

## **The Gods 1401**

Chapter 1401: The Real Universe, Once More

Time slipped by in silence.

Fate never acted like Fate — but Deceit was always Deceit.

From the very moment this world's Deceit laid eyes on Shadow Cheng Shi, everything about him had been seen through.

After all, He was the true Fate.

Cheng Shi had never been certain exactly when the Fear Faction learned the truth of the Universe. Perhaps it was the reckless intrusion of those figures inside the spacetime storm at the dawn of the Faith Game that first aroused Their suspicion.

Then again, perhaps it was now — or at some other point during the Faith Game — when an outsider like himself, uninvited, smuggled their way into this world and gave Them the clues They needed.

Whatever the case, he could be certain of one thing: from this moment onward, at the very least, Deceit and Time knew that beyond their Universe lay another Universe.

In the world below, Prosperity was about to fall. Shadow Cheng Shi found himself in the Void, witnessing that confrontation between Existence and Void.

When he used his own Fate to "complete" the Void beneath this starry sky, no one could fathom the complexity of what churned inside him as he shouted "Void is the only truth!"

He didn't dare meet those ever-laughing eyes, afraid of glimpsing the suffering behind the smile. Yet he didn't dare look away too obviously either, afraid the other would see the future's suffering reflected in him.

So Cheng Shi could only force a smile and stand alongside his Benefactor to parry Existence.

Those who don't know need no deception. Those who already know need it even less.

Whether Time's Deduction contained errors, Time Himself knew best. So the instant He saw Shadow Cheng Shi, He already understood what had happened.

But He didn't expose it. Before departing, He simply ferried His follower safely out of this starry sky — and along with him, a Master of Trickery who had been stranded in the Void for quite some time.

In truth, Time had never so much as glanced at Su Yida. It was Shadow Cheng Shi's parting epithet — that one word, "bitch" — that drew Time's attention to the Fate-linked Master of Trickery lurking in the Void. And so He bestowed this "farewell gift" upon the Clown.

Both were hurled from the world simultaneously. Before Su Yida could even react, Cheng Shi transformed into the Hero of Today and knocked the "naive" Master of Trickery unconscious, then hauled him deeper into the Real Universe.

The Fire Passing Plan was complete — but the search for Deceit had only just begun.

Before leaving, Deceit had specifically instructed Cheng Shi not to leave the world and venture into the Real Universe.

Would the Clown listen?

Of course not!

Deceit's defiance ran in the same vein as Fate's recklessness — cut from the very same cloth.

Besides, from Cheng Shi's perspective, compared to a slice universe without Deceit, the Real Universe where Deceit was present should be considerably safer, shouldn't it?

Even if the Real Universe was boundlessly vast and he might never encounter his Benefactor, what about the off chance?

When it came to Fate... who could say for certain?

Indeed, no one could — because he hadn't even traveled far before he spotted, directly ahead, those star-like eyes devoid of joy or sorrow!

He had appeared right in front of the Clown, just like that!

That aura of coldness tinged with a trace of despair was so familiar, Cheng Shi felt an instant sense of belonging.

Shadow Cheng Shi smiled. He knew this had to be Deceit, because the cruel truth had revealed that in this Experiment, no Fate had ever walked out of a slice universe alive!

Moreover, only the Deceit who had laid bare the truth to the Clown would come to resemble Fate so perfectly. The smoothed corners of those eyes weren't an imitation of Fate — they were His innate coldness.

He didn't enjoy smiling.

Most critically, these star-like eyes lacked the brilliant gleaming points of light. The dim star-trails within seemed to narrate countless sorrowful histories, and the lonely spiral at their center was the ultimate proof of Deceit's identity!

Was it Him?

It had to be Him!

Cheng Shi gazed into those eyes, a radiant smile across his face.

'What are the odds? One second I'm wondering where He is, and the next He appears right here.'

'Is this really Fate?'

'I think not.'

Shadow Cheng Shi drifted before his Benefactor, showing not the slightest remorse for his transgression, and instead heaved a deep sigh of relief.

'As long as it's not a scam, everything is fine.'

"My Benefactor — don't tell me You spotted me the instant I left the world?"

The answer You've been searching for... any leads?"

The Clown looked up at his Benefactor, his heart stirring with excitement.

Deceit was cold. The gaze He directed at Cheng Shi was anything but friendly.

Cheng Shi blinked. He quickly ran through a mental checklist and found that, apart from his current faith being Fate, there wasn't really anything he'd done wrong.

'Is following my Benefactor's footsteps a crime?'

'I was worried about You!'

But as Deceit's silence dragged on, Cheng Shi's grin slowly faded. His eyelid twitched, and he swiftly changed tack:

"I didn't disobey Your will on purpose. I just wanted to help You however I could.

The Real Universe is vast. You're out here all alone — how could You hope to find the answer quickly?

You said it Yourself — we're racing against Origin. None of us have much time left. Only by improving efficiency do we have a better chance, don't we?

How about... You share the clues with me, and I'll help You search?"

Deceit still said nothing. Cheng Shi was truly at his wit's end. He even recycled arguments others had once used on him:

"The weight of the world shouldn't rest on Your shoulders alone. I'm the Fixed Destiny — the axis upon which the Universe turns. Fighting for the world is fighting for myself. You know how strong my will to survive is, so You should believe how powerful my motivation can be.

I really can help You, my Benefactor. I—"

"Go back!"

Deceit finally spoke — and the first words out of His mouth were two icy syllables.

"Huh?"

Cheng Shi's mind went blank. So everything he'd just said was for nothing.

He tried to argue further, but Deceit's expression didn't waver. He repeated: "Go back!"

"But I'm already here—"

"No buts!"

Perhaps it was the Clown's unsanctioned decision that had truly angered Deceit. His tone carried unmistakable gravity.

"This is not a joke!

Gods explore the path ahead at the cost of their lives, with annihilation a constant threat. Every sacrifice they make is for the sake of a future — and the Clown holds the key to the world's future. Coming here recklessly, shouldering such risk, is beyond foolish!

You should not be here, regardless of your reason.

The script has already been written for you. You... do not disappoint the Screenwriter."

With that, Deceit seized Shadow Cheng Shi without another word — exactly the way Cheng Shi had grabbed Su Yida — and flung both of these audacious, clueless mortals into the nearest spacetime storm.

Watching the dark pinpoints of light slowly coalesce and then erupt before Him, a flicker of inexplicable sorrow crossed Deceit's eyes:

"Another world has failed..."

Cheng Shi knew that a spacetime storm meant a world's destruction. Watching it unfold, he felt no better.

He couldn't help but wonder: 'What kind of experiment is Origin — this terrifying Creator — conducting, that it requires the obliteration of world after world?'

'Do the myriad living beings carry no weight or value in His eyes?'

'A god this cold-blooded — what could He possibly be racing against time for...?'

It had started as idle musing, but the moment the thought crystallized, Cheng Shi's entire body went rigid. A flash of insight blazed through his mind. His eyes flew wide, pupils contracting sharply, and he froze where he stood.

His abnormal reaction drew Deceit's gaze. Deceit seemed to sense something. He shot Cheng Shi a complicated glance but said nothing, then cast both of them into the spacetime storm.

As Cheng Shi's stunned figure vanished, Deceit returned to His icy composure.

He cast a distant look toward where the Corpse Field of Gods lay, His expression shifting several times, then departed in silence.

An unknowable stretch of time later, before the spacetime barrier on the far side, He paused briefly. The dim star-points in His eyes blazed back to brilliance, and the spiral resumed its ever-mesmerizing rotation.

He seemed to have made some kind of decision. His gaze hardened with resolve, and He returned to the world.

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#### Chapter 1402: The Return

The marvel of Time is that it can be shortened just as easily as stretched.

Regardless of everything Shadow Cheng Shi had experienced beyond the Real Universe, Cheng Shi in reality had waited just over a day.

He had assumed that sending the shadow out would let him receive both sets of memories simultaneously, but he'd been overoptimistic. The spacetime barrier severed all impressions from the shadow's side — just like the moment they'd parted inside the spacetime storm. Only when Shadow Cheng Shi returned would those memories come back with him.

During that day, the Jokers immersed in the plan hadn't been idle either. They probed Jie Shu continuously, trying to uncover his true aim.

As a follower of Memory and a former member of the History School, Zhao Xishi naturally collected information at all times and places, so having her play the interrogator didn't seem the least bit out of character.

She had already asked countless questions — on topics stretching from above the gods to below the mortals — until Jie Shu was nearly sick of answering. Yet she didn't find any of it tedious. Every now and then, she'd throw in another:

"Your plan appears to have failed. It's been over twenty-six hours, and the Master of Trickery still hasn't returned.

I can't fathom what you mean by 'getting what we each need.' All I've witnessed is a murder — a brazen murder."

"You're a follower of Memory, not a devotee of Time. There's no need to announce the hour every hour," Jie Shu replied with a sidelong glance and a cold snort.

"When I first contacted you, I didn't see you take this much interest in my plan, much less such concern for the Master of Trickery.

What — have you taken a fancy to him?"

Zhao Xishi shrugged off the barbed jest. "Not a fancy. Purely curiosity."

"Curiosity? I'd say it's not the Master of Trickery you're curious about — it's me."

Zhao Xishi arched a brow. Rather than deny it, she ran with Jie Shu's words: "Both, actually. Since we're killing time anyway, why not share? I can trade. You know Memory followers are privy to plenty of secrets."

"Other people's secrets don't interest me. I'm only interested in my experiment."

Experiment?!

The word made everyone's head snap toward him.

Jie Shu swept his gaze around, drinking in their reactions, his mocking eyes suggesting he'd anticipated this all along. He chuckled:

"That's right — this isn't just a plan. It's an experiment.

