

## The Gods 931

### Chapter 931: The Anomalous Birth Gift

Cheng Shi, who possessed a quarter of Le Le'er's divinity, recognized the aura unique to Le Le'er at a single glance.

This was undoubtedly a severed branch of the Mother Tree of Fear, but the question was — why would a surface-world Inquisitor carry a "blessing" from an underground "evil god"?

It wasn't just the two Players who were stunned — even Lid Yara was shocked. She clearly knew what it was, and in an instant her eyes filled with fury and contempt.

"I never imagined you, Keinlaur, would embrace desire and fall this far!

"You've actually become Corruption's lapdog!?"

"Is this your new Benefactor? Is this the Order you want to rebuild!?"

"Alas..."

Keinlaur sighed once more.

"It seems He has already muddled your mind, Lid Yara. Everything you've done since your arrival has been a far cry from the image of the Grand Investigator I remember — the one who solved countless cases and never let a culprit escape.

"As expected, people only believe what they see. They refuse to spend even a sliver of mental effort reflecting on the true nature hidden beneath the surface."

Hearing this, Lid Yara furrowed her brow and fell silent. She sensed something was off about her own emotions, yet couldn't determine whether she'd been influenced by Corruption or, as Keinlaur suggested, by that self-corrupted Order.

When Sun Miao saw Keinlaur produce the branch of the Mother Tree of Fear, she froze, then turned to Cheng Shi and murmured in disbelief:

"Corruption?"

"Could the collapse of Order be connected to Corruption?"

"..." Cheng Shi blinked but said nothing.

He had to admit — before Order was replaced, the problems It developed were indeed linked to Corruption.

And after Its fracture, even without Deceit's scheming or Chaos's takeover, in Its guise as Pride-turned-Order, Order would likely have struggled to reclaim its former glory.

Seeing that Lid Yara had finally quieted down and was willing to hear him out, Keinlaur chuckled softly, held the branch a little farther away, then rubbed his forehead, his entire being sinking into the depths of memory.

"You may know what it is now, but you'd never recall what it once was.

"Several decades ago, this branch wasn't a limb of the Mother Tree of Fear as you see it today. It was...

"Your Birth Gift — a tribute of praise and reverence from the Rainforest Tribe."

"Impossible!" The moment the words left his lips, Lid Yara staggered half a step back, her pupils quaking, her expression drastically changed. "I'm an orphan left behind by tribal conflicts within the Nature Alliance — how could I possibly have a Birth Gift!?"

Hearing this, Cheng Shi asked, puzzled: "What's a Birth Gift?"

Sun Miao's tone grew noticeably excited — she looked like someone who'd just stumbled onto the juiciest gossip.

"When the Rainforest Tribe marries into the outside world and decides to entrust a newborn touched by other faiths to that outside world, the tribe's shamans or chieftains typically petition Prosperity for a sliver of blessing — to ensure the child of the Rainforest can grow up healthy.

"That blessing from Prosperity upon the newborn is what's called a Birth Gift.

"Of course, Prosperity doesn't actually bestow a real blessing — that's just the Rainforest Tribe's way of framing it. They simply take a young shoot from the Rainforest and pray that Prosperity will watch over the child.

"So — the unofficial histories were right after all. Lid Yara really is Esa Res's child!

"But what I didn't expect is that this blessing was genuinely given by Them.

"A branch of Le Le'er — this legacy of the Daughter of Prosperity — ended up in the Grand Tribunal's hands in such a manner. It proves that the Rainforest truly yearned for a peaceful and orderly life back then. They placed their highest hopes in the Grand Tribunal."

"..."

Cheng Shi was dumbfounded. 'Hold on, buddy — I came here to investigate Order and uncover Its connections to Corruption and War, not to munch on gossip.'

Yet who could have predicted he'd gorge himself on drama while finding not a single real lead? How was that even fair?

Still, at least Corruption had surfaced. He turned his gaze back to the unfolding spectacle. Keinlaur's reminiscence continued.

"You've guessed it — you simply refuse to accept it. But it's fine; Esa Res refuses to accept it too.

"It was nothing more than an accident. The Rainforest, having just been absorbed into the Grand Tribunal's territory, wanted to curry favor with Katouting through this gesture. Their original target was me, but at the time the rebellion was on the verge of ending and I didn't drink from that cup — so you became Esa Res's daughter instead.

"But none of that matters. What matters is that the Birth Gift they delivered underwent a transformation over the past several decades — slowly corrupted by Corruption, turning from Prosperity's blessing into a branch of the Mother Tree of Fear.

"I won't deny that my current fear of Order has been somewhat amplified by its influence. But if Order didn't warrant fear in the first place, how could this branch have magnified the emotions in my heart?

"In the end, the fault lies with Him."

By now, regardless of whether Lid Yara agreed with Keinlaur's views, the two of them had reached consensus on at least one thing:

Something had definitely gone wrong with Order.

But the Grand Investigator's proposed course of action clearly differed from the Supreme Inquisitor's. She believed the current situation could still be corrected, whereas Keinlaur's stance clearly leaned toward rebuilding from the ruins — which was why he was allowing the Grand Tribunal to slide into decline.

How much of this was truly about power, Lid Yara couldn't say. But she didn't believe the current Keinlaur possessed the pure devotion he claimed.

Once tainted by Corruption, desire always cloaked itself in the garb of instinctive self-justification. Keinlaur may have already sunk into desire without realizing it. She needed to wake him up.

So Lid Yara rebuked him coldly once more: "Stop making excuses for your desires, Keinlaur. You've already fallen. You truly are a disappointment."

Keinlaur offered no rebuttal. Instead, he smiled and picked up the branch, sliding it across the table toward Lid Yara.

"Since you don't believe me, why not see for yourself?"

See for herself?

How?

Lid Yara furrowed her brow. After assessing the current situation and weighing every cost, she set her jaw, stepped forward, and with immense solemnity, reached out to touch the branch.

In an instant, both Lid Yara and Keinlaur slumped forward, drained of strength. Their consciousness had clearly entered another space.

Now both Cheng Shi and Sun Miao were baffled. They exchanged a glance, realizing this was ultimately a dream — a dream that excavated memories. Such a dream could only trace back to past reality, but once it delved into the realm of consciousness, they were truly nothing more than spectators — spectators "denied entry for lack of a ticket."

"..."

Cheng Shi grew anxious. He felt the greatest secret of this memory trace might lie within the consciousness exchange between these two — and now, at the critical moment, he was locked out. How could this be acceptable?

"Master, is there really no other way?"

Sun Miao's face remained expressionless, but the disappointment in her eyes was plain for Cheng Shi to see.

"Memory may record everything, but the Chronicle of Time can only take us this far.

"The best-case scenario is that they recap what happened after they emerge, so we can hear what transpired at the moment their consciousnesses collided.

"If they skip over the topic once it's over — then it simply means this memory hasn't reached its time of revelation."

...

Chapter 932: Enlightenment from Memory

Bullshit!

I'm a follower of Deceit — since when do I need to respect Memory?

When has any memory in this world ever leaped out on its own just from waiting around? They've always been dug up by someone.

If even the Vice President of the History School had that kind of passive mindset, how were they ever going to make progress?

Cheng Shi furrowed his brow. He clearly didn't want to stop here, but the question was how to continue this unfinished dream. Would praying to Him even work?

Cheng Shi began mumbling under his breath, but after several attempts with no response, he could only settle down and think of more practical methods. Soon he remembered he still had a Memory artifact in his possession — the Memory Sea Insight, which bore an uncanny resemblance to the Tribunal's trial gavel.

He wasn't sure whether this artifact could grant him further enlightenment within a dream of memories, but using a Memory artifact that looked like an Order artifact in this place — wasn't that a kind of guidance from Fate?

He had to at least try.

So Cheng Shi pulled out the small hammer and struck it against the refined iron arrowhead in his hand.

And just as Sun Miao turned to look at Cheng Shi, puzzled by his inexplicable behavior — Cheng Shi vanished!

More precisely, his consciousness vanished. Just like the two rulers of the Grand Tribunal before him, his head dropped lifelessly, his body slumping sideways in this dream realm of Order.

...

"This is... the Sinking Land?"

A startled cry rang out, and Cheng Shi gradually regained consciousness. He opened his eyes to find himself standing right beside Lid Yara, while on the Grand Investigator's other side stood none other than Supreme Inquisitor Keinlaur.

However, Cheng Shi remained an observer within the dream — the other two hadn't noticed his presence.

Keinlaur nodded and took the lead, walking forward.

"That's right. This is the Sinking Land, and somewhere infinitely far ahead of us lies the legendary Sea of Desire. As long as the desires of living beings persist, the waters here will never run dry.

"Come. Let me show you why this universe can never truly follow Order."

Lid Yara kept her brow tightly knit, clearly repulsed by everything around her, yet she cautiously followed behind Keinlaur.

Cheng Shi never imagined he'd actually succeed — and even less did he expect that what he was witnessing wasn't a mere exchange of consciousness, but a journey of consciousness.

These two had clearly arrived at the edge of the Sea of Desire. Gazing at the endless, desolate mudflats stretching before him, Cheng Shi... hesitated.

How much sanity had perished here. How many desires had converged in this place.

