

## The Gods 801

Chapter 801: Share... Birth's... Authority?

"Then please forgive my bluntness, great God of Birth. I wish to inquire about a certain existence."

"Who —"

"Origin!"

The instant the word left his mouth, a foul wind erupted through the Void. That terrifying Divine Pillar lashed directly toward him, coiling around the cold-sweat-soaked Cheng Shi in spiraling loops, erecting a wall of Birth too blinding to look at.

Gazing at the countless life templates stitched together before him, Cheng Shi couldn't help thinking that this was what O221 and Zangier had been trying to create with their "Aberrant Mother Tree."

It seemed Zangier truly had studied Birth extensively.

But there was no time to think about Zangier now. Cheng Shi had paid a price for his probing — though it was only weak knees. She didn't seem intent on attacking directly, and She hadn't even shown surprise that he knew Origin's name.

"Rea — son —"

'A reason?'

'She isn't refusing me!'

Cheng Shi's eyes blazed with excitement. He'd gambled correctly after all.

Birth truly was laissez-faire about Origin. She could even tolerate a mortal discussing the "Creator" in Her presence!

This was good. It meant today might actually yield something!

His heart surged with heat.

Of course, his real reason for coming couldn't be spoken aloud. Having the nerve to gamble with his life didn't mean he actually wanted to die. Thankfully, Cheng Shi had rehearsed this. He raised his head with an air of even greater "reverence."

"Great God of Birth, I have learned terrifying things from other sources. I not only know His divine name, but I've also discovered that one of my Benefactors..."

He paused.

He'd been about to say it was Chaos who was distancing Himself from Origin, and that he'd come to ask what kind of existence Origin truly was. After all, Chaos had abandoned chaos to play the part of Order — which, in a sense, wasn't even a lie.

He'd chosen to ask Birth because both Aph Ros and Hu Xuan had repeatedly described their Benefactor's mercy and tolerance, making him believe this compassionate God of Birth might be willing to grant him an answer.

This way, Cheng Shi could offer a plausible excuse while simultaneously flattering his two allies — killing two birds with one stone.

What he hadn't expected was that, at the very moment he was about to say "Chaos," he was forcibly interrupted. Then another divine name escaped his lips entirely beyond his control:

"Deceit!"

One of my Benefactors — Deceit — is distancing Himself from Him!

This fills me with deep unease. I've come specifically to seek answers, hoping that You — merciful and compassionate toward all living beings — might grant me clarity, so that I may counsel my Benefactor and guide Him back to the right path."

The moment he finished, the Divine Pillar went still. So did Cheng Shi.

A single bead of cold sweat rolled from his forehead, traced down the ridge of his nose, grazed the corner of his mouth, then dripped from his chin into his palm. The icy sensation jolted Cheng Shi awake. He immediately lowered his head, eyes wide with horror, and began mentally screaming at Brother Mouth:

'Fool's Lips! Whose damn side are you on?!'

'You think this is the time for jokes?!'

'If you want to play traitor, don't drag me into it! You just outed the Fun God — what am I supposed to do now? I'm his—'

Wait. Wait.

Why had Brother Mouth blurted out the Fun God's name without any warning?

It was, ultimately, the Fun God's creation. It couldn't possibly be openly sabotaging its own master.

But if it wasn't sabotage, then why...

Hmm?

The Fun God was here?!

!!!

Cheng Shi's brow furrowed sharply. He suddenly recalled how Brother Mouth had previously collaborated with the Fun God to accept Fate's fusion with Time on his behalf. The sensation was so eerily similar that a hypothesis formed instantly:

Had the Fun God already arrived?!

Had He come to protect him, or — like Cheng Shi himself — had He identified Birth as the same breakthrough point?

The thought had barely formed when the limb-entwined Divine Pillar snapped back and cracked like a whip against the Void above Cheng Shi's head.

Crack —

The Void shattered. Above Cheng Shi, the underlying canvas of nothingness began to show through, and there, within that boundless nothingness — within the kaleidoscopic, phantasmagoric flow of Mockery and Jeering — a pair of star-bright eyes with dramatically upturned corners gazed down with keen interest, drinking in the scene below. Peals of side-splitting laughter echoed through the emptiness.

Deceit!

He had been here all along.

Seeing his Benefactor reveal Himself, Cheng Shi felt no delight — only alarm. He ducked his head, playing ostrich.

He hadn't forgotten that his self-initiated audience with Birth was partly a test of the Fun God. Now, being caught red-handed by his own Benefactor, his mind was already in full crisis-mode, furiously brainstorming excuses.

But Deceit's sarcasm was far faster than the Clown's cogitation.

"Well, well, well — let me see which little backstabber is paying court to someone else's Benefactor?"

Oh? It's the Clown.

What's this — surely the Clown hasn't come to Birth hoping to steal Her authority, carry it back as an offering to his own Benefactor, and then indulge in a universe-defying 'blasphemous' romp?"

"..."

Cheng Shi's eyelid hammered. Cold sweat drenched his back.

"Silence means consent." Those eyes pressed relentlessly.

Having no choice, Cheng Shi tried to weasel his way out:

"Yes!"

!!??

"Heh, Cheng Shi, Cheng Shi — honest as always.

But I must remind you: humans and gods cannot share Birth's authority.

So stop dreaming, Clown.

Though I will pass your little notion along to your Benefactor Fate.

Heeheehee~

No wonder you blaspheme Her at every turn — it was all to push Her tolerance, to test Her boundaries, so that by the time She has nowhere left to retreat, you can finally bare your wolfish ambitions.

Who'd have guessed — your 'desires' are quite something!"

"..."

'Excuse me???'

'May I please ask a question?!

'Benefactor, are You and Brother Mouth running a honey trap on me right now?!'

'How did Fate even get dragged into this?'

'When did I ever want to blaspheme Fate?!'

"..."

'Fine, I admit that I have, on occasion — rarely — accidentally — unintentionally — blasphemed Her. A few times... But how does that become "testing" Her? I—'

'Forget it. What's the point of arguing with the Fun God? Does it work?'

'No.'

So Cheng Shi fell silent and resigned himself to lying there, accepting the mockery.

But in the lull between human and god's wordless stare, the "mistress of this domain" — Birth — suddenly spoke. And the moment Her voice rang out, the entire expanse of nothingness fell into absolute silence.

"Hu — mans — and — gods —

may — share — My — au — tho — ri — ty —"

"..."

"..."

Even the Fun God froze at that. He blinked, cast a glance at the abstract Divine Pillar, and then burst into laughter so brilliant the stars flashed and the Void overflowed with color.

"Ha ha ha ha! Now that's interesting — truly fascinating.

Say, Big Sis, You're so adorable — are You trying to make me die laughing so You can inherit my authority?"

The instant the words landed, Birth's Divine Pillar snapped out like a whip again, swatting those convulsing eyes clean across the Void.

"..."

Watching this scene, Cheng Shi decided he wasn't witnessing an audience with a god. He was watching a divine circus.

And naturally, he had a cameo role in that circus — the funniest clown in the whole troupe.

I, Cheng Shi. The Clown.

Renowned across the universe.

...

Chapter 802: This Is Birth

Moments later, those eyes reappeared above the Clown's head.

The returning deity said nothing — just hovered there, stifling laughter, watching Cheng Shi unblinkingly. The unwavering gaze made Cheng Shi's scalp prickle.

Birth's Divine Pillar, seeing the shameless intruder refuse to leave, ignored Him entirely and turned back to Cheng Shi.

"Any — thing — else —"

Cheng Shi opened his mouth, but then a thought struck him. Lightning-fast, he clapped a hand over his own lips — terrified that the Fool's Lips would backstab him again and send whatever dignity he had left plummeting in front of two deities.

Not that he had much dignity left at this point.

He kept silent, so his Benefactor spoke for him.

"Listen here, Big Sis — the Clown's made himself perfectly clear. He wants to know who Origin really is. How can You just pretend You didn't hear?"

To be honest, I'm equally curious. After all, You're the first seed He planted with His own hand — the first true god He personally named. You know far more than the rest of us younger siblings who've only heard His voice and never seen His face. So won't You enlighten me as well?"

!!!

Just those few words from the Fun God made Cheng Shi feel that today's humiliation had been entirely worth it.

But this scrap of information squeezed from between the lines was nowhere near enough to satisfy the Clown's curiosity. He snapped his head up to stare at the Divine Pillar, his face a portrait of utterly genuine, zero-pretense desire for knowledge. This time, not a single cell of his expression was acting — it was one hundred percent hunger and anticipation.

Birth... fell silent for a moment. Then the Divine Pillar's movements gradually slowed.

"You — don't — like — Him —

Why — want — to — know —"

"Heeheehee~

That's a strange thing to say. What if You tell me, and I have a change of heart? Then wouldn't I like Him?"

"..."

Birth fell silent again — a longer silence this time, one that stretched so far Cheng Shi felt they'd reached an impasse. Then She moved.

The colossal Divine Pillar suddenly deconstructed itself, exploding above Cheng Shi's head into countless Life Marker Boards that spread through the Void in row after row, layer upon layer.