I didn't lie to you. Su Yida really is a competitive Master of Trickery with no self-awareness. His desire to kill Cheng Shi was genuine. And I happened to need an experimental subject to verify the spatiotemporal-trace resonance theory I've been researching.

We hit it off instantly — a perfect win-win. What's wrong with that?"

Wait!

The color drained from everyone's face.

If Jie Shu's so-called spatiotemporal-trace resonance theory had never been proven, then how had he used that unverified theory to send the Master of Trickery out?

'This is bad — the Wise Man set us up?'

A sinking feeling gripped the Jokers as the realization hit.

Jie Shu's plan wasn't full of holes at all. Rather, he had weaponized those apparent holes as an "invitation" — a lure!

He was fishing!

The only question was: who was he fishing for? The Jokers as a whole? One of them specifically? Or... Cheng Shi?

Jie Shu gave a light laugh — whether in praise or mockery, it was impossible to tell:

"I told you — getting what we each need.

A certain someone among you is also using my plan to accomplish what they want to do, aren't they?

Since you've hitched a ride on my vehicle, surely it's not too heartless to let me ride along for part of the way?

A partnership benefits everyone. Isn't that... what you're best at, Cheng Shi?"

"..."

"..."

"..."

Who was Cheng Shi?

Zhao Xishi — no, Zhen Xin — kept her expression unchanged. A casual wave of her hand pulled the rooftop back into the domain of Chaos. The three liars exchanged glances, all thinking the same question:

Was this a genuine probe, or a bluff seeking peace?

Cheng Shi, disguised as Mo Shu, gave a soft chuckle. Watching the befuddled Jie Shu slip into Chaos without noticing, he waved Zhen Xin off:

"It would be strange if the Wise Man couldn't guess. Don't bother with him — let him speculate all he wants.

With your Chaos identity, the most he can do is guess.

Though this does clear something up for me. No wonder he wasn't in a rush about the plan — turns out this was an experiment too.

He was certain someone would be interested in Su Yida — no, he was certain I'd be interested in Su Yida. He was even certain I'd meddle.

Which means the performance he and Mo Shu put on in front of the Dragon King and Long Jing was most likely theater. He leaked the information on purpose — and poor Mo Shu never even realized.

That also means his understanding of Su Yida is far deeper than ours. He knows the relationship between the Master of Trickery and me — and likely knows things even I don't...

Interesting. We've been piggybacking on his plan, and the Wise Man has been leveraging our strength.

But what he couldn't have anticipated is that the strength he's trying to borrow doesn't belong to us. It was a gift from another world's Cheng Shi to Long Jing.

Countless accidents puzzle-pieced together into coincidence. And when you stack this many coincidences... can you still call them coincidence?

Spatiotemporal-trace resonance...

What is he trying to find using those connections?"

"You?" the Dragon King offered, raising an eyebrow.

"No. If it were really me, he's already found me."

Unable to puzzle it out, Cheng Shi shrugged it off. "Forget it — whoever he's after, once the shadow comes back, maybe it'll bring answers.

If not, once the plan wraps up, we follow him. I want to see just what this Wise Man is really up to."

The three Jokers exchanged glances and nodded in unison. To avoid blowing their cover, Zhen Xin dispelled the Chaos field, and the rooftop quickly returned to normal.

Jie Shu noticed nothing amiss, though seeing Zhao Xishi smirking at him — neither confirming nor denying — he frowned, unexpectedly thrown.

'Wrong guess — she's not Cheng Shi?'

Jie Shu knew Cheng Shi had certainly inserted himself into this plan, but whether Cheng Shi was here in person, and if so who he was disguised as, remained beyond the Wise Man's grasp.

Today he felt oddly sluggish, far less sharp than usual. He didn't realize it was Chaos's doing; he simply assumed the others were hiding extraordinarily well.

Jie Shu scanned left and right. Seeing everyone sitting in silence with closed eyes, he frowned again and sank into thought.

The rooftop returned to stillness.

This silence didn't last long. Before long, violent spacetime fluctuations rippled across the rooftop, and the tunnel Jie Shu had left behind shattered on cue.

Then, from the stairwell leading to the abandoned high-rise's rooftop, came a single "click."

A hand pushed open an ordinary wooden door.

The four people outside opened their eyes simultaneously, each wearing a different expression as they watched the man who staggered in dragging a charred corpse.

They were supposedly looking at the man, but in truth every eye was on the charred body in his hands. Clearly, it was not the Fate Weaver's corpse.

The assassination plan had failed — but the Fire Passing Plan had succeeded.

Because the returning shadow had already transmitted all its memories from beyond the world to Cheng Shi.

At that, Cheng Shi exhaled deeply. All that remained now was rescuing Long Jing and Zhao Qian.

As for the Master of Trickery who'd survived to walk back... no one cared.

Even Jie Shu had said this was an experiment — one designed to verify the spatiotemporal-trace resonance theory. The target's safe return meant the Wise Man had already reaped his harvest from the experiment.

The four present reached an instant, silent understanding. Long Jing, on the far left, sighed: "Seems like bad news."

Zhao Xishi, on the far right, scoffed and turned to leave.

Mo Shu in the center — unusually quiet for once — and the unsurprised Jie Shu stared at the man a while longer, then spoke simultaneously:

"Who's going to handle this?"

"You do it?"

Jie Shu wanted to slip away, but Mo Shu wasn't having it.

Long Jing grinned with amusement. Feeling he ought to contribute something to the plan, he said:

"I'll do it. Leave it to me."

Jie Shu scoffed and vanished in an instant. Mo Shu followed right behind, disappearing without a trace.

Long Jing, whistling casually, flung the wide-eyed corpse of Su Yida — along with the charred remains — off the high-rise.

Down below, Zhang Jizu had been waiting for some time. From the charred corpse that plummeted before him, he retrieved the Epiphytic Wood and quietly resurrected the soul clinging to it.

When the real Long Jing opened his eyes once more and stood before the Gravekeeper, he threw his head back and laughed, clapping Zhang Jizu on the shoulder:

"Old Zhang — long time no see."

Zhang Jizu's eyes narrowed into a smile. "It's been exactly three days and four hours since the last Joker gathering. That should be the shortest interval between meetings since we first met. Hardly 'long.'"

"..."

Long Jing's grin froze in an instant, his expression turning wonderfully complicated.

"Old Zhang, you are... genuinely no fun.

Whatever — let's save people first."

At the mention of saving people, Zhang Jizu's smile faded. His eyes narrowed to slits, and he said in a low voice:

"There's been an accident. This one... can't be revived."

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Chapter 1403: The Needle-and-Thread Hypothesis

Zhen Xin's early departure wasn't an exit after the plan's completion — it was the key to uncovering Jie Shu's true purpose.

As one of the sixteen true gods presiding over the Universe, no mortal could elude her gaze regardless of how well they concealed their tracks.

Before long, Zhen Xin spotted Jie Shu employing a dizzying array of techniques to shake Cheng Shi off his tail, only to surface atop a barren mountain.

She chuckled softly, descended into the physical sky, and cloaked her form with the fullest extent of Chaos's power, then casually summoned the Clown — who had lost his quarry — to an audience at her side.

By the time Cheng Shi arrived, the Wise Man on the summit below appeared to be conducting preparatory work of some kind.

Cheng Shi fixed his burning gaze on the scene below, unsurprised:

"As I thought — he's running another experiment!"

Indeed. Since the Wise Man's theory had just been verified, he would naturally use the proven theory for the next stage of exploration.

Zhen Xin observed with keen interest, asking as she watched:

"How does it feel to be outwitted, Lord Yu Xi?"

"?"

Cheng Shi shrugged it off, shaking his head with a wry smile. "I've been the target of someone's schemes the whole way here. I'm used to it."

Zhen Xin raised an eyebrow, not expecting him to say that. She laughed:

"This time is different. The one who outmaneuvered you isn't a god — it's a mortal."

Cheng Shi glanced at her:

"It's not as if mortals have never outwitted me before. You and Zhen Yi conned me plenty of times before this..."

Besides, what's the difference between a mortal and a god? One just lacks a Divine Throne; the other happened to receive an Authority.

In this experiment run by the Creator, mortals and gods alike are pitiable test subjects — lost beings who can't see the road ahead.

At their core, there is no difference."

"..."

When the conversation climbed to that altitude, idle chat couldn't go much further.

Zhen Xin studied Cheng Shi with a peculiar expression — not the way one looks at a friend, and certainly not at a fellow Joker, but at a "senior" — someone standing at the crossroads of the world, about to guide the Universe forward.

The feeling was subtle, gradually blurring her memory of who Cheng Shi used to be.

The Clown hadn't been like this before. He'd been carefree, cunning, lazy, always grinning, with a tongue that dripped venom.

Now he was composed and decisive, strategic and measured. He still smiled often, but the flavor of those smiles had shifted.

And his tone increasingly resembled those gods whom the world regarded as lofty and untouchable. Even without being one, a faint "divinity" seeped from him all the same.

Zhen Xin's gaze grew complex. She studied Cheng Shi and murmured: "Always talking about 'lost souls' and 'core nature' — I feel like you're drawing closer and closer to Fate."

Cheng Shi paused, then smiled gently:

"Fixed Destiny is, by nature, Fate."

'So he's fully accepted his identity as Fixed Destiny...'

Zhen Xin said nothing, only nodded in silence.

While they spoke, the Wise Man on the summit finally completed all his preparations. He tore open another spacetime tunnel on the mountaintop, leading to parts unknown — though this one was visibly more stable than the rooftop version.

