

The Gods 1011

Chapter 1011: The Long-Lost Neighbor

Xie Yang was back.

Hard to say whether that was good news. But at least when Cheng Shi returned from his Collection Hall excursion and saw this long-absent neighbor in the rest area, he smiled.

Once a person undergoes a dramatic identity shift — say, from a soon-to-be-"unemployed" male college graduate to a "mother" — they tend to grow more grounded. Clearly, Xie Yang had matured.

But Cheng Shi offered no comment. He knew this wasn't a good joke — it was a shadow that haunted the man's heart.

Xie Yang did seem to have overcome those psychological scars, though. His expression and manner were no different from before — his eyes even carried an unusual resolve, more determined than when he'd been chasing his white moonlight.

Cheng Shi was curious about what this [War] believer had been through, but couldn't figure out how to broach the subject. Fortunately, Xie Yang spoke first.

Standing at the rooftop's edge, he waved warmly at Cheng Shi:

"Bro, I'm back!

Whether or not you deceived me — thank you again for saving my life!"

'Oh? He found out about my identity?'

Made sense. The necromancer cover had been used long enough — time to retire it.

Cheng Shi smiled and walked to his own rooftop's edge, facing his neighbor across the gap: "Where've you been gallivanting lately?"

Xie Yang's smile faded, his expression turning serious:

"Doing a few meaningful things.

After everything I've been through, I've finally found the meaning of my existence. I've finally figured out my purpose in this game.

I did too many stupid things when I was young. Now it's time to make up for the past — and contribute some repair work to this broken world."

"...?"

'Bro, I asked a casual question and you hit me with a life philosophy speech?'

'Setting aside what "repairing the world" means — your so-called "when I was young" wouldn't be referring to yourself two months ago, would you?'

'What — done with the simp literature, moved on to cringe?'

Cheng Shi's mouth twitched. He nodded along politely:

"Good for you. Everyone needs goals. Otherwise idle hands make trouble.

But I'm still curious — did you... save Xiao Li?"

Xie Yang had just found his groove and was about to wax philosophical further, but hearing Xiao Li's name made his face crumble instantly.

"No. My white moonlight has left me for good."

"My condolences..."

"But A Mian told me — you can't dwell on the past. You have to look forward!" Xie Yang's brilliant smile returned.

"...As if! Wait—" Cheng Shi blanked, blinking rapidly. "A... Mian? Who's that?"

"My white moonlight!

Remember the beast tamer I told you about — the one who tried to tame me?

He's dead!!

While my friends and I were hunting him down, he died in a trial by accident. He'll never hurt anyone again.

And his death let us seize his space and rescue all the poor souls he hadn't finished taming yet.

A Mian was one of them. She's an amazing girl. Strong, brave, decisive — and above all, she never gives up. She..."

The compliments kept coming, but Cheng Shi had already lost the ability to speak.

He could tell A Mian was indeed a wonderful girl — because the last time he'd heard this exact script was when Xie Yang had been introducing Xiao Li. More precisely: introducing Xiao Li's corpse.

'Bro, after everything you've been through, how have you still not shed that absurd nature of yours?'

What he'd assumed was a "prodigal son returns" story turned out to be nothing of the sort — the prodigal had no intention of turning back and was apparently ready to run headfirst through the wall.

"...But A Mian's suffered too much psychological trauma. She hasn't adjusted to freedom yet. I need to constantly comfort and care for her — to show her this world still has love and beauty!"

Cheng Shi's face twitched. He gave Xie Yang a peculiar look:

"So that's your 'contributing repair work to this broken world'?"

Repairing yourself right into some poor girl's emotional window?"

At this, Xie Yang straightened up solemnly: "Of course not! Repairing the world is my life's mission. A Mian is my unwavering love. How can you conflate the two!?"

Despite the endless material for mockery, Cheng Shi caught something meaningful between the lines.

This Xie Yang genuinely seemed to have found a purpose. But "repairing the world" — why did it sound so familiar?

"Oh right!" Xie Yang dropped his earnest persona and produced a tattered experiment manuscript from his personal space, tossing it to Cheng Shi.

Cheng Shi caught it, surprised. He flipped through a couple of pages. Nope — couldn't read it.

He glanced at Xie Yang, who took the hint:

"Bro — no matter what, without your rescue there'd be no reborn me.

This is an experiment manuscript I found at the 0221 experiment site. I'm not sure if it's useful to you, but I figure anything the Grand Marshal and Da Yi were fighting over must be worth something."

"?"

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow and smiled: "Oh? You stole this from those two?"

"Not exactly..." Xie Yang hesitated, choosing honesty. "I was going to take it, but they found the manuscript first. When they learned I was collecting it as a thank-you gift for you, they gave up the fight.

If you don't think it's enough, I can also—"

"Enough. More than enough. It's the thought that counts." Cheng Shi smiled brightly — though internally he wished someone would explain what it actually was.

He'd been asking Brother Mouth this entire time, but Brother Mouth was giving him the silent treatment. Left with no choice, Cheng Shi put it aside. He'd ask the Doctor about it next time they met — which of 0221's experiments this manuscript documented.

He'd expected this brief neighborly chat to wrap up there. Cheng Shi had plenty to think about, and Xie Yang had A Mian to care for. But just as Cheng Shi turned to leave, Xie Yang called out and said something inexplicable:

"Bro... I know you're a good person."

"?"

"You... forget it. I'm a straightforward guy, so I'll just say it. Since you were willing to rescue those people 0221 had trapped — have you ever thought about saving even more?"

Cheng Shi frowned. His "organization magnet" constitution was acting up again.

He looked at Xie Yang and shook his head with a laugh: "So — which organization's invitation is this?"

"It's...

Sorry, I can't say yet. But as long as you share this vision — join us. No — join them with me. Then we can work together to repair this broken world."

"And then what?"

"Huh?" Xie Yang blinked blankly.

Cheng Shi snort-laughed:

"I mean — repair the world, and then what? Turn the gods' broken pasture into a complete pasture?"

Since it's a pasture either way, what's the point of fixing it?"

"Of course there's a point!" Xie Yang straightened his back solemnly. "Without repairs, there'll never be wholeness. Besides, repair is the means, not the end. When the pasture's wild grass grows thick enough to block out the sky — who can guarantee the pasture's heavens won't change!?"

'So it's them?'

'They actually found Xie Yang?'

Cheng Shi frowned, wondering whether by their standards, Xie Yang's romantic history was a bit too checkered.

Then again, he might have guessed wrong. But regardless, this [War] believer was walking an admirably difficult road.

"Good thinking. Let's hope we live to see that day."

With that, Cheng Shi turned and left.

Watching his neighbor's retreating figure, Xie Yang's resolve only deepened.

"We will. Both this world and A Mian will only get better!"

...

Chapter 1012: [Truth]: I Wish to Update the Universe's Truth

The Void.

In the limitless darkness, countless stars blazed to life. Their brilliant radiance shattered the silence of nothingness, then moved in deliberate patterns — threading together traces brimming with the breath of reason, assembling into a luminous Book of Stars that pulsed with the light of knowledge.

The book turned its pages in the windless void. Before long, its recorded cosmic mysteries attracted a thief eager to peek at the truth.

A pair of gleeful eyes opened above the Book of Stars. Without a shred of courtesy, He browsed the contents, clicking His tongue in judgment:

"I say, Quill-Pusher — these old tropes of yours haven't been updated in ages. Don't you think they're a tad outdated?"

[Truth]... Indeed, this Book of Stars was [Truth]. The moment [Truth] sensed the visitor, He snapped the book shut and smiled back at those eyes:

"I wish to update the universe's truth. That's why I've come to you."

"Ooh~

How fresh. My head doesn't bear [Truth]'s divine name, so what use am I?

Want me to scribble a few lines in your raggedy book?

Sure — my followers just offered me some jokes recently. I'll write those in. How about it?"

[Truth] shook His head: "No need to obfuscate. You know what I want."

Those eyes blinked, feigning confusion: "Strange — who's the [Void] one here? The day when [Truth] comes to consult [Void] for answers?"