Cheng Shi's eyes flew wide. This was the first time he'd learned the Divine Pillar could even be disassembled!

But that was only the beginning. The neatly arrayed Life Marker Boards began spinning at blinding speed, and in the time it took to blink, they whirled through the Void like a revolving lantern turned into a wheel.

Simultaneously, voices in the languages of ten thousand races and a hundred million lives hummed like whispered hymns within the spinning wheel of life, converging in the Void into a single song — saturated with an overwhelmingly dense Life essence — that radiated outward in all directions.

Cheng Shi had caught only a single syllable of that melody, inhaled only a single wisp of that tide, and his consciousness already blurred. He felt his perspective rising without limit — climbing past the Fun God, peeling away from the Void, piercing through the nothingness — until he arrived in...

An expanse of pitch-black desolation.

He opened his eyes. A gas cluster that looked remarkably like a seed was drifting through the endless darkness. Before long, that "seed" began to sprout, grow, spread, and expand — except that none of these stages resembled a normal seed pushing out branches. Instead, countless grotesque life-forms were propagating at geometric rates, one after another, using their lives to "measure" this space-time.

These organisms that had germinated from the "seed" were each stranger than the last, but they shared one universal trait: nearly every individual bristled with innumerable "feelers." Only with these could they faster perceive their world, more efficiently explore the unknown beyond.

And as "time" flowed on, something resembling civilization began to emerge among these species. No — civilization wasn't quite the right word. They hadn't produced culture. What they'd produced was... twisted faith.

They began worshipping certain totems, symbols, and icons. Yet because every one of the countless tribes worshipped something different, it was difficult to say they shared a single unified faith.

What could be said with certainty was that regardless of tribe, every object of worship was a spiritual totem tied to rapid reproduction.

Most of these totems, symbols, and icons were things the Clown had never seen. But the handful he did recognize — every single one had appeared within the Divine Pillar he'd just been looking at!

At the sight, understanding crashed through Cheng Shi's mind like a thunderclap.

The Fun God had once said that the Paths of Fate were tied to the development of life and civilization. What he was witnessing now was almost certainly the untold history of Life's earliest beginning — the very moment Birth's "children" first came into being.

She seemed to be using this method to rewind time to an age mortals could never look back upon!

So this was why She was called the prelude of Life?!

She represented the dawn of the universe?

Cheng Shi was stupefied. He held his breath, focusing every fiber of his being, terrified of missing a single detail. But the images before him accelerated as if someone had pressed fast-forward — faster and faster, blurrier and blurrier — until, a few heartbeats later, these life-forms had carpeted every inch of space in an overwhelming blanket.

It looked as though Prosperity was about to arrive.

But at that very moment, the image went dark. Cheng Shi's vision plunged into silence.

"?"

'What happened? Why did it stop?'

Cheng Shi furrowed his brow, not daring to ask aloud. He squinted, straining his eyes to their absolute limit, trying to determine whether the darkness before him was truly darkness — or whether he'd simply failed to perceive the next stage of evolution.

And then, while he was looking in every direction, a voice he had never heard before resonated inside his mind.

It was at once intimate and remote. Every syllable seemed to vibrate in harmony with his soul. Every tonal shift felt like a fracturing consciousness that had veered off course. His field of vision bloomed with the voice, awash in color — as though every star in the universe was rising together, yet simultaneously as though all of creation was winking out. When the voice swelled, the cosmos blazed; when it faded, the cosmos dimmed...

For a moment, Cheng Shi couldn't tell whether he was hearing a sound or whether the synaesthesia came from watching the universe itself transform.

But soon he was certain it wasn't synesthesia. It was a voice. Because he distinctly heard a single sentence:

"This is Birth — the prelude of life, the... origin of all things."

In that instant, thunder detonated inside Cheng Shi's skull, ten thousand thoughts howling like a gale.

His mind went blank. It was a long time before the static cleared.

He was yanked out by an immense force, returned to the Void. And when he steadied himself once more, gazing into those eyes — equally solemn now — every pore on Cheng Shi's body was slick with cold sweat, his heart hammering like a war drum.

Origin!!!

The source of that voice had absolutely been Origin!

Birth seemed to have skipped the latter two phases of Life's journey entirely, projecting straight to the curtain fall of the first era for Cheng Shi to witness.

But He...

He had named a true god with nothing more than a single sentence?

So casually, so whimsically — He could "consecrate" a concentration of faith into a deity? If that was all it took, could the gods truly be called gods? Or rather — was He the only one who deserved to be called a god?!

As Cheng Shi reeled in shock, the eyes above let out a soft chuckle.

"So it turns out even You haven't seen Him, Big Sis."

"Seen — or — not — seen —

What — dif — fer — ence — does — it — make —"

"Oh, it makes a very big difference. If even You haven't seen Him...

Heeheehee~"

The Fun God's eye corners climbed ever higher, His tone growing more and more playful.

"Who knows whether He actually...

exists?"

...

Chapter 803: It's Your Turn to Perform, Clown

Honestly, when Cheng Shi heard that final sentence, it scared him so badly he shivered.

In all of creation, the only being brazen enough to question Origin's existence in front of another true god was the Fun God. No one else would dream of it.

Still, bold as the Fun God was, the challenge genuinely puzzled Cheng Shi.

Whether Origin was the Creator who had fashioned everything in the universe, or the conductor of the so-called Slice Universe experiment, He was undeniably a confirmed existence. So what did the Fun God mean by "doesn't exist"?

Cheng Shi didn't dare ask — especially not in front of Birth. He hadn't forgotten his purpose: he was here to petition a god. Birth had generously unveiled the history She'd witnessed before his very eyes. Granted, the privilege had piggybacked on the Fun God's presence, but you couldn't eat somebody's cooking and then flip their table for dessert.

Judging by Her reaction, Birth was unquestionably an "Approach Faction" deity — just one whose approach wasn't nearly as urgent as others.

In that moment, Cheng Shi felt Her method of drawing near to Origin bore a striking resemblance to how Hu Xuan drew near to Her. Devout? Absolutely. Frenzied? Not quite.

She and Hu Xuan were both steadfastly practicing Birth's will, unmoved by anything external.

No wonder Birth had favored Hu Xuan — She clearly preferred lives whose will mirrored Her own.

Of course, Birth was "fundamentally" still insane — the insanity simply expressed itself through world-view-shattering ethical arrangements and jaw-dropping reproductive capacity.

"Speak — not — reck — less — ly —"

The Divine Pillar began to sway once more, though She didn't seem angry. If anything, She resembled a gentle elder gently admonishing a junior.

The impression reminded Cheng Shi of the Tower of Logic's assessment of Birth: stable.

And She truly was.

"I said no such thing. Big Sis, what did You hear?"

Someone dared question Origin? Who?!

Was it you?

You there — Clown!"

Those eyes brimmed with mischief as they dropped to gaze at His follower. As for Cheng Shi — inexplicably saddled with a colossal blame —

He gave up resisting.

Normally he might have nodded along with his Benefactor, letting Him enjoy a few more laughs. But today, whoever shouldered this blame was going to die. He didn't dare move a muscle.

So the helpless Clown could only lower his eyes, nose to heart, heart to void, and sink into contemplation.

This was not the outcome Deceit desired. After three idle turns of those star-bright eyes, a soft chuckle slipped out, and He spoke again.

"Oh yes — didn't you say that once you understood Him, you'd steer me back onto the right track?"

Well, here I am, off the rails. So where, pray tell...

is the right track?"

"..."

'Silence is tonight's Clown.'

Cheng Shi had learned his lesson. In this arena where any word might be a landmine — and where Brother Mouth might backstab him at any instant — he figured that staying mute could deflect most interrogations. But this couldn't go on forever, so he was already crafting his exit lines.

The eyes, however, clearly had no intention of letting him off the hook. Seeing Cheng Shi remain mute, they scoffed.

"This look of yours — you've copied that mute's routine down to the last detail.

What, learned all these secrets and now you're too scared to talk?

Fine, since you won't speak, I'll speak for you.

Getting me back on the right track is actually quite simple. Right now, my path runs opposite to Big Sis's. So all you'd have to do is align our two directions, and I would be...

right back on track. Isn't that right?"

'Wrong!'

'Dead wrong!'

Before the Fun God had even finished, Cheng Shi was silently curling his lip. 'I know You too well, Benefactor.'

'Your idea of "aligning directions" is to drag Birth onto Your reverse course, isn't it? Get Her to walk away from Origin right alongside You — that's Your definition of "the right track," isn't it!'

'So this "right track" of Yours is relative, is that it?'

'I, as Your follower, know Your will inside and out. If I fell for this at a moment like this, I wouldn't deserve to call myself a liar.'

'Watch — I just have to not respond. Easy.'

"Right."

"..."

Cheng Shi's entire body went rigid. His spine locked. The light drained from his eyes.

'It's happened again. We have a traitor in our midst.'

"Heeheehee~"

The Clown really does have a mind of his own. Well then — let the course correction begin.

If I recall, Time yielded some strange little talent to you when She submitted to Fate. Hmm — I believe that if used on Big Sis, it might help Her... see her situation in a new light.

