

The Gods 601

Chapter 601: The Clown and the Dragon King's Heart-to-Heart

Li Jingming knew Cheng Shi was messing with him. He saw right through it—or rather, he was used to it by now.

This kind of teasing had become visibly more frequent ever since he'd left Memory for Deceit. And it wasn't just Cheng Shi—every other Void walker he encountered was just as relentlessly mocking.

Though in the past, this behavior had been more common among Deceit followers specifically. They'd always been displeased with Li Jingming's status as the Chosen of Memory. Back when they were on opposing sides, they'd occasionally hurl insults. Now that they were "family"... the insults had stopped. The passive-aggressive needling, however, had begun.

After all, for these disciples of the Fun God, snarky sarcasm was far more satisfying than crude insults. Li Jingming had accepted his fate as the eternal target of these entertainment-seekers.

But today, the Fate Weaver in front of him was displaying a will that leaned remarkably close to Deceit—which did give him pause.

Still, he didn't show it. He didn't take Cheng Shi's words to heart either. Seeing that the man was clearly gearing up for another round, he simply chuckled, quickly produced his "postage," and tossed an identical time-keeping wooden bird to Cheng Shi. Then he spoke before Cheng Shi could:

"Postage. Now talk."

Cheng Shi blinked. Holding the underwhelming B-rank item, he pursed his lips. 'I hadn't even said what the postage was, and you're already jumping ahead.'

He could plainly see the Dragon King hadn't bought a word of his act—just thrown something cheap over to shut him up. But he hadn't come here to fleece the man. This was purely a reflex—the instinctive opening move of a devout follower when encountering the Chosen of a rival god.

A harmless joke. Though if it happened to turn a profit, the Clown was happy about that too.

Pocketing the bird, Cheng Shi's eyes swiveled. He grinned:

"The postage is a bit short, but it'll do. The Fun God says he's busy today and won't be seeing you.

However... if you have questions for him, feel free to pass them through me, and I'll relay them.

Of course, conveying devotion isn't the kind of thing tainted by money—so I won't charge for delivery."

Cheng Shi's abacus was clicking at full speed, but he knew no sane person would believe him. These lines were bait to steer the conversation toward the Fun God. He was dying to know how the Fun God had managed to recruit Li Jingming. The curiosity was killing him.

What he didn't expect was for Li Jingming to actually respond. The man studied Cheng Shi with a contemplative look, then nodded:

"Fine. Then ask him for me—what happened to Order back in the Grand Tribunal? What was going on?"

Cheng Shi was thrown: "Wait—you're seriously asking?"

"Why not? You offered free messaging. Why wouldn't I ask?"

"..." Cheng Shi's expression turned peculiar. He was getting the distinct impression that the Chosen of Memory had surprisingly high compatibility with Deceit. Not in the Long Jing or Zhen Yi way—more in the Mi Laozhang way. The type that dismantled you with a perfectly straight face, weaponizing sincerity into sarcasm.

"You don't need to ask him that. I know the answer—I can tell you myself."

The instant those words left his mouth, a sharp glint crossed Li Jingming's eyes: "You saw what happened? You weren't affected by the chaos?"

Cheng Shi spread his hands: "How could I not be? Even you and Hong Lin were hit. What resistance could a lowly priest have? I didn't see anything—my Benefactor Fate told me."

Li Jingming's lips curved: "After I fell into chaos, I knew nothing of my surroundings. I didn't even know you'd been affected until you just told me. So... how did you know Hong Lin was hit?"

Cheng Shi rolled his eyes in exasperation:

"Are you deaf? I just said my Benefactor told me. How come you only listen to half my sentences?"

Dragon King, we're both smart people here. Can we quit the probing and counter-probing? I'm baring my heart to you—could you at least be sincere?"

"?"

'Who's the insincere one here?'

'How do you even have the audacity to say that?'

Li Jingming's eyelid twitched. He nodded irritably:

"Fine. Let's keep it simple then.

I assume you know what I'm about. I walk the path of Memory—I enjoy exchanging memories with people."

He paused to shoot Cheng Shi another look. "Of course, if someone doesn't care for memories, I do have some Existence-path materials on hand."

"..." Cheng Shi's expression grew even stranger. He got the growing sense that Li Jingming had struck some enormous jackpot and was now flush enough to barter with anyone. "Where do you get all this good stuff?"

Li Jingming didn't answer. Instead he smiled: "Shall we begin the exchange?"

Cheng Shi's eyes spun. He nodded: "Sure. That was my first question."

"Very well. My answer is... memory exchange. Everything I have was acquired through trading various memories."

'An intelligence broker!'

He'd expected it, yet somehow the label still crystallized sharply in his mind. The Dragon King certainly had the qualifications for the role—though for him, "intelligence broker" wasn't quite right. More like a memory merchant.

He was selling the remarkable memories he'd recorded. The price? Another interesting memory.

"Fair enough. Your turn. If it's the question from before, I can go ahead and—"

"No—no rush. That's what I want to ask him, not you.

Cheng Shi, I'm curious about you. You don't strike me as a Fate gambler—you're more like a Deceit con artist. So my first question is: what's your relationship with the Fun God, beyond sharing the same Void path?"

Cheng Shi hadn't expected the Dragon King to be this interested in his faith. He considered for a beat, then answered with a perfectly straight face:

"Simple. I'm a follower of Fate and a follower of Deceit.

To be blunt: I've fused Deceit and Fate. So I'm a true walker of the Void."

He laid the secret bare without a moment's hesitation. And the instant those words left his mouth, Li Jingming's entire demeanor transformed!

He stared at Cheng Shi in disbelief. But Cheng Shi simply produced a die in his left hand and raised a mask in his right, smiling:

"Dragon King—you're the first player in the world to learn this secret. Well? Is this memory spectacular enough?"

Flashes of astonishment raced through Li Jingming's eyes. He suddenly understood the man's intent. It seemed today's memory exchange was about to involve real currency.

"Spectacular. Absolutely spectacular.

No wonder I kept having *déjà vu* about you. So that's what it was—you're the lucky one chosen by Void after Zhen Xin!"

Li Jingming got it now. He finally understood why Cheng Shi had been subtly targeting him throughout their journey. A Fun God follower's bias against him was perfectly natural. And this Fate Weaver—no, this Clown—wasn't driven by pure greed after all. Perhaps he was manufacturing entertainment under the guise of greed, offering it as tribute to his other Benefactor.

'What a greedy Fate Weaver. What a mastermind of a Clown!'

Chapter 602: I Didn't Break My Oath—I Fused

Among the peak players, a handful knew the secret behind Zhen Xin and Zhen Yi. The Blind One was one of them. The Dragon King was another.

He'd exchanged memories with Zhen Xin. When the former Chosen of Deceit had told Li Jingming the truth about herself and her sister, the shock had been immense. At the time, he'd even assumed that gaining a second faith in this game required splitting into a separate personality.

Thankfully, a later audience with Deceit had clarified that it needn't go anywhere near that far. Zhen Xin and Zhen Yi had merely been a little experiment the god had whipped up on a whim.

So when Cheng Shi said he'd fused Deceit and Fate, Li Jingming believed it immediately. Not only because he knew Deceit had once intended to fuse with Fate, but because he knew something else... Fate had personally summoned Cheng Shi!

This was a fact attested to by many eyewitness accounts, and a truth Cheng Shi himself had admitted within the Mediocre Person Society.

This mysterious second deity of the Void—Fate—had never summoned even its own Chosen, yet had singled out a Fate Weaver with no ranking. That fact alone was enough to spark endless speculation.

Li Jingming's epiphany clicked into place. No wonder this Fate Weaver was so skilled at deception—he was a con artist to begin with.

But before Cheng Shi could respond, the Dragon King's brow creased slightly: "Hmm. The memory I gave doesn't seem valuable enough to match what you shared. Let me think about what else I should offer..."

"?" Cheng Shi blinked. He hadn't expected his gambit to yield a bonus.

Yes—gambit.

Cheng Shi wasn't genuinely playing the heart-to-heart game. He had his own calculations.

