

The Gods 1021

Chapter 1021: The So-Called Ritual of Truth

"Everything in this world that takes physical form — regardless of size, quantity, past, or future — contains [Truth] within it.

This is the very first axiom every scholar encounters in their studies: the Universal Axiom of [Truth].

The Ritual of Truth's existence is the most powerful proof of this axiom."

Pe Laya didn't seem like a violent or crazed person. Her emotions were remarkably stable, and her inner nature aligned almost perfectly with [Truth]. She introduced this wondrous [Truth] creation to the players with meticulous precision — as if lecturing her students.

Cheng Shi found it hard to imagine that a scholar who embodied [Truth] from head to toe would betray [Truth] over divine indifference.

He kept feeling that while the reason sounded plausible, it wasn't the full story.

Pe Laya's mini-lecture continued.

"Since all things in the world contain [Truth], this means every physical entity possesses a certain degree of equivalence at the faith level — or more precisely, at the level of subdivided faith cores.

Based on this, we can consider all objects as merely different expressions of the same faith core. Like this roof tile."

She plucked a broken tile shard from the ground, then compressed it between her fingers into fine granules.

"Tiles and bricks are nothing more than solidified gravel. Fundamentally, external force altered the gravel's structure and arrangement, causing it to manifest in a different form.

So if we analogize faith cores to gravel, then by modifying faith cores' structural arrangement through certain methods, we can use [Truth]'s power to equate any existing object with any other.

This is the founding principle behind the Ritual of Truth.

It isn't merely the supreme symbol of power that He bestowed upon the Tower of Logic — it's the foundation for every major experiment. It can create experimental environments beyond mortal capability, provided there are sufficient 'raw materials' for transmutation.

And this is why every major experiment at the Tower of Logic requires Erudition Presidium approval — we must assess which experiments are worthy of activating this costly [Truth] creation."

'Raw materials...'

Cheng Shi's keen ear caught the keyword. Seeing the sardonic edge to her smile, he raised an eyebrow: "What raw materials?"

Pe Laya snapped her book shut and pointed at everyone present — including herself. Casually:

"People."

'People!?'

Everyone froze — yet somehow wasn't surprised.

"The Ritual of Truth uses human lives as... consumables?"

"Yes."

Pe Laya's answer was brief, but the word carried weight.

Cheng Shi frowned and shook his head:

"That doesn't add up. If all things are composed of [Truth], why must human lives be consumed?

Soil, rainwater, trees, air — infinite and inexhaustible. Wouldn't those work?

And if they don't, wouldn't that disprove the axiom itself?"

His question gave everyone pause. The others all agreed he had a point.

The Erudition Presidium using the Ritual of Truth to "devour" people certainly cast a dark filter over the Tower of Logic. They'd always known the grand scholars didn't treat people as people — but they hadn't imagined just how thoroughly.

Pe Laya's face finally showed some expression. She gave Cheng Shi the faintest approving nod — like a teacher admiring a student with sharp instincts.

But rather than feeling the atmosphere lighten, Cheng Shi was transported back to school days — that tense moment of being singled out by a teacher.

'Oh no. The immersion is way too strong.'

"You already qualify as a preparatory scholar. Good question. But you still don't understand faith cores.

The Ritual of Truth does leverage the Universal Axiom. But as I said, it works by using [Truth]'s power to restructure an object's faith core.

And though all faith cores carry traces of [Truth], they vary greatly in concentration.

Soil, rain, and air follow fixed patterns in the world — immutable. So their faith core [Truth] content is minuscule.

Trees grow toward the sun and wilt without water — they already exhibit subjective pattern-chasing. So their faith core [Truth] content reaches the 'Trace' level.

By this logic, you should easily understand the rest.

Humans — whose every action reflects the summarization of patterns — have the highest and most stable [Truth] concentration in their faith cores. So using people as consumables is actually the most 'economical' and efficient choice."

"..."

"..."

"..."

At that moment, Cheng Shi realized the Tower of Logic's supposed path of understanding the universe was nothing like he'd imagined. What they taught wasn't cosmic comprehension — it was a twisted doctrine of consuming human life like mowing grass!

No wonder every [Truth] experiment always came with enormous costs. Under such warped values, were those costs truly inherent to the experiments?

Cheng Shi snort-laughed and shook his head again. Behind him, Fang Yuan's face darkened as he asked:

"If that's true, shouldn't [Truth]-following scholars have the highest concentration?"

Not only do their actions align with civilization's patterns — their faith itself is extraordinarily pure. So why not use scholars as fuel?

Surely the Erudition Presidium doesn't develop a conscience over a few scholars, given how they scorn human life?"

Pe Laya glanced dismissively at Fang Yuan and snorted:

"Pointless emotions are the greatest obstacle on the path to [Truth]. They'll trip you up.

You think the scholars wouldn't think of something you came up with?

You think the wisest minds selected from this [Truth] nation's Erudition Presidium wouldn't think of it?

Heh. Ignorant.

I'll tell you this: the Tower of Logic's experimental law code includes one statute posted on every laboratory wall annually. It reads:

'All self-collapse methods of [Truth] exploration are forbidden.'

In other words: you cannot use your own life as raw material for your experimental projects.

This is prohibited. Otherwise... given scholars' madness, you can't even imagine the speed of this nation's self-destruction.

Hmph. The Erudition Presidium has never pitied life. Because we know life merely changes its form of existence. But we must preserve enough followers for our Benefactor.

[Truth]'s voice must not be extinguished on this continent — much less die in the Erudition Presidium's hands."

"..."

After hearing this, Cheng Shi suddenly felt that O221 and Wei Zhi truly were the most devout [Truth] believers — they were crazy in exactly the same way as the Erudition Presidium.

As for the Doctor... he still had a long way to go.

"Brilliant lecture!"

Meng Youfang applauded. He studied the Pe Laya he'd summoned with admiration:

"Worthy of a [Truth] follower. You've brought back some of my memories of this old friend."

The "old friend" in Meng Youfang's words was naturally [Truth]. The players understood his delusion — but Pe Laya couldn't possibly comprehend. So she fixed the bard with her coldest stare — an expression that clearly read: 'Are you delusional?'

Cheng Shi quickly intervened before his intelligence source and its source started fighting. He redirected both their attention.

And the question he interjected was one he'd been curious about for a while.

"Grand Scholar — since you still hold [Truth] so dear, can you tell me: how did you come to betray the Erudition Presidium?"

Surely it wasn't a sudden attack of conscience?

Frankly, conscience is something you people... probably don't possess. After all, in your view, life is just another form of existence."

The words hit hard. But Pe Laya didn't flinch — because she fell silent.

She gazed once more toward the Three Suns Tower. Then she pulled out a smile that drained the color from every face in the room.

"Betrayal is betrayal. I have no regrets.

After all, this world holds more than just [Truth]."

...

Chapter 1022: The Afterglow Church Comes Knocking

'Not just [Truth]?'

Besides [Truth], the only other faith that could view the entire world through "relatively rational" thinking was [Folly].

Connecting this to Galusha being a [Folly] follower...

'Bad news. Did Pe Laya get assimilated by Galusha?'

'She's treating [Folly] as the new [Truth]?''

But for a scholar who appeared so utterly composed — how had she so casually become a [Folly] follower? Besides, she showed none of [Folly]'s signature mannerisms.

Cheng Shi was curious, but this clearly wasn't the time for stray questions. Explaining the Ritual of Truth had already burned precious time. Pe Laya's form was beginning to fade — he had to seize the moment and ask what contingency plan the Erudition Presidium might prepare against the traitor and the invaders.

And that plan was most likely the trial experiment the players were searching for.

Pe Laya frowned, calmly analyzing every piece of information the players had fed her. Before long, her entire body shuddered. Her pupils contracted sharply and she raised her head, barely suppressing fury as two words left her lips:

"Retgression!"

'Retgression?'

Cheng Shi knew all about retgression. Pe Laya's own Barren Walker experiment had deconstructed spacetime — using bloodline as a guide to build spacetime linkages, then retrograding back to the Rosna Empire to find Dizel's soul inside the Gift of Sores.

But what would the Erudition Presidium retrograde to that era for? Even if they had the means to fuse an envoy's soul and shell through the Ritual of Truth, Dizel's soul was already gone — personally destroyed by that lord.

If so, what was the point of retgression? What could they possibly retrograde to?

Wouldn't this trial's answer — this supposedly critical [Truth] experiment — be fundamentally impossible to complete?

