

The Gods 1161

Chapter 1161: Benefactor, Come Quick—Memory Isn't Home

Having retrieved the mirror from the Joker Gathering Place, Cheng Shi recalled what Dragon King had once said:

'Black Dragon King is free now.'

He still had no idea what the Black Dragon King inside the mirror actually was—something that could walk right out of its own reflection.

But upon reclaiming the mirror, Cheng Shi confirmed one thing: with the Black Dragon King's departure, That Dream My Nightmare truly could no longer reflect a person's innermost desires.

At this point, calling it a mirror was a stretch. It was more like a door—one leading both to Memory's Collection Hall and to the Dreamless Mirror.

Cheng Shi waved at it for a while. Seeing no mirror-image whatsoever, he pursed his lips in mild regret. This had been a perfectly good "anti-Doctor weapon." Now that it was gone, if the Doctor ever pulled his Eye No One stunt again, probably nobody would be able to spot him.

No time to waste. Cheng Shi touched the mirror's frame, silently recited the Memory prayer, and ascended once more to Memory's Collection Hall.

In the vast, empty hall, he bellowed without restraint:

"Great God of Memory, I come here boldly to propose a deal!"

"A deal involving the most spectacular memory of this era."

"Would You be interested?"

His voice echoed. No response.

Cheng Shi blinked in surprise. He mustered his courage and shouted again—but after a long wait, the Collection Hall remained silent save for his own echo.

The master of this place seemed to have completely ignored the intruder's "insolence," leaving him to his own devices.

'What?!'

'What's going on?'

Cheng Shi was baffled.

'Last time I came, Memory was desperate to catch every liar who broke in. And now He just... doesn't care?'

'I figured "stranger the first time, friends the second" would apply to uninvited me, but Memory adapted this fast?'

'This forgiving...'

'Don't tell me You caught Fate's bug too?'

Utterly mystified, but unable to give up on that crucial vote, Cheng Shi wandered the halls, shouting as he went.

At this point he probably didn't even realize that to an outside observer, he looked exactly like The Prisoner had—equally insufferable.

But he wasn't the only one enduring this noise. Time was suffering too.

Because Memory wasn't in His Collection Hall.

Right now, those ancient eyes—saturated with the history of countless stars—were open at the very edge of the universe, gazing at the eyes before Him: irises where time itself collapsed into black holes.

Neither spoke.

After a long silence, Time finally couldn't take His follower's racket anymore. He sighed, cut the "live feed" from the Collection Hall, and asked with neither joy nor sorrow:

"Why have You come?"

Memory chuckled softly—and answered the question with a question:

"Does Existence have meaning?"

Time looked at His sibling god and shook His head with a gentle sigh: "If Existence itself has begun to doubt its own meaning, then Existence truly has no meaning."

"Is that why You draw close to Deceit?"

"No. I'm simply answering Your question."

"Deflecting."

Though Memory didn't understand many of Time's choices, He hadn't severed ties with His sibling the way the two Void gods had.

From the very beginning, even when He disagreed with Time, He'd never once blocked any of Time's decisions. Because He'd always believed that all forms of Existence carried meaning.

He was simply curious: why had a sibling who'd always been closer to Origin than Himself now turned to stand on Origin's opposing side?

The traces scattered across the universe had long made Him realize a cataclysm had once occurred—one that had been suppressed by some force.

The Void alone couldn't possess the power to reverse everything. At minimum, They couldn't overly influence Existence. So Memory's first suspicion fell on His sibling, Time.

That was also why He'd wanted to search for the erased universal memory through Cheng Shi—because the gazes of both the Void and Time converged on this Clown.

Of course, Memory wasn't solely interested in collecting that lost memory. More than anything, He wanted to know what these gods who sought to distance themselves from Origin were really planning.

So He asked again:

"Drawing close to Him... is that not good?"

Time was no Deceit. He wouldn't lie through His teeth. He averted His gaze toward whatever lay beyond the universe, and after an eternity spoke in a weary voice:

"How do you know which direction is 'close'?"

Memory was taken aback, then smiled: "As I thought—after getting close to Deceit, even Your speech sounds like His. You mean to say that what I've been doing is actually moving away, while what You've been doing is drawing closer?"

A rare flicker of confusion appeared in those black-hole eyes—there and gone in an instant, but Memory caught it.

"Perhaps. I don't know either."

Memory's brow furrowed. A bold conjecture suddenly formed in His mind. He looked at His sibling in astonishment:

"Who is trying to replace Him?"

"You? Or Deceit?"

"Or is it... Fate—the one who pretends to be at odds with Deceit?"

"Replace Origin?"

Time laughed bitterly. "Who could replace Him? Who would dare?"

"Even if someone must eventually take His place, it will never be any of the gods present."

"Deceit has His schemes, but His schemes are wrong."

"Fate is the one who's right. This universe... will ultimately return to the Void."

With those words, the time crystallized into a black hole in the void shattered and dispersed—as though all of time had been sucked into a singularity.

Memory stood frozen, chewing on His sibling's words for a long while before departing with furrowed brows.

He reappeared behind a certain noisy Clown.

No matter how sharp Cheng Shi's senses were, he couldn't possibly detect a true god's approach. By now, after several laps, equally hoarse and exhausted, he'd lost all patience. His shouts had devolved into something extremely blunt—and blasphemous.

He'd changed tactics, trying to provoke Memory into showing Himself. He was certain that given Memory's hunger for memories, He couldn't possibly ignore this deal.

If He'd just come out, Cheng Shi was confident he could secure the vote.

And so, in the empty Collection Hall, the following sound rang out:

"Memory! Come out and see me! I'm counting to three! If You don't show, I'm calling the Fun God!"

But before the echo faded, he shouted "THREE!" and then cackled ominously:

"Heh heh heh, You forced my hand!"

"Cannot distinguish true from false, never debate void from real."

"Benefactor! Memory's not home! Get over here, quick!"

Having reached a dead end, Cheng Shi turned around—

—and found himself face-to-face with his boss's face, inches away.

The boss's expression was cold, hovering between a smile and not:

"Keep counting. I'd like to see if He dares come."

"!!!!!"

Cheng Shi's brain went blank. His hand, hanging at his side, pinched his thigh with white-knuckle force. Only one thought screamed through his mind:

'Stupid leg—STOP SHAKING!'

Chapter 1162: Cheng Shi the Diplomat, Part Two

"Uh... haha... You came to work in person?"

Cheng Shi no longer knew what he was saying. All he knew was that he needed to put some distance between himself and the boss standing before him.

He retreated two steps like a toddler learning to walk, then two more, and two more after that... until his back pressed against the endlessly stretching pure white wall of the Collection Hall. Leaning against it and fighting to keep himself from collapsing, he squeezed out the fakest smile imaginable and greeted:

"When did you get here?"

The boss's eyes rolled white for an instant, as if reviewing the Collection Hall's stored memories, before he spoke with absolute gravity:

"If you think you said something blasphemous that I shouldn't have heard, and you're hoping I didn't catch it, then let me assure you — I heard everything.

No matter when I come here, the memories within are laid bare before me.

Just as you said, this is my 'home.'"

"..."

'Does the pressure really have to be this intense during a simple chat?'

'You're making me a little nervous here.'

Cheng Shi shrank back, let out a couple of dry laughs, and hurried to steer the conversation away from the topic of "blasphemy."

"Then you must have also heard why I came here. Do you agree to this deal?"

The boss surveyed Cheng Shi with cold, appraising eyes and scoffed:

"I don't yet know the terms of the deal. How could I possibly agree?"

Besides, you're a mere mortal. What gives you the audacity to negotiate with me?"

The moment the conversation shifted to this kind of verbal sparring, Cheng Shi was in his element. His gaze turned resolute in an instant, and the words flowed effortlessly:

"Great deity, if I may — my audacity stems from your own relentless pursuit of that one."

"Insolent!"

Memory's brows shot up in fury, his eyes turning frigid:

"Do you know that reckless speculation about the Origin is a crime punishable by instant death?"

Boundless pressure surged from every direction, nearly pinning Cheng Shi into the corner of the Collection Hall. And yet, strangely, Cheng Shi wasn't as nervous anymore.

Perhaps he'd grown accustomed to being judged, or perhaps pressure bred courage. Either way, Cheng Shi shed his earlier panic entirely, the corners of his lips curling into a grin.

He looked straight into the boss's terrifying eyes and said cheerfully:

"Setting aside the fact that you haven't actually killed me on the spot — I merely mentioned 'that one.' How does that constitute reckless speculation about the Origin?"

I'm a mere mortal, separated from Them by an insurmountable gulf. Just hearing Their exalted name fills me with dread. How could I dare speculate?"

So I think the one whose mind was recklessly wandering toward Them... might actually be you, wouldn't it?"

"..."

Clearly, the standard divine intimidation no longer worked on Cheng Shi, who'd had frequent audiences with gods. Memory cast a cold glance at Cheng Shi, offered no comment on his retort, and didn't punish him for the "offense" either. After a long silence spent contemplating something, he spoke in a frigid tone:

"State your deal. You have one chance."

Cheng Shi's expression brightened, and he immediately laid out his plan to dethrone Oblivion. He candidly explained that under a mortal's machinations, the downfall of a deity would certainly make for an extraordinarily compelling memory — one worthy of being enshrined and even offered to that existence.

