

The Gods 981

Chapter 981: Again!

Just moments ago, something utterly absurd had occurred in this world.

A mortal who couldn't touch a god in any dimension had just revealed a so-called cosmic truth to one.

Ha. Not even the most daring screenwriter would have imagined such a ridiculous plot. Yet it had played out in reality.

[War]'s blazing gaze fixed on Cheng Shi. In that moment, Cheng Shi didn't look like a player — more like a puppet controlled by [Deceit], sent here specifically to deliver this information.

But Cheng Shi was genuinely no puppet. His motive for offering [War] this trade was to leverage [War]'s combative nature to create chaos in the universe for the Fear Faction.

He hadn't forgotten what the Fun God was plotting. His Benefactor's target was obviously the one who transcended everything — the "experimental" puppet master of the sliced universe, [Origin].

Remember that previous conversation between Cheng Shi and the Fun God? Cheng Shi had deduced His determination to investigate, but had begged Him to extend the preparation time until he could actually help.

Easy to say, but a mortal trying to help a true god scheme against a supreme being? That was pure fantasy.

Yet every problem had a solution. If a mortal couldn't help, perhaps another true god could?

[War] wasn't a purebred Fear Faction member, but He was afraid nonetheless. If that fear could be weaponized — as in this very moment...

When countless versions of [War] across the sliced universes waged war against each other, wouldn't the resulting chaos in the "experiment grounds" provide the perfect smokescreen for the Fun God's mysterious plan?

This was the most effective support Cheng Shi could currently envision for the Fear Faction.

Of course, it wasn't purely support. It was also a probe. A probe of the Fun God.

Cheng Shi's personal endorsement meant nothing to [War]. Even if he closed this deal, he'd only be passing along a tip. Whether [War] could actually break through the spatiotemporal barrier via [Time] and find other versions of [War]...

That depended entirely on whether the Fun God approved.

[Time] had no time for such affairs, so the final say still rested with [Deceit].

This was also why Cheng Shi appeared puppet-like: he knew that only by representing the Fun God could this trade possibly proceed.

And the Fun God's attitude toward this trade would reveal much.

If He accepted, it likely meant He planned to create chaos right under [Origin]'s nose. Perhaps that was why He'd seized [Chaos]'s authority and divine seat.

If He refused, well — the dog that bites doesn't bark. His rejection of chaos could only mean He was stockpiling power for something even larger and more terrifying.

And the latter's risk was obviously far greater than the former's, which at least offered wriggle room for excuses!

So Cheng Shi's move was also "prophesying" a vague future for himself. He wanted to know what kind of "changing" ending he was heading toward.

But all of this required [War] to agree first. If He retreated again like before...

"Come out... Your agent isn't qualified to bargain with me."

The eyes of blood and fire suddenly snorted, conjuring a blood wave across the battlefield that slammed the stunned Cheng Shi into the crimson sea, sweeping him away into the current.

The instant Cheng Shi vanished, a pair of mirthful starlit eyes opened above the clown's former position, gazing down at [War] from an even loftier vantage, half-smiling:

"It seems You're interested in the little clown's trade?"

[War] rumbled: "You could be more forthright... No need to pin this trade on your believer."

"Oh?" [Deceit] burst into laughter. "You've got it wrong. This trade surprised me too. My plans never included you.

But since we're both here, I'm curious — [War], are you interested in my plan?"

[War]'s gaze hardened: "So Your target really is [Origin]!"

[Deceit]'s grin widened as He returned the line in kind: "And Your target really is [Origin]!"

The two pairs of divine eyes locked for a moment. Then silence descended.

Before long, [Deceit] chuckled:

"Heh~

Relax. You could take two of me. What's there to fear?

Cold feet before battle is a cardinal sin of warfare."

"I'm not retreating... I'm merely wondering... If this universe truly is as you say, with countless versions of me I never knew existed... once war has flattened everything... will there still be opponents?"

"?"

At this, the Fun God — who'd assumed [War] was hiding His true depth — completely lost His composure.

'Are you seriously playing armchair general here?'

'If [Origin] were that easy to deal with, where do you think My fear came from? And how did [Folly] lose His authority?'

And so, [Deceit]'s tone instantly turned drippingly sarcastic:

"I'd thought [War] was a great fighter. How disappointing that You're an even greater fantasist.

Honestly, You're rather out of place in [Civilization]. Why not join my [Void]? I'll have [Fate] make room. He's been insufferably status-obsessed anyway, practically reeking of [Civilization]."

"..."

One sentence attacking two gods. You could never out-snark [Deceit].

[War] fell silent once more, but the Fun God's mockery never let up.

"Well? Carry on with your armchair strategizing. If you don't say something soon, I'll start wondering if [Silence] has taken control.

A [War] puppet?

Hmm, that would actually make sense. So the one who beat me earlier was actually [Silence]? A 2v2 — losing that is no shame."

"...No need for provocations. I won't humor you by picking a fight with [Silence].

War isn't only about fighting... it's about contending... He never contends, so fighting Him would be dull... Just tell me... tell me your plan... I'm still more interested in [Origin]."

The starlit eyes rolled once, the smile growing even brighter.

"Fair enough. Adding an extra role alongside the fixed script — isn't that a kind of change?

Joining is simple. Fight me.

Win, and I'll take you to smash down [Origin]'s door.

Lose, and you follow my instructions obediently."

The instant those words fell, the silent battlefield reignited with war!

But it didn't last long. Before the flames could illuminate the entire universe, they were suddenly snuffed out.

The eyes of blood and fire stared intensely at the seven-colored starlit eyes before them — utterly different from before — battle fury boiling:

"That is [Origin]'s power? Where did you obtain it? Was your previous loss deliberate?"

"Scared?"

"Again!"

"Heh."

"Again!"

"Tch—"

"Again!"

"?"

"Again!"

"..."

In a certain instant, those eternally brilliant starlit eyes actually dimmed the faintest shade under the reflected firelight — not unlike a certain lord upon His Bone Throne encountering certain [Void] annoyances.

Indeed, a brute was a brute. Absolutely unreasonable.

"Again!"

"..."

...

Chapter 982: If There's Still Hope...

Cheng Shi had naturally been oblivious to the apocalyptic battle that had just unfolded. All he knew was that he'd been knocked unconscious.

An unknown amount of time later, when he woke, he found himself back in the rest area, having been lying on the rooftop for quite a while.

Falling asleep without any precautions was highly un-steady. A shaken Cheng Shi discreetly examined his physical state. Finding no issues, he let out a heavy sigh of relief.

'What did [War] mean with that last line? The Fun God showed up?'

'But even so, why send me away?'

'The trade was my idea! Then the two of them hit it off and cut out the middleman?'

'Is that fair?'

Cheng Shi pouted, thinking that his mortal status had ultimately lowered his voice and sense of participation. Ultraman, Yu Xi — these alter egos worked on fellow mortal players, but in front of Them, they all became hollow jokes.

'Indeed, clowns are funniest in [Void].'

But what did the Fun God mean by intervening? He'd appeared before [War] — surely not just to rescue him?

And His attitude toward Cheng Shi meddling in His plan for the first time — what was it?

Cheng Shi desperately wanted answers, but asking the Fun God was a dead end. So he switched tracks: he'd visit his other Benefactor, [Fate].

Even if [Fate] was kept in the dark, the person who knew you best was often your opponent — especially a sibling god. If [Fate] felt the predestined path had become rougher, it might well mean the trade had succeeded.

No sooner thought than done.

Without a word, he pulled out his mask and began: "Stars of destiny—" But his prayer was interrupted halfway.

This time it wasn't some mysterious force yanking him into the void. His phone rang.

Cheng Shi arched a brow, considered the matter, decided it wasn't that urgent, and set down his mask to answer. The irritated voice of Big Cat came through:

"You were right. After I prayed to [Fate], I ran into Him again. Too bad He got away again!"

"?" Cheng Shi blinked. "Yu Go?"

"What else!?"

At the name, Big Cat's agitation visibly spiked. "Compared to Lin Xi, He's the real sewer rat. Why is this one so good at running?"

Does He have no dignity as an emperor!?

Forget Him. It's not all bad news lately. At least there's one good thing — Lin Xi is dead. Did you know?"

"..." Cheng Shi blinked but said nothing.

"Hello? Cheng Shi, are you listening? I said Lin Xi died—" Hong Lin's voice caught. Then she asked in wary surprise: "You already knew, didn't you? Don't tell me you had something to do with it!?"

Did you just come out of a trial too?"

'Well, well. Who said Big Cat was dumb? She's razor-sharp.'

No point denying it. He acknowledged: "I killed him."

"You... killed Lin Xi?"

"Mm. It's complicated. I ran into—"

He'd planned a quick intel exchange, but Big Cat cut him off and sighed:

"Did you know that Chun died too? 'Only Carving Rotten Wood.' I'd assumed she finally fulfilled her lifelong wish. But turns out you were the one who killed Lin Xi. Meaning she probably... ended herself..."

"I know."

"You know?" Big Cat's voice went off-pitch. "Wait — Cheng Shi, did you kill Chun too?"

'Right, who said Big Cat was sharp? She's too...'

'Never mind. We're all friends here.'

Cheng Shi shook his head helplessly and briefly recounted encountering both in the trial.