The thought stunned Cheng Shi. He genuinely hadn't expected previous wish trials to have blocked the path for this special trial.

The others were clearly familiar with this grand scholar's experiment too. Hu Xuan cast a knowing glance at Cheng Shi — same wavelength.

Only Fang Yuan frowned in confusion: "If the Ritual of Truth could truly assemble an envoy, the Tower of Logic would never have declined. Grand Scholar, are you sure they're continuing your unfinished experiment?"

"No. Who said they're continuing my experiment?"

Fusing a divine being isn't that simple, and time constraints make it even less feasible. They certainly plan to use retrogression to prevent current events — but the retrogression target definitely isn't the Barren Walker...

To deconstruct spacetime, you need a temporal linkage between two objects from different timelines. If I'm not mistaken, Volent and the others want to deconstruct the spacetime linkage not of the Barren Walker carrying pseudo-god potential — but of...

The Barren Walker and me!"

"And you!?"

Everyone's eyes sharpened. They immediately understood.

"You mean they want to deconstruct your spacetime linkage to retrograde and prevent your betrayal?"

Pe Laya nodded darkly. This was the only explanation she could think of.

Assembling a pseudo-god — questionable feasibility aside — would never be enough to halt the subterranean forces sweeping across the nation. But if Pe Laya's influence were erased at the root, then under the Ritual of Truth's enhancement, the Erudition Presidium could very well rebuild the ruined Tusnat!

"Not just me. They might also use it as bait to hook spacetime linkages related to her — to annihilate her at the source!

As long as the plague from the underworld is eliminated, Volent can use the Ritual of Truth to rebuild Tusnat."

By this point, Pe Laya's voice was practically grinding through clenched teeth.

Cheng Shi caught the shift. The "her" clearly meant Galusha. But even when analyzing her own targeting, the grand scholar's temperament hadn't wavered this much. Why did mentioning Galusha unleash such hatred — as if she wanted to slaughter every last member of the Erudition Presidium?

'They're that close?'

'Strange. How exactly did Galusha turn this [Truth] believer?'

Fang Yuan deliberated briefly, then seized the last moments before Pe Laya's reflection dissolved:

"Based on your knowledge of the Erudition Presidium — where would they set the trap for you?"

"Somewhere I can't anticipate."

"?"

"Activating the Ritual of Truth takes preparation time. If they want to use it to deconstruct the spacetime linkage between me and the Barren Walker, they'll want to delay my arrival as long as possible."

"So on this question, I cannot give you an answer."

"But without a hint, how can we help you?"

Cheng Shi saw the trail about to go cold again and switched to emotional manipulation. Though in truth, the way to clear this trial was probably to facilitate this very experiment.

Pe Laya was no fool. Even if she couldn't pinpoint the Erudition Presidium's location, she could have listed every plausible site for elimination — but she didn't.

She couldn't read these players' motives. And those detailed revelations earlier hadn't been pure cooperation — she'd had her own calculus of introducing variables into the game to buy her real self a sliver of survival.

As always, when time rewound to the Land of Hope, this world's natives were the era's true protagonists.

Pe Laya silently surveyed them. Her form gradually dissolved. The players exchanged glances, each with different expressions.

"That's grand-scholar cunning for you." Fang Yuan sighed, then turned to Cheng Shi: "Fate Weaver, it's been a pleasure working with you. But for efficiency, I'll head out first.

I'll sweep the south side for suspicious locations, then rendezvous at the time you set.

As for you three... together or separate, your call."

With that, Fang Yuan blasted open the void once more and vanished without looking back.

Watching the Elemental Judge leave, Cheng Shi suspected the "efficiency" excuse was fake — escaping Meng Youfang's delusions was probably the real motive.

Still, having a teammate who actually did trial work was a good thing. He glanced back at the compliant Hu Xuan, then at Meng Youfang with his "I'm sticking with you" attitude, and sighed inwardly.

'Time to adjust the plan.'

'Is it really this hard to score some points in a trial?'

"Life Sage, let's split up for a bit. For efficiency, please check the north side.

As for me... I've got another role to play."

The words had barely landed when — amid Hu Xuan's nod and Meng Youfang's mild confusion — three men and one woman appeared in the courtyard outside the laboratory.

The Afterglow Church. The very architects of the surface world's endless [Chaos]. They'd arrived with suspicious, trembling hearts of pilgrimage.

...

Chapter 1023: Galusha Again!

Hu Xuan left swiftly, not even sparing a glance at the visitors in the courtyard.

This mildly surprised Cheng Shi. He'd expected that even an accommodating friend like the Life Sage wouldn't treat a casual suggestion like a military order executed on the spot.

This wasn't Hu Xuan's style at all. More like she needed personal time for something else.

But in a Tusnat on the verge of total collapse — what could she possibly be doing?

For a friend, Cheng Shi felt only curiosity, not suspicion. But whatever Hu Xuan was up to, he had to finish his own performance first.

So, without any pretense, he pulled the church robes back on right beside Meng Youfang. Then, under the bard's contemplative gaze, he strolled out with casual confidence.

Meng Youfang didn't follow. He simply moved to the window and became a silent observer — because he believed what came next would be Cheng Shi's true self-introduction.

He was certain no mere mortal could "understand" him this well.

Seeing Meng Youfang stay put, Cheng Shi allowed himself a knowing smile. Everyone thought Meng Youfang was insane — but in his eyes, the man was a perfect scapegoat.

Whether it involved [Time]'s power or related topics, Cheng Shi could pin everything on Meng Youfang.

If the man's delusions were truly as "unwavering" as Cheng Shi suspected, he'd be a second Zhen Yi — someone who'd never refuse "responsibility" and might even volunteer for blame.

Of course, these were contingency plans. Whether they'd be needed depended on how many surprises this trial threw.

Turning to the front courtyard, Cheng Shi felt entirely at ease facing the Afterglow Church's leadership. After all, he was the "genuine" Ultraman. With the [Chaos] container in his hands, he had everything but an envoy's actual power — the identity lacked nothing.

So he slipped into character instantly. Seeing three men before him, he was already formulating how to berate them preemptively — to take pressure off the rest of his performance.

But just as the words reached his lips, he spotted a vaguely familiar face behind the three men. Combined with the vivid glimpse from the Tomorrow Truth tower earlier, Cheng Shi immediately identified the woman standing behind the Afterglow Church leaders — Galusha!

'What are you doing here?'

'I'm here to lecture the Afterglow Church. What's a [Folly] follower got to do with this?'

'Don't tell me after taking over the Extreme Desire Brotherhood, you've meddled in the Afterglow Church too? Are you the underground Emperor — calling shots everywhere?'

Cheng Shi went numb.

His reason for crudely throwing on a robe and playing himself was twofold: genuine confidence in his identity, and saving a mask.

He'd entered this trial as a [Fate] believer. He didn't want to remove his mask or use [Chaos] powers right away. That's why he chose the more direct route — presenting the [Chaos] container.

But he hadn't counted on Galusha tagging along. This madwoman should have been storming Tomorrow Truth tower to capture the Erudition Presidium. Why was she here making social calls?

Social calls were one thing — his real fear was that she'd already recognized him!

Indeed, Galusha definitely remembered Cheng Shi. Even if he was just a passing traveler in the Land of Hope's history, during that Montelani trial's finale, he hadn't forgotten how three idiot teammates had left his image at the scene of little Galusha's death.

So would this [Folly] follower, this mad avenger, confront him on the spot?

If she threw caution to the wind, his only option was switching back to his true faith and using undeniable [Chaos] authority to suppress the chaos.

Fortunately, Galusha merely glanced up at Cheng Shi, then "respectfully" lowered her head.

Her composure felt wrong, but there was no reason to abandon this rare opportunity. So Cheng Shi launched straight into the three Afterglow leaders:

"Beyond your rigid, idiotic devotion, I see not one trace of our Benefactor's will enlightening you!

Uncontrolled chaos might cause [Order] to crumble on its own — but this is [Truth]'s nation! The nexus of all patterns! Letting believers stampede blindly only helps these scholars find the rules, unravel the chaos, and reclaim Tusnat's control!

Have you gone so long without an audience that your thinking has already strayed from our Benefactor's will? Hmm?"

That single "hmm?" made all three elders who'd been about to verify his identity bow instantly. Eyes downcast, they exchanged sidelong glances — each wanting the other to speak first, yet telling themselves to absolutely not touch this hornet's nest.

