

The Gods 451

Chapter 451: Plotting Out Loud

The two figures supporting Cheng Shi from behind were none other than Gao Ya and Gou Feng— the same teammates he'd recently encountered again during a trial.

The Soloist who'd promised to give Cheng Shi a major shock upon their next meeting had kept her word. Her appearance here had indeed given him a shock.

As for the Chieftain who'd swallowed an Envoy's flesh in a bid to seize divine power... he, too, had finally achieved his heart's desire— becoming a genuine part of an Envoy.

After all, who could argue that a desire puppet wasn't part of an Envoy?

Seeing his former teammates reduced to this state, Cheng Shi felt a tangle of complicated emotions.

It wasn't that he couldn't bear it. He was simply lamenting that these two had vented their desires in entirely the wrong direction. Among all the people and things that could've satisfied their ambitions, they'd had to pick the progenitor of desire itself.

Well then. They'd thoroughly become part of desire now.

Aph Ros, seeing Cheng Shi's peculiar expression, chuckled:

"If you'd like to—"

"Thanks, but no. We're not close. Let's move on."

Cheng Shi seemed to have guessed what the Envoy was about to say and swiftly raised a hand to cut him off, then righted his chair and sat back down.

His brisk demeanor made it look as though he'd never known those two teammates at all.

Hu Xuan also returned to her seat— had she not, Cheng Shi wouldn't have dared sit back at the table so readily. She studied the two puppets with curious interest, then smiled:

"I can sense traces of [Birth]. It seems one of them was a follower of my Lord."

She glanced sidelong at Aph Ros.

"You turned one of my Lord's followers into a puppet right before my eyes. Are you testing my devotion?"

Aph Ros blinked in momentary surprise, then threw back his head and laughed.

"Fascinating, truly fascinating.

"I've figured it out now. You're not my brother's Miss Sun at all. On the contrary, my brother is more like your...

"Mr. Sun?"

"You're working so tirelessly to earn him leverage with me— could it be that you want him to break his oath and join His embrace? To become a real... Offspring Priest?"

"..."

Cheng Shi was speechless.

He genuinely appreciated Hu Xuan's help, but as he'd noted before, Hu Xuan was not a suitable negotiator. She was far too direct— her objectives sat right on the table, just as straightforwardly as her desire for a child.

But Cheng Shi was deeply grateful. In this three-way conversation, she was clearly on his side.

That was enough.

Though admittedly, Aph Ros wasn't an adversary either.

Like Hu Xuan, the Envoy had designs on Cheng Shi, but under [Fate]'s watchful eye, such designs could only be pursued gradually.

Faced with Aph Ros's teasing, Hu Xuan didn't deny it. She openly admitted her designs on Cheng Shi, which only made Aph Ros beam wider.

"It seems we are the same kind of people."

Hu Xuan nodded with elegant composure: "In certain respects, I concede the point."

With that, they exchanged a glance, then turned in unison toward Cheng Shi.

"..."

Cheng Shi was terrified. His current predicament felt even more nerve-wracking than his very first audience with a god.

The air was thick with the intermingled auras of [Corruption] and [Birth]. He didn't dare breathe, afraid that one inhalation might turn three people at this table into four— or even five.

And the most horrifying part? You wouldn't know whose belly the fourth or fifth would show up in.

'Help... HELP!'

After holding his breath and locking eyes with the two Envoys for a tense moment, Cheng Shi finally summoned the courage to shatter this unbearably awkward impasse by changing the subject.

"So, um... you can't eat an entire feast in one bite. I've heard plenty of bombshells today— I need time to digest.

"After all, I already know you're stuck here and can't leave— er, that's not what I meant. What I mean is..."

Before Cheng Shi could correct himself, Aph Ros smiled softly and telekinetically moved the Umbilical Shackles from beside Hu Xuan across the table to Cheng Shi's side.

"What you mean is that you have the ability to come see me anytime. Am I right?"

"Your Miss Sun here has surely been wanting to give this to you. The only reason she held back was to gauge my attitude first.

"Now you know.

"My attitude is perfectly clear. If giving this to my brother means he'll always remember me— perhaps even visit from time to time— then I'm more than happy to oblige.

"And of course, if you're also willing to—"

"I'm willing to accept it." Cheng Shi hastily stowed the shackles away, dabbing cold sweat as he cut off Aph Ros mid-sentence. He absolutely could not let this [Corruption] Envoy unleash any more explosive statements in front of a [Birth] Envoy thirsting for a child.

Aph Ros wasn't surprised in the least. He smiled happily but refrained from further teasing.

"Phew— let's discuss serious matters, Aph Ros.

"I don't know if you have a clear understanding of our identities, but I can tell you this: in this so-called [Void] era, the Land of Hope has become ancient history. Humans like us are the mainstream of this age.

"We call ourselves players. And what we've encountered— all of you— is called...

"The Faith Game.

"A game about faith!"

"A game?"

Aph Ros slowly savored those two words, then roared with laughter.

"How very [Void]!"

"But I must remind you, my brother: never treat history as mere history. It is merely a label that [Time] affixes to different presents, and a reproduction that [Memory] fishes from the Sea of Memory.

"When They place what They cherish under the spotlight, even history... can become the present."

Cheng Shi nodded slightly. He'd heard similar views from his Benefactor [Deceit]. The gist was that history was relative, and the present was relative too.

In a world where gods existed, whether the past was history or the future was history remained an open question.

But dwelling on such abstractions was pointless. Cheng Shi hadn't changed the subject to debate philosophy with Aph Ros. He had far more practical objectives in mind— such as...

How to handle those peak players still hanging from the dome.

"Regardless of how you view history, the bottom line is: for us, players are the protagonists of the [Void] era.

"So, Aph Ros, I'd like to make another deal with you."

"Oh? What kind of deal?"

"I've improvised a script. The only problem is it's still short on actors. So I'd like you to return my actors—"

Before Cheng Shi could finish, Aph Ros was already laughing.

He seemed to have guessed exactly what Cheng Shi meant.

Chapter 452: Daylight and Darkness — Which Is More Alluring?

"I know what you're about to say, my brother, but you seem to view our brotherhood too narrowly.

"Since I've already— oh no, since this Eternal Sun has already gifted my power to you on His behalf, whether you choose to release those sinners has nothing to do with me anymore.

"It's merely because I've awakened that these powers dragged them into my cage. But for my brother, having your prisoners lodged in my cage for a short while hardly counts as bargaining leverage.

"Do as you please."

"..." 'Oh no. Aph Ros is deploying the soft-touch strategy.'

'He's even trying to corrupt me with these petty favors!'

'Am I, Cheng Shi, someone so easily corrupted?'

'Yes, I am!'

Cheng Shi smiled— an absolutely gleeful smile.

"Aph Ros, I appreciate your generosity. But you've misunderstood me. The actors I mentioned aren't just them. There's also..."

Cheng Shi grinned at him.

Aph Ros blinked: "Me?"

"Exactly! The real deal is this: I'd like to invite you to star in a battle-royale script. As for how to play the villain, I'm sure I don't need to teach you.

"Naturally, the compensation you'll receive from this deal is..."

"After this, you may start receiving regular 'deliveries' from the [Void] era.

"Every sinner shipped to you— unless I specifically mark them for information extraction— will serve as your 'eyes' into this era!"

The moment those words landed, Aph Ros extended his hand.

"Deal!"

More than that, judging by his expression, this dual Envoy who'd been cut off from the outside world for so long could hardly contain his eagerness to explore this brand-new era.

Seeing the "partnership" go so smoothly, Cheng Shi smiled and extended his own hand, sharing for the very first time a firm handshake with this [Corruption] Envoy...

...separated by a generous buffer of air.

"..."

'Are you kidding? How could I possibly physically shake hands with an Envoy who can stir desire at will?'

'One handshake and can I still control my desires? Would I still even be me?'

Cheng Shi was steady to the core, so he air-shook as a token gesture. The move, however, unmistakably turned Aph Ros's expression "aggrieved."

Cheng Shi looked at him, utterly exasperated.

"Can I add one condition? Could you please stop making those kinds of expressions on a handsome man's face?"

No sooner had the words left his mouth than Aph Ros spun in the chair and instantly shifted into female form, still wearing that same aggrieved look.

But the moment Hu Xuan— silent until now— saw the [Corruption] Envoy transform into a woman, she dropped her elegant composure entirely. Her eyes narrowed slowly.

She first shot a glance at the rain-of-cold-sweat Cheng Shi, then gave Aph Ros a sidelong look and scoffed:

"The stench of [Corruption]. Smell too much of it and it really does turn your stomach."

