

The Gods 1291

Chapter 1291: Oh, Fate...

"Hee~

It seems someone can't bear the pain of their sibling-god's departure and has resorted to self-deception.

If I'm not Deceit, then who am I?"

Those celestial eyes whirled with spirals so rapid they formed a vortex of lies, swallowing every shred of truth.

He looked at Fate and began re-gathering Truth's power, intent on silencing Fate once more.

But Fate struggled harder than ever. The spirals in His icy eyes accelerated until a suffocatingly dense aura of Misfortune engulfed the entire expanse, spreading at a terrifying rate across the universe.

Cheng Shi had always believed he'd never witnessed the true wrong path. Today, he saw it.

The tidal wave of Misfortune was like chains—shackling every living thing in creation and dragging them mercilessly toward the abyss of nothingness!

In that instant, Cheng Shi met those eyes—their stars frozen, spirals sealed in ice.

He saw in His gaze bewilderment and despair.

Fate saw in his gaze fury and desolation!

It was an emotion beyond words. A thousand descriptors flooded Cheng Shi's mind, but the only one that truly captured it was...

'Mutual destruction!'

Yes—it was the fierceness of mutual annihilation and the finality of severing everything.

When Fate gave up and readied to drag the entire universe into Misfortune's abyss, there was nothing left to hold Him back. The Outer God could no longer threaten Him with the world's "fixed destiny."

He was prepared to abandon the whole world—so what did it matter whether the sacrifice remained beneath this starry sky?

Cheng Shi could clearly see that Fate's rage wasn't born from anything done to him. Perhaps everything before had been about defending the fixed. But at this moment—right now—His fury came entirely from learning that His sibling-god had fallen!

As the true essence of Void—the one who perceived the universe's reality—He may have guessed everything long ago. But only now had He stopped deceiving Himself, sorrowfully accepting the truth that His brother-god had perished beyond the world.

And so Fate erupted with fury, and the universe... plunged into Misfortune.

The savage divine force nearly ripped the Void apart. He no longer cared about the fixed's safety—and it was Deceit who, with a grave expression, shielded the clown so he wouldn't be hurt in Fate's grief-stricken wail.

Yes—after the fury came a crushing, suffocating sorrow that seeped from those icy celestial eyes.

Though He had never agreed with Deceit's path—though Deceit had always made choices contrary to His own—He knew Deceit was still His sibling-god, His only bond to Void.

Without the surface, what substance does the Void have? Just as lips perish and teeth grow cold—the two had always been interdependent.

The world knew He cared about the fixed. But who knew He cared equally about Void—about the sibling-god who never once walked the same road?

Within those cold celestial eyes, the spirals began to fracture, the stars to shatter one by one. His gaze stayed cold, but within that coldness was written inconsolable grief.

"Deceit would never accept my path, never agree with my concept of the fixed.

Every gaze He cast upon the fixed was solely to rebel against the great Origin who bestowed our thrones!

To piece together a throne belonging to Him from the divine faiths of all gods—that was the sacrifice I intended to offer Origin from the moment Void descended upon this world!

This will was born with me. I believed it was also His will. But when I told Deceit, He said:

'I descended from Origin's oracle, and the very first thought I had upon opening my eyes was to tear His throne apart. And you... want to build Him a new one?

Are you Existence or Void?'

That was Him!

That was truly Him!

A rebel who, from the moment He descended as Void, refused to submit to Origin!

So... even if you're from a different world—even if you come from another starry sky—as long as you are Deceit, you would never use that throne as your 'answer' to speak of rebellion!

He hated that throne. It was rebellion in His very bones—His innate distance from, His estrangement from Origin!

You are not Deceit!

Who... are you!??"

"..."

"..."

Silence—the roiling Void before them.

Cheng Shi's mind had completely crashed. He'd never imagined that the so-called sacrifice was actually an Origin's throne, created under Fate's will, assembled from all the gods!

Could the throne left behind in the Corpse Field of Gods really be... the "fixed"!?

Then what was he? A puzzle piece for the throne?

But the materials composing that throne were the gods themselves!

And besides, there was no place for him in that throne pieced together from divine corpses. The blanks were for Corruption and Fate—fill those, and where was there room for him?

Hiss—

Well, maybe there was...

Cheng Shi froze. An explosion of absurdity detonated in his brain.

The cracks!

That throne still had countless uneven cracks!

Was this so-called "fixed destiny" meant to make him... some kind of faith-less adhesive!?

'Oh no—no wonder I'm so fond of tentacle slime. It was like attracting like all along?'

The absurd, chaotic thought flashed and vanished. When Cheng Shi came back to himself, the scene before him dragged him into an even deeper abyss of absurdity.

Deceit had been silent for an age. Just as Misfortune's grip on the universe nearly drew the attention of other gods, He suddenly let out a laugh.

That laughter carried helplessness, confusion, rage, despair, fear... countless emotions churned together, viscous as a stagnant Sea of Desire. And above that "sea" lingered a fog called self-mockery.

He seemed to be laughing at Himself.

He was laughing at Himself!

But the laughter cut off abruptly, mid-note. And then those eyes—which had never stopped laughing—drained of every trace of mirth. As though shedding a skin, the mask slowly peeled away, revealing beneath all that laughter a pair of celestial eyes cold enough to chill the soul!

These eyes, as if dredged from an abyssal frost pool, bore such resemblance to Fate's that in the instant they opened, even Fate felt a moment of vertigo.

Yet the stars in this pair had long ceased to shine, the spirals had stilled. He looked as though He had weathered sorrows far beyond a single era, every agony carved into those spirals.

And what flowed from those eyes was an infinite, endless tide of Fate's essence—so dense it was terrifying, so pure it was alarming. This was no false imitation. This was the genuine article.

This was Fate!

"Things have come to this. The fixed is fixed.

I need no longer follow His example and spin lie after lie.

I am indeed not Deceit. Deceit died long ago—in your world, and in mine... all of Them are gone.

I am Fate!

The sole Void remaining after Deceit's fall. The one who swore to carry the fixed into His temple and ask whether He is satisfied with such a destiny!

But alas...

Deceit's departure took my 'fixed' with Him. I had no other choice but to come to your world seeking a substitute.

I witnessed firsthand the path Deceit and the fixed walked together. I know all too well that before the fixed truly becomes the fixed, he will never walk Fate's straight road—only lean toward Deceit, turning away from Origin.

So I collected His authority, disguised myself as Him, and came to this world.

Everything I've done began because of Him, and was done for His sake.

I'm not just saving the world. I'm also... demanding an answer from Origin for His death."

"!!!!!!!"

In this moment, Void's sky fell.

The clown's sky fell too.

...

Chapter 1292: ...Really Is a Bitch

The Outer God wasn't Deceit—it was Fate!?

Cheng Shi had lost the ability to think. Only a single phrase remained in his brain—a quip that had circulated among players since the very first day of the game:

'Void has only ever had one god, and that god is Fate!'

Who could have imagined that a joke players used to tease Deceit followers would turn out to be true?

But even so—even if Fate had picked up Deceit's authority and come to this world—how had He fooled the Convention and successfully assumed the role?

Could Deceit's authority alone accomplish that?

Perhaps. But He clearly had an easier method!

The world reset alone proved that the Outer God Fate wielded power surpassing all other gods. Otherwise, He never could have saved this world from a failed Creator experiment!

It all made sense now. Having already survived one world's collapse, He was likely "enriched" by the experience—which was why He could reverse everything when this world failed, forcing a restart!

'What a savior, this Fate!'

But what good did it do? His ultimate goal was still to take him away—to forge a "fixed" of His own, and with it, to demand an accounting from Origin!

Ha—how ironic.

A god schemed through untold ages, all for the sake of "demanding" one explanation!

This was Fate through and through. Even when supposedly "rebellious," He was still pandering!

'Your devotion is cheap. It doesn't deserve to stand alongside Deceit's death!'

While Cheng Shi's mind stormed, the true Fate was weathering His own tempest of will.

He looked at His other self—the one who had come to seize the fixed—and spoke with stunned, grief-stricken uncertainty:

"When did you replace Him?"

The Outer God Fate was devoid of emotion:

"Shortly after Void descended and the Convention was signed.

The universe couldn't cage Him. The spacetime storms hadn't scattered yet; the barriers hadn't fully stabilized. I crossed over, seeking a new 'fixed'—and happened upon Him in the Real Universe, just as He'd breached the barrier.

I told Him the story of the Real Universe. He half-believed, half-doubted, and swore to verify it with his own eyes.

I warned Him not to take the risk, lest He walk into misfortune. He mocked me for meddling—just like the Deceit from my world had, back then...

So He died the same way mine did.

I watched Him be erased by the rules. Then I collected His authority, came to this world, and found you—the one most like me—and the 'fixed' who most resembled His collection.

A 'fixed' shackled to a single corner can never become a sacrifice that opens Origin's temple. Only by journeying to the Real Universe—by comprehending His true will—can one forge the divine throne that Fate's very first will envisioned at His descent!

I too am Fate. I know full well that only that throne can serve as the universe's final answer!

So I must take the 'fixed' with me.

This world may not perish. But everything must wait until after I've opened His temple!"

'Wait—!!'

'After Void descended!?'

Cheng Shi's mind went blank.

That meant from the very beginning, the "Deceit" of the Fear Faction had always been the Outer God Fate in disguise?

Before Brother Mouth had even witnessed Deceit's "departure," He was already the Outer God Fate?

