

The Gods 481

Chapter 481: The Little Game of "Frank Openness"

Obviously, the third line was Cheng Shi's.

He wasn't trying to lighten the mood. He was "serious."

Because he'd suddenly realized just how awkward his position was in this makeshift team — he had no real ally!

Poison was the core of this interest-driven group. She held the biggest secret everyone wanted, and had a pre-existing arrangement with the Pointer Knight Jiang Chi. Her position was the most secure.

Even with two hunters targeting her outside, as long as she controlled the pace of her revelations and strung along her two helpers, she could easily leverage her secrets to survive the trial.

Jiang Chi was a collaborator whose partnership with Poison clearly predated this trial. This meant his expressed desire for the Gift of Sores was likely just a cover. Poison probably held other things he wanted, making their bond far more "solid" than any temporary alliance here.

Moreover, while he'd saved Poison during the plaza hunt, he'd done so with restraint — never creating irreconcilable conflict with anyone. Jiang Chi always retained the option to disengage, since he was a warrior who could fight, take hits, and exploit timing.

Da Yi's situation was even clearer. He had an openly acknowledged deal with Poison. Until she led him to the Gift of Sores, the two were unlikely to clash. Plus, he and Cheng Shi were acquainted, which naturally eliminated one potential hostile player.

His biggest headache was protecting Poison from Gongyang Jiao's hunt. But he'd said it himself — the deal lasted three days. If he didn't get what he wanted by then, whether he walked away or switched sides to hunt the assassin who'd jerked him around was entirely his call.

Because he was an assassin — a capable, elusive one.

Only Cheng Shi...

He was a priest. A priest with no one to rely on.

"No one to rely on" didn't mean he lacked the hidden strength to go head-to-head. It meant he had no one he could trust!

Even within this team, even before two familiar faces, there wasn't a single person he could "entrust his back" to.

These people weren't Mi Laozhang or Big Cat. They were all here for profit, making them hard to trust. So whether for the trial's progression or for seizing treasure, Cheng Shi was missing a partner.

Priests were a class that needed a partner. Other priests sought partners for combat power. Cheng Shi needed a tool — constantly putting himself in harm's way was irrational. With someone to scout ahead and clear traps, the trial became far easier.

But clearly, no such partner existed among these teammates. So Cheng Shi shifted strategies, abandoning his usual approach of building a "stable" inner circle in favor of becoming a "central heating unit."

Central heating meant... maintaining a warm connection with everyone.

He would use shallow, manufactured rapport to solidify his position within this team.

During the walk downstairs, Cheng Shi had thought extensively. With the tools at his disposal, once he learned the Gift of Sores' location, he had a strong chance of claiming it — becoming the last one laughing as the fisherman who profited.

But that assumed the Gift was easy to obtain.

Da Yi's eagerness, Hu Wei's scheming, Poison's caution — all signaled that this dagger wouldn't come easily. So his current goal was to avoid being squeezed out of this temporary alliance, surviving by every means necessary until the moment someone else obtained the Gift of Sores.

As long as the legendary dagger safely appeared in another player's hands, Cheng Shi had ways to... acquire it. Or at least con it away.

So his priority was befriending everyone!

He didn't need their full trust. He just needed them not to exclude him when facing external threats.

And thus, another game of exchanging "sincerity" for "sincerity" began.

Which was why he'd said that to Poison.

"What, should I strip right here?"

Poison arched a brow and smiled: "You want to get frank with me like that?"

"Don't you? Did I misunderstand?" Cheng Shi looked bewildered. An act.

Poison lightly licked the corner of her lip: "No. You understood perfectly."

"..."

This exchange left both Jiang Chi and Da Yi stunned. They'd been listening from downstairs for quite a while, initially assuming Cheng Shi and Poison knew each other but didn't get along. But his sudden tonal shift made them realize they'd been wrong.

The relationship between these two was apparently more complex than a one-time acquaintance.

When it looked like Cheng Shi might genuinely become Poison's asset, Da Yi's expression turned slightly more serious. Jiang Chi's smile, meanwhile, widened.

Setting aside the tangled relationships, front-row drama was truly entertaining.

His gaze bounced between the two, waiting to see who'd undress first.

Poison wore a sleek white down jacket — completely different from the black one at the start, clearly just changed. This implied they might have already been "frank" once. At minimum, Poison had been "frank."

Cheng Shi, on the other hand, wore a plain casual jacket over a white T-shirt. Minimal layers. Two items removed and he'd reach "total frankness."

So the question was whether these two really intended to play this little [Corruption] game under the others' watchful eyes.

At this level of play, most players were consumed by faith and rarely cared about mere flesh. So "mutual frankness" wasn't exactly novel for anyone present. What they cared about was what it revealed about the relationship.

Cheng Shi didn't hesitate for a second. He swiftly removed his jacket, tossed it at Poison's feet, and said flatly:

"Your turn."

Poison froze. She hadn't expected him to actually do it. In her memory, the little priest wasn't this kind of person.

She was surprised but not opposed — she was a catalyst for desire. When desire came knocking, she only ever welcomed it in.

And so, under Cheng Shi's silent pressure, Poison lifted her chin, bit down on the high collar of her down jacket, then swiftly pulled the zipper down and shrugged off her only garment, tossing it at his feet in mirror fashion.

Of course, "only" was what Cheng Shi had assumed.

Because the instant Poison's jacket fell away, everyone saw she was also wearing a white T-shirt underneath.

But a closer look revealed it wasn't one shirt — it was two. Layered.

Which meant if this game continued, Cheng Shi would reach "total frankness" one step ahead of Poison.

Seeing this, Da Yi looked unsurprised. Jiang Chi's grin grew wider still.

As for Cheng Shi himself — he froze.

Also an act.

He couldn't care less how many layers Poison had on. He had no interest in the scenery beneath the jacket. This whole "frankness" game had never been about any of that. It was about...

The down jacket.

Because the instant Poison tossed her jacket at his feet, Cheng Shi bent down, scooped it up, and pulled it on with practiced efficiency.

Yes. He'd conned her out of a down jacket — and put it on right in front of the mark!

Cheng Shi was slightly taller than Poison, so the fit was passable. But fit was beside the point, because the moment he zipped it up, all three of the others short-circuited.

Brains crashed.

'What happened to frank openness?'

'Frank openness? I never said that. And even if I did — you'd trust a con man's word?'

Feeling their stares bore into him, Cheng Shi showed zero embarrassment. Instead, he clasped his hands together with a shameless grin:

"Thanks for the jacket, generous friend.

"Man, I really didn't expect to land in a blizzard trial. Didn't pack enough clothes in storage. Had to mooch a little from the deep pockets. My humble little trick — please, have a laugh at my expense."

"..."

"..."

"..."

Da Yi stared at Cheng Shi as if beholding a lunatic. Jiang Chi's jaw dropped, eyes wide with awe — he even involuntarily began to clap.

Poison — the other party in this game — had thought she'd seen through Cheng Shi's teasing intentions. She'd expected to turn the tables in this thoroughly [Corruption]-flavored little game, making him the one who lost face. But here the little priest hadn't wanted her embarrassment at all — he'd wanted the jacket off her back.

?

'Getting inexplicably swindled out of a down jacket — sometimes you really just wanted to call the police.'

After standing stunned for a long while, Poison watched Cheng Shi rubbing his hands together and finally burst into laughter. She clutched her stomach, laughing for ages before shooting him an exasperated glare. Then she picked up his abandoned jacket and pulled it on.

Once dressed, she hugged her shoulders and shivered theatrically:

"Little priest, I only packed one outfit too. If it gets too cold outside later, I hope you'll remember your promise of frank openness.

"Don't worry — I don't want my jacket back. What I'm saying is, I'm quite slim. We could share the same down jacket and...

"Squeeze in together."

Chapter 482: How Do I Know? Because... A Prophecy From [Fate]

Regardless of what Cheng Shi was thinking, to the other two men, the exchange between these two looked increasingly like flirting.

Da Yi scowled and cut the act short with a forceful cough:

"Hot damn, whether you two are in heat or just fooling around, put it on hold.

"Poison, I blocked Gongyang once for you. Time to start coughing up the goods."

The Poison who'd been gazing adoringly at Cheng Shi one second shifted gears instantaneously at Da Yi's words. With perfect solemnity, she gave him a slight bow: "Thank you."

Da Yi short-circuited. A flash of irritation crossed his stern face, immediately replaced by something darker.

He clearly didn't like Poison pulling this, but Cheng Shi could tell the rugged assassin was susceptible to it nonetheless.

At the very least, his expression had softened considerably.

Poison was a master at reading emotions. She knew the gratitude was flimsy, but she couldn't possibly reveal all her life-saving intel at once. So she fed them just enough, and these morsels only cemented her indispensable position within the team.

"The Gift of Sores is in this trial. You all heard me earlier. I wasn't lying — it's the truth."

Da Yi's eyes narrowed almost instantly.

"How do you know for sure?"

"Know for sure?" Poison casually brushed a strand of hair aside, smiling faintly, her gaze slightly distant. She seemed to be recalling something. After a soft sigh: "Strange as it sounds, I think it was... fate's guidance?"

"???"

Cheng Shi froze. 'What does this have to do with my Benefactor?'

'So it wasn't [Deceit] who sent me here — it was [Fate]?'

The other two were equally confused. Da Yi frowned and snorted:

"Don't tell me the Blind One told you.

"If she'd prophesied this place, the dagger would've been snatched by Zhen Xin long ago."

