

## The Gods 551

Chapter 551: The Bone Servant Le Le'er's Ring — Upgraded!

The Screaming Earl was, indeed, waiting to die — and was nearly done waiting.

After personally witnessing Cheng Shi's conversations with various people and gods, he had been crushed by his own favorite thing: fear.

Now numb, he was like a goose force-fed to bursting, passively allowing the unswallowed fear to wrap around and compress him, shattering and grinding away his will to survive bit by bit. His consciousness gradually became chaotic and mechanical, a blank slate — stupidly waiting for death.

He even had a moment where he believed he'd already died, and what he was hearing and seeing now was merely the final judgment inside the hall of Death's authority.

The giant skull understood what Cheng Shi meant.

Honestly, He hadn't planned for things to be this complicated. In Death's original plan, He'd intended to simply extinguish this last remaining branch of Prosperity's bloodline — reducing it to an ordinary skull in the hall, eternally crushed beneath His feet.

But upon seeing Cheng Shi's "request," He hesitated.

It was an outrageous request, to be sure. The Bone Servant Le Le'er's Ring already exceeded the item-grade ceiling a player was supposed to have. Layering additional divinity on top would make the ring's power potentially violate the game's balance...

Yet, considering that Cheng Shi had made considerable contributions on His behalf, He did feel that perhaps this employee deserved a reward.

But — wouldn't this reward be excessive?

An excessive reward would mean He was using faith to endorse Cheng Shi. And right now, Death didn't want to get too entangled with Void.

However, speaking of Void...

"..."

The boiling green flames in the giant skull's eyes flickered inexplicably. He realized that if He didn't compensate Cheng Shi — yes, compensation, not a reward...

He realized that if He didn't offer compensation, then after this affair, He might have to face Void... alone.

Twice!

At this thought, the giant skull cast a long, drawn-out glance at the ring in Cheng Shi's mouth. He heaved a tremendous sigh, green light flashing through His eyes as He magnified the ring infinitely and fused it with the tendrilled ball that was the imprisoned Dizel.

Cheng Shi heard Dizel emit a blood-curdling shriek. Within seconds, under his increasingly fevered gaze, the entire dagger — "BOOM" — exploded.

A torrent of Decay intermixed with Prosperity's chaotic aura erupted outward. Luminous fragments scattered in all directions like a tidal wave, staggering Cheng Shi.

But he refused to miss this universe-rare spectacle of a Herald's demise. So he raised his head against the enormous pressure and watched as this legendary oathbreaker, this former offspring of Prosperity, this blasphemous would-be assassin of Decay, died without surprise in Death's Fishbone Hall. He completed his atonement for his mother's crimes — and followed in her footsteps, trailing after Prosperity into oblivion.

But Cheng Shi wasn't particularly concerned about Dizel's death. Right now, the only thing on his mind was whether his ultimate work-slave ring had gotten even stronger!

The answer was a resounding yes — though Death's forging of the ring was still in progress.

Flashes of green light streaked through the air. Scream after scream echoed all around. Countless whispering bones sang out in unison throughout the hall. In an instant, every skull in the entire Fishbone Hall erupted upward in a reverse torrent.

The white bones in the flood howled to the heavens while fixing their collective gaze on the ring hovering in midair. From their mouths spilled streams of deathly pale light, tendril after tendril, one wave after another crashing against the ring — painting its already ghastly white surface an even more harrowing shade of bone-white.

Before long, the sky-filling skulls cascaded down like snowfall. The thunderous Fishbone Hall fell silent in an instant. And in that moment, a ring bearing only partial resemblance to the old Bone Servant Le Le'er's Ring drifted slowly down from above, landing right next to Cheng Shi's jaw.

Cheng Shi was utterly transfixed. His empty eye sockets stared directly at the ring, and he could see that the transformation was dramatic.

The most obvious change was that the bewitching red glow that had once swirled across the ring's surface had been gathered and compressed into five pairs of crimson eyes, embedded into the band.

At the same time, the five crude screaming mouths had metamorphosed into five screaming faces, merging with the crimson eyes to form twisted, contorted visages of horror.

The ring's overall tone had become even more deathly white, but against that pallid base, one could clearly see black fracture lines spreading like vines — coursing through both sides of the band, intertwining and converging. They lent this ring of Death a shattered quality reminiscent of Decay.

At a glance, it was impossible to tell how many faiths had been fused inside.

Cheng Shi was euphoric beyond coherent thought. He fought the urge to immediately pop the ring into his mouth, instead channeling every ounce of trembling joy into demonstrating the boot-licking excellence befitting a star employee.

"M-My lord! Please bestow a name upon this epoch-defining Sub-God Relic once more!"

Upon hearing this, the giant skull on the Bone Throne instantly shed his earlier hesitation and became...  
"lively?"

For one brief instant, Cheng Shi could have sworn he saw the corners of the massive skull's mouth curve upward.

?

'Bizarre — impossibly bizarre. How does a jawbone even twist like that?'

The vast, majestic Fishbone Hall went instantly silent. It seemed all the chattering little skulls had clamped their mouths shut — none daring to disturb His moment of creative inspiration.

The giant skull deliberated for a very long time. Only when a sudden flash of inspiration struck did He begin to nod — rather satisfiedly — and bestow upon this brand-new ring a legendary name.

"It shall be called...

The Bone Servant Redeemer's Offspring Ring."

"..."

'Brilliant. Absolutely brilliant.'

'Only at moments like these does Your loyal employee dare roast You, great boss.'

'This is categorically not a name any human being could come up with.'

'But regardless, at least it sounds better than the Bone Servant Le Le'er's Ring... actually, not really.'

Cheng Shi froze in embarrassment, but quickly fell to vigorous nodding.

"Your aesthetic sense remains, as always, unparalleled across the universe...

I believe that no matter what vicissitudes this world may endure, future generations will surely remember this ring. Not for how devastating its power is, but because it bears a name that can only be called... legendary.

All praise to You. All praise to the great... God of Death (and Naming)."

Throughout all his previous flattery, no matter how creatively he'd embellished it, the lord upon the Bone Throne had always snorted with contempt.

But only this time — only now — did His expression shift into something subtly peculiar. He seemed to accept this "sincere" praise with a certain equanimity, yet restrained himself from showing it.

His gaze toward Cheng Shi grew ever more peculiar. But at this moment, Cheng Shi — heart ablaze — had no bandwidth left to reciprocate his boss's attention.

His eyes held only the ring.

This Bone Servant...

'Forget it. Why torment myself...'

'Let's just keep calling it the Death Fun Ring.'

...

Chapter 552: The Bone Servant Redeemer's Offspring Ring

### Bone Servant Redeemer's Offspring Ring (SSS'S):

A ring personally forged by Death, containing one-half of Thundering's divinity, one-quarter of fear-infused Corruption divinity, and one-quarter of Decay divinity. Because a "full portion" of divinity was bonded together, the item has been elevated from a Sub-God Relic to an unconscious Sub-God Puppet Tool.

Special Effect [Fear Fodder]: You can absorb surrounding fear emotions to charge it. Each full charge illuminates one screaming face on the ring. Each time a screaming face lights up, you gain slightly increased resistance to lightning elements, fear emotions, Corruption divine power, and Decay divine power.

Special Effect [Hatred Desire]: Each time you gain one portion of Fear Fodder, you gain an additional portion of Fear Fodder.

Special Effect [Thundering Judgment]: Consume one portion of Fear Fodder to summon Lightning Punishment, annihilating the enemy. If the target has previously provided Fear Fodder to the ring, Lightning Punishment is guaranteed to hit.

Special Effect [Screaming Servant]: Bodies killed by Thundering Judgment are automatically converted into a Screaming Servant, possessing the ability to release fear and corrode enemies. It will obey commands to hunt fear, or return to the Fishbone Hall, carrying your praise back to the noble lord upon the throne.

