

The Gods 501

Chapter 501: Poison's Death

Cheng Shi was done.

'Sister, aren't you a bit too relaxed? In this situation you're still driving that train?'

'Railway bureau certified conductor, is that it?'

He clicked his tongue, casually shifted the scalpel, and pressed it against Poison's neck instead.

But the woman who'd been ready to fight to the death moments ago now seemed utterly unafraid. Breathing unevenly, she looked at Cheng Shi with flushed cheeks, her words slightly slurred:

"When you negotiate with others, it's all business. But when it's me, you have to do it like this?"

"Or is this just your thing?"

"Mm, well... if you like it, I like it."

"What's this? I smell an unsettling [Birth] aura on it."

"Don't tell me you want to use this to... with me..."

Cheng Shi snorted. The scalpel flashed silver and plunged into Poison's shoulder.

Poison winced, her expression flickering.

"Ah~ That hurts~"

"Little priest, could you be a bit gentler?"

Cheng Shi studied Poison thoughtfully, then frowned: "One more word and I'll kill you."

"No you won't."

Poison lifted her chin defiantly, but her hands were clenched white-knuckled within her restraints — not as though she was testing Cheng Shi's temper, but fighting against some invisible force pulling at her.

"If you wanted me dead, Mr. Ram's attack wouldn't have aimed for my shoulder, and the Lizard Hunter wouldn't have sent all three arrows at the same spot."

Her speech grew increasingly slurred, but her logic remained razor-sharp.

"You're not here to kill me... you're... forcing me to cooperate?"

"No... I see... you're using this to cut me off from their team... so you can go after them next?"

"Interesting... who's your target?"

"Da Yi... or Jiang Chi?"

"I can help you... you know... out of everyone here, I'm the most trustworthy..."

"You'll trust me... right... little priest?"

As she spoke, Poison nuzzled toward Cheng Shi's neck like a kitten seeking affection.

"..."

'Something was off. Poison seemed to be... poisoned.'

But setting aside these appearances — true or false — Cheng Shi was genuinely irritated.

Fighting peak players was already exhausting. Add in one who could constantly sense your emotions, and it was an absolute nightmare. Even with every nerve on high alert, slips were inevitable.

Like right now — this [Corruption] follower had read his mind again. Even in her seemingly delirious state, she'd seen through the situation.

Yes, Poison was right. Cheng Shi's purpose in hunting her wasn't to kill her. It was to split that team apart, then consolidate every available force to kill Jiang Chi!

People who made it onto Cheng Shi's ledger had only two endings. Either, like Gongyang Jiao, a twist of fate gave them exploitable value — earning the privilege of "atoning" through black labor. Or they died. Simple as that.

His original plan had been to cooperate with Poison. She was the only one who understood Jiang Chi, and for a successful hunt, knowing your enemy was the most basic prerequisite.

But watching her sit there with that "I've got you figured out, you're mine" attitude — Cheng Shi found himself inexplicably annoyed.

'Think you can read everyone, do you? Love driving trains, do you?'

'Fine. Today I'll show you what "the human heart is unfathomable" means. Even trains can derail!'

With that thought, his gaze changed. It sharpened suddenly. And when the playful glint reached the corner of his eye, silver flashed once more. Beneath Poison's unguarded, increasingly heated stare — ssshk — her throat opened.

Yes. Poison died. Without resistance. Throat slit.

Feeling her life drain away and her vision darken, the Poison in Cheng Shi's arms showed no fear, no confusion, no bewilderment, no rage. She simply curled her lips into a faint smile and closed her eyes in complete contentment.

She seemed quite happy to die in Cheng Shi's arms.

The [Corruption] Chosen died in the most ordinary manner imaginable, head resting against Cheng Shi's shoulder.

'Really dead?'

'Really dead!'

Watching the vivid blood trickle down the dagger and forearm, the Chameleon wore an odd expression. Gongyang Jiao's gaze sharpened slightly.

Everyone knew such a crude method couldn't truly kill a Chosen. But neither of them tried to guess the deeper meaning behind Cheng Shi's action.

Gongyang Jiao, after his initial shock, broke into delighted laughter:

"Brilliant! Brilliant!"

"Shame she didn't die by my hand!"

But immediately, he stepped forward, face maniacal:

"Still, dying at your hands is an honor for that bitch."

'Your.'

Cheng Shi wasn't surprised by the address. He smiled and casually tossed Poison's corpse to the ground.

The two at his flanks stood silent, waiting for his next command.

If Da Yi's group could see this bizarre tableau, they'd be stunned — stunned at how obediently these two followed orders!

And to explain all of this, one would have to rewind to the moment Cheng Shi left the Evil Infant Inquisition.

Let the clock roll back slightly.

...

The reason peak players valued priests wasn't solely their healing.

At this tier, everyone carried enough healing items of their own. Yet in trials, players still preferred having a priest teammate. The reason: a priest's skills were far more efficient and immediate than healing items. More critically — most high-end priests possessed resurrection abilities more convenient than a player's own backup lives!

That was the real key!

Nobody liked wasting a free life. If a teammate could pull you back up, why burn your own safety net?

But a priest's resurrection wasn't available to just anyone. At minimum, within the same trial, you couldn't be standing on the opposite side.

After all, only a priest with a screw loose would resurrect an enemy.

Cheng Shi had a "screw loose."

He resurrected Gongyang Jiao.

Yes — he resurrected Gongyang Jiao!

After confirming that all three "teammates" had left the Rosna Court, he picked up a chunk of Gongyang Jiao's shattered flesh from the ground, donned the Lush Horn Crown, and cast the most basic healing spell on the meat.

The Lush Horn Crown's function was to imbue healing effects with a resurrection attribute. As long as a living being's vitality had been fully extinguished, it could revive them.

A piece of shredded meat had obviously lost all vitality. So Gongyang Jiao was resurrected.

His soul was wrenched from the Ring of Bone Servant Le Le'er by a mysterious [Prosperity] force, poured back into a newly regenerated body, and he stood — stark naked — reborn before Cheng Shi's eyes.

When Gongyang Jiao's consciousness returned, cold sweat drenched his forehead. His body was rigid as stone. Before he could do anything at all, he had already thrown himself prostrate before...

Lord Yu Xi.

He'd heard it!

He'd heard everything!

Not only that — he knew Aph Ros. He knew that was a terrifying dual Herald of [Birth] and [Corruption].

But none of that was most terrifying. What truly shook him was hearing [Time]'s words!

One of the gods seated upon the sixteen Divine Thrones!

A true deity, speaking to the person before him with such equanimity — that attitude alone was enough to fill Gongyang Jiao with awe.

He'd never had an audience with a god. He never imagined his first such encounter would be accomplished while parasitizing a Servant God's artifact.

Even though [Time] had paid him no attention whatsoever, sharing the same space with a true god and hearing divine speech — wasn't that, in its own way, an audience?

But Gongyang Jiao felt no joy. Only fear.

He was terrified. Not merely of his existence being discovered, but of Lord Yu Xi having seen through his designs on the ring.

Yes — he'd coveted that ring.

When he'd sensed the aura within it, so perfectly aligned with his own faith, and the rich undulations of fear — he'd wanted to seize it from Cheng Shi.

That was why he'd used Fear Parasitism, a secret technique he'd never shown outsiders, to feign death and "move into" the ring.

In Gongyang Jiao's plan, the next time fear surged inside the ring, he would devour that finely filtered terror, nourish himself, resurrect, and then...

Give Cheng Shi an almighty scare.

He did scare Cheng Shi. Big time. But Cheng Shi scared him even bigger.

The filtered fear appeared right on cue. Not just Cheng Shi's — his own fear was in the mix too.

The quantity was abundant. But he didn't dare consume it.

Because of the four beings present at that moment, besides one half-dead human soul-fragment — himself — the other three were all Him!

The Him of true gods and Servant Gods!

Gongyang Jiao was petrified. He didn't dare twitch, let alone resurrect. He could only watch helplessly as waves of concentrated, essence-grade fear bypassed him and were devoured by the ring.

Yet since not one of Them had called out his presence, the faintest thread of hope kindled in his heart.

'Perhaps there was still a chance?'

But then, when Aph Ros laid everything bare, he realized Lord Yu Xi had seen through his scheme from the very beginning.

His fear was made manifest — of the five Screaming Mouths that lit up on the Ring of Bone Servant Le Le'er, four had been his contribution!

Cowering inside the ring, Gongyang Jiao couldn't help but marvel:

'So this was what an Envoy was. A sharp-eyed [Deceit] Envoy!'

'After all, what illusion could escape the eyes of the "Ancestor of Illusions"?''

He was terrified beyond measure. So the instant he felt himself resurrected, he dropped to his knees before Lord Yu Xi.

He didn't know why Yu Xi had resurrected him. But he knew that if he failed to seize this chance, the next second might be his last!

And the so-called "Lord Yu Xi," upon sensing his Fun Ring was fully charged, fixed the kneeling man with ice-cold eyes and playful tone:

"It seems you truly do love fear, Mr. Ram."

"..."

Fear was indeed the Screaming Earl's sustenance. But the problem was — eat too much, and it would kill you.

Gongyang Jiao pressed his face to the ground, not daring to draw a single loud breath. Only after a long silence, seeing no reaction from his lord, did he finally summon the courage to speak:

"I... am useful."

Chapter 502: The Absurd Truth of Rosna

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow.

When a person was utterly powerless to resist and their survival instinct burned at its fiercest, they'd instinctively display their greatest value to carve out a space to live. Cheng Shi's silence was precisely to let Gongyang Jiao demonstrate his worth.

He still said nothing, only gesturing with his eyes for Gongyang Jiao to continue.

Seeing no rejection, Gongyang Jiao seized the lifeline with desperate fervor:

"I can serve you — help you search for your mask fragments.

