

The Gods 471

Chapter 471: New Trial — Why All Beings Rot, Why All Things Decay [Decay]

Everyone sat cross-legged in a circle before the clock, silently rehearsing the prayer, determined to recite every word flawlessly the instant the hour struck.

In those final minutes, Hu Wei suddenly proposed:

"I know everyone here is trustworthy. But this excursion carries extraordinary stakes. So allow me to play the villain in these last moments— please, everyone, bring out your faith tokens.

"Let us pray for this trial while facing one another's symbols of faith."

The moment he finished, Hu Wei and Da Yi both drew their weapons across their palms and planted their blood-slicked armaments into the ground before them.

Everyone had already seen Hu Wei's greatsword, but Da Yi's weapon was a first: a double-pointed stinger needle, roughly the length and thickness of a finger.

He really was an assassin!

And one who possessed a sixth finger, no less — because a needle that small would only ever dance and flip between an assassin's fingers, acting as a phantom sixth digit.

[War]'s token was inherently a single drop of blood. Choosing it at the Path Starting Point meant the player had to find a way to draw their own blood and resonate with it.

Over time within the game, this evolved into the Blood Splash Rite — drawing blood with one's weapon, then flinging it before oneself.

Hu Wei's request wasn't unreasonable. Though everyone knew perfectly well that no surprises could occur at this point, they complied nonetheless.

Mo Li produced a codex. The lance and shield emblazoned on its cover gleamed brilliantly, and the aura of Law Commands radiated solemn authority.

Hu Xuan set down a stone egg before her — a fossil-like object etched with countless microscopic veins of flesh and blood. This was [Birth]'s token from the Path Starting Point.

In the Faith Game, every faith besides [Void] barely needed their token for Oracle Acts. For most believers, these objects were more like badges identifying their faith than functional tools.

But [Void] was different. Its followers had to perform Oracle Acts in conjunction with their tokens. This meant nearly every [Deceit] follower kept a Die of Fate on hand — because even if they didn't need it, they had to have it ready just in case.

And so, as fellow [Deceit] believers, Long Jing and Cheng Shi simultaneously produced a Die of Fate in front of everyone.

"..."

"..."

"..."

Seeing the group's peculiar expressions, Long Jing froze mid-motion, then swapped the die in his hand at blinding speed for a pure-white mask.

"Apologies. Force of habit."

"..."

Everyone exchanged glances, mouths twitching. 'So this is how these con artists open. Still obsessed with impersonating [Fate] followers.'

Only Cheng Shi knew this was purely the acrobat's misdirection. The faux pas concealed the truth about his mask, which was just as fake as the die — both were forgeries.

Yet the sleight of hand perfectly redirected everyone's attention.

Cheng Shi should have laughed at the scene. But right now, every eye was on the Die of Fate sitting before him, and laughter was the last thing on his mind.

He scanned the group's faces, noticed they all looked like they'd breathed a sigh of relief, and quipped:

"What's that look for? Mine's the real deal. If anyone doubts it, feel free to inspect the merchandise."

That drew genuine laughter from the others. Hu Wei guffawed and waved it off, then instantly sobered:

"Time's almost up. Fifteen seconds. Everyone, ready."

He said this, but his gaze never left Cheng Shi's die.

Cheng Shi smiled along on the surface, but his heart lurched. 'Not good.'

He'd originally planned to secretly pray toward his mask, letting [Fate] deliver him smoothly into the trial. But who could have predicted that at this most secure of moments, Hu Wei would pull an even more secure maneuver?

It wasn't that Cheng Shi feared being exposed — his die was genuine and functional. The problem was...

His die was abnormal!

Though the Die of Fate was supposed to be [Fate]'s token, reality sometimes contained things that "shouldn't" be. Take the current situation: the die in Cheng Shi's hand didn't represent [Fate] at all. It represented... [Deceit]!

While [Fate] might "eavesdrop," the one who actually responded to his every prayer was the Fun God!

So if he recited [War]'s prayer while facing the Die of Fate, did that count as blaspheming one Benefactor, or two?

Would He let him join this trial?

Or to put it more directly: did He think the entertainment value of this trial was big enough?

And if it wasn't — what then?

At this thought, cold sweat nearly broke out.

But it was too late to change anything. As the second hand hit the mark, Cheng Shi had no choice but to join the others in reciting the pre-written prayer.

He quickly clasped the Die of Fate, held it before him with one hand while the other hid in his sleeve behind his back, and recited with utmost reverence:

"How does one survive? Only through blood and fire..."

Even as he spoke, he silently prayed that the Fun God wouldn't pull some outrageous stunt. But when the prompt appeared before his eyes, his expression crumbled exactly as expected.

[Wish Trial (Why All Beings Rot, Why All Things Decay [Decay]) has been initiated]

[Matching teammates (1/6)]

[Trial Objective: All beings are ordained to decay, yet none know why the universe decays (Time limit: 5 days)]

"..."

'Great. Just great!'

'I knew it!'

[War] really could take a punch. Even after he'd prayed by name, he'd still been shunted into a [Decay] trial.

'Why All Beings Rot, Why All Things Decay!'

'How catastrophic must things be for a god to rewrite His own prayer as a trial's title?'

Staring at this trial name he'd never seen before, Cheng Shi's heart dropped.

'Oh no. He's not going to keep venting His unspent rage on me, is He?'

'Dear Benefactor, You love watching the show, but shouldn't You at least consider whether the clown on stage might actually die?'

'I've already pissed off [Decay] once. If He decides to press the issue and I have to say some... unsavory things to survive, You'll have to... bear with me.'

Cheng Shi's face was black as ink.

Never mind whether the trial would be difficult — just being matched into a [Decay] instance meant this trial was guaranteed to involve unforgettable suffering.

All he could do now was pray he was overthinking things. Otherwise...

In the last second before his vision went dark, Cheng Shi quickly scanned the others. When he noticed that everyone except him wore faint smiles, his expression darkened even further.

'So I'm the only unlucky one?'

"..."

[Match successful (6/6). Entering trial]

Chapter 472: Familiar Faces Again

"Whooo—"

Frigid wind howled, biting to the bone.

The snowflakes carried by the gale were anything but soft. Shards of ice whipped and swirled like invisible rakes scraping across the earth, carving countless furrows and ridges into the blanket of white.

Cheng Shi shuddered.

His consciousness hadn't even returned before his body began reacting. The unexpected cold set him trembling, muscles contracting involuntarily. It didn't take long before he snapped fully awake.

There were no smells to catch, no sounds to parse — only an endless blizzard roaring and howling its welcome to the arriving players.

Cheng Shi opened his eyes. Then immediately shut them.

No particular reason — too bright.

The sun hung in the sky, yet it resembled the giant phantom sun Hu Xuan transformed into: all brightness, no warmth. For a split second, Cheng Shi wondered if this brutal environment had forced Hu Xuan to reveal her true form.

But on second thought, among the five silhouettes he'd glimpsed... Hu Xuan didn't seem to be among them.

'She didn't match in?'

'No — more accurately, it was impossible for her to match in!'

Cheng Shi frowned, braving the blizzard to pull out a fur cloak. He draped it in front of him and squinted his eyes open. Since the cloak blocked his forward view, he could only see the two figures beside him.

Neither was from the group who'd prayed together moments ago. But Cheng Shi wasn't surprised — under these circumstances, encountering prayer partners would have been the truly bizarre outcome.

To his left stood a man with a somewhat wild, eccentric expression. His garments were resplendent — vivid colors, intricate patterns, high collar, cinched waist, billowing sleeves, and a long robe. With the wind catching his hems, at first glance he looked like he was cosplaying a medieval nobleman.

To his right was another man — fair-skinned, curly-haired, with a refined high-bridged nose. He had a scholarly appearance and wore himself with composure, dressed in an old-fashioned suit that gave him the air of an academic. Yet his behavior was surprisingly lively.

The reason being: Cheng Shi spotted him already atop a low building nearby, prying loose a half-person-length object resembling a lightning rod from the snow-covered rooftop.

Cheng Shi frowned, scanning the surroundings with scrutinizing eyes. Only after taking in the vast, empty snowfield and the buildings of varying heights around it did he realize their spawn point was a plaza. A blizzard-swept plaza.

So what was that broken rod?

He couldn't make out the rooftop details clearly, but his instincts told him it wasn't a lightning rod at all. It looked more like a sundial needle — the kind many ancient civilizations used for timekeeping.

