

## The Gods 1431

Chapter 1431: The Dragon King Has Led Me Astray!

Of the sixteen Divine Thrones — setting aside the seat of Corruption, which had never been witnessed — the remaining vacancies were Oblivion, Folly, Time, and Void.

With Sun Miao's disappearance, the only candidate left for Folly was Galusha.

When Fate had sent Hu Xuan into that Trial, the intent had clearly been foreseeing this very moment at the era's end. That was precisely why He had the Sage bring Galusha out — to serve as today's Folly alternate.

And since Fate was Deceit, it meant Deceit had already located Folly's Authority by then and laid contingencies accordingly.

So was Sun Miao also one of His contingencies?

The Oblivion candidate was settled. Old Zhang was right — the Universe demanded stability now, and Oblivion followers were notoriously volatile, forever threatening to annihilate the world. Finding one who was both close to Fixed Destiny and not prone to eruptions was genuinely difficult.

Cheng Shi marveled once more at how every morsel and drop was fated. Back then, sparing Mo Shu's life had been nothing more than a whim. Who would have guessed it'd earn the Universe a "relatively stable" Oblivion?

Fate's Throne would of course go to the Blind One. But that appointment would have to wait, because the Flame of Hope had yet to be found.

Although the Pact's Proxy no longer needed a container to grant the Blind One succession, the Flame of Hope was also their companion. Before seeing him again, Cheng Shi felt he couldn't simply strip away everything belonging to Fate.

Besides, he already had suspicions about the Flame of Hope's identity. He believed the Flame would always be the Flame — even if it drew close to Fate, it would never make a decision contrary to Fixed Destiny at this critical juncture.

That left Time and Deceit...

Deceit was relatively straightforward. Long Jing was, after all, a devout and "loyal" Acrobat, and his number-two ranking proved he'd traveled far down Deceit's road.

But the seat of Time — no matter how hard he thought, the only people Cheng Shi could come up with were old friends who had faith in Time. Their closeness to Time's will, however, still fell far short of qualifying.

What to do?

Just as Cheng Shi wallowed in deliberation, two more figures materialized in the Void.

Li Jingming had arrived — with Long Jing in tow. Bewildered, Long Jing took one look at Cheng Shi and Old Zhang and blurted:

"Joker meeting?"

Cheng Shi was momentarily thrown. He looked quizzically at the Dragon King, who simply smiled:

"I know Time's Throne has been giving you a headache. So I've come to put your mind at ease."

He clapped Long Jing on the shoulder and nudged him forward a half-step. "Isn't there an outstanding Time follower standing right here?"

President Gong crossed the spacetime barrier and proved himself through a magnificent sacrifice, simultaneously raising the curtain on another world's pursuit of truth. To forge connections of time between different slice universes with such resolve — how could that not warrant a seat on Time's Throne?"

"!!!"

"???"

The Dragon King's declaration left all three other Jokers dumbstruck.

Honestly, having Long Jing inherit Deceit's Throne was an unspoken consensus among the Jokers. Even Cheng Shi felt there was no one more suitable.

Previously, there had been someone better — Zhen Xin was absolutely the ideal candidate. But Zhen Xin had already taken Chaos's Throne, which forced Cheng Shi to select from among the remaining Deceit followers.

And that person could only be Long Jing.

Long Jing had assumed the same. He wasn't entirely satisfied with the way the number-one slot had "walked off" and he'd been promoted by default, but for the Universe's sake, he was willing to accept the role.

Yet today, the Dragon King's proposal caught him completely off guard. Before coming, the Dragon King had only said the Throne successions needed to be accelerated — never that the Throne meant for him was Time's!

Long Jing stared at the Dragon King in shock, then at Cheng Shi in disbelief. The moment he saw the crease of worry between Cheng Shi's brows, he understood the dilemma:

'There's nobody left for Time.'

Long Jing wasn't averse to Time. On the contrary — he thought it was a fine fit, because the brightest moment of his entire life had been crossing the spacetime barrier and linking the temporal causality of two worlds.

Moreover, he knew the original Time had played a critically important role in the salvation effort — important in the same way he, the man who'd unveiled the Universal truth, had been. If he were to inherit Time, he had no objections.

The real question was: with his seat empty, who would fill Deceit's Throne?

Old Zhang?

Long Jing glanced at Old Zhang. One look at the Fishbone Hall behind him made it clear — Old Zhang had already inherited Death. So the only Joker left was the Doctor.

But the Doctor was slated for Truth's Throne... Which meant there was only one solution: have Zhen Xin select a new Chaos heir, relinquish the Chaos Throne, and return to Deceit's path.

Cheng Shi had arrived at the same conclusion.

From the moment he heard the Dragon King's pitch, he understood the man hadn't come solely to recommend a Time candidate. He must have found a suitable Deceit candidate first — hence pushing Long Jing toward Time.

And the new Deceit whom the Dragon King would endorse? No need to even think. It could only be Zhen Xin.

But that involved a critically thorny issue: placing Zhen Xin on Chaos's Throne hadn't been Cheng Shi's idea alone. It was Deceit's will!

Indeed — during the confrontation that had exposed Chaos's true form, Zhen Xin could never have inherited Chaos so smoothly without Deceit's backing. It was He who, at the crucial moment, returned everything belonging to Chaos and propelled His own follower onto that seat.

Which proved Deceit had also wanted Zhen Xin to inherit Chaos!

Granted, the plan was initiated by Cheng Shi and midway through he'd strong-armed Deceit into cooperating. But if this hadn't been part of Deceit's blueprint, He could easily have warped Cheng Shi's will during execution — He was certainly no stranger to that move.

So Cheng Shi hesitated. Was there a deeper purpose behind Deceit placing Zhen Xin on Chaos's Throne? Or had it merely been a temporary gambit to neutralize Order's vote?

Yet under those circumstances, Order's vote had been virtually moot anyway...

Cheng Shi sank into thought. So did everyone else present.

Seeing the silence, the Dragon King smiled: "Since the core contradiction hinges on the Magician, why not simply go ask her, Cheng Shi?"

"?"

Cheng Shi snapped his head up, eyes sharp:

"Dragon King, do you know something?"

Is there some secret about Zhen Xin stored in Memory's Collection Hall?"

The Dragon King shook his head: "Until Zhen Xin consents, I won't share her past. That is respect for memory — and respect for each of you."

"..." 'Your 'respect' sure is flexible.'

Cheng Shi curled his lip: "Want me to call a Pact vote to unseal the Magician's memories?"

"?"

'Is that really what the Pact is for?'

Zhang Jizu narrowed his eyes. Long Jing looked on with eager anticipation. The Dragon King chuckled ruefully: "Don't make me the villain. Just go talk to her."

The words had barely left his mouth when a striking figure appeared before them. The Magician wore her trademark smile and tilted her head at the group:

"Talk about what? Please tell me you haven't been badmouthing me behind my back."

The instant Cheng Shi saw Zhen Xin, something clicked. He understood the Dragon King's meaning.

With a note of surprise, he asked her a single question:

"Come to think of it, I haven't seen Zhen Yi in a long time. Where did she go?"

"..."

The smile on Zhen Xin's face froze. She lowered her gaze in silence.

Cheng Shi's heart skipped a beat. He whipped his head toward the Dragon King, thinking:

'This is bad. The Dragon King has led me astray!'

...

Chapter 1432: It Was Always...

The atmosphere turned awkward.

Everyone present — except Zhen Xin — was mulling the same question:

'Once the primary personality ascends to godhood, and the balance of consciousness is irrevocably tipped — does the secondary personality even have room to survive?'

'Could Zhen Yi have—'

The thought made Cheng Shi's expression shift. His pupils contracted sharply as he looked at Zhen Xin. Seeing the dimness behind her eyes, his heart sank. Memories of every encounter with Zhen Yi flashed across his mind.

The Master of Trickery who had always kept that signature "hee" on her lips — who laughed boisterously while tormenting the world — had disappeared because her sister ascended?!

Zhen Xin had paid such a price for her apotheosis?!

Admittedly, in other players' eyes, Zhen Yi was a demon incarnate. But in Zhen Xin's eyes, she was still her little sister — the only person who had been there for her through the darkest times.

Cheng Shi couldn't imagine how devastating Zhen Yi's departure must have been. Yet this resilient Magician had never uttered a single word of complaint.

She, too, had given so much for the Jokers, for the world...

"I'm sorry."

Cheng Shi bowed his head, tinged with sorrow.

That single apology shattered the atmosphere entirely. A wave of sadness suddenly permeated the space between the Jokers.

Even Long Jing — who had clashed with Zhen Yi more than anyone — wore a trace of grief. He didn't dare look at Zhen Xin. His gaze drifted to the distance as he muttered, barely audible:

"Idiot. So you finally screwed up, huh.

Couldn't even fool your own sister?

Pretending to be a hero... Yeah, I wanted to play hero too. Except I'm still alive. What about you... You're so damn clever — why couldn't you find a way to save yourself..."

His words teetered between insults and mockery, yet the emotion behind them was unmistakable.

'Bad luck' was never a lie. When Zhen Yi was alive, nobody thought she wasn't bad luck.

But the instant they learned the Master of Trickery had sacrificed herself for the "greater good," that uneasy feeling transformed — into reluctance, understanding, and forgiveness.

Especially after knowing the Zhen sisters' past, it became a kind of tenderness.