So...

Big Sis — care to give it a try?"

"!!!"

Before Birth could respond, Cheng Shi froze first.

'Strange talent — what was that?'

'Time Deduction?'

'Wait, what? The Fun God wants me to use Time Deduction on Birth?!'

'Use a fusion talent on an actual god?!'

'Is that even possible?!'

Cheng Shi was stunned — but the next instant, his pulse ignited. He snapped his head up to stare at those eyes, flashes of excitement streaking through his own, a torrent of silent questions crashing through his mind:

'Benefactor, You want me to have a conversation with a Birth from another timeline?!'

'Are You serious?'

'And could those different timelines not merely span different times, but different slice universes entirely?'

'You want to expose that truth before Birth's eyes, to show Her the reality and drag Her into the Fear Faction's camp?'

'And if I actually do this, will my safety be guaranteed?!'

Although the concept of the "Slice Universe" was something Cheng Shi had conceived on his own, his meaning right now was crystal clear — and Deceit could see straight through it. Those eyes blinked once in confirmation.

!!!

Now Cheng Shi was fired up.

Think about it: under the Benefactor's protection, in a position of absolute safety, initiating a dialogue with the Birth of another slice universe — what would you even call that? It was nothing less than a full-blown audience with an "Outer God"!

In all the universe, who else would ever have that chance?

The Clown was instantly electrified. His blazing gaze locked onto the slightly puzzled Divine Pillar, eyes brimming with anticipation — though a healthy measure of fear still lingered across his face.

He had to choose his words carefully, to disguise the Fun God's — and his own — true motives.

"Great God of Birth, my Benefactor means to say that this universe is vast — perhaps far vaster than You imagine. Of course, all of this should be the result of Time's deduction."

Here, Cheng Shi silently added: 'As for how many different Times' deductions are involved — well, that's anyone's guess.'

"This humble Clown merely collected a few sparks of divine power from the collision of Time and Fate, granting himself a chance to glimpse the scenery beyond the universe. Given that You are my Benefactor's elder... Ahem — his senior, propriety dictates that You should be the first, ahead of even my Benefactor and myself, to explore the mysteries within.

Would You be interested?"

The instant he finished, those eyes slid a half-amused glance his way.

"You certainly have a silver tongue."

Then, pivoting to face the Divine Pillar, the Fun God giggled.

"Heeheehee~"

Big Sis, why so quiet? You're not...

scared, are you?"

...

Chapter 804: The Conversation Between Deceit and Birth

...

"So this is the reason — for your fear —"

The Divine Pillar cracked against the Void like a whip, snapping sharply. It was also the first time a god had directly called out Deceit's true feelings.

The spirals within those eyes began spinning madly. After a moment, He laughed.

"Fear? Who said anything about fear? This is just called being prudent."

"..."

'Another day, another casualty for the "prudent" brand.'

Cheng Shi rolled his eyes but didn't dare comment.

"Whether fear exists or not — lies in your own heart —

But I too am curious —

Come —

Let Me glimpse what else exists — beyond this universe —"

That single word — "Come" — nearly scared Cheng Shi to death. But the words that followed resurrected the Clown, sending his heart racing with excitement.

"You agree?!"

Then — Benefactor — what should I do?"

"Tch —

How would I know how to use a talent bestowed by Time?

You don't need to perform devotion for me right now. What kind of follower I've got — as his Benefactor, I know perfectly well.

Do your job. Make it quick.

Don't force me to charge you with dereliction."

"..." 'Since when is asking for instructions a crime?'

Cheng Shi pursed his lips, muttered an "oh," and slowly raised his hand to activate the talent against that grotesque Divine Pillar.

It was his first time targeting a true god. The sensation was profoundly abstract and disorienting — the Clown swallowed several times before he could bring himself to do it.

Fortunately, a gust of wind seeping from the nothingness "reminded" him. He startled and fired off Time Deduction.

The instant the Time-ripple wavefront detonated against Birth, a laugh rang across the universe. Then — whoosh — both Birth and Deceit vanished from Cheng Shi's sight simultaneously.

Only a lingering giggle echoed endlessly through the Void:

"Heeheehee~"

Time is such a miser. She thought that by placing what I wanted inside the Clown, I wouldn't be able to use it?

How funny.

Everything the Clown has is mine."

"?"

While that was technically true, still...

'Benefactor! What happened to me talking to the Outer God Birth?!'

'How come it turned into a private chat between You two?!'

'So that's what You meant by "absolute safety," huh!'

Staring at the now-placid Void, all Cheng Shi could do was grumble internally. No words came.

And while the Clown stood there speechless, on the other side, the conversation had begun.

...

In the limitless pitch-black expanse — within the cracks of Existence beyond the Void.

A pair of star-bright eyes snapped open, draping the distant, churning presence in brilliant color.

In that instant, the endless Abyss of Existence — the same one that had once contained the Hero of Today and the Hawk Eye Scout — suddenly transformed, becoming a place uncannily similar to Mockery and Jeering.

So Deceit hadn't created that pocket of existence deep within nothingness just for entertainment. He'd been scheming all along — and now, His scheme finally bore fruit.

The crack of Existence!

He had threaded Mockery and Jeering — that river of near-Existence — all the way to this point: to an aperture in Existence itself, located outside His own universe.

From now on, He would no longer need to "break out" through the power of Time in Cheng Shi's hands. He had punched open a gate in the wall that no god was meant to scale — a gate belonging exclusively to Void.

"Tch —

Existence — nothing special."

No sooner had the words faded than another Divine Pillar appeared before those eyes — one strung with countless Life Marker Boards.

Birth had arrived. But the Birth before the Fun God now was subtly different from before. A mortal might never detect any discrepancy in a Divine Pillar that measured the breadth of Life, but the Fun God spotted it in a single glance: this Pillar bore countless species and tribes that were completely different from the previous one.

And so He laughed. Laughed until He couldn't stop.

"Well, Big Sis — surprised to see me?"

The Divine Pillar lashed the space around it, emitting a confused hum. But before long, She settled and spoke pensively.

"So this is the reason — for your fear —"

"..." Those eyes blinked blankly. Twice. "You two really are alike. But aren't You curious why You're seeing me here?"

The Pillar's swaying grew steadily smaller. Its tail twisted and coiled for a moment, then pointed sharply in one direction. Deceit furrowed His brow slightly and followed the indication. Then the friction between the Life Marker Boards produced a voice.

"There —

His aura — lingers —"

"Yes — I feel it too. His aura is there.

Heeheehee~

Big Sis, bringing that up now — You wouldn't happen to be suggesting we go exploring together, would You?"

Deceit grinned at the Divine Pillar, the star-points in His eyes flashing wildly, radiating obvious anticipation.

But what He received was not a reply — it was a taunt.

"You don't dare —"

The eyes froze. Every spiral, every flickering point of light, went perfectly still.

"Interesting. Why wouldn't I dare?"

"Because you're still here —"

"..." Deceit's gaze rolled aside, then He chuckled. "Oh? So the other me... is bolder?"

"I do not know —"

But I know — you share the same fear —"

Now Deceit went completely silent.

He scrutinized this Big Sis from a universe not His own, eyes flickering, utterly mystified.

"Have You... never felt fear?"

"Why would I fear —"

"The unknown." Deceit was curt.

"He birthed Me — I birth all life —

All life knows Me — I know Him —

Where is the unknown —"

Birth's words were striking enough to shake the heavens, but Deceit didn't take in a single one. He simply pretended to be a pair of eyes without ears, blinking innocently, not letting a syllable land.

Still, He had understood Birth's stance perfectly well: no matter what the future held, no matter whether universes existed beyond the universe, no matter who Origin truly was — Birth would always be Birth.

This eldest among the gods, the "origin" of all things, was simply putting Her head down and practicing Birth's will. She seemed to believe that doing so was enough to earn Origin's gaze.

That unwavering conviction was identical to His own — except His took the form of fear, while Hers... was equanimity.

"The obsession in a god's heart is a mountain that can never be moved.

Big Sis — have You ever considered what You'd do on the day Birth can no longer birth?"

"That day will never come —

If it does — it will only mean He no longer needs Me to birth all life —"

"Sigh — it's only at times like these that I actually miss that foul mouth. I should've brought Him along, so He could curse You out when I'm too polite to do it myself.

Pity.

Then again, nothing much to pity. That foul mouth has probably... already been here.

And I suspect He may have..."

Deceit's flickering gaze drifted toward the direction the Divine Pillar had pointed earlier.

"Forget it. There's no point talking to you old-fashioned traditionalists. I'm bored. How do You plan to get back?"

"That doesn't depend on Me —

It depends on the other you — deciding when to end His conversation with the other Me —"

"?"

The eyes sharpened, their hue deepening.

"That Time pulled a fast one here, didn't She? Before we came — were You talking this over with Her?"

So She knows too. Is that it?"

"Knowing or not knowing — what difference does it make —

I can see — you do not fear Him — you fear yourself —

Deceit — what has happened in Void —"

"Oh, Void? Nothing much. We just got ourselves a clown who keeps committing suicide-by-blasphemy day in and day out. Annoying as all hell.

