

The Gods 961

Chapter 961: The Fishing Plan

That's right. This was Cheng Shi's plan.

In a trial teeming with an uncountable number of people, trying to actively locate Xiao Qi's true body was pure fantasy. Even though a Beast Tamer's body couldn't stray too far from its tamed beasts, accomplishing this amid such chaos and so many false targets was like looking for a needle in the sea.

So to deal with the "problem" that was Xiao Qi, they had to think differently. For example...

Make his real body come to them.

Before learning that Xiao Qi was apparently using tamed beasts to offload his emotional burden, Cheng Shi couldn't conceive of a good solution. Now he had one. Not only had he thought of it, but fate had even stuffed the key to breaking this deadlock into his hands.

The [Corruption] container.

If Xiao Qi got his hands on it and felt how this "tool" could drain his raging emotions and desires, this emotionally unstable Beast Tamer would treasure it above all else. With it, he could reclaim every fragment of strength scattered across his tamed beasts. He'd no longer need to weaken and dull himself just to keep his emotions somewhat stable. He could become a "complete" Beast Tamer.

And under the container's absolute calm, Xiao Qi would logically conclude that now was the time to permanently deal with Cheng Shi.

After all, the tool had fallen from Cheng Shi's hand. Add Xiao Qi's long-standing grudge and obsession... Cheng Shi simply couldn't find a single reason the man wouldn't come to kill him.

And this was the full stop Cheng Shi was putting on this stale old grudge.

'I can overlook past deceptions, but I won't let you keep getting in my face over and over.'

'When it comes down to it, on the path of [Deceit], what the hell are you, Du Qiyu?'

'Even if [Deceit] really is a garbage bin, what garbage goes in it isn't for you to decide.'

And so Cheng Shi used a hunt born of conjecture to cement the killing intent already in his heart. He talked about the future being none of his concern, but in truth, he was exploiting the future too.

"What's next? History has been witnessed. The rest is garbage time. It's your call."

Now that they knew how Keinlaur had "lost" this battle, Sun Miao had lost all interest in the trial's remaining time. The three-way melee wouldn't end in a single day. Once the Elemental Judges were scattered too, once the meteor fire rain ceased, none of the three devastated nations would accept defeat gracefully.

They'd only smear the scorched battlefield with thicker blood, trying to redirect the fires that had depleted their own national strength toward the other two. But no matter how hard the Grand Tribunal and Tower of Logic fought, history's inevitability had already been written. The blood and fire on this battlefield had carved the victor's name.

Cheng Shi glanced in the direction Xiao Qi had fled, then up at the crimson sky lit by the meteor fire rain. Without hesitation, he charged back into the valley that had just been flattened — even cratered — by the impacts.

"Two meteors never hit the same crater. Since this area has already been washed by fire rain, now is the perfect time to scavenge!"

Sun Miao blinked, instantly understood, and followed. He assumed this was part of Cheng Shi's fishing plan. After all, if you didn't value the tool you'd dropped, what reason would the other party have to pick it up?

And this Fate Weaver was committing to the act fully. His deception was meticulous. He even feigned running in the wrong direction, deliberately veering away from the Fear Heartwood to give Du Qiyu enough time. This way, when Du Qiyu picked up the heartwood only to see Cheng Shi arrive a step too late, the Beast Tamer's killing intent would burn all the brighter.

Sun Miao, believing he'd seen through Cheng Shi's complete plan, couldn't help but marvel:

'A great reputation is truly never undeserved. Zhen Xin had a good eye. This Vice President Cheng is worthy of...'

'Wait. Hold on. Where are you going?'

Sun Miao, trailing behind Cheng Shi, froze. Because he suddenly realized Cheng Shi wasn't taking a roundabout path at all. He'd genuinely gone off-course, completely ignoring the Fear Heartwood.

He frowned, checked their current position, looked in the direction Cheng Shi was heading, pondered for a moment, then the realization hit. Every trace of admiration on his face went rigid.

"You're going after the Startled Bow in Delvo's hands?"

Sun Miao nearly laughed from anger. His nostrils flared as though he had words to say, but ultimately it was contempt that escaped his lips.

"I thought that at such a critical moment in the baiting operation, you'd at least keep some pressure on the Beast Tamer. But you're just going to scavenge for real!?"

Vice President Cheng, is this right?"

"?" Cheng Shi didn't even look back. "What's wrong with it? Didn't I tell you this was the best time to scavenge? I'm not lying."

"..."

"But if you yourself won't even go back for a tool you dropped, what makes you so sure the Beast Tamer will!?"

At this, Cheng Shi laughed.

"A Beast Tamer might not care about those things. But Xiao Qi definitely will.

I don't know any Beast Tamer. I know Xiao Qi. Anything that's mine, he's interested in. Otherwise, the surname Du wouldn't be...

Never mind. Ancient history isn't worth telling. Speaking of which, Vice President Sun, use that brilliant brain of yours and recall — where exactly did Delvo die? I'd rather not let Xiao Qi stumble upon the real Startled Bow by accident."

Sun Miao's face darkened. At this point he had no choice but to trust Cheng Shi, so he relied on his formidable memory to lead them back to where Delvo had been pulverized into ash.

But this time, they found no loot in the scorched crater. Only a set of fresh footprints.

Seeing this, Cheng Shi knew immediately that his spur-of-the-moment prize had been snatched.

His face turned dark. He examined the tracks underfoot carefully, wanting only to confirm the person who'd taken the Startled Bow wasn't Xiao Qi. Sun Miao was studying the prints too. After a moment, he frowned:

"War Machine Pawn treads and scholar boots. The Tower of Logic's people were here first. They beat you to it."

"The Tower of Logic?" Cheng Shi's brow furrowed. No matter how he thought about it, he couldn't fathom how the Tower of Logic had reacted faster than him. Surely they wouldn't have risked the bombardment just to grab this bow?

For what purpose?

"Is any Grand Scholar in the Erudition Presidium a trap specialist?"

Cheng Shi asked in bewilderment. That seemed the only explanation he could come up with.

"It's not necessarily the Erudition Presidium that needs it. It could be for research. But regardless, the bow is gone. Let it go.

Once something falls into the Erudition Presidium's hands, it never comes back out.

We still have time. Why don't we go check on—

Where are you going now?"

"The fake one might still be there. I want to see whether Xiao Qi wants that fake bow more, or my Fear Heartwood."

Watching Cheng Shi charge back into the scorched wasteland yet again, Sun Miao's eyelid twitched violently. He drew several deep breaths and followed anyway.

'Who was it that said a great reputation is never undeserved... By "never undeserved," they didn't mean "undeservedly empty," did they?'

...

Chapter 962: I May Not Understand Beast Tamers, but I Understand Xiao Qi

On the other side.

The instant the meteors finished falling, Du Qiyu commanded his surviving tamed beasts to brave the searing heat and charge back into the scorched wasteland. His true body, meanwhile, lay at the edge of the destruction zone, disguised as a dead soldier, stretching the tethering range of his beasts to its maximum.

Hiding his real body was an art, especially when his temper was spiraling out of control.

Indeed, Sun Miao's deductions about Xiao Qi were essentially spot-on. His emotions were genuinely problematic, forcing him to fragment his power and intelligence across tamed beasts to suppress the backlash.

This issue hadn't always existed. It first surfaced only two months ago.

As for why...

Every time Du Qiyu recalled the incident, he felt he'd been played for a fool.

He had fulfilled His promise of increasing Du Qiyu's power. But before that, Du Qiyu had never known the upgrade would come at such a steep price: despite growing genuinely stronger, his score had plummeted from 2,600 to 2,000.

Du Qiyu hadn't lied. He really had once reached 2,600. But he'd also lied, because that number only existed in the past.

So when he learned at the start of the trial that Xiao Shi held 2,200 points, his emotions became nearly impossible to contain.

'Why should he score higher than me?'

Carrying that thought, his bias against Cheng Shi deepened and his hatred swelled. Eventually, realizing this emotional turbulence was disrupting his trial pace, he had no choice but to frantically tame every living thing in sight to reduce the emotional backlash. But that meant his power plummeted further, until he'd sunk to the level of being sneered at by Lin Xi without daring to talk back.

He'd long since had enough. But there was nothing he could do. His temper grew harder to control by the day. All he could do was tame more people, transferring the pain outward, developing a twisted pleasure in the domination of others.

And just now, yet another batch of tamed beasts had died under the meteor fire rain. The distributed emotions surged back in, making him even more volatile. So when he charged back into the scorched earth, a subtle error crept into his decision-making.

Based on what he'd observed of Xiao Shi's expression during the ambush, the item that had been knocked from Xiao Shi's hand was clearly important. So he reasoned that Cheng Shi would rush back for it immediately.

Furthermore, when he last spotted the pair, they were far from Keinlaur's position, which meant Xiao Shi and the horse-faced wise man most likely hadn't noticed where the Startled Bow lay.

And so Du Qiyu made an instant decision: retrieve whatever Xiao Shi had dropped first.

