

The Gods 901

Chapter 901: He Has Arrived

The Void — she was back in the Void!

If the Fun God hadn't been the one to fling him here, if he weren't still perfectly alive and unharmed, Cheng Shi would have thought Oblivion had intercepted him.

Because the Void before him was just so... void. Pitch-black, boundless, eternally silent.

Honestly, when the Void returned to its truest essence, even the most devoted Void walker felt a bit uneasy.

The Void was supposed to be like this, sure. But knowing that this was the Fun God's headquarters, the idea that this pitch-black infinite space contained no shenanigans or entertainment whatsoever was simply un-Him.

While thinking this, Cheng Shi kept his senses taut, scanning the surroundings and trying to figure out who wanted to grant him an audience this time.

He reviewed his relationships with the various gods. After a good while of deliberation, a vague guess began to form — but before he could gather more evidence for his theory, Brother Mouth abruptly chimed in:

"He has arrived."

"Who?" Cheng Shi flinched instinctively. Then he watched as the Void around him plunged downward, dragging him along into a freefall collapse.

The maddening sensation of weightlessness made Cheng Shi clench his teeth. The seemingly brief fall distorted his senses, birthing the illusion that he was traversing eternity itself.

Before long, he found himself plummeting into a wholly new starry sky — one so familiar that it took him exactly one second to confirm his guess.

The "He" on Brother Mouth's lips was none other than... Time!

But!

It was the Fun God playing the role of Time!

Because Cheng Shi had once again arrived at the platform of the Universal Clock, where Lord Shi Zhen had been "born." The enormous jade-like dial hanging overhead and the towering pointer festooned with rings — nothing had changed. Time still lingered here, bending and flowing in gentle currents.

Moreover, the moment Cheng Shi landed, the great pointer swept across the center of the dial again with a crisp "click" — as if tolling the hour for the universe, and also as a reminder to a certain visitor who was currently bowing, head lowered, eyes sneaking peeks in every direction.

Reminding him: the one who had summoned him had arrived!

By that logic, the "summoner" was Cheng Shi. As for who the visitor was...

Cheng Shi could barely keep the corners of his mouth from curving up.

When he recognized the figure on the platform — an Acrobat with an extraordinarily familiar build — he shifted his form, reshaping himself into a clock hand.

He hadn't expected Long Jing's audience to come this quickly. Even less had he expected the Fun God to pull him in for a cameo appearance. It seemed that recently, the god had indeed been accelerating His faith deployment, rapidly opening up second faiths for His followers.

Then again, other gods' followers needed the second faith's deity to consent to the fusion. But the Fun God's approach... no matter how you looked at it, this was a hard sell.

'Hard sell works for me. As long as I'm always the one with the leverage, I will forever support hard sells.'

Shortly after, Cheng Shi touched down. Like a star falling from the heavens, he crashed onto the dial in an explosion of time-bending brilliance. The spectacular entrance stunned Long Jing, who — even during his audience with the other Envoy, Lord Yu Xi — had never witnessed such a dazzling arrival or a divine domain with this much visual impact.

Long Jing glanced upward. When he saw the fallen star transform into a clock hand, he finally understood just how fitting the title "Shi Zhen" was. The figure hadn't assumed human form at all — He was literally a clock hand!

At the sight, the Acrobat snapped to attention. A respectful smile forced its way onto his face. His posture grew increasingly deferential as he praised at full volume:

"Praise be to Time! May the universe fall into eternity, may the years flow in cycles, may the future become the past, and may all living things bask in the light of time!

Void walker, beloved of Deceit, one who reveres Time — Long Jing sends his greetings to the great Lord Shi Zhen, and brings warm regards from your old friend, Lord Yu Xi.

He is doing well, and hopes the same for You."

Having delivered his lines, Long Jing suppressed his excitement, composing himself as he awaited the response.

He gave his own performance a 9 out of 10. The remaining point was held back to prevent arrogance.

But the very next second, Shi Zhen's reply hit like a bucket of ice water, thoroughly dousing this internally blazing Acrobat. It was then that Long Jing realized the greeting system wasn't scored out of 10...

It was out of 1,000.

"A lineage of falsehood. Lip service dressed up as piety.

So — that sly con artist sent you here to steal another second hand from me?"

"???"

'Wait — what?!'

'Second hand?'

'Lord Yu Xi stole Lord Shi Zhen's second hand?'

Long Jing blinked in bewilderment. Cold sweat instantly drenched his forehead and back.

'This is bad! My lord, you can't do this to me! You call this an "old friend"?''

'A five-finger-discount buddy, more like!'

'Shouldn't you have given me a heads-up before I came? All that bootlicking just went straight onto a horse's hoof!'

'Then again — Yu Xi, Yu Xi... if he didn't play fools for fools, what kind of Fool's Play would he be?'

'Fine, fine — your guidance truly lives up to the name "Yu Xi"!'

In that moment, Long Jing gained a far deeper understanding of the Envoy known as "Yu Xi." Unfortunately, this epiphany did absolutely nothing to save him right now. So he was terrified.

His single, consuming thought was: 'Please, let whatever "second hand" Lord Yu Xi stole not be this Shi Zhen's child...'

'Even if it's just an artifact, there's still hope of surviving this!'

'But if it involves divine bloodlines...'

'Then this platform, painted with the wonders of time, would probably be his burial ground.'

For a moment, Long Jing — normally brimming with tricks — froze like a jammed gear, mind blank, ears buzzing, with no idea how to respond.

Watching the hilarious scene unfold, Cheng Shi fought with every ounce of his being to keep from laughing out loud. But the curl of his lips had already matched the curve of any Deceit mask.

The second hand was, of course, complete nonsense he'd made up on the spot.

He'd said it for only two reasons. First, to flesh out Yu Xi's persona and make the false identity feel more real. Second, naturally, to deliver a thoughtful little intimidation to this clever colleague of his.

Only by making smart people afraid could subsequent conversations go smoothly. This had been thoroughly validated in his previous audiences.

Even Zhen Xin had to take a hit first. Long Jing, who ranked behind her, couldn't expect any better.

Cheng Shi actually wanted to comfort him — to say that Zhen Xin, for all the Fun God's favor, received the exact same treatment here. She'd even performed a number for the privilege. At least the clown comedy show Long Jing put on was simpler than dancing, right? Wait — no — what did clowns have to do with—

But he had no standing to say any of that. So the great Lord Shi Zhen stifled his laughter, affected a cold snort, and offered the panicked Long Jing a way out.

"It seems you were played for a fool by him too. Hmph — that does sound like something he'd do.

Deceit followers are liars through and through. Utterly untrustworthy.

Speak — aside from stealing my second hand on his behalf, what else brings you here?"

"..."

At this point, Long Jing didn't dare utter a single word, because he'd realized every line was a trap. One wrong response and he'd be confirming himself as a thief.

'But I'm innocent!'

'Lord Yu Xi, oh Lord Yu Xi — you've really done me in this time!'

...

Chapter 902: Lord Yu Xi, You've Really Done Me In

Long Jing stood trembling in place, his brain spinning at full throttle.

He was never the type to sit and wait for death. Especially after encountering the first divine-audience crisis of his life, he forced himself out of the mental white noise with everything he had and began considering whether this was a test from Lord Yu Xi.

After all, in the last trial, aside from finding one of Lord Yu Xi's ears, he'd accomplished "nothing of note." Yet the lord had so readily agreed to his faith fusion prayer. This made Long Jing wonder if the real test had been placed here, on this Time platform.