"!!!"

4S!!!

Though the last S seemed somewhat different from the first three, there was no denying it — Cheng Shi now owned a 4S-grade item.

No — it could no longer even be called an "item." In players' understanding, the only thing above SSS grade was a servant god. Which meant he now possessed a ring that could loosely be called a "servant god."

A Sub-God Puppet Tool!

It sounded exactly like turning a servant god into a mindless puppet!

Cheng Shi's eyes blazed with fervor. He was so excited he didn't know what to say, because at this moment he recalled what Deceit had once told him:

"Servant gods and Heralds, aside from possessing their own limited divinity, mostly exercise the authority of a true god by proxy."

See the point?

Cheng Shi, this wanderer of Void, was currently wielding two true gods' authorities by proxy. Partial, yes — but two! One was Prosperity's "Vitality," and the other was Decay's "Faded!"

In addition, he possessed a "complete" portion of divinity — even if it was forcibly bonded together!

Indeed — with that lord's help, Cheng Shi had met every requirement for becoming a Herald. The only difference between him and a real Herald was:

A Herald unified everything within themselves. In his case... the two elements were kept separate.

So he remained a fake Herald. But to a certain degree... the fake was nearly indistinguishable from the real thing.

'Massive profit!'

Before being summoned by Death, Cheng Shi had never imagined he'd approach the status of "Him" through this particular path.

He had no intention of becoming a god. What he'd told Deceit early on — "I don't want to become a god" — was genuine. So his elation came not from nearing that divine status, but from gaining stronger power to pursue the "top scholar" title that Old Jia had once envied!

In Cheng Shi's heart, godhood didn't matter. Old Jia's "dying wish" was what mattered most.

Whether this was his way of comforting himself or his reason to keep living — in any case, getting closer to the Chosen One position made him happy.

And from a certain perspective, this split-identity state suited Cheng Shi's preferences perfectly.

After all, fake was fake. Before earning a seat at the table, he didn't need to worry about clinking glasses and trading schemes with those already seated.

"My lord..."

Cheng Shi lifted his ink-black, hollow eye sockets and gazed numbly at the giant skull upon the Bone Throne. His expression was so devout that Death was certain what came next would be praise "to shake the universe."

But He was wrong.

He never imagined anyone could be this insatiably greedy — brazen enough to push their luck right in a true god's face!

Because what He heard wasn't the anticipated praise. It was Cheng Shi's heartfelt bewilderment:

"My lord... something doesn't seem right. This ring absorbed Dizel's divinity, so where's the Decay effect?"

Your technique..."

Cheng Shi had been about to say, 'Your technique is a bit rough, just as Memory mentioned.' But he didn't dare. Reason ultimately prevailed over greed, and he shut his mouth just in time.

However, those two syllables — "Your tech—" — combined with that skeptical tone, apparently ignited the lord's fury.

Green flames as terrifying as a volcanic eruption blazed instantly through the entire hall, consuming the little skull at His feet in the blink of an eye.

Reduced to ashes, Cheng Shi was stunned to find he still had consciousness. He frantically tried to apologize, but the cinder pile could only twitch slightly with his attempted speech — no other response was forthcoming.

So he could only lie on the ground in embarrassment, playing dead, hoping to outlast the lord's moment of wrath.

Cheng Shi didn't want to leave the Fishbone Hall like this. He still had plenty of questions about Chaos to ask. Besides, as long as he retained consciousness, that meant the lord wasn't actually as angry as He appeared.

But then why had He suddenly lost composure and ignited the entire hall?

Surely it wasn't really because of his questioning?

"..."

Just as Cheng Shi was mired in anxious uncertainty, the answer presented itself.

He heard a "hee~" emanate from the void beyond the Fishbone Hall. Then his entire being — no, his entire pile of ash — was yanked away by an immense void-force, pulled free from the flame-engulfed hall and deposited before a pair of eyes painted with stars and spirals.

Those laughing eyes blinked casually twice, and the pile of ash gradually reformed, reforming into a tiny skull.

Cheng Shi was thunderstruck. He'd never expected the Fun God to appear.

Having seen Him, Death's rage suddenly had an explanation.

So it wasn't his unfinished blasphemy that triggered the fury — it was the Fun God!

'It had to be Him! It was definitely Him! There's no one else!'

'Oh my dear Benefactor, what absolutely heinous thing did You do this time to make my boss this angry?'

Those eyes seemed to read Cheng Shi's confusion, but rather than enlighten him, they blinked playfully at him and asked a question that rendered Cheng Shi petrified:

"Hello there, little bone. You look kind of familiar. I wonder...

Whose Herald are you?"

"..."

'Can't speak.'

'Absolutely cannot speak!'

Cheng Shi was terrified. He felt this question didn't just carry passive-aggressive undertones — there was genuine resentment in it. As for where that resentment came from...

'How should I know? It's not like I'm a god.'

He instinctively averted his gaze from his own Benefactor and silently kept his mouth shut.

Seeing Cheng Shi's attitude, those eyes let out a derisive snicker.

While this exchange was happening, across the way in the Fishbone Hall, the raging flames had gradually subsided. The giant skull sat upon the Bone Throne, a pair of eyes as deep as black holes staring directly at those star-filled eyes, seething with rage:

"You actually... still... want to get... Your hands on... that Corruption... new authority.

Deceit!

What... exactly... do You... want?"

"?"

Hearing this, Cheng Shi froze — then realization struck. The look he directed at his Benefactor was filled with... admiration.

'Incredible — so while Death was forging my ring just now, You were sneaking around trying to steal something?'

'Is this something a god should be doing?'

'Oh — it's the Fun God. Then I guess it's not surprising.'

Cheng Shi was instantly amused. With a peculiar expression, he looked at his Benefactor. Turning his back to shield himself from the other lord's line of sight, he whispered:

"Did You get it?"

Those eyes rolled thoughtfully, then sighed.

"So close — fell at the final hurdle.

It's all your fault. Who told you to make Him angry?"

"???"

'Wait — how is this my fault? How am I the one getting blamed for this?'

...

Chapter 553: A Quadruple Audience — A Silent Standoff

"What do I want?"

I don't want anything. I just noticed a wisp of new Corruption authority had fallen on the ground — ah, or perhaps it fell on you, old bones. Either way, it looked like nobody wanted it, so I thought I'd find somewhere to dispose of it properly.

I was being generous!"

"..."

"..."

Cheng Shi was shaken to his core. The green flames in the giant skull's eyes nearly sputtered out.

He looked at Deceit, then at Cheng Shi. After a moment of silence, without a single word, He and the entire Fishbone Hall dissolved into countless streams of white bone, vanishing in the blink of an eye.

Communicating with Void was, fittingly, an exercise in nothingness. He'd never enjoyed it. Rather than stay and be provoked, He might as well retreat to somewhere quiet.

Death could run, but Cheng Shi could not.

He could clearly feel his Benefactor's gaze was... off. He wanted to say something but couldn't find the words, so the scene simply... froze.

Those eyes watched Cheng Shi with a half-smiling, half-not expression. After studying him for a moment, the voice came:

"That work uniform fits you quite nicely."

Cheng Shi's lips twitched. 'It's not like I dressed myself — You put this on me. I'd love to change back, but the problem is, You're the one who has to do it, Benefactor.'

Those eyes seemed to read his thoughts. Two casual blinks summoned a gust of void wind that blew Cheng Shi several meters backward.

As the little skull rolled, it gradually transformed back into Cheng Shi's original form. The moment he felt limbs growing back, he arrested his momentum and stood up with an awkward expression.

But he still didn't speak. His mood wasn't as lively as usual. Strangely, those eyes remained silent too — just watching him. The silence deepened.