Poison chuckled and shook her head:

"The Blind One? No, no, no. The 'fate' I mean isn't Her — it's that intangible, invisible fate!

"Da Yi, you should know I've been searching for this dagger for a long time. My longing for it is no less than yours.

"But it was impossibly hard to find. For a while, I was convinced someone had already claimed it — otherwise, how could trial after trial yield zero leads?

"Even when my prayer was precise enough to specify 'seeing it,' nothing came back.

"Until a few days ago — right around when Mr. Ram met his new flame. I happened to match with this same woman.

"She was a [Decay] follower. A mummy.

"She said she was sick of living like the walking dead, didn't want to rot anymore. Mr. Ram could help her escape this 'sea of suffering,' so she decided to trust him just once.

"Stupid, I thought. I couldn't understand why she'd trust a man-eating lunatic. But then I understood — she simply didn't care anymore. She didn't care about being deceived, didn't care about being hurt, didn't care about dying. She even craved... death.

"All she wanted was release, but she lacked the courage to end it herself.

"Mr. Ram, however, had the courage to 'release' people. He was excellent at burying others — in his stomach, of course.

"But somewhere along the way, something unexpected happened. A spark ignited between them. The perpetually savage man was actually drawn to this girl's death-seeking aura. He grew... gentle.

"He changed his mind. He didn't want to eat her anymore.

"Sensing the shift, the girl came to me. She said she didn't want any more attachments in her final moments. She asked me to help her find release.

"You all know — I'm a... good person.

"I can't refuse anyone's request. So I ended her decay. And then Mr. Ram went insane."

"..."

'Absolute madwoman!'

Cheng Shi's mouth twitched. 'Not a single sane person in this story.'

Da Yi frowned impatiently: "I'm not here for storytime. Get to the point!"

"Coming right up!" Poison was instantly compliant with Da Yi. "The point is — I'm not just a good person. I'm a kind person.

"Unlike certain people who only bury their victims in their bellies, I found a proper resting place and gave the girl a complete burial.

"Since she'd renounced [Decay], it wouldn't do to let her [Decay]-blessed skin contaminate her grave.

"So I unwrapped the mummy's 'bandages' layer by layer, letting her depart cleanly.

"No need for praise. I've always been this considerate.

"Perhaps my consideration moved the heavens and earned a reward. Because as I peeled back those 'bandages,' I discovered intricate patterns and markings on the inner surface of her blessed skin.

"Curiosity got the better of me. I assembled all the fragments into a single image, and then..."

"Then what?"

All three were hooked.

Poison smiled mysteriously, covered her mouth with one hand, and whispered:

"Then I found a place called Rosna in that puzzle. It was a scroll depicting this nation, showing a scene:

"Countless followers prostrated on the ground in collective worship. At their center, a black-robed figure held aloft a dagger radiating holy light, apparently delivering some impassioned speech. Meanwhile, the worshippers bared their backs, revealing countless festering wounds.

"That scene is what convinced me the dagger was what I'd been searching for.

"Because its name is the Gift of Sores!

"It was the one that brought the visible devastation — the sores — covering this entire land!"

Finished, Poison pressed a hand to her chest, barely containing her excitement:

"So — do you all believe this was fate's guidance?"

Jiang Chi looked contemplative. Da Yi's brows knotted tightly. Cheng Shi's eyes darted about.

It wasn't that he doubted Poison's words. It was that "fate" was the sort of thing nobody could predict until the final act. Better not to attribute everything to it.

Seeing the three growing convinced, Poison pressed her advantage:

"I was searching for when exactly that scene took place. Until I just saw that plaza..."

"You're saying the image depicted that very plaza!?" Da Yi's tone was deadly serious.

"Yes. That exact plaza."

Cheng Shi raised a brow. 'What a coincidence.'

At this point, the team's sole [Time] follower Jiang Chi interjected: "But the timing may not align."

Poison smiled at him: "Then let's make it align. Isn't that what you [Time] followers do best — changing time?"

She fixed him with a meaningful look.

Jiang Chi's face grew serious. He stroked his chin, apparently weighing the feasibility of Poison's proposal. And in that moment of distracted contemplation, he missed the scrutiny in Poison's gaze.

Poison was indeed studying her partner. Not out of habitual caution — but because the hand she had hidden in her jacket pocket was gripping...

A pocket watch with its hands snapped off!

Yes, a pocket watch!

She was certain it wasn't hers. Someone had slipped it into her pocket. So who had quietly planted a broken watch on her person?

The answer was obvious...

Cheng Shi!

Remember — she was wearing Cheng Shi's jacket!

The watch in the pocket was the very one Cheng Shi had pulled out at the trial's start. Him putting his own watch in his own pocket was so utterly natural that it would never arouse suspicion!

And this was Cheng Shi's true objective!

He hadn't launched that inexplicable little game for a down jacket. He'd done it to pass information to Poison right under the other two's noses.

He'd tossed the jacket to Poison in full view of Da Yi and Jiang Chi. Poison had only realized he might have something to tell her after he'd already donned her jacket.

So she'd cooperatively put on his.

The message was simple. A pocket watch signified [Time]. A broken watch with snapped hands meant [Time] that had lost its precision.

Cheng Shi was telling Poison that this Jiang Chi wasn't a good person. Perhaps at this level, "good" and "bad" were too simplistic — but at minimum, he was communicating that the man might not be trustworthy.

As for why he'd make such a claim...

He'd made it up.

Pure fabrication.

Central heating could warm, but it could also cool. Building rapport with some while using dirty wedge-driving tactics to fracture others was a reliable way to earn more "trust" within the team.

Cheng Shi wasn't a master of such arts, but basic manipulation was well within his skill set.

And so, through his elegant information relay, Poison had taken the bait.

But whether the [Corruption] Chosen One had genuinely swallowed the hook, or had bitten down willingly...

That was something nobody could say for certain.

Chapter 483: "Dead Men Tell No Tales"

"If the scroll you described depicts the future, I can say with confidence that we have a strong chance of witnessing that scene firsthand.

"But if the gathering took place in the past..."

Jiang Chi sighed.

"As you know, [Time] isn't [Memory]. Rewinding isn't replaying. If it happened in the past, things get very complicated.

"Either way, we first need to determine one thing: whether the current moment is before or after that event.

"Miss Poison, while our original agreement didn't involve the Gift of Sores, if you write 'helping find the dagger' into the contract, I'm willing to accept.

"Of course, the price... would increase slightly."

Cheng Shi's brow twitched with interest. He was very curious about this [Time] follower's "price."

Poison nodded with a smile and accepted without question: "Naturally."

"Hot damn, quit the yapping. First show us that puzzle. If it's real, priority one isn't figuring out the timeline — it's killing that nuisance Gongyang Jiao. Otherwise, we'll be on tenterhooks every day. How are we supposed to find anything?"

?

Cheng Shi stared at Da Yi in disbelief. 'Didn't you literally just say to walk the other way when you see him? And now you want to go back and kill him?'

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

Jiang Chi frowned slightly at the suggestion. Only Poison — ever compliant with Da Yi — cheerfully nodded: "Sure. Whatever you say."

Da Yi grunted with satisfaction, but an instant later his face darkened. He spat irritably:

"Hot damn, don't pull that crap on me."

Poison pursed her lips: "Listening to you isn't allowed either?"

"...No. Well, yes... Hot damn, being around you is a headache. Just show us the puzzle already. Once we've looked, we move. Stop wasting time."

Cheng Shi watched their exchange with fascination, a realization crystallizing.

'So what Poison sold Da Yi was... obedience.'

'Interesting. Da Yi had a need for control?'

Cheng Shi had matched with Poison long ago. During his post-trial analysis, he'd recognized that this [Corruption] assassin was like a world-class saleswoman — except she didn't sell products. She sold emotions.

She wore many faces, each tailored to a different "customer." She provided the precise emotional experience each "customer" craved, trapping them in the enjoyment of that emotion until desire bloomed naturally within them.

And the price for these emotions? Simply letting the "customer" indulge the desire she'd kindled.

Yes — she never took. She only wanted you to feel happy!

But that was exactly what made her terrifying!

Descent, descent — once you sank into it, you became desire's plaything!

Da Yi clearly enjoyed Poison's compliant attitude. But he couldn't help guarding against her motives, because once you fell into her emotional trap, an addiction seeped bone-deep — making escape from this [Corruption]-woven cradle of depravity all but impossible.

Not because his willpower was lacking. But because Poison had the tools to erode willpower itself. If someone fell into her trap even while clearheaded, how could they possibly claw their way out once already lost inside?

This was precisely why Cheng Shi feared her.

Even though she'd long since identified his lack of trust and was willing to "sell" trust to his face, the purchase was one Cheng Shi truly didn't dare make.

He was afraid of drowning too.

This explained the polarized opinions peak players held about Poison. Those who loved her thought she was perfect in every way. Those who hated her — also because she was perfect in every way.

She walked the [Corruption] path, yet blazed a trail no other [Corruption] follower had explored: seamless "accommodation."

Everyone who knew her understood that her warmth and affection were fake. But they were drawn to her regardless — because they knew that even though Poison's "fake" was fake, her fake was more genuine than anyone else's truth.

She showed the mummy kindness. She showed Da Yi obedience. She showed Cheng Shi trust. This [Corruption] Chosen One always delivered the exact emotion a "customer" needed most, right when they needed it — then waited silently for their desire to stir.

