

The Gods 1341

Chapter 1341: A Schemer's Scheme: Deceiving All the Gods

And so, right under the Iron Law of [Order]'s nose, three clowns successfully rendezvoused.

Li Wufang, the only one present who hadn't been in on it, had never suspected that the "Cheng Shi" who followed him in to seek an audience with the Iron Law of [Order] was not Cheng Shi at all. Because the die he'd been holding wasn't Cheng Shi's — it was Zhen Xin's. Never Lost Gambling Gear and Elusive Chip were both talents, and a Magician's specialty was borrowing talents from others — especially when the other party cooperated willingly.

Having been through so much, Cheng Shi had long seen through the Iron Law of [Order]'s true nature. He knew that even if there was confusion, the Iron Law would never admit its [Chaos] identity. Having buried itself too deep into the role, it had completely forgotten the truth of being [Chaos]. Its only obsession now was to preserve the last thread of order in a world where order was steadily eroding — and its own existence, it believed, was the final order.

The Iron Law of [Order] would never believe a mortal's proof. In all likelihood, it wouldn't even bother looking at any memory produced by a [Memory] follower.

Presenting those memories wasn't Cheng Shi's attempt to prove the Iron Law's identity on the spot — it was to sharpen the conflict.

But as a precaution, he had made arrangements.

There were many ways to present memories. Cheng Shi had deliberately instructed Long Jing to manifest the so-called evidence in the most fragile form possible — as light bubbles. That way, when the evidence was transferred, the bubbles would be easily burst.

And given a god's pride and the Iron Law of [Order]'s deep resistance to having its identity questioned — once those bubbles were destroyed, it would certainly not ask a mortal for another copy of the evidence.

In this way, the tension between mortal and god over the identity question could be escalated to its maximum point.

And the ultimate purpose of escalating that tension was to drive the Iron Law of [Order] into an emotional trap. Whether irritation or fury — the goal was to make it boil over emotionally, its will destabilized, and through that, draw out the most fundamental [Chaos] will sleeping within it.

But that alone wasn't enough.

Mortals were still mortals. Even if they managed to get a seat at the table, the chips they held were still too few.

Something more had to be added to the emotional pressure — and that something was the three gods of the Fear Faction.

The appearance of [Death], [Silence], and [Time] was no accident. They were each aides Cheng Shi had gone and solicited one by one in separate audiences.

Of course, Zhen Xin — playing Cheng Shi — hadn't known any of this, and Cheng Shi hadn't told her. Only by keeping her in the dark could she project a convincing sense of pressure before the Iron Law of [Order] — the sense that "Cheng Shi" himself must be holding critical evidence capable of exposing its identity.

And for that reason, the arrival of the three divine beings further deepened the Iron Law of [Order]'s self-doubt.

The story began moving in the direction of the script Cheng Shi had personally written.

Aside from the small detour to the [Memory] Collection Hall, the plan proceeded with extraordinary precision. This wasn't only because Cheng Shi had fully grasped the [Order] lineage's nature and pushed steadiness to its limits — it was also because this script had a second author.

[Deceit].

Yes — [Deceit] had made its move. Just as Cheng Shi told Zhen Xin: it had been left with no choice.

Cheng Shi had used his Fixed Destiny identity as leverage, insisting on claiming an [Order] throne at this particular moment in time. Though this clashed with [Deceit]'s planned rhythm, it truly could not allow Fixed Destiny to absorb even the slightest risk right now.

So it entered the scheme. The first thing it did was make Zhen Xin's impersonation convincing to the entire universe.

No one noticed anything off about "Cheng Shi." Not even the three divine beings.

This was not only because [Deceit] excelled at deception — it was also because, when Cheng Shi requested help from the three gods, he and his patron completed an extraordinary act of silent coordination without a single word of exchange.

He didn't tell the three gods the full plan. He had presented Zhen Xin as himself during persuasion, maximally leveraging his Fixed Destiny identity to cash in on its prestige.

After that, he vanished from the universe's sight entirely — "archived" away by [Deceit].

When the three gods arrived, they simply assumed the "Cheng Shi" Zhen Xin was playing was the real Cheng Shi. Hence the scene that followed — [Death] furiously trying to block the Final Oracle, [Silence] descending only to be silenced in return.

Even [Time] only realized it had been deceived at the very last moment, when it heard the real Cheng Shi's prayer.

Two deceivers — one grand, one small — without exchanging a single word, had fooled the entire universe.

The second thing [Deceit] did, when [Chaos] returned, was to hand back everything it had stolen from [Chaos] — all of its divine authority — in full.

[Deceit] understood [Chaos] better than any other god. It had to — because otherwise it could never have pulled off the trick of making [Chaos] believe it was [Order].

Previously, [Deceit] had needed [Chaos]'s authority because there was a secret it had to hide from the entire universe. But now it no longer needed to hide it. And more importantly, it needed to resolve this upside-down identity crisis before the final plan could be executed.

It knew that this moment was a perfect opportunity to eliminate [Chaos]'s latent risk — so riding the momentum of Cheng Shi's operation, it began drawing in its own net.

And so, the moment [Chaos] tried to issue a Final Oracle to corrupt Cheng Shi's Fixed Destiny — [Deceit] did something supremely in character and supremely crucial at the same time: it deceived away Cheng Shi's name, making the universe forget in that instant what the name "Cheng Shi" meant.

This wasn't difficult. [Deceit] was [Void]'s surface — concealment was its nature. And before this, it had also seized [Memory]'s authority. The river of [Existence] flowing through [Void] was the clearest proof of that.

So in the moment before [Chaos] self-destructed, it suddenly could no longer remember the name. All it could do was point in fury and panic at the specific person before it — "Cheng Shi" — and declare:

"I bestow him as my Envoy — granting him dominion over [Chaos]'s Authority — permitting him to inherit my everything!

[Deceit] — I know your methods. But there are some things even you cannot defy!

Because — this is the Final Oracle!"

[Chaos] realized [Deceit] was interfering, but it had also found its solution: point at the target and designate "that one" as the inheritor of its throne and authority.

The Final Oracle truly was inviolable.

And so — recognized by a dying god, carried out with Justice (Order)'s rigid impartiality — Magician Zhen Xin inherited [Chaos]'s everything. Under the witness of all the assembled divine beings, she

ascended the throne and became the first person in this entire game to make the true, genuine transition from mortal to god.

It had to be said — the plan was executed with extraordinary precision. Almost every step moved exactly in accordance with Cheng Shi's will.

Though the process wasn't entirely without risk. At least in Cheng Shi's estimation, the only real risk in this entire succession performance was Zhen Xin herself.

If Zhen Yi — the sister who found amusement in everything — had suddenly woken up halfway through and decided to improvise a one-woman show in the middle of the script, the entire plan would have been finished.

Fortunately, Zhen Xin had promised to keep her sister in check. Zhen Yi truly didn't appear. That alone let Cheng Shi exhale with relief.

There was one more thing worth pondering.

How had [Memory] known that [Order] was replaced by [Chaos]?

In truth — the artifact inside the Collection Hall was simply wrong. What it depicted differed from actual history in multiple details. But strangely, the perspective of that artifact was unmistakably Cheng Shi's own — which meant [Memory] had drawn from Cheng Shi's memories to create its artifact.

But the question was: on what basis could it have done that?

And why had it placed a fabricated, overwritten memory inside its own Collection Hall?

That was very out of character for [Memory].

If [Memory] could freely cherry-pick memories from Cheng Shi's mind, it would have known the universe's truth long ago. [Deceit]'s protection was no impenetrable fortress against every intruder, and

Cheng Shi didn't believe [Memory] would be so heavily biased toward the Fun God — so after arriving at the scene, Cheng Shi cast a meaningful glance at Long Jing.

Perhaps only Long Jing could explain that to him.

Of course, before any of that — there were some thorny matters that needed handling first.

Deceiving someone is a moment's joy — the explanations afterward are an ordeal. Deceiving [Death] and [Silence] like this...

[Silence] was manageable. It could only swallow its objections.

But the boss at [Death]...

The great skull — released at last from the Convention's binding — turned its gaze upon the "just arrived" Cheng Shi, and said, one word at a time:

"Well. Well. Well."

Cheng Shi's expression froze. He didn't dare smile.

Boss, please stop complimenting me. It's making me scared...

Chapter 1342: The New [Chaos]

A farce that opened with mortals confronting a true god, and ended with a true god's self-destruction.

This absurd scene — had it taken place at the dawn of the era — would have left the universe reeling for an entire age afterward.

But now, the gods seemed long since accustomed to divine self-destructions. With the Convention's proxy functions and new divine beings ascending thrones, the universe... wasn't collapsing.

Even so, the gods remained extraordinarily sensitive to the revelation that [Order] was [Chaos]. What they focused on wasn't the Iron Law's identity — it was who had helped [Chaos] become the Iron Law of [Order].

The answer was obvious. Aside from the god who enjoyed deceiving the universe for amusement, no other divine being could have done something like this.

But right now, the true instigator was nowhere to be seen. Instead, a mortal had been pushed out front to "take the blame." The gods looked at the clown standing in the void, their expressions each uniquely complicated.

Justice (Order) had not left. With such a grave problem surrounding [Order]'s identity, it — as a fragment of [Order] — owed the assembled gods an accounting. Not all divine beings required one, however.

[Silence] departed in silence. No one knew what the god who had just attempted to silence the Convention itself was thinking. Cheng Shi only hoped it wasn't contemplating assimilating him.

[Death]'s boss also left.

A terrifying torrent of white bone swept through the void, punching a hole straight through it. Cheng Shi plastered a smile across his face and kept waving with both hands in the direction the boss had gone — but the great skull simply refused to acknowledge him. Out of sight, out of mind.

Of the remaining gods...

It was almost funny — calling them "the gods" implied a crowd, but there were hardly any left at all. Counting the ones already fallen, the ones who had already left, plus the absent [Existence] and the disappeared [Void] — the only ones who remained to spectate the "fun" were [Birth], [Decay], and [Folly].

[Birth]'s priority was participation. As long as the great work of creation remained undisturbed, it had never cared about anything other than its children.

