

## The Gods 911

### Chapter 911: An Unforeseen Conflict

It had to be said — children raised in poverty and children raised in privilege turned out very differently.

Cheng Shi still wore his childhood's "innocent smile." But the person across from him — Little Seven... no, he should be called Du Qiyu now.

Du Qiyu's eyes held a flash of barely perceptible hostility and suspicion.

Perhaps he hadn't expected that kid from back then — Xiao Shi — to still be alive. To have actually survived this brutal Faith Game all the way to the present.

He'd gone back to the orphanage to ask around after growing up. When he learned that his best childhood friend had been sold to a scrap collector for the princely sum of three thousand dollars, he'd been stunned for quite a while.

'Ha — three thousand dollars. Truly priceless. Couldn't even buy a single glass of wine from my dinner table.'

Every time he recalled this, Du Qiyu was reminded that lies really could change someone's entire life.

He had never regretted it. Not in any sense of the word.

Seeing Xiao Shi again, Du Qiyu's keen gaze swept Cheng Shi from head to toe. The man still looked as good as he always had. Hmph — but what was the point of good looks?

His heart was full of disdain, yet the hand propping up his face pressed more tightly against the wound.

'Those damn things — they just had to slash my face right now, of all times!'

Fury churned inside Little Seven, but his eyes remained crystal clear, even sporting a hint of pleasant surprise.

His gaze drifted to Cheng Shi's fingers. When he spotted three gaudy rings on Cheng Shi's hands, he nearly burst into a contemptuous laugh.

'Sure enough — a kid who begged for scraps in the shantytown just loved decorating himself with cheap, garish trinkets.'

'He thinks that's fashion?'

'Ridiculous. What era is this? In the game, power is the trend!'

Little Seven's mind was a churning mess. For reasons he couldn't explain, he'd begun projecting all manner of fantasies and criticisms onto Cheng Shi's past, present, and future.

Cheng Shi, however, knew none of this. He simply wore a radiant smile, gazing at the other with warm, good-natured eyes tinged with confusion.

It was a confusion laced with surprise, resistance, and wariness. But if one looked closely, beneath that slightly uneasy exterior was unmistakably the delight of running into an old acquaintance.

And Du Qiyu was nothing if not observant. He read every nuance in Cheng Shi's eyes and concluded: the man didn't recognize him. Yet instead of feeling even a shred of relief at dodging old awkwardness, he first froze — then surged with rage.

'He doesn't remember me?'

'How dare he not recognize me!'

'I had the guts to recognize him — and he can't even tell who I am?!'

'If those two pieces of trash hadn't wrecked my face, would I really be any less attractive?!'

'In the real world or the game — money or strength — in what way am I worse?!

Du Qiyu bit down on his anger. The hand behind his back moved faster. But outwardly, he showed no fury. Instead, a barely perceptible gleam flashed in his eyes. In an instant, he had a plan. He flipped through old memories and exclaimed with delight:

"You're Xiao Shi?

Don't you remember me?

I'm A Gua! You know, I used to sit right behind—"

Cheng Shi hadn't forgotten. He remembered who A Gua was — the chubby little kid who'd sat behind him at the orphanage. The boy did bear a passing resemblance to young Little Seven. Their birthdays even fell on the same day; the orphanage teachers used to joke that they might be brothers.

Of course, he remembered not only A Gua, but Little Seven even better.

'See? That's a con artist. From childhood to adulthood, never an honest word.'

The interesting part was that as a child, Little Seven's lies still had cracks. But now, grown up...

Cheng Shi smirked internally, because Master of Deception told him that Little Seven's words weren't lies.

Now that was interesting.

'Tsk — Benefactor, since when have You become a dumpster? What kind of trash are You picking up now?'

But since you want to keep acting, then as your "best friend," I'll naturally play along.

And so Cheng Shi's performance entered its next phase. Midway through Little Seven's sentence, his eyes went wide. The surprise buried beneath cold indifference erupted, and even the standardly polite fake smile at the corner of his lips took on genuine warmth.

But it didn't stop there. Just as that joy fully colored his eyes, Cheng Shi seemed to recall something. His entire expression dimmed; a flash of regret and loathing crossed his face. But it vanished as quickly as it appeared, replaced by the sheer delight of reuniting with an old friend.

Du Qiyu's sharp eyes caught every moment. He sneered internally, fury deepening.

'Just as I thought — this useless pretty face Xiao Shi still holds a grudge against me. He obviously remembered me through A Gua's name, which made him think of me — that's why his face showed that flash of malice.'

'But... let the hate flow. The more he hates me, the more openings I'll find.'

'A player who can't control his own eyes — how good could he possibly be?'

'Heh — one step behind, always behind. Xiao Shi, you've fallen too far behind.'

Little Seven continued talking. Cheng Shi blurted out in response: "You're A Gua? You actually slimmed down—"

But just as the two were talking over each other in their shock at this unexpected reunion, a true surprise struck!

The entire stretch of forest on one side of the cart simply vanished!

No warning. No sound.

Oblivion's power!

Everyone startled. They turned and saw the sparse-haired, brain-exposed teammate just pulling his hand back from the direction of the scabby head across from him — clearly saying: I'm the one who erased that forest.

And the scabby head sitting opposite? Gone.

Before anyone could figure out if they'd just lost a player at the start, the remaining strip of forest on the scabby head's side began to shudder violently. The trees erupted in wild growth, branches surging forward. Even the wooden cart bed sprouted new buds — buds shaped unmistakably like thorn-covered spikes!

Crown of Thorns!

In that instant, Cheng Shi's pupils contracted. He spun and bolted. The other teammates' faces drained of color too, as each vanished from the cart, clearing out of these two combatants' battlefield without a second thought.

The vanished forest had caused such a commotion that the entire convoy ground to a halt in panic. Shouts of "Enemy attack!" erupted from front and rear. Iron Law Knights throughout the column donned armor and raised spears. Fear showed on their faces, but their discipline held.

Though this was a conscript force, their combat quality was surprisingly decent. Knights fanned out in groups of three to five, forming defensive clusters. Despite the thicket of raised lances and drawn blades, none could spot where the enemy attack had actually come from.

Meanwhile, the two combatants from the player cart had already used their talents to distance themselves from the convoy, plunging deep into the forest on one side to fight with abandon.

The knights watched the fracas unfolding in the woods. Trees in the near distance alternately flourished, withered, and disappeared in whole swaths. Finally, the Elemental Judges overseeing the convoy stepped forward, their expressions grim as they began chanting — bringing the judgment of Order down upon whatever enemy dared assault this reinforcement column.

Seeing this, Cheng Shi's face went dark. He merged into the crowd and, without looking back, ran in the convoy's projected direction of travel.

After the unseen enemy had caused this much chaos, the only Grand Tribunal countermeasure Cheng Shi could envision was "Meteor Fire Rain."

He had no desire to relive the terrors of war in this forest. So Cheng Shi ran without hesitation.

He wasn't the only clever one. Du Qiyu and the horse-faced Folly follower had also vanished. Only one teammate trailed behind Cheng Shi — a female player whose face showed neither joy nor sorrow.

...

Chapter 912: Nobody Cares About the Trial

Perhaps worried that her short undergarment would be inconvenient while running, the female player had already slipped on a longer-hemmed shirt by the time she appeared behind Cheng Shi.

The two ran in silent accord, heading the same direction. To avoid being flagged as deserters by the war supervisors at the front of the convoy, they quietly downed several Iron Law Knights along the way under cover of the chaos.

Naturally, the one doing the takedowns wasn't Cheng Shi. As they ran, he'd gradually drifted behind the female teammate, ceding the vanguard position to her.

She showed no reaction. She simply pushed forward, occasionally waving a hand, which made every knight who tried to stop them lose their train of thought, rooted dumbly in place.

This confirmed it for Cheng Shi — she was a Silence follower. A Silence mage, specifically: a Mime Master.

They sprinted nonstop. Before long, they passed the lead wagon of the convoy and plunged into the deserted forest ahead. Only then did the Mime Master slow to a halt, turning to eye Cheng Shi with a slight frown.

Not knowing whether anyone was watching from the shadows, Cheng Shi went ahead and played the exhausted weakling — hands on knees, panting heavily, not even lifting his head as he asked:

"Master, who were those two?"

Having guessed her identity, Cheng Shi didn't expect a response. He was merely doing his best to play the role of a clueless low-rank player stumbling into a top-tier match. But the moment the words left his mouth, a crisp electronic voice sounded beside him.

"Cheng Shi, drop the act. I know who you are."

"???"

Cheng Shi's head snapped up. He stared at his teammate and found the expressionless woman holding an electronic voice box, her fingers dancing across it like butterflies, typing at a furious pace.

"My name is Sun Miao. I'm with the History School. What — Zhen Xin never mentioned me?"

"..."

Cheng Shi's eyes went wide, scalp tingling.

'Hold on — girl, what are you doing?'

'Playing abstract art with me?'

'Since when do Silence followers bug-exploit their way into talking like this?'

'Where's your devotion?'

'You really think not using your own mouth counts as piety toward Him?'

'Judging by the Void Puppet's design, complete non-expression is His will!'