And that was how she'd surpassed every terrifying [Corruption] follower to reach the summit of the Ladder of Ascent with her "seemingly delicate" facade.

This made Cheng Shi curious: what was Poison selling to Jiang Chi?

With Da Yi pressing, Poison's expression finally shifted.

She grew fidgety. Her eyes started to wander. When even Jiang Chi turned a suspicious look her way, the smirk she'd been maintaining collapsed entirely. Worse, an embarrassed flush crept across her cheeks.

"It's gone."

"?" Da Yi's gaze darkened: "Gone? Hot damn, Poison, I suggest you look harder."

Poison bit her lip, looking genuinely conflicted.

"I can't find it. Mr. Ram took the bandage puzzle."

"!!!" Jiang Chi was stunned: "Gongyang Jiao?"

"Yes..." Poison looked even more embarrassed. "I can't beat him. Him snatching that girl's keepsake from me... isn't exactly surprising, is it?"

"Then doesn't he also know where the Gift of Sores is!?"

"No. The instant he took it, the lunatic swallowed the bandage. He said even in death, the girl belonged in his stomach.

"So the image now only exists in my mind... and in Gongyang Jiao's stomach.

"The second option is admittedly a stretch. It would require that from the moment he swallowed the bandage until now... he hasn't had a bowel movement."

"..."

"..."

"..."

The room went dead silent.

Reality could be absurd — Cheng Shi could accept that. What he couldn't accept was that Poison hadn't embellished a single detail. Every word was true!

'Brilliant.'

'A perfect case of dead men tell no tales.'

"If you don't believe me, I can draw it."

Poison actually produced a pen and began sketching on the floor.

Watching her frown with concentration while drawing with agonizing slowness, the others estimated it would take ten days to two weeks to finish. With a five-day trial clock, who could wait?

Cheng Shi's eyes darted. He offered a suggestion: "I have some items that can replay [Memory]. How about you skip the drawing and just let me dig through your past instead? Suffer a bit for the cause."

The instant he finished, Poison's pen-hand paused — but she covered it quickly, looking up at Cheng Shi with wounded eyes:

"Then go ahead. Just... be gentle."

"..."

Cheng Shi rolled his eyes. He obviously had no such "memory-reading item." He'd only spotted Poison putting on an act for sympathy and wanted to call her bluff. When she agreed, he deflected with a laugh:

"Just kidding. Just lightening the mood. But seriously — neither of you two has any [Memory] items?"

Jiang Chi studied Cheng Shi thoughtfully, shook his head, and smiled. Da Yi frowned and mentally cursed his luck.

He fixed Poison with a probing stare for a long moment. Finally, gritting his teeth, he growled:

"Hot damn, I'll trust you this once. Poison, don't string me along like a sucker. Otherwise I'll switch sides and help Gongyang climb the ladder."

Poison lowered her eyes meekly, looking deeply grateful: "I never lie."

"?"

'Stealing lines now, are we?'

Cheng Shi was incredulous. He'd never expected the interrogation to end this easily. But watching Da Yi's teeth-grinding resolve, he had to reassess just how important this dagger was to the man.

Not just Da Yi — Hu Wei's determined demeanor was equally vivid in memory. So how had two people who both wanted the Gift of Sores managed to cooperate so peacefully?

'Could it be... they weren't seeking it for themselves?'

Cheng Shi frowned and filed away the thought. But when he looked up again, he clearly saw Poison's lips curve upward once more.

His heart sank — and then he smiled.

'Look at that. A "customer" had already taken the bait.'

'So had the [War] assassin's decision been influenced by [Corruption]... or not?'

Chapter 484: Destination — The Rosna Court

"Hot damn, so what's the plan?"

"We do what Jiang Chi said — first confirm the current timeline, and try to locate the black-robed figure from the image while we're at it.

"Anyone commanding a public worship must be someone important. So I suggest we head for this city's seat of power.

"Of course, before that, we need to figure out where we are."

As she spoke, Poison lifted the nearest unconscious child — the smallest of the family's three. She was clearly planning to extract information.

She sprinkled something unknown over the little girl. The child's eyes fluttered open, and before she could scream at the scene before her, Poison pressed a finger to her lips and asked in a bewitching tone:

"What year of the Rosna Empire is it now, and what city is this?"

The girl's terror-widened eyes slowly relaxed. She gazed blearily at Poison and mumbled:

"Year 100 of the Rosna New Calendar. This is the imperial capital, Kannar."

'The imperial capital?'

'So could the person holding the dagger aloft be their emperor?'

The moment the girl finished speaking, the group frowned and began speculating. Only Poison — her smile froze the instant she heard the answer.

The other three felt their hearts lurch. A sinking feeling washed over them. They turned toward Poison, who explained with a grim expression:

"I told you — the Rosna Empire lasted barely a century. That 'century' wasn't figurative..."

"???" Cheng Shi was stunned. "You mean the Rosna Empire existed for exactly 100 years? 100 on the dot?"

Poison's expression was as complicated as it could possibly get.

"Yes. And right now it's the calendar's hundredth year. So Rosna's destruction could be happening right now!

"This also means the scene in the scroll occurred in the past — with odds a hundred times greater than it being in the future.

"After all, no matter how you look at it, this weather suggests we're near the year's end...

"Sigh. Our luck's poor. It seems this isn't [Time]'s home turf."

Not [Time]'s turf meant it was [Memory]'s.

Jiang Chi's expression was equally complex. He wasn't without [Memory]-related tools, but compared to his own faith talents, the cost of using those tools was enormous.

He wasn't an assassin. The Gift of Sores didn't interest him all that much. If this deal was to continue, he needed compensation worth the investment.

Seeing Jiang Chi's expression shift, Poison hadn't even had time to worry before Da Yi jumped in.

"Hot damn, Brother Jiang, don't bail on us yet. Everything right now is guesswork. Maybe it all does happen in the near future.

"Let's start moving and gather intel first. Once we confirm it's in the past...

"Trust me, I'll have compensation that satisfies you. You won't be shortchanged.

"Of course, if this costs me dearly, Poison... you'd better not try anything clever at the last second.

"I will have the Gift of Sores. And all you're bargaining for... is your life."

The words were harsh — carrying the Grand Marshal's forcefulness, but with even less subtlety.

Jiang Chi deliberated briefly. His silence was acceptance. As for Poison — what she showed Da Yi was always compliance. No matter what she truly thought, she would never refuse.

And Cheng Shi certainly wouldn't object.

In the others' eyes, he was at best a healer. Well, being generous, a clever, cautious healer with some modest offensive capability. But not much.

At least until Cheng Shi fully revealed himself, he wasn't a threat to Da Yi. After all, Hu Wei hadn't brought him along to share the Gift of Sores. So while Da Yi maintained some wariness and suspicion toward Cheng Shi, he didn't see him as the primary competitor for the dagger.

That distinction still belonged to Poison.

With no objections, Da Yi nodded gravely.

He pushed open the front door, surveyed the raging blizzard outside, and said in a low voice:

"Hot damn, speed is everything in war. Stop wasting time. Find out where the Court is. We go there first to investigate.

"If that nuisance Gongyang gets in our face on the way, we take him out on sight!"

With that, he strode out without so much as a backward glance.

Jiang Chi chuckled softly and hurried after him.

Watching this, Cheng Shi finally grasped Da Yi's character. He was similar to Hu Wei, but more blunt.

When dealing with partners, he lacked the Grand Marshal's behind-the-scenes pressure games. Instead, he laid threats out in the open — a display of supreme confidence.

He seemed confident he could handle any problem, which was why he refused to waste time on schemes.

Like right now — walking out first probably wasn't because he trusted the makeshift team behind him. More likely, he trusted that even if betrayed, the consequences wouldn't be dire.

But undeniably, this was still a form of "trust."

'A "teammate" willing to expose his back to others — how could you not like him?'

The instant "back" crossed his mind, Cheng Shi inexplicably glanced at Poison beside him. She was busy "interrogating" the little girl. Having extracted all useful intelligence, she set the child down, rose, and turned — immediately catching Cheng Shi's gaze.

Seeing his peculiar look, the [Corruption] follower blinked with mild surprise, then — as if suddenly understanding — spun around and pulled open the jacket, revealing her now-fully-healed bare back.

Yes. Bare back. Again!

The two shirts that had been under the jacket had vanished once more.

"???"

Cheng Shi hadn't expected that a fleeting, tangential thought would be read so precisely. He snapped his head away and hurried after Da Yi at an embarrassed clip. But Poison was faster — she materialized beside him in an instant, walking shoulder to shoulder, and mouthed silently with a curled smile:

"Like what you see?"

Cheng Shi wasn't looking at her and naturally had no idea what she said. But feeling her drift closer once again, he said with exasperation:

"The road's this wide and you just have to crowd into my space?"

Poison nodded as if it were the most natural thing in the world: "I don't want to either, but I'm cold."

"How is you being cold my problem?"

"You stripped my clothes off and now you're denying it?" Poison instantly looked aggrieved. Eyes reddening, she tugged at Cheng Shi's hand like a jilted lover staring at a heartbreaker: "You said we'd squeeze together."

"..."

'Damn. Absolute madwoman.'

Cheng Shi rolled his eyes in irritation and sped up to shake her off. Poison followed immediately. Just as Cheng Shi was at his wits' end, Da Yi up front rescued him.

From the vanguard, Da Yi bellowed through the wind:

"Hot damn, I didn't tell you all to come out here and flirt! Poison, where are you? Get up here and lead the way — which direction to the Court?"

