

## The Gods 511

### Chapter 511: Mutation! Crisis!

The Screaming Earl swiftly withdrew the claws embedded in Jiang Chi's shoulders, then seized Jiang Chi's left hand with crushing force — nearly shattering the man's wrist bones. His other hand followed up immediately, snatching at the pocket watch.

Just as Gongyang Jiao was about to succeed, Jiang Chi showed no panic. Instead, with cold composure, he twisted his arm and used the opponent's own immense force to rotate their positions. Seizing the single timing window within this crushing pressure — before Da Yi's Iron Thorns could land — his free hand ripped the short blade from Gongyang Jiao's chest and severed his own left arm in a single stroke. Simultaneously, core and legs exploded with power as he curled inward, planted both feet against Gongyang Jiao's midsection, and launched himself backward with terrifying force — tearing free from the [War] Gap Light Trap and sprinting frantically in the direction Gongyang Jiao had come from.

The exquisite timing and the courage to amputate his own arm left everyone stunned. Gongyang Jiao himself was sent flying backward like a kite with its string cut — hurtling straight toward Cheng Shi.

Da Yi landed, found his target gone, and spared an unhesitating compliment — "Hot damn, impressive!" — before his expression darkened and he gave chase.

The Chameleon peppered Jiang Chi with cold arrows to slow his retreat, clearly impressed by the escape as well.

Seeing the man somehow slip away even from this, Cheng Shi frowned slightly and tossed a healing spell at the injured employee.

'This employee wasn't performing well...'

Gongyang Jiao was indeed not performing well — he was furious!

The instant he was kicked back to Lord Yu Xi's feet, the snarling Screaming Earl couldn't contain his rage. He threw back his head toward Jiang Chi's fleeing direction and unleashed the most blood-curdling scream of the entire trial — a howl channeling every ounce of [Corruption] power!

That piercing detonation raked across everyone's psyche like claws dragging across the tip of one's heart. A single syllable was enough to send consciousness reeling, as though your deepest, most primal terror had materialized before your eyes.

The attack was devastatingly effective. Good news: the blast radius was enormous and lethally potent. Jiang Chi coughed blood on the spot.

Bad news: the scream made no distinction between friend and foe. The pursuing assassin, the flanking hunter, and even Lord Yu Xi standing right beside the Screaming Earl — all were stunned for an instant.

Cheng Shi got hit worst. He was too close — close enough that it felt like a sledgehammer had slammed into his sternum. Sweetness rose in his throat and blood nearly spilled from the corner of his mouth. He forced himself to swallow the bloody foam, only to find that the single Gongyang Jiao before him had split into three overlapping ghosts. Meanwhile, his heart hammered violently, as if only by pumping this hard could it suppress the surging tide of terror.

"..." Cheng Shi's gaze froze. His face darkened. 'You didn't do that on purpose, did you, Mr. Ram the Employee?'

But while this sudden friendly fire was bad news, for certain parties it served as a perfect signal. Jiang Chi, for instance. And...

The Screaming Earl who'd issued the howl!

Yes — Gongyang Jiao didn't consider friendly fire a problem. Because from the moment he was kicked back, he had no more allies!

Because this was deliberate!

Everything changed in an instant!!

A grin more savage than before crawled across the Screaming Earl's face. He wiped blood from his lips and, snarling, extended his right hand.

Don't forget — Jiang Chi's severed arm, the one holding the pocket watch, was still in his grip. So when Gongyang Jiao raised it, the disembodied limb suddenly twitched as if by reflex, fingers peeling open to reveal the crushed, deformed pocket watch. And the instant that watch appeared before Cheng Shi—

'Bad. This was very bad!!'

Cheng Shi recognized the danger. But it was too late. Far too late.

[Time]'s power erupted. The entire area plunged into stagnation.

And Cheng Shi stood at the very edge of that frozen space!

Which meant Gongyang Jiao on the outside could still move freely. But Cheng Shi had become a sitting target!

This was a flawlessly executed, brilliantly coordinated assassination. The instigator was Gongyang Jiao. The perfect assist came from the fleeing Jiang Chi. And the mark... was Cheng Shi, who'd been kept in the dark until the very last second!

Gongyang Jiao had turned!

No — "turned" wasn't the right word. The desire he could no longer suppress had simply told him: that ring, so perfectly attuned to the Screaming Earl, should never have been on someone else's finger. He was its rightful owner!

And so, in the instant Gongyang Jiao had collided with Jiang Chi, he'd offered the Pointer Knight a new deal.

Jiang Chi could scarcely believe Gongyang Jiao would choose to cooperate at a time like this. But he had no other choice!

If he wanted to live — wanted to gamble — he could only trust Gongyang Jiao. Things couldn't possibly get worse than they already were!

So who said only Pointer Knights had a gift for timing? Every person here was a true master of timing!

And so these two warriors, under everyone's noses, executed a reverse assassination more stunning than anything their assassin counterpart could have managed. Right now, the target — Cheng Shi — was frozen in place by a pocket watch, unable to move a muscle.

Gongyang Jiao spun. He was fast. A single lethal thrust aimed straight at Cheng Shi's heart — no hesitation, no wasted motion.

In Cheng Shi's eyes, the grotesque grin drew closer and closer. Unable to move, he could only stare forward, forced to observe every wrinkle at the corner of those eyes, every fine hair along those lips — in excruciating detail.

But the finer the detail, the closer the distance.

When Cheng Shi felt the Screaming Earl's exhaled breath brush against his face, his heart plummeted.

'Careless.'

He'd never identified the moment he'd shown a crack in front of Gongyang Jiao — the crack that let the man see through his identity.

But just as panic and bewilderment churned together in his chest, his mind buzzing too loudly to reach any conclusion, he heard Gongyang Jiao's voice, inches from his ear:

"Farewell, Lord Yu Xi! An Envoy? So what — when it's time to die... you still die, don't you?"

"Exquisite — I can feel your fear!"

The words barely faded before talons pierced flesh and drove straight into his heart. The warrior's powerful arm clenched instantly, crushing the still-beating organ—

SPLAT.

Obliterated.

And in that same instant, [Time]'s stagnation dissolved. A body hit the ground with a thud. The savage grin on Gongyang Jiao's face froze solid.

He stared at Cheng Shi — still standing upright before him — and his expression twisted. Another earth-shaking scream tore from his throat:

"IMPOSSIBLE!!!"

Gongyang Jiao went berserk. He'd never imagined that at this moment — this razor-thin, life-or-death, god-slaying moment — someone could still save Cheng Shi. Could take the blow for him!

'Was she insane!?'

She wasn't insane.

She had never — not for a single second — been insane!

Don't forget: this hunt didn't involve just four hunters. There was a fifth, pinned high on the city wall, seemingly out of action.

Poison!

The [Corruption] Chosen — no one should ever have ignored her presence.

Everyone knew Jiang Chi's sword couldn't truly kill her. But in their minds, hanging on that wall was simply her way of avoiding the hassle of combat.

Not a soul expected that at this moment — the very instant Cheng Shi was about to die — Poison would reappear.

Just as she had at the Rosna Recruitment Square — wounded and all — she materialized before Cheng Shi in a flash, intercepting the killing blow meant for him.

Chapter 512: Want It? Take It

But this time was different — because Gongyang Jiao truly killed her.

Chest torn open, heart ripped out. A death both brutal and haunting.

Cheng Shi watched it all expressionlessly. Then he let out a self-mocking laugh.

The blood spraying and spattering from Poison's body felt scorchingly vivid against the snow — as though painted into a sardonic eye upon the white ground. That eye was half-lidded, mocking him. Mocking his refusal to place trust. Mocking his failure to heed her warning. As if to say:

"See, little priest? I told you Mr. Ram wasn't trustworthy."

'Yes. You were right. Mr. Ram truly wasn't trustworthy.'

He didn't know why Poison had been so certain. But this time, she'd guessed correctly.

Even so, Cheng Shi didn't retaliate. He didn't want to. The Fun Ring was fully charged and could have locked onto Gongyang Jiao mindlessly — but he still didn't move.

He merely studied the crouching Gongyang Jiao — unwilling to accept defeat yet too afraid to act — and kept reminding himself: over these past weeks spent impersonating an Envoy, he'd gradually let his guard down. He'd even started believing everyone would instinctively revere "mystery" and "Them."

But today, Gongyang Jiao had thoroughly dismantled that assumption. Through action, the Screaming Earl had administered a harsh lesson — teaching Cheng Shi a brand-new truth: among peak players, there would always be someone more deranged than the most deranged.

Deranged beyond reason.

Before such people, you could be an Envoy and they'd still kill you without blinking.

The man coveted his ring. He still dared to covet the ring. Even knowing his target was a genuine Envoy — he'd struck anyway!

'Was he insane?'

The scene made Cheng Shi recall something Da Yi had told him at the start:

"Gongyang Jiao, third on the [Corruption] leaderboard. He's a fanatic. Don't try to understand him. Just remember to walk the other way when you see him."

'A fanatic...' This fanatic's fanaticism was truly a sight to behold.

Cheng Shi laughed again. Still self-deprecating.

He didn't look at Poison's corpse at his feet. Instead, with neither joy nor sorrow, he removed his ring and tossed it to Gongyang Jiao.

Gongyang Jiao froze. He caught the ring in utter disbelief, rooted to the spot.

"Want it? Take it." Cheng Shi shook his head with a wry smile.

He'd never used such a vicious method to kill someone before.

Yes — vicious! Entrapment!

Because he knew this ring would never tolerate covetous outsiders. It was a gift from the Lord upon the Bone Throne. And that Lord was... not "seemed" — He was petty.

This was practically a hidden ace among hidden aces. Anyone who coveted this ring would face that Lord's retaliation. This wasn't Cheng Shi's imagination — it was a mechanism jointly certified by [Death] and [Deceit].

So if Cheng Shi wished, he could use this ring as bait to trap-kill unsuspecting peak players at will.

But he never had. First, he didn't want to abuse that Lord's attention. Second, outside of life-or-death moments, he had plenty of legitimate methods — no need for something this inhumane.

But today... he wanted to try.

Cheng Shi wanted to see what kind of death [Death] would bestow upon the Screaming Earl.

Gongyang Jiao was terrified. He knew he only had one shot. Before Yu Xi became the real Yu Xi, he had this single chance.