More than that, the surging Memory divine power spilling from within immediately reminded both Cheng Shi and Zhen Xin of the "Old Self in Memory" Long Jing had carried in his ring.

The Wise Man had indeed reaped something from the earlier plan!

Seeing Jie Shu poised to leap in at any moment, Zhen Xin raised an eyebrow:

"Do we stop him?"

The whole reason Jie Shu set up his counter-trap was to get his hands on our so-called 'resonance method.' President Gong's ring was exactly what filled that gap.

Truly worthy of the number-two on the Road to Ascension, right behind Wei Mu. He made no overt move during the earlier experiment, yet he still deciphered every step from start to finish and quickly replicated a similar path.

Sometimes I wonder whether the brains inside these Wise Men's skulls are even human.

Are they really just players? They're not all avatars of Folly, are they?"

"?"

Cheng Shi froze. Zhen Xin's offhand remark set off a flash inside his mind — a vague notion flitting through and vanishing.

He didn't manage to catch it, and instead asked curiously: "What made you think of that? Did Chaos's Will spark an inspiration?"

"Not at all." Zhen Xin shook her head. "It's just that, having observed through Chaos's lens for a while, I find a power like Folly's — one that sees through everything — rather staggering.

Folly is one thing — He is a god, after all, a true deity affirmed by Origin.

But Wei Mu, Jie Shu, and their ilk... compared to ordinary people, aren't they just absurdly overpowered?"

"Obviously. He's got cheats. Of course he's overpowered.

If you activate cheats and still perform worse than a regular person, what's the point of cheating?"

"?"

'My question was whether he's cheating? Wasn't I asking where the cheats come from?!'

Zhen Xin blinked, then broke into a laugh.

'The Fate Weaver really is still the Fate Weaver.' What had changed was his attitude toward the world, not the bedrock of who he was inside.

He would always be that oddly wired Clown — it was just that reality's weight no longer allowed him such lightheartedness.

"Make up your mind quickly," Zhen Xin said, her smile fading as she urged. "If Jie Shu leaves this starry sky, there's nothing I can do to help."

She then gave Cheng Shi a suspicious once-over and added cautiously: "You're not planning to follow him out there again, are you?"

"..."

'Am I really that wild? Never home for a single night?'

The corner of Cheng Shi's mouth twitched. He gave a helpless grin.

He had no intention of going out — because going out meant getting yelled at. But he had no intention of stopping the Wise Man either, because he couldn't be sure that Jie Shu wasn't the "thread" stitching different slice universes together.

Jie Shu was too mysterious. So mysterious that all anyone knew was that he was an outsider — no one knew his origin.

"Everyone knows Jie Shu is a 'smuggler.'

He appeared out of nowhere, claimed the number-two spot on the Road to Ascension, and Su Yida was the one he brought into our world.

Doesn't that strike you as strange?"

Zhen Xin tilted her head. "Strange how? It's not as if smugglers are all that rare."

"No — he isn't a simple smuggler.

Think about it. A Wise Man has appeared in the Real Universe. Where is this Wise Man's 'home'?

He couldn't have materialized from nothing. Some original world must have 'birthed' him.

But where is that world?

Or to put it another way — has our own world ever produced anyone resembling a prototype of Jie Shu?"

Zhen Xin seemed to grasp where Cheng Shi was heading, though she remained puzzled:

"Every world is different. Perhaps our world simply doesn't have a Jie Shu, and the one we know came from another world?"

Cheng Shi shook his head. "I used to think so too. But if you look back carefully, you'll notice that while beings in different slice universes may have different fates and endings, the premise is that they all exist — in every single world!

You, for example. The gods. The Jokers. The Destined Ones. Countless beings who — whether by rallying around or pressuring Fixed Destiny — helped it reach this point...

Once something is linked to Fixed Destiny, it cannot be a rootless drifter.

I'm not putting a crown on my own head here. This is the blood-soaked experience of countless worlds, countless iterations of Fixed Destiny. This Experiment was launched for Fixed Destiny's sake, so every existence related to it must have a traceable origin.

But Jie Shu...

At least as of now, we haven't found his roots. Even his memories are severed from the moment he arrived.

Nobody knows where he came from, nor what he's truly after.

So I suspect he may not belong to this starry sky at all. He may belong to..."

Zhen Xin's gaze sharpened. "The Real Universe?"

"Exactly!"

What if he was born of the Real Universe — what if his roots are there?

I can't imagine any world birthing a Wise Man like him, who — without ever having a connection to me — left his own world to search for a starry sky without a Fixed Destiny.

But if some will — or wills — within the Real Universe created him and then deployed him as a needle and thread to stitch countless worlds together... that's the only explanation that makes sense.

Yes, we were outmaneuvered during this plan. But it's also a fact that the Wise Man helped us pass the torch.

No matter how mysterious he is, no matter his intentions — the bottom line is he's caused no damage to this world, nor committed any unforgivable sin.

The assassination was only his bait. Drawing me into the game was his real objective.

That being the case, I have to ask: should we really risk depriving other worlds of their 'needle and thread' by keeping the Wise Man here?"

"..." Zhen Xin had never left the world. Everything she knew about the Real Universe came from Cheng Shi's descriptions. Yet even from those alone, she could vividly imagine how wondrous that starry expanse must be — a place where nothing would truly be surprising.

"So you think he's not only a needle and thread, but a reusable one?"

And that's why you're letting him go?"

Cheng Shi nodded. "That's my guess. Unless we can find the Wise Man's 'birth certificate' somewhere in our own world, otherwise—"

"No need for 'otherwise.' The Wise Man is gone."

Before her words had fully settled, the Jie Shu atop the mountain stepped into the spacetime tunnel with a grave expression.

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Chapter 1404: Two Accidents

Gazing at the mountaintop's return to silence, Cheng Shi and Zhen Xin wore complex expressions in their own ways.

No matter how Cheng Shi speculated, it remained a hypothesis. For both of them, whether to stop the Wise Man or let him go was a gamble staked on courage.

Nobody knew whether the departure of the Wise Man was ultimately good or bad.

Perhaps some would ask: it's only a mortal — does it really warrant this much caution and gravity?

Perhaps not. Perhaps the concern was unnecessary. But Cheng Shi didn't dare bet on it.

When you walk in ignorance, you stride boldly forward. Once you learn the truth, you step with exquisite care.

The greater the pressure, the more you fear a wrong step. That, too, was why Cheng Shi had insisted Long Jing flawlessly replicate everything he'd experienced in the other world.

A world that had lost hope needed only to transmit its wrong choices outward. But a world that had gotten every answer right didn't dare alter a single variable on the road ahead.

To other worlds, they were the lucky ones — but how far that luck would carry them, nobody could say until true Misfortune arrived.

"What's done is done.

Now that the Wise Man has left the stage, we should head back and welcome our triumphant hero."

Cheng Shi smiled and gestured for Zhen Xin to return together to the Joker Gathering Place. But Zhen Xin's expression shifted. She shook her head and, with a wave, summoned the Dragon King and the other two directly to them.

When Cheng Shi saw three Jokers standing before him with grim faces, his gaze sharpened. He realized something had gone wrong.

"Zhao Qian and Su Yida... where are they?"

Long Jing opened his mouth, unsure how to begin. He looked toward Old Zhang. Zhang Jizu gently laid down a charred corpse, then sighed deeply:

"The Torchbearer... can't be revived."

"!!!" Cheng Shi started. "Why?"

"His method of suicide destroyed his own soul." Zhang Jizu narrowed his eyes. "At first, I thought the spacetime barrier had blocked his soul's transfer.

But then I reasoned: since he died in this world too, my Benefactor's Fishbone Hall should at least hold the soul from his death in this world.

The truth is — it doesn't!

He left no soul at all when he died."

The instant those words landed, every sharp mind present understood.

Zhao Qian had done it deliberately.

Perhaps fearing that a version of himself capable of resurrection might somehow endanger the Cheng Shi who safeguarded the torch, Zhao Qian's death was not only absolute — it was "clean."

The flames of War had burned his soul to ashes, leaving a corpse with not a single thread for anyone to pull.

Of course, he hadn't made this choice for Cheng Shi the person. He'd made it for the most beautiful dream of passing the torch that burned in his heart.

That was simply who the City Builders were. When they saw someone who could hold the torch higher, every last one of them would willingly become a stepping stone beneath that person's feet.

Cheng Shi was moved once again. Time and again he thought he'd seen too much, that nothing could shake him anymore — and time and again, the Torchbearers' flames found a way to kindle those around them.

He gazed at this former teammate, this fallen "torch-carrying comrade," with infinite sorrow. He bowed his head in silent tribute and murmured:

"Sparks fade, but the torch burns on.

Farewell, my friend. May you be free of suffering. May your wish be fulfilled. May the new world you all dreamed of... be on its way.

To the greatest of Torchbearers."

Every person present lowered their heads, eyes brimming with respect: "To the greatest of Torchbearers."

The atmosphere turned solemn and heavy. Cheng Shi closed his eyes, exhaled hard, and broke the silence:

"Even a spray of sparks that will inevitably die leaves traces of light through the darkness it crosses.

Zhao Qian's story ends here. But what about the other one?

Where's the Su Yida that President Gong brought back?"

At the mention of Su Yida, the three faces grew even more peculiar.

The Dragon King spoke, his expression grave:

"A third party intervened. Someone intercepted our plan. I threw two corpses off the rooftop, but only Zhao Qian landed in front of the Gravekeeper.

Su Yida's body... vanished."

"???"

Both Cheng Shi and Zhen Xin froze. "What do you mean, vanished?"

Zhang Jizu's eyes were narrowed to slits, his expression none too pleased. The Fire Passing Plan had gone smoothly from start to finish — except at his step, where two accidents struck. Neither was his fault, but it was infuriating all the same.

