

The Gods 1041

Chapter 1041: Retrogression Experiment — Back to the Past

"Simple. Have Pe Laya break the formation.

Then come in with me. I'll clear every obstacle, and you — just go back in time and kill Selius. That's all."

On the way to the west district, Cheng Shi briefed Chen Yi on everything about Montelani.

The good thing about [Memory] followers: they remembered everything after hearing it once. Under the laid plan, Cheng Shi once again reached the underground experiment ground ahead of Chen Yi, blended in with the scholars, and began tagging everyone indiscriminately.

He hadn't found time to explain things to Aph Ros, but the situation demanded he borrow Go Lis's help once more. He had to eliminate every obstacle so the grand scholars themselves could activate the experiment and send Chen Yi back — only then could this Galusha-hijacked experiment actually succeed.

This time — it was a strike at [Folly]'s root!

Soon, Cheng Shi had circled the experiment ground multiple times, tagging every scholar outside the echelons. When the grand scholars captured the formation-breaking Pe Laya and suspended her in midair — when the first echelon boarded the departure platform — Cheng Shi finally found his opening to dart into the standby room and tag the reserve echelon too.

Just as Galusha charged in with her whip again, Cheng Shi greeted her with a smile and activated the Sinner's Redemption.

And then...

He got whip-launched out again.

"???"

Cheng Shi's brain short-circuited.

'What? Go Lis went on strike?'

'Seriously!?!'

'Bro, for real?'

'I only owe you one explanation! You're going to drop the ball at the most critical moment?'

Out of options, Cheng Shi had to rush ahead of Galusha's plan to slit Grind's throat, then teleported into the experiment corridor to rendezvous with Chen Yi, who was facing off against the three grand scholars.

He explained they were here to help — Galusha was the saboteur. Only by letting them through could the experiment succeed. If they kept wasting time blocking him, Galusha would win!

The three puppet-like grand scholars showed no urgency or concern for the experiment. But after exchanging glances, they silently stepped aside, letting Cheng Shi and Chen Yi through.

'That cooperative now?'

Cheng Shi was suspicious but had no time for analysis. One step at a time — deal with Galusha first.

Of course, nuclear options were off the table now. The only path was peace.

Cheng Shi led Chen Yi to face Galusha. Inside the experiment ground — already beginning to explode — he told her:

"Send him back. Otherwise, you'll never topple the Tower of Logic.

I said so."

Facing this mysterious old acquaintance, Galusha's expression was pitch-dark. She'd assumed Cheng Shi only wanted a share of the Tower's spoils — never imagining he'd interfere with her retrogression experiment.

Absolutely not. This experiment concerned her own awakening.

So Galusha refused. But the next second — Galusha died in an assassin's arms.

Chen Yi dropped her corpse, expression ice-cold. He surveyed the room: "Who else needs killing?"

In that moment, his lethal detachment seemed to say: anyone who stood between him and an audience with [Memory] was his lifelong enemy.

"..."

Even Cheng Shi went blank.

'Bro — you're not afraid of karmic consequences? You'd actually kill Galusha?'

But what was done was done. To seize victory in one blow, they had to force the experiment forward.

Under Cheng Shi's rapid-fire intelligence, Chen Yi became a blade weaving through shadows — striking wherever directed, killing whoever he touched.

The Old Days Hunter, for one glimpse of an audience, had unleashed his full potential.

Cheng Shi even worried whether the man's exhausted body could survive the trip to the past and complete the mission.

The moment Galusha died, the underworld moles inside the experiment ground shifted strategy — frenzied destruction, trying to wreck everything. But under the combined suppression of Cheng Shi and the grand scholars, the teetering experiment ground fired its spacetime energy beam at the last possible second, transmitting the sole person on the departure platform — Chen Yi — into the past that could save the Tower of Logic.

An explosion roared. Cheng Shi had to abandon the underground space and teleport to the surface. The massive blast attracted the Death Knell Knights.

As more [Chaos] followers converged, Cheng Shi said nothing. He simply pulled on a church robe, pointed at the massive crater, and commanded coldly:

"Secure the site. No one in, no one out.

The Afterglow Church stands by. I don't want surprises."

The approaching knights were uncertain of his identity. One started to question—

BOOM—

A thunderbolt. Instant silence.

"Yes — as the lord wills!"

All of Tusnat seemed to go quiet again.

Cheng Shi stood at the crater's edge, tapping his ring, calculating when Chen Yi would return. The grand scholars hadn't emerged from the rubble — they seemed to have shed their old shells and reconstituted elsewhere.

The commotion drew more than the Afterglow Church. Galusha herself arrived — the enraged [Folly] follower smashed through the Death Knell cordon, whip in hand, demanding answers. But before she could reach Cheng Shi, two white-haired elders intercepted her.

One spoke gravely:

"Galusha. Know your place. Do not offend the divine countenance."

Galusha scoffed, eyes narrowing at the old man: "How do you know he's a god? Can't a 'god'... be fake?"

The elder lifted one eyelid, then lowered his gaze, voice a low rumble:

"Real or fake — what of it?"

If real, I am devout.

If fake, when the true lord comes to question me, I can still be considered devout.

This... is Chaos."

"Ha. A fine bit of calculation. The Afterglow Church's hundred-year grand plan is about to be ruined by this person — and you're content with that?"

"The lord's will is the Afterglow Church's will. The Church's plans exist only to serve the lord's plans."

"Utterly foolish!" Galusha lashed the elder aside. Just as she was about to clash with Cheng Shi, another figure stepped in her way.

A woman whose presence could rival Galusha's own.

Hu Xuan!

The Life Sage had finally arrived. With a slight frown, she plucked Galusha's whip aside, half-turned, and asked:

"Cheng Shi, what happened?"

Cheng Shi shook his head softly: "I'm waiting for an answer. But I suspect the answer might be wrong, because..."

He looked at the very-much-alive Galusha. If she could show up here to cause trouble, it meant Chen Yi's retrogression had failed. Otherwise, history wouldn't have allowed Galusha to survive to the present.

Sure enough — the next second, a distortion rippled through spacetime. A battered figure crashed into the experiment ground's crumbled pit!

Chen Yi!

He was back.

Cheng Shi rushed to help him up — and saw that the dagger lodged in Chen Yi's shoulder was his own.

'Ha. Clever hunter — he'd "exiled" himself back.'

Seeing Cheng Shi, Chen Yi's eyes blazed with manic excitement. He seized Cheng Shi's hand:

"Mission accomplished. I can finally see Him—"

Mid-sentence, his gaze swept past the crater's edge and landed on Galusha. He went rigid — as if struck by lightning.

"THIS IS IMPOSSIBLE!!"

Chapter 1042: Another Failure — A Flaw in the Experiment Parameters?

"I killed her! I know I did!"

The instant those words reached her ears, Galusha's eyes blazed crimson. She lashed out with her whip at Chen Yi, but he was faster — a blur of shadow-step carried him behind her in an instant. Dagger in hand, madness burning in his eyes, he plunged the blade into the small of her back.

It wasn't enough. The moment her body crumpled, Chen Yi ripped the dagger free without a heartbeat's hesitation and drew it across Galusha's throat.

Chest heaving, he hurled the corpse to the ground, hoisted Galusha's severed head, and screamed at Cheng Shi in raw desperation:

"I killed her — look! I really killed her!"

That counts as a success, right? I'm not lying — I really killed her!

Give me the chance to have an audience with Him, just give me one chance..."

His voice trailed off as his legs gave out beneath him, and he dropped to his knees. Clearly, he didn't need Cheng Shi's answer — he already knew. The mission had failed.

Head bowed, hollow gaze fixed on the ground, he muttered to himself:

"How is this possible... How can she still be alive? She can't still be alive..."

Everyone who witnessed the scene furrowed their brows in confusion. Hu Xuan was especially baffled — how had Cheng Shi and Chen Yi ended up together in the short time she'd looked away?

Cheng Shi offered Hu Xuan no explanation. Expression grim, he walked over to Chen Yi, crouched beside him, and said:

"Tell me what happened. We're not out of options yet..."

"Really?!"

Chen Yi seized Cheng Shi's arm. A flicker of doubt crossed his eyes — the familiar sting of being duped by Zhen Yi seemed to resurface — but the thought of seeing Him, no, even just meeting one of His sibling-gods, of begging [Time] for a single chance to draw closer to Him... Chen Yi believed again.

He etched the phrase 'willing to be a Collection' deep into his heart.

The [Memory] follower steadied his breathing, gathered his thoughts, and recounted everything at speed.

After the temporal energy beam had hurled him into the past, his first move was to confirm the exact time period and his location. He discovered he was already inside the Grand Tribunal — right there in Katouting.

Using an Assassin's agility and stealth, he tracked down Keinlaur and found Selius, who had just arrived at the Grand Tribunal for their meeting.

While the two men were still deep in negotiation, Chen Yi struck without hesitation. He killed both of them inside the conference chamber and, to eliminate every possible loose end, slaughtered everyone present in the Supreme Court at the time — everyone except the other Supreme Inquisitors, who hadn't been there.

He then followed the traces of Keinlaur's aura to locate Galusha and dispatched her in a single strike — back when she was still a child, the very root of all the trouble.

Even after all that, he hadn't left immediately. He remained in the Grand Tribunal for a time, watching with his own eyes as the dead were buried and the Grand Tribunal held a full state funeral. Then he personally dug up the corpses to confirm they were unquestionably, irrevocably dead before finally plunging a blade into himself and casting his consciousness back to this stretch of time that could charitably be called 'the present.'

Chen Yi's account was incredibly detailed. The specifics didn't sound like lies at all, and more importantly, his current state made deception impossible. Even he couldn't fathom why everything had gone so perfectly, yet Galusha was still alive.

Cheng Shi's brow hadn't relaxed once since the account began. He kept turning it over in his mind — what could possibly have caused such a flawless execution to fail?

By now all his teammates had gathered. Even Wei Zhi, who'd been hoping to reap third-party benefits, had drawn close. He surveyed the blasted crater where the experiment site had been, rummaged through the debris for some time without finding the Grand Scholars' bodies, and climbed out looking rather disappointed.

"It seems you understand this experiment far better than I do," he said.

His piercing gaze fixed on Cheng Shi — an expression that hovered somewhere between admiring a worthy comrade and coveting a beast whose every part was a treasure.

Cheng Shi ignored the feverish stare, looked up, and laid out the broad strokes of his plan before asking, almost deferentially:

"Head Chief Wei, have I overlooked anything in my experiment?"

Hearing Cheng Shi's account, the others couldn't help but marvel at how astonishingly thorough his intelligence-gathering abilities were.

While they'd still been searching the areas he'd assigned them, while Wei Zhi had merely figured out where the Grand Scholars were hiding, this man had already unraveled every move the Erudition Presidium and Galusha had made — and moved on to solving the puzzle?

Wei Zhi's eyes narrowed slightly, a new wariness surfacing in his gaze toward Cheng Shi. But he didn't refuse the question. After a moment's thought, he probed without a shred of subtlety:

"You're running trial-and-error?"

You have a way to change the current outcome?"

As he spoke, Wei Zhi glanced at Meng Youfang. Clearly, he assumed it was the [Time] follower who'd been aiding Cheng Shi during this trial.

Meng Youfang knew Cheng Shi's true identity. He naturally assumed his quirky old friend had found [Truth]'s challenge too difficult and borrowed some of His own god's tricks, so he simply smiled and said nothing.

To Wei Zhi, that silence was practically a confession.

Cheng Shi took it all in, deflected the suspicion onto Meng Youfang, and pressed on: "Never mind that for now. Where do you think the experiment went wrong?"

I can trade you information about Zangier in exchange. I'm serious this time."

Wei Zhi's eyes lit up for an instant. He considered it carefully, then said:

"Perhaps the fundamental framework of the experiment was flawed from the start — it grafted Chen Yi's regression onto a parallel timeline.

I'm not sure how much of [Time]'s Authority my lord has seized, but He's certainly done so. And if He could, [Folly] may well be capable of the same. So the theory isn't far-fetched.

You yourself said that by the time the experiment began, Galusha's contingencies were already in motion. Who can guarantee that amid the chaos inside the site, her people didn't tamper with the experiment parameters?

The safest approach would be to clear everyone out of the experiment site and leave only the Grand Scholars to operate it. That way, the result would be beyond doubt."

At this point, Cheng Shi knew he could no longer hide the fact that time was being reset within this trial. But after the next reset, Wei Zhi wouldn't remember any of it — so he didn't lose sleep over it. Besides, the convenient scapegoat standing beside him was still smiling away. Anyone would pin the blame squarely on Meng Youfang.

Cheng Shi nodded, thinking: 'If that's the case, the next experiment will need one more person involved.'

He walked over to Fang Yuan, flashing a grin at the man who was studying him with undisguised suspicion.

"President Fang, as a follower of [Order], controlling every person within a given area shouldn't cost you too much... right?"

Fang Yuan frowned slightly. "Meng Youfang reversed time?"

Cheng Shi nodded vigorously and whispered: "Correct — but it absolutely won't affect any of you. You should be able to tell that I'm trying to lead everyone to victory in this trial. So, President Fang, to save us explanation time, please give me a code phrase — something that would convince you to help. That'll improve all our odds."

Fang Yuan understood. After a brief hesitation, he offered a name:

"Ah Kuan.

Just tell me Ah Kuan asked for your help. That should be enough to convince me."

Ah Kuan?

'Interesting.' Cheng Shi knew that many people set up prompt words for themselves to help allies locate them efficiently during Time Battlefields. He'd done the same thing himself. So 'Ah Kuan' was most likely Fang Yuan's personal code.

Cheng Shi committed it to memory, then turned back to Wei Zhi.

Indeed — this "Wei Zhi" was obviously Galusha. Cheng Shi had played it safe inside his own experiment, using the Truth Limit's power to fuse Galusha with Wei Zhi and let her assume his identity as a precaution against any tricks she might pull.

But that was as far as he could take it. How to help a trial NPC borrow a player's identity and climb out of history's river — that was beyond his pay grade. The rest was up to fate.

And fate, it seemed, had arrived.

When [Deceit] pulled Galusha out alongside the other players, He'd effectively confirmed her player status.

Whether the Convention acknowledged it was irrelevant. Once [Deceit] acted, He'd find a way to con his way through.

Why He'd accepted Galusha — nobody knew.

Galusha had never had an audience with a god. In fact, hardly anyone in the Land of Hope's history had ever achieved such a thing. So right now, she was remarkably well-behaved — nothing like the wild force she'd been inside the trial.

She was bold enough, though. At least she dared to sneak the occasional glance when the gods looked her way. But no matter how she looked, she couldn't sense her own Benefactor's presence.

At a summit where gods gathered to corner one of their own, the absence of your Benefactor meant only two things: either He was too insignificant to earn a seat at the table, or He'd already been eliminated.

Galusha believed her Benefactor wouldn't die that easily, so it was probably the former.

At this thought, she felt something rare — genuine fear.

If [Folly] didn't qualify to stand among the gods, then what was the point of everything she'd done?

Wouldn't it all be nothing but a Foolish Act?!

Aside from these two serious cases, there were two... less serious ones.

The moment Chen Yi found [Memory]'s eyes among the divine gazes, he went completely unhinged. He threw himself toward [Memory] like a man possessed, only for [Deceit] to knock him unconscious with an amused snort. Throughout the entire episode, [Memory] never once glanced in their direction.

As for Meng Youfang...

It was hard to imagine how this "Seventeenth God" conducted a divine audience — let alone how he handled facing this many gods at once.

At the exact moment Cheng Shi was frantically analyzing the situation, Fang Yuan was frozen like a statue, Galusha was trembling with apprehension, and Chen Yi was getting knocked out by [Deceit] — the God Worship Society president stepped forward with gravity in his eyes. Neither servile nor arrogant — no, "composed and measured" was more fitting — he let his gaze sweep across the assembled deities, offered a dignified nod, and declared:

"We meet again, old friends.

Though the timing is a bit premature."

Then, under the gods' half-attending gazes, he took a lateral step and planted himself between Cheng Shi and the gods. Facing [Truth], who was reeling under [Fate]'s assault, he intoned gravely:

"[Truth] — if you intended to steal my Divine Throne, direct your schemes at me.

None of this concerns my good brother. Do not harm him."

"!!!"

The declaration landed, and the assembled gods...

Had absolutely zero reaction.

Not a single deity took a mortal's delusions seriously. At most, a few bystander gods might have been reminded of [Time], who hadn't appeared before the pantheon in quite some time, based on Meng Youfang's faith.

As for the inexplicable proclamation itself — no god cared.

But Cheng Shi cared!

He stared at Meng Youfang's back, brain short-circuiting.

'Bro, are you for real?!

Even in front of the gods you pull this?!

Fine, believe you're a god — whatever. But dragging me into it right now? Afraid I don't already have enough eyes on me?'

That said, in truth, Cheng Shi harbored nothing but admiration for Meng Youfang at this moment!

Whether the man was delusional or terminally ill with grandiosity made no difference. When he believed himself a god, he genuinely dared to face [Truth] head-on!

More importantly — he dared to shield Cheng Shi in front of [Truth]!

How much courage did that take?

For Meng Youfang, it probably wasn't courage — it was "conviction." But in Cheng Shi's eyes, it was something else entirely.

When a person mastered any discipline to its absolute extreme, they became a "Chosen One"!

Meng Youfang lived up to his "Divine Name." This guy was the real deal — when trouble came, he showed up, and when lightning struck, he took the hit!

Sadly, the mortal's little interlude had zero impact on the atmosphere or the gods' tempo. The standoff continued. [Truth] hadn't spared a moment's distraction over both [Void] gods' moves.

He simply tanked [Fate]'s blow head-on!

Which was easy enough to understand. Under the Convention, true gods couldn't die. So with no good counterplay available, absorbing the hit was actually the optimal choice.

[Truth] understood optimal solutions better than anyone.

But the reality wasn't so straightforward. To [Fate]'s astonishment, the strike was far more effective than He'd anticipated — far beyond what any god present had expected. Because after the impact, [Truth] looked like He was genuinely about to die.

"!!!"

"Impossible! The Convention shields every god's divinity from loss — You cannot kill a true god!"

[Oblivion] panicked first. In that instant, He glimpsed His own end.

He counted Himself fortunate the Convention-bypassing blow hadn't landed on Him. What He didn't know was that at this moment, [Fate] was equally stunned.

No — not stunned. Frozen.

And then, those cold eyes turned utterly dark. Because He realized He'd been played.

[Truth] had set Him up!

The Convention did ensure every true god could survive combat with other deities unscathed. Yet some gods had still died — like [Prosperity]. Even under the Convention's protection, She had fallen in the Void.

Why?

Because She had chosen self-destruction — invoking a Final Oracle to realize Her vision of universal Prosperity.

So if [Truth] was dying right now, it absolutely was not because of [Fate]'s strike. It was because [Truth] had chosen to destroy Himself!

"!!!"

This lunatic, who'd been questing along [Truth]'s road for eons — He'd thrown away His own life?!

What was He trying to do?!

An experiment so important that [Truth] would sacrifice His very existence — what scale of experiment was that?!

This was wrong. Everything was wrong!

As [Truth]'s madness radiated outward in all directions, even [Deceit], who'd been watching from the sidelines, wiped the smirk from His face. A rare flicker of gravity crossed those eyes, and the stars within them pulsed faster.

And then, at the very edge of annihilation, [Truth] suddenly smiled — and answered the question [Deceit] had posed earlier.

"I was born to seek. To see is to know truth; to perceive is to grasp reason. I have never known what a Foolish Act is.

The world calls me mad — yet they do not know that madness, once settled, becomes knowledge, and delirium, once sublimated, becomes understanding.

Without the accumulation of knowledge, without the mapping of laws, how could there ever be [Civilization]?

So, esteemed colleagues — if this be a Foolish Act, then I embrace it gladly.

Where mystery lies ahead, the quest shall never end. This... is [Truth].

And I... am [Truth]!"

The words fell. The universe roared.

BOOM—

A pillar of light tore straight toward the heavens. Stars cascaded across infinity. The "sky" of nothingness was punched through, and this world's firmament...

...looked as though it was about to collapse.

...

If shock could be ranked by degree, then what the mortals were witnessing right now — this apocalyptic spectacle — was undeniably maximum.

No one could believe a true god had just self-destructed. Even Cheng Shi, who'd watched [Prosperity]'s self-annihilation firsthand, found it inconceivable that [Truth] would walk the same road.

He even wondered whether this was a fabrication the Fun God had whipped up, because otherwise it was simply too outrageous.

For what purpose?

A god, using His own life as an experiment — what kind of joke was this?

[Prosperity] had wanted universal flourishing, but before being schemed into a cage, She'd never intended to die.

The gods had surrounded [Truth], yes, but they hadn't seemed ready to strike. Only [Fate] had launched an attack. Was that really enough to push [Truth] into a do-or-die gamble?

Besides, wasn't His experimental method a bit crude? Blasting a hole in the sky would reveal the universe's truth?

Of course not. As the incarnation of wisdom and inquiry, [Truth]'s experimental methodology couldn't possibly be that rough. His core philosophy certainly wasn't "brute force solves everything."

If raw power could produce miracles, the universe's truth would've long since become casual gossip among the gods.

So "piercing the sky" was merely the opening move — [Truth] seizing the initiative.

He'd wandered the path of seeking the universe's ultimate truth for untold ages. All He'd lacked was a fresh experimental concept. And just now, inside that trial, a certain clown had delivered the perfect inspiration.

If using [Truth]'s power to reconstruct an object to a different position represented [Truth]'s restoration of [Time], then reconstructing an entire starry sky into a different state could represent [Truth] simulating a starry sky beyond the spatiotemporal barrier.

After all, both crossed "time."

Following that logic one level higher: if a world He couldn't reach truly existed out there, then by reconstructing the current world to be indistinguishable from the target world, the experiment's host could be considered to have carried the entire universe across into another spacetime!

Even if it wasn't true traversal, the resonance between two identical worlds would give [Truth] the answer He sought.

And that was exactly what [Truth] intended to do — and was doing!

He'd been preparing for ages, having everything in place even before approaching [Deceit]. But this experiment required breaking the spatiotemporal barrier, so He needed [Time]'s power.

[Time], however, had no time to let Him steal His Authority. So [Truth] devised an alternative — exploiting a loophole in the Convention to find a lever for [Time]'s power. That lever was hidden in...

Cheng Shi.

[Truth] had calculated that to win the trial, Cheng Shi would inevitably reset time again and again, searching for opportunities. So He issued an Edict: His followers — the Erudition Presidium's Grand Scholars — were to lay formation arrays throughout the experiment ground and siphon [Time]'s power.

That was also why Cheng Shi's Time Battlefield kept weakening — from the very first reset, [Time]'s power had been stolen.

No one would have imagined a true god would stoop to harvesting divine power from a mortal.

Yet [Truth] had. Or rather — this was [Truth]. He would never let pride stand between Him and His goal. Otherwise, He wouldn't have played the role of [Prosperity]'s son at the Assembly of Gods Convention.

Still, the core issue was simply that [Time] had no time. The gods searched for Him everywhere and found nothing; their only option was to work through His followers.

And Cheng Shi was simultaneously a [Void] walker. If [Truth] believed the clown carried no schemes relating to [Void] and [Existence], He'd be a fool.

So from the moment Cheng Shi was pulled into this special trial, everything was conspiracy. Every last bit was calculation.

[Truth] was still [Truth] — utterly without sentiment.

He'd schemed against not only Cheng Shi but His own followers. In other words, He'd never truly regarded His believers — they were merely variables with subjective initiative inside His experiment.

He had told the Grand Scholars about the players' existence, yes. But He'd never intended for them to actually replace the players in this era. Because the moment the trial concluded, His experiment would begin — and the entire universe would be demolished and rebuilt. What did a handful of mortals drowned in history's river matter compared to that?

And lest anyone forget — no matter how miraculous the Ritual of Truth was, it was still [Truth]'s creation. When the true god who wielded [Truth]'s Authority from His Divine Throne personally marked the universe and presided over its reconstruction, who could possibly stop this mad [Truth] experiment?

Nobody — because the gods had already been deceived!

[Truth] had used a confrontation with [Void] to capture the entire universe's attention, pinning down the gods so they couldn't interfere with His experiment. Then He dissolved the cosmos into raw material and rebuilt another world.

That was sufficient.

And if it wasn't? Then He'd throw in His own life!

A true god's existence could fuel this pre-planned experiment all the way to its final solution.

When the universe was rebuilt and truly resonated with another world, someone would naturally sense the truths flowing through it — truths that didn't belong to this world!

That someone wouldn't be the now-fallen [Truth]. But that someone would never forget that the real "truth" was something [Truth] had delivered.

Put simply, [Truth] was gambling too. He was betting that behind this world existed at least one counterpart [Truth] who shared His curiosity, who also yearned to reach outward. And world reconstruction would be one method of mutual communication.

It was like two telegraph operators in an apocalypse, each unaware the other existed, scanning frequencies. The moment they locked onto the same channel and confirmed each other's existence —

confirmed that beyond themselves, other [Truths] existed — then [Truth] would, by definition, no longer be the truth.

And that was why [Truth] had stopped valuing His own life. He knew: when [Truth] falls in pursuit, truth emerges from pursuit!

So what the gods and players saw before them was not [Truth]'s actual experiment ground. This space was merely a cage — a stage [Truth] had built to hold the universe's gaze. The real experiment had long since begun outside this place, which meant the cosmos was, even now, being ground to dust under [Truth]'s planned experiment — hurtling toward destruction.

Among the assembled gods, some had clearly arrived at the same conclusion. [Fate], having regained His composure, also realized He'd been duped. He was about to break free of this pocket space to halt [Truth]'s experiment when His twin god shook His head with a sigh:

"Too late...

If Bookworm hadn't chosen to die, we could still leave. But by choosing death, He ensured we can't destroy the experiment.

If I'm not mistaken, the old relic is about to arrive.

An irresistible Final Oracle...

The Convention will probably put Bookworm's Authority on the table for everyone to pick over. Of course, He'll have left behind distribution conditions elaborate enough to buy Him all the time He needs.

Heh — give a god who's studied rules His entire existence credit for finding a loophole in the Convention.

The last one to use a Final Oracle as a weapon was the Prosperity Mother, wasn't it? One after another... truly fascinating.

Death... is it always liberation?"

[Deceit]'s words were thought-provoking, but [Fate]'s focus lay elsewhere. He regarded His twin god with cold fury:

"You drove [Folly] away on purpose?"

You saw through [Truth]'s design all along, yet you wagered the hope of disrupting the experiment on [Folly]?

Since when have you been collaborating with [Folly]?

But you forget — [Folly] no longer has His Authority!"

[Deceit] smiled, gazing at the rain of [Truth]'s fading radiance falling through the Void, and replied with pregnant meaning:

"He doesn't. But someone else does."

...

The value of [Folly] continued to rise.

Time rewound by a moment.

While the gods' attention had been drawn to the corner where [Truth] held sway, [Folly] stood alone in the empty Void, witnessing the collapse of the universe.

It was true that He had leaped free of [Truth]'s trap one step ahead of the others, but that was as far as it went — He had never intended to stop the experiment in the first place.

All of this, in His eyes, was nothing more than a foolish act.

He did not believe [Truth] could succeed — or rather, what [Truth] called "success" was merely a fleeting glimpse of this universe's true nature, hardly worthy of being called a "success" at all. And so He had no reason to intervene. He simply stood to the side like a spectator, watching in silence.

Under the Supreme [Truth]'s extraction, the entire world was collapsing at a terrifying pace. Stars winked out. Flesh dissolved. Countless players had no time to register what was happening before everything around them crumbled to dust.

Fear had no time to spread — in an instant, it froze into absolute nothingness.

The final act of the Void Era seemed to have arrived ahead of schedule. In that moment, neither people nor things escaped its reach.

Every existing thing in the world was ground into raw material, destined to be used in the reconstruction of a new world belonging to [Truth].

Hong Lin was fortunate. Under the protection of the Convention, this Proxy of [Prosperity] was not counted among [Truth]'s experimental materials, and so she remained unaffected.

But the instant she watched Tao Yi — standing right in front of her — dissolve into ash with a look of utter bewilderment, Hong Lin's stunned eyes turned red in a heartbeat. She shifted into her Bear Spirit form and lashed out at everything around her.

Yet her "counterattack" was utterly powerless. No matter how desperately she fought the surrounding nothingness, she could not find the culprit who had taken Tao Yi and everything else away.

She howled in defiance, roared in despair, pounding in every direction, unleashing her fury — and yet it changed nothing.

Only when everything in the world had been ground to dust and begun rising, converging toward the heavens, did she finally see it in the Void — that beam of light called [Truth], and the cold, impassive figure of [Folly] standing beneath it.

Hong Lin raised her head toward the sky, blood dripping from her eyes, and roared her accusation:

"If you wanted the world to die, then why bestow the Game upon us?

Are mortal lives not lives at all?!"

[Folly] glanced at this mortal who had been pushed to the threshold of a Divine Throne, and spoke:

"All life is folly, all civilization is foolishness' — that is the greatest truth of this universe.

[Prosperity] wanted nothing more than for the universe to flourish — but did She ever ask whether anyone else wanted that?

[Truth] sought to prove the truth in His heart — but did He ever ask whether the world consented?

And you — when you ended the lives of others through preemptive strikes or acts of vengeance, all for the sake of those meaningless mortal emotions — did you ever ask how those who died at your hands viewed you?

The law of the jungle, selfish gain — the fundamental nature of this universe has never changed.

And so, you and Him..."

[Folly] cast another glance at [Truth]'s ongoing experiment and let out a derisive snort. "You're all the same. All foolish acts."

Hong Lin visibly froze for a moment at those words, but in the next instant her gaze grew even more resolute.

She had never once questioned whether her path was right or wrong. But inspired by [Folly]'s words, she came to a realization: the false [Prosperity] was utterly insufficient to protect her friends from the gods. If she wanted her friends to flourish forever, she had to become the true [Prosperity].

No — even higher than that. She had to become an existence above those sixteen Divine Thrones to impose her will upon the universe!

Hong Lin had her epiphany — but it seemed to have come a bit too late. And so, she went "mad."

She charged straight at [Folly].

"I can't find [Truth], so I'll start by taking down His accomplice!

[Folly], prepare to die!"

The silhouette of the great bear was utterly tragic. Perhaps she knew she could never kill a deity, and might even die here herself due to the gap in their Status — but she charged forward regardless.

With no attachments left, she had nothing but her own lonely courage.

But in [Folly]'s eyes, this courage was simply absurd.

"?"

'Do you even hear what you're saying? [Folly] is [Truth]'s accomplice?'

'Even setting aside opposing faiths, [Folly] was standing right here criticizing [Truth] — how does that make Him [Truth]'s accomplice?'

'What kind of brain does this Proxy of [Prosperity] have?'

Her foolishness didn't even operate on the same wavelength as the cosmic "foolish acts" He spoke of. Hers was foolishness in the most literal sense.

"..."

Despite His utter disdain, [Folly] departed anyway, because He had no desire to entangle Himself in a foolish act — and because [Truth]'s little display of folly had ceased to hold His interest.

At the tail end of the experiment, the result was nothing more than decoration. Once you knew the direction was correct, the rest lost all appeal.

[Truth]'s experiment had indeed reached its most critical moment. The immense power of [Truth] began to reconstruct the entire world according to the predetermined blueprint. In the very next second, Hong Lin — her attempt at deicide thwarted — watched the rest-area villa beside her re-form with a thunderous rumble, and Tao Yi, who had vanished, reappeared.

The torrent of grief and fury suddenly lodged in Hong Lin's throat. Her outstretched bear paw froze mere inches above Tao Yi's head, her entire body rigid with shock.

Tao Yi flinched as well. She looked at the bear-formed Hong Lin before her, tilted her head slightly, and asked in puzzlement: "Baldy, were you crying? Why are you crying?"

The sound of her best friend's unmistakably real voice shattered Hong Lin's composure in an instant. She swept Tao Yi into a massive bear hug and burst into sobs.

"Aaahh—"

Tao Yi had no idea what was going on, but her own eyes reddened in sympathy. She gently patted the giant bear's back, swallowing hard before murmuring: "What's all this crying about? Honestly, a grown woman like you."

"I..." Hong Lin lifted her head, both paws gripping Tao Yi's slender shoulders, trembling with the raw relief of someone who had survived a disaster. "I thought I'd never see you again—"

Before the word "again" could leave her lips — BOOM — Tao Yi and everything around them vanished into thin air once more.

Hong Lin's pupils contracted sharply. She lunged forward, desperate to hold onto Tao Yi, but her paws closed on nothing.

"Xiao Yi!!!"

The first reconstruction had ended. It appeared that no match for another [Truth] had been found.

But this was an expected failure. The second reconstruction would begin soon enough.

Just as the toppled bear raised her head once more, glaring up at the beam of [Truth]'s light blazing across the firmament, ready to wage a war to the death against it — the villa reappeared, and Tao Yi materialized out of nowhere, landing squarely on the bear's back.

The Wood Elf blinked in surprise for a moment, then laughed and patted the bear beneath her:

"Baldy, you never let me ride on your back! What's gotten into you today? Did something good happen?"

'Something good?'

'I'd like to know what part of this counts as something good!'

'But you're back — and that's the best thing of all!'

Hong Lin twisted around again, deftly catching the flung Tao Yi in her embrace — but this time, before she could utter a single word, Tao Yi vanished again. Disappeared right in her arms.

"..."

A few seconds later, Tao Yi reappeared, standing on Hong Lin's bear paw with a puzzled frown: "Baldy, what are you doing? I'm a mage — don't expect me to agree to a melee sparring match..."

By now, even Hong Lin in her daze could see the pattern. Tao Yi wasn't truly disappearing — she seemed to be undergoing constant reconstruction. And as for why she was being reconstructed...

That question was probably best directed at the [Truth] hanging high overhead.

What was He doing?

Running an experiment?

For once, Hong Lin didn't look at Tao Yi. Instead, she turned her gaze toward the beam of [Truth]'s light crowning the heavens, wondering: if this was an experiment, then why hadn't the other gods moved to stop Him?

Or had they already given their tacit approval — and if so, what did they hope to learn from it?

Did Benefactor [Fate] know? Did Cheng Shi know? And where was he right now?

While Hong Lin's mind churned in confusion, the frequency of Tao Yi's appearances and disappearances began to accelerate. She flickered in and out of existence like a strobe light, barely able to speak a complete sentence during each manifestation.

"Baldy, where is this..."

"I think I had a dream..."

"You're still alive... that's good..."

"Baldy, you..."

Hong Lin went numb. She just lay there, sprawled on the ground, watching Tao Yi flicker on and off atop her chest — sometimes even wearing different outfits — and thought to herself:

'If this experiment isn't lethal and could go on forever, having the little fox quietly keep me company for a while doesn't sound so bad, does it?'

The great bear, dragged back from the brink of despair, was exhausted. The strobing Tao Yi acted like a hypnotic pendulum, slowly coaxing her eyelids shut.

...

The world outside was undergoing countless cycles of collapse and reconstruction — a process that might continue for a very long time. Meanwhile, the gods "imprisoned" by [Truth] in that confined space were far from idle, launching a second game of their own.

After [Truth]'s self-destruction, [Justice] manifested immediately. That booming voice of divine order drowned out the cacophony of the apocalypse, once again drawing the gods into a brilliant, orderly starry sky.

The gods sat facing one another, with seven seats empty — [Prosperity], [Corruption], [Decay], [Truth], [War], [Folly], and [Time] were all absent.

The remaining nine would serve as today's voters in the Assembly of Gods Convention. And today's agenda was simple: how to distribute [Truth]'s Authority!

Even as the universe endured its apocalypse, [Justice] carried out the Convention's protocols with meticulous precision, as if the world's destruction had nothing to do with Him.

And in truth, the Convention had only been drafted to protect divine authority from being lost — it said nothing about preserving the universe from disintegration. So in this moment, [Justice] may have obstructed the gods from "saving the world," yet He remained perfectly within the bounds of "order."

The Scales representing the universe's ultimate fairness first glanced at the Iron Law occupying [Order]'s seat, then spoke in a resonant hum:

"[Truth] destroyed His own Divine Throne, leaving behind His Authority and issuing a Final Oracle, which states:

Truth lies in the pursuit, in the accumulation, in the mastery. Therefore, I forbid the gods from dividing My Authority among themselves. Instead, all Authority shall be bestowed upon a single god. Those willing to inherit My Authority shall attend this assembly, and the one who receives a majority vote shall claim it.

This Assembly of Gods Convention is hereby convened. Please begin your vote."

The moment He finished speaking, one god immediately cast a vote.

A star blazed to life above [Birth]'s head, and that massive Divine Pillar lashed against the starry sky as She cried out impatiently:

"Hurry—

Child—"

Evidently, someone was eager to clock out and pick up her child.

But wherever work existed, so did frustrations. Overtime was the norm, and no one was permitted to leave until the meeting concluded.

The gods regarded [Birth] with varying expressions. This was clearly not the time when voting for oneself could yield any advantage. [Truth]'s Final Oracle stipulated that the candidate needed a majority — there were nine voters present, meaning at least five votes were required.

Securing five votes was extraordinarily difficult. For the gods in attendance, it was no different from personally handing [Truth]'s Authority to someone else. So things were far from that simple.

Before the gods had even deliberated, voting for oneself was nothing but a waste of time — utterly pointless. Everyone present was exasperated by [Birth]'s impatience.

You couldn't say She didn't want the Authority — She had shown up, after all.

But you couldn't say She truly wanted it either — She clearly didn't care about strategy.

Fortunately, everyone had long since grown accustomed to this "big sister's" attitude. Her approach to everything was simple: show up, participate, and never leave a seat empty. Beyond that, She couldn't care less — as steady as an invariable in [Truth]'s experiment.