Unfazed by [Deceit]'s mockery, [Truth] continued steadily:

"You once deceived my followers by saying the end of [Truth] is [Deceit]. I've come precisely because of those words.

I can acknowledge that [Deceit] stands ahead of [Truth]. But first, [Deceit] must prove He stands before me."

"Tch—" Those eyes sneered, growing ever more sardonic. "My, my. The day Quill-Pusher actually bows?

Oh — right.

Some gods would play someone else's son for a scrap of authority. What's a tiny admission of inferiority compared to that?

But why should I prove something utterly baseless?

If anyone truly stands ahead of [Truth], it's probably [Origin] — the one you're relentlessly chasing.

You should have found It by now, yes?

Why not ask It directly? And while you're at it, ask for me: when exactly does the [Void] era end?

I can hardly wait for the next one."

"..."

As it turned out, even the most patient god could barely endure sustained ridicule. [Truth] fell silent. Then He did something that surprised even [Deceit].

He produced the "Abundance" authority — distributed by [Prosperity]'s Final Oracle — and offered it directly to [Deceit]. Then, word by word:

"I want only one answer:

Does truth still exist in this universe?"

Honestly, it was an absurd question. Hard to imagine the god who governed [Truth] — renowned for reason and composure — asking something like this.

But [Deceit] understood immediately. [Truth] had already sensed something about this universe's truth. Perhaps one more experiment away from grasping what "truth" truly meant.

[Origin]'s universe slice experiment might formally mirror [Truth]'s domain. But when a god who'd spent an eternity studying the universe — certain He was the most rational being in existence — discovered that everything He'd sought was merely a higher-dimensional experiment... what that dissonance would do to [Truth] was anyone's guess.

Would He plunge deeper into madness, finding [Origin]'s work aligned with [Truth]'s path? Or would the crushing defeat turn Him into a clown?

[Deceit] didn't want to speculate. At least not now.

His plans had no room for a [Truth] variable. So He didn't answer the question. Instead, He smirk-laughed:

"As long as you still stand before me, and I can still see you — truth exists in this universe. Doesn't it?"

But that's an [Existence] proposition. Asking a [Void] god about [Existence]'s affairs... heh. If you want to fight, just say so.

Even if I don't have time, [Void]'s got an energy-to-burn simpleton who'd probably love a sparring partner."

"[Existence]..."

Whatever [Truth] was contemplating, He pondered for so long that even those eyes grew impatient. Finally, He spoke again:

"[Order] vanished after meeting you. [War] also went silent after an audience with you. So I came to see for myself — to see whether the end of [Civilization] truly is [Void]..."

"Tch—

And? Got your answer?"

"No. An unverified answer doesn't qualify as an answer.

I still need one more experiment. And an experiment director."

"!!!" At this, [Deceit]'s expression finally changed. He stared hard at the Book of Stars, whipping up terrifying gales across the void. "You wouldn't dare!?"

[Truth] didn't flinch. Stood smiling.

"In pursuit of truth — what wouldn't I dare?

Calm yourself, [Deceit]. The trial will be over soon."

...

Meanwhile.

Time flew. Preparing and reviewing two wish trials, plus hosting the Joker Society, had consumed most of what should have been rest time. Shortly after returning from the gathering, the next special trial arrived.

【Special Trial (Seeking [Truth]) has begun】

【Matching teammates (1/6)】

【Trial objective: Finite truth is never truth (3-day time limit)】

A [Truth] trial?

As everyone knew, [Truth] was an experiment fanatic. The sole purpose of His sponsored trials was to correct experimental parameters and complete experiments.

Of course, the experiments weren't limited to lab sites. They could also involve events closely tied to experiments, where players accelerated research by completing objectives.

Overall, not the hardest difficulty tier.

Cheng Shi assumed this was just an ordinary — no, slightly challenging — special trial. But when the crimson notification appeared and he glimpsed through the red glow a pair of cold stellar eyes opening in reality...

"???"

'Why is [Fate] here!?'

Regardless of who'd arrived, it was too late. Before Cheng Shi could receive a rooftop audience, his consciousness had already plunged into darkness with the game's notification.

【Match successful (6/6). Entering trial.】

'Bumping into [Fate] on the way out — should be a good omen...'

'Right?'

...

Chapter 1013: As Expected, This Round Is a Lock!

Chaotic screams flooded his ears first. Then the familiar stench of gunpowder filled his nostrils.

Before Cheng Shi even opened his eyes, his heart sank.

'Not good. War again?'

'This is supposed to be a [Truth] experiment — why does it feel like I've been tossed back to the Boro Highlands!?'

As his anxious thoughts solidified, his consciousness snapped back. He cautiously stepped backward before opening his eyes — and one glance told him [Fate]'s appearance had indeed been a good omen!

This round was locked down. Because he'd been matched with an old friend:

Life Sage — Hu Xuan!

Sometimes [Fate] really was that wondrous. He'd literally just bluffed in front of the Doctor about consulting Hu Xuan, and now she appeared right before him.

This quasi-envoy of [Birth] had just opened her eyes too. Their gazes crossed the round table in an instant — a seamless collision — and both broke into smiles.

They both felt this round was a lock.

Their gazes shifted to survey the surroundings. They'd landed in a meeting room — or more precisely, one belonging to the Tower of Logic, given the emblems and banners plastering the walls.

Before Cheng Shi sat a massive round table. Despite its capacity for dozens, only seven chairs circled it. One stood empty. In the remaining six, bodies slumped — some sprawled forward, others tipped back.

Their faces and attire marked them as grand scholars. And judging by their scholar sashes' colors...

'Huh? The Erudition Presidium!?'

The thought had barely formed when a colossal explosion rocked the windows.

The awakened players frowned and looked out. On an adjacent tower, a figure laughed maniacally while dangling a trembling scholar by the collar. Amid the cheers of those around her and the wails of the scholars below — she let go with sadistic glee, hurling the scholar into freefall.

"AAAH—SPLAT!"

The scream cut off. The scholar hit the ground and became a puddle of flesh. Every player watched with narrowed eyes. The round-faced chubby young man beside Cheng Shi furrowed his brows deeply, speaking a name in a tone laced with complicated emotion:

"Galusha..."

'Who!?'

Cheng Shi startled. He whipped toward the stocky youth:

"The fall of the Tower of Logic?"

"We've stumbled into Galusha's era — which means these bodies are..."

"Correct. The Erudition Presidium!" A different player spoke up.

This one stood across from Cheng Shi — hulking and broad, built like Da Yi, but with scholarship leagues above anything Da Yi possessed.

He lifted the nearest grand scholar's arm and began manipulating the dead fingers to point at each corpse around the table, introducing the Erudition Presidium members in an unnervingly theatrical tone:

"Volent — pioneer of the Consciousness Faith Department. Galadry — backbone of the Life Extension Department. Ernie — head of the Mechanical Engineering Department... These three are the Presidium's top brass.

Then Burza, Asgis, Nelliel. Good — aside from the traitor Pe Laya, all wiped out.

Based on intel I traded from the History School, they should all have died at Galusha's hands. So can anyone tell me — who killed these great grand scholars before that madwoman could?

Shame. I'd have loved to extract some delightful truths from their mouths."

With that, the hulk ripped off Ernie's arm and began greedily sucking the blood from the severed limb.

"Ahhh~

This is the essence refined by [Truth]...

Pity, Ernie. You couldn't merge with me in a younger form."

Darkened blood dribbled from his mouth, splattering the floor. The pale-skinned male player beside him frowned, stepped three paces away, and remarked with distaste:

"Hmph. With you in the Reason Association, how could reason possibly survive."

'Hmm?'

'This brute is from the Reason Association?'

That explained it. The Reason Association was notoriously a gathering of lunatics. Though one this extreme was still a rarity.

Hu Xuan stood near the man too. She clearly knew him. Catching Cheng Shi's flicker of confusion, she considered her options — then decisively chose to...

Climb on the table!

That's right. Without a word, Hu Xuan gathered her skirt and stepped elegantly onto the tabletop.

The table was too vast. Walking around either side would waste time. Better to take the shortest route.

Her slightly showy move naturally drew every eye. Everyone recognized who she was, so they weren't watching her — they were watching her target.

