

The Gods 1181

Chapter 1181: Defeating [Descent] with [Descent]'s Own Hand

By any logic, Li Jingming had no reason to appear at the Assembly of Gods Convention — much less sit in [Corruption]'s seat and cast a vote on this petition!

Yet that voice was identical to the Dragon King's. Surely you weren't going to tell him [Corruption] was actually Li Jingming?!

Given that clean, seemingly desire-free image of his... hiss — actually, from the angle of ironic contrast, him being [Corruption] almost made sense.

'Oh no — [Corruption] was beside me all along?!'

Cheng Shi's wild speculation was cut short by the stunned murmurs around him. Just because he didn't recognize the figure didn't mean the gods didn't. [Memory] swept a glance over the newcomer and spoke a name with mild surprise:

"Drasilco... you're still alive."

Drasilco?

The Envoy of [Corruption] — the world's very first incarnation of sin?!

Cheng Shi was thunderstruck. He whipped his gaze toward [Corruption]'s seat and saw the hunched, black-robed figure raise his head, revealing a face covered in twisted totems. With beady eyes like a sewer rat's, he scanned the entire assembly and gave a sinister laugh:

"Drasilco, the Sin of Desirelessness, greets all the true gods.

It's been a while. The desires in your hearts have only grown stronger. My master would be pleased."

Regardless of how bizarre Drasilco's appearance was, regardless of how unsettling his form — at least he'd cast a vote in favor. Cheng Shi suppressed his burning questions and immediately shouted:

"Voting complete! The petition passes!

[Justice (Order)], [Corruption] has answered my desire! This vote should—"

"It's invalid!"

Before Cheng Shi could finish, [Oblivion] annihilated the rest of his words and fixed Drasilco with a shadowed, piercing stare:

"I suspect the real Drasilco was killed long ago! This one before us is nothing more than an illusion conjured by [Void]! Don't you find the timing suspicious? He appeared precisely when those two [Void] sovereigns were at each other's throats — their residual [Deceit] fluctuations providing perfect cover! Don't try to fool me! Casting a fraudulent vote won't fly! I request that [Order] verify his identity — but to prevent [Justice (Order)] from being exploited by [Deceit]'s loopholes again, I ask that the Iron Law of [Order], who voted in opposition, perform the verification!"

Then He shot [Deceit] one contemptuous glance.

[Deceit] scoffed, not refusing. He merely sniped back sarcastically:

"Be my guest. Whatever makes you happy. But I have to ask — shall we verify his identity first, or deal with the Sea of Desire that's about to flood this entire chamber?"

[Deceit]'s words turned everyone's attention back to the rising sea. At that moment, Drasilco, seated in [Corruption]'s chair, smiled. He bowed to the assembly:

"There's no need for [Order] to verify me. I'll demonstrate myself."

With that, he spread his arms and murmured [Corruption]'s prayer. His entire form began vibrating at an eerie frequency. In moments, flesh and black robe dissolved into a handful of desire-water, resonating in harmony with the ever-rising Sea of Desire.

This unprecedented spectacle made the gods wary. They couldn't help wondering whether Drasilco had truly earned [Corruption]'s approval — for how else could he control the Sea of Desire?

Before long, the boiling sea stopped rising. Seeing this, [Fate] furrowed His brow and retracted His Change authority.

His probe had its answer. [Deceit] had indeed allied with [Corruption], and Drasilco's appearance was the best proof!

Without desire to fuel it, the Sea of Desire began to recede rapidly. When the crisis was averted, Drasilco reformed his hunched shape and addressed the gods with a grin:

"Any more doubts?"

"..."

How could there be?

Even if Drasilco's appearance was [Deceit]'s illusion, you couldn't claim the Sea of Desire — which had sent the entire divine assembly into a panic — was also an illusion, could you?

If the Sea of Desire was real, then Drasilco was real. Otherwise, you'd have to admit that [Deceit] controlled the Sea of Desire.

That was even more absurd — you might as well say [Corruption] was [Deceit].

The gods nodded, all affirming. Only [Oblivion] glared with defiant eyes, unwilling to believe.

He had clearly won the vote — why had a [Corruption] Envoy appeared out of nowhere to ruin everything?!

[Corruption] hadn't shown Himself in ages. His Envoy had never located Him. So how had an Envoy capable of controlling the Sea of Desire suddenly materialized?!

Something was wrong!

He glared at [Deceit]'s mocking eyes, feeling the unspoken message: 'Even if something's off, you can't prove it.'

And [Oblivion] indeed couldn't find any cracks. Compared to believing Drasilco was still alive, He was even less willing to accept that [Deceit] could command the Sea of Desire!

'The Sea of Desire is the Abyss of Desire that caused even [Order] to disintegrate!'

If [Deceit] had that kind of power, why bother with this Envoy usurpation scheme? He could just dissolve Himself outright.

So [Oblivion] was furious — furious at His inability to find a flaw, and furious at the gods for accepting Drasilco's identity.

But He knew emotions were poison for the unmoored. He annihilated His fury, returned to cold calculation, and argued to [Justice (Order)] with precise logic:

"This vote is invalid! The Convention states that voting rights belong exclusively to true gods! Envoys have no voting rights! So even if this Drasilco is genuine, he has no authority to vote! The result remains 8:2:4! The traitor's petition has not passed!"

[Justice (Order)] deliberated for a moment, then spoke in His resonant hum:

"Indeed.

Though [Corruption] has long been absent and His status cannot be confirmed, if you wish for the Sin of Desirelessness to inherit [Corruption]'s voting rights, a separate Assembly of Gods Convention must first be convened to settle the question of succession. Only then could he be eligible to hold [Corruption]'s voting rights and cast a ballot.

Chronologically, the succession question for [Corruption]'s voting rights can only follow this current petition. Therefore...

This vote is invalid."

The moment the words landed, Herobos's expression turned dire. [Oblivion] sneered at [Void] once more:

"All the scheming in the world amounts to nothing when you fail at the final hurdle. I'll admit — finding Drasilco exceeded my expectations yet again. But you've still lost! Without inheriting everything from [Corruption], he's useless to you!"

Yet [Deceit] merely scoffed, not even bothering to acknowledge Him. It was Cheng Shi at the [Void] section's forefront who sensed this wasn't over. His eyes flickered with a sudden realization, and he shot [Oblivion] a razor-tipped smirk before delivering one last sarcastic blow:

"Drasilco's Benefactor isn't some unwanted true god. Why does he need to rush to inherit everything from [Corruption]?"

"?"

That remark clearly caught Herobos in the crossfire, but with the petition stumbling this far forward, all He wanted was victory. He wasn't about to quibble over details.

[Oblivion] sneered: "Very well. It seems you've accepted your defeat. On that point, at least, you deserve your Benefactor's respect."

"Tsk—

Who says I've lost?

I only said Drasilco doesn't need to inherit everything from [Corruption]. What does that have to do with losing?

Can't he be casting a proxy vote on [Corruption]'s behalf?!"

"!!!"

The instant the words left Cheng Shi's mouth, Drasilco looked at him and smiled meaningfully:

"Correct. I've come this time to cast this vote of agreement on my master's behalf.

He has long dwelt in the Sea of Desire. He never vanished — He merely prefers not to appear before the mortal world. So He sent me to answer the call of desire.

If anyone doubts this, they're welcome to visit the Sea of Desire and verify with my master in person."

"..."

One sentence. And every god present instantly understood [Void]'s game.

Regardless of who had found Drasilco, this move was, from every conceivable angle, an unbreakable open scheme!

If you accepted it, the vote was valid and the petition passed.

If you didn't, you'd have to go to the Sea of Desire and ask [Corruption] whether He'd truly sanctioned this. After all, the only living [Corruption] Envoy had confirmed this was the truth. If you wanted to refute it, you'd need to produce another servant god of equal standing to contradict Drasilco's claim.

But who else was left among [Corruption]'s Envoys?

Tria? Sorry — her relics were still on Cheng Shi's person.

Aph Ros? Setting aside whether the warden holding him would even allow him to testify — even if he was here, whose side he'd take didn't even require thought.

Once Cheng Shi grasped this, he finally appreciated the staggering foresight of [Deceit]'s planning. He burst into laughter and called out to [Justice (Order)]:

"Does the Convention forbid a true god from sending their Envoy to cast a proxy vote?"

The Flowing Light Scales fell silent. No matter how unprecedented this act was throughout all of history, the principle remained the same: that which the law does not forbid may be done!

So, moments later — amid [Oblivion]'s absolute fury — [Justice (Order)] spoke in His resonant hum:

"It does not."

Chapter 1182: This Era Is Truly Meaningless

But [Justice (Order)] was, after all, the embodiment of [Order]. He had to ensure every step of the process was fair according to the rules.

He continued:

"While the Sin of Desirelessness' proxy vote may be deemed valid in principle, the type of vote cast cannot be considered effective until it is confirmed to represent [Corruption]'s true will. This is to prevent an Envoy from conspiring with third parties during a true god's absence to usurp the god's rights.