Poison had wanted to tease Cheng Shi a while longer, but out of "obedience" to Da Yi, she pouted and reluctantly took point.

Without the antics, the group's pace through the blizzard accelerated. Before long they'd crossed back through the plaza and arrived before the Rosna Court — a building that looked more temple than palace.

Gazing up at the imposing inner walls and towering multi-tiered palace, Cheng Shi and Jiang Chi marveled at the Court's grandeur. But Poison and Da Yi, both leading the way, wore uneasy expressions.

Because their assassin-honed senses told them that the Court held far less life and sound than expected.

"Hot damn, something's off. Everyone stay close. We go in and scout.

"Brother Cheng, healing's on you."

Cheng Shi felt the wrongness too. Expression grave, he nodded, tightened his grip on the ring, and followed his teammates step by step into the highest seat of power in this [Decay] nation.

And as the four vanished into the blizzard, at a street corner they'd just passed, banked snow suddenly shuddered loose from a wall — only to be swept and re-piled by the howling wind moments later.

Chapter 485: The Historian

Snow fell like scattered salt. Wind cut like blades.

The group scaled the high walls against the blizzard and gazed upon the staggered palace complex with renewed awe.

It was hard to define the Rosna Court's architectural style. From a distance, the palaces looked magnificent and imposing. But up close, every pillar, wall, corner, and eave was fashioned from noticeably crude materials.

It was as if the masons had scooped up random stones, ground them into bricks, and slapped them together. The pitted blocks stacked tall with no aesthetic grace — yet pull back, and the whole structure somehow achieved a stunning, harmonious grandeur.

Looking at this, Cheng Shi was oddly reminded of Kanrival, that equally frost-gripped place. There, the [Life] path was harnessed for production. Here, [Decay]'s traces had been embedded into the city's very foundation.

The group leapt down from the walls and advanced straight through the deserted corridors. Before long, the oddity became impossible to ignore.

They hadn't encountered a single person. The unguarded area was far too vast.

Da Yi stopped, frowning. He perked his ears and listened for a long while, then spoke gravely:

"Drop the stealth. Unless that Chameleon can split himself, there's no way he's silencing this entire area.

"These palaces... are completely empty."

"Completely empty!?" Cheng Shi blinked in shock. "Is this really the Rosna Court?"

Poison nodded with equal gravity. The scene before them defied all logic. Even if the weather was terrible enough to empty the streets, this was the Court. Surely it couldn't be left unattended?

Even if the Rosna royal family was considerate enough to let the guards shelter from the snow, the palace interiors couldn't also be vacant.

"Something's wrong, but I don't sense any traps. Wait here — I'll go scout."

Before anyone could respond, Da Yi had drawn two Iron Thorns between his fingers, launched into the blizzard, and vanished.

Watching him go, Cheng Shi clicked his tongue in admiration.

'This guy's nerve was unreal. Faced with the unknown, he didn't retreat — he charged ahead as vanguard. If it were him and Mi Laozhang who'd stumbled upon this place, they'd have backed out hand-in-hand on the spot and found another approach.'

'Sometimes, you really needed [War]!'

The three hid in the shadows beneath the walls. Da Yi returned shortly — but not alone. When he appeared, he was hauling a skeletal old man who was one breath away from freezing to death.

"Hot damn, this place is haunted. He's the only one left in the entire Court. Brother Cheng, quick — save him!"

Da Yi didn't need to ask. As a dutiful priest, Cheng Shi already had his hands raised. The instant the two landed, a concentrated burst of healing surged onto the old man's head.

The black-robed, wrinkle-covered elder shuddered all over. His tightly shut eyes slowly opened. Seeing the puzzled Cheng Shi before him, he croaked:

"You're... not guards... trespassing in the Court... should be punished for sacr—"

Before he could finish, Da Yi dropped him on the ground and backhanded him across the face:

"Hot damn, I didn't save you to hear a lecture. Where is everyone in this Court? Where did they go?"

The old man reeled from the slap, trembling fingers reaching for his face. A flush of color appeared on his cheeks.

Don't get the wrong idea — not some bizarre fetish. Just swelling from the impact.

He rubbed his face, his slightly clouded eyes scanning the group. When he noticed his assailant was a hulking giant, he flinched as if remembering something, then clamped his mouth shut.

Seeing the old man shut down, Cheng Shi frowned and turned to Poison:

"How did the Rosna Empire actually fall?"

"Surely the entire city's population didn't all wither and die of old age in the same year. That family just now still had children."

"Little priest, you think I'm a history textbook? Piecing together even scraps of information within limited trials is already hard enough. With a living fossil right in front of us, why ask me?"

Poison's eyes shifted. She pursed her lips:

"Are you questioning my honesty? Trying to use this old man's words to cross-reference mine?"

"..."

'Peak players really did overthink everything.'

Cheng Shi hadn't meant anything by it — just an offhand question. But he couldn't stop people from interpreting, so he let it go.

Da Yi shot Poison a look, snorted without comment, then grabbed the old man by the collar and hoisted him up again:

"Hot damn, I'm asking you — where did everyone in the Court go? Talk!"

The old man had no strength to resist. Even if he looked like the most devout [Decay] follower, Poison had been right: the people of Rosna never received His blessing. He was just an ordinary old man.

Under Da Yi's imposing interrogation, the elder still refused to answer. Worse, he surreptitiously drew a short knife from his waist and jabbed it toward his own lower back.

He was trying to kill himself!

But the sluggish motion was child's play to these players. A [War] believer would never let his "prisoner" find easy release.

Da Yi sneered, crushed the old man's wrist with one hand, crumpled the blade into scrap with the other, and repeated his question over the old man's gasping howls of agony.

'Too brutal. [War] was too brutal.'

Cheng Shi couldn't watch any longer. He timed a healing spell perfectly, then said in a kindly tone:

"Don't be afraid. I won't let you die until you've told us what we need to know."

The expression was gentle. The tone, however, was so sinister that the other three players' looks turned distinctly peculiar.

'This Fate Weaver wouldn't happen to have some unspeakable hobbies, would he?'

The old man had been wailing. But hearing those words, he was terrified beyond reason. His entire body began convulsing. In his eyes, endless torture seemed infinitely worse than a clean death. So when he felt his shattered wrist actually knitting back together, he sobbed and begged:

"They ran! Everyone ran! His Majesty ran, the ministers ran, the nobles ran!

"You're too late! They abandoned the faith, abandoned the Empire, abandoned the people of Kannar — they all fled!

"Please, stop torturing me! Kill me! Kill me! Why are you saving me?! I'm already dead! I'm already dead!!"

The anguished howling made everyone's brows tighten.

This was deeply strange. From every angle, the old man's words were riddled with anomalies.

A [Decay] follower who preferred a swift death over enduring suffering? These people tortured themselves daily — yet now he sought release at another's hand?

But this wasn't the time for his liberation. Cheng Shi thoughtfully cast another healing spell, then followed up:

"Good, good. Still spirited. Next question:

"Who are we?"

"?"

The old man froze. Whether the healing had dulled his pain, or Cheng Shi's question had short-circuited his brain, he suddenly stopped trembling and peered at Cheng Shi through clouded eyes, scarcely daring to believe:

"You're... not World Destroyers?"

"World Destroyers?" Cheng Shi arched a brow and smiled, shaking his head. "No. We are Saviors. We're here to rescue you."

The room went still. The old man was stunned. The other players were stunned too. Their expressions turned odd, but nobody spoke — as if by tacit agreement, they'd ceded center stage to Cheng Shi.

The old man's gaze swept across the players once more. Then, with a bitter glance at his broken wrist, he fell silent for a moment — and chose to believe.

Watching the old man deceive himself so willingly, Cheng Shi's smile widened.

"Good. Now tell us about the suffering you've endured. Only by understanding what's happened to Rosna can we pull you from the depths.

"Trust me. Because we are Saviors."

Chapter 486: The Absurd Rosna Royal Family

The old man couldn't endure the torture, so he answered every question the players had.

Just as he'd said, this [Decay] nation's Court had become an empty shell.

The emperor had fled. He'd taken his ministers, nobles, and guards through a teleportation array inscribed beneath the Court, escaping to a place no outsider could know.

The reason the Rosna royal family had abandoned their entire nation in this panicked flight was simple: the current era had long since ceased to be [Decay]'s heyday. Faith was crumbling, power was being reconstructed, and across the Land of Hope, more and more self-proclaimed "World Destroyers" were appearing.

They believed the gods had stopped watching this continent because humanity's filth had polluted divine perception. So under the banner of "purifying the world for the gods," they began annihilating everything.

Numerous neighboring kingdoms had already been destroyed by these World Destroyers. Under their indiscriminate slaughter, no life survived — and not just life. Even traces of civilization spanning millennia were scoured clean.

The entire continent was shrouded in the shadow of annihilation. The air everywhere reeked of panic.

When this tide of terror reached the Rosna Empire, the declining royal family was terrified. And so the current scene came to pass.

Through ancient arrays passed down from the Life Era, they'd abandoned their home and capital, leaving an entire city's populace defenseless in place — sitting ducks awaiting the World Destroyers' blades.

Reportedly, aside from the capital Kannar, all other cities had already been reduced to ash.

The citizens still expected the royal family to rally and mount a final stand. But these supposedly "most devout" [Decay] followers had long since secretly betrayed [Decay], dumping the wreckage of their faith behind them.