The moonlit beauty that was Aph Ros gave a soft laugh, entirely unbothered.

"My brother, tell me...

"Is the sunlit day more worth lingering in, or is a night with a bright moon overhead more alluring?"

"..."

Cheng Shi was drenched in cold sweat, not daring to make a sound. He could only smile politely and bury his face in his food.

Internally, he was too drained to even complain. He suddenly found himself missing a certain surname-Chen ascetic monk.

'Praised be [Silence], please open your eyes and look at what's happening here.'

Jokes were jokes, and Aph Ros knew when to stop.

The two Envoys and one player spent a short while refining the script at the table, then settled into their respective roles.

The scenario was straightforward: Aph Ros would play himself, portraying the [Birth] monster Go Lis, an indiscriminate predator hunting sinners who dared try to escape within this Void.

Cheng Shi was the sinner who'd escaped through outside help— that outside help being Hu Xuan, naturally.

According to the script, Cheng Shi had blown the whistle to summon Hu Xuan, and the two of them had narrowly evaded Go Lis's pursuit— sustaining heavy wounds in the process— while conveniently rescuing a few people who deserved to be rescued.

As for who deserved rescue, Cheng Shi had already drafted the criteria.

First: exclude anyone surnamed Zhen. Next: exclude Big Cat's rival. After that: whatever felt right.

But just how generous "whatever felt right" turned out to be depended entirely on Cheng Shi's mood.

After hammering out the details, Aph Ros escorted Cheng Shi and Hu Xuan back to the Dolgod Assembly Hall. They watched as Aph Ros slowly faded, sinking into the depths of the Void to become Go Lis. Cheng Shi surveyed the sparse "stillborn infants" dangling overhead and smiled to himself.

The peak players had finally reached the peak in this land of [Birth].

Peak in the literal sense.

"Do you think... it's okay for me to screw them over like this?" Cheng Shi rubbed his hands together excitedly. There wasn't a shred of guilt in his tone— only glee.

Hu Xuan smiled lightly:

"It sounds quite satisfying, honestly. But I have to play the villain and remind you: since you've chosen not to rescue all of them, you need to carefully weigh the pressure you'll face from trapping those few.

"After all, this isn't a solo game.

"Cheng Shi, I think you understand this better than I do."

"Don't worry— they won't fail to escape. I actually have more confidence in them than in myself.

"I'm only giving Zhen Yi a minor setback— slowing her down so she doesn't interfere while I reclaim what's mine. As for the others, they'll be treated exactly as they should be.

"At the very least, from these players' perspective, I'm a pretty decent Fate Weaver.

"Sometimes, acquaintances who know your roots are far easier to handle than complete strangers.

"I'll inevitably have to deal with them going forward. If I can bank some goodwill during this incident, the road ahead might be a bit smoother."

Hu Xuan smiled faintly: "It seems you've already seen the path ahead clearly."

"Seen it clearly?"

Cheng Shi laughed self-deprecatingly.

"I've never seen it clearly.

"But does not seeing the path mean I shouldn't walk it?"

"No. I only need to know that besides this direction, there's absolutely nowhere else to go— and that's enough to force myself forward.

"Anyway, enough of this airy-fairy talk. There's one more thing... I might need to trouble you with.

"I 'returned' the whistle you gave me to Zhen Yi. Of course, it's probably in Zhen Xin's hands by now. So..."

Hu Xuan understood immediately what Cheng Shi meant. She'd sensed during her descent that the person who'd called her wasn't Cheng Shi. But she'd feared Cheng Shi might be in danger, unable to blow the whistle himself and forced to use a proxy. So she'd dropped everything and rushed over immediately.

What she hadn't expected was that this was all a trap Cheng Shi had set for a group of peak players.

The audacity!

Even she— now a candidate for Envoy— wouldn't dare antagonize this many peak players at once!

Setting aside whether the scheme would work or blow up, just the divine gazes these peak players carried on their backs... the thought alone was terrifying.

That wasn't just one God. That was a whole swarm of Them!

Chapter 453: The Silent Infant Bell

While marveling at this Fate Weaver's commendable courage, Hu Xuan didn't answer directly. Instead, she flashed a radiant smile and asked:

"So... what?"

Cheng Shi faltered, his expression sheepish.

'I can't exactly say: "Hey sis, you need to give me another whistle, or I won't be able to find you when I have needs."'"

'That would be walking right into the trap myself!'

'This Eternal Sun— when did she start playing mind games?!'

But such trivial challenges could never trip up a clown who performed on stage on the regular.

Cheng Shi cleared his throat and stated with absolute seriousness:

"After our three-way meeting, I now have a way to contact Aph Ros and exchange information with him at any time.

"So I wanted to ask: whenever I obtain intelligence about [Birth] or anything else that interests you, would it work if I left it with Aph Ros and then called to notify you to pick it up?"

"Is that... feasible?"

"..."

Hu Xuan blinked, then shot Cheng Shi a look that was half-smile, half-skepticism.

"It seems the night really is more alluring than the day. But I ought to remind certain people: what flows through the darkness isn't only moonlight. There's also desire and filth."

With that, she extended her hand and produced a new token!

But this time, it wasn't a Night Curtain Spring Whistle. It was a small white round bell!

Cheng Shi had been sweating from her rebuke, but the sight of the little bell shocked him instantly.

"This is... an Infant Bell Flower?!"

Hu Xuan nodded:

"Yes. A Silent Infant Bell.

"Cheng Shi, you're not an obedient Fate Weaver. You've got too many schemes racing through your head. A whistle is too shrill— for someone who always wants to hide something, it's hard to manage.

"So I made this instead.

"The Life Era has many ancient tribes with strange and wondrous forging arts. I prayed for a trial and had them craft this using the Infant Bell Flower as a template.

"Now you can shake it anytime, because this bell makes no sound. I've already asked a Ranger to seal the 'wind element' inside."

'Wait!'

'Ranger? What ranger?'

'A Wind-Taming Ranger?'

'Li Bola?!'

Cheng Shi went blank. He asked in surprise: "You're still in contact with her?"

Hu Xuan smiled and nodded: "Yes, and we're in frequent contact. She covets me, the same way I covet you."

"..."

'Lady, I really can't have a conversation when you put things like that.'

But honestly, this Infant Bell was leagues better than any Night Curtain Spring Whistle!

Cheng Shi was outwardly awkward but inwardly grateful. Hu Xuan had truly been thinking of him, so he shouldn't betray this... trust. Yes, trust.

Still, something felt slightly off, because the bell's design didn't exactly scream "respectable token."

After all, the Night Curtain Spring Whistle already had certain... functions. So this bell wouldn't happen to...

Seeing that Cheng Shi had guessed, Hu Xuan smiled and didn't bother hiding it.

"Correct— there is a tiny side effect that couldn't be eliminated. Though it's not really a side effect. It's just that when you ring it, the air fills with the scent of Infant Bell Flowers."

"..."

"The fragrance may carry a trace of my Lord's aura, but I trust your endurance can handle it."

"..."

'Should? Nice "should!'"

'I knew you had ulterior motives!'

But even with ulterior motives, any object that could summon the big boss for an emergency rescue had to be accepted.

And so Cheng Shi pocketed the bell with a shameless grin, thanked her with a dry laugh, and then returned to a serious tone:

"I've accepted the gift. Now then— shall we start the script?"

"I know you and Hu Wei's friend might have some... minor friction, but from what I can tell, the operation he mentioned is extremely important. I suspect he learned something from a higher intelligence channel, so I've decided to go have a look with him."

Of course, Cheng Shi couldn't directly say he was going for the amazing thing Hu Wei had promised wouldn't disappoint him. So his words were... polished somewhat.

"So, if I could trouble you to—"

"There's no need for such formalities between us. I'll play my part. But are you truly not interested in the Grand Marshal's missing friend?"

Cheng Shi paused, then shook his head: "If you're willing to share, I might be interested. But if you'd rather not, everyone has their own secrets. Don't they?"

Hu Xuan smiled. This was one of the reasons she admired Cheng Shi.

Respect.

In a world where you could never see what lay within people's hearts, this Fate Weaver still understood respect.

Unlike certain people, who had absolutely no idea how to respect others.

Hu Xuan smiled and began to speak unhurriedly about the Grand Marshal's friend.

"Your Grand Marshal brother has a wide circle of friends. That particular friend of his is a shrewd and calculating..."

"Fisherman."

Cheng Shi's gaze sharpened. He fell into thought.

A Fisherman— [Chaos]'s hunter class.

