

## The Gods 491

Chapter 491: Aph Ros, Open Up — I Know You're Home!

[Gate of Despised Desire]:

You may use a corpse consumed by the obsession of desire to construct a Gate of Despised Desire. Open it with the door key and step into the true Abyss of Desire.

Before Cheng Shi now stood the gateway to the Abyss of Desire. To open this door, he was supposed to first offer two sacrifices to the one upon the Bone Throne. But somehow, these [Death]-powered tools seemed to be operable on... credit.

Praise [Death]!

Cheng Shi wasn't sure whether the torrent of death he'd previously offered could still offset the sacrifice cost. But the door had already materialized — he couldn't exactly not go in.

So Cheng Shi stood, tidied the shredded meat and cloth dangling from his chest, and walked through with a smile.

After he vanished from the Rosna Court, the blood-soaked battlefield fell silent once more. Only the howling wind remained, as if mourning the Screaming Earl's death.

Meanwhile, on the other side.

Poison's injuries had mended considerably under the healing potions. She was still interrogating Jia Lun, cross-referencing every detail with the Rosna Historian.

Jiang Chi stood nearby with his usual smile, waiting for the result of the other hunt.

After a long while, terrifying thunder rumbled from the direction of the Court where they'd entered. Lightning flashed, illuminating the area for a split second — and three stunned faces.

Jia Lun panicked because he couldn't recall thunder of such magnitude ever striking Kannar. Jiang Chi was startled because he distinctly remembered a certain priest teammate claiming his "single-use item was already spent."

Only Poison, after a brief moment of surprise, curled her lips and sneered at Jiang Chi in a saccharine, singsong voice: "Soft~ per~ sim~ mon~"

Jiang Chi looked somewhat helpless. He spread his hands: "Well, at least I'm not the one who cracked a tooth. Sigh, let's hope the traveler returning through the blizzard brings good news."

Shortly after, Da Yi returned — from the direction he'd originally vanished toward.

Poison and Jiang Chi exchanged a glance, silently asking if this was his so-called "blizzard traveler." Jiang Chi gave a slight nod and turned to Da Yi with a smile:

"Find anything?"

Da Yi's expression was conflicted. He shook his head:

"Hot damn. I found a secret chamber, even saw a dagger rack. But the dagger... was gone. Those cowards took everything.

"Forget that — what happened here?"

"Gongyang came?"

"Where's Brother Cheng?"

'Brother Cheng?'

Hearing this, Poison wanted to laugh. But she couldn't — not in front of Da Yi. In her mind, Cheng Shi might indeed be someone's "brother," but probably not Da Yi's.

Because if Da Yi truly cared about Cheng Shi, his first words wouldn't have been a response to Jiang Chi's question. They'd have been asking where Cheng Shi was.

Clearly, he already knew what had happened here. He knew the thunder was connected to Cheng Shi. Perhaps he even knew things she and Jiang Chi didn't. Yet he was choosing to play ignorant, tossing the blame for the "lost teammate" right back at them.

Jiang Chi seemed to have anticipated this. With a look of regret, he lifted his pierced foot and sighed:

"Gongyang Jiao and the Chameleon came together. We got scattered. The hunter's trap caught me off guard and I couldn't keep up with Brother Priest. To protect our only lead..."

He pointed at old Jia Lun: "I had to turn back."

Now Poison understood why Jiang Chi hadn't treated his own wound — he'd been saving himself an alibi.

She chuckled softly but said nothing. The laugh, however, drew Da Yi's attention.

Da Yi heard Jiang Chi's account with furrowed brows and what looked like anger. He turned to Poison, seemingly expecting an explanation. But Poison only murmured under her breath:

"It's fine. Once we find the Gift of Sores, I won't fight over it. I just hope, Da Yi, that you'll let me look at it once. So I can paint a portrait of the Gift of Sores and burn it as an offering to the little priest — to thank him for everything he did for me."

"..."

"..."

This was pure passive-aggression. Poison's meaning was crystal clear: since everyone's goal was the Gift of Sores, why bother pretending to care about "Brother Cheng"?

Da Yi choked. Worst of all, he couldn't argue back to her face.

No matter how dark the scheming ran underground, you couldn't put it on display. Simple as that — it was about face.

So he could only backpedal: "Hot damn, Brother Cheng's got plenty of tricks up his sleeve. What makes you so sure he's dead?"

Poison pursed her lips without responding. Jiang Chi maintained a grave expression: "We didn't dare risk it. We were waiting for you."

"..."

Da Yi felt like he was being roasted alive. His original plan had been to create an opening for Gongyang Jiao to kill Poison — that simple. But Gongyang's appetite had been far larger than expected. The man had tried to kill everyone.

Too bad he'd run into Cheng Shi and gotten himself killed instead.

Indeed — Da Yi knew Gongyang Jiao was dead. He'd seen it with his own eyes.

He shared the Screaming Earl's bewilderment at Cheng Shi's terrifying combat power. But what shook him far more was what Cheng Shi had said while opening that eerie Bone Gate!

'What did he mean by "Still a mortal shell, after all. A bit too fragile"?''

That tone and perspective didn't sound like anything a human player would say!

'Could Cheng Shi be merely a vessel whose soul... had long since been replaced?'

Not impossible. Every peak player knew that within the peak circle, certain non-human existences lurked. Why souls long destroyed on the Land of Hope's historical stage would resurface in new skins was anyone's guess. But there was one consensus: these beings were not to be trifled with.

Da Yi hadn't expected to dig his own grave today — provoking a "non-human existence" with terrifying combat power.

The thought complicated his feelings enormously. But the mission to find the Gift of Sores couldn't be abandoned. So he could only take it one step at a time and maintain the surface-level peace.

"Hot damn, rescue first — standing around isn't going to help! I'll take point. Cover my flanks!"

He scooped up old Jia Lun and streaked toward the direction the lightning had come from.

Jiang Chi raised a brow, popped a pill, and hurried after him. Poison watched the two actors' retreating silhouettes with evident amusement, then laughed and followed.

On the other side.

When Cheng Shi pushed through the door and stepped into the darkness, the void before him twisted and shifted. Before long, it deposited him in front of a familiar structure.

The Evil Infant Inquisition of Dolgod!

That door that had nearly dragged Cheng Shi into the Abyss of Desire was once again before his eyes.

This time, he felt none of the unease or apprehension from last visit. He marched straight to the door and began pounding on it frantically:

BANG BANG BANG!

"Aph Ros, open up! I know you're home!"

Chapter 492: Wait — Since When Do You Have Guests!?

After Cheng Shi had knocked several times, the door finally responded.

Aph Ros, draped in a gilt-and-moonlight black robe, pushed the door open. Gone was the previous [Corruption] demeanor — He stood before Cheng Shi with a grave and solemn expression.

Seeing that face, Cheng Shi's heart lurched. He was about to ask "what happened" when behind Aph Ros, in the ink-black hall of the Evil Infant Inquisition, a pair of eyes he would never forget in his lifetime suddenly opened.

Eyes of stars!

Nebulae formed the dial. Stars served as markings. A flowing river of light ceaselessly eroded the riverbed of the void, shifting and redirecting — like a swinging hour hand that "ticked" within those eyes.

The stars within those pupils flickered bright and dim, as though harmonizing with the flow of time. The flickering was blindingly fast, yet somehow each glimpse felt like gazing at the end of time itself — slow and eternal.

Cheng Shi locked eyes with those pupils completely unprepared. By the time he realized who this [Existence] being inside Aph Ros's home was, it was too late — his soul had already ascended to a higher dimension, surveying every past and future of the place where he stood.

Time coiled into circles, twisted into knots. No matter how many temporal trajectories of the universe swept past, this independent knot of time floated silently within the [Void] — still and lonely.

He was awed by the sight. A crushing, infinitesimal sense of insignificance welled up within him. But before he could fully savor that bleak smallness, his consciousness snapped back into his body. His eyes glazed, and he stood rigid.

Aph Ros, seeing His brother in this state, offered no explanation, no comfort — He couldn't even squeeze out an apologetic smile.

Because in His presence, no one dared overstep.

"..."

Cheng Shi's consciousness swam for a moment. By the time he fully emerged from the shock, cold sweat had soaked through his shirt.

He bit down hard and stiffly turned to face Aph Ros. His eyes overflowed with the universe's most panicked, most helpless light.

'Bro, since when do you have house guests!?'

'You could've said something about having company!'

'If you'd so much as uttered "today's not a good time," would I have kept knocking? Would I have dared!?'

'Well, this is great. Now what? Face-to-face with the rival faction!'

'Who could this be? Who else could it possibly be!? One look and anyone could tell this [Existence] was [Time]!'

'I just got screwed over by one of [Time]'s followers, haven't even gone back to settle the score, and now — great — the big boss showed up first.'

'Excuse me, does [Time] play fair!?'

'If You're really not going to play fair, then don't blame me for...'

'Holding it in!'

'My Benefactor says I need to learn patience. I'm being patient!'

Aph Ros was equally caught off guard. He didn't know why [Time] had suddenly appeared here — He hadn't exchanged a single word with this [Existence]. The deity had descended just now!

One second before Cheng Shi knocked!

Aph Ros had been anxious, but seeing Cheng Shi made Him suddenly less uneasy, because He realized this [Existence] behind Him most likely hadn't come for Him — but for... His brother who never failed to bring surprises.

"It's been a long time."

[Time] spoke. As concise as ever.

But no one dared respond to this "long time no see." The silence stretched.