In truth, this decision wasn't logical at all. It was purely emotion-driven. But Du Qiyu couldn't overcome his emotions. He'd become a slave to them. The obsession cultivated since childhood had been amplified many times over by the emotional surge, ultimately crystallizing into a single bitter conviction: 'I can afford to be bad, but Xiao Shi can only be worse.'

Under these circumstances, Du Qiyu and Cheng Shi "passed each other by." One picked up the container. The other reached the fake bow, now nothing more than a pile of ash.

"..."

Looking at the bow-shaped cinders beneath his feet, Cheng Shi clicked his tongue.

Being fake, it had no resistance to the meteor fire rain whatsoever. But with the fake destroyed, how was he supposed to use it to bait the enemy?

Cheng Shi's eyes lit with an idea. He turned to Sun Miao: "Vice President Sun, do you happen to have any experience with forging weapons?"

"...Cheng Shi, I am a [Folly] believer, not some creation-obsessed fanatic who worships [Truth]."

"Oh. So there are things even [Folly] believers don't know."

"..." Sun Miao felt himself getting played. The sensation irritated him, but for the sake of [Folly]'s reputation, he had to prove himself. "Save your provocation. It doesn't work on me. Just tell me what you want."

'Doesn't work?'

Cheng Shi could barely contain his grin: "Simple. When Xiao Qi comes, he just needs to glimpse a bow frame glowing with red light. Whether it can actually fire arrows is irrelevant."

Sun Miao surrendered. He'd given up trying to read Cheng Shi's plans. All he wanted now was to lure the Beast Tamer in, kill him, vent his frustration, leave the trial, and record everything he'd witnessed into the History School's annals. That was his mission.

"You're sure your plan will work?"

"I may not understand Beast Tamers, but I understand Xiao Qi. He'll come."

Yet this time, they miscalculated again. Because the moment Du Qiyu obtained the [Corruption] container, this emotionally unstable Beast Tamer immediately drove every surviving tamed beast into a mad sprint and vanished from the battlefield along with his true body.

Think about it: when an expert afflicted solely by emotional side effects suddenly obtains a tool that can absorb his emotions and desires, what would he think?

'So this is where His guidance was leading?'

'This was His true promise all along?'

What promise could be more satisfying than snatching a self-enhancing tool right out of Xiao Shi's hands?

Du Qiyu had no idea what a "container" was. But the moment he discovered the tool's function, his first instinct was to verify whether this was truly a godsend.

As for the Startled Bow... who cared anymore.

He'd wanted it only because it nourished one's soul using an enemy's fear, which could help offset his emotional backlash. But with this thing in hand, who needed a broken bow?

And so Du Qiyu decisively fled. Under the container's influence, he believed he'd made the wisest possible choice. He needed to find a quiet place free of distractions to study this nameless tool. And once he confirmed it could truly solve his pain point...

'Heh. With all my power restored, perhaps even surpassing what I had before, will you be scared, Xiao Shi?'

Whether he'd be scared was debatable, but Cheng Shi was certainly feeling awkward. As the wise man's gaze grew increasingly sardonic, he let out a hollow laugh.

"Don't worry. What's coming will come eventually..."

...

At the same time, deep in the Void.

Rewinding slightly, at the very moment Cheng Shi realized the one who'd "killed" [Order] beside the Sea of Desire was a [War] believer, a pair of eyes painted with star points and spirals quietly opened in the boundless darkness of the Void.

The instant He appeared, He generously praised the pair of eyes before Him, one flaming, one bleeding:

"Should I praise silence as the finest disguise, or lament that beneath honesty lies nothing but deception?"

[War], since when have you been coming here to steal authority from my domain?"

[War] showed no reaction. He gave the starry eyes an expressionless glance and rumbled: "You... why have you come?"

[Deceit]. Yes, of course it was [Deceit]. He chuckled lightly and declared with righteous indignation:

"To seek justice for [Order]!"

"..."

[War] seemed to have heard the funniest joke in the entire universe. But don't forget: He was endurance incarnate. So He didn't laugh. Instead, He shook His head and rumbled on: "Then you should seek the Convention... There is no justice here."

"Oh? So you admit you're the one who split [Order]?"

"..." [War] half-closed His eyes, as if deflating slightly. "I don't recall... saying... anything of the sort."

"You just said there's no justice where you stand. And if there's no justice, aren't you openly stating [Order] has already fallen?"

"..."

Sometimes even gods wished they could call the police.

Unfortunately, the "police" among the gods had already become the "criminal."

[War] reopened His eyes. He gazed silently at [Deceit], whose upturned eyes belied the unmistakable gravity in His gaze, and sighed with a sudden complexity:

"His schism... has nothing to do with me."

That single sentence made the eyes that had been so breezy a moment ago immediately contract. In an instant, the star points blazed and the spirals reversed, and with a blink, He summoned a mass of chaotic yellow fog from the depths of the Void.

A great hand representing [Chaos] burst through the fog, flanking [War] from the opposite side, trapping Him between [Deceit] and [Chaos].

And the reason a single sentence had changed [Deceit]'s expression was simple: His authority told Him that [War] had just lied!

[Order]'s schism was absolutely connected to Him!

[Deceit]'s eyes turned profoundly grave, though His tone remained playful:

"Interesting. I've often wondered why [Order] of all gods would fracture at the Sea of Desire, while you, who stood right beside Him, remained wholly unaffected...

Now I see I underestimated you. What a patient god. What a master of the art of no-war-no-conflict.

But I do have a question: how exactly did [Order] split?

And what benefit did you gain from it!"

[War] fell silent again. He glanced behind at [Chaos], as if deep in thought.

Seeing Him refuse to speak further, [Deceit] wasted no words and struck. But the instant both He and [Chaos] moved simultaneously, the entire Void froze without warning!

This sovereign of [Void] seemed to lose control of the Void for a single heartbeat, pinned down alongside His avatar on His own turf.

But it ended there. [War] didn't press the attack. He instantly released His hold on the two probing gods and sighed once more:

"Leave. I pose no threat to you. The one I'm waiting for... is not you."

Before [Deceit] or [Chaos] could react, He departed first.

[Deceit], who had lost control of the Void for the first time in His existence, rolled His eyes toward the direction [War] had vanished. His gaze flickered, and He remained silent for a long while.

Not until [Chaos] also left and the Void returned to stillness did He suddenly let out a delighted "Hee~" and become cheerful once more.

"What incredible patience. What incredible power.

War, War. At this very moment, you truly live up to your name of [War].

But I still got what I came for. Hm. Stronger than all of them. Equal to two old bones combined, even.

But it's a shame. What you're waiting for isn't a peer. It's... a 'God.'"

As He spoke, a streak of seven-colored light threaded between the star points in His eyes and vanished, taking those eyes along with it.

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Chapter 963: Surprises Never Stop Coming

Nine days remained, but the trial was far from over.

Cheng Shi and Sun Miao had long confirmed that the trial's key figure was Keinlaur — King Delvo, the War Monarch. The remaining time was essentially spent waiting for him to fulfill his life's ambition: clear the battle lines and declare the founding of the Kingdom of War atop this scorched earth and piled corpses.

But wars didn't end easily. Fortunately, Delvo's preparations were extraordinarily thorough. Even without the players' help, he could succeed on his own. So neither of them planned to get further involved.

Their sole remaining thought was to wait for the "newly improved" Xiao Qi to come hunting them.

When Xiao Qi didn't show up right away, Cheng Shi followed Sun Miao away from the battle lines, and the two wandered the battlefield's periphery for a long while.

Sun Miao remained convinced that without desire or emotion, the Beast Tamer would definitely hide and wait out the trial's end. But Cheng Shi firmly believed Xiao Qi would come find him. So, once again conceding, the wise man found ways to occupy himself, because the Fate Weaver beside him had already started spacing out with nothing to do.

"Aren't you going to make some preparations for the hunter's arrival?"

Underestimating your enemy is never a good strategy."

Every time the wise man reminded him, Cheng Shi would give a perfunctory nod, then continue doing absolutely nothing.

Seeing the Fate Weaver's indolence, Sun Miao could only assume he'd already devised a foolproof plan. But what puzzled him was this: even if Cheng Shi was one hundred percent confident he could defeat Du Qiyu, how could he guarantee the man hadn't left some resurrection contingency outside the trial?

Sun Miao raised the question again, and Cheng Shi's answer was thought-provoking.

"Wise man, you're the one who told me this: when a person loses the drive to keep living, they naturally won't go on.

So, the one who kills Xiao Qi won't be me. It'll be himself."

"?"

'This Fate Weaver actually wants to drive someone with such powerful desires and emotions to suicide?'

'How is that possible?'

'Especially after the man obtains the Fear Heartwood and loses his desire and fear. With his shrewdness restored, how could he possibly make such an unwise choice?'

This time, even a [Folly] believer couldn't analyze it. He regarded Cheng Shi thoughtfully, feeling certain this Fate Weaver harbored the most alluring secrets in the entire universe.

But he couldn't extract those secrets at the moment, so he settled for what was available: secrets that could still be gathered during the trial. For instance... that sudden concentration of [Decay] energy that had appeared near the Forest County side of the Boro Highlands.