But annoying as he is, he's rather fun to tease now and then.

If you want him, I can ship him over. How about it, Big Sis?"

"Being generous at others' expense — classic you —"

"Aww, no fun if everyone's this clever. It's so rare for Him to show up — why not cause Him a little trouble? How boring otherwise."

...

At the same time, in a different crack of Existence, an identical line was being delivered word for word.

"Why not cause Him a little trouble? How boring otherwise."

"Your schemes won't work here — I have no interest in anything —

Do not disturb My reunion —

Leave —

Your ally — is not here —"

The voice faded, and four figures simultaneously dissolved into the crevices beyond the universe.

...

Chapter 805: Birth's Gift

The gods reappeared. In Cheng Shi's vision, the unspeakable Divine Pillar and the pair of star-bright eyes with upturned corners materialized once more.

The eyes had barely opened before they launched into a tirade at the Pillar.

"I swear, Big Sis — You barely say two words to me on a normal day, yet the moment You're over there, You chat up the other one for ages?"

'The other one?'

'Other who?!'

Cheng Shi was dazed. Had another deity been present during the two gods' conversation?

The Divine Pillar paused briefly, then lashed the surrounding Void with measured rhythm.

"You should reflect on yourself — and ask yourself — why He is so obnoxiously chatty —"

Now Cheng Shi understood. So "He" was also the Fun God? Another Fun God?

The two slice universes had hosted a mirrored exchange?

'That's possible?!'

'Then in the future, whenever I use this talent, won't it make the current target converse with themselves from another slice universe?'

The thought gave him pause. He'd need to choose his targets very carefully from now on.

But wait — could he talk to himself?

At this, Cheng Shi frowned deeply.

Deceit, stung by the retort, let the spirals in His eyes momentarily freeze — but soon the smile was back.

"Forget it. There's no reasoning with you elderly gods.

Now that the adventure beyond the universe is over, let's talk about the entrance ticket."

The Divine Pillar froze again. She twisted and contorted, emitting a deeply confused hum. "What entrance ticket —"

"Come on, Big Sis — You're the first of the gods, the origin of all things. Are You really going to welch?

Naturally, I mean the ticket for the door we just opened. You didn't think that trip was free, did You?"

"..."

"..."

This time it wasn't just Birth — even Cheng Shi was twitching his lips and averting his gaze. He couldn't watch this.

'Tch. And they wonder why the disciple's so greedy. Is it even my fault? It's all just modeling myself after my Benefactor's will!

"I already showed you — Life's past — the bygone era —"

"That was shown for the Clown. You answered a Player's prayer. Awfully kind of You."

"..."

The Divine Pillar's undulations grew more violent, Her aura turning increasingly agitated. She was clearly fed up.

"Opening that gate — was done with Time's power —"

"But it was Time's power inside my follower." Deceit argued His case with utter conviction.

"I — I — already showed your follower —"

"Wait!

You're playing concept-swap, Big Sis. Answering the Clown's prayer was one thing, but letting the Clown open that gate was already a second matter. You walked through that gate and toured around out there — and You're not going to pay the toll?

You can't bully the Clown just because he's mortal. Don't forget — he's still got a Benefactor. More than one, actually. Bullying the Clown equals bullying me. Bullying me equals bullying all of Void. And if You, Big Sis, keep..."

"Shut up — what do you want —"

The Divine Pillar had reached its breaking point. She battered the Void, shattering every speck of darkness ahead, as overwhelming tides of Birth essence surged outward, nearly drowning the entire space.

Had Deceit not casually shielded His follower, Cheng Shi would already be performing some rather undignified physical theatrics under the wrath of a deity.

But Cheng Shi's sharp eyes caught a detail: his Benefactor seemed to have grown stronger.

The scene before him wasn't caused by Birth choosing to yield — it was because She couldn't leave this section of the Void immediately!

The Fun God had used some force to seal this pocket of Void. Birth's Divine Pillar could only vent Her fury locally, then grudgingly concede.

"Heeheehee~"

That sounds so unpleasant. If I named my price, that'd make it extortion.

You walked through that gate voluntarily, so the ticket is whatever You feel like giving. Though I do trust that after learning the universe's greatest secret, Big Sis shouldn't be stingy with a small gift, right?"

"..."

The Divine Pillar went silent. A beat later, She lashed out — straight at Cheng Shi.

'???'

'Hey! The Fun God's the one who provoked You — go hit Him! What kind of god picks on a kid?!'

'When the food was served, You didn't think to invite me!'

But Cheng Shi had no chance to protest. He saw the shadow above him growing larger and larger, and before he could react, his brain went "BUZZ —" and his consciousness plunged into darkness.

Somewhere in the haze, he heard a single line — "In the future — don't bother Me again —" — and then nothing.

When the Clown came to, the shattered Void had already mended itself. The giggling eyes were hovering just in front of him, blinking as they watched.

Cheng Shi jolted in alarm and immediately began checking his body. But the instant he lifted a hand, his Benefactor's snicker cut through.

"Tch —

Big Sis drives a hard bargain. Kept it hidden all this time, only to use it here.

Birth's little darling — hand it over."

'?'

'Whose little darling? Birth's?!'

'Benefactor, I'll tolerate Your other slanders, but Birth's darling — whoever wants that title can have it. I am not worthy.'

Cheng Shi's lips twitched. He stood up obediently, faced the hovering eyes with a mask of pure innocence. "Hand over what, Benefactor?"

"Whatever's new on you — that's what you hand over."

'New?'

Cheng Shi blinked, turned his gaze inward, and the instant he caught a glimpse, every muscle in his body locked. His jaw dropped, his brain buzzed.

Because there, inside him, sat something that absolutely did not belong to him — something that shouldn't exist here at all.

Prosperity's authority — "Breeding"!

This authority — the one Prosperity had bequeathed to Birth via a Final Oracle upon self-annihilation — had been shoved into him by Birth!

"This... this — Benefactor, is this the entrance ticket from Birth?"

She showed You the history of the universe's beginning and threw in a piece of authority on top?!

Is... is this how business is done?"

Deceit's eye corners climbed sky-high, eyes blinking with delight. "What else? Fair and square. No tricks, no cheats."

'Oh, "fair and square, no tricks, no cheats"!'!

'Truly the Benefactor — You've made me realize that every single thing I've ever done falls woefully short of those eight magnificent words.'

"So, Benefactor... is this... for me?" Some wire short-circuited in Cheng Shi's brain, and the words tumbled out before he could stop them.

The instant they left his mouth, he regretted it. Countless gusts of biting wind erupted from the Void, howling and swirling around him.

"?"

Even the eyes were startled. He had never imagined the Clown could outdo Him in this arena.

'Daring to think it was one thing — but you actually said it out loud.'

Deceit's smile evaporated. The flickering stars and swirling spirals in His eyes froze simultaneously. His gaze sharpened to a razor's edge as He fixed the Clown with a look that was half smile, half threat.

"What did you say?"

Cold sweat drenched Cheng Shi's back. He forced a grin, pressed a hand to his chest to feel the authority's presence, and — still not ready to give up — probed with utmost caution.

"What I mean is — since Birth stuffed the ticket into Your follower, doesn't that mean the ticket belongs to Your follower?"

After all, it was Your follower who opened that gate. Giving the ticket to the one who opened the door isn't exactly... wrong, is it?"

Deceit's expression turned thoughtful.

"Interesting. Let me ask you — what is this ticket?"

"No clue." Cheng Shi began playing dumb. "Could it be something important?"

The instant the words landed, the Void's gale redoubled. The frigid wind sliced through Cheng Shi's skin like a blade. He flinched and course-corrected in one second flat.

"Authority! I recognize it now — this is the authority that scattered when Prosperity self-destructed."

"Oh, so it's authority."

Then let me ask you — what does a mortal, a clown, need Prosperity's authority for?

Could it be you're trying to..."

"I don't want to be Prosperity's darling!" Cheng Shi had learned to answer before asked.

...

Chapter 806: Uh-Oh — the Fun God Is About to Snap!

"Prosperity is dead. She doesn't need a darling anymore."

By the time Cheng Shi said this, his mind had already weathered a full-blown brainstorm.

Honestly, you couldn't blame him for being this audacious. He hadn't forgotten that the "Vitality" authority Big Cat currently wielded had also come from the Fun God.

So the instant he saw "Breeding" appear inside himself, Cheng Shi's first instinct was that the Fun God intended to complete Big Cat's set of authorities.

Of course, it wasn't that he didn't want it for himself — it was just that having Big Cat obtain the authority and then share it with him was far more valuable than hoarding it alone.

First, it would solidify Big Cat's position and boost her power, making the most reliable friend under heaven even more reliable. Second, he feared that Prosperity's authority might interfere with his Void path. At the end of the day, no matter how many faiths he'd fused, Cheng Shi still considered himself a Void practitioner. Whether out of "devotion" to Void or respect for the source of his power, he had no desire to swallow an authority whole and invite trouble.

