

## The Gods 541

Chapter 541: Each Suffers Their Own Losses

Reality. Some temple in an unknown province.

The moon was bright, the stars sparse. Frogs croaked and insects chirped.

When the alarm clock on the offering table sounded its hourly chime, Jiang Chi — seated on a prayer cushion — snapped his eyes open.

He doubled over, gasping for air. The horror in his eyes had congealed and wouldn't dissipate. He was drenched in cold sweat as if he'd been pulled from water, and his skull felt like it was being pierced by a thousand silver needles — a splitting headache.

"So... painful..."

He clutched his head and rolled onto the ground. His consciousness and memories had become fragmented and hazy. The scene of Cheng Shi curling his lips into a smile played on repeat in his mind — but as it replayed, the image suddenly shifted.

Cheng Shi wasn't smiling anymore. Instead, his expression was deathly serious.

Jiang Chi vaguely remembered the other man had indeed gripped his hand, but the backdrop didn't seem to be snow-blanketed Kannar City. Where was this?

He froze for a moment.

Before long, the skull-splitting pain gradually receded. Soaked in sweat, Jiang Chi slowly sat up from the floor, rubbing his face to clear his head. 'Could that lightning strike have also had the effect of tearing consciousness and scrambling memories?'

'Terrifying!'

He looked down at his right hand — the one the thunder had struck first. The devastating destructive power still made him shudder.

"Cheng Shi... Cheng Shi... What a Cheng Shi. What a Fate Weaver!

How did he retain his memories inside the Time Battlefield?

Fate's power?

But if Fate was responsible, why had none of His believers ever exposed this trick before?"

Jiang Chi was completely stumped. This puzzle was unsolvable for him, because even if he racked his brain to the point of explosion, he could never imagine that what had pierced through Time's illusion wasn't the opposing force of Fate — but his very own Benefactor, Time Himself.

His Benefactor had backstabbed him.

Of course, the most tragic part was that Time probably didn't even care.

Yet despite this, Jiang Chi still had to offer his devotion to Him, because this was his only source of power.

"No! NO!!!"

Jiang Chi pounded the floor in frustration. If Cheng Shi ever revealed this, his secret to climbing the rankings would be completely exposed. No one would believe he was merely a Pointer Knight anymore — they'd know he was a Time Walker who rewound time to turn the tables!

And once people were on guard against him...

The entire combat system he'd spent months building would be utterly ruined!

No one feared a Time Walker who lacked a mage's talent, because once your opponents knew you were a Time Walker, they'd never give you the chance to open your time battlefield at an undisputed hour mark!

This was worse than death. At least the dead couldn't feel despair.

"I have to find a solution. My only resurrection backup has been used up too. Before this gets exposed, I must find a way to fix this!"

...

Reality. Unknown space.

Fear continued to accumulate.

For a remnant soul capable of reviving through fear, the concentration of terror in this space had clearly reached the threshold — in fact, it had grown dense enough for ten resurrections over.

But no revival occurred.

Because within this space, there seemed to be an invisible layer of rules preventing any life from self-reviving. It felt like a worshipper of fear had stumbled upon the Mother Tree of Fear, which consumed all terror across the universe. Even though fear flowed like an ocean beneath one's feet, outsiders could only watch — unable to claim a drop. All fear flowed to Her.

This was a trap!

That Fate believer had used a ring perfectly attuned to fear to construct a trap!

Once someone stepped inside, getting back out became a luxury.

The remnant soul fell into despair. And so...

Fear continued to accumulate.

...

Reality. Some basement in an unknown province.

Nangong slowly opened her eyes. A flicker of confusion passed through them first, then a creeping trace of fear.

She was afraid!

Afraid that everything she'd just experienced was nothing but a beautiful dream. Afraid that Decay still clung to her, and that the Gift of Sores was still sitting in her storage space, waiting to be fed.

She sat on the ground, not daring to move. Her neck creaked stiffly as she turned it — and when she felt no scraping pain of scars against her collar, a brilliant light exploded in her eyes.

Nangong moved. She sprang to her feet and yanked up her sleeves. When she saw her arms were as flawless as they'd been in the trial, tears immediately streaked down her chin.

Tears of overwhelming joy, and more tears still.

An excited buzzing filled her head. Her heartbeat quickened. She tore off her long shirt, shed her trousers, and kept spinning in circles to examine every inch of her body — poking, pinching — until her limbs were red all over, and only then did she finally confirm it wasn't a dream.

She'd truly escaped that eternal nightmare!

"A mirror! A mirror!"

Nangong cried out excitedly, desperate to see what she looked like now. But when she rushed to the adjacent room, she remembered — every reflective surface in this basement had already been... thrown away by her.

The smile froze on Nangong's face, but she didn't feel dejected. Instead, a spark of hope ignited in her heart.

She'd never before wanted to enter a trial this eagerly. And the reason for this trial was, honestly, rather funny — it was for a mirror.

When that thought crossed her mind, she laughed again. She plopped onto the floor and kept slapping her own cheeks, muttering:

"You've lost it, Nangong. You've only escaped the current suffering, but the road ahead... is still going to be hard.

You're an ordinary person without a faith now. And you're wishing for a mirror...

Suffering... faith... Decay... Prosperity..."

As she murmured, Nangong drew her legs up and gently hugged herself.

"I need to pray for a faith first. Cheng Shi said He would accept me..."

Will He... really accept me?

Wait — Cheng Shi!"

Nangong's whole body trembled as something clicked. She hastily pulled out a notebook from her personal space — one filled with neatly recorded names — and deftly flipped to the page bearing "Cheng Shi." After deliberating solemnly for a long while, she carefully inscribed "Cheng Shi" in the blank space between several other names...

Twice.

There were now three Cheng Shi entries in the ledger.

Saving her life once. Breaking the Gift of Sores' contract once. Redeeming her from suffering and freeing her from Decay once...

Each debt was heavier than the last. But the name-filled notebook had no room left for bigger characters, so she could only trace over these three entries until they stood out deep and bold.

"Cheng Shi... thank you. Thank you. Thank you."

...

Reality. Some rooftop in an unknown province.

The moment Cheng Shi returned to the rooftop of the rest area, cold sweat poured down his face in an unstoppable stream.

This wasn't because the world-ending Oblivion power he'd "fled" from had frightened him. It was because...

His boss — the familiar face who shouldn't have been there — was standing before him once again.

"Cheng Shi."

"..."

Seeing this expressionless boss call out his name, Cheng Shi's heart sank like a stone.

'This is bad!'

He'd come to collect a "debt!"

The words He'd once spoken — "I hope you won't refuse me a third time" — still haunted Cheng Shi like a recurring nightmare. He'd thought, since He hadn't shown up for two weeks, that maybe he'd been forgotten...

But now it seemed he'd been overthinking.

Memory... would probably never forget.

...

Chapter 542: It's Over — It's Memory!

'What do I do?'

'Say hello?'

'But how do I even open? Maybe something like: "Oh my, you're here! Look — I've gone and smeared another huge chunk of the history in your Collection. So how are you planning to reward me this time?"'

Honestly, for a split second, Cheng Shi really did consider saying that, because he had to admit — the Floating Dream of the Memory Sea that Memory had bestowed was rather useful.

But he didn't dare. He was afraid of being beaten to death.

So he just stood there, not making a sound, laughing awkwardly.

The boss turned those eyes — far more ancient and profound than any mortal boss's — and examined Cheng Shi from top to bottom for a long while. Then He spoke:

"I had assumed that under my... hint, He would restrain Himself somewhat. But looking at things now, He did restrain Himself. It's your other Benefactor who... has started again.

And you — you're rather brave as well."

"..."

At those words, Cheng Shi began shaking his head frantically — like a rattle drum.

'No, bro — I'm not brave at all. If I were even the slightest bit brave, I would've asked you for a reward right then...'

'Look at me. See how well-behaved I'm being!'

"Interesting.

Are you denying your own courage, or denying your own actions?

Void always enjoys making trouble for people. Those two Benefactors of yours... Hmm, I said Fate has already been predetermined, and now you've experienced that firsthand.

Those two Benefactors of yours are truly exhausting.

Deceit loves to toy with history — always tearing off pages and folding them into shapes He fancies. Fate...

is no better. Since He commands predetermination, He uses the same excuse to mark up Existence at will, slapping misattributed labels onto countless items in my Collection.

As for you, Cheng Shi — very good. You're a cunning sycophant who knows exactly how to please your two Benefactors.

But have you considered — while you're soiling my Collection Hall and making your two Benefactors howl with glee — that I, the master of said Collection Hall, might get... angry?"

With that, the boss's eyes rolled upward until only the whites showed.

At the sight, Cheng Shi's cold sweat refreshed entirely. He waved his hands and shook his head, denying everything with absolute conviction:

"A misunderstanding! It's all a misunderstanding!

Someone else is responsible for dirtying your Collection Hall — it's definitely not me!"

The boss's eyes rolled back down. The surging, boiling power of Memory around them froze in place. He looked at Cheng Shi and chuckled.