Anyone who could wear that lord's robes — real or not — as long as he didn't deviate from the grand objective of taking the Tower of Logic, might as well be treated as genuine.

Even if they got the identity wrong, wasn't that in itself an offering to [Chaos]?

But if they challenged him and were proven wrong, they might lose more than just face.

So, following the principle of less talk, fewer mistakes, the three old men simply bowed lower and said nothing.

Cheng Shi clearly read their minds. He scoffed, unbothered. Completing his plan was all that mattered.

"That you still stand here at all — thank my Lord's mercy!

But your failure will disgrace me before the Temple!

The only way to recover your dignity is to follow my instructions to the letter. Do not make me summon you in the mortal world again.

Otherwise, the only thing that will prove your devotion next time... is your blood."

He flung a written edict at the middle elder's face. The man trembled, opened it — and froze.

"M-my lord... what is this?"

"What? Has proximity to [Truth] taught you to question?"

"!!!"

That accusation was tantamount to oathbreaking!

The three elders crashed to their knees, prostrating on the ground, not daring to move. The central leader, drenched in cold sweat:

"We dare not! My lord, forgive us! Benefactor, forgive us!

We are simply too dull to fathom your lordship's true intentions. Please, enlighten us further."

Cheng Shi snorted coldly. With eyes cold as [Fate] itself, he gazed at the only one not kneeling — Galusha — and said:

"Do you know why I call you failures?

The [Truth] followers in Tomorrow Truth have fled!

While you reveled in chaos, the Erudition Presidium vanished!

I won't deny that your chaos-making aims to attract our Benefactor's gaze and favor. But don't forget the Afterglow Church's mission.

This opportunity is once-in-a-millennium. Everything you see wasn't something you waited for — it was won because my Lord held back [Civilization]'s reinforcements.

So don't disappoint me. And don't disappoint Him."

"Yes, yes, yes!" By now, even without proof, the three were seventy to eighty percent convinced. But the edict's orders still baffled them. They bowed again:

"Please enlighten us, my lord."

"Fools. Since you've slowed the Tower of Logic's collapse, you must compensate elsewhere.

Draw [Order]'s gaze here. Under His very eyes, overthrow the order of this place — desecrate Him alongside it. That is the only way to salvage your dignity.

Remember: you are the Afterglow Church — not the Civiliz—"

Cheng Shi nearly said "Civilization Lonely Tower," but instantly realized this era predated [Folly]'s epoch. No such tower existed yet. He pivoted:

"—not [Civilization]'s slaves. If cooperation only slows chaos's spread, then such cooperation need not continue.

Leave."

"Yes, yes, yes!"

The three Afterglow leaders practically crawled out of the courtyard on all fours. Galusha frowned, gave Cheng Shi a meaningful look, and bowed as if she didn't recognize him before retreating.

But she hadn't taken two steps when Cheng Shi spoke again:

"Did I say you could leave?"

Galusha's steps halted. A mad grin curled her lips. She stood her ground, straightened, and locked eyes with Cheng Shi.

The three Afterglow men, seeing the lord openly rebuke [Folly]'s follower and refuse to associate with [Folly] — even singling out Galusha — naturally abandoned all pretense of alliance. They scrambled off to execute the edict.

Cheng Shi studied the woman before him — her eyes no longer as clear as they'd once been — and sighed with genuine emotion:

"Long time no see, little Galusha."

"Time has drowned everyone, yet it seems to have never dampened even the hem of your clothes."

The moment I saw you, I knew your identity was no simple thing. But I never imagined we'd meet again here.

So should I continue calling you 'my lord'... or should I call you Mr. Grind?"

...

Chapter 1024: The World's Suffering Is Known to [Truth]

Even Cheng Shi couldn't articulate his feelings toward this [Folly] follower.

He'd first heard her name from Zhen Yi's mouth. Then, because of [Fate]'s script, he'd met her in person during a trial.

Back then, [Fate] was still pushing for a fusion with [Folly] — though certain irreverent gods had sabotaged the plan.

Young Galusha, raised under Keinlaur's guidance, had been unmistakably clever and precocious. Cheng Shi could still recall the genuine emotional shifts in the little girl — the flickers of cunning wrapped in charm.

Now, those crimson eyes surged with open violence and a hunger for destruction. Her cold gaze was a perfect inheritance of [Folly]'s divine countenance — disdainful all equally. No — disdainful this entire world on a fundamental level.

Cheng Shi couldn't be sure whether it was the upheaval in her family's faith that had warped Galusha, or the side effects of the slice experiment that had created all this. Yes — Cheng Shi had naturally guessed she'd joined the slice experiment. Otherwise, she wouldn't have survived to this era.

By the facts alone, Galusha had changed enormously. Changed in ways that inspired "fear."

She seemed almost anti-human now. Judging by today's events, she was every bit [Folly]'s Fool Hunter — recklessly culling the world's "foolishness."

But the biggest contradiction: what she culled as "foolishness" was, by any current standard, the very embodiment of wisdom and knowledge.

From a [Folly] follower's perspective, these people might still qualify as "foolish." But strangely, while scholars died by the hundreds at her hands, ordinary citizens were barely touched.

Even accounting for faith opposition, this completely defied Cheng Shi's understanding of [Folly] believers. That's why he'd called her back — curious to know what was going on in her head.

Of course, if necessary, he might also detain her. For the trial's sake, clearing it was paramount. And to push the Erudition Presidium's experiment forward, Galusha might be the most critical ingredient.

"A name is just a label. No matter what you call me, I am who I am. Never changed."

Galusha clearly caught the subtext. She scoffed, the madness on her lips stretching wider.

"But I am no longer who I was."

[Order] decays. [Truth] corrupts the world. [War] sweeps through. [Civilization] crumbles at a touch.

Everyone wants to be the one who destroys civilization. Mr. Grind appears here disguised as the power behind the Afterglow Church — isn't that your aim as well?"

"Oh?" Cheng Shi's lips curled. A strange smile. "You think I'm acting?"

"Aren't you?"

From playing a prisoner to playing a knight — even 'Grind' itself was a role. Now you're playing [Chaos]'s agent. I'm genuinely curious: whose man are you really?

[Order]'s killer?

Lady Lid Yara did investigate the underground laboratory in Montelani. I once suspected you were her operative. But by the time I realized it, she was dead. No way to verify...

Hmm — apparently not. You showed no reaction to that name.

Then a [Truth] defector?

Grandfather told me everything. He said both you and Aunt Melina came with missions. If your roots lie in the Erudition Presidium — why help the Afterglow Church flatten the Tower of Logic now?

I've heard many scholars fled underground under the Erudition Presidium's persecution and joined [Chaos]'s camp. Are you one of them?

But if you've mastered the slice experiment's essence, why not share it with the Afterglow Church?

They're just tools for your machinations, aren't they?

So what does Mr. Grind plan next?

If your goal is to destroy this wretched world, then I... would happily become your partner."

Galusha smiled. But the smile was pure madness.

More [Oblivion] zealot than [Folly] Wise Man.

"..." Cheng Shi didn't know how to respond.

Every one of Galusha's guesses was wrong. Yet every single event she mentioned was connected to him — from Lid Yara to Melina to Chernosly. These threads were completely separate, yet they shared one nexus: himself.

So [Void] had long woven countless traces through history — and those traces were the predestined paths he'd walked.

He studied Galusha with a peculiar expression, then suddenly smiled:

"You've got your eye on my methods of controlling the Afterglow Church?"

Interesting. You don't seem curious about why I can play [Chaos]'s agent at all."

"Why should I be?"

[Chaos] has His reason for existing. I only need to know He isn't the universe's endpoint — and can never become it.

As long as the Afterglow Church continues cooperating with me, I don't care who stands behind them.

If it's an old friend, all the better."

"We're hardly friends, Galusha. When unknown forces covet from the shadows — doesn't that frighten you?"

Cheng Shi actually wanted to use the Death Fun Ring on her, but unfortunately, the ring had never collected her fear.

"The only thing I fear is that this world won't be destroyed by my hand."

"..."

His expression grew stranger. He felt he was conversing with a pure-bred fanatic.

"Why the rush to destroy the world?"

Relax — I'm just curious. As you can see, my control of the Afterglow Church isn't about saving the Tower of Logic either. To you, I'm more of a passing traveler.

