

The Gods 1151

Chapter 1151: The Prisoner's Past

Cheng Shi couldn't be certain whether Ji Yue's "have we met before" was a deliberate probe, or a side effect from her clash with the Memory follower Zhao Xishi.

All he knew was: if she truly recovered those memories, the one dying of embarrassment would be him.

And of course, the three other Torchbearers who'd been present at the time.

Just thinking about the nonsense he'd spouted in the void about becoming a god made his scalp tingle and his toes curl. Sure, he really was walking the path of godhood—but who wanted to look back at their dark history?

So he didn't want to stay a second longer. While the night still held, he planned to continue investigating the statue's secrets. He'd already found something, and hoped to find the answer he wanted before dawn.

But fate wasn't cooperating. Despite deliberately avoiding the direction he'd "launched" The Prisoner, he turned a corner—and there was that familiar gleaming head.

The bald scalp caught the moonlight, shining like a faded red traffic light, telling Cheng Shi: road closed.

Cheng Shi's eyelid twitched. He turned to leave.

But The Prisoner didn't try to stop him. He just stood there, gazing up at the night sky, eyes glimmering, voice low:

"This is how Granny went too..."

"?"

'Granny?'

That single sentence rooted Cheng Shi's mid-turn body to the spot. His ears perked up like gossip radar.

He wasn't leaving anymore.

The Prisoner didn't look at Cheng Shi. He rubbed his head and gazed at the stars, as if some emotion had pulled him into memory.

"I was born a stutterer. Unwanted from the start."

"They didn't like me, so they dumped me with Granny and took my flawless little sister off to live somewhere else."

Hearing this, Cheng Shi blinked. So The Prisoner really did have a sister?

"Granny..."

The Prisoner paused here and let out a sudden laugh—though the emotions tangled in that laugh were too many for Cheng Shi to sort.

"...wasn't what you'd call a good person. Sharp-tongued, mean, petty, and held grudges. Like a villain grandmother straight out of a TV drama."

"But no matter how the world saw her, she was always the only decent character in my life."

"Neighbors, classmates, teachers, villagers, random passersby—every one of them mocked me and bullied me. But whenever they hit me or cursed me, only Granny would step up and curse them right back, one by one."

"She'd take my hand and march up to their doors, stand at the threshold, point at every family's lintel, and let them have it—never repeating the same insult twice. And when she really got going, even I caught some shrapnel."

"She'd yell at me for being spineless—for not daring to curse them back the way she did."

"I wanted to. But I couldn't get the words out. I couldn't learn how."

"She was formidable. She knew every family's dirty laundry. Whoever she targeted became the village's laughingstock for days."

"Eventually, people couldn't afford to cross her, and they went easier on me too."

"But I'd been insecure since childhood. I could never lift my head around others, and I spoke less and less."

"She berated me daily for having no spine—yet the second someone else laughed at me for it, she'd grab a broom and chase them down."

"But one time... that chase went wrong."

"She ran too fast and fell—right at our own doorstep."

"By the time I came home from school, she'd been lying there for hours."

"Hours..."

"Our house wasn't on some remote back lane. People passed by constantly. Yet not a single one was willing to help her up."

"By the time I got there, she was nearly gone."

"I wanted to run and get a doctor. That's when she stopped me."

"She said: 'It's too late.'"

"She knew karma would catch up. She wasn't afraid of that. She was only afraid that after she was gone, no one would curse people for me anymore."

"I tried to carry her to the clinic. She refused. Said she'd just insulted someone yesterday and didn't want to go there and take their spite."

"In her last breath, she scolded me one final time: 'You don't know how to make people hate you. What are you going to do?'"

"I wailed. I thought every person in that village was a murderer. I wanted to kill them all."

"Granny saw it in my eyes. She gripped my hand and said:"

""There are still more good people in this world. They're just not here..."

"And then she was gone."

"I carried Granny inside and cried for a day and a night. I cried until I passed out, then hunger woke me up."

"When I woke with my face pressed against Granny... I realized my stutter was gone."

"Granny had left me the thing she was most 'proud of.'"

"Of course I know what being 'unlucky' means. But aside from this, I don't know how else to face the world's cruelty."

"Because this is all she ever taught me."

In the dead-silent night, the sound of teardrops hitting the ground rang clear.

Cheng Shi turned to face The Prisoner, a storm of conflicting emotions written across his face. He pressed his lips together, unsure what to say.

He didn't know why he'd suddenly been drawn into a heart-to-heart. He hadn't known The Prisoner's past was this painful.

Everyone had their own struggles, it seemed. No matter how unlucky a person appeared, there were always memories too heavy to let go of.

Cheng Shi sighed. He knew Ji Yue's words today had stirred The Prisoner's memories. But this sadness ran too deep, too heavy—he wanted to steer away from it, to keep the grief from lingering.

So he pointed at the teardrops by The Prisoner's feet and smiled with a complicated expression: "Is that gasoline too?"

The Prisoner wiped his face clean and nodded firmly:

"Exactly—brother-in-law, you really get me!"

"Is that how they taught you at home too?"

"..."

'A Masterclass in Destroying the Mood in One Second and Successfully Making Everyone Think You're Cursed.'

Cheng Shi was genuinely laugh-crying. He jabbed his finger at The Prisoner, but in the end couldn't bring himself to say anything harsh.

'After hearing his story, cursing him feels... wrong?'

'Wait—could this have been the Silence follower's plan all along?'

'I actually fell for that?!'

Cheng Shi's expression cycled through several phases before he exhaled:

"Show some mercy with that mouth of yours, Prisoner. For your granny's sake."

"But Granny never showed mercy with hers."

"..."

'If I respond to one more thing this guy says, I'm the idiot.'

Cheng Shi's face darkened and he turned on his heel.

The Prisoner didn't stop him. Only after Cheng Shi had gone far down the road did he rub his head and muse:

"Why didn't it work?"

"It works perfectly on Qin Xin and Li Jingming."

He crouched down, pulled out a match, struck it, and lit the "teardrop" at his feet.

Watching the tiny flame rise beside his shoe, The Prisoner said to himself in a strange tone:

"Granny, your tricks don't always work either."

"Sigh. Still need to practice. Still need to improve."

As the flame burned through its fuel and slowly died, The Prisoner stood and started walking back toward Ji Yue. He looked up at the sky as he went, eyes finding the brightest star in the night.

He smiled:

"In a world where evil outweighs good, who says death isn't a release?"

Chapter 1152: The Statue's Ravings

"He left?"

Ji Yue was already half sitting up in bed, smiling at The Prisoner as he pushed through the door.

The Prisoner nodded, dragged a chair over, sat by the bedside, and stared unblinkingly at Ji Yue—stared until her skin crawled.

In that moment, she remembered what Cheng Shi had said:

"Don't forget—this man is one of your Torchbearers. Still laughing?"

'Not funny at all!'

The smile froze solid on her face.

But she couldn't stay frozen forever. Unable to bear that guileless stare any longer, she looked away and changed the subject:

"Why did you join the Torchbearers?"

Torchbearers seemed to have a natural reservoir of conversation topics—beauty, dreams, purpose... When you thought about it, Ji Yue's pivot wasn't exactly abrupt. Two Torchbearers who'd just acknowledged each other really should understand each other's will to carry the flame.

The Prisoner blinked, fell silent for a moment, then said with absolute seriousness:

"Granny said the world had more good people than bad. But I never found them. So I figured the world was wrong, and I needed to fix it."

"..."

Ji Yue hadn't expected such a reason. She stared at The Prisoner in surprise, and before long, a smile blossomed across her face:

"So that's the kind of beauty you want to protect. Not bad at all."

"Qin Xin's eye for people is as sharp as ever."

Whenever the topic turned to the torch, The Prisoner actually dialed it down. He laughed awkwardly, rubbed his head, and said:

"And you? What's your reason?"

"My reason..."

Ji Yue's eyes went hazy for an instant. She shook her head:

"Honestly, it was an accident."

"Fang Shiqing—the City Defenders' Fire Seeker—let something slip during a trial, and I accidentally learned about the Torchbearers."

"She probably figured I wasn't a bad person, so she invited me."

"Logically, with my temper, someone as gentle and calm as Shiqing would never have been able to convince me. But there was a fire burning inside me. I always felt like some impassioned speech had persuaded me, pushing me onto the path of passing the torch."

"But whenever I tried to recall and savor it, it would vanish."

"So I assumed it was fate, guiding me from the shadows."

"But today... I dreamed of chaotic fragments again. Those fractured images suggested that impassioned speech really did happen at some point... which is why I'm confused now."

"Though even without any grand speech, I believe in what the Torchbearers are doing."

"When Fang Jue and I founded the Mutual Aid Society, I said it then: the harder and more dangerous things get, the more people need to stick together."