Some silences exist to gather the energy to break awkwardness. Others serve to... deepen the impasse.

Like now. As time passed, the situation calcified.

Between this one man and one god, an increasingly thick pane of frosted glass seemed to have formed, distorting each other's reflections upon its surface. From each perspective, the other no longer looked the way they'd been accustomed to. Everything had changed flavor.

Of course, all of this was purely Cheng Shi's own perception. Whether the Fun God's gaze had actually changed...

He didn't know. Because he didn't dare look up.

He stayed silent because he knew he couldn't out-deceive Deceit. The moment he opened his mouth, the crack spawned by suspicion might only widen.

Cheng Shi possessed a keen self-awareness. He knew his power couldn't exist without Void's shelter. And Memory had said as much — the other gods' interest in him stemmed entirely from Void's interest in him.

So he didn't dare carelessly shatter Void's filter on him — placing himself in an untenable position. Yet this very cautiousness only deepened the standoff.

"..."

'This can't go on!'

Cheng Shi realized that if he let this silence persist, the situation would spiral beyond recovery. His relationship with Deceit would never be the same.

Memory's words were indeed meant to drive a wedge. But the problem was that it was an open scheme. He hadn't fabricated weapons from thin air — He'd used the suspicion already living in Cheng Shi's heart as the blade, slowly cutting the tight bonds between Cheng Shi and Void.

And Cheng Shi had indeed been struck. Watching things slide toward collapse, cold sweat beaded on his forehead.

But this deadlock wasn't entirely unsolvable. Old Jia had once taught him that the best way to prevent misunderstanding was thorough communication.

In truth, misunderstandings arose the same way deception did — being isolated on the wrong side of an information gap. With proper communication and sufficient awareness of the full picture, misunderstandings naturally couldn't form, and one wouldn't be deceived.

But the question was: how could a mortal have "thorough communication" with a god?

Was he supposed to openly challenge whether the god had schemes against him?

How would he challenge? With what standing? What right?

Chess pieces on a board could only submit to being moved. Even if a move went wrong and the piece was captured, could the doomed piece rage at the player as it was placed back in the box?

No. Because chess pieces had no mouths.

But Cheng Shi did!

Under Old Jia's tutelage, Cheng Shi had learned many things. Among them was tempering the thick skin he'd forged in his orphanage days into something even thicker.

He saw the current situation clearly. He knew that if he didn't break the ice today, then from this point forward — even if he continued walking the path of Deceit — his devotion would no longer be devotion, and his Benefactor's gaze would grow blurred.

Though his lips never spoke devotion, his heart — through affinity with "deceit" — still held a sliver of expectation and reverence for the so-called God of Deceit.

This was undeniably the best possible relationship between man and god. From every angle, Cheng Shi didn't want to break it.

So he could only break the deadlock instead.

And his method of breaking it was... utterly artless. Brutally simple, even.

This clown who followed Deceit chose, at this very moment, standing before Deceit Himself — to use sincerity as his opening move.

He cut straight to the point. His first sentence was earth-shattering — no other player alive could have asked what came out of his mouth.

Because the question was:

"Benefactor... are You... harming me?"

Who said a mortal couldn't question a god?

If you never questioned, how would you know you couldn't?

This was the question Cheng Shi had most wanted to ask — the proposition he'd been pondering ever since learning that many players doubted the gods' intentions. The suspicion had peaked the moment he himself became Void's darling, yet he'd never once voiced it. He hadn't even discussed it with other players.

But the more one concealed, the more one feared. When a chess piece knows it's a chess piece, it will probably spend its entire existence wondering when the player will push it across the river as a sacrificial pawn.

Cheng Shi believed he was certainly a pawn that had crossed the river. But the question was whether this pawn, after crossing, had any chance of delivering checkmate. Because only by checkmating the opponent and winning the game would the remaining pieces on the board have a chance at survival.

So, after countless deliberations and a thorough weighing of the full picture, he asked this question that was practically tantamount to suicidal blasphemy.

Cheng Shi raised his head and looked solemnly into those star-filled eyes. Though his expression was steady and his gaze resolute, the five screaming faces lighting up on his fingers betrayed the anxiety and terror within.

Those eyes — stars flickering, spirals spinning — smiled upon hearing the question. A brilliant... radiant smile.

He studied His follower with great interest, the corners of His eyes lifting:

"It seems fear truly is one of life's most easily triggered emotions. Viewed this way, the scholars following that pen-pusher are indeed researching in the right direction. No wonder you obtained that new Corruption authority.

How interesting. You...

are afraid of Me?"

"..." 'Obviously.' Cheng Shi couldn't possibly say "no" at this point. He knew he couldn't deceive Deceit, so his only option was to stay the course of sincerity. He spoke in a low, firm voice: "Yes — I'm afraid!"

"Very good." Those eyes smiled even wider. They blinked while studying Cheng Shi, as if examining a prized artwork. "Why are you afraid of Me?"

"Because... the unknown." Cheng Shi's answer was resolute and decisive.

He knew today was a heart-to-heart — between man and god. He couldn't guarantee whether his Benefactor would lie, but to ensure the road ahead was smoother, he could only guarantee his own absolute honesty.

"Wrong. 'The unknown' is too broad. The universe is vast and deep — for humans, almost nothing is known.

Your answer is too vague. So it's wrong.

Think again. Why are you afraid of Me?"

"..."

Cheng Shi's expression shifted. His gaze lowered slightly, but he said nothing.

Seeing his reaction, those eyes burst into hearty laughter:

"You've thought of it, but you don't dare say it.

That's fine — I'll say it for you. It's because...

there is no kindness without reason in this world."

"!!!"

Cheng Shi's entire body jolted. That was indeed what he'd been thinking — but he never expected the Fun God to say it outright.

Hearing it was terrifying. Even the tone was identical to Memory's.

'So He was there? He heard everything?'

'No — He might have picked it up through Mockery and Jeering. But the question is, didn't Memory guard against Him?'

'He just let the Fun God overhear everything?'

"..."

'Of course — Memory couldn't have guarded against Him. Sowing discord meant both parties in the rift hearing those heart-piercing words for maximum effect.'

'Chaos probably thought the same way. So even though everything happened on Chaos's turf and right beside Memory, the Fun God still learned every last word.'

'But...'

'Benefactor — since You've spoken those words Yourself, I assume You'll give me an explanation?'

Cheng Shi furrowed his brow slightly, unconsciously clenching his fists. He also sensed a change in Deceit and knew this heart-to-heart was probably going to work. Even if this was just intuition — as a liar, Cheng Shi's intuition had always been sharp.

'So what is this "reason" — the one I've been too afraid to mention, the one Memory wielded as a weapon?'

'Today... will I get my answer, Benefactor?'

...

Chapter 554: A Long Talk with Deceit (1)

"Indeed — there is no kindness without reason in this world.

If a being you cannot fathom, cannot comprehend, cannot even approach casually bestowed upon you power beyond imagination — as a normal person, you'd naturally be afraid.

But the question is... why aren't they afraid?"

The tone of those star-specked, spiral-spinning eyes as they spoke was extraordinarily playful — carrying that signature flavor of Deceit's mockery, the kind that sounded passive-aggressive at first listen.

But Cheng Shi didn't hear it that way.

To him, the words struck like thunder detonating beside his ear. His entire body seized up. Pupils contracted. Eyes went wide. His disbelieving gaze drifted upward to meet those mocking eyes with his own look of horror.

He was terrified!

Yes — deeply, profoundly terrified.

This fear didn't stem from the Fun God's merciless ridicule. Rather, Cheng Shi sensed hidden meaning in those words. The "you" and the "they" in that sentence didn't seem to simply refer to "you" and "them."

Within the mockery, he detected a note of self-deprecation. So the "you" felt more like referring to Himself, and the "they"... should be Them!

