

The Gods 1001

Chapter 1001: That Dream My Nightmare

So this was That Dream My Nightmare!?

Gazing at the struggling, fearful human-like face on the mirror's back, Cheng Shi felt momentarily dazed. He recalled that Herobos had once said the mirror's shattering was connected to Aph Ros...

'Aph Ros, oh Aph Ros — what the hell did you do to get locked away in eternity by [Memory]'s sibling god?'

Everyone present had certainly heard of That Dream My Nightmare. But nobody knew it was in Li Jingming's possession.

As the helmsman of the largest intelligence organization — the History School — Zhen Xin was thrilled to see this mirror. But she merely watched and didn't touch, knowing it was haunted — that it could reflect the darkest parts of one's heart.

The mirror's owner, the Dragon King, was equally cautious. When he produced it, he deliberately angled the reflective surface toward an empty seat, ensuring it faced no one present.

So Cheng Shi had only seen its back. He studied it with curiosity, then asked: "This mirror..."

"I obtained it by chance from a Memory Traveler." The Dragon King stepped off his tombstone and stood behind the mirror, seeming to recall that memorable past.

"During a trial, I was disguised as another player. This duplicitous Memory Traveler tried to use me as a stepping stone. Being fellow [Memory] believers, I gave him a chance. But he was overly confident. So I found this mirror within his memories.

At first I wasn't sure this was That Dream My Nightmare. Not until... it finished consuming the trapped Memory Traveler entirely and reflected another me did I realize this [Memory] creation had, by some cosmic design, fallen into my hands."

Zhen Xin also dismounted her tombstone. She didn't dare approach the mirror's front, but wanted a closer look at this legendary servant god relic.

"Legend says That Dream My Nightmare reveals the darkness in one's heart. And you just said it trapped that Memory Traveler..."

So it can exchange those inside and outside the mirror?

The one you encountered was the Memory Traveler's mirror image?"

Zhen Xin's ability to extract the most critical information from scant details — even if Li Jingming didn't get along with her — earned his grudging admiration. He nodded, his tone quite grave:

"Exactly right.

It reflects everyone's dark side and relentlessly tempts you to trade places. Once you agree... being trapped in the mirror forever may be your fate.

After that, it devours your memories with gusto, offering them to itself.

I call the mirror image a 'Nightmare Shadow.' It's not purely darkness — it's more like a collection of desires one never brings to the surface.

So rather than reflecting one's dark heart, it reflects one's desires."

Hearing this, the Jokers gathered close. Cheng Shi examined the mirror from every angle: "You've looked into it?"

"Mm."

"So — is the Dark Dragon King interesting?"

"?"

'What the hell? Dark Dragon King?'

At this label, Li Jingming's face went dark. Zhen Xin, however, laughed. She tossed Cheng Shi an "appreciative" glance, then told the Dragon King with layered meaning:

"A desire-born personality isn't a wise choice for splitting. Li Jingming, seems you're quite committed to the Jokers.

What — is this your entry fee?"

Everyone had already figured it out. Once the Dragon King revealed the mirror showed desires, they all knew such a personality couldn't be safely split — nobody wanted to flirt with [Corruption].

So the Dragon King's intention was clear: he was taking the lead in "drafting" an agreement among the Jokers. Or more bluntly, as Zhen Xin put it — an entry oath.

An entry oath staked on baring one's innermost desires.

Liars could hardly trust each other. But problems needed solving and progress needed making. If everyone kept their guard up permanently, effective cooperation was impossible.

So Li Jingming using "personality" as a pretext to produce the mirror was never about "witnessing a personality." It was about getting the Jokers to see each other clearly — displaying their desires openly — and thereby forging an unspoken pact.

Li Jingming didn't deny it. He smiled:

"Since everyone's stayed through all of this, clearly no one's leaving. Since we're doing heart-to-hearts, let's go all the way.

Of course, my bringing this out isn't solely about opening hearts. This mirror holds a secret — one only those who've looked into it are qualified to know.

I believe this secret will be useful to the Jokers. So, everyone — who's going first?"

The mirror could reflect heart's desire, but the Jokers present didn't particularly balk at it. Nobody just wanted to be the first one "laughed at."

But then Zhen Xin stepped forward.

True to her word, she seemed absolutely determined to bare her heart to the Jokers.

Though in Cheng Shi's view, her move was less about voluntary honesty and more about curiosity — wanting to see what her own Nightmare Shadow would look like.

He'd thought only Zhen Yi had such "childish wonder." But now — heh — Zhen Xin was just a "kid" too.

"How does this mirror work?"

"Stand before it. Just look at the surface — keep your gaze fixed on it, and it will appear.

While one Nightmare Shadow exists in the mirror, other gazes won't produce another reflection."

"Interesting. But how do you know no second reflection would appear? Dragon King, who did you share such a precious servant god relic with? And who helped you verify this function without a whisper leaking out?"

Zhen Xin's questioning expression was loaded with implication. Li Jingming glanced at her but said nothing.

Zhen Xin snort-laughed, didn't press further, and walked directly to the mirror's front. But the instant her gaze met the glass, the [Deceit] Chosen's pupils contracted. Her expression shifted as she whipped her head to stare at the space behind the mirror.

Seeing her violent reaction, everyone stepped forward. They looked together into the mirror — and every face changed.

Because there, inside the glass, stood a Nightmare Shadow that belonged to none of them. A figure grinning with an eerie smile, waving in greeting.

Wang Weijin!

Cheng Shi recognized him instantly. That Dream My Nightmare was reflecting the Doctor's image!

"This is—!?"

"Huh?"

"WAIT!!!"

Cheng Shi blanked for a second, then his face went dark. He turned toward the empty space the mirror was facing and started shouting:

"Eye No One, is it!?"

Love hiding, do you!?"

I'll count to three. If you don't show yourself, I'm blasting you!

THREE!"

He raised his hand, but faster than him was the figure seated on the [Truth] tombstone in the mirror's sightline — Wang Mou.

That's right. The Doctor had arrived early. First, in fact.

His experiment had gone smoothly. Content with the results, he'd arrived at the venue early. But while waiting, an idea struck — and using his "darkness under the lamp" trick, he'd targeted each arriving Joker, making himself the "no one" in their eyes.

Until Li Jingming produced *That Dream My Nightmare* and aimed it at an "empty" seat.

And just like that, "no one" was caught in the mirror.

The Doctor hadn't planned to hide through the entire gathering. But this sudden exposure turned the previously solemn venue theatrical once more.

When Cheng Shi said he'd count to three, the Doctor — who knew Cheng Shi well — instantly dropped his talent and revealed himself. Because he knew Cheng Shi's mouth was incapable of truth — and certainly incapable of counting to three.

Sure enough, his quick thinking saved him from the Lightning Punishment already charged in Cheng Shi's hand.

But having poured his heart out in sharing everything, only to discover a freeloader had been lurking all along — Cheng Shi was livid. He pointed at the Doctor, ready to unleash another barrage, but then heard the Doctor say with perfect composure:

"The experiment was very successful. Results went smoothly. I've compiled all data and conclusions into a written report, along with some hypotheses I found at 0221's place. How should I hand it to you?"

The profanity on the tip of Cheng Shi's tongue took a sharp detour:

"You m— ...just leave it on the ground, please. I'll take it when we're done."

'Dammit — fell right into his trap!'

Cheng Shi was furious. Whether angry at being conned or angry at his own "weakness," he wasn't sure. But bowing to the greed in his heart, he couldn't help asking: "What kind of experiment this time?"

"Slice fusion experiment. A safe variant of the faith stitching experiment.

When a person has enough slices, only the quantity grows — not the quality. So I kept wondering: beyond using slices for various purposes, why not reference the faith stitching experiment and re-merge similar slices? By using special methods to eliminate slice consciousness and optimize the fusion process, you can compensate for the original body's deficiencies and increase life-force.

The experiment's initial success: I merged with another version of myself.

But there's a side effect..."

The Doctor paused, surveying all the Jokers now openly scrutinizing him. "When eliminating slice consciousness, there's a chance of failure — resulting in mild personality splitting.

But looking at it now... that side effect might actually be the real experimental breakthrough?"

"???"

Cheng Shi was stunned again.

He glanced at the liars around him, confirming this was a [Deceit] gathering. But... when did [Fate] arrive?

When did It get here?

Fine — It came. But did It have to bring gifts too? What a production.

Praise [Fate]!

Temporarily.

...

Chapter 1002: What Is Zhen Xin's Nightmare Shadow?

The Jokers present shared the same sentiment. They looked at Wang Weijin with expressions more colorful than the last.

Cheng Shi stared blankly for a while before introducing him to the group:

"Doctor Wang Weijin. An assassin who pursued [Truth] so thoroughly he ended up on the path of [Deceit]. You've guessed correctly — he's a slice of 0221. Though that's ancient history now.

