

The Gods 1201

Chapter 1201: Intermission — One-on-One

There were far too many questions. The sheer volume of information had nearly caused Li Wufang and Tao Yi to crash.

The Blind One was doing somewhat better — at least she already knew about the Slice Universe. From her current vantage point, Cheng Shi had simply elevated the perspective to the Real Universe, further raising the status of that unspeakable existence.

But the problem was that Cheng Shi's definition of [Fate] had plunged her into confusion.

She had been abandoned by her Benefactor in the original world. After arriving in this world, the current [Fate] had treated her like a worn-out shoe. It was Cheng Shi who had pulled her back with the Destined Ones' creed, placing her once again on [Fate]'s path. Yet now Cheng Shi was telling her that [Fate] was the enemy — that they needed to exploit [Fate]'s protection to rebel against fate itself and reach the shores of victory...

'Why is it like this?'

An Mingyu's mind was a mess. She "looked" at the Destined Ones present, then "looked" at Cheng Shi ahead of her. Her expression clearly said she had things she wanted to tell Cheng Shi but couldn't say them in front of everyone.

Cheng Shi read her intent, glanced toward the side, and was the first to leave his seat, walking into the deeper darkness.

'It's time to give everyone some space to cool down.'

Seeing the Fate Chosen follow Cheng Shi away from the gambling table, Tao Yi immediately moved closer to Hong Lin and began whispering something. Only Li Wufang remained, staring blankly at the [Fate] dice on the table, obviously still wrestling with whether or not to join this grand plan of ascension to godhood.

An Mingyu followed behind Cheng Shi until they were far away. Sensing the silhouette ahead of her stop, she halted as well and asked quietly:

"Did she... also die to rebel against fate?"

It was the first time the Blind One had ever brought up the other her's death in front of Cheng Shi. His expression turned solemn, and he let out a silent sigh:

"Yes."

He chose not to hide it. There was no reason to.

The sooner one recognized the cruelty of the Real Universe, the sooner that fear could become fuel to find a path of survival in this world.

"Not just her. Many people died.

You, me, Zhen Xin — all dead.

They were unlucky. They took the wrong path. But their lives eliminated one wrong option for us.

So, An Shenxuan — chin up.

This world's An Mingyu and the other world's Zhen Xin didn't abandon you and me. They lit the road ahead with their lives."

"Drip—"

A single glistening tear traced down the Blind One's cheek and fell to the tip of her shoe. She lifted her head, wiped away the tear, then forced a brilliant smile before the sob could escape and asked:

"Then in the world that belonged to me... she and I..."

Cheng Shi turned around and, with an unreadable look in his eyes, gently patted the Blind One's shoulder.

"This world belongs to you. And this world's Zhen Xin can't do without you, either."

"...Does Xin Xin know?"

"She does. And she's also searching for a way out for this world."

An Mingyu nodded, unsurprised. "Is it with that organization alongside Li Jingming?"

Cheng Shi blinked, then didn't bother hiding it. He chuckled: "You figured it out?"

"Zhen Yi has been muttering Li Jingming's name constantly lately. I guessed it was because Xin Xin had been in too much contact with him, and Zhen Yi picked up on the clues.

They're... a group of liars, aren't they?

Your left hand holds the Destined Ones, your right hand holds the [Deceit] followers. Are they also trying to steal the gods' Divine Thrones, just like us?

So our target is [Fate], and theirs is [Deceit]?

But didn't you say [Void] is still more or less on our side? If it's an ally, then how..."

"It's complicated — too much to explain in a short time. All you need to know is that we need [Void]'s power, but we can't fully trust [Void]'s promises.

If you absolutely must trust one of them, trust [Deceit]. Don't trust [Fate].

Our shared Benefactor has drawn too close to His will. In His eyes, nothing matters more than what is predetermined."

An Mingyu nodded thoughtfully, then added:

"You said [Fate] is forging a Sacrifice for that existence. So the Sacrifice..."

Cheng Shi didn't answer. The Blind One didn't ask again.

Between two sharp minds, no more needed to be said. They didn't even need to meet each other's gaze — everything worth saying had already been conveyed.

"Understood. What do you need me to do next?"

I'm skilled at prophecy, but now it seems these prophecies might just be [Fate]'s 'deception.' It guides us toward a predetermined future, but that future probably doesn't belong to us..."

Cheng Shi smiled. He wasn't at all surprised by how quickly the Blind One had come to terms with everything. She had always been a woman of exceptional wisdom — a peak player among peak players. Had she not endured the mind-bending ordeal of a world swap, she might still be that confident, composed prophet.

"Our future rests in our own hands alone.

You are still the person in this game who understands [Fate] best. Don't look at me — the fact that you're still Its Chosen proves you're close enough to It.

Get to know It again. Study It. Search for every clue in the trials and in history. If the conflicts of faiths truly cast their reflections in the mortal world, then there must be cases where someone successfully defied [Fate].

That history may be useless right now, but it could become the streetlights guiding our way forward.

The History School is a wonderful thing. Zhen Xin played a masterful move by leveraging it — she's using the School to search for something. If you have the time, lend her a hand.

As for the rest...

Remember one thing: be yourself.

An Shenxuan, I have never deceived you. You and I are both Destined Ones. The only difference is that this destiny isn't dictated by Them — it's held in our own hands."

"Mm."

An Mingyu said nothing more. Her expression gradually hardened into resolve. After a moment of silence, something seemed to click. She gave Cheng Shi a slight bow, then quietly returned to the gathering table.

The moment she left, Li Wufang — who could hold it in no longer — rushed over and blocked Cheng Shi's path back. He asked the question he simply couldn't wrap his head around.

"If [Fate] is our enemy, then why would It protect me? And why would It save me during that trial?"

Cheng Shi smiled. He looked at the anxious, wound-up [Fate] follower standing before him and said meaningfully:

"Think about it more carefully. Is that really what happened?"

The one who has always been protecting you in this game is [Order]. And the one who saved you... was me.

Each of us is writing our own destiny, but It thinks the script we're writing doesn't suit Its tastes. So It wants to lock us into an eternal, unchanging script.

I don't know how that script ends, so I'm afraid.

Just like you were afraid back then — not knowing whether someone would lend a hand to save your grandmother.

But back then, a man in a leather jacket reached out to you. And now — will you reach out to others?

Take that luck you're so proud of, and wield it as a weapon to save everyone else."

"..."

Li Wufang fell silent.

He still believed he was the lucky one blessed by [Fate]. The only thing that had changed was his decision to pass that luck forward.

"What should I do?" he asked, lost yet resolute.

Cheng Shi stroked his chin and pondered for a moment: "[Order] may have had Its nest stolen, but It should still have some 'relics' left behind. And since you happen to be Its follower, why don't we figure out how to swindle — I mean, inherit Its life savings? Of course, if we could get our hands on Its Divine Throne, that would be even better."

"!!!?"

Li Wufang was dumbstruck. Staring at Cheng Shi, who wasn't even pretending anymore, he said in disbelief:

"I just convinced myself to let go of [Fate] and return to [Order], and now you're telling me I need to seize my Benefactor's Divine Throne?!"

Brother Cheng, why do I get the feeling you've been deceiving me this entire time?"

Cheng Shi clapped Li Wufang on the shoulder repeatedly:

"Ah, you don't understand. Devotion taken to its absolute extreme becomes blasphemy.

This is a truth that holds in this world — no, in all worlds, even across the entire Real Universe!

Trust me. Because I never lie."

...

Chapter 1202: A Smile... Warmth... This Is [Fate]?

While Cheng Shi was consoling An Mingyu, another conversation was unfolding at the gambling table.

Hong Lin watched her best friend approach with a complicated expression. Her lips moved for a moment before all her emotions distilled into a single phrase: "I'm sorry."

Tao Yi tilted her head with a soft smile. "Why are you apologizing to me?"

Hong Lin clenched her fists and whispered:

"I had no idea Cheng Shi was planning to drag the Destined Ones into something this dangerous. I always thought he wasn't lying to me — that the Destined Ones were simply the people who would be sheltered by [Fate] until the very end.

And everything I witnessed about him told me the same thing: as long as you stayed close to him, [Fate] really would protect you. Even if the world collapsed, there would be a chance to start over.

That's why I wanted to bring you in.

I figured that since [Fate] was already protecting so many Destined Ones, one more wouldn't make a difference. As long as you could fuse with [Fate], it would mean It was willing to shelter you too.

I even thought that if you failed, it wouldn't matter — because if I asked Cheng Shi for help, he would absolutely help you complete the fusion.

But I never expected you to complete it on your own. And I certainly never expected the Destined Ones... to no longer be the 'destined' I understood.

Its protection was our poison all along. It was me who—"

Hearing this, Tao Yi gently reached out and covered Big Cat's mouth.

She smiled brilliantly with her eyes narrowed to slits, but in the instant she squeezed them shut, Hong Lin caught a glimpse of red-rimmed eyes.

Tao Yi shook her head and said softly:

"I'm the one who should be apologizing.

The Faith Game's arrival gave you a new life. I know you have so many ideas, so much drive — but your momentum has always been held back by me.

I'm the dead weight that's been limiting what you can do."