Among all [Chaos] followers, Fishermen were the least chaotic themselves. They excelled at fishing in "troubled waters," were even better at creating those troubled waters, and loved goading others into tearing each other apart within the murk— then reaping the spoils after the rivals destroyed each other.

Though [Chaos] and [War] belonged to opposing Paths of Fate, in a certain sense, these two faiths were... actually a perfect match.

"Although I've received His approval, I still need to seek [Birth]'s enlightenment through various trials.

"In one such trial, I was matched with him, along with one of his enemies— a follower of [Order].

"The Elemental Judge clearly had beef with this Fisherman. But the Fisherman couldn't seem to take his opponent down, so he turned his schemes on me.

"More precisely, on everyone.

"He set up a scheme that scrambled everyone's consciousness, making every teammate become hostile toward the Elemental Judge. Including me.

"I'll admit the Fisherman was formidable. Both me and my teammates fell into cognitive chaos. Just as he'd planned, we joined forces to suppress the Elemental Judge, and the Fisherman took the opportunity to finish off his enemy.

"But even after the man was dead, the dust hadn't settled. His heart was too ruthless— he actually wanted to pull up the roots and kill the Elemental Judge's child as well.

"Why are you backing away? You should know me by now: that child was me. Even if it wasn't at the time, I couldn't possibly let him kill a future version of myself.

"So I killed him.

"Just that simple."

"..."

Cheng Shi fell silent. 'Simple isn't really calculated that way, sis. You don't even need to tell me the details— just tell me how many children you gave birth to during that trial, and I'll know exactly how "simple" it was.'

Hu Xuan seemed to read his mind, but she made no effort to downplay [Birth]'s "madness." She simply smiled with elegant composure:

"Six."

Six?

6.

'Your squad only had five other members. Even if each one had a child, that's still one short. Where did the...'

But a moment later, Cheng Shi figured it out: including Hu Xuan herself, the trial party had exactly six people.

6!

'Makes sense. Makes perfect f*ing sense. It's not like she hadn't done it before.'

Chapter 454: Actors in Place, the Script Begins

"Right, right, right— story's over. Time for the new one to begin.

"Hu Wei has certainly guessed that you killed his friend. But after today, once you've saved his life, the friction between you two might ease up.

"The Grand Marshal isn't exactly a good person, but in certain ways...

"He's actually more trustworthy than certain people who never tell the truth.

"But I have to warn you: that trust only holds as long as your interests don't clash.

"Never trust anyone."

"Including you?"

"..." Cheng Shi froze for a moment, caught between laughter and tears. He wanted to say 'I never lie, how can you not trust me?' But after a moment's thought, he answered with gravity: "Including me."

Hu Xuan studied Cheng Shi with an inscrutable gaze, the [Birth] aura around her quietly intensifying.

She gave a slight nod, seemingly ignoring his words and responding only to the topic of Hu Wei:

"It doesn't matter. Whatever he thinks has nothing to do with me. This isn't arrogance born from my status— it's that we serve different Benefactors. I have no need to fear his Benefactor entering the fray.

"Because [War], He is... unique. Yes, unique. Completely different from what I'd previously imagined."

Cheng Shi chewed on that statement carefully. Something seemed to click, and he nodded with a hint of agreement.

The two exchanged a glance and fell silent. Cheng Shi sensed the moment had arrived. He gave an awkward chuckle and snapped his fingers behind his back.

That crisp snap was like a clapperboard striking— it set the "entire crew" into motion.

The instant the sound fell, the phantom of the Dolgod Church dissolved into nothing. The entire space plunged into the pitch-black, boundless Void. The stillborn infants suspended overhead slowly descended, then gradually spread apart, leaving ample space between each [Birth] prison.

To mask his aura, Cheng Shi had already switched back to his [Fate] faith. Now he retrieved blood packs from his storage, splashed them across himself, flicked some casually onto Hu Xuan, then produced a broad, flexible whip and began lashing himself.

He was fabricating whip marks— simulating the aftermath of a vicious battle. But when Hu Xuan watched this scene, she genuinely couldn't contain her laughter.

"If you happen to have certain... unusual preferences—"

"I don't. Thank you!" Cheng Shi's voice rang with ironclad conviction. After finishing his self-flagellation, he glanced up at Hu Xuan: "Do you... need some?"

Hu Xuan's smile was pure mischief. Her expression clearly said: 'And you claim you don't?'

Cheng Shi's mouth twitched and he immediately put the whip away. Seeing his preparations complete, Hu Xuan's gaze softened. Without doing anything visible, her [Birth] aura abruptly plummeted— the sensation was so authentic it felt as though some terrifying invisible force had drained her spirit dry.

Yet paradoxically, the moment Hu Xuan lost her vitality, the great sun in the Void grew increasingly solid and real.

The change startled Cheng Shi. Seeing his shock, Hu Xuan explained through pallid lips:

"I've returned my power to the Eternal Sun. This is an ability that emerged after receiving His approval. When the Eternal Sun solidifies, my physical strength withers in proportion.

"Don't worry— the power never disappears. It simply changes containers.

"Let's go, my leading man. It's time for your entrance."

As she spoke, Hu Xuan dispersed the phantom of the great sun behind her. Apart from Cheng Shi and a select few who knew the truth, no one yet knew she could actually become the Eternal Sun. So even if only to preserve a trump card, she would never reveal the great sun to others.

Cheng Shi understood this perfectly. So when he'd written the script, the great sun made no appearance.

As for the phenomenon of radiant light flooding the scene when Hu Xuan had descended— he'd already devised a plausible explanation for that.

Everything was ready. The show was about to begin.

After one final look at Hu Xuan, at the very instant the writhing shadow-tentacles beneath the Void were about to erupt, Cheng Shi suddenly charged with all his might toward the nearest stillborn infant.

He lunged forward, tore open the fetal membrane, and yanked the imprisoned player out.

Of course, the actual extraction wasn't his doing. Even with Go Lis relaxing her grip, an Envoy's prison couldn't be torn open by mortal flesh and muscle. The one who truly released the player was Go Lis herself. Cheng Shi was merely putting on a show.

But putting on a show was the entire point!

If he wanted to earn everyone's goodwill, Cheng Shi had to be the one doing the rescuing!

And when he saw that the player he'd pulled out of the first prison happened to be his good brother Hu Wei, his heart settled.

'Locked in! This is in the bag!'

He'd specifically told Aph Ros not to reveal who was trapped in which cocoon. He'd only asked the Envoy to drag the one containing the female player as far from him as possible. That way, Cheng Shi wouldn't

accidentally rescue Zhen Xin, and he could perfectly perform genuine surprise upon seeing who he'd saved.

Because he truly hadn't known who was inside!

So when he saw that his first rescue was Hu Wei, the delight in his eyes looked more real than reality itself!

But Hu Wei, upon seeing the two of them, felt no delight whatsoever. Only sheer terror!

During the three-way meeting at the long table, Hu Wei's consciousness had suddenly plunged into chaos. Only when Cheng Shi had just torn him from the prison did his awareness finally stir from its fog.

But the instant he awoke, he felt no relief. Instead, he held his breath, focused his mind, and without an ounce of hesitation, slashed a blazing arc of blood and fire at the unknown figures beside him!

Sensing [War]'s fury, Cheng Shi went pale: "Hu Wei! We're on the same side! Don't attack!"

Hearing that familiar voice, Hu Wei not only didn't pull back— his greatsword fell even faster.

Hu Xuan's eyes narrowed. She endured the risk of being killed on the spot and didn't dodge, because according to the script, she'd already exhausted herself fighting Go Lis's pursuit. As an "excellent" actress, she knew she couldn't evade now— and shouldn't be able to.

More importantly, she trusted Cheng Shi. She knew he would never let her die.

And indeed, Cheng Shi would never let his good brother kill his lifeline. But the way he saved Hu Xuan...

Caught Hu Xuan completely off guard.

Because at that critical instant, Cheng Shi lunged forward and wrapped his arms around Hu Wei's waist, driving his shoulder into the burly warrior to push him back:

"Hu Wei! Stand down! If you don't, we all die here!"

Feeling Cheng Shi's pitiful strength, Hu Wei frowned. His blade shifted three inches in its descent, screaming past Hu Xuan's left arm before crashing down with a thunderous boom.

The howling flames lit up the Void in an instant. Seeing Hu Xuan drenched in blood with her left arm charred and blackened, the Grand Marshal's frown deepened further.

'Not an illusion!'

Chapter 455: Cheng Shi — Truly My Brother!

