

The Gods 441

Chapter 441: Behind the Stage Curtain

"What does a one mean?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?" Qin Xin's smile froze. He recognized the gravity of the situation. "Is it related to [Fate]?"

"That, I also don't know."

"Then tell me what you do know." In that moment, the Torchbearers' pragmatic ethos asserted itself. Qin Xin crossed his arms, brow furrowed.

An Mingyu deliberated for a long while before carefully choosing her words:

"First, I can confirm that matters involving Cheng Shi are subject to prophecy.

"Not long ago, he contacted me. The implication was that he wanted me to make a prophecy about [Prosperity]'s fall. After discussing it with Xin Xin, I didn't do that. Instead, I made a prophecy about Cheng Shi himself.

"You should know that deities cannot be prophesied about lightly. So what I prophesied last time was: whether the matter Cheng Shi described was connected to him.

"I saw no visions whatsoever. But the number I rolled was..."

Watching An Mingyu's increasingly solemn expression, Qin Xin raised a brow: "What was it?"

"Maximum."

"Twenty-two?"

"No. All seventeen dice in my possession— every single one rolled maximum."

"..." Qin Xin's expression finally changed. Shock— rare for him— surfaced on his face. He pointed upward and asked, "Are you saying His fall... is connected to him? Connected to a player?"

"Which is exactly why I said... I don't know."

"I've conducted two prophecies about him, and those two prophecies produced two opposite extremes. All prior experience and guidance has lost its reference value..."

"What exactly was your second prophecy?"

"It's what you mentioned— the audience. I wanted to know whether my Lord had ever summoned him. And my Lord's answer was a pitch-black [Void], along with..."

"A one on the Die of Fate."

"Based on my understanding of you prophets, a one signifies absolute negation. So isn't it possible that [Fate] has already given its answer?"

An Mingyu fixed Qin Xin with a withering look, as if staring at a fool.

"I take no particular pride in it, but Qin Xin, please take a careful look at who's standing before you. I am the highest-scoring prophet in this entire game."

"As the Chosen One of [Fate], I believe I have somewhat more authority on the subject of dice values than you?"

"..."

"This is categorically not a normal one. You need to understand— [Fate] is suffused with change. No one can be certain that something will absolutely never happen.

"Fixed destiny only reveals itself at the very end... So the question is: whose ending is this?" An Mingyu furrowed her brow in thought.

Qin Xin stood there awkwardly. He shook his head with a smile.

"Forget it. What we don't know, we don't know. Whether or not he's had an audience with [Fate], it doesn't change the fact that the Torchbearers owe him a debt.

"With [Prosperity] fallen, everyone will start making moves soon. If the Torchbearers' God Creation Plan is to continue, the best approach is to seek inspiration at their funeral.

"Of course, I'm not sure there'll be a proper funeral. But I imagine that those who chase after the deity's relics will serve as a form of 'tribute' in their own right.

"I don't yet know what kind of lead Hu Wei and his group found ahead of time, but the Torchbearers need to start moving too.

"Once I return, I'll issue the task. As long as we find some 'relics' before everyone else learns the truth, we won't come out too badly.

"But I can't help reminding you and Zhen Xin of one more thing:

"Even if you're using Zhen Yi as a pawn in your schemes... letting her know too much is never a good idea."

Indeed— using Zhen Yi as a pawn!

This Mediocre Person Society gathering was never Long Jing and Zhen Yi's scheme. It was the Torchbearers' and Zhen Xin's!

After Zhen Xin had extracted every memory of Cheng Shi from Zhen Yi's mind, the Torchbearers' affairs had been laid bare before her.

And that was how the Blind One had come to find Qin Xin in the first place.

She hadn't been recruited as a Fire Seeker by Qin Xin— she'd come knocking of her own accord.

As for why Zhen Xin and the Blind One wanted to collaborate with the Torchbearers: it was because the Blind One, upon hearing about the organization from Zhen Xin, had immediately prophesied the Torchbearers' future.

And in the prophetic vision of that future, she'd seen herself and Zhen Xin.

So the two women had decided to approach the Torchbearers and align with [Fate].

After hearing this prophecy, Qin Xin— uncharacteristically— hadn't probed deeply into their motives. He'd simply consulted a certain "person," asking whether this partnership was feasible.

That "person" had given an affirmative answer but offered no further counsel.

So Qin Xin decided to take the risk.

Because the current Torchbearers were simply too weak. He desperately needed assistance, and a prophet who could see through [Fate] would undoubtedly spare them countless troubles.

Hence his earlier remark: the two sides were merely collaborating, and a parting of ways was inevitable.

And how to grow the Torchbearers before that parting came was the most urgent question burning in Qin Xin's mind.

Returning to the matter of the scheme: when the Blind One had gleaned scraps of information from Cheng Shi and cross-referenced them with Zhen Xin, they'd arrived at a bold conjecture— the very one Cheng Shi had spoken of: [Prosperity]'s fall.

But this intelligence couldn't be verified. So they'd devised a scheme, feeding a few fragmented memories to Zhen Yi and letting her curiosity drive the investigation.

And conveniently, Zhen Yi was headed to the Mediocre Person Society. Zhen Xin had also given Cheng Shi a Mediocre Person Society invitation card in advance. So the two women, together with the Torchbearers— who hungered most for divine intelligence— had laid their trap within the gathering.

Their primary target was Zhen Xin's alternate personality and sister, Zhen Yi— along with the clueless clown, Cheng Shi.

Zhen Yi had believed all along that she was the star of this mediocre gathering, so she'd contacted her "good friend" Long Jing, and the two of them had run their own "little scheme" inside Zhen Xin's grand design.

And the target of that little scheme was also... the clueless clown, Cheng Shi.

In summary: con the clueless clown, Cheng Shi.

Simplified further: Cheng Shi the Clown.

But what nobody expected was that before this scheme-within-a-scheme concluded, the true clown had turned out to be the schemers themselves. Everyone who'd tried to extract intelligence from this game had ended up the clown instead.

What followed in the hall essentially confirmed [Prosperity]'s fall for Zhen Xin, the Blind One, and Qin Xin.

Because Cheng Shi's refusal to challenge or question the claim was, in their eyes, an attitude in itself— it meant he could actually stomach the bitter fruit of Zhen Yi impersonating him, which in turn meant he'd already come to terms with [Prosperity]'s fall.

And so, the Torchbearers' God Creation Plan was set in motion. Step one: find [Prosperity]'s relics.

Which was why Qin Xin had issued that warning. He simply didn't want Zhen Yi piecing together clues about their affairs, which could deal a fatal blow to the Torchbearers' existence.

An Mingyu nodded in agreement:

"Rest easy. Xin Xin has already removed every memory Zhen Yi had regarding the [Prosperity] speculation. She only left behind the faintest of clues— otherwise, someone as clever as Zhen Yi would never have been lured into the scheme."

"Should I say 'no one knows a sister like her sister'?"

"Viewed this way, having an alternate personality is certainly convenient in certain matters."

"Convenient?"

"If it happened to you, you absolutely would not say that."

"The two of them are sisters, but they're also rivals— and rivals who know each other inside and out..."

Qin Xin's expression turned strange for an instant. He imagined what it would be like if another version of himself appeared, then was struck by some thought that made him burst out laughing.

"Having a rival isn't so bad either. But enough of that."

"What comes next is memory erasure time.

"Ming Yu, although you're only an unofficial Fire Seeker, regarding this particular memory..."

An Mingyu raised a hand to cut him off: "Just bring it out."

Qin Xin nodded with an appreciative look, then produced two brand-new vials of Remembrance Needle!

"You're generous with these— they're quite valuable, you know. Aren't you afraid I'll resell them and let Xin Xin keep this memory?"

Qin Xin smiled brightly: "I trust you."

Those three words alone were enough for An Mingyu to shed every trace of levity. She nodded with absolute gravity and accepted the two vials of Remembrance Needle. But then she added with a light laugh: "There's one thing I've always been terribly curious about."

Qin Xin raised a brow: "Go on."

"From using dreams to shroud this hall, to generating memory projections of players, to all the memory-erasure abilities you're using..."

"If I'm not mistaken, you seem to always rely on items to wield your [Memory] powers.

"Where on earth do you get so many [Memory] artifacts, Qin Xin?"

Qin Xin seemed entirely unsurprised by the question. He laughed heartily: "Perhaps you've forgotten that one of my Fire Seekers is a Learned Poet."

"True, a Learned Poet would greatly augment your capabilities. But what I mean is, your items go beyond mere pages.

"As a follower of [Memory], why do you refuse to wield [Memory]'s power directly?"

"What exactly are you hiding?"

"And that current mysterious number-one on the [Memory] ladder, Like A Dream— is that really not you?"

At those words, Qin Xin grinned from ear to ear.

"Of course it's not me. Because I..."

"Am not on the ladder you're referring to."

Chapter 442: How Many Curtains Does This "Mediocre" Stage Have?

An Mingyu's gaze sharpened, as if trying to determine whether Qin Xin was telling the truth.

Qin Xin, however, didn't dwell on the subject. Instead, he fished a golden card from his pocket and studied the small text on its surface with interest, smiling as he spoke:

"When a player dies, their personal storage vanishes, but this card falls right out— free for the next person to pick up.