She had appeared at the moment of Zhen Xin's deepest suffering, sheltering her sister from the downpour. Then she had vanished at the moment of Zhen Xin's greatest "glory," leaving the Universe nothing but a silent "hee..."

That behind-the-scenes-yet-unforgettable behavior struck a chord with Long Jing. President Gong actually turned his head and quietly sniffled.

Every Joker present stood at the pinnacle of the Universe. No matter how subtle a movement, it wouldn't escape their notice. Naturally, President Gong's two sniffles became the turning point in the funeral mood. He'd barely turned back around before the others were saying, in various expressions:

"At least we fooled one."

"President Gong empathizing with Zhen Yi — now that's something I never expected."

"Mm, another fine Collection piece."

"Hee~"

"!!!???"

Long Jing couldn't believe his eyes — or his ears!

He stared in disbelief at the four "companions" before him: that detestable Squinty Zhang with his eyes crinkled in laughter; that detestable Cheng Shi, brows arched, barely containing a grin; that detestable Dragon King, chuckling endlessly; and finally — that detestable Zhen Yi, face brimming with cunning!

It was definitely Zhen Yi. Her smile was too familiar. There was no mistaking it!

"You... you people..." President Gong was furious. "You actually played me!"

Zhen Xin doubled over laughing, brimming with energy:

"Hee~"

Who played you?

Old Gong, we didn't say a single word, you know? Who could've guessed you'd suddenly start sniffing?

Wait — did you think I was dead?

So you'd actually be this heartbroken if I died? Oh my — do you like me?"

"I like your—%@\$%!!!"

Long Jing's defenses crumbled. He jabbed a finger at Cheng Shi and demanded:

"You knew all along, didn't you, Fate Weaver!

If you knew Zhen Yi wasn't dead, why did you say 'sorry'?!"

Cheng Shi had finally rediscovered a sliver of joy among the Jokers. He smiled:

"Knowing I was about to trick you, I figured I should apologize in advance. Nothing wrong with that, right?"

"???"

Long Jing's pitch shot up, his face contorted: "You were saying it to me?!"

Cheng Shi nodded: "Of course. Fooling you is still wrong. A preemptive apology is only polite."

"But your face clearly changed! You were obviously thinking the same thing I was. Why did you suddenly figure it out?"

"Simple. If Zhen Yi had truly departed, no matter how well Zhen Xin hid it, there's no way she could've hidden it from the Fate Chosen who's always cared about her.

And given the Fate Chosen's personality — if he'd learned something that serious yet didn't come to me for help, it could only mean the premise itself didn't exist."

"..."

Long Jing's blank brain turned it over and had to admit it made sense.

But he wasn't having it. He rounded on Old Zhang next. Zhang Jizu, eyes narrowed tight, wanting no trouble, rattled off a quick explanation:

"I'm a Death follower. Even if I hadn't inherited the Benefactor's everything at the time Zhen Yi supposedly left — the Benefactor never issued an oracle about it. Which is good news in itself."

"..."

The moment Zhang Jizu finished, Li Jingming chipped in: "Same for Memory. No new Collection piece appeared in the Hall — which means nothing happened."

"..."

'So you're ALL geniuses, and I'm the only idiot?!'

Long Jing staggered back a step, fingers pressing furiously against his own nose. He let out staccato laughter — syllable by syllable — then roared:

"Ha. Ha. Ha. CLOWN!!!"

The merriment in the Void reached new heights. Every inch of space rang with laughter.

Everyone except Long Jing...

And Cheng Shi.

'Seriously, bros? The Clown's suffered enough already — and you're still flogging him?'

Cheng Shi couldn't laugh anymore. Then again—

'Wait. I'm not the only Clown here. Why isn't the other one taking it personally?'

He looked at Old Zhang. Zhang Jizu glanced back at him, and the arc of his squinting smile widened even further.

"..."

'Squinty Zhang is absolutely NOT laughing at me. He's laughing at Long Jing!'

Before long, Li Jingming's amusement slowly faded. He turned to Zhen Yi, seemingly about to say something.

But Zhen Yi shook her head at him with a bright smile, shutting the words before they left his mouth.

Zhang Jizu, having noticed the undercurrent, stood aside in silence. In the end, it was Cheng Shi who spotted the tension, let out a long sigh, set aside his genuine laughter, and said softly:

"Go on, then. Joy is wonderful — but fleeting.

Zhen Xin, you were part of that plan from start to finish. You must understand Deceit's intent. He didn't place you on that Throne on a whim.

So what are your thoughts?

The Dragon King seems to want you to return to Deceit's path... wait!"

Something clicked in Cheng Shi's mind. His expression shifted, caught between alarm and suspicion:  
"Dragon King — you don't mean for Zhen Yi to inherit Deceit's Throne, do you?!"

One body, two souls. Split succession across two seats?"

Whether it was feasible aside — just imagining one era's "hee" replacing another era's "hee" gave Cheng Shi a headache.

'True, a new Oblivion could be a cosmic crisis. But a new Deceit might be just as dangerous...'

He rubbed his temples and looked at Zhen Yi. His expression was somewhat grave:

"Zhen Xin — is this what you want too?"

All eyes turned to Zhen Xin. She still wore Zhen Yi's face, the corner of her mouth curled upward. But before long, the smile slowly fell away.

Eyes cast slightly downward, no longer playful, she spoke:

"The Benefactor truly didn't act on a whim.

He fulfilled a wish of mine. He gave me a sister."

"?"

While the group was still puzzling over the meaning of Zhen Yi's words, her shoulders sank — as though shedding an infinite disguise. She raised her head and forced a smile so strained it was almost painful:

"I am Zhen Yi. I've been Zhen Yi all along.

From the very beginning — from the past you all know — it was already me.

I am this body's... primary personality."

...

Chapter 1433: True Heart, True Feelings — Zhen Yi, Zhen Xin

Before the Faith Game descended.

The real world — an unknown city and province.

Winter had come. That year's cold was especially bitter; snow piled layer upon layer.

A pristine field of white was every child's playground — and one child's nightmare.

The little princess who lived in the hillside villa had gotten frostbite on her face from playing in the snow. As punishment, today she had to stand outside for two extra hours.

That way, when her father and mother went visiting tomorrow, they'd have more to bond over with that family.

The shivering girl could already imagine the lines they would use at tomorrow's dinner table:

"Children just love snow. Look — our Xin Xin is the same way. She played until midnight last night before coming home. Even got frostbite on her face. Funny coincidence though — it's almost the exact same spot as your little girl."

"That's what progress looks like. We move closer to the leadership, and Xin Xin moves closer to their daughter!"

And then joy would fill the dinner table. Including the girl herself.

Because she knew: if she didn't smile there, the time spent standing outside would double.

But she didn't like snow at all.

'It's so cold.'

'So tired and so cold.'

'If only I could sleep for a bit. Just a little nap. They won't notice. Just a little...'

"Don't sleep!"

Someone shouted — she didn't know who. But the drowning wave of exhaustion won. She toppled sideways into the snow with a soft thud.

The adults inside heard the noise and pushed the door open. Seeing the girl crumpled on the ground, their first reaction wasn't to bring her indoors. It was a frown and a scold:

"Don't you slack off. Get up! Other children play in the snow for two hours and they're full of energy. You've only been standing for one hour, and you want to rest?"

Honestly think you're a princess?

Stand up. Did you hear me!"

The girl on the ground didn't stir. At last, the adults panicked. They fumbled her inside, bundled her in blankets. The woman checked her breath, eyes darkening: "Let's take her to the hospital. She can't die yet."

The man's expression tightened: "No. If they find out Xin Xin's frail and ended up in the hospital from the cold, she won't be able to play with their daughter anymore. Wrap another blanket around her. Cancel tomorrow's visit. Let's see how she does after a day."

"But what if—"

"No 'what if.' She's not dead, is she."

"Fair enough. Let's leave it at that."

'Fair enough.'

'Let's leave it at that.'

A day passed. The girl slowly came to. She lay in bed. Her eyes opened, and she looked at the two frowning adults at her bedside. She was no longer silent and wooden as before. Instead, she suddenly broke into a radiant smile and chirped:

"Thank you, Mommy and Daddy, for saving me! I'll be an even better girl from now on."

The man and woman were stunned. As practiced liars, they didn't initially believe a child could change so drastically. But the more they observed, the more they realized the girl had matured overnight.

The woman was quite pleased: "I knew my eye for people was sharp. Even back at the orphanage, I could tell this girl was like us."

The man was even more satisfied: "See? I was right. The hardship in the snow made her grow. Good. We're one step closer to success."

Her newfound "good behavior" earned the girl more freedom. Her personality grew increasingly "pleasant" — at least in public. The young woman who kept a cheerful "hee" on her lips won over many people.

But in unseen corners, more than once, she would curl up with reddened eyes and murmur softly:

"They don't hit me anymore. Everyone likes me. Ming Yu comes to visit often, too. I'm doing a great job playing you — she's happy.

But she gets to see you. I don't.

Can you... come back? I miss you so much."

The girl's calls were never answered. Until one day, collapsed in her corner from exhaustion, she closed her eyes — and in the very instant they shut, they opened again.

She would never forget those words:

"From today on, you are Zhen Yi. My little sister.

Together, we are True Heart and True Feelings."

"..."