If the gamble paid off, he'd win everything. But if he lost... why was it also everything?

'Wait — Lord Yu Xi was... giving him the ring?'

One couldn't blame Gongyang Jiao for being dumbfounded. He was more stunned now than Cheng Shi had been moments ago. Caught between the crushing terror of a failed assassination attempt on an Envoy and this sudden, incomprehensible windfall, he couldn't tell whether he'd made a mistake or not.

But instinct drove him to his knees. Even with a savage grin still plastered on his face, even with undisguised greed burning in his eyes — to survive, he clutched the ring and knelt.

"Lord Yu—"

The trembling Screaming Earl barely got one syllable out before a silent arrow streaked from the distance. Drowning in the maelstrom of his own emotions, he didn't notice. And so—

Swish.

Under Cheng Shi's amused smile, amid the Screaming Earl's bewildered daze, the arrow punched clean through Gongyang Jiao's skull — pinning the [Corruption] follower who'd still been trying to read his lord's mood to the ground.

Dead.

The Ring of Bone Servant Le Le'er's second covetous thief, dead before Cheng Shi's eyes — in less than a minute, before the ring had even warmed in his hand.

Cheng Shi sneered. He didn't spare the corpse a glance. Instead, he looked up and forward. Soon, his gaze met a pair of [Silence] eyes.

The Chameleon, supposedly chasing Jiang Chi, had already doubled back at some point. Now he stood on a nearby rooftop, meeting Cheng Shi's scrutinizing look with a bow — reverent and fervent in equal measure.

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow, recalling what Gongyang Jiao had once told him:

"I can make that Chameleon follow your orders too. He dreams of an audience with a god."

'An audience with a god...'

It seemed the Chameleon had finally identified Cheng Shi's true status. Given the choice between trusting a partner and trusting a "deity," he'd chosen the divine.

'Heh. Fate... always so absurd.'

'The employee he'd personally recruited had betrayed him. The temp worker he'd never paid attention to became the unexpected "loyal servant."'

'And then there was... Poison — the one who'd taken a death blow for him.'

Cheng Shi lowered his gaze to Poison at his feet, a bitter smile tugging at his lips.

'Well, now he truly owed her.'

He wondered: without Poison's intervention, would he have died?

After thinking it through, the answer was...

'No.'

Not because he wouldn't have died. But because Poison would never not have intervened. She would always have blocked that ambush for him and "tragically" died before his eyes!

Because that was Poison. That was the [Corruption] Chosen who'd offered him her trust!

She wouldn't truly die from this. But she'd still spent a precious life to tell him: "You can trust me, little priest."

"..." A storm of emotions churned inside Cheng Shi. His mind roiled chaotically before he finally sighed: "Fate... not bad."

The interlude between hunters concluded. The story of hunter and prey should end as well.

Cheng Shi was done wasting time. He decided to deploy his final trump card against Jiang Chi — Sinner's Regret.

He bent down, kicked Gongyang Jiao's corpse over, pried the ring from the dead man's grip, and slipped it back on. Two Lightning Punishments for good measure. Then, face cold, he stepped over the ash and strode toward Jiang Chi.

With Da Yi harassing him, Jiang Chi hadn't gotten far. Or rather — having held some hope for the assassination — he hadn't tried very hard to run.

Da Yi hadn't tried very hard to chase, either. Who wouldn't want a front-row seat to an Envoy-assassination?

In Jiang Chi's hopes, Cheng Shi would be the one to die. But for Da Yi, the moment he sensed Gongyang Jiao turning back to kill Lord Ultraman, his only expectation was watching how the Screaming Earl would die.

'How did he dare?'

'Fanatics were truly frightening.'

'Clearly, one death hadn't taught him. A second would fix that.'

Sure enough — from the first sign of the assassination attempt, to its total failure, to the assassin's own bitter end — only a few minutes had passed. Lord Ultraman hadn't even needed to lift a finger before Gongyang Jiao died at the hands of his own partner.

'The Chameleon breaking character to kill the Screaming Earl... why would he? Had to be [Chaos] influence.'

'As a [Chaos] Envoy, Lord Ultraman could blanket the entire field in chaos!'

'Praise [Chaos]!'

In Da Yi's eyes, this barely even qualified as an incident. At most, it was Gongyang Jiao's foolishness. What he didn't know was that the invincible Lord Ultraman in his mind had just survived the greatest mortal crisis since the Faith Game began!

And all of it gave Cheng Shi a new understanding of these peak players — the ones closest to the gods.

"Learn from your mistakes..."

But setting his own carelessness aside, Cheng Shi wasn't sure whether that scene had been the result of players' tactical gambits — or true [Fate]'s protection...

But even if [Fate] had shielded him, he'd never again overestimate the power of an Envoy identity.

"As expected — the only people you can trust in this world are dead people. Or more dead people. That Lord on the Bone Throne really did have foresight..."

"Skulls... probably never betray."

Seeing Cheng Shi approach completely unscathed, Jiang Chi halted. His face was deathly grave.

He opened his mouth to speak, but Cheng Shi raised a cold hand to silence him.

"Shut up. Wait to die. Keep some dignity."

Then, Cheng Shi tagged every person present. Right hand rising, without a heartbeat's hesitation, he activated Sinner's Redemption.

In that instant, every person's vision plunged into darkness.

Cheng Shi gave a self-deprecating smile. In his mind: 'Aph Ros, here I am bothering you again.'

Chapter 513: A Surprise of Timing — and a Surprise from [Time]!

"Whooo—"

The wind howled, bitter and bone-piercing.

The snow it whipped up wasn't soft at all. Ice shards swirled and scoured everything, like invisible harrows raking the earth — carving a thousand furrows into the blanket of white.

Cheng Shi shivered.

'Why did this scene... feel familiar?'

He froze. A chill shot from his tailbone to his crown, sending his entire scalp tingling.

Not from the cold. From shock.

"!!!!!"

The moment he realized he was staring not at the pitch-black Dolgod Assembly Hall but at the snow-white Rosna Recruitment Square — he was rooted to the spot. Pupils shrank to pinpoints. Goosebumps erupted across his entire body!

Because Cheng Shi suddenly realized something: Sinner's Regret hadn't activated successfully. And the reason it hadn't was because someone had... reset time before he'd even triggered it!?!?

'How? How had time been reset?'

'Had someone secretly opened a Time Battlefield at the very start of the trial, without anyone knowing?'

'Who could have done this?'

'Who else could it be!?'

Cheng Shi stared in shock at the mild-mannered teammate currently climbing a roof beam to his right. His heart held no fear — only admiration and awe.

'The peak truly had no ordinary moves.'

'This Jiang Chi... what a magnificent Time Walker!'

'Everything clicked. Every piece fell into place.'

Cheng Shi pulled out his pocket watch and checked the time. Not a second more, not a second less — just past noon.

He'd noticed this detail before the reset. But he'd overlooked one thing: Jiang Chi, who'd already climbed to the rooftop, must have awakened earlier than him — meaning the man had had the opportunity to open the Time Battlefield exactly on the hour!

'No wonder this Pointer Knight could freeze entire zones of time. No wonder he was a warrior who lacked raw power. No wonder he fought with endless tricks yet never displayed a warrior's brute ferocity. No wonder what he'd drawn from Poison was wisdom and erudition!'

'Because he was never a Pointer Knight. He was a [Time] mage — a Time Walker capable of opening a Time Battlefield!'

'Incredible. He'd passed off a broken sundial needle as a sword and successfully disguised his identity for an entire trial — never uttering a word about it. More than that, this "Pointer Knight" had probably invested considerable effort into his cover, perhaps even acquiring combat-oriented talents that no mage would normally choose!'

'He'd thrown everything into impersonating a warrior — and perhaps his ultimate goal had always been this very moment!'

'A sleight-of-hand reversal. A chance to start over!'

'Brilliant!'

'This caliber of deception rivaled even peak [Deceit] followers!'

'Truly brilliant!'

But Cheng Shi wasn't the Time Battlefield's caster, nor was he a bearer of any special [Time] talent. He was a [Void] walker. How had he noticed the reset?

This time, it wasn't about the dice.

As a prudent player, Cheng Shi had indeed been maintaining a specific number on his [Fate] die as a time marker ever since he'd noticed a [Time] teammate. But that method could only alert him that time had been reset — it couldn't preserve his pre-reset memories.

Yet this time, [Time] hadn't dissolved anything. He'd even retained his memories!

Why!?

Cheng Shi was honestly bewildered. Only a fraction of his shock was directed at Jiang Chi's identity — he'd already harbored suspicions, so while the revelation exceeded expectations, it wasn't unacceptable. The vast majority of his shock was aimed at [Time] itself!

Yes — [Time]!

[Time]'s power was what had spared his memories and let him see through the reset. But before this moment, Cheng Shi had no idea he'd been carrying [Time]'s power!

Where had it come from?

The answer was simple. Since it was [Time]'s power, it naturally came from [Time].

And as it happened, Cheng Shi had held audience with [Time] inside Aph Ros's Evil Infant Inquisition!

It was then that this unchanging since antiquity [Existence] had radiated a soul-shaking radiance. That light had merely grazed Cheng Shi, yet it had pulled him free from the mortal dimension, letting him perceive the true form of the temporal cage imprisoning Aph Ros.

Remember what that cage looked like?

"Time curled into circles, twisted into knots, drifting indifferently through [Void] as countless temporal trajectories across the cosmos slid past — the isolated knot of time floating silent and alone."

Within that grand temporal loop, Cheng Shi had glimpsed the fundamental truth of time's interconnected nature. And so, in this comparatively trivial "loop"... Cheng Shi was completely unaffected.

Or rather — he would never be affected again.

Because the instant time reset and the loop began anew, an ancient ring streaming the weathered radiance of time materialized on Cheng Shi's finger.

That position had previously held [Existence]'s other ring — Floating Dream of the Memory Sea.

But with all three [Memory] charges expended, Cheng Shi had already removed it. And now, that spot was filled by a [Time] ring!

It was a ring formed from a single long, intact time-pointer twisted and wound into a double band. Two loops clasped snugly around his finger, and floating between them was a knot resembling both an infinity symbol and a Möbius strip.

At first glance, the ring looked ancient and corroded. But a closer look revealed the unmistakable flow of [Time]'s radiance within.