"I never—"

Hong Lin rushed to protest, but Tao Yi pulled her into a full embrace. Tao Yi's height only reached Big Cat's shoulder, so she pressed her forehead against it and covered the other girl's mouth again:

"You've already compromised so much to protect me.

What I'm trying to say is — everyone dies eventually..."

That last sentence set Big Cat off entirely. She wrenched free of Tao Yi's hand and fixed her with a fierce, unblinking stare: "Don't you dare talk about dying!"

Tao Yi paused, then chuckled gently: "Okay, I won't. I don't want to die either. I'll do my best to stay alive.

But Baldy, you don't need to live for my sake. You have your own destiny. Just like the little liar said — your destiny should be far more brilliant, a canvas for you to paint with bold, sweeping strokes. And right now, you and he are searching for a way out for all of humanity."

"I don't care about humanity. I just need you all to stay alive. Safe and alive."

"I know. I know that." Tao Yi gently patted Hong Lin's long hair as though stroking a cat. "But I'm not wrong either. Think about it — on the day the world is saved and every puzzle has its answer, I'll be able to stand tall among the survivors and say: 'See her? That's my best friend. My family. She's the one who led us out of the gods' cage.'

Even if you won't do it for yourself, you should at least fight for that future me, right?

Besides, I may be extra baggage, but I'm not some porcelain vase that shatters at a touch. I'm a 2,000-point Wood Elf and Screenwriter. I can take care of myself."

Big Cat was moved — her eyes were even turning red — but when she heard that last part, her expression twisted into something odd:

"More than half of your 200-point increase was from bonuses I gave you..."

Tao Yi froze. She puffed out her cheeks and punched Big Cat in frustration.

"Way to ruin the mood!

Forget it — anyway, stop looking back at me all the time. Trust me, I'll catch up.

You're the vanguard, the strongest Druid in this entire game — the one who breaks through every line. Only when you've cleared the path can the rest of us small fry walk it with ease, right?"

"...A second ago you were calling yourself a 2,000-point Wood Elf, and now suddenly you're small fry. You do realize small fry get eaten by big fish at any moment, don't you?"

"Compared to you, of course I'm small fry. But compared to everyone else, I'm still quite strong!

So put down the dead weight and let it roll on its own for a while."

Hong Lin understood what Tao Yi meant, but she still shook her head.

She pushed Tao Yi back, looked straight into her eyes, and said earnestly: "Before the game arrived, I was the dead weight. But you never left me behind."

Tao Yi kept smiling. She didn't say a word, but in her heart she spoke each syllable clearly: 'You were never my dead weight. You are my best friend. My closest family.'

"All right, I get what you're saying. That Investigator over there is starting to look at us funny. Mm, I still have a few things I want to say to the little liar. I'll go catch him before he gets back."

Hong Lin let go in silence, seeming to guess what Tao Yi was about to do. She watched Tao Yi walk toward Cheng Shi, and the emotion in her eyes slowly hardened into resolve.

She felt more and more certain that her thinking was right — and that Cheng Shi was even more right. Only by holding enough chips in your own hands could you protect your friends.

Because that way, even if her friend had no chips — don't worry. I do.

On the other side, Li Wufang had beaten Tao Yi to the punch, getting duped one more time before she arrived.

When Li Wufang noticed the Wood Elf approaching, he shot her an odd glance, nodded in greeting, and headed back to the gambling table.

Seeing Tao Yi standing nearby with a smile, looking his way, Cheng Shi couldn't help but laugh:

"I feel like an HR rep at a company on the brink of bankruptcy, doing everything I can to keep every single employee from jumping ship.

So, Miss Wood Elf — thinking about changing jobs too?"

Tao Yi blinked and grinned brightly: "Wood can only make feeding troughs, not jump ship."

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow and smiled, pleasantly surprised.

He had noticed the commotion between the two of them at the gambling table earlier and had assumed the Wood Elf was coming to "resign." After all, the Destined Ones' goal was terrifying — even for Chosen Ones it was a significant shock, let alone an ordinary player who hadn't even broken 2,400 points.

He hadn't expected this Wood Elf's resolve to be so firm. Then again, it made sense. Without that kind of resolve, she never would have made that deeply moving rescue during the 0221 Experiment Site.

"Then what did you want to ask?"

Tao Yi shook her head again and produced a small sprig from her personal space. The sprig was vibrant green, about the length of a finger, and resembled a brooch.

"What's this?"

Cheng Shi nearly jumped. At first glance, he thought Tao Yi had acquired some kind of [Prosperity] Authority. But upon closer inspection, he realized it was nothing more than an ordinary twig.

"A branch from the Lucky Tree.

The people of the rainforest tribe often use this tree to seek divine guidance. They believe the Lucky Tree brings good fortune.

I happened to acquire the seeds and planted them in my garden. I raised them for a long time — it wasn't until the third sapling that one finally survived. But a Lucky Tree can only bless one person. I gave away the third tree's sprig, so the one I'm giving you is from the fourth.

I know you're [Fate]'s darling, the one who gathers all the luck in the universe. But since you're now saying [Fate] is our enemy, let this Lucky Tree — which doesn't belong to [Fate] — bring you a little bit of fortune instead."

With that, she held out the sprig.

Cheng Shi took it and examined it carefully. He couldn't detect any trace of [Fate]'s aura on it, though there was a faint, almost imperceptible hint of [Prosperity]. Amused, he asked casually:

"How did you raise it so well?"

"I fed it Divinity."

"?" Cheng Shi stared.

'Hold on — even if your best friend is [Prosperity]'s Proxy, you can't just waste Divinity like that!'

'So many people would kill for that stuff, and you used it to grow a tree?'

'Tsk — well, in this day and age, I suppose that makes this thing a luxury item. Better hold onto it.'

He stored it in his personal space, thanked her solemnly, then asked with curiosity:

"Come to think of it, I don't think I've ever heard of a talent called Person in the Play. From its effects, it's an S-rank talent?"

Tao Yi had nothing to hide from Cheng Shi. She nodded:

"Yes. It was personally bestowed by It when It summoned me. I actually quite like it..."

"Wait!" Cheng Shi's brow shot up, and he blurted in astonishment, "You were summoned by It during your fusion?"

Tao Yi didn't understand his surprise and nodded again: "That's right. I still can't forget that moment.

So the form a True God takes in our world is a pair of star-filled eyes.

And Their smile... it was just as warm as a human one."

"..."

'A smile... warmth...'

'Are you sure you're talking about [Fate]?'

Cheng Shi's expression grew grave.

"Tell me about your audience, Miss Wood Elf. This is very important for all of us.

Don't leave out a single word."

...

Chapter 1203: True and False [Fate]

The Destined Ones gathered around the gambling table once more, only this time the focus had shifted to the Wood Elf.

One look at Cheng Shi's expression told everyone that the audience might be hiding something. Tao Yi carefully recalled everything that had happened during her audience, doing her best to recount every image from her memory without missing a single detail.

"I... for certain personal reasons, wanted to draw closer to [Fate]."

She kept her head lowered, meeting no one's eyes. She didn't mention that the one she had originally wanted to approach was [Deceit], and that [Deceit] had given no response whatsoever, so she had settled for second best and chosen [Fate].

She knew [Fate] was cold, so she hadn't held any expectations at first.

But to her surprise, that casual prayer — one so offhand it felt more like making a wish — had actually drawn [Fate]'s gaze and pulled her into a dazzling starry sky.

Hearing this, Cheng Shi frowned in confusion: "You're saying It summoned you beneath a starry sky? Are you sure it was the starry sky and not the Void?"

Tao Yi nodded firmly:

"I'm certain.

Because Its eyes were as beautiful as those countless stars.

It was indeed cold — even aloof. For the first half, I was the only one speaking, anxiously paying my respects, until It asked me a question: why I wanted to draw closer to [Fate].

Before a True God, I didn't dare deceive, so I told the truth."

At this point, Tao Yi paused briefly, skipping over the content of that truth, and continued:

"And then I saw It smile. Those eyes suddenly became dreamlike, mesmerizing.

The star-points flickered without end, spiraling into circles. I was drawn in by that smile, couldn't help but look a moment longer, and then I was pulled into the spinning spiral until my head was swimming — and I plummeted into the Void.

When I woke again, I had already fused with [Fate].

I always thought it was Its way of acknowledging me. But now it seems..."

Tao Yi's expression shifted. She suddenly looked even more uneasy than during the audience itself.

"Could it have been a deception... Cheng Shi?"

"?"

Cheng Shi ignored certain odd forms of address, furrowed his brow, and sank into thought. It was Hong Lin beside them who kept shaking her head:

"The location of an audience is decided by the god. I don't see any issue there. It's just that — [Fate] really is cold. Whether during an audience or at the Assembly of Gods Convention, I've never once seen It smile."

Li Wufang chimed in immediately: "It's true. Its iciness could practically freeze the Void itself. I always assumed that was simply the nature of [Fate]."

The denials from two fellow Destined Ones made Tao Yi visibly nervous. She couldn't be sure whether she had become a piece in [Fate]'s grand design, nor whether today's meeting — with her in attendance — could remain a secret under Its watchful gaze. She looked helplessly at Cheng Shi, only to hear the Blind One speak up beside her:

"I've seen it..."