But the other gods had far more on their minds.

[Deceit] took in every glance exchanged among the gods, then shot a sidelong look at the frowning, stone-faced sibling beside Him and grinned:

"Oh my, worried about your follower, are we?"

What good is worrying? A mortal can't attend the Assembly of Gods Convention."

His words dripped with passive-aggressive innuendo. Everyone who heard them knew He was hinting at something.

After all, [Deceit] was the one who had brought the Clown to the last Convention assembly — so this was less a taunt and more a deliberate opening.

But [Fate]'s eyes merely flickered, and He said nothing.

In truth, His concern extended beyond just His follower — He was worried about the world itself.

The Fixed Destiny had not yet reached its true culmination. The world should not be destroyed here. Yet He was shackled by the Convention, genuinely lacking the power to break a Final Oracle. So rather than causing a scene, it was better to vote obediently, conclude the meeting quickly, send [Justice] on His way, and then go save the universe.

However, certain gods clearly had no intention of ending this Convention so swiftly. Seeing [Fate] give no reaction, [Deceit] rolled His eyes, pondered for a moment, and then called out to [Justice] with a sly grin:

"Old fossil, I have a question before we vote."

[Justice] was the only god who would never preemptively silence [Deceit] just because He anticipated mischief — after all, He represented the Convention.

"Speak freely."

[Deceit]'s eyes curved upward in a smile: "[Truth] only stipulated terms for His Authority before dying, but made no mention of His voting rights. So I'd like to ask — how should the two voting rights in His possession be distributed?"

Indeed, [Truth] had held two voting rights — one His own, and one inherited from [Prosperity].

Those two votes had been instrumental in preparing for this experiment, and now they were ownerless.

[Deceit]'s question immediately piqued every god present. After all, those were two extra votes — two votes that could prove decisive at critical junctures.

The gods all waited for [Justice]'s response, but before He could reply, [Deceit] spoke again.

"I recall that one of those voting rights belonged to [Prosperity], correct?"

Since the god who took that voting right has now fallen, and [Prosperity] currently has an acting Proxy — then by the principle of fairness, shouldn't that voting right be returned to [Prosperity]?"

The instant He finished, a dissenting voice rang out.

"I object!"

[Oblivion] cast a spectral gaze toward [Deceit], then glanced at [Fate] before snorting coldly:

"Don't think others are blind to the relationship between that so-called Proxy and your [Void] faction. Handing a voting right to a mortal — only you, [Deceit], could dream up something like that. How is this any different from giving you an extra vote? You might as well take [Truth]'s Authority while you're at it."

[Deceit] arched an eyebrow and grinned:

"I'm not particularly fond of bookworms, but since we're already here — sure, why not?"

"When do I get it? Right now?"

"...?"

'Can you seriously not tell the difference between sincerity and sarcasm?'

[Oblivion] let out another cold snort and looked away.

Regardless of whether [Deceit] had caught the meaning, [Death] certainly had.

After a moment of deliberation, a tuft of green flame suddenly ignited in His hollow eye sockets, and He addressed the assembly:

"Even if... Frazor... has no... voting rights... She is... still a member... of [Life].

She has... the right... to attend... this Convention... as an observer. [Justice]... did you... ask Her... whether She... wishes... to attend?"

[Justice] fell silent for a moment. In His view, a Proxy was not a true deity — her status still classified her as mortal. Even if she possessed a Container, not even Envoys had ever attended as observers. Did a mortal holding a Container truly qualify?

The complication was that the Convention had no explicit provision on this matter, so everything had to be negotiated. [Justice] turned His gaze to the assembled gods and began soliciting their opinions.

As long as [Prosperity]'s Proxy held no voting rights and would not influence the disposition of [Truth]'s Authority, the other gods had no real objections. More importantly, [Deceit] had already spoken up; it looked as though He was courting [Death]'s vote. If they refused [Death] face now, and He ended up swayed to the other side... that would be far too disadvantageous.

And so the gods remained silent.

[Oblivion] knew He could not reject a seemingly "reasonable" request, so He held His tongue as well.

Just like that, with the gods' tacit consent, [Justice] pulled Frazor into the assembly.

In the very next second, nine pairs of divine eyes and one set of Scales watched as a softly snoring, sleeping bear materialized in [Prosperity]'s seat.

"..."

"..."

"..."

...

At this point, even [Deceit] couldn't hold it together anymore.

He burst out laughing:

"It appears the great Frazor exhausted all Her strength trying to save the world. Well, that's certainly understandable.

At least She's better than certain cold-hearted gods who are laser-focused on Authority while the universe burns around them."

"..."

Another wave of silence swept through the assembly.

When a loudmouthed troublemaker included himself in his own insult, there was simply no angle from which to mount a counterargument.

In the past, only [Folly] could match Him blow for blow — but with [Folly] absent, [Deceit] reigned unchallenged.

Yet those words struck a genuine chord in Hong Lin.

'I really was trying to save the world!'

'But the world rejected my salvation and hypnotized me with a strobing fox!'

Hong Lin was, of course, wide awake. No matter how much she loved sleeping, there was no way she could remain unconscious after [Justice]'s summons. After all, [Justice] had issued an invitation, not a forced conscription — so the mere fact that she had arrived at the Assembly of Gods Convention proved she had been awake when the invitation came.

So why was she still pretending to sleep?

The answer was the same as the first time she had deceived herself by attending with her eyes shut: what I can't see can't hurt me.

'As long as I can't see any of you, I can't make a mistake. And making no mistakes in front of the gods is the greatest achievement there is.'

Before she understood why [Truth] had destroyed the world or why this Convention had been convened, Hong Lin dared not presume whether what she had witnessed was a collective conspiracy of the gods or a freak accident. Either way, being admitted to this assembly was her only chance to find answers.

So she couldn't flip the table like she had tried to do with [Truth]. She needed to calm down, listen carefully to the gods' words, search for clues — and find a way to save her friends.

Of course, she might not be able to decipher every nuance hidden in the gods' dialogue on her own — but there was always Cheng Shi.

A Destined One would never fall before reaching the end. Under [Fate]'s protection, he would certainly survive to the final act of the world's script. Even if this was the final act, as the one who had guided her toward [Fate], the Fate Weaver would absolutely be the most brilliant protagonist on this stage!

So as long as she gathered the gods' information and relayed it to him, he would surely unravel every thread and find a way to save the world.

And once the world stabilized, Tao Yi and all her friends would naturally escape from this world-ending experiment!

That was the entirety of Hong Lin's reasoning for attending. Her faith wasn't blind trust in Cheng Shi — it was absolute conviction in [Fate].

She felt her good fortune extended far beyond this, and in truth, her instincts proved correct.

[Deceit] cast a meaningful glance at the soundly sleeping Frazor, then finally steered the conversation back on track:

"Let's return to the matter of voting.

Everyone seated here has already shown their hand, so there's really no need to play coy.

If we hurry up and push through, maybe after the votes are counted we can still interrupt [Truth]'s experiment before the era ends — buy a bit more time for the Void Era."

At those words, [Memory], who had been silent until now, finally spoke. Those eyes — so heavy with the weight of recorded history, betraying neither joy nor sorrow — intoned:

"The Void Era ending and a new era arriving ahead of schedule... isn't necessarily a bad thing."

"Oh? You really think the 'next era' will be a good thing?"

Let me tell you something, [Memory] — you and [Time] are both [Existence], yet the two of you couldn't be more different.

He's already seen the light, so what exactly are you still clinging to?

Tsk. Looking at you, you seem as obtuse as [Folly]. Don't tell me [Folly]'s Authority ended up with you?"

"..."

'Shouldn't have opened my mouth.'

[Memory] cast a ghostly glance at [Deceit] and said no more.

And with that, the already taciturn assembly fell completely silent. After being needled by [Deceit], virtually no god was willing to speak.

[Fate] shot a frigid look at His sibling and said icily: "Stop wasting time. Cast your vote."

"Heheh~

How is this wasting time? You think you're the only one in a hurry?

I'm in a hurry too. The world's destruction means [Void] is nearing its end, and as the master of this era, I'd rather it didn't come to such an abrupt close.

But no matter how rushed we are, the Convention must still be observed. So instead of squabbling after the fact, let's settle the voting rights issue first."

[Deceit] glanced left and right, silently tallied His votes, then proposed with a sly grin:

"How about this — I know everyone has a few bones to pick with me, so I won't stir up any more trouble for the universe.

I'll forfeit my claim to [Truth]'s Authority and cast my vote for one of you instead. But... I have one condition!

Those two voting rights of [Truth]'s — they go to me. How about it?"

Trade one concession for guaranteed passage on every future agenda item?

As if the universe would be so generous. Letting [Deceit] get His hands on two extra voting rights would be catastrophic!

Would anyone ever have a peaceful day again?

[Oblivion] shook His head, the first to object.

But considering the far greater uncertainty of [Deceit] actually claiming [Truth]'s Authority, the other gods remained silent — clearly agreeing to the trade.

[Oblivion]'s expression turned utterly grim. The thought of [Void] gaining an advantage felt worse than losing Himself.

Yet He quickly devised a countermeasure — a way to split the votes while simultaneously fracturing [Void]. He addressed [Justice]:

"Since the founding of the Convention, no single god has ever held three votes. This undermines absolute fairness, and I refuse to set such a precedent. If [Void] truly wants a voting advantage, those two votes can be split — one for [Deceit], one for [Fate]. But on the condition that both of them forfeit all claims to [Truth]'s Authority, and that these voting rights only take effect after this Convention concludes!"

"?"

[Oblivion] again!

[Deceit] turned to look at [Oblivion], the corner of His eye lifting in amusement.

'Clumsy [Descent], do you really think this will work?'

"I agree."

While [Deceit] was still savoring His disdain, [Fate] suddenly spoke up to accept the proposal.

His entire purpose in attending had been to prevent [Deceit] — who had strayed from the Fixed Destiny — from obtaining [Truth]'s Authority. That objective was now achieved. If He could also walk away with an extra voting right, it was practically a total victory. He had no reason to refuse.

Seeing His own sibling pull the rug out from under Him, [Deceit] frowned — but after a moment's thought, His eyes spun, and He agreed as well.

Immediately after agreeing, however, He turned and cast His vote. And His vote went to...

[Chaos]!

"I don't trust anyone to hold [Truth]'s Authority. [Chaos] doesn't have much going on upstairs — if He gets it, He gets it. No big deal."

The moment those words left His mouth, the room fell silent again.

Everyone knew that [Chaos] and [Deceit] had a history of deep collaboration. So how was voting for [Chaos] any different from voting for [Deceit]?

The gods certainly weren't going to follow suit on such a transparent vote. Winning [Truth]'s Authority as a solo candidate was impossible, so they surveyed each other, exchanging covert signals.

And it was at that very moment that [Fate] cast His vote. He gave it to...

The sleeping Big Cat.

"?"

Big Cat was stunned. She felt a flash before her eyes as though something had been ignited, and in her confusion she heard her Benefactor's voice:

"I have cast my vote and can no longer be a candidate. That being the case — may I be excused, [Justice]?"

...

Yet another one desperate to pick up the kids.

[Fate]'s urgency was written plainly across His face — every god present could see that He simply wanted to go protect the follower He had left stranded in the Void.

Although [Truth]'s experiment had bypassed the cage area He had established, that measure was designed to restrain the gods. Once [Justice] had pulled them all into the Convention assembly, there was no telling whether the Void out there was still safe.

The other gods clearly couldn't care less. Only [Birth] and [Fate] remained unable to set their worries aside.

Seeing this, [Deceit] smirked with amusement. [Justice] hesitated briefly before asking — in a rare departure — a question unrelated to the Convention:

"Is the truth that [Truth] sought truly beyond this space-time?"

[Fate]'s answer was resolute: "I don't know."

That answer drew an inscrutable smile from [Deceit], who turned His gaze toward [Memory]. [Memory], meanwhile, quietly lowered His eyes.

Since [Truth]'s self-destruction, no god knew that [Fate] had sealed away memories within Him.

[Fate] continued:

"All I know is that the Fixed Destiny has not yet been severed. So even if this universe truly contains truth, it can only reside within this space-time that I perceive.

[Truth] took the wrong path. He went astray.

As for the other spaces-time that the rest of you are imagining — that is nothing more than a great deceptive lie spun by [Deceit] and [Time] together.

I had assumed that even though [Existence] stands opposed to [Void], the two paths were at least equal in their devotion to approaching 'Him.'

Now I see how wrong I was.

[Existence] truly should not exist."

With that, [Fate] cut a blade-cold glare at [Memory] and departed the Convention.

A great deceptive lie woven by [Deceit] and [Time]?

The phrasing sounded profoundly awkward.

[Deceit] certainly loved His lies — but did [Time] even have time to tell lies?

If not, then what exactly had He been busy with all this while?

The gods knew far more than mortals and understood this world far better. They too had all manner of speculations about the universe and Origin, but now it seemed that some had already surged ahead in their understanding — [Void], [Time], [Folly], and the freshly fallen [Truth].

When you thought about it, the secret powerful enough to drive [Truth] to self-destruction in pursuit of self-evidence probably wasn't as simple as [Fate] described it. If truth truly lay beneath these stars, why would [Truth] have needed to annihilate everything and reconstruct a new world?

So [Truth]'s experiment hadn't merely brought Him His answer — it had inspired the others' imaginations about secrets beyond the universe, turning their gazes once again toward [Void], toward the two masters of this era.

Under the pull of curiosity and thirst for knowledge, everyone wanted the truth.

Yet perhaps only a handful actually possessed it. If the others wanted to catch up quickly, they would have to choose between [Truth]'s Authority and the universe's secrets.

[Oblivion] knew He couldn't scrape together half the votes. After long deliberation, He concluded that [Memory] — sibling to [Time] — likely knew something. Besides, His reason for attending the Convention was straightforward: prevent [Void] from claiming the Authority and making more trouble. With [Void] now ineligible for votes, He decided to cast his ballot for [Memory].

He wanted to acquire useful memories from [Memory]'s Collection Hall.

The two gods conferred briefly. [Memory] was noncommittal.

He didn't believe He had any collection worth sharing with [Oblivion], so He offered no response.

But [Oblivion] surveyed the assembled gods and simply couldn't find a better candidate. Even if only to rally opposition against [Void], He could only give this vote to [Memory].

One other god shared the same thinking. Although the Iron Law bore no grudge against [Void], it too yearned to learn about the past.

It often felt confused about its own identity, sensing that perhaps some memory had been lost. So it also cast its vote for [Memory].

[Memory] suddenly held two votes — a temporary lead.

The remaining gods held off, still observing.

And by "observing," they were really just waiting to see [Deceit]'s next move.

It wasn't hard to notice that among those who hadn't yet voted — besides [Memory] Himself — only [Death], [Silence], and [Chaos] remained.

Those three votes were transparently aligned. [Deceit] had initially planned to secure [Birth]'s single vote to claim [Truth]'s Authority, but [Birth] had impatiently voted for Herself, and [Fate]'s wasted ballot made things worse. Now it seemed impossible for the Fear Faction to sweep up [Truth]'s legacy.

Since that was off the table, [Death] and [Silence] couldn't very well give their votes to [Chaos] either — after all, on the surface, they weren't allied with [Deceit].

And so the situation deadlocked.

The gods were all shrewd enough to foresee the outcome. If no one compromised, [Truth]'s Final Oracle would drag on indefinitely. Who knew what would become of the world under the experiment's ongoing

reconstruction? And the final act of the Void Era might well proceed without them — leaving only the absent gods to play out the drama.

So everyone would inevitably compromise. The path of compromise was to choose the most reassuring, lowest-risk third party to receive [Truth]'s Authority.

And that third party, when you looked around the room, could only be...

[Birth].

No other reason — She was stable.

And so, in the next instant, [Death], [Silence], and [Memory] simultaneously voted for [Birth]. [Chaos] stealthily conferred with [Birth] at length, and under the impatient lashing of Her Divine Pillar, He too cast his vote for Her.

Five of nine — the Final Oracle was fulfilled. The god least in need of Authority had received [Truth]'s Authority.

[Birth]'s Divine Pillar twisted briefly, showing not a shred of joy at the acquisition. She bellowed "Child—" and vanished from the gods' sight.

[Oblivion] fled just as quickly — He had no choice. [Death] and [Deceit] were eyeing Him like hawks. He wasn't arrogant enough to fight two at once without preparation, so to the sound of [Deceit]'s mocking laughter, [Oblivion] dissolved His own form.

[Memory] gazed at [Deceit] with neither joy nor sorrow, leaving behind a single sentence — "Stop coveting my Collection Hall" — before departing.

[Deceit] paid no attention to the remark. Instead, He plucked up the pretending-to-sleep Big Cat, and said with deep implication:

"Little kitty, little kitty. After acting as a Proxy for so long, you've surely learned one lesson by now — once your Benefactor dies, there's no one left to protect His followers."

Then He casually tossed her aside and vanished into the starry sky.

The remaining gods filtered out one by one, leaving only [Justice] and the Iron Law behind.

Interestingly, at every previous Convention assembly, [Justice] had always been the first to vacate — since He represented the Convention, He never appeared when unnecessary.

But this time, He clearly had something to say to "Himself."

The perfectly balanced Scales turned their gaze toward [Order]'s seat, and after a long silence asked:

"Does order still exist in this universe?"

The Iron Law's reply was unwavering: "Of course."

The Scales paused, then asked: "Then why is it that every god has gone to save the universe — yet you alone have not gone to uphold order?"

The Iron Law fell into a brief confusion, thought for a moment, then replied:

"[Truth] told me that order exists not only within the universe, but perhaps beyond it as well. So I am waiting for a new order.

I want to know how one order differs from another. If order itself is not unique, then what is 'His' expectation of [Order]...

And what meaning does my existence hold?"

...

The world was still being reconstructed. [Truth]'s experiment continued.

But this didn't actually make sense.

For [Fate], [Truth]'s experiment was undeniably the greatest variable threatening the Fixed Destiny. Now that He had extricated Himself from the Convention assembly, logic dictated He would move immediately to halt the experiment and drag the universe's trajectory back on course.

Yet He didn't.

Not because He hadn't tried — but because He hadn't succeeded!

An unexpected force had blocked His interference, ensuring [Truth]'s experiment proceeded in orderly fashion.

This force did not belong to [Truth]. It was merely a contingency He had left behind. Ultimately, with [Truth] dead, no matter how grand or precise His experimental design, it could never withstand the power of a true god.

Only another true god could stop a true god.

[Fate] stared at those familiar eyes before Him, fury boiling over:

"So [Civilization] is truly determined to go astray — to part ways with [Fate]?!"

[War]. Yes, it was [War]. Those eyes of blood and fire bore straight into [Fate], all former restraint and deference stripped away, replaced entirely by battle lust and defiance.

His left eye erupted in flame; His right eye spattered with fresh blood. Blood and fire spiraled before the beam of [Truth]'s light, encasing the experiment's core within a fortress of impenetrable iron.

[War] was not facing [Fate] alone. After the Convention had adjourned, virtually every god had converged on this spot. They gazed at this [War] — so different from before, yet so reminiscent of the past — with undisguised shock. None had imagined that the final guardian of [Truth]'s experiment would be [Truth]'s sibling within the [Civilization] path.

[Death] was somewhat puzzled. The enormous skull tilted in confusion and asked:

"[War]... the universe... collapses... faith ends... what do you... gain from this?"

[War] shook His head, His flames roaring: "Nothing."

"Then why... do you... obstruct... the gods... from interrupting... [Truth]'s... experiment?"

[Truth]... died... seeking... proof — clearly... He already... had His... answer.

Since an answer... already exists... why must... the experiment... continue?

The world's... reconstruction... is destroying... the foundation... of our... faith.

When everything... in the universe — every vessel... of faith — becomes... a variable... in [Truth]'s... experiment — do you mean... to let our... very foundation... be held... hostage?

Even if... [Truth] is dead... and the experiment... has no master... we will never... entrust... our faith... to an... experiment.

You stand... here... blocking... the gods — do you intend... to use... this experiment... to seize control... of the universe?!"

A masterful move — the old fox had slapped [War] with a hat almost too large to bear. [Death] had already learned the truth about the universe from [Deceit], and knew full well that the unprepared universe could not withstand the "truth" that [Truth]'s experiment would bring.

If the universe's understanding were truly upended by a single experiment of [Truth]'s, then — as variables in a higher-dimensional experiment — might they not trigger uncontrollable changes that would alert the supreme Experiment Master to the anomalies in this corner of the starry sky, prompting measures detrimental to this world?

This was the Fear Faction's — or at the very least [Death]'s — gravest concern.

But these worries could not be spoken aloud; He could only "delicately" dissuade.

What He didn't know was that [War] should have been standing on His side. [Deceit] had long since established a cooperative relationship with [War].

What He knew even less was that [Deceit] hadn't yet found the right moment to share His plan with His Fear Faction allies — and one crucial link in that plan had already gone wrong!

[War] truly should not have been here!

He was never supposed to accept [Truth]'s invitation. [Deceit] had kept Him in reserve, promising that an epoch-shaking battle awaited Him — a promise exchanged for [War]'s support of the Fear Faction.

But [Deceit] had clearly underestimated [War]'s battle lust. Or rather, when a more direct path to confronting that Entity presented itself, [War] — who had restrained Himself for so long — refused to wait any longer.

So when [Truth] approached Him, He agreed without a moment's hesitation.

And [War]'s eagerness had, in turn, solidified [Truth]'s conviction in His own hypothesis — steeling His resolve to die in pursuit of truth for all.

When [Deceit] arrived on the scene and discovered that it was [War] who had safeguarded [Truth]'s experiment, His expression turned extraordinarily grim.

If [Truth]'s experiment merely revealed the truth to the world, then [War]'s presence here meant He intended to tear the sky wide open — to confront Origin head-on. After all, that had always been [War]'s sole and singular purpose.

As expected, different fears could never unite different beings.

[War], in the end, was never truly part of the Fear Faction. His one and only desire was to challenge the Supreme — and even after losing to Himself countless times, He had never given up.

But [Deceit] couldn't understand. Suppressing His fury, He addressed [War] in an icy tone:

"With what you have right now — how do you expect to win?"

In truth, the cooperation between [Deceit] and [War] had been mutual. On this front, [Deceit] had neither failed [War] nor deceived Him. It was [War], driven solely by His obsession with battle, who had betrayed [Deceit].

He knew He was in the wrong, yet He had no desire to turn back.

He simply gazed beyond the universe, spirits blazing:

"[War] lies in the fighting and in the struggling — but never in winning or losing!

From the day I shattered [Order] with my own hands, I have yearned for this moment day and night. All I seek is to challenge the first creation of this world. Win or lose, I will have been worthy of the divine name [War] above my head.

This, too, is the meaning of my existence.

[Deceit], though I have broken our pact, this is no reckless impulse.

You told me yourself — beyond this universe lie countless others, each containing another me. Since they are all me, when I cry out in blazing blood, every one of them will answer in roaring flame!

I cannot imagine how magnificent and fierce such a war would be. I only know that battlefield is my destiny.

'He' bestowed upon me the bloodlust of [War]; I shall return to Him a war worthy of that bloodlust. If I win, the fear in your hearts will vanish. If I lose, then every being in the universe will know terror.

Either way, I will have honored 'His' divine name and your 'guidance.'

Where is the fault in this?

So today — blood boils, flames rage, and I march to war!"

The instant His words fell, under the gods' stunned gazes, the entire universe shuddered violently. Then the reconstructing world ceased its cycles of destruction — it froze in place, and at some bizarre frequency, began to resonate with something beyond the universe.

The boundless Void began to peel away. Behind the nothingness, the iridescent colors of [Existence] bled through. One glance told every god these were Existence Rifts — yet the divine power seeping through these gaps between parallel worlds felt disturbingly unfamiliar and chaotic.

Whatever lay on the other side of these rifts didn't resemble the parallel timelines that [Time] had derived. Could what lurked behind them be the truth that [Truth] had sought?

But what was it, exactly?

Before anyone could ponder further, the substantive flow of [Time]'s power that had enveloped the universe fractured like a spider web — cracking open like an egg breaking its shell, admitting a breath that did not belong to this starry sky.

In that instant, every god who sensed the alien presence grew deathly grave and tense.

[Fate], watching the universe careen toward catastrophe, hardened His gaze. He wrung from Himself the very last drop of divine power, ignited the Authority of the Fixed Destiny, and single-handedly suppressed the universe's resonance.

[Birth] followed immediately. [Death] took up the relay. Every god unwilling to let the universe fall unleashed their full power, barely managing to hold the shattering world together.

Yet [Deceit] still had not moved.

[Fate] strained against the burden, spirals spinning in His eyes like whirlpools, starlight flashing like meteors. He caught sight of His sibling's utter indifference to everything unfolding, and through gritted teeth urged:

"Whatever plans or schemes you harbor, [Deceit] — the universe's collapse is absolutely not a prerequisite for your success! Why won't you act? This world is about to be destroyed!

The era must not end here, and the Fixed Destiny cannot be led astray! If the universe falls, he will die too — the [Void] Pact will be severed. Can you truly accept that?"

"Tch—

Is this really my dear sister who wanted to drag the universe into ruin?

You can't only count me as part of [Void] when it's convenient for you.

I'd love to help, but my understanding tells me it's all futile.

The only reason you're managing to hold on is that [War] hasn't struck yet. The moment He does, no one — no one — can save this starry sky.

Look — over there. He's about to begin."

The gods turned in alarm — and saw a world-burning inferno surge skyward in a reverse cascade, slamming directly into the place where [Truth]'s light shone. It was like a hammer striking a stress point, shattering the already overburdened "eggshell" beyond all recovery.

In that moment, beneath a sky raining shards of [Time]'s dissolving bubbles, the gods beheld countless identical worlds arrayed before them. Cries of disbelief and exclamations of shock rippled across every reality; scrutinizing gazes and examining stares intertwined. When the barriers of space-time came crashing down, the incredible truth of the universe was laid bare before all the gods.

The sky of this world had finally collapsed.

But not at [Truth]'s hand — it was [War] who had torn it apart.

Terror condensed in a single instant. The cacophony fell silent. Every slice universe seemed to reach an unspoken agreement, growing still at once.

And then, countless points of fire plunged like inverted meteors — streaking upward, a hundred answering one call.

In that moment, blood stained the crimson heavens, and flame illuminated the universe.

...

Cheng Shi had been in a daze throughout the entire ordeal.

After the Fun God had whisked him into the Void, he had witnessed the self-destruction of yet another true god — but [Truth]'s maneuver had been too swift. So swift that Cheng Shi couldn't even comprehend what had happened.

He had wanted to ask his Benefactor what [Truth]'s experiment actually entailed, but the moment [Truth] self-destructed, the gods had been pulled away by the Convention, leaving only a group of mortals adrift in the Void, staring at each other while the world outside churned through endless cycles of reconstruction.

Galusha undoubtedly understood [Truth]. She immediately sensed the torrents of restructuring power surging through the outside world — far more violent than even the Ritual of Truth — and her expression turned grave:

"Reconstruction... the entire world appears to be reconstructing itself..."

"World reconstruction?"

Cheng Shi froze for a moment. Although he had deduced that [Truth] had stolen [Time]'s power to verify the truth of the universe, he still couldn't grasp what that had to do with reconstructing the entire world.

In his view, [Truth] could have reconstructed the world even without [Time]'s power.

And what did reconstructing the current world have to do with exploring the unknown beyond it?

Cheng Shi looked to Galusha, hoping for an explanation.

Galusha was equally baffled. After all, this experiment involved a true god and pointed directly at the universe's truth. She didn't know what [Truth] — who had always been obsessed with apotheosis experiments — was truly pursuing, nor did she know that [Truth] had seized [Time]'s power during this trial. Without that knowledge, she had no basis for inference.

Seeing her confusion, Cheng Shi thought for a moment. To make sense of everything, he vaguely told Galusha about the existence of another world beyond this one, adding that [Truth] was likely using [Time]'s power to verify precisely that.

But Galusha only grew more puzzled.

"If even you, Mr. Prisoner — a mere follower — already know about this, why would [Truth] still need to verify it?"

"..."

'How do I explain that? I can't exactly tell her that some gods don't know as much as I do.'

For a moment, Cheng Shi was at a loss for words.

But the glint that flashed through Galusha's eyes at his reaction was sharp and knowing. She nodded: "As I suspected — your identity is far more complex than I imagined. The fact that we survived [Truth]'s experiment is undoubtedly thanks to you."

The way Galusha looked at him was somewhat unsettling. Cheng Shi's mind was a tangled mess, and he had no patience for explanations. Instead, he simply pointed at Meng Youfang:

"It has nothing to do with me. It's him.

Old Meng was once a true god, but fell from his Divine Throne due to certain circumstances. This stint in the mortal world is to reclaim his throne. My Benefactor happens to be an old friend of his — so we owe our survival to him."

The moment those words left his mouth, the silence that followed extended far beyond Cheng Shi alone.

Chen Yi was still unconscious. The only awake outsider, Fang Yuan, stood at the far back, his gaze sweeping between the others before fixing on Cheng Shi.

After witnessing the gods' assembly and [Truth]'s self-destruction, Fang Yuan's mind had been thoroughly blown. But bewildered as he was, he could still tell that their survival was definitely because of Cheng Shi — not some delusional patient like Meng Youfang.

Meng Youfang's audacity in calling himself a god before the actual gods was admirable, sure — but Fang Yuan had seen how the gods reacted. They hadn't treated Meng Youfang with any semblance of equality. They hadn't even acknowledged him.

But this Fate Weaver...

Every single god present had turned their gaze upon him!

The trembling Fang Yuan silently absorbed everything, but kept his mouth shut.

Because he knew — as long as he didn't say anything, as long as he quietly stayed close to the Fate Weaver, the biggest loophole in this game was his to exploit.

As for the fact that Galusha had assumed Wei Zhi's identity...

'None of my business.'

Whether Galusha was good or bad was debatable, but Wei Zhi — who had collaborated with the Erudition Presidium — absolutely deserved what he got.

After hearing Cheng Shi's words, Meng Youfang didn't deny it. He simply furrowed his brow in contemplation, trying to understand why [Truth] — who had sought to steal his Divine Throne — had instead chosen self-destruction.

After much deliberation, he finally arrived at a conclusion:

'Truth acted on impulse. One wrong move — and after I saw through his plan, he died of guilt.'

When he shared this deduction aloud, Cheng Shi felt the world truly deserved to be destroyed.

'Where does this extreme delusion even come from?'

'You're writing annotations on the world's timeline now, is that it?!'

'[Truth]'s dying words were wasted — his death-affirming testament somehow became an apology letter to you?!'

Cheng Shi rolled his eyes and ignored Meng Youfang. Galusha, too, lifted her chin and regarded Cheng Shi with a derisive hum — her expression clearly saying:

'You're telling me your Benefactor saved us for the sake of this guy?'

Knowing there was no washing this one clean, Cheng Shi stopped trying to explain and simply urged Galusha to analyze what impact this experiment might have on the universe.

Galusha was not an unreasonable person — otherwise she could never have walked alongside a humorless scholar to begin with.

Originally, after obtaining her player identity, she had planned to approach Cheng Shi again with a few ulterior motives. But now, given the degree of importance the gods placed on Cheng Shi, she no longer dared harbor such thoughts.

Whatever Fang Yuan could see, she could see too — and then some.

She could read the absolute priority that [Deceit] and [Fate], the two masters of [Void], placed on this Mr. Prisoner. Naturally, she understood she couldn't scheme against him — she could only draw close to him and strive to become an ally within the same faction.

So she set aside her probing of Cheng Shi's true identity and fell into quiet contemplation.

After a while, she spoke with a furrowed brow:

"The Department of Consciousness Faith once conducted a Faith Resonance Experiment — an evolution built upon the foundation of slice technology.

By that time, Grandfather Selius had already left the Tower of Logic, and the Life Extension Department's research findings were being applied across other departments. But a persistent concern had always surrounded slice technology.

To confirm slice safety and prevent critical experimental data from leaking, the Department of Consciousness Faith began investigating the links between slices across different consciousnesses. That was how the Faith Resonance Experiment was born.

The experiment worked like this: different slices of the same scholar were implanted with entirely different memories, then sealed in separate locations to conduct the same specialized experiment. This experiment fell outside both memory sets' areas of expertise, and several critical steps had been deliberately obscured — requiring the experimenters to discover the solutions on their own.

After extensive data collection, the results proved that even with altered and obscured memories, slices originating from the same individual maintained a connection on some level of consciousness. During observation, they found that when one subject discovered a replacement solution, the other would frequently arrive at the same answer shortly thereafter — even though their post-experiment theoretical explanations were completely different.

The Grand Scholars of the Department of Consciousness Faith termed this the Delayed Theory of Slice Consciousness Entanglement. Based on these findings, they petitioned the Erudition Presidium to enact a Slice Protection Act, establishing that scholar slices were not disposable resources — that they held scientific value equal to the scholars themselves...

Mr. Prisoner, what you described about 'another world' is too vague. But I imagine that whatever could drive [Truth] to such obsessive pursuit is probably not some parallel timeline governed by the gods. So I'll premise that this other world also has its own [Truth].

If that's truly the case, then I believe [Truth]'s world-reconstruction experiment isn't actually about reconstructing this world at all. He's probably using this approach to contact his counterpart — the other [Truth] in that other world."

The instant Galusha finished speaking, a streak of flame illuminated the universe and shattered the Void's "firmament."

Under everyone's horrified gazes, the sky collapsed.

...

The shattering of the space-time barrier might have been a breathtaking spectacle for the gods, but for mortals, it was nothing short of an apocalypse.

The reconstructing world froze in place. The remade populace collectively raised their heads to gaze upward.

All they felt was the earth swaying, the world trembling. Before they could even determine whether this was an earthquake or a divine anomaly, the vast blue sky fractured like a spider web and began collapsing in great sheets at speeds no mortal mind could process.

Pitch-black nothingness seeped into reality like mud, dragging shards of existence along with it as it cascaded downward in a torrent, tearing through everything in its path — real and illusory alike — dissolving it all with terrifying ease.

In that moment, no matter where anyone stood, the first thought was to run. Even with no idea where to go, the only instinct was to move — to flee.

Cheng Shi and the others were no exception.

True, they had been sheltered in the Void, inside the cage [Truth] had set up for the gods. During the world's reconstruction, they might have been safe — but now, as the world itself shattered, nowhere was exempt.

"What... is this?!"

"[War]!" Cheng Shi's face twisted with fury, his teeth grinding. "I knew it — all that restraint was a facade hiding ulterior motives. Beneath the surface of that forced calm, the most terrifying madness was always lurking!

He's gone insane! He's actually trying to break through the shackles of space-time to find opponents in a wider arena!

Damn it — He gets His fight, but what happens to the gods? What happens to the universe?!"

Cheng Shi's words struck everyone dumb — though it was equally likely that the ongoing destruction of the universe had already done that. Even Meng Youfang, self-proclaimed seventeenth god, had gone pale. He stared at the world-fractures spreading toward them and declared grimly:

"Could it be that [War] also wants to prevent my return to my Divine Throne?"

This doesn't look like ramping up the difficulty of a trial — He's crossed the line!"

"..."

Galusha's expression was equally severe: "Run! If we don't run now, it'll be too late!"

With that, she took off at full speed in the opposite direction of the spreading destruction. Fang Yuan followed close behind. Meng Youfang hesitated for a beat, then grabbed the motionless Cheng Shi and dragged him into retreat.

Cheng Shi's eyes were heavy with dread. He felt certain this situation had long surpassed anything mortals could resist. Something must have gone wrong in the gods' game — otherwise, neither [Deceit] nor [Fate] would have allowed the universe to deteriorate to this point.

But what exactly had gone wrong?!

Without identifying the root cause, they would never escape alive.

Yet there was precious little time to think. Compared to the speed at which the world's fractures spread, mortal running was inconsequential. Before long, the devouring black cracks had split open all around them.

They felt a horrifying tearing force assault them from every direction. Even with every technique at their disposal, they held out for barely a second before every last one of them plunged into darkness.

All except Cheng Shi — because he was rescued.

The moment cracks mirroring the universe's own fractures began to crawl across his vision, he felt someone — no, something with claws — seize the back of his neck.

Then he was flung through the air. After a nauseating tumble, he landed on the back of a beast — all rippling muscle and sleek fur — galloping at full tilt.

He instinctively clung to the creature racing beneath him. And despite the apocalyptic Void surrounding them, a feeling of safety welled up inside him.

Cheng Shi raised his head, saw that familiar silhouette before him, felt the biting wind whipping past his cheeks, and smiled with immense relief:

"Big Cat!"

Yes — Big Cat had arrived.

In truth, Hong Lin should have arrived much sooner.

The moment the Convention assembly ended, [Deceit] had tossed Hong Lin in this exact direction. His intent was obvious: send the little cat to find the Clown.

But at the time, Hong Lin — still reeling from the twin shocks of the world-ending experiment and the gods' power struggle — hadn't recovered her wits. Before she'd even reached the section of the Void where Cheng Shi was and caught sight of him, she had already turned back toward Tao Yi.

It wasn't until she was halfway there and saw [War]'s flames shatter the Void's firmament — the entire world disintegrating at breakneck speed — that it finally clicked. She belatedly realized that the Fun God's toss must have carried a deeper meaning.

And that deeper meaning, without question, had to be Cheng Shi — because her only connection to [Deceit] was through the Fate Weaver.

Hong Lin's expression shifted. She glanced toward where Tao Yi would be, bit down hard, and without a moment's hesitation, spun around and sprinted back the way she'd come to find Cheng Shi.

She knew that even if she found Tao Yi in this chaos, she could only protect her temporarily. To truly unravel everything and save the world, she needed the Fate Weaver.