Beyond that, Cheng Shi also admitted the proposal was partly self-serving. Oblivion's "departure" would benefit his own safety, and once he was safe, he could continue searching for Memory's lost recollection.

Furthermore, he pledged to negotiate an agreement with the new Oblivion, specifically requesting that they reduce the frequency of memory annihilation upon assuming power, thereby preserving more memories for this world.

In short, casting this vote cost Memory nothing and promised enormous returns. There was no reason not to lend support.

Of course, this was all persuasion from Cheng Shi's own perspective. As for what Memory actually thought...

He contemplated for a long time, his gaze drifting toward the audacious mortal before him — as defiant and rebellious as his own Benefactor — and neither refused nor accepted.

"If I refuse and annihilate the knowledge of Oblivion's crisis right here, wouldn't I gain a Descent ally while personally crafting another spectacular memory?"

In that case, how would it differ from agreeing to your terms?"

"???"

Cheng Shi's mind raced, and a response came to him within a heartbeat:

"Then you'd never be able to find the memories that interest you through me!"

And if I may be so shameless — right now, I'm quite the 'hot commodity' in the eyes of both Void Benefactors. Kill me, and sure, you gain one Descent friend, but you'd instantly make two Void enemies!

That's not a good trade."

"Deceit has always opposed me, and Void has never walked alongside Existence. Since we were already enemies, where's the bad bargain?"

Cheng Shi panicked.

'This is bad. He wouldn't actually kill me, would he?'

Thinking fast, he countered with another argument:

"Who says Void has never walked alongside Existence?"

Fate's fusion with Time is living proof that Void and Existence can travel the same road!

Your own follower Li Jingming walking the path of Deceit is evidence that you and Deceit can advance hand in hand!

All Existence has meaning, and if even opposing faiths can merge, then it proves this is the tide of the times.

Perhaps this is exactly what They desire from Their lofty vantage. If you wish to draw closer to Them, Void won't be a stumbling block — it'll be a stairway to the heavens.

Climb those steps, and who knows what vista awaits at the top?

Even if Void is ultimately meaningless, isn't meaninglessness itself a kind of meaning?

Just as nonexistence is a form of existence, perhaps Existence and Void were never meant to be so sharply divided.

Life birthed Descent, and Descent enriched Life;

Civilization spawned Chaos, and Chaos validated Civilization;

Now, Existence has extrapolated toward Void — but who can say that Void won't transform into Existence?

If you don't try walking in this direction, how will you know there aren't memories worth preserving ahead?"

The torrent of eloquence left Memory silent.

'Nonexistence is a form of existence?'

He regarded Cheng Shi with an inscrutable look, shed his icy demeanor, and smiled:

"Who taught you all of this?"

'Taught?'

'I made it all up on the spot!'

'If you were backed into a corner, you'd bullshit just as brilliantly!'

But the truth couldn't be spoken. Cheng Shi lowered his head slightly and replied with measured composure:

"After spending so long in the game, looking back, one can't help but gain some insights."

Memory raised an eyebrow and nodded:

"Memory is not Time. I cannot extrapolate — I can only record.

That is why Time rarely feels regret when calculating, while Memory sometimes hesitates when collecting.

Back when I saw through Fate's schemes, I should have been more forceful — pulled you directly into the Existence camp, rather than relying on some fusion with Time that turned Existence into a tool for your Void machinations.

Never mind. What's past is past. Even if I've always lived in the past, it's time I opened my eyes to the future.

Understood. You may leave."

With that, Memory waved his hand and departed. The pristine white Collection Hall shattered with a thunderous crash, hurling a thoroughly bewildered Cheng Shi out of the void.

Cheng Shi was genuinely dumbfounded.

'Wait — what?!'

'Another "understood"?!'

'Every last one of you — just an "understood"? What the hell does that even mean?'

'Is it so hard to let me "understand" something too?'

'At the very least, tell me whether you're casting your vote or not!'

'Is being a riddler really that fun?'

'Good grief, so this is what Fate's policy of embracing all faiths really means — infecting the entire universe with the riddler disease?'

'If that's the case, then I have no choice but to praise Fate once more.'

"What a magnificent piece of work!"

Chapter 1163: The Plan Begins

Back in the trial, Cheng Shi didn't dare launch his plan rashly.

He couldn't read the attitudes of Decay and Memory, and figured the prudent move was to consult his own Benefactor first.

After all, something this significant warranted a discussion with the Fun God. If he failed to secure Deceit's two votes at the Assembly of Gods Convention, the title of "clown" would echo across the entire universe.

So Cheng Shi recited a prayer and called upon his Benefactor — but received no response whatsoever.

After waiting for a long time with no summons from the Fun God, a sinking feeling settled in Cheng Shi's gut. He switched to calling upon his other Benefactor, Time.

Unsurprisingly, Time still had no time for him.

Refusing to give up, Cheng Shi mustered his courage and called upon Fate — but bizarrely, Fate was also "not home" today!

Just like those two "understood" replies, all three of his Benefactors had tacitly chosen to ignore his calls today.

Cheng Shi's face crumbled.

'What did I say? Having more Benefactors is useless when none of them are reliable!'

But Cheng Shi was not a man who gave up easily. After being denied an audience, he quickly shifted gears, borrowing a page from the Prisoner's playbook by convincing himself that their silence was tacit approval — no meeting necessary.

With this mindset, Cheng Shi nervously set his plan into motion.

He knew Mo Shu and Zhao Xishi were hunting him, so he deliberately left traces throughout the small town to lure them into finding him. Through Mo Shu's methods, he could then gain an audience with the key figure in his plan — Oblivion's Envoy, Herobos.

What he hadn't anticipated, however, was that Ji Yue recovered faster than expected, and the Torchbearers were even more aggressive in their search than Mo Shu.

By the time Mo Shu and Zhao Xishi discovered Cheng Shi's trail and were still deliberating whether it was a trap, the Prisoner was already racing toward Cheng Shi with Ji Yue in tow.

The Torchbearers were worried too. They feared Mo Shu would find the isolated Cheng Shi first, putting their friend in danger.

But from Cheng Shi's perspective, their charge was disrupting his plan. Mo Shu and Zhao Xishi would never attack while all three of them were together.

At this point, he still didn't know that Ji Yue had already become a nail Zhao Xishi had "planted." Left with no choice, he could only avoid the Torchbearers while continuing to leave traces along his circuitous route.

This back-and-forth was exactly what tipped off the hunters.

Zhao Xishi stood on the roof of a civilian house, sensing the nearly imperceptible power of Fate lingering on the eaves. She glanced in the direction the figure had vanished and smirked:

"Just as I thought.

You can tell from the Fate Weaver's movement pattern that he's avoiding the Purgatory Bishop. He's definitely hiding something.

I just don't see what's so special about this Purgatory Bishop that even the Prisoner has taken a liking to her.

But no matter. Soon enough, they'll all be able to 'lay their cards on the table.'

Grudges will be settled, grievances repaid. I'm curious to see how spectacular a memory this will make.

Why don't we... give them a little push?"

Mo Shu was sharp. He caught the subtext of Zhao Xishi's words immediately.

"You want me to draw the Prisoner away?"

Are you sure you can handle the other two alone?"

Don't forget — the Fate Weaver still has that trump card that lets him control shadows. You'd better not die to his shadow again.

If you die this time, history won't save you."

"No, no, no — you've got it wrong." Zhao Xishi winced at the memory of her substitute's death, but quickly shook her head with a light laugh. "It won't be me against two. It'll be me and the Purgatory Bishop, two against one.

Relax. Nobody falls for the same trick twice. This time, I'll be the fisherman, letting them fight it out first.

Don't worry about me. Just do your part.

Lure that jinx as far away as possible. Even if you can't take him down, as long as we can eliminate the Fate Weaver, we'll find out whether what Jie Shu said was true."

Mo Shu pondered for a moment. This was indeed the optimal play given the circumstances. Without the Prisoner in the equation, the hunt would be simple. The problem was that annoying pest was

exceptionally difficult to deal with — there was no way to annihilate the Fate Weaver without getting past him first.

He nodded, left a parting "Watch yourself," and slipped away toward the Prisoner's direction.

The Prisoner was no fool. A simple ambush would never be enough to lure the tiger from the mountain. So Mo Shu went to elaborate lengths with his preparations.

He fabricated signs of combat with the Fate Weaver at two locations in completely opposite directions, exploiting the Prisoner and Ji Yue's urgency to find Cheng Shi. He successfully split them apart and, along the Prisoner's inevitable path, tore open a rift in the void, dragging the Ascetic Monk directly into a space far removed from reality.

The Prisoner didn't resist. He stepped through without hesitation, his face etched with determination.

In that moment, anyone watching might have mistaken the Ascetic Monk for a man marching to his death in a final stand.

But in truth, his encounter with Mo Shu was also part of the Torchbearers' plan!

As the top-ranked follower of Silence, the Prisoner was extraordinarily sensitive to "environmental speech." He had long noticed a third party in this "chase game" — the two hunters had also arrived.

He relayed this information to Ji Yue. After careful deliberation, the moment she spotted signs of battle in two opposite directions, her eyes lit up with understanding:

"A divide-and-conquer strategy.

It seems they know you're not easy to deal with.

That being the case, Zhao Xishi also wants to pick us off one by one — which suits me perfectly.

Of the two of them, the biggest threat is the Scavenger. Zhao Xishi is arrogant and overconfident — she's actually the easier one to break through.