"Heh, quite the Mediocre Person Society. After changing hands several times, whoever ends up with this invitation card— can they really be called mediocre?"

"Ming Yu, who do you think created the Mediocre Person Society?"

An Mingyu frowned slightly and produced her own card.

The card in her hand had been given to her by Qin Xin. If not for the Torchbearers' rule requiring all unassessable mysterious items to be turned in, this scheme might not have come together so easily.

The Torchbearers held three cards in total: No. 16 in her hands, No. 13 in Qin Xin's, and No. 4, which remained at the Torchbearers' secret base.

Zhen Xin had taken No. 1, which Zhen Yi had originally collected, and had given Cheng Shi No. 15.

Considering the sparse turnout, it wasn't hard to guess: perhaps the Mediocre Person Society's invitation cards had only ever numbered sixteen— one for each of the sixteen faiths.

"He's screening..." An Mingyu said.

"Screening? Good word. He is indeed screening, but for what purpose?"

"The attendees' faiths are all different. As it stands, [Deceit] occupied two seats, which naturally excluded a certain faith.

"Among the faiths that didn't appear tonight, only two have the means to orchestrate something this grand.

"So could it be one of those two?"

"Ming Yu, do you have any prophecies left for today?"

An Mingyu smiled and shook her head:

"[Fate] offers guidance, not answers.

"If one blindly follows prophecy to the letter, one gradually strays from [Fate]'s true path.

"Remember— it is neither fixed destiny nor change.

"There's too little intelligence. I can't offer any conclusions. But I think you're right— this does seem like something those two could pull off.

"Especially him..."

Qin Xin was mildly amused by the Blind One's words, but he quickly schooled his expression. He lifted his gaze upward, eyes laden with meaning.

The two exchanged a few more casual words before departing not long after.

Before leaving, the Blind One still hadn't managed to pry Qin Xin's identity from him, which only deepened her curiosity about the Torchbearers' founder.

She recalled Zhen Xin's assessment of Qin Xin: someone who could "endure the humiliation of crawling between legs and fight his way before a god." A person of "unshakable composure who plans before he acts."

People with that temperament typically ran impossibly deep. Without special means, deciphering their thoughts— or their secrets— was a fool's errand.

But since she'd come to collaborate rather than antagonize, An Mingyu refrained from using her [Fate] talent on Qin Xin.

She figured that perhaps, someday, once mutual trust had been fully established, Qin Xin would reveal the answers to these mysteries on his own.

After the Torchbearers departed from that space, the hall fell silent once more.

The spotlights lost their glow. The seating tiers swallowed all sound.

This venue, now devoid of any players, seemed to have returned at last to true [Silence].

But was that really the case?

No. After silence had "echoed" for an unknowable stretch, yet another change stirred in the hall.

In a patch of shadow far up in the seating tiers, the flow of time suddenly warped. The effect manifested as the entire shadow "refreshing at high speed," and before long, the shadow came alive— its "mouth" writhing open to disgorge a...

Short figure.

Though the figure was small, his eyes blazed with keen intelligence.

He looked toward where Qin Xin and the Blind One had stood, then toward the direction where Hu Wei and the others had vanished. He stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"[Prosperity]? Torchbearers? Cheng Shi? [Fate]? Mediocre Person Society?"

"Interesting— how interesting.

"Tonight's show was definitely worth attending.

"This seems to be... [Birth]'s aura. Strong, too. Better give this Fate Weaver a wide berth in the future."

The figure grinned happily. Between his fingertips, a golden card spun rapidly. A closer look revealed it to be a Mediocre Person Society invitation card, and the number emblazoned on it read unmistakably: No. 14.

"So Qin Xin was him?"

"Well, well. [Void]'s members are tight as thieves, advancing and retreating together. So why is everyone in [Existence] so distant with each other?"

"Qin Xin, oh Qin Xin— why didn't your little Fire Seeker come recruit me?"

"[Fate] can prophesy, sure, but [Time] can extrapolate too! Am I really worse than that blind—"

"Hm?"

"Who's there?!"

The figure in the shadows went silent at once, snapping his gaze toward a certain direction across the hall.

He'd heard movement. His expression turned serious immediately.

Someone else was still here?

He'd assumed he was the final mantis behind the cicada, but it turned out tonight there were two mantises?

Brow furrowed, eyes glinting cold, he drew an invisible dagger and crouched in the shadows like a leopard, waiting for his prey to show an opening.

But his wariness quickly solidified into something else entirely.

Because he realized the direction the sound had come from was...

The direction the Prisoner had left!

Could it be...?!

As he stood there in stunned disbelief, a hand burst through the rubble of the passageway with a clatter, shoving aside chunks of stone. A head emerged from beneath the collapsed debris.

That dust-covered, rubble-flecked head broke through the surface and immediately flashed a brilliant smile toward the shadow in the seating gallery, beaming with delight:

"Lao Deng, what are you standing there for? Give me a hand!"

"Prisoner, you didn't leave?!?" The voice from the shadows practically shrieked, its pitch cracking with shock. "Dammit, I knew it— you're just like Zhen Yi, you love a spectacle too much to ever actually leave!"

The short figure seemed to recall some traumatic memory and instantly went into fight-or-flight mode.

He didn't hesitate for a single instant. The moment he confirmed it was the Prisoner, he dove into the flow of [Time] and fled the space without so much as a backward glance.

"Don't go! What has the world come to— have people forgotten all decency?!"

"You see me stuck like this and won't even lend a hand?"

The Prisoner grumbled for a moment, struggled to pull himself out a bit further, and when no reply came from across the hall, his eyes rolled with sudden inspiration. He shrugged off the rubble in one burst and stood up directly.

Expression cautious, he walked over to the shadow and inspected it carefully, muttering: "He really left?"

The hall offered no answer beyond the echo of the Prisoner's own voice.

But the Prisoner refused to give up. He simply sat down on the floor and waited quietly for the other to return. After an indeterminate stretch of time...

He finally opened his eyes again.

"So... he really did leave.

"Since everyone has left, then, Your Excellency... are you going to show yourself?"

"I know you're here. If you don't come out soon, I'm going to call the authorities.

"Voyeurism..."

"Is against the law, you know."

Chapter 443: The Curtain Falls, the Show Ends

The Prisoner was certain someone else still existed within this hall, because that very "someone" had ripped away his [Silence] camouflage!

Rewinding a little— back to the moment the Prisoner had made a fool of Yu Mu and strode laughing toward the exit.

The instant his hand closed around the door handle, a flash of inspiration struck. A far more brilliant idea bloomed in his mind.

He realized he didn't actually need to leave.

The one who should leave was the loathsome Zhen Yi— not the universally beloved Prisoner.

So he changed his mind.

He wanted to stay and observe— to see what kind of changes this so-called Mediocre Person Society would undergo once it lost its master of atmosphere, and how much more intelligence would trickle out.

Besides, he had a vague feeling that these weren't the only people in this venue.

He and Cheng Shi had reached the same conclusion: something was wrong with this hall!

In truth, it wasn't just the two of them. When Hu Wei had scrambled to leave so urgently the moment "Zhen Yi" started counting down, it wasn't necessarily pure panic— he simply hadn't wanted to stick around and invite new trouble.

So everyone had been thinking the same thing. What none of them expected was that "Zhen Yi" would strike first!

Returning to the Prisoner: at the very instant he pulled the door open and was about to step through, he used [Silence]'s talent to "silence" every line of sight in the venue, erasing himself from everyone's perception.

Then he quietly shut the door, slipped into the nearby rubble, and became a silent intelligence-gathering device.

[Silence] players excelled at precisely this, and he walked farther along [Silence]'s path than anyone else alive.

In that single instant, the Prisoner had fabricated the illusion of his departure— shifting from the spotlight to the shadows. From the loudest "cicada" who'd already left the Mediocre Person Society's stage, he became a silent "mantis" who'd circled back for an encore!

When he overheard Qin Xin and the Blind One's conversation, he realized the secrets buried beneath this Mediocre Person Society ran far deeper than he'd imagined!

He'd "accidentally" learned that Qin Xin commanded an organization dedicated to protecting goodness. He'd "accidentally" discovered his brother-in-law really was his brother-in-law. He'd "accidentally" found

out said brother-in-law was apparently formidable beyond measure. And he'd obtained the best possible confirmation of [Prosperity]'s fall.

Beyond all that, he'd also detected that after Qin Xin and the Blind One left, something else in the hall still hadn't departed!

After all, he "understood" [Silence] best— and right now, it wasn't "silent" enough!

So he didn't rush to leave. He waited patiently. What he hadn't expected was that this wait would produce yet another unexpected acquaintance.

Another mantis, just like himself, quietly materialized in the hall under the Prisoner's gleeful observation.

Lao Deng!

The Chosen One of [Time]— Lao Deng!

This "friend" whom he'd nearly led down [Silence]'s path once upon a time was now muttering his "award acceptance speech," blissfully unaware that the Prisoner had been recording every word of those somewhat cringeworthy declarations from beneath the rubble.

The Prisoner was having the time of his life. He was confident that the next time he encountered Lao Deng, he could push him even further down [Silence]'s road. But at the peak of his delight, the unexpected happened.

