

The Gods 1311

Chapter 1311: Blood Dry and Fire Spent — The Gods' Final Act

As a mortal, one might understand in the abstract that Fate — empowered by the Origin — was invincible.

But it was only a vague notion, like a frog at the bottom of a well gazing upward, knowing the sky was vast but unable to fathom just how boundless it truly was.

Not until that frog gained the strength to leap out of the well and stand upon the surface would it discover that the sky's immensity was far beyond anything it could have imagined.

This was exactly how Cheng Shi felt right now.

The power of War drove his boiling blood into every limb and every bone. World-ending fire coiled and burned around him. He had never felt such overwhelming, terrifying power. It seemed as though he carried an inexhaustible wellspring of divine force, and even his perception of the world had warped into the shape of flame.

He saw himself — a volcano in mid-eruption, crimson fire towering to the heavens. But the enemy... was a blazing sun that illuminated the entire universe, descending upon him!

It was the awe of the minuscule gazing up at the immeasurable. The dread of the created before the Creator. The wariness of the steady before the lethal.

But at a time like this, what use was caution?

Let it all go. Today there were only two endings!

Either he died fighting, or he died spent. Until the blood ran dry and the fire went out — not a single step back!

And so Cheng Shi moved.

As the die — an apology for his prejudice against Fate, a memorial for Deceit's departure — slowly rolled to a stop on a one in the Void, "War," bolstered by the last trace of Fate's power, roared and charged toward those eyes as cold as an abyss of ice!

He did not intend to melt the glacier with passion, nor to call it back. He intended to boil away every last drop of cold, to kill the Outer God beneath the very starry sky where Fate had fallen!

Even if it was impossible!

But Fixed Destiny itself had already been broken — what else was impossible now?!

"How do we survive!"

A streak of flame blazed toward Fate's eyes. Searing white fire spread outward like a spider web, dragging those icy irises into a raging inferno.

Within the all-consuming sea of fire, a colossal figure slowly took shape. A fist forged of roars, of keening, of wailing — surged skyward and hammered into the spirals within those eyes.

Those mesmerizing, revolting spirals — despised by mortals and gods alike. "War" could not suppress his fury. One punch shattered them to nothing!

"With blood — and fire!!"

The spirals dissolved. The Stellar Eyes shattered with them.

But it was all an illusion. The Authority of Deceit still clung to the Outer God, and Fate's eyes simply reopened behind Cheng Shi, the fury surging within them no less than his own.

Fate was truly enraged. Watching a scheme cultivated over untold ages crumble in a single moment, He abandoned any lingering attachment to this world.

Let it burn. Let it all burn. A new Fixed Destiny would be reborn in another world, and this place deserved nothing but ruin!

The ever-dimming iridescent light flashed through His eyes. In an instant, the entire world sank into darkness at the Outer God's wrath!

The Void encroaching?

No!

The Abyss of Misfortune!

The Outer God Fate was still Fate, after all. Misfortune — the Authority of Fate most easily witnessed — was also the deadliest weapon in Fate's arsenal.

Fate had once threatened the universe with misfortune, compelling all the gods to unite and support the sky. That alone proved the universe could not withstand the misfortune of Fate.

And if the universe could not endure Fate's misfortune, how could it possibly withstand the misfortune unleashed by the power of the Origin?

The answer was: it could not. Not a chance.

The cataclysmic upheaval drew the gods once more — but this time, they were no longer spectators.

The gods realized the "negotiations" had collapsed. The Outer God was using misfortune to annihilate the world. Even though they knew a world deprived of Fixed Destiny would eventually be destroyed by the Creator anyway, at the very least — while survival was still possible — no god wished to die.

And so, in a single moment, the gods struck. They no longer held the universe aloft. At last, they turned their weapons upon the Outer God Fate!

They finally understood that compromise was futile. Only by eliminating the Outer God could the world buy a single breath of reprieve.

But it was too late.

Birth's light blanketed the mortal realm. Countless followers embraced creation on the spot, and amid the surging tide of procreation, the Divine Pillar condensed the power of faith and lashed out at the Outer God.

Yet fragile life could not shake a god enthroned above the world. The Divine Pillar — strung with the life markers of countless beings — snapped with a gut-wrenching "RRRIP—", breaking apart in Fate's spirals.

Prosperity was silenced. Death was imprisoned.

Life — was no more.

The Sea of Desire churned ceaselessly, but as the universe crumbled, its waters poured entirely into the madly spreading rifts between real and Void.

Decay wanted to resist, but its ashen body had no strength left to give.

Oblivion had long since been obliterated. Descent had drowned in its own depths.

Order still sang. At the very least, the Iron Law of Order's pages and its resounding voice could still be seen and heard by the world. The insignificant mortals, sensing the world's collapse, organized by the few remaining players, raised their voices in united prayer to Order.

This should have been Order's greatest source of strength. But alas, Order was not true Order. Before the chaos it had itself wrought, the Iron Law's struggle was nothing more than the curses and wails of the weak against the strong.

The era's tragedy proved that "the small" needed order to protect the foundations of their survival — while "the vast" did not, because Its will was "order."

Truth... had long since ceased to exist.

The moment it was discovered that the entire world was merely a petri dish for the Creator's experiment, the universe had lost its Truth.

As for War...

He was indeed still fighting.

The "gift" of the Void had split War in two: fire blazed as "Deceit," joining the inferno to burn everything to ash; blood flowed as "Fate," binding the Outer God in chains, straining to drag Him into purgatory.

Yet history had already shown the world that Civilization's story could only end one way — waiting for civilization's fire to be snuffed out by the howling wind.

Chaos had long since entered the game. Folly watched from the sidelines with cold, appraising eyes.

At the infinite edge of the Void, a pair of eyes coated in chaotic white miasma surveyed every corner of the universe, then let out a derisive snort:

"As expected, this world has no answer."

Floating beside Him was a small puppet. It shared its Benefactor's field of vision, face filled with shock. After a moment, it too snorted and asked:

"So, oh impotent god of Folly — all you're capable of is talking. Can you give this world an answer?"

The miasma-veiled eyes fell silent. Then, self-deprecatingly:

"I cannot. Neither can you.

You informed War of the Final Oracle. All that does is hasten the fall of the Void — it is not the answer to escaping it."

The puppet nodded, looking once more toward the center of the gods' battle, and sighed deeply:

"I cannot. Neither can he.

You are the true Wise Man. The foolish acts of Void truly have no answer."

The Void fell silent — and so Silence descended.

The appearance of the Leaking World Silent Puppet instantly drained all color from the universe and all sound from the world. Yet no one could have expected that in this moment — which gave even the Outer God pause — Silence, who had never spoken a word since Chaos descended upon the world, would open His mouth before those furious, frigid Stellar Eyes!

He asked in a mechanical voice: "Why... does it... end this way?"

Fate cast a cold glance at Him, evading the onslaught of blood and fire, and answered with merciless indifference:

"Fixed Destiny exploded from within its silence — and so the world perishes in silence!

The universe has descended into Chaos — why not simply return to it?!"

The next second, the world's collapse accelerated. Existence was about to cease existing.

Chapter 1312: The Universe's Curtain Call — All Returns to Void...

At this very moment — where was Existence?

At the edge of the universe, beyond the world, within the cracks of Existence where this stretch of starry sky bordered countless others — Time was manipulating the invisible yet shadow-casting Pointer, meticulously synchronizing the world's time with that of the Real Universe.

Memory was here as well. It was the first time He had left the universe and seen the Real Universe with His own eyes.

He looked back toward the world's interior — toward the Void where gods and Outer God waged war in chaos — and for a moment found Himself unable to decide whether to commit the vastness of the Real Universe to record, or to chronicle this spectacular farewell performance for the world's sake.

Those ancient eyes, layered with the history of countless stars, seemed to have doubled in weight in a single instant. He shook His head and looked at the sibling god still diligently at work beside Him, asking calmly:

"The era of Void is about to end. The gods' suspicions were correct — the universe will ultimately return to Void.

You always said that after Void, no new era would follow. If the world has already reached a dead end, what meaning does anything you're doing still hold?"

Time said nothing. He simply kept aligning.

Memory turned His gaze to the Real Universe, sensing the vast, redundant, chaotic, fractured memories drifting within it. His voice was heavy with emotion:

"These memory fragments remind me of Truth's death. Of War's charge. Of the world being reset — that scene where Time saved the world.

The power He holds now... you once held it too.

Is there an answer hidden within that power? If not, I cannot fathom why you would stand by and watch an Outer God who doesn't belong to this world destroy everything you've protected.

It's come to this — are you still going to keep me in the dark?"

"..."

Time continued His task in silence, saying nothing.

Memory laughed bitterly:

"Time has no time. Memory knows no memories.

Deceit never deceived. Fate lost its fate...

What a fine age of Void. What a grand gods' farce.

So Folly was right all along — the universe was nothing but a foolish act.

But with the world at its end — will Time... save it again?"

Time finally spoke. He nodded, His gaze resolute:

"I have been saving it all along."