Cheng Shi didn't dare answer because he assumed [Time] wasn't addressing him. After all, this was his first audience — no, "audience" was too formal. His first run-in with [Time]. So the "long time no see" had to be directed at Aph Ros before him.

And Aph Ros... closed His eyes and went straight into playing dead.

He was [Time]'s prisoner — a convict caged within time's prison. Having guessed that the warden's visit wasn't for Him, He naturally wasn't about to invite trouble.

Seeing Aph Ros shut his eyes, Cheng Shi's heart lurched with worry.

'Bro, this is the deity who sentenced you! How dare you act this defiant — throwing a tantrum and refusing to answer!?'

'Do you think [Birth] can protect you? Or [Corruption]? If either could, you wouldn't be locked up here!'

Cheng Shi was losing it. He was terrified [Time] would blame Aph Ros's insolence on him and toss him into a temporal cage too.

So he stiffly winked and signaled at Aph Ros, but the eyes-shut Herald couldn't see his frantic facial gymnastics. The silence dragged on and on.

Cold sweat multiplied on Cheng Shi's back. He was approaching collapse.

Then, in that impossibly awkward, death-inducing atmosphere — someone spoke.

The voice came from Cheng Shi, but the words weren't his.

"It has been a long time."

The Fool's Lips had spoken.

The instant Brother Mouth uttered those words, both Cheng Shi and Aph Ros were stupefied.

Aph Ros's eyes snapped open. He stared at Cheng Shi with blazing intensity, as though trying to determine whether his brother harbored some deeply hidden, unknown identity.

And Cheng Shi...

Was absolutely terrified.

He'd been presented before many deities. But this was the first time Brother Mouth had voluntarily spoken in a god's presence!

It hadn't even acknowledged the Fun God. Yet here, before [Void]'s rival [Time], it had opened its mouth!

'Wait — Brother Mouth, don't tell me you're... one of [Existence]'s lackeys... ptui ptui ptui. One of [Existence]'s people?'

The gaze of Time's Eyes swept over Cheng Shi. No joy, no sorrow. No grief, no pleasure. His tone carried the cold indifference of time's passage — impossible to read:

"You found it."

"Yes. I found it."

???

Cheng Shi was terrified, but that didn't stop him from spectating while being terrified. It was like a hostage at gunpoint — trembling all over, knees buckling, but ears still perfectly functional for eavesdropping on the kidnappers' gossip about somebody's wife.

'After all, it's my legs that are weak. What do my ears have to do with anything?'

'My ears aren't weak.'

'So — what had Brother Mouth found?'

"But He has not found it yet."

"That is none of Your concern."

!!!

'Brother Mouth, you're trying to get me killed!!!'

Cheng Shi was genuinely trembling now. Even if the speaker was the Fool's Lips, the body standing before [Time] was his!

A human telling a deity "that's none of Your concern" — the terror of such an act was beyond comprehension for anyone who hadn't lived it.

Put another way: in the entire recorded history of the gods, this was probably a first.

A blasphemy delivered face-to-face, worthy of being recorded in history!

Cheng Shi desperately wanted to explain himself, but held back. He figured that at a moment like this, he couldn't undermine his own side's morale — and "his side" was clearly Brother Mouth.

So he clenched his teeth and stood firm, mentally reassuring himself that he was merely an old man at the village entrance overhearing two elders' gossip.

But mercifully, [Time] showed no anger. Time was always changing, yet those eyes before him seemed eternally unchanging.

"Time will prove everything."

The Eyes of Time released a sigh, then quietly closed and departed — just as He had arrived. No one knew why He'd left, nor why He'd uttered those cryptic words.

Of course, "cryptic" was Cheng Shi's and Aph Ros's assessment. Whether Brother Mouth understood... Cheng Shi had been internally screaming the question.

But the Fool's Lips went silent after [Time]'s departure, reverting to its aloof state, unresponsive to Cheng Shi's frantic bombardment.

Just as Cheng Shi's curiosity was about to boil over, Aph Ros launched his own... bombardment.

"My dear brother, don't you think you owe me an explanation? What exactly just happened, and..."

"Why?"

As He spoke, Aph Ros twirled and shifted into female form.

It wasn't intentional. After the shock, surprise, and a flood of pent-up emotions released by [Time]'s departure, the [Corruption] power within could no longer be contained.

She shed the robe and reached toward Cheng Shi, trying to pull him into the true Abyss of Desire. But Cheng Shi completely ignored Her. He simply stepped back, wedging himself outside the door where Her hand couldn't reach, then continued his frenzied interrogation of Brother Mouth.

The Fool's Lips, harassed beyond tolerance, decided to teach Cheng Shi a small lesson. And so the head-bowed Cheng Shi suddenly spoke:

"I'm sorry. I've just recovered some memories and now realize that I am actually..."

Aph Ros froze. Pressing against the impassable air-barrier at the doorframe, She stared with burning eyes:

"Who!?"

By the time Cheng Shi realized something was wrong, it was too late. He raised his hand to clamp his mouth shut, but two crisp, resonant words had already escaped:

"Your daddy."

"..."

'That's it. Let the world end.'

Chapter 493: That's Right — I Am [Deceit]'s Envoy

When you say "I'm your daddy" to someone's face, it's unquestionably a gross insult.

But there are always exceptions.

For instance, if the offended party happens to be a mainstream [Birth] follower, or a certain unconventional [Corruption] follower, they might not take it as an insult at all. They might see it as an invitation to demonstrate the depth of their devotion.

And as it happened, the being standing before Cheng Shi was both a [Birth] follower and a [Corruption] follower — a dual Herald who had fused with Himself, impregnated Himself, and given birth to Himself.

So when He heard the obscenity from Cheng Shi's mouth, He got... "dirty."

From behind the door, Aph Ros spread His arms in an embracing pose, slightly expectant:

"I always knew the moon would be more captivating than the sun.

"If you want to, anytime. My—"

"I don't want to!"

Cheng Shi shook his head frantically, black lines practically dripping from his forehead as he cut off the Herald before something truly explosive could be said.

'Bro, what's with this inexplicable competitive streak?'

Cheng Shi was done. Seeing a flash of disappointment in Aph Ros's eyes, he sighed:

"Fine. I know you've figured it out. Drop the act.

"Yes — I do have another identity!"

Hearing this, Aph Ros's pupils contracted. He instantly snapped back to normal, spun once to return to male form, and the discarded robe levitated onto Him of its own accord. Standing tall and sharp in the doorway, He raised an eyebrow and smiled:

"Suddenly I'm quite curious. Since our last encounter, your resistance to [Corruption] has multiplied. And arriving at the Inquisition's door this time, I caught a whiff of [Death].

"My brother — this identity you never mentioned... couldn't have something to do with the one upon the Bone Throne?"

"..."

Cheng Shi studied Aph Ros's curious, puzzled expression and felt speechless.

'How to put it — not so much "wrong" as "not right."'

'Getting here did involve that person on the Throne. But his identity...'

Cheng Shi touched his nose with a self-deprecating smile, then suddenly put on a dead-serious face:

"Since I can't hide it, I won't try to.

"Aph Ros, if I tell you the truth, you'll be the first — and only — colleague to know my identity.

"So... can I trust you?"

His gaze burned into the Herald, who jolted, then — pupils shrinking with disbelief — blurted a single word:

"Envoy!?"

The moment the word left His mouth, Aph Ros's aura began climbing without limit. [Corruption]'s energy, thick and viscous, surged through the invisible threshold like a tidal wave crashing toward Cheng Shi.

Cheng Shi's heart lurched. He wasn't sure he could withstand this credentials-checking probe. But the words were already out — he couldn't fold immediately. So he activated every tool at his disposal, the hand behind his back death-gripping the key, fighting to stand firm against the [Corruption] tide for just a moment longer.

Mercifully, the wave was brief.

Seeing that Cheng Shi hadn't been instantly dragged into the abyss by [Corruption]'s power, Aph Ros burst into laughter.

"Ha! Hahaha! I should have guessed!

"Someone who could lead me into [Corruption] could never be an ordinary 'player.'

"My brother, you've brought me too many surprises. The power you used to resist [Corruption] resembles it, yet I've never encountered its like. In that case, oh—

"I see. No wonder He came looking for me. You're [Fate]'s Envoy!?"

"..."

At this moment, Cheng Shi suddenly realized that clever people weren't perfect after all. At least when their deductions were wrong, the awkwardness was on another level.

'The mood was built up beautifully, and now if I suddenly say "you're wrong," isn't that slap going to echo a bit too loudly?'

'As a friend, would that be okay?'

'Yeah, it would!'

Because Cheng Shi had no choice. He absolutely couldn't impersonate a [Fate] Envoy right now. The only identity he could — and intended to — continue faking was...

[Deceit]'s Envoy!

That's right. He was going to play "Yu Xi" in front of Aph Ros, letting this fabricated identity make its debut in a deity's consciousness!

Though the idea had been improvised after Brother Mouth's outburst, it was highly feasible. Aph Ros was a convict from a previous era. He knew nothing about [Void]!

Even if He'd picked up a few things about [Void] from other players — a bunch of players, what did they know about [Void]!?

'Could they possibly know more than me, an "Envoy"?''

So Cheng Shi went all-in.

And this performance wasn't just about covering up what had just happened. It was also about getting back at Brother Mouth!

Indeed — "retaliating" against Brother Mouth!

