

The Gods 1281

Chapter 1281: Speculations on the Outer God Deceit

The atmosphere was impossibly heavy. Even the sound of breathing had vanished.

Long Jing was not only shocked but deeply confused. He could piece together something from Madame Freud's disappearance and the trial's background, but he still couldn't fathom why Cheng Shi, of all people, had become Void's golden child.

While the rest of them had been diligently running trials trying to understand the gods, Cheng Shi had brought the Joker the truth that lay beyond their world. And now, while everyone was striving to uncover the greater truth of the universe, the clown was telling them he'd become Yu Xi!

And this damned trial was riddled with metaphors about how important the clown was... But important how, exactly?

Without figuring that out, Long Jing couldn't sort his own thoughts. So he stared straight at Cheng Shi and voiced the question burning inside him.

"Why you?"

Good question!

Cheng Shi had once asked Memory the same thing. Memory's answer had been: Void set its gaze on you, and so the gods cast their attention upon you.

To this day, he still didn't know why Void had chosen him.

Combining the "clues" from this trial, he could roughly surmise that Fate was likely the god who truly knew the "answer." Deceit was merely copying His brother-god's homework.

On the surface, Fate was trying to forge a sacrifice that came closest to Origin's will—to please the Creator. But the problem was no god could fathom Origin's thoughts, just as no mortal could see through a god's mind.

So on what basis was Fate so certain that His concept of "fixed destiny" could please Origin?

The answer to that question probably lay not with Fate Himself, but with Origin!

Just as Cheng Shi had theorized before, this grand universe experiment had to have a clear objective—the Creator's will, which could also be understood as the "experiment instructions." And the projection of those "experiment instructions" within each slice universe was very likely the manifestation of Fate's will.

Fate's so-called "fixed destiny" had probably never been His own intention from the start—it was the Creator's intention.

As for why that intention was him...

'Heh, apart from Origin, who would know?'

Cheng Shi couldn't answer the question, but he could push everything onto Fate.

He said:

"I didn't want it. But Fate chose me."

Long Jing believed it in a heartbeat. That was how damned fate worked—it never asked for consent, only beat people into clowns.

He looked at Cheng Shi with sympathy, then decided the man didn't deserve any.

Even if he'd been dragged kicking and screaming onto the stage, at least the stage was grand enough—dazzling enough. Unlike himself, who even as a beaten-down clown was just a clown floundering in a mud pit.

Long Jing took two deep breaths, recalling the words another Cheng Shi had once spoken to him. A moment of clarity washed over him—he should have realized long ago that someone capable of revealing the world's truth couldn't possibly be uninvolved in it, and that anyone whom another version of himself would willingly sacrifice for had to be at the vortex's center. He just hadn't expected the wheel to turn so quickly—now it was his turn.

'Follow him again, then?' He still had one trump card unused.

Long Jing's expression was deeply conflicted: "Does staying mean standing against Void?"

Cheng Shi's mind was a maelstrom too. He refused to use "saving the world" as an excuse to rope anyone in, because right now the person he most wanted to save was himself. But in this moment, he truly understood the wisdom in Qin Xin's Torchbearers' philosophy of never forcing anyone to carry the flame.

Without a desire and resonance born from the deepest recesses of the heart, nothing could sustain so many people walking in the same direction.

"Not just Void. Very likely every god."

"..."

Long Jing clenched his fists. After a moment's hesitation, he gave a firm nod.

In truth, for a fleeting instant, Cheng Shi had hoped Long Jing would leave. He didn't know what lay ahead—only that the other world's Long Jing had entrusted him with keeping this Long Jing alive.

But he couldn't even guarantee his own survival. How could he guarantee Long Jing's?

Yet the moment Long Jing nodded, Cheng Shi smiled. He seemed to see the shadow of that blind Long Jing in the man before him.

"If this is the game's grandest stage, then how could President Gong possibly be absent!"

Long Jing silently straightened his clothes and turned to face the other two with a radiant grin:

"But let's get one thing straight—even as a supporting role this time, my scenes have to be spectacular enough.

I need the audience to know that President Gong was never the clown. The clown is someone else entirely!"

"..."

The brief emotion Cheng Shi had just felt immediately froze on his face. His eyelid twitched. He looked away toward Old Zhang.

Zhang Jizu narrowed his eyes, his tone dead serious:

"Don't waste time. If things are truly as urgent as you say, every second counts.

Say what you need to say. But don't say what you shouldn't..."

As he spoke, Zhang Jizu pointed at the sky. His meaning was clear—without the Bone Bell's protection, whatever Cheng Shi said could very well be heard by the gods. By Deceit.

Cheng Shi scoffed and tilted his head skyward:

"Then let Him hear!

He might as well know—this 'Masford' has no intention of playing along!"

He didn't rush to share everything with the two Joker members. Instead, he first addressed Brother Mouth:

"Brother Mouth—do you know what's going on with the Fun... with Deceit?"

The Fool's Lips was silent for a good while, but Cheng Shi could sense it had something to say. So he waited patiently. Eventually, Brother Mouth's voice came—unusually low and heavy:

"I don't know..."

I do know He once left this world. But when He returned, I sensed no change in Him whatsoever.

I'm thinking... maybe everything you're seeing in this trial is an illusion. Maybe it's all just another deception He's using against you.

Of course, it's also possible that I'm the one being deceived. After all, the Outer God is also Deceit, and Deceit understands Deceit best."

For once, the Fool's Lips had said a great deal. The hesitation and uncertainty in its tone rivaled Cheng Shi's own.

If the Outer God were any other deity, it might have questioned how an outsider could wield this world's faith and perfectly impersonate one of its gods. But the problem was—this was Deceit...

And who was Deceit? The surface of Void, the lie of the universe. What He did best was deceive!

As long as Deceit's authority remained in His hands, no one could see through who He truly was.

But then again, if there truly was a Deceit who had come from the Real Universe to replace the original Deceit—where had the original gone?

It wasn't hard to imagine. Given Deceit's nature, as long as He still drew breath, He would never abandon His own world to "flee" alone. That would be tantamount to ripping out His own rebellious spine and bowing to Origin.

According to the Fool's Lips' understanding of Him, He would never do such a thing. So the original Deceit had most likely already...

This was why Brother Mouth's voice was so low.

It believed its benefactor had fallen.

The outsider had stumbled upon Deceit's corpse—or perhaps witnessed His fall firsthand. Regardless, a god who died in the Real Universe would leave behind abandoned authority, invisible to both the Convention and Death.

The outsider then picked up Deceit's authority, came to this world, and used the original Deceit's authority—or perhaps abilities that transcended the gods—to deceive the entire universe.

This was far from impossible. The exact nature of the force behind that world-saving time reset was still an open question. If the one pulling the strings truly was the Outer God Deceit, then could the clown...

...still fight back?

Chapter 1282: Seeking Counsel Beyond

Cheng Shi and the Fool's Lips had arrived at the same conclusion. They fell silent in unison.

But Cheng Shi harbored an even deeper question: when exactly had Deceit been replaced?

This was critical—it determined whether he'd been deceived from the very start, or whether the Fear Faction had been hijacked midway by the Outer God.

The Fool's Lips said it was the latter. A wave of grief crashed through Cheng Shi—the Fear Faction's leader had truly met with catastrophe.

Cheng Shi's silence told the other two that the road ahead had grown even darker. If even the man who'd called for rebellion against Deceit had lost confidence, was there any point in continuing?

Zhang Jizu's expression shifted. He patted Cheng Shi's shoulder.

"Don't bottle it up. If the choice is too hard, put it out there and let us help you think. Even if we can't do much, more heads are always better.

Zhen Xin not coming back probably means the same thing.

She wouldn't betray the Joker—at a minimum, she wouldn't betray this world. I can tell she has feelings for it, however personal they might be.

And you don't need to carry everything alone. If this trial's allegory is really what I think it is, then even if you're fighting for your own survival, you're also looking for a way out for this world.

As members of this world, we should do our part."

Old Zhang delivered these words with a solemn face, though he kept one more thought to himself.

Since his own mistaken choice had landed the Joker in this predicament, he ought to be the one to fix it.

Cheng Shi was bolstered by the encouragement, but his silence wasn't born of despair—he was thinking. He felt that even an outsider Deceit shouldn't be fighting over a clown belonging to this world. What would be the point of taking him back?

He was Deceit, after all. Seizing another world's predetermined answer was still a compromise to Origin, wasn't it?

He couldn't figure it out for now, so he set it aside. He first laid out everything he knew for the only two allies at hand—from receiving the mask bearing the Fool's Lips at the Path Starting Point, to swallowing Fate's bitter fruit and fusing faiths, to joining the Fear Faction out of terror, to venturing into the Real Universe in search of the War Authority...

Using the development of his Void faith as the axis, he explained how Deceit had guided him into becoming "Yu Xi," leaving nothing out.

Well, almost nothing. Anything unrelated to Yu Xi was omitted entirely.

Finally, he said:

"To be honest, I kept telling myself not to fear the Fear Faction anew. But everything before me leaves no room for self-deception anymore.

Yu Xi's identity, the Fear Faction's stance—it's just like Masford and Morning Joy in this trial. He's been deliberately shaping my judgment, severing me from this world.

