

The Gods 331

Chapter 331: The Clown Atop the Void

When Cheng Shi awoke once more, he found himself still floating in the void—but back in human form. Not only that, a pair of supremely cold [Void] eyes were open before him.

He jolted, then immediately stood, bowed, and launched into a triple salute of praise.

"Praise the great [Fate]! May Your radiance shower down, filling the universe with the symphony woven of Fixed Destiny and Change, letting past and future alike sing the hymn composed of fortune and [Misfortune]!"

"Your most devout follower, Your most loyal pursuer, Cheng Shi, sends his greetings."

"And offers the most heartfelt gratitude for Your protection."

This time, he meant every word.

After all, his Benefactor had just rescued him—the least he could do was coat his lips in honey.

But to his shock, after hearing this devout praise, those cold eyes suddenly turned playful. They regarded Cheng Shi with a hint of displeasure, tongue clicking in disapproval:

"So the praise reserved for others is this devout and heartfelt. I suppose my protection doesn't quite deserve such 'sincere' gratitude."

The instant those words fell, Cheng Shi broke out in so much cold sweat he could have wrung out a body double.

!!!!

That wasn't [Fate]!

How could it not be [Fate]?

What kind of deity impersonated their own sibling-god on the same path just to mess with their follower!?

Was this any way for a proper god to behave!? Huh?

Oh—it was [Deceit]. Well then, never mind. Just chalk it up to bad luck.

Cheng Shi choked on his words. He frantically wiped the cold sweat from his brow and pivoted on a dime:

"Praise the great [Deceit]! May You... may You..."

Those eyes watched him with that half-smile, as if curious what flowers this follower's mouth could possibly produce.

'This is bad.' Cheng Shi immediately switched tactics and blurted out the first thing that came to mind:

"May You be happy every day, and may Your smile endure forever."

Hearing this, the spirals in those eyes began to reverse. They glanced at Cheng Shi with amusement before snorting derisively:

"So it seems I truly don't deserve those elaborate praises."

Cheng Shi waved his hands frantically: "No, no, no—great Benefactor, this is the most genuine blessing from the bottom of my heart! All those formulaic phrases are just for going through the motions. You should know that the simpler the praise, the more devout it is."

"Oh? So by that logic, all those praises you just offered to [Fate] were insincere lies?"

"?"

Cheng Shi had grown wiser. He didn't respond immediately, but instead carefully studied the details of the eyes before him. Only after confirming this wasn't [Fate] doing a reverse-impersonation of [Deceit] did he look around, then hesitantly nod.

'What else can I do? Just have to get through this.'

In the tiniest voice: "More or less."

The eyes hovering in the void instantly shifted from icy indifference to delight. The corners lifted upward as they giggled: "What was that?"

Cheng Shi steeled his heart, clenched his teeth, and muttered quickly: "More or less."

The moment he finished, an identical pair of eyes opened beside [Deceit]'s, gazing at him with neither joy nor sorrow.

"..."

"..."

"..."

Seeing two pairs of [Void] eyes materialize simultaneously in the void—seeing the spirals in [Deceit]'s eyes whirl in giddy frenzy—how could he not realize he'd once again become the clown in center stage?

He had no energy left to explain. His shoulders slumped, and he gave up entirely.

'I'm done. Destroy it all.'

'Destroy every last bit of it!'

'[Prosperity] shouldn't have killed Herself—She should have dragged all the gods down with Her and wiped every single one of Them off the face of this world!'

Though [Fate] had appeared "on cue," He did not pursue Cheng Shi's disrespect. He merely spoke in a cold tone:

"I have returned the power the Pact bestowed upon her. The matter of [Prosperity]'s fall is concluded."

"Huh? Power for whom—Baldy? Great Benefactor, did You just go see Baldy?" Cheng Shi couldn't sit still anymore. He scrambled to ask: "So does that mean Baldy became [Prosperity]'s Envoy after all? She became Fazor? Did she also receive a share of [Prosperity]'s Authority?"

Yet neither of the two pairs of eyes in the void responded. They seemed to be ignoring the human entirely, conversing amongst themselves.

[Deceit] looked at [Fate] with a grin:

"What's the matter—[Truth] didn't get the Authority He wanted? You seem a little unhappy."

"I'd wager the most rational being in the universe wouldn't go to the Sea of Desire and ask its occupant for the Authority of Assimilation, would He?"

"?" Cheng Shi looked sharply at [Fate], only to see those abyss-cold eyes grow colder still.

"Fixed Destiny lies in the future. Change governs the present. There is no impact."

"The future? Whose future? Great Benefactor, my future came back—did You know?" Cheng Shi seized every gap to interject, but the two paid him no mind whatsoever.

Hearing [Fate]'s words, [Deceit] grew even more delighted. His eyes blinked and blinked, barely containing His laughter.

"Oh? And he used that as his argument to convince you—to cover his tracks?"

Him!?

Who did "him" refer to!?

Cheng Dashi?

Cheng Shi recovered from his initial embarrassment, and his mind sharpened instantly.

Clearly, he didn't believe his Benefactor [Deceit] was merely having fun. He was obviously saying something to Cheng Shi—otherwise, the private exchange between the two gods of [Void] would never have included him.

Since They hadn't tossed him out of the void, it meant he was allowed to hear this—and in all likelihood, it was being said for his benefit.

So he immediately shut his mouth and listened with rapt attention, determined not to miss a single detail.

He gathered from their words that Cheng Dashi's return seemed to be connected to [Fate].

But he couldn't understand why his future self had chosen to work with [Fate] instead of [Deceit]. Logically speaking, his present self was more inclined to trust [Deceit].

Even if He dressed him up as a clown every day—well, tough luck. A con artist's boss should be [Deceit].

However, the two in the void didn't trade riddles for long. [Fate]'s spirals began rotating slowly. He looked at Cheng Shi and opened with a direct answer to the question burning deepest in Cheng Shi's mind.

"Your guess is correct."

!!!

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted. He pressed his lips together.

"The matter is actually not complicated."

"When a certain god of [Void] was provoking [Memory], the disturbance was too great, creating a rift between [Existence] and [Void]."

"A restless shadow listened to that [Void] deity's ramblings, slipped back through that rift, and found me before [Memory] could mend all the cracks."

With that, [Fate] looked at Cheng Shi once more, His gaze unfathomable—as if in a single instant He could see through Cheng Shi's past and future alike.

"He said he didn't return merely at some deity's behest, nor to meet his past self. He wanted to present me with a 'predetermined script overflowing with Change.'"

"He found an unchanging future too dull, and wished to bring the climax forward."

"I noted that he had walked the path of Fixed Destiny without wavering, and so I accepted his offering. I placed him into the trial I had bestowed, granting his request."

"I presume you have already met him."

Cheng Shi's scalp tingled, yet he shook his head with composure: "I... only guessed that he'd returned. I never actually met him."

"To know is to see."

"..."

'My level of enlightenment isn't quite that elevated, Benefactor.'

Cheng Shi pursed his lips and looked up: "Has he... already gone back?"

This time it was not [Fate] who answered, but [Deceit].

"Deported. [Void] enjoys disorder, but [Existence] does not. Those two rigid traditionalists cannot tolerate a single flaw within [Existence]."

"Still, it was quite entertaining—someone using their own brushstrokes to tamper with the collection of one so devoted to collecting."

Cheng Shi didn't bother parsing everything [Deceit] said. He was only thinking about how Cheng Dashi had used this method to achieve his goal.

"So... he accomplished his objective?"

"Using my offering to [Prosperity] to draw the gods into besieging [Prosperity], and then letting Her self-destruct in pursuit of 'universal prosperity'—was that his offering to You?"

"Is that the climax he rewrote for Your script?"

[Fate] didn't respond. Perhaps He would have, but [Deceit] spoke first.

"Hee~"

"What are you imagining?"

"So you think your future self is that impressive? Ha!"

"That treacherous little rat merely put pen to paper and wrote a single line. The first word of the rest of the script—you wrote that yourself. Everything after that has been part of [Fate]'s [Change]."

"All he did by sneaking back was create an opening. As for whether that opening perfectly exploited [Fate]'s [Change]—well, you'd have to ask this Benefactor you're so tired of showering with false praise."

"..."

'Fun God, I think You're trying to get me killed!'

[Fate]'s cold gaze swept past [Deceit], then coldly swept past Cheng Shi, and once again pardoned his Crime of Blasphemy.

"The fall of [Prosperity] was never part of the Fixed Destiny. The present is indeed governed by [Change], but the future still walks the path of the [Fixed]."

"I advise you—do not create any more rifts, nor entertain such futile fantasies."

"Did you hear that? He's scolding you."

[Deceit] looked at Cheng Shi with that impish grin and blinked.

"..."

'I don't know who's being scolded, but it's definitely not me.'

"Tch—boring. This audience was thoroughly unpleasant. I'm leaving. Seeing the two of you irritates me."

With that, those gleeful eyes gradually faded. The cold eyes swept over Cheng Shi one more time, then silently disappeared as well.

Only Cheng Shi remained, standing alone in the void with furrowed brows, silently organizing his thoughts.

It seemed the Change that Cheng Dashi had hoped for had arrived.

But [Fate] said the future was all Fixed Destiny—so had he actually changed fate, or hadn't he?

Or perhaps... his purpose in returning was never to change fate at all?

At this thought, Cheng Shi furrowed his brow in the dark.

"The future... Fixed Destiny... tragedy..."

"[Prosperity]... [Existence]... [Void]..."

"What exactly are They trying to do?"

...

Chapter 332: [Deceit]: [Fate] Is an Even Better Liar Than Me

Many questions remain unanswerable simply because there isn't enough information. So Cheng Shi didn't dwell obsessively on the intersection of future and present. Instead, he let out a heavy breath and prepared to leave the void.

He needed to return to the trial to check on Big Cat—to make sure she hadn't suffered any mishaps from this chain of upheavals.

Of course, now that [Fate] had said she'd become Frazor, he had even more reason to meet this orphan of [Prosperity] and see just how much she'd come to resemble Them.

But just as he was about to pull out the Tongue of Eating Lies and lick open a rift in the void, a pair of eyes painted with spirals and starpoints reopened in the exact spot where [Deceit]'s eyes had vanished.

Cheng Shi stared at those upturned corners and went completely numb.

'A surprise return attack? Really?'

Those gleeful eyes peered into the depths of the void, confirmed that no trace of [Fate]'s fluctuations remained, and burst into laughter.

"What's wrong—unhappy that your Benefactor summoned you again?"

"Ha ha, happy. I'm thrilled."

The swirling spirals spun rapidly for a moment before snorting: "Next time you lie, mind your expression. Otherwise, don't tell anyone you're my follower. It's embarrassing for a god."

"..." Cheng Shi's cerebellum had already overloaded too many times today. He truly didn't want to engage his brain anymore, so he sighed and said: "Great Benefactor, just speak plainly. Let's save time."

"Oh? You have designs on [Time] too?"

"..."

Cheng Shi rolled his eyes, pinched his own nose red, then looked up at his Benefactor with a face that screamed 'I surrender': "The clown is here. Let's get to the point, great Benefactor."

This display of abandoned resistance and embraced humiliation instantly killed [Deceit]'s interest. He gave Cheng Shi a look of pure disdain, then blinked once and retrieved from the infinite depths of the void a thick, thriving branch.

The instant the aura of [Prosperity] surged from the branch before him, Cheng Shi's gaze sharpened.