So, under the dual pressure of survival crisis and Yu Xi's examination, the overstressed Long Jing had a flash of inspiration — and actually came up with a strategy that covered both bases.

He pursed his lips, bowed once more, and slipped one hand behind his back to fiddle with something. Then he raised his head, feigning composure, and addressed Lord Shi Zhen.

"My lord, I believe there's been a misunderstanding.

I was summoned here with absolutely no intention of blaspheming Time. This humble Acrobat would never dare desecrate a deity.

I was unaware of any friction between Lord Yu Xi and Yourself. But as a devoted follower of Deceit and one who deeply admires the great Time, I am willing to make what small effort I can to ease the tension between you.

I also hope You might set aside the past and look toward the future — together with Deceit."

As he spoke, the hand he'd been hiding slowly emerged. He opened his palm to reveal... a slender second hand.

"?"

Cheng Shi froze.

He examined the second hand in Long Jing's palm for a moment and realized it was nothing more than a perfectly ordinary, utterly unremarkable second hand — most likely something the man had just pried off behind his back.

What was this supposed to mean?

'You actually think what Yu Xi stole was a second hand like this?'

Cheng Shi's expression turned peculiar.

'Well, well — Long Jing, you've got some creative thinking. Even if what Yu Xi stole was an ordinary second hand, the fact that you dismantled a piece of "time" on Time's own platform... if the real owner ever found out, you'd be genuinely guilty of blasphemy!'

'Fortunately, everything here is fake. Your "blasphemy" against Time might actually register as a form of peculiar "devotion" in the Fun God's eyes.'

'Lucky break — your blundering accidentally earned you a "win."'

But Cheng Shi wasn't about to let Long Jing off easy. Suppressing his laughter behind a cold facade, he pressed on.

"Time is the amalgamation of past, present, and future. By asking me to set aside the past, are you attempting — on behalf of your Benefactor, Deceit — to steal my Lord's authority?"

"???"

'That's an angle I couldn't have dreamed up if I'd squeezed my brain dry!'

'How are you impervious to everything, sir?!'

Long Jing's smile froze on his face. But before he could formulate a second rhetorical strategy, Lord Shi Zhen spoke again.

"You disassemble a clock and present me with a second hand. Are you trying to return the second hand that Yu Xi stole from me — on his behalf?"

Hmph. Absurd.

Do you even know what he took?"

"..."

"Very well. Since you don't know, then how dare you attempt to repay Yu Xi's offense with an ordinary second hand?"

Acrobat — are you blaspheming me with this pathetic circus act?"

"...Absolutely not!"

Long Jing panicked. He knew that if he didn't push back and let Lord Shi Zhen continue this judgment unchecked, the charges would spiral out of control. So he hastily gathered his words and argued:

"This humble Void walker naturally has no knowledge of what Your lost second hand represents. However, regardless of what it represents, it proves that Lord Yu Xi has a heart that yearns to grow closer to Time!

Otherwise, He would never have taken that second hand from You without asking.

Perhaps it's precisely because He knows His reputation in the world isn't enough to persuade You that He had no choice but to resort to this approach — one that's admittedly prone to misunderstanding — to prove His sincere desire to be Your friend.

So I maintain that this is a misunderstanding, Lord Shi Zhen. Lord Yu Xi meant no harm. And I — I am filled with nothing but admiration for Time!"

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Hearing this, Cheng Shi silently applauded. He very nearly clapped for Long Jing's quick thinking.

'Worthy of being the Fun God's number-two follower — that silver tongue is almost on par with mine.'

But Cheng Shi's expression remained "unimpressed."

"Hmph. Even so, that's no excuse for you to pass off a fake as the real thing, using that second hand as compensation!"

"No, my lord — you misunderstand." Sensing the tension ease slightly, Long Jing quickly held up the second hand and explained with gravity. "This is not compensation. It is a pledge.

I don't know what the second hand Lord Yu Xi took represents, but I know that every second hand in this world represents devotion to the great Time!

By showing You this second hand, I pledge — on the faith of my aspiration for Time — that when I return and see Lord Yu Xi, I will do everything in my power to persuade Him to personally clear up this misunderstanding with You.

My Lord Deceit's rival is Memory, not Time. You and Lord Yu Xi have no fundamental conflict of faith, nor any reason for confrontation. Don't you agree?

Furthermore, what my Lord has always sought is not the theft of authority, but a partnership.

If that weren't the case, why would He answer my prayer and send me here?

And so, Lord Shi Zhen — the player before You, Long Jing, has come bearing a sincere and genuine heart. I seek Time's gaze and humbly ask that You, on the road to faith fusion, grant a lost Void walker the tangible guidance of Existence!"

Having finished, Long Jing's posture grew even more respectful.

"..."

Cheng Shi smacked his lips, his expression complicated. He couldn't find a single angle of attack left in Long Jing's words.

Truthfully, he hadn't been doing this to satisfy some "revenge fantasy." He wanted Long Jing to fully display his will before the Fun God's eyes.

Don't forget — this was also Cheng Shi's way of probing how much of Time's authority the Fun God actually commanded. If Long Jing performed poorly and failed to catch the Fun God's eye, then no matter how much Cheng Shi probed, he'd never hit the mark.

So his "pressure" on Long Jing was, in reality, a form of "help."

He was accelerating the Acrobat's self-demonstration. He was pushing Long Jing to truly draw closer to Time.

And from what he'd seen... at least in Cheng Shi's estimation, Long Jing had passed.

This colleague of his may have been frightened, but his devotion to Deceit and his conviction in Void remained commendable. He hadn't prostrated himself just to fuse Time — he'd stood his ground, neither servile nor arrogant, using Deceit rhetoric to fight for his own interests. For con artists, that was textbook behavior.

So Cheng Shi was satisfied. The only question was... had the Fun God hidden beneath the platform been satisfied too?

Cheng Shi waited a moment. The entire platform showed no reaction. He furrowed his brow, thinking the timing might not be right. Since that was the case, other ideas began to form.

In Long Jing's eyes, Lord Shi Zhen brooded for a long time before slowly approaching him. The sudden closeness nearly made Long Jing flash-step away. But when he sensed no hostility, the wire-taut string in his heart finally slackened, just slightly.

"Lord Shi Zhen, are you...?"

"Relax. I see you have fine aptitude. So I'll trust that con artist this once and give you some genuine guidance.

Some guidance regarding Time."

With that, Cheng Shi circled behind Long Jing. In the gap where the other couldn't see, he swiftly switched to Fate, then placed his hand on Long Jing's back and activated Time Deduction!

In an instant, both figures on the platform lost consciousness simultaneously, and a grand show began to unfold in the cracks of Existence where Time intersected.

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Chapter 904: Long Jing's "Guidance" to Cheng Shi

On the other side.

Cheng Shi stared at the Long Jing before him and froze.

He had never imagined that President Gong — the man who always projected an image of merriment — could look this haggard.

Haggard was exactly the word.

Never mind the face etched with ravines of weathering — what struck him most was...

"Your eyes..." Cheng Shi said, face full of shock, peering into those clouded irises. "You can't see?"

Long Jing smiled and gave a light nod.

That's right — he was blind. Which was why he'd said "let me guess" when he turned, instead of simply looking.

Of course, losing his vision wasn't as debilitating as it might seem for a player at his level. After all, An Mingyu had been blind from the very start of the game, and she'd survived just fine — even claiming the number one spot on the Ladder of Ascent.

So Long Jing didn't consider it a big deal. He was simply curious — he wanted to see how this world's boss differed from his own.