No doubt about it — this feeling was unmistakable. Deceit was laughing at Himself while mocking all the gods!

!!!

Wait!

How could He say something like this? No — why would He use this tone to say something like this?

Cheng Shi was sharp. Instantly, he leapt to several conclusions he barely dared follow to their ends. But before those thoughts could crystallize, the Fun God's second sentence confirmed his guess.

His guess was spot-on. Because those eyes — drained of all laughter, filled with boundless melancholy — spoke thus:

"You're afraid of Me. That's perfectly normal.

So then guess...

Am I afraid of \*Him?"

"!!!!!"

\*Him!

It was \*Him!

The instant that pronoun left His lips, Cheng Shi knew the "\*Him" here could only be the Origin — the one that made Aph Ros blanch at its mere mention!

Though it was merely a pronoun, though Deceit seemed to have said nothing concrete — Cheng Shi felt with absolute certainty that he'd just heard the most terrifying horror story in the entire universe from his Benefactor's lips!

In this moment, a tale far more horrifying than "there is no kindness without reason" was born. But the underlying logic of terror remained unchanged — only the protagonist and the "villain" had been elevated.

The dimension had been raised!

A higher-dimensional horror story, for lower-dimensional life, could no longer even be called a story. It should be called... a catastrophe.

A catastrophe born from fear!

Cheng Shi listened with contracted pupils, body rigid, not daring to draw a single heavy breath. Meanwhile, the self-deprecation in those eyes hadn't yet concluded.

"Humanity's creation, in the end, has nothing to do with Void.

Life gave humans life. Descent inflated and twisted emotions. Civilization drove civilizational progress. Chaos disrupted essential clarity. Existence made the world colorful. As for Void...

We merely played a tiny joke — and gave you all a game.

So, whether it's Me or Fate, to you we're merely sources of power — not true creators.

But \*He...

Not only created everything, but bestowed irrevocable divine names, and more — entrusted the most precious authorities in this entire universe...

Yet no one knows why.

So tell Me — which is more frightening: Me, or \*Him?"

"..."

'You're both terrifying!'

Quips aside — in all honesty, Cheng Shi had never in his life felt such profound empathy as he did right now.

Yes — empathy! With a god!

In those eyes — corners slightly upturned, spirals lazily spinning — he saw for the first time an emotion beyond amusement and mockery. He saw something called fear. And the shape of that fear was identical to the one reflected in his own eyes.

He feared his Benefactor. And his Benefactor feared... his Benefactor's "Benefactor!"

What did it mean that \*He "created everything?"

Did this mean the gods were "created" by the Origin?

If a god could be "created"... could it still be called a god?

And then — wasn't the one who "created" the "gods"... the actual true god?!

So Deceit's very first answer was now confirmed once more: the Faith Game was indeed a game pursuing omniscience and omnipotence. Only — the participants weren't limited to players!

They, too, had stakes in this game!

And their goals differed.

At the very least, Deceit's goals differed from the other gods'.

The information packed into the Fun God's few sentences was staggering — so enormous that Cheng Shi's mind was on the verge of crashing.

But precisely because of these words, his alarm toward the so-called "kindness without reason" weakened considerably. Because he'd discovered he wasn't the only one bearing the pressure of "without reason!"

If what He said was true, then His choosing Cheng Shi didn't seem so "without reason" after all.

The Fun God's predicament seemed similar to his own. The Origin, toward Him... toward Him... toward...

'Hm? What am I thinking?'

Cheng Shi startled awake, realizing his thoughts had suddenly stopped keeping pace — as though affected by some inexplicable force.

!!!

'No — my consciousness is going blurry again!'

His pupils dilated sharply for an instant. Cold sweat drenched his entire body. He felt his soul beginning to go out of sync with his body — vibrating at different frequencies — even developing a tendency to detach from the flesh.

His vision blurred. The star-filled eyes before him doubled into afterimages. Two eyes wavered and became four — one pair with upturned corners, one pair frigidly cold.

He shook his head, drew a deep breath, and fought to suppress his frantically pumping heart. He strained to push down every thought about \*Him — but with minimal success.

Watching Cheng Shi's face drain of color, those stellar eyes chuckled once more.

He appeared completely unaffected.

"Consider that punishment for your blasphemy.

Fear is healthy — but choose your object of fear carefully.

Also, you asked the wrong god. Memory doesn't understand Deceit. Existence doesn't understand Void.

Since you want the answer to that question, why not ask it yourself?

You've walked further down the road of blasphemy than anyone. So why now...

Hee~

are you getting cold feet again?"

"..."

It was precisely that "hee~" that yanked Cheng Shi's hazy consciousness back to clarity.

He inhaled sharply, then fixed his Benefactor with an immensely complex gaze.

He knew which question the Fun God meant. But there was no longer any need to ask it — because he'd already found the answer.

Still, at this moment, to show gratitude for the Fun God's "protection," he obediently followed the "divine oracle" and asked the question.

"Why me?"

Those eyes finally smiled — as happily as always. Stars alternated their flickering. Spirals turned leisurely. The entire expanse of void seemed to rise with a joyous air.

In this atmosphere of euphoria, He laughed heartily and declared:

"My choice was never you — it was... Myself."

...

Chapter 555: A Long Talk with Deceit (2)

"Crash—"

The glass shattered.

Though no pane of frosted glass physically existed in this void to separate man from god, in this moment, Cheng Shi distinctly felt the barrier — the one that had long stood between them, the one that today had severely distorted both their images — break apart.

Those star-filled eyes appeared before him for the first time with such "authenticity" — vivid, lifelike, rich with "flesh and blood," every detail visible.

For one brief instant, Cheng Shi even felt that He was no longer a lofty, unreachable "Him" — but rather a forerunner, walking the very same road, simply having set out much further ahead.

So it wasn't just him who was afraid. He was even more terrified!

Cheng Shi's conjecture was right: Deceit truly wasn't of the "approach faction." And the reason He chose not to draw closer was this fear.

The fear called "kindness without reason."

But there was still something Cheng Shi couldn't figure out. The Origin wasn't like the other gods. He had never appeared, never manipulated the workings of the universe. For the life in this universe, He was an existence that "didn't exist" — with negligible influence. So what exactly was Deceit afraid of?

Afraid that His authority didn't truly belong to Him?

That was certainly possible. Death had once said that the Convention was a compact signed by the gods specifically to protect all divine authorities from being lost.

At the time, Cheng Shi hadn't thought much of it. But now, on reflection: below the gods, who could possibly cause divine authority to be lost?

So the Convention's original purpose was perhaps never aimed at beings beneath the gods. Since it wasn't aimed downward, it could only target... gods and above!

Beyond mediating disputes among the gods, the Convention was also likely a safeguard against \*Him!

But weren't there many gods in the "approach faction"? How could They agree to sign a Convention guarding against Him?

Evidently, the factors behind the Convention's creation were far more complex than Cheng Shi had previously imagined.

Beyond the Fun God's fear concerning authority, Cheng Shi harbored another theory: He was also afraid of the end of Void's era!

But then again — the current era already belonged to Void. As rulers of this age, Deceit should have felt far more secure than any other god.

Aph Ros had once said that after the Void era there would inevitably be another. If that was true — if even a Herald could weather the transition — a true god shouldn't feel fear over this.

So there must be some other reason he didn't understand yet. And that reason likely pointed directly to the core of the Fun God's terror!

This wasn't blind guessing. It was a deduction Cheng Shi drew from the surface difference between Deceit's and Fate's views on faith fusion.

As he'd noted before: Fate championed the predetermined — clearly wanting to witness the end of the Void era. Since Deceit's opinion opposed His, that meant He didn't want to experience the era's conclusion.

Cheng Shi badly wanted to ask outright what the end of the Void era would entail, but he could tell that his current self probably didn't have the right to learn more.

