

The Gods 431

Chapter 431: Since You're Cheng Shi, Then I Can Only Be Zhen Yi

Cheng Shi had been cut down— a single blade cleaving through his body.

The searing breath of flame still raged inside him, so violently that the blood spraying in every direction was instantly burned to ash. Cheng Shi himself had been reduced to a charred... husk.

He wasn't dead. In the instant of impact, he'd wedged the Tongue of Eating Lies against the side of his neck to prevent decapitation, then let [War]'s fury tear through his entire body and slam him into the ground.

Though he hadn't died thanks to the protection of his "Vitality" authority, not dying didn't mean not hurting.

That blow had been savage. Cheng Shi had no idea what fraction of the Grand Marshal's true strength it represented, but he could tell from the temperature of those flames alone that Zhen Yi had genuinely shattered the man's composure.

Especially since she'd done it in the exact same way— twice.

Somehow, he'd inexplicably become Zhen Yi again.

The only difference was that last time it had been deliberate. This time, it was involuntary.

But to Hu Wei, whether it was deliberate or not didn't matter. What mattered was that Zhen Yi needed to be taught a lesson she wouldn't forget.

Except the lesson hadn't reached Zhen Yi at all— Cheng Shi was the one who learned it.

From his own visceral experience, he distilled a single truth: stay away from Zhen Yi, or fate itself will turn unfortunate.

Hu Wei wasn't entirely certain which Cheng Shi was actually Zhen Yi, but to him it made no difference. Whether one was real, neither was real— he didn't care. What he cared about was that the Mediocre Person Society's chaos had to end here and now, and the "danger" lurking in the shadows had to be dragged into the open.

Only then could he ensure his reputation wouldn't be turned into a joke by this pack of liars.

So this strike carried more symbolic weight than practical damage. It was a deterrent aimed at everyone present, and a declaration directed at the still-hidden Zhen Yi.

His message was unmistakable: the past can be forgiven, but tonight— don't provoke me.

The Grand Marshal's resolve was absolute, and the others' loathing for Zhen Yi was genuine, so Cheng Shi's injuries were predictably the worst.

Honestly, if not for possessing "Vitality" at this moment, that single blow might have truly sent him to meet the lord seated upon the Bone Throne.

So why not offer praise to [Prosperity]!

It was Big Cat's protection of her friend that had allowed Cheng Shi to survive this ordeal.

Of course, Cheng Shi also knew he absolutely could not dodge that strike, because dodging would have meant losing.

He needed to take the blow without resistance to earn himself a chance— a chance for a desperate comeback!

Because Zhen Yi's false accusation had left him with nowhere to turn. Tonight, he was destined to become a clown.

But he refused to accept being toyed with to death by a single sentence from Zhen Yi, so his mind raced until he hit upon a plan for a desperate reversal:

Become Zhen Yi!

Yes— under Zhen Yi's "identification," fully become Zhen Yi!

The moment Zhen Yi had disguised herself as "Cheng Shi" and opened her mouth, the real Cheng Shi had already fallen into an impossible trap of self-verification.

No one would believe him. Especially not this group of peak players who despised Zhen Yi.

Because even if they believed both Cheng Shis were fakes, they probably wouldn't bother wasting brainpower figuring out which was real.

So from that moment on, Cheng Shi had already lost the ability to prove himself.

'Since I can't be me, then I'll become you!'

Only this way— only by swapping identities with Zhen Yi— would these furious Chosen Ones show any wariness toward him, and he'd no longer be mired in the quicksand of self-proof, caught between two impossible positions.

Moreover, based on Cheng Shi's understanding of Zhen Yi, the moment he became her, she would gladly welcome the spectacle and gleefully, "tacitly," play the part of him!

Because that was simply who she was— a person who wished she could toy with everyone every waking moment.

And right now was the perfect opportunity for her to continue playing everyone even after her identity had been exposed.

And the one giving her that opportunity was none other than tonight's clown— the very one she'd crafted with her own hands.

Only now, this clown refused to stay backstage any longer. He was about to take the stage!

The thick smoke cleared. The flames still burned. Cheng Shi lay in the crater carved by the greatsword that had pierced through him, coughing blood while casting a gleefully mischievous gaze at everyone watching. He called out:

"Oh my, caught again!

"But... hee~

"This one doesn't count, because someone cheated!"

"..."

"..."

"..."

The silence fell so suddenly that even the Prisoner went quiet.

He'd never imagined he'd meet someone today who was on his exact wavelength, and even less that this interesting Fate Weaver he'd admired was actually Zhen Yi in disguise.

So what did that mean?

Zhen Yi was his kindred spirit?

"..." 'Revolting!'

So what was the real Cheng Shi actually like?

He whipped his head around to look at the other side of the venue, only to see the "real Cheng Shi" heave a helpless sigh, shaking his head with a rueful smile:

"My apologies, everyone. It's not that I didn't want to warn you sooner, but I was outmaneuvered. She beat me again, and I was trapped inside that insufferable Void Memory Pocket.

"Fortunately, some outside force shattered the pocket, and I managed to break free.

"But I should make one thing clear— you've probably guessed already— I have absolutely nothing to do with this Master of Trickery...

"I'm just a victim of public opinion, that's all."

!!!

She'd taken up her role in this play without missing a beat, and hadn't exposed him!

What's more, her delivery was impeccable— her tone suffused with self-deprecation yet never veering into self-pity. It immediately improved everyone's impression of "Cheng Shi" considerably.

Even Hu Wei's gaze as he looked at "him" carried a hint of nostalgic recognition. Clearly, this "Cheng Shi" before him closely matched the Cheng Shi in his memories.

But that wasn't the reason he could accept "Cheng Shi's" identity. The more important reason was that "Zhen Yi" had appeared!

She'd already been smashed into the ground by the Grand Marshal!

Everyone studied "Cheng Shi" for a moment, then turned in unison toward "Zhen Yi" lying in the rubble.

"Zhen Yi's" face wore a gleeful grin, but inside, his heart plummeted into an abyss!

'This Zhen Yi is absolutely terrifying!'

Her impersonation was so flawless that Cheng Shi couldn't help thinking— even if he'd truly been standing in that position, what he would have said would have been more or less exactly the same.

She'd even voluntarily admitted to the truth of her false accusation against him, and fabricated a perfectly plausible reason for "his" arrival at the scene.

After all, what other reason could two people who didn't get along possibly have for showing up together? Obviously, one of them had been kidnapped.

'This Zhen Yi— her insight into people and her powers of observation are absolutely terrifying.'

Cheng Shi even wondered: if he let her keep playing this role a few more times, would anyone ever realize she wasn't the real Cheng Shi?

"Cheng Shi" seemed to sense "Zhen Yi's" gaze. He looked toward her with resigned exasperation and sighed:

"Zhen Yi, enough. Give it up. This place is surrounded by Chosen Ones.

"If you apologize now and return what you stole from me, I can try to put in a good word with Brother Hu on your behalf.

"As for the others...

"That's beyond my ability. You're on your own."

"..."

'Oh, so that's how it is!'

'You want to snatch some spoils from me too, is that it?!'

Cheng Shi was gnashing his teeth internally, but outwardly he mimicked Zhen Yi's signature feigned ignorance and asked:

"Stuff?"

"Hee~"

"What stuff of yours ended up with me?"

"Cheng Shi" rubbed his forehead in weary exasperation, as if "Zhen Yi playing dumb" had made him laugh despite his frustration.

"The whistle. The whistle Hu Xuan gave me. Can I have it back?"

Cheng Shi's heart lurched, and he sneered inwardly.

'What a smooth little pickpocket!'

What did she want the Night Curtain Spring Whistle for? Did she want to see Hu Xuan?

No— it probably wasn't Hu Xuan the person she wanted to see, but rather the identity Hu Xuan carried: the Eternal Sun!

So she'd noticed his arrival and set up this entire scheme in advance?

No, that was impossible.

His decision to impersonate her had been nothing more than a flash of inspiration born from his identity crisis, so her move must have been improvised too.

A spur-of-the-moment attempt to skim something off him before walking away?

But the question was— was she aiming at Hu Xuan, or at what stood behind Hu Xuan...

[Birth]?

Chapter 432: Reversed— Everything's Reversed

The venue fell deathly silent.

The other players, stunned by the absurd spectacle unfolding before them, didn't dare make a sound. They huddled motionlessly in their corners, dutifully serving as background scenery, surrendering the entire hall to the Chosen Ones at the front.

And those Chosen Ones, after listening with furrowed brows for a moment, each formed their own theories about the situation.

Grand Marshal Hu Wei first glanced at Long Jing standing amid the ruins of the stage. Seeing that Long Jing was still glaring at "Zhen Yi" with undisguised irritation, Hu Wei exhaled heavily, then turned to his brother— "Cheng Shi."

"Hu Xuan? Brother, you know that Eternal Sun?"

Hearing this, the real Cheng Shi felt a chill. It seemed his dear big brother had some kind of grudge against Hu Xuan.

What was going on— had Hu Xuan secretly carried his child or something?

He speculated about the history between those two while anxiously awaiting Zhen Yi's response.

Although swapping identities had been a brilliant move to save himself, it undeniably gave Zhen Yi the power to control "his" identity.

Zhen Yi's reputation was already the type where one more louse wouldn't make the itching worse, but his own identity was squeaky clean. If Zhen Yi spouted some nonsense right now, it would be absolutely catastrophic.

But to Cheng Shi's surprise, Zhen Yi didn't pull any stunts. She played the part of a Fate Weaver who'd been burned by "herself" perfectly, offering only a mild smile:

"We've met, sort of. We were matched in the same trial once.

"Back then she wasn't anything close to an Eternal Sun yet, but you could already tell this Life Sage was destined for greatness.

"I just didn't expect her to rise this fast.

"I suppose my 'support work' must have caught her eye, so she left me a little memento."

Support work?

Hu Wei pondered for a moment and immediately understood what "Cheng Shi" meant. A Fate Weaver's support work naturally referred to healing— his core duty. So it seemed his good brother had once saved that Hu Xuan.

In truth, the Grand Marshal and Hu Xuan had no conflict between them as Chosen Ones— they'd never even crossed paths. The reason he was so fixated on this Eternal Sun was that a certain companion from his inner circle of three had apparently fallen at Hu Xuan's hands.