Time of Eternal Imprisonment (SSS): Servant God Relic. A ring born from [Time]'s own contemplation, created upon witnessing time close into a loop.

Special Effect — Prisoner's Awakening: All time resets, reversals, and loops caused by [Time]'s power will not dissolve your concept of time, nor affect your consciousness or memories.

Special Effect — Awakened Shout: All positive effects generated upon you by time resets, reversals, and loops receive a minor enhancement.

"..."

'A Servant God Relic. Another Servant God Relic!'

Reading the description, the fury Cheng Shi had been nursing nearly extinguished itself.

"What is this — compensation?"

"Beat me with a stick and offer me a date?"

'Had He foreseen that His follower would infuriate me and pre-prepared the apology gift?'

'Was [Time] really that generous?'

Cheng Shi was baffled. By any metric, this ring could be called a divine artifact — especially for a [Fate] follower.

[Time] and [Fate] were eternal rivals. Their followers didn't get along. So what did it mean for a rival deity's follower to receive a ring that could negate most of [Time]'s mysteries?

'If Jiang Chi ever found out, he'd probably point at the sky and scream: "My lord — your soldiers still wish to fight! Why do you arm the enemy!?"'

Cheng Shi couldn't figure it out and didn't want to keep trying. Compared to these bewildering riddles, he knew exactly what needed doing right now.

Whether this ring was [Time]'s pre-arranged "compensation" or some kind of warning to stop here — nothing could make him abandon his plan.

After being "toyed with" again and again and again, Cheng Shi had snapped. He needed an outlet for his frustration. And right now — with everything reset — was the perfect opportunity.

At this moment, Gongyang Jiao hadn't betrayed. Poison wasn't dead. Jiang Chi had just found the sundial needle for his disguise and was walking back. The man presumably didn't know Cheng Shi had retained his memories. Judging by his demeanor, this Time Walker was probably planning to replay the entire scenario.

Only this time, he figured he could avoid every landmine and make it to the end.

'So this was the "Knight's" secret to climbing the rankings.'

'Little did he know — the moment Cheng Shi laid eyes on him, his ending was already rewritten.'

Jiang Chi trudged back through the wind and snow, leaning on his sundial needle. When he looked at Cheng Shi, a strange glint flickered through his eyes — but he quickly smiled and greeted him:

"Slippery after the snow... a walking stick helps... ah, ptoo ptoo, sorry, this wind is too strong..."

"I hate the north of the Land of Hope. Even though I'm a northerner myself."

"What should I call my friend?"

He extended his hand toward Cheng Shi again, face split in a warm smile. Everything looked perfectly friendly — as though that five-on-one hunt had never happened.

This time, Cheng Shi didn't produce a fur coat to block the wind. He looked at the outstretched hand, broke into a brilliant grin of his own, and strode forward enthusiastically. He clasped Jiang Chi's hand with both of his and shook it vigorously:

"Cheng Shi. A pleasure."

Jiang Chi blinked. A trace of suspicion flickered in his eyes. The man's personality seemed different from their first meeting — that Cheng Shi had been reluctant to get close. But now... why was he so warm?

'When things were abnormal, there was always a hidden reason.' But in Jiang Chi's view, nobody here should know what had happened inside the previous loop. Because no one had seen through his identity as a Time Walker.

That Pointer Knight disguise had carried him all the way to the peak. Never once had it failed. It had also earned him a modest reputation for wisdom and reliability. But who could have guessed that beneath the knight's skin was a mage who'd been imitating a warrior all along?

Suspicious though he was, Jiang Chi didn't reject Cheng Shi's warmth. He knew this person's identity was complicated. Rather than making an enemy from the start, it was better to stand firmly at his side from the very beginning.

Survival never depended on hatred — only on wisdom. Jiang Chi's intelligence might not be exceptional, but at least he had the chance to learn from his mistakes.

So he stepped closer, smiled, and gripped Cheng Shi's hand tighter, teasing:

"Your name happens to match a friend of mine. What a coincidence. I wonder if you know him — he's a Fate Weaver. Quite famous."

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow and smiled back: "Oh? Famous how?"

"Looks like you don't know. Hmm, where should I begin..."

The same familiar conversation. But this time Cheng Shi cut him off quickly. He fixed Jiang Chi with an amused look and couldn't suppress a snort:

"How about..."

"We start from the moment you reset the Time Battlefield. Sound good, Sir Knight?"

"!!!!!!!!!"

Chapter 514: Stand Still — I'll Speed-Run This for You

BOOM.

Fear was sustenance for some — and a death knell for others.

Cheng Shi gave Jiang Chi no chance at all. The instant his fear became sustenance, the knell was already ringing.

Before Jiang Chi could even react, before terror had time to surface in his eyes, a deafening explosion tore through the Rosna Recruitment Square.

Roaring plasma swallowed the silhouette before Cheng Shi in an instant. The blinding bolt of lightning struck and scattered. The thunderclap didn't shatter the blizzard, but it left behind a charred corpse in the square.

"I told you to keep some dignity. You chose not to. In that case..."

Without another word, Cheng Shi drove the door key into Jiang Chi's chest. Countless blood-slick bones erupted outward, spiraling skyward before cascading down — coalescing instantly into a bone-patterned gate before him.

He didn't step through. He simply nodded with satisfaction, then blasted the remaining flesh into fine dust with another Lightning Punishment.

As for which person on the field had provided the fear-charge for that bolt...

Hard to say. Because the instant Jiang Chi died, Cheng Shi's ring... was fully charged.

One of the five charges was, of course, his own contribution — a self-offering the moment he'd realized he was inside a Time Battlefield at the start.

But the other four...

'Thank you, [Time], for making this trial's "opening" so smooth.'

Cheng Shi smiled. Turning his back to everyone, he quietly donned a warrior's mask over his own face.

'Thank you again, [Time]. This opening was simply too perfect — the Hero of Today's power had returned thanks to the time reset.'

Perfect indeed — but only for Cheng Shi. For every other player in this trial, the opening was nothing short of hellish.

After all, from their perspective, one teammate had just erected a gate to hell in the middle of the square and used it to send another teammate packing.

Who could have imagined? A peak-tier match, and someone was already dead before the first blink.

After the twin thunderclaps, not a soul on the square dared move.

The most excited was Gongyang Jiao behind Cheng Shi. The Screaming Earl had not only sensed an enormous concentration of fear but had caught, on Cheng Shi's person, an aura of exquisite compatibility with his own nature.

To a Screaming Earl, that scent was like the world's most exquisite dish wafted before a gourmand — too fragrant, too rich, too pure.

'What kind of treasure was this!?'

His gaze locked onto Cheng Shi's fingers, eyes glittering, face painted with undisguised greed.

The most stunned was Da Yi. Eyes bulging, brain scrambled to pudding. He was trying to figure out how he'd failed to match with Old Hu and somehow matched with Cheng Shi instead.

'Fine — a twist of fate had brought Cheng Shi. But what kind of monster was this Cheng Shi?'

'Wasn't he supposed to be a Fate Weaver?'

'Was this how Fate Weavers mended destiny? Opening the match by shredding a teammate's fate?'

'This wasn't a Fate Weaver. This was a deranged fate tailor!'

'How was he this strong? That thunder would probably overwhelm even me. Who the hell was this Cheng Shi?'

'And who was the dead teammate? Da Yi hadn't even seen the man's face!'

He didn't know. Someone did.

Poison had started smiling the moment she spotted Cheng Shi. But when her partner-to-be was atomized in a single exchange, every trace of that smile froze solid.

She stared at Cheng Shi in disbelief, eyes flickering with complex emotion.

'Was this still the little priest she knew?'

'Had he changed classes?'

'Elemental mage?'

'Why had he killed her partner? Did he have a grudge against Jiang Chi?'

'This was bad. Gongyang Jiao was here, and she'd just lost her helper. This round was going to be rough.'

Poison bit down on her silver teeth, retreated half a step, and quietly raised her guard toward Gongyang Jiao's direction. But then — her jaw dropped again.

Cheng Shi turned with a smile, rolling his shoulders loose, and called out to Gongyang Jiao:

"I know what you want. Come on — kill me and the ring is yours."

Gongyang Jiao froze. Then a savage grin tore across his face: "Wonderful! Truly wonderful! You mean it?"

Cheng Shi snorted: "More genuine than your loyalty."

"?"

Gongyang Jiao blinked — clearly not following — but then Cheng Shi spoke again. This time, not to him, but to the Chameleon concealed in the distance.

"If I were you, I'd stand still. Sometimes staying neutral wins you everything. Chameleon, my friend — if you want an audience with a god, counting on this guy won't cut it."

"..."

"..."

"..."

The hidden Chameleon's expression shifted. Da Yi and Poison turned in surprise — neither had realized someone was concealed there.

Gongyang Jiao's eye twitched. The "this guy" in Cheng Shi's mouth was obviously him.

"Fine, fine, fine. So before the main course, there's an appetizer.

"Thank this fellow, bitch. His appearance just bought you a little more time. After I eat him, I'll take my sweet time swallowing you alive."

With a piercing scream, Gongyang Jiao charged without hesitation.

Fanatics knew no fear. Even witnessing one teammate annihilated in an instant, he'd never shrink from a fight until he'd tested the man himself.

And so, predictably, two warriors collided once again.

Gongyang Jiao — fanatically wild. The Hero of Today — burning with fury. The moment they clashed, neither held back. Every strike was a killing blow.

The death match from the Rosna Court replayed itself. Neither combatant feared death — only feared the other might survive. Exchanges accelerated. Blows grew more vicious. Within minutes, the square's white snow was strewn with blood and shredded flesh, horrifying to behold.

As the fight raged, Gongyang Jiao's swagger faded. His torso had been whittled nearly to a skeleton. His opponent's face, neck, waist, and back weren't much prettier, but still—

'This man could fight too well!'

'No wonder he was this arrogant. He'd rolled a perfect score!'

'This was an unknown high-tier Hero of Today!!'

It wasn't just Gongyang Jiao. Everyone more or less realized it — only a max-rolled Hero of Today could fight like this. What they couldn't understand was: heroes of today should still fear death. But this one...

'Was he insane?'

'Insane!'

Cheng Shi's madness rooted everyone else in place. Faced with this dramatic, absurd opening, they had no choice but to wait. Whether to start the trial or do anything else, they first needed to figure out what this lunatic wanted. Otherwise, the entire round was unplayable.