My purpose is to ensure all procedures are fair and correct. Thus, further deliberation is required."

This was so pointed it was practically accusing [Void] of cheating. But the argument was genuinely fair, leaving Cheng Shi unable to find any grounds for rebuttal.

'[Justice (Order)] is truly troublesome...' He was both the sword [Void] wielded and the shield defending against [Void] — a paradox made manifest. It was maddening.

Just as Cheng Shi was racking his brains for a way around this obstacle, [Deceit] — who had been happily watching the show — finally spoke. He said with a cheerful grin:

"Simple enough, old fossil. Just go to the Sea of Desire and ask around."

'Is that even a reasonable suggestion?'

The Scales fell silent. Clearly, He was only responsible for raising procedural objections. As for how to confirm — that wasn't His concern. At most, He'd simply postpone the petition indefinitely, which was at least favorable for [Oblivion].

Of course, [Justice (Order)] didn't lean toward favoring anyone. He answered only to the Convention and to order.

Seeing this, the rancor in [Oblivion]'s eyes faded slightly. He sneered at [Deceit]:

"It seems [Void] will have to make a personal trip to the Sea of Desire to verify! But since [Void] is a supporter of the petition, you can't go alone — a god from the opposing side must be present as witness. I don't have time to waste on such entanglements, and I suspect the Iron Law of [Order] won't agree to risk the Sea of Desire either. In that case — the petition is postponed indefinitely. You've still lost!!"

Indeed, with every avenue of victory being dismantled one after another, even Herobos — the principal in question — was sinking into despair.

He never imagined [Void] could have made so many preparations for this petition. But He'd imagined even less that despite all those preparations, He was still losing...

'But I was doing this for Your own good, my Benefactor!'

Herobos cast a complicated look at His Benefactor, only to find that [Oblivion] hadn't once looked His way. The god simply stared at [Deceit] and Cheng Shi with those dark, shadowed eyes, sneering endlessly, dripping with contempt.

It would be a lie to say Herobos wasn't panicking. Everyone knew what happened to an Envoy who betrayed their Benefactor. Furthermore, once His value to [Void] evaporated, would they waste resources on a chess piece that could no longer be moved?

The bewildered Herobos grew fearful. He knew all too well that between gods there was no sentiment — only interest. He looked at Cheng Shi, still wracking his brain at the forefront, and realized that this mortal — who hadn't even become an Envoy yet — was the one in this entire assembly who most wanted Him to win.

After all, their interests were deeply bound together.

Silence settled once more. The petition seemed to have reached its bitter end. When no one spoke for a long while, [Justice (Order)] prepared to announce an indefinite postponement. But at that moment, Cheng Shi stepped forward again!

His eyes burned with the desire to win. He couldn't afford to wait that long. He couldn't accept [Oblivion]'s continued hunt resuming after the petition closed. He wanted to strip [Oblivion] of everything right here, right now — to free himself from living in constant dread.

With a grave expression, he raised his hand toward [Justice (Order)] and called out:

"Lord [Justice (Order)], this matter is far from over.

And you need not descend into the Sea of Desire to determine [Corruption]'s inclination!

There is another way to let everyone here know what's truly in Drasilco's heart. I believe the esteemed true gods have likely already thought of it — they simply find it inconvenient to say. So let me be the fool who tears through the paper screen.

He turned to face [Memory], who still hadn't left His seat, and spoke with heartfelt sincerity:

"Great God of [Memory], the follower of [Time] — Cheng Shi — requests that You peruse the relevant past. Search the history beside the Sea of Desire for the pearl of memory pertaining to this petition. Through the wonder of [Existence], tell the assembled gods that Drasilco has not lied — that the vote of agreement he cast was not his own choice, but the will of the true god standing behind him."

The moment the words landed, the entire chamber was stunned.

Cheng Shi had indeed devised a clever solution. Through His authority, [Memory] could extract memories from Drasilco without approaching the Sea of Desire directly. While the method carried some contamination risk, it was far simpler than personally entering the Sea to verify.

More crucially, [Memory] had abstained — He wasn't aligned with [Void] or [Oblivion]. He was relatively "impartial."

But the problem lay precisely in that "relatively."

Everyone knew [Memory] was [Deceit]'s rival, perpetually opposing every proposal [Deceit] supported. That He hadn't voted against this time already indicated He'd been influenced by someone, tilting Him toward [Void]'s cause.

So could such an influenced god truly be fair?

Even if He learned something from Drasilco's memories, might He — swayed by prior influence — again choose in [Void]'s favor?

He wouldn't even need to fabricate anything, because Cheng Shi had left Him plenty of room!

Look at what Cheng Shi had said. He didn't claim Drasilco's vote represented [Corruption]'s will. He said the vote represented the will of "the true god behind him."

As for whether that true god was [Corruption] or [Deceit]... that was irrelevant.

What mattered was whether [Memory] would answer Cheng Shi's question based solely on its literal phrasing. If [Memory] saw [Deceit] in Drasilco's memories... would He answer with a "yes" rather than naming [Deceit]?!

This was yet another gamble!

Only this time, though Cheng Shi had set the table, the chips on it depended on whether [Deceit] could secure [Memory]'s cooperation in this one specific regard.

The instant Cheng Shi's words faded, [Deceit] and [Memory] exchanged an extraordinarily "tacit" glance across the chamber. Their eyes met — one pair fraught with complexity, the other gleaming with its usual mirth.

No one knew what would happen next. Drasilco blinked in surprise but didn't refuse the proposal. He bowed respectfully toward [Memory], his posture clearly showing he feared no memory-probing whatsoever.

The gods noted this detail. The pressure shifted — not onto [Memory], but back onto [Oblivion].

And by a stroke of cruelest timing, [Oblivion] had caught that exchange of glances between [Deceit] and [Memory]. In that instant, the "understanding" between those two rivals became the last straw that broke the camel's back. [Oblivion] — the god at the center of this entire petition — completely fell apart.

He suddenly erupted into wild, almost manic laughter.

"Now I understand! You — you — you — all of you want me to surrender this throne! Is that it?! What's the point of keeping up this charade?! When you cast that abstention instead of voting against — you were already setting up the stage for this very moment, weren't you?! [Memory]! I never thought even you would grovel before [Void]! What, because this is their era, they're automatically the masters?! Why can't it be us?! I see it now — every last one of you in this era is [Void]'s lapdog! And I'm not! So this era no longer has a place for me!"

[Oblivion] cursed every god present in a single breath. Then, with a sneer of absolute derision:

"An era like this is truly meaningless. Why not embrace oblivion with me..."

"!!!"

Chapter 1183: [Oblivion] Went Mad

[Oblivion] had gone mad. Not truly mad — but He was throwing a fit.

He suddenly realized that [Fate] had gotten one thing right: when it was time to go mad, you go mad — and you drag the entire world along with you.

He'd seen the writing on the wall. [Void] had no intention of leaving Him a way out. Since death was inevitable, why couldn't He choose how to die?

Was He supposed to sit around after losing His throne — imprisoned like [Prosperity], rotting in some cage with no freedom to speak of?

So in the next instant, [Oblivion] left His seat and ascended into the void. His eyes blinked, and countless worlds on the brink of annihilation materialized, carrying a torrent of terrifying [Oblivion] power that rampaged through reality, dragging everything it encountered into a collapsing, crumbling abyss.

Infinite [Oblivion] surged from His eyes like an apocalyptic flood, drowning the entire world in an instant. Those innumerable annihilation-worlds functioned like incomprehensible, higher-dimensional vacuum cleaners — devouring all of reality and disintegrating it piece by piece.

[Oblivion] had ultimately followed [Truth]'s old path: He'd begun to destroy the world.

But [Truth] had done it to shatter the shackles of spacetime. This felt more like venting and revenge.

Of course, fury wasn't the only driver. In this final act of madness, He was drawing closer to His own will — annihilating the entire world. He knew the gods would stop Him. But He also had a way to prevent them from doing so.

The Assembly of Gods Convention was abruptly interrupted. The attending deities materialized in the void with grim expressions, working together to hold up the reality that [Oblivion] was dragging toward destruction.

This scene once again reminded them of [Fate] — who could drag the universe into Misfortune at any time. At least [Fate] hadn't acted this time. But now [Oblivion] was picking up the slack.

'Having you two in this universe is truly the gods' good fortune...'

The gods were helpless. The Iron Law of [Order] tried reasoning:

"[Oblivion], if you proceed to annihilate the universe now, you'll have personally violated fairness and forfeited your voting rights, pushing yourself into an indefensible position. Keep this up and no one can help you!"

"Help?! How?! Who would help?! You, with our two opposition votes?! Ha ha ha ha! How laughable! [Justice (Order)] is rigid and you are pedantic! [Void] clearly wants me dead! Since I'm dying, then none of you get to live either!"

"Good. Not a single one of you gets to live!"

Things having escalated to this point, the most excited party was undoubtedly [Death]'s boss. He'd had His Scythe at the ready the whole time. Now, watching [Oblivion] lay waste to reality — destroying all beings rather than letting them die proper deaths — He was itching to lead the charge against His rival.