Some inexplicable force suddenly tore away his [Silence] cloak, abruptly exposing his presence to the other's senses.

Lao Deng was a Chosen One— an assassin, no less, the class most attuned to environmental awareness. He detected the presence immediately and snapped into combat mode.

What he hadn't anticipated was that this "fellow mantis" hiding even deeper than himself was the Prisoner!

That Prisoner who silenced everyone he touched!

In that instant, Lao Deng's face looked like he'd been chronically constipated.

And the moment the Prisoner called out "give me a hand," Lao Deng decisively chose to exit the stage, because fighting the Prisoner was utterly pointless.

It was like the frustration of being conned by Zhen Yi— brawling with the Prisoner only made things worse.

At least after being swindled, you could comfort yourself that the fraudster's technique was simply too sophisticated and you hadn't been careful enough. But against the Prisoner?

You couldn't exactly blame yourself for not talking fast enough.

What tormented people was never the Prisoner's fists— it was the Prisoner's tongue!

The man was terminally chatty. The verbal fabric he wove was so dense and airtight it could suffocate you!

And so the Chosen One of [Time] opted for a tactical retreat.

After Lao Deng departed, the Prisoner's expression turned uncharacteristically solemn.

He knew the moment had finally come to confront the true mastermind behind this Mediocre Person Society.

But no matter how he "called out" to the hidden figure within the hall, the venue remained utterly silent. Apart from the echoes of his own voice, there was not a single response.

Silence and noise reflected off each other in that moment.

The Prisoner shouted until his voice went hoarse. Still, no one acknowledged him.

He decided the other party probably didn't want to see him. And so the thoroughly bored Prisoner shook his head with a sigh and ultimately chose to leave.

This time, he truly left.

Because even without a direct response, between his own observations and the conversations he'd overheard, he'd already formed a guess about the hidden figure's identity.

What he wanted was an answer, not an actual exchange. And so, satisfied that he had his answer, the Prisoner made his exit.

Shortly after his departure, yet another change swept through the mediocre hall.

A drastic change.

Gold faded from gilt. Jade lost its luster. Chairs crumbled to rot.

Everything that had been resplendent within the hall began to distort and warp once every last attendee had truly vanished.

It was as if an invisible hand had peeled a high-saturation filter from the space. Before long, the entire venue lay in desolation.

Glory dimmed. Splendor could not endure. Beneath the gold and jade, it seemed, had always been nothing but rubbish.

Now, looking around the hall, beyond the demolished stage and passageway, all that remained were weather-eaten, rotting chairs, weed-choked stairways, and the mottled, faded dome above the stage.

And then, from atop that rust-streaked dome above the stage ruins, a crimson curtain unfurled downward.

The instant that blood-red fabric descended, it transformed into a rolling wave of cloth that surged outward in every direction. Before long, it had wrapped the entire hall in its embrace.

Then...

With a sharp whoosh, the entire venue vanished from the Void.

At the same time, on a stage somewhere in reality, a man in formal attire cradled a glass ball— mottled and decayed— and carried it to the stage's edge. With great care, he placed it on a shelf already crowded with glass spheres.

He polished the dust from its surface with an exquisite silk handkerchief, replaying scene after scene of the brilliant performance that had just unfolded on this stage. A satisfied smile crept across his face.

"Behold— the performances of the mediocre are always so magnificent."

He set the glass ball down precisely, then retreated step by step to center stage. Facing the empty audience seats below, he bowed deeply and murmured:

"The curtain falls. The show ends."

The moment those words faded, the stage's red curtain descended, enfolding his entire figure behind it.

But a golden card clattered out from behind the curtain, landing squarely at center stage.

The spotlight dimmed ever so softly. But before the light vanished entirely, its faint glow still revealed the detail inscribed upon the card's surface.

At its center were three small characters: "Mediocre Person Society." And the card's number read precisely...

No. 11.

Chapter 444: Go Lis's Grudge!

The moment Cheng Shi's vision plunged into total darkness, he was, in truth, somewhat uneasy.

This was his first time using the Sinner's Regret. He wasn't entirely certain what effects this Servant God relic would produce, or what kind of "punishment" it would inflict upon the imprisoned sinners. He only trusted that his friend wouldn't have given him something harmful, which was why he'd resolved to take the leap.

When his consciousness returned and he felt his limbs could still move, he knew in that instant that his friend was indeed trustworthy.

At the very least, this truly wasn't a [Birth] instrument designed to execute sinners. He'd merely been imprisoned— trapped in a darkness as vast and empty as the Void itself.

What's more, within that darkness he could hear faint, sibilant ravings. The voice came in disjointed rasps, grating and ugly, sounding at once like confession and like lamentation. The cadence lurched between frantic urgency and bitter fury, the syllables obscure and the words impossible to parse. A single sentence was enough to make one's skull feel like it might split open.

Cheng Shi's heart jolted. He immediately tried to cast a Calming Spell on himself.

But he failed.

Because he discovered he'd been stripped of all his powers. Neither [Deceit]'s nor [Fate]'s abilities responded.

His stomach dropped. He hurriedly checked his personal storage, and when he found he could still extract items from it, he exhaled a deep sigh of relief.

'Good. Supplies are sufficient. At least I won't starve in the short term.'

Cheng Shi smiled wryly. He tried pulling a magic lamp from storage to illuminate his surroundings, but once it was in his hand, he realized this space could never be lit.

Because he wasn't floating in actual Void. It was more like he'd sunk into a quagmire made of darkness— impossibly viscous, enveloping him completely from every direction. He couldn't even see his own limbs.

He could feel their existence, certainly. But in this environment, every movement required overcoming infinite resistance, and no matter how he struggled, his body could not shift from this tiny pocket of space.

After several attempts, a thought struck him: he felt as though he'd become a thoroughly swaddled... fetus.

'So this is Go Lis's Grudge?'

'Have I been turned into a "stillborn" like those Uma Sinners?'

'This viscous darkness can't possibly be... amniotic fluid?'

Cheng Shi's expression turned strange. 'Is this [Birth] of yours... wholesome?'

'What about umbilical cords? There aren't going to be umbilical cords, are there?'

He patted his stomach and, after a long examination, confirmed nothing bizarre had sprouted from his body. Then he retrieved the Umbilical Shackles that Hu Xuan had given him from his storage and slowly turned them over in his hands as he sank into thought.

He seemed to be the only person in this space. Beyond being trapped, there appeared to be no additional danger.

It seemed the players who'd fallen into Go Lis's Grudge had each been imprisoned separately.

This was good news: it meant he had ample time to work on escaping.

But it was also bad news, because it meant Cheng Shi had lost all ability to observe the others. He couldn't predict how long they'd take to break free.

He never doubted these peak players had the means to extricate themselves from Go Lis's Grudge—after all, Servant God relics weren't exclusive to him. But he believed it wouldn't happen quickly.

And that gave Cheng Shi an opening.

In his plan, he didn't need to be the first to escape. He just needed to get out before Zhen Xin.

Only then could he guarantee that if he encountered those peak players again after escaping, he'd have time to prove his identity and reclaim it before Zhen Xin could, completing the restoration of their proper roles!

That way, whether she was a magician or a Master of Trickery, she'd lose every slender advantage she'd built during the Mediocre Person Society gathering, and silently eat a massive loss by taking the blame for Cheng Shi!

So escaping as fast as possible was the most critical piece of Cheng Shi's substitution plan.

And he had every confidence in his ability to escape.

Because he'd long since prepared a guaranteed method of extraction. He already knew how to free himself from the Sinner's bonds!

The Servant God relic's description was perfectly clear. There were only two ways to leave Go Lis's Grudge: either be rescued by someone else, or have your faith become devout once more.

Based on Cheng Shi's rudimentary understanding of Go Lis, "faith becoming devout once more" likely meant that those marked as sinners had to become devout [Birth] followers before Go Lis would willingly release them.

But that condition was nearly impossible to meet. Unless someone committed oathbreaking right in front of Go Lis, the trapped could only wait for rescue.

Would those peak players abandon their faith over a non-lethal predicament?

Certainly not.

So calling for outside help was their best answer!

Unfortunately for them, they didn't know the answer. Only Cheng Shi knew it, and he held the key!

The Night Curtain Spring Whistle!

This whistle that could summon the Eternal Sun with a single blow was undeniably the best solution for dispelling Go Lis's Grudge.

When Hu Xuan had given him the artifact, she'd said: if you need something, blow the whistle.

And right now was precisely when Cheng Shi had the greatest need. Though this particular need differed from what Hu Xuan had in mind, both concerned [Birth], so surely she'd understand.

So why, after deliberating for so long, hadn't he blown the whistle?

Because... he'd given it away!

Yes— he'd given it away.

The Night Curtain Spring Whistle he'd tossed to Zhen Yi was not a fake. It was genuine— the very one Hu Xuan had personally placed in his hands.

During that earlier standoff, Cheng Shi could have used Sacrifice to Nihilism to fabricate a whistle and deceive everyone.

But he knew such a move wouldn't fool Zhen Yi, because Zhen Yi had read his memories and knew he was a clown who possessed the "Sacrifice to Nihilism" talent— not some Fate Weaver.

So she'd probably anticipate that he'd forge a fake whistle and toss it over to deflect her demands.