Da Yi watched with grave intensity, visibly reassessing Cheng Shi's power. The Chameleon, called out dead-on, weighed his options for a long time and never drew his bow. Poison looked delighted — sure, Cheng Shi had killed her partner on sight, but wasn't he now also pounding her enemy?

'The little priest got stronger. Good for him. As for poor Jiang Chi...'

'Dead was dead. What could you do? All the hopes she'd placed in Jiang Chi would just have to transfer to the little priest.'

Thinking this through, Poison actually laughed out loud.

"Little priest! Mr. Ram is quite formidable, you know. Do you...

"Need help?"

Cheng Shi fought and laughed. He didn't look at Poison, but between clashes, he called back loudly:

"Stand still. This round — I'll speed-run it for you."

The instant those words landed, the [Corruption] Chosen's eyes lit up like stars.

Chapter 515: Follow — or Not?

"GYAAAH—

"You know that bitch!?"

Gongyang Jiao was furious. He'd assumed this was a warrior's duel — only to discover mid-fight that this man actually knew Poison.

Cheng Shi snorted. 'The intimidation factor was well established. No need to keep playing with Mr. Ram.'

He raised an eyebrow and grinned: "Indeed, I do know your mother."

Without waiting for Gongyang Jiao to react — BOOM — he dispatched him the same way he'd dispatched Jiang Chi.

Of course, Gongyang Jiao had one advantage over Jiang Chi: he could parasitize through fear. So Cheng Shi knew the Screaming Earl wasn't truly dead — he'd seized the moment to slip into the ring. But no matter. This time, Cheng Shi wouldn't have a brain twitch and resurrect his employee.

What he needed was an employee who was dead... beyond dead.

Watching another thunderbolt claim another teammate, the remaining three wore grave expressions.

Standing before a teammate who could casually defeat peak players? Claiming you felt no apprehension would be a lie. Da Yi and the Chameleon both wore deep frowns. Even Poison's smile had dimmed noticeably.

She wanted a powerful partner — but not one this powerful.

Less than half an hour in, Cheng Shi had whittled six players down to four. That might make sense in a fish pond match, but in a peak-tier game? Something was deeply wrong.

Everyone looked at Cheng Shi strangely. Cheng Shi couldn't care less. He'd already seen through every angle — knew exactly what each person wanted. Seeing his three remaining teammates standing frozen in the blizzard like statues, he smiled and called out to Da Yi:

"Relax. The mission hit a snag. I'm handling it."

Then he turned to Poison with a smirk: "You scared too?"

Poison blinked, then licked the corner of her lip. Her smile turned loaded: "Scared you won't be hard enough."

Cheng Shi scoffed, ignored her, and limped back toward the bone gate — exposed muscle and skeletal frame showing through his shredded flesh. He called out to the Chameleon as he went:

"One chance. Everything you want is inside.

"Of course, this is a gamble — because what I'm saying might not be true.

"Whether to believe it is your choice."

With that, Cheng Shi stepped through the gate without another word. The moment he crossed the threshold, he hastily pulled out a vial of Prosperity of Yesteryear, gulped it down, and accelerated his healing.

This time, he wasn't merely recruiting employees. He needed to confirm something: whether Aph Ros had been affected!

Logically, an Envoy outside the trial shouldn't have been touched by the reset. But for prudence's sake, Cheng Shi wanted to verify with his own eyes — because re-performing the Yu Xi act was exhausting. Delivering the same lines again was not only mentally draining but excruciatingly awkward. The kind of awkward that curled your toes.

Beyond confirming Aph Ros's status, he also had a few small, easily executed plans.

Whether those plans would go smoothly depended on whether the three outside would cooperate properly.

When Cheng Shi vanished through the gate oozing [Death] and [Corruption] aura, the other three stared at each other in silence.

The quiet settled quickly — and was broken just as fast.

But the one who spoke wasn't the Chameleon whom Cheng Shi had called out. It was... Poison.

Her eyes darted. She slipped to one side of the gate, studying the door built from Jiang Chi's bones, sensing the [Corruption] aura drifting within. She practically itched to follow.

But she was cautious. Rather than diving in, she turned to Da Yi:

"Da Yi — seems you know the little priest. What mission are you two on?"

"..."

Da Yi's face was iron. He said nothing.

He was genuinely shaken. He was even wondering whether the "mission" Cheng Shi mentioned was the same one handed down by that lord. After all, this Fate-Weaver-who-fought-like-a-warrior had been brought in by Old Hu. If Cheng Shi knew...

'Could he be Hu Wei's subordinate?'

'That didn't feel right. The attitude, the presence — it sounded less like Old Hu's underling and more like Old Hu's boss!'

'Add that terrifying power and cryptic tone... could he be—'

Da Yi's mind was in chaos. For a split second, he too wanted to follow through the gate for answers. So when Poison's question reached him, he shot her a heavy look — clearly wondering what connection this "Cheng Shi," who was tied to his own mission, had with the [Corruption] Chosen.

Seeing Da Yi refuse to answer, Poison turned toward the seemingly empty space and called out with a hum:

"Hey — who are you here... to help?"

"Mr. Ram?"

"Since when are you two an item?"

"The little priest says you want an audience with a god. Was that Mr. Ram's condition?"

"And you believed it? Believed a Screaming Earl whose hobby is eating people?"

"Fascinating. Desire flows silent in every heart, yet people insist on branding it with labels that can't see the light. Making it shameful to speak of."

"Everyone wants to meet a god. You could partner openly with normal people. Why choose... a fanatic?"

"Wait, is that why you follow [Silence]? If so, let me counsel you — why not worship my lord instead?"

"Forget it. Brick walls are boring. Where is the little priest taking you?"

"An audience with a god?"

"Which of those sixteen thrones sits behind this door?"

"He can just visit them whenever he pleases now? A bit too fantastical, isn't it... though..."

"Hey, could you say something? If you don't want to go, can I take your spot?"

While Poison kept talking, the Chameleon had at some point already left his original position and appeared right before the gate.

The soundless movement startled Poison. Wariness flickered in her eyes, though her mouth continued to tease:

"I sense the surging of desire. Looks like you want in. Mind if I follow you?"

The Chameleon didn't trust Poison. He neither responded nor approached her. He simply stood rigid before the door, expression shifting multiple times — clearly torn in violent internal conflict.

Poison watched him with keen interest. Even knowing she was seeing only the Chameleon's false body, she tried to read something from those silent eyes.

She was curious: facing desire, could a [Silence] follower resist the temptation?

This scene before the gate was the perfect [Corruption] observation post.

If other [Corruption] followers were here, watching a teammate struggle against inner desire, they'd have started deploying subtle techniques already. After all, [Corruption]'s will was to embrace desire.

But Poison was different. She was never the cause of desire — only its catalyst. She neither guided, nor seduced, nor enabled. Like a quiet passerby, she would only cheer and applaud the moment you chose to embrace your desire.

So this scene was deliciously interesting: a silent [Corruption] follower, observing whether a [Silence] follower was willing to approach [Corruption]...

The Chameleon agonized for a long time. He didn't understand how Cheng Shi had seen through his relationship with Gongyang Jiao. He understood even less how the man had peered directly into his heart and known he craved an audience with a god!

But he seemed to have found an explanation for all these mysteries:

'Who said the other person had to be a player?'

'What player at this tier could casually annihilate two peers?'

'If this being that Poison called "little priest" wasn't a player at all — then everything suddenly made sense.'

'After all, he'd encountered such things before. Abilities like peering into hearts? For Them, perhaps that wasn't difficult at all.'

So after prolonged hesitation, the Chameleon finally steeled his resolve. He glanced at the nearby Poison, then back at the motionless Da Yi. Heart hardening, in full view of both, he walked through the gate with measured steps and vanished into the darkness beyond.

Seeing the Chameleon unable to resist his own desire, Poison smiled brightly.

But the smile didn't last. Because the same choice now confronted her.

Follow — or not?

A question practically dripping with [Corruption]'s will.

Chapter 516: May I... Come In?

Once the decision was made, the [Silence] hunter felt no more hesitation — only excitement about what awaited him beyond the door.

He craved an audience with a god with desperate intensity. Especially after learning, bit by bit, that one Chosen after another had begun meeting Them. The yearning had grown unbearable.

Otherwise, he'd never have agreed to cooperate with Gongyang Jiao in hunting a Chosen.

Even if Poison wasn't known for combat, she was still a rank-one player. Difficult to deal with, and deliberately targeting her risked drawing the unfriendly gaze of her Benefactor, [Corruption].

But the Chameleon didn't care. He even welcomed [Corruption]'s unfriendly gaze!

Yes — this [Silence] follower's desire for a divine audience had reached such fevered insanity that any attention from any god would suffice. Good or bad — just as long as it existed!

Hidden beneath [Silence]'s veil, his low profile meant few outsiders understood him. But today, the moment Cheng Shi saw through his heart, the desire he could no longer contain... erupted.

He expected a monumental surprise behind that door — while warning himself this could just as easily be smoke and mirrors. After all, a hunter knew better than anyone how bait lured prey. And this person had killed his partner, which made an ambush entirely plausible.

But even at one-in-ten-thousand odds, he had to try. Even if it was a trap, he'd accept. The worst case was losing one life.

The cunning hare had three burrows. Surely a seasoned hunter had at least a second life.

So the Chameleon gritted his teeth and walked through. And the instant his vision adjusted from infinite darkness, he saw two figures standing before a magnificent, ancient structure—

No. One god and one human!

The man standing inside the doorway, breathtakingly handsome — flawless, even — couldn't possibly be mortal. The [Corruption] aura billowing from every inch of Him was dense enough to suffocate. A single look sent endless desire flooding through your veins.

A being like this was at minimum a Servant God!

And right now, this Servant God and that "teammate" from earlier stood shoulder to shoulder on either side of the threshold — studying him with evident interest!

The Chameleon's mind went blank.

He suddenly realized his wish had come true. Even if this was only a Servant God — who said a Servant God wasn't a Him!?

He didn't care which faith's deity deigned to receive him. He simply wanted to stand before one Him — a being fundamentally different from mortals, representing the universe's ultimate truth!

Yes, the Chameleon believed every god embodied this world's essence — the root source of all creation. Because he was a zealous member of the God Worship Society!