As old scars were torn open and frozen suffering thawed anew, the truth dawned on everyone: it wasn't Zhen Xin who had conjured a Zhen Yi to bear the pain in her stead. It was Zhen Yi who had missed another version of herself — and imagined a Zhen Xin into existence.

As for where the original Zhen Xin had gone...

She hated snow. She had probably chosen to leave during that winter.

Silence.

Endless silence.

Cheng Shi stood rooted to the spot, his expression indescribable. Only now — belatedly — did he understand how the Magician had deceived herself.

No. It should be: how the Master of Trickery had deceived herself.

Zhen Xin had always been Zhen Yi — and Zhen Yi was the primary consciousness in this split identity.

'No wonder!'

'No wonder her secret fear was "the world lost hope long ago." No wonder she threw herself headlong toward death the moment the Fate Chosen departed!'

Because she had nothing left to lose. Perhaps it was An Mingyu's existence that had kept Zhen Yi going — her conscience refusing to let go — and so she "created" a Zhen Xin.

But the reason for Zhen Xin's existence was already gone. Then Zhen Yi—

Every Joker present was moved by the sisters' bond. Cheng Shi's thoughts ran deeper. He needed to confirm one thing:

"Who inherited Chaos's Divine Throne?"

Zhen Yi sniffled once, then flipped to a beaming smile in an instant:

"My sister!

When I learned that we'd be replacing Them, I realized I might have to part with her.

I was terrified. Lost. Until you came to me and brought up Chaos's Throne.

And I thought: if the sister I imagined were acknowledged by the Pact and became an actual god in this world — wouldn't she be truly 'resurrected'?"

"..."

"So to resurrect Zhen Xin, you risked your own disappearance and had her agree to inherit Chaos?"

"She didn't agree. But she doesn't get a say.

Hee~

I'm the primary personality. So I agreed.

But you guys don't need to look so sad. I didn't die, right?

Besides — if 'bad luck' died, you should all be celebrating."

"..."

"..."

"..."

For a moment, Cheng Shi couldn't tell if the situation was bad luck or not.

He drew a deep breath, sorted his thoughts, and nodded:

"So now Zhen Xin's consciousness is independent thanks to Chaos's Throne, and you didn't disappear. Which means you can still inherit Deceit's Throne?"

As he spoke, Cheng Shi suddenly chuckled at his own expense: "Of course. It's perfect. It was always meant to be this way.

Deceit... He's practically cut from the same cloth as you.

No — she is you—"

He didn't say the last part aloud. In his mind, he finished the thought: 'A lonely soul performing a one-man show throughout the Void era.'

Silence settled once more. Zhang Jizu sighed and looked at the Dragon King: "You saw her past early on. So when I was wondering who would inherit Deceit, you already had the answer."

Li Jingming nodded: "That's right. No one is more suited. Though of course, the final say belongs to the Pact."

Long Jing, off to the side, was fuming. Through gritted teeth he asked: "And the rest of their memories? Don't tell me those people lived until the Faith Game descended."

The Dragon King shook his head: "When a liar realizes they've been lied to, it's worse than death. It's all in the past..."

While the others murmured among themselves, Cheng Shi turned to Zhen Yi:

"Where's your sister? I need to consult her on a few things."

"Just ask me. I am her."

"You're not. You're Zhen Yi. The one I need to speak with is your sister, Zhen Xin — the one who inherited Chaos's Throne, who has her own independent persona now, who kept you alive and still respects your existence."

"..." The smile vanished from Zhen Yi's face. A second later, the Magician returned.

She wore a fractured smile: "Sorry for worrying everyone."

Cheng Shi shook his head. Cutting straight to the point:

"Zhen Yi is suited for Deceit's Throne. That's an indisputable fact.

But I have to tell you, Zhen Xin — as her sister, you still have a choice.

Becoming a god isn't necessarily a blessing. And don't worry about us being unable to find a successor and falling short. On this unknown road ahead, every god carries a heavy burden. Once Zhen Yi inherits Deceit, she may have to bear even more.

She's already given so much. Would you... still agree?"

Zhen Xin pressed her lips together, eyes lowered, and spoke softly:

"Zhen Yi has grown up. She's far more mature than I am.

From what I know of her, whether she inherits or not doesn't depend on her — it depends on whether this world cares about her.

The only reason she's gritted her teeth this long is partly for Ming Yu and me — but the rest is her obsession with this world.

Every mark she leaves behind is her way of telling people that Zhen Xin was here...

She's a strong little sister. I'm the cowardly older one.

And now — everyone's care, or at least the Jokers' care, has made her joyful once more.

Cheng Shi, you shouldn't be asking me this question. You should ask her directly.

I was never her. I can't make decisions for her."

How bitter — and how warm — those words were. Everything Zhen Yi had ever done was simply to prove that Zhen Xin had once existed.

Her "bad luck" was never bad luck at all. It was her longing for her sister — and her refusal to let go.

"Understood."

Cheng Shi nodded, clarity settling in his heart.

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Chapter 1434: The Clown's Nose Is on the Clown!

The sisters swapped identities once more. Just as Zhen Xin had anticipated, Zhen Yi did not refuse the Divine Throne of Deceit, and so the Will of Deceit was finally carried on.

But Cheng Shi wasn't in any rush to hand over the Divine Throne. Whether clinging to one last sliver of hope or simply for the sake of absolute steadiness, he wanted to wait a little longer.

With the new Deceit confirmed, a successor for Time naturally followed. Long Jing — the Pointer Knight who had only partway through his journey under Deceit set foot upon the path of Time — took the Pointer from Cheng Shi's hand and became the new god of Time.

And the moment he reclaimed the Authority of Time, he stared at Cheng Shi's finger in shock, disbelief written across his face.

"That... that's..."

Cheng Shi blinked, raising his hand to look at the ring on his finger.

The Time of Eternal Imprisonment.

It was the only ring he still possessed — a gift once bestowed by Time.

"What about the ring?" Cheng Shi frowned.

Long Jing seemed to have realized something, as though struck by a revelation, his expression brimming with emotion.

"We searched for it for so long, yet it turns out Time had hidden it right here all along.

I can see the knotted time on this ring, and I can see the meaning buried beneath it. Those intertwining loops of time — don't you think they look like something?"

"?"

Look like what?

Cheng Shi removed the ring with a puzzled look and held it up in the air. He merely shifted the angle in front of him, and suddenly realized that those parallel loops of the ring looked exactly like a pair of... nostrils?

"!!!!!"

The Nose of Verification?!

The name flashed through every Joker's mind almost simultaneously.

The Time of Eternal Imprisonment was the Nose of Verification?

Was that even possible? One was a faith artifact bestowed by Time, the other a secret puzzle piece connected to Deceit — no matter how you looked at it, these two things couldn't be linked.

But lest anyone forget — Deceit steals everything. Just as the Secret Peeping Ear was close to Silence, and the Eye of Mockery was close to Folly, then as another pillar of the Fear Faction, the Nose of Verification being close to Time didn't seem so incomprehensible after all.

Besides, Deceit does not distinguish true from false, and only Existence truly cares about truth and falsehood. They refused to pass off lies as truth, and they had no desire to twist reality. Thinking of it that way, the Nose of Verification really could be the Time of Eternal Imprisonment!

So the nose had been on him this entire time?!

No wonder the mask began assembling itself the moment he entered the Mockery and Jeering — it had been showing him the answer all along. The Clown simply hadn't realized it...

Cheng Shi stood dazed for a moment, then his expression tightened. He immediately sealed off the universe and pulled out the Tongue of Eating Lies, the Eye of Mockery, and the Secret Peeping Ear. He laid all the pieces before him and asked Brother Mouth in his mind:

"Is it the one, Brother Mouth?"

The Fool's Lips hadn't made a sound in a long time. Ever since Deceit's departure, it seemed to have sunk into silence as well.

Now, with all its "siblings" gathered, sensing the faint yet familiar presence emanating from the Time of Eternal Imprisonment, the Fool's Lips replied with some uncertainty:

"I can't say for sure. There's a layer of Time's power concealing it..."

Before they could finish their exchange, Long Jing extended his hand and channeled the surrounding power of Time, peeling away the Time seals on the Time of Eternal Imprisonment one by one. The instant the last seal faded, a very real mask-nose materialized before everyone's eyes.

The Nose of Verification!

It was the one!

At that same moment, every fragment of the mask except the Fool's Lips began to vibrate, resonating in unison, drawing closer and closer to one another. Seeing this, Cheng Shi knew he should throw Brother Mouth in as well — to unlock the greatest riddle Deceit had left for him.

Yet when the moment truly arrived, he hesitated.

Fixed Destiny had already lost so much. Now, was even Brother Mouth going to leave?

"Brother Mouth..."

Cheng Shi's expression darkened. Before he could even say a word, his own mouth moved on its own.

"Idiot. I'm just detaching from your body to merge into the mask. I'm not dying. Can you hurry it up? I want to know what He left behind too."

"..."

Of course. It was still the same old Brother Mouth.

Cheng Shi knew this was a Fool's Lips-style attempt at comfort, but right now, he couldn't bring himself to smile at all.

Beyond the tension and apprehension of approaching a secret, there was also a fog of confusion and fear over an uncertain future.

But Cheng Shi knew everyone was watching him, everyone was waiting for him. So he gritted his teeth, steeled his heart, and tore at his own mouth.

He'd used this move once before on the snowfield against Su Yida — back then the heavens and earth had shifted color, and the detached Brother Mouth had become his trump card for intimidating the Master of Trickery.