"But aren't you just standing here watching the Outer God run rampant, letting the universe plummet into misfortune? Is the nature of Existence truly to cease existing?"

"No. The nature of Existence is to exist eternally — and yet to be eternally void.

Soon. That moment is nearly here."

"..."

Memory could not understand Time, but He chose to trust Him. Essence had always run deeper than appearance — at least on that point, He was certain beyond doubt.

Within the cracks of Existence, all was peaceful. Within the universe, war raged on.

The battle had reached its final moment. Apart from War — still fighting — every god had fallen.

Not because the Outer God was ferocious, but because the power of the Origin was undefeatable!

Cheng Shi knew he should have perished long ago. War's burning blood alone could never overcome the Outer God Fate. Yet Fate's cold-bloodedness seemed intent on making Cheng Shi watch this world be swallowed by misfortune, piece by piece.

He stood high above, surveying the universe, merciless beyond measure:

"In my search for Fixed Destiny, I have witnessed the collapse of countless universes, the fall of countless worlds. I thought it would all end in this era.

But alas — Fixed Destiny possessed the fortune of destiny, yet lacked its true fate.

Everything will end now. The Void's curtain has fallen.

No new era will follow. The world's destruction will draw the Creator's gaze. He will erase every trace of this starry sky and start a new experiment in its place.

And amid the tide of annihilation, I shall seize a fresh thread of the Origin's power and travel to another world to continue seeking a Fixed Destiny capable of breaking this cycle.

As for all of you...

Void will be your eternal grave. Embrace it. This is your final moment of existence — in this world, in this experiment, in the Real Universe."

The words had barely faded when darkness consumed the sight of every living being. Across the vast universe, every star was snuffed out, every shimmer extinguished.

In all the starry sky — no, in all the Void — only a single feeble ember of flame remained. It was not any flame of hope. It was the lone eye that Cheng Shi, trapped within Fate's misfortune, could still open.

War's left eye!

The flickering firelight within it could illuminate only a small corner of his surroundings. The eye rolled defiantly, straining to look in every direction, but it could no longer perceive any trace of the world.

Time trickled away, second by second. The world seemed to have perished long ago. He could not even be sure whether this lingering consciousness was a dying obsession or the memory-ash given off by a collapsing world.

He could not move. He could not struggle. He simply watched the blackness close in, crushing the last sliver of light before his eye — the universe's final spark of Vitality.

The flame grew ever weaker, its light twisting desperately. All the rage, defiance, repression, and despair erupted at once — yet still could not rekindle the fire within his pupil. It merely flared in a single flash, like the last radiance before death!

But in that fleeting burst of brilliance, the eye that should have been filled with fury, defiance, repression, and despair suddenly changed. It became cunning, mocking, scornful, teasing!

Yes — in the final instant before the world surrendered to Void — Cheng Shi laughed.

He was laughing at himself, and he was laughing at Fate.

The Outer God intended to steal another thread of the Origin's power amid the tide of annihilation, to continue His path of plundering Fixed Destinies. But the question was — before you steal, have you asked the "unsuspecting" owner's permission?

The Origin was detestable, yes — but so was Fate.

If that was the case, why not use one hateful god against another?

Cheng Shi had not given up. He still wanted to "summon" the Origin!

If the misfortune unleashed by the Outer God Fate could annihilate the world, could this world's own misfortune drag the departing Outer God to his death beneath these hopeless stars?!

How would he know without trying?

And so Cheng Shi laughed. In the final second before his consciousness faded, he stopped struggling. Instead, with the last of his divine power, he activated...

Fate Has Divergence!

Yes — fate had its own detours. But did Fate Himself have detours?!

Yes! Of course He did!

In the instant before the world plunged completely into Void, a pair of eyes — beyond anything even gods could imagine — suddenly opened before them all!

Those eyes swept across the terror in every god's gaze in a single heartbeat, then vanished.

But Cheng Shi never saw it.

The last flicker of fire in his pupil died as his divine power was exhausted. In that instant, upon a stage with no "audience" left to watch, the era's curtain slammed down, burying this stretch of starry sky's entire past in eternal darkness.

And so...

The universe was reduced to ashes. Void descended.

Chapter 1313: Trial Cleared — A Bewildered Daze

[Special Trial (Curtain Call Performance — Deceit) — Challenge Successful]

[Scoring and calculating rewards...]

[Player: Cheng Shi — Performance Score: S]

[Item obtained: Curtain Call Performance Participation Certificate (C) x1]

[Item obtained: Clown Nose (C) x1]

[Item obtained: Clown Setting Mirror (C) x1]

[Item obtained: Match of the Flame of Hope (C) x1]

[Item obtained: Fate's Denial (C) x1]

[Item obtained: Deceit's Praise (S) x1]

[Road to Ascension +20]

[Ladder of Ascent +3]

[Current Road to Ascension score: 2333 — Global Ranking: 330,713]

[Current Ladder of Ascent score: 196 — Path Ranking: 18]

[Trial cleared. Exiting now.]

"..."

When the trial-cleared notification popped up before his eyes, Cheng Shi experienced a moment of disorientation.

He thought he had been resurrected — and the only being capable of resurrecting someone when the era had ended and the world had collapsed was... the Creator, seated high above in the Real Universe. There seemed to be no other possibility.

In that instant, Cheng Shi was both shocked and elated.

Shocked that the Origin had actually descended. Elated because — if He had truly come — then the Outer God's scheme had nowhere to hide, and Fate had truly stumbled into a detour!

But when his five senses returned in full and he opened his eyes to find himself not in the Void or the Real Universe, but on the rooftop of the Rest Area, Cheng Shi froze.

He looked at his hands. No more scalding flames. He touched his eyes. No more boiling blood...

His entire body trembled. Eyes wide with disbelief, his shaking hands reached for his mouth — and then he felt it: a startled, bewildered little twitch that he hadn't initiated.

The Fool's Lips were back!

They weren't dead!

Then everything before...

Cheng Shi's mind exploded. He staggered back two steps and dropped onto the ground, his lips moving for ages without producing a single word.

Only when he slowly accepted that all that despair had been nothing more than a trial — only when he slowly digested the memories he had never truly lost — did he finally recover. With a resounding "thud," he collapsed backward onto the rooftop, stared up at the sun hanging high in the sky with vacant eyes, felt the warmth of sunlight and the temperature of the living world, and cried.

This was absolutely not out of emotion — anyone who stares at the sun will cry!

Two lines of tears fell. Cheng Shi smiled through them, then doubled over pounding the ground, then erupted into something resembling delirium.

He leaped up from the ground, yanked the mask out of his coat, and smashed it against the floor. Not satisfied, he stomped on it viciously and jabbed a finger at it, cursing:

"Screw you!"

Where one leads the charge, another follows.

"Screw you!"

When the Fool's Lips — for once — were on the same side as him, especially when it came to cursing the Fun God, Cheng Shi felt every pore on his body open in bliss.

This was the feeling!

Without the slightest hesitation, he pulled out the Tongue of Eating Lies, the Secret Peeping Ear, and even popped out the Eyes of Mockery — dumping them all on the ground, just to hear those few words:

"Screw you!" x3.

Hm?

Wait, that wasn't right.

The tongue, ear, and eyes were three separate entities — but the eyes came in a pair. Why were there only three voices?

Realizing something was off, Cheng Shi and the gang immediately turned their gazes toward the "traitor" among them — the Secret Peeping Ear.

The Secret Peeping Ear was silent for a moment, then murmured:

"While the mask is His token, in your hands it represents Fate.

If you want to curse someone, you should really be cursing at the dice...

Otherwise, knowing His personality, all those greetings you just sent to the Origin will get forwarded to Fate instead."

The Tongue of Eating Lies instantly froze mid-wriggle in its post-resurrection revenge squirming. It said stiffly: "What does the Origin have to do with anything?"

Both Eyes of Mockery spoke in unison: "Idiot. Deceit's mother is obviously the Origin."

"..."

Cheng Shi's head was buzzing.

In that moment, he felt as though the trial rewards — the Clown Nose and the Clown Setting Mirror — had materialized before him, invisible, and the mirror was reflecting a classic clown right back at him.

His face twitched uncontrollably. He pulled out the Dice of Fate and stared at it blankly for a long while, then laughed in self-mockery, dropped the die on the ground, and snarled through gritted teeth:

"Bitch. Everything in Void is a bitch!"

The Fool's Lips followed up instantly:

"Bitch. Everything in Void is a bitch!"

Cheng Shi laughed — then grew suspicious: "Brother Mouth, the whole era-ending apocalypse in the trial didn't scare you into becoming a parrot, did it?"

The Fool's Lips blinked in confusion, then reverted to their true nature:

"Moron."

"..."

Cheng Shi blinked. There it was. That felt right.

That was Brother Mouth! Perfect.

He stopped paying attention to the chattering gang on the ground and walked to the edge of the rooftop, beginning to think about the meaning behind this unthinkable and spine-chilling Trial of Deceit.