He'd long harbored a plan to gradually peel away the mysteries of the Fool's Lips and the Tongue of Eating Lies. But opportunity had eluded him — until Brother Mouth's conversation with [Time] was witnessed by Aph Ros. Suddenly, this dual Herald was the perfect tool... no, the perfect opportunity!

So he immediately adapted his plan and deployed it here, on Aph Ros. This meant that on the road to uncovering the Fool's Lips' backstory, Cheng Shi had finally begun making moves.

He shook his head, denying Aph Ros's guess, and smiled teasingly:

"My brother, your guess is making me question your intelligence.

"This whole 'I seek only wisdom' thing — that's just a persona you're trying to build for yourself, isn't it?"

"..."

That single line deflated Aph Ros's entire presence. He looked at Cheng Shi with faint resentment but didn't speak, seeing that Cheng Shi wasn't finished.

"You should know — [Void] doesn't have only one deity. Besides [Fate], there's also..."

"[Deceit]." Aph Ros answered immediately.

Cheng Shi blinked in surprise: "You knew?"

Aph Ros smiled, seemingly pleased at having scored a point: "Indeed. Miss Sun returned, and we had... an in-depth exchange."

?

'That "exchange"... was it proper?'

Cheng Shi wanted to ask when Hu Xuan had returned, but maintaining his role took priority. He nodded and continued:

"Seems I've been spared a lot of explaining. Yes, I am an Envoy. Specifically...

"[Deceit]'s Envoy. Yu Xi.

"Though I still prefer the name Cheng Shi."

"My brother," Aph Ros frowned, skeptical, "it's not that I don't believe you. I recall you're a [Fate] follower. So how..."

"Interesting. Who says a [Fate] follower can't be [Deceit]'s Envoy?"

"Aph Ros — anyone else can ask that question. But you..."

Cheng Shi wanted to say "you've got some nerve asking." But he wasn't that caustic. He simply smiled:

"You, of all people, should know better.

"Besides — They're sibling gods of the same path."

"..."

Aph Ros's mouth twitched awkwardly. He had no rebuttal. But seconds later, He countered with something like a defense:

"My judgment of your identity wasn't based solely on you. It was based on His attitude.

"You know — He has summoned me before. And from my impression of Him...

"Mm, this may border on blasphemy, but I trust you, my brother, not to repeat what's said here.

"What I want to say is: in my view, [Fate] doesn't seem to... enjoy sharing."

"..."

Now Cheng Shi was stumped.

Under Aph Ros's scrutinizing gaze, he fell silent for a moment before speaking again:

"You've been deceived."

"?" Aph Ros startled: "Deceived?"

"Yes. You've been deceived. Because [Void]... is meaningless."

The statement was spectacularly vague. In low-level player circles, it might earn a punch from some hot-tempered bruiser.

In high-level circles, it would provoke deep contemplation.

In peak circles, it might even draw one or two nods of praise.

And before an Envoy? He would simply attempt to comprehend it, then nod gravely: "I see."

Behold!

This was the con!

Cheng Shi himself had no idea what his words actually meant. But to everyone else, they sounded profound. Even when the sentence literally said "meaningless"!

Seeing Aph Ros convince Himself, Cheng Shi finally smiled. Happily.

"Yu Xi... Yu Xi..."

"I've heard your Benefactor is also a god who chases pleasure. So, my brother — between [Deceit]'s pleasure and [Corruption]'s pleasure, which is superior?"

'How many questions do you have?'

Cheng Shi rolled his eyes internally. He knew this was a blasphemous death-wish question, but answered without a moment's hesitation:

"Before fun, the pleasures of Descent are worthless.

"Of course, I don't mean you personally, Aph Ros. What I mean is — before [Deceit], [Corruption] deserves nothing but to be conned!"

Chapter 494: The Shattered Envoy's Mask

The words were harsh, but Aph Ros wasn't angry. In His view, self-expression was itself an act of embracing desire. So He wouldn't blame Cheng Shi.

But this concerned His Benefactor. Whether out of devotion to [Corruption]'s will or personal piety, He wanted to mount a rebuttal. Yet just as Aph Ros opened His mouth to counter, He heard Cheng Shi laugh loudly and add:

"After all, [Corruption] never refuses anything!"

"!"

That single line, and Aph Ros wanted to strip again.

'He understood too well. He was the perfect vessel for [Corruption]'s will!'

'Someone like this should be [Corruption]'s holy son! So why was he walking [Void]'s path!?'

Aph Ros was jealous. He'd been scheming to pull Cheng Shi into His camp — a slow, patient seduction. But today, learning that Cheng Shi was [Deceit]'s Envoy, that dream shattered.

And Cheng Shi had no idea that his little performance had unwittingly yanked him back from the brink of the abyss.

Watching Aph Ros's increasingly strange gaze, he quietly retreated another step and forced an awkward social smile.

Aph Ros quickly reined in His desire. A sigh: "What a shame."

Cheng Shi maintained his smile. Didn't dare speak.

"A [Deceit] Envoy. A [Fate] follower..."

"My brother, I have a feeling your identity isn't nearly this simple. But everyone has secrets, and I can suppress my curiosity. What I can't suppress, however, is..."

"Just now — what exactly did you and Him discuss?"

As expected, what Aph Ros cared about most was the conversation with [Time].

After all, [Time] was the god who'd imprisoned Him. A true deity exchanging words with a rival path's Envoy like old friends — that was genuinely unthinkable.

Especially since this [Existence] seemed to have come specifically for Cheng Shi.

Hard to explain. But Cheng Shi had already drafted his talking points.

He produced a tongue from his spatial storage, dangling it, and explained to Aph Ros:

"The Tongue of Eating Lies.

"That little stunt just now? It was this thing's doing."

"???"

The Tongue of Eating Lies was stunned. It had assumed its appearance would be a simple identity-verification prop. Never did it expect to have an enormous black pot dropped on its head the moment it entered the stage.

It immediately writhed and smacked Cheng Shi across the face, furiously denying: "It wasn't me!"

Cheng Shi seemed to have anticipated Brother Tongue's reaction. He immediately pinned the thing down and smiled apologetically at Aph Ros:

"Sorry about that. Due to certain... historical complications better left unspoken, my mask was dismantled into many components scattered across different locations. The Tongue of Eating Lies is one such piece.

"My Lord enjoys fun, so these fragments that developed self-awareness are always trying to stir up entertainment. As you saw — they're not very obedient.

"I'm working on reassembling them, but the process may take some time."

Cheng Shi swiftly stowed Brother Tongue — who was winding up for another slap — back into storage, then rubbed his cheek awkwardly:

"Recovering a part of myself probably drew His attention again. That's why He made a special visit to say hello.

"Though personally, I think it was mockery. He probably saw my less-than-optimistic future in His projections, so He came to witness my optimistic present.

"And that's my story."

A glint flashed through Aph Ros's eyes. Something sparked in His mind, and He suddenly asked:

"Was it He who dismantled your mask?"

Cheng Shi blinked.

'Who?'

'[Time]?'

'Hiss—'

'That... actually kind of works.'

'As [Fate]'s rival, framing [Time] shouldn't cause any problems, right?'

'After all, He and Brother Mouth genuinely did seem to know each other. Plus there was [Fate]'s protection overhead. Viewed in that light, everything fell neatly into place.'

Cheng Shi's eyes gleamed. He nodded immediately:

"Correct. It was Him!

"So in a sense, you and I — we're both [Time]'s victims."

Hearing this, Aph Ros smiled again. He'd never been this happy.

A friend who was an impossibly perfect match for His Benefactor's will — and now also a "cellmate" of a different kind!

What could be more delightful than becoming "relatives twice over"?

"It seems we have even more in common now, my brother.

"So — the other 'He' that [Time] mentioned... who is that?"

'How should I know!?'

Cheng Shi was losing it.

Every lie's gaps had to be filled with more lies.

He had no idea who [Time] was referring to. Brother Mouth refused to tell him and had even pranked him in the process. To avoid further disasters, he didn't dare disturb Brother Mouth's peace now. He could only offer a mysterious smile:

"I can't tell you about Him. I'm sorry, Aph Ros. I don't want my friend trapped in difficulty again.

"But I can tell you about myself. Only by knowing each other better can I shamelessly ask for more of your help..."

The line was still a con, but at least it carried a sliver of genuine goodwill.

An utterly substance-free statement, repackaged by Cheng Shi to sound profound — Aph Ros bought it completely. He suppressed His delight and said gravely:

"My brother, if not for this cage's restrictions, I would help you with anything."

"..."

'Bro, if not for this cage, I wouldn't dare ask you for anything...'

Naturally, he couldn't say that out loud. Cheng Shi beamed with gratitude:

"I do need your help with a couple of things, Aph Ros.

"First — if you learn anything about my mask fragments through any channel, please tell me immediately. I trust that [Time]'s cage... can't truly hold you.

"Second — I may need to borrow..."

Aph Ros's eyes lit up.

"...Borrow your doorstep." Cheng Shi smiled faintly.

"?"

Aph Ros was baffled. 'His brother came for help, didn't need an actual person, and just wanted to use the front door?'

"You mean... the Evil Infant Inquisition's entrance?"

"Yes. You've probably noticed — my identity isn't just Yu Xi, but also a player named Cheng Shi.

"Explaining what I'm doing is complicated and involves many parties. You only need to know that playing this role well is critical for me.

"It's extremely important!

"I'm sure you've come to understand the players of this era. Many are sharp-minded and unpredictable. Earning their trust as a mere ordinary player is incredibly difficult.