I take it I don't need to introduce these people to you, Doctor."

The Doctor nodded, offering a friendly wave to the Jokers with a smile: "I made five copies of the experimental conclusions..."

"A pleasure."

"Long-time admirer."

"So you're that stowaway. Interesting."

"..."

'Now that's what you call social finesse!'

Who said scholars only had their noses buried in research? Look at the Doctor — practically touching [Truth] in the field of interpersonal relations too.

Speaking of which, after merging with [Deceit], this rigid scholar had finally developed a hint of human warmth.

Hopefully, more of this experimental-conclusions-bearing warmth would follow.

After the brief chaos, the Jokers didn't dwell too much on the freeloading Doctor's appearance. Among liars, the currency of exchange was deception itself. If someone had the skill to fool you, it only raised your opinion of them.

Besides, with That Dream My Nightmare right there, everyone's attention lingered on the Nightmare Shadow in the mirror.

As Wang Weijin's reflection, the eerily grinning shadow inevitably reminded everyone of 0221. They might not have seen what 0221 looked like before his transformation, but the gaze and bearing were unmistakable — the spitting image of that [Truth]-overdosed madman.

Li Jingming turned to study the Doctor, then glanced at the mirror's reflection. He frowned with curiosity:

"Why are you so quiet today?"

The Nightmare Shadow flicked a glance at Li Jingming and spoke in a voice identical to 0221's airy, gap-toothed rasp:

"Heh heh. Even if I wanted out, would he let me?"

No. He wouldn't. [Truth]'s composure will keep him refusing me forever. And it's [Truth]'s same composure that tells me I should save my energy."

The shadow then turned its half-amused, half-mocking gaze on the Doctor. The playfulness in those eyes made everyone frown.

'This is just 0221!'

Cheng Shi's expression darkened too. He hadn't expected Wang Weijin — who'd severed ties with 0221 — to still harbor a 0221 within his heart. "A gentleman is judged by his actions, not his thoughts," sure — but this kind of hidden danger still set off alarm bells.

The Nightmare Shadow was clearly plotting something. But even the Dragon King, who had a preliminary understanding of the mirror, couldn't figure out how a shadow confined to the mirror could influence its real-world host.

Still, as a fellow Joker, despite his concerns, he reassured the Doctor:

"Don't worry. Verbal attacks are simply one of the Nightmare Shadow's tactics. Just ignore it."

The Doctor nodded gravely. In truth, he hadn't planned to go first. The accident had simply dragged 0221 right before his eyes. Under everyone's watch, he quietly averted his gaze, and the eerily smiling 0221 dissolved from the mirror's surface.

Seeing the glass empty once more, Zhen Xin smiled and stepped up without hesitation to face the mirror.

Before long, the surface shifted. A cold figure appeared before everyone — identical to Zhen Xin in every way, but with a colder, darker expression. Like a corrupted Zhen Xin.

This seemed reasonable enough. After all, That Dream My Nightmare was fundamentally still a mirror. But Zhen Xin apparently disagreed. She shook her head with a wry smile:

"Drop the act. You're not pulling it off."

The instant she spoke, the "Zhen Xin" in the mirror broke into a wide grin — an expression hauntingly familiar, as manic as Zhen Yi.

"Heh~

Why is everyone staring at me? Don't tell me you all have a crush?

Oh my, oh my — what to do? So many men circling little old me. What a waste of resources. How about... you all fight it out?

Whoever wins gets to be my new boyfriend. Deal?"

"!!!"

'So Zhen Xin's desire is... Zhen Yi!?'

The circumstances of Zhen Yi's birth arguably stemmed from a need to master the art of "deceit." But... didn't this mean Zhen Xin's heart always harbored the same "destructive urge" as Zhen Yi?

Otherwise, as an independent personality, Zhen Xin should never have reflected another personality. Psychologically speaking, they were clearly two separate people.

Cheng Shi studied Zhen Xin thoughtfully, then irritably rolled his eyes at the mirror's Zhen Yi: "Why would winning count as a punishment?"

The mirror's Zhen Yi giggled and stuck her tongue out at Cheng Shi:

"How is this punishment? This is obviously a reward.

What, not enough of a prize?

Don't forget — my sister and I are one heart and one body. Two rewards and it's still not enough?"

"..."

"..."

"..."

Every Joker turned to Zhen Xin with bizarre expressions. Zhen Xin's eyelid twitched violently, but she maintained a half-smile:

"I didn't let you out to flirt with men. Nothing you want to say to me?"

The Nightmare Shadow sneered:

"You're not as fun as men. Right... my dear sister?"

Everyone caught the loaded subtext, but the next second Zhen Xin sneered right back, looked away, and the shadow vanished from the glass.

"Nothing interesting. Though I'll admit the conversation does aid personality splitting. But I imagine none of you want a second Zhen Yi?"

"!!!"

The Jokers achieved a rare moment of perfect unity. Every head shook like a rattle drum.

With Zhen Xin stepping back, the remaining members fell into silence. Seeing no one move, Cheng Shi's eyes turned and he sidled up to Long Jing, nudging the acrobat with his shoulder:

"Not going to try?"

Maybe there's another version of yourself in there to guide you."

"?"

Long Jing stiffened, eyeing Cheng Shi suspiciously — wondering if the other knew something. But Cheng Shi's casual manner suggested it was a throwaway comment. He relaxed.

'Shouldn't be possible. Lord Shi Zhen only summoned me. There's no reason he'd know about any of that.'

Still, Cheng Shi's words kindled something in Long Jing. Even knowing the mirror contained his desires — who said desire couldn't be another form of guidance?

Perhaps it could show his lost self what to do next.

Excitement flared in his chest.

But just as he was about to step forward, no one expected the largely silent Zhang Jizu to move first, standing before the mirror.

The next second, a "Zhang Jizu" with eyes squinted to the extreme appeared in the glass. He surveyed the room, chuckled ominously twice, then flicked a carving knife from his sleeve. Idly sharpening his fingernails with it, he spoke coldly:

"Shame to leave those tombstones empty. Let me out. I'll bury every last one of you. Improve the utilization rate. How about it?"

"..."

"?"

Cheng Shi rolled his eyes speechlessly. 'Squinty Zhang, you really do want to equally send everyone off, don't you!'

...

Chapter 1003: The Jokers' Desires

Zhang Jizu didn't feel the slightest embarrassment. And nobody else did either.

Or rather, from the moment everyone saw the Joker meeting grounds filled with divine tombstones, they'd already guessed some of this [Death] Chosen's thoughts.

For a [Death] believer, offering lives to Him was devotion. And for Zhang Jizu's Nightmare Shadow to share that same devotion — he truly deserved that gentleman's gaze.

But when Cheng Shi remembered that this supremely devout Squinty Zhang had answered his question about why he wanted to stay alive with nothing more than "to live," he grasped a principle that cut straight to the universe's core: devotion taken to its extreme becomes blasphemy.

'Indeed. I'm still far too devout.'

Perhaps owing to their frequent exchanges, just as Zhang Jizu was about to look away, Li Jingming pressed a hand on his shoulder. Smiling, he shook his head:

"We can't just have everyone glance in the mirror and leave. These Nightmare Shadows belong to each of you, but they also carry some of the mirror's own knowledge and memories. That's how I confirmed Yu Xi's identity..."

"?"

'Hold on — I don't even know who Yu Xi is, and the mirror confirmed it for me?'

'Seems the mirror fibs too. Tch. Reeks of [Deceit].'

But Cheng Shi certainly wasn't going to poke holes in his own lies. He continued listening.

"...These memories are all intelligence.

I don't object to [Death]'s protection being enough to grant you an exchange exemption at Joker meetings. But... you're exempt. Your Nightmare Shadow should still have something to say, shouldn't it?"

Zhang Jizu stared at his Nightmare Shadow without moving, eyes narrowing: "I reserve the right to look away at any time. I advise careful questions."

'Was that a yes?'

Cheng Shi's eyes spun with mischief. Before the Dragon King could speak, he blurted out a question: "If all you want is to survive, why must you bury everyone?"

The mirror's shadow merely glanced at him, snorted coldly, and said nothing. It was Squinty Zhang himself who answered with perfect composure:

""Kill and survive' means all of you die, which by extension means I live longer.

Trading offerings to that gentleman for personal longevity — I still consider this a form of devotion."

"?"

'Logical in its own way, but why does it also reek of [Deceit]?''

'The Joker Society was just too [Deceit].'

Cheng Shi rolled his eyes. The Dragon King ignored the joke entirely — his expression grave as he turned to the mirror's shadow and asked something unexpected.

"Why do you lead there? Is this [Corruption]'s conspiracy, or [Deceit]'s scheme?"

