

The Gods 1241

Chapter 1241: The Corpse Field of Gods

If witnessing [War]'s swarms being erased had been the most terrifying sight Hong Lin had ever experienced, what lay before her now was testing the absolute limits of this Druid's capacity for fear.

Observing from afar and standing in the thick of it were entirely different sensations. Watching countless gods inexplicably disintegrate around her — that apocalyptic dread nearly crushed Hong Lin's nerves entirely.

She went numb. She even thought she was hallucinating.

Cheng Shi felt the same.

The moment he realized what he was standing in, his instinctive reaction was to snap his fingers and get out — now!

But this time, his body reacted to the terror faster than his brain. His spasming hands wouldn't stop trembling. He couldn't even muster the strength to snap.

Qin Xin, bolstered by [War]'s Authority, was the only one still standing straight — but just barely.

Among the three, he was the only one who hadn't witnessed [War]'s fall in the Real Universe. The scene before him thoroughly filled that "gap."

Not that he'd ever wanted it filled.

The sensation was shattering. Like obtaining superhuman power that didn't belong to mortals, ready to make your mark — only to discover that beings who once possessed that very power had long since perished in unnamed corners.

And not just one. A horde of them.

In this lightless expanse of sky — more like a corpse pit than a starscape:

Tentacles everywhere, withered like dead vines. Boundless green canopies, severed from all life. Enormous skulls, stacked into thrones. [Life] — continuing no more.

Flowing Light Scales, corroded and dim. The Starlight Canon, its pages torn and scattered. Red flames gone silent, leaving only blood rain. [Civilization] — unable to carry on.

And further still: bodies of rotting wood all shattered, collapsing pupils frozen stiff, white miasma eyes rolling like gravel, silent puppets falling en masse, broken upon landing... [Descent], [Chaos] — none spared either.

Memories fractured and scattered. Time knotted and warped. Faint stars drained of all color. Spirals ceased their spin...

Those once-lofty gods had now become the cheapest things in this space. Their divine power dissolved, their corpses strewn everywhere. They hadn't even uttered a cry before death — just silently received their ending.

Falling Authority-light passed through the three figures. Cheng Shi fought back his terror, extending a trembling hand to feel the ownerless Authority drift through his palm and continue its descent. For a moment, he was dazed.

This was Authority. The most sacred thing in the universe. The Creator's seal of legitimacy for the true gods. And now it was just... ethereal, gossamer rain, falling with no one to care.

As initial horror faded with time, as the soul-shattering shock dulled through adaptation, the three finally regained their senses. They exchanged glances — couldn't even make out each other's faces clearly — seeing only the helpless shock and contorted fear in one another's eyes.

"This is..."

Hong Lin was the first to speak — only to clap her hand over her mouth in even greater terror the next second.

If the gods themselves died in silence, what mortal dared raise their voice here?!

Thankfully, the sky remained quiet. No one — no, no god had noticed their presence. Nor would any god notice.

They were all dead.

Cheng Shi's vision slowly sharpened. He pulled out the [Corruption] Container again, draining the fear from all three. Seeing that no immediate danger lurked, he began examining their surroundings in earnest.

In truth, once fear was stripped away, everything here became startlingly straightforward.

The gods raining down weren't dying in this particular sky. They had already been dead before arriving.

This place was more like a graveyard for burying gods — no, a mass grave. And the buried were gods from every world.

Watching the endless rain of disintegrating remains, Cheng Shi even wondered: did all gods who perished in the Creator's experiment end up here?

How else to explain the staggering, incalculable numbers?

Brow furrowed, Cheng Shi gazed at the chaotic white-miasma eyes plummeting in the distance. Without even realizing it, he murmured:

"So this is the answer to your foolish act, [Folly]?"

"..."

The other two shot Cheng Shi a strange look. Even with the Container absorbing their emotions, they both felt a peculiar something stir inside.

But they paid him no further mind. The opportunity was rare. Nobody knew how this "spacetime leap" accident had occurred. But since they had found this place, of course they had to investigate.

Searching for [Silence]'s corpse had been for information. Here, there was clearly far more to find. And so the only three living beings in this starscape began scouring the Corpse Field of Gods.

The search yielded something extraordinary.

In this ocean of corpses, remains of every god could be found — with exactly two exceptions.

One was [Corruption]. The other was [Fate]!

Even [Deceit]'s shattered, sealed eyes of starlight could be found beneath this sky.

Honestly, when Cheng Shi first saw the Fun God's "corpse," the terror and shock surging through him exceeded even the Container's absorption capacity.

[Deceit]'s remains weren't as tangible as the other gods'. Like the chaotic memory-fields spawned by [Memory]'s death, or the warped time left by [Time]'s demise, [Deceit] in death appeared as an eternally fading painting of stars hung at the edge of the sky.

Every star in it had dimmed. Only in the fractured outlines could one still see they had once spiraled together.

They plummeted in freeze-frame, like an entire sky collapsing in sheets. It was more beautiful than any other god's fall — yet it was difficult to appreciate with a smile.

Even though He had once embodied joy and laughter.

But with his emotions drained, Cheng Shi didn't dwell too deeply in dread. He kept searching through the corpse field, yet never found the remains of [Corruption] or [Fate].

He shared the discovery with the other two. Big Cat was stunned. Qin Xin was puzzled.

Qin Xin frowned: "Since [Deceit] is identical to [Fate] in appearance, how can you be certain those cascading stars are [Deceit] and not [Fate]?"

"Authority." Cheng Shi's face was dead serious. "I can feel the Authority falling from them. Although it's useless to me, every time that Authority passes by, I can resonate with the 'laughter' within it.

He was already dead, and yet He was still laughing...

I don't think [Fate] would do that. So I believe the fading stars are [Deceit]."

Qin Xin nodded, accepting the reasoning.

"[Fate] at least leaves some traces. If it's not here, it's simply not here.

But [Corruption]... what's the story there?

I haven't sensed even the faintest imagery of the Sea of Desire. Nor has anything here stirred a tidal wave of desire. Cheng Shi — could whatever you're holding be interfering with our perception of desire?

To be thorough, let's remove it and try again?"

The suggestion snapped Cheng Shi awake. He quickly stowed the [Corruption] Container, letting the tumultuous emotions flood back. Enduring the fear, he searched one more time.

Still nothing.

[Corruption] had left absolutely no trace here.

Facing this fact, a bold conjecture suddenly flared in Hong Lin's mind.

"If [Corruption]'s corpse isn't in the mass grave, does that mean He never died?"

The words had barely left her mouth before she dismissed them herself.

"No, that doesn't hold either. Surely not every world's [Corruption] survived?"

"!!!"

Hearing this, Cheng Shi's eyes went wide.

He had to admit — what Hong Lin said was entirely possible.

But the same logic applied to [Fate]. No corpse here — did that mean every world's [Fate]... had survived?

Wouldn't that prove [Fate]'s choice was the universe's ultimate answer? That fixed destiny was the only path to survival?!

'No, no, no!'

'Wrong!'

After [War] charged upward, countless worlds had clearly been destroyed by the Creator's hand. Among them there had to be gods of [Fate]. So why wasn't a single [Fate] corpse here?

Cheng Shi focused his thoughts, sensing they had gotten one thing wrong.

This place was perhaps not the Corpse Field of the Creator's entire experiment. More likely, only gods who died in the Real Universe were "dumped" here.

Which meant that many gods had come to the Real Universe for various reasons — but [Corruption] and [Fate] were never among them!

[Corruption] was easy to understand. He had never shown His face. Desire spread itself.

But [Fate]!

If all the above was correct, then even knowing the Real Universe existed, [Fate] had never once shifted His gaze. He sat in His own world, singlemindedly guarding fixed destiny until the world crumbled — and never once let go!

He was like a terrifying obsessive — seeing nothing beyond fixed destiny. Nothing but fixed destiny!

A [Fate] this fanatical — could what He clung to truly be the universe's answer?

A chill crept up Cheng Shi's spine. Unexplainable dread seized his heart.

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Chapter 1242: A Sound That Stops the Heart

Ordinary people could rarely pierce through appearances to glimpse the essence. Much less could three "mortals" hope to glimpse the essence of the Real Universe.

The Corpse Field had indeed spawned many new conjectures for Cheng Shi, but they still couldn't unveil this place's secrets.

He didn't know how it operated, nor why dead gods were "transported" here. One thing was beyond question, though: this was undoubtedly part of the terrible Creator's experiment — possibly a dump for "discarded waste," or perhaps a recycling ground for "reusable consumables."

Given his perspective and knowledge, that was as far as he could reason.

Of course, this accidental "trip" wasn't entirely fruitless. At minimum, Cheng Shi had confirmed one thing: the [Silence] "corpse" he'd encountered earlier in the Real Universe was indeed not dead!

If He had truly perished, He would most likely end up like the Leaking World Silent Puppets in this field — dismembered here, rather than drifting in solitude.

This deepened Cheng Shi's puzzlement.

[Silence] being alive wasn't hard to understand. If mortals could reach the Real Universe, how much more so an immortal god?

The question was: what was He doing?

Just floating through the Real Universe, passively spreading His will?

No — that didn't add up. He hadn't assimilated any nearby life. His behavior was more like turning his body into a trap. But that would only make people despise, reject, and abandon Him. Hardly a method of spreading will.

Furthermore, any god who would leave the soil of His faith and choose to drift through the Real Universe had presumably seen His slice universe destroyed. [Silence] must therefore know the truth — that the Real Universe was just part of a grander experiment. So why still practice His own will? Why display devotion to the cold-hearted Experiment Master?