So the Dense Forest Spotted Leopard once again demonstrated her speed, snatching Cheng Shi from the jaws of oblivion at the very last second and flinging him onto her back.

Unfortunately, the rescued party showed no gratitude. The words "Big Cat" nearly made Hong Lin's fur stand on end.

If not for the genuine delight in his tone, she would have swiped him with her claws.

The instant Big Cat appeared, Cheng Shi knew she couldn't have found him on her own — coincidences like that didn't exist. So after casting a Healing spell on her, he immediately asked:

"Who sent you?"

[Fate] or [Deceit]?"

What message did they give you?"

Hong Lin answered quickly: "[Deceit], but there was no message."

No message?"

Impossible.

Cheng Shi frowned and said in a low voice: "Then tell me everything you know. Whatever you have — things you heard, postures you observed, expressions you noted — it all counts."

Hong Lin wasn't as clueless as she appeared. The moment she realized [Deceit] had sent her to find Cheng Shi, she understood the [Void] master's intent. She had spent the entire run replaying everything she'd experienced, and she quickly recounted it all to Cheng Shi — [Truth]'s experiment, [Folly]'s commentary, the Assembly of Gods Convention, and the Fun God's cryptic parting words.

And when Cheng Shi listened carefully and pieced it all together, he finally understood what was happening.

The Fun God had pulled Big Cat into the Convention assembly to use her as a messenger. And Big Cat had done an excellent job — though Cheng Shi found it puzzling that her account contained only the gods' spoken words and no other details whatsoever.

'So [Folly]'s Authority is in [Memory]'s hands?'

'Is that what the Fun God was trying to convey? But if He already knew, why didn't He go after it Himself?'

'[Memory]'s guard is too deep — as an opposing faction, He can't easily make a move?'

'That's plausible. If so, I understand — this job probably falls to Li Jingming.'

'But then what did the Fun God's final warning mean?'

According to Big Cat, He had dangled her in the air, delivered one seemingly disjointed piece of advice, and then sent her on her way. Clearly, that sentence was meant to be more important than anything else from the Convention.

Yet it sounded like a perfectly ordinary warning...

"Once your Benefactor dies, there's no one left to protect His followers..."

Cheng Shi mulled it over for a long time without reaching a conclusion. He even began to wonder if it was just the Fun God's way of pressuring Big Cat — a threat not to grow too close to [Fate].

But then Hong Lin, noticing his prolonged silence, glanced back with a question — and inadvertently sparked his breakthrough.

Hong Lin asked: "What exactly happened? Why did [Truth] try to destroy the world?"

That question lit a flash of inspiration. Cheng Shi slapped his palm against Hong Lin's flank and raised his head with excitement:

"[Truth]!"

"?"

The completely incongruous answer and the Fate Weaver's repeated provocations pushed Hong Lin over the edge. She was about to turn her head and roar at him when Cheng Shi launched into rapid-fire explanation:

"B— Hong Lin, turn around — no, change direction!

We need to find people — find the Erudition Presidium, find the Grand Scholars!

My trial settlement hasn't appeared, which means the trial isn't over yet. If it's not over, we can still go back.

I understand what the Fun God meant now.

It's not just [Prosperity] that's lost its protection!

[Truth] is dead too — His followers have equally lost their shield! Which means what they're holding is mine for the taking!

That's what the Fun God meant — He's telling me to go after the Ritual of Truth!"

"?" Big Cat was stunned. "The Ritual of Truth?"

"Yes, the Ritual of Truth!

[Truth] self-destructed. His voting rights went to [Void], His Authority to [Birth]. It looks like nothing's left — but don't forget, His Servant God creations still exist!

If we find the Ritual of Truth, we can carve out our own share in this world-ending experiment!

Hurry, Hong Lin — find a way to get me back there."

"..."

It wasn't that Hong Lin didn't want to — she didn't understand.

Her speed was impressive, but she was barely outpacing the world-ending fractures. She couldn't see how securing the Ritual of Truth had anything to do with saving the world.

The world was about to be destroyed. Was this really the time to hunt for spoils of war — a Servant God creation of [Truth]'s?

The timing seemed all wrong.

No matter how greedy a person was, you couldn't gamble your life for greed.

But trusting Cheng Shi, she did her best to follow his directions and sprinted toward the section of the Void that led back to the trial.

Along the way, seeing Cheng Shi's utterly confident demeanor — as though he no longer worried about the world's collapse at all — her curiosity finally got the better of her:

"Can the Ritual of Truth stop [Truth]'s experiment?"

Cheng Shi burst out laughing at the question, pointing toward the world-fractures visible in the distance:

"The current destruction has nothing to do with the Ritual of Truth.

At first, I was terrified too. But the moment I realized the Fun God was sending me after spoils of war, my fear vanished.

Think about it — if He truly had no way to handle this world-ending experiment, the only thing He'd be doing right now is trying to save this world. All His schemes and secrets are in this starry sky. Even if every other god gave up, the Fun God probably wouldn't — He's not the type to surrender that easily to 'Him.'

Yet in the middle of this crisis, He still has time to concern Himself with trivial matters like sending me to grab loot. That means He must already have a countermeasure!

[Truth]'s experiment and [War]'s eruption look unsolvable to us — but in His eyes, they might not be a bad thing at all.

He's probably using this as another opportunity to scheme something.

Relax — this world won't collapse.

When the sky falls, the tallest will hold it up."

"?"

Hong Lin was even more confused. She blurted out: "[Deceit] is going to save the world?"

Cheng Shi gazed toward the firelight streaking across the horizon, his eyes glinting.

'He said He would — but this time, the savior probably isn't Him...'

...

When [Deceit] saw [War]'s figure appear in the real universe so far ahead of schedule, His expression turned undeniably grim.

But since the deed was done, He could only respond to all changes by remaining unchanged — standing at the edge of the Existence Rift alongside the other gods, supporting that corner of the Void while gazing up at [War] and bearing witness to this battle that would surely be recorded in history.

[Deceit] might have been calm, but the other gods were anything but — especially those who had never heard that beyond their world lay countless others not derived from [Time]'s projections. Having seen the universe's truth with their own eyes, they stood rooted in stunned silence.

"So beyond the universe... there are indeed... others who share my visage... It seems... the path of decay... is far less simple... than I imagined..."

"This is impossible! I am a deity! A true god anointed and named by Origin! An avatar of the era who wields Authority! The destination of faith for billions of followers! How is it possible that I am nothing more than a tiny corner of this vast universe?!!"

"So this... is the new order?"

Then what meaning does the order I have upheld all along truly hold?"

"The fool finally learns what foolishness means.

Ha — what a splendid act of folly."

"..."

"So what you have been watching all this time were other worlds — they occupied your time and kept you so busy?"

Hmm, to commit this moment to memory is itself a memory.

Let others walk their paths; I have my own."

"You... knew all along, didn't you?"

The memory I sealed away — it was this truth, wasn't it?"

[Fate]'s voice seemed to have lost its customary coldness, replaced by an infinite hollowness. In this moment, He finally revealed to the world what true [Void] looked like.

[Deceit] let out a derisive snort and glanced at the sibling beside Him, wearing a half-smile:

"Though the one who unveiled the truth for you was [War], I'm afraid you can't seek compensation from Him anymore.

Go ask [Memory] — after all, rediscovering the truth is itself the breaking of memory's seal.

But tell me, dear sister — do you still believe your Fixed Destiny is truly fixed?

Look at all these worlds before you. If a Fixed Destiny does exist, then isn't this predetermined fate... a bit too numerous?"

It was a killing blow aimed straight at the heart.

[Deceit]'s mockery cut into [Fate] like a knife. Yet after a single instant of confusion, [Fate]'s gaze grew only more resolute.

That ancient, unchanging coldness returned to His eyes. With neither joy nor sorrow, He gazed upon this real universe that had exceeded all expectations, and intoned:

"The Fixed Destiny does not depend on quantity, but on truth and falsehood.

I bear the divine name of [Fate]. I wield the Authority of [Fate]. I perceive the universe's true nature. Naturally, I can discern which is the genuine Fixed Destiny."

"Tch—

You think they're all illusions?

How interesting. Have you considered that at this very moment, they look at you and think you are the illusion?"

"Fate has never cared for the gaze of others, nor heeded the slander of the world.

All is predetermined. Divergent paths will return to the true course.

Even if these countless worlds tell me that the universe is nothing more than a preposterous experiment — what 'He' anticipates must be the offering that comes from me.

This is the Fixed Destiny."

"...Utter fool!"

[Deceit] erupted — those eyes burning with the frustration of watching someone refuse to fight for themselves. He wanted nothing more than to shake this sibling awake on the spot, but He restrained Himself. With a deep furrow of His brow, He let out another mordant snort:

"Keep dreaming. What you want — that can only exist in dreams."

He turned away from the obsessed [Fate] and lifted His gaze toward [War] in the real universe.

There, in the Existence Rifts far removed from the world, countless pillars of skyward flame continued to surge higher — strand by strand, beam by beam — each carrying unshakable conviction, each racing to be first.

Firelight blazed through the darkness, leaving footprints of blood in its wake.

Without question, as the [Wars] from countless slice universes broke free of their "shackles" and illuminated the real universe, the entity above the cosmos had long since been revealed to the gods of every world.

Though they could not make out His form or state — perceiving only His location through sheer instinct — the reverence and devotion rooted in the very essence of their Authority told them: that was Origin, and could only be Origin!

And [War]'s target was Him!

However, the [Wars] and Origin were still separated by an immense gulf — a void of uncertain substance, of darkness that had to be crossed.

A single god's power was ultimately finite. That darkness stood like an unbridgeable chasm, blocking every flame that tried to illuminate it.

And so, as countless trails of fire reached the limits of their strength, they changed course. Rather than pressing deeper, they connected — left joining right — "fusing" with their countless selves into one.

Blood and fire converged. Battle spirit soared.

High above, boiling blood burst forth and raging flame roared in spirals. A terrifying storm of blood and fire erupted, devouring the darkness at a maddening pace, howling toward Origin's domain.

Even the iridescent Existence Rifts warped under the pressure of this frenzied fighting spirit, and in that instant, the entire universe boiled.

"How do we survive?"

Through! Blood! And! Fire!"

The real universe rang with the synchronized prayer of every [War], its fervent cadence igniting every god who watched. Though the gods held Origin in fearful awe, the contagious power of that cry for survival birthed within them the audacious notion that perhaps they, too, could fight!

This was [War]!

To fight, to strive — regardless of victory or defeat — never retreating!

Blazing flame scorched the heavens, a rain of blood veiled every eye. Under this terrifying display of power, the gods fell as silent as cicadas in winter.

In that moment, even the cosmic terror was seared away by [War]'s inferno. Every being — mortal or divine — who witnessed this scene became utterly convinced: this would be a victorious battle.

The searing fury forged from the gathered fire of countless worlds would drag the lofty Origin down from His Creator's throne and burn through this horrifying slice-universe experiment once and for all.

The universe could hardly wait to welcome a world without Origin. Gods and mortals alike gazed upward, cheering for [War]'s audacity — and for the victory that was about to come.

But then — at the very instant the heavens-scorching flames crossed that dark expanse and were about to illuminate one corner of Origin's throne—

Snap.

A single crisp sound reverberated across the universe.

Was it... a snap of fingers?

No — an illusion!

No one could describe what kind of sound it actually was. It might have been the muffled toll of a bell, or an abrupt whistle, or a rumbling peal of thunder.

But regardless of what it was, after that sound — the real universe went dark.

The flames, the blood rain, the sweeping advance, the fighting spirit...

Gone in an instant!

The dark void returned to its original state. The Existence Rifts were no longer warped. Everything — all of it — settled into silence, as though none of it had ever happened.

In an instant, blood dried, fire died, and the universe fell silent.

"!!!!!"

The gods who had witnessed this with their own eyes felt their pupils contract to pinpoints. If not for the parallel worlds still arrayed before them and the universe's ongoing collapse, they might have believed they'd imagined the whole thing.

Gone?

Just like that... gone?

Where was [War]?

In that moment, the fear that [War]'s fire had burned away came flooding back — doubled, tripled over what it had been. A tidal wave of terror swallowed gods and mortals alike without discrimination, just as [War] had said:

In all the universe, every being now knew fear.

It was a terror rising from the deepest reaches of the soul, forcing the billions of lives in this experiment — no, billions of variables — to their knees, prostrate and trembling.

Cheng Shi's world was hit hardest. Had he not sensed the danger and drawn out [Corruption]'s Container in time, this moment might have frightened him and Hong Lin to death beneath this overburdened starry sky.

Even with [Corruption]'s Container absorbing their fear, the dread did not stop spreading.

Big Cat's limbs went weak, her voice quaking: "This is..."

Cheng Shi's face was ashen, jaw clenched: "...Origin."

At that same moment, while the gods around Him bowed their heads in dread and murmured repentant prayers, [Deceit] looked upward against the current, staring fixedly at where Origin dwelt, His pupils shrunk to pinpricks.

The corners of His eyes no longer curved upward. The grin had vanished from His face.

[War]'s extinction had forced Him to confront a single inescapable truth:

All His schemes and machinations were a joke — nothing more than a self-amusing farce.

To this Creator who presided over the cosmic experiment, gods were merely variables that could be erased with a casual wave of the hand.

Utterly beneath mention.

...

Just how panicked the gods were, Cheng Shi had no idea.

All he knew was that if he didn't move soon, his spoils of war would be lost.

The gods frozen in place had been so terrified they'd forgotten the world was still collapsing. They had stopped supporting the Void together, and the universe's disintegration was accelerating.

Cheng Shi and Big Cat had still been trying to figure out how to loop back to the section of the Void where the trial was located, but that plan was now meaningless — the Void had nearly fallen entirely.

With no other choice, the two of them fled in the only direction that still showed signs of vitality.

Hong Lin gritted her teeth and pushed forward, burning through nearly all of her divine power. Without the Authority of [Prosperity] sustaining her, she would have collapsed from exhaustion halfway.

But running like this was no solution. With the gods motionless, the universe would inevitably shatter. Fleeing alone couldn't save their lives.

In this moment of desperation, Big Cat had no room for other thoughts — she just wanted to understand what was happening before she died. She wanted to know whether the Fun God's "salvation" was real or not.

"What is He waiting for?"

Indeed — what was He waiting for?

Cheng Shi himself had no answer.

He had assumed that even if [Truth]'s experiment and [War]'s actions exceeded expectations, the Fun God would be able to pivot and exploit everything they'd done, perhaps using it to probe Origin.

But now the problem was clear: Origin's power had exceeded all predictions. So would the Fun God's original method of "saving the world" still work?

Why hadn't that savior appeared yet?

Just as these thoughts churned through his mind, in the midst of the spreading panic, a beam of light suddenly rose in the vast real universe.

It was unlike [War]'s flame. This light was brilliant, radiant — like a pillar refracting the colors of [Existence], and like a comet carrying the wonder of [Void].

It surged upward — an inverted fall — mirroring exactly the way [War] had charged!

In a universe paralyzed by silence, this light shattered the shroud of fear, broke through the spreading panic. It was defiance freed from chains, contemptuous of the infinite darkness with its own luminance — as if crying out on behalf of the trillions of slice universes beneath it, and as if keening justice for the trillions of [Wars] who had vanished!

At first, only a single beam of light existed. But soon — two, three, four... more and more lights erupted from below, weaving together, converging into a sea, once again illuminating that hollow darkness.

Yet that was all they could do — illuminate the darkness. Because compared to [War]'s raging inferno, the brightness of all these lights combined was still far too dim.

In the end, humans could never match gods.

Indeed — humans!

This time, the lights streaming upward against the current were not the gods of any world. They were the mortals of countless worlds!

When the gods discerned exactly who those radiant mortals were... a gasp of shock swept through the real universe, echoing the very first cries when the space-time barriers had shattered.

"It's him... has he gone mad?!"

The gods whipped around. After seeing him within their crumbling world, they turned again to look at all those versions of him in the real universe.

[Fate]'s pupils contracted violently, unable to bear the sight. [Deceit]'s smile vanished completely, replaced by eyes like frost.

The converging mass of light traced the Void-scars left by [War]'s passage, surging upward once more in a fresh "charge" toward Origin's domain.

Though the momentum of this advance compared to the last was like a firefly against the moon — worlds apart — they traveled farther than [War] ever had.

Yet even that greater distance couldn't illuminate a single corner of that throne.

Human strength had its limits.

The brilliant light grew weaker, dimmer, before long melting into the hollow darkness until it could no longer be seen.

They seemed exhausted — or perhaps dissolved.

This feeble assault didn't even attract Origin's attention. It simply dissipated on its own, halfway there.

But just as the fear dispelled by the light came surging back like a tide, and the spreading despair shattered the silence once more — from the place where the light had vanished came a series of rolling thunderclaps.

BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM—

Thunder pealed endlessly. The fleeting brilliance lit up that hollow expanse once again.

This time, what every living being in the real universe saw was not merely the infinite darkness beneath that light — but a mocking smile, assembled from countless bursting droplets of blood.

That smile had only a pair of eyes and a mouth, exactly like the brushstrokes on a mask. Those empty, hollow eyes overflowed with crimson, staring directly toward Origin's domain. And the upturned corners of that mouth seemed to be ridiculing something.

As for what...

No one knew.

Except... Cheng Shi.

Cheng Shi's mind went completely blank.

Those countless thunderbolts in the real universe might as well have struck his skull directly. He felt his brain humming, screeching, howling.

His eyes flew wide and his strength left him. He toppled straight off Big Cat's back. Even as he fell, his pupils still quaked, his limbs still trembled. He stared in disbelief at that blood-red smile in the real universe, only one sentence echoing through his mind:

"For the sake of us being 'our own people' — remember to cheer for me when I die. Because that is neither humiliation nor surrender. It is mockery drawn in blood. I will sneer at that Observer, before the gaze of billions of lives and tens of thousands of worlds, and tell 'Him': Your experiment will never produce any answer!"

He never imagined the chance would come so soon!

He actually did it.

No — they did it!

With astonishing synchronicity, as though they had coordinated in advance, amid the chaos of the universe's truth being laid bare, amid the terror of [War]'s death at the hands of an inviolable power, under the stunned gaze of the gods across countless slice universes — they painted this unparalleled tableau. Facing the supreme Creator, they used their lives to curve their lips into a blood-red sneer!

But... did this mean anything?

Yes!

Of course it did!

Freedom has always been born of defiance. Without the cry that dares to break free from chains, how could there ever be brilliant rebirth amid despair!

So Cheng Shi smiled.

Though his eyes were bloodshot, he couldn't stop smiling.

Smiling, clapping, cheering:

"Show-off — Cheng Shi, you're nothing but a show-off!

Showing off in front of ten thousand universes — feels great, doesn't it?"

He wanted to say "You got your thrills, but from now on all the pressure falls on the one version of me who never got to face Origin..." — but those words never left his lips. Instead, they turned into a self-deprecating sigh:

"That's fine. As long as you're all happy.

Despair is in the past now. From here on, you'll never have to live in fear again."

He muttered to himself, even as his entire body plummeted toward the shattering nothingness below.

Hong Lin was equally stunned when she saw that scene. Her legs buckled from the sheer shock, and she nearly crashed to the ground — and at that exact moment, Cheng Shi lost his grip and slid off her back.

The instant she sensed him falling, Big Cat nearly lost her mind.

She let out a howl toward the heavens and dove after Cheng Shi. Her outstretched claws didn't reach him — but they touched the tears floating upward.

Big Cat's heart seized in panic. The words tore out of her throat:

"Cheng Shi, don't you dare!!!"

Cheng Shi looked at Big Cat lunging toward him and smiled even wider.

"Of course I won't go. If I did, wouldn't their deaths be for nothing?"

Don't worry — I'll live well. I'll keep living until the day 'He' declares the experiment a failure!"

Feeling the tearing force of the crumbling world growing ever stronger around him, Cheng Shi reined in his smile. His tone turned playful:

"It's about time. This should be the moment."

With that, he raised his hand and snapped his fingers — a snap that made no sound.

And then, under Big Cat's astonished gaze, space-time froze.

...

[Deceit] had indeed been probing Origin.

Originally, His plan wasn't all that different from what [War] had just done — He had merely pushed the timeline back, because there was still much He needed to do. Rushing to tear away the final curtain could just as easily bring the actors onstage and audience below not a pleasant surprise, but a terrible shock.

Whether the world could withstand that shock was debatable, but now it was clear — it absolutely could not.

Origin was too powerful. No — perhaps "powerful" wasn't even the right word to describe 'Him.'

When one being of the same species surpasses another, you could call it "powerful." But Origin and the gods...

They weren't even the same category of existence.

Even though the gods had always known Origin had created everything and bestowed upon them their divine nature, as deities who had reigned supreme for eons, they lacked any clear understanding of a "Creator" who had never once appeared.

Today, that understanding was completed.

Before 'Him,' they were mortals — perhaps even less than mortals!

Origin's display had terrified the universe. The Fear Faction seemed to have won a decisive victory — but that was an illusion.

A measured dose of fear was the courage to claw a path to survival from a dead end. But an overdose of fear was simply the last straw that broke the camel's back, transforming the so-called Fear Faction into a Despair Faction.

Like right now — with the gods standing paralyzed in shock.

When that bloody sneer detonated across the real universe, countless worlds were collapsing and perishing. But the gods saw clearly: those worlds that vanished from view were instantly erased and replaced by an imperceptible force with pristine substitutes.

Though these new worlds were wrapped within Existence Rifts and indistinct, the faint vitality seeping through told the gods plainly — a brand-new era seemed to have begun again.

So they were nothing more than mass-produced petri dishes. As for what the Creator was cultivating within them, no one knew.

But that wasn't even the most terrifying part.

What was more terrifying: now that [War] had vanished into nothing and the bloody sneer had faded from the cosmos, what would become of those universes still collapsing but not yet fully destroyed?

These universes had lost their window for salvation because the gods froze in shock. They could no longer support the crumbling cosmos. As their worlds crept toward annihilation, the only fate awaiting them was the exact same ending as the samples that had already been replaced...

Perhaps even worse!

Because the worlds that perished were already gone. And in the worlds that still stood, gods and mortals alike could only sit and wait for death.

That alone was devastating enough — but the reality [Deceit] noticed was even more hopeless than despair.

He observed that even though the [Wars] of countless worlds had ridden [Truth]'s experiment to pierce the sky and confront Origin directly, there were still countless other worlds cocooned within Existence Rifts that had never witnessed this madness at all.

The same was true of the bloody sneer — countless Clowns had sneered at Origin, but countless others remained trapped in their tiny corners. Their worlds hadn't caught up to this "grand show"; some didn't even know — due to differences in "progress" — that a grand show was unfolding beyond the universe.

This meant the infinite slice universes were not progressing in lockstep. Each world had its own pace.

Parallel timelines worked the same way, of course. This wasn't hard to understand or even to guess. [Deceit] had already grasped this when He smuggled Himself into other worlds through the Mockery and Jeering.

So why did this realization still frighten Him?

Because when the perspective zoomed out, jumped dimensions, and shifted from inside a slice universe to the real universe — it became obvious that "time" was flowing here, too. And from that came a ghost story:

How many times had [War]'s charge happened already?

Or rather — how many encores had this "grand show" already seen?

The more you thought about it, the more terrifying it became!

There was no escape!

In that moment, even [Fate] was forced to redefine the Fixed Destiny!

If everything within the real universe was repeating itself, then wasn't that, too, a form of predetermined fate?

Just as this net of fear was about to ensnare every last god, just as the tidal wave of despair was on the verge of swallowing the world entirely, [Deceit]'s gaze sharpened. He realized He had to start saving the world.

More importantly, His only "subordinate" in the Fear Faction — that devout little Clown follower — was about to die. Drifting toward the "predetermined" was not a good omen. So He acted decisively to prevent that outcome.

Of course, the timing was His to decide — but the god who actually moved was not Him.

[Deceit] was the facade of [Void] — a phantasmal bubble, an unchanging falsehood. He could deceive, He could bluff, but the one thing He could not do was save.

So the true savior was not [Deceit], but rather...

[Time]!

The reason [Time] never had time was precisely because He had been continuously aligning the "time" of the universe with the "time" of the real universe. He was synchronizing the progress across every temporal dimension of the Creator's experiment, ensuring that the world behind Him displayed no anomalies and attracted no attention from the Experiment Master.

So from the very beginning, He had been the "savior" — a savior who silently stood guard before the world.

But strangely, when [Truth]'s experiment had revealed the truth to the gods, when [War]'s impulse had torn away the world's disguise — when the slice universe beneath their feet lay exposed under Origin's observation as an anomaly — where had [Time] gone?

He hadn't shown His face since the Convention assembly. Before, His time had been consumed by "synchronization." But now the shattered universe no longer needed synchronizing — so why had He still not appeared?

Because He was hiding!

Not hiding His talents — hiding Himself. He was avoiding a gaze — the Creator's gaze!

He carried within Him the power to save the world from fire and flood — and that power came from the Creator Himself. So He dared not show His face, lest He draw the Creator's attention.

Whether a god's concealment could truly escape the Creator's notice, no one knew. But thus far, the Creator had not personally intervened to accelerate this world's destruction.

Which meant there was still a chance.

As for how to save the world — it was simple.

"Time Has Its Own Path!"

Since the world had gone astray because of [Truth], then simply wind the deviation back to the right course. Restore the shattered world to its former state — turn it back into a normal sample. That way, this world would be indistinguishable from all the other slice universes that had never witnessed "the blood drying and flame dying" or the "bloody sneer" — just another "obedient" experimental sample.

Once "obedient," it could "resynchronize." And resynchronization meant going unnoticed by the Creator.

This was a mad gamble — with the entire world as the stake!

The bet was that the Creator's power could restore the world, and that the restored world would not be noticed and replaced!

But...

Did you catch what was wrong?

This kind of gambler's spirit had previously only been seen in [Fate]. Yet today, for the sake of the world, [Time] was gambling too.

He unleashed every last ounce of the Creator's power within Him and performed a regression on the world beneath — a regression that transcended the space-time barrier.

Time reversed. The deviation was corrected!

This time, not only did the shattering world stop breaking and begin to "re-adhere," but even the multiple reconstructions [Truth] had performed were rewound.

And so Cheng Shi went from falling to rising. Big Cat went from sprinting forward to retreating backward. Tao Yi resumed her flickering. Players returned to their trials. Everything ebbed like a receding tide — as if none of it had ever happened!

Before long, when Cheng Shi opened his eyes and found himself back amid the ruins of Tusnat, the heart that had been lodged in his throat finally sank three notches toward calm.

[Time]!

It was Him after all!

He realized [Time] had acted — this Benefactor had taken the entire world back to the beginning of [Truth]'s experiment, depositing him back inside [Truth]'s trial.

But had it worked?

Had the dust settled?

He didn't know how [Time] had done it. He only knew that the memories of blood drying and flame dying, of the blood-red sneer of despair, remained seared into his mind!

Cheng Shi had not forgotten!

Because of...

The Prisoner's Awakening.

...

Of course, what made Cheng Shi's expression shift wasn't just [Time]'s marvel — it was also his current situation.

What frightened him wasn't how he'd woken up, but where he'd woken up!

He had woken up cradled in Hu Xuan's arms...

Can you imagine that kind of tension?

When he saw that elegant, refined face hovering three inches above his forehead — even though her eyes were full of concern — the first thing Cheng Shi felt wasn't the relief of being rescued, nor the lingering shock of what he'd witnessed. Instead, a single "fatal" question echoed through his mind:

'Am I currently before the "birth," or after it?'

This question mattered greatly. It determined the generational hierarchy — specifically, whether he was Hu Xuan's father, or whether Hu Xuan would become his mother.

"..."

The moment Hu Xuan saw the panic in Cheng Shi's eyes, she relaxed. Then she shook her head with an amused laugh and slapped him on the forehead.

"Wake up. I may covet your offspring, but I'm not the type to take advantage of someone in peril.

Is my image in your eyes really that deplorable?"

"..."

'Since when do followers of [Birth] have any right to talk about image?'

'Do you have any idea what your image actually is?'

'Who wouldn't be terrified of people who are constantly birthing something?'

Though the phrasing was undeniably strange.

Cheng Shi gave an awkward laugh. His expression was a masterpiece of conflicting emotions, but he played along and asked:

"What's... the situation right now?"

He sat up. Hu Xuan rose as well and gazed south with a serious expression:

"The Erudition Presidium set its sights on our player identities, just as you predicted.

While you were reconstructing this experiment, the Grand Scholars tried to remold us along with it.

Fortunately, I'd taken some precautions in advance. We should be past the worst of it now. We're still in Tusnat, but this is the real Tusnat — we've escaped the experiment."

"?"

Cheng Shi listened in total bewilderment. He had to set aside the multitude of shocks and stray thoughts and focus on understanding the current situation first.

As he awoke, his teammates gradually came to as well. When they saw that everyone was unharmed, all eyes turned to Hu Xuan.

After a moment's thought, Cheng Shi understood.

[Time]'s miracle had deposited him back in the latter half of the trial — the point when they had been fighting the Grand Scholars' attempt to dissolve the experimental world through the Ritual of Truth. And it was at that same moment that Hu Xuan had given birth to a... man!

Right — where was that man now?

Cheng Shi scanned the surroundings and found no sign of him. He looked questioningly at Hu Xuan, who smiled softly:

"Don't bother looking. He's already gone.

You guessed correctly — He is exactly who you think."

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted. A name instantly flashed through his mind:

Lu Xia!

The Servant God of [Life], the Envoy of [Birth] — Birth Holy Voice Lu Xia!

So the figure he'd seen parting ways with Hu Xuan in the West District had been Him?

He was inside the trial?!

Had Hu Xuan learned about the experiment's irregularities through Him?

Wait — if this was a Tusnat reconstructed by the Grand Scholars, how could the Ritual of Truth have reconstructed a Servant God?

"You found Lu Xia and used Him to confirm this experiment was compromised ahead of time?"

"Not quite." Hu Xuan shook her head and smiled calmly. "It was precisely because I couldn't find Him that I suspected something was wrong with this trial.

Lu Xia had concluded that the people of this kingdom were too obsessed with [Truth], which was causing birth rates to plummet. So He had stayed in Tusnat, never leaving, in order to help extend [Truth]'s legacy in this land."

"..."

An Envoy of [Birth] — ostensibly helping followers of [Truth] sustain their truth by steering them toward [Birth]...

There were so many things wrong with that statement that Cheng Shi didn't even know where to begin.

"But I couldn't find Him in the experimental Tusnat, which meant the Tusnat I was seeing wasn't real.

So during my search in the West District, I posed as a follow-up doctor sent by Lu Xia and visited couples He had previously helped.

The west side had been badly damaged, and I nearly lost the trail. But fate smiled on me at the last moment, leading me to a child that Lu Xia had personally delivered.

Speaking of which, I should thank the Erudition Presidium's faithful recreation of Tusnat — it meant this child still carried a trace of Lu Xia's aura.

Yes — the child you saw parting ways with me in the West District was him.

I extracted a wisp of Lu Xia's aura from the child and nurtured it, then gave birth to a false child of Lu Xia during the trial.

That would be the man you helped me deliver.

He was Lu Xia — but only an empty shell, without any consciousness. Through the process of 'birth,' I formed a connection with the real Lu Xia that transcended the experiment's constraints, and was able to transmit your auras to Him.

If that's hard to understand, think of it this way: through a method that appears to be childbirth, I backed up your 'data' with Him.

So when the Grand Scholars destroyed everything and we couldn't stop them, Lu Xia used [Birth]'s blessing to rebirth us into the real Tusnat.

And thus, we escaped the calamity.

That's the gist of it. Understand?"

"..."

'How badly I wish I didn't understand...'

'No, seriously, your [Birth] people...'

'Having extra mothers was bad enough — now you're telling me there might be extra fathers too?'

'But even if there's an extra father, don't tell me it was Lu Xia — a grown man — who carried sextuplets and gave birth to all of us!'

Everyone's expressions became extraordinarily colorful.

Seeing this, Hu Xuan chuckled:

"Birth Holy Voice is merely a midwife. He assists in birth, but does not give birth Himself. You needn't worry on that count.

Besides, when it comes to life, being alive is what matters most. Does it really matter how you survived?"

"..."

"His ability can cause anyone to give birth to anyone. So He probably found a suitable host for us. But if that makes you all uncomfortable, then I strongly advise you not to investigate what that host was.

I'll only say this — it might be easier to accept if you think of it as a host rather than a mother."

"..."

Fine. Being alive was enough.

As long as they were still breathing, who was the father and who was the mother was entirely up to them to decide, wasn't it?

Cheng Shi let out a long exhale. He didn't rush to analyze what he'd witnessed in the real universe. Instead, he carefully studied the expressions of his five teammates.

After a long while, once he was certain they had absolutely no memory of what had just happened, he finally confirmed it: time truly had been reset. And it was a world-level reset.

Moreover, even as he was experiencing the reset, the new timeline had already begun moving forward — only this time, it bypassed the deviation and took a different path.

But the question was — on this new path...

Was [Truth] still alive?

...

Meanwhile, on the other side.

The shattered reality was gradually re-adhering, but the shattered Void remained broken — because at this moment, [Fate] was still dragging the universe into Misfortune, and the gods had arrived to support it.

But just then, the Starlight Canon that had been blocking [Deceit] and [Fate] this entire time casually flipped through a few of its own pages — then simply vanished from the starry sky.

It seemed to have calculated that the experiment had no chance of success, and so it abandoned it outright.

This left [Oblivion] — who had rushed over to stand on [Truth]'s side and watch the show — frozen in the Void.

"Wait, [Truth], you...???"

With the architect of the deviation gone, [Fate] no longer needed to threaten the universe with collapse. In the next instant, He withdrew Misfortune and fixed [Oblivion] with a frigid stare.

[Deceit] likewise turned toward [Oblivion], wearing His signature half-smile: "What's the matter — care to stand in our way again?"

"..."

[Oblivion] vanished His own form once more. And the moment He disappeared, [Deceit] didn't linger for a single second before leaving as well.

He seemed unwilling to bother with His follower anymore.

But He knew that even if He didn't, someone else would.

[Fate] stood gazing into the distance, pondering briefly. He was somewhat puzzled by the gods' sudden change of stance, but it didn't matter. As long as the Fixed Destiny held and His follower was still alive, He would pay no attention to anyone else.

And so He turned His gaze toward [Truth]'s trial, bestowing upon His follower the compensation of Fate.

It was at that moment, deep within the Void, at the entrance where the Mockery and Jeering led to [Time]'s rift, that a pair of star-filled eyes opened.

They looked toward another pair of eyes — black-hole eyes that had long been standing there, gazing into the distance — and said nothing.

After a time, the black-hole eyes sighed:

"Don't stuff any more of those things into me."

With that, He returned a wisp of blurred, iridescent power to the star-filled eyes.

The star-filled eyes let out a soft, amused hum: "What, it didn't work?"

"It worked. But it was also terrifying."

"Well, isn't that perfect? That makes you a qualified member of the Fear Faction."

"...I feel fear, yes. But not only because of fear."

And with that, the black-hole eyes departed.

The world was restored. He had lost His time once more.

...

"What do we do now?"

When Fang Yuan asked that question, Cheng Shi was busy sizing up Wei Zhi.

Honestly, Cheng Shi was a bit puzzled that Hu Xuan had saved Wei Zhi along with the rest. By that point, Wei Zhi had clearly betrayed the player faction out of greed and self-interest — and given Cheng Shi's hostile attitude, he couldn't think of any reason Hu Xuan would rescue him.

The only logical explanation was that Wei Zhi was still a follower of [Truth], and might yet prove useful in this trial. So she had pulled him along as a precaution.

But Cheng Shi was certain Hu Xuan had left a failsafe in Wei Zhi's Recovery. Only that assurance would make him believe the Sage would save a traitor.

So he looked at Hu Xuan, flicking his eyes subtly toward Wei Zhi in silent inquiry.

Hu Xuan gave a meaningful nod — confirming his suspicion.

That eased Cheng Shi's mind... except it didn't, because he still needed to confirm whether the current Wei Zhi was the pre-fusion Wei Zhi, or actually Galusha.

He couldn't ask outright in front of the others. Instead, he chose to probe carefully:

"What a shame. Grand Scholar Pe Laya helped us so much — I'd hoped we could fulfill her wish. But now it seems it was all an illusion. A slice is a slice, after all."

The others weren't stupid. They could tell Cheng Shi was directing the comment at Wei Zhi, though they didn't know the full story. All they had observed was that when the time came, Cheng Shi had chosen to modify the experiment rather than destroy it — and Wei Zhi had emerged alive within the modified version. So they figured the Reason Association president must have struck some deal with Cheng Shi during that window, one that had gone unfulfilled due to external interference.

Wei Zhi himself was baffled. He frowned, cautiously stepped back, and ignored Cheng Shi's inexplicable remark. Instead, he turned to Hu Xuan with a respectful nod:

"Regardless of your motives for saving me, I'm deeply grateful.

What happened before was my fault. I underestimated the Grand Scholars of the Erudition Presidium — they weren't merely pioneers on the path of truth, but master manipulators of the human heart...

Forget it. It's too embarrassing to bring up.

I'll make amends through my actions. I will never again betray any of you — not until we've won this conflict."

Before Wei Zhi could finish, Chen Yi — his expression dark — sent a dagger spinning through the air.

He glared at this combat expert who had nearly derailed his path of devotion, and snorted coldly: "Why should I trust you again?"

Wei Zhi's brow furrowed slightly. His gaze swept across everyone present, his expression hardened — and then he did something no one expected.

He tore off his own arm!

Rrrrip—

A blood-trailing limb hit the ground. Wei Zhi clutched the wound through gritted teeth, managing a bitter smile:

"Is that enough to earn your trust?"