That the Fun God had explained this much was already beyond imagination. That He'd forced Cheng Shi to ask that blasphemous question already demonstrated His attitude.

Yes — forced.

The one who truly broke the ice wasn't Cheng Shi. It was the Fun God Himself.

When He used that silence to corner Cheng Shi into the standoff, He'd already broken the ice. Because this exceptionally clever pair — man and god alike — both knew that when the impasse arrived, Cheng Shi would inevitably find a way to shatter it. And that meant He'd long been prepared to "explain" something to Cheng Shi.

It was only that Cheng Shi, overwhelmed by terror in the moment, hadn't seen through it. But once the explanation landed and he'd steadied himself, the sharp mind caught up instantly.

He'd seen through Cheng Shi's suspicion all along. And He'd used this silent drama to deliver the answer Cheng Shi wanted.

But Deceit was the surface of Void — the aggregate of all lies. Could His explanation truly be trusted?

Cheng Shi wasn't entirely certain. But at the very least, when it came to breaking the standoff, His actions and His stated position aligned.

A liar's intuition told him that the Fun God was worth trusting. But whether that intuition worked on a god...

'Sigh. Nothing to do but take it one step at a time.'

Cheng Shi let out a long exhale.

Today's harvest was enormous. He'd received countless revelations too staggering for words. But the most important thing was untying the knot Memory had personally tied — restoring his courage to draw closer to Void... no, closer to Deceit.

At least, until he understood his other Benefactor's true will, he couldn't be certain whether Fate was actually... ahem.

But on a positive note, Deceit had seemed sincere enough today. He didn't appear to be harming him. At most, He was using him.

"Using" here wasn't pejorative — merely a player moving pieces across the board with a view of the whole game. A piece couldn't resist and could only endure. But if one day, the piece also became a player...

Then two players walking the same road might very well cooperate — and make this great game of the universe a little more spectacular.

Cheng Shi could see it: his Benefactor was working toward exactly that. Because it seemed He hadn't found a single "god" among the other fifteen thrones willing to play alongside Him.

And as for today's audience — the one that untangled his heart — he had Memory to thank.

Had the opposing side not planted that inner demon, causing Deceit's "plan" to veer off course, it might have taken far longer before Cheng Shi could have learned any of this.

Of course, perhaps thanks were also due to Death. It may have been His gift of that forcibly bonded "complete" divinity that gave Cheng Shi the chance to "temporarily take a seat at the table."

Cheng Shi thought long and deeply. Only after he'd fully shaken free of the Origin's influence did he raise his head with a solemn expression and look into those joyful eyes.

In this moment, no more words were needed. A disheartened clown had returned, smiling once more, to the stage where he belonged.

He gazed at those eyes. His lips moved for a moment. As though he'd made some great resolution, he spoke with utter sincerity:

"What should I do?"

Those eyes rolled once and let out a snicker:

"A clown truly is a clown. Your ability to make people laugh is far stronger than your confidence."

"..."

Hearing this, every ounce of resolve Cheng Shi had just mustered instantly dispersed.

Seeing this, those eyes burst into hearty laughter once more:

"You overestimate yourself. There's nothing you can do.

Your role is player. So — just be an honest liar."

'Player... role...?'

Cheng Shi heard this and blinked. Then he raised an eyebrow — as though he understood.

...

Chapter 556: A Long Talk with Deceit (3)

"Benefactor..."

When Cheng Shi uttered these four syllables again, his heart was a storm of mixed emotions.

Deceit had lost some of its "divine" filter in his eyes — yet in return, his respect had only grown.

He didn't know where this strange, awkward sense of reverence came from, but the feeling was remarkably similar to what Old Jia had given him.

Like someone using lie upon lie to forge a shield against every external attack.

Of course, whether that shield was blocking harm for Cheng Shi or for the Fun God Himself still required careful study.

Cheng Shi fixed a complex gaze on those eyes and slowly raised his left hand. He showed the nail of his left pinkie finger to the god and spoke earnestly:

"I don't know if this was also part of Your plan, but in that last trial, I obtained..."

Before he could finish, the Fun God cut him off.

"Heh — that stinking beggar is generous, I'll give him that. But if you truly think He's merciful, you'd be an idiot."

???

'Leaving aside how I feel about Decay — "stinking beggar?" Is that... serious?'

'Wait — so Zhen Yi learned her trash-talk nicknaming from You?'

"..."

'But what does He mean? Decay isn't actually merciful?'

Cheng Shi furrowed his brow and sank into thought.

Indeed, His compassion hadn't felt like genuine compassion. He clearly had ulterior motives. In hindsight, Decay's behavior looked more like He'd taken the mercy He longed to receive from the Origin and projected it onto Cheng Shi — using measured benevolence to satisfy a craving that could never be fulfilled.

In other words, He was playing the role of a benefactor. By bestowing upon others the pity He himself couldn't receive, He soothed his own "wretchedness."

But the Fun God's meaning seemed to go deeper. So Cheng Shi blinked in confusion, waiting for further explanation.

Those eyes were in an uncommonly talkative mood today. They snickered:

"I know what you've guessed. You're not wrong — that stinking beggar truly does yearn to see Him. In fact, before Civilization arose, both Life's and Descent's worship of Him was utterly primitive and fanatical.

Just as humans of that era worshipped gods with feverish devotion, They too were fanatical toward \*Him.

But even if He was inspired by the Mother of Prosperity's self-destruction and found a new path toward \*Him, He didn't need to have a mere player wield the 'Faded' authority by proxy.

You are only a player. Under the Convention's constraints — even if the game could continue indefinitely, as you all assume — the most you'd ever do in your entire life is encounter a few more of His followers.

That degree of fading is utterly useless to a god. Yet He still granted you His power. Do you know why?"

Cheng Shi caught on immediately. His expression turned grave as he nodded: "Because I'm Void's... wanderer."

"Tch—

Darling. Just say darling.

An ordinary wanderer doesn't get this many gods watching."

"..."

"Memory was right — They can't figure out what I'm planning. So They each placed a bet on you, then sat back to wait.

And don't delude yourself into thinking I'll tell you what's going on. Hee~

Because even I don't know what I'm doing."

"..."

Cheng Shi so badly wanted to retort. He genuinely felt like a clown right now — one awkwardly contorting an uncoordinated body on stage for laughs. The only difference from other clowns was that this stage was handcrafted by the Fun God, and the audience below... were gods perched high upon Their divine thrones!

The gods couldn't understand what this performance was about. But that didn't stop Them from tossing a few coins onto the stage when the clown performed well.

At this thought, Cheng Shi's expression crumbled.

'Great. Now I really am a clown. The gods' clown!'

Deceit seemed to read what Cheng Shi was thinking. He laughed heartily, confirming the thought.

"Looks like that stinking beggar earned quite a bit in past eras. His tip is much more generous than old bones'."

"..."

'Wait — Benefactor, what do You mean by that?'

'That lord... is one of the speculators in the audience too?'

'That doesn't seem right. Death really does seem like a good boss.'

"Old bones is decent — just a bit too dull.

But being a good person doesn't mean having no ulterior motives. He's trying to decipher that new Corruption authority you 'presented' to Him. And He intends to use it to fish something out of the Sea of Desire — the very sea that once split Order!

Tch — sounds so noble and grand, but it's all just treasure-hunting.

Otherwise, did you think that bone ring on your hand fused all that broken divinity by magic?

It was fear!

The new authority related to fear gave old bones a fresh idea — using fear as a binding force to shackle together divinities that should never have been compatible.

Though that's the best he could manage. Different divinities inherently repel each other. That can't be changed."

Hearing this, Cheng Shi froze — then his eyes lit up.

"So that's why the gods want to fuse divinity?