"And I can't reveal my true identity. So I have to use unconventional methods — [Deceit]'s methods — to achieve my goals.

"Simply put, I need a mysterious space to 'disguise' myself as my true self, or as other identities. That way I can pry things out of these clever players.

"Of course, I don't actually need what they know. I simply need..."

"Them to be deceived."

Aph Ros fell silent. He savored Cheng Shi's words for a long while, then nodded. Then shook His head:

"I think I understand.

"Indeed, They always issue edicts that even Servant Gods can't comprehend.

"A [Void] practitioner must spread void. A [Deceit] Envoy must deceive all beings.

"All of this, I can understand.

"But I have one more question. A final question. My brother — answer this, and the Evil Infant Inquisition's door will always be open to you."

Cheng Shi's eyes shone: "Ask."

Aph Ros's keen gaze seemed to pierce Cheng Shi's soul. He chuckled softly:

"I can feel your heartbeat. I can sense your emotions. You overflow with the scent of [Deceit]. Though I've never encountered Him directly, within [Corruption]'s Sea of Desire I can detect an aura similar to lies.

"You're lying. Aren't you?"

"Heh. So my brother, my final question is:

"Just now, and right now — are you deceiving me?"

Cheng Shi's heart clenched, but his surface remained serene:

"Yes.

"I'm deceiving you."

Aph Ros's brow creased. He'd anticipated this — after all, the man claimed to be [Deceit]'s Envoy. If someone who championed falsehood never lied, that would be truly absurd.

But being deceived was still irritating. Worse, He couldn't even identify which parts were lies — because the scent of deception on Cheng Shi had never once faded!

Yet He wasn't angry. At minimum, in Aph Ros's view, Cheng Shi's willingness to reveal his Envoy identity was already the greatest gesture of goodwill. As for the other lies... for a Prisoner like Himself, none of it mattered.

But then Cheng Shi's next words shifted His perception yet again.

Because Cheng Shi immediately followed up with:

"My faith demands lies. So I told you lies. I embraced my own desire — and in doing so... drew closer to [Corruption] as a gesture of my sincerity."

The words had barely landed when clothing hit the floor.

The full moon rose — luminous and white.

"???"

Under that blinding moonlight, Cheng Shi...

Was absolutely terrified.

Chapter 495: Hu Xuan and Zhen Yi — And Eras and Epochs

You simply couldn't have a normal conversation with a pervert who refused to wear clothes. To ensure future effective communication, Cheng Shi spent a long time talking this [Corruption] Herald out of being so [Corruption]-like.

Aph Ros kept insisting Cheng Shi come inside to talk. Though Cheng Shi had previously ventured deep into the cage, this time he declined the invitation.

In Cheng Shi's mind, the invisible doorway was a baseline he never dared approach, let alone cross — especially with [Corruption]'s aura this thick.

Of course, being directly teleported inside... that didn't count.

'After all, even standards had to adapt with the times.'

So he sat cross-legged in the doorway, face-to-face with Aph Ros, and began verifying certain things.

For instance — what He'd just said about Hu Xuan.

"I'm not sure why Miss Sun suddenly came back. She told me you'd joined a new trial, but she chose not to go with you.

"She said she had more important things to do. One of which was meeting that legendary 'girlfriend' of yours.

"What a strange term — 'girlfriend.' Shouldn't it be 'prey'?"

"..."

'Great. So during their pre-trial prayers, Hu Xuan had faked her participation and returned here to see Zhen Yi?'

'What was she planning?'

Aph Ros read Cheng Shi's confusion and continued:

"Your script didn't include instructions for handling those two players, so I granted Miss Sun's request. After all, she's also... my sister, in a way.

"I met your prey. Mm, quite attractive indeed.

"They talked for a long while and seemed to reach some agreement. Then Miss Sun took your prey and left.

"She assured me you'd agree. So I didn't refuse.

"Now seems like a good time to ask — do you agree?"

'The person was already gone. What good was his consent or lack thereof?'

'Still — Hu Xuan had taken Zhen Yi?'

Cheng Shi frowned, deep in thought.

'Two completely unrelated — even mildly antagonistic — players suddenly joining forces?'

But a moment later, he looked up at Aph Ros with suspicion:

"What do you mean 'seemed to reach some agreement'?"

"They were on your turf, talking for that long, and you don't know what they said?"

"Something's off. Very off."

"I don't buy that you'd so generously let Hu Xuan walk off with prey that already 'belonged' to you. So — you definitely overheard something. And what they discussed involves you!"

"That's the only reason you'd agree to let Hu Xuan take Zhen Yi!"

Cheng Shi's eyes gleamed with certainty. Aph Ros roared with laughter:

"Worthy of my brother. Your wits are as sharp as ever."

"Yes, I heard what they said, and I know what that Miss Sun is up to."

"What?" Cheng Shi's brow arched.

Aph Ros's smile turned mysterious: "This secret involves many parties. So — that'll be a separate price."

"..." Cheng Shi was speechless. After a pause: "I do have some ideas. Put it on my tab. Later I'll bring more people over — add some living warmth to this Inquisition... no, to Dolgod."

Aph Ros blinked, then nodded with a smile:

"You always manage to move me with different bargaining chips. Noted."

"Mm, what they discussed does involve me, though the connection is minor."

"Your prey told Miss Sun that she'd tracked down information about Lu Xia — seemingly found his whereabouts. So Miss Sun took her to go find him."

'Lu Xia?'

'Who was that?'

Cheng Shi frowned. 'If Hu Xuan's interested in this person, they've got to be at least Envoy-level.'

'Someone who'd interest her and have a connection to Aph Ros... the two probably share a single common thread... [Birth]?'

Cheng Shi startled: "A [Birth] Envoy?"

"Smart. Seems you're unfamiliar with Him.

"He's a [Birth] Envoy born during the Civilization Era. Beyond that, I don't know much either."

"?"

Cheng Shi laughed in exasperation. 'You don't even know the details — what are you playing mysterious for, bro?'

'Hu Xuan took Zhen Yi away for intel on an Envoy. Did that mean [Birth] was still searching for Her children?'

'How many children did She even have?'

'What was She planning — a family reunion spanning multiple eras?'

No answers, but a new question suddenly surfaced. Cheng Shi straightened up and asked with dead seriousness:

"I recall you died in the Civilization Era — before [Truth] cast its gaze. So then, was Lu Xia born during the period after your death, when [Truth] prevailed and war raged? That is, the mid-to-late Civilization Epoch of the Civilization Era... correct?"

Aph Ros seemed to guess what Cheng Shi was trying to confirm, but He shook His head with a smile, denying the guess.

'Wrong?'

Seeing the headshake, Cheng Shi's heart lurched. Just as he moved to revise his reasoning, Aph Ros continued:

"He was indeed born during the Civilization Era. But he didn't ascend to Envoy status during [Truth]'s heyday.

"He was a citizen under the Grand Tribunal.

"It wasn't until the next era that he... became Him."

The instant the words landed, Cheng Shi's eyes went wide. A flash of insight blazed through his mind. He stared in shock:

"You're saying Lu Xia wasn't an Envoy during the Civilization Era, but became one during the Chaos Era?"

"But he was born under the Grand Tribunal..."

"So the Chaos Era also had a Civilization Epoch! Am I right!?"

Aph Ros nodded with a smile: "Correct."

!!!

It clicked. Cheng Shi suddenly understood the relationship between eras and epochs.

They weren't disordered. They were nested — contained within one another!

Each era appeared to cycle through all the epochs. The Life Era had a complete sequence. The Sinking Era had a complete sequence. Even the Void Era still had a complete sequence!

'So that was the relationship between eras and epochs.'

Excitement surged — but his grin froze almost immediately. Because he suddenly remembered: the gods had descended in order. If every era contained a full set of epochs, why had no mention of other paths' gods ever surfaced during the Life Epoch?

'Were They following some kind of rule?'

'Or...'

His eyes darted. He tossed out a casual question:

"Since you became His Envoy back in the Life Era, why didn't you try to merge directly with [Corruption] to fulfill your wish?"

Aph Ros shook His head with a laugh:

"You can ask me directly — no need for roundabout probing. Before, I couldn't tell you because your status didn't warrant access to such knowledge. But now that you're also an Envoy, you're naturally qualified.

"There was never any [Corruption] during the Life Era. How could I have fulfilled my wish?"

!!??

Cheng Shi gaped, utterly stunned:

"You mean to say that during the Life Era... there was only the Life Epoch, and [Corruption] never descended!?"

"Yes."

"So the Sinking Era gained its Sinking Epoch precisely because the [Descent] gods arrived — that era had one more epoch than the last!"

Now Cheng Shi truly understood. He continued excitedly:

"The Civilization Era gained three epochs because the Civilization path unfolded. And the Chaos Era must have been the longest, because it had four epochs!"

"But what about [Existence]?"

"The Existence Era should logically have an Existence Epoch, yet I've never heard anything about one."

"[Void]... neither has [Void]."

"Every other path has three gods, but [Existence] and [Void] each have only two. So does that mean something changed when the era reached [Existence]?"

"It doesn't correspond to a single epoch. Instead, it reorganized — combed through — everything that exists?"

"Just as He once said: [Time] marks annotations for projections, and [Memory] transcribes the images into the Collection Hall...

"That's why you found your chance during the Existence Era to become a dual Envoy of [Birth] and [Corruption]!

"Because it was [Time]'s brand-new projections that revealed a new possibility to you!