First: the more peak players he encountered, the more inevitable it became that his dual-faith identity would be exposed. No matter how seamlessly he acted, concealed, and disguised, he'd told too many lies. Those lies would eventually contradict each other.

When all those "landmines" finally detonated at once, no explanation would be believed.

So what he needed to do now was plant the endpoint of all those lies in the Dragon King's fertile soil of Memory—letting Memory's reputation anchor a single, authoritative "truth."

And that truth was: Cheng Shi had fused with the Void. Regardless of how he'd done it, the fact remained that he'd fused.

Later, when others learned of this through the Dragon King, his credibility would lend weight to the claim. Those scheming peak players would then review their own memories of Cheng Shi, match every inconsistency against the dual-faith explanation, and complete the logical self-persuasion on their own.

This was Cheng Shi's effort to cover his tracks.

The dual Void faith had been his trump card—a hidden ace he logically shouldn't reveal. But a trump card that's been shown too many times ceases to be a trump card. It becomes common knowledge.

In truth, Cheng Shi hadn't planned to reveal it this soon. He still hadn't found a replacement—a new hidden card to buy himself lying room.

But now he had one.

The unexpected Chaos fusion had dealt him a fresh ace. With that in his pocket, he could afford to push the Void dual-faith out into the open as a new identity marker.

This should have been done more subtly—his original plan was to have Mi Laozhang be the one to "reveal" it. Not because of friendship, but because Mi Laozhang already knew about his dual faith and was an honest man. People trusted honest men.

But "unfortunately," Cheng Shi had conned Mi Laozhang into joining Deceit—so the honest man had lost his honest label and was no longer credible.

So Cheng Shi had been searching for a new candidate. Running into the Dragon King this trial gave him a perfect target. And he was confident this secret could fetch something even bigger in return.

So he confessed.

Half-truthfully confessed.

But regardless—he hadn't actually lied, had he?

Cheng Shi smiled and waited for the Dragon King's response. And Li Jingming didn't disappoint. He revealed a secret of his own—a secret about faith.

"Cheng Shi, I'm sure you've noticed I still wield considerable Memory power. Everyone's been curious about it, but I've never explained.

Today, given your honesty, I choose to exchange this memory of faith with you.

I didn't break my oath. I fused Deceit and Memory."

"!!!"

Cheng Shi's eyes went wide with shock. Though this intelligence wasn't entirely fresh—the understanding had simply shifted.

Everyone had assumed Memory hadn't inflicted an oathbreaking curse on the Dragon King—had even left him some unusually strong oathbreaker talents. But now it turned out every guess had been wrong. He'd fused?

How could the Fun God possibly choose to fuse with Memory?

What did this mean? Had eons of faith opposition ended today?

Followers on both sides had been at each other's throats for ages—and the two gods sitting on their Divine Thrones had shaken hands?

But if the Fun God truly intended this, why had he issued a divine decree during a trial ordering his followers to harvest Memory's followers?

And if opposing faiths could fuse, then how did Aph Ros...

Wait!

Who said Aph Ros didn't count as a fusion? Even if its faith was two sides of one coin rather than a true merger, having two faith powers in one body was, in a sense, already a form of fusion.

But that opposition had evolved into genuine fusion in the Dragon King's case!

So the Existence era had shown the early signs of fusion, while the Void era had fully resolved the problem of opposing-faith fusion?

Was this why the gods had agreed to sign the Convention?

Had the Fun God used this breakthrough to persuade the gods into the Convention?

Was this a truth discovered by Truth, or a change ushered in by the Void era?

Cheng Shi's brain was mush.

Li Jingming didn't know Cheng Shi was pondering such lofty matters. Sensing his shock, he assumed Cheng Shi was wondering how opposing faiths could coexist, so he smiled:

"I don't know how he convinced my Benefactor. But the fact is, I fused two opposing faiths."

Cheng Shi's expression became spectacularly complex. He'd assumed he was the one ahead of the curve—but looking back, Li Jingming had left Memory and joined Deceit several days before he had.

'So the Dragon King really had been the Dragon King all along!'

Li Jingming read the bewilderment and gently shook his head:

"I wasn't as lucky as you might think. The fusion was a long process—so long that I endured a great deal of ridicule under the Deceit banner. It's only recently that Deceit's power has started manifesting in me.

I finally understand now that this is what fusion is."

'Right—Hong Lin also mentioned that Li Jingming had only recently started impersonating people. So his fusion really was recent—even after Hong Lin's!'

"But then... why did you come to Deceit? Shouldn't faith fusion keep you in your original faith?"

"I don't know. But I suspect it was one of the Fun God's conditions.

He does enjoy making people into entertainment, doesn't he?"

'Yes! Absolutely yes—that's utterly irrefutable.' But still...

Cheng Shi furrowed his brow: "You don't know? Didn't he tell you anything when he summoned you?"

Li Jingming recalled the audience and shook his head with a bitter smile: "He said something—but it was the same as saying nothing.

He asked me: 'Do you want to fuse a second faith?'

I said: 'Yes.'

And then the audience ended. My faith inexplicably switched to Deceit, but I had no Deceit talents at first—only my original Memory talents.

God knows I never imagined I'd be fusing with Deceit."

"..." 'Your conversation was surprisingly straightforward. How come the Fun God wasn't this easygoing when he summoned me?!

But regardless, it felt like the Dragon King had been played by the Fun God.

Mi Laozhang seemed to have been played into it too.

The god just loved playing people.

Cheng Shi was numb. He pursed his lips:

"Fine. Since you've been so generous, I can't be stingy either. Go ahead—ask your questions.

You've been interrogating me nonstop. Now it's your turn.

Dragon King, make the most of this. I know far more than you'd expect."

Chapter 603: The Unwavering Path of Memory

Li Jingming seized the opportunity—or rather, he knew precisely what memories he needed to record. His eyes blazed as he looked at Cheng Shi and posed the question he'd been most eager to ask:

"What happened in that trial? And why did Prosperity... fall?"

Cheng Shi had more or less expected this. He chuckled, lips curling upward: "Does that count as two questions?"

"?" Li Jingming considered for a moment, then nodded. "Then consider it two."

'Generous!'

Cheng Shi grinned—brilliantly. This time, he held nothing back and recounted the trial from start to finish. He only obscured the parts involving the Destined Ones and Big Cat, and attributed the reason for the gods' mass descent to "unknown causes."

"Prosperity went mad and tried to Assimilate Decay. The gods descended to uphold the Convention's justice and imprisoned Prosperity—who then destroyed itself. That's the full sequence of events.

But I didn't witness it personally. My Benefactor told me everything."

"Fate!"

"Correct. My Benefactor. I don't know why I was granted an audience, but he said it was an accident—an accident driven by change."

Li Jingming felt profound shock. He'd already known about Prosperity's fall, but hearing that it had destroyed itself under divine siege stirred a surprising sense of respect.

Yes, respect—he seemed to be earnestly appreciating the nature of its "devotion."

Noticing this, Cheng Shi felt the Dragon King's mindset was slightly off. He clicked his tongue and said abruptly:

"Dragon King, aren't you a bit too devout toward Memory? The smell of it is practically wafting up my nose. I've met plenty of people, and everyone's devotion has at least a trace of personal desire mixed in. But you're different.

I can sense your devotion, but as for whether that devotion is directed at it..."

Before Cheng Shi could finish, Li Jingming smiled: "You want to know why I walk the path of Memory so unwaveringly?"

"Tch. 'Unwaveringly' is a fine word. You've already switched to Deceit's banner—how is that unwavering?"

"..." The Dragon King ignored Cheng Shi's quip and spoke with a hint of gravity: "I simply want to do something for this world."

"?" Cheng Shi froze, thinking he'd misheard.

Li Jingming repeated himself and elaborated:

"Life is fragile. Civilizations are brief. Since I was born here and grew up in this era, I naturally want to leave something behind before it all passes away.

And recording memories is the best method I can think of."

"You..." Cheng Shi was dumbfounded. He'd never expected the Dragon King to suddenly get philosophical. But the tone, the expression, the delivery—it all sounded far too genuine.