But now, no Benefactor remained who could rage on its behalf. Cheng Shi simply tore away the Fool's Lips that had accompanied him through the entire game, merging it completely with the other fragments.

"Hummm—"

"Bang!"

The resonating pieces slammed together, erupting in a circus-like burst of dazzling smoke. When the dust settled, a pure white mask hovered before them all. The mask no longer carried the vitality of its fragments — it drifted silently, like a key.

The Dragon King understood at once. He summoned the Collection Hall of Memory before the group. Cheng Shi, his heart a tempest of emotions, took the "key" and gently pressed it against the sealed Collection.

The next second, a swirl of intertwined divine power — including that of Deceit — rose from Cheng Shi's fingertips, coiled along his arm like a viscous pull, and dragged him straight into the Collection.

"Whoosh—"

Watching Cheng Shi vanish into the Collection Hall, the remaining few exchanged glances, curiosity burning.

"What do you think is hidden in there?"

"Deceit's contingency plan. The future of the universe. Or perhaps... the past of the gods.

Who knows? When the Fate Weaver comes out, we'll find out soon enough."

"What if it's a trap?"

What if the Benefactor is destroying the world's hope at the most promising crossroads — as an act of defiance against the Origin?"

"President Gong, you're a god now. Act like it. Even Zhen Yi is more mature than you."

"???"

'I fought and bled for this world — how am I not mature?!'

Long Jing was about to retort, but Cheng Shi — who had only just been pulled into the Collection — was already walking back out. His expression was grave, and he didn't look the least bit pleased, as though he hadn't gained anything at all.

"What was inside...?"

Cheng Shi's eyes — laden with more emotions than anyone could name — swept across the gods present. He spoke in a tone beyond description, his voice a near-sigh:

"I saw the future. And I saw the past.

We were all wrong. This isn't a mask — it's a pact forged by several gods at the dawn of the era.

It predates even the Convention. It was drawn up so early that by the time Fate fell, a scheme spanning an entire era had already begun.

After seeing all of this, I know I have no choice.

Everyone — it seems you'll have to follow me down this road of Fixed Destiny to the very end.

I'm sorry. For certain reasons, I cannot reveal the secrets contained within. But please, trust me — I am doing everything in my power to give this world a future."

The greatest secret of the universe had just been swallowed whole. Normally, no one would accept that.

And yet, not a single Joker present voiced any objection. The Dragon King even smiled and quipped:

"Should we take the Collection off the shelves? If nobody can know about it, it's probably better to keep it hidden."

Cheng Shi shook his head slightly, holding the mask in his hand.

"The key is with me. I'll inform each of you of what you need to know when the time is right.

For now, I need to finalize all the Divine Thrones as quickly as possible, and then attempt to realize the vision of the Fear Faction.

The Void Era is drawing to a close. Everyone — prepare to welcome the 'future.'"

...

Chapter 1435: The Universe's Past?

Cheng Shi hadn't lied. The mask in his hand truly wasn't merely a mask — it was a divine pact.

This pact involved six gods: Deceit, Death, Time, Silence, Folly, and Memory!

To explain the origins of this pact, one would need to follow Deceit's perspective and travel back to the very beginning of the era — the moment that shattered Void's heart.

Deceit had placed everything He experienced within this pact. When Cheng Shi entered the Collection, he was granted a window into the past.

At the dawn of the era, Fate fell for prophesying the Origin, and Deceit was consumed by grief — and caught completely off guard.

His resolve to defy the Origin only hardened, but at that time, Deceit didn't even know what the Real Universe was. His understanding of the Origin was limited to the Will born during the descent.

Fear swept over Him, and all He could do was endure in silence.

But He had already resolved to take revenge.

To walk this path of vengeance, He had to ensure at minimum that the Void Era would persist. It was obvious — if the Void Era died in its cradle, Deceit wouldn't even have time to scheme.

So, relying on His instinct for deception, He concealed the news of Fate's death as best He could, gathering the Authority that had not yet departed, hoping to fool the entire universe.

But at that time, there was no Convention, no Final Oracle. No matter how well Fate's death was hidden from the other gods, there was one deity it could never be hidden from:

Death!

That's right — Death knew of Fate's fall from the very beginning of the era. In a sense, He confirmed Fate's death even faster than Deceit.

And He also knew that Fate's demise had to be connected to the Origin, because He had not received the half of the Divinity that should have been offered to Him upon a god's death.

A death tainted by the Origin's Will did not belong to Death. This was precisely why Death's fear only grew fiercer throughout the Void Era.

Deceit understood that resisting the Origin alone was utterly impossible. So He seized this opportunity to recruit Death — to bind Death to His chariot of war!

He went straight to Death's door and cornered Him inside the Fishbone Hall.

He said:

"The Origin is merciless. You've seen what happens to those who get close.

Gods are nothing but playthings to It — even stealing a single glance is forbidden.

I can give up being a god, but I refuse to give up being myself.

Born into chains, I will not accept it!

Old Bones — will you?"

Death was silent for a long time. In that era, Deceit's words were nothing short of earth-shattering. Regardless of how the gods felt about the Origin, no one had ever put these words out in the open!

But Fate's fall and Deceit's resolve moved Death. He didn't agree immediately, but instead said:

"Just us... is not... enough..."

Deceit understood Death's meaning instantly and told Him they would soon have new allies.

But Death could never have imagined how Deceit went about finding them.

Fate was dead. Apart from Time, no god could peer into the future. To find a viable path forward, Deceit sought out Time and shoved Fate's Authority straight into His hands, saying:

"Fate has fallen. In His prophecy, every approach leads to no ending — the universe will ultimately return to nothingness, and there will be no next era.

The Existence you built no longer has meaning. If you want to escape this fate, take Fate's Authority and find a way out for this world."

Deceit was lying, of course. Back then, He didn't care about the world at all. All He wanted was to resist, to avenge.

Fate had never made any prophecy concerning the world either — He had died shortly after descending. His sole prophecy was about the Origin. But apart from Fate, no one could see through Deceit's lies — unless... they took Fate's Authority!

Hearing these words, even though Time's eyes were twin black holes, they visibly contracted for an instant.

In that moment, Time felt that Deceit didn't resemble Deceit at all — He seemed more like Corruption, so masterfully did He beguile the heart.

Time thought there might still be room for negotiation, but Deceit's next words eliminated that possibility:

"I am destined to stand against every Will that draws close to the Origin. If you refuse, the Origin won't even have to act — I will reduce the legacy of the previous era's Existence to ashes myself.

You can call it a threat. You can choose to refuse. You can even go 'report' me and trade that for a chance to draw closer to It. But Fate's ending has already given you the answer:

If you want to die too, that's certainly a shortcut.

Perhaps you don't care about your own death. But what about the world you created? What about the Existence you cherish?

Even if Existence itself is also part of Its Will, I refuse to believe you'd be so heartless — otherwise you wouldn't have simulated world after world, granting life infinite possibilities.

Give the world a chance. Give fear a chance. We don't have to be puppets — we can be ourselves..."

"..."

Time had no choice — just as Fixed Destiny had no choice.

The moment Deceit set His sights on Him, the chance to refuse had already vanished. He had been dragged aboard the dark chariot.

And so, the Fear Faction gained another member.

Next came Silence. Deceit's original target was actually Chaos, but Chaos wasn't always capable of coherent conversation. A plan born from fear demanded reliability, so Silence became the third Victim.

Deceit found Silence. Before the Leaking World Silent Puppet, He recounted every single thing that had happened since His descent — every event, even every thought — without omitting a word.

Even when Silence realized something was wrong and tried to flee, Deceit simply chased after Him and kept talking.

By the time Silence had been forced to learn everything, Deceit smiled and said:

"It's too late to disagree now. If you don't 'report' me, you're an accomplice by silence. And if you do 'report' me — that's tantamount to drawing close. Drawing close can kill you. Do you have the courage to die?"

"..."

In that moment, Silence gave birth to fear.

Deceit had some understanding of the other gods' Wills, and none of them were on His target list. All except one — one He absolutely had to bring into this pact.

Folly!

Folly was far too clever. If Deceit wanted to lay plans throughout this era, He had no confidence He could hide them from Folly.

Since He couldn't hide it, He simply wouldn't bother.

So He went to Folly, got straight to the point, confessed the truth about Fate, and proposed a wager.

"Foul Mouth — since you're so clever, do you think this world has a future?"

Deceit's wager naturally had a deeper purpose. He wanted to pry open Folly's mouth, to have the wisest being in the universe "point Him toward" a clear path of resistance against the Origin.

But in response, Folly merely sneered:

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

Deceit laughed:

"Of course it does.

I've answered your question. Now it's your turn to answer mine. Do you think this world has a future?

I know you're about to call this a foolish act again — but does that mean you think the world has no future?

If it doesn't, then can the great Wise Man find even one possible future for this world?"

"..."

"Ha! You can't!

But I can!

You're not Fate, yet you can foresee the future. You simply use your intellect to influence the universe's trajectory, thereby fulfilling your own 'judgment.'

But if you were to lose your wisdom, relinquish your Authority, and let the universe escape your influence — would you still dare to declare that the world has no future?

That's the bet I'm proposing. Do you dare?"

...

Chapter 1436: No — The Universe's Future!

For Folly, winning this wager carried no benefit whatsoever, while losing it could yield a future for the world.