"Am I right, Aph Ros!?"

Cheng Shi's burning gaze locked onto the Herald, awaiting confirmation.

Aph Ros's admiring look deepened. He even applauded.

"Brilliant. A flawless deduction.

"You're entirely correct. That is exactly how it is.

"However, my brother — though your conclusions are perfect, the angle of your reasoning...

"Doesn't quite feel like that of a [Void] Servant God.

"Yu Xi? Yu Xi.

"My dear brother, don't tell me the part you lied about was actually...

"Your identity as Envoy Yu Xi?"

"!!!"

The instant the words fell, Cheng Shi's smile froze and cold sweat erupted.

Chapter 496: No Amateurs at the Peak

He'd gotten too excited and forgotten his supposed perspective.

But this level of challenge was nothing for a clown. Cheng Shi swiftly shifted his expression to self-deprecation, then sighed with a bitter smile:

"You're right. I'm not really Yu Xi."

The instant the words left his mouth, Aph Ros's gaze turned razor-sharp.

"At least, not right now. Because my mask is shattered." Cheng Shi spread his hands, then pointed at his own face. "When my mask vanished, I stopped being Yu Xi. That's why I'm playing the role of Cheng Shi.

"Everything you find illogical — it's all because He and I... made a wager."

Aph Ros's expression turned serious: "[Deceit]!"

"Yes. My Benefactor, [Deceit].

"I need to set one thing straight: long before becoming a [Fate] follower, I was already a [Deceit] Envoy. I walked the path of [Void], but had an unexpected clash with [Time].

"Whether that clash was good or bad is debatable. It was a gamble. I lost, and as the stakes, my mask — the embodiment of my identity and memories — was shattered by Him.

"When my Benefactor learned of this, He didn't help me repair that mask that represented who I was. Yes, you heard right — that mask is my true form."

"Why?"

"Why? Because... the Fun God needs fun. And what's more entertaining than stripping your own Envoy of his Envoy status?"

"The most hilarious part: He personally tracked me down, told me everything about my identity to my face, and mocked me without mercy."

"I had no choice. To restore my true body, I made another bet with Him."

"The wager's terms: start over. From the Path Starting Point. Reassemble my mask as a player, and walk back to the center of [Deceit]'s stage."

"That's why I became a [Fate] follower."

"The bet forbids me from borrowing His power. So at the Path Starting Point, I picked up the die that symbolizes [Fate] — after all, as a [Void] walker, my only other option besides [Deceit] was [Fate]."

"Everything [Deceit]-related you see on me now is partial power I recovered after reclaiming my tongue."

"So now you know, Aph Ros. That is every secret of Yu Xi."

"The only thing I can guarantee is that I am Yu Xi. Whether anything else I've said is a lie — you'll have to judge for yourself."

"Because this is who I am. This is [Deceit]'s Envoy, Yu Xi."

"A liar through and through... a fraud!"

Aph Ros listened, entranced. He was simultaneously verifying Cheng Shi's identity and using the information to fill gaps in His knowledge of this era's new gods.

Seeing such apparent candor, Aph Ros broke into another smile:

"Fascinating. Truly fascinating. I adore lies. Whether deceiving or being deceived — desire always flows through falsehood.

"You're right, my brother. When you can't suppress your compulsion to deceive, the distance between us...

"Grows ever smaller."

"..."

Cheng Shi gave an awkward laugh and finally steered the conversation back on track.

"There's actually one more thing I don't quite understand. I was hoping to consult someone who's witnessed several eras firsthand — a living..."

"Fossil?" Aph Ros gave Cheng Shi a half-amused, self-deprecating look. "Go on."

"How could I say fossil? You're a living archive of history!

"My question concerns a certain deity."

"Oh? Who? Surely not my Benefactor?"

"No — [Decay]!"

"This god who descended after [Corruption] seems thoroughly unkind to His followers.

"I've encountered a kingdom that worshipped Him. Even though those people devoted their entire nation to Him, He never bestowed them so much as a single blessing.

"This contradicts what I know about Him. So I'd like your perspective — what kind of being is He, exactly?"

At the mention of [Decay], Aph Ros's expression visibly sobered.

He fell silent for a moment, then sighed:

"If it's not absolutely necessary, I'd suggest you... stay away from Him."

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted: "Why?"

"Not all curiosity leads to answers. [Decay]... is unlike every other god.

"Come to think of it, His will does bear a certain resemblance to my Benefactor [Birth]."

???

'[Decay] and [Birth] with similar wills?'

'One rotted and withered. The other birthed new life. Where was the similarity?'

"The 'will' I'm referring to isn't the will that mortals presume gods to possess. It's Their own will...

"I can't tell you too much. But I can confirm that what you experienced was correct.

"In the earliest era, He was indeed extremely cold. Even cruel and harsh!

"The [Decay] period within the Sinking Era didn't last long. Or rather, the so-called Sinking Epoch saw only [Corruption] truly flourish for any significant duration.

"Both [Decay] and [Oblivion] were flashes in the pan. On the scale of history's long river, the periods when Their faiths were prevalent barely qualified as a single ripple.

"It wasn't until the Civilization Era's arrival that [Decay]'s attitude toward mortals shifted somewhat. He began to develop... compassion.

"After that, He gradually stopped resembling the original Him and became what He is today.

"If you want to know more, my brother — my advice is: don't.

"Because His transformation is entirely related to that existence I refuse to mention!"

Cheng Shi's entire body trembled. That terrifying divine name surfaced once more in his mind: [Origin]!

'[Decay]'s transformation was connected to [Origin]!?'

'So why exactly did He change, and what was His relationship with that being Aph Ros refused to go near?'

Seeing that the conversation had strayed into dangerous territory, Cheng Shi fell silent.

After a long pause, he nodded. "Thank you."

"No need to thank me. The stories I heard from you today are far more interesting than anything I shared.

"I should be thanking you for helping me better understand this era.

"However — I've noted your outstanding tab.

"My brother, remember to pay up next time. Of course, I'll accept... any method of payment."

"..."

Cheng Shi's eye twitched. He didn't dare respond. After a moment's thought, he decided it was about time and prepared to bid Aph Ros farewell and return to the trial.

But as he rose, Aph Ros couldn't contain his curiosity:

"Not going to tell me anything else?"

Cheng Shi startled. Inside, his heart lurched. On the surface, he smiled: "What else would you like to know?"

Aph Ros studied Cheng Shi with interest, then directed his gaze toward the ring between Cheng Shi's fingers — the Ring of Bone Servant Le Le'er.

"Quite a remarkable ring. Last time I merely noticed its existence — no other aura stood out. But this time, when you arrived through [Death]'s power, I detected something on it... a faint trace of...

"[Corruption]'s scent.

"How interesting. You've brought a [Corruption] follower's soul-fragment before me, yet you haven't breathed a word about it. Could it be you were waiting for me to ask?"

!!!

???

'What!?'

'A [Corruption] follower's soul-fragment!?'

Cheng Shi was stunned. Completely floored!

If Aph Ros had detected Le Le'er's divinity, that wouldn't have surprised him — Le Le'er was also connected to [Corruption].

But divinity and a soul-fragment were entirely different things. This fragment was clearly some dying-but-not-dead thing latched onto his ring!

'When!?'

'He hadn't noticed at all!!'

His heart sank. In a flash, he realized exactly what this fragment was.

The Screaming Earl. Gongyang Jiao!

'No wonder!'

'No wonder that maniac had fought so savagely. No wonder he hadn't feared death at all. Cheng Shi had suspected that simply killing Gongyang Jiao wouldn't end things — that the man surely had a resurrection method.'

'But he never imagined this audacious player had dared to "contaminate" his ring!'

'Was the man after the ring, or was this simply the Screaming Earl's unique revival technique?'

'Could he parasitize fear itself — and resurrect through another's terror?'

'What a peak player. He'd used his own death to slip right past Cheng Shi's guard!'

After piecing it all together, Cheng Shi was deeply troubled inside. But outwardly, he betrayed nothing. Instead, he laughed heartily:

"Working alone can be inefficient, you know. When you spot a suitable bruiser, naturally you want to grab him for labor.

"Persuading him as 'Cheng Shi' probably wouldn't work. So I had to bring him here to watch the show.

"Don't worry — he won't dare say a word."

Cheng Shi was lying again.

He knew nothing about the fragment's state inside the ring — whether it could hear, what contingencies it had. But he said it anyway. The purpose: to con the nonexistent into existence!

Because he'd suddenly realized Gongyang Jiao was perfect labor material.

Formidable combat power. Poor judgment. Constantly going berserk.

That three-in-one package meant anything he did required minimal explanation. He was practically the holy body of blackwork... no, the holy body of taking the fall!

And so in this moment, Cheng Shi told a single lie that deceived two beings at once — one person and one god!

He even began to hope that the parasitic Gongyang Jiao could hear his conversation with Aph Ros.

If things went well, the man might end up like Long Jing — another tool in Lord Yu Xi's arsenal.

After all, any sensible player would know they had zero power to refuse. Especially a [Corruption] follower, who — upon learning how close Yu Xi was to [Corruption]'s own Herald Aph Ros — would have even less reason to say no.

Aph Ros nodded in understanding at Cheng Shi's response.

'Recruiting a subordinate. Common enough.'

"So — your business with the Inquisition's entrance is concluded?"

Cheng Shi blinked, then waved his hand: "No, no, no — this was just the first time. I'll probably need to trouble you a few more times down the road."