"This is...?"

"The gift from [Prosperity]'s Final Oracle—the Authority of 'Vitality' allocated to me."

"Of course, all Authorities are inscribed in the Pact. This branch you see is merely the outward manifestation of the Authority."

"That scheming Mother certainly knew how to divvy things up—leaving the most useless thing for [Void] with me."

"Did She think everyone would be as interested in this Authority as [Truth]?"

"Heh. Universal prosperity. Too bad—I don't take in [Prosperity]'s leftovers."

With that, those supremely amused eyes pushed the thick branch toward Cheng Shi.

Cheng Shi froze, then looked up at Him, blinking in confusion:

"You're... giving this to me?"

"This is the Authority of a True God! You're just... tossing it away?"

"Bestowing it upon a... player?"

"But humans can't wield a god's Authority—can they?"

"Oh? So you have designs on [Prosperity] too?"

"..."

'Yes, yes, yes—I've got designs on the whole damn universe! I wish I could follow [Prosperity]'s example and just blow it all up!

Seeing his follower fall silent once more, [Deceit] chuckled twice and turned serious.

"Who told you humans can't wield divine Authority?"

"Old bones?"

"Hmm, what He said wasn't entirely accurate. You indeed can't partake of [Prosperity]'s Authority—because a living [Prosperity] would never allow you to steal it. And the fallen [Prosperity]... you don't have the qualifications to inherit it either."

"The Pact does protect all divine power from being lost. But if a god happens to be in a generous mood and bestows a portion of Their Authority as a 'divine gift,' then that doesn't count as lost Authority—it's a transfer of proxy rights."

"In this way, humans can temporarily wield a god's Authority as proxy."

"Servant Gods and Envoys exist in precisely this relationship with True Gods. Apart from their own modest divinity, most of them wield True Gods' Authority as proxies."

"So..."

Hearing this, Cheng Shi's back snapped ramrod straight: "So!!?"

"So—I'm done teasing you. This isn't for you. Bring it back to your little cat friend."

"She's been recognized by the Pact as an Envoy, after all—having no Authority at all is just too embarrassing."

"Besides, without Authority, what kind of Envoy is she?"

Huh?

For Baldy?

This Authority was for Baldy?

Cheng Shi was stunned—but in the next instant, a subtle gleam flashed through his eyes.

"Aren't You also pursuing faith fusion? Why would You turn down free Authority?"

"Do You look down on [Prosperity]?"

Those eyes paused their spinning for a moment. In a rare departure from levity, they sighed:

"It's not about looking down. Universal prosperity is indeed a good thing. But... the purpose behind Her desire for universal prosperity was wrong."

"She and I are not kindred spirits. Besides, [Void] has no need of [Prosperity], because [Void] has no meaning."

"But—"

"Heh, you want to ask why your other Benefactor—the one you shower with insincere flattery—accepted [Prosperity]'s gift?"

"...I don't." Cheng Shi shook his head with a dark expression.

"You can't fool me. But..."

"Hee~"

"Who said He accepted it?"

"I am [Void]'s surface; He is [Void]'s essence. If even the surface can see clearly, how could the essence not?"

"He gave away the Final Oracle's gift long ago. The Mother of [Prosperity] played her cards well. She didn't allocate a single shred of Authority to [Fate], yet She left Him the task of rewarding followers in [Prosperity]'s trials as proxy—all so that the path of [Prosperity] might sprout a few more seeds of hope under [Fate]'s influence of Change."

"Unfortunately, [Fate] is too cold-hearted, and too lazy. He refused the extra workload and outsourced the whole thing to your little cat friend."

"Then again, who knows whether this was exactly what the Mother of [Prosperity] had calculated all along?"

"She saw [Fate]'s favor toward the little cat, so She took a gamble—leaving a spark for [Prosperity]."

"After all, no matter how you slice it, that cat is a follower of [Prosperity], isn't she?"

"And now she's even become Her eldest daughter. Look—it seems [Prosperity]'s hope has found its way back into [Prosperity]'s hands."

"[Fate] can peer into the future, so of course He'd know all this. Yet He still gave it away. It's just that the method of giving was, well... too dirty."

"What do you think that contract He had the little cat sign was?"

"It wasn't a supplementary clause of the Pact—it was an oath to [Fate]. She unwittingly sold herself to [Fate]."

"Hee~"

"Quite amusing, when you think about it. The eldest daughter of [Prosperity], having finally been recognized by the Pact as an inheritor of the Servant God's identity—only to become [Fate]'s wage slave in a muddled daze, doing off-the-books work left behind by [Prosperity]."

"I've suddenly come to appreciate human wisdom. At the very least, capitalists really are despicable."

"Anyway, that's about all there is to it. Remember to deliver the Vitality Authority to her. I won't summon her myself—I'm afraid I wouldn't be able to resist mocking her."

"..."

Hearing all of this, Cheng Shi's heart was a storm of conflicting emotions.

He felt the relationships between gods were impossibly complex. Every single one of Them schemed against the others while remaining absolutely unwavering on the road to fulfilling Their own will—going so far as to place faith's importance above Their own survival. What could this kind of zealous, unshakable conviction—even more fervent than any player's—possibly bring Them?

A god had self-destructed. What could that possibly bring to a deity who, after Her fall, existed only in history?

Cheng Shi couldn't comprehend it. Couldn't even begin to.

But from [Deceit]'s return, he understood one thing: [Fate] didn't always tell the whole truth either.

[Deceit] seemed to see right through Cheng Shi's thoughts. At last, He broke into a genuinely pleased smile.

"It seems you've had an epiphany."

"Be careful. He's very good at lying."

"..." Cheng Shi went numb again.

'A god who wields the Authority of Deceit is warning me that His sibling-god is good at lying. You're really not lying right now?'

"Hee~"

"Don't disbelieve me. He's far better at lying than I am."

"You don't actually think that treacherous little rat sneaked back just to present Him with a predetermined script, do you?"

"Though I didn't personally witness what contract he struck with Him, it's obvious enough—your crafty future self must have used reverse psychology."

"Well, that's all I'll say. This audience is truly over now."

"Hmm, it wasn't very fun. You've gotten dull. Less amusing than before."

"Off you go."

With that, a gale erupted from the void and swept Cheng Shi downward.

Cheng Shi let his vision go dark without resistance, but his mind kept circling around the "reverse psychology" [Deceit] had mentioned.

Cheng Dashi had used reverse psychology on [Fate], and that's why [Fate] agreed to his plan?

If [Deceit] wasn't deceiving him, then Cheng Dashi had indeed returned to attempt to alter the predetermined future.

As for how he'd employed the reverse psychology...

That was simple enough.

The moment Cheng Shi heard the words "reverse psychology" from [Deceit]'s mouth, he guessed the gambit his future self had used against the Benefactor [Fate].

It could barely be called a gambit, really. All he needed to do was present [Fate] with a single proposition, and [Fate] would likely accept his "offering."

And that proposition was:

'If the future is truly written in Fixed Destiny, then any change we make right now shouldn't affect the future at all.'

At this thought, Cheng Shi let out a wry chuckle. He was certain Cheng Dashi had used exactly this method to turn [Fate]'s own logic against Him. Of course, the prerequisite for this approach was that the one making the challenge had to be [Fate]'s favored child—otherwise, He probably wouldn't even bother listening.

And as it happened, he—past or future—seemed to be exactly that.

With this, everything finally made sense.

Cheng Dashi had succeeded. Though all he'd done was create a single opening, [Fate] Himself had said [Prosperity]'s fall was never part of the predetermined destiny. So Cheng Dashi had truly succeeded.

He'd slipped back from the future through the rift [Deceit] had torn open, used reverse psychology to convince [Fate] to cover his tracks and leave a message for his past self. Then his past self voluntarily entered the game and triggered a cascade of Change—letting events unfold naturally into a situation that his future self's timeline had never seen.

Clearly, this cascade of Change had been driven not only by [Fate], but by nearly all of Them.

Impressive. Cheng Dashi might have predicted every one of Their reactions. The only question was whether he'd anticipated [Prosperity]'s self-destruction.

The present script of destiny seemed to have been altered—yet his Benefactor [Fate] appeared utterly confident that all future trajectories would still converge on that predetermined conclusion.

So the question remained: had the future actually been changed, or hadn't it?

Had [Deceit] lied, or had [Fate]?

Cheng Shi had a vague sense that these two Benefactors of [Void] held differing views on the future. Yet despite their disagreement, both remained steadfast on the path of faith fusion. That was stranger still.

But no amount of thinking would change anything. He wasn't [Fate], and he wasn't [Time]. Until the future arrived, all speculation was meaningless.

So Cheng Shi opened his eyes. As his vision gradually cleared, he found himself back in the trial—back in the Sighing Forest that [Prosperity] had overrun.

Only now, every trace of [Prosperity] had faded from the forest. [Decay] hadn't reclaimed it either. As far as the eye could see, the vast landscape was scarred and devastated.

The once lush rainforest looked as though someone had suddenly stripped away a filter. Every towering tree still held its verdant posture, untouched by withering or decay—yet they had lost every drop of green. Like uncolored half-finished works, they harbored no more life.

Clearly, Her fall had wrought tremendous impact here as well. If even the trees had been reduced to this, then what about the Mushroom-Footed People, spared from death under [Death]'s protection?

No sooner had the thought crossed his mind than Cheng Shi heard a chorus of jubilant cheers. He rose and looked back to find every Mushroom-Footed Person standing intact, surrounding a familiar figure, devoutly, excitedly, fervently shouting their heartfelt praises.

They were praising the Divine Envoy. Praising rebirth. Praising forgiveness. Praising [Prosperity].

This tribe—imprisoned beneath the surface by the Tower of Logic for hundreds of years—was now immersed in the joy of liberation, utterly unaware that their Benefactor had long since fallen, self-destructed before the assembled gods.

Cheng Shi watched the scene with a maelstrom of emotions churning inside him.

He had no idea what [Fate] had done to Hong Lin, but somehow the Mushroom-Footed People had accepted her without question as their Divine Envoy.

They were so devout, yet like puppets, they were arranged and rearranged by the gods—and even by him.

What was called "faith" was nothing else but the strings on those puppets. At the whim of the Puppet Masters, the Follower-Puppets could only passively go wherever the Masters needed them to be.

Pitiable? A little.

Tragic? A little.

Laughable? Not at all.

Because even as puppets, they still lived in hope—still walked the path they believed to be right, never once giving up.

Perseverance is never laughable. Only admirable.

[Prosperity] had vanished from the Divine Throne—but in their hearts, [Prosperity] had only just begun.

...

Chapter 333: She Turned Into a Dense Forest Spotted Leopard

Hong Lin saw Cheng Shi, and the moment she caught sight of him, a brilliant smile spread across her face.

She waved off the Mushroom-Footed People, telling them to wait, then approached him with her smile replaced by a complex expression. When she reached Cheng Shi, she sighed with profound emotion:

"I never imagined destiny could be this convoluted."

Cheng Shi smiled as he sized up this warrior friend who'd been recognized by the Pact as one of [Prosperity]'s heirs. Then a mischievous grin broke through:

"Is this still the fearless, charge-first Druid I know?"

"Since when did you get so sentimental?"

"Bullshit—it's just heartfelt reflection!" Hong Lin laughed again, shaking her head with an amused smile. She reached into her spatial storage and produced the die that [Fate] had bestowed upon her.