It's because... the divinities bestowed by that existence are mutually incompatible. So the gods are trying to reverse-engineer fusion as a way to approach... that existence. Am I right, Benefactor?"

Those eyes raised their brows in unexpected surprise. A soft snicker followed:

"Getting smarter. Looks like you're not scared anymore."

"..."

'Stop mocking me. Can't I just be a clown in peace?'

Cheng Shi was numb. But he finally understood what all those Tower of Logic experiments he'd been through were actually about. Those Grand Scholars, under Truth's aegis, had been endlessly testing methods for fusing divinity, grafting faiths, and creating artificial deities.

They thought these experiments would elevate them to godhood. What they didn't realize was that behind the curtain, Truth was assimilating their methods — using nearly identical approaches to draw closer to \*Him!

So this was the gods' true purpose!

Every cause and effect They'd sown across the universe was for \*Him!

In that case, gods allied with the Fun God constituted the Convention's "Fear Faction," while gods like Truth and Decay represented the "Approach Faction." But even within the Approach Faction there were differences — some worshipped fanatically, others approached rationally.

Doing a rough headcount, the "Fear Faction" included...

Exactly one member.

Because nobody liked the Fun God. Even Fate — His sibling within Void — disagreed with Him.

'Truly tragic. So I'm not the only clown. There's an even bigger one.'

'As for who that is...'

Cheng Shi rubbed his nose, eyes drifting, not daring to make a sound.

...

Chapter 557: A Conversation Between Void

Those star-specked, spiral-spinning eyes regarded Cheng Shi with that half-smiling expression again. He seemed to see right through what Cheng Shi was thinking.

To avoid getting scolded, Cheng Shi hastily changed the subject.

"Benefactor, when Memory summoned me, He said 'Time will bring you the answer.' And indeed, Time did grant me a ring."

He raised his right hand and continued: "He also said this was the result of Your negotiations with Time. So — is it You who told Time to bring me the answer?"

A flicker of barely perceptible surprise passed through those eyes. Rather than answering the question, He replied with passive-aggressive flair:

"First Memory's favor, then Time's gift. I've never seen those two brothers pay such attention to a mortal.

Oh~ I see. So you're Existence's darling."

"..."

Cheng Shi's eager expression froze on his face. He twitched his lips awkwardly and slowly lowered his raised hand behind his back.

Those eyes giggled once, then suddenly turned serious:

"Time doesn't have the answer. The one who gave the answer was Fate!"

'?'

'Fate? How is Fate involved in this too? Aren't You and He at odds?'

Cheng Shi blinked in confusion. He furrowed his brow and pondered for a moment but couldn't make sense of it. When he looked up again, he noticed the spirals in those eyes were spinning at breakneck speed — clearly indicating that any further questions would only yield false answers.

Just as He'd said: He didn't want to share too much about what He was doing.

But Cheng Shi's head was bursting with questions. If this one couldn't be answered, he'd simply switch to another.

"Benefactor, I have another question. Though... it's still about Memory..."

Those eyes blinked and snickered: "Go ahead — Existence's darling."

"..." Cheng Shi nearly choked on the air. His lips twitched, cold sweat dripping, but he braved the passive-aggressive pressure and pressed on: "Since He doesn't like people smearing His Collection Hall, why does He grant His followers the power to alter history?"

This time, the Fun God answered cleanly and directly:

"Because Memory knows that Void's erosion of Existence is an unstoppable tide of the era. Since Existence is destined to be changed, that change naturally needs to contain Existence's will.

The same goes for Time — but He... forget it. You needn't worry about Him. He's very busy. Not enough time."

"..."

'Listen to that — Time doesn't have enough time.'

'So the irony winds have finally blown into the divine circle too!'

Having received some clarity, Cheng Shi furrowed his brow and organized his thoughts, gradually stitching together a new understanding of the gods.

Perhaps he'd been misunderstanding all along. No — every player in the Faith Game had been wrong. Their true will wasn't the surface-level meaning mortals perceived. It was rooted in countless essences connected to \*Him.

No wonder his sophistry always hit the mark. It wasn't because sophistry was effective — it was because his fortunate self had coincidentally, through this method, touched the primal will deep within Their hearts!

'So in the end... it all comes down to Fate...'

'That I've made it this far is probably thanks to this so-called predetermined destiny.'

'Praise be to Fate!'

Speaking of Fate, though... Cheng Shi frowned and thought of something else. Every other Path had three gods. Only Existence and Void had just two each. Why?

He had a feeling this question would go unanswered if asked directly. So his eyes darted, and he rephrased it.

"Benefactor, I'd like to ask — beyond the current sixteen gods on the divine thrones, where did... the other gods go?"

For example, the ring that lord bestowed on me contains a trace of Thundering's divinity.

I only know Thundering died at the hands of Order, but I don't know..."

"Heh — what, Death's darling wants to become Thundering's darling too?"

"..."

'Can we even still have a conversation, Benefactor?'

'Where are all these darlings coming from!'

'So many darlings and I haven't seen a single one — just more and more clowns, all wearing the same face...'

Cheng Shi pursed his lips, not daring to respond. Those eyes giggled again, voice turning cheerful once more.

"Hee~"

Knowing too much isn't good for you. Enough — this audience has gone on long enough. Getting bored. You're dismissed."

With that, the eyes began blinking, and a gale from the depths of the void swept in instantly. Cheng Shi froze, and before the wind reached him, he craned his neck and shouted desperately:

"Benefactor! One last question! One last question!"

I want to ask — do You... have a Herald?"

Those eyes watched Cheng Shi with supreme amusement, eyebrows arched sky-high. In the very moment Cheng Shi was helplessly blown away by the void wind, they answered with a mocking smile:

"Of course I do. My Herald — isn't that you, Lord Yu Xi?"

"!!!???"

Cheng Shi heard it — but immediately lost consciousness.

After the clown was blown from this region of void, another pair of eyes — also painted with stars and spirals — opened before the first pair. Unlike those previous eyes, this pair was utterly frigid, jarringly at odds with the surrounding atmosphere of mirth.

Fate had arrived. The moment He appeared, before He could even speak, Deceit beat Him to it:

"Oh? You're a god of Void, yet you reek of Existence.

What happened — did you get into a fight with one of those two brothers?

Not talking?

If you don't answer, I'll start guessing. Hmm... I'll guess it was Memory. He's more punchable than Time."

The cold eyes glanced sideways at Him — regarding this chattering sibling god of Void with neither joy nor sorrow:

"Why did you lie to him?"

Deceit's eyes rolled, stars flickering rapidly, as He laughed: "Where did I lie?"

"You've been lying the entire time.

I met with Memory. He said that after learning Time had summoned My follower, He decided to stop meddling in Void's affairs.

So — why did you impersonate Memory?"

"Hm?" The laughing eyes spun with surprise, then snickered. "Did I hear that right? You're a god of Void, yet you take an Existence god's word to suspect your own sister?"

Heh — I never expected Memory to be so skilled at throwing dirty water."

"Precisely because I am Void, I know His words may be true.

Existence indeed cannot understand Void. But I do understand.

It was I who saw destiny's predetermined path and chose him — not you.

You know full well that he represents the predetermined and will ultimately step into Void. So why are you still betting on him?"

"Oh? Am I not allowed to bet?"

The cold eyes glanced at Him without answering.

The laughing eyes snickered and pressed on:

"Then it seems I am allowed.

And if I can — why wouldn't I?

Besides, I am Void's surface. I wield Deceit's authority. Lying is the very will I champion. Why shouldn't I lie to him?

But what about you? I'd wager this 'darling of Fate' doesn't particularly enjoy your so-called predetermined destiny.

Otherwise, why would he play-act as my Herald to get closer to me — instead of getting closer to you?

You saw his future through destiny. What you don't realize is that in every timeline, he loathes that future.

How interesting. Does your darling know that you plan to sell him off when the era collapses?"

