the Choking Green creatures, the creatures immediately scattered upon seeing Ashe and his group, leaving no chance for them to engage in combat.

The Choking Green creatures not only possessed intelligence but also had a heightened sense of detection, allowing them to swiftly identify powerful sorcerers. While this made them wary of attacking major cults, it did not mean they were unwilling to ambush isolated individuals.

Every town Ashe and his group passed through organized daytime patrols around its perimeter. Yet, even with such measures in place, Choking Green creatures still managed to exploit gaps in the patrols to infiltrate the towns and hunt for prey. It was only because Ashe and his three companions had risen to the ranks of upper-tier powerhouses in Senlo that they could even consider pursuing Silver Lantern. For weaker individuals, simply traveling through this land would be an immense challenge.

For the weak, the Choking Green creatures were undoubtedly the ‘Green Calamity.’

In such an environment, those born on the surface had to master combat skills to fight against the Choking Green creatures. This was especially true for the strict and hardship-revering Tribulation Fire cult. Vesser, whose soul had been weakened by the Mirror Dragon Secret Toxin, which in turn affected her physical condition-since the soul and body are interdependent, any weakness in one would impact the other-had to rely even more on her combat techniques to protect herself.

Coupled with an intense sense of unease, Vesser had never let up on her combat training, even after ascending to the Sanctuary. After the Four Pillars Cult had wiped out multiple sects, she managed to obtain their ancient texts. Against all odds, in a land where Senlo’s knowledge had been severed, she mastered over twenty Spellcasting Sects.

Her greatest weakness had always been her frail physique, but after replacing her blood with silver dragon blood, that weakness was no more.

Clang!

The Chain Glove struck Ashe's sword blade from the side, deflecting it. Vesser's palm shot toward Ashe's chin—a hit that could shatter his jaw and tear through his neck!

Ashe dodged and retreated to create distance, but Vesser pressed forward instead of backing off. Realizing the situation, Ashe immediately discarded the Honey Sword and engaged Vesser in close-quarters combat!

He, too, had the Golden-level Fist-Claw Sect shared by the Witch. Who was afraid of whom?

However, after several rounds of intense exchanges, Ashe began to regret discarding his weapon—he was starting to lose.

The 'Raven Dance' of the Raven Annihilation Cult, the 'Killing Tribulation' of the Tribulation Fire Temple, the 'Spin Strike' of the Spin Light Sect, the 'Fog Erosion' of the Fog Extinction Cult... Vesser had blended the combat techniques of various sects into her own fighting style. Every counter Ashe attempted was anticipated, and her relentless attacks pressed him to the brink, leaving him gasping for air.

He felt like a Blade Fish Dragon whose every move had been figured out, as if he were merely playing a part in Silver Lantern's masterful performance. If it weren't for his Golden-level spellcasting instincts allowing him to barely block critical strikes, he would have been knocked down by Silver Lantern long ago.

Ashe stole a glance to the side and saw the Observer engaged in a fierce back-and-forth with another Silver Lantern. Their swords danced like a tightly woven net, with the Observer even holding a slight advantage, though it was clear the fight wouldn't end anytime soon.

He couldn't use spellforce now, Igor and the others weren't here, the hall was sealed, and the ambush they'd prepared hadn't worked...

If I lose...

Vesser keenly noticed the shift in Ashe's rhythm, but it didn't matter. Her silver dragon blood physique far surpassed Ashe's, and her combat skills were-

Slash!

Her hand blade pierced through Ashe's shoulder, but Ashe didn't retreat. Instead, he surged forward, his arms locking around Vesser like a vice. He pulled off his Mask, revealing a calm face and a set of white teeth-

“Mmh!”

Vesser grunted, realizing she couldn't break free from Ashe's grip. Her right foot snapped upward in a short, brutal strike to his shin, delivering unbearable pain even without much force. Though Ashe fell, he didn't let go. Instead, his teeth clamped down harder, sinking into Vesser's neck with ferocity!

The searing pain spread through her body like poison, yet Vesser's eyes only grew brighter. She used her tongue to push up her fox Mask and then sank her teeth into Ashe's throat!

The two of them rolled on the ground, locked in an embrace as intimate as lovers, yet their teeth were desperate to tear through each other's throats! Just as this brutal contest of fangs was about to reach its conclusion, a sudden force pulled them apart.

The Observer had grabbed Ashe, while Yolan held Vesser. It was unclear when they had silently agreed to rescue their respective Fate Twins first.

Ashe wiped the blood from his mouth and stood up, declaring, “I almost had her.”

Vesser adjusted her Mask, her voice dripping with mockery. “Were you licking my neck, Ashe Heath?”

The four of them stood facing each other, and then the battle erupted once more! This time, Ashe charged at Yolan, while Vesser went after the Observer!

The injury to his throat would undoubtedly affect his combat ability, so Ashe naturally intended to let the stronger Observer deal with Silver Lantern as quickly as possible, while he would intercept the other Silver Lantern. Vesser, on the other hand, wanted to see who Ashe's Fate Twin was.

However, as soon as they clashed, Ashe noticed the differences between the two Silver Lanterns. Compared to Vesser's ruthless lethality, Yolan's fighting style was more fluid and adept at using her opponent's strength against them. Her movements weren't fast, but she always managed to throw Ashe off balance and land hits.

Though not fatal, within seconds Ashe's back of the head, back, waist, buttocks, and even his face had been struck. If fighting the real Silver Lantern was like battling a wild beast, then fighting the phantom Silver Lantern felt like a child being toyed with by an adult!

After taking a kick to the backside, Ashe managed to adjust his stance, but his frustration was mounting. He had hoped that someone like Silver Lantern would have an opposite Fate Twin here, but it seemed this twin, though slightly different, was just as malicious- truly birds of a feather!

Meanwhile, Vesser wasn't faring much better. Though skilled in close-quarters combat, the Observer's twin swords kept her at bay, never allowing her to get close. The Truth sorcerer was seething with annoyance. Why was Ashe's twin stronger than the original, while her own twin had become weaker due to her playful nature?

But a stronger, calmer, and more flawless Ashe... Vesser suddenly spoke up, "Do you have a name?"

The Observer ignored her, his swords weaving a relentless melody of attacks, leaving Vesser little room to breathe. Yet, she still found a moment to negotiate through the storm of blades: "If Ashe dies, you'll be the only Ashe Heath. You'll inherit everything he has. You'll no longer be his twin or his half-you'll be the real him."

"You are free to chase your dreams and weave your own fate, rather than existing as 'the false Ashe' or becoming 'another Ashe.' You can be yourself."

"How about this proposal?" Vesser sidestepped the blade, avoiding the sword's edge. "Of course, you might be worried about it turning into two against one... In that case, when we gang up on Ashe, you can freely choose which one of us to betray. No matter what, only two people will walk out of this hall."

"You don't have to answer," Vesser quickly retreated, moving out of the Observer's sword range. "I'll go kill Ashe now. All you need to do is decide with your actions who gets to live."

Vesser didn't lower her voice, so Ashe naturally heard her proposal.

But he didn't look in her direction. Instead, his gaze remained fixed on Yolan.

As if in response to Vesser's proposal, Yolan's attacks suddenly intensified. Ashe's left hand, already injured by Vesser, was in poor condition, and now it became even worse. He could barely resist, so he resorted to desperate measures, trying to grab hold of Yolan.

Yolan seemed to have anticipated his reaction, but she didn't try to escape his grasp. Instead, her hands coiled around Ashe's wrists like water snakes, and with a swift hook of her left foot, she tripped him, pinning him down with force!

She leaned in close, her fox mask nearly pressing against Ashe's face. He stared into the cold, indifferent eyes behind the mask and heard the soft, cruel whisper that emerged from it: "Look at me. Don't be afraid. It'll be over soon."

Thud! Thud! Thud!

Ashe heard Vesser's footsteps approaching from the side. His body tensed, his heart pounding, but surprisingly, he felt no anger or fear-only a chilling coldness that began to seep into his eyes-

Clang!

In a dizzying whirl, Ashe found himself once again in the Observer's grip. Vesser stood with her arms raised, shielding Yolan. A clear Sword Mark had appeared on her arm, blood soaking through her clothes.



“What a pity,” Vesser said coolly, speaking words Ashe couldn’t understand. “Neither are you.”

## Chapter 572: Can I Trust You?

Click, click, click...

At that moment, the sound of mechanisms turning echoed through the Underground Hall.

They turned their heads and saw that eight new passages had suddenly appeared in the sealed hall.

Without any prompt, Ashe and Vesser both knew that once they stepped into one of these passages, it would seal behind them, becoming their exclusive trial path.

In truth, Ashe and the bystander hadn’t intentionally planned to ambush the Silver Lantern Twin here-they simply couldn’t leave either.

Because after they arrived in this hall, their wristbands had displayed a message: “The passage to Cicada Hall will only open once all Trial Takers have reached Cicada Lurk Hall.”

Clearly, even if Vesser and her group had arrived at the hall first, they still had to wait for Ashe and his team to arrive before they could proceed. Ashe had initially wondered why such a setting existed, but upon seeing these eight passages, he understood.

Originally, there had been sixteen passages in the hall, meaning this trial was supposed to be conducted simultaneously by sixteen groups.

Eight passages meant only half of them could advance to the next trial. Unlike using speed to distinguish the Trial Takers' strengths, the organizers of this trial seemed to prefer assessing overall competence-waiting for everyone to arrive in the hall, then letting half perish so the others could move on to the next stage.

Ashe could almost imagine how intense the trials of the past must have been: sixteen groups of Twins gathered in the hall, with the strong scheming and intimidating others, the weak forming alliances and feigning cooperation, until only eight groups survived to step into the next hell.

Wasn't the Gray Fox Divine Era supposed to be a splendid and magnificent time? How could there be such a bloody ritual? Or was Ashe mistaken, and the Trial Takers would decide the outcome with a game of rock-paper-scissors?

But regardless, their fight could no longer continue.

"Silver Lantern, you're lucky," Ashe couldn't help but taunt.

"Well then, see you in the next hall," Vesser said, stepping backward into a passage.

“Wait!”

“If you’re going to ask what the trial is about, don’t bother,” Vesser said in a low voice. “You and I aren’t close enough to share intelligence.”

“He’s called the bystander.”

Ashe placed a hand on the bystander’s shoulder as he introduced him, then turned to Yolan. “And what’s your name?”

“I’m also Silver Lantern,” Yolan replied with a smile.

“Silver Lantern is her codename. You must have a name of your own.”

“Since he’s called the bystander,” Yolan said, pointing at the bystander, “then I’ll be called the Mirror Master.”

Ashe looked slightly confused. “What’s the connection?”

“You’re the bystander,” Yolan said, retreating into the passage alongside Vesser.

“And I’m the one in the mirror.”

Watching the Silver Lantern Twin disappear into the passage, Ashe heard footsteps behind him. He turned to find the Observer silently walking into another corridor. Hurrying to catch up, Ashe called out, “Wait for me! What if I get left behind in the hall?”

The Silver Lantern Twin moved through the brightly lit passage. Vesser glanced at her wristwatch and noticed the countdown remained frozen, unmoving.

She suddenly spoke up, “That codename...”

“Well, you’re not interested in taking that path anyway,” Yolan said casually. “Why not let me use it?”

“You even have that memory?”

“Of course. You’ve been hallucinating that name lately, haven’t you? Silver Lantern Master... That’s what the Four Pillars expect of you,” Yolan explained. “If you were to fully awaken your tactile ability, that’s what it would be called. Since you’ve already taken ‘Silver Lantern,’ I’ll just have to use ‘Master’ as my codename.”

“I didn’t think this trial was advanced enough to monitor the traces of the Four Pillars.”

“Or maybe the Four Pillars simply don’t care if others notice their presence,” Yolan said with a laugh. “They’re like a bunch of advertisers blasting spam messages through megaphones, desperate for everyone to hear their call.”

Soon, they spotted a door in the corridor. As they approached, it automatically opened, revealing a dining table, chairs, food, and two soft beds inside.

“Welcome, Trial Taker 1 Twin. You may remain in the rest area for 360 minutes. Once the time expires, the trial will resume. Leaving the rest area will be considered an early end to your rest period, and the trial will continue immediately.”

Even though defeating trial Copies could restore physical stamina and heal injuries, the high-frequency battles were mentally exhausting. While they could choose to continue the trial and race to the next hall, they would still have to wait for Ashe and his group to arrive before the third trial’s passage could open.

No matter how you looked at it, resting here was the best option. Moreover, if Ashe chose to rest, Vesser had no choice but to do the same.

Once the door closed, Yolan didn’t even bother heading to the restroom. She stripped off all her clothes as she walked and immediately threw herself onto the bed, rolling around gleefully.

Vesser felt deeply uncomfortable watching this scene-seeing someone who looked exactly like her act so wild and unrestrained made her feel a little embarrassed.

Even if she pretended to embody that persona on the outside, it didn't mean that's who she truly was inside.

Still, she didn't say anything. She removed her mask and coat, pulled out some hemostatic bandages from a drawer, and began wrapping the wound on her neck in front of the mirror-the bite mark Ashe had left was clearly visible, just a hair's breadth away from her windpipe.