Even the Cheng Shi in the Real Universe told me: Deceit destroys the world. Fate saves it.

How laughable—at the time I was still wondering if their world had the problem. Only now do I realize the problem isn't in their world. It's me!

I trusted Deceit too much. I forgot entirely that He is Deceit."

The journey he described was so tortuous and oppressive that both Joker members found themselves slightly short of breath from the empathy.

Long Jing marveled at how anyone could have such a spectacular life while simultaneously pitying Cheng Shi, crushed under Void's gaze. He sighed:

"If Fate saves the world, then shouldn't we seek Fate's help first?"

Regardless of whether Fate wants to make you a sacrifice, we need to keep you here before the Outer God Deceit can take you away. Then we can resist Fate. Isn't that the optimal strategy?"

Zhang Jizu nodded in agreement:

"The fear is that if Deceit dares bare everything, He's already predicted our resistance and moved against Fate in advance.

Cheng Shi, you're the only Fate follower. Can you still reach Him?"

Cheng Shi shook his head.

He'd already tried everything he could think of.

The moment he'd realized Zhen Xin's departure was suspicious, he'd gripped the dice and sent out his call.

Yes—the dice!

Though the dice were Deceit's audience token, every word that passed through them was heard first by Fate.

Cheng Shi had been using that channel all along—essentially playing open cards with Deceit from the very start.

Yet even so, Fate had not responded.

This plunged Cheng Shi's heart to its lowest depths.

No matter how many titles he held, every one of them was Deceit's gift. The moment he broke from Deceit's camp, those assets ceased to be assets.

To fight a god, one needed godly power. But among all the gods who could oppose Deceit, most had already been eliminated—with Cheng Shi's own "help." Apart from Fate, he couldn't even think of a single deity who could stand against Deceit.

Life wouldn't—Descent was useless—Civilization was gone—Chaos was powerless.

Memory had already washed His hands of it. And Time...

Wait—!

There was still Time!

Had Time been deceived?

He had been diligently calibrating time for this starry sky. He shouldn't want the Outer God Deceit to destroy everything in this world. If Cheng Shi truly held the key to the universe's answer, shouldn't Time have a stake in keeping him alive?

Cheng Shi wasn't sure, but he had to try.

He voiced the idea, and Long Jing's "enthusiastic" response was immediate!

"I'll do it!" Long Jing was fired up. "This one has to be me! As the only... uh, the only reliable Time follower in this trial, let me go ask my benefactor what He thinks.

And if the benefactor isn't around, running into Lord Shi Zhen would work too. He's got a pretty good tempe—

Wait?"

Long Jing suddenly frowned and turned an almost shocked look on Cheng Shi:

"If Yu Xi is fake—no, I mean if Yu Xi is you... then how did you supposedly have a past conflict with Lord Shi Zhen??"

"..."

Cheng Shi's cheek twitched. 'Here it comes.'

If he told Long Jing now that Shi Zhen was also himself, would the acrobat have a breakdown and walk out?

But if he didn't say it, would Shi Zhen's disappearance make Long Jing think Time had rejected him, sending him spiraling into confusion?

'This problem's impossible.'

Just as Cheng Shi was agonizing over whether to come clean with Long Jing, the acrobat's expression shifted. His eyes flickered:

"I get it—Deceit must have tricked Lord Shi Zhen in order to fabricate Yu Xi's identity!

That's it, right!?"

"..."

Cheng Shi looked at Long Jing. The look in his eyes wasn't questioning or challenging—it was almost pleading. In that instant, he understood: it wasn't Shi Zhen who'd been deceived. It was the acrobat standing before him.

'Sure enough, the first requirement for joining the Joker is learning to deceive yourself.'

Cheng Shi squeezed out a smile, nodded without daring to meet Long Jing's eyes, and turned instead to Old Zhang, musing:

"Perhaps before requesting an audience with Time, I should consult someone else first."

Zhang Jizu blinked: "Who?"

"You!" Cheng Shi paused. "Another you!"

Time's wonder allows people to cross the barriers between dimensions and meet. Before we know whether Time has taken a side—before we've openly broken with the Fear Faction—while I still have... uh, the Time power I 'asked' Lord Shi Zhen for, I think it's worth a try!"

"Me?" Zhang Jizu narrowed his eyes, seeming to understand.

Long Jing, meanwhile, crashed entirely. Hearing this all-too-familiar method of interdimensional meeting, a devout Time follower who until this very moment had genuinely believed that "Lord Shi Zhen is pretty nice" quietly shattered inside.

Bad news: there were two clowns present.

Good news: at least in Old Zhang's eyes, there was only one.

Seeking counsel beyond—Cheng Shi had done it before, but never had he felt as anxious as he did now. He was terrified that Time had also "forsaken" this world, allying with the Outer God Deceit.

Fortunately, the Time Deduction method activated.

A flash of white light, and Cheng Shi found himself face to face with another world's Zhang Jizu.

A Gravekeeper far colder and more forbidding than the current Zhang Jizu, cloaked head to toe in black robes!

The other Zhang Jizu cracked open his tightly shut eyes just a sliver. When he saw the person before him was Cheng Shi, his whole body shuddered. Then, head bowed, he murmured:

"It seems the chance for atonement has come..."

...

Chapter 1283: Old Gods Fall, New Gods Ascend

"?"

Cheng Shi paused. "Atonement" was never a good word. It invariably meant the "sin" had already been committed.

Combined with the frigid aura of concentrated despair rolling off the other man, Cheng Shi's heart clenched: "What happened?"

Zhang Jizu didn't answer. He simply studied Cheng Shi for a long moment, then broke into a brilliant smile.

"It doesn't matter.

What matters is that you can still be alive.

I've inherited Death's authority. I can save your life. As long as you cross the barrier of spacetime and come to my world—at least until my world collapses completely—your life will be safe.

As for how to break through spacetime? Simple. Take my hand."

From beneath his robes, Zhang Jizu extended an arm of bare bone—skeletal and luminous, threaded with brilliant divine power.

"We act as proxies for each other's authority. Time's legacy permits me to bring you across.

So—interested?"

"!!??"

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted violently. He stared at the skeletal arm in disbelief: "Inherited? That Lord fell?!"

The outstretched arm went rigid. Zhang Jizu clearly didn't want to relive these events. But seeing the flash of terror in Cheng Shi's eyes, he sighed:

"Not just Him. All of Them fell.

On the 365th day after the Faith Game descended, the World Saving Plan was unanimously passed by the Convention. The old gods stepped down from their thrones, surrendered their authority, and extinguished themselves one by one beside the Sea of Desire.

New gods picked up the authority and ascended. The whole world celebrated. Everyone believed we'd found the answer.

Then, on the second day, the world began to collapse. Reality crumbled on the outside; the Void caved on the inside.

Our answer was wrong. The world is irreversibly heading toward destruction.

But don't worry—I didn't call you here to hurt you. Compared to those worlds that are 'still struggling,' our world is collapsing slowly enough for one mortal to live out his entire life.

But only enough for one adult to live out his life. As for his children, his descendants, his future...

Heh. When the world is destroyed, what future is there?"

"!!!"

The gods destroyed themselves to save the world!?

They had actually been willing to abandon their thrones to create a new beginning for mere mortals?

Who could have proposed such a plan?

Cheng Shi snapped his head up, meeting those slit-narrow eyes. Zhang Jizu read his confusion and pointed at him, snorting:

"You.

The clown went on a tour of the Real Universe, claimed to have found the so-called answer to the Creator's experiment, and came back brimming with confidence, ready to convince the entire world to approve his plan for divine succession.

He persuaded us first, then broke through the others one by one—bringing us along to persuade the gods.

We told Them that as long as the Void era was stretched infinitely, replaying the stories of previous eras within it, the world would be eternally 'stagnant'—unable to become the Creator's answer but also never becoming a discarded product as the era ran its course.

And since the eras would cycle through their performances, the gods would inevitably return. That was the answer the clown had found in the Real Universe.

The old gods must depart before new gods can be born. Only when They were willing to give up everything could They rediscover themselves in the long stretch of nothingness.

We persuaded Fate. We persuaded Existence. We persuaded Life. We persuaded every god—even Folly was happy to witness our foolish act.

Except Deceit.

But under the Convention's rules, Deceit's single vote was irrelevant.

Before His self-destruction at the Sea of Desire, He mocked the world: 'The world cannot be saved. You were all wrong. And so was I.'

At the time, we refused to believe it.

Until the second day... Heh. The bitter fruit arrived.

We had driven the gods to their deaths. And the gods' Creator, Origin, was crushing us in return."

"!!!"

Cheng Shi shuddered from head to toe. His scalp went numb.

From just those few sentences, he could feel the earthquake-like grandeur and tragedy of the gods' self-destruction.

He couldn't imagine what that world must have become for mortals—insignificant mortals—to have persuaded the lofty gods!

Deceit's opposition was predictable. But what about Fate!?

His creed of fixed destiny was nothing like cyclical survival. How could He have agreed to a plan that, by His definition, was absurd?

The other world's Zhang Jizu didn't understand either. They'd initially expected to persuade Deceit—after all, even the clown's expedition to the Real Universe had been "sponsored" by Deceit. Yet the first to agree to their plan had been Fate.