It wasn't just Hu Xuan. In the shower of sparks, Cheng Shi's body had also acquired numerous burn wounds.

Neither of them was an illusion.

So who was Cheng Shi? And who was this woman?

Hu Wei's brow was locked tight, his gaze sharp as lightning. He swept his eyes over the two, then recalled the flash of light he'd seen from within the prison. His expression immediately grew complicated.

Because he'd already guessed this stunning beauty's identity.

"Hu Xuan!"

Hu Xuan shot Hu Wei a frigid glance, said nothing, and turned to sprint toward the next stillborn infant.

According to the script Cheng Shi had written for her, her role was to help him rescue people— everyone except Zhen Yi and Yu Mu.

Beyond that, she didn't need to interact with anyone. She didn't even have a single line!

Seeing Hu Xuan leave with cold indifference, Hu Wei turned to the Cheng Shi before him. But his eyes held no gratitude— only gravity and suspicion.

Not that anyone could blame him. With Zhen Yi in the mix, nobody dared trust anyone.

But Cheng Shi had prepared for far too long. He had more than enough ways to make the other believe. Yet strangely, he did nothing— not even a single word of explanation. He simply turned ashen-faced and followed after Hu Xuan.

Seeing this, Hu Wei's expression hardened. After a quick scan of his surroundings, he decisively chose to follow.

But Cheng Shi didn't acknowledge him. He was panting heavily, constantly glancing at the ground below. His deeply furrowed brow didn't look like an act at all— it genuinely seemed as though something lurked in the shadows around them.

Before long, Cheng Shi's stamina was visibly flagging. Even Hu Xuan ahead of them had slowed.

When Cheng Shi saw Hu Xuan stagger, he didn't hesitate. Gritting his teeth, he cast a Spirit Spell on her. Hu Xuan steadied herself, looked back at him with a firm nod, and pressed on.

Only after seeing that Spirit Spell take effect did Hu Wei's expression soften slightly. At the same time, wariness faded from his eyes, replaced by something awkward.

He felt his own condition was still decent, yet he couldn't fathom how these two had ended up in such sorry shape. So he quickened his pace, catching Cheng Shi by the arm and asking in a complicated tone:

"Cheng Shi, what is..."

A flash of anger crossed Cheng Shi's eyes. Honestly, getting hacked at by the very person you'd come to rescue would make anyone furious. But Cheng Shi's performance was richer than mere anger— he wove helplessness and frustration into it.

That blend of emotions all but screamed at Hu Wei: 'I know why you attacked me. I know why you don't trust me. But I'm still angry, because I'm a victim too!'

'A victim of that Master of Trickery and this [Birth] crisis!'

Hu Wei was exceptionally skilled at reading people. His insight had always lived up to the title of Grand Marshal. And being good at reading people meant being good at reading their eyes. He sensed Cheng Shi's anger and understood the complexity in his peripheral glances. His expression grew even more awkward, because the person before him was clearly no illusion or impostor— it was unmistakably Cheng Shi himself.

But given how decisively he'd swung that blade, and how icily Cheng Shi and Hu Xuan were treating him, he couldn't think of a suitable way to break the ice in this bizarre "team" dynamic while the situation remained unclear.

Just as Hu Wei was growing anxious, Cheng Shi "relented."

Perhaps because he still needed the Grand Marshal's strength, or perhaps because he couldn't blame a fellow victim, Cheng Shi gasped out an explanation between breaths as they ran:

"Zhen Yi dragged us into Go Lis's lair. To escape, I blew the whistle and summoned Hu Xuan..."

"Go Lis detected our escape and launched a relentless hunt. We had no choice but to double back... and find another way out!"

"Hu Xuan took heavy injuries shielding us from her. Run... before the Go Lis we knocked back catches up!"

Go Lis? Lair? Hunt?

In any other scenario, Hu Wei would've turned this information over in his head three times, because far too many critical details were missing. But caught up in the momentum of Cheng Shi and Hu Xuan's actions, swept along in this headlong flight, he merely ran through it once with a furrowed brow and roughly pieced together what had happened.

It seemed his little brother hadn't originally intended to rescue him— he'd only thought of it after failing to escape and deciding to double back for reinforcements.

'Good. Very good. He truly is Cheng Shi!'

Once he'd grasped the situation, Hu Wei picked up speed. He moved like the wind, scooping up Cheng Shi and charging forward at full tilt.

How fast a front-line warrior could sprint at full power needed no elaboration. The Grand Marshal grabbed Cheng Shi in one hand, caught up to Hu Xuan in two strides, snatched her up in the other, and barreled madly toward the next stillborn infant.

As he ran, his gaze repeatedly swept the Void below. Sure enough, he saw countless shadow-tentacles creeping upward.

Hu Wei's eyes narrowed. He still had breath to spare and asked in a low voice:

"What is Go Lis?"

'Huh?'

'Bro, you don't know?'

Cheng Shi was stunned. He was about to answer when Hu Xuan spoke first, her voice weak:

"My Lord's Envoy. The whip of divine punishment against blasphemers. I released a burst of [Birth] aura to cow it, but it'll only hold for a short time. It'll be back soon."

Envoy!

Nothing else needed to be said. That single word alone told Hu Wei this was undoubtedly a life-or-death situation!

But he'd also caught something else in Hu Xuan's words: this [Birth] follower called the Eternal Sun actually had the strength to face an Envoy head-on!

Though she was covered in blood, though she was badly wounded, the fact that she'd confronted an Envoy and walked away in one piece proved everything.

She was a powerhouse.

And she was seriously injured!

Furthermore, she had most likely killed one of his brothers.

At that thought, Hu Wei's gaze sharpened!

But even after a long moment, he made no hostile move. If anything, his legs pumped faster.

He had no intention of revenge. Indeed— Hu Wei had never once considered revenge!

That earlier slash had been a probe born from not yet recognizing Hu Xuan. It was not retribution for a fallen brother.

In the Grand Marshal's philosophy, if someone learned certain truths about him through mutual connections, his first instinct was never to silence them. Instead, he'd evaluate the person— to see whether they qualified to become one of his own!

A marshal leading troops never feared betrayal or death. What he feared was having no soldiers to command!

And right now, he clearly felt Hu Xuan had what it took to be one of his people.

So the right move was to protect Hu Xuan— not to strike while she was vulnerable.

He did harbor one question, though: the whistle had sounded so close, yet somehow, the distance between them had been stretched impossibly far.

But he kept the question to himself, guessing it was likely the work of the Go Lis that Hu Xuan had driven back momentarily.

The creature was probably trying to prevent the players from escaping.

"..."

Cheng Shi, of course, had no idea his good brother's internal monologue was this elaborate. All he knew was that Hu Xuan's improvisation just now had been brilliant. She seemed to have gleaned some understanding of the Grand Marshal through the Fisherman's death, and that single line had been crafted to move Hu Wei.

The acceleration was proof enough: Hu Wei was now running at absolute full speed.

Before long, the three arrived at the second prison. The shadows in the Void below were drawing closer by the second.

Spotting the curled fetal shell, Hu Wei swung his sword at it. But under Go Lis's genuine power, his slash didn't even leave a scratch.

"..." Hu Wei's expression stiffened. He looked at Cheng Shi.

Cheng Shi was over the moon internally but didn't dare show a moment's hesitation. He stumbled forward with a pale face and tore the fetal membrane apart with bare hands.

The player inside felt consciousness returning. Before even emerging, a voice drifted out:

"This place is—"

Before the sentence could finish, Hu Wei reached in, hauled the trapped Mo Li out, and clamped a hand over the mouth that had just opened!

Chapter 456: The "True Escape"

Mo Li was remarkably composed. Though his expression shifted, he never made any reflexive movements.

He pinched several book pages between his fingers and swept his surroundings with a grave gaze. When he saw that the people around him were Hu Wei and Cheng Shi, he quietly tucked the pages away.

Cheng Shi filed this away, enriching his mental profile of the Arbiter known as the Chief Grand Secretary. This man looked even more steadfast than the Grand Marshal.

He seemed perpetually confident. Whether that confidence was genuine or feigned, Cheng Shi couldn't say.

Seeing Mo Li stand down, Hu Wei released him. He drove his greatsword into the ground with two light taps, then spoke rapidly:

"Go Lis is chasing us. We need to escape her lair immediately."

The instant Mo Li heard that name, his pupils contracted sharply.

He clearly knew of Go Lis.

"The Sin Brood Mother! This [Birth] attack dragged us into her lair?"

Hu Wei looked faintly surprised: "You've heard of her?"