His two Benefactors had told him countless times to stay away from Corruption. Fate had warned that once you strayed into the Sea of Desire, not even Void could guarantee pulling you back out.

So Cheng Shi had always maintained absolute vigilance toward Corruption — he hadn't dared let his guard down even when facing Aph Ros. Now, standing before the Sea of Desire itself, he was even less inclined to make any rash moves.

Even though he was still a dreamer, and everything he saw was merely Memory's enlightenment regarding this stretch of history — who could guarantee that Corruption wasn't lurking within the Sea of Desire?

They were not bound by the shackles of past or future, dream or reality!

If Corruption's gaze fell upon him, there was no telling what desire would do to a Void practitioner whose moral bottom line was... flexible.

So Cheng Shi found himself paralyzed with indecision, unsure whether he should press forward.

If he didn't — the opportunity would be wasted, and the artifact spent for nothing.

If he did and seized the chance — the artifact would have been worth the "ticket price," but he might very well lose himself in the bargain.

This impossible dilemma left Cheng Shi agonizing, and he could only watch as the two figures ahead of him grew smaller and smaller, gradually vanishing into the fog-shrouded mudflats.

'Cheng Shi, what are you afraid of? If the Fun God sent you here, how could He possibly ignore your predicament?

'The Fear Faction's terror is directed at that omniscient, omnipotent "Him" — not at Corruption.

'A mere True God, and it's got you paralyzed!?

'Where's your curiosity? Where's your greed? Your entire being is practically an offering to Corruption — so why fear Them now?

'Look on the bright side. Whether the Greed Lord identity becomes real isn't up to the Fun God anyway. You'll need to meet the real "Benefactor" eventually, won't you?'

Whether it was the fog he'd inhaled emboldening him, or Corruption already resonating with little Cheng's greed, the longer he stood here, the more fiercely the urge to probe burned within him.

His eyes blazing, he stared at the two silhouettes still faintly visible in the mist. After thinking it over again and again, he silently retrieved the Door Key — the one that could resist a measure of Corruption's control — and placed it in his mouth. Then his gaze hardened, and he took his first step toward the unknown.

All the while, a single question looped endlessly in his mind: 'Brother Mouth, am I doing the right thing?' x10.

The Fool's Lips let out a derisive snort: "I don't know, and don't you dare try to pin this on me."

"..."

'Good news — Brother Mouth answered me. Bad news — he saw right through me.'

'Looks like the scolding I'll get when I return is one I'll just have to eat...'

Cheng Shi pursed his lips but didn't forget the caution in his heart. Along the way, he scattered his dice, terrified that Corruption might warp his perception of time.

The mudflat clung to his every step, each one a struggle as if he were trapped in quicksand. Cheng Shi gritted his teeth and quickened his pace, gradually catching up to the other two — though he didn't get too close. He stopped at just the right distance where he could hear their conversation and make out their silhouettes, and went no faster.

A long while later, the three of them — exhausted to the bone — finally spotted the first thing on the boundless mudflat besides fog. But even its hazy outline was enough to freeze Cheng Shi in place with shock.

The Mother Tree of Fear!

The colossal tree standing before them — one that looked as if it pierced the heavens and the earth — radiated a thick, suffocating aura of terror. A single glance was enough to conjure thoughts of the legendary Mother Tree of Fear!

And as the three drew closer, the massive tree — already withering — swayed its branches, from which dangled countless spawns of terror, and every one of them turned to look this way in unison.

Keinlaur and Lid Yara might not have been able to perceive the gaze from another plane of existence, but Cheng Shi felt it instantly — the most absolute terror in all the universe. Because the one staring at him was the Envoy of Corruption, the Servant God of Descent who fed on the world's fear to please her masters, the Daughter of Prosperity — Le Le'er!

In that moment, Cheng Shi's mind went utterly blank.

When terror reached its apex, there was no reaction at all — the brain's self-defense mechanism simply severed consciousness from its violent turmoil, temporarily disconnecting the living being from awareness.

That was exactly Cheng Shi's state now. He didn't even know he was afraid. He simply stood there, frozen, like a puppet assimilated by Silence.

No one could have imagined why Le Le'er's gaze would bypass the protagonists of this memory and fix directly on Cheng Shi — just as no one could have imagined that at this very moment, Le Le'er's mind was equally blank.

Because She sensed the extraordinarily chaotic mixture of auras on Cheng Shi's body. She "saw" that the fall of her mother was connected to this human. She "saw" that the death of her brother was also linked to him. She even "saw" that her sister had somehow transcended death and formed a connection with this human. And above all, she "saw" fragments of fear divinity — divinity that should have existed only within herself...

But the problem was, the faint wisp of divine aura in his mouth was unlike any fear divinity in the entire Sea of Desire!

It was precisely this unfamiliar fragment of divinity that made Le Le'er — who had been withering ever since Prosperity's fall — tremble once more with a fresh kind of fear. She felt fulfilled, satisfied, so much so that the Mother Tree of Fear experienced...

A last radiance.

And when She unconsciously revealed her covetous desire toward the bearer of that divinity, Cheng Shi...

Nearly pissed himself.

...

## Chapter 933: Even Inquisitors Have Desires

...

Although Le Le'er was anything but a stranger to him, Cheng Shi had never imagined he'd one day stand before her.

This colossal tree had inherited every aspect of her mother Prosperity's style — immense, "lush," and festooned with terror demons dangling like fruit alongside their "eyes."

The only difference was perhaps that the terror demons hadn't fused into the trunk, and the lushness was a thing of the past.

Le Le'er had clearly withered by now. Not a single green leaf clung to her gnarled branches. Her gaunt limbs resembled Decay more than Prosperity — much like her brother Dizel, rotted and twisted.

Of course, rather than scrutinizing Le Le'er, the very first thing Cheng Shi did upon regaining consciousness after that peak of terror was what he considered the wisest possible move — he hid the ring on his finger, the one that had collected Le Le'er's fear, away into his personal storage space.

'I don't dare guess what attracted her gaze, but at least right now there's no lost divinity of yours on me. You can't still hold that against me, can you?'

Cheng Shi consoled himself with that bit of self-deception, but to his surprise, Le Le'er had only glanced at him once and made no further move afterward.

Having savored the freshest fear, her attention returned to the protagonists of this memory-dream.

Keinlaur was still pressing forward. Though his constantly trembling body made it clear that the terror in his heart had reached its limit, he gritted his teeth and persisted — until...

He raised his hand. Directly beneath the withered canopy of the Mother Tree of Fear, he picked up a massive branch shaped remarkably like the body of a bow. Then he hoisted it above his head and roared with every ounce of strength in his body:

"All for... a new Order."

The moment the words left his lips, Keinlaur planted the wood as a bow, twisted fear into a string, and fired an arrow named Terror at Lid Yara — the woman who had trekked alongside him for so long.

Lid Yara had still been waiting for an explanation from him, but the instant she heard the bowstring sing, she knew she'd been wrong.

Keinlaur hadn't brought her here to show her the truth. He'd brought her here to make her a stepping stone for his embrace of desire.

She was a Hunter — no one understood better how to string a perfect hunting bow. If this colossal bow, drenched in the aura of fear, could fell "Order," then the entire nation might be engulfed in the terror of Order's absence.

Keinlaur had become Corruption's lapdog after all!

That was Lid Yara's final thought. The next second, she screamed and died — consumed by the ultimate terror.

Witnessing this unimaginable scene, Cheng Shi's pupils contracted sharply and his scalp went numb. His thoughts mirrored Lid Yara's — he'd never suspected Keinlaur's invitation was a trap.

The Master of Deception had told him Keinlaur was speaking the truth, but the problem was that what Keinlaur had said was merely an invitation for Lid Yara to come and see for herself. As for what she'd see...

The slain Lid Yara, on this land belonging to Corruption, instantly dissolved into a strand of terror so dense it was nearly solid, flowing toward the canopy of the Mother Tree of Fear. Before long, a new, infant terror demon sprouted among the dense clusters already hanging from the branches.

The scene was grotesque beyond words — yet even that grotesquerie paled beside Keinlaur, who stood beneath the tree laughing like a madman.

The massive branch, after drinking blood, began to pulse with crimson veins. Its shape grew ever more akin to a bow's body. Keinlaur leaned against the great bow, running his fingers reverently along every inch of its grain, and spoke with deep emotion:

"To restore Order with this bow, one must first string it with 'the blood of order.'

"My blood still has its uses, so Lid Yara — I'm afraid you'll have to be the one to offer yours.

"You were always prepared to sacrifice yourself for Him at a moment's notice, weren't you?

"You'd already resolved to die before you even came here, hadn't you?

"Since that's the case — since death was inevitable either way — then dying beneath this Startled Bow is, at least, an offering of your last shred of devotion to a new Order.

"I won't forget you. The new Order won't forget you. And the world certainly won't forget you."

With that, Keinlaur picked up the refined iron arrowhead that had fallen onto the mudflat, gripped the great bow, and slowly faded from Cheng Shi's view.

And the moment the Supreme Inquisitor's silhouette dissolved, Cheng Shi's expression hardened, cold sweat erupting down his back in an instant.