What he hadn't expected was that this time, the Fun God genuinely seemed unwilling to part with "Breeding."

Why?

The transfer of "Vitality" wasn't even that long ago. What had changed to make the Fun God suddenly want the authority?

This wasn't about whether the Fun God was obligated to be generous. Cheng Shi was simply wondering: what new plan had his Benefactor hatched that required collecting authority at this stage?

He thought for a moment and drew a blank — until he raised his head and caught a fleeting flash of gravity in those star-bright eyes. Cheng Shi's heart lurched. He pressed a hand over his chest and stumbled several paces backward.

But in Deceit's perception, this reaction looked like nothing more than a greedy follower clinging to his ill-gotten authority for dear life, willing to split from his own Benefactor if that's what it took.

The eyes turned abruptly deep. A cold snort, and gales of biting wind erupted from the Void.

The blood-freezing tempest reminded Cheng Shi of all the times Fate had punished him.

'These two Benefactors' methods are growing more alike by the day.'

But no matter how frigid the environment, how labored his breathing, how crushing the pressure — Cheng Shi's hand stayed clamped over his chest. He bit down and held on, never once letting go.

He shouted into the wind, defiant.

"Benefactor! I will NOT surrender this authority to You!"

I cannot let You go searching for the universe's ultimate truth!

In all of creation, only the two of us live every day in terror. If You go, I will become the most frightened person in the entire universe!

You once said that if the fear in my heart exceeded Yours, I would be able to see farther.

But as a mortal, I cannot see that far into the future. All I can see is that if You go there, You will lose Your authority — just like Folly!

And then no one will be left to protect me. And a clown without protection would surely..."

Cheng Shi paused, his expression turning strange.

"...be torn apart."

It was bizarre — Cheng Shi had never imagined the Fool's Lips would ever speak in front of the Fun God, and certainly not to tack on such a non-sequitur. But right now he had no energy to worry about it. Pale as a ghost, he pressed on.

"And then — the Fear Faction would suffer a complete defeat!

Would You accept that outcome, Benefactor?!"

The instant those words landed, the wind in the Void died.

A streak of light crossed those star-bright eyes. Then, with an expression caught between amusement and something else, they regarded Cheng Shi.

"You think I'd follow that foul mouth's example and go exploring into the absolute unknown beyond the universe?"

Cheng Shi had managed to keep his teeth clenched and his spirit intact throughout the gale — but the instant the opposing force vanished, his will collapsed. He crumpled straight to the floor of the Void, gasping in ragged heaves.

"Yes — no, it's not that I think You would. It's that You absolutely will!

I know I can't stop You, but I don't want You to go now!"

"Why do you say that?" Deceit asked with genuine curiosity.

"You can see through my thoughts. You already know."

"I don't."

Cheng Shi stared up into the pitch-black Void and heaved a weighty sigh.

"Because You have never been a god who covets Prosperity's authority. Otherwise, You wouldn't have gifted 'Vitality' to the likes of us.

But this time, You're unwilling to let go of 'Breeding.' I don't believe 'Breeding' suits Void any better than 'Vitality' does. So You must have an ulterior motive.

I've combed through every change between now and before — and the only thing I can think of is that discovering the Slice Universe gave You a new idea.

On top of that, Folly's loss of authority is almost certainly connected to the truth of the Slice Universe. So I don't think You covet the authority itself. I think You want to use it as a pathfinder stone — to probe the most fundamental secret beyond this universe!

But can authority really substitute for admission, Benefactor? I doubt Folly would share anything with You, so I'm more inclined to think this is entirely Your own speculation.

You... want to gamble!

You want to use a surplus authority as the stake, and gamble on what lies at the universe's ultimate end!

Am I right, Benefactor?"

"..."

"Sigh. A clever clown isn't funny — only pitiable." The eyes snorted a laugh, blinked gently, and sent a soft breeze over Cheng Shi, healing every wound.

But Cheng Shi didn't get up. He lay gazing at the void above, hand pressed to his chest. "Can You... not go?"

Deceit scoffed. "What — as my follower, you have so little faith in your Benefactor?"

Or do you think I'd make the same blunder as that foul mouth and dig my own grave?"

"Yes."

"?" Another storm whipped through the Void — but gusted for only a single second before pulling back.

"Insolent Clown! To dare question your Benefactor — do you know you've committed blasphemy?"

"I'd rather repent to You now inside Void's prison than mourn You tomorrow in the cracks of Existence!"

"?" The eyes twitched with anger-laced laughter. Stars blazed wild. "You think I'm weaker than that foul mouth? She merely lost Her authority — but I would actually die?"

"Yes."

BOOM —

The nothingness exploded. The Clown was annihilated.

An indeterminate amount of time later, the Void restored itself. The same pair of still-furious eyes. The same Clown lying on the ground, refusing to get up.

"You've gotten bolder."

"Benefactor — if I'm timid now, I may never have another chance to be bold."

Those eyes paused. The fury drained away, replaced by renewed delight.

"Why don't you want me to go now?"

"I want to..."

At this, Cheng Shi stood. He had never faced his Benefactor with this degree of solemnity — not even during the confrontation born of fear had he been this sincere.

"I want to wait until I can help You. Then You can go."

"..."

The Void fell silent. Then the limitless dark began to warp, turning phantasmagoric and kaleidoscopic. Every pocket of blackness seemed to be painted with color, flowing freely, surging, boiling.

In that instant, it was as if the entire universe was laughing — and the omnipresent nothingness resonated in kind.

Yet the Fun God's tone remained razor-sharp.

"Tch —

A mortal clown — how dare you talk about helping me?"

"Then all the more reason to let me grow. And this!" Cheng Shi jabbed a finger at his own chest. "Is one of the stepping stones for that growth."

Those blinking eyes studied Cheng Shi. In mere moments, the upturned corners climbed once more.

"Is it you growing, or your little cat friend?"

"Her growth is my growth. You know — she shares the authority with me."

"Oh?"

Authority, authority...

You're getting better at misleading people. In the end, the Clown is just afraid I'll lose my authority and won't be able to grant him the power to deceive the gods anymore, right?"

"..."

Cheng Shi's voice went dead.

'Even if there's a teeny-tiny bit of that consideration — Benefactor, could You at least give me some face? There's nobody else around — why blow the cover?'

Cheng Shi rubbed his nose and muttered, "That's secondary. The main thing is caring about You."

"Tch —

Hard to say which is secondary. But I never planned to go anyway. I was just testing your devotion.

You failed, by the way.

Now scram. Looking at you annoys me.

Remember to deliver the authority to your little cat. This isn't suited for you. Nothing good comes from boundless greed."

With that, those eyes prepared to send Cheng Shi away. But Cheng Shi still had a mountain of questions to ask. Seeing the wind of nothingness already rushing toward him, he shouted the one question on the tip of his tongue.

"Benefactor! Is the Fool's Lips Your creation, or was it the shattered mask that was Your creation?!"

But before any answer came, the Clown had already been blown from the Void.

Watching the vanishing figure, Deceit's smile turned inscrutable.

"It is probably wondering who it really is too, isn't it?"

But...

Slice Universe?

Hmm — quite an interesting name for it.

So it seems the end of this universe really does conceal Truth.

Then could He... be one of the culprits?"

...

Chapter 807: Dorae-Cheng-Shi

The Clown landed back on his rooftop.

The Fun God hadn't sent him back to Dolgod, which meant the gathering there had probably already dispersed.

Cheng Shi opened his eyes and immediately rang the Silent Infant Bell. He wasn't sure whether Birth's parting burst of anger had adversely affected Hu Xuan, so he wanted to confirm first.

Fortunately, though the Life Sage didn't appear in person, she sent back an all-clear. And the method of delivery was rather amusing — when Cheng Shi shook it, the bell emitted a faint glow, like a miniature Eternal "Lamp," casting the silhouette of a pregnant belly on the ground.

Seeing this, Cheng Shi hurriedly "put the magic away."

'She's at it again. Better not disturb the Life Sage.'

As for Aph Ros — now that his "sibling" had accepted his "excuse," Dolgod was officially his backup experimental base.

Zangier would undoubtedly spend a very memorable remainder of his life there. How memorable? Cheng Shi didn't care. He only knew that, even for Her own sake, Aph Ros would definitely "supervise" Zangier's hard labor with great enthusiasm. Go Lis, after all, was built for punishing blasphemers.

And then there was Wei Mu...

Truthfully, without others around, the thought of a one-on-one encounter with this supremely intelligent Player made Cheng Shi nervous. He was afraid that his reactions might betray the fact that he was playing the part of Yu Xi. Even more, he feared that Wei Mu would silently weave a trap that Cheng Shi would walk into without ever realizing.

The Clown had excellent self-awareness. He knew how to leverage his strengths, and he knew even better how to avoid his weaknesses. This was his steady will in action.

Of course, he had no intention of abandoning this brainiac either. Even if they couldn't be allies, at least he wouldn't push Wei Mu to the opposing side. He very much wanted to stand on the same team as Wei Mu — that was the only way to extract useful assistance. He just hadn't figured out how to deepen the relationship yet.