For precisely that reason, Cheng Shi thought one step ahead. Rather than fabricating a forgery, he'd "surrendered" the real whistle.

As for whether it was truly a surrender— that depended on how the other side reacted.

But this meant the whistle that could summon Hu Xuan was now in Zhen Yi's hands. Whether Cheng Shi could escape hinged entirely on whether she blew it— a massive increase in uncertainty. So how had he dared hand over his safety net?

Remember: Cheng "Steady" Shi never took risks without reason.

When he surrendered one safety net, it invariably meant he had at least one more!

And that second safety net was... [Deceit]!

Cheng Shi had prepared ample backup for this "capture peak players" plan. In the very instant Go Lis's Grudge dragged him into the Void, he'd completed a faith switch through contact with his own shadow— transforming from [Fate]'s favored child into one of [Deceit]'s collection.

And as it happened, in the previous game, Cheng Shi had deceived a follower of [Birth].

Therefore!

What others could only achieve through oathbreaking— that first condition— for him required nothing more than... a single prayer.

And so he struggled to extract his Die of Fate from within his clothes, curled his lips into a smile, and whispered:

"Lie like yesterday, mock today.

"Yesterday I deceived a follower of [Birth]. And so today...

"I am a follower of [Birth]."

The instant those words faded, Go Lis's Grudge lost one blasphemous clown— and gained one supremely devout Offspring Priest.

Faith renewed. Devout once more. The grudge, crumbling...

Freedom— within arm's reach!

Chapter 445: The Hero Arrives: Eternal Sun!

Meanwhile, on the other side.

After everyone was dragged into Go Lis's Grudge, every face turned grim and serious.

This was clearly a terrifying control-type [Birth] artifact. Its ability to hard-crowd-control so many people simultaneously spoke to its devastating power. By any reasonable estimate, this had to be at minimum a Servant God relic!

Fortunately, the Servant God relic only restrained— it didn't cause harm. So these peak players weren't panicking to the point of cold sweat.

For ordinary people, such a situation might be genuinely terrifying. But for these paragons among paragons, puzzle-solving was second nature.

Just as it was now: every trapped peak player was carefully searching for a way out.

This particular predicament was merely tainted by some [Birth] aura that nobody particularly wanted to touch, but when survival was at stake, nothing was unbearable.

Beyond that, during their moments of respite, each of them was also wondering where "Zhen Yi" had obtained a Servant God relic of this caliber, and whether the relationship between [Deceit] and [Birth] had shifted yet again.

However...

Whether Zhen Yi actually possessed a relic of this grade was something others might not know— but Zhen Xin certainly did.

Even she hadn't expected Cheng Shi to wield this kind of power, capable of sweeping up every player present in one move.

Honestly, wide-area control artifacts weren't unheard of among peak players, but very few dared to use them directly against others. One misstep in explanation and you'd invite a collective beatdown.

Zhen Yi, on the other hand— Zhen Xin had deliberately avoided acquiring such mass-aggro items to keep her sister out of trouble. Yet in the end, "Zhen Yi" had found one on her own!

But this "Zhen Yi" was not that Zhen Yi!

This Cheng Shi, wearing her sister's name, had just created a spectacular mess for her!

She thought she'd taken this [Deceit] colleague seriously enough, but he'd still handed her a "surprise" of this magnitude.

Of course, the true "surprise" came not from Cheng Shi, but from her own sister Zhen Yi!

Because a violent emotional spike had occurred the instant she was dragged into Go Lis's Grudge, the Zhen Yi she'd personally sent to sleep suddenly found a window of opportunity— a chance to fight back against her sister. And so, the instant Zhen Xin sank into the dark mire, Zhen Yi...

Woke up.

She laughed gleefully as she shoved her sister back to sleep, then set about cracking the little puzzle Cheng Shi had so graciously delivered to her doorstep.

A [Birth] puzzle naturally required a [Birth] key. The brilliantly clever Zhen Yi immediately thought of the whistle that little Cheng Shi had "returned" to her.

The Night Curtain Spring Whistle.

She'd seen this whistle before. From its exterior, it looked like an ordinary Night Curtain Spring Whistle. All such whistles were more or less identical, making it impossible to confirm whether this was truly the one Hu Xuan had given Cheng Shi.

Zhen Yi was sharp as a tack. She never believed Cheng Shi would willingly part with the real whistle. Then again, she didn't think the little clown was foolish enough to use Sacrifice to Nihilism to casually forge one to placate her.

So she concluded it was simply an ordinary whistle— one Cheng Shi had prepared in advance for exactly this kind of scenario.

After all, in this clown's memories, such things were abundant. Virtually every tool in his personal storage had a useless replica counterpart.

The clown's contingency preparations were impressively thorough. Zhen Yi silently applauded his foresight.

She gleefully retrieved this ordinary Night Curtain Spring Whistle from her storage, running her fingers over its shell again and again, unable to suppress her grin:

"Dishonest little liar. You had such a fun toy— why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"You must have been planning to capture all of us from the start, which is why you gave me this fake whistle just to mess with me. Making me know exactly what the answer to escape is while being completely unable to use it.

"Aww, the little liar's gotten naughty.

"But..."

"Since you love seeing me flustered so much, of course I'll give you what you want.

"Oh, I'll give you plenty!"

"Hee~"

With that thought, Zhen Yi struggled to lift the whistle to her lips, then with all her might, blew into it with sheer delight.

She hoped the whistle's note would pierce through the viscous darkness and reach Cheng Shi's ears. If it did, perhaps the clown would be overjoyed that his scheme had worked. And the moment she heard Cheng Shi's laughter, Zhen Yi's own entertainment would begin.

When a clown played the clown once more, the audience would roar with delight.

Such was the true essence of the circus!

Zhen Yi was already praying— more devoutly than she'd ever prayed in her life. She prayed that Cheng Shi would hear this premeditated whistle note and that she would hear his laughter in return. Then she could stand on her perch of superior logic and mock the clown down below to her heart's content.

'This is too perfect. Fun God, help me out here!'

As it turned out, devout prayers often proved quite effective, because Cheng Shi did hear the whistle.

Not just Cheng Shi— everyone heard it. The piercing note carried tremendous penetrating power, which meant that although they'd been imprisoned separately, they weren't far apart within Go Lis's Grudge!

Their teammates were right nearby!

This undoubtedly "comforted" the trapped peak players, though since no one knew what the whistle signified, they remained still and silent, each wearing a different expression.

As for Cheng Shi: the instant he heard that familiar note, he hadn't yet fully extricated himself from Go Lis's Grudge.

But in that moment, he froze— and then his grin stretched as wide as it could possibly go!

'Zhen Xin actually blew the whistle?'

'That doesn't seem like something she'd do!'

But regardless of whether it seemed like her or not, she'd blown it. And the moment she did, it proved his calculations were flawless. Zhen Xin had at this very moment replaced him as the clown!

Because that whistle...

Was absolutely real!

Whatever her motive, in the end, the beneficiary of blowing that whistle would always be him. Because Hu Xuan recognized Cheng Shi the person— not some Night Curtain Spring Whistle!

Moreover, Hu Xuan had once told him that the Night Curtain Spring Whistle couldn't sustain her descent medium for long, and she'd been meaning to switch to something new. It was precisely those words that had sparked a bold idea during the standoff.

He'd planned to bait with the real Night Curtain Spring Whistle and let Zhen Yi eat another silent loss!

And that silent loss was this: the "fake" whistle she'd blown with her own lips would become the true key to saving Cheng Shi!

Summoned by its call, Hu Xuan would descend to rescue the very fraud who'd stolen her identity!

Better still, the moment Cheng Shi met Hu Xuan again was the moment this whistle would lose its function.

And to further improve his margin for error— in case Hu Xuan couldn't respond to the call— Cheng Shi had already transformed himself into an Offspring Priest and begun extracting himself.

This way, even if Zhen Yi's whistle failed to actually save him, Cheng Shi would still claim it had, and use the fact to mock the outwitted Master of Trickery!

Perhaps such a maneuver wouldn't cause Zhen Yi any serious harm. But based on Cheng Shi's understanding of her, making her eat crow was already the deepest wound one could inflict on this Master of Trickery!

What Cheng Shi hadn't anticipated was the mid-performance actor swap— Zhen Yi being replaced by Zhen Xin.

He couldn't be sure Zhen Xin would blow the whistle as he'd hoped. But as it turned out, the sisters were quite united in the end...

The Night Curtain Spring Whistle had been blown.

And so...

The instant that note rang out, in the infinite Void, within Go Lis's Grudge, a blazing sun— fierce as fire— slowly rose.

The Eternal Sun, Hu Xuan, had descended once more.

And when the giant sun's radiance pierced through the viscous darkness to illuminate the eyes of every trapped player, the crowd was bewildered and confused. Only Zhen Yi's smile...

Froze on her face.

She held the whistle at her lips, and in a sudden, terrible moment of clarity, realized she'd been played.

Standing on the second level, she'd been tricked by a clown performing from the third.

But she wasn't devastated. Gradually, she kneaded that rigid expression into an even wider grin.

"Hee~

"The clown seems to have gotten smarter.

"Now this is... truly entertaining."