Regrettably, he could sense the boundless vitality radiating from the man before him, but he would never again see that face — one that could rewind from world-weariness to innocence with a smile.

Cheng Shi keenly detected the shift in his emotions. His expression turned grave, and without wasting a single second, he cut straight to the point.

"Who fell?"

Compared to wordless stares, Long Jing clearly preferred this kind of brisk efficiency. His own expression sharpened as he answered seriously:

"Time..."

"WHO?!"

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted violently. A chill shot through his entire body. Fine cold sweat instantly soaked through the back of his shirt. He stared at Long Jing in disbelief, brow tightening, voice rigid.

"That joke is not funny, Long Jing.

I can tell you clearly know what's happening here, which means your world has also mastered the method of 'finding gaps in Time and traversing timelines.'

But if your Time has fallen, how did you arrive in front of me?

I don't believe a one-sided summons from Time could enable us to meet in these Existence gaps. I've always assumed it takes both worlds' Time acting simultaneously to bring us together.

Because I know — right now, another me is having the exact same exchange with another you. Am I wrong?"

Long Jing laughed — a casual, easy laugh.

"Of course. Without Time's assistance, we couldn't communicate at all. But what I said is also true.

Time fell. In a god war witnessed by all the divine, a showdown of faith against Fate — He held every advantage, yet at the final moment, He chose to spare Fate and self-destruct.

To keep the world's evolution proceeding neutrally, the Benefactor — well, the Fun God — along with several other deities, used a narrow edge in Convention voting rights to divide Time's authority equally among all of Time's followers.

The state you see me in isn't because I've truly weathered great upheaval. It's the consequence of mortals bearing Time's power in human bodies.

In other words, this isn't my weariness. It's His."

"..."

Cheng Shi never in his wildest dreams expected this kind of answer. He gaped at Long Jing, wanting to say something but unable to form the words.

Time had actually fallen...

Did He have the time to fall?

'No... what's the point of thinking about this now? Since that world's Time followers have jointly shouldered Time's burden, does it mean that they — or rather, the entire world — already know what this so-called "world" truly is?'

Wait. At this thought, Cheng Shi blinked and looked at Long Jing, face softening with emotion. "You also fused Time."

Long Jing smiled. "Isn't that what you told me to do, boss? Oh wait — should I call you Lord Yu Xi instead?"

"..."

The weight packed into those words "Lord Yu Xi" was so immense that Cheng Shi fell silent the moment he heard them.

But Long Jing didn't stop there. As if he knew exactly what Cheng Shi wanted to hear, he wiped the smile from his face and spoke with gravity.

"I don't know how far you've gotten on your side, boss. But my boss told me this world lost its hope a long time ago."

'?'

'Why does that sound so familiar?'

Cheng Shi paused, thinking — 'The "boss" he's talking about — that wouldn't happen to be a different person from who I'm thinking, would it?'

'Could I — no, could he really say something like that?'

But he didn't interrupt Long Jing over such chaotic speculation. Instead, he listened as the other continued:

"Even he — bearing Time's authority as proxy — can't see any hope of survival. But he still told me:

The answer lies in Time.

He said it's only a guess. But he instructed us to relay this guess to every 'you' we encounter. Save whoever we can. We've lost Time, so we'll never crack its secrets ourselves. But maybe you can find inspiration in it.

As for the rest... it's just the boring memories of people fighting to stay alive. Every world has its own scars. We're no exception.

But you know, I've met many versions of the boss. You... well, you look like the one with the fewest scars.

Keep going, boss. He always tells me that only being alive yourself counts as truly being alive. But I don't agree.

Since worlds are similar... then isn't another me still me?

So boss — live well.

And if you can, take another me along. Live well."

As he finished, the Time energy beneath their feet surged to a boil. The exchange was nearing its end.

Cheng Shi wasn't Deceit — he couldn't use divine power to control the duration of the conversation. Realizing he was about to be returned to his own world, the deeply furrowed Cheng Shi inexplicably asked one more question:

"Why don't you leave?"

"Hm?"

"I know some worlds have found a way out."

"Ha — yes, they have. But if I go, what happens to the other me?" Long Jing laughed aloud. "I said it — he isn't him, he's me. I can't cannibalize another me's survival space just because I want to live a little longer.

The boss talks a big game about how taking care of yourself comes first, but... hasn't he also never gone to replace 'any of you'?

You're all the same person. No matter how many I've met, that's never changed."

The words fell, and both figures vanished from the enormous Universal Clock platform.

But the platform didn't dissipate. Through the Existence gaps, it gazed in the direction where the other Cheng Shi and Long Jing had returned. After a long silence, it released a sigh.

When Long Jing came back to the present, he heard the movement behind him and watched Lord Shi Zhen pace back around to face him. His lips trembled for a moment, and a struggle crossed his face. After a long internal debate, he decided not to relay everything he'd heard from the "deduction Cheng Shi."

He simply looked up at Lord Shi Zhen with a complex expression, then bowed his head.

"Thank you, my lord, for the guidance."

Lord Shi Zhen looked equally absent-minded.

"It's not me you should thank. It's him."

As for which "him" — the answer in each of their hearts was probably not the same.

...

Chapter 905: Acrobat Knight? No — Pointer Performer

Silence reclaimed the scene. Only after a long moment, once Long Jing had digested everything he'd received from Cheng Shi, did he raise his head again and tentatively ask:

"My lord, the deduction of Time — was it real, or false?"

Real or false?

Good question.

Cheng Shi let out a bittersweet laugh, unsure how to answer.

'If even the world beneath our feet is fake, what does the truth or falsehood of a deduction even matter?'

'But even if worlds aren't truly worlds, the people in each one are so real. Long Jing, Qin Xin... even the Blind One, who came to this world and stood before me. I can't deny their existence or dismiss their meaning.'

'So Existence... perhaps it has already fused with Void.'

As Cheng Shi, having such sentiments was perfectly fine. But as a follower of Time — Lord Shi Zhen could never voice them.

So Cheng Shi composed himself and smiled.

"I appreciate that you are awed by Time's divine magnificence. But mortal, your words border on blasphemy.

As a Void walker, it's not wrong to consider the illusory. But you should look at where you're standing. This is not Void's emptiness — this is Existence's starfield.

My Lord is also of Existence. Therefore, the deductive power that flows from Him is, by nature, also Existence.

So — do you understand?"

Cheng Shi was subtly telling Long Jing that regardless of what he'd heard from another version of himself, the stories might differ from world to world — but that other world was absolutely real.

As for whether Long Jing understood... the Acrobat was conflicted. He was conflicted about whether he should understand.

He was someone who'd been forced to grow up alone from a young age, gradually developing independent judgment in a complex environment. He'd used flattery to navigate the powerful, disguises to blend in among peers — hedging his bets, doing well enough for himself.

At every major crossroads, his sharp judgment had allowed him to make choices in his own interest. But this time...

If he believed what the weathered Cheng Shi had said, then everything he saw was an illusion. The world couldn't be called a world. Time, himself, deception, the past — all of it was fake.

But the problem was, Lord Shi Zhen still wanted him to believe the deduction...

'My lord, Cheng Shi was the illusion inside the deduction. If I believe him, wouldn't that make You the fake one?'

'Fine — suppose I do believe, suppose I accept that everything I see is fake. Didn't Cheng Shi's point basically amount to: I still have to fight for this fake world anyway?'

So in the end, no matter how many worlds there were, no matter how different the universes — every world's inhabitants could only firmly believe they were the sole reality, then struggle forward to turn the "false" into "true."