Clearly, the experience that players had accumulated over time was correct: the hints in a Deceit trial — even the title itself — could not be trusted. Not a single word.

Curtain Call Performance?

Bah!

This was never a curtain call. It was a full-blown circus act!

And the clown hadn't been just him — every living being in the universe had been made an actor on that stage!

But the stage had been too real. The crushing despair, the searing Authority, Fate's cruelty, the Pact's response... Could all of it really have been nothing more than an illusion?

Or had it all already happened once, and he had simply lived through another time reset?!

Time?!

No, no, no — the trial-complete notification made it clear that the timeline had advanced past the Deceit trial. The Pact's rules were still processing the settlement, which meant the experience had been a trial — unrelated to present reality.

It was definitely not a reset. It was more like... a projection?

Time wasn't the savior — Time was the accomplice?

Cheng Shi faltered. The words nearly slipped out: "I think Time is also a..." He caught himself. "Ahem."

Until he was sure, he would still guard his devotion.

But "unrelated to reality" did not mean the Outer God didn't exist. The current state of Void still needed to be reassessed. But before that, Cheng Shi had to confirm one thing first — something that made his blood run cold and his scalp tingle just thinking about it:

'Am I truly the real me?'

'Is the current me someone who has just finished a shocking trial — or am I nothing more than a fragment of memory living inside some broken world?'

'Or... have memories from another world contaminated this one, causing me to inherit a different Cheng Shi's past...'

If all cause and effect were confined beneath this starry sky, Cheng Shi would never have had to think this deeply.

But after personally experiencing the realities of the Real Universe, he had no choice but to ponder — in a world where anything was possible — whether "I" was still truly "me."

Cheng Shi stood at the rooftop's edge, gazing into the distance, his expression a complicated mess as he murmured:

"Brother Mouth — are we... still us?"

The Fool's Lips felt the turmoil of emotions within Cheng Shi. It retracted its hostility and hummed softly:

"No matter what's happened to you and me — at the very least, His aura hasn't changed.

He's not dead. I have a Benefactor again."

"..." Cheng Shi froze, then suddenly smiled. "Yeah — your Benefactor's come back. I hope my Fear Faction... comes back too."

Chapter 1314: Disappointment and Lost Memories

Reality. An unnamed barren mountain in an unknown province.

The mountain was already a shadow of its former self. The once-sparse woodland had rotted entirely to deadwood, and everywhere you looked, decay stretched as far as the eye could see.

Yet amid the sea of yellowed ruin, a pair of legs — so pale they practically glowed — were propped up on an enormous tree stump, swinging back and forth in an easy rhythm.

Wispy, blue-tipped ends of cropped hair fluttered in the breeze. A dagger flickered between nimble fingers, spinning with a soft metallic hum.

The scene would have been the very picture of serene leisure — were it not for the "stump" standing nearby, fuming in silence.

Unfortunately, the one who had ruined the aesthetic saw no guilt in it. After all, the "stump" belonged here — while that splash of color was clearly the interloper!

'Outsiders truly are the worst!'

But if the outsider happened to be carrying an oral decree from the lord... well, waiting a little was acceptable.

Indeed, the figure absentmindedly flipping the dagger was none other than Poison. This Chosen of Corruption, stripped of all desire, was currently squatting on someone else's territory with nothing to do.

And the one standing silently beside her was Qu Yan.

True to his name — enduring without a word.

After the Special Trial ended, Poison had come here. This was not her first visit. Ever since both she and Bianse Long had found a second faith under Lord Yu Xi, they had "naturally and instinctively" formed a subtle alliance.

Poison thought of it as weak players huddling together for warmth. Qu Yan considered it subordinates banding together — the only way to serve Lord Yu Xi better and please the gods.

So when Poison said she had once again encountered Lord Yu Xi and brought back an oral decree, Qu Yan fell silent.

This was not a sign of resistance — he simply followed Silence, after all.

One look at those burning eyes made it clear his heart was anything but calm. He was dying to know what Lord Yu Xi had said. But Poison refused to speak, content to sit on this mountainside and let her mind drift empty.

Only when the sun sank below the horizon and the mountain wind turned cold did she finally put the dagger away and smile at Qu Yan:

"I told the lord a big secret, and as a reward, he handed you — his little chameleon — over to me as a subordinate."

Before the words had settled, Poison launched herself into the air. The dagger between her fingers flashed silver, deflecting a withered vine-thorn arrow, before she backflipped and landed firmly on the carpet of rotting leaves, her voice dripping with amusement:

"What's the matter, chameleon? Staging a mutiny?"

Qu Yan's expression darkened. He stopped paying attention to her.

He knew Lord Yu Xi would never make such a decision. He might not understand Yu Xi, but he understood himself.

A "nobody" player like him would probably never be mentioned by the lord unless they happened to run into each other — which explained why no new assignments had come his way in so long.

He knew Poison was lying. But he could not help feeling hopeful — after all, who could resist following a god in this game?

Sadly, the moment Poison uttered those words, his hope crumbled. He put away his bow and arrows, sat cross-legged on the ground, and closed his eyes.

Seeing her entertainment dry up, Poison sighed, her expression complicated. She dropped down beside Qu Yan, shaking her head:

"The lust for power... what does it even taste like?"

I wasn't lying about one thing — I really did see the lord. And I did tell him a secret.

Drasilco is dead. He took my desires with him before he went. Right now I'm like you — a 'silent' follower with no idea how to 'express' herself."

Qu Yan showed no reaction. It appeared he had never heard of Drasilco.

Finding no common ground, Poison sighed again and gazed into the distance, murmuring:

"Sometimes I envy people like you. You know nothing, and yet a single goal — getting stronger — is enough to keep you going.

But what's the point of trying harder? In the end, don't we all just die in some muddled era finale?"

If I told you this world lost its hope long ago, that everything you see is nothing but a wedding dress woven for someone else, that the gods are fighting over nothing more than a grand farce — would you still think your life, your game, has any meaning?"

"..."

Qu Yan offered no response.

Poison hadn't expected one. She did not know what she was doing, nor what she was supposed to do. She was simply following her instincts, trying to keep playing the role of her former self.

Seeing that dusk had fallen, she stood, brushed off the dust, and left without a word.

After Poison's figure disappeared, Qu Yan raised an eyebrow and pulled a pair of earplugs from his ears.

That's right — he had not heard a word of her later speech. The moment Poison had tricked him the first time, he stopped wanting to hear another lie from that "venomous woman."

'As expected — the prettier the woman, the less trustworthy.'

'Good thing I didn't listen.'

...

The Void. A gap in the rules. Beyond the world.

When a flaming great sword shattered the tranquility of this place, the flickering light and shadow illuminated a face shrouded in ambiguity.

"Grand Marshal" Hu Wei.

This was his first time returning here since discovering this location!

And the reason was simple — he had noticed that the Wooden Bell linking him to Wei Mu had vanished.

As a player whose greatest asset was his vast network of connections, Hu Wei placed enormous value on every line of communication with his "friends" — especially the Chosen Ones. So when he discovered the Wooden Bell was gone, he instinctively sensed that something had happened.

Yet when he reviewed the entire trial, he found nothing abnormal. No teammate had approached him.

Though the whole trial had been orchestrated by Deceit's pawns, he was certain he had stayed lucid throughout and had never once used the Wooden Bell. So how had it disappeared?

Could Wei Mu have rigged the bell when he first gave it to him — setting it to vanish automatically over time?

Did Wei Mu not want any connection to him?

No, that didn't make sense.

If this place was truly, as Wei Mu had described, a rule loophole independent of the world, then its significance was enormous. No matter how brilliant Wei Mu was, he could not afford to pass up a collaborator — and Hu Wei was the ideal choice. Wei Mu would understand that.

So how had the bell gone missing?

Unable to find an answer, Hu Wei risked returning here after the trial. He wanted to search for secrets he might have missed, or memories he might have lost.

But before he could even begin exploring, a familiar figure appeared beneath the distant starry sky.

Wei Mu!

The puppet had arrived at almost the same moment he did!

The instant he saw Wei Mu, Hu Wei felt disoriented. He couldn't help wondering — had he forgotten ringing the bell himself?

But when he saw the same confusion reflected in the puppet's eyes, his pupils contracted. He knew for certain that something significant had happened!

The puppet drifted slowly to the Grand Marshal's side. His very first words cut straight to the reason for Hu Wei's presence.

"Lost the bell?"

Hu Wei's expression shifted, then he sighed, unsurprised: "Yes. I take it you've already guessed what happened?"

Wei Mu, for once, shook his head:

"Strange. I have this overwhelming feeling that I experienced a once-in-a-lifetime foolish act, and yet I have no memory of it whatsoever.

I suspected Memory's meddling. But when I found that the Wooden Bell for summoning Folly had also vanished, I ruled that out.

Memory might be able to tamper with mortals, but He cannot touch Folly.

Folly may be powerless in many ways, but He would never be bound by Existence.

However, not all of Existence belongs to this starry sky. So I followed my instinctive unease and came here, hoping to check whether the time in this place had shifted — whether the synchronization between inside and outside was no longer aligned.