The cold eyes grew ever icier.

"That isn't selling. That is fate."

The laughing eyes snickered once more, mockery written in every line.

"Tch — so that's why he called you a whore. Hmm, I think he was right."

This was a devastating verbal critical hit. Yet Fate, remarkably, didn't strike back. He merely stared at Deceit with those frozen eyes and asked in a low voice:

"What is wrong with \*Him?"

"No — you're wrong. He is fine. He is perfect in every way.

It's me who's wrong.

Hee~

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Has at least one: me."

...

Chapter 559: Not a Gardener? Huh?

"It's a long story."

Cheng Shi trusted Big Cat. Or rather, in this entire Faith Game, the person he'd given the most trust to was Big Cat — because he knew she would never betray a friend's trust.

Even so, he didn't share the fact that he'd obtained the "Faded" authority. He merely gave a rough explanation of the last trial, saying he'd happened to guess Decay's true will and used that acknowledgment to strip away Nangong's faith.

Hong Lin didn't believe a word of it. She'd seen Cheng Shi pull off miracles before. She knew a trial involving Chosen Ones would never be simple — and certainly not as breezy as he made it sound.

So Cheng Shi must have cleared an extraordinarily brutal trial and poured his heart into saving a good girl.

'He is a good person!'

Even without witnessing that soul-stirring trial firsthand, Hong Lin was happy. She felt validated in her judgment of character.

"So that's what happened. She truly is lucky."

Cheng Shi blinked, sensing a hidden layer in those words but not dwelling on it. He asked directly:

"So our kind priest friend has become a gardener now?"

"A gardener?"

No. Rather than becoming a gardener who tends plants and preserves prosperity, I think she's better suited to be a fate weaver who mends others' destinies.

I saw her vision. I knew she was repaying a debt of gratitude. It moved me, so I recommended she take the path of Fate.

Nangong accepted. She was happy — because a certain fate weaver had given her a wonderful example to follow.

You know who I'm talking about, right, Cheng Shi?"

"..."

'Seriously?'

'This works?'

'So she ended up as a colleague? Great, great, great — this basically looks like I poached someone from Decay on behalf of my Benefactor.'

'Well, since Nangong's already been faded, that single-minded colossus obsessed with decay probably won't care about these faith headaches anymore.'

Cheng Shi smacked his lips with complicated feelings, unsure what to say. It was Hong Lin who gradually reined in her light laughter and suddenly turned serious.

"The good news ends here. Next comes the bad news.

Lin Xi... found his second faith."

'Lin Xi?'

'The Decay Chosen — the Plague Cardinal whose ID is "Rotten Wood?"'

Hong Lin's voice was heavy. Cheng Shi's heart lurched. "What faith?"

"Oblivion. He embraced Oblivion.

Being a fellow Descent faith made his offensive power even more devastating. I've done my best to hide our connection, but I still want to warn you — be careful of him. He and I don't exactly get along."

"..."

'Got it. Cover blown. Watch my back.'

That said, Cheng Shi thoughtfully looked at his left pinkie nail again. A Decay and Oblivion dual-faith follower, standing before him...

'Wouldn't that just leave... Oblivion?'

'No, no, no — can't fade him. If I fade him, I'd face a pure Oblivion follower. But if I don't fade him, he would have to face a Decay "Herald" wielding the "Faded" authority!'

'And that Herald... is me!'

Thinking it through... 'Tsk, I'm kind of eager to run into this "Rotten Wood" now.'

'If I dealt with this "Rotten Wood" in some trial, would Big Cat be shocked enough to literally bristle?'

"Alright, I'll keep that in mind." Cheng Shi said this aloud while quietly scheming internally.

Hong Lin acknowledged with a "Mm" and continued:

"The pace of faith fusion seems to be accelerating lately. I don't know if it's because of Her... because of Her fall speeding up the gods' movements, but many players — even those who haven't stepped onto a new path — have at least found a lead.

Keep in mind, just a week ago, even some Chosen Ones had no leads on a second faith."

'The gods' will had definitely shifted because of Prosperity's self-destruction, but where exactly that shift led was still unclear.'

Cheng Shi frowned and said nothing, patiently listening on.

"You know Mo Li, right?"

"Hm?" Cheng Shi blinked. 'That guy just parted ways with me, and there's already new drama?'

"Yeah, I know him. Why?"

"Apparently, he's looking to approach War. But whether that's true, I can't say for certain."

'War?'

'What?'

'An Order follower going for War?'

'Has he given up on maintaining order?'

'What — he needs one hand holding the codex and the other swinging a big stick, clubbing anyone who breaks the rules?'

Cheng Shi's expression turned peculiar. He asked casually: "According to whom?"

Hong Lin's reply was blunt and unhesitating.

"Li Jingming. I ran into him again. Still doggedly pursuing his Memory path.

But he's changed too. Maybe it's from Deceit's influence — he's started trying to impersonate other people.

He also said he recently obtained a small portion of 0221's memories. You know 0221, right? Truth's Chosen."

Cheng Shi's gaze sharpened. He nodded in confirmation.

This mysterious Truth Chosen had an exceptionally scant information footprint across all the channels. For a mage — especially a Truth mage — that was highly abnormal. Suspiciously mysterious.

"0221 is conducting slice experiments. When I heard this, I was shocked but not surprised — it's very Truth, after all.

But he doesn't seem to be doing only slice experiments. He's apparently trying to replicate every experiment the Tower of Logic has ever conducted — it's just that the slice experiment has been the most successful.

Li Jingming theorizes this madman might not be the original. '0221' might literally be his slice number. But there's no hard proof yet.

I agree with that theory, personally. Those Truth and Folly types can't be measured by normal human standards. What do you think, Cheng Shi?"

Cheng Shi smiled. Rather than answering Hong Lin's question, he countered:

"I'm not particularly curious about some O221. What I'm curious about is what earth-shattering intel you traded to get all this from the Dragon King. Don't tell me you told him you inherited Prosperity's authority?"

"Tch — do I look that stupid?"

"..."

"I just told him the truth. I said Prosperity had fallen."

"?" Cheng Shi's eyebrow rose. 'Clever girl!'

This news would spread like wildfire after that Mediocre Person Society gathering. By telling Li Jingming now, Big Cat had exploited a time gap to freeload his intel.

'Smooth move!'

But wait — how did she know Prosperity's news would spread quickly?

'She's got something.'

Cheng Shi grinned, praising her as he went: "Impressive. Nice time gap play. Was the Dragon King... shocked?"

"Not really. He seemed to already know. I felt like someone had told him, but he traded intel with me anyway."

"..." Cheng Shi froze. He opened his mouth, sighed, and asked: "Then why did you suddenly decide to trade this with him?"

"I figured there was no way to hide it from these sharp people. Better to trade early for something useful."

"..." 'That's reasonably smart, actually.'

Cheng Shi blinked: "So how did you explain the source?"

"I pinned it on Zhen Yi. Let that jinx take the fall. She's got so many lice she's stopped itching."

'Hiss—'

'Is this what a Fate follower with Good Fortune looks like? Casually throwing someone under the bus while perfectly closing the information loop?'

'The Mediocre Person Society's intel was connected to Zhen Yi anyway!'

'Fine, fine, fine. You win. You always win.'

Cheng Shi twitched his lips and said nothing more.

Silence fell over the phone line. On the other end, Hong Lin seemed deep in thought. After a long while, she finally spoke again:

"What about you, Cheng Shi? Any news on your end?"

Cheng Shi pondered briefly, then remembered there was still one unresolved matter. He smiled:

"The Decay number one is too tough to tackle. Let's steer clear. But, Hong Lin — have you ever thought about making a move on the Decay number two?"

"Number two? Yu Mu?" Hong Lin froze, then gave a half-smile. "What — another late-night hit?"