He still remembered the night he'd first heard Hu Xuan's name— it was the same day Zhen Yi's monstrous lie had fooled him completely.

At that night's meeting, his companion had warned them to steer clear of Hu Xuan if they ever encountered her. But not long after, that companion had vanished without a trace.

After extensive inquiries, he'd finally uncovered a few clues. Apparently, his companion had been matched with the Eternal Sun in a trial, and somehow ended up entangled with this rising star. A few days later, he'd disappeared from everyone's sight entirely.

Death in the game was perfectly normal, but [Birth] had many methods of tracing origins. His fear was that his companion's death might leak certain information about himself, which was why he'd kept tabs on Hu Xuan.

Though "Cheng Shi" spoke as if it were nothing, Hu Wei had a fairly good read on the situation— his little brother was a deep thinker and probably wasn't telling the whole truth.

He turned back to "Zhen Yi," his expression darkening again: "Zhen Yi, what whistle did you take from my brother?"

Cheng Shi fought the urge to twitch and kept his gleeful grin intact:

"Hee~

"It's just a little Night Curtain Spring Whistle. Why so tense?"

With that, he extended his hand as if gripping something, then shot a coy glance at "Cheng Shi," lips pursed, head bashfully lowered:

"Unless... you want to use this whistle to... do something with me?"

"..."

"..."

"..."

"Cheng Shi's" face went black. His expression screamed speechlessness, his eyes brimming with revulsion. He looked exactly like the real Cheng Shi would— letting his disgust for Zhen Yi show without the slightest attempt to hide it.

Everyone had long known Cheng Shi was the one who always got screwed over, but seeing him like this still stirred a pang of sympathy.

Little did they know... it was all fake.

Reversed— everything was reversed!

Two unhinged [Deceit] followers were impersonating each other right under everyone's noses, fully committed to their roles.

One, for self-preservation, was suppressing his revulsion and finding creative ways to "flirt" with himself.

The other, purely for entertainment, was flawlessly playing the victim in this "emotional drama."

Cheng Shi wasn't the least bit surprised that Zhen Yi could portray him so convincingly. What he couldn't fathom was how this lunatic clearly knew how much everyone despised her, yet didn't care in the slightest— and could even amplify that loathing in an even more repulsive performance!

'Is this really something a human being is capable of?'

Just as the standoff devolved into mutual bewildered staring, Long Jing— still standing amid the stage wreckage— snapped.

He glared at "Zhen Yi" with fury blazing in his eyes and erupted:

"Are you insane?!"

"Setting a trap and failing to catch anyone is one thing, but why did you shatter your own pocket too?"

"Don't tell me it was just so you could beat me up!"

"Honestly, what rotten luck. Listen, everyone— I don't know whether that Fate Weaver called Cheng Shi is the real deal or not, but I can guarantee that this Zhen Yi standing before us is absolutely genuine!"

"I saw something in her hands that belongs to me!"

"Zhen Yi, I should remind you— the rental period for the Tongue of Eating Lies is almost up!"

"..."

Huh?

Cheng Shi's mind went blank. He'd never imagined the Tongue of Eating Lies was actually Long Jing's property.

Zhen Yi had gotten it from him?

And then Zhen Xin had "lent" the tongue to himself?

But now, this very tongue had become "damning evidence" proving he was Zhen Yi...

So was this a trap laid by the Zhen sisters long ago, or was it merely [Fate]'s coincidence?

Cheng Shi's head buzzed, but there was no time to overthink it. Swallowing his disgust once more, he forced his trademark grin:

"Hee~

"How did you figure out I'm sick in the head?"

"You're so concerned about me— my boyfriend might get jealous, you know. He's standing right over there. Aren't you afraid he'll come hit you?"

"..."

"Cheng Shi's" face went dark. He looked at Long Jing, who'd whipped around to face him, and stiffly shook his head:

"President Gong, wise and mighty as you are, please don't engage with this lunatic.

"I'm just a nobody priest, an invisible little nobody. Just pretend I don't exist.

"And if you fine folks could open a door and send me home, that would be even better."

Before Long Jing could respond, Hu Wei raised a hand to cut "Cheng Shi" off.

"Cheng Shi, hold on. I'm actually planning something big, and the team's short a priest. Don't rush off— I'll take you somewhere good in a bit."

"..."

The moment those words left his mouth, all eyes turned to Hu Wei.

Sure enough, the Grand Marshal hadn't come here to sightsee— he had his own agenda.

But those words... weren't they awfully familiar?!

'Bro, do you always need a priest?!'

Hearing this, Cheng Shi's awareness wavered, as if he'd been thrown back into that unforgettable nightmare of a trial.

That very trial was what had entangled him in the public-opinion disaster with Zhen Yi in the first place!

And while that was admittedly his own doing coming back to bite him, this bite was altogether too vicious!

And it was about to get worse. Because right now, he and the other protagonist of that scandal had swapped identities.

And they'd swapped knowingly, in full mutual awareness!

Under these circumstances, Hu Wei's invitation to "Cheng Shi" inevitably handed Zhen Yi a brand-new toy to play with.

She stole a subtle glance at Cheng Shi, and their eyes happened to meet. In their mutually "awkward" gazes, she read his worry, and he understood her meaning.

Through that silent exchange, Zhen Yi laid out her "negotiation" terms:

Don't interfere with my participation in Hu Wei's secret affair, and I won't cause too much trouble for your identity.

Cheng Shi sneered internally. He didn't believe a single word of what she was conveying. Not only did he decline to respond, he suddenly flashed a grin at Hu Wei and spoke up:

"Where are you all going— can you...

"Take me along too?"

Hu Wei's face darkened. He wanted nothing more than to hurl "Zhen Yi" out of there immediately, but he knew he couldn't. So, expression rigid, he extended his hand:

"Zhen Yi. Don't make me use force. Give my brother his whistle back."

"Cheng Shi" raised an eyebrow, seemingly pleased that someone was collecting the debt on his behalf. Meanwhile, "Zhen Yi" pouted with an air of grievance, then "reluctantly" tossed the whistle over.

Hu Wei caught it with a frown, inspected it carefully several times, and only after confirming nothing was wrong did he press it into "Cheng Shi's" hand.

He hadn't expected Zhen Yi to be this cooperative today, which only deepened his suspicion that she was brewing something far worse.

"Cheng Shi" murmured a grateful thank-you, then stowed the whistle in his personal storage.

Having reclaimed his brother's property, Hu Wei kept five-tenths of his attention on Zhen Yi, then turned to Long Jing with a stern expression:

"Brother Long, tonight's little spectacle— don't you think you owe us an explanation?"

Chapter 433: The True Convener of the Mediocre Person Society!

"Explanation?"

"I'm the one who wants an explanation!"

"The plan was to come to the Mediocre Person Society, sit back, and fish for intelligence. And what happened? This is how you fish for intel?"

"I busted my ass writing a script and got the crowd fired up to this point, and you're telling me the target was already caught?!"

"And then you turned around and attacked me?!"

"Zhen Yi, have I been cursing Li Jingming so much that you got the impression I wouldn't curse you?"

"Don't you think you should explain to me what the hell you're trying to do?!"

Long Jing was on the verge of exploding. It wasn't that he didn't know what kind of person Zhen Yi was, or that she was difficult to work with. But before all this, when Zhen Yi had come to him with her pitch, her words had been too enticing—enticing enough to make him abandon his prejudice against her entirely.

Zhen Yi had told Long Jing she'd obtained intelligence about a major upheaval among the gods, but her sister had stripped away a critical portion of the memory.

She only remembered that during that particular trial, the gods had descended simultaneously. She remembered encountering Cheng Shi. And after that, something unprecedented had occurred between [Decay] and [Prosperity].

Of course, these were technically her sister's memories, but Zhen Yi narrated them from her own perspective.

Most people knew Zhen Yi and Zhen Xin were two halves of a whole, so Long Jing had no reason to question this. If not for Zhen Xin covering for Zhen Yi, this trouble-seeking menace would have been hunted down and killed by a coalition long ago.

Her sister was a reliable fraud— at least when it came to partnerships, she'd never let anyone down.

If a piece of intelligence was important enough for Zhen Xin to secretly erase from Zhen Yi's mind, then it truly had to be critical— critical enough that she didn't want her sister leaking it.

A message about the gods, hidden by Zhen Xin.

Those two qualifiers alone held an irresistible allure for Long Jing, and so he'd taken the bait.

After seven or eight meetings with Zhen Yi, he'd concluded she was most likely telling the truth. So he decided to collaborate with her.

Their objective: extract Cheng Shi's complete memories of that trial from the man himself, and determine exactly why the gods had descended and what had happened between [Decay] and [Prosperity].

According to Zhen Yi's memories, Cheng Shi possessed a Mediocre Person Society card. Better yet, she knew he didn't know she still had one of her own.

And as it happened, Long Jing also had a Mediocre Person Society card. So the two of them agreed to lie in wait at this so-called gathering and extract some intel.

Indeed— they'd come specifically to extract intelligence, and their source was none other than Cheng Shi!

So the two of them had timed their arrival at the Mediocre Person Society, settling in to wait for their rabbit to walk into the stump— to see whether Cheng Shi would attend as Zhen Yi had predicted.

Sure enough, Cheng Shi showed up.

The moment Cheng Shi pushed open the door, he'd had no idea that countless predatory gazes from the Void path had already locked onto him.

What followed was even more bizarre.

After waiting more than ten minutes, the venue showed no signs of activity. Not a single person came forward to explain to the assembled players what this gathering was even about.

But it was precisely this absence that sparked a bold idea in Long Jing's mind. He secretly signaled Zhen Yi to play along, then brazenly donned a mask, leapt onto center stage, and "stepped in" as the Mediocre Person Society's convener!

Yes— his identity as president was entirely fabricated.

An acrobat who'd rewritten the script on the fly, rushing onstage for an impromptu "save the show."

As for where the real convener was, whether they were even present, and who they actually were— not even he and Zhen Yi had figured that out.

But that didn't stop two fraudsters from running a joint con. The problem was, while conning everyone else, Long Jing discovered he'd been conned himself.

Because he'd never anticipated that the Cheng Shi he'd been watching all along was actually Zhen Yi in disguise!

This wretch had captured the real Cheng Shi and swapped places with him at some unknown point, yet she'd never told him. Instead, it looked like she was planning to hoard the intelligence for herself.