'Bro—are you serious?'

Li Jingming seemed lost in recollection. His voice turned nostalgic:

"I was an orphan from birth—abandoned on the side of a highway. My master found me and brought me back to Cloud Field Temple, where he raised me."

"What temple? Wait—you're actually a Daoist?!" Cheng Shi blinked.

"Naturally. Plenty of your Deceit folks mock me for putting on airs, never realizing this outfit is who I actually am.

Cloud Field Temple was tiny—just my master and me.

Yet it was also vast—because the temple held the complete records of every patriarch and ancestor from antiquity to the modern era.

As strange as it sounds, no matter how many times the land changed rulers and seas turned to fields, the temple's single-line succession remained unbroken to this day.

My daily chores, besides stoking the fire and cooking meals, were reading through the lives of those patriarchs—some extraordinary, some ordinary. Perhaps that's where I developed the habit of remembering..."

Cheng Shi had been listening casually at first, but gradually something felt off. The Dragon King was... leaving behind his own past.

He was recording others, while simultaneously ensuring others recorded him?

'Interesting idea—but wrong audience.' Cheng Shi pursed his lips and unceremoniously cut him off:

"Enough, enough. Who isn't an orphan these days?"

Nothing to sigh about.

And this doesn't count as trade content. I didn't ask—you volunteered. Don't try to sneak it onto the bill."

Li Jingming laughed softly and nodded: "A person's past, present, and future all deserve to be recorded. Cheng Shi—if you ever want to leave something behind for this world, my memory can help you."

"I'll pass.

You Existence followers really are cunning—always finding new ways to pull people toward Existence.

We Void walkers are different. This world inherently has no meaning."

As the words left his mouth, Cheng Shi silently added: 'Because the person who gave this world meaning is no longer here.'

Li Jingming was perceptive. He caught the flash of sorrow in Cheng Shi's eyes, paused briefly, then nodded and dropped the subject.

"Your turn, Cheng Shi. The memories you've provided are extraordinarily valuable, but I should warn you—memory exchange is voluntary, and I won't always be this generous."

"..."

Cheng Shi understood. The Dragon King was telling him he couldn't trade a bunch of small questions for one large answer. Watching the exploit he'd just discovered get "officially patched," Cheng Shi rolled his eyes.

"Fine. But I answered two of your questions, so naturally I get two of my own.

Hmm... let me think. Tell me about them—about Lu Xia and Yu Go."

"?"

"Birth Holy Voice Lu Xia and Vulture King of Decay Yu Go?"

Those two have absolutely nothing in common. No connection whatsoever. Why suddenly ask about both?"

'Why?' Because he needed to keep tabs on his allies' leads.

Hu Xuan had taken Zhen Xin to find the so-called Lu Xia. Big Cat had only asked about Yu Go during her conversation with Aph Ros. Both women had their targets, and while Cheng Shi couldn't help directly, he at least needed to know these figures' backgrounds—so he could adapt when new developments arose.

But he naturally couldn't voice his reasoning. Instead, he deflected with his trademark redirect:

"Is that a new question?"

"..." Li Jingming was momentarily stumped. He gave Cheng Shi a strange look, shook his head, and after a moment of reflection began:

"Lu Xia was an orphan born in the Grand Tribunal. As a child, he was taken by a merchant from the Nature Alliance to a tribe that worshipped Birth, where he grew up. When he came of age, he traveled to the Tower of Logic and became a key member of the Church of Life based there."

'Wait—another orphan?'

'No, that's not the point. The point is the Church of Life. This prototype organization—the one that players used as reference when founding the Nature Sect—seems to have produced quite a few notable figures. The Grand Scholar Selius had been a member too.'

"His childhood memories are untraceable. All I know is that before ascending to godhood, he was a... midwife in Tusnat."

Chapter 604: Lu Xia and Yu Go

"A midwife?" Cheng Shi blinked. "Wasn't Lu Xia a man?"

"He was. But his skill with deliveries was extraordinary—an exceptionally high survival rate for the children he brought into the world. Over time, as his reputation grew, people simply chose to overlook the gender issue.

Moreover, rumor has it that even before ascending to godhood, he could already cure certain types of infertility. So he wasn't a traditional midwife—more like a technically proficient obstetrician."

"...So that's why he was called the Birth Holy Voice?"

"His divine name and his past come from two entirely unrelated memories, so I can't give you a definitive answer. But in my personal opinion—almost certainly."

"In that case, this Envoy of Birth isn't exactly..." Cheng Shi hesitated. He'd thought of Go Lis and nearly used the word "grotesque," but considering his "friendship" with Aph Ros, he swallowed it.

"Isn't exactly what?"

"...A villain?"

Li Jingming paused, then chuckled:

"There's no hero or villain among them—no good or evil either. Such judgments are merely subjective assessments colored by personal perspective.

The basis for those judgments is, more often than not, self-interest.

If a being benefits me, it's good. If it doesn't, it's bad.

That's why I often think devotion is never truly pure—desire always runs through it."

'Hss—'

Why did that sound so familiar?

'Excuse me, sir—is your full name Li Aph-Ros Jingming?'

Cheng Shi blinked in bewilderment, then silently attributed the déjà vu to the fact that well-traveled people tended to reach similar conclusions.

"Then what desire is mixed into your devotion?"

"Mine?" Li Jingming smiled. "Probably curiosity and memory. For example—I'm quite intrigued by these 'eras' you mentioned."

'Well played—you really know how to squeeze in through every crack.' Cheng Shi snorted and waved a hand. "That's next round. Let me finish my questions first."

Li Jingming's eyes lit up at the promise. He nodded and continued:

"I know relatively little about the Vulture King of Decay. All I can say is that when there was only one follower of Decay left in the entire universe, that follower was finally graced with mercy by its Benefactor. In the battle that nearly marked Decay's extinction, it was elevated to Envoy.

But after becoming an Envoy, it lost the courage it once had. When cornered by Herobos and his World Destroyers, it broke through the encirclement... and fled.

Very few people are interested in it. Even Decay's own followers rarely mention it. It's hardly a shining example—more like a clown who survived on luck. Uh... apologies. I forgot you're also a clown. I didn't mean to imply anything."

"..." 'You better not have!'

Cheng Shi's eye twitched. He thought to himself that Yu Go really couldn't change its spots—across all these eras, its only specialty remained running away.

'Can Big Cat actually catch something like that?'

'And even if she catches it—can she beat it?'

He couldn't help worrying about Big Cat's future. But in that moment, he forgot something crucial: where had Big Cat ended up?

He'd been so absorbed in the memory exchange with Li Jingming that he'd completely lost track of his other companion's whereabouts.

"Well? Satisfied with this memory?"

"Passable. But I'll need some time to verify whether what you've said is true. You're a con man, after all—con men don't deal in truth." Cheng Shi clicked his tongue with mild disdain, then raised an eyebrow to signal it was Li Jingming's turn.

Here in this undisturbed pocket of Void, Cheng Shi had ample time to fill the gaps in his knowledge. At least until those two Benefactors finished their fight, he should be reasonably safe.

Li Jingming could see Cheng Shi was in high spirits for discussion—exactly what he'd hoped. So he smiled and said: "My interest in them is far smaller than in you. If you'd be willing to—"

"Out of the question."

Li Jingming paused briefly, then nodded in understanding: "Very well. Then let's discuss the 'eras.' I'm very curious about how this concept relates to the 'epochs' I already know."

Now Cheng Shi was fired up. This topic could definitely extract something major from Li Jingming's vault. So he didn't hide or fabricate—he simply kept things vague:

"Epochs aren't unique. The Civilization epoch you know about has occurred roughly four times throughout history. The current one is the fourth."

"!!!"

The opening statement alone sent a shockwave through Li Jingming. His brow creased as he dove into his memories. Azure rays of light flickered through his eyes—countless of them—until, after a prolonged silence, he responded thoughtfully:

"I see. So there was one more."

"Hm?" Now it was Cheng Shi's turn to be startled. "You guessed?"