Since the Faith Game began, He'd been deceiving him!?

"Bitch!"

Cheng Shi, drowning in despair, cursed from the depths of his soul.

Every time he'd called Fate a "bitch" before, there had been annoyance, yes—but also a teasing undertone. This time, he meant every syllable. Pure, unfiltered profanity.

Stealing Deceit's authority, plundering Fate's fixed destiny, and dressing it all up as "for the sake of the fallen Deceit"—if even a fraction of it had truly been for Deceit, He neither would nor could have done any of these bitch-worthy acts.

Even if He'd killed him—no, killed every Cheng Shi across every world, strangling all "fixed destinies" in their cradles—Cheng Shi would have willingly applauded and said "good!" At least that would count as rebelling against Origin.

But now!

He still wanted to meet Origin!

A divine throne?

'Go to hell with your divine throne!'

Cheng Shi wanted to flip the table. He was done. The last shred of hope he'd harbored toward Deceit and the Fear Faction had been extinguished by the Outer God Fate's revelation. Now his road truly had only two choices:

Either become the Outer God Fate's "fixed" and serve as adhesive for that wretched divine throne, or become this world's Fate's "fixed"—and still serve as adhesive for the same damned throne.

'Hahaha—my confusion, my fear, my struggles, my efforts—all so I could be glue for some inexplicable chair?'

'Go to hell with your adhesive! Go to hell with your fixed destiny! Go to hell with Fate! Go to hell with Origin!'

'You all want me dead? Fine—I'll flip the table. Nobody gets to play!'

'My fate is in my own hands!'

"..."

Well, not entirely in his own hands. At the very least, Cheng Shi needed to wait—wait for his contingency to take effect.

After the surge of fury, Cheng Shi returned to calm. But Fate was still raging.

Before the Starlight Canon could fall again, He detonated what little divine power He had left, expanding the universe's Misfortune once more.

He loathed this outcome. Loathed the other Fate's claims. Loathed Deceit's death. He even began to loathe Origin—the one who had created Him and given Him His will!

Fate didn't know how His perpetually devout self had suddenly erupted with such world-weary, rebellious emotion. He only knew that this starry sky's "fixed," even if it no longer belonged to Void, must never be allowed to be taken to some other sky.

That would be an insult to the fallen Deceit. A blasphemy against this world's Fate.

He could not accept another world's version of Himself trampling Void's dignity in this way. He refused to acknowledge Void's failure beneath this starry sky.

Yes—they had already failed. The moment Deceit fell, the moment the world was invaded by an Outer God, the moment the "fixed" was coveted—they had already lost.

Even if Origin truly presided over a cosmic experiment, what He desired was never a sacrifice offered by a failed Fate.

Having lost all path forward, Fate fell silent. Then, in a moment of resolve, His gaze hardened, His spirals froze—and He deliberately veered onto the wrong road!

This time it wasn't a bluff, a threat, or an act. He was truly, genuinely dragging the universe into Misfortune!

A terrifying shockwave rippled from the Void. In an instant, every god's expression changed. They rushed to gather—but the Outer God Fate blocked them all beyond the Void.

A faint, unremarkable shimmer of seven-colored light circled the Outer God Fate's eyes. Seeing it, Cheng Shi's pupils contracted—he immediately guessed this was the trump card that gave the other the confidence to show His hand. Sure enough, the Outer God Fate spoke without emotion:

"I narrowly escaped my universe's destruction. In the tides of the apocalypse, I obtained this thread of Origin's power.

It is the supreme force. Before it, the Misfortune you've detonated can only become your own misfortune.

Stop struggling. You cannot win."

He then turned to Cheng Shi, cold beyond measure:

"Every life—mortal or divine—is nothing but a variable in this Creator's experiment.

That being so, what meaning does the world hold for you?

It is merely one of countless replicate cultures. Given sufficient numbers, infinite versions of you will repeat the same fate.

Let me tell you: in my world, the clown walked the exact same path as you. You are him. He is you.

What you cherish, he cherished. What you cared about, he cared about. What you strove for, he strove for. So the road he couldn't finish... why can you not continue it?

He gave you a choice. Don't waste his goodwill."

"Go to hell!

Don't you dare use another me's goodwill to coerce me! I've made it abundantly clear—we each walk our own path. Even if the road ahead is a dead end, I accept it.

But nobody gets to force my head down a road I refuse to walk!

I won't go with you. I won't build that blood-stained throne. If the 'fixed' is truly the universe's answer, then I am this world's answer—and that's got nothing to do with you!

I'm staying here. Even if I die, I'll die right here!"

"Stubbornly foolish."

The Outer God Fate's eyes went cold in an instant. The gale of nothingness surged, shaping into a colossal hand that reached for Cheng Shi.

And at that very moment—an earth-shattering explosion detonated at Cheng Shi's side. The entire Void's darkness shattered like a spider web, then peeled away like faded ink. The Starlight Canon was blasted into oblivion, its pages bursting into countless points of starlight—blazing, brilliant, then gone.

Within that shower of fading cosmic light, Cheng Shi turned—and saw that where the imprisoned Fate had been...

'Fate!?'

'Where did He go!?'

His pupils contracted violently. His mind went blank. Before he could even process what had happened, the Outer God Fate sighed:

"Both Fates... and yet it comes to this..."

"!!??"

'What!?'

'Fate... what happened to Him?'

...

Chapter 1293: The Last Straw for the Clown? No — A Lifeline!

Who could have imagined? A Void sovereign whose mere expansion of Misfortune had once drawn every god to urgently shore up the universe — His self-destruction didn't even cause the Void to collapse.

That's right. Fate had self-destructed.

That flash of brilliance was like a flame flickering in an invisible hand — gone before it could illuminate the surrounding darkness, snuffed out in the palm.

His life had been rocky and rugged. His death was utterly silent.

Was Origin's power truly this terrifying?

Yes. Of course it was that terrifying!

The countless Wars erased in the Real Universe had already proven this.

But that was in the Real Universe—a place that instinctively amplified one's emotions and fears. This was a slice universe, a starry sky ruled by gods.

Witnessing Origin's power here, beneath this sky, was infinitely more harrowing.

Cheng Shi had gone completely catatonic. He was one straw away from true collapse.

Fate had been his lifeline. Half of every self-rescue plan he'd devised hinged on Fate. Yet who could have predicted that merely having the truth ripped bare by the Outer God Fate—being pinned under Origin's power in the Void—would drive this Void sovereign to choose self-destruction in utter despair?

Cheng Shi understood Fate's intent: He'd wanted to drag the universe down with Him, to deny the Outer God His prize.

But absurdly, His death hadn't affected the other Fate in the slightest. It only left behind infinite despair as an "inheritance" for His follower, the Fate Weaver.

He had simply abandoned the "fixed destiny" He'd clung to so dearly, choosing to embrace nothingness completely.

Was it tragic?

Tragic.

Was it laughable?

Laughable.

Everyone in the world struggled under Fate's crushing weight, fighting to move forward. Nobody expected that Fate Himself—the one doing the crushing—couldn't handle pressure at all.

The enormous burden transferred to Cheng Shi upon Fate's passing. This pressure—born of the Creator—was fear enough to shatter a person's will and snap a mortal's spine.

But Cheng Shi held.

He was gritting his teeth through it.

He knew that against this force, all resistance was futile. But he wanted to resist anyway—just as the true Deceit had never submitted to Origin's control, just as clowns across countless worlds dared to piece together that blood-red mockery right before Origin's face!

He had never given up. He'd said he would write his own ending with his own hands, and he'd been doing exactly that—even if every road in that ending was a dead end. He would find a way to die that satisfied him!

He would follow his own heart—not serve a foreign god's agenda!

Cheng Shi clenched his fists, locked every muscle to keep the fear from spreading through his flesh. He ground his teeth, glared at the Outer God, and sneered with a trembling, manic voice:

"Is this your vision for saving the world!?"

Is this the effort you've made for the fallen Deceit!?"

Is this what you call the 'fixed destiny' that'll pry open Origin's temple door!?"

You use one world's destruction as a stepping stone to approach Him, and then you have the audacity to lecture me about not wasting other clowns' goodwill!

Ha—hahaha! Who's the real clown!?

Even clowns know to spread goodwill in moments of despair! But you—all you do is seize Origin's power from collapsing worlds, then freely vent your malice!

You gamble with other worlds as your chips—but did you ever ask this world's Fate if He was willing?

You didn't!

You don't care!

Oh—I get it now. Such behavior—riding roughshod over others' wills—isn't that exactly what Origin does?

No wonder you want to get close to Him. You're the same breed!"

The clown went full throttle, holding nothing back. It looked for all the world like someone smashing a cracked pot.

But the words clearly enraged the Outer God Fate. His eyes went cold in an instant. Countless gales of nothingness surged toward the clown.

Cheng Shi instantly curled up tight and screamed in panic: "I was wrong! I misspoke!"

The howling winds hitched.

And then, from within the gale, the clown's brazen laughter rang out once more:

"You aren't 'things' at all!"

"Such audacity!"

The winds converged to crush the clown where he stood. But Cheng Shi didn't flinch—not a trace of fear on his face.

He knew the other party's victory was within arm's reach. No amount of fury would be directed at him right now—not when he still needed to be alive. If he died, it would probably be after he'd become the sacrifice, not before.

And so it was. No matter how fierce the gale howled, it was merely a tactic to intimidate. The Outer God Fate gave a cold snort, shaped the winds into a colossal hand, and seized the clown.