But just then, [Deceit] held Him back and addressed [Memory] with a grin:

"Funny how [Oblivion] keeps accusing [Void] of bullying Him, yet the first one taking the hit from His annihilation flood is [Existence].

Hee~

He's treating [Existence] like that, and you can still hold yourself back?

Surely you're not going to throw away your faith for the sake of new memories?

Once reality is annihilated to nothing and only the void remains, I personally don't mind. But I wonder whether you and your brother would."

"..."

[Death] understood. [Deceit] wanted [Memory] to be the cannon fodder leading the charge. After [Memory] glanced at [Deceit], He didn't take the bait. Instead, He asked coldly:

"Why does Drasilco carry the aura of [Memory]? And what have you done in my Collection Hall?"

"Your precious Collection Hall is guarded so tight I couldn't get in if I tried.

Besides, whatever happened to Drasilco is something you should ask [Corruption] about, not me.

Maybe [Corruption] has been thinking about you this whole time, so His Envoy's scent gradually took on your aura.

Tsk. I had no idea — before the [Void] Era, were you two an item?"

"..."

'Impossible to hold a conversation with this one.'

[Memory] shot [Deceit] a cold glance, then turned and charged into the battlefield. Just as [Deceit] had said — He couldn't stand by while [Oblivion] annihilated the entire world.

He wasn't worried about being used as a pawn, either. Given the scale of [Oblivion]'s rampage, one god alone couldn't possibly restrain Him. When the time came, every deity present would have to act in concert.

Before long, the sensible gods began joining in — shoring up the universe and attempting to talk [Oblivion] down. But this time wasn't like before. If [Oblivion] backed off now, He'd have no choice but to accept His throne being stolen. Once everyone realized persuasion was futile, their attacks grew increasingly fierce.

No god would let the foundation of their faith simply vanish before their eyes while [Oblivion] dragged everything into ruin.

[Oblivion] stood alone against the many. Lasting even a moment was impressive enough. Yet He showed no fear. Perhaps burning the boats truly gave Him courage, because after weathering one round of the gods' assault, [Oblivion] suddenly annihilated His own form — and expelled fragments of [Existence] He'd previously extracted from reality through the countless dying worlds.

Infinite [Oblivion] power wrapped around those [Existence] shards and scattered them across the void. And just as the gods assumed this was some new [Oblivion] technique, the fragments began reassembling — reconstructing a "brand new" world before their eyes.

Seeing this, the gods' gazes sharpened. [Death] looked mildly surprised. [Fate] watched with cold curiosity. [Deceit]'s eyes flashed with an inexplicable glint of admiration. And [Memory]'s expression darkened with displeasure — because He could clearly tell this employed [Existence]'s authority!

[Oblivion] had somehow stolen a portion of [Existence]'s authority.

Cheng Shi — watching from a safe distance with Hong Lin shielding him — stared wide-eyed. He suddenly thought of the Curtain Call Ball he carried.

Qin Xin had once said he believed the power of world-reconstruction within the Curtain Call Ball was very likely [Oblivion]'s way of comprehending [Existence] in His own fashion. If that was true, then in the era before [Void] had descended, [Oblivion] had probably been actively working to draw closer to [Existence].

But given [Existence]'s cold indifference, He'd likely failed.

So in this era, He'd switched to drawing closer to [Void]. And the result... was another failure.

No matter who He tried to approach, it was clear that He was always trying to approach the era's sovereign as a way to get closer to the Creator's will. At his core, [Oblivion] was a member of the Approach Faction.

And the scene He now projected into the void only proved His devotion to the Creator further.

Cheng Shi's vision blurred, and the entire void plunged into a fantastical space. Though infinite [Oblivion] power filled every direction, it held no destructive force — instead, it performed a special dramatization of the world [Oblivion] wished to express.

Time in this world flowed at blinding speed. Most images flashed past in an instant — too fast for mortal comprehension. But Cheng Shi still caught several staggering scenes.

He understood instantly what this was!

This wasn't the shore [Oblivion] hoped to reach — it was the past He had once lived through!

This was a memory. The end of the [Descent] Era — the moment Origin had named the three gods of [Descent]!

Chapter 1184: Embrace Rebirth with Me

Upon a vast continent, countless lives were dying one after another. Clearly, this was the tail end of the Life Epoch — [Death]'s will spreading like wildfire.

The images were fragmented, scenes shifting at breakneck pace, making it hard to find a focal point. After several rapid flashbacks, Cheng Shi saw that amid this wave of death — where lives fell like grass — some beings finally gave birth to fear.

They refused to relinquish their lives too early and embrace [Death]'s cold will. And so they began attempting to break free from the endless "cycle" of Birth to Prosperity to Death. This clearly defied the era's mainstream, but the fearful ones argued cleverly, trying to absolve themselves of guilt.

They insisted their faith wasn't wavering — that life held more meaningful things to do. Yet they didn't actually do anything meaningful. They simply did everything possible to flee from death, then spent their elongated lifespans indulging their fears and satisfying their personal desires.

Thus — [Corruption] began to fester.

Before long, this decadent wind swept across the continent. [Death]'s will, too, walked toward its own "death" before the next epoch could arrive.

Desire flowed like water, a hundred rivers merging into one. The universe's cravings converged into an ocean, carving horrifying chasms across the continent, tearing the entire world to pieces.

Nothing could fill those chasms — nothing but desire itself.

But life that knew only indulgence was destined not to endure. Before long, the continent ground to a halt, even regressed. The world began to rot.

When desire shrouded the land and life lost meaning, fear swept through once more. And once again, a minority awakened first. They reignited the flames of the previous epoch, pored over the traces of ages past, and finally — upon the abandoned earth — found evidence that the gods existed.

They were convinced that if faith could reconverge, the gods would lead life out of the mire.

More and more beings began calling out to the gods. But the gods offered no response.

Lost and directionless, the beings could only continue to beg — continue to crave mercy. Gradually, a tide of supplication swept the continent. Though it extinguished the flames of desire, it dragged the entire continent into another kind of trap.

All beings wailed without cease. Lives competed to out-suffer one another, each convinced that only by being more wretched than the rest could they earn the gods' gaze.

And so — [Decay] began its anthem.

But diminishing lives and withering masses still failed to win divine compassion. As the continent slowly rotted, the convictions of the previous generations were overturned yet again.

A new ideology emerged. The vanguard believed that life's excessive encroachment upon the world had brought divine punishment. The current state of affairs was the gods clearing away the "gangrenous flesh."

If they only accelerated the process — annihilated every meaningless life — the gods would surely restart the world and bring about new birth.

With that, [Oblivion]'s song finally rang out.

Afterward, the continent grew emptier and emptier. The images in memory grew ever more fragmented. The entire epoch — no, the entire era — sank into an eternal, lifeless oblivion, submerging completely into darkness.

The images shattered. Silence invaded. And at that moment — the familiar sensation returned!

Just as before, when he'd heard it in [Birth]'s memory — Origin appeared again. Even though it was merely a replicated voice, every god who'd been pressing the attack stopped short, standing in reverent reception, none daring to overstep.

In this moment, Cheng Shi finally understood what [Oblivion] was plotting. He'd used this method to freeze the gods in place, buying time for His "grand endeavor" of annihilating the universe!

Origin's voice was just as "terrifying" as before. When it rose, the very stars resonated. When it paused, the galaxy flickered between light and dark. Invisible words seemed to linger in one's vision, but the moment you focused, they dissolved at the edges of hearing. It wasn't stirring. It wasn't grand. Yet when you heard it, you felt as though you'd been lifted out of the universe — gazing down upon countless worlds, just as He did.

He spoke:

"This is [Corruption] — overture of descent, the desire of life.

This is [Decay] — crescendo of descent, the tragedy of all beings.

This is [Oblivion] — finale of descent, the silence of the world.

All that is thought becomes desire — thus, [Corruption].

All that is done brings suffering — hence, [Decay].

All that is sought goes unmet — therefore, [Oblivion]...

The three of [Descent] — all lies herein."

As the voice faded, thunderbolts crashed through Cheng Shi's mind, leaving it blank. Hong Lin, hearing Origin's voice for the first time, lost all composure — frozen in place.

The gods held their positions, expressions varying. But [Oblivion] suddenly seemed to reach an epiphany. He ceased His annihilation of the universe and burst into wild laughter high above the void:

"All that is sought goes unmet — therefore, Oblivion! So that's it! That's what it was! Did you hear?! This is the true meaning of Oblivion! What you've taken is nothing more than a throne shackled in chains! I am the true Oblivion in His eyes! He showed me the path long ago — and I was too foolish all these ages

to realize I'd been walking the wrong road! But now I've turned back! Without first annihilating the self, how can one embrace rebirth?! I will await you all... in the reborn world!"

Before the gods could react, the reconstructed memory shattered to pieces. Every shred of [Oblivion]'s power saturating the void reversed course, pouring inward — back into [Oblivion] Himself.