Just to survive?

Reasonable, but something felt off.

Cheng Shi sensed something was wrong but lacked enough intelligence data to piece it together.

The three lingered anxiously in the Corpse Field a little longer. Finding no further useful information, Qin Xin suggested:

"Time to go back. The longer this accident drags on, the more unpredictable variables accumulate.

"We've gathered enough... gains from this trip. Let's leave."

Hong Lin nodded, wanting nothing more than to immediately flee this terrifying place. Cheng Shi, however, frowned slightly and cast one look downward, into the infinite depths.

He was about to speak when Hong Lin clamped a hand over his mouth.

"You promised just one look!"

Cheng Shi blinked, then patted Big Cat's hand. His muffled voice came out: "This chance only comes once."

"!!!" Big Cat was frantic. "I knew it! Every time it comes to this, you charge in while I'm the cautious one."

Fear flickered through her eyes. She looked down into the depths of the starry pit, then at the countless divine corpses piled around it. Every muscle tensed. She gave a firm nod:

"Fine. One look. Stay behind me."

With that, Hong Lin clenched her jaw and dove toward the abyss below.

Cheng Shi's expression was grim as he followed. Qin Xin took up the rear without being asked. He knew he was their lifeline. If anything went wrong ahead, he had to deploy every ounce of Authority to pull these two from danger.

The three fell in single file, accelerating. Divine corpses streaked past them in increasing density. The radius of the corpse-stacked pit was narrowing. The suffocating pressure of tidal fear made breathing near impossible.

They couldn't tell how deep the pit went. Thankfully, the depths were as devoid of immediate danger as the surface.

Repetitive scenery numbed the senses fastest. The longer they fell, the more the three adapted to the endless abyss and the rain of corpses streaming past.

But accidents always struck when vigilance was lowest. Just as the three were discussing whether to stop and cease their risky descent, a vast, resonant voice suddenly erupted from the "wall" of the corpse pit — not far below.

The voice was profoundly abstract, as though it detonated directly inside the brain while simultaneously echoing in their ears.

"The gods..."

It hit without warning — like an invisible hand seizing all three hearts and squeezing them still. They froze mid-fall in the deep shaft.

Qin Xin's hands and feet went instantly cold, his entire body numb. His last shred of consciousness activated [War]'s Authority. He grabbed the other two and rocketed upward — only to discover, upon touching them, that both had gone white as chalk, stiff as dead wood, too terrified to move a muscle.

Though the sudden sound was frightening enough, he hadn't expected players as powerful as Cheng Shi and Hong Lin to collapse like this.

Qin Xin didn't have time to investigate. Head down, he hauled them upward at full speed. Then the next second, his consciousness, too, was obliterated — because the voice thundered once more in his mind:

"...are extinguished. The universe... disintegrates. This is...

Origin!"

"!!!!!"

In the final second before awareness faded, Qin Xin gritted his teeth and triggered the tool's effect. [Memory]'s power reached through the Corpse Field, plucked him and Hong Lin free, and reprinted them onto the Spacetime Dolphin Bridge.

Yes — Qin Xin and Hong Lin vanished.

But Cheng Shi had not!

He remained in this abyss, its depths alive with echoing murmurs!

The deepest, most primal fear had driven Qin Xin to execute the retreat plan flawlessly. But in that moment, he hadn't had the capacity to consider whether Cheng Shi was using the same extraction method.

Don't forget: Cheng Shi had come here relying on his own [Time] talent as a failsafe. So when Qin Xin activated the tool, Cheng Shi was naturally left behind.

Fortunately, his companions' disappearance jolted Cheng Shi awake, ripping him from the bottomless terror. Face white with horror, he looked toward the source of the sound below and, without thinking, nearly snapped his—

He didn't snap. He held it.

Right now, Cheng Shi wasn't being Cheng Steady. He was being Cheng Shrewd!

He immediately pulled out the [Corruption] Container, drained the flood of fear, then his brow furrowed — and once again, at this crossroads of life and death, he gambled!

He bet this voice did not belong to Origin!

Exactly. The reason Cheng Shi and Hong Lin had broken down was that they had both heard Origin's voice before. Cheng Shi had heard it more than once. And at the Assembly of Gods Convention where [Oblivion] destroyed itself, Hong Lin had been "fortunate" enough to hear the "divine oracle."

So when they heard a voice identical to Origin's, both had simply shattered.

Qin Xin had never heard it, so it didn't strike him the same way. But when the voice spoke Origin's name, even he couldn't stifle his most primal fear and chose to evacuate.

The clearheaded Cheng Shi wouldn't leave so quickly. Because he knew: if this voice truly came from Origin... then fleeing or staying made no difference.

If He wanted the trespassing mortals dead, He wouldn't need to make a sound.

But if He didn't intend to punish them, why speak up at all?

Remember — when entire swarms of [War] charged Him in formation, that spectacle hadn't earned even a passing glance from the Creator. Why would the merciless Creator descend His voice upon three "mortals"?

Therefore, the source of that voice was absolutely not Him!

Nor could it be a god.

This was a graveyard for fallen gods. Any god here would be dead. They couldn't possibly survive here, much less be "sent" here alive.

So the very existence of this voice was strange enough.

Stranger still was its content — tantamount to blasphemy against the divine countenance.

'The gods are extinguished. The universe disintegrates. This is Origin!'

Listen to that — what kind of declaration was that?!

Before, only Origin had ever passed judgment on the gods. Since when was some "person" allowed to pass judgment on Origin?

This was practically declaring that Origin was the culprit who toppled the world and shattered the universe!

Judging by that statement alone, whoever issued this voice might not even be an enemy. They could be some Fear Faction survivor hiding here to avoid Origin's scrutiny!

At this thought, Cheng Shi's gaze sharpened. He steeled himself and sent Shadow Cheng Shi out.

He had to know what was hiding here "impersonating" Origin, and what purpose had driven it to emit that sound.

Just one look. One look at most!

Cheng Shi held his fingers in a death grip over the snap, waiting for Shadow Cheng Shi's report.

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Chapter 1243: The True Divine Throne

It was a dark tunnel cut into the wall of the corpse pit.

Only by circling past the divine corpses stacked at the front could one discover the gap behind them. Inside flickered iridescent specks of light, swirling with kaleidoscopic mist — utterly incongruent against the black-and-white canvas of dead gods.

Shadow Cheng Shi stopped here and dared not proceed further, because ahead there was not a single shadow left to hide in.

One more step meant full exposure in the chromatic glow. He asked himself again and again: was this risk worth taking?

Cheng Shi was torn as well. His heart kept insisting that if real danger existed here, he would already be dead. Yet he had to consider whether this mysterious sound source might be a trap — just like [Silence]'s drifting corpse in the Real Universe.

Leave it alone and nothing happens. Insist on looking, and problems arise.

Fate Has Divergence still hadn't finished cooling down. To ensure safety, the [Fate] faith remained on his main body. That meant if danger struck, the [Deceit]-empowered Shadow Cheng Shi had virtually no way to—

Wait!

He could turn to mist!

Cheng Shi's spirits surged. The deep tunnel ahead was filled with mist, and [Deceit] fused with [Chaos] could merge into mist. Could this be his one and only means of breaking through?

After a moment's deliberation, Cheng Shi did exactly that — he let Shadow Cheng Shi dissolve into smoke, blending with the mist, and peered inward from an omniscient vantage.

What he saw was a scene he would never forget for the rest of his life.

At the end of the unfathomably deep tunnel, a hidden world opened up. Beyond the passage, within a space self-contained by that iridescent mist, a massive Divine Throne stood at a slant.

The throne resembled two triangles pressed tip to tip — shattered, fractured, fissured throughout. A closer look revealed it was not a single throne that had broken apart, but rather countless miscellaneous fragments of divine corpses assembled into one horrifying, gargantuan chair.

This was a true "Divine" Throne!

And through the crevices beneath the seat, dense, kaleidoscopic mist wove in and out, grinding against the throne's surface to produce that teeth-grating, soul-chilling sound:

"The gods... are extinguished. The universe... disintegrates. This is... Origin..."

"!!!"

Cheng Shi was stunned. He had expected a survivor hiding in here. Instead, the voice was a dead sound — mist flowing through the throne's cracks!

The sound fluctuated in volume, mechanical and repetitive. At its quietest, you couldn't hear it even by pressing your ear to the throne. At its loudest, the sound carried only to the tunnel's midpoint.

Seeing this, Cheng Shi frowned. He guessed that their rapid descent had caused spatial ripples that altered the mist's flow rate, which was why they had heard the dead material's lament outside the tunnel.

But this was no accident.

Setting aside how the throne had been assembled — the mere fact that iridescent mist flowing through crevices in a throne could produce comprehensible syllables could not possibly be a coincidence of corpses tumbling together.

Someone had deliberately assembled this throne and placed it here.

But who?

Cheng Shi couldn't guess. Rather than puzzle over the builder's identity, observing the present scene was clearly more productive.

Even with his mind overloading, Cheng Shi needed only two laps around the throne to spot something vital.

The "corpse fragment" materials in this throne were remarkably "comprehensive." Every type of divine corpse found in the pit had a corresponding piece in the throne — except, again, for [Corruption] and [Fate].

Several sections in the throne's backrest were hollow. Cheng Shi studied them carefully, tracing the grain of the fragments, and concluded this was a "work in progress."

These hollows were meant to be filled with additional material. But no matter how thoroughly Cheng Shi searched the space, he couldn't find any fragments to complete the throne.