Looking at the twenty-four-sided die in her hand, Cheng Shi pulled out his own die with envy written all over his face. Six sides.

But regardless of how many sides they had, when the two placed their dice side by side, they murmured in perfect unison, as if moved by the same impulse:

"The coming path and going road, all are destined."

Watching Hong Lin's expression grow increasingly devout, Cheng Shi's mouth twitched. 'Well, that settles it—Big Cat's been completely duped.'

Of course, credit was due to his Benefactor [Fate], who was ultimately the one who'd convinced Hong Lin that the Destined Ones was a real organization.

But speaking of which—now that Hong Lin had her own die, what about the one still in his pack...?

He snuck a peek at his spatial storage and found that the Die of Fate meant for establishing a second faith was still sitting quietly inside. His Benefactor hadn't reclaimed it.

So...

Had his identity as a Destined One been officially endorsed?

Did He still want him using this die to recruit more people?

Cheng Shi let out a dry chuckle, remembering [Deceit]'s words: 'He's a better liar than me.'

Looking at it now, Cheng Shi didn't know whether [Fate] was actually a better liar—but He certainly seemed to enjoy it. Well, to be precise—He enjoyed bamboozling people.

Seeing Cheng Shi's smile, Hong Lin raised an eyebrow: "What's so funny? Share with me."

Cheng Shi shook his head: "Nothing. The trial's over, and I should get going. But before I leave, I've got a couple things for you."

With that, he produced two branches right in front of Hong Lin.

One thick and thrumming with vitality. One tender yet overflowing with [Prosperity].

Hong Lin recognized only her own new-birth baptism. As for the other branch—though she didn't recognize it, she could guess what it was.

Sensing the boundless power of [Prosperity] emanating from it, Hong Lin's pupils contracted sharply. Her gaze locked on, and she whispered in stunned disbelief:

"This is Her... Authority!?!?"

She jerked her head up to stare at Cheng Shi, unable to hide the shock in her eyes.

"Where did you get [Prosperity]'s Authority?"

Cheng Shi shrugged and pressed both branches into the dumbfounded Hong Lin's hands.

"He gave it to me."

He certainly couldn't say it was from [Deceit]—he could only offer the vague pronoun "He" and let Hong Lin fill in the blanks. But he knew she'd inevitably assume "He" meant [Fate].

This was surely anticipated by [Deceit], who didn't care about such things—and would probably find it amusing.

Because that was the Fun God. Apart from entertainment, He probably didn't care about anything.

"You—"

"You just said you haven't gotten sentimental, and now you're all 'you, you, me, me.' What—don't want them?"

Hong Lin stared into Cheng Shi's eyes, then suddenly broke into a laugh: "Of course I want them. What I was going to say is—do you have any other Authorities? You can give them all to me. I'll take everything."

"..."

'In your dreams.'

Cheng Shi rolled his eyes and irritably fished something else out of his storage—

A tongue.

Pinching the Tongue of Eating Lies, he looked at the instantly stiffened Hong Lin and smirked:

"Don't think this business is over. Brother Tongue says that even if you've become [Prosperity]'s Envoy, you still need to finish our unfinished game."

"So—truth, or slap?"

The Tongue of Eating Lies had been squirming in Cheng Shi's grip, but the moment he finished speaking, it let out a lazy belch and went still.

Hong Lin wasn't stupid. She could see the tongue had zero interest in her. With a light laugh, she turned to Cheng Shi:

"Truth. Ask away."

'You said it!'

Cheng Shi was delighted. He blurted out Hong Lin's own question, bouncing it right back at her word for word:

"How did Zhen Yi scam you?"

Though Hong Lin had expected it, hearing that name still darkened her expression.

'Of course!'

She nodded with a bad-tempered huff, gnashing her teeth:

"Fine, fine, fine—you want to know, right? I'll tell you. But swear you won't breathe a word to anyone."

Cheng Shi nodded vigorously: "Absolutely. Never. Quick—spill."

"She..." A flash of mortified fury crossed Hong Lin's eyes. She clenched her fists. "She transformed into a Dense Forest Spotted Leopard..."

"?" Cheng Shi blanked. "What does that mean?"

Hong Lin shot him a furious glare and refused to say another word. The Tongue of Eating Lies showed no reaction either, which only left Cheng Shi more baffled.

Seeing him still lost in thought, Hong Lin smiled through gritted teeth:

"The trial's over. Are you planning to stand here pondering until sundown tomorrow, waiting for the game to auto-teleport you out?"

Cheng Shi snapped back to attention. Though curiosity still lingered in his eyes, he nodded properly:

"Right, time to go."

"Though I am curious—now that you're an Envoy, will you still participate in trials like the rest of us?"

Hong Lin furrowed her brow, thinking carefully as she chose her words:

"The guidance He gave was too vague. I won't have any answers until I leave this trial."

"But speaking of that—let me ask you something. An organization as big as the Destined Ones should have some kind of communication tool or way to meet up, right?"

"Why haven't you ever told me about one?"

"Don't tell me you're still hiding things from me?"

"..."

'Lady, if a two-person organization counts as "big," then yes—I've been hiding plenty from you...'

'As expected—one lie's gaps need countless more lies to fill.'

'Good thing I'm somewhat skilled at lying. This sort of small scene doesn't faze me.'

Cheng Shi let out a dismissive snort, then pursed his lips:

"Don't forget whose protection we're under. When you need to see me, destiny will naturally bring us together. Same goes for me."

Hong Lin nodded thoughtfully, a fervent light blazing in her eyes.

'This is destiny. Wild and mesmerizing destiny.'

Watching Hong Lin's expression grow increasingly... intense, Cheng Shi quietly swallowed.

The hand behind his back clamped tightly over the overstuffed Tongue of Eating Lies, preventing it from letting out another belch.

'Yeah, better keep this tongue hidden from now on—otherwise it'll blow my cover.'

Setting aside [Truth], Baldy was probably the last "bloodline" of [Prosperity]. And this lone remnant of bloodline had been bamboozled by him into believing in [Fate].

'I have to say... destiny really is quite interesting.'

"Alright, that's all from me. Baldy—until we meet again."

"Wait—aren't you curious what I inherited from [Prosperity]?"

'Of course I'm curious. If my Benefactor hadn't already told me, I'd be dying of curiosity.'

But right now? Ahem—the mysterious Destined One never concerns himself with worldly trivialities.

Cheng Shi smiled and rubbed his nose: "What's there to be curious about? Everyone has their own fate. I'm off. Don't bother seeing me out."

With a wave, he stepped back.

It wasn't some farewell ritual—he simply wanted to end this trial as a follower of [Fate], writing a perfect period to close out this destiny-altering chapter filled with Change.

So he quietly reached behind him, touched his shadow, and left the trial.

And the instant he departed—the moment he saw the settlement screen—he finally understood what "wielding the power to reward [Prosperity]'s followers in trials as proxy" actually meant.

[Special Trial (Dying Embers: [Prosperity]) — Challenge Successful]

[Calculating score and settling rewards...]

[Player: Cheng Shi — Performance Score: S]

[Item Obtained: Lush Horn Crown (SS) x1]

[Item Obtained: Rainforest Tribe Hero Medal (A) x1]

[Item Obtained: Letter of Thanks from Mushroom People (C) x1]

[Item Obtained: Standard Phone (C) x1]

[Divine Gift Obtained: [Prosperity] Authority "Vitality" (Partial) x1]

[Road to Ascension +20]

[Ladder of Ascent +3]

[Current Road to Ascension Score: 2188 — Global Rank: 407,440]

[Current Ladder of Ascent Score: 172 — Path Rank: 40]

[Trial Complete — Preparing to exit]

...

Chapter 334: The Recorder, the Devotee, the Oathbreaker, the Lucky One, and the Knower

Reality. A supermarket in an unknown city.

Though this was technically a supermarket, the shelves had long been stripped of merchandise. Now, they were packed with nothing but thick, heavy books.

In the aisle between shelves, a tall, thin young man in a windbreaker hunched over a wooden desk, writing furiously.

He transcribed into a massive blank notebook while muttering every word aloud, his expression a twisted blend of fervor and ecstasy—as though immersed in an indescribable bliss.

"Beneath the Septic Final Tomb, beside the lake of putrid blood, the soil brimming with black ichor was not the flesh of [Decay]'s pilgrims, but the accumulated ash of [Prosperity] over countless years."

"As for where those pilgrims who sought the Septic Final Tomb ended up—the answer might surprise you. They all sank to the bottom of the Blood Lake, becoming part of the chorus of blood effigies, mechanically and woodenly chanting [Decay]'s dirge, begging for the day their Benefactor might once again grant them freedom."

This tall, thin young man was obviously Zuo Qiu. He regarded his freshly transcribed "history" with deep satisfaction.

History was never entirely true—indeed, most of it had been embellished by its recorders. He'd understood this from the moment he joined the History School.

So he wasn't copying genuine history. He was slipping his own personal touches into the recorded account.

As for whether those blood effigies at the bottom of the lake were truly begging for freedom...

Who knew?

Let the next person seeking the real history discover those truths for themselves.

After all, [Memory] required succession. All he needed to do was cast a hook that was indistinguishable from truth, then quietly wait for the next devout [Memory] believer to take the bait and seek the truth. That person would inevitably discover his own history along the way—and remember it alongside everything else.

In this way, his own "existence" would be recorded without end.

Oh, and he should also thank that Puppet Master. At least she, too, had witnessed a segment of his "existence." Perhaps when he finally died, he might live on in her memories.

...

Reality. An apartment in an unknown city.

An Jing sat quietly beside the coffee table, wiping the dirt and grime from little Cai Wei's body.

Her wish to seek an audience with [Decay] had fallen through, but that didn't really matter—she wasn't a follower of [Decay] to begin with. She was merely desperate to meet any of Them, without a specific target in mind.

As she cleaned, she replayed the unfathomable events that occurred just before the trial ended.

When she and the historian had been running for their lives to escape the rampaging Sighing Sorrow Tide, she could have sworn she glimpsed one of Them atop that colossal canopy.

But she wasn't certain, because she remembered the divine aura beneath the canopy being far too complex—as if more than one deity had been present.

Yet how could multiple gods descend simultaneously in a trial devoted to [Prosperity]?

She couldn't figure it out, and after finishing her cleaning of little Cai Wei, she silently settled on her next target.

'Since my memories aren't very clear, why not pursue [Memory]?'

That way, she might even serve as a quiet mole, feeding Xin Xin and Zhen Yi useful intelligence about [Memory].

...

Reality. A cinema in an unknown city.

A man lay sprawled on the ground, staring at his rotting hands and his broken body. He slammed his fist against the floor with a vicious curse, letting out a howl of rage and despair.

"No! No!!!"

"Why!? How!??"

"How did it come to this! How did it come to this!!"

This wretched figure, body decayed beyond recognition, was obviously Zhen. As for why he—who had broken his oath to join [Prosperity]—had reverted to this sorry state...

It was simply because he was still alive.

Yes. The reason was that he was still alive.

When that overwhelming [Decay] tide came crashing down like a mountain, he'd lost all hope, his heart turned to ash—a single thought remaining in his mind: His punishment had come!

Zhen didn't want to die. Otherwise, he would never have broken his oath in the Blood Lake. So when he found himself with no way out, he was forced yet again to pray to his original Benefactor, begging for forgiveness and pledging everything in return.

In that instant, the despairing man held virtually no hope that this deity would tolerate his faith-hopping antics. But against all expectations, at that very moment, [Decay] actually answered!