He wasn't certain, but his right-side teammate soon confirmed it, trudging back through the howling wind while leaning on his "staff," laughing:

"Even if a sundial needle can't be used for timekeeping... pah, it makes a perfectly fine walking stick... ah, pah pah pah, sorry, this wind is brutal..."

"Looks like we've arrived in the northern reaches of the Land of Hope. Here's hoping this trial isn't too grueling — wind and snow notwithstanding."

"And what should I call my friend?"

'It really is a sundial needle!'

'So this teammate is...'

Cheng Shi studied this cheerful teammate, gaze sharpening. His left hand — hidden behind the wind-blocking cloak — instantly produced a pocket watch. He glanced at the time: just past twelve. High noon.

High noon, sun overhead, and yet a blizzard this intense? The weather was bizarre beyond measure. No wonder this teammate had preemptively grabbed a "hiking stick" for self-defense.

The friendly teammate was still approaching. He picked up the pace and extended his hand toward Cheng Shi with a brilliant smile.

Cheng Shi returned an equally brilliant smile but didn't shake hands. Instead, he lifted the fur cloak to indicate his hands were occupied.

"Cheng Shi. Nice to meet you."

The cheerful teammate blinked, then his eyes widened:

"Your name happens to be the same as a friend of mine. What a coincidence! I wonder if you know him — he's a Fate Weaver. Quite famous, too."

Cheng Shi arched a brow: "Oh? Famous how?"

"Ah, so you haven't heard. Hmm, where to begin..."

"To properly explain, you first need to know about a certain con artist. Name's Zhen Yi.

"Oh? Judging by your expression, you've heard of her. Good — then we can continue.

"The Zhen Yi you know and my friend have a bit of... that kind of relationship. Yep, your expression is priceless — exactly what you're thinking!

"Ha! Shocked, right? When I first found out, my face was even more exaggerated than yours."

As he spoke, this outgoing teammate actually began scooting closer, seemingly intent on squeezing under Cheng Shi's one-person-sized fur cloak to share cover from the wind.

"..."

Cheng Shi eyed this overly familiar teammate with a bewildered expression.

'Since when did I have a friend like you?'

'When exactly did we meet?'

'Who even are you?'

Just as the teammate was about to press up against him, Cheng Shi abruptly stepped back to create distance, then offered a polite smile:

"Unless I'm mistaken, I am the friend you just described.

"So — how should I address you, my 'old friend'?"

"..." Now it was the cheerful stranger's turn to fall silent.

He looked up in bewilderment, blinked several times, then blurted in shock: "It's really you?"

Cheng Shi's tone grew more teasing: "Why? Have we been apart so long you can't even recognize me?"

"..."

The teammate's smile froze on his face. He awkwardly jabbed the sundial needle into the ground and muttered under the cover of the howling wind: "Not bad looking, but that attitude's just like The Prisoner's..."

Of course, Cheng Shi didn't catch that. He only saw the man mumble something, then stand there with a strained laugh.

Sensing no hostility, Cheng Shi breezily let it slide and partially lowered his cloak to peer ahead through the blizzard.

At the windward end of the plaza stood three more teammates. None stood close to each other, and none appeared inclined to change that. They stood motionless in the howling snow like sculptures — so still that if their eyes hadn't been scanning the area, one might genuinely mistake them for newly erected statues.

The gale raged. Snow stung the eyes. Squinting against it, Cheng Shi could only make out their rough silhouettes — faces were impossible to discern. But even from shapes alone, he discovered that among these three were familiar faces!

And not just one, but two!

One "old acquaintance" and one "new friend"!

Standing to his front-left — directly ahead of the medieval nobleman — was the same burly [War] assassin Cheng Shi had prayed alongside at the Grand Marshal's campsite: Gap Light Iron Thorn, Da Yi!

Chapter 473: The Screaming Earl

The instant Cheng Shi spotted Da Yi, his pupils contracted sharply.

'Why is Da Yi here!?'

'No — how could he possibly be here?'

Cheng Shi's own presence in a [Decay] trial was undoubtedly the Fun God's doing. But Da Yi?

A [War] believer who prayed to his own Benefactor — could he also have "walked into the wrong room"?

'Surely the Fun God didn't toss him in here too?'

This contrast-defying assassin had genuinely prayed to his Benefactor, [War]!

If [Deceit] could slap [War] in the face this blatantly, what exactly was [War] even here for?

Padding the numbers for the Convention?

Cheng Shi couldn't figure it out. Neither could Da Yi.

Da Yi wasn't surprised by his own presence here. What stunned him was that the Fate Weaver had ended up in the same instance!

Honestly, the moment Da Yi saw Cheng Shi, his shock far exceeded Cheng Shi's own!

He'd considered the possibility of matching with campsite allies — but that should only have been the Grand Marshal Hu Wei. It shouldn't have been anyone else!

So Cheng Shi's appearance rattled him severely. But he hid the shock well, simply lowering his gaze in silence.

Da Yi was merely Cheng Shi's "new friend." The so-called "old acquaintance" was the short-haired female player standing somewhat further ahead. She'd bundled her upper body in a sleek black down jacket but left her lower half exposed — two pale, shapely legs gleaming in the snow.

Cheng Shi recognized her at first glance. Not because those legs were especially eye-catching, but because of that unmistakable black-to-cyan gradient wolf-tail hairstyle!

'It's her!'

'This trial just went south!'

Cheng Shi wasn't the only one who'd identified the female player. Others clearly recognized her too.

The wind still howled, yet Cheng Shi could distinctly hear the unrestrained laughter from the "medieval nobleman" to his left:

"Wonderful, wonderful!"

"I knew it. As long as I fantasized daily and prayed hourly, someday I'd match with you again, you rotten slut.

"Ha, hahahahaha!"

As he spoke, the nobleman's tone suddenly turned savage.

"Poison. Are you ready to die in my arms?"

!!!

'Drama!'

Cheng Shi's eyes lit up instantly.

But caution prevailed. He stepped back several paces, putting distance between himself and this medieval lunatic.

Still, from just that one monologue, Cheng Shi had already identified the man's faith.

[Corruption]!

The dense aura of [Corruption] radiating from him was nearly impossible to conceal.

And Cheng Shi could tell which desire this man had embraced: fear!

The medieval nobleman's expressions were absurdly dramatic. His Adam's apple bobbed, his mouth stretched into a grotesque grin, his eyelids twitched, and his head swayed. He was deliberately cultivating a horror-movie persona, trying to generate an atmosphere of dread. Unfortunately, the blizzard's ferocity made his contortions look more like hypothermic spasms.

Cheng Shi nearly burst out laughing at the spectacle but didn't dare — because he didn't want to become the center of attention, and he certainly wasn't about to involve himself in this [Corruption] civil war.

Yes — a [Corruption] civil war!

Initially, Cheng Shi hadn't been sure of Poison's true identity. But the instant this teammate snarled that name — combined with Da Yi's and the others' reactions to it — everything clicked. He finally connected his memories with the information gathered from various channels.

The assassin Poison he'd encountered long ago really was the current [Corruption] Chosen One!

Meeting an old acquaintance far from home should have been a happy occasion. But Cheng Shi couldn't muster any joy.

Just thinking about that assassin lady's various... personas, he was certain this trial would offer zero moments of peace.

As a veteran spectator, he did love watching drama unfold. But only on the condition that the show didn't randomly draft a clown for a guest appearance.

Yet reality was cruel — what he feared most came knocking. Just when Cheng Shi thought he'd retreated far enough, the civil war found him anyway.

The players who'd been standing scattered across the plaza suddenly moved in unison. The shearing sound of their movement cutting through wind drowned out even the gale, reverberating across the entire plaza.

They'd started fighting. Without so much as introductions, the opening moment erupted into combat.

Cheng Shi barely registered a blur before three figures vanished from his sight. Only he, Da Yi, and the "walking-stick" teammate remained standing in the blizzard, three pairs of wide eyes watching the show.

The other three moved like wisps within the tempest — shooting, colliding, howling. The sheer impact blasted apart the surrounding snow, spraying rings of ice shards outward. Then the center of the battle circle erupted with a thunderous crash, the clash of weapons momentarily overpowering even the roaring wind.

Amid the spray of snowflakes, specks of crimson scattered on the wind. In the blink of an eye, someone was already wounded!

The three separated instantly after the exchange.