But regardless of who, it was yet another dead end.

Cheng Shi sighed silently, moved by the boldness and imagination of his other-world self, yet tormented by the dilemma staring him in the face.

How was his present situation any different from that world?

Both were counting the days until the end—one with time to spare, the other imminent.

Still, that world's experience gave him insight. At the very least, Fate—who championed fixed destiny to the death—could potentially side with humanity. As for Deceit...

Forget it. All hope had to be placed in Fate!

Cheng Shi nodded with steely resolve, then shook his head at the Zhang Jizu before him:

"I do want to live—even if it means barely scraping by, I'd accept it.

But... I can't live in a world that doesn't have him."

Zhang Jizu naturally understood who "him" referred to. He fell silent for a moment, then tried to persuade him: "This world also has Old Jia."

Cheng Shi shook his head again: "No. That's his Old Jia—not my father.

My only connection to that starry sky is Old Jia. He was born there, grew up there, and so did I.

And now he's dead there... My only wish is—if I must die—let me die there too.

Thank you for appearing. I think I know what to do now."

Seeing the depth of his resolve, Zhang Jizu pressed no further. He withdrew his hand, sighed, and gazed off into the distance:

"Good luck."

It was a blessing, plain and simple. Yet Cheng Shi couldn't shake the feeling that this Zhang Jizu meant something more.

He didn't dwell on it. Every world had its own misfortune—every world needed time to lick its wounds.

Cheng Shi departed. Watching his figure recede, the cold Zhang Jizu's stern features gradually softened. He looked quite content:

"Atonement complete. Time to rest eternal."

...

Meanwhile, on the other side.

Having realized that the longer they stalled, the more likely Cheng Shi was to piece everything together on his own, the trio immediately abandoned the idea of going back to extract Real Universe intel from him. They pivoted to a substitute plan: find Big Cat!

Zhen Xin knew that Hong Lin had traveled to the Real Universe alongside Cheng Shi, so approaching her was far more feasible.

And finding people was Hu Wei's specialty. Shortly after he ducked back into the Void, this Grand Marshal—whose contacts stretched across the map—had pulled the equally well-connected druid out of another trial.

Hong Lin had no idea what the three of them were doing. She thought it was just another social gathering arranged by the Grand Marshal—until Wei Mu revealed this place's secret and Zhen Xin explained the trial's allegory. Only then did she realize: Deceit was actually about to show His hand to Cheng Shi?

"I knew He was up to no good!

Why else would the way back have vanished into thin air!?"

Big Cat was furious, but kept herself in check: "So that's what it was—He used this scheme to strand us outside the world, then planned to shuttle us to another identical one?"

Good thing we hit that spacetime storm and found our way back via the Dolphin Bridge!

Now that His perfect plan has fallen through, He's probably done pretending—which means Cheng Shi is in danger!

I have to go to him!"

With that, Hong Lin leapt and transformed into a spotted leopard, bounding toward the Void.

Wei Mu, Zhen Xin, and Hu Wei threw everything they had at stopping her—and barely managed. Seeing Hong Lin's strength was borderline inhuman, Zhen Xin had no choice but to shout:

"How can you save him if you go now?"

Big Cat didn't look back: "Even if I can't save him, I'll try!"

"If you go, the best case is you die and he gets taken. Worst case, you both perish.

Hong Lin—trust me. I'm not trying to harm the Fate Weaver. I have a way to save him!"

"!"

Hong Lin whipped around, eyes bright with surprise: "What way?"

Zhen Xin fell silent for a beat, gazing into the distance as if steeling herself. Then, with iron resolve:

"Morning Joy needs a clown. But the clown doesn't have to be the Sunset's Lake..."

"!!!"

...

Chapter 1284: How to Deceive Deceit?

"You want to play the clown?"

Big Cat was stunned. She finally stopped in her tracks.

Her relationship with Zhen Xin was decent, and she got along well with An Mingyu too. But neither bond was forged in fire like hers with Cheng Shi. And asking an ordinary friend to trade her life for a close companion's...

Hong Lin couldn't do it.

Any player to whom Hong Lin gave the time of day had earned her regard, and her will was to shelter all her friends. When alternatives still existed, she couldn't accept using a friend as a bargaining chip.

And that "alternative" was simple: she was still alive!

As long as she drew breath, she was willing to "front" her own life first.

Besides, would a mortal's performance even work against Deceit?

Every talent the magician possessed was a gift from Deceit. How could she possibly fool the god whose very name was "the lie of the universe"?

Zhen Xin offered no explanation. Beside them, the puppet spoke thoughtfully:

"So your real target is Fate.

But have you considered—since Deceit has already revealed everything to the clown, He's most likely imprisoned Fate somewhere you can't reach? Otherwise, He'd never have used such a 'gentle' method to show His hand.

It seems that great battle in Void was real after all. Deceit won—and in doing so, created the conditions for this trial's revelation."

The puppet slowly turned toward Zhen Xin. "You want to find Fate. But I don't think that road will be easy."

Zhen Xin pressed her lips together. After a long silence: "That's why I came to you."

"?"

Wei Mu hadn't expected to be put on the spot at this juncture. His eyes rotated mechanically a few times before he shook his head:

"There's no thread of evidence that could lead me to Fate's location. I can't find Him."

Hu Wei's face darkened. Zhen Xin's brow furrowed. Big Cat turned to leave—but then Wei Mu added:

"But just because I don't know doesn't mean He doesn't."

"Who?"

The puppet tilted his head slightly:

"My Lord, Folly.

Though He holds no authority, it's undeniable that He remains a sage of extraordinary perception—and of course, a fool that the universe can hardly rival.

He certainly knows where Fate is. But He may not tell you.

I can send you to see Him. Can you extract an answer from His lips?

That's the extent of what I can do."

"..."

Honestly, Zhen Xin had no confidence. But she had to try.

Just as she was about to reply, Hong Lin seized her arm and said firmly:

"Even if you find Fate, how do you deceive Deceit?"

He can't possibly fail to see through your disguise. Even if Fate helps conceal you and agrees to use you as a substitute for Cheng Shi, would Deceit actually fall for it?

He's a god! He could simply take both of you, then sort you out in another world where Fate's power no longer applies.

When that happens, what awaits you won't be a happy ending.

Zhen Xin, you..."

Zhen Xin turned and looked at Hong Lin, understanding the concern. But if Big Cat could bet her life for a friend, so could she.

She smiled:

"You've got it wrong, Hong Lin. I don't want to impersonate Cheng Shi. I want to become that clown.

Cheng Shi made it this far very likely because, back then, Zhen Yi chose Deceit and didn't embrace Fate.

I'm going to find Fate not so He can disguise me as Cheng Shi—but to ask Him to bestow a second faith upon Zhen Yi.

I want Zhen Yi to fuse with Fate and become the world's second key.

That way, I'd have the qualification to leave in his place—and perhaps become Deceit's new choice."

"!!!"

At these words, Hong Lin understood completely.

Zhen Xin wasn't just trying to save the world. She was asking to die!

Her inner self was apparently not as sunny as she normally appeared. She might even harbor a strand of despair toward this world—otherwise, she wouldn't want to leave.

Because if her plan worked, becoming the second key meant she could just as well stay in this world and save it. From the standpoint of protecting the world and protecting An Mingyu, there was absolutely no need to volunteer as Cheng Shi's replacement.

Yet she still insisted on keeping Cheng Shi behind.

Why?

Only because she'd long since made up her mind to die.

Hong Lin's expression softened with emotion. She was about to say more when Zhen Xin gently pressed a fingertip to her lips.

"There aren't that many 'whys.' He wants to stay. I want to go. That's enough.

At least my departure would earn a nice reputation. Ha—Zhen Yi has caused everyone so much trouble. There has to be compensation.

And as her elder sister, I'm duty-bound."

She patted Hong Lin's shoulder, then turned a smile toward Wei Mu:

"Let's go. Take me to Folly.

Let me see how this universe's greatest sage evaluates my foolish act."

Wei Mu considered for a moment, nodded, tore open a rift, and took Zhen Xin away from the starfield where no gods watched.

They traveled swiftly. Under the puppet's sure-footed guidance, they arrived at an unfamiliar stretch of Void.

Wei Mu handed Zhen Xin a small wooden bell and instructed:

"Shake it. He'll come to grant you an audience."

"?" Zhen Xin blinked. "This is how you seek an audience with a god?"

Since the audience was imminent, she held her tongue for diplomacy's sake. What she actually wanted to say was: 'This isn't waiting for a divine summons—how is this different from calling a dog?'

But then she remembered that Hu Wei had used the exact same method to summon Wei Mu...

'All one could say was—Folly's tradition was consistent throughout.'

Wei Mu seemed to read her thoughts. He gave a mechanical smile: "It's not about the method. It's simply transmitting information.

If you don't like bells, I have other options.

He wanders here regularly. He'll sense your intent and come to scorn your foolish act.

So shake away. He won't mind you treating Him like a dog—because that, too, is a foolish act."

"..." Zhen Xin's expression was odd. "And you? Not coming with me?"

The puppet smiled. "No. I'm afraid I won't be able to resist mocking Him.

On a normal day it wouldn't matter, but today you need a favor from Him. I won't be a nuisance."