"It disappeared mid-fall.

I investigated the area immediately afterward and found no traces whatsoever.

Whoever did this was powerful, bold, and meticulous. They didn't just take Su Yida's corpse — they even extracted the Epiphytic Wood from his body and stuffed it into Zhao Qian's remains.

Based on that, they bear us no ill will. They simply had a keen interest in the Master of Trickery."

The Dragon King added: "The power of Memory couldn't locate the true past either. That means the perpetrator either has a method to evade Memory, or they're a..."

"Deity?"

Cheng Shi frowned. At this point, it didn't seem like any deity would do something like this.

When Deceit was still around, this was exactly the sort of thing that'd get pinned on Him. But the number of gods still alive in the Universe was dwindling — who would bother paying attention to a Master of Trickery at a critical juncture like this?

Zhen Xin raised an eyebrow and offered a guess:

"What if it was Jie Shu?

What if the true needle and thread isn't Jie Shu alone, but him and Su Yida together?

Don't forget — everyone assumes Su Yida was someone he brought to this world. Could he have taken Su Yida back, heading with the Master of Trickery to the next world?"

It sounded plausible, but Cheng Shi still shook his head:

"That doesn't add up. You were right there. If the Wise Man could slip past your gaze and double back, that level of power rivals a god's — so why bother with schemes at all?

Unless he had help. And help of that caliber would need at least Hong Lin's level of strength, or perhaps even...

Wait!

Wei Mu?"

A flash of insight lit Cheng Shi's eyes. "Earlier, what was it you discussed with Jie Shu — he didn't attend the Audience Meeting because he was afraid Wei Mu would see through his confidence?"

What confidence? Knowledge of the Real Universe? The ability to leave the world?

But is Wei Mu really that easy to handle?

Wouldn't Jie Shu's absence from the meeting make the number-one on the Folly Ladder suspicious?

We're talking about Wei Mu. The moment he starts suspecting something, can Jie Shu's schemes really stay hidden?

I doubt it!

So it wasn't just us watching the Wise Man — the other Wise Man may well have been watching him too.

Bold yet meticulous. No trace left behind. Even Memory's power can't find anything... If there's one mortal who could pull that off...

Do you think Wei Mu could?"

Of course he could!

No one doubted Wei Mu. Such was the reputation and strength of the undisputed number-one on the Ladder of Ascent.

Cheng Shi's speculation was somewhat baseless, yet the Jokers found no holes in it.

After all, Su Yida was linked to the unveiling of the Universe's truth within their world. If Wei Mu had taken him, that made sense.

"But for what purpose? Just to probe what we've been doing, or — like us — to figure out what Jie Shu is after?"

Besides, Wei Mu's on good terms with all of us. There's no need for him to be this secretive, is there?" Long Jing voiced his confusion.

"Who cares why. We'll go look and find out."

With that, Cheng Shi turned to Zhen Xin. She understood immediately and activated her true god's vision to survey the Universe from above — but this time, her search came up empty.

"Can't find him?"

"It's not that I can't find him. He's been shielded.

And the only thing that can shield Authority... is Authority."

"..." Cheng Shi froze, then something clicked. His expression turned incredulous.

...

Meanwhile, elsewhere.

A corpse lying on the ground jolted awake, eyes snapping open, gasping for air. His face was tense, drenched in sweat. Before he could make sense of his situation, a mechanical, puppet-like voice reached him from above:

"Master of Trickery Su Yida?"

...

Chapter 1405: Even the Wisest Can Stumble

Su Yida scrambled to his feet in an instant and lurched backward.

Death was too terrifying. He never wanted to experience it again.

That suffocating despair still coiled through his mind, so acute that even his desperate movements came out contorted and misshapen.

Yet even with no strength left in his body, he retreated like a madman — until there was nowhere left to go. He pressed into the corner of a wall, shaking from head to toe, and through the terror clawing at his chest, finally looked toward the source of the voice — a... puppet?

Just a puppet?

Su Yida's first thought was the Puppet Master. But followers of Silence wouldn't speak so freely — at least none he'd ever met. Any other associations with puppets... there were too many, and his shattered mind couldn't sift through them fast enough to identify the figure.

All he could manage was a trembling question: "Who... are you?"

The puppet paid no mind to Su Yida's reaction. It hopped down from the lab bench, gave a slight bow, and introduced itself:

"Wei Mu. Pleased to meet you."

Who?!

Wei Mu?!

The number-one on the Road to Ascension — the player hailed as the Behind-the-Scenes Puppeteer closest to godhood — Wei Mu?!

Su Yida was stunned. He could scarcely believe it. "You're... with them?"

Clearly, his recent death had rattled the Master of Trickery to his core.

The puppet shook its head, expressionless:

"No. You're simply letting fear devour your reason. Otherwise, you should be able to see that I saved you — not harmed you.

You're very bold.

To be honest, with your methods and strength, going up against any single one of them would likely end badly for you.

Yet you dared to fight all five, and in a situation where the path ahead was completely unknown, your 'desire to become a god' alone was enough to make you come here...

All I can say is — no wonder Jie Shu chose you. That unique driving force of your twisted ambition really is a fine trait for experimentation."

"?"

'What is this puppet babbling about?'

Su Yida was lost.

He admitted that the shock of death had left his consciousness in utter disarray, making everything harder to process. But why wasn't the confusion stopping? Why was the bewilderment only growing? And why were his eyelids getting heavier, his vision blurring?

Su Yida wasn't stupid — but it depended on who he was being compared to.

Before Wei Mu, the shrewd Master of Trickery was as simple as a blank sheet of paper.

He hadn't even worked out why Wei Mu had saved him before he lost consciousness entirely inside Wei Mu's laboratory.

Yes — this was a laboratory.

The puppet watched Su Yida's eyes slide shut, nodded, and murmured:

"Dosage is just right. Now then — time to analyze how to slip out of this starry sky."

With that, the puppet climbed onto the lab bench and began operating.

The cavernous laboratory erupted with successive rumbles as countless instruments whirred to life. Data cascaded across displays. Everything proceeded in orderly fashion — until...

"BOOM—"

A violent, distorted spacetime fluctuation detonated without warning in front of the lab bench. Instruments shrieked and spat sparks as if struck by an electromagnetic pulse. Alarm after alarm blared in rapid succession. The scene dissolved into chaos.

And from the heart of that wretched maelstrom, a disheveled figure was squeezed out of the spacetime tunnel and fell squarely in front of the puppet.

His back was to the puppet; he didn't notice its presence right away. But when he saw who was lying on the floor before him — the Master of Trickery — a chill raced down his spine. He whipped his head around.

And met a pair of eyes devoid of all emotion.

Wei Mu!!!

It was Wei Mu!!!

The figure's pupils contracted violently. He froze where he stood.

The puppet found this rather unexpected as well, but moments later gave a soft "Oh," as if the pieces had clicked into place all at once.

"I've always known there was something off about your identity, but I never imagined the source would be here.

No wonder He said my foolish act was about to begin. So, I too have been locked inside this cage called Fixed Destiny.

And I believe you understand now as well. Seeing me here is quite the surprise, isn't it... Jie Shu?"

Indeed — the figure who had tumbled from the spacetime tunnel was none other than the Jie Shu who had vanished from the mountaintop just moments ago.

Jie Shu had never dreamed he would find Wei Mu here. He knew exactly what this meant. With a self-deprecating scoff, he lowered his proud head.

'He who laughs at others ends by laughing at himself. A wise man's thousand calculations across a lifetime — and in the end, he stumbles at the finish line.'

To explain all of this, one had to start from the true purpose behind Jie Shu's experiment.

Cheng Shi had guessed half correctly. Jie Shu was indeed no rootless drifter — but where his roots lay, even he himself did not know!

In his earliest memories, he had already been awake in the Real Universe, a Master of Trickery by his side. The limited memories told him that he had exhausted every possible means to escape from a world's destruction, narrowly saving his life — but at the cost of a gap in his memory.

What remained told him he was searching for a world without Cheng Shi. The Master of Trickery beside him was the key to finding that safe haven. The reason was simple: the Fate Weaver represented destruction. Every starry sky where he existed had ultimately collapsed.

Being a Wise Man who followed Folly, if he noticed distortions in his own memory, he would never trust what was left — because memories were easily fabricated, especially for "experimental subjects."

Jie Shu understood this keenly, so he treated everything in his memories with suspicion. Even though the Master of Trickery's fragmented memories corroborated his own, he still refused to believe.

Until, drifting through the Real Universe, he witnessed the destruction of world after world — and every single one was tied, in some way, to the Fate Weaver...

At last, he believed.

But what he believed was only the logic of searching for a "safe world" — not that he was a complete, independent individual.

More than finding a safe world, the Wise Man in Jie Shu wanted to understand what memories he had lost, and whether those broken fragments were truly his own.

So he quietly launched his own verification plan. The first step: deceiving the Master of Trickery who traveled at his side.

"Deceiving" was perhaps too strong a word. The Master of Trickery's cunning seemed rather childish beside his. A few nudges were all it took to ignite Su Yida's twisted hatred of Cheng Shi. Then, carrying the Master of Trickery along, he traversed Dolphin Bridge after Dolphin Bridge, making contact with different versions of Cheng Shi, laying the groundwork for his plan.

For Su Yida's benefit, he fabricated a complete scheme: their only chance was to find a still-weak Fate Weaver, kill him, and then relocate to that world. In reality, Jie Shu was preparing to trace back to the source of his own identity.

He told Su Yida that any Cheng Shi who could exist in the Real Universe was already too powerful for him to face alone — so they needed to settle in a relatively safe world first, strengthen the Master of Trickery, and then work together to bring the Fate Weaver down at their leisure.