This was also where Long Jing felt lost. He never considered himself a "savior." The world's rot had nothing to do with him. When fate had abandoned his parents, the world hadn't shown him any kindness — so why should he help now that the world had problems?

Long Jing was cunning, but some of his values remained simple and traditional: you treat me well, I treat you well; you try to cheat me, I cheat you right back.

Before today, his only plan regarding Cheng Shi had been to cheat right back. But after receiving the weathered Cheng Shi's "gift," Long Jing was lost.

He didn't want his "rival" becoming his "benefactor." That feeling of rejection burned even more fiercely than any bewildering call to save the world.

A young man's pride naturally bristled against defeat. Now his opponent had suddenly earned his goodwill through what felt like "cheating," and Long Jing couldn't wrap his head around it.

But his instinct for self-preservation kept the frustration from showing. He remained respectfully bowed at Lord Shi Zhen's side, awaiting the response to his faith fusion prayer.

Now he was even more determined to fuse Time. Only through fusion would he gain the strength and means to investigate everything the weathered Cheng Shi had told him — to approach the truth of this world. After all, the man had said: the answer might just be Time!

Long Jing wasn't the only one waiting. Cheng Shi was too.

He knew perfectly well that he was a fraud, a fiction conjured from thin air. He naturally had no power to grant Long Jing a second faith. So he was waiting for the Fun God's reaction.

Don't forget — this was also Cheng Shi's way of probing the Fun God. He wanted to know how much of Time's power the god had actually claimed.

And the next second, He seemed to give the answer.

The enormous pointer — draped with countless smaller dials of varying sizes — swept toward the center once more. With a crisp "click," it declared this audience concluded and witnessed the beginning of a faith fusion.

He had bestowed His faith!

A strand of twisted time descended from the tip of that colossal pointer, drifting down before Cheng Shi. Under his slightly bewildered gaze, it crystallized into a pointer sword brimming with Time's power.

Seeing what was clearly the Fun God's intention — to use his hands to gift Long Jing a Pointer Knight weapon — Cheng Shi nearly switched to his "Greedy Cheng Shi" identity and stashed the sword in his personal space.

But he didn't.

Not because reason had conquered greed, but because he'd been preemptively countered.

Long Jing's fusion wasn't complete yet. The Acrobat was still just an Acrobat. Although Time's energy was surging toward him from the platform, it was as if it lacked a key — never pushing open the door of Deceit.

As for why the key was...

Cheng Shi looked at the pointer sword in his hand. His eyelid twitched violently.

'Seriously, Benefactor? You need to guard against me this hard?'

'Do I look like the kind of person who'd embezzle another employee's benefits?'

Cheng Shi was furious. He felt he'd been sla— seen right through.

And so, seething with indignation, he flung the sword to Long Jing. The moment the Acrobat — overjoyed yet nervous — took the pointer sword in hand, Void and Existence became one once more.

Deceit had fused with Time yet again.

From this point on, the Acrobat performing on stage had gained a new prop: a sword that could rewind the moment.

"Just like that... it's done?"

Long Jing could hardly believe it. Today had gone too smoothly.

Even before learning about the friction between Lord Yu Xi and Lord Shi Zhen, he'd never thought a single audience would yield a second faith. After all, Time was just his aspiration — he'd thought himself still a long way from drawing close.

But now... whether it was Lord Yu Xi's foresight or Time's boundless generosity, the fact was, he'd actually fused faiths. He'd become a...

'Er — "Acrobat Knight" sounds terrible. "Pointer Performer"... that's tolerable, I guess. I've actually become a Pointer Performer!'

"Praise Time!"

No matter how much deceit lay behind the gift, one thing was certain this instant — Long Jing's joy was genuine.

And watching Long Jing's elation, Cheng Shi felt deeply moved as well. He bore no deep grudge against the man. Under the influence of their counterparts in another world, all he could do was sigh: 'May his future — and his eyes — be brighter than the other Long Jing's.'

'Also — the one you should be praising isn't Time. It's Deceit.'

'Because He has already paved the road ahead for His followers.'

...

Chapter 906: Time, Deceit, Experiment, Answer

Long Jing left.

His grin had been too radiant. Lord Shi Zhen booted him off the platform, and he plummeted back to reality.

Cheng Shi was livid.

Having just kicked the Acrobat away, he was preparing to haggle with his Benefactor about why his own fusion hadn't come with a weapon — when a pair of black-hole eyes opened at the center of the enormous dial, gazing at him with unfathomable depth.

"Cheng. Shi."

Time had appeared. But Cheng Shi showed zero panic — even a hint of disdain.

"Benefactor, please drop the act. Don't think pretending to be Time will make this go away!

I believe I've worked hard enough on the Void path, so why didn't I receive a weapon of Time?

Since You can grant faith on Time's behalf, surely gifting one more weapon isn't... no — an ordinary weapon can only count as a past reward, not as current compensation!

How about You just grant me another identity instead? That shouldn't be hard for You.

Or we don't even need to go that far."

Cheng Shi whipped out his container, eyes gleaming.

"Just activate this thing for me. The faith itself — I'll scam it out of people using Shi Zhen's identity. Deal?

And the deception process still counts as an offering to You. When you think about it, You're coming out ahead."

Cheng Shi delivered his proposal with visible excitement. But the eyes atop the dial didn't move. Like an unchanging eternity, they simply regarded Cheng Shi with cold detachment, saying nothing.

"Benefactor, please say something! You—"

'?'

Cheng Shi froze. His brow furrowed. Sensing the eerie atmosphere, something lurched in his gut.

'Wait — hold on!'

'This Benefactor — which Benefactor is He?'

'He couldn't possibly be...'

'No way. When would He have the time?'

The wild, terrifying thought had barely surfaced before Cheng Shi shuddered head to toe. Before he could even process whether this was the genuine article, a pair of starlit eyes — brimming with surprise — opened above the enormous dial. Spirals reversed, star-points flickered, and a click of the tongue rang out:

"Well, isn't this rare — you actually have the time to grant your followers an audience?"

'!?!?'

'WHAT?!'

The black-hole eyes shifted upward, replying at an unhurried pace: "Deceit."

The single word detonated Cheng Shi's brain.

As if struck by the infinite power of Time, his mind launched into a flashback of his entire life. He frantically reviewed everything he'd said and done on this enormous dial, scrutinizing every blasphemous remark he'd made after assuming this was the Fun God...

Mercifully, his dialogue with Long Jing while playing Shi Zhen had contained relatively little blasphemy. Unfortunately, virtually everything he'd said after Long Jing's departure had been pure, undiluted profanity against a god.

'The sky is falling...'

By the time the mental replays ended, Cheng Shi was numb. He forcibly rejected his own deduction and firmly convinced himself that the eyes before him could not possibly be Time!

'This has to be some new Deceit trick. He split Himself in two just to watch His follower humiliate himself!'

'That's definitely what's happening!'

'Time doesn't have the time to descend!'

Cheng Shi refused to accept reality. He even began hypnotizing himself. But when those black-hole eyes turned back to him, and he felt within them the purest, most infinite essence of Time...

In that moment, it was as if all the time in the universe twisted around Him.

'It's over. It's all over.'

'It really is Him!'

'It really IS Time!'

But if He was Time, then why had He been "duped" into granting Long Jing a second faith?

And why had He allowed a mortal to impersonate His creation's will on His own platform?

Had Time, who had fused with Fate, also absorbed Fate's generosity?

"..."

In this moment, Cheng Shi was terrified beyond measure.