And as the unmasked fervor in the Chameleon's eyes blazed ever brighter, Cheng Shi finally recognized the issue. Now he understood why this [Silence] follower had cooperated with Gongyang Jiao over so absurd a pretext.

'Ah. One of the God Worship Society's maniacs.'

'They'd stop at nothing for an audience with a god.'

'Given his rank — sixth on the [Silence] leaderboard — his standing in the Society was probably substantial.'

The Chameleon stood trembling, lips moving soundlessly, too overwhelmed to speak. Aph Ros gave him a curious glance, then looked at Cheng Shi and smiled:

"This is the interesting player you mentioned? A mute who can't talk?"

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow: "You know he's one of His followers, and you still dare say that? Aph Ros — I detect a whiff of blasphemy in your tone."

Aph Ros shrugged: "Even if He were present, He wouldn't escape being called a 'mute.' They all call Him that. I'm merely following the trend."

"?" Cheng Shi's interest piqued. Having already confirmed that Aph Ros was unaffected by [Time]'s reset, he'd told the Herald that entertainment might follow soon. Now, seeing Aph Ros's dismissiveness toward [Silence], his amusement deepened: "Seems He's quite adept at endurance."

"Endurance? Perhaps. But I'd lean toward 'spectating.'

"[Silence] is a boring audience member. He never speaks, never critiques. He merely watches everything in the universe in silence — thinking who-knows-what. Nothing piques His interest, yet nothing bores Him either.

"He's like a stone immersed in its own world, never once changing.

"I don't agree with His will, but I quite enjoy observing His followers. In the era when I became [Corruption]'s Envoy, that was one of the few entertainments available.

"His followers want to demonstrate devotion to Him, yet refuse to abandon their desire for expression. In the constant tug between faith and human nature, the most delightful sparks fly.

"Oh, and I suspect your Benefactor would enjoy these things too."

"..."

'He wasn't wrong.' The Fun God had probably observed these people long ago. In fact, He might not have been watching [Silence]'s followers at all — He might have been watching [Silence] Himself!

'What could be more entertaining than goading a "stone" into anger?'

'Tsk. Hard to judge.'

Over here, the conversation flowed animatedly. Over there, the listener hung on every word.

Despite these two openly mocking his Benefactor, the Chameleon felt no offense whatsoever. If not for the last thread of devotion still pulling at him, he would've loved to join the Envoys' chat — playing the sycophant who self-deprecatingly mocked his own Benefactor.

Yes — he was now certain his mysterious teammate was also an Envoy. From fragments of conversation, he'd even deduced the man was most likely a... [Deceit] Envoy!

After all, among all the deities one could associate with the word "amusement," [Deceit] would sit alone at the very top.

'So the teammate who'd killed two others was a [Void] Servant God!?'

'What did that even mean!?'

'As far as he knew, since the Faith Game had descended, not a single piece of information about any [Void] Servant God had ever been collected!'

'And today, he seemed to have witnessed one with his own eyes!'

Looking at Cheng Shi's brilliant smile, the Chameleon clenched his fists until his knuckles went white.

'So this was the smile of [Deceit] incarnate?'

'He had disguised Himself as an ordinary player to deceive everyone, then used a game of desire to lead him before another [Corruption] Envoy.'

'Mystery, power, truth, origin...' For a god-worshipper, today was historic enough to etch into the annals. But the Chameleon didn't care about records. What he cared about was how to earn Their...

Recognition!

The God Worship Society's fundamental desire was never simply an audience. It was recognition — becoming one of Them!

In other words, the ultimate goal for the vast majority of Society members was to become an Envoy of the gods, like the two before him now. And if there existed a rank beneath Envoy that still carried comparable divine prestige, they'd happily accept that too.

God Worship Society — the word "god" was inescapable.

He desperately wanted to break [Silence] and pour out his excitement and reverence. But what remained of his reason told him: now was not the time.

Before demonstrating his worth and earning their appreciation, any self-deprecating or Benefactor-mocking behavior would only lower their impression of him. The era before [Silence] had been the era of [Folly]. Its followers hadn't inherited [Folly]'s arrogance, but they had absorbed the wisdom of the previous faith-era. They knew exactly how to seize an opportunity.

And he knew precisely who had given him this chance to seize.

Thinking this, the Chameleon fixed his burning gaze on Cheng Shi. His eyes were painted with scorching, fervent madness.

Aph Ros noticed the little mute's zealotry shifting targets and smiled:

"So, my brother — you brought him to see me. Do you have some fresh story to tell?"

"I don't see anything interesting about him. Where exactly is this entertainment you promised?"

"..."

Cheng Shi smiled. 'At last.' Aph Ros's curiosity was step one of the plan — and ideally, this step needed to land before any second player wandered in.

He wasn't sure anyone else would follow. But he could cover every possibility with a single quip.

He rubbed his nose, then grinned:

"He's not the entertainment. The real fun is coming next.

"I bumped into your Benefactor's Chosen. You probably know what 'Chosen' means by now — the mortals' self-amusing title. But there's no denying that [Corruption] has shown her some favor.

"This door hasn't closed. And she's right outside.

"Think about it — a player who embraces desire is, at this very moment, resisting her inner desire and refusing to follow us in. Isn't that...

"Entertaining?"

The instant the words left his mouth, a head with black-to-teal gradient hair peeked through the pitch-dark doorway. She looked at the three people inside, blinked, and said:

"May I... come in?"

Chapter 517: Speed-Running the Trial? No — Speed-Running Faith

Poison came in.

She hadn't forced her way in. The moment Aph Ros saw her, He'd extended an invitation to this junior of the same faith.

"No one can refuse a beautiful woman. Especially one who worships Him. So, my brother — why are you standing there? Entertain this lovely follower of my lord for me.

"A pleasure to meet you, miss. What should I call you?"

"..."

Cheng Shi smacked his lips in exasperation. He shot Aph Ros a glance, thinking: 'Now where have I seen that opening move before?'

But he didn't refuse. After all, he'd opened the gate in front of everyone precisely to lure them inside and set his plan in motion.

Cheng Shi had several schemes to resolve the interest conflicts within this trial. The core conflict involved only two people: Poison and Da Yi.

Both coveted the Gift of Sores. But even with time reset and the First Prince still alive, there was only one dagger. So how to balance the final distribution was this "new trial's" greatest puzzle.

Cheng Shi obviously didn't want to give up Da Yi. The Ultraman identity was far more useful to him than the illusory Yu Xi persona. If he could secure the Da Yi pipeline, he might even be able to direct Hu Wei as a personal asset during future impersonations.

'Imagine — the Grand Marshal running errands for me. Just thinking about it was exhilarating!'

'Never mind whether Hu Wei was actually the Grand Marshal. The point was: everyone believed he was.'

But Poison... clearly couldn't be discarded either.

To go far enough in this game, having no friends was impossible. But the people Cheng Shi could genuinely call friends were vanishingly few. In an apocalypse, all types existed. So beyond friends, he needed people who could cooperate on demand, pawns he could deploy freely, and pieces hidden in the shadows...

Cheng Shi couldn't give trust to a [Corruption] follower. But that didn't stop him from mimicking Poison's own approach — "stringing" the other along so both became available tools when needed.

Besides, she had died for him once. Since the promise of "I'll speed-run it for you" was already made, Cheng Shi naturally wouldn't undermine his own word.

As for the remaining Chameleon... never mind. A temp worker didn't qualify. Next.

Therefore, he'd been searching for a way to make one of the two conflicting parties relinquish their claim on the Gift of Sores.

The simplest option was replaying the Ultraman role to make Da Yi stand down, since Cheng Shi had already confirmed Da Yi was running errands for Lord Ultraman's mission. Canceling the mission at its source would eliminate all conflict from this trial.

But he refused. Because...

'Ultraman was himself!'

'Doing that would mean he was the one giving up the Gift of Sores. And why would Cheng Shi surrender a dagger that was rightfully his just for a promise!?''

'Absolutely not!'

In his own words: 'It's not that I'm greedy. It's [Corruption] constantly influencing me. Not just Aph Ros — Poison too. These [Corruption] followers keep eroding me, making me unconsciously embrace my own desires!'

'[Corruption] is terrifying!'

'Blame-shifting complete.'

Since Cheng Shi wouldn't budge, the one to yield could only be Poison.

And so he'd chosen to lead the Chameleon through the gate in front of everyone. He knew these players — especially high-scoring ones with backup plans — could never kill their curiosity. As long as any of them followed, his plan could proceed.

Poison following was ideal. But Cheng Shi's goal wasn't to use status and intimidation to force her to give up. It was... to offer her a different path entirely!

Aph Ros.

The alternative path Cheng Shi had chosen for Poison was Aph Ros.

Since the trial began, Cheng Shi had been analyzing everyone's motivations for pursuing the Gift of Sores. Da Yi and Hu Wei's purpose was obvious — they wanted Dazel's soul, primarily for their [Chaos] mission. But Poison?

She'd been hunting this dagger even before Dazel's vessel, the Barren Walker, was abandoned by [Truth]. This [Corruption] assassin's relentless pursuit couldn't possibly be about upgrading her weapon. Cheng Shi could see her current dagger was already of exceptional quality. She had zero reason to risk her life for a replacement.

So what drove her was the only remaining possibility: a chance to draw closer to Them — or rather, a chance to keep pace with the game's evolving rhythm!

The Chosen all knew the gods were pushing Faith Fusion. Some had already begun fusing. But Poison? As a [Corruption] follower, her Benefactor had never summoned a single player. Forget players — even Aph Ros had never been granted an audience with Him.

Without her Benefactor's guidance, how could [Corruption]'s rank-one player keep up with the Faith Fusion wave?

The answer: with extreme difficulty.

Considering the gods' collective attitude toward [Corruption], They would exercise extreme caution about recruiting His followers.

So Cheng Shi surmised that everything Poison did was self-driven struggle.

Without guidance, she was trying to forge a path through her own understanding of the game.

The Conjugate Whisper Fruit had been her first target. That fruit existed between real and illusory — obtaining it might have granted her a second faith in [Existence] or [Void]. But she'd failed. Because "Zhen Yi" had eaten it.

The Gift of Sores was her second attempt. It contained the soul of a [Decay] Envoy — one who'd formerly been a child of [Prosperity]. Acquiring it could very well open a path to a second faith. That was why she fought so hard.