"You know I'm a warrior of extraordinary will and relentless persistence. This isn't a boast — I spent an entire month without sleep, matching into trial after trial, just to encounter Poison.

"At my match frequency, news of your mask fragments should surface quickly, Lord Yu Xi!"

'Wow, you're quite the obsessive one, bro. Seems the grudge against Poison is real.'

'Was Hu Wei telling the truth? A [Corruption] follower, catching actual feelings?'

Cheng Shi found it privately amusing, but his expression stayed ice-cold. He looked down at Gongyang Jiao with a contemptuous snort:

"Too distant. Until I've witnessed your loyalty, every promise is merely a lie woven from fear.

"You want to lie before me...

"Are you sure?"

Gongyang Jiao wasn't actually lying — at least not right now — but Cheng Shi used the intimidation to ratchet up his submissiveness.

Sure enough, Gongyang Jiao flinched at the words. He'd keenly perceived "Lord Yu Xi's" obsession with playing the role of Cheng Shi, so he reflexively reviewed Cheng Shi's attitude and behavior throughout the trial. Viewing things from that angle, he immediately showcased his most useful asset:

"I can prove my loyalty, my lord!

"I can make that Chameleon follow your orders too. He dreams of an audience with a god — I promised him exactly that opportunity. That's why he agreed to partner with me in hunting Poison.

"Trust me, my lord. I can bring him into your camp.

"I know you don't need us. But the 'Cheng Shi' you're playing does. Whether it's winning or losing this trial, or claiming the Gift of Sores that bitch... she was after — Cheng Shi needs manpower, doesn't he?

"Your former teammates all abandoned you. They're blind fools. I can kill them for you.

"Such trivial matters aren't worth your personal attention.

"Besides, that ring of yours... doesn't it hunger for more fear?"

As he spoke, Gongyang Jiao lifted his head, eyes blazing as they locked onto the Fun Ring on Cheng Shi's hand.

His covetousness was completely undisguised. Cheng Shi's brow furrowed slightly.

'What a [Corruption] follower!'

'Your appetites really were enormous!'

'Even an Envoy's property couldn't dampen those greedy desires one bit.'

'Should I call you bold? Or praise your purity of faith?'

Thinking it over, Cheng Shi smiled.

He had to admit Gongyang Jiao's proposal was sound. With several teammates lost, he genuinely needed reinforcements.

So Cheng Shi approved Gongyang Jiao's plan to prove loyalty, and sent him to retrieve the Chameleon.

He didn't know what Gongyang Jiao told the [Silence] follower. All he knew was that when the Chameleon returned, unmistakable fear lurked in his eyes.

But beyond fear, the Chameleon's gaze burned with something else — something ambiguous yet fervent.

Cheng Shi shot Gongyang Jiao a questioning look. The Screaming Earl stepped forward and murmured:

"My lord, I didn't reveal your true identity. But to convince him that my resurrection wasn't some Desire Puppet arrangement or a scheme to betray him, I did hint at a few things.

"It's all about you — though it's a mix of truth and fabrication. As for what he's imagined from it...

"I'd wager he's bought it."

Cheng Shi regarded Gongyang Jiao with mild surprise. 'Didn't expect a thick-chinned brute like you to have a knack for [Deceit]!'

As for the Chameleon, Cheng Shi neither understood nor cared to understand him. He'd never planned on collecting this many subordinates. What he wanted were controllable black-laborers, not every high-end fighter he crossed paths with.

That wasn't realistic. And it was exhausting.

Even if there was technically one more "subordinate slot" available in this trial, it wasn't earmarked for this [Silence] follower.

So Cheng Shi was indifferent to the Chameleon's attitude. They were using each other for this one trial. If fate brought them together again afterward — well, he could consider it then.

Cheng Shi then outlined his plan to seize the Gift of Sores. And it was during this exchange that Gongyang Jiao dropped a bombshell.

"The Gift of Sores is already gone, my lord."

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted: "How do you know?"

Gongyang Jiao lowered his gaze deferentially:

"The Chameleon heard your thunder near the plaza..."

At the mention of thunder, the Screaming Earl couldn't help glancing at Cheng Shi's ring again, though he quickly dropped his gaze.

"We followed the sound and found the civilians you'd left behind.

"Of course, before the interrogation, I didn't know they weren't actually civilians."

Hearing this, Cheng Shi's lingering question was finally answered.

'No wonder Gongyang Jiao had parasitized his ring like that — he'd already sensed the kindred aura inside it back in that civilian house!'

'So his death was premeditated!'

'From the very start, he hadn't been purely hunting the priest — he'd had his eye on the ring all along!'

'Two birds with one stone indeed.'

'Whoever said warriors were reckless? These peak warriors, no matter how manic or deranged, were each sharp as a tack.'

But that was water under the bridge. The Screaming Earl was now Lord Yu Xi's black-labor employee.

"Who are they?"

"The First Prince and his family." Gongyang Jiao raised an eyebrow, a trace of relish crossing his face. "The Rosna royals' fear was quite delicious... oh, my apologies, my lord. I lost myself.

"We didn't know the Rosna royals had already disappeared. So I asked him whether there was anything around here resembling the Gift of Sores.

"I swear, my lord — I had zero designs on that dagger. I only wanted its location so I could set an ambush and kill Poison. But to my surprise, I actually got an answer.

"The First Prince broke under the pressure. He said he'd once bought a dagger from a wandering merchant — one that absorbed rotting flesh and expelled [Decay] power. He treasured it as a supreme artifact and even planned to offer it to his father, hoping this divinely powered dagger could replace the useless Sin Cleansing Scepter as the Rosna Empire's symbol.

"But that night, when he went to seek an audience, he overheard his father — the Emperor of Rosna — conspiring with the War Minister to flee ahead of schedule.

"He suddenly realized his father's faith wasn't genuine. That the entire Court's faith was compromised.

"So he abandoned the idea of presenting the dagger and sealed it away in his secret chamber.

"He didn't dare use it and was terrified of it falling into someone else's hands to be offered up.

"The First Prince wasn't worried about someone using it to expose the royal family's impiety. He was worried the dagger was a genuine divine gift — and that blasphemy would bring destruction upon Rosna!

"But he couldn't tell his father outright. He knew the old man was too stubborn — his first reaction upon learning the truth wouldn't be atonement, but destroying the gift.

"So he hid it.

"But..."

Cheng Shi sighed, shaking his head: "The Gift of Sores went missing."

"Yes." Gongyang Jiao nodded heavily. "The dagger disappeared. The First Prince never noticed. It was a minister's child who accidentally stumbled into his sealed chamber. When the prince went to scold the intruder, he discovered the dagger had already been swapped out.

"Terrified this was also an act of blasphemy, he never dared make a fuss. But he was equally terrified of divine punishment falling on the Rosna royals, so he scrambled to sever ties with his father and the royal family — hoping to save himself.

"My lord, I know this sounds foolish. But this prince was never very bright to begin with..."

"These are all his exact words. I didn't embellish a thing.

"His ignorant beliefs and idiotic actions gave him the excuse to distance himself from the palace. He also told us the Rosna royals were already preparing to flee.

"When we later caught up with you... that was confirmed. The Rosna royals had truly run."

"..."

Cheng Shi would never in his wildest dreams have guessed that such an absurd reason lay behind the First Prince's banishment.

'What a talent this prince was. He'd committed the blasphemous act himself, then managed to pin the blame on the royal family. Was his rush to sever ties with his father an attempt to save himself — or his father!?'

'If his father, Emperor Rosna, ever learned the truth, he'd probably erect a monument for him.'

'My son, I thank you for sparing my life!'

Cheng Shi's head was buzzing. Reviewing the entire story, he suddenly realized that [Decay] hadn't bestowed a single blessing upon this nation — but He'd thoroughly rotted their collective brains to the point of mush.

What Cheng Shi didn't know was that these truths wore an entirely different face in the kingdom's Historian's telling. If he'd known that in the hearts of the populace, this dim-witted prince was a stalwart War Faction hero, Cheng Shi might have burst out laughing on the spot.

'War Faction? United national defense?'

'Please. Was it the Historian who was terrible at his job, or was history itself this absurd?'

'Incredible. For the Rosna Empire to decay into dust, every participant deserved equal credit!'

Despite the gallows humor, Cheng Shi couldn't bring himself to laugh.

Because the trail to the Gift of Sores seemed to have gone cold.

The sole witness had died under Gongyang Jiao's interrogation. Everyone connected to the witness had already fled. After unraveling half the yarn ball, the thread had tangled around multiple strands and knotted tight — about as pleasant as finding a fly in your soup.

Cheng Shi cursed internally, yet clung to a quiet hope in fate.

He hoped this wasn't a dead end. He hoped his Benefactor might still conjure some change on this seemingly impassable road.

But at least for the moment, he had no choice.

With the objective gone, all he could do was settle personal scores first. Some grudges shouldn't be left overnight.

And that was how the earlier scene — Cheng Shi's trio ambushing Da Yi's trio — had come to pass.

Chapter 503: Cheng Shi's Plan

The scene shifts back to the present.

Three standing in the wind. One on the ground.

Gongyang Jiao and the Chameleon were both waiting for Cheng Shi's next move. But just then, Cheng Shi produced the Lush Horn Crown behind his back and cast another healing spell on the fallen Poison.

'Only a priest with a screw loose would resurrect an enemy.'

Cheng Shi's screw had come loose once. This was the second time.

Two negatives make a positive. So his brain was fine now.

Though the bone-deep cold had already frozen the wound on Poison's neck rigid, when the resurrection aura flowed into her, that stiff gash slowly softened, sealed, and healed.

Poison had never imagined being resurrected by someone else. She'd finally found a direct lead on the Gift of Sores — she'd never abandon her dream dagger over a little headwind.