When Sun Miao proposed investigating the dense [Decay] aura, Cheng Shi actually wanted to refuse. Instinct told him danger lurked there.

But he still needed the wise man as backup when dealing with Xiao Qi. After careful deliberation, he decided to accompany Sun Miao, though he'd keep his distance and not walke alongside him.

Sun Miao had no objections to this arrangement. The two quickly changed course and headed behind the battlefield.

They weren't worried about Xiao Qi failing to follow. After all, for a hunter, tracking was the bread and butter of the trade. Cheng Shi's only concern was that Xiao Qi's arrival would coincide with the wise man's investigation. If facing unknown risks at the same time, he genuinely didn't know whether his planned strategy could still play out smoothly.

Fortunately, fate favored Cheng Shi once more. When they arrived at the area indicated by the Corpse-Eating Vine, there was no danger around, and Xiao Qi hadn't appeared to cause trouble.

All they found in a stretch of dense forest were some residual traces of [Time] energy and large swaths of withered trees. Something had clearly been here, but whatever it was had left behind nothing except widespread decay.

Sun Miao found this fascinating. He ventured alone into the river valley forest to observe and investigate, while Cheng Shi stood on a hillock at the outskirts, keeping watch.

This time Cheng Shi wasn't slacking off. His own safety was at stake, so he was fully alert.

But what he didn't expect was that despite watching all directions and listening to every sound, someone had still managed to stand behind him right under his nose.

Cheng Shi didn't even notice at first. Not until he reflexively glanced at his own shadow did he realize that what should have been his mirror image had somehow grown a full size rounder!

Cold sweat poured down his body instantly. But he didn't panic. His first move was to fling lightning behind him with one hand while crushing a smoke bomb with the other.

BANG!

The noise startled Sun Miao, who was investigating clues in the forest. Seeing a cloud of smoke erupt at Cheng Shi's position, his heart lurched. He spun to help, but the moment he tried to shadow-leap to Cheng Shi's side, the dead-silent [Decay] trees suddenly came alive. One rotten trunk after another exploded, sending clouds of decaying dust into the air like prison bars, trapping Sun Miao in place.

"Not good!" Sun Miao immediately pulled out a tool, held his breath, and began deconstructing the cage's weaknesses.

But as he worked, he discovered that while the cage did have flaws, the [Decay] power contained within it was far beyond anything a player could contend with.

Meaning: whoever had trapped him and ambushed Cheng Shi possessed strength far surpassing Lin Xi's. The two weren't even on the same level.

Lin Xi had already been [Decay]'s number one. So the only being who could exceed him would be...

"An Envoy!?"

Sun Miao's pupils contracted violently. His cry of alarm rang out.

But the cage of rotting dust didn't just trap his body. It sealed his voice too. His shout identifying the attacker never reached Cheng Shi. All Cheng Shi heard from within the smoke was a different, raspy voice:

"Don't. I mean no harm."

As those words faded, Cheng Shi made out the ambusher's face through the mist.

He was certain he'd never met this person before, yet oddly found the face familiar. He couldn't immediately place where the familiarity came from, but at minimum it meant the person's rank couldn't be too high. After all, Cheng Shi would never forget what a true god or an Envoy looked like.

But... was that really true?

That thought lasted barely a second before Cheng Shi contradicted himself, because he suddenly remembered where he'd seen this face. It had been on a painting hanging on a bedchamber wall in the

empty Rosna Court — a portrait of the emperor who had abandoned his city and fled with his nobles and ministers.

Later, Cheng Shi had also learned this man's name from Aph Ros.

Yu Go. A survival expert who'd been elevated to Envoy by [Decay] in the previous era.

At this realization, Cheng Shi's shock was immense.

"!!!"

'That's Yu Go!?'

...

Chapter 964: This Yu Go Is Rather Interesting

How had this escape artist — one even Big Cat couldn't track down — ended up running straight to him?

After the initial shock subsided, Cheng Shi regained his composure. Clearly, this being meant no harm. Otherwise, having approached in total silence, the one to break the awkward standoff wouldn't have been Cheng Shi himself.

But what did He want?

Question marks plastered Cheng Shi's forehead. From his perspective, this [Decay] Envoy was decidedly not an ally.

Yu Go remained within the smoke and showed no sign of retreating, nor any concern about what the smoke might do to Him. He didn't seem as cowardly as Big Cat had described. His beady, rat-like eyes simply swiveled about, sizing up the invisible Cheng Shi somewhere in the mist.

His somewhat rotund frame paired with those shifty little eyes was a far cry from the imperial image Cheng Shi had imagined...

One god and one cloud of smoke silently assessed each other for a long while. The smoke gradually dissipated, and Cheng Shi revealed himself once more. He took a cautious step back and regarded this "ill-intentioned" Vulture King with a low voice:

"What business do you have with me?"

By now, Cheng Shi had already steeled himself for the worst-case scenario: the Envoy was most likely here for the "authority" on his person.

Why else would the timing be so convenient? Lin Xi had just been Faded, and now a [Decay] Envoy showed up right on cue.

Sure enough, the moment Cheng Shi dropped his disguise, Yu Go's first glance went to his left arm — the one harboring the [Decay] authority. Then, with notably polite mannerisms, He retreated two steps, creating some buffer distance, and smiled with narrowed eyes:

"Your reputation precedes you. I've come to pay my respects."

The whole demeanor screamed small-time hustler who'd clawed his way up from the streets. It was a far cry from any emperor, let alone an Envoy of divine status.

This only deepened Cheng Shi's confusion. Coming here because of "your reputation"? Was this really the same Yu Go who'd bolted from Big Cat in three seconds flat?

But since the other party had opened the conversation, whether it was a probe or a trap, Cheng Shi had to respond. His eyes shifted subtly. Sensing Yu Go's gaze repeatedly drifting toward his left arm, he deliberated for a moment, then played dumb:

"I wouldn't call it a great reputation. Compared to your eminence as a Servant God, I'm merely an ordinary player."

Your Majesty Yu Go, you've come a long way. If you have orders... just speak plainly."

Yu Go paused. Not because he was surprised Cheng Shi recognized Him, but because he found Cheng Shi's keep-away attitude rather interesting. So He frowned, retreated two more steps, and fell into thought.

"?"

Watching the other party suddenly grow even more cautious, Cheng Shi was baffled.

'Buddy, you clearly tested my abilities with that silent approach. How are you being more careful than me now?'

'Who are you afraid of? Big Cat? But Big Cat isn't even here. Besides, not every player is Big Cat.'

'Yes, I'll admit I've already marked you, and if push comes to shove, I might have to flash Aph Ros's tiger skin. But you shouldn't be able to sense Go Lis's mark, right? So is this foresight or just natural paranoia?'

Yu Go's contradictory behavior only fed Cheng Shi's puzzlement. But before long, the rat-eyed Rosna Emperor let out a drawn-out "Oh," as if struck by sudden epiphany:

"I understand now. As expected of His kin. Such dedication to the role.

But rest assured on that point. Your fri— your travel companion can't hear what we're saying.

I came specifically for you, Mister Yu Xi."

'Who!?'

'Yu Xi?'

'How does He know about Yu Xi!?'

Though still bewildered, Cheng Shi's reflexes were razor-sharp. The instant Yu Xi's name was mentioned, he activated Chaos Acting and transformed into the true Yu Xi before Yu Go's eyes: that tall, gaunt masked figure who had once graced the stage of the Joy Theater in San Dales.

Simultaneously, his mind raced. Today's events were truly a case of stumbling into luck. Perhaps his slow reaction to Yu Go's approach and his failure to immediately claim his "identity" had led this [Decay] Envoy to fill in the blanks himself, concluding that Cheng Shi had been staying in character...

But that worked in his favor. At least the earlier blunder was now compensated. Their "identities" were on equal footing now.

Of course, Cheng Shi couldn't rule out the possibility that this was all a performance designed to test whether Yu Xi was genuine. Master of Deception wouldn't help him against Envoys.

But he followed the other party's "script" anyway, because the Yu Xi identity offered enormous room to maneuver.

He raised a finger and tapped the mask on his face, then smiled eerily:

"I'm curious. Very few know of my existence, let alone an Envoy of a dying god.

Yu Go, state your purpose. I don't have much intermission time left."

Seeing the person before him suddenly shift in tone and address him with a faintly condescending air, Yu Go's smile — far from stiffening — actually grew brighter. He seemed thrilled to have found the right person. But Yu Xi's pressure made Him back up several more steps, even placing one foot behind the other, ready to bolt at any moment.

Yu Go's beady eyes darted about, seemingly composing his pitch.

He didn't find anything strange about Cheng Shi's "intermission" comment or the roleplay element. He knew that every Servant God who walked the mortal world on behalf of their patron had quirks of one kind or another. He had his own.

So the stranger Cheng Shi acted, the more He believed.

Seeing the other party finally willing to cut to the chase, Yu Go dropped the pretense too.

He stared covetously at Cheng Shi's arm, rubbing his hands together in a politely eager manner:

"I've come to propose a trade with you, Mister Yu Xi."