The Blind One's expression was far from pleasant. She smiled bitterly: "But that gentle smile was not directed at me.

Among everyone here, the only one who could make [Fate] break into a smile... is probably you, Cheng Shi."

Cheng Shi's face grew even more tense, clearly weighing the same thoughts.

Although it felt somewhat conceited to think so, he couldn't fathom any reason [Fate] would have smiled at Tao Yi.

'Was it because she brought Hong Lin into the fold, and It was fond of the association?'

'No — if that were the case, why not smile directly at Hong Lin?'

Given Hong Lin's conviction in the Destined Ones and her devotion to [Fate] at the time, that single smile might have been enough to make Big Cat fight to the death for [Fate].

But It hadn't. Instead, It chose an "insignificant" Wood Elf. Did the Wood Elf harbor some hidden connection to [Fate]?

Cheng Shi looked at Tao Yi with puzzlement, only to find her lashes blinking rapidly, her emotions clearly unsettled.

He reassured her for a moment, then, watching her like this, a sudden flash of inspiration struck — another possibility.

'Was the one who summoned Tao Yi truly [Fate]?'

'Could it have been the Fun God?!'

After all, It and Its sibling god were identical. Add [Deceit]'s Authority of disguise to the mix, and a player attending her first audience would have no way to tell Them apart!

'But if it really was [Deceit], what was It doing?'

'Watching [Fate] go mad too slowly and deciding to lend a hand?'

'Tsk — actually, that does sound like something It would do.'

'But there's a problem. Although there's plenty of fun in it, don't forget — the rift within [Void] is widening. Both sides are racing against time to write Their preferred ending before the other. If the Fun God did this, wouldn't it push the universe even further toward the predetermined outcome?'

'Or did It plant another hidden card within [Fate]'s fixed destiny?'

'Were the faith and talent It bestowed nothing but [Deceit]'s disguise?'

Cheng Shi couldn't figure it out. He felt certain this was far from simple. It would be best to go and ask the deity in question directly, to avoid deeper misunderstandings creeping into their future plans.

So he addressed the group:

"There's definitely something fishy about this. But don't panic. I'll verify it myself. Until I do, just chalk it up to [Fate] having a mood swing."

"..."

"..."

"..."

"As you've all seen, whether it's this era or this game, everything is hurtling toward its end. And the closer we get to that conclusion, the more chaotic things will become.

If we want to secure enough chips before the finale arrives, we need to pick up the pace too.

Wufang, after this meeting you're coming with me. There are some things we need to 'settle' with [Order].

Hong Lin, stay sharp. I may need you to accompany me to the Real Universe."

"!!!"

Even someone as formidable as Big Cat's pupils contracted at this. She exclaimed in shock: "What for?!"

"We can't exactly leave our own god to die out there, can we? So this trip — we're going to bring [War] home."

"!?!?"

Big Cat froze, her scalp tingling.

"You want to collect [War]'s remains? But It already turned to ash!"

"Not the remains — the Authority. The chips I was talking about!

With those chips in hand, our position improves by a measure."

That statement finally calmed Big Cat down. Fighting spirit and fear coexisted in her eyes. She glanced at Tao Yi several times, her expression complex, then answered with resolve:

"Fine. I'll wait for your word."

Cheng Shi nodded: "I haven't found a way to reach the Real Universe yet. It may take a long time, but this journey is unavoidable. Prepare yourself early.

As for the rest of you — stay vigilant. Feel [Fate].

As long as the weight of those shackles remains formless, it means fate's chains are far more terrifying than we imagine.

Since we've chosen to defy [Fate], we must be prepared to be baptized by suffering. I'm not being an alarmist — I truly don't know where this path the Destined Ones have chosen will lead.

But no matter where it ends, that ending will be one we wrote ourselves. An ending of flesh and blood — not a puppet's final bow.

So embrace your fear, everyone. Fear is nothing to be afraid of. It is the force that drives us forward — the firm footprints we leave behind when we look back at the road we've walked."

His impassioned words seemed to carry an almost enchanting power, setting the blood of those who had just been lost and panicked racing with renewed heat.

Cheng Shi saw the desired effect and moved to end the small meeting, intending to take Li Wufang to pry loose [Order]'s "estate." But just then, Li Wufang stopped in his tracks and said to Cheng Shi:

"I'd like to stay a bit longer."

"?" Cheng Shi paused, glancing thoughtfully at the others present. 'Who does this Investigator want to have a post-meeting chat with?'

He didn't refuse, simply smiling: "All right. When you're done, pray to [Chaos]. I'll be waiting for you there."

With that, Cheng Shi left — leaving a thoroughly mystified Li Wufang opening and closing his mouth, unable to recover for quite some time.

'Weren't we going to see [Order]? Why am I praying to [Chaos]?'

'So this is what "devotion taken to its extreme becomes blasphemy" means?'

'And blasphemy taken to the extreme becomes the ultimate devotion?!'

Li Wufang felt like he had achieved enlightenment.

The Blind One exchanged a few more words with Hong Lin before leaving the meeting ground. Just as Hong Lin was about to take Tao Yi and depart, Li Wufang suddenly called out to them.

He looked at Tao Yi — yes, Tao Yi, not Hong Lin — his expression complicated: "May I speak with you, Wood Elf?"

Hong Lin froze, staring at Tao Yi in surprise, but Tao Yi seemed to have expected this. She nodded gently: "Sure."

The two walked into the deeper darkness under Hong Lin's suspicious gaze. Tao Yi remained silent until Li Wufang stopped walking. Only then did she ask quietly:

"About what?"

Li Wufang broke into an open grin: "We're both Destined Ones. There's no need to be so guarded with each other. You probably already know why I'm here. Don't forget — I'm an Investigator. My senses are sharp. I noticed you were staring at it for a long time."

As he spoke, he tugged at his leather jacket.

"If I'm not mistaken, you've also met the previous owner of this jacket. Am I right?"

Tao Yi pressed her lips together. After a moment of silence, she nodded: "Yes, that's correct. I have met him."

...

Chapter 1204: That Leather Jacket

Li Wufang was delighted by Tao Yi's response.

All these years he had wanted to repay the man in the leather jacket, yet he had never heard a single piece of news about him. Now, encountering someone who might have known the man, his heart surged with excitement.

"Even at this very moment, as we're about to walk a path of defiance against fate, I can't help but praise [Fate] once more.

To think I found a lead among the Destined Ones — someone who's actually met him. If that isn't destiny, what is?

Do you know him? What's his name? Where is he from..."

Halfway through, Li Wufang suddenly realized that his excitement had made him overlook too many things. This was no longer the old world. With the Faith Game's arrival, whether the leather jacket man was even still alive in this game was itself a question.

At that thought, his expression stiffened. His voice faltered. A flash of worry crossed his eyes, followed by a surge of inexplicable hope. His voice dropped low, cautious: "Is he... still alive?"

That question was far too difficult for Tao Yi.

She believed the person the Investigator was talking about was already dead. But she couldn't give a definitive answer, because to this day she still couldn't be one hundred percent certain that the man in question was who she thought he was.

Tao Yi had indeed seen this leather jacket before — back when she was in college.

At that time, her best friend Hong Lin was enduring the darkest period of her life. Not only had her youth and body been locked inside a glass cage bristling with tubes, but her family's business had also collapsed. Even a life without dignity was becoming impossible to sustain.

Tao Yi went home and begged her parents for help. Her parents weren't cold-hearted people — they offered the greatest support they could as friends. But that sum was a drop in the bucket against the money-devouring life-support equipment.

Tao Yi was a sensible girl. She knew her own family was struggling too, so she began cutting her expenses and eliminating anything extra. She ate only one meal a day, just to scrape together enough money to buy her best friend a sliver of hope.

And that hope was... lottery tickets.

Nothing could save her friend's family like a stroke of divine fortune. But where in the world would you find that kind of luck?

Rather than gambling on good fortune for Hong Lin, she was really just unable to accept reality and numbing herself with that slimmest of hopes.

Over half a year of persistence, she won nothing. Hong Lin's condition deteriorated further. Mounting debts began to crush the family. No matter how generous that biology professor was, the pressure of funding eventually forced a halt to the life-support equipment.

Her best friend was going to die, and Tao Yi was powerless to stop it.

The endless pressure finally broke her on a rainy day. She collapsed outside the lottery station, sobbing silently, feeling as though the entire world had been draped in a grey shroud.

But just then — a turning point arrived.

A man in a leather jacket pulled her to her feet, grabbed her arm, and tossed her under an awning. He didn't comfort her. Instead, he mocked her:

"What good is crying?

If tears could solve problems, the world would've been destroyed a long time ago."

Strangely, though she had been ridiculed, Tao Yi felt no malice from him. She lifted her tear-blurred eyes and looked up. Behind those oversized sunglasses, she couldn't make out his face — all she remembered was that pitch-black leather jacket.

"I've been staying here for three days. Every time I go out for a walk, I see you show up at the exact same time to buy lottery tickets. Interesting. If you're so desperate to gamble, why not go to a casino?"

You'd make money faster there, wouldn't you?"