She pursued fusion with [Decay] not out of affinity — but out of necessity.

Cheng Shi had built these deductions from his understanding of Poison and intelligence gathered over time. Then, to balance both parties' interests and repay Poison's "trust," he'd orchestrated a small setup: bringing Poison face-to-face with Aph Ros.

As [Corruption]'s Envoy — the true king of Dolgod — Aph Ros happened to hold two faiths. If He could offer even the slightest guidance on the Faith Fusion path, Poison might genuinely abandon the dagger she'd pursued for so long — achieving a win-win with Cheng Shi!

So when Cheng Shi said "I'll speed-run it for you," he'd never meant speed-running the trial. He meant something far more audacious: speed-running faith!

He was using Aph Ros's territory to secure Poison a second faith — or at minimum, the guidance toward one!

'Eldest brother as father.' In an era where [Corruption] never showed Himself, who said an Envoy couldn't serve as faith's guide?

Of course, Cheng Shi knew Aph Ros's other faith probably wasn't suited for Poison. [Birth] was terrifying — more terrifying than [Corruption]. Making one person serve as both a malevolent sinner and a birth-borrowed infant? The mere thought would drain anyone's sanity.

But the specific faith didn't matter. What mattered was Aph Ros's method of fusing faiths!

What Poison had always lacked was a guide — not a faith-changing opportunity placed directly before her. Of course, a direct opportunity would be better. But as an intelligent person, she surely understood: teaching a man to fish beats giving him a fish.

With clearer guidance, she could follow the map at her own pace and seek a second faith that truly suited her.

So Cheng Shi's answer for speed-running Poison's faith was... introducing her to Aph Ros. To an Envoy with firsthand Faith Fusion experience!

For a Chosen who'd never once been summoned by her own Benefactor, this was an opportunity beyond measure.

And judging by Aph Ros's attitude, He seemed quite interested in this junior of the same faith.

Cheng Shi smiled. Looking at the slightly bewildered Poison, the corner of his mouth curled. Silently, he thought:

'The opportunity is yours. Whether you seize it, how tightly you grip it, and how much you take — that's entirely up to you, Miss Assassin.'

'With this, our transaction concludes.'

'I'm sorry, but it can only be a transaction. Because I am a liar. I cannot offer trust.'

'And the trust you offered... may not have been sincere either.'

'I won't investigate why Gongyang Jiao suddenly drowned in self-desire and erupted with greed. But I remain grateful for the rescue. At least — you spared me one death.'

'Since They built this chessboard, you and I are both pieces. So pieces huddling for warmth — or even serving as each other's pieces — is nothing to be ashamed of...'

'Wouldn't you agree, Miss Assassin?'

Chapter 518: Two Transactions

Poison recognized Aph Ros's identity.

Not because she was particularly learned or well-versed in history, but because her road toward earning [Corruption]'s attention had been so painfully long. When her Benefactor never answered, she'd had no choice but to study His Envoys instead — and Aph Ros was by far the most famous.

This [Corruption] Envoy championed ultimate indulgence, aspiring to create a paradise of descent where every living being in the cosmos could embrace their desires.

That diverged heavily from her own understanding of [Corruption] — the passive, non-resistant approach. But it didn't matter. The broad direction aligned.

'But hadn't Li Jingming said He was imprisoned in the past by [Existence]? How was He here?'

Poison wasn't stupid. Quite the opposite — she was sharp.

She could sense others' emotions and possessed frightening observational skills. Seeing the Chameleon's rigid, excited posture and the dynamic between Aph Ros and Cheng Shi, she'd already pieced together a rough picture.

What shocked her now wasn't a [Corruption] Envoy materializing before her. It was the little priest's identity, which seemed to have... changed far too much.

'Was he still the same little priest from her memories?'

'He'd opened this gate so she'd fail to resist the temptation and come in to meet Aph Ros?'

'He was fishing... waiting for her to bite?'

'But if she'd known Aph Ros was behind this door, she wouldn't have even needed the bait. She'd have charged in regardless...'

Surprise swirled with a thousand questions, but Poison didn't freeze up like the Chameleon. Suppressing her roiling emotions, she offered Aph Ros a small bow, returning the greeting with the aristocratic etiquette of the Life Era:

"Most esteemed Lord Aph Ros, you may call me... Poison."

Aph Ros raised an eyebrow and smiled:

"Poison. Fine name.

"The fallen scramble for it. The awakened flee from it.

"A bottle of poison doesn't stir desire in itself — but once desire is stirred, one might just want to taste it.

"So that's how you understand Him."

Poison was stunned. But she swallowed the shock almost instantly. Whether in terms of comprehending [Corruption] or sensing emotion, Aph Ros was her ancestor. That He could pinpoint her philosophy with surgical precision wasn't remotely strange.

She didn't feel anything was off. She simply smiled and nodded — "acknowledging" Aph Ros's assessment.

Watching this, Cheng Shi's lips curled ever so slightly.

Poison really was an interesting player. She was utterly unwavering on her path of [Corruption]. Just now, any other player would've anxiously asked, "Is my path wrong?" But she hadn't. Not only that — she'd adopted a posture of graceful acceptance, even hinting at a stance of "seeking common ground while preserving differences."

Whether that posture was genuine or performed? Perhaps only Aph Ros could tell.

And Aph Ros did tell. He sensed not only Poison's complex emotions but also Cheng Shi's intent. Cheng Shi had never mentioned this same-faith player before, yet now brought her here — clearly with a request.

Connecting that to the persona and gambit Cheng Shi had spoken of earlier, Aph Ros understood instantly. He smiled knowingly:

"So, my brother — what sort of transaction are we making this time?"

Cheng Shi's smile turned enigmatic:

"A deal that's extremely favorable for you.

"You've seen it — before you stands a genius with a highly unique understanding of [Corruption]'s will. How well she aligns with your Benefactor, you know better than I.

"And you, Aph Ros — I said [Time]'s cage cannot hold you. That wasn't mere flattery. What I'm saying is: now that the Evil Infant Inquisition is no longer mired in the past, now that Dolgod has guests once more — have you considered that your will, too, can be reborn? Carried forward by people of this new era... tested on your behalf, spread in your name?"

As Cheng Shi spoke these words, Aph Ros's entire demeanor transformed.

His gaze grew razor-sharp. His expression turned grave. It was as though time had rewound to the moment [Time] had descended. He fixed Cheng Shi with blazing eyes, mind churning through every possibility.

"He won't agree." After a long silence, Aph Ros sighed.

Cheng Shi knew Aph Ros meant [Time]. He scoffed: "And then?"

"?"

Aph Ros frowned, about to speak, but Cheng Shi continued:

"What does His agreement matter?

"Even if He objects, could your situation possibly get worse than it already is?

"Would He really banish you — back into the past — now that you've re-emerged in the present?

"You said [Birth] is searching for Her children. Would She allow Her child — once revived — to die again? Even if that child is rebellious...

"You know the answer. She wouldn't.

"And speaking irreverently — even if [Birth] can't stop [Time], what about... [Deceit]?"

"My lord will not tolerate [Existence] continuing to lord over this era. Because the one who gets to lord over this era is Him.

"I've said it before: [Void] is meaningless, but [Void] needs entertainment.

"Having a relic of a bygone era re-enact the very events that enraged [Time]? Isn't that the ultimate entertainment?

"Besides, He isn't [Time]'s opposite. And the one proposing this plan is a [Fate] follower. He pays no cost yet gets to sit back and watch the show. A spectacle like this — I don't think He'd miss it. Nor would He want to.

"So I ask again: what does [Time]'s agreement matter?

"If He didn't want you back, then even if I'd stumbled upon you in that trial, He'd never have allowed you to appear in this era.

"Times have changed, Aph Ros. Didn't you want to borrow [Void]'s power to attempt those mad ideas of yours? I can't break [Time]'s shackles for you, but I can find you some... suitable test subjects.

"And she..."

Cheng Shi pointed at the thoroughly dazed Poison.

"She is, as of now, the finest available [Corruption] test subject.

"Of course, following desire means no coercion. If Miss Assassin doesn't wish to be part of this experiment, I have others—"

"Who says I don't want to?" Poison seemed to grasp Cheng Shi's meaning, though she couldn't fathom why he would hand her such a massive opportunity for free. Even so, she agreed in a heartbeat.

'Why refuse a gift dropped in your lap?'

'She had no idea what this "experiment" was, but anyone with ears could hear: this so-called experiment was plainly a chance to draw closer to Them!'

No fool would turn it down. And Poison, being exceptionally shrewd, certainly wouldn't.

What she didn't notice was that the Chameleon, listening nearby, could barely conceal the burning envy in his eyes. He wanted desperately to raise his hand and volunteer as a test subject too.

Poison sensed the Chameleon's emotions. She sensed Cheng Shi's as well. And so she smiled — beaming.

"You want me to want it, so I want what you want."

"..."

'Lady, are we doing tongue-twisters now?'

Cheng Shi scoffed but didn't respond. Instead, he turned back to Aph Ros: "The volunteer is in position. What does the experiment's host think?"

Aph Ros exhaled softly. Countless kaleidoscopic hues danced in His eyes. Barely restraining the urge to shed His clothes, He smiled brilliantly:

"I like [Void]. And I like this era.

"My brother, I must admit — your proposal is compelling, and very [Corruption].

"But I have to ask: if you had such a fine method, why not tell me from the start?

"Dangling it piece by piece, luring me forward step by step — are you... trying to drag me into [Deceit]'s abyss?"

"..."

'What [Deceit]'s abyss? Since when did [Deceit] have an abyss? Even if it did, it wouldn't be called an "abyss" — it'd be called Mockery and Jeering!'

'Besides, who leads with a royal flush in poker? You take it one step at a time. And this particular hand was only just drawn — he hadn't planned it before.'

Cheng Shi pursed his lips and shook his head:

"[Deceit] has no abyss. But [Void] will always lead to void.

"I'm not like you — someone who stockpiled all their chips in a bygone era. I was born into this one, and my mask was torn apart almost immediately.

"While recovering my identity, I can't focus only on myself. I also need to please Him when appropriate.

"After all, no matter how much He mocks me, He's still my Benefactor.

"I need His protection.