The power-hungry Su Yida believed every word and descended into this world alongside Jie Shu.

What followed was the story of everything that happened within this world. While advancing his plan, Jie Shu simultaneously gathered intelligence and searched for any trace that he might once have existed here. The first two bore fruit; the last yielded nothing.

The Wise Man grew ever more curious about his own origins. After extensive deliberation, a bold plan took shape.

He designed a way to borrow Cheng Shi's methods, discovered a technique for "tracing origins," and without a moment's delay launched an origin-seeking experiment modeled on "Old Self in Memory."

The other Su Yida's safe return had provided Jie Shu with ample experimental data. By fitting the data and replicating the divine-power ratios within the spacetime tunnel, he successfully opened a passage connected to the deepest resonances of his past self.

Beyond that, he had woven a few creative touches into the experiment.

Jie Shu reasoned that if he truly was an independent being who had fled the destruction of some world, that world had most likely already collapsed. Tracing back to it could mean perishing alongside its ruins.

So he anchored the spacetime destination within this world. If he could find traces of his past existence here, he would have a way to recover his memories.

But the search for his own identity outside the experiment had turned up absolutely nothing, already planting an ominous suspicion. And now, that suspicion had been confirmed at last.

...

Chapter 1406: Cause and Effect Will Always Close the Loop

He had landed right in front of Wei Mu!

That meant his identity was inextricably linked to the indisputable number-one on the Road to Ascension.

The problem was that their ages made any biological relationship impossible — so the connection could only be... experimental in nature.

Then who was the test subject?

The answer was self-evident.

Looking at the flash of despair and anguish in Jie Shu's eyes, the puppet nodded, expressionless.

"It seems the experiment will need to be conducted differently.

I've long wanted to throw a proxy puppet beyond the world to witness the wonders of the Real Universe, but I could never find the method.

Today, I not only found it — I even gained a complete set of reusable spacetime experience.

As thanks for your 'sponsorship' and 'support' of this experiment, I'd like to name the test subject 'Jie Shu' — to honor your contribution.

What do you think, Jie Shu?"

"..."

In that moment, Jie Shu found where he came from.

The puppet ignored the increasingly silent Wise Man and continued:

"So everything was ordained all along. Hmm — this may be the first time I've truly felt the wonder of Fate.

Snatching someone from Yu Xi was an act born of desperation. But now, you've given me the opportunity to smooth things over.

I imagine the Master of Trickery was bound to you in exactly this fashion?

Good. If I send you both out of this world, perhaps — considering that the next world's Yu Xi will benefit — the Yu Xi of this world won't hold my impudence too much against me.

In that case, I'd trouble 'Jie Shu' to take this Master of Trickery and set off on a new journey together.

Relax. We'll meet again.

At the end of the next world's era, I'll be waiting for you — in another laboratory."

"..."

Naturally, the original Jie Shu was kept behind.

He was the experimental result sent by a Wei Mu from another world. This Wei Mu accepted the delivery, expressed his thanks, and in turn dispatched a new "Jie Shu."

Traveling with the Wise Man, of course, was the Master of Trickery Su Yida — now reduced to a test subject.

A new cycle of experimentation had begun. Every Wei Mu, at the very moment he launched his experiment to explore the Real Universe, would receive the results of an identical experiment from elsewhere — and then send out a fresh sample.

No one knew when these "stitches" binding countless slice universes together had first started. But the ones threading the needle knew: if possible, they would keep sewing.

...

Elsewhere.

The Jokers departed.

Sometimes, the absence of an answer is itself an answer.

The moment Zhen Xin said "the only thing that can shield an Authority is another Authority," the Jokers had their answer.

Staggeringly unexpected — yet impeccably logical.

How else could one explain Wei Mu's intellect and computational prowess? How else could one explain the chasm between him and every other peak player?

It was only that Cheng Shi had never imagined the thing he'd been searching for had been hiding right beside him all along.

Folly truly deserved the title of the Universe's supreme intellect. Sometimes, He was even more deceitful than Deceit.

The good news: proximity to Folly's Authority had indeed brought answers about the world's future.

The bad news: did this count as a contamination of Wei Mu's will?

When Wei Mu had deduced everything and delivered his so-called Void answer, had he known he was Folly's Authority?

Cheng Shi sank into deep thought.

He felt that regardless of whether Wei Mu knew, the puppet would certainly want to talk. The era had evolved to this point; every path forward would eventually converge. No one could escape the final curtain call, so they would surely meet again — before the future arrived, or before the world ended.

He could sense that Wei Mu wasn't a conservative from the Approach Faction, nor did the puppet bear any ill will toward this world. So perhaps the little puppet wouldn't metastasize into an obstacle?

It was also in this moment that Cheng Shi recalled another person.

Sun Miao!

If the Jokers' suspicion was correct — and Wei Mu really was Folly's hidden Authority — then as a symbol of the old world's divine power, Wei Mu could never approach the "new" Origin and become a "god" in the new world. That meant the seat of Folly would be left vacant.

Which meant someone in reality would need to be found — a follower of Folly close to Fixed Destiny — to inherit everything of Folly and become the new deity.

But among those near Cheng Shi, who had the "qualifications"?

After thinking it over, it seemed only Sun Miao fit the bill.

But actually — no!

Because when it came to proximity to Folly, there was someone far more qualified than Sun Miao: Galusha!

At the very least, her devotion to Folly was beyond reproach.

Yet from Cheng Shi's perspective, a Sun Miao who wholeheartedly believed in Yu Xi was clearly a better fit than a Galusha whose very foundation was madness. So his inclination was for Sun Miao.

That being the case, it was time to pay another visit to the Fire Passer Hall.

Since his showdown with Deceit, Cheng Shi had learned all the truths. That meant the Flame of Hope naturally couldn't be an Envoy formed from the sliver of Change that Fate had cast away — He could only be a "creation" of Deceit's.

Yet when one also considered that the Flame transformed into a Fate Container upon death...

Cheng Shi couldn't help speculating about the Flame of Hope's relationship with the true Fate.

One must not forget: when the real Fate fell, He had brought a thread of Origin's power into this world. Where exactly that power had gone, Deceit still had not revealed.

'Could it be Him...?'

Cheng Shi didn't want to guess and didn't wish to guess. He wanted the Flame of Hope to tell him personally.

Yet his plan fell apart. By the time Cheng Shi contacted Qin Xin, he learned the Flame of Hope had already vanished — and along with Him, the "Vice President" Sun Miao.

"What do you mean, vanished?"

"Can't be found. Can't be reached. Every trace has been erased. Aside from my memories of him and Him, it's as if they never existed.

I didn't dare tell the others. I only said the Flame of Hope was on a classified mission.

But I feel... it doesn't look like He left on His own because the torch had grown stronger. It's more like He deliberately distanced Himself from us."

"..."

Cheng Shi stood dazed before Qin Xin, feeling once more that helpless sensation he hadn't felt in a long time — being swept along by an invisible force.

He could roughly guess that the Flame of Hope's disappearance was connected to Deceit's larger design. But why Sun Miao?

Sun Miao's vanishing cost Cheng Shi his best candidate for the seat of Folly. Fate went round and round, and seemed to have circled back to Galusha once more.

In that moment, he finally understood why he'd been able to pull Galusha — a being who didn't belong to this era — out of a Trial of Truth.

So Deceit had long since corrected the course for the current crossroads.

'Then what is Galusha up to now? Oh, right — she's been frequenting Aph Ros's Dolgod lately, apparently fascinated by the experiments there.'

Cheng Shi fell silent. After a long pause, he nodded:

"Fair enough. Everyone has their own path to walk.

All I can do is bring together the wills that wish to draw close, and let them walk side by side. But if He, he, or she want to forge their own road, I'm naturally delighted to see it.

If it works, we'll be each other's backup plan.

Qin Xin — time waits for no one. Are you ready to inherit everything of War?

This time you won't be alone. Several others will join you, ascending to godhood together."

...

Chapter 1407: Please Let Me Be Someone Useful

Cheng Shi silently reviewed the several "new gods" about to ascend.

Qin Xin went without saying. After reclaiming everything of War from the Real Universe, he was, at this point, virtually indistinguishable from the true War — lacking only the Divine Name.

The Dragon King was the same. At the very least, before Memory departed, He had left behind the Container representing Memory's Collection Hall to His follower, signaling He had already chosen a successor for His Divine Throne.

Li Wufang's situation was slightly more difficult. After all, Cheng Shi had only obtained the Order Container. To push the Investigator onto the Divine Throne, he needed Justice — the manifestation of Order — to acknowledge that the true Order, Pride, had left valid expectations and instructions for Li Wufang before self-destructing.

Given Justice's rigidity, this might not be easy. But no matter — Cheng Shi had a fallback. Even if Li Wufang's succession was blocked, he could convene an Assembly of Gods Convention and use a vote to place the Investigator directly on the Divine Throne.

When he tallied the counts — Prosperity, Death, Truth, War, Chaos, Silence, Existence, Void... the Fear Faction had long since commandeered the voting bloc. They held absolute control. As soon as Deceit returned, the Pact of Gods would no longer constrain Them. Instead, it would become a tool for the Fear Faction to govern the Universe.

The Pact truly was a brilliant move — especially for the weak seeking Divine Thrones.

Whether Deceit had foreseen all of this back when He'd hoodwinked the gods into signing the Pact, who could say?

Beyond those three, this visit to the Fire Passing Hall had yielded an unexpected "gift."

That old friend who'd been terrified of causing trouble in the Fire Passing Hall — Nangong — seemed to have adapted to the Decay Container's erosion.