She didn't fear death. She even craved it. Not just because she'd set up failsafes at the very start of the trial — but because nothing short of death could break the desire-pull of Dance With Desire!

Yes, she'd intended to use a strategic death to defuse the hunting crisis and save herself. She'd simply chosen a killer she found... agreeable.

In this trial, the [Corruption] Chosen had at least two resurrections available, each carefully engineered. The timing was calibrated to be neither so fast that she'd still be in danger, nor so slow that she'd miss her window. Her body wouldn't even revive at the corpse's location — a precaution against someone disposing of remains in unsavory spaces. Like... Mr. Ram's stomach.

If she still couldn't obtain the dagger after two resurrections, then the trial had become too dangerous to continue.

These two chances were Poison's bottom line in the fight for the dagger.

Her so-called "fight to the death" was merely trading one guaranteed death for one of Gongyang Jiao's lives.

Unfortunately, the plan fell through.

She hadn't killed Gongyang Jiao. She'd died in the little priest's arms.

What she never expected was that the very priest who'd killed her had resurrected her on the spot!

When consciousness returned, Poison assumed her own failsafe had triggered. She stretched languidly: "The little priest really has changed—"

Halfway through, both her words and her movement froze.

Her eyes snapped open. She was still under that blizzard-swept Kannar city wall. Cheng Shi stood before her, watching with an amused gaze, as though studying... an idiot.

The Chameleon stood expressionless nearby, but his posture clearly said he was enjoying the show.

Gongyang Jiao's face was the sourest of the three spectators. He'd assumed Cheng Shi had burned one of Poison's lives. He never expected her to be pulled right back.

'What exactly did this Envoy want?'

'Was he leveraging Poison's combat power? Or testing his own loyalty through Poison's life?'

He couldn't figure it out, didn't dare ask, and could only stand there stone-faced, eyes flickering with inscrutable thoughts.

And the lady of the hour — Poison — went completely blank.

Her scrambled thoughts couldn't immediately parse what Cheng Shi was doing. But she recovered quickly, sprang up, and lunged at Cheng Shi with a grin.

Cheng Shi raised another scalpel to her throat: "Want to die again?"

Poison nodded frantically, then immediately shook her head. Licking her lips, she said with lingering relish:

"Don't want to die. But I do want you to save me again.

"Little priest, you really are a good person. This is the second time you've saved me!"

"You call the man who killed you a good person?" Cheng Shi arched a brow.

"How I died doesn't matter. What matters is you saved me."

"..."

In that moment, Cheng Shi felt a tiny pang of regret.

But to take down the even more insufferable Jiang Chi, he endured.

Seeing Cheng Shi's expression shift several times, Poison chuckled softly — then instantly turned serious:

"I can help you kill someone. You know me well enough to know this isn't empty talk, and to know when you can trust me.

"But I can't give up that dagger.

"Little priest, if you also want that dagger, I'd suggest you kill me one more time. That would be better for both of us."

Cheng Shi's expression shifted.

He didn't fear Poison when she was joking around. It was when she got serious that she was dangerous.

He knew she wasn't lying — not because of Master of Deception, but because the [Corruption] Chosen before him had re-entered that "selling" state. She was selling her trust!

Cheng Shi understood: right now, he could fully trust Poison. If she said she'd help him kill, she'd see it through to the end. Her trust might not be genuine, but it was more reliable than countless people's sincerity.

Still, she'd also been candid about the dagger. This [Corruption] Chosen's obsession with the Gift of Sores ran deep.

Fortunately, their conflict of interest no longer existed. The dagger had already vanished.

Cheng Shi hadn't resurrected Poison for her combat prowess, or for a trustworthy partner to watch his back. He wanted to ask about the Pointer Knight, Jiang Chi.

Know your enemy and yourself — a hundred battles, a hundred victories.

Killing a [Time] follower required thorough preparation.

But if he'd always needed Poison's help, why had he killed her first?

The reasons were many. Including but not limited to: satisfying new employee Mr. Ram's wish, taking the Chosen down a peg, refusing to let Poison's rhythm dictate the partnership, intimidating the Chameleon, recognizing that she was actively seeking death...

But none of these were decisive. The single defining reason was...

Cheng Shi had wanted to do this for a very long time.

'Killing a Chosen One — the feeling was absolutely magnificent!'

Seeing Poison suddenly pledge "loyalty," Gongyang Jiao spat viciously nearby. He didn't dare mouth off in Lord Yu Xi's presence, but a small display of displeasure was within limits.

Poison heard the disdainful noise and whipped around with interest, beaming at Gongyang Jiao:

"Well, well, if it isn't Mr. Ram! What's the matter — rabies cured? Starting to enjoy being someone's dog?"

"?"

The remark stunned Cheng Shi.

'Even if he was the one holding the leash, why did that sound so grating?'

He'd expected Gongyang Jiao to blow up. But the volatile Screaming Earl actually held it in.

"Heh. If you, Poison, can be someone's dog — why can't I?"

"???"

'Wait — were these two [Corruption] followers taking shots at him?'

Cheng Shi's eye twitched. He was tempted to stab Poison again just to shut her up. But then he heard her say with a smile:

"I'm voluntary. Are you?" She even threw in a defiant little "woof" at Cheng Shi.

"..."

That single "woof" silenced everyone.

Whether Gongyang Jiao had been wounded internally by rage, or simply found this pointless unwinnable bickering beneath him, he shot Poison a murderous glare and spat again furiously.

Watching this exchange, Cheng Shi smiled on the surface while understanding Poison's true message.

She was reminding him that Gongyang Jiao wasn't trustworthy. But the problem was, sister — you didn't know why he was so obedient. If you did, you'd be obedient too.

And that, precisely, was why Cheng Shi didn't want to reveal his "other identity" in front of Poison. Not because he feared disobedience, but because he feared... excessive obedience.

He couldn't handle that.

With the situation stabilized, Cheng Shi pushed Poison away and finally got down to business.

He looked at Poison — who was busy sizing up the other two — and spoke just five words:

"Tell me about the Knight."

Those five words told Poison everything: Cheng Shi's true target was the Pointer Knight who'd pushed him out of the team at the crucial moment. Jiang Chi!

"I'm curious — Da Yi orchestrated that hunt. Why are you so fixated on Jiang Chi—"

"Stand here and tell me what you know, or lie on the ground and stay quiet. Pick one."

"..." Poison's gaze turned plaintive. She murmured a soft "so fierce," then folded her arms and, rubbing her own skin for warmth, began to speak.

"The first time I met him was also in a trial where I'd prayed for the Gift of Sores. But that trial ended abruptly — wrapped up inexplicably not long after it started.

"Back then, I only knew he was a [Time] follower. I had no idea he was a Pointer Knight.

"Then I ran into him a second time. We fought side by side for a full trial. Our coordination was decent. His combat power was average, but he was careful and sharp. His ability to seize opportunities was strong — though only in small-scale engagements.

"He likes working with clever people. Especially the kind who know their history and carry themselves with elegance.

"So I can tell you with absolute confidence, little priest: the moment you took me out of the picture, he and Da Yi...

"Will never get along.

"Congratulations. Your prey is already alone."

Chapter 504: New Prey and a Solo Meeting

Cheng Shi frowned: "I noticed he can freeze time around his opponents during attacks. Do Pointer Knights have that kind of talent?"

He glanced at the recipient of that very ability — the Chameleon.

The Chameleon didn't speak, but offered a small nod — affirming he'd been hit by Time Stagnation, not affirming Cheng Shi's question itself.

"Maybe a stack of multiple talents?" Poison furrowed her brow, uncharacteristically serious. "Or could it be an effect of that Hour Hand Sword?"

"Pointer Knights specialize in seizing timing. Time Stagnation of that level would at most come from [Time]'s generic talents.

"There aren't many Pointer Knights at the peak. Now that you mention it, I'm genuinely not sure.

"Why — doubting his identity?"

Cheng Shi shook his head, feeling like he was overlooking something.

He thought for a moment, then turned to Gongyang Jiao, hoping to hear insights from a fellow warrior about their shared profession. But the Screaming Earl shook his head darkly — clearly unfamiliar with Jiang Chi.

"You haven't known him long? Heard of him before?" Cheng Shi looked back at Poison.

"He's probably a newcomer. A peak-tier newcomer.

"I've wondered whether he was using a false identity, but [Time]'s people are always mysterious and secretive — it doesn't match Jiang Chi's style.

"The players toward the top of the rankings may not shift much, but after the fifteenth or twentieth place, the rotation frequency isn't low at all.

"Their understanding of faith may not align perfectly with the gods' will, but that doesn't mean they're weak.

"Take you, for instance, little priest — what exactly is your ID on the Ladder of Ascent?"

Cheng Shi shot Poison a sidelong look, ignored her, and sank back into thought.

A peak newcomer who dared partner with Poison.

'Sure enough — anyone touched by the word "peak" was hard to read by normal standards.'

In truth, Cheng Shi already had a plan. He was simply being extra cautious, which was why he kept asking. He also had a cruder approach available — sending these three ahead to test Jiang Chi's depth.

After all, Cheng Shi's target had always been Jiang Chi alone. As for Da Yi...

He intended to handle Da Yi personally.

The First Prince had been devoured by Gongyang Jiao. Though the Screaming Earl hadn't said so outright, a man-eater like him surely wouldn't pass up a Rosna-royal snack. So when Cheng Shi had told Da Yi "the First Prince is inside," he'd already decided to sit down and talk with the man face to face.

And he was confident: when Da Yi found no First Prince in that house, the shrewd assassin would stay and wait for him.

After much deliberation, Cheng Shi decided to split up.

Poison's trio would hunt Jiang Chi. He himself would go "settle things" with Da Yi. If both fronts succeeded, it wouldn't matter if they never found the so-called Gift of Sores — because Cheng Shi would already be the biggest winner.