Regarding Lin Xi's death, Big Cat offered nothing beyond a curt "good riddance." But the [Prosperity] believer's death left her unsettled for a long time. She really had considered the girl a friend — whether an ally-friend or a "fun sparring partner" kind of friend.

Hearing the sighs on the other end, Cheng Shi fell quiet too. Only after a long pause did he steer the conversation back to Yu Go. He was curious about the [Time] power Yu Go had used to escape, so he asked Big Cat why Yu Go would carry [Time] energy.

This time Big Cat was baffled.

"Who has [Time] power?"

Cheng Shi hadn't realized the disconnect yet. "Yu Go, obviously. How else did He slip past you?"

"Yu Go?"

Cheng Shi, have you been drinking?

Yu Go is a [Decay] follower. Where would He get [Time] power!?

He escaped using [Decay], not [Time]. Are we even talking about the same Yu Go?"

'???'

'Where am I supposed to find a second Yu Go? He's not a twin. He...'

'Wait!'

Cheng Shi's eyes sharpened. His grip tightened on the phone: "You said He escaped using [Decay] power?"

"You definitely drank something."

"When was your trial?"

"?" Sensing Cheng Shi's deadly-serious tone, Hong Lin caught on that something was wrong. She recalled the timing and answered with certainty: "Seven minutes ago. After the trial ended, I drank one cup of water and called you."

'Seven minutes...'

'That's impossible!'

'The previous trial ended ages ago. Even if the audience-with-god time didn't sync with the world, he'd already napped for a while in the rest area. This wasn't a seven-minute issue. By all logic, Yu Go had long since lost [Decay]'s protection — so how could he use [Decay] to escape!'

'Who's the one who had too much to drink?'

'Or is something actually wrong?'

"Cheng Shi, what's happening?" Big Cat's tone turned grave.

He didn't know either. But a wild guess was forming — one too unthinkable to share carelessly. So he could only explain the fading he'd applied to Yu Go and admit he was equally in the dark.

Hong Lin went quiet. Finally, she spoke:

"Maybe there really is another Yu Go?"

[Time] extrapolates countless iterations. What if one of the two we encountered was from an extrapolation world?

I can confirm there were no [Time] followers in my trial. So Cheng Shi — the one you ran into was the fake from an extrapolation!"

'What a Big-Sherlock-Cat!'

But the problem was: his trial hadn't contained any other [Time] believers either. The sole [Time] follower was Cheng Shi himself.

'Did I run an extrapolation or not? Wouldn't I know?'

...

Meanwhile. The rooftop rest area.

"Delivered?"

A silhouette sat facing the dying sun at the roof's edge, chugging a slime drink.

The hooded figure in black behind him snorted with a laugh and nodded:

"That Yu Go was excessively cautious. But thankfully, An Shenxuan's divination was convincing enough. Mission accomplished."

Hearing the affirmative, the seated figure wiped his mouth and smiled:

"Good. That's all we can do. The rest is up to them — whether they can find their own path."

No sooner had he finished than several more silhouettes landed on the rooftop. A crisp female voice rang out, tinged with teasing:

"I heard you turned down Qin Xin?"

The seated figure didn't turn. He gazed at the sinking sun and nodded.

"We're different from them. The Torchbearers shouldn't pin their hopes on me. I am who I am. I was never any god."

"What a shame. You refuse to join a safe God Creation Plan, insisting on leading some kind of god-slaying plan instead..."

The woman chuckled and trailed off. A male voice followed immediately:

"Interesting. Tell us — who's the target?"

All eyes were on him. The figure slowly stood, his solemn gaze fixed on the horizon, hardening with ironclad resolve.

"[Prosperity]!"

Perhaps She is the true answer."

"Just because that world's [Prosperity] fell?"

"Not only that. Recently, I met another interesting 'me.' He told me that while [Time] is the answer, [Prosperity] is the paper screen blocking it.

So he helped that world pierce the screen and topple [Prosperity].

It's a bit late for us now. But what if?

Until the gamble is over, nobody knows what face the dice in the cup will show."

As he spoke, the figure raised a single red dot between his fingers, eclipsing the last of the dying sun.

"Oh? So that world's success wasn't a spontaneous miracle, but an inevitability pushed by many hands?

Fascinating. I'm suddenly curious what kind of memory the 'me' in that world would record. But I'm even more curious about the one who pierced the screen for them. Did he... escape?"

"Escape...?"

Nobody escapes. If their own world still had hope, who would light their only spark somewhere else?

He's more unfortunate than I am. At least I still have all of you."

...

Chapter 983: [Folly]'s Day

Nobody knew what deal [Deceit] and [War] had struck. But at least the fires in the void had finally subsided, and the universe welcomed complete tranquility—

Just kidding.

Those starlit eyes, having barely escaped the blaze, hadn't even caught a breath before being intercepted on the way to their next destination by a pair of eyes painted with chaotic white miasma.

Seeing who it was, [Deceit] scoffed and seized the initiative: "Do you think your foolish acts will ever have an answer?"

The white eyes regarded [Deceit] from an impossibly bizarre angle, then scoffed in kind.

"My attempt may not be a foolish act. But your foolish act has already given me an answer.

This is the reason for your fear, isn't it?"

"!!!"

The instant [Folly] spoke those words, [Deceit]'s gaze froze. The mirth drained from the corners of His eyes, which slackened and drooped.

He suddenly realized He had genuinely committed a "foolish act." And the foolishness was nothing other than completely misjudging how [Folly] had learned the universe's truth!

This self-proclaimed supreme intelligence — the second god of [Chaos] — had most likely never escaped beyond this starry sky at all, nor approached the [Origin] that sat above the countless sliced universes.

'I should have realized sooner. If even [Time] needed time to permeate the barrier, how could [Folly] simply flee this place?'

He'd likely just used His authority to stage a ruse, making all the gods believe something was wrong with Him. And when [Deceit] — after seeing through the universe's truth — used it to probe every god's attitude, [Folly] could infer from their reactions. No, not infer — verify His hypothesis.

'This was the real reason He'd agreed to merge with [Birth]!'

'If He'd truly known everything already, He would never have "lowered Himself" at this juncture to engage with an old-fashioned traditionalist.'

'The unchanging [Birth] looked like an open card, a "fool," in [Folly]'s eyes. The only thing about Her that could attract [Folly]'s attention was the sliced-universe truth He'd just learned... from [Deceit]'s own mouth!'

'So I'd walked into [Folly]'s trap and practically told Him everything about the universe.'

Only now could [Folly] truly be called a genuine insider of the universe's secrets.

At this realization, [Deceit]'s eyes narrowed.

"I underestimated you. It seems you've learned everything from [Birth].

But I'd like to ask — where is your so-called 'Number One Fool'?

Hiding behind others and pulling tricks doesn't befit the self-styled greatest fool of the universe."

[Deceit]'s tone bordered on gnashing teeth. And [Folly]'s response nearly cracked His composure entirely.

"I'd already deduced everything. I simply didn't want to waste time verifying.

Because I knew that eventually, some foolish act would deliver the answer. And now, your 'courage' has not only verified my deduction but proven my hypothesis.

This world is one massive foolish act."

[Deceit]'s eye twitched violently. He regarded this [Chaos] deity — unpleasant from every angle — and rather than feeding His own fury, His eyes rolled once and He burst out laughing again.

"Heh~

Clever trap. But aren't you worried someone might find the authority you hid away?"

Yes. If [Folly] had never put Himself in danger, then the lost authority was naturally fiction!

He still possessed His authority. It just wasn't on His person.

[Folly] snorted coldly, voice dripping with contempt: "Is this 'someone' you? Then no, not particularly worried."

"?" [Deceit] laughed in disbelief. But the next instant, realization dawned: "Oh? I see. You don't even know where you hid it!

Fascinating. So He's in on the game too."

The moment those words fell, the starlit eyes vanished. [Folly] remained motionless in place. After a long silence, He snorted.

"[Memory] may be in the game. But if you could pry my authority from His hands — heh — then [Memory] should be renamed [Folly] long ago.

Mortals think themselves wise, so their foolish acts never cease...

Gods are no different."

As He spoke, the white eyes gazed into the depths of void, and for a moment it was unclear whether He referred to Himself, to others, or to that entity beyond the universe — the one observing the countless sliced worlds.

...

While [Deceit] rushed off toward [Memory], [Folly] didn't linger. He seemed to have much to ponder and much to verify today.

Before long, He opened His eyes again — right in front of another pair of starlit eyes. This time, their owner was furiously assaulting [Decay] in the void.

Yes, you read that correctly. At a time like this, someone was actually lashing a god who wanted nothing more than to rot away in peace — the practically invisible [Decay].

[Decay] had no idea how His long seclusion had attracted the ire of this [Void] ruler. All He heard were incomprehensible mutterings about "how dare you impersonate [Fate]" before suffering an unprovoked barrage.

Fortunately, the attacks amounted to accelerated decay of His own being — a kind of shortcut — so He didn't resist.

Those eyes knew they were just venting frustration. They wouldn't let [Decay] benefit from the rage, so the attacks gradually weakened until the anger was nearly spent.

And at that precise moment, [Folly] arrived.

The instant He materialized, that quintessentially [Folly]-flavored opening line rang through the void:

"Do you think your foolish act will have an answer?"