Whether this place is destroyed has nothing to do with me. Satisfy my curiosity, and I won't interfere with anything you're driving. Deal?"

Galusha's frigid gaze lingered on him for a long time. She even considered drawing her whip to test whether she could simply eliminate this suspicious obstacle.

But for the grand plan, after lengthy deliberation, she chose restraint.

Because from the curve of his smile, she couldn't read a single chance of winning the confrontation.

"Truly?"

"Absolutely. I never lie." Cheng Shi's smile was radiance itself.

Galusha hesitated, then hatred for the Tower of Logic flashed through her eyes:

"The deception of my childhood was merely the catalyst for this path. Now, vengeance is no longer my sole purpose.

Over all these years — above and below ground — I've witnessed too much suffering. I know deeply that every tragedy is the bitter fruit of self-righteous humans playing with wisdom.

Those scholars who fled underground were right. To stop the world from repeating its tragedies, you must halt the foolish act of passing wisdom down through generations!

[Truth] shouldn't be known to the masses. Wisdom should rest in the hands of the few. Only then, amid the cheers of the ignorant, can the world find peace.

I am willing to bear the burden of wisdom. To become the misunderstood outcast — so that the pain I've endured will never befall others.

The world's suffering is known to [Truth]. And so the first step is to extract [Truth] from them!

This is [Folly].

May all life be foolish. May all civilization be ignorant. And thus: universal harmony. Peace under heaven."

"..."

'So you're actually a pacifist?'

Only then did Cheng Shi realize he'd been wrong about something. Influenced by the known history, he'd always assumed Galusha had been a [Folly] follower all along — yet never considered when this Wise Man, born in an [Order] nation and navigating countless subterranean faiths, had actually joined [Folly]'s camp.

Now he understood: it was those underground [Folly] seedlings that had influenced her. They'd transformed an avenger into a Wise Man.

And she, carrying [Folly]'s will, had stood atop the Tower of Logic's ruins and rung the bell that heralded the start of [Chaos] across the Land of Hope.

No wonder [Fate] had once chosen this very person for him to approach [Folly]. She truly was "foolish" — in the most devout sense. The question was: would her Benefactor appreciate such devotion?

Lost in thought, Cheng Shi raised his eyes to the horizon.

And in a place Cheng Shi couldn't see, a pair of eyes coated in chaotic white miasma gazed down upon everything in the world, sneering:

"Look. Another grand foolish act."

...

Chapter 1025: Brother, I Knew You Were No Ordinary Man

Galusha left.

Cheng Shi chose not to keep her. Not because the liar had turned over a new leaf and started keeping promises — but because he wasn't sure whether doing something to Galusha now would interfere with the Erudition Presidium's experiment.

Besides, the current Galusha was at most a slice. Capturing a slice served no real purpose. For the sake of scoring points, Cheng Shi deliberately played it safe.

No — doubly safe.

Given Galusha's undeniable [Folly] wisdom, he had to prepare for the possibility that the Erudition Presidium's trap would fail entirely. So during his conversation, he'd secretly marked her.

This way, if the current Galusha tried to scheme against him, what awaited her was Dolgod's iron bars.

With all that settled, Cheng Shi finally turned to Meng Youfang, who'd been watching from inside the laboratory. The God Worship Society president could barely contain his excitement. Clapping, he strode out.

He clearly wanted another handshaking session, but Cheng Shi smiled and stepped back — opening just enough distance between them.

Not cold enough to feel distant, yet it shifted their dynamic. From "sycophant and true god" to "two gods meeting as equals."

Meng Youfang's gaze visibly changed. He wasn't appraising a player — he was scrutinizing a... kindred spirit.

Staring straight into Cheng Shi's eyes, his smile turned warm:

"Good brother. I knew you weren't ordinary.

Mortals are too shortsighted to perceive my divine majesty. Yet you recognized me at first sight — proof enough that you're an old friend from the past.

No wonder. And I appreciate you lowering yourself to remind me. But the gods' trial isn't over yet. I still haven't recovered my memories.

So, my good brother — you must be... a subordinate of [Chaos]?"

Despite being neck-deep in delusion, Meng Youfang was still sharp. His logic was self-consistent. He knew Cheng Shi couldn't be one of the sixteen true gods, so he immediately classified him as a servant god.

More interesting still: even after pegging Cheng Shi as a "servant god," he dared converse as equals.

Cheng Shi could already imagine how absurd an audience with an actual god would be for this man.

Alas — [Time] had no time to receive His followers.

The man's delusions were bone-deep. But that was exactly what Cheng Shi wanted. 'If you weren't this crazy, I wouldn't dare scheme around you.'

Cheng Shi didn't claim the [Chaos] subordinate identity. All that groundwork — even performing in front of Meng Youfang — hadn't been for Ultraman's reputation.

The [Chaos] container's divinity was dripping fast enough. What he needed now was to accelerate the [Deceit] container's accumulation.

And so...

"No, no, no! Brother Meng — ha, allow me to call you that before you've reclaimed your seat — you're mistaken. I'm not [Chaos]'s subordinate. I am... [Deceit]'s envoy.

Let me reintroduce myself. My name is Yu Xi. A servant god of [Void]."

"[Deceit]'s envoy!?"

Meng Youfang's pupils contracted. Suspicion crept across his face.

He thought Cheng Shi was lying. He'd never heard of [Deceit] having any envoy.

Seeing that look of doubt, Cheng Shi was even more exasperated.

'Bro — you can believe you're the seventeenth god but can't believe I'm just an envoy?'

'Your delusion is way too exclusive, you know that?'

But these minor speed bumps couldn't stop a seasoned clown. Cheng Shi quickly smiled:

"Naturally. Everything just now is the best proof.

I borrowed [Chaos] Envoy Ultraman's identity to deceive the Afterglow Church — all to create enough entertainment in this trial to please my Benefactor.

And making them abandon chaos and obey order? That's the biggest joke of all, isn't it?"

Meng Youfang's gaze sharpened as he fell into thought. Shortly after: "What exactly did you make them do?"

Cheng Shi didn't answer, only smiled mysteriously: "Wait and see. Revealing a trick early ruins the fun."

This coyness made Meng Youfang believe a few more degrees. But liars had a notorious reputation — he had to be careful not to get swindled.

Not that he feared being tricked. Rather, he felt that being deceived during his trial might count as a failure. On the road to reclaiming his divine throne, he wanted zero blemishes.

But Cheng Shi understood human nature perfectly. He knew he had to push harder to cement his identity. The key to convincing someone like this wasn't arguing rationally — it was understanding, empathizing with, and immersing yourself in their logic!

Just like countering Zhen Yi with performance and fighting the Prisoner with chatter. You had to enter their framework to find the opening for victory.

So Cheng Shi began again — adding another layer to Yu Xi's disguise.

"My affairs are trivial. Your trial is what matters.

Speaking of which, if my Benefactor hadn't declined and [Fate] hadn't lost interest, the proctor role wouldn't have fallen to me.

Sigh, I'm hardly a qualified proctor either. Seeing you enjoy this game so much made my hands itch — so I jumped in too. Only now did I finally bump into you.

If not for your earlier insistence on strict conditions, I'd have pulled some strings long ago to speed up this trial.

Now I'm stuck too, with no idea when this game ends.

Brother Meng — why not just call it? Wouldn't returning to your throne early and launching the next era be better?"

"...?"

Honestly, since Meng Youfang had "awakened his divine self," this was the first time in any conversation that he'd been left speechless.

Before, whether facing probing or outright ridicule, the fully immersed Meng Youfang had always found a logical, self-consistent rebuttal against external attacks. But today...

No attack came. Instead, a "partner" showed up.

Fine — if this "partner" were genuine, that would be one thing. But choosing to be his proctor specifically, of all divine positions? What was that about?

Any normal person's first instinct would be to reject — nobody wants a burden or restriction imposed on them. But Meng Youfang wasn't normal. He believed he was that god. So he found Cheng Shi's identity perfectly reasonable — very reasonable — but with one condition:

'You can't scam me while my memory's sealed. You have to prove your identity is real.'

'This "reunion" wasn't my doing. As the one who broke the game's rules, you're responsible for earning my trust.'

Meng Youfang's eyes conveyed exactly this. Cheng Shi understood, smiled, and produced the [Order] ring.

"I know your memory hasn't returned. This is the embodiment of [Order]'s contract from within the Convention. Inside is the proctor's signature, personally verified by you when you initiated this game. In your current state, you can't read the text — but you should be able to feel the power."