"No—it's just that certain overlapping memories had minor contradictions, which made me suspicious about specific points on the historical timeline.

I initially assumed it was like the Time trials—temporal entanglement somewhere had caused distortions in the historical record.

But now I see that isn't the case. Different epochs of civilization produced different histories.

However, the few overlapping histories in my memory do share similarities. Does that mean each time the Civilization epoch replays, history follows the same general trajectory—just with minor variations?"

They both froze simultaneously. They looked at each other and said the same word in unison:

"Fate?"

Indeed—it was too much of a match. Variation within the predetermined was precisely Fate's authority.

But in previous eras, Void hadn't yet descended. In other words, Origin hadn't yet created Void. So where was this overwhelming sense of déjà vu coming from?

Cheng Shi had genuinely never considered this issue from Memory's perspective. He mulled it over but, finding no answers, filed the question away for later.

Li Jingming was even more confused—he didn't even know how "eras" actually worked. But leveraging his vast store of memories as a foundation, he'd still managed to piece together certain conclusions. Eager to verify them, he pressed forward:

"Does the 'four' you mentioned correlate with the number of Paths of Fate?"

'Brilliant!'

Cheng Shi had never expected the Dragon King to extrapolate this far from such vague hints. He appraised Li Jingming with visible appreciation, clicking his tongue:

"Not bad at all. Now I actually believe what Hong Lin said—Zhen Yi might not have managed to scam you. But I'm more curious: what exactly did she do to you?"

"If you can explain the full picture of the 'eras,' I don't mind sharing that rather uninteresting memory. Cheng Shi—you should see it by now. I was never Deceit's enemy, and I won't be yours."

Chapter 605: It Told Me Everything

Hearing Li Jingming's words, Cheng Shi uncharacteristically dropped the grin and asked seriously: "Then whose enemy are you?"

"If I must have one... probably those who no longer wish to leave any mark on this world.

Perhaps I've preserved their loathing toward this world—but that loathing is part of it too.

The game the gods brought down won't go on without an ending. When that day comes, none of us can say what will happen to us.

I'm not a pessimist, but I'm not an optimist either. I don't believe this world will continue to exist.

So walking my path of Memory isn't just about doing something sentimental for my own satisfaction. I often wonder—what if..."

At this point, Li Jingming's momentum faltered. Almost reflexively, he deployed a sound-isolating formation around them both.

"What if someone like me exists—someone willing to do something for this world? Willing to push back against the gods' oppression under their very gaze? Then perhaps everything I know could become that person's weapon. And wouldn't that let me, just like my founding patriarch, leave behind a 'life' worthy of future generations' respect on Cloud Field Temple's records?"

"..."

Cheng Shi was stunned. His feelings were complicated.

The instant the Dragon King had activated the formation, he'd assumed he was about to be recruited into another organization. But instead, he'd heard this.

This was the second time Li Jingming had shared his convictions.

The Dragon King was... serious?

Cheng Shi was genuinely taken aback.

'With ambitions like these, not joining the Torchbearers would be a real waste, wouldn't it?'

'If the Torchbearers' founder is also a peak player, there's no way they wouldn't try to recruit someone like this—they couldn't possibly reject him with that tired old excuse of "opposing faiths" the way Zhen Xin had.'

'Wait—why did Zhen Xin even cross his mind?!'

'The Torchbearers definitely couldn't have been founded by Zhen Xin... right?!'

Cheng Shi shook his head in alarm, then ventured a cautious question: "A small question that doesn't count as part of our exchange—you don't have to answer if you don't want to. This founding patriarch you mentioned..."

"Oh—he enlisted. When the nation was in crisis, every citizen must answer the call. He put down his horsetail whisk and picked up a rifle.

So I apologize—I told a small lie earlier. Cloud Field Temple's lineage wasn't actually unbroken. During that turbulent era, the tiny mountain temple lost its incense entirely.

My master's master stumbled upon it while seeking refuge, read through the founding patriarchs' records, and was so moved by the temple's legend that he chose to stay and carry on the succession.

So in truth, I'm not a direct-line disciple of the temple at all..."

"..."

Cheng Shi was genuinely moved—though not by what the Cloud Field Temple Daoist had done. It was the Dragon King's way of narrating history. The man had an irresistible magnetism that made you want to dig deeper.

'Truly worthy of being a Memory follower. Whether it's recording memories or sharing them, he's the best among all players.'

'The Chosen of Memory—the title is well-deserved.'

This mutual exchange of understanding finally told Cheng Shi why the Dragon King had such a sterling reputation, and why Big Cat got along with him so well.

But even if every word was true, not everyone would trust him for it. Not everyone was a Torchbearer—in fact, vanishingly few were.

Many people wanted to protect their own interests. Very few wanted to protect what was genuinely good.

People feared that being too thoroughly recorded would invite problems. So even someone like the Dragon King probably had very few real friends.

After all, not even Order followers were universally popular.

"Which makes me even more confused. If your path of Memory is this unshakable, why would you want to impersonate others?" Cheng Shi frowned. "Deceit... to put it bluntly, the Fun God doesn't exactly have a great reputation. Impersonating people you've memorized is the kind of thing that makes people associate you with... that unlucky thing. That doesn't match your original intentions, Dragon King."

Hearing this, Li Jingming smiled. He felt his sharing had finally earned a sliver of genuine sincerity from the other man.

"Don't put me on too high a pedestal. I told you—recording is my habit, and all those lofty-sounding ideas are just occasional daydreams in between.

I'm a person who pleases himself first. Only second do I aspire to emulate my founding patriarch.

And I said it myself—I'm not a true lineage disciple. So, from start to finish, there's nothing noble about me.

Impersonating others is simply my method for collecting more memories. Using Deceit's camouflage also spares me unnecessary trouble.

Someone who knows too much needs deterrents beyond Memory alone. We're both at this tier—I trust I don't need to elaborate."

'Now that's honest.'

Cheng Shi smiled. He found this undevout Deceit colleague endlessly fascinating. A possibility suddenly occurred to him. After a moment's deliberation, he decided to make this heart-to-heart even more heartfelt.

So he shifted his stance and laid out the "eras" concept in full for Li Jingming. And as the Dragon King's eyes grew wider and wider with each revelation, Cheng Shi dropped a bombshell:

"...And the beginning and end of every era is connected to a certain entity I cannot name."

At the mention of this unnamed entity, Li Jingming's gaze sharpened. He spoke two words with grave solemnity:

"The Origin!"

Cheng Shi's eyebrow twitched. 'So he does know something.' He nodded meaningfully, then grinned: "It seems the Dragon King is quite well-informed himself."

"You're more impressive, Cheng Shi.

I've always known there are people more capable and heights beyond heights, but on the path of Memory, I'd never met anyone who could sit and discuss on equal footing.

No—that's putting gold on my own face.

What I've recorded is merely history that already happened. It existed, so it left traces. If you look, you'll find it—the only variable is how much time and effort it takes. I simply know a bit more and a bit deeper than others.

But what comes out of your mouth, Cheng Shi...

Honestly, it's not the kind of thing you can find just by searching.

I've crossed paths with every Chosen out there. All of them together probably don't know as much about the gods as you do.

I don't even dare judge whether you're lying. Not 'can't'—dare not. You haven't shared a single concrete memory, yet every point you've made aligns with clues already in my records.

Cheng Shi—where did you learn all of this?

...Are you really just a player?"

Cheng Shi laughed—a genuinely happy laugh. What compliment could be sweeter than praise from a rival god's Chosen?

'In this moment, when it comes to knowledge of the gods, I out-Dragon-King the Dragon King.'

'Tsk—now this is a moment worth remembering!'

But if asked how he'd learned all this?

The answer was simple: nothing special, just lots of divine audiences.

Of course he couldn't say that. But the deflection was already prepared. He curled his lip, gave two theatrical coughs, and adopted the look of someone desperately hiding their embarrassment:

"That too is an interesting memory. I can share it—but on one condition."

"What condition?" Li Jingming was burning with curiosity. At this point, he had no fear of paying a steep price.

"I'll tell you afterward. But first, you have to agree."