Normally Li Jingming would never dare ask this. He feared his recklessness might attract other gods' attention — especially [Corruption]'s.

But now, with divine surveillance blocked, he hid nothing of his curiosity about the mirror's hidden secrets.

To everyone else, the question sounded bizarre. What conspiracy? What scheme? This was a [Memory] creation. Even if it looked tainted by [Corruption], what did [Deceit] have to do with it?

The mirror's shadow squinted at Li Jingming with an eerie smile:

"Let me out. I'll bury them all. Then I'll tell you. Deal?"

Or here's another option: you come in. I'll bury you. Then I'll carve what you want to know onto your epitaph. A comfort to your curiosity."

"..."

Terrifying words, but this level of threat held zero weight with the Jokers. Squinty Zhang even consoled the Dragon King with a squinty smile: "Ignore him. It won't be his turn."

"?"

'What exactly do you mean by "turn"?''

'Did Cheng Shi possess you?'

'Is the Fate Weaver's infectious personality really that contagious?'

The Dragon King gave Zhang Jizu a strange look. Zhang Jizu quietly averted his gaze.

Further questions would only be garbage time. This shadow did nothing but talk about burying people. Probably wouldn't yield anything useful.

Two remained. Cheng Shi naturally wouldn't volunteer to go first, so the acrobat took the stage.

Long Jing side-stepped to the mirror in one smooth move, letting That Dream My Nightmare sketch out a "brand-new" version of himself. The Nightmare version of President Gong appeared instantly, beckoning everyone with dramatic flourishes and an eerie grin:

"I know what you're all searching for. Let me out, and I'll take you there. Deal?"

"..."

'Performance drive maxed out as always.' Clearly, when it came to hogging the spotlight, every Long Jing was the same.

But the real Long Jing was more "restrained." At least after seeing this shameless version of himself, he had the urge to turn and flee.

Fortunately, Cheng Shi steadied him immediately, then grinned at the mirror's Long Jing: "Really?"

"Of course. This is a heart-to-heart session, isn't it?" The mirror's President Gong bowed elegantly, but the wild covetousness in his eyes couldn't be concealed.

Cheng Shi nodded approvingly: "Indeed. I unilaterally approve. But I need to verify one thing — you'd really take us to find it? I mean..."

[Origin]!

He didn't dare say the words aloud, but he mustered the courage to mouth them.

The instant Cheng Shi "spoke" those two characters, the mirror's Nightmare Shadow shuddered violently. Every trace of humor froze on its face.

It shot Cheng Shi a venomous glare, then its expression shifted to fear — and it simply exploded into black mist with a "boom," dissolving from the mirror's surface.

That Dream My Nightmare appeared to have... crashed.

Everyone blinked, exchanging confused looks. Cheng Shi scratched his head, glancing at the Dragon King awkwardly: "Has this ever happened before?"

Li Jingming's face went dark. He'd brought out the mirror to guide them closer to its secret — not so they could tease the shadows for fun. If this had blocked the path to [Memory]'s Collection Hall, who would answer for it?

Looking grim, he shook his head, stepped closer to the mirror, and began probing it carefully.

Seeing the mirror unresponsive for the moment, Zhen Xin chuckled meaningfully at Cheng Shi:

"Nice trick. But I'm curious — how did you know that would dispel the shadow?"

"???"

'How the hell would I know.'

Cheng Shi's mouth twitched. 'Who knew this thing was this easy to break?' But in hindsight, this was convenient. Maybe he'd just dodged his own mirror encounter.

He'd shared so many secrets already. Surely he didn't need to bare his desires as proof of sincerity too?

But the Nightmare Shadow's reaction was still worth pondering. Since it was another version of Long Jing, its fear of [Origin] was really a reflection of Long Jing's inner terror. Looking at it that way, the fact that the acrobat could overcome such fear and still appear here truly made him worthy of the other world's Long Jing's salvation.

Regardless of motive, the courage to conquer one's own fear was praiseworthy.

So President Gong did have his merits.

...

Chapter 1004: Cheng Shi — Nightmare Shadow (Slacker Edition)

Cheng Shi had it all figured out — but reality had other plans. As the Dragon King's gaze lingered on the mirror's surface, the glass seemed to recover. A figure identical to the Dragon King slowly emerged from the black mist within.

This Li Jingming's eyes were noticeably colder and more venomous than the original. He surveyed the room, deliberately avoiding Cheng Shi's gaze, then addressed the Li Jingming standing mere inches away:

"Still want to go there? If so — come inside. I'll take you.

Memories that belong solely to Him are buried there. Don't you... want to etch those memories into yourself?"

The Jokers frowned. Li Jingming ignored the taunt entirely. Looking at his mirror counterpart, he told the group:

"The memory it's referring to is the mirror's greatest secret. Cheng Shi, you're up.

I imagine the device shielding us from divine surveillance has a time limit. Let's pick up the pace — as the Jokers stand now, we can't afford the risk of exposure."

A hard-hitting point. Cheng Shi pursed his lips — no way to refuse that.

So he smiled at everyone, feigned indifference, and stood before That Dream My Nightmare. The next instant, black fog coalesced into an identical Cheng Shi.

The Nightmare Cheng Shi merely tossed the onlookers an irritated glance, then sprawled directly on the ground, legs crossed:

"Look, look, look — the hell you looking at? The world's ending. Staring at me ain't gonna help.

Lie down and wait to die. At least you'll save some energy."

"..."

"..."

"..."

Everyone's brain short-circuited. Even Li Jingming froze. He'd never seen a Nightmare Shadow this... non-aggressive.

After all, a Nightmare Shadow was a person's dark side — a collection of mapped desires, reflecting the parts one never let see daylight. Every shadow harbored ill intent and made zero effort to hide it. But what was going on with Cheng Shi's?

It looked like it had given up.

So this Fate Weaver — riding high, watched by gods, privy to the universe's truth — his deepest desire was simply... to not try?

Was this right?

It wasn't impossible to understand. At least Zhen Xin could, having accessed Cheng Shi's memories before. She knew he was fundamentally an unambitious person. His current efforts in the game could very well be self-anesthetizing exertion, driven by emotional regrets he needed to fill.

But even if it was understandable, nobody was buying it — because the moment the shadow appeared, they'd detected massive [Corruption] energy streaming toward Cheng Shi's real body in reverse.

Anyone with eyes could tell this was Cheng Shi's countermeasure against the shadow. But how did this Fate Weaver have so many tricks to manipulate a [Memory] servant god relic?

Just because he was a follower of [Deceit] — [Memory]'s opposite?

'We're [Deceit] followers too. How come we don't have all these gadgets?'

Indeed, Cheng Shi was actively countering That Dream My Nightmare. Not so much "countering" as a spur-of-the-moment experiment — wondering if the [Corruption] container would work against the mirror's version of himself.

It actually did!

The instant he slipped the [Corruption] container from his sleeve, the Nightmare Cheng Shi's eyes went completely lucid. Its desires were drained entirely by the container, entering a state of sage-like [Void] emptiness. Total slacker mode.

More interestingly — since the shadow was part of That Dream My Nightmare, its desires far exceeded the real Cheng Shi's. This meant the container could absorb desire and drip divinity at an accelerated rate.

And it didn't stop there. Since the shadow was technically Cheng Shi, the divinity produced still belonged to Cheng Shi...

'Good news: found a divinity-farming exploit.'

'Bad news: the divinity is [Corruption].'

"..."

How to put it? It felt like discovering a secret tunnel to a vault, only to push open the door and find it piled high with hell money...

'That's no vault — that's a tomb!'

Cheng Shi was numb. Everyone else's expressions grew more colorful by the second.

You could say this Fate Weaver withheld trust — but he'd shared secrets even the gods didn't know. You could say he was trusting — but when it came to anything about himself, not a single honest word emerged, and he was fidgeting with tricks everywhere.

Grand visionaries focused on the big picture and released the small stuff. With the Fate Weaver, it was reversed: clutch the small, release the big. The signature move of "I'll lead you in revolution, but don't ask which side I'm on."

Li Jingming was speechless. But Cheng Shi had at least looked in the mirror. They couldn't exactly force the Jokers' organizer to expose his heart's desires. So he sighed in resignation and only asked:

"What are you holding?"

Cheng Shi certainly wouldn't say "container." He whipped out the same story he'd used on Sun Miao.

"Fear tree-core. A [Corruption] tool dropped from Le Le'er's body. It absorbs people's desire and emotion. I usually use it to assist meditation — works wonders."

"..." Not a single word from this liar was trustworthy. Though the name was probably real.

Hearing "Le Le'er," Zhen Xin paused, then suddenly asked: "Did [Prosperity]'s fall affect Le Le'er?"

'Sharp!'