"Oh? I know you're the king of specious arguments. But I'll give you one chance.

Tell me — who contaminated my Collection Hall?"

"It was You—"

Cheng Shi swallowed nervously, his body taut with tension. He looked every inch a man terrified to death. And yet, despite that, he gritted his teeth and argued his case:

"—r follower!

If You observed the last trial, You should know that I didn't do anything to affect history in that trial!

Everything I did was in the present and only concerned the present.

It was Your follower — that unnamed historian — who used Your power to write it all into history.

It's like me saying 'robbing a bank makes you rich,' and then he actually goes and robs one. How is that my fault? The law wouldn't convict me!

I'm innocent!

The one who contaminated Your Collection Hall was that singer! I can't even be called an instigator, because he'd already begun rewriting history the moment he arrived — I hadn't even spoken a single word to him!

It was his own desire that led him to profane You. But since You granted them the ability to rewrite history, that means it wasn't profanation at all — it was an offering.

So the fact is: I did nothing wrong. Your follower made an offering to You. You..."

Cheng Shi desperately wanted to say "You've come to the wrong place," but seeing that increasingly amused expression, he swallowed the words and pivoted.

"...perhaps want to review the details one more time?"

Memory laughed. A hearty, booming laugh.

"So you're saying my Collection Hall got dirty, yet no one is at fault?"

Cheng Shi laughed dryly and averted his gaze, not daring to meet His eyes.

"If someone absolutely must take the blame...

Then it can only be that singer follower of Yours. His personal desire influenced his use of the power You bestowed. This wasn't a sincere offering — while offering to You, he was simultaneously offering to Corruption!

I suspect he harbors divided loyalties. I recommend a thorough investigation!"

After speaking, Cheng Shi guiltily lowered his head. But hearing these words, Memory laughed again.

"Very good. You suit Deceit so well — I imagine Fate must have quite a headache.

Instigator?

What a fine charge. You are indeed an instigator."

"???"

'What do you mean I am one? Didn't I just say I wasn't?!'

Cheng Shi was dumbfounded. He looked up to argue further, but Memory spoke first:

"You seem to have forgotten something. Your so-called 'laws' have become a thing of the past. Whether you're an instigator isn't defined by the past — it's defined by the present."

Cheng Shi refused to accept this. He pressed on stubbornly: "But You are Memory — and memory IS the past!"

Memory raised an eyebrow — a rare display — and His smile softened slightly.

"And that is precisely why I am merely the surface of Existence, while Time is Existence's essence.

Existence isn't only the past — it also includes the present. Your so-called 'past' cannot hold standing within Existence."

Cheng Shi panicked.

'So what, you're determined to sentence me today?!'

'Fine, fine, fine — Aph Ros offended Time and got sentenced to Eternal Imprisonment. I offended Memory...'

'Wait — I offended Memory. So on what basis are you using Time's "law" to judge me?!'

Cheng Shi jerked his head up and argued through sheer sophistry:

"Even if I did blaspheme You, what I blasphemed was the surface of Existence. On what grounds would You use Existence's essence to measure my guilt?

I disturbed 'the past,' so 'the past's' laws should be the ones to sanction me! But 'the past' tells me I'm innocent. Therefore!

I did nothing wrong!"

The words rang with conviction. But Memory didn't listen. He merely sighed, muttered "stubborn fool," and with a wave of His hand, cast Cheng Shi into a labyrinth of lost history.

Cheng Shi watched his vision begin to warp, his consciousness sinking into the Sea of Memory. The rooftop scenery slowly shattered into an ethereal blue void. He panicked. In his heart, he began

frantically chanting prayers to both Benefactors, hoping Void might once again corrode Existence and rush to his rescue.

But Void gave no response.

Cheng Shi's heart dropped. He couldn't believe the joke he'd made to Aph Ros's face had actually come true.

'Bro — when I said we were both victims, I didn't mean this kind of victim! How did I actually end up as a "prison buddy?!"'

'Help!'

'Somebody come save me!'

The Sea of Memory's oppression grew stronger and stronger. Cheng Shi felt himself slowly peeling away from reality, his entire body growing numb and sluggish. But at least... he could still think.

'I can't let this continue. If this goes on, I'm done for!'

He thrashed wildly, silently screaming every divine name he knew. His hands weren't idle either — cycling through every ring he owned, each one essentially a distress call. But even after exhausting every method he could think of, the outside world remained silent.

"..."

'It's over. I've really gone too far this time.'

...

Chapter 543: There Is No Kindness Without Reason in This World

After confirming there was no saving himself, Cheng Shi's emotions actually calmed. He let himself fall through the endless phantom Sea of Memory, his mind flashing through a cascade of thoughts.

This wasn't a life flashing before his eyes — it was his final struggle.

He didn't want to die. So he was thinking about how to earn Memory's forgiveness.

Yes — forgiveness.

Since external forces were temporarily unreachable, his only option was to beg for mercy from the god before him. Lowering his stance to survive wasn't shameful — the problem was finding an opening. A trigger that might make Memory pause.

That trigger couldn't be just sophistry — it needed real substance. Something that could make Him interested.

But he was a Void follower. What could he possibly possess that would interest Existence...?

Wait!

He actually did have something!

Cheng Shi's eyes snapped open. He struggled to raise his hand before his eyes and stared at the ring on his finger — the Time of Eternal Imprisonment!

!!!

So that was it!

Realization struck like lightning. None of this had been punishment. Sinking into the Sea of Memory wasn't a sentencing. Memory seemingly had never intended to imprison him at all — otherwise, with a true god's power, why would He waste so much time letting Cheng Shi drift along the path to a "prison cell?"

He needed only a single thought to bury him at the bottom of the Sea of Memory forever.

So He'd wanted Cheng Shi to notice this ring?

But this was his ring — a ring from Time. Memory was Memory. What good was showing him a Time ring?

To see through to Existence's essence?

Who could see through to Existence's essence?

If he could see through that, why would he still be a player?

If he truly could, he'd round up all sixteen of Them and make Them the players!

Cheng Shi was completely stumped. But he had confirmed one thing: after all this time spent thinking, he still hadn't lost consciousness. That meant the other party definitely wasn't being lethal.

But this ring... what was its purpose?

Cheng Shi began to recall. Whether it was an illusion or not, he kept feeling that his memories had become exceptionally vivid since sinking into the Sea of Memory. He carefully reviewed every past encounter related to Memory, savoring each sentence He'd spoken during their audiences — hoping to discover what Memory wanted to express or what He wanted Cheng Shi to know.

But he found nothing.

Until much, much later, after replaying the scene of his first summons by Memory for what must have been the hundredth time, a sudden flash of inspiration connected one of His phrases to the present moment.

He remembered Memory saying to him: "Time will bring you the answer."

Initially, Cheng Shi had assumed the "time" in that sentence was just ordinary time. But now — could it actually mean Time?!

So what did that imply?

Time had given an answer? What answer? What was the answer?

If Memory's meaning was that Time had already provided the answer, the only answer Cheng Shi could think of was the ring on his finger — the Time of Eternal Imprisonment, the item specifically designed to counter Time's followers!

What kind of answer was that?

Kill all Time followers? Or was it pointing toward Aph Ros?

Cheng Shi was bewildered. He'd never hated riddlers as much as he did right now. Speaking in riddles was fine, but did it have to be while he was dying?!

But desperate times called for desperate measures. Even without understanding what Time's "answer" was, he had to test whether this ring was what Memory was looking for.

So he touched the ring of Time and shouted with everything he had: "I found it! The answer! I found the answer!"

His body had long since gone still, producing not a single sound. But his consciousness's scream carried outward, and someone heard his call.

In the very next second, Cheng Shi was yanked from the surface like a fish on a hook — "whoosh" — and pulled back into reality.

He snapped his eyes open and gasped for air, only to find he hadn't moved at all. He was still standing in the same spot on the rooftop. And before him stood a familiar, expressionless figure studying him — the... boss.

'Damn.'

Cheng Shi wanted to curse. But he held it in, suppressed the terror in his heart, raised his hand, and spoke through gritted teeth:

"The answer. I found the answer."

Memory glanced at the ring in his hand. He nodded, then shook His head.

"You're clever.

But that isn't the answer.

You're quite active — just like your Benefactor. I don't know what deal He struck with Time, nor can I fathom what He's planning. But I can tell you this: Time's answer may not suit you.

I know you learned certain things from the Gate of Joyous Lust. Indeed, the Convention is related to Him. But He is not a terrible monster — He's not worth Their vigilance.

Of course, your Benefactor may not be guarding against Him. If I were to say... He is trying to please Him — well, that possibility isn't out of the question either.

As for the method of pleasing Him — hmm, most curious.

Existence has never seen through Him. No one ever has.

Including me. Including you."

"!!??"

Cheng Shi's mind went blank for a moment. He wasn't sure what Memory was trying to accomplish by saying all this, but the mere fact that a true god was openly mentioning Him sent shockwaves through Cheng Shi.

"There is no kindness without reason in this world, nor malice without cause.