"Do you need help?" Yolan asked, reclining lazily on the bed with a teasing smile.

"No."

"Ashe's Twin doesn't seem to be the truth you were hoping for. What's your next move?"

"His Twin is precisely the truth he's been hiding... I never expected things to be that straightforward," Vesser replied calmly. "In the end, my plan never accounted for him following me in. The Divine Fire Trial was supposed to be mine alone. His presence only complicates things. I didn't expect the Transcendent Cult to give him an atonement voucher for remote divine hosting..."

“But it doesn’t matter,” she continued. “Piling all the troublesome things together makes it easier to handle. In fact, the current situation has become even more intriguing.”

“Oh?”

“Compared to stumbling upon a ready-made ally, I prefer slowly molding a companion to my liking,” Vesser said. “Here, he’s lost his companions, his spellforce, and is utterly lost and out of his depth. Surrounded by enemies, with no familiar faces in sight... We’re just one step away from peeling back his true self.”

“This bite mark is the beginning of his awakening. Next, all we need to do is push the dominoes in the Virtual Realm, and we’ll witness his collapse.”

“Compared to picking up something ready-made, nurturing it is far more interesting...”  
Yolan walked behind Vesser, bent slightly, and placed her hands on Vesser’s shoulders. She gazed at their reflections in the mirror, her lips softly savoring the words until they fermented into a bittersweet flavor.

“You make a good point.”

“Ouch, be gentle, lighter.”

The Observer tossed aside the bandage. “This time it’s your left shoulder that’s injured. Next time, you’ll have to wrap it yourself.”

“Come on, there are two of us. Shouldn’t we help each other? If you get hurt next time, I’ll treat you too,” Ashe said, examining himself in the mirror. His throat and left shoulder were wrapped in bandages. “Looks like I won’t be able to take a shower tonight...”

“I can wrap my own injuries, and so can you.”

“We’re the same, aren’t we? You wrapping it is the same as me wrapping it myself,” Ashe tried to justify with an absurd logic. “But thankfully, we still have six hours of rest, and even food and a bathroom. I was starting to wonder if Trial Takers were just supposed to relieve themselves anywhere...”

“By the way, I’m heading to the Virtual Realm later. Can you come too?”

The Observer sat on the bed with his eyes closed, meditating. “No. Aurora’s Sorcerer Handbook is exclusive to you. I’m just a Copy with your memories and skills.”

“You’re not just a Copy. You’re the Observer who nearly beat Silver Lantern,” Ashe said cheerfully. “What about the Virtual Realm? After we leave here, can you enter it?”

The Observer opened his eyes and looked at him, taking a moment before speaking. “Do you have a single spirit that you summoned yourself?”



Ashe was taken aback. “Don’t I? Substitute, Heart Sword... huh?”

Because he had always entered the Virtual Realm through the operators’ Gate of Truth, Ashe suddenly realized how absurd his situation was—he was already a sanctuary sorcerer, yet he didn’t have a single spirit he had summoned on his own!

He hadn’t even seen the Gate of Truth once!

Without Aurora’s Sorcerer Handbook, he couldn’t even enter the Virtual Realm!

It was more outrageous than going through university without ever meeting a professor. It was akin to living for over a decade without knowing your own name.

“I’ll work on it,” Ashe said earnestly. “But even if you can’t enter the Virtual Realm, it’s fine. You protect me now, and when I become a legendary sorcerer, I’ll have your back!”

The Observer remained unmoved. “I won’t take care of you. You’re on your own.”

“Strange,” Ashe muttered, sitting on the Observer’s bed and staring at him thoughtfully. “You’re not a tsundere, are you? Is my complementary type really this weird?”

The Observer showed no reaction. After a moment, he noticed Ashe was still sitting there, fidgeting with an expression that seemed to oscillate between speaking and holding back. Finally, Ashe made up his mind and asked, “Hey, there’s something I want to ask you...”

“I haven’t inherited any of your emotions,” the Observer said. “And I’m not interested in trivial things like friendship, love, or family.”

“What about our parents!?”

The Observer lowered his eyelids. “Same.”

Though slightly dissatisfied, Ashe also felt relieved.

He sat cross-legged on the bed, swaying slightly as he spoke. “Later, when I enter the Virtual Realm, I hope to draw the ‘Myriad Glories Hand’ from the Dream Treasure House. Last time, when the Sword Princess equipped that collection, it was invincible. Unlimited use of Blood Moon, Shattered Lake, and Meteor Trial-unless it’s an invulnerable affix, it could tear through dream phantoms effortlessly...”

The Observer cut in, “Why are you talking to me?”

Ashe blinked in surprise. “If not you, should I talk to a pillow?”

The Observer shook his head. "If I'm not mistaken, you were initially wary of me, but now you've completely trusted me."

Ashe blinked again, then nodded candidly. "Yeah, because even when Silver Lantern tried to persuade you, you didn't betray me. I feel at ease now. Honestly, I was really worried at first that you might try to replace me or something..."

"What if I have another plan, or simply find Silver Lantern more threatening?" the Observer said. "If a more suitable situation arises--"

"Assumptions are pointless. Human nature shouldn't be tested. Everyone has a price for betrayal. If someone offers enough, even I could betray everything." Ashe's tone was light. "What truly makes me happy isn't that you didn't betray me, but that I can trust you."

"Even though I have people I can confide in, who accept me, who share my joys and sorrows, and even a home waiting for me, companions I can rely on..." Ashe looked down at his hands. "But you're the only one who truly understands me."

After a moment of silence, Ashe scratched his head in embarrassment and quickly rolled back to his own bed. "That sounded like something a middle-schooler would say. Kind of embarrassing... Anyway, it's about time. I'm heading to the Virtual Realm. Goodnight!"

As Ashe's consciousness connected to the Virtual Realm, entering the dream phantom, the restroom fell into silence.

Only after a long while did a cold remark break the quiet:

“Too soft.”

## Chapter 573: Return to Shattered Lake

“A half with your memories, identical in appearance but completely different in personality?”

In the dream phantom, Ashe licked the iron railing while nodding. “Yes, he’s a tsundere, completely different from me.”

Sonya and Deya glanced at him but said nothing. The dream phantom here was the academy city within the walls, filled with young, vibrant boys and girls on the streets. The four sorcerers walking among them were considered elders.

“16 to 8, 8 to 4, 4 to 2...” Vesser was surrounded by various phenomena—flames rising, mist swirling, lightning flashing, flowers blooming, and leaves falling. “If only one person can pass the Trial in the end, then the feud between you and Silver Lantern will soon be over.”

“It’s two people because the Fate Twins are a pair,” Ashe corrected. “But you’re right. This long chase will end in death during the Trial.”

“But you can’t use spirit or spellforce now, and even your companions aren’t by your side. Can you really defeat Silver Lantern?” Deya asked worriedly while playing cat’s cradle. “The Blood Seed she planted in you is still there, right?”

Ashe nodded. “I really can’t defeat Silver Lantern. Besides the gap in combat skills, it’s also because of the Blood Seed. The closer I am to her, the stronger its effect. She’s constantly draining my life energy. If we fight, she’ll grow stronger while I grow weaker.”

“This time, I relied on a mutual destruction technique to drag her down to my level, but she might not fall for it next time.”

During the fight, he didn’t notice it, but after distancing himself from Silver Lantern, Ashe clearly felt his body becoming excessively weak. It wasn’t until he ate some high-calorie energy bars in the restroom that he recovered, a sign that the Blood Seed was still active.

“If it were just me and Silver Lantern, I’d probably be out of options this time,” Ashe said, spreading his hands. “But my half doesn’t have this burden, and he’s much stronger in combat. As long as we cooperate well, we can definitely take down the Silver Lantern Twins!”

Although Ashe was very confident, the Sword Princess and the Witch were still deeply concerned. After all, they hadn’t seen this ‘half,’ and Ashe described him as a tsundere, which added to their unease-not that being a tsundere affects combat ability, but someone whose true nature Ashe could easily see through didn’t seem much sharper than a Blade Fish Dragon.

“Found the affix,” Vesser suddenly announced. “It’s related to color. Stepping on white tiles makes you invulnerable, while stepping on black tiles increases negative effects.”

At the same time, the nearby scene began to freeze and rewind, and a stream of information flowed into the sorcerers' minds:

“Hopscotch: Back to the dorm after school, and whoever steps on the black squares loses! Stepping on white squares grants immunity to all damage, while stepping on black squares applies one layer of the ‘Damage Amplification’ curse. Each layer increases damage taken by 10%, stackable with no upper limit.”

“Affix Identification Reward: A small amount of Truth sect experience, a small amount of fate sect experience, and a small amount of spellforce.”

“Limited Affix Privilege: In the next dream phantom, stepping on white squares grants one layer of the ‘Defense Enhancement’ blessing, reducing damage taken by 5% per layer, up to a maximum of 10 layers.”

Ashe and the others gasped.

Although it was a single-affix phantom, this affix was absurd, especially for sorcerers who might spend over a dozen minutes trying to figure out the affix clues.

The roads here were almost entirely paved with alternating black and white tiles. Once a sorcerer moved, they would inevitably step on dozens or even hundreds of black tiles. Since the curse stacks had no upper limit, this meant that once combat began, they would

suffer an additional 1000% damage amplification. Their Sanctuary could very well be shattered by virtual realm creatures in an instant!

It was precisely because of such outrageous affixes that Ashe and the others had to spend so much time searching for affix clues.

Ashe licked the railing, Deya played cat's cradle, Sonya walked, jumped, flew, and even walked backward... Each of their unusual attempts was a stress response born from being beaten down by affixes.

Sonya had actually read various travelogues and even learned methods for testing affixes from professors like Trozan and Nidhogg. But as the saying goes, knowledge from books is shallow; true understanding comes from being beaten down. For example, they once encountered an affix called "Sword Frenzy," where gripping a sword caused a gender swap. Since then, Sonya and Ashe's first step in every new phantom was to draw their swords.

However, as the number of phantoms they experienced increased, they found that their efficiency in identifying affixes also improved rapidly.

Not just Vesser, but Ashe and the others occasionally managed to deduce affixes through their probing. Yet, their nightly progress didn't improve much-they still only cleared seven or eight phantoms. However, their safety had increased significantly.

Affixes like "Hopscotch," which could kill you just by testing them, they had preemptively countered at least seven or eight times.

Since the first two phantoms had been so easily cleared, and with the “Hopscotch” affix privilege granting 50% damage reduction, Ashe decided to take on a challenge. Opening the “Virtual Realm Map,” he spotted a three-affix phantom and led the group inside.

“Huh?”

As soon as they entered the new scene, Ashe froze in place. Sonya thought he had already fallen victim to an affix and cautiously grabbed his hand. “What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing.”

Ashe shook his head lightly, then began to wander forward as if sleepwalking. This Phantom was a massive enclosed structure. They pushed open the door and entered a spacious Central Hall with a glass ceiling that allowed sunlight from afar to freely spill onto the benches. Potted plants lined the sides, and a few people sat on the benches-some chatting, some reading, and even one sleeping... If it weren’t for the fact that they were all wearing prison uniforms, this place could easily be mistaken for a park.

Prison uniforms?

Sonya and the other two were momentarily stunned before realizing something.



Ashe walked up to the front bench and looked at the holographic screen playing the news. The content was about the City Council announcing new policies, filled with long, tedious phrases with such low information density that it seemed designed to prevent citizens from understanding. On the front bench sat a 7'2" green-skinned Orc and a 4'3" short-legged Goblin, their conversation clearly reaching Ashe's ears-

"Isn't it time for the Combat League yet? Finally, it's 'Dragon Slayer's' turn to fight. His matches are the best-every time, brains and blood splatter all over the arena. Way more exciting than the Blood Moon Tribunal."

"Hmph, I bet 'Dragon Slayer' gets wrecked tonight. His opponent is the newly promoted Ogre fighter, 'Fenanshe'! He's the most brutal-last match, he even smashed a Goblin's head into his chest. They couldn't even save him!"

"Fenanshe... Why does that name sound familiar?"

"Maybe it's a common name among Ogres. Who cares?"

"True."

Ashe snapped out of it and turned to his teammates. "This is a three-affix Phantom. Let's split up for ten minutes and search for clues separately. How does that sound?"

Sonya and the others had no objections. After Ashe left, the three of them exchanged glances, and Sonya spoke up. “Vesser, come explore with me.”

“No way!” Deya grabbed Vesser’s arm. “This time, Vesser should definitely come with me!”

Vesser, caught between the two, let out a bitter laugh. “Actually, splitting up would be more efficient... But if we have to team up, I’ll go with the Sword Princess. Witch, you can explore on your own.”

“Why?!”

“Because the type of your spirit is far more diverse than that of the Sword Princess,” Vesser said. “You can conduct many tests on your own, but the Sword Princess primarily has Swordsmanship spirits, so she can only perform a limited number of tests.”

Deya pouted unhappily, “Then you must hang out with me next time!”