Qin Xin told Cheng Shi that the Container's corrosive force was weakening. Nangong no longer had to wrestle against it every waking hour.

Cheng Shi blinked, instantly realizing it wasn't that Nangong had adapted to Decay — it was that the true Decay... was fading.

Though within the game, not all Decay followers had perished, the Decay who had learned the Universe's truth had long since stopped lingering in this starry sky.

He was vying against countless other versions of Himself across slice universes for the Creator's mercy. But by now, Origin's mercy had yet to come — and Decay was about to be "obliterated" first.

Whatever the world thought of Decay, at the very least, this rotting colossus had never been overly harsh to Cheng Shi. He had even bestowed the Authority of Proxy Action, once serving as a pillar of confidence when Cheng Shi faced his enemies.

Thinking of all this, a complex mix of emotions stirred inside Cheng Shi.

The old gods' era was indeed turning its final page.

They had pursued their own wills and were falling, one by one, on the road toward or away from Origin. Yet they wouldn't exit the stage immediately — because the ground where they fell became fertile soil, destined to birth new deities.

With the idea of conveniently claiming one more Divine Throne, Cheng Shi set his sights on Decay. If he didn't act now, the opportunity would slip through his fingers.

At the Fire Passing Hall, wearing the identity of "Flame of Hope," he summoned Nangong.

And when Nangong discovered that the god sheltering the Torchbearers was actually Cheng Shi... the girl who'd already been deceived to the point of shattering looked at the Flame of Hope before her and "shattered" all over again.

"You—"

Cheng Shi smiled. "What about me?"

"You can't possibly be the Flame of Hope." Nangong still couldn't believe it.

"Why not?"

"Because you're Cheng Shi!"

"..."

To an outsider, that reasoning might sound laughable — what kind of reason was that? But to Cheng Shi, it was the only reason that mattered.

'That's right. Precisely because I'm Cheng Shi, I am not anyone else, and I don't want to become anyone else.'

'Yet also because I'm Cheng Shi, I must be everyone, and I must become the one I don't want to become — no, not a person. A god.'

A flash of astonishment crossed Cheng Shi's eyes. He never imagined that the simplest, most straightforward truth touching his inner heart would be laid bare today by a guileless girl.

But then a smile crept across his face.

"Do you know why I called for you?"

Nangong's eyes still brimmed with shock. She nodded stiffly. "The God Creation Plan."

"Exactly. The God Creation Plan.

In truth, the God Creation Plan has already succeeded.

You should know — the Torchbearers launched the God Creation Plan to forge a deity who could oppose the gods' oppression and restore the world to clarity.

The moment Qin Xin obtained War's Authority, the plan was, in theory, complete. Given the current state of the Universe, a single true god — especially War — is enough to shelter the Torchbearers until 'the end.' You shouldn't have to endure this much suffering.

It hurts, doesn't it?"

Cheng Shi glanced at the scars covering Nangong's hands. She flinched, then shook her head, tucking her hands into her sleeves and hiding them behind her back.

"I volunteered."

"Of course I know you volunteered. The Torchbearers would never force a comrade to do something against her will.

Your courage deserves everyone's recognition."

Nangong pressed her lips together and shook her head again. Her voice carried a note of gratitude:

"I'm not brave. All my courage was given to me by everyone around me.

All along the way, I kept meeting people who helped me. They didn't look down on me. They didn't abandon me. They were willing to lend a hand. Step by step, they hauled me out of the mire...

And that includes you, Cheng Shi."

Nangong lifted her gaze to meet those "frightening" eyes of his, her own darting away slightly:

"You've always been deceiving me — but I know you meant no harm. You were helping me, helping me deal with problems I could never have faced alone."

"No — I just wanted to con you."

Cheng Shi chuckled. Not deceiving Nangong somehow felt like leaving money on the ground — it was unbearable.

Of course, that line was a deception too.

"..." Nangong was stunned into silence. She glared at Cheng Shi for a solid moment before retrieving the thread of her emotions. She continued: "Everyone's kindness — I remember all of it.

So when they were looking for someone who could withstand the Decay Container, I stepped forward.

I have no special skills. The only thing I'm good at is enduring.

If bearing pain is all it takes to help everyone, to repay everyone, then I don't see it as endurance at all — it's a kind of 'joy.'

I suddenly became useful, and that made me incredibly, incredibly... incredibly, incredibly happy.

I don't taste bitterness. I only taste sweetness."

As she spoke, a radiant smile bloomed on Nangong's face.

"..."

'One person's suffering is another person's smile.'

The thought surfaced unbidden. Cheng Shi's gaze dimmed for an instant, and inwardly he sighed: 'Why does this naive girl always manage to pierce straight through to the heart?'

'Is this what purity looks like?'

'The last person this pure... also belonged to the Torchbearers.'

'Cui Qiushi is truly blessed — a good father, and a good comrade-in-arms.'

'No — not one comrade. A whole host of them.'

Cheng Shi smiled. He already understood what Nangong wanted, but he offered one last word of counsel:

"The matter of the Decay Container is critically important to the Torchbearers' next move. Your courage is already the greatest repayment you could give to those who extended a hand to you. The road ahead will be extraordinarily difficult...

Nangong, you're a pure-hearted girl, so I won't mince words with you. Whoever takes the Container will eventually become a god. That means the God Creation Plan will continue. Before long, you may succeed as the new Decay.

And at that point, the true rot will only just begin.

I'm not Decay. I can't know how agonizing it is to slowly corrode across the endless span of a god's lifetime. Perhaps the pain then will be a hundredfold what it is now. Then again, perhaps once you receive the Authority, all suffering will leave you, and all you'll need to do is hold fast against the loneliness within your heart...

Either way, what I want to say is this: the risks ahead are enormous. You've already done more than enough. You have every right to step away here and now.

I'm not robbing you of the chance to become a god. I simply know that not everyone wants to become one."

"..."

Nangong fell silent.

She wasn't foolish. She could feel the sincerity in Cheng Shi's words and his concern for her. But she... didn't want to give up.

She thought of the pile of notebooks in her room, stacked like a small mountain. She thought of the names written on page after page. She thought of the journey she'd staggered through, pulled along

hand after hand, until she stood here today. Her fists clenched tight. She looked up at Cheng Shi, her eyes resolute, her voice unwavering:

"I want to be someone useful.

I don't covet divine power or a Divine Throne. It's simply that enduring is the thing I'm best at. If someone must bear the pain, I'd rather it be me. I don't want everyone else to suffer.

Cheng Shi... no — Flame of Hope. Please let me be someone useful.

Even if I rot for eternity in the mire, at least I can still use dead branches and fallen leaves to lift up the ones who once helped me."

Hearing those words, warmth spread through Cheng Shi's chest, and a brilliant smile crossed his face.

"Don't sell yourself short. You have always been someone useful."

...

Chapter 1408: Suffering and the Past

It was hard to imagine what kind of life and experiences could have nurtured a girl as kind as Nangong.

Perhaps before the Faith Game descended, she too had a happy home.

For reasons he couldn't explain, Cheng Shi suddenly thought of Old Jia. And Nangong, caught in the same somber atmosphere, thought of her grandfather.

A reminiscent light entered her eyes, her tone carrying the relief of someone who had made a momentous decision:

"I did it. Grandpa would be proud of me, wouldn't he?"

Cheng Shi said nothing. He knew this moment belonged to Nangong.

Sure enough, before long, Nangong bowed her head and began to murmur:

"When I was little, my family was very poor. Grandpa and Mom were both sick. We had no money for treatment. Everything in the house that could be pawned was sold — and still it wasn't enough.

We couldn't go on. Dad still refused to give up. Eventually... she found release, leaving only me and Dad to look after Grandpa, enduring one day at a time.

Suffering can drive a person mad.

Dad went mad. He heard something from somewhere and decided — since life was already this bad, why not bet everything on one throw? Could it possibly get worse?

What's scary isn't dying. What's scary is wanting to die but being unable to, and not daring to...

So that day, he made up his mind. He sold the family's only house. Twelve hundred and twenty-three yuan. With that money, he bought three bus tickets and took me and Grandpa south.

He left us sitting at the entrance and told us: whether we live or die depends on whether God takes pity on us today.

Then he turned around and walked into... a casino."

"?"

Cheng Shi froze for a moment. He never would have guessed that being driven mad meant being driven into a casino.

Nangong's smile was bleak:

"Dad won. He won a huge amount of money. God knows how much — so much that several carloads of security showed up.

They sealed the casino off completely, verifying the final sum.

We were shoved to the side. I cried and called for Dad. Grandpa covered my mouth.

But soon Dad came out. In the fastest way possible — he jumped from the casino's top floor and landed right in front of me.

Chips scattered everywhere.

He was dead.

Right before my eyes.

Countless security guards swarmed out and surrounded his body. They said Dad had been cheating, refused to admit it, and even tried to escape by jumping off the building with stolen chips that didn't belong to him...

Jumping to escape. I'd never imagined life had pushed him that far.

In that moment, my world collapsed.

And on that same day, my ailing grandfather became my entire world.

He told me this was all fate. His luck had been bad, and it had dragged Dad down with him. He knew life in this family was suffocating and had actually wanted to die long ago. But he was afraid his son would lose his father, so he didn't dare die — couldn't bear to die.

Now he dared even less, because I was still so young. A little girl couldn't survive alone in a city this big.

And so, the old man who had always lain bedridden carried me through a strange city and somehow managed to scrape by.

We lived in an alley not far from the casino, surviving on handouts from gamblers who'd won big.

Every day, Grandpa would carve characters into the wall — recording the gamblers who gave us money. He said gambling was wicked, but people's hearts leaned toward good. One thing was one thing; as long as you were alive, you must never forget the hands that were once extended to you.