"Too many have already lost themselves in pointless faith and misplaced devotion. But those gods sitting high above... they don't necessarily see us as people."

"And if that's the case, then humanity must stand up for itself!"

"I refuse to grovel as a worm. So I said yes to Shiqing and joined the torch."

"Even if taking that step only transforms a worm into a moth, I'll accept it."

"Because there cannot be no fire in my life!"

Clap clap clap!

The Prisoner actually started applauding. Ignoring Ji Yue's embarrassment, he said admiringly: "Is that why you chose War?"

Ji Yue's expression froze. She turned away: "That was also an accident."

"Another accident?"

"Lots of variables in your destiny, huh." The Prisoner clicked his tongue. "Do you think our next plan will have any accidents too?"

"...I'm not a Fate follower."

"But the plan you're talking about... what plan?"

The Prisoner sat up straight:

"The Find Yu Xi Plan!"

"You must've heard the news about Yu Xi by now. Since we know His position, we should be reaching out even more proactively!"

"My brother-in-law responds to soft approaches, not hard ones, and he's the linchpin of this whole plan. So to get his help, we need to make him owe us another favor."

"When can you recover? Once you're back on your feet, I'll take you to settle the score!"

"Kill the Historian and the Scavenger?"

"Not just those two—every clueless Oblivion follower too! This time we keep killing until my brother-in-law agrees!"

"..." Ji Yue studied The Prisoner with a strange look for a long moment. "I assumed you were a City Defender. I never expected you'd be a City Builder too?"

The Prisoner thought about it, then shook his head:

"No, I think I'm a Cheng Shipper. He and my sister are just too perfect together."

"..."

...

By the time Cheng Shi returned to the statue, the night sky was already fading.

The town streets in the hour before dawn were at their most deserted. Even the patrols had thinned. Not a soul was in sight, giving him room to work freely.

Cheng Shi tapped and prodded around the statue, growing more certain it was hollow. Something was definitely hidden inside.

His earlier reconnaissance had already revealed the statue's properties. Despite being a stone sculpture, it was impervious to force, immune to fire and water, and beyond the reach of the void. No ordinary person could break through, let alone peer inside.

But Cheng Shi wasn't ordinary. He'd thought of a method.

Since the statue's eyeballs could move, there had to be a gap between the eyeball and the socket. If he could squeeze a die into that gap, he could use his talent to swap himself inside.

So Cheng Shi climbed to the statue's peak, hung from the eye socket, and after some groping around, actually found a small hole worn into the socket's seam—apparently from years of erosion.

And that hole just happened to be big enough for a single die!

Overjoyed, Cheng Shi tossed in a handful of dice for insurance. But when he activated his skill—nothing happened. He was still hanging outside.

"?"

This only strengthened his conviction: the statue possessed some mysterious force that severed all divine power.

What now?

He dropped from the statue and frowned in thought. Dawn's glow was already creeping over the mountains. If he couldn't figure something out, he'd have to wait until the next night—but with Mo Shu and Zhao Xishi lurking nearby, anything could change by then. He didn't want to wait.

After a moment's deliberation, Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow and produced from his personal storage a... shovel.

He was going to abandon all power and dig his way in using nothing but human muscle!

He could touch it. He could stuff dice into it. That meant the statue didn't reject all contact—it likely only blocked divine power. So if he willingly forfeited his powers, wouldn't that open a path inside?!

No sooner planned than done. Cheng Shi eyed the direction of the coming dawn, pried up the first paving stone from the plaza in the statue's shadow, then spun his arms like windmills, racing against the rising sun.

Perhaps the people of Redi Core had never imagined someone would come to undermine their statue's foundations—and that this someone would be remarkably efficient at it.

In no time at all, Cheng Shi had excavated a "coffin camp" beneath the statue.

Only this time, the coffin camp wasn't the underground shelter players built against danger. There was literally a coffin down here!

Cheng Shi had dug into the tomb of the so-called first Fool Hunter, buried beneath the statue.

Seeing a coffin under a statue would make anyone nervous—that was just human nature. But Cheng Shi had seen enough in his day. He fought down the urge to retreat and gently tapped the coffin wall with his shovel.

And then he understood what the statue's ravings truly were.

"Save... save me..."

"!?!?"

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted. He vanished from the spot in an instant.

Chapter 1153: The First Fool Hunter's Secret

He hadn't been dragged inside—he'd retreated a full two li.

For a player of the cautious persuasion, willingly answering a creepy call from inside a coffin was absolutely unacceptable. Who knew what lurked in there?

For a moment, he even considered going back for his tool—his designated errand-runner—to scout ahead. But then he remembered that the only tool available this round was The Prisoner...

Forget it. Whatever was in that coffin couldn't possibly be more "dangerous" than The Prisoner.

After all, this was a Torchbearer who wanted to set himself on fire.

So Cheng Shi changed tack. After a moment's thought, he crept into a few nearby houses in the pre-dawn darkness, selected several lucky winners, woke them up, and dropped them into the hole.

Folly's followers weren't stupid. Any of them could see that this villain who'd interrupted their beauty sleep was after the statue's secret!

This criminal had dared to dig up the statue's foundation, desecrating their faith's purity! Someone like this deserved to be hacked to pieces at the statue's foot—punished and executed!

And so, the enraged Folly followers raised their scalpels, glared viciously at the instigator before them, and brought their blades down again and again on...

Themselves.

They hacked themselves to pieces.

Simple reason: they weren't idiots.

Between punishment and death, the former was clearly the wiser choice.

They could only accept punishment—willingly, at that—because they knew that satisfying this villain's twisted desires was their only chance at survival.

And so, in the hour before dawn, the brilliantly wise little town of Redi Core staged a rather unwise spectacle.

Every time Cheng Shi let out a contemptuous snort, the Folly followers' fury deepened. The angrier they became, the more viciously they carved into their own flesh. But watching their "cleverly calculated" "foolish acts," Cheng Shi sneered again with even greater disdain.

A vicious cycle between Deceit and Folly was born.

Of course, for Cheng Shi, it wasn't really vicious—because just as these Folly followers' wounds deepened, something miraculous happened!

Wisps of red light seeped from their wounds, formed into threads, and burrowed toward the coffin beneath the statue's feet. The coffin trembled slightly, emitting the faint sounds of greedy sucking.

Cheng Shi was stunned. But even more shocked were the self-mutilating Folly followers. Horror and disbelief painted their faces as they stared at the coffin:

"This is impossible! We're not sinners—how can the statue be draining our primal folly?!"

"I've been careful my whole life! When did I ever commit the crime of Knowing Folly?!"

"No, this isn't real. This is a hallucination! I'm still dreaming—hahaha, I get it now, I haven't woken up! This is just a nightmare!" Saying this, the man plunged his scalpel into his own heart, snarling: "I'm about to wake up. I can't commit... Knowing Folly... in a dream..."

He died.

After death, the red light pouring from his wounds blazed even brighter, flowing in rivulets straight into the coffin.

Cheng Shi retreated half a step cautiously, then pointed his shovel at one of the survivors on the ground:

"What is the 'primal folly'?"

The man still couldn't believe what he was seeing. His expression crumbling, he explained:

"In Redi Core, not everyone guilty of Knowing Folly carries true foolishness. Some merely committed folly on impulse. When those sinners are punished, the statue gives no response."

"But there exists a type of person with absolute foolishness. When they're punished, their foolishness is flayed out of them, and the Fool-Hunting Statue, sensing the primal folly, absorbs it—keeping foolishness from remaining in the world."

"That red light was clearly primal folly. But we've never even committed Knowing Folly—on what grounds are we being judged as possessing it?!"

"This only happens a few times a year in all of Redi Core's history! Why us?!"

'So that's how it works?'

Cheng Shi blinked. 'Surely it can't be that coincidental—that every random person I grabbed is an absolute fool?'

'Something's not right!'

The red light didn't look like "foolishness" at all. It looked more like blood essence.

And after absorbing so much blood essence, the voice from inside the coffin grew slightly more solid.

"More... I need more blood..."

'It IS blood!'

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted. He suddenly suspected that what was buried inside the coffin wasn't the first Fool Hunter's actual corpse—but some sealed abomination!

The Folly followers had clearly realized this too. Terror gripped them as they felt the most sacred pillar of Redi Core's faith had been trampled!

What on earth was hiding in there?!

Cheng Shi narrowed his eyes, mind spinning. He didn't ask why and didn't agree—just spoke two words to the coffin: "Beg me."

"?"

The surviving Folly followers froze, turning to stare at this villain, thinking: 'Of course his desires are twisted. Even now he's getting off on his power trip.'

But what shocked them even more was that the coffin actually responded.

"Please... more..."

"..."

'No wonder this coffin keeps trembling. It's genuinely trembling...'