With that, Cheng Shi casually tossed the ring to Meng Youfang. The instant it touched his palm, his eyes grew even more resolute.

"Yu Xi. Though I know you mean well, a trial is a trial!

I cannot end this self-imposed test so carelessly.

Let Them wait. This era still has a long road ahead.

Before the next era begins, I will reclaim my divine throne."

"..."

'Incredible. He actually took the bait.'

...

Chapter 1026: In This Kind of Match, Who'd Trust Anyone?

'Yeah, yeah, yeah. Whatever you say is right.'

Cheng Shi retrieved his ring and smiled at Meng Youfang:

"Brother Meng's resolve is ironclad. I was presumptuous. Since that's the case, I'll resume my player identity and properly complete this trial.

Please forget what I just said. We're not old friends reunited from a past era — we're new teammates meeting for the first time."

Meng Youfang's admiration deepened. Nodding repeatedly, he clapped Cheng Shi's shoulder:

"Since we've revealed ourselves to each other, no need to be so formal. But one rule must stand: no trial can be broken through with external help.

Your impersonation of the [Chaos] envoy counts as trickery, so we'll let that slide. But going forward, you can't use Yu Xi's power to lower the difficulty for me.

Otherwise, this trial loses its meaning."

"..."

Though inwardly speechless, Cheng Shi's eyes narrowed into a fox's smile.

'Where else would you find such a perfectly gullible mark?' Look — the man was even instructing him to put away Yu Xi's power.

'Me? Do I even have any?'

'Whether I do or not — I will absolutely keep them hidden. Promise.'

Cheng Shi was delighted. Who said delusional people couldn't be teammates? Under the right rhetoric, any force could be leveraged.

In this world, there were only incompetent liars — never a tongue that couldn't deceive.

Meng Youfang had zero awareness of being duped. He was genuinely happy about reuniting with an old friend.

"Now — where should we go?"

"Don't look at me like that. This isn't cheating. I'm treating you as a teammate, so naturally you should face my questions with a player's mindset."

"..."

'Self-consistent delusions are truly terrifying...'

Cheng Shi's smile froze momentarily. Then his eyes spun:

"To help the Erudition Presidium complete their experiment, we first need to find the grand scholars.

Same as before — increase efficiency. South and north are already covered. Let's split up and hunt for clues.

You can sense time. Make sure to rendezvous on schedule."

Meng Youfang approved of Cheng Shi's earnest trial attitude. Nodding, he left a brief "I'll take the east" and gave Cheng Shi a meaningful look before departing.

Watching him go, Cheng Shi marveled that the God Worship Society had somehow maintained its "worship" founding principle all this time. At least they still considered themselves human — aware of the divide between mortals and gods.

But this president? Terminal. Beyond any cure.

Still — what did that last look mean? Was someone else still here?

Cheng Shi went on alert. He first scanned peripherally. Finding nothing after a while, he switched tactics. A light cough:

"Time's running thin. Let's not play hide-and-seek. Come out, and say what you need to say."

A figure emerged from beyond the laboratory, strolling out with a smile.

Wei Zhi!

Cheng Shi had expected the [Deceit]-hating Chen Yi coming for seconds — not this combat expert.

'What — done with your snacks already?'

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow, waiting for an explanation. Wei Zhi surveyed the area, then smiled:

"Fate Weaver, I'm here as promised. Bringing my token of gratitude."

With that, he tossed two pale, glistening... things at Cheng Shi's feet.

'Brains!??'

Cheng Shi's own brain nearly short-circuited.

"Don't tell me these are..."

"They are.

The brain — vessel of wisdom — has always been a prime research subject for scholars. These before you came from two Erudition Presidium grand scholars.

Chen Yi abandoned his corpses. Waste not, want not — I enjoyed them in his place.

But I saved the best parts. From ancient times to present, brains have never been placed on either experiment tables or dinner tables. I believe this sufficiently demonstrates my sincerity?"

"..."

'If this trial continues much longer, I'm going to lose my mind.'

'Are these people still on human brainwave frequencies?'

'If I refuse, will this combat expert immediately turn around and cook brain stew?'

Feeling Wei Zhi's expectant gaze, Cheng Shi frowned — then decisively... accepted the gift.

He whisked the grand scholars' brains into his personal space. Seeing this, Wei Zhi was the one who froze.

Cheng Shi smirked: "What? You offered them. Having second thoughts?"

"Second thoughts? No, no, no!

Hahahaha! Meng Youfang was right — Cheng Shi, you really are a delightful fellow."

Wei Zhi tilted his head back laughing, clearly appreciating Cheng Shi's reaction: "Now that you've accepted— care to tell me where Zangier is?"

"Funny thing — you're all so certain he's still alive."

Wei Zhi nodded, his smile carrying layers: "So he is alive. Good."

"..."

"Death is merely a pointless end. Only the worthless get discarded.

Zangier entered the game personally, stole authority from a god to become a pseudo-god — already a feat. And then he survived the crushing pressure of multiple factions and divine wrath... Do you understand what that means?

It means his brain isn't just filled with scholarly accumulation and experimental insights. Most importantly, he's experienced the process of a mortal ascending to godhood!

The path of [Truth] is standing on predecessors' shoulders to see farther. Countless scholars, through one accident after another, built Zangier into this massive 'stepping stone.' If future generations are destroyed before they can even climb up and look — then whoever destroyed that stone is the sinner blocking this world's path to [Truth]!

Don't get worked up, Fate Weaver. The sinner I mean isn't you — it's 0221.

He tried to hoard Zangier for himself. Despicable...

But that's all past now. As long as Zangier lives, I have a chance to sav... to consult him on the enlightenment of godhood.

So — given how openly I've bared my heart, will you give me an answer, Fate Weaver?"

'Fair points, all of them. But badmouthing that lord so openly — aren't you afraid of being invited for "tea" someday?'

'That lord is genuinely petty. So you'd better be genuinely unafraid of death.'

Cheng Shi eyed him strangely. Rather than answering, he asked another question:

"Found the grand scholars' location yet?"

Wei Zhi frowned; his gaze gained a sharp edge: "Your deflection suggests you don't actually know where Zangier is, Fate Weaver."

"Of course I know. Don't forget — it was I who brought Go Lis.

You said you'd trade everything for Zangier. What — one extra question and you're backing out?

Wei Zhi, don't tell me you couldn't extract anything from the grand scholars' corpses?"

Wei Zhi's face froze. Darkly: "Trading everything buys the person, not the information about his whereabouts. Don't try to provoke me, Fate Weaver. The fact that I'm here conducting a civil transaction is already very courteous. I hope you—"

"What — want to fight?"

Cheng Shi scoffed. With a flick, a scalpel appeared. He tilted his chin upward at Wei Zhi:

"Go ahead. Maybe it's the fastest shortcut to seeing him?"

"..."

Wei Zhi's expression shifted multiple times — clearly suppressing fury. After a long silence, he exhaled heavily:

"They're in the west district's timber market warehouse. My answer?"

"You got that from the grand scholars' flesh and blood?"

"Correct. Through the [Truth] essence connection, I can pinpoint their location."

Cheng Shi frowned slightly. The man wasn't lying — but at this tier, even Master of Deception was only a reference. His eyes turned:

"Then why come to me first instead of finding them? I thought you were dying to merge with grand scholars."

"I will. Just not now. Fate Weaver — you really don't know where Zangier is, do you?"

"On [Birth]'s Divine Pillar." Cheng Shi smiled, making it up on the spot.

"?" Wei Zhi blanked. Then his brows twisted in rage: "You're lying!?"

"Tch. Though I follow [Deceit], I never lie. If you don't dare verify — why yell at me?"

"The Divine Pillar only connects extinct races! You're telling me he's alive!?"

Cheng Shi shrugged:

"I never said he was alive. You insisted he was.

[Truth]'s stepping stone might be useful to you, but for me it's just a stumbling block on the road.

[Void] doesn't need to climb. And has no [Truth].

I handed him to Go Lis. How He deals with it — what's that got to do with me?

Besides, just go pay [Birth] a visit. You'll know if I'm lying.

If He won't see you — well — I can make an introduction. The referral fee, however..."

"Hmph!" Wei Zhi snorted coldly. The fury suddenly drained, replaced by a long, meaningful look at Cheng Shi. "I understand your stance now, Fate Weaver. Don't regret this."