At first this puzzled him. But soon the reason dawned on him.

Because the missing materials simply weren't here.

Those gaps were most likely reserved for [Corruption] and [Fate]!

And as luck would have it, these very hollows, combined with the crevices between the throne's fragments, formed the channels through which the mist flowed, producing those distinct syllables.

And the kaleidoscopic mist saturating this space was the twisted posthumous remains of [Chaos]...

Outside, [Chaos]'s corpse-fragments were scattered and hard to identify. Through faith resonance, Cheng Shi had only found a few. But this chamber was thick with [Chaos]'s essence.

Clearly, their concentration here was inseparable from the throne's construction.

Who had built all this?

Cheng Shi listened to the sound over and over, trying to parse its deeper meaning, but made no headway.

His understanding of Origin was simply too scant.

Time slipped away silently. When Cheng Shi realized there was nothing else useful to find in this space, he finally decided to retreat.

If he delayed any longer, Big Cat might go berserk.

But to leave empty-handed after lingering so long — did that justify the risk?

At the thought, Cheng Shi gritted his teeth... and fixed his eyes on the one "useful" thing before him — the throne!

But the throne was enormous. An intact throne would never fit in his portable space. Left with no choice, Cheng Shi tried to see whether he could pry it apart along the cracks and disassemble it.

As it turned out — he could!

The seemingly solid throne crumbled at a touch. Cheng Shi barely had to exert himself before the throne came apart into puzzle pieces, which he stuffed wholesale into his portable space.

That done, he didn't linger a single second. He immediately withdrew from the area, merged with his main body, snapped his fingers, and returned to the Dolphin Bridge.

He was eager to share what he'd seen and learned with Hong Lin and Qin Xin. But the moment he materialized, what greeted him was not Big Cat's embrace — but an iron fist!

The enraged giant bear slugged Cheng Shi flat onto the bridge's surface. Tears brimming in her eyes, she seized his shoulders and roared:

"Liar!

You liar!"

Another fist crashed beside Cheng Shi's head, making the entire Dolphin Bridge hum with the impact.

Cheng Shi saw stars. He shook his head, pried open a half-swollen eye, and looked at the "wronged" Hong Lin — then immediately broke into a grin.

He didn't blame Big Cat for her fury. He knew his behavior had truly been reckless.

Though that punch was a bit much, wasn't it?

Cheng Shi half-coughed, half-laughed:

"Survived the Corpse Field of Gods, and then nearly got beaten to death by you."

Hong Lin blinked, incredulous that he still had the nerve to joke. She glared daggers and raised her fist again. But Cheng Shi immediately added:

"But I've always been a liar."

"..."

Hong Lin's fist froze in midair. The joy of reunion, arriving on the heels of anger's delay, finally smoothed away her terror. She stared at Cheng Shi with teeth clenched, wanting to say something — but every word that reached her lips dissolved into silence.

Seeing this, Cheng Shi tilted his head toward Qin Xin, who was still visibly shaken, and said with a pout:

"Besides, you two are the ones who left me behind. How is that my fault?"

"..."

Silence fell. A few seconds later, Qin Xin bowed deeply in apology:

"I'm sorry. In that moment, I truly couldn't have done better."

'It's fine, it's fine...'

Cheng Shi had no reason to blame Qin Xin. Quite the opposite — he should thank Qin Xin for extracting his friend from danger.

'But Old Qin, someone needs to take the fall for this. Help me draw Big Cat's fire.'

So Cheng Shi suppressed a grin, turned his swollen half-face away, and mumbled:

"I refuse to accept that — unless Big... Hong Lin also gives him a punch. No — a full beating!"

The words had barely left his mouth when the giant bear before him vanished. Then came the sound of fist meeting flesh.

THUD — THUD — THUD —

Big Cat's blows were savage, one after another. The battered Qin Xin took every hit in silence. Not a word of complaint.

Cheng Shi craned his neck slightly. Watching the giant bear sweat from exertion, he knew Big Cat genuinely wanted to hit Qin Xin.

Fair enough. In her worldview, death wasn't scary. What was scary was abandoning a friend and leaving them to die.

Even at the height of terror, Hong Lin's subconscious would never have given up on Cheng Shi. But since Qin Xin had saved her, she couldn't exactly complain. Now that she'd been given a reason to strike, she naturally unleashed all her fear and fury at once.

And so the Dolphin Bridge suddenly had two pig-faced occupants.

Cheng Shi pulled himself to his feet. Looking at Qin Xin's face — swollen like a pig's — he burst out laughing. But the instant Hong Lin whipped a glare his way, his whole body flinched. He straightened his expression, looked at them both, and said solemnly:

"I'm sorry."

This apology was heartfelt and genuine.

Hearing it, Hong Lin lowered her fist. Qin Xin managed a smile.

Both turned to look at Cheng Shi, about to say something — when the earnestly apologetic liar added contritely:

"I'll do it again next time."

"..."

"..."

"Because time waits for no one, and the chance only comes once!"

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Chapter 1244: Going Home!

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A reunion had somehow devolved into an apology session.

Hong Lin also said sorry after venting. She pulled up the pig-faced Qin Xin, studied him with a strange expression for a long while, then lifted her chin:

"It's not like I hit you harder on purpose because I won't be able to beat you in the future. I just..."

She trailed off, her gaze drifting into the distance. She sighed softly:

"Never mind. There's nothing wrong with admitting it. I was just terrified.

In this Real Universe, even the gods are this insignificant. What does that make us?

Qin Xin, hit me back. You saved me. I should be saying thank you."

Qin Xin coughed lightly, wiped the blood from the corner of his mouth, and smiled:

"The Hong Lin I know isn't this sentimental."

He patted Hong Lin's shoulder, then turned to Cheng Shi with a helpless sigh:

"Glad you're back.

So — what did you find?"

At that, Cheng Shi's expression turned grave. He relayed everything he'd seen in full. But he didn't dare mention that he'd brought the Divine Throne back with him. The act itself was too alarming.

Whether the throne concealed secrets or dangers remained uncertain. Better to wait until he understood it further before raising the subject.

Qin Xin and Big Cat were both shaken by the revelation, and they threw out guess after guess about who could have built such a thing in that place.

"Since the gods are all dead there, could the builder have been human?"

Qin Xin looked at Cheng Shi. Though he didn't finish the thought, his expression made the real question plain: 'Could it have been another... you?'

Cheng Shi wasn't sure, though he had indeed suspected as much.

Previously, from Scarred Cheng Shi onward, every version of Cheng Shi who'd "declared war" on Origin had done so openly — impassioned, righteous. Cheng Shi couldn't imagine what kind of Cheng Shi would, in that place, assemble such a thing — expressing his covetous ambition toward the Divine Throne in such a "dark," "twisted," "covert" manner.

Baseless speculation was clearly futile. Before long, all three abandoned the thread.

They had lingered in the Real Universe long enough. Nobody knew how much longer the Spacetime Dolphin Bridge would last. After enduring so many accidents, they knew it was time to leave.

Their bodies might be fine, but their exhausted minds and spirits — along with the omnipresent fear — would not allow further exploration. The Real Universe was unfathomably vast; they couldn't swallow it whole in one bite.

So the three conferred briefly, realigned their mental anchor, locked onto the direction of home, and prepared to leave this terrifying place.

Cheng Shi gazed into the abyss beneath the bridge. The eager desire to go home he'd felt before was gone. Only suspicion of the Fun God's purpose remained.

When he returned, would the Fear Faction still unify everyone's fears as before?

He didn't know.

The three exchanged one final glance, their expressions varied. They counted down from three — and leapt together into the twisting light beside the bridge.

With that, the Real Universe returned to silence...

Just kidding.

It was never short on excitement.

The moment the trio departed, the previously vanished Jie Shu and the other hooded figure reappeared on the bridge.

They gazed in the direction the three had gone, silent for a long time, expressions mixed.

After a while, the hooded figure clenched his fist nervously: "Why is every world's version of him this strong?"

Jie Shu gave a cold snort: "Why else do you think we're looking for a world without him?"

The hooded figure hesitated, then asked: "Can't we just steal his opportunities?"

"His opportunities?" Jie Shu scoffed. "Do you think the gods' gazes carry no weight?"

Along this journey, you've seen how many Fate Weavers were crushed under that weight.

When you look at something, don't see only its strengths and ignore its costs. He was chosen by [Void]. And what are you?"

"..."

The hooded figure was clearly unconvinced, but remembering a certain scene, he relaxed his clenched fist.

"I suppose I'm nothing. I just want to survive. Let's go — we should be on our way."

Just as the two prepared to leave the Spacetime Dolphin Bridge for another world, two more figures suddenly materialized beside them.

Their sudden appearance gave the hooded man behind Jie Shu a terrible fright. Jie Shu, at least, kept his composure. Looking at the two identical faces before him, he frowned, thought for a moment, and sneered:

"It seems we're not the only ones chasing a 'beautiful homeland.'

Unfortunately, you're one step late. That person went home."

Hearing the words "went home," both figures visibly froze.

They exchanged a look, each seeing disbelief in the other's eyes.

Tricked again!

But this time it wasn't the little one who'd tricked them — it was the big one!

Indeed, these two figures were none other than Cheng Deceit and Cheng Fate.

They had come to collect their rightfully owed payment, only to learn that Cheng Shi had safely returned home. At this, the "wanderers'" sky practically "collapsed."

The Real Universe was unimaginably vast. Even wanderers who had drifted for years might never encounter another soul in their remaining lifespan.