'You've gone astray, girl — same wrong path as The Prisoner!'

Still, now that he thought about it... she'd named Zhen Xin directly. Did that mean her rank within the History School was high enough?

Otherwise, how could she possibly link the History School to the Deceit Chosen — the arch-enemy of Memory — and use that as an introduction?

Meaning Zhen Xin had told her about him?

Cheng Shi couldn't help but think this way, because her trick was deviously effective. Operating an electronic voice box was technically action, not speech — and Master of Deception couldn't detect actions. So right now, he had no way to verify whether her identity was genuine.

But real or not, such minor tricks couldn't stump Cheng Shi. Since his cover was blown, he simply dropped the pretense.

'Heh — when I stop acting, let's see if anyone can keep performing in front of me.'

So Cheng Shi used the bowing posture to discreetly switch back to Fate, then — right in front of Sun Miao — placed a pure white mask over his face.

He'd used this trick before at 0221's experiment ground against Wang Mou. Beneath the pure white mask hid a warrior mask, meaning Cheng Shi had just openly transformed into a Pointer Warrior under her watchful eyes.

He wasn't worried about her documenting this. In that famous experiment-ground showdown that had rocked the game, he'd already left traces of the pure white mask. Putting it on now actually made him the perfect recreation of that warrior version of himself.

In the next second, Cheng Shi brazenly scattered his dice on the ground. Then, with a smirk and a snap of his fingers, he materialized beside the Mime Master. Before she could react—

"Click—"

He seized her neck and hoisted her into the air like a slab of cured meat.

'Honestly — a mage standing inside a warrior's attack range without putting up defenses? On what planet?'

'Just because you know me?'

'Sorry, but I might not have that many friends.'

Cheng Shi fixed his sharp gaze on the "captive" in his grip, clicking his tongue.

"So you like talking, huh? Fine — here's your chance to talk. Use your tongue and tell me you're not lying."

His grip wasn't particularly tight, but gravity was doing the work. Sun Miao's face flushed a dark, liver-like crimson.

A flash of annoyance crossed her eyes, but she chose not to resist. Instead, she continued typing with both hands.

"I don't have a tongue."

"?"

Actually, Cheng Shi had sensed something off the moment he lifted her. For a mage who'd shown decent agility and speed during their escape from the convoy, her score obviously wasn't low.

Low-scoring mages couldn't afford to invest in physical ability at all. Only the elite obsessives aiming for the absolute peak would develop themselves comprehensively — forced to do so by the increasingly brutal trials.

Yet this high-scoring mage, when hoisted up, hadn't shown the slightest desire to fight back.

Cheng Shi wasn't a Silence follower. No matter how fast he moved, physical restraint alone couldn't fully block a player's talent-based attacks. Her non-retaliation already told him something: she bore him no ill will.

But did absence of malice equal safety?

No. Using someone's connections as an entry point to approach a target was one of the most effective deception strategies. Cheng Shi knew this intimately, so he remained prudent.

Thus, the instant he heard she had no tongue, his eyes went to the wound at the corner of Sun Miao's mouth.

The festering skin looked tainted by some Decay power. Cheng Shi frowned slightly and set the Mime Master back down. When her toes touched the ground and her neck could finally bear weight again, she darkened her face and slowly opened her mouth.

A shriveled, bark-like tongue lay horrifyingly inside a mouth reeking of Decay. The visual impact was so intense that Cheng Shi felt as though he wasn't looking at a person at all, but some creature masquerading as human.

"You..."

Cheng Shi blinked, his expression a masterpiece.

Sun Miao continued typing: "The tongue-branding punishment, courtesy of Decay followers. I can't stop myself from wanting to talk. I can't fully devote myself to Him, so I have to use auxiliary methods."

"..."

'No kidding — even after rotting her own tongue, she still had to beep away on an electronic voice box.'

'So she's from the same school of thought as The Prisoner... her score must be pretty high too.'

Sun Miao seemed to read Cheng Shi's doubts. But rather than typing a reply, she gave a pointed, annoyed look at the hand still on her neck.

Cheng Shi deliberated for a moment, then released her. He decided to tentatively trust her, because the Decay marks on that tongue had clearly been there for some time — not something fabricated specifically for this trial to bypass Master of Deception.

Of course, it could still be a countermeasure against Deceit followers in general. But as long as it wasn't aimed specifically at him, that was enough.

Cheng Shi stepped back two paces — giving her a sliver of space while keeping her well within his reach.

Sensing his tentative trust, Sun Miao paused, then resumed typing.

"Relax. I won't hold a grudge over your roughness, because my purpose is the same as yours — we're both here for the Grand Tribunal.

Zhen Xin gave us an assignment: investigate Order's history. I assume it's related to you, correct?

Don't be surprised. She's been mentioning you constantly to our group, along with these assignments. Anyone with half a brain could connect the dots.

And if I'm not mistaken, we'll soon be discussing history in a different kind of meeting. Am I right, Cheng Shi... Vice President?"

"?"

At this, Cheng Shi dropped nine-tenths of his suspicion.

No player with ulterior motives could fabricate everything she'd just said. It was all current, real-time information — things that only Cheng Shi and Zhen Xin knew. She had to be from the History School, and her rank within it had to be high.

Very possibly, she was Zhen Xin's right hand. Otherwise, there was no way she'd know any of this!

A gleam sparked in Cheng Shi's eyes. He withdrew his fist and smiled.

"Then what should I call you? Vice President Sun Miao?"

"Excessive courtesy only reduces efficiency. Just Sun Miao is fine."

Efficiency?

Cheng Shi arched a brow. 'A Silence follower, worried about efficiency? If you all cared so much about efficiency, you should've broken your silence and communicated more ages ago.'

Then again, her insistence on talking despite following Silence... maybe she really was someone who valued efficiency.

"Very well, Master. How should we begin?"

Cheng Shi smiled, looking at Sun Miao before turning to gaze back at the convoy behind them. So far, the other teammates hadn't shown up, and the distant fighting showed no sign of stopping. It seemed nobody cared about this trial.

But each one embracing their desires and doing what they pleased — wasn't that exactly Corruption's hope for the players in His trials?

So blasphemy and devotion had always been intertwined.

Put another way: at least half of an individual's unconscious blasphemy was, in fact, devotion.

'And if that's true, then by rounding up, my claim of being one hundred percent devout is completely valid, isn't it?'

...

Chapter 913: Chun and Lin Xi

"Who was the player sitting next to you?"

Cheng Shi recalled the appearances of the two combatants. Cross-referencing what he'd seen, he could roughly guess the identity of the sparse-haired, brain-exposed player in this conflict.

Lin Xi!

ID: "Rotten Wood." A Decay Chosen who had fused Oblivion — the rank-one player on the path. A Plague Cardinal whom Big Cat called "the mouse."

Even now, with Big Cat serving as Prosperity's representative, his score on the Ladder of Ascent still sat at the top.

Cheng Shi had no idea what Big Cat was thinking. She clearly didn't care about that spot — but still, didn't she at least owe it to Prosperity's followers to fight for some respect?

He hadn't been able to figure it out before. But after stumbling into today's clash, it clicked.

The one meant to fight for Prosperity's honor wasn't her — it was the Prosperity follower who'd just attacked Lin Xi in this trial!

That's right. The attacker was a Prosperity follower. A Prosperity assassin: Crown of Thorns.

What Cheng Shi hadn't expected was that she looked nothing like any Prosperity follower he'd ever seen. Even when they deliberately controlled their hair length, he'd never encountered a completely bald, scabby-headed Prosperity follower like this one.

"You don't recognize her?" Sun Miao typed.

"?" Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow and smiled. "Is that strange?"

"A little. Everyone says you're close with Hong Lin. Surprised she's never mentioned her to you.

Her name is Chun. That name might not ring a bell, but if I give you her ID...

Only Carving Rotten Wood."

"!!!"

'It's her!'

'That scabby head is Only Carving Rotten Wood?'

'No wonder she and Lin Xi are at each other's throats. One look at the ID and you'd know there must be some deeply personal enmity between them.'

Cheng Shi frowned and turned his gaze toward the distant battlefield. "Her hair — did Lin Xi do that?"

"Yes and no."

Sun Miao typed at blistering speed, her fingers practically leaving afterimages.

She clearly enjoyed typing. But even as she typed, she didn't cater entirely to Cheng Shi's questions. She surveyed their surroundings, assessing which direction to take, then stepped forward, walking and talking simultaneously.

"They were originally married."

What?

Cheng Shi's stride hitched mid-step. His jaw nearly hit the floor. But the emotionless electronic voice that followed immediately reeled in his spiraling thoughts.

"Don't misunderstand. Chun only looks male in her current form — she's actually a woman.

Decay's curse stripped her of everything feminine. Including her lover.

Their story is long. If you're certain you want to hear it, you might want to think about what intel you're prepared to trade. Don't forget — I'm with the History School. Despite the 'history' label, its true nature is an intelligence organization no one can deny.

So with me, all types of information are welcome."

"..." Cheng Shi trailed behind her, watching Sun Miao's hands move constantly as though gripping a game controller. He couldn't shake the absurdly surreal feeling.

'Sure enough — the History School is full of weirdos.'