Chapter 446: Hu Xuan and... Aph Ros

Cheng Shi was free.

Whether it was the Eternal Sun's blazing radiance that proved too fierce, or Go Lis's Grudge finally collapsing under the Offspring Priest's devout faith, the result was the same: Cheng Shi dropped.

Yes— dropped.

When his feet hit the ground, he realized the so-called "Sinner's Regret" truly had suspended everyone from on high.

The peak players still trapped hung like the Uma Sinners dangling from the ceiling of the Evil Infant Inquisition— each curled into a fetal position, strung up against the phantom of some eerie structure's dome.

Cheng Shi had a nagging sense that the phantom of this building looked familiar. Squinting under the great sun's light for a better look, his entire body went rigid and cold sweat broke out across his skin.

He remembered now. The phantom of this eerie building looked uncannily like...

The Assembly Hall of the Dolgod Church!

'That lingering ghost Dolgod is still chasing me!'

Just then, the great sun reached its zenith and a figure wearing a black halter-top dress emerged from its blinding center. Bare feet touched down, and she descended along the Eternal Sun's rays toward Cheng Shi.

Sure enough— the Void differed from reality. Here, Hu Xuan possessed a complete physical body rather than an intangible projection.

Watching this ally who technically counted as a friendly reinforcement approach, Cheng Shi felt a faint, inexplicable flutter of... fear.

'She is coming to rescue me, right? She won't have any unreasonable demands, will she?'

He couldn't blame himself for overthinking. One look at Hu Xuan in this state and his brain automatically echoed with that single word: "Come."

As Hu Xuan drew closer, Cheng Shi chuckled nervously and greeted her:

"Well, I certainly didn't expect we'd meet again so soon."

No sooner had the words fallen than a response echoed through the Void.

"Quite unexpected indeed."

"Quite unexpected indeed."

"..."

Cheng Shi froze. Just like Zhen Yi moments before, his smile solidified on his face.

Hu Xuan halted too, stopping mid-step and hovering in the air.

Because both of them realized the second response hadn't been the Void's echo— it had come from the lips of someone else, mere steps away!

Cheng Shi's eyes narrowed with gravity. Hu Xuan turned in surprise. Where their gazes converged, amid the shadowed seats of the Assembly Hall's phantom, a man clad in a moonlit gilded black robe rose to his feet. He turned and offered them both an exquisitely elegant smile.

"My brother, the way you appear before me is always so... well, unexpected.

"And might I ask— are you on a date with this beautiful lady?

"That's terribly heartbreaking. You actually chose to meet a stranger inside my cage.

"Could she be your... Miss Sun?

"I sense His aura upon her. So would you tell me— who is this Miss Sun?"

"..."

Aph Ros!

Cheng Shi never imagined Go Lis's Grudge would deliver him straight back to Aph Ros!

Though on reflection, it made perfect sense. This being was Go Lis, and the Sinner's Regret was Go Lis's "authority" left behind in history.

So when Go Lis had awakened from history, the effects of this Servant God relic... had they actually been powered by Aph Ros all along?

Wait— had he accidentally summoned Aph Ros with these Umbilical Shackles?

'Hold on. How is he already working for [Void] this quickly?'

"..."

'No, Cheng Shi, stop thinking about random nonsense. You need to face this— face this historic moment where two Envoys are meeting for the first time!'

While Cheng Shi stood there slack-jawed, Hu Xuan recovered first. She gazed at Aph Ros with calm composure, recognized his identity at a glance, yet offered neither greeting nor acknowledgment. Instead, her eyes lit with curiosity as she turned to Cheng Shi:

"What's 'Miss Sun'? Is that what you call me behind my back?"

"..."

'Please, spare me.'

'You think that's a compliment?'

'The [Corruption] Envoy only elevates his objects of desire to "Miss Moon." Him calling you "Miss Sun" is practically a blasphemy!'

'That's a "filthy" term dripping with desire. Let's not pick up these dirty habits!'

Cheng Shi shook his head emphatically, signaling the term had absolutely nothing to do with him. But to his dismay, Aph Ros seized the moment and began "explaining" on his behalf.

Facing Hu Xuan hovering in the air, the Envoy smiled with effortless charm.

"It seems you know who I am. Allow me to clarify: Miss Moon is the woman I love most dearly. I assumed you were the woman my brother loves most dearly, which is why I called you Miss Sun. If I was mistaken, please forgive—"

"You weren't mistaken."

"..."

Hu Xuan moved.

She glided down with graceful steps, her expression— which had previously held no intention of acknowledging Aph Ros's existence— softening noticeably.

"The meaning behind it may be wrong," Hu Xuan said with a glance and a smile at the speechless Cheng Shi. Then she walked with effortless poise to stand between Aph Ros and Cheng Shi, shielding Cheng Shi behind her while blocking each man's line of sight to the other. Facing Aph Ros with elegant composure, she smiled: "But I like the title."

"Even though it's tainted by [Corruption]?" Aph Ros studied Hu Xuan with fascination.

"[Birth] resides within the heart." Hu Xuan offered a modest bow in return— a concise response.

The scene resembled nothing so much as medieval royalty crossing verbal swords with the most refined of noblewomen. The surface was perfectly calm; beneath it, undercurrents raged.

The clash of faith ignited in that instant. The collision of divinity had already, at some unknowable point, begun permeating the Void.

And as the sole human in this standoff of faiths...

Cheng Shi was absolutely terrified.

Not by the tension— but purely by the words coming out of these two.

"[Birth] resides within the heart..."

'Is that really something a normal person would say?'

'And you, the other one— you're flaunting your [Corruption] aura right in front of a candidate for [Birth] Envoy. Are you not even slightly afraid of getting hit?'

'Oh, Aph Ros probably genuinely wasn't afraid, because Hu Xuan definitely couldn't beat him.'

'Even caged as he was, undeniably he was a genuine Envoy— no, two Envoys!'

'Whereas Hu Xuan? She was half of one at best!'

'Moreover, they weren't standing outside the cage. They were inside it!'

'This was Aph Ros's home turf.'

But somehow, Cheng Shi found he wasn't actually that panicked. After regaining his composure, he crept behind Hu Xuan and introduced the pair with a nervous laugh:

"So, uh... we're all friends here. Let's stay calm, everyone. Let's talk this out.

"Aph Ros, this is— well, you've probably guessed. She is His Envoy, the Eternal Sun.

"Hu Xuan... and this one, I won't bother introducing. You probably know him better than I do..."

Listening to Cheng Shi's thoroughly unhelpful introduction, Hu Xuan chuckled softly. Her gaze burned as she fixed Aph Ros:

"Indeed, I do know you. My Lord's first child— Go Lis."

The name didn't surprise Aph Ros at all. As a child of [Birth], Hu Xuan could never possibly call him by his other name.

But he didn't mind. Both names were him. Far from taking offense, he smiled:

"The obsession of faith is itself a form of desire. If you cannot face my name and identity, perhaps that, too, is a kind of injury to Him."

Hu Xuan frowned slightly, her smile fading.

Yet before she could respond, Cheng Shi spoke up from behind her, glaring at Aph Ros:

"She chooses to acknowledge you but refuses to speak your [Corruption] name— isn't that precisely the act of resisting faith's corruption? She is restraining her desire. Therefore, [Birth] was not harmed. Rather, it received a devout offering."

The instant those words left his mouth, Hu Xuan turned back with a radiant smile— and the sheer force of that smile sent Cheng Shi crouching to the ground.

'Lady, I'm helping you here! And you turn around and terrify me?'

'Please, rein in those divine powers...'

Aph Ros watched this scene with undisguised amusement, clicking his tongue:

"Perfection."

"My brother, you are a perfect God Upholder.

"I once believed you were [Corruption]'s darling, but I was wrong. You are this era's darling.

"[Void]— [Void]!

"Only in this era could there be a stage that lets you shine.

"I'm growing envious, my brother. If only I had been born in this era...

"How wonderful that would be!"

Era!

Cheng Shi's gaze sharpened. The very reason he'd been longing to see Aph Ros again was precisely for this— the "era." Today, at last, his questions would be answered!

Chapter 447: Three People Meet, A Long Table Conversation

Seeing no sign that the two before him were about to come to blows, Cheng Shi slowly let his heart settle back into his chest.

But there were far too many things demanding his attention. He couldn't yet fully immerse himself in chasing divine secrets. Take, for instance, the players still dangling from the ceiling— what state were they in?

The timing of Hu Xuan's descent had been too perfect, and Aph Ros's appearance too unexpected. Cheng Shi hadn't had a moment to examine the peak players trapped alongside him.

Now that he had a spare moment, he discreetly stole a few glances at the multitude of "stillborn infants" hanging from the dome.

This look confirmed some of his earlier suspicions: the Mediocre Person Society's hall had never contained that many living people.

Because the stillborn infants hanging from the dome, aside from himself, numbered only...

Five?

How were there five?

Cheng Shi frowned slightly. Hu Wei, Mo Li, Zhen Xin, and Yu Mu added up to four. Who was the fifth?

The hidden mastermind, accidentally caught in his sweep?

His interest was piqued and he wanted to ask, but compared to the question of "eras," everything else was secondary. So he turned his gaze back to Aph Ros.