[Decay] was down to its last breath, and by the look of things, that breath wouldn't last much longer either.

As for [Folly]...

Same as always. After [Death] departed, it immediately looked at the Flowing Light Scales and gave a scoff.

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

Justice (Order) was silent for a moment, then spoke in that resonant voice.

"Compared to a universe that loses [Order] entirely — a false [Order] may serve to give the world stable footing until true order can arrive..."

That line alone made it plain: Justice (Order) had already known [Chaos]'s identity long ago, and had simply chosen not to expose it.

It wasn't wrong. Whether on the continent of Hope or within this Faith Game, [Order] was still the faith of countless adherents of order, the crystallization of their collective will. If faith collapsed and [Order] ceased to be, chaos might sweep the world far sooner than it otherwise would have.

Viewed from that angle, Justice (Order)'s choice hadn't been wrong. Though it also wasn't exactly a "choice" — it had been backed against a wall and forced to accept the situation.

[Deceit]'s sleight of hand had not only fooled [Chaos] completely — it had driven [Order] into a corner from which the only path forward was to acknowledge that [Order] still existed. They had had no other option.

Justice (Order) was embedded in the Convention. Fear (Order) was constrained by the Faith Game. It wasn't obvious before, but looking back now — [Deceit]'s very first move at the dawn of this era had already been calculated all the way to today.

Its scheme had stretched across the entire [Void] era, and it was only now — triggered by another schemer — that it had fully detonated.

And the detonation's result: the [Order] throne was now vacant, and the [Chaos] throne had changed hands.

[Folly]'s eyes — clouded over with white chaos-haze — swept over the new [Chaos] without comment, then fell on the confidence radiating from Cheng Shi. Another scoff.

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

Cheng Shi said nothing. He simply moved his mouth:

"Do you think your question is a foolish act?"

"..."

Sure enough — against [Folly], the only effective weapon was the Brother Mouth's more aggressive variety of verbal sparring.

[Folly] gave no response. It turned its gaze to Justice (Order) and said with mockery:

"Trapped in the middle of the scheme, used as a tool to send away the [Chaos] throne — and before long you will use your own hands to send away the [Order] throne too. In my view, the god in this universe most aligned with [Deceit] is probably you. Justice. (Order)."

The Flowing Light Scales didn't deny it. On the contrary — to the surprise of everyone present — it actually responded in that resonant voice.

"In certain respects, my position and that being's do align. But the Convention shows no favoritism. [Order] has always been impartial."

"Hmph. Foolish act."

[Folly] departed — at such speed it seemed determined to flee before the foolishness of the scene could contaminate it.

After all that had just unfolded, however, Cheng Shi now had a clearer picture. Every divine being present — including Justice (Order) — certainly held no memories of the false Curtain Call.

That meant the variation script the Fun God had written was now known to only a handful of people. The author himself was one. The lead actor — the clown — was another. And the rest... were likely all beyond the boundaries of this starry sky.

[Birth] departed next. [Decay] seemed on the verge of retreating as well — but just before it left, Cheng Shi called out to it and asked with sincere reverence:

"Great [Decay] — when will you..."

"Die?"

"???"

Cheng Shi was at a complete loss. Yes, that was what he meant — but the Brother Mouth! I did not want to die before [Decay]!

The still-lingering [Decay] exhaled, its frame — crisscrossed with cracks — rigidly turning to look at Cheng Shi.

Even knowing the Fear Faction would never let him die here, Cheng Shi tensed in that moment. Fortunately, the sharp-thinking clown caught himself immediately and pivoted.

"You once sheltered me. I would like to... see you off when the time comes. I also wish to personally witness the devotion of this universe's last trace of [Decay]'s will.

May you achieve what you seek. May the grace you've long desired finally come."

[Decay] wasn't naive. To be precise — none of the gods were naive. Even if [Void] had once kept Fixed Destiny very well hidden, by this point in the game's development, who still couldn't read the situation? Fixed Destiny was the answer of the age that [Void] was championing.

When even Justice (Order) had begun making concessions on its behalf, the other gods ought to have woken up by now — ought to have understood that drawing close to [Void], as [Death] and [Silence] and [Existence] had done, would yield the greatest return in this era.

And yet they simply didn't want to fall in line with [Void]. Their will had never changed. Faith-born devotion kept each of them walking their own unwavering path.

This streak of "defiance" — was, in its own way, exactly like [Deceit].

[Decay] sensed that its own rot might never find an answer. But that was all right. The next era could always start again.

It firmly believed [Origin] would eventually show it mercy — even if that required countless ages. It could wait. It would continue to decay.

The cracked skeleton of a giant gave Cheng Shi a slow nod. Perhaps that was its final expression before it walked toward "oblivion." It neither agreed nor refused — it only said, with a faint exhaustion:

"I understand."

Then it vanished from sight.

Watching [Decay]'s retreating form, Cheng Shi felt a complex mixture of emotions — as if what was departing was not just one god's loneliness, but the twilight of an entire divine era.

New gods had begun ascending thrones. That meant a new "order" was coming.

Cheng Shi exchanged a glance with Zhen Xin across the distance. Both curled their lips at the same moment. Then they turned to the Flowing Light Scales, which had not yet departed, and "reverently prayed":

"Great Justice (Order) — the universe cannot lose [Order]. For the sake of keeping the world beneath [Order]'s radiant shelter, I recommend this devout follower of [Order] to take on the [Order] seat and carry [Order]'s will forward. Under his leadership, I believe the world will take on an entirely different shape."

The radiance around the Flowing Light Scales shimmered. Its gaze passed over all three mortals and the one remaining god. After a long silence, it spoke in resonance:

"Rules cannot be broken. The Convention contains no such precedent. He meets no condition to inherit a divine throne. Mortal — your recommendation carries no weight."

Justice (Order)'s refusal came as no surprise to Cheng Shi. After all, they didn't yet hold the token that would allow a [Order] throne succession — the [Order] Container.

But conveniently — he knew exactly where to find it.

Cheng Shi smiled faintly and bowed.

"Very well. Then I'll return to discuss the meaning of recommendations once I've obtained [Order]'s token. But for now, I also had one more... hey hey hey, don't leave!"

Yes — the Flowing Light Scales had left. Departed with such decisiveness, it was exactly as Cheng Shi had imagined: it probably had no interest in remaining in the company of a clown who constantly disrupted [Order].

Seeing that, Cheng Shi had no recourse. All he could do was look forward to their next meeting, when he would reach for the [Order] throne once more.

He looked at his companions, his gaze sweeping the three of them, and said after a brief pause:

"Zhen Xin and I are heading somewhere first. We'll be in touch with you all shortly. Long Jing — you owe me a thorough explanation of exactly what went on inside the Collection Hall."

Li Jingming smiled quietly and nodded. "Come find me in the Collection Hall anytime."

Anytime?

What — has the [Memory] Collection Hall become your own private house?

Cheng Shi's expression turned odd, as if something had struck him. Zhen Xin also gave Long Jing a meaningful glance, then snapped her fingers and took Cheng Shi with her as she vanished beneath the starry sky.

Now that she had ascended the throne, she ought to go see her own temple.

Chapter 1343: The Anxious Kataro

The [Chaos] Temple.

Kataro was unusually panicked today, because things had happened inside the temple that he couldn't begin to understand.

First, the entire [Chaos] Authority had returned — hovering above the temple for a long time before some unseen force swept it all away, making it impossible to sense anymore. And even the faint trace of [Void] energy his patron had left inside the temple had vanished entirely.

This undoubtedly meant the universe had experienced another earth-shaking event — and it was quite likely connected to [Chaos].

Kataro naturally knew that [Chaos] was his patron [Deceit]. But his instincts told him this was far more than his patron stirring up trouble — it was almost certainly tied to the true [Chaos].

He had never once seen his patron hand back authority he had already seized.

Who was [Deceit]? The same type as Lord Cheng Shi — someone who never gave up anything he'd already gotten, unless he was fishing for something bigger. So if he was using this authority as bait — who was the catch?

Normally, when something big happened, Kataro wouldn't need to panic. There were taller targets for trouble to hit first — and if Lord Cheng Shi couldn't hold it, there was still his patron. But his patron had recently vanished without a trace. How could he not be worried?

Factor in everything he knew about Lord Cheng Shi, and his awareness of the incident involving [Chaos] usurping [Order]'s throne — and intelligent Kataro found it hard not to wonder whether [Chaos]'s current upheaval was connected to the Iron Law of [Order]'s identity being exposed.

And the one with both the motive and the style to tear apart that disguise before all the gods — that could only be the chaos-loving Lord Cheng Shi.

Thinking that, Kataro's face went a shade of green.

He stared out into the distant void, muttering to himself nervously:

"My lord, my lord — stirring up the winds between all the gods, just please don't stir away this lowly Kataro along with them.

My patron has been absent for a long time now. Perhaps, my lord, you could come inspect the temple and offer a word of encouragement to this dutiful Kataro?"

Speak of the devil — and the devil appears.

The moment those words left his mouth, Cheng Shi's figure materialized inside the temple.

"!!!"

The Magician had arrived alongside him. But — what was that aura around the Magician?

Kataro was stunned. That was an aura he had only ever sensed on his patron.

That was a god's aura — and moreover, a god's aura deeply resonant with this very temple.

Even so, Kataro — accustomed as he was to the presence of true divine beings — wouldn't have been shocked by that alone. At most, it might mean the patron had granted the Magician proxy authority over [Chaos]. But this time was different.

You see — when the patron had held the [Chaos] Authority, the entire temple had been under Kataro's vigilance. And his role wasn't just doorkeeper; anyone who came or went had to pass through his awareness.

Yet just now, when Lord Cheng Shi and the Magician arrived — he had felt nothing whatsoever.

Only when they appeared in his field of vision did he realize someone had come.

The only time that had happened before was when his patron [Deceit] arrived.

So in that instant, the way Kataro looked at Zhen Xin completely changed. He bowed with absolute reverence, and compliments flowed immediately.

"This humble servant of [Void], Kataro, greets the great patron, and greets Lord Cheng Shi."

"?"

Zhen Xin blinked, then looked curiously at the Kataro in front of her.