"Oh?" Cheng Shi tilted his chin up and scoffed. "I don't usually trade with the audience."

'The audience?'

'So He knew all along that I was watching Him?'

Yu Go started, but quickly heard the next line: "But there are exceptions. Tell me about your trade. While I still have time."

Cheng Shi's words were, of course, designed to patch the roleplay he'd already established. As for what new conclusions they inspired, he didn't know. Yu Go pondered for a moment, confirmed there were no other observers nearby, nodded, and with a solemn expression, drew from his robes a...

Container!

A [Decay] container!

"???"

The sight of this rotting-wood-and-dead-root container stunned Cheng Shi so completely that for a moment he couldn't even mask his shock. So he resorted to bursting into wild, exaggerated laughter, using the twisted and unsettling sound as his disguise. At the same time, he produced his own container.

Not the [Prosperity] one. The [Deceit] one.

As before, he feared this was a performance to verify his identity, so he had to match the bet. And when Yu Go saw the container in his hand, He let out a small breath of relief, just as expected.

Seeing this, Cheng Shi seized the initiative:

"What? You're interested in the Fun God?"

Could it be you want an admission ticket to this [Void] banquet as well?"

"..." Yu Go's expression went rigid. He instantly retreated several more steps. Any further and they'd need to shout to hear each other.

The runaway emperor gave an awkward smile, and the flicker of genuine panic in his eyes didn't look faked.

"No, no. I shed the emperor's cloak long ago, so I've no desire to attend any banquets.

I won't pretend otherwise before you, Mister Yu Xi. Yes, I fear [Void]'s curtain call. And I know I hold no favor among the gods.

You're aware of my Benefactor's... situation." He glanced at Cheng Shi's left arm again.

Cheng Shi curled his lips into a grin. "Abandoned you all?"

"..." Yu Go's expression soured, but He had to concede the point.

Reducing the entire universe to nothing but [Decay] was, from another angle, tantamount to abandoning everything except [Decay].

But as a [Decay] Envoy, Yu Go could hardly badmouth his boss. Even if the boss was no longer paying salaries, the "social insurance" was still being deposited. For the sake of survival, Yu Go could only remain "devout."

"Not abandoned. It is we who are too foolish and have delayed our Benefactor's great enterprise..."

Hearing this, Cheng Shi laughed even louder without bothering to hide it.

'Why do I get the feeling this Yu Go is kind of interesting? Not nearly as detestable as Big Cat described.'

...

Chapter 965: An Unthinkable Trade

"So?"

Cheng Shi stifled his laughter and regarded Yu Go with amusement.

Yu Go clutched the container tightly, his expression turning solemn:

"So, to accelerate my Benefactor's plan, and also to prove my own devotion, I wish to..."

...deposit this container with you for safekeeping, Mister Yu Xi. When the next era begins, you can return it to me..."

'What!!'

Cheng Shi was genuinely stunned. He'd imagined countless possible trades, but never that the container had been produced not for identity verification, but as a "transaction."

Still, was this really a trade?

Calling it a deposit sounded nice, but where was the cost to him?

Surely this Envoy wasn't eyeing the [Deceit] container in return?

Absolutely not. His container could be dyed. One of his was worth three of Yu Go's, and in the future possibly four or even sixteen...

But Cheng Shi didn't react hastily. He feigned composure and patiently waited for Yu Go to continue. Seeing "Mister Yu Xi" remain so unflappable seemed to bolster Yu Go's courage, and He went on:

"Of course, to ensure you don't come out at a loss, I will pay a deposit fee.

Payment will be in... divinity.

I am willing to voluntarily shed my [Decay] faith, temporarily transferring the container's ownership to you. During this transitional period between eras, all the divinity it produces will be entirely at your disposal. Consider this the payment for this transaction.

What do you say?"

'Not a chance!'

When Yu Go had first mentioned depositing the container, Cheng Shi had been mildly interested. But the moment Yu Go said He'd also pay a fee, Cheng Shi rejected the deal outright without a second thought.

This wasn't a paid deposit. This was a pure giveaway!

True, the Sea of Desire had left him with some residual greed. But he was greedy, not stupid.

The way Yu Go was practically shoving this container into his hands was alarming. Could it be some kind of inescapable curse?

What was [Decay] up to?

Could He be planning to personally cleanse the universe of faith-based deadweight to accelerate the decay?

What else could terrify an Envoy so badly that He didn't even want His own [Decay] container?

Cheng Shi's mind was in chaos. There was too much to consider: [Decay]'s attitude, Yu Go's motives, how He'd learned of the Yu Xi identity, and why He wanted to hand the container to the [Void] camp.

Among the players who knew the name Yu Xi, those who could definitively confirm that Yu Xi was role-playing as himself — or rather, that Cheng Shi was Yu Xi — were likely limited to Bianse Long, Qu Yan, and the villain Poison. He'd openly admitted it in their presence.

But on closer examination, that could also be a false lead. After Zhen Xin learned the truth, he'd already covered his tracks.

So why could Yu Go be so certain that the player Cheng Shi was the Envoy Yu Xi?

Too strange. Strange enough that Cheng Shi suspected Yu Go's arrival might carry some god's will behind it.

Who had sent Him? [Deceit] or [Fate]?

It didn't seem like the latter. After all, the Yu Xi identity wasn't exactly welcome in [Fate]'s court.

But if it was [Deceit], given the gods' collective impression of Him, why would Yu Go follow a "liar's" guidance?

Cheng Shi racked his brain but found no answer. He consulted Brother Mouth, but the Fool's Lips ignored him. With no other option, he asked Brother Mouth to activate the Secret Peeping Ear's trait so he could glean something from the conversation.

This time, Brother Mouth didn't refuse. Overjoyed, Cheng Shi immediately composed himself, put on a very interested expression for Yu Go, and asked with a smile:

"Interesting. It's been a long time since I've seen such a fascinating trade.

Your asking price is reasonable. It falls right within my expected range. But I'm curious: who sent you, or rather, who taught you these things?

Don't give me platitudes about devotion. You can't fool me, and I don't enjoy discussing devotion."

"..."

An Envoy who refused to discuss devotion — that was tantamount to publicly announcing his own blasphemy.

Yu Go broke into a sweat hearing this. But then He remembered the other party was [Deceit]'s Envoy, and suddenly it all made sense.

Being disloyal to [Deceit] was being loyal to Him...

With any further retreat threatening to send Him tumbling off the hillock, Yu Go smiled and wiped the sweat from His brow. After a long, agonizing deliberation, He chose honesty:

"It was [Fate] who guided me here."

[Fate]!? That couldn't be!

Cheng Shi startled and immediately pressed Brother Mouth for confirmation. The Fool's Lips, pestered into reluctant compliance, relayed the Secret Peeping Ear's assessment:

"Not [Fate]. [Deceit]."

That statement froze both parties in their tracks.

Cheng Shi's first thought wasn't about why it really was [Deceit], but whether Brother Mouth was lying to him again.

He'd been deceived often enough to develop expertise. Answers this seemingly reliable were rarely truthful, especially when the Fun God was involved.

Yu Go was equally shocked. Based on everything He'd done and verified, if [Fate] was behind this, He could at least gamble on it. But if the mastermind was [Deceit]...

Was the path He'd chosen even the right one?

Had He been deceived onto a dead end?

The hand that had been about to offer the container suddenly retracted. Seeing this, Cheng Shi finally confirmed the deposit plan was genuine. Yu Go had likely received real guidance from someone.

He wasn't here to harm Cheng Shi. He probably wanted to use the deposit to avoid some catastrophe at the era's end.

After all, the fact that the [Void] era would end in void was something players might not know, but Envoys who'd survived previous era transitions understood all too well.

What they didn't know was that this era's "void" might be completely different from what they imagined. So whoever had guided Yu Go here had to be an "insider" who knew what the void's curtain call truly meant!

And as far as Cheng Shi could tell, among the gods, the likely insiders numbered only four: [Birth], [Folly], [Time], and [Deceit]. Plus the uncertain [Fate].

[Birth] kept to Himself, hardly the type to stir things up. And as an Envoy of an opposing Path, He had no reason to meddle with Yu Go's survival.

[Folly]... He'd sooner ridicule Yu Go than guide Him.

[Time] had no time for guidance. That left only the two Benefactors of [Void].

Meaning the answer had to be one of the two. But which?

Cheng Shi wasn't dwelling on this out of stubbornness. Receiving a container out of nowhere could be trivial or monumental.

From his recent experiences, it was clear that containers of different faiths were converging on him in a discernible pattern. Cheng Shi had a theory forming.

Imagine: if his suspicion was correct, and he gathered enough containers — or to put it bluntly, collected all sixteen faiths' containers — what would happen next?

Some cliché about summoning a dragon?

This world had no dragons. The only thing that came close was the entity who had scattered authority across the universe to validate all the gods: [Origin]!

And so, naturally, Cheng Shi's thoughts turned to Him. Was the containers' convergence connected to Origin?

If so, then without question, [Fate] had to be assisting from behind the scenes!