He seemed to have understood something. He abandoned the annihilation of the universe and chose instead to annihilate Himself!

Yes — this [Oblivion] power was not being recalled. It was an attack!

Under the gods' stunned gazes, [Oblivion] smiled with pure release:

"I've won! This time — I'm closer to Him than any of you!"

BOOM—

Every trace of [Oblivion]'s power across the universe detonated at a single point. All that force of world-ending destruction collapsed into those eyes — eyes that no longer existed.

The disintegration of [Existence] halted abruptly. The scene fell into sudden, total silence.

Another god had fallen. And this time, it had been driven — with a mortal's own hand pushing it along — to its end.

In that moment, the speechless Herobos recalled something Cheng Shi had said when persuading Him: "Without casting everything aside, where is rebirth?"

At the time, He'd assumed it was just another lie from Cheng Shi — an excuse to manipulate Him into compliance.

But now...

Had this [Deceit] follower truly glimpsed Origin's will and used it as bait to lay an open scheme — one that left His Benefactor no choice but to draw closer to Origin?

Otherwise, why would a true god choose self-annihilation when He still had a fighting chance, when He hadn't been cornered into absolute desperation?

[Void] had only wanted the throne — not His life!

But if the Benefactor really had drawn closer to Him through this... then what about himself?

For an instant, Herobos stared at Cheng Shi with a kind of dread, as if seeing a preview of his own future path.

Cheng Shi had no time to deal with Him. No matter how stunning [Oblivion]'s self-annihilation had been, it was only good news for Cheng Shi. Having witnessed more than one god's demise, his recovery was swift. His eyes shot immediately to [Justice (Order)], and he spoke with feeling:

"[Oblivion] has relinquished His throne — and His very life. Does this petition still hold meaning?"

"Upholding fairness is meaning in itself."

The Flowing Light Scales showed neither joy nor sorrow, still radiating the breath of [Order].

"The universe operates by its own logic. That is [Order].

I execute the Convention's rules and will not allow external influence to compromise fairness. [Corruption]'s will has not been confirmed. Therefore, this petition is...

Postponed indefinitely."

The words fell. And Herobos's world collapsed.

[Void]'s goal had always originated from Cheng Shi, and Cheng Shi's objective had been to eliminate the enormous threat that was [Oblivion].

Now that [Oblivion] was gone, whether what remained — Herobos — could actually inherit the throne was...

Well, [Void] had done everything it could. Herobos had seen it with his own eyes. If [Justice (Order)] wouldn't budge, there was nothing more to be done. The Convention couldn't be defied.

Cheng Shi looked at Herobos with an awkward expression, shooting Him the most apologetic look he could muster.

Herobos's mind went blank for an instant. The moment awareness returned, He wanted to curse. But after a beat of thought, He held it in.

From every conceivable angle, He was in no position to blame [Void] — especially today, after losing His Benefactor's protection.

An absurd farce concluded in an even more absurd fashion. There were many winners. But the one left hurt seemed to be... Herobos alone — who had lost both His Benefactor and the throne.

Chapter 1185: The Assembly Ends, and [Deceit]'s Method of Hiding People

[Justice (Order)] departed. In past assemblies, He would always see every god off before leaving last.

But today, He apparently didn't want to lay eyes on certain people or gods.

The gods exchanged glances — expressions varying — and left one by one. Before departing, [Death]'s boss looked toward Cheng Shi and gave an approving nod:

"Cheng — Shi — you did — well!"

With that, a torrent of white bone swallowed the boss and vanished into the sky.

Cheng Shi blinked. 'Boss, your timing for compliments could use work. Herobos is standing right beside me — can He really handle hearing that?'

He could not!

He absolutely could not handle it!

But what He couldn't handle, He had to stomach anyway.

Herobos wasn't stupid. He knew that as long as the throne hadn't fallen into His hands, at least on the surface, in the gods' eyes, [Void] was still His "backing."

There was no way He would push away His only lifeline. So with tactful awareness, He "thanked" [Deceit] before departing the void ahead of the others.

He knew [Void]'s camp would likely hold a "post-game analysis" next — and it was a discussion in which He had no standing to participate.

What Cheng Shi hadn't expected, though, was that before leaving, Herobos pressed something into his hand — a constantly collapsing and reforming hourglass.

When Cheng Shi saw it, his mind went blank.

'A container?!'

'[Oblivion]'s container?!'

'What's going on? I practically swindled your Benefactor into nonexistence, and you're thanking me for it?!'

He didn't know his Benefactor had also struck a deal with Herobos, so the gesture made no sense. But as he weighed the [Oblivion] container in his palm, Cheng Shi's estimation of Herobos rose a notch.

To make such a calculated sacrifice when stripped of all favor and stuck in a losing position — that spoke volumes about Herobos's ambition.

Whatever His underlying motives were, whether surrendering the container was His own idea or not, it proved He could read the room and knew what best served His current predicament.

Sure enough — there were no fools among the divine. They were simply more fanatical about faith than ordinary beings... and more twisted.

After Herobos left, Cheng Shi visibly relaxed. Hong Lin exhaled too, settling wearily in the void and taking a deep breath:

"When [Oblivion] fell, I was sure Herobos would go berserk and try to take you down with Him... nearly gave me a heart attack."

Warmth flooded Cheng Shi's chest. He knew Big Cat had been guarding his back the entire time since [Oblivion] had left His seat.

"So how's it feel attending the Assembly of Gods Convention for the third time?"

He'd meant it as a lighthearted quip to ease the mood. But Hong Lin shuddered violently, shaking her head hard:

"Terrifying. Absolutely terrifying."

If I hadn't seen you here, I wouldn't have opened my eyes even on pain of death.

But it's also eerie — every time one convenes, another god falls. At this rate, there won't be many more conventions to hold..."

"..."

Hearing that, Cheng Shi looked up at the two Benefactors who still hadn't left. His expression was something to behold.

'Sis, you really don't hold back, do you? Did you maybe check whether those two above our heads are still here before you said that?'

'Saying that in front of them is basically the same as cursing them to die.'

Hong Lin seemed to realize her blunder. Her face changed, she shoved Cheng Shi forward, shifted into a spotted leopard, and bolted.

Leaving Cheng Shi standing alone, caught in the crossfire of two Benefactors' gazes. Awkward beyond measure.

Though [Void]'s camp had technically "won big" at this Assembly — eliminating [Oblivion], who had been targeting the sacrifice — these two [Void] sovereigns had been at each other's throats when proceedings were cut short!

Clearly, neither was happy about the other's relationship with [Corruption]. Even after the petition concluded, the two were still locked in a cold stare.

[Deceit]'s eyes tilted upward, mirth intact:

"Everyone's gone home. Why are you still loitering? What comes next is my celebration time with my follower — we won a small victory for [Void], you know. You're kind of in the way, sis."

[Fate]'s cold eyes swept like wind, colorless and expressionless:

"For cutting away one wrong path from Fixed Destiny's road, I'll overlook your antics today.

But the Sin of Desirelessness — I must take Him with me."

[Deceit] glanced at Drasilco, who stood in place with a mild smile, showing no urge to leave. Then He turned back to His sibling and scoffed:

"He's [Corruption]'s follower. What right do you have to take Him?"

"The right that I see the aura of Fixed Destiny on Him."

"Tsk. What a convenient excuse.

Next time I find something interesting, I'll use the same line. As long as I see entertainment value in something, it should be mine. Sound fair?

Actually that works out great. By that logic, the entire universe belongs to me."

"..."

[Fate]'s eyes narrowed to razor slits, His voice glacial: "You want to fight?"

"Tsk—

I think the one looking for a fight is you. If we're doing this, let's do it. Quit wasting time!"

With that, two pairs of star-bright eyes collided. The void churned. Nothingness rose. Endless black wrapped their internal [Void] war in a cocoon of silence, letting not a single sound or shape escape.

Outsiders might think [Void] was putting on another act. Only those involved knew the truth: [Deceit] had deliberately drawn [Fate] away, buying time for the others to leave.

Yet Drasilco made no move to go. He stood in the void, facing Cheng Shi across the distance, grinning brightly.

He looked Cheng Shi up and down with evident satisfaction:

"A rich scent of desire — my favorite flavor. You're not bad. Far more pleasing to the eye than that [Memory] follower."

"!!!"

That single sentence told Cheng Shi that Drasilco wasn't merely similar to the Dragon King in voice. There was definitely a connection between them.

Linking that to what the Dragon King had said about the "Black Dragon King" leaving the mirror, and the dense [Corruption] aura within "That Dream My Nightmare" — a bolt of inspiration hit, spawning a bold theory.

'Could Drasilco be the Black Dragon King?!'

'Wait—'

'The "nightmare" within That Dream My Nightmare — was it Him all along?!'

'A [Corruption] Envoy sealed inside [Memory]'s creation?'

'So [Memory] had moved against [Corruption] after all?'

'Just like [Time], He'd imprisoned one of [Corruption]'s followers?'

'No — wait!'