But now none of that matters. Seeing you here tells me that something we don't know about has indeed changed in this world.

So talk, Grand Marshal. What have you been through recently? The timing is too precise — I suspect the Special Trial is the key."

Hu Wei listened intently, struggling to keep up with Wei Mu's leaping logic. In the end, he gave up trying to think and simply focused on answering the question.

"An unremarkable yet not entirely ordinary Trial of Deceit. The ending was unexpected, but somehow inevitable..."

"A Trial of Deceit?" The puppet blinked, then gave a slight nod. "It seems He's gone and told another heaven-deceiving lie — fooling the world once again..."

Chapter 1315: Triumph and Recovered Memories

Reality. A Daoist temple in an unknown province.

Peak players — no, peak con artists, rather — all had their quirks. Take Zhen Xin, who had a sister running around causing chaos everywhere yet insisted on keeping the Museum spotless. Or Long Jing, who constantly dreamed of taking the stage yet never once stepped onto it in the Rest Area. Or Li Jingming, whose temple appeared to have thriving incense traffic yet never opened its doors to any pilgrim besides Memory devotees...

But today, the Dragon King had "broken his vow." Cloud Field Temple had a visitor.

On the wooden table before the main hall sat two cups of tea — one brimming, one drained dry.

Every time Li Jingming poured himself a cup, the impolite guest across from him would reach over, steal a pour from his tea bowl, and top off his own cup.

The Dragon King was helpless. The guest was having the time of his life.

Only when the pot ran dry did the guest pat his round belly and remark: "Mediocre flavor."

"..."

Li Jingming said nothing. He picked up the teapot to go refill it, but the guest across from him waved frantically:

"Don't bother, don't bother! I couldn't drink another drop. Let's talk business.

That thing I mentioned last time — my plan to infiltrate the Jie Shu Organization — there's been a change."

Long Jing. That's right — the Dragon King's guest was Long Jing!

Riding high after clearing the trial, Long Jing knew there was a bomb buried on the road ahead, waiting for him. Rather than let himself become the Joker's clown yet again, it was better to bring things into the open himself — reframe an accident as part of his plan, and at least salvage some dignity.

As for what that "accident" was — naturally, it was getting caught by Cheng Shi and Zhen Xin during the trial while impersonating Su Yida.

Seeing his one-man show about to become an ensemble cast, Long Jing was far from happy. But being unhappy wouldn't help — he could hardly admit those two jinxes had beaten the truth out of him.

So Long Jing tweaked the story slightly and presented his "plan."

"Jie Shu is a smart man. The more I thought about it, the more I realized going in alone was risky. So when I ran into those two tricksters during the trial, I figured I'd bring them along to broaden their horizons.

That's when I came up with a new plan: the Joker Encirclement!

I'll play Su Yida. Cheng Shi plays Mo Shu. Zhen Xin plays Zhao Xishi. The three of us surround Jie Shu.

That way, everyone around Jie Shu is one of ours, and his secrets become the Joker's secrets.

But here's the thing... Dragon King, you know how it is. To play a role well, you need to understand the role. I have a solid grasp of Su Yida, but Cheng Shi's understanding of Mo Shu and Zhen Xin's understanding of Zhao Xishi is still a bit lacking.

Don't let the fact that they've had conflicts fool you — the whole 'enemies know each other best' thing is true enough, but what they know is all surface-level. Jie Shu's sharpest skill is reading people, and if the details slip — the show falls apart.

So I came here to get some Memory items for those two."

Li Jingming looked mildly surprised, then said thoughtfully:

"Cheng Shi is back? And Zhen Xin knows too?"

Long Jing's teeth itched with frustration, but he forced himself to act as though he were vouching for the two jinxes.

"That's right. My plan needs some cover. Their trickery is a notch below mine, but they're serviceable enough."

Li Jingming nodded: "Then doesn't that mean I no longer have to work exclusively with you?"

"???"

Long Jing was floored. He blinked rapidly, utterly blindsided by this Dragon King's true colors.

'We've both got "Dragon" in our names — how can you betray the family?!

He panicked: "I designed this plan! I was the one who shared the intel with you first! And now you want to burn the bridge after crossing it?!"

Li Jingming chuckled softly:

"Not burning bridges — renegotiating terms.

You're asking for too much. That's unreasonable in a buyer's market.

Also, stay away from the Fate Weaver. Don't let him infect you with his bad habits."

"..."

On that last point, Long Jing agreed.

'Cheng Shi, that greedy bastard. Squeezing the Dragon King is one thing, but now he wants to lay his hands on my President Gong's assets too?'

He was seething, but he had no leverage. All he could manage was a surly mutter:

"Those two tricksters won't be as honest as me. If you actually go to them, you won't just get scammed — you'll get fleeced... conned out of a pile of items. Think that's really a good deal?"

Li Jingming shook his head with a laugh: "I don't trust any trickster. Memories are best committed to memory in person."

"Huh?" Long Jing straightened up, startled. "What are you going to do? Buy my Su Yida identity?"

Li Jingming laughed heartily:

"No, no, no!

I'm interested in Su Yida, but only his relationship with Jie Shu — not his identity.

I believe your plan has a hole in it. And I can help you patch it."

Long Jing frowned: "A hole? What hole?"

"You!"

Li Jingming shifted the teapot's spout until it pointed at Long Jing.

"You are the biggest hole.

Followers of Folly can infer many things from a single detail. The moment Jie Shu learns that Su Yida went through a trial involving identity verification, he'll suspect that Su Yida's identity has been compromised.

Once the seed of doubt is planted, no matter how well you perform, you'll always be the biggest weakness."

Long Jing's face fell. Li Jingming continued:

"That's why I said you're the biggest flaw.

But the fix is simple. Jie Shu already knows you've had your eye on his organization. So the best way to clear your name is for you — Long Jing — to also join that organization!

When Long Jing and Su Yida appear together, no one will ever suspect Su Yida's identity again."

Long Jing slammed his palm on the table and jabbed a finger at Li Jingming:

"You said you didn't want Su Yida's identity!

I see — now that those two are involved, you can't hold back either? Dragon King, oh Dragon King — I had you all wrong.

I will absolutely never sell you Su Yida's identity!"

Long Jing spoke with iron resolve and made as if to leave. But Li Jingming sat still as a stone, not saying a word.

Long Jing's stride faltered. His face reddened with embarrassment. Seeing that the other man wouldn't budge, he cleared his throat pointedly: "Ahem... I'm leaving?"

"I won't see you out."

"!!!"

Long Jing's face crumbled. Flushed with humiliation, he spun around, dropped back into his seat at the tea table, and growled: "I want a higher fee."

Li Jingming smiled: "I'm not buying Su Yida's identity. On the contrary — I'll even compensate you."

"?"

'There's a deal like that?'

Long Jing's face lit up for one second — then collapsed again, because he had already guessed what Li Jingming was after.

If Su Yida needed to appear alongside Long Jing, and Li Jingming didn't want to play Su Yida, then the answer was obvious:

He wanted to play Long Jing!

'Son of a — the Dragon King wants to impersonate me again?!'

Seeing the realization dawn on Long Jing's face, Li Jingming chuckled: "I'll go and commit the memories to mind personally. In exchange, I'll use items at my disposal to purchase a temporary ID credential for President Gong. How does that trade sound?"

"..." Long Jing's face was awash with disgust. He looked the Dragon King up and down. "Can you even pull it off?"

Li Jingming gave a faint smile, his gaze drifting past the main hall toward the mountains of folded scrolls piled in the storeroom:

"Don't worry. I remember everything."

"..."

Long Jing fell silent. After a long pause, he nodded.

Chapter 1316: Reunion and Reunion

Reality. A cemetery in an unknown province.

Night had fallen. A scattering of feeble stars dimly lit the sky. Not a single flame burned in the sprawling cemetery. The silence was absolute.

In the pitch darkness, sixteen great tombs could be faintly discerned, arranged in a row at the cemetery's heart.

Life, Descent, Civilization, Chaos, Existence, Void... All but the fourth tombstone — which bore no name — had the Divine Names of the gods carved upon them.

Zhang Jizu had fulfilled his "wish." He had buried the gods here.

But!

This Zhang Jizu was not that Zhang Jizu. Though the cemetery also belonged to a "Zhang," it was not the Zhang from Cheng Shi's world.

Yet the figure standing silently in the cemetery, mourning in the dark, was indeed the Mi Laozhang from Cheng Shi's world.

He stood before a newly erected tombstone. It rose in the shadow of the Death tombstone, its engravings identical in every detail — only slightly smaller, as if it were the grave of Death's successor...

A friend newly buried. A gravedigger in grief.

Zhang Jizu stood before that tombstone for a very long time — so long that even the few remaining stars in the night sky began to dim — before he finally walked away without a word. He followed the path between the tombstones until he reached another tombstone — this one shattered — and stopped again.

This broken tombstone lay in the shadow of the Deceit tombstone. Freshly destroyed today, its rubble still scattered across the ground, not yet cleaned up.