As for what he could win, that depended on what he could extract during his conversation with Da Yi.

Once the decision was made, the four exchanged brief words and moved.

Gongyang Jiao obviously despised the idea of working alongside Poison. He left first, face like thunder. The Chameleon followed close behind. Poison lingered, glancing back at Cheng Shi as if wanting to say something.

But Cheng Shi's pace was equally swift. He was already heading toward the First Prince's safehouse.

Seeing no intention of engagement, Poison frowned slightly. Her gaze swept toward Gongyang Jiao's departing direction, and with an odd expression, she followed.

...

Meanwhile — the First Prince's hideout.

As Cheng Shi predicted, the moment Da Yi burst in and found the place empty, he realized Cheng Shi had something to say.

But whether this "Cheng Shi" was truly Cheng Shi remained an open question.

Da Yi had many doubts. Who was this person? What did he want? How strong was he? But short of the man himself answering, this trial offered no other source.

The [War] assassin sat in the dimness on a couch, eyes shadowed, waiting silently for those answers.

Outside, the blizzard howled. But the figure he'd left standing guard had long vanished from the wind and snow.

The shrewd Da Yi had already realized he and Jiang Chi could never continue as partners. He also recognized that Cheng Shi's likely target was the Pointer Knight.

If he'd worked that out, Jiang Chi certainly had too. By now, the [Time] follower was probably hiding his tracks to evade the hunt.

And this "Cheng Shi"...

He was clearly someone who held grudges. Yet he appeared unbothered by Da Yi's role in that killing scheme.

Why?

'Surely it wasn't friendship forged during that brief campfire encounter...'

'Could his true identity have something to do with me?'

Da Yi's brow tightened. As his thoughts spiraled deeper, an utterly absurd idea took shape:

'Was "Cheng Shi" also one of that person's people? Or was he... that person himself!?'

The thought startled Da Yi, but a second later it seemed plausible.

He began replaying every detail of his encounters with Cheng Shi. And the very first image was Hu Wei leading Cheng Shi into their campfire gathering.

'Right — Old Hu had brought him there.'

'So did Old Hu know Cheng Shi's real identity?'

'If Cheng Shi were also that person's agent, Old Hu would've told me in advance. During preparation, he'd clearly treated everyone as potential opponents, which meant... Cheng Shi wasn't one of us.'

'But there was another possibility: Old Hu had been acting!'

'He knew Cheng Shi was an ally but couldn't say so for some reason and needed to maintain distance. For instance...'

'If Cheng Shi's rank was higher than Old Hu's, and his arrival among them served a different purpose entirely — that would explain Old Hu's silence.'

'And then there were Cheng Shi's words after killing Gongyang Jiao: "Still a mortal shell, after all. A bit too fragile..."'

Da Yi's heart lurched. Horror flashed across his face: "Hot damn — could it really be Him!?"

The instant the words left his mouth, Cheng Shi pushed through the first-floor door, brushed the snow from his shoulders, and smiled at the stunned Da Yi on the couch:

"Seems you've already guessed."

Yes — under the perception of an assassin, Cheng Shi had appeared without a sound.

But that wasn't strange. He had a [Silence] helper.

Before leaving, Cheng Shi had the Chameleon apply a layer of [Silence] camouflage. That was how he'd bypassed the assassin's senses and reached the house undetected.

He'd originally planned to wait longer and eavesdrop — Da Yi had a verbal tic, always muttering and grumbling. Maybe he'd blurt something useful.

And sure enough, the wait produced the perfect entrance cue.

So Cheng Shi tore off the [Silence] disguise and walked in.

He'd expected a smooth opening. But to his surprise, this [War] assassin was more cautious than anyone. He wasn't rattled by Cheng Shi's silent appearance. He didn't hypnotize himself into buying some fabricated identity. Instead, his expression went flat, his gaze hardened, and he covertly readied an attack stance:

"Hot damn — who are you, really?"

Cheng Shi answered with a question: "Didn't you just guess?"

Da Yi shook his head coldly: "I never trust guesses. Only what I see and hear with my own eyes."

"Oh? Is that so?" Cheng Shi took a few casual steps deeper into the room. "I believe you did hear. Why the lack of confidence?"

"Hot damn, your smoke-and-mirrors act doesn't work on me. Brother Cheng — I'll call you Brother Cheng one last time. Old Hu brought you here. You saved Old Hu's life. So I trusted you. But if you keep hiding your identity like this...

"Then don't blame my Iron Thorns... for not recognizing faces."

'Trust?'

Cheng Shi glanced at the gleaming Iron Thorns in Da Yi's hands. He shook his head with a smile.

"Fine, fine, fine. In that case, let me give you another hint."

He stopped. His smile turned deeply meaningful.

"[Chaos]!"

"Ring any bells?"

[Chaos]!

Da Yi's pupils contracted violently. Horror bled through his composure. And the instant Cheng Shi saw that expression crack — he knew his gamble had paid off.

This [War] assassin was indeed tangled with [Chaos]!

Chapter 505: Lord Ultraman — Limited-Time Comeback!

Cheng Shi hadn't shouted "[Chaos]" on a whim.

Grand Marshal Hu Wei's second faith was [Chaos]. The Fisherman killed by Hu Xuan had also followed [Chaos]. That alone proved the players around that campfire were all connected to [Chaos] to varying degrees.

And the simplest extension of that hypothesis was:

These [War] and [Chaos] followers were perhaps trying to fuse their faiths — binding [War] and [Chaos] together.

So, as Cheng Shi had previously speculated, could Da Yi's second faith also be [Chaos]?

Even if it wasn't, this [War] assassin was certainly entangled with [Chaos] in ways that couldn't be easily unwound.

Cheng Shi couldn't impersonate anyone from [War] — he had no familiarity with it. But [Chaos]...

He was intimately familiar.

If he could be sure how much Da Yi knew about [Chaos], Cheng Shi would've loved to just slap the man on the shoulder and introduce himself:

"Heard of the Chaos Steps? I danced on them."

Now, seeing Da Yi's violent reaction to that single word, Cheng Shi's heart settled.

He offered no further explanation, nor did he press Da Yi for an immediate response. Instead, he smiled and produced a key, turning to Da Yi:

"Every door key needs a door to prove itself. An ordinary door won't do. So, warrior of [War] — do you happen to carry any corpses?"

Hearing this oddly sing-song tone, Da Yi's expression grew complicated and strange.

He still couldn't confirm Cheng Shi's true identity. But one thing was certain: this "Cheng Shi" was definitely not a player.

He remembered the scene he'd witnessed in the blizzard. The image of Cheng Shi jamming the key into Gongyang Jiao's eye socket. He guessed Cheng Shi wanted to take him somewhere, but hesitation still lingered.

Da Yi was debating whether to gamble.

Indeed — a gamble.

Facing the unknown, nobody knew where the risk lay. He could choose to trust Cheng Shi and follow him through that terrifying Bone Gate to see what waited on the other side.

He could also refuse, choosing not to believe the man's words.

But the problem was — the man had pinpointed [Chaos]. That alone made Da Yi lose his confidence in reading the situation.

'Could this be that person?'

'If so, what was He doing?'

Da Yi was good at observation and reading situations. He might be volatile, but he handled peer-to-peer relationships well enough. The problem was, when "upward networking" was involved, his brain didn't seem to work as fast.

At this moment, he found himself thinking of a friend.

"Hot damn, if only Lin Renyu were still alive. That guy really knew how to read his superiors."

Da Yi muttered aloud without thinking. Cheng Shi filed the name away but gave no reaction.

A few seconds later, the [War] assassin somehow convinced himself. He finally took a "brave" step forward, pulled a complete corpse from his spatial storage, and set it before Cheng Shi.

"..."

'As expected of [War].' Cheng Shi's eye twitched.

It was plainly a Kingdom of War soldier's corpse, still armored, blood barely congealed. Clearly a trophy from Da Yi's previous trial.

Cheng Shi didn't linger on the body. He simply drove the key into its forehead.

Before long, that bone-patterned door materialized before them both.

Cheng Shi chuckled — "Not the best place to chat" — and stepped through.

Da Yi paused at the threshold. Staring at the Bone Gate oozing [Death]'s aura, he frowned deeply, fished a palm-sized banner flag from storage, quietly planted it in the floor, and followed cautiously.

Since Aph Ros had awakened, this was the first time Dolgod's Evil Infant Inquisition had welcomed a guest other than Cheng Shi.

The grand architecture and eerie aesthetic left the first-time visitor Da Yi brimming with unease. He studied every detail, brow furrowing ever tighter. He held back for a long time but finally couldn't resist:

"Hot da— this looks like a [Birth] site?"

Cheng Shi stood beside him, gazing at the door leading to the abyss. He raised an eyebrow.

'Good guess. No prize, though.'

'Startup funds were tight. There simply wasn't a better venue for hosting these Victims. This would have to do for now.'

'Besides, atmosphere was enough. No need to push it to perfection. What sold a con was always the script — never the backdrop.'

Cheng Shi had already written the script. So the moment Da Yi chose to follow him in, the man had tumbled into a web of lies.

"Correct. Your eye is sharp. This is indeed a [Birth] site."

Da Yi didn't dare get too close, yet didn't dare stay too far either. Cheng Shi's suddenly transformed bearing and confidence left him restless. He was increasingly sure this was that person — but he couldn't confirm it, and didn't dare ask outright.

He feared that if Cheng Shi really was Him, and he asked — it would make him look stupid and faithless.

But if he didn't ask, none of the techniques Cheng Shi had displayed matched anything he'd seen from that person.

Caught in this agonizing uncertainty about identity, Da Yi's expression darkened further.

This volatile [War] follower now stood before the door — just paces from Cheng Shi — fidgeting like a schoolboy who'd been told to stand in the corner.