Anyone who knew Hu Xuan knew this [Birth] Chosen always had to birth a child during trials. So they all speculated whether this vaguely familiar "stranger" might be the father of her first child.

By rights, whenever Hu Xuan made this kind of move, Cheng Shi would normally retreat ten steps out of respect. But this time, not only did he stand his ground — he stepped forward, offering his hand with a brilliant smile to help her down from the table.

He knew this was Hu Xuan boosting his position. A "prey" targeted by the [Birth] Chosen should be very safe — at least until she got what she wanted.

Seeing he'd caught her meaning, Hu Xuan landed with a smile:

"Looks like you came prepared today, Cheng Shi?"

"?"

Cheng Shi rolled his eyes at Hu Xuan, then whispered: "Who is that guy?"

Hu Xuan first nodded to the chubby youth beside Cheng Shi, then stood shoulder-to-shoulder with him to make introductions:

"Wei Zhi. [Truth]'s current Chosen and Head Chief of the Reason Association."

'Who!?'

Cheng Shi froze, mumbling: "He's the mad dog Zhen Yi mentioned?"

"Mad dog?"

I simply wish to become Zhen Xin's third personality — accelerating her truth-seeking within [Void]. How does that merit the word 'mad'?"

Wei Zhi had excellent hearing. He'd obviously caught Cheng Shi's words. Smiling, he set Ernie's arm down, licked his lips contentedly, then fixed Cheng Shi with a burning stare:

"Fate Weaver. Clown. Cheng Shi..."

At last we meet. I should thank you, in fact.

If you hadn't taken out 0221, how would I have gotten this close to [Truth]?"

His gaze shifted to Hu Xuan, and comprehension dawned.

"I see. So Go Lis's thread traces back to you. Never expected the only player bridging [Void] to have connected with [Birth]. Pity — [Birth]'s will is too conservative. No affinity with [Truth].

But I still admire you greatly.

Cheng Shi, how about a trade?

Is Zangier still alive? You know — grand scholars who've become pseudo-gods hold a fatal attraction for me. I'll give you everything I have in exchange for him. Deal?"

Cheng Shi looked at this half-bloodied Reason Association head and pursed his lips in exasperation.

"That's not how business works.

If you really want to show gratitude, make it tangible.

Once I see your sincerity, then I'll consider the trade."

The words had barely landed when a long-haired male player on Cheng Shi's other side — silent until now — began to gently clap.

"Interesting. A delightful fellow."

...

Chapter 1014: This Match Has Some Background...

As it turned out, having a "secretary" present really did make trials easier.

The instant the long-haired man spoke, Hu Xuan chuckled and began her introduction:

"Meng Youfang. Bard. Head of that chaotic God Worship Society. Also the current [Time] Chosen."

'Him!?'

In hindsight, he should have guessed. This man in simple robes who still exuded elegance looked every bit the poet. Though more of a freewheeling ancient poet than a wandering bard — but a poet nonetheless...

Combine that with those eyes that scorned all mortals — wasn't this exactly the image of the delusional God Worshiper who fancied himself "the seventeenth god"?

But what a coincidence.

He was also a lunatic. Also a head chief. Most importantly, also a Chosen — and one who'd only risen because Cheng Shi had taken out the previous Chosen...

'Uh...'

'What is this, a gratitude reunion?'

Cheng Shi blinked at Meng Youfang, wondering how to subtly hint that he'd "played a small role" in Lao Deng's demise.

But that was just wishful thinking. Shi Zhen's identity couldn't have even a thread connecting back to him.

With a regretful sigh, Cheng Shi nodded at Meng Youfang: "You're also a delightful fellow."

Meng Youfang's eyes lit up: "You've heard of me?"

The instant those words left his mouth, every face in the room dropped. Even Hu Xuan's smile froze for a beat. She'd meant to warn Cheng Shi not to casually engage this person, but his mouth was too fast — he'd already responded.

Too late to retract now. She couldn't start a rift with a teammate from the jump — especially a powerful one. So she could only tap Cheng Shi's leg under the table with her toe.

Cheng Shi sensed the mood shift and caught the hint immediately. 'Watch my words.'

But was this guy really that terrifying? Why did everyone look at him the same way they looked at Zhen... the Prisoner?

Zhen Yi's level wasn't something just anyone could reach. At least no one here had attacked — meaning Meng Youfang's influence was still a notch below hers.

Cheng Shi suppressed his thoughts and dared say nothing more, forcing a brilliant smile: "A little."

"Oh? Then how do you view my accelerating return to my divine throne?"

"?"

Cheng Shi froze. Seeing the man's dead-serious face, he thought: 'This guy's not just sick — he's terminal. You're not just fantasizing — you've already fully inhabited the role?'

Everyone else responded with snorts or laughs — clearly unconvinced. But Cheng Shi didn't let the words hit the floor. His eyes spun, and he grinned:

"This era could use some change. During my audiences with my lord [Fate], He often tells me the universe ultimately trends toward the fixed.

I could never quite grasp what 'predestined intent' meant — until I heard your story. No — until I met you today, Brother Meng. Only then did I realize: true predestination does exist in this world.

But Brother Meng — ahem, allow me to address you as 'brother' before you reclaim your throne — I'd suggest that while nothing's decided yet, lying low is the righteous path.

After all, [Fate] and [Time]'s contest — who can say which side wins? Even if you can see through Their struggle, before you've reclaimed your rightful glory, be wary of Them...

I've said too much. I was simply overwhelmed by your extraordinary fortune and spoke rashly. Please regard it as hot air."

"This is NOT hot air!"

Meng Youfang's eyes flashed. He swept his wide sleeves forward and, before Cheng Shi could react, seized his hand like a long-lost kindred spirit, shaking his arm vigorously with absolute conviction:

"I've always said 'I am not alone in my path,' but even I knew it was somewhat self-deceiving.

But today — at last, I am truly not alone!

Cheng Shi — good, very good!

When I return to my throne, I shall—"

"..."

'I said repay me, not repay me in your dreams!'

Cheng Shi was numb. What truly shocked him wasn't the depth of this man's conviction — it was Meng Youfang's speed. How!?

Even if Cheng Shi didn't have Hero of Today's superhuman reflexes, he wasn't slow either. Yet this man was just a bard — how was his hand speed fast enough to catch him off guard?

"Brother Meng, choose your words carefully. True gods don't make promises lightly. I'm not saying this for rewards either.

I'm a blunt person — can't keep things in. Say what I think. All heartfelt words.

As long as Brother Meng doesn't take offense, that's already the greatest 'grace' you could bestow."

"..."

"..."

"..."

After this exchange, every player in the room was looking at Cheng Shi differently.

They'd seen simps for gods. But never a simp for a pseudo-god.

The thing was — if Meng Youfang were an actual pseudo-god, fine. But he was a "truly pseudo" god. Besides the word "pseudo," he had zero connection to divinity.

His delusion might sell within the God Worship Society or among mid-to-low-tier players. But in a peak match where everyone was sharp as a fox — who'd buy it?

Only fools would.

But Meng Youfang believed Cheng Shi!

He thought "Cheng Shi" was a well-chosen name. How honest!

Watching this unfold from behind Cheng Shi, Hu Xuan wavered between laughing and crying. She fought to maintain her composure without rolling her eyes at this farce, thinking:

'Everyone else avoids Meng Youfang because this God Worship head will relentlessly debate his identity with anyone who engages. But you — you waltz up and validate him on the spot. Do you have any idea how much trouble acknowledging this madman creates?'

'Calling him a bone-gnawing parasite doesn't do him justice. In a world where everyone assumes everyone else is holding back, you've just handed him the one and only "lifeline." The way he'll cling to you afterward — Cheng Shi, can you even handle it?'

Honestly, Cheng Shi wasn't sure he could handle the "noise." But he knew he had to do this.

Because his backup plan required a [Time] follower's help for cover — and Meng Youfang was probably the only [Time] believer in this trial!

Two teammates remained unIntroduced, but Cheng Shi could tell neither had ties to [Time].

The round-faced chubby youth beside him wore a Grand Tribunal judicial robe, with an [Order]-worshipping badge pinned prominently to his chest. His faith was self-explanatory.