The scene fell silent.

Cheng Shi arched an eyebrow. The fact that this thing would beg and grovel to survive meant the being sealed inside couldn't be that high in status. At the very least, the gods on high would never utter such words.

'Not a god. Good.'

Somewhat relieved, Cheng Shi pressed: "Who are you?"

The coffin paused. When the voice came again, it was even weaker.

"I am... Skart."

"!!!"

Before Cheng Shi could react, the Folly followers in front of him lost it.

"Impossible! Lord Skart can't possibly still be alive!"

"My ancestor personally confirmed Lord Skart's death and buried him with his own hands! How can you be him?!"

"This has to be a monster! A blasphemous abomination!"

"I understand now—you're not the villain! The real villain is the monster in the coffin!"

"You came to expose it, didn't you? You woke us up and used our blood to awaken this monster—all so you could drag this thing that tramples our faith and honor into the sunlight, reveal it to the people! Isn't that right?!"

In an instant, the Folly followers' eyes shone with hope as they gazed at Cheng Shi. In that moment, they seemed to forget that one of their own had died beside them.

Then again, perhaps they'd convinced themselves—after all, revelation always demands sacrifice.

But Cheng Shi had no time for theatrics. He scoffed:

"Wrong."

"..."

They collapsed back to the ground, hope giving way to despair.

Cheng Shi ignored them and addressed the coffin: "Who are you really? Last chance. Tell the truth and you'll get blood."

Master of Deception hadn't activated due to the statue's interference, so Cheng Shi couldn't tell whether "Skart" was a disguise or had some other purpose. But the coffin held firm—only weaker this time.

"I... really... am... Skart..."

"Then why are you still alive?"

"Or did the power of faith resurrect you?"

"No, that doesn't work either. Your blood-drinking behavior doesn't look like Folly's blessing. Who ARE you?!"

"..."

The coffin went silent. It seemed to have run out of strength.

Cheng Shi frowned, hauled up one of the lucky winners at his feet, and ended the man's suffering.

A trickle of red light fed into the coffin again. Ragged, gasping sounds returned.

"More... too little..."

'You're getting picky now?'

Cheng Shi's lip twitched. He kicked the coffin:

"Answer my questions, and you'll have an endless supply of blood. Otherwise... dawn's coming. I'll fill this hole back in, and whether you see me again depends on my mood tomorrow night."

"Or maybe this is your only chance."

"Perhaps once the sun comes up, I'll report everything here to the Folly Prohibition Office. Under the zealotry of their faith's judgment—do you think you can stay hidden?"

"..."

The coffin fell silent. After a long pause, it whispered:

"I am Skart... but I was never a Fool Hunter..."

"Because I was a Scarlet Hunter..."

"I was a follower... of Death..."

"!!!?"

'Wait—WHAT?!'

Chapter 1154: Misrecognition, or Foolish Act?

"Utter nonsense!"

As it turned out, Folly's followers were genuinely devout. Even at this point, the survivors had the nerve to curse the thing in the coffin.

They shouted abuse and kicked and punched the coffin.

"This is Folly's sacred ground! The place where our Lord bestows His blessings! How dare a foul demon spew such lies!"

"Lord Skart was the greatest Fool Hunter in history! After his death, even our Benefactor acknowledged his status and let him act as proxy to purge the world of folly!"

"He CANNOT possibly be a Death follower!"

"I understand now! I know what you are!"

"You must be the incarnation of foolishness—a projection of the world's absolute folly!"

"Lord Skart sealed you here to ensure no folly remains in this world!"

"Great Lord Skart, you succeeded! What you sealed was indeed the most foolish creature in existence!"

"..."

The outburst silenced both Cheng Shi and the coffin.

After a moment's contemplation, Cheng Shi raised his blade and dispatched them all in quick succession. As bodies thudded to the ground, wisps of red light streamed into the coffin. But even after feeding it this many people, the "Skart" inside still sounded feeble.

"I'm not foolishness... The truly foolish ones... are those Folly followers..."

"?"

'Do tell!'

Cheng Shi caught the scent of prime gossip. His expression sharpened as he silently assessed the situation.

Regardless of what was inside, he'd already planned his response:

If the "Skart" in the coffin was telling the truth, then a hidden history lay within. And against a being that was merely "human," he likely had a fighting chance.

But if the coffin actually imprisoned some demon or embodiment of absolute folly, and he accidentally released it—well, he'd simply divert the disaster straight to Mo Shu's doorstep.

That way, he might still play the fisherman reaping rewards while others fought in muddy waters.

With that reasoning, Cheng Shi took the gamble.

He sliced a small cut on his arm with a scalpel, letting blood drip down and condense into blood essence, which the coffin eagerly captured.

At first, the coffin absorbed slowly. But when it discovered this particular supply seemed inexhaustible, it accelerated.

Cheng Shi merely frowned slightly—no real reaction.

Blood essence was just another expression of vitality. Under the protection of his Vitality authority, sustained damage was the least of his concerns. The coffin could gorge itself to bursting and still never drain him dry.

What he hadn't anticipated was that the coffin nearly did burst.

Like rain after a drought, the "Skart" who'd starved for who-knows-how-many years finally had a feast. He guzzled Cheng Shi's blood essence with reckless abandon. Before long, retching sounds echoed from inside.

Years of atrophy had left him unable to handle the sudden richness, producing vertigo and nausea.

Hearing the genuinely unforced vomiting, Cheng Shi finally accepted that whoever was in there did sound like a Scarlet Hunter.

The retching didn't last long. Soon the coffin settled. Dawn light was already reaching the mountain peaks—time was running out. Cheng Shi frowned and was about to press for answers when the sated "Skart" pulled himself together and spilled everything at once.

"I really am Skart—the one Redi Core's history calls the first 'Fool Hunter.'"

"But I wasn't lying. I was never a Fool Hunter. I was a genuine, authentic, devout—well, not that devout—Scarlet Hunter!"

"It's a long story. Could you, or rather, could You perhaps—"

"Then make it short."

"...Very well. You've shown me a chance at escape. I'll answer every question you have."

"I was originally a hunter from a Death tribe in the surface-dwelling Nature Alliance. Truth followers fleeing the Civilization Lonely Tower's pursuers passed through our tribe and were spotted by Folly believers. Fighting broke out."

"Seeing a once-in-a-century opportunity, our entire tribe deployed, hoping to seize the chance to seek an audience with our Benefactor."

"But I... was still young. I hadn't yet grasped the value of drawing closer to my Benefactor. So I panicked. I ran."

"But it's not exactly easy to flee a battlefield saturated with large-scale magical attacks. I was hit by a Folly spell, hurled into the void, spat out by the current, and crash-landed on Folly's territory."

"Lucky me—at least I wasn't killed on impact. I landed on a Folly follower."

"The first thing I did was endure the pain and ask him where I was. But I'd... crushed him to death."

"While I stood there dazed and lost, an entire squad of Folly believers rounded the low hill ahead."

"They were a reserve force of the Civilization Lonely Tower. Seeing a foreigner who'd killed one of their own on Folly's home turf, they moved to execute me on the spot."

"But I didn't want to die. Driven by desperation, I argued and babbled. I remembered my tribespeople once telling me that Folly prized wisdom above all and despised foolishness. So I said: this man's death wasn't unjust. If he were truly smart, he wouldn't have been crushed to death by me."

"He died—therefore he was foolish. And the foolish deserve to die."

"I don't know which words got through to them, but they stopped attacking. They looked at the bow in my hands, began to cheer, and hailed me as the 'Fool Hunter.'"

"From that moment, I—Skart, a Scarlet Hunter from the Nature Alliance's Death tribe—became the first Fool Hunter, celebrated across the Civilization Lonely Tower..."

"And to survive, I had no choice but to fake my faith and pretend to be a Folly devotee who hunted foolishness in Folly's name..."

"That's the whole story. I know it sounds absurd, but I haven't told a single lie. Can You find a way to get me out?"

"..."

Cheng Shi was dumbfounded.

'Are you telling me that the Folly hunter class "Fool Hunter" actually originated from a national case of mass misidentification?!

'What is this—to hunt the foolish, one must first be foolish?'

'Yeah. That's very Folly.'

But Cheng Shi wasn't in a rush. He frowned and asked: "Then why are you sealed in the coffin? Did they find you out?"

"...This isn't a seal."

"I was originally a Death follower. Blasphemy against my faith distanced me from death itself. For decades I didn't die—but Folly's followers don't live forever. They age and pass on. If I kept living, I'd become undeniable heresy."

"So I devised an exit strategy."

"After decades building my reputation, I had plenty of power. I staged a fake death, planning to escape this blind, foolish land once I was buried."

"But..."