Cheng Shi wanted to laugh, but maintained his solemn performance: "They're beginning to awaken."

"Who!?" Da Yi jolted, pupils contracting.

"Who? The Servant Gods who've long been dormant, naturally."

Cheng Shi let out a soft hum of laughter, gesturing at the Inquisition's great door at a measured pace:

"This place was once gazed upon by [Birth]. You've probably gathered just how zealous [Life] can be.

"I've received word that Lu Xia appears ready to return to Her embrace.

"Look — even [Birth], who has always minded Her own business, has begun making moves in this era. We...

"How can we afford to stand still?"

The words sounded mysterious and lofty. But upon close examination, beyond sprinkling in some tidbits about divine beings, there was zero substantive content worth affirming.

But as always — that was how cons worked.

When trying to deceive someone, what you said didn't matter. What mattered was what the other person heard, and what their mind built from it.

After Cheng Shi finished, the other player — Da Yi — mentally concluded that the person before him was, in all probability, that very lord.

The tone was too similar. And the information He spoke of existed on an entirely different plane from what players had access to.

Though he still had doubts about why this lord was impersonating Cheng Shi and about certain aspects of His appearance, Da Yi's posture gradually lowered.

"My lord, then your visit this time..."

Seeing Da Yi bow slightly, his tone turning reverent, Cheng Shi's smile deepened.

'Oh? So that verbal tic wasn't completely uncontrollable after all?'

'Guess previous-me just didn't warrant the restraint.'

But this also confirmed it for Cheng Shi: Hu Wei's group truly did have a connection to a [Chaos] Envoy.

Previously it had been speculation. The entire con had been advancing on a hypothesis. It was like a clown taking over for an acrobat, leaping onto a steel wire suspended above a bottomless chasm. One misstep and the clown would plummet, shattered to pieces.

But fortunately, this clown named Cheng had always been lucky.

He'd won the gamble again.

As for whether this Envoy was truly who Cheng Shi suspected...

That would be another gamble entirely.

Cheng Shi watched Da Yi waiting expectantly for a response. Behind his back, his fingers kept spinning a [Fate] die.

'Ultraman, oh Ultraman. Before Da Yi — should I or shouldn't I be [Chaos] Envoy Ultraman?'

Chapter 506: Wait — You're Actually [Chaos]?

"No specific goal. I was just wandering around, happened to bump into him, and followed along to have a look."

The "him" in Cheng Shi's mouth naturally referred to Hu Wei, but he didn't know what Hu Wei was called within this circle, so he could only use vague pronouns.

He wasn't done yet. A lie with too little information was easily picked apart. So he padded it with some unrelated filler.

"Originally I wanted to visit an old friend here. Unfortunately, we didn't cross paths.

"But I should warn you — that thing has already been taken.

"A pity. One step too late."

Da Yi couldn't guess who Cheng Shi's "old friend" was, but he knew what "that thing" referred to. At the last sentence, he froze.

"Taken?

"Hot damn — taken by who?

"My lord, with you here, can't we get it back?"

'My lord...'

'Oh, my lord indeed.'

'So which lord, exactly!?'

Cheng Shi was sorely tempted to lay his cards on the table — just say he was Ultraman and watch the reaction.

But he knew that even now, Da Yi didn't trust him a hundred percent. The man might have no other choice but to gradually believe, yet as long as full confirmation was lacking, this shrewd assassin would keep a kernel of vigilance alive.

Cheng Shi didn't dare touch that vigilance. He definitely didn't dare gamble on that lone possibility, because it could become the fuse that detonated the entire con — incinerating the identity script he'd painstakingly crafted.

Still, if they kept exchanging idle small talk like this, a slip was inevitable.

Cheng Shi didn't know how close Da Yi was to this so-called lord — how many times they'd met. To minimize friction and prevent exposure, to redirect Da Yi's attention toward the content being delivered, he decided to add more weight to [Deceit]'s scales.

"Servant God. Servant God. That single word 'servant' makes it clear — those bearing such a title are far from omnipotent.

"Its disappearance is entangled with Their wills. I underestimated this matter."

Cheng Shi knew Hu Wei and Da Yi had come with a clear objective: obtain the Gift of Sores. So he pushed more aggressively, re-framing the dagger quest as a mission from a certain lord — probing their hand.

On the surface, the line carried a whiff of "I miscalculated this assignment." But if the guess was wrong, the phrasing left enough ambiguity for backtracking.

This was classic con-artist exit-strategy rhetoric. Cheng Shi knew it by heart.

But apparently no exit was needed. Because after hearing those words, Da Yi lifted his head with resolute eyes, displaying his devotion through an expression of utmost gravity:

"Then what should I do now, my lord?"

'He believed it!'

'Oh!'

That single response told Cheng Shi the job was done!

Hu Wei's people had indeed been searching for the Gift of Sores on behalf of someone above!

But that "someone above" wasn't [War]. It was [Chaos].

'Now that was interesting.'

Cheng Shi didn't rush to speak. He studied Da Yi carefully, then smiled:

"When did you first realize it was me?"

Da Yi froze. He didn't understand what this lord was getting at — he couldn't very well admit he'd had no clue until after Cheng Shi killed Gongyang Jiao, could he?

Even if it had been an honest mistake before the reveal, Da Yi didn't want to acknowledge his significant role in the scheme to corner Cheng Shi.

So he answered carefully:

"My lord... your disguise was impeccable. I didn't recognize you.

"At first, I was too eager to track Dizel's soul and broke from the team, putting you in danger...

"When I went back for you and found Gongyang Jiao's corpse, I realized the 'Cheng Shi' you were playing might not be a simple Fate Weaver.

"It was only later — when you spoke to me from atop the wall. Those words, in a style unmistakably yours — that I began to suspect you might be... you..."

'Good grief!'

Cheng Shi nearly mistook Da Yi for a [Deceit] follower.

'Buddy, your boot-licking game rivals Long Jing's.'

'Now even a throwaway line of mine has "his lordship's style"?''

Cheng Shi wanted to laugh, but his face remained half-smiling, noncommittal. Seeing the expression, Da Yi dropped his gaze. And played dead.

The room fell suddenly silent. Cheng Shi was in no hurry. He ran through the entire con one more time, confirmed there were no contradictions, then spoke again:

"Aren't you curious why I'm impersonating a Fate Weaver?"

Da Yi's gaze sharpened, but he shook his head: "My lord has His reasons."

"Heh. 'His reasons' indeed.

"Correct. I do have certain ideas.

"This era belongs to [Void]. While [Chaos] and [Void] aren't mortal enemies, [Void] offers [Chaos] no benefit whatsoever.

"So to accomplish anything in this era, we must find another path.

"[Fate] is the essence of [Void]. If we want [Chaos] to bloom within [Void], we can never — under any circumstances — bypass Him.

"And so I've begun... a new experiment.

"Using a [Fate] follower as the catalyst is the first step.

"I selected a player within His followers that I found agreeable. Copied his identity. And began working to raise my score and draw closer to Him..."

Da Yi was thunderstruck. He raised his head, visibly shaken, and asked uncertainly:

"My lord, we've... changed targets?"

"Weren't we supposed to approach [War] first?"

???????

'Huh?'

'What!?'

'Huh??'

'What are you saying?'

Cheng Shi blanked. Mental thunderclaps echoed through his skull.

'This was bad!'

He suddenly realized he'd miscalculated one thing: was Da Yi's identity as a [War] assassin actually real? Or was his [Chaos] power distorting perception!?

Before today, even if he'd thought of the question, he couldn't have reached the answer.

But now, combined with what Da Yi had just said — "Weren't we supposed to approach [War] first?"

"We" were approaching [War]!

'So on what basis were "you" and "I" grouped as "we"?'

'It couldn't be [Chaos]!?'

'Don't tell me you're actually a [Chaos] operative?'

'Huh?'

'This seemingly straightforward Gap Light Iron Thorn... was actually a mirage-refraction type?'

'Then where did all that [War] power come from?'

'Dual faith? Or [Chaos] trickery?'

'Even if all of that could be explained away — what about his ranking? His Ladder of Ascent standing — wouldn't someone catch on?'

Cheng Shi couldn't laugh anymore. His brain was mush. But his reflexes were sharp. He immediately responded:

"The established target hasn't changed. That's why I called this an experiment."

Da Yi relaxed, exhaling with relief. Then he asked in a low voice:

"Does Old... Old Hu know?"

'You'd better not be about to say "hot damn" ...'

But verbal tics aside, Cheng Shi suddenly realized this was a serious problem!

Hu Wei!

Da Yi had mentioned Hu Wei! And that tone of voice...

'Something was off. His identity couldn't also be [Chaos], could it!?'

'That was the Grand Marshal — the Chosen ranked at the very top! How could he also be an impostor!?'

Da Yi's situation could be faked with enough effort. Setting aside all manner of bizarre techniques, he wasn't in the top handful of rankings. As long as he hid his ID, he could manage. Especially as a [Chaos] follower — muddying waters was second nature.

'But Hu Wei...'

'Forget his immense [War] power for a moment. Even if he truly was a [Chaos] follower, to usurp [War]'s name — would [War]'s original Chosen agree to that?'

'Wouldn't the real Chosen blow the whistle!?'

'How could any Chosen silently tolerate someone else — possibly not even a Chosen — occupying their "honor"!?'

'The Chosen rankings held no secrets. Under the scrutiny of all, they couldn't be altered. So how could identity theft work?'

'Then again... the [Chaos] Chosen had never publicly appeared...'

Cheng Shi was stupefied.

He'd assumed this conversation would yield a few useful scraps at best. He never imagined he'd reel in something enormous.

As for whether this revelation was real...

'Probably not.' He could hardly believe anyone would surrender their Chosen status without exposing Hu Wei.

Unless the Ladder of Ascent had rules he didn't know about. Or unless They possessed undisclosed methods of "cheating."