Not only was he anxious about Time's reaction, but he was simultaneously cursing the Fun God in his head.

'This is all the Fun God's fault!'

'If He hadn't played the Universal Clock once before, if He hadn't flung me out of the Chaos Temple only to set this scene up right away — how was I supposed to NOT assume the platform beneath my feet was His creation?!'

'This is all His fault!'

'Deceit has ruined me!'

But silence wasn't going to help here. The Fun God — unreliable as He was — would just sit back and enjoy the show the moment real entertainment appeared. He had to save himself!

Cheng Shi gritted his teeth. His brain kicked into overdrive, desperately searching for an excuse to explain away his behavior.

Just as Cheng Shi was racking his brain in a panic, the starlit eyes above burst into belly-shaking laughter:

"As expected — a clown is hilarious no matter where he goes.

Alright, your performance is over. Get off the stage. But there's no reward this time."

A gust of Void wind blew him straight off the platform. Cheng Shi's taut nerves went slack in an instant. He looked up with a mixture of relief and confusion, feeling that today's Benefactor was somehow unusually unfamiliar.

'He actually wasn't in the mood for entertainment?'

'Praise the Fun God!'

And when the Clown vanished into the starry sky, those starlit eyes did something uncharacteristic — the upturned corners smoothed out, the amusement faded, and His voice took on a rare weight.

"Things seem far more complicated than I imagined."

The black-hole eyes offered no comment. After a pause, the starlit eyes continued:

"Whether this Experiment is a true experiment remains unclear. I originally thought everything was tied to faith. But now it seems... perhaps He was right all along.

The universe will ultimately walk into Void."

Time still said nothing. Only after a long silence did He ask a single question:

"Which timeline's Deceit are you?"

The starlit eyes blinked, genuinely surprised.

"You can't even recognize me?"

Time — if you can't even identify an ally under the same starry sky, how am I supposed to trust you?

How is our plan supposed to proceed?"

"Without the full picture, what is there to plan?"

Stop fishing. I'm busy. If you won't speak the truth, then we're done here today."

With that, the black-hole eyes truly began to dim. The Universal Clock platform itself started to warp, its time flowing outward in all directions. The starlit eyes panicked, snapping irritably:

"Wait!

You have time to watch a clown's performance but can't spare a moment to strategize with me?

Are we still allies under the same sky or aren't we?"

"Whether we are or aren't — you know the answer yourself.

When I saw Mockery and Jeering's course rerouted to connect to the Existence gaps, I knew the restless you had gone to another world.

As for where you came from...

I'm sorry. Another Time's fall may have left you backed into a corner, feeling the pressure. But if I spend too much time here with you, the version of you belonging to this starry sky will also be backed into a corner.

When this universe's 'time' can no longer synchronize with the whole Experiment, our 'sample' will be flagged as an anomaly. And then we'll have no sky left above us.

You... should understand this better than I do."

"Tch — his luck is something else."

"No. He's as Unfortunate as you. When—"

"Enough!" The starlit eyes broke free of their reverie, voice turning cold and mocking. "Blathering on and on, saying you'll leave but never going. Wasting time. Utterly boring."

With that, the eyes simply dissolved from the platform.

And with His departure, Time also gradually faded from view. He truly had no time to linger. As for the earlier clown performance... that hadn't been a waste of time. It had been a search for answers.

Time never held any answers.

The one who provided answers had always been Fate. Time merely followed Fate's guidance, searching for new ones.

...

Chapter 907: On the Gods, Part One

Something profoundly bizarre had happened to Cheng Shi.

Imagine: one day, you — barely past probation at your company — suddenly lose your mind and scream at the CEO that you deserve a seat on the board. The CEO says nothing but writes your demand into the stock prospectus, stamps it, and the next day... you're a director.

Great dream, right?

Sure — it just doesn't feel real.

When Cheng Shi woke up the next morning, the man who never dreamed could've sworn he'd had the most absurd dream of his life the night before.

He examined his container again — this hourglass-shaped vessel of Time — and no matter how he turned it over in his mind, nothing made sense.

'Has there been another version update?'

'Blasphemy actually comes with rewards now?'

'Who could possibly keep up with me at this point?'

'No, no — what I mean is, is generosity really this contagious?'

Cheng Shi couldn't figure it out. But confusion and bewilderment couldn't suppress the grin tugging at his lips or the excitement in his chest. Having Time's container essentially meant He had acknowledged the fabricated Shi Zhen identity. With three Envoy identities in hand, other players really might not be able to compete anymore.

Of course, Cheng Shi's sights had long moved past other players. His targets were Them.

Since returning to the rest area, he'd been reviewing his understanding of the gods over and over, sorting through Deceit's and the Fear Faction's relationships with the others. After systematically

mapping the current landscape, he discovered that the gods he'd flagged with question marks were precisely the ones that Deceit was probing — or who were probing Deceit.

First: the Life Path. Birth unquestionably upheld a devotion that had never wavered from the very beginning. Even after learning the truth about the slice universes, He was unmoved — singularly committed to His own will and using it to draw closer to Origin.

While He was an Approach Faction deity, He was one that posed zero threat to the Fear Faction. Given His attitude toward offspring, the Fear Faction could even cooperate with Him to a degree.

Of course, cooperating under the banner of Fate might be more convenient. Fate was also Approach Faction, and They'd already had one mutually beneficial collaboration — the same one that had introduced Cheng Shi to Life Sage Hu Xuan, his "window" into Birth.

Prosperity... there was nothing to say. Dead was dead. Any commentary beyond praising the grandeur of the universe's will toward prosperity risked desecrating a corpse.

Death was even more obvious. This seemingly neutral boss was undoubtedly a powerful ally for the Fear Faction. The Fun God certainly had close, undisclosed dealings with Him. The mere fact that the boss's summons had been growing less frequent signaled that He was already deliberately keeping His distance.

Next: the Descent Path. As the "heretical god" representatives of the underground faiths, Descent's reputation was... concerning. But regardless of how players perceived Them, this Path was nearing its end.

Corruption was powerful but showed no aggression whatsoever.

The one display of His strength had occurred during the ancient god war, where Order and War's transformations had proved the point. But that was it — beyond that single incident, nobody knew anything more.

So Cheng Shi had flagged Him with a question mark. The Fun God's recent resurfacing of Order's fracture — relayed through Kataro's mouth — was quite possibly an attempt to probe Corruption.

And as the leader of the Fear Faction, His guidance was undoubtedly the direction in which Cheng Shi would soon be heading.

Decay... also not much to say. An ironclad Approach Faction deity, either already dead or nearly there. This true god was embracing His own will and using it to beg for Origin's gaze, but from the looks of it, He seemed to be "dying for love" alongside Prosperity.

Of course, Cheng Shi only dared think such things in private. After all, he was still wielding Decay's proxy authority. Don't bite the hand that feeds you — better not to talk behind backs.

As for Descent's main act, Descent's finale — Oblivion... Cheng Shi put three question marks on that one.

He didn't understand this deity. He couldn't even classify Him as neutral or Approach.

It wasn't as though Cheng Shi had never scored well in Oblivion's trials. Back then, he'd considered Oblivion a "mind-your-own-business" kind of invisible god. Even when Cheng Shi's alignment had tilted strongly toward Death's will, the other had shown zero reaction.

But looking back now, he owed himself two slaps for his past naivety.

Still, since Oblivion's arrival was tied to the Fun God, and both of his Void Benefactors had simultaneously issued the edict to "obliterate Oblivion" — then regardless of which faction this deity belonged to, Oblivion was destined to be his enemy.