'Then again, it probably takes a weirdo to get along with Zhen Xin.'

Cheng Shi mulled it over briefly. A grin quickly formed — he thought of an exceptionally interesting piece of intel for the trade. He spoke outright.

"Order has a problem."

"!!!"

Sun Miao's guiding stride lurched to a halt. She swiveled halfway around, rigid, and for the first time, a change flickered in her gaze. She looked at Cheng Shi, fingers flying.

"That's not exactly news. Anyone familiar with the Grand Tribunal knows that by the mid-to-late Civilization Epoch, the Tribunal began fracturing. That's precisely the era this trial is set in."

"No, no — you've got it wrong. Knowing the Grand Tribunal fractured and knowing Order itself has a problem are not the same thing."

Sun Miao froze again, then typed with her usual blank expression.

"From small things, larger conclusions can be drawn. From the known, the unknown can be inferred. If the surface shows problems, one naturally investigates whether the root has changed.

I'm not stupid. I can reach that conclusion myself."

Watching someone maintain a perfectly expressionless face while earnestly arguing with him — and somehow sensing emotion through an unchanging electronic voice — Cheng Shi couldn't shake the feeling that something was off.

'Why does the History School's Vice President feel less like a Silence follower and more like a scholar?'

'No — more like a wise man!'

'Wait — where did that horse-faced Folly follower go?'

Suspicion stirred in the back of Cheng Shi's mind. Something felt overlooked.

But he didn't let it show. Instead, he assessed her while probing.

"Silence truly is Folly's destination. Your way of thinking closely resembles a wise man's.

But I need to correct you: inference is inference. It can never be fact. Your deductions give you only a floating logical anchor, whereas my intel is indisputable, solid fact.

So for you, this remains new information."

Sun Miao went silent. After a pause, she typed: "You've witnessed Order's problem firsthand?"

"Of course."

"What exactly is the problem?"

Cheng Shi smiled. This was exactly what he'd been waiting for.

"It's a long story. If you're certain you want to hear it, you might want to think about what intel you're prepared to trade.

Don't forget — I'm about to become a History School member. Despite the 'history' label, its true nature is an intelligence organization no one can deny.

So with me, all types of information are welcome."

Cheng Shi returned her own words verbatim. The speech made Sun Miao's ordinarily immovable face twitch.

Seeing her composure crack, Cheng Shi grinned broadly.

He walked past her and pressed on. Sun Miao paused with her head lowered, then hurried to catch up, and began sharing what she knew about those two.

"Chun and Lin Xi were both originally Decay followers."

"?" Cheng Shi blinked. "Oathbreaking curse?"

"Yes. Everything she's suffered comes from the oathbreaking curse. That's Decay for you — He never let a single deserter from His camp go unpunished."

Hearing this, Cheng Shi frowned. True — the old Decay might have been deeply possessive about faith. But now...

He probably wished for as many oathbreakers as possible. Ideally, He'd be the last rot standing in the entire universe.

Sun Miao continued typing:

"Since you've heard of Lin Xi, you must know about how the People in Coffin inspired him to enter the Sighing Forest in search of the Septic Final Tomb."

"Of course. I don't just know about it — I also know it wasn't the People in Coffin who inspired him. It was your History School!"

"?"

Sun Miao paused, then typed:

"Impressive. It seems Zhen Xin has shared quite a lot with you.

Fair enough — she even routed your requests through the History School's assignment system. Your partnership must run far deeper than outsiders suspect.

Correct. It was the History School that leaked the information, directing Decay followers to scout the path.

At the time, Lin Xi was just a small fry with barely two thousand points. Yet this small fry resolutely set off on the dead-end road of seeking Decay's gaze.

And as his wife, after her pleas fell on deaf ears, Chun had no choice but to follow him into the Sighing Forest."

"So you're saying Lin Xi and Chun found the Septic Final Tomb together?

And their relationship fell apart because of the Tomb?"

"Exactly. An absurd farce drove a once-'loving' couple apart. History written by romance is always this melodramatic — and yet, somehow, always compelling."

As she typed this, Cheng Shi noticed Sun Miao's fingers trembling slightly. It seemed the secret she was telling hadn't captivated him yet — but it had already agitated her.

"..."

'Interesting. This Mime Master comes with a natural talent for the abstract.'

...

#### Chapter 914: Decay and Prosperity — History and Story

"Since you know the truth about the People in Coffin, you must also know what the Septic Final Tomb is about.

When this couple was lucky enough to find the Septic Final Tomb, they happened to arrive during a Sighing Sorrow Tide eruption. Even more coincidentally, at that moment in the Sighing Forest, Decay — dwelling within the Final Tomb — seemed to be locked in a fresh round of faith conflict with Prosperity, who was quietly encroaching.

Under those circumstances, these two 'explorers' were caught in the aftermath of the clash between true gods and nearly became ash beside that blood lake.

But fortunately, in that forest, Decay was everything.

The two of them lay by the blood lake, riddled with wounds, crying out to the tomb floating overhead — begging their Benefactor to spare their lives. Yet as their breath grew weaker and weaker, these two clever people realized their pleas hadn't moved their Benefactor one bit.

By this point, Lin Xi had given up. He didn't believe a mere two-thousand-point player could earn his Benefactor's mercy. Despair set in. He accepted that everything had been a pipe dream.

That's when he finally looked at Chun beside him. He gave her one tender gaze. Though he said nothing, his eyes said everything.

Perhaps it was that single look — or perhaps Chun's love for Lin Xi had never wavered. Watching the light drain from her beloved's eyes, she squeezed every drop of survival instinct she had, refusing to let him die like this. So she..."

The electronic voice stopped.

"?" Cheng Shi frowned, looking at Sun Miao, whose fingers had suddenly frozen. "So she what?"

"Vice President — is this piece of intel... no, is this bit of gossip enough to trade for yours?"

"???"

'You're cutting it off here?!'

'Since when does a couple's romancing belong at the same table as secrets of the gods?!'

Cheng Shi's eye twitched. He said nothing — just pulled out a handful of dice.

At the sight of them, Sun Miao's face locked up. Not long after, she grudgingly resumed typing.

"She stabbed Lin Xi."

Hearing this, Cheng Shi wasn't the least bit surprised. Instead, he raised an eyebrow in appreciation and applauded.

"I understand. The one who truly guessed Decay's heart wasn't Lin Xi — it was Chun.

I'd wager she didn't just stab Lin Xi. She turned around and sent a gift to the invading Prosperity — one grand enough to slap Decay across the face.

Her oathbreaking wasn't forced. It was voluntary, wasn't it?"

"Clever." A flicker of change crossed Sun Miao's face — Cheng Shi clearly caught a hint of shock — but her typed tone betrayed nothing.

"No wonder Zhen Xin agreed to work with you. The History School welcomes all clever people.

It's exactly as you guessed. Chun realized that earning Decay's pity wasn't as simple as being on death's door. After all, His followers self-mutilated constantly — how many walked the edge of death without ever catching His eye? Why would two dying nobodies be any different?

They were no more special than any ordinary follower.

Was it just because they'd found the Septic Final Tomb?

No — ordinarily, reaching the Tomb might have earned a sliver of attention. But their timing was wrong. They'd witnessed a divine faith clash, and the battlefield was Decay's own territory.

Prosperity had descended with naked aggression — as good as slapping Decay across the face.

If not outright humiliation, it was certainly no mark of honor. Two mortals who'd witnessed this moment at their Benefactor's darkest hour — what made them think they could attract His attention rather than His wrath?

It was precisely these thoughts that led Chun to devise a way to separate attention from anger.

She stabbed Lin Xi, pushing his essence further toward the brink, closer to Decay. Then she turned and prayed to the invading Prosperity — begging the intruder to save her life, willing to pay any price to survive.

What happened next isn't hard to guess.

Prosperity never let an opportunity to make the universe flourish pass Him by. Even absorbing one follower was just a small step — but one that happened on Decay's home turf, a detail too sweet for Prosperity to refuse.

And so Chun broke her oath. To help her lover fulfill his dream, she shouldered the curse of betrayal and shoved Lin Xi toward Decay.

In her mind, Decay would punish her in the cruelest way possible: by saving her lover and letting Lin Xi hunt her endlessly.

She understood Decay too well. She knew this was Lin Xi's only chance.

And her gamble paid off.

The instant she defected to Prosperity, Decay poured limitless power into Lin Xi. And there, on this battlefield of clashing faiths, two players of opposing beliefs — mirroring their Benefactors — went to war.

Chun understood Decay. But she apparently didn't understand Lin Xi. She'd bet that, even after being saved, Lin Xi wouldn't truly carry out Decay's vengeance. But the facts proved otherwise...

Love, in the face of some people's faith, is worth nothing.

The instant Lin Xi was revived, he attacked Chun without hesitation or mercy. His eyes were full of rage and terror, without a shred of love — plunging Chun, who had forsaken her own faith for him, into total despair and madness.

And so, as you've already seen, they've been fighting from that day to this."

"..."

Cheng Shi understood. The story was undeniably melodramatic. Anyone who suffered betrayal would struggle to let go. But... he pursed his lips. "How do you know all this in such detail? Was someone from the History School at the scene?"

