

The Gods 411

Chapter 411: Zhang Jizu's Moment of Faith (2)

After returning to the rooftop, Cheng Shi pulled out his dice and mask more than once, frantically praying to both Benefactors.

But no matter how he prayed, there was no response. Neither summoned him.

This threw Cheng Shi into a panic. He began wondering whether something monumental had just happened between Them, keeping both Benefactors too occupied to respond.

If true, should he stop pestering Them?

But not knowing the cause was driving him insane — like ants crawling all over his body.

So this devout follower began gaslighting himself: these prayers weren't pointless buzzing — they were alarm bells to help his Benefactors escape their predicament!

He saw no issue whatsoever with the notion of a mortal guiding true gods out of crisis. So he shamelessly closed his eyes and kept praying.

Finally, after an untold number of recitations...

Night fell.

The void remained silent.

...

Meanwhile, elsewhere.

Reality. An unknown cemetery in an unknown province.

Zhang Jizu had spent half the day healing every wound inflicted by the Void storm. Once free, he took the Deceit mask token in hand and climbed atop the watchtower roof.

Bright moonlight poured down like a waterfall.

He held the mask up high. Silver light filtered through those elongated eye-slits and fell on his own eyes, reflecting a gaze brimming with bewilderment.

Zhang Jizu was lost — because he'd failed.

The Oracle Act had failed.

Just moments ago, he'd tried putting on the mask and performing an Oracle Act. Honestly, it was the first time since the Faith Game's arrival that he'd sincerely recited another god's prayer. Though his great one had approved the matter, it still felt illicitly disloyal — as though he were sneaking behind Death's back to do something wrong.

Disloyalty aside, the bigger issue was that the deity who'd given him the mask had shown zero response to his Oracle Act.

He felt no acknowledgment. He found no trace of Deceit's power on himself. Everything that happened today seemed more like an actual act of deceit.

He — that Fun God Benefactor of Cheng Shi and Zhen Yi — appeared to have...

played him?

Was it possible that the entertainment He wanted wasn't Zhang Jizu walking the path of Deceit to create fun — but turning Zhang Jizu himself into the fun?

He couldn't tell.

Zhang Jizu was an excellent analyst, but only on the condition that the subject didn't involve Them.

Yet he was curious — just as curious as Cheng Shi praying on the rooftop right now. So the normally steady man made a moderately bold decision: he would go ask Him what this was about.

Not Deceit, naturally. But his own Benefactor — Death.

So Zhang Jizu removed the mask, randomly selected a lucky mouse from the rooftop rat cage, and with practiced deftness dispatched it ahead to scout the Fishbone Hall. Then he murmured with genuine devotion:

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

The moment the words fell, green flames erupted across his body. He glowed with jade-green light in the darkness. Before long, he burned away to nothing and vanished.

When he opened his eyes again, he was beneath the great one's Bone Throne. The colossal skull's eye-sockets roared with boiling green flame, staring down at him with an unmistakably grim expression.

Zhang Jizu blinked. Something felt off about his Benefactor's mood, but he didn't think much of it. He stepped forward to offer his customary praise — but before he could open his mouth, the colossal skull on the Bone Throne unleashed the rumble of cosmic silence.

"Why. Do. I. Sense. A. Trace. Of. Deceit's. Lingering. Aura. On. You!?"

"?"

Zhang Jizu blinked again. He thought: 'But wasn't it You who approved my prayer to Deceit for a second faith? Why—'

Before the thought could finish, his heart lurched. His brow furrowed tightly. He seemed to have sensed the problem.

He'd had two audiences with his Benefactor today. But he could confirm with certainty that only this current audience was genuine — because it was his own prayer that summoned him here.

But the first time?

If his current Benefactor had no knowledge of anything Deceit-related happening to him, then who was the "great one" from that first audience?!

'It can't be...'

'Deceit!!??'

Zhang Jizu's eyes flew wide. He immediately tried to explain to his Benefactor what had happened. But before he could speak, his mouth began moving on its own.

"Great one, today I received Your approval and prayed to Deceit for a second faith. But during the Oracle Act just now, I received no acknowledgment from Him.

You already know about this, do You not? I sought this audience precisely to ask why He bestowed a token upon me, yet granted me no new talent?"

Hearing this, the colossal skull on the Bone Throne could sit still no longer. He stiffly lowered His gaze to the follower below. After a beat of silence, every river of white bones in the Fishbone Hall erupted simultaneously, like a dam bursting and flooding the entirety of the void.

Death lost composure.

He suddenly realized what had happened to His follower — and that the infuriating Deceit had used this ploy to siphon away a portion of His follower's devotion!

'That detestable Void — absolutely insufferable!'

And so Death raged. Green flames blazed in His eye-sockets like the cold fire of the Nine Hells — so bright they illuminated the entire hall, yet so frigid they left Zhang Jizu below feeling as if he'd plunged into an ice abyss.

Squinty Eyes had never seen his Benefactor this furious. He realized he'd been duped — but who could have imagined that a lofty deity would impersonate someone else's Benefactor?!

And who could have imagined that, at this very moment, He was still right here — using the Deceit aura on Zhang Jizu's body as cover, seizing complete control of his body!

Yes — Zhang Jizu had been stripped of bodily autonomy.

All he could do was watch helplessly as his Benefactor raged. Watch helplessly as his body — under an irresistible force — feigned bowing in trembling submission. And he could do nothing.

He couldn't even make a sound. He could only silently watch as the deity who'd toyed with him now toyed with his own Benefactor right before his eyes.

Death was genuinely furious. He'd never intended to entangle Himself with Void. Recruiting Cheng Shi had been accidental — appreciating Cheng Shi didn't mean appreciating Void.

Even if this era truly belonged to Void, Life did not depend on Void. And Death had no need for Deceit.

Yet no matter how He felt, He couldn't stop Deceit from fixating on Him — and even on His follower.

Watching His carefully chosen follower inexplicably walk the path of Deceit — watching the devotion in that follower's heart be cracked open by the insufferable Deceit and have a share spirited away — His irritation only grew.

Of course, the frustration was directed at Deceit, not at Zhang Jizu.

After all, before Deceit's games, players were utterly powerless to resist.

Not even that loyal employee, Cheng Shi.

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Chapter 412: Old Bones Is Kind of Adorable

After the towering spectral flames had engulfed nearly the entire void, the colossal skull atop the Bone Throne finally settled once more. He gazed down at Zhang Jizu with a complicated expression, brooded for a long moment, then dimmed His eye-sockets and sighed in resignation:

"Choosing. Deceit. As. Your. Second. Faith. Treading. The. Path. Of. Void...

Are. You. Certain?"

Zhang Jizu was stunned. He hadn't expected the furious Benefactor to grant him another chance at this juncture.

'He... agreed?'

'But what does it matter whether I've decided? Right now, my body isn't even mine to control.'

Yet just as that thought crossed his mind, he suddenly discovered that bodily control had been returned!

So Zhang Jizu narrowed his eyes as tightly as he could. He didn't answer the question. Instead, he asked something that concerned him more:

"Great one, forgive my impudence, but Your relationship with Deceit appears to be... not exactly..."

The green flames in the colossal skull's eye-sockets winked out. He seemed weary — inexplicably, overwhelmingly weary.

"I. Am. Different. From. Him.

Or. Rather. Every. Deity. You. Know. Differs. From. Every. Other.

The. Gods. Either. Pursue. The. Convention. Or. Remain. Neutral. Only. He. Treats. The. Convention. As. A. Joke. And. Endlessly. Exploits. Its. Loopholes. For. His. Own. Amusement.

Deceit. May. Have. Other. Purposes. But. No. One. Knows. What. He. Truly. Wants.

So. Whether. Those. Who. Uphold. The. Convention. Or. Those. Who. Stay. Neutral. None. Wish. To. Be. Involved. With. Him.

I. Am. No. Different.

I. Despise. Trouble. Yet. He. Is. Trouble. Itself.

But...

Faiths. Will. Ultimately. Merge. It. Is. Only. A. Matter. Of. Time.

And. Faith. Fusion. Is. Neither. Right. Nor. Wrong.

At. Least. In. Void's. Era. Drawing. Closer. To. Void. Cannot. Be. Called. Wrong.

But. No. Wrong. Does. Not. Mean. No. Risk.

You. Must. Understand. That. Trouble. Is. The. Source. Of. All. Risk.

So...

If. You. Truly. Wish. To. Walk. Toward. Void. And. Gain. That. Troublemaker's. Gaze.

Are. You. Prepared?"

"..."

When Zhang Jizu finished listening, two words echoed relentlessly through his mind: THE CONVENTION.

This was the first time his Benefactor had ever mentioned anything about Them. And the Convention was something They were pursuing!