"I never imagined their devotion to me would be so fanatical. The day after my burial, they worked through the night to build a divine throne above my grave—trapping me inside this coffin!!"

"To make my fake death convincing, I'd already weakened myself to the brink. With the statue pressing directly on the coffin, I couldn't break free!"

At this point, Skart's voice dripped with grievance.

Even though centuries had passed, he spoke about it as though it had happened yesterday.

"I was trapped like this for over ten days. Without food or water, I could practically see the end of my life. Just when I thought my Benefactor had finally forgiven my betrayal and was summoning me..."

"A turning point appeared."

"In my honor, the people of Redi Core held a Knowing Folly lashing ceremony at my statue's foot."

"The blood essence leaking from the sinners' bodies gave me hope for survival. I sipped it through the coffin's cracks—just barely enough to cling to life. But I didn't dare take too much, terrified that these 'smart' people would notice something. So I could only sip here and there... and survive until now."

"..."

Cheng Shi paused, then shook his head with an incredulous laugh: "Your blood-drinking was mistaken for Folly's proxy power—a divine gift of purging foolishness. And your cries for help were heard as the statue's ravings!"

"More or less..."

"No wonder only drunks heard the statue's ravings."

"With how cowardly you are, how would you dare openly deceive a sober Folly follower?!"

"Your plan wasn't bad, I'll give you that."

"Too bad you're a bit stupid."

"Then again, you're not the only foolish one here. Otherwise, how would you have survived this long?"

"But I still have one question. If everything is fake, then what exactly was the so-called divine gift that Koshna received?"

Chapter 1155: The Divine Gift Is a Pair of Eyes

"A pair of eyes."

"!!!?"

Cheng Shi's whole body jolted. The words flew out: "The Eye of Mockery?"

Skart in the coffin paused, confused:

"What's that?"

"I don't know any Eye of Mockery. All I know is that what I threw out... was my own eyes."

"Huh?"

Cheng Shi blinked, not processing: "Your eyes?"

"You gouged out your own eyes and threw them out?"

"But you've been trapped in this coffin clinging to life for ages—how did you manage to throw your eyes outside?"

"If you could throw out your own eyes, then couldn't you just dig—"

He stopped midsentence. Because he remembered the small hole in the statue's eye socket—the one that looked worn through by years of friction. So the one who made that hole was Skart?

"I have been digging. But that's all I could manage."

"I knew that passively drinking blood wasn't safe, so every time I regained some strength I'd let a little of my own blood, tear strips from my burial shroud, harden them with blood, and use them as tools to chisel the coffin."

"As a Scarlet Hunter, blood is second nature to me. Blood-soaked cloth becomes hard as iron. But to avoid alerting the Folly believers outside, I could only absorb tiny amounts of blood essence each time, limiting my digging to brief sessions."

"Time, however, I had in abundance. So over the span of a century, every time I woke I'd chisel a little more—until I bored a small hole through the coffin and followed the statue's only ventilation shaft to drill a gap through the statue's eye."

"Then I spent several more centuries accumulating Folly's power of faith, wrapping my eyeballs in it to preserve their vitality."

"That way, once I threw my eyes out, I could reverse the blood-absorption process—feeding on my own blood through the eyes—and use them as a foundation to rebuild my body."

"Even if the reborn shell would be weak, at least I'd be free."

"And so, after preparing for heaven knows how long, the opportunity finally came."

"I sensed someone approaching outside, investigating my sounds. I knew they'd leave soon and clear the area to prevent drunks from defiling the statue in their stupor."

"So the moment I heard silence outside, I executed my plan and threw out my eyes..."

"But you didn't realize Koshna hadn't left—he'd just fallen asleep." Cheng Shi's expression was priceless—torn between laughing and crying.

"...Yes."

Who could've imagined that Skart's escape plan, centuries in the making, would be foiled by a modern-day hangover?

Koshna, investigating the statue ravings incident, had drunk wine to replicate the conditions. But he couldn't hold his liquor and fell asleep during his worship. Skart, thinking the coast was finally clear, launched his eyes.

Then Koshna woke from his nap, mistook the thing for a divine gift, and carried it away.

Without sensing his own blood essence, Skart's eyes couldn't rebuild his body. He'd failed—and lost his eyes in the process.

And Koshna receiving the "gift" had been witnessed by Kandert, who then orchestrated a Knowing Folly case to get at Koshna and stole the dead man's eyes.

But Kandert's actions were in turn discovered by Max, leading to everything that had unfolded in this trial...

From the moment Skart entered the coffin—no, from the moment he crash-landed on this soil—Redi Core's chain of foolish acts had never once been broken.

The shame of it was: the so-called divine gift was no divine gift at all. Just a pair of Scarlet Hunter eyeballs.

Did this mean the trail to the Eye of Mockery had gone cold?

No—not necessarily.

After all, the Eye of Mockery was part of that mask, making it one of Deceit's "creations." Whether or not it was Folly's divine gift didn't matter. What mattered was whether it carried Deceit's comedic gene.

And as it stood, these eyes—even originating from a Death follower—were absolutely hilarious.

So he couldn't rule out the possibility that Skart's discarded eyes were the Eye of Mockery.

One question remained, however: even if Kandert had witnessed Koshna receiving the "gift," what made him certain the divine gift was hidden in Koshna's eyes?

Unless he'd actually watched those gifted eyes merge with Koshna's. Otherwise...

Thinking of this, Cheng Shi frowned and asked:

"If someone else picked up your eyes, how would they maintain their vitality?"

"I refuse to believe that a plan centuries in the making had zero contingencies. Tell me. This is the last question. Answer it, and I'll bring you back to the light."

The coffin fell silent for a moment—an internal struggle. But in the end, the desire for freedom overwhelmed everything, and Skart yielded:

"There was a contingency..."

"If the eyes were unfortunately picked up by someone else, and that person had any wound on their body, the eyes would burrow inside like a parasite and fuse with that person's own eyes to preserve themselves."

"But that's all they can do. In my weakened state, I couldn't arrange anything more. I could only hope that someday, after escaping, I'd track down my eyes through the connection."

"But I know that's unlikely. The faith force sustaining them comes from Folly, and I'm not a true Folly believer. Once they're away from me for too long—no, not even a few days—they'll probably stop being mine..."

"Eye of Mockery?"

"Nice name. Eyes that return to folly—what else would you call them but the Eye of Mockery?"

"..."

Cheng Shi pursed his lips, thinking: 'The Eye of Mockery I'm talking about isn't Folly's contemptuous gaze.'

Still, the eyes Skart had lost matched every known characteristic of the Eye of Mockery. To avoid dismissing a lead through premature judgment, Cheng Shi decided he still needed to search.

The question was: where exactly had Kandert hidden these eyes?

'Could they be in his own eyes?'

"If the eyes have already fused with one person, could they fuse with a second person's eyes?"

As he spoke, Cheng Shi produced Kandert's corpse from the Molten Coffin.

The coffin-bound Skart considered briefly: "Of course. Think of my eyes as the most primitive lifeform possible—no intelligence, just survival instinct. To stay alive, their only option is to parasitize..."

"Then check whether this body has your eyes."

"..."

A long silence. Then Skart sighed: "Setting aside the fact that I have no vision right now... You haven't let me out. With the coffin lid between us, I can't see anything."

'Oh right, forgot about that.'

Cheng Shi laughed awkwardly, glanced at the sky outside, stowed the corpse, and said with a half-smile to the coffin:

"Then come on out."

"...I'll need Your assistance for that."

"Tch—"

"I think not."

"When you were weak, you managed to chisel through this coffin with nothing but bloody rags. Now that you're well fed, don't tell me you suddenly can't?"

"You keep insisting I do the work. Is it because you're trying to provoke me—make me feel resistant or concerned so I leave?"

"After I leave and there's no more external threat, you can just break out on your own, right?"

"Nice little scheme."

"Too bad for you—you've run into the big scheme."

"Come out!"

"I'm counting to three. If I don't see your head, don't blame me for sending you to meet your Benefactor."

"THREE!"

"!!!?"

BOOM—

Chapter 1156: Hurry—Don't Keep Him Waiting

A thunderclap split the air, and dawn broke over Redi Core.

Balf jolted awake at the commotion outside, hands shooting to his neck.

Drenched in cold sweat, he sat up and found no wound on his throat. He was actually alive.

'But didn't I die at that villain's hand?'

'How am I still alive?'

'Was it just a nightmare?'

He scrambled to his feet, examined every inch of his body, checked the mirror again and again—not a single wound. Every cut he'd made with his own scalpel had vanished without a trace.

"Phew—"

"It really was just a dream!"

"But it felt so real."

Balf was overjoyed. Basking in the ecstasy of "rebirth," he cheered aloud, then pressed himself against the window to see what all the ruckus outside was about.