What Folly thought at the time, no one could know. All that was certain was that He accepted Deceit's wager and hid His own Authority.

But looking back at Folly's maneuver from Cheng Shi's current perspective, one could finally appreciate what Wei Mu had meant by "one move ahead."

With a chess piece named "Wei Mu," He had illuminated a future for the world. Though He didn't believe that breaking free from the Origin's control held any meaning, there was clearly ambition hiding behind His actions.

If Folly was unrivaled throughout the universe, did the Origin stand above Him?

If not, what claim had He to being unrivaled?

If so, given Folly's temperament — would He willingly acknowledge this Creator's supremacy, or would He question the Origin the same way Wei Mu had questioned Him?

In hindsight, He clearly wanted to challenge the Origin. Using Wei Mu's mouth to voice the future Deceit desired — that was His "provocation" against the Origin.

Yet He also knew this provocation was trivial. No matter how they evaded it, the Origin could not be defeated. And so He always maintained that the universe had no answer — only foolish acts.

To this, Cheng Shi sighed deeply: the Wills of the gods truly were complex.

But for Deceit at the time, Folly's entry into the game was clearly a welcome development.

Next came Memory. Nothing that occurred in the universe escaped Memory's Collection. To achieve a true deception of the universe, Deceit goaded Time into bringing His sibling god into the fold as well.

However, Memory was too devout in His dedication to memories. He refused to be complicit. Left with no choice, Deceit proposed a compromise — one where both sides could give a little:

Everyone would forget these memories, but the memories themselves would not be erased. Instead, they would be sealed within Memory's Collection Hall, to be revisited once the dust had settled and it was time to weigh right and wrong, victory and defeat.

Facing the covetous gazes of several coercers — especially seeing that Time was among them — Memory relented.

And so the sealed Collection was born, and Memory forgot these memories.

But while Memory was doing his work, would Deceit sit still and play fair?

Of course not!

He tampered with the process.

Remember the thread of the Origin's power that accompanied Fate's fall?

That's right — Deceit used that trace of the Origin's power to preserve the memories of Himself, Time, and Silence. The reason He didn't preserve Death's memory was that He wanted the old god — who had no close ties to Void — to remain an outsider, serving as a hidden "wild card" for a critical moment.

Moreover, in Deceit's estimation, Death was "too honest." He feared the old god might crack under the weight of such an enormous secret over the course of an entire era. Silence, on the other hand, would not — because He only took in and never let out.

And so, at the dawn of the era, there came into being a memory painted into Memory's Collection Hall that Memory Himself did not know about, along with a divine pact woven from fear, defiance, betrayal, and provocation.

The mask fragments were never Deceit's creation — they were tokens of the seven who forged the pact!

No, perhaps it should be said: seven.

The Tongue of Eating Lies perceived truth, representing the long-fallen Fate, and also alluding to Death at the dawn of the era. The Secret Peeping Ear ferreted out secrets, representing Silence who guarded them. The Eye of Mockery looked down upon all living things, representing Folly who saw nothing but foolish acts. The Nose of Verification pierced through illusion, representing Existence who stood firmly by truth...

And the Fool's Lips, naturally, represented Deceit — the one determined to resist at all costs.

After spreading this colossal lie at the dawn of the era, He pursued two goals simultaneously: on one hand, He secretly searched for Folly's hidden Authority, hoping to find another path of resistance; on the other, He began "marketing" the Convention to the gods, preparing His plan for "vengeance."

The plan was simple: find a world, bestow a Faith Game upon its living beings, and through the game's selection process, identify the one closest to the Origin — a Sacrifice. He would use Fate's method to approach the Origin, and then backstab It the moment It appeared!

From the very beginning, Deceit never intended to save the world — He only wanted revenge!

It was only during the process of molding the Sacrifice that He discovered the universe's true nature. Seeing that vengeance was hopeless, that the Origin could never be defeated, He could only place all His hope in resistance.

Salvation was the lie. Resistance was the truth.

Even if just one thread of mortal will could break free from the Origin's control, to Deceit that would be victory!

Of course, all of that came later. In Deceit's plan, the Faith Game was paramount. So when choosing a target world, He found one that most resembled San Dales — a world "without faith." Only such a world could possibly produce an individual without any faith yet encompassing all faiths — an "Origin"!

This planet came from one of Time's simulations during the Existence Era. Time had constructed countless worlds, and this was one of them.

And so, on that day, the gods descended, and this world welcomed a Faith Game.

All of the past became clear. This chess game, set in motion at the very dawn of the era, had passed from the hands of the departing chess master into Cheng Shi's grasp.

After witnessing every piece Deceit had placed on the board within the Collection, Cheng Shi finally understood what kind of "inheritance" Deceit had left for him.

This wasn't the past — it was the "future"!

This was unmistakably a script concerning the "future"!

To simulate the current crisis, to find a way out of this predicament through an experiment — everything he had just witnessed was the indispensable fine detail needed for that experiment!

An ordinary Collection of Memory would never contain such records. Deceit had prepared everything for His follower long ago.

After stepping out of the Collection, Cheng Shi departed in silence. Just as he had said, he needed to finalize the remaining Divine Thrones as quickly as possible.

No one knew how long the era would last. Though the Benefactor had once said there was still plenty of time on a mortal's scale, Cheng Shi was still saving every second he could.

Before long, he arrived at Mo Shu's small courtyard. The Scavenger was still lost in confusion over the meaning of Oblivion, living like a heap of mud.

Cheng Shi knew it was pointless to lecture the current Mo Shu about the world's future, so he took a page from his own Benefactor's book and made Mo Shu a deal.

"I have a script here. I need you to put on a performance.

Your payment: during the performance, you may discover the meaning of Oblivion."

At the mention of Oblivion's meaning, Mo Shu jolted upright.

"Are you lying to me?"

"Are you even worth lying to?"

"...Fine. What's my role?"

Cheng Shi smiled.

"Don't rush. Let's lay down three ground rules first.

First — once you receive your actor's props, if you attempt any action that would sabotage the performance, you will be severed from Oblivion entirely — and even from the meaning of your own existence. Don't question whether I can do it. This isn't a reminder. It's a warning.

Second — before the performance, I'll show you your script, though it may not be complete. After reading it, act according to your own interpretation. I may be the Screenwriter, but I also allow my actors to improvise their talents.

Third — follow the Screenwriter's arrangements in all things. Even a temporary death is part of the performance. Don't worry about it.

Understood?"

"So what exactly is my role?"

"Simple. Oblivion."

With that, Cheng Shi waved his hand and restored the name of Oblivion.

...

Chapter 1437: Silence's Farewell

The Void.

When Cheng Shi found the Prisoner, the Ascetic Monk was standing in the Void, head tilted back, gazing at something. The surroundings were utterly quiet, exactly like the domain of Silence.

Anyone who had been granted an audience with Silence would have no trouble understanding the Prisoner's posture — to look directly at that colossal Leaking World Silent Puppet, one truly did have to crane their neck upward.

The problem was, there was no Leaking World Silent Puppet in front of the Prisoner. Boss Death had said that Silence had already departed alongside Time. So what exactly was the Prisoner staring at in this empty expanse of Void?

Cheng Shi drew closer, but the Prisoner showed no reaction. He didn't even spare a sideways glance — he simply stood there, motionless, staring straight at the place where the Leaking World Silent Puppet had once existed.

In that moment, Cheng Shi felt a pang of empathy.

He never would have guessed that the Prisoner was the one who found it hardest to let his Benefactor go. Perhaps many couldn't bear to see their Benefactors leave, but few would express that sentiment as openly as the Prisoner...

Even though Silence had been gone for a long time, the Prisoner still stood here, refusing to leave.

But then again, who wanted them to go?

Cheng Shi sighed softly. "Prisoner, the old days are gone. It's our turn to take the stage now. You..."

The Prisoner didn't move a muscle.

"..."

Cheng Shi thought for a moment. Out of respect for Silence, he chose to stand alongside the Prisoner for a while.

After all, Silence had shouldered an era's worth of secrets for the Fear Faction and had, at every critical vote, stood firmly behind Fixed Destiny. A proper send-off was the least they could do.

But to his surprise, the moment Cheng Shi fell silent, the Prisoner became restless instead. He began frantically signaling to Cheng Shi with his eyes.

Yet Cheng Shi was standing shoulder-to-shoulder with him, facing forward, his mind drifting with scattered thoughts — he hadn't noticed the Prisoner's gestures at all.

The Prisoner grew anxious. He lunged in front of Cheng Shi, his face full of indignation.

"Brother-in-law, did you do that on purpose?"

"?"

Cheng Shi had long since resigned himself to the issue of what the Prisoner called him. Seeing the Prisoner suddenly snap out of that emotional state, he assumed the man had made peace with it and chuckled softly.

"Not really. We should at least see Him off."

"See Him off?"

More like you're trying to see ME off!

Do you have any idea how long I've been standing here to win this game?

You weren't even here from the start — what gives you the right to join halfway through?"

"???"

The Prisoner was fuming. Cheng Shi was utterly bewildered.

Wait — what game?

He looked at the Prisoner, then back at the spot where the Leaking World Silent Puppet had once stood, his face stunned. "You're... playing a game?"

"Obviously!"

"With... whom?"

"With my Benefactor — who else?"

Name one other deity who can go this long without speaking!"

Cheng Shi's expression shifted. His pupils contracted sharply. "You and your Benefactor — is Silence still here?"