Without the Scavenger interfering, I don't think taking down Zhao Xishi will be difficult.

Even if her ranking is far above mine, a singer is still a singer — on a straight battlefield, she's no match for a mage.

Prisoner, if you trust me..."

"I trust you," the Prisoner said, rubbing his bald head firmly. "Worst case, if you die, we'll just get your brother-in-law to revive you."

"..."

'What kind of trust is that?'

Ji Yue choked, then wordlessly pointed toward the direction where Oblivion's power was denser:

"Then go stall the Scavenger. The longer you hold him, the better our odds.

Don't worry about me. I still have a trick up my sleeve."

Of course the Prisoner believed Ji Yue could defeat Zhao Xishi in a head-on confrontation. But he also knew someone like Zhao Xishi would never fight a mage head-on. Still, out of trust in his fellow Torchbearer, he nodded and walked straight into the trap Mo Shu had laid for him.

Watching the Prisoner leave, Ji Yue's gaze hardened. She hefted her spear and charged in the opposite direction.

But she never expected that waiting for her there wasn't Zhao Xishi — it was the very Fate Weaver she'd been searching for!

The moment she laid eyes on Cheng Shi, Ji Yue froze, her heart lurching.

She knew that if Cheng Shi had wanted to avoid the Torchbearers, he would never have come to meet her voluntarily. The fact that they'd run into each other meant either he was in danger and forced to seek help, or everything around them was Zhao Xishi's trap.

Either scenario meant they were in extreme danger right now.

Ji Yue made a snap decision. She swung her spear and conjured fire, first scorching the area into a purgatory to give herself a combat advantage, then backed toward Cheng Shi, scanning every direction for a surprise attack.

Cheng Shi was equally startled to see Ji Yue appear. He was certain he hadn't detected any Torchbearer traces in this direction. He'd sensed Oblivion's power entangled with another force and assumed the Torchbearers had drawn Mo Shu away, planning to seize the chance to take out Zhao Xishi.

Instead of Zhao Xishi, he found Ji Yue — who may or may not have recovered her memories.

And the instant he saw Ji Yue backing toward him with her guard up, a flash of understanding lit Cheng Shi's eyes, and everything clicked into place!

The memories that had surfaced in Ji Yue's mind when she was on the brink of death couldn't have been a real dream. They were most likely the work of Zhao Xishi's cerulean threads. As for why the Historian had manipulated this Torchbearer's memories...

'She wouldn't be trying to use Ji Yue's hand to deal with me, would she?'

Cheng Shi's brow twitched, and his heart hammered. He still vividly remembered the scene from an earlier trial when Ji Yue had personally eliminated the only priest in her own team.

The scholar's temper was truly explosive. Once she found out he'd deceived her...

But she was a mature Torchbearer now. She should be able to keep her temper in check...

Right?

Chapter 1164: "Turning Against Each Other"

Zhao Xishi lurked in the shadows, the corner of her lips curling upward.

Peak-level matches weren't just about raw combat power. Unless you were facing an opponent like Hong Lin, everyone had to play at least three rounds of mind games first.

She watched Ji Yue and Cheng Shi slowly draw together, back to back, and sneered inwardly:

"How cautious. Too bad you never considered that the very closeness between you would ultimately write the ending of your betrayal."

Ji Yue knew Zhao Xishi was nearby. She was also trying to figure out what kind of trap the Historian had laid to dare face two opponents at once — especially when one of them had already killed her in this very Trial.

Cheng Shi's nerves were wound even tighter than Ji Yue's. He was terrified this Torchbearer would fly into a rage and put a spear through him. Of course, he knew that as a Torchbearer, she would never actually kill him — but a single strike could sound the attack horn for the lurking Historian, making their situation even more precarious.

So Cheng Shi stayed on high alert. Shadow Cheng Shi prowled through the surrounding darkness, scanning for any trace of the Historian.

But Zhao Xishi had designed this setup. She wouldn't let herself be exposed so easily.

The distance between the two kept shrinking. Before long, they bumped together, back to back.

Once they'd confirmed their rear was clear, Ji Yue didn't relax — her frown only deepened. Cheng Shi mirrored her, his expression growing increasingly uneasy.

Regardless of what the two of them were thinking, Zhao Xishi knew the moment she'd been waiting for had finally arrived.

From her concealed position, she silently clapped her hands. In an instant, every memory thread dormant in Ji Yue's mind snapped taut at once, dragging those discarded memories from the depths of oblivion back into the Purgatory Bishop's consciousness.

Scene after scene replayed. Memory after memory resurfaced. In that moment, Ji Yue finally remembered everything!

She remembered what it truly meant to be a Torchbearer. She remembered the face of the man who had stood before her, passionately declaring, "Among all those seated upon their lofty Divine Thrones — why can't one of them be me?"

Her eyes first glazed with confusion, then blazed with towering battle intent. The long spear she'd been pointing outward suddenly thrust backward, and from the void that split open above her head, an endless deluge of [War] weapons came pouring down.

The Purgatory Bishop had made her move — but her target wasn't Zhao Xishi. It was the Fate Weaver!

Cheng Shi jolted with alarm, but his reflexes were sharp. He deflected the spear's butt with his scalpel, immediately threw himself into a roll, and began dodging the rain of [War] weapons while cursing:

"Ji Yue, have you lost your mind?!"

Ji Yue's eyes burned crimson. She gave a cold, humorless laugh:

"Lost my mind?"

Cheng Shi, when you erased my memories, did you ever think I might get them back one day?!

You dared to deceive me — now die!!"

As she spoke, the torrent of blades and spears raining from the ancient battlefield in the void grew even more ferocious. Between the falling weapons, there wasn't a single gap left. Cheng Shi's expression twisted with alarm. Seeing no way to dodge, he detonated a cloud of smoke screen and hid within it, shouting at the surroundings:

"Zhao Xishi, you've been waiting here for me?!"

Fine, fine, fine — and Ji Yue, you're an idiot too! Can't you see this is the Historian's scheme?!"

"So what if it is?"

You made your choice — now own it!"

Ji Yue said nothing more and simply kept attacking.

Cheng Shi's expression turned deadly serious. From within the remnants of smoke, nearly shredded by the endless rain of blades, he spoke in a cold voice:

"Since you refuse to see reason, don't blame me for fighting back.

I'll deal with you first. Zhao Xishi can die a little later."

With that, Shadow Cheng Shi moved — and his opening strike was lethal.

Just like when he'd fought Zhao Xishi, the shadow appeared behind Ji Yue without warning. Two pitch-black hands clamped around her throat, as if the next second would send this Purgatory Bishop — whom he'd personally resurrected — back to the Fishbone Hall.

But Ji Yue showed no fear. She clenched her teeth until blood seeped from the corner of her lips, and then her silver hair stood on end, refracting blinding light before exploding into a roaring inferno of flames.

She was on fire!

Just like Qin Xin before her, Ji Yue burned from head to toe.

'It seems the founder of the Torchbearers gave his Fire Seekers quite a bit of private tutoring.' Cheng Shi's gaze sharpened. He wrenched Ji Yue's neck, snapping it, then immediately retreated — but the flames clung to him like maggots burrowing into bone, crawling along those dark arms all the way to Shadow Cheng Shi's chest.

Shadows might not feel temperature, but they certainly feared the light.

The radiance from the flames nearly incinerated Shadow Cheng Shi entirely. Cheng Shi burst out of the smoke screen and saw his shadow reduced to ashes. His eyes widened with fury as he roared at Ji Yue, who was struggling to her feet:

"You really won't stop until one of us is dead?!"

Zhao Xishi is right out there — kill me, and do you think you'll survive alone?!"

Ji Yue's snapped neck slowly mended under the nourishment of the flames. Her entire body blazed like a furnace, yet her eyes were cold as an abyss. She looked at Cheng Shi and spoke word by word, every syllable dripping with bone-deep hatred:

"I never cared about surviving.

Come and fight!"

With that, a howling firestorm swept toward Cheng Shi. The destruction of Shadow Cheng Shi had already dealt him severe damage, and despite his best efforts to dodge, the storm still scorched half his body.

The titanic force of [War] sent him flying. He slammed into the ground, coughing up blood, barely clinging to life.

And at that moment, Zhao Xishi — who had been biding her time in the shadows — furrowed her brow slightly.

'Something isn't right. Not right at all.'

A Fate Weaver who'd fought his way through a gauntlet of Chosen Ones at 0221's Experiment Ground couldn't possibly be this weak.

To put it generously, the Purgatory Bishop could be considered a peak player — but in the true upper echelon, her name didn't even register.

Even Zhao Xishi herself had been able to outmaneuver Ji Yue, let alone Cheng Shi, who'd carved a path through multiple Chosen Ones. So the moment Cheng Shi hit the ground, she knew this was far from over.

'This liar is definitely faking his defeat!'

Ji Yue had arrived at the same conclusion. Her approach toward Cheng Shi visibly slowed as she cautiously surveyed her surroundings, wary of whatever trick he had up his sleeve.

Seeing that his opponent wouldn't take the bait, the supposedly incapacitated Cheng Shi simply sat up and spat in Ji Yue's direction.

"So now you're being 'steady,' huh? Tch — showing off amateur tricks before a master."

As he spoke, Shadow Cheng Shi — the very one they'd all just watched burn to nothing — reappeared behind Ji Yue and locked her in a vice grip. At the same time, Cheng Shi raised his hand and launched three thunderbolts straight at Ji Yue's horror-stricken face.