This was the real reason Long Jing was furious!

He could tolerate Zhen Yi pranking him, but he could not tolerate watching a duck that was practically in his mouth sprout cooked wings and fly into someone else's bowl for no apparent reason!

Especially when that "someone else" was the very Zhen Yi who'd been stoking the fire alongside him!

Under Long Jing's murderous glare, Cheng Shi suddenly broke into a grin.

His wounds had mostly healed. He rose from the rubble, did a playful little spin— as if showing off "her" prowess to the audience— and taunted:

"What do I want?"

"Hee~"

"Why even ask such a simple question? I just wanted to hit you."

"If I can beat you up for free, why wouldn't I?"

At those words, Long Jing's expression darkened further, but a flicker of excitement flashed through "Cheng Shi's" eyes.

"So why did you wreck your own setup and let him out?"

"Don't tell me you've gone soft on him. I took all that lovey-dovey crap as hot air— are you telling me you two are actually a thing?"

Long Jing was so angry he'd lost all composure. He genuinely couldn't understand what Zhen Yi was doing.

Even if she wanted to monopolize the intelligence, even if she wanted an excuse to hit people, there was no reason to tear down her own stage like this and let the captured Cheng Shi escape.

He saw absolutely no benefit in it. The biggest beneficiary was, paradoxically, the Fate Weaver who'd gotten free.

And even if it was all for fun— the joke had landed squarely on Zhen Yi herself. What was the point?

Long Jing couldn't figure it out no matter how hard he thought, but the others weren't fools either. From these few exchanges, Hu Wei and Mo Li had already caught the scent of something deeper. Mo Li shook his head with an amused smile:

"So you two were also cuckoos in the nest. I thought it was strange— since when do [Deceit] followers go to the trouble of organizing a heartfelt gathering? Hah— interesting. So where's the original host?"

"Did they quietly slip away after seeing you take the stage?"

"Also, Long Jing, that business about [Decay]'s fall— is that real or fabricated?"

"This matters a great deal to me. I can offer other intelligence in exchange."

Long Jing spat viciously, abandoning any trace of the suave showman he'd been on stage. He shot a vicious glare at "Zhen Yi," then jabbed a finger at "Cheng Shi":

"Ask him!"

"He's the one I came here to question!"

"That 'friend' I mentioned was Zhen Yi, sure, but it was really supposed to be him— this Fate Weaver, Cheng Shi!"

"He personally lived through that trial, so whatever happened during that god-descent event, he has to know!"

The moment those words fell, every eye turned toward "Cheng Shi."

!!!

"Cheng Shi" panicked for an instant. Feigned, of course.

But everyone present caught the flash of alarm in his eyes, which only made them more eager to learn about the trial Long Jing had described.

Immense pressure continued to bear down on "Cheng Shi," pinning him nearly in place. Even his good brother Hu Wei refrained from stepping forward to shield him this time, his silence itself a statement of position.

Clearly, he too was very interested in this information.

"Cheng Shi's" expression grew complicated. Under the crushing pressure, it seemed he had no choice but to recount what had happened during that trial. But the instant he was about to open his mouth, "Zhen Yi" beat him to it.

"Hee~

"What's the point of asking him? If you want to know, come beg me.

"Poor little Cheng Shi has already been dumped by me. Aww, but don't be upset— there are just too many people in this world who adore me. I have to give them some of my time, you know.

"Why are you all looking at me like that? I'm not lying this time— I really do know what happened.

"Ha! Not only do I know what happened, I also know that this poor little Fate Weaver doesn't know anything anymore.

"Why else do you think I let him out of my pocket? It's because his memories have already been taken— by me!"

Chapter 434: Check!

The moment those words fell, everyone's expression darkened.

Hu Wei suppressed his disgust and glanced at his good brother with a deep frown, only to find that "Cheng Shi's" face was equally clouded and uncertain. He seemed on the verge of saying something in explanation, but ultimately gave up.

Seeing this, Hu Wei's heart sank. He cursed under his breath— 'Rotten luck.' It seemed "Zhen Yi" was telling the truth. "Cheng Shi"... had been played.

But had Zhen Yi actually been played?

Yes— she genuinely had been.

Wanting to deliver a more convincing "Cheng Shi" performance, she'd deliberately hesitated for a split second before speaking. But that single second allowed Cheng Shi to seize the initiative and put her in check.

The opening for this check was the utterly illogical appearance of "Cheng Shi." No one other than "Zhen Yi" herself could explain the self-contradictory act of sabotaging her own scheme. But now, "Zhen Yi" had provided that explanation.

And the explanation was this: "she" had already extracted "Cheng Shi's" memories of that trial, rendering the Fate Weaver no longer important.

This left "Cheng Shi" with only two paths forward:

The first was to refute "Zhen Yi" and prove she hadn't lost her memories.

But doing so would mean "Cheng Shi" was no longer "Cheng Shi," because the real Cheng Shi would never willingly make himself a public target. So even if "Zhen Yi" was spouting nothing but lies, he would seize the opportunity to fade into the background and let her absorb all the fire.

Few people here truly understood Cheng Shi. The Grand Marshal barely counted as one. So the moment Zhen Yi chose to refute, there was a strong chance it would arouse Hu Wei's suspicion— or even blow her cover entirely.

But if she didn't want to expose herself, she could only choose the second path: continue playing "Cheng Shi" and let "Zhen Yi" run wild.

And once she silently accepted the role of "Cheng Shi," the real Cheng Shi would seize control of the situation, potentially steering it in an entirely unexpected direction.

It was a dilemma— and the best possible response Cheng Shi could have devised in such a short time to answer Zhen Yi's "negotiation" overture!

'I'm only giving you two paths. Either you blow your own cover and give up joining the Grand Marshal's secret venture— and we restart a second round of identity verification— or you stay as "me" and I stay as "you," but from here on, this is my stage, and you're nothing more than an audience member!'

This choice was agonizing for Zhen Yi, because no matter which option she picked, she had to accept an uncomfortable truth: she'd just gotten outmaneuvered by Cheng Shi— again.

Just like last time when she'd been felt up— even if she could blame that on her sister, groped was groped. She had to pay the price for losing her bet.

The situation now was no different.

And this time, after a rapid assessment, Zhen Yi decisively chose to continue playing "Cheng Shi."

It wasn't her most palatable option, but it was the one best suited to protecting her fearsome reputation.

In truth, the real Zhen Yi had a third option: flip the table entirely and stop playing along. She had both the strength and the standing to do so.

But flipping the table was tantamount to revealing her identity. Such a move might work in an ordinary trial, but in front of this many Chosen Ones and peak players, it would be an admission that she'd been outplayed in this private battle of wits— worse, that she'd been forced to resort to brute force by her opponent's maneuver!

That was the outcome Zhen Yi wanted least of all.

With the Prisoner present, she knew perfectly well that by tomorrow— no, probably within a few hours— the entire peak circle would know about this incident, and the "reputation" she'd painstakingly built would collapse overnight.

After that, whenever people discussed her, their smiles would no longer be rueful— they'd be mocking.

Mocking the Master of Trickery who'd turned everyone into a punchline, only to finally become one herself.

Zhen Yi didn't mind becoming a joke— but only on the condition that it was voluntary and intentional. Right now, it was neither.

So she could only grit her teeth, take a step back, and commit to playing "Cheng Shi" — this tedious, self-preserving Fate Weaver with zero entertainment value!

When Cheng Shi saw that "Cheng Shi" remained silent, he knew he'd won the first round in this ever-shifting game.

He'd used his understanding of Zhen Yi and his awareness of his own personality to trap her inside the prison of his identity. In the same stroke, he'd used a single sentence to distance himself from that trial, and even offloaded the consequences he'd created.

From today onward, the title of "Zhen Yi's boyfriend" was finally going to become history.

Even dark history was better than having it permanently attached to him.

Better still, his plan to escalate the [Prosperity] situation could proceed unhindered.

After all, whatever came out of Zhen Yi's mouth— what did that have to do with Cheng Shi?

'My memories were taken, after all...'

And so, in a battle of liars invisible to all, the tide had turned.

Everyone stared at "Zhen Yi" with iron expressions, thoroughly disgusted.

Can't kill her. Can't catch her. If "Cheng Shi's" memories really had been taken by "Zhen Yi," then no one would ever know what had truly happened during that trial— unless they could find other players who'd participated in it.

Mo Li cast an inquiring look at Long Jing. Long Jing caught his meaning but shook his head in irritation, because Zhen Yi's target had always been Cheng Shi alone. She'd never told him who else had been in that trial.

And so, the final say had circled right back into "Zhen Yi's" hands— yet in everyone's eyes, "she" was also a liar whose every word was suspect.

Now, no one could learn what had truly transpired in that trial.

Seeing the standoff threatening to freeze over, Mo Li sighed once more and addressed Zhen Yi:

"Four against one, Zhen Yi. Even if you manage to escape, you won't avoid a thorough beating first. So let's hear your terms. Compared to violence, I'd rather negotiate."

"Zhen Yi" was absolutely delighted watching everyone squirm. Not only that— "she" even had the audacity to saunter right up to Mo Li, scrutinizing this Chosen One of [Order] from up close with a face full of gleeful mischief. Only after she'd had her fill did she turn and walk toward—

She couldn't go near Hu Wei. So she turned right back around.

Swagger was not a resource to be squandered. Being able to brazenly inspect a Chosen One while wearing "Zhen Yi's" name was impressive enough.

Cheng Shi mentally catalogued Mo Li's features, savored his satisfaction, then circled back and spoke again:

"My terms are simple. I already stated them just now."

"What?"

Hu Wei frowned, but heard Long Jing hissing through clenched teeth beside him:

"Beg her..."

"This wretch is begging for a beating. Everyone, the earlier charade was my fault, and I owe you all an apology. To show my sincerity, I'll take point this time.

"Today, one way or another, we're pinning this mongrel to the ground and beating the life out of her—that's the only way I'll be satisfied!"

With that, Long Jing leapt high, ready to strike "Zhen Yi." But at that exact moment, the always-silent Prisoner reached out and yanked the airborne Long Jing back down, clutching his arm while pleading frantically:

"Easy there, Old Gong, take it easy— calm down, Old Gong— let it go, let it go—"

"..."

"..."

"..."