Grandpa didn't know their names. He could only note what they looked like — long overcoat, yellow blouse, pleated skirt... Over time, the alley walls were covered, and the writing even became a gimmick the casino used to attract customers.

Every gambler passing by would toss Grandpa a lucky coin for good fortune. Under those circumstances, life improved a little.

But not that much. Because Grandpa was fading.

In the days before he passed, he met the person who pulled me out of that sea of misery.

The man was also a gambler — a high roller, in fact.

He frequented that casino, and every time he showed up, someone was waiting to receive him personally.

One day he noticed Grandpa begging at the entrance and sat with him for a while.

Grandpa, riddled with illness, had figured out some pain management techniques after years of being sick. The man seemed to have something wrong with him too. He watched Grandpa for quite a while, found it useful, and rewarded him with a single chip.

It wasn't until casino staff came to exchange it — all smiles and courtesy — that we learned a single chip was worth a hundred thousand yuan. That the security guards could be pleasant after all.

For a city drowning in luxury, it was a modest sum. But for Grandpa and me, alone in the world, it was staggering. So much money it was frightening.

Grandpa's conscience wouldn't rest. He wanted to return it. But when they met again, the man simply said:

'Think of it as the last thing your son won for you. Casino money — what's there to return?

Losing isn't frightening. Being unable to lose — that's frightening.

The casino was in the wrong here.'

Only then did we learn he had been one of the witnesses that day. That Dad hadn't cheated at all. He'd simply won too much...

Fate truly smiled on us — but abandoned us on the very same day.

Before long, the man gambled the casino into ruin and 'returned' half the money to Grandpa.

But Grandpa didn't take it. He didn't dare. He donated everything and kept only enough for my schooling. He enrolled me in school, and then said his goodbye to this world.

From that day on, I 'inherited' everything from Grandpa.

I'm grateful to everyone who's been kind to me, and I want to repay every person who's ever helped.

No matter how much suffering there is, I want to listen to him — and be someone useful."

Nangong wept.

Suffering had never let her go, but she had found a way to triumph over it.

Cheng Shi's expression softened. He departed in silence.

Nangong's strength was sufficient to protect her vulnerability. What she needed now wasn't comfort — it was a quiet space to tend her wounds.

After leaving the Fire Passing Hall, Cheng Shi didn't immediately summon the soon-to-be successors. Instead, in the final hours while Decay still drew breath, he petitioned for one last audience with Decay.

Decay agreed.

When Cheng Shi's figure appeared before the god — now little more than a heap of disintegrating, sand-like bones — he heard Him leave the world His last syllables of Decay.

"I... am Decay..."

You... who are you..."

Cheng Shi's expression was complex. "The sovereign of the era. The destination of Void. Deceit."

Decay was like a dying old man. He seemed to have lost the clarity to judge.

"You... are Deceit..."

Why do you carry... my Authority..."

"Only when the world returns to Void does the true curtain fall. Your Authority rests in me — you should find comfort in that.

Decay, what's done is done. I won't judge whether your choices were right or wrong. But I'm telling you — the old era is about to end. If you want Decay's Will to still resonate in the new one, then leave behind your Authority and your Divine Throne. Go.

You've done enough for Him. It's time to think about the future Decay."

The bones crumbled away. The voice grew ever more hoarse.

"You... are not Deceit...

You are Cheng Shi... a mortal..."

Cheng Shi shook his head, his gaze inscrutable:

"I am no mortal. I am... Origin.

Trust me. Draw near. I will grant Decay's Will continuation, and give the new Decay... legitimacy."

His words had barely settled before bone scattered into sand.

Decay fell — completely, irrevocably.

The black blood of the Septic Final Tomb ceased its dripping at last. It pooled calmly in the lake, as if waiting for the arrival of the next era's Benefactor.

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## Chapter 1409: The Feast of Ascension

This day would undoubtedly be recorded in the annals of the era.

In the boundless Void, five figures stood in silent stillness.

Cheng Shi stood at the fore, his deep gaze as fathomless as the Void itself, staring straight into the heart of nothingness.

He had thought for a long time. Stayed silent for a long time. Sighed for a long time. At last, he spoke:

"Begin."

The first to his left was Li Jingming. The Dragon King nodded, withdrew his Container — shimmering with deep-blue radiance, swirling with countless memories — and lifted his gaze to the sky. He addressed the Void:

"I, the practitioner of Memory's Will, the agent of Memory's Collection Hall, the recorder of this world — Li Jingming — petition under the witness of the Pact to succeed the departed god Memory's Authority."

The Dragon King's voice was soft — barely audible to those nearby.

Yet his words carried an impossible weight, so heavy that the entire Void seemed to shed its dark curtain, redecorating itself with brilliant constellations.

Justice had arrived!

That Scales of flowing light remained as resplendent as ever, as though the Universe's loneliness had nothing to do with Him.

The Pact operated as always, proceeding by the rules. But the number of gods who could attend and bear witness to this moment had dwindled considerably.

Birth's pillar descended, but gone was His usual impatience. He merely watched everything beneath the starry sky in silence, without a single word.

Folly was the same as ever — throwing in a contemptuous snort now and then.

Beyond those two, nearly everyone else present was Cheng Shi's backing.

Death arrived as promised, standing tall behind Cheng Shi. Even though the surroundings held no danger, He displayed His Scythe — forged from countless blended divinities — openly before the assembled gods.

Silence came too, keeping His distance, watching quietly.

Time, as usual, had no time...

The remaining two, Hong Lin and Zhen Xin, sat on chairs conjured from swirling yellow Chaos mist, the most enthusiastic spectators at the ceremony.

As for Servant Gods, even fewer had come. Apart from Herobos, who showed his face cautiously, nobody else dared approach.

They weren't foolish. They feared drawing attention.

Justice looked down upon Li Jingming. He seemed to have long known this day would come. Memory's choice conformed to the rules; He naturally had no power to refuse.

A ray of holy light descended upon the Dragon King's head. In the next instant, countless memories that did not belong to him — memories of across the world — flickered through Li Jingming's eyes.

Existence was made whole once more. Now it was this traveling chronicler's turn to curate the Universe's treasures.

Li Jingming felt the indescribable Authority of Memory coursing through him. He smiled faintly. The very first thing he did was file this moment into the Collection Hall.

'Changing of the Guard?'

'No — perhaps "Legitimization" would be more fitting.'

Next came Qin Xin.

In truth, Qin Xin's status no longer needed any formal recognition. He already possessed War's Authority in full. But Cheng Shi wanted more — at the very least, War's voting rights had to be firmly in his own hands.

The successor of War produced the Container Cheng Shi had given him. His left eye erupted in flame; his right eye bled crimson. Authority surged across his entire body. He spoke with solemn gravity to Justice, high above the Void:

"I, Qin Xin — the sole Proxy of War in this era — petition the Pact for the right to succeed War's Divine Name!"

The instant those words reached Cheng Shi's ears, he felt a sudden dizziness of *déjà vu*.

The phrasing was identical — word for word — to what had been said during that False Curtain Call. Back then, Qin Xin had done the same, shouting "succeed the Divine Name" before elevating himself to Envoy in the next heartbeat.

He had given everything to prevent the Outer God from taking him — even passing on War's flame.

And now, he was receiving War's flame once more...

'Surely this time, the flame won't go out.'

Cheng Shi turned slightly to look at the Qin Xin behind him. Just then, a column of holy light poured down and ignited Qin Xin's hair and beard.

The iron-tower of a man erupted once more with searing sparks — like his indomitable life itself, illuminating, with every fiber of his being, the omnipresent darkness of the world.

War's warmth lingered; Order's hum returned.

The moment Li Wufang realized it was his turn, he retrieved his Container and was about to speak — but Justice, as if acting on pure inertia, simply poured a ray of holy light down on the Investigator's head before a single word was uttered.

This violation of the Pact's protocol stunned every god present. But moments later, Justice intoned His explanation:

"Things being as they are, we all understand. This charade of 'petitioning the Pact for witness' is nothing but empty words.

Even if I refused to certify him now, at the next Assembly of Gods Convention — who would object?

You? Or you?"

The Flowing Light Scales looked toward Birth, then toward Folly, and released a long sigh:

"That being the case, let us be done with it quickly.

Manufacturing pageantry for the ascension of new gods serves the Universe no benefit.

At the very least, here, you cannot stretch the span of an era."

Never had Justice spoken so many words unrelated to the Pact. He had even streamlined the procedure, bypassing essential steps to bestow legitimacy upon the new Order.

Had the recipient been any other god, it would have been one thing. But the deity Li Wufang was inheriting was Order itself.

It looked as though Justice had suddenly ceased being just, tilting in Order's favor for personal gain.

But Cheng Shi didn't see it that way. He knew Justice had once refused Li Wufang's succession. Before they'd obtained the Container, Justice had given them no opportunity whatsoever.

If He were going to show favoritism, that would have been the time. Now, with Li Wufang's ascension practically set in stone, what was the point of "speeding things up"?

'Icing on the cake never trumps sending charcoal in the snow. Would a deity really not understand something so simple?'

More importantly, Justice's final words struck Cheng Shi as deeply peculiar. "Here" — where did He mean?

The Void?

Or reality?

'Does He... know something?'

Cheng Shi wasn't the only one who caught the nuance. The other gods sensed it too. They all turned to look at Justice — only to see the Flowing Light Scales do something exceedingly rare: they tilted. The balance that should have been perfectly level... had tipped.

Seeing this, Folly scoffed:

"So in the end, you've embraced the foolish act.

Justice — do you think your foolish act has an answer?"