Perhaps from your perspective, as the opposing force of your faith, Existence is the 'enemy.' But some things cannot be judged by surface appearances alone.

Deceit is also a surface appearance.

Think about your other Benefactor. I think Fate isn't bad — at least better than Deceit.

I've said all I'll say. Three times is the limit.

I hope the next time we meet, you won't again be an instigator who dirties my Collection Hall."

With that, this god of Memory — who'd appeared to punish Cheng Shi — actually prepared to leave.

He was dropping a pile of incomprehensible words and walking away.

But at that moment, Cheng Shi gritted his teeth and called out to Memory!

"Why me?"

Yes — he was bold enough to stop a departing enemy god, then ask, with a deeply complex expression, the question he'd always wanted to know but could never figure out:

"Why me?"

Without specific context, this question was impossible to answer — no one could know the questioner's intent. But Memory seemed to see right through Cheng Shi's heart. He chuckled softly and replied:

"Good question.

As I said before, no one can see through Deceit. Likewise, no one can see through Fate.

As for Void — I don't know why They chose you.

But for everyone else...

Cheng Shi, this is Void's era. As rulers of this age, whatever They value, everyone else finds interesting too.

For instance — me. For instance — Time. For instance — Death. For instance... Them."

With that, the boss vanished — disappeared into thin air before Cheng Shi's eyes.

The moment Memory was gone, Cheng Shi's strength drained out of him completely. He collapsed sideways onto the rooftop.

His heart pounded violently. Cold sweat streamed down his body. Waves of lingering terror crashed against his consciousness, and an inexplicable fear surged through him — as though an invisible claw were gently squeezing his heart.

He seemed to have thought of something terrifying, but instantly forced himself to shake his head and fling those absurd thoughts away.

Cheng Shi suddenly suspected he'd grasped Memory's meaning.

He was sowing discord!

"There is no kindness without reason in this world!"

What a devastating sentence — one that chilled to the bone.

But the question remained...

Why were They so permissive with him?

Why was he the darling of Void?

Was it just because of sophistry? Because his silver tongue aligned with Void's will?

No...

Even Cheng Shi himself didn't believe that.

There had to be a reason. But this reason... Cheng Shi had never sought it.

Not because he didn't want to, but because he didn't dare.

Before he'd "earned a seat at the table," he had no right to know the answer. So — was this what Time's answer was referring to?

The Time of Eternal Imprisonment. Was he a prisoner?

Whose prisoner?

Deceit's prisoner? Fate's prisoner? Or... Void's prisoner?

'So exhausting.'

An overwhelming wave of fatigue suddenly enveloped Cheng Shi. The tremendous mental exertion of recalling and thinking had seemingly drained his spirit entirely.

He stared blankly at the sky, watching countless stars hang from the firmament, slowly turning. His eyes drifted shut, and he fell asleep.

...

Chapter 544: Wait — Again?!

Cheng Shi slept deeply — profoundly.

Honestly, ever since the Faith Game had descended, he'd never rested this unwarily. But this time, the moment he closed his eyes, a thick drowsiness enveloped him completely, trapping him in a deep slumber he couldn't fight free of.

He didn't stir until he'd recovered fully. But waking up didn't mean opening his eyes. When he realized he had no idea how long he'd been out, Cheng Shi's heart sank. Without so much as a twitch of an eyelid, he quietly gripped the ring on his finger.

Something was wrong. Extremely wrong.

Cheng Shi knew he wouldn't sleep this deeply on his own. The only possibility was external influence. So he was afraid that after Memory had left, something else had come.

But he strained his ears for a long while and heard nothing strange. The surroundings were perfectly quiet — not a single unusual sound...

Wait!

This was a building's rooftop. How could there be absolutely no sound?

Even if the neighbors weren't generating any noise — what about the wind? At this height, it was impossible to not have even the sound of wind!

'This isn't the rooftop!'

Cheng Shi jolted. He snapped his eyes open, his keen gaze rapidly sweeping across everything before him — an interior, a palace, stone pillars, graffiti-like carved patterns, a familiar murky yellow hue...

'Hm?'

'This looks like...'

"My lord, you're awake."

"!!!???"

The sudden voice made Cheng Shi jump. He was about to leap backward when a familiar face entered his vision.

Kataro!

This Chaos seedling follower, who served as proxy for his Herald identity, was standing right there, smiling at him.

The Chaos Temple!

He'd ended up in the Chaos Temple?!

For a brief instant, Cheng Shi's taut nerves actually relaxed. He sensed he probably wouldn't be harmed here — at the very least, like in the Void, he felt a strange sense of belonging.

But his guard quickly returned. He rose slowly, discreetly examining his surroundings, then asked with furrowed brows:

"Was it you just now?"

Kataro seemed to know what Cheng Shi was asking. He bowed respectfully: "Yes, my lord. You looked far too exhausted. You needed rest."

"..." 'How thoughtful of you. But please don't do that again — it scares me.'

Cheng Shi exhaled in relief, but then something else clicked. He frowned in alarm:

"How long have I been asleep? No, wait — when did I get here?"

Kataro smiled: "My lord, you've been sleeping here the entire time."

"???" Cheng Shi froze. "You're saying — the moment Mem... He left, you pulled me here?"

Kataro shook his head:

"No, my lord. It was our Benefactor who summoned you. The instant you left the trial, He brought you here."

"What? But I..."

"But you encountered Memory."

"!!!" Cheng Shi's pupils contracted sharply, his gaze turning razor-sharp. "You know? You saw it? He summoned me here? Inside the Chaos Temple?!"

Kataro bowed reverently, then shook his head:

"Yes, my lord. Existence can transform anything into existence. He did indeed summon you within our Benefactor's temple.

However, I did not witness this legendary encounter, nor did I get to behold your magnificence in Memory's presence. All of this was conveyed to me by our Benefactor. He said you needed rest."

"..."

'What a sycophant!'

'Good thing you didn't see it. Otherwise you'd know exactly what kind of person the Lord Ultraman you revere truly is.'

'I nearly pissed myself!'

'At least my image is intact.'

But... why was he worrying about his image?! The fact that Memory had summoned him inside the Chaos Temple — that was bizarre!

What did this mean?

Had Chaos and Memory struck an agreement?

On His turf, there was no way He couldn't hear what Memory had said!

No wonder his cries for help had gone unanswered — Chaos had blocked them all! What would answer?!

What was Chaos playing at?

Seeing Memory sow discord between him and the two Void gods — was Chaos going with the flow and lending a hand?

Was He still waiting for Cheng Shi to claim the Ultraman identity?

"..."

If all his guesses were true, then Chaos... what was His angle?

"There is no kindness without reason in this world." This identity had literally been fabricated by Deceit — so why was He so invested in a made-up, fake identity?

Just because it was chaotic?

Cheng Shi's brain began spinning furiously again. With a slightly grim expression, he looked up toward the upper reaches of the temple and asked:

"Is He... here?"

Kataro's demeanor grew even more devout. He lowered his head in reverence: "He is. He has always been."

"..." Cheng Shi's eye twitched. 'That phrase sounds way too familiar.'

Sure enough, the moment Kataro's words faded, the temple before Cheng Shi began to transform thunderously.

The domed ceiling crumbled into mist. Stone pillars twisted into spheres. Carved patterns scattered like falling snow. The floor heaved in waves. From the churning, chaotic yellow fog above their heads, an enormous hand coalesced from mist, parted the dome with left and right sweeps, reached down to Cheng Shi, gently pinched the dumbfounded man — and flung him into the boundless yellow fog.

Cheng Shi felt his body go weightless as he was hurled outward with terrifying force. His consciousness couldn't even keep pace with his body's velocity, leaving his mind momentarily blank.

By the time his awareness returned, he found himself on a platform held aloft by churning, boiling chaotic yellow fog. This platform was the very same one from Cheng Shi's first audience with Chaos — the one at the entrance to the Chaos Steps!

Beneath his feet, the stone slab still bore those chisel-and-axe-scarred inscriptions. Beside him stood a massive gate — the torn-open, inward-facing Gate of the Order Codex.

"..."

'What's happening — am I supposed to retrace Chaos's old path?'

Cheng Shi was stunned. He quickly surveyed the area, then looked down at himself — and discovered he was wearing robes identical to Kataro's, the same murky yellow vestments.

'Huh? Why am I wearing Kataro's clothes?'

He immediately sensed something was off. But just as he was about to think deeper, the chaotic yellow fog beneath the platform suddenly parted, revealing a corridor leading into the Void. And the other end of that corridor connected to none other than Mockery and Jeering — that river of unreality that looked even more chaotic than Chaos itself!

And at this very moment, walking through Mockery and Jeering, step by step, was a large round face wielding a golden apricot tree!

When Cheng Shi caught sight of that figure, his pupils contracted violently. His scalp prickled.

Hu Wei!

This Grand Marshal of War had actually appeared here — at the starting point of the Chaos Steps!

What was he doing here?

Seeking an audience with Chaos?