Zhang Jizu had no intention of cleaning it. This was not his cemetery. He had no authority to act.

The cemetery's true owner hadn't come to clean it either — not because he didn't care, but because he was now buried in that smaller Death grave.

That's right. This world's Zhang Jizu was dead.

Dead right before Zhang Jizu's eyes. Fallen in this very cemetery.

The sight had shattered Zhang Jizu's composure. He remembered that just hours ago, while the sunset still lingered, the two of them had been admiring the cemetery's masterwork in the evening glow. But as they walked, Death Zhang Jizu had led him to that smaller Death tombstone.

He had pointed at the grave and asked:

"What do you think?"

Our Benefactor's will once manifested as a colossal skull, and we were all the little skulls beneath His Bone Throne.

Now that He has fully embraced His own will and become a tombstone, isn't it only fair that I carve myself a matching smaller version?"

At the time, Zhang Jizu had blinked. He was internally noting that the colossal skull was vastly larger than the tiny skulls beneath the throne, yet the difference between these two tombstones was hardly significant at all.

But before he could say a word, the person beside him collapsed with a dull "thud."

Death's divine power erupted in a violent surge, crashing outward in every direction like an apocalyptic tide. In an instant, the cemetery's formations resonated with the power, blazing with light — and then, the very next second, everything went still. As if nothing had happened.

All that remained was a fresh grave, and another tombstone — now in pieces.

Zhang Jizu was stunned. He watched as the cemetery's power-driven formations buried Death Zhang Jizu's body in the grave. His mind buzzed endlessly. Only when the tombstone settled back into place did he react — another version of himself had just... died?

Died?!

In a world where every god had already perished — who could silently kill a god?!

He was a gravekeeper, just like himself — but he was also Death!

A true god wielding the Authority of Death, dying in his own cemetery, right before his own tombstone!

The horrifying scene completely destroyed Zhang Jizu's legendary composure. He scrambled backward, putting distance between himself and the grave, breathing in ragged gasps, terror and confusion fighting for dominance. But before long, his breathing from within the tall grass grew quieter — because he had suddenly understood the cause of death.

Zhang Jizu's body convulsed. He squeezed his eyes shut, unable to believe it.

Substituted death!

Death had not been killed. He had died in someone else's place!

Among the talents granted by Death, this ability did exist. After all, choosing which offerings to accept was the prerogative of the true god Death. But for whom would He substitute His death?

The answer was simple. Obvious.

Cheng Shi.

This world's Cheng Shi!

In that instant, Zhang Jizu suddenly realized that Death Zhang Jizu had foreshadowed His own death long ago. He had once said:

"It's alright. The debts can always be repaid. He can do it. You can do it. I... can too."

Yes — he himself was atoning, having been used by Deceit and having wronged the Joker. The Cheng Shi who had brought the "answer" back from the Real Universe and plunged the world into destruction was also atoning. And the other world's version of himself — that Death Zhang Jizu — did he not also need to atone?

He did. That was why He had said "I can too."

He had known that when the opportunity came, Deceit Cheng Shi would surely go to atone. So He had long ago bound His own life to the other's.

The moment Deceit Cheng Shi died, Death Zhang Jizu chose to die in his place.

He traded His own life to bring Cheng Shi's life back once more!

He atoned for His guilt by returning to Death's embrace — but left behind a deep and lasting shock for the Zhang Jizu from another world.

Zhang Jizu's eyes narrowed to slits, his expression gravely solemn.

If even Deceit Cheng Shi was dead... was there any chance the original world's Cheng Shi was still alive?

Had the world-saving plan failed?

No!

He didn't know. He dared not think. He dared not guess.

All he knew was that he had to go back — back to that world — to confirm whether it was safe, whether the Jokers were safe, whether Cheng Shi was safe.

...

The Real Universe. Location unknown.

Two drifting figures suddenly sensed something. They exchanged a glance and immediately rocketed toward a certain direction.

One of them clicked his tongue:

"See, I told you the stars were unusually bright today — flickering nonstop. Something good was bound to happen. Look — right on cue!

Cheng Fate, care to guess? Is it a fresh blossom or another poor bastard?"

Indeed — these two figures were the very same Cheng Deceit and Cheng Fate that Cheng Shi had once seen.

Cheng Fate's expression remained as cold as ever. He snorted: "Guessing is hope. Hope always leads to disappointment. So I don't guess."

"And that's why you're boring."

Cheng Deceit pouted and accelerated toward the source of the spacetime disturbance.

Before long, beneath an unfamiliar stretch of starry sky, they found a figure who alternated between sobbing and laughing. The instant they laid eyes on him, Cheng Deceit remarked with mild surprise:

"Deceit's divine power...

Looks like a poor bastard. But not the worst off — at least he can still feel Him. His will still flows through this one..."

Cheng Fate disagreed. He shook his head, a trace of pity crossing his face:

"No. He's unluckier than either of us.

Time heals pain, but the divine power he bears will keep the wound from ever scabbing over.

Another wretched soul. Come on — let's go meet him.

After all these years of wandering, it's about time we got promoted to 'Old Cheng Shi.'"

With that, Cheng Deceit and Cheng Fate slowly approached the figure.

But the figure was completely oblivious to their approach, still trapped in a daze of helpless bewilderment, wooden and rigid.

Only when Cheng Fate could bear it no longer and gently tapped his shoulder did the newcomer snap awake. He looked at the two versions of himself before him — startled, then hopeful, then heartbroken — and asked:

"Have you lost your homes too?"

Cheng Fate shed his coldness and managed a small smile: "The Real Universe is our home."

Cheng Deceit nodded vigorously and offered warm encouragement:

"Don't be so down! Look on the bright side — now that there's three of us, we can play cards tonight, yeah?"

Cheng Fate's eyebrow twitched with interest:

"Mahjong. It's more fun than cards.

Where's the other one?

Call them over. We're one short."

Chapter 1317: Endings and Endings

Reality. A museum in an unknown province.

Zhen Xin had woken up, but she hadn't moved.

She stared blankly at the mirror on the table — at her own reflection — feeling groggy, as though she had forgotten something.

Before long, a figure in a black gauze dress appeared in the museum. Zhen Xin heard the footsteps and looked up, only to be startled by the sight of the figure hiking up her skirt and sprinting toward her.

Zhen Xin was caught off guard. She rose to her feet:

"Ming Yu, what—huh?"

Before she could finish, the figure crashed into her in a desperate embrace, knocking her backward against the wall.

Feeling her best friend's tension and unease, Zhen Xin's gaze softened, though her brow furrowed tighter. She gently stroked An Mingyu's long hair and asked in a low voice:

"Ming Yu, you—"

An Mingyu straightened up, gripping Zhen Xin's shoulders so hard her knuckles turned white. Her face was deadly serious:

"Xin Xin — I can't lose you again!

I refuse to accept losing you again!"

The smile on Zhen Xin's face froze. She turned solemn in an instant:

"What happened?"

An Mingyu shook her head, confusion clouding her features.

"The instant the trial ended, I think I had a strange dream. I can't remember what it was about anymore — all I know is that I couldn't find you in it. No matter where I looked, you were gone.

I fought back, I struggled, but nothing worked. Fear consumed me, and then everything went dark.

When I woke up, all that remained was a pounding heart. I was afraid it might be a bad omen, so I ran over to check on you..."

Zhen Xin studied her friend, who was clearly holding something back, and pressed her lips together. She chose not to call out the "lie."

An Mingyu was lying, yes — but it wasn't a deceitful lie. She was simply omitting certain details.

Before coming to find Zhen Xin, her fear of the darkness in that dream had been so overpowering that she "broke her vow" and cast a prophecy about the future.

She had made this prophecy once before — asking Fate whether the world would collapse.

Back then, Fate had answered with seventeen max rolls, and the Destined Ones' conference had just begun. Cheng Shi had told her it was the max-roll result of Oblivion's attempt to destroy the world, and that it had already passed.

But today's inexplicable dream had dredged up that old prophecy. She performed it again — and this time Fate's answer was...

Seventeen ones!

The world would not collapse!

This should have been good news — cause for celebration. But the diametrically opposite results left An Mingyu at a loss.

The world was not simply black and white. Neither was Fate — it wasn't only fortune and misfortune. So why would an identical prophecy produce two results so extreme and so completely opposite?

An Mingyu was bewildered. The more she tried to understand Fate, the less she did. She desperately wanted to ask the one person who truly understood Fate what this prophecy meant — but that person had yet to return...

And so she had come here first.

Both friends were sharp enough and clever enough. The moment they noticed something off about each other, they simultaneously realized that something must have happened — they had missed something monumental enough to affect the entire universe.

Zhen Xin's brow furrowed. The first name on her lips was:

"Cheng Shi."

Whatever had transpired in the universe, this Fate Weaver under the Void's watchful gaze would surely know something. Rather than sit here and speculate, it was better to go ask him directly.

An Mingyu blinked: "He's back?"