He pardoned Zhen's sin of oathbreaking and accepted him once more.

And so, when the frozen-solid tide of [Decay] came crashing down, Zhen not only survived—he was healed by the infinite power of [Decay].

Of course, [Decay]'s healing was somewhat... different from [Prosperity]'s. So he wound up looking like this half-dead mess once again.

The good news was that he'd survived the trial.

The bad news was...

He now bore two Oathbreaking Curses!

One from [Decay], one from [Prosperity]!

[Decay] had taken him back but hadn't bothered removing the first curse. So after all his maneuvering, he was still the same fourth-ranked Rot Chanter on the Ladder of Ascent—but now sporting two shiny new oathbreaking curses.

You'd think that was the end of it? No—this poor double-oathbreaker even had twenty points deducted after the trial concluded.

Nobody had ever heard of a player having points deducted during a trial, but to Zhen, this score was an unmistakable declaration of [Prosperity]'s utter loathing toward him!

She was a deity who relished revenge, and the mere thought of it drove deeper terror into Zhen's heart.

"No! Why! I refuse to accept this!! Fate is unjust! Fate is unjust!!!"

...

Reality. A villa in an unknown city.

When Hong Lin opened her eyes, she found nothing about herself had changed. She returned to her familiar Rest Area, still in normal human form, still receiving trial rewards and score bonuses during settlement.

Apart from possessing some special powers and a more vigorous vitality within her body, she still appeared to be an ordinary player.

Well, a Chosen One wasn't exactly ordinary—but from Their perspective, she truly was.

Recalling everything that had just happened, Hong Lin couldn't help but smile. And the very instant her lips curved upward, the phone beside her rang.

It was Tao Yi calling.

The first thing she heard upon answering was bewilderment and confusion.

"Something feels weird!"

Hong Lin raised an eyebrow, as if she'd anticipated this: "What's weird?"

"After this trial, He gave me three points. Isn't that weird? I've never even gotten the two-point 'honor' before, and this time I did absolutely nothing and got three points."

"A Tu, you always say two of His three points come with bad intentions—does that mean He's started watching me too?"

Hearing this, Hong Lin nearly burst out laughing.

But she held it in, suppressing her amusement: "Yep. He's started watching you."

"Hm? Did you just laugh?"

"You laughed, didn't you?"

"You know something, don't you? This wasn't random, was it?"

"Huh? I don't know anything."

"No, you know!"

"You've been way too quiet today. This isn't like you at all. Something big happened that I don't know about—right?"

'Little fox is still a little fox.'

Hong Lin finally couldn't hold back. She burst into laughter, clutching her stomach, laughing for a good long while—until she no longer remembered what she was laughing about.

She put the phone on speaker, tossed it on the floor, then lay on her back staring at the ceiling. Her expression a bizarre mix of emotions, she said:

"I saw that swindler. He really is a swindler."

"Hm? Who? Cheng Shi?"

"Ha—I only said 'swindler' and you immediately knew it was Cheng Shi?"

"...I guessed."

"You guessed wrong. He's not a swindler. He's a Fate Weaver."

"Huh?"

"Also—those three points? I gave them to you."

Hong Lin smiled, waiting for the other end's shock-filled response. But instead, after a moment, she got:

"How is he a Fate Weaver?"

"..." Hong Lin's eyes instantly turned deeply resentful. "Little Yi, you really have changed your affections."

"Huh? No—what did you just say?"

"I said your three points came from me!!!"

"But what does that have to do with him being a Fate Weaver?"

"..."

BANG!

The great eldest daughter of [Prosperity], Frazor, at this moment, sentenced one phone to the death penalty of destruction.

...

Reality. A museum in an unknown city.

Zhen Xin woke. Her eyes held a trace of disappointment, but far more confusion.

During the closing moments of the previous trial, while she'd been waiting in the mutating rainforest for any additional chance to search for that prophesied "future," she'd dimly made out several of Them descending upon the boundless canopy.

Just when she thought her moment had come, she was abruptly hurled out of the trial by some mysterious force—dumped straight back into the Rest Area.

So Zhen Xin was very confused. What had happened in that trial that resulted in players being ejected?

She racked her brain without answer. Her first call went to Aunt Jing, but Aunt Jing was equally clueless. However, from their conversation she learned that other players didn't seem to have been ejected at the same time.

So her exit from the trial wasn't an accident!

Most likely someone—or some god—had deliberately removed her from the trial.

But who was "he," and why?

For anyone else, this kind of question—lacking any logical starting point—might take three days and nights with no result. But Zhen Xin was different. She was a con artist, and a con artist with a vivid imagination.

She reasoned that since she'd been ejected unharmed, the other party bore no malice. And since there was no malice, it certainly wasn't some careless afterthought.

So she immediately strung together every suspicious detail from the entire trial—and her thoughts landed on Cheng Shi's shadow, on that stretch of void, on that utterly unresponsive "future."

Was it possible that the "future" hadn't answered at the time, but had just now responded?

Only that ethereal, intangible "future" would act so illogically—throwing her out of a trial.

Because if it had been one of Them, she'd have woken not in the Rest Area, but on the Audience Ground.

So... what was the "future's" response?

The answer was simple: the shadow!

Zhen Xin furrowed her brow and switched on a Magic Lamp that Zhen Yi had collected for the museum, casting her shadow onto the floor.

She studied her shadow, preparing to step into the void once more—but the instant she reached out to tear it open, she suddenly noticed that her shadow's outline was... peculiar.

Its shape only vaguely resembled her. Both the upper and lower halves were distorted and warped, with indentations and gaps along the edges and curves, as though corroded by some sourceless light.

Zhen Xin froze, then immediately repositioned herself, assuming the exact pose she'd struck in the trial when she'd stepped onto the void seeking the "future."

As she adjusted her posture, her shadow slowly shifted, eventually forming an even stranger silhouette.

It looked somewhat like her—but far more like some kind of symbol.

Her gaze locked on. She memorized the symbol in an instant, then pulled out a blank sheet of paper and traced it down.

Staring at the bizarre symbol, she murmured unconsciously:

"Is this... script?"

She furrowed her brow and began poring through ancient texts from the Land of Hope, searching for similarly styled characters.

She combed through countless volumes from the Civilization Era without finding a single clue. Only after widening her scope to include tribal relics from the Life Era did she finally discover identical characters—on an ancient, nearly crumbling chain of bone fragments strung together like pages.

Not similar. Identical.

She saw the exact same strokes.

"Found you!"

The exhausted Zhen Xin finally smiled. She broke down the characters on the bone fragments, mixed them with other symbols, and distributed inquiries through various channels and contacts. By the time the next special trial arrived, she had deciphered the symbol hidden in her shadow.

And the meaning of those strokes, once translated, condensed into two words:

[Origin].

This was clearly a Divine Name—but strangely, Zhen Xin had never heard of it. Despite having collected countless anecdotes about deities, she had never once encountered this name in the margins of history.

"[Origin]... who is He?"

She repeated the name over and over, scouring every memory for any historical connection. But so focused was Zhen Xin that she failed to notice—the instant she whispered that name, her distorted shadow quietly returned to normal.

And then, abruptly, she froze. Her expression shifted rapidly to delight, the corners of her eyes lifting high, her curling lips unable to conceal a smile. Words spilled from her mouth, uncontrolled and mischievous:

"Hee~"

"My dear sister, why haven't you called me yet?"

"I've been waiting so impatiently."

"Since you won't call me, I'll just have to come find you~"

...

[End of Volume One: Faith Game]

...

Chapter 335: Authority "Vitality" and the Lush Horn Crown

Though Cheng Shi had partially anticipated the so-called "proxy power to distribute [Prosperity]'s trial rewards" that Hong Lin had inherited, he was still stunned when he saw his own settlement page.

'Well, well, well—halfway through the exam, the test-taker became the proctor and started cheating out in the open.'

'That's way too entertaining!'

'Good thing the cheater is me. Otherwise, watching someone else pocket cheated bonuses would be maddening.'

He sat on the rooftop, reviewing his scores again and again, then shook his head with an amused laugh.

Twenty bonus points to the Road to Ascension. He'd never heard of anyone getting twenty points—the most he'd ever earned was seventeen.

But this wasn't necessarily a good thing. Higher Road to Ascension scores only made trials harder. Better to have more Ladder of Ascent points and cheat his way straight to first place.

'Unfortunately, even if Hong Lin really could inflate Ladder scores, that privilege only extends to [Prosperity]'s followers. After all, my Benefactor is still alive—and doesn't seem like He's dying anytime soon.'

But beyond the scores...

Cheng Shi's expression turned serious as he produced the so-called divine gift—the partial Authority of [Prosperity]'s Vitality!

It was a branch slightly thinner than the true Authority.

Looking at this thick bough he'd shoved into Hong Lin's hands without hesitation—now "partially" returned to him through trial settlement rewards—a peculiar smile crept across his face.

'Does this count as gambling?'

'Probably not, since I only gave it away because my Benefactor told me to.'

'But who says honesty isn't just another form of deceit? Perhaps this wasn't absolute deception, but it was certainly a generous test!'

If he wanted to walk further down a solitary road, he needed some companions on parallel paths who could keep pace. It seemed he'd truly gained another friend who understood him to the core.

'Though I have to say—Big Cat really is... generous.'

Indeed, Hong Lin was generous.

When she exited the trial and discovered that her inherited power was the ability to distribute [Prosperity]'s trial rewards, she'd become shrewdly strategic in an instant.

She hadn't returned to the Rest Area right away. Instead, she'd appeared atop a canopy drained of all color—a sea of ashen gray. And at the very summit of this canopy sat a treasure vault of [Prosperity], embedded in the space between reality and illusion.

It was packed with all manner of items. Some were crafted by Her own hand. Some were trophies plundered from other deities. Others were [Prosperity] sacrifices that players had discovered during trials or offered up to Her, which She'd fished from the river of time using the Pact and casually stored inside.

In short, every [Prosperity]-related reward came from this vault.

And now, Hong Lin had become its master.

Its true master.

From this point on, every item related to [Prosperity] would pass through her fingers before reaching the players in trials. In a sense, she was already fundamentally different from ordinary players.

Because she had truly become Frazor—the eldest daughter of [Prosperity], as recognized by the Pact.

And this Frazor was undeniably generous. The moment she learned she had the power to bestow gifts, her first thought was of her friend. She gifted the most precious item from that vault.

Of course, the vault's most precious treasure wasn't actually inside the vault—it was on her person.

She took out [Prosperity]'s sole remaining Authority and, without hesitation, bestowed it upon her friend, Cheng Shi.

"We won this gamble together. You've already won more than enough on my behalf, so this heaven-sent Authority should rightfully be your share—chips you earned for yourself, Fate Weaver."

Her heart was generous, but the bestowal failed.

For a player without Envoy status, the Pact did not permit the proxy wielding of a complete Authority.

Left with no choice, Hong Lin split the Vitality Authority and sent out only the portion most critical for survival.

As [Prosperity]'s divine gift descended alongside the rewards, above the vault, a pair of gleeful eyes quietly faded from view.

"[Fate] truly deserves His title as the god who governs good fortune. Your luck isn't bad—shame I didn't snatch her up first."

Another pair of cold eyes likewise vanished, leaving only a frigid snort echoing from the depths of the void.

"You can't deceive her."

"A silly little cat—how hard could she be to fool? Don't tell me you think only you can deceive her?"