'Don't forget — this is only an enlightenment from Memory. If the vessel of this memory has vanished, then why is the observer still here?'

'Who kept me behind?'

Facing this scene, this tree, this sea — the answer seemed self-evident.

Cheng Shi was terrified. Seeing that he hadn't been teleported out, he tried stepping backward, hoping to "go back the way he came" — at the very least, to leave the Mother Tree of Fear's line of sight and stop her from intensifying his terror.

But just as Cheng Shi lifted his foot to retreat...

"Hummm—"

A strange radiance cascaded down from the Mother Tree of Fear's canopy, merging irresistibly into Cheng Shi's body. The next second, the ever-cautious Clown lost... all of his fear.

Cheng Shi suddenly stopped. He raised his head, staring directly at the heaven-piercing colossus before him, and the first words out of his mouth were:

"Le Le'er, are you dying?"

The moment he spoke, the countless terror demons dangling from the branches opened their crimson eyes in unison, swiveling to look at him. But Cheng Shi paid them no mind — he even furrowed his brow in disgust and added:

"Your children are hideous. If you have something to say to me, make them leave.

"I'm about to have a trypophobia attack... No, wait — why call it a phobia? I don't feel any fear. I just feel disgusted."

"..."

After hearing Cheng Shi's words, Le Le'er showed no anger whatsoever. She merely swayed her withered branches and uttered the first words a mortal had heard from her since she'd plunged into the Sea of Desire.

"Garuda — is that you?"

"..."

Cheng Shi froze.

She'd still sensed her own divinity — but she believed it was still on Garuda.

'Except our dear Garuda was already devoured by your mother. And now you suddenly remember him?'

'Isn't it a bit late for that?'

Cheng Shi had no idea why he'd lost all sense of fear — or rather, he hadn't even realized his fear was gone. He simply felt there was no danger here whatsoever, which was why he dared to run his mouth so recklessly.

"Sorry, there's no Garuda here. The dagger in which you two were buried together has been dismantled.

"That Lord said the two of you weren't a good match. Our Garuda was too upright — he deserves an innocent girl.

"As for you... forget it. Just stop looking. Spare a couple of families the heartache."

The colossal Mother Tree of Fear showed no emotional shift at any of his words — except when she heard the word "buried together," a faint aura of sorrow drifted from her.

"He died..."

"That's right. While you were gulping down fear and partying in the Sea of Desire, he was treated by your mother, the Prosperity Mother, as compensation for your rebellion — and devoured.

"You should understand your mother well enough. Otherwise you wouldn't have been born fearless."

...

Chapter 934: Le Le'er

Le Le'er fell silent. Wisps of bewilderment and confusion drifted from her — She seemed wholly ignorant of the outside world, as though She'd been sinking here for countless ages, mired in chaos until this very moment.

Seeing this, Cheng Shi was dumbfounded.

'Sis, please don't tell me the sky's falling out there and you're in here not knowing a thing?'

'Fine, fine, fine — I kept badgering you to do your job, and it turns out you really haven't done a lick of work.'

'Is fear really that delicious?'

'Tasty enough to keep you blissful for all these years without ever bothering to check what's happening outside.'

'Then again, lucky for you that you're growing at the edge of the Sea of Desire — nobody dares come bother you. Otherwise, with your level of sloth, the Envoy seat would've changed hands several times over.'

Cheng Shi pursed his lips in exasperation. While Le Le'er was still lost in confusion, he surveyed his surroundings once more. He could already hear the faint sound of tides and figured the Sea of Desire must be just ahead.

'If I could just take a few more steps — even just glimpse it from afar — wouldn't that make me the first person in this world... no, the first human in all of recorded history to have laid eyes on the Sea of Desire?'

The thought set his heart ablaze, though he also knew Le Le'er had kept him here for a reason — She had something to say. So he urgently called out to her again:

"Hurry up and say what you want to say. You can dawdle all you like, but it won't bring Garuda back.

"Your mother devoured Garuda and then died herself — effectively killing him twice and extinguishing every last hope of his resurrection."

Le Le'er's aura hitched. She didn't pursue Cheng Shi's blasphemous words, but genuinely heeded his suggestion and dispersed all of her offspring.

Countless terror demons shrieked into the air, spreading their wings across the sky of the Sinking Land, plunging the entire realm into darkness in an instant.

Confronted with this rare and terrifying spectacle, Cheng Shi didn't even break a single drop of cold sweat. He merely pulled out a flashlight with a look of distaste and aimed its solitary beam at Le Le'er's trunk like a stage spotlight.

"The backdrop's set. The spotlight's on. Ready to talk now, Le Le'er?"

"I'm dying..."

"Yeah, I noticed. Any last words? I can serve as a witness to your final testament and preserve one last trace of you in this world.

"Naturally, the witnessing service comes with a fee — though I've always been fair and honest in my dealings.

"In the human world, we generally respect the deceased, so even when we swindle, we don't swindle too much."

Without an ounce of fear in him, even the tone of Cheng Shi's negotiations had changed. He didn't need to consider the consequences of deception — he simply laid his intentions bare.

"..."

Le Le'er fell silent again. Her moments of lucidity were few; only now, at death's door, had she emerged from the ecstasy of ultimate fear. Her only memory of humans still lingered in the Rainforest, back when she interacted with her people.

Those mortals had respected her, supported her, worshipped her — but never feared her. That was precisely why She had stripped Cheng Shi of his fear, trying as best She could to make this mortal, who had stumbled close through sheer coincidence, more like them.

But as it turned out, no follower had ever dared to stare a god in the face quite like Cheng Shi — let alone actually talk back to one.

Of course, the human before her was no ordinary mortal. At the very least, his body carried many familiar scents — and that left Le Le'er even more confused.

Their auras seemed to be fusing.

"All things eventually march toward Death. That is the inevitable path of life, and the final destination of all existence in the universe.

"I was closer to Death than most, yet Garuda rejected me..."

"?"

'Wait, hold on!'

Cheng Shi's gaze sharpened and he immediately challenged: "Le Le'er, don't you dare pull the same stunt as those bastards from the History School with their revisionist chronicles. That Lord told me clearly — it was you who rejected Garuda!"

Le Le'er's swaying branches froze in an instant. Her voice carried a mixture of confusion and uncertainty:

"I clearly separated my most tender branch and fused it with his divinity, sending Garuda the most joyous of invitations — inviting him to bathe in fear with me here. But he...

"Never answered."

"..."

Cheng Shi stood stunned. So the so-called "corruption" of the Dagger of Garuda hadn't been a rejection at all — it was an invitation. But who in their right mind sends an invitation using Corruption's divinity?

'You had the nerve to invite, but did anyone dare accept?'

'Did you even stop to consider what kind of reputation Corruption had among the gods?'

'Oh right — by that point you'd already drowned in the ecstasy of fear, too far gone to think about any of that. But then again, even in a state of brainless bliss, you still didn't forget to invite Garuda to join the party...'

'Tch. Hard to judge.'

'What even is this? A pure, tragic love story where two souls raced toward each other only to pass by, each plummeting off opposite cliffs?'

'Whether the love was pure, who knows — but both parties were definitely idiots. Both of them.'

At this thought, Cheng Shi didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

'When it comes down to it, the gods' drama is always tastier. Human romances can't hold a candle to the absolute chaos the divine stir up. Truly, the essence of the universe is gossip.'

Listening to all this, Cheng Shi was still debating whether to clarify the misunderstanding for Le Le'er, but he quickly realized — she hadn't actually blamed Garuda for anything. She'd pinned all the fault on her mother.

Le Le'er believed it was the Prosperity Mother devouring Garuda that had brought this love to its premature end. And as he listened to Le Le'er's muttered ramblings, Cheng Shi sighed inwardly and ultimately chose not to reveal the full truth to this dying tree.

Perhaps it was better this way. At least in Le Le'er's heart, Garuda's name remained untarnished.

Though he'd misjudged her too — Le Le'er was no temptress. She was just a fool.

"When one grows old, one always likes to bring up the past. So, Le Le'er — what's the point of telling me all this?"

As the swarm of terror demons gradually departed, the Sinking Land brightened once more. The Mother Tree of Fear swayed her branches like the lone "survivor" in this forsaken place, her voice drifting with confusion:

"I don't know either. I've been alone for too long... I just wanted to say something.

"I felt my mother pass away. But I don't know — after her fall, are my people... still all right?"

Cheng Shi rolled his eyes, feeling indignant on behalf of Le Le'er's former followers:

"Oh, so now you remember your people?"

"When you flung yourself into the Sea of Desire, why didn't you spare them a thought first?"

"A god shouldn't only remember her followers when she needs their faith, Le Le'er. Don't tell me you're trying to use the power of faith to revive yourself?"

"Does Prosperity even have that kind of power?"

"Corruption certainly doesn't — otherwise you wouldn't look like this."

Every word out of Cheng Shi's mouth dripped with sarcasm, yet Le Le'er didn't take the slightest offense. Or perhaps after fully embracing fear, She had lost certain other emotions — growing here in a murky daze, only regaining clarity on the cusp of death.

...