The medieval nobleman now stood where Poison had been. He sneered and flicked blood from his hand, casually wiping a bloody smear from the corner of his mouth.

But the blood on his lips didn't appear to be his own. It looked more like he'd bitten someone.

Poison, meanwhile, materialized directly behind Cheng Shi, coughing up a mouthful of dark blood. Her strength seemingly spent, she collapsed backward — right toward Cheng Shi's back.

She was the one injured!

The first to react wasn't Cheng Shi but the cheerful teammate who'd also been watching the show. Seeing Poison suddenly appear beside him, he flinched and burst backward in a flash, bolting out of the combat zone to distance himself entirely.

Of course, Cheng Shi wasn't slow either. The instant he felt a wave of warm breath approach from behind, his eyes narrowed...

And he simply dropped low and rolled clear!

His dodge left the seemingly grievously wounded Poison with nothing to fall against. She slammed face-first into the snow with a heavy thud, followed by a pained groan from beneath the white surface:

"Ow, that hurts."

Hearing that sultry, alluring voice, Cheng Shi's mouth twitched. He backed away further, face dark.

'Ha. Same old tricks. Not falling for that again.'

Watching Cheng Shi's reaction, the medieval nobleman let out a sinister chuckle.

"Wonderful. Wonderful indeed.

"Looks like your little boy-toy isn't here this time, you filthy slut. Today is the day you die!"

He launched off the ground with explosive force, rocketing toward the spot where Poison had fallen. The wind-shearing momentum condensed into a blood-curdling shriek that made everyone's expressions change with alarm.

Studying the terrifying pressure, Cheng Shi's eyes sharpened.

'A Screaming Earl!'

This man was [Corruption]'s warrior — a Screaming Earl.

Chapter 474: The Most Explosive Trial Yet

No wonder he made those horrifying faces. No wonder he constantly needled his target's nerves with his words. Screaming Earls were the [Corruption] camp's foremost experts at manufacturing and harvesting fear. They fed on terror, endlessly tormenting their enemies — rivaling certain [War] followers in their capacity for cruelty.

And rumor had it that the Terror Demons birthed by the Mother Tree of Fear after it absorbed the world's terror were the very prototype for the Screaming Earl class.

Thinking this, Cheng Shi glanced at the Bone Servant Le Le'er's Ring on his finger.

'Manufacturing fear, using fear as sustenance, and carrying one-quarter of the Fear Mother Tree Le Le'er's divinity...'

'By that logic, this ring was practically this Screaming Earl teammate's ancestor!'

But he couldn't go around claiming family ties with everyone. After all, not everyone could be The Prisoner. As the civil war reignited, Cheng Shi hurriedly retreated in another direction — toward where Da Yi stood.

Despite Both having questions about why the other was here, the two sharp players chose to "cooperate" first, at least until the civil war's shockwaves passed — survival came first.

And so Cheng Shi and Da Yi converged, standing together.

Seeing doubt lingering in Da Yi's eyes, Cheng Shi took the initiative, feigning total ignorance:

"What's the story, Brother Da Yi? Only the two of us matched in?"

The question left Da Yi momentarily speechless. Seeing that Cheng Shi's expression appeared genuine, Da Yi shifted into a sour grimace and spat:

"Hot damn, who knows.

"Didn't bump into a single teammate, but trouble? Plenty of that. How'd we end up with those two? Peh, rotten luck."

Cheng Shi wanted to say something like "Compared to Zhen Yi and The Prisoner, the current scene barely qualifies as bad luck," but he held his tongue and asked directly:

"Who's that guy?"

This time, Da Yi dropped his usual catchphrase entirely, speaking with unusual gravity:

"Gongyang Jiao. Same as his ID. Number three on the [Corruption] ladder. He's a... lunatic who enjoys eating people."

'Gongyang Jiao?'

'Real name or stage name?'

Cheng Shi blinked in confusion: "His surname is Gongyang?"

Da Yi paused, regarding Cheng Shi with mild surprise, and nodded:

"Hot damn, Brother Cheng, you're clearly a cultured man. You even know that surname exists.

"First time I heard his name, I thought he was some pervert who lifts ladies' skirts. Peh, what a garbage name."

"..."

"But don't let the name fool you. This guy is no joke. We steer clear if we can."

"How much of 'no joke' are we talking?"

"?"

Da Yi genuinely hadn't expected anyone to ask such a casual question under these circumstances. He shot Cheng Shi an odd look, then patiently elaborated:

"Fights like a front-line berserker. Eats people like a gourmet.

"All Screaming Earls specialize in manufacturing fear, but there's only one player who's turned himself into the gold standard of terror.

"Gongyang is an obsessive. Don't try to understand him. Just remember: see him, walk the other way."

"..."

Cheng Shi was stunned. He sized up the brawny man standing bare-armed in the blizzard and thought: 'I'm a priest — I'd obviously dodge everyone. But you're a big, burly... assassin. And even you're this cautious?'

Da Yi was scanning the battlefield with a deep frown and didn't catch Cheng Shi's faintly condescending gaze. Soon enough, Cheng Shi turned his attention to the fight as well:

"What about the other one? The other—"

He stopped mid-sentence, freezing up.

Because he realized that until now, his judgment that three people were fighting had been based solely on process of elimination: three hadn't moved, so three must be fighting.

But the problem was — why did this last teammate have such a pitifully low presence?

He remembered distinctly seeing that teammate's silhouette earlier. Yet trying to recall the details now, he couldn't remember what the person looked like.

A jolt of alarm ran through him. He suddenly realized he'd been unconsciously skipping over this teammate during his earlier assessment, as if the person possessed some kind of magic that deflected gazes!

And someone who could repeatedly evade notice like that had to be...

"Hot damn, it's that Chameleon." Da Yi's expression darkened. He'd clearly identified the sixth player.

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted. 'As expected.'

Bianse Long — [Silence]'s hunter.

A hunter supremely skilled at camouflaging himself and waiting for prey.

They were like real chameleons, always managing to vanish from everyone's field of vision, erasing their presence so thoroughly that people unconsciously overlooked them. Then, at the most unexpected moment, they'd launch a killing strike.

And right now, this oft-ignored hunter appeared to be assisting the Screaming Earl!

Meaning Poison was currently facing two experts at once.

Cheng Shi's gaze sharpened: "What rank?"

Da Yi frowned: "Hot damn, sixth. But very strong."

Cheng Shi nodded, mentally elevating the situation's severity another notch. He asked simultaneously: "What on earth did she do to earn this kind of beating?"

"That's... complicated. I only heard that Poison snatched away a target Gongyang Jiao had been watching for a long time. As for how she snatched it, or where it went — no idea.

"Lao Hu's seen that woman. Good looking. He said Gongyang Jiao might not be hunting this time — could actually be serious. I didn't believe it at the time, but watching Gongyang's ferocity now, I'm starting to buy it.

"Not that it matters anymore. She's been snatched away with no trace left. No wonder he's clobbering Poison so enthusiastically.

"Hot damn, [Corruption] really is a mess."

"?"

Cheng Shi's head was spinning with question marks after that info dump.

'Wait, big guy, I'm confused. Can you elaborate?'

'The woman you're talking about — you mean a different woman, not Poison?'

'Huh? Poison stole the Screaming Earl's woman right out from under him?'

"..."

[Corruption] was indeed a mess...

This side was deep in conversation; that side, deep in combat.

Just as the two were still assessing the situation — BOOM! A blood-spraying figure was hurled from the battle zone, crashing heavily into the snow not far from Cheng Shi and Da Yi.

Looking at the battered, bloodied Poison casting pitiful, pleading eyes their way, Cheng Shi chuckled and closed his eyes.

But Poison wasn't discouraged. She immediately targeted Da Yi instead. This time, she wasted no effort on expressions and simply said with a smirk:

"Save me. I know where the Gift of Sores is."

The words had barely landed before Da Yi leapt in front of Poison, blocking the pursuing Gongyang Jiao.

And Cheng Shi's eyes snapped open, gleaming with excitement. He raised a hand, summoned a healing spell, and smiled:

"Talk first. Heal second. Fair and square."

Chapter 475: What, She Stole Your Sweetheart Too?

Gongyang Jiao halted.

In the howling wind, his medieval costume flapped and snapped wildly.

The scene was bizarre. Had those robes been battle armor and a war cape, the moment would have looked devastatingly cool. But in a nobleman's garb with hems flying every which way, the Screaming Earl standing before Da Yi cut an inexplicably comical figure.