It was genuinely unclear which foolish-act practitioner this was aimed at, since two of Them were present.

But the moment [Fate] saw [Folly]'s arrival, He immediately blew [Decay] away and turned an icy gaze on [Folly], snorting heavily:

"Yes!

The Fixed Destiny is my answer."

[Folly] showed no appreciation for [Fate]'s unhesitating acknowledgment that His own behavior qualified as a foolish act. On the contrary, His contempt only deepened. He averted His gaze and looked at [Fate] sidelong:

"Have you considered... that it might not be your Fixed Destiny?"

"Want a fight?"

Actions over words. As He spoke, [Fate] was already striking.

The pitch-black expanse of void suddenly erupted into chaos. Biting winds of nothingness threatened to shred and annihilate every trace of existence within this space.

Facing such ferocious assault, [Folly] furrowed His brow slightly, left behind a parting "Unreasonable," and departed.

Without His authority on hand, handling these attacks would be difficult.

After [Folly] vanished, [Fate] instantly recalled all of His void power. His eyes, dark and deep, lingered on the spot where the other had appeared, and He spoke in an inscrutable tone:

"Fixed Destiny is Fixed Destiny. It belongs to no one and draws no distinction.

I bear the divine name of [Fate]. I wield the authority of [Fate]. And I will answer for Fixed Destiny.

Whoever attempts to destroy Fixed Destiny... becomes [Void]'s enemy."

...

Chapter 984: Everything Is a Foolish Act

Silence was the majority of the void.

[Silence] rarely appeared yet was omnipresent. His form to the world was usually the colossal Leaking World Silent Puppet. But the amusing thing was: any life that witnessed this form was typically assimilated into one of His silent puppets — muted for eternity, never again able to describe their Benefactor's magnificent visage.

So in a sense, He had never descended. At least, few traces remained in the memories of the living.

There were exceptions, of course. A certain fortunate soul protected by [Fate] had memorized the Puppet's appearance. Not that he cared to recall it often.

And it was in this soundless, silent domain that the chaotic white eyes opened once more.

[Folly] never shared. [Silence] never expressed. When these two met, they should have simply passed each other by, neither acknowledging the other.

But few existences in this universe could dodge [Folly]'s question. That same opening rang out again in the silent expanse:

"Do you think your foolish act will have an answer?"

"..."

"Why is the universe foolish?"

Why does [Void] fear?"

Where did I hide my authority?"

And what did [Deceit] promise you?"

Surely you don't think that by staying silent, I can't find answers from you?"

[Silence], don't think a feigned attempt at assimilation can wash your hands of involvement. I know you're in league with [Deceit].

It seems [Void]'s secrets have grown too numerous... generating fear even in you."

The chaotic white eyes stared hard at the Silent Puppet, but the enormous figure was perfectly still — like a soulless husk, showing not the slightest reaction.

[Folly] frowned slightly and gave it a sidelong glance.

"You disdain mortals' lack of wisdom, and so you refuse to open your mouth to enlighten them.

I know your pride far surpasses mine. So the thing that could make even [Chaos]'s endgame afraid...

[Origin] has already descended once, hasn't He?"

"..."

"Fool unaware of own folly."

Seeing the Puppet still unmoving, the white eyes left a trail of contempt and departed once more.

No sooner had [Folly] left than [Deceit] arrived.

When those familiar starlit eyes opened in the silent domain, the Silent Puppet — which hadn't twitched an inch moments ago — retreated half a step in what passed for "a show of respect."

He wasn't afraid. He just wanted to leave.

Out of sight, out of mind. [Folly] was bothersome too, but being a fellow [Chaos], [Silence] understood Him. As long as He stayed unresponsive, the other would eventually leave.

But this thing before Him now...

"Heh~

Why do you reek of [Folly]?

He was here?

What did He ask?

Forget that — what did you say?

You didn't go blabbing our little secret, did you, mute?"

"..."

"What, trying to flee?

Take one more step and I'll tell everyone you know [Void]'s secrets. Try me."

"...?"

'Who exactly is keeping whose secret?'

'If you spill it, who loses more?'

'I dare you to— ...ugh, forget it.'

The enormous Puppet's form twitched. He placed the half-retreated foot back down.

This wasn't practicing self-will or offering devotion to the supreme. It was synchronizing with [Deceit]'s fear, reinforcing the confidence within His own heart.

That's right. [Silence] really was in the Fear Faction.

Just as [Folly] had guessed, He knew too many secrets — so many that fear was constantly fermenting within Him.

[Deceit] also knew this companion, who had walked the path of fear for so long, could never turn back. So He spoke freely of His discoveries, utterly unconcerned about being overheard.

Because this was [Silence]'s domain. He would silence every word that shouldn't reach the outside.

But He didn't expect the very first sentence to plunge Him into silence yet again.

"I think [Corruption] may have a problem. A big problem..."

...

The void. The Fire Passing Hall.

Today's silence permeated the universe. Even the Torchbearers felt its influence. The three people in the hall stared at one another wordlessly, their expressions varied.

Fang Shiqing, who'd just arrived, looked in shock from Qin Xin seated behind the desk to the uneasy figure standing before it. She blinked several times before regaining composure.

"What are you talking about? Leaving? Why leave?"

She stared at the figure, brow tightly furrowed:

"The Torchbearers will never abandon a comrade. If you're facing a crisis, speak up. Even if Qin Xin can't solve it, surely the Flame of Hope can?"

"..."

The figure stood with head lowered, enduring the chastisement without a word.

Fang Shiqing's face hardened. She turned to Qin Xin:

"One of them won't talk, fine. Have you gone mute too?"

What could possibly force someone out?

Qin Xin, since the Torchbearers' founding, there has never been an exit mechanism. Are you serious about what you said today?"

"..."

The heavily armored Qin Xin leaned back in his chair, knuckles rapping the desk repeatedly. After a long pause, he sighed: "It wasn't me who said it."

Fang Shiqing froze, then her expression grew even graver. She turned back and said coldly: "Then it was you. Why do you want to leave?"

The figure attempted a smile, but seeing Fang Shiqing's stern face, pressed their lips together: "I'm no longer suited to be a City Defender."

"Suited or not is for everyone to judge — not for you to conclude through self-denial."

Fang Shiqing stood with arms crossed, furious at the lack of fighting spirit, like a dean lecturing a student. She knew this wasn't how to treat a comrade, but this situation infuriated her. There was even a flicker of fear in her heart.

They'd weathered the most fragile times. Why, now that things were getting "better," would division appear in their ranks?

Was the path of passing the torch destined to be fraught with hardship?

But giving up wasn't in Fang Shiqing's nature. She pressed on:

"Even if you're not suited for City Defender, what about City Builder? You could transfer."

"My principles don't align with the City Builders."

"?"

Fang Shiqing's breath hitched. Her eyebrows shot up. She rolled up her sleeves, clearly ready to throw hands. The figure backed up a step, lips firmly sealed, refusing to "apologize":

"It's the truth! City Builders value pioneering spirit. I don't have that courage."

"Then explain how City Defenders, who emphasize steadfastness, aren't suited for you!"

"It's me who isn't suited for the City Defenders..." The figure corrected her phrasing, then muttered softly: "Everyone is committed to protecting beauty. But I think only protecting beauty in this world

isn't... In short, vice and wicked desires never yield the road for beauty. Mere guarding isn't enough to save this world!"

Fang Shiqing laughed in anger. She glared at this familiar yet unfamiliar silhouette:

"Then what do you want?"

The figure clenched a fist, eyes turning resolute: "I want to purge the things that aren't beautiful. Sweep them all into the trash. They don't deserve to enjoy beauty. They don't deserve to live in its shelter."

"You want to pass judgment on others under the Torchbearers' name!?"

The figure raised their chin, absolute in their resolve: "I won't dirty the Torchbearers' name. So I've decided to leave."

"Request denied. The moment you chose to consult me, your decision lost its force."

Qin Xin rapped the table, steadying the dazed Fang Shiqing and settling the matter in one stroke.

"I'm a heartless boss. I'm short-handed right now. So I won't let you go."

City Defenders guard the good. City Builders seek the new. You want neither? Then we'll call you a City Breaker.

The world changes constantly. The Torchbearers can't fall behind.

If you want to lance the world's festering wounds, then go ahead. Go try to tear down the walls that can no longer bear their weight.

Torchbearers' hands don't avoid blood. They avoid pointless blood.

But remember: never let desire rule you again. And never let the arrow called 'good' in your hand earn you a name of 'evil.'

Today's meeting is adjourned. Everyone, back to work.

I'll find a new Fire Seeker for the City Breaker role. But until the new Fire Seeker is in place, you may not recruit any City Breakers."

"But there's one who—"

"I said: you may not recruit any City Breakers.

If he truly wants to join us, have him consider the City Defenders or City Builders."

Qin Xin's figure vanished from the hall. The remaining two exchanged glances and fell silent once more.

"Sister Qing, I..."

"No matter what, you remain one of the beautiful things I've witnessed with my own eyes. I believe in you. And I believe in the City Breakers."

...

Chapter 985: Let Me See Which Blasphemer Has Arrived

Harboring a guess that even he found unthinkable, Cheng Shi hung up the phone and raised his mask to recite the prayer once more.