After a bit of asking around, he learned that a bolt of dry lightning at dawn had shattered the ground at the statue's feet, exposing Lord Skart's tomb.

A chill ran through him. Without bothering to dress properly, he bolted outside toward the gathering crowd.

Four or five others had rushed out in equally disheveled states—exactly matching the number of lucky winners Cheng Shi had chosen.

They pushed through the crowd to the front row. As the Folly Prohibition Office guards cleared the blast site and maintained order to protect the slumbering soul beneath the statue, each of them wore a peculiar expression, eyes darting nervously.

Before long, they noticed one another. When their gazes met in pairs, their hearts lurched in unison—the realization that their earlier experience wasn't just a pre-dawn nightmare but something that had actually happened.

They just couldn't explain what had happened to them. Or why the villain had brought them back to life.

But as long as they were alive, nothing else mattered.

One by one, they kept their mouths shut. Even upon seeing the coffin's corner blown apart with no body inside, they said nothing. When the guards questioned them, they shook their heads and claimed they were just there for the spectacle.

As for where Lord Skart's remains had gone...

If lightning could shatter the ground, it could certainly reduce a body to ash. And the mountain wind would carry the ash away. So naturally, nothing remained in the coffin.

What was so hard to understand about that?

...

The Eye of Mockery's trail hadn't gone cold yet. Cheng Shi still needed to stay in Redi Core and investigate, which was why he'd staged this whole scene.

Of course, the lightning hadn't actually targeted Skart. He'd simply run out of time to refill the hole he'd dug, so he faked a lightning strike instead.

But the cowardly Skart, having felt the thunderbolt's fury a hair's breadth away, was markedly more obedient now. He crawled out of the damaged coffin and followed Cheng Shi away from the plaza without a word of protest.

His face, though, was a picture of lingering dread the entire way.

Cheng Shi paid him no mind. While the Folly Prohibition Office guards were all out maintaining order at the statue, he brought the blind Skart back to the office and had him feel Koshna's corpse to search for the missing eyes.

Skart, expression odd, groped the body for a long while before shaking his head.

Seeing this, Cheng Shi sighed. Of course—once the Fun God was involved, nothing was ever simple.

With the trail cold again, Cheng Shi reluctantly turned to Brother Mouth. He wanted to know if the Eye of Mockery had any other distinguishing features besides being removable.

For once, the Fool's Lips didn't stay silent—though their words were harsh as ever.

"A clown truly earns his keep by acting stupid for the audience's amusement. And in that regard, you've reached the absolute pinnacle."

"..."

'You've also reached the pinnacle of insults, Brother Mouth...'

Cheng Shi went numb.

'If you don't want to tell me, fine—but why the personal attack? What did clowns ever do to you?'

'And aren't you a clown yourself?'

'Past life or present, you've always been a clown's mouth.'

He didn't dare snap back. After all, he'd need Brother Mouth's help going forward. But Brother Mouth never said anything without purpose. Had he really overlooked something? Did the Eye of Mockery have some obvious feature he'd missed?

Cheng Shi sank deep into thought.

Beside him, Skart didn't dare interrupt. He stood obediently to the side, "eyes" fixed straight ahead, carefully avoiding "looking" at this terrifying lord, lest he provoke another thunderbolt.

Cheng Shi ruminated for a long time. Nothing. Frustrated, he turned to Skart:

"Have you ever thought about meeting your Benefactor? The one on the Bone Throne?"

The question scared Skart half to death. He dropped to his knees, prostrating himself:

"Please spare me, my lord! Please!"

"Yes—I'm a coward, I deserve to die, I desecrated my own faith! But I've been desecrating it for centuries now, which means I've lost all right to an audience with Him!"

"I can't sully His temple with my filthy, faithless presence! I can't dirty His eyes and ears! I'm not worthy! Just let me rot in the mortal world! Let me suffer every worldly torment, forever cast aside by my Benefactor in contempt!"

"..."

'Good lord, are you making birthday wishes over here?'

'Nice try. Being cast aside by that lord in contempt is basically immortality.'

'I'd like some immortality too. The question is, does that lord actually get to decide?'

Cheng Shi rolled his eyes and said flatly:

"I see. So you just don't want to dirty His eyes and ears—but it's not that you don't want to see Him. Right?"

"I..." Skart stammered, tears and snot streaming. "Can I possibly not want to?"

Cheng Shi grinned:

"No wonder you were the first 'Fool Hunter.' You really are clever."

"No, you can't."

"I want you to want to, so you have to want to."

"Let's go, blasphemer. Let's see what that lord thinks of you."

With that, Cheng Shi plunged a blade into Skart's heart and began to pray in place:

"Soul sleeps in peace, life comes to an end."

"Great God of Death, your most devoted employee has been so busy with work lately that he hasn't reported in. The guilt has been unbearable. Today, there happen to be some matters I'd like to report to You. Might You have a moment to spare?"

An ordinary sacrifice couldn't reach the Fishbone Hall directly. Cheng Shi's confidence in speaking to that lord came from the fact that upon entering the Folly Prohibition Office, he had secretly struck his Bone Bell.

In other words, everything he'd done was happening right under that lord's watchful gaze!

That was why Cheng Shi felt so relaxed.

Of course, he wasn't doing this to show the lord a disloyal follower. Skart wasn't important enough to warrant a god's judgment of his devotion.

The real reason Cheng Shi wanted to see that lord was an entirely different plan.

But to his surprise, this "deeply moving" "heartfelt appeal" received no response whatsoever. The body slid off his blade and crumpled to the floor. Apart from the dripping of blood, total silence.

Cheng Shi was dumbstruck.

'Is the boss not home?'

'That can't be right. Even if He's not in the Fishbone Hall, He can't possibly not hear my call.'

'Unless... to avoid suspicion, He can't respond to prayers within the Bone Bell's coverage area?'

'Oh no. Then this was all pointless?'

Just as Cheng Shi stood there in stunned blankness, Skart's corpse at his feet popped open like a jack-in-the-box—BANG—exploding into countless chattering little skulls. They jabbered and clattered, assembling before Cheng Shi's eyes into a Bone Gate, and cried out in unison:

"Hurry! Faster! Don't keep Him waiting!"

Cheng Shi was overjoyed. He stepped through without hesitation.

"Coming, coming! My lord—your top sales champion is here to report!"

Chapter 1157: The Top Salesman's Performance Review

The Fishbone Hall was unusually quiet today.

Within the torrent of white bone, countless little skulls watched Cheng Shi's arrival with varying expressions, not uttering a word—as though a storm were brewing.

Cheng Shi was startled too. He thought perhaps the boss wasn't pleased about him using the Bone Bell to make contact, because all his earlier elation had vanished, replaced entirely by unease.

Naturally, you couldn't read unease on a tiny skull—but you could read pure death energy.

And that death energy came not just from Cheng Shi, but from another little skull: Skart.

Although his corpse had exploded into the Bone Gate, Death had still pulled him in. But Skart had never seen anything like this. The instant he materialized on the steps of the Fishbone Hall, he shuddered head to toe, rolled himself off the path and into the bone torrent, and found the spot where he belonged.

With his companion gone, Cheng Shi felt the atmosphere grow stranger by the second. He carefully hopped his way up to the Bone Throne, craned his skull upward at the massive cranium above—its eye sockets devoid of even a flicker of green flame—and wondered: 'What is He thinking?'

'Surely He's not thinking about how to punish me?'

'He wouldn't. I'm an exemplary employee. Even without a bonus, punishment doesn't apply!'

His gut told him this wasn't the time for flattery. He didn't dare disturb that lord's contemplation, so he simply stood quietly beneath the Bone Throne and waited.

It was as good a time as any to organize his thoughts and the pitch he'd prepared for the boss.

But the wait stretched on, indeterminate.

Not until the massive skull emitted a resonant hum did Cheng Shi snap back to attention.

"You... came here... to seek... an audience... or to... take shelter... from the trial... and slack off?"

"You have... been here... for so long... without uttering... a single word."

"?????"

Cheng Shi was dumbfounded. He jerked his head toward the lord, his hollow eye sockets radiating shock.

"My lord, weren't You deep in thought?"

"I didn't want to interrupt Your contemplation!"

"Who... told you... We... were thinking?"

"..."

'Nobody, technically. But...'

"...You were completely still. I assumed the trivial matters of the universe had caught Your attention, preventing You from looking down upon this humble employee."

A wisp of green flame ignited in the massive skull's eye, and it huffed heavily:

"Since you... set foot... in this hall... We have been... watching you."

"Yet you... ignored this completely... and sat there... lost in your own... thoughts."

"Cheng... Shi."

"Do you... treat this... as your... Void... domain?!"

'Oh no, the boss is angry!'

Cheng Shi's heart clenched, but outwardly he remained calm. Steeling himself, he nodded:

"My lord, as a Void walker, the Void is indeed my home."