At this pace, within one minute, the two of them would come face to face on this platform beneath the Chaos Steps.

Cheng Shi was stunned. He suddenly understood what Chaos wanted — He was going to have Cheng Shi play the role of Ultraman. No — He wanted the "real" Ultraman to receive this Grand Marshal who may or may not be a Chaos follower!

'What?'

'All you give me is a change of clothes — no mask, nothing? Aren't you afraid of getting busted?'

'Oh right — this is Chaos. Scrambling identities is easier for Him than breathing.'

'But still...'

'Is it really okay to backstab a player who works for You like this?'

'Of course it's okay!'

'The one being backstabbed isn't me, so why should I care?'

At this thought, all of Cheng Shi's tension evaporated. The corners of his lips slowly curled up into a deeply meaningful smile.

'Deceiving people...'

'Now that's something I'm very, very good at.'

'Since the opportunity is this rare, today — let me find out whether this dear "big brother" of mine is really... man or ghost.'

...

Chapter 545: The True Chaos Herald — Lord Ultraman!

Hu Wei ascended.

He was ejected from Mockery and Jeering, reverting to his original form as he stepped onto the platform. Coming with him was Da Yi.

Honestly, before Da Yi set foot on the platform, Cheng Shi never could have guessed that the foul mouth trailing behind the big round face was actually Da Yi...

'Hilarious — even the Fun God thinks his mouth stinks?'

That tracked. He could even picture Da Yi's face when he first learned he was a "foul mouth." That hot-tempered man would definitely curse:

"Damn — why am I a foul mouth?!"

'Nailed it. With that grandma catchphrase you plaster everywhere, you've earned the Fun God's Best Foul Mouth Award.'

Then again, foul as Da Yi's speech was, it couldn't possibly be worse than Chen Shu's. 'What does Chen Shu look like in the Fun God's eyes?'

At this thought, Cheng Shi suddenly found himself looking forward to seeing Chen Shu's form in Mockery and Jeering.

His state grew ever more relaxed, but the two arrivals were the very picture of solemn gravity.

Hu Wei wasn't bad — he looked relatively composed. Even if nerves gnawed at him inside, this deeply calculating "big brother" would never let it show on his face.

Da Yi was different. His temperament was more straightforward. Especially since he'd already partnered with Lord Ultraman on a mission — seeing the Lord summon him here yet again, he first put on a wide grin as a greeting, then obediently fell in behind Hu Wei.

Both men's peripheral vision, however, ceaselessly scanned their surroundings. They were clearly unfamiliar with this place.

Cheng Shi observed everything, understanding completely. Da Yi had mentioned they'd never walked the Chaos Steps, which naturally meant they'd never been here before.

But the timing of their arrival...

Cheng Shi's mind turned, and the pieces fell into place. This suspicious big brother of his had likely developed doubts about Cheng Shi's identity. So he'd used the pretext of ascending the Steps to seek an audience with Chaos.

And Chaos... had perhaps observed Cheng Shi's Ultraman impersonation during the trial, so the moment the trial ended, He'd summoned Cheng Shi here!

He was helping cover the gaps!

'He's that considerate?!'

'No — no, no, no. Cheng Shi, stay sharp. This could just as easily be a test. It might very well be a lure. He's tempting you to draw closer to Him. Once you taste the sweetness of power, letting go becomes nearly impossible!'

'You are a wanderer of Void — not a subordinate of Chaos. Don't lose yourself!'

Just as Cheng Shi was repeatedly reminding himself, Memory's words flashed through his mind again...

'There is no kindness without reason in this world...'

'Oh, screw that!!!'

Cheng Shi gritted his teeth and shoved the mountain of doubt down deep.

'Even if there is no kindness without reason in this world — when I'm dirt-poor and powerless to refuse, all I can do is accept this reasonless kindness!'

'I've never feared the world presenting me with illusions, because Old Jia told me: even illusions can hold tenderness.'

'And besides, my attitude toward this world is itself an illusion — because the one person I could ever be truly sincere with... is already gone.'

'Since it's all a mirage, since it's all a void dream — then why not embrace Void!'

'Cheng Shi — you can't let Memory's words become your inner demon!'

'Take it as it comes, deceive as you go. No one in this world is immune to deception. Don't aspire to be a liar who's never been fooled — just be the one who gets fooled the least, and that's enough!'

'You have only one goal: win that top scholar title for Old Jia!'

'If Deceit's promise is real — if He truly will grant you the ability to deceive all gods once you become the Chosen One — then at that point, you'll swindle back everything that was swindled from you!'

'Scheming and counter-scheming — it's nothing more than that.'

'Don't let these seeds of suspicion become stumbling blocks on your path!'

Cheng Shi had an epiphany. In that instant, it was as though some thin membrane of shackles burst, and he inhaled a fresh lungful of air from beyond the cage. His entire being became invigorated — eyes brilliant, spirit soaring.

This kind of radiant confidence blooming from the inside out was something he himself might not notice, but in the eyes of the other two, it was as though a halo of divine light had unfurled behind the Herald — a glow that made them feel small by comparison.

Hu Wei's eyes flickered with surprise. He lowered his head in a show of respect. Da Yi was inwardly shaken, his reverence deepening.

Cheng Shi emerged from his self-correction and looked at Hu Wei at the front. He chuckled softly and, without giving the man any chance to speak first, challenged:

"I've sensed your doubts. But pointless suspicion will only slow your progress."

"!!!"

Upon hearing this, Hu Wei instantly understood — his probe had ended before it even began. The person who'd been with Da Yi could only have been Lord Ultraman. Absolutely Lord Ultraman. There was no other possibility.

His body stiffened sharply. He bowed his head with devotion: "I overstepped, my lord."

Da Yi also bent into a deep bow, though his expression wasn't quite as reverent. Instead, it carried a trace of amused smugness — after all, the doubter was Lao Hu, not him. The one getting scolded was Lao Hu, not him. So he didn't really care.

His ultimate goal had simply been to walk the Chaos Steps.

Da Yi wanted an audience with a god. Even though Lord Ultraman was a Herald who served before the divine throne and essentially relayed His will — he still wanted to see his Benefactor with his own eyes. To see one of the sixteen most exalted beings in the entire game.

Seeing both men standing like chastened schoolboys, Cheng Shi smiled again.

"Caution is a good thing. It isn't wrong.

I am indeed trying something new — something related to Void, and to this era..."

With that, Cheng Shi recycled the speech he'd given Da Yi during the previous trial. Once the two understood the lord's plans, realization dawned on them both.

So the Herald had far deeper schemes in play. They were the ones being shallow.

However...

Hu Wei's expression grew complicated. He raised his head and looked at the lord, probing cautiously:

"Then... my lord, the player named Cheng Shi..."

'Look at that — my big brother still remembers me. Even while being dressed down by a Herald, he doesn't forget to ask about me!'

'What a great big brother. Aside from never saving me, he's perfect in every way.'

"..."

Cheng Shi suppressed the urge to quip and replied casually:

"He's fine.

I merely borrowed his identity. Of course, I'm not the only one trying to use it — others are itching to do the same."

"Others have stolen his identity too?" Both Hu Wei and Da Yi were dumbfounded.

Cheng Shi nodded:

"Indeed. Everything I said in the Mediocre Person Society was true — I was impersonating him. And the reason I chose him is because Fate truly did summon him for an audience.

No one can see through Fate, just as no one can comprehend Void.

So I share your curiosity, and this is what drove my decision — to test the waters on behalf of my Lord in Void's era.

But enough. You needn't know too much about these matters. It's too early for you. Today, there's only one thing — to fulfill your wish of an audience with Him.

See that gate? Go. The long stairway to the temple is right there. How many steps you manage to climb depends entirely on your talent."

Cheng Shi pointed toward the gate and smiled meaningfully.

Hu Wei and Da Yi both turned to look. When they saw the torn-open Gate of the Order Codex with its boundless surging waves of Chaos, their eyes blazed with fervent longing.

This time, even the most composed Grand Marshal couldn't control his expression. Though he couldn't see the total number of steps, he took a deep breath to contain his extreme excitement before departing, and asked one final question:

"My lord, how many steps must one climb to earn the honor of an audience with our Lord?"

'How many steps?'

'Heh — how would I know? I never even finished it myself.'

Cheng Shi's heart convulsed, but his expression remained mysterious:

"Walk and you'll find out."

...

Chapter 546: The Grand Marshal? Nothing Special...

The two went separately.

On the path leading straight to Chaos's temple, no one would consider themselves devout enough.

They didn't dare share this glorious moment, nor did they want to split this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

But since two people needed to go — who first, who second?

Before departing, Hu Wei paused and glanced back at Da Yi with a trace of hesitation. Da Yi was shrewd enough to see that Lao Hu wanted him to go first, so Hu Wei could stay behind and observe.

After all, whoever went first was essentially the trailblazer. If they encountered something incomprehensible, they'd have zero time to think.

It was undeniably the most cautious approach. Setting everything else aside, knowing both your enemy and yourself was the key to a hundred victories on the battlefield. This was the strategic eye of a true marshal.