So the most reasonable inference given the current facts was:

Hu Wei had always been a [War] follower. His second faith was [Chaos]. And within [Chaos]'s scheme to approach [War], the Grand Marshal looked more like a [War] defector — playing a role that was neither honorable nor devout in this merger of faiths.

If so, the benefits he'd gained from the [Chaos] camp had to be staggering. Only something that massive could offset the losses of branding yourself a faithless traitor to your own faction.

"He will know."

Cheng Shi smiled. But the emotions woven into that smile were anything but simple.

Chapter 507: Killing a [Time] Follower for Fun

"So what should I do now, my lord?"

Da Yi repeated the question in his gruff rumble.

The atmosphere sufficiently groomed, Cheng Shi considered for a moment and laid out his plan.

"Hunt [Time] with a blade. Show [Fate] our goodwill.

"There's a [Time] follower in this trial. His identity isn't simple, but no matter — since we've crossed paths, his fortune is simply poor.

"Purging a blemish for [Fate]'s sake should make for a suitable excuse to please Him.

"I've already set them in motion. Under a different identity, naturally.

"You need not concern yourself with those identities. [Chaos]'s will shall guide the lost forward.

"Since the Gift of Sores has vanished and there's nothing better to do, go join them.

"Bring me the [Time] follower's corpse. Preferably... in one piece."

'Jiang Chi...'

Da Yi's gaze hardened. He bowed his head with genuine devotion: "Da Yi accepts."

But he didn't leave immediately. After a beat of hesitation, he asked with cautious hope:

"My lord, if we can't find the Gift of Sores, will we still... have the chance to hold audience with the supreme and most exalted?"

'Oh?'

'Audience with whom? [Chaos]?'

'So they hadn't even had an audience yet?'

'Now this was interesting.'

Cheng Shi's eyes shifted. After a moment, he smiled: "What — want to walk the Chaos Steps?"

Da Yi froze. His expression flickered with surprise — a micro-change that Cheng Shi instantly caught. He now knew Da Yi didn't even know the Chaos Steps existed.

'Buddy, your version is seriously out of date.'

'But then again — more room to maneuver.'

"To voluntarily ascend to His temple, one must cross the Chaos Steps. With a mortal's body and soul, you can't make it through.

"So if you want our Lord to summon you — show Him your talent, or show Him your loyalty.

"I shouldn't have to spell this out every time, should I?"

Da Yi's expression shifted. He lowered his head in assent.

By this point, Cheng Shi was essentially certain the identity he was playing was Ultraman. Not because he'd parsed any reveal from Da Yi's scraps of speech, but because the man's total lack of pushback told the real story.

Cheng Shi had no idea how many Envoys [Chaos] had. But the Envoy he'd improvised according to his own logic had met zero challenges or contradictions from Da Yi. And this wasn't a performance before some stranger — Da Yi had clearly interacted with this Envoy before.

'Even so, not one crack had been spotted!?'

'Was the performance that flawless? Was his luck that explosive? That he'd perfectly matched the speech and manner of a [Chaos] Envoy he'd never met?'

'That seemed impossible.'

'Even if his Benefactor was [Fate], this kind of fortune was beyond belief.'

So there was only one explanation: this Envoy was Ultraman himself.

Ultraman wasn't a real entity. He was an identity that [Deceit] had fabricated by warping [Existence] — and [Memory] had then legitimized his existence, allowing Kataro to stand in whenever the original was absent.

And this was the sole logical anchor of Cheng Shi's deduction: Kataro was impersonating him!

Not impersonating Ultraman. Impersonating him — Cheng Shi!

Only this explained why Da Yi hadn't raised a single eyebrow during their entire conversation. In Da Yi's understanding, this was simply how Lord Ultraman behaved.

So [Chaos]'s promise of "keeping the seat warm" hadn't been empty words. He'd even paved every road, waiting only for a single response from Cheng Shi.

A response acknowledging he was Ultraman.

And at the time, Cheng Shi had refused.

But now, he'd picked it back up.

"..."

'People really were fickle. You only learn to cherish what you've lost.'

Cheng Shi gave a self-deprecating laugh, then thought: 'If given a second chance... I'd still refuse.'

'Because I have to be Cheng Shi first before I can be any other jumbled-up identity.'

'Names — no matter what — cannot be changed.'

With that thought, he suddenly said something meaningful:

"I've always served before the temple, paying little attention to mortal affairs. But since impersonating this Fate Weaver, I've heard some... interesting things. For instance..."

"My name."

"..." Da Yi went rigid. Honestly, he'd long since accepted this lord's name. He'd seen it enough that he didn't even make the connection anymore. But he never expected the lord himself to bring it up.

'Hot damn, that was just weird.'

But could he respond to this?

No.

So Da Yi's face twitched, and he said nothing.

Watching the reaction, Cheng Shi felt utterly, definitively confirmed.

"Go. I have other matters to consider.

"Let's hope for some good news this time."

Da Yi wasn't entirely sure whether "good news" referred to whatever his lord was pondering, or to the Jiang Chi hunt. But orders were orders. He bowed reverently and withdrew.

After Da Yi was gone, Cheng Shi knocked on Aph Ros's door again.

Between the knock and the opening — barely one second. Seeing Aph Ros's face brimming with gossip-spectator energy, Cheng Shi could only sigh.

"Entertaining?"

Aph Ros wasn't the least bit embarrassed. He didn't even smile. He studied Cheng Shi with open suspicion, eyes full of scrutiny:

"My brother — are you [Deceit]'s Envoy, or [Chaos]'s Envoy?"

"?"

Cheng Shi burst out laughing: "You believed it?"

"..."

Embarrassing as it was, Aph Ros nodded. Whether or not Cheng Shi's performance was a lie, it had once again rewritten His understanding of [Deceit]'s authority as a new god.

"It's not that I want to doubt you. It's that your emotions told me the deception in this particular con wasn't as dense as when you told me you were Yu Xi.

"Compared to claiming you're Yu Xi, you clearly find it far easier to accept being some [Chaos] Envoy.

"So, my brother — you wouldn't happen to be like me... a dual Envoy, would you?"

'Spot-on guess. Except I'm not a dual Envoy — I'm a dual-fake-Envoy.'

'Of course, that only described the present. Who knew whether in a few days he'd evolve into a triple-fake-Envoy or some other stacking monstrosity...'

Cheng Shi smiled. Looking at the puzzled Aph Ros, he chuckled and nodded:

"Indeed. I've finally confirmed it — the intelligence you display is merely a persona you've built for yourself.

"I much preferred the shrewd you from when you were searching for Miss Moon. Right now, though...

"Hmm, sorry. I shouldn't say that. Your reaction is undeniably a compliment to my deception.

"I should thank you, Aph Ros.

"Thank you for the validation."

"..."

Aph Ros's expression finally turned the tiniest bit sour. He looked Cheng Shi up and down for a long while, then slowly reassembled his previously confident and composed demeanor.

"My brother, you've given me new inspiration.

"I'm thinking — if I could approach Him through you, is it possible He might help me deceive my two Benefactors, and then...

"Trick Them into merging?"

"..." Now it was Cheng Shi's turn to fall silent.

'Bro, stop trying to pull off these epic stunts.'

'Last era's epic stunt got you imprisoned. And before you're even free, you're already planning the next sentence?'

'Then again — the Fun God would probably love this.'

'After all, fun trumped everything.'

'Damn. Going to need to keep more distance from Aph Ros in the future.'

Chapter 508: It's Hunting Hour!

Cheng Shi hadn't knocked on Aph Ros's door for any special reason — simply to thank the Herald for his generosity.

They exchanged a few idle words and parted. He returned once more to the civilian quarter of Kannar.

Da Yi had already left to join the hunt. Cheng Shi looked around, confirmed no one was nearby, and sank into the couch the same way Da Yi had. He began considering how to conclude this trial.

After all, this was first and foremost a [Decay] trial. The scramble for the Gift of Sores was merely a subplot within it.

Undeniably, some participants had matched in specifically because they'd prayed for the Gift of Sores. But items of this caliber weren't automatically granted just because you prayed. Otherwise, Poison wouldn't have spent so long searching fruitlessly.

It was like the [Fate] trial Cheng Shi had once entered. The window for obtaining the Conjugate Whisper Fruit had lasted a single instant. Seize it and it was yours. Miss it, and the players who'd prayed for it merely served as historical wallpaper once more.

And that was also why, upon learning the First Prince had been eaten, Cheng Shi abandoned the search and pivoted to other matters.

The trail had gone cold.

The sole witness who might have recalled where the dagger ended up was dead. Death alone wouldn't have been insurmountable — Cheng Shi could've interrogated a spirit. But eaten? That was another matter entirely.

So he'd decisively shifted strategy and started pursuing other gains. He couldn't have risked entering a trial only to walk away empty-handed, could he?

He redirected toward the players themselves. If this trial netted him a few intelligence channels and some useful pawns, it would be a guaranteed return on investment.

At this point, Cheng Shi was quite satisfied.

But there was still room for improvement. For instance... winning the trial itself.

Everything today had moved at breakneck speed. From start to now, multiple rounds of scheming and combat had played out — yet incredibly, this was still Day One. In a five-day trial, Cheng Shi appeared to have already cleared every obstacle, freeing up time to study the trial mechanics and secure victory.

After all, a trial win earned serious points.

He mulled it over carefully, combing through every scrap of knowledge about [Decay] in his memory. Ultimately, he realized the key to cracking this trial might lie in precisely what Aph Ros had called "compassion."

[Decay]'s trials were fascinating. Though this deity's will championed deterioration, His trials never forced players to deteriorate.

Each trial had a single objective: following the given clues, convert one or more specific targets to [Decay]'s faith!

Yes — His targets weren't the players but the NPCs who'd long vanished into history.