"But this place—this is my home too!"

"Home is home. So You speak correctly—if I may be so bold—though I am but a mortal, I truly do think of this place as home."

At these words, the bone torrent in the Fishbone Hall surged once, then each skull settled back into place. Silence returned.

Cheng Shi ducked his head, thinking he'd played the wrong emotional card. But from an angle he couldn't see, the massive skull actually contorted into an expression of extreme distaste—before reverting to its cold mask:

"Your... silver tongue... is the spitting image... of your... wretched... Benefactor's."

"Speak... why... have you come?"

"?"

'Did I pass?'

Cheng Shi brightened and looked up again:

"Well... Esteemed Lord, besides returning a wayward follower to the fold, I do have something else."

"But I'm not quite sure how to put it."

"Then... don't." The massive skull hummed.

"?"

'That won't do!'

Cheng Shi had a creeping suspicion the boss found him annoying today, though he couldn't pinpoint why. To ensure his plan went smoothly, he needed to clear this hurdle with the Death lord first.

So after weighing his words, he began:

"Then I'll just say it, my lord."

"You remember the time I intercepted a flood of Oblivion sacrifices for You, yes?"

The massive skull went still. Then it said ominously:

"If... you are here... to ask for... a reward... you may leave... now."

Cheng Shi panicked:

"No no no!"

"My lord, those were offerings from Your humble employee's own devotion. How could devotion be measured by rewards?"

"Of course, if there happened to be one, that wouldn't be unwelcome either—"

"Why are Your flames flaring up? Please, stay calm—that's not what I meant!"

"What I mean is: after extensive preparation, Your employee is preparing a second offering for You. And this devotion is far, far greater than the first!"

These words sent the green flames in the massive skull's eyes blazing for an instant. Interest flickered, but the voice remained stern:

"Those who... curry favor... always want... something."

"As We see it... you show no such... devotion... even to your... two annoying... Benefactors..."

"So... now... what do you want... from Us?"

"..."

Cheng Shi's jaw clicked a couple times. He felt a twinge of injustice.

'Is that really how You see me? Your outstanding employee—just some insatiable greed machine?'

'Can't I be genuinely devout?'

'Never mind. Fooling myself is pointless. I do want something. But this time, it costs You nothing!'

Steadying himself, Cheng Shi shook his head:

"My lord, with all respect—You're wrong."

"My devotion to You has never wavered. Even if I have received blessings from Your hand, those were affirmations of my devotion—not the grabbings of a greedy employee."

"Especially this time. I guarantee this offering will satisfy You."

"In fact, You'll be so satisfied that You'll want to give Your employee the greatest reward of all."

"..."

The green flames in the massive skull's eyes hitched. He sensed that no matter how many times the conversation circled, it always came back to "reward" with this person. Although greed bordered on the sin of Corruption, He chose not to dampen Cheng Shi's enthusiasm and hummed:

"Very well... Let Us... hear... what manner of... surprise... you have... prepared."

Cheng Shi's expression turned deadly serious:

"Oblivion's Divine Throne!"

"Are You interested?!"

"?"

The massive skull froze solid.

"What... did you say?"

Cheng Shi repeated with solemn gravity:

"Oblivion's Divine Throne!"

"My lord, if You're interested—I want to help You knock Oblivion off His throne!"

"Does an offering like that satisfy You?"

"...Utter... nonsense."

"If... a mortal... could shake... the seat... of a true god... this world... would have long since... escaped... the gods'... control!"

"But the universe isn't under the gods' control anyway, is it, my lord? The one truly pulling the strings in this world—shouldn't that be the one sitting high above all... Him?"

Cheng Shi lowered his head, staring at the ground, enunciating every word.

"..."

The massive skull's gaze shifted. It fixed Cheng Shi with a cold stare, but made no move. After a long pause, it spoke—voice deep and measured:

"Tell Us... your plan."

Cheng Shi's jaw worked twice. In his mind: 'It worked!'

Chapter 1158: On How to Dethrone Oblivion

"My lord, before anything else, I need to confirm something with You."

"As You must know, Oblivion has been targeting me relentlessly. Of course, I realize He isn't doing this simply to avenge a mortal who intercepted a few sacrifices."

"I despise Oblivion, yet I know a true god wouldn't be that petty. So today I'd sincerely like to ask: why does He want to obliterate me so badly?"

The massive skull snorted:

"You should... ask... your own... Benefactors."

"Ask Them... why... Oblivion... is so... 'fond'... of you."

Though Death's tone was cold, the sentence carried an unmistakable note of satisfaction.

Cheng Shi had a realization. So Oblivion's hunt for him was definitely a plus in the boss's ledger.

'But what good is asking those two Void ancestors? They're not Oblivion's rivals...'

'Wait!'

Cheng Shi froze. 'Could Oblivion's "excessive attention" actually stem from the Void's gaze?'

'Could it be that the "sacrifice" He's fixated on isn't me per se?'

Alarmed, Cheng Shi looked up: "It's because of the Void's sacrifice?"

"Sacrifice..."

"An apt... description."

"Not entirely... wrong... nor entirely... right."

"Oblivion... has always... coveted... the Void... yet your... two Benefactors... have never... given Him... the time of day."

"After years... of this... prejudice... He refuses... to accept... the 'sacrifice'... endorsed by... the Void's... masters."

"It seems... you already... understand... the significance... of the Convention... Not bad... Oblivion's... fixation on you... does partly... stem from this... but more of it... is about... pleasing... Himself."

"What is not... forbidden... is permitted... The Convention... brought about... the Faith Game... and set its rules... but how... to select... what you call... a 'sacrifice'... that clause... was never... set in stone."

"Therefore... His actions... cannot be... sanctioned by... the Convention... nor can you... receive... the rules'... protection."

"However... if merely... for this... you think... to scheme... for His throne..."

The massive skull studied Cheng Shi and shook.

"You're... delusional."

"Not a single... rule... of the Convention... would permit... you to do so... let alone... that you are... merely a mortal... outside the Convention's... protection."

"You have met... Order—Justice... You should know... His fairness... borders on... inflexibility."

Cheng Shi hopped forward, words tumbling out in excitement:

"My lord, it's precisely because His fairness borders on inflexibility that I believe there are loopholes in the rules!"

"I won't mince words with You. Let me ask directly: if I wanted to inherit Oblivion's Divine Throne and authority—what would I need?"

The massive skull spoke gravely:

"When... Prosperity's Mother... fell... I already... told you... When a true god... is trapped... or falls... their Envoy... under the Convention's... witness... may inherit... their throne... and authority."

"Frazor... was a lie... but at least... it was... believable."

"But... Oblivion... is not dead... and due to... His authority... He can never... be trapped."

"Setting aside... His status... He has... but one... subordinate... the Hand of Purifying Weevil... How do you... intend to... replace him... and become... another... Oblivion... Envoy?"

Cheng Shi shook his head and smiled:

"My lord, You've misunderstood. When did I say I wanted to become Oblivion's Envoy?"

"I belong to the Void. I am close to You. Even if Oblivion stopped hunting me and offered me the Envoy position as an apology, I still wouldn't—"

"Hsss—"

Cheng Shi clamped his mouth shut. He'd almost said "wouldn't say no."

He cleared his throat hastily and corrected course:

"I absolutely could not accept such a position!"

"But think about it—there's already a ready-made Envoy. Why does it have to be me?"

"From start to finish, what I've been discussing with You is pulling Oblivion off His throne—not putting myself on it!"

"!?"

Green flames erupted in the massive skull's eyes. Spectral fire illuminated every corner of the Fishbone Hall. He spoke with considerable astonishment:

"You want... to turn... the Hand of Purifying Weevil?"

Cheng Shi nodded vigorously:

"Exactly!"

"My lord, I want to turn Herobos—offering him the condition that he stops hunting me, in exchange for a genuine Divine Throne!"

"Absurd! Preposterous! Outrageous!"

"Even... your Benefactor... Deceit Himself... would not dare... promise anyone... a Divine Throne... and you... a mere mortal... presume to... discuss... the transfer... of a god's seat!?"

"Did We... hear wrong... or—"

"You heard correctly!"

"My lord, every word I've said is fact."

"Why else would I insist on a personal audience before daring to speak of this?"

"I have a method—with a very high probability of success—but the prerequisite is Your full support!"

The massive skull grew even more bewildered. No matter how He calculated, He couldn't fathom how a mortal could scheme against a god who still possessed freedom.

But He was also growing more intrigued, because He could see that this "employee" was brimming with confidence.

After careful deliberation, He spoke, eyes blazing:

"Very well... We... believe you... this once."

"We can... give you... every support... you desire."

