

## The Gods 1191

### Chapter 1191: The So-Called Foolish Act

In the past, diving into someone else's memories always counted as an adventure. But today was different.

Compared to the players of the Faith Game, Kandert's life was clean as a blank sheet of paper.

In his several decades of existence, the most spectacular moment was probably watching the idol bestow a divine gift upon Koshna on the day before his death.

In that instant, Kandert's jealousy ignited completely.

He had lost to Koshna in the Folly Prohibition Office's Executioner election, becoming only a deputy. Yet even so, he firmly believed his own conduct was far more devoted than Koshna's.

He was convinced he'd lost only because fake fools — those who disguised their idiocy — were hiding among the populace, making senseless, judgment-free choices. That was exactly why he'd willingly stayed on at the Folly Prohibition Office: to root out these genuine fools.

So even with Koshna positioned above him, Kandert still believed he was the true wise man in the Benefactor's eyes — the one most aligned with [Folly]'s will.

But all of that shattered the moment the Fool Hunter's idol bestowed a divine gift upon Koshna. Kandert could not accept that the idol would bless a drunkard of an Executioner while ignoring him entirely.

At first, he didn't immediately rush to seize Koshna's gift. Instead, he "gave" his Benefactor a "chance."

He knelt before the idol just as Koshna had, praying devoutly, hoping to receive a gift of his own.

He saw it as the Benefactor's validation. If he too could gain that affirmation — even if the public still ranked him below Koshna — he could accept it and be content.

But the idol gave no response.

Skart only had one pair of eyes. No matter how devout Kandert was, no matter how loudly he cried out, Skart couldn't produce a second pair to satisfy the man's delusion.

So Kandert broke. Rage boiled from his chest and malice surged from his gut. He immediately schemed, killed Koshna, and stole the divine gift from the dead man's hands.

But he also knew that while his original motive sprang from devotion, his actions had violated [Folly]'s will, committing the crime of Knowing Folly. So he resolved to go all in — take the gift and flee to a new city, begin a new life as a devout wise man among strangers.

As long as no one in the new city recognized him as a criminal, they would all be blind fools — and he would naturally be the one closest to the Benefactor.

To this end, Kandert crafted a meticulous plan. Fearing that hiding the gift on his person might trigger unpredictable changes that would alarm the guards, he sewed those eyes...

Into the bodies of the criminal fools he'd used to murder Koshna!

That way, he'd only need to push one of the prisoners carrying the gift off a cliff someday, then use his position's privileges to leave Redi Core. Afterward, he'd quietly retrieve the gift from the base of the cliff.

The plan was seamless — until the [Chaos] follower Max stumbled onto it midway through.

Max killed Kandert out of self-preservation, which meant none of Kandert's subsequent plans ever materialized. And Cheng Shi had been unable to extract useful leads from Max.

The memory ended there. However, because this corpse had first been "ravaged" by [Death]'s comprehension of [Memory] power, certain details had "died" — so Li Jingming couldn't make out the face of the prisoner who'd been sewn with the Eye of Mockery.

He returned from his Memory Traveler journey and reported everything faithfully to Cheng Shi, concluding:

"It seems we may need to relive the story you went through one more time.

Now that we've confirmed its location, all that's left is trial and error."

But hearing this, Cheng Shi showed not the slightest agreement. He froze, then lowered his head with the strangest expression, saying absolutely nothing — while internally raging.

'Brother Mouth, get out here!

The Eye of Mockery was that close to us — don't tell me you didn't sense it!

You knew all along, didn't you?!

You knew exactly where the Eye of Mockery was and just didn't tell me!'

The Fool's Lips gave no response. Cheng Shi grew less certain.

To Li Jingming and Zhang Jizu, his silence naturally looked like deep concentration — searching for clues related to the Eye of Mockery. But after waiting a while, they watched Cheng Shi whip a scalpel from his sleeve and, without a word, drive it straight toward his own eye sockets.

"!!!"

Li Jingming's expression shifted — then understanding dawned. Zhang Jizu's eyes narrowed knowingly. Under their stunned and astonished gazes, Cheng Shi gritted his teeth against the searing pain and forcefully gouged both eyes from their sockets.

Blood sprayed. Eyeballs hit the ground!

He wasn't certain he was the lucky chosen one picked by Kandert. He was simply reasoning from [Folly]'s contempt for foolish acts — guessing that perhaps the Trial had contained one more foolish act targeted at himself, called "looking for the donkey while riding it."

And indeed — the instant both eyes hit the ground, the left and the right each "came alive," hopping away from each other in opposite directions with mutual disdain, speaking in perfect unison:

"Idiot."

At the exact same moment, Brother Mouth came back online, seizing control of Cheng Shi's mouth:

"Clown."

"..."

To the other two, that "Clown" sounded like Cheng Shi's self-deprecation. But only Cheng Shi knew he'd been insulted again — and the insult was truly filthy!

He recalled what Brother Mouth had said during the Trial:

"A clown really does make his living by acting stupid for the audience's amusement. In that regard, you've reached the pinnacle."

So it had given a hint all along. But who could have imagined that at the very start of the Trial, an NPC had sewn the Eye of Mockery into his body?!

The question was — why hadn't his body reacted? Merging with oneself should have involved a painful adjustment period. When Brother Mouth had merged, the mask nearly burned him alive. But this time...

Wait!

There had been a reaction!

At the Trial's onset, his eyes had burned like they were on fire. And he'd used one Healing spell after another to smooth away all the pain...

'Oh no. I've become an actual clown!'

Cheng Shi's face fell apart.

But at that very moment, those gruesome, blood-streaming sockets suddenly rolled — and a brand-new pair of bright eyes emerged. Cheng Shi, seeing light once more, watched the two Eyes of Mockery bounce further and further away — and broke into a grin of genuine relief.

"Well, at least I don't have to trouble the liars with running around anymore."

Li Jingming picked up one of the eyeballs with keen interest, examining it up close:

"So this is the Eye of Mockery?"

The Tongue of Eating Lies devours lies. The Secret Peeping Ear steals secrets. So the Eye of Mockery... what does it do?"

The question stumped Cheng Shi completely. He shook his head, picked up the other eyeball, and redirected the question to Eye Bro.

"Eye Bro, what's your deal?"

The Eye of Mockery's answer was very [Deceit] — and very [Folly]. Both in perfect unison:

"In an idiot's hands — nothing."

"..."

Both men holding eyeballs froze. Awkward. Zhang Jizu, watching from the side, squinted happily.

Li Jingming's lip twitched. He set the eyeball back on the ground. Cheng Shi, however, wasn't about to let it have the last word. He took off his shoe, dropped the eyeball inside, and asked:

"How about in an idiot's shoe?"

"..."

The Eye of Mockery went silent. Whether the smell rendered words unnecessary, or it simply refused to argue with an idiot, was unclear.

Seeing one eyeball's "suffering," the other let out a disdainful laugh.

"Also useless.

You think you came out ahead, but soon enough, the idiot in the shoe will be right back in your eye socket. So you didn't disgust it — you disgusted yourself.

Stupid indeed."

"..." Cheng Shi was losing it.

But the Eye of Mockery wasn't done. It continued its assault: "Just as stupid as that mouth."

"!?"

Hearing that, Cheng Shi perked right up.

Regardless of anything else — as long as you help me roast Brother Mouth, I will acknowledge you as the real big bro.

Eye Bro, please accept my bow!

"..."

Chapter 1192: Half Price on the Fourth Tombstone

The three of them huddled together and studied the thing for ages, but for the life of them couldn't figure out what the Eye of Mockery actually did. If you had to name an ability...

It was really, really good at insults.

Using it to psychologically demolish an enemy's mental defenses — sure, that was decent. But that was about it.

Cheng Shi went silent. He finally couldn't endure the endless barrage of contempt, stowed the Eyes of Mockery, and looked at his two fellow unfortunate souls:

"Why exactly did we stand here getting roasted for several hours?"

"Are we masochists?"

"..."

Zhang Jizu said nothing. Li Jingming shook his head with a sigh — probably genuinely dazed from the verbal beating. He shook the fog from his brain and gave a rueful laugh:

"Now that the Eye of Mockery is in hand, the next target should be the Mask's nose, right?"

I don't believe I've ever heard anything about that particular piece. Do either of you have something to share?"

Zhang Jizu remained quiet, though after hearing the question, he looked at Cheng Shi — his gaze carrying the certainty that the other man absolutely knew something.

Cheng Shi didn't hide it. But the intel had come from his scarred alternate self, so when he mentioned the name "Nose of Verification," a barely perceptible flicker of sadness crossed his eyes.

"The Nose of Verification..."

Interesting. [Deceit] never distinguishes truth from falsehood. So why would He create a Nose of Verification?

Could it be related to [Existence]?"