"???"

'So—a blank check?'

Li Jingming frowned. He studied Cheng Shi for a long moment. Seeing that it didn't appear to be a trap, he nodded with some hesitation:

"Fine. As long as it's nothing too outrageous, I'll consider it. Go ahead."

Cheng Shi smiled—the grin of a fox whose scheme had just worked: "I don't actually know that much about the gods. But someone knows a great deal, and that person told me everything."

"Who?!" Li Jingming's gaze locked on.

"Yu Xi. Deceit's Envoy. A Servant God of the Void."

Chapter 606: Brother Mouth's True Identity?

'The Fun God has an Envoy?'

'Void has a Servant God?'

Generally speaking, a Path of Fate having a Servant God seemed perfectly normal. But it depended on who was doing the assessing.

Ordinary players might find it unremarkable. But for Li Jingming, he had reservations about the claim's authenticity—after all, both the person delivering the news and the person described within it were followers of Deceit.

He had to consider the possibility that the con artist across from him was slipping in a half-truth right when they were supposed to be baring everything.

Yet he couldn't identify a motive. He saw the respect in Cheng Shi's eyes and reciprocated it. In an atmosphere where they could genuinely become friends, there seemed to be no reason for such a pointless lie.

So this "Yu Xi" was real?

But its existence didn't... add up.

Because Li Jingming's knowledge told him that Existence had no Servant Gods. So why would Void—Existence's counterpart—have one?

The existence of Servant Gods had always been traceable. These favored followers, who carried out divine authority and spread divine will on behalf of the true gods, had always been the followers that the gods valued most. The gods were willing to have someone in this world championing their cause.

This was most common during the Life and Descent eras, where every god had at least one Envoy—some had several.

But when the Civilization era arrived and the Civilization gods descended, the number of Servant Gods plummeted. Order may have had a few, but after Truth's arrival, there were none.

This made sense. When Truth descended and the pursuit of knowledge began to spread, truth was no longer monopolized by the few. Grand Scholars and other great minds sprouted like mushrooms after rain, while Envoys faded into the river of time and vanished.

Ordinary people who gained divine attention rose to prominence, becoming the mainstream of their era, leading the advance of civilization and the turnover of knowledge. Under Truth's gaze, everyone became a hero of the search for Truth.

Correspondingly, the Chaos era saw a few Envoys under Chaos, but after Folly's arrival, there were likewise none.

Then came Existence...

Existence didn't seem to have an era or any Envoys. Time was supremely mysterious and inscrutable, and as for Memory...

Li Jingming frowned slightly, recalling a particular memory from a certain trial—and a mirror he'd found.

That mirror was clearly conscious, but it didn't resemble a god. At least, it couldn't be the Memory god. It seemed more like a Memory creation contaminated by some other faith's power.

Truth had something similar: the Ritual of Truth, held by the Erudition Presidium. Though that Truth creation was of far purer faith purity.

Studying these histories closely revealed a pattern: some gods seemed to no longer wish to elevate Envoys. Instead, they preferred to create constructs that possessed Envoy-level abilities but were deliberately limited.

Mortals couldn't know the reason for this shift. But the fact remained.

Li Jingming had been swept up in a flood of memories. His thoughts drifted. He shook his head, shelved his musings, and decided to hear more before judging whether this Clown of Deceit had ulterior motives.

What came next was surprisingly sincere. Cheng Shi described in full how he'd encountered Lord Yu Xi during a trial, how his identity had been stolen, how he'd uncovered the entity's existence, and how their relationship had developed—clear, detailed, and vivid.

Even the expressions and nuances at certain moments were rendered without concealment—the narrative was lifelike.

It certainly didn't sound fake.

Li Jingming furrowed his brow again. He was starting to believe—not because the account was thorough, but because he'd found a piece of self-convincing evidence within Cheng Shi's words.

"You're saying this Lord Yu Xi... is searching for its mask?"

Cheng Shi nodded vigorously:

"Yes. I spent ages probing indirectly before I finally guessed that from its expressions and reactions.

But honestly, it definitely knew I was testing it. It was just incredibly approachable and never stopped me from probing or getting closer.

And I truly want to do this. I'm willing to search for those broken mask fragments to get closer to it.

But I didn't approach Deceit because of this—I'm simply curious about this Deceit Envoy who wanders the world as it pleases.

Hmm, probably the same way you're curious about remarkable memories.

So—is this another spectacular memory?"

"Spectacular!" Li Jingming was finally convinced. Not only had he persuaded himself, he now wanted to share his own knowledge in return. "Though one thing might not be what you think."

"?"

Cheng Shi went blank. He studied the Dragon King with a peculiar expression, wondering whether this narrator wasn't just a narrator but actually an expert too.

'Yu Xi's entire identity is something I fabricated. How could you possibly know more about it than I do?'

'Who do you think you are—Brother Mouth?'

Li Jingming hadn't noticed the shift in Cheng Shi's expression. Head bowed, he organized his logic and refined his phrasing. After a long pause, he laid out his deductions one by one.

It was actually quite straightforward—he'd simply applied the memories and conclusions he'd just been ruminating on to this Deceit Envoy.

"Void shouldn't have an Envoy. But the Yu Xi you described should genuinely exist."

"???"

Now Cheng Shi was truly baffled—because he could tell the Dragon King wasn't making this up. The man seemed utterly convinced that Cheng Shi had gotten something wrong.

'Wait, bro—what?'

Li Jingming then explained in crystal-clear detail how Existence had no Envoys and how Void should mirror that status. He capped it off with an extremely confident guess about Yu Xi's true nature.

"So what I want to tell you is: your so-called Lord Yu Xi is probably not a person—or rather, not an Envoy. It's..."

The mask before it shattered!

Just like the Ritual of Truth, it's most likely a creation of the Fun God. Whether made on a whim or with a specific purpose, it eventually—for reasons unknown—broke apart and scattered through history.

That's why it never comments on its own identity and lets you guess freely. It's not that it refuses to lower itself to explain—it's that it's actively muddling your understanding.

It's skilled with deception. After all, it is a creation of Deceit."

"..."

This time, Cheng Shi was genuinely, truly stunned!

'Is he right? Does this make sense? It makes so much sense! I think he's onto something—what do you think, Brother Mouth?!

'Say something, Brother Mouth!'

'So this is your real identity, isn't it?!

'This is why you wouldn't explain yourself, isn't it?!

Chapter 607: A Delightful Surprise! New Clues About the Shattered Mask!

Cheng Shi was agitated. He kept bombarding the Fool's Lips in his mind, desperate to know whether the Dragon King was right.

There was a reason the man was called the Dragon King. Even the second-ranked Deceit follower had turned into a groveling fanboy the moment he'd heard the name "Yu Xi," but Li Jingming? Three sentences and he'd flatly dismantled the fabricated identity, driving straight to the core: the mask was the true body!

'You nailed it, bro!'

'I invented all of this just to figure out what Brother Mouth actually is!'

'Now, one conversation with you is worth ten years of questioning that mouth!'

'Brother Mouth, say something! I know you're listening! You've got the nerve to lie to me but not the nerve to speak up?!

'Got your cover blown and now you're going silent, is that it?'

'Fine, fine—I knew playing the heart-to-heart game with the Dragon King would yield massive returns. I'm just too clever!'

Cheng Shi was elated. He felt he'd finally found the right track. The Fool's Lips and the Tongue of Eating Lies had to be fragments of some Deceit creation. The complete mask might truly be something as mysterious as the Ritual of Truth.

But the Dragon King's surprises didn't end there—because before Cheng Shi could even coax a response out of Brother Mouth, Li Jingming spoke again:

"Come to think of it, my memories do contain a record of something resembling a fragment of such a mask.

Of course, before learning about your 'Lord Yu Xi,' I'd assumed it was merely an unusual transcendent artifact. Now, looking at it again... it could very well be one of the mask pieces you're searching for."

"!!!"

Cheng Shi snapped upright. He crossed the distance in a single stride, seized the Dragon King's hands, and declared with absolute gravity:

"Where? I'll trade any memory you want for its location."