Chapter 935: Survived Another Day

Seeing how pitifully foolish Le Le'er was, Cheng Shi sighed and revealed a few details about the Rainforest being under the Grand Tribunal's protection. But he hadn't forgotten why he'd come here, so he followed up immediately:

"Order once entered the Sea of Desire alongside War. Did They come into conflict with your Benefactor?"

Le Le'er's aura grew even more bewildered. She actually asked Cheng Shi in return:

"When did They come?"

"?"

Cheng Shi laughed in disbelief. He had no idea how to evaluate this utterly "unique" deity.

"Fine, fine, fine — They never came, I came, I'm the one who came, happy now...?"

By this point, Cheng Shi had more or less figured out the situation. Rather than saying Le Le'er had fallen to become Corruption's Envoy, it was more accurate to say She'd devolved into a simpleton who did nothing but devour fear to amuse herself.

This "I don't know, I don't know, I don't know" routine of hers was enough to drive a person mad.

"Do you regret it?"

Finding no other answers to extract, Cheng Shi could only redirect his attention back to Le Le'er herself.

"You plunged into the Sea of Desire just to fill the void of your missing fear, and you became the Mother Tree of Fear — loathed by all in the universe. You lost your people, you lost Garuda, you even lost everything except fear. Le Le'er, do you have any regrets now?"

"Do you still remember the 'courage' you felt when you leaped?"

"Courage..." Le Le'er's aura suddenly wilted, and the branches of the heaven-piercing tree began to wither at an alarming speed. "I had no courage..."

"Back then, standing before the Sea of Desire, I witnessed what true fear was. I was already deeply satisfied. I didn't want to jump — someone pushed me in..."

"!!??"

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted. He blurted out in disbelief: "Garuda!?"

"No, it wasn't Garuda. I know his aura well. But the one who pushed me..."

"I've never... felt... their aura..."

"They were like... like..."

Mid-sentence, Le Le'er lost her voice. She grew increasingly dazed and confused, her branches seeming to point somewhere — but the moment they aimed toward Cheng Shi, all movement ceased.

Something seemed to be affecting her. Her withering accelerated.

But she didn't die. Deep within her trunk, she preserved one final, feeble spark of vitality, wrestling against this sudden external force.

Of course, Cheng Shi knew none of this. All he saw was that as an Envoy's life force faded, the colossal tree before him lost its former grandeur and became utterly ordinary and hideous.

And right at that moment, a sparrow-like bird appeared from nowhere and, under Cheng Shi's watchful gaze, alighted gently on the withered treetop. It glanced about, pecking here and there, as if demonstrating to Cheng Shi through action alone that this tree was no longer a threat.

Cheng Shi froze for an instant. He hadn't even begun to process what was happening before a blazing desire surged through his heart.

Since the path ahead was clear, since his heart held no fear — then why not... go take a look at the Sea of Desire?

Even just one glimpse from afar!

The moment this thought arose, the distant sound of tides grew even clearer. Hearing that soul-stirring call, Cheng Shi didn't hesitate — he took his first step toward the Sea of Desire.

Then a second, a third, a fourth...

His strides grew longer, his speed faster. He was terrified that a single moment of delay would cost him this once-in-a-universe chance to see the Sea of Desire with his own eyes. So he mustered every ounce of strength and charged headlong forward.

Just as Cheng Shi was about to leave the Mother Tree of Fear's line of sight and plunge straight toward the edge of the Sea of Desire — just as the Clown was about to surrender to his own desire and embrace

the cravings of the universe — the little bird that had just landed on the withered tree hurriedly flapped its wings and took flight, craning its neck as if to sing and awaken this lost soul.

But before the bird could utter its first note — BANG — Cheng Shi's figure suddenly halted, driving into the ground like a nail, rooted firmly between the Mother Tree of Fear and the Sea of Desire.

He stopped.

Drenched in cold sweat, gasping for breath.

His face was deathly pale, his entire body trembling. His frame appeared utterly rigid, yet his lips seemed to "dance" with a life of their own.

"Heh — fear's back?"

The Fool's Lips chose this rare moment to proactively send Cheng Shi a "greeting."

Cheng Shi clenched his fists with white-knuckled force, gritted his teeth, and didn't dare raise his head to look at the road ahead. He squeezed two words from his throat: "No."

"Then why'd you stop?"

"Because..." He wrenched the foot he'd stomped deep into the mud free, turned stiffly around, took several deep breaths, and resolutely began walking back the way he'd come. "...Old Jia taught me that being human means first learning to control your desires. Having no fear isn't a reason to cut loose."

"Ha. I've seen people put themselves on pedestals before, but this is the first time I've seen someone put someone else up there.

"Whether it was him or not, you know the truth, Clown."

"..."

So much for the cool act — or rather, so much for that performance.

It truly wasn't Old Jia's teachings that had brought Cheng Shi back. A memory tied to a mere mortal couldn't possibly withstand the tidal pull at the edge of the Sea of Desire.

Corruption was simply too terrifying. Even if a creature entering this place harbored only the faintest wisp of desire, it would find countless resonances across these mudflats near the Sea.

Those resonances were like a thousand invisible threads — tugging you, pulling you, controlling you, drawing you ever deeper toward the Sea of Desire, seeking stronger connections and deeper resonance, until your desires flowed like a trickle merging into a river, becoming one with the Sea.

Even a Servant God might fail to resist that pull, let alone Cheng Shi, who merely possessed a single container. So he'd fallen for it almost immediately — especially now, stripped of fear, he had no way to guard against his own desires. Not until...

He intervened!

Cheng Shi, having resolutely turned back, suddenly coughed up a mouthful of blood and spat the blood-stained Door Key from his mouth into his palm.

He stared numbly at the key that had saved his life, realizing it was that Lord's gift that had pulled him back from the edge of the Sea of Desire.

Indeed — Death had protected Cheng Shi once more.

Le Le'er may have stripped away his fear, but she couldn't take the new authority of fear that didn't belong to Corruption.

When Cheng Shi had been sprinting toward the Sea of Desire faster and faster — so fearless that he'd scorned the Door Key's protection and nearly spat it out — the rough-hewn creation of Death had sliced open the underside of his tongue, delivering a new fear unto him.

And so the Clown stopped.

What he'd said wasn't entirely wrong. What saved the Clown was indeed fear — but not the old fear. It was a new fear, a brand-new terror that didn't belong to Corruption.

Once he realized that even the Sinking Land, short of the Sea of Desire itself, was far from simple, Cheng Shi retreated even faster. As he cautiously withdrew, he asked with lingering dread:

"Brother Mouth, I lost my fear and nearly charged straight into the Sea of Desire. Would the same have happened to Order when It stepped onto this land?"

"Did Corruption strip away Its fear to make It fracture even further?"

"So is that how Fear-Order came to be?"

...

Chapter 936: The Foolish Old Man Pales Before You

...

The Fool's Lips stayed silent for a long while, but Cheng Shi's relentless badgering finally forced a sigh out of it:

"I'm not the omniscient, omnipotent one — how would I know?"

"Then you must know something at least?"

"All I know is that the Clown who just barely escaped with his life is still a clown.

"Have you ever considered what would've happened to me if you'd died inside the Sea of Desire? What about Tongue? What about Ears?"

"We don't want to turn into some bizarre Lips of Fear, Tongue of Ecstasy, and Ears of Anguish."

"..."

In that moment, Cheng Shi hadn't had the mental bandwidth to think about any of that — desire had seized total control.

But now that he'd regained his composure and heard those words, a strange expression crept over his face as he shot back:

"Brother Mouth, Le Le'er was Prosperity's Envoy before becoming the Mother Tree of Fear. Since you're saying you could become something akin to her — Lips of Fear — doesn't that mean you're tacitly admitting something? Namely:

"Even if the Fun God hasn't officially given you the title, you're effectively already his Envoy?"

"You're wrong." The Fool's Lips responded instantly.

"?"

"The true Envoy is you, Lord Yu Xi.

"Although, judging by today's performance, we might as well drop 'Yu Xi' and just call you the Greed Lord instead. After all, the only thing connecting you to the Sea of Desire is greed."

"..."

'Got roasted again — but this time it actually felt... kind of nice?'

Cheng Shi smiled. A grin split across his ashen face, though it wasn't because he'd collected some masochistic pleasure from verbal jabs at the edge of the Sea of Desire. He smiled because being roasted meant he was still alive.

'How wonderful. Survived another day — and in the absurdly dangerous Sinking Land at the edge of the Sea of Desire, no less.'

Cheng Shi quickened his retreat, breathing with utmost caution, even covering his ears to block out the distant tidal sounds.

He was convinced it was the fog and the tides that had hijacked his reason, and Le Le'er's unwitting assist had sealed the deal.

But with fear restored, Cheng Shi was back to his steady, prudent self. At least on the way back, he could feel his condition steadily improving.

"Brother Mouth, if even I couldn't resist the Sea of Desire's call, how did Keinlaur manage to hold himself back at the foot of the Mother Tree of Fear — profiting from it and walking away?"

The Fool's Lips hadn't intended to humor Cheng Shi any further, but the rare chance was too good to pass up. It let out a derisive snort:

"The Supreme Inquisitor has a Benefactor's protection."

"?" Cheng Shi stopped mid-step and furrowed his brow. "That's some comment. As if I don't have a Benefactor? I've got four... no, three... two Benefactors. Isn't that more than his?"