Not everyone's request for an audience was accepted by their Benefactor. But the darling favored by [Fate] was clearly different. The moment he finished his blasphemy-tinged prayer, the blasphemer's figure vanished from the rooftop.

The void. The void again!

Seeing those familiar, ice-cold eyes before him, Cheng Shi's heart tightened. He launched straight into praise.

"Praise to the great... God of [Deceit]!

May Your mood forever soar as high as the corners of Your eyes. And may my devotion always 'reach Your divine ears'!

Your most devoted believer, Cheng Shi, greets You."

The ice in those eyes dissolved instantly. The entire void erupted in phantasmagoric splendor. Yet His tone remained distant, as though an infinite gulf of people separated this god and mortal...

"Oh my. Let me see which blasphemer has arrived.

Why, if it isn't the never-devout [Void] walker, the thoroughly dishonest [Time] believer, the [Chaos] thief of fabricated history, [Death]'s counterfeit employee, [Prosperity] and [Decay]'s blind choice, the eavesdropper on [Birth]'s descent into history, the party involved in [Folly]'s wager against foolishness, and [Silence]'s clown candidate for assimilation puppet.

What's this? So many of you here at once — planning to knock me off this divine throne?"

"..."

'What are you looking at me for?'

'Laugh!'

'The Fun God said this many words. If you don't laugh, are you forswearing!?'

'You're not devout!'

'Laugh now or I'll blast you with Lightning Punishment.'

Cheng Shi forced the corners of his mouth upward, on the verge of tears.

'Benefactor, I said all those things precisely because I'm devout!'

'Fine, this devotion was born of fear. But shouldn't devotion born of fear count as devotion for the Fear Faction!?'

'You keep mocking subordinates and crushing morale. Sooner or later you'll...'

"Hmm?"

"...Remember to eat properly.

Health comes first, after all. You're the backbone of all us liars. If You wear Yourself out, we'll have no future, my lord."

Seeing those eyes threaten to turn cold, Cheng Shi instantly activated his talent "Steer According to the Wind" and wiped the cold sweat from his brow.

'Close call. Forgot He can read minds.'

'But I can't let this slide. I just recited that entire rap sheet of crimes. I should at least get something in return, otherwise it's a wasted guilty plea.'

So the nervously laughing Cheng Shi straightened his back slightly and muttered: "I'll accept the charges. But before sentencing, my lord, I'd like to file a defense."

Those eyes glanced at the clown, stifling a laugh: "Granted."

Cheng Shi instantly perked up: "My lord, the prayer I recited was [Fa—... a different one entirely. Why are You here?"

"The blasphemer blasphemes to the Benefactor's face, repeatedly citing blasphemous conduct, with obvious intent to challenge the Tribunal. Crime elevated by one degree."

"Whoa, wait wait wait — that shouldn't count! I was just curious..." Cheng Shi's fake smile was nearly fossilized. He thought: '[Order] was sealed away, not devoured. Why does Your mouth taste so much like [Order]?'

'And what kind of "Tribunal" are You running, exactly?'

'I brought up the defense to give myself some peanuts to chew on. And You're putting on a whole courtroom drama?'

But he didn't dare even think too loudly. He could only murmur again:

"My lord, the blasphemous actions You describe do indeed exist..."

"Excellent. The blasphemer has confessed. Off with his head."

"...WAIT!" Sweat streamed down Cheng Shi's forehead. "But they were also my most devout offerings to You!

Whether disguising my identity with false pretenses or washing my crimes with lies — all of it is me demonstrating my devotion to You.

I swear the clown is the most devout believer You've ever had. In this entire universe — no, even beyond the universe — no one follows You as steadfastly as I do."

"Tch— A lie."

"Truth demonstrates my loyalty. Lies represent my offering. Whether You judge these words true or false, my devotion remains unwavering."

Those eyes blinked. He hadn't expected the clown to wrap Him in a paradox. He scoffed again, spiraling slightly:

"What a silver tongue of sophistry. You're so fervently insisting on your devotion — is the next step begging for a reward?"

Cheng Shi rubbed his hands sheepishly, shaking his head vigorously: "I'm not that kind of person... So, is there one?"

"Hmm?"

"Merit is merit. Fault is fault. They shouldn't be conflated.

Beat me if you must, punish me as deserved — I accept. But the reward for devotion can't be withheld!"

Those eyes actually broke into hearty laughter. Clearly, He was indeed in fine spirits today.

And so, under Cheng Shi's dumbfounded gaze, [Deceit] blinked lightly and tossed a ball of fire before him.

Strangely, the first thing Cheng Shi thought of upon seeing the fire was the Torchbearers!

'What does this mean? He wants me to approach the Torchbearers? Or become their fire!?'

He wanted neither.

Cheng Shi froze. He didn't immediately reach for the fire but instead looked up at those eyes with a face full of question marks.

Those eyes saw through the clown's inner conflict and scoffed:

"If you haven't seen its truth, you must believe it false.

No need to keep showcasing your devotion. Of course, your current 'devotion' may not actually be devotion — just plain stupidity.

Those mortals who love chasing firelight need no protection from you. The Flame of Hope is more than enough to bring them genuine warmth."

'The Flame of Hope?'

'So this is how the Fun God protects the Torchbearers?'

Cheng Shi silently filed this away without comment, then turned his attention to the fire before him. When he focused and examined it closely, he discovered it wasn't just fire!

Beneath the blazing flames lurked a shadow that the firelight couldn't illuminate. And the shadow didn't seem to be pure darkness, either. Cheng Shi stared for a long time without being able to discern it. He decided to reach out and test it — after all, this was the void, with the Benefactor watching overhead. Surely nothing would go wrong here?

So he moved. His fingers touched the shadow. Instantly, a viscous sensation transmitted from his fingertips.

'This is... blood!?!'

Cheng Shi's eyes sharpened. He grasped the shadow in one motion, then held the hourglass-shaped object — constructed of fire and blood — before his eyes in stunned amazement.

Now he finally knew what [Deceit]'s "reward" was.

"[War]'s... container!?"

"What? Aren't you collecting these things?"

This is [War]'s payment from that trade you proposed.

I'm merely the delivery man. Now it's the clown's turn to pay his end. I hear you're supposed to show Him the world?

Perfect. I'm also curious how a clown goes about seeing the world."

"..."

'I'm scared, my lord. If You keep up this passive-aggression, I'm going to become a believer of [Sarcasm].'

...

Chapter 986: The Flame of Hope?

Sarcasm aside, this was not a pot he'd carry.

"My lord, I never wanted to collect anything. If I had, it would only be that mask presumably belonging to Crown.

As for these containers..."

Cheng Shi openly displayed every container in his possession.

"...You sent them all.

[Deceit], [Chaos], [Time], [Prosperity], [Corruption], [Decay]..."

He wasn't sure whether the three newest containers were connected to the Fun God, but shifting blame first was never wrong.

"I've been devout to [Void] from the start. I've never once entertained thoughts of approaching other gods."

Those eyes blinked:

"Oh, I see. Very well. I'll convey your disdain to the Old Bones. Poor elderly god — no one likes Him in His twilight years."

"???"

'That's not what I meant at all!'

Now Cheng Shi was genuinely panicked.

'My lord, can You please not stir up trouble? If that gentleman hadn't dragged me out of the Sea of Desire, would You even have a clown to toy with right now?'

'The company boss does nothing, fine. But don't sabotage my side gig too!'

'Then again, would working a side gig let me see a container?'

'What would that gentleman's container look like?'

'Two interlocking little skulls?'

Realizing his thoughts were spiraling, Cheng Shi reined himself in and decisively skipped the topic, getting straight to the point:

"My lord, it's no use. All this teasing is just because You don't want to explain why You keep pushing containers toward me. But I still want to know.

Why?"

Those eyes blinked rapidly. The starry specks within them flashed erratically, the spirals reversing. After a long pause, He chuckled in amusement:

"Are you afraid?"

"No."

"No need to act. You pulled out the [Corruption] container specifically to absorb your own fear so you could ask me this question."

As He spoke, [Deceit] blinked twice, severing the container's influence. The faint fear crept back into Cheng Shi's heart. Then He continued:

"What? You think I'm going to destroy the world? Annihilate everything [Origin] created?"

"!!!"

Cold sweat instantly refreshed across Cheng Shi's back.

The words were terrifying, but this was precisely what Cheng Shi feared yet never dared voice.

From his perspective, every sliced universe's gods were merely insignificant test subjects in [Origin]'s vast experiment ground. An ant trying to shake an oak — how could it be easy? So he'd always suspected that [Deceit]'s scheme wasn't to "topple" [Origin] and win the world, but rather to derail [Origin]'s experiment.

That fit His personality. Perhaps only through this could [Deceit] honor His own "rebellion" and the [Void] He bore.

After all, no matter how much the Fun God feared [Origin], His devotion to [Void] remained unwavering. Every piece of counsel He gave Cheng Shi originated from [Void]. Even after parting ways with [Fate], He still upheld [Void]'s name.

He cared deeply about [Void]. But He didn't care about this world — or even those countless universes.

And that was why Cheng Shi had never dared speak plainly before [Deceit]. Because a failed experiment very likely meant the universe's annihilation.