"Oh, right — I forgot to introduce myself. My two teammates — you may call me Cheng Shi. Or you may address me as Yu Xi.

"I'm [Deceit]'s Envoy, and also an ordinary player.

"Of course, unless it's somewhere private, I prefer you call me Cheng Shi. Just... a Fate Weaver with a bad reputation."

Hearing Cheng Shi finally confirm his identity outright, both Poison and the Chameleon wore expressions of shock.

Though the former's was more complex, and the latter's more excited.

"Little priest, you—"

"Pardon — a correction. I'm not some little—"

Before Cheng Shi could finish, Poison amended: "Big priest, you—"

"?"

Cheng Shi went numb. For a moment, he felt as though the Prisoner had possessed Poison.

Seeing Cheng Shi's exasperation, Poison laughed — the same playful laugh she always gave when teasing him. She didn't know why Cheng Shi had suddenly become [Deceit]'s Envoy Yu Xi, but sensing his emotions, she confirmed this was indeed the same Cheng Shi she knew, at least.

"So you've always been Yu Xi, and never any Cheng Shi?"

Cheng Shi shook his head. His smile turned meaningful: "Wrong. I've always been Cheng Shi. Never any Yu Xi."

Sincere words. But words from a [Deceit] Envoy? Probably no one would believe them.

Aph Ros gave Cheng Shi an appreciative look and smiled:

"My brother, you really do keep surprising me. I'm already eager for our next meeting."

"If the surprises keep coming, then even if what lies ahead truly is [Deceit]'s abyss, I think I'd follow my desires right in.

"But for now, I'm more interested in Miss Poison here.

"Beautiful lady — would you care to share a drink with me, on a Dolgod afternoon?"

Poison looked at Cheng Shi, then at Aph Ros, and smiled just as brilliantly: "With pleasure."

Without hesitation, she walked through that inner door as if returning home.

She never once looked back at Cheng Shi. Because she knew he wanted her to go in. She might not have guessed every reason, but she was willing to show Cheng Shi her trust.

Just as Cheng Shi had thought: the [Corruption] Chosen also believed that two chess pieces on this cold board ought to huddle together for warmth.

And if one piece somehow, inexplicably, became the player moving the pieces...

All the better. Lying in a player's palm was warmer than standing on the board, wasn't it?

So Poison smiled again. The aura of [Corruption] thickened.

"Very well. We're off for a heart-to-heart. As for you, my brother, and this little mute...

"We'll give you some privacy."

With a wave, Aph Ros led Poison away and moved to close the Evil Infant Inquisition's gates. But just before He shut them, Cheng Shi requested one more thing.

"What?"

Cheng Shi smiled secretively, leaned close, and whispered a few words.

Aph Ros gave Cheng Shi a peculiar look, then fulfilled his strange request.

"My brother, best remember my warning."

Cheng Shi nodded with a smile: "Of course. Until I've recovered my true self, I won't provoke Him."

Watching Aph Ros close the doors, Cheng Shi turned to face the Chameleon:

"Tsk. Don't look at me like that. Those feverish eyes remind me of the Screaming Earl.

"Honestly, I don't trust human 'loyalty' much. Let's do this — sign this agreement.

"It's a contract... with text invisible to mortals. The content is a one-year loyalty oath. If, over this year, you demonstrate sufficient loyalty, I'll give you the opportunity you've dreamt of.

"But if, within this year, you break your oath, then...

"May fate be kind to you, child."

Before Cheng Shi even finished, the Chameleon had already scrawled his name in fervent devotion.

To him, this wasn't a slave's contract of servitude. It was more like a guidebook — a passport toward Them!

The true Road to Ascension lay right before him. How could he not be moved!?

And so, under the lure of approaching Them and becoming one of Them, the Chameleon never changed color again. From start to finish, he maintained the hue of fanaticism.

'God Worship Society members really were all lunatics.'

Cheng Shi griped internally while smiling outwardly. He took back the plain A4 sheet and studied the name written on the white paper with interest, clicking his tongue in admiration:

"Qu Yan?"

"Fine handwriting. Fine name!"

Chapter 519: A True Speed-Run!

Cheng Shi waited a while longer.

His original hope was that Da Yi would also succumb to curiosity and follow — so he could re-stage their earlier conversation right before the Evil Infant Inquisition's doors, only this time with a far more seamless performance.

But this [Chaos] assassin was extremely cautious. Especially after Cheng Shi's inexplicable remark, he seemed too wary to enter.

Not that it mattered for the plan. The moment Poison chose the Aph Ros path, the trial's outcome was already in Cheng Shi's pocket.

He led Qu Yan out of the Inquisition and back to the Rosna Recruitment Square. When Da Yi saw the two of them emerge one after the other, wearing peculiar expressions, his face shifted slightly.

"Poison..."

"Don't worry about her. I introduced her to an old friend. They'll have a lot to discuss."

Cheng Shi cut off Da Yi's probing, didn't even look at him directly, and strode toward the side of the square. Walking, he spoke:

"As for you..."

"Follow me. Rosna has seen many events. Many changes, too — some unexpected even to me, some threaded with Their will. I misjudged the situation this time.

"Your mission just got harder. So to ensure no further complications, I came personally.

"I sent Hu Wei elsewhere. As for those two who died — hmph, it was to strip away the attention of whoever stood behind them.

"And this [Silence] child..."

"His name is Qu Yan. He'll be traveling with us for a while."

Every sentence struck Da Yi like a sledgehammer. The shock was staggering — especially when Cheng Shi said "I sent Hu Wei elsewhere." That nearly pushed him over the edge.

'He really was Lord Ultraman. Could only be Lord Ultraman.'

'No one else could know everything they'd done so precisely.'

Dazed enlightenment washed over him. He followed in a stupor — not baffled by the situation, but by why this lord would disguise Himself as Cheng Shi. Yet as he mulled it over, memory carried him back to the scene of Old Hu bringing Cheng Shi in.

Human logic, once established, ran on rails. Before the reset, Da Yi had already figured everything out. Now he simply re-walked that logic — and convinced himself for the second time.

'Cheng Shi was that lord!'

Once this clicked, the way he looked at the Chameleon turned strange.

'This [Silence] follower had probably already been controlled by his lord's [Chaos] methods. Was the poor sap still thinking his lord was some [Silence] Envoy?'

'And those two who died — Gongyang Jiao and the unknown teammate. How pitiful. Everyone knew a peak player's climb was brutal. Yet just because they stumbled into Lord Ultraman's personal visit, they'd lost a life in total silence.'

'Truly tragic. Could someone killed by an Envoy even resurrect?'

Da Yi's mind raced. Beside him, Qu Yan's thoughts churned just as fiercely.

This [Silence] follower had no idea Da Yi wasn't [War] but [Chaos]. So his mind was preoccupied with one thing: 'No wonder this assassin was always so unshakably bold around everyone. Beyond [War]'s toughness, he had an Envoy standing behind him!'

'If I had an Envoy backing me, I'd be bold too!'

'Lord Yu Xi had clearly built a considerable network among the players. He'd said something about "recovering himself"?''

'What did that mean? He wasn't complete?'

'An incomplete Envoy was already this formidable. If He recovered...'

Qu Yan's gaze burned hotter. A single thought consumed his mind: what could he do to help Lord Yu Xi recover himself!?

'I need to improve! Desperately!'

And so, two players broadcasting on completely different frequencies — each armed with wholly self-consistent logic — interpreted each other's behavior and followed behind Cheng Shi together.

At this point, even if their identities shifted again mid-journey, neither would bat an eye.

Because in their minds, wasn't that exactly what [Chaos] ([Deceit]) was like?

Cheng Shi walked fast, narrating Rosna's background for both as he went.

These details had originally come from Poison's mouth. But now, every word became further proof of Lord Ultraman or Lord Yu Xi's vast erudition.

Then again, Envoys were naturally scholarly. They transcended all.

"The Rosna royals abandoned their faith. The Gift of Sores was also lost through a chain of accidents. The causes are complex — you don't need to know. Just know that this house shelters the First Prince and his wife and child.

"Go. Bring them back. We're heading into the court. Time's running short."

Da Yi and Qu Yan had no idea what exactly was running short, but upon hearing the order, they executed immediately — faces solemn, movements precise.

They broke down the door and subdued the household effortlessly. Finding the couple and child exactly as described, a few cursory interrogations confirmed their identities. The two exchanged glances and quietly buried their astonishment.

Believing was one thing. Witnessing every word from that lord proven correct firsthand? That shock was something else entirely.

Both players were now in the same state: dazed, with a thread of excitement running through it.

They had no idea what Rosna held in store or where the trial was headed. But they knew that with that lord present, everything was... just so simple.

'This feeling was incredible. So this was what being carried felt like.'

'And this was a peak-tier match! Who else could carry a team of peak players through one? The only answer: Them...'

Seeing the two emerge with their prisoners, Cheng Shi smiled and headed for the court.

"There's still time. The historian whom the Rosna royals abandoned probably hasn't frozen to death in the blizzard yet. Though even if he's dead, it's fine — dead men don't lie."

Da Yi and Qu Yan followed closely, hauling the First Prince's family. Da Yi's curiosity was killing him. He desperately wanted to ask what had happened in Rosna, but feared that asking something too trivial would make him look ignorant before his lord.

He wanted the Chameleon to ask instead. But a [Silence] follower was truly...

'Cheating!'

He could tell Qu Yan was just as curious. But the man's faith in [Silence] kept his mouth sealed.

'Hey — you've already been bamboozled by [Chaos]. What are you still holding back for?'

Da Yi was frustrated. But the instant he considered that Lord Ultraman's identity in the other man's eyes was probably something entirely different, he sighed and accepted his fate.

"Old— Old Hu wasn't fortunate enough to follow you here, my lord. His luck was poor."

"?"

'This burly, bushy-browed catchphrase-addict was actually pretty sharp.'

Cheng Shi scoffed: "He has his own path."

Seeing his lord in decent spirits, Da Yi finally couldn't resist his curiosity. He struck while the iron was hot, asking timidly:

"My lord, the historian you mentioned..."

Cheng Shi had long sensed Da Yi's curiosity. He'd deliberately withheld details precisely so someone would ask. Otherwise, having Lord Ultraman volunteer every explanation unprompted would've been terrible for the image.

'That said — credit where due, [Chaos] was reliable. If both of these guys followed [Silence], all this foreknowledge would've had no stage.'