Cheng Shi didn't hide this. He stated plainly that Le Le'er had died — cause of death: [Prosperity]'s fall.

"So we've lost every means of approaching the only vacant divine throne. Am I understanding correctly?" Zhen Xin frowned.

'Yes... and no.'

They truly couldn't approach [Prosperity]'s throne anymore. But not because they'd lost the means — because a candidate was already waiting beneath that seat.

Unfortunately, this wasn't something he could share yet. Not until Big Cat actually climbed onto that chair could this secret be made public.

Otherwise, the covetousness sparked by throne inheritance would bring Big Cat endless trouble. Even if Big Cat's power could flatten every challenger, desire didn't stop at the threshold of death. Those aspiring maniacs, unable to seize godhood, would turn to destruction — which was precisely why [Corruption] inspired wariness in all gods.

An inescapable bone-gnawing parasite.

Normally this topic would have passed quickly. But the Jokers were far sharper than he'd imagined. The Doctor, hyper-sensitive to data anomalies, suddenly spoke from behind the group:

"Things may be more complicated than we think. I suspect someone has already stolen [Prosperity]'s divine throne through certain means. If not fully, then at least partially."

The moment this theory surfaced, Li Jingming and Zhen Xin said in unison: "The [Prosperity] Ladder of Ascent."

"Correct. The [Prosperity] Ladder." The Doctor nodded, analyzing coolly: "Although [Prosperity] followers' score growth isn't as insane as before, with enough observation, patterns emerge. All [Prosperity] followers are climbing in a staggered fashion."

Major changes in high-score brackets would attract attention, so this mass point-farming is concentrated in mid- and low-tier brackets — especially players hovering around 1,600 and 2,000. Most have recently broken to a new level.

These two thresholds grant an additional talent slot. So it's easy to deduce: whoever's secretly stolen [Prosperity]'s divine authority is systematically boosting the [Prosperity] camp's strength.

I can't divine the purpose, but it certainly benefits this hidden figure. Perhaps it's one method of consolidating the throne.

The part I can't figure out is how a player exploited the loophole. With the Convention in place, how could divine authority fall into outsider hands?"

"What makes you so certain it's a player?" Cheng Shi tried to deflect — and failed.

"The gods don't seem like they'd play this kind of game. [Prosperity] has fallen — protecting Her followers is meaningless. Besides, [Decay]'s followers have long since lost sight of their Benefactor. So the theory of supporting [Prosperity] to counter [Decay] doesn't hold either..."

"Weren't you doing experiments? How do you know so much about what's happening outside? Doctor, were you blowing me off before?"

Wang Mou's eyelid twitched, but he continued explaining with perfect composure: "Precisely because of the experiment. For several uncertain steps and data points, I posted anonymous verifications in the [Truth] channel.

While collecting feedback, I happened to see the channel mages' analyses. I merely put my slices to work on some side tasks while waiting for results — and stumbled upon this discovery."

"..."

'As expected — in this Faith Game, veteran mages were the ultimate productive force.'

...

Chapter 1005: This Is... [Memory]'s Collection Hall?

"Forget all that — we've all looked in the mirror. Where's the secret?"

To protect Big Cat, Cheng Shi had to steel himself and change the subject once more. But the Jokers weren't so easily misled. Watching him redirect yet again, they'd already concluded: this Fate Weaver was most likely the insider.

Fortunately, Cheng Shi's performance today had earned enough respect. So no one dug further. Instead they followed his gaze toward Li Jingming.

Li Jingming gave Cheng Shi a meaningful look, turned the mirror so its back faced the group, then traced the frame and spoke:

"Place your hand on the frame, hold for a moment, then recite [Memory]'s prayer. You'll be able to enter the secret place with me.

To prove there's no risk, I'll go ahead and wait for you."

Li Jingming whispered the prayer and vanished. The remaining Jokers stood speechless, exchanging bewildered glances.

'Hold on — you're a [Memory] believer, so reciting [Memory]'s prayer has some excuse. But have you considered who you're asking?'

'At a Joker gathering themed around [Deceit], every single liar has to recite a [Memory] prayer?'

'Trying to make our blasphemy charges heavier, are we?'

'Though it probably wasn't worse than sitting on the gods' tombstones...'

In that instant, several of them finally grasped why Cheng Shi had designed this place as a cemetery. One by one, faces twisted oddly, they touched the frame and followed the Dragon King.

Zhen Xin stayed behind, last to go. Seeing everyone else gone, she smiled at Cheng Shi:

"There isn't a second Doctor hidden here, is there?"

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow, recognizing that Zhen Xin had something to say. To lighten the mood: "Maybe. Who knows how many slices the Doctor brought in? Exposing one doesn't mean the others are exposed too, does it?"

Zhen Xin clearly didn't take the bait. She chuckled softly, leaned close to Cheng Shi's ear, and without preamble spoke a single name:

"Hong Lin?"

Cheng Shi's heart lurched, but his face betrayed nothing: "What about Hong Lin?"

Zhen Xin studied his reaction carefully. Finding no opening, she waved it off:

"Hong Lin hasn't seen you in a while. She asked me to say hello."

Cheng Shi rolled his eyes: "Think I'd believe that? You stayed behind just for this?"

Zhen Xin's feet paused. She turned with an "oh" and smiled again:

"You two met recently? So it really is her."

Without waiting for Cheng Shi's reply, she stepped into the mirror using the most blasphemous method possible. Watching her leave so breezily, Cheng Shi's forehead throbbed.

'Couldn't hide it after all...'

But hiding or not, he still had to "hide" — because if he didn't cut off the Jokers' endless deductions, in maybe not even an hour — within minutes — these shrewd liars would have their sights trained on Big Cat.

So Big Cat had been exposed all along. His topic changes merely signaled the Jokers to rein it in.

It became an unspoken secret among Jokers. Everyone knew Hong Lin was hiding something, but thanks to Cheng Shi's implicit "guarantee," they wouldn't pursue it further.

"Sigh. Who can really fool whom?"

Cheng Shi rubbed his temple and, mimicking the others, stepped into the mirror.

The instant he vanished, a figure on the cemetery's perimeter slowly materialized. Eyes fixed on That Dream My Nightmare beneath the dim lamplight at the gathering's center, a flash of covetousness crossed them.

But the figure made no reckless move, melting into invisibility again.

Murmuring: "Did he actually detect me, or is he bluffing?"

The dim light illuminated the half-face beneath the hood. Anyone present would have recognized it immediately: another... Wang Weijin.

...

It was hard to say what form [Memory]'s Collection Hall actually took. But to mortal eyes, a museum was the closest comparison.

When Cheng Shi opened his eyes again, he found himself in a space of pure white — reminiscent of the infinitely shifting [Existence] glimpsed within the [Existence] Gap, but more stable.

This space had no sky, no ground, no boundaries. Towering white walls intersected throughout, hung with "paintings" of every shape and style. One glance made it clear: these were His collected works.

"[Memory]'s Collection Hall!?"

Everyone was stunned. They'd never imagined setting foot in a god's private domain — let alone [Memory]'s Collection Hall. And they'd arrived as a "[Deceit] tour group"...

Cheng Shi was delighted. He looked at the Dragon King leading the way: "Dragon King, your devotion runs pretty extreme too, huh? Can we view these memories?"

Since they're displayed here, they're meant for visitors, right?"

While he was still asking, Zhen Xin had already moved. The [Deceit] Chosen went straight to the nearest painting and practically pressed her face against it, studying every detail.

But unfortunately, no matter how hard she tried, all she could see was an ordinary painting. These images were like frozen snapshots of history — beyond a blurry first frame visible to mortals, the rest remained unseeable.

"No exploits to find. Our power is too feeble to activate these memories.

That said — would [Memory]'s power be useful?"

Zhen Xin turned to ask, but seeing Li Jingming stride ahead without answering, she knew: the Dragon King had already tried. No dice.

Reluctantly, she followed the group. She and Cheng Shi, trailing at the rear, exchanged wistful sighs.

"What a shame. If we could take all these memories back, they'd probably cover a lifetime's worth of History School research."

Cheng Shi's eyes burned with longing too. What he lacked most was historical knowledge — and this was [Memory]'s curated selection. The sheer richness was unimaginable.

But impenetrable was impenetrable. Beyond coveting them, there was nothing to be done.

After a moment, Zhen Xin suddenly said: "Do you think... if we destroyed this place, could we earn a title similar to Yu Xi's from the Fun God?"

"?"

Cheng Shi's smile froze solid. He eyed Zhen Xin suspiciously — only to see her sigh with a loss of interest.

"Relax. I'm not Zhen Yi. I was just thinking aloud.

You know, running the History School is exhausting. If there were shortcuts, who wouldn't want to take them?"