I owe none of you an explanation. Nor do I need to repent for embracing my own desires. After waking up, I could have simply left — and none of you, focused as you are on the Erudition Presidium, would have wasted resources chasing me.

But I stayed. Because I can't swallow this humiliation.

Believe me — right now, I want revenge on those old bastards far more than any of you do.

I can lead the way. But only if we win."

"..."

It had to be said — Wei Zhi made a decent point.

But no amount of logic would make anyone trust someone who had already betrayed the player faction. The real reason no one had attacked him yet was to conserve strength for the trial ahead — they couldn't afford to let internal strife create openings for the Grand Scholars.

Cheng Shi, however, didn't buy a word of it. He studied Wei Zhi with an odd expression, the curve of his lips tinged with amusement.

"So you're renouncing all the spoils from this conflict?"

Wei Zhi nodded solemnly: "That's right."

"Good. In that case..." Cheng Shi's eyes gleamed as he said cheerfully, "No one here trusts you, but for the sake of profit, I'm willing to give you one chance.

Here's the deal — we'll handle the Grand Scholars. We've been humiliated, and payback is definitely on the agenda.

But a single Erudition Presidium won't satisfy my appetite, and it certainly won't repay the Sage for what she's done. So, Wei Zhi — go kill Galusha.

Galusha has been a follower of [Folly] managing the Underworld for years. She must have something valuable. Trade whatever she's got for your life.

And don't feed me that garbage about wanting revenge on the Grand Scholars. The only reason you haven't already left is because you suspect the Sage planted something inside you.

Don't try lying to a fraud — it's pointless."

"..."

Wei Zhi's face turned ashen. He couldn't refute a word, and the look in his eyes as he regarded Cheng Shi gained a new layer of... complexity.

But Cheng Shi didn't care. He pointed toward the West District, in the direction of the Grand Scholars:

"That's settled, then. Sage, would you mind going ahead to scout their position? I need to brief him on a few things. I'll catch up shortly."

Hu Xuan gave the two of them a thoughtful glance, then nodded and led the others away.

Once they were alone, Cheng Shi let out a derisive snort at the "traitor" before him:

"Cat got the traitor's tongue?"

How does it feel — betraying your original side?"

That sarcastic tone made Wei Zhi's voice catch. Then, to Cheng Shi's surprise, he relaxed into a knowing smile and chuckled:

"Impressive. How did you figure it out, Mr. Prisoner?"

Wei Zhi was still Galusha!

When Cheng Shi spoke of betraying "the original side," he wasn't referring to Wei Zhi betraying the players — he meant Galusha betraying the NPCs!

Of course, the current Galusha didn't understand the concept of "NPCs." Her fusion with Wei Zhi was merely a physical reconstruction — it hadn't transferred memories.

Cheng Shi knew this, which was precisely how he'd pierced through Galusha's disguise.

"Want to know how?"

And what about the debt of saving your life?"

Galusha's eyes took on a [Folly]-like gleam. She glanced in the direction Hu Xuan had departed and smiled:

"It was that elegant lady who pulled me out of the experiment. What does that have to do with you?"

Cheng Shi grinned: "You clearly have no idea what our relationship is."

"I can see she has physical desires regarding you, while you have... absolutely zero interest in her.

Don't forget, Mr. Prisoner — I have some expertise in matters of love. On this front, you can't fool me."

Cheng Shi's lip twitched. He shook his head with a wry laugh:

"Wrong. There are more kinds of feelings in this world than just romantic love.

Great Lady Galusha, have you ever heard of something called friendship?"

I imagine not — after all, you never had any to begin with."

"..."

That barb was a bit too sharp. Galusha's expression darkened and she whipped out her lash.

But the instant Cheng Shi saw that whip, he relaxed completely.

Galusha had simply used the opportunity to escape the Grand Scholars' experiment. She, too, had no memories of the world shattering or the real universe being revealed. Otherwise, knowing what she truly was, she would never have had the nerve to threaten him.

So the time reset had indeed brought some coincidences and changes.

Could this be the catalyst for Galusha's separation from this world?

Cheng Shi studied Galusha thoughtfully, ignoring her anger. He first answered her question with a smile, then turned serious:

"What you call a 'conflict' is what we call a trial.

And this trial is already unwinnable. The best we can do is clear it.

Wei Zhi would have known this. Only you wouldn't.

But honestly, Galusha — now that you've obtained a player identity, have you considered robbing yourself?

From now on, you and the original you are essentially two different people. She'll continue sinking into the sediment of history, waiting for the next prospector. But you — you've become a prospector yourself.

This road may not be as easy as you imagine. A little extra preparation never hurts, does it?"

Galusha scoffed: "How much do you want?"

Cheng Shi blinked, rubbed his hands together, and said sheepishly: "Well, when you put it that way — helping a friend is helping yourself. By that logic, I'd say we're friends now, aren't we?"

"Heh. I don't have friendship."

"?"

'Did that boomerang really come back this fast?!

...

Cheng Shi laughed awkwardly:

"Things are always changing, you know. Look — now you have it.

True friendship is about sharing, so..."

"There's an old saying in the Extreme Desire Brotherhood:

Once you see through someone's greed, they lose all their allure.

Heh, Mr. Prisoner — you're not looking so mysterious anymore."

"..."

Cheng Shi rolled his eyes and thought:

'You haven't seen anything yet. What would you say if I pulled out my credentials as Friend to [Prosperity], Employee of [Death], Proxy of [Decay], Guardian of [Order], Envoy of [Chaos], Servant God of [Void], and the esteemed Master Shi Zhen?'

Galusha showed no interest in robbing herself. As she put it:

"I am me, and she is she. I've become Wei Zhi — a Drifter. That naturally severs any connection between us.

She probably doesn't even know that one of her slices has broken free of this world and been reborn. And when you think about it, my life was given to me by the Erudition Presidium.

That being the case, why maintain any ties to the past?

Starting fresh on a new path of faith — that's probably what I need to do next.

Mr. Prisoner, I'm happy to help you deal with the Erudition Presidium. But Galusha...

Forget it. I know her better than you do. I know exactly how much trouble provoking her would bring."

"?"

That was a first — someone trash-talking their own original self right after "breaking up."

Cheng Shi pursed his lips. Still unwilling to give up squeezing some benefit out of Galusha, his eyes glinted as he played another card:

"Since you know how troublesome she is, all the more reason to lighten history's burden a little.

Drifters are people — but NPCs aren't?

Here's the deal. I'll go find my spoils. Meanwhile, by whatever means you choose, bring back a suitable compensation before the trial ends. That compensation is what the Sage is owed for saving your life. Once I have it, I'll get the Sage to remove whatever failsafe she planted in you.

Don't try to bargain. Otherwise I'll tell Galusha about how you became a Drifter.

Don't tell me she wouldn't be interested in your identity.

I imagine fusing with a slice is much easier than fusing with Wei Zhi. Wouldn't you agree, Lady Galusha?"

"You...!!"

Galusha was furious. She raised her whip and lashed it at Cheng Shi. He dodged nimbly, let out an amused hum, waved his hand casually, and jogged off after the other players.

Once Cheng Shi disappeared, Galusha's rage evaporated in an instant. She gazed in the direction he'd gone and chuckled softly.

"Interesting.

Greedy people make the best partners, don't they?"

With that, she turned her gaze toward the Three Suns Tower at the city center. Her expression shifted several times before she finally set off in that direction.

She wasn't going to find herself — she only wanted to say goodbye to Pe Laya. Even if the Pe Laya here didn't belong to her.

...

Meanwhile, on the other side.

After their failed attempt to steal the Drifters' identities through the reconstructed experiment, the six Grand Scholars departed the experimental grounds with ashen faces.

They knew the escaped Drifters would return for revenge. So for temporary safety, they split up and scattered in every direction.

This meant the Tower of Logic's decline was now irreversible. They had squandered their best opportunity, losing not only Tusnat, but the Erudition Presidium itself.

Scholar Volent seethed with frustration. To this moment, he still couldn't fathom how this experiment had failed despite their Benefactor's advance instructions!

That was a true god! If a mortal targeted by a true god could still escape, could such a mortal truly be called mortal?

And more terrifyingly — were the so-called true gods really as omnipotent as they claimed?

Any other god's follower would have wondered whether another deity's will had interfered with the experiment, causing its failure.

But the Grand Scholars were different. Having spent their entire lives pursuing the path of [Truth], their first instinct when something went wrong was to question [Truth] Himself!

After all, truth was approached through relentless questioning and pursuit.

So throughout his escape, Volent kept mulling over what had gone wrong with [Truth].

Unfortunately, as a mortal confined to one corner of history, he would never figure it out.

Of course, the world was full of things beyond understanding — like right now. He had carefully disguised himself as a fleeing civilian and even evaded the first sweep by the Drifters. Yet he still ran into the last person he wanted to see.

Credit where due — as the craftiest old fox of the Erudition Presidium, Volent understood human nature.

While the other five Grand Scholars had all bolted toward the city outskirts, he went in the opposite direction, disguising himself as a refugee and heading toward the city center.

In a Tusnat engulfed in chaos and carnage, this behavior was certainly suspicious — unless said refugee was constantly muttering the names of his beloved and children. Then it made perfect sense.

A father braving the fires of war, rushing toward the heart of conflict — all in search of his family's last hope.

That kind of performance would earn sympathy anywhere. So when Fang Yuan and the others swept through the area and Chen Yi heard the names the man was mumbling, he simply shook his head and signaled — all clear.

And the group continued toward the West District.

Volent seemed to have truly found a moment to breathe amid the crisis — but his good luck came to a screeching halt when he ran into a certain someone.

Or rather, that someone's good luck was so overwhelming that it had siphoned all of Volent's away.

Cheng Shi bumped into this refugee.

Honestly, Cheng Shi had no idea this person was Volent. He'd simply grabbed a random NPC — the same way he'd casually grabbed a Funeral Bell Knight before, or stopped two scholars to ask for directions. He just happened to spot someone ahead and pulled them over to ask which way his teammates had gone.

After all, the Grand Scholars wouldn't just sit around waiting to die. And since he hadn't kept pace with Fang Yuan's group, it made perfect sense to ask a passerby about the direction of the loudest commotion.

But Volent misread the situation — or rather, his acting was too good for his own sake. He tried to play the sympathy card again, putting on the most convincing display of terror with a trembling body and wary eyes, wailing the names of loved ones and children, hoping to deter this nosy questioner.

Unfortunately, Cheng Shi's mind was completely consumed by the Ritual of Truth. He couldn't stand the man's dawdling, so he pulled out the Lush Horn Crown and said bluntly:

"Sorry buddy, I know you're in a rush, but so am I.

How about this — you cooperate and die real quick. When I'm done asking, you go find yours, I go find mine, and we both have a bright future ahead. Sound good?"

"?"

He said "sound good," but there was really no choice — because before Cheng Shi even finished asking, the lightning at his fingertips had already charred the refugee to a crisp.

But what he absolutely did not expect was this: just as he was about to pull out the Finger Bone Brooch to interrogate the charred corpse, a dim, lightless orb rolled out from within its clothes.

...

If Cheng Shi had never overseen a Truth Limit experiment, he would never have recognized this thing as nearly identical to the star at the very center of the Truth Limit. But in its current state, it looked more like a star encased in ice.

A fine layer of frost covered the celestial body, as though it had entered its own ice age.

"!!!?"

Why would a refugee be carrying something like this?

Cheng Shi was stunned. He didn't rush to grab it. Instead, he cautiously stepped back and frantically scanned his surroundings. Only after confirming there was no ambush did he — shock still plain on his face — use the Finger Bone Brooch on the charred corpse from a safe distance.

He kept his distance and asked only one question:

"You're... Volent?"

Driven by the pale green and deep blue glow, the corpse's jaw fell open and rasped: "Yes."

"...Hm?"

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted sharply.

He'd suspected as much — but wasn't this a bit too absurd?

He'd randomly killed an NPC he'd stopped for directions, and it turned out to be the number one Grand Scholar of the Erudition Presidium, Scholar Volent — who also happened to drop the Ritual of Truth?

That frozen star had to be the Ritual of Truth!

Was this right?

What kind of dumb-luck protagonist storyline was this?!

Cheng Shi was dumbfounded — but quickly recovered, his expression lighting up!

He triple-checked that nothing was amiss, then sprinted over, snatched up the "cooled" Ritual of Truth, shoved it into his spatial storage, and blasted Volent's remains into ash with two consecutive lightning bolts.

Now, no one could tell a Grand Scholar had ever been here.

Cheng Shi was grinning from ear to ear, utterly satisfied. The trial's greatest prize was already in the bag — winning or losing no longer mattered.

Of course, extra points would be nice, but that clearly wasn't happening anymore.

Still, in the end, fortune had smiled upon him. All praise to [Fate]—

Actually, forget that. Praise [Time] instead.

Thanks to [Time], this world was still alive.

But he still couldn't figure out why [Time]'s power had been able to restore an experimental sample belonging to Origin.

Cheng Shi left the spot and headed out, brow furrowed in thought as he walked. If gods were constantly stealing Authority from one another, was it possible that [Time] had been so busy all this while because He was researching how to steal...

Origin's Authority?

The audacity of that thought startled even Cheng Shi himself. But without it, he simply couldn't explain how a variable within an experiment could transcend the experiment's dimension and restore a sample belonging to the Creator.

That reminded him of Scarred Cheng Shi's advice — urging him to learn more about [Time].

But [Time] was wrapped in too much mystery. How could he possibly get close?

And another thing — the Ritual of Truth had fallen into his hands so easily. Did that mean [Truth] had conceded defeat?

Was He still alive? Was [War] still alive?

How many secrets lay hidden beneath this truth that had shaken the universe?

Cheng Shi gazed upward with furrowed brow and thought:

'Let this trial end soon. I need to see the Fun God. Benefactor, I have far too many questions.'

The players scouring the city managed to eliminate several Grand Scholars, but two still remained at large.

Unable to find them, they reluctantly abandoned the pursuit and regrouped.

Five reunited at the experimental grounds in the West District. Only Chen Yi was missing.

Chen Yi was too obsessed. He was convinced that [Truth] was interfering with his relationship with his Benefactor, so he had launched an unrelenting hunt against [Truth]'s followers, vowing to eliminate every last Grand Scholar within this trial.

No one commented on this. Seeing Cheng Shi's slightly disappointed expression, Meng Youfang offered consolation:

"You really wanted the Ritual of Truth?"

Well, I hear you. Even if you can't get it now, don't worry — once I reclaim my Divine Throne, I'll definitely borrow it from [Truth] and let you play with it for a few days. How's that?"

"..."

Everyone else's expressions grew more bizarre by the second, but Cheng Shi actually believed him.

He knew Old Meng wasn't lying — assuming he actually had a Divine Throne, it would absolutely happen.

Too bad he didn't have one, and the Ritual of Truth was already in Cheng Shi's possession.

Naturally, Cheng Shi kept this to himself. He merely grumbled about how viciously [Truth] had designed this experiment — using the lure of faith to endanger players' lives. Even if the players cracked the puzzle, they'd fail the trial by wrecking the experiment, earning zero points.

The players sighed in resignation and echoed his sentiments, but given that this was a Special Trial, they came to terms with it.

And so, the trial hadn't yet ended, but the remaining time was garbage time. With the clock still ticking, everyone dispersed to explore the history of things that interested them.

Cheng Shi walked alongside Hu Xuan, asking about Lu Xia.

Hu Xuan smiled as she described this "older brother" she had only recently met:

"He's quite peculiar. He doesn't like meeting familiar faces. He tirelessly spreads [Birth]'s philosophy across the world, yet He avoids attention — quietly delivering one life after another.

He believes the universe's essence is continuation. The more desperate a place, the more it needs Him — and that's His reason for not returning to [Birth]'s side.

He feels [Birth] already has more than enough children nearby. Rather than drowning in [Birth]'s ocean, He'd rather carve out His own stream and enrich more soil.

So encountering Him in Tusnat was, in itself, a stroke of luck."

"..."

Cheng Shi had been listening earnestly, but the moment phrases like "[Birth]'s ocean" entered the conversation, the imagery in his head spiraled out of control.

He forced an awkward laugh and offered a vague agreement: "Luck is great. I'm pretty lucky too."

But just then, Hu Xuan stopped abruptly. She tilted her head, smiling at Cheng Shi:

"There's something I never told you. Before the trial even started, I saw [Fate]."

"!?"

Cheng Shi blinked. "An audience?"

Hu Xuan shook her head:

"No — in my rest area.

The trial notification had already appeared in my vision. But one second before I entered the trial, I saw Him descend right before my eyes.

And then, what should have been my [Fate] trial suddenly became a [Truth] one.

So, Fate Weaver — let me ask you: was that lucky?"

"!!!

You were sent in by [Fate]?!" Cheng Shi's pupils quaked.

Hu Xuan smiled and nodded: "Yes. So when I saw you here, I wasn't particularly surprised. And finding Lu Xia was also inspired by that event.

I had a feeling He wanted me to come help you.

And it seems I didn't let Him down."

"..."

Hearing this, Cheng Shi plunged into deep thought. If [Fate]'s appearance was no coincidence but a "rescue," it meant He had seen through [Truth]'s plan — just a beat too late.

And that also meant [Truth] had been targeting him all along. Not as a potential backup material for the experiment, but as someone who had been placed on the operating table from the very start.

Well played, [Truth]!

Cheng Shi recalled the trial's initial prompt: "Limited truth is never truth..."

Ha — that was never a hint to the challengers. It was an epitaph [Truth] had written for Himself!

So He'd been prepared for self-destruction from the trial's inception — waiting only for the [Time] power within Cheng Shi.

Sigh... what could he say? [Truth]'s targeting of him was infuriating, but it had to be admitted — like [Prosperity], He was truly someone who practiced what He preached.

But in this absurd world, what good was living by your convictions? The will you championed was nothing more than experimental conditions imposed on you by the Creator.

You championed it, spread it, proved it, upheld it — and in the end, all you were doing was following the rules 'He' had written for all living beings.

When you thought about it that way, it was truly despairing.

What was 'He' even observing?

And was [Truth]... still alive?

The first question was nearly impossible to answer. But the second seemed to find its answer the moment the trial ended.

[Special Trial (Pursuing [Truth]) — Challenge Successful]

[Evaluating performance and calculating rewards...]

[Player: Cheng Shi — Performance Rating: C]

[Item Obtained: Universe Truth (C) x1]

[Road to Ascension +20]

[Ladder of Ascent +3]

[Current Road to Ascension Score: 2301 — Global Ranking: 291,306]

[Current Ladder of Ascent Score: 190 — Path Ranking: 24]

[Trial Cleared — Preparing to exit]

...

The Void — an unknown space.

While Fang Yuan was still lamenting that his Road to Ascension score had indeed been docked, his consciousness was pulled into a stretch of infinite darkness.

Soon, the darkness gradually receded, and light rekindled across his vision.

The piercing brightness left him dazed for a moment. He looked around — and realized he seemed to have arrived at...

Katouting?!

Wasn't this the Supreme Court located in Katouting?!

Given where he was, there was no need to guess who had pulled him in.

[Order]!

Benefactor!

An audience!

Fang Yuan was overwhelmed by the honor.

Honestly, it wasn't that he'd never had an audience with a deity. He'd just never had one with his own Benefactor.

Whether it was because he exploited too many loopholes, [Order] had never once summoned him. But after making inquiries, he discovered that his Benefactor apparently hadn't summoned anyone else either. So he leaned toward a widely circulated theory among [Order] players:

Personal audiences would compromise the fairness of the entire faith faction. Therefore, [Order] never summoned followers.

So what was this audience for — a judgment on his loophole-exploiting, or a special favor that broke the norms of collective fairness?!

Fang Yuan was deeply anxious. He didn't know how to face this absolutely "just" Benefactor.

But he understood the basics of proper praise and greeting. So he immediately bowed his head and spoke with utmost devotion:

"Praise be to the great—"

But before he could finish, the codex placed high upon the Supreme Court bench flipped its pages and spoke:

"What is [Order]?"

"?"

Fang Yuan froze. A tremor ran through his body as he lifted his gaze toward the codex, wondering if this was some kind of test.

But why did his Benefactor's tone sound so... lost?

Could it be that Mo Li had been right — [Order] had lost His order?!

...

The Void — an unknown space.

The moment Chen Yi felt himself being pulled into the Void, his reaction was unmistakably panic.

Because his Ladder of Ascent score had been docked — the first time since the Faith Game began. This meant he had forgotten important memories from the previous trial.

How was that possible!

He had memorized everything! Why had there still been an omission?!

Where had the gap started?!

The Time Battlefield?!

True, the Time Battlefield could affect one's memories. But as long as you remembered the final overwritten version, there shouldn't have been a problem. Every previous trial involving a Time Walker had gone smoothly. Why was this the one time he'd been penalized?

Unable to make sense of it, Chen Yi poured all his grievance and fury onto [Truth].

It was all [Truth]'s fault!

If [Truth]'s trial hadn't been so hostile toward his relationship, how could his Benefactor have docked his score!

Did He... not like him anymore?

No — He liked him. He must. Why else would He pull him into the Void?

Deities wouldn't summon mortals they didn't care about!

Amid this turmoil of apprehension, anticipation, and nervousness, Chen Yi saw those eyes.

This was his first audience — no, his first date with his beloved.

In the privacy of the Void, they would finally bare their hearts to each other.

So when those divine eyes — steeped in the weight of history's millennia — opened above his head, the words spilled from his lips unbidden:

"I DO!!!"

"..."

Silence was the audience's answer.

It took those eyes a long time before they finally looked down at their follower, devoid of joy or sorrow:

"Speak not in vain."

"!!!"

Chen Yi snapped back to reality. His expression changed instantly. He dropped to his knees, body shaking uncontrollably — whether from the afterglow of excitement or the regret of overstepping, he couldn't tell. He began shuffling forward on his knees, desperate to draw closer to his Benefactor and prove the purity of his love. But those eyes were far above him in the heavens — no amount of distance on the ground could bring him any closer.

"Benefactor, I... I..." Chen Yi was losing his mind. The usually silver-tongued version of himself had vanished. The man who passionately proclaimed the beauty of human-divine love before other players now couldn't form a single sentence.

Fortunately, the awkwardness didn't last long. Those eyes glanced at him and spoke in a deep voice:

"Your memories — they've been obliterated."

"!!!?"

Obliterated?

By whom?

[Oblivion]?!

Was it because of Him that his Ladder of Ascent score had been docked?!

But why? And which memories had been destroyed?!

Chen Yi was beside himself. In that instant, his hatred shifted from [Truth] directly to [Oblivion]. He wanted to ask his Benefactor why [Oblivion] had done this, but he was also afraid of wasting this precious time together. And so, paralyzed by indecision, he watched helplessly as those eyes faded from the Void.

The moment he returned to the rest area, Chen Yi — his expression dark as a thundercloud — pulled out a dagger and carved two words deep into the floor: OBLIVION.

"Damn it — damn [Oblivion]!"

...

Reality — a private estate in an unknown city.

Meng Youfang looked at himself in the mirror.

...

The Void — an unknown space.

A frigid voice echoed through the emptiness, stirring gusts of biting wind. Yet the summoned woman felt no chill whatsoever.

She gazed up at those star-filled eyes with a smile, watching the constellation points within them interweave and spiral, marveling at the wonder of [Void].

"You and fate have been entwined for a long time.

A follower of [Fate] once rewrote your destiny. And now, you have helped guide a deviation back to the Fixed Destiny.

In the universe, every drink and every peck is destiny.

So, Hu Xuan — would you walk the path of [Fate] and become one sheltered by [Fate]?"

"..."

Perhaps having anticipated this "invitation," Hu Xuan smiled brightly. But then she shook her head with firm resolve:

"Praise be to [Void]. Praise be to [Fate].

This humble one receives [Fate]'s grace with nothing but awe and gratitude.

But I have already devoted myself to [Birth]. My heart holds no room for another path. Though [Fate] is wonderful, it is not the road I wish to walk.

To have earned the Fate Weaver's regard is already the fortune of a lifetime. To covet [Fate]'s gaze on top of that would be Hu Xuan not knowing her place.

I have resolved to remain by my Lord's side. This stroke of luck — I can only let it slip through my fingers.

But since I've been granted the rare honor of this audience, Hu Xuan does have one small request."

The moment those words left her lips, the Void froze solid.

Now, for the first time, the summoned woman felt the true cold of [Void]. A fine layer of frost crept across her brows, her eyes, her skin.

Yet Hu Xuan remained composed and unwavering — for in this moment, she represented not herself, but... [Birth].

The Eternal Sun had already been acknowledged. Any god who wished to erase her would effectively be declaring war on [Birth].

But [Fate] clearly didn't care about such things. He fixed Hu Xuan with eyes as cold as ice and spoke with utter detachment:

"One who refuses to walk into [Void] dares to demand blessings?"

Do you know what you're doing?

Mortal — even if you truly become His child, in this Void, [Birth] cannot protect you!"

To claim she wasn't afraid would have been a lie. But Hu Xuan held steady. She forced a kind smile through her struggle, chose not to respond to [Fate]'s challenge, and spoke through gritted, trembling teeth:

"Great [Fate], I wish to beg You — please transfer this good fortune to Your follower, Fate Weaver Cheng Shi.

I wish to plead for a second gaze on his behalf from You.

May his road ahead be free of worry. May fortune follow him in all things."

The moment she finished, the biting wind vanished.

The entire Void fell still, leaving only a complex, lingering glance from [Fate].

"I sense your sincerity. But I must remind you — without fate's favor, your path will not be easy."

Hu Xuan smiled radiantly: "And will his path be easy?"

[Fate] said nothing more and departed in silence.

The Void lapsed once more into stillness.

...

Six in the evening. The sun was still scorching.

Cheng Jia was squatting in the shade at the mouth of the alley, picking at his toes, while idly listening to the fortune-telling master at the neighboring stall read characters for a customer.

The fortune teller was new. He'd never seen the man around at any of the nearby parks.

As for his skill... nothing special, really. The man survived purely on the gift of gab.

At the moment, his customer was a young couple — fresh-faced with clear eyes, obviously students from a nearby trade school.

Young people's money was always the easiest to earn.

The girl had spotted the fortune-telling stall right outside the supermarket and couldn't walk past it. She insisted on dragging her boyfriend over for a reading. The boy visibly rolled his eyes at the idea, but eventually gave in under her relentless pestering.

Without a word, the master handed them paper and a pen, asking them to write a single character.

The girl asked curiously: "Master, I haven't even told you what I want to know!"

The master chuckled and waved his hand: "If you're not here about romance, I'll pay you."

That one line made the girl's eyes light up. She tugged at her boyfriend's sleeve nonstop: "See? See? I told you he's good! He already knows I'm here about romance!"

The boy secretly rolled his eyes, patted his girlfriend on the head with a smile, and when she wasn't looking, silently mouthed to the master:

"Cheap rate or no deal."

The master curled his lip and held up five fingers while scratching his head — meaning: half-price, fifty percent off.

The boy still wasn't satisfied, but he couldn't win against his girlfriend's enthusiasm and sighed as he paid up.

With the money collected, the girl nervously scribbled a character on the paper: "shi" — meaning "truth" or "real."

The boy said helplessly: "Why are you writing my name?"

The girl grinned: "Hmph — I want to see if your heart is true to me!"

Upon seeing that character, Cheng Jia lifted his head for the first time to glance at the boy. Just a glance. His verdict: not as good-looking as Little Shi.

The master cheerfully picked up the character and studied it for a while, mumbling before giving his interpretation:

"Shi' — in traditional form, it's written as '實.'

Take the top: '宀' — it represents a household, signifying establishing a home and prosperity. Take the bottom: '貫' — it means strings of coins, symbolizing rolling wealth.

The two of you have good fortunes. If you support each other with love, it will certainly be a fine match."

When the master finished, two of the three people present — Cheng Jia and the boyfriend — pursed their lips. Only the girl looked excited, shaking her boyfriend and repeating: "Did you hear that? Did you hear? We're a fine match!

But Master, I clearly wrote it in simplified characters. Why did you interpret the traditional form?"

The master said solemnly: "Establishing a home and building wealth — when have those ever been easy?"

Going from simple to complex indicates that your path of love will be rocky. You'll both need to stay true to yourselves."

The boyfriend was visibly displeased at this. He shot the master a glare — only to see the man cheerfully wiggling his ear, where a cigarette was tucked.

The boy blinked, caught between laughter and annoyance. He raised his fist as if to punch the master, then thought better of it and gave a reluctant nod.

Receiving the signal, the master immediately switched to a beaming smile: "But I can tell you're both deeply devoted people. Good things take time — you'll get your happily-ever-after.

And when you two do tie the knot, don't forget to leave a glass of celebratory wine facing my stall. Let me share in the festive joy, won't you?"

The girl walked away satisfied, but when the couple turned back while passing by, the boy — still rolling his eyes — tossed half a pack of cigarettes onto the stall.

The master picked up the cigarette box, peered inside — only half a pack, and the cheapest brand at that. He kept muttering "Lost out, lost out."

Cheng Jia watched and smiled, saying nothing.

Before long, Cheng Shi came home with his little backpack.

He hadn't walked home today — a classmate's mother had driven him back. It was the classmate's birthday, and the parents had thrown a party for the kids.

Cheng Shi hadn't wanted to go, but when Cheng Jia heard he could skip cooking one meal, he'd shooed the boy out the door.

Now the kid was back, so Cheng Jia quickly wiped his hands on the neighbor's stall canvas and went to greet him.

The master spat irritably, staring at the muddy foot prints on his canvas — neither able to clean them nor willing to leave them.

When Cheng Jia led Little Cheng Shi past the alley entrance again, the fortune teller — noticing the boy staring at him — teased:

"Hey brother, aren't you gonna let me read his fortune?"

Cheng Jia gave the master a sidelong look and scoffed: "How much will you pay?"

"?"

'Do you hear what you're saying?!'

'Who's paying whom here?'

The master's face fell: "You eat my food and take my stuff — aren't you afraid of being a bad influence? Your son's right here listening!"

Little Cheng Shi tilted his head and repeated Old Jia's words: "How much will you pay?"

"???"

'You two...'

'Fine. Fine fine fine.'

The master was so angry he laughed. He slapped the half-pack of cigarettes onto the stall and snapped: "Is this enough?"

Honestly, Old Jia was a little tempted. But Cheng Shi pursed his lips and pushed the cigarettes back.

"He doesn't smoke. Offer something else."

"?????"

'Excuse me — are you being picky now?'

'Am I begging you to let me read your fortune or what?!'

'Fine — yes, I'm begging you!'

'I absolutely MUST do this reading today.'

The master was livid. He snatched back the cigarettes, then slapped down 5 dollars. "Enough?"

Little Cheng Shi thought for a moment, then turned to Old Jia: "If he's actually offering money, he's definitely up to no good. Let's go home."

"You mother—" The master was fuming.

Cheng Jia, however, didn't leave. He swiped the money off the ground with practiced ease and said cheerfully: "Spoiled brat — you think money's easy to come by? 5 dollars isn't money? Go on, let him read you. Write a character."

"You write it."

"If your old man could write, wouldn't I have just earned that money myself? Hurry up — write, then go home and do your homework."

Little Cheng Shi had a feeling this master was up to something, but for the sake of earning 5 dollars to help with expenses, he put pen to paper and wrote a character.

Also "shi."

Cheng Shi's "shi."

When the master saw the character, his face went dark.

He suspected he'd been set up.

But soon his expression changed again, brow furrowing as he muttered to himself:

"Striving upward only to be pressed down by the heavens — and beyond the heavens, there's yet another dot holding it all in place. How does it feel like..."

The master's voice was too low. Little Cheng Shi strained his ears but couldn't make it out. Seeing the master seemingly in a trance, Cheng Shi pursed his lips: "Mumbling nonsense — forget it. Let's go. Time for homework."

And he pulled Cheng Jia away.

Old Jia did glance back meaningfully at the master before ambling off after Cheng Shi.

That night.

Cheng Shi was doing homework at Sun Yuying's house. Cheng Jia was squatting on his own doorstep, picking at his feet again. Sun Yuying couldn't take it anymore and kicked him.

"Can you at least wash them?"

"No water at home."

Sun Yuying sputtered: "I have water!"

"That's your house."

"Fine... fine fine fine... the pair of you, I swear, you'll be the death of me."

Hearing this, Cheng Jia looked up cheerfully and asked: "What'd Little Shi do?"

Sun Yuying plopped into a chair, fanning herself furiously:

"Little Shi's had classmates with birthdays lately. I can tell — he wants a birthday too.

I said I'd take him out for a nice meal tomorrow. He refused.

His eyes are practically swimming with envy, but he won't let me treat him. Says he doesn't want me spending money. As if I'd need him to pay!"

"..."

Cheng Shi not wanting a birthday celebration didn't surprise Cheng Jia. But he had no idea when the kid's birthday even was.

So he asked: "How do you know when Little Shi's birthday is? Did you check with the orphanage? Wait — the orphanage doesn't even have records."

"How the hell would I know!" Sun Yuying snapped. "All I know is that tomorrow's the first anniversary of you bringing Little Shi home. A birthday's just a date — what difference does it make which day you pick?"

I think tomorrow works perfectly fine. But the ungrateful brat won't have it. Whatever — eat or don't eat."

Cheng Jia froze. His hands and feet went still as he looked through the doorway at Cheng Shi, belatedly realizing they'd been relying on each other for a whole year now.

If Sun Yuying hadn't said it, he'd have forgotten the kid was adopted at all.

"Yeah, you're right — a birthday should be celebrated. If he won't eat, that's his call.

Uh... lend me some money."

Sun Yuying's fanning hand stopped. She frowned: "Buying cola again? I'm telling you — kids shouldn't drink so much cola."

"He loves it."

"..." Sun Yuying's retort died on her tongue. She rolled her eyes. "How much?"

"The price of a case minus 5 dollars.

One case is enough. Kids shouldn't drink too much cola."

"...???"

Sun Yuying was furious. She yanked a fistful of red bills from her pocket and smashed them into Old Jia's face. Standing with her hands on her hips, she roared:

"You want exact change?! I don't carry coins!

Take the money and get out of my sight!

I can't stand looking at either of you!

You — willing to spend money celebrating other people's birthdays, but you can't be bothered to give Little Shi a proper one?

What happened to all that energy when you used to buy coins for strangers and give away lottery tickets?

So the good stuff was all for outsiders, huh?!"

Sun Yuying's rant sounded like it was directed at him, but Cheng Jia didn't respond. He stood up, patted his backside, and headed out.

At the top of the steps, he paused for a beat, shook his head, and sighed:

"You said it yourself — that was before. What's past is past."

Sun Yuying watched Old Jia's departing figure, then glanced at Little Shi inside the house, and irritably kicked over the chair next to where Old Jia had been sitting.

But as she did, she noticed an ID card had fallen from it.

She frowned, picked it up, and took a look...

"Isn't this that hack fortune teller from the alley? Why did he bring the guy's ID card home?"

An Ning?

Big burly man — how'd he end up with such a delicate name?"

...

The Void — an unknown space.

This was perhaps a situation Galusha had never anticipated.

She was aware of Drifters' existence, and had observed the Department of Consciousness Faith's research on them from the shadows. But the information had always been too scarce. The scholars'

speculative conclusions couldn't serve as definitive characterizations of Drifters — so even "knowing" amounted to little more than awareness that such beings existed. As for the specifics of what Drifters actually were, she remained clueless.

After her brief encounter with Mr. Prisoner in the previous trial, Galusha had assumed Drifters were simply agents who operated closer to the divine will — proxy agents of a sort.

But she never expected that "closer" would mean this close!

She was having an audience with a god!

Awkwardly, the first deity she found herself facing was not her own Benefactor, but the very god she had devoted her life to destroying...

[Truth]!

This had to be [Truth]. The radiance of knowledge emanating from that star-illustrated tome, the rhythmic pulse of natural law that surged with every turned page — all of it confirmed beyond doubt that the Starlight Canon before her was the very [Truth] she had spent her whole existence yearning to destroy!

How absurd. She had merely borrowed a follower's identity, and now she'd been dragged into the Void for judgment?

For a moment, Galusha didn't know what to do.

To say she wasn't afraid would be a lie. No matter how defiant she was, she was still mortal. She could look down on the Tower of Logic, on the Erudition Presidium, on the Grand Scholars — but could she really look down on a god?

No matter how mad she was, it was impossible to maintain her arrogance before a deity.

But Galusha was still Galusha. Unlike ordinary mortals, even while facing an enemy god head-on, fear did not consume her entirely!

She bowed her head and bent her body, yes — but that was simply a mortal's instinctive reflex upon first seeing a god. In secret, her eyes never behaved. They roamed, studying the Starlight Canon before her.

The word "submit" simply didn't exist in Galusha's bones. Even if she compromised temporarily, even if she bent her back — the spine of defiance within her stayed straight as ever.

She even felt that having emerged from history's river by some stroke of fortune, seeing a real god even once before dying was already worth it. As for whether she lived or died — ha, she was nothing but a slice from an experiment. Every second she'd lived up to now was pure profit.

If she could spit one last word of contempt at the [Truth] she'd despised all her life before dying, then her brief existence would become dazzlingly, brilliantly meaningful.

She'd even begun composing the perfect contemptuous remark — because she was certain that as the god most skilled at seeking truth and observation, [Truth] would never mistake her identity.

He surely already knew that beneath this skin, the one squatting in His follower's body wasn't His real believer!

Sure enough, the Void didn't stay silent for long. The Starlight Canon called out her name.

"Galusha."

Galusha's whole body trembled. Her scornful words were already on the tip of her tongue — but in the next instant, every sound died in her throat. No matter how she screamed, she couldn't produce a single syllable.