"Yes."

"...[Fate] really is always changing. And growing more shameless by the day."

"You want a fight?"

"Why wouldn't I?"

BOOM—

Another battle erupted in the void. Compared to the spectacle of [Prosperity]'s self-destruction, however, this explosion went entirely unnoticed.

...

[Prosperity] Authority "Vitality" (Partial): A True God's Authority recognized by the Pact, bestowed by its steward, granting the holder the partial power to wield this Authority as proxy.

Authority Effect — Endless Life: Influenced by the Authority, the proxy's vitality becomes boundless. Until their life force is completely extinguished, no weakening of vitality will occur.

Staring at this Authority effect, Cheng Shi was dumbfounded.

He didn't know how many effects the full "Vitality" Authority contained, but judging from this one alone—Big Cat truly didn't want him to die.

This "Endless Life" was basically a cheat-code health lock!

Reading the description, as long as the damage didn't one-shot him, his condition wouldn't deteriorate!

What?

'Who would have thought that I, Cheng the Steady, would one day be able to stand up and go wild!'

From the descent of the Faith Game until now—when had he ever encountered damage that could instantly kill a player?

'Oh, right—being squished to death by Them doesn't count...'

'Well, this is great. Priest skills are useless on me now—oh wait, no, they're still useful. Cleansing debuffs is still necessary.'

'But even so, this is an ultimate power-up!'

Cheng Shi's eyes sparkled with excitement. 'See? See! Greed pays off—be greedy enough, and you end up with everything!'

After grasping the Authority's function, he quickly stowed the branch and pulled out the other cheated reward—the Lush Horn Crown.

It was a headpiece, somewhat resembling a wooden circlet, but with two impressively majestic antlers jutting from either side.

The crown was far from light. Cheng Shi tried it on, and his first impression was that the pressure on his cervical spine was rather excessive.

"What's this supposed to mean—personally targeting me?"

"I said Tao Yi has spinal problems, so she gives me a neck problem?"

"That can't be it..."

But after reading the crown's effects, Cheng Shi understood. Hong Lin wasn't making a pointed jab—her goal was the same as always: she didn't want him to die.

She was even more cautious than he was. More cautious than him—Cheng the Steady himself.

True to her word—when she inherited [Prosperity]'s power, she wanted her friends to prosper forever.

Lush Horn Crown (SS): A crown forged from thousand-year antlers and immortal wood, offered by the Antler Folk of [Prosperity]'s tribes. When you wear this crown, your healing effects gain the Recovery property. When healing a living being whose life force has been completely extinguished, it will revive them. This effect can only trigger once per living being.

A resurrection artifact!

Since the descent of the Faith Game, Cheng Shi finally possessed a resurrection item of his very own!

Though its effect could only work on the same target once, this wasn't a consumable—which meant he now had the ability to revive others!

And whether held in reserve during trials or played as a trump card in negotiations, this kind of ability was invariably the most valuable of all.

Now he truly had no choice but to praise [Prosperity]!

These two items alone made every risk he'd taken in this trial absolutely worth it!

Not to mention he'd also gained the friendship of an Envoy—the genuine friendship of Frazor herself.

And there was also the matter of divinity he'd forgotten to return—and which Baldy hadn't asked for back.

'I couldn't have just... accidentally pocketed it, right?'

'Is that... okay?'

...

Chapter 336: The Relationship Between Lips and Tongue

Besides the Authority, divinity, and crown, the rewards contained a few more peculiar items.

Cheng Shi spent a while organizing his warehouse, then hung the "Rainforest Tribe Hero Medal" on the wall behind the shelf.

He'd assumed an A-rank item would at least be something practical, but he was wrong. The rating only reflected the material—it was carved from the bones of a royal war bear of the rainforest.

It was nothing more than an ordinary medal with no divine power whatsoever, meant purely to commemorate those who had contributed to the rainforest tribes.

The trial settlement rewards had a hard cap, and the Authority plus the crown had nearly maxed out the allocation. So Hong Lin had to rummage through the treasure vault, eventually picking this thing and tossing it Cheng Shi's way.

Generously put, it commemorated his salvation of the Mushroom-Footed People. Bluntly put, it was filler.

And aside from taking up space in the warehouse, it really was useless.

"Then again... can you eat a royal war bear's bones?" Cheng Shi eyed the medal on the wall and scratched his head. After much deliberation, he abandoned the idea.

'Forget it. Let's eat actual food. Can't wrong Brother Mouth.'

The letter of thanks was even more absurd. It was a leaf—a leaf covered in text written with hair-thin root tendrils. Cheng Shi knew nothing about Mushroom-Footed People culture, so curiosity compelled him to call upon Brother Mouth.

The Fool's Lips pondered for a moment, then began today's recitation:

"To the great Daughter of [Prosperity], Lady Frazor:"

"No words can capture the depth of our gratitude and devotion. As sinners of [Prosperity], the opportunity to return to His embrace once more is the greatest fortune of our entire race."

"To express our gratitude, I wish to share the greatest secret in our tribe's recorded history. Please take note:"

"Wrapping fungal roots three or more times around each other during upright mating effectively prevents lateral falls and improves birth rates."

????

Cheng Shi keeled over mid-listen.

He stumbled and crashed to the floor. Rubbing the shoulder that had slammed against the ground, he sighed in exasperation:

"Brother Mouth, next time you embellish, could you at least leave the important parts alone? I was waiting for the secret, and you give me this?"

"The secret was made up too."

"Their gratitude was too bland, so I spruced it up for them."

"..."

'Well, aren't you refreshingly honest!'

Cheng Shi paused with a bizarre expression, then pulled the tongue from his spatial storage and held it near his face.

"Brother Mouth, care to repeat that?"

"The secret was made up too."

SLAP—

The Tongue of Eating Lies smacked Cheng Shi across the face.

He perked up immediately, grabbing the tongue with glee:

"You lied! Brother Tongue says you lied! They do have a secret! What is it?"

"Sure, sure, sure."

The words barely left, and the Tongue of Eating Lies delivered another slap.

SLAP—

That wiped the grin off Cheng Shi's face. He suddenly realized that regardless of whether the Tongue of Eating Lies could detect the Fool's Lips' deceptions, it was slapping his face either way.

Why should he take slaps for Brother Mouth's lies?

'What kind of bullying is this!?'

'Are you two playing me?'

His eyes narrowed as he glared at the tongue in his hand. The tongue flipped over lazily and grumbled with boredom:

"How'd you end up hosting an idiot?"

"..."

Cheng Shi blinked in confusion, then it hit him—the "idiot" meant him. He flung the tongue to the ground and was about to fire back when his own mouth beat him to it:

"You're right."

"..."

Cheng Shi's vision went dark. He tried to speak again, but the Fool's Lips were faster:

"Just tell me—are you full or not?"

The Tongue of Eating Lies squirmed twice on the ground, then drawled lazily:

"I could eat just fine over at the girl's place too."

Wait!

Girl?

That Puppet Master!?

She could out-lie him?!

'Impossible!'

But who was she, really!?

Cheng Shi was stunned. He was about to press for answers when the tongue continued: "Though if I stayed with her, I'd probably eat myself to death. At least you have some taste—this idiot's mouth still has a few honest words in it."

"..."

'Great, great, great—you two calling me an idiot back and forth, having a grand time, are you? Fine. If that's how you want to play, don't blame me for getting creative.'

Cheng Shi picked up the tongue with a dark expression, activated the Tongue of Eating Lies' ability on himself, and began a self-interrogation:

"Have I ever deceived anyone? No."

"..."

"..."

The Tongue of Eating Lies jolted and slapped him across the face. Cheng Shi let out a cold laugh, didn't even flinch, and immediately followed up:

"Have I ever deceived anyone? No."

"..."

Bound by its own rules, the tongue slapped him again. But by now, the tongue was starting to sense something wrong.

Sure enough, Cheng Shi didn't hesitate. One sentence after another, he launched into a relentless loop, re-targeting himself with the tongue after each declaration. After several dozen repetitions, his face was swollen to absurd proportions—but the tongue that had been doing the slapping now lay paralyzed on the ground, utterly immobile.

"Can't eat anymore—urp—gonna die—urp—gonna burst—urp—"

"Begging for mercy? Heh heh. Have I ever decei—"

Before he could finish, the tongue convulsed violently and made retching sounds.

"BLERGH—"

"..."

'This is way too weird. A tongue that dry-heaves.'

Cheng Shi looked down at the gagging tongue and spoke with a cold smile:

"Who was your original owner?"

The tongue retched painfully for a good while before finally succumbing to Cheng Shi's antics. With tears, it choked out a name:

"Zhen Xin—her name is Zhen Xin!"

!!!???

Huh?

Cheng Shi went numb. He'd never imagined the Puppet Master had been Zhen Xin in disguise.

But those puppet strings had seemed completely genuine—was she a Victim class who possessed the Lies of Yesterday talent?

Just as Cheng Shi puzzled over this, the Fool's Lips—which had been watching the show this whole time—spoke up: "It lied to you."

Cheng Shi blanked, then his expression darkened.

"Who lied to me? Brother Mouth, are you trying to trick me too?"

"I never lie."

'That's me! Not you!'

Cheng Shi rubbed his swollen, aching cheek, then abruptly changed the subject: "What's your relationship with this tongue?"

"No relationship."

"Oh, is that so? No relationship? Then let's flush it down the toilet!"

"..."

With that, Cheng Shi scooped up the helpless tongue and strode toward the bathroom behind the warehouse. But halfway there, the Fool's Lips caved.

"There is a relationship."

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow, thinking: 'There it is—finally pried it out!'

"What kind of relationship?"

"If the lips are gone, the teeth will be cold."

"?" Cheng Shi frowned. "What does that mean?"

"Without me, the tongue gets cold."

"..."

'Are you seriously giving me an idiom lesson right now!?'

Cheng Shi's face went rigid and he sharply quickened his pace—but no matter how fast he walked, the Fool's Lips said nothing more. Seeing Brother Mouth go completely silent with zero intention of explaining, Cheng Shi's mouth twitched and he stopped.

"Not flushing it?"

"..." The tongue was still dry-heaving, unable to respond.

Cheng Shi growled through gritted teeth: "The toilet's clogged. Can't flush."

'I fought to get this tongue back—why would I let anyone flush it?'

'Damn it—getting my face slapped swollen by a tongue is bad enough, and now I'm being mocked by a set of lips. My life really is tragic!'

But he absolutely refused to concede defeat. Cheng Shi produced a potion to reduce the swelling on his cheeks, then muttered stubbornly:

"Fine—don't talk. I'll find out eventually."

He stomped to the edge of the rooftop and sat down, mulling over whether the Puppet Master really was Zhen Xin. Just then, Xie Yang from the neighboring building poked his head over the opposite rooftop edge and called out curiously:

"Bro, what's wrong? You look kinda deflated."

Cheng Shi froze, then blurted out:

"The toilet's clogged. Ate too much."

?????

Cheng Shi was dumbstruck. He'd never imagined that taking phrases out of context and splicing them together could work like this.

Xie Yang was equally dumbstruck. He noticed his neighbor's cheeks still looked somewhat puffy, and recalled that the direction he'd come from was indeed the back of the warehouse rather than the front entrance. His expression froze, and he said with a hint of unease:

"...Ha, that's a pretty, uh, unique hobby you've got there... Anyway, I've got something to take care of. I'll head out first."

"..."