“Okay, it’s a date,” Vesser waved goodbye to the Witch and then accompanied the Sword Princess through another passage.

During these days, she took the opportunity to have heart-to-heart talks with the Sword Princess and the Witch, while keeping a polite social distance from Ashe, soon becoming the most popular member of the team.

Aside from her diplomatic skills, it was more because the Sword Princess and the Witch had no other option-apart from Vesser, they had no one else to discuss emotional issues with.

Even without making an effort to get close, as long as she showed no interest in Ashe, Vesser would still become the confidante for others.

Vesser glanced at the passing White-haired Hunter and turned to ask, “Are you very worried?”

“How could I not be?”

Sonya sighed, “It seems like he has never had a peaceful day; if he’s not caught in a conspiracy, he’s sucked into a whirlpool; if not being hunted, he is the hunter. And now, his spellforce and spirits are sealed, making him almost as vulnerable as a straw man, yet there are enemies around him wielding scythes...”

“When he was in Shattered Lake Prison, at least the prison had to abide by the law, and he could exploit legal loopholes to protect himself. But now he faces the trials of the wasteland, with no laws, no rules, no companions, only enemies and the unknown...”

Vesser said softly, “It would be better if he had you by his side.”

The village girl bit her lower lip, her left hand resting on the end of her sword hilt, silent.

“But, you shouldn’t worry too much; didn’t he say he has trustworthy Fate Twins? Copies that possess all his memories and skills-“

“That’s exactly what worries me the most,” Sonya said. “Why would the Trial create such copies? The most likely reason I can think of is to have the Copy replace the original. But right now, he trusts the Copy a lot.”

“You could try to persuade him to be more cautious about the Copy’s actions-“

“No,” the Stretch Paw Club President shook his head. “I can listen, I can make suggestions, but I cannot interfere with hidden possibilities because he is to make judgments, not seek our advice. If I advise him that way, it would only make him feel like I doubt his judgment.”

“But you mean well for him.”

“Although I am worried about him, I respect his abilities, just as he has never interfered with my career development,” Sonya said. “We can only listen to processed, second-hand Intelligence, but only the person involved can assess all the factors comprehensively. Those worries of mine, either he has already considered them, or he does not want me to worry.”

Vesser nodded heavily, “You make a very good point... but besides respect and trust, he might also need your support.”

“Hmm?”

“From what you’ve said, when he was in prison, although his strength was low, he had the protection of legal rules; when he was in Gospel, although he was dominated by the Pact, at least his strength was intact and he had the power to protect himself. But now, he has neither legal rules nor the power to protect himself. Apart from enemies with deep-seated hatred, there are only unpredictable Copies and unknown mysterious trials.” Vesser said, “If you were in such a situation, how would you feel?”

Just thinking about that scenario made Sonya feel suffocated, and she couldn’t help but tightly hug herself.

For a sorcerer, losing power is more terrifying than the environment or enemies.

A sorcerer who has lost their power is like an adult reverting to a three-year-old child. They could once protect themselves, able to resist any danger, but now they have to beg for fate’s mercy-this shift in status is enough to be suffocating.

“...I would be very scared.”

“Anyone would be scared, but he has to put on this confident front so you won’t worry,” Vesser said. “Fear, loneliness, worry... these negative emotions he can only swallow and digest alone. Because he knows that telling you won’t help, it will only drag you into the swamp as well.”

Sonya’s breathing became shallow and rapid. She stopped in her tracks, silent for a moment, then murmured, “What can I do then? I can’t do anything...”

“You should think about it the other way around,” Vesser said. “If you were in such a situation, how would you want him to support you?”

“Like you know, this isn’t the first time he’s faced danger. When he broke out of prison, when he entered the Gospel Royal Palace, when he was almost drained by the Blood Seed, when he couldn’t defeat Silver Lantern tonight... in those moments, did he feel any regrets?”

“Perhaps, he has been waiting for you for a long time.”

Vesser stopped and looked at the Sword Princess, waiting for a moment. The Sword Princess slowly opened her eyes, her ruby-like eyes sparkling and bright, a blush spreading across her face, but her expression was full of determination.

“Next, I’ll trouble you, Vesser, to search for clues alone.”

“Leave it to me.”

The Sword Princess nodded and ran directly along another passage.

Vesser turned around, leisurely passing through the prisoners, and strolled back to the Central Hall.

In fact, she could have pushed the team’s emotional progress earlier, not just because of her subtle hints over the past ten days, but also because the three of them were already a volcano ready to erupt, a flood ready to burst. Without her, perhaps the emotions in the Virtual Realm would have to wait for changes in reality to reach a turning point, but as soon as someone took a step forward, this stable team would face trials no less than a Doomsday catastrophe.

Moreover, now is the most ideal time for trials.

Vesser’s analysis wasn’t baseless; Ashe was indeed at his weakest and most helpless at this moment. If the Sword Princess and the Witch could give him meticulous warmth, it would naturally be a timely help, but conversely, giving him an emotional storm that’s hard to resolve could also be the last straw that breaks his rationality.

The Divine Fire Trial in reality, the emotional trial in the Virtual Realm.

Let me see, Ashe, what kind of truth lies beneath your human skin.

Soon, Vesser encountered the Witch.

Deya looked at her curiously, “Where’s the Sword Princess? Wasn’t she with you?”

Vesser took two steps back, then turned to run, but the next second she was tightly hugged by the Witch: “Speak, where did the Sword Princess go, did you eat her? Was she tasty?”

Vesser blinked, “The Sword Princess, she...”

## Chapter 574: Love and Hate Reversal

Ashe couldn’t help but feel a wave of emotions as he watched a stranger, a death row inmate, now occupying the cell that once belonged to him.



He never imagined that one day he would return to this place.

Even more surprising was the faint sense of nostalgia he felt for this prison.

In reality, it had only been a few months since he spent those ten-odd days in Shattered Lake Prison, but it felt like an eternity had passed.

As he passed by the cafeteria, he saw the table where he, Igor, Harvey, Langna, and Ronald used to gather and discuss their plans. Now, it was occupied by two ogres enjoying their meal.

He walked past the deathmatch arena and saw an elderly man with a diamond-like sheen pummeling a goblin. Clearly, it was “Diamond” Taig, once again playing the fool to catch the tiger.

In the library, he noticed a young man writing a novel. After reading a few lines, Ashe immediately remembered who this person was—a writer who had been sentenced to death before even finishing his book due to its overly controversial content. Well, they didn’t arrest the wrong guy.

After wandering for a while, Ashe realized that he didn't have many fond memories of this place. What he missed wasn't Shattered Lake Prison itself, but the naive days right after his time travel, like the first bowl of beef brisket noodles with fried sauce he had here, or the first taste of Lala Fatty.

In comparison, the situation within the dream phantom intrigued Ashe more.

Through various intelligence analyses, it wasn't hard to see that this phantom reflected Shattered Lake Prison long after Ashe's escape. After all, Igor and the others were no longer here, and the Combat League promoted by Fenanshe had already taken root.

The question arose: Whose dream phantom was this?

The Sword Princess had mentioned that dream phantoms were generally believed to be the lingering dreams of deceased sorcerers. Because they were dreams, they didn't necessarily mirror reality perfectly. They could manifest various peculiarities based on the sorcerer's thoughts, such as the appearance of people who shouldn't be there or the existence of rules that shouldn't apply-the latter being the so-called affixes.

In other words, could this dream phantom belong to some unfortunate soul from the Blood Moon Tribunal?

Wait a minute, there's someone I haven't checked yet.

Ashe suddenly remembered something and headed toward the infirmary from his memory. However, he didn't hold much hope. After all, before his escape, [222] had mentioned that they were about to leave. Now, after so much time had passed, it was likely that-

Ashe turned into a corridor and saw a figure pushing a wheelchair at the far end. The figure quickly disappeared from view. Ashe took a couple of steps but then sensed something was terribly wrong. He immediately broke into a sprint!

That person wasn't a prisoner-they weren't wearing a prison uniform!

Not only were they not a prisoner, but their forearms were covered in a layer of fur, almost like arm guards!

This sister seemed to be the one Ashe had seen before!

And she was someone who absolutely shouldn't be in prison!

Ashe was so excited not only because he realized that this might hide the secret truth of the Distant Sky Domain, but also because he wanted to see how the Bewitcher had been doing recently and ask about which heroine won in the finale of “Sorcerer 100%”.

He rushed to the corner but didn’t see the Bewitcher, so he continued to dash toward the nearby fork in the path-

Thud!

In the moment before they collided, both martial sorcerers instinctively tried to grab each other to use the reaction force to maintain their balance. However, their thoughts aligned, and they ended up grabbing each other’s shoulders, tumbling to the ground together.

“Huh...?”

Ashe and Sonya, who was lying on top of him, locked eyes. His hands were on the Sword Princess’s shoulders, and her hands were similarly resting on his.

They didn't look like they had accidentally bumped into each other; instead, they resembled a pair of lovers embracing regardless of the situation.

Sonya instinctively pushed against him to get up, but after a moment's thought, she gave up and lay on his chest like a kitten. Ashe could almost see a tail wagging behind her.

After a while, Ashe couldn't help but say, "Get up."

"Not in a hurry to get up," Sonya's gaze wandered, but she eventually opened her eyes wide and stared at him. "I have something to tell you."

Ashe blinked. He instinctively wanted to say something, but seeing the shyness and determined courage in the Sword Princess's eyes, he eventually closed his mouth and quietly waited for fate's favor.

Sonya was also nervous. She had actually been planning this moment since the Meteor Trial, preparing countless scripts, and Vesser's words had only helped solidify her resolve. After all, she had watched so many romance TV dramas and had specifically studied how to tie a man down. It was time to show her true skills!

Was it the queenly “From now on, you belong to me,” the vulnerable girl’s “You have to protect me,” the reckless yet adorable “Why haven’t you said you like me yet,” the tsundere’s “I don’t like you, I just can’t live without you”... or the scene she would always remember, “I will become your wings, and you will become mine”?

But!

But!

Sonya opened her lips, only to find that she couldn’t utter any of the pre-prepared lines. Her heart was pounding so hard that the village girl felt like she was about to faint.

Where was the acting skill that never faltered in front of the camera? Where was the calmness that proudly accepted cheers on the battlefield?

Sonya steeled her heart, reached out to wrap her arms around Ashe’s neck, pressed her cheek against his, and whispered into his ear, “I-“

Click!

In the far distance, a tremendous noise, like the meshing of gears, suddenly erupted.

Then, the entire Shattered Lake Prison began to melt like a candle over a flame, with walls dissolving and ceilings warping.

Most terrifyingly, Ashe clearly felt a transformation in his inner emotions. His joy, anger, sorrow, and happiness... all were gradually reversing.

He smelled a strange odor in the air, saw chaotic lines of sight in the space, and heard noises from afar... All this intelligence converged into one message:

“Love and Hate Reversal: A gaze from the summit of Ruby Mountain attempts to shatter the tactile sense of the Four Pillars. All outsiders will be affected, all emotions will be reversed, and all creatures will actively attack outsiders. Once an outsider dies, they will suffer severe soul damage and must endure for 30 minutes to leave this Phantom.”

Ashe turned his head, locking eyes with Sonya.

Though the scene was identical to before, the emotions in their eyes had been replaced with intense killing intent.

Boom!

The moment the two separated through the Sanctuary, they immediately drew their long swords and clashed, each striving to kill the other!

However, Ashe quickly realized he was no match for the Sword Princess. After dodging the fierce assault of 'Blood Moon Shattered Lake,' he activated 'Heart Pen,' retreating while drawing barriers to prevent the Sword Princess from approaching and to gain a tactical distance!

Sonya, of course, would not relent, her eyes fixed solely on Ashe's head. But at that moment, a flood of prisoners and prison guards emerged from all sides of the passageway. They had clearly broken free from the prison's restraints and were attacking the two with various weapons!



Ashe tore through these condemned prisoners while retreating, with Sonya hot on his heels. Ashe attempted to shoot a 'Rage Sword' at her, but she activated 'Meteor Trial' while moving, her trans-spatial slash nearly decapitating Ashe!

Fortunately, it was the Virtual Realm; in reality, he would have been slit throat!

Soon, Ashe arrived at the spacious Central Hall, where Deya was in a corner, desperately defending against the onslaught of condemned prisoners. When she saw Ashe approaching, she immediately carved a bloody path, using 'Witness,' 'Fast Forward,' and 'Void Slash' to create a miracle that could briefly tear through the Sanctuary-'Empress's Gaze'!

Where the Empress's Gaze falls, all is royal land, and all are royal subjects!

Ashe had no way to dodge the gaze that carried the Empress's will. The Witch's hands tightened fiercely, pinning him firmly in place!

The Sword Princess soared through the air, drawing her sword and slashing towards him, unleashing a Blood Moon Shattered Lake!

## Chapter 575: I Have a Friend

### Chapter 575: I Have a Friend

Many days ago, the Mercury Trojan Horse had mentioned that the tactile sense of the Four Pillars would face hostility from the virtual realm after the Distant Sky Domain.