This might not be the kind of void [Fate] envisioned, but it was void all the same.

"So is this the Fixed Destiny, my lord?"

The world will inevitably return to 'void.' Whether by [Deceit]'s road or [Fate]'s road, they lead to the same destination..."

A barely perceptible shift flickered through those eyes. Then a scoff:

"Tch—

You think you've seen through [Fate]'s Fixed Destiny?"

"...I don't think so."

"Good. Even I don't dare claim to know what Fixed Destiny is. So stop overthinking.

Fixed Destiny is far more complex than you imagine.

Also, put your heart back in your chest. I'm not destroying the world. I'm... saving it."

'The Fun God wants to save the world?'

'Oh sure, sure. Watch me believe that.'

Cheng Shi's anxiety deepened. [Deceit] watched His believer and chuckled again:

"If your anxiety comes from these containers, why not give them away? This world could use some fresh blood. If it's always the same old fossils holding things up, it gets rather dull."

'Give them away?'

'To whom?'

'The Fun God's words always had words within words.'

Cheng Shi frowned slightly, turning the Benefactor's words over and over without finding the key. But he did notice something else worth addressing. He looked up at those eyes in puzzlement:

"My lord, [Fate] repeatedly warned me to stay away from [Corruption]. Yet during this trial — no, even this container!" He pointed at the [Corruption] container before him. "Even while I was using it, You never cautioned me. So have You already gotten the answer You wanted from this probe?"

[Corruption] isn't as frightening as people think?"

"Ignorant words." The eyes narrowed. "She is far more terrifying than the gods imagine. But you needn't know that.

Speaking of [Corruption], there's an amusing story. You've probably already met him in the trial — my other believer."

'Another believer? Who?'

Cheng Shi blinked, suddenly realizing the Fun God's "believer" might be... Xiao Qi?

'Something's wrong!'

'This is absurd.'

'Any player a god bothered mentioning couldn't be ordinary. But Xiao Qi? What about him?'

'He couldn't still be alive!?'

While Cheng Shi's mind raced, [Deceit] chuckled:

"I conducted a very interesting experiment on this little believer. He originally didn't belong to [Void] but to [Descent]. He was a [Corruption] follower."

"!!!"

[Corruption]!?

The instant the Fun God personally confirmed Xiao Qi had been a [Corruption] believer, every puzzle in Cheng Shi's mind clicked into place.

'So the price Xiao Qi paid wasn't from his talent but from an oathbreaking curse?'

'That makes far more sense. [Corruption] manipulates desire and emotion. Such a curse fits perfectly... Wait!!'

'That makes even less sense!'

'[Corruption] never refuses. Why would She curse Her own believer?'

Cheng Shi was baffled. Seeing the crux of the problem, he looked up at his Benefactor. The Fun God roared with laughter:

"That's what makes this so interesting.

I altered the description of a certain talent I'd granted this little believer, disguising it as an oathbreaking curse. But who'd have thought — this fascinating mortal's body actually manifested the curse's effects..."

Before the sentence ended, Cheng Shi's mind went blank.

'WHAT!?!'

'Altering talent descriptions...'

'So there was a second victim in this game!?!'

'In a way, that made Xiao Qi a lucky soul too.'

'But... why?'

Cheng Shi furrowed his brow in thought: "You mean [Corruption] never refuses, so She didn't refuse Your rewritten talent either?"

"Heh. That's indeed what happened. But the strange part is, I've never exchanged authority with [Corruption]. So how did She convert my [Deceit] power into [Corruption]'s power?"

That's why I say [Corruption] is far more terrifying than you imagine.

Stay away from Her. If you lose your life, it's not my problem.

Anyway, divine affairs are none of a mortal's business. Go do what you need to do."

"..."

'You brought it up. I didn't even ask.'

But hearing this, Cheng Shi's eyebrows rose. He keenly latched onto the key phrase and probed: "You mean after becoming a god, I can meddle?"

"Tch—

'I don't want to become a god' — someone seems to have forgotten their own words."

'I haven't forgotten!'

Cheng Shi straightened his back, thinking righteously: 'Even if I don't become a god, my friends becoming gods works just as well, right?'

'A god's status is nothing more than an entry ticket to the table. If my friends can take me in, why would I need to become one?'

'I've never forgotten who I am. Just an ordinary father's ordinary son. God or not — it has nothing to do with me.'

'I just want to live. And maybe pass the imperial exam while I'm at it.'

"Heh. Incomprehensible mortal sentimentality. Get lost. Take these eyesores and get out."

A gale swept through the void, hurling Cheng Shi and his containers back into reality.

Returned to the rooftop, Cheng Shi stared at the newly acquired [War] container. He could feel his blood stirring, roused by its presence — an almost unbearable restlessness, an urge to find someone and fight on the spot.

'Saving the world...'

'Would the Fun God truly save the world?'

'Could the Torchbearers' existence be not a mortal's delusion, but His hope?'

'Otherwise, why would His method of sheltering the Torchbearers be called the "Flame of Hope"?''

'Who gave the hope? And where does the fire come from?'

...

Chapter 987: Squinty Zhang, Does the Fun God Know You're This Devout?

After the high-intensity divine audience, Cheng Shi finally had a brief respite.

He rested in the rest area for a day — though he hardly idled. He sorted through everything he'd learned, growing increasingly convinced that passively waiting was hopeless. The only way to carve out breathing room on this terrifying predestined path was to take the initiative.

Even if he couldn't reverse the fixed momentum, he could at least be an informed person before true [Void] arrived. That way, when the era collapsed, he might still know what contingencies and fallback arrangements to put in place.

As for whether any of it would work...

Do your best and leave the rest to fate.

After another night of deliberation, Cheng Shi finally decided to find himself some allies.

His first targets: the Fun God's believers — the eclectic crew of Jokers.

He knew that regarding matters of the gods, Big Cat was superior to the Jokers in both strength and divine status. But the one "drawback" was that she believed in fate...

The Destined Ones all believed in fate. Yet [Fate] had already diverged onto a path that deviated from [Deceit]. No matter how favored Cheng Shi believed himself to be by [Fate], he didn't dare loudly "conspire" and "rebel" under that god's watchful gaze.

So he chose the Jokers. Not a matter of trust — a matter of faith.

Besides, the long-promised Joker Society meeting had never been held. By now, the Jokers' numbers were actually rather "substantial." Might as well use this gathering as the spark to blow open the undercurrents beneath the surface calm.

With his decision made, Cheng Shi went straight to Zhang Jizu.

Let's not forget — this "grassroots organization" had two founders. Others might not know, but the two parties were perfectly aware.

Cheng Shi figured he'd already secured the meeting space from Big Cat, but he couldn't exactly have a bunch of people standing in empty void for a meeting. That would be too awkward.

So he used the key Zhang Jizu had sent and opened the Bone Gate once more, landing with practiced ease in the mass grave beside the Cemetery.

Clearly, a certain [Death] Chosen hadn't set any VIP shortcuts for his friend. Staring at those familiar tombstones and the long slope, Cheng Shi pressed the "doorbell" in exasperation.

"Hey hey hey, Squinty Zhang, are you home? Are you home?"

The enormous shout echoed beside the graveyard. Before long, a head peeked over the slope.

Seeing the owner had arrived, Cheng Shi grumbled: "Can't your hospitality be a little more sincere?"

Zhang Jizu squinted from atop the slope and grinned:

"How sincere?"

Zhen Xin's 'zhen'? Or Cheng Shi's 'cheng'?

Compared to those two, I'd say my hospitality is already sincere enough."

"?"

'Something's wrong with you!'

Cheng Shi was about to fire back when Zhang Jizu snapped his fingers, instantly teleporting him from the bottom of the slope into the actual Cemetery.

He bounced around in his skull-body and spun, seeing Zhang Jizu walking leisurely from behind him — from the direction of the slope — murmuring as he approached:

"I've upgraded the 'security' system, but given the limitations of the formation, I still haven't found a good aura-identification tool.

But I think this is fine. After all, if someone impersonates a visitor, rigid tools won't help me distinguish friend from foe.

The manual semi-automatic identification process remains a necessary step in the defense protocol."

"..."

'Steady Zhang is as steady as ever. It's just that the "steady" seems to be gradually trending toward "snarky"...'!

'Who taught him this?'

Cheng Shi tried to roll his eyes — unsuccessfully. But at this point, what Zhang Jizu was saying didn't matter. To truly understand a person, you had to look at what they'd done.

Gazing at the rows upon rows of tombstones before him, each engraved with a divine name, Cheng Shi's spirits finally lifted.

"Tch. Slow work yields fine results, sure. But Squinty Zhang, isn't your efficiency a bit too slow? Is this really the pragmatic, efficient [Death] Chosen I know?

What, does carving letters burn your hands?

How else do you explain these tombstones still missing their Chosen's names?

Something come up?

Fine, fine, save your excuses for the defense. I'm absolutely filing a complaint..."

Before he could finish, Zhang Jizu squinted down at the little skeleton on the ground, scooped him up, and placed him atop the [Order] tombstone. Then, from somewhere, he produced a camera, and before the dumbfounded little skull could react — click — took the first photo of Cheng Shi's existence in this game.

"?"