Watching Xie Yang bolt away at full speed, Cheng Shi had a sinking feeling that his reputation as a "necromancer" was only going to accumulate more bizarre quirks.

'Oh well. I've watched plenty of his embarrassing moments—fair's fair if some get watched back. Shared joy beats solo joy.'

'Let's just call it an offering to the Fun God...'

Thinking about it that way, he felt much better.

...

Chapter 337: Standard Phone: I Had an Audience with [Birth]

Among the trial rewards, Hong Lin had also slipped in a communication tool: Standard Phone (C).

They called it a phone, but it was really just a handset—a disconnected telephone handset, at that.

It had no buttons and no interactive functions. After studying it for ages without figuring out how to use it, Cheng Shi casually tossed it into the warehouse.

He'd received similar communication tools from trial teammates before but had always declined them, since back then he hadn't wanted too many connections with other people.

But now, having learned about the tangled web of relationships among peak players, he decided to keep this phone as a new source of intelligence.

From Hu Wei and Big Cat's experiences, it was clear that any player who reached the top couldn't remain completely independent. Otherwise, when someone plotted against you, you might not have a single ally.

Of course, getting Cheng Shi to genuinely befriend and bare his soul to others was nearly impossible. In a world where everyone schemed, sincerity was vanishingly rare. But fortunately, he was good at scheming too—so carpooling forward through mutual calculation wasn't out of the question.

Just as he was thinking this, the phone in the warehouse started ringing.

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow in surprise, got up, walked to the warehouse, and picked up the handset. The instant he touched it, the call connected—and a familiar voice came through from the other end.

"I had an audience with [Birth]."

Just that one sentence, and Cheng Shi's hand clenched so hard he nearly crushed the handset.

The caller was Hong Lin. Her words clearly meant the audience had already concluded, but a thread of tension still wove through her voice.

If what had summoned her was that Divine Pillar of [Birth], then it was hardly surprising—no one who met Him for the first time could remain calm.

But strangely, more than nervousness, Hong Lin's voice carried excitement. Barely containable excitement.

'More good news?'

Cheng Shi's eyes narrowed slightly, but he didn't respond.

This was his first time using this kind of communication tool. He needed to be careful enough. Identifying someone solely by their voice was too rash, so he said nothing—only tapping his fingernail lightly against the handset to signal the other party to continue.

The other side paused, then let out a confused "Hm?"

Cheng Shi still didn't respond. He tapped the handset again.

This time the other party understood. She gave a wry chuckle:

"You're way too cautious. I'm the one who gave you this phone—who else could it be?"

"Anyway, stop messing around. I really did have an audience with [Birth]. I saw that Divine Pillar you never want anyone to see twice..."

"He... is beyond special. Even more so than [Death]. As it turns out, among the gods on the [Life] path, only [Prosperity] had the most normal form—the one that came closest to my idea of what a deity should look like."

"..."

Hearing this, Cheng Shi fell silent.

'Did you even think before saying that?'

'Oh right—you probably never got an audience with your Benefactor atop the Prosperity Divine Shade. Can't blame you, then.'

"Hey, why aren't you talking? Don't tell me you tossed the phone aside?" When Cheng Shi remained silent, the voice on the other end suddenly turned cautious and serious. "Wait—you're not Cheng Shi. Who are you?"

"..." Cheng Shi frowned slightly but still didn't speak.

"What have you done with my friend?"

Hearing that, he finally realized what had been nagging at him.

The Authority!

Big Cat had bestowed [Prosperity]'s Authority as a divine gift. But she hadn't confirmed the Authority transfer with him at the very start. This was her first time exercising this power—wasn't she worried that something had gone wrong with the bestowal of such immense might?

In Big Cat's eyes, the gods were far less important than her friends—especially a friend who had just pushed her into that position.

Besides, with the Endless Life blessing, how could he possibly run into trouble the moment he received it?

Of course, he couldn't rule out that the caller really was Hong Lin, simply rattled from the audience with [Birth] with some residual nervousness.

But Cheng Shi still felt something was off.

Nevertheless, after that last remark, he didn't continue his silence. Instead, he revealed his identity openly.

"Just teasing you. It's me, Cheng Shi."

Hearing his response, the other party hesitated again. She seemed to let out a breath of relief, then immediately bristled with mild anger: "Looking for a beating, are you?"

Cheng Shi laughed heartily: "Long time no see."

The tone on the other end faltered: "Hm? The trial ended only a few hours ago. Are you having a fit?"

Cheng Shi chuckled and replied: "I haven't seen Hong Lin in just a few hours, true. But what I actually meant was: long time no see, Zhen Yi."

In truth, Cheng Shi had no idea who was on the other end. He wasn't even sure it was really Hong Lin. He'd simply bluffed out of caution, hoping to glean more from the caller's reaction.

Upon hearing "Zhen Yi," the other party clearly choked—but moments later, a furious roar erupted from the handset:

"Cheng Shi! You did that on purpose, didn't you!! Don't think that just because you know my secret, I won't dare beat you up!!"

?

That genuine reaction left Cheng Shi completely stunned.

'Huh? It really is Big Cat!'

Cheng Shi gave an awkward laugh, thinking he'd been a tad too cautious. The phone had been in his possession for barely a few hours—besides Hong Lin, who else would know about it and be able to reach him?

'Well, this is bad. Dropping the name "Zhen Yi" probably just set Big Cat's fur on end.'

His expression turned sheepish and he was about to apologize—but just as he was formulating a casual deflection, the words died on his tongue.

Cheng Shi furrowed his brow and abruptly changed course:

"Drop the act. I know you're Zhen Yi. Baldy never told me any secret—you just gave yourself away."

The other end went dead silent. A few seconds later, a familiar, crisp, teasing voice came through:

"Hee~"

"How strange. If Baldy never told you her little secret, how did you guess it was me, Cheng. Little. Shi?"

!!!!

'What the actual—you really are Zhen Yi!!!!'

Cheng Shi was stunned. His grip on the handset was even tighter than when he'd heard [Birth]'s Divine Name. The grinding noise traveled through the line and reached Zhen Yi on the other side loud and clear.

When she heard it, Zhen Yi stopped laughing.

Her tone turned quite rigid: "You bluffed me again?"

Cheng Shi laughed in exasperation: "You lied to me again? How did you know I had this phone? And how did you call me on it?"

"Tch—it's a Baldy thing. She always likes giving these out. Sis said she hung around you for a while, so I figured you'd definitely have one."

Cheng Shi blinked: "She gave one to you too?"

"Boo-hoo-hoo, don't even get me started—I like her sooo much, I'd do anything for her, and she won't even give me one. She only gave one to my sister."

"Oh, and by the way—my little boyfriend, don't be jealous. I like you a lot too, you know. Look—the second I swiped Sis's phone, I called you first!"

"..."

'Lunatic!'

'Absolute lunatic!'

Cheng Shi wanted nothing more than to stuff the handset down the toilet and flush it, but he held back. After a moment of silence, he asked a question.

"Zhen Xin is a Magician?"

The other party blanked, then exclaimed in surprise: "Oh? You're not stupid after all. How'd you guess?"

"Ha ha, you tell me."

"Ooh, I love guessing games! I bet you—"

"Beep-beep-beep—" Cheng Shi hung up.

'If the conversation isn't going anywhere, cut it at half a sentence. Chatting with a lunatic shortens your lifespan.'

But the instant he hung up, the phone rang again. Cheng Shi's face darkened, and he raised his hand to smash it—but after a moment's thought, he lowered his arm.

He answered with a menacing growl: "What else?"

The person on the other end suddenly faltered, her voice tinged with disbelief and confusion:

"What's going on? Cheng Shi, who were you just talking to? That's impossible—this prayer-gifted phone can only connect the few people I gave one to. You..."

This time the voice was Hong Lin. She trailed off mid-sentence, then cried out in alarm: "Zhen Yi? Did Zhen Yi call you?"

'What rotten luck!'

'What absolutely rotten luck!'

Cheng Shi's expression looked as though he'd eaten something unspeakable. He exhaled heavily and replied: "You're close with Zhen Xin?"

"Sigh—you mean the phone thing?"

"Not really. She's much more levelheaded than her sister. We had a brief partnership once. But don't worry about it—Zhen Yi won't have access to the phone for long..."

"Do they live together?"

"You didn't know?"

Cheng Shi blanked: "Know what?"

"Hee~"

"My sister and I are the same person, Cheng. Little. Shi!"

"?????"

'Son of a—!!!!'

...

Chapter 338: Standard Phone: I Really Did Have an Audience with [Birth]

Cheng Shi threw the phone in the end.

He hurled the handset—still carrying Zhen Yi's laughter—out of the warehouse and sat inside sighing.

'Careless. Truly careless.'

He should have known this lunatic wouldn't give up after just one attempt. He'd already fallen for this exact same trick before, and yet he'd walked right into it again.

'Cheng Shi, oh Cheng Shi—when will you ever learn?'

He sat on the floor and raised his hand, wanting nothing more than to slap himself. But the next moment, he thought: who could possibly defend against this?

If Hong Lin hadn't contacted her, then everything Zhen Yi had said must have been deduced from scraps of information gleaned through her sister, Zhen Xin.

So the Tongue of Eating Lies wasn't wrong. Between the Puppet Master and Zuo Qiu, one of them had to be Zhen Xin—most likely Zuo Qiu!

Because Zuo Qiu was the one who'd used his shadow to step into the void!

But how had she fooled his Master of Deception talent?

She had definitely told lies.

Zhen Yi must have picked up something from Zhen Xin's words. She also clearly knew Hong Lin well—well enough to guess the phone gesture, and even fabricate an opening line about an audience with [Birth] based on the upheavals in the trial.

Given that a god had just fallen on the [Life] path, such an opening wasn't even implausible.

But how had she come up with [Birth] as the opening?

The timing was diabolically precise—utterly impossible to guard against.

She also knew what [Death] looked like. And as for [Birth]'s Divine Pillar—well, the less said the better. The first time Cheng Shi had ever heard about it was from Zhen Yi herself. She might have even had an audience with [Prosperity]—or at the very least had seen the Tree Deity's form.

All this intelligence, combined with her ability to read people and improvise on the fly, made this Master of Trickery a genuinely lethal grifter!

Fortunately, she didn't know Hong Lin had become an Envoy. That single flaw was what Cheng Shi had caught.

Well... "caught" was generous. He'd stumbled into it through a bluff.

But this experience taught Cheng Shi a lesson: from now on, whenever something felt off, assume Zhen Yi first. Even if he was wrong, at least he wouldn't get scammed even harder.

Though what she'd said about being the same person as Zhen Xin... what did that mean?

Split personality?

Cheng Shi paused, recalling the ID "True Heart True Intention."

Maybe Zhen Xin and Zhen Yi really were two personalities sharing one body—even sharing the same account?

That would explain why both had been ranked in the same bracket as him.

No!

Wait—Zhen Yi was definitely lying. She was misleading him again!

'Can't trust her anymore.'

Cheng Shi scoffed, deciding to forget everything from today's conversation. And right then, the phone he'd thrown started ringing again.

Ring-ring-ring—

Cheng Shi's expression froze. He glared at the handset with an iron-dark face.

'Oh, so we're doing this, are we? No end in sight?'

'Fine. You want to go crazy? I'll match your crazy. Let's see just how much free time you have.'

With a cold smile, Cheng Shi strode out of the warehouse, grabbed the handset, held it to his ear, and launched straight into a friendly greeting:

"How's your dear mother doing?"