"But... you must... tell Us... have you... contacted... your several... Benefactors... or other... true gods... to jointly... hunt down... Oblivion?"

Cheng Shi paused, then shook his head: "No."

"No!?"

The massive skull released a thunderous hum: "Oblivion... commands... the authority... of obliteration... He can... obliterate... His own form... at any moment... He is... nearly impossible... to kill... even harder... to trap!"

"Without that... how do you... plan to... inherit... His authority... and throne?"

"Why does it have to be that way?"

Cheng Shi smiled. He dropped all pretense and laid it out with absolute certainty:

"My lord, You said it Yourself: when a true god is trapped or falls, their Envoy may—under the Convention's witness—inherit their throne and authority. This is a clause of the Convention, correct?"

"You confirm my understanding is accurate?"

"We... confirm."

"Then here's my question: does the Convention anywhere state that when a true god is not trapped and has not fallen, their Envoy cannot inherit the throne and authority?"

"?????"

'WHAT?!'

The green flames in the massive skull's eyes snuffed out instantly. It was as though He'd just heard the most inconceivable thing in the entire universe. His entire skull went blank.

The sudden silence startled Cheng Shi. He thought he'd misunderstood the "concept" and hurried forward, bouncing a couple of hops, cautiously peering up: "My lord?"

"HA HA HA HA HA—"

The massive skull burst into laughter that shook the universe—and for once, didn't stammer at all.

He surveyed the tiny skull before Him with satisfaction, nodding repeatedly:

"Not bad... The Convention... indeed... never made... such an... explicit... provision."

"If you... raise this... as a motion... and petition... Order—Justice... to invoke... the Pact of Gods... convention... with... Order—Justice's... rigidity... He would... certainly... acknowledge... the motion's... validity."

"Then... a simple... vote... would decide... the fate... of Oblivion's... throne!"

"And at that point... the Void... to protect... Their 'sacrifice'... would naturally... cast their votes."

"We... understand... You have come... for Our... vote."

"Exactly!"

Cheng Shi gazed up at the lord on the Bone Throne, eyes shining with anticipation: "Then... do You agree?"

Green flames flickered in the massive skull's eyes. He weighed and calculated every angle for a long while before finally nodding:

"The opportunity... is rare."

"Were the target... not Oblivion... this would be... impossible."

"With Civilization... in chaos... and a surplus... of votes... to gather... it is... worth... a try!"

Though the Death lord agreed without hesitation, that final remark sent a jolt through Cheng Shi.

Because this lord clearly hadn't lost His memories of the Real Universe—otherwise He'd never have said "with Civilization in chaos."

He truly was a member of the Fear Faction!

With this realization, Cheng Shi's confidence solidified, though he didn't point it out.

Securing this vote brought him one step closer to pulling Oblivion off His throne.

'Heh. You want to kill me?'

'Then let's see who finishes first—you losing your throne, or me losing my life!'

Chapter 1159: Counting the Votes

"The Pact of Gods... convention... requires... more than half... the votes... to pass... a motion."

"Your two... Benefactors... don't get along... with Oblivion... They will likely... support it."

"Deceit... holds proxy... for Truth's... vote. Fate... holds proxy... for Prosperity's... vote. Add... Our vote... that's already... 5. You need... at least... 4 more."

Hearing this, Cheng Shi asked in confusion:

"My lord, but Prosperity and War have both fallen. Can those still count?"

Green flame swayed gently in the massive skull's eye sockets as He explained:

"If... a god's fall... meant one fewer... seat... then if... accidents... kept happening... wouldn't the gods... be completely... wiped out?"

"The Convention... permits... other gods... to hold proxy... for votes... which means... it already... acknowledges... that vacant thrones... count as... voting seats... Otherwise... the rules... break themselves."

"Of the remaining... 4 votes... Chaos... has long... cooperated with... Deceit... and may be... winnable. Time... is also... your Benefactor... If He... wishes to... protect you... that counts too."

"As for... the last... 2 votes..."

"We... have thought... hard... and see... great difficulty."

"Birth... though Our... sibling god... never pushes... nor hinders... such matters... Even if We... personally lobbied... He would likely... abstain."

"Decay... has long... distanced Himself... from the gods... Even if He... once noticed you... under Oblivion's... influence... He would never... vote in favor."

"The Iron Law of Order... would never... permit... such a breach... of order... That vote... is certain... opposition."

"Folly... never obstructs... foolish acts... but asking Him... to commit one... Himself... is nigh impossible."

"Silence... votes purely... by His own... heart... Nobody knows... what He... is thinking."

"By this... calculation... only Memory... remains."

"But even if... an Envoy... replacing... a true god... on the throne... is itself... a memory... as the Void's... opposite... He would likely... struggle... to cast... that vote."

"So... to claim... Oblivion's throne..."

"Cheng... Shi... you still have... work to do."

"We... will inform... the Void... and do Our best... to maneuver... within the Chaos camp... But the other... votes... do you... have a plan?"

'As expected—the gods' business requires gods to handle.'

After Death's analysis, Cheng Shi immediately realized he needed to secure at least one vote from Birth, Decay, or Memory, while hoping the boss could lock down at least one from Folly or Silence. Only then would there be a chance to take down Oblivion!

He wasn't worried about the Chaos and Time votes. When you traced all the threads, the Fun God was the one calling the shots.

But if the Fun God Himself didn't support this bit of entertainment that Cheng Shi had initiated—then Oblivion could go fight His own battles.

'Fear Faction?'

'Whoever wants to deal with it can deal with it!'

'I quit.'

Just as this thought crossed his mind, green flames blazed again in the massive skull's eyes. Cheng Shi quickly looked up to ask if the lord had further instructions—only to hear the boss snort coldly:

"No plan... no method... yet you speak... of usurpation?"

"Time... is short... Go... and get to work!"

With that, He commanded the bone torrents flanking the hall to sweep Cheng Shi off his feet, tumbling him into the void and back to the trial.

After Cheng Shi's figure vanished, the sea of bone vanished with it. The massive skull on the Bone Throne disappeared, replaced by a pair of upturned, starry eyes.

Stars flickered and spiraled in those eyes as they gazed toward where Cheng Shi had vanished, grinning:

"What a teachable lad. He only observed two Convention assemblies and already figured out how to exploit the loophole."

"Worthy of being my follower!"

But then the grin faded into a slight frown:

"That last vote will ultimately fall on the Clown's shoulders. Will He... cast it?"

"Ah well, why overthink it? As long as the entertainment value is high enough."

"Even if they refuse to vote, I still have to try."

"After all, this is the first motion the Clown has ever proposed. If it fails..."

"Hee~"

"How heartbroken would the Clown be?"

"Come to think of it—win, and I lose a threat. Lose, and I harvest entertainment. Hmm. Not a bad deal either way."

Those starry eyes laughed to themselves in the void for a good while before blinking and summoning the single little skull that had been left behind, examining it with a meaningful look:

"That foul-mouthed one really is clever—started probing Old Bones so early."

"Who knows what He figured out."

"But no matter. Every foolish act will be laughed at eventually."

"When that day comes, I'd like to see who exactly ends up being the butt of the joke."

Then, turning to the little skull, the voice became gentle:

"You... what did you hear?"

The little skull didn't react. It looked around blankly and murmured: "How did I get here? Where is this? Where did that lord go?"

The moment those words left its mouth, its own voice echoed back through the void:

"I don't know anything, I didn't see anything, don't kill me, I swear on the true gods, don't kill me, I played dumb well enough."

Hearing his innermost thoughts spoken aloud, cold sweat beaded on Skart's skull—despite being nothing but bone.

But the master of the void didn't torment him. A single scoff, and He departed, leaving Skart adrift in the starry expanse.

Skart was stunned. He watched the direction the eyes had gone, wanting to beg for mercy but not daring to open his mouth, wanting to play dumb but unable to keep the act going. So he could only let himself float through that empty void, thinking in despair:

"Is this the price for blaspheming my Benefactor?!"

"But this isn't the kind of immortality I wanted..."

...

The moment Deceit departed, He sought out His follower's other Benefactor—Fate.

Though the Clown's motion would inevitably receive Fate's support once proposed—after all, it was about protecting what was Fixed—the matter was too significant for Deceit not to ensure that Fate's two proxy votes were ironclad.

So He came.

Yet upon seeing Deceit, Fate didn't even acknowledge Him and turned to leave.

Deceit wasn't surprised. He didn't block the way—just grinned and laid out the Clown's plan, certain that even if Fate refused to engage with Him, He would never abandon His follower.

Sure enough, upon learning that His follower intended to launch a bid for a Divine Throne, Fate stopped.

He didn't question it once. He only said coldly:

"How do you guarantee Herobos will agree?"

Deceit's eyes sparkled with glee: "Can't guarantee it. That's up to the Clown to persuade him."