Zhen Xin nodded and recounted to her friend everything that had happened during the recent Special Trial.

It had been a trial that could not be called spectacular, yet was steeped in the essence of Deceit. With the players' help, the story within the trial had finally reached its conclusion.

That conclusion might not have satisfied everyone — but at least every participant had done justice to their own curtain-call performance.

After hearing it all, An Mingyu felt there was a deeper meaning to the trial's story, but she couldn't put her finger on it. She stopped overthinking and nodded:

"Since he's back, I suppose the Destined Ones will need to meet again. I wonder what he found in the Real Universe. Is he alright?"

Zhen Xin smiled:

"He seemed fine. But I think that before your group meets, he's probably already waiting for us there."

Ming Yu — want to come with me? Save some time."

An Mingyu paused, then shook her head: "I'd better not. I'm not a Joker, and I don't understand Deceit. Go ahead — ask him what he saw in the Real Universe. If Void really is our enemy, find out whether this world still has any new hope..."

Zhen Xin's eyes drifted to An Mingyu's hand and noticed several dice clutched in her palm. She quickly looked away, said nothing about it, and simply smiled:

"Wait for me."

As she spoke, Zhen Xin flicked out a poker card inscribed with ritual symbols, opened a door to the Joker Gathering Place beside her, waved at her friend, and stepped through.

After Zhen Xin vanished, An Mingyu opened her palm and stared at the dice — each showing a one. Her mind churned.

...

The Joker Gathering Place.

Just as Zhen Xin had predicted, when she arrived at the cluster of tombstones, Cheng Shi was already there.

The Fate Weaver stood motionless before the Death tombstone, head bowed, his face half-hidden in shadow, murmuring something under his breath.

In truth, the moment Cheng Shi realized the False Curtain Call had been nothing but a trial, his thoughts had turned to Mi Laozhang and the other world's version of himself. He needed to know whether the exchange between those two had been real.

He had rushed to the Cemetery — only to find no trace of Mi Laozhang. His attempts to make contact went unanswered. That was when he knew for certain: Mi Laozhang had truly left this world.

There was, after all, a crack in the Fun God's False Curtain Call. No matter how freely He scrawled the script, a trial was still a story told beneath this starry sky. The moment an individual left this starry sky, they naturally fell beyond the trial's reach.

And that was why Mi Laozhang had been genuinely swapped to another world.

From this, two things could be confirmed:

First — the False Curtain Call had truly occurred. Though the timeline had skipped past the tragedy, it was not truly "false."

Second — the other world's Cheng Shi might not be dead. Since everything was a script, the Fun God should not have actually killed another clown.

But these were all guesses. Cheng Shi did not even know how the trial — of which he had zero memory — had actually ended. So he had come to the Joker Gathering Place.

He knew someone would come looking for him.

Sure enough, it wasn't long before that person arrived.

When Cheng Shi sensed someone behind him, he spoke without turning around:

"Thank you."

Zhen Xin, finding the mood too heavy, let her eyes wander and said in an imitation of Cheng Shi's voice: "Verbal thanks aren't very sincere. How about something tangible?"

Cheng Shi chuckled softly. By the time he turned, the heaviness had lifted from his face, replaced by a crooked, teasing smile:

"That 'thank you' was for Mi Laozhang. What does it have to do with you?"

Zhen Xin folded her arms and stood firm, seeing through his lie. She shook her head:

"Some people may be called Cheng Shi, yet they are never honest.

But it's fine — I'm collecting on Mi Laozhang's behalf."

"..."

Cheng Shi froze for a moment, then burst into laughter.

'How wonderful. This is what it feels like to be alive. This is what a living Joker looks like!'

But the fact that Zhen Xin's first instinct was to tease rather than express shock or confusion meant she had already forgotten everything about the era's end in the trial.

As expected — not everyone had retained the true memories.

Cheng Shi's brow creased slightly. He looked at Zhen Xin and said, sincerely this time, "Thank you." Then, in a grave tone:

"Miss Magician — the questions I'm about to ask may sound unthinkable, but I need to ask them:

What exactly happened inside the trial?

Please recount every detail of the story you remember."

The moment she heard this, Zhen Xin's pupils contracted sharply. Her first thought was: 'Who is the Cheng Shi standing in front of me?'

But an instant later she realized Cheng Shi was Cheng Shi. The problem was more likely herself!

That nagging sense of emptiness, Ming Yu's racing heart — both seemed to suggest that something enormous had occurred during the trial. And yet she remembered nothing of it. And Cheng Shi had lost all his memories of the trial entirely?

No — judging by his reaction, he hadn't forgotten anything. He seemed to have remembered something. Was she the one who had lost her memories?

But she had been lucid from start to finish during that trial. How could she have amnesia?

Zhen Xin's expression slowly hardened. She thought for a moment, then asked, not entirely certain:

"Time — or Memory?"

Cheng Shi said darkly: "Probably both."

"Both?!" Zhen Xin's eyes went wide with disbelief. "Then is it Existence — or... the Origin?"

"Perhaps both as well."

Let's start with the trial, Miss Magician. What I have to tell you is probably nothing like what you're expecting."

Chapter 1318: The Rewritten Story

Zhen Xin steadied herself and recounted the trial from beginning to end.

The first half matched Cheng Shi's memory perfectly. The altered portion began after Zhen Xin and Hu Wei traveled together to the Kurd Imperial City.

Inside the imperial city, they found the Morning Joy Circus's Ringmaster, Madame Freud — and the body of the clown Masford. They confirmed that Masford's death was undeniably connected to Madame Freud!

"Masford was smothered to death by Freud!"

"What?!"

Cheng Shi was stunned. This was a twist he could never have imagined.

Zhen Xin's expression was grim as she continued:

"After parting ways with Lake at the tavern, Masford returned to the circus and happened to run into Freud, who had come looking for him.

The clown, emboldened by drink, poured out his admiration for Lake. He said a rival like that deserved his respect — even if he lost, he would have no regrets.

But Freud didn't see it that way. She didn't know what had happened — she only told Masford that no matter what, Morning Joy could not lose.

Yet Masford insisted: in a fair competition, anything was possible. If Lake truly devised the perfect clown act, then Morning Joy deserved to lose.

Perhaps the alcohol had magnified his emotions. Despite Freud's repeated reassurances that he would win, that rebellious streak — so like Freud's own — drove him to contradict her at every turn.

A fierce argument erupted between them. Masford declared that art was what mattered most. Morning Joy's victory should never rest on a single person!

That line was what shattered Freud's last hope. In that moment, she thought back on everything they had shared and decided that their entire past was worth less than a single evening of drunken honesty with a rival circus's clown.

And in that same moment, the desires buried deep within Madame Freud twisted beyond repair and exploded.

Don't forget — she was a member of the Extreme Desire Brotherhood.

Corruption influenced her at the peak of her emotional turmoil. Without a word, she helped the drunken Masford back to his tent, waited for him to fall asleep — and smothered the clown with her own hands!

Through tears, she said:

'Morning Joy's victory truly shouldn't depend on the clown alone. If so — then let the victory come a little easier.'

Afterward, Madame Freud staged the scene, pinned everything on Sunset's Ringmaster Fate, and then used the fabricated crime to lure the Sunset clown to Morning Joy for the final showdown."

The altered plot sent shockwaves through Cheng Shi. He refused to believe the Fun God had rewritten the ending without deeper meaning. His mind roared, his body went cold, and in that instant, he seemed to understand what had truly caused the despairing end-of-era he had lived through in the trial.

Corruption?!

Was the Fun God using this to tell him — to tell the world — that Corruption had influenced Him? That it had nearly led Him astray?!

Then what had pulled the path back from the brink?

Was it really Time?!

Noticing the shift in Cheng Shi's expression, Zhen Xin paused. Her face grew even more serious. "What exactly happened?"

"Something beyond what either of us expected. Until I can confirm it fully, I can't say what the truth is. Keep going — let me sort out the trial first."

Zhen Xin nodded and continued:

"After that, we brought Madame Freud back. Before ironclad evidence, she had no defense. When Lake learned the truth, he demanded to know why she had done this to him. Freud said nothing. And then..."

"What?" Cheng Shi felt his heart skip. Zhen Xin's pause made his skin crawl.

"She killed herself.

The methods of the Extreme Desire Brotherhood. She had hidden poison in her mouth. While everyone's attention was on Lake, she bit down — and took her own life."

"!!??"

Zhen Xin let out a deep sigh:

"But that was far from the end.

We concealed the deaths of Masford and Madame Freud, buried them, and escorted Lake back to Sunset. But when Ringmaster Fate heard the news that Lake had survived the explosion — a flicker of shock passed through his eyes.

No one caught that flash of something off. No one except you.

You saw the change in Fate. You told us things were far from simple. Then we restrained Fate — and pried out the secret.

Those shoes...

They hadn't been stolen by a spectator. They hadn't been found by Freud poking around. Fate had deliberately placed them in plain sight — for Freud to find!"

"What?!"