She knew about [Deceit] replacing [Chaos], so she understood what a servant of [Void] was. She just couldn't work out when this servant had arrived at the temple — whether he was someone the Fun God had left to receive them — or, incidentally, when exactly Cheng Shi had become "Lord Cheng Shi."

Zhen Xin shot Cheng Shi a suspicious glance. His expression looked slightly uncomfortable. She then looked back at Kataro, taking in that familiar figure, those unmistakably familiar gestures, that air which strongly resembled someone she knew — and immediately felt her eyebrow rise, as if something had clicked.

Just as Zhen Xin was about to say something, Cheng Shi reached out, clapped Kataro on the shoulder, and said with an uneasy smile:

"It's been a while, kid. Your eyes have gotten noticeably worse.

Have a good look — is this your patron?"

"!!??"

If Lord Cheng Shi himself said so, then obviously the Magician in front of him was not his patron [Deceit]. But the problem was — if that was true, how had she bypassed his awareness entirely to arrive inside the temple?

She couldn't be [Chaos], could she?

Ha. Don't be absurd.

Kataro nearly laughed at his own dramatic imagination — but then he froze in place. His eyes trembled as they turned toward Cheng Shi, pupils contracting to pinpoints. Stunned and unable to believe it, his mind raced:

How is that not possible?

The [Chaos] Authority being returned out — didn't that mean the patron had given up that authority?

So then.

This Magician here had inherited [Chaos]'s authority?

Then she was —?!

Kataro's whole body shuddered. He immediately prostrated himself before Zhen Xin.

"Great [Chaos] — I have sinned!"

"?"

Cheng Shi realized things were about to develop in a strange direction. He reached out to pull Kataro up, not wanting to hear any sort of confession — but in this place, which was [Chaos]'s temple, no one could move without [Chaos]'s permission. His hand was immediately stopped by a wall of churning chaos-fog.

Zhen Xin gave Cheng Shi a look that was half smile and half something else, blocked his mouth with chaos-fog, then looked down at the prostrated Kataro with an expression of amused mischief.

"You get one chance."

Kataro never squandered opportunities. He immediately blurted out the story of how he had once impersonated Lord Cheng Shi and deceived the actual Cheng Shi.

Zhen Xin blinked, looked back and forth between the two "Ultramans" present, and let out an exasperated laugh. She released her hold on Cheng Shi and looked at him without sympathy.

"Is there a single honest word in your mouth?"

How many more things haven't you told us? No — how many times have you actually lied to us?"

"..."

Lost count.

Cheng Shi's expression shifted to something complex. He still managed to argue weakly: "Everything I say is the truth. Not my problem if you don't believe me."

Then he turned a meaningful glance toward Kataro, and said with languid amusement:

"Looks to me like this servant of [Void] has some other ideas on his mind. What is it — thinking of pledging yourself to the new god [Chaos]?"

New god [Chaos].

So it was confirmed — this former "artifact" of [Deceit] had truly inherited the [Chaos] throne.

Kataro's world had caved in. He had always assumed this position would be Lord Cheng Shi's — what else could explain the rewriting of history, the emergence of the Chaos Envoy Ultraman, the bestowal of the [Chaos] Container? His patron had evidently been cultivating Lord Cheng Shi as the heir.

How had the sky changed like this?

But the change wasn't the reason Kataro had "confessed." Having once played the role of Lord Cheng Shi, he knew exactly what kind of person the man was — and on the strength of the "contributions" he'd made in supporting Cheng Shi before, Lord Cheng Shi would absolutely not abandon him.

But the new god [Chaos] was different.

Under patron's direction, Kataro had paid considerable attention to this Magician — and he knew full well that inside her body lived a far more terrifying "little sister." If that one were provoked, never mind keeping his position — even keeping his life would be another matter entirely.

So steady-minded Kataro went straight for the "confess" tactic. Selling out his lord would, at most, earn him some light sarcasm from Lord Cheng Shi — but it could at least keep him alive while the new god [Chaos]'s temperament remained unknown.

Besides — since [Chaos] had arrived alongside Lord Cheng Shi, his chances of anything going badly wrong were probably manageable.

So Kataro acted decisively, demonstrating his resourcefulness to the new god once again.

Zhen Xin saw through it all clearly. She found the "job application" reasonably satisfying.

"Don't be nervous. Even my status as a god was something your Lord Cheng Shi arranged. A spot tending a temple — I don't imagine he'll begrudge you that.

Isn't that right, Lord Cheng Shi?"

"..."

The Fun God wasn't here. But its particular brand of pointed remarks had still found their way into this room.

Chapter 1344: Temple Conversation and the Sand Map Meditation

Ascending from mortal to god was something extraordinarily "difficult to accept" — especially so when you inherited authority directly, bypassing the gradual development of an Envoy.

Big Cat had once said, when she received partial [Prosperity] proxy rights, that the perspective of scoring trials had already exceeded what a mortal's understanding could encompass — as if a dimension-transcending force had entered her.

For Zhen Xin, who had gone from zero to the top without any scaffolding in between, this was equally true — and even more so. After all, what she had inherited was [Chaos]'s everything. And [Chaos] meant absolute disorder. Truthfully, the fact that Zhen Xin had been able to return here from before the assembled gods with her composure fully intact already filled Cheng Shi with admiration.

He couldn't help asking:

"What is [Chaos] at its most fundamental level? Why don't you seem as chaotic as I'd expect?"

Zhen Xin immediately read Cheng Shi's puzzlement. To explain more clearly, she extended both hands and — in the manner of a true Magician — materialized two clusters of chaos-fog, one in each palm. In one hand, yellow fog churned in wild, disordered patterns. In the other, the fog was also in constant reconstruction — but its forms were recognizable, real-world shapes Cheng Shi could identify.

Zhen Xin held both up and asked with a smile:

"Which of these two do you think is [Chaos]?"

"?"

When the answer seems obvious, framing it as a question is clearly meant to lead you toward choosing the wrong option. But given a Magician's [Deceit] nature, the average person would genuinely hesitate for a moment.

But Cheng Shi was Cheng Shi. He was sharp enough that in an instant, he recalled every intuition he'd ever had about [Chaos], and said in a deliberate tone:

"Both."

Zhen Xin nodded, pleasantly unsurprised.

"At this moment, I finally have a small sense of why the gods would turn their gaze to you. Yes — they both are.

What the world calls 'chaos' is simply whatever lies beyond their understanding. But for the world itself, any evolution that departs from its essential nature is chaos. And since that essential nature can never be pinned down or established as a fixed standard — you could say chaos is everything, and everything is chaos.

[Chaos]'s authority encompasses a great many things. But because of faith...

Honestly — this is the first time I've genuinely felt faith as something real. Not some vague and airy concept, not an empty summary of words — but a feeling that exists in the will as concretely as a bloodline connection.

I can feel my followers' awe and devotion toward this throne. I can feel their fanaticism and hunger for the authority it holds. They believe [Chaos] can bring them everything they desire — and that faith-force, transmitted up to the throne, becomes the 'weapon' in my hands.

I can even sense a certain person's 'lack of devotion' toward me.

So the gods are not fools. Some people speak devotion with their mouths while endlessly asking for things and having every request granted — that's probably not because the words work. It's because the gods believe granting it also furthers their own will."

"..."

Cheng Shi blinked rapidly, entirely "unable to comprehend" what Zhen Xin was saying.

Zhen Xin gave him a sidelong glance and shook her head with a laugh.

"Faith is mysterious — and also terrifying. Though [Chaos] encompasses everything — the strongest of its authorities is still the portion of chaos the world understands.

Your answer wasn't wrong, Fate Weaver — both forms in my hands really are chaos. But..."

She raised the hand with the disordered yellow fog. "This is [Chaos]'s greatest strength. It is the anchor of faith, and the resonance of will."

Cheng Shi nodded as if something had clicked, gaining a little more understanding of faith.

He watched the yellow fog in the Magician's palm and continued to take in the feel of "chaos" — unaware that the Magician's eyes had dropped slightly and a brief, unusual flash crossed them.

Zhen Xin had lied.

Her sharing of faith and authority had been entirely sincere — but she had deliberately glossed over why she had been able to adapt to [Chaos]'s authority so quickly.

The real reason was simple enough. Having coexisted with her little sister for so long, [Chaos]'s first impression on Zhen Xin wasn't one of extreme disorder — it was a subtle resonance. As if all the chaos had always been destined, and it had simply begun the moment Zhen Yi was born.

And in fact, in the moment when she was deciding whether to accept the [Chaos] throne — she had consulted Zhen Yi. No matter how much of a curse others saw her as, Zhen Yi was still her little sister.

But at that moment, Zhen Yi had not answered Zhen Xin's question. She only laughed — kept laughing — laughed until Zhen Xin could no longer find a way to step back, no longer able to refuse the authority's embrace.

The two of them fell into a silence, each with their own thoughts, until Cheng Shi pulled himself free from his musings on faith and looked up at Kataro with a grave expression.

"Where did it go?"

Kataro's heart clenched. If even Lord Cheng Shi didn't know, what exactly was his patron planning?

He shook his head vigorously, then said with a trace of apprehension: "My lord, the patron — it..."

Cheng Shi was not surprised by Kataro's ignorance. If the Fun God was hiding from everyone, it obviously wouldn't rely on Kataro to pass messages. But Cheng Shi had a persistent sense that if the Fun God had dared to use the [Chaos] throne and authority to cooperate with his plan, there had to be deeper meaning in that choice.

Was that deeper meaning tied to Zhen Xin — or to this temple?

Cheng Shi looked around, then asked Kataro again.

"When did it last come here?"

Kataro's expression became serious. He recalled immediately. "My lord — it was when you left the universe to visit the Real Universe."

Just as he'd suspected.

Everything traced back to the moment he had left this starry sky.

Cheng Shi's brow furrowed. "What did it say when it came? Did it leave any guidance or make any arrangements?"

Kataro shook his head again.

"The patron left no arrangements and didn't call for me to attend. It stayed alone in the hall for a long time, then departed. After it left, I entered the hall and found the chaos-fog had gathered in midair, not yet dispersed — as though it had taken on the form of something like a sand map.

I didn't dare look directly at what the patron was thinking. I could only begin to disperse it..."