The only question was whether he could actually settle this grudge of ambush and assassination. 'I can't beat You? Fine — can't I at least beat Your followers?'

Remove the firewood from under the pot. Faith was undeniably the gods' firewood. So going head-on against Oblivion was hopeless, but secretly bullying Oblivion's followers should be perfectly doable — so long as he was careful. Even under constant observation, he needed to distance himself from any suspicion.

So who was the best scapegoat for attacks on Oblivion's followers?

Then came Civilization. Despite its name, this Path had about as much to do with actual civilization as a soda can.

Order was the biggest victim. Even if He was Approach Faction, His current state left Him no strength to approach anything.

Whether He could even protect Himself was debatable. His sole advantage might be the Convention. As long as the gods couldn't shake free of it, Justice of Order at least retained some say — though the universe's order had long since ceased to concern Him.

But it did concern Cheng Shi!

Until he'd verified what benefits the Order subordinate identity could bring, he could tentatively classify Order as a "Fear Faction ally."

Who says Approach Faction can't feel fear?

They might not fear Origin specifically, but fear was fear. 'I just need an excuse to cooperate with you — to keep this deal running. Beyond that, don't overthink it. Sitting quietly in your cage is best for both of us...'

Truth was undeniably Approach Faction. Though His approach might not stem from devotion, He was the god who walked this road most resolutely and had traveled the farthest.

The countless insane experiments conducted under His aegis proved as much. He was pursuing the genuine Truth according to His own understanding of Origin, with the most unwavering steps.

To be fair, this was a deity who — like Birth — had achieved a perfect embodiment of self-will. And in terms of being "nauseating," He was on par with Birth as well.

Countless test subjects trembled under His shadow. The way they gazed up at this god of Civilization probably wasn't much different from how the Fear Faction gazed up at Origin.

After all, these countless slice universes were practically a genuine experiment in Truth.

...

Chapter 908: On the Gods, Part Two

As the final member of Civilization — Civilization's endgame — War was a god of complex will.

On one hand, He constantly obeyed order and suppressed His true nature, refusing to make a single transgressive move. On the other, He sheltered His belligerent War followers as they waged conflict everywhere.

This vicarious-thrill-seeking behavior was genuinely baffling. Cheng Shi had likewise slapped a question mark on this deity — unable to categorize a god whose words and deeds were in complete contradiction.

The bright side, compared to Oblivion, was that War at least wasn't an enemy combatant. And His transformation had a traceable origin.

When that ancient god war erupted, He and Order had stepped into the Sea of Desire together. Afterward, both of Civilization's champions lost their chance to reshape civilization. Order split into three; War curtailed His fighting spirit.

So the picture was clear: if he could figure out what had happened in the Sea of Desire, it would immediately reveal the positions of the two question-marked gods — Corruption and War.

The Fun God was probably thinking along the same lines. Cheng Shi was beginning to grasp His intent, yet felt equal parts curiosity and dread about uncovering these historical truths.

Curiosity about why the Sea of Desire was so terrifying. Dread for the "grand entertainment" the Fun God had to be plotting!

He feared this final spectacle would be the Fun God's own interpretation of His fear — His answer to Origin. And knowing his Benefactor, Deceit was probably planning to flip the table right in front of everyone... to face that being beyond all universe slices.

So the question became: if the Fear Faction boss personally led the charge and flipped the table, then as the Fear Faction's sole underling — and the only member who could be scapegoated or held accountable — how was Cheng Shi supposed to handle this crisis from his own boss?

He didn't think he could handle it yet. That was why he regarded these divine secrets with both alarm and reluctance.

Next came Chaos' Path.

Chaos needed no further comment — He was now Deceit.

For who knew how long, the Fun God had schemed to shunt the real Chaos into Order's seat, then openly usurped the throne and seized Chaos's authority.

The more Cheng Shi experienced, the more certain he became that his Benefactor's move was about concealing His secret plot — using the intertwined divine power of Deceit and Chaos to mask His expression of fear toward Origin.

Fear itself needed no concealing. Every one of the fifteen other true gods in this universe knew He was distancing Himself from Origin. But none knew what the Fun God was preparing. So whatever He was planning was likely the true nature that lay hidden beneath the facade.

As for Folly...

Honestly, Cheng Shi felt he wasn't qualified to critique this one. He even needed to run through various scenarios before daring to comment on Wei Mu in his Cheng Shi persona.

This wisest god in all creation was like a genuine prophet. Beyond His single inability to vary the contemptuous tone in which He addressed all living things, there was truly nothing He might not know.

He was unquestionably Approach Faction. And the proof of this wasn't His own behavior — it was Fate's former wholehearted alignment with approaching Origin.

If Fate could cut ties with even His sibling deity Deceit, it meant He'd never put stock in the Fear Faction's future. There was no universe in which He'd align His will with a Fear Faction member.

So Folly was definitely Approach Faction. Yet this particular Approach deity didn't seem to pose much of a threat.

Compared to Fate, who actively opposed the Fear Faction, Cheng Shi figured Folly's attitude toward them amounted to little more than asking "Do you really think your foolish acts will yield results?" a few more times...

But then again — if Folly, the one hailed as the universe's wisest, had no answer to that question... how could anyone else?

Right, Ultraman? Shi Zhen? And... Yu Xi?

After much deliberation, Cheng Shi erased Folly's Approach tag and moved Him to Neutral. Perhaps only that classification fit a will that scorned all things regardless of identity or status.

Silence had originally been another Neutral deity but had been reclassified by Cheng Shi into the Approach Faction's hostile camp.

He couldn't fathom why a god with virtually zero presence — yet simultaneously omnipresent — would attempt to assimilate him. Perhaps only a god opposed to the Fear Faction would make such a move?

But then his Benefactor, Fate — also Approach Faction — had rescued him from Silence's grasp, which had confused Cheng Shi for a long time. Until he realized: the Approach Faction was never of one mind. Each god approached that existence in His own way. So Fate and Silence weren't at odds in ideology — they diverged in methodology.

This faction sorting gave Cheng Shi a splitting headache. Other Silence followers might not matter, but The Prisoner... this number-one Silence ranker who was still a Torchbearer — what did he represent?

If the Fun God hadn't factored this in, He shouldn't have exposed the Torchbearers to Silence's line of sight. But if He'd known Silence's stance all along, then why had Silence come looking for Cheng Shi?

After racking his brain without finding the connection, Cheng Shi reluctantly stamped a question mark on this Chaos finale as well.

So, excluding the overly familiar Existence and Void, a total of four gods had received six question marks.

If one question mark meant Cheng Shi didn't quite understand a deity... then a god wearing three question marks wasn't necessarily incomprehensible. Maybe He just wasn't a god at all — maybe He was... a lunatic?

Cheng Shi pursed his lips, set aside the tangled thoughts, and turned his attention back to the current Time container.

Though this was the "third" container in his possession, the rate at which it dripped divinity was clearly the slowest.

The name "Shi Zhen" was known to only a handful of people so far. Even once they spread this classified intel, it would take time. And high-level secrets naturally spread slowly and narrowly — just like Yu Xi. No matter how he performed the role, the faith condensation rate could never match that of Ultraman, the Chaos Envoy who'd appeared in recorded history.

At this thought, Cheng Shi scratched his head in resignation. His first complete batch of divinity was destined to go to Ultraman. What a waste of perfectly good names like Yu Xi and Shi Zhen...

'I should've put more thought into naming myself back then.'

With a sigh, he switched the container's color back to Deceit. After observing for a moment, he noticed the drip rate of Deceit divinity was slightly faster than before.