But Da Yi didn't refuse. Because...

He was shrewd.

Who says having the courage to go first isn't a form of devotion?

Showing one's pursuit of Chaos in the face of the unknown — wasn't that proof of sincerity?

So Da Yi nodded, shed his smile, and with a solemn expression, strode through the gate. A step materialized beneath his feet immediately. He glanced left and right, steeled his nerves, and slowly climbed up.

The first step was "Slander and Abuse." This degree of chaos was utterly trivial for someone with his caliber of foul mouth. Da Yi almost opened his mouth to shout back "Damn—!"

He almost succeeded. Thankfully, he caught himself in time and clamped a hand over his mouth.

He'd been affected. But at least he hadn't profaned the divine staircase. Still, cold sweat soaked through the back of his shirt, leaving him shaken.

Da Yi's gaze fell solemnly on the second step, then traveled upward following the trajectory of the stairs. Deep in the endless void, he thought he glimpsed the faint radiance of a divine temple.

Whether it was an illusion or not, the staircase looked extremely long — at least several hundred steps. Plodding along like this would waste far too much time.

Had he been alone, he might have lingered to savor the experience. But Lord Ultraman was right behind him. If he hobbled along all timid and sluggish, his standing in the lord's eyes might drop.

So Da Yi deliberated briefly, then made a bold decision. He...

Flash-stepped.

Using his talent, he blinked straight to... the tenth step!

He couldn't actually see where the tenth step was — he'd estimated based on instinct and appeared at its approximate location.

However, the instant he materialized on the tenth step, this flesh-and-blood being disintegrated into countless bizarre symbols. Those symbols gushed upward like a torrential rain in reverse, dissolving into the churning yellow fog above Cheng Shi and Hu Wei. Then, in an incomprehensible temporal-spatial distortion, they came drifting back down.

"..."

"..."

The two men on the platform were stunned speechless.

Cheng Shi's head filled with question marks. 'Bro, you really went for it. Do you even remember you're a Chaos follower?'

'You don't actually think you're a War believer, do you?'

'What?'

'That reckless?'

'You do realize Lord Ultraman only managed five steps before blacking out, right? And you just flash-step straight to the tenth?'

'Impressive.'

Of course, whatever Lord Ultraman thought of this brute, said brute would never know — because Da Yi had already dissolved into a stream of abstract, scrambled composite symbols, flowing through the platform's grooved inscriptions and slowly twitching.

Hu Wei saw this and shuddered.

Cheng Shi swore, this was the first time he'd ever seen the Grand Marshal show nerves.

But there was nothing shameful about it — Cheng Shi himself had just been startled half to death. Probably no normal person could witness this without fear.

People exploding into flesh and blood? For peak players, that was child's play. But people exploding into symbols?

Sorry — too advanced. The current version's CPU couldn't process that kind of interrupt.

Hu Wei's entire body jolted. Shock was written across his face. He stared in disbelief at the shattered pieces of "Little Yi" on the ground, then looked back at Cheng Shi with contracted pupils. He clenched his fists uncertainly:

"My lord, Da Yi... is he..."

"..."

'Well, you've asked the right person. Care to guess whether I have any idea what happened to him?'

But this couldn't stump a clown. A couple of vague responses would do. Chaos surely wouldn't kill off a follower who was working for Him. That would be too... chaotic.

"Ahem. It's noth—"

Before he could finish, the chaotic yellow fog surrounding the platform suddenly churned to a boil. The mist crashed against the platform like tidal waves, sweeping up the scattered symbols under Cheng Shi's mysterious smile and Hu Wei's taut nerves — then reconstituted them into...

A completely bewildered Da Yi.

He was genuinely stupefied. He only remembered using his talent — then instantly losing consciousness. When he opened his eyes and found himself behind Lao Hu, he didn't even suspect he'd failed to withstand the Chaos Steps' power. Instead, he started wondering if he'd just been too nervous.

He looked at Hu Wei and scratched his head awkwardly: "Damn... Lao Hu, did I jump backward?"

For one brief instant, Da Yi believed he had no affinity with the divine.

But he quickly rationalized his way back. Because it suddenly hit him: wasn't jumping backward its own form of chaos?

And so, fueled by this creative self-comfort, Da Yi's expression became wonderfully complex.

Hu Wei's expression was even more complex. He glared at Da Yi, thinking: 'What kind of intelligence did this "scout" actually bring back?'

So far, he'd learned only two things: the first step had zero pressure, and you couldn't flash-step above the stairs. As for anything else... he was still completely in the dark.

"You..."

Hu Wei shook his head with a sigh, gave Cheng Shi one final bow, then tossed away the greatsword in his hand and strode resolutely toward the Chaos Steps.

When Cheng Shi saw the blood-and-flame greatsword being discarded outside the gate, a bolt of lightning struck his mind!

"BOOM—"

Chaos!

He was Chaos!

This universally acclaimed Grand Marshal, this so-called number one on the War leaderboard — he wasn't a charge-into-battle warrior at all! He was a warrior of Chaos: an Alien Blood Compatriot!

Otherwise, he would never have abandoned his greatest advantage at a time when pure strength was needed to ascend these steps!

The only explanation for discarding that greatsword was this: the weapon wasn't a pure asset — it was actually a hindrance that would impede his progress and profane the Chaos Steps. Because the faith aura the greatsword carried was completely different from his own true faith!

And he no longer dared to use War's tools in Chaos's presence. Not because he no longer wanted to keep up the disguise — but because there was no need to disguise himself anymore!

Because this was his "home." The place his faith belonged!

He'd been a Chaos man all along!

'What a Grand Marshal. What a big brother. What a... Hu Wei!'

'Your name really does fit you perfectly!'

Cheng Shi was shaken to the core. But oddly, his thoughts lingered less on Hu Wei and more on the true War Chosen whose identity Hu Wei had stolen — the one who never said a word.

'Bro, you can really endure. Just like your Benefactor — a pure ninja.'

"Hoo—"

After seeing through Hu Wei's biggest secret, Cheng Shi was suddenly struck by the feeling of having glimpsed the full picture.

This was what peak players were. This was what Their Chosen Ones looked like. Every single one was more cunning, more resourceful than the last. They were wave-riders in the great tide of the age — the vanguards of the Faith Game's meta. While other players were still struggling to survive, while most didn't dare claim they even understood the game, these people were already performing on stages ordinary players couldn't even look up to. Performing for the gods!

Of course, Cheng Shi was one of them too. And the clown's stage, as things currently stood, appeared to be...

Just a bit higher.

Just as Cheng Shi was radiating endless sentimentality, Hu Wei... began to dance.

He'd climbed to the same height as Cheng Shi, and then his burly frame started performing a tap dance.

Don't ask why it was tap dance. The answer was: unconscious chaos.

Cheng Shi couldn't keep his composure. He nearly burst out laughing. He wished desperately for a video camera to record this moment — and the instant that thought crossed his mind, he noticed Da Yi had quietly pulled out a phone behind him, trembling all over as he activated the recording function.

"Pfft—"

'Hilarious. Way too hilarious.'

'This isn't the Chaos Steps — it's a village talent show!'

'Chaos Chosen? Grand Marshal? None of that exists here. There's only a good big brother performing a frenzied tap dance while his buddy secretly films the whole thing!'

Watching all of this, Cheng Shi quirked his lips.

'Tsk. Now how do I get a copy of the video from Da Yi's phone?'

...

Chapter 547: His Name Is Yu Xi

Hu Wei came back down — plucked from the divine staircase by a giant hand formed of chaotic yellow fog.

The moment he descended, Da Yi swiftly pocketed his phone, even sneaking a furtive glance at Lord Ultraman — terrified the lord had noticed his mischief.

He'd assumed that a Herald — especially one so close to Them — would at least be above such petty interests.

He was wrong. A sidelong glance revealed the lord behind him, watching him with a not-quite-smiling expression. Da Yi's brain went white with a buzz. Once it caught up, he immediately lowered his head, shut his mouth, and attempted to play dead until the moment passed.

Cheng Shi stifled his laughter and didn't call him out. Instead, he turned to Hu Wei, who was gradually regaining clarity.

Hu Wei's face was dark. Though he had no idea what he'd done on the stairs, the realization that he'd failed after only five steps left him staring back at the path to the temple with shock in his eyes — eyes that mixed defiance with a undercurrent of genuine fear.

That long staircase had nearly a thousand steps, yet he couldn't even get past the beginning. He could feel that it was the limitations of human existence that had stopped him from going further. But the question was: even with His blessing, he still couldn't climb a few more steps on the Chaos Steps?

Did one truly have to transcend humanity and become one of Them to reach the summit?

Then who could possibly finish the climb?

Hu Wei sighed with a complex expression, accepting the reality that he wouldn't see his Benefactor today. He turned to look at Cheng Shi, a flash of longing envy passing through his eyes.

'If it were this lord, he could probably walk the entire staircase in one go.'

After all, He was one of Them. Even as merely a servant god, He was still a god!