"?"

Begin to disperse it?

Ha. You think I believe that?

Cheng Shi knew these [Void] servants far too well. Never mind the influence of being at the Fun God's side for so long — just the fact that Kataro had impersonated him for so long made it impossible to believe the man had walked in and kept his eyes obediently closed.

So Cheng Shi let out a short, knowing laugh, gave Kataro's shoulder a pat, and said with that half-smiling expression:

"It's not even here. Stop pretending to be pious. Tell me what you actually saw."

"..."

No one knew Kataro like Cheng Shi. And the reverse was equally true.

It was accurate to say Kataro hadn't dared look the remnant-thoughts of [Deceit] directly in the eye. But — sharp Kataro had considered: if Lord Cheng Shi asked about the patron again and he had nothing useful to offer, wouldn't that cost him standing in Lord Cheng Shi's eyes?

So he had averted his direct gaze — but let his peripheral vision take a small, brief peek at the shape of the chaos-fog.

That way, even if the patron caught him at it, he could explain it as an effort to bring Lord Cheng Shi closer to the patron. Could he be heavily punished for such a generous-sounding excuse?

Between his secrets and Lord Cheng Shi — Kataro had a pretty clear sense of which his patron valued more.

"My lord — Kataro only caught a glimpse...

I'm not certain which era or epoch it represented. But I'm sure it was the Land of Hope.

The chaos-fog had materialized into the complete terrain of the Land of Hope. The reason I'm so certain is that I saw the Abyssal Volcano connecting the surface to the Underground on the sand map.

The patron quite likely spent some time in the hall meditating on that sand map. What it was contemplating, this lowly Kataro cannot know. But taking what I saw today alongside everything else — I believe this is probably the 'guidance' the patron left for you.

Otherwise, it would not have needed me to see any of this."

With that, Kataro lowered his head and stood in utterly convincing reverence.

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted. He sank into thought.

The Land of Hope?

What was it doing meditating on the Land of Hope?

Chapter 1345: Changes in the [Memory] Collection Hall

No one could read [Deceit]'s mind — not even its closest first and second artifacts.

But no one had anticipated that the Magician who walked furthest down [Deceit]'s path would, on the eve of the Assembly of Gods Convention, become [Chaos].

The good news was that in the Assembly of Gods Convention, Cheng Shi's side — not [Deceit]'s — had just gained another vote.

The bad news, however, was that Zhen Xin had not lost her ranking on the Ladder of Ascent. She still sat at the very top, which meant Cheng Shi wasn't able to advance any further.

At that, Cheng Shi felt a complicated pang.

"Thank you."

Zhen Xin blinked. "What's this for? Any way you look at it, shouldn't I be thanking you?"

Cheng Shi shook his head. "I know you didn't necessarily want to become [Chaos]. But you accepted it anyway. And after inheriting the authority of a god defined by disorder — you didn't let the world become even more disordered..."

Zhen Xin's expression shifted into something complicated. She studied Cheng Shi, considered for a moment, then let out a soft sound of understanding.

"I see. You were worried that once I became a god, I would start carrying out my own will — finding a new answer for this world in Zhen Xin's way?"

Cheng Shi — that doesn't sound like you. The Fate Weaver I know was bold and precise, without hesitation. Only that version of you could come up with imaginative, sweeping answers to every problem in front of you.

But now — you have too many worries. They've become chains around you, holding back your steps forward.

You..."

Zhen Xin had meant to offer some encouragement. But the words reached her lips and she swallowed them back.

Because she felt that this kind of nudging wasn't "fair."

Anyone who had come to understand that they were the hinge on which the entire universe turned — the weight of that, mountain-tipping and tide-swallowing — would probably feel unable to breathe. And

the Fate Weaver had already done more than enough. He had always been walking toward an answer. He had never compromised.

What Cheng Shi needed right now probably wasn't comfort or guidance. It was trust — a word of affirmation from a friend.

So Zhen Xin smiled. She raised a fist toward him.

"No matter where you lead the world — the Jokers will be standing at your back. Using your own will to write the era's ending, in an age where gods exist — isn't that something worth doing?"

So don't overthink it. Be yourself, Cheng Shi. We naturally trust you. But the condition is — you have to trust yourself.

I still admire that clown who looked down on gods and deceived heaven and earth alike. And I'm looking forward to the clown giving us a performance that shakes the universe."

Zhen Xin's words came straight from the heart, unmistakably sincere. Cheng Shi could feel the genuineness in them — no, he could even feel the "Zhen Yi" in them. "Isn't that something worth doing?" — that really didn't sound like something Zhen Xin would say. Could this be Zhen Yi taking the wheel?

Cheng Shi's expression shifted slightly — but he was still moved by the sincerity. He smiled and bumped his fist against hers.

"As expected — working with President Zhen always feels like a breath of spring air.

Enjoy your temple. I need to go handle a few other preparations.

The Fun God won't avoid me forever. Before the Assembly of Gods Convention, I need to build up enough confidence to face whatever changes are coming."

Zhen Xin smiled brilliantly. "Don't worry. At the very least you'll always have [Chaos]'s vote."

Cheng Shi smiled and nodded, then turned and left.

The moment Lord Cheng Shi disappeared, Kataro's smile disappeared too. He stood awkwardly to one side, waiting for the new god's instructions. But Zhen Xin made no move to treat Kataro as a proper servant — she only asked, expression somewhat grave:

"Do you know San Dales?"

Kataro blinked. "Your grace, that is an experiment site of the Tower of Logic, and also the home city of the clown Crown."

"Right. And since you know of it — you must also know that San Dales has a Joy Theater?"

Kataro wasn't sure where Zhen Xin was going, so he could only answer what he knew.

"Yes. Crown was the clown of the Joy Theater. Lord Cheng Shi also once... performed there."

"Yes — performed at a new stage..." Zhen Xin's expression became complicated. Bewilderment filled her eyes. Whatever she was thinking about, she said with a soft sigh:

"The History School traced things back and found, on the northern ice plains of the Land of Hope, a record of past history. That history shows that among the group who fled south to escape the frozen wasteland was a clown performer. And rather conveniently, among the northern migrants taken in by the Tower of Logic, there was also a clown — and this clown was the one who founded the Joy Theater.

Tell me — do you think these two clowns could be the same person as the clown who once left the theater that became ashes?"

"?"

Kataro knew a fair amount about the Land of Hope — but all of it had been gleaned from his patron's words in passing. He was no all-knowing, universe-transcending being. He simply didn't know who the clown in Zhen Xin's story was.

He ventured carefully: "He was Crown's ancestor?"

Zhen Xin shook her head.

"No. There's no evidence that connects these clowns to each other. The only link between them is probably having performed on the same stage once upon a time...

Never mind. Perhaps I'm overthinking it. No one can ever read the Fun God's mind after all.

Kataro — show me around this place. Let's see if we can find any more guidance it left behind."

"Your grace, it would be my honor."

...

The void — the [Memory] Collection Hall.

After leaving the [Chaos] Temple, Cheng Shi arrived at the [Memory] Collection Hall immediately through the Joker gathering place and the That Dream My Nightmare mirror.

When he appeared inside the pure-white hall, Li Jingming was still wandering through it — seemingly committing the Hall's every detail to memory.

Sensing Cheng Shi's arrival, he gave a slight wave of his hand and summoned him forward.

Seeing that, Cheng Shi's pupils tightened. He confirmed what he'd already suspected — Long Jing had become something like Kataro at the [Chaos] Temple, holding some degree of control over this Collection Hall.

Between two sharp minds, conversation rarely required many words. Sometimes a glance or a single gesture was enough for mutual understanding.

Li Jingming knew he couldn't hide it from Cheng Shi. He hadn't intended to. He gave a nod.

But the moment his guess was confirmed, Cheng Shi still couldn't suppress a moment of shock.

"The [Memory] Collection Hall... is yours now?"

"Yes. I obtained the Hall's key."

As he spoke, Li Jingming extended his hand, materializing in his palm a brilliant, crystalline hourglass that shifted and transformed endlessly. Each time a grain of sand fell, countless memories refracted through thousands of ice-crystal facets — a sight that dazzled and captivated, impossible to look away from.

Cheng Shi recognized it in one second. He hadn't realized his guess had still been too conservative.

"A Container..."

Li Jingming nodded, his expression solemn.

"Yes. A Container. I had originally come to seek an audience with [Memory] — but it wasn't there. Instead, the memories in the Hall came crashing down and buried me. I was struggling in the Sea of Memory when I grabbed onto this 'last lifeline.' Only afterward did I realize it was [Memory]'s Container. With it, I now hold the ability to control the [Memory] Collection Hall."

Cheng Shi's surprise gave way to delight. "And that artifact?"

"Still inaccessible..." Li Jingming had clearly already tried. "The Container is the Hall's key — but it isn't the key to that particular artifact. Because the lock on that artifact wasn't placed there by [Memory].

To see the memories buried within it, perhaps the only answer is Crown's Mask — the Fool's Play Mask. That is, Yu Xi's — your — mask."

"..."

Cheng Shi was out of options. Even knowing the Nose of Verification was somewhere in the Mockery and Jeering river — the problem was it couldn't be found. He'd been hoping for some back-door method to open the memories hidden inside that artifact. Now it was clear that was wishful thinking.

The clown's spirits deflated. He said with a slight pout:

"So the artifact that set off [Chaos] earlier — that was something you fabricated, wasn't it?

Well, well, well. First day on the job as new master, and already you've used [Deceit]'s methods to overwrite a memory inside the Collection Hall. Long Jing, oh Long Jing — you're a properly qualified blasphemer now."

Cheng Shi gave him a genuine thumbs-up. A real one this time.

Li Jingming accepted it graciously and smiled. "Staying at the side of a blasphemer long enough — the influence was inevitable."

"Right, right. You really should keep your distance from Long Jing. We can't have the clown contaminating us."

"...?"

Chapter 1346: Do You Still Remember Me, Wrath of Abomination?

Truthfully, though Li Jingming was surprised that he had managed to obtain the [Memory] Container, he wasn't entirely unable to understand it. After all, of everyone walking the [Memory] path, he had gone

furthest. And [Memory] was different from other divine beings — it hadn't poured too much of its attention on any particular artifact of [Deceit].