"I enjoy your visits. But I'd prefer you reassemble your mask soon and converse with me as the true Yu Xi.

"The scent of [Death] isn't to my taste. In the future, if you come and need me, knock. If you don't need me — I'd much rather share a sunset feast with you at the long table on Dolgod's terrace."

With that, Aph Ros smiled elegantly and strode into the depths of the Inquisition. The great door closed behind Him.

And in that moment, Cheng Shi's face turned grim. He raised his hand and stared at the ring.

"Enjoying the show... are we?"

Chapter 497: Complex Team Dynamics

The ring gave no response. But that didn't mean the one inside couldn't hear.

Knowing the Screaming Earl's resurrection method was still in play within this trial, Cheng Shi already had a complete plan in mind. But this wasn't the place to set it in motion. He chuckled softly, strode away from the Inquisition, and returned to the trial.

When he reappeared inside the Rosna Court, his teammates were long gone.

All that remained were massive bloodstains, chunks of flesh, clumps of charred remains peeled from bone, and countless scattered footprints.

Cheng Shi squatted down with interest and studied the tracks. Three different sets of footprints. It seemed his teammates — the ones who'd wanted him dead — had already visited the scene. The question was whether they'd come out of concern, to confirm his death, or to figure out where he'd gone.

Cheng Shi wasn't entirely sure whether anyone besides the Chameleon had witnessed him killing Gongyang Jiao. If someone had, his best guess was Da Yi, who'd separated from the team.

He'd anticipated this. That was precisely why he'd left behind an ambiguous remark before departing — a hook he hoped would someday reel in this [War] big fish.

He was playing at mystery, sparring with them from afar. Whether it was shooting in the dark or not — he'd need to gauge their reactions when they met again.

But for now, Cheng Shi wasn't in any hurry to rejoin his teammates. He had something more pressing to handle. Such as... dealing with the soul-fragment playing dead on his ring.

...

Meanwhile, on the other side.

Four silhouettes appeared once more atop the Court's outermost walls. Three of them cast complicated backward glances at the Rosna Court, then leapt from the wall with an old man in tow and returned to the Rosna Recruitment Square.

The four were Da Yi, Poison, and company.

After confirming that the hunt's casualty was the hunter, not the prey, all three left with varying expressions.

Not out of fear — but because time waited for no one.

They couldn't find Cheng Shi, and they wouldn't linger for a "teammate" with whom trust had already fractured. So the group departed the Court and, following old Jia Lun's directions, set out to find the banished First Prince.

As things stood, only the First Prince would know the dagger's whereabouts.

From Jia Lun's account, they learned the First Prince had been banished precisely because he was the sole member of the Rosna royal family who belonged to the War Faction!

He'd advocated mass conscription and a united national defense — driving every World Destroyer out of their borders.

The Recruitment Square before the Court had been built under the First Prince's oversight.

But the shrewd old emperor had long foreseen the empire's end. He knew the Rosna royals' sun had set. So he refused his son's counsel and promptly banished his war-hungry heir from the palace — sacrificing a royal scion to buy himself and the ministers time to flee.

Hearing the full story, all three players agreed: the old emperor was indeed smart.

Whether the First Prince was a fool... that was debatable. It depended on whose perspective you took.

But the players didn't care about any of that. They weren't the saviors Cheng Shi had proclaimed. They'd come running for one thing only: the Gift of Sores — the dagger every assassin dreamed of.

Logically, finding a nation's prince in its own capital should have been simple. The problem was that every guard who might have known the prince's whereabouts had fled with the emperor. Add a paralyzing blizzard, empty streets, and snow burying every trace, and the search became exponentially harder.

Fortunately, the players were clever. Using the Historian's side profile of the First Prince, they quickly narrowed down several likely locations. The trio pushed back into the blizzard.

Da Yi led as always, hauling Jia Lun and setting the team's course.

Poison and Jiang Chi trailed behind, guarding the flanks — no longer just watching for the Chameleon, but also for a certain Fate Weaver named Cheng Shi.

'Who knew whether this hard persimmon, having cracked the hunters' teeth, might come back for theirs?'

As the three traversed the rooftops, Jiang Chi suddenly sidled closer to Poison and asked with a frown:

"You and this Fate Weaver... you're close?"

Poison blinked: "What counts as close? Does sleeping together count?"

"???"

Jiang Chi nearly stumbled off the roof. He never imagined a casual question would unearth explosive gossip.

He stared at Poison in disbelief, but then — remembering this was Poison — decided it somehow tracked.

Still, he'd been derailed. He couldn't resist: "You two... slept together?"

Poison suddenly smirked: "No. I was asking you."

"???"

'Who asks questions like that!?'

Jiang Chi's mouth twitched, expression darkening. He recognized the subject-change for what it was. But he quickly steered back:

"Having worked together counts as close."

Poison's reply was blunt: "Oh. Then no, we're not close."

"..." Jiang Chi's face grew darker. "Not close, yet you left messages for him in the snow? I saw you use Gongyang's blood to draw him a trail. Poison — I'm your partner. Even if he is too, you don't need to lie to me about it."

Poison blinked again:

"I wasn't lying. We're genuinely not close."

"We've never worked together. The one trial we bumped into each other in, he played me for a fool. All I managed was to cling to his coattails and scrape through."

"Also — you saw wrong. I just felt a little happ... sympathetic when Mr. Ram died. So I dabbed some blood and scribbled a couple of words. A casual tribute to a follower of my Lord, that's all."

Hearing this, Jiang Chi let out a cold laugh: "So you did leave him a message!"

"?" Poison's pupils contracted, her expression shifting: "You tricked me?"

"Heh." Jiang Chi shook his head, dead serious. "I'm just reminding you — without my help, you can't out-compete Da Yi. Don't count on that Fate Weaver helping you either. In his eyes, you're equally complicit in the trap that nearly killed him.

"Even if Da Yi played a more villainous role in that little scheme, don't forget — he and that Fate Weaver are close. At least before things turned hostile, the Fate Weaver stood on his side."

Poison's eyes shifted. She feigned shock: "You're saying those two... slept together?"

"?"

It was clearly a joke. But Jiang Chi couldn't muster even a hint of laughter, because he knew that when Poison resorted to gags, it meant she was already guarding against him.

"Miss Poison, stop deflecting. We need to face our relationship honestly. So... is our partnership still on?"

At this, Poison's expression finally turned serious. She scoffed and asked coldly:

"Shouldn't I be asking you that, Sir Knight?"

"I was being so openly affectionate with the little priest — practically had 'he's also my partner' tattooed on my forehead. Yet you still took the chance to push him out of the team. So was that supposed to help me, or hurt me?"

"I've been very curious — after that opening confrontation, how did you find Da Yi, and what did you two discuss?"

"My partner — are you still my partner right now?"

"You haven't... made a deal with the other assassin too, have you?"

Chapter 498: It's Him!

Now it was Jiang Chi's turn to fall silent.

There were no fools at the peak level. He'd assumed Poison would be wary of her own position and refrain from calling out a relationship that disadvantaged her. He was wrong.

Poison hadn't just called him out — she'd turned the question around.

Her meaning was clear: whether to continue cooperating wasn't hers alone to decide. It depended on what this Jiang Chi — who'd been secretly networking between players — truly wanted.

And Jiang Chi's silence had already given the answer: he had indeed been in contact with Da Yi!

Yes — Jiang Chi and Da Yi had reached a preliminary cooperation. The deal: Jiang Chi would help Da Yi obtain the Gift of Sores, and Da Yi would promise to lend him aid someday in the future.

For Da Yi, the promise cost essentially nothing. Nobody knew whether any given player would survive to see "the future." So he'd accepted without hesitation.

He naturally knew Jiang Chi had his own calculations. But the reality of the peak circle was that you could never get someone completely on your side. So... take whatever advantage presented itself. In the end, whoever was better at exploiting the other would come out on top.

Jiang Chi did have his own schemes, but Poison's exposé provoked no anger in him. He actually shot her an appreciative glance, then smiled and kept moving.

Not because his composure was unfathomable — but because Poison had accurately seized the pulse of his emotions!

What this [Corruption] Chosen "sold" to the Pointer Knight was precisely wisdom and erudition!

All that history she'd recited in the civilian house wasn't just to appease Da Yi — it was a demonstration for Jiang Chi.

She knew Jiang Chi was the type who loved working with smart people. That was why she'd dared call out his games to his face — knowing it wouldn't embarrass him, and might even pull this partner partially away from Da Yi's orbit.

Only by doing so could she carve out even the slightest extra chance of claiming the dagger in this worst-case scenario.

Her ideal partner had been Cheng Shi, of course. But frustratingly, Cheng Shi didn't trust her — or rather, didn't dare to.

So Poison could only play it by ear. The message she'd left for Cheng Shi was meant to show him that "teammates" for cooperation still existed in this trial. Whether he'd accept depended on how badly the Fate Weaver coveted the Gift of Sores.

The four trudged through the blizzard for a long time. The armory, the inn, the tavern, the mansion... following Jia Lun's guidance, they visited location after location. But the First Prince was nowhere to be found. After hours of searching, Da Yi stopped.

"Hot damn, don't let me find out you've been stringing us along!" He shook old Jia Lun violently: "Think harder! Where else could the First Prince be!?"

Jiang Chi frowned at the scene. Poison caught his expression, her eyes shifting, and she addressed old Jia Lun thoughtfully:

"You said the First Prince is a hawk. So is it possible he left the city to fight the World Destroyers?"