"Not impossible." Zhang Jizu squinted and methodically counted the pieces he'd already encountered, analyzing coolly: "The Secret Peeping Ear spawned the bizarre tales of 'silence' in San Dales. The Eye of Mockery was venerated by [Folly] followers as the Fool Hunter's divine gift. By that logic, if [Deceit] shattered this Mask, there's every reason to suspect He intended to use the fragments to siphon other gods' authority. A so-called Nose of Verification being linked to [Existence] wouldn't be strange at all."

"Sharp as always, Laozhang!"

Cheng Shi had long suspected that Crown's Mask wasn't just a key to unlocking [Memory]'s lost memories. Hearing Zhang Jizu's analysis, he felt it was very likely true.

The power struggle between gods never stopped. If the Fun God wanted to rebel against Origin in that kind of environment, He'd naturally need more power. Using mask fragments as mediums to undermine other faiths' foundations... He would absolutely do something like that.

The only question was which [Existence] god the Nose of Verification was connected to.

Cheng Shi naturally hoped it was [Time], since [Time] was his Benefactor and wouldn't have time to obstruct his search for the nose.

But if it was [Memory]... Cheng Shi glanced at the Dragon King. 'This is probably going to land squarely in Dragon King's lap.'

He didn't pressure the man though. Instead, he grinned at Zhang Jizu:

"You're unusually sharp lately, Laozhang. Have you been finding new sources of information behind our backs? Care to share?"

Hearing the sarcastic jab, Zhang Jizu squinted, shot him a sidelong look:

"See the big picture from the small details, the whole leopard from a single spot. When you have enough known facts, deducing unknowns comes naturally.

I refuse to believe neither of you thought of this — I simply said it first.

If you want to ask something, just ask. Get sarcastic with me again and I won't mind burying you in a grave to cool off."

He even raised his shovel for emphasis.

Cheng Shi's eyebrow arched, his tone growing more peculiar:

"Such dedication to cemetery management. But do you really think patting some dirt around fools us?"

We're not blind. Even in this dim light, we can spot which tombstones have been changed.

I can see the Dragon King's been holding it in and can barely contain himself, so I'll ask on his behalf — why the new tombstones?"

His eyes swept the front row of divine tombstones. It was plainly visible that two of the fifteen had been replaced with more elegant versions.

If it were just regular swaps, Cheng Shi wouldn't think twice. What made it suspicious was which two tombstones had been changed.

He glanced at Zhang Jizu again, meaningfully:

"And why, of all gods, did you happen to replace [Prosperity] and [Truth]?"

Mi Laozhang — what have you learned?"

Indeed, Zhang Jizu had come here specifically to swap tombstones. He'd painstakingly carved fine new tombstones for the fallen gods, yet placed them here at the Joker Gathering Place rather than in his own cemetery.

His purpose wasn't idle beautification — it was his way of alerting Cheng Shi that he'd learned certain things.

He knew Cheng Shi was the sharpest among them. He'd see through the oddity immediately, and working backward might deduce where the information had come from.

Zhang Jizu had no idea why the Fun God had chosen him, and he couldn't defy the Fun God's will. But he still wasn't sure whether [Deceit] was trying to save the world or destroy it. If it was the latter, he didn't want to become the Fun God's accomplice in deceiving his friends. So he'd set this trap — a trap that exposed himself.

But he obviously couldn't say outright that something was wrong with him. So when Cheng Shi pressed, Zhang Jizu squinted and replied:

"I've had a lot of free time lately. Figured I'd replace the rough tombstones with polished new ones. Something to pass the time — give myself a project in these strange times."

"Oh~ I see. Just happened to finish [Prosperity] and [Truth]'s tombstones first. So you swapped those. Right?"

Zhang Jizu nodded: "Correct. No deeper meaning."

Cheng Shi pursed his lips. 'I don't believe you for one second, you squinty little skeleton. You're up to no good. You definitely know [Truth] has fallen.'

But this didn't strike Cheng Shi as particularly strange. [Death]'s boss had retained His memories through the world reset. Given how much the boss favored Mi Laozhang, it made sense He'd pass along the information.

What Cheng Shi didn't realize was that when the information gap was too wide, Zhang Jizu's intended message lost fidelity before it reached its target. Cheng Shi failed to pick up on the warning signal from his fellow "steady" strategist, and instead spent his time deliberating whether to share the divine fall news with the other Jokers.

But on second thought — before retrieving the [War] authority from the real universe, it was probably best to keep things quiet, lest unforeseen complications arise.

He didn't doubt the Jokers, exactly. It was just that some of them still had living Benefactors — like [Memory]. Given the vote [Memory] had cast, He didn't seem fully aligned with [Void] yet. So some things were best avoided where possible.

Cheng Shi mulled it over, then grinned:

"This shows your lack of ambition, Laozhang. If you've got the craftsmanship for this, why not think of your own Benefactor first?"

That boss has seen more death than anyone — a new tombstone design probably wouldn't impress Him much. But what about the Fun God? Didn't you think to give Him a new one first?"

Hearing this, Zhang Jizu fell silent. His tightly squinted eyes flicked upward, and both men followed his gaze.

They looked up — and saw that the Fun God's tombstone, serving double duty as the Gathering Place's "lantern," had already been swapped for a new design. And it was just as freshly carved as [Prosperity] and [Truth]'s.

"???"

'Wait — Mi Laozhang, you're actually serious about this?'

Cheng Shi gaped at the new tombstone above their heads, momentarily speechless. The symbolism felt... distinctly inauspicious.

At that moment, Zhang Jizu added in his trademark flat tone:

"Want any others replaced? Half price on the fourth."

"..."

Chapter 1193: I Don't Demand Much, but I Won't Say No to More

The [Death] Chosen's ice-cold humor didn't lighten the mood — it chilled it. The room fell into dead silence.

Cheng Shi sized Zhang Jizu up and down, puzzled. Something about Mi Laozhang felt off today.

But he couldn't pinpoint exactly what, so he rolled his eyes and decided to probe a little. He repeatedly steered the conversation toward Redi Core's history, discussing it with the Dragon King. Midway through, he suddenly turned to Zhang Jizu: "What does the History School think about this?"

Zhang Jizu froze, then immediately grasped Cheng Shi's implication — and realized the man was overthinking. Inwardly helpless, yet unable to avoid proving his identity, he squinted hard and said:

"Being steady means approaching developments with a conservative, cautious attitude to mitigate unknown risks. It doesn't mean being paranoid and seeing threats in every shadow at every moment. That will only drain your mental reserves.

I know what you're thinking, but I'm not Zhen Xin. Much less Zhen Yi."

Cheng Shi wasn't buying that for a second. A liar never admitted to being a liar — and if they did, they were surely setting up an even bigger con. He didn't believe a word out of Mi Laozhang's mouth. But since the man had called it out, Cheng Shi went with the flow:

"Then try saying 'hee~' for me."

"..."

Zhang Jizu's expression stiffened. He strained for ages — veins popping on his neck — and couldn't squeeze out a single "hee."

Seeing this, Cheng Shi was finally convinced the person before him was indeed Mi Laozhang.

But now he was even more curious.

"You've been acting weird today. Is there something you can't say? Did the boss put a gag order on you?"

'It's not the [Death] Benefactor who silenced me — it's a different Benefactor...'

'But He didn't actually forbid me from speaking the truth. I'm just afraid that once I reveal everything, He'll replace me with another "tool" to do His bidding. Then I'd lose my position of foresight, and I'd no longer be able to "predict" risks for everyone — leaving the Jokers in an unsteady position.'

Zhang Jizu thought this in silence, then shook his head without a word.

The liars present were undeniably sharp. When no amount of questioning produced results, Cheng Shi and the Dragon King knew that whatever was going on with Mi Laozhang, divine will was involved.

As for whose will — given the complex web of relationships between gods, it was anyone's guess.

But Cheng Shi was never one to dwell. The moment he realized Mi Laozhang had reasons he couldn't disclose, he decisively dropped the subject and brought up the Black Dragon King with Li Jingming instead.

He chose not to mention [Oblivion]'s fall or the Assembly of Gods Convention. He simply said he'd happened to encounter the Sin of Desirelessness, Drasilco, and had heard the Dragon King's voice coming from the figure.

Li Jingming had already deduced the Nightmare Shadow's identity from that letter. Cheng Shi's report didn't surprise him. What puzzled him more was how Drasilco had ended up hidden inside That Dream My Nightmare.

Had it been imprisonment, or voluntary concealment?

Seeing the Dragon King's solemn expression confirmed he was equally clueless. Cheng Shi thought for a moment, then decided to share a bit more — telling both of them about the Memory Dump inside That Dream My Nightmare. He knew this was technically the passageway to meet the Flame of Hope, information that shouldn't be widely known. But reaching the Flame of Hope required being summoned from outside the Dreamless Mirror.

That was the Flame of Hope's choice to make. So it was still safe enough.