The pale-skinned male teammate made zero effort to hide, radiating [Memory]'s aura. He practically wanted everyone to know he followed [Memory].

Frankly, this fanatical devotion to [Memory] exceeded even the Dragon King's. So Cheng Shi was even more curious about this teammate's identity.

But instead of asking Hu Xuan, he used the opportunity to break free from Meng Youfang's grip. Under those approving eyes, he asked:

"And these two are?"

Meng Youfang gave them a dismissive glance:

"Fang Yuan. President of the defunct Order Alliance. An Elemental Judge who barely qualifies as an [Order] follower."

'Wait!'

'Another president?'

Cheng Shi was stupefied. He glanced back at Hu Xuan, thinking: if he remembered right, she was also a president — of the Nature Alliance...

'What is this, the presidents' match?'

"And the other one? Also a president?"

"No. Just a delusional lunatic."

"..."

Cheng Shi glanced at the pale-skinned teammate, then turned incredulously back to Meng Youfang, thinking:

'Bro. How do you say that with a straight face?'

...

Chapter 1015: He Really Is Delusional!

"Who are you calling delusional?"

Honestly, aside from skin so pale it verged on sickly, this teammate looked perfectly normal. Even handsome, in fact. Not the androgynous beauty of Aph Ros — more of a masculine allure tinged with illness.

His features should have read as rugged, yet woven through the ruggedness was a thread of something... subtly effeminate.

The man's sharp gaze swept over Meng Youfang. After appraising him head to toe, he sneered:

"Physician, heal thyself!

I'm merely pursuing love. You, Meng Youfang — you're the biggest delusional case in this entire world!"

These two clearly didn't get along. Not wanting to stir the pot through Meng Youfang's mouth, Cheng Shi glanced at Hu Xuan for gossip. But Meng Youfang — however aloof he appeared — had quite the venomous tongue.

"Love?"

You?"

How could a deity feel empathy for a mortal?"

"?"

Cheng Shi's eyebrow quirked. He smelled a bombshell. But that's when Fang Yuan stepped in to mediate.

"That's enough, you two. Take your personal matters offline. We don't have time."

He rapped the table and pointed at the knights rampaging below:

"The Toll Knights are closing in. Of the Three Suns Towers, Yesterday Truth has already been burned to ash. Today Truth is being ravaged by Galusha. Only Tomorrow Truth — under our feet — remains.

This is a [Truth] trial, in case anyone's forgotten. When this tower — the Tower of Logic's supreme seat of power — falls, what experiments will be left in Tusnat?

Then where exactly are we supposed to complete this trial?

Focus on the present. Galusha hasn't arrived yet, but every grand scholar of the Erudition Presidium is dead. Clearly, a conspiracy is buried here — one likely connected to whatever experiment the trial wants us to find.

I've tried. These bodies can't be revived. The grand scholars prepared for this — they don't want anyone knowing where they went.

Don't just stare at me. Anyone have thoughts?"

Wei Zhi — stop eating. You know the Erudition Presidium best. Tell us: what happened in this era?"

While Fang Yuan spoke, the Reason Association's head had torn off Ernie's second arm. Still greedily sucking "refined truth," he shook his head:

"The Reason Association isn't the History School. We pursue [Truth]. We pursue Them. The one thing we don't pursue is history.

But — you think I actually enjoy eating this?"

"Don't you?" The pale man snorted with disgust.

Wei Zhi tossed the arm aside and laughed:

"I do — but not purely!

This is a Life Extension Department technique: consume flesh and blood to commune with their truth. I'm tracking Ernie's whereabouts. Relax — I want them alive more than any of you do. And I know these old codgers wouldn't die this easily.

But I need more time."

"How long?" Fang Yuan checked the base of the tower again, then produced a simple staff resembling a court rod. With practiced ease, he blasted open a void rift above the round table — clearly preparing an escape route.

"Haste buries truth — a foolish act.

If you can't wait, go ahead. Just leave me the scholars' bodies."

'Leave them for you? So you can snack on the clues?'

Fang Yuan sighed, scooped up the nearest corpse, and leaped into the void. Over his shoulder:

"Even in a place about to lose all [Order], orderly action can still bring hope of victory.

Everyone — coming?"

Cheng Shi assessed the situation. The plan was decent, but nobody here shared the same wavelength. No one followed.

Wei Zhi had started on the second corpse. The pale man hadn't moved, though his eyes kept darting toward Cheng Shi.

Cheng Shi had noticed from the start that this [Memory] believer harbored intense hostility toward him. But why? It couldn't be faith opposition — at this tier, that was child's play.

Not the Meng Youfang connection either, since the hostility had been there from the man's very first glance.

Baffled, Cheng Shi certainly wasn't going to buddy up with a possible enemy. He signaled Hu Xuan with his eyes — time to split off.

Hu Xuan had zero objections. She simply smiled: "Your call. I'll follow you."

Cheng Shi nodded, then addressed Fang Yuan:

"Everyone here is strong beyond question. In a race against time like this, there's no point clustering together. Better to scatter and investigate — maximize efficiency.

Six bodies, one per person. Take them as clues. Now, let me check the time..."

Before Cheng Shi could pull out his pocket watch, Meng Youfang chimed in like a precision clock: "Real-world time: 9:47:32."

"?" Cheng Shi pulled out his wristwatch. Exact match.

He stared in surprise: "Talent?"

Meng Youfang shook his head mysteriously: "[Time]'s gift to an old friend."

"..."

'And you say you're not delusional?'

Cheng Shi dry-laughed, nodded, and addressed the room:

"Since none of us know what happened here, let's give each other time to investigate. Three hours should be enough — I doubt Galusha can burn all of Tusnat that fast.

So if anyone still wants to cooperate afterward, we'll meet in three hours at the ruins of Yesterday Truth. A tower that's already been torched shouldn't attract much attention.

Sound good?"

Cheng Shi rarely took charge of a trial's tempo from the start. But this match was different. Every teammate looked like a lunatic. Add the parade of "head chief" and "president" titles — clearly these weren't people who'd walk in lockstep.

So rather than calling it a suggestion, he'd used efficiency as a pretext to shelve the awkward dynamics — giving everyone a face-saving excuse to split up without tearing each other apart.

Fang Yuan had expected this "disorderly" behavior. Smiling, he nodded, grabbed the nearest corpse, and vanished into the void.

Wei Zhi was still drinking blood. Cheng Shi frowned and signaled Hu Xuan to leave.

But just as he and the Life Sage each collected a grand scholar's corpse and turned to go, the pale teammate suddenly called out coldly: "I hear you're close with Zhen Xin?"

"?"

Cheng Shi's feet paused. 'So that's it — he's got a grudge against Zhen Xin?'

'Fine, fine, fine. Never saw that one coming. But Zhen Xin is Zhen Xin, and I am me. Take it up with her — why come at me?'

'At most we're "coworkers." And the kind who deceive each other, at that.'

Thinking this, his mouth was already distancing:

"I wouldn't say close. Work-related at best.

She's the president, and as vice president, I have to report to her."

The room went still for a beat.

"You're also History School?"

Even Hu Xuan tilted her head in surprise: "Since when are you History School vice president?"

Cheng Shi smiled, left it at a teaser, then turned back to the pale man: "What — do I need to report to you too?"

The pale man snorted heavily. Then, inexplicably, he erupted. He flung a dagger with a venomous glare at Cheng Shi:

"You reek of [Deceit] from head to toe. Absolutely sickening."

Before the words fully left his mouth, he launched himself forward with terrifying speed and killing intent — hurtling straight toward Cheng Shi.

'Old Hunter!'

'This man is a [Memory] assassin.'

'Shit. A genuine psychopath.'

Cheng Shi's eyes hardened. His hand shot toward the scalpel — but before he could act, someone else moved first.

And it wasn't Hu Xuan. It was Meng Youfang!

...

Chapter 1016: Plan? No Plan

Bards were a truly marvelous profession. They could manifest beings from the river of time's past and command them.

Combined with the bard class's weak-self characteristic, no wonder Cheng Shi had been stunned by Meng Youfang's speed earlier.