Judging by [Memory]'s reaction to Drasilco at the Assembly, He clearly hadn't known about this. Which meant the one who'd "imprisoned" Drasilco wasn't [Memory] — it was someone else!

Not only that — this person had done it without [Memory] ever finding out!

'How absurd. Who could tamper with [Memory]'s own creation while fooling [Memory] Himself?'

Thinking it through, there seemed to be only one answer...

Cheng Shi's expression shifted as everything clicked into place.

'The Fun God!'

'It could only be Him!'

Only this Benefactor — who could create backdoors for him inside That Dream My Nightmare, who wielded the authorities of deception and disguise as [Void]'s sovereign — could use such an exquisite method to "hide" a [Corruption] Envoy inside His rival's mirror.

And the reason it was so exquisite was that the Fun God must have leveraged the fact that Aph Ros's desire had corrupted the Mirror of Delusion, causing it to fracture. He'd used the [Corruption] aura originating from Aph Ros to cleverly mask Drasilco's own [Corruption] aura, then wielded His inconceivable authority of deception to fool [Memory].

Only this explanation accounted for why He was so familiar with That Dream My Nightmare, and why [Memory] couldn't even recall whether Drasilco was still alive.

Because what lay hidden within That Dream My Nightmare was the Memory Dump — the refuse heap of memories [Memory] deemed unworthy of retrieval, the redundant and meaningless scraps He'd discarded after surveying the entire universe!

He would never look there. So the Fun God had hidden Drasilco there!

'What a masterful blind spot!'

If you wanted to hide something, was there anywhere less conspicuous than your rival's trash bin?

Worthy of the Fun God indeed. But this also implied something important: the Fun God's probe of [Corruption] might have begun far earlier than anyone imagined!

He'd been laying the groundwork for ages — and only now had He played this card.

Realizing all of this, Cheng Shi drew a deep breath and addressed Drasilco with grave seriousness:

"What exactly is the deal you struck with my Benefactor?"

Chapter 1186: Trial Complete, Empty-Handed

"A deal?"

You're giving me too much credit. I'm merely a servant god — how could I negotiate terms with a true god?

And even if there was something, the one you should ask isn't me, but your Benefactor.

He's the mastermind behind all of this. I'm just a puppet pushed to the front of the stage — same as you. Neither of us has much room to resist."

Drasilco gave a helpless smile, then added meaningfully: "But I find you rather interesting. I've looked through your memories. You're quite the... pitiful soul."

Cheng Shi frowned. Having his memories known to a [Corruption] Envoy didn't seem like good news.

Drasilco appeared to read his concern. He smiled again:

"Relax. As long as desire still beats in your heart, my lips stay sealed.

Besides, in a sense, we're on the same side, aren't we? Both of us — pieces on His board.

But I've said too much already. Speaking more will get me silenced, and I have no desire to end up like Tria — a handful of dust before this era's halfway point. I hope we meet again, Clown."

With that, Drasilco's figure gradually faded, leaving Cheng Shi standing in place, brow furrowed in thought.

The [Corruption] follower clearly held a dim view of [Deceit]. He'd used words like "puppet" and "chess piece" more than once. Whether it was deliberate provocation or genuine sentiment was hard to say — but either way, he wasn't wrong.

No matter how much Cheng Shi resisted, wasn't he still walking the so-called path of "Fixed Destiny"?

And now that he looked back, while the one who championed Fixed Destiny was [Fate], every past event that had been laid like stepping stones... had been arranged by [Deceit].

The Fear Faction's fear was not without reason.

Drasilco had also mentioned Tria. Combined with the mysterious Tria container in his possession, Cheng Shi couldn't help but wonder: had the Fun God killed her Envoy as part of his probe into [Corruption]?

If true, it was no wonder Drasilco felt poorly toward the Fun God. Even if he despised Tria, she was still a fellow [Corruption] adherent. The Fun God's actions would naturally chill his heart. And yet, there clearly was some kind of cooperation between the Fun God and Drasilco — the specifics of which remained unknown.

...

Meanwhile.

While [Deceit] and [Fate] were brawling again, [Truth] — yes, [Truth], or perhaps more accurately [Deceit], given His particular expertise — descended beside the Sea of Desire, listening to its tides with an inscrutable expression.

Before long, a hunched figure appeared beneath the Starlight Canon. He looked up at [Truth], puzzled for a moment, then understood:

"You're so eager to find my master because You want to make Him into a puppet like this [Truth]?"

The Starlight Canon scoffed:

"Only the scheming types enjoy controlling puppets. According to my philosophy of entertainment, clowns should write their own scripts — that way the plays they put on are far more watchable.

I'm not talented enough to make your mysterious master serve me. If I step into the Sea of Desire, not becoming his puppet would already be a win.

Besides, why do you say I'm the one eager to find Him?

You devoted Envoys are the ones who keep trying every trick to get closer. I'm simply being generous and lending you a hand."

Drasilco's face twitched. He lowered his head: "My devotion drives me ceaselessly onward. Let us hope this time we can find His trail."

The Starlight Canon flipped a couple of pages and laughed strangely:

"I've searched high and low without finding any trace of His existence. Since when does your master hold the authority of 'hide and seek'?"

Or — does your master simply not exist at all, and your 'devotion' is nothing but a heartfelt fantasy?"

Drasilco's expression sharpened: "Please don't jest about this, true god. Without my master, how could we exist?"

In those days, beneath the Cathedral's scaffold, upon the rack — had my master not descended a container to save me, there would be no Sin of Desirelessness today.

He pointed me toward my path. Perhaps being hidden away by You for so long cost me the privilege of my master's gaze, and now He no longer wishes to see me..."

"Oh? Blaming me now?"

If I hadn't saved you lot when [Time] was about to round you all up, right now you'd be trapped in your crumbling Cathedral like the Gate of Joyous Lust — endlessly falling through the past with no chance of ever seeing daylight again."

"..." Drasilco realized he'd misspoken and fell silent.

The Starlight Canon scoffed again:

"How amusing. His own followers He doesn't protect, yet I have to do it for Him.

Every god elevates Envoys by first summoning them, then bestowing a container. Only you three — He tosses a container and disappears. [Corruption]'s containers don't even require consent. This shadowy figure handing out containers from behind the curtain — is He necessarily [Corruption]?"

Not many gods can pull off something so stealthy. Let's start by ruling me out, and then what's left..."

Hee~

If we fish a certain foul-mouthed somebody out of the Sea of Desire today, I won't be the least bit surprised."

With that, the pair — one person, one book — faded at the edge of the Sea of Desire.

The sound of tides surged, drowning out all other noise.

...

The aftershocks of [Void]'s internal war eventually leaked through just enough to blast Cheng Shi from the void back into reality.

He'd returned to the final moments of the Trial. Watching the varied citizens of Redi Core hurry about, feeling the breath of [Folly] saturating the air, Cheng Shi gave a bitter smile and sighed.

Though he'd technically "won big" at the Assembly of Gods Convention, within this Trial itself... he'd come away with absolutely nothing.

'Worthy of His Trial. In the end, it was all one big foolish act.'

But at least he wasn't as foolish as the Historian or the Scavenger. One had recovered the Torchbearers' memories at the cost of his own life. The other had summoned an Envoy and ended up annihilating his own Benefactor...

He wondered how many points [Folly] would give their respective foolish acts. Hopefully his own score wasn't too high — otherwise, it would feel like being judged and mocked for no good reason.

With that thought, the world went dark, and the Trial came to an end.

[Wish Trial (Round 12814229109141 of Folly — [Folly]) — Challenge Successful]

[Calculating score and rewards...]

[Player: Cheng Shi — Performance Score: B]

[Item acquired: Insight Mask (S) x1]

[Item acquired: Secret-Keeper Mask (S) x1]

[Item acquired: Awakening Mask (S) x1]

[Item acquired: Despair Mask (S) x1]

[Road to Ascension: +12]

[Ladder of Ascent: +3]

[Current Road to Ascension Score: 2313 | Global Rank: 276,703]

[Current Ladder of Ascent Score: 193 | Path Rank: 19]

[Trial complete. Exiting.]

Chapter 1187: To Know and Not Speak

Reality. Atop a mountain in an unknown province.

A small wooden puppet was fiddling with its wooden arms, writing and drawing on the earthen ground. What it wrote wasn't in any script from the real world or the Land of Hope — it was an entirely new alphabet.

It wrote as it murmured aloud:

"Cheng Shi. Yu Xi. A sacrifice from [Void]...

Makes sense, but [Void]'s sacrifice to Him would never be merely a newly elevated Envoy.

[Deceit] choosing him might have been a matter of temperament — full of randomness. But how do we explain [Fate] choosing him as well?

Two wills running in opposite directions, yet converging upon a single person. That can only mean..."

The puppet paused in thought, erased several lines, then started a new row next to them:

"One of those wills is a fabrication.

So between [Void]'s surface and its essence — which one is the true essence, and which is the misleading illusion?