Mo Li's expression was solemn: "Yes. I was fortunate enough to hear that name once, but she'd long since been submerged in the Sea of Memory. Why would this place..."

"Grudge!" Cheng Shi seized the opening to interject. "Stop wasting time— we'll talk while we run!"

With that, Cheng Shi sprinted toward the next stillborn infant. Hu Xuan followed close behind, leaving space for Hu Wei and Mo Li to confer.

Both men were sharp enough to realize Cheng Shi had deliberately given them room to compare notes, sparing them the trouble of catching each other up separately.

Hu Wei didn't hesitate. He tossed Mo Li over his shoulder and charged after them, rattling off everything he'd deduced in one breath as they ran.

After hearing it all, Mo Li combined it with his own knowledge of Go Lis and returned a single word:

"Legit."

Hu Wei instantly picked up speed.

And now, in this moment, the Chief Grand Secretary's terrifying support capabilities finally revealed themselves.

Cheng Shi, running point, couldn't even tell what tune the other had sung— he only felt his body suddenly become weightless. More than that, under the Secretary's blessing, a single casual stride now carried him farther than five steps before.

That much was still comprehensible. Speed buffs came in countless forms— the mechanism might vary, but the concept was universal.

What happened next, however, made Cheng Shi realize he'd underestimated the Chief Grand Secretary.

Because the distant stillborn-infant prison was now hurtling toward him at breakneck speed!

What had been a one-sided chase suddenly became a two-way rush!

"Holy..."

In barely a dozen seconds, the infant was right in front of him.

Cheng Shi raised a brow— he seemed to grasp Mo Li's intent— and without hesitation tore open the fetal shell with bare hands, releasing the person inside...

An acrobat.

!!??

Long Jing!?

How could it be him!?

He hadn't left!!

Cheng Shi's gaze hardened. His heart lurched.

'Well, well, well. The number-two on the [Deceit] ladder had snuck the ultimate sleight-of-hand right under everyone's noses. He'd never left the hall at all— he'd used [Deceit] techniques to drift from the stage's center and hide among the crowd!'

'So that's why there was an extra stillborn hanging overhead. It was him!'

Yes— Long Jing truly hadn't left. He'd fooled everyone so he could keep gathering intelligence inside the venue. But who could have predicted that Cheng Shi would deploy an indiscriminate crowd-control attack!

That single move had swept even Long Jing— who'd thought he was sitting pretty on top of the world— straight into Go Lis's Grudge!

Cheng Shi almost laughed in spite of himself. He kept up his act of momentary confusion, and he wasn't the only one— everyone present except Hu Xuan, who knew nothing about the Mediocre Person gathering, froze for a beat.

Long Jing's consciousness snapped back and he leaped clear of his restraints. But when he saw a group of familiar faces staring at him with odd expressions, this acrobat— renowned for his tumbling evasions— stumbled upon landing and nearly twisted an ankle.

Hu Wei regarded the Prisoner with a half-smile and cold scoff:

"Is this your next circus act?"

"The unsteady look suits you— it's quite funny."

"..."

"..."

"..."

Hearing this, Cheng Shi turned back in shock, almost thinking the Prisoner had possessed Hu Wei.

Long Jing broke free and sighed with relief— until he spotted Cheng Shi in the group. The heart he'd just lowered shot right back up!

This person... Judging by everyone's attitude, they'd clearly accepted this "Cheng Shi." But the question was: was this "Cheng Shi" the same "Cheng Shi" from before?

If so, then... where had this impostor come from?

Cheng Shi had happened to turn toward Hu Wei at just the right moment to miss Long Jing's probing gaze. Whether it was coincidence or the Fate Weaver's deliberate timing, nobody could say. In any case, seeing that Cheng Shi didn't engage him, Long Jing shelved his suspicions and chose not to expose Cheng Shi's identity.

From his perspective, this encounter felt less like the earlier clash of con artists and more like a new "partnership."

So he decided to observe and wait.

Cheng Shi hadn't expected Long Jing to get caught either. He'd known he'd eventually meet this President Gong again, but not this soon.

So soon that he'd barely finished planning how to handle Long Jing's questions. A thread of tension ran through him, but thankfully the other didn't improvise any scenes. Cheng Shi exhaled quietly with relief.

But the scrutiny came from all sides, and it was ceaseless. That very glance backward brought Mo Li's gaze onto him. Mo Li studied Cheng Shi for a moment, then asked in measured tones:

"You probably know what I'm looking for, Fate Weaver."

Cheng Shi shook his head with a wry smile, then reached into his storage and produced an object.

When everyone saw the fragments, confusion filled their eyes. Only Hu Xuan chuckled bitterly and said nothing.

Cheng Shi's expression darkened as he explained: "The Night Curtain Spring Whistle. I used the primordial [Birth] power stored inside it to break your restraints. But now... it's shattered."

Hu Wei's eyes sharpened: "When that whistle reached me, it didn't seem to carry this kind of power."

"That's because Hu Xuan wasn't present at the time. Her arrival amplified the resonance in this [Birth] artifact." Cheng Shi's face was a picture of bitter resignation. "Hu Wei, this was the fail-safe she gave me after I saved her life. And now it's completely spent."

As he spoke, Cheng Shi turned a pitiful look toward Hu Xuan, his expression all but begging: 'Can I get another one?'

Hu Xuan gave a soft laugh and offered no reply, her face pale.

With that, everything clicked into place for Hu Wei and Mo Li.

The chain of events, as they understood it, was this:

Cheng Shi had used the whistle Zhen Yi returned to him to summon Hu Xuan, breaking his own restraints to prepare for escape. But during their flight, Go Lis's Grudge had driven them back.

Their battle against Go Lis had clearly failed. Hu Xuan had used a secret technique to hold Go Lis at bay temporarily, and the two had fled in the opposite direction. Left with no choice, they'd come to rescue the others and pool everyone's strength to find another way out.

Up to this point, Cheng Shi had rescued three people, but the whistle's power was depleted. This meant the remaining two were...

Beyond saving.

And that wasn't even the worst of it. The shadows below the Void seemed to be closing in.

Dread gathered beneath their feet. Hu Wei frowned slightly and moved to sprint toward the next prison without a word, but Mo Li grabbed his hand. He turned in surprise to see Mo Li shaking his head:

"There's no time. One of the two remaining is Yu Mu, and the other is an unknown stranger— most likely the lurker hiding in the audience seats, same as Long Jing, watching the show from behind the scenes. Without confirming their identity first, freeing them is unwise.

"As for Zhen Yi... this is her trap. She's probably already escaped. We'll settle that score in due time.

"I've heard of Go Lis. She despises all blasphemers. I don't know how Zhen Yi sent us in here, but remember— we broke free of her restraints using [Birth]'s power. Regardless, we are now her targets.

"And once she hunts us down, it won't end until one of us is dead!

"So, Grand Marshal— save your time. Find a way to retreat first!"

Hu Wei seemed tempted but ultimately shook his head after a moment's hesitation.

"I'm the one who invited Yu Mu down here. Even if nobody likes him, I can't just abandon him. You all go ahead— let me try one more time!"

With that, Hu Wei charged off.

"..."

Watching that hulking figure recede, Cheng Shi felt genuinely conflicted.

'You call him righteous, but sometimes he can stand by and watch you die. You call him callous, but he'll pull you back from the brink at the last second.'

'People— what complicated creatures indeed.'

Despite these musings, Cheng Shi's feet followed Hu Wei. Because in his script, this was a secondary plotline: if the Grand Marshal refused to abandon Yu Mu, Cheng Shi would tag along for the performance, banking goodwill. After all, Yu Mu was definitely not getting released.

Even if Yu Mu really was in the second-to-last fetal prison, this [Decay] follower's fate had already been written in stone.

Fixed destiny, authored by Cheng Shi.

Chapter 457: The [Deceit] Follower's Choice

Cheng Shi was moved, and so was everyone else present. A flicker of something unusual passed through each person's eyes as they watched Hu Wei go.

Even Hu Xuan, who had just been scorched by flames, forgot her pain for a moment, a glint of admiration in her gaze.

Long Jing knew he'd been the first to deceive the group and had no standing to ask questions. So he maintained his silence, trailing behind Mo Li, waiting for this Arbiter to be gracious enough to fill him in.

Mo Li was not only a singer who excelled at supporting others— he was also a man who knew how to leverage every useful resource. He understood that escaping this place required high-level combat power, so he gave Long Jing a rough overview of the current situation.

After listening, Long Jing showed no visible reaction. His expression only darkened as he ground his teeth and spat out:

"Son of a..."