And as it turned out, even a bard as agile as Meng Youfang still relied on summoning as his primary combat method. What he'd summoned now was none other than...

"?????"

'Zhen Yi!'

When that familiar figure appeared with a playful "hee~" and blocked the charging pale-skinned man, Cheng Shi's head nearly exploded.

But the one who blew up faster was the pale man himself. The instant he saw Zhen Yi, his eyes turned scarlet. He shrieked, very nearly breaking down:

"Meng Youfang, I'll KILL you!"

"Ha! Be my guest!

Only by shedding the mortal shell can one forge a god's body!

Come — show me if Their trial is fiercer this time!"

The two clashed violently while Cheng Shi gaped and Hu Xuan watched thoughtfully. Meng Youfang handled the two-on-one with ease, even finding time to call out during the fierce exchange:

"Go handle your business, brother. Once I pass this trial, I'll come find you."

"..."

'Delusional versus psychotic!'

'This [Existence] civil war was too spectacular.'

If not for Galusha's forces closing in, Cheng Shi would have loved to watch the entire show. But prudence prevailed — he grabbed Hu Xuan and leaped out the window, plummeting toward a less crowded area.

Spotting a few Toll Knights below who stood their ground, Hu Xuan casually waved her hand. The knights instinctively clutched each other, and she asked curiously:

"Looks like you already have a plan. What is it?"

Cheng Shi used the landing to roll and absorb the impact, then shook his head with a hearty laugh:

"Plan? There's no plan. The entire city is under [Chaos]'s grip — what's the point of planning?"

My plan is to let the Toll Knights tear Tusnat apart, root out those Erudition Presidium old-timers, and then ask them what their plan is."

"...?"

Hu Xuan was lost. She couldn't figure out how Cheng Shi planned to turn the Toll Knights to his purpose.

Cheng Shi wasn't worried about their situation. He just turned back to gaze up at the tower and asked casually:

"That Old Hunter — do you know him?"

Hu Xuan nodded:

"Anyone with [Deceit] friends would have a hard time not knowing him.

Chen Yi, ID: 'This Love Awaits.' The new [Memory] Chosen who rose after Li Jingming nominally switched to [Deceit]. Hates every last [Deceit] follower — so his hostility toward you is normal."

"Is he sick?" Cheng Shi knocked out a lucky Toll Knight and dragged the body into a crumbling alley beyond the Three Suns Towers.

Hu Xuan followed close behind, smiling:

"By normal standards? Absolutely. And it's terminal — on par with Meng Youfang."

Cheng Shi's curiosity deepened:

"What kind of delusion, exactly?"

It involves love, so don't tell me... he fell for Zhen Yi?

Hmm!?! And got rejected?"

He felt he'd hit on the key. Maybe because he was the widely known "ex" of Zhen Yi, Chen Yi had targeted him?

'Hss—'

'Not impossible.'

But Hu Xuan's next words took his already-shattered expectations and ground them to dust.

"Not Zhen Yi. [Memory]."

"?"

'What?'

"[Memory]?"

Who in [Memory]? Li Jingming?

Then how does Zhen Yi factor in? Did she publicly claim the Dragon King?"

This chain of logic was so wild that even Hu Xuan couldn't help laughing.

"No, you misunderstand. I don't mean someone under [Memory]. I mean [Memory] the god.

The true god [Memory]!"

"CRACK—"

Cheng Shi's foot crushed a roof tile. He froze mid-stride.

Blinking rapidly, he processed for a long moment before looking at Hu Xuan uncertainly:

"He — a [Memory] believer — is in love with... [Memory]?"

The kind of 'in love' I'm thinking of?"

"I'd say no." Hu Xuan pointed at herself, then at Cheng Shi, and smiled. "More like this kind of coveting — but with even stronger emotions."

"..." The moment the topic veered toward [Birth], Cheng Shi went silent. He prudently put some distance between himself and the Life Sage, then couldn't resist asking: "Does [Memory] know?"

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. Who can read a true god's mind?"

But Chen Yi's feelings are common knowledge. Not because his love burns too openly — but because..."

Seeing the peculiar smile on Hu Xuan's face, Cheng Shi already guessed the answer.

"That jinx blabbed?"

"Exactly. But she didn't just blab.

At first, people only heard from Zhen Yi that Chen Yi wanted to bear [Memory]'s child. Later..."

"Wait! Hold on!"

Cheng Shi felt his brain was about to short-circuit. He looked at Hu Xuan strangely, as if recalling something "horrificing."

'Ma'am — are you sure the person talking about bearing a god's child is Chen Yi and not yourself?'

But that didn't add up either. Chen Yi was clearly a man — Cheng Shi trusted his own eyes. After a brief moment of thought, realization struck. He pointed at one of the two figures still battling atop the tower:

"He's originally from Dolgod?"

Otherwise, based on my eyesight, I can confirm he's a man."

"Who says a man can't bear children?"

Hu Xuan broke into a devout smile. Then, under Cheng Shi's deeply frightened gaze, she continued:

"But he did undergo a gender change similar to the people of Dolgod — and Zhen Yi goaded him into it.

When Chen Yi first entered the peak circle, his excessive devotion spiraled into obsessive infatuation with his Benefactor. He attempted to bear a divine child — and that's how he came to my attention in [Birth] circles.

Unfortunately, his [Birth] impulse was tainted with impure feelings. Not pure enough. Otherwise, recruiting him for [Birth] wouldn't have been bad."

"..."

'Fear factor: doubled...'

"Zhen Yi met him in a trial and tricked his feelings about [Memory] out of him. Then she 'sympathetically' informed Chen Yi:

'This won't work — [Memory] is female, too.'

That one line of 'consolation' drove Chen Yi to change his gender. But when he next encountered Zhen Xin...

This [Deceit] Chosen sister told Chen Yi that she'd heard [Deceit] refer to [Existence] using brotherly terms.

From that day forth, Chen Yi lost his mind. He viewed every [Deceit] follower as an obstacle to his love and tried to purge them all — believing this would salvage his relationship with his Benefactor.

So as I said, you being targeted is normal. All [Deceit] players are targeted.

It's just that your close relationship with Zhen Xin made his hostility toward you slightly larger."

"..."

'Slightly!?!'

Cheng Shi's face went through an entire kaleidoscope of expressions as he listened to the full saga. Only one thought remained:

'That jinx is truly a jinx!'

'And truly not human!'

...

Chapter 1017: The Container Trade Theory

Gossip could make players linger, but it couldn't stop the Afterglow Church's advance.

The Toll Knights had closed in. Though the scholars were fighting desperately, wave after wave of assaults had breached their defenses — no longer enough to protect the Tomorrow Truth tower.

The subterranean counter-attack had begun from inside the Tower of Logic's supreme power center. This turned the War Machine Pawns stationed at Tusnat's perimeter into the day's biggest joke.

As the portal held open longer, waves of underworld forces poured forth, blocking the mechanical soldiers outside the city. It almost looked as though the Afterglow Church had assumed Tusnat's defense — and the Mechanical Engineering Department's reinforcements had become "invaders."

The Toll Knight Order, the Afterglow Church's spearhead, naturally seized this opportunity to drive deep into the Erudition Presidium's heart.

The raging inferno from Gasmira's funeral was still fresh in memory. Now, with smoke and fire blanketing another city, Cheng Shi could only marvel at how [Chaos] believers truly spared no effort — and no decency — in spreading chaos.

But the more chaotic things got, the more advantageous his position.

Cheng Shi had already dragged his unconscious Toll Knight into an empty alley ruin. Without a shred of shame, he pulled out a set of church robes in front of Hu Xuan and threw them on — the same style as Kataro's from the [Chaos] temple.

Then he woke the knight. When the knight's eyes burned with suicidal resolve, Cheng Shi slapped him, hurled him away, and said coldly:

"The Afterglow Church has truly gone backwards. You think this is still Gasmira?

This is the Tower of Logic's power center. The Erudition Presidium's base. A holy land pilgrimed by countless [Truth] believers. Uncontrolled chaos only gives these shrewd scholars openings to escape. If the grand scholars get away — who can guarantee a second Tower of Logic won't rise on the Land of Hope!?