'Was the Faith Game born from the Convention?'

'What exactly are the gods chasing?!'

Zhang Jizu squinted as hard as he could. Clearly, his Benefactor's unprecedented candor was meant to convey one message:

'There is danger near Deceit — and that danger likely stems from the very Convention the gods pursue!'

He was making an exception to warn him: the road after choosing Deceit would not be easy!

So the seemingly generous choice He'd offered was actually meant to persuade Zhang Jizu to refuse!

Zhang Jizu was moved. But he didn't dare move.

The great one had overlooked one detail: the very Deceit He wanted His follower to reject was, at this moment, right here — on Zhang Jizu's body!

'My Benefactor doesn't seek trouble, but He doesn't fear it either. After all, He has the means to counter Deceit and the problems Deceit brings. But me...'

'If I follow His advice and abandon the Deceit faith I've "already obtained," that might be the real trouble!'

No one could be certain whether, in Deceit's view, impersonating another's Benefactor to grant approval actually counted as valid approval.

Logically speaking: it definitely shouldn't.

But the problem was — Deceit was the antithesis of logic. You couldn't reason with Him!

And so...

Out of his steady philosophy, out of protecting his own life, and to avoid inviting unsolvable trouble — Zhang Jizu, for the first time before his Benefactor, went against his heart. Gritting his teeth, he bowed his head:

"Please forgive me, great one. I... want to try..."

Death seemed to have foreseen this outcome. His eye-sockets flickered with spectral light. He studied Zhang Jizu for a long moment, then slowly sighed:

"What. Did. He. Promise. You?"

"?"

'There was a promise?'

Just as Zhang Jizu raised his head in bewilderment, about to explain that Deceit hadn't promised him anything — his mouth snapped shut on its own.

And at the same instant, a pair of grinning eyes opened without warning atop...

the colossal skull's head!

Deceit had arrived.

No — He'd been here all along. He'd even used His authority to fool Death, all for this very moment!

He gazed contentedly at His new follower, clicking His tongue in satisfaction:

"Who said little bone doesn't know how to lie? That 'I want to try' just now was beautifully insincere.

Looks like your devotion to me isn't exactly devout either.

Mm — good. I like people whose devotion is a lie wrapped in devotion. You suit my taste perfectly. Approved!"

With a blink of those eyes, a mask drifted slowly down from the colossal skull's crown and landed neatly before the small skull that was Zhang Jizu.

Looking at this mask — identical to anyone else's — Zhang Jizu finally confirmed that he had indeed spent the entire day trapped in Deceit's web of lies!

Only now — this moment — had He truly accepted him. Under Death's direct witness and reluctant concession, accepted him!

"..."

"..."

Zhang Jizu fell silent. Death fell silent too.

What was done was done — nearly irreversible. He'd personally given His follower the choice, and His follower had used a lie that barely qualified as a lie to accept Deceit's gaze.

What was even more enraging: that Deceit had the gall to perch atop His head, in the Fishbone Hall, and lord it over everything.

'What is tolerable in life is one thing — but Death will not stand for this!'

And so—

BOOM—

An explosion that shook the entire universe erupted. Boundless yin wind and green flame blasted Zhang Jizu — mask and all — straight back to reality.

After his disappearance, the entire void began to collapse, dissolving into eternal nothingness.

Within that eternal void, countless skeletal hands representing death rose skyward like blooming flowers, encircling the entire space layer by layer.

The grinning eyes, trapped within a cage of bone hands, giggled as ever — laughing even harder than before.

"Old Bones, you're finally willing to fight.

Though with those creaky old joints of yours, you might not have it in you anymore. Want me to call in backup for you?"

"Deceit!

You. Violated. The. Agreement. And. Exceeded. The. Terms. Of. Our. Transaction.

You. Should. Have. Known. My. Fury. Would. Burn. Through. Void!"

"Hee~

Oh, pardon me — laughing is just a habit.

Don't get hasty now. I kind of want to fight you too, but the meager ethics I've picked up from humans tell me to respect my elders. And, hmm, if I knock you apart there's no guarantee I can put you back together.

Even if not for your sake — we can't let the big guy be all sad and alone in Life.

How about this: let's make another deal.

I've taken a liking to those bone gates of yours. How about you build one for me to play with? In return, I'll pick two nice talents for little bone. How does that sound?"

"..."

The green flames in Death's eyes froze.

He stared at those detestable eyes, His expression a tapestry of conflicting emotions.

"..."

"Three?"

"..."

"Come on, say something, Old Bones."

"..."

"Deal?"

"..."

"Alright, it's settled then."

"..."

The colossal skull said nothing. He gazed at Him for a moment — then collapsed into countless rivers of white bone that surged in every direction, vanishing into the void at blinding speed.

Watching this unfold, the grinning eyes tilted even higher at the corners.

"Hee~"

Just realized Old Bones is kind of adorable."

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Chapter 413: Praise the Great God of Fa— Deceit!

Cheng Shi was panicking.

Because he discovered that his prayers had not only failed to summon either Benefactor, but had somehow caused the Gate of Joyous Lust token to vanish from his hands.

He didn't know when it was taken or by whom, but he guessed it was probably Fate — since Fate had apparently rejected his proposal to put Aph Ros to work.

Losing an SS-grade item didn't particularly pain Cheng Shi. What truly agonized him was that the token had been a window into the gods' secrets — and that window had just been slammed shut.

'So They really don't want me knowing about "eras"!'

But the more They concealed, the more curious Cheng Shi became. Yet curiosity was useless now — he had no other avenue to learn these things.

He'd considered calling someone, but that wasn't a safe approach. If his own Benefactors weren't prepared to tell him, then should problems arise while he was digging into it, would They still have his back? That required careful consideration.

Playing it safe, Cheng Shi decided to shelve the matter and keep his eyes open during future trials.

A day of frayed nerves had left him exhausted. He decided to sleep early — drown his worries in slumber.

But the instant he closed his eyes, his vision plunged into absolute darkness!

Some deity had summoned him again!

He knew because he never turned off the small lamp beside his bed. The faint glow of a magic lamp filtered through his eyelids, leaving a trace of light in his vision even while sleeping. That was how he could tell whether his consciousness was being invaded or area-affected.

This time, the darkness was too pure. Pure as...

The void!

Cheng Shi guessed who it was. He snapped his eyes open — and sure enough, a pair of dazzling, radiant stellar eyes had opened before him!

But dazzling were the star-points, and radiant was the flowing light. The expression in those eyes was so glacially cold that one glance immediately evoked the dispassionate, all-observing Fate!

So Cheng Shi's heart settled. Joy spread across his face. He immediately opened with praise:

"Praise the great God of Fa— Deceit!

May the universe's lies weave themselves in Your hands into phantoms of deceit, adorning this great era of Void!"

He'd corrected himself — and fast — because he suddenly realized that if it were Fate, He wouldn't deliberately summon him at the precise moment his eyes closed, making such a theatrical entrance.

As for why these eyes looked so cold — ha, given Deceit's personality, need more be said?

Moreover, in the split second of his correction, Cheng Shi seized the flash of inspiration to weave a probe into his praise. Whether it would work...

That depended not on whether the Fun God took the bait, but on whether He was in a good enough mood to bite willingly.

And so, when a Void fishing line appeared before him — bearing a straight hook and dangling bait — those cold eyes transformed into something playful. They sneered:

"I don't recall there being a deity called 'Fa-Deceit' among Void.

What — has your path of Void already advanced this far beyond mine?"

"..."

Cheng Shi's smile froze. He lowered his head sheepishly and tried to spin it:

"My inner devotion always makes me want to praise both Benefactors at once. I accidentally let my true feelings slip. Please forgive my blunder, Lord Benefactor."

The amused eyes heard this and said nothing. They simply blinked — and from deep in the void emerged a voice identical to Cheng Shi's.

"As long as my face is thick enough, He won't hold this tiny slip against me, right?"

"Shit — I forgot He could do that!"

"Wait, what I mean is... Lord Benefactor, don't You think this is a bit... unsporting?"

"Goddammit, it never ends."

"No, no, no — stop thinking!"

"..."

Cheng Shi was numb. Cold sweat beading on his face, he lowered his head in silence and began mentally looping Deceit's prayer.

Seeing this, the mocking voice grew louder:

"Oh my — accidentally let a follower's true feelings slip. Please forgive my blunder, dear follower."

"..."

Cheng Shi's mouth was twitching so rapidly it approached facial paralysis. He looked up at his Benefactor with an expression of total surrender:

"Whatever makes You happy."

"Hee~

I'm not happy. When a certain little cat set foot on Fate's path, she showed such a strong sense of belonging to a certain organization. So how come, when it's little bone's turn, he's not nearly as devout?"