Yes — like a clown.

That said, not a single person present would actually mistake him for one.

Because his pressure was overwhelming. Even standing before three opponents, his savage face showed no trace of fear — if anything, he expected to see fear in theirs!

"Da Yi. What, you're in bed with this filthy slut too? Want to protect her?"

Gongyang Jiao's gaze darted between the three of them. When he noticed Cheng Shi was a priest, a shadow of displeasure crossed his eyes.

Encountering a priest of unknown allegiance during a hunt was never good news. Healing prolonged the chase and made assassinations exponentially more troublesome.

Da Yi snorted coldly and spat:

"Hot damn, as if!

"I've got business with her. Today's not convenient. Gongyang, do me a favor — come after her some other time."

"Favor?" Gongyang Jiao's eerie grin stretched to its limits. The muscles in his neck rippled, and he made a series of exaggerated expressions — like a starving beast aching to feed. "I'm already giving you face by treating you as a person. What, without the Grand Marshal around, you think a mere assassin can block my way?"

Cheng Shi's eyes sharpened.

This was his first time encountering someone this brazenly arrogant in a peak-level trial. Usually, players with this temperament only appeared in mid-tier games or "fish pond" matches where high-rankers stomped novices — because people this hot-headed typically got killed before reaching high ranks.

Yet here and now, facing a priest, an assassin, and a wounded Chosen One who still had fight in her, this warrior was swaggering straight through Da Yi's warning glare!

'Was he really that powerful?'

'Don't tell me he's the [Corruption] version of Big Cat?'

Expression grave, Cheng Shi shifted his footing and prudently positioned himself behind the line connecting Da Yi and Poison, dodging the Screaming Earl's probing gaze.

Poison rolled her eyes at Gongyang Jiao's words, dipped her head with a derisive snort, then looked up again with keen interest to study Cheng Shi.

Clearly, she was quite curious about this priest "friend" she hadn't seen in so long.

Da Yi, meanwhile, was unfazed. He apparently knew this was just how the man was.

He snorted again and flicked an Iron Thorn into the snow at Gongyang Jiao's feet, halting his advance. Then he barked:

"Hot damn, quit the act.

"Gongyang, that crap doesn't work on me.

"The trial just started. I don't want to hurt anyone. If you're really this bloodthirsty, come back in three days.

"Once I get what I need from her mouth, I couldn't care less if she dies."

He glanced back at Poison with a frown:

"Hot damn, three days. Can you manage that?"

This was open negotiation.

Under these circumstances, Poison had little room to refuse. She looked badly hurt — without protection, her next moment might be her last. She knew this was Da Yi's way of forcing her to submit, but she bore no grudge. Instead, she curled her lips and nodded:

"Fine. You're the boss."

Seeing her compliant pose, Da Yi felt an inexplicable surge of irritation. He spat forcefully, then turned to shout at the other side — toward the near-invisible [Silence] follower:

"Hot damn, you too — give me a sign. I've matched with you plenty of times, but this is the first I've seen you this riled up. What, she steal your sweetheart too?"

"?"

"!!!"

The entire plaza fell silent. Only the howling wind remained.

Cheng Shi was dumbstruck. 'Bro, your mouth has absolutely no filter. You're saying that right in front of Gongyang Jiao? Can this negotiation even continue?'

Da Yi himself froze. But he recovered quickly, smacked himself across the mouth, and waved at Gongyang Jiao:

"Hot damn, slip of the tongue. Gongyang, that's not what I meant—"

But before he could explain, the prone Poison failed to suppress her amusement and let out a soft, tinkling laugh.

That laugh shattered the wind-scoured silence like a spark dropped into a munitions warehouse. The entire front line detonated in an instant!

The Screaming Earl was furious!

He whipped toward Da Yi, veins bulging from his neck, breath scalding from his nostrils, every feature twisted into a grotesque mask. His entire being turned rabid.

He dropped low, coiling to charge. Before Da Yi could utter a single "sorry," a bone-chilling shriek erupted from Gongyang Jiao's throat. Like a hurricane, he barreled toward the three of them.

Da Yi's eyes darkened. He swore — "Hot damn!" — didn't even try to dodge, and threw himself forward in a head-on collision.

This [War] assassin's opening stance was indistinguishable from a front-line berserker's. When faced with a warrior's charge, he actually mimicked the man's rushing posture and plowed straight into him!

Cheng Shi's jaw nearly hit the ground.

'What is wrong with you [War] people—'

But there was no time for spectating. Because the instant Gongyang Jiao attacked, the other hunter moved as well.

The near-invisible Chameleon had somehow circled behind Da Yi and materialized in front of Cheng Shi. Before Cheng Shi could react, a short bolt was already streaking toward his left leg.

This wasn't a kill shot — merely a threatening blow to drive the priest away. The Chameleon didn't want complications; he just wanted a clean kill on Poison.

He'd even revealed his position beforehand, specifically so the target would recognize futility and retreat.

But the target didn't seem to move.

In truth, Cheng Shi was on full alert. But against a peak [Silence] hunter's decisive strike, a mere priest was still half a beat too slow.

Between masters, half a beat meant everything.

The shot that most peak players would have dodged wasn't avoided by the priest — and it even looked poised to punch clean through both legs.

Seeing this, even the Chameleon who'd fired the bolt paused in surprise. He'd never imagined anyone on the field could be this "weak." His shock even disrupted his tempo for engaging Poison.

Cheng Shi felt the danger. But he wasn't afraid. He knew the bolt wouldn't kill him — at worst, it was a wound.

And the one thing a priest feared least was getting wounded. His priority right now wasn't dodging the bolt, nor was it protecting Poison for some vague promise of intel. He was calculating how to disengage from the battlefield after being hit.

Yes — he was pragmatic. He knew he couldn't dodge.

And he also knew: the deal with Poison had been struck by Da Yi alone. He himself had said nothing.

Cheng Shi's condition had been "talk first, heal second." Since Poison hadn't talked, the transaction existed only between her and Da Yi.

So he wouldn't waste his strength. At most, he'd make a mental note about this hard-to-spot Chameleon, and once he understood the trial's details and background, he'd settle the score at leisure.

With that thought, the hand gripping his ring quietly relaxed.

Now was not the time to reveal his true capabilities. In this chaotic opening, preserving every ounce of his strength was the top priority.

Chapter 476: Little Priest, You've Changed

But the tide of battle turned in an instant. No one could have predicted what came next.

Just as the silent arrow was about to pierce both of Cheng Shi's legs, Poison moved first.

From her prone position, she sprang up and threw herself in front of Cheng Shi's legs, using her own body to block the bolt.

The projectile tore through Poison's right shoulder, punched through her spine, and erupted from her left rear scapula — like a bone shackle pinning the [Corruption] Chosen One to the ground at Cheng Shi's feet.

That alone wasn't the worst of it. The worst was that this was a [Silence] bolt, saturated with [Silence]'s blessing. It instantly sapped Poison's ability to resist, leaving her to cry out in agony.

"Ow, that hurts."

She turned her head toward Cheng Shi. A flash of undisguised pain crossed her eyes, but she forced through the pallor with a quip:

"Your reflexes are still this slow, little priest."

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted violently!

Not from gratitude for her body-blocking sacrifice — but from frustration at his own carelessness. Despite every precaution, he'd fallen for her play!

This [Corruption] assassin was always this uncannily skilled at stirring desire in others.

The desire to protect and guilt — those were desires too!

But still... what kind of relationship would drive a woman to take an arrow for a man?

In any other context, bystanders would dig into this relentlessly. But if someone clarified that the woman in question was Poison, the general reaction would simply be:

'Oh, Poison? Yeah, that tracks. What, she's got a new target?'

This illustrated the [Corruption] Chosen One's reputation among peak players: not exactly good or bad — just deeply bizarre.

Those who loved her loved her to death. Those who hated her ground their teeth to dust.

And unlike other [Corruption] followers who repulsed people, she never deliberately provoked anyone's desires, never encouraged emotional indulgence. She simply found the perfect moment to appear exactly where you needed her most — then made you willingly "offer up" your desire.

Just like now.

She'd met Cheng Shi before, knew him, even understood him to a degree. She knew this player wasn't normal — he never trusted anyone. But neither did his lack of trust make him cold-blooded. At least when he had room to retreat, this priest wasn't heartless.