As for whose ancestor was being cursed... Cheng Shi figured it definitely wasn't his own.

Unlike the Prisoner, he didn't go around claiming random relatives. All he could do was hope that Zhen Yi actually had an uncle somewhere.

Chase and flight— where there was a side fleeing, there was naturally a side pursuing.

Though the group moved quickly and Mo Li's ability was pulling the distant infant prison toward them at an impressive speed, Go Lis was not mere scenery. She was an actress in this script too, and she moved.

Her script told her not to let Yu Mu go. So the moment she saw what was happening, she knew it was time for her entrance. And so, with exquisite timing, one second before they could reach the second-to-last stillborn infant— Go Lis's Grudge erupted!

The entire Void plunged into absolute darkness. Yu Mu's fetal prison tore free of Mo Li's control and shot away at blinding speed. Under the group's horrified gazes, countless colossal shadow-tentacles came shrieking up from the Void beneath their feet, surrounding them from all sides. The tentacles howled and wailed, murmuring profane ravings, and without a heartbeat's hesitation slammed down toward the encircled players.

The force was like the sky itself collapsing— utterly terrifying. The surging [Birth] aura crashed over them like a flood. Had Hu Xuan not gritted her teeth and absorbed the [Birth] energy within it, everyone present would have long since fallen under its gaze and devolved into mindless breeding flesh.

That single strike drained the color from every face!

They finally understood what Cheng Shi and Hu Xuan had understated so casually. They finally grasped what kind of game Zhen Yi had dragged them into.

'Did that lunatic truly believe her sister had enough clout to protect her even after pulling something like this?'

'Or was Zhen Yi not joking this time— was she genuinely playing for the highest stakes? Did she believe none of them could escape?'

Mo Li seethed, teeth clenched. He produced a golden book page and slapped it onto Hu Wei's back, then raised his voice in a hymn of [Order]'s praise. Countless holy lights cascaded down like an inverted waterfall, bathing everyone.

Cheng Shi felt his exhaustion replaced by surplus fighting spirit and fervor. His entire being surged with inexplicable energy. Even Hu Xuan's pallid face recovered a touch of color, looking as though she'd received a powerful healing spell.

But Cheng Shi knew this wasn't healing. Arbiters might have ways to heal through items, but Mo Li clearly hadn't used any. What the Chief Grand Secretary had deployed was a potential-unlocking method— in this instant, he'd excavated everyone's latent capacity to its absolute maximum.

The technique resembled "overload," but it was overload beyond overload. Hu Wei, after receiving this "stimulus," had physically grown a size larger. The fine hairs across his body pulsed like delicate flame patterns, breathing in rhythm!

The Grand Marshal had been pushed to the ultimate limit!

Mo Li, seeing the effects take hold, roared against the crushing pressure:

"Grand Marshal— strike! Cleave the Void! We escape through Mockery and Jeering!"

"?"

Hearing this, Cheng Shi did a double take. He felt as if he were watching a band of thieves, caught by the "homeowner," whispering to each other right in front of said owner: 'Quick, let's climb out through the back window!'

'This feels so bizarre.'

He shot the Arbiter an odd look. Before he could even suppress a smirk, a streak of fire— too blazing to look at directly— flashed past. The Void overhead shattered, collapsing into a fiery vortex that swallowed every giant tentacle-shadow that had been bearing down on them.

Yet even after neutralizing every visible attack, the group still felt a crushing weight descend. Every person present was forced to the ground by an invisible pressure!

!!!

Everyone's alarm deepened. They assumed Go Lis's Grudge was far more terrifying than they'd imagined. Only Cheng Shi, face pressed against the Void-floor, twitched his mouth in wordless exasperation.

'He had a sneaking suspicion this was Aph Ros deliberately retaliating for that unanswered question. But he had no proof, because the Envoy's performance was impeccable. As the director, he couldn't criticize a dedicated actor.'

"..."

The situation appeared to be spiraling.

They were already in the Void. Smashing deeper would either lead to Mockery and Jeering or to even deeper nothingness.

But the nothingness wasn't exactly accessible. The last time they'd gone there, it had taken Zhen Yi stealing abilities from a future version of himself just to catch a glimpse. And this time, even with the top support's limitless buffs, Hu Wei had only managed to shatter a sliver of the Void and block one furious strike from Go Lis.

So the problem was clear: the only way to escape was to find Mockery and Jeering. But Mockery and Jeering wasn't easy to locate. No one knew where the fun-loving god had decided to set up shop this time.

But surely His followers understood Him better than anyone!

And among those present, there happened to be exactly one follower of [Deceit]!

Long Jing!

This acrobat who'd been silent since his rescue finally had his moment to shine!

This was also one reason Mo Li had been willing to brief him on the situation— the top support hadn't put all his eggs in the Grand Marshal's basket. He hadn't forgotten Long Jing's identity either.

Indeed, it was Long Jing's presence that had given him the idea to escape through Mockery and Jeering.

So he looked at Long Jing, eyes full of expectation. Long Jing felt that gaze, but in this moment he had absolutely no leads.

He did know the Fun God had created a river of Mockery and Jeering within the Void. But [Deceit] wasn't exactly easy to second-guess. The god was utterly untraceable!

Long Jing's brow was furrowed as if deep in thought, but inside he was burning with anxiety.

Time waited for no one. The tentacle shadows that had been caught in the fiery vortex were already tearing free and rising once more, poised for a second onslaught. If they couldn't find Mockery and Jeering soon, Hu Wei's [War] brute force might hold once or twice, but once Mo Li's blessing wore off, that would be the end for all of them!

With that thought, Long Jing's eyes darkened and his resolve hardened. He pointed at the ground beneath his feet and shouted:

"Grand Marshal— smash right here, under me!"

Chapter 458: Mockery and Jeering Once More

Long Jing was going all in.

He wagered that the Fun God was watching this spectacle. After all, this fiasco had been orchestrated by His favorite top-ranker on the Ladder of Ascent.

If so, the most entertaining vantage point would be to see how he— the number-two— would crack this dilemma.

So he figured the melon-eating passage might be right under his feet. And so he'd called for the Grand Marshal to strike!

Hu Wei had been itching to act. Were it not for allies all around him, he'd have long since shattered this Void inch by inch, combing through the blackness for the escape route.

Seeing Long Jing point at the ground beneath him, the front-line warrior's eyes sharpened. With a thunderous roar, he channeled every ounce of muscle to redirect a river of fire and blood to Long Jing's feet.

Then everyone heard a detonation-like hum as the Void beneath Long Jing instantly fractured and collapsed, revealing within it...

Another expanse of Void.

The Void was inherently layered— emptiness within emptiness, nothingness within nothingness.

Mo Li's face sank when he saw that Mockery and Jeering wasn't under Long Jing after all. His heart lurched.

At that very moment, the giant tentacle-shadows swept down once more. Hu Wei was livid but helpless. He could only leap skyward and tank it head-on, swinging his sword in spiraling walls of fire to resist Go Lis's lashing assault.

But those fire walls— barriers that other players would consider impenetrable— were pathetically fragile before a true Envoy. A single strike punched through them. The tentacle shadow cracked across Hu Wei's body like a whip, sending him crashing down in a spray of blood.

Everyone else was doing their part. Hu Xuan continued to suppress the [Birth] aura, forced from her mage role into a pure support. Mo Li's chanting never ceased— he frantically dispelled the fear in everyone's hearts while precisely layering each person with refreshed buffs.

Long Jing, guilty for wasting the group's opportunity, leaped up to join Hu Wei in taking Go Lis's phantom attacks head-on.

On the brink of death, this team of players had inexplicably fallen into perfect synergy— no longer scheming against each other, but twisting every ounce of survival into a single rope.

But where some fought, others freeloaded.

As for who could coast through a squad of peak players unnoticed... that probably didn't need spelling out.

Cheng Shi had his reasons for slacking, though. He'd already established the appearance of spiritual exhaustion. Under Mo Li's enhancements, all he did was toss out the occasional healing spell. But against the damage Go Lis was dealing, his heals were like hooking up a saline drip for an ICU patient— couldn't exactly say it was useless, but it certainly wasn't saving lives.

Mo Li quickly noticed the Fate Weaver's oddity. In his experience, a peak-level priest should have been working the hardest of anyone— burning themselves out to heal teammates, presenting at bare minimum an appearance of giving everything.

Eyes and posture couldn't lie.

Yet this supposedly brilliant Fate Weaver who'd allegedly outwitted Zhen Yi wasn't even watching his teammates' positions. He was looking down, glancing around aimlessly, and loafing.