And if that day comes, when will our Lord's will ever resonate across the universe?

Can the Afterglow Church bear that responsibility?"

The Toll Knight was stunned speechless. This [Chaos] believer's brain might not be the sharpest, but his devotion was admirable.

He clearly sensed the mysterious figure before him was an ally — and a high-ranking one at that. Yet he stubbornly defended:

"[Chaos] is inherently without order! We worship our Benefactor, follow our Benefactor, offer to our Benefactor. What wrong is there?"

Cheng Shi smiled. Then the smile vanished, replaced by a cold mask:

"The only reason you'll leave here alive is your devotion.

But blind devotion is a burden that drags down faith!

Understand this: if temporary blasphemy can yield greater devotion, then blasphemy itself is a form of devotion.

Scram. Bring me whoever's running the Afterglow Church here. Otherwise, if the Erudition Presidium escapes, I won't hesitate to disband the church myself and install a truly devout believer to carry [Chaos]'s banner."

By now, even a fool could guess who stood before him. The Toll Knights were the Afterglow Church's backbone — in sermons, they'd heard leadership repeatedly mention a certain lord who enacted the Benefactor's will. This lowly knight just couldn't believe the person before him was that lord. So he stood frozen — unable to leave, unable to stay.

Seeing this, Cheng Shi knew words alone wouldn't convince. He snorted, pulled out the [Chaos] container from his robe, and hurled it at the knight's head.

The iridescent container cracked the knight's skull on impact, drawing blood. But upon feeling the utterly pure [Chaos] energy it radiated, the knight didn't dare show anger. Instead, he reverently set the container at his feet, then bolted out of the alley.

Running and raving in a frenzy:

"He's here! He's here!

Our Lord's proxy has arrived! The world shall fall into eternal chaos! Praise [Chaos]! Praise [Chaos]!"

"..."

Hu Xuan had watched the entire performance from the side, her smile widening steadily — as if watching a clown circus.

Whether that admiring gaze contained something else... who could say?

The show had been entertaining. But when Cheng Shi produced something and threw it at the knight without warning, Hu Xuan's smile froze.

She knew exactly what that was. As a container-holder herself, she recognized the aura instantly.

But the question was: why could Cheng Shi produce a container?

"Produce" wasn't about owning one. She understood that if even she had received her Benefactor's gaze and gift, an outstanding [Deceit] believer like Cheng Shi would inevitably receive a container too — just a matter of time.

So Hu Xuan wasn't surprised he owned one. She didn't even find it odd that his container wasn't [Deceit] but [Chaos]. What shocked her was that he could materialize it physically!

Because her container existed only in consciousness — formless, invisible, utterly impossible to materialize.

Hu Xuan blanked for a beat, then frowned:

"Cheng Shi, I didn't deceive you. My container..."

Cheng Shi froze, then picked up the container and waved dismissively:

"Don't be so sensitive. Our... our pure friendship shouldn't endure groundless tests.

I know you didn't lie. When I received these containers, I already knew — your situation and mine are different."

Setting aside her [Birth] desires regarding Cheng Shi, Hu Xuan was first and foremost a shrewd top-tier player. Without keen ability, a mere flash of divine favor wouldn't have carried her to Chosen status. So she instantly caught the word "these" in his sentence, and her eyes flooded with shock.

Not long ago, he'd only learned of containers' existence from her mouth. And now he was already discussing their quantity?

How many did he have?

Where from?

Her Benefactor had explicitly said mortals couldn't retain other containers before truly becoming an envoy. So Cheng Shi...

A thousand thoughts raced through Hu Xuan's mind — but she asked none of them. She simply continued listening in silence.

"I'm guessing [Birth] focuses on His heirs, so He doesn't want to accomplish anything else through containers. He bestowed one upon you but didn't grant you the authority to trade containers.

Don't be shocked. You heard right. Trade.

Containers can be traded. As for why — that wasn't my decision. It was..."

Cheng Shi pointed skyward.

Hu Xuan's jaw dropped. She couldn't fathom how, if containers were tradeable, this differed from selling government posts. Had the gods already let go of servant god seats — allowing an "agent" to manipulate divine positions?

But when she considered that the person "manipulating divine positions" was Cheng Shi, she relaxed.

She knew him too well. With this in his hands, her alliance would only grow — because "Fate Weaver Certified" was a gold-standard label.

"I think I understand the container situation. I can guess part of your plan too. But Cheng Shi — that identity you're playing...

Are you sure [Chaos]'s original owner won't come after you?"

At that, Cheng Shi's smile turned deeply knowing.

'Playing myself — where's the trouble in that?'

'And who'd come after me? Kataro?'

'The original wouldn't harass his own stand-in. Even if Kataro came, the devout fellow would probably only say: "Praise the great Lord Ultraman."'

Right now, Kataro's devotion was far purer than the likes of Chen Yi or Meng Youfang.

...

Chapter 1018: The Genuine History School Vice President

Cheng Shi didn't linger in the alley.

Though he'd contacted the Afterglow Church, waiting in place for "subordinates" was far too beneath his station. A noble servant god shouldn't make things easy for mortal audiences.

If these [Chaos] believers couldn't even locate their own master, the Afterglow Church didn't deserve to be called a church — might as well rename it a circus. Every follower inside might as well be a clown.

Then again, [Chaos] had always been played by [Deceit]. When you thought about it, that tracked.

But that wasn't the real reason Cheng Shi left. He genuinely had an idea — not quite a plan, but at least a direction in this chaotic Tusnat.

So he led Hu Xuan swiftly out of the area. As for the destination — honestly, he didn't know the way. But at least he knew what the place was called.

"Remember that Pe Laya you told me about? Do you know where her laboratory is?"

"Pe Laya?"

Hu Xuan certainly remembered. This grand scholar's betrayal was what had let the Toll Knights into Tusnat's inner city. But her knowledge of this era only went so far — pinpointing a laboratory in a city engulfed by chaos was asking a lot.

So she shook her head, puzzled: "Are you still looking for the Gift of Sores?"

I heard Hu Wei's group already gave up. Seems someone fished it out in the chaos."

"..." Cheng Shi pursed his lips. "No need to probe. It was me."

"I knew it." Hu Xuan laughed. "If you already have the dagger, why go to her lab?"

Or does it hold another secret connected to this trial?

Oh — and I forgot to ask: Cheng Shi, when did you become History School vice president? Did you trick them?"

"Trick? Impossible. I never lie."

Cheng Shi grinned mysteriously. "This vice president title is the genuine article. But bringing you there has nothing to do with the History School."

During that trial, I stumbled on details of Pe Laya's experiment. I learned that the Barren Walker's shell had fallen into her hands. And when the Afterglow Church stormed Tusnat, several grand scholars abandoned the fight against the underworld forces just to charge into her lab and seize that servant god shell.

At the time, I thought nothing of it — figured it was some insignificant academic turf war before chaos fully spread. But now... things might not be so simple."

Moving toward where scholars were scattering in flight — hoping to grab a few for directions — Cheng Shi surveyed the burning city and explained to Hu Xuan:

"The Afterglow Church's assault speed far exceeds what I imagined. Between Galusha's incitement and Pe Laya's betrayal, the subterranean counter-offensive has virtually destroyed all of Tusnat. At this point, only the area near the Three Suns Towers retains any resistance.

Which means total collapse is imminent. War and destruction will sweep across every inch of the Tower of Logic's territory.

So when the country was practically gone — why were these grand scholars still fixated on the Barren Walker's shell?

Even if they got it, where would they find a lab to replicate the experiment!?

And another thing: Pe Laya betrayed the Erudition Presidium. She'd never leave behind experimental methods for the Tower of Logic. So they didn't take the Barren Walker for the Gift of Sores I'd already claimed — it was something else entirely.

Now look at the scholars' desperate situation. I can't help but suspect these grand scholars planned to use the Barren Walker's shell for something — something to save Tusnat and turn the tables.

As for what exactly, I can't guess. But this lead is enough.

Find these shell-hunting scholars, and we might find the very experiment this trial points to.

The trial hint says: 'Finite truth is never truth'...