So there were many beings like them — stripped of their original worlds, adrift in the Real Universe. It was just that some might go their entire lives without meeting another.

The reason they had located Cheng Shi's entry point into the Real Universe so quickly was partly their ability to sense spacetime fluctuations — but mostly because they'd received a "spoiler" in advance.

Yes — a spoiler!

Not long ago, a Fun God from one world had suddenly found them and asked them to cooperate on a performance. But He would only provide the stage, not the script. The actors would improvise. With one exception: He insisted the actors deliver the line "Deceit destroys the world. Fate saves the world."

Cheng Deceit and Cheng Fate had initially wanted to refuse. But that particular [Deceit] had offered too much. He said:

"I can guarantee this world won't be destroyed by Origin the way yours was. As for how to escape this unsolvable experiment...

Complete this performance, and I can tell you that too."

Cheng Deceit hadn't believed a word. But Cheng Fate had heard enough to want to gamble.

As it turned out, they lost the bet.

Just as Cheng Deceit predicted, [Deceit] reneged on the deal and vanished without a trace.

They could use spacetime breaches to enter that world and "collect the debt," but what would be the point?

Meddling excessively in another world was never their intention. Besides, they still hadn't found a successor. They couldn't leave the Real Universe.

And so, two Clowns who had already been played once by Cheng Shi were smeared with fresh paint on the Spacetime Dolphin Bridge — brand-new Clowns once more.

But no matter how clownish, this was still a "family affair" among Clowns.

So when Cheng Deceit heard Jie Shu's snide tone, he sneered right back:

"Do you think your foolish act has an answer?"

"???"

Jie Shu's face darkened. He gritted his teeth.

This was exactly why he wanted to find a world without Cheng Shi. There was certainly personal enmity mixed in, and that enmity boiled down to one sentiment: he should stay far, far away from this walking jinx!

"Whether it does or doesn't, at least it has nothing to do with you two."

Jie Shu gave a cold snort and took the hooded man away.

As the Spacetime Dolphin Bridge fell back into cold silence, Cheng Deceit and Cheng Fate exchanged a look. Both saw worry in the other's eyes.

They didn't fear being deceived. They knew the Fun God's nature.

But they were deeply troubled by the line He had insisted on: "Deceit destroys the world. Fate saves the world." No matter how they thought about it, a Benefactor who had given His life to send them out of their world — even if this wasn't the same one — would never commit an act of world destruction.

They couldn't help wondering: was the reneging God preparing an even grander deception for His follower? Or was He Himself... a deception all along?

This Benefactor who had written so many scripts for Cheng Shi... did He truly know the answer?

...

Reality. An unknown city, a certain villa.

They were back. Finally back!

The moment they opened their eyes and saw Big Cat's villa, Cheng Shi instantly re— couldn't relax at all.

Though they had indeed left the Real Universe and returned within a world's boundary, he had to confirm this was his own world.

No matter how logical a hypothesis was, it was never truth until verified.

On her own turf, Hong Lin's excitement was palpable. With confidence restored, she charged into her house, speed-checked every piece of decor, then burst back out and nodded vigorously:

"Absolutely right. This is the place. We're home!"

Qin Xin's razor-sharp gaze visibly relaxed. Even the most iron-willed warrior couldn't help feeling a little shaken after encountering something as harrowing as spacetime distortion. After all, Ming Yu's experience still loomed fresh in memory.

And Cheng Shi finally exhaled deeply.

Somehow, the instant Big Cat confirmed everything, he felt a profoundly subtle fluctuation — as though misaligned time had been precisely restored, as though wayward fate had returned to its fixed course, and even the urge to lie in his heart began to boil again.

In that moment, the restoration of faith made him feel genuinely "at ease."

This was the world he knew. Not the unmoored Real Universe.

But cautious as always, Cheng Shi didn't fully let his guard down. He needed to confirm that every relationship in this world was undisturbed. So he began contacting the Joker.

He needed to know whether, during the two-plus weeks he'd been gone, these tricksters had found the Nose of Verification in Mockery and Jeering.

The first person he called wasn't just anyone — it was the Doctor. Because the Doctor's rigor would yield the most precise answer.

Meanwhile, the other two began verifying their own connections.

Qin Xin nodded farewell to the pair and, Authority in tow, returned to the Fire Passing Hall. Before leaving, he solemnly pledged the Torchbearers' friendship and promised that [War]'s Authority would stand by his friends in any battle, at any time.

Hong Lin immediately called Tao Yi. The two best friends began whispering — but it wasn't long before a startled exclamation rang from inside the villa.

"What?!"

And at that very moment, the Doctor's voice came through Cheng Shi's phone.

"You're finally back.

In the one hundred and four days you were gone, we found nothing. Care to guess why?

Also — where in the world were you?

Praise Yu Xi."

"!?!?"

...

Chapter 1245: No Time to Breathe — The [Deceit] Trial Descends!

One hundred and four days?

Why had only two weeks passed in the Real Universe, yet over a hundred days had elapsed in the real world?!

No one could give Cheng Shi an answer. Not even Big Cat — because the instant the Doctor's "Praise Yu Xi" fell, a crimson trial notification flooded Cheng Shi's vision.

【Special Trial (Curtain Call Performance: [Deceit]) has opened】

【Matching teammates (1/6)】

【Trial objective: Every performance has a finale (Time limit: 5 days)】

"!!!"

Cheng Shi could never have imagined his timing would be this perfect — returning just in time to collide with a special trial. And it was the Fun God's trial, no less!

But could it really be this coincidental?

From sending him out, to the traces of [Fate] he'd sensed in the Real Universe, to this suspiciously "perfectly timed" trial... the Fun God seemed to be deliberately avoiding him!

Whether it was the question before departure or the "debrief" after witnessing so many accidents, the Fun God hadn't given him a single chance for an audience.

Of course, the timing of special trials was governed by the Convention's rules. Perhaps no god's will could change it. But don't forget — being unable to change the trial's timing didn't mean being unable to change the player's timing.

The Fun God and [Time] were bound allies. When Cheng Shi had passed through the spacetime barrier to return, who knew whether [Time] had tampered with the process?

After all, They could reset entire worlds. Adjusting a few mortals' timelines would be child's play.

So was the Fun God genuinely unwilling to see him, or simply didn't need to?

What was He hiding? What was He avoiding?

Could it be that from the moment he'd set foot in the Real Universe, everything had been part of the God's design?

'Every performance has a finale...'

What a blatant hint. Was the end of the [Void] Era truly approaching?

A million thoughts flashed through Cheng Shi's mind in a single second. He hadn't even had time to hang up the phone before consciousness was ripped from his body.

【Match successful (6/6). Entering trial】

...

It seemed very bright outside.

Not much ambient noise — probably indoors. A breeze swept through the room. Dry, but not cold.

Felt like the north of the Land of Hope.

The instant awareness returned, Cheng Shi had already formed several conclusions. His eyelids trembled. He didn't rush to open them. He first confirmed no one was nearby, then shielded his eyes with his hand and cracked them open — afraid the brightness would blind him.

He had assumed the room just had excellent natural light. But when his eyes opened, he discovered the dazzling glare wasn't all from the window — it was gold!

Gold filling his entire field of vision!

The entire room was opulently gilded. Round table, chairs, bed, door — everything in sight was cast in gold.

Only the walls were relatively normal, but the wainscoting, baseboards, and edge trimmings were still gold.

Cheng Shi was dumbstruck.

The last time he'd seen this kind of nouveau riche décor was at the Mediocre Person Society.

'What — is this room's owner also a mediocre person?'

'Wait. Don't tell me I'm the owner of this room.'

Cheng Shi examined himself with a peculiar expression, checked his reflection in the gleaming gold tabletop, then nodded with a completely serious face:

"Definitely a mediocre person."

He laughed at himself, stood, and scanned the room before hearing movement outside.

His shadow had already scouted ahead. When he saw that the teammate emerging from the adjacent room was An Mingyu — draped in black gauze — Cheng Shi's eyebrow twitched.

'This coincidental?'

'Surely the Fun God did this on purpose?'

'[Fate] and a finale... certainly fit together.'

Brow furrowed, Cheng Shi pushed his door open. An Mingyu, who had stepped out first, heard the sound and turned to "look." Somewhat surprised, she nodded in greeting:

"[Death] and a finale are indeed a fitting pair. Long time no see, Zhang Chosen."

Cheng Shi returned the greeting with narrowed eyes and an unreadable expression:

"Long time no see, An Chosen."

Correct — Cheng Shi hadn't entered as himself. He had assumed the form of Mi Laozhang.

This wasn't a spur-of-the-moment decision. It was premeditated.

The moment he saw this trial was bestowed by the Fun God with the word "finale" in its prompt, he had decisively chosen to enter under a different identity.

He had just returned from the Real Universe. His mind was a tangle of unresolved threads. He needed time to think things through properly. He couldn't afford to become the trial's focal point again.

The Fate Weaver identity was too famous. It would be nearly impossible to escape other players' attention in a [Deceit] trial. Even if they didn't approach out of curiosity about his reputation, they'd seek him out — the well-known [Deceit] follower — to analyze the trial's prompt.

Cheng Shi didn't want trouble. At least until he figured out what the Fun God was up to, he wanted peace. That was why he'd chosen the most "obscure" and safest role to play: Zhang Jizu.

Nobody would pay excessive attention to an unkillable [Death] Chosen. And behind [Death]'s veneer, he could also sidestep a great deal of hassle.

The strategy proved effective. Even the Blind One had been fooled.