'Hm?'

'Little bone? What little bone?'

Cheng Shi wasn't stupid. After a one-second delay, he realized the "little bone" Deceit was referring to had to be Squinty Zhang!

'He summoned Squinty Zhang?'

Shock and delight flashed across Cheng Shi's face:

"Squint— Little bone had an audience with You?"

You granted him a second faith?"

The spirals in the eyes reversed twice. With a smile that wasn't quite a smile, He acknowledged.

"Some people just can't let go of those dice even while tricking others. Deceiving on one end while buzzing in my ear on the other, practically reciting every fabricated promise word for word for my benefit.

Bold of you — playing both sides like that. When did I ever agree to grant little bone a second faith?"

Hearing this, Cheng Shi immediately pulled his head in like a turtle. He went quiet.

Not because his Benefactor was pinning baseless charges on him — but because everything his Benefactor said was true. He really had been playing both sides!

When Zhang Jizu had asked what he stood to gain by betting alongside Cheng Shi, Cheng Shi had spun him a whole sales pitch.

But he knew every word was fiction. Meaning that by normal logic, Zhang Jizu's gamble was all risk, zero reward.

Cheng Shi didn't want that. He felt Squinty fit his wavelength. They shared an almost identical cautious temperament. He didn't want his new friend taking blind risk for nothing.

So while fast-talking Zhang Jizu, he'd simultaneously clutched a Die of Fate and ceaselessly chanted Deceit's prayer in his heart — hoping He'd overhear his "creative reinterpretation of Deceit's intentions"!

Yes — he wasn't just tricking Zhang Jizu. He was also "tricking" his Benefactor, Deceit!

Well, "tricking" wasn't quite right. It was more like "baiting."

While selling Squinty Eyes on the plan, he'd simultaneously been pitching Deceit on how much entertainment "pulling Zhang Jizu onto Deceit's path" would generate — hoping to convince Him well enough that, in a burst of amusement, He'd actually grant Zhang Jizu a second faith!

That was Cheng Shi's true purpose. In a game with zero upside, he'd manufactured an upside for his new friend!

Of course, he couldn't be sure Zhang Jizu would actually want to walk Deceit's path. So he'd left the final choice to Squinty himself. And the moment Squinty agreed to join the gamble, Cheng Shi's other gamble went live.

The upside: the Fun God, entertained enough, actually accepting Zhang Jizu. The risk: Zhang Jizu getting nothing.

So what Cheng Shi had been gambling on was never their lives — but whether his Benefactor would find the entertainment value high enough to give Zhang Jizu a hand.

And now, it seemed he — no, Zhang Jizu — had... won the bet?

The eyes in the void, seeing Cheng Shi retreat into his shell, sneered once more.

"Twisting a deity's will is the great crime of blasphemy. Your audacity grows by the day."

Cheng Shi politely broke into a cold sweat, then whispered his explan— his defense:

"Lord Benefactor, You can't pin baseless charges on me. When did I ever twist Your will?"

"Refusing to admit guilt makes it worse." With that, the void's atmosphere began to chill.

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Chapter 414: Another Deceit Mini-Game?

Yet Cheng Shi stubbornly refused to bend:

"Fine — I admit I made stuff up. But when it comes to Deceit, how can you call it 'twisting'? I was clearly making an offering — offering You lies!"

The instant those words landed, the cold winds in the void evaporated. The lofty stellar eyes flickered rapidly, spirals spinning merrily, eye-corners tilted sky-high — thoroughly delighted.

He studied His follower with amusement, as if appraising a satisfying piece in His collection.

"Old Bones is rigid and old-fashioned. Little bone is equally bland and boring. If I hadn't glimpsed the entertainment to come, I'd never have granted him a second faith.

But you got one thing wrong. The entertainment from mortals is always finite. The entertainment born from Old Bones' reactions — now that's the truly watchable, endlessly enjoyable stuff.

Little bone genuinely isn't suited for Deceit. But the thought of infinite entertainment from Old Bones makes even that eyeless little bone seem a bit adorable."

"..."

'Oh no — does this mean I just sold out my other boss?'

Cheng Shi shrank into himself, grinning sheepishly.

'Surely my Benefactor won't spell this out to the other great one's face?'

'That's terrifying.'

But since Squinty Zhang had walked the same path as himself, at least one stone could be lifted from Cheng Shi's heart.

Having scored his prize, Cheng Shi's expression shifted. He rapidly steered the conversation elsewhere, heading off his Benefactor's desire to keep milking the topic.

He still had "eras" on his mind — the subject his Benefactor had quietly ignored. His eyes darted, and he began angling the discussion in that direction.

"Lord Benefactor, You mentioned seeing future entertainment. Does that mean our Deceit also has the ability to see the future?"

"No."

"?" Cheng Shi blinked.

"Stole it from your other good Benefactor — the one who tirelessly flatters. What, you didn't know? The gods' relationships are all about stealing and grabbing. Since I can steal from others, I can naturally steal from Him too.

Being fellow Void makes stealing from Him considerably easier than from the rest."

"..."

'But He's Your Path partner!'

'You just friendly-fired Your own teammate?!'

'And from Your reaction... You seem weirdly proud of it...'

Cheng Shi's jaw practically hit the floor. After a bewildered moment: "Aren't You afraid He'll steal from You too?"

"Hee~

Afraid of what? It's already been stolen. Why else do you think He's full of lies?

I've told you — don't believe what He says. He's far better at deceiving than I am.

If you want to know something, just ask me directly. No need to beat around the bush. I know roughly a tiny bit more than He does."

"..."

Cheng Shi's expression changed. He was somewhat speechless.

'Lord Benefactor, do You know Your Path partner said the exact same thing?'

'So which of You actually knows more?'

But he didn't dwell on it. Since the Fun God was generously allowing questions, he might as well cut straight to the chase instead of wasting brainpower on probes.

He swallowed hard, took a deep breath, and spoke directly:

"Lord Benefactor, in the Birth trial You sent me to, I heard talk of 'eras.'

You wanted me to learn about this through someone else's mouth, right?

That person said the Existence era has passed. So may I ask: the era we're in right now — is it Void's era?"

The eyes regarded Cheng Shi, blinking and blinking, saying nothing.

The two stared at each other for a long while, devoutly offering their tributes to Silence.

After ages, Cheng Shi's expression stiffened. He suddenly realized he'd fallen into another trap. He sighed with resignation:

"Are You planning to say something, or...?"

"Say what?"

"Didn't You say I could ask anything? I've asked. So where's Your answer?"

The eyes blinked and blinked, corners crinkled with delight.

"I only said you could ask freely. I never said I'd answer."

"..."

Cheng Shi was numb. He laughed — a derisive, self-mocking laugh. He raised his hand and scrubbed his nose red, then shook his head with a sigh.

He couldn't help imagining what cosmic spectacle it would be when Squinty Zhang had his audience with the Fun God!

As the secondhand embarrassment peaked, he almost wished the Fun God would bring him along next time to witness that honest little bone who couldn't tell a lie.

The Fun God read Cheng Shi's thoughts and laughed along:

"Little bone walking Deceit's path will indeed produce entertainment. But he truly isn't suited for it."

"Why not suited?" Cheng Shi saw his Benefactor in good spirits and challenged with full conviction: "For You, entertainment reigns supreme. So 'not suited' should be what qualifies as 'suited,' shouldn't it?"

"Heh—

Sophistry may be my domain, but you should understand: Deceit is merely Void's surface.

Walking this path, entertainment was never the direction. Lies were never the purpose...

Concealing the essence — that is what my devout followers should tirelessly pursue."

Cheng Shi's gaze sharpened. He chewed on every word.

This was the first time Deceit had preached to him about His will. Usually it was Fate who performed this duty, never stingy about course-correcting. But from Deceit, this was unprecedented.

After all, His previous conversations had never been... serious.

And this was the first time Cheng Shi heard his Benefactor's official interpretation of Deceit's path.

After thinking it over, he tested one more question:

"Lord Benefactor, then what is Void's essence?"

"It's Fate."

"No!" Cheng Shi's eyes blazed. In a burst of maximum courage, he cut straight to the heart: "Forgive my impertinence. What I mean is — the Void essence You wish to conceal. What is it?!"

Those eyes studied Cheng Shi with interest, and replied with a not-quite-serious grin:

"Also Fate."

"..."

Cheng Shi pursed his lips, thinking: 'That's clearly deflecting. He doesn't want to say.'

But to Cheng Shi's surprise, Deceit wasn't finished. The eyes rotated their gaze slightly, then spoke:

"So someone has piqued your curiosity.

Corruption's desire — always so intense. So — the 'eras' He mentioned interest you?"

!!!