With that thought, Cheng Shi smiled and "graciously" laid out the full chain of events behind the Rosna royals' flight. Only after hearing everything did Da Yi finally grasp what "the Gift of Sores is lost" really meant.

"Then, my lord... what are we doing now?"

"Finding the historian. Restoring the Teleportation Array.

"History is never torn. [Memory] won't allow Them to smear His collection excessively.

"Since [Decay]'s guidance points to the Rosna Empire, we will find a way to locate the Gift of Sores.

"I need the historian and this First Prince to recall exactly when that dagger went missing. If someone infiltrated the Prince's quarters to take it — the only culprit would be a rat inside the court.

"And now the court is empty. If we want to find that rat, the Teleportation Array is our only avenue."

Yes — Cheng Shi's target was the Teleportation Array.

He'd suddenly realized that in the previous loop, buried under Da Yi's leadership and the team's convoluted interpersonal dynamics, he'd missed critical information. Chief among them: the damaged Teleportation Array.

Though the historian hadn't lied, nobody knew exactly how badly the array was damaged — whether it could be repaired, or how. Six players had brawled until their brains leaked out, only to end with the Screaming Earl eating the sole witness.

This time, every interference factor had been eliminated. Cheng Shi finally had sufficient time to properly trace the Gift of Sores.

The group pushed through the blizzard into the court. When the First Prince beheld its vast, empty halls — not a soul in sight — his expression turned indescribably complicated.

"Are you mourning the Rosna royals' stupidity? Or lamenting your own foolishness?"

"Your Highness — we're almost there. I hope that when you see the historian, the two of you can strike the spark I'm looking for.

"Remember: that spark is the only Flame of Hope that can keep you from dying in this blizzard."

Chapter 520: The First Prince and Old Gallon

Cheng Shi led the group to where Da Yi had originally found the historian. His timing was perfect — the emaciated old man lay rigid on the ground, nearly frozen to death.

Old Gallon desperately needed healing, but no priest was present. Under an Envoy's watchful eye, however, anyone could become a "priest."

Qu Yan especially. A task this trivial couldn't possibly require Lord Yu Xi's personal attention. The moment he saw Gallon's vitality fading, he produced a healing potion from his storage space and poured it down the old man's throat.

The potion worked fast. Before long, Old Gallon regained consciousness. He took one look at the strangers before him and opened his mouth to rebuke them — then spotted, behind the group, the First Prince who'd been cast out of the court long ago.

This prince — who'd sworn to conscript every soldier in the city and fight the World Destroyers to the death — was currently trussed up like a dumpling, misery written across his face as he met Old Gallon's eyes.

Gallon looked at the prince. Looked at the strangers. And felt his world crumbling.

He'd mistaken Cheng Shi's group for World Destroyers again.

This time, Cheng Shi didn't bother correcting him. With absolute control over the situation, identity hardly mattered. If Gallon wanted to see them as World Destroyers, then World Destroyers they'd be.

In truth, the scene told itself to anyone with eyes. The First Prince was clearly a kidnapping victim. These three "World Destroyers" had found their way here and had obviously extracted everything from the prince's mouth already. In Gallon's mind, they were surely hunting down the Rosna royals and nobility — though what role the famously stubborn First Prince was playing in this "hunt" remained unclear.

He didn't believe a man like the First Prince would bow to an enemy. But the evidence before him bred fear. So Gallon's lips trembled as he quavered:

"Your Highness... how did you..."

Hearing this, Cheng Shi scoffed and turned to the First Prince and his family.

The prince's expression crumbled — a terror-struck face turned away. Beyond the embarrassment of his heroic image being shattered in real-time, what dominated his features was... guilt toward the historian before him.

Cheng Shi couldn't directly sense emotions, but he read the undercurrents within that twisted expression. When he connected it to everything he'd previously learned, a bold guess leapt into his mind.

'Had the First Prince lost the dagger... on purpose!?'

Cheng Shi nearly laughed. He fixed the pair with an amused look and smiled:

"What's this — two people who see each other daily, suddenly acting like strangers?"

"Nothing to be ashamed of?"

"A prince who'd do anything to sever ties with the entire royal family for self-preservation. And a historian who was exploited by the entire royal house without even realizing it.

"I went through considerable effort to arrange this reunion. Not so you two could perform a silent drama for me.

"Talk. Where did that dagger go?"

The First Prince trembled violently but didn't speak. Old Gallon's eyes swam with confusion as he mumbled: "Dagger? What dagger?"

Cheng Shi scoffed: "Allow me to jog your memory. Your child was playing with the First Prince's child when they accidentally stumbled into a sealed room and discovered a dagger the prince had once used. Yes — that dagger. Ring any bells?"

Old Gallon remembered. But he immediately shook his head hard:

"It was taken! That dagger must have been taken! When His Highness was expelled from the court, he wasn't allowed to keep a single possession. And when His Majesty fled, the palace guards swept up every last piece of wealth. If the dagger was in the prince's quarters, it's long gone—"

"Oh? Is that so?"

"Even now, after everything, this prince's image in your heart remains so righteous and unblemished.

"But I'm curious: how exactly did two children, roughhousing, happen to wander into a sealed room containing a 'relic of faith' that the First Prince himself feared and avoided at all costs?"

"Hmm, you probably don't know those details, Gallon. So let's have the prince answer instead.

"Your Highness — a dagger you regarded as a divine gift of [Decay], something you feared. Why would you store it in such an insecure 'sealed room'?"

Cheng Shi smiled. He even stressed the words "sealed room" with pointed emphasis.

"..."

"..."

The First Prince fell silent. And as his silence stretched, Old Gallon seemed to guess something. His eyes widened further and further.

Both players observed the NPCs with fascination — marveling at their lord's omniscience on one hand, and greedily speculating about the story of this place on the other.

Old Gallon's expression shifted to utter disbelief. Whether it was the phrase "divine gift of [Decay]" that frightened him, or the sudden connection of many small details — he raised a trembling finger at the prince. He didn't even call him "Your Highness" anymore. Eyes burning with grief and fury, he spat:

"You... you... what did you do to Ai Lian?"

Cheng Shi snorted and turned to the prince: "Answer. The historian is asking you a question."

The First Prince, seeing no escape, clenched both fists, stepped sideways to shield his wife and child, raised his head — expression equal parts anguished and wretched — and burst out:

"I didn't want to do this! But I had to protect my wife, my child! I was forced! I had no choice!

"That dagger — it kept threatening me, demanding I feed it massive quantities of blood and vitality. I'm not the emperor! I'm just a prince! I didn't have enough to offer! To satisfy its demands, my family was on the brink of collapse!

"And the divine punishments it described — they were too horrifying! I couldn't withstand a god's wrath! I just wanted to be rid of it!

"But its voice echoed in my ears night after night, robbing me of sleep. So I had no choice but to find a way to pass it on!

"Gallon, I didn't want to hurt Ai Lian. I tried other ways, many times. But she was the only one — the only one who showed interest in that antique dagger. Under your influence, Ai Lian loved studying old things.

"Gallon, you must believe me — I wasn't targeting her specifically. I just couldn't hand the dagger to an adult. Only a child! Only a child's innocence would be dismissed. Even if someone saw or heard, they'd chalk it up to Ai Lian's wild imagination.

"Gallon, I didn't—

"Gallon, what are you doing! Gallon, how dare you— AHHH! My lord, save me!! My lord, I struck the spark! My lord, save me!!!"

"AHHH!!"

A blood-curdling scream tore through the tomb-silent court. The twisted shriek overpowered even the howling blizzard, sending shivers through everyone present.

Accompanying the scream was a rhythmic, steady pounding — the sound of stone meeting bone.

Gallon had snapped. He'd snatched a cobblestone from the ground, eyes crimson, and thrown himself onto the First Prince. Blow after blow he hammered the prince into the earth, until flesh, sinew, and bone melded with the snow beneath — forming a murky, crimson stream. Only then did Old Gallon stop, gasping for air, body convulsing as he collapsed sideways. He seemed to have spent every last ounce of strength in his life.

He was lost. Helpless.

This historian of Rosna hadn't understood what the dagger was for. He'd only understood that the First Prince had schemed against his child to escape disaster — and that was enough to drive him mad.

Meanwhile, the First Prince's family — his wife and child, who'd watched him be beaten to death — appeared calmer than Gallon himself.

The princess, face white as parchment, clutched her child against her body. Fighting through terror, she begged the "lords" for mercy. "Innocent! I didn't know anything!" she kept repeating. But she never once looked at Gallon.

Perhaps she understood that whether she and her child survived had nothing to do with this historian who'd killed her husband — and everything to do with the three standing figures.

Cheng Shi watched it all in silence. He merely glanced at Qu Yan beside him. Qu Yan understood immediately, producing another potion to revive the near-dead Gallon.

Gallon jolted awake from his frenzy, dropped to his knees, and wailed at Cheng Shi: "My lord, save my child! My lord, save my child!"

And in that moment, Cheng Shi suddenly realized: Old Gallon hadn't been chosen as the "lucky survivor" simply because he knew about the ancient Teleportation Array from history. The larger reason was almost certainly that his child was being held hostage by the Rosna emperor.

But who could have guessed that this emperor had used such means to reclaim the very calamity his own prince had desperately tried to shed...

So round and round it went — and it all circled back to the Teleportation Array the Rosna royals had used to flee.

Meaning that even if the players had never uncovered this absurd truth, as long as they'd bulldozed straight ahead following the Teleportation Array, they'd have eventually found clues.

'Heh. Fate... truly was something magical.'

Cheng Shi smiled and helped Old Gallon to his feet.

"The one who can save your child isn't me. It's you.

"How badly damaged is the Teleportation Array you sabotaged? Whether it can be repaired — that's not for me to decide."

Old Gallon froze. But quickly, his eyes hardened with resolve, and he nodded firmly.

"I can restore it, my lord! I will restore it!"

Outwardly, Cheng Shi said "I believe you." But the moment he turned away, he "summoned" the First Prince back up. Addressing the green-glowing corpse, he repeated the same questions. Only after receiving identical answers did his smile grow truly radiant.

"Let's go. Pick up the pace."

Then he turned to the prince's widow with a grin:

"Thank [Fate] for His mercy. Though the one who saved you was [Time]."