Cheng Shi's eye sockets stared questioningly at Squinty Zhang, who replied at an unhurried pace:

"There's my explanation. A player disguised as a [Death] believer has been constantly bossing me around, leaving me no energy for carving and maintenance work.

I couldn't beat him, so I had no choice but to let it be.

Well? Is that explanation satisfactory?"

"???"

Cheng Shi was stunned.

'Dude, is your skull leaking?'

'If your brain isn't drafty, how could you come up with such a cerebellum-atrophied excuse?'

'That's almost as legendary as me setting up a stool and impersonating that gentleman in front of you...'

'Are you still Squinty Zhang?'

'Dear god, don't tell me you're actually some cursed thing surnamed Zhen!'

The little skull's eye sockets scrunched into a ball, scrutinizing Squinty Zhang with suspicion. As a [Deceit] believer, Zhang Jizu naturally guessed what Cheng Shi was thinking.

Indeed, if he could pull off a "heh~" right now, it would be the perfect finishing move.

Unfortunately, even squinting until his eyes disappeared, Zhang Jizu couldn't force out that one syllable...

It was simply too hard. Not everyone could impersonate Zhen Yi without breaking character. Just thinking about that fellow Chosen made Zhang Jizu feel cursed.

Seeing Squinty Zhang's neck veins practically bulging without producing the "heh," Cheng Shi sighed with "relief." Then his expression relaxed, and he suddenly split into a grin:

"Heh~"

"..."

Sure enough, Zhang Jizu's face changed. He swept the little skull off the tombstone with a wave and stalked toward his quarters, face dark.

'How was that not evening the score!'

Cheng Shi bounced along behind Squinty Zhang, tutting with satisfaction.

"Look, Squinty Zhang, if you truly want to bury Them, just waiting around won't get you anywhere. You've got to actually do something, right?"

"..."

Zhang Jizu's footsteps faltered. Then he kept walking:

"I've always maintained that I'm not trying to bury the gods. I simply haven't gotten around to carving their Chosen's names."

The little skull snorted. Two quick bounces.

"Right, right, right. Fool me if you want, but don't fool yourself.

I've seen tombstones half-carved. I've never seen every single tombstone half-carved.

But come to think of it — you dare do this because carving a tombstone for that Gentleman counts as an offering to Him, right?

You use your devotion to one god to offset your blasphemy against fifteen?

Squinty Zhang, does the Fun God know you're this devout?"

While they bantered, they'd arrived at Zhang Jizu's quarters. He pushed the door open and let Cheng Shi bounce over the threshold. The moment Cheng Shi hopped inside, he noticed something: right across from the doorway, not far away, stood a mirror.

And that mirror was reflecting an exact copy of himself.

'?'

'What sane person puts a mirror by the front door?'

...

Chapter 988: Where on Earth Can You Find a Boss This Good?

"You put a mirror here just to welcome yourself?"

Tch, how cute. Seems like [Deceit]'s corruption is spreading faster than I thought..."

Before he could finish, Cheng Shi's tone hitched. He suddenly realized what stood before him wasn't a mirror at all — it was... another skull!

For a [Death] Chosen, placing a skull at the entrance to greet a guest was understandable enough. But... why did this skull look so much like him?

Cheng Shi froze. At first he thought it was some trophy left by one of Zhang Jizu's enemies. But he quickly noticed something wrong: the skull bore faint but unmistakable traces of deliberate carving!

This had clearly been sculpted from a large piece of bone. Coupling that with Squinty Zhang's practiced camera skills from earlier, Cheng Shi's bone-complexion darkened. He spun around and let loose:

"You bastard, Squinty Zhang, so this is what you were setting up.

You carved this little skull for what exactly?

I was about to use you as a scap— I treat you as a friend, and you keep using me as a scapegoat!?"

"How am I using you as a scapegoat?"

"This isn't!?" Cheng Shi gnashed his teeth, bouncing around the carved skull. "You carved an identical replica of me so you could whitewash your own blasphemous deeds!"

"Cheng Shi, that's just a skull. All skulls look pretty similar." Zhang Jizu squinted with a smile.

"You think I'd believe that?" Cheng Shi scoffed. "Who are you trying to fool?"

Fine. Even if I bought that — what about Them?

You don't actually think that placing this thing on each tombstone and snapping a photo will fool the gods?

Are you underestimating the divine? They may not be truly omniscient, but do you think They don't know everything that happens in this game and everything mortals do?

You think this would get past Them?

This is textbook self-deception!

Ha, don't tell me you're planning to offer this whole farce as a tribute to the Fun God?

Then I'll admit it — from now on, you are a proper [Deceit] believer."

If the little skull had salivary glands, Cheng Shi's spit would be spraying Squinty Zhang's... no, his shoes.

He bounced ceaselessly at Zhang Jizu's feet, as though suffering some monumental "betrayal."

But Zhang Jizu didn't engage with the scolding. He just smiled, dragged over a stool, hoisted Cheng Shi up, and sat cross-legged across from him. Squinting, he returned Cheng Shi's own words:

"That question should be directed at you, Cheng Shi.

Do you think this would fool Them?"

Cheng Shi blanked. He hadn't expected Squinty Zhang to mean that.

Zhang Jizu continued in his unhurried way, as though he'd anticipated Cheng Shi's visit all along.

"Because of the Jokers, I've been in frequent contact with Li Jingming lately. He seems to have a particular read on you. He thinks you possess many secrets that no mortal should hold, and that the weight of those secrets without anyone to share them with will only trap you in immense fear.

So he told me: sooner or later, you'd look for someone to confide in.

I didn't really believe it — until I saw you show up at the Cemetery again today...

Anything that can be communicated over the phone doesn't require face-to-face. An in-person visit means the matter is either critically important, or the person lacks confidence — or both.

There's been no progress on Yu Xi's mask. Neither the History School nor Li Jingming has found new leads. And you've been here for a while without once bringing up Yu Xi. So you're clearly not here to discuss the mask.

But what information could rival the importance of mask fragments... besides something about Them?

So your visit this time definitely concerns the gods. And if you've been stalling with jokes this entire time, it's probably not good news about the gods...

That's why I want to ask: if something is important enough, do you really think you can hide it from Them?"

'There are no fools in this game...'

Cheng Shi fell silent for a moment, then tapped his chin: "Can't I have just come by to visit?"

"No. Because you're Cheng Shi. You never do pointless things."

"Squinty Zhang, you're severely underestimating our friendship!"

"I'm merely facing a liar's craft head-on. The more you deflect, the more it proves my guess is right."

"..."

'Talking to smart people can be exhausting sometimes. Good thing this smart person is on my side.'

Cheng Shi tapped his chin and sighed:

"There are indeed some extremely thorny matters. But I think under the Fun God's protection, safety shouldn't be a concern."

"So it's about the Jokers!"

Zhang Jizu's eyes narrowed to slits, nodding as if everything clicked.

"So you really are going to hold the so-called Joker Society meeting. What do you plan to confess at this gathering?"

Setting that aside — since you said 'shouldn't,' that means you're not certain. And this involves [Deceit] too?"

Cheng Shi was done.

He glanced at Squinty Zhang, then shuffled back two steps and gestured irritably:

"Come on, here's the mic. You talk. Keep going.

If you're so good at guessing, go ahead and guess my entire purpose.

The whole stage is yours. Let's see what else you can come up with."

No sooner had the words fallen than Zhang Jizu shook his head with a laugh. Casually, he pulled a large bell made of pale, assembled bone fragments from his inventory.

The bell wasn't huge — about the size of a normal human head. Were it not for its rounded bell shape, it might have passed for an ancient chime.

"?"

Cheng Shi froze. A bell radiating [Death] energy inevitably called to mind the bell ringers — the singers who served that gentleman upon the Bone Throne.

'But Squinty Zhang, what are you pulling out a bell for at a time like this? Going to perform for me?'

'What is this, [Death] Metal musician Zhang Jizu?'

While Cheng Shi sat dumbstruck, Squinty Zhang swayed the bell and slowly explained:

"You should be able to tell — this is a gift from the Benefactor.

I prayed to Him, requesting a supreme treasure that could shield against the gods' prying..."

"???"

'What!?'

Cheng Shi stared at the bone bell in disbelief, voice nearly cracking: "This thing?"

"Yes. This. It's called the Bell Ringer's Funeral."

Cheng Shi's eye sockets creased in bewilderment: "I know that gentleman in certain ways better than you do. There's absolutely no way He came up with that name."

"...That's not the point. The point is, this bell can emanate sufficiently dense [Death] energy to simulate the Benefactor's presence, thereby blocking all surveillance from other gods."

"!!!"

Now Cheng Shi was genuinely, thoroughly stunned. It was obvious this was something Squinty Zhang had prayed for specifically for the Jokers.

"You... were already preparing for the Joker Society?"

Squinty Zhang, I had no idea your sense of belonging to the Jokers was this strong..."

Zhang Jizu squinted and shook his head:

"Not me. It was Li Jingming. Or rather, Zhen Xin.

Their anticipation for the Joker Society far exceeded my imagination. After all, I know what the Jokers really are. But those two had no idea, and were full of expectation.

In fact, these two — who rarely interacted — even re-established communication because of the Jokers. And what I'm holding is the product of their collaboration.