Since [Decay] had never granted them power, He naturally wouldn't punish these overlooked apostates either. So for self-preservation's sake, the Rosna royals chose to save themselves amid the apocalypse.

This old man who'd been left behind was the "lucky winner" chosen for the cleanup.

Once the teleportation array activated, it wouldn't stop unless its core inscriptions were damaged. The royal family, terrified the World Destroyers would follow, had left behind one minister who knew how to dismantle the array.

After destroying the array, this minister had no escape route. He foresaw his end — when the World Destroyers arrived and found the Court empty, they'd unleash their fury on him. To spare himself a brutal fate, he'd decided to die first: walk outside and freeze to death in the blizzard.

But then the players arrived. Da Yi found him moments before death and dragged him here.

Hearing the old man's full account, the group exchanged glances — their eyes holding both empathy and sudden understanding.

None were surprised by Rosna's fate. The description even pointed them toward a specific deity:

[Oblivion].

[Decay] had decayed. [Oblivion] was being born.

So this trial's backdrop was the transitional period between two faiths within the Sinking Era.

Those self-proclaimed World Destroyers had to be [Oblivion]'s followers.

[Oblivion]'s followers were no joke. Most harbored uncontrollable urges toward destruction. And this was the Land of Hope in an age of divine supremacy — nothing could stop these annihilation-worshipping maniacs!

No wonder the Rosna royals had been so terrified, so desperate to flee.

After the historical context clicked, the group fell silent again, because they simultaneously realized that reality had completely contradicted their earlier assumptions.

They'd initially believed the figure worshipped by the masses in the scroll was a ruler — at minimum, a devout person of high status. But now, this Rosna Empire didn't have a single devout high-ranking individual left.

From emperor to ministers to nobles to soldiers, every Oathbreaker who'd betrayed the faith had vanished through a destroyed teleportation array to survive in hiding. Only a city of ordinary citizens remained, kept in the dark, naively awaiting death.

Laughable and tragic.

Given all this, could the scroll's scene truly have occurred in the past?

Da Yi scratched his head in frustration:

"Hot damn, I knew this wouldn't be simple. Everyone who could rally a crowd has bolted. Looks like we'll need to go through [Memory] after all.

"Brother Jiang, it's on you now. Don't worry — I'll make the payment worth your while."

Jiang Chi didn't respond, still deep in thought. It was Cheng Shi who shook his head at Da Yi, signaling him to wait. Then, smiling, he addressed the old man:

"So you're one of the Rosna Empire's ministers?"

The old man pressed his cracked lips together and stiffly nodded. He'd picked up that these people were looking for someone.

"Good. And your title is?"

The old man stammered, then quavered: "Historian. I'm a historian who records history..."

'A Historian!?'

Everyone's jaws dropped. Cheng Shi broke into a wide grin.

'See? This was fate. It constantly created dead ends, yet always managed to produce a miracle just when the road ran out.'

He looked at the old man's conflicted face and smiled even wider.

"Then I think I can guess why you were the one left behind, Historian. This teleportation array, passed down from the Life Era — almost no one in the entire empire knows how to operate it, right? Or rather, almost no one knows how to destroy it.

"But someone steeped in history — like you — would be one of the few who did.

"You phrased it very delicately. 'Lucky winner.' Tch. Seems that luck was rather... predetermined.

"I'm curious what the Rosna royals used to threaten you into staying. But that's no longer important. The moment you revealed you're a Historian, you saved yourself.

"Trust me — the history you love will become the power that redeems you.

"And how should we address you, Historian?"

The old man was thoroughly confused, but he'd caught a glimmer of hope in Cheng Shi's words. So he nervously complied:

"Jia Lun. My name is Jia Lun."

"Jia Lun — what a fine name!" Cheng Shi clapped lightly and continued: "As a Historian, Sir Jia Lun must know Rosna's history inside and out. So I have a question.

"In these brief hundred years of Rosna's history, which year saw a massive gathering in the plaza outside the Court?"

"I can give you more hints. This assembly was related to your faith, and—"

Before he could finish, Jia Lun's face went rigid.

Seeing the sudden change, Cheng Shi's heart sank. He asked with growing unease:

"Did I say something wrong?"

Old Jia Lun's withered lips twitched. He answered gingerly:

"My... my lords, I must point out — the plaza you're referring to is called the Rosna Recruitment Square. It was only completed in the latter half of this year, built to recruit soldiers to reinforce the cities beyond the capital.

"But in the second month after its completion — that is, now... His Majesty fled, along with the Conscription Minister and the Chief War Minister."

He finished with a stiff grimace: "If you have further questions about this brief history, I could go to the Construction Minister's attic and look through the building records."

"..."

"..."

"..."

Cheng Shi's face darkened: "The plaza was built just one month ago?"

"Yes..."

The players exchanged a look, then turned to Poison. Her expression hardened. She stated with absolute certainty:

"I won't forget, and I wasn't wrong. It's definitely that plaza. The columns and the steps are in the exact same positions."

She drew a dagger and began carving directly into the snow-covered ground. This time she worked far faster than in the house, sketching out lines and contours in just a few strokes.

Poison's drawing skill was solid. Before long, everyone could see it was clearly the Rosna Recruitment Square, drawn from what appeared to be the Court's vantage point. It didn't look like something Poison had hastily fabricated by deconstructing perspective on the fly.

Da Yi's hopeful expression sank again.

Cheng Shi's gaze sharpened as he fell into thought. He didn't even need to look at the ground sketch — Master of Deception told him Poison wasn't lying.

If the scroll's scene hadn't occurred in the past, that meant it was destined to happen in the near future.

But the question was — who would rally the entire city's population?

'Could there really be some heaven-sent savior in Kannar?'

'Hiss—'

'Don't tell me it's Jia Lun?'

'The black clothing matched. But still...'

Cheng Shi stepped back and whispered to Poison:

"The puzzle you saw — was it in color?"

Poison blinked, shook her head, then nodded:

"Skin-etched art has no color. The flesh only had blood-red grooves. But I can confirm the figure's clothing was black — because that outfit was the only thing filled in.

"The artist seemed to be specifically memorializing that detail. It was the only color in the entire puzzle.

"You suspect... him? The Historian?"

Cheng Shi nodded. Currently, old Jia Lun fit best — identity, status, and timing all roughly aligned. If it wasn't him, finding the figure from the scroll would be like searching for a needle in a haystack.

Poison scrutinized Jia Lun carefully, then said with rare seriousness:

"His robe has no hood. The figure in black... was wearing one."

Chapter 487: Da Yi's Urgency

Da Yi might be a hot-tempered [War] follower, but he had one excellent quality: he never interrupted a teammate's rhythm.

Seeing Cheng Shi fall into deep thought after the interrogation, he merely frowned but made no further demands.

Before long, Cheng Shi looked up and asked the Historian:

"Does the Rosna Empire possess any relic that symbolizes royal or divine authority?"

The old man startled, then nodded hurriedly: "Yes... the Sin Cleansing Scepter in His Majesty's hand is the supreme symbol of imperial power. However, the scepter has been taken."

"What does the scepter look like?"

"Person-height. Three fingers wide. Carved from a single piece of wood. A dark-green gemstone set into the top."

Cheng Shi frowned. Another option eliminated.

Several rounds of questioning had failed to produce the answer he wanted. He had no choice but to try a more direct line of inquiry.

"What about daggers? Is there any famous dagger in the empire? Or perhaps it isn't technically a dagger, just something functionally similar. Anything like that?"

Hearing this, old Jia Lun finally understood that these powerful humans weren't searching for a person — they were hunting for a dagger.

He racked his brain for a while, then suddenly widened his eyes:

"There may have been... something like that."

"!!!"

Everyone perked up instantly. Da Yi snatched Jia Lun off the ground with visible excitement:

"Hot damn, finally! What's it called? Where is it?"

Old Jia Lun was terrified. Trembling uncontrollably, he stammered:

"The First Prince once traded with a foreign merchant caravan and purchased a dagger that could cut through iron like butter. He displayed it publicly several times. But after a while, he sealed it away and strictly forbade anyone from mentioning it ever again.

"This was a long time ago. Or rather, very few remember it. Had my child not been close friends with the First Prince's child, and accidentally stumbled into his secret chamber during play, perhaps no one would have recalled..."

Cheng Shi scoffed: "How convenient. Your kid just happened to stumble upon it?"

"I... speak only the truth."

Cheng Shi could tell the man wasn't lying. But wasn't this too convenient?

"The First Prince is your age?"

"Then your emperor must be over a hundred."

"What, he really had a crown prince for several decades?"

Old Jia Lun's face stiffened. He answered with deep sorrow: "I was born in Year 64 of the Rosna New Calendar. I'm only... 36 years old."

"..."

"..."

Thirty-six...

'Bro, never mind 36 — with your condition, you could say 93 and I'd believe it.'

'Truly worthy of a [Decay] follower. The devotion was visible.'

'No wonder the emperor ran. If Rosna's prime-age men all looked like this, any war of resistance would basically amount to mental patients slaughtering their way through a nursing home...'

Cheng Shi's expression turned peculiar. His gaze on old Jia Lun even took on a tinge of pity. The thought was dark, but he couldn't help it: 'No wonder the emperor didn't take you when he fled. Past 35 is peak optimization age, isn't it?'

'Who'd have thought those rules applied even in the Sinking Era's Land of Hope.'

At this point, Da Yi couldn't contain himself any longer. His face was urgent: "Hot damn, where does the First Prince live? When he left, did he take the dagger? If you know, start leading — don't make me slap you again!"