But Long Jing's fury only intensified at those absurd words. His eyes blazed as he glared at the Prisoner, wanting nothing more than to beat him too.

Yet the Prisoner's demeanor shifted in an instant, as if he'd suddenly taken Long Jing's side. He turned to "Zhen Yi" with a pitifully pathetic expression and wailed:

"Please, Zhen Yi, have mercy on me! If not for my sake, then have pity on Old Gong and your amnesia-stricken ex-boyfriend!"

"..."

"..."

"..."

After that outburst, the entire room plunged into silence.

No one had expected one of these two to actually open his mouth and beg, and the other to actually bow his head and go along with it.

Even "Cheng Shi" nearly broke character and laughed out loud at the sight.

Long Jing's temples throbbed with rage at the Prisoner's groveling. He swung a fist straight at the back of the Prisoner's head.

But at that very instant— just as the whistling fist was about to crack the Prisoner's skull open— "Zhen Yi" suddenly and gleefully accepted the Prisoner's plea.

Whether it was "Old Gong" that had hit her funny bone or the phrase "ex-boyfriend" that was simply too entertaining, she was grinning from ear to ear.

"Fine, since you all begged so nicely, I'll just tell you.

"But you'd better remember— you owe this entirely to my dear Brother Prisoner."

"..."

Without waiting for the Prisoner's "pitiful" look to freeze on his face, "Zhen Yi" addressed everyone present and dropped the most explosive revelation of the night's Mediocre Person Society gathering.

"Little Cheng Shi's memories told me that during that trial, a deity truly did fall. But the fallen deity wasn't [Decay]— it was..."

"[Prosperity]!"

The moment those words landed, the entire room erupted in shock.

Mo Li's eyes blazed with sudden intensity. Hu Wei's expression hovered between belief and doubt. As for "Cheng Shi"— "his" gaze as it settled on Cheng Shi carried a depth of meaning, as if to say 'so that's how it is.'

But just as everyone was still trying to judge whether "Zhen Yi's" words were true or false, "she" suddenly doubled over with laughter.

"Hee~

"You all..."

"Didn't actually believe that, did you?"

Chapter 435: The Convention— You Said "Convention," Right?!

"Heh."

If "Zhen Yi" hadn't added that last line, perhaps no one present would have believed anything coming out of her mouth.

But that single question— "You didn't actually believe that, did you?"— sent everyone sinking into deep, frowning contemplation.

Even Long Jing, a fellow fraud, fell silent.

When something sounds outrageous, it might very well be a lie.

But when something sounds too outrageous, it can't even function as a lie anymore.

In an era where [Prosperity] followers' scores were surging across the board, who would dare claim that [Prosperity] had fallen?

The instant those words left her lips, neither the [Decay] followers who'd just been railing about [Decay]'s supposed fall, nor the [Prosperity] followers who'd been quietly reaping profits in silence, could utter a single word.

How should one evaluate the intelligence "Zhen Yi" had shared?

Setting aside its truth or falsity, the only word in most people's minds was: lunatic.

Hu Wei clearly knew something the others didn't. He made no move to question "Zhen Yi's" claim and instead turned to Long Jing with a deeply furrowed brow:

"Long Jing— between the two of you, who approached whom first?"

Long Jing's expression shifted. He immediately grasped Hu Wei's implication and replied darkly:

"Zhen Xin took part of her memories, which is why she came to me to deal with that Fate Weaver!"

"..."

Everyone present was sharp enough, and sharp minds only needed a nudge to connect the dots.

Now all the information lined up.

Before long, these Chosen Ones had reached the same conclusion: perhaps a deity truly had fallen, and it very likely was [Prosperity]!

This wasn't a deduction drawn from the game's current state or hard evidence— it was a conjecture derived from interpersonal relationships.

Everyone knew that one's Path of Fate didn't necessarily dictate one's alignment. Yet in the players' perception, [Descent] and [Chaos] still carried an aura of "evil"— especially the followers of certain faiths, who'd been unwelcome by the majority from the very start. Faiths like... [Decay].

And [Decay]'s few peak players did, in fact, have universally mediocre relationships with everyone else.

Viewed through that lens: if [Decay] had fallen and Zhen Xin happened to learn about it, then as the most cooperation-minded player around, she would never pass up the chance to claim a piece of that pie.

But she probably couldn't extract profit from a deity's fall on her own, so she'd inevitably seek partners. Even if she only needed to fill a six-person trial roster, she'd recruit at least five collaborators— and if she made any moves, it would be impossible for others to notice nothing.

After all, interpersonal networks in the age of the gods' descent were extraordinarily fluid.

Certain things, once known by outsiders, could be kept under wraps only briefly before leaking through all manner of unexpected channels.

Granted, those channels typically reached only peak players. Ordinary players had no such privilege.

Yet this time, clearly no one present had received any such intelligence.

Which meant only one thing: Zhen Xin had deliberately suppressed the information.

As a peak player, she wouldn't have refrained from profiting off it willingly. The reasons she'd choose not to find collaborators were vanishingly few— especially if the fallen deity was [Decay], which would give her no reason to show consideration for those few [Decay] peaks.

But if the fallen deity was [Prosperity]... that changed everything. Because Zhen Xin's relationship with Baldy was actually quite good.

The partnership between Zhen Xin and Baldy was well known. Though Baldy and her sister didn't get along, that hadn't stopped the two of them from collaborating happily.

So was it possible that Zhen Xin was helping her [Prosperity] friend... weather the storm?

After working through this logic, Mo Li frowned and addressed the room:

"Has anyone run into Baldy recently?"

Everyone exchanged glances. No one spoke, but their gazes sharpened.

The Prisoner helpfully added: "I haven't either. And it's not just Baldy— I haven't seen that scruffy weirdo around either."

Scruffy weirdo?

The group blinked, then immediately realized who the Prisoner meant. So Zhidiao Xiumu had also been absent for quite some time.

So something really had happened to [Prosperity]?

But why would [Prosperity] suffering result in its followers benefiting?

[Decay] had won the God War but then generously rewarded its rival's followers?

Was that deity... insane?

Just as the collective bewilderment deepened, Mo Li's eyes suddenly flashed. He silently mouthed a single word at Hu Wei.

Hu Wei's pupils contracted when he read it, and he nodded.

They seemed to "understand" the inside story.

Seeing those two exchanging meaningful looks, Long Jing grew even more irritated. He hadn't caught what Mo Li had said and was about to press Zhen Yi for an answer when the Prisoner— who'd been idly scanning the room— caught Mo Li's lip movements. And just like that, without the slightest discretion, in front of everyone, under the gaze of every attendee in the hall, he blurted out the thing that players were never supposed to know:

"The Convention— you said 'Convention,' right, Brother Lu?"

"..."

"..."

"..."

Cheng Shi was delighted. Before this, he'd never imagined that the greatest secret between the gods would just be announced like that.

Even more surprising was that the Prisoner apparently didn't even know the Convention existed!

And he wasn't the only one. The astonishment on Long Jing's face showed that this number-two of the [Deceit] ladder was equally unaware of the Convention. Meanwhile, Mo Li and Hu Wei showed no surprise at all— they were only taken aback that the Prisoner had dared to say the word aloud.

"The Convention... what is that?" Long Jing asked, his eyes blazing with hunger.

"It's..."

Mo Li was about to explain, but was cut off by "Zhen Yi," who'd been watching the show with great amusement.

She beamed at the Prisoner and raised a thumb in his direction.

"Way to go, Brother Prisoner! That's exactly right— the Convention!"

"Everything you've seen about [Prosperity] followers' scores rising? It's actually all..."

"Compensation from the Convention to [Prosperity] players for a vacant divine seat!"

!!!

Everyone gaped at "Zhen Yi" in shock. Only the Prisoner chimed in at the worst possible moment:

"Is this one a lie too?"

"Zhen Yi" laughed so hard she was nearly in tears: "What else would it be? Of course I'm lying to you."

"..."

Fine, fine— so the charade continued.

What "Zhen Yi" was saying no longer mattered. What mattered was that everyone had their own thoughts, silently cross-referencing her words against everything they already knew.

Hu Wei pondered for a long while with furrowed brows, then abruptly turned to "Cheng Shi":

"Brother, how much do you still remember about that last trial?"

"Cheng Shi" smiled bitterly and shook his head, then sighed:

"I'm sorry, Brother Hu. It's embarrassing, but I genuinely don't remember."

The instant those words were spoken, several faces in the room changed.

Long Jing's pupils contracted sharply, though he quickly ducked his head to hide his shock.

The real Cheng Shi, on the other hand, was caught off guard— he nearly jabbed a finger at her nose and cursed aloud.

'Wait— you're switching actors mid-scene?! That's cheating!'

'Where's Zhen Yi?'

'Where'd you put Zhen Yi?'

'The actress playing "Cheng Shi"— when did she suddenly become Zhen Xin?!'

Cheng Shi was stunned. Long Jing was bewildered. Because the sentence "Cheng Shi" had just uttered was clearly a lie!

The Master of Deception talent informed both these fraudsters that "Cheng Shi" had just lied...

Which meant "Cheng Shi" still retained his memories. He remembered everything that had happened in that trial!

Long Jing didn't make any rash moves. He merely stole a cautious sidelong glance at "Zhen Yi"— and Cheng Shi's eyes happened to meet his.

That sudden scrutiny sent a chill through Cheng Shi's heart. 'Not good,' he thought. The situation had shifted yet again.

The bad news: his opponent hadn't folded— she'd called his bet. The trouble had circled right back.

The good news: not everyone could see that she'd called. For now, only this number-two of the [Deceit] ladder had earned a seat at the table.

As for which table that was...

It was, of course, the table of [Deceit]— rising and falling with the surging waves of lies, hidden in the undercurrents no one else could see.

The game of deception had just grown far more complex!

Chapter 436: Yes, I've Had an Audience with a God

Zhen Yi never sat idle and waited for doom.

The outsiders' assumptions about her were largely correct. When this universally acknowledged jinx went silent for an extended period, she was never retreating— she was always brewing up something bigger.

She'd already mapped out her next move to counter Cheng Shi, but just as she was about to showcase her "game sense," her sister Zhen Xin suddenly seized control of their body and sent her back to sleep.

Yes— this time, Zhen Yi had been "invaded" by her other personality, just as Zhen Xin had been before.