Cheng Shi naturally had no idea what Hu Wei was thinking. Seeing how quickly the man recovered from his disappointment, he assumed an approving expression and nodded:

"Impressive. Reaching the fifth step in a human body is more than enough to prove your talent.

Worthy of being Chaos's favorite."

"!!!" Hu Wei's eyes blazed briefly. 'What — the fifth step is enough to earn the lord's recognition?'

'So I'm actually not that bad! It's just my human body holding me back!'

Da Yi, hearing this from the side, looked like he wanted to collapse in on himself with regret.

He kept cursing himself internally. Why had he flash-stepped? Why had he tried to show off? Why couldn't he just walk normally? Now Lao Hu was "Chaos's favorite," and him?

'Heh — just a Chaos clown who flash-stepped off the map.'

Seeing both men's expressions growing stranger by the second, Cheng Shi knew he couldn't let them spiral further. He cleared his throat, changed the subject, and formally closed this chapter of the stairway journey.

"They've begun to revive."

It was the familiar opening gambit. Cheng Shi knew this routine by heart.

He hadn't originally wanted to reveal too much of his plans on Chaos's turf. But now he'd changed his mind.

Since Chaos had given him this opportunity — and this time hadn't forced him to claim the Ultraman identity — he might as well tacitly accept it, reclaim this alias, and use it for his own purposes.

Regardless of what Chaos was planning, regardless of whether His goal was to pull Cheng Shi away from Void — when the benefits were right there, take them first. When they became too heavy to carry, that was the time to worry about what came next.

'If the sky falls, the Benefactors will hold it up. And if the Benefactors can't hold it... well, switching jobs isn't off the table.'

Cheng Shi had grown more vigilant. He truly couldn't afford to stake his entire future on Void's two Benefactors.

Deceit's purpose remained unclear. Fate was destined ultimately for nothingness. Neither path might be the one he wanted. Though he didn't know what road he'd walk beyond winning Old Jia that top scholar title, it was better to be prepared than not.

So while he could still borrow external forces, why not return the warm gestures of those recruiting from outside? Become a clown who danced between all the gods — rather than performing solely under two gods' noses.

Perhaps that would be better for everyone.

Of course, if the Benefactors ever asked about these things, the only thing coming out of his mouth would be devotion.

After all, Cheng Shi never lied.

"They?!"

As expected, the first sentence stunned Hu Wei and Da Yi. Da Yi had actually heard all this before, but a Time reset had turned him back into a clueless "Xiao Bai."

"Indeed — Them." Cheng Shi smiled and continued with an enigmatic expression. "The Eternal Sun has been redeemed. The Gate of Joyous Lust has reopened. The Mother Tree of Fear is rooted deep in the Sea of Desire. And even Dizel — the former Shadowless Crown — has begun the path of revival.

Servant gods lost to history are stepping back onto the stage of this era, one after another. Each seeks something different, but their ultimate goal is the same: to weather the tide of the era's end."

Da Yi's gaze sharpened. Clearly, he was remembering the Herobos that Lord Ultraman had told him not to provoke during the last trial.

'So he's one of these soon-to-rotate Heralds too...'

Hu Wei evidently knew about a few of them already, but he sensed the lord's real point lay elsewhere. He furrowed his brow, pondered momentarily, and probed:

"My lord, is the 'era' you speak of different from the era as we understand it?"

'Look at that — he is the Grand Marshal for a reason. Sharp hearing.'

Cheng Shi smiled and nodded:

"Indeed. The era marches forward. Before Void's collapse, everyone wants to accumulate enough chips — and I'm no exception.

The deeper implications are beyond your current standing to grasp. But drawing closer to Void is never the wrong move."

Both men nodded with partial understanding, savoring every word Lord Ultraman said.

"Getting close to Fate is just one of many plans — a new experiment that I can handle alone.

But Void isn't only Fate. There's also..."

"Deceit!" Hu Wei and Da Yi spoke in unison.

"Exactly — Deceit!

He is far harder to fathom than Fate. To find new chips in this era's tide, we can't afford to reject proximity to Him either.

I told you — They've begun to revive. And Deceit also once had a Herald who was lost in a long-forgotten age. Based on recent activity within Void, He...

is likely nearing His return."

"!!!" Da Yi's eyes went wide with disbelief. "A Void servant god?"

Cheng Shi smiled mysteriously: "Yes. A Void servant god."

"Hiss—"

As far as players knew, Void had never had a single reported servant god. Even the History School couldn't find the slightest clue or historical fragment about Them.

So this news was nothing short of explosive for these two Chaos believers.

Hu Wei furrowed his brow tightly, eyes narrowing. He knew Lord Ultraman never spoke without purpose. Since they'd reached this point, their next task would likely be connected to this Void servant god.

The unknown meant difficulty. Whatever the mission, if it touched beings no one had ever heard of, it wouldn't be simple.

But Hu Wei wasn't afraid — he was calculating which resources he had that could help complete this upcoming mission of approaching Void. After thinking it through, he could only come up with three people.

Three Void players.

One was Zhen Xin, a highly cooperative magician. One was the Blind One, a rather mysterious prophet. And the last one...

Honestly, the person Hu Wei thought of was Cheng Shi.

Despite every Cheng Shi he'd encountered so far turning out, through a series of strange coincidences, to be a fake — after being reminded so many times, he still thought of this brother of his.

His instinct for reading people was sharp. From the very first time he'd been matched with Cheng Shi, he'd known the man was no amateur. But everything afterward had moved too fast — he'd never gotten the chance to reunite with his brother before being burned by one fake Cheng Shi after another.

'Sigh — as expected of a Fate believer. His fate's complicated enough. I wonder what this good brother of mine — whom Lord Ultraman has already taken notice of — is up to right now...'

Cheng Shi had no idea where Hu Wei's mind had wandered. The Ultraman identity was working perfectly — it would be such a waste not to put his good big brother to work.

So he continued:

"I know some of His story. I know He's been collecting His masks."

"Hm? Masks? My lord, you mean this Deceit Herald lost His masks?"

"No — the story behind it is rather complicated and hard to explain simply. Think of it as His mask shattering into many pieces. And when He finds all the mask fragments..."

He will return."

Hu Wei nodded. He understood.

Since Chaos wanted to draw closer to Void, and the lord was personally working on approaching Fate, then their next assignment would surely be seeking out mask fragments for this Deceit Herald — thereby approaching Deceit.

In that case, they'd probably need to deal with the History School, since no one was better at digging up historical traces than they were.

It seemed it was time to go meet with her.

Da Yi guessed it too. He silently committed every word the lord had said to memory, then asked with curiosity: "My lord, what is this Void servant god's divine name...?"

'Good question!' Cheng Shi thought.

He smiled, and with an air of deep mystery, spoke:

"His name is Yu Xi. The Yu Xi who makes fools of all living things."

...

Chapter 548: This World Truly Needs Order

Yu Xi?

Hu Wei and Da Yi exchanged glances, each seeing surprise mirrored in the other's eyes.

'Truly befitting a Deceit Herald — even His name sounds so... deceitful.'

"I'll say no more about what follows. Just remember one thing: no matter where you encounter Him, no matter who He's pretending to be — don't spoil His fun, and don't deliberately try to approach Him.

He's unpredictable — far harder to get close to than His Benefactor.

That's all for today's meeting. I have plenty to attend to. Once I finish dealing with these troublesome matters, I'll return here to serve before the temple.

As for you two...

I have great expectations. You still have your chance."

Seeing Lord Ultraman issue his dismissal, the two bowed and prepared to take their leave. Before going, Hu Wei hesitated briefly, then tested the waters:

"My lord, both Lin Renyu and Chen Chi have had incidents. Might there, in the future, be..."

Hu Wei didn't finish, but Cheng Shi already understood: they were short-staffed and requesting reinforcements.

'If you're asking me to find a couple of partners to replace them and team up with Brother Mouth — I could probably drag in two more people.'

'But if you need helpers from the Chaos faction... sorry, I'm afraid I can't summon anyone.'

Cheng Shi pursed his lips slightly, squeezing out a peculiar smile: "You'll know about the future when the future arrives."

Hu Wei blinked, nodded, gave one final salute, and departed with Da Yi.

Once they leapt into Mockery and Jeering and left, Cheng Shi's expression turned serious. He looked upward.

"Kataro, I don't have to walk the Chaos Steps again, do I?"

The question clearly wasn't aimed at Kataro — after all, it was Chaos who had brought him down. But Cheng Shi didn't dare point fingers at Chaos directly, so Kataro would have to serve as the proxy.

What he didn't expect was that Chaos apparently just wanted him to play Ultraman and had no intention of granting another audience. So while Cheng Shi stood on the platform waiting for a response, a giant hand coalesced from chaotic yellow fog appeared beside him without a word and swatted at him.

???

Cheng Shi tried to dodge, but he was overthinking it.

A true god's eviction order wasn't something a mortal could resist. His vision went black as he was slapped clear into the void and vanished.