Don't forget: when it came to deceiving people, [Fate] was also a master. The Fun God Himself had said as much.

And recalling the [Corruption] and [Prosperity] containers he'd obtained from Le Le'er just days ago, if these containers were gathering to him because [Fate] was orchestrating it...

Then this wasn't a gift. It was a death warrant!

Could this be what He meant by "the fixed"?

Using sixteen faiths' containers to summon [Origin]'s attention, or perhaps to purchase the "Awakening" of that supreme being!?

But half the containers in his possession had come from the Fun God. If [Fate] was driving this, why would the Fun God cooperate?

The Fear Faction's dread flooded back into his mind. Cheng Shi squeezed every drop of brainpower he had to connect everything he knew. The only conclusion he could reach was that the Fun God was probably piggybacking on [Fate]'s fixed plan to scheme something of His own. What exactly, Cheng Shi couldn't guess. But it had to be an act that defied [Origin]'s will.

That was the only scenario that explained why, when Yu Go mentioned [Fate], Brother Mouth had answered with "[Deceit]"!

So from the Fear Faction's standpoint, he apparently needed to accept this [Decay] container.

But accepting it meant drawing one step closer to [Fate]'s fixed destiny, like personally picking up a rope that would eventually bind him to the sacrificial altar... When that time came, would the Fun God's schemes truly be enough to save him?

Cheng Shi fell silent for a long while, thoughts churning endlessly. In the end, he steeled himself and took the step forward.

Because he knew he had no other choice.

If the Fear Faction bred fear within itself, it would suffer a complete and total defeat.

...

Chapter 966: The Trade Can Continue, but I Have One Condition

Cheng Shi had agreed, but hadn't spoken yet.

Not because he was still deliberating, but because the situation had changed. After the Fool's Lips uttered "It's [Deceit]," Yu Go had actually recoiled.

The [Decay] Envoy clearly didn't trust His own intellect. He was terrified this was a trap orchestrated by [Void]. What He couldn't figure out was: if [Deceit] had truly set this up and sent Him here, why would [Deceit]'s own Envoy expose the scheme at the very moment the deal was about to close?

Where was his devotion?

Or was this... a scheme within a scheme?

Yu Go's beady eyes were filled with scrutiny. At this moment, He finally looked like the figure Big Cat had described. If anything caused the slightest stir, Cheng Shi had zero doubt the runaway emperor would vanish instantly.

What should have been a simple transaction had become a crisis requiring Cheng Shi to urgently rebuild trust.

But for a "Deceit Envoy" skilled in performance and sophistry, this was child's play. As easy as eating Finger Bread and drinking nose drippings.

And so Cheng Shi began his performance.

First, he snapped his fingers and dispersed the confusion from Yu Go's mind, letting Him calm down. Then he extended his hand and beckoned toward the container in Yu Go's grasp, flashing a brilliant smile:

"As a party in this transaction, I've fulfilled my obligation to disclose.

Although I'm a liar, I never use someone else's lies to make trades. Even if that someone is my Benefactor, [Deceit].

If I want to deceive, I'll do the deceiving myself. So relax. What I said just now was a warning for you. You were deceived.

The one who sent you here wasn't [Fate]. It was [Deceit].

But you also weren't deceived. Because [Deceit] would never, like a certain someone from [Descent], enjoy bullying the 'weak.'

Whatever you prayed to Him for, He merely played a small joke on you as the fee for granting that prayer. You know how it is. In this entire universe, only He would pull something like that."

"..."

Yu Go was completely frozen. His brain, rotted through by sycophantic courtiers, could no longer sustain this level of mental gymnastics. He simply tried his best to decode Mister Yu Xi's riddle and translate it into words He could understand:

[Deceit] had toyed with Him. But the trade could apparently continue.

As for why it could continue, He didn't understand. So for the moment, He hesitated, not daring to commit the way He had at the start.

Clearly, compared to [Deceit], Yu Go trusted [Fate] more.

Seeing this, Cheng Shi's eyes shifted and he added:

"You seem unsure about this trade... In that case, let me share something you don't know. I'm actually a [Fate] believer, too."

"!?"

Yu Go's beady eyes went wide. "Is this a new scam?"

"No, no, no," Cheng Shi laughed heartily. "As you know, I'm role-playing a player called Cheng Shi.

And Cheng Shi happens to be a [Fate] believer. So I have insights into [Fate] as well.

He... does not pity the common people. He favors only the fixed.

So if you are one of the fixed, you needn't worry about your fate when the [Void] era draws its curtain. But from what I've observed, you don't appear to be.

Which makes you one of the 'common people.'

And if you're a common person, ha, I'm sorry, but no matter how exceptional or outstanding you may be, this sovereign of [Void] won't spare you a single glance. Let alone guidance.

[Fate] worships the fixed. Change exists only within [Deceit].

I don't know if you can understand what I'm saying, but here's my point: the only [Void] sovereign willing to provide guidance to mere mortals is [Deceit].

Because He needs to challenge 'the fixed' to manufacture His own amusement.

So it could only have been Him who sent you.

Understand? But He won't harm you. He merely collected a little 'fun tax' from you."

"..."

Sensing the moment was right, Cheng Shi decisively cut himself off.

If this trade devolved into a lecture on logic, the more eagerly he explained, the more this cautious [Decay] Envoy would retreat. Counterproductive.

In all things, less is more. Let the other party fill in the blanks. After all, Cheng Shi didn't actually know why this Envoy-Emperor had come here in the first place.

Sure enough, Yu Go began filling in the blanks.

But His available brainpower was rather limited. After much deliberation, He arrived at a single conclusion: someone of Mister Yu Xi's caliber had been rambling for this long without attacking, which meant He had zero interest in Yu Go himself.

His willingness to complete the trade was most likely out of respect for [Deceit].

Armed with this understanding, Yu Go finally recovered His "confidence."

He turned His beady eyes toward Cheng Shi, mulled it over for a moment, then approached with a warm expression. He placed the container in Cheng Shi's palm and solemnly entrusted:

"Then I leave everything in your hands, Mister Yu Xi."

"..."

'How did a perfectly good clown show turn into Liu Bei entrusting his orphan to Zhuge Liang on his deathbed?'

'I don't even look like Zhuge Liang. And you, with that build and demeanor, are no Liu Bei. You're Liu Shan!'

Cheng Shi's vision blurred for an instant, as though he saw a trembling chubby boy pressing the imperial seal into his hands and crying out at the top of his lungs:

"Chancellor, save me!"

"..."

'Look what the poor kid's been driven to...'

Gazing at the [Decay] container in his hand, Cheng Shi was momentarily overcome with emotion.

Who could have imagined that this "divinity extraction tool" — something ordinary players didn't even know existed — would come so easily? He'd always thought he was making the fastest progress on the [Chaos] path, but now it seemed [Decay] was about to overtake him. After all, he was already wielding [Decay]'s Faded authority, while the Benefactor who'd usurped [Chaos] had granted him no authority at all.

But he was ultimately a [Void] walker. No matter how many authorities he held or how authentic his identities, the only one who could truly protect him would always be the Fun God.

He could only hope this container brought not disaster but the Fun God's genuine will.

Cheng Shi steadied his emotions and, in front of the container's previous owner, quietly stowed it away.

He looked at Yu Go and thought: one thing at a time. The trade was complete, sure, but if he didn't say something about Yu Go's disgusting ambush on [Prosperity] believers, wouldn't he be betraying Big Cat's friendship?

But having just accepted the man's "gift," how could he change faces without showing his hand?

Oh, right. The Fading still needed to happen!

No wonder Yu Go's forehead was sweating more profusely. His pause had apparently triggered fresh worries in the Envoy.

But Fading alone probably wouldn't be enough to appease Big Cat's grudge. Hmm. He needed to think about how to squeeze this runaway emperor who'd delivered himself to his door.

Cheng Shi's eyes darted about, schemes bubbling. Within seconds, an idea struck.

'Got it!'

"Your Majesty Yu Go, the trade can continue. But I have one condition."

"?" Yu Go's expression instantly changed. He stared at Cheng Shi in alarm, scarcely believing his ears. "But sir, I've already given you the container. The trade is half-done — how can you change the terms now?"

"Why can't I?" Cheng Shi's lips curled into an enigmatic smile. "I never stated what my side of the bargain was, did I?"

Whether it's depositing the container or paying the Fading fee for your faith, those are your chips. I merely moved part of the transaction's content ahead of the chip reveal. I believe this adjusted sequence in no way compromises a sincere trade, wouldn't you agree?"

"..."

'I WOULD NOT agree!!'

Yu Go mustered a stiff, dry laugh, feeling He'd been swindled by [Void] twice over.

'Damn it! [Deceit] is truly evil!'

...

Chapter 967: Oathbreaker, Du Qiyu

"Relax, I'm an upright person. I won't make things too hard. All you need to do is...

...then come back to see me, and I can help you finalize this trade."

Hearing this outlandish demand, Yu Go once again felt that Mister Yu Xi was truly absorbed in his roleplay. His eyes flickered as He repeatedly confirmed:

"Truly?"