In a sense, His trials resembled those of [Prosperity], His opposite: [Prosperity] needed to sustain prosperity; [Decay] sought to spread decay.

Based on previous [Decay] trials, once you identified the conversion targets, you essentially gauged the difficulty.

For example: converting an unaffiliated commoner in a city teeming with competing faiths — trivially easy. But converting a tribal high priest or chieftain in a rainforest deeply devoted to [Prosperity]? The difficulty spoke for itself.

Cheng Shi's situation was more complex than preaching [Decay] in a [Prosperity] tribe — because he stood on [Decay]'s own holy ground. Everyone here already worshipped [Decay].

The only group that seemed insufficiently devout had already fled Kannar through a Teleportation Array.

'He couldn't possibly be expected to convert the World Destroyers lurking outside the walls to [Decay], could he?'

'That would be absurd.'

'[Decay] hadn't yet devolved into [Oblivion]. Was [Oblivion] supposed to reverse course and regress back to [Decay]?'

"..."

'Unlikely.'

Cheng Shi had been wondering whether they'd arrived too late, and whether the trial's objective was specifically to restore the Rosna royals' piety.

But later, after his conversation with Aph Ros, enlightenment struck.

He thought he'd found a way to win this trial.

'Making [Decay] more decayed... just like making [Prosperity] more prosperous. Both were excellent theses...'

Once his thoughts were in order, Cheng Shi exhaled long and deep, rose from the couch, and headed outside.

He didn't know what stage the hunt had reached, but now — armed with a plan — he could join in.

Certainly, part of him wanted to reinforce the hunters. But the bigger motivation was prudence: if the prey broke free from the encirclement, it might turn around and charge at him — a lone, separated hunter.

'I'm a priest. Can't beat a warrior in a straight fight.'

Speaking of priests...

"Times like this really show how important Mi Laozhang is — he never worried about any of this, because he literally can't die."

Cheng Shi laughed at himself, then pushed out into the driving snow and the steadily darkening sky, tracking the traces through the city.

...

Meanwhile, on the other side.

Jiang Chi had reached his limit. They'd caught up.

He swore he'd started running early enough. He'd even given Cheng Shi's vindictiveness its due respect.

In his estimation, the moment Cheng Shi finished with Poison, the three hunters would double back for him. And Da Yi, that shrewd brute, wasn't worth continuing to cooperate with. Left with no alternative, he'd slipped away ahead of time.

What he hadn't expected: despite hiding for so long, he still couldn't evade them.

It was a textbook chase between hunters and prey. He'd been confident in his concealment, but the problem was the hunting party included an actual hunter!

The [Silence] Chameleon was too good at finding people. He'd quickly dismantled every decoy and misdirection Jiang Chi had scattered through the city, then zeroed in on his true location.

The hunters still numbered three. But the Fate Weaver was absent. Instead, his former partner Poison — not only alive but converted into a new hunter — had taken his place.

Staring at this absurd tableau, Jiang Chi's expression grew complicated.

"Miss Poison, since you're alive... is our partnership still on?"

Poison stood at the trio's far right, studying the trapped Jiang Chi at the wall's base. She raised an eyebrow and said nothing.

She recognized the divide-and-conquer gambit. But the man had no idea what kind of bond held her hunting team together.

She wasn't entirely sure herself. But she knew the anchor of that stability wasn't present at the scene.

Which meant no matter how silver-tongued Jiang Chi became, he couldn't soften these hunters' killing intent by even a fraction.

She smirked: "Sorry — I'm just a Desire Puppet controlled by a persimmon. No idea how to answer your question."

"..."

'Playing dumb again!'

Jiang Chi's face darkened. He turned to the snarling Gongyang Jiao in the center: "He killed you, and you're helping him? Gongyang — since when does the Screaming Earl, who feeds on fear, start feeling fear himself!?"

Gongyang Jiao grinned savagely and spat: "Whether I'm afraid or not is none of your business. You being afraid is enough!"

"..."

Jiang Chi's expression blackened further. He turned toward the direction where the Chameleon lurked, opened his mouth, and found no words.

"..."

'Impossible. This match was simply unplayable.'

"It seems... I have no choice but to fight for my life!"

With that, Jiang Chi's eyes turned grave. Right hand raised the Hour Hand Sword vertically before him. Left hand drew a pocket watch from his coat. Amid the driving wind and snow, every nerve drawn taut, he waited for the hunters to make the first move.

In this situation, he couldn't strike first. The instant he moved, the two who weren't his target would immediately exploit the opening and end him.

Seconds crawled by. None of the four moved.

Wind grew wilder. Snow fell harder. Darkness thickened.

Minutes ago, the light had been fading gradually, like silk unraveling. But in the space of a few blinks, the luminous canopy overhead was violently torn apart.

Night fell. Kannar's darkness arrived. The pocket watch in Jiang Chi's hand even chimed the hour.

And the very instant nightfall descended on cue, a blinding streak of light slashed from the highest point of the wall above Jiang Chi's head — plummeting like a meteor.

"Hot damn — waited and waited and nobody moved. I don't have that kind of patience!"

Chapter 509: The Warped, Twisted Pointer Knight

"Da Yi!!?"

Jiang Chi's face contorted. His voice cracked with shock.

'What was this [War] follower doing here?'

'He was a hunter too!?'

'Was Cheng Shi a Fate Weaver or a Lord of Desire!?'

'Had all these people been brainwashed!?'

Jiang Chi didn't dare let his guard down. Seeing the streak of light plunge directly at his head, he gritted his teeth and swung his sword upward to intercept.

As the [Time]-infused blade traced a half-circle above his head, Da Yi — who'd almost reached Jiang Chi's face — suddenly froze the instant before his Iron Thorns connected.

The wind and snow around them froze with him.

Space itself had been stopped by [Time]!

Seeing the [War] assassin locked down practically at arm's length, Jiang Chi felt no urge to counter-attack. His raised sword immediately swept forward again as his body shot backward, retreating to the high wall and pressing his back flush against it.

During his retreat, Gongyang Jiao's figure materialized from a gust of howling wind — frozen in place at the exact spot Jiang Chi had just vacated.

Everyone had moved!

The Screaming Earl had seized the moment, but the Pointer Knight's reflexes proved superior. He'd blocked the ambush perfectly. But before he could catch his breath, the hunter's arrows shrieked through the wind.

Jiang Chi's sword spun like an umbrella, deflecting the leading arrows. But the rapid-fire barrage was relentless, and his maneuvering space was too cramped. He had no choice but to freeze all the remaining arrows mid-flight.

The distant Chameleon frowned at the sight, immediately shifted position to find a new angle, and drew his bow again. Meanwhile, the fourth hunter — Poison — had...

Vanished.

Just as Jiang Chi held his breath, eyes unblinking as he scanned for her, a soft laugh emerged from somewhere within the thick city wall behind his head.

"Sir Knight — which is harder, the wall or the persimmon?"

Jiang Chi startled violently. He whipped his sword backward, pommel-first, while simultaneously flooding the wall space behind him with [Time] stagnation. A solid thunk rang out — the pommel struck solid masonry. There was no Poison behind him.

A decoy voice!

Jiang Chi frowned and half-turned to glance back. And in that split-second — from behind a snowflake directly in front of him — a snow-white figure erupted forward. Poison, in full assassin garb, materialized without warning. Lips curled in a smirk, eyes dancing, Dance With Desire flashing through the air — she carved a gash along the Pointer Knight's thigh in a single stroke.

Poison's real target had been the hand holding the pocket watch. She'd observed that the watch was likely the source of his time-freezing power, so she'd aimed to cripple his left hand.

But startled as he was, Jiang Chi's reflexes were anything but slow. The instant Poison appeared, he'd already lifted his knee in a counter-kick, timed perfectly — catching Poison in the one moment she had no leverage.

Left with no alternative, the assassin settled for slashing his thigh on the way past.

Blood sprayed. Three inches deep. The wound carved long, and under Dance With Desire's desire-pull, Jiang Chi's entire body shuddered.

The assassin struck and withdrew without hesitation. But Jiang Chi refused to eat the loss in silence. He raised the pocket watch toward Poison's escape route and froze that entire section of space.

Though the assassin had already vanished into the blizzard and no figure was visible within the frozen zone, the furious Pointer Knight had a solution for that: AoE.

Through gritted teeth and searing pain, Jiang Chi launched himself upward, dodging two volleys from the Chameleon, then swept his sword through the space where Poison had disappeared — indiscriminate slashes, covering every inch.

Of the hunters present, the only one he could match in direct combat was Poison — who wasn't particularly combat-focused to begin with.

And with her controlled, he had even more confidence.

The seemingly wild sweeps proved devastatingly effective. Within moments, four or five savage wounds appeared in the air above the frozen zone.

Scalding blood poured forth, tracing the outline of a shapely figure in mid-air. The instant she took damage, the assassin's stealth shattered.

Once an assassin lost concealment and was hard-locked in place, death was all but inevitable.

Spotting her position, Jiang Chi sneered, then spun and hurled his sword — straight at Poison's back!

And at that precise moment, Da Yi recovered.

The earliest frozen zone finally fractured. The [War] assassin cursed under his breath, eyes narrowing, and shot toward Jiang Chi. For a peak assassin of his agility, the distance was covered faster than a blink.

Da Yi keenly exploited the window created by Jiang Chi's thrown sword. He flashed past the about-to-be-impaled Poison without sparing a thought of rescue. Target locked. Full charge at Jiang Chi.

His Iron Thorns danced like butterflies, somehow refracting eerie light even through the dark blizzard. Threads of light fanned out like flung silk, boxing Jiang Chi against the wall. Despite his hulking frame, his movements earned the word "spectral" — and in a single breath, he closed the distance.