After the exchange, An Mingyu showed no further interest in "Zhang Jizu." She continued surveying the massive residence. Moments later, she nodded with certainty:

"Kanrival.

The gold décor is blinding, but the architectural style doesn't lie.

This is summertime Kanrival — the single month each year when you can wear light clothing.

A shame that such a beautiful season lasts only one month. Truly... all beautiful things are fleeting."

There was clearly a deeper meaning in An Mingyu's words, but Cheng Shi didn't probe. He knew this [Fate] Chosen was still working to reconcile herself with her own destiny. He offered no comment.

Before long, hearty laughter rang from a room up ahead. A gleaming gold door swung open, and before the person was visible, Cheng Shi heard a voice he knew all too well.

"When I saw the word 'finale,' I was worried. But the moment I heard your voice, I relaxed.

With you here, [Fate] will always guide us to the trial's path.

Long time no see, Ming Yu."

The words had barely faded when a burly man strode out. Cheng Shi's expression stiffened — another familiar face.

Hu Wei!

'What's my Big Bro doing here?'

Indeed, the third teammate to appear was none other than Hu Wei. Still exuding that same gallant, larger-than-life demeanor, he greeted An Mingyu and then turned to Cheng Shi with a nod:

"Brother Zhang, hope you've been well! Ha — listen to me. Even if everyone else were in trouble, you'd be the last one standing.

Good. With Brother Zhang here, I'm even more confident about this trial."

"..."

Cheng Shi responded with a narrow-eyed smile, but the moment he turned away, the corner of his mouth twitched.

He knew full well his "Big Bro" would never be trapped by a mere trial. He just didn't know what earth-shattering stunt Hu Wei planned to pull this time.

Whatever it was, Cheng Shi had no intention of getting involved.

He planned to run this trial solo — find a quiet spot, think in peace, peel back the layers, and see if he could divine the Fun God's recent will from this trial's design.

But that plan was killed the instant he tried to walk away.

"Don't rush off, Brother Zhang. I'm short a Priest.

Let me ID the rest first and see how many good hands our squad can muster.

Relax — this time it's nothing outrageous. Won't jeopardize clearing the trial."

With that, Hu Wei knocked on the other room doors one by one.

Five in a row yielded no response. Only when the last door was knocked did they see a slender hand pull it open. Then a figure in work clothes stepped out.

Zhang Jizu.

That's right!

Another [Death] Chosen walked out of the room.

...

Chapter 1246: Brother, I'm Short a Priest

"???"

When you see two identical players standing before you, what's the first thing that comes to mind?

Low-scoring players would immediately think "impostor." But peak players' minds would land on only one name.

Hu Wei's pupils contracted. He instantly gripped the greatsword on his back, shifted back to create distance, and scrutinized the two Zhang Jizus with deep suspicion.

An Mingyu also froze, then furrowed her brow as she studied both Zhang Jizus.

Cheng Shi was the most rattled of all. He never imagined the fake could run into the real deal here.

'Seriously?'

'When I needed your help, you were nowhere to be found. I borrow your face for five minutes and you show up in person to blow my cover?'

'Do I owe you?'

'Isn't it you who owes me a hundred S-rank items?'

'I didn't form the Joker to actually become a literal joker!'

Cheng Shi's eyelid twitched violently. To avoid creating trouble for himself, he narrowed his eyes to slits, looked at the Zhang Jizu across from him, and spoke first:

"If your disguise is meant to fit the [Deceit] trial's theme, I can provisionally agree to lend my likeness rights.

But I need to know who's borrowing.

Zhen Yi?

Or... Cheng Shi?"

As he spoke, he flicked a scalpel from his sleeve.

Hearing this preemptive accusation, the real Zhang Jizu's eyes nearly disappeared behind his squinting lids.

He hadn't expected to run into a fake version of himself here, either. He'd been trying to figure out which Joker member was causing him grief. But the moment he spotted the scalpel tip peeking from the other's sleeve, he understood immediately: the one impersonating him was none other than Cheng Shi.

Only Cheng Shi used a scalpel the same way he did.

And the situation was far from needing "weapons." Flashing that glint of silver was purely a signal — a way to coordinate, to silently plead: 'Don't blow my cover.'

The problem was: 'You're wearing my identity!'

'If I don't expose you, then who am I?'

Of course, Zhang Jizu's thoughts ran deeper. Considering the trial's prompt, he could easily guess Cheng Shi was using his identity as a shield to carve out maximum operational freedom for this trial.

He could accept that. On the condition of "out of sight, out of mind."

Zhang Jizu was utterly exasperated, but he had no choice but to play along.

When a [Deceit] trial included the word "finale," the difficulty spoke for itself. Cheng Shi, as [Deceit]'s most "favored" follower, was the single best candidate to clear this trial. Bar none.

And Zhang Jizu understood the weight of that "favoritism" better than anyone. Given the lies he'd told and the things he'd done on the Fun God's behalf, he had a feeling this trial wouldn't simply be a trial — it was more like the Fun God hinting at something.

So to give Cheng Shi more room to maneuver, Zhang Jizu made a quick decision: he would catch this "ball."

Thankfully, after joining the Joker, his "acting instincts" weren't half bad. He responded immediately:

"X..."

Never mind. He couldn't pull it off.

Zhang Jizu knew Cheng Shi's identity would attract attention and invite trouble. His first instinct was to borrow Zhen Yi's identity.

After all, no matter how jinxed you were, as long as people steered clear of you, you'd be relatively free.

But asking him to utter that signature "hee" was a bridge too far. Left with no choice, he had to accept the "fact" that he was Cheng Shi.

Yes — the optimal play right now was to swap aliases with Cheng Shi. That way, when Cheng Shi needed to make an appearance later, it wouldn't seem abrupt.

So, mimicking Cheng Shi's mannerisms, he pursed his lips and sighed:

"Come on, Old Zhang. Do you have to be this serious every time we meet?"

I only put on your clothes. It's not like I dug up your cemetery. What — you want to take a swing at me?"

The instant that familiar tone emerged, Hu Wei realized the second Zhang Jizu was not Zhang Jizu at all. Nor was it Zhen Yi. It was his good brother — the Fate Weaver he'd been searching for under every star: Cheng Shi!

Hu Wei had been looking for Cheng Shi for a while now. Lord Ultraman had revealed that his chance to fuse [Deceit] lay with Yu Xi, and Cheng Shi just happened to be the player Yu Xi had once impersonated. If anyone claimed Cheng Shi had no connection to Yu Xi, Hu Wei wouldn't believe it for a second.

So the moment he spotted "Cheng Shi," he clapped a hand on the man's shoulder, overjoyed:

"Brother Cheng, where have you been?!"

I always said a [Deceit] game couldn't do without you. And sure enough, here you are!

Good. Haha, great! Today, you're coming with me. My squad is short a Priest..."

Before he could finish, "Cheng Shi" twitched at the corner of his eye and raised a finger, pointing at "Zhang Jizu" across the way.

He didn't say a word, but the "noise" was deafening.

'Isn't that a Priest right there?'

'A [Death] Priest, no less — the best at keeping people alive.'

Cheng Shi's face was equally rigid. He thought: 'Old Hu, your ability to lie through your teeth is truly unmatched. Other people burn through potions in trials. You burn through Priests?'

'How many Priests do you go through per trial, on average?'

'Priests exist to heal teammates, not to be milked dry. You can't treat them as expendables...'

Cheng Shi kept his mouth shut. After all, he'd never intended to tag along with Hu Wei.

Hu Wei was visibly embarrassed, but this kind of minor awkwardness was nothing for the "Grand Marshal." With a grand wave, he laughed heartily:

"Usually I'm lucky to run into one. Today I've got two — double insurance! Not bad at all.

Brother, I know you're the cautious type. This time, our squad absolutely cannot go wrong."

"..."

In the past, Cheng Shi had been too weak to refuse. He'd simply gone along. But now, he genuinely had no desire to waste time on Hu Wei's plans. So he adopted Zhang Jizu's mannerisms and asked bluntly:

"Where does the Grand Marshal plan to go this time?"

At the mention of plans, Hu Wei's expression turned serious:

"Mockery and Jeering!

As you may all know, Mockery and Jeering vanished for quite a while and only recently reappeared in the depths of the Void.

I suspect something unimaginable has changed inside it. I want to investigate.

Deep in the Void shouldn't pose any danger. Bringing you two along is just for peace of mind. What do you say?"

'Mockery and Jeering vanished?!'

Cheng Shi was stunned. He never expected that to have happened. But the Doctor hadn't mentioned it on the phone, either.

Oh — right. He probably hadn't had time to.

Cheng Shi frowned. He hadn't even confirmed whether he'd truly missed that much real-world time, so he couldn't very well press for details about Mockery and Jeering. And given his alias as Mi Laozhang, he couldn't openly ask anyone about the time discrepancy. So he assumed a contemplative air, shut his mouth, and waited for others to react.

Judging by Zhang Jizu's and An Mingyu's expressions, they clearly knew about this. Which meant the Joker's search for the Nose of Verification had likely been affected as well.

No wonder the Doctor had challenged him to guess why the Joker had come up empty. They'd been searching for a needle in a haystack — and the haystack had disappeared.

"..."

'Don't tell me the Fun God deliberately interfered?'

Zhang Jizu noticed Cheng Shi's confusion. Knowing he hadn't been in the real world recently, he stepped into the role of mouthpiece and asked Hu Wei:

"Why did Mockery and Jeering disappear?"

Hearing the question, a flicker of suspicion crossed Hu Wei's eyes. He stared at "Cheng Shi":

"Brother Cheng, you're a traveler of the [Void] path yourself. How could you not know?"