Right now, he needed the Dragon King — the foremost expert on [Memory] — and the other Jokers to keep an eye out for Black Dragon King-related information. So he selectively shared some of what he'd witnessed inside the mirror.

When Li Jingming heard there was a Memory Dump — discarded by [Memory] Himself — inside That Dream My Nightmare, his pupils contracted with shock:

"You really did deceive me."

Cheng Shi pursed his lips: "Tsk, as if you didn't deceive me."

Li Jingming went rigid at the remark, then fell silent.

Now it was Cheng Shi's turn for contracting pupils. His face darkened as he jabbed a finger at the Dragon King:

"You actually did deceive me?!"

You shameless [Memory] follower — did you peek through everyone's memories?!

Otherwise, what do you have to feel guilty about?!

I thought your advice was genuine concern — turns out it was guilt! Talk! What did you see?!"

Zhang Jizu grew curious too. He looked at the Dragon King, only to see Li Jingming exchange a glance with him before turning back to Cheng Shi, speaking evenly:

"What would you like me to say?"

"..."

The deflection was expertly done. Cheng Shi furrowed his brow — even if the Dragon King had seen every last memory, he couldn't exactly interrogate him in front of a third party. So his scheming mind churned, thinking: 'No way I'm the only one who loses out here.'

"Tell us what we don't already know. Hoarding all that to yourself is greedy. But if I happen to be part of that 'hoard,' I might be convinced to keep your secret."

Li Jingming shook his head with a smile:

"If you're willing to let me discuss your memories — with the subject's consent — I'm happy to share.

But if you want me to reveal other people's pasts...

No.

If I speak even one extra word about someone else's history right now, it's irresponsible to them and a contamination of your memories.

You should know — if I can stand before you and discuss Zhen Xin, then I can stand before Zhen Xin and discuss you.

Respect is mutual. That's the prerequisite for cherishing a friend's memories."

"Ha! 'Respect is mutual' — you didn't ask our permission before recording those memories. You inhaled everything in one go, and now you talk about respect?

That's not respect. Forgetting those memories — that would be real respect."

Cheng Shi was mid-rant when he noticed Li Jingming produce a Remembrance Needle from somewhere, holding it up with a gentle smile directed at both of them:

"I admit I was being self-serving. I've deliberated over it many times recently.

Normally, I collect memories through fair exchange or recovered remnants. This time was more like stumbling upon a treasure hoard.

My greed got the better of me. I'm no exception.

I recognize it was wrong — at least when it comes to friends. To fellow Jokers.

So I found this. If either of you truly believes I need to forget, I'm willing to choose oblivion.

Even if it's a sacrilege against [Memory] — don't forget, I'm also a [Deceit] follower. Consider it fulfilling a different kind of devotion.

In times like these, having one or two companions to walk alongside is already the best memory I could ask for.

I don't demand much, but I won't say no to more. So the decision is yours."

"..."

The instant he saw the Remembrance Needle, Cheng Shi nearly blurted out: "Did you catch fire-passing fever too?"

But he restrained himself. After a long silence, he asked:

"How much did you see?"

Li Jingming lowered his eyes slightly: "A lot."

"Did you see him?"

Li Jingming hesitated, glanced sideways at Zhang Jizu, then nodded: "Yes. He was a great father."

"How great? Greater than your master?"

"..." Li Jingming's eyelid twitched. He opened his mouth, then closed it — unsure how to respond.

Cheng Shi scoffed quietly and shook his head:

"Forget it. Leave it be. Someone should remember the good in him.

If this increasingly terrifying world ever truly drives me mad, at least... there'll be one person who can tell me: he wouldn't want me to become that."

As Cheng Shi's tone grew heavier, the Gathering Place sank into silence.

Just as the other two thought Cheng Shi was drowning in memory and struggling to surface, the Clown pivoted without warning. Eyes darting, face brimming with cunning:

"But on the principle of equivalent exchange, Dragon King — you've recorded so many of my memories. Shouldn't you share something I don't already know?"

Why was Drasilco inside That Dream My Nightmare?

Whose divine scheme was that? Or is it a secret [Memory] hoarded?

What's the relationship between [Memory] and [Corruption]? What is [Corruption] planning?

Does what He's planning have anything to do with a certain Creator sitting high above?

What's with that look — don't tell me you don't know any of this?

Tsk. And you call yourself a [Memory] follower?

If you truly don't know any of it, then how about... we get practical instead.

Got any more gear? I demand much, and I want more."

"..."

Chapter 1194: The Missing Nose of Verification

No one could defeat the Greed Lord in His domain.

The three-clown meeting ended abruptly thanks to a thorough shakedown. The Dragon King left behind a pile of "valuables," and even Mi Laozhang was charged a "project deposit" for "unauthorized renovation of the Gathering Place."

'Project deposit.' How rich. Before this, Zhang Jizu had single-handedly built the entire Gathering Place — a job a certain Clown had specifically sought him out to do.

But now he couldn't even swap out a tombstone without paying a deposit.

Aside from muttering "morals in decline, hearts no longer true" a couple of times, what could he do?

As the two black-faced Jokers departed, the thoroughly enriched Cheng Shi returned to his Rest Area in high spirits.

This Trial had been extremely satisfying. He'd not only found Eye Bro, but also eliminated the greatest divine-level threat — [Oblivion] — and even glimpsed a corner of the Fun God's larger strategy.

Looking at the gods' current situation made it clear:

[Life]'s path had only one devout Approach Faction member left — [Birth] — and She had always been neutral toward worldly affairs. [Prosperity] had fallen. [Death]'s boss was confirmed as a Fear Faction ally. This path was essentially free of obstacles.

[Descent] now had only the never-seen [Corruption] and the desperately clinging [Decay], having lost all influence over the universe and the other gods.

[Civilization] was wiped out entirely. The sole survivor was imprisoned behind [Chaos]'s throne, likely to join His two sibling gods at any moment.

[Chaos] was the most active, but of its three seats — one belonged to the Fun God Himself, one to the nostrils-only deity of [Folly] who only sneered and never lifted a finger, and the last to a friendly ally who'd vote with [Death]'s boss. So [Silence] probably had ties to the Fear Faction too.

[Existence] went without saying. [Memory]'s abstention that drove [Oblivion] mad had already shown His shifting stance toward [Void]. And [Time] was a steadfast Faith Fusion ally, quietly supporting the Fun God's every decision.

So tallying it all up, the Fear Faction had no remaining adversaries in the universe — except for [Fate], who was also [Void]!

As [Void]'s two sovereigns, both Benefactors wanted to write the era's ending with their own will. But which of their competing visions was right...

No one knew. Just as no one knew what Origin's experiment was truly for.

Cheng Shi had a nagging feeling the "Fixed Destiny" dispute was about to reach its conclusion. He just didn't know how [Fate] would lose to [Deceit].

He didn't care how [Fate] lost. He only prayed he wouldn't become collateral damage in this ideological war. After all, he was still [Void]'s sacrifice. If the Fun God's plan of rebellion involved shredding the sacrifice prepared for Him... then Cheng Shi would truly be trapped in terror forever.

After spacing out in the Rest Area for a while, Cheng Shi rallied himself and began taking stock.

He removed his ears and tongue one by one, gouged out his eyes, and tossed the lot into two small iron cages. Once his vision regenerated, he watched the Eyes of Mockery bouncing tirelessly inside their hamster wheel and asked curiously:

"Eye Bro, do you two really have no abilities?"

Ear Bro eavesdrops on secrets. Tongue Bro eats lies. Following that pattern — all you can do is mock people?

Verbal attacks are your whole skillset?

Or to think more broadly — can you precisely identify a target's emotional vulnerabilities and use words to break them?

Or maybe you have no abilities at all, and constantly belittling me is just to build an air of mystery so I'll think you're more valuable than the other parts?"

The moment he finished, Cheng Shi was roasted again — in stereo, left and right channels.

"Tsk—

An idiot is an idiot. I can barely imagine how you found them through sheer guessing.

Then again, that proves stupidity congregates. Idiots of the same type gravitate toward each other — just like them and you."

"Your provocation and denial will only make you look more like a clown. When everyone already knows, there's no need to reinforce your clown credentials every single day.

One or two times might amuse the audience. After eight or ten, it just proves you truly are a clown. A stupid one, at that.

What's sadder is the Mask has fallen into a clown's hands again.

Tsk. Round and round. [Deceit] is truly boring."

"..."

But this actually made Cheng Shi feel better.

'See? Not just me getting roasted — even the Fun God as their Benefactor catches strays.'

Still, having insulted everyone, could they at least cough up something useful? If he'd gone through all that trouble to bring home two grandmas who just yelled at him... he genuinely couldn't handle it.

Cheng Shi pouted and tried a different angle:

"Fine, I'm stupid. I'll own it.