Cheng Shi pursed his lips, offering no comment. Only when Zhen Xin wasn't looking did a die slip from his pant leg and roll away. Then he followed the tour group, outwardly unbothered, toward the place harboring the secret.

...

Chapter 1006: [Memory]'s Secret!

When the Jokers followed Li Jingming to that painted-over artwork, they all realized the Dragon King had spoken true.

Think about it: inside [Memory]'s Collection Hall hung a "[Deceit] riddle." For these opposing faiths to coexist in this dusty corner proved something monumental was involved.

"It's a mask!?"

Long Jing was first to exclaim. Then the Doctor offered his cool analysis.

"I can't imagine what kind of mask could serve as the key for [Memory] to seal His own memories. If such a thing exists, I'm more inclined to think it was a transaction between [Deceit] and Him. In that case, if [Deceit] also has a mask..."

"I'm not sure if the Fun God has one, but I do know someone who happens to have a mask — one with sufficient status."

The instant Zhen Xin finished, she met Li Jingming's sharp gaze as he turned back.

"Yu Xi!" several Jokers said in unison.

"Exactly. Him. So as the person who knows that gentleman best — Cheng Shi, care to weigh in?"

"..."

'This one I genuinely can't.'

Cheng Shi was numb. Whatever the others had figured out, he could too. The problem was: he knew Yu Xi's identity better than anyone. This [Deceit] Envoy, barely past its "first month," couldn't possibly be connected to [Memory]'s seal here.

If there was a connection, it could only involve Crown — the seedling follower of [Deceit].

But Crown never ascended to a divine seat or became the Fun God's servant god. This was a secret between true gods. Could it really involve him?

Cheng Shi frowned and immediately consulted someone: Fool's Lips.

Knowing Brother Mouth too well, he knew a direct question wouldn't work. So he took a different angle, addressing the lips in his mind with utmost caution:

"Brother Mouth, between us — did you betray the Fun God and defect to [Memory]?"

How else would your traces be in [Memory]'s domain?"

This was a "fabricated charges" play. Cheng Shi didn't even know if this was connected to Fool's Lips, but he'd already dropped the blame on them.

Naturally, Fool's Lips wasn't one to take this lying down. It immediately fought back — only its response wasn't an internal whisper like Cheng Shi's. It directly moved the mouth.

So everyone heard Cheng Shi say:

"I only know that Lord Yu Xi lost a segment of memory. What that memory was, He never said. Now I finally understand why He refused to speak of it.

It's connected to [Memory].

It seems His mask should be the key to this place!"

"!!!"

At these words, everyone's eyes lit up.

Having a target made things actionable. After all, several Jokers remembered exactly who'd taken the Secret Peeping Ear in San Dales. Those in the know looked at Cheng Shi. Those not — at Zhen Xin.

By now there was no point deflecting to Zhen Yi. So Zhen Xin asked directly: "Are they still in your possession?"

"..."

Cheng Shi was stuck.

After Fool's Lips so readily confirmed everything, Cheng Shi knew he'd been played again. He'd wanted to push everything onto the "Yu Xi" identity, but Brother Mouth clearly wasn't letting him off. It continued:

"Yes. I'm collecting mask fragments for Lord Yu Xi. Three are already in hand. Currently only the eyes and nose remain missing. So once those two are found, I'm confident we can unlock the mystery!"

"???"

'Wait — Brother Mouth, you're serious?'

Cheng Shi was stunned. He couldn't tell whether Brother Mouth was genuinely on his side — accelerating the mask fusion — or using this as another excuse to manipulate him. But publicly revealing this had both pros and cons. Since the situation was irreversible, he might as well go with the flow and bring the mask search to the Jokers' table.

The first one confused by this was Long Jing. In his memory, Zhen Yi had been the one who took the Secret Peeping Ear.

"Wasn't it you guys...?"

Nobody paid the slow-on-the-uptake acrobat any mind. Zhen Xin studied Cheng Shi thoughtfully — specifically his mouth — and blinked with layered meaning.

Li Jingming blanked, then frowned: "I've heard of the Tongue. The Ear, I witnessed myself. But Mouth — never heard of it. Cheng Shi, where did you find it?"

'Where?'

'Wasn't it a starter gift when the game began?'

Brother Mouth had gone quiet again. The helpless Cheng Shi could only say it was something Yu Xi already had. He knew the Dragon King wanted to use the Mouth's discovery location to deduce where other fragments might have scattered — but he genuinely couldn't help.

"So He retained one fragment. That He'd entrust a mask piece to you speaks to His regard.

But do you know what the Eyes and Nose are called? Even a shred of information would help. Otherwise we'd be stumbling blindly — like searching for a needle in the sea."

"No idea. But knowing [Deceit]'s creations, they'll probably have some 'fun' flavor. I can only ask everyone to stay alert during trials. Especially the History School — Zhen Xin, this job is made for you."

Zhen Xin didn't refuse. But she remained deeply curious about what sort of interesting memory could exist between [Memory] — a true god — and a mere servant god. And another thing: did the Fun God know about this?

If He discovered a memory hidden here — one so secret that even [Memory] had sealed it — would He create another mask to spy on these memories?

At this thought, a barely perceptible gleam flashed in Zhen Xin's eyes.

"Fate Weaver, since you already have three, why not try them here? If the seal can be loosened by fragments — even a glimpse of memory would make this trip worthwhile, wouldn't it?"

In the spirit of rigorous experimentation, the Doctor proposed yet another experiment.

But Cheng Shi had no intention of performing this experiment in front of everyone. The Tongue of Eating Lies and the Secret Peeping Ear were manageable — but how would he "place" Fool's Lips?

He couldn't very well walk up and kiss the wall in front of everybody.

What would that look like?

But if he didn't produce Fool's Lips, these shrewd liars would find it suspicious — amplifying doubt into deduction into discovery. If the fusion of Fool's Lips with his body was exposed...

Then the "Yu Xi" identity would truly be compromised.

How else would you explain an envoy's mask fragment fusing with a player?

That was practically announcing he was Yu Xi.

So Cheng Shi shook his head, deadpan: "Each piece has mandatory storage conditions. They're not on me right now."

Everyone frowned slightly. Zhen Xin didn't buy it at all. She eyed Cheng Shi with a half-smile: "When the Tongue of Eating Lies was with Zhen Yi, it wasn't this high-maintenance."

Cheng Shi's answer came without missing a beat: "And that's why it burned through so much divine power. To make the final fusion possible, I'm nurturing it. You wouldn't understand."

"..."

One "you wouldn't understand" shut everyone up. Seeing nothing more to gain today, Li Jingming knew it was time to leave.

They stood at the vault's threshold but couldn't enter. The surrounding memory paintings proved unreadable. After a brief discussion, they departed one by one.

Some things couldn't be discussed inside [Memory]'s Collection Hall. And the bone bell couldn't ring there either — if [Memory] detected [Death]'s sudden arrival in His domain, it wouldn't be a matter of blocked surveillance. It would mean being personally etched into [Memory]...

Far too terrifying. So the liars bolted, returning to the gathering grounds.

Afterward, the Jokers discussed the gods' and their followers' positions, exchanged missing intel, and even earmarked several potential recruits for new Jokers.

But Cheng Shi only half-listened. His mind was entirely in that Collection Hall, wondering when the Joker Society would end so he could slip back and try again.

As for what he'd try — ahem — definitely not kissing the wall.

...

Chapter 1007: Adjourned! Sneaking Back!

Not everyone harbored secrets grand enough to shock the room. And even if they did, not every secret could be made public.

Having grasped the universe's truth, exchanged intel, identified the direction for a breakthrough, and assigned everyone their tasks, the liars had nothing left to discuss.

So the Joker Society adjourned after some casual conversation.

Zhen Xin commanded the History School — naturally tasked with leveraging this massive intelligence apparatus to locate the remaining parts of Yu Xi's mask. Li Jingming, with his vast etched memories and experience impersonating every faith, was to seek the "method of becoming a god" — or at least a way to get closer to Them.

The Doctor excelled at experiments and was to focus on the viability of multi-faith personality vessels, ensuring everyone's strength could keep pace with their investigations. Long Jing, having received an audience with Shi Zhen and fused with [Time], would spearhead the search for a method to breach the space-time barrier.

Zhang Jizu hadn't shared much intel, but [Death]'s protection of the Joker Society spoke volumes. The group's suggestion: stay devout, visit his Benefactor often, and try to pry loose the names of other gods who weren't aligned with the majority.

As for Cheng Shi... as the Joker Society's founder, he wasn't assigned any work.

As the Jokers put it:

"As long as you're alive, you draw enough attention. Intel will come to you — no need to take risks.

Of course, if the Fun God makes any new moves, do share promptly. Otherwise, given how rarely we get an audience with the Fun God, by the time we learn what He's done, it'll be ancient news."