Concerned for their safety, Ashe naturally didn't dare to hide this information and quickly informed his teammates, including Vesser. However, over ten days had passed, and aside from the painful experiences of being beaten by affixes, the virtual realm hadn't targeted them in any significant way-though it was only natural for sanctuary sorcerers to be battered by affixes, as it was part of the established order.

Just as Ashe and Vesser were almost forgetting about this matter, the gaze of the virtual realm suddenly surged upon them like a landslide or a tsunami.

Vesser hid in the shadows of the passageway, invisible to the rioting prisoners. Although "Love and Hate Reversal" caused all virtual realm creatures to actively despise outsiders, it didn't mean these creatures were immune to the miracles of spirit spells. Her "delusion" spirit still greatly diminished her presence.

She watched the fierce battle among the three in the Central Hall, a hint of doubt rising in her heart.

While "Love and Hate Reversal" was highly effective, it seemed too targeted. Not only Ashe, but even Vesser, given the bonds she had formed over these days, wouldn't let her go. Of course, Vesser was cold and indifferent by nature, harboring no affection or resentment towards them, which ironically made her unaffected by the reversal.

However, the strength of the virtual realm creatures was gradually increasing. Initially, most of the prisoners were One-Winged Sorcerers, but now Two-Winged prisoners were appearing sporadically, and they seemed almost endless.

It was predictable that in the final minutes of the 30-minute period, a large number of sanctuary enemies would appear, which alone would be enough to trap the tactile sense in an inescapable encirclement.

If it were a true tactile sense, like the Mercury Trojan Horse, who could transform virtual realm creatures into her own Trojan Horses, the initial phase would see her forces grow as she fought. Even if she couldn't hold out in the end, she could still buy time by consuming her Trojan Horses.

But the effect of "virtual realm creatures besieging" was likely a common feature of all curse affixes, while "Love and Hate Reversal" was the virtual realm's malice directed specifically at them! It wasn't random, nor was it aimed at others-it was a deadly trap conceived by the virtual realm based on their situation!

The virtual realm... the summit of Ruby Mountain... the tactile sense of the Four Pillars...

Vesser's heart trembled slightly. The more secrets the virtual realm held, the more it proved her right-that reality was merely a dream phantom created by the Divine Sovereign for life, and all souls would eventually head to the eternal battlefield known as the virtual realm!

Therefore, she had to act one step ahead, to pierce the illusion of all things before Senlo succumbed to illness!

Vesser looked up just in time to see Ashe being controlled by the Witch and slashed by the Sword Princess. Once close and loyal teammates had now turned into enemies, their killing intent boiling over as cold blades clashed!

In the blink of an eye, Ashe transformed into a warm light, darting along the ground and narrowly evading the combined attack of the Witch and the Sword Princess.

Miracle-Rush.

In the past, he had always used this technique to close the distance between himself and the Sword Princess or the Witch, seeking their help to escape danger. Never had he imagined that one day he would use it to flee from them.

Watching this scene, Vesser couldn't help but let a faint smirk creep onto her lips. However, she quickly composed herself, transforming the 'Thousand Changes' spirit into the 'Calm Mind' spirit, forcibly soothing the chaotic thoughts stirred by the reversal, and pondering the impact of "Love and Hate Reversal" on her plans.

It was all gain and no loss, she thought.

If Ashe were to die here, his soul severely damaged, it would be equivalent to cutting off all support from the Virtual Realm, and it might even affect his real-world combat capabilities. With both real-world and Virtual Realm support severed, his mental state

would undoubtedly be severely tested, making it easier to strip away his facade of cowardice and hypocrisy.

The most exquisite part was the mutual love and hate among Ashe and the other two. Even if they later realized that their mutual slaughter was caused by the Love and Hate Reversal, once they crossed a certain boundary, they would find that there were no chains to restrain them.

Before this, no matter how severe their emotional entanglements, they would never resort to violence or backstabbing. But after this, that might no longer hold true.

When they argued again, would the Sword Princess remember her sword blade drenched in the Witch's blood?

When favoritism was shown, would the Witch's gaze once again solidify into deadly jealousy?

Yes, death in the Virtual Realm was merely an intermission, but precisely because death was not the end, they would be even more unrestrained in their use of violence.

People, having stayed too long in delusion, always believe in the existence of insurmountable walls-morality, rules, life, faith. But once they cross those walls, they realize it was all a delusion, that fate is illusory, and that all truths are permissible.

The scene Vesser most wanted to create was precisely this moment of mutual love and hate. Even if things returned to normal afterward, the seeds had been sown. As long as the conflicts between them persisted, they would inevitably sprout one day.

The three of them clashed once more, and to Vesser's surprise, although the primary target of both the Witch and the Sword Princess was Ashe, they did not cooperate sincerely with each other. Instead, they secretly clashed and sought to harm one another.

This meant that there was still some emotion between the Witch and the Sword Princess; their experiences on the Time Continent had not been in vain... How weak they were...

As Vesser observed and pondered, the combat power of the Prison Guards began to rise rapidly, and even a large group of Blood Hunters charged in. Faced with such pressure, Ashe, despite the killing intent between them, had no choice but to divert more attention to the external threat.

Vesser also began to move. Although her Delusion Spirit was effective, the Blood Hunter had already used the Reconnaissance Miracle to search for her, forcing her to temporarily retreat. Fortunately, Ashe and the other two had drawn the aggro of all the virtual realm creatures; otherwise, she would have been overwhelmed by the tide of enemies.

However, she still needed to prepare. If Ashe and the others fell, the virtual realm creatures would have only her as their target. No matter how powerful her Delusion Miracle was, it couldn't completely shield her from the overwhelming Reconnaissance Miracles. She had to create advantageous terrain to survive the final few minutes.

Time ticked by, and new enemy types began to appear in the prison: Moonshadow Priests and Blood Saint Physicians. Though still at the two-wings golden level, the Moonshadow Priests excelled at blessings and enhancements, linking everyone's life energy together. This caused Ashe and the others' killing speed to plummet. Meanwhile, the Blood Saint Physicians cursed the Blood Hunters, causing them to explode and shoot corrosive Blood Arrows upon death. The more enemies Ashe and his group killed, the more they injured themselves.

Vesser grew increasingly excited.

Facing the relentless onslaught, Ashe and the others had already expended most of their spellforce. If this continued, they would inevitably be overwhelmed by the virtual realm creatures. With their intelligence, they surely realized this. So, before death, would they submit quietly, or would they fight to take down the one they hated the most?

Perhaps unconsciously, or perhaps sensing that sticking together would help share the pressure, Ashe and the other two gradually closed the distance between them.

Soon, the three were forced into the central area. They exchanged glances, their eyes revealing inexplicable emotions.

But in the next second, they unleashed their most violent killing miracles, charging at each other!

Vesser held her breath, waiting for the most spectacular scene to unfold-

Crack!

Ashe's Rage Sword pierced through the air, stabbing into a chest!

Sonya's Blood Moon shattered the lake, destroying everything in its path!

Deya's Empress's Gaze slaughtered the bodies of her foes!

They killed the ones behind each other, then stood back-to-back, forming a rock-like defense against the tide of virtual realm creatures.

"Have you recovered yet?"

"No, I still want to rip out your intestines and strangle you with them, you scheming Little Trumpet."

"I... by constantly switching between my sisters... I can barely stay calm..."



“Don’t think of me as your friend or anything,” Ashe said, rising. “This is the virtual realm curse, ‘Love and Hate Reversal.’ The more emotions you feel, the more you’re affected.”

“So, we need to return to the beginning, to where we started.”

“Even without emotions, even if we despise each other, hate each other, and even wish to tear each other apart, it doesn’t matter. Did we have any bond from the very beginning? Did you have any goodwill towards me from the start?”

“But in the lonely virtual realm,” Ashe drew a defensive line with the ‘Heart Pen,’ “we are destined to be inseparable companions, teammates moving forward together.”

“No reason is needed; we are each other’s strength.”

Vesser stared blankly as the three of them, as usual, cooperated seamlessly, forming a defense against increasingly powerful virtual realm creatures. She was so mentally shaken that she almost failed to maintain the delusion, nearly being noticed by a death row inmate.

As the inmate lunged at her, Vesser slapped and pressed down, crushing the inmate’s head against the wall like a mosquito until it exploded like a watermelon.

She had been so distracted that she forgot to hide her close combat skills in the virtual realm.

Watching Ashe, still in the state of Love and Hate Reversal, fight alongside the Sword Princess and the Witch, effortlessly resolving the crisis, the usually calm Vesser felt a surge of intense... resentment for the first time.

Ashe suddenly sat up, seeing the Observer already packed and ready to leave. He pulled the latter to the bedside and said, "You'll never guess what I just encountered in the virtual realm-I actually wanted to kill the Sword Princess and the others! You can't imagine what that felt like, can you?"

The Observer's eyebrow twitched, and he brushed off Ashe's hand on his shoulder, asking, "So did you kill them?"

"How could I? I can't beat her," Ashe grumbled. "Just thinking about it makes me break out in a cold sweat. I was controlled by the Witch, and then the Sword Princess swung her sword at my head... God knows how I dodged it."

You're quite proud of not being able to beat them, huh?

"Oh."

"So the virtual realm really does despise the Tactile Sense of the Four Pillars," Ashe mused. "We made it through this time, but will we have to endure an additional curse affix every time we enter the virtual realm from now on? I didn't gain any advantage from the Tactile Sense, and now the difficulty has increased for no reason."

Though he felt it unnecessary to help him analyze, to avoid Ashe rambling on about this topic, the Observer said, “You didn’t trigger any curse affixes for so many days before, which means the virtual realm doesn’t often notice that you are the Tactile Sense of the Four Pillars. Compared to the virtual realm, you are too insignificant, like a bug on a giant. Occasionally, you might tickle the giant, and the giant will notice and slap you, but most of the time, the giant won’t care about you.”

“I didn’t do anything,” Ashe said, puzzled. “How did I tickle the virtual realm?”

The amplification of spellforce, the enhancement of spellcasting, the surging of desires, the triggering of special affixes—all these factors accumulated to a point where the Virtual Realm could no longer endure... The Observer quickly deduced the answer in his mind.

However, he remained silent, knowing that Ashe would arrive at the same conclusion on his own. He stood up to leave but was pulled back by Ashe. “Help me analyze this too, will you?”

For some reason, a wave of inexplicable irritation rose within the Observer. With an expressionless face, he said, “Maybe it’s because you’re in heat.”

Ashe stiffened, then immediately locked the Observer in a chokehold, pinning him to the bed. Half-serious and half-joking, he demanded, “Do you know what happened to me in the Virtual Realm!? Spill it!”

The Observer, of course, couldn't be subdued by such a crude tactic. He hadn't even used his true strength in last night's battle with Yolan Vesser. With a casual flick, he flung Ashe away. However, Ashe, being the unscrupulous type, turned what should have been a fair contest into a test of brute strength. More importantly, the Observer didn't want to hurt him, so he avoided attacking vital areas like the eyes, groin, or throat.

After a brief tussle, the Observer suddenly calmed down. It had been years since he'd engaged in such low-level grappling, and he almost let Ashe drag him into it. He calmly explained, "I just figured it out."

"Is it that obvious!?" Ashe exclaimed, startled. "Wait, no-is it because we complement each other? So you can sense even the slightest change in me?"

The Observer wore an expression that said, "Yeah, sure, whatever." "Yes, since we complement each other, I naturally notice your mood shifts."

Finally satisfied, Ashe let go and went to wash up and have breakfast.

The Observer straightened his wrinkled clothes. Unlike Ashe, he was meticulous about his appearance. This was something he could never understand about Ashe. He remembered that ever since his time in Shattered Lake Prison, he had paid attention to every detail, ensuring that everything-from his appearance to his plans-was flawless and without a single crack.

How could Ashe be so carefree, almost like a Lala Fatty come to life?

Sigh.

The Observer quickly smoothed out his thoughts. Deep down, he understood the reason for his emotional vibration. Even though he had prepared himself, even though he had experienced countless wars and upheavals, this was still Ashe Heath-the Ashe who still worried about his loved ones, the Observer who had yet to witness the apocalyptic world.

It was like looking at an old photograph, inevitably stirring up a sense of nostalgia.

Even though he had always been an onlooker, now he couldn't help but become part of the reflection.

What a pointless longing.

The Observer opened his eyes and saw Ashe sitting across from him, munching on an energy bar. "Observer, there's something I want to discuss with you."

"It's like this, I have a friend..."

"He seems to be on the verge of being confessed to recently..."

“But...”

The Observer listened calmly as Ashe recounted the intricate and tumultuous details of his love life, and couldn’t help but glance down at the countdown on his wristwatch.

Is the break not over yet?

Swordflower College.

Adelle looked at Sonya, who was hiding under the blanket, and poked Lois. Lois turned to Engulite, who shook her head.

Lois mustered up her courage, climbed onto the village girl’s bed, and asked, “Sonya, are you feeling unwell?”

“No.”

“Then why did you come back and just lie in bed?”