When the Chaos Temple fell silent once more, Kataro stood with his head lowered in the center of the hall. He addressed the empty air at the heart of the great hall with respectful deference:

"My Benefactor, since Lord Ultraman has reclaimed his identity, why wouldn't you grant him an audience?"

A snicker emitted from the air:

"What he wants isn't the identity of a servant god — it's the authority of a Herald. Wanting both — he's too greedy. Meeting him would just be annoying."

"..." That was impossible to respond to. Kataro focused his gaze inward and fell silent for a moment. Then, unable to contain his curiosity, he ventured: "My Benefactor, forgive my overstepping — Lord Ultraman mentioned You... mentioned Deceit's Herald."

In my time running errands for You and exercising authority on Lord Ultraman's behalf, I've heard whispers about the servant gods.

But this Lord Yu Xi... I've never heard of Him.

Does He... truly exist?"

"He's fake." The voice in the air shifted — becoming slightly more cheerful, though clearly restrained. "Deceit has never had a Herald. So Yu Xi's identity is fabricated. However... Void does have a genuine servant god."

Kataro froze in surprise: "Then wouldn't that be Fate's..."

"Correct. After Fate wrote the predetermined final chapter, He elevated a Herald He found agreeable and bestowed the divine name Flame of Hope.

Heh — how interesting. If the ending was already written as a tragedy, why light a flame of hope?"

With that, the voice from the ether snickered twice more.

Kataro didn't dare comment on matters involving Them. He quietly lowered his head and fell silent. Before long, the laughter ceased. Seeing that the Benefactor hadn't yet departed, Kataro deliberated momentarily before voicing another question.

"My Benefactor, please forgive my further overstepping — since You knew Memory's intentions weren't pure, why did You allow Him to speak those seductive words inside Your temple?"

Lord Ultraman seems to have been influenced. His view of You... of Deceit and Void... appears to have changed."

"I did it deliberately." Chaos's answer was loaded with meaning.

"You... deliberately?"

"Indeed. He fits Void too perfectly. Without this method, he would never have stepped outside of Void."

"But why would You want the lord to step outside Void? Isn't devotion a good thing?"

"Heh — who told you that staying within Void means he'd be devoted?"

You've been impersonating him for some time now. Don't you know how talented he is at blasphemy?"

"..."

Cold sweat broke across Kataro's body.

'Oh, I know very well. But I absolutely don't dare learn from his example!'

The presence in the air seemed to sense Kataro's discomfort. He chuckled softly and continued:

"Faiths are ultimately meant to converge. That pen-pusher Truth thinks so, and that foul-mouthed Folly thinks so too. Though I look down on them, I must admit — on the road to omniscience and omnipotence, no one can match their speed.

I don't know if Truth's answer is correct. But before Truth becomes true truth, I need to hold in my own hands an answer of equal weight."

Kataro felt he was hearing something momentous. The Benefactor seemed to be in an exceptionally good mood today.

'But why?'

'Lord Ultraman has begun guarding against Void, fabricated a Deceit Herald, and still hasn't acknowledged his Chaos Herald identity...'

'Every single action is blasphemy. So what exactly are You happy about?'

Kataro couldn't figure it out, so he settled for seeking clarity: "Is this answer... Lord Ultraman?"

The temple went suddenly silent. Kataro jolted with alarm, realizing he'd crossed a line. He immediately lowered his head, not daring to make another sound.

Fortunately, Chaos didn't pursue the matter. After a long pause, He suddenly spoke: "Give my regards to Order. I'm leaving."

With that, He departed.

Seeing the Benefactor leave, Kataro let out a massive sigh of relief. But before he could even straighten up, he sensed another presence arriving — no, not Existence, but Void.

A pair of eyes painted with stars and spirals opened outside the temple. With a gaze like a blazing torch, He stared at Chaos's temple, then glanced at Kataro inside. A cold voice asked:

"Who are you?"

Kataro's heart dropped like a stone. This was a death-trap question.

He couldn't answer that he was Chaos's Herald — because he wasn't. But he especially couldn't answer that he was a puppet wielding Herald authority as proxy — because then Fate would hold a grudge against Chaos for recruiting His follower, and the wrath would fall on Kataro.

Kataro undoubtedly knew about Lord Ultraman's complicated identity and his relationship with Fate. Seeing the lord's other Benefactor arrive on the scene, he suddenly understood why his own Benefactor had left.

'How nice — the Benefactor avoided a great battle.'

'But also not nice — because that battle is about to land on me.'

Trembling with fear, Kataro straightened up and looked at Fate. Without flattery, without subservience, he carefully composed his words and replied:

"All praise to the great Fate. My name is Kataro, and I am... a servant of Void."

Those star-flecked eyes turned instantly frigid. He gave a cold snort:

"The crime of false speech!

Since when do Void's servants walk within Chaos?

Moreover — since when does Void have servants?

You — whose servant are you?"

Kataro secretly gritted his teeth, put on a solemn expression, and gambled everything on one answer:

"I am the servant of Lord Ultr... Lord Cheng Shi."

"...?"

Those cold eyes studied him for a long moment, said nothing further, and departed.

Watching Void vanish into the void, Kataro collapsed onto the ground, all his usual composure gone without a trace.

'Terrifying. This world truly needs Order. No wonder the Benefactor told me to send regards to Order.'

'Go — going right now!'

'Today, I shall sing paeans to the fact that Order yet exists in this universe.'

'Praise be to... uh... praise be to Chaos!'

...

Chapter 549: A Triple Audience

He was back. Finally back.

This time, when he opened his eyes, Cheng Shi confirmed he was indeed on the rest area rooftop. But his prayer trial had originally been set at the Grand Marshal's campfire, so returning to the rest area was strictly thanks to Chaos.

He'd been slapped back here.

That was fine, actually — at least it spared him the trouble of dealing with Hu Wei and Da Yi again.

He shook his head with a bitter laugh and plopped down on the ground. Recalling how he'd just been commanding the Grand Marshal like a puppet — exhilarating as it had felt, the hidden risks were enormous.

He still couldn't fathom Chaos's true intentions. He could only take this overwhelmingly chaotic play one step at a time. But even without seeing the full picture, he needed at least some sense of direction. Walking blind any further would inevitably cause problems.

So he began considering how to extract intelligence about Chaos from another god — to uncover what He was really after.

Cheng Shi first thought of his two Benefactors. But Deceit would probably never give a straight answer. Since He favored having Cheng Shi merge with Chaos, anything He said about Chaos — true or false — would require careful scrutiny. Too much brainwork.

Fate... He'd tell everything without reservation. But the problem was, given the current situation, Cheng Shi had clearly donned a disguise and profited within Chaos's domain. Letting Fate learn about this particular act of blasphemy... 'Forget it. Even blasphemy shouldn't target the same god every time.' He was afraid something would go wrong.

Setting Void's two aside, the only god he could meaningfully seek an audience with and dare to ask questions was Death. Plus, there was still that Screaming Earl trapped in his Fun Ring waiting to be dealt with — visiting Death had become unavoidable.

So Cheng Shi decided: find an opportunity to visit the Fishbone Hall.

A fine plan, but difficult to execute. Because...

Xie Yang had truly vanished.

This War follower hadn't shown his face since his last appearance. Even his little round girlfriend had dropped off the map. If the zone merger hadn't fallen through, Cheng Shi would have assumed the man had died in some trial.

'Strange. Where did that guy go?'

'Disappearing is one thing, but you could've at least left me some "inheritance." Without you around, where am I supposed to find a corpse?'

"..."

Just as Cheng Shi was racking his brain over how to gain an audience with that lord, a massive gate of white bone suddenly yawned open on the rooftop before him.

Countless ghastly pale hand bones struggled out of the void, tearing a rift in reality. A howling flood of skulls then filled that rift, transforming it into a horrifying, cacophonous gate of death.

The countless skulls adorning the gate stared at Cheng Shi with their hollow little eyes, chattering as if demanding his soul:

"Hurry! Come in! He's waiting for you! He's waiting for you! Don't keep Him waiting!"

The dissonant noise was headache-inducing. Watching this, Cheng Shi's jaw dropped.

What was this?

Telepathy?

'I was just thinking of Him, and He was thinking of me?'

Cheng Shi sprang to his feet, face beaming with a radiant smile. Mimicking the little skulls' chattering cadence, he called out, "Coming! Coming! Stop rushing!" as he sprinted through the gate.

This gate of white bone — which to outsiders looked like the threshold to death's abyss — was, to Cheng Shi, more welcoming than his own front door.

This wasn't a gate to death. This was the office door!

As a dedicated employee who loved his work, the office was home!

Cheng Shi stepped through and was instantly swept up by the torrent of white bone, surging into the depths of the void.

When he opened his eyes again, that familiar giant skull sat motionless upon the Bone Throne, twin flames of vivid green blazing in its eye sockets, watching him.

Cheng Shi instinctively tried to raise an eyebrow... but had no eyebrows left, since he'd already transformed into a skull.