The Purgatory Bishop might have seen her own end coming, but she showed no fear. She faced the lightning head-on and, without a shred of hesitation, detonated herself. For a split second, thunder and fire intertwined, bleaching everyone's vision white and leveling the entire block!

Zhao Xishi wasn't spared either. She snapped her eyes shut with lightning reflexes, but was still blinded for an instant. When she forced her stinging eyes open, she found nothing in the alley but Ji Yue's charred corpse — Cheng Shi was nowhere to be seen!

Where he'd been standing, only a thick streak of blood trailed through the air, flung outward — but the person it belonged to was already gone!

He'd run!

Zhao Xishi blinked in surprise — then was overcome with elation. She locked onto the remnants of Cheng Shi's aura and gave chase.

That single instant of "blindness" alone could have put her in lethal danger. In this game, there were countless abilities and talents capable of unleashing devastating area attacks. If the Fate Weaver had followed up with an indiscriminate barrage during that window, she could very well have died.

But the Fate Weaver hadn't!

Why?

The only explanation was that the collision of thunder and fire had wounded him too — wounded him so severely that he had to disengage and tend to his injuries first!

He couldn't be sure that his battered body could defeat her, so he'd made the steady choice and retreated.

This was perfectly consistent with everything Zhao Xishi knew about Cheng Shi. And so she knew her moment had come. Every piece of her scheme had been building toward this final act — the fisherman reaping the spoils. The snipe and the clam had fought until one was dead and the other crippled. There was no way she'd let her prize slip away. This time, the Fate Weaver would not leave this Trial alive.

Was what Jie Shu said true or not?

Was the Fate Weaver truly the key to what lay beyond this world?

Once she had his corpse, every question would have its answer.

"I'm about to catch you, Fate Weaver."

Chapter 1165: The Historian's Swan Song

Perhaps because the Afterglow Church belonged to [Chaos], and he happened to be the "Envoy" of [Chaos], Cheng Shi had a certain fondness for this scene of dying sunlight.

The sun was sinking low, stretching the shadows of people and objects into long silhouettes — all except Cheng Shi's, which was tattered and broken, looking like a kite full of holes.

As for Cheng Shi himself, while not quite as ragged, he was in a wretched state. His spiritual energy had been completely burned away by the searing breath of [War], leaving him unable to cast even a single healing spell.

He staggered into an alley and quickly vanished into its shadows.

A few breaths later, a figure appeared atop the alley's rooftops. Zhao Xishi furrowed her brow and observed for a moment. When she noticed a few passersby occasionally glancing back into the alley, a smile crept across her lips.

As a Historian who reconstructed the past, she excelled at piecing together clues. They might not be as skilled at tracking as Hunters, but as long as they caught even the faintest traces, they could calculate a target's position all the same.

Clearly, a stranger had entered this alley.

But Zhao Xishi didn't rush in. Instead, she took out her history book and altered the history of Redi Core, causing the passersby to suddenly change direction and file into the alley one by one.

Only after they emerged safely from the other end did she nod, confirming that the Fate Weaver was indeed a spent force — he no longer had the strength to set traps here.

"No wonder he ran so fast. It seems [War]'s fire really did burn through his defenses."

Zhao Xishi chuckled softly and strode into the alley. As a precaution, she left a failsafe at the entrance to summon Mo Shu — this way, even if she made a careless mistake and fell to the critically wounded Fate Weaver, at least one ally could arrive for the final harvest.

As for whether Mo Shu could shake off the Prisoner and arrive in time...

She'd stake the Scavenger's entire reputation on it. If he couldn't make it, he had no business continuing in Jie Shu's company.

The Historian was cautious. Even though everything had gone smoothly today, proceeding exactly according to plan, she still gave her all when facing a Fate Weaver of extraordinary combat prowess.

She didn't believe the Fate Weaver would simply flee without fighting back. So she used herself as bait, first walking halfway through the alley to slow his retreat, then decisively pulling out a page from her book and leveling half the alley in one blast.

Before Cheng Shi could even make a move, the explosion blew him out from underground.

He coughed up a mouthful of blood and, rather than fighting back, immediately bolted for the exit while cursing:

"Damn it!

Zhao Xishi, you'd better hope I never catch you!"

"Catch me?" Zhao Xishi's gaze hardened. "You won't live long enough for that."

With a wave of her hand, the passersby who had previously left the alley inexplicably turned around and filed back, blocking Cheng Shi's escape route — their faces twisted and savage, as if ready to devour him.

Cheng Shi's brow darkened, but his stride didn't falter. He charged straight through.

"You think a few NPCs can stop me?"

Dream on!"

"You're the one dreaming. After all, death is nothing but an endless dream..."

The Historian opened her history book once more. At her command, the passersby threw themselves at Cheng Shi one after another, each detonating on impact and releasing dense waves of [Oblivion]'s power. Only then did Cheng Shi realize that Zhao Xishi's killing technique had actually come from Mo Shu all along.

The concentrated [Oblivion] energy was several times greater than the dose that had been inside Ji Yue. It struck Cheng Shi down almost instantly.

He collapsed, coughing blood, writhing and convulsing — yet his jaw remained clenched, and he didn't let out a single cry of pain.

He poured every last shred of strength into healing himself, but the feeble glow of the healing spell against the rampaging [Oblivion] energy inside him was like a firefly before the full moon — utterly useless.

The Fate Weaver's defeat was sealed.

Even so, Zhao Xishi still didn't approach.

She merely watched from a safe distance, tossing out the occasional barbed remark to hasten the Fate Weaver's emotional collapse.

Cheng Shi struggled for a long time before his strength finally gave out. He twitched twice, the blood trickling from his mouth already black, his pupils slowly dilating. He stared at Zhao Xishi with defiance and asked the final question of his life:

"Why?"

Zhao Xishi scoffed.

"Why?"

For a peak player, what a childish question.

This world has always been kill or be killed, deceive or be deceived. You died because you weren't tough enough — there's no 'why' about it.

But we are quite interested in you.

As for how exactly... heh, I'd rather not let you die enlightened."

The Historian said no more, refusing to reveal a single secret. The defiance in Cheng Shi's eyes only deepened, but the light within them was already fading.

He died. The widely acclaimed Fate Weaver had fallen, right there in the history of Redi Core.

After confirming three times over that the corpse before her showed no signs of life whatsoever, a flash of fervent hunger crossed Zhao Xishi's eyes.

She looked at Cheng Shi's body with undisguised covetousness, wishing she could deliver it to Jie Shu that very second to verify whether his staggering hypothesis was true.

She strode toward Cheng Shi, pulled a small urn-like paper box from her personal space, opened the lid, and reached for the corpse's hand to stuff it inside.

But the instant her fingers touched Cheng Shi's arm — everything changed!

The lifeless corpse suddenly opened its eyes. Beneath the charred skin of its face, burnt flesh peeled away to reveal the corner of a mouth curled in a grin. A scorched hand whipped around and seized her arm with such force that it crushed Zhao Xishi's bones on the spot!

Zhao Xishi's pupils contracted violently, her face twisting with shock. Ignoring the pain, she immediately drew her blade and hacked off her own arm to pull away, screaming:

"That's impossible!!!"

"Impossible?"

A perfectly intact Shadow Cheng Shi materialized behind her in the same instant, closing in just as he had the first time he'd killed her. His arm hooked around her neck while his other hand tore off the Historian's one remaining arm — the last limb that could hold a pen and write history.

He leaned in and whispered in her ear like a demon:

"This world has always been kill or be killed, deceive or be deceived. You died because you weren't tough enough — there's no such thing as 'impossible.'"

Before the echo of his words faded — crack. Her neck snapped.

Cheng Shi lunged forward and drove the Flaying Bone Knife into Zhao Xishi's heart once more.

This time, the Historian truly fell into history.

Looking at the lifeless Zhao Xishi, Cheng Shi felt no satisfaction. Instead, he violently spewed a mouthful of blood and collapsed onto the ground, cursing at the sky:

"No wonder the Prisoner couldn't hold out...

If it weren't for Vitality, who the hell could withstand that thing?

[Oblivion] is this overpowered and they haven't nerfed it?!"

Then, gritting his teeth, Cheng Shi dragged himself upright and answered his own question:

"Nerf it!

I'll nerf it myself!"

The setting sun's afterglow laid a golden carpet through the alley, stretching Cheng Shi's shadow long — long enough to drape over Zhao Xishi's body.

Those who defile fate have never met a good end throughout all of history — save for one particular individual. The Historian had proven this truth with blood-red strokes, and her swan song was at last buried in the annals of the past.

Chapter 1166: Who Are "We"?

Cheng Shi dragged the corpse behind him with one hand, coughing up blood as he walked back to the earlier battlefield.

Ji Yue was still lying dead there. He couldn't just leave her.

Yes, the Torchbearer had truly died. The fight wasn't staged — though both sides had been acting, the combat itself was completely real. Even Ji Yue's final self-destructive strike was a genuine trump card she'd never revealed before.

Anything less would never have fooled a shrewd Historian.

It was precisely because both sides had gone all-out, holding nothing back, that Cheng Shi's critically wounded state had appeared so authentic. After all, acting could only go so far — and Cheng Shi really had been blown into spitting blood.