"No. Chun told us everything herself.

As the largest intelligence organization, she needed our network to find Lin Xi, so she shared this history with us."

Cheng Shi had guessed as much. Still, he asked:

"When you collect intelligence like this, is a Master of Deception present?"

"For genuine history — yes.

For melodramatic gossip — no."

"?" Cheng Shi blinked. "Then how can you be sure Chun was telling the truth?"

"We can't, of course." Sun Miao's hands trembled again. She was clearly suppressing shock, yet her face remained blank — the disconnect between behavior and emotion strikingly jarring. "History demands to be seen clearly. Gossip doesn't. It just has to be melodramatic enough.

And if it's not melodramatic enough, we add fuel to the fire.

You know how we are — the people who record history are the best at this kind of thing.

Seeing the essence through the surface isn't wrong, but not everyone wants to see the essence. People only believe what they see. That's why surfaces can deceive — and why, in this era, con artists flourish.

Rather than exhausting yourself explaining thankless truths to outsiders, it's better to simply show them what they want to see through unimportant stories.

Take gossip, for instance. What people want is Chun and Lin Xi's endless battle, their melodrama of salvation and betrayal. As for what's real and what's fake behind the romance... nobody cares.

We don't care either — unless declaring one side's position benefits the History School. At that point, the side that benefits us naturally becomes the truth, and the side that harms us may shoulder all blame.

Centuries from now, the story we've painted becomes what future generations call history.

And the history we witness today is merely a story that those before us once painted.

That's history's inevitability and its essence. Don't you agree, Fate Weaver?"

...

Chapter 915: Your Devotion Is My Answer

'Whether you're right or wrong is none of my business.'

'I just want the gossip. I have zero interest in how your History School manipulates history.'

Cheng Shi pursed his lips, pocketed his dice, and kept walking.

Seeing the gossip hadn't swayed him, Sun Miao hurried to catch up, typing as she walked: "Fine — I admit I'm very interested in this compromised Order. So what kind of intel would it take for a Fate Weaver like you to open that golden mouth and enlighten me?"

Cheng Shi ignored the question and countered instead:

"Are you sure this is the right direction?"

The convoy wasn't heading this way."

Sun Miao paused, looked around, then nodded with certainty.

"I'm fairly confident in my knowledge of the Land of Hope's geography. That Folly follower was right — the convoy is clearly bound for the Boro Highlands front line. Their route detours around the impassable hills at the southernmost edge of Forest County. We obviously don't need to do that.

Cutting straight through will save a lot of time.

The trial may be fifteen days, but surely you don't want to waste half of them on the road?

At the convoy's marching speed and original route, it'll take four or five more days to reach the front. If we head this direction at full speed, we can reach the Twin Lakes County border in roughly two days.

This is the shortest path. You can trust my judgment.

Once we're there, the clues you're looking for will likely become clear."

Cheng Shi let out a scoffing laugh. "You know me that well? You know what I'm looking for?"

"Not specifically. Zhen Xin only told us to investigate history related to Order. And today, you told me Order has a problem. So whether it's from that angle or from a trial-completion standpoint, the Grand Tribunal's leadership will inevitably be your target.

And in this place, aside from Keinlaur — the Supreme Inquisitor defending Boro Highlands — perhaps no one stands closer to Order.

Cheng Shi, stop probing. Dropping your guard will let us work more efficiently."

Cheng Shi gave a noncommittal smile and quickened his pace, running toward the predetermined destination.

He didn't speak to the Mime Master again for the rest of the run. Not until the booming echoes of "Meteor Fire Rain" thundered behind them and they burst out of the forest — then sprinted south at full speed for half a day — did they finally stop in the fading glow of sunset, resting briefly to recover stamina.

Interestingly, even though Cheng Shi ran at the pace of a normal warrior, Sun Miao — a mage — kept up without missing a single step for half a day.

By now, sweat beaded her face. Despite her ragged breathing, she'd gritted her teeth and held on.

Of course, Cheng Shi noticed she hadn't done it on raw stamina alone. She'd used some item's power.

That wasn't strange — everyone had items. What was strange was that, for all her talk about him dropping his guard, she'd refused to ask him for a single spirit spell throughout the entire run.

Requesting a heal from a priest teammate was literally the most basic form of cooperation in this game. She was resisting even that. So... what exactly was she on guard against?

Cheng Shi couldn't figure it out. But he knew he still controlled the situation, so he let it go and focused on resting.

He sat cross-legged, gazing toward the sinking sun, letting his mind go blank.

Sun Miao noticed his state. After half a day of silence, she finally pulled out her electronic beeper again and typed:

"I've always thought the Afterglow Church had a nice name. When Order's sun sets in the west, what's left across the Land of Hope is nothing but afterglow.

Just like right now. Order is probably truly going down."

Cheng Shi smiled, pulled his gaze from the horizon, and turned to this teammate whose desire for Order intel was completely unmasked.

"Answer me one question, and I may share some things about Him."

Sun Miao perked up instantly. Her hands hammered the keys: "Ask!"

"Where did that Folly follower go?"

Hearing the question, the death-masked Mime Master froze for a beat. After a pause, she shook her head and typed: "He was the first to flash out of the cart. I didn't see where he went."

"Then where do you think he went?" Cheng Shi's lips curved. His gaze landed on her, loaded with meaning.

Sun Miao stared blankly for a long time without answering.

Seeing this, Cheng Shi shook his head with a chuckle.

"Cat got your tongue?"

The trial's opening hint was simple. If we woke up on that convoy, then the convoy's destination must be where the trial clues are buried.

And this path under our feet is the shortest route to those clues. Half a day has passed — so why hasn't our Folly teammate caught up?

Is he too slow?

I doubt it. You're a mage, and you kept pace with me. What class would he have to be for both of us to lose him so completely he's not even a speck on the horizon?

A Soloist?

Impossible. His gaze at the start — the way he appraised everyone — was intensely aggressive. Setting aside the contempt woven into it, no singer would dare show that kind of eyes.

That he did so tells me one thing: he's utterly confident. He's not afraid to provoke. So I'd lean toward an offensive class — a violent offensive class at that.

I simply cannot think of why he hasn't appeared on the shortest path to Boro Highlands.

Vice President Sun, care to explain?"

This time, Sun Miao didn't pause. She typed immediately: "Not everyone cares about a trial. He might have his own purpose."

The moment she finished, her fingers froze on the electronic beeper. They didn't lift.

Cheng Shi caught the detail. He scoffed again.

"Your judgment right now is far less sharp than when you were trying to win my trust, Master.

If a Folly follower doesn't care about this trial, then why did he volunteer all that background knowledge at the start?

As Silence — the faith closest to Folly — Vice President Sun, can you clear this up for me?"

"..."

Sun Miao seemed unable to field Cheng Shi's challenge. She silently turned away, set down the electronic voice box, and sank into total silence.

In this moment, she chose devotion.

And her devotion was exactly the answer Cheng Shi had been looking for.

So Cheng Shi smiled. He said nothing more, simply relaxing deeper into his rest.

Not until the sun had fully plunged below the horizon and the moon — long since hanging high — began to cast its glow did the two exchange a wordless look, rise together, and prepare to move on.

But just then, a faint rustling came from the grass nearby. Cheng Shi's eyes sharpened. He turned — and saw a black-backed, white-browed long-tailed rabbit that had somehow crept up close, huddled in the undergrowth, gnawing contentedly on blades of grass.

"..."

Cheng Shi recognized the creature. Or rather, these things were everywhere around Forest County. The rabbit was ugly and ate voraciously — an ideal food source for players on trial.

Too bad this one arrived at the wrong time. A bit earlier and they could've had a proper dinner.

He chuckled, turning to leave. But then Sun Miao — silent for so long — picked up her electronic beeper again and typed:

"Based on your reaction, you've seen these forest tree-rabbits before but aren't familiar with them.

A tree-rabbit's long tail isn't for balance while running — it's for gripping branches while climbing. They eat leaves. Only leaves. So...

Fate Weaver, care to guess why the tree-rabbit in front of us is eating grass?"

The words fell. Cheng Shi stopped in his tracks.

The rabbit's eyes went red.

...

## Chapter 916: You're a Hunter Too?

A Beast Tamer!

The instant Sun Miao exposed the forest tree-rabbit's disguise, the class leapt straight into Cheng Shi's mind.

'Fits perfectly. Too perfectly.'

Wasn't he himself a hunter who used lies as arrows, roaming the world in pursuit of profit?

And as for who "he" was?

Heh — aside from that childhood playmate, the only teammate who hadn't shown up, who else could it be?

'Right, Little Seven?'

Of course, Cheng Shi didn't overreact to the tree-rabbit's approach. He was certain it had only just crept up. No other creature had drawn near during their half-day journey, which meant Little Seven probably hadn't overheard his exchange with the Mime Master.

And judging by Little Seven's attitude toward him, he didn't seem to know that "Xiao Shi" was the same Cheng Shi who'd caused a scene at 0221's experiment ground.

If that held, the charade could continue.

So Cheng Shi instantly switched expressions — blinking in mild surprise, he stared at the forest tree-rabbit with convincing bewilderment.

"A Gua?"