Think about it: a madman who dared insult his own Benefactor Folly to Her face — how could such a person not be suspicious of a lie-spouting Deceit Envoy?

So for now, Dolgod remained the best meeting ground. Only in Aph Ros's presence — with a genuine Envoy's attitude toward him as endorsement — could the wise man's doubts be somewhat allayed.

But all of that was for later. The pressing matter was delivering the "Breeding" authority to Big Cat.

So Cheng Shi contacted Big Cat and once again met her in a fabricated forest somewhere in the Void, connected by that symbol.

The moment Big Cat saw Cheng Shi in one piece, she exhaled heavily with relief. Then a playful smile curled her lips, and she opened with:

"Whose surname does the baby get?"

"???"

The question blindsided Cheng Shi completely. Thanks to Birth's lingering aftereffects, he flinched, shot Big Cat a wary glance, and — without letting it show — retreated one step.

But that single tiny step made Big Cat instantly realize her words could be misread. So—

"ROAR —"

A gust of wind blasted through the forest. The Dense Forest Spotted Leopard planted a paw on her prey and looked down at him with imperious disdain. "Why did you step back?"

Cheng Shi was done. He struggled to raise his head and spat out the dirt in his mouth.

"Gra—"

SLAM — the paw bore down, mashing the Clown's face back into the mud. "Still running that foul mouth!"

"..."

Left with no choice, Cheng Shi snapped his fingers, teleported out from under her, and then — face dark as thunder — plucked the crushed grass from between his teeth, flung it onto the ground, and jabbed a finger at Big Cat.

"Grass! It was grass in my mouth! Sour, bitter grass!

And excuse me — you're the one who misspoke! What gives you the right to play the victim?

Don't forget — which of us is the other's creditor?"

"..." Big Cat obviously knew she was in the wrong. But how could she possibly swallow her pride and admit it at a time like this? Fine, she'd misspoken — but what did that backward step mean?

'Who exactly are you showing contempt for?'

Big Cat snorted through her nose and turned away, licking a paw as though she'd heard nothing.

But after Cheng Shi stayed silent for a long stretch, her entire feline body stiffened. Irritably, she pawed at her own head, and after a prolonged internal struggle, finally squeezed out: "Tao Yi says thank you."

Seeing her like this, Cheng Shi grinned.

"See? At least the Wood Elf has a conscience. Unlike certain... hey — what are you doing?! Think your claws are a big deal? I'm saying it right now — unlike certain meatheads who thank you up and down beforehand and then beat up their creditor afterward."

Big Cat's frustration hit critical mass. She paced in a circle, fangs bared, then marched right up to Cheng Shi. Without bothering to shift back to human form, she sat bolt upright and rumbled:

"Give me a bit. I'll pay you back soon."

Teasing the cat was an ever-escalating source of joy for Cheng Shi. His eyes darted and he started heaping on guilt trips.

"What — settle the debt so you can pretend the favor never happened?"

Hong Lin, oh Hong Lin — I never knew you were this kind of person!"

That pushed Big Cat straight into bristle mode. She arched her back, coiled to spring, and was a split second from swiping the mouthy Fate Weaver when — out of nowhere — Cheng Shi produced a tiny green sprout in his palm and held it up in front of her face.

This sprout, radiating dense Prosperity essence, was something Hong Lin knew all too well. The instant she laid eyes on it, her fur spiked even worse than before.

Her voice even cracked!

"Prosperity's authority?!"

Mission accomplished. Cheng Shi burst out laughing. "That's right — the Prosperity authority 'Breeding.' Well? Want it?"

Big Cat's brain hadn't even engaged before her mouth was halfway through "yes" — except the word caught in her throat and she swallowed it back down.

She snapped into human form, locked Cheng Shi with a dead-serious stare, and shook her head firmly.

"No. I don't need it. No matter how much authority comes my way, it can't change my current state of being caught between human and god. It's not suited for me. But it's suited for you, Cheng Shi.

You don't have to hand over every piece of Prosperity you find. I..."

"Cut the nonsense. Do you want it or not? If you don't, I'll give it to someone else."

Big Cat's breath hitched. She wanted to hit him, but restrained herself. "Why don't you keep it? I know you're goading me."

"I don't need it. I've got better things." The Clown gave a scornful snort, eyes dripping with disdain.

But in truth, this was the best thing Cheng Shi had.

Posturing aside, watching a divine authority slip through his fingers genuinely stung Cheng the Greedy. But this wasn't a Void authority. Even if it had been Chaos or Time, even with the Fun God's explicit order, he would have found a way to keep it.

But Prosperity...

Bottom line: nowhere in the foreseeable road ahead did Cheng Shi see a role for Prosperity.

And in Big Cat's hands, this authority was unquestionably more useful than in his own. Because arming Big Cat was, to a very real degree, arming the Clown himself.

Of course, "arming" was a superfluous word when it came to Big Cat. Cheng Shi's actual goal was to help her become a genuine "half-Prosperity" as soon as possible. Even without a vote among the gods, at least in status and tier she'd be able to feed him richer intelligence about Them.

Hong Lin's expression was a tangle of conflict. She understood what Cheng Shi meant. She also knew that taking this wouldn't be as useless as she'd claimed. But the sensation of good things landing in her lap every few days had plunged her into a surreal haze.

'Is this a Fate Weaver?'

'This is Doraе-Cheng-Shi!'

'How does he have everything?'

Before meeting Cheng Shi, her journey had been nothing like this. Every piece of gear she owned had been earned one punch at a time. But now?

Authority arrived, then divinity. Divinity arrived, then more authority. At this rate, Hong Lin was beginning to feel she'd discovered the cheat code for the Faith Game: protect the Fate Weaver, then sit back and wait for good fortune to knock.

She'd never imagined that "destiny" meant this kind of destiny — apparently a direct fast-track into the world's endgame storyline!

...

#### Chapter 808: An Unusual Memory Exchange

Seeing Cheng Shi's resolve, Big Cat didn't dwell on it and accepted the authority.

But when she caught the flash of envy in the Fate Weaver's eyes, she paused, then couldn't help but laugh.

"Alright, I'll take it. Come to me whenever you need it.

But Cheng Shi — you're not a very convincing actor. Your eyes are practically dripping with sour jealousy, and you're still pretending you don't want it.

For someone as greedy as you, giving up authority must be really hard, huh?"

"???"

'Excuse me?!'

'I came all this way to deliver authority to you, and you're being sarcastic about it?!'

Cheng Shi's face went black. He lunged for her paw. "Give it back!"

As if Big Cat would ever return something already in her possession. She let out a hearty laugh — finally getting even — snatched up the authority in her jaws, and bounded straight out of the forest. Parting words echoed behind her:

"Remember to pray. I'll share my authority with my friend.

Yes — my authority."

"..."

Cheng Shi was equal parts furious and amused. But the laughter faded fast.

Because reality proved that without a complete set of Prosperity divinity in his body, a mortal couldn't wield a second Prosperity authority through proxy — not unless he was willing to swap out "Vitality."

But in terms of practical effect, "Breeding" — which specialized in restoring and regenerating limbs — was clearly inferior to the life-saving clutch that "Vitality" offered. So, reluctantly, Cheng Shi had to let it go.

Big Cat, however, didn't shortchange her friend. Upon learning the result, she pulled every string at her disposal, not only securing him the two gathering venues he wanted but also stuffing an absurd mountain of Prosperity potions into his pockets.

By the Clown's reckoning, even if the Faith Game lasted until his "retirement," he'd probably never have to worry about potions again.

The current worry was that his warehouse might not have room for all of them...

"Isn't pocketing all of this a bit, you know, embezzlement?" When Cheng Shi asked this over the phone, he was laughing the entire time.

Big Cat was laughing too.

"If my own friends can't prosper first, then what's the point of being Prosperity?"

Cheng Shi — what else do you need?"

"Since you're offering, there is one thing. Only it might not be in Prosperity's treasury.

I need..."

When Cheng Shi stated his request, the expression on Big Cat's face on the other end was truly spectacular.

"Are you sure?"

"Positive. And soon as possible."

"Done. Tomorrow at the latest."

Big Cat agreed without hesitation and sounded ready to go find it immediately. But Cheng Shi didn't rush to hang up. He held her there and cautiously shared a sliver of his concern.

In his current understanding, no absolute coincidence existed in this world. So after Birth gifted the authority, the Fun God abandoned His gamble, and Cheng Shi delivered the authority to Big Cat — he couldn't help but wonder what the Fun God was really scheming.

Yet out of solidarity within the Fear Faction, Cheng Shi didn't dare interpret his Benefactor's motives with excess malice. That would only spiral them back into a fear standoff. So over the phone, he kept it vague.

"Be careful. Authority isn't a cure-all, Hong Lin."

This time Hong Lin had genuinely grown sharper. She seemed to catch his subtext and fell silent for a moment.

"It's fine. As long as it can protect my friends, to me it's everything."

"But what if one day..."

"There won't be such a day, Cheng Shi. There won't." Hong Lin rattled off a string of boasts about how strong she was and how easily she could shield her friends, then decisively hung up.