He hadn't expected Ji Yue to be so committed to the role. The sheer resolve behind that final detonation was indistinguishable from a genuine fight to the death between mortal enemies...

In the instant he'd been blasted away by the inferno, Cheng Shi had even wondered if she'd done it on purpose — as payback for his deception.

'But wasn't she afraid I wouldn't come back to revive her?'

As it turned out, whether Ji Yue had been afraid or not, Cheng Shi couldn't live with himself otherwise.

He couldn't abandon a teammate who had sacrificed her life for his plan without so much as exchanging a glance beforehand.

This had indeed been Cheng Shi's plan. The moment he'd realized Zhao Xishi might tamper with Ji Yue's memories, he'd worked everything out. The problem was that at the time, under the enemy's watchful eyes, he'd already lost any chance to communicate with Ji Yue openly. So in the split second their backs pressed together, Cheng Shi had silently used his left and right elbows to trace two characters on Ji Yue's waist:

"Kill me."

Ji Yue was brilliant. She'd immediately understood Cheng Shi's intent. She didn't know exactly how to act well enough to deceive Zhao Xishi, but she knew she had to convincingly pretend to turn on him — attack him, but not kill him.

As long as the Priest wasn't dead, everyone on the field could be saved.

But if the Priest died, all that was left to do was wait for death.

As for how far to take the betrayal — that would depend on how aggressively the Fate Weaver escalated things during their staged fight.

What she hadn't anticipated was that the moment she received Cheng Shi's plan, Zhao Xishi's plan arrived as well.

The "dead" memories came rushing back, and Ji Yue instantly rediscovered the light that had guided her toward the Torchbearers!

Cheng Shi!

This silver-tongued liar had used an outrageous deception to trick her into joining the Torchbearers — an organization he wasn't even part of!

In that moment, Ji Yue was genuinely furious.

[War]'s ferocity amplified her indignation, while the Torchbearer's discipline kept her restrained. But as Cheng Shi hit harder and harder, Ji Yue knew this performance had to be utterly convincing.

So, under the cover of their act, she unleashed her truly genuine fury at Cheng Shi.

The beauty of it was that from start to finish, she hadn't spoken a single lie. Outsiders naturally couldn't tell what was real and what was fake.

Right up until the moment lightning poured through her body and she closed her eyes with composure, her final thought was:

'When the Fate Weaver revives me... how embarrassed is he going to be?'

He was already embarrassed.

Cheng Shi stood beside Ji Yue's corpse, toes curling inside his shoes.

Youthful delusions of grandeur were cringe-worthy enough in hindsight, but who would've guessed that a lie told mere months ago could give a seasoned liar goosebumps all over?

'When I bring the Torchbearer back to life, what's the first thing she'll say?'

'Are you Cheng Xin, or Qin Shi?'

In Ji Yue's original understanding, he was supposed to be the one who founded the Torchbearers, wasn't he?

'A madman who tried to become a god for the sake of passing the torch...'

'Heavens, the sins I've committed.'

But leaving her dead wasn't an option. Cheng Shi took several deep breaths, pulled out the Lush Horn Crown, and hauled Ji Yue back from death.

As fresh skin bloomed across charred flesh, Cheng Shi averted his gaze. The moment he turned away, he heard the Purgatory Bishop ask from the ground in a half-amused tone:

"So — are you going to tell me you're also the man behind Qin Xin?"

"..."

'Since when does Qin Xin have so many men behind him?'

'No... what kind of nonsense is this?'

Cheng Shi shook his head and sighed.

"We're all fighting to survive. Everyone's been deceived at some point. If you want to punish me, just say the word — no need for the passive-aggressive treatment.

I can take the scolding, but Qin Xin doesn't deserve to be dragged into this."

"Oh, now you feel sorry for him?" Ji Yue stood up, casually pulled out a fresh set of clothes and got dressed. She looked at Cheng Shi's back, wanting to say something more, but in the end it all dissolved into a sigh.

"You're really not a Torchbearer?"

Cheng Shi shook his head. "You should have seen my will clearly enough by now. I have no fire to pass on. I just want to stay alive."

"Then what about all that talk about becoming a god..."

"!!!"

Cheng Shi panicked.

'Seriously, lady? You're still digging up that corpse?'

'Yes, I lied, and that was wrong of me. But you practically begged to be deceived — don't you bear any responsibility?'

Cheng Shi glanced back at Ji Yue. Meeting those eyes still flickering with a trace of expectation, the retort died in his throat. He stiffly changed the subject:

"The Prisoner is still fighting Mo Shu. As his comrade, you should probably be worrying about him right now."

"..."

Ji Yue went quiet for a moment. Though she said nothing, Cheng Shi caught the fleeting look of awkwardness in her eyes and read the unspoken thought behind it:

'If the one who died was the Prisoner... that wouldn't be the worst outcome.'

What made it even more awkward was that Ji Yue also read Cheng Shi's fleeting expression — and saw agreement with that very sentiment...

An uncomfortable silence settled over them.

After a moment, Ji Yue's gaze fell on Zhao Xishi's corpse behind Cheng Shi, her eyes turning cold.

"Did you get anything out of her?"

"Didn't ask. Can't give villains too much time, or they'll stage a comeback." Cheng Shi smiled. "But there's still time to ask now."

He produced the Finger Bone Brooch and held it over Zhao Xishi's corpse.

"The 'we' you mentioned earlier — 'we are quite interested in you' — who exactly are 'we'?"

Cheng Shi was clever. He didn't need to extract the full truth from Zhao Xishi. He only needed to know who was targeting him so he could stay on guard.

If these people were truly enemies, there would eventually come a day when they'd clash again — and the full picture would reveal itself.

Zhao Xishi's limp head slowly straightened under the pull of [Death]'s power. Her eyes glowed an eerie green as she croaked:

"Jie Shu, Mo Shu, and a stranger I've never met."

Jie Shu?

Cheng Shi clearly recognized the name — or at least had heard it before — but he couldn't quite place it. He looked up at Ji Yue, who furrowed her brow:

"Ranked second on the Road to Ascension. His score isn't leagues ahead of the runners-up, but there's still a considerable gap.

More importantly, he's also a follower of [Folly] — a Fool Hunter who rose to sudden fame just months after the Faith Game descended.

He claims his idol is Wei Mu. And that his only rival is Wei Mu."

"?"

'Another [Folly] follower?'

'And a Fool Hunter at that?'

Being singled out by clever people was never good news.

A thought suddenly struck Cheng Shi — he recalled the teammate in this Trial who had vanished so early on.

If Jie Shu considered himself Wei Mu's rival, perhaps this was the perfect opportunity to sic Wei Mu on this pursuer walking the path of [Folly]?

But where on earth had the man who was leagues ahead as number one on the Road to Ascension disappeared to?

And the other stranger Zhao Xishi had mentioned... who could that be?

Chapter 1167: Go Get Your Boss

When the mysteries kept piling up with no leads, Cheng Shi stopped dwelling on the present.

He disposed of Zhao Xishi's corpse, then stepped into the void alongside Ji Yue to go reinforce the teammate neither of them particularly wanted to reinforce.

But when they reached the battlefield where the Prisoner and Mo Shu were fighting, the scene before them left both stunned in their tracks.

The two warriors weren't locked in a desperate battle through the void as expected. Instead, they sat cross-legged facing each other from a distance, silent, as if waiting for something.

The moment Cheng Shi and Ji Yue burst in, the Prisoner's face lit up with delight while Mo Shu's expression darkened. Their standoff finally had a result.

"Told you I'd win. You didn't believe me — do you believe me now?"

Call me daddy."

"..."

The entire void fell silent.

Cheng Shi's eyelid twitched violently. Ji Yue's lip spasmed.

'What is this — a father-son match?'

'How does this jinx manage to adopt family members wherever he goes?'

'And with Mo Shu's personality, how could he possibly have agreed to such a bet?'

Cheng Shi and Ji Yue exchanged a look, each finding the same answer in the other's eyes: this poor Scavenger had probably been "tacitly consented" into it again.

Seeing Mo Shu rise to his feet with a stony expression, refusing to respond, the Prisoner cheerfully called out:

"Aw, my dear boy."

That single remark ignited Mo Shu's fury. His expression turned glacial. He launched a punch at the space before him, and while the Prisoner moved to block, Mo Shu annihilated his own form in an instant, leaving behind a single parting line:

"The arrogant are unworthy of counsel."

The three of them weren't about to let such a perfect opportunity slip, so they gave chase simultaneously. But Mo Shu employed the same old trick — after returning to reality, he left three false trails heading in three different directions, clearly intending to split the Torchbearers up.

The Prisoner stared at the three streams of [Oblivion] energy drifting in opposite directions, paused, scratched his head, and said:

"This kind of thing is more up my bro-in-law's alley.

Bro-in-law, where are your dice? Pull them out — odd we go left, even we go right, standing on edge we go center. If the Scavenger's fate says he's done for, we'll definitely catch him."

"..."

Hearing this, Ji Yue rolled her eyes, shoved the Prisoner aside, and began carefully sensing the residual [Oblivion] energy to gauge which trail was strongest.

Seeing that no one was paying him any attention, the Prisoner clicked his tongue and turned around:

"Bro-in-law, why aren't you saying anything? You..."

Hm?!

"Where'd my bro-in-law go?"

Ji Yue froze. She spun around only to find that Cheng Shi, who'd been trailing behind them, had already disappeared without a trace.