"Truly. But I'll only wait half a day for you. Once the sky darkens..." Cheng Shi pointed at the sun overhead, his smile devoid of warmth. "The deal is void. I'll leave the container here, and you can come collect it yourself."

At those words, Yu Go didn't hesitate for a second. He transformed into a network of rotting roots and burrowed underground, vanishing from Cheng Shi's sight in an instant.

Witnessing the Envoy's escape speed firsthand further convinced Cheng Shi that you could pick a bad name but never a wrong nickname. The runaway emperor's escape skills were truly impressive.

As for who'd coined the nickname... irrelevant. It fit perfectly.

For a long while after Yu Go departed, Cheng Shi didn't bother checking on Sun Miao, still trapped in the zone of decay. Not because he'd abandoned his teammate, but because rare opportunities to set the stage didn't come often. And he knew that the longer the wise man stayed trapped, the more elaborate his mental fabrication would become.

Consider: with a [Folly] believer's intellect and the Deconstructing Eye's talent, Sun Miao would probably deduce Yu Go's identity rather quickly. And the fact that Cheng Shi had confronted an Envoy alone for this long yet still emerged to "rescue" the wise man afterward... the amount of blanks Sun Miao would fill in through speculation was beyond what Cheng Shi dared to imagine.

This would not only help cement the Yu Xi identity going forward but also conveniently keep them separated for a time. So he was in no hurry to comfort the wise man.

He simply sat atop the hillock, quietly awaiting Yu Go's return. And Yu Go didn't disappoint. After vanishing for only two or three hours, He reappeared before Cheng Shi, nodding firmly:

"Mister Yu Xi, I've completed your request. Can the trade continue now?"

As He spoke, His gaze fell once more on Cheng Shi's left hand.

'That fast?'

Cheng Shi blinked. The Envoy's urgency didn't resemble someone working to advance his Benefactor's cause at all. It felt more like He was desperate to shed some shackle.

'But buddy, once I Fade you, without [Decay]'s protection, can you still slip away from people this smoothly?'

Curiosity struck. So he prepared to honor the trade as agreed, planning to dump the post-Fading Yu Go in Dolgod to keep Zangier company.

After all, Aph Ros was also a [Descent] Servant God. When these two met, wouldn't that count as a sort of reunion?

Besides, this didn't violate the agreement. The deal only specified its contents, not what happened after. And the Fun God, when telling him to pick up this "delivery," never said what to do with the "delivery man." If garbage could be recycled, why couldn't waste be repurposed?

Obviously, both the deposit and the Fading were mere pretexts. What Yu Go truly sought was security. Cheng Shi wasn't going to mistreat Him. He'd even found Him a sanctuary away from the world. In an era full of scheming and backstabbing, where else could you find such a saint?

Come to think of it, the Envoy still owed him a thank you.

Having hatched his crooked plan, Cheng Shi was ready to act. But first, one more question:

"After you're Faded, can you maintain that [Decay] cage for a while?"

Yu Go blinked: "Sir, isn't that your... uh, friend?"

You're not going to continue the roleplay?"

"No, no, no. It's precisely because I'm fully immersed in the role that I need a moment apart from the wise man. I just never found the chance until you showed up, and I realized [Fate] has once again blessed me.

So, can you?"

Yu Go had no reason to dampen Mister Yu Xi's spirits over something so trivial. After a moment's thought, He nodded and drew an engraved seal from His robes, presenting it politely to Cheng Shi.

"This is the Rosna Royal Inscription. I've infused the control power of the 'Decay Breath Cage' into it. This way, even after my faith recedes, you can use this little trinket as a controller for the cage, modifying its state at will.

Consider it an insignificant bonus from my end of the trade. I hope you enjoy yourself."

Cheng Shi accepted the inscription, deeply satisfied. He then channeled the inscription's [Decay] aura to activate his Faded authority and bleached every last trace of [Decay] faith from Yu Go's body. Then, the very next second, he grinned and triggered Sinner Redemption, ready to surprise Aph Ros.

But Aph Ros never got his surprise. Instead, Yu Go turned around and surprised Cheng Shi.

The instant all [Decay] power left Him, a look of ecstatic relief swept across Yu Go's face. Those beady eyes squinted, and — a heartbeat faster than Cheng Shi's move — He vanished from the empty hillside.

Yes. He'd vanished again. And faster than last time!

Staring at the dense divine energy fluctuations left behind, Cheng Shi's pupils contracted sharply, his expression grave.

[Time]!

The residual divine power before him was [Time]'s!

But why [Time]!?

How had Yu Go connected with [Time]? What was this [Existence] Benefactor doing? Had He... actually found the time to meddle in all of this?

...

Meanwhile, on the other side.

After obtaining the [Corruption] container, Du Qiyu had fled north, leaving the Boro battlefield entirely. He settled in a small border town in the Grand Tribunal's Forest County.

Along the way, he continuously recalled his tamed beasts. To test the tool's effects, he'd even steeled himself to kill off several of his favorite beasts, keeping only two or three as a final contingency.

The experiment's results were supremely satisfying.

Perfect!

This was an absolutely perfect tool for him!

[Deceit]'s promise had finally come full circle.

From the seduction to break his oath, to the plummeting score, to what amounted to a split personality — Du Qiyu had endured two months of excruciating pain.

Yes, Xiao Qi was an Oathbreaker.

On the day the Faith Game descended, there had been no masks in his starting room to choose from. As for the Die of Fate? Pure nonsense.

He hadn't even been given a choice. The only thing placed before him was the twisted desire representing [Corruption]!

So from the game's beginning all the way to 2,600 points, he'd been a [Corruption] believer. A Sensory Stalker.

He was undeniably talented at it. But he believed he was better suited for [Deceit], because [Corruption]'s talents were merely the foundation of his strength, while lies were his weapon of choice.

His countless successes had been paved by lies, and every lie brought different rewards. The rush aligned with his desires, amplified his confidence, and combined with the various "legends" of tricksters in the game, Du Qiyu had once yearned deeply for [Void].

...

Chapter 968: The Shelter of [Deceit]

He had thought that even [Fate] would do. With the aura of mystery, he could deploy his swindling skills more effectively. But he'd never had the chance to touch [Void].

Until one day, a true god found him.

That's right. Du Qiyu had met a god. He'd kept this tightly under wraps, never telling a soul.

It happened in a pitch-dark Void. He stood facing... a pitch-dark Void and completed his first audience.

That made sense, didn't it? [Void] was nothingness, so naturally it would have no concrete form.

The one who'd summoned him was a deity of [Void]. To be blunt: [Deceit].

No one knew why the Fun God had summoned Du Qiyu. He simply gave Xiao Qi a choice: permission to break his oath and join [Deceit]'s camp.

He even promised that the power boost from switching camps would far exceed the side effects of [Corruption]'s Oathbreaking Curse. He told Xiao Qi to think it over carefully and give his answer within three seconds.

It was undeniably coercive. Who would dare refuse a true god? And who could make such a drastic oathbreaking decision in three seconds?

Someone could.

Xiao Qi gave his answer in one.

Because he had no desire whatsoever to refuse!

He'd envied [Deceit] believers for too long. And so, with the Void as his witness, he finally became a member of [Deceit]'s camp.

But this was also where his nightmare began.

[Deceit]'s gifts were blunt and direct. Every talent He bestowed was enough to make Xiao Qi shine in the game, and his strength had genuinely improved in substance.

In all fairness, setting aside [Corruption]'s Oathbreaking Curse, with the caliber of talents he now carried, climbing above 2,600 would have been trivial so long as he participated in trials systematically. He could even have surged up the Ladder of Ascent several ranks under his Benefactor's protection.

But the Oathbreaking Curse ruined everything.

[Corruption]'s punishment for oathbreakers was viciously cruel. The curse was called "Insatiable Desire." Under its influence, the desires in Xiao Qi's heart swelled at an unthinkable rate, accompanied by a buildup of toxic emotions. The ceaseless craving nearly devoured his sanity and left him paralyzed.

Fortunately, [Deceit] had seemingly anticipated this curse all along and provided Xiao Qi with a countermeasure. And so, a Beast Tamer who fragmented himself was born.

Du Qiyu could only survive by mass-taming beasts and splitting himself among them, suppressing the growth of desire and calming his emotions. But in doing so, his gifted power fragmented along with him.

[Deceit]'s promise seemed to have become empty words — until today!

Until he snatched this emotion-absorbing tool from another [Deceit] believer's hands, he finally understood: [Deceit]'s gaze had been on him all along.

And when the person who'd provided this crucial tool turned out to be Xiao Shi... in that moment, Du Qiyu's elation rivaled what Cheng Shi had felt upon first merging with [Void].

He felt that he was destiny's chosen in this game.

Now everything was perfect. He no longer needed to fragment himself into tamed beasts to contain his emotions and desires. He had more than enough power to do whatever he wished. For example...

Seize this perfect timing, these rare matchmaking odds, and get rid of this tool's former owner — his old friend, his fellow [Deceit] traveler, Xiao Shi — as quickly as possible.

Only then could the path ahead be free of worry.