"You know!? You heard!?" Cheng Shi's face was pure shock.

"What's strange about that? I may not be omniscient, but very little happens in this void that escapes me."

"..."

'I don't think it's "things in the void" — more like "entertainment in the void."'

'Mockery and Jeering!'

Cheng Shi suddenly remembered that entertainment-viewing channel that had turned him into a spider web.

"'Eras' is a very broad concept. The reason He doesn't want you to know is that Fate favors the fixed. He doesn't want the fixed to stop being fixed. So you'll probably never learn these things from His mouth."

Hearing this, brilliance flashed in Cheng Shi's eyes. He felt he'd guessed correctly — these two Benefactors held different views on the "fixed ending."

So he boldly pressed: "And You? What can I learn from You?"

"Hee~

You're overthinking. At your current level, you're not qualified to know these things yet.

But I'm in a good mood after mocking Old Bones today. I could play a little game with you."

Cheng Shi blinked: "Another truth-and-lies game?"

"No. A little game crowned with my divine name."

"?"

'So it's a Deceit game?'

'How is that different?'

Cheng Shi frowned. But soon, a barely perceptible flash of realization crossed his eyes.

Watching Cheng Shi's expression shift, the eyes gave a dismissive snort and changed their mind.

"Actually, never mind. My mood's run out for today. Some other time.

Hee~

Audience wasn't much fun. My followers just aren't devout anymore.

I'm off. You should go too — looking at you is annoying."

A gust of wind blew Cheng Shi from the void. When he opened his eyes again, he stared at the small magic lamp above his bed with blazing clarity, murmuring silently:

"A Deceit game?"

So that's...

what He meant!"

...

Chapter 415: The Universe Will Ultimately Return to Void

Deceit said nothing — yet said everything.

Obviously His words carried hidden meaning, because He'd just stated that Deceit's path was about concealing the essence beneath the surface!

So to uncover the essence of that statement, one had to peel back the "surface" layer by layer.

The riddle looked hard, but Cheng Shi had actually already solved it.

Because the hints were generous enough that he couldn't possibly go off track.

The surface: "a little game crowned with Deceit's name."

Cheng Shi had once had the fortune to play this game, and from His mouth he'd heard two alarming truths.

Whether those truths were genuine remained debatable. But it was that "debatable" quality that made Cheng Shi grasp what his Benefactor truly wanted to convey.

After all, Deceit's answers could never be verified. So Deceit's game inevitably ended in deceit — every participant would be deceived.

Following that logic to the question Cheng Shi had asked: did it mean that Void's era, when it reached its end, would inevitably become... void?

A void that no one who lived through the era could escape?!

Cheng Shi's gaze sharpened. He strung together every past clue. Realization dawned.

So the essence Deceit wanted him to uncover, the fixed future Fate anticipated, and the tragedy Cheng Dashi had experienced — or foreseen — were all the same thing:

This era would ultimately march into Void!

Void...

"Hoo—"

Cold sweat drenched Cheng Shi. Even though he was in his own rest area, lying on his own bed with no danger in sight, sweat still soaked through his clothes and made him shiver.

Void was not a good thing.

One only needed to look at the Void-Whiskered Swallowing Dolphins tearing and devouring existence at reality's edges to understand — when everything was swallowed into the void, existence ceased to exist.

"So... this is our ending?"

Cheng Shi exhaled heavily and sat up from the soaked bed. He stared deep into his shadow on the floor, touching its fingertips with his own.

As he cycled between faiths, he contemplated what role he played on this "road to Void."

'Fate favors me so much — surely not because I pushed this tragedy forward?'

Then he recalled Su Yida's words upon returning...

'He said I'd risen to a sufficient height. So does that height have something to do with the future's ending?'

'Have I become a key driver of the world's descent into Void?'

Cheng Shi's brow furrowed deeply. He didn't feel like that kind of person. But his feelings were irrelevant — everything he'd experienced seemed to confirm that Fate was virtually inviolable.

"Fate... why is it so... peculiar."

His thoughts spiraled outward endlessly. Eventually they circled back to the "Change" that Cheng Dashi had "smuggled back" from the future.

Before, Cheng Shi had assumed Cheng Dashi simply wanted Fate to undergo change. But now, viewed against the backdrop of Void's endgame, perhaps what Cheng Dashi truly aimed for was...

Void itself making a change?

'Could that be the only way to prevent the universe from walking into Void?'

He frowned harder, wondering whether the divergence between Deceit and Fate on the path of Faith Fusion was also mere surface.

'Could its essence not be about choosing a fusion path at all, but rather encompass their differing views on the universe's impending descent into Void?'

This wasn't idle speculation. Because one had to remember: Deceit was the patron of the Torchbearers.

You could say it was for entertainment. But countless organizations sought to defy the gods or seize their authority — each offering comparable amusement. So why had He chosen to shelter an organization whose mission was to build and defend walls around reality?

At this thought, Cheng Shi finally felt that the fog Cheng Dashi had carried back from the future and sown in his heart was beginning to thin.

He had an inkling his guess was correct. Perhaps every effort in the future was aimed at preventing the entire world from falling into Void!

Eras!

The word was terrifying. It looked like something accumulated across infinite time, layered with countless memories — yet in the near future, within a human-scale measure of time, within the brief span in which Cheng Shi could grow into Cheng Dashi, it would write a horrifying conclusion.

"I absolutely must figure out what these so-called 'eras' really are!"

If the present is Void and the past was Existence, does that mean every Path of Fate has its own era?

Life, Descent, Civilization, Chaos... have these eras already played out? Have they ended? What were their conclusions?

It's time to go ask Aph Ros."

Cheng Shi pressed his lips together and reached into his storage...

"..."

He'd forgotten. The deluge of information had made him forget that his SS-grade token had been confiscated by Fate. The fire in his eyes froze on his face.

But just as he was about to sigh and give up, he discovered something in his storage that hadn't been there before: a bone-faced key he'd never seen!

He startled and pulled out the rough key carved from bone. One look at its stats, and he went rigid.

Key to Despised Gate (SS): Quasi-divine artifact. A door key forged personally by Death, using Gate of Joyous Lust ribbon fragments as raw material. It contains His great understanding of Corruption's ■■■ divinity.

Special Effect — Gate of Despised Desire: You may use a corpse riddled with desire-obsession to construct a Gate of Despised Desire, then unlock it with this key. On the other side lies Time's prison — the true Abyss of Desire.

Special Effect — Desire ■■■: While holding the key, the pull of Corruption's power on your desires is reduced.

Special Effect — This Is Not a Gift, But a Transaction: Each time you use the Gate of Despised Desire, you must offer two sacrifices to the noble lord upon the throne.

"!!!"

Cheng Shi was dumbstruck. But what first seized his attention wasn't the key itself — it was...

'Wait — the price went up?!'

'Hold on — why are there censored words in the item description?!'

'Huh?'

'This game's standards are loose enough that some items' backstories are downright obscene, and even those have never been censored. So why is this key censored?'

'Version update?'

Cheng Shi held up the bone-white key, studying it closely. So the great one atop the throne had taken the token and reforged it.

Whether the original ribbons or the reforged key — both led to Aph Ros's doorstep.

'So the great one was worried I'd be corrupted by Corruption and sink into the Sea of Desire?'

'Strange — I'm actually feeling warmth from a skull. Does that skull even have body heat?'

Cheng Shi's brain wandered through all manner of oddities. Before long, he guessed what the censored text had to mean.

'New Authority!'

He'd once heard the great one mention that the strand of Corruption divinity he'd obtained during the trial was called Corruption's "New Authority." So His understanding of Corruption's divinity must have originated from that very strand!

'So this is compensation for confiscating my divinity?'

'But if He's willing to compensate me, then He's not entirely opposed to Squinty Zhang joining Deceit's camp either...'

So, bewildered but grateful, Cheng Shi held up the key and proclaimed sincerely:

"Still so rough... No, wait!

Praise the great God of Death!

Your loyal employee Cheng Shi will continue working diligently as ever, looking forward to achieving even more glorious results for You!

Though my neighbor has gone missing recently, so there are no corpses to dispatch as messengers. I'll just recite the prayer a couple of times symbolically. You know...

Please understand."

...

Chapter 416: Welcome to... Time's Prison

The moon hung at its zenith. Midnight's breath thickened, and the countdown ticked toward its end.

Cheng Shi stared at the card in his hand and sighed.

His original purpose for praying this trial into existence had been to acquire Big Cat's mental-power item before attending the Mediocre Person Society gathering.

But now, sorting through the explosive revelations born from a mess of Birth ethics had eaten an entire day.

It wasn't a total wash, though. At least the great one's gifted door key had illuminated a path forward.

The path: find a corpse, open the Gate of Despised Desire, and ask Aph Ros face-to-face.