Judging from the recent explosion of [Fate] believers, [Fate]'s behavior has become visibly more erratic. He's getting anxious. But why do the newest [Fate] followers describe their deity with two different appearances?

Is He using this to differentiate the sources of faith, or is some other god impersonating [Fate] to fish in troubled waters?

Is it [Deceit]?

Doesn't seem like it. [Deceit]'s focus lies elsewhere.

[Folly] once said [Deceit] is close to finding the answer. What answer?

Is it whatever [Time] is busy with, or... the key to [Folly]'s own authority?

Insufficient data. Can't deduce further. I'll need more contact with them to find out.

Yu Xi, Yu Xi...

If your Benefactor is close to finding the answer, then are you, too, close to finding my master's authority?"

With that, the puppet stopped writing. It gazed toward the distant mountain range, gave a faint sigh, and produced several sheets of paper from its spatial inventory. Slowly tearing them apart, it scattered the fragments into the air below.

Mountain wind scattered them like snow.

Between the drifting scraps, words like "idol" and "eyes" were barely legible. The puppet stood in the paper-snow, its eyes shifting subtly.

"I found you in the Trial. But what did you find in the Trial?"

Eyes...

I recall Zhen Yi once obtained a tongue from Long Jing's possession — one that devours lies. And in San Dales, there were legends of the Secret Peeping Ear... All facial features. Could they be the same thing?

Connected to [Deceit] — hmm? Masks?

So has [Folly] already lost to [Deceit]? Perhaps even surrendered His authority to Him?

Then why wouldn't [Deceit] know where that authority is?

Oh. I see.

[Memory]!

It seems He played a critical role in all of this.

In that case, they appear to share a forgotten past. Interesting — can even [Memory] forget His own memories?

And where would He hide such secrets?

In [Memory]'s Collection Hall? Or within that Mask belonging to [Deceit]?

And what connection does that supposed Mask have with Yu Xi's path to godhood?"

The puppet fell into deep contemplation.

Atop the peak, there was nothing but the howl of wind.

...

The void. Location unknown.

A figure clad head to toe in heavy armor appeared, and the silent void finally stirred.

It was Qin Xin. He never expected that shortly after dispatching the Prisoner, the man had already dug up leads on that [Deceit] Envoy — Yu Xi — who was central to the God Creation Plan.

He was surprised. But what surprised him more was that during this meeting, his normally garrulous secret Fire Seeker stood motionless, gazing at him with a complicated expression, saying absolutely nothing.

Qin Xin grew uneasy. Frankly, he worried this was the Prisoner's version of "charging his ultimate." He dreaded subjecting his exhausted brain to an unbearable symphony of chatter, so he cleared his throat twice — interrupting the "charge-up" — and asked as calmly as possible:

"What did you find?"

The Prisoner was in agony.

When he'd called for this meeting, he'd already resolved not to reveal the truth. He would only say that his brother-in-law had a reliable way to meet Yu Xi, and that the Torchbearers should get close to said brother-in-law — ideally recruit him.

But when he saw the weariness on Qin Xin's face, he wavered. Maybe it wasn't wrong to let this man — who had been running himself into the ground for humanity's hope — know the truth.

Even if it violated certain Torchbearer tenets, Qin Xin still had the Remembrance Needle, didn't he?

At worst, he could learn the full picture, plan accordingly, then erase his knowledge of the brother-in-law's true identity. That way, the Torchbearers might take fewer detours.

After all, knowing that Cheng Shi could meet Yu Xi, versus knowing that Cheng Shi was Yu Xi, were two entirely different things. The former would waste enormous manpower and resources; the latter only required keeping close to his brother-in-law. He was an expert at that. And he was confident his brother-in-law would welcome his company.

Hence — the Prisoner's dilemma.

And Qin Xin, naturally, could tell that the man had discovered something he wasn't sure he should share. He gave a soft smile and patted the Prisoner's shoulder:

"I'm seeing you in a new light.

Honestly, when I first brought you into the Torchbearers, I wasn't sure you were the right fit.

Your childhood experiences moved me, but they only proved your 'evil' had a cause — not that you possessed the desire to protect what's good, as I'd hoped.

Now I see you've grasped the true meaning of passing fire.

The moment you hesitated, it proved that what you know can't be shared with me. So don't agonize over it — just tell me what you can.

What you choose to keep is the goodness you're protecting. And that is what keeps us passing the fire."

Qin Xin's words were sincere and warming. But the Prisoner still struggled.

"Even if what I know could be useful for the path ahead?"

Qin Xin blinked, then smiled:

"Remember — the fire in our hearts is passed on willingly, torch by torch, person by person. It's never stolen flame from elsewhere, nor a wildfire set loose to take shortcuts.

Kindling that betrays our founding principle is like damp wood. It won't make the fire burn brighter — it'll only thicken the smoke."

The Prisoner fell silent again. After a moment, he nodded firmly:

"I understand. I did find a trail leading to Yu Xi — all the intel came from my brother-in-law.

I believe he's our best window to get close to Yu Xi.

So my recommendation is this: I'll maintain contact with my brother-in-law and try to recruit him into the Torchbearers."

"..."

'Brother-in-law...'

A vein throbbed on Qin Xin's forehead. The corner of his mouth twitched: "Setting Cheng Shi aside — tell me about Yu Xi."

'How can I talk about Yu Xi without talking about my brother-in-law?'

The Prisoner looked pained but quickly laid out everything he knew — and that briefing took half a day.

There were only two people in the void, yet Qin Xin felt as if he'd just sat through a debriefing with several dozen attendees.

The useful information could have been summed up in a few points. The useless tangents — "my sister," "my brother-in-law," "honey-trap tactics" — went on from start to finish.

Listening to those completely irrelevant suggestions, Qin Xin's head swelled to the size of a drum.

At that moment, he decided he'd given his "new light" assessment a bit prematurely.

The Prisoner was still the Prisoner. Some things never changed.

Chapter 1188: To Know and Speak Recklessly

Reality. An office building in an unknown city.

Ji Yue had been lying motionless on her bed ever since returning, sorting through her thoughts and memories.

She remembered why she'd originally joined the Torchbearers: partly to ensure humanity's continuation and spare the world from suffering, and partly to uncover the secret of godhood — to challenge those sixteen who sat so high above.

Her later decision to join hadn't entirely betrayed that founding purpose. At the very least, the Mutual Aid Society proved she was someone willing to protect the weak.

But what troubled her now wasn't any of that. It was the things Cheng Shi had said and done during his first "recruitment" attempt.

He'd said the Torchbearers were on good terms with [Deceit]. Everything he'd hinted at — overtly and subtly — pointed to one message: [Deceit] was sheltering the fire-passers.

Of course, at the time Cheng Shi had been working with Fang Shiqing to deceive her, so it was entirely possible he'd been lying. But the thing was — words could deceive, but could a god's reaction also be a lie?!

She distinctly remembered Cheng Shi leading them to find the Mockery and Jeering, then using a Peeping Mirror [Deceit] had left inside it to reach the Tower of Logic's Void Experimental Site. If that had all been fabricated, where would Cheng Shi have gotten the ability to conjure a Mockery and Jeering in the void?

That was something only a god could do, wasn't it?

So the Mockery and Jeering couldn't have been fake, and [Deceit]'s response couldn't have been fake either!

That meant [Deceit] definitely knew about the Torchbearers. Their conversations in the void had probably been monitored by Him all along — it was the only way He could have responded to Cheng Shi's "call" so instantly.

The question was: if [Deceit] knew the Torchbearers existed to overthrow the gods' "tyranny," why hadn't He made a move against them?

Because He found the mortals' rebellion entertaining enough to watch from the sidelines?

Not impossible. But Ji Yue's gut told her there was far more to it. Her sixth sense said Cheng Shi might not have been wrong — the one sheltering the Torchbearers really could be [Deceit]!

Only [Deceit] had the motive and the angle to conceal a group of mortals.

The Flame of Hope might be the Torchbearers' guardian deity, but He was only a servant god — and an abandoned one at that, cast off by [Fate]. Did He truly have the power to hide the Torchbearers from sixteen true gods?

That didn't add up.

Before recovering her memories, Ji Yue would never have doubted the Flame of Hope. But once the seed of doubt was planted, it grew like wildfire, flooding her mind until it could no longer be stopped.

She couldn't help but question the Flame of Hope's identity, and quietly worry about [Deceit]'s motives for protecting the fire.

Just then, someone knocked.

Ji Yue glanced at the door and called out, "Come in." The door opened, and a man leaned against the frame with a deadpan expression:

"Several more Mutual Aid Society residents have successfully merged with [Fate]. Segments ranging from 1800 to 2200. So it's true — [Fate] was the first to lift the faith restrictions.

Still, plenty of people have their own preferred faith they want to merge with and aren't rushing into [Fate]. They're waiting for the Faith Game to open up further.

Hm? Ji Yue, are you even listening?"

Ji Yue snapped back to focus. She nodded, then shook her head:

"Fang Jue — hypothetically, if I'd been lying to you about something, but had never harmed you or the Society, and was still doing everything in my power to protect everyone... what would that make me?"