For Zhen Xin, this was commonplace, because Zhen Yi's nature made it so. But for Zhen Yi, it was decidedly uncommon— from the start of the game until now, Zhen Xin had rarely done this.

Yet today she had, and it gave both of the other two fraudsters a start.

Regardless of the process, the outcome had produced plenty of entertainment, so in both their eyes, it did look like something Zhen Yi would pull.

The only difference was that in each of their minds, this "Zhen Yi" was not the same Zhen Yi.

Cheng Shi's analysis was more precise— he knew the person across from him had definitely switched. But for Long Jing, this game had become hopelessly chaotic.

He couldn't even confirm whether the "Cheng Shi" before him was a single person. 'Could "he" be an illusion conjured by "Zhen Yi"?'

No— Mo Li's Law Command couldn't be sustained indefinitely, but while it was active, this "Cheng Shi" hadn't shattered. That meant he wasn't an illusion but a flesh-and-blood person.

But the question remained: who was "he"?

A Fate Weaver?

A Fate Weaver bold enough to perform a double act with Zhen Yi right under everyone's noses?

Or was he actually an old acquaintance— one of the fraudsters from the [Deceit] rankings?

Even if he was a fraud, why had he voluntarily blown his cover when "Zhen Yi" had already fooled nearly everyone?

Could it be... they weren't on the same side?

Long Jing's eyebrow arched. His interest sparked to life. He could smell entertainment in the air. He fixed "Cheng Shi" with a meaningful gaze and asked abruptly:

"Brother Fate Weaver, you seem a little... different from me."

"Cheng Shi" blinked in confusion, looking as if he had no idea what that meant. Everyone turned to Long Jing with puzzled frowns, wondering what kind of bizarre question that was.

But Long Jing quickly continued:

"I genuinely hadn't heard of this 'Convention' before. But..."

"You didn't seem surprised at all. Did you already know about it?"

At those words, the room's demeanor shifted. Every gaze landed on "Cheng Shi."

"Cheng Shi's" expression was a masterwork of emotional display. First came a jolt of shock, followed by alarm, regret, and resignation cascading across his face. Finally, expression darkening, he grudgingly accepted the truth.

"Ha... They say you can't hide secrets under the noses of peak players, and today I truly learned that lesson. Yes— for certain reasons, I did learn of the Convention's existence..."

Those words detonated the room. Everyone stared at him in utter disbelief.

As for the real Cheng Shi... his face had gone rigid.

Hu Wei's eyebrow shot up. He spun around, astonishment written across his face:

"Brother— you've had an audience with a god?"

"Which one summoned you?!"

Their reactions were understandable. Something like the Convention could only be learned directly from a deity's own lips— there was no other way. A case like the Prisoner's, where someone simply shouted it in front of a crowd, was the only such incident since the game began.

Hence Hu Wei's question.

And that question essentially confirmed Cheng Shi's status: although this Fate Weaver's score wasn't high enough to rank among those present, he was clearly already a peak player.

Honestly, before meeting him face to face, no one here besides Hu Wei had ever even heard of Cheng Shi— they hadn't known such a person existed. It was only because a baffling rumor had reached the peak circle, and Zhen Yi herself had never denied it, that they'd learned of this "audacious" Fate Weaver who'd dared to deceive that walking jinx.

But now, upon learning that Cheng Shi had very likely been granted an audience with a god, they viewed him in an entirely different light.

In this game, whether a player qualified as "peak" ultimately came down to one thing: whether their relationship with the gods was closer than everyone else's.

The higher someone climbed on the Road to Ascension or the Ladder of Ascent, the more it signified the gods' growing "interest" in that player.

And the ultimate expression of that interest was undeniably a divine summons!

In other words, any player who'd been summoned by the gods was by definition a peak player— and one who outranked any high scorer!

After all, even the Prisoner and Long Jing had never been summoned by any deity!

Yes— the Chosen One of [Silence] had never once been called before any god.

Which was why he was the most shocked of all.

Mo Li was shocked too, though he'd done a far better job of concealing it.

He had undoubtedly received a summons before. He'd even heard the word "Convention" from the very god who'd called him. He knew this was a divine secret that ordinary players could never access, which was precisely why he found it inconceivable.

Consider: a player who'd attracted the gods' attention must possess considerable strength, and that strength would naturally be reflected in their score. So why, before that rumor surfaced, had no one ever heard of this man?

Mo Li's gaze toward "Cheng Shi" deepened, as if trying to see through the Fate Weaver entirely.

"Cheng Shi" saw no reason to hide it in response to Hu Wei's question, and answered directly:

"Yes— I've had an audience. The one who summoned me was my Benefactor, [Fate]!"

"[Fate]??!"

Long Jing momentarily lost control of his voice. Then, his expression a complicated swirl of envy, jealousy, and shock, he turned to the others and shook his head:

"It's true. That one's the truth."

And indeed it was— though every emotion on his face was an act.

By now, he'd fully confirmed that this "Cheng Shi" was an impostor. He still couldn't pin down "Cheng Shi's" true identity, but that didn't stop a fraudster from joining this deception when "invited" to the game.

At least the thing he'd most wanted to learn tonight had been confirmed. So, business concluded, all that was left was the fun.

Extracting more intelligence from between two liars while producing more entertainment— to Long Jing, that was far more enjoyable than simply unmasking them. So he smiled knowingly and chose to play along.

And this was precisely Zhen Xin's objective.

She understood Long Jing, and she had a reasonable grasp of Cheng Shi as well. Since Cheng Shi had dumped the burden of [Prosperity]'s fall onto her sister's shoulders, she naturally couldn't let him slip away so easily.

So this wasn't deliberate revenge— it was more like a clash between fraudsters.

Zhen Xin wanted to claw back a point in this turbulent undercurrent of deception, to prevent her sister from losing too badly.

The room processed Long Jing's words with varied expressions.

Only Cheng Shi— he sensed that having had an audience with [Fate] apparently wasn't exactly "good news" in this context. Yet he didn't dare break character as "Zhen Yi," so he could only ask with his trademark unhinged giggle:

"Oh? You've had an audience with [Fate]?"

"Little Cheng Shi, how come I never saw any of that in your memories?"

Cheng Shi was trying to muddy the waters, but everyone pointedly ignored "Zhen Yi's" remark. Every gaze, complicated and intense, bore into "Cheng Shi." Hu Wei's eyes flickered with unreadable thoughts, but after a moment he suddenly burst into hearty laughter and clapped "Cheng Shi" on the shoulder:

"I knew you were something special! When did this happen?"

"Cheng Shi" shook his head with a rueful smile:

"Don't put too much pressure on me, Brother Hu. I'm truly nothing special. If you all keep staring at me like that, my legs are going to start trembling..."

"It was only a few days ago, actually. And it's precisely because the memory of that audience with my Benefactor remains intact that I vaguely sensed I'd lost a trial's worth of memories.

"He must have summoned me after that trial concluded. It wasn't until... this lunatic admitted to stealing my memories that I could confirm the timeline was correct.

"But none of you need to be this shocked. I believe He wasn't truly focusing on me— it was only because a rift appeared among the gods during that trial that the audience followed.

"And as it happened, I was the only [Fate] follower in that trial."

When he finished, no one's expression changed— but a strange look crept across several faces.

Mo Li shook his head with an amused half-smile and addressed "Cheng Shi":

"Fascinating. The one who receives divine attention doesn't realize it, while those who don't receive it seek it everywhere.

"Cheng Shi... truly remarkable.

"Do you know why everyone here finds this so shocking?

"You, who aren't very familiar with peak players, probably don't realize— but among all the peak players I'm aware of, [Fate]...

"Has apparently never summoned anyone before.

"Including the Blind One!"

!!!

Chapter 437: The Grand Marshal's Game

Cheng Shi and "Cheng Shi" were both shocked simultaneously. Of course, Cheng Shi's shock was genuine while "Cheng Shi's" was feigned.

No wonder Zhen Xin had uttered the word "Convention"— she'd done it to set up this very revelation!

[Fate] had never summoned "its own Chosen One," yet it had summoned an "obscure" Fate Weaver. The sheer magnitude of this bombshell might not rival a deity's fall, but compared to the gods' secrets, it was far more relatable to players— and far more entertaining.

So was her goal to make him famous among peak players, thereby creating even more entertainment?

No— she wasn't Zhen Yi. He couldn't use Zhen Yi's personality to guess her motives.

Cheng Shi had limited contact with Zhen Xin. The little he knew about her came from fragments Big Cat had mentioned. He could only confirm that Zhen Xin was marginally more reliable than Zhen Yi, but not how much more reliable.

So what was she actually after?

Redirecting [Fate]'s pressure onto him to take the heat off the Blind One?

Or was this simply payback for him screwing over her sister?

'Fine, fine, fine. Whatever you're scheming, you can kiss the Tongue of Eating Lies goodbye.'

Having come this far, Cheng Shi wasn't actually too worried about Zhen Xin piling glory onto "him," because every halo she added was genuinely real. So even when he reclaimed his true identity, he could own all of it.

Moreover, in Long Jing's eyes, "Cheng Shi" was definitely not the real Cheng Shi. If he could just wait for Long Jing to eventually publicize that fact, he could "shed the cicada's shell"— slipping free from all this pressure.

Then again, honestly speaking, for the Cheng Shi of today, the pressure of being known as someone who'd had a divine audience was actually better kept on than shaken off.

After this "battle," he knew he could no longer remain anonymous among peak players. He was destined to become one of the most explosive pieces of "news" in the near future, attracting the attention, contact, and scrutiny of hundreds of peak players.

And the more halos he carried, the more mysterious his persona would become, and the more wary other peak players would be of him.

Yet wariness often came hand-in-hand with covetousness. This was the core dynamic of the peak-level game— the relentless pursuit of ultimate power and the hunger for divine attention. Cheng Shi could not avoid it.

When you carried a touch of mystery, others would take note and keep their distance.

But when you carried ten times that mystery, under the overwhelming pull of curiosity, others might not be so willing to keep their distance anymore. They'd want nothing more than to capture you and strip that mysterious cloak clean off.

So what Cheng Shi needed to do right now was to rein Zhen Xin in— to stop her from saddling him with any more backgrounds that were either unexplainable or required mountains of lies to maintain!

He quickly slipped back into "Zhen Yi's" skin and used her whimsical personality to cut into the conversation:

"Hee~

"Little Cheng Shi, what does [Fate] look like?"