The combat expert left. He hadn't chosen to fight a priest head-on.

Cheng Shi pursed his lips and glanced toward the west district. Then he decisively headed in the opposite direction.

'In this kind of match — who'd trust anyone?'

...

Chapter 1027: Offering [Chaos]'s Lord an Orderly Rite

Cheng Shi was in no rush to find the grand scholars.

The trial's 3-day time limit showed the players still had breathing room. And he still held the Afterglow Church — the edict he'd issued did contain legitimate orders, with tracking the grand scholars being one of them.

The Toll Knights were probably already on the move. All Cheng Shi needed to do was find somewhere to avoid that [Memory] psychopath, then wait for the meet-up time with the Life Sage and the bard.

Of course, there was still one important thing to handle in between.

He wove through the streets of the central district, witnessing firsthand how [Chaos]'s will swept across this land of [Truth]. The Toll Knights, spears raised high, brought trauma and death to Tusnat's citizens and scholars. Organized resistance had all but collapsed. Masses of scholars gathered beneath the Tomorrow Truth tower, sworn to defend [Truth]'s last beacon to the death.

Galusha stood atop a platform built from scholars' skulls, surveying the Erudition Presidium's floor — ready to order the final assault at any moment.

That's when one of the Afterglow Church elders approached Galusha and shook his head.

Galusha frowned. Displeasure crossed her face, but she still stepped back, yielding the position.

The elder, standing upon the skulls, addressed the knights below. They looked confused but obeyed. In unison, every spear was lowered.

Before long, the entire city gradually quieted from its spiral of chaos. Even the smoke thinned.

And then — a single prayer boomed across the sky.

"Fabricated laws — a cosmic joke!"

[Chaos]'s believers, in that moment, abandoned chaos itself. In unified resonance, they performed a prepared orderly rite — offering their devotion to the supreme [Chaos].

Players scattered throughout the city startled at the sudden prayer. Watching Toll Knights raise their heads and pray to the heavens, they thought the Afterglow Church was activating some apocalyptic spell array.

Only Cheng Shi, hiding in a corner of the central district, smirked and snapped his fingers.

"Done!"

He immediately sprinted toward the west district — but didn't head straight for Wei Zhi's specified location. Instead, his agile movement and sharp eyes assembled the investigative puzzle of this city.

The west was a slum district. Building scale and street conditions differed starkly from other quarters. Tangled alleys should have been the biggest obstacle to searching — but the Toll Knights had already cleared those obstacles for the "boss."

After the brief pause of [Order], chaos resumed. War engulfed the city again. Cheng Shi watched the west district crumble under the knights' boots — yet found nothing resembling a hiding place.

The Afterglow Church hadn't sent word either, meaning the search was going poorly. Out of options, Cheng Shi finally turned his attention to Wei Zhi's tip: the timber market warehouse.

He'd actually surveyed that spot from afar during his earlier search. Already reduced to rubble. The timber had burned to ash. At a glance — nowhere to hide a person.

But above ground being empty didn't mean underground was too. Especially in a place like Tusnat, riddled with laboratories. Hidden underground experimental sites or large chambers were perfectly normal.

So Cheng Shi shifted focus to subterranean spaces. Underground reconnaissance was far slower than surface sprinting. Without someone like Big Cat to barrel through walls, he could only methodically probe for entrances.

Before long, he found one — at the base of a collapsed wall beside the timber warehouse!

The entrance bore faint traces of formation energy. Without getting close, it was impossible to notice the hidden world beneath this crumbled corner.

"Really here?"

Cheng Shi frowned. Something about this felt wrong at every level.

Wei Zhi was no fool. After reading Cheng Shi's dismissive attitude, he'd still revealed the Erudition Presidium's exact hiding place? That itself was suspicious. Add the man's identity as Reason Association president...

Don't forget: the Reason Association was, to some extent, born from the Tower of Logic's influence. Though this organization had chosen an entirely different path of madness, lunatics would stop at nothing to achieve their goals.

So Wei Zhi couldn't possibly be this generous.

Considering his opening position — wanting to keep all corpses for his meal — this man probably hadn't taken the trial seriously at all. What he wanted was maximum personal gain from this scenario. After all, not everyone was lucky enough to stumble into the Erudition Presidium's doomsday.

So his sharing this location could only mean one thing...

"Using me as a mine sweeper?"

Tch. Well played."

Cheng Shi smiled. He memorized the location, then walked away as if he'd never been there.

Shortly after his departure, a nearby ruin suddenly collapsed. Dust and rubble cascaded down. And within the hollow gaps formed by broken timber and stone, a pair of bloodstained eyes quietly opened. From beneath the debris came a soft, scoffing laugh:

"Cautious fellow. But whoever enters first makes no difference."

...

Cheng Shi didn't pin all his hopes on the timber warehouse underground. He continued circling the west district, discovering several more subterranean spaces along the way. Most had been destroyed by Toll Knights; the few intact ones showed no signs of life.

As time wore on, Cheng Shi accepted that it was probably there after all. But being prudent, he waited until the agreed meeting time before returning to the vicinity of the Yesterday Truth tower.

By now, Galusha had led her forces into Tomorrow Truth. The tower's lower floors had become a meat grinder. Toll Knights surged in like waves, only to be blasted out by screaming magic. Bodies piled with each cycle.

The scholars fared worse. Each dead knight at least remained a corpse, but every fallen scholar had their head severed by Galusha and strung together like beads.

She burned freely beneath the tower, roasting scholars' skulls until they cracked — as if trying to drive [Truth] out of humanity's minds this way.

The sight drove the scholars inside Tomorrow Truth to the brink of madness — terrified yet enraged beyond reason. They unleashed magical attacks on the Afterglow Church, but Galusha returned her own "magical attacks" — the kind that destroyed sanity.

"She's an absolute lunatic. I won't deny that time has distilled wisdom into her — but it's also concentrated her madness.

Stay away from her. Madness is contagious."

...

Chapter 1028: Who Goes to Break the Trap?

Fang Yuan arrived first. The round-faced chubby fellow truly was the most orderly person in this trial. Even bearing a reputation for disobeying [Order], he'd arrived at Yesterday Truth before the agreed time.

He hid in a corner of the tower's ruins and waved Cheng Shi over.

Cheng Shi was hiding in a corner too. He could hardly stand atop the ruins in plain sight waiting to be spotted. But when Fang Yuan beckoned, he didn't move — instead inviting Fang Yuan to come to him, simultaneously asking with his eyes what leads the man had found.

Fang Yuan sometimes thought this Fate Weaver was fine in every way except for being too cautious. With skills at this tier, walking a few steps over was impossible to detect.

But upon reaching Cheng Shi's position, he realized he'd underestimated the Fate Weaver's caution. There in the collapsed corner were three magic lamps, each half-shielded — filling the space with shadowless light.

Fang Yuan was speechless: "I thought you were guarding against the Afterglow Church. Turns out you're guarding against Chen Yi?"

Cheng Shi smiled: "Better safe than sorry. Harbor no ill will toward others, but never drop your guard against them.

Galusha is a lunatic — guard against her. Our own teammate is also a lunatic — naturally guard against him too."

Fang Yuan's expression turned odd: "You're implying something, Fate Weaver."

"If a follower of Him doesn't toss a barb or two, I'd seem insincere. Relax — it wasn't aimed at you.

So — find anything?"

"Nothing." Fang Yuan's face went serious instantly. "I saved quite a few scholars through rescue operations and extracted some secret lab locations from them. But none showed traces of grand scholars — just civilians hiding.

Honestly, your time window was too short. Tusnat is huge. Even with just one direction, I could barely manage a thorough sweep.

But my instinct says the Erudition Presidium isn't in the south district. You — find anything?"

"A trap."

"Trap?" Fang Yuan started. "Whose? The grand scholars'? You found them?"

"Not certain. It could also be a trap left by the Reason Association's leader. So I came back to discuss with everyone before probing further."

As they debated Wei Zhi's suspicious behavior, the agreed time was nearly up — yet the Life Sage still hadn't returned.

Right at the deadline, Meng Youfang appeared exactly on the dot. Expressionless, he walked toward them.

Meeting Cheng Shi's questioning look, he shook his head:

"Nothing. Lots of experimental traces and sites, but none connected to the Erudition Presidium.

I skipped the obvious buildings and focused on inconspicuous alleys and odd corners. Still nothing.

I subdued countless Toll Knights and scholars along the way, but not one had useful information.