But Cheng Shi didn't have a corpse on hand. Xie Yang next door had vanished somewhere — couldn't even be called out. The countdown was about to end, and he didn't yet know whether the so-called invitation would activate the instant midnight struck.

If it worked as he suspected, the remaining minutes weren't enough to pray for another trial to pursue Big Cat's Prosperity item, nor to locate a corpse.

In that scenario, even a risk-free trial wouldn't leave him time to readjust before the gathering. So he chose to rest briefly, maintaining peak condition for the meeting ahead.

It wasn't the most cautious approach, but the Vitality authority gave Cheng Shi a baseline of confidence.

So he revised his plan and called Big Cat, hoping to push back their "under-the-table deal." Unexpectedly, the call didn't go through.

'Big Cat is busy?'

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow. It was a small matter — no need to force the call. His urge to dial had been more about venting complaints than actual communication.

'Tu Tou, get a grip already.'

He shook his head with a wry grin, tossed the phone aside, and picked up the golden card. Thumbing its surface, he murmured:

"Hopefully the Mediocre Person Society has a surprise for me. Ideally including a corpse — that'd make everything easier."

The fine print on the card kept shifting. Cheng Shi gripped it solemnly, motionless, waiting for the invitation to an unknown space to take effect.

He was slightly more nervous now than before a special trial. Special trials, however special, followed a format he'd internalized completely.

But a real-world gathering was different. He'd never attended a player-organized assembly, and he had no idea what unknown risks lurked behind this elaborately crafted, mysterious card.

And so, amid that taut anticipation, the timer crawled to zero.

00:03!

00:02!

00:01!

Countdown complete!

Invitation... nothing. No invitation. Not even the imagined teleportation.

Nothing happened!

Cheng Shi was dumbfounded. He swiveled to scan the room, peered through the window at the rooftop. No void fluctuations up there — not a hint of a spatial rift.

Instead, a new line of small text appeared on the back of the golden card where the countdown had been:

Please affix this card to the back of any door, then push it open to enter the venue.

"..."

The instant he read this, Cheng Shi felt the Mediocre Person Society's allure dim somewhat.

'Manual teleportation in this day and age?'

'Is this Mediocre Person Society even legit? Are they actually just... mediocre people?'

'I came to collect intelligence. They'd better not turn me into the one sharing it...'

But sitting here was pointless. With a sigh, he stood, stuck the card to the back of his room's door, and gingerly pushed it open.

...

Meanwhile, elsewhere.

In a blood-washed apartment, a sweating woman hurled her charred experimental tools away in fury. She slammed her fist into the ruined desk.

BANG — the already-strained table disintegrated to dust.

Gao Ya had failed. Despite the magnificent blueprint of faith fusion, her experiment was a catastrophic wreck.

That Silence puppet had seemed like a true mannequin — utterly pliable. Even during annihilation activation and physical disassembly, it gave no feedback. Yet the instant she tried to fuse the "force-ripened" Birth soul she'd birthed into it, the residual Silence force rejected it without hesitation.

The rejection was so violent that it blew apart half the living room.

She glared at the equally destroyed puppet, feeling like a clown.

"So Silence's rejection is this severe. He doesn't seem to want to fuse with other faiths at all...

Why?

Or is it that faiths from different Paths simply can't be bonded together with soul glue?

No — my previous experiments showed otherwise. I refuse to believe it!"

Gritting her teeth, Gao Ya stood and pulled an exquisite map from her storage. She unfurled it, scanning for something. Before long, in the southwestern corner, she found a city drawn in simple strokes — Dolgod.

"I'd planned to change back to myself the second time I returned. But now it seems I need to delay that plan.

This time, I need to find a new God Reproduction host and get my hands on the Descent Technique hidden in the library. Only then will I have an unending supply of experimental material..."

Gao Ya took a deep breath, pressed her finger to Dolgod on the map, and prayed with eyes closed:

"All life is folly, all civilization is foolishness..."

...

Trial — Dolgod, Theocracy of Growth Rest Hall.

Back to familiar ground.

When Gao Ya opened her eyes, the other teammates were already sizing one another up. She swept her gaze across them, and her scrutinizing stare stopped abruptly on a hulking figure.

He wore a pure-black mask. Every inch of him was concealed. Yet despite this, Gao Ya sensed a familiar aura from him.

Folly's intuition told her she definitely knew this person. Cross-referencing his behavior from the last trial, her brow darkened. She'd guessed his identity.

'Gou Feng!'

She hadn't expected the scheming Chieftain to return here — and land in the same group as her again.

'Interesting. What does he want this time?'

'Surely not... to steal what I'm after?'

Gao Ya didn't expose the Chieftain's identity. She merely frowned, stepped back, and put enough distance between them for reaction time.

This was clearly another high-score match. Teammates introduced themselves one by one. Beside Gou Feng stood a bespectacled woman who kept covering her mouth with a light laugh, seemingly fascinated by everything here.

"The scent of Infant Bell Flowers — as expected from His trial. Good evening, everyone. You may call me Shui Gui.

Gui as in 'sundial,' not gui as in 'ghost.'

Perhaps my name gives away my faith. I'm not good at disguises, so I'll just come clean.

2471, Time Walker."

'Time?!'

'Another Time teammate?'

Gao Ya's brow furrowed. Something felt off.

Being matched with a teammate from the previous trial was bad enough. Now there was a Time player — just like last time.

Coincidence?

Maybe. There were only sixteen faiths — you'd run into repeats eventually. But Folly's intuition told her something was wrong.

So Gao Ya decided to leave. Go solo. Folly was never a team player anyway, so her departure would raise no eyebrows.

She silently glanced over the assembled teammates, then — amid expressions of annoyance, curiosity, and astonishment from the others — smashed through the window behind her and left without a word.

She didn't need to waste time on anyone. She knew where the Descent Technique was hidden.

But on her calm, collected walk toward the church's rear library — she bumped into someone.

The man in church robes caught her around the waist the instant their shoulders touched, affecting a gentlemanly air:

"I didn't hurt you, did I, beautiful lady?"

'That tone — is this a pickup attempt?'

Gao Ya sneered internally. For blissfully ignorant NPCs like this, she had only one approach: drain every ounce of utility, then kill. She had plenty of control tools at her disposal.

But this time, she used none of them. Instead, she struggled with violent desperation to break free from his embrace.

Because she'd recognized who he was. But a mere identity alone wouldn't inspire this much terror.

What terrified Gao Ya was realizing her emotions were being pulled. Her desires were being amplified. She felt that if she didn't struggle free now, she'd be lost in these ballooning desires — irrevocably... falling in love with the man before her.

Turadin!

This man whose pickup lines were deplorably hackneyed was Turadin.

But he couldn't be the Turadin she'd known. Because those purple eyes — she'd never seen them before.

Gao Ya panicked. She'd never imagined NPCs within a trial's backdrop could change!

'Why are these beings — who should have been annihilated by history — moving as if they're alive, possessing their own consciousness?'

That smirk curling his lips made one thing clear: he'd recognized her!

'Impossible — an NPC, no matter how special, having memories?!'

'This can't be!'

Turadin saw Gao Ya's fear and confusion. He drank in those emotions with greed, his blazing gaze locked on her eyes as he smiled:

"What — don't recognize me?"

I'm so happy to see you again, miss. But could you tell me... why didn't my brother come?"

"You... YOU!!??" Gao Ya's pupils contracted. Her face drained of color. She tried to reach into her storage for an escape tool, but before her hand could rise, a tentacle materialized from thin air and locked every joint in her body.

She couldn't move.

Turadin tilted his head toward the rest hall, shook his head, and sighed.

"There's another familiar aura over there too. But it's not my brother either.

Pity. I thought he'd come find me again. Seems I was wrong.

I'm a little disappointed. But old friends returning isn't so bad.

So please allow me — the lonely prisoner, Aph Ros — to welcome the beautiful lady's arrival."

With that, he spread his arms wide in a devout embrace toward the heavens. Then his blazing eyes settled on Gao Ya, his lips curling into an eerie smile.

"Welcome to...

Time's prison.

Beautiful lady, are you ready to receive the most exquisite pleasure this world has to offer?"

...

Chapter 417: Running into an Acquaintance!

Lavish. Ostentatious. Dripping gold. Dazzlingly resplendent.

That was Cheng Shi's first impression of the so-called Mediocre Person Society.

When he stuck the golden card to the door and pushed it open, the other side was no longer his rooftop but a grand entrance corridor — gilded red carpet underfoot, diamond chandeliers overhead.

He stood at the carpet's starting point. At the far end stretched a massive, eye-searing pair of doors.