"..."

Only two beings in the Universe dared mock Justice to His face before the assembled gods. Now that one had made His move, the other naturally wouldn't stay silent.

Cheng Shi hadn't forgotten the role he was playing. He was not a mortal — he was Deceit disguised as one.

So in the next instant, he let out a scoff of his own, mimicking Folly's contempt:

"Whether the old fossil's foolish act has an answer, I couldn't say.

But yours, foul-mouth — looks like it's about to run out of answers.

Still want your Authority?

Because if you don't, don't blame me for picking it up where you dropped it."

"..."

"..."

"..."

A hush fell over the assembly.

'Too convincing — it's simply too convincing!'

If they hadn't known Deceit had departed, even Death — seated on high — would have sworn what just happened was Deceit in the flesh.

His follower and He might as well have been cast from the same mold. Not a single crack or flaw to be found.

Even Hong Lin was confused. She thought Cheng Shi really wasn't here. She elbowed Zhen Xin beside her and whispered:

"What's going on — He's acting as him?"

Zhen Xin held back a laugh and nodded. "Mm. He's acting as Him. Pretty convincing."

"?"

Hong Lin's expression turned odd. 'Well of course — Deceit playing a mortal? How could it not be convincing?'

'But where did that unreliable Cheng Shi run off to this time? And why is Deceit posing as the Fate Weaver again?'

Murmurs rippled through the assembly. Folly sneered repeatedly.

He shot a sidelong glance at "Deceit" and left without another word, tossing one last remark over His shoulder:

"Picking it up won't help. Picking it up is still a foolish act."

He was fool enough. And you... surpass Him by far."

Cheng Shi shook his head with a wry smile, unbothered. In this moment, though he was no god, he carried himself with the weight of one.

The chessboard of the Universe had, at last, passed into his hands.

'So this is what it feels like to hold the pieces?'

'Heh. Not bad at all.'

Cheng Shi smiled, then looked up at the Flowing Light Scales.

"Justice — abbreviated once, abbreviated twice, what's the difference? There's one more behind me. If you'd rather not waste time, let's begin.

Otherwise, the next time we meet, it'll be awkward for both of us."

"..."

Before his words had even settled, a beam of holy light poured down upon Nangong's head. She hadn't even drawn the Container, yet she inherited everything Decay had left behind.

And in that very moment, the sole "outsider" still in attendance — Birth — finally grasped the full picture:

Justice had yielded to Void.

This only hardened His conviction further. In this era of Void, the Universe would inevitably draw closer to Void.

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## Chapter 1410: Seizing Voting Rights

What did it feel like to become a god?

For Qin Xin, it didn't seem all that different from becoming an Envoy.

As a "veteran" player who had set foot in the Real Universe, visited the Corpse Field of Gods, and learned the truth of the Universe, the only real change — beyond his title — was likely the voting rights that came with a seat at the Assembly of Gods Convention.

For the Dragon King and Li Wufang, however, the transformation from mortal to deity was seismic. At the very least, the elevation of perspective and consciousness brought the Universe's truth into sharper focus — along with the oppression and terror radiating from the Creator.

As for Nangong...

The poor girl was still in a daze.

Even having inherited everything of Decay, she still couldn't quite accept the fact that she had simply... become a deity.

'That's a god — a being mortals can only gaze up at and never see. One of the supreme powers who bestowed the Faith Game upon the Universe. And now... I'm one too?'

She was lost in the shock of godhood and the transcendence of divinity, unable to rein herself in — until the Authority settled into her body. Feeling the infinite power of Decay at last pulled her out of that chaotic state. She fell silent.

Life was eternal suffering. The life of a god was no different.

Cheng Shi had been right. If one wished to approach Origin in a pitiful guise and beg for His mercy, one must first endure agony himself.

That was Decay's Will.

Someone who didn't yet know the Universe's truth might have wondered: 'Now that I've become Decay, why must I still draw near Origin?'

But Nangong harbored no such idle musings. The Flame of Hope had said Decay must endure suffering, so she would endure suffering. As for why... life didn't come with that many "whys." As long as this was a chance to repay everyone, she would simply do it.

And so, Cheng Shi secured four brand-new votes at the Assembly of Gods Convention!

Note: these were Cheng Shi's votes — not the Fear Faction's.

Though Cheng Shi was deeply entwined with the Fear Faction and its members supported him, the Faction was ultimately driven by Deceit's Will — an extension of Deceit's design. Everything They did was, at its core, for the sake of Fixed Destiny, not for Cheng Shi.

Even if Cheng Shi was Fixed Destiny.

So those four votes were critically important to Cheng Shi's current position.

More than that, holding four votes gave Cheng Shi far more room to maneuver. The instant Nangong ascended to godhood, he raised a new request to Justice:

He petitioned for the return of Prosperity's voting rights and the reclamation of Prosperity's scattered Authority.

Prosperity's Final Oracle had shattered His Authority and dispersed it, temporarily achieving universal prosperity by an unconventional means. But that era was past. The true era now dawning was the era of "Universal Fear." So Cheng Shi struck while the iron was hot and demanded the Pact return everything that belonged to Prosperity.

At any other time, this would have been impossible. Among gods locked in open and covert rivalries with intertwined interests, nobody would willingly spit back Authority already in hand.

But things were different now. Even if the old gods each had their reservations, the new gods' wills had been braided into a single rope — and the other end of that rope was fastened to the Fixed Destiny pulling the Universe forward.

So when Cheng Shi submitted the request, before Justice had even responded, he already held five votes!

Hong Lin leapt to her feet, face alight, and nodded toward Cheng Shi from across the Void. She knew exactly what he meant. At this point, there was no need to keep performing for the old gods.

Justice had anticipated all of this. He simply hadn't expected Cheng Shi to move this quickly.

The Pact could not be defied. He could only convene the Assembly of Gods Convention per the rules and put Cheng Shi's motion to a vote.

There was one wrinkle, however: Cheng Shi wasn't actually Deceit. By rights, he shouldn't be able to propose an Assembly. The Pact did not shelter mortals.

Yet when the Assembly was indeed convened, for one brief instant, Cheng Shi genuinely believed Justice had been fooled as well.

Of course, the likelier explanation was that Justice had streamlined the process again. After all, with this many backers behind him, even if Cheng Shi's proposal were rejected, another true god would simply raise it again.

'Why make extra work?' Justice had simply indulged Cheng Shi, bringing his motion before the Assembly.

Interestingly, aside from the gods already present, no new deities attended this Assembly of Gods Convention.

Folly's absence was a concession of defeat.

For Death, Prosperity's voting rights had always been held by the Fear Faction as a proxy. Transferring them from Deceit to Cheng Shi made no real difference. Considering Fixed Destiny's importance, the Boss had no reason to object.

Silence was even less likely to object. In His eyes, Cheng Shi probably was Deceit. Why would one oppose Deceit's own proposal?

And so the motion effortlessly gathered seven votes — just two short of what was needed for Hong Lin to reclaim Prosperity's voting rights.

But those final two votes proved exceedingly difficult. There were hardly any voting-eligible gods left in the Universe.

Seeing the deadlock, Death let out a faint sigh and cast one more vote.

Cheng Shi stiffened, staring at the Boss in surprise. The green flames in the massive skull's eye sockets flickered as Death intoned:

"This... is... Time's... vote. He... has no... time... to spare... so I... cast it... on His behalf."

'Is that even allowed?'

Cheng Shi wondered. 'Can't absent gods simply not vote? Does a proxy vote actually count?'

'If so, then Void's two votes would be guaranteed in the bag...'

But before pursuing that line, Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow at Justice and tested the waters:

"I also have a vote. No — Truth's voting rights are still with me. That gives me two votes. So, old fossil, does the motion pass?"

"..."

The Universe fell silent. Justice didn't dignify the insolent claim with a response.

Seeing this, Cheng Shi clicked his tongue and sighed.

'Figures. There's no deceiving the Pact. Even if the process is streamlined, the rules must still hold.'

'But what about proxy votes? Are they valid?'

Before Cheng Shi could even ask, something unexpected happened.

No one could have predicted it. At this critical juncture, Birth — who had abstained from every vote without exception — actually cast a vote in support of His sibling god!

"In favor—"

Having spoken, the massive Divine Pillar turned to face Cheng Shi, twisting and coiling.

Cheng Shi met the gaze of the countless tightly shut eyes covering the Pillar's surface. For a moment he was taken aback — he felt that Birth had recognized him. But it didn't matter. As long as the vote landed, that was enough.

The next instant, the tilt of the unbalanced Flowing Light Scales grew more pronounced, and a resonant judgment rang out:

"Vote valid. Motion carried. Prosperity reclaims scattered Authority and associated voting rights!"

"HUMMM—"

The Pact took effect — the gavel fell.

This Assembly of Gods Convention, which should have been "entirely routine," had produced a surprise after all. But the one left stunned wasn't any absent objector — it was the motion's own proposer, Cheng Shi.

He wasn't alone. Nearly every new god present was bewildered.

'The votes were enough? Proxy votes are valid? Is that really how the rules are written?'

'If not — is this still Justice?'

'Are you sure these Flowing Light Scales aren't Deceit in disguise?'

'Otherwise, why would He lean so heavily toward the Fear Faction? Why force motions through even as the Scales tipped?'

Cheng Shi couldn't figure it out right away, but not understanding didn't mean he'd let the opportunity slip.

Spotting a "loophole" to exploit, his spirits surged and he called out again:

"Truth has fallen. I petition to exercise Truth's voting rights by proxy!"

"Denied..."

"Truth has fallen. I petition for Prosperity to exercise Truth's voting rights by proxy!"

"...Voting... begins."

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