So she'd reversed roles. From the protected, she became the protector — throwing herself to save Cheng Shi.

Granted, the attack wouldn't have been fatal. But the instant Poison was pinned to the ground by the bolt, a desire to help surged in Cheng Shi's chest.

Even though that impulse evaporated the moment he remembered who she was, the fact remained: she always managed to pluck the softest string in a person's heart.

Cheng Shi's gaze darkened further. This [Corruption] Chosen One seemed to have grown even stronger.

And when Poison caught the flash of hesitation in Cheng Shi's eyes, she knew she was saved.

So she smiled. Pale-faced but radiant — a smile so dazzling it dimmed the colorless plaza, like a lotus blooming amid a raging blizzard: breathtakingly, soul-stirringly beautiful.

But the smile froze on her face after exactly one second. Because the Cheng Shi who'd just shown a trace of compassion actually... jumped away.

Right in front of her.

He looked like a clown who'd only just noticed the bolt stuck in the ground before him — leaping back in belated shock, face full of exaggerated fear.

The farcical scene was performed with such consummate realism that nobody could find a single flaw. But Poison knew: this wasn't the real Cheng Shi. He'd used that awkwardly comical retreat to mask his true feelings, distancing himself to reject involvement in this mess through action rather than words.

"..."

In that moment, Poison said nothing. She didn't cast any more pitiful rescue-seeking glances at Cheng Shi. She simply pressed her bloodless lips together and closed her eyes to await death.

She seemed disappointed. And despairing.

That wretched image made even Da Yi — engaged in his front-line standoff — furrow his brows. Before getting the information he wanted, he genuinely didn't want Poison to die here.

Cheng Shi, on the other hand, stood like a cold-blooded animal with a heart of iron. Outwardly he looked panicked, but his eyes flickered with amusement. He simply stood there, watching Poison perform, with zero intention of lending a hand.

He didn't know what this woman was scheming, but he knew the Chameleon in the distance absolutely couldn't kill her. If he could, she would never have become the [Corruption] Chosen One!

Sure enough, just as the [Silence] follower was overjoyed at Cheng Shi's non-intervention, another twist occurred.

The cheerful spectator who'd been watching from the sidelines suddenly hurled his sundial needle at the Chameleon's feet, blocking his advance. Then he vaulted forward to land before Poison, deftly retrieved the needle, and swept it in a wide arc — using the Chameleon's split-second bewilderment to drive him back. He planted the needle like a sword before his chest and declared:

"I've suddenly become very interested in the information you mentioned. I trust Miss Poison wouldn't mind sharing the secret with one more person?"

He half-turned to Poison with an elegant half-bow, then faced the direction where the Chameleon had vanished:

"Allow me to introduce myself. Jiang Chi.

"If you're merely the Screaming Earl's backup, I'd suggest holding off. After all, with Miss Poison's talents, her fellow hunter here may well end up as her devoted servant. Don't you agree?"

Jiang Chi's voice wasn't loud, yet every word carried clearly across the windswept plaza.

Poison curled her lip in a dismissive smirk, offering no comment on the "review." The vanished Chameleon likewise gave no response. Seeing himself ignored, Jiang Chi laughed self-deprecatingly and added:

"Of course, if you'd care to warm up in this frigid weather, with this sundial needle in hand, I can at least hold my own for a round or two."

Hearing this, Cheng Shi arched a brow. 'As expected.'

This Jiang Chi was indeed a Pointer Knight!

Pointer Knight — [Fate]'s natural rival, [Time]'s warrior. A true timing expert who excelled at exploiting every split-second opening.

Cheng Shi had already suspected the man's identity. The moment he'd snapped off that sundial needle, Cheng Shi had guessed his faith was likely tied to [Time] — which was precisely why he'd chosen to move toward Da Yi instead of staying put to spectate alongside this man.

In a trial that erupted into violent conflict from the very first moment, he had to distance himself from unstable elements first. The question of whether faith rivalries affected team cooperation could wait until the situation stabilized.

But at least for now, the Pointer Knight called Jiang Chi appeared to have sided with Da Yi and himself.

Of course, "sided with" meant the camp that wanted to hear the Gift of Sores' secret — not some Poison-rescue brigade.

Seeing herself saved yet again, Poison cracked her eyes open and smiled once more.

But she didn't acknowledge Jiang Chi. Instead, her gaze drifted back to Cheng Shi, complex and tinged with loss:

"Little priest, you've changed."

Cheng Shi snorted coldly and ignored her.

"You've gotten so hard."

"???"

"Your heart's gotten so hard."

"..."

Chapter 477: Poison — Have I Changed?

Cheng Shi's eye twitched. He snapped back irritably:

"Either stand up on your own, or keep lying there playing dead. As long as you're not afraid of the cold or dying, I'm sure I've got plenty of time to wait you out. After all, they're hunting you, not me.

"And I told you: talk first, heal second.

"Poison, if you want treatment from me, spit out your secret first. Otherwise, no deal."

Hearing this utterly frigid negotiation tone, Poison sighed with waning interest. Then, remarkably, color began creeping back into her face.

The assassin who'd looked moments from death suddenly appeared to be recovering on her own. Gritting her teeth, she wrenched the bolt from her shoulder, and staggered to her feet from the blood-stained snow.

She still looked somewhat feeble — so much so that the instant she stood, she lost her balance and stumbled toward Cheng Shi. He snorted coldly, pivoted, sidestepped. One fluid motion.

But this time he'd underestimated her determination to get close. Poison lunged forward, slipping through Cheng Shi's shadow — vanished — and rematerialized in the middle of Da Yi and Gongyang Jiao's battle.

Cheng Shi's gaze hardened. A furious roar echoed from ahead, and three figures blasted apart, retreating in different directions.

Da Yi returned to his original position, expression grave, shirt soaked through with sweat. His Iron Thorns had multiplied from one to three in each hand.

Gongyang Jiao's face was slathered in blood. His left cheek appeared to have been pierced through. Blood dripped down his chin and neck, making him look even more deranged.

His crimson tongue poked through the mangled hole in his cheek, coiling around the torn flesh and pooling blood. He sucked and chewed, then fixed Poison with a savage glare:

"I'll peel your skin, you filthy slut. I'll stitch it over my face.

"Then I'll teach you what real fear means!"

With the main combatants separated, the Chameleon didn't press the attack either. He slipped silently into the blizzard, vanishing from everyone's sight once more.

Jiang Chi frowned slightly, wanting to move closer to Da Yi. But seeing the Gap Light Iron Thorn didn't seem to trust him, he shifted two steps toward Cheng Shi instead, positioning himself partly in front of the priest.

This wasn't to protect Cheng Shi — it was to facilitate the deal with Poison.

Because at that very moment, Poison had emerged from the melee and returned to Cheng Shi's side, draping herself across his back in a show of complete exhaustion.

"Don't move. Let me lean on you for a bit. I really have no strength left."

Cheng Shi's expression darkened. He desperately wanted to backhand her with a Lightning Punishment and send this endlessly troublesome assassin on her way. But he didn't dare.

Because Poison's dagger was already pressed against his chest.

He had zero doubt that this Chosen One assassin would cut him down the instant she felt threatened. But he equally had no doubt that as long as he didn't make a move, she would never strike first.

Because that was Poison. She never enjoyed killing with blades.

What she enjoyed was letting people's own desires kill them. She was merely the catalyst who made them forge their own suicide weapon.

"Have I changed?"

Poison draped over Cheng Shi's back, arms hooked around his neck, her warm breath ghosting against his skin.

"?" Cheng Shi frowned, failing to follow her train of thought.

Seeing him freeze, Poison suddenly laughed. Weak as she was, she still shook with mirth.

"What I mean is — after all this time apart, you've gotten harder. So have I... gotten softer?"

As she spoke, Poison's weakened arms tightened slightly around him.

"..."

Cheng Shi's entire body went rigid, as if the raging blizzard had frozen him solid in place. He didn't dare move a muscle.

"Why won't you answer? Has my temper gotten softer than before?"

"..."

Cheng Shi's eye twitched. 'I don't know if your temper has changed. All I know is the snow in the sky just turned yellow.'

Gongyang Jiao couldn't hear what Poison and Cheng Shi were saying, but seeing how familiar they looked, his expression twisted into something even more grotesque.

"I've underestimated your charm."

His bloodshot eyes bored into Poison, then narrowed as he reassessed Cheng Shi.