"Are you sick?" Naturally, it was Hong Lin's voice. Cheng Shi heard the familiar tone and his expression froze.

'Too accurate. Could this be the real one?'

But he immediately rejected the thought. No—he couldn't trust again. That wretch's imitation was simply too perfect.

He let out a cold hmph: "I've got the same sickness as your mother!"

A beat of silence on the other end, then a deadpan reply: "You're going through menopause too?"

"..."

"Took some gunpowder pills? What's with the temper? Oh—I get it. Zhen Yi called you?"

'Damn. This one actually sounds real.'

Cheng Shi furrowed his brow and spoke gravely:

"Who did we encounter during the trial?"

"..." The other end went quiet. After a moment: "Sounds like she called more than once. I'm Hong Lin. Don't worry—I can prove my identity."

"She's dead. The Authority is with me."

"Phew—" Cheng Shi went limp. He let out a massive exhale. This time, it was really her. Hearing that familiar tone, he grumbled: "Your crappy phone doesn't even have caller ID—why did you give one to Zhen Yi?"

"Sigh—that one wasn't for Zhen Yi. It was for her sister, Zhen Xin."

"You know Zhen Xin, right? Seriously, Cheng Shi—was it Zhen Xin who gave you that Master of Deception badge?"

Cheng Shi's heart clenched. He asked in stunned disbelief: "She really is a Magician?"

"Hm? You don't know Zhen Xin, but you've tangled with Zhen Yi?"

"Interesting. Don't tell me you didn't know they're the same person?"

"Huh? They really are the same person?"

"Tsk, tsk, tsk—you genuinely didn't know, huh? Zhen Xin is the primary personality. She's a levelheaded but very skilled liar of a Magician. Zhen Yi is an imagined secondary personality—a sister she created. She's a... actually, forget it, let's not talk about that jinx."

"Anyway, the phone was for Zhen Xin. Zhen Yi occasionally swipes it."

"Also, whether the phone has caller ID or not isn't up to me. When I prayed for it, I only asked for a set of long-distance handsets. How was I supposed to know I'd end up with just handsets..."

"Alright, enough small talk. How is it—how does it feel to wield Authority as proxy?"

Cheng Shi's expression had been shifting constantly, but at the final question he finally returned to something resembling normal. He smiled and turned the question around:

"Shouldn't I be asking you that? How does it feel to inherit Authority?"

Silence on the other end. Then:

"Handing out cheated rewards is pretty fun. But it's exhausting. You have no idea how many trials settle at the same time."

"The Pact—that terrifying thing—is acting as Her proxy in administering trials. It seems to never refuse bestowing rewards. But that means my workload is enormous."

"Honestly, only when I'm doing the bestowing do I feel like I've left the realm of humanity and become one of Them."

"I can't describe the feeling precisely—I can only give an analogy. When countless [Prosperity] trials end simultaneously, I become like an observer who's leapt out of the river of time. I can browse through the history of every trial at will, choosing whether to respond when they make their offerings to [Prosperity]."

"If it were just that, it might not be too remarkable—like approving paperwork. But..."

"I'm doing all of this simultaneously!"

"At the same instant—the same instant as humans comprehend it—I'm reviewing countless trials at once. It's as though I've split into countless copies of myself working in parallel, yet without interfering with each other."

"Our thinking is unified, our consciousness resonates. I can instantly connect all past events and, with thorough deliberation, distribute different rewards accordingly."

"It's miraculous. Transcendent. I never knew a living being could become so powerful and abstract."

"But the moment I exit that state and return to being a player, I lose that ability."

"So this made me realize something: although I'm a Pact-recognized Envoy, I'll only ever command this tiny sliver of [Prosperity]'s power."

"Which got me thinking..."

Cheng Shi quickly cut her off:

"Whoa, whoa, whoa—hold on! You've barely become a proctor, and the seat under you isn't even warm yet. You're already thinking about upgrading to question-setter?"

"We are the Destined Ones, not the Death-Wish Ones. You might want to go to your grave, but I still want to live."

"...I was just thinking out loud."

"Keep it to yourself. Don't say it out loud—who knows if They're eavesdropping?"

"What god would be so idle as to—... Okay, fine. I'll keep it to myself."

"..."

Cheng Shi was stupefied. He felt that ever since Big Cat had been bamboozled by him, she'd been sprinting down the road of recklessness without looking back.

Before, getting her to jump into the deep end of a gamble required asking three times over. Now, without any prompting, she was already harboring loftier ambitions.

'Lady! Progression requires taking things step by step—you can't skip grades!'

"Hey, that's not even why I called. How did I end up blabbering like you? I called for something else entirely."

"What is it?"

"I had an audience with [Birth]."

"!!!!"

'You're still claiming you're not Zhen Yi!?'

Cheng Shi was truly, completely numb. This time he genuinely couldn't tell—but before he could recover from his blank shock, the voice on the other end continued:

"Just now. He summoned me." Her tone shifted to confusion: "But He didn't say a single word. Didn't even show His form."

"Are you really Baldy?"

"...Cheng Shi! I'm telling you about an audience with a True God, and you think I'm Zhen Yi?"

"Ha, ha ha ha—is this really the Fate Weaver who supposedly ran circles around Zhen Yi?"

"Or was it she who ran circles around you?"

"Come on, I'm curious now—what exactly did she say to you?"

Cheng Shi twitched: "The first thing she said to me was: 'I had an audience with [Birth].'"

"..."

Well. Hearing that, Hong Lin fell silent too.

No wonder Cheng Shi had reacted so strongly. Anyone hearing the exact same line would freeze for a couple of seconds.

"This is exactly why I'm... a little wary of her. Sometimes the lies she casually throws out are as accurate as the truth."

Hearing this, Cheng Shi almost laughed. Big Cat had really been traumatized.

But then, remembering how often he himself got swindled, the laughter dried up.

She was wrong about one thing, though. Zhen Yi definitely wasn't lying "casually." Every word she spoke was likely meticulously prepared—even if that meticulous preparation was exactly what the victim was meant to perceive.

Her deceptions weren't entirely untraceable. After replaying them a few times, you could see the pattern: she excelled at exploiting information asymmetry. Once the information gap she'd personally excavated severed someone's ability to verify, the poor soul she'd cut off was ripe for the next swindle.

Her knowledge of the gods far exceeded his own. She also understood Big Cat well—the two even shared secrets they couldn't reveal to outsiders. That was how she kept weaving truth and lies together to fool him again and again.

She might be a lunatic, but she was genuinely formidable.

One thing did puzzle Cheng Shi, though. He could tell that the secret between Big Cat and Zhen Yi seemed to involve [Birth]...

Had they encountered each other in a [Birth] trial?

Hm?

Cheng Shi's expression suddenly became very interesting, because he thought he'd finally figured out what Big Cat had meant by "she turned into a Dense Forest Spotted Leopard"...

Hiss—

'Surely... it's not what I'm thinking?'

'Oh no. Why is everything starting to look... suggestive.'

...

Chapter 339: The Exceptional [Fate] Chosen One

Cheng Shi shook his head, flinging the indecent thoughts from his mind, and resumed the previous topic:

"If He didn't show Himself, how did you know it was Him?"

But the instant those words left his mouth, he regretted them—because Hong Lin on the other end went dead silent.

'Damn. Said something I shouldn't have.'

'Sure enough, the moment my brain goes somewhere dirty, I get stupid.'

[Birth] was unlike any other god. His aura was far too easy to identify.

Saying something like that in front of the person involved made the atmosphere rather... awkward.

Cheng Shi's expression seized up and he quickly course-corrected:

"And then what? Pulled you in for an audience, said nothing, and sent you right back?"

"Yes. That's why I'm confused."

Cheng Shi furrowed his brow: "Details. Try to recall more details—otherwise I can't guess what He's after."

"There are no details. He pulled me into the void but didn't reveal Himself. And then when I... succumbed to [Birth]'s aura, I was sent back out."

"The void? He summoned you into the void?"

"Yes."

"..."

Cheng Shi's heart skipped a beat. 'Could He have been looking for me?'

Though he hadn't been summoned by many gods, based on his audience experience, deities typically summoned players in their own domains. Even if those domains existed within the void, they would be each god's personal territory.

Like [Prosperity]'s Divine Shade. [Death]'s Fishbone Hall. [Memory]'s Collection Hall. Or [Chaos]'s temple.

So why had [Birth] simply tossed Big Cat into the void?

His choice to summon Big Cat at this moment most likely stemmed from [Prosperity]'s fall. And the only elements in this entire affair connected to the void were:

[Void]. [Deceit]. [Fate]. And... Cheng Dashi.

Every single one of those was connected to him.

'Great.'

'What does He want?'

'If He was looking for me, why not just summon me directly instead of summoning Hong Lin?'

'Or am I overthinking this—maybe He just wanted to see what the eldest daughter of [Prosperity] looked like?'

'But He already saw her at the Assembly of Gods Convention. Two eyes, one mouth—what could possibly be special?'

Neither of them could figure it out, nor did they dig deeper into it. The conversation drifted naturally to other topics by unspoken agreement.

After all, discussing [Birth] over the phone for too long was just too weird.

Cheng Shi steered the topic. In his mind, a Chosen One who'd held the top spot on the [Prosperity] rankings for a full two months should possess plenty of intel he needed. So he didn't waste this call—he carefully probed for specific information through indirect questions.

Hong Lin sensed that Cheng Shi was gathering intelligence, so she tried to be as precise as possible, ensuring the information chain didn't break at her link.

But there was one thing she remained deeply curious about: Cheng Shi's score.

Logically, a member of such a mysterious and powerful organization couldn't possibly be a low-scoring player. Yet she'd never heard Cheng Shi's name among the peak players.

The most baffling part was that she'd heard Cheng Shi's name from Tao Yi's mouth. But Tao Yi's score... how could she possibly have been matched with Cheng Shi?

Reviewing all of Cheng Shi's operations, Hong Lin immediately ruled out the possibility that he was low-ranked. The only explanation was that Tao Yi had gotten spectacularly lucky and been matched into a high-tier game.

She was never one to hold back thoughts, so while trading intel with Cheng Shi, she asked about this several times. But each time, Cheng Shi silently redirected the conversation.

After enough attempts, Hong Lin picked up on it. Cheng Shi's ranking on the leaderboard wasn't high—at least not high enough to regularly match with peak players.

He was suppressing his score!

But why?

Higher scores meant better rewards across the board. Someone as clever as him—someone who could even spar with Zhen Yi—why would he deliberately hold his score down?

Since Cheng Shi clearly didn't want to discuss it, she tactfully stopped asking. Their conversation meandered, one line here, one line there, until it drifted back to the topic of Chosen Ones. Cheng Shi hesitated, then asked:

"Blind One—what do you know about her?"

Hearing this, Hong Lin became even more certain Cheng Shi was suppressing his score. Otherwise, he surely would have been matched with the [Fate] Chosen One.

'Come to think of it, I'm curious about how this self-proclaimed seer-of-destiny [Fate] Chosen One views an organization like the Destined Ones.'

'Although... she probably doesn't know about it?'

'Interesting. Next time I run into her, I'll have to play my cards close. Can't let the Destined Ones get exposed on my watch.'

"I know her somewhat. Or rather, any peak player with a high enough score has probably been matched with her."

"Blind One's real name is An Mingyu. She's..."

"A very exceptional Prophet."

Surname An?