What he couldn't quite work out was why [Memory] had chosen this moment to bestow the Container.

This had undoubtedly been a "bestowal." The Sea of Memory survival ordeal was only the "ceremony" of the bestowal.

Li Jingming's puzzlement didn't escape Cheng Shi's eyes. One moment Cheng Shi was laughing and making light of himself — the next, the smile was gone, his expression quiet. He looked in the direction of that blurry artifact and let out a faint sigh.

"It left."

Li Jingming blinked, momentarily unable to parse what Cheng Shi meant. He blurted out: "Who left?"

But before the words were even out of his mouth, they caught in his throat. His whole body shuddered.

"[Memory]... left?! And it left this Container behind for me because of that?"

"Yes, roughly so." Cheng Shi nodded. "[Time] told me that [Memory] felt there was no longer any need to preserve the records of this starry sky's future. So it went to the Real Universe in search of more memories."

"..."

That news hit Li Jingming hard enough that even long after hearing it, his heart could not settle.

He furrowed his brow, thoroughly confused.

"How can that be? Past or future — those are merely states of existence. As a true divine being who governs [Memory] and embodies [Memory]'s will — how could it suddenly abandon its fixation on

memory and go to the Real Universe? I don't understand it. It feels more like a desecration of its own will.

Cheng Shi — don't you find something wrong with this?"

"Desecration is the highest form of devotion, Long Jing! Besides, are the memories of the Real Universe not memories? Could it not...Actually, forget it. That joke doesn't land right."

Cheng Shi laughed at himself and touched his nose. "Of course I think something is wrong. The moment [Prosperity] self-destructed in front of me, I felt that this entire world was wrong.

But what use is that?

The gods' decisions will never be moved by our will.

I can't understand why [Memory] would abandon this world's memories either. [Time] didn't explain much. I can only speculate — perhaps [Memory] felt that the future would no longer produce any more memories worth preserving? Now that the rhythm of this era's ending rests in [Void]'s hands, when all is reduced to void, naturally there would be no more memory to speak of?"

Li Jingming shook his head with a grave expression.

"No — based on my understanding of [Memory], even if no new memories are generated afterward, the era's ending would itself be one of the most important memories of this age.

I genuinely cannot understand why it abandoned such a significant memory — unless [Time] had already described the world's future to it, and [Memory] had used that to inscribe the future's memories in advance."

As he spoke, Long Jing's eyebrow rose. "Yes — that must be it. Even memories not worth inscribing — it would still find somewhere to bury them. The memory dump inside the That Dream My Nightmare mirror is the best proof of that. So it's not that it isn't inscribing — it's that it already has.

[Time] must have already seen that future. Cheng Shi — you said you had an audience with it. Didn't [Time] give you any guidance at all?"

Yes it had — but it might as well have given nothing.

Cheng Shi was at a loss. He recounted what [Time] had said to Long Jing. Li Jingming listened to the end and was equally baffled.

"Draw closer? We're at this point already. What does that even mean?"

"That's exactly what's so difficult to understand. I can't picture how what is currently 'distance' could become 'closeness.' The only thing I'm certain of is that the Fear Faction is real, and [Time] is genuinely trying to look out for this world.

But as for this so-called answer that requires drawing closer — perhaps the only way to find it is to wait for the Assembly of Gods Convention, meet the Fun God, and ask it directly.

Let's set aside what we can't figure out and talk about what's right in front of us. Long Jing — are you prepared to inherit [Memory]'s throne?"

Li Jingming blinked, momentarily at a loss.

In the Joker Society meeting that had just concluded, the Fate Weaver had still been talking about scheming for a few thrones — and now, the Magician had already become [Chaos], and the [Memory] throne was gradually moving toward him.

All of this felt so unreal that even the usually resolute Li Jingming found himself questioning — no, questioning not himself, but the world itself.

"Gods abandoning their thrones. Mortals taking their places. If this is the world's answer, then it falls to me to inscribe these memories for the world..."

That was as good as a yes.

Cheng Shi smiled faintly — though he knew this was absolutely not the world's answer. The other world that had completed the full blood exchange had already fallen somewhere along the path. That version of Cheng Shi who inherited [Deceit]'s authority was still nowhere to be found.

He wouldn't repeat an already-proven failure. And he trusted that the Fear Faction wasn't constructing a larger nightmare.

"Prepare yourself, Long Jing — the throne has been placed in front of you. But in order to fight for a stronger voice within the Convention, I still need to take advantage of the current momentum and lock in [Order]'s vote."

With that, Cheng Shi said a simple farewell to Li Jingming and went back to find Li Wufang.

He needed to take Li Wufang somewhere, and reclaim from there everything that belonged to [Order].

The Investigator was genuinely scared at this point. All the way there he kept asking: "Who exactly are we going to see?"

Cheng Shi smiled with mysterious calm. "You'll see when we get there."

With the new god [Chaos]'s assistance, Cheng Shi and Li Wufang soon found themselves standing before a cage. At the sight of the prisoner locked inside that enormous cell, Li Wufang went pale.

"This is..."

Blazing flames surged and cascaded. Blinding light radiated in every direction. Sensing the temperature that could burn through rock itself, Cheng Shi introduced the occupant.

"The Wrath of Abomination. Also once known as the Blazing Sun — one of the Inquisitors personally commissioned by [Order]."

"!!!"

Li Wufang knew who the Wrath of Abomination was. Every follower of [Order] knew. The Elemental Judges' forbidden spells had made life miserable for anyone who dared desecrate [Order], and more than a few bystanders had been reduced to ash by the Meteor Fire Rain. That was exactly why the Wrath of Abomination had such a fearsome reputation.

But right now — this tempestuous, infamously violent [Chaos] Envoy was huddled in the corner of the cage as far from the door as possible, compressing its flames with every ounce of effort, making absolutely certain not a single spark would touch the Cheng Shi standing at the entrance.

If the Fear Faction judged solely by fear — without asking why someone was afraid — then the current Wrath of Abomination would unquestionably qualify as one of the Fear Faction's core members.

It was absolutely terrified.

Not of the mortal standing in front of it. What it feared were every one of the true divine beings standing behind that mortal.

[Deceit], [Fate] — [Void] alone was enough to make it feel hollow inside. And behind this mortal stood [Death], [Silence], [Time]...

It wasn't blind. It had seen what just happened in the void — seen this person corner and kill its patron. Whether that had been [Chaos] or [Order], the point was: its patron had changed hands. The new patron was this mortal's friend — a Magician who followed [Deceit].

A figure who could withstand the Convention's pressure and make Justice (Order) itself "flee the scene" — who wouldn't be intimidated by someone like that?

The Wrath of Abomination wasn't thinking about anything else right now. Its entire head was filled with one thought: this nightmare of a person couldn't be eyeing its cage, could he?

Take it. Please take it. As long as you want it — you can even have the prisoner's identity that goes with it.

And right at that moment, Cheng Shi directed a brilliant, warm smile at the trembling Wrath of Abomination inside the cage.

"Do you still remember me, Wrath of Abomination?"

"..."

Was it too late to say no?

Chapter 1347: Not All Fire Is the Same

"ROAR—"

A small roar. Something like a response.

A servant god — even while imprisoned — behaving before a mortal like an obedient schoolchild. In any other era, the world would have labeled such a scene a logically incoherent delusion. But in the [Void] era, it was simply real.

The Wrath of Abomination had a temper, not a shortage of brains. If it couldn't afford to pick a fight, it didn't. Simple enough.

Right now it was treating Cheng Shi as [Void]'s own avatar — [Deceit] in person, just wearing a different face to confuse it. So as long as it made no mistakes, it definitely wouldn't repeat its patron's fate.

It recalled its first contact with Cheng Shi. "Contact" was a loose word — at the time, it had given essentially no thought to the mortal scrambling through a trial. It was only the appearance of two [Void] rulers that told it a particular player had been simultaneously noticed by both of them.

It could clearly remember [Deceit] personally pointing this person toward a path back then. It had felt no particular unease at the time. But given Cheng Shi's current standing and the ways the gods themselves had begun to regard him with gravity...

Could it be that the inexplicable "seven o'clock direction" [Deceit] had pointed to back then — the one supposedly deviating from [Fate] — was hinting that the arrival of the seventh era was somehow connected to the man standing in front of it?

Thinking this, the Wrath of Abomination suppressed its flames even further.

Cheng Shi sensed the steady retreat of that overwhelming presence. He didn't know what the other was thinking — but this cooperative attitude was genuinely satisfying.

Truthfully, the reason he'd rushed over to find the Wrath of Abomination right now was simply to ride the momentum from that last big performance.

The clown was privately well aware of his predicament: in one breath he'd deceived three members of the Fear Faction. For a while, asking any of them for help again would be difficult.

Especially the [Death] boss. Cheng Shi could already picture it — until the day Mi Laozhang was found and brought back, [Death] probably wouldn't see him at all.

Add to that [Deceit] having gone into hiding and [Fate] being hard to locate — and right now, the only true divine being left at Cheng Shi's back was one newly-crowned [Chaos].

The Wrath of Abomination was a [Chaos] Envoy, yes — but it was also [Order]'s prisoner. If it decided to refuse him by leaning on the cover of [Order]'s imprisonment, Cheng Shi would need to invest considerably more effort.

He didn't want to waste time, so he had chosen to come while his momentum was at its peak — using the simplest possible method of pressuring it into submission through raw intimidation.

Cheng Shi couldn't understand the Wrath of Abomination's roars, and had no need to. He studied the giant blazing sun caged before him, gave a nod, and said:

"Good — glad you do. In that trial of blood and fire half a year ago, the fire rain you poured down so carelessly inflicted irreparable damage on my fragile psyche. Since then, I relive that scene in my dreams, waking in the dead of night.

It has left me with brittle nerves, hair loss, mental exhaustion, and difficulty concentrating..."

Cheng Shi was still rambling through the list of his sufferings. Inside the cage, the Wrath of Abomination had already understood what the other party was getting at. It curled in the corner and let out a muffled sound.