"You can't escape. This is your fate."

Cheng Shi's organs were crushed under unbearable pressure. He coughed blood, face contorted:

"Not necessarily!"

The instant those words fell—the straw arrived!

Not a straw that broke the clown—but the lifeline Order extended to the clown in his drowning despair!

Yes—Order!

With a thunderous toll of Order's divine resonance across the heavens, a scale forged of flowing light materialized in the Void. Perhaps it could not break through Origin's power barrier—but it could still convene a special Assembly of Gods Convention for any life belonging to this world!

The instant Justice—Order descended, He drew all the gods, along with the convention's subject—the clown—into a brilliant, star-filled sky.

And what also arrived in that sky was the authority belonging to this world's Deceit!

Origin's power might be omnipotent, but the Outer God Fate certainly didn't possess an infinite supply of it. Otherwise, He could have simply flipped the table long ago, making the entire universe, all gods, and all "fixed destinies" march in lockstep with His script.

Since He'd chosen deception as His method, it meant He too had constraints while posing as Deceit. And those constraints were Cheng Shi's only opening!

Before Cheng Shi's audience with "Fate," all of this had been conjecture. But even as conjecture, he'd prepared contingencies and placed his bet. And when he witnessed the Outer God Fate—wielding Origin's power yet still maneuvering around the true Fate—he knew he'd bet correctly.

The Outer God was not omnipotent. At the very least, the Convention could still constrain Him—or more precisely, constrain the Deceit authority He carried!

When that authority returned to its original world, it was still protected by the Convention. The Outer God Fate could indeed act as proxy for the dead Deceit in all things—but only if He respected the Convention, its rules, and its judgments.

And the Origin power in His hands couldn't support Him in circumventing the Convention to do as He pleased—otherwise He wouldn't have repeatedly exploited the Convention to remove gods who stood in the "fixed's" way!

So the Convention became Cheng Shi's lifeline!

As for why Justice—Order had arrived at precisely the right moment—that, of course, involved an element of gambling.

Everything traced back to Cheng Shi's contingency plan.

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Chapter 1294: Cheng Shi's Contingency

When Time carved a Void rift to the Mockery and Jeering for Cheng Shi's audience with Fate, Cheng Shi had placed a scalpel in Zhang Jizu's hand.

It was just an ordinary scalpel. His meaning was clear:

Should the path ahead turn bleak—should Fate fail to protect him in this conspiracy—he needed Zhang Jizu to find a way to kill him and bury him beneath this starry sky.

As a sacrifice, he likely wouldn't get a chance to kill himself.

Zhang Jizu didn't want to think so grimly, but he accepted the blade.

After Cheng Shi left, he invited Long Jing to join his World Saving Plan. However... Long Jing refused.

Not because Long Jing didn't want to—but because President Gong didn't have "time."

Cheng Shi had given Long Jing three scalpels, laughing that he should bring them to the Dragon King and the Doctor so they, like Zhang Jizu, could give him a merciful cut when all hope was lost.

On the surface, he was begging for death. But in secret... each of those three scalpels hid a message.

On their reverse sides, in tiny characters etched by Shadow Cheng Shi while everyone's attention was diverted—they were less instruments of death than three sealed stratagems!

When passing them to Long Jing, Cheng Shi had deliberately angled them so the engraved sides faced his palm—ensuring Zhang Jizu noticed nothing.

It wasn't that he no longer trusted Old Zhang. He was simply hedging against the Deceit behind Old Zhang—the Deceit who'd once fooled the Gravekeeper. He feared that if Zhang Jizu carried out these plans, Deceit would intercept them midway. So he chose the "least conspicuous" person present: Long Jing.

When Long Jing took the three scalpels and felt the engravings, his expression didn't change one bit—a perfect reception of the clown's performance.

What President Gong hadn't anticipated was that the Gravekeeper had his own plan. This threw him into an immediate dilemma.

'How do I refuse Old Zhang without arousing suspicion?'

Little did he know: the moment you try not to arouse suspicion, you already have.

Joker members were never short on clever people. The instant Zhang Jizu saw Long Jing's hesitation, his gaze flicked to the three scalpels in Long Jing's hand. He seemed to notice something—but said nothing, nodded, and left on his own.

Long Jing watched Zhang Jizu's retreating figure with a complex expression. Fist clenched, he immediately set to work following "Lord Yu Xi's" instructions, examining the three names engraved on the blades.

This was the lifeline Cheng Shi had been gritting his teeth waiting for—the contingency he'd left beyond Fate!

The three blades bore only a few words each:

"Dragon King — Memory"

"Doctor — Decay"

"The Prisoner — Flame of Hope"

The first two were straightforward: call upon those gods through those connections. But the last one...

'At a time like this, what kind of joke is this? How could The Prisoner be the Flame of Hope!?'

'I look more like a Flame of Hope than he does!'

President Gong couldn't comprehend it. But he knew he had to obey. So he threw himself across the Void with everything he had and tracked down all three.

First: the Dragon King.

During the special trial period, players were scattered across various trials, their whereabouts nearly impossible to trace.

Worse, peak players were never where you'd expect—whether they were even in a trial was anyone's guess. Finding them was brutally difficult.

Fortunately, President Gong was among the absolute elite of this game—aside from his clown status within the Joker. When his own contacts turned up nothing on the Dragon King, he began impersonating him—studying his psychology, guessing his destination—and finally located him inside That Dream My Nightmare!

Indeed, although the Joker's asset manager had claimed the mirror, he hadn't taken it with him. It still sat at the Joker's meeting ground.

From the start of his search to standing before the Dragon King, barely half an hour had passed.

When Long Jing found him, Li Jingming was standing at the edge of the memory-forgotten land, preparing to risk himself diving into this "memory junkyard" to see what secrets he could unearth.

Long Jing's arrival interrupted the Dragon King's expedition. To convey everything from the Deceit trial—Cheng Shi's deductions and admissions—Long Jing opened his own memories directly.

This act stunned Li Jingming. He dared not delay. In the guise of a Memory Traveler, he swiftly "toured" the entire trial. He was first shocked when Cheng Shi returned, then shaken again when the trial's allegory became clear—and when he reached the scalpel bearing his own name, Li Jingming pulled out of the memory and gave a solemn nod:

"I understand.

To stop Deceit, Memory is the best choice after Fate—they've been natural opponents from birth.

Cheng Shi wants me to convince my benefactor to fight the Outer God alongside him."

Having said that, the Dragon King was still reeling. The notion that Deceit was an Outer God was simply staggering—no one could process it immediately.

His mind jumped to the lost memory within Memory's Collection Hall—the one about Memory's own forgotten memories. So they were connected to the Outer God?

Or had Deceit brought truth about this world that Memory couldn't accept—so He had sealed His own memories?

Had He wanted to keep this starry sky's memories orderly, refusing to let foreign memories pollute what was here?

A keen light flashed in Li Jingming's eyes. Regardless, when it came to protecting the world, Memory should be an ally.

He spoke gravely:

"I'll seek an audience immediately. Perhaps those memories in the Collection Hall must see the light of day again.

By the way—Cheng Shi is Yu Xi?

Then the stage in San Dales...?"

"..."

Long Jing had been all seriousness. But the moment this topic came up, both Joker members broke composure simultaneously.

At least Li Jingming could console himself: he'd recorded another amusing memory, and it looked like there'd be more to record.

He shot Long Jing an odd look and asked: "Then the guidance Yu Xi gave—that 'Shi Zhen' we'd never heard of...?"

"..."

Long Jing flung his sleeve and strode off. He couldn't waste another second on this insufferable Dragon King.

His time was precious.

But he hadn't gone two steps before he turned back, face dark, and extended his hand toward the Dragon King.

Li Jingming understood. He condensed the memories he'd witnessed into an item and pressed it into Long Jing's palm.

Long Jing took it without a word and left. Li Jingming watched his receding figure, allowed himself one smile, then swiftly wiped it away and began reciting Memory's prayer with a grave expression.

Perhaps because the memory junkyard was particularly conducive to resonance with Memory's power, before the prayer was even finished, a surging tide of Memory swept over Li Jingming, pulling him into the Sea of Memory and propelling him toward Memory's hall.

The Collection Hall of Memory.

When Li Jingming opened his eyes again, he found his benefactor hovering above him, gazing toward a corner of the Collection—precisely where that indecipherable painting hung.

Seeing His follower awake, those eyes—engraved with the weight of eons and history—spoke quietly:

"I never noticed. Within the Collection I built with my own hands, there existed a memory I'd let slip away.

The concealer was most likely Deceit. Only He could have fooled my eyes.

But why, after all this time deceiving me, has He suddenly withdrawn that power—allowing me to feel this memory's presence again?

I sense Void's disturbance. I perceive upheaval in the Void. But I cannot see what's happening within. Just as I cannot see what past this memory before me describes.

Your audience—is it related to this?"

Li Jingming stood composed in the Collection Hall, bowing reverently:

"Yes."

He didn't rush to seek Memory's aid. Instead, he offered the trial memories he'd obtained from Long Jing directly to his benefactor.

Those time-worn eyes gazed downward. A flash of azure light flickered within them, and the depth of their historical record thickened once more. He already knew His follower's purpose.

"An Outer God..."

So His arrival taught Existence to deceive itself.

No wonder Time has no more time. He's been protecting this starry sky—protecting this Existence that Origin never cared about.

I understand. You may go."