"The First Prince, he..."

"?"

'What was with this pause? Another twist?'

'Again!?'

Cheng Shi had gone numb. His gaze on old Jia Lun suddenly turned scrutinizing. He narrowed his eyes, wondering if this dear Historian might be some kind of undercover colleague.

'Was he stringing them along?'

'Great, the paranoia was flaring up. The more he looked, the more suspicious it seemed. So was this man a [Deceit] colleague or a [Fate] colleague?'

Cheng Shi's gaze sharpened. The more he thought, the more uneasy he felt. But he didn't act rashly. Instead, he gave Poison a meaningful glance.

While he'd built a "cunning" reputation with Hu Wei, he didn't want to over-display his caution and shrewdness. So he reached for the tool at hand.

And this trial's designated tool was, without question, intel-core Miss Poison.

The instant Poison caught Cheng Shi's look, she sensed his suspicion. As the "never-say-no" desire catalyst, she understood perfectly and immediately sprang into action — snatching Jia Lun from Da Yi's grip and ripping open the old man's clothing in the howling blizzard, exposing the scar-covered torso and back.

But the Historian's wounds were different from those on the civilian couple. His scars overlapped and tangled in ghastly patterns, covering his entire body — the suffering he'd endured was clearly far greater.

Everyone frowned at the sight. Only Cheng Shi seemed to notice something meaningful about the scars. But before he could examine them closely, Da Yi yanked the man back, cursing:

"Hot damn, Poison, don't tell me you're trying to steal my prisoner.

"I'd advise you to behave. Don't forget — Gongyang could be anywhere."

He jerked Jia Lun upright and demanded again: "Talk. Where's the First Prince? Where's his dagger?"

Jia Lun was frozen stiff. Shivering violently, he stammered:

"The First Prince... was banished from the palace by His Majesty.

"As for his collections and contraband, the guards likely swept everything up and took it all..."

"?" Da Yi blinked. "You're saying the person's still here, but the dagger's gone?"

Old Jia Lun nodded fearfully.

THUD.

Da Yi dropped him with a dark expression and spat viciously: "Hot damn, I won't believe it until I see for myself. Old man, where's the First Prince's palace?"

Jia Lun pointed a quivering finger in a direction. Da Yi's eyes swept the group. He said only "Wait for me" before vanishing again. Watching Da Yi's frantic urgency, Cheng Shi grew even more puzzled.

'Were these [War] brutes really this desperate for Dizel's soul?'

'The man wasn't even trying to hide it.'

'Even if it was an Envoy's soul, extracting value from it was a thorny problem for players. Yet this man acted as if he'd already found a method...'

'Wait!'

Cheng Shi suddenly recalled the Grand Marshal's words. Hu Wei had said he'd learned certain things from an "extremely reliable channel." At the time, Cheng Shi had wondered if that channel might be Them... Thinking it over now, the possibility wasn't far-fetched.

'Could their source be their Benefactor, [War] Himself?'

'Did [War] also want to make moves after [Prosperity]'s fall?'

'Not impossible, but that didn't match his impression of Him.'

'Unless it was... [Chaos]?'

Hu Wei's second faith was [Chaos]. That tracked. But what about Da Yi — was his second faith also heading toward [Chaos]?

Two [War] followers backed by [Chaos]?

?

Cheng Shi's expression turned strange. 'Oh no. Had he run into people from the sister company while on a business trip?'

'If he pulled out a board member badge from the sister company right now, would Da Yi... actually not believe it?'

Chapter 488: Killing Intent in the Blizzard

Cheng Shi frowned in the direction Da Yi had vanished, then turned to whisper to Poison:

"Did you do something to him?"

Poison blinked innocently: "What?"

Cheng Shi pursed his lips: "Don't play dumb. Da Yi is rough around the edges, but he doesn't seem like someone this impulsive. His desire for the Gift of Sores is way too intense. Did you use your tricks on him?"

Poison stared at Cheng Shi for several seconds. Her eyes first swept toward Jiang Chi, who stood nearby with his eyes closed in meditation, then she curled her lips and whispered back:

"Are you worried about him being influenced, or about yourself being influenced?"

Cheng Shi's gaze sharpened. His expression darkened.

'This [Corruption] follower really had made a move. Terrifyingly subtle — she'd managed to influence a fellow assassin without leaving a trace. And Da Yi apparently... hadn't even noticed?'

Cheng Shi glanced toward where Da Yi had disappeared, unease gnawing at him. Had the man truly not realized?

'What was his plan in choosing to leave at this moment?'

'And what about himself — had he been affected too?'

Cheng Shi wore a puzzled expression on the surface while secretly gripping the key in his hand.

At that moment, Poison edged closer, seemingly trying to squeeze inside Cheng Shi's down jacket for warmth.

"Why would I ever move against you, little priest? I trust you completely. Otherwise, how could I entrust my back to you?"

As she spoke, Poison turned around and began backing toward Cheng Shi, simultaneously reaching for her jacket zipper — as if about to bare that flawless snow-white back once more in the blizzard.

This time, Cheng Shi didn't stop her. Instead, he mirrored her, turning his own back, hand rising to his down jacket's zipper — initiating another round of "frank openness" with this [Corruption] follower.

Both stepped backward in small increments. The moment their backs collided, Cheng Shi sneered:

"Strip then. Why'd you stop?"

Poison puffed her cheeks in a coyly indignant pout, then "obediently" yanked the zipper open and tossed the jacket aside. But this time, what lay beneath wasn't bare skin — it was a snow-white assassin's combat suit.

Poison struck!

Before the jacket hit the ground, she shot into the blizzard like a bolt. Simultaneously, Cheng Shi dropped all pretense. With deadly seriousness, the hand at his neck flicked out three scalpels, hurling them at the wall directly ahead.

The scalpels sliced through the wind. They were about to embed in the wall when empty space before it suddenly rippled, scattering the surrounding snow. Three metallic clinks rang out as an invisible force deflected all three blades to the ground.

'Someone was there!'

'The Chameleon!'

Cheng Shi's eyes narrowed. He stepped back, away from Jia Lun and Jiang Chi.

If Poison hadn't turned her back to tip him off, he truly wouldn't have noticed that his other two "teammates" had closed to striking range.

So was Da Yi's departure the hunters seizing an opportunity — or had Poison created the opening for them?

'Was she trying to take out Gongyang Jiao here?'

'On what basis?'

'Certainly not a defenseless priest. So her trump card was Jiang Chi?'

'Most likely!'

Because the instant Cheng Shi retreated, the Pointer Knight moved.

At some point, he'd drawn an intricately inscribed Hour Hand Sword from his spatial storage. Held vertically before him, his bearing was incomparably sharper than when he'd wielded the sundial needle at the plaza.

The moment space warped before the wall, the Pointer Knight laughed aloud, thrust his sword tip forward, and channeled [Time]'s power. The distorted space froze. Even the falling snowflakes slowed. Then he seized the opening, launched from the ground, and whirled his blade like an umbrella of steel — a wind-piercing drill boring into the warped space.

Jiang Chi was powerful. Honestly, Cheng Shi had never seen a Pointer Knight who could freeze the [Time] of an entire spatial zone. Perhaps the ones he'd encountered before were simply too low-ranked — they'd managed at most to slow or freeze an opponent's movements. But Jiang Chi's technique was on an unreasonable level entirely.

The Chameleon had clearly been caught on timing. In the split second after being forced out of stealth but before he could reposition, the hurricane-wreathed Hour Hand Sword had already pierced his left shoulder.

Hiss—

Jiang Chi didn't go for the kill. This was still a warning strike.

The sword tip punched through and out the other side, trailing a line of blood that splattered across the wall behind — a splash of vivid crimson in the white world.

But the knight's elegance was short-lived. The instant blood hit wall, the Chameleon before him gritted his teeth, tanked the sword through his shoulder, and surged forward an inch. With a devastating swing, he smashed Jiang Chi clean away.

Jiang Chi was struck in the shoulder as well. His expression darkened as he staggered backward. Looking up, he saw his opponent wielding — a longbow. The hunter's standard weapon!

This hunter actually had formidable close-combat power. He'd used nothing but the bowstring to swat a point-blank warrior away!

'Insane!'

'Was the warrior too weak, or the hunter too strong?'

Cheng Shi was dumbfounded. And not just Cheng Shi — even the Chameleon himself seemed momentarily stunned, apparently not expecting his raw strength to contest a Pointer Knight's.

But he recovered quickly. He sprang to the wall's summit, nocked an arrow, drew, and began firing at range — but not at the staggering Jiang Chi. His target was Cheng Shi, who'd been cautiously spectating from the side!

???

Cheng Shi was shocked. Four words flashed through his mind: Kill the healer first!

'Damn!'

Seeing [Silence]'s power gathering at the arrowhead, Cheng Shi's face darkened. He turned and bolted, cursing as he ran:

"Are you sick in the head!? The knight stabbed your shoulder, not your brain! He hit you — go hit him back! Why are you aiming at me!?"

But the Chameleon was unmoved by words. He loosed five arrows at Cheng Shi's retreating form. The first four each grazed him — shaving off slivers of flesh without striking anything vital. But the fifth found its mark just as Cheng Shi tried to vault a low wall, slamming into the center of his back and sending him crashing down.

Everyone heard a muffled grunt, then a heavy thud behind the wall. After that — silence.