"Quantity aside, I said he has a Benefactor's protection. You just have Benefactors — what good does that do?"

"???"

Cheng Shi froze. He was already wondering the same thing. If the Fun God had sent him to probe Corruption, why wasn't it the Fun God who'd pulled him back from the brink of the Sea of Desire? Why was it Death?

His expression turned peculiar, but before he could even voice the question, the Fool's Lips helpfully answered for him.

"If He dared come here to fish someone out, why do you think He needed a little clown to scout the way for Him?"

"Is it because clowns run faster than fun?"

"..."

'Well... that's actually a fair point...'

'But hold on, Brother Mouth — are you blaspheming the Fun God right now?'

"Oh, some people toss around blasphemy every other sentence without blinking, yet I grumble once and suddenly I'm being judged?"

"Lord Clown Inquisitor, might I inquire — whose divine law does your judgment follow?"

"Surely not the God of Deceit's — the one who didn't bother to save you?"

"..." 'Brother Mouth's especially combative today.'

'Maybe he felt the fear too?'

Cheng Shi fell silent.

Sure, losing control to desire was his own fault. But in all honesty, shouldn't the absent Fun God bear at least three... no, seventy percent of the blame?

And what about Fate?

The other Benefactor who claimed to guide him toward his Fixed Destiny — why hadn't He shown up either? Was his Fixed Destiny supposed to lie in the depths of the Sea of Desire?

Absurd!

If he said that out loud, the entire universe would die laughing.

At least he'd made it out of the Sea of Desire's pull and salvaged his life. Now he truly owed that Lord a debt of survival.

Cheng Shi rallied his spirits, kept every nerve taut, and walked faster and faster. Before long, he was back at the foot of the Mother Tree of Fear — only now, Le Le'er had completely withered, drained of every last drop of vitality.

This Envoy of Corruption, who had dominated the Sea of Desire for an eternity, had finally perished alongside her fallen mother. Who knew whether, when they met again in some other dimension, they'd still disagree about the will to prosper all of creation.

"Dead... An Envoy just... died, like that..."

The sight hit Cheng Shi with tremendous force. He'd witnessed Prosperity's self-destruction, true enough — but that apocalyptic detonation, which shocked the universe into silence, had been earth-shattering and awe-inspiring. Le Le'er's death, though...

She was like a colossal tree with the fast-forward button pressed — dying as ordinarily as could be. Soundless, unremarkable, no different from a flower wilting on a roadside or a tree toppling in a forest.

That stark contrast was what truly shook Cheng Shi. It was beyond imagination that the fall of such a being could be so silent.

So even becoming a Servant God only made you a slightly bigger wave in the river of this era — utterly incomparable to Them, who had climbed out of the river and sat upon its banks.

Perhaps in the next era Le Le'er could start over. But the question was — could She wait that long? Could the universe?

And even if they could, would what arrived be another era...

Or another experiment?

Cheng Shi's thoughts descended into turmoil. A flicker of confusion crossed his eyes, but fear jolted him awake, helping him find himself again.

He stood beneath the withered colossus, glancing left and right, when a puzzled look crossed his face:

"Brother Mouth, can ordinary living things wander into the Sinking Land?"

"Admitting you're an Envoy now?"

"..." Cheng Shi rolled his eyes. "I came in as a dreamer, so I'm hardly an ordinary creature. But I distinctly remember seeing a sparrow on this branch earlier — how come it's gone now?"

"Isn't it right here? Chirping and squawking all day long — if that's not a sparrow, what is?"

"..."

'Definitely not a good day to chat with Brother Mouth. The sarcasm just won't stop.'

'But was that sparrow just an illusion created by the Sea of Desire's tidal disturbance?'

Cheng Shi frowned slightly but didn't dwell on it. His attention was quickly drawn to Le Le'er's "corpse."

'Think about it — Keinlaur picked up a single fallen branch from Le Le'er and fashioned it into a giant bow that could split the wind and slay a person. If I hauled off the entire dead tree...'

Hiss—

'The Sea of Desire's influencing me again!'

Even as the thought formed, Cheng Shi's hands had already fished a sharp axe from his personal storage, seemingly of their own accord.

Seeing this, someone let out a derisive snort:

"In ancient times, a foolish old man tried to move a mountain. Today, a clown tries to chop a tree.

"But the old man had endless descendants to carry on his work. The clown has nothing but laughs.

"If laughter alone could fell a tree — the old man pales before you."

"..."

Cheng Shi's face crumbled, as if all his strength had been sapped.

'Great. The one episode where Brother Mouth decides to be literary.'

...

Chapter 937: Caring for Cold Old Bones

Cheng Shi was Cheng Shi — a little mocking banter was never going to make him abandon his greed.

Even knowing that greed was the bait that stirred the Sea of Desire's tides, having treasure right in front of him yet being told not to take it — then why didn't they just kill him outright when he'd nearly stumbled into the Sea?

So at the very least, the Lord on the Bone Throne supported him taking Le Le'er's corpse.

Besides, was he taking this giant tree for himself?

The Fishbone Hall was so cold — he needed some firewood to start a fire. What if that Lord caught a chill? Who'd protect him then?

Could the unreliable Fun God handle it?

No!

So Cheng Shi got to work, burying his axe right into Le Le'er's "ankle."

Honestly, he hadn't even swung hard — he'd merely wanted to test whether an ordinary axe could breach an Envoy's shell. But to his surprise, this single chop not only split a gash in the withered tree wide enough for a person to lie in, it also shook loose something from the sparse canopy that Cheng Shi could never have anticipated.

A sphere of light shimmering with every color imaginable descended from above, landing squarely before Cheng Shi's eyes. Up close, he saw that within the glow were two intertwined, inverse teardrops.

Their slender tails connected while their rounded bodies repelled each other. The light inside them stretched and warped ceaselessly, tangled and twisted, making the whole thing look like an alien hourglass.

Cheng Shi had only ever seen this peculiar, eldritch shape on one kind of object. Without a moment's hesitation, he pulled out his own container from within his consciousness.

A container!

When Le Le'er died, a container had fallen from her canopy!

Cheng Shi was stunned. He set the two containers side by side — one emanating the aura of Chaos, the other relentlessly tugging at his emotions. The unmistakable reaction confirmed it: the new container before him was a Corruption container!

"This..."

Cheng Shi's heart lurched. His first instinct was to glance toward the distant Sea of Desire. His second was to stow his own container and take a cautious step back.

No — half a step.

Because while his expression was guarded, his eyes blazed with hunger.

If this hadn't been a Corruption container, Cheng Shi wouldn't have let it sit before him for this long. Even if one person couldn't hold two containers at once, he'd have found a way to stash it in his personal storage space.

But it was precisely because it was a Corruption container that greedy little Cheng felt genuine, bone-deep fear.

Claiming he wasn't afraid would be a lie. The crisis of nearly stumbling into the Sea of Desire was still fresh in his mind. No matter how badly he wanted to be greedy, Cheng Shi had to ensure he'd live long enough to be greedy.

And at this moment...

'Seventeen seconds. Nothing dangerous seems to have appeared. The tides of the Sea of Desire haven't surged again. Does that mean the container is safe?'

'No — steady, Cheng Shi, be more cautious. Wait at least twenty seconds.'

The instant twenty seconds passed, Cheng Shi snatched up the Corruption container and bolted, arms pumping wildly as he sprinted in the direction farthest from the Sea of Desire.

With this prize in hand, Le Le'er's corpse didn't matter anymore. As for the Fishbone Hall being too cold — well, that Lord was used to the environment by now. A sudden change might not suit Him anyway, right?

Cheng Shi was already drowning his thoughts in random nonsense, terrified that his uncontrollable glee might stir the Sea of Desire's tides behind him.

Yet as he ran, he found himself gradually calming down. The chaotic thoughts in his head gave way to analysis about how this container had ended up in his hands. Moreover, the fear in his heart dissolved again, allowing him to assess his own shifting state and the "risks" that lay ahead.

He analyzed everything with cold rationality. Before long, a flash of insight struck and he stopped in his tracks, set the container on the ground, and backed away from it with a grave expression.

Sure enough — after Cheng Shi released the container, his greed and fear slowly returned.

He stared at the container again, eyes ablaze, and realized that the Corruption container didn't absorb faith from the universe like his own Dyeing Container — instead, it continuously devoured the desires of anyone who drew near!

This thing didn't even need an owner. Whoever found it could potentially become Corruption's Envoy!

Because faith was finite, but desire... was endless.

'This is bad. The Fun God's joke turned out to be prophetic — the Greed Lord is literally waving me over!'

'But let's be honest — who could stand here and refuse a free container?'

'Besides, isn't picking up loot after a hero defeats the boss standard procedure? Even if the boss fell on its own, the hero did launch a verbal attack against it.'

'Wait — are verbal attacks not attacks now?'

Cheng Shi had nearly convinced himself, but before making the final decision to take the container, he decided to deceive himself one more time. He shook out his arms and asked cautiously:

"Brother Mouth, this container... can I take it?"

The Fool's Lips let out a contemptuous snort, declining to comment on the Clown's self-deception. In his panic, Cheng Shi pulled out his Tongue, which simply flipped over and went back to sleep.