"..." 'Sis, I'm sorry. It was just a slip of the tongue from overthinking.' Cheng Shi coughed awkwardly and quickly pivoted: "Doesn't have to be late at night. Whenever you want. Just say the word, and I'll deliver him to you, gift-wrapped."

"?"

'You — a priest — are going to tie up a number-two-ranked hunter and deliver him to me?'

Hong Lin fell silent. After a long pause, she murmured: "Are you serious?"

"Absolutely. Dead serious. After all, I never lie."

...

Chapter 560: Squ... Old Zhang?!!

"Deal!

As long as you can restrain him, leave the rest to me."

Cheng Shi grinned: "You've had your eye on him for a while, haven't you? Got a plan?"

"Mm. A hunter's five senses are sharper than any other class, especially one at Yu Mu's score level — his perception is terrifyingly acute.

I don't exactly lack these things, but having another chess piece that can sense the environment is never a bad thing."

"Sounds like you're planning to turn him into a puppet?"

"More or less. Prosperity's treasury has some soul contracts with effects so bizarre even I can't stand looking at them. I haven't tried them yet — perfect test subject.

Speaking of which, Cheng Shi — hurry up and initiate a prayer trial. Come pick up your stuff."

'My stuff?'

'What stuff?'

Cheng Shi blinked, then immediately remembered. Before stumbling into that Birth trial, he'd originally been planning a Prosperity prayer trial to pick up a spirit-enhancing item from Big Cat.

After all the twists and turns, he'd now completed two trials — and still hadn't collected the item.

"..."

Cheng Shi laughed bitterly, then nodded: "Alright, I'll make the prayer soon. Actually — join me. I want to take you somewhere to introduce you to an interesting new friend."

"Interesting new friend?" Hong Lin raised an eyebrow in surprise. "Sounds like this person has a story?"

'Story?'

'If "giving birth to yourself from yourself" counts as a story and not an accident, then yes — definitely a story.'

"You'll see when we get there.

Oh, and — let me ask about someone. Have you heard of a player called Lin Renyu?"

Hong Lin chuckled over the phone and answered at once: "Him? What — did you run into him?"

"So you do know him. Didn't run into him personally — heard the name from someone else. Curious what kind of person he is."

"A Dissonance Zitherist who didn't make the top ten, but is fairly well-known."

'A Dissonance Zitherist!'

'Chaos!'

'Just as expected — this Lin Renyu, mentioned by Da Yi, was also one of Chaos's people.'

'Ha — so the clues pointing to the Grand Marshal being a Chaos follower were buried in these breadcrumbs all along. The fisherman Hu Xuan killed, the Lin Renyu who Da Yi talked about constantly, and then Da Yi himself posing as a Gap Light Iron Thorn... all three were high-scoring Chaos players. That campfire gathering of four was nothing less than a Chaos night meeting.'

'And yet, even if everyone's identity was known, under Chaos's obfuscation, nobody could piece together the clues.'

'Chaos really plays a dazzling game.'

Cheng Shi clicked his tongue in admiration and asked: "From your tone, this 'fame' doesn't sound too positive. Care to elaborate?"

Hong Lin laughed heartily:

"His notoriety came from the Prisoner.

Originally, this guy was low-profile — liked impersonating others. Then he got matched with the Prisoner, who saw through the disguise.

Annoying as the Prisoner was, you have to admit — Silence followers really are masters of observation. He cracked Lin Renyu's identity, then turned the tables by impersonating him instead. He caused mass chaos in Katouting, the Grand Tribunal's capital, to the point where they literally enacted a law putting a bounty on this Dissonance Zitherist.

Coincidentally, there was a Memory follower in that trial too. Under the Prisoner's coercion, that Memory believer even wrote this new law into history...

As for what happened after — you can probably guess. Lin Renyu killed the Memory follower in a rage, but couldn't kill the Prisoner. So from then on, he kept wreaking havoc under the Prisoner's name.

He's quite sharp. Even if he's not among the absolute peak players, you'd want to be careful if you ran into him."

"..."

'A Dissonance Zitherist who likes causing trouble under "the Prisoner's" name?'

'What?'

'Could it be... him?'

Cheng Shi's expression turned extraordinarily complex. The more he thought about it, the more certain he became. He couldn't help but burst out laughing.

Hong Lin heard the laughter and asked in surprise: "What?"

"Nothing. No need to be careful anymore. You'll never run into him again."

"?" Hong Lin froze, unable to process this. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing much. I think I saw him once. He was killed — by someone very powerful. As for who killed him... I didn't get a clear look."

"Oh, I see. And this very powerful person — what's their surname? Same as yours?"

"..." 'Sis, it's kind of cute when you're a bit dim sometimes. Don't be too smart.'

Cheng Shi went numb. He felt he'd gotten too excited and said too much. But it wasn't worth fretting over — so much time had passed, and with the effects of the Floating Dream of the Memory Sea, probably nobody knew who'd killed that Dissonance Zitherist.

Besides, even if someone found out, what could they do? The killer was no longer just a fate weaver. He was also Lord Ultraman — Chaos's Herald, Lord Ultraman!

"Your laugh sounds so smug. Anyway, that's about all the news I've got. It's currently 2:26 — let's sync up. At exactly 3:00, I'll prayer on the dot. The prayer content will be the Prosperity incantation plus a request for a simple trial where I encounter you. Don't stand me up, Cheng Shi. I'm looking forward to meeting this new friend."

With that, Big Cat hung up cleanly.

Cheng Shi smiled at the disconnected phone. He had a feeling the meeting between Big Cat and Aph Ros would spark something new.

His decision to bring Big Cat to meet the dual Herald wasn't solely about dealing with Yu Mu. Simply disposing of one player wasn't worth connecting Big Cat — who'd inherited Prosperity's authority — with an information pipeline. This trip was primarily about finding Big Cat an advisor.

At Big Cat's level, she encountered plenty of secrets, but her questions would multiply just as fast. She couldn't constantly consult a true god, and no god would spare time to answer her queries. So finding her an insider with a similar status — an intelligence window — was crucial.

And Aph Ros, as a temporary "ally," was certainly up to the "job."

Of course, if other options existed, Cheng Shi would've considered them. But the problem was his network of contacts only extended to one prisoner locked up by Time. Beyond that, he had no other Herald "friends."

Hu Xuan was half of one, but her accumulated knowledge was even less than the original Big Cat's.

So meeting Aph Ros was a move born of necessity.

'Sigh — still not enough "friends" ...'

'Plenty of Life friends already. Descent's people are hard to approach. Chaos crew are all lunatics. Thinking it through, only Civilization has a few friend slots to spare.'

'But the question is...'

'How come I've barely heard of any servant gods from Civilization?'

'Truly strange. Next time I see Aph Ros, I should definitely ask about this.'

Just as he was pondering, new changes appeared on the rooftop before Cheng Shi.

A small door made of interlocking fine bones suddenly opened in the ink-dark sky. Before long, a pale little skull came bouncing out, tumbling onto the ground. It rolled several times before finally righting itself, then bounced about, fixing a pair of hollow eye sockets on everything around it in careful examination.

The sight left Cheng Shi dumbfounded.

'Wait — more? That lord just summoned me!'

'And how come this little bone servant looks so... lively? Does it have consciousness?'

Just as Cheng Shi was puzzling over what message this skull might be delivering, it spoke up with a dead-serious demeanor:

"Standing high may give you a far view, but you also risk being blown over by the wind. Cheng Shi, why do you live in such an unsteady place?"

"!!!"

Cheng Shi was blown away. He stared at the skull before him in sheer disbelief, jaw dropping:

"Squ... Old Zhang?"

You got a facelift? How did your eyes get so big?"

"?"

Hearing this, the little skull instantly stopped bouncing.

...