"Roar — roar roar—"

Even with extreme suppression, a faint, uncontrollable fury laced the quiet tones.

It was called the Wrath of Abomination for a reason — it was an endless blaze of rage born from turning its back on order.

Cheng Shi's words broke off. He glanced over. Once again, he "understood" what it was saying.

"Compensation?"

All right. Since you insist on making amends for your past transgressions, I can hardly be too harsh and refuse you a chance to turn over a new leaf.

It seems that [Order]'s imprisonment has indeed washed away a fair amount of your [Chaos] will. But we both know you once belonged to [Order].

Whether this is genuine repentance taking hold, or whether in your attempt to evade punishment you've once again revealed a trace of the order most fundamental to your nature — that question is important. It bears directly on the length of your sentence.

I'm someone who cannot bear to see others suffer. And I understand that [Order] shows no mercy to any who have transgressed. Given that you're willing to offer compensation — I'll provide some guidance.

Hand over the [Order] Container that's in your possession. That will be the equivalent of stripping away the [Order] that was once part of your will. Once [Order] sees that your repentance has genuinely produced a new seed of order within you — it will naturally release you.

This is a mutual benefit. What do you say?"

"Roar?"

The Wrath of Abomination was baffled. It had guessed Cheng Shi was here to take something — but it had never imagined the man was here for a Container. And an [Order] Container at that.

But where would it get an [Order] Container?

When the Civilization era ended, the servant gods under [Order]'s protection received no pardon at the era's close. They were swept away by the tide of the age just like everyone else and reborn with the next era's beginning. This had stripped [Order] of all its former prestige — and given the Blazing Sun's kind reason enough to stop believing in [Order], defecting to [Chaos] instead.

And if they had chosen to defect — why on earth would they have kept [Order]'s Container?

The Wrath of Abomination didn't lack the will to give it — it simply had none to give.

What it desperately wanted to offer was a [Chaos] Container — to board Cheng Shi's express train. But the [Chaos] throne had already changed hands via a Final Oracle, making the Container no longer necessary.

The Wrath of Abomination panicked. It roared urgently:

"Roar! Roar roar—"

The tone was clearly different from before — no longer the sound of compliance, but something more like objection.

Cheng Shi frowned, his expression cooling slightly.

"What's this? Refusing? Think I'm bluffing?"

You don't actually believe that just because the [Order] throne is vacant now, [Order] will simply never exist again, do you?

Even mortals don't think only of the immediate moment. All the more so for a divine being like you.

A new [Order] will appear sooner or later. When it does — can you guess who will be sitting on that throne?

And then — can you guess who will decide whether you're released?"

As he spoke, Cheng Shi let his gaze drift — seemingly casual — toward Li Wufang.

Li Wufang at this point had completely lost the thread. He couldn't understand a word the Wrath of Abomination was saying, and watching his chief have what looked like a back-and-forth conversation with this [Chaos] Envoy, he felt a deep and genuine envy.

This was communication between divine beings — a language that had no need to account for whether mere mortals could follow along.

The Wrath of Abomination was also confused. It didn't disbelieve him. It simply didn't have one. Didn't have one — so how was it supposed to give one?

I want to give it. I genuinely want to give it. I just don't have it!

And then it caught that meaningful look Cheng Shi directed at the [Order] follower beside him — and its panic spiked. Even the densest observer could see that this [Order] follower was almost certainly the person Cheng Shi intended to put on the [Order] throne, which meant this person might very well become the future "warden."

If it offended this future [Order] right now, it didn't even dare think how long its sentence might extend.

"!!!"

The Wrath of Abomination's flames leapt in agitation. It desperately wanted to charge up to the cage door, grab Cheng Shi's hand with flame, and explain — but its reaction was being read as increasing defiance, exactly like that version of Cheng Shi who had inherited [War]'s authority and fought desperately against an outer god's intrusion.

"...?"

What was happening — had pushing a little too hard triggered some deep fighting spirit?

Cheng Shi's expression darkened slightly and he took two steps back. Li Wufang also retreated, feeling the temperature climbing all around them, and said with alarm:

"Chief — did the negotiation break down?"

"..."

Cheng Shi's face twitched. He said nothing.

There hadn't been any negotiation to break down. He'd been talking to himself the whole time — the other party had just reacted differently than expected. How could this count as a breakdown?

This was standard clown performance. An enthusiastic audience response just meant the show hadn't collapsed.

But you could hardly tell the Investigator: "I brought you here specifically to perform a clown show for the Wrath of Abomination. Look at how actively it's responding..." — that would be way too embarrassing.

For a moment, Cheng Shi's expression went somewhat stiff.

Fortunately — even in this awkward situation, the clown's observational instincts remained sharp as ever. Just as the Investigator was about to conclude the Wrath of Abomination had refused, Cheng Shi noticed something: while the ambient temperature was rising, the actual flames inside the cage were still being suppressed with everything it had. Not a single lick of fire had spilled outward. Despite all the noise and spectacle — neither of them had taken any damage whatsoever.

That unusual detail made Cheng Shi pause. He furrowed his brow, thought for a moment — and suddenly realized the other party hadn't refused him at all. Instead...

"?"

Cheng Shi asked, with a trace of uncertainty:

"You... don't actually have an [Order] Container, do you?"

"ROAR ROAR ROAR!"

In that moment, the Wrath of Abomination inside the cage resembled nothing so much as a baboon whose performance had finally been recognized — so overcome with relief it shed a cascading rain of fire.

"..."

Seeing this, Cheng Shi's expression fell.

Well. This time he really had turned into the clown.

Chapter 1348: Deceive When You Must, Fight When You Must

The [Order] follower had, once again, moved further away from [Order]'s throne.

Despite his confusion about Cheng Shi's communication methods, the outcome was obvious. No success.

Li Wufang had missed another chance to obtain the Container.

Truthfully, he wasn't in any particular rush to become a divine being — but compared to how smoothly Zhen Xin had ascended, his own "road to ascension" had been full of complications. Rather like his life before the Faith Game had descended.

Fortunately, back then he had also encountered someone invaluable. Just as he had now.

This was [Fate].

Only — that invaluable person right now looked somewhat displeased.

All of Cheng Shi's calculations, and he had simply not calculated that the Wrath of Abomination didn't have an [Order] Container. How was he supposed to feel good about that?

The only [Order] Envoy left in the world was this one — and even the Container was nowhere to be found. What hope was there of inheriting the [Order] seat?

Not that Cheng Shi was fixated on the [Order] throne specifically — it was just that watching a throne sit empty while he couldn't pull it home felt genuinely awful.

With no better option, he could only temporarily give it up and first secure the other vacant thrones. The most straightforward of those was naturally Qin Xin's [War] throne.

He planned to go see the Torchbearers.

Since the false Curtain Call, he had not yet visited Qin Xin, nor sought out the Flame of Hope. These two could be called the world's last hope — especially the Flame of Hope, who held the [Fate] Container in its hands...

But that Container was the one Cheng Shi least wanted to claim.

Only when hope was extinguished — when change returned to the proper path — could the Flame of Hope become the [Fate] Container. So to obtain it, the Flame of Hope had to die.

Cheng Shi had no desire to let the Flame of Hope die. He hoped more that [Fate] would, at this era's end, embrace change and stand on the side of the Fear Faction. He hadn't forgotten — in that other world, where the old gods fell and new ones rose, [Fate] had agreed to the other Cheng Shi's plan to save the world.

That meant there existed at least a sliver of possibility that it could let go of the Fixed Destiny it had clung to for an entire era — and that, perhaps, would be the only turning point before the world fully entered [Void].

Before parting, Cheng Shi offered Li Wufang a few words of comfort — though comfort was hardly needed. Li Wufang himself hadn't mentally prepared for godhood. The Destined Ones had pushed him to this point; he'd had very little choice in the matter.

His current bewilderment was like early Cheng Shi's. He understood that he was supposed to climb onto that throne — but what he was supposed to do after, he had no idea whatsoever.

Not that he was alone in that — even the one driving the entire throne-usurpation plan, Cheng Shi himself, wasn't sure what came next. He only knew that if he had the opportunity to gather enough Convention votes and divine throne backing and chose not to take it — whether such an opportunity would come along again was something that truly couldn't be counted on.

Miss the moment, and no moment waits. That much was undeniable truth.

Cheng Shi patted Li Wufang on the shoulder, said farewell to this bewildered Destined One, then reached out directly to the Torchbearers' founder — Qin Xin.

Qin Xin hadn't expected that barely one trial after returning from the Real Universe, Cheng Shi would come looking for him again. This abrupt visit was entirely out of character for the Fate Weaver — and sharp as he was, Qin Xin immediately realized something major must have happened while his back was turned.

Cheng Shi wouldn't hide anything from someone who had been willing to burn himself as kindling to pass fire to him in the universe's final second. He told Qin Xin directly that he was here to see both him and the Flame of Hope. Though puzzled as to why Cheng Shi specifically wanted to see the Flame of Hope, Qin Xin agreed with a grave expression and told Cheng Shi how to properly reach the Torch-Passing Hall.

Coming as a formal visitor — sneaking in through the back door wouldn't look right.

And so, before long, Cheng Shi appeared in the Torch-Passing Hall for the first time through completely conventional means.

Qin Xin hadn't alerted anyone to Cheng Shi's quiet arrival. The Torch-Passing Hall was as usual — a steady flow of people, though not crowded.

Cheng Shi walked the illuminated path toward the hall's depths, hood raised, attracting no suspicion from those around him. But halfway there, someone suddenly called out to him.

The voice was shocked — and guarded.

"You're... Cheng Shi?"

Cheng Shi didn't even break his stride. He let the call pass by him like wind. He had no desire to engage with this old acquaintance — but this old acquaintance apparently wasn't willing to let him go so easily. She called out once more, immediately muffled herself, and without another word grabbed his wrist and tugged him into the shadows at the side of the path.

"How are you here? Why are you here? You're not one of us — what are you doing here?!"

The Torchbearer's voice was low and urgent. She was afraid of being overheard, and equally afraid of being too quiet. She was torn. She knew that with Cheng Shi's character, becoming a fellow Torchbearer was impossible — and yet here this schemer was, deep in the Torchbearers' own stronghold.