You came looking for me?

I had no idea you were a Deceit follower!"

Indeed — "A Gua" was a Beast Tamer. This rabbit was one of the scouts he'd taken control of back on the cart.

He'd planned to use the clash between those two teammates as cover to slip into the shadows and track everyone via controlled animals. But he hadn't expected that the moment he caught up with Xiao Shi and this Silence follower, the annoyingly well-read woman would expose him like this.

'What the hell is that sound-making thing in your hands, lady?'

'Silence followers are committing cyber-blasphemy against their god now?'

Even with all of Du Qiyu's worldly experience, this particular brand of sacrilege left him momentarily speechless.

Fortunately, this Xiao Shi — who apparently didn't even recognize a forest tree-rabbit — gave him a comfortable way out.

So the dull-looking tree-rabbit hopped forward two steps, spat out the chewed grass, and spoke in a human voice.

"Xiao Shi, it's me. I finally caught up with you two.

Forest tree-rabbits aren't good runners. I nearly ran my legs off before I even spotted you."

Cheng Shi's gaze drifted to the rabbit's legs. Noticing they didn't even have a speck of mud on them, he nearly broke character. To suppress his laughter, he whipped his head away and pretended to scan the surroundings.

"Where's your real body? Why not come out and join us directly?"

The rabbit's brow furrowed. It lowered its voice.

"That Lin Xi and his opponent are too dangerous. I was worried they'd interfere with the trial. I planned to stay hidden and protect you from the shadows. But since you've found me out, let's split the roles — one in the open, one in the dark — and face the unknown risks together.

Xiao Shi, take me with you. I'll be your eyes from concealment."

"..."

'Eyes?'

'Heh — are those eyes meant to watch for enemies, or to hunt us?'

The holes in that excuse were so numerous that Cheng Shi genuinely wondered whether the man was actually a Deceit follower.

With his "talent," how could he produce such a sloppy explanation?

Was it because Cheng Shi's performance had been so mediocre that it lowered the man's guard?

'His lying skills really haven't improved over the years. His motto seems to be: as long as it counts as a lie, it's fine.'

Just as he was thinking this, the first probe came.

Du Qiyu seemed bothered by how Cheng Shi had identified him. From his perspective, he wasn't the only teammate who'd vanished. Even setting aside the two in combat — who wouldn't have had time to reach here — there was still a missing Folly follower. So why had Xiao Shi immediately pegged this tree-rabbit as him?

Could the man be playing dumb?

So Du Qiyu tested: "Xiao Shi, how did you guess it was me?"

Cheng Shi blinked at the idiotic question, scratched his head with a dry laugh, and said:

"Probably... intuition?"

I figured if it were that Folly follower, he probably wouldn't control a leaf-eating rabbit into doing something as weak... as weakening its biological habits."

"..."

"..."

The phrase "weakening its biological habits" stunned both listeners into silence.

Du Qiyu's Master of Deception confirmed the statement as true. He couldn't tell whether the man was seizing a chance to mock him or was just blurting things out. Regardless, the irritation and anger within him ratcheted up another notch.

But this time, his assessment of Cheng Shi shifted. He began to take this surviving childhood companion seriously.

Granted, a childhood environment could reshape someone's personality. But a person's innate sharpness was nearly impossible to erase. The young Xiao Shi had been exceptionally clever. So the current version was likely far less simple than he appeared.

Du Qiyu made a mental note, his rabbit's red eyes studying Cheng Shi as it hopped "amiably" toward him.

"It's getting dark. I think we should set off again.

By the way — aside from the two experts going at it, where did our Folly teammate go?"

Cheng Shi watched the rabbit hop toward his feet. His eyes shifted. He grabbed the rabbit by the ears, hoisted it up, then casually glanced at the Mime Master. His gaze lingered on her for a beat before he smiled.

"No idea. After all, Folly's wise men always see far and plan ahead. Perhaps he's already walking ahead of us?"

Sun Miao's expression didn't change. She spared a single glance at the rabbit dangling from Cheng Shi's hand, seeming to grasp the subtle dynamic between the two men, then turned and sprinted toward Boro Highlands.

Cheng Shi followed without hesitation. And then, the most bizarre sight the hilly terrain had ever witnessed unfolded.

A human female charged ahead in silence, blazing a trail. A human male swung a violently retching forest tree-rabbit by the ears as he kept pace, step for step. This absurd "chase" radiated a farcical energy so potent that every nocturnal beast emerging to hunt simply stared — convinced they hadn't woken up yet.

Swinging one's arms did aid running form, sure — but even Du Qiyu, fool that he wasn't, recognized this as Xiao Shi's probe.

'Fine. Still as repulsive as ever!'

But did he really think such a juvenile trick could rattle him?

Du Qiyu scoffed internally and decisively severed the visual link between himself and the tree-rabbit.

At this moment, his real body was trailing in the shadows not far behind, tracking their path. He was a true hunter — agile enough to keep up, and even if a moment of caution made him lose visual contact, he could pick up their trail again from the tracks they left.

So he never worried about losing touch with his teammates. What worried him was whether this Xiao Shi had already seen through his identity and was putting on a show!

After long deliberation, Du Qiyu decided to test him again. During the arm-swinging torment of his tamed beast, he suddenly spoke through the rabbit's mouth to both teammates.

"Though the trial's been going for half a day, our reunion could count as a fresh start.

Shouldn't we introduce ourselves?

Even if Xiao Shi and I know each other, we should at least be transparent with outsiders to build trust, right?

Maybe Deceit followers don't have the best reputation, but I promise — I'm one of the rare ones who treats people sincerely.

So as a gesture of good faith, I'll go first.

Zhao Xiaogua. Beast Tamer. Ladder score: 2,677."

Neither sprinting figure slowed. Sun Miao, in the lead, glanced back at Cheng Shi. Seeing his peculiar smile, she deliberated briefly, pulled out her beeper, and typed:

"Sun Miao. Mime Master. Ladder: 2,459."

"What a coincidence — we share a surname." Cheng Shi didn't break stride. "I'm Sun Lin. Pen of Finality. Ladder... 2,201."

'A 2,400-point Silence follower — not much of a threat. But... 2,200?'

'Not even 2,400?'

Hearing a score that Master of Deception confirmed as true, Du Qiyu frowned.

Though the frown wasn't entirely about the score. It was also because...

"Xiao Shi — you're a hunter too?"

"Sure am. Why can't I be a hunter?" Cheng Shi's smile was radiant.

...

Chapter 917: Little Seven's Probe

Du Qiyu was not stupid. Or rather — when he wasn't facing Cheng Shi, he was extraordinarily shrewd.

It was just that encountering this childhood "friend" stirred up a restlessness he couldn't suppress no matter how hard he tried, corroding his usual decisiveness and cunning.

He'd always believed this orphan — whose only asset was a pretty face — was inferior to him in every conceivable way. So why did so many people care about him?

So upon seeing Cheng Shi again, Du Qiyu felt the same as he had in childhood: the other man was nothing but a straw-stuffed mannequin in golden robes, unworthy of his full attention. The more casually he handled it, the more it proved how beneath him Xiao Shi truly was.

'He's a Pen of Finality?'

'A Fate follower?'

'Ha — absolutely ridiculous. I stole your fate, and you still think you have one.'

But despite the swarming contempt and irritation, Du Qiyu remained on guard. He'd once heard the orphanage director's name for Cheng Shi's adoptive father, and as he recalled, the man's surname wasn't Sun.

So he probed again: "Your adoptive father's surname is Sun? I'd heard them call him Old Jia."

The instant Old Jia's name left Little Seven's mouth, Cheng Shi's radiant smile turned eerie. A flash of nostalgia crossed his eyes, followed by a sweep of ice-cold detachment — like that downpour over the graveyard, washing away every last scrap of warmth and any lingering fondness for childhood.

Murderous intent nearly spilled from the scalpel hidden in his sleeve. But he held back. He simply maintained his smile and nodded.

"Yes. Old Jia was my father. An ordinary, yet great father."

The tone could only be described as "proud." But neither of the other two could relate; they only found his voice peculiar.

Sun Miao, knowing nothing of Cheng Shi's past, said nothing. But in Du Qiyu's eyes, the display painted a very different picture.

'A scrap-collecting bachelor — and you actually think saying that out loud earns you respect.'

'Great?'

'Before the Faith Game descended, only power and money deserved the word "great." After the game, stats and scores are everything.'

'Never mind whether your stinking scrap-collector father is alive or dead. With your pathetic 2,200 score, uttering the word "great" is an insult to greatness itself.'

'Compared to some shantytown family, only MY father truly deserves to be called great!'

Still, so far, Xiao Shi hadn't told a single lie. That was uncommon at this level. Did he really have no guard up around people?

'No — someone without any guard couldn't possibly survive this long.'

Du Qiyu frowned again. Splitting his attention between scanning his surroundings to ensure his own safety and relentlessly pressing Cheng Shi for more, he continued:

"I really envy you — at least you got a home. Not like us, growing up in an orphanage, fending for ourselves, with nothing to lean on.

I used to dream about what a normal family felt like. A few times, I even dreamed I'd been adopted — and the person who adopted me was Little Seven's father...