This is [Truth]'s city, after all. As its rulers, the grand scholars could hide far too easily."

He pointed skyward with a smile: "For example — the void. Have you checked the experiment grounds up there?"

The moment he finished, the sky above the ruins tore open. A black-skirted silhouette descended gracefully from the void. The instant she landed, she shook her head at Cheng Shi:

"Nothing. The void's situation is no better than Tusnat's. The Afterglow Church hasn't forgotten the grand scholars' capabilities — warfare there is even fiercer than in reality.

The north is also empty. Every place I could think of — no trace of the grand scholars."

Cheng Shi naturally trusted Hu Xuan. But the others were another matter. Fang Yuan listened and frowned:

"Life Sage, I don't doubt your ability. But searching both the north district and the entire void in this limited time...

What I mean is — were you thorough?"

Hu Xuan smiled at Fang Yuan: "Naturally. My methods may be more thorough than yours. If you don't believe me — come~"

She extended her hand. Fang Yuan's face changed. He believed her.

"..."

When this scene played out between others, it was rather amusing. Cheng Shi wanted to laugh but didn't dare. He cleared his throat and told everyone about discovering a hidden underground space in the west district — prompted by Wei Zhi's tip.

Meng Youfang heard this and immediately volunteered to venture in. Cheng Shi grabbed him — thinking, 'I finally found a perfect scapegoat; if something happens to you, how do I operate later?'

But this gesture gave Meng Youfang the wrong idea. He thought Yu Xi was warning him about the trap's danger — covertly lowering his trial difficulty. So he declared with righteous solemnity:

"I must face every challenge head-on, leaving no blemish on my path of return.

Good brother, I understand your eagerness for our reunion, but rules must be followed. This is the road I must walk."

"..."

At this, the sole [Order] believer present couldn't hold back. Fang Yuan glanced oddly at Meng Youfang, certain the man was about to start calling his Benefactor "brother."

Sure enough, Meng Youfang continued: "...It's also my respect for my old friend, [Order]."

"..."

Cheng Shi's forehead throbbed. He wondered what spell could cure delusion.

'You respect [Order] so much — does [Chaos] sitting on [Order]'s throne know?'

Well, [Pride (Order)], chained behind [Chaos]'s throne, certainly didn't know.

Regardless, Cheng Shi refused to risk his scapegoat. So he offered a safer suggestion:

"This trial is a six-person game. To clear it, everyone should contribute something.

Even if Wei Zhi has an agenda, at least he shared the location. So the one teammate who hasn't contributed — shouldn't they step up?"

Clearly aimed at Chen Yi — but the [Memory] follower wasn't visibly present.

Everyone scanned their surroundings. They assumed Cheng Shi had detected his presence. Little did they know, Cheng Shi had no idea where Chen Yi was.

He just feared the psychopath had nothing to do and would turn around and drill him again. Better to find the fellow some work — and make use of him in the process.

Hu Xuan, confused: "Even if he's here, why would he listen to you?"

"I'm not expecting him to. I'm just saying — what if [Memory] happens to be in that underground space?"

"?"

Pure nonsense, and every intelligent person knew it. The hook was absurdly transparent — couldn't even stay in a fish's mouth.

But Cheng Shi pivoted:

"Even if He isn't there — a memory of being willingly used for His sake and self-recorded in the process... shouldn't that qualify for entry into His Collection Hall? Worthy of becoming an exhibit to please Him... right?"

The moment those words landed, everyone sensed something vanish from a nearby shadow.

'!!!'

'Wait — you were actually here!?'

'Fine, you were here — but you actually bit!?'

'What hook was there to bite? This was a fisherman taping a photo of bait to his line — and the fish climbed up the string!'

'How could something this absurd exist in this world!?'

Nobody could speak.

Fang Yuan stared at Cheng Shi in utter shock, eyes wide: "Your [Deceit] people are playing open schemes now? Have some decency..."

Cheng Shi hadn't actually expected Chen Yi to be there. He'd had backup plans. But with someone volunteering to sweep mines, the backups were unnecessary.

He instantly mirrored Fang Yuan's shock, pretending ignorance: "I told you, I was just making conversation. What just happened?"

"..."

They'd seen shameless people before — never one this shameless. A liar's mouth truly held no truth.

But regardless of whether the liar's words were genuine — some people's feelings... were painfully real.

...

Chapter 1029: [Truth] Formation — The Grand Scholars Are Really Here!

Chen Yi actually went to break the formation.

He wasn't stupid — just obsessed.

He knew perfectly well Cheng Shi was fishing. But when those words "willingly" were spoken, he found an emotional resonance — and truly became willing.

He was willing to do anything for [Memory]. Willing to collect exhibits for Him. Willing to fill that Collection Hall until it overflowed with splendor — so that through these omnipresent traces, he could "live" in [Memory]'s "home."

How divine infatuation forms is hard to pin down. But for someone who admires strength, worships mystery, and is deeply nostalgic, [Memory] fulfilled every beautiful fantasy of a partner. So from the moment at the Path Starting Point when he picked up that old photograph, Chen Yi had fallen in love.

He believed [Memory] reciprocated. Why else would He have brought him this far in barely half a year?

'Chosen One!'

To become [Memory]'s Chosen, he'd had to surmount two insurmountable mountains: Li Jingming and Like A Dream.

And now? Li Jingming had been "exiled" to [Deceit]. Like A Dream had simply vanished. Didn't all these signs prove He was introducing him — sparing no effort — to others, to other gods?

That's how Chen Yi saw it. Chosen — not just his choosing Him, but Him choosing him.

He wanted to share this joy with others. Share the thrill of His gaze. But ever since sharing once with Zhen Yi, he'd concluded that every malice in the world stemmed from jealousy of their love. The world was united in obstructing this relationship. Especially [Deceit]'s followers.

'They deserve death!'

But this Cheng Shi... had a point. He should memorize a willing memory for himself.

Though that's all it was — a good point. Following [Deceit] was his original sin. After recording this memory, Chen Yi would conveniently send this [Deceit] follower into the past too — let him lie in eternal [Memory] as a witness to love.

Quickly, Chen Yi found the timber warehouse and the formation hidden in the rubble. Though an assassin, his extensive knowledge — courtesy of [Memory]'s blessing — let him identify the formation's origins: definitely the work of Erudition Presidium grand scholars.

The array patterns bore the Erudition Presidium's "signature."

He began dismantling. He had no interest in what lay beneath. He knew [Memory] couldn't possibly be here. But a whisper of hope still rose — a self-deceiving yearning.

Of course, recognizing and actually breaking were two completely different things. He wasn't a fool. He wouldn't endanger himself. So his method wasn't doing it personally — he'd found a "stand-in."

He stood in the shadows near the formation, threw out the figure trapped within, and pointed at the formation:

"Break it. I'll return your freedom."

The figure frowned, turning to face Chen Yi with composure: "And if I refuse?"

"Then you'll permanently lose any chance of reuniting with your lover. I told you — the only reason I didn't banish you to the past is that your love defied convention. That's what I wanted to see.

But your love has lost its purity. You've developed thoughts of betrayal. Nothing disgusts me more than infidelity.

So seize this chance. If you help advance my relationship with Him, I can turn a blind eye to this blemish on love. After all, mortal love — no matter how transgressive — is never as profound as ours. Not worth memorizing."

"..."

'This person is insane.'

The figure stood before Chen Yi for a long time. His patience wore thin. He couldn't admit his own inadequacy — couldn't let others arrive before he'd broken the formation. That would stain this "willing" memory.

"Last chance. Either you act, or I do. Choose."

The figure stiffened. Clearly resolved not to comply.

Chen Yi's eyes darkened. He flung his dagger. But just as the blade pressed against the figure's neck, he suddenly stopped — and asked with genuine curiosity:

"I see now. The secret beneath this formation involves her, doesn't it?"

You think those old men want to harm her, so you won't act?

Mortal love is so fragile. The moment a crack appears, it's kill or be killed.

Heh. Now I'm actually starting to sympathize with your lover.

But what puzzles me is — I can still see infinite love in your eyes. So tell me: is that love the excitement of having moved on to someone new, or something you're hiding?"

"None of your business!"

"But it's my dagger's business." Chen Yi smiled as the blade drew blood. His tone turned ice-cold: "Act. Otherwise — whoever your love is for — I'll kill her immediately."

"You can't kill her."

"Oh? Want to try?"

"..."