Indeed, the man at the door was Fang Jue — a follower of [Order]. As a law-abiding [Order] adherent, Ji Yue had never recruited him into the Torchbearers. In her view, the Torchbearers' road ahead was uncertain, and she refused to impose her own will on others — including everyone in the Society.

Fang Jue blinked in bewilderment: "You're losing it?"

BANG!

Ji Yue hurled a pillow at the door. "I'm serious. If you noticed something off about me, what would you do?"

Fang Jue caught the pillow and frowned slightly:

"You've been lying to us? About what?"

You're the highest-scoring, strongest player here. What could we possibly have that's worth deceiving us for?

If this isn't some psychological experiment or a test of my aid willingness, Ji Yue, I think we need to have a proper conversation. A completely honest one."

Ji Yue's expression soured, then she shot upright from the bed and slapped her thigh:

"Exactly! Just have an honest conversation — that's all I need!"

She shoved Fang Jue out the door with a parting "You really are easier on the eyes than before," locked the door, drew a symbol on the wall beside her bed, and stepped directly into the void, headed for the Fire Passing Hall.

She was going to have an honest conversation with the Flame of Hope!

Fang Jue stood outside staring at the door an inch from his nose, paused a moment, then shook his head with a rueful laugh:

"She really did join some incredible secret organization behind our backs. But with that bull-in-a-china-shop personality of hers, will it really not cause problems for whatever group requires secrecy?"

...

The void. Fire Passing Hall.

Ji Yue moved fast. She turned heads among the Torchbearers the entire way, and at the Hall's entrance ran into Fang Shiqing — coming to deliver a report. Seeing the Fire Seeker who had once helped Cheng Shi deceive her, Ji Yue's face darkened and she fired off a jab:

"Shiqing — where did the God Creation Plan originally come from?"

Fang Shiqing paused mid-stride, tilting her head:

"Why do you ask? If I remember correctly, it was your predecessor — An Shenxuan — who devised it together with Qin Xin.

[Fate] followers probably see further ahead than the rest of us. The Vice President Sun you recruited proves that, doesn't he?"

"?"

'That deadpan serious?'

Ji Yue's eyebrow arched. Suspicion formed in her mind, but she pressed further, expression turning peculiar: "Back when I was at 2,400 points..."

She trailed off, jutting her chin toward Fang Shiqing suggestively.

Fang Shiqing's clear eyes rippled with genuine confusion. She blinked: "Aren't you already at 2,700?"

"..."

'Boring.'

This Fire Seeker — so devoted to protecting what was beautiful — had probably already used the Remembrance Needle to forget everything Cheng Shi had done.

Ji Yue sighed, having no choice but to accept the wonderfully boring fact that she'd been tricked and was the only one who'd recovered her memories. She waved dismissively, ignoring Fang Shiqing's follow-up questions, and strode toward the Flame of Hope.

She was going to have that honest talk!

Fang Shiqing stood watching Ji Yue's retreating figure — all fury and fire — and murmured to herself:

"Her heartstrings are ringing loud and strong, yet there's something heavy and secretive beneath it all. What has she discovered?"

2,400... What about 2,400?"

Meanwhile.

The Flame of Hope received a "guest" in a reception room. The moment she walked in, she spoke as if she'd unearthed the secret of the century, her voice solemn:

"I know who you really are!

You're not [Fate]'s Envoy, the Flame of Hope — you're [Deceit]'s Envoy, Yu Xi! Am I right?!

That's why you sent us searching for Yu Xi — because only by doing so could you smoothly transfer the Torchbearers' gratitude from you to [Deceit]!

From the very beginning, the one sheltering us was always [Deceit] — never some abandoned destiny...

You protected us, but you also deceived us. What are you really doing... Lord Yu Xi?!"

Facing the Fire Seeker's absolute conviction, the Candle Man blinked in bewilderment. He was silent for a long time. Then a smile — unmistakably [Deceit]-style — crept across his face, and he burst into laughter:

"So you've finally found me out.

That's right. I am Yu Xi — a servant god of [Void], and [Deceit]'s one and only Envoy."

Chapter 1189: To Know and Not Speak

Nobody knew what Ji Yue had experienced in that reception room. But ever since she emerged, the way she looked at the [Deceit] followers around her carried a new layer of meaning that no one could quite decipher.

The Fire Passing Hall was unusually lively today. Not only were both Fire Seekers present, but even the recently recruited Sun Miao had returned.

After "settling" the Prisoner, Qin Xin had rushed back to the Fire Passing Hall for another meeting with the core members. And it was during this four-person gathering that Sun Miao produced the [Decay] container — the one Lord Yu Xi had specifically asked him to deliver to the Torchbearers.

But he didn't say outright that it came from Yu Xi. Instead, he claimed he'd accidentally found it lying by the Rest Area entrance.

When a lie is that absurd, everyone understands the Vice President must have reasons he can't disclose, and that this was his only way of hinting at the container's true origin.

Given a [Folly] follower's temperament, to willingly keep a secret and serve as a "delivery man" could only mean the sender wasn't a person at all — but a certain unnamed deity!

And who else could that deity be?

For a moment, every expression in the room turned thoroughly peculiar.

Seeing this, Sun Miao smiled in silence, deeply satisfied.

When Lord Yu Xi had told him to find any excuse to hand off the [Decay] container, He'd said He didn't want too much association with the Torchbearers. Sun Miao had complied — and indeed found a random excuse.

But Sun Miao was no fool. Having committed to following Lord Yu Xi's "revolution" to the end, he wasn't about to pass up such a perfect opportunity to win hearts.

Making the Torchbearers trust Yu Xi a bit more was like paving a few extra meters on his own future road. As a smart [Folly] follower, he knew how to choose.

And so the room fell into a strange silence.

Qin Xin's gaze sharpened. Staring at the [Decay] container on the table, he finally understood what the Flame of Hope had meant by saying the key to the God Creation Plan lay with Yu Xi. So divinity dripped from containers. So the road to godhood required one.

And yet this infinitely precious item had been handed over so casually. Did that mean Yu Xi also endorsed the Torchbearers' cause?

Both of [Void]'s servant gods were sheltering a group of mortals who opposed the gods. The implications demanded deep reflection.

Ji Yue's thoughts ran even further. She couldn't help but marvel at everything the Flame of Hope had done — what an intricate chain of schemes, an entire play within a play. His moves, front to back, had practically bound the fire-passing and Yu Xi together. It wouldn't be long before the Torchbearers fully accepted [Deceit]...

She still couldn't fathom why [Deceit] was also rebelling upward. But not understanding was fine — knowing that [Deceit] wasn't raising the Torchbearers like livestock for entertainment was enough. The rest, she could observe and figure out over time.

As for Fang Shiqing — she was the happiest of the four.

Knowing nothing meant worrying about nothing. The God Creation Plan had finally taken a crucial step forward. Even if that step had been pushed along by someone else, progress was still progress.

She smiled and asked what came next. Qin Xin deliberated for a long while before declaring:

"Sun Miao says the container needs an owner first. We don't have a suitable [Decay] follower among us, so the next step is to screen the Torchbearers for a fitting candidate — let's at least get past this hurdle.

Everyone, the God Creation Plan is of paramount importance. The screening must be approved by multiple parties.

Go. I'll safeguard this container until we find a suitable 'vessel' for it."

...

Reality. A courtyard in an unknown city.

Mo Shu hadn't spoken a single word since leaving the Trial with his S rating.

Strange — an [Oblivion] follower, silenced by [Folly]'s contempt.

He vented by annihilating everything in his Rest Area. Everything except his baking station.

Standing inside the empty courtyard walls, Mo Shu murmured in confusion: "What is [Oblivion] even for?"

He asked himself again and again, repeating the question until the sun set and the night curtain rose. Finally, an answer came.

But it wasn't one he'd arrived at himself. Someone else brought it.

"For rebirth."

A strange ripple flashed, and two figures materialized before him.

Seeing the uninvited guests, Mo Shu's eyes darkened: "How did you break through the barrier rules to get here?"

Jie Shu — tall, lean, bespectacled — gave a cold snort:

"When you understand the rules, they stop being shackles and become weapons in your hands.

The 0221 group experiment wrapped up some time ago. Wei Mu's findings have already been shared in a small circle. If you don't bother learning and only question, you'll fall behind and miss a great deal.

Besides, I've breached far greater barriers than this fragile air wall.

Enough of that. I came to ask whether you've made your decision.

I've reached out to you multiple times with no response. If viable candidates weren't so scarce, I wouldn't have this much patience."

Jie Shu could tell Mo Shu was seething. But in this world, who wasn't? If everyone could play the game happily, there wouldn't be so few survivors.

So he disregarded Mo Shu's emotions. An [Oblivion] follower shouldn't have pointless emotions anyway.

Sure enough, Mo Shu annihilated his anger on the spot and returned to cold composure. He eyed the stranger beside Jie Shu:

"Who's he?"