'What kind of self-respecting priest doesn't even resist when Poison clings to him?'

'Probably already her plaything.'

'Disgusting. He'd thought this would be a satisfying hunt. Now it looked like another obstruction.'

"Kid, I'd advise you to open your eyes. Don't just touch any woman.

"Some women are fine wine — mellow and sweet. But others... are poison. Heart-rotting, lung-corroding poison. Drink it, and you die!"

Before Cheng Shi could even defend himself, the Screaming Earl detonated from his position and charged straight at them. His momentum was so overwhelming that even Poison, draped across Cheng Shi's back, tensed and hissed:

"Run!"

She flung an oddly shaped dagger at Cheng Shi's feet. It detonated with a boom, erupting into a massive cloud of white mist.

Everyone on the field recoiled, fearing [Corruption]'s power might lurk within the haze. Only Gongyang Jiao barreled through without hesitation — but by then, not a soul remained inside.

"Mr. Ram, you're quite impressive. But I'm simply too tired today. Let's not play anymore. We'll schedule a rematch~"

Hearing the mocking taunt lingering in the mist, Gongyang Jiao roared three times and began pounding the ground like a madman.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

"Filthy slut! Filthy slut! I'll kill you! I'll rip you apart with my bare hands!!"

The crushing force set the entire plaza trembling. Sensing his fury, Da Yi and Jiang Chi exchanged grave glances and rapidly withdrew.

Soon the plaza held nothing but the wind's howl and the earl's pounding. As for the Chameleon, who'd barely shown his face the entire time — no one knew where he'd gone either.

Back to Cheng Shi.

The instant Poison's mist bomb detonated, Cheng Shi's vision whited out. His body lurched — before he could react, he'd been yanked from the plaza entirely. When he opened his eyes again with a frown, he found himself in a dim attic.

He knew it was an attic not from the view outside — the blizzard rendered everything beyond the window a wall of white — but because the ceiling was slanted.

The space wasn't exactly cramped, but far from spacious. The stairwell opened just ahead. The banister was old but polished to a shine. A small fireplace on the adjacent wall held faintly glowing embers, its meager heat barely noticeable against the freezing air the two players had carried in from the plaza.

This was clearly a bedroom. The bed was a simple ground-level pallet with blankets. The only furniture was a squat little tea table bearing a cup of water, wisps of steam still rising from its rim.

Cheng Shi quickly scanned the room. They'd apparently landed in someone's home — though their timing was fortunate: the attic's resident was absent.

And Poison, who'd just been clinging to his back, now lay face-down before him. Covered in blood. Back to him. Perfectly still. Not even the sound of breathing.

'Dead?'

Chapter 478: Extra Session...

'Impossible. This is definitely a trap.'

'She's exploiting his kindness again. Too bad — his kindness was reserved for good people. Villains like her only deserved his blade.'

Cheng Shi watched her for several tense seconds, then quietly flicked a scalpel from his sleeve into his palm.

He raised the blade, aimed two precise passes at the back of Poison's skull, and then—

Flung it at the window beside him, shattering the glass. Without a moment's hesitation, he leapt through.

He'd never intended to attack. He just wanted to leave!

'Are you kidding? A peak warrior couldn't kill her after fighting for ages. Cheng Shi certainly didn't believe he could one-shot her. He had that much self-awareness.'

'Just like taking down Mo Shu's substitute — even with every trick in the book, he could only burn through one of a peak player's lives. Since killing her was out of the question either way, why invite trouble?'

'Besides, he and Poison had no blood feud. Wasn't running the obvious call?'

'Get away from danger. Problem solved.'

But reality had a habit of defying intentions.

Just as Cheng Shi launched himself toward the window, a powerful arm shot up from the floor and seized his ankle, yanking him back inside.

"..."

Cheng Shi seemed to have anticipated this. Without missing a beat, he used the momentum to flip back, landing heavily beside the now-awake Poison. He sneered:

"That was a quick resurrection for a corpse."

Poison's face had gone pale again. She blinked weakly: "You want to leave me that badly?"

Cheng Shi nodded coldly: "Yes. Desperately. Can I go now?"

A flash of hurt crossed Poison's eyes. She pressed her lips together, expression torn: "Then go."

She turned her head away and began to whimper softly.

"..."

Cheng Shi didn't move. Not because he'd changed his mind — but because Poison's hand was still clamped around his ankle. He was afraid that one wrong step would cost him the leg.

"Had enough performing? Then let go. I told you — no intel, no healing.

"Though from what I can see, you probably don't even need healing."

"Who says I don't? I'm really hurt."

Poison stopped crying instantly. The emotional switch was so jarring that her reddened eyes returned to normal in the blink of an eye.

She studied Cheng Shi with evident fascination, scrutinizing this old acquaintance, and smiled:

"So — you're interested in the Gift of Sores too?"

Cheng Shi glanced at her but said nothing. Seeing herself ignored, Poison sighed:

"Looks like you can't let go of your bias against me either..."

"It's fine. I'm used to it. This has always been a world full of bias.

"But when everyone is biased against everyone else, isn't that itself a kind of correction for the world?"

"Perhaps bias... is the most authentic lens through which the masses see reality.

"But let me make one thing clear: I have no bias against you, little priest. I know you're a good person. You always have been.

"So the instant I saw you, I was overjoyed. Because I knew this trial finally had someone I could trust with my back."

With that, Poison sat up and turned away from him. Right before Cheng Shi's eyes, she peeled off her tattered down jacket — revealing a bare back streaked with blood, riddled with wounds.

Yes. Bare back.

"..."

Cheng Shi was stunned.

'Lady, what kind of person wears nothing under their down jacket!?'

His expression stiffened, mouth twitching helplessly: "The 'back' you want to entrust shouldn't be this kind of back!"

Poison held a hand modestly over her chest and glanced back, mildly surprised:

"Of course not. I just wanted you to see my wounds.

"Oh~

"I see. So you're into this?"

"..."

Cheng Shi's face froze. He spun around to leave, but the instant he took one heavy step forward, Poison spoke again:

"The Gift of Sores is inside this trial. If you leave now, you'll never get it."

Cheng Shi's foot halted. His brows knotted tightly.

'Truth!'

'She's actually telling the truth!'

'The Gift of Sores is really here?'

'So Hu Wei and Da Yi's target truly was this!'

'And the Fun God — what's His angle?'

'Does He want me to go after that dagger — the one every assassin dreams of — the Gift of Sores?'

'Hiss—'

'An Envoy's soul... that is genuinely tempting...'

'No, no, no. Remember what that being said: greed is the path to death. Before understanding the trial's background and everyone's motives, he couldn't let [Corruption] manipulate his greed!'

'The [Corruption] Chosen One standing right in front of him was actively influencing his desires!'

'The priority now was to figure out where they were, why Poison was here too, and whether she... was also after Dizel's soul.'

While Cheng Shi frowned in thought, Poison spoke up once more:

"Little priest, I've already paid the deposit. So isn't it time... for the session to start?"

'Session?'

'What kind of person calls healing a "session"?''

Cheng Shi's expression became quite colorful. He glanced at the two bloody holes in Poison's shoulder, then sighed and casually flung a healing spell her way.

The holy light of restoration settled across Poison's back, stanching the bleeding wounds. Feeling her body stop hemorrhaging, Poison curled her lips and let out a breathy, trembling sigh of satisfaction.

"Don't stop. Keep going."

"???"

'Lady, if you keep this up, I'm going to start seeing the world through tinted lenses. Could you maybe not make those noises?'

Cheng Shi was exasperated. He wanted to curse her out, but when he turned back, his expression slowly grew grave. Because he realized the healing spell had only stopped the bleeding — the wounds on her back hadn't healed at all.

Which meant the [Silence] hunter's bolt really had inflicted devastating damage on Poison. Even now, residual energy continued tormenting the battered assassin.

Not a light wound. A severe one. Extremely severe.

And yet she was acting like nothing was wrong, spouting nonsense.

"You're really hurt?" Cheng Shi said in disbelief.

Poison turned her head, eyes brimming with wounded innocence, and nodded. She pressed her bloodless lips shut without a word.

Cheng Shi frowned, immediately launching a Purification spell, followed by Healing, Spirit Spell, and Calming Spell — one after another, hammering into Poison's back in rapid succession.

Under the barrage of restorative magic, Poison's condition finally began to improve, slowly.

But just as she felt her strength creeping back — approaching perhaps a third of capacity — the healing abruptly stopped.