Cheng Shi was dumbfounded. He repeated it in disbelief: "Fate baited Freud with the shoes, then deliberately let Lake lose heart and let himself be lured to Morning Joy?"

Zhen Xin nodded: "Yes. That night, while checking on Lake, he stumbled upon the uninvited Freud and overheard her 'secret' with Lake. He understood this traitor who had broken away from Sunset, so after eavesdropping he devised a plan to win without lifting a finger!

What he hadn't counted on was that in the final days before the last showdown, Freud's plan would be exposed by us — and his own scheme would collapse with it."

"..."

The twist came so suddenly that Cheng Shi's brain crashed.

What was this? Fate had used Deceit's hand to bring about Fixed Destiny?

Granted, on the path of Fixed Destiny, Deceit had indeed contributed the most. But if every move the Fun God made — or the entire Fear Faction — had been under Fate's calculation all along, that was simply too outrageous!

Was this really the same Fate who championed Fixed Destiny and would sacrifice everything for it?

No wonder Deceit had said Fate was an even better liar than Himself.

Then again, whether the Fear Faction was truly the Fear Faction at this point was debatable. The current state of the Fun God and Fate was also unclear. In that false end-of-era, Cheng Shi still could not figure out why Fate had chosen to self-destruct.

If the Deceit trial's message was that Fate was the true mastermind behind everything — then how could this world's own Fate have dared to annihilate Himself at that crucial moment?

Had He orchestrated everything just to welcome His own Void?

That defied all logic.

Cheng Shi sank into thought. Zhen Xin continued:

"Lake, knowing everything now, was utterly heartbroken. He felt Kanrival and Sunset could no longer hold him.

So he tendered his resignation to the shattered Ringmaster Fate and left the land that had caused him such pain.

He believed this place was unworthy of art's highest temple. He wanted to go beyond the snowfields and find a pure land — a place free of conflict forever, where the circus would live on for all time.

And so, alone, he left Sunset, left Kurd, left the northern snow country, and headed south in search of a new home.

You personally saw him off. And we... attempted to 'reverse' the trial's ending according to the Fun God's 'hints.'

Faced with two circuses that had no natural conclusion, President Gong continued playing his Lake, and I played Morning Joy's Masford.

On the fifth day of the trial, the final showdown arrived as scheduled. President Gong — credit where it's due — was every bit the seasoned 'clown' of the stage... He won. The audience loved him, and Sunset's attendance far exceeded Morning Joy's.

He won Sunset a false tomorrow. And we earned ourselves a cleared Special Trial."

Zhen Xin had been watching Cheng Shi's eyes throughout. When she finished, she pressed her lips together:

"What are you thinking, Fate Weaver?"

Can you share what you know now?"

Chapter 1319: I Am Yu Xi, Again

"Call them all in. The Jokers probably need to hold another meeting."

Cheng Shi let out a long sigh.

The Fun God had chosen to "lay his cards on the table" this way — so Cheng Shi would do the same with the Jokers.

To earn the Jokers' full support, he couldn't keep hiding things from them. Besides, they had fought so desperately to save him during the Era's Curtain Call performance. That debt of gratitude had to be acknowledged.

The moment Zhen Xin heard those words, she knew something massive was coming. Last time, the Fate Weaver had pulled back the curtain on the Real Universe — this time, what earth-shattering secret would follow?

She nodded and quickly went to gather all the Jokers. The special trial had just ended, so everyone was easy to reach — except for... Zhang Jizu.

When the Jokers had all assembled with one Gravekeeper conspicuously absent, Cheng Shi — standing before the [Death] tombstone — didn't wait. He opened the meeting immediately.

Everyone exchanged confused glances. Long Jing raised an eyebrow at the tombstone, muttering thoughtfully:

"Gravekeeper couldn't make it?"

Cheng Shi smiled and nodded. "Yeah. He's off handling something life-or-death. But don't worry — he'll come back safe."

Everyone present was sharp enough to read between the lines. Though Cheng Shi's tone was breezy, his eyes kept drifting away, unable to meet their gazes directly — and that told them Zhang Jizu's absence was anything but simple.

Thinking back to Cheng Shi's total amnesia regarding the recent trial and the grave weight he'd carried ever since, Zhen Xin felt a vague suspicion begin to take shape in her mind.

The small prelude quickly passed, and Cheng Shi wasted no more time. He cut straight to the heart of things, sharing with them the despair he had just lived through.

He said:

"Just moments ago, the world took a wrong turn.

In what I will temporarily call a 'simulation' — a false Era's Curtain Call — the world was destroyed.

You didn't notice because certain divine beings erased all your memories.

And this wasn't the first time your memories were wiped. There was one world reset before this as well, and none of you retained that either..."

"...?!"

Cheng Shi's opening words landed like a bomb, detonating in the already-restless hearts of every Joker present.

Every pair of eyes that turned toward him was blank and bewildered. Collectively, they were all thinking the same thing: Fate Weaver, when you say "the world" — do you mean the one we're currently standing in?

Surely you're describing some dream world, right?

Because none of this matches our perception of reality at all.

When someone presents a so-called "fact" that contradicts everything everyone else knows — can it still be called a fact?

Under ordinary circumstances, no.

But it depends on who's saying it.

Said anywhere else, no one would believe it — people would just think they'd stumbled across another Meng Youfang with a uniquely bizarre brain.

But this was the Jokers — the one place where every impossibility had a chance of becoming possible. And the one saying it was none other than the Fate Weaver himself.

So every last one of them stood there, stunned, eyes wide and hungry, hanging on every word, waiting for Master Cheng to reveal the truth.

Professor Cheng's lecture was now in session.

Cheng Shi continued:

"Things this time are extremely complicated.

Honestly, seeing your reactions now only confirms that none of you remember what happened — well, perhaps one person does, but he..."

Cheng Shi turned his head slightly and glanced at the [Death] tombstone, his expression impossible to read.

Since old Zhang had swapped places with his counterpart from another world, it meant that everything in this world — whether the simulation or the reset — would no longer affect him.

He would remember it all. At least the final scene before the world ended.

But unfortunately, he wasn't here right now.

Cheng Shi paused, then continued:

"Forget it. Since he's not here, I won't talk about him.

During the last world reset, I cross-referenced my memories with others and confirmed beyond any doubt that those events truly happened.

But this time — up until now — it remains solely my 'delusion.'

I've confirmed this with the Mask fragments, but they shared my perspective, so they can't serve as independent verification.

So what exactly happened during that trial may only be settled once I've sought confirmation from the divine beings themselves. But I can't afford to wait — while my memories are still intact, I need to back them up first.

Help me think through what they were trying to express with this Curtain Call performance.

Whatever the answer, one thing is certain: our world is teetering on the edge of collapse..."

The conversation had turned heavy again, casting a shadow over every Joker's heart.

Perhaps Cheng Shi, having confronted despair firsthand, had built up some resistance to it. But the Jokers remembered nothing — they couldn't begin to grasp why, when the game was still ongoing and the universe still being explored, the world would already be on the verge of ruin.

"I know. Ever since the very first Joker Society meeting, you've all had your doubts about my identity. A mere player shouldn't have access to this many secrets — especially when I seem to know more than certain divine beings.

First, I owe everyone an apology. I lied to you.

These secrets were never told to me by Yu Xi. I knew them myself."

"!!!"

Everyone froze — and then something even more staggering arrived.

"Because I am Yu Xi!" Cheng Shi exhaled with a rueful sigh, and casually glanced over at Long Jing out of the corner of his eye.

"???"

That single glance shattered the composure of President Gong.

No way. Buddy. What?!

Though the world's return to normal at the end of the trial had erased President Gong's memory of that breakdown moment, Yu Xi had thoughtfully returned that memory to him — whether in the wrong path or the right one, there was always a clown getting emotionally wrecked and pressing forward.

And that wasn't limited to just one.

The moment Cheng Shi said the name "Yu Xi," the Doctor quietly retreated into the shadow of a nearby tombstone.

He couldn't face anyone right now.

Every single "Praise be to Yu Xi" he had uttered at Cheng Shi now came back to haunt him, and with each one, his toes curled a little tighter into the dirt.

He desperately wanted to turn and walk away — but his sincere devotion to Yu Xi kept pulling him back forward.

And so, caught in the struggle between pious faith and burning shame, the tombstone's shadow became like a steel saw, grinding back and forth across what little face he had left.

The other two had their reactions, but nothing nearly as intense as those two.

"I knew it was you all along!" Zhen Xin said — and yet she wasn't truly surprised. Or rather, she had this odd feeling, as if she'd already heard this confession once before.

That elusive sense of familiarity only deepened her certainty that Cheng Shi was right: they had absolutely forgotten something.

Li Jingming shook his head with a quiet laugh, as if something had just clicked into place.

"Should have seen it coming. This is so you.

So you fabricated an identity, then used that false identity's secret as a bargaining chip — trading it to others in exchange for their resources and intel?"

"!!!" Long Jing's fury flared even hotter at those words.

But President Gong wasn't angry because Cheng Shi had used this to deceive everyone — he was furious that he'd never thought of such a brilliant scheme himself!