Facing the challenge, Zhang Jizu's instinct was to squint. But he caught himself, converting it into a lip-pursing sigh:

"This is a bit embarrassing, but I'll be honest.

I ran into some trouble recently. Got trapped somewhere outside the Void. Only barely escaped with my life.

As for why I was trapped — I'd advise you all not to get curious.

Otherwise, when you get locked in there yourselves, I won't be able to rescue you."

Zhang Jizu delivered the lie with an air of mystery, which only piqued the group's interest. Only Cheng Shi, hearing these fabrications, adopted an extremely peculiar expression.

'Tsk. [Deceit] really is one massive dye vat.'

'Old Zhang used to be such an honest man. When did he become like this?'

'Better keep my distance. Can't let him be a bad influence.'

...

Chapter 1247: [Void] Is at War with Itself Again

Hu Wei believed what "Cheng Shi" said.

Whether he truly believed it or not didn't matter. He "needed" something from Cheng Shi, so even if he knew it was a lie, he wouldn't call it out.

This Big Bro — rough on the outside, sharp on the inside — cast a meaningful glance at "Cheng Shi" and patiently explained:

"Mockery and Jeering vanished suddenly. No warning at all. That day, everyone traveling through Mockery and Jeering was ejected.

Among those I know of personally: Li Jingming, Long Jing, Zhen Xin..."

At the mention of Zhen Xin's name, An Mingyu pressed her lips together. Judging by her expression, she'd known Mockery and Jeering had disappeared, but not the reason.

Hu Wei continued:

"Many people have been investigating what happened deep in the Void. Some even tried to use the opportunity to plunge into the Void and uncover [Deceit]'s secrets. But they came up empty.

Because they had no idea what had actually occurred inside the Void."

Here, Hu Wei deliberately paused. His expression turned mysterious: "I only found out through a secret channel — overheard from a certain Lord.

This leaves my mouth and enters your ears. If you repeat it outside, I'll deny everything.

That Lord told me: [Void] went to civil war. A ferocious one. It was [Fate] who, in a fit of rage, severed [Deceit]'s Mockery and Jeering!"

"?"

Cheng Shi had been listening with due seriousness, curious what anomaly had struck the Void during his absence. But when he heard "[Void] civil war"...

'Bro — what's new about that?'

'Don't those two throw down every other day?'

Still, "[Fate] seizing [Deceit]'s Mockery and Jeering" sounded way too extreme. It reeked of false information no matter how you heard it.

'Where'd you get this intel?'

'Don't tell me it came from Kataro's mouth.'

At that thought, Cheng Shi's expression turned spectacular.

'Old Hu, do you know the "Lord Ultraman" who summoned you is actually Kataro the temple attendant in disguise?'

'You don't.'

'Then you definitely don't know that Kataro looks like [Chaos]'s attendant on the surface but is secretly a devout [Deceit] loyalist.'

'So you're taking a liar's word at face value?'

Cheng Shi wanted to laugh, but couldn't.

Because he suspected Hu Wei wasn't showing off intelligence — he was being used.

This was the Fun God's trial. His Big Bro just "happened" to appear. And then just "happened" to explain the disappearance of Mockery and Jeering. Was it really because Hu Wei was generous with intel?

Probably not!

If this wasn't the Fun God using Hu Wei's mouth to explain why the route home had vanished, Cheng Shi would rip off his own head and kick it like a ball!

For the world's players, Mockery and Jeering was merely a convenient Void corridor. But for Cheng Shi's trio, stranded in the Real Universe at the time, it had been their hope of going home!

The Fun God had silently cut off the route — and now He was trying to pin the blame on His sibling god, [Fate]?

'Heh. Think I'll buy that?'

Cheng Shi's expression darkened.

Regardless of whether the Spacetime Dolphin Bridge was a backup plan the Fun God had prepared for them, Cheng Shi hadn't forgotten this debt. Nor could he forget the spiraling terror he'd felt when he'd

thought he'd "failed." Right now, he genuinely harbored an extra sliver of wariness toward the Fun God — toward the Fear Faction.

He didn't agree with [Fate]'s fixed destiny. He was willing to work with the Fear Faction to break the so-called fixed path. But on one condition: the method of breaking destiny could not be breaking him...

Upon hearing this news, the other two still had questions.

"Cheng Shi" pondered for a moment, then asked: "Why did [Void] go to war?"

Hu Wei frowned suspiciously: "You really don't know?"

"Cheng Shi" froze, blinked, and hastily rephrased: "What I mean is — haven't they had enough yet?"

The remark evidently put Hu Wei at ease. Yep, that was his brother, all right. That thought process was unchanged.

"No idea. The gods' minds are hard to guess. [Void]'s are even worse. Nobody knows what They're doing. But when you trace it all back, it always comes down to Authority.

Just look at your faith fusion, brother. Their designs on each other's Authority are clearly out in the open.

If faith's destination is fusion, then before the merger is complete — who gets the final say in the fused faith...

That question should be worth fighting over, don't you think?"

All else aside, the analysis was remarkably astute.

A brief silence settled. Hu Wei looked around, then raised his voice:

"It's been ten minutes since the trial opened. The other two still haven't shown. They've probably left already.

More and more lone wolves these days.

I'd like to think my reputation in peak-level rounds is decent enough. So — be on guard, everyone. Those two who left could be enemies who don't want to face you, or scheming pests with ulterior motives.

Since the trial environment is this complex, why don't we set off now?

At least the Void is wide open. Safer that way."

"..."

To hurry everyone along, Hu Wei had resorted to saying things with a straight face that had no basis in reality.

Just look at this lineup:

The universally known "Grand Marshal." The undisputed number one Prophet. The literally unkillable Gravekeeper. And the Fate Weaver who had rocketed to fame after facing a Pseudo God head-on...

Offense, support, and healing — all covered. If any player out there actually dared challenge this roster, Cheng Shi could only assume the two who'd left were Big Cat and Qin Xin.

Only those two would qualify.

So after hearing Hu Wei's speech, everyone's expressions varied.

Cheng Shi's eyes darted. After deliberating for a while, he decided to go take a look. If there really was some clue inside Mockery and Jeering, it couldn't hurt the trial.

Zhang Jizu saw Cheng Shi wasn't objecting, so naturally he wouldn't refuse either. An Mingyu swept her "gaze" between the two Zhang Jizus for a moment, then said nothing.

Seeing no opposition, Hu Wei laughed, cleaved open the Void with a single sword stroke, and was the first to leap through.

Watching the [War] great sword cut through the air, Cheng Shi noticed that the blade representing "Blood Apricot" still blazed with the same keen edge — no sign of withering whatsoever.

'The Authority that Qin Xin brought back must have renewed this [War] creation.'

Cheng Shi eyed Hu Wei with a strange look, thinking: 'Back when you impersonated the Grand Marshal, the real Grand Marshal was still just a player — one who knew how to endure. So the two of you coexisted peacefully.'

'But now, some "Grand Marshals" are still "Grand Marshals," while the real Grand Marshal is no longer human. When [War]'s true will returns to the world, can you still keep up this act?'

'No wonder you need to fuse [Deceit]. Looks like you're committed to taking this impersonation act all the way.'

Without wasting more time, the group leapt into the Void one by one. Hu Wei beckoned "Cheng Shi" to walk up front. The real Cheng Shi naturally fell in with An Mingyu at the rear.

Watching the two up ahead bonding like brothers, Cheng Shi's mouth twitched.

'I wonder if Mi Laozhang can handle this.'

But no matter what, before they dove into Mockery and Jeering, he had to catch up to Mi Laozhang's pace. Otherwise, the moment they jumped in, the jig would be up.

...

Chapter 1248: The Squinting Little Skull and the Invisible "Fate"

Though Hu Wei wasn't a [Deceit] follower yet, his "privileges" in the Void far exceeded Cheng Shi's.

Nobody knew how many backdoors the Fun God had opened for this "best enforcer." He could pinpoint Mockery and Jeering's location every time without fail.

While Hu Wei led the way with Zhang Jizu up front, the trailing An Mingyu asked Cheng Shi a curious question:

"He... when did he come back?"

An Mingyu had clearly changed since Cheng Shi's departure. Shifting allegiances within the [Fate] path again and again seemed to have returned her to the image of that cold, enigmatic Prophet.

Sensing the change, Cheng Shi shook his head with a strange expression.

"I didn't know he was back either until I saw a second me.

As far gone as he'd been, I thought the tombstone I prepared for him might actually see some use."

"...?"

An Mingyu's pace faltered. She tilted her head slightly in surprise: "Is this the change that comes from fusing [Deceit]? You never used to say things like that, Zhang Chosen."

Cheng Shi smiled meaningfully, glancing at her:

"People change."

Cheng Shi's remark killed the brief conversation dead. He stopped paying attention to the Blind One and began meticulously reviewing every detail of the journey — a post-mortem of the Real Universe trip.

An Mingyu lowered her head, lost in her own thoughts.

Before long, Hu Wei located Mockery and Jeering. A downward sword strike split open the kaleidoscopic fabricated [Existence].

He laughed heartily, leveling his blade ahead:

"Brother Cheng, after you?"

"Cheng Shi" paused mid-step, not rushing to jump. He waited for the real Cheng Shi behind him, then turned with a grin:

"Let Old Zhang go first. Scout the path. If Mockery and Jeering has become dangerous from whatever upheaval happened, at least the Gravekeeper can keep himself alive. Un-killable."

"..."

Cheng Shi's eyes vanished into slits.