Fate's expression darkened, His voice growing icier:

"Then there is risk."

"I didn't spare his life back then to create risk for my follower."

"I agree to the motion. I'll go find Herobos and make him agree too."

Deceit blinked: "How would You guarantee that? Don't tell me You're going to beat him into submission?"

"What else?"

"..."

Deceit blinked again. Words failed Him. After a pause, He shook His head with an incredulous laugh: "Is fighting really the only thing You know? You plan to punch the universe into Fixed Destiny?"

Fate's eyes grew even colder. The void around them began to stir with bitter wind.

"You want a fight?"

"Tch—"

"Don't think that collecting stray believers makes You strong enough to beat me."

"A rabble's hearts are filled with desire, not devotion."

"And don't mistake me for a fool either. I may be the Void's surface, but I have the ability to see through to the essence."

"What you really want isn't that pitiful trickle of mortal faith—it's the authority of Assimilation from Corruption's ever-open hands, isn't it?"

"Tsk tsK tsK. You're actually getting close to Him, trying to borrow His power to strengthen the universe's Fixed Destiny..."

"Have You lost Your mind?"

Certain gods' talent for passive aggression was truly off the charts. The moment those words left His mouth, the entire void was dragged into a storm.

Fate glanced sideways with cold indifference—no joy, no sorrow:

"Someone has indeed lost their mind."

"I saw traces the Void had left at the edge of the Sea of Desire. But before that, I had never made contact with Him."

"So which member of the Void went to Him first—and for what purpose?!"

"Can You tell me that, Deceit?!"

"..."

Not grinning anymore.

Chapter 1160: Cheng Shi the Strategist, Part One

When Cheng Shi returned to the trial and found that Skart hadn't come back with him, he was momentarily stunned.

But then it clicked.

'Seems that lord really likes the Scarlet Hunter. Why else would He keep him at the Bone Throne as an attendant?'

Being rid of a complication that wasn't even a real lead lightened Cheng Shi's mood considerably. Now, he needed to continue his lobbying campaign.

Birth was out of the question. The first god of the Life path had explicitly said He never wanted to see Cheng Shi again. No point poking that hornet's nest—if he annoyed Him enough to switch from abstaining to voting against, it would be a farce even if it didn't change the outcome.

Decay, however, was still worth a shot. True, this god shared the Descent path with Oblivion, but Cheng Shi did hold proxy over His authority, didn't he? For the sake of "Faded," maybe—just maybe?

So Cheng Shi decided to first see if he could reach this god he hadn't visited in ages. He found an empty corner, hid himself away, posted Shadow Cheng Shi as a lookout, then sliced his arm with a dagger and prayed over the wound:

"All beings shall rot, all things shall decay."

"Great God of Decay, Your dedicated Faded authority proxy, Cheng Shi, sends his greetings."

"Having walked the path of universal fading for some time now, certain new ideas have formed in my mind. But whether these ideas serve the withering of Decay's faith requires counsel from You—the universe's most accomplished 'Faded One.'"

"Should You have a moment to lend an ear, it would be the supreme honor of both myself and the universe."

Prayer was prayer, but honestly Cheng Shi wasn't expecting much. This old relic had long since shut His doors to visitors and didn't even attend the Assembly of Gods Convention anymore. Cheng Shi doubted any excuse he concocted would rank higher than the Convention assembly.

After a beat of silence—nothing.

As expected. Cheng Shi shrugged, preparing to head to the Joker Gathering Place, unearth That Dream My Nightmare, and use it to ascend to Memory's Collection Hall for a chat with Memory.

But just as he was about to slip into the void, a torrent of Decay force erupted from his arm wound, dragging everything around him into decrepitude.

Walls faded. Earth rotted. Vegetation withered... Everything in sight lost its vitality in an instant. Even Cheng Shi, proxy of Decay's authority, couldn't withstand the erosion—he crumbled to a mound of yellow earth within moments.

When he opened his eyes again, he was back inside the Septic Final Tomb. Within the massive palace built from dark stone blocks, the ancient giant had tumbled from His throne and lay on His back beside the bloodstained seat, half His body already stripped to bone.

If not for the rotting flesh still clinging to the skeleton, Cheng Shi would've thought he'd stumbled into his boss's cosplay.

'Decay's will is being carried out thoroughly, I see. He really is even more "pitiful" than before.'

But pitiful or not, this was still a god. Cheng Shi didn't dare show the slightest disrespect. He hurriedly bowed and offered praise:

"Praise to the great God of Decay!"

"May You be withered wood and rotting timber, on death's very doorstep. May Your faith wither, forever parted from prosperity."

"May no one in the universe spare You a thought. May the Creator at last look down and grant You mercy..."

Cheng Shi knew exactly how to flatter Decay. He understood that Decay was a die-hard Approach Faction member—everything He did was to draw closer to that *Him. So Cheng Shi steeled himself against the revulsion and fear, and wove the Creator into his praise.

The tactic worked.

The giant slowly raised His head, leaning against the throne. Tainted blood trickled down the chair's back, dripping onto the tomb floor. In the weakest possible voice:

"Deceit's follower... you've done... well..."

The same opening line. The same familiar scene.

One sentence dragged Cheng Shi all the way back to that Prosperity trial—back when Prosperity was still alive and he was just an ordinary player.

But now...

The person was still the same simple soul. But quite a few gods had fallen, and Civilization had only one left.

Cheng Shi sighed wistfully. He didn't dare take credit, merely bowed: "It's all thanks to You."

'And naturally, the blame is Yours too.'

The giant had no idea the Clown was muttering under his breath. He wheezed feebly:

"Faith... has not yet... withered... Faded... need not... be reclaimed..."

"Why have you... come...?"

"?"

'Wait—the Faded authority can be taken back?'

Cheng Shi was alarmed. But a moment's thought made it clear: if the goal was universal decay of all faiths, only Decay Himself could remain. A proxy authority holder couldn't be allowed to exist at the end.

Given the contributions Cheng Shi had made to Decay's fading cause, He probably wouldn't kill him—but He would definitely reclaim the authority.

This forced Cheng Shi to reevaluate his role as a "Faded One."

'Time to slow things down.'

Next time he encountered a Decay follower, he couldn't rush to fade them. But he couldn't just let them pass either.

If Decay happened to be watching and saw him slacking, all his prior merit would be wiped out. So he needed a plausible excuse to stall—something convincing enough to slow the fading without raising suspicion.

After mulling it over and deciding the approach was viable, Cheng Shi said with utmost deference:

"Great One, this visit isn't about the authority. It's about accelerating faith's decline."

The giant's clouded eyes brightened. He nodded weakly:

"Speak..."

Cheng Shi held nothing back. Given his standing in Decay's eyes, one proposal wouldn't undo everything. So he shared his plan to topple Oblivion—though he wrapped it in a reason Decay couldn't refuse.

"The shifting of paths is also that Being's will. I'm sure You understand this far more deeply than I do."

"If so, then I've been thinking—perhaps Decay shouldn't only decay from within. It should also be obliterated by Oblivion."

"But Oblivion probably won't do this. He still needs Descent's support, and He doesn't want You drawing closer to the Creator before He does."

"He may not want to do it—but plenty of others would!"

Hearing this, Decay understood.

"You mean... to replace... Oblivion..."

"Exactly!"

Cheng Shi nodded and launched into an impassioned pitch.

"Think about it—if a new Oblivion is installed and an agreement is reached, having Him obliterate enough sources of faith after taking power would bring You even closer to that Being!"

"Moreover, a newly enthroned Oblivion would have the self-knowledge not to compete with a senior like You for the Creator's mercy. That way—You, I, and Him—we all benefit. A win-win-win!"

"..."

The giant fell silent.

In His view, Cheng Shi's intentions were good, but the idea was wildly unrealistic.

He harbored the exact same doubts Death had: Oblivion wasn't that easy to deal with. And who would take His place?

He glanced at Cheng Shi. The implication was obvious.

Cheng Shi naturally couldn't reveal his full plan to this god. So he kept things vague, saying only that he'd exploit the Convention—but didn't specify how, or who would replace Oblivion. The gist of every sentence boiled down to two words:

Vote, please.

The giant pondered for a long time, then coughed heavily:

"I understand."

Then, without ceremony, He flicked Cheng Shi back to reality.

A bewildered Cheng Shi stood in the alley's shadow, face darker than the darkness itself.

'What does "I understand" mean?'

'You understand but I don't! Did you agree or not?!'

On a matter this important, he couldn't afford to be careless. With no other choice, he had to treat it as a rejection.

Which meant he still needed to visit Memory.

Just thinking about that rival god summoning him while wearing his boss's face made Cheng Shi's scalp tingle.

'What choice do I have? A wage slave's fate is to report and be rejected.'

'Sigh. Onward.'