Cheng Shi couldn't have been happier with this arrangement. He'd come looking for help, and now the helpers had taken over all his work. What more could he want?

The other Jokers felt the same. When the game's truth was suddenly unveiled, what flooded their hearts wasn't just fear — it was the thrill of upward challenge.

How long that thrill would last depended on whether their efforts would actually bear fruit.

And so the Joker Society concluded with another collective prayer. As the "devout" chant faded, everyone departed. Only Cheng Shi remained... and the Doctor.

Wang Mou was in no hurry to leave. Smiling at Cheng Shi, he posed an unexpected question.

"Is Zangier still alive?"

Cheng Shi blinked, shaking his head uncertainly:

"Not sure. Go Lis and I aren't exactly partners. That summoning strap for Go Lis was actually a gift from a friend — and I imagine you can guess which one.

Why, Doctor — you're not planning to follow 0221's path, are you?"

Wang Mou shook his head as well:

"The path wasn't wrong. The traveler was.

I couldn't find the key manuscripts for the slice experiment and splicing experiment in his laboratory. Something tells me his experiments incorporated other elements.

Since he could assemble a shell capable of hosting Zangier's descent, he clearly had significant insights into life-extension disciplines.

On a mortal level, this kind of life-force amplification is quite useful. Against Them, it's still helpless — but you have to eat one bite at a time, walk one step at a time. Drawing from many wells is how you pave the road to [Truth], isn't it?"

"...So you want to reverse-engineer 0221's experimental methods through Zangier?"

"That's the idea." The Doctor offered a rare smile. He studied Cheng Shi intently, as if certain Cheng Shi was lying. "He is still alive after all."

Seeing the Doctor's keen interest in Zangier gave Cheng Shi a headache.

Zangier was locked up in Dolgod. Normally he'd just take him there — but right now...

He hadn't even figured out an excuse for Aph Ros yet. Not convenient to visit.

Noticing Cheng Shi's hesitation, the Doctor said gravely: "Whatever the difficulty, I can help. After all, this is my request. I should rightfully bear the 'cost.'"

'The one paying the cost might be me...'

Cheng Shi pursed his lips: "Do you absolutely have to meet him?"

"Both reasoning and experimentation take time, and we're racing against time. Standing on predecessors' shoulders saves enormous effort — even if that predecessor is an enemy's 'corpse.'"

Cheng Shi sighed and nodded: "This isn't my call alone. But noted. I'll go talk to Hu Xuan and see. Wait for my word."

After getting Cheng Shi's response, the Doctor smiled, left a "contact me anytime," and departed.

But watching the Doctor vanish, Cheng Shi didn't leave. Instead he frowned, lost in thought.

The Doctor said his slice fusion experiment could produce a residual personality as a side effect. So — did the Doctor just now have a second personality?

Or rather — was the one who'd just spoken to him actually the second personality?

Why else would a scholar who'd fled to another sliced universe to escape 0221's control suddenly develop 0221-like interest in Zangier?

Was it really just for science?

[Truth]-induced madness was still fresh in memory. He had to stay vigilant.

But vigilance aside, Cheng Shi wasn't overly worried. Even if his suspicions were correct, a mere fragment of the Doctor's personality probably couldn't extract Zangier from Dolgod. Besides, he already had some ideas about this.

"Since we'll have to meet eventually, might as well face it head-on. Hmm — I'll need to bring Hu Xuan. Otherwise things could get ugly."

Thinking this, Cheng Shi walked toward the lamplight, switched back to [Fate], and snapped his fingers to transport himself back to [Memory]'s Collection Hall.

When he opened his eyes again, the smug grin that had been forming on his face instantly froze rigid. The vast white Collection Hall was still there — but this time, it came with a pair of eyes. Ancient, eternal divine eyes swimming with the weight of countless epochs.

"!!!!!"

Those eyes flicked toward him. A cold snort.

"If I recall correctly, I once told you: what I despise most is liars sneaking into my Collection Hall.

Truly worthy of a [Deceit] follower. Your memory seems remarkably poor, Cheng Shi."

Cheng Shi's legs turned to jelly...

Right now it wasn't just his memory that was failing — his whole being was failing.

'Seriously, bro? A whole nest of liars walked in earlier and you did nothing, just waited here to ambush me alone?'

'Is that fair?'

Fair or not didn't matter. Caught was caught. If he'd merely been accused, at least he could argue. But being caught red-handed by [Memory] — what defense was there?

He couldn't exactly say: "I just saw a bunch of liars come to steal stuff. Found it disgusting, so I came to check if You were missing anything. Turns out nothing's gone. Was about to report it, but then You showed up..."

Never mind whether [Memory] would buy it — Cheng Shi didn't even buy it himself.

This time he was done for. But just as he was racking his brain for a way out, something even more dramatic happened.

Right beneath those ancient eyes, right before the sweat-drenched Cheng Shi, a graceful figure materialized as if unraveling from thread!

When the figure solidified and saw Cheng Shi was already here, she chuckled without a trace of surprise:

"Fast on your feet."

But before the words fully left her mouth, Cheng Shi's frantic signaling made Zhen Xin's heart lurch. She turned her head stiffly.

And in that glance, she saw not only those ancient, unchanging eyes — but also a second figure slowly materializing beneath them.

"Heh heh — knew it. I'm in! Now isn't this Collection Hall practically my backyard? This time I'm going to find so much more... hm??

Cheng Shi!? Zhen Xin!?

Great, great, great. Great minds think alike! But what's with those faces? Don't think you can fool me like that.

We're all Jokers here — have some decency. Acting this hard, you might as well just tell me [Memory] is standing on my forehead.

What, you guys are getting bolder, huh? Always targeting just me, is that how it is? You—

Hm???

!!!!!"

...

Chapter 1008: [Memory] Doesn't Remember Its Memories

People convulse when pushed to extreme terror.

Whether it was genuine or not, Long Jing shut his eyes, twitched twice, and lay motionless on the ground.

If Cheng Shi had thought for a second this trick could work, he'd have done the same. But with those divine eyes growing colder by the second, his brain went into overdrive. Before the true god's punishment could fall, he shoved the blame squarely onto the Fun God.

He had no choice. What should have been a salvageable situation had been wrecked by Long Jing's idiocy.

'You're just a mortal — barely a high-scoring [Deceit] follower — and you had the nerve to call [Memory]'s Collection Hall your backyard? Running your mouth is one thing, but doing it in front of the owner? Ask the Fun God if He'd dare!'

'...He absolutely would.'

Which was exactly why Cheng Shi was using Him as a scapegoat.

As for why not use his other Benefactor, [Time], as an excuse — he wanted to, but couldn't. The Jokers had just held their inaugural trust exercise. He couldn't ditch Zhen Xin now — she wasn't a [Time] follower.

If either Zhen Xin or Long Jing had been absent, Cheng Shi could have concocted a righteous excuse to slip past. But with both present, all he could think of was the Fun God.

"Great God of [Memory], hear me! This is entirely our lord [Deceit]'s doing! We have nothing to do with it!

The three of us, as [Deceit] believers, were holding a gathering to discuss how to offer Him our devotion. Though this scene displeases You, it stems from the most extreme sincerity of three mortals. I believe the Faith Game's purpose has always been to cultivate sincerity — so I don't believe we've done wrong.

The one who erred... is our Benefactor.

Perhaps the joy of toying with followers outweighed the patience of awaiting offerings. Our gathering drew His gaze, and then He dumped us into Your Collection Hall — with a message for You..."

By the time Cheng Shi had rattled this off in one breath — even pulling out his mask for dramatic effect — Zhen Xin's gaze had transformed.

Hard to say whether it was admiration for the clown's desperate argument or shock at the Fate Weaver's shameless fabrication. Either way, she swallowed every draft response she'd prepared in the last second, standing perfectly still as she waited for Cheng Shi to clear their names.

She didn't believe a single word. But she somehow felt Cheng Shi could get them out of this.

If even Zhen Xin didn't believe him, would [Memory] — one of the sixteen true gods upon Their divine thrones — believe a word from these small-time liars sheltered by the biggest liar of all?

Absolutely not.

He had no intention of believing them.

Yet He didn't act immediately. Why?

Because Cheng Shi's real purpose was exactly this — spewing a wall of words just to set up the final line. And [Memory] had noticed that final line. He was curious: what "message" had supposedly been conveyed?

Curiosity didn't just kill cats — it could also delay a god's sentencing.

Seeing it had worked, Cheng Shi clenched the finger-snap behind his back, steeled his gaze, gritted his teeth, and made his biggest gamble.

"He told us to tell You: You seem to have forgotten a memory about Him!"

"!!??"

'What are you SAYING!?'

Zhen Xin and Long Jing were thunderstruck. The acrobat on the ground nearly broke character, his face twitching from sheer fury at Cheng Shi's self-sabotage.