Cheng Shi was undeniably dangerous. Du Qiyu had heard how the Fate Weaver had smashed through 0221's experiment site and rescued a host of experts. So this was his last window of opportunity.

This wasn't some manifestation of obsession. It was born from the coldest, most rational analysis. If he let Xiao Shi go, would those players the Fate Weaver had saved use that debt as an excuse to come after him?

He knew that in the high ranks, there was no friendship — only interests. Not everyone who'd been rescued would necessarily help Xiao Shi out of gratitude. But if Xiao Shi went out there and told people this tool was now in Du Qiyu's hands, how many of those so-called expert players would resist the temptation once they learned about such a useful tool?

So it was a simple calculation: either attempt a 1v2 during this trial, or hide until the trial ended, only to face a 1v-unknown on the outside.

Whether driven by desire or reason, Du Qiyu would choose the former without hesitation.

He was simply thinking about how to execute it. Ideally, he'd first separate Xiao Shi from the wise man, then find a one-on-one opportunity.

Du Qiyu had always been cautious. But when a person's fear dissolves along with their other emotions, that person becomes confident. Strangely confident.

A victory you've never personally witnessed — who knows how much of it was inflated?

Even if Xiao Shi had managed to kill Lin Xi during this trial, don't forget: he'd had help.

Nobody knew how much effort the former [Prosperity] Chosen One had contributed. And since both Lin Xi and Chun had disappeared, didn't that suggest they'd traded lives? Xiao Shi was just the fisherman who reaped the benefits.

And so, growing ever more certain, Du Qiyu began devising a plan to eliminate Cheng Shi before the trial's end. Time was short. When the battlefield would conclude was always an unknown for individuals, and as long as the timing wasn't in his own hands, every second mattered.

But while he was carefully preparing this new hunt, a small interlude occurred. He actually sensed the presence of a god within this trial!

Yes. Him.

The density of this [Decay] aura was incomparable to Lin Xi's. Just as Sun Miao had reasoned, a force whose magnitude dwarfed the Chosen One couldn't possibly belong to a player.

And so, with fear absent from his heart, Du Qiyu had a "flash of inspiration" and made a shocking decision. He actually followed the faint trail and tracked it, wanting to see why an Envoy had descended into this trial.

Naturally, if he was fortunate enough to spark something with this Envoy, or even establish a connection, it would be a tremendous asset for his future.

Hadn't Xiao Shi won against Zangier precisely because of the legendary hideous-faced Go Lis?

But these were all rational, calculated probes. Du Qiyu's devotion to [Deceit] at this point was absolute. He harbored not the slightest thought of returning to [Descent], and even believed he was about to become a son of [Deceit], perhaps earning a seat at the Audience Meeting through his devotion.

No — not "perhaps." Definitely!

There would definitely be a seat for him at the Audience Meeting.

But fortune didn't always favor the persistent. While [Deceit] sheltered him, [Fate] clearly wasn't interested.

Du Qiyu had barely glimpsed the Envoy's retreating form, caught only a single phrase — "Why is He here too" — before the [Decay] Envoy vanished in an incomprehensible manner.

Because of this, Xiao Qi also learned that yet another Envoy had descended into this trial.

But who could that one be?

...

Chapter 969: Xiao Shi, Heaven Wills Your Death!

Du Qiyu was an undeniably excellent hunter.

After familiarizing himself with the tool's effects, he quickly used a hunter's keen senses to find Cheng Shi's trail and tracked it relentlessly.

He first returned to the scorched battlefield. Upon discovering that the Startled Bow was nothing but a pile of ash, the Beast Tamer stood there with a cold smile.

A great bow recorded in history, a weapon that was possibly a Servant God relic — it absolutely could not have been reduced to ash by a mere fire rain. So what lay before him was definitely fake, deliberately staged by Xiao Shi to fool him.

The Startled Bow had clearly already fallen into Xiao Shi's hands.

You couldn't blame Du Qiyu for thinking this way. The scent trails Cheng Shi had left around the area were far too dense. He could practically reconstruct the scene from them, as though watching Xiao Shi standing before him, smiling as he picked up the great bow Du Qiyu had dreamed of, then fabricated the crime scene — all while Du Qiyu was retrieving the emotion-absorbing tool.

Perfect. Now he had one more reason to hunt Xiao Shi.

But Xiao Qi wasn't stupid. He knew the other party was most likely hunting him too. After all, anyone who lost such a tool would want it back.

So he carefully concealed his true body, tamed a few inconspicuous birds as his eyes, and began following Xiao Shi's trail. It wasn't until he spotted Cheng Shi standing outside a cage woven from [Decay] dust — face dark with frustration, sighing — that he realized he wasn't the only one who'd encountered the Envoy. Xiao Shi apparently knew of His existence too.

Though Xiao Shi's predicament was far worse than his own.

"There's no way around it. My lightning can't break this cage."

Cheng Shi paced in agitation, rubbing his forehead. Refusing to give up, he fired another bolt of lightning, but it passed through the decaying dust and nearly hit Sun Miao inside, giving the wise man quite a scare.

"Recklessness is the sort of foolish act that destroys the self, Vice President Cheng. I know your lightning is powerful. No need for further demonstrations."

"...You think I'm demonstrating? I'm trying to save you! If only you'd swallowed your pride in front of Him, put away those upturned nostrils of yours — would you have been locked up?"

Wise man, you call me reckless, but can I afford not to be?

The Fear Heartwood was snatched by Xiao Qi. He can come back at full power any moment. Even if I'm confident I can hold him off, you're still my insurance, you know that!?

Now look at the mess. You got yourself locked up. And this is a wise man? How can someone who gets himself into danger from his own actions dare call himself 'wise'!?

Thank god it was Yu Go. The most cowardly one. The slightest breeze and He bolts. Otherwise, heh, I'd be burying you near this battlefield just like Chun."

"..."

Sun Miao couldn't argue back. Or rather, he was simply too exhausted from arguing.

You had to understand: making sure that Du Qiyu, whose arrival timing was completely unknown, happened to overhear all this dialogue wasn't something you could just stumble into.

To make everything appear natural, Cheng Shi had first released Sun Miao, letting the wise man deploy every silent enemy-detection method around the area. Then he used Chun's relic to reverse-track Xiao Qi's position. Finally, he erected a new cage and locked Sun Miao back inside.

He modified the cage's settings to no longer muffle sound, and thickened the rolling dust so outsiders couldn't see Sun Miao within. With that, the stage was set.

But the thorniest problem remained: against an excellent hunter, neither Sun Miao nor Cheng Shi could guarantee their enemy-detection tools would work. One slip, and the consequences could be fatal.

So, to lure the target into this elaborately dressed trap, Cheng Shi began a performance that lasted over twenty hours.

That's right. Even the night before Xiao Qi's arrival, Cheng Shi had already been sighing in front of this cage. He'd performed non-stop through an entire night and half a day, never repeating a single line or gesture, all so the approaching Xiao Qi would witness this "accident" with his own eyes!

If Xiao Qi hadn't come today, the show would have continued. Though the lightning blasts weren't all that frequent — so far, Cheng Shi had only fired two, one per day. It just so happened that today's performance coincided with Xiao Qi's arrival.

As the two had predicted, this skilled hunter triggered not a single alarm, leaving both actors unaware the enemy had already crept close.

And the cautious Xiao Qi would never act rashly upon first seeing an unexpected windfall. He observed silently for half a day, until he saw Cheng Shi give up on breaking the cage and switch to laying traps around the perimeter. Only then was he finally convinced that Xiao Shi had genuinely run into trouble.

'Heaven itself is helping me.'

'Xiao Shi, oh Xiao Shi. From the moment your destiny was stolen by me, [Fate]... seems to have abandoned you.'

Du Qiyu struck.

He chose the moment when Cheng Shi's guard was lowest. Just as Cheng Shi finished scrawling something array-like on a tree outside the cage, letting out a long breath and preparing to head back, a silent arrow shot from the dense forest like the wind, aimed straight at Cheng Shi's face.

The arrow came from Xiao Qi's true body. There was no other way. To take the enemy down quickly, he had to bring his full power to bear. The window couldn't be missed. And despite all his constant belittling of Xiao Shi, he'd never truly underestimated him.

Sure enough, Cheng Shi's reaction lived up to Du Qiyu's expectations.

The instant he heard the sound of splitting air, his pupils contracted. He decisively crushed a smoke bomb and dove into the cloud, evading the attack. Simultaneously, his heart leapt with satisfaction. Xiao Qi had finally appeared. All those days and nights of performing hadn't been wasted.

Du Qiyu hadn't expected a one-shot kill either. This opening volley was nothing but a feint. The other humanoid tamed beast he'd kept — one that closely resembled himself — had already flanked to Cheng Shi's side. From the edge of the smoke cloud, it unleashed an unknown number of thunder-fire arrows.

He didn't know how bizarre the smoke's defense was, but overwhelming force solved everything. When you couldn't find the enemy, just pile on firepower and blast them to death.