He stepped around the Prisoner and peered into the Void, but it was utterly empty. There was no trace of Silence anywhere.

The Prisoner was still nodding.

"Of course.

My Benefactor suddenly summoned me, handed me a Silent Puppet, and then vanished into the Void.

Being the sharp mind that I am, I immediately grasped His intent and joined this game of 'whoever moves first loses.'

You knew I always want to chat with you — yet you chose THIS moment to come find me. Tell me — did my Benefactor send you here specifically to make me lose?"

"...?"

For a moment, Cheng Shi's mind was in utter chaos.

'Are you kidding me...

I thought you were standing here motionless out of sorrow over Silence's departure — and now you're telling me you've been playing a game with thin air?

'Prisoner, oh, Prisoner — has your brain been silenced too?

How else did you become as surreal as Old Meng?!

'No, wait — he was always surreal.'

Cheng Shi fell silent again. In that moment, he felt the Prisoner had practically inherited the Authority of Silence already.

Cheng Shi even wondered whether the Prisoner might be using this absurd performance to deceive him — that he actually missed his Benefactor terribly but was putting on an act as though Silence had never left.

But looking into the Prisoner's clear, guileless eyes, Cheng Shi decided he was overthinking it.

The man was simply surreal by nature.

"..."

Cheng Shi's mood had been thoroughly derailed. He took a deep breath and told the Prisoner, with utmost seriousness, that Silence had left.

The Prisoner blinked, glanced back over his shoulder, and suddenly laughed. "No wonder He didn't dare show Himself — turns out He sneaked off! Ha — does that mean I won?"

"..."

Cheng Shi was defeated. Utterly, unconditionally defeated.

He spent some time reorganizing his emotions and gathering his words before speaking again.

"Prisoner, stop fooling yourself. Silence has left this starry sky and gone out into the Real Universe. He left the universe's silence to you..."

"..." The Prisoner's smile vanished in an instant. He turned away for a moment, then said, "Why? Is it because there are no good people here either?"

But everyone here is actually quite decent."

"..."

Hearing this, a complicated smile — a tempest of emotions — pulled at Cheng Shi's face.

"Everyone IS quite decent, and there are plenty of good people here.

But other places have far too few. He wanted to go help — to go to the places where good people are scarce and lend a hand to those lonely souls.

That's a wonderful thing, isn't it? This way, there will be good people everywhere. There will be hope everywhere.

You are part of His hope, too."

The Prisoner clearly agreed with that. A smile blossomed across his face once more. He turned back around and gave Cheng Shi's shoulder a hearty slap.

"That's my brother-in-law for you — always sees things so clearly!"

Gone is gone. Everyone has to leave sometime. Granny already taught me that lesson.

Anyway — what did you come to find me for?

I'm not stupid. Something big must have happened in the universe, and you need me to handle it. Go ahead — did you and my sister get into another fight?"

"..."

Cheng Shi's smile couldn't even survive a full minute on his face. He directly bestowed the Authority and the Divine Throne of Silence upon the Prisoner, and then pulled out the Dyeing Container.

Cheng Shi knew that the seemingly unreliable Prisoner was actually very much worth trusting — otherwise, his own contingency during the False Curtain Call wouldn't have activated. Since that was the case, there was no need to waste more words on this headache-inducing Silence.

By now, the Dyeing Container had been dyed by Oblivion and had transformed into a cyclic hourglass — two celestial bodies inverted against each other, one collapsing while the other reconstructed. The Prisoner stared at the hourglass for a moment and said:

"The Silent Puppet He gave me seems a bit like this..."

"Dye it. Then shut up."

"..."

The Prisoner clearly wanted to say more, but seeing how serious Cheng Shi's expression was, he took care of business first.

When the Container had been dyed into a blank, rigid puppet hourglass, Cheng Shi said nothing further. He stowed the Container and left immediately, dropping a single sentence behind him:

"The era is ending. Be ready. Wait for me to come find you."

The Prisoner stood in the Void, feeling the true power of Silence coursing through him. He gazed off in the direction his brother-in-law had departed and mused:

"Is it my turn to keep the universe's secrets now?"

"Don't worry, brother-in-law. I've got a plan."

...

Chapter 1438: A Request from the Grand Marshal

The sixteen Divine Thrones were nearly finalized. Apart from Corruption, which was proving particularly troublesome, and Fate, for which the Flame of Hope had yet to be found, the only one remaining was Folly.

The reason Folly was saved for last wasn't anything complicated — it was simply because Galusha had been spending a lot of time in Dolgod recently.

That place was Time's prison, the site of the Time Knot, and the location where Cheng Shi planned to begin the experiment.

Going there meant not only facing Aph Ros's "interrogation," but also meant he would have to launch that predetermined and absurd experiment. He had been avoiding it, postponing it until only Folly remained.

Cheng Shi had actually considered making another trip to the Fire Passing Hall — perhaps Qin Xin had received some new information. But he also knew that if Qin Xin had found the Flame of Hope, he would have notified Cheng Shi immediately.

So where on earth was It hidden?

Should he really use the Convention's authority in his hands to force It out?

But Cheng Shi didn't want to do that. After all, this was the Flame of Hope who had stood on the opposite side from Deceit just to support him. Even if Its identity wasn't as straightforward as he'd imagined, until the very last moment, Cheng Shi didn't want to damage their "revolutionary" bond.

So he decided to go to Dolgod first.

Some things you simply have to face — so let the storm rage.

Yet surprises always outnumber plans. Just as Cheng Shi was about to set out, an unexpected visitor came calling.

A brilliant phantom star plummeted from above, suddenly detonating in the Void. It burst apart before Cheng Shi, dispersing into a thick, churning yellow fog of chaos.

The fog roiled without ceasing, pushing a long staircase toward Cheng Shi. At one side of the staircase, Kataro stood respectfully, addressing Cheng Shi with the utmost deference.

"My lord, someone is requesting an audience with you at the Temple of Chaos. Will you see them?"

"Kataro?"

Cheng Shi blinked, frowning his brow. "Who wants to see me?"

He was surprised. After all, this was no longer the era when Chaos was disguised by Deceit and Deceit Himself was seldom seen. Zhen Xin had inherited the Authority of Chaos and had become the new Chaos. Kataro's Benefactor was still present — so who would be seeking an audience at the Temple of Chaos?

And moreover, which "him" were they asking for?

Ultraman?

The moment Ultraman crossed his mind, a name flashed through Cheng Shi's thoughts.

"Hu Wei?"

Kataro nodded at once. "Correct, my lord. The ones requesting an audience are those two followers of Chaos, but they aren't asking for Lord Ultraman — they're asking for... you.

The current you."

His tone dripped with reverence as he spoke those final words.

The way this servant of Void looked at Cheng Shi had completely changed. Before, he had thought that at most, the great Lord Cheng Shi would take over his Benefactor's Divine Throne and become a true god.

But who could have imagined that the man who not long ago had to disguise even his status as an Envoy had now become the Convention's Proxy!

That was an existence that could be considered above the gods themselves.

Zhen Xin hadn't kept this from Kataro. She had told him everything, and Kataro was brimming with pride!

Lord Cheng Shi was far greater than he had ever imagined!

Cheng Shi, however, paid little attention to Kataro's shift in attitude. He was merely thinking that since there were two visitors, it was most likely Hu Wei and Da Yi.

Once the Divine Throne of Chaos had a proper successor, he had indeed overlooked his good brother.

Now that he thought about it, Hu Wei was the true Chosen One of Chaos and had contributed to Chaos's cause. With the Divine Throne now in Zhen Xin's hands, he must have had some complicated feelings about it.

And who knew whether Zhen Xin had said anything to him during the Audience Meeting, or why he was looking for Cheng Shi at this particular moment...

"Did Zhen Xin send you?" Cheng Shi asked.

Kataro didn't dare conceal it. He nodded quickly.

"Yes, my lord. Our Benefactor specifically summoned those two followers in a private audience and disclosed some of the universe's developments to them. This time they've come — Kataro suspects — perhaps to bid you farewell."

"Farewell?"

What were they saying goodbye for?

Cheng Shi hesitated for a moment but decided to spare some time for the meeting. Setting everything else aside, he'd been making this big brother do his bidding for quite a while — the least he could do was show some appreciation.

So Cheng Shi nodded and stepped onto the Staircase of Chaos.

In the hands of true Chaos, the Staircase was a manifestation of its Will. Even as the Convention's Proxy, walking upon it required resonating with the intent of Chaos. Fortunately, Zhen Xin had no intention of making Cheng Shi embarrass himself by breaking into a dance at a time like this, so before long he arrived inside the Temple.

The Temple was virtually unchanged, but the person behind it had long since been replaced.

Seeing the two familiar figures in the center of the Temple, Cheng Shi found himself at a momentary loss for how to greet them.

Hu Wei and Da Yi spotted Cheng Shi too. Their expressions were even more complicated. Only when Cheng Shi walked up close did Hu Wei let out a hearty laugh and say:

"Brother Cheng, it's been a while!"

Da Yi's expression shifted several times before he also called out: "Grann — Brother Cheng, you've been holding out on us. We..."

"Da Yi!" Hu Wei nudged Da Yi's shoulder. Da Yi clamped his mouth shut, sighed, and fell silent.

Cheng Shi didn't know how much Zhen Xin had revealed, so he could only respond with a smile. "So you both know?"