He was a big-time businessman. If only he'd really been my dad.

Oh right, Xiao Shi — do you still remember Little Seven? I remember you two were closest friends as kids. He goes by Du Qiyu now. "Du" as in prevent, "Qi" as in anticipation, "Yu" as in jade. I've heard he's doing great — never short on food or clothes, studied abroad, graduated from a top school, took over the family business. Practically royalty..."

As he spoke, even Du Qiyu's own tone grew wistful.

"Too bad. The moment the game descended, all of that... became the past."

Cheng Shi listened to this self-aggrandizing monologue, his scalp nearly crawling off his head. Before this, he'd never believed secondhand embarrassment could be lethal. But now, he felt he was on the verge of being assassinated — by weaponized cringe.

Even so, he didn't interrupt the man's immersion in his glorious past. He simply voiced one loaded remark:

"Yeah. It's all in the past now."

From behind, Du Qiyu detected nothing unusual in the words. He seized the golden opportunity and pushed his probe further.

"Xiao Shi, are you still in contact with Little Seven?"

Cheng Shi's stride hitched. He didn't answer.

The silence sent a jolt through Du Qiyu. He feared the worst: that the other man might be avoiding any statement that Master of Deception would flag as a lie.

And that would mean everything prior could have been Xiao Shi stringing him along using his own Master of Deception.

'Could he be a con artist too?'

Du Qiyu's eyes darkened. He didn't abandon the probe. Instead, he pressed harder.

"Makes sense... you still hate him, right?"

They were all just rumors in the orphanage, but I heard Rong Mama say he stole your chance. Boss Du was supposed to—"

Before he could finish, Cheng Shi's expression shifted. He cut the rabbit off mid-sentence.

"Enough. I don't hate him."

A lie!

In the distance, Du Qiyu froze — then laughed out loud.

'Ha. Hahaha. I was being way too paranoid. He told a lie!'

'He doesn't have Master of Deception. He's not a con artist.'

'After all these years, he's still the same fool. Can't even lie properly.'

The tension coiling Du Qiyu's nerves unraveled at once. He halted behind, laughing with the relief of someone who'd laughed at himself for overestimating an opponent.

But mid-laugh, his expression twisted again.

'Xiao Shi hates me!'

'What right does he have to hate me?!'

'It was YOUR own uselessness that let one lie spin your head around. That's on you, not me!'

'And besides — without me, how would you have ever met your "great" father from the shantytown?!'

Du Qiyu's face went dark. He clenched his fists, aching to turn Xiao Shi into one of his tamed beasts right then and there. But he hadn't yet determined the Silence follower's relationship to Xiao Shi. Arrogant as he was, he didn't fancy his odds against two players at once.

The scar on his face was already one warning. He couldn't afford another moment of careless cockiness.

"Is that so? Good that you don't hate him. Ha — why am I even bringing this up? Let's keep moving. Before those two catch up, before trouble finds us, we need to locate the trial clues as fast as possible."

Everyone knew that in a wish trial at this level, the trial clues were secondary — the clues you'd prayed for were what mattered. But neither of the other two contradicted "Zhao Xiaogua's" falsehood. After all, a Deceit follower's mouth was never a reliable source.

Listening to the loaded dialogue from behind, Sun Miao several times reached for her electronic beeper, tempted to interject. But she reconsidered each time, maintaining her devotion to her Benefactor and continuing her silent sprint.

She didn't expose Cheng Shi, because she could tell his relationship with the Beast Tamer was clearly strained.

She just hadn't figured out how bad it was, or how she might leverage this tense, delicate dynamic to extract more "history." So she held still, listening in silence.

The three picked up speed. The leading mage was now moving at near-flash-step velocity — an explosive burst that resembled an assassin's. The speed itself surprised Cheng Shi, but what truly astonished him was the endurance.

An assassin's burst was fast, yes — but only for an instant. To sustain this kind of explosive output for so long meant that even an assassin would have to be ranked among the elite.

Yet Sun Miao wasn't even an assassin. She was a mage. How was she doing this?

Du Qiyu found it baffling. But not Cheng Shi. He felt the teammate was showing him a particular answer. It all but confirmed his guess — the current situation was far more complex than it appeared.

The accelerated sprint dramatically shortened their travel time. Through the ongoing tug-of-war of probes and deflections, Du Qiyu gradually assembled a profile of the current Xiao Shi.

Beneath his joyful-reunion facade, the man was in fact fiercely guarded.

He'd acknowledged Du Qiyu's claimed identity — but that didn't mean he trusted him.

Perhaps it was the Deceit label that made Xiao Shi wary. But... 'Wary or not, I still fooled you, didn't I?'

'Heh — Zhao Xiaogua, that dinner you went to all that trouble to treat me to has finally paid off. You may be dead, but at least the identity lives on.'

'From now on, I am you. I am Xiao Shi's childhood best friend — until this trial ends, until there's no more "Xiao Shi" in this world.'

'Relax. I'll send him down to see you.'

'Best friends should be reunited. Won't that make you both happy?'

...

#### Chapter 918: The Front Line

This was probably the most speechless and most boring trial Cheng Shi had experienced in recent memory.

Two days in, and all he and his two teammates had done was travel and probe, travel and probe. Zero external threats the whole way; internally, everyone stayed wary, but nowhere near the threshold of violence.

In this complex, awkward atmosphere, the three finally reached Boro Highlands in Twin Lakes County before sunset on the second day. Gazing up at the Grand Tribunal banners blotting out the sky above the highlands, they realized: the grandest battle of the mid-to-late Civilization Epoch was about to unfold before their eyes.

The fire of War had been smoldering for a long time, but a nation had yet to be founded.

The true spark hadn't originated in the Grand Tribunal — it had ignited within the Tower of Logic.

When the Erudition Presidium funneled all experimental resources exclusively into projects they personally evaluated and approved, those scholars walking the road of Truth — who could see no hope yet had no more resources to continue — realized that if this went on, Truth would be monopolized by the few.

This clearly contradicted the Tower of Logic's vision of universal knowledge and shared wisdom. Internal protests erupted first.

Particularly during that period, the underground's various faiths had also grown restless. Under the accelerating spread of countless belief systems toward the surface, the Tower of Logic's protests intensified until full-scale factional confrontations erupted across academic departments and cities.

As departments clashed and tensions boiled over, someone finally declared:

"Since our respective Truths can't convince anyone at the debate table — let's smash the table, whittle it into spears, and stab the heretics peddling false doctrines."

Whether those stubborn Truth followers deserved to be called fake or not was debatable. But those who actually smashed tables and took up spears had certainly stopped being Truth followers.

And so the sparks of War blazed across Truth's domain. The Tower of Logic erupted into multi-front civil wars under the banner of "Clarifying Truth."

The chaos grew uncontrollable, eventually spilling across borders to ravage the Grand Tribunal.

After all: if the so-called "compendium of universal laws" that was Truth could harbor oppression — how could Order, which was "merely" a "single rule of discipline," possibly be exempt?

And so the war fire that burned across the surface of the Land of Hope intensified, nearly toppling a thousand years of civilization that humanity had built with its own hands.

Fast-forward to the present. After years of campaigning, the various weary armies had been encircled in the south by the Grand Tribunal and the Tower of Logic. The vested interests of Order and Truth were counting on a single decisive strike to restore peace to the surface.

But every player knew this hope would soon be dashed. Not only dashed — this very battle would let War's followers swallow countless elite troops from both nations, found their own kingdom in the south, and formally stamp War's name into every corner of the continent.

So despite the awe-inspiring sight of banners ripping in the wind across the highlands, they all knew: within days — very possibly within this trial's fifteen-day window — those waving flags would become the finest kindling for War's fire.

All three were moved.

Sun Miao pulled out her electronic beeper:

"Too many sentries. Without the convoy, we can't approach the central army tent through legitimate means. We'll need to scrounge up two sets of battle armor.

War supervisor uniforms would be ideal — they'd let us blend in and reach... whichever NPC each of us finds interesting."

Cheng Shi had the same idea. But he had no intention of doing the grunt work himself — not when there was someone better suited.

So he and the Mime Master exchanged a glance, then jointly looked down at the rabbit in his hand — its ear fur nearly yanked bald.

The rabbit was on its last legs. Under Cheng Shi's deliberate-yet-casual abuse, it had gone almost limp.

But Du Qiyu was still very much alive. That was all that mattered.

He'd come to the front line because his prayer was also connected to this battle. But upon hearing a mage with far lower stats presume to order him around, Du Qiyu — lurking at a distance — snorted coldly. He released the two juvenile hawks from his hands and vanished silently into the river valley below the highlands.

He was gone.

Du Qiyu was confident he'd mapped Xiao Shi's capabilities and had tagged the target. He could return and find him at any time. So first: complete his own prayer wish. Then, before the trial ended, he could send his old friend to reunite with another old friend — faster and better.

As for what his goal was...

He'd prayed to obtain a long-coveted item.

Allegedly imbued with the power of War, this item would let him dispose of Xiao Shi with ease — and even counter-ambush the two self-righteous "justice warriors" who'd slashed his face.

So he slipped away without a sound, using his talent to bypass the two and infiltrate the Grand Tribunal's camp first.