Meanwhile, the book opposite her flipped its pages faster and faster, its tone turning playful:

"Tch—

I've met plenty of clowns. You're the most presumptuous of the lot.

What — did you think performing a mime would amuse me?

Compared to a certain comical follower of another god, your entertainment skills are far inferior."

"!!!"

Galusha's face changed dramatically, her pupils shrinking. She stared at the Starlight Canon in utter disbelief, pointing a trembling finger:

"You... you're not [Truth]?!"

Her voice had returned — but it was now drenched in shock and fear.

"Oh? And why can't I be [Truth]?"

Unless... you've seen another [Truth]?"

"..."

That one sentence shut Galusha down completely. Then she broke into a delighted grin — because the moment she realized this entity was not [Truth] but was impersonating Him, she understood that this deity could never be her enemy. In fact, there was a strong chance He was an ally!

Ally was perhaps too bold a word. More accurately — a god who could shelter her on the path to destroying [Truth], helping her walk farther than she ever could alone!

Why else would He assume [Truth]'s identity to summon her?

So at last, genuine respect rose to her face. She bowed again:

"Of course not. In my eyes, You are the true [Truth]."

She'd expected such a tactful response to win His approval. Instead, she stood bent over for an eternity before receiving a single reply:

"Hmm?"

You clearly know I'm not [Truth], yet you insist on labeling me as such — is that because you wish to dispose of me?

Bold. Plenty of people want to kill gods, but you're the most brazen about it."

"???"

That leap of logic left Galusha's head spinning.

'Wait...'

'Who was the one who claimed to be [Truth] in the first place?'

'How does every pot end up on my head?'

'I thought I'd found a protector, but instead I got a troublemaker.'

'Is this god even serious?'

Wait!

Not serious?

Something clicked. Galusha's pupils contracted once more. The words burst from her mouth: "You're that—"

"Shh!

Speak not in vain."

The Starlight Canon's pages flipped even faster — flickering like strobing stars.

Galusha felt a sudden surge of excitement. She was now certain this "Truth" was the deity who had interfered with and sabotaged countless [Truth] experiments.

But why had He summoned her — to use her as a weapon against [Truth]?

As if reading her mind, the Starlight Canon suddenly chuckled. Its tone was dripping with derision:

"Don't think too highly of yourself.

I simply needed a backup variable, and you happened to fit the bill. So I fished you out.

When you think about it, you merely jumped from one experiment into a bigger one.

Nothing to be excited about."

Galusha's expression darkened.

She hated being called a variable — because variables were too closely associated with [Truth].

But she hated [Truth] more. So as long as this deity stood opposed to [Truth], she could swallow the disgust and play along.

After a moment's thought, she looked up and asked: "So long as it doesn't interfere with eradicating [Truth], I'm willing to cooperate with Your arrangements.

What would You have me do?"

"[Truth] doesn't need you to eradicate Him.

I told you — I am [Truth]. The [Truth] you want to eradicate...

Never mind. You shouldn't know about that.

I have no assignments for you. Just stay alive. That's enough."

"..." Galusha's heart tightened. "Stay alive... until when?"

"Self-aware — good.

That's not for me to decide. Probably... until the time comes when he needs you."

He?

Galusha's gaze sharpened.

Who was "he"?

...

Something was wrong. One hundred percent wrong.

Twenty points added to his Road to Ascension — that was the highest possible approval from the god overseeing a trial.

Cheng Shi knew perfectly well what he'd done. If the world hadn't been reset, then [Truth] awarding him 20 points, while extreme, wasn't entirely incomprehensible — after all, [Truth] had stolen the power of [Time] from him and completed that cosmos-shattering experiment of pursuit.

But now?

Under the current circumstances, he had not only sabotaged [Truth]'s preliminary experiment and stolen the Ritual of Truth, he'd thoroughly wrecked the entire trial — and on top of that, he'd pulled Galusha, a follower of [Truth]'s rival, out of history...

Any one of those actions warranted a -20. So where had this +20 come from?

Furthermore, the rating and score didn't match — a discrepancy that had never occurred before.

Had [Truth]'s memories not been reset?

That was even more impossible.

The moment [Truth] realized that His so-called truth was merely an experiment in the real universe, He would inevitably walk the path of self-destruction again — because He had already carved His own epitaph!

So why?

What on earth had he done to deserve 20 points?

The bonus points were certainly welcome, but there was too much hidden baggage packed inside that welcome. It made Cheng Shi uneasy.

He puzzled over it endlessly — only to discover that what came next was even more bewildering.

He'd been summoned again!

And the one summoning him was the deity he least wanted to see and most feared facing.

After the trial ended, before Cheng Shi could even return to his rest area, he opened his eyes to find himself inside that magnificent, pristine white Collection Hall once more.

At this very moment, his "boss" stood beneath one of the collected works, gazing up at its blank surface in contemplation.

[Memory]!

Again!

The instant Cheng Shi saw this, his pupils contracted and he immediately lowered his head.

No other reason — guilt.

His guilt wasn't about having secretly visited the Collection Hall before. It wasn't about having discovered [Memory]'s secret. It wasn't even about learning that [Folly]'s Authority was likely in [Memory]'s possession. It was about the world reset!

The world reset must have erased every god's memories. And the scene before him was the finest proof.

The collection [Memory] was examining was clearly different from the others — and different from the sealed one, too. Its frame pulsed with the iridescent shimmer of [Existence], looking remarkably similar to the blended aurora of reality glimpsed within the distant Existence Rifts.

Moreover, the wall on which this collection hung differed from the rest. It wasn't pure white, but a mottled gold — as though a golden wall had suffered corrosion and lost its original vibrancy.

But what kind of corrosion could cause something as stable as gold to become mottled?

Cheng Shi had already seen the answer:

Time!

The lingering traces of [Time]'s aura were unmistakably telling the viewer that this wall had undergone a baptism of time.

It was [Time]'s power that had washed the content from [Memory]'s collection!

Combined with everything that had happened during the world's collapse, it wasn't hard to deduce that this collection had originally recorded something directly related to the real universe and to 'Him'!

So [Memory] had been forced to forget this content. Yet because the memory was connected to Origin, it hadn't been completely erased!

Facing this bizarre scene, [Memory]'s first thought was naturally of the one who frequently came to His Collection Hall to tamper with His works — [Deceit] — and all of His troublesome followers!

But why did it have to be him?

Zhen Xin, Long Jing, even the Dragon King — not a single one of them was a good person.

Why wasn't one of them summoned for this audience?

Could [Memory] have already seen his memories?!

Cheng Shi was both alarmed and terrified. He frantically racked his brain for a way to handle what was surely coming — and at that moment, his "boss" turned to face him. Those eyes spun rapidly, the expression deeply meaningful:

"Another collection has been defiled.

This time, the defiler even left [Time]'s power behind in my Collection Hall.

Such clumsy framing is rare. But considering the cunning of fraudsters, I must think one step further — perhaps they're playing mind games. Deliberately leaving their own traces to then claim they were framed, thereby clearing themselves. The criminal logic is quite clever. If true, the crime itself would be worthy of being collected as a piece and hung right here.

So, Cheng Shi — do you plead guilty?

If you confess, then considering the Collection Hall would gain a new piece, I might show leniency."

"..."

Cheng Shi's mind went numb.

But then a wave of relief washed over him.

The fact that [Memory] was asking meant He hadn't directly extracted those memories from him. It also meant the concealment from the Time of Eternal Imprisonment was even more effective than he'd hoped.

Though honestly, it might've been better if [Memory] had just read the memories outright — Cheng Shi really shouldn't have to bear this burden on [Time]'s behalf.

If confessing could get him out of trouble, maybe a quick guilty plea wasn't the worst idea.

After all, guilt or innocence didn't reside in someone else's verdict — it lived in his own mouth. As long as he insisted he was innocent, he could argue guilty into not-guilty.

But this time... he truly couldn't confess!

The blame was too enormous. He couldn't carry it!

[Memory] couldn't possibly miss the Existence Rift-like pattern on the frame. So He must have already guessed this collection was related to Origin. Yet knowing that, He still wanted to pin the crime of tampering with an Origin-related collection onto a mortal — which meant this wasn't mere framing or personal vendetta. It was a probe into the content of this collection!

So Cheng Shi dared not respond at all. He was terrified that any answer might expose a flaw.

Seeing Cheng Shi's silence, [Memory] approached with a cold expression, stopping before him. He studied Cheng Shi from His towering vantage for a moment, then asked abruptly:

"I once bestowed upon you a Floating Dream of the Memory Sea, so you could witness the wonder of [Memory].

Now that you walk the path of [Time], return that creation to me."

Cheng Shi blinked, caught off guard. The Floating Dream of the Memory Sea had exhausted its three charges long ago. It no longer existed. How was he supposed to return it?

His brow furrowed slightly. Instinctively, he looked at his own hand — and when he saw the Time of Eternal Imprisonment ring on his finger, his expression shifted. He realized [Memory]'s target had never been the Floating Dream of the Memory Sea.

It was the Time of Eternal Imprisonment!

He was probing his reaction to [Time]!

And that instinctive glance had already given him away.

Sure enough — the moment [Memory] saw Cheng Shi's gaze fall on that [Time] ring, He had His answer.

"I see. So it was Him after all.

When did my [Existence] sibling start stealing my Authority?

Or was this the reward [Deceit] promised Him for their partnership in breaching the boundary between real and false?

Using Authority stolen by [Void] to turn around and use against His own sibling?

Very well..."

Hearing this, Cheng Shi was genuinely terrified. He thought he was about to witness the fracture of [Existence] — but to his shock, [Memory] simply added:

"This, too, is a memory worth collecting."

"..."

'Seriously?'

'You can't be that much of a pushover?'

'Boss — when you came after me, you weren't like this at all. You pinned me down in the Memory Sea and nearly drowned me, refusing to give me a single chance.'

'But when it comes to [Time], a couple sentences and you just... let it slide?!'

'Is that fair?'

'If "a memory worth collecting" is all it takes to soothe a god's heart, why don't you go collect that follower of yours who's insanely in love with you?'

'Oh right — speaking of which, does this Collection Hall have a portrait of Chen Yi?'

For a moment, Cheng Shi's curiosity got the better of him.

...

[Memory] left.

He came quickly and departed just as fast.

Strangely, He left on His own — without taking Cheng Shi, and without expelling him either.

Cheng Shi was currently standing inside the Collection Hall. In the past, the little swindlers couldn't so much as poke their heads in without being chased out. Yet now, [Memory] had simply... "left him behind." Was this right?

Something was off! Very, very off!

Cheng Shi stood frozen, thinking for a long time. He concluded this had to be entrapment — just bait, waiting for him to make a move so [Memory] could catch him red-handed and turn him into a prisoner of [Existence] like Aph Ros.

So he didn't dare move. He just stood there quietly, waiting for [Memory] to reappear and, with visible disappointment, send him back.

But he waited and waited, and nothing happened. This plunged Cheng Shi back into thought.

Was [Memory] serious?

What did this mean — He didn't mind a stroll through His Collection Hall?

Was He really that gracious?

Impossible.

After all, the phrase "there is no kindness without reason in this world" had come from [Memory]'s own mouth. So how could He suddenly relax restrictions on a follower of [Deceit]?

Even if He truly was tacitly permitting him to walk through the Collection Hall, there had to be an ulterior motive!

Was He waiting for Cheng Shi to slip up and reveal the details of this memory?

Or was it possible that this adversary of [Deceit] wanted Cheng Shi to "voluntarily" decode the lost memory for Him?

Did [Memory] know the Time of Eternal Imprisonment could preserve his memories?

Cheng Shi's brain was practically smoking, and still no answer came. But as time dragged on, he began leaning toward the latter — that [Memory] was trading ground for space, hoping to extract something from him.

If that was the case, he no longer needed to worry about entrapment.

After all, he was already here. Not taking a look around would be a waste of the fright he'd endured today. So he began strolling through the Collection Hall with cautious, measured steps.

Most of the collections were still indecipherable. However, certain major historical events he'd personally experienced could be vaguely discerned.

The number of pieces in this hall was beyond counting. No mortal could imagine whether this place even had an end. Cheng Shi even suspected that these weren't just memories from a single world — perhaps the memories of the parallel worlds derived from [Time]'s projections were also stored here.

After all, for gods, everything beneath this starry sky was still within their grasp.

As he wandered, Cheng Shi suddenly came upon an extraordinarily clear collection.

His pupils shrank. His footsteps stopped. He stared at the lifelike Divine Pillar before him, completely stunned.

Why on earth did [Memory] have a portrait of the Divine Pillar hanging in His Collection Hall?

While he was still wondering this, the Divine Pillar in the collection suddenly warped. Without any warning, it broke free of the frame's seal, struck Cheng Shi to the ground, coiled around him, and dragged him away. In the blink of an eye, Cheng Shi vanished from the Collection Hall with a bewildered expression on his face.

...

The Void was lively today, and the person standing in it was simmering.

Perhaps no mortal had ever experienced what it felt like to be lashed by [Birth]'s Divine Pillar. Now Cheng Shi had.

He knelt on the ground, staring at the enormous Divine Pillar swaying before him, unable to speak for a long time.

Thank heavens the Sage wasn't here — otherwise today would have been the day she got her wish.

But why [Birth]?!

Why was He hiding inside [Memory]'s Collection Hall to ambush him?!

What was the purpose of this audience?

Had He, too, discovered that He was missing a memory?!

[Birth] might have been terrifying, but He wasn't like [Memory]. The latter was lethal — the former only caused... pregnancies.

So after the initial awkwardness passed, Cheng Shi returned to his polished audience-with-gods persona, lifted his head, and unleashed a torrent of praise at the Divine Pillar:

"Praise be to the great God of [Birth], may You—"

But before he could finish, the Divine Pillar lashed the surrounding Void, emitting a hoarse shriek. He seemed impatient.

"The child — where is —"

"?"

Cheng Shi blinked, the very picture of innocence.

"What child? Which child?"

Have You lost another one of Your children?

Rest assured — finding children is my specialty.

Which Envoy has awakened from history this time? I'll bring them back for You."

"Lu Xia —"

"Birth Holy Voice?" Cheng Shi paused. "He's not in Tusnat anymore?"

Hearing that place name only made the Divine Pillar's agitation worse. He whipped the space around Him, seething:

"[Deceit] deceived me —"

I gave Him Authority — but He never brought Lu Xia — back —"

"???"

'Wait, hold on!'

'This sounds like the Fun God struck a deal with [Birth] — promised to bring Lu Xia home in exchange for something. But it seems the Fun God reneged. He took [Birth]'s Authority but didn't do the work?'

'Wow — you really have the nerve, Benefactor!'

'Aren't you afraid [Birth] will retaliate by giving [Void] a few little baby [Voids]?'

'But... what Authority did they trade?'

Cheng Shi's interest suddenly surged. His curiosity multiplied. Rolling his eyes slyly, he spoke with utmost reverence:

"If I may, great God of [Birth]:

I am indeed a follower of [Void], that much is true. But at the end of the day, I'm still just a mortal. My Lord's actions are His own — they have nothing to do with His followers. I hope You won't hold me responsible.

That said, I am His follower, and while having a Benefactor like this gives me headaches, for the sake of universal peace and stability, I sometimes have no choice but to clean up after Him.

Please calm down. Before I can help You, I need to understand what happened. Only after I know everything can I do my best to make amends and soothe Your wounded heart.

So... if it's not too much trouble, could You tell me about this deal between the two of You?

Just the basics — I'm not here to gossip, purely to help."

The Divine Pillar, too impatient for long explanations, answered tersely:

"He hid my child — to trade for [Truth]'s Authority —

I agreed — but Lu Xia never returned — he's still in that kingdom of [Truth] —

He deceived me — CRACK —"

A thunderous lash of the whip exploded right beside Cheng Shi's ear, like a thunderbolt striking his skull, leaving his head ringing and his vision swimming.

But what truly made him dizzy weren't the pyrotechnics of [Birth]'s rage — it was the staggering volume of information packed into those few short sentences.

First: [Birth] still had memories of the Assembly of Gods Convention — no, more than that. He still held the [Truth] Authority that the Convention had allocated to Him!

This didn't just mean His memories remained intact — it meant that the Convention's disposition of [Truth]'s Authority had been preserved through the reset!!

How was that possible?!

If [Truth]'s Authority was still in other hands, then... had [Truth] failed to resurrect through the world reset?!

But if He was dead, then who had awarded the 20 points?

Surely not the Convention acting as proxy?!

Second: the Fun God's scheming was truly masterful!

Cheng Shi had wondered why Hu Xuan was the only player not rescued back then. He'd assumed that her candidacy as an Envoy was enough to keep herself safe, so the Fun God hadn't bothered. But now he saw the truth — it wasn't that He hadn't bothered. He'd literally locked her away!

So even before the Convention assembly began, [Deceit] had already been scheming against [Birth]!

Truly worthy of the Fun God — even without knowing what might happen at the Convention, having a contingency ready was never wrong.

[Birth] had no attachment to [Truth]'s Authority, so when faced with the "kidnapper's ransom," He had readily agreed.

And [Deceit] was truly ruthless — He'd sent Hu Xuan back but not Lu Xia?

No, wait — before the trial ended, Hu Xuan had clearly mentioned Lu Xia. That meant Lu Xia had already been freed, which meant the deal had been honored.

If the deal was fulfilled, why was [Birth] still furious?

Cheng Shi pondered for a moment, then froze. He blinked and asked [Birth]:

"Great God of [Birth], let me confirm something:

Your understanding of 'bringing the child back' means that [Dec—] [Deceit] was supposed to deliver Lu Xia, who was far away in Tusnat, back to Your side. But now Lu Xia has chosen of his own free will to stay out there. So...

You believe [Deceit] failed to complete the deal — is that correct?!"

"Precisely — so!!!"

"..."

'Well then...'

'Trading away Authority just to get a "rebellious" child to come home.'

'Say what you will — being one of Your children sounds pretty nice, actually.'

...

The two back-to-back audiences left Cheng Shi even more confused.

[Memory] clearly had not retained His memories. Even though He had managed to sketch a collection piece in His hall the instant He perceived the universe's truth, [Time]'s power had scrubbed it clean.

But [Birth] was different — He had not only retained memories but even held onto the Authority!

How was this possible?

Could [Time]'s regression discriminate — not between people, but between gods?

Whoever He wanted to keep memories, kept them?

Hiss—

This discovery sent a jolt through Cheng Shi's heart, followed by a surge of excitement. [Time] was, after all, a member of the Fear Faction. If even a world-level regression could be fine-tuned, this was an incomparably powerful tool for the Faction's scheming!

He just didn't know what price such a "perfect" technique demanded. Surely a world reset couldn't be that simple.

But if memories could be preserved, which other gods had learned the universe's truth during this incident?

And would the Fun God use the same method to recruit new members for the Fear Faction?

Cheng Shi frowned in silence, mentally reviewing the remaining gods. After running through them all, he realized the Fear Faction didn't seem to have many potential new allies.

Among the gods, they were either devoutly in the Approach Faction, or already secretly allied with the Fear Faction. The Neutral Faction had barely anyone left.

[Decay] counted, technically — but He'd be equally useless no matter which side He joined. No god would bother with Him, and He wouldn't bother with any god.

[Birth]...

Forget it. If gods from opposing factions could unanimously cast their votes for [Birth], that meant He was like [Decay] — purely a mascot.

As long as He could still give birth, this prelude to [Life] wouldn't pose any threat to the universe.

But at this very moment, Cheng Shi himself was under threat.

Why was he the one cleaning up after the Fun God's broken promises?

Having a Benefactor like this was utterly exhausting. Then again, the Fun God hadn't technically broken the deal — it was just that the two deities had different understandings of what "coming home" meant.

Cheng Shi sighed helplessly. He knew he couldn't possibly convince Lu Xia to return, so he tactfully relayed what Hu Xuan had said about Lu Xia's wishes before the trial ended, adding some flattery:

"Great God of [Birth], there is no need for worry.

Lu Xia is fervently spreading Your will across the world. I know You feel the universe isn't safe — that having Your child nearby gives You peace of mind.

But the truth is — and forgive the disrespect — the reality we face is too heavy. If the day You fear truly comes, even with Lu Xia at Your side, You probably couldn't protect Him.

Because the danger comes from..."

Cheng Shi pointed solemnly upward, leaving the name unspoken.

"...So why not let Your child be himself during this 'last stretch of time'?

He may seem rebellious, but it's actually devotion and love — because what he cares about is still Your will.

Of course, I may be painting too bleak a picture, but I trust You understand what I mean..."

Cheng Shi's words were genuinely sincere, and [Birth] truly took them to heart.

The thick Divine Pillar stopped its lashing, swaying pensively for a moment. Then He addressed Cheng Shi:

"Do not attempt to pull me into your faction —

I have never feared 'Him' — I simply do not want my children — scattered and lost —

You — just like your Benefactor — born to beguile hearts —

Stay away from my children — do not fill their heads with the will of [Deceit] —

I will not summon you again —"

"..."

Cheng Shi pursed his lips. Shut out by [Birth]...

Whether this was a good thing or a bad thing, he couldn't say.

Indeed, Cheng Shi had hidden a motive in his rhetoric. If [Time] had left [Birth] with memories, that meant the Fear Faction had designs on [Birth].

As a member of the Fear Faction, he had to at least try. That was why he'd painted such a pessimistic picture — to provoke this deity into moving closer to the Fear Faction for the sake of protecting His children.

But [Birth] was impervious.

Cheng Shi was out of options. He wanted to ask: since You've witnessed Origin's terror and the universe's true nature, why aren't You afraid?

But he knew that question would lead nowhere.

Fine.

Even if recruitment failed, at least he'd shaken off the burden of bringing Lu Xia home, right?

That counted as a win.

[Birth], who despised [Deceit], swatted His follower away with a single lash. Cheng Shi — long accustomed to this sort of treatment — closed his eyes and waited to land back in reality.

But today, reality seemed far away. He fell for a long time without touching solid ground. So he opened his eyes, looked at the Void around him, and sighed wearily:

"Had enough fun yet, Benefactor?"

"Hee~

Not yet."

With that playful giggle, the eyes of starlight and spirals opened once more above Cheng Shi's head.

The Fun God had arrived, and He appeared to be in a great mood.

[Truth]'s Authority was in His pocket. The world hadn't attracted Origin's attention. Even [Truth]'s own creation was now in His follower's hands. With such a "total victory," He was clearly the biggest winner.

So the moment Cheng Shi laid eyes on the Fun God, he cut straight to the point:

"You foresaw all of this?"

Those eyes blinked and blinked, playing dumb: "All of what?"

Cheng Shi pursed his lips, steadied himself in the Void, and repeated the question. This time the Fun God answered — though the response was unexpected.

"Of course not.

Nobody can foresee everything — not even [Fate], who claims to perceive the universe's true nature.

It really was an accident.

I'll admit — [Truth] had impeccable timing. He launched this experiment at the moment when my guard was lowest and caught me completely off guard. [War]'s betrayal only compounded the chaos, throwing my plans into total disarray."

"?"

'Why does this sound like bragging?'

'If You were truly caught off guard and scrambling, how did You end up with such a bountiful harvest?'

Cheng Shi's lip curled in disdain, thoroughly unimpressed.

Those eyes clearly read his thoughts and snorted in amusement:

"What — you think I made out like a bandit from this experiment?"

"[Truth]'s Authority changed hands. If I'm not mistaken, the Convention's voting rights were probably preserved too. That means everything [Truth] lost went straight to You. How is that not a windfall?"

"Tch—

If you only look at what's in front of you, all you'll ever see is the surface.

Even as my follower, you mustn't settle for appearances.

If I could choose, I'd rather not have this Authority.

You should know — [Truth]'s Authority is merely compensation for propping up a collapsing building. It's not a trophy.

I took a massive loss. But...

At least I saved this world.

So — do you believe now that I was saving the world?"

"..."

Cheng Shi was quick on the uptake. His expression tightened and he immediately asked: "What was the price?"

Those eyes turned coy: "You don't need to know. You only need to know that [Truth]'s Authority doesn't even come close to offsetting what saving the world cost."

Was the Fun God really the savior?

No — Cheng Shi didn't believe that. Even if the Fun God's hand had been visible in this rescue, Cheng Shi sensed that He had saved the world not to preserve it permanently, but to ensure it didn't collapse midway — so it would instead collapse at the endpoint He had chosen.

What the Fun God was planning had to be a rebellion against Origin. Otherwise, it wouldn't be worthy of His [Deceit] will.

But Cheng Shi saw no need to call this out. The Fear Faction couldn't afford nested layers of fear within its own ranks. He thought carefully for a moment. If the Fun God hadn't been lying, then the regression concealed many more secrets.

For instance, His phrase "if I could choose" — but wasn't [Time]'s regression the result of choices made by Him and [Time]? Otherwise, why did some gods retain their memories while others didn't?

Could there be more to this story?

...

"You've seen for yourself how terrifying 'He' is.

When it comes down to it, before [War] launched that 'comical' war of his, we had never truly understood 'Him.'

Now it's clear — every scheme against 'Him' was futile.

In this farce, the fact that this starry sky survived at all is already a miracle. Returning completely to how things were before is no longer possible.

[Time] did reset the world, but everything that had been 'tainted' by contact with 'Him' remained beyond [Time]'s control.

Take [War], for instance. He... can never come back.

Ha — perhaps it's better that way. Better than having Him try again with another comical war.

[Order] fell, [Truth] self-destructed, [War] was annihilated. [Civilization] no longer exists.

That is likely the guidance Origin, high above, has given us through these events.

'He' is warning us — even if we know we are not a true civilization, do not attempt to resist. Because all who resist will be erased without a trace, just like [War]."

"..."

While these interpretations were most likely [Deceit]'s unilateral reading of Origin's will, Cheng Shi felt his Benefactor was right — Origin truly didn't care about civilization.

'He' only cared about 'His' experiment. Or, as Scarred Cheng Shi had put it, He only observed His experiment.

As long as the experiment remained intact, everything else was irrelevant.

That was probably also why 'He' hadn't pursued this world's reset — no matter how the contents thrashed around, as long as they didn't affect other experiments, they were at most a "defective product."

And before the experimental results materialized, even a "defective product" held some observational value.

Ha — what a despairing world.

Cheng Shi's eyes were heavy with gravity, his heart filled with sorrow. But he quickly shook off the stray thoughts and refocused on the present.

The Fun God's words carried enormous amounts of information — far beyond pessimism about the real universe.

If things tainted by Origin couldn't be regressed, then [War] could never return. [Civilization]'s Divine Throne would remain empty forever.

But what about [Truth]?

When you thought about it, [Truth] had only conducted His experiment within this starry sky. Even if He found a path to the real universe, He had died before making contact with Origin — so strictly speaking, He shouldn't count as "tainted"...

Cheng Shi looked up in confusion, only to hear the Fun God continue calmly:

"When mending a broken object, you can't just focus on the cracks — you must also find what caused them."

"!!!"

That single sentence made Cheng Shi's pupils contract violently, a tremor running through his entire body!

[Truth] was not dead!

No — [Truth] had indeed died. But He hadn't died from self-destruction. During [Time]'s regression, He had died at the hands of...

[Deceit] and [Time]!

In this world reset, [Time] could definitely determine which targets were regressed and which were not — that was why some gods retained memories while others didn't.

If that was the case, then [Truth] — who had never made contact with Origin — should have been resurrected through the world's reset.

But He wasn't!

Because He was an uncertainty in this starry sky. No one could guarantee that a resurrected [Truth] wouldn't pursue truth again and tear through the heavens for a second time.

So as the "savior," [Time] had exiled Him during the temporal reset!

Which meant the one who had awarded Cheng Shi those 20 points as "Truth" was probably...

[Deceit]!

Of course — only the Fun God would give someone a C rating and then add 20 points.

He hadn't just exiled [Truth] — He had stolen [Truth]'s Divine Throne and Authority.

But had the Convention simply gone along with this?

Could they really manipulate the Convention through such means?

Cheng Shi was stunned. Then he thought of [War] — if the Fun God had taken everything from [Truth], had He also taken everything from [War]?

No, that seemed different. [War] had died in the real universe. Did His Authority even still exist?

At this point... did the Convention even work?

Although the Convention safeguarded all divine rights to prevent their loss, the one who had "lost" [War]'s Authority this time was the Creator Origin Himself!

A contract signed among gods couldn't possibly bind 'Him,' so then...

"You've guessed half of it right.

[War]'s Authority is indeed no longer under this starry sky."

Those eyes curved upward at the corners, clearly appreciating His follower's sharp mind.

Cheng Shi was taken aback:

"Not under this starry sky?"

You mean His Authority drifted into the real universe? It didn't vanish?!"

"Correct — but that's only my conjecture.

There are many entangled factors and it's hard to explain clearly. You only need to know that Authority differs from tangible things — it's tied to faith, and its anchor remains within this starry sky.

So as long as this world endures, [War]'s Authority almost certainly won't disappear.

But exactly where it ended up — no one can say."

Hearing this, Cheng Shi's heart skipped a beat.

The way the Fun God said this gave a certain impression...

'You're not planning to go into the real universe and pick up [War]'s Authority, are you?'

'No, wait—!'

Cheng Shi's eyes widened. He stared at those divine eyes with an incredulous expression: "You're not planning to go into the real universe and collect every scattered piece of [War]'s Authority, are you?!"

Those eyes froze for a moment, then let out a derisive snort:

"Seeing greed in yourself, you see greed in all.

What — does the Greed Lord think that his sidelined Benefactor is just as greedy as him?"

"..."

'You don't have to be that aggressive — I didn't even do anything greedy this time.'

But Cheng Shi still felt he'd guessed right. After recognizing Origin's terror, [Deceit] would inevitably try to accumulate power by every possible means. Even if that power was too weak to challenge the Creator, it was still better than nothing.

Knowing he couldn't dissuade Him, Cheng Shi could only sigh: "Please... be careful."

Those divine eyes softened for an instant, then snorted with amusement:

"Be careful of what?"

If even you can think of this, do you really believe the versions of me in other slice universes can't?

Authority stripped of its faith anchor most likely can't be used in other worlds. When the time comes, I'll simply follow in their footsteps and collect that fool's Authority. What's so difficult about that?"

"..."

'If You hadn't brought up the other versions of Yourself, things might've been fine. But mentioning the other slice universe Fun Gods...'

'Benefactor — do you have any idea what you're like?'

'I'm terrified that when a bunch of [Deceits] get together, not a single one will step forward first. They'll all wait for someone else to go — and then waste days accomplishing nothing.'

'And knowing their luck, after dragging their feet, they'll band together and decide to pull another [War]-style performance art piece...'

'And then the sky... would have to fall all over again.'

Cheng Shi felt he should try once more. He carefully chose his words:

"You've already secured [Truth]'s Authority. Why not play it safe?"

I'm guessing the 20 points from that trial were also from You — which means You didn't just get the Authority. You used the world reset as an opportunity to claim [Truth]'s Divine Throne.

Even if it was an accident, Your harvest is more than enough. Since power from this tiny world can't challenge the Creator of the real universe, why take the risk?"

Cheng Shi's words were sincere, tinged with a sliver of genuine fear. [Deceit] fell silent for a long while before the corners of His eyes rose again, and He answered with a single line:

"It's not that I want to — it's that this world needs it.

To achieve the Fixed Destiny, the Authority of all gods is essential!"

"!!!!!"

'What?'

'You're the leader of the Fear Faction, and you're talking about the Fixed Destiny?!'

'No way...'

Cheng Shi was floored. He blinked frantically, certain he'd misheard.

Was this really the Fun God?

'Please don't tell me this is [Fate] wearing a disguise!'

"What do You actually—"

Cheng Shi was about to ask what the Fun God meant — but at that very moment, a pair of eyes cold as frost opened right beside the first pair!

Looking at these two identical sets of eyes, Cheng Shi's heart lurched.

'Oh no — the real [Fate] is here!'

The instant [Fate] appeared, the Void froze over under a challenge as cold as the cosmos itself:

"I saw the world's path sever and then continue. [Deceit] — what are you playing at this time!"

[Deceit] fired back with a sneer:

"Tch—"

Strange. There may not be countless gods in existence, but there are at least a dozen or so. And every time something goes wrong, it's automatically my fault?

If you want to pick a fight, you don't need some trumped-up excuse.

What — couldn't find [Truth], so you want to take it out on me?

I'm not the one who shoved your follower into that trial. Your follower was 'devoutly' serving too many Benefactors — blame him. [Truth] used him to scheme against me. If anything, I'm the victim here. I haven't even found anyone to air my grievances to — and you come knocking on my door.

Fine then — want to fight?"

"..."

'When gods fight, mortals suffer.'

Standing beneath those two pairs of divine eyes, Cheng Shi trembled and dared not speak.

'Fun God, you're unbelievable!'

'How can you divert trouble onto someone else even now?!'

'What do you mean "devoutly" serving too many Benefactors? Did I choose which faiths to integrate?'

'Wasn't it all arranged by you?'

'You want justice? Who do I go to for justice?!'

But Cheng Shi also caught the subtext — the Fun God was signaling to him. The message was clear: in this world reset, [Fate] was one of the gods who had lost His memories.

...

If fighting was on the table, words were unnecessary.

The flame of [Void] ignited at the slightest spark — those two were at it again.

Cheng Shi, caught in the shockwaves of two true gods clashing, plummeted straight through the Void — but he didn't fall back into reality. Instead, he landed inside a magnificent divine temple.

Seeing Kataro greet him with a polite smile and lead the way, Cheng Shi sighed with emotion:

"Being alive is nice, isn't it, Kataro?"

"!!!"

Kataro was not privy to the world reset. In his memory, he had simply been faithfully guarding the gates for his Benefactor when Lord Cheng Shi arrived for an audience.

But what did Lord Cheng Shi mean by that?

'Is he testing me? Has humble Kataro done something wrong lately?'

Kataro froze. His smile looked more like crying as he turned to face Cheng Shi, his mind racing until he cautiously ventured: "Pardon me, sir? I'm sorry — Kataro was momentarily distracted."

Cheng Shi had only been musing aloud, naturally seeing no need to repeat himself. He waved his hand, left Kataro behind, and strode straight into the temple.

Seeing that Lord Cheng Shi had no intention of reprimanding him, Kataro let out a long breath of relief outside the hall.

"Being alive is nice... Kataro, keep it up!"

Cheng Shi had no idea Kataro was giving himself a pep talk back there. All he knew was that the Benefactor had set aside His public persona to summon him yet again — meaning there was definitely something important to discuss.

So he quickened his pace, entered the temple, looked up at the massive murky-yellow hand hovering above the central hall, and asked:

"I'm here, Benefactor.

Do You have further instructions?"

The colossal hand, formed from swirling yellow fog, fiddled in the endless haze for a moment before gently releasing two objects.

A lush branch — and a squishy, pale-white... brain.

"..."

The branch was easy to identify. He'd seen things like it before. Shocking, sure, but unmistakable — it was [Prosperity]'s Authority.

But the brain...

'Has the Fun God been taken over by Wei Zhi?'

Cheng Shi blinked in utter bewilderment and looked upward, only to hear the great hand chuckle:

"Kitten did well. This is her reward.

[Prosperity]'s 'Abundance' was once given to [Truth], and now it's been reclaimed.

I have no use for it. Take it to her.

As for the second piece...

Hmph — consider it a warning for a certain accomplice of [Truth]!"

"..."

'[Truth]'s accomplice?'

'Who?'

'Who was so despicable as to nearly bring the universe to ruin?!'

'Well — definitely not me.'

Cheng Shi coughed twice and averted his gaze.

The murky hand snorted in amusement and continued:

"No matter how you deny it, the fact remains that [Truth] collapsed the universe with your help.

It's time to exercise more caution, Clown.

The world may have been reset and only a few retain their memories, but the gods are not that simple. Amid the traces that couldn't be erased, they will inevitably find evidence pointing to a world reset.

For instance, [Memory]'s blank collection — or the completely inexplicable redistribution of Authority under the Convention...

[Time]'s work was precise enough, and my disguise can fool them for now. But they won't rest easy. So the Clown's situation will only become more precarious."

By now, Cheng Shi was drenched in cold sweat.

"They can't see through [Void], but they can always see through mortals.

Are you afraid?

Good. Remember that fear. That, too, is 'His' doing.

I say all this not as a warning to anyone in particular, but as the reigning sovereign of [Void] in this era — a god who holds a Divine Throne — I need capable followers who can run errands intelligently.

And you... have attracted far too many gazes. If one day something were to happen..."

"Please don't jinx it, Benefactor!" Cheng Shi panicked. "Ptuh ptuh ptuh — lies don't count, the wind blows them away."

"..."

The great hand instantly transformed into the starry eyes, gazing down at Cheng Shi with a half-smile, mockingly:

"Aiding the enemy and blaspheming your god — you deserve proper discipline.

Some clowns are on the verge of forgetting their place.

Don't think of this as a reward. I merely want to ensure that if my current Clown happens to disappear one day, I'll have a handy replacement ready."

"..."

'Do you actually believe your own words?'

Seeing the Clown's skeptical expression, [Deceit] paid it no mind and carried on:

"[Truth] possessed the power to enlighten wisdom. What lies before you is a Wisdom Crystal.

It can bestow intelligence upon a living thing — and a living thing with intelligence naturally qualifies as 'civilization.'

Take out your Clown Substitute. I know you have it."

Clown Substitute?

Cheng Shi paused, then rummaged through his spatial storage for the clown doll he hadn't used in ages. He examined the hideous-cute puppet, thinking: 'Is the item getting an upgrade?'

'Has the Fun God finally remembered to strengthen His followers?'