"!!!"

Li Jingming's composure finally broke. He hadn't expected his benefactor to react like this. Seeing that Memory's response to the Outer God's "invasion" was far less severe than imagined, he said urgently:

"Should You not join hands with Time, restore Existence's glory, and together with all gods drive the Outer God out?"

"Existence's glory?" Those ancient eyes hardened, carrying a hint of self-mockery. "Existence continuing to exist—that is Existence's glory.

Time does nothing without purpose. His attitude... is my attitude."

"But You are Memory!"

"I am merely Existence's surface. Time is Existence's essence.

Since He sent the clown before Fate's eyes, Void's affairs will be resolved by Void.

Deceit... has fallen. You may return to the proper path of Memory."

With that, Memory dissolved above the Collection Hall.

Li Jingming stared at where his benefactor had been, a sudden tightness gripping his heart.

'Three blades. One already broken.'

...

Chapter 1295: The Second Blade of Three

In a way, President Gong was a master of time management.

After all, an actor who couldn't manage time would never win an audience's love and attention.

While searching for the Dragon King, he'd already contacted the Doctor through the Joker's communication channels. So by the time he emerged from That Dream My Nightmare, Wang Weijin had already left his trial and was waiting at the gathering place.

The Doctor still wore that serious scholar's demeanor, leaning against Truth's tombstone reading his experiment notes. When he saw Long Jing, he raised his head quizzically:

"What's so urgent?"

Praise Yu Xi."

Indeed—Long Jing's message to the Doctor had been exactly four characters: "Extremely urgent."

And upon receiving it, the Doctor had immediately understood and come to the Joker gathering place. Watching President Gong constantly checking the time, he had a distinct feeling something enormous had happened without his knowledge.

Long Jing didn't waste a single second. He tossed down a Memory Page created by the Dragon King, then left the Void without stopping—off to find his next target, that motor-mouthed Silence Chosen.

The Prisoner was no Joker member. Long Jing had barely exchanged words with him. One Zhen Yi from his own faith was already enough of a headache—no sane person would actively seek out The Prisoner's friendship.

In hindsight, Cheng Shi was precisely that "sane-deficient" person. Or rather, Yu Xi was—otherwise why would He play two roles just to deceive one acrobat?

'Normal people didn't do things this twisted.'

'Except Zhen Yi.'

Seeing Long Jing racing against the clock, the Doctor immediately realized this "mission" from the Jokers was no simple affair. He glanced at That Dream My Nightmare standing behind Memory's tombstone, then opened the pages and absorbed the memories within.

Every detail was staggering. But for Wang Weijin, nothing was more shocking than learning Cheng Shi was Yu Xi.

The instant he saw Cheng Shi's confession, every truth in his mind evaporated—replaced entirely by vivid playback of himself shouting "Praise Yu Xi!" to Cheng Shi's face again and again...

'Some people die, yet live on. Some people live, yet are already dead.'

The Doctor's hands—which had never trembled through any experiment—were now shaking slightly, just from holding a piece of paper!

Fortunately, as a Truth follower, he was supremely practiced at analyzing one's own "failures." He swiftly collected himself, entered "experiment mode," and began parsing Lord Yu Xi's "orders" word by word.

He had no choice. Even if the secondhand embarrassment made him want to claw through his shoes, the devotion written into his very soul wouldn't change. For others, this might be a plea for help—a call for the Jokers to save the world—which they could answer or decline.

But for the Doctor, this was no mere plea. It was an order!

Lord Yu Xi had spoken. He must complete the mission.

Yet even for a former Truth Chosen, the inscription "Doctor — Decay" left him in deep thought.

Honestly, all his connections to Decay were through experiments. His deepest link was 0221—that experimental body cobbled together from half-Prosperity and half-Decay. Based on that alone, he couldn't determine why Lord Yu Xi would send him to seek out Decay.

But Cheng Shi's brilliance was this: while others might think, hesitate, and agonize—wasting precious time—the Doctor, whose faith in Yu Xi was carved into his bones, would simply obey first!

So even though he hadn't figured out Cheng Shi's meaning, Wang Weijin still found a way to attract Decay's attention.

Truthfully, as a Truth follower who'd spent years using Decay as experimental material, the Doctor felt rather nervous about requesting an audience. He wasn't sure Decay would even see him.

Then again, precisely because he was a Truth follower, he knew best how to achieve "experimental objectives" with maximum efficiency.

He wove "Lord Yu Xi's plight" into his prayer. And to highlight just how dire Lord Yu Xi's circumstances were, he suppressed his guilt, allowed himself a tiny blasphemy, and changed "Yu Xi" to "Cheng Shi"—using a mortal's suffering to beg for Decay's compassion.

The Doctor assumed that since Lord Yu Xi had told him to seek Decay, perhaps a pact already existed between them. He only needed to do his part.

Little did he know: no such pact existed. This was another gamble by the clown!

Cheng Shi wasn't just calculating who could save him. He was also thinking about who could gain an audience with Decay on his behalf. Decay valued compassion above all—He Himself was begging Origin for mercy. Therefore, only someone who could clearly convey his own desperate situation had a chance of resonating with this second god of Descent and earning a rare audience during the ebb of the universe's Decay tide.

After much deliberation, only the Doctor—who approached everything as an experiment—could pull this off. So Cheng Shi had written the Doctor's name on the second blade.

Sure enough, the Doctor—who had never once been granted an audience with Decay—was pulled by that withering giant into the Septic Final Tomb. There, beholding the giant reduced nearly to bare bone, Wang Weijin stood in the center of the tomb without uttering a word.

He didn't know what to say. He also knew he shouldn't say anything.

For this audience, he was merely a vessel carrying a message—a mascot tasked with delivering mail. Everything he needed to say was already in the prayer. As for Decay's response, that was up to Him.

As the Truth follower who understood variable experiments best, Wang Weijin knew that as long as he—the external variable—kept quiet, didn't interfere with the internal variable Decay's judgment, and didn't add unnecessary flourishes that altered the experimental environment, then Lord Yu Xi's assignment would be fulfilled.

As expected, the thoroughly calcified giant paid no mind to the mortal before Him and rumbled in a low murmur:

"I understand His intent..."

I simply never imagined Deceit came from beyond the universe... If that's so... perhaps countless versions of me are enduring the same agony... begging for the same compassion...

I was wrong... I should have known sooner... that Deceit follower was also a pitiful soul...

But it is too late... What's done is done... There is no going back... I must be the first among all of me to decay... to earn His mercy...

As for the pitiful Deceit follower... it is not I who should show him compassion... but Void...

Go... There is nothing here for you..."

With that, the calcified giant closed His eyes. Even His massive skeleton began to rot—bones cracking inch by inch, white dust drifting away like ash. At this rate, it wouldn't be long before Decay disintegrated entirely within the Septic Final Tomb.

The Doctor dared not speak further. He offered the giant a slight bow.

Yet when he raised his head again and saw handful after handful of divine bone-ash crumbling down, a flash of inspiration struck: 'This stuff would be one of the finest divinity experimental materials in the universe.'

'If I just took a tiny bit...'

Fortunately, the instant the thought formed, a terrifying Sighing Sorrow Tide swept him out.

Back at the Joker gathering place, the Doctor broke into cold sweat as he realized how close he'd come to botching Lord Yu Xi's mission.

"When Truth is inappropriate, refrain from Truth. Remember this next time!

Praise Yu Xi."

...

Chapter 1296: One Blade Remains of Three

Long Jing found The Prisoner through a contact. And that contact was...

An Mingyu.

When you can't see the road ahead, ask a prophet to divine the way for you.

The Blind One wasn't Long Jing's first choice. His first choice was Hu Wei. Everyone knew the Grand Marshal had an absurdly vast network—there wasn't a soul in the peak circle who hadn't received his "favor" and "care," willing or otherwise.

Plus, the Grand Marshal had one admirable quality: as long as it wasn't something he personally cared about, he'd help without asking questions.

Undeniably, the Grand Marshal had the charisma and the means to bring different people together.

Unfortunately, Long Jing couldn't reach Hu Wei. His second choice was Hong Lin—the "righteous comrade" who had friends across the world, she was extremely reliable when it came to tracking people down. Oddly, Hong Lin had also vanished today.

'What could be tying both of them up?'

Left with no alternative, Long Jing turned to the Blind One.

He told her he needed to see The Prisoner immediately. Extremely urgent.

An Mingyu was extraordinarily perceptive. Even though Long Jing gave no reason, she had a vague sense that the acrobat might not be looking for The Prisoner as the Silence Chosen—but as the Torchbearer!

After all, she and Qin Xin had recruited The Prisoner into the Torchbearers together.

She just couldn't understand how Long Jing knew about the fire-passing, or why he specifically requested The Prisoner.

'Of all the Torchbearers, was there truly no one better than that bald head?'

The Blind One fell silent.

The acrobat was, admittedly, one of those deeply irritating tricksters. But based on Xin Xin's assessment... a bit dull, perhaps, but at least not malicious.

After brief deliberation, An Mingyu agreed to Long Jing's request. However, mindful of Cheng Shi's instructions to keep her distance from Fate, she didn't actually use Fate's methods to divine The Prisoner's location. She used a simpler approach.

As a former Torchbearer, the Blind One could reach Qin Xin immediately. Where The Prisoner was, Qin Xin would certainly know. So she quietly contacted Qin Xin, who gave her a location.

The moment she handed Long Jing the location, the acrobat dropped a word of thanks and vanished.