Jie Shu didn't answer. Instead, the cloaked man stepped forward, extending a hand from beneath his robe, his tone peculiar:

"A pleasure, Thorough Deletion.

I know you, but you certainly don't know me. Surname's Su. I'm a Master of Trickery."

"A [Deceit] follower?"

Mo Shu's expression soured. He had zero goodwill toward [Deceit] followers right now. He turned to Jie Shu, visibly surprised: "So you've given up on the Acrobat."

Jie Shu nodded:

"The Acrobat seemed like a good choice, but Li Jingming's recommendation made me cautious.

I've learned he's on good terms with the Fate Weaver. To avoid being set up, I've decided against further contact with President Gong. That's also why I say usable people are running thin."

Mo Shu fell silent. He didn't care much about whether Long Jing joined or not. But faced with the "collapse of faith" he was currently experiencing, he genuinely needed something new to redirect his attention. After a moment's thought, he nodded:

"Fine. I'm in. But tell me right now what you're actually doing."

Jie Shu finally smiled. He produced a sound-dampening device from his spatial inventory, deployed it, and spoke with gravity:

"We're searching for the world's answer — the universe's ultimate truth. We want to find a homeland where we can live in peace, hidden within the Creator's blind spots.

But that homeland comes with one condition: in that world, the Fate Weaver must not exist."

"?"

Mo Shu clearly didn't understand the first half. But the second half registered, and his expression shifted:

"You're planning to kill him?"

If all of this is just an excuse to justify a hunt, count me out.

I don't want to see him right now."

Jie Shu and the surnamed Su both scoffed. The cloaked man smirked: "Looks like that irritating fellow has already caused you trouble."

Before Mo Shu could respond, Jie Shu continued:

"This is not a simple hunt. We're casting a wide net and reeling in slowly.

Our sights aren't set only on this world's Cheng Shi. Explaining all of it will take time.

To save time, once I locate the Historian, I'll lay out the full truth for all of you.

Have you seen Zhao Xishi recently?"

Mo Shu's eyes flickered — as if something had crossed his mind — and he shook his head: "No. That arrogant woman is just as insufferable."

Jie Shu gave him a meaningful look:

"Indeed. But as I said — usable people are scarce. Once we reach her, we begin."

Chapter 1190: Empty-Handed?

An empty-handed "Greed Lord" was undeniably a failure.

Cheng Shi couldn't accept his own failure, so he consoled himself: at least the Trial had earned him an eye-roll from [Folly]...

Of course, that was self-deprecating humor. As the player closest to the authority of greed in the entire universe, Cheng Shi couldn't truly have come away with nothing.

Don't forget — the Trial had begun because he was searching for leads on the Eye of Mockery. Even if he hadn't found the Eye itself, getting a lead was just as good, wasn't it?

In this centuries-long foolish act, Skart had played the protagonist for the vast majority of it. Only at the curtain's fall did the true architect — Kandert — emerge as the man behind the maze.

The shame was that he was dead. The greater shame was that Cheng Shi had wasted his one chance to question the dead, meaning he could never again extract the Eye of Mockery's whereabouts from Kandert's mouth.

But just because [Death]'s boss couldn't extract the information didn't make it [Memory]'s problem, did it?

As long as Kandert's body was in his hands, he could just get the Dragon King to search through the man's memories!

That's right — Cheng Shi had brought Kandert's corpse out of the Trial. It was the most direct lead to finding the Eye of Mockery, and the biggest prize he'd "won" from the Trial!

All he had to do now was find the Dragon King, have this fellow Joker walking the path of [Memory] review the dead man's memories, and they'd pinpoint the Eye's location. As a bonus, he could rally the crew for another grand Joker performance in pursuit of the next mask fragment.

So the moment Cheng Shi returned to the Rest Area, he didn't pause for even a second — didn't even examine the [Oblivion] container in his possession — and immediately contacted the Dragon King, arranging to meet at the Joker Gathering Place.

What he hadn't expected was that when he arrived at the gathering place, the graveyard held more than just the Dragon King. Mi Laozhang was there too.

The [Death] Chosen was wielding a shovel, tamping down the earth around one of the tombstones.

Cheng Shi blinked. Seeing that the tombstone read [Memory], he asked with a peculiar expression:

"Did you two have a fight?"

What's going on, Laozhang — planning to bury the Dragon King?"

Zhang Jizu squinted, his narrow gaze sweeping over the Dragon King and Cheng Shi as they arrived. He shook his head and said with absolute seriousness:

"Cemetery management isn't an easy job. You have to constantly monitor the grounds — checking whether weeds have sprouted around the tombstones, whether the soil has loosened or softened, whether the inscriptions have been smudged or faded..."

In short, every trade has its own craft.

We don't have any quarrel. I just happened to run into you two while on my rounds."

"?"

Cheng Shi's expression grew even more peculiar. He pointed at the freshly-filled mound beneath the [Memory] tombstone and grinned:

"Laozhang, I always thought you just had small eyes. Turns out you're literally half-asleep today.

This is the void, not your cemetery. No grass seeds, no rainwater, no vandals. Nobody comes here except the Jokers for meetings — who'd bother vandalizing a tombstone?"

Zhang Jizu gave one last pat, smoothed the soil behind the tombstone, and leaned on his shovel, addressing the rhetorical question to himself:

"I was wondering the same thing. If there truly are no vandals, then who dug up [Memory]'s tombstone?"

"..."

Cheng Shi's expression froze. Acute embarrassment flashed across his face.

'Oh no. Last time I was in such a rush to grab That Dream My Nightmare and bring it to [Memory], I dug up the mirror and forgot to refill the hole.'

'So that's what Laozhang's been passive-aggressively getting at this whole time — he's scolding me!'

'You sly old fox! I haven't even called you out for standing me up, and you're the one coming at me — not with a rake, but a shovel!'

There was no way he could admit this. Even if all three of them knew exactly what had happened, the truth could not be spoken aloud. A clown was funnier hiding backstage, but once you pulled back the curtain, the audience laughed even harder!

'My profession is Clown. I can't actually be a clown.'

Cheng Shi let out a strained "ehehe," looked skyward, sidled over to the Dragon King in two quick steps, and dumped Kandert's corpse out of the Molten Coffin — forcibly changing the subject:

"As I mentioned, this guy is the key to finding the Eye of Mockery. He's yours now, Dragon King. I believe in you.

If you actually find a lead, I'll authorize Laozhang to upgrade [Memory]'s tombstone to a bigger one. Consider it your reward."

"..."

Li Jingming paused. Something about today's Cheng Shi reminded him of a certain bald contestant. His expression turned thoughtful:

"You ran into the Prisoner?"

The name "the Prisoner" still packed devastating force. Cheng Shi's mouth snapped shut instantly, his face going rigid.

Li Jingming nodded:

"Looks like another unforgettable memory.

Interesting. Let me see what secrets lie hidden in this wise man's memories."

He produced a page from his spatial inventory and prepared to begin. But Cheng Shi suddenly interrupted, puzzled:

"Wait — Dragon King.

Normally you'd insist on exchanging some memory of mine before doing something like this. How come you're not asking this time?

Getting [Memory] a bigger tombstone doesn't sound like a payment you'd accept."

Li Jingming's expression shifted briefly, but he smoothed it to casual nonchalance:

"I'm more interested in the memories of actually finding the Eye of Mockery afterward. Besides, we're both Jokers — helping each other out is perfectly normal."

"Normal? In absolutely no universe is that normal!"

Cheng Shi rubbed his chin and circled the Dragon King, studying him: "We all know what kind of people make up this Joker alliance. Aside from me, what liar ever says anything honest?"

Oh~ I get it. You just don't want to memorize anything related to certain people — specifically certain [Silence] followers, am I right?

Tsk tsk tsk. Dragon King, even your road of memory is getting picky now.

What, the Prisoner — as the [Silence] Chosen — the world's finest Ascetic Monk — his memories aren't worth a penny?"

"..."

Li Jingming went silent.

In this moment, only three people stood at the Joker Gathering Place. Yet it felt as though an invisible spectator was hiding somewhere, peeping at all of them.

The oppressive sensation was suffocating. Li Jingming lowered his gaze to Kandert's corpse and said quietly:

"Fine. Name your price."

Cheng Shi beamed. "Well then, I'll just—"

Four words in, he shut his mouth again.

Replaying the Prisoner's antics in his memory once was painful enough. Having to narrate it aloud for two Jokers... just kill me now.

The scene fell silent once more.

Cheng Shi glanced awkwardly at Li Jingming, then at Mi Laozhang — whose expression looked equally uncomfortable — and sighed:

"They say the Dragon King never comes out on the losing end. I concede. Let's get to work."

Li Jingming shook his head with a rueful smile. He pressed the page against Kandert's body, touched two fingers lightly to the corpse's brow, and moments later, countless cerulean [Memory] lights bloomed from his fingertips.

Those dancing rays of light circled the pair — one living, one dead — surging and intertwining. Amid the weave of light and shadow, Li Jingming entered a trance on the spot.

The Memory Traveler had embarked on a new journey through memories.