Gold filigree, silver trim, pearl accents, jade panels — the doors had zero aesthetic sensibility. Pure material excess. One glance and the nouveau-riche stench hit you like a wall.

Seeing this at the corridor's end, Cheng Shi's mouth twitched involuntarily.

'As the saying goes, people flaunt whatever they lack the most. So the Mediocre Person Society is...'

'Pretty short on cash, apparently.'

But really — who still cared about this stuff? Gold, silver, and jade in the age of the Faith Game were worth less than a loaf of Finger Bread and a can of snot water.

At least food filled your belly. But these precious metals and stones that had been coveted for thousands of years — what were they good for now?

Showing off?

A mountain of gold couldn't beat one extra point on the Road to Ascension. Embracing faith and getting closer to Them — that was the real flex these days.

Of course, those were just thoughts. Not bragging.

What Cheng Shi really meant was, these doors...

"A bit tacky."

He muttered, tentatively ran a hand along the gilded lines on the walls, then deftly whipped out a scalpel, cut off a chunk, and examined it up close.

It was clear this wasn't paint — it was genuine, solid gold.

'Interesting.'

Whether the Mediocre Person Society was run by mediocre people remained uncertain. But one thing was sure: whoever orchestrated all this had to be a tasteless person. Profoundly, spectacularly tasteless.

Cheng Shi snorted a laugh. He waited a cautious moment, confirmed there were no delayed traps in the hallway, and finally stepped forward.

Before entering, caution was written all over his face. But the moment his feet hit the red carpet, his posture relaxed. He strode with confidence, projecting an air that said: this man can handle anything coming his way.

Was that real?

No. It was an act. Classic Cheng Shi.

Relaxation was impossible. Cheng Steady had been running on taut nerves the whole time. The breezy exterior was a mask for others' benefit.

He knew this was a player gathering. He wouldn't let any emotional crack show on his face. He certainly wouldn't reveal wariness to the other attendees. He'd shield himself behind a calm gaze and a don't-talk-to-me smile — in case the Mediocre Person Society had some means of scouting incoming guests.

He wasn't sure anyone was watching. But the essence of caution was: think more, walk steady!

The corridor was short. Soon he reached the end.

Cheng Shi eyed the massive doors — gold-carved, jewel-encrusted, absurdly heavy — drew a deep breath, and pushed them open.

Blinding light speared through the gap, making him squint.

But he wasn't standing in the light's path. He'd pressed himself to the far side of the door, using a mirror shard to peek through the crack — and managed to blind himself with the reflection.

"..."

'Over-cautious to the point of self-sabotage.'

Once he recovered, he realized he'd overthought it. This place was very safe — or at least the people inside seemed to think so!

Yes — there were lots of people behind those doors!

Through the mirror, Cheng Shi spotted countless heads milling about the enormous venue. His gaze sharpened. He shifted the mirror's angle and studied the scene — then noticed something extremely strange.

These attendees — who appeared to be fellow gathering participants — were crowded into this vast space and hadn't uttered a single word. Not a sound. The entire hall was dead silent.

More than that — players who were moving had deliberately erased every trace of their footsteps, determined not to attract others' attention through stray noise.

Cheng Shi froze at the sight. He suddenly wondered: was the Mediocre Person Society set up by Silence followers?

'Is everyone's purpose here a group offering to Him?'

"..."

'That'd be way too weird.'

At the hall's center stood an enormous circular wooden stage. The stage was completely empty — no set, no performers.

Surrounding the stage were tiered rings of seating. But interestingly, the gaps between seats vastly outnumbered the seats themselves. Each ring held only sixteen chairs. At first glance, the hall looked like a child's doodle of a sun — a crimson stage at the center with sixteen "rays" extending outward. Those "rays" were the seats arranged for attendees.

Meaning: each seat had only a front neighbor and a rear neighbor. None beside it.

This odd layout clearly unsettled many people, since every seat offered a view of the person in front's head — while exposing your own to a stranger behind you.

Yet the cards in everyone's hands bore seat numbers. With no choice, many simply stood beside their assigned seats, cautiously observing the people and surroundings.

When facing the unknown, everyone was cautious.

The door Cheng Shi had pushed open was in the first row, closest to the stage. The moment he stepped into the seating area, he spotted his assigned position.

No. 15.

It was the very first seat in a long, straight column — right at the stage's edge. The spot was too conspicuous and too hard to sit in. At least from the second row onward, you could stare at someone's head. Cheng Shi's seat offered nothing but the stage.

'Careful math says: I'm one head-of-hair in the red.'

Seeing this, he pursed his lips in wordless displeasure, then without a word began climbing the tiered stairs.

His reasoning was simple: if he sat high enough, far enough back — with nobody behind him — he'd never need to worry about his back.

But he was far from the only "clever" one here. Loads of people wanted the back rows. Countless players tiptoed upward. The "magnificent" spectacle gave Cheng Shi flashbacks to his university days.

'Everyone wants the back row.'

"..."

But the back rows weren't so easy to claim. After observing for a moment, Cheng Shi discovered the massive hall could extend infinitely — meaning, as long as someone was willing to keep climbing, the tiers would stretch toward an unseen sky!

And some were already doing exactly that. These players, driven by unknown motives, had walked so far they were mere specks in the distance — as if hidden treasure awaited them up there.

Watching the scene, Cheng Shi furrowed his brow slightly.

'Spatial abilities...'

'So is this Oblivion, Truth, Existence, or Void?'

Silhouettes shifted, gazes crossed, positions shuffled — the entire venue remained cloaked in eerie silence as more and more attendees filtered in.

Realizing the hall was essentially endless, Cheng Shi gave up. With a sigh, he decided to find a safe spot and observe first.

But just as he was scrutinizing his surroundings — he suddenly spotted a familiar face in the seating area.

An acquaintance!

...

Chapter 418: An Ascetic Monk Who's Even Poorer Than You

The instant Cheng Shi spotted the familiar face, his lips curled upward.

But he didn't greet the person. Instead, he suddenly halted, changed direction, and strode directly toward them. Then, under their bewildered and confused gaze, he casually sat down — right in the seat directly below.

Row 8, No. 135.

The acquaintance sat in Row 9, No. 151.

In this venue, the overwhelming majority wouldn't dream of sitting so openly beneath a stranger. Yet Cheng Shi just dropped into the chair without a care in the world.

As if he was absolutely certain the other person would never harm him.

The bizarre move drew stunned looks from those nearby.

Clearly, in their eyes, either Cheng Shi knew this person or he had enough confidence to back it up.

But judging by the expression of the person behind him, they obviously didn't know each other. So...

A consensus began forming among the surrounding players: this man was strong. He radiated an almost arrogant confidence!

But there was one person even more confused than everyone else — and that was the one sitting behind Cheng Shi...

Cui Qiushi.

Yes — the Torchbearer Order Knight. Son of Old Cui, Cui Dingtian.

The Torchbearers had evidently obtained a few Mediocre Person Society invitation cards.

No one knew how the cards appeared. But lately, many seemed to be chasing them.

The Torchbearers had been lucky enough to "find" a few. For intelligence purposes, they'd dispatched several members to investigate — Cui Qiushi among them.

When a stranger suddenly appeared in his line of sight, deliberately changed course to sit in the seat below him, Cui Qiushi first assumed he'd run into a disguised "ally."

But after studying the man closely, he confirmed this was no ally — just an unfamiliar man he'd never seen.

Scheme, or coincidence?

Tensing instantly, Cui Qiushi clenched his fist and subtly shifted backward.

He glanced toward a companion not far away, calculating his response zone and how quickly he could reach his teammate — ensuring he could shield them if anything went wrong.

His companion had likewise noticed the oddly behaved man. Their gaze sharpened, and they began assessing Cheng Shi carefully.

Meanwhile, the man who'd caused all this tension? He'd already settled contentedly into his seat with his eyes closed, resting.

In Cheng Shi's mind, Cui Qiushi couldn't possibly recognize him. But that didn't stop Cheng Shi from knowing Cui Qiushi — and knowing that this Order Knight was a genuinely righteous person who'd never kill an innocent.

So — as long as he didn't reveal his "true villainous nature" — safety was assured.

Thinking this over, Cheng Shi's lips twitched into a smile.

'Tsk. Not bad. Found myself a bodyguard right out of the gate.'

'Today's going to be a good day.'

While Cui Qiushi continued observing the man in front of him, more and more players filtered in.

Most reacted the same way: scanning strangers, tiptoeing upward, drifting toward less populated areas.

Cheng Shi observed for a long time. The vast majority of players here didn't seem to have particularly high scores. Only a few had the composure of high-level competitors.

He even spotted a handful of crafty types faking nervousness. Whether they were fellow practitioners of deception would require further observation.