Even if you look down on me, I'm still the one most likely to reassemble the Mask. Speaking of which — shouldn't you help me find the last fragment? So the Mask can be whole again? To honor Crown's tremendous contribution to the faith of [Deceit]?"

The two eyeballs scoffed in unison:

"Crown's greatest contribution to [Deceit] was helping Him trick you. But what does that have to do with me?"

"I do have abilities, of course. But the idiot can't see them. When you stop being stupid, you'll naturally understand what I'm for."

"..."

Cheng Shi was well and truly out of moves. He'd asked the same thing countless times and received nothing but contempt. So he turned to Brother Mouth instead:

"Brother Mouth, do you know?"

The Fool's Lips hadn't even opened when the Eye of Mockery cut in:

"What would it know? It doesn't even know what it's useful for."

"?"

A gleam sparked in Cheng Shi's eyes. "What's Brother Mouth good for besides knowing a lot, lying without getting caught, and... calling me a clown?"

"Nothing. Just as useless as you."

"..."

"..."

'Defeated. Utterly defeated.'

In truth, seeing the normally fearless Secret Peeping Ear maintain total silence, and the perpetually fidgety Tongue of Eating Lies lying tamely on the ground, Cheng Shi should have realized that talking to the Eyes of Mockery would lead nowhere.

He wearily opened the hamster cage, released the endlessly energetic Eyes of Mockery, made sure they were far from his ears, then lay on his back staring at the sky, sighing:

"Why does it feel like those two are more like creations of [Folly] than the Fun God's handiwork?"

Can anyone give me an answer? Ear Bro? Tongue Bro?"

"..."

"Even if you won't discuss those two, at least talk about the Nose of Verification. It's the last step. Once we find it, I can complete the Mask — and you'll get to discover the secret that [Memory] Himself forgot, hidden in His Collection Hall.

I'm fairly sure the Eyes of Mockery retained their memories and know what's in there. But you don't. Aren't you curious?"

The Secret Peeping Ear answered honestly: "Curious."

The Tongue of Eating Lies flipped over lazily: "Curious."

Cheng Shi's spirits rose: "Then tell me where the nose is, and I'll find it — and give you your answer!"

A moment of silence. No one expected the one to break it would be the Fool's Lips:

"It's no use. Before you learned its name was the Nose of Verification, I couldn't even remember what it was called."

"!?!?"

Cheng Shi shot upright, face full of disbelief. The ear beside him chimed in:

"That's correct. I seem to have no memory of this 'brother' at all. It's as if some force is concealing it, making its existence undetectable."

Cheng Shi's brow furrowed. Following Mi Laozhang's theory, the Nose of Verification was something the Fun God had created in an attempt to siphon [Existence]'s authority. If it really was being concealed by some force, could [Existence] be responsible?

Not impossible. After all, they controlled all [Existence].

But the question was — which one had done it?

[Time]... or [Memory]?

...

[Volume Three: The Mask Is Not a Face — End.]

Chapter 1195: [Oblivion]'s Container

Cheng Shi's current predicament: no clue about the Nose of Verification, no leverage over the Eyes of Mockery.

He quietly stowed all the mask's sensory organs and produced the [Oblivion] container that Herobos had reluctantly gifted him.

Honestly, the container's form surprised him. It wasn't constantly collapsing and disintegrating like [Oblivion]'s eyes. Instead, one half was undergoing violent destruction — ash drifting away — while that very ash reformed in the other half, forming a brand-new hourglass bulb.

When the crumbling half vanished entirely, the newly born half would begin its own destruction. The cycle repeated endlessly — death and rebirth, alternating without pause.

The container's behavior made it clear that [Oblivion] truly held the will to bring the universe new life. Unfortunately, in Origin's eyes, what followed [Descent] wasn't the new world [Oblivion] hoped to create under His own lead — but the descent of [Civilization], helmed by [Order].

Cheng Shi kept sensing the aura radiating from the [Oblivion] container. The "hope" that burst from the interplay of destruction and rebirth was unexpectedly captivating. A spark of inspiration hit: if [Oblivion] could "forge" new life, then given the right "tool" for shaping... could it actually forge a "world"?

Like how the Curtain Call Ball could reproduce a corner of reality, perhaps the [Oblivion] container could reproduce something even grander?

Driven by this idea, he thought for a moment and drew out a servant god-level item he'd never used before: the Ritual of Truth!

The Ritual of Truth could deconstruct the truth of all things and use [Truth]'s power to reconstruct everything. The [Oblivion] container, meanwhile, carried the force of rebirth through destruction. Combine the two — could they spark something new?

The answer: yes!

And the spark was quite literally big!

Cheng Shi held the Ritual in one hand and the container in the other, rubbing them together like primitive fire-starting — until actual sparks flew — and still nothing happened.

He was starting to think it had been pure delusion when the Eyes of Mockery suddenly spoke up:

"Tsk—

I've seen experimenters who lacked materials and had to improvise with substitutes. But I've never seen an idiot with no materials at all, just sitting there fiddling with two pieces of lab equipment.

You're pressing them together that hard and rubbing that fast — are you trying to get them pregnant so you can steal [Birth]'s authority?

Truly, you break new records of stupidity every passing second."

"I—"

Though he'd been roasted, Cheng Shi wasn't the least bit annoyed this time. He was, in fact, delighted — because he'd finally figured out one use of the Eyes of Mockery. When you couldn't understand something, just try the dumbest approach possible. That way, Eye Bro — who couldn't tolerate even a speck of stupidity — would "enlighten" you through contempt, telling you which path was wrong.

If you were lucky, there might even be a nugget of useful information buried in the insult.

Like "lab equipment"!

What kind of experiment could the [Oblivion] container and the Ritual of Truth serve as equipment for?

Cheng Shi desperately wanted to ask, but held back. He knew that pressing further would only invite more contempt, not answers.

But this was enough. At least the spare container wasn't junk.

The [Oblivion] container was different from other containers. This faction had virtually no friends of Cheng Shi's. He couldn't use it for strategic positioning, nor could he reasonably compete with Herobos — stuck in the indefinitely postponed petition — for [Oblivion]'s throne.

Liars had to protect their reputation. Once your name was mud, you could never con anyone again.

Even if he planned to "burn bridges," he'd wait until the day reputation no longer mattered.

Cheng Shi set the container and Ritual on the ground, letting his thoughts wander to the road ahead.

The Fear Faction held overwhelming divine "power." The universe's drift from Origin's will was becoming increasingly obvious. [Fate], desperate to ensure Fixed Destiny held, was spreading His faith far and wide, accelerating the Destined.

But the Fun God's schemes were also tied to Fixed Destiny. So at least regarding acceleration, [Void]'s two sovereigns and their servant walked the same road.

If [Fate] wasn't lying — if Fixed Destiny truly related to Origin — then as the person at the center of it all, Cheng Shi's most logical guess was that he was being shaped into a sacrifice imbued with "Origin's aura."

This "Origin's aura" didn't mean creating a force similar to Origin's. The gods probably couldn't produce such a thing. [Void] most likely wanted to unify the gods' wills in a single body, simulating the Creator's will.

And the method for that unification, it now seemed, was likely finding a "faithless" vessel whose will aligned to some extent with every god's, then "dressing" it in containers or authorities bearing those divine wills — transforming it into a sacrifice.

As for why it had to be faithless...

When someone devotedly approached any one of the sixteen thrones, their will inevitably skewed toward that specific deity. That would contradict Origin's will — because He had never favored anyone. He was the aggregate of all wills, balanced and unified.

Was that the reason [Void] had chosen him?

Cheng Shi wasn't sure. But thinking about how his constant casual blasphemy might end up strapping him to a stake piled high with kindling... he wished he could slap himself.

Too late for regrets, though. Compared to players who hadn't been selected as sacrifices, his path ahead was steeper and more perilous — but he still held a sliver of agency.

Leveraging his identity as the sacrifice, before the [Void] Era's curtain fell, what he could see and what he could do far outstripped the countless mortals blindly struggling through the Faith Game.

That was probably the source of every slice-universe Cheng Shi's courage to face Origin head-on. At least he wasn't walking alone — there were countless companions, behind and ahead.

With that thought, his wandering mind narrowed to focus. A moment later he snapped back to the present, remembering the Destined Ones' meeting needed to happen. It was time to give these Destined something to do. Since everyone enjoyed [Fate]'s protection, they might as well help speed things along on the Destined path.

He dialed Big Cat. Her boisterous voice came through almost instantly.

"Today?"

Cheng Shi smiled and nodded: "Today. Rally the people. Get me in touch with An Shenxuan and someone called Li Wufang — a follower of [Order]. I'll handle the rest.

I've decided to tear open this world's script and lay it out for everyone. So they all know how this game really works."

Hong Lin's voice caught, stunned:

"Ming Yu really is in there?"