The granting of this bell was actually beyond all our expectations. When Zhen Xin proposed the idea, none of us thought it would work. After all, no god would allow mortals to block Their hearing and sight.

Unsurprisingly, their two prayers naturally failed.

Mine failed too, actually. When I made this request to that gentleman, He didn't agree..."

"?" Cheng Shi blinked, glancing at the bell in Squinty Zhang's hand as if to ask: then what's this?

Zhang Jizu caught Cheng Shi's confusion. His expression turned strange, his squinted eyes fixed on the little skull before him with an unusual look:

"...Until I mentioned you. I told Him this artifact was being requested on your behalf."

"???"

"And then, after a long silence, the Benefactor bestowed this bell.

So Cheng Shi, I'd like to ask you too — why does the Benefactor's favor toward you so greatly surpass His favor toward me?"

"..."

Cheng Shi was stunned. In his mind, the image of that gentleman upon the Bone Throne materialized — a figure so grand and radiant.

'Where on earth can you find a boss this good?'

For a moment, the little skull was moved to tears.

Faking it.

...

Chapter 989: Accomplice

Cheng Shi was also wondering why the [Death] boss had bestowed such a thing.

This was obviously an item for ill-intentioned players to defy the gods. If that gentleman could tolerate such a challenge to divine authority, didn't that mean He very likely shared the Fun God's spirit of "rebellion"?

But on a divine level... wasn't that just the Fear Faction?

"!!??"

'So that gentleman went from neutral to Fear Faction?'

'Did the Fun God actually pull Him over?'

'Not impossible!' Considering how that gentleman had been looking after him all along, Cheng Shi even suspected He'd been recruited by the Fun God long ago. The bad blood between [Death] and [Void] might have been an act all along — just to avoid suspicion.

And now, using His gift to block the gods' surveillance perfectly solved the problem of attracting too much cosmic attention under [Deceit]'s protection. After all, that gentleman's reputation among the gods was decent — at least He wasn't the type to constantly cause trouble.

At this thought, possibilities bloomed in Cheng Shi's mind.

With this artifact's protection, the room for maneuver expanded enormously. The only question was whether it could also block the Fun God's prying...

Seeing Cheng Shi's doubtful expression, Zhang Jizu spoke up:

"Don't think too simply about this. Even if it blocks the gods' surveillance, it's still the Benefactor's creation. Everything said and done under its protection cannot escape that gentleman's gaze.

Cheng Shi, if what you want to share also involves the Benefactor..."

He didn't spell it out, but Cheng Shi understood.

"Furthermore, this artifact isn't without a time limit. The Benefactor warned me that prolonged [Death] energy presence will also arouse the gods' suspicion. When They merely observe from afar, the energy shroud might deceive Them. But if They grow suspicious and come to investigate in person...

A fake is a fake. Everything we discuss will be caught red-handed.

So whether to use it or not is entirely up to you."

'Definitely using it.' Since that gentleman had given it, He clearly intended it to be used. The question was whether the Fun God's will was embedded in it.

If the Fun God and that gentleman had struck some deal — if there were backdoors in this artifact — then he'd need to watch his tongue. He couldn't very well gossip about his Benefactor in front of two gods.

But without gossiping, how could he boldly speculate on the Fun God's intentions?

Cheng Shi fell into deep thought again. After a long while, he resumed a relaxed demeanor and stared fixedly at the bell in Zhang Jizu's hand:

"Noted. But, why are you still holding my stuff?"

"?" Zhang Jizu's eyes narrowed to slits, smirking: "Yours? Cheng Shi, 'gifting a clock' isn't exactly an auspicious sign, you know."

"?" The little skull's eye sockets bulged. "Squinty Zhang, you've got some dangerous thoughts."

"Those were your words. Nothing to do with me."

With that, Zhang Jizu handed the bone bell directly to Cheng Shi.

What should have been a nice little treasure-grab, but the moment the phrase "gifting a clock" came up, Cheng Shi felt like he'd taken a loss.

"Squinty Zhang, you definitely carved my tombstone in secret. Where'd you hide it?"

Zhang Jizu shook his head with a sigh. To escape the little skull's incessant chatter, he plopped the bone bell right over Cheng Shi and snorted:

"A hundred tombstones is a massive project. I've been a bit busy lately. But don't worry — yours won't be missed."

"..."

The next second, loud protests erupted from within the bell.

"Squinty Zhang, this is betrayal of friendship and sabotage of the revolution! You dare imprison the Benefactor's most devout employee!? Confess — have you already embraced [Corruption] to soothe your jealousy!?"

Zhang Jizu's eyes were practically squeezed shut. Unable to bear the little skull's noise, he grabbed a carving knife and rapped the handle against the bone bell. The resonating toll left Cheng Shi inside seeing stars, finally silencing him.

"You only turned into a small skull — you didn't actually become one of those noisy creatures. Save your energy. Let's talk about the Jokers."

The battered Cheng Shi swayed his head inside the bell, groaning:

"Don't think changing the subject settles this. I'm remembering this grudge..."

We've got the venue. Preparations are... reasonably thorough. The only issue is that the void space is too empty — doesn't befit the Jokers' status. That's why I came for your help. But who'd have thought I'd fall victim to your treacherous payback!"

Zhang Jizu completely ignored the last part, furrowing his brow:

"The Jokers were born of [Void]. A venue that's empty and void hits the point exactly. How does that not suit?"

Cheng Shi recovered and scoffed: "Let me ask you this: could you handle discussing face-to-face, nose-to-nose, with Zhen Xin?"

If you can say yes, I'll drop everything, take this bell, and walk out the door. No questions asked."

"..."

Zhang Jizu squinted, quickly grasping the deeper meaning. This wasn't about proximity — it was about distance.

When a group of liars appeared in the same space and could freely choose their positions, what would they do?

Too close and they'd feel unsafe. Too far and it seemed standoffish. After all, everyone was here for intelligence. If you broadcast "stay away" from the start, would you hear anything useful?

Under the Jokers' nominal bond, even if these liars distrusted each other, they'd at least have to perform mutual trust.

And distance was trust's most honest expression. They'd keep inching closer, shrinking the gap to demonstrate their "sincerity."

Between two liars, trust and wariness would negotiate to a comfortable distance, and both would stop. But with a whole group of liars...

Trust me — they'd only crowd closer, because standing even one step further than everyone else would invite ridicule and contempt.

To showcase their "sincerity," they were absolutely capable of this.

Of course, if every attendee were like the Dragon King — sincere in discussion — standing close wouldn't matter. But what if the group included a Zhen Xin?

Sure, Zhen Xin was great at cooperation and easy to talk to. But remembering that face also belonged to Zhen Yi...

Zhang Jizu's eye twitched. He immediately proposed: "We need a table."

"Exactly!" Cheng Shi laughed, the sound muffled inside the bone bell. "I'd been thinking about a table before coming. But after arriving here, I suddenly had an idea.

Squinty Zhang, if you don't mind, how about..."

"???"

Zhang Jizu was stunned. He lifted the bone bell, staring at the wickedly grinning Cheng Shi underneath, and confirmed three times: "Would this actually work?"

"You already know the answer, don't you?"

Tch, I've never seen you this excited before, Squinty Zhang. Your thoughts really are a bit dangerous."

Zhang Jizu masked the glint in his eyes, turning his head away, silently thinking:

'No matter how dangerous I get... I'm only an accomplice at most.'

...

Chapter 990: Who Isn't a Puppet?

(Super super super long chapter!)

"Who's attending?"

Zhang Jizu had been curious about this for more than a day or two. He already knew about the Dragon King, Zhen Xin, and others joining, but he wasn't sure who else Cheng Shi had recruited.

"What's the rush? You'll find out when you see them."

Cheng Shi kept him guessing. He unceremoniously reclaimed the bone bell, chatted with Squinty Zhang about this and that, and delicately expressed his potential need to "requisition" some supplies from the Cemetery.

Zhang Jizu neither agreed nor refused, seemingly waiting for Cheng Shi to trade him some intel for an answer.

Seeing Squinty Zhang had wised up, Cheng Shi cursed him out, declaring their friendship wasn't even worth as much as his neighborly bond with Xie Yang. He then tried to swap Xie Yang's gossip for Cemetery corpses.

Zhang Jizu listened to the gossip happily enough, but still didn't commit. The swindled Cheng Shi indignantly explained the meeting protocols, dumped the venue's "renovation" onto this Cemetery manager, and left without looking back.

Before departing, Cheng Shi tried to take along the skull that looked exactly like him — to preempt any future scapegoating — but Zhang Jizu was quicker, snatching it away. This irked Cheng Shi even more.

"I'm reporting you! I'm reporting you to the Fishbone Hall!"

Watching the furious little skull bounce away, Zhang Jizu squinted with a smile, gazing thoughtfully at the skull in his hand.

"Fear really does weigh people down. Right now, you're less fun than the love-struck neighbor you mentioned.

I'm actually looking forward to this so-called Joker Society. Cheng Shi, just how many secrets are you hiding..."

Though he didn't get the replica skull, at least Cheng Shi walked away with the bone bell.

Back on the rooftop rest area, he began contemplating the Fear Faction "guidance" the bone bell represented.