'Thank you so much!'

Though he knew the man was faithfully following the impersonation playbook, did he really have to nail it this well?

The steadfastly cautious "Zhang Jizu" naturally wasn't going to rush in. He stopped at the breach's edge and waited.

Fortunately, everyone was familiar enough to know these two wouldn't move without a clear path ahead. Hu Wei didn't bother haggling and took the initiative — he jumped straight in.

"I'll be waiting below. Priests, keep up."

Watching the burly man flatten into a pancake the instant he made contact, the corners of everyone's mouths twitched with amusement.

Cheng Shi and "Cheng Shi" still didn't move. Clearly, these two "Zhang Jizus" had things to discuss. An Mingyu read the room, gave a slight nod to both, and leapt in herself.

When only Cheng Shi and Mi Laozhang remained in the Void, they exchanged no words.

Two cautious minds wouldn't say anything meaningless in an insecure location and risk their cover. Zhang Jizu merely looked toward where An Mingyu had disappeared, his expression questioning.

Cheng Shi understood. He glanced at Mockery and Jeering and shook his head with a smile.

Clearly, he didn't think it was a problem.

Doubt resolved, Zhang Jizu nodded. They exchanged one look — synchronized like a person and his shadow — and jumped in together.

But the moment they entered, Cheng Shi discovered that An Mingyu, who'd just "gone under," had vanished!

He never imagined the [Fate] Chosen's form inside Mockery and Jeering would be invisible, intangible "air"!

Mi Laozhang, on the other hand, was surprisingly true to form — he'd become a tiny skull whose eye sockets were narrowed to mere slits.

Seeing this, Cheng Shi nearly burst out laughing. But trouble arrived immediately.

The pancake "swam" over to Cheng Shi. First it studied him suspiciously, then probed:

"Brother Cheng?

How'd your spider web get so big?

And what's that mask on the web?"

Cheng Shi didn't hesitate for a single second. He fired back:

"It's my devotion.

This is what you call devotion made manifest.

Apologies — I guess my devotion was a bit much for everyone."

"..."

"..."

"..."

'Your devotion didn't scare us. Your shamelessness sure did.'

The pancake twitched twice and offered no comment. The squinting little skull didn't even listen — it just stared at the mask in the web's center, thinking: 'Looks like Cheng Shi was right. The Nose of Verification really is in here.'

Seeing everyone's attention stuck on Cheng Shi, An Mingyu helpfully spoke up to divert focus:

"I don't seem to sense any change in Mockery and Jeering. Could its disappearance have been just a temporary damming by [Fate]?"

Now — where should we head?"

A Prophet who could illuminate the path ahead was asking her teammates where to go?

Hu Wei felt today's Blind One was acting stranger than usual. But he didn't dwell on it. After a pause, he asked back:

"What does [Fate] say?"

Silence fell briefly. Everyone guessed the Blind One was rolling her dice. Sure enough, they soon heard An Mingyu say, tentatively:

"Seven o'clock direction. Worth a try?"

Hu Wei looked in that direction, considered for a moment, and deemed it viable.

Cheng Shi's eyelid twitched. He had a feeling a certain someone's chosen direction carried deeper meaning.

'Defying fate again?'

'Well, at this point, one more blasphemy won't make a difference.'

'Besides — this is Mockery and Jeering. No matter how vengeful [Fate] is, would He really come onto the Fun God's turf to make arrests?'

The group set off toward seven o'clock. Cheng Shi expressed considerable curiosity about the Blind One's form. He didn't understand what "shapeless and invisible" implied. Could it be that in [Deceit]'s eyes, [Fate] simply didn't exist?

Cheng Shi couldn't help himself. He asked.

An Mingyu answered — though her answer was as good as none:

"This is [Deceit]'s creation, not [Fate]'s. Nobody knows what He's thinking. But His definition of me does grant me the convenience of traveling through Mockery and Jeering. I just don't come here often."

A [Fate] follower avoiding [Deceit]'s road made enough sense. But after hearing this, Cheng Shi asked another peculiar question:

"What about your good sister Zhen Xin? What does she look like in here? Don't tell me she's..."

He paused for a long time before continuing slowly: "...a magic card?"

Before An Mingyu could answer, Hu Wei interjected in a haunted tone:

"She can transform into anything. She's even turned into you, Brother Cheng!

More than once, I thought I'd run into you. But... never mind, that's ancient history.

Zhen Xin is [Deceit]'s Chosen, after all. That level of favoritism is unmatched."

"???"

'Say what?'

'She can transform freely?!'

'No wonder Old Hu got tricked by me back then. Zhen Xin's been cheating this whole time.'

'Hang on — we're both part of the Collection. How is number two this much worse than number one?'

'All the suffering is mine; all the perks are hers?'

'Is that fair?'

Cheng Shi gnashed his teeth.

An Mingyu also fell silent after hearing this.

The four embarked on a long exploration. And just after they set off, at the Void breach that had yet to seal, another figure suddenly appeared.

That figure slipped through in the last second before the gap closed, transforming into a dark-green seed that looked like solidified liquid. It glanced toward the direction the four had gone, then quietly slipped away in the opposite direction.

...

Chapter 1249: Traces of [Fate]

The four advanced steadily along the direction the Prophet had indicated. Along the way, Cheng Shi repeatedly sensed the lingering traces of [Fate]'s power.

These traces were blatant enough for even non-[Fate] followers like Hu Wei and Mi Laozhang to detect. That meant [Fate] had indeed been here and had unleashed divine power — consistent with the "damming" Hu Wei had described.

Cheng Shi sank into thought.

'Was the homeward path truly cut off by [Fate]?'

'But why would He do that?'

Cheng Shi knew [Fate] most likely had no knowledge of the Real Universe's existence. The Fun God had hidden that well. So the most reasonable theory was: when Cheng Shi vanished from within Mockery and Jeering, [Fate] — sensing that fixed destiny had been disrupted — came here seeking his trail, demanded an explanation from the Fun God, and the confrontation erupted into war.

That was plausible enough...

But Cheng Shi kept feeling something was missing. The whole picture might not be as simple as it seemed.

After the group traveled a while longer, Hu Wei abruptly stopped. The pancake rippled with surprise:

"Dense [Chaos] energy here."

"?"

Zhang Jizu stopped as well. He focused on the surroundings but detected only a faint whiff of [Chaos] — far from "dense." He looked at Hu Wei in puzzlement.

Hu Wei played it off smoothly: "I once sought to fuse [Chaos], so I carry certain [Chaos] blessings. I'm quite sensitive to it. It seems [Chaos] was here too. Strange — what would He be doing here?"

As a [Chaos] follower and someone who knew Hu Wei's true faith, Cheng Shi naturally felt the same thing. But his interpretation differed. He knew [Chaos] was the Fun God. If the Fun God's "alter ego" also appeared here, the most likely scenario was that the Fun God had faced [Fate] two-on-one inside Mockery and Jeering.

Then again, it could have been three-on-one. He just hadn't sensed [Truth]'s presence yet.

The four grew increasingly energized, feeling they were closing in on Mockery and Jeering's secret. Unfortunately, for nearly half a day after that, they found nothing more.

This river of [Existence] buried deep within the Void offered no further traces. No changes. The kaleidoscopic distortions were everywhere, same as always.

Hu Wei refused to give up. To check whether the changes might have occurred in the Peeping Mirrors, he smashed several, using them to visit different towns across the Land of Hope. No incidents. No anomalies.

The Grand Marshal, who'd been determined to dig up Mockery and Jeering's secrets, was noticeably deflated.

But his hunger for the [Deceit] faith and his enthusiasm for Yu Xi tempered the "disappointment." Along the way, he'd pestered "Cheng Shi" with all kinds of questions about Yu Xi.

He was deeply curious: how had Yu Xi taken an interest in Cheng Shi?

To this, Cheng Shi had no answer.

'What am I supposed to say — that I saw Him in the mirror?'

Left with no choice, Cheng Shi recycled the same script he'd used on the Joker members: telling Hu Wei he'd merely been fortunate enough to receive Yu Xi's summons, and that this [Deceit] Envoy was mysterious by nature — no one could fathom His intentions.

But to leave his Big Bro something to cling to — and to have a pretext for summoning him later — Cheng Shi improvised a new bit: Yu Xi favored the devout most of all. If they cleared this trial, it might attract His attention.

He said this hoping to steer Hu Wei back to the trial in search of new clues. And Hu Wei did believe it — after all, what Envoy wasn't devout?

As for the squinting little skull and the invisible Blind One, neither offered any comment.

Having found nothing more, the group wasted no time. They pinpointed their location, made a beeline back, shattered a Peeping Mirror, and returned to Kanrival.

But what they didn't know was that from the very beginning, they had chosen the wrong direction.

At the extreme far end opposite to their search path, in a stretch of Mockery and Jeering that was twisted and utterly empty of visible beings, a voice — cold beyond measure — suddenly rang out.

"[Deceit], do you truly believe that stealing my 'Change' and padding it with this counterfeit [Existence] can hold me?"

"Of course. Otherwise, why are you still here?"

Did you fall in love with the place? Is that why you don't want to leave?"

A pair of eyes opened in this region — star-flecked, lazily spiraling — gazing into the Mockery and Jeering where no "existence" could be found. They spoke with amusement: "I never knew 'stubbornness' was also one of your Authorities."

"You!!!"

[Fate] was furious.

Indeed — this being, invisible within Mockery and Jeering just like An Mingyu, was none other than [Fate] Himself.

His disheveled state proved that [Void] had truly erupted in civil war — one grander in scale than any that came before.