"Cheng Shi" shot Cheng Shi a peculiar look and replied coolly:

"[Fate]? He..."

"Why should I tell you?"

"?"

"..."

A strange atmosphere permeated the room. To everyone else, it didn't look like two people refusing to communicate— it looked more like a lovers' quarrel.

Even Hu Wei froze mid-sentence, jaw hanging open, unable to find words.

The Prisoner, on the other hand, lit up with approval and addressed "Cheng Shi" warmly:

"Brother-in-law, you truly possess great wisdom!

"Even if [Fate] summoned you, I still think [Silence] suits you better. Don't you agree?"

"..."

The topic had derailed entirely. Clearly, the audience was now almost as fascinated by Cheng Shi's audience with [Fate] as they were about [Prosperity]'s fall.

Seeing the situation spiraling, Grand Marshal Hu Wei stepped forward once again. He clapped "Cheng Shi" on the shoulder with a grin:

"Alright, kid, that's enough on this subject.

"Hmph— nobody's intelligence comes for free. If you want to hear more, show some sincerity and trade for it with my brother."

As he spoke, he shifted half a step to the side, a move that clearly signaled he'd cross-referenced "Cheng Shi's" account against what he already knew, found it credible, and was now formally vouching for "Cheng Shi's" identity.

The Grand Marshal's generosity and loyalty, having satisfied his own curiosity, were on full display once more.

"Cheng Shi" went from being a public target to a valuable asset shielded behind a Chosen One.

Though the others' expressions shifted slightly at Hu Wei's stance, their reactions were muted— they all knew the Grand Marshal's personality. Only the Prisoner looked aggrieved, muttering under his breath:

"Cheng Shi is just your self-appointed brother, but he's my brother-in-law by blood. Even as an ex-brother-in-law, I clearly have a closer relationship. Old Hu, how is what you're doing any different from being a homewrecker?"

"..."

"..."

"..."

Nobody could follow the Prisoner's train of thought. Faces contorted as if constipated. "Cheng Shi" looked utterly speechless. Only "Zhen Yi" grinned as always. "She" glanced at "Cheng Shi" with a wink, then turned to Hu Wei and dropped yet another inexplicable remark:

"You're in such a rush to take little Cheng Shi away— you're not trying to be my side piece, are you?"

BOOM—

The instant those words fell, a second arc of blood and fire slashed toward "Zhen Yi's" position!

Seeing his chance to escape at last, Cheng Shi used the cover of the flames to switch his faith, then blinked away with a single dice throw, landing at the edge of the venue.

The other players nearby recoiled in panic the moment they saw this "jinx" approaching. Two Torchbearers also backed away cautiously, though their eyes never left Cheng Shi's body.

Hu Wei wasn't surprised his strike missed. He simply spat "rotten luck" under his breath, then addressed the others:

"I've got a big job lined up, and I'm wondering if anyone's interested.

"I can't guarantee everyone will walk away with something, but at the very least, my brother Cheng Shi will be coming with me."

As he spoke, he slung an arm around "Cheng Shi's" shoulders, ensuring "he" couldn't slip away.

"Even if you don't get anything, you can trade the intelligence you've got for something interesting from my brother.

"But I should be upfront— there are two things in that place I must obtain. One is a promise I made to my brother, and the other is my own objective. Aside from those two items, everything else is fair game— fortune favors the bold.

"So how about it, Mo Li, Long Jing— are you interested?"

No sooner had Hu Wei finished than the Prisoner raised his hand indignantly:

"What about me?!"

Hu Wei glanced at him sideways without responding, his gaze fixed squarely on Mo Li and Long Jing, awaiting their answers.

Mo Li deliberated carefully for a moment, then nodded with a raised brow.

Long Jing, however, rolled his eyes this way and that, studying Hu Wei's greatsword before stealing an imperceptible glance at "Cheng Shi" behind Hu Wei's back.

Zhen Xin wanted to venture into the Grand Marshal's game alone, so naturally she'd need to prepare.

But the situation gave her no time for extra preparation. Among those present, not a single person made for a good partner— except Long Jing...

Only this number-two of the [Deceit] ladder could remotely be considered a teammate capable of keeping pace.

That was precisely why she'd used that deliberate lie earlier to expose her identity— making things difficult for Cheng Shi while simultaneously piquing Long Jing's curiosity enough to draw him in.

She'd also subtly revealed her allegiance, letting Long Jing know she was a fraud who opposed "Zhen Yi," all to encourage this man— freshly burned by her sister— to lean toward collaborating with her.

Zhen Xin's scheming was nothing short of brilliant. But she'd miscalculated one detail: Long Jing had followed along halfway, then abruptly stopped.

This "President Gong" was privately delighted by the spectacle, but on the surface he politely declined the proposal with a smile.

Not only that— he even deliberately stepped back half a pace, as if distancing himself from the fraudsters in the room.

'Yes, I didn't expose you. But I'm also... not helping you anymore.'

Zhen Yi might be detestable, but her perspective on watching fellow liars squirm was genuinely masterful. Since she could sit back and enjoy watching her peers' antics, why couldn't he?

So Long Jing pulled out while he was ahead. And when he caught a flicker of bewilderment in "Cheng Shi's" eyes, it only made him happier.

'Go on and lie. Go lie your hearts out. If you can fool the Grand Marshal, that's your talent. If you can't? Well, you'll just have to test whether the Grand Marshal's blade is sharp enough with your own neck.'

'And as for you, Grand Marshal— when you discover that your dear brother is a fraud, I hope you're still smiling as brightly as you are right now.'

'Count me out. I'd rather not die alongside a fraud whose identity I can't even determine.'

Chapter 438: The Old Bow May Be Old...

"Ahem, with the Grand Marshal charging at the front, I doubt there's room in the squad for an acrobat like me. The next circus show's about to start, and I've got preparations to make. I'll take my leave."

With that, Long Jing cupped his hands toward the group, then turned back to spit a sarcastically venomous farewell at "Zhen Yi." Just as he'd arrived, he donned a mask and vanished in an instant.

"Cheng Shi" darkened at seeing someone bail, and quickly protested:

"Brother Hu, I've got rice cooking back at the rest area. Can't leave it unattended. How about... next time?"

Hearing such a stiff refusal only deepened Hu Wei's confidence in his identity. He clapped "Cheng Shi" on the shoulder once more and roared with laughter:

"Hahaha, what's the rush? I would never screw over my own brother. This is the real deal— something sensitive I can't talk about yet.

"But don't worry, brother. If we pull this off, I guarantee you'll thank me.

"You saw for yourself— my team really does need a priest."

"..."

With the pitch laid on that thick, "Cheng Shi" could hardly refuse. So he could only chuckle stiffly and stand there in silence.

Mo Li stepped forward, officially joining the group. The Prisoner was itching to tag along, but he'd barely taken two steps before the Grand Marshal flung a blade into the ground at his feet as a warning:

"My squad is short one more person, but it's not you.

"You and Zhen Yi haven't seen each other in a while. Why don't you go have a nice chat? As for the last spot...

"Heh, you've been listening long enough. Are you coming or not?"

Everyone followed Hu Wei's gaze in surprise toward the distant spectator seating, where among the wary "mediocre" onlookers, a hooded player slowly lifted his head to meet Hu Wei's stare. He pushed back his hood, revealing a weathered face— skin sagging, wrinkled, carved by time.

Cheng Shi had expected the audience wouldn't be entirely composed of nobodies, but he hadn't imagined that amid such an intelligence-laden bombshell of a scene, someone could resist their curiosity and remain hidden in the crowd without joining the discussion.

Wasn't he afraid the peak players on the floor might actually seal everyone's hearing?

Then again, anyone Hu Wei would invite probably had their own methods. This "old man" was most likely one of [Decay]'s peak players.

So who was he?

That question didn't linger long. The Prisoner, ever the motormouth, immediately identified him:

"Well well, Old Yu's here too? Still alive, are we?"

The old man called "Old Yu" chuckled and fired back in a raspy voice:

"As long as nobody beats you to death first, I'm not going anywhere.

"Today's been a roller coaster for this old heart. I thought my Benefactor was gone, but turns out it was the rival who bit the dust. Good— good indeed.

"With [Prosperity] fallen, can [Decay]'s triumph be far behind?

"Since the Grand Marshal deems this old thing worthy, then this old man naturally won't be the ungrateful sort. I'll go— these creaky bones could use the exercise."

With that, the black-clad old player rose cheerfully and shambled toward the floor.

Cheng Shi's eyes narrowed as he watched. This had to be YuMu, [Decay]'s number-two on the ladder.

He knew the man's ID matched his real name, but he hadn't realized Yu Mu was this old. Moreover, this didn't look like aging caused by [Decay]'s influence— Yu Mu appeared to have been elderly to begin with.

As Yu Mu descended, his gaze swept over "Zhen Yi." He snorted with amusement, speaking as he walked:

"The Zhen girl's here too. What a coincidence. How come you're not offering to make me a walking stick today?"

Cheng Shi blinked— he hadn't expected Zhen Yi to torment even someone this old. With no choice, he plastered on a grin and replied:

"Hee~

"From the looks of it, you old fossil don't have many days left anyway. How about when you kick the bucket, I collect your bones and whittle them into a couple of canes for charity? What do you think— isn't that a brilliant idea?"

No sooner had the echo faded than someone in the room applauded enthusiastically:

"Brilliant!

"I call dibs on a pair!"

Everyone turned to find the speaker was, of course, none other than the Prisoner.

"..."

"..."

"..."

Yu Mu's face went black. His smile instantly froze, but then he stopped in his tracks and extended a pair of withered, wrinkled hands, grinning a grin that never reached his eyes:

"Grand Marshal, since we're all here, why don't we change things up a little?"

"Before we go grab what we came for, let's warm up first.

"Both jinxes are present today— how about we get rid of one first? Clean up the game's environment a bit?"

With that, Yu Mu moved like a veteran general marching to war— he suddenly drew an invisible bow, nocking an arrow of thorny dried vine aimed squarely at the Prisoner below.

Then came a resonant hum— "THRUM"— and a gale too fast for the eye to follow screamed toward the Prisoner.