Jiang Chi's expression shifted. His sword spun in a storm of flourishes, [Time]'s power erupting wildly to drag at the Chameleon's footing. But the Chameleon disengaged instantly, refusing to linger. The moment his target went down, he sprinted along the high wall toward where Cheng Shi had fallen.

Jiang Chi tried to pursue, but after two steps realized he'd stumbled into a [Silence] trap. All five senses cut out at once. Unable to tell direction, he began running in place.

Seeing his trap immobilize the knight, the Chameleon didn't press the advantage. He simply drilled an arrow through Jiang Chi's foot to pin him, then broke away at speed.

In his view, finishing off the priest would make this hunt half-won.

Yet when he leapt down from the wall and vaulted over the low barrier, the landing zone held nothing but a pool of blood. Not a person in sight!

The priest had vanished!

No matter. Tracking was a hunter's specialty.

The Chameleon frowned, scooped up a pinch of blood-stained snow, and sniffed. Then, with a look of grave focus, he sprinted in a specific direction. As he ran, his silhouette once again blended into the blizzard and disappeared.

Seconds later, a figure streaked back from the perimeter in flashes of red and white.

Poison landed and immediately coughed up blood, but she quickly wiped the stain from her lips. Then she froze in surprise:

"Where's the little priest?"

Jiang Chi tumbled free of the trap, casually sliced the arrow shaft from his foot with the Hour Hand Sword, and replied with a flat expression: "Captured."

"?" Poison's gaze hardened. She fixed the Pointer Knight with a cold stare: "I didn't partner with you so you could throw the match, Jiang Chi."

Jiang Chi snorted softly. He crouched to quickly tend his wound, then looked up with an amused expression:

"Our agreement doesn't include a 'protect the priest' clause, does it?"

"Besides, I have to consider my partner's interests. Every extra person in this team lowers your chances of obtaining the Gift of Sores.

"One competitor is enough trouble. That Da Yi is no pushover."

Poison smiled. She curled her lips and studied Jiang Chi with interest:

"So you're going for the easy target?"

"More or less. I know there are no easy targets at this level. But a Fate Weaver is definitely softer than a Gap Light Iron Thorn."

Poison scoffed: "Oh? You've tested that theory?"

"..." Jiang Chi's mouth twitched. He said nothing.

Poison shook her head with a laugh. She retrieved a healing potion from storage and began applying it, murmuring in a voice too quiet for anyone to hear:

"Jiang Chi, Jiang Chi. I'm afraid you picked the wrong persimmon. The little priest..."

"Is very hard.

"Exceptionally hard."

She laughed softly to herself, then stole a glance toward the direction Da Yi still hadn't returned from. A flicker of wariness crossed her eyes.

Chapter 489: You're Here? I've Been Waiting

Cheng Shi slipped away. Not a scratch on him.

Under the protection of his [Vitality] authority, he simply pulled the arrow out and left the scene.

And his escape method was laughably simple.

Since the trial began, he'd been secretly planting dice along every path he traveled. From the plaza to the residential district to the Court — the entire route was dotted with positions he could swap to.

But he didn't leave the Court. Instead, he teleported to a spot as far from his teammates as possible.

In the heat of battle there'd been no time to think. During his arrow-pierced retreat, it finally clicked: this wasn't a kill order targeting Poison.

Or rather, this particular ambush hadn't been aimed at Poison — it had been aimed at him!

These "hunters" wanted him dead!

And "hunters" didn't just mean the man-eating Gongyang Jiao and the stealthy Chameleon. It also meant Da Yi, who'd conveniently vanished, and Jiang Chi, who'd pretended to be injured while spectating!

They all wanted him dead.

Because whether from the perspective of hunting Poison or obtaining the Gift of Sores, this priest was an obstacle.

In Gongyang Jiao's eyes, failing to eliminate the healer would make Poison far harder to deal with. In his "teammates'" eyes, one more person with designs on the Gift of Sores meant one more mouth splitting the spoils — bad for their bottom line.

So Da Yi, riding the emotional turbulence Poison had stirred up, stomped off angrily — creating an opening for the actual hunters. And Jiang Chi's "warning shots only" fighting style had conveniently given the Chameleon the chance to follow the golden rule: kill the healer first.

To be fair, Da Yi's departure may not have been deliberately targeting Cheng Shi — anyone dying would've been acceptable. But Jiang Chi's choice was clearly calculated. He couldn't let his partner die, so the only person he could throw to the wolves was Cheng Shi.

As for the Pointer Knight's partner — that Poison who'd charged out and vanished...

Honestly, Cheng Shi didn't believe Poison's intent was to let him die. But her misread of the situation led her to rush out and get pinned down by Gongyang Jiao, unable to return — which undeniably accelerated the kill.

When Gongyang Jiao broke free from Poison, that would be the moment the Screaming Earl and the Chameleon teamed up to finish Cheng Shi off.

And this was exactly why Jiang Chi had been so "blatantly" throwing the fight — he was making a statement through his performance, letting Cheng Shi know the team's attitude toward him was anything but friendly.

In Jiang Chi's calculation, Cheng Shi wasn't stupid. He'd certainly sense the hostility, and after being wounded and fleeing, he wouldn't return to the team. Once Cheng Shi was isolated, the hunters' opportunity would arrive — especially since their quarry was an injured Fate Weaver.

So in this sudden ambush, everyone came out a winner. Everyone except Cheng Shi, who'd fled like a stray dog.

But was that really how it went?

No.

Perhaps in the first instant of the ambush Cheng Shi had genuinely misjudged the situation. Perhaps he hadn't expected this to be a targeted kill. But the moment the arrow hit, everything crystallized. He untangled the dynamics and actively chose not to rejoin the team.

Not because he no longer trusted Jiang Chi and the others — truthfully, he'd never trusted them. He'd simply thought of a method to deal with some of the trial's nuisances first.

Namely, the ever-meddlesome Screaming Earl.

Gongyang Jiao's logic was sound — kill the healer first in a hunt. To most observers, the sequence of events qualified as a brilliant hunt. But everyone had overlooked one thing: prey wasn't always just prey.

In any hunt, the roles of hunter and prey weren't fixed from the start. They were decided by who fell. The one who fell was the prey.

Cheng Shi had always believed this. So he refused to be the prey.

Gongyang Jiao believed the same — but he was certain he'd be the hunter.

This Fate Weaver did carry some reputation in the peak circle. Granted, it had started with a rumor, but anyone with name recognition at this level was no simple player.

Gongyang Jiao was a maniac, not a fool. He never underestimated an opponent, and he was already giving Cheng Shi considerable respect. That's why he'd chosen to team up with the Chameleon to take Cheng Shi down.

After all, his squad for targeting Poison was also just a two-man team. A Fate Weaver famous for a rumor couldn't possibly be harder to handle than an actual Chosen One, right?

Gongyang Jiao didn't buy that.

Respecting an opponent didn't mean demonizing them. His specialty was demonizing himself — making enemies breed fear. So after quickly shaking off Poison, he doubled back and followed the Chameleon's trail toward Cheng Shi.

But as he tracked, he noticed his hunting partner's footprints had turned... erratic.

Gongyang Jiao stood atop a palace roof, surveying half the Court below with furrowed brows. He looked down at the Chameleon, his expression dark:

"Don't tell me you lost him?"

The Chameleon glanced up, visibly annoyed. But he had indeed lost the trail — because the quarry hadn't been moving on foot at all. He'd been blinking between fixed points.

Worse, these positions were spaced far apart, leaving the hunter in an absurd bind.

Hunters were fast. In most scenarios, their agility far exceeded other classes. But speed was only meaningful if your target had speed too.

When the target started teleporting, speed as a metric became meaningless.

This [Silence] hunter had anticipated the healer having escape tools. What he hadn't anticipated was that this Fate Weaver named Cheng Shi seemed to have escape tools with... no cooldown?

'Was that even fair?'

The Fate Weaver kept swapping across the Court, his aura flickering near and far. How was the Chameleon supposed to answer Gongyang Jiao's question?

'Say he couldn't keep up with his prey?'

Too humiliating. Thankfully, as a [Silence] follower, he wasn't obligated to respond.

After a moment's thought, the Chameleon decided to split up and box him in. Once they pinched Cheng Shi's blink path from both sides, they'd have another chance to close the distance.

He pointed Gongyang Jiao at one direction, then shot off like a gust of wind toward the other.

Gongyang Jiao watched the hunter disappear, frowned, and spat a mouthful of bloody foam from the hole in his cheek.

"Pfeh. Nothing impressive."

He leapt off the roof and streaked toward the assigned direction. At their speed, Cheng Shi would be pinched between them in no time.

But Cheng Shi was no fool. His constant blinking wasn't meant to confuse the hunters — it was meant to summon them.

He was waiting for the hunters to come. It was just that fighting two-on-one at his current strength might be tricky, so he'd used this method to split them apart.

He'd predicted they'd try to box him in. So as he shifted positions, he was also guessing which hunter would be the lucky one to bump into him first.

And once he spotted one of them, he would stop moving.

Like right now. Seeing the Screaming Earl enter his field of vision, Cheng Shi smiled and stood still. He pulled a pair of invisible gloves from his spatial storage and slipped them on. At the same time, he casually scattered a sky full of dice, letting them drift down with the snow and settle on the ground.

When one particular die among the countless others tumbled across the snow, wobbling to a stop on the number one—

Cheng Shi rolled his neck, cracked his knuckles and wrists, and beamed at the savage-faced Gongyang Jiao who'd just landed not far ahead:

"You're here? I've been waiting forever.