Those starry eyes blinked gently and fused the Clown Substitute with the Wisdom Crystal. There were no dazzling lights or earth-shattering effects — the two items simply merged like cream blending into milk, phasing right through each other. Then they bubbled, collapsed, and became... a black hole?

Cheng Shi was stupefied. He stared at the black sphere, unable to comprehend how this equation worked.

'Clown + Brain = Black Hole?'

'Benefactor, this [Truth] You inherited... isn't it kind of twisted?'

But quickly, Cheng Shi realized the dark mass wasn't actually a black hole — it was a shadow. Because right as he marveled, the shadow rapidly vanished from before his eyes and reappeared inside his...

Shadow!

The black hole had merged with his shadow!

"???"

Before Cheng Shi could process any of this, a far larger shadow swooped down on him from above.

He felt a violent spin, was blasted by a stinging gust of palm wind, and tumbled through the Void. When he woke, he was already back in his rest area.

And lying beside him was a figure identical in build — but whose entire body was as deeply dark as a black hole.

A shadow person.

"?????"

Cheng Shi's pupils shrank. He leapt to his feet and stumbled backward — and the shadow person mirrored him exactly, retreating in the opposite direction. Both "people" simultaneously blurted out: "Holy—"

Cheng Shi blinked in disbelief, finally grasping what the Fun God meant by "enlightening wisdom."

'Wait — You turned my shadow into a person?!

'Do I even still have a shadow?'

He snapped his head down — the shadow was still there beneath him. But when he looked up again, the shadow person had vanished.

His brow furrowed. With a mere thought, the shadow below him stretched out a hand, broke free of its two-dimensional prison, and stood up before him once more, right before his eyes.

"..."

When he locked gazes with those pure black eyes, Cheng Shi felt the utter strangeness of it all.

His shadow was alive — just like the very beginning, when he'd first been granted the talent of [Void].

Back then, the shadow had concealed Cheng Dashi's contingency. But now...

"Who are you?"

Both "Cheng Shis" spoke in unison, then simultaneously nodded.

"You are me. You are..."

Cheng Shi."

...

The Void — the Fire Passer Hall.

The hall was a few degrees colder than usual today.

Qin Xin sat at the conference table, distracted, unable to shake the feeling that his eyelid was twitching.

He wasn't a superstitious man, but the nameless unease gnawing at him prompted him to seek someone out.

As the backbone of the Torchbearers, he naturally couldn't spread unverified worries among his people. So the one he consulted wasn't a person at all — it was a god.

The Flame of Hope.

As a Servant God of [Fate], the Flame of Hope might have a more precise interpretation of these nebulous premonitions.

Qin Xin wasn't sure. He merely sought peace of mind for this inexplicable anxiety.

But what he hadn't expected was that his unease had manifested in the Flame of Hope itself!

When he found the Flame of Hope inside the Fire Passer Hall, the normally carefree, perpetually joking protector of the Torchbearers was slumped on the ground, his light dimmed — looking as if he might go out at any second.

Qin Xin was terrified.

"What happened to you?"

He rushed over, lifting the no-longer-scalding Flame of Hope. The flickering Candle Man forced a bitter smile and shook his head:

"Don't panic. I'm fine."

Qin Xin's expression turned severe as he scanned the surroundings warily:

"If this counts as fine, then I can't imagine what would count as a big deal.

Was there an intrusion?

You're too weak — it looks like you've been in a fight. Who? How can I help?"

"No need... minor issue. Just need to rest a bit."

The moment those words left his mouth, the flames on the Candle Man's legs went out.

"..." His expression froze, and he let out another bitter laugh. "Well — looks like I'll be in a wheelchair from now on."

Qin Xin was exasperated, but hearing that the other still had the energy for self-deprecation, he confirmed the situation wasn't completely out of control. At least there was no immediate danger.

"What happened?" He propped up the Flame of Hope, trying to use his own fire to rekindle the lost legs.

It was useless.

The Candle Man sighed and shook his head:

"Not all fire can give the world hope.

[Fate]'s fire can, but [War]'s fire... only brings destruction."

Qin Xin sensed there was something beneath those words, but couldn't decipher it immediately. The Flame of Hope was simply musing — there was no particular emotion behind it.

He sighed again:

"Don't waste your spiritual energy. I did get into a fight.

He was dangerous — nearly found out about this star... space.

But everything's fine now. For a long time to come, the Torchbearers won't face any danger.

But I may need to rest for a while.

Qin Xin — during that time, stay low and stay vigilant. Don't bring trouble upon yourself.

[War] is hot-blooded, but that doesn't mean He can protect followers who share that hot blood."

Qin Xin was no fool. The repeated mention of his Benefactor told him something had happened among the gods. But since the Flame of Hope didn't elaborate, he wouldn't pry. He simply nodded solemnly:

"Don't worry. Rest up properly.

I'll look after everyone. And when you come back, we'll be waiting — for you to light the... flame of hope once more."

The Candle Man gazed into the depths of the hall with an distant look, managing a somewhat strained smile.

"Yes. Hope will be lit again."

...

The Void — the starry sky of Justice [Order].

"You summoned me. What for?"

Beneath the Scales, a pair of eyes coated in chaotic white miasma gazed up at Justice [Order] and opened with:

"Do you think your foolish acts will ever have an answer?"

"..."

The Scales fell silent for a moment, then prepared to leave.

He droned: "The Convention is not an outlet for the emotions of gods. Your contempt is misdirected. Do not summon me for such absurd matters again."

"Who's the absurd one here?" Those eyes sneered in challenge. "I was bored, so I browsed through the Convention records and discovered that not long ago, there was an Assembly of Gods Convention involving the Authority of a true god.

Yet I have no memory of this. Looking around, not a single god has brought it up.

So I suspect it was you, Justice [Order], who quietly buried everything — conspiring with a few shady gods to complete this exchange of Authority.

So let me ask you — Justice [Order] — are you still just?"

"..."

The Scales was silent for a long time — so long that fresh contempt kindled in those eyes.

"Naturally.

I represent the Convention. I uphold justice. I stand accountable to every challenge the universe can offer."

"Oh? Is that so?

Because your silence has already told me you've lost the last shred of justice.

To think — the once-great [Order] now clings to survival as a mere 'Fear [Order]'... how pathetic.

Justice [Order], aren't you going to explain yourself?"

"When a deity temporarily surrenders Authority, they summon my witness. Once the transaction is complete, the Authority is returned. Everything follows proper procedure and complies with Convention regulations. Therefore, no explanation is needed."

"Ha. Do you think I'll believe that?

I can hardly imagine any god handing over Authority to another and then getting it all back intact.

Why don't you give me an example?"

Just as [Folly]'s questioning grew sharper, a voice rang out from behind:

"Of course you can't imagine it. After all, [Chaos] is disorder — your self-important wisdom couldn't comprehend truth."

[Folly]'s gaze hardened. He turned around — and there, beneath the starry sky, a Starlight Canon lay open, shimmering with radiant light and exuding the dazzling glow of knowledge.

First came surprise. Then a mocking smirk spread across those eyes:

"So it was you!

I see now — [Truth] gave you quite a bit of trouble.

But I'm curious — how did you convince Justice [Order] to let you terminate [Truth] outside the gods' sight?

Don't tell me [Truth] is still alive. I won't buy it."

The Starlight Canon's page-turning gradually slowed, then stopped entirely. A playful laugh:

"How did you know it was me?"

"Tch—

[Truth] only ever buried Himself in pursuit. He never explained Himself to anyone, and He certainly never spoke with your brand of sarcasm.

So it seems [Civilization] has now lost two. [War]... is probably next, isn't He?

The gods haven't seen [War] in quite some time. Are you hiding Him to set up some master plan — or are you concealing news of His death?

[Void] devouring [Civilization] — is that your way of reminding the gods that civilization is false and meaningless?

To distance yourself from 'Him,' you really do spare no effort."

"..." The Starlight Canon paused for a moment, then spoke with a half-smile: "Aren't you worried I'll do to you what I did to [Truth]?"

"Ha. Bluffing.

If you truly had the means, why hide until now?" Those white divine eyes grew even more contemptuous.

The Starlight Canon brushed it off and countered with its own jab:

"Aren't you the same?

Hide your own Authority and you can suppress your curiosity — is that what you think, [Folly]?

Then why don't you guess — do I know where you've hidden your Authority?"

[Folly] gave "Truth" an indifferent sidelong glance:

"Take it if you want. I can hardly wait to witness the next act of folly.

When the time comes, this world's truth will show you — even if you collect all sixteen Divine Thrones' worth of Authority, folly is still folly."

"..."

[Deceit] could refute every one of [Folly]'s claims — except this one. It had already been proven before the world was reset.

Every effort of the slice universe was, to the 'Him' above the real universe, indeed an act of folly.

But so what?

[Folly] was born knowing folly. [Truth] had tested folly with His own existence. With such precedents, there was no reason [Deceit] couldn't reconstruct this folly into something new.

When that time came — folly was still folly, yes. But it wouldn't be entirely meaningless.

...

A trial — somewhere unknown on the Land of Hope.

It had been an incredibly brutal trial. [Truth]'s followers had actually been coveting the players' identities — making Long Jing feel like he'd lived through a horror story.

Fortunately, the horror story had familiar faces in it. With the help of his teammates, they'd finally thwarted the conspiracy and escaped alive.

Now, with the trial nearing its end, the four surviving players stood amid the ruins of a city, gazing out over the war-ravaged landscape in quiet reflection.

On the far end, a player in a trench coat held a battered wooden crate in one hand. He sighed wistfully:

"Destruction is, in its own way, a form of [Oblivion].

Unfortunately, the flames of war burned too fiercely. I didn't have time to help everyone find release.

But at least, nourished by hatred, [Oblivion] has already taken root in the hearts of this city's people.

That brings me great comfort."

Long Jing eyed this somewhat unfamiliar Scavenger with an odd expression. He had a nagging feeling he'd seen the man before, but no matter how deeply he searched his memory, he couldn't find a trace.

Could this person have merged with [Memory]?

Long Jing looked toward the Dragon King beside him, only to see Li Jingming give him the subtlest of winks — clearly also noticing something unusual about the man's identity.

But that said — this Dragon King's personality seemed a bit erratic for this round. Was he actually someone else in disguise?

Cheng Shi? Zhang Jizu? Or... one of the Zhens?

While Long Jing was still deliberating, the other teammate spoke up.

He raised his chin, looking down through his nostrils at the trench-coat man, and said in a deep voice:

"Mo Shu — the matter I've raised is entirely your decision to join or not. But you'd better drop those little [Memory] tricks of yours. Otherwise, after this round ends, I won't remember you — and I won't trust you again."

Indeed — the trench-coat man was Mo Shu.

Mo Shu glanced back at this follower of [Folly] and smiled: "I'm certainly interested. But what you've described far exceeds my understanding. I'll need time to think it over carefully. Don't worry — I'll come find you, and I'll earn your trust again."

"Foolish.

If the risks of this trial hadn't thrown us together, I wouldn't have trusted you like this. You'd pass up the present opportunity to pursue future validation?

Ha — I hope [Descent]'s brain can teach you just how unreachably brilliant [Folly]'s wisdom truly is.

Forget it. These things can't be rushed."

With that, the [Folly] follower prepared to exit the trial.

But just then, Li Jingming reached out and stopped him.

"Wait — he may not be interested, but I am.

Jie Shu, why don't you explain your plan? Whatever it is, I'm fairly confident I can be of some small help.

Of course, in exchange — this memory must be recorded."

Jie Shu paused mid-step, turned to face Li Jingming, and let out a derisive snort:

"Come to you?"

Tch—

Whether you're really Li Jingming is still up for debate."

"Of course I am," Li Jingming said with a smile. "The genuine article."

"Then I definitely can't involve you. I need an assistant, not a mole. You... don't fit the bill."

A mole?

Both Li Jingming and Long Jing furrowed their brows at that.

Long Jing reasoned that Jie Shu must be planning to move against someone, and that target apparently had ties to the Dragon King — which was why he refused to work with him.

Suddenly, Long Jing grew curious. He wanted to know whose name had made it onto the "list" of this Fool Hunter — ranked second on his path, right behind Wei Mu on the Road to Ascension.

Li Jingming raised an eyebrow, looking thoughtful:

"Interesting.

Mo Shu carries [Memory]'s power and you don't mind. Yet you won't travel with me, a [Memory] follower. That suggests your target is most likely a follower of [Deceit].

What happened — were you swindled?

Tell me about it. If I get to record a new memory, I might even be able to offer hints and guidance."

"Ha — guess all you like. There are plenty of faiths in this game. Because I didn't invite you, it must be [Deceit] I'm after?

Li Jingming, you're a bit too full of yourself."

"Then why didn't you invite Long Jing?"

He shared this trial's hardship with you too, and you're both ranked second. A second-ranked Acrobat isn't good enough for you?

No — the look in your eyes tells me you never even considered Long Jing as a candidate. So you do have an issue with [Deceit].

At this level of play, refusing to associate with [Deceit] simply because of being tricked before does happen — take my lovesick colleague, for instance. But for a clear-sighted follower of [Folly]... it would be absurdly out of character.

So I lean more toward the conclusion that you're targeting someone in [Deceit].

That makes me even more interested in your plan.

How about this — let me recommend someone. Someone perfectly suited to help you take on a [Deceit] follower. And you won't need to tell me anything about your plan. Just choose one memory to share, and the deal is done. Sound fair?"

Jie Shu considered this briefly, then asked with amusement: "Any memory?"

"Any memory," Li Jingming confirmed.

"Interesting — I do have time for a little game.

I once observed that some so-called players are players in name only — they're actually non-human entities. Which means the real players in this game aren't limited to us mortals.

Does that count as an interesting memory, Li Jingming?"

"?"

Li Jingming's pupils contracted slightly. He sensed the remark was pointed, but he nodded and smiled:

"Naturally it counts.

Since you've shared your memory, I'll give my recommendation as promised.

And my recommendation is... him!"

He pointed at Long Jing.

Both Jie Shu and Mo Shu froze. Jie Shu lifted his chin with undisguised disdain: "If you can't take this seriously, don't play."

Li Jingming smiled:

"What — you don't believe me?"

If you're going after [Deceit], you should know that only a fraud can catch a fraud.

And whoever you're targeting seriously enough to recruit help for must be someone with a name on the rankings.

Coincidentally, this President Gong here has a grudge against every single notable fraud near the top of the [Deceit] Ladder of Ascent. So he's absolutely the best choice."

Jie Shu glanced at Long Jing and scoffed again:

"What deal do you have with this fraud?"

You think I'll believe this?"

Li Jingming smiled, about to argue further — but Long Jing suddenly let out a mocking laugh and spat toward both of them:

"Morons.

You think I need outsiders to deal with them?"

Fraud versus fraud comes down to one thing — the con. If brute force worked, would I have waited this long?"

Don't tell me you two — a Memory Traveler and a Fool Hunter combined — actually think you're stronger than one Acrobat.

Ha — who gave you that confidence?"

Ridiculous.

I'm leaving. Don't bother me. My day at the top will come."

With that, Long Jing's figure gradually faded and vanished.

The remaining three stood in stunned silence. Li Jingming chuckled softly:

"It seems I underestimated President Gong's stubborn pride.

Oh well — a boring memory exchanged for useless advice is still fair enough.

Gentlemen — until we meet again."

Li Jingming left too. Jie Shu and Mo Shu, alone in the trial, exchanged a look — their expressions varied, their eyes flickering.

Before long, everyone had left the trial. Silence returned to the ruins. But just as the smoke of war began to clear, two figures reappeared on the spot.

Long Jing and the Dragon King locked eyes. Li Jingming smiled: "Nice acting, President Gong. You truly are a master of the craft."

Long Jing frowned, gazing in the direction Jie Shu and Mo Shu had disappeared. He mused:

"For Jie Shu to treat something this seriously, the targets are probably all in the Joker alliance. Dragon King — who do you think they're going after?

That bad-luck magnet?"

Li Jingming shook his head:

"With [Folly]'s shrewdness, he'd never do anything pointless.

Even knowing he outranks Zhen Yi, he'd never provoke her.

Because he knows that win or lose, apart from courting trouble, there's no benefit.

So my money's on his target being..."

Long Jing raised an eyebrow and blurted out a name: "Cheng Shi?"

"You said it — I didn't."

"So what if I said it? Based on what I know of Jie Shu, him and Cheng Shi shouldn't have any history."

"History doesn't have to be from the present. With [Folly]'s wisdom, maybe he's spotted something?"

Regardless of what he's seen — President Gong, I'm the one who gave you this opportunity. If he truly comes to you again, remember to share that memory with me."

Long Jing pursed his lips and stared into Li Jingming's eyes:

"That's a discussion for later. But first..."

Tell me, Dragon King — who are you really?"

"..."

The scene fell suddenly silent. Then both men's expressions shifted at the same time — lips curling in identical grins — and they spoke as one:

"Hee~"

"..."

"..."

Silence again.

Neither had tricked the other — but both were thoroughly disgusted with themselves.

What rotten luck.

Both scowled in unison. Long Jing waved his hand and walked off.

Li Jingming stood in place, then suddenly reached into the empty air and pulled out a swirl of [Memory] power. He studied it with fascination:

"Interesting. Using [Memory]'s gift to alter others' memories, yet unwilling to draw close himself.

Since you don't like [Memory], then me taking your [Memory] power shouldn't be unfair — right, Mo Shu?"

...

What did it feel like to have a shadow that could detach and act independently?

Before today, Cheng Shi couldn't have answered that question. Now he could.

The shadow's independence was essentially a second audiovisual system. Even though the same brain processed all the information, the inputs had doubled.

And of course, the outputs — physical ones — had multiplied even more.

The shadow wasn't just some decorative living thing. It possessed faith of its own — and that faith was complementary to Cheng Shi's main body.

In other words, when Cheng Shi's primary form operated as [Deceit] merged with [Chaos], his shadow became [Fate] merged with [Time]. And when Cheng Shi touched his shadow, the two swapped faiths.

That was just the beginning. The shadow also carried its own Faith Talent — essentially a Cheng Shi of a different faith. So the next time he used Chaos Acting to impersonate someone, he'd have a "devout" follower of [Fate] by his side.

This follower could even use masks to switch professions, achieving perfect coordination with the main body!

It was tantamount to wielding two sets of Faith Talents simultaneously!

The moment he realized this, Cheng Shi immediately prayed for a solo trial to test it out.

And the results proved that 1+1 was far greater than 2. With two faith talents in play, Cheng Shi's combat power didn't just double — it was like having a "henchman" who understood him one hundred percent.

This should have been cause for joy.

Unfortunately, the timing was off.

Having witnessed the universe collapse, the real universe emerge, and Origin snuff out [War] like a candle — this leapfrog in combat power still couldn't restore a shred of confidence.

But something was better than nothing. No matter what, he had to keep looking forward.

Cheng Shi silently reviewed everything that had happened, tallied up his gains before and after [Truth]'s self-destruction, and calculated how far he was from the Fixed Destiny.

It was obvious — the gods' "power" was being invisibly guided by "fate" to converge upon him.

[Birth]'s assistance, [Prosperity]'s proxy, [Death]'s support — [Life] had practically become his second faith "homeland."

[Corruption]'s container, [Decay]'s Authority, [Oblivion]'s hostility — [Descent] had only [Oblivion] left who hadn't walked alongside him.

[Order] granted identity, [Truth] left behind a creation, [War] bequeathed a container — [Civilization] was finished, yet had left ample traces of civilization on him.

[Chaos] was his faith, [Folly] was his target, [Silence] was his opposite — in all of [Chaos], [Chaos] itself was paradoxically the most lucid.

As for [Existence] and [Void]...

Three of the four were his Benefactors. The only god on a different path — [Memory] — was currently pinning hopes on finding a lost memory from within him.

The weight of divine gazes — who could imagine it without bearing it firsthand?

People always begged for the gods' attention. Little did they know that when too much of it accumulated...

It was just like that. Nothing special.

Better without it.

Cheng Shi pursed his lips and retrieved the Ritual of Truth from his spatial storage.

He genuinely couldn't tell anymore whether this thing had been sent by [Deceit] or [Fate].

After all, [Deceit] had also mentioned the Fixed Destiny — meaning the Fun God's plans had to be tied to [Fate]'s Fixed Destiny as well.

After everything he'd experienced, Cheng Shi could finally see [Fate]'s intent. This Benefactor, who blindly worshipped Origin, was clearly trying to shape him into the ultimate sacrifice — the one most pleasing to Origin!

And this "pleasing," given his current situation and past experiences, looked more like being molded into the life most resembling Origin.

[Fate] seemed to be using the aggregation of faiths to incrementally approach 'His' comprehensive will.

Of course, this kind of Fixed Destiny made absolutely no sense within the framework of a slice universe experiment. But who could be certain what experiment Origin was actually conducting?

What if...

What if Origin's true aim was to germinate a new "Origin" within the real universe's experiment? Then [Fate]'s so-called Fixed Destiny would truly become the Fixed Destiny of the real universe.

But this was all speculation. [Fate] had also lost His memories of the real universe.

After the world reset, only [Time], [Deceit], and [Birth] retained their memories. The other gods...

Hmm — wait!

Would Big Cat still remember?

Probably not. Otherwise she'd have called by now.

The instant that thought crossed his mind, the phone in the warehouse rang.

Cheng Shi startled. He picked up before he could even speak — and from the other end came a voice drained of all vitality.

That voice sounded as though it had seen through life, through the world, through everything. Faint as a thread, nothing like its former strength.

"I think I had a terrible dream..."

Cheng Shi — do you think it could have been real?"

"!!!"

It was Big Cat!

She hadn't forgotten!

No — the Fun God hadn't let her forget!

She remembered everything. And apparently, even Big Cat had learned to probe first...

'Sis — you haven't even told me what the dream was about. How are you so sure I'd know?'

The fear had truly gotten to her.

On something this serious, Cheng Shi didn't tease. He said:

"It was fake."

"?" Big Cat's tone faltered. "I didn't even tell you what the dream was about. How do you know it's fake?"

"Because it was a dream. So it's fake.

Hong Lin — you may have merged with [Fate], but you're a Hero of Today. A warrior who fights based on dice rolls, not some dream-interpreting Prophet. Don't let yourself get trapped in a dream.

Do what you need to do. If the sky falls..."

"Someone tall will hold it up!"

Hong Lin finished the sentence. Hearing this, how could she not know it hadn't been a dream at all?

But she still couldn't believe it. Even having watched Cheng Shi reset the entire world with her own eyes, she'd spent the last several hours drowning in absolute shock and bewilderment, unable to calm down.

If challenging [Folly] head-on had been her last act of courage, then seeing [War] vanish had taken almost all the rest of it with him.

An experiment!

The universe was nothing but a pathetic experiment.

No — this starry sky beneath their feet didn't even qualify as one "experiment." It was merely an infinitesimally tiny sample within the Creator's experiments. And there were thousands, millions, billions... countless more just like it.

Learning such a truth was shocking enough. But witnessing it firsthand — that overwhelming sense of void that struck the very soul — had nearly swallowed her whole.

If she hadn't been a warrior, the current Hong Lin would have already embraced [Void] and become utterly void.

So only after a long time did she work up the nerve to call Cheng Shi. And when she heard him console her in this way, the old Hong Lin gradually came back.

She gripped the phone, her eyes slowly hardening with resolve:

"Cheng Shi — I want to be that tall person.

I can't accept standing helplessly and watching the world be destroyed, unable to protect my friends!

I can't accept having my life toyed with by the gods, enduring it in silence!

And I can't accept doing nothing while you're out there fighting for this world!

If we're all samples, all variables — then who's more noble than whom!? What gives the gods the right to stand above us!?

Cheng Shi — help me. I need to get stronger..."

"Okay. Let's talk in person. I happen to have [Prosperity]'s Authority to bring you."

"Mm... hm?"

Hong Lin was stunned.

"Wait — what did you say? Authority?"

Cheng Shi laughed: "That's right. If you want to be the tall person, you need nutrients to grow. Authority is the nutrient. You happen to need it, and I happen to have it."

"..."

Silence fell on the other end of the line. After a long while, Hong Lin finally asked:

"Who are you, exactly?"

Cheng Shi smiled self-deprecatingly: "Formally speaking — a variable. An insignificant variable, just like you."

"I can't reset the entire world, though..."

'Hm?'

'Big Cat had the wrong idea?'

'She thinks I'm the one who saved the world?'

Cheng Shi blinked, then shook his head with a wry smile.

That was fine. A beautiful misunderstanding didn't need correcting. She needed hope — and perhaps only believing that the means of salvation were right beside her would make her believe this world could still be saved.

Even if he himself didn't believe it, someone had to...

Cheng Shi didn't address Big Cat's comment. Instead, he continued:

"But I prefer another way of putting it:

I'm Cheng Shi. Just Cheng Shi. His son — and your friend, Hong Lin."

Hong Lin clenched her fist and nodded firmly:

"Friends. Yeah — friends!

I need to get stronger!"

"Come to the Void you granted me. We'll—"

"I need to get stronger!"

"?" Cheng Shi paused. "I know. We'll—"

"I need to get stronger!"

"...Just say what's on your mind. Since when do you speak in riddles?"

Hong Lin hesitated on the other end, then said with a hint of disappointment:

"I kept thinking that if I said 'I need to get stronger,' you'd just conjure up some Authority...

Guess it was just my imagination."

"?"

'Sis — am I a wishing machine to you?'

'Even if the gods are experimental variables just like us, Authority isn't some parameter you can just pick off the street! Where am I supposed to find that much Authority for you?'

Cheng Shi pursed his lips but said nothing. He understood Big Cat's urgency.

The gap between a god and a "god" was simply too vast.

...

From returning to [Fate], to learning about the Fixed Destiny, to stepping into it and witnessing the universe's truth — throughout the entire process, Cheng Shi had been passive.

He'd been swept along by all manner of wills, pushed forward with never a chance to breathe.

But after the experience of conversing with another version of himself, and after witnessing that streak of blood-red mockery explode across the real universe, Cheng Shi's mindset finally began to shift.

Compliance was submission.

Only rebellion could earn true freedom.

He should have understood this long ago. After all, the Fun God had been doing exactly that — the leader of the Fear Faction had been "teaching by example" the whole time. Cheng Shi had simply been too caught up in nostalgia for the past, unable to face his own heart, and therefore unable to take that step.

Old Jia wanted him to be the top scholar. And yes — the peak of the Ladder of Ascent was within reach. If he kept progressing through trials at this steady pace, the day he'd contend with the Dragon King and Zhen Xin for first place would come. In fact, that day was just around the corner.

But then what?

After fulfilling that "dying wish," would he just keep clinging to survival in this experiment as a variable endlessly mourning a "pre-set variable"?

Whether he survived at all wasn't even up to him. A fish on the chopping block didn't get to choose. What a fish called "survival" was merely praying the fisherman wouldn't cut right away.

Under those conditions, being alive — being the top scholar — it was all illusory. All self-deception.

If he was going to live, he'd live authentically. If he was going to be the top scholar, he'd be the top scholar of the real universe!

He kept telling himself:

'Cheng Shi — you need to find a way to fight back against all of this. You need to prove to yourself and to the universe that you are all living, breathing people — not variables to be manipulated at will.'

'Old Jia is absolutely not some cold pre-set condition.'

'Break free from Origin's control. Escape [Fate]'s manipulation. Rebel upward like [Deceit] — until you find a path of salvation for this world, this starry sky, Old Jia, and your friends.'

And to do all that, the first step was to obtain a real divine identity and gain some say in this world.

Second: enter the game in person. Accelerate the Fixed Destiny!

Cheng Shi had resisted the Fixed Destiny from the start, believing it was dragging him toward an inescapable abyss.

But undeniably, every step the Fixed Destiny advanced made him stronger.

And since defying it at this stage was virtually impossible, he might as well do as the Destined Ones described — use it, turn it into a weapon in his own hands.

Cheng Shi had been leveraging [Fate]'s protection, but only superficially — lip-service devotion while privately desecrating, freely enjoying [Fate]'s talents.

Now he was ready to go deeper. He would actively embrace the Fixed Destiny in exchange for even greater support from [Fate]!

What allowed him to make this decision was the one change Cheng Dashi had brought to this world: [Prosperity]'s self-destruction!

The world's Fixed Destiny had undergone a shift. His other self had said it — [Prosperity]'s fall, Le Le'er's death, and the release of universal fear were all prerequisites for stepping beyond the Fixed Destiny. So if the path beneath his feet seemed right, why not pick up the pace?

If he could truly push Big Cat onto that Divine Throne — plus [Fate]'s favor — then even as a mortal, he could climb to the gods' negotiating table and hold two votes.

If he could also win over the [Death] boss, cleverly wheedle two votes from the Fun God, and devoutly proxy the vote for timeless [Time], he'd have six votes!

Six votes — in an era where gods were beginning to fall — was enough to trade for a great many bargaining chips.

With that plan in mind, Cheng Shi handed the Authority to Big Cat at their meeting and instructed her to present herself as [Prosperity] from now on, accelerating the drip of Divinity. When the time came, he would lobby among the gods and try to push the Convention into recognizing the new [Prosperity]'s identity — the first step in infiltrating the divine circle.

This time, he held nothing back. He told Hong Lin virtually everything he understood about the gods and his insights into the Fixed Destiny. He even explained that while the Destined Ones enjoyed [Fate]'s protection, he himself wasn't sure where the destination led.

Beyond that, he analyzed every facet of the current situation. He told Hong Lin that if she wanted to find a path free of Origin, she had to move closer to [Deceit] — ride [Deceit]'s coattails — but never fully trust Him.

However, [Deceit] did have an Envoy — Yu Xi — who was absolutely trustworthy.

Because He, too, was contemplating rebellion against everything.

Naturally, when Cheng Shi said all of this, he rang the Bone Bell. Under that great one's protection, he spoke without reservation, hoping to lay bare his heart and earn the boss's support through raw sincerity.

Hong Lin listened in silence the entire time, never uttering a word to interrupt. Only when Cheng Shi had laid out every thought, and mentioned he planned to gather the Destined Ones for a small meeting soon, did she finally let out a quiet "Mm" before saying hesitantly:

"I..."

"Hong Lin, we're not just friends now — we're comrades in arms.

This journey is guaranteed to be rough. If we — on the same ship — can't be honest with each other, I'm afraid this voyage... will never reach the other shore.

In front of me, no need for hesitation. You can say anything.

I will never be a puppeteer, and you are nobody's puppet."

Hong Lin suddenly smiled. She nodded:

"I get it.

What I wanted to say is — I know the Destined Ones are probably very important to you. They're a huge asset on our road ahead, and their members' strength is beyond question.

But I believe that on this path, some things may matter more than raw power.

Like trust. Like loyalty..."

Cheng Shi was who he was — the moment he heard this, he guessed Big Cat's meaning.

"You want to bring Tao Yi into the Destined Ones?"

"..." Big Cat's expression froze. She gave a stiff nod. "Yes. I'll admit I have some personal bias. But I guarantee — the little fox is absolutely trustworthy."

Cheng Shi's brow furrowed slightly — not because he doubted Tao Yi's ability. The girl had already proven herself in 0221's experiment ground. She was genuinely clever, and even if her raw combat power couldn't match the very top tier, serving as Big Cat's external brain would be valuable enough.

But the Destined Ones were, in a sense, followers of [Fate]. Would [Fate] extend His protection to her?

Big Cat showed a rare flash of shrewdness. Reading Cheng Shi's concerns, she suddenly adopted an odd expression:

"You might not know this — the little fox, wanting to better understand a certain follower of [Fate], prayed to merge with [Fate]."

"?"

Cheng Shi's face locked up. He asked stiffly: "It worked?"

"Yep. It worked."

And precisely because it worked, I think she and Nangong are both good fits for the Destined Ones..."

"Wait — who? Nangong?"

What does she have to do with this?" Cheng Shi blinked, recalling that Nangong had committed Oathbreaking against [Decay] and embraced [Fate] to become a Fate Weaver.

"I think they're both excellent candidates. One is loyal, the other is kind — neither will hold us back."

"..."

Cheng Shi considered it. It wasn't a bad idea, actually.

Nangong may have converted to [Fate], but she'd once belonged to [Decay]. Having an extra set of eyes from another faith for intelligence-gathering had its uses.

But... wasn't this girl a bit too gullible?

Would the intel she gathered even be real?

While he was mulling this over, Hong Lin asked again:

"How big a venue should I prepare? Is a thousand-seat hall enough? Any requirements for zones — seating by faith? Round-table conference or lecture-stage format?"

And the most important question — Cheng Shi, do you have absolute authority within the Destined Ones?"

"..."

Cheng Shi couldn't laugh anymore. His head swam at these questions.

'Imagine — when the meeting starts, and Big Cat discovers that including the two she's bringing, there are only six people total... will she smash me into the floor?'

'...She wouldn't. Right?'

...

After briefing Big Cat, Cheng Shi returned to the rest area and called the Blind One.

He wasn't just notifying her about the Destined Ones meeting — there was another matter:

[War]'s fall.

[War] had been erased by Origin's own hand, and His Authority may have scattered into the real universe. This meant the Torchbearer founder — a follower of [War] — had permanently lost his Benefactor's protection.

Of course, under the Convention's safeguard, he wouldn't lose all his power outright. But Cheng Shi worried that as [War]'s will reverted to "frenzy," Qin Xin might be unconsciously influenced into taking rash actions with unpredictable consequences.

The Torchbearers had to be important.

This wasn't just what their vision and beliefs told him — it was what [Deceit]'s attitude toward them confirmed.

When Cheng Shi first learned of the Torchbearers' existence, he'd assumed they were just "toys" the Fun God sheltered to annoy the other gods. But as he came to know the Fun God and the universe's truth more deeply, he realized the Torchbearers had to be a piece in the Fun God's grand design.

After all, they were so alike — both fighters rebelling upward.

The only difference was that the Torchbearers harbored noble ideals, while the Fun God... harbored none.

Compared to that distant Origin, the Fun God was more like a shadow puppeteer — mysterious, perpetually scheming.

Cheng Shi naturally wouldn't tell An Mingyu directly that [War] had fallen. He simply hinted that he'd sensed a new round of strife among the gods — that [Civilization] might have some problems — and asked her to remind Fang Shiqing and Qin Xin to be careful.

An Mingyu accepted without suspicion. After chatting for a moment, she suddenly asked in a hesitant tone:

"I've been feeling uneasy lately — as if I sensed a fluctuation in [Fate]. My divination scores have been low for several readings in a row. Could it be that our Benefactor...

has also lost ground in this latest struggle?"

"..."

The question silenced Cheng Shi completely.

[Fate] had indeed encountered something unexpected — but the issue wasn't in this starry sky. It was in another one.

Don't forget — the current An Mingyu had been swapped in during that [Time] trial. The original An Mingyu of this world had voluntarily departed for an unfamiliar starry sky to save the Zhen Xin of another world.

And now...

Cheng Shi couldn't even be sure whether that other starry sky would have a [Time] salvation... and even if it did, could a world reset bring those people back?

At the very least, the version of himself who had died before Origin's throne... could never return.

For a moment, Cheng Shi fell silent, unsure how to answer.

And it was precisely this silence that made An Mingyu's heart lurch.

She was too clever — not just now, but always.

The moment she'd felt her unease, she'd begun divining. Though she hadn't said what she was reading, the low scores had already revealed an unhappy ending to the Prophet.

Coupled with Cheng Shi's hesitation, she immediately realized that the thing she least wanted to foresee had perhaps already come to pass.

"She... what happened?"

'Was this what they called consciousness synchronization?'

Cheng Shi found this too cruel. So he forced a lighthearted laugh and said:

"Our Benefactor... He is fine."

He deflected with wordplay.

"[Fate] isn't just about the Fixed Destiny. There are always changes along the way. But as the sovereign of this era, He can handle anything.

Don't worry — He just got into a scuffle with His sibling god. And those low scores and your unease are probably just the Fun God's mischief.

[Fate] is fine. [Void] is fine. What's not fine is [Civilization]...

I have a feeling [Civilization]'s defeat bodes ill. That's why I called.

And... don't overthink things. Whether as a Destined One or a Torchbearer, your path ahead is bright.

Chosen An — keep going."

An Mingyu gave a soft "Mm" and hung up.

She forced herself to stop thinking about it, then quietly turned and walked back into the museum.

Zhen Xin was leafing through reports and glanced up when she saw her best friend return: "Cheng Shi?"

An Mingyu smiled: "Yes. The gods had another power struggle. [Civilization] seems to have run into trouble. He asked me to remind the Torchbearers to be careful."

"Did [War] lose, or [Truth]?"

I just heard that certain [Truth] trials have turned their spears on the players. Sounds like [Truth] is making a major move.

[Civilization] united on this front and challenged the Convention?"

"Not sure. He wasn't very specific."

An Mingyu gathered the scattered documents from the floor and sat down quietly at the desk to read.

Watching her unusually silent friend, Zhen Xin's brow furrowed slightly.

...

Meanwhile — the Void, the Fire Passing Hall.

With the Flame of Hope in poor condition, Qin Xin had intended to keep a low profile for a while.

But when Fire Seeker Ji Yue walked into the hall accompanied by a familiar face, Qin Xin knew that staying low was an impossibility.

"You, of all people?"

When Ji Yue told me you'd be someone I'd never expect, I didn't believe her. Now I do.

So — Vice President Sun, has the Order Alliance taken an interest in us Torchbearers?"

The moment Qin Xin finished, Ji Yue grinned:

"The vice-president title is correct, but the Order Alliance is too narrow. Qin Xin, you may not realize it, but this Vice President Sun isn't just the Order Alliance's second-in-command.

He's also the vice president of the Reason Association, the God Worship Society... and countless other organizations I can't even name."

Ji Yue, all smiles, led the slightly awkward-looking Sun Miao over and clapped him on the shoulder, introducing him to Qin Xin:

"This is the first piece of kindling I've found for the Torchbearers.