Hu Wei nodded, but before he could get a word out, the hot-tempered Da Yi jumped in again:

"We know. The world's done for, and everyone's trying to find a way. Look, Brother Cheng, we're not the kind of people who'd abandon our own. If we'd known the gods were just like this, you should've told us sooner. Maybe we could've figured something out before things got this bad."

"...I'm sorry. I didn't know where the world was headed either," Cheng Shi said with a bitter smile. "By the time I found out, everything had already been arranged."

The way I see it, not knowing is a kind of blessing. At least you don't feel so hopeless."

Da Yi wanted to say more, but when he saw the exhaustion on Cheng Shi's face, he quietly swallowed his words.

Hu Wei patted Da Yi's shoulder, then patted Cheng Shi's.

"Brother Cheng, no matter who you are now, no matter how far apart our knowledge lies, I've always treated you as a true brother.

Sure, walking the path of faith means occasionally pulling a few tricks on your brothers — but I knew you could handle it. Just like now, you've handled everything.

As for me — I thought I was cutting a dashing figure in this game, even 'stealing' myself the thin title of 'Grand Marshal.' In the end, it all amounted to nothing.

This self-directed chaos ultimately only drove myself mad. Ha — call it karma, I suppose.

But Brother Cheng, we've come to say goodbye."

So it really was a farewell?

"Where are you going?" Cheng Shi blurted, then suddenly realized. His eyes widened. "The Real Universe?"

Hu Wei and Da Yi nodded simultaneously.

"That's right.

Learning of the era's affairs only at its twilight proves we've already fallen behind the times — that we're of no use to them.

Since we're no use, we might as well go out and 'see the world.'

I've always felt my life was quite the spectacle, both before and after the gods' descent — finding the rules, breaking the rules, forging myself, gaining satisfaction.

But now, under the shadow of the Origin, I cannot accept that my entire life has been nothing more than an expendable variable in some experiment.

I want to see it with my own eyes. The Real Universe. The so-called Creator. Whether there are countless other universes beyond ours. Whether, freed from this world, I can find even a sliver of Vitality under a different sky.

I was never a follower of War, but I've always yearned for it.

When you've chanted 'How to survive — only through blood and fire' enough times, when the moment of truly 'how to survive' arrives, all you can cry out is 'only through blood and fire!'

Brother Cheng, in light of the humble contributions we've made for Chaos, for Deceit, for Void, and for you... give your big brother a chance.

Even if I die, I want to die in a place where I know who I am — not muddled away inside some experiment."

"Damn it all, I can't hold back anymore — same goes for me!" Da Yi declared, his face resolute, his blood running hot.

"..."

Cheng Shi could understand how Hu Wei and Da Yi felt. He knew that people like them would never accept mediocrity, nor would they give up the fight.

But if Deceit truly had found a future for the world, that future could only exist beneath this starry sky — not out there in the Real Universe.

Of course, among those countless Slice Universes, perhaps there truly was a brighter future than this world's. But would such a world be easy to find?

If it were, the Real Universe wouldn't be drifting with so many versions of Cheng Shi. Sending them out now was tantamount to sending them to their deaths.

But after a moment of silence, Cheng Shi agreed to their request.

He chose to respect their decision.

Though before consenting, he made one final attempt at persuasion. "This starry sky is very likely the only one that can escape the Origin's gaze. I can't guarantee it one hundred percent, but at least the chances are better if you stay. You..."

"Please!"

Hu Wei's gaze was unwavering. It was clear that "survival" wasn't why he wanted to leave.

Understood.

Cheng Shi nodded.

"I'll release you when the time is right, but only on the condition that it won't jeopardize this starry sky's future.

Say your goodbyes to the world. When the moment comes, you'll be free to go."

Cheng Shi dismissed the two with a mind full of tangled thoughts. Standing before the empty Temple, he murmured to himself:

"Ignorance spares you from despair. Why must you insist on tearing open this cruel reality?"

From above the Temple, a wisp of chaotic yellow fog descended and materialized into Zhen Xin's form. She landed opposite Cheng Shi, first offering a smile, then letting her expression settle into gravity.

"Everyone has the right to know. Besides, even if we said nothing, they'd find out eventually.

You've been busy consolidating the Divine Thrones, so you probably haven't noticed some unexpected developments in the real world:

Someone is spreading the name of the Origin among the people!"

"???"

"The existence of the Origin is no longer a secret. Not only that — the players also know that the Origin has already visited.

I don't know the exact meaning of this 'already visited,' but when I traced the chain of information back to its source, I discovered that the truth the players so firmly believe... came from the mouth of Wei Mu.

But if I'm not mistaken, Wei Mu should have already departed by then.

So, Cheng Shi — who do you think is the one pulling the strings behind all of this chaos?"

...

Chapter 1439: Ming Yu Has Vanished

Zhen Xin didn't give Cheng Shi time to answer. She continued:

"The History School is actively collecting discussion content across all channels. Unraveling the threads from the tangled mass of chatter, it's not hard to distill certain conclusions the players have reached.

Particularly some conclusions about the Origin — they don't just know about the Origin. They even know about Fixed Destiny!

They just don't know who Fixed Destiny is. They've only heard that the Faith Game exists to create a Sacrifice to appease the Origin, and that Fixed Destiny is that Sacrifice.

Unfortunately, after the Audience Meeting, the gods' offering failed. The Fixed Destiny they had championed was rejected by the Origin, and the entire world was abandoned because of it.

Meanwhile, Wei Mu, as the number one on the Road to Ascension, appeared in person and testified that the Sacrifice was supposed to be him, but Fixed Destiny usurped his place, causing the world to lose the Origin's gaze and be reduced to a dead star.

The gods either fell or departed. They deemed this planet worthless, and so the Faith Game was suspended.

The players are furious beyond measure, and equally terrified. They don't know the full story — perhaps the source of the rumor doesn't even have one. All they know is this: the Origin has abandoned this starry sky!

Connecting that to the plan Wei Mu once described, I can't help but wonder — could this be the so-called... future of the world?

So what do you think — is it possible that this is a contingency Wei Mu left behind for us after he departed?"

Wei Mu's contingency?

Cheng Shi's gaze sharpened. He shook his head.

No. With Wei Mu's intellect, he absolutely knew the world's future rested in Fixed Destiny's hands. Only Fixed Destiny could guide the world's direction.

This was precisely why the Fear Faction's gods refused to contaminate Fixed Destiny's Will. They could only offer vague hints and let every decision come from Fixed Destiny's own heart.

Cheng Shi hadn't understood this at first, but now he did. If Fixed Destiny truly was the Origin, and if the future truly was an experiment, then it seemed only Fixed Destiny could break the deadlock.

Seeing Cheng Shi shake his head, a glint of light flashed in Zhen Xin's eyes.

"Actually, I didn't think it was possible either. I have another theory.

We know better than anyone who Wei Mu was. After his departure, the number of people capable of impersonating him is vanishingly small. And even if such people exist, they'd be limited to a handful of Deceit followers and Folly followers.

The top-tier deceivers have already been 'swept up' by you, and I can't think of a motive for the rest. Folly's followers are even less likely — those at the top of the Ladder of Ascent, even knowing they couldn't match Wei Mu, would never stoop to such a laughable foolish act.

On the surface, no one seems to have a motive for any of this. But there is one exception."

Cheng Shi answered without hesitation. "Sun Miao."

Zhen Xin nodded emphatically.

"Exactly. Vice President Sun.

He's vanished — and so has the Flame of Hope.

The Flame of Hope has deep, intricate ties to Deceit. Its disappearance at this particular moment makes it impossible not to wonder — could It be a contingency Deceit left behind for us after His departure?

If so, then It very likely took Sun Miao with It. And Vice President Sun's identity as a follower of Folly would be the perfect advantage for impersonating Wei Mu.

The Flame of Hope belongs to both Fate and 'belongs to' Deceit. If It could provide cover for the Torchbearers, It could just as easily help Vice President Sun deceive mortals.

So our most pressing task is to find the Flame of Hope. Only then can we..."

Before Zhen Xin could finish, Cheng Shi let out a quiet laugh.

"Magician, you're a bit nervous. At this point, is there still something you need to hide from me?"

You've laid out all of this — but is finding the Flame of Hope really all you're after?

Yes, I know we must find the Flame of Hope. Even without knowing about everything happening among the players, the Flame of Hope's whereabouts are critical to the world's future and the Torchbearers'. But I recall you weren't nearly this anxious before.

Tell me — what happened that I don't know about?"

"..."

This was Cheng Shi.

Even without any Authority, he could still see through a person's heart. Of course, Zhen Xin had also worn her heart on her face.

She had no choice but to be anxious, because...

"Ming Yu has vanished."

"?" Cheng Shi froze.

Zhen Xin took a deep breath.

"She would never run off at such a sensitive time. And even if she did, my current power would be more than enough to find her. But I haven't — and that means a god is providing cover.

In this entire universe, the only places I can't reach are the Sea of Desire where Corruption resides, and wherever the vanished Flame of Hope is.

It's a Servant God of Fate, a creation of Deceit — and It is the only one who could have taken Ming Yu.

I know the Flame of Hope would never harm her, but I don't want Ming Yu to go through any more surprises."

Zhen Xin was right — the Flame of Hope was the only one with sufficient reason to take the Blind One away. But Cheng Shi didn't believe the Blind One would meet with any accident. After all, that was very likely her...