Seeing that Tongue wouldn't engage either, an embarrassed Cheng Shi pulled out his Ears. Ears were reliable — they glanced at the container, then asked a puzzled question:

"He gave you this thing — what for? Wants you to go undercover in the Sea of Desire?"

"!?"

'He, Sea of Desire, undercover?'

'What does that mean — this was given by the Fun God?'

'But isn't this Le Le'er's relic? The Fun God never showed up — how can this count as a "gift"?''

Cheng Shi stood frozen. He furrowed his brow, sensing something was off about this explanation. He tried to ask more, but Ears — realizing it had said too much — instantly muted itself. This anomalous change made Cheng Shi suspect the Fun God might have already arrived and was watching him from somewhere right now.

So he drew a deep breath and called out toward the sky of the Sinking Land — loudly... no, he didn't dare make it loud. He whispered:

"My Lord Benefactor, since this is your gift, it would be rude of me to refuse?"

The moment the words left his lips, the Fool's Lips scoffed: "You said that so quietly — were you hoping He wouldn't hear, so you could count His silence as consent?"

"?"

'Brother Mouth, whose side are you on!? Why do you keep blurting out the truth!'

Cheng Shi coughed awkwardly, then a gleam sparked in his eyes: "So He really is here?"

"Oh absolutely, He's totally here. He's everywhere, all the time."

"..."

The Deceit follower who'd just straightened his spine thinking his Benefactor had arrived immediately hunched over again.

'That tone doesn't sound like He's actually here at all.'

'Is Brother Mouth lying to me again?'

'But regardless of whether He's here or not, I can't just throw away a Corruption container, can I?'

'I've already carried it this far, so far from the Mother Tree of Fear — how can it still count as hers?'

'What if it's a wild, ownerless Corruption container? After all, a container that absorbs desire doesn't need a master. No master means no owner. And if it has no owner — why can't it be mine?'

'Praise the Benefactor!'

Cheng Shi decisively tossed the container into his bag.

After standing still for a moment and confirming that nothing had changed — and that his desires and emotions were unaffected as long as he wasn't touching the container — Cheng Shi pursed his lips. His unsatisfied gaze drifted back toward the Mother Tree of Fear.

'You know...

'That Lord lives alone in the Fishbone Hall, and it's awfully desolate in there. Even if a bit of firelight can't warm His essential coldness, at least it could bring some warmth to the little skulls in the hall, right?'

'That Lord cares so deeply for His followers — surely He'd support me doing this, wouldn't He?'

The thought had barely formed before Cheng Shi steeled his nerves, shook out his hands, and tentatively walked back.

...

### Chapter 938: One Envoy Falls, Two Envoys Rise

As it turned out, after Le Le'er's death, the Sinking Land held no more dangers.

The Sea of Desire's tides still sounded far away. As long as fear remained and one stayed cautious, falling prey again wasn't easy — a lesson Cheng Shi had distilled after traversing this stretch of land for the third time.

He shuffled back to the foot of the Mother Tree of Fear in small, measured steps. When he saw that the gash from his single axe blow was spreading on its own, he realized this colossal tree — which had once pierced the universe to drink in fear — was truly rotten to the core.

The withered trunk could no longer support this gargantuan mass of gnarled branches. Cheng Shi was convinced that one more swing of the axe would bring the whole thing crashing down before him.

And so — for the sake of his colleagues in the Fishbone Hall — Cheng Shi threw caution to the wind. He resolutely pulled out his axe and delivered another blow at the fissure.

BOOM—

The strike rang out like a blade striking a chime, producing a deafening hum. Before Cheng Shi could react, he saw cracks spontaneously erupt across the heaven-piercing colossus, racing outward like serpents, covering its entire body in an instant, and then—

CRASH — it exploded.

The giant tree didn't produce debris. Instead, it dissolved into countless motes of light, like stars scattered into a river, transforming this barren, cold Sinking Land into a dazzling galaxy.

The shockwave sent Cheng Shi flying. His pupils shrank as he tensed every limb, plowing the ground with all fours and skidding dozens of meters before barely coming to a halt. But when he looked up, every muscle in his body was wound even tighter than before.

Because there, hovering in the mist-cleared, star-dusted air directly ahead, was an hourglass strikingly similar in shape to a gnarled tree — radiating brilliant light, swirling with emerald green, endlessly alive!

"This is—!!??"

Cheng Shi was thunderstruck. If the Corruption container had required careful identification, then this container's allegiance could be named at a single glance.

Prosperity!

Who could have imagined that today — after Prosperity's fall — he would find a Prosperity container?

And who could have imagined that the boss, upon falling, would drop not one gold coin but two?

If this had happened with any other Envoy, Cheng Shi might have harbored doubts about the second container. But this was Le Le'er — She had been Prosperity's Envoy, the Daughter of Prosperity. Even after falling to become the Mother Tree of Fear, She'd maintained a form remarkably similar to Prosperity's. Wasn't that alone proof enough that this container's existence was perfectly logical?

Yet now, Cheng Shi wasn't as quick to grab it as before. He was thinking — thinking about whether this was Deceit's illusion or Fate's gift.

That Benefactor who'd practically parted ways with the Fear Faction — could He have had a change of heart?

Otherwise, how could his luck be this good?

Saying the Clown wasn't greedy would be an outright lie, but being this greedy... even the Clown was getting nervous.

Taking without asking was stealing. He could still stretch the excuse for the last container — call it payment for witnessing Le Le'er's "innocence." But this one? How was he supposed to spin that?

Cheng Shi was frantic. He feared delay would invite complications and something would happen to the container. He feared it was a trap and some entity was exploiting his greed to scheme against him. The panicked Clown gnawed at his lip and clenched his fists again and again, until he finally decided to dump this pot squarely on his Benefactor's head.

Greater power meant greater responsibility. Greater responsibility meant a bigger pot to carry!

What kind of Benefactor refused to take the blame for his follower?

So Cheng Shi went for round two, whispering again — only this time his voice was even quieter than before, his lips moving without parting.

"A Benefactor's gift cannot be refused. Since my Lord Benefactor thinks so highly of me, I shall repay Him with the utmost devotion!"

He didn't even leave the Fun God time to give tacit approval. He simply kicked off the ground, rocketed forward, snatched the container — and snapped his fingers, teleporting himself back to... outside the dream.

Yes — outside the dream!

The talent Time Has Path, bestowed by Time, allowed Cheng Shi to set the dice-swap temporal anchor outside the dream, back in the trial. But the sheer mental energy required for such an enormous temporal leap was beyond what Cheng Shi could normally muster. So how had he succeeded?

Because — "Praise Prosperity!" No — praise Big Cat!

It was the Thorn Weeping Rite that had worked another miracle. When Cheng Shi had first been preparing to flee the Sinking Land with the Corruption container, he'd looped the Thorn Weeping Rite around his arm as a precaution against running out of mental energy mid-sprint.

He hadn't needed it then, but the fully charged mental reserves had now become his key to escaping the dream.

And in the very instant the Clown departed this grotesque and beautiful dream, a pair of star-like eyes opened in the sky above where the Mother Tree of Fear had once stood rooted.

Those eyes gazed toward the Sea of Desire with an ambiguous, half-smiling expression and spoke in a cryptic tone:

"It seems you're quite the cold-hearted one yourself — watching your own follower die right before you without batting an eye. Where's your desire, then?"

"You preach the confluence of all desire in the universe, yet you yourself have forsaken desire. If your followers ever found out... would you still have their faith?"

"Oh wait — you don't need faith. You only need desire. But what do you want with so much desire?"

"I'm genuinely curious now. Is it really you hiding in the Sea of Desire?"

The moment the words fell, those eyes blinked twice, and in an instant the sky of the Sinking Land shifted from clear to dark. The Void violently tore into reality, painting everything within those eyes' field of vision in the hollow blackness of Void.

That blackness relentlessly consumed the Sinking Land, spreading toward the Sea of Desire at a speed invisible to the naked eye!

But just as true Void was about to descend upon the Sea of Desire... those eyes vanished without warning!

He took with Him every trace of Void, leaving behind only a single sentence:

"Wait for me. Soon, I'll come to find you."

"But not yet..."

...

Cheng Shi was back. He snapped his eyes open and found himself in the dream again — and awakening alongside him was Keinlaur.

As for Lid Yara, she slumbered eternally, collapsed upon the long table, her hand still resting on the branch of the Mother Tree of Fear, now crumbled to dust.

Interestingly, Cheng Shi and Keinlaur had opened their eyes at nearly the same instant, as though the stretch of time during which they'd crossed paths in the Sinking Land had left no trace within the dream.

When Sun Miao saw Cheng Shi first slump lifelessly then jolt awake alongside Keinlaur, she assumed he'd found a way in and witnessed an even greater secret. But just as she was about to ask what he'd seen, her keen eyes caught the deliberately suppressed flicker of mischief at the corner of his eye, and she stopped herself.

Seeing her reaction, Cheng Shi fought to contain his grin and asked: "Aren't you going to ask me what I saw?"

Sun Miao scoffed coldly, tearing apart his ruse without mercy:

"A boring trick.