With that, the puppet swiftly departed.

Zhen Xin was left standing alone in the Void, staring at the wooden bell, speechless for a long while.

She thought about many things. She calmed herself. Then she shook it.

Moments later, a pair of eyes—painted in chaotic white miasma—opened before her, gazing down at the clearly supplicant Deceit collection who stood with a hint of deference. A mocking snort:

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

Zhen Xin pressed her lips together. As if making some final decision, she shed her deferential posture. She raised her head, blazing gaze meeting Those divine eyes, and laughed aloud:

"No.

Mortals are only fit for foolish acts. Where would an answer come from?

But...

Great God of Folly—You who stand as the universe's supreme sage—can You give my foolish act an answer?"

"..."

Those white-miasma eyes fell silent. After a long pause, He snorted again.

"Worthy of being Deceit's first collection. You enjoy that nauseating petty cleverness just like your benefactor.

Still, I'm happy to witness His foolish act.

Go. The one you seek has been trapped in that twisted River of Existence."

The eyes blinked and vanished, leaving behind a Void rift before Zhen Xin—one that opened straight into the Mockery and Jeering.

...

Chapter 1284: How to Deceive Deceit?

"You want to play the clown?"

Big Cat was stunned. She finally stopped in her tracks.

Her relationship with Zhen Xin was decent, and she got along well with An Mingyu too. But neither bond was forged in fire like hers with Cheng Shi. And asking an ordinary friend to trade her life for a close companion's...

Hong Lin couldn't do it.

Any player to whom Hong Lin gave the time of day had earned her regard, and her will was to shelter all her friends. When alternatives still existed, she couldn't accept using a friend as a bargaining chip.

And that "alternative" was simple: she was still alive!

As long as she drew breath, she was willing to "front" her own life first.

Besides, would a mortal's performance even work against Deceit?

Every talent the magician possessed was a gift from Deceit. How could she possibly fool the god whose very name was "the lie of the universe"?

Zhen Xin offered no explanation. Beside them, the puppet spoke thoughtfully:

"So your real target is Fate.

But have you considered—since Deceit has already revealed everything to the clown, He's most likely imprisoned Fate somewhere you can't reach? Otherwise, He'd never have used such a 'gentle' method to show His hand.

It seems that great battle in Void was real after all. Deceit won—and in doing so, created the conditions for this trial's revelation."

The puppet slowly turned toward Zhen Xin. "You want to find Fate. But I don't think that road will be easy."

Zhen Xin pressed her lips together. After a long silence: "That's why I came to you."

"?"

Wei Mu hadn't expected to be put on the spot at this juncture. His eyes rotated mechanically a few times before he shook his head:

"There's no thread of evidence that could lead me to Fate's location. I can't find Him."

Hu Wei's face darkened. Zhen Xin's brow furrowed. Big Cat turned to leave—but then Wei Mu added:

"But just because I don't know doesn't mean He doesn't."

"Who?"

The puppet tilted his head slightly:

"My Lord, Folly.

Though He holds no authority, it's undeniable that He remains a sage of extraordinary perception—and of course, a fool that the universe can hardly rival.

He certainly knows where Fate is. But He may not tell you.

I can send you to see Him. Can you extract an answer from His lips?

That's the extent of what I can do."

"..."

Honestly, Zhen Xin had no confidence. But she had to try.

Just as she was about to reply, Hong Lin seized her arm and said firmly:

"Even if you find Fate, how do you deceive Deceit?"

He can't possibly fail to see through your disguise. Even if Fate helps conceal you and agrees to use you as a substitute for Cheng Shi, would Deceit actually fall for it?

He's a god! He could simply take both of you, then sort you out in another world where Fate's power no longer applies.

When that happens, what awaits you won't be a happy ending.

Zhen Xin, you..."

Zhen Xin turned and looked at Hong Lin, understanding the concern. But if Big Cat could bet her life for a friend, so could she.

She smiled:

"You've got it wrong, Hong Lin. I don't want to impersonate Cheng Shi. I want to become that clown.

Cheng Shi made it this far very likely because, back then, Zhen Yi chose Deceit and didn't embrace Fate.

I'm going to find Fate not so He can disguise me as Cheng Shi—but to ask Him to bestow a second faith upon Zhen Yi.

I want Zhen Yi to fuse with Fate and become the world's second key.

That way, I'd have the qualification to leave in his place—and perhaps become Deceit's new choice."

"!!!"

At these words, Hong Lin understood completely.

Zhen Xin wasn't just trying to save the world. She was asking to die!

Her inner self was apparently not as sunny as she normally appeared. She might even harbor a strand of despair toward this world—otherwise, she wouldn't want to leave.

Because if her plan worked, becoming the second key meant she could just as well stay in this world and save it. From the standpoint of protecting the world and protecting An Mingyu, there was absolutely no need to volunteer as Cheng Shi's replacement.

Yet she still insisted on keeping Cheng Shi behind.

Why?

Only because she'd long since made up her mind to die.

Hong Lin's expression softened with emotion. She was about to say more when Zhen Xin gently pressed a fingertip to her lips.

"There aren't that many 'whys.' He wants to stay. I want to go. That's enough.

At least my departure would earn a nice reputation. Ha—Zhen Yi has caused everyone so much trouble. There has to be compensation.

And as her elder sister, I'm duty-bound."

She patted Hong Lin's shoulder, then turned a smile toward Wei Mu:

"Let's go. Take me to Folly.

Let me see how this universe's greatest sage evaluates my foolish act."

Wei Mu considered for a moment, nodded, tore open a rift, and took Zhen Xin away from the starfield where no gods watched.

They traveled swiftly. Under the puppet's sure-footed guidance, they arrived at an unfamiliar stretch of Void.

Wei Mu handed Zhen Xin a small wooden bell and instructed:

"Shake it. He'll come to grant you an audience."

"?" Zhen Xin blinked. "This is how you seek an audience with a god?"

Since the audience was imminent, she held her tongue for diplomacy's sake. What she actually wanted to say was: 'This isn't waiting for a divine summons—how is this different from calling a dog?'

But then she remembered that Hu Wei had used the exact same method to summon Wei Mu...

'All one could say was—Folly's tradition was consistent throughout.'

Wei Mu seemed to read her thoughts. He gave a mechanical smile: "It's not about the method. It's simply transmitting information.

If you don't like bells, I have other options.

He wanders here regularly. He'll sense your intent and come to scorn your foolish act.

So shake away. He won't mind you treating Him like a dog—because that, too, is a foolish act."

"..." Zhen Xin's expression was odd. "And you? Not coming with me?"

The puppet smiled. "No. I'm afraid I won't be able to resist mocking Him.

On a normal day it wouldn't matter, but today you need a favor from Him. I won't be a nuisance."

With that, the puppet swiftly departed.

Zhen Xin was left standing alone in the Void, staring at the wooden bell, speechless for a long while.

She thought about many things. She calmed herself. Then she shook it.

Moments later, a pair of eyes—painted in chaotic white miasma—opened before her, gazing down at the clearly supplicant Deceit collection who stood with a hint of deference. A mocking snort:

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

Zhen Xin pressed her lips together. As if making some final decision, she shed her deferential posture. She raised her head, blazing gaze meeting Those divine eyes, and laughed aloud:

"No.

Mortals are only fit for foolish acts. Where would an answer come from?

But...

Great God of Folly—You who stand as the universe's supreme sage—can You give my foolish act an answer?"

"..."

Those white-miasma eyes fell silent. After a long pause, He snorted again.

"Worthy of being Deceit's first collection. You enjoy that nauseating petty cleverness just like your benefactor.

Still, I'm happy to witness His foolish act.

Go. The one you seek has been trapped in that twisted River of Existence."

The eyes blinked and vanished, leaving behind a Void rift before Zhen Xin—one that opened straight into the Mockery and Jeering.

...

Chapter 1286: Audience with Fate, Part One

The Mockery and Jeering.

In that twisted River of Existence, a mirror drifted with the current, rising and falling amid kaleidoscopic tides.

This was the form Zhen Xin commonly used to represent herself—the appearance Deceit had bestowed upon her when she first entered the Mockery and Jeering. Though she could change her shape at will, she usually chose the mirror when she needed to declare her identity.

Of course, it was also Zhen Yi's preferred form—because that way she could blame every act of mischief committed in the Mockery and Jeering on her elder sister.

At this moment, the mirror faced a region of pure "nonexistence," bowing reverently:

"Praise be to Fate, may—"

Before she could finish, a voice cold as the abyss cut her off mercilessly.

"Since when does Fate need praise from a Deceit follower?"

"..."

Zhen Xin fell silent.

She could sense that Fate's condition was dire. This Void sovereign appeared to be imprisoned here, and the only being capable of imprisoning a god in this place was... the Fun God. There was no one else.

'As expected—He'd done all the groundwork long before showing His hand.'

Zhen Xin knew that Fate wouldn't welcome anyone or anything associated with the Fun God right now. But she steeled herself, endured the crushing weight of that "nothingness" gaze, and spoke with deference:

"Deceit was the wrong turn at the start of the journey. The lost traveler awakened by a stroke of fortune, and so I've come to seek Fate's guidance—to find the road that lies ahead.

You are Void's very essence. Naturally, You can see the truth within my heart.