Li Wufang... I know him, actually. But — you're going to show your hand to the Destined Ones?

Cheng Shi. When someone's strength isn't enough to carry the weight of that much information and that much pressure, knowing more only breeds more fear. That doesn't help them move forward.

Even knowing the Destined Ones are the elite of this game — don't forget, from the Faith Game's descent until now, the only person who's sat at the gods' table to gamble is you. Everyone else is a chess piece.

They can see the board clearly. The wisest among them might see two or three moves ahead. But if you want them to look up and see the players moving the pieces...

Can they handle it?"

Cheng Shi was quiet for a moment. Then he nodded:

"They can.

I believe in them — the same way I believe in fear."

Chapter 1196: The Grand... Small Gathering of the Destined

Hong Lin was unusually anxious today.

Even though she'd been the one who'd "personally" arranged the Destined Ones' meeting space, hearing Cheng Shi say they needed to meet immediately still set her nerves on edge. The anxiety wasn't about meeting unknown Destined companions — it was about... Them.

Hong Lin wasn't incapable of thinking. She just wasn't great at it. After several world-shaking upheavals and divine falls, she'd long since realized where this game's so-called endpoint must lie: breaking the current world's shackles and racing toward a shore she couldn't foresee.

But those shackles weren't so easily broken. Setting aside the Creator sitting high above in the real universe — even in this starry sky, the gods still ruled. Straining against the chains meant making enemies of some gods, perhaps all of them.

She herself was half a divine candidate. At least by "the rules," she had some standing to challenge them. Cheng Shi went without saying — as the only person to have ever played a card at the gods' table, he was the vanguard of this will to shatter the universe's chains.

But what about everyone else?

If the Fate Weaver was going to show his hand, it meant the Destined Ones' next moves would likely defy certain gods' wills. Before meeting them in person, she wasn't sure these unknown companions could stand firm and united.

All she could do was trust in [Fate] and believe that every one of them was a warrior who'd press forward without looking back!

After hanging up, Hong Lin immediately went to Tao Yi's Barren Mountain Vegetable Garden. The mountain was barren no longer — nourished by divinity, lush green growth blanketed the entire peak. At a glance, everything was flourishing; not a trace of decay remained.

When Hong Lin arrived, Tao Yi was picking vegetables in the field. She saw the leopard bounding over with an urgent expression, three leaps bringing her close. Before Big Cat could even speak, Tao Yi tilted her head and smiled:

"The venue's set up. We can meet anytime. Like... right now."

Hearing the confirmation, Hong Lin relaxed — then wrinkled her nose, sniffing the air dramatically:

"How'd you know there's a meeting? I only made one phone call. I haven't seen anyone, so how could I have his scent on me?"

Tao Yi plucked a branch from a vine, shaking her head with a laugh:

"Just because you've got a sharp nose doesn't mean everyone else does."

There's only one thing that would make you rush over in such a hurry: a Destined Ones gathering. I can't think of a second reason.

Speaking of which — was setting up the venue really the first test the Destined Ones gave me?

Or did certain lazy people not want to do it themselves and outsource such a big project to me... Baldy?"

"Ahem... well, uh, the grass looks very grass-y. And the flowers look... flower-y."

Big Cat deflected with visible embarrassment, prowling circles around Tao Yi, occasionally swiping at a vine with her paw, muttering things like "What's this? Pretty cute. And this? Not bad either. Hmm, but nothing's as pretty as you."

The little fox didn't call her out. She simply stowed the cut branch, then asked with total seriousness: "When?"

Big Cat stopped mid-stride, turning: "Today."

"Right now?"

"Yeah. Coming?" With that, Big Cat sliced open the void with her claws.

Tao Yi was visibly nervous too, but she nodded and followed Big Cat through.

...

The void. Location unknown.

As one of the absolute peak players — arguably the highest combat power in the entire game — Hong Lin was noticeably less restrained around fellow players than she'd been at the Assembly of Gods Convention.

She strolled casually through a pitch-dark corridor, arriving before a door that stretched endlessly upward. Gazing at this gate that would make even a giant crane their neck, Hong Lin's heart sank. Her trust in the little fox's aesthetic sense and design skills was having a crisis.

"Xiao Yiyi, this is just a door, right? The meeting hall is inside?"

Tao Yi squinted, smiling like a fox.

"Of course. Were you planning to hold the meeting on the door panel?"

"Phew — okay, good." Hong Lin breathed a sigh of relief, pushing the door open while asking, "But why make it so tall?"

Tao Yi pointed at the countless stars dotting the door and explained earnestly:

"Fate like stars — within sight but beyond reach.

If mortal eyes could see where it ends, how could it be called 'Fate'?

Moreover, all attendees are souls blessed by [Fate] — sheltered from the storm by our Benefactor. The calm inside the meeting hall mirrors that protection. So I erected a towering gate before it.

To push open Fate's door — that is what it means to be one of the Destined."

The interpretation of [Fate] warmed Hong Lin's heart. She thought this answer would surely satisfy Cheng Shi, so she planted her feet and pushed. The massive door swung slowly open.

Starlight poured down like rain, illuminating the round table at the center. To Hong Lin's surprise, several hooded figures already sat around it. The headcount was noticeably smaller than she'd expected — but that wasn't the point. The point was: apart from the table... where was everything else?!

Huh?

Just one round table?

And judging by its design — the surface layout, the carved patterns — this was... a gambling table.

A gambling table?!

"TAO XIAO YI!!!" Hong Lin's face went black. She rubbed her eyes in disbelief and hissed through clenched teeth, "Explain yourself!"

You put a gambling table in the Destined Ones' meeting hall?!"

Tao Yi took a measured step back to open distance from Big Cat, covering her mouth with a delicate laugh: "Well, yes. Don't you think that when everyone walks in carrying a set of dice, it looks exactly like an underground gambling ring?"

"???"

Hong Lin glared daggers, half-wishing she could drag the girl out for a thrashing: "This is your devotion? This is your understanding of the Destined Ones?"

"Absolutely. Randomness is [Fate]'s authority. Gambling is the theme of destiny. I think it's perfectly reasonable."

"You—"

Big Cat's world crumbled. She suspected her best friend had never believed the whole "Destined Ones' initiation test" story, and had set up this table specifically to sabotage her.

Consider: when Cheng Shi saw this gambling table, he'd probably freeze for a second. But then he'd remember who'd been in charge of the setup...

Right. Big Cat.

'Oh no. The little fox played me!'

Hong Lin spun around, murder in her eyes — but then, at that exact moment, Cheng Shi arrived!

He followed the route Big Cat had left him, stepped into the void, and the first thing he saw through the giant doors was the conspicuous gambling table. At first he raised an eyebrow with genuine interest, thinking the design was very fitting for [Fate] — after all, the Destined Ones were about to make the biggest gamble of their lives!

But then he noticed the figures seated around the table...

"???"

One, two, three, four, five...

'Wait. Not counting Big Cat and the Wood Elf by the door, and excluding myself — since when were there this many Destined Ones?'

'Did I come to the wrong place?'

Chapter 1197: "Illusions"

When Hong Lin saw Cheng Shi frown, she desperately wanted to throw Tao Yi under the bus — say it was all the little fox's doing and had nothing to do with her.

But her nature wouldn't let her make Tao Yi take the fall. So she played it cool, waved a greeting at Cheng Shi, then pulled Tao Yi inside to take their seats.

Watching Big Cat's awkward expression and Tao Yi's slightly upturned lips, Cheng Shi easily guessed the setup was probably the Wood Elf's handiwork. Setting aside whether her interpretation of [Fate] was correct, the all-wood construction of the door and table said enough on its own.

He had no complaints about the venue. The Destined Ones weren't like the Jokers — a group where everyone was scheming; where you needed the environment to keep the liars' itch to deceive in check.

Here, the youngest member, Cheng Shi, was more like the head of the family. He could critique the state of affairs without reservation, comment on the gods and the universe, present his views and proposals. Everyone else, frankly, was an audience.

Big Cat could be more than that — but she lacked a broader perspective and a sharper mind.

The Blind One could be more than that — but only the original Blind One who belonged to this world.

The An Shenxuan who'd been transplanted here had endured her Benefactor's abandonment and was now a broken soul stumbling along [Fate]'s path. Whether it was the Fate Weaver's redemption or the Clown's encouragement, both had become her guiding light.

As for Li Wufang — this seemingly orderly "little brother" appeared capable of nothing beyond order. Let alone the Wood Elf that Big Cat had dragged in...

So the Destined Ones were essentially Cheng Shi's one-man show.

But since when did this one-man show have so many extras?

Deeply puzzled, Cheng Shi walked in, eyes sweeping the room, greeting no one — and no one greeted him.

Near the table, he stumbled on the carpet and nearly toppled onto one of the hooded companions. Fortunately, the figure was broad enough that by bracing against their sturdy shoulder, Cheng Shi steadied himself.