Aph Ros read Cheng Shi's intent instantly. As [Corruption]'s Envoy and the embodiment of unrestrained desire, he understood desire intimately. The moment a ripple of want surfaced in Cheng Shi's heart, he'd already responded to it.

"Don't worry about those god chasers.

"When I sensed your call, I began observing them. The reason I left you conscious is that I had a sense you were running some kind of scheme, my brother.

"Now I'm certain— you were indeed screwing them over. Mm, very good. That's very desire.

"But it seems you're more interested in me right now, so I naturally won't let those people spoil our enjoyment.

"By the time this Miss Sun descended, they had already...

"Fallen asleep."

"..."

'Bro, could you maybe talk a little more normally?'

'I'm interested in the secrets in your mouth, not you. There's nothing improper going on between us...'

Cheng Shi's expression stiffened. Suddenly he felt like a lamb caught between two wolves, forced to dye his wool the color of wolf fur just to earn his seat at the wolves' table.

"And what's a 'god chaser'? You just called me a 'God Upholder.' These sound like two different factions?"

Cheng Shi used his topic-deflection expertise to pose the question, but to his surprise, the one who answered wasn't Aph Ros— it was Hu Xuan.

"Throughout the Land of Hope's history, there have always been beings who chase the footsteps of the gods. They view achieving godhood as faith's ultimate goal. Such people are called god chasers.

"And naturally, where there are those who aspire to become gods, there are those who fervently uphold them. There are people who believe the gods are the meaning of the universe's existence, the entirety of creation, and that the whole world revolves around them. They follow the gods with absolute devotion and punish all blasphemers. These people are called God Upholders."

Cheng Shi blinked. He looked at Aph Ros and asked in bewilderment:

"How do I qualify as a God Upholder?"

'At best, I'm a blasphemer,' Cheng Shi mentally added.

Aph Ros laughed heartily:

"How don't you qualify? Understanding Their will, protecting Their faith, broadening the roads of faith—that's what God Upholders spend their entire lives doing.

"Many among them may not be particularly devout toward the one sitting on the Divine Throne, but toward faith itself, they are invariably and absolutely devout.

"God Upholder is a rather broad term. And you, my brother— you always protect the faith you wish to protect, yet you never covet faith itself.

"Therefore, you are a God Upholder through and through."

"..."

'Fine. Never imagined the day would come when I, Cheng Shi, would be called a defender of the gods.'

"Enough of that. I'm extremely curious about what you called 'eras.' If I want to learn about them, Aph Ros, what do I need to pay?"

Aph Ros smiled with elegant composure and offered no direct reply. Instead, with a flourish of his sleeve, he extended an invitation:

"This isn't the place to talk. Let us... find a more pleasant setting."

With those words, the phantom of the church Assembly Hall crumbled away. All three were swept forward on a dense tide of desire. Before long, countless dwellings materialized around them, as if they'd arrived at a small town floating in the Void.

Cheng Shi noticed the Void beneath his feet suddenly solidifying— stone bricks stacking, wooden beams spanning, small fragments of material assembling and reconstructing right before his eyes, forming a spacious terrace beneath the three of them in the blink of an eye.

Meanwhile, the great sun representing Hu Xuan settled gently on the horizon, merging seamlessly with the town. It hung as if perpetually about to set, painting the terrace in a wash of golden amber.

Sunset. High pavilions. Terrace. Breeze.

This was certainly more scenic than the stillborn-festooned Assembly Hall, yet Cheng Shi's face showed not a trace of admiration— only shock.

Because he'd recognized this town!

'This is— isn't this Dolgod?!

His expression complicated, he turned to Aph Ros: "So the cage [Time] gave you isn't just the Evil Infant Inquisition. It's the entire... Dolgod?"

Aph Ros sat elegantly at the head of the long table on the terrace. He smiled and nodded, then shook his head.

"You can think of it simply that way, but [Time] is not the present moment.

"My cage is the [Time] in which I [Existed].

"In ordinary terms, this resembles [Memory] more closely. But existence is extraordinary that way— [Memory] is merely the surface. [Time] is the essence!"

Hearing this, Cheng Shi's eyes narrowed, but he said nothing.

The explanation didn't surprise him. [Void] worked the same way. Or rather, on corresponding Paths of Fate, each deity's significance mirrored the other's.

"And my brother— the version of me you see is merely my most perfect state within this segment of [Time].

"Just as the Eternal Sun holds her bias about my name— it's not that I refuse to greet her as Go Lis. It's that...

"When I become Go Lis, what I care about is no longer any of this before your eyes. It becomes only Him, and the blasphemers who desecrated Him.

"Believe me: you would not want to share a table with that version of me."

"..."

Cheng Shi had no objections to Aph Ros's current identity. As long as the other didn't use [Corruption]'s methods on him, didn't transform into a woman in front of him, and didn't remove those fine clothes, everything else was negotiable...

But Hu Xuan was a different story. She wasn't a true [Birth] Envoy. As merely a candidate, would sharing a table with a [Corruption] Envoy affect her in some way?

Cheng Shi stole a glance in Hu Xuan's direction, only to see her elegantly pull out a chair and take a seat with evident interest.

"I suspect He anticipated this moment long ago, which is why He placed your 'relics' in my keeping before you awakened.

"This is probably what He was trying to tell me. I believe my Lord wanted me to come meet you.

"Perhaps He, too, wanted to know how His former child had fallen to become... this."

Hu Xuan's tone was gentle, but her words cut like a blade.

Yet Aph Ros showed no anger. He merely smiled and clapped his hands, and rows of puppet servants filed onto the terrace bearing trays of exquisitely presented dishes, setting them along the long table before the three.

Cheng Shi surveyed the scene and pursed his lips.

'If this counts as being imprisoned...'

'Being imprisoned for a while wouldn't be the worst thing in the world.'

Chapter 448: The So-Called Eras, Part One

Speaking of "relics" ...

Cheng Shi furrowed his brow for a moment before deciding to produce the Sinner's Regret— the gift from Hu Xuan— right in front of Aph Ros.

This should rightfully belong to Aph Ros. If it had always been Cheng Shi's, he would have returned it to its owner without a second thought.

Because he was thinking long-term. He didn't want an Envoy-caliber intelligence source to grow distant or withhold information just because he'd "pocketed" something of theirs.

Cheng Shi was greedy, yes— but between greeding for more and greeding for less, he still knew how to choose.

He couldn't return this [Birth] gift on Hu Xuan's behalf, but he could demonstrate goodwill. Besides, the item technically belonged to Hu Xuan now. So he placed the Sinner's Regret beside Hu Xuan's hand, then chose a seat on the other side.

With that, the long table formed a three-way standoff: Aph Ros seated at the head, Cheng Shi and Hu Xuan facing each other at the foot.

When Cheng Shi set Aph Ros's "relic" on the table, Hu Xuan immediately grasped his intent. He believed the item could smooth the relationship between the two sides and make this extraordinary meeting go more smoothly.

Hu Xuan nodded at Cheng Shi with appreciation, then looked toward Aph Ros:

"This is..."

"He gave it to you?"

"Indeed.

"Although He stripped Go Lis's power from it beforehand, the fact that He entrusted this 'relic' to me means He, too, is anticipating your return.

"The question is: are you willing?"

Honestly, Hu Xuan wasn't a born negotiator. Nor was she skilled at it. As Cheng Shi well knew, this woman was utterly straightforward— she said one when she meant one, and never wasted words.

Giving birth was also like that.

Aph Ros hadn't expected the so-called Eternal Sun to have this kind of personality. He shook his head in bemused wonder, gazing at the "relic" on the table:

"You don't understand.

"Only when I am unwilling will He be willing.

"The moment I become willing, He will become unwilling.

"That's simply the nature of gods— a bundle of contradictions. They always want to display compassion when pity isn't needed, yet erect their majesty precisely when mercy is required.

"You, Miss Sun, are too young. You've misread His intent.

"He didn't send you to persuade me to return. He sent you to persuade me to give up. As for what I should give up— I won't say it in front of His child.

"Also, He didn't strip my power as a token of goodwill. He borrowed it to safeguard His new child.

"He cares about you deeply. That's good. At least it assures me my convictions were not wrong.

"Furthermore, whether I'm willing or not is meaningless, because as long as the one from [Existence] doesn't speak, I will repent and wallow in this cage again and again, era after era."

"..."

"..."

Those words were so steeped in despair that both people at the table couldn't help but feel it viscerally.

But moments later, Hu Xuan frowned and released a wave of [Birth] aura, realizing she'd unconsciously fallen under [Corruption]'s influence.

As for Cheng Shi...

He had it even worse.

His emotions told him this was the moment to weep. His body told him this was the moment to— well. But his reason screamed that he couldn't let this continue!

When divine beings clashed, mortals suffered. At this rate, the conversation would never happen!

So he hit himself with the purest Calming Spell he could muster.

As the blue light flashed, clarity returned to Cheng Shi's eyes. But in the eyes of the other two present... a raging fire of desire ignited.

Because— [Birth]!

Cheng Shi was currently an Offspring Priest, which meant his Calming Spell was saturated with [Birth]'s essence!

Hu Xuan raised a brow and politely restrained a certain impulse, smiling enchantingly: "It seems you've grafted my Lord's faith..."