Even without limbs, that didn't stop him from showing respect to the boss. He clicked his jaw to prop himself upright, then gave a slight forward "bow" and declared:

"All praise to the great god of Death!

Life is destined for its final road, and flesh shall surely decline. When the universe's final chapter rings out, what shall bloom in eternity will surely be imperishable Death.

It is my great honor to stand before You once again, to feel Your will, to heed Your teachings, and to hope that under Your guidance, I may glean wisdom and bask in divine grace.

Your devoted employee, Cheng Shi, sends his regards."

Cheng Shi didn't say a word before launching into full flattery mode. The bootlicking clearly had some effect, because the green flames in the giant skull's eyes briefly froze.

He gazed at the little skull at his feet with a peculiar expression and spoke in his drawn-out manner:

"Your... devotion... has... too much... Deceit... flavor.

You must... surely... have... a request.

What... do you... want... this time?"

"?"

'This time?'

'When was I ever so tactless as to make demands? I don't even remember.'

Cheng Shi clicked his jaw twice, eyes growing innocent.

'Boss, this really is genuine devotion. From the bottom of my heart.'

'But since the boss asked...'

'No — steady, Cheng Shi. Can't look too eager. Following flattery with a request would be way too obvious. At least make some small talk first!'

So he steadied himself and replied respectfully:

"All praise to You, my lord. You are as generous as always. But those are small matters. Your affairs are far more important. May I ask — what instructions do You have for summoning me today?"

The giant skull stared at Cheng Shi for a long moment, and rather than giving any orders, instead posed a question:

"Do you... know... why... Truth... chose... Dizel's... body... rather than... His soul?"

"!!!"

Cheng Shi had imagined many reasons for Death's summons — a warning about his mounting divine credit tab, a question about how Zhang Jizu was embracing Deceit, things like that. But he'd never expected this audience to involve Dizel, much less that the first question would be a massive issue concerning Them.

He honestly had no idea. So he shook his head truthfully.

The giant skull's tone suddenly turned deeper. He gazed into the infinitely distant void and began to reminisce:

"This story... begins with... the Mother of Prosperity.

You should... know... that reproduction... is... Birth's... authority.

Before... the Mother of Prosperity... stole... Birth's... authority... She had... no power... to bear... offspring."

?

Cheng Shi blinked, suddenly realizing he'd never actually considered this. He knew Prosperity had four children, but he'd had no idea that gods needed to wield specific authority just to have offspring.

'No wonder Birth has so many children — why wouldn't you use your own authority?'

"Yet She... still bore... four offspring.

Do you... know... why?"

...

Chapter 550: Work — Work Again!

"..."

'My lord, just be direct. I'm a noob — I truly know nothing.'

Cheng Shi was numb. All he could do was shake his head.

The giant skull apparently hadn't expected a real answer either. He continued:

"She... stripped away... a part of... Her own body... and used... redundant... divinity... to nurture... these four... offspring."

"!!!"

Cheng Shi was stunned.

'What?'

'Isn't that just... plant propagation?'

'You gods use such a down-to-earth method of reproduction?'

'But... if that's true, then doesn't it mean Prosperity's four children were originally part of Her?'

'So what was Prosperity assimilating all along?'

'Pooping it out just to eat it again?'

The giant skull saw Cheng Shi's shock and nodded:

"Indeed... they were all... once part of... the Mother of Prosperity.

But after... each grew... independently... they became... different from Her.

You should know... before finding... the correct... path... Our paths... are not... singular.

She originally... intended... to use this method... to create... a second self... then a third... a fourth... and fill... the universe... with copies.

But later... She discovered... these offspring... were too weak... They couldn't... grow into... what She... envisioned.

So She... continuously... devoured... old offspring... to strengthen Herself... then bred... new ones... creating possibility.

Dizel... was born... under that fear... and betrayed... Her.

Until... Le Le'er... foolishly... leapt into... the Sea of Desire... Only then... did the Mother of Prosperity... realize that... the offspring She raised... were of... wildly varying quality... completely unable... to meet... Her standards.

From that point on... She completely... changed Her goal... shifting to... self-prosperity... through assimilating... the universe."

!!!

Hearing this, Cheng Shi suddenly realized that the answer to the lord's first question might lie within these very words.

"So You're saying — Truth didn't use Dizel's soul because his soul is, to a certain extent, linked to the Mother of Prosperity? Perhaps even deeply bound?"

But Prosperity is already dead...?"

Wait!

Halfway through, a flash of inspiration struck Cheng Shi like lightning:

"I understand! You mean — Prosperity's fall has impacted Dizel's soul!

After all, he was once part of Prosperity. So when Prosperity vanished, he too began to... wither?

And this withering could very likely affect the Truth who consumed him! Am I right, my lord?"

Though his hypothesis hadn't been confirmed yet, Cheng Shi's gut told him this was the answer. He remembered Dizel himself saying that both he and Le Le'er had developed problems.

And that problem was likely the fatal consequence of Prosperity's self-destruction!

This Herald's soul was withering because it had lost its root and source!

The green flames in the giant skull's eyes blazed for an instant. He nodded:

"Exactly so... a soulless body... is far less... affected... than the soul itself.

Therefore... whether it's... Dizel... or that wretch... Le Le'er... They are... both nearing... Their end."

Cheng Shi's heart lurched at those words.

'Doesn't that mean the Gift of Sores I just obtained is about to lose its power and become worthless scrap?'

The thought made his expression collapse. Of course, "collapsing" on a skull just meant the bone color turned even paler.

The giant skull noticed his reaction and added in a leisurely drone:

"In the... temporal dimension... that mortals understand... They will not... wither... that quickly."

'Huh? It won't become scrap? Oh good. That's good.'

Cheng Shi let out a huge sigh of relief — but his expression immediately froze. He went rigid.

Because he suddenly realized the lord on the Bone Throne wasn't making idle conversation. He clearly already knew that Cheng Shi had obtained the Gift of Sores, had found Dizel's soul. So...

What was He getting at?

Last time, the new Corruption authority had been confiscated. This time... they wouldn't confiscate the dagger too, would they?

'That is absolutely NOT happening!!!'

'I tricked so many people to get this back! How can you just confiscate it!'

'Even capitalists can't treat people like workhorses every single day!'

'Workhorses need feed too! And this dagger looks mighty fine as feed — exactly my favorite flavor!'

Cheng Shi panicked. He desperately wanted to protest, to make his position clear. But he didn't dare. So he could only mutter meekly:

"My lord... You don't exactly seem like... You'd find a dagger very convenient to use... right?"

"..."

The green flames in the giant skull's eyes froze. He let out a cold snort and, without so much as asking Cheng Shi's permission, dumped everything from his personal storage space onto the ground beneath the Bone Throne.

The scene was painfully familiar. Cheng Shi's fighting spirit crumbled and he gave up resisting.

'Take it. Take it all. Workhorses deserve to slave away their whole lives. Finally find something nice, and before it's even warm — no, it was never warm — the boss takes it.'

'No wonder capitalists should all hang from lampposts. Deserved. Truly deserved!'

Cheng Shi watched listlessly as the lord rummaged through the pile, extracting the Gift of Sores from the heap of miserable, unsightly items. The moment the dagger — housing Dize's soul — emerged, it seemed to sense something terrifying. It let out a shrill scream of fear.

"Death!

What are You going to do! You can't treat me this way!

I am a servant god of Life! You cannot treat me this way!"

The trembling roar startled Cheng Shi. He looked up to see the dagger-form Dize instantly revert to its withered-branch-bearing-fruit shape. But under the shroud of Death's power, all the vines were unable to spread outward — locked in a tiny space, squeezed into a shriveled ball of tendrils.

The lord upon the Bone Throne regarded him coldly, snorted, and declared:

"Dizel... you no longer... belong to... Life... nor are you... a servant god.

You are nothing... but a... pitiful... oathbreaker... and blasphemer... unworthy... of compassion.

Prosperity... took away... Garuda... and you... as Her... offspring... must pay... with your life.

Therefore... your destination... can only be... death."

When the word "death" dropped like a hammer blow, the giant skull's eyes lifted past Dizel to fix on Cheng Shi. The wild dancing of green flames in those sockets genuinely startled him.

This lord was great in every way — just a little too... grudge-holding.

Over a single Garuda, He'd enslaved Le Le'er's divinity and now He was going to kill Dizel.

Anyone who offended Him was truly...

'Hm? Wait!'

In that very instant of locking gazes with the giant skull, a sudden burst of divine inspiration struck Cheng Shi. Something clicked. His eyes gleamed with a spark as he snatched up the Bone Servant Le Le'er's Ring from the pile of junk, clamping it in his jaw. He clacked his mandible excitedly, looking up at the lord.

His skull was stuffed, rendering him speechless. But his ecstatic manner said it all:

'Work! Make him work, my lord! Make Dizel work for You too!'

'Let him and Le Le'er work for You together!'

In this moment, having caught the scent of profit, Cheng Shi was beside himself with excitement. But what he'd completely forgotten was that inside this very ring, a remnant soul of the Screaming Earl was still waiting to die.

...