Sonya pulled back the blanket, her lips pressed tightly together, her face filled with confusion. After a moment, she sat up and said, “I’m just thinking about a question.”

“What question?”

“I have a friend who recently confessed, but I’m not sure if it counts as having confessed or not...”

Adelle, Engulite, and Lois squeezed onto her bed: “Tell us more.”

Royal Palace of Yisuo.

Lise wriggled out of Annan’s embrace and hopped over to sit in front of the mirror, asking, “Did Dad talk about Lise today?”

The image of the Witch sisters appeared in the mirror: “No, but something very interesting happened.”

“What?!”

White Queen: “Today, Little Ashe was chasing us...”

“Oh oh oh!”

Black Butler: “And we warmly welcomed him...”

“Wow!”

Scarlet Dead Apostles: “We even shot threads to tie him up...”

Lise covered her eyes, her fingers spread wide enough to fit eyeballs, her face filled with excitement: “And then? And then?”

Deya: “And then the Sword Princess rushed over and almost chopped his head off with a sword.”

Lise: “Σ(っ °Д °;)っ?”

## Chapter 576: The Younger Brother

Clang! Clang! Clang! Clang!-



The sound of bullets biting into metal echoed endlessly in the corridor. Ashe turned sideways to face the enemy, minimizing his exposed area. His sword danced like a shield, fiercely protecting him amidst the storm of bullets!

After the previous Trials, Ashe had gained a bit of confidence. But as soon as the second day's Trial began, he was hit with a harsh reality-

Phantom Annan!

A mobile gun sorcerer specializing in gunmanship!

Theoretically, without the assistance of spellforce or spirits, he had no ability to perform a counterattack. Otherwise, gun sorcerers wouldn't have earned the reputation of being the "strongest offensive sorcerers below the Sanctuary." Even three-winged sorcerers had to rely on the Sanctuary to withstand and ultimately end the dominance of gun sorcerers.

However, for some reason, although he couldn't use his sorcerer powers in the underground Trial, his senses seemed to have been enhanced. Wind currents, scents, sight, hostility, sounds-all these factors combined in a mysterious way in his mind, forming a sharper intuition.

If he had to describe it, it was somewhat similar to the "Conceptual Secret Toxin." The side effect of this toxin was that it occasionally allowed one to glimpse the truth of the

world. Ordinary people could only see light reflections, but those poisoned by the concept could see traces of Miracles, such as the spiderweb-like Gospel that blotted out the sky.

Strangely, after so many days in Senlo, Ashe hadn't seen any grand Miracles that used the entire Kingdom as their stage. Although he occasionally saw dazzling colors, they were merely the veils armed by various cults for the city.

Ashe's current feeling was as if he had been afflicted with a permanent Conceptual Secret Toxin. The world was no longer just monotonous light, vibrations, scents, and flows. Instead, there was something more hidden, more wondrous, and more elusive...

Swoosh!

A bullet grazed past the blade edge, skimming over his forehead and taking a chunk of flesh with it. Ashe looked at the phantom Purple Moth fifty steps away. She had fully extended her virtual wings, the purple light condensing into four Miracle guns. Combined with the two Assault Guns in her hands, she formed what could only be described as a hopeless barrage of bullets in this narrow corridor!

Miracle: Honor of the Dolan Family!

That was indeed its name, as it was Annan's exclusive Miracle. This Miracle was based on the Gunmanship Sect, blending alchemy, illusion, and fire spells. The reason she could utilize her virtual wings was due to her silver blessing, "Burning Wings," which allowed her to integrate spirits into her virtual wings, thus transforming them!

From this, it's clear that Young Lady Annan is an incredibly extraordinary protagonist in a coming-of-age story. Her background aside, her talents and opportunities are on par with

those of a chosen one. Even without the interference of Ashe and others, she could carve out a place for herself on the Future Ranking list.

When she's an ally, even if she's not a conventional leader, the work environment is quite comfortable.

But when she becomes an enemy, everything changes.

The dual guns of the phantom Purple Moth were already troublesome, but now, with full firepower unleashed, Ashe has no doubt that he'll be torn apart like an apple pie in the barrage of bullets!

Just as the phantom Purple Moth was preparing to unleash a Miracle to set up her turret, the Observer suddenly leaped off the walls, rapidly closing in on the gun sorcerer's restricted zone from above!

Without hesitation, the phantom Purple Moth raised her gun barrels, sealing off all his escape routes!

Bang bang bang bang bang-

The deafening gunshots echoed through the corridor, accumulating into a heart-wrenching roar of hell. The sheer assault on the eardrums alone was enough to disorient any sorcerer. Yet, facing the flood-level barrage, the Observer kicked off the walls, his

movements alternating between fast and slow, leaping back and forth above like a butterfly in a storm, narrowly dodging the bullets!

At that moment, the phantom Purple Moth suddenly shifted her aim to Ashe.

While the Observer drew her attention for a brief moment, Ashe immediately slipped into the shadows, swiftly closing in on the enemy. His “Observer’s Visage” and “Listener’s Woe” seemed to still be effective. While they were useless in a one-on-one fight, with someone else drawing the enemy’s focus, he became an unnoticed bystander!

Bang bang bang!

Within seven steps, the gun was both accurate and fast. Ashe only managed to deflect half of the bullets, while the other half he tried to block with his arm. But how could flesh and blood stop steel?

However, Ashe never intended to stop the bullets with his body. As the bullets penetrated his flesh, causing cavitation effects and explosive fragmentation, his limbs burst into clouds of blood mist. With a swing of his arm, the blood sprayed toward the phantom Purple Moth’s eyes!

But it was futile. The terrifying kinetic energy of the bullets was enough to halt Ashe’s charge. He barely had time to throw his “Honey Sword,” but the phantom Purple Moth simply sidestepped, easily dodging his desperate move.

But Ashe wasn't alone.

From above, a spinning figure suddenly descended, effortlessly weaving through the chaotic barrage caused by the loss of vision. The Observer landed, slicing through the phantom Purple Moth's gun barrels, then thrust his long sword forward, cutting her throat.

The phantom Purple Moth collapsed to the ground, her eyes dimming, blood pooling around her. Two blazing flames flew out from her body, landing on Ashe and the Observer.

With a shudder, the bullets embedded in Ashe's body were expelled, his wounds healed, his stamina restored, and even the cavities left by the bullets disappeared.

He sat up, examining his injuries with a puzzled expression.

"Were you so fearless because you were certain the Trial would reward you with healing?" the Observer asked calmly, wiping the blood from his sword blade with his elbow.

"Yes," Ashe nodded. "After all, the first Trial yesterday had such a reward. There's no reason the second one wouldn't. And in that situation, since you created an opening, I had to charge in to support you."

“What if there was no reward, or if the reward wasn’t enough to heal you, or if you were killed outright? What then?”

Ashe was taken aback, then shook his head. “It was an emergency. How could I have had time to think about that?”

The Observer said nothing more, sheathing his sword.

Ashe walked past the corpse of the phantom Purple Moth, glancing at the wound on her throat. “Thank you,” he said.

The Observer didn’t acknowledge him, instead breaking into a run down the corridor. Ashe followed closely.

From their experience the previous night, it was clear that as long as they didn’t reach the next hall, the Trial would continue. This meant that the longer they stayed in the corridor, the more battles they would face. Therefore, moving faster could reduce the number of fights.

However, unless one was a physical sorcerer, it was difficult to create a significant gap in physical strength. The designers of the Trial must have considered this factor, so moving slowly would definitely be a disadvantage, but moving quickly might not necessarily bring many benefits. In fact, it could lead to excessive stamina consumption from running, potentially causing them to fail the Trial midway.

“Have you noticed,” Ashe suddenly said, “that the ‘rewards’ today seem more substantial than yesterday’s?”

“The reward from the first Trial only healed our injuries and restored our stamina, but the reward from the second Trial seems to have enhanced our physical abilities as well. It’s not much, but without the interference of spellforce or spirits, I can definitely feel that my senses have become sharper.”

“Actually, I found it strange during the last battle. Although my Swordsmanship is at the Golden level, it shouldn’t have been enough to deflect bullets. Yet, in the Trial, not only were my senses enhanced, but I also vaguely sensed something beyond reality. That’s why I was able to position my sword blade in the bullet’s path before it was even fired.”

“My intuition wasn’t this sharp yesterday. Thinking back now, it must be because yesterday’s ‘reward’ took root within me. So, to what extent will today’s ‘reward’ nurture that seed?”

Ashe spoke for a while but received no response, so he curiously looked at the Observer.

After a moment of thought, he said, “Are you upset because I have girls who like me?”

The Observer glanced at him indifferently. Ashe patted the Observer’s shoulder and comforted him, “You look exactly like me, so surely someone will like you too! Even Harvey gets kissed by little girls. Are you saying you’re not as good as Harvey?”

“What do you think this Trial is trying to do? It sealed our spellforce, yet it’s making us stronger through the Trial...”

The Observer finally spoke, “You already have your own judgment. Why are you still seeking answers from me?”

“Because I need your affirmation of my judgment!” Ashe clenched his fist and said, “And if you think the same as me, doesn’t that mean I’m right?”

“Do you really need others’ affirmation that much?”

“Not from just anyone,” Ashe replied. “But you’re my brother.”

At that moment, even the Observer, who had navigated through the barrage of bullets with ease, crossed the Angel’s Graveyard, and faced the Divine Sovereign without fear, suddenly felt a string in his heart snap.

Ashe continued chattering, “Look, you were only born yesterday, younger than me, and weaker in ability. Clearly, you’re the younger brother, and I’m the older one. But in our family, we don’t really stick to formal titles. I just call our elder brother by his name, so you don’t have to call me ‘Brother Ashe.’ After all, it would be a bit embarrassing for a grown man like you to call me that...”

The Observer responded, “...Hmm.”



“But the main point isn’t about being the younger brother,” Ashe said. “It’s because you care about my safety, and naturally, I want my decisions to be affirmed by you.”

“Although I can’t guarantee that I won’t have to fight desperately in the next battle, I will cherish my life more,” Ashe looked at his Twin, “and trust your abilities more.”

This sounds so familiar, the Observer thought. He seemed to have said something similar to someone before. Who was it?

However, the focus wasn’t on who he said it to, but on how much truth and falsehood were hidden within those words.

“But there’s one thing I’m really curious about,” Ashe said. “The healing we receive from the Trial rewards isn’t like the reconstructive healing of ‘Hydrotherapy.’ It’s more like something I’ve heard of but can’t quite remember-“

The Observer interjected, “Bullets are removed, flesh and blood are restored, tissues are as good as new, as if everything has returned to the state before the injury.”

“That’s the effect of the Time Reversal series of spirits. It’s a healing method that involves reversing time.”

## Chapter 577: A Private Date

Igor leaned against the railing, gazing up at the sky above.

The massive cavern had been filled, and a new city was being rebuilt atop the ceiling. In Nightfall City, most of the debris had already been cleared, and countless mechanical creatures were hauling dirt. New buildings were even under construction.

It was hard for anyone to imagine that just ten hours ago, this place had been a wasteland left by the collision of two cities.

“Mr. Rust Crow.”

Igor turned his head to see the Dark Serpent Twins standing behind him. The Dark Serpent Twins were the divine hosts of the Twinborn Cult, the two who had fought alongside the Mad Wolf Knight Ashe against Silver Lantern last night.

In the Twinborn Cult, the serpent was their totem of faith, as their Demi-God, the Twinborn Fang, was a giant serpent. Depending on the level of divine hosting, those below 5% were considered juvenile serpents, 5% to 15% were the White Serpent Twins, 15% to 30% were the Blue Serpent Twins, and those above 30% were the divine hosts-the Dark Serpent Twins.

As for why the colors white, blue, and dark were used as the hierarchy... Igor glanced at Nightfall City. The primary palette here was the white light of the earth, the blue neon of

the skyscrapers, and the pitch-black of the sky. It was a very straightforward primitive religion.

“Mr. Dark Serpent,” Igor said, “it seems you’ve made a decision?”

The Dark Serpent Twins asked seriously, “If we share the secrets of Nightfall with you, can you really find a way to reopen the [Abyss of Twinborn]?”

The Con Artist smiled faintly. “That’s a promise only the Divine Sovereign could make. It’s the great legacy of the Gray Fox Divine Era-how could I guarantee its reopening? Anyone who dares to make such a promise is undoubtedly a fraud.”

“However,” he continued calmly, “if there’s anyone in Senlo who could possibly intervene with the gray fox heritage, it would be people like us.”

“Seeing is believing, hearing is doubting. Aside from Silver Lantern, the only ones who can enter the Abyss are our companions.”

The Dark Serpent Twins exchanged a glance, still unsure.

Igor turned back to look down at Nightfall City below. “I’ve heard that the divine fire system is the bridge of civilization that stabilizes the continuation of the divine era. If it hadn’t been damaged, Senlo wouldn’t have fallen into the wasteland era for over two hundred years. Silver Lantern carries multiple Demi-Gods and is here for the Divine Fire Trial. Perhaps the next ruler of Senlo is about to emerge...”