Cheng Shi tensed, bracing for fresh trouble. But to his astonishment, the Prisoner casually extended one hand, thrust it into the wind, and caught the wooden arrow with a single palm. He flipped his wrist, planted the thin branch on the ground like a walking stick, and clicked his tongue appraisingly:

"Too thin. Too short. As a walking stick, it's nowhere near as good as Old Yu's bones.

"Hey Zhen Yi, when are you going to finish making that cane? I'm actually looking forward to it."

"Zhen Yi" beamed brightly:

"In a hurry?"

"If you're that eager, why not pull out your own bones first? I'll make a pair from those. And since you won't be able to walk without bones, a set of crutches would be just the thing."

"..."

That one stunned the Prisoner into silence.

'Listen here, sister— the only person in this entire room willing to take your side, and you're tearing into him like this? Are you really not afraid of getting ganged up on?'

The Prisoner's lips twitched.

Seeing that "Zhen Yi" had no intention of siding with him— and that Yu Mu beside him was egging Hu Wei on to start a fight— he sized up the situation and decided retreat was the wisest option. He casually tossed an object at Cheng Shi, sighing with emotion:

"Only my brother-in-law doesn't despise me. Here— it's a communicator. Let's keep in touch, yeah?"

"Cheng Shi" didn't dare respond, but Hu Wei had already snatched the flying object on his behalf.

The moment it touched his hand, he realized it was a perfectly wrapped piece of chewing gum!

The Grand Marshal was about to erupt when— BOOM— the entire venue shuddered.

Everyone spun toward the sound, only to discover that somewhere in the Void beneath the hall, an explosion had torn open a rift, revealing a hidden passageway underneath the seating area.

Cheng Shi's pupils narrowed. He recognized the location— it was precisely where the Prisoner had originally entered.

So that piece of gum the Prisoner had stuck to the wall earlier was actually a miniature explosive.

'This Chosen One of [Silence] is unexpectedly prudent.'

At the same moment, while everyone gaped in astonishment, the Prisoner vaulted high and landed before the blasted-open passageway. Feigning complete innocence, he planted his hands on his hips and bellowed indignantly:

"What kind of person hides explosives in chewing gum?! Absolutely no class!"

"..."

Then, utterly ignoring everyone's withering stares, he turned to Hu Wei's direction with unbridled excitement.

Faces darkened all around. Hu Wei, thoroughly disgusted, hurled the gum straight back at the Prisoner. But instead of dodging, the Prisoner's face lit up as he lunged to catch it.

Hu Wei's eyes sharpened—suspecting a trap—and he swung his greatsword to intercept the Prisoner's advance. But Yu Mu, standing closer, moved faster. His sleeve snapped open as he loosed a single shot, the vine arrow striking the fingertip-sized gum with pinpoint accuracy. An invisible force reeled it back toward his hand.

The Prisoner leapt with outstretched hand but missed. He frowned, gaze hardening, then immediately pivoted and charged straight at Yu Mu.

Yu Mu only retrieved the arrow faster. Not only that— he had already drawn his bow again.

This time, however, no arrow sat on the string. Yet the Prisoner's expression shifted the moment he saw it, and he pulled back without hesitation.

But in that instant of retreat, the trailing edge of his coat lagged by a fraction. An invisible force enveloped it, and the fabric aged, decayed, and crumbled to dust in the span of a heartbeat— all while he was still mid-retreat.

The Prisoner clicked his tongue and muttered sarcastically:

"Nice 'Sudden Dusk' you've got there. Looks like I ought to rebrand you. No more 'Old Yu'— from now on, you're 'Old Bow'!"

"Mm, not bad at all. The old bow may be old, but it still has enough pull to hit the target!"

"..."

"..."

"..."

Chapter 439: And So the Curtain Falls

Yu Mu's movements visibly faltered at the Prisoner's remark, yet the Prisoner made no move to close the distance. Instead, he kicked off with both legs and bolted toward the passageway again.

Seeing his sudden pivot, Hu Wei's expression shifted. Mo Li raised a warning brow: "Careful—something's off!"

But it was already too late.

Yu Mu had drawn the gum-skewered arrow close, and at that exact moment—

"Watch out!"

BOOM—

The gum exploded a second time. But explosives of this caliber could do little more than add a splash of color to peak players.

And adding color was precisely the point!

A dazzling cloud of pink mist erupted through the air, drenching the nearby Yu Mu from head to toe. Once Mo Li— lips twitching— used a Law Command to force the haze to settle, what stood before everyone was a pink-haired... decrepit old man.

"..."

"..."

"..."

Yu Mu had decayed virtually every ounce of destructive force in the blast, yet the explosive hadn't been designed to cause damage at all!

He stared at the undecayable pink coating his body, seething with fury.

Meanwhile, the Prisoner lounged against the passageway wall and pointed straight at "Zhen Yi," gleefully shifting the blame:

"Shame— almost had the raw materials for that walking stick.

"Don't look at me. Zhen Yi brought the gum. I have no idea why this person just hands out color-changing bubblegum for no reason. Good thing I saved it instead of chewing it myself.

"Old Bow, thanks for screening that for me. Although I have to say, a pastel-pink old man is kind of adorable."

"PRISONER!!!"

Yu Mu let out a raspy roar and launched an arrow deep into the passageway, but the Prisoner had already vanished after his "performance," long gone before the fury could reach him.

With no outlet for his rage, [Decay]'s number-two turned his grim bow toward Cheng Shi.

Cheng Shi's heart lurched. Internally, he cursed both Zhen Yi and the Prisoner to the heavens and back. But his preparations were already complete, so at this moment he felt no panic whatsoever. Instead, a smile played at the corner of his lips as he began counting down:

"Five!"

"Four!"

He'd barely reached four when every face in the room changed.

"Trap! There's a trap!"

"I knew it— that's why this wretch was so quiet tonight! She was stalling for time! Dammit— rotten luck! Move, now!"

Hu Wei's expression darkened. Without sparing a thought for the remaining mediocre folk, he carved a towering wall of flame with a single slash for cover, then split the venue's Void open with a second stroke, ready to spirit "Cheng Shi" and the others out of the Mediocre Person Society's hall.

Too late.

Because Cheng Shi's countdown was a bluff. The Sinner's Regret had already completed its marking. The instant Yu Mu had leveled his bow at Cheng Shi— the instant the count hit four— he'd already activated Sinner Redemption.

And so, to the horror of every widening pupil in the room, every attendee present was instantly paralyzed and hoisted into the air, then dragged bit by bit into the grudge of the Sin Brood Mother, Go Lis!

Full-room hard crowd-control. Complete wipe.

'What did you think I was doing the whole time I toyed with you?'

'Sorry— there were too many people in this hall to mark. Thanks for your patience.'

The Sinner Redemption didn't discriminate. Even Cheng Shi himself was strung up. But in the instant darkness claimed his vision, he met every furious gaze bearing down on him, silently brushed against his own shadow, and smiled with deep satisfaction.

'Oh, Zhen Yi, Zhen Yi. Since you love causing trouble for everyone so much, I'm sure you won't mind one more feat added to your "track record."'

'Oh, right— Zhen Yi is Zhen Xin now.'

'You want to use my identity to wade into Hu Wei's murky waters?'

'Sorry, but I never intended to let you borrow my identity all the way to the end. Maybe some of you have the means to break free of Go Lis's grudge, but...'

'No matter.'

'By the time everyone breaks loose, Cheng Shi will be the real Cheng Shi again.'

'And when that happens, what does the Master of Trickery's wrongdoing have to do with a humble Fate Weaver?'

'And the rewards my dear Brother Hu Wei promised— on what grounds should a magician claim any share?'

So this was the grand scheme Cheng Shi had prepared for everyone present— a grand stage for [Birth] to bloom!

The con could have kept going, sure. But since they'd swapped actors midway, it was now his turn to make a substitution!

Unfortunately, Long Jing had gotten away.

But that was a minor issue. Who could guarantee that this acrobat's future "clarification" wouldn't become another pleasant surprise?

As for the Prisoner...

Cheng Shi had never intended to mark him in the first place. This [Silence] follower seemed far more troublesome than Zhen Yi. He couldn't be sure his own methods wouldn't get deflected by some inexplicable power of [Silence], so he'd simply left the man alone. Fortunately, the Prisoner had seen himself out.

And so, to Cheng Shi's thorough satisfaction, tonight's Mediocre Person gathering came to an early close.

Every peak player on the scene— all caught in the crossfire of their mutual scheming— had been swept into [Birth]'s "pocket." As for the other people present...

Honestly, from the moment he'd joined this insane Faith Game, Cheng Shi had never once gone out of his way to provoke innocent bystanders.

Not because he was soft-hearted, but because he was cautious. No— prudent.

Making enemies for no reason was the worst possible approach to the game. You never knew what bizarre abilities or connections someone might have up their sleeve. So under normal circumstances, he only dealt with those who needed dealing with. Anyone who hadn't made a move against him— no matter how many schemes they harbored— he wouldn't strike preemptively.

But tonight, why had he swept up the entire room?

Because at a certain moment, he'd suddenly realized that the other "spectators" in this hall...

Might not even be human!

Take the Cui Qiushi and Zhang Hao he'd saved, for instance. These two, as covert Torchbearers, had made no attempt to find an alternate exit beyond that one door, despite how secretive their identities were supposed to be!

Not only that, their gazes had been locked on him the entire time.

But he should have been "Zhen Yi" right now, not Cheng Shi!

Zhang Hao was someone Cheng Shi didn't know well, so he could set that aside. But Cui Qiushi? Such an upright, morally good man, and yet amid this entire chaotic scene, he hadn't spared "Cheng Shi"— his own savior— a single glance. His eyes had never once left "Zhen Yi."

Had he seen through to Cheng Shi's true identity, or was he observing "Zhen Yi" on someone else's behalf?

Cheng Shi couldn't be certain. But what he could confirm was that players who were "observing" others like Cui Qiushi were far from rare in this venue!

They played the role of panicking bystanders, yet they were clearly "gathering intelligence" with purpose and precision!

So— were they actually people?

Cheng Shi had pondered this for a long time. He'd reviewed the entire situation's development, traced the positions and movements of several suspicious figures, and even cross-referenced the peak players' peripheral attitudes toward the outer spectators to deduce these "mediocre folk's" true nature.

He'd ruled out the possibility that they were illusions. But false identities didn't begin and end with [Deceit]'s phantasms— there were also the nebulous constructs of [Existence]!