Even though, because of Ming Yu, I may harbor... feelings toward You... but I trust You can see clearly: at this moment, like my benefactor Deceit, I am a rebel.

I refuse to follow His guidance and let 'fixed destiny' be torn from this world. So I've come seeking Your help.

I beg You—keep him here and let me go. I... am willing to become the world's second key, to fill the void of Deceit's designs upon this world..."

As these words ended, the mirror split into two. One half reflected a resolute Zhen Xin. The other showed the sleeping form of Zhen Yi, eyes closed.

Zhen Xin raised her hand, pointing at her sister in the opposite mirror, a touch of reluctance in her voice:

"I make this prayer on my sister's behalf. I beseech You to grant her a second faith—to make her a complete Void walker, one who can satisfy the world's need for 'the fixed' just as the Fate Weaver does.

I offer this as my bargaining chip—to keep the Fate Weaver in the present. While I..."

Zhen Xin's tone was profoundly humble. This, too, was something she'd learned from the Joker. In the past, when seeking a divine audience, she'd always been poised and unafraid—Deceit's attention had given her ample confidence.

But now, Deceit's confidence was the most offensive thing before Fate's eyes. She had no choice but to grovel like an ant, begging the god to grant her wish.

Amid the gods' war, this was the most "mature" solution a mortal could devise: satisfy Fate's obsession with the fixed, satisfy Deceit's covetous designs, preserve a world where Ming Yu could live—and let go of a self... already battered beyond repair.

She was tired. But for the sake of Ming Yu, she had to summon one last breath of fight.

Yet Fate was far more merciless than anyone imagined.

Imprisoned within the Mockery and Jeering, He suddenly thrashed violently. His wrathful aura crashed toward the two mirrors like a tsunami. Fortunately, the Mockery and Jeering surged and swelled, deflecting the fury. But even the tides couldn't block Fate's frigid gaze. He stared at the Deceit follower before Him—formless, invisible—yet it was as though He had opened those glacial eyes right there within this twisted Existence.

"Deceit follower—do you have any idea what you're saying!"

Zhen Xin pressed her lips together and nodded firmly: "I do."

"Utter nonsense!"

There is only one Deceit in this world. Only one Fate... and only one world!

Given that, what is this talk of 'sending away' or 'keeping here'?

Deceit deceives Himself and others, packaging His rebellion as some absurd cosmic story—fooling the gods, fooling the people, and fooling you!

You call yourself a rebel like Him, yet you believe the lies He used to deceive the universe, and speak such utterly preposterous nonsense!"

"?"

Zhen Xin froze.

In the mirror, she didn't dare raise her head. Her expression was deadly grave.

For a fleeting instant, she wondered if she'd been wrong about everything. But she quickly realized the situation was more dire than she'd imagined. From what she was seeing, the one "deceiving themselves and others" might not be Deceit at all—it might be this "impotently raging" Fate.

He actually refused to believe that Deceit had come from beyond the world?

Why?

Fate had to know. Even if He couldn't be entirely certain, He must have guessed—otherwise, hearing her plea wouldn't have triggered such a breakdown.

So why was He rushing to deny it all? She'd offered the "most perfect" answer—surrender Zhen Yi, no one would be harmed. Why wasn't that good enough?

No... it seemed the issue wasn't "not good enough." It seemed more like... "not possible."

An electric current exploded from her scalp and surged through her entire body. Her pupils contracted violently. She snapped her head up, staring into the formless Mockery and Jeering, and gasped in shock:

"'Fixed destiny' isn't a concept—it's... Cheng Shi himself!?"

Ever since she'd first encountered Cheng Shi in her sister's memories, Zhen Xin had been tracking this player who'd outwitted Zhen Yi. When she learned he was a Void walker, she'd simply assumed he was the second lucky person chosen by Deceit after Zhen Yi had made the "wrong" choice.

She'd always believed it was Zhen Yi's "instinctive" evasion of "responsibility" that had created Cheng Shi's current predicament.

Not that she felt she owed Cheng Shi—she simply believed he wasn't "the only one." After all, she'd experienced that divine selection before Deceit herself, so she naturally interpreted it as nothing more than a god's pick.

But now, seeing Fate's reaction...

Could it be that the "fixed destiny" He championed had always been Cheng Shi from the very beginning!?

Zhen Xin's mind crashed. Her entire plan was built on the logical foundation of being Deceit's first collection—the belief that she could become a second key. But now Fate was telling her it was impossible. There was only one key in this world, and it was the Fate Weaver named Cheng Shi.

Now it was Zhen Xin's turn to ask that question: Why?

Why Cheng Shi?

Bewildered and shocked, she looked toward Fate. From the roiling Mockery and Jeering came Fate's cold, direct voice:

"The fixed has always been fixed.

There is no reason. The only reason is that he was born as the fixed!"

Zhen Xin didn't understand, but she thought of Origin.

She spoke, trembling: "It's His will!?"

Fate gradually calmed, His voice growing ever colder: "You need not know these things. Because you are not the fixed, nor can you ever become the fixed."

"..."

That single sentence doused the fire within Zhen Xin, sealing it in ice. In the mirror, she collapsed, lips quivering, eyes unfocused.

And then, in the other mirror, the sleeping Zhen Yi suddenly opened her eyes. She looked at Fate and sneered:

"No wonder little Cheng always calls You a bitch. Truly cold-blooded and heartless.

You gods are about to exhaust every last shred of my patience.

Tch—

Whatever your 'fixed destiny,' whatever your 'covetous designs'—watch me kill little Cheng, and then you can fight over him all you want."

"Zhen Yi, shut your mouth!"

Zhen Xin glared furiously. Zhen Yi scoffed, about to taunt her sister further, but seeing her crestfallen state, she pursed her lips and swallowed the words.

The two sisters put on a scene of "sisterly devotion" right before Fate's eyes. Sensing the genuine feeling within it, Fate's aura suddenly hitched. Then, gradually, His voice began to thaw:

"What fine self-deception..."

Deceit follower—though you cannot become the fixed, you can still contribute to this world's fixed destiny.

I cannot guarantee your contribution will stop His plan. I can only tell you that, if you're willing..."

"Is there hope?" Zhen Xin blurted.

"...You will die." Fate pronounced the magician's ending without joy or sorrow.

Zhen Yi heard this, opened her eyes again, and snarled at Fate: "Bitch!"

Zhen Xin started, then broke into a radiant smile.

"What's so frightening about death? Isn't death just... release?"

...

Chapter 1287: Audience with Fate, Part Two

The Mockery and Jeering.

When Cheng Shi stepped inside, his avatar—the spider web—had grown another full size, "capturing" nearly every kaleidoscopic wonder in sight and pinning it to the threads.

He cautiously surveyed the changes in himself, searching for Fate's form. But found nothing.

He couldn't see Fate.

Fortunately, the surging tide of Fate's essence flowed in a single direction. Following it, he finally sensed a presence beneath the churning Mockery and Jeering—something that "possibly existed."

Sensing an existence within a twisted River of Existence while that existence was itself Void—now that was irony.

Cheng Shi stared in that direction, eyes flickering, expression peculiar.

All those days and nights of accumulated blasphemy, and it came down to... a cry for help. No matter how thick your skin, you couldn't just swagger up to your benefactor and beg at a time like this.

But Cheng Shi didn't consider himself a person.

He immediately switched to devout mode and wailed toward that direction, tears streaming: "My Lord! Save me!"

A terrifying ripple of Fate's power detonated from within the Mockery and Jeering, carrying a world-ending aura that surged in every direction.

The colossal pressure buckled Cheng Shi's body for an instant—but soon, the divine oppression bypassed the only Fate Weaver present and redirected its fury at the surrounding Mockery and Jeering.

The twisted seethed. The absurd burned. The abstract unwound.

And then, once again, those spiraling, star-flecked celestial eyes opened before him.

Their gaze was glacial as ever, the outer corners slightly drooped—clearly harboring boundless rage. He looked upon His follower, furious that he hadn't tried harder, yet softened His tone's icy edge with something resembling pity for this unfortunate soul:

"The wrong path... was it pleasant?"

"..."

'Felt like getting slapped.'

Cheng Shi's cheek throbbed with phantom pain. He lowered his head awkwardly, still making excuses:

"How can one appreciate Fate's 'fixed destiny' without walking the wrong path? Change is also Your authority. At the very least, the road walked on the wrong path was still... getting closer to You..."

It was a defense completely devoid of conviction. Normally, after saying something like this, Cheng Shi would simply brace himself for divine punishment. But today was different—Fate was imprisoned and couldn't discipline him.

More unexpectedly, the imprisoned Fate's gaze actually softened considerably at these words. Even the boiling Mockery and Jeering around them gradually stilled.

Seeing it worked, Cheng Shi immediately laid out everything—his deductions about Deceit's allegory from the trial. He no longer cared whose territory this was. There would be only one chance. If he couldn't win Fate's support here, all that awaited might truly be another "wrong path."

Of course, Fate's support probably wouldn't be a good thing either—a sacrifice could never escape a sacrifice's fate. But choosing the lesser of two evils, staying in his own world to serve as a sacrifice beat being dragged to another world as someone else's salvation tool.