"The Court's guards were taken by your useless emperor, but the city garrison remains. Could he have already mobilized and departed?"

Old Jia Lun shook his head frantically:

"If the garrison were battle-worthy, why would His Majesty have fled so fast?!"

"The armies of other cities could still put up a fight. But Kannar's garrison had long been turned into a stepping-stone for nobles' promotions. When His Majesty fled, who knows how many noble scions he took with him. How many real fighters remain among the soldiers is anyone's guess.

"World Destroyers are no rabble. The First Prince isn't stupid either.

"I don't doubt his resolve to defend the people. I believe he'd lead troops against the Destroyers. But I don't believe he'd march out to fight those demons without first recruiting new soldiers."

Da Yi grew more agitated: "Hot damn, this doesn't work, that won't do — where IS he!?"

Jiang Chi stayed silent. Poison frowned, thought for a moment, then said:

"Stop listing places he might go. Does this First Prince have any distinguishing features? We've encountered plenty of people at those locations. By your description, many match his appearance, but you've rejected them all.

"Is there something more distinctive?"

"At our speed, splitting up might be more efficient."

Old Jia Lun was terrified. He trembled in thought for a while, then shook his head with a bitter smile:

"The First Prince looks quite ordinary. Doesn't even resemble His Majesty much. Nothing about his face stands out.

"If there must be one royal trait — the Sin Cleansing Scars on royal family members are arranged in an orderly pattern, distinct from nobles and commoners alike.

"But those are hidden under clothing. You'd be better off checking faces!"

"!!!"

The instant he said this, all three perked up. Da Yi's breathing turned audibly heavy.

Poison's eyes lit up: "The Sin Cleansing Scars — those are the wounds on your backs?"

Old Jia Lun, skewered by three piercing gazes, felt as exposed as if he'd been stripped naked. He nodded quickly.

"Only royals have neatly arranged scars?"

"Then does your First Prince also have three children — one boy, two girls?"

"Does the First Prince's consort also bear neatly arranged scars?"

"?"

Old Jia Lun was stunned. 'They didn't know that much, yet they already knew this much? Then why keep asking?'

But this time, before he could respond, Da Yi — having already read his expression — snatched him up and shot toward the plaza.

"It's him!"

Poison and Jiang Chi exchanged a look, declared in unison, then raced after Da Yi.

Jiang Chi ran while kicking himself: "Should've realized sooner. Since he advocates conscription, of course he'd stay near the square he built!"

Poison gave Jiang Chi an amused sidelong glance, chuckled twice, and said nothing.

The three moved fast — and they'd been near the plaza anyway. Before long, they arrived at that same civilian house.

No one had expected fate to be this magical: the answer had been right before them from the very first moment.

Before entering the alley where the house stood, Da Yi pulled a potion from storage and poured it into old Jia Lun's mouth. He asked the same questions one more time. Only after receiving identical answers did he knock the old man out cold and toss him aside.

Seeing this, Poison smirked with self-deprecation:

"Da Yi, do you really need to be this cautious of me?"

"I had no idea my random pick just happened to be the First Prince's hideout outside the palace."

Da Yi shot Poison a glance, ignored her, snorted, and dashed toward the house. But before he even reached the door, the [War] assassin's face transformed. His copper-bell eyes went wide as he backpedaled furiously.

Poison and Jiang Chi, right behind him, hadn't spotted the problem yet. They looked up to find several silent arrows streaking straight at them.

The Chameleon!

'This [Silence] follower had set up an ambush here!?'

'How dare he!?'

'With Gongyang Jiao dead, how could he alone challenge three peak players!?'

'Did he have a death wish!?'

The three retreated into the alley to dodge the arrows. Their expressions soured further when a single thought hit them simultaneously: if a hunter dared make a last stand in front, someone behind the scenes had to be quietly weaving fate — giving him the confidence to step onto center stage!

And right now, that someone could only be...

Cheng Shi!

The Fate Weaver and the Chameleon had joined forces!

At this realization, Da Yi's face darkened, Jiang Chi's expression grew complicated, and Poison... curled her lips into a smile.

She quietly positioned herself at the rear, her voice teasing:

"What did I tell you? The little priest is hard.

"Well, this is great. The number of hunters hasn't changed, but we're one short on our side.

"So what's the plan, gentlemen?"

Chapter 499: Roles Reversed — The New Hunter

A battle's course was never driven by the defending side.

How this surprise attack would unfold wasn't for Da Yi or Poison to decide. The one truly steering the situation was the ambusher.

In other words...

Cheng Shi!

Yes — the mastermind behind this ambush was indeed Cheng Shi!

And he wasn't hiding behind the scenes. Shortly after the Chameleon drove the three back, he appeared on the rooftop of a civilian house flanking the alleyway.

Under [Silence]'s cover, none of the three had detected the Fate Weaver lurking at their side — barely a hundred meters above their heads!

The moment Cheng Shi revealed himself, he pulled out three colorful spheres with an amused expression and lobbed them behind the trio in the alley. Simultaneously, his left hand flicked open five scalpels, launching them one after another at Da Yi in the vanguard.

The spheres burst on impact, billowing clouds of smoke. The blades flew true, aimed straight at Da Yi's face.

It appeared the smoke was a diversion, while his real target was the most combat-capable of the three — Da Yi, the [War] assassin!

Da Yi frowned but stayed calm. Rather than charging forward, he spun his Iron Thorns in a dazzling blur, effortlessly deflecting the incoming scalpels while keeping an eye on the Chameleon ahead to guard against a follow-up ambush.

But the two behind him didn't have it so easy.

Poison knew Cheng Shi's tactics. She didn't believe the smoke detonating behind them was harmless. So she leapt onto the rooftop, facing Cheng Shi across the gap of the alley.

Jiang Chi's expression darkened further. He swept his sword in whirling arcs, blasting the spreading smoke backward.

Any keen observer could see that while the knives thrown at Da Yi were fast and accurate, they were almost too accurate — all five aimed at dead center, unvarying trajectories, textbook-rigid. It was hard not to wonder whether Cheng Shi was using this to send Da Yi a message.

Jiang Chi's heart lurched. Better safe than sorry — he retreated.

He feared Cheng Shi was about to team up with Da Yi to eliminate him first. So the second Poison darted away, he too leapt onto the rooftop at the alley's far end, putting distance between himself and his "teammates."

And then came the most absurd outcome.

The ambusher had fired a single feint — and the three-person team instantly shattered.

Cheng Shi seemed to have anticipated exactly this. He smirked, drinking in their stricken faces.

As for why it was a feint — the three colored spheres contained absolutely nothing special. They were ordinary smoke grenades Cheng Shi had collected ages ago.

Their only purpose: creating chaos in low-level matches for fishing in troubled waters. Since he'd started matching into high-level games, these bottom-tier tools hadn't seen use in a long time.

But "no special effects" didn't mean nothing was hiding inside the smoke.

When the cloud Jiang Chi had blown away drifted to the alley's end, a blood-curdling scream erupted from within. A blindingly fast figure burst from the smoke and lunged straight at Jiang Chi — razor claws extended, face contorted in savagery.

The hidden killer in the smoke was none other than Gongyang Jiao!

"Gongyang Jiao!! You're alive!?"

Jiang Chi's pupils contracted violently. His face twisted in shock. The Hour Hand Sword couldn't swing in time. He pitched backward in a clumsy dodge — the crudest possible evasion of this utterly unexpected strike.

But the distance was too short. A warrior's burst closed the gap before Jiang Chi could escape. The Pointer Knight watched, mid-fall, as Gongyang Jiao's savage grin filled his vision — cheeks perfectly intact. The man was clearly at peak physical and spiritual condition!

"I taste your fear, Knight. You're afraid!"

'He'd been resurrected!?'

'And the Fate Weaver had healed him!?'

'But wasn't Gongyang Jiao sent to kill Cheng Shi? Why had Cheng Shi brought him back!?'

'Seriously? Was this some kind of illness?'

'The prey killed the hunter, then resurrected the hunter, and now they were hunting new prey together?'

'What kind of absurd behavior was this!?'

Jiang Chi couldn't make sense of it. But there was no time left to think. Gongyang Jiao's claws were already buried in his shoulder, slamming him down.

To the onlookers, the backward-toppling Jiang Chi looked as though the maniacal Gongyang Jiao had tackled him off the wall. The two bodies overlapped and vanished from sight.

But in the instant Jiang Chi was knocked off the wall, the savage grin on Gongyang Jiao's face suddenly froze.

Not just him — the entire space behind the wall froze.

[Time]'s power seeped silently from Jiang Chi's left hand, freezing everything before him solid.

But Jiang Chi didn't counter-attack. Instead, he drove his sword into Gongyang Jiao's shoulder, used the leverage to fling himself away, and retreated to what he deemed a safe distance.

When he judged Gongyang Jiao couldn't launch another such ambush, he snapped his fingers, releasing the [Time]-frozen Screaming Earl back to "life."

THUD.

Momentum carried Gongyang Jiao to the ground. Feeling the hard crowd-control that [Time] had slapped on him, he shot a stunned look at Jiang Chi ahead — then broke into an eerie smile.

"So that's how it is!"

And then, instead of pursuing, he wheeled around without hesitation and charged in the opposite direction — toward Poison.

Gongyang Jiao's true target had always been Poison. That had never changed!

But this time, Poison wasn't his own pick. The choice had been made by the ambush team's core — Cheng Shi.