Hearing this, the Dark Serpent Twins finally made up their minds. “Mr. Rust Crow, should we call your companions to join us?”

“No need,” the Con Artist said leisurely. “Let’s go.”

Raven Annihilation is currently meditating at the entrance of the Abyss, and since he’s illiterate, there’s no need to call him over. Of course, the more important reason is that Igor doesn’t trust that black raven-or rather, he doesn’t trust many people at all. Even Harvey has only barely earned Igor’s “harmless certification.”

There’s also no need to summon the necromancer. Harvey has already delegated his brain elsewhere, and besides, he’s busy upgrading and modifying Alice with some “materials” he obtained from the Twinborn Cult-thanks to the fall of the Nature Cult, the Twinborn Cult’s stockpile of materials is now overflowing. He has no time to gather intelligence.

Thinking about this, Igor’s disdain for Raven Annihilation grows. At least Harvey is preparing for the future, doing everything he can to strengthen himself for unforeseen circumstances. Tamashi, what’s the point of you sitting by the entrance? Are you going to rescue Ashe with your imagination?

Igor followed the Dark Serpent Twins across the aerial walkway and glanced down at the mechanical workers transporting materials below, raising an eyebrow.

As if noticing Igor’s gaze, the Dark Serpent Twins explained, “These are Nightfall’s mechanical workers, probably the only group of mechanical workers still functioning in Senlo. Mechanical constructs used to be a household necessity, but after the Cataclysm,

almost all of them were completely destroyed. Only a few Fish that Escaped the Net survived.”

“No, I’m not surprised by the mechanical constructs,” Igor said. “I’m just curious about Nightfall’s efficient use of corpses. My companion would probably be overjoyed to see this.”

The materials being transported by the mechanical workers were carts filled with fingers, ears, tongues, and some other body parts not suitable for discussion during mealtime.

The source of these materials, needless to say, was undoubtedly the generous benefactors of the Nature Cult.

But from the meticulous categorization, Igor knew they weren’t being used for consumption or other purposes. This was undoubtedly related to the Necromancy Sect.

Interestingly, while the Necromancy Sect is well-suited for the wasteland era, throughout their journey, Igor and his companions hadn’t encountered a single necromancer. Senlo’s approach to utilizing corpses still remained at the wasteful level of “burial.”

The reason for this was likely due to faith.

In Senlo, a mage’s spellcasting sect isn’t something they choose themselves-it’s closely tied to their faith. The Tribulation Fire Temple specializes in fire spells, the Transcendent

Cult focuses on thunder spells, the Nature Cult masters Nature Spellcasting... Therefore, to produce necromancers, there must be a faith associated with necromancy.

And such a faith doesn't exist.

The reason is simple: life is already hard enough. If you introduce a faith centered around negativity, people would just give up and die. How could a cult like that ever thrive?

An ideal can be outrageous, absurd, or even anti-human, but it cannot be negative. Even if it's about destroying the world, you must be full of energy and enthusiasm to attract disciples to follow you.

So, when Igor saw that the efficiency of corpse utilization here was almost on par with Harvey's, he naturally had a guess: "Do you possess some gray fox heritage related to the Necromancy Sect?"

The Dark Serpent Twins exchanged a glance. "More or less."

"I've heard some rumors before that merchant legions passing through Nightfall would disappear without a trace... Did you send them straight to be 'recycled'?"

The Dark Serpent Twins remained silent, but their lack of response was already an answer.

Igor naturally didn't care about the lives of those people, but he couldn't help frowning at this point: "I've heard that the Gray Fox Divine Era was a time of peace and tranquility. How could such a heritage have been passed down? Could it be that the Gray Fox Divine Era's ideology was so advanced that it aligned with necromancers, completely disregarding the humanistic value of corpses?"

At that moment, they entered a palace, and the guards at the entrance were actually three pairs of Twinborn Sorcerers. Even in such a critical time, the Twinborn Cult didn't spare manpower to guard this palace, which showed just how important this place was to them.

As the palace doors slowly closed, the Dark Serpent Twins finally spoke: "The Gray Fox Divine Era was indeed a beautiful and peaceful time. Material wealth was abundant, all beings lived in harmony, everyone pursued their ideals, and society progressed steadily, like heaven on earth."

Igor was puzzled. "Then what about Nightfall..."

"If we're talking about the Gray Fox Divine Era," the Dark Serpent Twins pushed open the door at the end and turned to the Con Artist, "that's indeed the case."

Igor stepped inside, and though he maintained his composure instantly, his eyes still betrayed a storm of shock.

Before him was a massive biological exhibition hall, filled with cultivation tanks of various sizes. The smaller tanks were about three meters tall, with detailed labels in front of them: “Human-Male-One-Winged Sorcerer,” “Human-Female-Two-Winged Sorcerer,” “Orc-Male-Three-Winged Sorcerer,” “Elf-Female-Four-Winged Sorcerer”...

The larger tanks, however, contained virtual realm creatures that should have been impossible to see in reality: “Blade Fish Dragon-Male-Juvenile,” “Foxlamp Dragon-Female-Growth Stage,” “Raging Slashing Dragon-Male-Maturity,” “Shadow Evil Drake-Male-Juvenile”...

But what shocked Igor the most was that these cultivation tanks were still operational.

The creatures inside the tanks were submerged in nutrient fluid, connected to numerous tubes, as if they could wake up at any moment.

“It has nothing to do with the Twinborn Cult,” the Dark Serpent Twins said from behind. “After the cataclysm, no sect has been able to restore civilization to this extent. We’ve merely been trying to keep the laboratory running.”

“So, this is a laboratory from the Gray Fox Divine Era?” Igor said, then immediately shook his head. “No, based on what you just said, this can’t be something the Gray Fox Divine Era could have created with their human experiments. Then it must be-“

“Did you know,” the Dark Serpent Twins suddenly interjected, “that the Elves here are the last of Senlo’s Elves?”



Igor was taken aback. “What do you mean?”

“Have you seen any Elves outside?”

Igor thought for a moment. Since arriving in Senlo, he hadn’t seen a single Elf.

“Of course you haven’t,” the Dark Serpent Twins continued. “Because the Elves of Senlo were already on the brink of extinction during the Fire Cat Divine Era.”

While the extinction of intelligent species wasn’t particularly rare, the way the Dark Serpent Twins brought it up made Igor sense something deeper. “Were the Elves... deliberately wiped out?”

The Dark Serpent Twins nodded. “Elves are the longest-lived among intelligent creatures, so they were also seen as... materials for achieving immortality.”

Igor’s pupils contracted sharply, and the name almost slipped out: “The Circle Cicada Demi-God!”

“Actually, it wasn’t just the Circle Cicada Demi-God’s pursuit of immortality,” the Dark Serpent Twins said, seemingly wistful. “The Knowing Guard Fire Demi-God’s goal of

allowing ordinary people to wield spirits, the Chasing Light Demi-God's ambition to conquer death-which of these desires was easy to achieve? Without extensive and brutal human experiments, how could there have been the Bluebird Divine Era or the Gray Fox Divine Era?"

"The Gray Fox Divine Era was indeed a beautiful time that everyone yearned for, but the Fire Cat Divine Era was not. It was a mad age when all of Senlo was burning for the sake of these three Demi-Gods."

"The reason Nightfall managed to survive the cataclysm is that it's not just a legacy of the Gray Fox."

"It's also the remnants of the Fire Cat."

Ashe glanced down at his wristwatch and noticed the Trial count had changed to 18.

Although the interval between Trials had been extended from 30 minutes to 60 minutes, they had still been fighting for over ten hours. Ashe had been both traveling and battling, and even with the Trial rewards replenishing his stamina, he felt utterly exhausted, both mentally and physically.

The most frustrating part was that enemies he had already defeated could reappear with different abilities. For example, aside from the initial "Mental Rust Crow," Ashe had also encountered "Poison Smoke Rust Crow" and "Bomb Rust Crow." He never expected Igor to be so versatile.

Annan was no exception. Besides the “Gunmanship Purple Moth,” there was also the “Infinite Firepower Purple Moth,” which immediately unleashed the Miracle “Honor of the Dolan Family” upon appearing. Six guns fired simultaneously, nearly overwhelming Ashe and the Observer, as if taunting, “I’m starting with my ultimate move this time-let’s see how you dodge this.”

Yet, even as the Trial enemies’ strength escalated to the two-wings level, Ashe and his companions managed to hold their ground. Not only did their physical abilities rapidly improve, but Ashe’s “senses” also grew sharper. He could now predict all incoming attacks, and his body was able to keep up with the speed of his thoughts.

By the time Ashe formulated a battle strategy in his mind, his body had already executed it.

Despite his rapid growth in strength, Ashe wasn’t particularly thrilled. However, since the Observer beside him didn’t comment, Ashe kept his thoughts to himself.

When they finally reached the glowing door at the end of the passage, Ashe breathed a sigh of relief, though he knew the real challenge was just beginning. “How do we split this? Do you want to take on the Mirror Master or Silver Lantern? I’m not confident I can defeat either of them.”

“Neither am I,” the Observer replied calmly.

“Then let’s not split up,” Ashe said. “Since we work so well together, let’s team up and make them cry.”

“Agreed.”

With their decision made, Ashe and the Observer stepped through the glowing door and entered the second chamber.

The next moment, Ashe found himself in a brightly lit hall. He immediately dodged to the right, anticipating a possible ambush, and glanced around.

Then he froze.

“Where is everyone?”

The glowing door had turned into a wall, which Ashe had expected. But the direction he had come from showed no trace of the Observer!

Had the Observer suddenly noticed his shoelaces were untied and stopped to tie them?

“In the Cicada Hall, the Fate Twins are separated, and the passage to the next chamber won’t open for ten minutes.”

Ashe turned to see Silver Lantern standing in the center of the hall, still wearing her fox mask and dressed in her elaborate attire.

“Then where did they go?”

“In another chamber,” Vesser said. “They’ll either spend the next ten minutes peacefully... or...”

“Decide life and death.”

As soon as she finished speaking, the two of them charged at each other, continuing the battle from last night!

“Can we just sit here for ten minutes?”

Seeing the Observer draw his twin swords, the Mirror Master, who was sitting cross-legged on the floor, immediately raised her hands in surrender. “If you’re going to kill me, just do it. I’m not fighting.”

The Observer sheathed his swords and said, “Something unexpected might happen.”

“Huh?”

“Ashe’s foundation is weak, so he’s gained the most from the Trials. Combined with his talent...” the Observer said, “Vesser might not be able to defeat him.”

“I have a different view,” the Mirror Master said with a grin. “In terms of talent, Vesser isn’t lacking either. Plus, she has the silver dragon blood, so her physical abilities are at least on par with Ashe’s, if not better.”

“More importantly, she’s been in a bad mood since she woke up today. It’s terrifying.”

“This time, she might really want to kill Ashe.”

## Chapter 578: The Hollow Vessel

As soon as the fight began, Ashe felt an overwhelming discomfort.

It wasn’t because the Blood Seed inside him was continuously draining his life energy to his opponent, nor was it because Silver Lantern’s combat prowess far surpassed his own.

In fact, after a day of Trial rewards, Ashe's physical abilities had rapidly improved. Even though he still couldn't match Silver Lantern's silver dragon blood physique, the gap wasn't so wide that he would be completely dominated.

What troubled him was that Silver Lantern possessed the same level of 'senses' as he did.

The Honey Sword and the Chain Glove clashed, producing a sharp, grating sound. In that instant, Ashe keenly sensed Silver Lantern's follow-up move, but she, too, anticipated all the variations of his strike. Their predictions led them directly to the final step, and once again, their blades met!

After several exchanges, neither of them bore any injuries, but the fatigue in their eyes was unmistakable. I predict your prediction, and you predict mine. When both sides instinctively make the optimal decisions, the battle turns into a tedious and exhausting charade.

As if struck by a mutual understanding, they locked eyes and abruptly plunged into the most perilous close-quarters combat! Since both had predictive abilities, they dragged the fight into a life-and-death quagmire, using the mire of fear to disrupt each other's judgment!

When it came to risking it all, they both had unwavering confidence!

But this time, Ashe didn't abandon his sword. With his right hand extended, he angled the blade for a diagonal thrust. Vesser slapped with her left hand, and Ashe used the force to pivot his wrist, his long sword tracing an ellipse as it cut toward Vesser's throat in a delayed yet precise motion.

Moonlit Water Swordsmanship.

Though there was no spirit to assist him, Ashe had recalled the Sword Princess's combat style from over a dozen battles and extracted the essence of this miracle, barely managing to execute a defensive counter with mortal swordsmanship!

As a Truth sorcerer, Vesser naturally recognized the brilliance of this move. If she delved deeper into studying this swordsmanship, she might even be able to summon the Moonlit Water spirit... Yet, the more talented Ashe proved to be, the more her killing intent surged!

Snap!

She sent the long sword flying into the air, and within two seconds, they exchanged over a dozen attacks and defenses. Although Vesser had integrated various techniques from the Senlo cult, Ashe had the foundation of a Golden-level Fist-Claw Sect. Sure, he had nearly been reduced to tears the night before, but would the same moves work on him a second time?