For example, the kind he'd encountered in his own dreams: dream-people who truly existed!

Dream-people were not illusions, so naturally they couldn't be dispelled by Mo Li's Law Command.

So— could there be a [Memory] follower lurking behind the scenes within this very hall?

Was this opulent venue truly a gathering place for mediocre folk, or was it someone's undiscovered masterwork of a dream?

Cheng Shi realized he'd clearly walked into a trap. But he couldn't determine who had laid it.

This unseen puppet master who'd never shown their face— what was their purpose in allowing Long Jing and Zhen Yi to usurp his identity right here in the hall?

Cheng Shi couldn't be sure, and he couldn't afford to gamble.

So he ran. Using the Sinner's Regret, using [Birth]'s power, using a ready-made excuse, using "Zhen Yi's" identity— he flipped the entire chessboard and slipped away.

He decisively fled this impenetrable, unfathomable Mediocre Person Society!

'Mediocre people, mediocre people— where in this room do I see anyone mediocre?'

'This is nothing less than a summit of peak players, a clash of titans rife with undercurrents and games nested within games!'

'You're all geniuses. I'm just a mediocre person. Too scared to stick around— best to leave first.'

And so he slipped away.

The retreat was inelegant, perhaps, but it was effective.

And once every last person had vanished into the Void, the venue finally— mercifully— fell quiet.

Chapter 440: The Show Is Over? No— The Show Continues

Silence. An eerie silence.

With everyone gone, not a single sound remained in the hall.

The quiet persisted for so long that time itself seemed to have forgotten this place, as though the entire space would sink into the sea of memory at any moment.

Then, from a point far beyond the naked eye's reach in the upper seating tiers, a footstep echoed.

Someone was descending from the farthest reaches of the gallery!

And not just one person!

Two sets of footsteps answered each other— one heavy, one light, rising and falling in perfect harmony. Before long, the heavier tread grew louder and louder, reverberating through the entire hall.

As the footsteps drew near, two silhouettes gradually emerged from the darkness.

In front walked a man clad in battle armor. He wore no iron helm, but war boots encased his feet— which explained the thunderous weight of his stride.

This armored figure wore his hair at an awkward mid-length, brows drawn in a perpetual furrow. As his gaze swept the ruins of the central stage, a sharp glint flashed through his eyes.

"Your prophecy said nothing about this kind of situation..."

He didn't turn around. He kept walking, but the comment was clearly directed at the woman behind him.

She wore a star-speckled dress of deepest black, stepping delicately into each of the armored man's footprints. Her expression was strange as she nodded:

"[Fate] merely guides. Until change and divination have settled their contest, no one can be certain what the future holds.

"I simply never imagined this Fate Weaver would possess such... unexpected strength."

The woman's voice was crystalline and ethereal, lingering in the empty hall like wisps of mist, draping the vacant space in a veil of mystery.

The only imperfection was the strip of black cloth bound over her eyes. The coarse fabric clashed jarringly with the delicate silk of her dress.

The armored man nodded, then halted at the front row. He studied where everyone had been standing, then glanced back with a raised brow toward the spot where Cui Qiushi and Zhang Hao had been, his expression pensive.

The woman in the black dress followed his line of sight, looking mildly surprised as she nodded, but said nothing.

The armored man chuckled softly: "You noticed it too. Why the silence?"

The woman in black smiled back: "I never imagined the person who set the Torchbearers on the right path... would be him.

"He's... well, to use Xin Xin's words, very unique— but also very solitary.

"Though his relationship with Baldy seems rather good."

The armored man burst into laughter:

"Aside from her rivals and Zhen Yi, Hong Lin gets along with practically everyone. She's someone who treasures personal bonds.

"Unfortunately, what she treasures are small bonds, not the greater ones.

"Otherwise, I'd have invited her to join the Torchbearers."

The woman in black smiled faintly: "I'll take that as a compliment."

"Hahaha, you don't quite qualify either. You're like Hong Lin in that you value personal bonds, but your ambitions run far deeper than hers.

"We're merely walking the same road for a stretch. Sooner or later, we'll part ways.

"I only hope that when that time comes, we can go our separate ways peacefully. Ming Yu, I ask only that you stay your hand— even if you won't give us a push, at least don't tear up the road behind us."

Indeed— the woman in the black dress was none other than An Mingyu, the Chosen One of [Fate], known among peak players as the Blind One.

Which made the armored man's identity easy to guess: Qin Xin, founder of the Torchbearers!

An Mingyu shook her head with an amused smile: "I've told you— I've seen that my future and the Torchbearers' future converge. But you don't believe me, and there's nothing I can do about that."

Qin Xin returned a wry smile: "If you and Zhen Xin weren't best friends, I'd believe that ninety percent. But knowing you're acquainted with her, I can only believe ten."

"Oh? Is it ten percent you believe, or one Cheng?" An Mingyu asked with amusement, clearly playing on the homophone to gauge the Torchbearer founder's attitude toward Cheng Shi.

Qin Xin caught the wordplay. He fell silent for a moment, then sighed:

"I truly never expected him to save Qiushi. Even though that was only a projection of my memories, Cheng Shi clearly knows Qiushi.

"Sigh— just from the fact that Qiushi doesn't recognize him, I can already deduce that the benefactor my Fire Seeker anxiously chose to forget... was him!

"The way things played out... the Torchbearers owe him a debt.

"Fortunately, it's not too late to make amends. This misunderstanding may require Zhen Xin to suffer a little for it."

An Mingyu let out a quiet sigh of her own: "At least Zhen Yi can take the blame. Xin Xin shouldn't have underestimated him."

"Those who deceive will always be deceived in turn. Zhen Xin knows that saying as well as anyone."

"Of course she does. She's probably the person in this world who understands it best.

"But let's set that aside for now. How do you plan to face the Torchbearers' benefactor?"

"I shouldn't face him at all," Qin Xin said, his expression grave. "Since my Fire Seeker chose to forget him, I should not learn his identity at this stage either.

"But tonight's misunderstanding— I will express my apologies with sincerity."

"Should I thank you on behalf of the Learned Poet for your unwavering principles? Or should I curse your stubbornness on my own behalf?"

At that, Qin Xin laughed aloud.

"You think I shouldn't forget Cheng Shi's identity?"

An Mingyu nodded without hesitation:

"One who orchestrates the game board should survey the entire field.

"If you forget who he is, and when you place your next piece you discover this Fate Weaver standing in the Torchbearers' path once again— wouldn't that move be wasted? Wouldn't it simply invite another tragedy?"

"You are not [Fate]. You are [Memory]. Your duty is not to enact [Fate]'s tragedies, but to remember everything you know."

Qin Xin's gaze sharpened. Then a smile surfaced on his face.

After a long moment, he turned and studied the blindfold covering the Blind One's eyes. His smile faded, replaced by solemn gravity:

"You're wrong.

"The Torchbearers must first protect each member's individual ideals— only then can they collectively defend their shared ones.

"It's true that most of our members possess selfless dedication. But that dedication means sacrificing one's own principles, not someone else's.

"I cannot make decisions for my Fire Seeker, and I will support every decision she makes.

"Because that is the ideal I choose to protect, and the founding purpose of the Torchbearers."

"But in the end, I'm still not a qualified Torchbearer?" An Mingyu smiled.

Qin Xin faltered, then sighed: "Just think of me as an old fossil."

"Not exactly. You're rather endearing, actually. To use Xin Xin's words: adorably foolish."

An Mingyu laughed softly and stepped toward the exit.

She walked to the edge of the stage ruins and looked down at this place that had been jointly demolished by memory's projections and deceit's illusions, the corners of her lips curling upward despite herself.

"Whenever I picture Xin Xin and this Fate Weaver swapping identities, I can't shake this sense of [Fate]'s inevitability.

"I suspect this won't be the last time they swap. But this Fate Weaver... is truly brave!

"Daring to provoke even Zhen Yi."

"Zhen Xin went alone into Hu Wei's game. Aren't you worried about her?"

"Worried? The one who should worry is the Grand Marshal and his group. What do I have to worry about?"

"What concerns me more right now is that Zhen Xin has fallen into Cheng Shi's hands. This Fate Weaver doesn't seem like the accommodating type."

Qin Xin raised an eyebrow: "Because of Zhen Yi?"

An Mingyu nodded with a smile: "Yes. Because of Zhen Yi."

"So the rumors are true. She really is [Deceit]'s test subject."

"Test subject? No— Xin Xin wouldn't agree with that phrasing." An Mingyu seemed to recall something, her expression growing complicated. "Zhen Yi existed long before the Faith Game descended.

"It was only when [Deceit] cast its gaze that it gave Xin Xin an extra opportunity— or rather, gave Zhen Yi an opportunity.

"It intended for Zhen Yi to pick up the Die of Fate. But who could have guessed? Right in front of a god, Zhen Yi changed her mind and chose the same mask as her sister."

Qin Xin's eyes lit up with sudden understanding, and he laughed:

"Of course! I suspect [Deceit] wasn't angry at all— in fact, it was probably delighted?"

An Mingyu pressed her lips together in a smile and didn't reply.

But her expression said it all: 'You guessed right.'

Qin Xin shook his head in amusement. Letting go of the topic of Zhen Xin, he looked into An Mingyu's eyes and asked with gravity:

"Zhen Xin said he'd had an audience with [Fate]. Cheng Shi's reaction to that was very telling— he didn't seem to reject the claim at all. So, Ming Yu, what do you think?"

At those words, An Mingyu's smile vanished instantly.

She furrowed her brow in thought for a moment, arriving at no conclusion. Then she produced a twenty-two-sided die and tossed it casually to the ground.

The Die of Fate tumbled back and forth until it finally slowed to a stop at her feet, showing...

One.

"..."

"..."

Qin Xin froze, then chuckled:

"What did you divine?"

"His audience?"

"So I was overthinking it?"

"It seems [Fate] truly is indifferent. Perhaps it simply dislikes summoning anyone..."

An Mingyu's face became extraordinarily complex. She gently shook her head, then "gazed" at Qin Xin and said with utmost seriousness:

"I need to tell you a secret first:

"This should be only the second time since I embarked on [Fate]'s path and received the Die of Fate... that I've rolled a..."

"One."

"?" Qin Xin's gaze sharpened, pupils constricting sharply.