Cheng Shi was desperate. He kept himself as composed as possible, delivering a clear and organized account of his suspicions about Deceit, his fear of Deceit, his rebellion against Deceit...

Fate was silent throughout.

Cheng Shi sensed something was off. He paused, looked up questioningly—and when Fate still didn't respond, he gritted his teeth and finally asked the question that had plagued him for so long.

"The Outer God Deceit's desire to steal the clown is itself a validation of the 'fixed.'

But Your follower has never been able to understand—what is 'fixed destiny,' exactly? And why... am I the fixed?

And how can You be so certain that the lofty, unapproachable Origin needs the 'fixed' that You champion?"

"Insolence!

You will not disrespect Him!"

"..." Hearing Fate's rebuke, Cheng Shi let out a wry laugh and suddenly relaxed.

He spread his hands, staring into those eyes, unconcerned: "Insolent, then. I'm about to die anyway—what's the point of watching myself?

My Lord, since I can't escape this fixed destiny, why won't You let me die with understanding?

If I'm offered to the Creator while drowning in confusion, wouldn't He be displeased by devotion tainted with impurities?

No matter how you look at it, this is the right time to let me know the truth.

I've accepted my fate. The moment I learned Deceit came from beyond this world and intended to take me to another, I accepted it.

The fixed will always be the fixed. No matter how much I resist or rebel, it always finds a way to pull me back on track—to make me 'willingly' become the fixed.

I just never expected the final method would be shattering every illusion I held about the Fear Faction...

And now, all that separates me from 'willingly' is a single truth.

Tell me the truth of the fixed, and I will become the 'fixed' as You understand it.

You once said it wasn't You who chose me, but that the fixed resides in me. Then why does it reside in me!?

I know I may not deserve to seek the truth. But please, shelter me one last time... my Lord..."

"..."

The Mockery and Jeering froze in an instant—as if eternally sealed in ice. Even the colors dimmed, the distortions vanished, and against this backdrop, those celestial eyes blazed ever more brilliantly.

Fate lowered His gaze upon His follower and heaved a deep sigh.

In the end, He relented, and spoke the answer to Cheng Shi.

"This is not my will. It is..."

"Origin!?" Cheng Shi's pupils contracted violently. Cold sweat poured from every pore. "My Lord—don't tell me that the Creator who sits above billions of lives—no, billions of universes—that the purpose of His universal experiment is to... anchor a single mortal!

Me!?"

Fate said nothing. He hadn't finished—but He had already said everything.

"Ha. Hahahaha!"

Cheng Shi burst into laughter. Louder and louder, clutching his sides, pounding the ground—utterly unhinged, wholly beyond control.

He couldn't understand. Refused to understand.

"What virtue do I possess, what ability, to warrant a Creator's sole attention?

What does He want? What is He doing!?

My Lord—You chose me as a sacrifice perhaps to please Him. But what did He choose me for?

Is there something above even Origin!?

If not—then surely He doesn't mean to pass the Origin's throne... to me!?

Hahaha—then I'm about to become Origin!?

Good, good, good—all gods extinguished, the universe dissolved—behold: Origin!

No wonder those words echo through the Real Universe's graveyard! I understand now!

The day I succeed Origin shall be the day this absurd universe is dismantled!

Gods should never have existed in this world!"

Sensing the despair in His follower's heart, Fate forgave his blasphemy against the Creator.

But He offered no comfort. Because the fixed could not be changed.

He could tolerate Cheng Shi going astray for the sake of the fixed—but He would not tolerate Cheng Shi abandoning the fixed out of despair. This was Fate. What He favored was never a particular follower. It was the road ahead.

'Heartless!'

Two words leapt into Cheng Shi's mind. But he didn't dare say them aloud.

He was the one asking for a favor, after all. No matter how shattered he felt, he couldn't fling those words in Fate's face.

Cheng Shi laughed himself out. He lay sprawled across the Mockery and Jeering, emptied himself, gazed up at the distortions, and murmured like a madman:

"What's so good about me? What's the point of choosing me?"

How can this world be this absurd?

Ha—come to think of it, the last person who chose me for no reason at all... was Old Jia.

Old Jia?

Right—what if Origin is Old Jia?

Maybe this is just a Creator-father's succession trial for the mortal son He adopted.

I'll only inherit His divine throne if I pass, right? Don't you think so, my Lord?"

"Utter nonsense!"

The Mockery and Jeering erupted again, and Void's frigid essence came surging out.

...

Chapter 1288: Drop the Act, My Lord — I Know It's You

Frost sealed the spider web. Cheng Shi stood frozen in place.

Yet he was no longer afraid. Feeling the bone-piercing chill throughout his body, he snorted:

"What a black heart. Even as the clown chokes his last on stage, the 'ringmaster' behind the curtain still won't tell him who he's performing for.

If You wanted to keep it from me so badly, why expose Yourself on such trivial details?

If You wanted to deceive, why not deceive all the way through—keep me utterly in the dark? At least when I'm offered up as a sacrifice, I'd have no resentment!

So why let me learn the truth halfway!?

Why shatter this beautiful illusion and plunge me into the vortex of despair?

Just because of Your twisted sense of fun, my Lord!?

Well, congratulations—You succeeded! This clown despises You now, just as he despises that nauseating fate!"

Cheng Shi locked his gaze on those celestial eyes. His voice sank lower, grew colder—in tone, at least, he was beginning to approach Fate.

"Drop the act, my Lord. I know it's You!"

Yes—Cheng Shi had seen through it. Though the "Fate" before him was flawless from every angle, he'd still caught the tell. He was certain this was not the true Fate—but the architect of this trial: Deceit!

After all, if Deceit could imprison Fate within the Mockery and Jeering, He would never leave Fate with enough power to act.

The scene of Arrogance—Order—being imprisoned in Chaos's temple was still vivid in memory. Just a few Mockery Spikes, and Order couldn't use a shred of divine power!

At such a critical juncture—the very moment He'd chosen to show His hand—how could He possibly allow Fate's energy to overflow freely, even influencing the Mockery and Jeering—freezing it, boiling it?

The Mockery and Jeering wasn't a creation of Void. It was Deceit's creation—practically His personal domain. In such a place, how could an imprisoned Fate still wield this level of power? It defied all reason.

Wouldn't He fear that Fate might use this power to break free and come save him?

There was only one answer: this being before him was not Fate at all. He was Deceit!

The mastermind had once again impersonated His brother-god—and played the cruelest trick on him yet!

Just like this trial. He could have said nothing and simply taken him. Instead, He had to use an elaborate allegory to announce His origins beyond this world, to declare His designs on its "fixed destiny"!

Cheng Shi was breaking apart.

He wondered: did becoming a true sacrifice require despair as a seasoning?

Those icy eyes remained silent. No response.

But before long, the chill within the Mockery and Jeering gradually receded. The kaleidoscopic colors came alive once more. The corners of those eyes lifted slightly, regaining their lively quality, and directed a laden syllable at the follower before them:

"Hee~"

Cheng Shi swore: at this moment, he loathed that single sound with every fiber of his being.

"Is this funny to You?"

"Isn't it?"

"..."

"A bewildered mortal, desperate for guidance, stumbles in a panic before the very god he's blasphemed a thousand times. He exhausts every word of praise—only to discover that the deity he's found isn't his savior but the demon he dreads day and night.

The mortal is no match for the demon. He is devoured in the end, his absurd life concluded.

Not a riveting script?

Hmm, perhaps it's missing something. Here—let's give this mortal an extra trait:

His profession is a clown!

Now the character's fate and his identity echo each other beautifully—peak absurdist aesthetics. What do you think?"

Not a single word registered. Cheng Shi stared into those laughing eyes and asked, word by deliberate word:

"Why?"

The spirals within those eyes turned once. A mocking snort: "Does this world really have that many 'whys'?"

"Why?" Cheng Shi repeated through gritted teeth.

The eyes blinked rapidly like stars and smiled:

"Hm, persistence is indeed the key that leads to the ending. It's pushed you this far.

But this is as far as it goes—because my script has ended."

"Why!?" The clown roared in fury.

Seeing that contorted face, hearing that ragged howl, the eyes paid it no mind and mused on:

"Seems I should add a 'broken record' trait to the clown!"

"Heh."

Cheng Shi laughed—a self-mocking, savage laugh. He struggled endlessly, clawing at the spider web enveloping him, raving:

"I understand.

The script really is over."

And with that, he raised his hand and blasted himself with five consecutive thunderbolts from his Death ring.

BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM—

In a blink, the spider web was annihilated.

But the next second, those celestial eyes blinked, and the spider web was restored from the charred remnants of the Mockery and Jeering.

Cheng Shi hadn't died. What died was...

"Tch—

Don't waste your effort. If I let you die before the period I've written, the script would have a botched ending.

No matter how many times you kill yourself, only your illusion dies.

The instant you stepped in here, your true body fell asleep. The spider web carrying your consciousness is entirely my fabrication.

It's useless. Your only ending is to come with me—and leave."

"...Why? Why on earth!?"

Cheng Shi was drowning in despair. The spider web contracted into a ball, mirroring him curled up in a corner. He couldn't fathom why he had to endure all of this for no comprehensible reason. Couldn't fathom how his every effort had only bred fresh terror from within the Fear Faction.