Cold sweat burst across Cheng Shi's forehead. He wiped it away awkwardly and gave a nervous laugh:

"Well, would you look at that— pure coincidence. Just a coincidence."

Aph Ros was even more intrigued. In the era he'd lived through, faith grafting had never existed. Well, it had— but only as the feverish fantasies of [Truth] followers.

"I've been extremely curious about what's happened to you.

"Now it seems this might be the new gods' authority?"

"Faith grafting?"

"If His authority is grafting, then what purpose do the others across all Paths of Fate even serve?"

Cheng Shi's eyes flashed at those words.

'See? The capital for intelligence exchange just presented itself!'

"You want to know?"

"Of course."

"Done. I'll tell you about the new gods' authority, and you explain to me the meaning of the eras. Deal?"

Hu Xuan watched the two in silence, internally somewhat shaken— but only somewhat.

By now, she'd been captivated by the Cheng Shi who sat at this long table negotiating with an Envoy. Or to put it differently, she'd been drawn by the [Birth] aura emanating from Cheng Shi.

She was thinking: if Cheng Shi resisted her using her own abilities to bear a child for him, then was it possible that Cheng Shi— who'd grafted the Offspring Priest's abilities— could "bless" her with a child instead?

After all, it would only take a single Healing Spell, and she'd have a chance of receiving [Birth]'s gaze.

Surely [Birth] would be happy to watch over His child and His child's child.

So... was it possible?

The more she thought about it, the more her gaze burned.

Cheng Shi, however, was completely oblivious. Or perhaps he didn't dare be aware. Either way, right now, all he wanted to know was what this "era" that even his Benefactor refused to discuss actually was!

"So— who goes first?" Cheng Shi fixed his blazing gaze on Aph Ros, as if looking at a treasure vault of intelligence.

Aph Ros elegantly tucked a napkin into place. Before picking up his utensils, he smiled and began to lay out what he could share:

"I don't know how many more eras await us, but I can confirm that I have lived through six.

"Including the current era of [Void], six in total."

Cheng Shi was quick on the uptake. This aligned with what he'd already theorized: each Path of Fate seemed to correspond to an era. But what fascinated him most was the difference between "eras" and the "epochs" players commonly referenced.

So he continued to listen patiently.

"I was born in the first era— the era of [Life]. In that age, I was fortunate enough to receive His gaze and became His first child.

"Then the world marched toward [Death]. The universe reached its conclusion. The first era ended.

"And then... I was born again in the second era.

"In this age belonging to [Descent], I failed to receive His gaze again, but I was unexpectedly baptized in the Sea of Desire and became... what you see before you now."

!!!!

'Wait, hold on!'

Cheng Shi's mind went blank.

And it wasn't just him— even Hu Xuan, struggling to contain [Birth]'s impulses, froze for a moment.

Neither of them could make sense of what "born again in the second era" meant.

So what did the first era's ending signify?

Reset? Zeroing out? Reboot?

Cheng Shi's gaze sharpened. He was about to open his mouth to ask when Aph Ros silenced him with a look.

"Don't ask. I speak. You listen.

"What you can hear, you may hear. As for what you can't hear... I'll try not to say it.

"I know you're puzzled by the ending of eras, but I cannot tell you more.

"Believe me— this isn't about hiding things. It's that...

"Certain things cannot be spoken of.

"If you absolutely must know something, my brother, I can tell you His Divine Name. But only if you've prepared yourself to learn of Him."

As he spoke, Aph Ros also looked toward Hu Xuan.

"So— are you both prepared?"

Hu Xuan straightened with elegant composure, smiling as she nodded. She appeared perfectly at ease, though a trace of gravity showed in her eyes.

Cheng Shi, even more so.

His fists clenched white, toes gripping the ground, his entire body taut as a fully drawn bowstring— as if the slightest touch would set him thrumming.

He realized he was about to brush against the gods' secrets. Yet in that very moment, he wavered. He didn't know if he should continue.

Being alive was good, and at the current pace, he figured he could stay alive for quite some time.

So did he truly need to know these things— these things that even Aph Ros treated with such gravity?

But then, unbidden, the image of Old Jia flashed through his mind. The old man strolled through Cheng Shi's thoughts just as he always strolled by the front door each day.

And behind the old man stood a blurred figure, nodding at him with quiet approval.

On closer inspection, the figure seemed to be himself— but with a blink, it looked more like Cheng Dashi, returned from the future.

'Right. If I can't change the tragedy, what's the point of living a little longer?'

Old Jia was still that same Old Jia from memory. He was still this same version of himself inside the game. When the future's tragedy unfolded, where would he find the old man in memory then?

With that thought, Cheng Shi's gaze hardened with fierce resolve.

He looked at Aph Ros and nodded. And from the lips of this dual Envoy, he heard a Divine Name he would never forget.

"Very good.

"All I can tell you is that the ending of every era is connected to Him.

"And His name is...

"[Origin]."

Chapter 449: The So-Called Eras, Part Two

"I don't know what kind of existence He is, nor am I qualified to know. I merely heard Him mention that name once, and only then did I learn that beyond Them, there exists such a being."

At this, Hu Xuan raised an eyebrow.

"Him? My Lord?"

"Yes. It was Him, and it could only have been Him.

"All that [Corruption] reveals to living beings is the Sea of Desire. Though I received His gaze, I was never granted the honor of being summoned before the Divine Throne to hear His will.

"So the 'Him' I speak of is your mother— [Birth]."

Hu Xuan's brow furrowed deeply. Cheng Shi's eyes, however, glinted with keen light.

[Corruption] had never shown itself. Not even His own Envoy had ever seen Him!

This undeniably aligned with what his Benefactor had told him. But the question was: why be so mysterious?

Was this a desire He insisted upon, or... was there more to the story?

Cheng Shi recalled [Fate]'s mention of [Deceit]'s theory. The Fun God had claimed [Corruption] didn't truly exist. Could the Fun God have actually guessed correctly this time?

But the Convention had clearly been established with His consent!

After a whirl of tangled thoughts, Cheng Shi redirected his attention back to Aph Ros's account.

"Let's return to the eras you're curious about.

"After that, I was born again in the third era.

"It was unquestionably a magnificent age— and the most frenzied era for god chasers— because in that era, the world's god chasers actually received the protection of one of Them. And that deity was..."

"[Truth]!" Cheng Shi cut in with certainty.

Aph Ros smiled.

"Correct. It was Him.

"Unfortunately, by the time He cast His gaze upon this continent, I was already dead. It was a great era, but it didn't belong to me. I ended my life too early.

"After that, I was born again in the fourth era. That one was even more chaotic. I didn't repeat any previous fate, and died in the womb as an infant.

"And finally...

"The era of [Existence] arrived.

"I at last found the meaning of my own existence. But the masters of that era did not agree with my ideals. So after becoming an Envoy shared by both of Them, the master of that era sentenced me to eternal imprisonment.

"Heh. Here, within the cracks of time I once inhabited, I became forever... myself."

Cheng Shi's mind was reeling. He desperately wanted to ask how eras were delineated, what rules governed their progression, and how they differed from the epochs players commonly spoke of. But judging by Aph Ros's demeanor, this was as much as the Envoy was willing to share.

Whether it was a matter of inability or unwillingness, Cheng Shi couldn't determine.

He turned his confused gaze to Hu Xuan, hoping she might extract some insight from Aph Ros's words and combine it with her own knowledge to offer clarity. But she looked equally puzzled— because like him, she possessed not a shred of prior information about "eras."

Still, Cheng Shi had grasped a few key points. He raised an eyebrow and asked:

"You were [Birth]'s Envoy in the first era and became [Corruption]'s Envoy in the second, but you didn't become a dual Envoy until the era of [Existence]?"

Aph Ros placed food slowly into his mouth, chewed carefully, and met the question with a smile but no answer.

Cheng Shi frowned. Without expecting a reply, he continued thinking aloud:

"You don't know Hu Xuan, which means the Eternal Sun was never born in any of the eras you experienced.

"And the Eternal Sun was created by the Tower of Logic. So..."

He looked at Hu Xuan and ventured a guess:

"So could it be that your predecessor was born during the third era— the one where he died young?"

"The era of [Civilization]— that's the right term, isn't it?"

Hu Xuan furrowed her brow in thought. It was the previously silent Aph Ros who suddenly perked up. He looked at Hu Xuan, eyes tinged with surprise.

"You... were created by those god chasers?"

"Interesting. Though it makes sense. He is a merciful god— at least when mercy isn't required, He's generous enough.

"So it doesn't surprise me that He would accept you."

"You keep mentioning His mercy. That concerns me. When exactly does [Birth] not need mercy?"

Aph Ros sipped his wine and smiled, deftly sidestepping the question.

"Enough about me. Tell me about yourself, my brother. I'm terribly curious about this so-called [Void].

"So— your Benefactor who rides the Void itself, what sort of authority does He wield?"

Cheng Shi sensed something off in that phrasing. He asked, scarcely believing it:

"You've met Him?"

"Yes. He came to warn me— to stop using [Corruption]'s methods to assimilate you.

"Honestly, it's prejudice.

"Our desires have always resonated on the same frequency, haven't they, my brother?

"After all, you were the one who guided me."

"..."