She furrowed her brow and sighed.

"We were never destined to walk the same path."

The Prisoner grew anxious: "That's exactly why we need to pull him in! You fought Zhao Xishi together — that's a life-or-death bond. How could you not even try to persuade him?"

'Persuade?'

'How am I supposed to persuade him?'

'I'm the one he persuaded into joining! And now you're telling me he was never even part of it? How many versions of this Torchbearer story are there?!'

Ji Yue had only just recovered her memories, and her mind was in turmoil. She had no patience for the Prisoner and simply shook her head:

"Let's split up too."

The Prisoner blinked. "You want to quit the Torchbearers?"

"..."

Ji Yue nearly lost it.

She hurled her spear forward, its tip stabbing the ground at the Prisoner's feet:

"I'm talking about the paths at your feet!

I'll take the left. You take the right. If either of us spots anyone, send up a flare. Whatever happens, we can't let the Fate Weaver fall into danger."

With that, she vanished without waiting for the Prisoner's reaction.

The Prisoner looked left, looked right, scratched his head, and ultimately ignored Ji Yue's instructions entirely — choosing the center path instead.

He felt he was very "central."

And while the Torchbearers split up to search, Cheng Shi had already found Mo Shu!

The instant he'd left the void, he'd broken away from the group and returned to the spot where Zhao Xishi had died. He figured that if Zhao Xishi and Mo Shu truly belonged to the same nascent organization, Mo Shu would come to confirm the Historian's death first.

Sure enough, when he arrived, Mo Shu was already there with an iron-dark expression, erasing every trace from the scene.

The Scavenger knew he was at a disadvantage. But when Cheng Shi appeared, he didn't immediately flee. Instead, he asked in a low voice:

"You found out?"

Cheng Shi gave an easy smile. "Of course. I have ten thousand ways to pry what I want from her mouth, but I chose the simplest — making the dead talk."

He even showed Mo Shu the Finger Bone Brooch in his hand.

Don't forget — [Death] and [Oblivion] were rivals. This was a blatant provocation.

Yet Mo Shu kept his composure. His expression shifted, and he asked another question:

"So — beyond this world, there really are countless other worlds?"

"?"

Cheng Shi's gaze sharpened. He suddenly realized that this small group centered around Jie Shu knew far more than he'd anticipated.

As a Chosen One, Mo Shu couldn't possibly be unfamiliar with parallel worlds. So the only thing that could prompt such a question was the slice universes in the real universe!

'He even knows about that?'

'Jie Shu told him?'

'But how does Jie Shu know?'

'They came after me just to verify this?'

'Could it be that during the world reset, the followers of [Folly] slipped through a loophole?'

'No, that can't be it — otherwise Jie Shu would already have the answer instead of still trying to confirm it. But as a mere player, how could he have learned all this?'

A torrent of theories flooded Cheng Shi's mind, but his expression remained perfectly calm. He even fired back with a taunt: "If that's what you think, then sure."

Mo Shu's face grew colder: "How did you discover all of this?"

Cheng Shi scoffed:

"That's none of your business.

Worry about yourself instead.

If there really are that many worlds beyond this one, then your Benefactor's so-called will to annihilate the world is a fantasy that'll never come true.

Let me tell you something — in the worlds beyond ours, many versions of [Oblivion] are already dead..."

"Utter nonsense!"

"Tsk, hit a nerve, did I?"

A frog at the bottom of a well can never grasp how vast the world is. I've seen more worlds than you've met people.

Here's another secret for you — [Oblivion] in our world is almost finished too.

Otherwise...

Why would He be in such a rush to annihilate me?"

In truth, Cheng Shi was bluffing. But the words were so powerfully suggestive that Mo Shu's first instinct was to conclude that his Benefactor's downfall was somehow tied to the Fate Weaver standing before him.

But how could a mortal influence the fall of a true god?

His logic had tumbled straight into Cheng Shi's trap. He never even stopped to consider whether anything Cheng Shi said could be a lie.

After all, the information was too shocking. Beyond that, it was unprecedented for a deity to issue a divine decree to hunt down a single player. All these coincidences, piled atop one another, made Cheng Shi's words all the more convincing.

Of course, Cheng Shi's words weren't entirely false either. He was indeed working to make [Oblivion] disappear — just not the god itself, but rather the Divine Throne beneath Him. And the crucial step in that plan was to first meet [Oblivion]'s sole Envoy: Herobos.

So, seizing the moment while Mo Shu was still reeling, Cheng Shi smiled:

"You're out of your league. Telling you all this is pointless.

If you want to save your Benefactor — go get your boss.

We're all smart people here, so let's stop playing games. Herobos, I know you can hear me. Come out. I'll teach you how to save your Benefactor."

The instant his words fell, reality split open above Mo Shu's head. A massive hand tore through the void and lunged for Cheng Shi. But Cheng Shi didn't move an inch. He stared at the titanic Hand of Purifying Weevil hovering just above him with an expression of pure amusement, then tilted his head upward:

"I'm standing right here. Do you dare?"

"!!!"

Under Mo Shu's utterly stunned gaze, the hand — overflowing with savage [Oblivion] energy — actually stopped three inches above Cheng Shi's head.

A cold voice drifted from the void.

"You have one minute. Explain."

Cheng Shi casually pushed the hovering hand aside with a smirk:

"You have one minute. Stand before me properly.

Otherwise — no deal."

Chapter 1168: My Name Is Yu Xi, the Only Winner of This Era

This man is insane.

That was Mo Shu's first thought.

No player, no matter how arrogant, had ever dared speak to a deity in that tone — at least none that Mo Shu had ever seen.

He had always considered himself one in ten thousand, blessed by his Benefactor's grace and accompanied by an Envoy. But now, compared to the Fate Weaver who had ripped the hand right off Lord Herobos, he was still lacking.

Lacking in sheer audacity.

Mo Shu's gaze on Cheng Shi was complex — part envy of a poor student watching a top student, part bystander watching a protagonist in action.

He knew that from the moment Lord Herobos had "obediently" descended into reality, Mo Shu was no longer the lead in this drama. The two figures standing in the spotlight were his direct superior on one side, and on the other, the ultimate nemesis of the entire [Oblivion] faction.

What made it even more absurd was that this nemesis was claiming he could save their Benefactor, [Oblivion]...

The more Mo Shu thought about it, the more surreal it became. Standing behind Herobos, he couldn't help but speak up:

"My lord, don't believe him..."

Herobos said nothing.

He was well aware of how humiliating it was to manifest in the mortal realm at a human's provocation. But was the person standing before Him truly just a human?

Cheng Shi wasn't stupid either. He couldn't possibly believe he was some sort of destined protagonist who could make every villain grovel at his feet while he swaggered around consequence-free.

Against another player, they were equals — mere mortals, and he had nothing to fear. But facing an Envoy, one who could erase him from existence at any moment, he couldn't afford to be careless.

So his confidence rested not on his bluffing tongue, but on the container bestowed upon him by the Fun God!

Since the beginning of this exchange, Cheng Shi had been hiding the container behind his back. With Herobos's level of perception, He couldn't possibly have failed to sense the container's aura — nor missed the fact that it belonged to [Deceit].

Killing a mortal favored by [Deceit] and killing a carrier of [Deceit]'s container were two entirely different matters. Moreover, [Deceit] had never had a publicly known Envoy walking the world. Most servant gods had never even seen [Deceit]'s container. So when Herobos sensed the purest essence of [Deceit] emanating from behind Cheng Shi, He had no choice but to take seriously the "surprise" this mortal was offering Him.

He stared hard into Cheng Shi's eyes, and the longer He looked, the more those cunning, smiling eyes reminded Him of the star-bright gaze that watched from above the void.

"Who exactly are you?" Herobos asked, word by deliberate word.

Cheng Shi spread his hands:

"As you can see — a player, a mortal.

If you're asking for my name... Cheng Shi. The 'Cheng' from Cheng Jia, the 'Shi' meaning 'honest.'"

Herobos considered many possibilities, even wondering if this man was using some unknown artifact to bluff, borrowing strength he didn't have. After all, [Deceit] loved these games and delighted in spectacles. So was this a case of the mortal called Cheng Shi riding the tiger's coattails, or was it the [Void] Sovereign deliberately orchestrating this farce to irritate Him?

[Oblivion] and [Void] were on extremely bad terms at the moment. If this was an insult aimed at His divine prestige and dignity, Herobos would never let it slide. But before that — He genuinely wanted to hear what Cheng Shi had to say about "saving [Oblivion]."

Setting aside His identity as a servant god, Herobos was first and foremost a devout believer of [Oblivion].

History had shown time and again that only those closest to a deity's will were elevated to the rank of Envoy. Herobos didn't merely embody [Oblivion]'s will — He was a zealot of [Oblivion].

He had dedicated His entire existence to [Oblivion], which was why He had earned the god's approval.

Now, hearing that His Benefactor was "in danger" — whether true or false — He had to at least assess the claim.

He signaled Cheng Shi to continue, only for Cheng Shi to shake his head and point at Mo Shu:

"What I need to discuss with you involves too much. Unauthorized ears shouldn't hear it.

Remove this spectator, and I'll tell you things you don't know."

At these words, Mo Shu's face twisted with fury, and Herobos's gaze darkened.

Mo Shu's expression turned stormy and he moved to attack, but Herobos stopped him and addressed Cheng Shi in a cold voice:

"Until you demonstrate useful information, don't think you can wave [Deceit]'s banner to punish my Master's followers.