The moment the call disconnected, Hong Lin looked at the phone in her hand and smiled brilliantly.

"There won't be such a day. Because even if there is... I won't live to see it."

...

Meanwhile, elsewhere.

Wei Mu had finally left Dolgod. He'd spent a full three days inside that city drenched in Birth's aura!

Three days — honestly, he had never toiled in anyone's shadow for this long. Even facing Folly Herself, he'd never felt this mentally drained.

But here, dealing with the Corruption Envoy, Wei Mu experienced a fleeting sense of helplessness.

He'd helped Dolgod establish a new tribunal. He'd helped Aph Ros build the requisite laboratory. He'd helped Zangier catalogue every known experiment of the current era. He'd even helped process 0221's corpse.

0221 was dead. Not in his mentor's arms — but under the tentacles of Go Lis.

An experiment didn't need two lead researchers, and Aph Ros had no interest in harboring an ambitious schemer. She could see that 0221's desires ran thick as tar. So for simplicity's sake, She snuffed out his soul directly and had Wei Mu refine the body into a puppet overseer.

As for Zangier — stripped from 0221's body, he was casually dropped into a Dolgod local's frame and set to work at a brand-new workbench, beginning his road to atonement.

The husk containing the Aberrant Mother Tree and the Desire Vortex was something Wei Mu had hoped to claim as payment. He failed.

Aph Ros refused. The dual Envoy invoked "brotherhood" at every turn, insisting She was saving it for Her finest brother, Yu Xi.

That left Wei Mu thoroughly speechless. He couldn't shake the impression that Aph Ros was doing everything in Her power to ingratiate Herself with Void — and the method was shamelessly "sucking up" to the Deceit Envoy.

When Wei Mu first heard the name Yu Xi, he'd had his doubts. No such name appeared anywhere in the history he knew. But after hearing Aph Ros speak of the mask, it started to seem plausible.

If Memory had the Mirror of Delusion, then why couldn't Deceit have the Fool Mask?

And yet something about this Yu Xi felt perpetually off. What was it, exactly, that made his impression of the man so... groundlessly floaty?

Could this be the true power of Void — the genuine force of Deceit?

Wei Mu sank into contemplation. But before long, someone entered the same space and interrupted his thoughts.

The newcomer was a Daoist wearing a topknot. The moment he materialized, he smiled softly.

"I've arrived. I've already heard about your exploits. Sounds like quite a spectacular memory."

Yes — the visitor was the Dragon King, Li Jingming.

"Spectacular indeed. But per our agreement, I can only exchange the less spectacular portion with you. As for the climax... even if I wanted to trade it now, I probably don't have the authority to decide."

A glint flashed through Li Jingming's eyes.

He had indeed finalized a deal with Wei Mu. The terms: he would point Wei Mu toward 0221's Truth Experiment Ground, letting the wise man thoroughly study his rival — the Truth Chosen.

In return, Li Jingming would stay out of it entirely and simply wait for Wei Mu to bring the memory back.

In other words, Wei Mu's connection to Big Cat hadn't come from some omniscient deduction — the Dragon King had paved the road for the wise man.

The puppet meticulously handed over the memory, completed the transaction, then asked with curiosity: "I'm very interested in whatever made you miss such a grand show. Want to make another trade?"

Li Jingming smiled and shook his head. "Next time. Once I've accomplished that thing, I'll trade it for the climax you mentioned."

"Oh? That would be a very sensitive memory..." Wei Mu thought it over. "I'll need to assess in advance whether your memory is worth the price."

"Same meticulous you. No problem — I'll give you a teaser so you can judge whether the future memory is worth the exchange."

I know you've been selling plenty of entrance tickets. And I happen to be looking for one myself."

"Entrance ticket? What kind of entrance ticket?" The puppet blinked.

"A ticket that lets you step onto the stage and perform." Li Jingming smiled. "That's all I can say for now. See you — pleasure doing business."

The words barely faded before it was Wei Mu — not Li Jingming — who vanished.

Watching the puppet's figure depart, the Dragon King savored the freshly exchanged Truth Experiment Ground memory and smiled with genuine pleasure.

"Who says a future memory can't be traded?"

The past's future is the future's past, isn't it?

Time to set off. Destination... the place where the ticket is hidden."

...

Chapter 809: Destination — San Dales. Move Out!

Not long after returning to the Rest Area, the Road to Ascension's periodic settlement arrived. The talent and item rewards were so underwhelming that Cheng Shi picked a novelty snack at random and closed the page.

He sat on the edge of his rooftop eating dinner as usual, waiting for a long time without seeing Xie Yang on the rooftop across the way.

'Where did he disappear to again?'

If the space merger hadn't taken effect yet, Cheng Shi would've assumed the Gap Light Iron Thorn hadn't escaped 0221's Experiment Ground.

So... who had grabbed him this time?

'Born-to-be-kidnapped physique?'

Cheng Shi shook his head with a grin and let it go. What commanded his full attention now wasn't some neighbor in reality, but this: with the special trial freshly concluded and his condition at peak, how exactly should he track down the ear that Brother Mouth and Brother Tongue both refused to discuss — the Secret Peeping Ear.

He'd already contacted everyone he considered reliable: Big Cat, the Dragon King, the Blind One, Mi Laozhang — even Wang Mou!

Yes, Wang Mou now had a phone. A gift from Big Cat. She'd apparently picked up on Cheng Shi's attitude toward the Doctor during the final battle and, on a flash of inspiration, sent the man a handset.

Wang Mou had accepted it. After witnessing the Fate Weaver's methods, his curiosity about the "Joker" organization had only deepened.

He even assumed Big Cat was one of its members. Fortunately, he hadn't asked in front of everyone during the chaotic aftermath of the shattered experiment. Otherwise, the next time Cheng Shi saw Big Cat, he'd have had to explain what the Joker actually was.

The Doctor had readily accepted Cheng Shi's invitation and was prepared to accompany him to San Dales in search of the mysterious object the Jokers needed.

With everyone but the unreachable Dragon King on board, Cheng Shi — before departure — even took the time to "greet" Brother Mouth one more time, asking whether it was excited about meeting its other sibling soon.

Brother Mouth played dead. Not a word. This only hardened Cheng Shi's resolve to obtain the ear. And so, at an agreed-upon moment, everyone began their prayers simultaneously.

To prevent the Fun God from meddling, Cheng Shi directed this prayer to his other Benefactor...

Time.

That's right — Time!

Because he knew Time definitely didn't have time to meddle.

"Time slips through the cracks; I ride the wind.

Your devoted follower prays to You — open a trial...

A trial to 'spy upon secrets in the frigid northern frontier of San Dales.'"

The instant the words faded —

[Wish Trial (Believing is Seeing, Hearing is Doubting — Silence) has been opened]

[Matching teammates (1/6)]

[Trial objective: Applause at the performance's curtain fall — regardless of joy or sorrow (Time limit: 3 days)]

'Wait — who?!'

'Silence!'

'Why Her?'

Cheng Shi blinked, a flicker of suspicion crossing his face.

While Silence trials didn't demand total muteness, their mechanics typically required Players to follow clues toward a secret — and then keep their mouths shut about it. The moment you spoke the secret aloud, or even hinted at it, the trial ended in failure.

The silver lining: Silence trials used individual scoring. A teammate's elimination wouldn't drag everyone down.

The downside: until you found the secret the clues pointed to, nobody dared say a word. No one wanted to be kicked out before understanding the full picture.

So while Silence trials didn't mandate silence, in practice, everyone tended to be very, very quiet.

But there were exceptions. As long as you mastered the art of "idle chatter," you didn't have to stay mute the whole time.

With that in mind, Cheng Shi's brow knotted. His gaze darkened.

'Please don't tell me San Dales is actually hiding some massive secret.'

[Match successful (6/6). Entering trial]

...

On the edge of the northern snowfield, frigid wind howled.

But Cheng Shi's landing point had no wind. It was still cold, sure — but at least it beat enduring the knife-edged gales outside.

This trial's spawn location appeared to be indoors. A dark interior.

His hearing recovered first. Nearby, he caught the drip-drip of water — crisp, with a faint echo. That meant the space was vast.

Then his tactile sense sharpened. He pinched the soil beneath him, rubbed it between his fingers, and tasted it: sludge, soaking wet.

He was still speculating whether this might be some underground tunnel when all five senses roared back at once, flooding his nose and mouth with a cocktail of rot, rust, and damp.

"Ugh —"

Someone retched from the stench — but it wasn't him. The gagging came from the adjacent pipe.

Hearing it, Cheng Shi smirked. He already knew where he was.

A sewer pipe.

An abandoned sewer pipe, at that.

'What a start — roommates with the rats. A surprise silent enough to shut anyone up.'

Cheng Shi rose from the pipe's floor. The diameter was generous enough that walking inside didn't feel cramped. He controlled his footsteps to produce no sound whatsoever, then crept toward the junction where his branch merged into the main tunnel.

Moments later, he reached the junction's edge. Pressing himself flat against the pipe wall like a shrimp, he slowly poked his head out toward the opposite wall of the main passage.