But that single touch was enough to flash something peculiar across his eyes.

The person was fake!

These companions seated around the table didn't exist. Every last one was an illusion.

But these illusions differed from true illusions — they were only projections without physical form. The instant Cheng Shi's hand touched the "shoulder," it was only his exceptional core strength that kept him upright. He quickly placed his hand loosely over the illusion's surface, barely avoiding a genuine fall.

This was very strange. Why would unidentified illusions appear at such a secretive small meeting?

And who were the illusions meant to fool?

The answer was obvious: Big Cat.

Only three real people had arrived. Such a "clumsy" trick could never fool Cheng Shi. And the Wood Elf had arranged the venue, so she knew. That left only one uninformed person — Big Cat.

As for why the Wood Elf had done this — Cheng Shi could guess most of it. As he steadied himself, he glanced sideways at Tao Yi, and found her looking right back. She blinked, her slightly nervous expression clearly asking: did it work?

Cheng Shi smiled. Everything the Wood Elf had done was probably for his sake.

Though everyone here was a Destined One, he'd never told Big Cat exactly how many members there were. And given Big Cat's assumptions, she probably figured quite a few people carried [Fate]'s blessing.

The truth? Including the Wood Elf, the Destined Ones numbered exactly five.

Tao Yi was clever. She must have picked up inconsistencies from Big Cat's description and built the setup accordingly. She hadn't generated an overwhelming crowd — just enough so the number was "small but not unacceptably so." She'd also left plenty of empty chairs, in case the actual headcount exceeded expectations.

Her thinking was meticulous. The purpose was simple: soften the psychological blow for Big Cat, leave room for the Fate Weaver to explain, and draw some fire away from him.

Because when the Destined Ones figured out the illusions were her doing, they'd inevitably wonder why a Wood Elf could create something typically used by [Deceit] followers.

Cheng Shi was curious too. But before he could ask, another guest arrived.

Same familiar black gauze dress. Same eye-catching blindfold. An Mingyu stood outside "Fate's" gate, gazing upward, hands clasped to her chest in devout prayer:

"Fate like stars — within sight, beyond reach."

Any other time, Cheng Shi might have teased her for the piety. But today he stayed quiet, because he could read the worry all over the Blind One's face.

Something was on her mind?

An Mingyu gave a subtle nod to everyone present, her "gaze" lingering briefly on Tao Yi — a wordless greeting for the new companion she'd heard of but never met — then silently took the empty seat at Cheng Shi's right hand.

The headcount grew, but the atmosphere only grew stranger. Complete silence. Everyone's eyes crossed and tangled, yet no one spoke.

Mercifully, the stillness was finally broken. Li Wufang appeared in fitted leather, and before anyone even saw him, his bright, cheerful voice rang out:

"Whoa, that is a tall door. So this is the Destined Ones' gate? Impressive!"

Brother Cheng! Good to see you again. And Big Sis Hong Lin — when you called, I thought it was a joke. You're a Druid. Since when do you believe in fate?

And this is... huh, have I seen you before? You look just like an actress from a drama I used to follow.

Quite the crowd. Hm? The Blind One?

Brother Cheng, didn't you say the Blind One wasn't fit to... wasn't here?"

The Investigator's remark made the Blind One's frown deepen. She lifted her head, "looking" toward the door, her face heavy with worry:

"Has something gone wrong with [Order] too?"

"!!!?"

Though it sounded like a retort to Li Wufang's rudeness, nobody took it that way. Don't forget who she was — the [Fate] Chosen, the preeminent Prophet in the entire game. So was what she just said a new prophecy?

Li Wufang froze mid-step, one foot outside, one foot in, advance or retreat equally impossible. He scratched his head awkwardly:

"I mean, sure, my heart belongs to [Fate], but I can't just forget my roots the moment I finish Faith Fusion, right?"

[Order]... is fine. At least He sheltered me while I was tirelessly spreading [Fate]'s will. Blind One, please don't scare me. What exactly did you mean by that?

If getting close to [Fate] causes problems for [Order], then I..." He hesitated, wrestling with it: "...might need to consider a more roundabout approach."

"..."

Cheng Shi nearly burst out laughing.

Good news: the kid was still devout.

Bad news: all that devotion went to [Fate]. Right now, [Order] was basically the side chick.

Chapter 1198: Whose Side Are You On?

Though Cheng Shi was looking at Li Wufang, his peripheral vision never rested — constantly scanning the reactions of everyone else in the hall.

Hong Lin showed little reaction to Li Wufang's arrival. After all, she'd been the one to notify him. No surprise there.

The Blind One had deep "history" with Li Wufang — they'd been in the same Trial once, the very [Time] Trial that had brought this version of the Blind One to this world.

But Tao Yi's behavior was strange. She'd shown no reaction to his voice, yet the instant she saw his face, her eyes widened sharply and she glanced sideways at Cheng Shi.

Cheng Shi caught the look, a growing hunch that this Wood Elf harbored secrets unknown to the rest.

He didn't call it out. Instead, he waved the hesitating Investigator inside.

Cheng Shi rapped the table, smiling meaningfully:

"Your 'roundabout approach' would be a blasphemy against both [Fate] and [Order].

Though blasphemy is its own kind of devotion — I don't think you're at that level yet.

We know you're devout, but your devotion is aimed at the wrong venue. This isn't a temple for an audience with god, and there's no need to perform for outsiders. This is the Destined Ones' gathering — the closest thing to 'truth' in this entire game.

Here, not just you..."

Cheng Shi smiled, sweeping his gaze around the table. "None of you need to wear masks anymore. Treat this place like home. Drop every inhibition, every suspicion. Let's have an honest exchange.

[Deceit] followers love their heart-to-heart confessionals. But we're different.

We are the lucky souls blessed by [Fate]. What we share isn't just our hearts — it's our lives."

By the time he finished, Li Wufang was already applauding as he stepped through the gate, finding an empty seat.

He noticed the flat atmosphere. In an attempt to warm things up, he turned to the hooded figure beside him: "Why no applause? Brother Cheng's speech was great."

That innocent remark only deepened the Wood Elf's predicament. Cheng Shi smiled at her:

"Well, Wood Elf? Ready to drop the disguise?"

"What disguise?"

Hong Lin blinked, suspicion flickering as she looked at her best friend. Tao Yi pressed her lips together and, like a student caught misbehaving, folded her hands primly on the table.

As her head lowered — the hooded figures around the table — "POP" — vanished all at once.

The "exit" effect was identical to certain [Deceit] illusions shattering!

Hong Lin jolted in shock, then slammed a fist on the table. No matter how slow she was, she now realized every hooded figure had been an illusion. But why would the little fox create a bunch of illusions?

At that exact moment, Cheng Shi rose with a smile, bowed slightly to the four others, and placed his [Fate] Die between two fingers, setting it delicately on the table.

"The Destined Ones' meeting — formally begins.

The road we've traveled, the road that lies ahead — all of it is destined!"

The solemnity cut through Big Cat's building fury. Though everyone still had questions, they each drew their dice and recited, together with Cheng Shi, the most sacred prayer of the Destined.

But to Big Cat's eyes, it all felt wrong. If Tao Yi hadn't told her the gathering looked like an underground gambling ring, the thought might never have occurred to her. But now — watching everyone slam their dice face-down on the table — how was this any different from a casino guessing-game?

And how fitting that the round table happened to be a gambling table...

Everyone seemed to realize this simultaneously. They exchanged glances — and finally, at the same time, burst out laughing.

Hong Lin laughed — then remembered something, laugh dying instantly. Face going black, she rounded on Cheng Shi:

"Cheng Shi! What is this?!"

You said it was time to start, but where are the PEOPLE?!

Don't tell me it's just these five!

Five, and one of them is someone I brought!"

"..."

Cheng Shi's smile froze. Before he could stammer out an excuse, Tao Yi murmured from beside Hong Lin: "Quality over quantity..."

"You have the nerve to talk?"

Hong Lin went both hands on Tao Yi's cheeks, squishing and stretching her face, teeth grinding: "You know about quality over quantity?"

Do you know how I got you in here?! I figured with so many people, one extra wouldn't matter — otherwise how could I have brought it up?!

And you! Helping him fool people and acting all righteous about it! Talk! When did you two coordinate? Who gave you the [Deceit] tools?!"

The little fox was no fool. Seeing the beating was imminent, she capitulated in one second flat, hugging Big Cat's arm and tossing her [Fate] Die onto the table, mumbling her explanation:

"They're not [Deceit] tools. It's a [Fate] talent — a talent [Fate] bestowed on me. Person in the Play.

I'm a Screenwriter now, Baldy. Those illusions were all characters from my script."

BONK!

Big Cat's fist came down on Tao Yi's head. Face even darker.

"Don't call me Baldy in public!"