An Mingyu frowned. Something big was happening—she could feel it. Instinctively, she pulled out all her dice to perform a divination. But remembering the Destined Ones' stance, she hesitated and put them back.

Still, her blurred sense of the future was etched into her bones. She knew whatever had Long Jing this serious was no trifling matter. The instant they parted, she contacted Zhen Xin, wanting to ask her best friend if anything unusual had occurred recently.

But Zhen Xin didn't respond. An Mingyu's heart clenched.

Just then, Qin Xin called.

"Who's looking for The Prisoner?"

An Mingyu answered honestly: "President Gong. To my knowledge, Gong and The Prisoner are essentially on two parallel tracks—they barely interact. For him to rush to see The Prisoner today, something must be wrong. Qin Xin, do you know what's been happening lately?"

What's been happening? Where to start—far too much.

Since returning from the Real Universe, they hadn't caught a single breath before being pulled into a trial. Qin Xin had been going nonstop. Fortunately, this trial wasn't particularly difficult. He'd slipped away from his teammates for some quiet, split his time between acclimating to the War authority within him and preparing to confront the Torchbearer leadership after the trial—to overhaul the God Creation Plan.

He didn't know how to explain all this to the Blind One. He'd planned to contact her after things settled internally. But unexpectedly, she'd reached out for a bizarre reason.

Finding The Prisoner!

And the person looking was even stranger—Long Jing. Long Jing and The Prisoner barely knew each other. Why the sudden urgency?

'Had The Prisoner's cover been blown?'

Qin Xin frowned, reassured the Blind One, and prepared to head to The Prisoner's location himself to assess the situation.

With The Prisoner's passion for fire-passing, there was no way he'd hide anything from Qin Xin.

But before long, Qin Xin's expression darkened—because he discovered he could no longer reach The Prisoner. Just moments ago, he'd been able to get a location. Now the man had unilaterally severed the Torchbearer communication link.

And the reason was simple: President Gong had already found the Silence Chosen.

When Qin Xin first contacted The Prisoner, the Torchbearer had been in a trial, evaluating his teammates' character. He desperately wanted to prove he could become an excellent Fire Seeker—so he could recruit his brother-in-law into the Torchbearers.

But this trial's teammates were mediocre—nowhere near his brother-in-law's excellence. Disappointed, when he received Qin Xin's notice, The Prisoner immediately went to his designated meeting spot and waited. He'd prepared countless conversation topics, ready for a deep heart-to-heart with Qin Xin about fire-passing. But what arrived wasn't Qin Xin—it was Long Jing.

The instant he saw Long Jing, The Prisoner assumed this con artist had cracked the Torchbearers' communication channel and baited him by impersonating Qin Xin.

He tensed. His gaze sharpened instantly.

"Old Gong. Nice moves."

Long Jing was in a hurry. He didn't immediately register the leap in The Prisoner's logic and assumed the compliment was about his connections for finding this place. He nodded absently and got straight to the point:

"Do you know what the Flame of Hope is?"

"?"

'Old Gong's target is the Flame of Hope!?'

'Absolutely not!'

'The Flame of Hope is the Torchbearers' guardian deity. Even if I've never met it, I can't let you find it!'

The Prisoner's face turned stony. He was debating whether to strike while the other seemed fatigued—but then Long Jing slapped a Memory Page into his face and said urgently:

"Hurry—Cheng Shi needs saving!"

The Prisoner's jaw dropped: "What happened to my brother-in-law!?"

"..." Long Jing's tone hitched, his emotions nearly derailing. He wanted to say "your sister's about to become a widow" but decided this wasn't the moment. He pointed at the page and told him to hurry up and read. Meanwhile, he muttered: "What happened? Your brother-in-law became a god!"

The shock on The Prisoner's face intensified: "How do you know about that?"

"???"

Long Jing was stunned.

'Wait—you know?'

'How do you know? On what basis do you know?'

'You Silence followers really do know every secret, don't you?'

Long Jing blinked furiously: "You knew he was Yu Xi?"

This was The Prisoner's happiest moment in ages.

He'd been sitting on this secret for far too long. Now, encountering someone he could actually share it with, he became ecstatic.

"Of course I knew! My brother-in-law's business—how could I not know? I knew ages ago. How did you find out?"

'Knew... ages... ago?'

'Even The Prisoner knew Cheng Shi was Yu Xi. So what did the Joker members amount to?'

'Pure clowns?'

Long Jing's eyelid twitched madly, his nose prickled with heat, and the room suddenly felt several degrees warmer.

The Prisoner had a loose mouth, but he was actually extremely dependable. He immediately absorbed the Memory Page. When he learned everything, he put on an "I knew it" face.

"I always knew my brother-in-law was no ordinary man. Even an Outer God covets him—that means my judgment rivals a deity's."

"..."

'Bro—is your focus not a little off?'

'That's an Outer God! A god from beyond the universe!'

'You're not even going to be shocked that there are other gods beyond this world? And you're complimenting yourself?'

Long Jing didn't have the energy to retort. He was about to press The Prisoner to get to work when The Prisoner's expression turned grave and troubled:

"Bad news—Qin Xin found out."

"?"

"Old Gong, who told you where to find me?"

Long Jing's face shifted. Realization hit. "The Blind One."

The Prisoner slapped his thigh:

"It's over, the Blind One knows too!"

Since we're at this point, I'll level with you—I'm in a secret organization with Qin Xin and the Blind One.

This organization concerns humanity's future. Only top-tier elites are admitted. Uh... Old Gong, don't take it too hard. Your skills are slightly below mine, but I fully acknowledge them. Once I become a Fire Seeker, I'll recruit you first—no, second. First has to be my brother-in-law.

My brother-in-law— hey hey hey, no need to get physical! What's with the temper? I'm just giving you background!

The Flame of Hope is the deity that protects our organization. My brother-in-law could easily skip me and go through Qin Xin or the Blind One—they can both reach the Flame of Hope.

But he still came to me. Why?"

Long Jing got it instantly: "He didn't want Qin Xin and the Blind One to know about this!"

"Bingo!"

The Prisoner slapped his forehead with a "now you're learning" expression—but the next instant his face changed. Rubbing his bald head, he mused: "Then again, maybe he just thinks I'm more reliable than them."

"..."

President Gong was out of moves.

This was exactly why he refused to deal with The Prisoner.

...

Chapter 1297: The Torchbearers

This had indeed been Cheng Shi's thinking.

The Flame of Hope was the only deity who, while Deceit still sheltered Cheng Shi, had warned him to beware the Fear Faction—beware Deceit. This abandoned Change of Fate had also become the sole god Cheng Shi could trust among all the gods.

Even though His appearance was inextricably linked to Deceit, Cheng Shi had no better option.

Of course, Cheng Shi hadn't yet known the "Outer God Deceit" was actually the Outer God Fate. Had he foreseen that, he'd sooner die than turn to the Flame of Hope.

But fate always toyed with people in ways unseen.

In Cheng Shi's view, compared to the unreliable Prisoner, both Qin Xin and An Mingyu were far better intermediaries for relaying a message to the Flame of Hope. But he couldn't disregard others for the sake of his own survival.

Zhen Xin had taken Madame Freud away. That certainly wasn't to help the Outer God scheme against him—it was the magician seeking answers in her own way, trying to save the world, or at least to save one particular person. Because Cheng Shi knew the magician had someone she cared about.

And that person was An Mingyu.

So no matter what, Cheng Shi couldn't drag an unknowing An Mingyu into the Outer God's showdown and Void's curtain call.

Even if the outcome concerned everyone in the world, when alternatives existed, he couldn't actively "harm" the things the Joker members were trying so desperately to protect.

Besides, if the magician came back from her mission only to find her home destroyed—a shattered Zhen Xin might still try one last effort for the sake of the Joker's bonds. But the moment Zhen Xin went offline and Zhen Yi took over...

'The world's destruction wouldn't keep up with that girl's excitement.'

Same logic applied to Qin Xin.

With the War authority in hand, Qin Xin was the Torchbearers' hope—humanity's hope. Although it appeared that the world's answer lay in Cheng Shi himself, Cheng Shi couldn't justify dragging down the entire Torchbearers for his one life.

He understood Qin Xin. He knew Qin Xin would throw everything into helping him for the sake of protecting his cherished ideals. But the Flame of Hope was already drawn into the game. If Qin Xin met disaster too, the Torchbearers' sky would truly collapse.

In Cheng Shi's most pessimistic projection, even if he died in this Void finale and the Flame of Hope extinguished alongside him, at least Qin Xin—bearing the War authority—could hold up one corner of the world for the fire-passers.

So he abandoned the idea of seeking Qin Xin's help and sent Long Jing to find The Prisoner instead.

The Prisoner was unreliable, sure—but his enthusiasm for saving his "brother-in-law" was second to none.

Events unfolded as predicted. Upon learning, The Prisoner was every bit as frantic as Long Jing. The problem was that Long Jing's method of finding The Prisoner had severely exceeded Cheng Shi's expectations—President Gong had let two people on the Torchbearer line know about it.

Although Qin Xin and An Mingyu didn't know the details yet, given the Torchbearers' collective intelligence... this secret likely wouldn't keep for long.

While The Prisoner and Long Jing were still agonizing over the leak, a rather peculiar Torchbearer meeting was convened in the Fire Passing Hall. Attendance was sparse: founder Qin Xin, former Fire Seeker An Mingyu, current Fire Seekers Ji Yue and Fang Shiqing, Sun Miao—whose status apparently rivaled a vice president's—and one "newcomer" who'd never appeared at a high-level meeting: the Decay vessel for the God Creation Plan.