Of course they would.

Vesser wasn't some lazy Lala Fatty. If Ashe could make such significant progress in today's Trial, couldn't she also innovate and refine her skills?



Even without spirits or spellforce, she was still a Truth sorcerer!

The long sword, flung into the air, began its descent. Ashe swiftly grabbed the hilt, shifting to a reverse grip and slashing horizontally. Vesser had no choice but to retreat to avoid the strike. Yet, Ashe pressed forward, closing the distance once more. How could Vesser allow him to expand his advantage? Her chain-wrapped hand snaked toward the sword blade, attempting to wrest the weapon from his grasp.

To Vesser's surprise, Ashe not only abandoned the sword but actively shoved it into her hand. Then, with both hands, he launched a fierce assault, his strikes as powerful as a tiger's pounce.

Vesser, possessing the swordsmanship of a silver-level practitioner, immediately swung the sword in retaliation. However, Ashe deflected her attacks bare-handed, forcing her to abandon the sword and focus on defense. Seizing the opportunity, Ashe reclaimed the sword and with two swift slashes, cut through her clothing. Had Vesser not dodged in time, she might have suffered a critical injury.

How utterly infuriating!

Vesser had already discerned Ashe's strategy: he had seamlessly blended his golden-level Swordsmanship with his golden-level Fist-Claw Sect techniques. This fusion not only amplified the lethality of his swordplay but also incorporated the agility of his fist and claw strikes. His movements were as chaotic and unpredictable as a circus act—one moment his fists struck like thunder, the next his blade sliced through the air! Moreover, Ashe's long sword was no hindrance to his close combat prowess; he could toss it into the air or shove it into her hands without breaking his rhythm.

In other words, Ashe was leveraging his spellcasting realm to dominate her!

But mastery in the spellcasting realm only allowed Ashe to excel in specific disciplines; it didn't mean he could casually fuse different sects. Even Vesser, a Truth sorcerer proficient in over twenty spellcasting sects, found this feat nearly impossible.

And Ashe? He had always been the mascot hiding behind the Sword Princess and the Witch in the Virtual Realm. How could he suddenly possess such combat genius? Vesser knew he wasn't the type to conceal his strength. On the contrary, he was the kind who'd eagerly announce, "I've gotten stronger, come praise me!" Therefore, this newfound prowess could only be the result of the past two days of Trials.

Was it possible that being thrown into a Trial where no one could hear his cries for help had led to such tremendous growth?

While Vesser was reeling from shock, Ashe was feeling more and more exhilarated, as if he were floating on air.

As far back as that rainy night in Nabistin, when he had single-handedly fought dozens of Sanctuary-level opponents, Ashe had sensed that he was rapidly assimilating the spellcasting experience shared by the Witch and the Sword Princess over the past days. However, after the title of First Gospel was reclaimed by Lise, Ashe lost his cheat code and naturally hit a bottleneck.

Forced into this Trial, Ashe felt the bottleneck loosening as his physical abilities and senses improved. Now, on this solo date with Silver Lantern, facing an opponent whose combat skills were no less formidable than his own, Ashe unleashed everything he had. The more he fought, the more confident he became, and finally, he achieved the seamless fusion of Swordsmanship and Fist-Claw techniques!

However-

Whoosh!

As Vesser deftly snatched the long sword and slashed back, Ashe tilted his head to dodge, but a streak of blood still marked his cheek.

Even though he immediately reclaimed the sword, he couldn't leverage his superior skill to widen the gap further.

The scales of battle had balanced once again.

Because Vesser had already incorporated all his combat techniques into her predictions.

That's right, Ashe's skills were superior to Vesser's, but was the gap between their realms wide enough to be overwhelming? No.

Unless Ashe could, like Tamashi, unleash a shockwave with his bare hands and shatter brain tissue from a distance, he and Vesser were still fighting at the level of mortals.

Even if Vesser's technique was slightly inferior, as long as their attack power was roughly the same, she could naturally block Ashe's moves and even trade injuries with him.

Not only that, but as time went on, both sides gradually memorized each other's fighting styles to the point of perfection. Their predictive abilities deepened further, to the extent that they were essentially reciting each other's moves.

When Ashe's gaze shifted downward, Vesser could see the trajectory of his next several dozen sword strikes. When Vesser changed her stance, Ashe knew exactly what fighting style she would switch to.

They weren't fighting; they were replaying the future they had already foreseen.

"How far can your eyes see?" Vesser asked calmly, as if unaffected by the storm of their battle.

"I see your death," Ashe replied without hesitation.

“I see myself achieving my desires, realizing my ideals, and reaching eternity. The world changes because of me, fate diverges at my presence, and though history may not record me, I will become history,” Vesser said. “What do you see? Marrying a few wives? Having a few children?”

“Why are you using the word ‘few’...” Ashe gradually adapted to the rhythm of conversation during their deadly clash. “At most, I see myself growing old with the one I love.”

“How pitiful. You don’t even dare to chase immortality?”

“Of course I do. Who wouldn’t? But priorities differ. If I can hold onto happiness and still have the strength, I’ll naturally pursue those distant, extravagant dreams.”

“Happiness within a life shrouded by aging and death is nothing but a dream phantom,” Vesser said. “A fleeting delusion.”

“But aren’t you the same?” Ashe countered. “You’re so desperate to chase your dreams, scheming tirelessly, willing to pay any price—isn’t it because you’re also terrified of the unpredictable twists of fate?”

The personality of the Senlo people is deeply intertwined with this wasteland. Or rather, the people of every Kingdom bear the indelible mark of their homeland.

Just as the people of the Blood Moon inevitably gravitate toward self-destruction, the Senlo people, shaped by their environment of endless night, the Choking Green, the wasteland of Doomsday, and the rampant Green Calamity, have witnessed too many sudden deaths. This has instilled in them a deep understanding of the phrase “time waits for no one.” Coupled with the possibility of becoming a Demi-God after death, nearly everyone is eager to burn themselves out in pursuit of their ideals, knowing that even in death, they can continue to exist in another form.

To resist the threat of the Choking Green, the Senlo people must cultivate an intensely passionate sense of self. The faith in Demi-Gods serves as both a shortcut to developing this self and a vessel to contain it.

Once this vessel is lost, most souls wither away in emptiness until they find a new one. A rare few, like those of Raven Annihilation, Silver Lantern, and the founders of various cults, possess selves so vast that they can illuminate the night, burning until they themselves become new Demi-Gods, receiving the worship and devotion of others.

“But death is not an end for me; it is a rebirth. It is not a conclusion but a deadline,” Vesser said, her voice unwavering even as the sword blade nearly grazed her throat. “Death has never spared you, but I have never spared death. That is the difference between us.”

Are you trying to rattle me with words to create an opening? Ashe thought, responding bluntly, “So what? I don’t care. I just want to live an ordinary, peaceful life. Do you need me to praise you for your grand ambitions?”

“But is that what your companions want as well?” Vesser countered, her reverse-gripped sword now at Ashe’s throat. Her fox mask concealed her face, but her piercing eyes locked onto his. “Does the mental sorcerer want a peaceful life? Does the necromancer aspire to be ordinary?”

Ashe deflected the blade and struck back. "Of course they don't."

"Then why do they choose to follow you? Do you know why?"

"Obviously because of my extraordinary charisma."

"Exactly."

Ashe was momentarily stunned, and that split second of hesitation nearly cost him his life. He thought to himself, How shameless of Silver Lantern to suddenly throw in a compliment while berating me, throwing me off balance... This is psychological warfare!

"It is indeed because of your charm," Vesser said coldly. "Because you are hollow enough."

"Your companions-are they not all insatiable, fiercely ambitious individuals who cannot accept mediocrity? If you weren't there, do you think they could coexist peacefully and form bonds?"

Ashe's mind immediately flashed to his former companions: Annan, Banjeet, Lise, Igor, Harvey, Langna, Ronald, Tamashi... and the Sword Princess and the Witch.

Though he was reluctant to boast about his own importance-doing so would seem far too arrogant-he couldn't help but wonder: Could Igor and Harvey really come together and coexist peacefully? If not for this series of events, Harvey would have likely found some desolate burial ground to squat in for decades until he became the Ghost King, while Igor would have been well on his way to his path as the Rust Crow.

As for Tamashi... Ashe could easily guess that if he didn't return to Nightfall and reunite with the others soon, Tamashi's status in Igor's eyes would quickly drop from "teammate" to "artifact," or even "disposable artifact."

Annan was an even heavier case. Igor might let it slide, but Harvey surely still harbored thoughts of revenge against her. If not for Ashe, and if Harvey could return to the Gospel Kingdom, he would never let go of the Purple Moth who once dominated him.

The relationship between Annan and Lise was even more absurd. Annan wanted to overthrow the Gospel, while Lise was the First Gospel.

As for the Sword Princess and the Witch, although they got along well, Ashe couldn't help but ask himself: If it were just the two of them, could they really have formed the bond they have now? The Sword Princess initially despised newcomers, and the Witch had often fallen into bouts of madness over the messiness of her hair...

"You've realized your importance, haven't you?" Vesser said. "But why is it that someone as empty and without ideals like you becomes the key figure connecting everyone else? Why would those filled with passion and ambition be willing to be your companions?"



“It’s precisely because their desires are too intense, their dreams too grand, that they need you so much. You’re an empty vase, a hollow socket. They can’t become companions with each other-those with the same intensity only burn one another. But only someone as empty and ordinary as you can contain their immense egos and give them peace.”

Snap!

Ashe finally left an opening, and Vesser’s hand blade slashed past, cutting a bloody gash into his left shoulder!

“You’re not their companion at all,” the voice behind the fox mask was venomous. “What they see in you is themselves.”

“What you think is a bond of companionship is nothing but a one-sided delusion.”

## Chapter 579: The Swap

“Why the sudden interest in my relationships, Silver Lantern?” Ashe’s tone was light. “I can’t even retaliate, since you don’t have any relationships to speak of.”

After injuring his left shoulder, the functionality of Ashe’s left hand had noticeably declined. But just as Ashe’s high realm couldn’t overpower Vesser, his injured left hand still allowed him to hold his own in battle, though moving it was a bit painful.

“Is retaliating against me meaningful?” A soft chuckle came from behind the fox mask. “The point is your own thoughts.”

“If you’re trying to sow discord or mentally shake me, you’ve succeeded,” Ashe said. “I never thought in the direction you suggested, but upon reflection, it does make some sense.”

“You people of Senlo, under extreme death pressure, religious indoctrination, and lack of entertainment, indeed have the potential to be philosophers.”

Hearing Ashe’s admission, Vesser couldn’t help but breathe a little faster, eager to say, “Changing the subject is pointless. As long as you accept this idea in your heart, the seed will take root. You’ll soon realize you have no companions-“

“I do.”

Ashe wrapped his left hand around Vesser’s right hand, reversing his grip on the sword to slash at her throat. “You make a good point, but how are they not my companions?”

“You consider this parasitic relationship a companionship? Then the snail and its shell are companions too.”

“They can see themselves in my eyes,” Ashe stared into the eyes behind the mask, “because I am also watching them.”

“Perhaps I am indeed the vessel for their self-projection, but am I not also admiring them?”

Vesser clenched her teeth, even though her stamina was nearly depleted, she mustered her energy and suddenly intensified her attacks, focusing on Ashe’s left hand, trying to bring him down.

Yet Ashe still kept up with her combat rhythm, saying, “Although I yearn for a mundane and peaceful life, do I not enjoy those grand adventures? Impossible, even if I stay at home, I play those explosive virtual games to get my fix.”

“I admire them, Silver Lantern. Though Igor has a terrible personality and a strong desire for domination, like me, he enjoys using grand, mocking pranks to counter the twisted and bizarre order. Our bond probably started from that grand prank.”

“Harvey’s interests are far from ordinary. Although I’ve been so influenced by him that I can almost understand him, no normal person would ever accept him. Yet, I admire his determination. Ununderstood, unloved, with his legacy severed, he never complains, no matter how harsh the environment, and even tries to drag us into his mess... If he died in Senlo, he’d undoubtedly become a Demi-God.”

“Raven Annihilation is the same. As someone despised by the Virtual Realm, he accepted his ordinariness but not the fate of an ordinary person. Mercury Trojan Horse dares not show her face because of him, you, Silver Lantern, fear his killing blows, and we respect him as a fighter of equal caliber... How could I not respect him?”

“And the Swordmaster who dreams of becoming a performer, the Purple Moth who seeks to overturn divine intervention... Even if their dreams aren’t necessarily noble or just, I still admire them.”

“Whenever I see these people of unwavering determination, I feel...” Ashe’s lips curved into a smile, “that perhaps I came to this world just to witness their colors.”

“How boring,” Vesser said coldly. “Perhaps only someone as hollow as you could walk alongside people with such disparate desires... You’re nothing more than strangers who coincidentally ended up together, hardly like-minded at all.”

“There aren’t that many like-minded people in this world,” Ashe replied. “Even dreamers with the same goals will have different desires. Silver Lantern, your standards for companions are strict, but in my eyes, as long as we can respect and admire each other’s dreams, that’s enough to be companions.”