But only a single day had passed!

Yu Xi's name had already gotten fresh exposure?

'That doesn't seem right. The speed is TOO consistent. Has something gone wrong?'

Cheng Shi's brow tightened. Something in him felt that his right eyelid was itching to twitch.

'Who's been furiously spreading Yu Xi's faith?'

'Poison, Qu Yan, Ai Si... or Long Jing?'

'Beyond those few, there didn't seem to be any other Yu Xi "fanatics" ...'

...

Chapter 909: Cat and Mouse

Time slipped by quietly. Cheng Shi spent several peaceful days in the rest area.

He'd been steeling himself mentally, planning to first learn a bit about the histories of the Kingdom of War and the Grand Tribunal. Once he had a rough understanding, he'd decide whether to truly enter the game and accelerate the Fun God's overarching strategy.

But researching history was tedious work. The unreliable intel from chat channels would never yield distilled insights. So Cheng Shi naturally thought of the History School — or rather, of Zhen Xin.

He hadn't forgotten that Zhen Xin still owed him compensation. Granted, it was Kataro who'd secured it, but who says a shadow isn't another version of yourself?

So Cheng Shi called Zhen Xin. For about ten seconds after the line connected, neither spoke. Not until Zhen Xin chuckled softly and said "It's me" did Cheng Shi relax slightly. Then they began discussing Lord Ultraman's "assignment."

Compared to the stagnant Cheng Shi, Zhen Xin had been far more industrious. She'd already compiled the history of the Grand Tribunal and had prayed for several trials around it.

Unfortunately — no breakthroughs.

But the result wasn't surprising. If anyone could see through the gods' relationships in just a few trials, the gods probably wouldn't deserve to be called gods.

Zhen Xin wasn't discouraged. She even generously shared her insights and organized notes with Cheng Shi. Ostensibly, she called it the promised compensation, but Cheng Shi knew: beyond the compensation, she was pressing him to come clean about the other worlds.

After all, she'd already fused Chaos. She'd peeled back a corner of the curtain hiding the Deceit-Chaos relationship and fulfilled her side of the bargain.

Cheng Shi had no intention of stalling. It was just that the deeper he delved into the Fun God's plans and machinations, the more a creeping sense of helplessness told him he couldn't keep up with the pace. So he felt it was time to bring in allies to analyze these deepest secrets together.

One mind could never match the pooled wisdom of many. Cheng Shi decided to gather a few people for a joint consultation, and the best pretext was Lord Yu Xi's guidance.

So he told Zhen Xin not to rush — the real Joker Society gathering was coming soon. He would reveal to the Jokers what this world truly was and disclose secrets that far exceeded anything players thought they knew.

Of course, the Joker Society had an admission fee. Zhen Xin's ticket had already been paid. And the others wouldn't be freeloading these secrets either. So rest assured — the Magician hadn't gotten the short end of the stick.

Zhen Xin offered no comment on this, merely wondering in silence just how many Envoy connections this man held in his hands.

Shortly after ending the call, Zhen Xin deposited her organized historical materials into a space Cheng Shi designated — using a method so efficient it bordered on unbelievable. The History School's data-sharing protocols were remarkably effective. That very afternoon, Cheng Shi began poring over this "accumulated wisdom," quickly gaining a rough understanding of the Grand Tribunal's history and the broader trajectory of the Civilization epoch.

Zhen Xin said she'd prayed for trials across multiple historical periods of the Grand Tribunal. The time frames most likely to reveal the true nature of the Order–Corruption conflict were either the early epoch — when the Tribunal first established its nation and swept the continent — or the late epoch, when the Underworld launched its counterattack against the surface. The other gaps were simply too vast to pinpoint specific moments.

But Cheng Shi disagreed. After all, Zhen Xin didn't know War was also part of this equation. The historical node for a trial couldn't be selected based solely on Order and Corruption. So after careful deliberation, he chose the period he believed offered the best chance of uncovering clues: the founding era of the Kingdom of War, when it clashed simultaneously with the Grand Tribunal and the Tower of Logic in a three-way war.

In the fires of war, desires flowed freely. That might be the ideal moment to find leads.

So Cheng Shi decided to dip his toes in first — not fixating on cracking every cause and effect in a single trial, but simply experiencing the history firsthand, observing as a bystander to confirm whether this period held anything worth noting.

Before departing, Cheng Shi made some arrangements. He first contacted Kataro, issuing orders under the "Ultraman" identity to Hu Wei and Da Yi — vaguely leaking some intel and tasking them with exploring the faith conflicts of this era to help search for clues.

Then, prudent as ever, he contacted Big Cat. As the current number-one combat force, Big Cat was undoubtedly the most capable ally for war-history trials.

Unfortunately, Big Cat was busy. She was busy "catching a mouse."

"Is the trial important?" That was the first thing she said upon hearing about it.

"..."

Truthfully, the initial scouting run wasn't important — just groundwork for later pushes. But Big Cat's question piqued his curiosity. He shelved the idea of enlisting her help and asked instead:

"Trouble? Need a hand?"

On the other end, Hong Lin shook her head irritably.

"Not for now. Nothing major.

Remember that Yu Go I mentioned before?"

Yu Go?

The Decay Envoy? The Vulture King?

Cheng Shi paused. "You're still looking for Him? I thought your obsession was just about sparring..."

He didn't elaborate on what kind of "sparring," but the meaning was clear enough — basically asking Big Cat, 'Is fighting really that thrilling?'

Hong Lin caught Cheng Shi's bewilderment and snapped:

"This isn't just about fighting anymore. I've run into Him several times in trials, but..."

Yu Go has completely shattered my baseline expectations for divine beings. An Envoy! A Servant God! And His fighting style is cowardly to the core. Behind your back, though? An absolute master of underhanded tactics.

Ever since our first encounter — the one time I took a swing at Him — He's been skulking around in hiding, dodging me at every turn. Not only does He go out of His way to avoid combat, He holds a grudge. He's been secretly retaliating against Prosperity followers, driving everyone mad.

I've been hunting Him recently. But it's better if you stay out of it. With Yu Go's slimy, treacherous nature and his utterly bizarre escape abilities, you'd only end up covered in His stench."

"..."

Cheng Shi was stunned. He blinked, thinking — 'This Decay Envoy really does value His life. Exactly like when He was an emperor.'

Then again, if anyone faced an opponent they absolutely couldn't beat, wouldn't they refuse to sit there and wait for death?

Cheng Shi let out a wry smile.

"Has it occurred to you that He runs so fast because your fists are too hard?

Impressive, Hong Lin — making an Envoy flee in panic. Among all players, you're probably the only one who could pull that off."

Hearing this, Hong Lin's temper flared even higher.

"But I haven't even fought Him!"

"?" Cheng Shi blinked. "Didn't you just say you two met and—"

"Three seconds." The voice on the other end was practically seething.

"Meaning?"

"From the moment I saw Him, to transforming, to closing the gap and throwing a punch — three seconds total. In those three seconds, all He gave me was one panicked look in response to my attack — then He turned into a withered vine and fled through the crowd!

Cheng Shi, can you imagine? Facing a player who hasn't even shown her full power, an Envoy — just ran!

Calling it a 'fight' is giving Him credit. My fist didn't even touch His body!

And yet that single attempt earned His grudge. Now He hunts Prosperity followers like some lurking Decay assassin — Sore Eye — endlessly retaliating for the 'hello' I said with my fist.

But if you want revenge, come at me! Why are you going after Prosperity followers?"