"The Fate Weaver said this place is home."

"...Whose side are you even ON?!" Big Cat was livid. She grabbed the little fox and hurled her at Cheng Shi. "Go! Go be with him!"

Watching a Wood Elf rapidly grow larger in his field of vision, Cheng Shi's expression went dead serious. One snap of his fingers teleported him beside Li Wufang, and — under the Investigator's bewildered gaze — he watched serenely as Tao Yi crashed to the ground.

THUD—

Silence returned. Even the worry-laden Blind One couldn't help smiling at the bestie comedy. But a thought quickly resurfaced and she tightened her lips, furrowing her brow once more.

Seeing the ice sufficiently broken, Cheng Shi moved to soothe Big Cat and get down to business. But the bestie-tossing Big Cat hadn't cooled off yet. She whipped around, jabbing a finger at him:

"You told me to call Ming Yu — I called! You told me to reach Li Wufang — I reached him!

So where are YOUR people?!

Where's 'them'?!

Cheng Shi, when you recruited me into the Destined Ones... was there literally not a single person in this organization?!"

"..."

Now Cheng Shi was panicking.

'Sis, be angry, sure. Shout, sure. But since when are we digging up old receipts?!'

But it wasn't over. Li Wufang, suddenly enlightened, chimed in helpfully:

"Big Sis Hong Lin — when an organization has no members, it shouldn't be called an organization. Because it doesn't exist yet."

"???"

'Bro — whose side are YOU on?!'

Cheng Shi stared at the Investigator like he was looking at a traitor.

'I knew it. Nothing good comes from [Order].'

Hearing that, Hong Lin's fury flared even hotter. But she had enough composure to know this wasn't the time for a meltdown. Her strategic sense won out, and she sat back down with an icy huff.

Seeing her bestie's anger ebb, the little fox silently crept back to her seat. Expressions varied across the table. The atmosphere was... "heartwarming."

Cheng Shi hastily redirected everyone's attention to the visibly troubled Blind One.

"An Shenxuan — you've seen it yourself. No masks needed here, nothing to hide.

If something's weighing on you, share it. Let us help.

Don't forget what the Destined Ones are for. Before this world's script reaches its final act, there's no hurdle we can't clear."

An Mingyu's expression shifted. She didn't look up, but gazed at the table, fidgeting with her [Fate] Die, face still heavy with worry:

"But what if the final act comes early?"

"!!??"

One sentence. The entire room went cold.

An Mingyu straightened in her seat. She struggled for a long while, then solemnly shared what she knew:

"I had a feeling — a sense that the world was being dragged toward some abyss of no return. So I made a prophecy about this world's future.

And this..."

She turned all seventeen dice on the table face-up. Every single one showed maximum.

"...was my answer."

Chapter 1199: The Blind One's Prophecy

"As everyone should know, prophecy cannot peer too far into the future. So the vision I saw is imminent."

The Blind One pressed her lips together and slightly turned her head to "look" in Cheng Shi's direction.

Cheng Shi naturally understood what had prompted the Blind One to prophesy about the world. "An occasional feeling" was merely a pretext. The true catalyst was being shaken by what had happened to this world's An Mingyu.

But the prophecy still made his heart skip.

Thinking about how [Fate] had been spreading faith with escalating frenzy lately — behavior that did indeed resemble a world-line reaching its conclusion — Cheng Shi furrowed his brow and asked:

"What did you see?"

All eyes turned to An Mingyu. The Blind One clenched her fists, face heavy with sorrow:

"I asked Him if this world would collapse.

His answer was... yes. One hundred percent yes!"

Every trace of laughter evaporated. Expressions turned grave all around. Li Wufang and Tao Yi knew nothing of the gods' affairs and couldn't grasp the crushing weight behind the Blind One's prophecy. But Hong Lin had not only lived through the universe's actual collapse — just hours ago she'd witnessed an aborted one. She understood with perfect clarity how terrifying the future the Blind One described truly was.

Worse — the new collapse might be mere days away!

If the world were destroyed again, would anyone come to save it?

Hong Lin's gaze first flicked to the little fox — an oddly meaningful glance — then locked firmly onto Cheng Shi. She felt certain: if anyone could halt the collapse or rescue this world, that person must be — could only be — Cheng Shi.

And if no single person could save the world, then whatever method existed would inevitably involve Cheng Shi at its core.

After countless shoulder-to-shoulder shocks shared with this Fate Weaver, he'd already become the key in Hong Lin's eyes. Even when the road ahead vanished, he could push open a brand-new door from the roadside and forge a new path with his friends.

So if the Prisoner's famous line — "Cheng Shi is this world's answer" — ever reached Hong Lin's ears, she'd agree wholeheartedly.

Cheng Shi had no idea Big Cat placed such enormous hope in him. But at this moment, his mind was running along the same track: he, too, was remembering the explosion of [Oblivion]'s will that had just occurred.

Eyebrow raised, he asked: "Blind One — when exactly did you make this prophecy?"

An Mingyu paused, then recalled: "Yesterday evening. I was up all night. I wanted to discuss it with Xin Xin first, but Hong Lin's call came through before that, so I decided to bring it here."

"Yesterday..." Cheng Shi tapped the table, thinking aloud: "So your prophecy was made before the Assembly of Gods Convention?"

"The Assembly of Gods Convention? What's that?" Several faces exchanged blank looks. None had ever heard of it.

Only Big Cat caught his meaning. Her face lit up and she slapped the table:

"You mean what Ming Yu actually prophesied was [Oblivion]'s—"

She caught herself midway. Even knowing Cheng Shi intended to show his hand to the Destined Ones, she wasn't sure what should or shouldn't be revealed. She shut her mouth.

Cheng Shi waved it off with a carefree smile and nodded:

"Some of you may never have heard of the Assembly of Gods Convention. That's natural — it was never meant for mortals. It's where the gods exercise their rights under the Pact to make final rulings on the universe's affairs. Only gods may attend. True gods.

Even the servant god's assembly requires a true god's sponsorship.

And just a short time ago, one such convention concluded in the void.

[Oblivion]... lost His divine throne and went mad with fury. He tried to drag the universe into annihilation with Him — to obliterate everything. That's the 'world collapse' you prophesied.

But His rampage was neutralized by the other gods. Our own Benefactor, [Fate], was one of those who 'saved' the world.

So you see — the final act hasn't arrived. The Destined Ones are fine.

Hm? Why are you all looking at me like that?

You don't think I attended, do you?

I already told you — even a servant god needs a true god's approval to attend, let alone a mere mortal.

But you did guess correctly. Someone among us was at that convention. Just not me — it was..."

Cheng Shi's lip curled as he looked at Big Cat. "...Hong Lin!"

"?????"

Big Cat never in her wildest dreams imagined that Cheng Shi's "showing his hand" would start with flipping her cat card!

While everyone stared at her in shock, before she could offer a single word of explanation, Cheng Shi steamrolled ahead:

"But even that description isn't quite right. Hong Lin didn't attend as a mere bystander, and she didn't attend as a 'human.' She was one of the convention's protagonists — and also one of the true gods seated on those sixteen divine thrones!

You heard me correctly.

Hong Lin is no longer human.

She's a god!"

"!!!"

The flustered Big Cat had no mental bandwidth to analyze whether Cheng Shi had sneaked in some insult. She didn't know whether she should match his theatrics and project divine gravitas, or first clarify that she wasn't actually a true god yet — just a candidate.

While she wavered, An Mingyu couldn't stay seated. She jolted with sudden realization:

"[Prosperity]?"

Big Cat's heart tightened. Knowing there was no escape, she immediately sat up straight, folded her hands on the table with dead seriousness, and gave An Mingyu a solemn nod:

"Correct. I am the new Proxy of [Prosperity]."

Even Tao Yi was dumbfounded. The Wood Elf blinked in confusion: "But didn't you say you were only the Proxy of [Prosperity]'s eldest daughter, Frazor? How did it become [Prosperity] Itself, Baldy?"

"Don't call me Baldy here!"

"Then... O True God [Prosperity] on high, would You deign to enlighten Your bewildered follower?"

"..."

Sure enough — letting the little fox near Cheng Shi was a terrible idea. Every word she spoke now came pre-seasoned with his flavor.

While the besties bickered, the orderly [Order] follower Li Wufang had completely blue-screened.

He'd never imagined a human could shatter the rules and become a god — not a servant god, but one of the sixteen true gods!

Sure, he knew [Prosperity] had fallen. But why would a human fill that vacancy?

Was this the game's true nature — for a player to seize a true god's throne?

Or was [Prosperity]'s fall merely a facade, with humans — no, the Destined Ones — having engineered the fall to claim the throne?!

If it was the latter, then the Destined Ones were... truly magnificent!

Praise [Fate]!