That's right. Cheng Shi had decided to eliminate Poison first!

The moment Gongyang Jiao reversed course, everyone on both sides moved.

Poison sensed danger instantly. The smile froze on her face. She threw one disbelieving glance at Cheng Shi, then turned and ran.

The Chameleon drew his bow and loosed arrow after arrow, sealing Poison's escape routes while sprinting in pursuit.

Cheng Shi chuckled softly and strolled along the rooftop to where Poison had been standing. En route, he made no move against the tense, motionless Da Yi. Instead, he delivered one cold, detached line — "The First Prince is inside" — before heading after Poison without looking back.

Watching the three hunters suddenly lock onto Poison, a battered Jiang Chi clutched his shoulder and limped back. He and the stunned Da Yi exchanged a look. Both saw the bewilderment mirrored in the other's eyes.

"There could be traps inside!" Jiang Chi frowned, offering a warning.

Da Yi had been thinking the same. But remembering how Cheng Shi had killed Gongyang Jiao, and recalling the condescending tone just now, he frowned, spat, and fired back:

"Hot damn, Jiang Chi — can I still trust you? Whose side are you even on?"

Jiang Chi's gaze sharpened. He took half a step back: "You want to break the deal?"

"Break the deal?" Da Yi drew six Iron Thorns — three in each hand — his face darkening: "Your previous partner is being chased by three people, and you're standing here without lifting a finger.

"Hot damn, with a cold-blooded partner like you, shouldn't I be afraid?"

The accusation left Jiang Chi stunned. Internally, he wanted to curse.

'Wasn't it precisely because of his deal with Da Yi that he'd abandoned the partnership with Poison? And now Da Yi was turning it around on him!?'

But he quickly realized this was just Da Yi's pretext. The seemingly impulsive [War] follower was actually quite shrewd. He'd simply become wary and didn't want any more surprises.

"Hot damn, stand guard here. If they double back, warn me immediately. I'm going in to check!"

Without a backward glance, Da Yi charged into the First Prince's hideout.

Jiang Chi watched Da Yi's retreating back with a dark expression, then looked toward where Poison had fled. A nagging feeling crept over him...

His situation was getting worse.

Chapter 500: "A Blade This Short Won't Reach My Heart"

Poison's flight was desperate.

Though assassins excelled at stealth and evasion, facing three players in pursuit — especially with a [Silence] hunter among them — she was virtually cornered.

After running for a long time, the towering city wall loomed ahead. Poison knew she couldn't escape.

A cryptic light flickered through her eyes. She exhaled hard, and while the hunters hadn't yet closed in, she stopped at the base of the wall and drew her last-resort dagger.

It was a blade brimming with [Corruption]'s power, named Dance With Desire. Whether the wielder or the one struck, anyone touched by its aura would have their desires stretched and amplified without end — until they plunged into boundless madness, satisfying untouchable, impossible fantasies through delusion.

In simpler terms: first lose your mind, then go insane.

Dance With Desire's effect was exceptional. But Poison rarely used it. Unless cornered in a life-or-death fight, she almost never took it out — precisely because it was too effective.

So effective that even a [Corruption] Chosen One couldn't resist its pull.

Yet today, right now, she'd drawn this dagger from storage. She gripped it tight, gravity etched across her face.

All because Poison had suddenly realized she could no longer read the little priest she'd once encountered.

In her memory, he was a player who lied through his teeth, was cautious to the extreme, yet stayed cool under fire and could turn the tide single-handedly. Most importantly — he was a good person worth trusting.

But today, that good person had changed.

He hadn't become bad. He'd become... too strong.

Poison knew with certainty that Gongyang Jiao had been dead. Yet only a few hours later, this resurrected Screaming Earl had become the little priest's enforcer.

Yes — she believed the little priest had masterminded this ambush.

The moment Gongyang Jiao passed up attacking her and went for Jiang Chi instead, Poison knew something was off. The Chameleon might play indirect games, but the straightforward Screaming Earl

never would. His tactics had always been head-on confrontation — generating fear through raw violence. He'd never bother with misdirection.

The only person among the three who favored this kind of battlefield-splitting maneuver was the little priest.

So when the same-faith warrior wheeled toward her, Poison knew: she was the little priest's real target!

'Run!'

In the past, she might have tried to read his intentions. But under this mad-dog assault, she had no such luxury.

So Poison ran.

But she couldn't escape.

She knew that against three hunters, an all-out sprint was merely delaying the inevitable. Running wouldn't save her. And with the dagger still unfound, she wasn't ready to quit the trial. So her only option was to shift strategy and strike first.

Poison didn't know what deal Gongyang Jiao had struck with Cheng Shi. She only knew that if she killed Gongyang Jiao first, there might still be room for negotiation with the little priest. They were old acquaintances, after all, and she had no real grudge against the Chameleon.

The [Silence] hunter seemed more like a "mercenary" hired by Gongyang Jiao.

Except this mercenary appeared... a tad too professional.

So Poison stopped, drew Dance With Desire, and prepared to fight Gongyang Jiao before the three hunters converged.

She gripped the dagger tight, concealing herself in the wind and snow beneath the wall. When three dark shapes rapidly approached, a ghostly silhouette materialized right beside the center figure — Gongyang Jiao.

A Chosen assassin, delivering her most flawless kill, prepared a devastating surprise for the warrior who'd been hunting her.

Gongyang Jiao had already started scanning his surroundings when the Chameleon slowed — but Poison's ambush was too perfect. As seamless as his own attack on Jiang Chi moments ago. The target never had time to react.

The Screaming Earl didn't even manage a roar before a ghastly gash appeared across his throat.

A clean hit!

But she wasn't done!

Poison knew one strike wouldn't kill Gongyang Jiao. She vanished instantly, reappeared below his falling trajectory, and drove the dagger perfectly into his lower back.

Overwhelming [Corruption] power surged into the wound. Even a fellow [Corruption] follower had his desires ignited instantly.

"You filthy bitch! You're dead!!!"

The raspy voice grated like a broken bellows. The peak warrior seized Poison's forearm mid-air and twisted his body in an unthinkable acrobatic reversal — spinning from back-to-Poison to face-to-face. His other hand lunged for her shoulder, desire blazing in his eyes, ready to tear her apart on the spot.

Poison wasn't fazed. She knew she couldn't trade blows with a warrior. With a contemptuous smile, she broke her own arm, vanished again, and reappeared behind Gongyang Jiao — plunging the dagger into his back with blinding speed!

Three hits, all clean!

In this brief window, anyone who ate Poison's full combo would lose half their life, especially with Dance With Desire's desire-amplification. Gongyang Jiao instantly fell to a disadvantage.

But just as Poison prepared to close in and finish the warrior — the [Silence] arrows arrived.

Three whistling shots in rapid succession targeted Gongyang Jiao's position. The angles were wickedly precise — from their original trajectories, the arrows didn't look like extraction cover for the warrior at all. They looked like Poison's ally helping her finish Gongyang Jiao off.

The catch: Poison had flashed behind Gongyang Jiao and swapped positions. During her descent, she dropped right into the arrows' path!

It was a perfectly predicted triple shot. The hunter had bet on Poison attacking from behind — and won.

Poison's expression shifted. She immediately blinked backward, trying to attack from another angle. But what came next was truly devastating.

A column of healing light poured directly onto Gongyang Jiao. The surging restorative power rapidly mended his ravaged flesh.

Seeing this, Poison's heart sank.

'The little priest...'

'No chance left. Perhaps there never had been one.'

Realizing her assassination attempt was doomed, she gritted her teeth and bolted outward.

But as she tried to use the blizzard's shadows to break contact once more, she crashed into someone.

Her pupils contracted. She spun to strike — but when she saw who stood behind her, she froze for a split second. And that split second was all it took for bloody shackles to clamp around her, binding her tight.

A familiar scalpel pressed against her chest in the very next instant.

Poison's expression stiffened. A cryptic light flickered through her eyes before she simply... gave up resisting.

She laughed at herself, then arched her neck backward, looking up — back pressing against chest — at the face mere inches above hers. She sighed softly:

"Little priest, you really have changed."

Yes — the one who'd caught her was Cheng Shi. And he'd removed his mask, reverting from Hero of Today back to Fate Weaver.

As for why he'd swap out of a combat-ready class to return to priest... naturally, it was to maintain his persona.

He didn't want to prematurely expose his "second profession." Only by keeping that hidden could he retain trump cards in the peak circle.

Switching back to priest was risky, but Cheng Shi had already prepared contingencies. At minimum, if the situation went completely south, he could still save himself.

So he'd reverted to priest and used one devastating healing spell to seal off every escape route for Poison.

But he also knew Poison wasn't so easily caught. The reason she'd fallen into his hands was most likely...

She'd done it on purpose.

From the direction of her flight to that momentary freeze — it was probably all scripted.

'Tch. Clever girl. Spotted him here and just bodychecked her way in. What, planning to lean on that [Corruption] will again to earn trust? Sister, please.'

'Outdated!'

'Although... why was her face so red?'

Cheng Shi held the captive tight in his arms, choosing not to call out her game. He merely scoffed:

"Well? How does it feel, having a blade held to you?"

Poison's breathing grew unsteady. Her gaze turned slightly hazy. She glanced at the scalpel pressed to her chest, and far from fear, she licked the corner of her lips. In a voice dripping with bewitching allure, she murmured:

"Little priest, I suggest you try a different angle. Otherwise, a blade this short..."

"I'm afraid it won't reach my heart."

"?"