Tao Yi said nothing. She was still adrift in the blank space left by the pressure that had shattered her, not even fully aware of what she was doing or who the man in front of her was.

Seeing her silence, the leather jacket man snorted a laugh: "It's about money, isn't it? Funny thing is, everything in this world is a problem for me — except money.

Go on, tell me. How much do you need to make your troubles go away?"

Hearing this, Tao Yi gradually came to her senses.

She clutched her collar nervously, hugged herself, and cautiously scooted back. She was well aware that her looks attracted trouble, but she hadn't expected trouble to arrive at such a delicate moment. In that instant, a thought crossed her mind — could this trouble, perhaps, solve Hong Lin's troubles?

But when the leather jacket man saw her reaction, he spat in disgust.

"You're barely more than a kid, and your head's full of garbage. Who'd want any of that.

Yes or no — give me an answer. I'm not so desperate that I need to grovel to throw money at you."

Tao Yi was genuinely stunned by the scolding. But she had absolutely no reason to reject what appeared to be a hopeful "scam." So, treating it like making a wish, she went all in and named a number.

"That's it?"

That's not even enough for one hand at my table."

The leather jacket man scoffed, casually tossed down a chip, and beckoned with his hand, summoning a "female assistant" whose poise and beauty were both remarkable.

Tao Yi stared blankly at the chip on the ground, then looked up in a daze at the elegant woman. She watched, wide-eyed, as the two people before her resolved in a few brief sentences what had seemed to her an insurmountable financial crisis.

"Ah Ying, convert it into lottery winnings for her. Otherwise, how's a little girl going to explain where all that money came from?"

"...Caught your eye, did she?"

"Like hell. I've got too much money. Doing a good deed to rack up some karma."

"...Then how about racking up some karma with me?"

"You want some? Should've said so. I'll hand you next month's entire deposit. More karma, more good luck — maybe I'll even die a little slower."

With that, the leather jacket man turned and walked away.

Tao Yi finally snapped back to reality. She shot to her feet, gripping the chip tightly, and shouted at the retreating figure in the rain: "What's your name? How do I find you?"

The leather jacket man paused mid-step: "Find me? What, you're latching onto me now?"

"I want to repay you."

"Really want to repay me?"

Tao Yi flinched, then set her jaw and nodded firmly: "What's your name? How do I contact you?"

The leather jacket man stood still in the rain, turned his head, and gave her a sidelong glance:

"Tsk. You want to know who I am?"

Too many people have their eyes on me. I can't even be sure today's good deed isn't someone else's trap set for me.

Little girl — can I trust you?"

Tao Yi froze, then nodded emphatically again: "You can."

The leather jacket man suddenly laughed. He scoffed:

"Trust you, my foot. Forget it. By the time you have the ability to pay back this money, I'll probably be dead already. What's the point of repaying?"

Go repay my son instead."

The rain grew heavier and heavier. The silhouette in the leather jacket grew smaller and smaller. The woman called Ah Ying spoke briefly with the lottery shop owner, then opened her umbrella and elegantly chased after that fading figure.

Tao Yi passed through a muddled night. The next day, her friend was saved.

She had never told anyone about any of this — not even Hong Lin. She had never brought it up.

She had assumed that after the Faith Game descended, the debt of gratitude she spoke of would never be repaid.

Until...

In a trial of [Oblivion], she heard a certain young Priest — whose words and mannerisms bore a certain resemblance to him — utter that same line:

"Can I trust you?"

In that instant, she saw his shadow in the young Priest.

...

Chapter 1205: His Son

When Li Wufang saw that Tao Yi remained silent for a long time, he seemed to understand something.

After a pause, he said a quiet "Thank you" and turned to leave.

After he was gone, Tao Yi still stood in place, deep in her memories. At some point, Hong Lin appeared behind her. Gazing in the direction Li Wufang had departed, her expression was complicated:

"It was the person who gave you the lottery ticket, wasn't it?"

Li Wufang is his son?"

Tao Yi startled awake, staring at her best friend in shock: "Baldy, you knew?"

Hong Lin smiled — though the smile carried more emotions than could be counted.

"Mm. I've known for a long time, but you didn't want to talk about it, so I never asked.

You, you little fox, thought you'd pulled it off seamlessly. But you forgot that in the old world, there was something called surveillance cameras.

Anyone who finds a winning lottery ticket mysteriously tucked into their clothes is going to be suspicious — let alone two people who'd spent years in business and had already seen every dirty trick in the book.

At first, they thought someone was trying to set them up. It wasn't until they checked the footage and spotted you sneaking around.

I didn't know about any of this originally. It was much later, one night when I hadn't fallen asleep yet, that I happened to overhear them talking.

They were worried you'd gone down a dark path to raise the money, but at the same time they couldn't believe that even the darkest path could produce six million in half a year...

So they hired someone to investigate. Eventually, they traced it back to the man who gave you the chip."

"!!!"

Tao Yi was stunned. She seized Hong Lin's hand: "You found out who he is?"

The intensity of her reaction actually startled Hong Lin. She shook her head:

"No. I asked, but they wouldn't tell me.

Mom said that regardless of the man's motives, you weren't harmed, and I survived because of it... Since the benefactor didn't want anyone to know, the matter would end there.

They paid to erase every trace. The year after the company was saved, they donated the entire sum — every last cent.

I never told you any of this because I was afraid you'd feel bad about them investigating you. That's all."

"Mm."

Tao Yi murmured a soft acknowledgment. She wrestled with herself for a moment, then decided to tell her best friend the "truth" about this matter.

She wasn't sure her guess was correct, but if it was, then the Destined Ones... might have been connected by the threads of [Fate] even before the Faith Game descended.

"He's not Li Wufang's father."

Hong Lin was visibly relieved, since she had only been guessing: "Good. Otherwise, I wouldn't know how to face that teammate."

"He's Cheng Shi's father."

"Oh, so he's—

????

Whose?!"

Big Cat's fur practically stood on end. She grabbed Tao Yi's hand right back, both eyes wide as saucers: "Whose father did you just say?!"

Tao Yi pressed her lips together and repeated those two words.

"Cheng Shi's."

"!!!"

Hong Lin stopped breathing. She seemed unable to believe what she had heard; her mind went completely blank for a long time. It wasn't until her expression had twisted into something almost unrecognizable that she finally recovered enough to confirm the little fox wasn't messing with her.

The benefactor who had saved her entire family really was Cheng Shi's father.

She didn't doubt for a moment whether the man's age matched Cheng Shi's, because she knew Cheng Shi was an adopted orphan.

'So even before the game descended, he was already guiding me onto [Fate]'s path?'

Hong Lin stared at her best friend in astonishment. After a long pause, her expression suddenly shifted to something far more colorful, and her tone grew strange:

"Is that why you have your eye on him — because of his father?"

Tao Yi averted her gaze, turning her head aside, and shook it: "I'm repaying his father's kindness."

"By offering yourself?"

"Could you please be serious?"

"Ha — you want me to be serious now?"

Where was your seriousness when your head was full of the Fate Weaver?"

"..." Tao Yi pressed her lips together and said nothing.

Hong Lin was burning with curiosity. She desperately wanted to know how the little fox had confirmed the connection between Cheng Shi and that man. Tao Yi didn't hide it any longer. Since the truth was already out, she laid everything bare.

When Hong Lin heard that the man had told Tao Yi to repay his son, she gave her a peculiar look and asked:

"You didn't add that part yourself, did you?"

Let's not forget — you've become a Screenwriter now. Is that really how the 'script' in your memory goes, hmm?"

Tao Yi fell silent.

She had indeed told a "lie." The original "script" wasn't quite like that. But she hadn't altered the "script" — she had merely omitted part of it.

That night, as the two silhouettes grew smaller and smaller in the rain, she had still vaguely caught the whispered words carried back by the cold wind.

"Since when do you have a son? I never heard about this."

"A son, my foot. I was lying to her. What kind of charity just throws money and leaves nothing to hold onto? Give her something to aim for, and the kid might make it a little further.

Besides, a girl who sits on the ground bawling and has nothing but garbage in her head doesn't deserve my son anyway."

"So where's this son of yours?"

"...How do you not understand? I was speaking hypothetically. Hypothetically, do you get it?!"

I can't explain anything to you. Shut up, or I'm cutting off next month's deposit."

"I don't want money. I want a son."

"...You're insane."

...

The perspective shifted to the other side. At this very moment, his son was standing beside the Steps of Chaos, patiently waiting for Li Wufang's arrival.

Kataro stood quietly at Lord Ultraman's side, the picture of devotion.

Cheng Shi wasn't really curious about what Li Wufang had stayed at the meeting grounds to do. What he was curious about was where the [Chaos] inside the temple had gone.

The Fun God had vanished.

When he had first ended the meeting and returned to the Rest Area, Cheng Shi had planned to see his Benefactor first — to discuss the matter of "true and false [Fate]" and feel out whether it was yet another one of Its schemes.

But the Fun God gave no response.

Cheng Shi didn't give up. He tried every method he knew to reach his Benefactor — [Truth], [Chaos], even [Time]... If he hadn't been afraid that pushing the blasphemy too far would earn him a scolding from [Fate], he would have nearly crushed the dice in his hand.