"Time's short, so let's...

"Make this quick!"

Chapter 490: Hero of Today!

The words had barely left his mouth when Cheng Shi vanished and reappeared directly in front of Gongyang Jiao. Before the Screaming Earl could fully raise his guard, a straight punch detonated against his skull.

The blow was massive, yet it didn't budge the man an inch.

Seeing Cheng Shi's shocking power, Gongyang Jiao was mildly surprised but utterly fearless. He licked the blood from his lips, teeth bared in a manic grin:

"Wonderful. Wonderful!

"Worthy of the Fate Weaver who's been tangling with Zhen Yi. You've exceeded my expectations. Only by devouring someone like you can I feel true pleasure..."

Even as he spoke, his expression twisted increasingly savage. He gave Cheng Shi no time to press the attack. The instant his voice dropped, a Fear Scream blasted Cheng Shi into a momentary freeze. Then Gongyang Jiao flickered behind him and drove both steel-claw hands into Cheng Shi's shoulder blades.

This was one of his methods for subduing prey. Runners get their legs torn. Fighters get their wings clipped. This was also why Poison's back had been covered in so many wounds.

The Screaming Earl loved attacking from behind.

The [Corruption] warrior's screech carried a dense payload of fear that scrambled the target's mind. Cheng Shi had clearly been hit — his reaction lagged just enough for Gongyang Jiao's iron-cutting claws to punch into his back.

But his recovery was fast. The instant his mind cleared, he blinked away via a die.

Seeing his quarry flee after a single exchange, Gongyang Jiao's excitement only intensified.

"Run! Flee! I don't enjoy resistance — only fear. The more terrified you look as you run, the more thrilling my pursuit becomes! Ha, hahaha! Not running anymore?"

"Since you won't run — here I come!"

Before he finished, a hurricane of fear roared toward Cheng Shi. But Cheng Shi showed no sign of fatigue after his tactical retreat. Facing the incoming onslaught, his lips slowly curved upward.

'What a coincidence — I like fear too!'

He hadn't actually been hit by the scream. A maxed-out Hero of Today carried extremely high [Fate]-blessed resistance. He couldn't fully nullify the Fear Scream's effects, but it certainly wouldn't impair him enough to let the attack land.

Cheng Shi could have dodged. He chose not to.

Not because he was searching for openings. Not to feign weakness. It was because...

The Fun Ring's charges were depleted.

The only fear he'd collected since the trial began was a single unknown charge at the start, already spent during his tussle with Poison.

So right now Cheng Shi lacked any heavy, fast-execution method. Taking the Fear Scream and Gongyang Jiao's assault head-on had been him harvesting his own fear!

The opponent specialized in manufacturing fear. Whether that fear stemmed from [Corruption] talents didn't matter — the Fun Ring wasn't picky. Whatever the source, fear became fuel for the Thundering divinity within the ring.

And so, in the instant Cheng Shi blinked away, the Fun Ring gained one charge. Only one — but enough.

So when Gongyang Jiao barreled in for another frontal assault, Cheng Shi finally unleashed the Hero of Today's full splendor. He charged headlong without the slightest hesitation.

BOOM!

Two warriors collided like rams locking horns. Under [Fate]'s blessing, Cheng Shi's strength was terrifyingly amplified. He made no effort to evade the claws sinking into his chest, instead hammering a fist into Gongyang Jiao's throat while his other hand spun a scalpel like a blossoming steel flower — gutting the Screaming Earl wide open.

In a single instant, the carnage went maximum.

Gongyang Jiao was stunned, but the savagery on his face didn't waver. Seemingly indifferent to his own wounds, he launched a counteroffensive, trading blow for blow with the scalpel-wielding Cheng Shi in a frenzy of mutual destruction.

Hissing, roaring, crashing, tearing...

The meaty impacts nearly drowned out the wind's howl. Horrifying streaks of blood decorated an entire alleyway, stretching from a palace entrance to the base of a high wall.

Hundreds of meters of blood trails in the all-white world — vivid as arrows, guiding the "snowflake audience" cheering for this gladiatorial bout toward their front-row seats.

Wounds ripping open, blood coughing from nose and mouth, flesh flying...

Both fighters had gone mad. Neither cared whether he lived or died. Each only wanted the other dead.

Their death-defying fury drove them to the breaking point. A hunt had been bludgeoned into a deathmatch.

The reckless mutual pummeling never stopped. The ground that had been merely blood-splattered now began catching chunks of flying flesh. No one could explain how the combatants had reduced each other to barely recognizable forms in mere seconds. All they knew was that so long as the prey hadn't fallen, the hunter couldn't rest!

Cheng Shi wore the Puppet Grip. Every punch he landed slowed his opponent fractionally more. Gongyang Jiao had his screams for crowd control, but as the battle intensified, the screaming stopped — because his windpipe was now exposed to the open air. Every head shake flung fresh droplets of crimson onto the white ground below.

Cheng Shi was no better off. His chest cavity was nearly demolished. If not for one hand clamping over his heart, he'd have long since dropped out of the fight, a corpse on the roadside.

Yet even so, his combat power still exceeded Gongyang Jiao's. Not because of [Fate] — but entirely because of [Prosperity].

Under [Vitality]'s protection, he recovered far faster than his opponent and maintained a combat state far less affected by wounds. It was [Endless Life]'s effect alone that kept him standing.

Gongyang Jiao, by contrast, was reaching his limit. His flesh had virtually fused with Cheng Shi's arm. His gaze was beginning to lose focus.

That unfocused look wasn't a harbinger of death. It was a harbinger of... fear.

He was afraid.

A Screaming Earl who specialized in manufacturing fear and feeding on it — after barely ten seconds of mutual destruction with a "Fate Weaver" — was afraid.

His own fear could theoretically amplify his power. But it devastated his mentality.

Facing a Cheng Shi who didn't fear death and seemingly couldn't die, Gongyang Jiao's mind birthed one enormous question:

'How!?'

Yes, he knew there were plenty of dual-class players in the peak circle. And the Cheng Shi before him clearly wasn't just a Fate Weaver — he had to be a Hero of Today as well.

But what he couldn't understand was why this Hero of Today had rolled a perfect score at the exact moment they clashed!

'The state he was in was definitely max roll. Otherwise how could he be this durable?'

At the highest echelons, the Hero of Today class was extremely rare. Relying on dice — an inherently uncertain factor — to boost yourself might carry you far, but it would never carry you to the front of the pack.

Because its greatest flaw was instability.

Even if the Hero of Today had other tools to compensate during dry spells, at equal talent counts, others simply had more options. Yet Cheng Shi's performance right now convinced Gongyang Jiao beyond doubt: this was a max-rolled warrior.

He wasn't incapable of tanking a peak warrior. It was just that the man's regeneration seemed to far exceed anything he'd ever known about peak warriors.

'This [Fate] follower couldn't possibly be healing himself while fighting. Setting aside that Gongyang had never heard of a dual-class talent that let both work simultaneously — even if one existed, how could his mental stamina sustain it?'

Buried under all these unanswerable questions, and with his body deteriorating by the second, Gongyang Jiao was afraid.

He was only still standing not because his fighting spirit was stronger — but because he was waiting for backup. Waiting for the Chameleon to track his way here.

When his partner arrived, that would be this [Fate] follower's deathbed!

But could Gongyang Jiao last that long?

No. Because the Fun Ring had reached two charges.

Feeling his enemy's fear convert to fuel and flow into the ring, Cheng Shi smiled. The mangled flesh on his cheek twitched involuntarily. His mouth — gum nearly exposed — suddenly spoke:

"Mr. Ram. Do you think me brave?"

When one combatant suddenly breaks the silence mid-brawl, any experienced warrior immediately heightens alert and prepares to disengage.

But Gongyang Jiao was a step too slow. His combat state couldn't keep up anymore. And more critically — Cheng Shi's right hand was still buried inside his chest, never withdrawn.

BOOM — BOOM!

Thunder roared. Lightning erupted.

Cheng Shi didn't wait for an answer. He detonated two Lightning Punishments directly inside his opponent's chest.

Terrifying lightning howled and raged, blasting through the surrounding blizzard, illuminating the entire Court.

And right then, the Chameleon finally arrived.

The [Silence] hunter was fast. The moment his quarry's aura stopped moving, he'd sprinted toward the location. From redirection to touchdown: less than one minute. But who could have imagined that in that single minute, a hunter had already died at his prey's hands!

The Chameleon stood atop the high wall, pupils contracted, face stark with horror. He watched Gongyang Jiao's charred corpse slide off Cheng Shi's equally charred arm — and without a sound, without a moment's hesitation, turned and ran.

Cheng Shi had no intention of pursuing. The deterrent had achieved its purpose. Kill or don't kill — it was only a matter of time. Besides, while his stats still hovered at peak, the hardware was failing.

[Vitality] locked health, but not bodily integrity. The authority's regeneration wasn't that fast either.

Looking at his blood-pulped legs, the exposed-bone dangling-flesh ruin of his chest, and a charcoal arm that would crumble at a squeeze, Cheng Shi clicked his tongue:

"Still a mortal shell, after all. A bit too fragile."

He spat a key out from under his tongue, crouched, and jammed it into the charred corpse's eye socket.

Before long, shattered bones extracted themselves from the corpse, launched skyward, spiraled down, and coalesced before Cheng Shi — fusing into a bone-patterned door of eldritch horror.