'Getting caught was bad enough — but before they've even started interrogating us, you just volunteer our entire criminal history?'

'Are you afraid [Existence]'s judgment won't be harsh or fair enough, Cheng Shi!?'

Of course not!

Cheng Shi detested being judged. But this time, he had to say it.

From [Memory]'s first and only statement after catching them, the Collection Hall's owner hadn't mentioned the Jokers' earlier intrusion — which was their greatest crime. Why would He overlook that?

No — perhaps He hadn't overlooked it. Perhaps He simply hadn't "seen" it!

So Cheng Shi made a bold conjecture: as long as outsiders had touched that self-sealed memory, [Memory] wouldn't detect their "visit" — would even automatically "forget" it.

Everything Cheng Shi was doing now was to stall for time. Stall until he could signal Zhen Xin to make their desperate move together — dual insurance for this mad hypothesis.

While professing his devotion to [Deceit] before [Memory], Cheng Shi had deliberately produced his mask. At first Zhen Xin hadn't grasped what the mask meant — until Cheng Shi blurted out the very memory that [Memory] had forgotten...

If she couldn't catch a hint this obvious, the Jokers could hardly claim any understanding.

The brilliant Zhen Xin instantly grasped his thinking. So in the split second [Memory] paused to contemplate this seemingly [Deceit]-flavored joke — the two mortals moved, right under the god's nose!

Zhen Xin whipped out a golden playing card and flung it before her. It transformed into a gleaming golden door, which she pushed through without hesitation.

Cheng Shi's method was even simpler: one finger-snap teleported him back before that "[Deceit] riddle" painting!

When the two reconvened at the sealed artwork one after the other, [Memory]'s interrupted contemplation turned to cold fury. Then — ignoring the acrobat still lying on the floor — He vanished from the Collection Hall and appeared in the void beyond.

There, He met a pair of eyes that irritated Him to no end. Those eyes, meanwhile, gazed meaningfully at everything within the Collection Hall, then let out a cryptic hum.

"Long time no see. Since when is [Existence] this courteous — greeting me personally?"

Those weighty historical eyes regarded [Deceit] coolly:

"Whatever deal you struck with [Time], this place doesn't welcome you."

"Oh?"

If I'm unwelcome, why did you let my followers in?

One face in public, another behind closed doors — well done. When it comes to understanding appearances versus essence, nobody beats you [Existence] types."

[Memory] frowned. His gaze swept meticulously through His Collection Hall, finding nothing amiss.

So He sighed:

"Don't think your tricks can blind my eyes and ears. Some things I'll tolerate once — but never twice.

Rein in your schemes. This has never been your playground for twisting [Existence]."

[Deceit]'s eyes crinkled upward, apparently quite pleased with [Memory]'s response.

"So you really are forgetting. Hmm, excellent. Keep it up.

Though don't forget everything. Where is [Folly]'s authority? If you remember, do share."

"Nonsense!" [Memory] shook His head. With a wave, He concealed the entire Collection Hall and Himself within the void. He couldn't drive away the annoying fly, but He could choose to stay far from it.

Watching [Memory] depart, those stellar eyes spiraled for a long moment, then snort-laughed:

"You little liars are bold indeed. Thinking every memory in the world is yours to browse?

There are reasons some things are hidden from the world. A half-baked guess at Fixed Destiny already terrified you all that much. If the real Fixed Destiny comes...

Heh. This world grows more and more tedious."

As those eyes prepared to leave, they paused inexplicably. Then, with an amused blink, they reached into the void's depths and retrieved a skull no larger than a speck of dust.

This tiny skull differed from every other skull beneath that gentleman's throne — because its eye sockets weren't two holes. They were two slits!

The small skull appeared and calmly reported to those stellar eyes:

"My Lord, the [Death] Benefactor summoned me and asked why He detected fluctuations resembling His own divine presence near me.

I deflected as per Your instructions, but that gentleman clearly didn't believe me. What should I do now?"

[Deceit] smiled, eyes spinning with a new idea:

"Next time, just tell Him outright. Otherwise the old bones will grumble about me swindling His followers again.

Ha, I can hardly wait to see Him throw a tantrum. Oh right — He doesn't have feet."

"..."

"You've done well. Keep it up."

The small skull showed no joy at [Deceit]'s praise. Instead, brow-slits furrowed gravely:

"My Lord... if everything Cheng Shi said is true... are You truly destroying the world?"

"What, think I lied to you?"

"...I wouldn't dare."

"Tch—

Wouldn't dare think it, or wouldn't dare say it?

The little liars do understand me. But sadly, they don't understand [Void]'s surface — much less [Void]'s essence.

I am clearly saving the world. Just as you raise my tombstone yet remain devout.

Don't worry. That little graveyard of yours can't hold that many gods.

This world might still be salvageable."

With that, those eyes tossed the bowed, silent little skull out of the void, then gazed sharply into an unknown direction:

"But only might..."

...

Chapter 1009: "Joker"

Saved!

When Cheng Shi and Zhen Xin realized [Memory] hadn't pursued them, they knew their gamble had paid off.

This sealed memory painting was the Collection Hall's one and only bug!

But the bug's potency was so terrifying that both fell into deep thought again.

Before long, Zhen Xin frowned and looked up: "What kind of memory did He need to forget that His own seal still affects Him right now?"

My curiosity grows by the minute. Cheng Shi, don't tell me you came back just to take a look around. Where's the Tongue? The Ear? And... that mysterious Mouth?"

Her gaze drifted to Cheng Shi's mouth again.

Cheng Shi's face darkened: "You have the nerve to bring it up? If you hadn't snuck back, would I be in this mess?"

"How rich. If you hadn't snuck back first, would you be in this mess?"

"..."

The two Jokers locked eyes, then in perfect unison cursed:

"It's all Long Jing's fault!"

The words had barely landed when Long Jing came sprinting down the Collection Hall's corridor, skidding to a stop. He stared at the pair in disbelief, eyes brimming with "injustice."

'Two mouths at 37°C each make 74°C combined — how can they say something this cold?'

'If either of you had just SAID [Memory] was behind me, would I have spouted off like that?'

'How is this my fault?'

'If you'd both stayed put instead of sneaking back, would we have been in this mess!?''

But here they all were. What could he do?

So the indignant President Gong said nothing. He walked up in silent fury, staring daggers at them both. Clearly determined to learn something here — otherwise, today's cardiac events would have been for nothing.

"..."

Cheng Shi was numb. He'd planned to scout alone first. Now look — how was this any different from another Joker meeting?

"Hurry up. Stop dawdling." Zhen Xin stood with arms crossed, a trace of worry in her eyes as she gazed into the distance. "I don't know when the forgetting effect expires. We can't afford to waste time playing it safe."

"And now you're rushing me?" Cheng Shi laughed in exasperation. "I just came up for a quick look. Who said I was going to open this lock?"

"What — you've already retrieved the mask fragments?" Long Jing blinked, looking at Cheng Shi's palm.

"..."

'Sometimes I really want to call the police.'

'Wonder if turning these two accomplices in for breaking and entering could earn me a reduced sentence, letting the authorities haul the other two away and leave me alone.'

Probably not. So Cheng Shi stopped fighting it. He pulled out Brother Tongue, stepped forward, and held the most "obedient" of his companions before the untouchable painting.

Despite the gap between tongue and canvas, the Tongue of Eating Lies felt a mysterious pull. It flipped in Cheng Shi's palm, then turned toward him — no, toward Fool's Lips — and exclaimed in shock:

"I feel it! It's truly calling to us!"

'Us?'

Though Cheng Shi could tell Brother Tongue was speaking to Brother Mouth, this scene carried an entirely different meaning to the other two.

Yes — everyone knew Cheng Shi attracted a lot of divine attention. Nobody had said it at the Joker meeting, but everyone had their theories. Now, seeing this, it was hard not to wonder whether this player was himself a "key" to this Faith Game.

Why else would [Deceit] so often favor him? Why would Yu Xi choose him as spokesperson?

But Cheng Shi himself was too stunned to explain anything to these two. Because — watching Brother Tongue's reaction — he suddenly realized that Fool's Lips and the others didn't actually know the meaning of their own existence!

Historically, they were fragments born from Crown's faithful shattering. But what would collecting all pieces accomplish? Could they revive Crown, who'd never been an envoy? Brother Mouth had never said.

Cheng Shi had always assumed Brother Mouth was hiding something. But today, connecting the dots with Brother Mouth's earlier takeover to commit to this task, he realized belatedly: Brother Mouth, too, had been searching for the meaning of its own existence all along.

And the answer might lie within this memory that [Memory] had forgotten — the meaning of Brother Mouth's existence!