Fortunately, though the Fun God hadn't responded, Kataro was still faithfully manning the temple. So Cheng Shi had come to the [Chaos] temple ahead of time, waiting quietly for his meeting with [Order].

He told Kataro that he would soon bring an [Order] follower to visit [Order] in its prison, and asked him to make preparations.

When Kataro learned of this, he opened his mouth, wanting to ask: 'Does the Benefactor know about this?'

But on second thought, he swallowed both the question and the words of dissuasion he had been about to offer.

Whether Lord Cheng Shi's actions were right or wrong, Kataro adhered to one single principle: when the Benefactor was absent, Lord Cheng Shi's word was divine decree.

Such was Kataro's path of devotion — and the very foundation of his survival in this era.

Praise [Void]. Praise the Benefactor. Praise Lord Cheng Shi.

...

Chapter 1206: The Last Order

Li Wufang had arrived.

This [Order] follower had never in his life imagined that one day he would personally recite the prayer of [Chaos].

The moment he stood in the Rest Area and blurted out "Fabricate rules" with an agonized expression, his anxiety hit an all-time peak.

'This is blasphemy of the highest order!'

For a split second, he even wondered whether that Fate Weaver — the one who spouted nothing but sacrilegious nonsense — was using this to have leverage over him, forcing him to rebel against [Fate] together.

But when he ascended the yellow-mist platform and laid eyes on the Fate Weaver again, his faith in the Destined Ones was quietly restored.

Perhaps that was the Fate Weaver's charm. He possessed a kind of magic that made people trust him, even though hardly a word that left his mouth was ever true.

"You're here."

Cheng Shi wasted no time. He casually introduced Kataro as the temple's attendant — one who served at a True God's side. Since the True God was currently absent, Kataro would escort them both to see [Order].

Li Wufang's mind was buzzing.

He was bewildered by why [Order] would be inside [Chaos]'s temple, and staggered by the fact that a True God's attendant treated the Fate Weaver with the same reverence he would show a True God.

'That's a deity's servant! If a god's servant bows and scrapes before a player, what does that say about the player — other than the fact that he's no ordinary person? Surely he can't be a god?!'

'But his faith is [Void]!'

'Even if he were a god, why would a god of [Void] be given preferential treatment inside [Chaos]'s temple?'

'Is this what [Chaos] is?'

Li Wufang marveled at his own lack of worldly experience while curiously trailing behind Cheng Shi, eyes darting everywhere. This was his first time inside a divine temple. Granted, it was the enemy's temple — but what if [Order] had already conquered [Chaos] and seized this temple for itself?

'That would explain why [Order] is on [Chaos]'s territory!'

With the most earnest devotion, Li Wufang told himself exactly that.

But cruel reality shattered his fantasy soon enough. When he saw the codex nailed behind [Chaos]'s Divine Throne, Li Wufang thought his eyes were playing tricks on him.

He suddenly laughed, then — in front of everyone — slapped himself on both cheeks and said cheerfully:

"You know what, Brother Cheng, this dream is impressively realistic."

Cheng Shi shot him an odd glance, his gaze repeatedly sweeping over the man's nose.

'Bro, which one of us is the Clown here?'

'With the way you devote yourself completely to whatever you believe in, you actually think you'd have a dream this "treasonous"?''

But Cheng Shi didn't call him out directly. Instead, he smiled and greeted the imprisoned [Order].

"We meet again, great [Pride (Order)].

Ever since You bestowed upon me the subordinate status of [Order], I've been so busy restoring universal order that I simply haven't had time to report to You.

However, I believe actions speak louder than reports, and I trust You would never doubt my commitment to the universe's order.

But just in case the long silence tests Your patience and You revoke my credentials, I've come today to deliver a report in person — and I've brought a witness.

See? This is Your follower. He will testify to how incredibly hard I've been working to uphold universal order... and how utterly... exhausted I've been."

With that, Cheng Shi pushed Li Wufang in front of the codex and nudged his back with an elbow.

The Investigator was no fool. He immediately realized this was no "simple" audience. The Fate Weaver appeared to want him to give false testimony — all so he could squeeze more benefits out of Li Wufang's Benefactor.

Just as he'd said: the ideal outcome would be to swindle [Order]'s entire life savings.

He was conflicted. But having come this far, he could hardly stand in front of the codex and undermine the Fate Weaver. Besides, he had already betrayed his most cherished [Fate]. In that case, [Order] — which had originally existed as a tool for propagating [Fate]'s faith...

'Forgive me, my Benefactor. I'm already on the pirate ship. There's no turning back. I know You've always protected me, but the Fate Weaver said he's doing this for the sake of universal order.'

'Letting a "Proxy of Order" who can walk freely spread [Order]'s word is surely more useful than a Prisoner like You... right?'

After such heroic self-persuasion, Li Wufang squeezed out a fake smile.

He was a sunny, cheerful young man — one who loved to smile. But for the first time, he realized that smiling at a god could be this difficult.

"Praise the Benefactor. Praise the great [Order], whose radiance illuminates every corner of the universe.

Your devoted follower Li Wufang has come for an audience. I stake my... devotion as guarantee — every word the Fate Weaver has spoken is the absolute truth."

Hearing this, Cheng Shi beamed. But the codex did not stir.

It turned its pages slowly, emanating an aura that clearly said it didn't believe a single word from either of the "swindlers" before it.

A brief silence fell over the temple. After a short while, the codex hummed:

"[Void] is truly an abyss — one that drags every faith into its depths and corrupts them all.

Even my own follower cannot resist.

But do you really think such crude tricks can deceive me?

Imprisoned though I may be, I am still the supreme [Order]. I can feel whether the universe's order stands or falls. And in such turbulent times, you have the audacity to loudly trumpet your own accomplishments...

Laughable!

Were you afraid that I, imprisoned here for so long, might be too bored — so you staged a Clown circus for my entertainment?

Or is it that you want to take something from me again?"

Normally, having his scheme so thoroughly exposed, Cheng Shi would have been cringing with embarrassment.

But times had changed. The universe's order was accelerating toward collapse. Cheng Shi couldn't be bothered to act anymore. He knew that as long as [Order] still held any hope for the universe's order, it had no choice but to bet on him.

So he simply smiled:

"See? There's been a misunderstanding. I'm doing all of this to get universal order back on track!

The world is in chaos, and strength is king.

Great [Order], this is no longer the era when You shone brightly upon the world. In the era of [Void], those who acknowledge Your name are few and far between. An empty title with no real power has left even someone as eager to help as me unable to take a single step forward.

So in order to salvage the last vestiges of order, perhaps You could contribute a bit more of Your remaining heat — so I can better spread Your will.

Ahem — and in case Your understanding of the current era is a bit off, let me be more direct. Strength is everything. So any 'relics' that could boost my strength are welcome. Authority, Containers, things of that nature — I'll take whatever You've got."

After saying all that, Cheng Shi actually extended his hand toward the codex. His brazen expression plainly said:

'Hey, old man — drop some gold coins, will ya?'

"..."

Li Wufang was completely stupefied by this performance.

He blinked frantically at Cheng Shi. The razor-sharp mind he had cultivated through peak-level gameplay couldn't quite process such a "complex" scenario.

'Wait — so players can just ask gods for Authority directly?'

'Huh?'

'Is this how the game actually works?'

'Then what was the point of all those years I spent devoutly praying for talents and trials? What was the point of so faithfully awaiting my Benefactor's summons?'

'Did the Fate Weaver find some kind of backdoor in the game — or has my understanding of this entire game been wrong from the very beginning?!'

'If what I'm seeing right now is real... could I also ask my Benefactor for some Authority?'

'Compared to the Fate Weaver, I'm at least its actual follower. I've gotta be closer to order than a con man.'

At that thought, Li Wufang — his mind a complete mess — found his hand reaching out toward the codex as if possessed. He mumbled nervously:

"Me too."

"..."

"..."

Silence was the frozen page of today's temple.

...

Chapter 1207: A Better Choice

Li Wufang's outstretched hand actually made even Cheng Shi freeze for a moment.

He knew the Investigator who would stake his life on his faith was brave — but he hadn't expected him to be this brave.

'I've got my Benefactor backing me up, plus a whole faction of fear-aligned gods as insurance, so naturally I'm fearless. But you? What do you have?'

The instant Li Wufang extended his hand, he too realized he had made an enormous blunder. His expression stiffened, his entire body seized up, and he shot Cheng Shi a look that screamed for rescue.

Seeing this, Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow, trying not to burst out laughing.

'So the one backing you up is me? Well, alright then.'

A top-tier Clown would never let the show go cold. Cheng Shi switched gears in an instant, turned to the codex with perfect solemnity, and declared:

"You see? This is the current state of universal order. When even a devout [Order] follower is forced by external pressure to brazenly petition You for a bestowment, it proves that saving universal order has reached a point where not a single moment can be wasted.

Time may mean nothing to a deity, but to Your follower, every single second is irreplaceable.

You cannot measure a mortal's devotion across the vast span of a True God's perspective. Every second You waste here will double the suffering Your follower must endure on the road ahead.

Of course, in order to spread [Order]'s will, they would gladly embrace that suffering. But the steps of faith are finite, and You are not the only deity in this universe.