Poison spun around in confusion, only to find Cheng Shi watching her with a cold smirk:

"The deposit session is over. Tell me where the Gift of Sores is, and I'll add an extra session."

Poison's expression blanked for a moment, then brightened with delight:

"How long can you add?"

"Until you're fully healed."

"Oh?"

"Then... can I add some special services, lit~tle~ priest~?"

"..."

'Great. The snow was turning yellow again.'

Chapter 479: Complicated Teammate Dynamics

"Yes."

Cheng Shi's answer was resolute. He even smiled at the clearly astonished Poison.

"As long as the intel is valuable enough, I can provide any special service you'd like."

"...You really have changed." Poison studied him with fascination. "But little priest, that's not how you do business. You have to tell the customer the menu first. Then the customer can decide whether to spend the 'money.'"

Cheng Shi let out an exaggerated "Oh~" and then replied with perfect solemnity:

"How right you are.

"Our establishment offers the following services:

"Sensing fear, experiencing suffering, satisfying curiosity, and... indulging in pleasure.

"Prices rise in that order. It all depends on which service the customer desires."

When Poison heard the word "pleasure," her eyes lit up. Unable to suppress her curiosity, she unconsciously licked the corner of her lip. Her burning gaze locked onto Cheng Shi, and she asked in a husky, alluring voice:

"Why is everything you offer from [Corruption]'s menu?"

"For a [Corruption] customer, naturally we provide [Corruption] services. It's called customization. Isn't it?"

"True. In that case..."

Poison's face suddenly flushed — whether from Cheng Shi's healing restoring her complexion or from the "pleasure" blazing in her imagination. Either way, she looked at him with reddened cheeks and chose the most "expensive" option without hesitation.

"I choose pleasure. But I have one condition."

Cheng Shi smiled and nodded, polite as a true salesman: "The customer is king. Name it."

"I want to... try before I pay."

"Done."

Cheng Shi seemed to have anticipated the request. Far from refusing, he agreed with remarkable readiness.

And the instant after agreeing, he stepped forward, crouched before Poison, slid his left arm around her back to cradle her waist, extended his right hand along her neck, and gently cupped the perfect curve of her chin. In a posture of absolute dominance, he leaned in closer amid her deeply emotional, bashful gaze—

BOOM!

The floor exploded.

[Death] Fun Ring charge -1.

Of course, the surprise Lightning Punishment didn't actually hit the Poison in his arms. The instant he'd reached for her, she'd sensed the danger and flickered backward, dodging the lethal strike.

Staring at the charred, gaping hole in the floor, Poison's blush and smile froze simultaneously.

She'd expected Cheng Shi to pull something. But she'd never imagined he'd go straight for a killing blow!

The thunderbolt's power rivaled a Servant God's relic. And he'd just fired it point-blank, right in her face. Had she been any less nimble, even a glancing hit would have dealt damage far beyond anything she'd suffered earlier!

"You're serious?" Poison's pupils shrank.

"Oh my, it seems the customer has already recovered. My healing really is effective."

"..." Hearing this dripping sarcasm, Poison's expression blanked. She silently produced a fresh down jacket, turned away to put it on, then looked back: "This isn't about healing anymore — it's about you attacking me! Little priest, don't tell me you're working with Mr. Ram?"

Cheng Shi snorted and dusted off his hands: "Please don't slander our establishment. This is a legitimate business — we don't stock any 'Mr. Ram' for your self-entertainment. Besides, didn't you yourself order the 'indulging in pleasure' service?"

Poison laughed in spite of her anger. She jabbed a finger at the gaping hole: "I'd like to know — where exactly was the pleasure in that?"

Cheng Shi pointed mockingly at her, then at himself:

"You played the clown. I was thoroughly pleased. That's indulging in pleasure, isn't it?"

"Great expression work, by the way. Solid performance. Thumbs up.

"No tip, though."

"..." Poison's mouth opened and closed stiffly, her expression as if she'd swallowed a fly.

She kept feeling like she could see a familiar figure behind Cheng Shi — whether that person's surname was Zhen or Chen, she couldn't quite tell.

While Poison fell into silence, Cheng Shi peered down through the smoking hole with a smirk and called out:

"Enjoy the show? Come on up already."

Shortly after, two heads slowly extended horizontally from below the hole, peering upward — one rugged, one refined. Their owners were none other than Da Yi and Jiang Chi, fresh from their plaza retreat!

Seeing them, Cheng Shi thought, 'Just as expected.'

He'd been deliberately stomping the wooden floor since arriving. Yet strangely, this clearly inhabited room had produced zero response from below.

He and Poison had fled here for shelter, landing directly in the attic with no time to handle the house's residents.

Outside, the blizzard raged; upstairs, a fireplace burned. This family was obviously home. So why no reaction?

Cheng Shi had initially assumed the household was too frightened by the commotion to respond. But when Poison chose to play roleplay games here instead of recovering or fleeing further, he realized she wasn't nearly as afraid of Gongyang Jiao as she appeared.

At least within this trial, she had the confidence to survive being jointly hunted by the Screaming Earl and the Chameleon.

So what was her trump card?

It couldn't be him — his appearance in this trial was an accident.

Nor could it be Da Yi — his genuine surprise at Poison's intel was impossible to fake.

By elimination, among his five teammates, only one person remained: the Pointer Knight who'd suddenly entered the fray under a flimsy excuse, wanting intel from Poison. Jiang Chi!

'He was probably Poison's ally.'

'At the very least, her backup. His mid-battle intervention had been suspicious from the start. Even if he'd given a reason, it was too flimsy. Two assassins were clearly both after the Gift of Sores — even if he wanted it too, what made him think he could claim a share between two assassins?'

'Unless he and Poison were already working together!'

'So he wasn't just a spectator — he was a flanking teammate!'

'And if backup had already arrived, had he been the one who subdued the NPCs downstairs?'

So Cheng Shi's Lightning Punishment hadn't been aimed solely at Poison — it was killing two birds with one stone.

He glanced down again. Upon seeing the pair, he thought 'just as expected.' But then he caught Jiang Chi's gossip-hungry gaze and Da Yi's amused expression.

"..."

'Great. Eavesdropping, were we!'

Cheng Shi's eye twitched hard. 'Sure enough — watching drama was everyone's idea of fun.'

'No wonder they showed up and didn't come upstairs. What's the matter, boys, were you actually planning to spectate a live "indulging in pleasure" session?'

Sensing Cheng Shi's mocking gaze, Da Yi rubbed the back of his head with an awkward grin:

"Hot damn, Brother Cheng, I just found out this Jiang guy is on Poison's side. He found me and brought me here.

"But... if I said I just arrived and didn't hear a thing, would you believe me?"

Cheng Shi rolled his eyes, not sparing his dignity: "No."

But the jab didn't land. Da Yi's "ruggedness" guaranteed him a hide as thick as Hu Wei's.

The big man barked a laugh, vaulted up to the attic, and launched into a barrage of flattery at Cheng Shi:

"Hot damn, that's why educated folks are smart! You're absolutely right not to believe me, Brother Cheng!"

"..."

Cheng Shi nearly laughed in spite of himself.

'Wonderful! I never thought the day would come when even my clown status was under threat!'

Jiang Chi leapt up as well. A flash of embarrassment crossed his face before he gave Poison a polite nod, then turned to Cheng Shi with a hint of admiration:

"Worthy of the legends. A priest with this kind of offensive firepower."

Cheng Shi sneered internally but denied it outright:

"Hardly. Just a lucky lightning gadget I picked up. Single-use. Already spent."

"..."

Jiang Chi's expression turned odd. 'Brother, I'm treating you like a master, and you're treating me like an idiot?'

'Who here would buy that?'

He glanced at Da Yi, who was facing Cheng Shi but clearly studying him and Poison from the corner of his eye.

This [War] assassin obviously didn't trust the two of them either.

'Now that felt right!'

This was peak-level play. Players who were fighting to the death one second might become allies the next. Teammates who seemed inseparable right now could put a knife in your back a moment later.

Everyone wanted cooperation, yet no one could find a sincere partner. They were merely interest-driven adhesives — the bigger the prize on one side, the stronger the bond in that direction.

And this was precisely why Poison had wanted to team up with Cheng Shi the moment she saw him. She knew he wasn't that kind of person.

But Cheng Shi didn't see it that way.