"A follower of Deceit shouldn't waste these flashy deceptions on his own people. You did a decent acting job — if you'd just managed to hold back that smirk at the corner of your eye, I might've actually fallen for it.

"Let's focus on what matters, Vice President Cheng. You'd better pray that our Supreme Inquisitor feels sentimental enough to share something, or Lid Yara's death becomes another cold case.

"History will only record that she died during a consciousness exchange. But as for how she died... I hope we find the answer today."

'The answer is already there — you just don't know it.'

Cheng Shi smiled faintly, feigning rapt attention as he perked up his ears to listen, though the taut strings in his heart slowly loosened just a fraction.

'Fooled her...'

This way, no one would know he'd obtained two containers in that absurd dreamscape extension.

Who could imagine that the man who'd only just learned about containers was now a "container wholesaler"?

Feeling the two motionless containers in his personal storage, Cheng Shi smiled with delight...

And unease.

...

Chapter 939: The Real Sun Miao

Obviously, a composed, calm, and calculating Inquisitor wasn't about to deliver some "villain's parting speech" after the fact.

Keinlaur didn't even glance at Lid Yara's body. He simply drew out that colossal bow — nearly as large as a man — and kept tracing his fingers along its blood-red veins before sealing it inside a tall case originally meant for an Order greatsword.

Only after all this did he pick up the short crossbow and arrowhead that Lid Yara had dropped, then carried her body out of the room.

The dream ended there. Memory's power ebbed like a retreating tide, expelling Cheng Shi and Sun Miao back into the trial's reality.

The two exchanged silent, inscrutable looks while staring at the refined iron arrowhead in Cheng Shi's hand. Then the electronic beeper's sound filled the tent.

"Not entirely fruitless, though not exactly a haul either.

"At the very least, you should honor your promise and tell me about Order."

Sun Miao raised her head to look at Cheng Shi. Her tone was utterly flat, lacking the fervent intensity from before.

This wasn't because she'd lost interest in Order's transformation — she simply had a feeling that even if she got a promise, this man wouldn't necessarily tell her the truth.

Then again, lies would still be something. What she truly feared was that this swindler — one capable of partnering with Zhen Xin — was still formulating excuses to weasel out.

So Sun Miao had actually braced herself for disappointment before entering the dream. Her hesitation and indecision had stemmed from exactly this — she wanted to gamble, and she'd lost.

What she didn't expect was that Cheng Shi actually talked. Before revealing the divine truth, however, the Fate Weaver with a radiant grin at the corner of his mouth first asked:

"Can I trust you?"

He'd already asked this question once — though last time, the person he'd been asking wasn't her.

Sun Miao paused, then typed with a grave expression: "It seems you've already figured it out."

Cheng Shi shrugged with a casual smile: "This has nothing to do with figuring things out. I should thank you for not going out of your way to disguise it. But I'm curious — what's your relationship with her?"

"There is no relationship."

"Don't bother lying. Just because Folly looks down on everything doesn't mean it can lord over Deceit's lies. Which one out-deceives the other is still up for debate."

"There are definitely traces of Them in this trial. I can't say whose, but the identities of us six players are definitely not that simple."

"When I woke up on the wagon, I noticed the reflective armor was like a dividing line, splitting us into two clear-cut sides."

"I didn't think much of it at first — not until Lin Xi and Chun started fighting and I learned about my old friend's identity. That's when I realized it really was a dividing line. So do you two share some kind of deep-seated grudge?"

"..."

Hearing this, Sun Miao fell silent again. But it wasn't a secret worth hiding, and her silence wasn't from embarrassment to speak — she simply felt slightly awkward about having her cover blown.

The awkwardness faded quickly, and she typed again:

"You're right. She and I do have... a misunderstanding."

"A misunderstanding? A misunderstanding doesn't warrant what you've done. Is she still alive?"

"Also — is your name actually Sun Miao, or is hers Sun Miao?"

"Wise Man, don't tell me you're a mole planted inside the History School by some other organization?"

Cheng Shi's gaze turned scrutinizing. Sun Miao paused, then typed:

"Similar to what you're thinking, but the identity is completely wrong.

"She's not dead — just in a half-conscious, half-controlled state. That's why she's been desperately creating trouble for me.

"Normally, no one notices these details. But you're different — you're sharp. As sharp as Zhen Xin.

"I am Sun Miao, and I am the Vice President of the History School. Don't doubt that.

"As for what she's called, I don't know. We've never spoken a single word to each other. A single exchange of glances was enough for her to consider me an enemy."

"?"

Cheng Shi blinked, suddenly intrigued. He looked the Mime Master up and down — her slightly protruding midsection and all — and said with amusement:

"If the Master still has her own will, then I'd like to hear the next part from her."

Sun Miao paused: "Is this the final condition?"

Cheng Shi nodded vigorously: "That's right. After I hear this story, I'll tell you a new one."

Upon receiving confirmation, the Wise Man — yes, Folly follower Sun Miao — released her control over the Mime Master. Sun Miao's expression reset to one devoid of joy or sorrow. She thought for a moment, then reintroduced herself — though her very first words made Cheng Shi's eyebrows shoot up.

"I belong to the God Worship Society. One day, during a gathering, I witnessed this esteemed Vice President engage in behavior that was... out of line. I realized he wasn't a pure god-worshipper, so I launched an investigation.

"Thanks to Silence's talents, the investigation went smoothly. And when I discovered he held identities in multiple organizations, I realized he'd actually known what I was doing all along — he'd even been quietly guiding me to uncover those very identities."

"?"

Though a Folly follower's intellect was beyond question, Cheng Shi was still puzzled by Sun Miao's motives.

'What's going on — did he take a fancy to her? Wanted to flash some credentials and recruit her as a secretary?'

'Admittedly, a Silence follower would make an excellent partner — especially when it came to keeping secrets and uncovering them. They excelled at both.'

'Add the God Worship Society's fanatical buff on top, and Sun Miao — who likely held countless pieces of intelligence — only needed to leak a few crumbs about the gods to have droves of people crawling over each other for the information.'

'But did he succeed?'

Clearly not — otherwise the two of them wouldn't be sitting at opposite ends of this wagon.

Cheng Shi's interest deepened. He asked: "I can roughly guess what you were after. So why didn't it work?"

This time, it was Sun Miao herself who answered. The Mime Master's typing hand paused before she said:

"Whatever you've guessed, you've guessed wrong.

"I had no ulterior motive. I was simply testing the Silence follower in my own way.

"They're skilled at disguise and harbor vast numbers of secrets. I wanted to know — if I exposed my own secrets to her, would this Silence follower who had the 'right to speak' broadcast them to the world?

"Honestly, I wasn't afraid of exposure. I already had sufficient contingency plans and excuses prepared. But disappointing as it was, Silence followers proved to be just as dull as I'd imagined. Even knowing all of this, even with the ability to 'speak,' she chose not to expose anything — instead, she chose to continue 'following' me.

"The test yielded its result, so I naturally lost interest in dealing with her.

"What you guessed was probably her motivation. Indeed, she wanted to find more shortcuts to Them through me. But since her behavior didn't meet my expectations, I never gave her any information. That infuriated her — she even had impulses to attack me.

"I just didn't expect her to be so direct about it. This trial's purpose was probably aimed at me from the start.

"But sadly, she lost again."

"..."

'Hold on, buddy — are you playing fetch with a dog here?'

'Someone kept your identity secret and you're actually unhappy about it?'

'What, have you embraced the desire for suffering too?'

'When your desires aren't satisfied, you start throwing a tantrum?'

But in fairness, this Folly follower truly was close to Them — because he'd already completed the fusion of faith.

This was a real eye-opener for Cheng Shi, who'd been under the impression that "Wei Mu looks down on other faiths, probably because Folly looks down on other faiths." It corrected his prejudice against Folly.

So Folly hadn't been entirely idle after losing its authority. It knew how to share after all. But what kind of scheme lay hidden behind that sharing — how could mere mortals hope to know?

Still, right now Cheng Shi very much wanted to ask Him:

"Do you... think your foolish act has an answer?"

...

Chapter 940: Where Should We Look for Keinlaur?

"So after all that talk, can I trust you?"

Sun Miao froze for a moment. She hadn't expected Cheng Shi to be so fixated on the word "trust," and she didn't believe anything resembling genuine trust could come from a liar's mouth. But regardless, she couldn't say anything else right now, so she nodded and typed out her reply:

"If you can even trust Zhen Xin, then you can certainly trust me.

At least for this trial, our goals are aligned, and the one who initiated that alignment was you."

"Good, in that case..." Cheng Shi smiled and raised a single finger. "One last question, Vice President Sun. How many Gods have you had an audience with?"

"What does that have to do with the story of [Order]?"

"Nothing. It's purely my curiosity.

But if my curiosity isn't satisfied, well, then it will have everything to do with it."

"..."

Shameless! Absolutely shameless!

Sun Miao paused. If it weren't for the fact that a Mime Master's expression rarely shifted, she would have gone dark-faced on the spot. After a moment of internal struggle, she chose to concede: "My Benefactor [Folly], and... my Benefactor [Birth]."

[Birth]!