All in all, the venue was lively — eerily silent, yes, but the undercurrents beneath that calm surface ran as fierce as any psychological warfare inside a trial.

Of course, with this many attendees, "mavericks" were bound to appear. A few minutes later, two people who clearly didn't care about the eerie atmosphere or others' opinions simply strode to the first row and sat down.

Cheng Shi glanced their way. One took seat No. 7 in his own column; the other sat at No. 9. And the one in seat 9 — he knew him too.

Another familiar face!

This acquaintance had actually spotted Cheng Shi the moment he'd pushed through his own door.

Upon seeing Cheng Shi's position, he'd raised an eyebrow, started to wave — then suddenly recalled something. His face darkened, and he forcefully lowered his half-raised hand.

Witnessing this, Cheng Shi nearly broke character and laughed aloud.

'Once bitten, twice shy. From now on, this big bro of his would probably never greet him as cheerfully as before.'

'At minimum, he'd need to confirm Cheng Shi wasn't Zhen Yi first — only then might a "genuine" smile appear.'

That's right — this acquaintance was the Chosen One of War, Cheng Shi's "generous" big brother, Grand Marshal Hu Wei.

The instant he pushed through the door, his heavy footsteps shattered the venue's silence, drawing every eye.

But he showed zero interest in the attention. Frowning, he found his seat and dropped into it — looking for all the world like the Mediocre Person Society's chairman.

After he sat down, another man who also sat in the first row pushed through his door.

He and the Grand Marshal exchanged a knowing smile upon entry — clearly acquainted.

Cheng Shi silently noted the man's face, then quickly averted his gaze, letting his eyes wander.

With Hu Wei having broken the silence, rustling sounds gradually filled the hall.

Perhaps some had found old friends. Perhaps others had stumbled upon hated enemies. Either way, Silence withdrew His gaze at some point, and the noise in the venue grew steadily more complex.

A few more minutes passed. The atmosphere grew rowdy. Then another person pushed through a first-row door. The instant he appeared, Cheng Shi noticed his gleaming bald head.

A genuine baldhead!

But this was no laughing matter. Because Cheng Shi distinctly caught — from the side profiles of Grand Marshal Hu Wei and the other first-row man — the moment this bald man appeared, both their expressions turned deeply uncomfortable.

The last time Cheng Shi had seen the Grand Marshal this flustered was when Cheng Shi had let out that "hee~" right to his face.

So...

'Is he Zhen Yi?'

"..."

'No, no, no — he's not Zhen Yi!'

This wasn't because Cheng Shi deduced the bald man's identity. It was because he caught the man's name from the hushed exclamations around him.

"The Prisoner?! What is he doing here?"

"Bro, who's The Prisoner?"

"He's... forget it. You're better off not knowing..."

'The Prisoner?'

Cheng Shi's gaze sharpened, recalling what Big Cat had once told him:

The Chosen One of Silence is an ascetic monk who's even poorer than you.

So this baldhead was the Silence Chosen One Big Cat had mentioned?!

'Dude, your class is Ascetic Monk and you actually went and shaved your head for the role?'

He looked toward where The Prisoner had appeared, curious where this Silence Chosen One — who was allegedly poorer than himself — would choose to sit. But what happened next surpassed everyone's expectations.

The "genuine bald Chosen One" first rubbed his shiny dome while surveying the room. Upon spotting Hu Wei, he broke into a cheerful grin, spat out the gum in his mouth, rolled it casually between his fingers, and stuck it on the corridor wall.

Then, hands in pockets, whistling a tune, he sauntered with peak nonchalance toward the Grand Marshal's seat. Under Hu Wei's increasingly thunderous expression — he plopped himself down, with total nonchalance, on...

Hu Wei's lap.

"..."

"..."

"..."

...

Chapter 419: Welcome to the Stage of Mediocre People!

Everyone fell silent.

Just as clamor and commotion were about to sweep through the venue, a single small gesture from this Chosen One instantly rendered the entire hall pin-drop quiet.

Cheng Shi's jaw nearly hit the floor.

'Dude?!'

'You just sat on the Grand Marshal's lap?'

'Huh?'

'What's next — the marshal goes to war with a "little wifey" in tow?'

Cheng Shi was dumbstruck.

He wasn't alone. Every last person in the room was stupefied.

Only the distinguished gentleman seated alongside Hu Wei in the first row seemed to have expected this. The moment The Prisoner chose Hu Wei instead of him, he quietly exhaled in relief — and the faintest smile tugged at his lips.

Still — credit where it was due. This Silence Chosen One's ability to manufacture silence was genuinely...

Eye-opening.

Godlike, even.

Cheng Shi watched with amusement. The crowd found it hilarious. But the man involved certainly didn't share the sentiment.

A vein throbbed on Hu Wei's forehead. Staring down at The Prisoner perched in his lap, he instantly drew a greatsword erupting with blood and fire. But the moment he was about to strike, the enormous crystal magic lamps on the ceiling went dark.

Blackness engulfed everyone's vision. All that remained was the churning fire on the greatsword, illuminating The Prisoner's bald head and the Grand Marshal's thunderous face.

But in that instant, nobody cared about the two-person stack in the front row. Startled cries rang out. Nearly everyone snapped into defensive postures, guarding against opportunistic chaos. Yet with so many people present, unsettling sounds rose from certain directions — even screams and wails.

The loudest commotion, though, came from the first row.

No one saw clearly what happened. They only caught a blood-red rainbow arcing through the dark, followed by a surge of searing heat flooding the hall.

In those towering heat waves, the sound of fist hitting flesh rang like clashing steel. The radiating flames sent nearby attendees scrambling backward in alarm.

Cheng Shi's heart lurched. He, too, leaned back three inches — and that single motion nearly made Cui Qiushi behind him draw his weapon.

A small shield materialized in Cui Qiushi's palm.

Fortunately, the man in front had only taken a defensive position without further action. But his reaction left Cui Qiushi even more confused.

'He's never turned around. He even dared press his back toward me. Why?'

'How is he so certain I won't hurt him?'

'Does he know me?'

'No — I'm sure I've never seen him.'

'So... who is he? Is it him?'

'No, he said he'd act alone and wouldn't meet with us. It can't be him.'

Regardless, as long as no genuine hostility was shown, Cui Qiushi wouldn't strike first.

He stared at Cheng Shi's head in the darkness for a moment, then decisively shifted back one seat.

Cheng Shi sensed Cui Qiushi's movement and twitched his mouth in wordless exasperation.

"..."

'Great — gave the bodyguard a stress reaction.'

But this wasn't something he could explain away. He'd just have to stay put for now.

Just then, the hall — which had been dark for only seconds — lit up again. Several blinding spotlights converged on the stage's center, illuminating a short-haired man in a black tuxedo wearing a cartoon mask.

The room went quiet instantly. Whether the scuffles had ended or the shadows simply couldn't survive in the light, every attendee greeted this "host" with "tacit silence."

Cheng Shi stole a peek at the front row. At some point, The Prisoner had vanished, and Grand Marshal Hu Wei was back in his own seat.

Though from his posture, his foot... seemed to be stepping on something.

"..."

But not everyone's attention was on Hu Wei and The Prisoner. Most eyes were drawn to the man at center stage, gazing suspiciously at this figure who'd appeared from nowhere and triggered the chaos.

The masked man laughed broadly. He swept a 360-degree bow to the surrounding audience, then spread his arms and called out with barely contained excitement:

"Good evening! Welcome to the stage of mediocre people!

Allow me, in tonight's enchanting moonlight, to extend my sincerest welcome to all the... mediocre people in attendance."

It sounded like an insult, but no one challenged him. Everyone observed the host in silence, harboring their own thoughts.

The masked man seemed to relish the spotlight. He spun in an elegant circle, presenting his image from every angle.

Honestly, between his appearance, his hosting style, and everything Cheng Shi had observed in the venue, he could already eliminate several faith candidates for this mystery host:

Prosperity, Order, Folly, Silence.

But these were only guesses. After all, some Silence followers were surprisingly chatty. So a Folly follower being sociable, an Order follower not maintaining order, or a Prosperity follower with short hair weren't impossible either.

While Cheng Shi's thoughts wandered, the masked host continued in an elevated tone:

"Perhaps you've already guessed. I am the convener of this gathering of mediocre people, and the most self-aware mediocre person among us all.

My surname is Gong. If you don't mind, you can call me—"

"Old Gong?" a voice shouted.

"..."

"..."

"..."

The hall went silent again. But shortly after, muffled laughter rippled through the crowd.

Cheng Shi's mouth twitched. Unsurprisingly, he looked toward Hu Wei's direction.

And that "Old Gong" had indeed come from beneath his feet — from the Silence Chosen One, The Prisoner.

Yes. Beneath his feet.