“Because admiration is the wheel of bonds, leaving shared marks on the journey.”

Whoosh!

Ashe reversed his grip on the sword and slashed fiercely across the fox mask. Surprisingly, the mask’s quality held up, leaving only a faint scratch. “For example, Silver Lantern, though I don’t agree with your ideas, I admire your resolve.”

Vesser's attacks suddenly intensified, but Ashe countered each move. "You've kept everything bottled up, hidden away in the Tribulation Fire Temple, joined the Four Pillars Cult, and only at the last moment did you break away to walk your own path. No one understands you, everyone is hunting you, yet you've never wavered in your determination, never giving up even in the face of setbacks."

"Sometimes I feel like I'm the protagonist of some boring novel-no plan, no ideals, nothing-yet I'm here trying to stop you, a villain with grand ideals, a far-reaching plan, and unshakable resolve."

"If we could have just sat down and talked from the beginning," Ashe said, "perhaps you wouldn't have had to come this far."

At this moment, Vesser suddenly recalled the history of another world line that her Mirror Dragon avatar had once mentioned.

In that world line, she hadn't destroyed the Tribulation Fire Temple, Mercury Trojan Horse hadn't assassinated her, she hadn't used the Dragon Blood Cultivation System, and she had gained an ally...

But that was a story from another world line.

As time passed, Ashe's left shoulder injury worsened, blood loss increased rapidly, draining his stamina, and the influence of the Blood Seed grew stronger. Although Vesser was also exhausted, Ashe reached the breaking point faster-

Thud!

Ashe was kicked far away, and the Honey Sword he had been holding flew into the air, only to be caught by Vesser. She didn't immediately pursue him but instead took a deep breath. Her entire body was drenched in sweat, and after a moment, a small puddle formed on the ground beneath her.

Ashe was equally exhausted. The moment he stopped, his muscles, flesh, and bones ached so much he couldn't lift them, as if every cell in his body was protesting the overtime. He struggled to sit up, watching as Silver Lantern approached step by step with her long sword in hand. "You were so fixated on the keyword 'companions' earlier. I thought you were jealous of me."

Vesser didn't respond, gripping her sword with both hands. This time, she would show no mercy.

"But I finally realized," Ashe said, "you're actually jealous of what I've given them, aren't you?"

In that instant, Vesser's hand trembled slightly, and Ashe seized the opportunity to grab her wrist, wrest the long sword from her, and then they quickly separated, standing at opposite corners of the hall.

The four passageways arranged in a cross around them had quietly opened at some point, perhaps unnoticed due to the intensity of their fight. Unlike the passages in the Cicada Lurk Hall, the ones in the Cicada Hall were light gates, seemingly leading directly to other places.

Ashe and Vesser locked eyes across the distance.

At the beginning, they both thought they could make the other stay. But now, they just wanted to leave as quickly as possible.

Watching Silver Lantern disappear into the light gate, Ashe also let out a long breath and turned to step into another light gate.

He immediately sensed someone beside him and reached out to place a hand on their shoulder. "Help me up. I'm completely worn out this time..."

"Sure thing."

Hearing the deliberately cutesy voice of a mature woman, Ashe froze, his head turning stiffly.

He saw a fox mask.

The moment Vesser stepped out of the light gate, she nearly collapsed against the back wall, utterly drained. She pressed a hand to her pounding heart, trying to dissipate the heat in her body through shallow, rapid breaths.

How could I possibly be jealous of him? It's just... the intense battle causing hormonal imbalances... Don't overthink it...

Vesser quickly calmed her thoughts and turned to ask, "On your side-"

The next second, she froze.

The emotionless swordsman, with twin swords at his waist, was leaning against the passage wall, his cold gaze fixed on her.

## Chapter 580: Chrysalis

Although Vesser reacted immediately, her hands striking like venomous snakes aiming for the Observer's vital points, his speed was far beyond hers-

Thud!



The tip of the sword pressed against Vesser's throat, pinning her to the wall.

There was no fancy technique involved. She clearly 'perceived' that the Observer had simply drawn his sword, thrust it forward, and struck. His physical abilities weren't superhuman, yet his movements were inexplicably fast, almost...

Almost as unreasonable as that Raven Annihilation.

The Observer sheathed his sword and walked down the corridor without a word.

Vesser touched her throat, finding no wound. A realization dawned on her, just as a new message popped up on her wrist device:

"Chrysalis: Before the trial begins again, all Trial Takers are protected by a sanctuary-like barrier called 'Chrysalis,' which nullifies all damage. The Chrysalis disappears once the trial starts."

"Metamorphosis: During the trial in the passage leading to the Chrysalis Hall, there is a chance of encountering sanctuary-level combatants."

The trial information was still stingy with details, but these key points were enough for Vesser to understand the focus of the third trial-cooperation and betrayal.

The existence of the 'Chrysalis' meant that, at least before the trial began, they didn't have to worry about being assassinated by other Trial Takers. However, the rise in the enemy's power to the sanctuary level meant that they would have to cooperate sincerely to have any chance of surviving the trial.

Yet, her current teammate wasn't the familiar Fate Twins, but the Observer-Ashe's other half, with whom she had been locked in a life-and-death struggle just two days ago!

Though she hadn't interacted much with the Observer, Ashe had already revealed most of his personality traits in the Virtual Realm. Setting aside subjective impressions like 'tsundere,' Vesser had a very clear understanding of the Observer: calm, cold-blooded, unmoved by external factors, and untroubled by emotions.

On the surface, the Observer seemed like the 'real Ashe' she needed. However, the Observer not only protected Ashe but also maintained a good relationship with him, which showed that he was still trapped in the delusion Ashe had created.

As a manufactured half of fate, the Observer was at best a poor imitation of the 'real Ashe'-ultimately, just a younger brother.

Though the Observer wasn't perfect, as an enemy, he was extremely difficult to deal with. Vesser understood the mindset of such people all too well: all alliances were temporary, and they only trusted their own judgment.

He could choose to cooperate with Vesser one moment and betray her the next, as long as he saw a high enough stake!

If the 'Chrysalis' could exist indefinitely, they might still have a foundation for cooperation, since they couldn't harm each other. However, once the Trial began, the Chrysalis would disappear, and friendly fire would be enabled.

At that point, the Observer could pin her to the wall with a single thrust of his sword!

Of course, Vesser's hands could just as easily crush his windpipe!

Would she dare to entrust her back to the Observer during battle, instead of keeping three parts of her attention on the enemy and seven parts on him? Would the Observer dare to fight with full focus, rather than constantly keeping her in his line of sight?

Under these circumstances, how much of their true strength could they actually unleash?

What's most intriguing is that 'sanctuary sorcerers' are only a possibility, not a guarantee.

Given their current combat power, even facing a two-wings sorcerer one-on-one wouldn't be an impossible challenge. This means the Observer could gamble on the Trial not featuring a sanctuary sorcerer, assassinate her during the fight, and then clear the Trial on his own-after all, not having to worry about a teammate's betrayal might actually be safer.

Vesser had the same thought.

Of course, she wouldn't take that gamble herself, but she hoped Yolan would. She hoped Yolan would seize the opportunity to backstab Ashe during the battle.

At this moment, Vesser suddenly understood the hidden malice and mockery in this Trial mechanism:

First, the 'Cicada Lurk Hall,' where they were destined to meet in a chaotic battle, sowing seeds of enmity;

Then, the 'Cicada Hall,' where all the Twins were separated, forced into solo skirmishes.

Immediately after, on the path to the 'Chrysalis Hall,' they had to swap teammates with the very enemies they'd clashed with just days prior, facing not only the threat of sanctuary sorcerers but also the danger of betrayal from their supposed allies.

Thankfully, this Trial only involved their two groups. In the heyday of the Gray Fox Divine Era, when sixteen groups competed for the divine fire, the deceit, suspicion, and mutual wariness would have been enough to make one's scalp crawl.

At this point, a flicker of doubt arose in Vesser's mind-the mechanisms of the Cicada Lurk and Cicada Halls were one thing, perhaps necessary 'tests of death' to filter out the most

qualified candidates for the divine fire. But the Chrysalis mechanism seemed almost nakedly malicious, as if designed to expose the Trial Takers' ugliest sides.

Were the hearts of the Gray Fox Divine Era's Demi-God followers truly so dark...?

Just then, Vesser followed the Observer to a door. It slid open automatically, and their wrist devices chimed with a notification that they'd entered the rest area.

Unlike the previous rest area, this one was divided into a common room and two separate bedrooms. Vesser breathed a sigh of relief-at least the Gray Fox sorcerers had some decency, allowing them to rest apart and not have to constantly watch their backs.

If she had to share a room with her enemy, Vesser wouldn't even dare to enter the Virtual Realm, let alone sleep soundly. She'd have to keep one eye open at all times, and she wouldn't even risk taking off her fox mask. How could she possibly rest and recover? After all, he wasn't Ashe...

Click.

The Observer silently entered his room and shut the door firmly behind him. Vesser exhaled a long breath and stepped into the other bedroom to bandage her wounds. While she had injured Ashe, he hadn't exactly left her unscathed either.

Vesser removed her fox mask and peeled off the tattered clothing Ashe had left her in, revealing a body covered in bruises. As she looked at herself in the mirror, a strange thought crossed her mind: perhaps this was the true meaning of the ‘Chrysalis.’ It allowed Trial Takers to seal themselves in isolated rooms, within a sanctuary-like barrier, granting them a rare moment of tranquility. It was in this solitary cocoon that they could undergo their own metamorphosis.

Suddenly, the corners of Vesser’s lips curled upward as she thought of something that brought her joy.

She realized that just as she had lost Yolan, Ashe had also lost the Observer.

Ashe, you’ve finally lost the only half you could rely on.

So, are you, like me, now trapped in a chrysalis?

“Ouch, be gentle, it hurts.”

“Who did this to you? It’s so brutal, utterly inhumane. Just looking at it makes me wince...”

In the common room of the rest area, Ashe turned his head and shot a pitiful glare at Yolan’s fox mask.

Yolan tilted her head slightly. “Hmm, I think it was the other me who did this. Actually, if you look closely, it’s kind of artistic. See this bruise? Doesn’t it look like a violet...”

“Stop poking it!” Ashe hissed through clenched teeth.

After a while, they finally finished bandaging his wounds. Ashe gingerly rotated his left arm. “It still hurts a bit. It might affect me in the first Trial tomorrow, so...”

“Leave it to me!”

Yolan rolled up her sleeve and flexed her baby-sized bicep. “As long as it’s not a sanctuary sorcerer, I can handle it all by myself!”

“I don’t doubt your strength,” Ashe said, glancing at her. “After fighting the Observer, not only did you escape unscathed, but you didn’t even have a scratch on you... I’m just glad I didn’t run into you earlier, or I’d probably be dead by now.”

“That’s not true at all. The Observer just has a soft spot for girls and didn’t hit me. Don’t let his cold exterior fool you-he’s actually quite gentle with women.” Yolan waved her hand dismissively. “I’m really not that strong.”

“Aside from that last sentence, I agree with most of what you said,” Ashe replied.

“So, you’re still wary of me,” Yolan said, feigning dejection. “Sigh, I get it. After all, I’m the other half of Silver Lantern. It’s only natural for you to be cautious of me.”

“If I were you, encountering a half of an enemy who is despicable, ruthless, cold-blooded, and utterly wicked, I would definitely be extremely cautious and wouldn’t believe a single word-or even a punctuation mark-that came out of their mouth.”

Ashe blinked, “You’re really tearing into Silver Lantern...”

Yolan shook her head, giggling, “I’m not talking about Silver Lantern... But I get it. I’ll go back to my room now and stay out of your sight until tomorrow morning. As for the third Trial, you can just stand behind me the whole time. If I were behind you, you’d probably suspect I’m plotting to stab you in the back...”

Seeing her pretend to leave, Ashe quickly pulled her back down. “If I were wary of you, I wouldn’t have asked you to help bandage me up.”

“You’re only letting me touch you so freely because of the ‘Chrysalis’ protection, right?” Yolan suddenly turned sharp-tongued. “If there were no Chrysalis, would you dare to put your neck in my hands?”

“Of course... not.”



“I knew it.” Yolan pouted cutely, but her tone deepened the second time. “I knew it.”

“So, isn’t this our best opportunity?”

“Huh?”

“With the Chrysalis protecting us, we no longer have to fear hurting each other,” Ashe said. “Maybe that’s why the ‘partner exchange’ suddenly appeared in the Trial.”

Yolan shook her head, “I don’t follow. Isn’t the ‘partner exchange’ mechanism meant to increase the difficulty of our Trial?”

Ashe shook his head, “The so-called chrysalis is a necessary step before metamorphosis. Six hours from now, when the Trial begins, our Chrysalis will disappear... Doesn’t that make the meaning of the Chrysalis obvious?”

“The Chrysalis is the Trial’s way of giving us a chance to understand each other, a chance to transform together,” Ashe said. “Let’s have a good talk, Mirror Master.”