"...Uh, let's be honest here, Hong Lin. I recall you said the reason you went looking for Yu Go in the first place was because He was hunting Prosperity followers.

So it seems... that was just your excuse to pick a fight, wasn't it?"

"..." The other end went silent. After a beat, Hong Lin's voice returned, even more irritable than before. "That's not the point!

The point is, this guy has pissed me off. I have to find him."

Cheng Shi pursed his lips and withheld comment, but he understood Big Cat's anger. After thinking it over, he offered a suggestion.

"Blindly searching won't work. Now that Decay has decayed, a Yu Go who's lost His patron's protection will only be more cautious. Instead of praying to yourself every day, why not go ask the Fate Chosen? Maybe Fate will give you guidance."

At the mention of Fate, Cheng Shi's expression stiffened. He sighed.

"Hong Lin — although Fate has always protected you and me, sometimes... be careful."

"Careful of what?" Hong Lin was clearly taken aback.

"Careful of..." Cheng Shi frowned, mulling it over, then swallowed the word "Fate" back down.

'Forget it. Constantly fearing Fate goes against the very idea of the Destined Ones. If He's willing to protect us, then let Him.'

'Same principle as always: being destined isn't just about fear. It's a weapon you can hold in your hands.'

...

Chapter 910: Wish Trial — Free Conviction: Corruption

After exchanging some intel with Big Cat, Cheng Shi hung up and began his wish trial in an orderly fashion.

This was his first step toward the answer. No need for giant leaps — so there wasn't much pressure.

Cheng Shi sat cross-legged, closed his eyes, and prayed with devotion.

"Cannot distinguish true from false, disregard reality from illusion.

Your faithful follower prays to You — open a trial...

A trial of 'witnessing the ceaseless conflict between the Kingdom of War and the Grand Tribunal'!"

A wash of crimson spread across his vision the moment the words left his mouth.

[Wish Trial (Free Conviction: Corruption) has been initiated]

[Matching teammates (1/6)]

[Trial Objective: Desire was never a sin. And even if it were, the one who judges should be yourself.
(Time Limit: 15 days)]

"?"

A Corruption trial?

This coincidental?

He hadn't even planned on investigating Corruption first, yet His trial came knocking?

Cheng Shi blinked in mild surprise. To be fair, while Corruption's followers weren't exactly popular, His trials weren't usually that difficult.

The pass condition typically involved following hints to find a target and ensuring that target could openly embrace their own desires.

So Corruption trials actually offered considerable room for creative solutions.

Cheng Shi still vividly remembered a trial anecdote from the early days of the Faith Game, shared on the chat channels. A Mercy Lord had been matched into a trial bestowed by their own Benefactor. The target was an ascetic cultist on the verge of breaking a taboo. The team spent half a day locating the target, and the Mercy Lord — moved by compassion — disrobed and joined the cultist in embracing their descent. The three-day trial was cleared in half a day and thirty seconds.

The story had kept players laughing for ages and was hailed as the go-to survival strat for Corruption trials.

But not every Corruption trial involved carnal pleasures. At least this one's hint didn't — and besides...

Fifteen days?! What the hell?!

A seven-day trial was already nerve-wracking enough. Double that and it seemed like Corruption was worried His trials were too easy and players weren't dying fast enough.

Seeing no way to undo it, Cheng Shi's face went pitch black.

He felt like his little exploratory step had been shoved by an invisible hand into a giant leap.

[Match successful (6/6). Entering trial.]

Cheng Shi sighed and surrendered himself to the encroaching darkness, consciousness peeling away from reality.

...

Scorching sunlight was shredded by dense branches overhead, stubbornly casting dappled patches on the ground below.

On a narrow trail through thick forest, a convoy pushing through the heat brought a gust of sweltering wind to the silent woods.

They were moving fast. Wooden wheels rolled over leaf-strewn, uneven ground, jolting awake the people riding in the carts.

Cheng Shi's consciousness had barely returned when he heard a teammate's voice from the cart bed diagonally across from him.

"The Grand Tribunal. Forest County. Based on the plant species distribution, we're in the southern stretch of Forest County's woodlands — very close to the Boro Highlands in Twin Lakes County.

And we're still heading south. The convoy's banner is the Iron Law Knights. Visible length exceeds two miles front to back — a significant formation.

Judging by the ruts outside, we're in the rear-middle section of the convoy.

Though the Grand Tribunal frequently wages external campaigns, mobilizations at this scale are rare in the records.

So congratulations, everyone — we're likely conscripts from Katouting, a last-minute reinforcement force bound for the front lines, facing the War followers now trapped in the Grand Tribunal and Tower of Logic's final encirclement.

Our destination is most probably the Boro Highlands, north of Twin Lakes County.

As for what happened there — with an event that significant, I trust I don't need to elaborate.

Of course, if none of you have any idea what I'm talking about, then this fifteen-day trial is going to be exceptionally difficult."

Having finished, he began openly sizing up the other five teammates on the cart.

Faced with the man's nostril-first scrutiny, Cheng Shi wisely chose not to engage.

Sharp observation, clear logic, extensive knowledge, and encyclopedic mastery of the Land of Hope's history — those four qualities alone would have made this horse-faced male teammate an excellent asset.

Unfortunately, he was a Folly follower.

Folly followers — same as ever, nostrils and all.

Cheng Shi lowered his head with a smile and began studying the others.

He sat at the right rear of the cart bed. Directly across from him was a young man who looked roughly his age, propping his chin on one hand as if leaning for support. But Cheng Shi could tell: the teammate was actually hiding the scar on his lower face.

Was he injured?

The crimson peeking between his fingers looked like a fresh wound. Setting the wound aside though, why did this person's brows and eyes give him an inexplicable sense of familiarity?

Cheng Shi frowned slightly. He noticed that the player's other hand — hidden behind his back — was constantly fidgeting, though he couldn't tell what it was doing.

Beside the young man sat the assertive Folly follower, who craned his elongated face around in a full sweep, unabashedly examining everyone's body as if searching for something.

Each of the six wore only thin undergarments — perhaps due to the blistering heat. Six gleaming sets of armor sat piled in the center of the cart bed like an impassable boundary line, splitting left from right in stark division.

This trial held five men and one woman. The sole female sat to Cheng Shi's right — fair-skinned, dark-haired, with long hair cascading down, its motion just barely concealing the festering scar at the corner of her mouth.

Her appearance was unremarkable — nothing memorable. If anything stood out, it was that since awakening, this female teammate hadn't made a single sound.

Next to her was a terrifying sight: a scabby head — scalp uneven and mottled with bloody stains, devoid of a single hair. A pair of vulture-like, darkly brooding eyes were locked onto the teammate directly across.

And the player sitting opposite was no beauty contest winner either — sparse, gray-white hair dotted a scalp that looked like a landscape of crevasses, giving the unsettling impression of an exposed brain.

"..."

'Hold on, guys — what is this? A looks-based matchmaking lobby?'

'I've heard of filtering upward, but never downward!'

'You all look like THIS — am I the odd one out?'

Cheng Shi began questioning his existence. Just as he was frowning and wondering what kind of trial this even was, two voices — utterly different in tone — struck everyone's ears simultaneously.

A venomous sneer from the scabby head. A startled gasp from the chin-covering young man across from Cheng Shi.

"Hey, stinking rat — happy to see me?"

"You're... Xiao Shi?"

At the first line, Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow. At the second, he broke into a grin.

Because he'd finally remembered who the man across from him was.

'Well, what do you know — a childhood playmate. It really has been...'

'Long time no see.'

...