The slower they walk, the faster followers of other faiths advance. And when every footstep measuring devotion belongs to another faith, the god closest to Him will most certainly not be You.

Hesitate no longer, great [Order]! We are not racing against time for ourselves — we are racing for You!"

By the time he finished, even Kataro could barely stand to listen anymore. When it came to sheer audacity, there was no one in the entire universe who could match up — except the Benefactor — other than Lord Cheng Shi.

'No wonder he became [Void]'s darling.'

Li Wufang was dazed too. He hadn't realized he was this important. The way the Fate Weaver put it, his outstretched hand suddenly felt justified.

The codex still said nothing. It resumed turning its pages, the rustling sound echoing through the temple. After finding some clause within, It finally spoke after a long silence:

"Bestowing Authority upon a member of the Judgment Seat is indeed within the rules. But..."

"!!!"

Cheng Shi's spirit soared. He never expected that his audacious demand would actually yield a genuine concession. After all, last time his silver tongue had only earned him a title. It seemed that bringing an [Order] follower along as a cheering section really worked.

In that instant, the Investigator became a perfect ten on the useful-pawn scale in his eyes.

Cheng Shi pressed eagerly:

"But what? Whatever Your conditions, name them. As long as it's within my power, I'll deliver.

No need to mention spreading [Order]'s will — I've been steadfastly walking that path for a long time now. Committed and unwavering."

"..." The codex paused again, then sneered: "Lies. Never to be trusted.

The last time I believed you was because, as you yourself put it, I had no better choice.

But this time is different."

The codex's voice halted as It "looked" at Li Wufang and his outstretched hand.

"I should thank you for bringing me a devout follower.

I will bestow my Authority upon my own follower, so that he may carry my will into the world and act as [Order]'s Proxy.

Since you are so eager to restore universal order, surely you have no objection?"

"???"

Cheng Shi's expression changed dramatically. His eyes went wide, his gaze leaping between Li Wufang and the codex, as if he hadn't expected to shoot himself in the foot — his own clever scheme costing him the chance to get closer to the Authority.

The codex took note of this reaction and let out another cold snort.

It seemed to see right through everything.

Little did It know that at the very moment even Kataro was feeling sorry for Lord Cheng Shi, Cheng Shi's heart was blooming with joy.

'You think you can outplay me, old man?'

'Then you've severely underestimated me.'

On the surface, Cheng Shi's face was ashen. Inside, he was clicking his tongue with satisfaction.

The Investigator had long since been bound to the Destined Ones' pirate ship. So this trip was never about securing the Authority for himself — from the very start, his plan was to have Li Wufang inherit [Order]'s Authority!

After all, no matter how much Authority Cheng Shi personally amassed, he could never become the true [Order]. At most, he would end up like [Decay] — acting as a Proxy for a single aspect of [Order]'s Authority.

Given Cheng Shi's current position, he no longer needed to grow stronger against players, and proxying one more Authority would be equally useless against gods. Having or not having the Authority meant nothing to him.

But once that Authority fell into Li Wufang's hands, everything changed!

The Iron Law of [Order] was the sole dissenting vote at the Assembly of Gods Convention. And given what [Void] was up to — whether it was [Deceit] or [Fate] — neither could possibly earn the Iron Law's approval.

To secure that vote, or rather to kick it off the gods' table entirely, the only approach was to expose its false identity and restore the "true" [Order].

Cheng Shi could never become the "true [Order]," but Li Wufang was different. He was a genuine [Order] follower. Once he became a Proxy wielding [Order]'s Authority, and once they found [Order]'s Container, Cheng Shi would have the chance to maneuver alliances and enemies alike — recreating the moment when an Envoy cleverly seized a True God's Divine Throne, expelling the false [Order] from its seat!

And unlike before, Li Wufang was on their side — a fact already verified in other Slice Universes. With Cheng Shi's eye for people, he also trusted that Li Wufang would never betray him. If the plan to topple the Iron Law succeeded, that vote would no longer rest in the hands of the Fear Faction — it would rest in Cheng Shi's own.

This was of monumental importance to Cheng Shi's grand design. That was exactly why he had brought the Investigator along today for this performance of "please, take my seat."

What he hadn't anticipated was Li Wufang's impulsive hand-reaching perfectly complementing his scheme, nor that [Order] would relent this quickly.

Seeing everything unfold exactly as planned, Cheng Shi hid both his contributions and his glory.

The Investigator, on the other hand, stood rooted in place, still unable to accept that he was about to become the Proxy of his Benefactor's Authority.

'Am I... worthy?'

'When I originally chose [Order] at the start of my Path of Fate, wasn't it because there was no [Fate] to choose?'

'And now I'm being asked to uphold [Order]'s final will...'

Li Wufang looked at Cheng Shi, deeply wanting to tell his Benefactor: 'I think the Fate Weaver would be more effective as Your Proxy.'

But Cheng Shi read his expression and immediately, without a trace, passed him certain information.

Li Wufang understood. His heart jolted as he finally realized that the Fate Weaver's entire plan had never been for himself — it had always been for him!

This unfathomable Destined One had just casually handed over a True God's Authority!

In that moment, he recalled what Cheng Shi had said during the Destined Ones' meeting:

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

At the time, he had dismissed it as another one of the Fate Weaver's ploys to hoodwink them. But now...

The Authority had already arrived. Could godhood be far behind?

...

Chapter 1208: Become My Envoy — Take My Authority

"You don't trust me?"

Cheng Shi's tone carried equal parts shame and fury. He stepped forward, jabbing a finger at himself as he exclaimed:

"It was I who chose not to expose the fact that [Order] had been replaced — preserving [Order]'s last shred of dignity!

It was I who uncovered the past within the Sea of Desire and personally sent the [War] that had torn [Order] apart to a battlefield of certain death!

It was I who stopped [Oblivion] from throwing the Assembly of Gods Convention into chaos — safeguarding [Order]'s final measure of honor!

And it was I who spared no effort running everywhere to protect the universe's last remaining order — even risking discovery by my own Benefactor to bring [Order]'s follower here to see You!

And yet You would bestow this Authority upon Your follower?!

Is this right? Is this reasonable? Is this fair?!

Is [Order]'s so-called fairness nothing more than denying all effort and judging a person's devotion solely by how close their faith happens to be?

Hmph.

Then I must say — [Order]'s decline is well deserved!

This kind of order no longer merits my service."

With that, Cheng Shi flung his hand dismissively, shot the codex an ice-cold glance, and walked away.

Kataro looked left, looked right, his expression a masterpiece — then hurried after him. Only a shell-shocked Li Wufang was left standing alone before the endlessly turning pages of the codex, lost and bewildered.

The two left the temple one after the other. The instant they were out of [Order]'s line of sight, Kataro deftly summoned the yellow mist of chaos to envelop their forms, and together with Cheng Shi, they hid within the fog, peering back into the temple to watch what would unfold.

He was nervous. After a long internal debate, he finally couldn't hold back: "My lord, your performance was a bit..."

"Over the top?" Cheng Shi snorted a laugh.

Kataro paused, then relaxed considerably:

"So this was also part of your calculation. Kataro worried for nothing.

I assumed that since even I could tell you were acting, [Pride (Order)] would surely see through it. I never imagined you had deeper intentions. As expected of Lord Cheng Shi."

"..."

Cheng Shi shot Kataro an odd look: "You've been laying it on pretty thick lately. Did you mess something up?"

"Kataro would never dare!" The servant of [Void] went white as a sheet.

"Good.

There wasn't any deep meaning behind it. I simply wanted to vent.

I've been getting chewed out by everyone lately, and I had a bit of an epiphany — sometimes giving someone else a good scolding feels pretty great."

"..." Kataro's expression froze. Confused, he asked: "Then your plan..."

Cheng Shi chuckled softly:

"[Pride (Order)] probably saw through my scheme, so to prevent any further surprises, I had to leave the stage immediately.

Now Its choices are limited again.

Wufang is an honest man. The only time he ever deceives is to spread [Fate]'s faith. In here, he doesn't need to lie — all he has to do is tell his Benefactor what he knows, and It will see for Itself just how far universal order has fallen.

The Fun God will never release It, because [Pride (Order)] doesn't carry the Fear Faction's blood in its veins.

But Wufang is different. As long as he inherits everything from [Order], the Fun God might tolerate a new [Order].

After all, [Chaos] sitting in that seat only ever stirred up trouble. Regardless of whatever partnership They once had, times change — and so should the era."

Kataro listened in silence, head bowed in reverence. In that moment, he felt a faint but unmistakable echo — watching Lord Cheng Shi position his pieces on the board was strangely reminiscent of watching the Benefactor himself steer the fate of the universe. Both inspired the same deep sense of awe.

Outside the temple, two furtive figures continued to spy. Inside, the heart-to-heart between [Order] and its follower had begun.

Just as Cheng Shi had predicted, Li Wufang answered every question [Pride (Order)] asked honestly — with the sole exception of what he had just learned at the Destined Ones' meeting. Before long, the codex — imprisoned here for who knew how many ages — had a clear picture of everything transpiring in the current universe.