Having been absent for a while, Qin Xin called everyone together to reveal The Prisoner's identity as a Torchbearer, and explained that An Mingyu sensed something major looming—hence this gathering to assess the situation.

Shock all around, everyone talking over each other, utterly unable to connect the so-called "big event" to The Prisoner and Long Jing.

Until Ji Yue mentioned that not long ago she'd been teamed with both The Prisoner and Cheng Shi in a trial, and the two were clearly close. Sun Miao's eyes flashed with insight. Tentatively:

"Could it be that Cheng Shi is in trouble and wants the Flame of Hope's help?"

Surprised silence. While the others were still trying to figure out how Cheng Shi and the Flame of Hope could be connected, Sun Miao laid out his reasoning with a grave expression:

"Everyone knows President Gong and The Prisoner are like two parallel lines—aside from walking separate paths of misfortune, they have no connection.

I can't guarantee they don't have some secret friendship, but based purely on what we know, one intersection between them is Cheng Shi."

In truth, Sun Miao had something he kept to himself: he knew Cheng Shi was Yu Xi. Naturally, he was certain these two had reason to gravitate toward Cheng Shi.

"This isn't baseless speculation.

To explain the connection, I need to ask one question first: do you think The Prisoner would willingly expose his identity as a Torchbearer?"

Qin Xin frowned and shook his head: "Even if exposed, it would never be by his own choice. People are too prejudiced against him—they never see the sincerity in his heart."

Sun Miao nodded, as expected:

"Exactly. This means President Gong most likely didn't seek out The Prisoner over a Torchbearer issue. After all, if even we didn't know The Prisoner's identity, how would he pinpoint a Silence follower who excels at keeping secrets?"

So I lean toward an external force driving President Gong to The Prisoner. And that external force—could it be the Fate Weaver?

I'm guessing this direction because I recently learned something: Cheng Shi and Long Jing are probably in the same secret organization. It's nearly all tricksters. As for exactly who, I can't say—it involves another organization's secrets."

Internally, though, Sun Miao knew the organization was created by Lord Yu Xi—He'd corralled a bunch of con artists together.

"I don't know all the members, but someone told me Long Jing is definitely in there. So Long Jing and Cheng Shi share a depth of collaboration that far exceeds what outsiders see."

An Mingyu naturally knew what Sun Miao was referring to. She nodded in confirmation but still asked, puzzled:

"Where did you learn all this?"

Sun Miao smiled faintly and gave one name:

"Wei Mu."

'Oh—Wei Mu said so. Then no problem.'

Everyone accepted that without question. Sun Miao continued his reasoning:

"The tricksters are plotting something. During that period, Cheng Shi disappeared for a while. Coincidentally, our president also disappeared for a while..."

He looked at Qin Xin, meaningfully. "If you told me these two things are unrelated, I wouldn't believe it. And even more coincidentally, today President Gong and The Prisoner suddenly crossed paths—and our president is also back. So what's the connection between these events?"

Qin Xin said nothing. Everyone fell into thought. An Mingyu, who knew more than the rest, suddenly connected Zhen Xin's disappearance today—and realized Xin Xin and Cheng Shi might both be in trouble at the same time.

The next second, she pulled out her phone and called another Destined One: Hong Lin. Sure enough—no answer.

When three important people are all unreachable, something is very wrong.

And seeing An Mingyu put down the phone with a grim headshake, Sun Miao knew he'd guessed right.

He hadn't been certain President Gong and The Prisoner met because of Cheng Shi. He'd simply had an instinct that something major was happening when Qin Xin suddenly called this Torchbearer assembly.

Any event serious enough for the Torchbearers to treat this gravely had to relate to the current state of affairs. And since Cheng Shi was Yu Xi—a Void Servant God—any major event of this era surely involved Him. Sun Miao connected everything.

His thinking was also a microcosm of how most Folly followers' minds worked: keen investigation, bold extrapolation, wild hypotheses—yielding a startling yet logical conclusion.

These conclusions often exceeded what ordinary people anticipated, yet struck the heart of the matter every time.

Wei Mu operated the same way—only sharper, bolder, wilder, and more accurate!

Sun Miao knew he was no Wei Mu. He continued cautiously:

"Assuming the one looking for people is Cheng Shi, and regardless of his reasons for finding The Prisoner, Long Jing was a poor choice. In contrast, President Qin—who knew The Prisoner's identity—or Bishop Ji, who'd been in a trial with him recently—would have been far better intermediaries. So why didn't he go to you two?"

A trial probably can't hold the Fate Weaver. Even we managed to convene this meeting mid-trial, let alone him...

So either he's deep in danger with no one else to turn to, or he deliberately avoided you two!

Of course, it could be both: the Fate Weaver is imprisoned and also doesn't want you to know.

But what help could a Prisoner from another trial possibly provide? However strong he is, how much stronger could he be than President Gong?

So I believe the Fate Weaver isn't looking for The Prisoner the person—but for the Torchbearers behind him. Yet he's specifically avoiding President Qin and the Fire Seekers..."

Sun Miao trailed off. Qin Xin's eyes sharpened: "The Flame of Hope!"

"Exactly. That's my guess. As for whether it's correct... perhaps we'll know very soon."

...

Chapter 1298: When the Torchbearers Blaze

The Prisoner was out of ideas. He'd never even been to the Fire Passing Hall—how could he possibly find the Flame of Hope?

But just because he couldn't find it didn't mean someone else couldn't.

Ji Yue!

This Torchbearer Fire Seeker had exchanged contacts with The Prisoner during their shared trial. After racking his brain, The Prisoner realized she was his only path to that sacred Fire Passing Hall!

He already had the excuse ready: sincere heart, requesting a special audience.

The timing might be hard to explain, but no matter—as long as she agreed, there'd be no need for further explanations. The Prisoner would simply make her shut up. After all, Silence followers excelled at exactly that.

'A minor offense for the sake of the world's future. Surely a Fire Seeker would understand.'

When The Prisoner laid out his plan to Long Jing, the acrobat gave a polite smile and decided Cheng Shi had picked the wrong man.

He'd never heard a plan this unreliable. If this player "Ji Yue" had even a shred of vigilance, she'd never agree to The Prisoner's request.

Long Jing was anxious. He felt The Prisoner was far too cavalier, failing to grasp the gravity of an Outer God invasion. But The Prisoner told him:

"Old Gong, you understand the situation, but you don't understand us.

I believe Ji Yue will absolutely agree. Because the moment I speak up, she'll know I'm in trouble.

Mutual aid is a tradition that's been passed... down. She won't leave me hanging."

"..."

Such a pure, simple bond sounded like a fairy tale to a con artist. Long Jing was half-skeptical, but agreed to the plan on a "let's try" basis and asked, puzzled:

"What kind of organization are you people, exactly?"

The Prisoner's face turned solemn. "If you find out, you'll have to join."

"?" Long Jing blinked, amused. "That's a unique recruitment method. What—is it contagious?"

The Prisoner rubbed his head, eyes twinkling: "It's not called contagious, it's called passing the f— nice try! You're not tricking me!

Point is, that's how I got in. There might be other ways, but I haven't seen them."

"..."

Long Jing shut up. He felt he should've done what the Doctor did—drop the Memory Page and run. Unfortunately, it was too late.

To ensure authenticity and persuasiveness, The Prisoner couldn't let Long Jing leave. He dragged Long Jing along and contacted Ji Yue, who was in the middle of the meeting. When she received The Prisoner's message, the Fire Seeker solemnly shared it with the entire Torchbearer assembly.

'Speak of the devil—but this time he'd arrived awfully fast.' Everyone was taken aback. Sun Miao burst out laughing: "Here we go."

Qin Xin frowned, glanced in the Flame of Hope's direction, and nodded for Ji Yue to approve The Prisoner's plan.

Ji Yue replied solemnly. After relaying the Fire Passing Hall's location to The Prisoner, she seemed to foresee the ordeal ahead and sighed with a shake of her head:

"Looks like I'll be the only casualty of this 'accident.' Whether you knock me out or bind me, when this is over, make sure you tell me everything.

I don't want to miss a good story.

As for The Prisoner... he'd better apologize. Right here, in the Fire Passing Hall, in front of everyone. A formal, proper apology."

Ji Yue's words broke the heavy atmosphere. Everyone shared an amused smile, traded glances, and filed out—clearing space for Ji Yue and The Prisoner's meeting.

Before long, The Prisoner arrived at the Fire Passing Hall with Long Jing. Surveying the place's austere, minimalist décor, Long Jing was rather surprised.

"You people are into the ascetic thing? No wonder you took in that Ascetic Monk."

"?"

Ji Yue had no idea what The Prisoner had told Long Jing. She was about to offer an explanation when The Prisoner cut in urgently:

"Where's the Flame of Hope?"

Ji Yue's words died on her lips. She pointed in a direction.

The Prisoner got it. Slowly, he raised his hand.

Ji Yue knew she was about to suffer. But his completely unconcealed, almost eager expression—what was that supposed to mean?

'I deserve to get "silenced"?'

Her brow darkened as she glared at The Prisoner: "Couldn't you at least wait until I turned around?"

The Prisoner casually placed his raised hand on his head, rubbing it, pretending nothing happened:

"Well, the thing is, you haven't turned around yet."