Li Jingming paused, glanced down at his hands—now white from Cheng Shi's grip—and said with a wry chuckle:

"You've supplied more than enough memories, Cheng Shi. I'm not the secretive type. But the place genuinely isn't easy to reach.

It's a city from the mid-Civilization era called San Dales."

Cheng Shi frowned, remembering the place.

The city belonged to the Tower of Logic, situated in a remote area near the northern snowfields. Thanks to its sparse population and perennial cold, the Tower's Grand Scholars had long used it as a dumping ground for experimental waste. It had reportedly flourished briefly before falling into total disuse.

"Can you be more specific?"

"I've no additional memories. You should thank the fact that this one came from another Memory follower. If not for his devout habit of collecting the memories of traveling merchants from the Tower of Logic, I might never have learned such a thing existed there."

"?" Cheng Shi blinked. "Then how can you be sure it's related to the mask I described? That's pretty thin evidence."

"Because it looks like something Deceit would create—and more specifically, like part of a mask.

It's a pair of ears. In San Dales's ghost stories, it's called...

the Secret Peeping Ear."

'The Secret Peeping Ear!!!'

No doubt about it—absolutely none. Just hearing the name, Cheng Shi knew the Secret Peeping Ear was part of the mask!

Originally, the whole "shattered mask" concept was something he'd entirely fabricated. But now it seemed he'd actually stumbled onto the truth. Brother Mouth and Brother Tongue were almost certainly fragments of a single mask!

So Cheng Shi resumed his mental barrage on Brother Mouth. And this time, Brother Mouth responded—though it didn't seem to be answering Cheng Shi so much as reminiscing about the past.

More importantly, it didn't respond internally. It spoke aloud.

"San Dales... what a distant memory."

"!!!"

Cheng Shi froze. Brother Mouth tossed out a cryptic line and vanished, leaving Cheng Shi's cheeks twitching as he tried to figure out how to respond.

Fortunately, the remark piqued Li Jingming's curiosity. He raised an eyebrow and smiled: "Sounds like you've been there before—and something interesting happened?"

'I've never been anywhere near it!'

Cheng Shi was numb. 'Fine, Brother Mouth—you just have to keep making trouble for me, don't you?'

His lip twitched, and he quickly clarified: "Just a passing thought. I heard someone mention it during a trial—the scenario was near San Dales. Seems I accidentally missed it."

Li Jingming nodded thoughtfully:

"Perhaps it wasn't accidental. Fate is formless, traceless, and impossible to find. When you aren't supposed to know these things, it may simply not guide you to the right place.

You're a follower of Fate. You should understand that better than I do."

'Understand? Ha—I don't just understand, I know it all too... too well. This is just destiny, isn't it!'

Cheng Shi smiled thinly, promptly silencing a few blasphemous thoughts that had tried to surface.

Seeing the peculiar smile, Li Jingming shook his head: "Let's hear your condition, Cheng Shi. I'd rather not carry a blank check around and give myself unnecessary stress."

Cheng Shi's eyes rolled: "First, tell me what Zhen Yi did to you."

"That's your condition?"

"No—that's the exchange for 'eras.'"

"?" Li Jingming blinked, his expression turning slightly helpless. "So many people exchange memories not to preserve them, but to..."

"Eat the gossip!" Cheng Shi's eyes lit up and he grinned from ear to ear. "Cards on the table—I just want the gossip. But this is a melon you promised to slice, so hurry up. I want to move to the next topic."

"..."

Li Jingming gave a rueful laugh, then nodded: "An exchange should be fair. But this one is honestly... unlucky."

The Dragon King quickly summarized what had happened between him and Zhen Yi. It was an incident from shortly after the History School's founding. Back then, Li Jingming had sought out the School in search of memory exchanges.

At the time, he'd genuinely admired the History School's pragmatic approach, so he'd paid a steep price to secure an introduction through intermediaries and met its helmsman: Yi Zhen.

Of course, the Dragon King had no idea at the time that this "Yi Zhen" was neither nostalgic nor truthful—and wasn't the History School's founder at all, but the founder's younger sister: that era's not-yet-infamous trickster, Zhen Yi.

His timing couldn't have been worse. Zhen Yi happened to have hijacked Zhen Xin's account at that point, so the person who received the Dragon King was the mischief-loving sister.

To join the History School, beyond a broad knowledge of history, one had to have personally witnessed a major event on the Land of Hope. These criteria were easy for the Dragon King—he casually recounted an experiment conducted within the Tower of Logic, passing the basic evaluation effortlessly.

But this particular examiner was unusually harsh. After the basic evaluation, she insisted on an additional round of "sitting and debating history."

The Dragon King didn't mind. So, just as he was doing today, he began a memory exchange with the "examiner."

Chapter 608: The Dragon King and Zhen Yi—A Story That Must Be Told

(Warriors, hold the salt!)

The examiner's scholarship was vast. After all, this was the helmsman nurtured by an entire organization's resources. Her torrent of eloquence—quoting extensively and citing broadly—was so commanding that even Li Jingming, the Chosen of Memory, nearly conceded defeat.

But the Dragon King held his own. At minimum, in the breadth of his knowledge of the Land of Hope's history, he offered equally thorough research and incisive commentary.

And so the two fought to a draw, seemingly developing a mutual appreciation born of their respective historical foundations.

But what the Dragon King hadn't expected was that she flipped on him almost immediately. This capricious helmsman of the History School used the Dragon King's "failure to win" as grounds to reject his membership—and decreed that the History School was henceforth forbidden from ever having dealings with him.

Honestly, having believed he'd found a kindred spirit, the Dragon King spent quite some time puzzling over this baffling rejection. But he was merely puzzled—he didn't consider it a loss. After all, compared to the histories he'd shared, what he'd heard from the School's helmsman was far more voluminous and staggering.

No matter how he calculated, it couldn't be called a bad deal.

But as he later came to understand the Land of Hope more deeply, the Dragon King discovered that every piece of those unfamiliar histories the School's helmsman had told him... was fake.

Only then did he realize he'd been conned. And his swindler was Zhen Yi.

"..." Hearing all this, Cheng Shi's eyes held not a shred of mockery or amusement. Only sympathy. In this moment, two people who'd been played by Zhen Yi found perfect empathy.

'What rotten luck!'

But...

'That counts as not losing?'

'Dragon King, you lost everything down to your shorts!'

'If you call that breaking even, then when I went up against that unlucky thing, I practically turned a profit!'

He studied Li Jingming with furrowed brows and a peculiar look. The Dragon King seemed to read the doubt, and smiled:

"Memory may be the surface of Existence, but what it records isn't limited to the surface.

In that fraudulent memory exchange, I didn't manage to record a single genuine piece of Hope's history. But I did record a person—vivid, fully fleshed out, with a personality that was... interesting.

That was my greatest gain. A harvest no less magnificent than any spectacular memory."

"..."

Cheng Shi was done. He didn't understand Memory's logic, but he was fairly certain the Dragon King had gained absolutely nothing from his encounter with Zhen Yi. This was pure cope—a spiritual victory, nothing more.

In this moment, the Dragon King's halo began to dim, and the shadow of Ah Q slowly merged with his image.

But setting all that aside, one thing Cheng Shi had definitely guessed right: the Dragon King was always recording people.

'Called it. Memory can never change its memorizing ways.'

He chuckled to himself, then put on a straight face and looked at Li Jingming:

"Dragon King, that's not very sporting!

We're exchanging memories, yes, but outside our deal you've been silently recording my current self. I've given away my image for free without any compensation—and back in the day, that was called invasion of privacy.

I don't particularly care, of course. But as a beneficiary of memory exchange, shouldn't you...

Show some appreciation?"

"..."

Li Jingming froze. While the logic wasn't wrong per se, no one had ever thought like this before. Memory exchanges were inherently part of conversations. Being able to record someone more thoroughly was simply a natural talent of Memory followers—how could that count as part of the deal?

But he'd more or less figured out Cheng Shi's temperament by now. The Clown's sharp tongue and apparent greed might just be a deliberate distortion of his own image.