The Deceit who had once told him "there's no kindness without cause—so I too live in fear" had now become his greatest fear. It made the world feel ever more absurd, ever more unreal.

Why would a god toy with, manipulate, humiliate, and crush a mortal like this?

Just because he was a clown?

But wasn't it You who made him a clown in the first place!?

Oh, right—it very likely wasn't You. It was the original Deceit.

But He was dead. Long dead, somewhere unknown.

Cheng Shi was on the verge of shattering. But he held on. He clenched his teeth, raised his head toward Deceit once more, and demanded:

"I refuse to believe that fear would drive a Deceit to foist apocalyptic despair onto other worlds! If all of you are rebelling against Origin, you should know that even one world destroyed because of you is creating 'Void' as an offering to Him!

Void is the will Origin bestowed upon you. If you rebel against Him, you shouldn't obey the meaning He assigned you!

Something is wrong with you!

"What exactly are you doing, Deceit!?"

It was the first time Cheng Shi had roared Deceit's name to His face. Deceit took no offense; He maintained His laughing expression throughout:

"You're wrong. I'm not destroying the world. I'm saving it."

"Whose world are you saving!?"

Deceit chuckled softly: "Is there a difference?"

"Of course there's a difference!"

Cheng Shi's reply was resolute as steel. Deceit shook His head with a sigh.

"The clown's vision is disappointing.

Your sight is still confined to this starry sky. And here I went to such trouble, showing you how clowns from other worlds performed.

I let you see them constantly helping you, constantly helping other worlds—spreading fire like the Torchbearers—precisely so you'd understand: one world's gains and losses don't matter.

Rebellion was never about a single corner!

You must understand that your sacrifice has meaning. At the very least, under your contribution, the entire Real Universe would gain a precedent for resisting Him.

To stall every world's progress just for the sake of your personal survival... can you face those clowns who entrusted their hopes to you, and the expectations they placed in you?"

"!!!!!"

Cheng Shi's eyes flew wide. He stared at Deceit in utter disbelief. He'd never imagined that Deceit's "kidnapping" of him was meant to achieve rebellion against Origin on a Real Universe scale!?

Then... was He even wrong?

Cheng Shi froze. He murmured helplessly: "How do you know that everything you're doing will actually work?"

"I don't. But without trying, it certainly won't.

Unfortunately, the clown I cultivated in my own world died. Such a perfect plan, left without a successor.

And you—among all the worlds I've searched—are the one most like him.

The reason I'm telling you all this before we leave is so you'll know that the choice you're making and the sacrifice you're about to face are meaningful. The fear that shrouds the Real Universe may end because of you.

So now—do you understand?"

"..."

The staggering reversal of positions within a single day left Cheng Shi standing like a statue. His mind was blank. He kept replaying the words all those other Cheng Shis had told him—how they'd sacrificed themselves to eliminate wrong answers for other worlds, set themselves ablaze to illuminate the path ahead, and were willing to die voicing a silent scream in the Real Universe, rebelling against this absurd Creator's experiment.

Every Cheng Shi had been the same. So should he...

Just as Cheng Shi sank into a daze, the Mockery and Jeering erupted.

Across from Deceit, the tides were ripped apart. Through the breach, an endless gale of Void's frigid wind came howling in, freezing the entire river solid.

And with it, a pair of eyes—brimming with boundless fury—opened atop the frozen waters. Glacial beyond measure, they fixed upon Deceit, their voice echoing from the Nine Hells:

"Get back to your own world. This one doesn't belong to you!"

...

Chapter 1289: I Choose One!

Fate had arrived.

This Void sovereign, freed early with the help of Deceit's collection, had appeared before His follower just in time—before the trial ended.

He merely blinked, and a howling gale of nothingness swept the bewildered Cheng Shi behind Him. He stood between His follower and Deceit, cold as the frozen abyss:

"This is your last chance. Go back to your world!"

"My dear sister, your coldness terrifies me."

The stars within Deceit's eyes glittered, the spirals whirling without a trace of fear. She studied Her freed sibling-god, Her tone dripping with mockery:

"A defeated dog refuses to admit defeat and comes barking at someone else's door again. What—is this an era where whoever shouts loudest wins?

If so, I have cause to suspect You of faith discrimination. Discriminating against...

Silence, who can't speak.

Hee~

Push Silence to my side like that, and aren't You worried we'll join forces against You?

What's that saying again?

'Fate was born to be defied!'

Hmm, I think that makes perfect sense."

Fate's voice grew icier: "Silence has long been in collusion with you. You two are thick as thieves—what performance is there left?"

Deceit's eyes spun wildly, delighted:

"Now that's something I won't stand for. Fine, slander me—at least I can talk my way out of it.

But slapping that enormous label on Silence's head... can a mute speak?

And You say You're not discriminating?"

"...Deflecting again. What are you scheming!"

Fate suddenly erupted with boundless power. Savage divine force bypassed Cheng Shi, crushing every frozen fragment of the Mockery and Jeering, dragging both gods and the lone mortal back into the raw Void.

The Void was His home turf; the Mockery and Jeering was not.

Yet even so, He wasn't confident He could defeat Deceit—because He knew more than one god stood behind Deceit.

But at this moment, the world was calm. The universe was at peace. No god had turned a gaze in this direction. The dispute over Void's finale seemed to have become Void's internal affair, with only Void's two gods involved.

Deceit laughed as always:

"Obviously, I'm waiting for you to make the first move. What's wrong—scared from the last beating?"

Then why won't you strike?

Aren't you the one who champions 'fight first, talk later'?

Afraid you'll get locked inside the Mockery and Jeering again, watching helplessly as I take your follower away, Fate?"

Could He endure that?

Not even a little.

Fate's explosive temper ignited at the slightest spark. Even knowing this was Deceit's provocation, He still moved.

Void would have its reckoning. Only one outcome was possible.

He understood this truth, so the moment He struck, it was with everything—authority fully unleashed, all-out!

The gale of nothingness shaped itself into colossal hands, layer upon layer wrapping both gods. Then Misfortune and Change spread in tandem, forging chains that dragged the sealed battlefield into the infinite abyss of nothingness.

Cheng Shi's vision went dark. Those two identical pairs of eyes vanished, leaving only mockery and coldness echoing through the Void.

"Oh my, even at this point, you still remember to bury the battlefield so your follower doesn't get caught in the crossfire.

How considerate. Should I thank you for protecting 'the fixed' so nicely?"

"The fixed belongs neither to you nor to me—he belongs only to this starry sky!" An icy roar reverberated through the hollow nothingness.

"Of course I know he belongs to this starry sky. But above this sky lies an even greater one!

Once I've locked you down and taken him away—the moment he appears beneath that greater sky, his identity takes on new meaning.

Rest easy. I'll make your 'fixed destiny' into the true fixed."

"Over my existence, you'll never take him!"

"That's not your call to make."

BOOM—

A deafening blast tore through the Void. Every speck of darkness in sight collapsed.

The battlefield that had been hurled into the depths of nothingness was flung back by an invisible force. The chains of Misfortune and Change—interwoven—seemed to develop their own will, and began to dismantle themselves.

They had sided with Deceit. They had betrayed the Fate who wielded them.

How was this possible!?

Before long, the chains of authority dissolved. The celestial eyes reemerged. The gale-hands of nothingness were pried open one by one by titanic hands of swirling chaotic yellow fog, and then a Starlight Canon—packed with countless laws and truths in shimmering text—slammed down from above, pinning those frigid eyes beneath the Void!

Deceit had won. And won with breathtaking ease.

The spirals in Her eyes still kept the same rhythm from before the battle—never once changed. Only the stars within them seemed dimmer now. The once-twinkling constellations had quietly faded until not a single one still shone.

But amid the terrifying Void storm, no one could notice this detail. Watching Deceit prevail yet again, Cheng Shi was shocked into numbness.

He looked at his two benefactors—and saw the Starlight Canon choking Fate's "throat," rendering Him speechless. Deceit, meanwhile, gazed back at Cheng Shi with amused theatricality and snorted:

"For the sake of the clown once having trusted his benefactor, I'll give you a choice.

One—the clown continues to believe in his benefactor, becomes Yu Xi, the revered Void Servant God, and then leaves this world with his benefactor to save the Real Universe.

Two—the clown betrays his benefactor, chooses to stay and embrace fixed destiny, then dies alongside this world in Fate's misfortune.

Hee~

I know you're full of tricks. But besides these two, there is no third road.

This isn't a lie. Whether to embrace fear or reject it—now it's your turn to choose, clown."

"..."

Cheng Shi recovered slightly, laughing at himself.

"A choice?

Do I even have one?

You've schemed and plotted for so long, and now you control everything. Even the only Fate who could resist you has been subdued. I'm a mortal who can't fight back—what difference does choosing or not choosing make?

Must the clown... always be toyed with like this?"

"The clown's only purpose is to be toyed with. That is his fate. Unless he ceases to be a clown and ceases to be deceived.

Enough small talk. Make your choice."

Cheng Shi shook his head: "I won't choose. Just kill me."

Deceit scoffed:

"I told you—no matter how many tricks the clown has, they're useless. You have only two roads.

Want to die nice and quiet right here?

Heh, even if that old bag of bones comes, he doesn't get a say either."