'Well, well. A liar's mouth really holds no truth. Here I thought you were omniscient — turns out you don't even know why you exist.'

'How very [Void]!'

"Cheng Shi, what do you think? Can you open it?" Zhen Xin's eyes blazed. She was even considering whether to peel the Fate Weaver's face off and slap it onto the painting.

But Cheng Shi knew that even with a response, the mask was still missing two of five parts. There was no way to unlock anything now.

So he pulled back the tongue and shook his head: "No dice. Let's do it the proper way — find the last two parts. Once Yu Xi's mask is complete, this memory won't be far away."

Zhen Xin gazed at the painting thoughtfully. Long Jing, meanwhile, stared at the Tongue of Eating Lies that once belonged to him with heartbreak.

If he hadn't been forced to lend it to Zhen Yi, wouldn't the person holding this memory key be him right now?

'All Zhen Yi's fault!'

With the test yielding nothing, the three knew it was time to leave. Every second spent in a Collection Hall once graced by [Memory]'s presence was another second of risk. So the three exchanged irritable nods and each departed.

This time, truly, no one snuck back. And the sleeping grounds of [Memory] finally fell into eternal quiet.

...

Elsewhere, when Long Jing returned to his theater, he sat absent-mindedly in an audience seat, staring at the ring in his hand for a long, silent moment.

The acrobat had lied.

In that exchange with the other Cheng Shi, he'd received more than the universe's truth. He'd gotten a ring — one that only became visible after he merged with [Time].

Dense [Time] energy flowed through it. One glance revealed it was no less powerful than a servant god relic.

And this ring's sole function was to transport the current Long Jing away from here. Away from... this world.

Long Jing's expression was distant. His mind's eye drifted back to that moment:

After Cheng Shi had said everything that needed saying, he fell silent for a moment. Then he slid a transparent ring from his finger.

Back then, Long Jing couldn't even see the ring. He'd simply watched, dazed, as the other pressed it into his palm and spoke:

"Not everyone is a warrior. But without question, the Long Jing I knew — he was one.

And precisely because he was, you don't have to be.

If you lose faith in your world, this can carry you away from despair.

Though I can only promise you'll escape the current despair. Where this door leads...

Take care."

Then Cheng Shi smiled and faded away.

Long Jing naturally guessed this was a ring capable of smuggling him to another world. That's why he'd asked at the Joker Society:

"Perhaps we can find a more hopeful world?"

That wasn't a suggestion to the group. It was a deliberate probe.

Whether seeking validation or self-consolation, he'd tried to steer the Jokers away from this world's despair. But he'd failed. No Joker wanted to leave. Now, looking at the ring, Long Jing smiled self-deprecatingly and stored it away in his personal space.

"Running away is just poison to numb yourself. Escape for a moment — can you escape forever?"

This ring deserves a better use than this...

President Gong, oh President Gong. Don't let the world remember you with mockery. What we want is cheers and applause.

Even if this is a tragedy."

...

Chapter 1010: Also a "Joker"

Reality. A museum in an unknown city.

When Zhen Xin returned to the rest area, a figure was already waiting at her desk.

Seeing the figure, Zhen Xin raised an eyebrow in surprise.

"Mingyu, what brings you here?"

But this single sentence made the seated An Mingyu frown, her expression tightening.

"Zhen Yi!?"

Zhen Xin froze, then broke into a bright smile.

"Sorry — just finished a meeting with a bunch of liars. Haven't switched my mood back yet. It's me."

Zhen Xin smiled as she settled into her chair, then proceeded to handle History School business while openly ignoring An Mingyu's presence. The latter seemed more comfortable with this version. Her tension eased, and she spoke:

"I know that I—"

"No, you don't!" Zhen Xin cut her off with a glance. "Mingyu, if the person sitting here were no longer the me you know, but another me — would you... still say what you came to say today?"

"..."

An Mingyu fell silent again. She knew their bond should be seamless, but she was still adjusting — not to Zhen Xin's attitude toward her, but to untangling her own internal knots.

Friendship, faith, seeking, truth — the knot was complex. An Mingyu was working hard to rediscover her true self. Having felt this world's warmth, that process was accelerating.

"Alright, stop with the stiff face. If you have time, help me review whether these historical research directions are worth the manpower. If you just came to say something inexplicable..."

You'd be better off helping me clean.

These people trashed my conference room. Clearly nobody takes the president seriously."

Hearing that familiar complaint, An Mingyu's integration with this world deepened another notch. She chuckled softly and headed to the conference room to work. Watching her go, Zhen Xin's eyes glinted with mischief as she shook her head with a wry smile:

"Making a blind person do chores — now that's entertainment."

Before long, the slightly sweaty An Mingyu finished her task and waved goodbye. But she'd noticed her best friend seemed agitated — pressing both hands against her head, staring blankly at the desk.

"Xin Xin?"

Zhen Xin snapped her head up. Seeing An Mingyu, she instantly forced a smile.

An Mingyu paused, seeming to realize something. She tilted her head with a grin: "Got tricked again?"

Zhen Xin nodded with a bitter smile: "It's so frustrating. A real handful, this liar."

'Seems fine.'

Amused by Zhen Xin's competitive streak, An Mingyu stepped forward to pat her head — but her outstretched hand hesitated mid-reach. Sensing the retreat, Zhen Xin leaned her head toward An Mingyu instead.

"It'll be fine."

An Mingyu nodded too: "Mm. It'll be fine."

With that, the [Fate] Chosen departed. The moment she vanished, Zhen Xin's warm smile turned ice-cold. She slammed a hand on the desk, gnashing her teeth:

"ZHEN YI!!!

Do you have ANY idea how important that Joker Society was!?"

The next second, the cold face shifted. A playful grin emerged:

"Of course I do~ That's why I left you ALL the memories. Didn't hold back a single thing.

Oh, my dear sister, don't worry. My performance was flawless. They had no idea."

"..." Zhen Xin's expression shifted again, darkening unpredictably. "When did you—"

"Today was so exhausting. I'm sleepy. Going to sleep now. Good night~ Zzz—"

"Zhen Yi!?"

"Zzz—"

...

Reality. A workshop in an unknown city.

The two Doctors reunited and conducted a systematic information cross-check. Once they confirmed the intelligence each had gathered at the Joker Society matched, they exchanged a glance. One of them smiled — and slit his own throat.

"Can't let it go to waste. Flesh and blood are precious raw materials."

The Doctor smiled as he lifted his other self and carried him deeper into the laboratory.

After 0221's death, the Doctor had consolidated the entire experimental complex. He was now its master — though he shared that title with one other.

Carrying his experimental material, the Doctor approached a cage wrought of flesh and blood. Inside hung another version of himself, strung upside down and barely clinging to life. He smiled:

"Changed your mind yet?"

What's so bad about merging with me? After all, you are me, and I am you. We were always meant to be one. Isn't that right?"

The caged Doctor wheezed. Mustering every ounce of strength to pry open one eyelid, his vacant eyes fixed on his captor. His voice was weak but reverent:

"I never imagined the true mastermind wasn't 0021 — but you... Wang Weijin!

You planted a failsafe from the very first slice, didn't you? You inscribed your obsession with the slice experiment and splicing experiment into every clone's genetic code...

So when I resumed those experiments, your personality resurfaced from within them...

Ha. Clever.

0221 probably never realized his success in meeting Zangier wasn't because the experiment went well — he was just lucky. Lucky enough not to trigger your original personality...

I wasn't so fortunate...

But give up, Wang Weijin. I won't agree..."

"Why not?" The one outside the cage studied his caged self with amusement. "Just because you don't belong here?"

Isn't that even better?"

If our fusion can bridge the connection across space-time, then forking a new [Time] pathway as an experimental branch isn't out of the question.

This is a perfect opportunity for approaching [Truth]. You shouldn't throw it away."

"Heh..." The caged Doctor shook his head. "Now I understand. My [Truth] became [Deceit] long ago. You and I... we're not the same kind of person."

The outer Doctor's expression hardened, all humor gone. He turned and walked away, done wasting words.

"[Time] or [Deceit] — both are merely stepping stones to [Truth].

You're too attached. But that's not a problem.

Even without willing consent, I can still absorb you. Relax. The day I meet Zangier again is the day the three of us become one.

Look forward to it, Doctor."

Wang Weijin left. The caged Doctor watched his retreating figure and laughed bitterly.

"Of course I look forward to that day...

But what I look forward to more... is the moment he defeats you again...

You underestimated the Jokers...

And I... am also a 'Joker'..."

...

Meanwhile, somewhere else.

"Interesting. You actually agreed to make the trade?"

"Nothing ventured, nothing gained. I also want to try etching the memories within this mirror."

"Then... deal?"

What answered that voice was no longer a voice — but a hand. A hand that was [Existence] — and warm.

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