'Thank you very much. A pot that big? Even if I built it myself, I'm not carrying it.'

But setting that aside— which Benefactor had summoned Aph Ros?

Cheng Shi thought it over and decided it was [Fate].

He likely hadn't been content with merely instructing Cheng Shi and had come in person to warn Aph Ros as well.

'Oh...'

Cheng Shi gave the master of this domain a complicated look. After a moment's contemplation, he began recounting what he knew about his Benefactor.

Naturally, he spoke of [Fate]— because in Hu Xuan's eyes, he was still just a Fate Weaver.

"My Lord is the essence of [Void], seeing through all truths of the universe. He is the embodiment of all good fortune, and also the aggregate of countless misfortunes.

"Under His gaze, the world overflows with change, and the future is written with fixed destiny. Everything you could imagine regarding fate falls under His authority, yet none of it encompasses His entirety.

"Because He needs no description and cannot be defined.

"Because He is [Fate]— the [Void]... to which all things return."

Aph Ros watched Cheng Shi in quiet contemplation, savoring every word of the Fate Weaver's description of his Benefactor.

Compared to Aph Ros's composure, Hu Xuan was visibly more astonished.

She'd expected Cheng Shi to have a unique understanding of Them, but now it was clear he understood far more deeply than she'd anticipated. At the very least, he understood [Fate] profoundly.

Aph Ros, however, seemed to see it differently. He studied Cheng Shi with fascination and suddenly laughed aloud.

"My brother, I must say— your praise for your Benefactor is...

"Mm, absolutely flawless. Not a single imperfection.

"However, based on my understanding of desire and my perception of emotion, it seems you have something left unsaid.

"What more did you want to say?"

"Why not say it?"

"I'm curious. I have a feeling that the things you held back are actually your true thoughts about [Fate]."

Aph Ros set down his utensils, propped his chin on both hands, and smiled with narrowed eyes:

"Won't you share a bit more?"

Cheng Shi's expression froze. He let out a nervous chuckle.

'The beauty is in what's left unsaid.'

'If I blurted everything out, wouldn't perfectly good praise turn into blasphemy?'

'My Benefactor has sheltered me so generously. I can't exactly be ungrateful, can I?'

"Say what? There's nothing more to say. After all, [Fate] simply..."

"Needs no further words."

Chapter 450: [Origin]!

"[Fate]... [Fate]..."

Aph Ros tapped the table rhythmically, clicking his tongue.

"No wonder you could guide me toward my own destiny, my brother. It turns out this, too, was your fate."

"?" Cheng Shi was thoroughly fed up with these cryptic fate-related riddles. After a moment's thought, he cut straight to the point: "The first round of information exchange went smoothly. Let's move directly to round two. What I want to know is simple— just one question: who exactly is [Origin]?"

Aph Ros stiffened, then shed his smile entirely.

When discussing [Origin], he was always dead serious.

"Setting aside whether I can answer that question— even if I could, I couldn't.

"A Servant God has no right to approach [Origin]. If you want to learn about Him, perhaps your Benefactor can provide the answer.

"Interesting.

"In your emotions, I taste fear and unease. You keep pressing me about the eras— are you afraid of the [Void] era's end?"

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted. In a rare moment, rather than avoiding Aph Ros's probing gaze, he looked the Envoy dead in those captivating eyes and gave a stiff nod:

"Yes."

"Fear— the finest catalyst for [Corruption].

"I can guess what you're afraid of. Though I cannot answer your question, I can share one conjecture of mine.

"Based on the pattern of previous eras, this one...

"Will most likely conclude with universal [Void].

"In other words, everything will cease to exist— until the next era arrives!"

Both Cheng Shi and Hu Xuan's gazes sharpened.

"There's a next era?"

"Why wouldn't there be? When I died in the first era, I never imagined I could be born again in the second.

"Of course, if you want to carry memories from a prior era the way I do, you'll need to work much harder. At the very least, you'd have to become something like this Eternal Sun before you could potentially...

"Preserve your memories through an era's collapse."

!!!

At those words, a flash of clarity struck Cheng Shi!

He linked together every scrap of information he'd gathered about the gods and arrived at an extraordinarily bold yet somehow logical conjecture.

The gods appeared to be riding the tide of the eras!

Because Aph Ros predicted the [Void] era would ultimately return to void, and [Fate] was convinced its path was fixed destiny— even hinting vaguely that it had long foreseen the coming tragedy. This suggested that [Fate] was inclined to see this era through to its conclusion.

And it wasn't just Him. None of the other gods had shown any excessive opposition to the [Void] era's curtain call. They were simply experimenting with every possible method of faith fusion within this era.

Perhaps their signing of the Convention— their pursuit of becoming an omnipotent god— was precisely to keep pace with these endlessly ending and restarting "eras"?

Just as Aph Ros had said: since becoming a Servant God allowed one to preserve memories across the rise and fall of eras, didn't that imply a higher form of existence could preserve even more?

So what could a true god preserve? Authority?

And what about an even higher god? An omnipotent god!

Was... this their true purpose?

And that omnipotent god they pursued— could it very well be the [Origin] Aph Ros had mentioned!

So— was it He who created all of this?

Paths of Fate, epochs, eras... was everything the creation of this so-called omnipotent god?

Then what was He doing?

If all these conjectures were true... then what was the Fun God— who opposed [Fate]'s views— trying to accomplish?

Cheng Shi felt his brain buzzing. The sudden deluge of explosive divine secrets had left him momentarily unable to determine which thread of thought to follow or which direction to pursue.

And so, caught in that tangle, he slipped into a strange state. Part of him wanted to force himself deeper, to reason out the essence of Him. Another part knew that dwelling on these things now was meaningless and he'd be better off letting go. Yet the allure of glimpsing the universe's truth pulled at him with mysterious force, as if an invisible giant hand had pried open his skull and was rearranging his brain.

That indescribable sensation sent his consciousness drifting. His pupils dilated. Cold sweat poured out. His limbs went numb. His body locked rigid.

Hu Xuan noticed his abnormality immediately. She frowned slightly and glanced at Aph Ros. Once she confirmed this wasn't the [Corruption] Envoy's doing, she acted decisively to save Cheng Shi.

Her method was simple but devastatingly effective.

She rose, leaned across the table, slowly took Cheng Shi's hand, and parted her lips to say a single word:

"Come."

That single syllable jolted the entranced Cheng Shi awake. His pupils snapped into focus and he threw himself backward in retreat.

The force of his recoil was so violent that it took the chair with him, sending him crashing flat on his back.

The sweat came even harder. But at least he was conscious again.

First he stared at Hu Xuan's hand in shock, then rapidly blinked down at his own. Trembling, he wiped the cold sweat from his face and gasped with lingering terror:

"Th-thank you."

Hu Xuan lay draped across the long table, her posture alluring. A glint of teasing amusement danced in her eyes as she looked at Cheng Shi.

"So close. What a shame— a moment more and I'd have been the one thanking you."

"..."

'Lady, please spare me.'

Cheng Shi shook his head with a wry smile. He knew Hu Xuan was simply lightening the mood. Without his explicit consent, this friend... probably wouldn't be carrying his child.

'[Birth] is terrifying.'

'Good thing. Good thing...'

He exhaled heavily, then fixed his gaze on Aph Ros with grave seriousness, only to find the Envoy watching his predicament with eyes crinkled in amusement.

Cheng Shi's heart clenched. He immediately realized this hadn't been some mental breakdown— it was...

"This is why you were reluctant to tell me too much about Him, isn't it?" Cheng Shi asked, his expression heavy.

Aph Ros laughed heartily:

"I've never misjudged you, my brother. You're clever.

"If I hadn't let you experience it firsthand, knowing your personality, you'd probably have treated His existence as just another piece of intelligence to trade."

As he spoke, Aph Ros's own expression grew solemn.

"Remember this: not everything can be mentioned casually.

"Unless necessary, do not speak of the gods.

"Naturally, some gods may not seem like gods. But others...

"I trust you understand now."

!!!

Cheng Shi understood completely. His comprehension of the word "god" had been fundamentally rewritten.

After all, in his past life of "being watched by gods and blaspheming as casually as drinking water," he'd never once felt such a horrifying, eerie force.

He examined his own body with utmost gravity, taking long, deep breaths before finally suppressing the lingering panic.

"If Hu Xuan hadn't saved me, would I have..."

"I don't know, and I don't want to know," Aph Ros said with a smile.

"Understood."

Cheng Shi nodded and struggled to stand. Halfway up, two puppet servants appeared behind him, gripping his arms and hoisting him to his feet.

He quickly rearranged his expression into a grateful smile and turned to thank them— but the instant he turned, the cold sweat that had just dried surged fresh from his brow once more.

Because the two puppets who'd helped him up had disturbingly familiar faces!

"You two..."

Aph Ros, watching Cheng Shi's shock, grinned until his eyes crinkled into crescents.

"Well? Happy, my brother? This is a special surprise I prepared just for you.

"I could tell you're someone who enjoys making friends. So I thought reuniting you with old acquaintances might bring you joy."

"..."

Staring at the two all-too-familiar faces he'd only just parted from, Cheng Shi mentally scoffed.

'Oh, I'm thrilled. Absolutely thrilled.'