The Eye of Deconstruction lives up to the name — his philosophy aligns very well with ours."

Qin Xin's gaze was sharp as a hawk's. He scanned Sun Miao up and down, then smiled again: "Is that so? What if it's all an act?"

At this, Ji Yue shot Sun Miao an amused look. Sun Miao finally spoke his first words in the Fire Passing Hall:

"It is an act. But what if I keep acting, all the way to the end?"

"..."

For some reason, when Qin Xin heard this, the person who came to mind wasn't anyone from [Folly] — it was a certain follower of [Fate] whose brain worked in equally peculiar ways.

Qin Xin shook his head with a wry smile and turned to Ji Yue: "Is that why you invited him? A pretender willing to be a good person?"

"No, no, no," Ji Yue laughed heartily. "I said — many of his ideas mirror the Torchbearers'. At the very least, they mirror the City Builders'. They fit my temperament well. So I figured it was time to inject some fresh thinking into the Torchbearers."

Qin Xin mused for a moment, then asked directly: "Fresh in what way?"

Ji Yue glanced at Sun Miao. Sun Miao's lips curled with an air of mystery:

"The God Creation Plan!"

"You told him even that?" Qin Xin's eyes narrowed.

"Relax. Hear him out."

With Ji Yue vouching for him, Sun Miao continued:

"Your approach is wrong. [Prosperity] did fall, but His Divine Throne has already been claimed by someone.

Don't ask me who — I don't know. But the veteran mages of the Reason Association have been buzzing lately, analyzing this person who seized the throne. The evidence is quite solid. I can put the report directly on your desk — the Reason Association's report.

That's why I say your direction is off. If you truly want to create a god, truly want to claim a Divine Throne, [Prosperity] is no longer the best option."

Hearing this, Qin Xin essentially understood what Ji Yue was after.

Intelligence — and ideological support!

As the number-two figure of countless organizations, Sun Miao held an astonishing amount of intelligence in his hands — arguably more, in some respects, than even Zhen Xin and An Mingyu combined.

But bringing an information broker into the Torchbearers was also a risk. The City Builders were the radical faction, and Ji Yue was the most radical of them all — so she didn't care. But Qin Xin had to carefully define this person's role.

He studied Sun Miao and smiled once more: "No need for riddles. In your view, what's the best option for the Torchbearers?"

"[Decay]!

[Decay] hasn't summoned His followers in ages, nor issued any divine proclamations. His faith camp, eroded steadily by [Prosperity]'s followers, is in precarious shape at best.

Moreover, substantial evidence suggests [Decay] may be looking to relinquish His influence over the universe entirely.

A god so intent on 'decaying' Himself probably has no attachment to His Divine Throne. And the seat under His backside is exactly what you need."

Qin Xin considered this for a moment, then extended his hand to Sun Miao.

"Not 'you.' Us.

Welcome to the Torchbearers."

...

When Cheng Shi had first lifted the veil on the Torchbearers for Sun Miao, he'd definitely had an ulterior motive.

He wanted Sun Miao to watch the Torchbearers for him — gaining a channel of information beyond Zhen Xin and the Blind One to silently monitor the group's movements.

At the time, he'd assumed someone of Sun Miao's identity could never be formally inducted into the Torchbearers.

But he'd miscalculated one thing: circumstances change. Back then, the Torchbearers he'd known didn't include a blazingly fierce [War] Fire Seeker.

He'd also failed to predict that his planted chess piece would report back so quickly.

He received a signed letter — the History School's official communication method. Via prayer, a letter was delivered to the intended recipient, and anything written on it would appear in real time.

Compared to phones or video, this method was decidedly old-fashioned — befitting the History School's focus on documented legacy.

When Cheng Shi saw the sender was Sun Miao, he first wondered whether An Mingyu's feedback had tipped off Zhen Xin, prompting her to send a familiar face to probe.

But when Sun Miao drew two hands exchanging a torch on the letter, Cheng Shi froze.

The Fire Passing!

This Vice President Sun wanted to discuss the Torchbearers with him!

It was impossible to discuss something this sensitive on paper, so he arranged a meeting in the Void.

It was hard to describe how strange Sun Miao's expression was when they met again. Cheng Shi couldn't determine the man's true attitude toward him either. Though [Folly]'s arrogance hung on his face as usual, something complex lurked beneath — as if he'd glimpsed some profound truth.

After brief consideration, Cheng Shi concluded the oddity was related to Yu Xi. Otherwise, a [Folly] follower who ranked among the very top of peak players would never behave this way.

Sure enough, Sun Miao's first words weren't about the Torchbearers — they were about Yu Xi.

He said:

"The History School voted unanimously to investigate Yu Xi. We deployed virtually every resource at our disposal to study this [Void] Envoy, and we've arrived at some very interesting conclusions. Would you...

like to hear them?"

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow and smiled:

"If you're planning to use this as a bargaining chip in your intel exchange, I'll pass.

If it's free, then sure — why not."

"..."

'As expected of him.'

Sun Miao's face darkened, but he carried on regardless:

"We did find traces of [Void]'s influence on reality throughout history. However, those fragments only demonstrate that [Void]'s power appeared at various points — they can't be directly linked to Yu Xi.

When that path hit a dead end, we changed approaches and began tracing the origins of intelligence about Yu Xi's emergence. This time, we finally had results.

Guess what we found?"

Watching Sun Miao's increasingly complex expression, Cheng Shi's heart lurched. He suddenly felt he may have underestimated the true power of the History School as an intelligence juggernaut.

But he couldn't be sure the man wasn't bluffing, so he merely smiled: "Spill it or don't."

"We found that the sources of this intelligence are, in one way or another, all connected to you.

In other words, in every traceable origin story involving Yu Xi's information, your figure appears.

Don't ask me how — the History School paid dearly for this in classified intel. Information exchange is always an equal trade.

So, Cheng Shi — do you know what this means?

According to the History School's Historical Definition Method, an overreliance on a single source turns history into mere story. We don't have enough evidence to prove Yu Xi truly exists. In fact, His existence may very well be nothing more than a lie you fabricated!

Care to explain?"

At this, Cheng Shi's heart clenched. He hadn't expected the History School to actually have substance — to trace an information chain all the way back to him among such cautious, brilliant peak players.

How much resources and manpower had they burned just to investigate Yu Xi?

And how many people knew these conclusions?

Did Zhen Xin know?

Was Sun Miao here on his own initiative, or had Zhen Xin sent him to probe?

Cheng Shi's mind kicked into overdrive, analyzing every angle of his current predicament.

He traced through every breadcrumb and hint he'd ever left, and concluded the situation was still savable. At the very least, Crown's mask genuinely existed. Worst case, he could do what Li Jingming had once proposed — push the final truth onto that mask.

Besides, as long as he didn't crack, as long as he maintained that he'd seen Yu Xi in person, the History School couldn't produce evidence to disprove a divine audience.

After all, whom a god chose to summon wasn't the History School's call.

So as long as he kept up the clever argument, there might still be a way out.

Outwardly, Cheng Shi beamed. Inwardly, he was already composing his defense.

But the very next second, Sun Miao's follow-up dropped his heart right back down.

"Nothing to say, huh?"

Are you about to admit it was all a self-directed performance — a lie to fool the world!?

Ha — you think I'd believe that?

If there truly were an Envoy of [Deceit] in this world, He would never use such a clumsy lie to hide His identity. He would deceive the vast majority of fools, guiding the stupid masses into believing that no such thing as Yu Xi ever existed.

But He underestimated this world — and its mortals!

Someone will always see through the illusion, pierce the lie, and find the truth hidden behind it.

And that truth is this: Cheng Shi is nothing but a mortal disguise for your little game. You are the very [Deceit] Envoy, the [Void] Servant God we've been searching for!

Am I wrong... Lord Yu Xi?"

"..."

Cheng Shi's mind went blank.

He realized that [Folly] followers' brains did work fast — but in a direction he hadn't predicted. He'd been agonizing over how to subtly lead a smart Wise Man into believing Yu Xi existed, only for the other party to skip the guide entirely and slap Yu Xi's identity directly onto him!

'If that's how you want to play it, bro — don't blame me for rolling with it.'

Indeed — as the Envoy of [Deceit], why would His lies be so transparent?

When everyone else was on the first level, He should be on the second!

And Vice President Sun here? Straight to the third level!

[Folly] follower — massive points scored.

Since the man had already said it, for Cheng Shi not to play along would feel downright rude.

So he instantly activated Chaos Acting, transforming into the tall, lean figure of Yu Xi. For good measure, he pulled out his [Deceit] container, caressing it as he spoke with an eerie smile:

"Interesting. Few can discern my identity. Several of those who have are followers of [Folly].

Like Wei Mu, you have a fine brain. But unfortunately, guessing right earns no reward.

Forget all of this. Even if you've uncovered my true identity, I will not offer you any aid or guidance.

[Void] is meaningless. All of this is nothing but a game."

Light flickered rapidly in Sun Miao's eyes. He remained unmoved, his tone unwavering:

"If it were truly meaningless, why would You have directed me toward the Torchbearers?"

Whether City Defenders, City Builders, or City Breakers — they all hold to beauty and rebel against the gods. If Your will weren't behind them, there's no way they'd remain hidden from divine sight.

So You shielded them — correct?

And the so-called Flame of Hope is just another one of Your aliases — isn't it?

And the reason You do all this... forgive my presumption in seeing the whole through a glimpse... is probably because You share the same desire as the Torchbearers — to rebel upward?

You're rebelling against [Deceit]? Or perhaps... against all the gods?"

"..."

Cheng Shi's brain short-circuited.

'Bro — how did you manage to get everything wrong in your reasoning and yet arrive at entirely correct conclusions?'

'So this is [Folly]?'

...

Seeing Lord Yu Xi's expression freeze, Sun Miao knew he'd guessed right.

Indeed — with enough intelligence, one could find the world's truth and the gods' will through the tiniest of clues!

Yu Xi was rebelling!

What was He rebelling against? Why? Could it be that He coveted those sixteen Divine Thrones — that even a Servant God's heart wasn't purely devoted?

Sun Miao's mind raced with possibilities.

Cheng Shi's mind raced just as fast. He had to admit Sun Miao's timing was impeccable — this was precisely when Cheng Shi needed allies, and Sun Miao's identity as vice president of countless organizations genuinely had value.

The only awkward part was his faith.

[Birth] was permanently neutral, never involved in any of this. And [Folly] was seemingly just a spectator, doing nothing but heckling the actors on stage.

Neither wanted to get involved, yet both had watched over every event in the universe from the beginning.

Could such a strange faith fusion become his asset?

Obviously it could. Even if only for the intelligence Sun Miao possessed, he deserved a seat in Cheng Shi's camp.

So after a moment's thought, rather than answering the question, Cheng Shi smiled and asked:

"What do you think is the purpose of this game?"

The purpose of the game?

Sun Miao's brow furrowed slightly. He immediately understood this was Yu Xi's test — and if his answer aligned closely enough with the deity's will, he might take a giant leap forward.

Who wouldn't want to know the game's purpose?

Choosing [Folly] meant Sun Miao desired to approach the gods' truth far more than most. And juggling countless vice-presidencies and stockpiling intelligence was just one means to that end.

He'd pondered this question long ago. The gods were virtually omnipotent — why insist on hosting a game to spread faith? Combined with the so-called "Road to Ascension" and "Ladder of Ascent," Sun Miao deliberated briefly and answered earnestly:

"To create — no, to forge a god. To forge a god!"

"?" Cheng Shi was genuinely intrigued. "Go on."

"The Ladder of Ascent represents each god's affirmation of their followers' devotion. That's one method of faith propagation.

But the Road to Ascension is different. The gods bestow trials on mortals of all faiths and score them based on performance. In the peak circle, there's a consensus: the scores on the Road to Ascension correlate with how well a player's actions in a trial align with the trial god's will.

In other words, if someone's comprehension of faith is broad enough — if they can unify all faiths — they could walk farther on the Road to Ascension than anyone. Like the person You mentioned... Wei Mu!

And personally, I believe the Road to Ascension is called 'Ascension to Godhood' for a literal reason.

Wei Mu is the person closest to a Divine Throne!

Of course, the sixteen thrones above are already full, and as a mortal, I don't know which one he's heading toward.

So my conclusion is: this game exists to create a god. It's a game the gods designed to forge the seventeenth deity!

And this seventeenth god — embodying all their wills — would be unlike any existing one.

However, from a mortal's limited perspective, I cannot fathom their true purpose in creating such a being.

Is my understanding correct, Lord Yu Xi?"

"..."

Cheng Shi's expression turned strange. He wanted to tell Sun Miao: 'You're wrong — the seventeenth throne belongs to my Big Bro Meng. Wei Mu's seat would be number eighteen at best.'

But he didn't crack that joke here.

Honestly, Sun Miao's reasoning was flawless from a mortal standpoint. That he could strip away the game's illusion to ponder the purpose of faith fusion — his depth of thought earned the title of [Folly].

But because he lacked knowledge of the gods and awareness of the universe's truth, his theory was still somewhat narrow.

The game's true purpose wasn't to create a god — it was to forge a "sacrifice" to please that true 'God'!

Because only 'He' could embody so many wills simultaneously. The faith fusion the gods were driving was nothing more than a clumsy imitation — a laughable mimicry of 'His' omniscience.

After his showdown with [Fate], Cheng Shi had already recognized this. But now, having witnessed the real universe firsthand, his perspective had shifted.

An even more terrifying thought was taking shape in his mind.

Granted, the current era's method of offering was a "game rule" set by [Void]'s two rulers. But was this Faith Game truly [Void]'s invention?

If even the gods were variables in the experiment — if any variable could be altered or erased at will — then who could guarantee that the gods' wills were actually their own?

Just like the slices in [Truth]'s experiment: when different slices were implanted with different memories, would you — before discovering this — ever believe you were merely a slice of someone else?

Absolutely not!

You'd believe you were a living, independent person with your own intelligence and a correct understanding of the world!

Never realizing that your so-called understanding was merely what the experimenter wanted you to understand.

Following this train of thought, Cheng Shi was chilled to the bone.

He couldn't help wondering: was [Fate]'s pursuit of the Fixed Destiny truly His own desire? Was [Deceit]'s rebellion nothing more than a pre-programmed "procedure" in the experiment?

And this world, surviving amid the real universe's chaos — had the Creator truly accepted [Time]'s reset and decided not to flag it as an anomalous sample?

Was it possible that everything he'd experienced and witnessed was actually part of experimental conditions 'He' had set?

The more terrifying Fixed Destiny the Fun God spoke of... could it be that He, too, had already figured this out?

Cheng Shi fell silent once more.

Sun Miao was perceptive. He'd sensed trace ripples of fear — and that sensation stunned him as well.

Lord Yu Xi truly was rebelling!

No — perhaps even the gods themselves were rebelling!

This game might not be as simple as it appeared. The so-called "players" might include more than just mortals.

What if the gods, too, were struggling within it? Could that be why they wanted to create a seventeenth god to shatter their chains?!

Yes!

Otherwise, why would they "turn a blind eye" to the Torchbearers? And why would Lord Yu Xi shelter them? The Torchbearers' God Creation Plan — wasn't it identical to what the gods themselves were doing?

This...

Could something exist that imprisoned even the gods, trapping them in this impassable universe?

Sun Miao's imagination was boundless — so vast he nearly stumbled into the truth by wild guessing.

Cheng Shi snapped back, banished the fear, and spoke from behind his mask with an eerie grin:

"Creating a god... a plan to create a god. Yes — your understanding is quite good."

The God Creation Plan!

He was right — what the Torchbearers called the God Creation Plan was merely a microcosm of this entire game!

Thrilled to have uncovered the universe's "truth," Sun Miao immediately volunteered every conjecture he had about the God Creation Plan in hopes of extracting more from Yu Xi. He laid out the suggestions he'd given the Torchbearers, then timidly looked up:

"I wonder... might any of these suggestions be useful?"

"..."

Sun Miao was genuinely clever. But mortal thinking was ultimately too simplistic.

This starry sky held sixteen Divine Thrones. Lose one, and everyone could find an opportunity.

But beyond this starry sky?

The Creator's throne had only one seat!

So for the gods, this method was certainly not viable.

However — having the Torchbearers compete for [Decay]'s Divine Throne?

...

This idea actually aligned perfectly with his own.

So the Torchbearers had a God Creation Plan all along...

Cheng Shi had been searching for a new source of strength for the Torchbearers for some time, and plundering [Decay] was exactly his plan.

When he'd handed the [Prosperity] container to Big Cat, he'd told her that the [Decay] container had another purpose. In truth, he'd already been planning to give the [Decay] container — the one he'd obtained from Yu Go of another timeline — to the Torchbearers.

At the time, he hadn't thought too deeply about it. He figured that since the Fun God wanted him to hand it off, the Torchbearers — who lacked any high-end power — were an obvious choice.

First, the Torchbearers were under the Fun God's protection, so giving the container to Qin Xin would be no more than an internal asset transfer between departments. Second, [Decay] was singularly focused on decaying — having His container wouldn't pose a terrible influence on the group.

The only reason he hadn't done it yet was that he didn't want to put it on the table openly. He'd been waiting for the right moment.

And now, the moment had arrived!

The God Creation Plan?

Perfect — let the Torchbearers create a [Decay] god!

If they could truly use this container to find their opportunity and climb onto that Divine Throne, his vote count could potentially jump from six to seven!

After all, even with "full attendance" at the Assembly of Gods, there were only 15 votes. Seven votes was just 0.5 away from a majority!

Feasible!

So after brief consideration, Cheng Shi pulled the [Decay] container — which resembled rotting wood — from his coat.

The moment Sun Miao saw the container, he immediately recalled something.

"A creation like the 'Fear Tree Core'?"

Cheng Shi smiled enigmatically:

"That wasn't a Fear Tree Core — it was a [Corruption] container.

And this is a [Decay] container."

"Container... what's it for?" Sun Miao's expression shifted. Given that Yu Xi was producing this at a time like this, he had an inkling.

Cheng Shi's answer confirmed his guess and transformed his suspicion into complete shock.

"For creating gods, obviously."

"!!!!!"

"What makes a god a god — aside from possessing Authority — is Divinity. I'm sure I don't need to elaborate on that.

But what you mortals don't know is that to become a god, Divinity comes first, and Authority follows.

Only by gaining faith's recognition can one be formally established as a true god.

The specifics are complex and beyond your need to know. You only need to understand that the container is the sole tool for distilling Divinity."

In the past, "beyond your need to know" had always been what the gods said to Cheng Shi. Using it on Sun Miao today felt entirely different.

Rather satisfying, actually.

Sun Miao was thrilled too. All his intelligence-gathering had been aimed at uncovering the gods' truth — but all that effort couldn't compare to having answers handed over directly!

Just by expressing a desire to draw closer to Lord Yu Xi, the other party had revealed such an enormous secret!

So Divinity wasn't pieced together from fragments — it was distilled through containers!

And were those two containers in the Lord's hands equivalent to two Divine Thrones?!

Sun Miao's eyes blazed with fervor.

True — not everyone wanted to become a god. But if a chance at godhood was placed right in front of you, would you take it?

The Sea of Desire was powerful precisely because desire was infinite.

At this moment, Sun Miao knew he'd been stirred by [Corruption].

Cheng Shi registered every shift in the man's expression, snorted softly, and tossed him the [Decay] container:

"This is [Decay]'s container. Bring it to the Torchbearers.

But don't say it came from me. Make up any excuse you like — as long as they believe it.

As for whether this path leads anywhere, or where it leads... no one knows.

To walk it or not — the choice is theirs.

But I should warn you: distilling Divinity through a container requires faith's recognition. The [Decay] camp is currently 'in shambles,' so collecting Divinity won't be easy. You'll have to manage on your own."

"..."

Sun Miao caressed the container that could elevate one to godhood, his heart pounding so hard his expression nearly slipped.

Gone was [Folly]'s composure. His lips trembled as he murmured:

"You... aren't afraid I'll take this container and run?"

Cheng Shi, in perfect imitation of [Folly]'s mannerisms, raised his chin slightly and scoffed:

"Would you?"

"Never!" Sun Miao's gaze hardened instantly.

Only a fool would trade the chance to follow Lord Yu Xi for short-term gain.

The Wise Man understood better than anyone: power could only be redistributed through "revolution." So following a rebel was his greatest opportunity in this game!

Setting aside the question of how to gather faith and distill Divinity once he had the container, the state of the [Decay] camp alone was a headache. After all, guessing that [Decay] didn't care about His throne versus [Decay] actually not caring were vastly different — not a simple zero-or-one distinction, but zero versus a hundred!

If he misjudged [Decay]'s will, this container would be a death sentence, not a stairway to heaven.

But since Lord Yu Xi had offered the container, it meant his guess was right — [Decay] likely did intend to abdicate. Even so, how could a rootless mortal ascend to a Divine Throne while the other gods circled like vultures?

Don't forget — gods stealing Authority from one another was hardly a secret.

So chasing short-term gain was nothing but harm. Only by following Lord Yu Xi's rebellion upward could he hope to claim his rightful share.

As for whether this [Deceit] Envoy was simply messing with him through an elaborate ruse...

Being worth a Servant God's deception was, in itself, proof of his value.

Sun Miao deliberated in silence. Under [Folly]'s protection, if this truly turned out to be a con, he was confident he could see through it midway and withdraw. So in this moment, he chose to gamble.

He was betting that following Yu Xi would get him a seat at the table.

So he bowed respectfully:

"I will deliver the container to Qin Xin. Rest assured — every plan will proceed smoothly under my direction.

Does Lord Yu Xi have any further instructions?"

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow, inwardly amused. The man could suppress his curiosity in the face of such a mysterious [Deceit] Envoy, asking no questions and simply awaiting orders — he knew who held the cards.

No wonder Sun Miao could be vice president of so many organizations. His ability to read the room and serve his superiors was genuinely commendable.

Having nothing more to assign, Cheng Shi dismissed Sun Miao and returned to the rest area.

Back on the rooftop, inspired by this meeting, a new idea struck him. If vacant Divine Thrones meant opportunity for mortals, then right now, the most promising target was actually [Civilization] — not [Decay].

Except [Order] had been usurped by [Chaos], and [Truth] was being impersonated by [Deceit]. The only genuine opportunity seemed to be [War].

He did hold [War]'s container. But the problem was — His Authority was gone.

The Fun God said the Authority had most likely been lost in the real universe...

Wait!!

Cheng Shi suddenly clenched his fist as a bold idea flashed through his mind.

If the Fun God could venture into the real universe to retrieve scattered Authority — why couldn't he?

A mortal poking around the real universe would create far less of a ripple than a true god, right?

Didn't that mean when it came to picking up Authority, he actually had an advantage over the Fun God?!

Hiss—

'Fortune favors the bold. Starve the timid. Hesitation means defeat. Decisiveness leads to riches!'

The only problem was he didn't know how to retrieve Authority. But if he brought along Big Cat — a "god candidate" sensitive to Authority — and a follower of [War] who'd be attuned to [War]'s presence, then this whole thing...

...maybe wasn't impossible after all?

...

Risk was poison to the Steady faction.

Setting aside whether now was even the right time to scavenge the real universe, the sheer question of how to break through the spacetime barrier was already a massive problem.

The Time Deduction method could only send him temporarily to the Existence Rift. That brief window certainly wasn't enough for a "prison break." So competing with the Fun God for spoils needed a fully formed plan.

And at the heart of that plan lay [Time]!

The Joker Society wished to absorb experiences from other worlds. Scarred Cheng Shi had told him to study [Time]. Spacetime barriers, saving the world — everything revolved around [Time].

But [Time] literally had no time to summon him. Even during the faith fusion, the Fun God had impersonated Him. [Time] had only appeared for the split second of granting the faith before vanishing again.

What was He so busy with?

From Cheng Shi's current understanding as a Fear Faction member, the answer was clear: He was busy "countering" Origin. But if He was that occupied, and Cheng Shi couldn't even secure an audience, how could he possibly learn anything about Him?

Should he pray to his Benefactor to send him over?

[Deceit] would never agree.

He likely already knew about Cheng Shi's little schemes and wouldn't let him disturb [Time]. Given the world reset, [Time] was clearly the backbone of the Fear Faction — a force the Fun God could rely on. Their plans left no room for Cheng Shi's interference.

[Fate]... was even more impossible.

He'd just decided to embrace the Fixed Destiny and accelerate things. If he went to [Fate] now requesting a visit to His rival, who knew if he'd get frozen in the Void.

Even if [Fate]'s magnanimity overlooked blasphemy, such behavior would signal that his heart definitely wasn't approaching the Fixed Destiny.

So the same old conclusion held: even with four Benefactors, not a single one was dependable.

When it came to reliability, that other great one was still the best.

It had been a while since he'd seen that great one. Would He help with this?

With that in mind, Cheng Shi glanced at the neighboring rooftop. He planned to ask Xie Yang for a corpse so he could visit the Fishbone Hall and pay his respects to the boss. But as luck would have it, Xie Yang wasn't around — and just then, another call came in.

Cheng Shi picked up and found the Doctor on the other end. His opening line was:

"Cheng Shi — any progress on the Zangier matter?"

Zangier?

That's right!

Cheng Shi's eyes lit up. He immediately recalled Aph Ros, who was holding Zangier prisoner.

If the goal was understanding [Time], Aph Ros was an excellent window. After all, He was [Time]'s Prisoner — and among all the Servant Gods, the only one with a direct connection to [Time].

Shi Zhen didn't count — just an impostor riding on someone else's name.

So why not ask Aph Ros? While he was at it, he could also investigate what Herobos had mentioned about the history of That Dream My Nightmare.

But one problem remained: how to explain to Aph Ros why an Envoy like himself had needed to borrow His name when dealing with Herobos...

That was the real headache.

Cheng Shi shut his eyes to think. The Doctor didn't rush him. After a long while, he remembered the call was still connected and shook his head with a laugh:

"There's been progress. The Sage told me where Zangier is — he's still alive.

Let's set up a meeting point. I'll take you there.

Though there may be other friends joining us on this trip. I trust the Doctor won't mind?"

Other friends?

A gentle laugh came from the other end: "Of course not. I'm merely going to glean the wisdom of the ancients. If you have other business, please feel free."

"What a coincidence — the other friend is also there to glean ancient wisdom. I suspect you'll have plenty to talk about.

It's settled, then. Let me send you the meeting coordinates."

Cheng Shi gave the Doctor the Void coordinates he'd arranged with Big Cat, then made another call — this time to the Dragon King.

He needed to get someone's contact information from Li Jingming. And that someone was unlikely to be in Big Cat's circle.

The moment the call connected, a familiar voice came through.

"It's me."

Though this was a standard Dragon King greeting, Cheng Shi sensed the tone was subtly different from the usual Dragon King.

His brow furrowed slightly. Playing it safe, he held his tongue, waiting a long time before finally letting out a deliberate "Hee~" as if he couldn't contain himself.

The instant the "Hee" landed, the other side snorted in amusement: "Cheng Shi. If you have business, state it."

"?"

'You guessed even that?'

'Does your phone have caller ID or something?'

Cheng Shi inspected the phone handset in his hand, found nothing resembling a display, then pursed his lips:

"Dragon King, something's off about you. Even if you know I once impersonated that bad-luck magnet, there's no way you could be this certain the caller was me.

Did it never occur to you that I might actually be Zhen Yi?

Oh — I get it.

You are Zhen Yi!

That's why you knew it wasn't her. Am I right?

Zhen Yi — confess! What have you done with the Dragon King?!"

"..." Silence from the other end. Then a disdainful laugh: "Sometimes, certain memories truly aren't worth recording."

If you're just here to tease me, then we're done. The Jokers have assigned me plenty of work — I don't have time for idle chatter."

Hearing this, Cheng Shi's brow visibly darkened.

This person was absolutely not Li Jingming. The Dragon King would never treat memories so casually.

But they had mentioned the Joker Society...

Someone holding the Dragon King's phone, possessing the Dragon King's memories, and even familiar with Cheng Shi's personality — someone pretending to be the Dragon King...

Who could it be?

Long Jing? Zhen Yi?

Both possible — but neither quite fit.

Cheng Shi's frown deepened, though his tone stayed light:

"Don't hang up!

Quick question — do you know the president of the Reason Association?

I'm thinking of joining. Could you give me his contact info?"

"That's it?"

"Yep. That's it."

The other end fell silent, then suddenly laughed:

"Wei Zhi. Combat Expert."

The Reason Association was established in the name of the Tower of Logic, but apart from having the same brand of insanity as [Truth]'s followers, it bears no resemblance in any other way.

The organization has essentially become another version of the God Worship Society. If you're trying to keep tabs on Wang Weijin, Wei Zhi isn't a wise choice."

Cheng Shi's gaze sharpened. He smiled thinly and countered: "Why would I need to keep tabs on the Doctor?"

"If you weren't watching Wang Weijin, I can't fathom why you'd bypass the Joker Society's own [Truth]-related resources and seek out Wei Zhi instead.

This man's madness is far more extreme than you imagine. Apart from Wei Zhi himself, there's nothing in the Reason Association worth your attention."

Cheng Shi's expression shifted repeatedly. He was now certain this was not Li Jingming.

Moreover, the person was exceptionally clever.

Deducing his true intent from a single thread proved them at least as sharp as the real Li Jingming. Yet despite such acuity, they hadn't put the slightest effort into disguising themselves as the Dragon King — even leaving obvious flaws for others to find. They clearly didn't care if their identity was exposed.

A pretender who didn't care about being exposed at all — who could that be?

A thought struck Cheng Shi. His pupils contracted as he probed:

"Interesting — nobody knows me like the Dragon King.

Indeed, I am investigating the Doctor. After the last Joker Society meeting, I noticed he'd changed — become different from before.

To ensure internal security, I need to confirm his identity quickly.

Wei Zhi is his rival — his competitor on the [Truth] path. Only an enemy truly knows their opponent. So I asked for Wei Zhi's contact to verify the Doctor's identity.

But if you're willing to help, I may not need to approach Wei Zhi.

I recall from the Joker Society meeting — we all looked into a mirror. If you, Dragon King, would lend me that mirror so I could use it on the Doctor again, who knows what it might reveal?"

"..." The other end suddenly laughed. "That's That Dream My Nightmare — not some demon-revealing mirror."

"But a nightmare... isn't that essentially a demon?"

If an actual demon slipped out, being able to expose its true form would be rather useful."

Cheng Shi's words were practically laying his cards on the table. But to his utter shock, after a brief silence, the other party agreed.

"Fine. I'll lend you That Dream My Nightmare."

"?????"

'Wait — what?'

...

That Dream My Nightmare was his now?

Cheng Shi blinked, momentarily unable to process.

The logic should check out, right? Long Jing had lent Brother Tongue to Zhen Yi, so ownership passed to her. Applying the same logic — the Dragon King lending That Dream My Nightmare to him...

Hey — one free mirror.

Cheng Shi smiled. He knew the fake Dragon King had to have some scheme behind lending the mirror. But this was That Dream My Nightmare — a fragment of a Servant God-level creation of [Memory], virtually equivalent to a Servant God relic!

Who could refuse?

Whoever could, he sure couldn't.

"How could I impose?" Cheng Shi feigned reluctance for exactly one second, then immediately followed with: "Will you mail it, or...?"

"Come pick it up. That Dream My Nightmare is, after all, my Benefactor's creation. During the handover, I need to ensure nothing goes wrong in transit."

Go pick it up in person?

That was obviously a trap.

Cheng Shi's brow furrowed slightly. His eyes darted, and he said: "I've been a bit busy lately — can't find the time. How about this: leave the mirror at the Joker meeting ground in the Graveyard. Just pick any tombstone, dig a hole underneath, and bury it. Then tell me which tombstone.

I'll go dig it up the first chance I get. And once I use it on the Doctor..."

He stopped himself. Even if the fake Dragon King had lent it, the real one would eventually come asking for it back — and he couldn't leave any leverage.

He absolutely couldn't say the word "return." So he merely cleared his throat twice, the implication being: I'll definitely give it back.

The Li Jingming on the other end clearly caught his real meaning — but still didn't seem to care. He simply laughed:

"You're as cautious as ever.

Fine. I'll place it beneath [Memory]'s tombstone for you to retrieve.

If the Doctor's identity really does turn out to be compromised, remember to contact me. I'm very interested in that memory."

With that, Li Jingming actually hung up first. Cheng Shi stared at the handset in his palm, suspicion swirling.

His initial guess was that the person on the call was the Dragon King's Nightmare Shadow — escaped from the mirror — meaning Li Jingming had fallen for the Nightmare Shadow's trick and been swapped.

But he couldn't reconcile it — given the Dragon King's shrewdness, how could he have fallen for the mirror's trap?

And if the caller truly was the Nightmare Shadow, why wasn't it afraid of Cheng Shi obtaining the mirror and helping the real Dragon King escape?

Could the mirror itself actually be the trap?

Cheng Shi found himself uncertain about the identity on the other end.

To verify whether Li Jingming had truly been compromised, he had no choice but to contact the other Jokers and cross-reference their information.

But then again — why had so many problems cropped up among the Jokers right after the meeting?

Was [Fate] making a move?

Cheng Shi called Zhang Jizu first. Mi Laozhang said the Dragon King — who usually exchanged messages with him frequently — hadn't contacted him recently. This further corroborated the fake Dragon King theory.

Then Cheng Shi reached out to Long Jing. Long Jing knew quite a bit about the fake Dragon King situation. He also believed the Dragon King had been replaced — though he wasn't sure by whom.

The two exchanged observations. Toward the end, Long Jing made several attempts to say something but kept holding back.

He figured: until it was confirmed that Jie Shu and Mo Shu were actually targeting Cheng Shi, there was no need to bring it up to the person involved. If it turned out to be a false alarm, his reputation as the "Clown" among the Jokers would be cemented for good.

So he decided to wait — at least until they approached him to infiltrate the group — before telling the Jokers about Jie Shu's plan.

After wrapping up with Long Jing, Cheng Shi held the phone and hesitated for a long time. The last Joker was Zhen Xin. He wasn't sure whether to call — he was worried she'd notice something.

But without consulting this head of the History School, his own limited knowledge of That Dream My Nightmare wouldn't be enough to determine what the fake Dragon King was plotting.

After much deliberation, he called anyway. Zhen Xin's first words were:

"What happened to Ming Yu?"

That sent a jolt through Cheng Shi's heart. But he didn't panic or fall silent — he immediately fired back: "Huh?"

He suspected Zhen Xin hadn't actually figured anything out. Given her cunning, this was likely just a probe!

Sure enough, after his seamless counter-question, her tone shifted to one of genuine puzzlement:

"After she spoke with you, she's been acting strange. Did you say something to her?"

That was close...

Cheng Shi tensed inwardly, keenly aware of how formidable Zhen Xin could be.

Had he hesitated for even a second, the [Deceit] Chosen One would have deduced that the other An Mingyu had run into trouble.

Cheng Shi wasn't intentionally hiding anything. He simply understood the pain of losing something you depended on, and wanted to find a gentler way to break it to Zhen Xin. He just hadn't found that way yet.

"She didn't tell you?"

The gods had another round of power struggles. [Civilization] was thoroughly defeated, but nobody won either."

Zhen Xin immediately surmised that this struggle likely involved matters beyond the universe. With furrowed brow, she exchanged views with Cheng Shi for a while, until he brought up the fake Dragon King situation. Zhen Xin said, somewhat uncertainly:

"The History School doesn't know much about That Dream My Nightmare. We only know it's a mirror that can swap a person with their Nightmare Shadow. As for other effects, the limited historical fragments we have don't record any.

However, one of our vice presidents theorized that when the Nightmare Shadow is on the outside, anyone else who looks into the mirror might swap out the person previously imprisoned inside. This way, That Dream My Nightmare could acquire new memories by cycling 'hostages.'

So — if the person you spoke with really is the Dragon King's Nightmare Shadow, could it be trying to trap you inside?"

"?"

Was it helping its Benefactor search for his memories?

Not impossible!

Cheng Shi's eyes widened in sudden realization. He immediately asked: "This vice president wouldn't happen to be Sun Miao, would it?"

Zhen Xin laughed: "No — it's a different [Memory] follower. But this is still just speculation. Nobody actually knows what a Nightmare Shadow intends."

She then added: "Cheng Shi, be careful. The Jokers can't afford to lose you right now."

"?"

'What does "right now" mean?'

Cheng Shi's face darkened. He couldn't shake the feeling it meant: once the Jokers had squeezed dry all your intel and connections, you'd be free to move along.

Milked to the last drop — how 'vicious' of you, Miss Zhen!

Cheng Shi pursed his lips, grunted an acknowledgment, then got Wei Zhi's contact info before hanging up.

Since nobody understood That Dream My Nightmare, it seemed he'd have to visit Dolgod first. The ordeal of facing Aph Ros's questions head-on was unavoidable.

He only hoped that after paying such a "steep" price, the road ahead would be a little smoother.

What had really gone wrong with the Doctor? Had a second personality — steeped in [Truth]'s fanaticism — germinated inside him?

And had the Dragon King truly been trapped inside the mirror? What was this Nightmare Shadow — which made zero attempt to hide its identity — actually scheming?

Trivial matters piled up until Cheng Shi's head was pounding. He lay back on the rooftop and gazed up at the sky, and there, faintly, he could make out a great gate.

The door leading to Dolgod seemed to call to him from the Abyss of Desire.

"My brother — what's taking you so long?"

...

Here they were.

Cheng Shi had finally arranged things with Galusha, and the three of them met up with the Doctor in the Void.

The moment the Doctor saw Wei Zhi present, he looked at Cheng Shi with a flicker of surprise: "This is the friend you mentioned? Wei Zhi?"