As he peered out, another head emerged from the neighboring branch. Their foreheads bumped — both recoiled a step. In the same heartbeat, both raised small lamps.

"Who?!"

"Who?!"

The words echoed and died. The sewer returned to stillness — save for the sound of hammering hearts.

Thanks to the two warm glows illuminating a corner of the tunnel, Cheng Shi discovered that the teammate poking out from around the bend was... also a Cheng Shi?!

"!?!?"

The other's posture was virtually identical to his own. For one delirious instant, he thought someone had mounted a mirror at the main tunnel's junction.

But — a mirror would reflect the same clothes, wouldn't it?

So why was the other one wearing a jacket while he wore a casual blazer?

That meant the other was just a Player. A Player disguised as him!

And really — who else in the world would be bored enough to impersonate him inside a trial?!

At the thought, Cheng Shi cocked an eyebrow and struck first:

"Heeheehee~"

But to his utter astonishment, the other had the exact same idea. At the precise instant he made that freakish noise, the impostor fired back:

"Heeheehee~"

'Good news: the fake just ran into the real deal.'

'Bad news: the real deal is also trying to pretend to be the fake...'

Cheng Shi's scalp prickled. He was staring at this teammate — who bore an uncanny resemblance to Zhen Yi — and was just about to launch into a tirade when his peripheral vision caught a lamp flickering to life in a third branch on the far side of the junction. A blurry figure stepped forward.

Before the two of them could make out who it was, a third "Heeheehee~" drifted from beside them.

And the moment that giggle reached Cheng Shi's ears, he realized with horror that this second teammate entering the light...

Was also him.

A third Cheng Shi had appeared!

"..."

"..."

"..."

Six eyes frantically sized one another up, but three mouths stayed firmly shut.

And just like that, the sewer plunged into an eerily tense, absolute silence.

...

Chapter 810: Seeing is Believing × 3

The situation was, for a moment, excruciatingly awkward.

Before long, a fourth set of footsteps echoed from farther down the main tunnel. All three Cheng Shis exchanged a glance, hearts lurching in unison, and swiveled to look — praying this nightmare wasn't about to repeat itself.

Fortunately...

"Phew —"

No fourth copy.

The newcomer was Zhang Jizu.

The Death Chosen walked toward them with his lamp, then halted mid-stride. His perpetually half-closed eyes involuntarily widened by three full degrees.

This man — renowned for his composure — was brimming with shock. He even rubbed his eyes in disbelief.

"One, two, three..."

Three. Indeed three.

But why three?

"You all..."

Zhang Jizu promptly retreated a step, scalpel in hand, brow furrowed.

"Cheng Shi? Zhen Yi? And the third one — who?"

You couldn't blame him for thinking that way. Visually, the three Cheng Shis were flawless aside from different clothes. All three radiated the unmistakable aura of a con artist, so the impersonator had to be top-tier.

And when it came to a top-level illusionist who loved playing other people... no matter who you guessed, it was hard not to start with Zhen Yi.

Hence Zhang Jizu's cautious retreat. He wasn't guarding against anything else — he was guarding against the possibility that one of the three actually was Zhen Yi.

No sooner had he spoken than sounds came from behind the third Cheng Shi. Splashing water erupted abruptly, followed by a surprised female voice.

"Cheng Shi?"

Which Cheng Shi?

The Cheng Shi who summoned Go Lis and the Eternal Sun to eat Zangier?!"

The voice grew louder, the figure closer. Before long, a tall female Player wrapped in a mink-fur coat strode into view, dragging a massive blade behind her.

A wine-red high ponytail swung with every turn of her head. She swept an odd look across the assembled Cheng Shis, and her expression morphed into something spectacular. Seconds later, she burst out laughing.

Couldn't hold it in. Absolutely couldn't hold it in.

"What's going on here — is this cosplay? Shadow clones? A bard's summoning spell? A 'best Cheng Shi impersonation' contest? Or..."

A match-three puzzle?

Pop — do they disappear?"

She even pantomimed an explosion with her hands, her gaze bouncing eagerly between the three.

But when she saw that all three Cheng Shis reacted to her performance with exactly zero expression, her face stiffened. Brow arching, she scoffed self-deprecatingly.

"Heh — as expected of a hotshot riding high. Surname Cheng, don't tell me you've already forgotten me?"

The three Cheng Shis each wore a different look, but not one responded. They seemed trapped in some inexplicable atmosphere of 'whoever speaks first can't possibly be the real one' — doing nothing but sizing each other up, hunting for a crack in the disguise.

By now, Zhang Jizu saw through the dynamic. He knew Cheng Shi was locked in a battle of wits. Regardless of which was genuine, at least two were fakes. So with a tight frown, he walked up, circled the trio, and greeted the female Player first.

"Zhang—"

"Jizu. I know you. Gravekeeper. Death Chosen.

Last published score was 2,717. Probably above 2,800 by now — impressive. Less than a thousand points behind that Behind-the-Scenes Puppeteer at the top of the Road to Ascension. I'm rooting for you."

She was extroverted. Perhaps too extroverted. She extended a hand to Zhang Jizu with a dazzlingly bright smile.

"Ai Si. Ai as in mugwort, Si as in yearning. Small fry. War Supervisor. Just cracked 2,400 on the ladder, so I'll spare myself the embarrassment of reporting my exact score.

That number's a little awkward in a lobby full of big shots, but at least I'm a priest — and a priest who knows when to step up and when to step back. So even if I can't carry, I probably won't be dead weight either.

Surname Cheng can vouch for me on that.

Though which surname-Cheng should vouch for me... haha, that's not my problem."

"..."

Cheng Shi was numb. Being matched with acquaintances was a coincidence; being matched with himself was just bizarre.

Besides, this standoff couldn't go on forever. The trial was only three days. They couldn't burn it all in the sewer. So after a moment's thought, he decided to break the deadlock first.

But before he could speak, Zhang Jizu drew his scalpel again. He glanced at his watch and narrowed his eyes.

"Five minutes and seventeen seconds have passed since I met all of you. In that time, even the most distant teammate should have appeared. But he hasn't. I haven't even heard a distant sound.

So before verifying anyone's identity, we should prepare for how to deal with a teammate who went solo right from the start. At least the three of you look somewhat chaotic but still 'harmless.'

So — what do you say, Cheng Shi, Cheng Shi, and... Cheng Shi?"

"HA HA!" Ai Si cracked up without a shred of composure. She planted her sword in the ground and doubled over laughing. "I know surname Cheng's been in the spotlight lately, but is he really this popular?"

No worries though. I've had a 'thing' with surname Cheng before. I can help you guys figure out which one's the real... liar!"

"Who's had a thing with you?"

"Who's had a thing with you?"

"Who's had a thing with you?"

Three Cheng Shis in perfect unison.

The synchronized chorus of disgust froze Ai Si's grin on her face. She twitched, expression cycling through several colors before she sighed.

"Fine. Shouldn't have tried to bluff a bunch of liars. I can't tell them apart. Over to you, Chosen Zhang. I'll just focus on proving I'm useful so surname Cheng will keep carrying me to victory.

Three Cheng Shis — our odds look great this round.

I'll go look for the missing person. You guys... sort yourselves out."

And with that, Ai Si genuinely hefted her blade and set off down the tunnel to search.

Zhang Jizu watched her disappear, eyes narrowed. Impressive decisiveness from that Player.

Though it probably wasn't just about decisiveness. This sharp-witted War Supervisor had likely already sniffed out the other two's identities and simply didn't want to wade into a "rank" war this far above her pay grade.

A smart choice. A solid one, too.

After one final glance at the three Cheng Shis, Zhang Jizu headed after Ai Si — without so much as a backward look. The message was clear: your mess, your cleanup.

Steadiness saved Zhang the Steady from the headache. But the headache landed squarely on Cheng the Steady.

Once the two acquaintances had left, Cheng Shi finally snapped.

He swept a razor-sharp gaze across the other two versions of himself and scoffed.

"Tch —

There probably aren't many people in this game capable of impersonating me this convincingly. So — care to guess whether I can guess who you are?

Zhen Yi?

And... Dragon King?"

At that, the third Cheng Shi — the one in the trench coat, standing in the left-side branch — let out an identical scoff.

"Bro, I don't know which of you is Zhen Yi and which is the Dragon King, but...

Zhen Yi, that dog — fine, she likes playing pretend. But Dragon King — you ignore my calls and secretly sneak in here behind my back?

Don't tell me you're trying to steal something from right under my nose."

The remark plunged the scene back into silence. Cheng Shi and the second Cheng Shi both wore grave, pensive expressions. Soon, the second Cheng Shi — the one in the jacket, standing in the right-side branch — let out his own scoff.

"Well, well. Silence really threw us a curveball right out of the gate.

I thought maybe you two actually were the Dragon King and Zhen Yi. But now...

That overly coordinated script of yours — what, teaming up already?

Interesting. Are you two really the Dragon King and Zhen Yi? Or could you be Zhen Xin and Long Jing?

Don't tell me this is a con job the liars custom-built just for me.

Because if it is...

I'm absolutely terrified."

...