'What a coincidence.'

Cheng Shi frowned and pressed on: "Is she close with Zhen Xin?"

"Yes. Very close, I'd say. Openly, unreservedly close. Practically everyone who knows both of them is aware of their friendship. Of course, Blind One and Zhen Yi have an awful relationship—the antagonistic, head-to-head kind of awful."

"..."

'Not surprising. As expected.'

But upon learning this, Cheng Shi suddenly began re-examining his memory of the Puppet Master, An Jing.

If the Puppet Master had executed a flawless collaboration with Zhen Xin, and Zhen Xin was exceptionally close with An Mingyu, and An Jing shared the surname "An"...

So the "An" surname was the thread connecting all of them?

Were Blind One and the Puppet Master relatives?

'Makes sense, in a way—one blind, one mute, both equally unfortunate...'

But during the trial, Hong Lin hadn't noticed any physical resemblance between An Jing and Blind One. So this remained mere speculation.

Since the events were already past, dwelling on a Puppet Master's identity held little practical value. Cheng Shi's motivation for piecing this together wasn't to rehash old events, but to ensure he'd be as prepared as possible when he next encountered Zhen Xin—narrowing the information gap as much as he could.

Knowing your enemy might not guarantee a hundred victories, but at least you wouldn't lose before the battle even starts. Regular review truly was essential.

"Is she really blind?" Cheng Shi continued.

"Yes. She's genuinely blind. I heard from Zhen Xin that the Blind One actually had her sight before the Faith Game descended. She lost her vision afterward."

"But despite blindfolding herself with black cloth, she can still 'see' things. She once said publicly that she can't make out specific objects but can see the flow of destiny—which is why she claims to have seen through fate."

"Seen through fate?"

"Tsk... bold claim. Our Benefactor never gave her trouble for that?"

'Our Benefactor...'

Hong Lin still wasn't used to being a [Fate] follower. Hearing the phrase, she said with an odd expression:

"She seems to have never had an audience with [Fate]..."

?

Cheng Shi blanked: "How is that possible? The [Fate] Chosen One has never had an audience with [Fate]?"

"Nobody knows if it's true. That claim comes from Zhen Yi. But strangely, Blind One has never denied it."

"So everyone takes it at face value. The prevailing theory is that she aligns so perfectly with [Fate]'s will that He sees no need to provide audience-style guidance."

"Before meeting our Ben— before meeting Him, I thought that made sense. After having the audience, I think it makes even more sense."

"After all, He is the cold, abyssal [Void]."

"..." 'Is it possible... that you're wrong about that?'

Cheng Shi naturally kept that thought to himself. After a moment of reflection, he asked:

"So what makes her exceptional? A blind woman who can see the world? Or are her prophecies especially accurate?"

"No, neither. What makes her exceptional is that she possesses sixteen Dice of Fate!"

"???"

'How many!?'

...

Chapter 340: Running a Wholesale Operation on [Fate]'s Dice

Cheng Shi was stunned. He'd never heard of anyone possessing a double-digit number of Dice of Fate.

'She has more dice than my die has dots. Is that even legal?'

'Is that even possible?'

'She's hacking, right?'

He asked again in disbelief: "Sixteen?"

"Yes, sixteen. And every single Die of Fate is different."

"Since stepping onto [Fate]'s path, Blind One's dice haven't upgraded like other [Fate] followers'. Instead, at each scoring milestone, He bestows a brand new die—an already-upgraded die."

"So she possesses every die from six-sided to twenty-one-sided. Sixteen dice in total."

"..."

'Well. Now I've met a genuine [Fate] favorite. She's running a wholesale operation on His dice.'

"No wonder you all trust her prophecies so much. With one throw of all those, even with the worst luck she'd still get at least sixteen points..."

"What good is trusting her? We still got—... Ugh, forget it. Bad luck. Not talking about her."

"But why are you asking so much about Blind One? Don't tell me you're thinking of... recruiting her into the Destined Ones?"

'Ha ha, would I dare?'

'If she opens with a sixteen-dice prophecy and sees right through me, then what's the point of pretending to be fate's champion? I might as well go home and play the clown.'

Of course, he couldn't exactly say he was investigating in advance to prepare for eventually competing for the Chosen One title. So he laughed it off:

"Just curious."

"Since when is your curiosity worse than mine?"

"..."

Cheng Shi's mouth twitched. 'Big Cat, your self-awareness seems to have gone missing. That's not a good sign.'

"Thanks for all the info. Let's wrap it up here—the phone bill's getting expensive."

Hong Lin's expression turned extremely odd:

"That's a pretty lousy excuse to hang up on someone. But hold on before you go—Her vault has tons of stuff. Think about what you're missing. Today's special: everything's free."

'Right! Almost forgot that!'

Since one of the test-takers had become the proctor, cheating only once would be a waste. The instant this was mentioned, Cheng Shi's spirits soared:

"What good stuff do you have?"

"Way too much good stuff. Giving it all to you isn't realistic, and the rules won't allow it either. Just tell me what you need."

"Let me think... [Prosperity] is the flourishing of mind and spirit—an emphasis on vitality and mental vigor in tandem. My vitality's covered now, so... do you have anything that boosts mental strength?"

Hong Lin thought for a moment, then answered:

"I have a rough idea. But there's too much to sort through and I need to find the right thing. Before the next Special Trial, pray for a [Prosperity] trial—and I'll deliver the goods to you then."

"That simple?"

"That simple!"

"Baldy, you've become incredibly charming!"

"..." Hong Lin went stone silent for a beat, then spoke with a half-smile: "I'm quite charming when I'm beating people up too. Want a demonstration?"

"Maybe not..." Cheng Shi laughed awkwardly, then added: "Oh, by the way—since you can grant gifts, does that mean players' offerings to Her can reach you as well?"

"Yes. Why—do you have something for me?"

"Divinity, Baldy. You forgot the divinity you stored with me." Cheng Shi's face was the picture of sincerity.

"Oh? So it wasn't a loan—it was storage?"

"..." Stiff silence.

"No rush to return it. Consider it a loan." Hong Lin smiled, then added solemnly: "After becoming an Envoy, I've had some realizations. Maybe what I need isn't disassembled puzzles or scattered fragments. I might need something of my own."

"Let me do more research. Until I figure it out, consider that divinity on loan—actually no, too generous. Consider it rented."

"Rent fee: this phone call. Stay in regular contact."

'Look at that. Now that's generosity!'

Compared to the Grand Marshal's aggressive brand of generosity, Baldy's was the real deal!

Cheng Shi beamed—absolutely radiant.

"Boss is generous! Don't worry, I'll use it sparingly!"

"?"

"Uh—said that wrong. I definitely won't lose it."

"You'd better not!"

After chatting a bit more, they finally hung up. And in those last moments, Cheng Shi also learned how to make outgoing calls.

Hong Lin explained that you simply held the handset to your ear and spoke the target's real name. If the target had the same type of phone, the call would go through.

Cheng Shi stared at the handset in his hand, then—struck by a sudden idea—held it to his ear and spoke a name.

The call connected. After three rings, it was answered. On the other end was a cool, detached female voice.

"An unexpected call. Yesterday's prophecy didn't include this. So—who are you?"

Cheng Shi blinked, thinking it was surprising she'd spend one of her daily prophecies on something like this. But he didn't stay silent for long. After a moment's thought, he asked a question that probably sounded completely baffling to the person on the other end:

"If the god I worship has died, should I resolutely pursue the empty Divine Throne—or should I break my oath and seek another deity's protection?"

He deliberately lowered his voice, roughened his tone, and blurred his inflection—rendering it utterly unrecognizable, yet distinctively recognizable.

Because anyone hearing this voice would immediately think the speaker was disguising it on purpose.

The person on the other end clearly didn't recognize Cheng Shi's voice. After a brief silence, surprise crept into her tone:

"An interesting question. So then—whom do you worship?"

Cheng Shi intentionally stalled, feigning anguish:

"[Prosperity]. I worship [Prosperity]."

Complete silence on the other end. A long time passed before a cold voice responded:

"Who are you?"

Cheng Shi didn't answer. He hung up.

The other party was obviously Blind One. And Cheng Shi's reason for making this call wasn't simply to tease [Fate]'s Chosen One—he was attempting to amplify the impact of [Prosperity]'s fall.

In the current unchanging landscape of the Faith Game, if he told someone that one of those lofty gods had fallen, nobody would believe him. They'd just think he was a delusional lunatic. But if the same words came from [Fate]'s Chosen One, the effect would be entirely different.

Cheng Shi knew full well that Blind One wouldn't believe such a claim based solely on one inexplicable phone call. But as long as she was curious enough, she would inevitably trace the call's origin.

If all the phones in this set came from Big Cat, then she would certainly approach Big Cat with probing questions.

Big Cat wasn't stupid. When she sensed Blind One was fishing, she'd realize Cheng Shi had leaked the news of [Prosperity]'s fall. Knowing her character, she'd probably cover for him without saying too much.

And that would make this increasingly curious [Fate] Chosen One begin using her prophecies to dig for the truth. Once she obtained the truth—or some approximation of it—the news of [Prosperity]'s fall might spread through her mouth.

This was a casual move on the board. Cheng Shi didn't know whether spreading the news would prove useful, but that didn't stop him from giving it a push from behind the scenes.

If Cheng Dashi's purpose in returning was to create change, then logically, the bigger the change, the better. So Cheng Shi wanted to try. He didn't want this hard-won change to be quietly smothered by the Pact's whitewashing of [Prosperity]'s fall.

Cheng Shi had guessed correctly. Blind One was indeed deeply curious.

The instant the call was disconnected, she reached for her Dice of Fate, intending to divine the identity of the caller. But she quickly abandoned the idea, instead furrowing her brow and picking up a different phone to dial a number.

The call was answered immediately. A crisp, composed female voice came through:

"Ming Yu?"

Blind One heard the greeting and paused, then sighed: "Where's your sister?"

"Ming Yu, stop messing around. I am the sister."

"Right. Well, I'm looking for the younger sister."

The other party blanked, then burst out laughing:

"Hee~"

"Then you've called the right person! I'm the younger sister too!"

"...Have her call me."

Without another word, Blind One hung up. She rolled the dice between her fingers, then picked up the Standard Phone and called Hong Lin.

The instant the call connected, she spoke rapidly:

"He called me. I've agreed."

Hong Lin froze. Something seemed to occur to her, but she hesitated, not entirely certain:

"Who?"

Hearing the surprise and uncertainty in Hong Lin's voice, Blind One hung up—and smiled.

"Interesting. It really is one of Baldy's new friends."

"So what does this new friend want me to do? Make a prophecy?"

"A prophecy about [Prosperity]'s fall?"

"Is he a fellow traveler who's seen the future? Or does he know some incredible secret?"

"Hmm, Xin Xin—call me soon. I'm getting very curious."

Meanwhile, Cheng Shi hadn't been idle after hanging up either. He tried dialing a second number. This call connected too—on the other end was a steady, unhurried male voice:

"It's me."

Cheng Shi blanked. He'd meant to say something playful, but on second thought, decided against it. He hung up without a word, then looked at the handset in his hand and shook his head with an amused laugh.

"Big Cat sure has a wide network."

At the same time, in some unknown corner of the world, a man in hemp robes with his hair tied in a Daoist topknot let out a bemused chuckle and put away his handset.

"Seems Baldy's made a new friend."

"Interesting—I just wonder what kind of memory this will make?"

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