There lay The Prisoner, pinned under the Grand Marshal's boot, face-down on the ground, craning his neck upward to interject with the flattest expression imaginable — as though his current situation were the most natural thing in the world.

No one else found it normal.

Cheng Shi was impressed. Thoroughly, completely impressed.

He decided this so-called Chosen One was unexpectedly formidable.

The Prisoner's single "Old Gong" had struck the man on stage into silence.

The masked man froze mid-sentence, raised a hand to rub his temples, shook his head with a rueful smile, then quickly found his rhythm again.

He looked in The Prisoner's direction with an unfazed grin:

"Calling me 'Old Gong' is moving rather fast. If you're serious, feel free to contact me privately after the gathering. Whether you're a follower of Birth or a devotee of Corruption, I believe I can make a modest contribution to your piety.

But right now!

My time belongs to every mediocre person here."

With a slightly suggestive joke, the masked man elegantly sidestepped the "Old Gong" topic, then laughed loudly and prepared to resume his speech.

But to his dismay, The Prisoner had no intention of stopping. He produced a phone from somewhere, pressed it to the number pad with both hands, and asked with genuine earnestness:

"Perfect — what's your number? I'll write it down. I'll call you the second this wraps up."

"..."

"..."

"..."

The venue fell silent yet again. The masked man stood frozen for a long moment before slowly turning back to face him.

This time he didn't engage. Instead, wearing a half-smile, he addressed Grand Marshal Hu Wei:

"I don't suppose it was you, sir, who put him up to this?"

Hu Wei scoffed, ground his heel slightly harder — shoving The Prisoner's face into the carpet — and replied:

"My apologies. Ever since the family dog learned to talk, he won't stop running his mouth. I'll keep him in line."

The masked man stared for a long beat, slowly nodded, then turned once more to address the rest of the crowd.

But just then, the trampled Prisoner interrupted him again.

"Woof woof woof woof woof woof woof...!"

"..."

"..."

"..."

'He's literally a dog!'

Cheng Shi was numb. Half laughing, half crying at the spectacle, he suddenly felt a twinge of sympathy for Silence.

'Does that omnipresent deity know His follower is like this?'

'While other gods' Chosen Ones are being aloof, mysterious, or strategically pulling strings from the shadows... His Chosen One is barking like a dog under someone's boot...'

'Putting on entertainment this hilarious doesn't exactly seem like practicing His will. It's more like something Deceit would do. So, God of Silence...'

'You wouldn't happen to be Deceit's alt account, would You?'

...

Chapter 420: President Gong

The masked man had had enough.

He stopped responding to the "barking" from beneath the stage. With a hearty laugh, he straightened up and addressed the entire hall:

"The splendor of life is much like this very moment — always interrupted by unexpected interludes. But no matter how delightful these little diversions may be, most are nothing more than garnish. They'll never become life's main melody, much less its climax.

So let us get to the point.

My surname is indeed Gong. If you don't mind, you may call me 'President Gong.' As the convener of the Mediocre Person Society, I believe I marginally deserve the title of 'president.'"

But most players clearly weren't buying it. Nobody had the slightest understanding of what the Mediocre Person Society actually was. No one was about to hand a stranger the title of "leader" right out of the gate — especially one they'd never met.

So the hall buzzed with life.

Most players kept their grumbling internal — quiet mutterings at most. But bolder voices existed. From the upper tiers, someone let out a shout:

"Hilarious! You haven't explained a single thing about what the Mediocre Person Society even is, but the first thing you do is lock in your own title? President Gong, isn't that a little shameless?"

Are you a Corruption follower who's embraced the desire for power?

Hmm, doesn't quite fit — you don't seem fanatical enough...

You give me more of a 'nouveau riche tossing coins at beggars' vibe. Not much craziness, but a healthy dose of arrogance.

Huh? You wouldn't happen to be a Folly moron, would you?"

"..."

Everyone glanced back in surprise, but the spot the voice had come from was empty.

Teleporting in a room of over a thousand people was a brazen move — unlikely to evade that many eyes. So the challenge was probably voice projection; someone had masked their location by throwing their voice elsewhere.

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow, finding the situation more interesting by the second.

Not everyone here was mediocre. Some clearly had real ability — and real skill at passive-aggressive snark.

Though the heckler was challenging President Gong, his words also managed to insult Corruption and Folly in passing.

Corruption followers would probably let it slide — they were absorbed in their own desires and wouldn't get heated over petty jabs. But Folly...

Folly followers would never let it go. The instant the man's voice faded, contemptuous retorts erupted from every corner:

"Pointless."

"Utterly foolish."

"Mediocre people indeed."

"Idiot!"

"..."

Cheng Shi wanted to laugh. And he wasn't alone — even the insulted President Gong cracked up.

He threw his head back and laughed three times on stage, then gestured for quiet. Patiently, he explained:

"This has nothing to do with my faith. Suspicion and skepticism are perfectly normal. But what I want to say is that I've gathered you all here not to elevate myself, nor to extract anything from you, but for...

All of you!

Don't interrupt just yet. I know that as the Faith Game has progressed, most of you no longer believe in selfless benefactors.

But as it happens — I'm one of them.

Honestly? I've participated in too many trials. Endured too much suffering. Witnessed too many tragedies.

I know how each of you crawled up from 1200 points. I know how ordinary people struggle to survive in this apocalypse of the Gods' Descent.

Not everyone has the talent to climb to the top of the Ladder of Ascent. Not everyone is lucky enough to clear the 2000-point threshold. I couldn't bear to watch more compatriots vanish into the river of time. That's why I conceived the Mediocre Person Society.

Admit it, everyone — we're all mediocre!

In this age of divine descent, as humanity's fire dims, the geniuses can push through blizzards alone. But we can't. We need to huddle together for warmth. Only by gathering and supporting one another can we walk further!

Just like the Mutual Aid Societies in every region — only by clasping each other's hands can we withstand greater storms and climb the same peaks as the geniuses, to glimpse the view on the other side!"

President Gong spoke with rousing passion, but far too few were swayed.

The Folly followers launched a second round of ridicule. One didn't even bother hiding, sneering loudly:

"How unnecessary! If Mutual Aid Societies already provide mutual help, why do we need a Mediocre Person Society bossing everyone around?"

President Gong burst into laughter. He looked at the Folly follower who'd "publicly sneered" from the back rows and replied with a smile:

"Not everyone in a Mutual Aid Society is mediocre. My friend in Folly, please use that sharp mind of yours for a moment. If you were the highest-scoring member of a Mutual Aid Society, would you go out of your way to pull up the low-scoring players?"

"?"

Everyone turned. The Folly follower wrinkled his brow and said nothing more.

Obviously, he wouldn't.

But watching this exchange, Cheng Shi's lips curled imperceptibly.

'This President Gong is interesting.'

The question itself was shallow. After all, people who joined a Mutual Aid Society were, by definition, willing to lend a hand. So the question was basically meaningless.

But!

His skill in choosing who to answer was superb.

The challenger was a Folly follower — the type who'd never join a Mutual Aid Society. His challenge was purely logic-based inference.

From his standpoint, Mutual Aid Societies shouldn't exist at all. All he saw was the false kindness and pretense in them. To him, such organizations only dragged people down.

So President Gong had taken a shortcut: traded a meaningless question for a guaranteed answer, and neatly choked the Folly follower using his own logic.

It wasn't the most brilliant maneuver. But as long as it outshone the challenger, it was enough to burnish his image in the crowd's eyes.

After all, this was a gathering of "mediocre people."

Even if clever people lurked among them, the clever always saw through without saying so. President Gong had evidently grasped this principle, which was why he'd used this approach to clap back at a Folly follower.

Though on second thought, that Folly follower might genuinely be mediocre...

His score probably wasn't high.

Sure enough, the sneering Folly follower fell silent. He wanted to say something more but found nothing to say.

President Gong smiled faintly and continued:

"Our friend here seems to understand. Not everyone in a Mutual Aid Society is mediocre — but we... all are.

Even if you refuse to accept it, we must acknowledge that compared to those lofty leaderboard players, we might as well be nothing.

Below 2000 points, all are equal. So rather than calling ourselves mediocre, we're really just a group of unfortunate souls at roughly the same level.

Given that, let's stop scheming and dragging each other down. If you're willing to walk forward hand in hand with the Mediocre Person Society, perhaps one day... the leaderboards will have a place for us too."

The instant President Gong's voice faded, The Prisoner — still pinned underfoot — craned his head up and spoke again.

"The Ladder of Ascent has eight boards. Even counting the Road of Ascension, there are only a few hundred named spots.

But there have to be at least a thousand people in this hall. Old Gong, when the Mediocre Person Society makes it big, who goes first and who goes last?"