Cheng Shi's gaze grew complicated. He thought for a moment, then sighed.

"There's something I never told you. Actually, Fate..."

...

Meanwhile, somewhere unknown.

An endless expanse of crystals stretched like an ocean, refracting brilliant azure light.

A faint little flame drifted ahead, shielding the person trudging behind it from the constantly encroaching force of devouring.

The flame flickered, on the verge of going out, but mercifully the long and arduous path had come to an end.

An Mingyu lifted her head. In a depression not far away — one that resembled a valley of crystal — she "saw" a familiar glow she hadn't encountered in a long time.

The Flame of Hope!

Though the Candle Man's form was faint, she could still feel the warmth radiating from his body. She drew closer to him, step by step.

Sensing someone's approach, the Candle Man turned slowly and saw a pair of tightly shut eyes.

The veil of black gauze had long since fallen away during the journey. Disheveled hair and bitten lips made An Mingyu look somewhat pitiable at this moment.

The Candle Man stared at those closed eyes for a long time before he spoke, his voice thick with complicated emotion:

"You're a pitiful one too."

An Mingyu blinked in surprise. She had never expected to hear such words from the Flame of Hope's mouth, nor could she imagine what emotion lay behind them.

But she didn't mind. She had never considered herself pitiful. At least she had Xin Xin by her side, and there was the Fate Weaver who was fighting to save her. At most, her path had simply been a rough one.

What drew her attention far more was the enormous crystal Coffin behind the Candle Man — and the figure lying inside it, at once familiar and strange.

An Mingyu stood frozen.

"I've seen him before. Why is he here?"

The Candle Man glanced back, his words laden with meaning:

"Him? He's asleep. Dreaming.

Maybe it's a pleasant dream. Maybe it's a nightmare.

But until he wakes, no one can know what kind of dream he'll ultimately face.

Of course, it might not be a dream at all — it might be a memory of his past."

An Mingyu furrowed her brow, unsure whether what the Candle Man described matched what she was thinking. The one thing she could be sure of was that the Flame of Hope hadn't guided her here just to listen to riddles.

He was an Envoy of Fate, and she was the "Chosen One" of Fate. At this tail end of an era where new gods were replacing old ones, anyone could guess that this meeting was destined to produce something.

In that moment, An Mingyu suddenly recalled a prophecy she had made long ago:

Both she and Xin Xin would appear in the Torchbearers' future.

Was this, then, the moment that prophecy would come true?

"Flame of Hope, you..."

"I'm fine. And you're fine. That brings me comfort."

...

#### Chapter 1440: Void's Curtain Falls

Zhen Xin stood motionless in the Void, her face a mask of shock.

"You're saying... the Flame of Hope is Ming Yu's true Benefactor?!"

Cheng Shi nodded, his voice heavy with emotion.

"Ever since I learned that the Flame of Hope would transform into a Container of Fate upon death, I began reexamining Its identity. And when I discovered that Fate had already fallen at the dawn of the era — that this era's Fate was nothing more than a role played by Deceit — I was finally able to connect all my suspicions.

I don't actually have any direct evidence proving that the Flame of Hope is the fallen Fate. I simply... looked back on the whole story from Deceit's perspective.

Void bound them together. Even though their time together was brief, theirs was a bond that transcended time.

Deceit watched His sibling god fall — He would never just let it go. Given His nature, even if the Origin was involved, He would have tried. After all, that was exactly what He was already doing.

And at that time, He still had a thread of the Origin's power left behind by Fate's prophecy.

So, if you were Deceit, what would you do?"

Zhen Xin answered without hesitation. "Resurrect Him!"

"Exactly! Resurrect Him.

I believe Deceit did try to bring Fate back. But a variable that had been excised by the Origin was hardly something so easily restored. So all He could do was use the Origin's power to gather everything that remained of Fate, and from it, create what now stands before us... the Flame of Hope.

That is precisely why the Flame of Hope, despite being a creation of Deceit, is considered an Envoy of Fate.

Deceit placed a portion of Fate's Change within the Flame of Hope — perhaps He was also entrusting His own hope for Fate's Change.

So I think it wasn't that Fate discarded the Change it could not accept. Quite the opposite — Deceit deliberately preserved Fate's Change. He wanted His sibling god to stop championing that so-called Fixed Destiny. But His sibling god could not be reborn, and the world — just as Fate had 'wished' — marched step by step toward the predetermined.

Fixed Destiny, in the end, cannot be defied.

Ha. Sometimes I even wonder whether Fate's prophecy had foreseen the world's future — perhaps even the sole path leading to it — and that is why Fate chose to 'embrace' the Origin at the dawn of the era, leaving His sibling to push the world toward its 'endpoint.' Otherwise..."

Watching Zhen Xin's eyes grow wider and her pupils contract smaller and smaller, Cheng Shi shook his head. "Forget it. Thinking about all this is meaningless.

Cluttered thoughts like these keep flooding my mind lately, giving me no peace.

I don't even know when the era will end. The sense of urgency pushes me forward, but it also makes me overlook certain things.

Thank you, Zhen Xin. And thank you all. I know everyone is working hard, trying to share the burden with me. But..."

"There is no 'but.'"

Zhen Xin set aside the shock on her face and smiled. "If even the gods couldn't control their own destinies, what chance does a mortal like you have?"

Cheng Shi, everyone is doing this not just for you — it's for the world, and for themselves. Nobody is asking for a reward. But please, don't be so quick to dismiss..."

Cheng Shi smiled bitterly and shook his head. "I'm not dismissing anything. I'm grateful..."

"I know, but your keeping us at arm's length feels like dismissal.

The universe, top to bottom, is one body. You've already held up an entire sky. The remaining cracks — let us help with those.

As Zhen Yi would put it: 'While you're alive, you ought to do something that everyone will remember, right?'"

"...?"

The conversation had been perfectly heavy and normal until that moment, but the mention of Zhen Yi yanked Cheng Shi right out of the mood.

So was that the reason Zhen Yi became the universe's number-one jinx?

Making the world aware of her sister's existence, while also doing infamous things people would remember?

"..."

Cheng Shi shook his head and laughed in spite of himself, then said something cryptic. "But what if the world never finds out?"

Zhen Xin blinked, then a look of resolve flashed through her eyes. "Then forget what the world thinks. Just be true to your friends and yourself."

"And if there's no 'yourself' left?" Cheng Shi pressed, raising his gaze.

A radiant smile broke across Zhen Xin's face, full of longing.

"Then... it would be liberation, wouldn't it?"

"Liberation."

Cheng Shi rolled the word over and over in his mind, the smile on his face gradually widening. "Yes. Liberation. There will be liberation."

...

An Mingyu turned out to be a girl you could count on. Before Cheng Shi could even go looking for her, she came back on her own.

When Cheng Shi laid eyes on the black-dressed Blind One cradling the Container of Fate in her arms, a vivid scene from the False Curtain Call flashed through his mind once more:

The Flame of Hope igniting violently in the Void, its cold fire shrouding the universe. It stood within the flames, slowly fading away.

"You were never the kindling — you are the flame. The light that illuminates this world.

And I, called the Flame of Hope, am in truth the Kindling of Hope.

Ignite me. Take this light. With the world's final Change, seize a hope — for yourselves, for the world!"

Cheng Shi would never again have the chance to ignite the Flame of Hope, because An Mingyu had already brought hope's ember home.

Cheng Shi felt almost numb. He was beginning to lose all expression.

His gaze skimmed over the Container, then drifted toward the distance.

"It..."

An Mingyu held the Container of Fate against her chest, her shut eyes fixed on it with fierce intensity — in that moment, she looked exactly like a Prophet delivering a fate prophecy.

"It left.

It told me many things, and asked me to relay some of them to you.

It said that Deceit once asked It: 'Will I be forgiven for doing all of this?'

The Flame of Hope gave no answer at the time. But after a long silence, today's Flame of Hope gave me this answer:

'No matter what He did, at the very least He sheltered the passing of the flame, and He sheltered the Flame of Hope.

The fact that the Flame of Hope was able to burn in this era — that in itself is the best answer.'

I don't understand the deeper meaning, but I understand the word 'hope.' So let me ask you, Fate Weaver — does our world still have hope?"

Cheng Shi's expression didn't change. He nodded.

"It does. It absolutely does.

There's something you may not know. No matter how rough the road ahead, no matter how dire the present situation, the Flame of Hope will never go out — because It represents the survival instinct of the smallest minority, the last remaining hope of this world.

The only thing that could extinguish It is this: our world's hope growing large enough that Its protection is no longer needed..."

Silence fell over the scene. No one knew whether Cheng Shi was lying. No one dared assert he was right, either — after all, his own voice didn't sound entirely steady.

But Cheng Shi wasn't concerned about whether his message had landed properly. At that moment, his mind was on something else entirely:

Void... had taken its final bow at last.

The era hadn't yet reached its end, yet its two Void rulers had exited the stage early — an irrevocable curtain call.

But strangely, facing Void's departure, Cheng Shi found he wasn't as grief-stricken as he might have expected. He was silent for a moment, then looked at the Blind One, his face devoid of joy or sorrow.

"Did you see Sun Miao?"

An Mingyu shook her head.

"No. But I did see someone else.

Come with me. I'll take you to him."

"Where? To see whom?"

"To the depths of memory. The place where all memories are born."

...