Deceit was also a mask. Li Jingming never forgot that.

"Fine. What do you want?"

"I think you didn't finish the Zhen Yi story. Otherwise, given Zhen Yi's personality—if she'd truly gotten one over on you—she'd have broadcast it to the entire world by now. The fact that this never came to light means she didn't win.

And the reason definitely isn't your 'spiritual victory' nonsense.

What did you actually get from Zhen Yi?"

"Sharp and perceptive.

Cheng Shi, you're impressive. Most people would've accepted the story at face value by now. It's rare for someone to dig deeper.

But the rest involves Zhen Yi's memories. What are you offering in exchange?"

Cheng Shi's eyes spun: "I'll lay out that condition—my condition—clearly, right now."

"That was part of the previous round's exchange. Chips can't be spent twice."

"But I could also make it vague. Let you carry that burden while you walk your path of Memory.

I've noticed—you're a man of your word. You don't like unpaid debts.

Lucky for me, I'm not. I'm a con artist. I have thick skin. Welshing on a deal doesn't keep me up at night." He spread his hands in a shrug: 'I'm playing dirty—what are you going to do about it?'

"..."

Li Jingming's eyelid twitched hard. He stared at the man for a long time before finally convincing himself to eat the small loss.

"Zhen Yi back then was too young. She loved showing off."

"Showing off?" Cheng Shi blinked.

"Yes. The histories she told were largely correct in their broad strokes, but many of the details were wrong—and the more important the detail, the more severely she'd twisted it. That's what I mean by showing off.

She was deliberately muddying the true turning points of history.

But truth is truth. Once I gradually reassembled these distorted histories, thanks to her 'guidance,' I could reverse-engineer the logic to locate the real key moments and core information.

That's how I managed, from one memory to the next, to excavate truths that I'd once overlooked—truths only the History School possessed.

So her showing off inadvertently revealed even more hidden history to me.

When the increasingly savvy Zhen Yi eventually found out, her annoyance with me naturally... intensified."

"..."

'The two of you really have brains within brains. Combine every follower of War and Chaos together and their collective intellect probably wouldn't match yours.'

Cheng Shi clicked his tongue appreciatively. The Dragon King really wasn't inferior to Zhen Yi.

"All right, I've explained everything. Now you, Cheng Shi—what exactly is your condition?"

At the prompt, Cheng Shi's eyes lit up. He finally got serious. Looking at the Dragon King, he flashed a mysterious smile, then leaned in close and said quietly:

"I think you'd be a perfect fit for us. So I'd like to invite you to... join us."

"?" Li Jingming frowned, sensing that the "us" in Cheng Shi's mouth wasn't some ordinary organization. "Who is 'us'?"

Cheng Shi produced a mask and placed it over his face, offering an elegant bow:

"The Jokers.

A group of... liars who tell the stories of Void through the art of absurdity, all to entertain the entire world."

Chapter 609: An Existence Joker Is Even More Absurd

'A bunch of liars?'

Li Jingming studied the man before him with obvious interest and a wry laugh: "But I'm Existence."

"Using Existence to narrate Void. Even more absurd—and even more entertaining. Don't you think?"
Cheng Shi's smile was sly.

'That does make a sort of sense...'

When it came to being abstract, the Void was still a notch above the rest.

"But everything I narrate is an Existence story."

"No, no, no—the moment you started impersonating others, you were already telling a Void story."

Cheng Shi explained this with a perfectly straight face. The explanation made the Dragon King's eyes light up.

"Interesting. I don't object to joining organizations—otherwise I wouldn't have sought the History School's approval in the first place.

But every organization exists for a purpose. Some pursue profit, some seek survival. So what about yours, Cheng Shi? What are these so-called 'Jokers' for?"

"I already told you—to tell the stories of Void well."

Li Jingming shook his head:

"Stop being cryptic. I know you Fate followers love playing mysterious, but I'm a pragmatist, Cheng Shi. That routine won't work on me.

Be straight with me. What do I gain from the Jokers, and what does it cost me?"

'Good—this is exactly the bite I was waiting for!'

'If you never took the bait, I wouldn't know how to keep the pitch going.'

Cheng Shi laughed—full and loud. He lowered his mask with great ceremony and began his introduction:

"We aren't just narrators of Void's stories—we're also the audience.

You've probably misunderstood me. When I say 'telling the stories of Void,' I don't mean spreading the will of those two gods. I mean collecting the real stories—the ones that actually happened in the Void era.

Of course, the protagonists aren't mortals or players. They're the gods who exist now or once existed.

Dragon King, this era is fundamentally different from all others. As for why—you don't have sufficient... clearance yet.

Just remember: players have never been the era's trendsetter. Only the gods are.

So our ultimate goal is, through endless storytelling, to make ourselves part of the story—to go from jokers... to protagonists."

Li Jingming's gaze sharpened. His brow furrowed in surprise: "An alternative God Worship Society? Your end goal is to become gods?"

"Godhood isn't the point. What we want is to survive—to survive in this era of Void.

At minimum, in terms of pragmatism, our organization is very much like you."

'And the organization's Mi Laozhang is even more pragmatic than you,' Cheng Shi thought privately. 'So I'm technically not lying.'

"Moreover, our path doesn't conflict with your path of Memory. Even if you don't buy into our philosophy, you could simply treat us as an intelligence exchange hub—that works too.

Dragon King, I'm making an exception to invite you because I see potential in you. Otherwise, you wouldn't have this chance."

'Potential?'

'Survive?'

Li Jingming mulled the phrases, pondered for a moment, and finally allowed a smile to crack through his gravity.

"So I should be thanking you?"

Cheng Shi nodded as if it were the most natural thing in the world. "We're all brothers once you're in. No need for excessive courtesy—just settle the membership fee."

"..." 'Knew it. I just had to wonder where the catch was—and here it is.'

But Li Jingming didn't refuse. He was genuinely intrigued—though his interest lay not in the Jokers organization itself, but in Cheng Shi the person.

At the very least, in this group, he could hear fascinating stories about the gods from Cheng Shi's own mouth.

'Being a quiet audience member among storytelling jokers—without making a fool of myself—doesn't sound half bad.'

"I accept. What's the membership fee?" The Dragon King remained characteristically generous.

"Oh come on, I said we're all brothers. No need to be so formal. You still have some of that Chronicle of Time? Just toss me a couple of pages.

Why's your face going dark? This is all for the organization—I'm not pocketing it.

Think about it. We need to tell stories, right? And stories need material, right? And where does material come from? At the end of the day, we have to dig through history and accumulate it.

Hmm, now that I think about it—Dragon King, you and the Jokers are a match made in heaven. You're exactly the kind of Memory powerhouse we need."

"..."

'Fists clenching again.'

Li Jingming turned away, unable to look at this infuriating clown any longer. He took two deep breaths—then, unable to resist his curiosity, asked:

"Who else is in the Jokers, Cheng Shi? Don't tell me this is an organization you literally just founded five minutes ago to scam me for a membership fee.

Since you need Memory, I take it there aren't any Memory followers. So you're all Deceit followers?

Are the Jokers just a gathering of entertainment-seekers?"

"Of course not. The organization is full of talented people. You'll find out soon enough."

Cheng Shi said this with real conviction—because the organization had technically been established the last time, in front of Mi Laozhang. By now, the Jokers had survived for... an entire day on the Land of Hope. By that math, it was practically an ancient institution.

"Fine. I believe you.

Give me the organization's crest, the identity cipher, the recognition passcode, the meeting location, and the bylaws. If I encounter any other Jokers, I'll pay the full fee."

"?"

Cheng Shi froze.

'Bro—why are you so by-the-book?'

'Have you never joined a grassroots organization before?'

'This world isn't perfectly orderly everywhere, you know! Remember that chaos earlier? Chaos is the mainstream, brother!'

'Besides, where am I supposed to get all that stuff?'

'I didn't write the lore that deep...'

But things had come this far. There was no way Cheng Shi was going to push away a walking "intelligence database." So he raised the mask again with utmost solemnity:

"Void has no meaning—so naturally, there's none of that fancy stuff. Just remember: the Jokers' motto is 'Everything for the Void.'