After waiting for a long time without response, Cheng Shi snorted, tossed aside the dead-eyed rabbit, and grinned at Sun Miao.

"Let's move, Master. The animal's a lost cause. We're on our own now."

Sun Miao knew Zhao Xiaogua had left too. But instead of heading out immediately, she fixed her expressionless gaze on Cheng Shi and frantically typed:

"Your relationship with him is unusual. Care to share that history with me? In exchange, I can leak some of our president Zhen Xin's past to you.

These are absolute secrets that have never been recorded in any document or book. Even the other vice presidents in our school have never heard them.

With these stories, you'd likely gain a degree of leverage in your partnership with her.

So — interested?"

Cheng Shi blinked. 'This woman is something else. She'd sell out her own boss for intel.'

'Still — your nose for information is solid. Unfortunately, your eye for trading partners... isn't.'

"What secrets — you mean the one about her growing up in an orphanage, like me?"

"?"

At Cheng Shi's quip, Sun Miao's hands visibly seized. Despite her unchanged expression, her shock showed through a dozen micro-details.

"Interesting. Your relationship with her seems far more complex than I imagined.

Don't tell me you're actually Zhen Yi's boyfriend?

Something this private — aside from Zhen Yi, I can't imagine any other way you'd find out."

'Zhen Yi's boyfriend?'

'Tsk — that's ancient history. You're behind the times, girl.'

'The current version is...'

"Hee~"

Cheng Shi let out a spontaneous "hee" — and that single syllable made the ever-eager, ever-stoic Mime Master's expression combust for the first time. In a panicked reflex, she raised her hand and blanketed her own feet with an indiscriminate Silence Domain.

"..."

Cheng Shi couldn't speak anymore. But the laughter in his eyes and the smirk at his lips were more "venomous" than any words.

She'd lost composure again — the second time, after misjudging the Folly teammate's movements.

Sun Miao realized it was just a joke. But the joke dredged up certain... unpleasant memories.

She glared at Cheng Shi, took several deep breaths, then typed again:

"I hope there won't be a next time for jokes like that."

Cheng Shi shrugged indifferently.

'All I did was mimic a certain someone's verbal tic, and it scared you this badly. Heh — Zhen Yi really does live up to her title as the number-one jinx.'

'But that's exactly what makes the "hee weapon" a credible deterrent.'

The Silence Domain was still active. Cheng Shi opened his mouth and silently mouthed a few words, then immediately decided that looked idiotic. So he reached out and gestured for the electronic voice box. With clumsy fingers, he typed:

"Stop wasting time. Go find us uniforms."

Sun Miao's eye twitched. Her face was stone cold. She stared at her own "mouth" in Cheng Shi's hands, her expression clearly asking: "Why me?"

Cheng Shi didn't bother explaining. He just typed on:

"Hee, hee, hee, hee—"

The electronic "hee" carried zero menace. But the Mime Master grasped the message loud and clear: if you don't go, I'll just keep "hee-ing" at you.

Sun Miao's face went dark. She had never in her life hated a single syllable this much. Nor had she ever found another human being this utterly detestable.

'No wonder he can partner with Zhen Xin. They're a perfect match.'

"Hee, hee, hee, hee—"

Sun Miao couldn't take it anymore. She snatched back her voice box and stormed wordlessly toward the military camp.

Watching her leave, Cheng Shi stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"Interesting. Even after that much provocation, she still wants to team with me. She really is fascinated by Order's current state.

But the question is — is it her who's interested... or them?"

...

## Chapter 919: Keinlaur Once More

The Silence follower worked quickly. Before long, she returned with a set of war supervisor's garb for Cheng Shi. The two changed in the river valley, then slipped along the route with the fewest sentry posts, disguising themselves all the way into the camp atop the highlands.

This was indeed the central army of the Grand Tribunal's southward encirclement force. The soldiers patrolling and drilling around them were Iron Law Knights from Katouting — elite among elites. Judging by the knights' morale and bearing alone, Cheng Shi could've sworn he was standing in the War legion's headquarters.

Historical records might be vague, but only by going back in time and seeing both sides firsthand could you truly appreciate the terrifying scale of the battle that birthed the Kingdom of War.

Cheng Shi struggled to imagine how a force this formidable — one he'd dare march up to a god and shout at — could have fallen entirely to the supposedly "fragile" remnants of the War legions across the line.

Keinlaur, the battle-hungry Shared Law Faction military commander... had, in a way, achieved a remarkably unanimous reputation among players. Whether good or bad — at least it was unanimous.

Cheng Shi's target was naturally Keinlaur, inside the central army tent. He and Sun Miao advanced cautiously, scrutinizing every passing soldier. Not that their wariness was misplaced — there was still a potential time bomb out there.

Beast Tamers specialized in taming beasts. But let's not forget: humans are beasts too. In some Beast Tamers' eyes, humans were merely slightly cleverer animals.

So to prevent Little Seven from causing trouble, every step Cheng Shi took inside the camp was painstakingly careful.

This continued until they fought their way near the main tent, where the identity verification system was too stringent. Staring at the tent right in front of them, they had to rethink their approach.

"Master, it's your time to shine again.

I know Silence has certain talents that can control 'expression' — making these knights unable to perceive our presence. It's not dark yet, and everyone's attention is tied to their own duties. We can slip inside and hide. Then, once only Keinlaur remains, perhaps we can ask him... what exactly went wrong with Order.

How about it? Isn't that exactly the answer you've been looking for?"

"..."

'Why do you make it sound like I'M the one who wanted to come here, and you're just tagging along?'

'Don't forget — the History School's assignment is tied to YOU!'

Sun Miao felt that from the moment this trial started, her role had been fundamentally miscast. She was basically here to do grunt work for this new vice president. But they were both vice presidents — why wasn't he doing anything?

'If you used that threatening, coercive energy on NPCs, we'd have been inside ages ago!'

'Identity checks can't possibly stump a Deceit follower, can they?'

'Does he really think he's a Pen of Finality?'

But Sun Miao had no choice. She knew Cheng Shi's tug-of-war with Du Qiyu was still ongoing. Seeing that he wouldn't budge no matter how she urged, she grudgingly darkened her face, activated her talents, burned some items, and suppressed both their presences — allowing them to waltz into the main tent in plain sight.

Cheng Shi was no stranger to Silence's effects. When the surrounding knights began ignoring them, he chuckled softly and stepped back, yielding the lead to the Mime Master.

"..."

Sun Miao saw through him completely now. 'You will never gain even a sliver of advantage over this absurdly cautious man.'

'Risk is mine. The split of spoils... TBD.'

But she didn't dwell on it. Expressionless, she led the way. They quickened their pace toward the tent. Before they even lifted the flap, an aged yet steely voice reached them from inside.

"The time is nearly upon us. The Truth followers have completed the final encirclement. The chance to purge everything lies before us. Everyone..."

Return to your posts and prepare. Let us hope we bring Him a victory.

All for the new order."

"All for the new order."

Many voices echoed in unison. Then came bowing and salutes as each person departed.

The heavy clatter of armor was enough to quicken anyone's pulse. Standing outside, the two watched as legion commanders filed out, lifting the tent flap one by one, faces grim as they strode past. Both were still processing the fact that the Grand Tribunal's prayer had changed.

Then came a cold huff from the sole Supreme Inquisitor still inside.

"All guests are welcome here. Now that you've come — why don't you dare step inside for a chat?"

"!!!?"

The words froze both Cheng Shi and Sun Miao in place. They exchanged a startled look. Then Cheng Shi saw Sun Miao shake her head with unusual solemnity, her meaning clear:

'Even if someone could see through Silence's concealment, it could NOT be the Keinlaur inside that tent.'

Initially, Cheng Shi had simply been stunned by Keinlaur's keen perception. But Sun Miao's certainty now made him realize: perhaps the ones exposed weren't them — maybe it was some other lurker with hidden motives.

Sure enough. As Keinlaur's words fell, a "war supervisor" crouching beside a campfire outside the tent silently brushed dirt from his body and rose from a shallow pit in the ground — right in front of Cheng Shi and Sun Miao.

Under Silence's influence, the intruder didn't seem to notice outsiders were present. He simply smiled, patted the dust off his uniform, and strode straight through the tent flap.

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow. One look at the man's disguise technique — so convincing that even Cheng Shi himself hadn't detected it — told him this was unquestionably a skilled hunter.

Moreover, the war supervisor's face was completely unfamiliar, looking every bit like a native-born Grand Tribunal knight. That meant he was either a refined flesh puppet or a controlled... pet.

Given all that, it wasn't hard to guess who was pulling this war supervisor's strings.

Cheng Shi scoffed silently, then followed the war supervisor into the tent. Sun Miao cast one thoughtful glance toward a certain direction before slipping in after him.

Inside, the war supervisor showed zero deference upon facing the Supreme Inquisitor who represented Order. Without so much as a bow, he launched straight into a condescending, practically top-down negotiation.

"Keinlaur, right? I know who you are.

I'm here to make you a deal. One you can't refuse."

Keinlaur sat on the judgment seat...