After the initial shock, Li Wufang grew ecstatic. He was dying to know every detail of Hong Lin's ascension. But Cheng Shi didn't give him the chance. Seizing the moment while everyone was processing, he turned back to the Blind One:

"So your prophecy wasn't wrong. The world did stand on the brink of collapse — for one brief instant. But Fixed Destiny triumphed over Change. The collapse ended. And your prophecy has been fulfilled."

An Mingyu felt like her mind was in chaos. She was still reeling from the revelation that her friend had already claimed a divine throne. And now the Fate Weaver said her prophecy was already fulfilled — did that mean the universe was safe, and she could stop worrying?

She raised her head, "looking" at Cheng Shi for confirmation. He smiled and nodded — though inside, he was anything but calm.

The truth was, he wasn't certain the Blind One's prophecy referred to [Oblivion]'s attempt to annihilate the universe. The timing simply happened to align, so he'd used it to reassure her.

This fate-battered prophet had suffered enough on [Fate]'s path. If he let her spiral deeper into worry, there was no telling whether her road would veer off [Fate]'s track entirely.

That was why he'd used [Oblivion]'s fall as comfort first — and would think through whether the prophecy was truly fulfilled later.

After all, [Oblivion] wasn't the only force that could push the universe toward collapse. Setting aside what was close at hand — there was still a Creator sitting in the real universe!

A single casual glance from Him could reduce this entire world to nothing!

What worried Cheng Shi most was whether something else might draw the Creator's attention. If the threat truly came from Him, then given this starry sky's current "capabilities"... could the Fun God and [Time] hold the line?

Could they reset the world as they'd done last time, and dodge another catastrophe?

A weight settled in Cheng Shi's chest.

Chapter 1200: Showing One's Hand

The curiosity of those present about Hong Lin becoming [Prosperity] clearly outweighed their fear of the prophecy. They studied the Druid anew with shocked, complicated emotions, their knowledge-hungry gazes making Hong Lin's skin crawl.

Hong Lin had no idea where to begin explaining, so she simply kept her mouth shut and waited for Cheng Shi to do it for her.

She shot Cheng Shi an angry glare, clearly saying "you caused this mess, you clean it up." Cheng Shi got the message, pushed aside the tangled thoughts in his mind, and smiled again:

"I know everyone has a lot of questions. Since we've come this far, I won't hide anything anymore.

This world, and this game, are far more complex and far more terrifying than any of you imagine.

For humans, as players, to win any kind of outcome in this game is nearly impossible.

But if we shed our identities as players the way Hong Lin did — stealing one of those sixteen Divine Thrones and claiming it as our own — then perhaps we still have a chance of winning.

So I apologize. I deceived all of you. The Destined Ones was never an organization that relied on [Fate]'s protection to reach the finish line.

On the contrary, we must shatter [Fate]'s shackles, break free of the game's chains, drag Them down from Their lofty Divine Thrones — and hoist ourselves up in Their place!

That is what it truly means to be destined. Destined by fate... for you and I to become gods!

Hong Lin is the most powerful proof. Her present is your future."

"..."

"..."

"..."

By the time he finished, even Big Cat was stunned.

'Wait — that's not showing your hand, that's straight-up fabricating!' she thought.

'Since when did the Destined Ones become some kind of ascension-to-godhood organization?'

'The ones who want to become gods are the God Worship Society, the Reason Association — anyone but the Destined Ones.'

'Sure, I became [Prosperity]'s Proxy, but wasn't my becoming the Proxy something [Fate] itself sanctioned? So why are we rebelling against [Fate] now — what does all our good luck even count as then?'

'A gift from the enemy?!'

Her expression was bewildered, and she wanted to ask something, but then she caught the serious look Cheng Shi gave her. Big Cat understood immediately and began playing dead.

She trusted Cheng Shi absolutely and knew that whatever he said, he had his reasons. So when she couldn't figure out what he was thinking, she might as well be a prop and go along with it. He'd explain everything to her eventually.

Cheng Shi's speech had indeed pulled everyone's attention back, though their expressions had grown even stranger.

An Mingyu furrowed her brow and lowered her head, fingers fidgeting with her dice as if she were divining something. Li Wufang, meanwhile, was so agitated he started taking off his clothes. He slapped his leather jacket onto the table, baring a shoulder full of muscle, and scratched his head:

"Hold on — this doesn't add up, Brother Cheng.

You're the one who pulled me into the Destined Ones. You're the one who told me [Fate] watches over me every moment. You're the one who led me onto [Fate]'s path.

So how is it that the moment I set foot on this road, it turns into the road of rebelling against [Fate]'s chains?

Something's off here, isn't it?"

Cheng Shi replied with a perfectly straight face: "Something is indeed off. Who told you to strip? Showing off how big you are?"

"..."

Li Wufang paced in anxious circles. He had zero desire to rebel against [Fate], because he genuinely believed himself to be one of the lucky ones blessed by [Fate]. [Fate] had carried him this far, and now he was supposed to betray it? That would be the same as admitting that every step he'd taken until now had been wrong. A course correction that drastic wasn't something anyone could accept on the spot.

Tao Yi felt the same. She finally realized that this gathering might truly not be meant for her.

'Are you kidding? Becoming gods?'

She never doubted anything Cheng Shi said, and she believed that humans could ascend to godhood. But she didn't believe she could.

Baldy was the [Prosperity] Chosen, the person closest to [Prosperity]'s Will. Her acting as [Prosperity]'s Proxy, while defying common sense, was at least logical.

The same went for An Shenxuan. She was hailed as [Fate]'s Proxy within the game, the prophet closest to the divine among countless [Fate] followers. If she one day ascended to that [Void] Divine Throne, Tao Yi wouldn't be surprised.

As for that [Order] follower — though his personality was a bit erratic, considering his connection to him...

Tao Yi glanced again at the leather jacket Li Wufang had tossed on the table, then quietly lowered her head in thought. 'Perhaps it's not impossible.'

According to Baldy, [Order] was already compromised. If that was the case, then under a Fate Weaver's maneuvering, he might have a chance to replace [Order] after all.

'But what about me?'

As a dual follower of [Prosperity] and [Fate], both of those Divine Thrones already had "candidates." What merit or ability did she possess to fight for a Divine Throne of her own?

So from the moment Cheng Shi finished speaking, the Wood Elf had accepted her role within this organization. She was the one who would support from beneath the Divine Throne. As for how much strength she could lend, that depended on how much she had and how much the Destined Ones needed from her.

Cheng Shi took in everyone's reactions but didn't give them much time to think. He continued:

"I know that becoming a god seems like an impossibly lofty proposition to all of you. But since there's already a successful precedent, it proves this isn't as difficult as you imagine."

After rolling several ambiguous results, An Mingyu finally couldn't hold back. She sighed with a helpless, wry smile:

"How is it that becoming a god sounds so simple when you say it? Are we even playing the same game?"

Cheng Shi smiled.

"An Shenxuan, I can understand that the rest of them don't know the rules of this world. But you should be able to understand what I'm saying."

Everyone thinks it's difficult simply because they believe the gods sit on high, omniscient and omnipotent, commanding all, impossible to challenge.

But the truth is, They are nothing more than 'lucky ones' who happen to be acting as proxies for a higher existence's Authority!"

"What?!"

"That's... how is that possible?"

"What's impossible about it?"

Our world is not the only one, and gods are not exclusive to this starry sky. Beyond countless worlds, there is a Creator gazing down upon everything — observing us the same way humans observe ants.

The gods we speak of are nothing but insects in His eyes.

So replacing the sixteen True Gods before us isn't the hard part. The hard part is finding a way out from under that Creator's hand after we've replaced Them.

I know you might not fully understand yet. That's fine — we have plenty of time today to lay it all out."

Cheng Shi took his time sharing everything he knew with the Destined Ones gathered around the table. Even Big Cat, under such meticulous and thorough explanation, gained a much clearer understanding of the Real Universe.

But the more they understood, the more terrified they became. Before he was even halfway through, Cheng Shi felt his ring's charge reach full capacity.

Yet he didn't stop. Not until he had laid out the Creator's Experiment in plain, unmistakable terms and dissected the current situation of every player with crystal clarity did he finally conclude:

"I've held nothing back. I've told you everything — what I should have said and what I probably shouldn't have.

[Fate]'s method of attracting His gaze is to forge a Sacrifice that perfectly resembles the Creator.

As for what [Deceit] is trying to do, I still have no clue.

I'll admit — my desire to see all of you become gods is laced with absolute selfishness. I'm trying to survive. I don't want to die.

But you also have to admit that the only way to survive this Creator's Experiment — an experiment with no visible future — is to fill your own hands with as many chips as possible. There is no other way.

Think of it like this gambling table. If you don't hold the chips, then you are the chips.

And those sixteen Divine Thrones hanging above our heads? They are the 'easiest' and most 'convenient' chips we can get our hands on right now.

So, everyone... any questions?"

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