The Scavenger's devotion is well-proven. You will not touch him."

Mo Shu's expression lit up with emotion upon hearing this, as if all his efforts had finally found their meaning.

Cheng Shi merely pursed his lips with a dismissive look:

"You certainly know how to win people's hearts. But are you sure you want a 'devout' mortal to hear about your Benefactor's disgrace?"

"..."

There was no refuting that.

Whether out of protecting his Benefactor's dignity or out of genuine reverence, Herobos truly couldn't allow Mo Shu to hear such gossip about their Benefactor — even if it might all be lies.

So, overriding Mo Shu's protests, He annihilated the Scavenger's form outright, then spoke in an even icier tone:

"My patience is limited. Whoever you are, if I don't hear what I want to hear soon, today will end in annihilation."

"Big words."

Cheng Shi knew that the moment he showed any weakness, he'd lose all leverage in this confrontation. So his expression grew increasingly sardonic, his gaze increasingly sharp.

His entire demeanor shifted. The instant Mo Shu vanished, the Chaos Acting technique activated. Before Herobos's eyes, a tall, slender figure wearing a mask and a suit gradually materialized.

Herobos's pupils contracted. Then He heard the figure speak:

"I am indeed not a mere player.

My name is Yu Xi. I am the Envoy chosen by my Master within this game — and the sole winner of this era.

Yes, you heard correctly. The ultimate purpose of this game was to find an absolutely loyal servant for my Master. That servant is me.

Of course, none of that is the point. I mention it only to assure you that what I say is the truth, and that not every threat bearing [Deceit]'s name is a lie.

Your Benefactor's current predicament is far worse than you imagine.

But before I explain His dire situation, I believe I need to give you — this ignorant 'native deity' — a primer on what the real universe and slice universes actually are..."

With that, Cheng Shi launched into a sweeping explanation of what lay beyond their sky. Every word was true, not a single falsehood or embellishment. His confident tone, combined with the traces the real universe had left upon their starry sky, caused Herobos's expression to grow grimmer by the moment.

He could scarcely imagine that beyond the parallel worlds derived from [Time]'s calculations, there existed countless identical worlds — and countless identical versions of Himself.

What He found hardest to accept, of course, was that there were also countless identical versions of His Benefactor.

So which Benefactor was the true Benefactor?

Or perhaps none of them were — and the true master was the Creator who sat beyond the universe, overseeing the Experiment?

Chapter 1169: "Usurpation"

"You've probably already guessed it.

When you pull the perspective back from this starry sky to the entire real universe, your Benefactor's laughable will becomes nothing more than a joke.

I'm not singling Him out — all the gods are the same. All of them are jokes.

The Creator's experiment must have some result, but no one knows what it is.

The gods' devotion to Him is undoubtedly the clearest guiding sign. So if your Benefactor still wishes to fulfill His will and achieve His grand ambition, He has no choice but to become the most 'correct' [Oblivion] among the countless slice universes!

And that is precisely why I said [Oblivion] is about to disappear. Because once another [Oblivion] beats Him to the finish line, the only fate left for the failed sample is extinction."

The scene was deathly silent. Herobos had all but annihilated the sound of His own breathing. His expression shifted through several changes as if He were weighing the truth of Cheng Shi's words. After a long pause, He spoke coldly:

"Proof.

I cannot take a liar at his word."

Cheng Shi scoffed:

"Tsk—

Herobos, I think you have the wrong idea here.

I'm not here to tell stories and win your trust. I'm doing you a favor out of the goodness of my heart. Believe me or don't.

What does it have to do with me?"

Herobos's expression darkened: "I doubt your heart is all that good."

Cheng Shi shrugged:

"Fine, I admit it. I'm sick of your Benefactor hunting me. The Faith Game isn't over yet, and I haven't truly become [Deceit]'s Envoy.

This is my only chance in this era. I won't let [Oblivion] stop me from ascending to godhood."

"So you fabricated all this to blunt my offensive?"

If you're not yet a true Envoy, Cheng Shi, how dare you stand before me and spout such arrogance?"

With that, Herobos moved to strike again — but Cheng Shi made no move to defend himself. He simply stood there, smiling as casually as ever:

"Those who are too suspicious will always fail due to hesitation.

The fact that you didn't annihilate me the moment you had doubts proves you're not certain whether what I said is true.

I have no patience to make you believe every word I say. Whether any of this is real — you'll have to verify it yourself. All I can do is offer you a suggestion. A suggestion for how to preserve your Benefactor in the real universe.

If you want to hear it, then shut up and listen.

If you don't — go ahead, try using your Hand of Purifying Weevil."

"..."

Herobos froze in place once more.

It was no wonder He was so conflicted. Anyone else would have died eight hundred times over by now. But the man standing before Him was both [Deceit]'s protege and [Fate]'s favored child, and now he was claiming to be the Envoy elevated by [Deceit]...

Yes, Herobos knew the Convention existed to draw closer to Him. But the revelation of the real universe had already overturned the gods' understanding of Origin. On top of that, [Deceit]'s actions were inscrutable to all. If He truly had chosen an Envoy through this absurd game... it wasn't impossible.

More importantly, everyone knew [Deceit] was distancing Himself from Origin. Under that objective, it was perfectly logical that He could discover things the Approach Faction could not. So Herobos fell silent.

He didn't dare gamble — especially not with His own devotion and His Benefactor's will as the stakes.

He was afraid that if Cheng Shi's words turned out to be true, then [Oblivion]'s will might truly be extinguished beneath this starry sky.

What He most wanted at this moment was to return to those worlds on the brink of annihilation and consult with His Benefactor. But He also feared that Cheng Shi's claims were nothing more than a bluff. Torn between the two, He fell into Cheng Shi's rhythm.

Seeing that the Envoy neither left nor attacked, Cheng Shi's confidence solidified. He continued with a smile:

"It seems you've made your choice. Good.

Herobos, you know as well as I do — once I become an Envoy, the tides of this era can no longer erase me. I'll stand at the crest of the age just like you, watching the mortal world change and faiths rise and fall.

But how far this era can go under this starry sky depends on whether our world can catch the Creator's eye.

So this plan of mine helps you, and it helps me.

Even if I win this era and become one of the servant gods, the power I'd enjoy won't take effect until the next era begins. I'd rather not become a god only for this world to be discarded by the Creator the very next moment. So any method that might please the Creator — I'm willing to try."

At this, a flash of suspicion crossed Herobos's eyes.

"Your Benefactor doesn't seem to share that view. He is distancing Himself from Origin. And as the Envoy He elevated, you would seek to submit to Him?"

Cheng Shi's lips curled in an unbothered smirk:

"That's exactly why you should believe me most of all.

My rebelliousness is cut from the same cloth as His. That's precisely what proves my will is closest to [Deceit]'s."

"?"

'That's... possible?'

Herobos was momentarily stunned. 'As expected of the most meaningless [Void] Era,' He thought. 'A crooked roof leads to a crooked foundation. Absurdity truly is this era's defining color.'

After a long deliberation, Herobos finally asked the question:

"What method?"

'Here it comes!'

After all that groundwork, he'd finally reeled the Envoy in.

Cheng Shi suppressed his excitement, fixed Herobos with a burning gaze, and uttered two words with absolute seriousness:

"Usurpation."

"!!??" Herobos recoiled in shock. "You want to replace [Deceit]?!"

'That's not what I—'

Cheng Shi hurriedly waved his hands:

"No, no — wrong target. You are the one who needs to replace [Oblivion]!"

"Utter nonsense!"

In that instant, the [Oblivion] energy within Herobos erupted outward, dragging the entirety of Redi Core into a world on the brink of annihilation.

Cheng Shi stumbled, staggering before he regained his footing — only to find himself standing in the void. The furious Herobos glared at Cheng Shi with an iron-dark expression, gnashing His teeth:

"You're trying to drive a wedge!"

Cheng Shi smiled and, right before the Envoy's eyes, rang the Bone Bell — a gift from [Death]'s master — and calmly explained:

"Easy now.

This isn't a trap, nor a conspiracy.

[Death]'s presence will block your Benefactor's gaze, giving us the freedom for a more thorough discussion.

I know you are absolutely devout to your Benefactor — otherwise you wouldn't have been trying to kill me under pressure from the two masters of [Void].

But the usurpation I'm proposing isn't a betrayal of [Oblivion]. It's the salvation of [Oblivion].

Think about it — beyond annihilating the universe, what else does your Benefactor's will contain?"

Herobos gave a cold snort: "You think you understand Him better than I do?"

"No, no, no. Nobody understands [Oblivion] better than you. But I have one advantage — I look at things from a uniquely different angle.

I know [Oblivion] doesn't seek annihilation for its own sake. He also yearns for rebirth.

That desire is undoubtedly His way of trying to draw closer to the Creator. But the problem now is that too many versions of [Oblivion] are trying to impress the Creator. How do you make the Creator remember the one you follow?

It's a bit late to start thinking about it now, so let me give you the answer directly:

Rebirth!

Every [Oblivion] across every slice is walking the path of annihilating the universe, but none have found rebirth. If your Benefactor gets there first, our world will earn the Creator's attention — and at the very least, [Oblivion] will enter His field of vision."

"What does any of that have to do with usurpation?"