The figure trembled. Staring into those deranged eyes, she slowly relented.

Ignoring the dagger at her throat, she wrenched her head away — tearing a line of blood — and walked toward the formation without looking back. Watching this, Chen Yi murmured:

"Still in love..."

But if the love remains, why won't you stop the Erudition Presidium?

Mortal love is truly complicated. Good thing my feelings are pure enough."

...

After detecting Chen Yi's departure, the players needed confirmation regardless. Under Cheng Shi's lead, four of them circled to the west and reached the timber warehouse.

What they saw defied belief:

A slender figure stood at the formation's center, dismantling traps with practiced, expert movements. Fire, lightning, thorns, and falling stone exploded and hummed around her.

Good news: the formation's energy was fading. The breakthrough was imminent.

Bad news: the commotion was enormous. Anyone below now knew people were here — and that the intruder was someone they recognized!

Nobody expected the person breaking the formation to be not Chen Yi — but Pe Laya!

The four who'd just met Pe Laya's temporal reflection were now face to face with the real thing — right at the entrance to the Erudition Presidium's hideout!

But how? Why was she here?

Cheng Shi frowned and scanned the area. Soon he spotted "supervisor" Chen Yi in a shadow on the other side. Chen Yi sensed the gaze and shot him an ice-cold glance, smirking as he drew a dagger across his own throat in a "you're next" gesture.

Cheng Shi wasn't fazed. A fish that bites a straight hook was probably single-minded. He was safe before the formation broke — and with Meng Youfang and Hu Xuan flanking him, one Old Days Hunter couldn't cause waves.

What truly unsettled him was Pe Laya's presence.

The Erudition Presidium's scheme was clearly aimed at her and Galusha. But if the "target" just showed up at the grand scholars' doorstep...

'Hss—'

'Did [Fate] intervene?'

'Otherwise how could this round go so smoothly?'

Cheng Shi's heart clenched.

...

Chapter 1030: Get Out, or Die

Following normal logic, if [Fate] personally appeared to shelter him, it meant this trial was anything but easy.

Why else would He shatter reality's veil and descend before the trial even began?

Irreverence was irreverence, banter was banter — Cheng Shi needed to take [Fate]'s descent seriously as guidance. So right now, he was extremely cautious.

Even with the formation's collapse imminent, he didn't rush. He simply shook his head, signaling everyone to keep observing — see how the people below would react to Pe Laya's appearance.

He hadn't forgotten what Pe Laya's reflection had said: the grand scholars were likely using the Barren Walker's shell to construct a spacetime linkage with Pe Laya, then retrograding to the past to prevent her betrayal.

So their target had to be the past Pe Laya — not the current one breaking the formation.

After all, preventing her past self could at least slow Tusnat's fall, buying the grand scholars more time to salvage everything.

But Pe Laya's current appearance might trigger another possibility — something her reflection had also mentioned. If the grand scholars could capture the real Pe Laya, they might directly use her to construct a spacetime linkage with Galusha — retrograding further into the past to stop Galusha!

If so, this experiment the players needed to push forward might become a defensive siege. Just keep Galusha from disrupting the grand scholars' work, and the trial would likely be cleared.

But could it really be that simple?

Cheng Shi pondered. Don't forget — he controlled the Afterglow Church. That meant Galusha had lost her largest surface army. What leverage did she have to break through a cordon of peak players and interfere with the experiment?

Wouldn't this special trial just become a giveaway?

Something felt off. Could the experiment hold surprises?

While he was thinking — BOOM. The formation shattered.

Instantly, cascading light surged from the underground space, coiling around Pe Laya like chains before she could dodge — and dragging her in.

At the same moment, Chen Yi moved. He vanished into the shadows, streaking toward the [Deceit] follower who "dared obstruct his love."

Cheng Shi knew he couldn't wait any longer. He had to seize the moment — determine the grand scholars' actual situation and whether the trial's difficulty lay in experimental steps or fighting Galusha.

So he barked decisively:

"Brother Meng, hold off Chen Yi! Life Sage, stay up top — alert us if Galusha appears! Fang Yuan, with me underground. If the experiment's real, we need to ensure the grand scholars succeed in one shot!"

He whispered "watch out for Wei Zhi" in Hu Xuan's ear, then snapped his fingers to teleport himself to the formation's entrance and dropped in.

Fang Yuan was just as fast. He blasted open the void with a wave and stepped through into the underground space.

The chubby fellow was remarkably skilled at void-walking. Perhaps for him, traveling through the void was just another way of exploiting reality's loopholes.

But when he materialized in the vast underground chamber, the Cheng Shi who'd jumped in first was nowhere to be seen.

Fang Yuan frowned. Cautiously raising his staff, he began channeling elemental forces to construct a barrier while softly calling Cheng Shi's name, inching forward.

It wasn't until he turned past a corridor wide enough to qualify as a room that Cheng Shi's voice sounded — from behind him.

"So the grand scholars really didn't leave any traps down here."

"?"

Fang Yuan's face darkened. He instantly understood: Cheng Shi's "jump" had been feigned — staged for his benefit. The crafty [Deceit] follower had pulled back, letting Fang Yuan scout ahead.

He wanted to blast his staff backward. But then Cheng Shi laughed:

"Don't misunderstand, Judge. I was simply worried about ambushes behind you. So I bravely chose to guard the rear.

See? Entrusting me with your back is perfectly safe, right?"

"Like hell. The biggest threat behind me is you, Fate Weaver. Your turn to lead!"

Cheng Shi stopped mid-step, expression instantly grave:

"Bad news — danger behind us. You go first. I'll hold the rear!"

"..."

'Do I look convinced?'

Fang Yuan didn't budge. Half-smiling, he studied this Fate Weaver who absolutely refused to go first:

"The elemental traces from my barrier will alert me to any surrounding changes. Cheng Shi — stop trying. I'm not falling for it.

Today, either you lead or we both sit here until the trial timer runs out. Your call.

I'm genuinely confused — we're here to help the grand scholars. Why does it feel like some covert sabotage operation?"

Left with no choice, Cheng Shi moved to the front. He scanned their surroundings cautiously while muttering:

"Can't be too careful, Judge.

It'd be great if trials were this smooth. But I fear this experiment's threats are both internal and external. Galusha wants to interfere from outside, sure — but are the grand scholars' own ranks really secure?

If they were, the Tower of Logic would have won in the history books."

Fang Yuan never denied Cheng Shi's logic. He just refused to be used as a mine canary again and again. Once Cheng Shi was up front, his resistance became agreement.

"..."

Cheng Shi sighed and kept leading.

They hadn't gone far when a white-bearded grand scholar appeared before them, leaning on a staff used like a cane. Cheng Shi's step faltered. Eyes narrowing, he recognized the man — Asgis, the grand scholar Wei Zhi had mentioned at the very start.

They really hadn't died. They really were hiding here!

But the grand scholar's state was bizarre. His expression was stiff, yet his eyes churned with turbulent fury. Body slightly rigid, he took two labored steps forward, raised his staff, and warned coldly:

"Get out. Or die."

Fang Yuan also noticed the abnormality. Frowning: "Something's wrong with the grand scholar. It's like he's..."

"Being controlled!"

Cheng Shi's heart sank. The man's suppressed rage reminded him of Galusha outside — about thirty percent similar. Was this another of Galusha's contingencies?

But he had to explain their purpose first. If words could resolve the misunderstanding, negotiations would flow smoother.

So Cheng Shi raised both hands — showing himself harmless — and smiled:

"Grand Scholar, we're here to help—"

"DIE!"

Asgis gave no chance. Mid-sentence, his staff swung toward Cheng Shi.

The void on both sides of the underground chamber tore open — then collapsed inward, crushing toward the pair like collapsing walls.

"Void Mass-Energy Department!"

Cheng Shi's face changed. His raised hands scattered dice across the ground. Then a snap — and he reappeared behind Fang Yuan.

"I'll watch the rear. You handle him!"

"???"

'Even now you want to watch the rear!?'

'Is there anyone back there!?'

Before Fang Yuan could formulate an insult, energy rippled through the previously empty corridor behind them. Teleportation array lines blazed to life along the walls. Two figures — one male, one female — stepped out from either side simultaneously.

Cheng Shi stopped smiling.

"Burza and Nellie!"

Fine — Fate Weaver, you watch my back. I'll focus on Asgis!"

Every fire element in the surrounding space surged toward Fang Yuan.

...