Mo Li found this puzzling.

Yes— puzzling, not infuriating.

At this level of play, there were no mediocre players. In life-or-death moments, everyone pulled out creative tricks to survive. The experienced Mo Li didn't suspect Cheng Shi of slacking. Instead, he wondered: how was this Fate Weaver planning to mend their seemingly shattering fate?

And just as his confusion deepened, Cheng Shi raised his head.

He smiled.

Truthfully, this wasn't in his script. His original ending had Hu Xuan deploying a desperate secret technique at the critical moment to suppress Go Lis once more, then tearing open the Void to send everyone out. That way, Hu Xuan could make a clean "exit" while leaving every Chosen One owing her an enormous favor.

This was the benefit he'd plotted for Hu Xuan— a core principle of seamless cooperation: the one profiting can't hog all the winnings.

Of course, Hu Xuan didn't actually have that kind of power. She was just acting. The one pulling strings behind the curtain was this domain's true master, Aph Ros.

But plans couldn't keep up with changes. Cheng Shi hadn't anticipated Mo Li targeting the Fun God's Mockery and Jeering— trying to escape through that melon-eating passage.

This sparked an entirely new idea. After all, he'd never seen many of these people's "true forms," and given the current situation, Hu Xuan had already won several people's goodwill. She could easily join the Grand Marshal's operation midway, taking the slot vacated by the vanished Yu Mu.

That way, she'd gain something tangible from a mysterious trial.

So Cheng Shi rewrote the script on the fly. He'd help Mo Li and the others find Mockery and Jeering.

But to be clear: his earlier loafing hadn't been spent searching for the real Mockery and Jeering. He'd been covertly communicating with Aph Ros— notifying his backstage actor of the script changes. Only after the actor confirmed receipt did he lift his head and look at Mo Li.

In that moment, his smile was radiant.

'I hear you're looking for Mockery and Jeering?'

'Why even search?'

'If this thing doesn't open right under the clown's feet, then the clown might as well retire from the stage.'

Cheng Shi understood the Fun God all too well. He might not comprehend everything about [Deceit], but he definitely knew how [Deceit] liked to watch its entertainment.

And so, meeting Mo Li's confused and anxious stare, Cheng Shi casually took a step backward, pointed at the spot where he'd just been standing, and shouted at the battered, blood-vomiting Hu Wei:

"Hu Wei— here! Try right here!"

"?"

Seeing the ground where Cheng Shi had been standing, Hu Xuan looked mildly surprised. Long Jing's gaze flickered with something like expectation. Hu Wei was bewildered. Mo Li's pupils constricted.

The Chief Grand Secretary poured every last drop into maintaining Hu Wei's condition and asked with uncertain conviction:

"Any basis for that?"

Cheng Shi gave a sheepish laugh: "No real basis. I rolled my dice. This spot came up a perfect score, so... might as well try a Hail Mary."

Dice?

[Fate]'s dice?

A perfect score?

Mo Li's eyes lit with sudden understanding.

'Of course! He's a follower of [Fate]. And in a situation like this, [Fate] is the only thing that can tip the scales!'

Then again, a Fate Weaver wasn't a Prophet. Could his perfect roll really serve as a prophecy?

But there was no time to deliberate. He could only pray that [Fate] was full of change, and that this time, change happened to favor their side. His gaze hardened. He unleashed another cascade of support abilities and roared: "Grand Marshal— strike!"

Hu Wei still had strength left.

Or more accurately— he'd long since grown accustomed to enduring pain.

The blood-drenched front-line warrior spun his greatsword in both hands, carving a terrifying ring of fire as a momentary shield. Then every muscle swelled, veins bulging, and with a furious howl, he drove his blade into the spot Cheng Shi had pointed at.

The ferocity of that flame and the grandeur of that force made even Hu Xuan's pupils contract.

BOOM—

This was no ordinary front-line warrior's full strike. This was the first Arbiter's full enhancement layered onto the first front-line warrior's full strike.

The blow shattered the Void outright, sending everyone into freefall. But halfway down, a bizarre, kaleidoscopic "river" materialized right before their eyes.

And it appeared directly beneath where Cheng Shi had been standing!

Not a single inch off.

"..."

'Naturally...'

Cheng Shi secretly rolled his eyes. Long Jing's gaze sharpened subtly. Everyone else was overjoyed beyond measure.

The life-saving Mockery and Jeering had finally appeared!

Mo Li silently counted his blessings. He shot Cheng Shi a deeply meaningful look and thought:

'As expected of a player who's had an audience with [Fate]. His fortune truly is extraordinary.'

'Can't help but... praise [Fate]!'

Chapter 459: "Escaping With Their Lives"

Mockery and Jeering!

When Cheng Shi threw open his arms and let himself plummet in, the winds of nothingness swept him high, then hurled him alongside the other players into this river that endlessly burst with kaleidoscopic change.

'Home again!'

Somehow, the instant Cheng Shi transformed into his spider web form, a wave of unprecedented relaxation washed over him.

No matter how good his relationship with Aph Ros was, that had always been borrowed turf. But here, he could finally say he'd arrived on "his own" territory.

The claim was arrogant, but the facts seemed to support it. Under the Fun God's watchful eye, Cheng Shi felt that at least he wouldn't encounter any real danger.

Though embarrassment didn't count.

The moment he dropped in, Cheng Shi "swam" a short distance outward and looked back with keen interest, eager to see what his "teammates" looked like through the Fun God's eyes.

But when he glanced back, he froze for an instant— then returned to normal just as quickly.

Mo Li was the first to fall in. The moment he hit Mockery and Jeering, he transformed into a war hammer. But the hammer was lopsided— one end larger than the other. A careless glance might mistake it for a blunt-headed hand axe.

Hu Wei followed close behind. His good brother's image remained utterly unchanged— still a flung-out flatbread. Nothing to say.

The interesting part, though, was that this flatbread froze for a moment upon spotting the spider web Cheng Shi had become— and then whipped out the greatsword that looked like a golden apricot tree within Mockery and Jeering!

But Hu Wei apparently thought better of it and sheepishly sheathed the blade.

Cheng Shi watched all this with mixed feelings of amusement and exasperation.

His good brother seemed to have developed a bit of a trauma response to the spider web image. And no wonder— the last time he'd seen this web, Cheng Shi's body had been hosting a certain "Zhen Yi."

Long Jing had the most distinctive image. After falling, the acrobat became three constantly tangling juggling balls, each painted with a different pattern. After observing for a while, Cheng Shi realized the three designs were a war hammer, a flatbread, and a spider web...

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'The acrobat was treating the three of them as props?'

Recalling everything he'd witnessed at the Mediocre Person Society gathering, Cheng Shi guessed this acrobat— like himself— was skilled at impersonating others.

Hu Xuan was the last. When she dropped in, everyone's vision brightened for an instant, because her image in Mockery and Jeering matched her identity perfectly: a miniature, adorable sun.

Except the moment this sun fell in, it seemed drawn by some irresistible force— instinctively, involuntarily drifting toward Cheng Shi. And then... it hung itself directly on the spider web he'd become.

Yes. The sun had been captured. And suspended on the web!

Cheng Shi was dumbstruck. So was Hu Xuan.

This was her first time entering a creation of [Deceit]. Though everything here felt novel and fascinating, she was certain she hadn't actively "swum" toward Cheng Shi. She'd been pulled by a force she couldn't refuse.

Hu Xuan was curious but didn't ask— this clearly wasn't the place to discuss "internal" matters.

Cheng Shi was curious too, but his improvisational skills were far more seasoned than hers. He sensed the anomaly but chose not to stay silent. Instead, he suddenly spoke to Hu Xuan:

"#...#@¥%"

Hu Xuan, realizing the sound was being distorted, caught on immediately and replied: "...%*¥@#"

Then both fell silent simultaneously.

In any other setting, this exchange would have seemed bizarre. But here and now, in the eyes of the other three, it was perfectly normal.

Because Mockery and Jeering was simply that absurd a place.

Moreover, after this little interlude, Mo Li and the others were no longer surprised about the sun hanging on the spider web.

Everyone knew Cheng Shi and Hu Xuan were close, and that Hu Xuan had come specifically to rescue Cheng Shi. So whatever pose these two maintained within this river of change seemed... perfectly understandable?

Mo Li chuckled softly and let it go. From the moment he saw Cheng Shi's spider-web form, the Chief Grand Secretary in every player's eyes had already acknowledged this Fate Weaver's worth.