Discussing the universe under this bell's protection meant laying bare every piece of knowledge he had for that gentleman to see. The first question, then, was whether that gentleman even knew their current universe was nothing more than an "experiment" from a higher dimension.

So far, the gods Cheng Shi could confirm knew this secret numbered exactly five:

[Deceit] and [Time], who'd discovered the truth. [Folly], who'd presumably lost His authority for seeing through it. [Birth], whom [Deceit] had probed. And [War], who'd made a deal with him.

As for the others, Cheng Shi hadn't exchanged words with Them on this topic and couldn't easily conclude anything.

If the [Death] boss truly was Fear Faction, then logically the Fun God should have already shared this secret with Him to bolster the faction's resolve. But what if the [Death] boss wasn't Fear Faction, and had instead played a clever hand — using this as a way to test the Fun God and His believer? What then?

After long deliberation, Cheng Shi decided it was manageable either way. If that gentleman truly wasn't Fear Faction, learning the universe's truth might push Him directly into it. And then, wouldn't Cheng Shi be the biggest contributor?

'Contributors deserve rewards... that's only fair, right?'

So no matter how he looked at it, the Joker Society had to happen.

This wasn't just about exchanging intelligence with the Jokers. It was also about reading between the lines to deduce Their intentions, and laying groundwork for an even grander plan in his heart.

Granted, the plan was rather fantastical. But what if it worked?

Once it proved viable, he could understand the Fun God's arrangements from multiple angles, finding a path within the Fun God's plan that belonged to him — but wasn't Fixed Destiny.

He didn't want to follow the predestined road into void. Regardless of whose Fixed Destiny it was, Cheng Shi refused.

Let's not forget: the Fear Faction's core principle was upward-facing fear.

So no matter how much shelter [Deceit] offered, Cheng Shi had to keep a contingency. Because His divine name was [Deceit]. Nobody could see through how many lies this [Void] ruler had told — especially "saving the world."

After contacting Squinty Zhang, Cheng Shi reached out to the other Jokers one by one. The Dragon King had no issues — he'd been eagerly awaiting this day.

The Doctor's reaction was more interesting. He neither accepted nor refused, simply saying his experiment was at a critical juncture and his attendance depended on how it went.

Cheng Shi couldn't pry out what experiment it was, so he left the meeting details and hung up.

He wasn't worried about imposters. In the Joker Society, what was real?

Next was Zhen Xin. The History School's president had long been waiting for Cheng Shi to reveal the world's truth, so she agreed readily.

But Cheng Shi was less at ease. He stressed repeatedly that the only attendee must be Zhen Xin. If another personality appeared, he would permanently revoke all Zhen-surnamed players' meeting privileges.

Zhen Xin declined to comment and instead tossed out a History School Vice President's slot to "bribe" the meeting organizer.

Cheng Shi would never be so easily bought. He righteously... accepted the position.

"You can CC me on all regular intelligence. I won't participate in actual work — otherwise people will think I used your connections to compete with other Vice Presidents for power. Bad optics.

But that's that. The Joker Society welcomes only you. As for Zhen Yi..."

Cheng Shi's face darkened. "Once she learns to behave, we can discuss it.

Zhen Xin, I'll say this once: the 'heh' weapon is for enemies, not for sabotaging your own people. You need to make her understand who the real older sister is."

Seeing how reviled her little sister was, Zhen Xin hung up with a smile.

With all Jokers assembled, Cheng Shi wasn't done reaching out. He still planned to recruit Long Jing — the acrobat who'd merged with [Time] — into the Joker ranks.

He hadn't forgotten what the other world's Long Jing had said. And considering his future plans might require [Time]'s assistance, President Gong deserved a seat among the Jokers.

But Cheng Shi didn't have Long Jing's contact information. To reach the right person, he had to pull some strings and find... Big Cat.

Of course, meeting Big Cat wasn't purely about contacting Long Jing. He also wanted to give her a gift.

Hong Lin had been busy chasing the rat these past couple of days, wanting to confirm her judgment was correct — that the Yu Go Cheng Shi encountered probably wasn't a real existence.

But Cheng Shi knew the Yu Go he'd met was absolutely real. After all, the [Decay] container was already sitting in his inventory.

As for whether the one Big Cat was pursuing was real — the answer to that question was crucial to validating his hypothesis about the two Yu Gos. So he strongly supported her continued pursuit.

The two met in a stretch of void. Cheng Shi was brief: he wanted to trade something for Long Jing's contact information.

Hong Lin wasn't surprised Cheng Shi wanted to reach Long Jing, but his formal manner baffled her.

Then Cheng Shi produced an hourglass that resembled gnarled wood, and she was even more bewildered.

Yes. The gift Cheng Shi intended was the [Prosperity] container.

Let's not forget — Big Cat currently possessed the title of [Prosperity] proxy but lacked actual divinity.

She'd been searching for her own divinity, but since learning about containers, Cheng Shi knew her efforts were futile.

With [Prosperity] fallen, the proxy had lost all avenues to obtain a container.

Her only four children: two were devoured. Dizel had defected to [Decay] and been dismantled. The sole remaining Le Le'er had plunged into the Sea of Desire, becoming the Mother Tree of Fear.

Even if Big Cat knew containers existed, even if she dared venture into the Sea's edge searching for Le Le'er, she'd still have to hope that this Mother Tree of Fear — long since transformed into a [Corruption] Envoy — could still yield a [Prosperity] container.

Missing any single step, and for Big Cat — whom Cheng Shi had pushed onto the stage as proxy — it was checkmate.

But [Fate] was just that miraculous. Who would have guessed that Cheng Shi, out of sheer greed at the Sea of Desire's edge, would pick up this one remaining [Prosperity] container?

Sound familiar?

Illness — a doctor came. About to die — the game descended. Believed in fate — received divine authority. And now, from empty title to sighting a container...

Though it was Cheng Shi who brought it back, the first thing that flashed through Hong Lin's mind when he showed and explained it were those cold starlit eyes.

[Fate]!

"So this is the Destined Ones?" Hong Lin's mind buzzed. She momentarily forgot to even ask where it came from.

Cheng Shi didn't know what brainstorm Big Cat was experiencing, but seeing her suddenly so devout, his expression grew exceedingly strange.

Logically, with this container and the faith of countless [Prosperity] believers, Big Cat would soon develop her own divinity and gradually become a "complete" Her. But...

'You're a [Prosperity] proxy. Why is your face screaming [Fate] devotion!?'

'Is this right?'

'[Deceit] conned [Death]. [Fate] stole [Prosperity]. So [Void] is just fleece-farming [Life]'s entire path?'

'Good thing [Birth] is stable enough to ignore everyone. Otherwise, this universe's origin would have nothing to do with [Life] anymore — [Void] would usurp it, becoming the fraudulent genesis of all creation.'

Watching Big Cat's pupils quaking with astonishment, Cheng Shi smiled and nodded:

"This is the Destined Ones."

"But Cheng Shi, why didn't you keep it for yours— you have MORE!?"

Seeing Cheng Shi produce yet another container, Hong Lin's voice cracked. She snatched the [Decay] container from his hand:

"This is... you got it from that Yu Go?"

Then the one I encountered was the simulation from an extrapolation!?"

"..."

'You don't always need to overthink things, Big Cat. You're different from everyone else — don't waste your talent on brainwork.'

Cheng Shi held back a laugh and said nothing.

The overwhelmed Hong Lin had no time for embarrassment. She scrutinized the two containers repeatedly, then asked uncertainly:

"You're really giving this to me?"

"In this entire game, no one is more suited for it than you, right?"

'Why?'

Hong Lin wanted to ask, but suddenly felt she didn't need to. Her gaze toward Cheng Shi shifted and shifted again, until everything consolidated into steely resolve. She nodded solemnly: "Alright!"

That single "alright" carried such complex emotion that Cheng Shi could see "determination" made tangible in Big Cat's eyes — a sincerity that trusted unto life and death.

"What about the [Decay] container?"

Factional opposition aside, honestly speaking, among [Decay]'s players, there probably isn't a single one worthy of it.

If you want to pick a puppe— ...an ally among them..."

Hong Lin furrowed her brow, beginning to consider candidates.

But Cheng Shi just smiled casually, took back the [Decay] container, and patted Big Cat's shoulder:

"I have my own plans for that.

But Big Cat, you said one thing wrong. You've never been anyone's puppet.

Not in the past, not now, and never in the future.

You are you. The Fate Weaver's friend, and the clown's pillar."

'Who's whose pillar is still up for debate...'

Hong Lin's nostrils flared, visibly moved. She silently pocketed the gift and produced Long Jing's contact artifact. After a moment of silence, she suddenly looked up, eyes blazing with ferocity:

"What did you just call me?

Cheng Shi, don't think tossing me a present now and then means you can walk all over me. You're asking for a beating!"

"?"

'Can't afford to provoke, can't afford to provoke.'

Sensing danger, Cheng Shi grabbed Long Jing's contact info and bolted. Watching the Fate Weaver vanish from this space, Hong Lin gazed at the containers in her hand, smiling — bright and carefree.

"Gods above, pulling the strings. Mortals below, dancing as told.

Who in this game isn't a puppet?

The only thing luckier about me is that I can still choose to be a friend's puppet.

For that, I am perfectly willing.

Praise [Fate]!

The road here and the path onward — all is destined."

...