Cheng Shi felt the danger. He slipped out from the smoke's edge and flung a bolt of lightning — not at the nearest tamed beast, but instinctively aiming toward the forest in the direction the arrow had come from.

He was certain that first arrow had been shot by Xiao Qi himself.

He was right. But the lightning missed.

A fearless Xiao Qi couldn't charge the Death Fun Ring for him. Cheng Shi frowned, ducked, and retreated. Xiao Qi snorted, loosing arrow after arrow in rapid succession, doggedly pinning Cheng Shi's attempted retreat. Through the bird's-eye view from above, he taunted simultaneously:

"Where's your courage, Xiao Shi? Why are you running? Show me the strength that defeated the pseudo-god Zangier!

I know you've got Go Lis behind you. Why not call Her out to help?

She too busy!?"

Despite the aggression of his assault, Xiao Qi himself remained hidden in the shadows, carefully guarding against everything around him. With his tamed beasts reduced to single digits, his recovered power was enough to see this fight through. Even if he somehow lost, escape was still on the table.

But Du Qiyu quickly realized that losing this fight was simply not possible. Because Cheng Shi's so-called trump card... appeared to have failed.

And connecting this to what he'd just overheard: heh, Xiao Shi, your little feint that "scared off" the [Decay] Envoy — you must have summoned Go Lis, right?

'Let me think. Summoning an Envoy — a power tantamount to cheating — can't possibly have no cooldown. An Envoy wouldn't just let a player call and dismiss Her at will. So your greatest trump card is useless right now, isn't it?!

'Praise [Decay]! So you aren't just kiting to create distance. You're actually running!'

'Waiting for cooldown?'

'Heh. Dream on.'

'Your time has come!'

'Xiao Shi, heaven wills your death!'

...

Chapter 970: No, This Is Impossible!

Watching the two — one attacking, one defending — rapidly disappear from his field of view, Sun Miao was dumbfounded.

'Wait. This isn't what we planned!'

'Cheng Shi, what are you doing!?!'

'We finally reeled him in, and you're not letting me out!?'

'You want to take on the Beast Tamer alone?'

'Stupid! Arrogant! Preposterous!'

'How can you act this foolishly at a time like this, clinging to some pointless one-on-one and the illusion of a dignified solo kill?'

'This foolish act will squander our only chance, do you understand!?'

Sun Miao was genuinely frantic. While he wasn't worried about the life of someone who'd defeated Zangier, he refused to waste this window of opportunity they'd waited an entire day and night for.

If this attempt failed, there wouldn't be a next time. A wary Beast Tamer would never walk into the same trap twice, and that would mean a tool of the Fear Heartwood's caliber falling into enemy hands for nothing.

That was harder to accept than failing the trial itself.

But Sun Miao was also powerless. He could hardly shout "Cheng Shi, let me out so I can help you!" That would tip off the Beast Tamer to their setup, and the fish that had just taken the bait would swim away even faster!

Yet without shouting, the apparently foolish Fate Weaver seemed to have zero intention of releasing him.

So the suddenly sidelined Sun Miao stood still, frowning, and began carefully pondering what this secret-laden Fate Weaver could possibly be planning.

Cheng Shi had made zero preparations beforehand. What confidence did he have to face a peak-state Beast Tamer and ensure the man stayed in this trial permanently?

And what about his prolonged refusal to explain how he'd dealt with Yu Go? Was that somehow connected to this planned kill?

Too many questions. The wise man couldn't figure it out.

Xiao Qi couldn't figure it out either. How did this childhood friend have so many bizarre tricks for staying alive?

He'd already hit him with three arrows, yet none of them had slowed Cheng Shi's retreat one bit.

Being a priest who could heal himself was one thing, but the practiced ease with which Xiao Shi chugged potions like water — where had he learned that? Whose potions could even be used like that?

'Did you hack into the backend and edit your potion count?'

Watching the fleeing Xiao Shi still having energy to spare, Du Qiyu's expression gradually darkened.

'If this drags on until Xiao Shi's Go Lis cooldown resets, I'll be the one in danger!'

'I can't let this brief window slip...'

Thinking this, Du Qiyu decisively culled his remaining tamed beasts, keeping only one humanoid beast as backup. Then, channeling virtually all his peak-level power, he leveraged his hunter's talents once more and fired a single arrow — one meant to decide the outcome — at Cheng Shi's only escape path.

This arrow was his complete understanding of the hunter class in this game. In a sense, it even resembled the time-reversal arrows of the Wind Taming Ranger, except the Ranger hit the past, while Xiao Qi hit... the future.

Although the [Corruption] container ceaselessly drained his emotions, at this very instant, the launched arrow was the condensation of his half-life's obsession.

In terms of raw speed alone, this arrow shattered everything Cheng Shi knew about a hunter's upper limits. He couldn't defend. He couldn't dodge!

If he were a Pointer Warrior, he'd have been confident in timing the evasion. But as a priest—

WHOOSH! THWACK! HUMMM—

The fragile human body couldn't slow the arrow by even a fraction. The shaft punched clean through, erupting from Cheng Shi's back in a mist of blood, then buried itself in a tree trunk behind him with a droning vibration.

"GAHH—"

Cheng Shi vomited a mouthful of blood, staggered two steps, and crumpled backward. But before his body even hit the ground, a cascade of arrows rained down with screaming whistles, nailing him to the earth like a voodoo doll stuck full of pins.

This time, the cautious Xiao Qi didn't play the talkative villain. The instant he seized his opening, he locked victory down tight.

'Won?'

'Xiao Shi is dead?'

As a keen hunter, upon realizing every single arrow had found its mark, he should have been absolutely certain the prey was gone. But this was Xiao Shi. The childhood friend he'd once deceived. The lucky kid who'd supposedly found a father's love. The game's "new" prodigy who'd allegedly beaten a pseudo-god...

The composure Xiao Shi had shown while running had already proven he was no easy foe. And now, he was dead?

Just like that?

For an instant, the elation of victory nearly reignited the accumulated emotional buildup. Fortunately, the container in his hand siphoned away Du Qiyu's excitement just in time, restoring calm.

Champagne could be savored anytime, but never at halftime.

So Xiao Qi moved cautiously. After confirming the trapped wise man wasn't getting out anytime soon, the Beast Tamer... didn't reveal himself.

He was too cautious. Like the most seasoned of hunters.

Not only did he stay hidden, he even shifted positions and fired arrows from the forest at irregular intervals, lashing the corpse that barely had a square inch of intact flesh left to receive another arrowhead.

This paranoid hunter intended to finish this hunt in the most thorough, most careful way possible.

The shooting continued for nearly half an hour.

No hunter would waste this much time on a dead prey's corpse. When even Xiao Qi felt he was being excessively cautious, he finally stopped his barrage and allowed himself a smile.

No ecstasy. No unburdened relief. Du Qiyu simply smiled with satisfaction under the container's influence. In that moment, it was as though he'd finally bid farewell to the person he used to be.

As for whether Xiao Shi might resurrect somewhere else...

No. Absolutely impossible.

Because he still had one more tool in his possession — one that could seal a prey's death with absolute finality!

The Flaying Bone Knife!

An SS-rank prize confiscated from some bone-scraper, this knife contained the purest [Death] curse. Once any living being's corpse was cut with it, an eternal burial in [Death]'s bone heap would be the only destination.

Du Qiyu calmly drew the bone knife from his sleeve and walked toward Xiao Shi's corpse, step by step.

Interestingly, even now, the one approaching Cheng Shi's corpse wasn't his true body, but his sole remaining humanoid tamed beast.

It had been dressed identically to the Beast Tamer — Du Qiyu's proudest masterpiece. Now he would use another version of himself to send this childhood friend to hell once more.

"Safe travels, Xiao Shi. I hope in the next life, you'll still be fooled by me."

With those words, Xiao Qi raised the bone knife and stabbed downward.

But halfway through the plunge, his motion stopped. Because he realized the arrow-riddled corpse didn't even have one spare centimeter of skin for the blade's point.

Left with no choice, Xiao Qi pulled out the arrow lodged in Cheng Shi's chest. Under that density of fire, no normal corpse could possibly retain an intact heart. One tug and it should come out with a mess of pulped flesh.

But what Xiao Qi felt through the arrow shaft was unmistakable resistance from living tissue. And more horrifying still, the instant he touched the arrow in Cheng Shi's chest, that heart — which should have been reduced to mush — suddenly thumped and began pumping again!

The tamed beast's pupils shrank. With lightning reflexes, abandoning the arrow extraction, it thrust the bone knife straight at the beating heart. But the strike didn't suppress the heartbeat. Instead, the heart beat faster and faster, pumping hot blood directly through the wound and spraying it across the tamed beast's face.

At the same time, the arrow-studded Cheng Shi suddenly raised both hands, plucked the arrows from his eyes and mouth, and turned to face his stunned old friend beside him. With a ghastly smile — eye sockets streaming blood, mouth mangled yet still curving upward — he rasped through the gaps in his ruined lips:

"Heh. Old friend, your life-saving technique...

Not bad at all."

In that instant, even with the container in hand, both Du Qiyus went cold to the bone.

'No. This is impossible!'

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