Indeed — if the Erudition Presidium truly perishes here, who in this world would still seek [Truth] on [Truth]'s behalf?"

Hearing this analysis, Hu Xuan's gaze toward Cheng Shi burned even more openly.

Not long ago, this same Cheng Shi had been an "idler" who asked questions left and right, cobbling together scraps of information. Now he could peer through history's cracks, spot the subtle machinations of those who stirred the wind, and act on them.

Indeed — everyone grew. The Fate Weaver just grew exceptionally fast.

Soon Cheng Shi snagged two informants from the fleeing crowds. These terrified scholars thought the Toll Knights had come and nearly shook apart before they could speak.

Fortunately, Cheng Shi had his ways. Under his reassuring smile, the two quickly pointed him in the right direction.

Cheng Shi and Hu Xuan dashed toward Pe Laya's laboratory without hesitation. Along the way, Toll Knight sightings thinned — but signs of scholarly infighting multiplied.

Clearly, Pe Laya's influence within the Existence Origin Department was considerable. Her subordinate scholars hadn't abandoned this experiment that proved their department's worth.

When they reached the laboratory entrance, the bodies strewn inside and out — and the rivers of blood — spoke to an internal battle no less brutal than the external invasion.

As for who won — the grand scholars who came for the shell, or the scholars guarding the experiment — Cheng Shi couldn't say. But he knew he'd arrived a step late.

Because Fang Yuan, who'd vanished into the void moments earlier, was now walking out of the lab with a frown.

Evidently, the round-faced chubby fellow had reached the same conclusion.

Seeing Cheng Shi here, Fang Yuan was equally surprised.

"If you tracked this far, you clearly know this era well. So — you really are the History School's vice president?"

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow. 'So he hadn't actually left through the void — he'd stayed to eavesdrop.'

'Figures. In a peak match, every player has a hundred backup plans.'

"Naturally. If you need intel traded later, come to me. For the sake of 'meeting quota,' I offer better rates than others." Cheng Shi smiled and glanced at the lab. "Find anything?"

Fang Yuan was a straightforward man — nowhere near as "disorderly" as Meng Youfang claimed. He held nothing back and shared his findings plainly:

"By the time I arrived, the item was gone.

I compared the battle traces inside — far more combatants than corpses left behind. So the arrivals didn't just take the Barren Walker — they also brought along some Existence Origin Department scholars.

The Erudition Presidium may be trying to salvage the situation this way. Unfortunately, I don't know enough about [Truth]'s experiments to say what they're specifically doing.

Fate Weaver, any suggestions?"

Cheng Shi frowned briefly, then broke into a smile. He strode into the laboratory, speaking as he walked:

"I do, actually. But I'll need to ask the people on scene."

...

Chapter 1019: Situation Analysis

There were no living people at the scene, so "asking" naturally meant asking the dead.

The laboratory was littered with bodies in every direction. Cheng Shi swept his gaze across, selected several relatively intact corpses, and activated the Finger Bone Brooch on them. The answers from these scholars were virtually identical to what Fang Yuan had said.

So the Elemental Judge was trustworthy enough.

The strange thing was, even the raiding scholars knew nothing about the overall plan. They'd simply been ordered to seize the Barren Walker's shell — where to go afterward, the grand scholars hadn't said.

This sounded more like a conspiracy. Only the commanding grand scholars knew the full operation.

Cheng Shi asked for the commanders' identities. Several corpses gave the same answer — two grand scholar names he'd never heard of.

All three players stared blankly at each other. The trail had gone cold again.

Cheng Shi glanced at Fang Yuan and probed: "Got any tracking items?"

Fang Yuan gave him an odd look and shook his head:

"I don't have any trace-tracking equipment. Not skilled at manipulating [Memory] either.
If you really need that kind of thing, you might try asking Chen Yi."

"..."

'Just say no — why the sarcasm?'

'What decent [Deceit] person would go poking that hornets' nest?'

Seeing Cheng Shi drop the subject, Fang Yuan paced, analyzing carefully:

"Since we can't find leads here, let's circle back to why the grand scholars staged a fake death at Tomorrow Truth tower.

Before we took the bodies, the information was clearly left for the Afterglow Church and Galusha to see.

But here's the problem: with [Folly]'s wisdom, Galusha could probably spot the deception with a single glance. Wouldn't that contradict the Erudition Presidium's intent?

If we can think of this, the scholars who managed this vast [Truth] dominion certainly could too.

So after thinking it over, I can only see one possibility..."

Cheng Shi's lips suddenly curled. Meeting Fang Yuan's eyes, he finished the thought:

"They did it on purpose!"

Fang Yuan's eyes flashed with approval: "Exactly. It can only be deliberate. They anticipated Galusha's reaction — and used it to buy time!"

Their back-and-forth amused Hu Xuan, but having three clever people in one room was almost too dull. So she willingly played the straight man, finding the right moment to ask:

"Why do you say that?"

Cheng Shi shot her a peculiar glance. He didn't want to waste time on this, but couldn't let the Life Sage feel awkward, so he picked up the thread:

"Galusha managed the underworld for so long without being destroyed — and even rallied the Afterglow Church for a successful surface counter-offensive. That proves she's extraordinarily cautious.

A clever person seeing the Erudition Presidium randomly dead at the top of a tower would immediately suspect an escape ploy — and start thinking about whether to pursue, how to finish them off.

But a cautious person encountering this scene would first wonder: is this a trap to lure me in? If I chase recklessly, am I walking into their setup?

The old foxes of the Erudition Presidium are betting on exactly that mentality. But whether a [Folly] follower will take the bait — nobody can say for sure.

Right now, the priority is finding these old foxes. If Galusha cracks their gambit first, this trial of ours is finished."

Hu Xuan listened, smiled, and nodded — something strange flickering in her eyes.

This exchange looked entirely different in Fang Yuan's eyes.

'I thought you two only had a [Birth]-academic relationship. Turns out you're here flirting?'

'I'm the only outsider here, and you two are just chatting for... whose benefit, exactly? As if anyone here couldn't figure this out...'

He looked at the pair with exasperation — only for Cheng Shi to suddenly frown, his tone turning grave:

"Wait..."

If I were an Erudition Presidium grand scholar, with Tusnat's survival at stake, I'd never put all my eggs in one gamble with Galusha.

Too risky. If Galusha raises her logic to the next level, this clever Wise Man might see right through my calculations. So I'd need backup — a dual insurance for the plan."

Fang Yuan's levity vanished: "You mean... it's both a delay tactic AND a lure?"

"Exactly!"

Whatever they're preparing, they need somewhere to set the trap. Somewhere that can't be a standard emergency site — because the traitor Pe Laya, as an Erudition Presidium member, knows all those locations too.

So they can't use known intel against the enemy. They have to improvise on the spot.

And that improvisation originated here."

Cheng Shi pointed at the laboratory floor. "This trap is almost certainly an experiment. And it must involve the Barren Walker. But an experiment needs a venue.

Tusnat is pure chaos right now. Labs are being trampled by Toll Knights everywhere. So I think the grand scholars are hiding somewhere, preparing an experimental environment. And once Galusha gradually approaches through her indecision — by then, their trap should be nearly ready!"

"But this ambush ultimately fails," Fang Yuan's thoughts aligned perfectly now, "because history has already told us the outcome. So this is a trial set in a false past to correct the Erudition Presidium's errors. Our job is most likely to help them — and complete the counter against Galusha and the Afterglow Church!"

"Sharp!" Cheng Shi nodded approvingly, then smiled. "Now the question is: we know nothing about this experiment, so we have no idea where to look.

Speaking of which, President Fang — your take on [Truth]...?"

"You're asking the wrong person, Fate Weaver. That question belongs to Wei Zhi.

The man's behavior is bizarre through and through, but I admit — when it comes to understanding the Erudition Presidium and Tower of Logic, nobody except 0221 matches him."

'Wei Zhi...'

The image of this combat expert gulping scholars' blood raw made Cheng Shi wince slightly. Not someone easy to deal with. And the Reason Association was famously a madhouse — even Zhen Yi called him a lunatic supreme. Who knew what this head chief might do.

His instincts said: stay far away.