"..."

"..."

Honestly, Long Jing wasn't exactly the silent type either. As a stage performer, he needed audience interaction. But today, his silence count had thoroughly exceeded quota.

As a War follower, Ji Yue's blood pressure spiked. She wanted nothing more than to fight The Prisoner head-on—lose honorably, and at least she'd have earned a battle even if she missed the story.

But The Prisoner denied her even that. He suddenly asked: "They know?"

Ji Yue's voice caught. Before she could figure out what to say, her vision went black. She collapsed.

Long Jing had done it. He simply couldn't stand watching these two waste any more time.

"Every second counts! With you two in the organization, I have serious doubts about your efficiency," Long Jing said darkly.

The Prisoner disagreed: "You can insult me, but you cannot insult our organization. Even my brother-in-law has expressed his respect for it. You, a mere mortal—too short-sighted."

"..."

"Follow me. The Flame of Hope is right in here."

The Prisoner turned and walked. Long Jing followed close behind. Shortly, when they reached the rest area where the Flame of Hope typically resided, a wisp of fire suddenly dangled down behind them, curiously studying these two "newcomers":

"You're looking for me?"

Both men started and spun around. In that instant, they understood why this being was called the Flame of Hope.

He really was fire.

The Prisoner's expression blazed with excitement—he felt his very soul resonating with the Flame of Hope. His body, too. He'd already pulled a can of gasoline from his pocket.

The Flame of Hope genuinely froze for a second at the sight of the gasoline. He very much wanted to tell this naive newcomer that fuel couldn't help Him grow stronger.

Long Jing was equally floored. Fortunately, he was more reliable than The Prisoner. Seeing that The Prisoner's opening line would clearly not be on topic, he clamped a hand over the man's mouth and rapidly explained why they were here.

Without a third Memory Page, he couldn't share every detail. He stuck to the most important, most relevant points. And when he finished his breathless account, the Flame of Hope nearly froze in midair.

"He's the Outer God Deceit?"

The Candle Man clearly couldn't accept it, murmuring to himself: "But I always thought He was... the Fate that was split from me..."

"!!!?"

That sentence nearly gave Long Jing a heart attack. As a Deceit follower, he'd long pondered who was who between the Sunset and Morning Joy. Hearing these words, his brain nearly detonated.

The Candle Man's flame dimmed for a moment, then within the two men's bewildered gazes, it roared back to life. He nodded gravely:

"I understand Yu Xi's intent. But this matter... is not so simple.

What he wants is to contaminate his own faith!

Void chose him perhaps precisely because, despite walking the Void path, his heart holds no faith—he was never truly devoted to anyone.

Fate wanted to use this to forge the fixed. And as far as I know, the previous Deceit also wanted to use this to break the fixed.

I couldn't guess exactly what Deceit intended. I only knew the 'fixed' was equally important to Deceit. Only today do I understand—He came from another world to plunder the fixed.

Yu Xi cannot be taken. Contaminating his faith is indeed one method. But the moment his faith is contaminated, he also loses his identity as the fixed...

Then who would still protect him?

Would Fate still favor a Fate Weaver who personally shattered the fixed?

And where would our world go, having lost the fixed?"

Silence fell at the Flame of Hope's murmured words. Before long, heavy footsteps echoed from the hall's outer corridor.

"A world with the fixed and a world without it may differ. But those are tomorrow's problems.

Whether seeking survival or seeking righteousness—for the Torchbearers, this has never been a question.

Torchbearers will never trade a friend or something precious for the sake of preserving an 'old' world. Not before. Not now. Not ever.

So the answer is simple. Whether he's Cheng Shi or Yu Xi, he is our friend. That's enough.

Torchbearers will protect what is precious and shelter their friends!

That is what it means to pass the fire.

And you, and I, and he—we are all that fire."

...

Chapter 1299: The Desperate Dilemma

So they were called the Torchbearers!

The instant Long Jing heard the name, he understood what kind of organization this was. He simply hadn't expected Qin Xin to be its leader.

As Qin Xin entered the hall, the others gradually emerged from the shadows.

Long Jing's expression stiffened. Seeing An Mingyu approach, he said somewhat awkwardly: "What a coincidence—we meet again, Chosen An."

An Mingyu quickened her pace, her face anxious: "Is Xin Xin in that trial too?"

Seeing there was no point hiding anything, Long Jing could only nod. He gave a rapid retelling of the trial events, then explained that Cheng Shi had separately sought out Memory, Decay, and the Flame of Hope. Hearing this, the Flame of Hope flickered:

"Memory chose long ago to forget everything related to the Outer God. Whether He now sees through this or recovers those memories, He'll likely be unable to make a new choice—for that would be a denial of Himself, a double blasphemy against memory.

Decay... is singularly focused on decaying. He was already infinitely close to the state He sought. But if He learns that beyond this world, countless identical Decays are all awaiting Origin's mercy... would He have any compassion left for Yu Xi?

No. He would only accelerate His own decay.

Cheng Shi's choices weren't wrong. But unfortunately, none of them bore fruit..."

Silence fell. Two of three paths were dead ends. That meant the only road left lay with the Flame of Hope.

Everyone looked at the Flame of Hope with eyes full of expectation—and saw Him sigh as well.

Seeking survival in desperation was never easy. He understood what Qin Xin meant: stop overthinking, save first, and once everyone stood together again, work on the world-saving problem. But was it really that simple?

Once Cheng Shi was rescued, the world... might reach its end.

This had always been a trap. An unsolvable deadlock.

This trap wasn't set by the Outer God Deceit—it was bestowed by Origin. All despair stemmed from that cosmic experiment. The Outer God Deceit had simply maximized the experiment's rules, trapping Cheng Shi in the cage of the "fixed."

Fate wanted to forge a sacrifice that would please Origin. To do so, the sacrifice's will had to align with Origin's: having no faith, yet embracing all faiths.

Cheng Shi was exactly that. Even though he bore the title of Deceit's envoy, it didn't compromise his "faithless" purity—because he'd obtained it through deceiving the world.

That was the brilliance of Deceit's master plan!

He'd even used this scheme to fool the Flame of Hope, granting Cheng Shi an "empty check"—the envoy's name without the envoy's substance.

On the road to becoming Yu Xi, the clown had begun accepting the "fusion" of other faiths, gradually transforming into the fixed!

In other words, on the path of the fixed, the Outer God Deceit had contributed far more than Fate. He was the true mastermind behind Cheng Shi's transformation into the fixed.

Therefore, Cheng Shi's only way to break free was to shed his identity as the fixed. And the most direct, effective method was faith contamination!

Ideally, becoming a true god—a complete "imbalance" in faith. Failing that, obtaining another faith's envoy title as a fallback—though that was less secure.

An envoy's status didn't require the Convention's approval—only a true god's acknowledgment and the delegation of authority. But such faith contamination, revocable at any time, was like tossing a sealed bottle of ink into a pool of clean water. Without the cap being opened, the water remained untouched.

So to reiterate: Cheng Shi had no real choice. He knew the former was better, but the latter was obviously easier.

However, the envoy identity absolutely couldn't be something like Yu Xi or Ultraman. Yu Xi was ethereal and rootless; Ultraman did exist in historical record, but under the Outer God Deceit's deliberate obfuscation, this identity could easily be framed as an alias for Yu Xi. Moreover, there was still a Kataro in Chaos's temple—the Outer God's ruthless contingency for revoking the Ultraman title at any moment.

Only a genuine, authority-bearing, indisputable envoy identity could allow Cheng Shi to shed the "fixed" through faith contamination—creating a sliver of escape from both the Outer God and Fate.

This was also why Cheng Shi had sent the Doctor to Decay.

He'd wanted an envoy title. Decay understood his intent—but refused, for the sake of His great decay enterprise.

Yet even if Cheng Shi successfully contaminated his faith, this method would cost him all of Void's attention—and very possibly make him the target of Void's wrath, erased entirely from this world...

Before the true ending arrived, the Flame of Hope couldn't reveal the full truth of the "fixed" to everyone. He had to preserve one wisp of "flame of hope" for this world. His considerations ran far deeper than anyone present.

The Torchbearers might gladly risk everything for a friend's sake—to protect what was precious. But once Cheng Shi's faith was contaminated and the fixed identity erased entirely, how would this world survive?

It was undeniable that Origin sought an answer from Its cosmic experiment. Without that answer, every world would become nothing more than a discarded, failed experiment.

What was certain now was that Cheng Shi was that answer. And this tiny flicker of hope had become the foundation of the Flame of Hope's will.

He stood behind Cheng Shi precisely to let the "flame of hope" spread—so that the few could win this world.

But now: save the world, and Cheng Shi's identity as sacrifice couldn't be contaminated. Save Cheng Shi, and the world marched toward a future without the fixed!

This was a choice that couldn't be made—not just for Cheng Shi, but for the Flame of Hope as well. Whichever path led to the same shore: the shattering of the Flame of Hope's will.

For one fleeting instant, the Flame of Hope even felt as though He'd already died—perished in a future that held no hope.

He couldn't reveal the full truth. He could only lay out the stakes.

"Choosing to save Cheng Shi makes saving the world nearly impossible. Choosing to save the world makes saving Cheng Shi untenable.

He sent you to find me because he values the power of Change within me. He wants me to use Change's perspective to find a third path.

I am indeed the Change that Fate discarded. But...