He wasn't here to cause trouble — was he?

She wasn't sure. She could only grip his hand tightly, her expression enormously complicated.

"Don't move another step. Answer me. How did you get in here?"

Cheng Shi, don't play dumb — I know who you are. Let me tell you, I'm very strong now. If you try to deceive me again..."

As she spoke, the Torchbearer suddenly clapped a hand over her own mouth and nose, her voice muffled.

"I'll... I'll just..."

Was there a threat living somewhere in that unfinished line? Impossible to say.

"Just leave, okay? I'm begging you... I'll pretend I didn't see you. Don't come back after this, and don't tell anyone how to slip into the Torch-Passing Hall. All right?"

"..."

Hearing the voice already verging on tears, Cheng Shi felt something ache quietly inside him.

This girl Nangong was still far too kind. She was willing to let "the intruder" go just to repay a debt of gratitude.

That wasn't rational. But it was very Nangong.

Looking at the hand gripping his wrist — now covered again in vivid, jagged crimson scars — Cheng Shi let out a quiet exhale.

So she truly was one of the vessels the Torchbearers sought for the [Decay] Container.

The God Creation Plan was going smoothly then.

But smoothly as it was going, nothing could be smoother than Qin Xin inheriting everything from [War].

Cheng Shi hadn't the heart to deceive this earnest, guileless girl any further. Gently, he reached up and pulled away his hood — and looked at her with a puzzled frown.

"Nangong, what's wrong?"

You said you saw Cheng Shi — where? Why do you look like that? Don't you recognize me?

It's me. Cui Qiushi. My father even tried the [Decay] Container alongside you once...

Hey? Nangong? Blink if you can hear me — you're not having hallucinations, are you?"

Nangong went completely blank.

She couldn't begin to understand how the face burned so indelibly into her mind — the face she'd never mistake — had somehow become Torchbearer Cui Qiushi the moment the hood came off.

She knew Cui Qiushi of course. She could confirm this person was Cui Qiushi — because no one other than the real Cui Qiushi could know so many specifics about the Torchbearers' innermost workings.

Nangong was at a complete loss. For a moment she didn't know how to explain herself. Like a startled rabbit she released his hand, took two steps back, and stumbled through something half-hearted.

"I... sorry, I mistook you — no actually, I didn't mistake you..."

I was just... ha, playing a little joke on you. Not funny? Right, no, never mind then. I'll be on my way. And, uh — take care of Old Cui. He hasn't had it easy."

With that, Nangong turned around and ran without a backward glance.

But just as she was about to break out of the shadows, a figure stepped directly into her path and stopped her — looking with mild puzzlement into the shadows behind her, then turning to her with concern.

"Nangong — what's going on? Why are you running?"

"!!!?"

Nangong's whole body went rigid. She looked up in disbelief at the Cui Qiushi standing directly in front of her. The pupils of her eyes went through something like an earthquake of impossible scale.

"You... you..."

Cui Qiushi was baffled. "What about me?"

"!!!"

Nangong snapped her head back to look behind her — to find not a single trace of the person who'd been there moments ago.

Cui Qiushi was no newcomer. Nangong's behavior immediately told him something dangerous was lurking in the shadows. His expression darkened and he was already raising his sword and shield to go investigate — but Nangong grabbed him, her face a mask of panic poorly disguised as calm. She shook her head firmly.

"Don't go."

Cui Qiushi's gaze sharpened. He gently freed his arm from her grip and stared hard into the shadows. "Who's there?"

Nangong was quiet for a long moment, her expression layered with things she couldn't name.

"One... one of our own."

"?" Cui Qiushi was unconvinced. "You're sure?"

"Yes. I'm sure." Nangong drew a deep breath. Her face was written over with conflict.

Cui Qiushi frowned, looked into the shadows once more, then glanced at Nangong standing before him — and then, without further questioning, simply let it go. His expression smoothed into a smile. He patted her on the shoulder.

"All right then. You look a little drained — probably the Container's corrupting effect taking its toll. Make sure you rest and take care of yourself."

That said, he actually dropped the matter entirely and walked away.

Watching his retreating form, Nangong's heart clenched. She called out before she could stop herself.

"You... you believe me?"

Cui Qiushi paused, turned back, and smiled.

"Of course. I trust every fellow Torchbearer.

Even when they have things they can't speak openly about — it's always because they're protecting something precious to them."

...

At the same moment, deep in the Torch-Passing Hall.

The upside-down Candle Man listened distantly to the brief exchange between the two — his expression vivid beyond description.

"How could you bear to deceive them?"

From somewhere in the darkness came a sound like a quiet, amused exhale.

"Not deceiving when you can, is the same as not fighting when you should. I've finished the deceiving. Now it's the Torchbearers' turn to fight."

Chapter 1349: You've Already Started to Resemble Them

The words weren't wrong. Even the reasoning wasn't wrong. The execution, though, had been extremely rough.

The Flame of Hope hung suspended upside-down in midair, finding nothing to say. Qin Xin let it pass with a small smile, already thinking about how to comfort Nangong afterward so she'd know the Torchbearers had lost nothing to Cheng Shi's visit.

Having briefly relived the simple pleasures of a newbie fishing pool match, Cheng Shi indulged a laugh himself — but he remembered why he'd come, so he quickly settled into focus. His expression sharpened as he laid out his intentions.

"The Assembly of Gods Convention is right around the corner. I suspect the Fun God has something big prepared for me on the other side.

I can't be certain what the path ahead holds — I can only do my best. Qin Xin, I need your vote. Badly."

That vote naturally referred to [War]'s influence within the Convention — so Cheng Shi's meaning was clear: he was urging Qin Xin to inherit everything from [War] as quickly as possible, take the throne, and present himself before the world in a new form.

This didn't conflict with Qin Xin's own goals — but the problem was that the timing for revealing himself had come far too early. Qin Xin had planned to remain in the shadows a while longer, growing in strength and expanding the Torchbearers' scale. At minimum, he had intended to wait until a path toward the future became visible before inheriting that throne and bringing the Torchbearers into the open.

But Cheng Shi's words today were unmistakably pushing the Torchbearers' "God Creation Plan" to accelerate.

It was easy to hear that Cheng Shi's tone was extraordinarily earnest. The Torchbearers also genuinely owed the Fate Weaver a debt. As the founder of the fire-passing mission, Qin Xin had no obvious grounds to refuse.

But what Qin Xin considered was never only about protecting something beautiful. Beyond his personal will, he had always been thinking about what was best for this world.

He would still choose to help Cheng Shi. But before his ascension, the Torchbearers' arrangements might need some adjusting — they could not afford to have the world learn of them so quickly just because he had "revealed himself."

Cheng Shi read the conflict on Qin Xin's face and shook his head.

"By now, no one is paying attention to what kind of organization the Torchbearers are.

The gods' gaze is on me. With a figure like me out front — someone trying to drag them off their thrones — they won't invest much attention in a group of mortals who don't yet pose a threat. And when you become [War], they won't rush to make an enemy of you over a band of mortal resisters either.

The divine beings who stood in the way of [Void]'s era-ending have long since been swept out by the tides of the age. You need to understand: everything the Fun God has done throughout this entire era — all of its scheming — was to clear away every obstacle standing in the Fear Faction's path."

Cheng Shi began with what he knew of [Deceit]'s grand scheme, and told the story all the way through to the false Curtain Call that no one in the universe had any memory of.

He couldn't bring himself to tell Qin Xin about the Final Oracle again. But he did speak of the Flame of Hope turning into the [Fate] Container in order to save him.

The Candle Man's flames flared and blazed for a moment upon hearing that — then fell almost immediately into a hollow dim.

It looked at Cheng Shi in disbelief, listening as Cheng Shi finished the story of that event named "change," until its entire flame-formed body went rigid and still.

Somewhat at a loss, it said:

"It's an outer god — [Fate]?"

"No. It's [Deceit]. The outer god persona was a disguise. I still don't know why it played the role of an outer god — but it is absolutely not an outer god." Cheng Shi's voice was firm.

Or so it appeared to Qin Xin and the Flame of Hope — absolute in its certainty.

But the Flame of Hope had seen through the confusion buried inside Cheng Shi. It was just as lost.

It had questioned its own identity countless times. It had even once believed [Deceit] simply wasn't [Deceit] — that it was the heartless [Fate] who had severed a part of itself. So in its mind, [Fate] was naturally not truly [Fate] — most likely [Deceit] wearing a different identity, having deceived the entire universe.

But that speculation was completely overturned the moment it heard Cheng Shi describe the false Curtain Call. Because in its understanding: if [Deceit] had been playing [Fate], it would never have chosen martyrdom. And if [Fate] was actually [Deceit] all along, it would never have acknowledged being an outer god.

[Fate] wouldn't consider its obsession with Fixed Destiny a kind of sin — and would have no need to dump all that "blame" onto some inexplicable outer god.

Everything in the false Curtain Call had been change. And the Flame of Hope was itself change. It understood change better than anything — it could see through which wills in that performance had been freely distorted, and which had never changed from beginning to end.

So [Deceit] was still [Deceit]. And [Fate] was still [Fate].

But then — why did it feel that particular pull from [Deceit], as if some thread of faith connected them?

Could it be that the Flame of Hope's identity was actually the false one? That it was simply a creation of [Deceit] through and through? That [Deceit] had sacrificed a piece of its own authority, deceived the entire universe, and created it?

If so, what authority had it sacrificed?

And in that false Curtain Call — why, after its own disappearance, had it transformed into a genuine [Fate] Container?

The Flame of Hope fell into turmoil. Its flames swayed violently, betraying an inner state far from calm.

It asked quietly:

"And [Fate]... where is it now?"

"Same as [Deceit]. Gone."

Cheng Shi was also speculating — could [Fate]'s obsession with Fixed Destiny be nothing but [Void]'s performance? Had these two [Void] rulers settled on a plan to welcome the era's end before the era even began — and then staged a grand conflict for the universe to watch?

How else to explain that most of his Fixed Destiny had been driven by [Deceit], with [Fate] raising no objection? Or that the [Fate] of another world had changed its own will and agreed to [Deceit]-Cheng Shi's world-saving plan?