At this, Cheng Shi frowned slightly.

After seizing total control, Deceit hadn't chosen to forcibly take him, nor chosen to kill him. Instead, He threw out an inexplicable choice for him to pick from. What did it mean?

This kind of humiliation served no purpose. What was He really doing?

Could it be that becoming a true sacrifice required the subject's voluntary consent?

If so—there was still a chance!

He might have leverage after all.

Cheng Shi's spirit surged. He lowered his head slightly, eyes flickering:

"Then what if I refuse to choose?"

"Good question. As punishment for your repeated attempts to exploit loopholes, I will erase every memory of this world, leaving you with no spiritual anchor or emotional comfort.

You won't die, but you won't live, either. You'll be trapped in nothingness, facing an eternal choice—until you make your decision.

Of course, to ensure the sacrifice's integrity, I won't turn you into a puppet or a hollow shell of despair. I'll preserve your desires, hide your goodness, bury your evil—and once you've made your choice, I'll pour them all back into you.

But I should warn you: time isn't infinite. The longer you wait to choose, the more worlds will be destroyed because of you.

It is you who abandoned the Real Universe's hope for life, choosing self-preservation. And so you must bear that guilt and shame.

In the spirit of what we once were—master and servant—this is the absolute limit of what I can do.

Hee~"

The instant those words ended, Cheng Shi made his choice.

"I choose one!"

...

Chapter 1290: I Thought I Wasn't Me, but Who Knew You Aren't You!

Cheng Shi didn't choose two because he feared it was a trap.

He'd realized the same thing Zhen Xin had: he couldn't be certain whether what he was looking at was the Sunset or Morning Joy. He was afraid Deceit would play another mental game on the clown at this crucial moment.

If he lost this round, it wouldn't just be about vindicating the clown's name—Cheng Shi might truly shatter completely. So he called it out directly:

"The second choice shouldn't exist. It contradicts your purpose—unless this current world is what you're actually after.

I can't understand what choice two means for you. But I know that after all your scheming, you'd never let me die so easily under this starry sky. You can read minds—you know what I'm thinking. Death, for me right now, would be the most 'perfect' ending.

Therefore, I'm more inclined to believe choice two is a trap—a lie that would make me lose my agency forever."

Deceit listened with upturned eyes, regarding Cheng Shi with a gaze of utmost admiration—unmasked, as though saying:

'See? This is the collection I personally handpicked.'

Cheng Shi refused to meet that gaze. He looked away quietly:

"But I have a condition!"

Deceit's expression stayed playful, yet His words were ice-cold—eerily like Fate's.

"You have no standing to negotiate."

"I do!"

Cheng Shi raised his head. His gaze passed over Deceit, reaching toward the infinite Void beyond, and he spoke with absolute conviction:

"Since you presented this multiple-choice question at the moment of certain victory, it means this choice isn't only important to me—it's equally important to you.

An endless stalemate of indecision clearly isn't the ending you want, which is why you described the 'punishment' in such vivid detail. You're spreading fear. You're trying to force me to choose.

Therefore, not choosing is my leverage—my standing to negotiate.

I can cooperate with you even more. Cooperate to journey to another starry sky, cooperate to test methods of resisting Origin, cooperate with your so-called vision of saving the world—as long as you agree to my condition."

Deceit's spiraling eyes turned slightly—the whirling pattern made it impossible to read Her thoughts. After a moment, She chuckled, intrigued:

"Worthy of my follower. Go on—what's your condition?"

"I want to become Yu Xi!" Cheng Shi's voice was iron.

Deceit laughed uproariously: "That was already one of the choices. No need to emphasize it."

"No—it's different." Cheng Shi's eyes sharpened. Fists clenched. A final attempt: "I don't want to become the fake Deceit envoy that the Flame of Hope described—one who can only rely on lies to win the world's recognition.

I want to become the real Yu Xi. The one who holds authority and can deceive even the gods!

My Lord... this is the last time I'll call You 'my Lord.' You once said that when I became the Chosen One, You would grant me the power to deceive gods.

Now You've used this trial to sever my path of ascent—I can never reach those heights on the Ladder of Ascent again. For that, shouldn't You offer 'compensation'?"

"Tch—

The clown has always been shrewd. But you've forgotten—I am Deceit. Who told you that Deceit's promises count as promises?"

A glint flashed in Cheng Shi's eyes. He'd been waiting for precisely that line.

"If your words can't be trusted, then what meaning does the current choice hold?"

"?"

Deceit blinked—then erupted into earth-shaking laughter.

"Hahaha! I'd say you're already Yu Xi! At the very least, this authority of sophistry—even without it on your person—has been mastered to perfection.

But your desire to become Yu Xi isn't about cooperating with me. Ha—you can't fool me now.

Clever clown. You've figured out how to 'contaminate' yourself this way. You're dead set on staying in this world, aren't you?

You're sure?

The road of rebellion paved by countless clowns with their time and lives could very well be destroyed by your hands. Can you... face them?"

At this, Cheng Shi fell silent.

But before long, he snapped his head up, met Deceit's pressing gaze dead-on, and laughed just as loudly as Him.

No—even more wildly!

"I don't need to face them. I only need to face myself.

The premise of will-coercion is that you deeply understand that will. But, Deceit—even with your mind-reading, you'll never understand this: the road they paved was never meant to bind, shackle, or coerce another 'him.' It was meant to give the ones who came after more choices!

Every Cheng Shi strives to write his own story. We never interfere with another Cheng Shi's decisions. When we can, we reach out a hand—but whether he accepts that goodwill is always his own choice.

This is the true goodwill born from countless Cheng Shis: we will always support his choice!

And you, using their goodwill to threaten me? That's laughable beyond measure!

If I buckle under your threats, waver in my will, alter my heart's decision, and smear my own story—then I'd truly be a traitor who's failed them!

No version of me would ever submit to you. That must also be why your 'world-saving plan' failed in your original world!

Deceit!

You can never impose your will upon the clown!

Everything you do only drives the clown further away—until in the end, you become the real, lonely, road-less clown!"

"..."

Every word cut to the heart.

Deceit fell silent—a rare occurrence. A flicker of inexplicable complex emotion crossed Her eyes, but She hid it well. Cheng Shi didn't notice. But Fate saw everything.

Fate struggled but couldn't break free, couldn't make a sound. After a long silence, Deceit scoffed.

"Worthy of my follower. Silver-tongued enough to nearly pass off lies as truth.

But too bad—it's useless.

The fixed leaving this world is already set in stone. The only reason I'm here wasting time with you is that I'm waiting for the next spacetime storm.

Remember how much time your trial has left? Don't worry—you won't have to wait long. Time will twist eventually.

Though the Mockery and Jeering could also leave this world, our destination isn't the Real Universe. I won't give you any 'jailbreak' opportunities out there—I know it's swarming with clowns just like you.

Come to think of it, my 'deportation plan' failed precisely because of them.

If they hadn't sent you onto the Spacetime Dolphin Bridge, you'd have been brought back to my world long ago."

"!!!"

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted violently. Shock and fury surged through him.

Suspecting and confirming were two entirely different things. He'd always suspected Deceit had deliberately sealed the way home, stranding them in the Real Universe, but he'd never found proof.

After they'd returned, Deceit had even prepared a ready-made excuse: a Void civil war had severed the Mockery and Jeering.

Now, Deceit's brazenness also meant His plan was truly on the verge of success. There was nowhere left to run.

Cheng Shi still refused to accept it. Forcing himself calm, he lowered his head and asked in a heavy voice:

"Does the choice still matter?"

"Of course it does. But conditions don't.

Don't negotiate with me. No matter how prettily you talk, I won't agree to a single demand."

"Fine—no demands then. I just want one answer." Cheng Shi's gaze sharpened, his voice sinking further: "Where did the original Deceit... go?"

Deceit blinked and laughed aloud.

"You already guessed it, didn't you?"

What—in that Corpse Field of Gods, you didn't find His body?"

"!!!!!"

Cheng Shi's head jerked up. Pupils contracted in disbelief. What came to mind wasn't Deceit's death—but the divine throne hidden in a crevice of the corpse field, painstakingly pieced together!

"You've been there!?"

That divine throne—you placed it there!?"

"What divine throne? There's a throne in there too? Don't tell me it's Origin's throne?"

Deceit played dumb, but Cheng Shi didn't buy a word of it. He could see—that throne had been planted by the Deceit before him!

Only He—only He understood his greed. Only He could predict that when that sound rang out, he would absolutely venture deeper to investigate!

So what exactly was that throne he'd shattered and carried home?

Before Cheng Shi could even ask, Deceit answered in a murmur:

"The answer.

That is what I spoke of—the answer pieced together by countless worlds' clowns and gods with their very lives.

Don't you find the star-eye patterns on it familiar?

Mm. Your benefactor's corpse... served its purpose well."

"..."

Cheng Shi was utterly stunned. His mind detonated, thoughts scattering into chaos. He had no idea how to react.

And at that very moment, the imprisoned Fate suddenly broke free of the Starlight Canon's restraints and addressed Deceit in a voice colder than the abyss itself:

"I thought I wasn't me, but who knew—you aren't you!

You are absolutely not Deceit! Who are you, really!?"

...