'Think about it: a Fate Weaver who's been summoned by [Fate], blessed by fortune, and who appears as the "web of destiny" even in [Deceit]'s eyes— how could such a person possibly remain obscure?'

'Blind One, oh Blind One. Your unassailable position as [Fate]'s Chosen One has finally met a formidable challenger.'

'A clash between two [Fate] followers— now that should be spectacular.'

Thinking this, Mo Li smiled knowingly.

But now wasn't the time to relax. The crisis wasn't fully resolved, and they couldn't afford to stop here. Hu Wei peered back toward the Void beyond, and seeing that Go Lis's Grudge hadn't pursued them this far, he called out to the group behind him and took the lead, "swimming" deeper in.

The others exchanged glances and followed. It wasn't until they'd traveled for nearly an hour that the Grand Marshal at the front finally stopped. The flatbread flipped itself around, facing the group.

He produced that apricot tree once more and slammed it against a round mirror beside him.

CRASH—

The mirror surface cracked and shattered. An enormous suction erupted, pulling everyone in.

Cheng Shi watched this familiar scene with mild surprise.

His vision went dark. When he opened his eyes again, he found himself standing in a vast, open wilderness.

A cool night breeze swept the solitude of the plains forth to greet them. A single breath was enough to scatter every scrap of tension and suffocation from the escape. Everyone felt their spirits widen and unfurl.

At last, the taut strings in everyone's hearts eased. They could finally say they'd "escaped with their lives." And Cheng Shi knew his script had reached its curtain call.

What came next would be the start of an entirely new story.

Because in the flickering glow of a crackling campfire not far off, a man every bit as imposing as Hu Wei sat staring at the group, his eyes wide as copper bells, utterly astonished:

"Holy— Lao Hu, did you bring a whole posse to jump me?!"

"?"

Hu Wei laughed bitterly. He tossed his greatsword aside, his face etched with exhaustion, and walked to the campfire. He sat cross-legged on the ground, spat, and growled:

"Bad luck. Got played by Zhen Yi again. If I hadn't run into my brother, this time would've been the end."

Then he mustered a weary smile and turned to the group behind him.

"Come sit, everyone. This is where my friend and I have our little get-togethers. There's no danger here. We're safe."

Chapter 460: Da Yi — Yi As in A, B, C, D

Their reactions varied as they strolled forward. Cheng Shi surveyed everything around him, his confusion deepening.

His good brother somehow always managed to find his destination within Mockery and Jeering, where directions were impossible to discern.

This time was no different. He'd clearly been heading straight for this safe-zone-like meeting point. But how had he known this path would lead here?

Why did the Grand Marshal seem even more at home in Mockery and Jeering than Cheng Shi himself?

Could it be that the Fun God had... partnered with [War] too?

He wasn't the only one with questions. Everyone else was quietly sizing up both the place and the burly man sitting across from them. Mo Li took a seat beside Hu Wei and was about to introduce himself when the big man boomed:

"Hot damn, anyone Lao Hu brings around is bound to be no pushover.

"Chief Grand Secretary— I know you. Nice to meet ya.

"Long Jing— we've crossed paths. Make yourself at home.

"As for you two..."

He looked quizzically at Cheng Shi and Hu Xuan, apparently trying to guess their identities.

Hu Wei laughed heartily and clapped Cheng Shi on the shoulder:

"This one's also my brother. Fate Weaver Cheng Shi.

"And this one is—"

"Wait, what?" The big man blinked, scratching his head. "Hot damn, he's the one who was messing around with Zhen Yi?"

"..."

"..."

"..."

Soft laughter rippled through the group. Only the man in question stood with a rigid expression, unsure whether to acknowledge or ignore the remark.

But Hu Wei came to Cheng Shi's rescue, laughing it off:

"Ancient history. Ah, wait, wrong phrasing— it was never a thing in the first place. Anyway. My brother saved my life, so keep that foul mouth of yours in check and stop making people uncomfortable.

"As for this one..."

The Grand Marshal's expression grew somewhat complicated as he turned to Hu Xuan and spoke with visible gravity:

"This is the one Lao Sun always mentioned— the Eternal Sun. Hu Xuan."

"???" The big man shot to his feet, eyes wide as saucers, utterly disbelieving: "Hot damn— who?!"

Hu Xuan's cheeks had gained a touch of color.

Whether it was the campfire's glow warming her face or simply that the show was over and she no longer needed to feign pallor, she now looked entirely free of fatigue, though she retained a certain weary beauty.

She sat with knees together beside Cheng Shi, offered the big man a gentle smile, and introduced herself:

"Hu Xuan."

The big man's expression shifted. Then he let out a sigh:

"Hot damn. So Lao Sun really is gone. Sigh... it is what it is.

"The old boy was a bit underhanded, sure, but he was warm-hearted. What a shame.

"Anyway, enough of that. Since Lao Hu brought you here, I suppose that makes us... friends.

"Name's Da Yi. Yi as in A, B, C, D. Nice to meet you both."

He bumped his fists together toward Cheng Shi and Hu Xuan. His bold manner resembled Hu Wei's.

Cheng Shi found this man intriguing. His gaze swept carefully over Da Yi's fingers, the webbing between thumb and forefinger, his wrists, then quickly scanned his ears, nose, and neck. In moments, he'd deduced the man's class.

Assassin!

This brawny man was actually an assassin!

Because his hands bore no calluses whatsoever. His fingers were nimble and delicate as a lady's— clearly the hands of an expert who worked with precision. His nostrils flared in constant subtle motion, and his ears rotated faintly, hypervigilant to every sound around him.

Most tellingly, when facing the group he kept his chin slightly tucked, shielding his neck with that exaggerated jaw— a posture that screamed cautious defense.

From all this, Cheng Shi deduced the man was almost certainly an assassin. The only question was which faith.

That question didn't linger long, because Long Jing's next remark delivered the answer.

"Grand Marshal, [War] actually holds these little get-togethers?"

'[War]?'

Cheng Shi blinked internally, then casually stole another glance at Da Yi.

So he was [War]'s assassin— a Gap Light Iron Thorn?

'Aren't those supposed to be shadow killers who lurk on battlefields, waiting for the chance to slay generals and seize banners? Bro, why are you built like a front-line warrior?'

'Has the assassin community started trending toward ironic contrast?'

'Tsk. Hard to comment.'

Cheng Shi stifled a chuckle and imperceptibly averted his gaze. Hu Wei spoke up again with a smile:

"It's just sharing intel— not strictly a [War] assembly.

"Today, aside from that dump of a Mediocre Person Society gathering, I was coming here anyway. And the purpose is exactly what I mentioned before— the place where there's real profit to be had!"

Everyone's spirits surged at those words.

In that moment, they all seemed to forget the dangers they'd just endured, the harm Zhen Yi had inflicted. It was as if they'd adapted to the bad luck, tossing every unpleasantness behind them, their eyes fixed solely on the "profit" at hand!

Their emotional pivot was so swift that Cheng Shi marveled internally:

'So this is peak-player efficiency. They never dwell on failure, never wallow in the past. They don't even heal their wounds before sitting around the fire, plotting the next trial.'

'They know no fatigue, no rest. At this pace, though the Faith Game had only existed for barely half a year, for this group, they'd probably forged themselves through what amounted to years— even decades— more than everyone else.'

'And thinking about his own past... he'd fallen far too behind.'

This was precisely why Cheng Shi wanted to reclaim his identity and tag along with the Grand Marshal—to broaden his horizons. His gaps in intelligence were simply too vast.

"Actually, this whole thing ties into something Long Jing mentioned." Hu Wei turned to Long Jing.

"Me?" Long Jing startled, then whispered in stunned excitement: "[Decay]'s fall?"

Hu Wei's eyes glittered:

"Exactly. [Decay]'s fall.

"Before Zhen Yi claimed it was [Prosperity] that fell, I too had been guessing it was [Decay].

"Don't all look at me like that— I have special intelligence channels. I don't know the details, but I can confirm: even if [Decay] didn't outright fall, it must have sustained devastating injuries in that God War!

"It may have even... lost significant divine power and authority!

"And I gathered all of you here for precisely those things [Decay] lost.

"That's why, back at the Mediocre Person gathering, I was inclined to trust you. But you... betrayed that trust, Long Jing."

That was a direct call-out.

Long Jing looked embarrassed, but he quickly found a way to redirect the awkwardness: cursing Zhen Yi.

"Damn that rotten luck. It's all that bitch Zhen Yi's fault. If she hadn't—"

Halfway through the sentence, he seemed to realize something. He immediately glanced at Cheng Shi, his apologetic expression layered with unspoken meaning.