All of it was strange. There was no logical foundation solid enough to build an explanation on.

"Gone?" The Flame of Hope hadn't felt anything from its connection to [Fate] ever since [Fate] severed it. It couldn't use that to locate [Fate]. So it didn't know whether Cheng Shi's "gone" meant gone into hiding, or...

"Is [Fate]... still alive?" The Candle Man asked haltingly.

"?"

What kind of question was that?

Since it had been a false Curtain Call — of course [Fate] was alive.

"Of course." Cheng Shi answered without hesitation. "Though I suspect it may not be free right now. The Fun God has been scheming for a long time — it wouldn't allow [Fate] to disrupt its plan. So I've always felt that the scene in the false Curtain Call, where [Fate] was trapped inside the Mockery and Jeering river, was not a false part at all.

It may really have been imprisoned somewhere — just not somewhere we know how to find.

The era is moving along according to the Fun God's rhythm. But even if it's moving against [Origin] — something still feels off to me.

And that's the main reason I came here to find you.

Qin Xin — before the Fun God reveals its final plan, we must stand united.

The Convention doesn't only protect divine authority. It's also the only foothold mortals have for surviving in any desperate situation.

Only if we secure enough votes to change the universe before the Assembly of Gods Convention can we face the Fun God's plan with any composure — only then will we have the standing to search for a future that belongs to this world..."

Qin Xin listened to the end, then gave a solemn nod.

"Understood."

"..."

The heavy atmosphere was instantly broken by those two words. Cheng Shi looked at Qin Xin with a strange expression — and eventually couldn't stop himself from muttering:

"Figured. You've already started to resemble them."

Chapter 1350: A Familiar Face in the Torch-Passing Hall

Whether for Long Jing or Qin Xin, ascending to a divine throne was actually fairly simple — because both had received divine recognition and met the Convention's rules regarding Envoys inheriting thrones. All they needed was to seek an audience with Justice (Order) at the appropriate moment and have their divine authority legitimized.

The difficult case was Nangong in the God Creation Plan — someone who was actively serving as a Container vessel, hoping to earn the right of inheritance. Her ascension and Li Wufang's would likely have to wait until Cheng Shi held enough votes.

Though that wasn't far off now. The votes Cheng Shi could leverage were about to exceed half the total divine count. [Death], [Silence], and [Time] were already the Fear Faction's reliable bloc — and now, with [Chaos], [Memory], and [War] added in, even without [Void] showing itself, Cheng Shi already held six votes.

[Prosperity]'s vote was with [Fate]; [Truth]'s was with [Deceit] — those two would be hard to covet for a while. But among the remaining divine beings, opportunities still existed.

[Birth] was all about participating, and with the Eternal Sun as a point of connection, it wasn't inconceivable to win its vote at a critical moment. [Decay] was still around — given their prior relationship, and as long as it didn't interfere with [Decay]'s self-rotting, a vote might be possible. [Oblivion] was regrettable — what should have been a solid vote was now simply on hold. As for [Folly]...

Never mind.

With Brother Mouth having railed against [Folly] so thoroughly, expecting [Folly] to grudgingly acknowledge its own foolish act and join the foolish acts faction was more than dreamlike. He'd find another way to get that last vote.

Cheng Shi sighed in resignation, muttering "Folly, Folly..." under his breath. Small as his voice was, Qin Xin caught every word.

Qin Xin's brow tightened. He looked at Cheng Shi seriously. "What's going on with [Folly]?"

Cheng Shi had been about to say "nothing, just thinking aloud" — but seeing Qin Xin's expression, he blinked and turned the question back. "What's going on with [Folly]?"

He could read it clearly — Qin Xin had also run into something related to [Folly].

Things had reached this point of mutual disclosure, and everyone's efforts were unified. Qin Xin couldn't very well use Torchbearer secrecy as an excuse to deflect Cheng Shi anymore. So he told him his [Folly] situation.

"[Folly] itself is fine. But its follower came."

"?"

Cheng Shi immediately thought of Sun Miao. Now that he thought about it, this person with the Deconstructing Eye was the "mole" he had "planted" in the Torchbearers in the first place. Thinking of this, Cheng Shi's expression turned a little odd. "Her coming isn't strange at all. What's the problem?"

"Strange?" Qin Xin shook his head and exhaled. "I can't find any part of it that's normal. There are too many problems. Never mind how he got here — the most critical issue is, how do I get him to keep the Torchbearers' existence secret?"

"???"

Cheng Shi was momentarily confused — but soon realized that this [Folly] follower Qin Xin was referring to absolutely was not Sun Miao. It had to be...

"Wei Mu?!"

Qin Xin blinked. "Who else would give someone such a headache? Jie Shu?"

"..."

In fairness, Jie Shu was pretty headache-inducing too.

Upon hearing that Wei Mu had come to the Torch-Passing Hall of his own accord, Cheng Shi was visibly surprised. "He's here right now?"

"Yes. As luck would have it — shortly before you arrived, he came uninvited. If I hadn't reacted quickly enough, this little puppet would have walked right into the Flame of Hope.

Fortunately, he didn't anticipate my strength to be able to restrain him — otherwise the meeting we're having now might not be happening."

"You captured him?"

"Just temporarily restricted his freedom. I can tell he probably doesn't want to leave in a hurry either. So once we're done here in a bit..."

"No need to wait!" Before Qin Xin even finished, Cheng Shi clapped a hand on his shoulder and said with genuine delight. "I've been wanting to find him too. I'd love to ask the Road to Ascension's perennial top-ranked absents what his take is on the [Void] era's ending. Come on — take me to see him."

Qin Xin paused. He looked at Cheng Shi, looked at the Flame of Hope, then let out a smile of quiet understanding. "It seems the world's future truly has lost its direction."

Cheng Shi shook his head firmly.

"No. The future's direction is right beneath our feet — the path we walk is the world's future. But before taking that first step, we have to be careful, and careful again. The universe won't give us a second chance to start over.

Like the Torchbearers — every source of outside strength available to us must be seized. Only then can we find a single road toward light in the absolute darkness."

No sooner had the words left his mouth than the Candle Man floated upside-down near Cheng Shi's shoulder and said close to his ear:

"Strange. Somehow, the flame of torch-passing I sense in you today is stronger than anyone else here. You feel more like the Torchbearers' leader than any of them.

Weren't you the one who refused to draw close to the Torchbearers? Was it the unyielding spirit of the Torchbearers in the false Curtain Call that changed you?

Are you still Cheng Shi? Perhaps you should be called... Qin Shi?"

"..."

"..."

Qin Xin burst out laughing. Cheng Shi responded with a disgusted roll of his eyes and pushed Qin Xin forward.

He didn't deny what the Flame of Hope said. Inside, he thought quietly:

When I face despair — even when I cannot see hope — I still hope that a flame will blaze someplace else where the darkness falls. That is what this false curtain call taught me. It is also the continuation of your unyielding will and mine, carried forward into the Real Universe.

The three "divine beings" soon arrived at the room where Wei Mu was being "held." Looking at the little puppet restricted within Qin Xin's room, Cheng Shi immediately understood — this was nothing but a scouting technique Wei Mu was using. The puppet's true self was nowhere near here, and Qin Xin had no real intention of imprisoning him.

Peak combat power and peak intellect met each other. Both gave the other a degree of face.

After all, no one could be certain what provoking Wei Mu might lead to. Even after Qin Xin had inherited [War]'s authority — [War] was not [Folly]. Trying to outthink Wei Mu was impossibly hard. This game wasn't about raw power alone. Otherwise, [War] wouldn't be called [War] — it would be called [Origin].

When the puppet saw the three arrive, it blinked with slight surprise. Then, quickly, it jumped up onto the surface of the table and bowed toward all three.

"A humble mortal form, Observer of the World's Folly, Unveiler — Wei Mu, offers his greetings to the three... Envoy Lords."

That phrasing felt familiar. The last time Wei Mu had introduced himself with such solemnity, they had been in the Theocracy of Growth in Dolgod. But why had "he who draws the curtain" become "he who unveils the curtain"? What exactly had this wise man of [Folly] come to understand?

Cheng Shi was curious — but before asking his own questions, he felt the need to slightly deflate the other party's confidence first.

Standing before three Envoys as a mortal and still projecting that kind of boldness — would the rhythm of everything that followed not end up entirely in Wei Mu's hands?

So Cheng Shi let out a brief, amused sound. "How do you know three Envoys stand before you?"

Wei Mu considered briefly and answered without hesitation.

"Your identity needs no further elaboration. That of the [War] successor I had not anticipated — though by my understanding of [War], staying hidden and striking at the right moment would naturally earn its recognition.

As for this one..."

Wei Mu's eyes shifted to the Flame of Hope and analyzed.

"[War] is not achieved in a single instant. Before reaching that point, some divine being would have to be sheltering this place. And a life capable of walking side by side with both of you to arrive here... should be the guardian of this place."

The puppet turned and looked at the upside-down Candle Man with curiosity.

"I sense in you a vague, layered void-power unlike that of any currently seated divine being. So — you should be [Fate]'s Envoy? A 'rebel' who has chosen a path entirely different from the current [Fate]?"

"..."

"..."

"..."

The three looked at each other, momentarily speechless.

How do you play against this?

He lays everything bare openly — where's your move?

Cheng Shi was exasperated — but he still spotted a gap in Wei Mu's reasoning.

"You're wrong. The one sheltering the Torchbearers isn't the Flame of Hope — it's the Fun God!"

"[Deceit]?!"

Wei Mu blinked in surprise, then nodded thoughtfully. "So it goes. So [Deceit] has indeed been pulling [Fate] down a road that diverges from [Fate]..."

"..."

You can never defeat a sharp and eager learner. Or to put it another way — you can never defeat a master analyst who has no apparent blind spots.

Rather than pressuring Wei Mu, Cheng Shi's remark had only given him more material to "deduce."

Watching the puppet sink into thought, Cheng Shi gave up.

Don't try to provoke an authority in a domain where you don't excel. Better to join them than to keep pushing back.

So Cheng Shi cleared his throat and asked with complete sincerity:

"Wise man — are you open to cooperation?"