Cheng Shi gave a cryptic smile:

"Everything. Without casting aside all that you are, how can there be rebirth?"

Look at [Decay] — why did He suddenly begin to decay Himself?

Who's to say He didn't discover the real universe's secret long ago and took the first step to compete for the Creator's favor?

I know [Oblivion] and [Decay] share the [Descent] path and help each other. But on this matter, can your Benefactor be certain [Decay] hasn't lied?

Don't forget — while they're both devout toward that Existence, they are competitors on the road to reaching Him!

So take a page from [Decay]'s book...

First, annihilate the self. Then seek rebirth.

And the first step to annihilating the self is to relinquish the Divine Throne He can't bring Himself to let go of.

But He can't do it voluntarily. Only when pushed to the brink of total despair can one burn the boats and fight. I trust you understand what I mean.

If you don't, let me spell it out: this time, you must be the villain who betrays Him.

Can you do it, Herobos?

For your Benefactor. For the will of [Oblivion]."

"..."

Chapter 1170: The Loyal Herobos

Evil gods did exist in this world.

At least in this moment, Cheng Shi's words were like the whispers of an evil god, echoing ceaselessly in Herobos's ears.

He had never imagined that a person's words could be so seductive — it felt as though refusing to usurp would be a disservice to His own Benefactor.

But what had gone wrong with this world, that even usurpation could be counted as devotion?!

Herobos's mind was a storm. He even suspected Cheng Shi had lied to Him — that the man had long since become [Deceit]'s Envoy and was now using [Deceit]'s authority to cloud His judgment.

His expression kept shifting. Every so often He would glance at Cheng Shi, who merely waited with a patient smile, making no further attempt to persuade.

He knew that pushing too hard would backfire. If he didn't let the Envoy work it out on his own, He would never willingly board this pirate ship.

The void fell silent for a long stretch. Whatever mental tempest Herobos endured remained unknown, but by the time the silence had dragged on so long that even Cheng Shi was getting bored, the Envoy's expression finally steadied.

Seeing this, Cheng Shi smiled faintly and tossed one more weight onto the wavering scales of faith.

"This is a win-win, isn't it, Herobos?"

We're both servant gods. Let me speak frankly — and I'll only say this here, because I'll deny it anywhere else.

Are you telling me you've never thought about taking [Oblivion]'s place and becoming one of the sixteen supreme sovereigns?"

Herobos jolted, nervously scanning left and right before snapping back with a dark expression:

"My devotion is witnessed by heaven and earth!

Don't think your filthy tricks can defile my faith!"

After a pause, a strange glint flickered in His eyes. "...Have you?"

Cheng Shi nodded vigorously with utter sincerity: "Absolutely. In fact, if you have a way to take [Deceit] down, I'm happy to follow your lead. I'll do whatever you say. Deal?"

"..."

'Wait — you're serious?'

Herobos's pupils contracted. His fists clenched tight, then slowly loosened. Clearly, His emotions were far from calm — and that meant He had thought about it too!

'Well, well. As expected, absolute devotion is never far from blasphemy.'

Even a blindly loyal enforcer like Herobos had dreamed of godhood. The so-called devotion of this world was only so deep after all.

Cheng Shi smiled. His tone held no mockery — only candor:

"There's an old saying in my world: a gentleman is judged by his actions, not his thoughts. I've been devout in every deed, never once blaspheming. So what if I think about it?"

Besides, it's called 'studying the master's intent.' As His Envoy, I should naturally strive to align my will with His.

[Deceit] is a rebel to the bone. So as the treasure He chose, shouldn't I be a rebel too? When I say I want to replace Him, it's not a joke — I simply lack the opportunity.

But you're different. You have the opportunity.

[Oblivion]'s decision to make enemies of [Void] in this era was His worst mistake, and it's one that can't be undone. Since the situation is already beyond saving, why not ride the current?

While [Void] treats Him with contempt, while [Descent] stands alone without allies — this is the perfect moment to topple Him!

And you only need to bear the label of 'traitor' in [Oblivion]'s eyes. In return, you get both loyalty and ambition — you'd awaken [Oblivion] to seek rebirth, and you'd seat yourself upon a Divine Throne no one could refuse!

If I were you, I'd never let this chance slip away!"

"..."

Evil gods were truly terrifying.

Herobos was starting to waver. His gaze dropped, dark and unsettled, avoiding Cheng Shi's brazen stare. He fixed His eyes on the shoes of this lanky, stick-thin candidate for [Deceit]'s Envoy and asked in a voice mixed with hesitation and unease:

"Even if everything you've said is true, there's nothing I can do.

All my authority comes from my Benefactor. Even if you [Void] conspirators plot to kill Him..."

'Heh, careful with your words there — making sure to distance yourself.'

Cheng Shi clicked his tongue and laughed: "Who said anything about killing [Oblivion]?"

"?"

Herobos's eyes turned ice-cold. "If He isn't killed, how would I inherit the Divine Throne?"

The moment the words left His mouth, Herobos realized His slip and immediately corrected Himself: "What I mean is, everything you've said is nothing but empty talk!"

"Oh?"

Cheng Shi grinned. The smile carried a hint of sarcasm, but far more delight.

The fact that Herobos could say those words meant His stance had already shifted. One more push was all it would take.

"I have a clever plan.

Let me tell you — you don't need to do anything that harms [Oblivion] directly. The only thing you need to do is acknowledge your intention to inherit [Oblivion]'s Divine Throne. Everything else, leave to me.

Rest assured, this won't be some scheme to sow discord.

Inheriting divine authority requires convening the Assembly of Gods Convention. If I spent this much effort lobbying the gods only to drive a wedge between you and your Benefactor... heh, the other gods I 'used' wouldn't let me off the hook even without your intervention."

"You've already lobbied other gods?"

"What else?"

If I didn't have everything in place, how would I dare come offer counsel to you, Lord Herobos?

Come to think of it, I'm quite the masochist — holding all these cards and using them to put the very servant god who's been hunting me on a Divine Throne...

Herobos, let's be clear about one thing up front. If this actually works and you sit upon that throne as the new [Oblivion], the old [Oblivion]'s divine decree will naturally become null and void. Agreed?"

Herobos didn't dare respond. He knew that the moment He agreed, it would be the first step toward blaspheming His Benefactor!

Even if that blasphemy was for the Benefactor's own good, He couldn't guarantee it was one hundred percent for the Benefactor's sake.

His selfish desires had been awakened.

He looked at Cheng Shi and snorted coldly: "This is your true objective, isn't it? What do you want out of this usurpation?"

"Smart!"

Cheng Shi clapped his hands, beaming. "Talking to a smart person really saves time and effort. After all this scheming and effort, of course I want something in return.

[Oblivion] leaving me alone is only the first part. Second — after you ascend, I need you to protect me when you can, so I can safely weather this era's tribulations and become a true servant god."

Herobos's expression was grave. He said nothing, but His silence was itself consent.

Compared to gaining a true god's Divine Throne, sheltering a mortal who wasn't even a servant god yet was practically nothing.

"I'm not done yet. Third — when I have the chance to reach for the Divine Throne above my own head..."

Cheng Shi stared meaningfully into Herobos's eyes and spoke word by word: "I want your vote!"

"!!!"

'So that's what this is about!'

When He heard those words, the stone in Herobos's heart finally settled.

'I knew it — there's no such thing as goodwill without cause. Why would someone hunted by a Benefactor turn around and help that Benefactor and His Envoy?'

But if this man was laying groundwork for the future, then everything made perfect sense.

For Herobos, this was no longer a matter of manipulation and betrayal. It was two aspiring gods helping each other along the road to divinity!

Framed that way, the two of them now shared the most fundamental bond of mutual interest — and mutual constraint.

The cold detachment in Herobos's eyes softened slightly. A barely perceptible spark of fervor flashed through His gaze — a complex swirl of devotion, anxiety, guilt, and ambition that soon resolved into steely determination.

"I understand."

He spoke those four words with gravity.

"..."

Cheng Shi had an epiphany. 'When you don't want anyone to know whether you agree or disagree, you say "I understand."'

'It's just like an employee asking the boss, "Is this plan good?" and the boss replying with "Mm." The whole point is to avoid refusing, avoid initiating, avoid taking responsibility — and leave no evidence.'

Cheng Shi curled his lip in mild distaste, then continued:

"No, you don't understand.

Fourth—"

"Yu Xi, aren't your demands getting a bit excessive?"

'Changed the way you address me, have you?'

Cheng Shi's eyebrow arched. He knew that if the Envoy was calling him "Yu Xi," it meant He'd already placed Cheng Shi on equal footing.

He smiled and carried on:

"Just a small request.

After this era ends, I'll be ascending to godhood eventually. Those [Oblivion] followers who blasphemed against me — I want them sentenced to death in advance for the crime of defiling a god. That's not unreasonable, is it?"

He didn't name names, but Cheng Shi was clearly asking for Mo Shu's head.

Yet Herobos furrowed His brow and shook His head:

"No. Divine authority without faith is a rootless drifter. [Oblivion] needs followers — devout followers especially."

'Oh? And which [Oblivion] are you talking about — the current one, or yourself?'

Cheng Shi didn't press the point. After a moment's thought, he waved his hand.

"Fine. Since you've already taken a monumental step toward this plan, I'll spare the mutt his life."

But then a thought immediately followed:

'I may have spared him, but if the Scavenger happens to die at someone else's hands — that's none of my business, right?'