That's right — absurd as it sounds, the tent housed a complete judgment desk. Judge, Justice Official, Investigator — every seat was present. And there sat Keinlaur, high upon the judge's seat. By rights, he was the one looking down at the war supervisor. Yet in terms of presence, he was a full tier below this brazen stranger.

The white-haired elder said nothing. He merely regarded the visitor below him with hawk-like eyes. After a long pause, he spoke.

"Hill was a devout follower of Order. You killed him and assumed his identity — that alone carries a death sentence.

A criminal. Daring to make boastful deals with me in this court of judgment?"

The words had barely landed—

"Whoosh—"

An arrow grazed Keinlaur's temple with pinpoint precision, embedding itself in the Grand Tribunal emblem behind his head.

The war supervisor snorted, lowering a military longbow.

"That's my bargaining chip. Enough for you?"

I know War's followers have caused you no end of trouble. But you're destined to lose this battle.

To spare your confidence, I'll skip the details. But I can tell you this: if I fight on the Grand Tribunal's side in this campaign, my bow alone can win you the war.

War followers? Legion commanders? Heh — just one arrow apiece.

I can purge every enemy you want purged. And the price? Very fair.

I don't need the Grand Tribunal to give me anything. I just want to take one item from that mountain of war spoils.

Just one.

Deal?

For you, that's pure profit — zero investment.

After all, only victory brings spoils, doesn't it?"

Keinlaur was silent. He studied the man for a long time before asking in a low voice: "What... do you want?"

"A bow. A great bow — hidden away by War's followers until all its edge was lost.

I'm not sure where it is right now, but I know it's somewhere on this battlefield.

That's why I'm here. I can bring it new glory — and that glory can belong to Order.

Keinlaur, you have one day to consider. This time tomorrow night, I'll visit again. I hope by then, I'll have the answer I want.

As for searches and lockdowns... save it. Don't take pointless actions that anger me. Otherwise, next time, this arrow hits your throat, not Order's emblem."

With that, the war supervisor turned and swaggered out. At the exit, he tossed back one final line:

"Oh — and if anyone else like me comes looking to cooperate with you...

My advice? Kill them on the spot.

I alone am more than enough to bring you victory."

...

Chapter 920: Upheaval — The Camp Raider!

The war supervisor collapsed unconscious beside the campfire the instant he stepped out of the tent. Cheng Shi and Sun Miao watched the blowhard Beast Tamer leave and shook their heads with a chuckle.

In the face of what was arguably the grandest battle of the mid-Civilization Epoch — did individual martial prowess matter?

Obviously yes — if your name was Hong Lin, or Frazor. Then perhaps the entire dynamics of the Land of Hope could genuinely change because of you.

But if you weren't? Even if you were the Grand Marshal, or the true War Chosen hiding among the Torchbearers — sorry, your power would only let you rampage across a localized battlefield. Against the tide of a war waged by entire nations, all you could do was marvel at your own insignificance.

Don't forget: the Grand Tribunal, the Tower of Logic, and even the not-yet-founded Kingdom of War weren't just composed of mortals and soldiers. They were followers under the gaze of gods!

Once war escalated to the level of faith, victory wasn't determined by mere mortal combat, but by how much attention the gods paid to it.

Sure, individual prowess was useful against a handful of pivotal but modestly powerful NPCs. But once the meat grinder of war started turning...

Had you figured out how to tank indiscriminate Meteor Fire Rain bombardments? Or an Elemental Tsunami unleashed by an entire nation's worth of Elemental Judges?

These forces didn't belong to mortals — they were projections of divine conflict on a certain plane. If your status didn't exceed that plane, then sorry — you were no different from the countless corpses littering this battlefield. Just a question of how much ash you'd leave behind.

So Du Qiyu's promise was a false proposition from the start. He'd merely seized the right moment to intimidate Keinlaur, constructing a mysterious persona to leverage in future negotiations, squeezing the old man until he got what he wanted.

Cheng Shi knew this trick intimately — he did the same thing. Most Deceit followers did, in fact.

Only their targets usually weren't someone of Keinlaur's stature across the Land of Hope. They preferred ordinary people.

Still, seeing Little Seven pull this stunt, Cheng Shi could guess the reason.

Historical records were probably too unkind to this battle-loving but battle-losing Supreme Inquisitor, seeding enough contempt in Little Seven's heart that he couldn't be bothered to waste words on a commander who'd lost the critical battle.

The Du family's young master would indeed be that kind of person.

And yet... could someone who'd risen to Supreme Inquisitor in a nation under His gaze really be that incompetent?

Cheng Shi frowned slightly, studying Keinlaur. He felt the old man was hiding something. Based on his own experience with the man back in Montelani, this forceful inquisitor would not typically tolerate such blatant desecration of Order in his presence.

Endure when you can — that didn't sound like Order at all.

The tent fell silent again. Keinlaur sat motionless on his judgment seat. The white-haired elder gazed at the tent's entrance, eyes flickering, seemingly lost in thought.

What he was contemplating — no one knew. But Cheng Shi would know soon enough.

Because Cheng Shi made his move. With no one else present, the two invisible people in the tent had clearly found their window for interrogation.

Though Cheng Shi would have preferred to stay a pure observer in this trial full of surprises, if he had the chance to personally question the person closest to Order on this continent — perhaps he'd learn something new about Order's stance toward War.

Remember: this trial was bestowed by Corruption, and the hint explicitly pointed toward followers of Order — because "sin" was a word that Order's believers used most.

So what hidden desires lurked within this white-haired inquisitor?

And when Cheng Shi recalled the Divinity Germination Experiment beneath Montelani's Colosseum, and the man's granddaughter — Galusha, that "Folly guide" whom Fate had once arranged — he became increasingly certain that Keinlaur was far less simple than people assumed.

How would the militant Shared Law Faction achieve its vision of universal shared law? The answer might rest entirely on this man — the Grand Tribunal's last Shared Law Supreme Inquisitor!

Cheng Shi's lips curled with interest. He glanced at Sun Miao, signaling her to keep watch, then discreetly touched a ring on his finger. This time, he would personally launch a courtroom interrogation that belonged to Order alone.

But not everything goes to plan. Because just as Cheng Shi was about to shed his Silence disguise and appear before the contemplating Keinlaur — catastrophe struck!

The entire tent simply vanished!

Everything inside was suddenly exposed under the campfire's flickering glow. Firelight played across the startled faces of the three people still inside, writing an indefinite ellipsis over their not-yet-begun courtroom exchange.

"!!!"

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted. He flashed back to Sun Miao's side, then immediately scanned the surroundings. Every tent in the camp had vanished — leaving behind nothing but countless stunned faces, all looking around just as bewildered as he was.

Then the cry of "Enemy attack!" rang out again — only this time, far louder than two days ago on the forest convoy.

This was a military camp. A camp guarded by tens of thousands of Iron Law Knights. The instant the anomaly struck, countless patrolling and drilling knights swarmed into formation.

Armor clashed. Lances rose. Firelight leapt and danced across cold steel, painting every grim face a burning crimson. From a distance, those dark-red visages linked and intertwined like sparks of war on the verge of igniting.

"Civilization rises, Order endures!"

All units, hold fast! Iron Law Knights enter punitive stance! War supervisors, conduct unit inspections! Guard force, shield the central tent — protecting Lord Keinlaur takes priority!

Relay to the vanguard: fall back and secure the base of the highlands! Guard against enemy camp raids! Left and right flanks, hold position — beware diversionary tactics!

Notify the Tower of Logic scholars immediately — we have a situation tonight! They must heighten alert and reinforce the eastern front!

Elemental Judges, by my command — illuminate!

Iron Law Knights, by my command — all units advance with leveled spears! Crush any who dare desecrate Order!"

Such orders echoed across every regiment's encampment, the combined roar so thunderous it felt as though battle was imminent.

But was there truly an enemy raiding the camp?

No. The moment the tents vanished, Cheng Shi knew who had arrived — and he knew the "raider" was coming for him.

Oblivion!

Because he could already smell the undisguised aura of Oblivion.

It was Lin Xi!

This Decay follower who'd fused Oblivion had finally caught up, carrying his mission of Oblivion.

Cheng Shi's gaze sharpened. 'The Fun God was right all along. Oblivion's zealous followers really are actively approaching me under the guise of devotion.'

But why hadn't he obliterated everything in the tent — including Cheng Shi — in one stroke?

That sudden attack should have left zero reaction time!

Was he also invested in the trial and didn't want Keinlaur to vanish along with everything else? Or had the Grand Tribunal's passive defenses activated?

Regardless — since he'd narrowly escaped this disaster, then Lin Xi, your judgment day was coming.

'You offer such zealous devotion to Oblivion — but aren't you afraid that your other Benefactor, Decay, might have opinions about that?'

'Even if He doesn't — have you asked the proxy wielding Decay's authority? Have you asked ME?'

With that thought, Cheng Shi grabbed Sun Miao and charged outward.

The central command area was no place for a fight. Keinlaur couldn't die from collateral player combat, so he needed a different battleground for this reckless challenger.

As for where to fight...

Cheng Shi gazed down at the forested river valley below the highlands and snorted.

"That spot looks perfect. Burying a Decay maggot in a forest of Prosperity — now that's poetic justice."

...