Boldly impersonating Yu Xi was already the limit of his audacity, but inventing an Envoy out of thin air... what kind of unhinged genius had the nerve to pull something like that off?!

Even Zhen Yi had never gone that far!

Cheng Shi laughed too, shaking his head. "No — Yu Xi's identity isn't fabricated. He truly exists. And he truly is me."

"???"

The Jokers were all stunned.

President Gong's expression twisted again. "You actually became an Envoy?!"

Cheng Shi nodded. "That's right. It's a long and complicated story — you just need to know that I haven't deceived you."

As he spoke, Cheng Shi set the [Deceit] Container down in front of everyone.

"This. Is the proof."

Chapter 1320: Blood Exchange

Having lived through an entire false Curtain Call, Cheng Shi hadn't forgotten to revisit the insights he'd gained in the depths of despair.

It was painful — nearly equivalent to reliving that hopelessness all over again — but he did it anyway. In the brief window before Zhen Xin finished gathering the Jokers, he sorted through his thoughts and brought clarity to what had been chaos.

Fixed Destiny was no longer an abstract concept to him. It was a clearly visible dead end.

When [Void] first descended, it had arrived alongside [Fate] — and embedded within its will was a devout conviction to forge a divine throne for [Origin] as a sacrifice. That was Fixed Destiny.

[Deceit], on the other hand, had harbored a desire from the very moment of its descent to shatter that throne. Whatever the throne represented, it was a symbol of [Deceit]'s rebellion.

So [Deceit] had set its sights on [Fate]'s Fixed Destiny — and used the half-truth, half-fiction maneuver known as "Yu Xi" to draw Fixed Destiny into the Fear Faction's camp.

Though Cheng Shi held the [Deceit] Container, [Deceit] had never formally acknowledged him as its own. Every attitude the god had shown toward the Yu Xi identity was one of teasing mockery — consistent with its subtle manipulation of Fixed Destiny.

[Deceit] couldn't allow Fixed Destiny to be tainted by other faiths. Because if it were, even a drastic maneuver to stop [Fate] from building the throne might cause the world to lose its ending altogether.

In the trial [Deceit] had granted, Chen Xi and Xi Mu originally had no ending — it was the "reversal" hinted at through the Deceit trial that got players to patch together a conclusion for that false history.

This, without a doubt, proved that [Deceit] cared about this world. It didn't want the world to lose its future.

So Cheng Shi, in turn, could not expose everything. He could only follow the Fear Faction's intent and help conceal the Fun God's lies.

He also needed the Yu Xi identity for himself. With the full truth still untold, the identity of a divine being spoke louder than any words — it could make even unbelievable facts feel credible.

Of course, Cheng Shi hadn't forgotten the terrifying scene of [Deceit] ripping away its disguise to become the Outer God [Fate]. He wasn't certain that the current [Deceit] wasn't an Outer God — he only knew that since the Curtain Call was false, there had to be at least one divine being standing on his side.

So everything he was doing now wasn't truly for the Fear Faction's sake. It was for this world — and for himself.

He needed to borrow every power available to him and insert himself into the final chapter of [Void]'s fate.

He could not bear to watch the tragedy play out again. He refused to accept that his own future was just another plunge into despair. Like the Outer God [Fate] had said during the false Curtain Call — having failed once, I am now that much closer to success.

Cheng Shi wasn't sure if this was the purpose behind the Fun God granting him this trial, or whether it was [Deceit]'s guidance to him before [Void]'s final curtain fell. But he hoped it was.

Never before had his fear resonated so perfectly in sync with that of the truly terrified [Deceit].

"This is...?" someone murmured.

"A container." Cheng Shi turned the [Deceit] Container over in his hand. "The key to divinity — it gathers faith and distills it into godhood.

Every divine being carries one. They use it to 'produce' divinity. Divinity is never assembled from pieces — it drips down from the container. Which means every research direction the Tower of Logic has pursued over the centuries has been wrong.

And yet — not entirely wrong.

Because divine beings can't see [Origin]'s container, and don't know how its divinity condenses. So [Truth] had no choice but to let its followers run endless experiments, hoping to spark inspiration and find a path closer to [Origin].

Unfortunately, it died before it ever found one."

"Wait!" The Doctor jolted out of his stupor. He stepped out of the shadow, voice edged with shock. "Is [Truth] dead? Praise be to Yu Xi."

"..."

Cheng Shi blinked.

The question itself was fair enough — but following it immediately with "Praise be to Yu Xi" made it sound like the Doctor had been hoping his own patron god would die and that Cheng Shi was somehow the culprit.

[Truth] destroyed itself. What does that have to do with me?

Then again... it did, sort of, have a little to do with him.

Cheng Shi's expression went through several interesting phases before he nodded. "Correct. [Truth] is dead."

"Then who is [Truth] now? Praise be to Yu Xi."

"... [Deceit]. The Fun God has taken on the role of [Truth]."

"!!??"

The Doctor's eyes went wide. When the truth hit him — his world didn't shatter.

He had long since decided that [Deceit] was the real truth. He just hadn't imagined it would be quite this literal.

From this moment on, every confusion he'd ever felt about [Deceit] merged completely with his devotion to [Truth]. Combined with his heartfelt reverence for Yu Xi, he felt he had become the person on the [Deceit] path who understood [Truth] best.

So the Doctor spread his arms and cried out with genuine feeling:

"Praise be to Yu Xi!"

"..."

"..."

"..."

If none of those present had ever met Yu Xi, the Doctor's behavior could at most be written off as an eccentric player or a fanatical worshiper.

But the problem was — Yu Xi was Cheng Shi, and Cheng Shi was standing right in front of them. All Jokers stood on equal footing. When you kept endlessly chanting "Praise be to Yu Xi" like a sycophant, what was everyone else supposed to do with themselves?

Long Jing couldn't take it anymore. He pressed his hands over his ears. "Shifu, please stop. Can we all convert to [Silence] just for the next hour? Otherwise how is this meeting supposed to go?"

The Doctor seemed to realize he'd lost himself. He straightened, bowed solemnly, and stepped back. "You're right. My apologies. Praise be to Yu Xi."

"..."

Cheng Shi was also at a loss. He shook his head with a helpless laugh and continued:

"[Truth]'s death revealed to this world the true nature of the Real Universe — allowing the gods to glimpse the terrifying reality of the Creator. [War]... also died at the Creator's hands.

Unfortunately, [Time]'s reset caused many divine beings to forget those memories.

That was the first time I was referring to when I said your memories were wiped.

There may have been others, but since I don't remember them either, there's nothing I can say about them.

When a divine being dies within the Real Universe, their Authority is lost there. During my absence, I traveled to the Real Universe to recover the Authority that [War] left behind.

And now — I've brought it back."

"[War]'s Authority?!" Long Jing's voice cracked. He practically vibrated with the urge to feel a true god's Authority for himself — but the next second, Cheng Shi doused his excitement with a bucket of cold water.

"Don't get your hopes up. It's not on me. Qin Xin has it.

At this point, there are things I can no longer keep from you.

In this world, we are not the only ones carefully scrutinizing our relationship with the gods and quietly pushing back against them. Qin Xin is doing the same — and he's even built an organization around it."

Zhen Xin hadn't expected Cheng Shi to reveal the Torchbearers here, but she raised her brows and smoothly picked up the thread:

"The Torchbearers."

"Exactly. The Torchbearers." Cheng Shi nodded. "They carry the torch for this world, guard humanity's hope, and protect whatever each of their brothers and sisters holds dear.

They are the most trustworthy people in this world — and the ones most deserving of protection.

The Jokers... can't be judged in simple terms of good and bad. But when it comes to how we treat the Torchbearers, I only ask one thing:

Never extinguish another person's flame.

This world needs them. We need them too. If we want to stand against fate — against [Origin] — the support of divine beings is indispensable.

When the original gods can no longer be trusted, a new divine being can give us hope.

So one of our goals going forward is to ensure that Qin Xin ascends to the [War] throne.

Don't look at me like that. Relax. Trust me — it's not going to be difficult."

"..."

The Jokers went quiet.

In the art of deception, they could go toe-to-toe with anyone. When it came to maneuvering close to divine beings, each had their own hard-earned tricks. But pushing a human onto a divine throne...

Hold on. Was this the right room? Were they really still a player organization?

Since when had the Jokers become powerful enough to decide who sat on a divine throne?

Everyone felt like they must have missed ninety-nine Joker Society meetings — because last time they'd been discussing how to leverage a god's influence, and now they were talking about putting someone on a throne?

But Jokers were Jokers. After a brief stunned silence, a strange light flickered through every pair of eyes.

"If I'm guessing right," Zhen Xin said with a meaningful smile, "Qin Xin becoming a god is probably only the first step in the 'blood exchange'?"

Cheng Shi rubbed his chin. He liked that phrasing.

"Blood exchange..."

That's a good way to put it. The gods have held their thrones long enough. It's time for some fresh blood.

I trust that everyone present has at least some interest in their thrones?"