His gaze swept across all three in turn. Seeing them sizing each other up in return, he sighed silently.

'So these were his three teammates for this trial. The other two would likely refuse to cooperate — and worse, might ambush and hunt them.'

'Even this four-person alliance was temporary at best. They shared the same objective, and none of their characters could be fully trusted.'

'Truly, whenever a trial involved Them, things got astronomically complicated.'

'So how, exactly, was he supposed to navigate this web of alliances and come out safely?'

Chapter 480: The Tragic Nation of the Sinking Era — [Decay]'s Kingdom, Rosna

One warrior, two assassins, one priest. This was the trial's makeshift roster.

Objectively, the composition was quite solid — especially considering Da Yi's role was more of a flex player who could seamlessly switch between assassin and "warrior." That made the lineup even better.

The only flaw was that his teammates had too many agendas. A mid-trial split was entirely probable.

But Cheng Shi was never one to fixate on future worries. He kept studying the three, then spoke up:

"The architecture here doesn't match any style I've seen from the Civilization Era. The interior decor has hints of early-civilization influence, but I can't place this location. Would any of you experts care to enlighten me?"

At this, Da Yi's brows drooped and he began staring at the floor — the very picture of a poor student caught unprepared.

Jiang Chi offered a stiff smile, then rotated to face a pitch-black painting on the wall whose subject was entirely indecipherable: "The art of this period is certainly... distinctive. Yes, quite distinctive."

Only Poison chuckled softly. Leaning against the banister, she said with certainty:

"This is Rosna, from the Sinking Era."

'The Sinking Era?'

'Rosna?'

Cheng Shi frowned, eyes full of confusion. He'd never even heard of this place.

Sinking Era trials were pitifully rare. Nine out of ten players knew almost nothing about [Descent]'s history. The remaining one had mostly gleaned fragments from Underworld expeditions during the Civilization Era.

So when Poison named "Rosna," none of the other three could contribute a word.

Clearly, all three belonged to the "poor student" majority.

But poor grades didn't mean no curiosity. Jiang Chi abandoned his art-connoisseur act and turned back with interest:

"Rosna... what kind of place is it?"

"[Decay]'s kingdom. In the limited historical record, people prefer to call it the Tragic Nation."

"The Tragic Nation?"

"Yes."

Poison began moving. Her fingers trailed along the banister as she drifted toward the lower floor, eyes roaming the attic's decor while she explained:

"Everyone here worships [Decay]. They believe that humans are born sinful, and that harming oneself is a way to excise that sin.

"Only through ceaseless self-inflicted suffering can one be purified and earn His forgiveness. So every person here spends their entire life striving to become a clean, sinless being — to draw closer to Him.

"But amid this tide of relentless self-harm, the nation gradually bled out its population and combat strength. Like a rust-eaten antique abandoned by its era, it sank slowly into the sands of history."

Three brows furrowed simultaneously. The explanation was hard to digest.

Jiang Chi hesitated, then asked:

"They worship [Decay], offer themselves to [Decay], even transform their bodies into decay. That kind of devotion should only grow stronger under [Decay]'s faith. How could they possibly... lose combat strength?"

"That puzzled me too, once. But I recently found the answer.

"Because their offerings...

"Apparently never moved the Benefactor they worshipped.

"[Decay] was likely... a god devoid of all compassion!

"In other words, the perspective of gods and mortals may be fundamentally different. What mortals see as devotion may be worthless in Their eyes. He might have once gazed upon this nation, but He never granted it any of [Decay]'s power.

"And the people of Rosna assumed their devotion simply wasn't enough — that they hadn't moved their Benefactor. So their offerings grew ever more frenzied...

"In the end, this [Decay] nation truly 'decayed.' They announced their departure from history's stage with one final, grandest offering of all.

"And to that, [Decay] still offered no comment.

"Tell me — isn't that tragic enough?"

Poison didn't stop walking. She was clearly headed to the lower floors. Cheng Shi exchanged a glance with the other two, then followed her down through the unsettling atmosphere. The group arrived at the ground floor and finally saw the house's occupants.

A middle-aged couple, deathly pale and emaciated to the extreme, along with their three children. All five had already been knocked unconscious by Jiang Chi and lay on the floor.

Poison approached the couple, gently tore open their clothing, and flipped them over. The husband was noticeably sturdier than his wife — more flesh, smoother skin.

The wife, by contrast, was little more than skin stretched over bones. Not a trace of aesthetics to her frame.

The three children were progressively thinner than the last, their ashen complexions screaming of starvation.

This confirmed Poison's account. Self-harm had derailed this empire. When the future's hope was on the verge of death, what hope could the future hold?

Of course, Poison's purpose wasn't simply sightseeing. She wanted them to see Rosna's suffering — and the so-called "purification."

Following her guidance, they saw the couple's backs covered in an impossibly dense network of scars.

Punctures, slashes, whippings, brandings...

The scars weren't chaotic or overlapping. They were arranged in neat, orderly rows — looking less like abuse and more like some kind of "medals of honor."

Poison gave a disdainful snort:

"This is the fate of worshipping [Decay]. Those in power refused to relinquish their authority, so they forged a new faith to seize everything they desired. But how can this self-inflicted withering compare to embracing desire?"

"Humans are, at their core, a collection of desires. Whether indulging or restraining — both are facets of desire."

"Switching faiths is merely pursuing a different set of hidden desires. Where in this world are there saints?"

"Since none of us are saints, why pretend to be one?"

"Don't you know — pretending to be a saint is the universe's greatest desire of all!"

"Isn't that right, little priest?"

'?'

'Why are you calling on me?'

'Teacher, pick on the poor students. I'm not a poor student.'

Cheng Shi pursed his lips and said nothing. But he'd heard the subtext — Poison wasn't explaining the present situation. She was evangelizing her [Corruption] philosophy.

Though compared to her peers, her style of articulating ideology was remarkably un-[Corruption]. Her colleagues, after all, preferred demonstrating their faith through action.

Da Yi had abandoned his rough demeanor and was playing the attentive listener. Cheng Shi refused to give Poison the engagement she wanted. That left only Jiang Chi as the straight man.

Jiang Chi appeared to have heard something about faith transitions before. He nodded with interest:

"I once heard that [Decay] turned its gaze to the Land of Hope precisely because, after [Corruption]'s heyday, there emerged a group of people who — for various reasons, especially physical ones — could no longer embrace desire.

"These people wanted to keep their power but could no longer offer themselves to Him. So in their weakened, withered state, they sought a new anchor of power — and drew [Decay]'s gaze.

"So it seems Miss Poison supports this view?"

"Facts don't need support. That's simply how [Decay] came to be.

"That's also why Rosna is called the Tragic Nation. When a country pours all its vigor, vitality, and life force into offerings to Him... who can stop that nation from perishing?"

"[Decay] differs from [Corruption]. Its period of dominance was extremely brief — after all, His will doesn't exactly keep you thriving.

"When Rosna was founded, it boasted tens of millions of faithful. But in barely a century, this so-called 'Divine Kingdom of [Decay]' shrank to a handful of cities.

"They proved their devotion through one magnificent act of decay. But the question is... when everyone's dead, what good is devotion?"

It made a certain kind of sense. But why did Poison know so much about this place? Just because she also belonged to [Descent]?

Cheng Shi had his doubts. Jiang Chi asked the question directly.

Poison laughed lightly, hands clasped behind her back like a student awaiting praise. She tilted her head and explained:

"I have zero interest in [Descent] as a concept. Haven't you guessed why I know so much about this place?"

"It's obviously because I've been searching for the lost... Gift of Sores!"

"After learning that Zhen Yi devoured the Conjugate Whisper Fruit I was most interested in, I had no choice but to set my sights on the Gift of Sores. Everything you've just heard was pieced together trial by trial over countless attempts.

"With this level of sincerity, can I earn everyone's frank openness in return?"

Looking at Poison's captivating smile, the three men's reactions diverged.

The [Corruption] Chosen One was masterful at "friendly exchanges." Unfortunately, none of those present were the flower-admiring types. The instant she finished, the other three spoke with eerily synchronized timing:

"I merely feign refinement; in truth I'm crude as they come. I'm more interested in where the Gift of Sores actually is."

"Hot damn, cut the chatter. Just tell us where the thing is!"

"Frank openness? What, should I strip right here?"

"...?"

The warrior and the assassin froze. But the other assassin's eyes lit up.

Because she could see the priest was glowing!