While the three debated the trial's content, another voice suddenly came from outside the lab.

"Not necessarily."

All three startled. Looking toward the voice, they found Meng Youfang — bloody and battered.

Despite the sorry state, his complexion was ruddy enough. Apparently he hadn't taken much real damage.

'Already done fighting?'

Cheng Shi smiled: "How did the trial go?"

Seeing Cheng Shi so readily play along with Meng Youfang's delusions, Fang Yuan made a face. Hu Xuan simply smiled in silence.

She knew that if Cheng Shi had deliberately ignored her warning, it meant this Fate Weaver — no, this liar — was lying again.

Meng Youfang ate this up wholeheartedly. Given Cheng Shi's willingness to believe him, he practically treated Cheng Shi as a soulmate. One of only two.

The last person who'd somewhat understood him had been Zhen Yi.

"Not too good, not too bad.

He is, after all, someone sheltered by [Memory]. Out of respect for Him, I didn't go all out.

But in this mortal shell with my divine power yet to recover, I can't honestly say I'd definitely beat him."

"..." Cheng Shi swallowed a torrent of retorts and managed a forced smile: "Good attitude. Truly a true god's demeanor."

Meng Youfang admired Cheng Shi even more.

"Naturally. Tempering isn't just physical — it's spiritual.

Constant self-reflection, self-awareness, accepting the constraints of my current predicament — that too is a test of mental fortitude.

Only when body and mind are both restored will I reclaim the divine throne that belongs to me."

"..."

"..."

"..."

At this point, Fang Yuan developed a kind of "respect" for Cheng Shi too.

To maintain such composure through Meng Youfang's ramblings — this Fate Weaver was truly a man of extraordinary patience.

Unfortunately, even Cheng Shi's patience had limits.

He was dying to retort, but didn't want to damage the carefully cultivated "friendship." So he channeled his sarcasm into a seemingly innocent question:

"By the way, Brother Meng — what is your divine name? Might I have the honor?"

Meng Youfang blinked. Showing no suspicion, he shook his head with utmost gravity:

"That is precisely why I respect [Memory]. He sealed part of my memories, so I myself currently have no clue.

But no matter. When my trials are complete, my memories shall return.

At that time, I won't just tell you my divine name — I'll share my throne's glory with you.

Cheng Shi, my good brother!"

"..."

'Great. The value of "brother" just went up again...'

Cheng Shi's eye twitched. The forced smile continued.

...

Chapter 1020: Confronting Pe Laya

Not everyone was willing to engage with Meng Youfang's ramblings. Seeing Fang Yuan and Hu Xuan steadfastly silent, Cheng Shi pursed his lips and mustered his energy to continue:

"Brother Meng, what did you mean by 'not necessarily' just now? Could it be you're familiar with [Truth] experiments too?"

"Not at all."

Setting aside his true-god delusions, Meng Youfang was a practical man. At least he dared admit his ignorance — already a cut above countless face-saving peak players.

Of course, this ignorance was packaged as memories not yet restored. Naturally.

"Even gods should respect each other. I never actively seize [Truth]'s authority, so naturally I don't understand it well.

But just because outsiders don't understand [Truth] — does that mean [Truth]'s own followers don't?"

"You mean...?"

Cheng Shi blinked, already guessing Meng Youfang's drift.

"Exactly! The Erudition Presidium's grand scholars themselves. No matter how well 0221 or Wei Zhi know the Presidium, could they know it better than its own members?

So rather than asking that lunatic, why not ask the masters themselves."

Fang Yuan frowned: "I said their bodies can't be revived—"

He cut himself off mid-sentence. Everyone present realized that unrevivable corpses didn't mean unsummonable grand scholars — and standing before them was the game's most powerful bard.

"It seems you've all figured it out.

Tell me who you want to ask. Given my former identity, I doubt the grand scholars would refuse.

But choose carefully. The trial with Chen Yi consumed much of my power. I can summon at most one temporal reflection now, and it won't last long."

"..."

The three exchanged glances, newly energized.

They marveled at the bard talent's versatility and were exasperated by Meng Youfang's extreme delusions — but at least they had a way forward. Fang Yuan signaled Cheng Shi with his eyes: pick a "lucky scholar" for interrogation.

After deliberating, Cheng Shi named someone none of them expected.

"Pe Laya."

"Pe Laya? You're sure?"

Everyone froze. They all knew this grand scholar was the Erudition Presidium's traitor — Galusha's ally. Whether this conspiracy targeted Pe Laya too was anyone's guess.

But Cheng Shi held firm.

"I'm sure!

As I understand the bard talent, it isn't [Memory]. Reflections drawn from time's river are only substitutes of past existences — they can't perfectly replicate the original, much less current memories. Correct?"

Meng Youfang nodded in confirmation. No matter how powerful a bard's talent bonuses, a reflection remained a reflection. Even he could only offer modest advantages in synergy, speed, quantity, and duration.

With that confirmed, Cheng Shi continued:

"So rather than questioning a grand scholar who'd die before betraying the Tower of Logic's secrets, why not ask the grand scholars' enemy?"

After all, the one who understands you best is your enemy.

We could seek out the real Pe Laya in the trial, of course, but given Galusha's aggression, playing it safe seems wiser. Agreed?"

It made sense. Summoned reflections might be influenced by the bard, but as independent entities from the time stream, they had their own thoughts — meaning conversations with Erudition Presidium loyalists might genuinely go nowhere.

Meng Youfang nodded approvingly and, despite his exhaustion, pulled Pe Laya's reflection from the river of time.

When a stern-faced female scholar with furrowed brows and cold eyes appeared before them, book in hand, Cheng Shi finally beheld this grand scholar who'd been etched so prominently in history.

Honestly, Pe Laya was remarkably plain.

Aside from a somewhat eye-catching pair of gold-framed spectacles, she was utterly unadorned — even resembling the ordinary scholars he'd encountered before. None of the lofty grandeur typical of grand scholars.

Hard to imagine that this woman — who looked like she only knew how to bury herself in research — had been the single greatest force behind the Tower of Logic's fall.

But... why did she look vaguely familiar?

The reflection was summoned and time was precious — they should ask immediately. But at the critical moment, Cheng Shi held back. He couldn't place the source of that inexplicable familiarity, so he tilted his head toward Fang Yuan, signaling him to take the lead.

Fang Yuan didn't refuse. He clearly described the current situation and asked Pe Laya what the Erudition Presidium would do with her experimental materials.

But Fang Yuan was no rigid [Order] follower. His words were laced with contempt for the Erudition Presidium — coupled with concern for their current plight. His tone suggested the players had come to help Pe Laya through her crisis.

This performance showed Cheng Shi what "exploiting loopholes" truly looked like. He eyed Fang Yuan with increasing curiosity, wondering if this man had some [Deceit] side hustle.

Pe Laya listened in silence for a long time. When Fang Yuan finished, she adjusted her glasses, surveyed everyone coolly, and shook her head:

"No matter how persuasive the language, I can hear you are not my allies."

"..."

"But I can also see you haven't sided with Volent's people either."

Whether you're interlopers from elsewhere or covetous eyes on the Barren Walker experiment — as long as it helps her, I'll tell you."

With that, Pe Laya gazed toward the Three Suns Tower — as if meeting her real self's eyes across time.

The sight reminded Cheng Shi inexplicably of all the other versions of himself he'd encountered.

[Time]'s power was endlessly wondrous — always letting different selves "meet."

"Volent is a grand scholar worthy of the title. Though the Tower of Logic declined under his watch, that was never one man's fault."

[Truth] is too cold. Thousands of years without once sheltering His followers — leaving scholars to struggle on the path of truth-seeking without a shred of hope."

"...Grand Scholar, while understandable, now isn't the time for grievances."

"This isn't a grievance. It's fact."

What I'm saying is: beyond Volent's wisdom, remember that he's the ruler of this nation. Which means he holds something critically important."

Pe Laya swept her gaze left and right, enunciating each word: "The Ritual of Truth is still in his hands."

'The Ritual of Truth!'

'That servant-god-level creation said to be capable of creating truth!'

'Right — how could they have forgotten about it?'

But the question was: what kind of experiment could it unlock?

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