Jiang Chi's face was grim but fearless. He'd drawn a shorter blade from somewhere — half the length of the previous Hour Hand Sword — and channeled every ounce of strength into his body. He didn't target the oncoming Da Yi. Instead, he slashed at the light-threads coiling around him.

Those silk-thin threads should have been intangible, yet steel rang against them — a resonant metallic clang that sang without end. But the blow lacked sufficient force. The Gap Light Trap binding him held firm.

Da Yi grunted in amusement, seized the opening, and stabbed upward.

Six thorns at once!

Shlk—

Six punctures burst simultaneously across Jiang Chi's chest and abdomen. The Iron Thorns pierced clean through his body along the light-thread tethers. Da Yi caught the returning thorns and yanked.

Squelch—

The threads cut like razors, slicing Jiang Chi's body into countless fragments.

Amid the stunned silence of all onlookers, the [War] assassin appeared to have ended the war in an instant.

But was it real?

No. It was false.

The victorious Da Yi suddenly felt the world blur. Then he realized nothing that had just occurred was real. The memory dissolved gradually in his consciousness, fading into phantom images where no detail could be grasped.

He blinked in shock and found himself still standing at his original attack position. Poison was pinned to the wall by the thrown sword. Gongyang Jiao had advanced several meters at some point but was now trapped in another time-stagnation field, unable to move. Only the Chameleon remained...

Currently locked in close-quarters combat with the Pointer Knight who'd just broken through the encirclement — bow against sword, trading blows blow for blow.

Seeing this, Da Yi was both alarmed and furious.

A [Time] deduction illusion-trap!

This Pointer Knight had somehow planted a deduction trap above his head, just waiting for him to walk into it!

At least the simulated outcome had him winning. If the opponent had possessed an item that could overwrite the deduction's result, the consequences would have been catastrophic.

'This warrior... how did he have so many tricks!?'

'Warriors were supposed to be brutes who charged head-on! Why was this one fighting with nothing but calculations!?'

That said, Jiang Chi's warrior image had become genuinely warped — even deformed — in Da Yi's eyes. The Pointer Knight was undeniably skilled, but that skill didn't quite match the title "Pointer Knight."

He possessed the sharp instinct for seizing timing, yes — but in practice, most of those timing-seizes relied on Time Stagnation. He had a warrior's physique, true — but his raw strength barely matched a peak hunter's.

He looked like a warrior, certainly. But his combat power lacked a peak warrior's ferocity. His attack methods leaned heavily on talent-based skills. Yet the Pointer Knight was supposed to be a brute-force class. [Time]'s blessing granted them precise timing capture — and if such a warrior lacked raw power, what good was perfect timing?

Case in point: right now, he'd hard-locked multiple opponents, and still chose to retreat and break out rather than press the advantage.

If Da Yi or Gongyang Jiao had that kind of crowd control, the frozen enemies would've been pounded until not even bone dust remained.

"Hot damn — something's off!"

Da Yi spat fiercely, stopped dwelling on the illusion trap, and threw himself back into the fight.

Chapter 510: This Is What I Was Waiting For!

Jiang Chi was at the breaking point.

He wasn't a Hero of Today. He wasn't a Druid. He didn't have bottomless reserves of spiritual power.

That he'd fought one-versus-four for this long already proved he deserved the word "peak." He'd actually found a gap to break out — only for the Chameleon to spring the biggest trap of all.

The [Silence] follower had silenced every possible escape route. And it was a blanket, indiscriminate faith-silence.

That meant even the caster himself had lost all active talents. So when Jiang Chi stumbled into the zone in shock, the two of them had resorted to the most primitive form of combat.

Da Yi hadn't noticed either. The hunter's trap was simply too well-concealed. He only realized it would be a pure brawl after stepping inside and having his own talents silenced.

But for the martially gifted Da Yi, this was no problem — especially with that lord still in the city. He had zero reason for fear.

So he charged in again. Like a warrior.

Jiang Chi saw Da Yi's shape bearing down. Knowing his own strength deficit, he didn't fancy a head-on collision with this power-specialized assassin. He deflected the Chameleon's bow, then dragged his wounded leg outward.

His agility didn't match the hunter's, but his timing was impeccable. The Chameleon, thrown off-balance by the parry, couldn't close the gap in time — and Jiang Chi actually managed to open some distance.

But just as he prepared to vault off the rooftop and duck into an alley, another figure materialized in his path. One he absolutely did not want to see.

The Fate Weaver!

The one who'd likely killed the Screaming Earl. Standing right there, idly twirling a scalpel, plugging the road ahead.

"Cheng Shi!" Jiang Chi's movement stuttered. His face was stone. "You and I have no grudge—"

Cheng Shi snorted, cutting off the moral monologue: "Yep, sure. I'm the villain, I only kill good guys. And oh what a shame — you look like a good guy to me."

He flicked a scalpel, which embedded itself at Jiang Chi's feet.

"..."

Jiang Chi's gaze sharpened. Clearly, there was no room for negotiation. Without complaint or further protest, he pivoted instantly and sprinted toward the outer wall.

He didn't think he could beat someone who'd defeated Gongyang Jiao head-on. What he didn't know was that Cheng Shi had already switched back to priest — making him the weakest link in the three-sided encirclement.

Jiang Chi held his breath in razor focus and ran. He was planning to leave Kannar entirely, withdrawing from the Gift of Sores competition.

This place had lost every shred of safety for him. Continuing the trial was impossible. But could he escape five hunters?

'Difficult!'

Because the instant he'd changed direction, Gongyang Jiao broke free from [Time]'s restraint and blocked his path at the base of the outer wall!

Now — with Poison still pinned to the wall — four of them had Jiang Chi boxed in across the Silence Domain's breadth.

Despair flickered across Jiang Chi's face. But he harbored no thought of begging or surrendering.

He simply held the short blade before him, mustering every last scrap of focus and willpower to guard every angle.

At least within the Silence Domain, no one was moving too fast. The gradual tightening gave exhausted Jiang Chi a sliver of breathing room.

But he knew this might be his last breath.

"Fate Weaver — you can't kill me!"

Jiang Chi fixed Cheng Shi with a grim stare. The tone wasn't bravado. It sounded like the calm statement of a fact.

Cheng Shi scoffed, unmoved, and kept advancing.

'I don't need to kill you permanently in one trial. Stripping one life from you is satisfying enough.'

'Peak players could resurrect, sure. But they couldn't do it forever, could they?'

'Every life was precious. Taking even one would hurt.'

'As for grudges... the other side hadn't worried about making an enemy of him. Why should he overthink it?'

The other three followed Cheng Shi's pace, continuing to close the circle. When he stopped at a not-too-close, not-too-far position, all four halted in sync.

Though Cheng Shi hadn't verbalized the plan, everyone present was an expert. They understood intuitively: wait for the right moment.

And that moment was the Silence Domain shattering.

No domain or barrier lasted forever. This wide-area silence couldn't hold much longer. The instant it collapsed and divine blessings returned — that would be Jiang Chi's greatest crisis.

And that instant... was now!

CRACK.

The domain crumbled. The sound rang in everyone's ears. Five peak players' eyes flared with sharp light. Every body tensed and moved as one!

The fastest react belonged to the assassin, without question. Da Yi hurled his Iron Thorns instantly. To counter Time Stagnation, the six projectiles flew on wildly different trajectories.

The instant they launched, Da Yi himself followed the light-trails — aimed at the airspace above Jiang Chi's head.

Second-fastest was the hunter. The Chameleon had drawn his bow taut long ago, patiently waiting for this moment. As the trap's creator, he knew the domain's duration better than anyone. His arrow leapt from the string a fraction before the collapse — and by the time it reached mid-flight, [Silence]'s power had re-imbued it!

Gongyang Jiao was close behind. Perhaps from long partnership with the Chameleon, the instant the hunter's arrow blazed forth, the Screaming Earl had already launched. By the time the domain shattered, he'd transformed into a howling hurricane, sweeping toward Jiang Chi at the center.

Only Cheng Shi stayed motionless. He stood rooted, even slowing his scalpel-twirling. To anyone looking, he was openings incarnate.

But when the openings are this obvious — can they still be called openings?

No!

This was clearly "besiege three sides, leave one open."

Anyone who'd read a single page of military strategy knew this was the old lure-them-into-breaking-out trick. Jiang Chi at the center understood this perfectly. Even if Cheng Shi hadn't made the gesture so blatant, he would never have tried to break through toward "a priest who could kill peak warriors."

So Jiang Chi moved. Under the crushing weight of mortal peril, his sharp instincts found the most advantageous angle. Pouring everything into one final effort, he dodged [Silence]'s arrows and [War]'s Iron Thorns, and charged headlong toward [Corruption]!

He detected that Gongyang Jiao's aura was the weakest!

The attack might be the most terrifying, but compared to the assassin's agility and the hunter's precision, a warrior was the only target he could realistically face head-on and break through.

And so, within the very second the domain collapsed, two warriors collided with an earth-shaking crash.

Gongyang Jiao's claws buried themselves in Jiang Chi's shoulders. Jiang Chi's short blade pierced clean through Gongyang Jiao's chest. The two warriors met and immediately went for the kill — a ferocity rivaling Cheng Shi and Gongyang Jiao's earlier duel.

But team fights weren't turn-based. When you locked up with an opponent, no one else was going to wait politely. The instant Jiang Chi's blade caught in Gongyang Jiao's ribcage, Da Yi was already plummeting from above!

Six spinning Iron Thorns descended in arcs of light that bent like a warping cage, engulfing both grappling warriors. At this velocity, one small pull and both fighters inside would be diced into undifferentiated meat.

Jiang Chi obviously didn't want to die. Trapped between three converging threats with zero room to dodge, he had no choice but to harden his gaze and raise the pocket watch in his left hand.

And in that very instant, Gongyang Jiao grinned savagely.

"This is what I was waiting for!"