As for meetings... they're irregular. No fixed headcount. When the need arises, the Void will respond."

He was about to don the mask and sell one last bit of mystique—but before the mask even reached his face, his entire body was sucked away with a sharp whoosh.

"..."

Watching the suddenly vanished Cheng Shi, Li Jingming's expression froze solid.

'So this is... the Void responding?'

'This is how it responds?'

'Who summoned Cheng Shi?'

'Deceit? Was it done with its business?'

'What about me—is my turn coming?'

Just as the Dragon King was thinking this, barely seconds later—whoosh—the Chosen of Memory, still eagerly anticipating an audience with his second Benefactor, was seized by a massive force and hurled out of the Void, right back into reality.

"..."

Chapter 610: The Heart-to-Heart Between Deceit and Fate

Rewind the clock a moment.

After the Void civil war had shattered the entire expanse, two identical pairs of eyes confronted each other once more in the deepest reaches of the Void, neither willing to yield.

As the twin sovereigns of Void, their emotions visibly influenced its state. And so, a wondrous sight appeared:

In these deep layers of Void—rarely explored by outsiders—one half of the realm danced with exuberant joy, awash in feverishly psychedelic colors, while the other half was frozen tundra, its howling winds threatening to encase the entire universe in ice.

"Hee~

Shall we continue?"

Deceit, eyes upturned at the corners, grinned as always. It didn't appear to have gotten the worse of the clash.

Fate was cold as true destiny. It knew it couldn't overcome its sibling god, but some tantrums simply needed throwing—otherwise, one day, the insufferable creature would literally irritate it to death.

"A pointless act of foolishness. Continuing would only waste time.

But know this—it's not that you are unbeatable. It's that I am unbeatable."

"?" Deceit blinked in bewilderment. "Are you sure you're Fate and not that foul-mouthed Folly? Because if you are Fate, you seem to be getting assimilated awfully fast."

"..."

No one could out-talk the Fun God in a war of words—Fate was well aware of that. So it dropped the banter and shifted to a colder warning:

"You violated the Void Agreement you yourself established. Therefore, as of now, the Agreement is void."

Deceit seemed wholly unbothered. It nodded: "Indeed. Void. You're free to withdraw your faith from that follower of yours."

"?"

The instant those words left Deceit's mouth, the frigid gale of the Void surged forward, pushing the boundary of "ice and fire" right up to Deceit's eyes.

"He is my follower. The faith that should be reclaimed is yours, Deceit!"

"My, my—it seems someone is forgetting certain facts.

How curious. I'm the one opposed to Memory, yet somehow my memory is better than a certain god who isn't even affected by Memory?

Let me think... I recall your follower—oh wait, I should say my follower—was an Oathbreaker?

Yes, he was. But whose oath did he break, exactly?

That memory is sooo old—I really need to think hard."

"..." Fate said nothing. The winds blew even fiercer.

Its frigid gaze swept across the pair of eyes identical to its own, then spoke in a low voice:

"His Oathbreaking was also part of the Void Agreement you drafted. Since the Agreement is now null, the Oathbreaking naturally doesn't count."

Deceit's eyes rolled, amused:

"Fine, fine. For the sake of our shared Void, I'll let you have this one.

But Chaos has already acknowledged his loyalty. That can't be undone. Since it's come to this, why not abandon your plan to move closer to Folly and join hands with Chaos instead? Together you could explore the future.

Chaos conceals the essence—Fate sees through to truth. When you think about it, you two are quite complementary. Not bad at all. Rather interesting, actually."

"And you still claim you didn't meddle—that you didn't steer him toward Chaos!"

"Don't go slandering me. My relationship with Chaos is purely professional—nothing sordid about it.

Chaos is one of the sixteen true gods personally appointed by Origin—named, enthroned, and granted authority. Even at my best, I can't control what it thinks, let alone when it's inherently chaotic.

So whatever choices it makes have nothing to do with me.

Adult gods should take responsibility for their own actions. That advice goes for you too.

And while we're at it, don't blame me for your follower's choices either. You heard him—he didn't mention Deceit once.

Oh wait, he did mention Blazing Sun. So maybe it was that prisoner who corrupted him?

Convicts, after all—they'll do anything to break out of jail."

Fate was speechless. It stared coldly at its sibling, then after a long silence, abruptly quelled the Void's gale and chill. A faint, weary sigh escaped:

"Existence works in harmony, top to bottom. Why must Void be divided?"

"Hmm? Who's dividing? Are you trying to split from me, dear sister? How ruthless."

"..." Every star-point and spiral in Fate's eyes froze still. It returned to perfect joylessness and said: "You know what I mean. It was Origin who bestowed everything. Drawing closer to it is not a mistake."

"I used to think so too," Deceit laughed self-deprecatingly, then grew increasingly enigmatic. "Until..."

"Until what?"

"Until my rebellious phase hit. Hee~"

A child who never changes is so boring. Who knows—maybe it's me that Origin favors, not the rest of you?"

"..."

Fate gave up. It ceased trying to correct its sibling's thinking. But it still offered a warning: "Even so, for you, Chaos is not a good choice."

Don't forget—when Chaos started its era, its rejection of Order wasn't for any other reason. It, too, was trying to draw closer to Origin.

Chaos is different from you. It won't necessarily help you."

"I don't need its help. Right now, I'm the one helping it. And I'll help myself too—so you needn't worry about that."

If you're bored, go write some more tragedies. A world full of fun is too distant from you. Not understanding it is perfectly normal."

"...Incorrigible. Time will prove that I am right." Fate spoke with glacial finality.

"Yes, yes, yes—you're right. You're always right. I was expecting you to say 'Time will eventually give you the answer,' but it turns out—he never gave you an answer at all, did he? So why did he give one to your Oathbreaker?"

Fate's brow creased: "He will not be Fate's prisoner. He will be Fate's Destiny."

Hearing this, Deceit's eye corners drew up in a mocking arc. The derision was so layered and complex that it was impossible to tell whether it was aimed at Fate, at Time, or... at itself.

Fate had no intention of wasting more time. It cast one final glance at Deceit:

"Since the Agreement is void, Fate's follower will inevitably walk the path of faith fusion. You...

take care of yourself."

With that, Fate vanished—leaving Deceit to roar with laughter in the empty Void.

"Such an actress. At the end of the day, you just can't bear to part with your little darling.

Ha—the Oathbreaker of Fate. Mmm, not bad. Not bad at all."

With a casual blink, the Void that had shattered in their civil war was restored in an instant. Infinite darkness flowed once more through the expanse. The god peered into its depths, toward those two followers who fancied themselves Jokers telling tales of Void, and let out a contemptuous snicker before yanking one of them over.

As for the other one...

'Tch. Stinks of Memory. Just looking at it is annoying.'

And so, before the two Jokers could even take the stage, one was flung out of the Void and the other was trembling before the "audience."

"Praise be—" Cheng Shi's opener was so well-rehearsed it was automatic. He hadn't even identified which pair of eyes he was facing before the words tumbled out.

But Deceit knew him all too well. So in the instant the Clown was about to raise his head, it locked his body in place—preventing him from seeing who this audience was with.

"..."

The scene hung awkwardly. Until the entity spoke, Cheng Shi genuinely couldn't be sure which Benefactor stood before him.

Normally this would be the Fun God. But by sheer coincidence, his actions today might also have offended the other one. So...

The Clown panicked. Cold sweat erupted from his brow in an instant.

"Go on—why'd you stop praising?"

Hearing that sardonic, mocking voice, the weight on the Clown's heart instantly lifted.

'Saved!'

'It's the Fun God!'

"Praise the great God of Deceit! Beneath your gaze, the world overflows with falsehood and the universe knows no more truth!"

Cheng Shi couldn't have sounded more devout. But the moment he finished, Deceit snorted with contempt:

"Then that sentence you just said—was it truth or a lie?"

"It was—"

'Was nothing—just kill me and be done with it!'

The Clown's face crumbled. He gave up on the spot.