Though the perspective was colored by Li Wufang's subjectivity and the sources were limited, for a deity who knew every god inside and out, it was more than enough. It could piece together a complete picture of the current era from fragments alone — and slowly came to believe the things Cheng Shi had said.

The universe's order truly was reaching its final act. Even under the Convention's constraints, gods had begun to fall.

It knew this was not the end — but the beginning of order's collapse.

The codex fell silent. It hadn't expected the era's deterioration to be worse than its projections. Yet this only deepened its conviction that its choice had been correct.

It gently turned a page, reining in its pride, leveling its tone as much as possible, and spoke to Li Wufang in the guise of a "benevolent" Benefactor:

"I have been imprisoned here by [Chaos] and [Deceit] for far too long. Their methods have long since drained me of all divine power.

Even if I wished to bestow my Authority upon you, I could not bypass Their blockade.

There is only one way for you to inherit everything I have. And that is...

Pull out the Mockery Spikes driven into my body. Tear apart the Chaos Chains binding me. In the instant Their divine power destabilizes, I will be able to bestow my Authority upon you and recognize you as the Envoy that [Order] has elevated in this era — so that you may reclaim everything that belongs to [Order] at the Assembly of Gods Convention!

My follower, will you accept this great charge — and carry the last [Order] into the world?"

"!!!"

It wasn't just Li Wufang — even Cheng Shi and Kataro outside the temple held their breath.

Could it truly be that today, within this [Chaos] temple, a new Envoy would be born?

But if [Order] had no divine power, how had It bestowed the ring representing the Inquisitor's seat before?

He clearly remembered that the Mockery Spikes had loosened their hold, allowing [Pride (Order)]'s divine power to surge forth. Had the Fun God squeezed [Order] completely dry over time?

Setting all that aside — could the measures left behind by the Fun God even be undone by a mortal?

Cheng Shi turned to Kataro, only to find Kataro equally baffled.

He knew the Benefactor had imprisoned [Pride (Order)] here, but whether It could be released, and how — the Benefactor had never given instructions on that.

Even if [Pride (Order)] had ulterior motives and was trying to use Li Wufang's hands to break free...

The question was: could Li Wufang actually do it?

A mortal, breaking through the Benefactor's cage?

No matter how absurd the era of [Void] might be, surely it couldn't be that absurd?

While Cheng Shi was suspicious and Kataro was confused, the Investigator also furrowed his brow cautiously and asked:

"Forgive my impudence, my Benefactor. I am but a mortal. How could I possibly pull out [Deceit]'s spikes or tear apart [Chaos]'s chains?"

The codex's page-turning ceased, and It let out a cold laugh.

"Perhaps this was an oversight on Their part. Or perhaps this was always part of [Deceit]'s calculation.

When They joined forces to imprison me, They presumably never anticipated that many years later, a human would stand before me. So while these spikes and chains may be formidable against gods, to a mortal they pose no threat whatsoever.

The last time that Clown came, I assumed [Deceit] had given him the power to release me. But his greed showed me everything I needed to know.

This time, I trust only my follower.

Investigator — as my follower, you have no reason to stand still on [Order]'s road.

Your hesitation does not merit the right to wield my Authority. But I truly have no other choice.

[Civilization]'s fire rises. [Order] endures eternal!

For [Order] to endure, you must shoulder everything.

Pull out the spikes. Unchain the shackles. Become my Envoy. Take my Authority.

In the era of [Void], [Order] must raise its voice — and that voice must ring with iron resolve!

Regardless of what [Deceit] and Its follower are scheming, do not let hesitation destroy [Order]'s path. And do not make me question my own choice.

Look into your heart and ask yourself: does this era still have order? Does this era still need order?!"

...

Chapter 1209: Who Walked into Whose Trap

To a liar's ears, [Pride (Order)]'s words sounded exactly like the honeyed persuasion of a prisoner plotting a jailbreak.

But Cheng Shi didn't move. He even held back the restless Kataro.

With a slight frown, he murmured:

"[Order] won't run. Because It knows Its appearance would only plunge the current universe into greater chaos.

The gods would have to decide between two [Orders], and choosing sides would mean taking a stance. But right now, nearly the entire universe is under the Fear Faction's influence. If It realizes that, It will know that the moment It escapes and blows the lid off this secret, the gods led by the Fun God will side with the Iron Law of [Order] and formally legitimize the [Chaos] that stole Its nest.

That would hand the Fun God the chance to claim the Iron Law's vote.

So if It chose to 'break out' now, It would only let our Benefactor reap the benefits.

It's prideful, not stupid. It wouldn't do something that foolish.

But It's definitely trying to do something in the meantime. The one thing I can't figure out is — even if It breaks free of Its chains, what can It actually do..."

Kataro marveled at Lord Cheng Shi's astuteness, though he shared the same confusion. He peered into the temple and saw that Li Wufang's expression of doubt was even heavier than that of the two onlookers.

Li Wufang bowed deeply, the very picture of devotion.

"My Benefactor, the universe will always need order. But I am neither Your Chosen One nor a man of great merit. I don't know if I can bear such a burden..."

"Divine decree cannot be defied. Divine gifts cannot be refused."

The codex's icy voice cut him off, and the frenetic rustling of pages once again filled the air.

"This is no longer a question of whether you can or cannot. You must!

Do not let your cowardice plunge the universe into lawlessness!"

The struggle on Li Wufang's face deepened further. He desperately wanted to run back and catch up with Cheng Shi — to ask whether this so-called "path to godhood" required shouldering a fallen god's will.

He wasn't afraid of carrying the weight. He was afraid that his failure would lead the Destined Ones to an unfortunate end.

He wanted to lend a hand to destiny, but only on the condition that he didn't drag destiny into the abyss.

Seeing the follower remain indecisive, the codex grew increasingly agitated and finally played its trump card.

"Think about the man who brought you here. Do you really believe he left?"

Hmph — the fact that he hasn't appeared to stop you proves he, too, hopes you will take everything I have.

I know his schemes. But I trust my follower more!"

"..."

Li Wufang was swayed.

[Pride (Order)]'s analysis of Cheng Shi's attitude finally convinced him. He nodded resolutely and asked with determination:

"What should I do?"

"Good child. Step forward and grant me release."

Li Wufang harbored no suspicion. He walked toward the codex with steady steps. It was his first time sensing a deity's presence at such close range — the fine creases on the codex's cover, the light and shadow playing within its pages, the faintly leaking breath of [Order] inscribed with weariness... and a vague, indescribable flicker of hope.

He assumed it was [Order]'s relief at finally passing on Its legacy. He had no idea that from the very beginning, every single person had misread Its intentions.

The moment Li Wufang reached for the spike, a string pulled taut in Cheng Shi's mind suddenly snapped. His breath caught, his pupils contracted.

"Wait — don't!"

But the warning came one step too late.

The Investigator's hand passed through the cage woven from [Deceit]'s power and [Chaos]'s power without the slightest resistance. He pressed his palm against the Mockery Spike and with a gentle tug, ripped free both the spike and the chains that had imprisoned [Pride (Order)] for untold ages — all in one motion.

The cage that had held a True God captive tore apart like flimsy window paper, punctured by a mortal atop the highest temple.

By the time Li Wufang heard Cheng Shi's shout, it was too late. His face went pale with shock as he spun around — only to see Cheng Shi leap down from within the yellow mist of chaos and reappear before him, just as his Benefactor had said: the Destined One had never left.

But the expression on Cheng Shi's face was strange and complex — so much so that even an Investigator like Li Wufang couldn't pin a name on the tangle of emotions.

Cheng Shi's eyes were indeed complicated. Among the many emotions, the most dominant was undoubtedly shock.

He stared in disbelief at the liberated [Pride (Order)] and managed, after a moment of stunned silence:

"Why?"

The codex, freed from its shackles, floated above their heads. Its cover blazed with golden light. Pages peeled away one by one, spinning like leaves, drifting down like rain. The commands of law sang in soaring chorus, and [Order]'s grand voice thundered across the heavens.

The fallen pages curled upward from the ground, spiraling back to wrap the now-bare, shriveled codex — nothing but its cover — into a tight sphere. It looked like a chrysalis awaiting metamorphosis, or a burial shroud encasing a corpse.

From on high, It gazed down upon the stunned Cheng Shi, the terrified Kataro, the fear-stricken Li Wufang. First It let out a scoff, then spoke in a tone laced with wistful self-mockery:

"Time and again I've proclaimed myself the orthodox, the builder of [Civilization], the vanquisher of [Chaos], the one who held [Void] in contempt. And yet here I am, at this moment, forced to draw closer to [Void] in this manner.

This is the one thing I learned from [Deceit]. A lie.

My follower, I deceived you.

As a shattered fragment of [Order], I lost all Authority long ago. Otherwise, how could [Chaos] have stolen my Divine Throne without a single god noticing?

Bestowing the Judgment Seat was already the limit of what I could do. The Authority and Container you seek... are the very things I, too, wish to reclaim."

The codex's gaze swept over Li Wufang and Cheng Shi, then turned to the universe beyond the temple.

In that moment, in everyone's eyes, It no longer resembled [Pride (Order)]. It looked more like the complete [Order] — the one once affirmed by Origin itself.

"Not every question in this world has an answer. You ask 'why,' but how would you know that for all these years, I too have wished to ask the same?