The result of that war was plain to see: [Fate] had been bound here. [Deceit] was basking in triumph.

As for whether the war had truly severed Mockery and Jeering temporarily, as Hu Wei had claimed — nobody could say. Perhaps only the gods involved could explain.

Unfortunately, one of them would never get the chance to speak again. And the other would never willingly bring it up.

The shackled [Fate]'s tone grew ever colder. He looked at His sibling god and spoke, word by deliberate word:

"Your schemes will not succeed.

I am [Fate]. The essence of [Void]. I see through all truth. Even imprisoned here, I can still drag the universe into misfortune. When that time comes, you will see that everything you've done is nothing but a fleeting illusion!"

"Hee~

Oh no, I'm so scared."

[Deceit]'s eyes curved upward at the corners. "Then why aren't you doing it already?"

Mortals have a saying: 'the dog that bites doesn't bark.' If you launched your Misfortune right now and dragged the universe into the mud, I might actually spare a thought for how to protect your precious fixed destiny.

But since you've said it out loud...

Then by all means, keep talking.

Let's see whether your words, your spittle, can plunge this universe into the abyss the way your Misfortune can."

"..."

"What, nothing to say?"

Have you fallen for [Silence]?"

"..."

Seeing His sibling god rendered speechless, [Deceit] laughed with unbridled delight:

"Oh~ I see. So you've already guessed a few things. You know destroying the universe poses no threat to me.

Good. That's more like the [Fate] who 'sees through all truth.'

But too bad — the 'truth' you see is only the truth others want you to see.

Stay put like a good boy. I know this place can't hold you for long. But I don't need that long, either. Once this trial ends, everything will have its answer."

With that, the eyes vanished. Left behind was only the silent [Fate], gazing in the direction where Cheng Shi had appeared, murmuring — cold, unwavering:

"Fixed destiny cannot be defied.

He belongs neither to you nor to me — but to this starry sky..."

...

Chapter 1250: "An Mingyu"

As the focal point of [Void]'s attention, Cheng Shi had no idea just how lively things had been inside the Mockery and Jeering he'd just left.

The four returned to Kanrival, back to that golden room refracting light in every direction.

Driven by the urge to get closer to Yu Xi, Hu Wei was brimming with energy. His enthusiasm for clearing the trial hit an all-time high.

To make up for the time squandered in Mockery and Jeering, he decided to split into two teams to accelerate clue-gathering. As for how to divide up...

"I'll go with Brother Cheng. Brother Zhang, keep Ming Yu safe."

He didn't give anyone time to refuse, directly pushing "Cheng Shi" out the door.

And Zhang Jizu, wanting to give Cheng Shi room to operate, didn't resist. He simply let himself be dragged away with a helpless expression.

Cheng Shi watched the two disappear and silently offered Mi Laozhang a brief eulogy:

"Have fun."

An Mingyu smiled at that as well, then "looked" toward Cheng Shi: "So — where should we head?"

"A [Fate] follower asking [Death] for directions. The symbolism's a bit ominous, don't you think?"

Despite saying so, Cheng Shi surveyed the ostentatiously decorated house and mused:

"This is where the trial dropped us. There should be clues here.

To figure out what this so-called 'finale' means, we first need to find out what happened in this land.

A building this flashy wouldn't be some nameless place in Kanrival. So let's start by identifying who owns this house, then follow that thread.

What do you think, An Chosen?"

"Zhang Jizu's" suggestion was impeccable. An Mingyu had no objections. But just as she was about to look around, Cheng Shi smiled and looked at the Blind One again:

"How have you been lately, An Chosen?"

An Mingyu was taken aback. She hadn't expected the question. After a brief hesitation, she lowered her head:

"Trying to see [Fate] more clearly.

I once fancied myself the person closest to Him. But now I realize my understanding of Him is still far, far from sufficient."

Hearing this, Cheng Shi's lips curled. His smile turned playful.

"Whether your understanding of Him is sufficient doesn't matter. I wasn't asking about you. I was asking about An Chosen."

"?"

An Mingyu raised her head in confusion, apparently not understanding.

Cheng Shi had no interest in continuing the charade. He cut straight through her cover:

"Still acting?"

You really think I'm Mi Laozhang?"

The moment the words landed, An Mingyu's entire body jolted. She froze on the spot.

She went silent. Then, slowly, she raised her head. The placid expression faded by degrees. The corners of her mouth began to curve.

The An Mingyu who had worn nothing but worry recently was now smiling — brilliantly.

"When did you switch?"

When you climbed out of Mockery and Jeering?"

I thought there was something off about a certain someone asking about me in there. So you'd already suspected me?"

Interesting. When exactly did you start suspecting?"

Cheng Shi gave her a teasing look. He said nothing, offered no explanation.

Seeing this, An Mingyu's face darkened. She realized instantly that she'd been tricked. He hadn't swapped identities after Mockery and Jeering at all — the very first "Zhang Jizu" she'd met was already Cheng Shi!

"...And here I thought I was the one making others into clowns. Turns out the clown was me all along."

An Mingyu shook her head with a rueful laugh. She raised a hand to the black cloth over her eyes.

With a gentle tug, the blindfold slipped free. In the same breath, the black gauze robes transformed into a magician's suit. Flowing hair and a familiar face reappeared before Cheng Shi.

Zhen Xin!

[Deceit]'s first Collection was in this trial too!

No — her appearance was hardly a surprise. After all, this trial was about a "finale"!

Exposed, Zhen Xin showed no frustration. She tilted her head with a smile:

"If I could see through to essence the way Ming Yu can, perhaps I wouldn't be showing off my amateur tricks before a master Clown."

"...?"

'Your technique was sloppy and you didn't fool anyone. What's that got to do with Clowns?'

'Did Clowns eat your family's rice or something?'

Cheng Shi curled his lip in distaste:

"Even if you could see through to essence, it wouldn't help.

Because you're not An Chosen. You can't capture her essence..."

But the moment he said it, he regretted being so quick-tongued. He knew Zhen Xin understood An Mingyu best. She absolutely could capture An Mingyu's essence. The problem was, the An Mingyu she'd depicted wasn't the current An Mingyu.

That was why today's "An Mingyu" had come across as slightly cold — because it wasn't the An Mingyu who'd changed for the sake of fate, but the An Mingyu that Zhen Xin, as a best friend, was nostalgic for...

"..."

Discussing death was suffocating. Neither of them had actually uttered the word "death," but between clever people, things rarely needed to be spelled out.

Cheng Shi was visibly flustered, momentarily at a loss for how to console her. Fortunately, Zhen Xin consoled herself. She shelved that wistful sorrow, instantly switching to a smile — corners of her mouth rising in an even more exaggerated arc:

"Hee~

Tricked you again. I'm not my sister. Why would I feel sad for that blind girl?"

"..."

Though his eyelid was twitching furiously, though every instinct screamed at him to escalate, Cheng Shi held back.

Because he knew this wasn't "Zhen Yi" trying to deceive him. It was Zhen Xin deceiving herself.

This trickster seemed to be using this method to hypnotize herself — to temporarily forget the pain inside. But for someone as perceptive as her... could it actually work?

He hoped so.

This was the first time Cheng Shi hadn't found Zhen Yi annoying.

Seeing Zhen Xin — still wearing Zhen Yi's persona — about to seize the opportunity to "cause trouble," Cheng Shi's expression sharpened. He immediately changed the subject, cutting off her chance to speak, and walked away briskly:

"Let's not waste time, Magician.

Since you also know how to use An Chosen's identity to dodge trouble, you should understand what a [Deceit] trial with a 'finale' prompt means.

Especially since you're His first Collection.

This is very likely His annotation on this era's ending. Only by clearing this trial can we learn what kind of finale He intends for the [Void] Era.

So we can't lose this trial. We can only win.

We must decipher His will. Only then can we find our place in the era's curtain call — or even climb onto the stage and become performers who write their own scripts..."

"Clowns?" Zhen Xin finished with a grin.

"..."

'???'

'Excuse me?'

'I'm being serious and analytical here, and you're sneaking in another profession-based insult?'

'Has anyone ever told you that you're just as insufferable as your sister?'

Zhen Xin's mischievous eyes seemed to read Cheng Shi's expression perfectly. She smiled again: "No."

"Well, now they have.

You're every bit as jinxed as your sister."

Cheng Shi shot her a sideways glance and walked ahead in open disgust.

"..."

Zhen Xin blinked, gazing thoughtfully at Cheng Shi's retreating figure. She couldn't shake the feeling that this Clown who'd returned from the Real Universe was harder than before.

Not harder in words — but as though the confusion about the road ahead had, somewhere along the way, transformed into conviction about the ground beneath his feet.

Interesting. What had happened beyond the world to change the Clown this much?

Zhen Xin tilted her head, eyes brimming with curiosity, and followed after him.

"Tell me about out there. Let me see just how magical this Real Universe really is."

Cheng Shi had no intention of hiding things from the Joker, and so naturally wouldn't hide them from Zhen Xin, either. At this moment — with the Fun God's will unclear — the only forces he could rally, aside from the few gods he hoped to win over, were mortals.

And the Joker and the Destined Ones were his last reserves of strength.

Even if Zhen Xin hadn't asked, he would have told her. But clearly, now wasn't the ideal moment.

Because just as he was about to search this golden house for clues, the front door was suddenly flung open. A flamboyantly gold-adorned "merchant" strode in, saw the two of them from behind, and barked imperiously:

"Get to work. Round up those useless lot. This one's a big deal."

...