So he really was a Borrowed-Birth Infant, a faith-fusion assassin who had planted himself inside the Mime Master's womb!

Unsurprising. Cheng Shi had already guessed as much. He nodded, a sharp glint flashing through his eyes as though something had just clicked into place.

"I suspect your fusion happened very recently, perhaps even in the last few days. Otherwise, the Master wouldn't have fallen for it."

"That's correct. The great wave of faith fusion has only just begun. Completing my fusion this early already puts me a step ahead of the rest, wouldn't you say?"

Sure, sure, sure. Fusing two faiths through sheer personal ability certainly deserved a word of praise.

But Cheng Shi just smiled and said nothing more.

"Cheng Shi, I can tell you're very interested in my Benefactor, but I'd advise you not to go looking for a scolding. All you'll get is a single line..."

"Do you think your foolish act has an answer?"

Is that the one?"

"..." Sun Miao's expression finally shifted. "You've had an audience with Him!"

Cheng Shi smiled again. 'An audience? I even cursed Him the same way He curses you. If you knew about that, would you convert to worshipping me instead?'

As expected, [Folly] wasn't truly omniscient and omnipotent either. His current proximity to [Birth] was most likely an attempt to probe the next move of his own Fun God Benefactor.

The Fun God had just escorted [Birth], that elder brother among the deities, into the interstice of [Existence] to witness the truth of the universe. And now, [Folly], who had never been known to fuse with any god, had suddenly fused with [Birth]. That subtle speed of follow-up was, in a sense, already an answer in itself.

[Folly] was also investigating the truth of the universe, or more precisely, what interested Him was likely the Fun God's reaction after discovering that truth.

Nobody knew what the Fun God intended to do. And since nobody knew, [Folly] had to be the first to find out.

Just as He had said, even if it was a foolish act, He had to be the first god to learn of it and carry it out.

What a competitive, ultimate-overachiever, pro-max-plus-ultra mentality.

After deducing several divine movements from the faintest traces of faith fusion, Cheng Shi contentedly shared the story of [Order] with Sun Miao. Of course, he couldn't go around blabbing that the Fun God had goaded [Chaos] into attempted usurpation, so he merely hinted at [Order]'s schism.

After all, Cheng Shi hadn't forgotten that he still held the identity of an [Order] Inquisitor. If intelligence about [Order]'s fracturing could leak out through the mighty hand of the History School, then as the only "imperial-appointed Inquisitor" currently walking the mortal world under [Order]'s banner, wouldn't his status be elevated by proxy?

And so, in every exchange of intelligence, the information being traded was actually secondary. What truly mattered was how to seamlessly weave personal will into the transaction, and ensure that subsequent events unfolded according to one's own design.

Cheng Shi was a master of this art, not only because he held divine intelligence that countless players would kill for, but also because he possessed the silver tongue of a born liar.

Perhaps even he hadn't realized it yet, but through these scattered, fragmented exchanges of information, his actions had already begun to resemble an invisible hand stirring the winds and clouds of the Faith Game.

Sun Miao was deeply shaken by the revelation of [Order]'s schism. She questioned Cheng Shi repeatedly about its authenticity, and he responded with the same line every time: "Your Benefactor told me. If you have doubts, take them up with Him."

Sun Miao instantly assumed the "Benefactor" he referred to had to be [Folly], not [Birth]. But why had her Benefactor only offered her a single line that was half-insult, half-riddle, while telling this liar such closely guarded secrets?

She couldn't figure it out, yet she also began to re-examine and scrutinize everything Cheng Shi had said, for she couldn't guarantee that a liar's words contained one hundred percent truth.

But this was clearly not the priority right now. Having learned an earth-shattering secret, Sun Miao turned her attention back to the trial.

"A fractured True God, whether on the path to reunification or further disintegration, offers countless opportunities for participants and investigators to stake their claim.

No wonder you and Zhen Xin both came chasing after [Order]'s question. Indeed, possessing intelligence means possessing the initiative. My path was never wrong.

But for now, where should we look for Keinlaur? He's the linchpin of this trial. We cannot afford to lose him."

Sun Miao's words didn't sound like a question so much as thinking aloud. Cheng Shi listened with a smile, then shook his head.

"I just realized we've been overlooking something."

"What?"

"Remember the Keinlaur that Lid Yara killed?"

If his slices are everywhere, then why should we fixate on the one who was abducted?"

Cheng Shi took two steps toward the tent entrance, pulled back the flap, and gazed out at the still-orderly military camp. He smiled.

"Let's wait a bit longer. Perhaps when Keinlaur is meant to appear, he'll show himself.

As for what the kidnapers can extract from Keinlaur's mouth, heh, a Supreme Inquisitor with decades of trial experience hardly needs outsiders to coach him on how to handle an 'interrogation.'"

And so, after the two players abandoned their search for Keinlaur, the entire central camp sank back into silence. Everything continued to run in perfect order, as though no trial had ever taken place here, as though no humans called "players" had ever set foot in this place.

But let us not forget, this was no mere training camp. This was the vanguard of war itself, the iron line of the Grand Tribunal's encirclement of the War Legion. And those watching with predatory eyes were not limited to the encircling forces. The War Legion, hell-bent on leaving their mark upon the Land of Hope, had never submitted. They still yearned to spread the flames of war to every corner of this continent.

And so, on the third night of the trial, a real night raid finally came.

The War Legion's right flank advanced under cover of darkness, striking at the junction between the Grand Tribunal and the Tower of Logic's encirclement. That junction was held by the Grand Tribunal's left flank and the Tower of Logic's right-wing defensive forces.

Their aim was to ignite hostility between these two nations, long-established powers of the continent, by dragging them into a three-way battle. The resulting chaos would create an opening for the weaker War Legion to exploit.

Everyone knew the Grand Tribunal and the Tower of Logic had been at odds for ages, with friction between them a constant. If this gambit succeeded, this central-axis battlefield would become the War Legion's sole breakthrough point and escape route.

And so the night battle erupted.

Word reached the central camp quickly. When the commanding officers discovered that the Supreme Inquisitor was not present, they reacted as though accustomed to this, showing no panic. Instead, they methodically deployed their divisions to advantageous defensive positions, maintaining vigilance against a possible feint.

Seeing this, Cheng Shi and Sun Miao knew that Keinlaur had pulled this kind of maneuver more than once or twice before.

Sure enough, it wasn't long before another report came from the front lines: Lord Keinlaur had already anticipated the War Legion's movements and had secretly traveled to the left flank to command and suppress. The situation was nearly under control.

The moment they heard this, the two of them immediately reversed course and raced toward the Grand Tribunal's left flank.

Meanwhile, a young hawk that had been circling the area lately came flapping back to the river valley's depths in a state of frantic agitation. It landed violently on a tree above a subterranean cave and screeched down into the darkness:

"You let Keinlaur go on your own initiative? Lin Xi, do you have any idea what you've done? All the traps we set were for nothing!"

Shortly after, Lin Xi emerged from the cave with a furrowed brow, dragging an unconscious Keinlaur behind him. The moment the furious young hawk saw that Keinlaur was still there, it froze.

"..."

Lin Xi listened to the hawk's report, then gazed toward the Grand Tribunal's left-flank front line, deep in thought.

"It's time for you to earn your keep, Beast Tamer. Is this the enemy's counterattack signal, or is there really another Keinlaur commanding the left flank?"

Give me an answer, and only then can I determine our next move."

"I..." The young hawk's body stiffened. It glanced around resentfully for a moment before flinging a feather that embedded itself in Keinlaur's thigh. "Interrogate him. Only he knows whether it's real or fake!"

Lin Xi scoffed at this and hurled Keinlaur's body onto the ground.

"He's dead?!" The young hawk's voice pitched even higher. "Lin Xi, you killed him behind your ally's back? What did you find out?"

Lin Xi glanced at the hawk and shook his head, a mocking and chilling smile spreading across his face.

"Sometimes I wonder whether you're really a 2,600-point [Deceit] believer."

"..."

Xiao Qi fell instantly silent, a flicker of suppressed fury passing through his eyes.

Catching that subtle shift in expression, Lin Xi felt a twinge of uncertainty. 'Is he hiding his true strength, or is he genuinely this volatile?'

But regardless, now was not the time to push away his only cannon fodder. So Lin Xi offered a mix of persuasion and consolation:

"Drop the act, Beast Tamer. Pretending to be hot-headed doesn't reduce the danger you face on this mission.

I'm not arrogant enough to face two opponents alone, and you shouldn't pin your hopes on shoving me to the front to solve every problem in this trial.

I told you he's strong. If you want to survive, our only option is to cooperate."

Lin Xi casually erased all traces of Keinlaur's corpse, then gazed into the distance and sighed.

"Prominent figures who earned their place in history really shouldn't be underestimated. Every last one of them is a shrewd liar.

I didn't kill him. The moment he fell into my hands, he had already planned his own death.

Given that, the Keinlaur at the left flank is most likely the real one. Which means the one waiting by the stump might now be that Fate Weaver.

If that's the case, let's go. Best not to keep the farmer waiting."

With that, Lin Xi vanished silently into the forest.

The young hawk stared toward the left-flank battle line, conflict written across its features. But soon enough, it followed.

Because it didn't want to die.

...