I do not know what He is doing. I only know that I am [Order] — and this universe needs order!"

The instant the words faded, all sound vanished around the page-wrapped sphere of the codex.

Countless fractures erupted across the paper in an instant, like golden veins reframing the codex anew. But that radiant spectacle lasted no more than a single breath. The next second, the gold dimmed, [Order] faded, and the pride that had once disdained Its prison finally submitted within this temple that was never Its own.

The codex dissolved. It crumbled without a sound.

As a fragment of [Order], Its death was not like that of other True Gods. It didn't even disturb the universe beyond the temple walls.

Its departure was quiet. Hasty. And yet profoundly stirring.

Watching the golden light scatter like rain, Kataro and Li Wufang were left completely stupefied.

They could never have imagined that the True God who, just moments ago, had seemed intent on "escaping" would choose to self-annihilate the instant It was freed.

Before dying, It had said: this universe needs order.

If that was Its will, then why did It choose to perish?!

[Order] was dead. Where would the universe find its order now?

Only Cheng Shi had guessed what [Pride (Order)] intended to do. Because Its words had been "step forward and grant me release" — not "break my chains and receive my Authority."

'What a "release" indeed!'

He simply hadn't expected [Pride (Order)]'s desired release to be this decisive.

'Why?'

The question surfaced in his mind once more.

Without a doubt, the Fun God must have foreseen this — perhaps even expressed His approval of [Order]'s self-annihilation by choosing not to appear.

Otherwise, how could a fragment of a True God that still had remaining value possibly self-destruct before three mortals?

But why had [Pride (Order)] done this, and what had shifted in the Fun God's attitude toward It? All of it remained shrouded in questions.

Cheng Shi gazed up at the temple's ceiling in a daze, then looked at the other two beside him. But in their eyes, he found nothing but an even deeper bewilderment.

Li Wufang was equal parts horrified and stunned. His mouth opened and closed several times before he managed to squeeze out:

"Was this also... destiny?"

Cheng Shi clenched his fist, his expression complicated, and nodded:

"Perhaps. But not yours or mine."

...

Chapter 1210: The Resounding Voice of [Order]

The first to sense [Pride (Order)]'s demise were not other gods, but the players currently in [Order]'s trial settlement.

These bewildered players only noticed that today's final judgment was exceptionally harsh. Even those who hadn't violated a single rule throughout the trial were still sentenced to lashings with no right of appeal.

The players suffered in silence, blaming the game for growing ever more difficult, endlessly squeezing humanity's survival space.

They thought [Order] had gone mad. But [Order] wasn't mad — It was afraid.

[Fear (Order)], as the embodiment of [Order]'s will within the trials, immediately retreated to a dazzling starry sky the moment Its "work" ended.

Another fragment of It "dwelled" here. The moment the Judgment Chair beheld the Scales forged of flowing starlight, It spoke in terror:

"It's dead! Can you feel it? It's dead! [Order] is no longer complete!

[Deceit] must have killed It. [Deceit] is finally making Its move against us!

I knew it — all those excuses about '[Pride (Order)] leaving of its own accord out of arrogance' were lies! [Deceit] imprisoned It and then killed It!

Now It has enough votes. Order is disposable to It. It's starting — It's coming for us!

[Justice (Order)]! Look at me! Tell me you still stand with me!!"

Terror poured ceaselessly from the Judgment Chair, but the Flowing Light Scales remained unmoved. They merely hummed:

"You are afraid."

"Of course I'm afraid! The universe is about to lose [Order] entirely — are you not afraid?!"

"But you are [Order]. And I am [Order]. [Order] has lost only one of its own. How can you speak of losing everything?"

"I..."

The Judgment Chair was struck speechless. After a moment, It cried out in mingled shock and fury:

"I'm trapped inside the trials! You're locked within the Convention! This was all [Deceit]'s plan! When It pushed for the Convention's signing, It had ulterior motives from the start — to throw the universe into chaos and achieve Its [Void] objectives!

Out there, the only one left is that fool Iron Law of [Order] who doesn't even know its own identity! Are you really going to pin the last hope of universal order on [Chaos]?!

Absurd!

'If I can make [Chaos] convert to [Order], will you agree to build a Faith Game with me?'

Listen to that! Those were the lies It used to deceive us all! And you still haven't woken up, [Justice (Order)]?!'

It's all a sham! All of it!!"

The Flowing Light Scales remained calm, responding to the Judgment Chair's questions at a measured, unhurried pace.

They said:

"You are afraid. [Deceit] is also afraid. If that is so, then why would you fear It?"

"?"

The Judgment Chair was stunned. For a fleeting instant, It even suspected that [Deceit] had long since dealt with [Justice (Order)] and taken Its place — that what stood before It now was not a fragment sharing Its origin at all, but [Deceit] Itself.

At the thought, It grew even more terrified.

"You... who are you, really?"

"I am [Justice (Order)]. A fragment of [Order]. The rules of the Convention. And I am also His..."

"Enough! Don't say it — please, don't say it!" The Judgment Chair shrieked, recoiling frantically, as if unable to face whatever the Scales were about to say next.

The Flowing Light Scales fell silent. After a long pause, They spoke in a distant, contemplative tone:

"This is our fate, and [Order]'s final destination. For the universe to possess order, you and I must eventually die.

Without sweeping away the old order, how can the new be born?

The sound of [Order]'s fall will be the resounding first note of a new order's symphony."

The Judgment Chair went mad. It roared at the Scales: "I am [Order]! If I die, what order will the universe have?!"

The Flowing Light Scales' tone remained devoid of joy or sorrow. Yet what They said made the Judgment Chair freeze cold to the core.

"True order does not rest in your hands or mine. We..."

...are nothing more than His tools."

...

"[Order] must raise its voice — and that voice must ring with iron resolve!"

Those were [Pride (Order)]'s last words before self-annihilation. Yet It had died without a sound. How could that possibly count as "ringing with iron resolve"?

Cheng Shi had a splitting headache. Not only did he need to decipher what schemes lurked behind the codex's dissolution, but he also lamented the lost opportunity to claim [Order]'s Authority.

He had assumed the [Chaos] temple held buried treasure. Instead of treasure, he'd gotten himself covered in trouble.

[Order]'s other fragments — one was inside the trials, the other locked within the Convention. Given his track record, wringing any benefit from those two seemed unlikely. That left only the Iron Law of [Order] as a possible source of [Order]'s Authority.

Cheng Shi wasn't deliberately collecting [Order]'s Authority. It was simply that among the gods no longer "sitting in their seats," [Order] had been the easiest to "approach."

His reason for wanting [Order]'s Authority was the same as his plan to salvage [War]'s Authority — he needed to amass as much power as possible to counter the risks from the Real Universe... and the risks from [Void].

Now it seemed he had been outmaneuvered. The Fun God had likely known his intentions all along and, together with [Pride (Order)], had used him in turn.

'As expected — not a single simple character among the gods.'

He stood in the temple, brow furrowed in deep thought. Li Wufang, having "made a mistake," naturally didn't dare interrupt. He could only exchange hushed words with Kataro, who stood equally at a loss.

Li Wufang's head was bursting with questions, and he had no idea where to begin. But catching sight of Kataro's devout expression, a sudden flash of inspiration struck, and he asked:

"Brother Cheng... is he actually human or a god?"

Kataro's heart clenched. 'As expected of an Investigator — he picked up on the clues.' But without Lord Cheng Shi's explicit permission, he certainly couldn't speak freely. So he could only avert his gaze and look up toward the temple ceiling.

As fate would have it, that casual upward glance was all Li Wufang needed to connect the dots!

'Mortals and gods occupy different planes. If mortals are the dirt beneath our feet, then gods are undoubtedly the stars overhead. Kataro looked up — doesn't that mean Brother Cheng is a god?!'

Li Wufang held his breath in an instant. He stole a glance at Cheng Shi. He should have realized sooner that the player who understood the universe's truth and led them in rebellion against [Fate] couldn't possibly be a mere mortal. What ordinary mortal would dare to challenge the authority of the gods — or even discuss the Creator seated atop the Real Universe?

But when the realization truly struck — that the brother standing beside him was a god — Li Wufang still felt a wave of disorientation.

He scrutinized Cheng Shi for a long time, then in a moment of heated impulse blurted out:

"Brother Cheng, what's your Divine Name?"

"?"

Cheng Shi froze, his train of thought derailed. He gave Li Wufang a strange look and rattled off his emergency contingency response without a second thought.

He figured now was not the time to come clean with the Destined Ones. Besides, announcing his own identity felt far too strange.

"My life is your life. The fates of us Destined Ones have long been bound together."

"..."

Li Wufang was dumbfounded. In his muddled state, it didn't even occur to him to question whether Cheng Shi was brushing him off. He was even wondering whether he'd genuinely misheard — had he confused his own pronunciations?

'No way, right?'

He turned to Kataro, only to find the quick-witted servant offering a slight smile and a nod:

"My life belongs to the Benefactor — and also to the Lord."

'Which lord?'

Li Wufang couldn't tell. All he knew was that Kataro had seized upon his confusion to deliver one magnificent piece of flattery to that mysterious "Lord."

...