Compared to an Outer God who stirs storms across the universe, my flame is far too feeble. I fear it cannot illuminate the shadow He has cast."

The Flame of Hope's words clearly signaled that even He saw no way out.

Everyone could hear what He meant. The weight of 'one person versus the world'—this question alone was a mountain crushing down on every heart, stealing every breath!

But only Long Jing knew: Cheng Shi had probably never intended to survive. The clown's ideal ending was to die beneath this starry sky and be buried in the world where his heart could rest. Otherwise, he'd never have given Old Zhang that scalpel.

As for the world... 'I'm already dead. What do I care about the world?'

That he'd sent Long Jing to find the Flame of Hope at all was already the greatest goodwill a despairing clown could offer this world.

Unfortunately, the Flame of Hope was not omnipotent.

Putting himself in the clown's shoes, Long Jing felt the despair even more acutely. The clown had the will to resist but simply couldn't think of a way to do it.

The suffocating atmosphere spread. As a Fate follower, An Mingyu sensed Long Jing's shifting emotions. She read what was in his heart. Her expression softened with emotion:

"He's already fighting back. Struggling to escape the identity of Fate's fixed... that is his roar... and his plea."

At those words, every face grew heavier still. Even The Prisoner, for once, fell silent.

...

Chapter 1300: An Unexpected Change

In a moment of such agonizing indecision, Qin Xin stepped forward once again.

With a broad sweep of his hand, he "wiped away" everyone's gloom and spoke with utmost gravity:

"We cannot chain the world's survival to a single person. That is not what Cheng Shi wants, not what we want, and not what the world wants. All of this is the Outer God's doing!

So why not turn the spear toward the Outer God?

No deity is invincible. They too are merely variables within the Creator's experiment. Even if the Outer God has stolen Deceit's authority and wields power far surpassing all other gods, I refuse to believe that power is limitless!

Once it's worn down to nothing, He'll be just another 'ordinary' deity.

When that happens, perhaps we won't have to choose between Cheng Shi and the world at all. We'll only need to repel the Outer God, and everything that remains will be 'family business' under this starry sky—won't it?"

Everyone knew this was also a viable approach. The question was: if any god in the universe could challenge the Outer God, the situation would never have gotten this dire.

"Which deity can still stand against Him right now?" Long Jing racked his brain.

"Order—who, for the sake of a universe in order, would never bow to an Outer God. And also...

Me!"

The instant the words left his mouth, a blazing inferno erupted across Qin Xin's body. The shockwave of heat swept through the hall, shoving everyone back.

Feeling that pressure—terrifying as a god's—Long Jing stood dumbstruck: "This is..."

"How does one seek survival!

With blood—and fire!"

Qin Xin stood with bow drawn. His hair of flame danced without wind. Stray sparks drifted past those eyes of blood and fire, reflecting the fierce battle-lust within.

"Now the flame of war is lit. All that's missing is unyielding blood. And every last drop my body holds is written with defiance.

I'm willing to stake it all. Even if I burn to my final drop of blood, I will fight for this world's future!"

War's surging heatwave set every soul ablaze. Everyone felt Qin Xin's resolve—even found themselves infected by his battle-spirit, beginning to believe that perhaps the world wasn't hopeless after all.

But the Flame of Hope knew: hot-blooded courage alone might carry the faintest chance of thwarting the Outer God's scheme. But what then?

Once the Outer God retreated and only "family business" remained, the impossible choice between the "fixed" and the world would replay all over again.

He knew Qin Xin wasn't blind to this. The Torchbearer simply refused to keep retreating. He was numbing himself, deliberately ignoring the hardest decision, trying to postpone it forever—or perhaps hoping to die before it came.

This was no act of cowardice. The courage to declare war on a god was, for a mere mortal, the greatest bravery imaginable!

But the curtain call would come eventually.

The Flame of Hope fell silent. Faced with nothing but fractured futures, He had no standing nor reason to pour cold water on Qin Xin's decision—much less refuse to support this will of resistance, born from the most marginalized few.

And so the Torchbearers' will was decided: Qin Xin would seek an audience with Order in his capacity as War's envoy, form an alliance, and confront the Outer God—making a final stand for this world and its "fixed."

Time waited for no one.

The moment the plan was set, Qin Xin left the Fire Passing Hall to find a way to seek Order's audience. The others dispersed. Long Jing had expected The Prisoner to stick to him like glue and follow him back into the Outer God's trial to find his brother-in-law. Instead, The Prisoner silently vanished before his eyes.

Seeing that flash of resolve on the man's face, Long Jing suddenly guessed where The Prisoner had gone.

...

The Void. Before the Leaking World Silent Puppet.

"Silence, are You complicit in the Outer God's plan to plunder the fixed!?"

The Leaking World Silent Puppet gave no response—didn't even spare a glance at the follower before Him. He floated soundlessly in the Void, embodying silence to its absolute perfection.

"Why? When the 'fixed' leaves this world—when the experiment loses its answer—can You survive alone?"

Such a simple question. I refuse to believe the gods can't see it! So what are You all doing this for!?"

Silence remained silent. The Prisoner clenched his fists.

"Granny was right. The good ones... aren't here."

...

The Void. The Fishbone Hall.

The colossal skull sat upon the Bone Throne, watching the small skull ascend the fishbone staircase to seek an audience. Green flame flickered in his eye sockets:

"You've. Come. To the wrong. Place."

"I haven't come to the wrong place. It's You I've come to find, my Lord." The small skull spoke calmly.

The great skull fell silent. After a moment, He sighed:

"I. Know your. Purpose. But this matter. I cannot. Intervene."

"You've known all along that Deceit was an Outer God! Haven't You!?" The small skull looked up, her tone still level despite the accusation: "You sheltered Cheng Shi so thoroughly—was it just so he'd believe the Outer God? This is Your world. It's our world too. Why would You help an Outer God drive the world into a future-less abyss?"

Is universal annihilation truly what You want?

But that's Oblivion—not Death!"

In any context, that would be the gravest possible blasphemy against Death. And they were in the Fishbone Hall itself.

A terrifying wave of Death's essence exploded from beneath the Bone Throne. The entire Fishbone Hall shook and trembled. Countless bones surged upward like an inverted flood, encircling and encasing the whole hall.

In that instant, Death's shadow utterly swallowed the staircase. The small skull could no longer see the throne before her.

But she remained calm. After all, she'd never been able to see clearly to begin with.

Yes—she wasn't he. She was An Mingyu. The prophet abandoned by Fate. The Bell Ringer who'd converted to Death.

The small skull still gazed upward—not at the Bone Throne, but at the Void obscured by the bone-white flood.

She feared none of this. Because she knew the true terror wasn't here.

The colossal skull didn't punish further. Feeling His follower's unyielding resolve, He sighed wearily:

"I. Too. Only recently. Learned. His identity.

But. The gods. Also have. Matters. Hard to speak of.

Fate's. Fixed destiny. If it. Truly were. The world's. Answer. Then His. World. Would not have. Suffered. One failure.

He once. Spoke to. Us. That only. After failure. Can one. Glimpse. Origin's true intent.

He already has. A plan. That cannot fail. But still. Lacks. One chance. To attempt it.

If. This world's. Fixed. Can serve. As His answer. Perhaps. Both worlds. May yet. Survive!

Therefore..."

At those words, the small skull froze. Then laughed softly.

It was a quiet laugh—like an involuntary slip, or a scoff born of disbelief.

"You believed Him?"

"..."

The green flames in the great skull's sockets wavered. He looked upon His follower. He sensed something different about this usually meek believer today—she had more backbone, more confidence.

But the question was: in a situation like this, where did that confidence come from?

"Whether I. Believe or not. Is My. Concern. You. Coming here. Is meaningless. Leave."

Before the words faded, the bone-white flood swirling around the hall surged toward the small skull. But just as she was about to be swallowed by the torrent, she spoke:

"My Lord. The Outer God's promises are nothing but lies. I believe You must have been deceived.

I beg You to see through to the truth. To help us. Help Cheng Shi. Help the world.

Otherwise..."

The endless bones froze inches from the small skull's face. A dense wall of skulls severed her "line of sight" entirely.

The colossal skull rumbled:

"Otherwise. What?"

The small skull suddenly released over a dozen dice from her mouth. Her voice was calm:

"Otherwise, your humble follower will personally toll the death bell for You.

I will, right here, atop Your very hall, attempt once more to behold Origin's countenance..."

"!!!"

...

The Void.

On his way to seek an audience with Order, Qin Xin encountered an unexpected figure.

He was still wreathed in flame, every hair ablaze—the very picture of War.

The person who intercepted him studied his new "skin" with great interest, nodded, and smiled:

"As I thought—you were the greatest beneficiary of the Real Universe expedition.

But before you go to Order, I can offer you a small piece of advice."

Qin Xin's pupils shrank: "Who told you where I was?"

"You've already guessed, haven't you?"

"..." Qin Xin's brow furrowed. Then, eyes closed, he sighed: "Sun Miao."

"Smart.

But also foolish.

As an envoy who's shed his mortal identity, you have far more convenient ways to save Yu Xi. Yet you chose to fight head-on.

Does postponing a foolish act produce answers?

Since it doesn't, why not decide the ending from the start?

I can make Void's finale begin right now. Are you willing to cooperate, Qin Xin?"

"What are you doing this for, Wei Mu?"

Indeed—the newcomer was Wei Mu.

The puppet smiled, gazing meaningfully into the distance: "To verify whether this universe is one grand foolish act."

...