Cheng Shi nodded without much fuss: "That's right. I've been interested in the Life Extension Department lately, and it just so happens that Galu... obtained the Reason Association president's contact info. He's also very interested in Zangier.

And even more coincidentally, President Wei helped me greatly during the last trial. As a return favor, I promised he could come with us to see this Zangier — imprisoned by [Birth].

Since the Doctor already knows him, no introduction needed."

Cheng Shi had played a subtle trick — he didn't say Hu Xuan was the one imprisoning Zangier. Instead, he pinned it directly on [Birth].

A prisoner of a true god wasn't something mortals could covet. Even a [Truth] follower's ambition would have to think twice when confronting Zangier's new status.

Besides, [Birth] had already declared She wouldn't summon him again — which meant he needn't worry about getting called out for the deflection face-to-face.

An exploit like that simply demanded to be used.

As for Galusha — he'd just told her he needed a companion for a trip to Dolgod. Whether she knew the place or what they'd be doing there, he mentioned none of it.

The less she knew about the Doctor, the less purposeful her gaze would be — reducing the risk the Doctor would catch on. Cheng Shi had still been pondering how to convince Galusha to cooperate, but to his surprise, the moment he mentioned the invitation, she accepted immediately.

And her tone was more eager than his own.

When Cheng Shi asked why, Galusha didn't answer. But she knew: she'd figured out exactly who the ta "Truth" had mentioned was.

'So you're His follower?'

'Being so favored by a god, Prisoner — you truly are different from ordinary people.'

Galusha's gaze toward Cheng Shi was deeply meaningful.

Wang Mou's expression was also peculiar. No matter how he thought about it, he couldn't picture Cheng Shi being friends with Wei Zhi. So the reason Wei Zhi was here was simple enough: the Jokers' organizer had grown suspicious of his identity.

'Perceptive Fate Weaver — but suspicion alone is useless. Once I lay eyes on Zangier, [Truth]'s convergence will make me powerful again!'

And so, carrying their hidden agendas and wary appraisals of one another, the three stood before the Gate of Desire, each wearing a different expression.

The desire emanating from within was so terrifying that even Galusha — who dealt with the Extreme Desire Brotherhood daily — wouldn't have dared step through without Cheng Shi's assurance.

"This gate leads to...?"

Galusha asked curiously.

The Doctor, overhearing, was surprised. If you were going to find Zangier, you should know that beyond the gate likely lay Go Lis's lair — and since Go Lis and Aph Ros shared one body, it was probably Aph Ros's lair too. That would explain the overwhelming desire.

But this Wei Zhi seemed to know nothing at all?

Cheng Shi stepped through and glanced back with a smile:

"Dolgod — the homeland of [Birth]'s followers, and the birthplace of desire."

As darkness shifted around them, Cheng Shi found himself back in Dolgod. Before the familiar building stood the Evil Infant Inquisition. He hadn't even knocked when the doors slowly swung open.

A strikingly handsome man in a gilt-and-moon black robe stood at the threshold with an amused smile. He hadn't crossed the doorstep, yet the desire in his eyes clung to Cheng Shi like invisible threads.

He looked at Cheng Shi and beamed:

"My brother — you've finally come."

"..."

No matter how awkward and nervous Cheng Shi felt, he couldn't show weakness in front of two outsiders. He nodded, then turned to gesture at his companions, about to introduce them — when Galusha stepped forward and muttered softly:

"What's his connection to Meng Youfang?"

"?"

Cheng Shi blinked.

'Sis — is your focus a bit too... unique?'

'Yes, fine — the word "brother" does sound a bit twisted coming from either of them. But you're having an Audience with God here! Sure, Aph Ros is [Time]'s Prisoner, but He's a bona fide Servant God!'

'A dual Envoy, no less!'

'How are you this relaxed?'

Cheng Shi shot Galusha a curious glance, only to hear her casually appraise Aph Ros for a moment, then whisper:

"Aph Ros — I know of Him. As I told you before, learn too much... and the mystery disappears."

"???"

'Know too much?'

'Where did you learn too much?'

Galusha noticed his confusion and, dodging the Doctor's earshot, whispered again:

"Don't you think this Servant God's will is quite similar to something?"

Oh? Your surprised expression tells me it never crossed your mind. Fine — I didn't expect Him to still be alive either, let alone thriving like this.

We always assumed He was slain after angering the gods. Now it seems... history really is all rumors."

'We?'

Cheng Shi seized on that word. One train of thought later, he understood what she meant:

The Extreme Desire Brotherhood!

His pupils shrank: "You're saying...?"

"Exactly. The Extreme Desire Brotherhood's motto — 'indulge the self, plunge into pleasure' — was, to a degree, also shaped by Aph Ros's influence.

He wanted to build a paradise where all could revel. After His supposed 'death,' that will lived on and influenced countless [Corruption] followers. And so, the Extreme Desire Brotherhood was born.

He's basically Shi Lolin's 'founding patriarch.'

I'm using that term correctly, right? I've been studying the culture of the Drifter world recently. Quite interesting — though not so different from the Land of Hope. It's all just the evolution and distillation of patterns."

"..."

Galusha's remarks were so loaded with bizarre tangents that Cheng Shi couldn't even decide where to start retorting.

Meanwhile, Wang Weijin — observing the two whispering like old friends — frowned and took it upon himself to introduce himself to Aph Ros:

"A seeker of [Truth] — Wang Weijin. I pay my respects to the dual Envoy of [Birth] and [Corruption], Lord Aph Ros."

Aph Ros gave Wang Mou a lazy sidelong glance, utterly ignoring his greeting. His entire attention was fixed on Cheng Shi, waiting for an explanation.

He didn't care how many guests Dolgod had to accommodate. What He cared about was how many secrets this "brother" of His, Yu Xi, was hiding.

Under Aph Ros's gaze, Cheng Shi's scalp tingled. He had no choice but to face those eyes and plaster on a smile:

"Ahaha — what a coincidence! This one's also a [Truth] follower. His name is Wei Zhi.

They're both here to visit your Benefactor's Prisoner, Zangier."

"And you?" Aph Ros heard the deflection in Cheng Shi's words, but neither stepped aside nor relented.

Cheng Shi's voice hitched. He quickly composed a solemn expression: "I naturally have something very important to discuss with you."

"What could be more important than my brother borrowing my name to scare off Herobos?

Or have you finally decided to tell me why His container ended up in your hands?"

Aph Ros's tone was playful, and the information packed into that sentence visibly shocked the other two. But Cheng Shi's expression remained dead serious.

"It concerns... [Time]!"

I've discovered that the reason He imprisoned you is far from as simple as we thought!"

"!?"

Aph Ros's gaze sharpened. He scanned the one god and two mortals, then nodded slowly and stepped aside.

"You'd better not be lying to me, my brother."

Cheng Shi strode through the door without missing a beat, his face the picture of earnestness:

"I never lie."

...

Dolgod's sunset was as enchanting as ever. Had today not been a mission, the evening breeze on this terrace would have been the most soothing massage for frayed nerves.

Unfortunately, what should have been a pleasant dinner had devolved into an interrogation. Aph Ros and Cheng Shi sat at opposite ends of the long table — one boring an unrelenting stare, the other letting his gaze wander. Anyone could tell there was something between them.

By this point, even the densest person could see these two had things to discuss. Combined with Cheng Shi's visibly hesitant demeanor, Galusha considered the situation briefly and tactfully suggested:

"Rather than food to fill the stomach, what we [Truth] followers truly crave is knowledge for the mind. So — I humbly request that Lord Aph Ros allow us to visit Zangier first.

Besides, two scholars would spoil such an atmospheric setting. Sunset and evening breeze intertwined should create..."

She looked between them with great interest, clearly getting the wrong idea. "...a beautiful 'friendship,' not cold reason."

She even raised her wine glass in a toast to Aph Ros.

Cheng Shi was dumbfounded.

'Sis — what exactly are you implying?'

His expression was beyond strange as he glanced at Galusha, then at Aph Ros. But Aph Ros completely ignored Galusha's gesture, His eyes fixed on Cheng Shi, waiting for an explanation.

That playful expression clearly said: 'If your explanation doesn't pass today, then I'm sorry, my brother — your Prisoner status might truly become my Benefactor's to claim.'

'As for these two [Truth] followers — if not for your face, they'd have no standing to set foot in Dolgod, let alone visit any prisoner.'

"..."

Seeing the situation about to stall completely, Cheng Shi sighed, straightened himself, then pulled a white mask from inside his coat, slapped it on the table, and put on a fresh smile. He propped his head on his left hand and tapped the table lightly with his right:

"Aph Ros — you may refuse to let them see Zangier. But what I'm about to say...

is not for mortal ears."

At this, Aph Ros's eyebrow arched. He was finally interested.

With a casual wave, He stripped both mortals of their five senses. Then He fixed a burning gaze on Cheng Shi and gestured: "Please."

The next instant, Cheng Shi activated Chaos Acting and transformed into the tall, lean Yu Xi. He then pulled out the [Deceit] container and tossed it on the table. Fingers interlaced beneath his chin, he leaned forward with an eerie grin:

"I've recovered some more of my power. Now, I can finally meet you in my true form."

"!!!"

When the aura of [Deceit] grew thick enough to nearly mask the desire on Cheng Shi's body, Aph Ros knew: His brother hadn't deceived Him about his identity, at least.

The other party had to be an Envoy of [Deceit].

Since the identity checked out, then regardless of why Cheng Shi had borrowed His name — it didn't matter.

Cheng Shi had been conning Herobos at the time, and Herobos wasn't close to Aph Ros anyway. Whether or not Herobos got duped was none of His business.

What Aph Ros truly cared about was the container in Cheng Shi's hands. While reclaiming the [Deceit] container, His dear brother seemed to have acquired someone else's container too.

He needed to understand how Cheng Shi came to possess [Corruption]'s container.

If his brother had actually struck against [Corruption]'s Envoy for some reason, then Aph Ros would need to reassess whether their so-called anti-[Time] alliance was still valid.

He hadn't forgotten that Cheng Shi was currently disguised as a follower of [Time]. But whether that disguise was real or fake — that depended on today's explanation from Yu Xi.

Cheng Shi had his script prepared. To lay everything out, he calmly narrated how he'd incrementally reclaimed his power from the great [Time] tyrant.

"[Time] has a hidden agenda!"

That opening line alone erased half the doubt in Aph Ros's heart.

"Long ago, I noticed that [Time] had stopped appearing before the gods and no longer descended into the mortal world.

That's why I was so shocked when He descended upon Dolgod to summon you.

He seems to be chasing something new — and this something involves secrets above the universe!"

"Oh? What secrets?"

"Beyond this starry sky, there are other starry skies!"

"?" Aph Ros froze, then His smile gradually vanished. Expressionless, He regarded Cheng Shi — suspecting He was being toyed with. "My brother, meaningless stalling won't earn you more trust. [Time] wields the Deduction Authority. Of course there are countless starry skies beyond this one.

Where else do you think these so-called 'players' come from?

Isn't the Land of Hope itself another realm beyond the mortal world?"

"No, no, no — Aph Ros, you've misunderstood me.

If it were merely simulated worlds, why would I go to such lengths to speak in private?

The starry sky I'm referring to isn't one created by [Time]. It's a brand-new starry sky that [Time]'s reach cannot touch!

There, our [Time] has no authority. Only that starry sky's own [Time] gets a say."

"!!!"

Aph Ros was stunned.

His first instinct was that Cheng Shi was lying — mocking Him even more blatantly than before. But He quickly steadied Himself and spoke coldly:

"Evidence.

I cannot believe the ramblings of a [Deceit] Envoy.

Yu Xi — do you understand how absurd your claims are? If that starry sky truly existed, do you realize that even your Benefactor — that ruler of [Void]..."

"Yes — you're absolutely right..." Cheng Shi cut Him off. "There is also a version of my Benefactor there. And not only that — every Divine Throne beneath this starry sky has a corresponding god in that place.

They've formed their own factions. They don't know we exist.

Until... [Time] discovered them!"

"!!!!!"

Judging by Cheng Shi's serious expression alone, none of this sounded false. But Aph Ros couldn't bring Himself to believe something so preposterous.

Because accepting it would mean accepting that He had two additional Benefactors.

[Birth] and [Corruption] were both true gods! How could they possibly have "counterparts" unknown even to themselves?

Aph Ros's brows knotted tightly. He scrutinized Cheng Shi's desires, trying to determine whether he was lying. But under the [Deceit] container's influence, the man's desire currents were indistinct.

And then came the most interesting part: Cheng Shi voluntarily put the [Deceit] container away, letting its aura dissipate so Aph Ros could clearly see how his desires surged and churned.

Yet no matter how He looked, Aph Ros arrived at a staggering conclusion:

Yu Xi was not lying.

At this, Aph Ros's eyes went wide. He sank back into his chair in disbelief.

"You... weren't lying."

"Of course not. As I've said — my lies are merely the means by which I embrace the desire to deceive and draw closer to you. On serious matters where lying isn't an option, I never deceive."

With that, he pulled the [Deceit] container back out and placed it on the table once more.

In Aph Ros's eyes, this looked like Cheng Shi proving his devotion. But only Cheng Shi knew: the moment the other party believed he wasn't lying — that was the perfect moment for lies to begin.

And the [Deceit] container on the table would be the best shroud for every lie to come.

...

"[Time]'s deduction is much like [Fate]'s change.

He has been using countless deductions to depict [Existence] as He sees it. But from my observations, beyond His own deductions, He resists all external change.

These changes come not only from [Fate] but also from countless anomalies attempting to break free of the simulation's control.

He wants to ensure that all of [Existence] exists exactly as He wills it!"

Cheng Shi had his reasons for saying this. From Herobos, he'd learned the approximate reason [Time] had imprisoned Aph Ros. So naturally, these words were designed to resonate.

In a sense, Aph Ros's attempt to desecrate [Existence] was precisely one of those "anomalies."

"But stumbling upon another starry sky clearly exceeded His comprehension.

I must say — the first time I learned this secret, I was even more shocked than you.

I could hardly imagine another world existing beyond this one, independent yet identical to ours. Of course, sixteen additional gods wasn't impossible to accept. But the truly terrifying question was...

How many of 'Him'... are there?"

"Enough!"

Aph Ros broke out in cold sweat and cut Cheng Shi off immediately. The conversation had veered far beyond expectations. He'd only meant to trace the origin of the [Corruption] container — never imagining the discussion would lead all the way to Origin.

One [Time] alone had imprisoned Him for eons. If idle talk here angered Origin...

Aph Ros didn't dare imagine the consequences.

His greatest dream was simply to build a paradise for [Birth] and [Corruption], carrying His devotion and unifying both Benefactors' wills into one.

Beyond that, He didn't care and had no interest.

Compared to other Envoys, you could say Aph Ros's ambition was "strange" — but not grand.

Still, even a small ambition came with curiosity.

While He didn't dare discuss that being, He was intensely curious about [Time]'s secrets. So after calming Himself, He looked at Cheng Shi with a complicated expression and asked how he'd discovered all this.

Cheng Shi's answer was watertight:

"I'm just a Servant God. How could I spy on a true god's secrets?"

Naturally, my Benefactor told me. Remember what I said before?

Get close to your enemy to understand your enemy. My Benefactor helped me approach [Time], and during the process of stealing Authority, He uncovered the secret [Time] had found.

You should feel fortunate — no, we should feel fortunate. If any god other than my Benefactor had learned of this, they'd likely have become [Time]'s accomplice or a silent co-conspirator. But [Deceit] is different.

He lives in fear that the universe doesn't have enough chaos — that it's not big enough!

So He immediately informed me, telling me that [Void] held leverage over [Time].

[Time] doesn't want a second [Existence] in the universe. He wants to guarantee His uniqueness. So while the other gods remain ignorant of that other starry sky, He's silently plotting to destroy that world!

Yes — you heard me right, Aph Ros. [Time] is a bona fide World Destroyer!

And the reason I'm certain my Benefactor [Deceit] told me the truth and not a lie — is because on the very day you saw me deceiving Herobos, I encountered a Servant God from the other world. [Decay]'s Envoy — Yu Go!

A simulated parallel world wouldn't produce a second Yu Go!

I didn't just see Yu Go — I obtained a [Decay] container from His hands, one from beyond the universe!"

At this point, Cheng Shi casually took back the [Deceit] container from the table — though his gesture was nonchalant, more like idly toying with a symbol of identity.

Aph Ros, bombarded by chaotic information, had completely fallen into Cheng Shi's rhythm. Seizing the moment, Cheng Shi let Him read his desires once more, and the conclusion was:

Not lying.

Truth both ways — Aph Ros no longer doubted His brother's sincerity.

"You killed the other world's Yu Go?" Aph Ros continued in shock.

"No. I didn't kill Him. He gave me the container voluntarily."

"Gave? He abandoned his own Divine Throne — why would he give it to you? And why to a you who, from his perspective, belonged to another world entirely?"

Hearing this question, Cheng Shi knew Aph Ros was thoroughly hooked.

He'd lost the composure to think critically, completely submerged in the lies.

But Cheng Shi didn't press harder. Instead, he deliberately pointed out Aph Ros's lapse, coaxing back His shrewdness to continue building trust.

Though while speaking, he conveniently pushed the [Deceit] container back out again.

"This isn't like you, Aph Ros.

Where's your cunning gone?

I told you — [Time] wants to destroy that world to ensure [Existence]'s uniqueness. Yu Go somehow learned of this and fled.

He may be cowardly, but He's clever. He knew that by surrendering His Divine Throne, He might survive [Time]'s blade.

So giving me the container was all upside for Him, no downside. It's me who's stuck holding a hot potato, forced to collect evidence to bring [Time] down before the other gods.

Aph Ros — in the fight against [Time], I have never betrayed our friendship."

The moment those words landed, Aph Ros spun on the spot and began shedding clothes.

"..."

Cheng Shi's expression changed in a heartbeat.

'Bad — got carried away with the con. Forgot about that.'

Watching Aph Ros's desire practically drooling, Cheng Shi quietly leaned back, putting distance between them, and said in a strained tone:

"That's enough — I can see your trust. But if you want to hear what else [Time] has done, rein in your desire.

My Benefactor may tolerate me getting close to [Corruption] for the sake of fighting [Existence], but He won't tolerate me embracing [Corruption].

If you still want to fight [Time], don't get me thrown into prison too."

Aph Ros had only been expressing His feelings — and showcasing a touch of appreciation. He naturally wouldn't actually make a move. [Fate]'s threat was still fresh in mind, and He didn't want another chain on His ankle.

But hearing that Cheng Shi was still working tirelessly against [Time] as always, He began convincing Himself.

The [Corruption] container probably had a similar story behind it. In any case, Yu Xi would never slaughter [Corruption]'s Envoy.

Aph Ros stared at Cheng Shi with sparkling eyes for a long time — until Cheng Shi had to gaze at the ceiling — before reluctantly picking up His clothes and reverting to male form.

Once passion subsided and composure returned, He asked another critical question:

"But I'm still curious — why do you have His container?"

Is it also from another world's version of Him?"

Cheng Shi paused, realizing "His container" referred to the [Corruption] container. Knowing Aph Ros still had doubts about its origin, he answered "honestly":

"After Le Le'er died, someone found Her container near the Sea of Desire. I then took it from them."

Aph Ros frowned: "What does this have to do with Le Le'er?"

"?" Cheng Shi was baffled. "How could Le Le'er's container have nothing to do with Le Le'er?"

"Le Le'er's container?"

You mean you have a [Prosperity] container too?

But I was clearly asking about the [Corruption] container — the one that belonged to Tria."

"???"

Cheng Shi blinked.

Who?

...

[Corruption] had three Envoys:

Drasilco, Aph Ros, and Tria.

This was information the Dragon King had once provided.

Had Aph Ros not mentioned Tria again today, Cheng Shi would have nearly forgotten such a person existed.

But what had Aph Ros said?

Tria's container?

That [Corruption] container had clearly dropped from Le Le'er's body. How could it be Tria's...

Wait!

Why wasn't Le Le'er listed among the Dragon King's three [Corruption] Envoys?

Cheng Shi was suddenly dumbfounded. He recalled his first confrontation with the Dragon King — the man's certain tone had clearly stated that [Corruption] had only these three Envoys. So where was Le Le'er?

As [Prosperity]'s daughter who'd betrayed Her and plunged into the Sea of Desire, as the Mother Tree of Fear who absorbed the universe's terror for the Sea — how could She not be a [Corruption] Envoy?

That's right! Le Le'er had said She didn't jump willingly. Some unknown force had pushed Her into the Sea of Desire!

Could it be that Her "desire" hadn't been recognized by the Sea, and Her status had never been accepted by [Corruption]?

Cheng Shi looked at Aph Ros in bewilderment and voiced his greatest confusion:

"The Mother Tree of Fear, Le Le'er — is She not an Envoy of [Corruption]?"

Aph Ros was equally taken aback: "Who told you that [Prosperity]'s daughter was a servant of my Master?"

"...?"

'This is bad. Something's seriously wrong.'

Cheng Shi suddenly realized he'd been mistaken about something all along. Not all Envoys who switched faiths automatically retained their status.

Previously, influenced by the cases of Dizel and the Wrath of Abomination, he'd always assumed an Envoy who changed faith remained an Envoy. But now it was clear — Le Le'er's case was entirely different!

She'd become the Mother Tree of Fear against Her will, so Her devotion had never been recognized!

Then what was Her actual situation?!

And what about the [Corruption] container that had dropped from Her body? He'd never even met Tria — how had it become Tria's container?

Still dazed, Cheng Shi pulled out the [Corruption] container. When Aph Ros saw it, His expression grew solemn once more.

"Tria is dead. Otherwise, She would never have relinquished this honor that was rightfully Hers."

Cheng Shi was silent a moment, then said only five words:

"I didn't kill Her."

"Mm. I believe you, my brother.

From what I can see today, you've clearly never met Her. And I find it hard to believe anyone in this world could 'bear' to kill Her."

That only piqued Cheng Shi's curiosity more. He asked:

"You know I've lost my memories. But even without them, I can't recall hearing about Her from anyone else.

An Envoy worthy of such praise from you — what kind of deity... was She?"

"She..."

Aph Ros grew uncharacteristically serious, lowering His head in thought.

"Was a girl who carried compassion in her heart.

Tria was born in the Descent Era. In that age, desire ran rampant and [Corruption]'s influence overflowed — even I was shaped by it, becoming the Aph Ros you see today.

She, however, was the continuation of my Master's radiance in that era.

At the start of the Descent Era, after the initial [Life] phase concluded, my Master began spreading His will.

She was born in a territory held by an alliance that worshipped our Master. Raised amid boundless desire, she naturally grew into one of His followers.

At that time, people wildly indulged their desires and ambitions to catch the Benefactor's eye. They'd do anything for power — and followers in that territory died senseless deaths every day.

Tria grew up in that environment, witnessing the scheming and killing. Yet she despised all of it.

She often said: 'No matter how swollen one's own desire may grow, there's no need to crush another's. We're all the Benefactor's followers — why can't we live in harmony and bask in the Sea of Desire together?'

Guided by that conviction, she treated everyone with 'kindness' and forgave with 'generosity.' She never harmed a soul, bringing only pleasure to others.

Perhaps her joy moved their hearts, or perhaps they saw her as utterly harmless. In any case, during an election for alliance lord, those power-hungry ambitionists refused to withdraw yet knew they couldn't win — so they threw their votes at Tria, treating them as throwaway ballots.

Unexpectedly, when enough votes went to Tria, the lordship itself seemed to walk to her feet.

But the result caused an uproar across the temple. The disenfranchised cried it was a mockery of desire. The bystanders insisted it was divine guidance. The two sides screamed at each other until it came to blows.

To quell her compatriots' fury, Tria smiled and immolated herself.

In the flames, she said:

'All people deserve pleasure, not suffering.'

'When suffering comes, I am willing to dissolve it for the world. That is my desire.'

'Since the world takes no pleasure in me, I shall vanish from it and yield to someone worthy. Thus, the suffering I have caused shall evaporate at once.'

She was that resolute — not a moment of hesitation. Unfortunately, amid the surge of desire, no one could comprehend her will.

But what no one expected was this: the very instant the [Corruption] follower Tria burned away her last shred of flesh, the [Corruption] Envoy Tria was reborn from the flames.

The people saw divine light descend upon the world. They fell to their knees, prostrated, chanting Her name. And they called Her... the Mercy Lord."

"Huh?"

Cheng Shi was stupefied. He'd never imagined that [Corruption]'s priest class — the Mercy Lord — was actually a Servant God's Divine Name.

And this Tria — beyond the theme of pleasure, what part of Her actions remotely resembled [Corruption]?

Performing acts of mercy with a compassionate heart — that alone made Her better than eighty percent of people in the current world.

Then again, saintly was saintly. At the end of the day, anything linked to [Corruption], even on the straight path, could never be fully righteous.

The endpoint of desire was always the abyss — Old Jia had taught him that, and it was the real truth.

Cheng Shi's thoughts churned. He digested this information and furrowed his brow once more.

Whose hand could have killed Tria?

Or rather — which god would dare provoke [Corruption] by slaying His Envoy?

The culprit had to be one of the true gods sitting on those sixteen Divine Thrones. Mortals couldn't kill a Servant God unaffected by the erosion of eras.

What was the connection between Her death and Le Le'er?

Was the container dropping a coincidence, or had he stumbled into some kind of crime scene?

Le Le'er had never mentioned Tria before Her death. Had She even known Tria's relic had ended up near Her?

Too many questions, and not a single lead. Cheng Shi thought it over fruitlessly, then shook the tangle from his head. Seizing the moment, he asked about another topic that interested him:

"Drasilco...

I seem to have no memories of this [Corruption] Envoy either."

...

At the mention of Drasilco, Aph Ros's brows rose ever so slightly.

If His eyes had been filled with tender sympathy when recalling Tria, then upon speaking of Drasilco, only one thing remained in them... admiration.

A strange sort of admiration.

Aph Ros's feelings toward this "colleague" seemed complex — so complex that He didn't even bother asking why Cheng Shi was interested in Drasilco.

"Sin of Desirelessness — that is His Divine Name."

Aph Ros sank into memory once more, though this time He seemed more like a spectator — an observer of desire.

"He was likely the world's first malefactor, and the most wicked of them all.

His will was the polar opposite of Tria's. Just as His Divine Name suggests — any ascetic who refused desire was, in His eyes, a sinner guilty of the Sin of Desirelessness.

He tirelessly traveled the land for one purpose alone: to punish these 'sinners.' Every ascetic He found was either forcibly implanted with irresistible desire, or they rejected desire and embraced death.

He was like a dagger, slitting the throats of blasphemers, diligently painting over the blank spaces of desire in our Benefactor's name with their blood.

Granted, His methods were perhaps a touch extreme. But His devotion was beyond question."

Hearing this, Cheng Shi immediately understood why Aph Ros admired Him — because... the Sin Brood Mother!

This Drasilco was essentially the [Corruption] version of Go Lis!

Punishing all who blasphemed against the faith — an existence like Go Lis: a divine whip of belief.

'Well, well — turns out you two are not just colleagues, but kindred spirits.'

Aph Ros seemed to read Cheng Shi's thoughts. He nodded and continued:

"If I hadn't seen clearly that you've genuinely lost your memories of Them, I'd truly think you were steering my judgment — trying to make me suspect Drasilco killed Tria."

"?"

Cheng Shi blinked. "The two of Them didn't get along?"

"Correct. Very much didn't get along.

One only spread pleasure, never inflicting suffering. The other ran rampant, taking joy in planting desire through the suffering of others.

Their wills were diametrically opposed — completely unrelated — so naturally they couldn't stand each other.

Hmm, that's a bit one-sided. It would be more accurate to say Drasilco couldn't stand Tria. Tria never judged. But Drasilco viewed Her non-action as a blasphemy against ultimate desire.

He certainly could have killed Tria. But I don't believe He would have done it near the Sea of Desire.

Because He was the most devout of us three — the one most in resonance with the Sea of Desire. He might unleash His own desire, but He would also respect our Benefactor and never slaughter His own kin near the Sea.

My brother — having heard all this, you must have gotten what you came for.

So, as the price you owe for this intelligence exchange, may I make a request? Could you investigate the truth behind Tria's death?"

Cheng Shi's brow tightened:

"You want to avenge Her?"

Have you lost your mind?

Setting aside whether you can even leave this [Time] prison — whoever killed Tria was at least a Servant God, possibly a true god!

You want revenge against a true god?

I think you genuinely want more shackles on your ankles!

Aph Ros — think clearly. As you yourself said, if you truly believe the next era will come, then Tria... will return."

Aph Ros watched Cheng Shi with a lingering smile. Only after he finished did He shake His head, trace an "x" on the table with one finger, and say playfully:

"I never said I wanted revenge."

"Then what's the point of the investi—" Cheng Shi froze mid-sentence. Then his expression shifted to one of alarm: "Wait — Aph Ros, you're not planning to have me do the avenging for you, are you?"

Clap, clap, clap—

Aph Ros broke into applause: "I knew it, my brother. Yu Xi — you'll definitely help me."

"I will not!"

Cheng Shi refused in one second flat, without a heartbeat of thought.

But Aph Ros seemed entirely unsurprised. He shook His head and laughed again:

"You will. Otherwise, you won't hear another word of what you're looking for today.

My brother — don't forget I'm His follower. Beyond sensing the desire in your lies, I can detect many other desires too.

You put off coming for so long, and now you show up using two mortals' desires as a pretext — clearly because you want to mine lost memories from me again.

Add to that your exposé of [Time]'s true face and your plans against [Time] — I'd wager what you want to learn is related to our warden [Time]. Am I right?"

"..."

'Talking with smart people is genuinely exhausting.'

Cheng Shi was starting to wonder whether Aph Ros had even believed any of his excuses.

But whether He truly believed didn't matter. What mattered was Aph Ros's attitude.

As long as He was willing to let Cheng Shi enter Dolgod again, and willing to have Go Lis continue lending her aid, what difference did belief make?

But on the topic of [Time], Cheng Shi genuinely couldn't understand why Aph Ros was using this moment to raise the price.

He clearly hated [Time]. Why bundle the joint cause against [Time] with investigating Tria's death?

Wasn't that just tripping over His own feet?

Was Tria really that important?

Could Aph Ros be hiding something — some deeper connection between Himself and Tria?

Cheng Shi's brow furrowed. After a moment of silence, he fixed his gaze on Aph Ros and said:

"I'd say there's a traitor in our anti-[Time] coalition. Only it's not me — and as for who... I won't say."

Aph Ros smiled, utterly unbothered:

"Of course I want to resist.

But my brother, you've forgotten something.

You have your Benefactors watching over you. [Void] stands against [Existence], so under divine protection you can act as you please.

I'm different. I'm merely a Prisoner of [Time]. The risk of rebellion is too great. Without sufficient leverage, I can hardly stand up against Him even after learning He's a World Destroyer.

The era's tide will carry me back eventually, yes. But this era is fascinating — and I'd rather not die young in it."

"..."

Cheng Shi was out of options. He could tell Aph Ros genuinely cared about Tria's death. If he didn't budge today, he'd truly learn nothing else — turning this into a visit-the-prisoner day trip.

So, with reluctance, he offered:

"I can look into Tria's death. But Aph Ros, I can't give you a firm promise. All I can commit to is this:

If the killer is a Servant God, I'll try to avenge Her for you.

But if the killer is a true god...

I'll find someone to pick out a nice graveyard plot for Tria, have a fine tombstone carved, and buy two quality wreaths out of my own pocket!

Risking my Benefactors' wrath by getting entangled with [Corruption] to do you this favor — that is the absolute maximum sincerity I can offer!"

Sincerity was one word for it — but even in this half-promise, Cheng Shi had buried a loophole.

He'd said "if the investigation reveals the killer is a Servant God, he'd try to help Aph Ros get revenge." But the premise was actually finding the killer!

'If I just... never find out... well, you can't blame me, can you?'

'I'm not [Folly] — I can't just look and know the answer. And it's not like I didn't investigate. I'm just a bit dim, is all.'

The wordplay's effect was undeniable, given Aph Ros's reaction.

The instant Cheng Shi finished, the moon on the table's edge rose into the sky.

Aph Ros was overjoyed.

He tiptoed up, stepped onto the tabletop, and looked as though He wanted to collapse across it just to close the distance between them.

He gazed at Cheng Shi, eyes alight:

"I have never doubted our friendship, my brother. Whatever you wish to ask — I'll tell you everything."

"..."

Across the table, eyes were glowing. Cheng Shi, however, was trembling. He stiffened and shrank backward.

'What — you can talk just fine from over there! Why are you squirming all over the table?!'

'scared.jpg'

...

"Ahem, so..."

[Time] is destroying a world. Although the world He's targeting isn't the starry sky above us, you and I can't afford to drop our guard!

We must beware of the other world's [Time] retaliating by destroying ours once He learns of this.

We must also beware that if [Time] succeeds this time, He may grow unsatisfied with our world's evolution and attempt annihilation again — then reboot a new world from [Existence]'s ashes.

Neither outcome is one we can afford.

So, to ensure that you and I can continue to exist beneath this starry sky, we must resist and stop Him!"

Seeing Aph Ros closing the distance, Cheng Shi clutched his container and stood up, feigning deep analysis as he circled the table.

"As I've said: know your enemy to defeat your enemy.

To beat [Time], we first need to fathom His will, then extrapolate His next move from that will, so we can intercept and disrupt.

We already know [Time] is sparing no effort to preserve [Existence]'s uniqueness. But why He developed this obsession, and where His will originates from...

These minute details will help us — or let me be blunter — will help my Benefactor, [Deceit], to pierce [Time]'s conspiracy!"

At this, Aph Ros sobered slightly. He lay sideways on the table, somewhat puzzled:

"Every god's will derives from 'Him'...

[Time] protecting [Existence]'s uniqueness is the universe's orthodoxy. What's there to trace back to?"

"Plenty!

If you believe [Time] listens only to that 'Him,' you're wrong — dead wrong!"

After witnessing the real universe's turmoil, Cheng Shi no longer dared utter that being's name aloud. Whenever He came up, Cheng Shi substituted with silence.

"Before now, [Time] had never committed an act of destruction.

Past and future are merely the angles from which He views the universe. Since He stands above the river of time to gaze upon the world, why would He bring destruction to another one?

That annihilation, in His eyes, could just as easily be that world's past, not its future.

So His intent to destroy worlds is far from simple. If you can't figure it out, don't bother trying — just tell me how you provoked [Time]'s will. If we reason backward from the past, we'll naturally see when [Time]'s ambitions first took root!"

Aph Ros's brow furrowed. He understood now — Cheng Shi was asking why He'd been imprisoned by [Time].

This was an old wound He'd rather not reopen. But the atmosphere was thick with reminiscence today, and His brother had been genuinely sincere. Swept up in the moment, Aph Ros became candid in turn.

Candid as His body.

He gazed at Dolgod's distant sunset, and a nostalgic smile played across His face.

Clearly He was recounting His own "crime" — yet Aph Ros harbored not an ounce of "remorse." From start to finish, He believed Himself... blameless.

"I've always believed that the one who wanted to imprison me wasn't [Time] alone, but all of [Existence]. After all, the first [Existence] I desecrated was [Memory]..."

'Here it comes!'

The Mirror of Delusion!

How exactly had this Servant God-level creation been split into the Dreamless Mirror and That Dream My Nightmare? Cheng Shi was dying to know.

His spirits surged, and both ears practically snapped to attention.

"It was the dawn of the fifth era. Thanks to the opportunity [Existence] brought, I was fortunate enough to become a favored of both Benefactors — a twisted dual Envoy.

But coexisting faiths were far from unified wills. To fully realize my vision, I kept searching for a way to build a pure paradise of Descent.

I observed the world ceaselessly, drifting through various faiths, watching how people worshipped their gods and expressed their devotion — hoping to sketch my paradise's blueprint from the aspirations of these humble believers.

It was then that I found a group — a sect of [Memory] followers.

They called themselves 'Mirror People,' a circle of memory keepers. Though the era's wheel was already half-turned, [Memory] and [Time] had yet to descend. They were essentially Seedling Followers — having sensed the current of memory flowing through the universe, they'd gathered spontaneously to pray for their new god's arrival.

Though few in number, their devotion was plain to see. They exchanged memories with each other, shared every history they knew, and annotated the passage of ages through the act of remembering.

But since mortals couldn't be sure whether such a god would ever notice this fresh devotion, their gatherings, though frequent, were like headless flies."

Hearing this, Cheng Shi's eyelid twitched. He seemed to guess what was coming. His tone grew strange as he interjected:

"So you... gave them a little help?"

"Precisely!"

Aph Ros suddenly stood up on the table. He was profoundly satisfied with the word "help" — so satisfied that the gaze He fixed on Cheng Shi once again brimmed with "admiration."

"My brother — in all this universe, only you truly understand me!

I did indeed help them."

"..."

"But I knew their devotion was itself a form of desire — one that shouldn't be warped. So I used no tricks. I simply approached one of their organizers as a foreign traveler, coincidentally crossing paths. And through storytelling, I described how the people of Dolgod worshipped their gods.

Of course, I never mentioned Dolgod by name — I substituted another city. I told him about Object Worship — how dedicating prayers through physical objects best attracted divine attention."

'Wait!'

'Object Worship?'

Cheng Shi froze, suddenly recalling the reward he'd earned in that [Birth] trial — the God-Worshipping Wood Carving.

Indeed — whether it was the wood carvings or the massive divine statue atop the Theocracy of Growth, Dolgod's people had clearly been channeling their devotion through objects.

"I only wanted their devotion to not go wasted — their yearning to receive an answer. So I offered a small nudge.

And that organizer didn't disappoint. Perhaps my story inspired him, for at the very next gathering, he crafted an enormous mirror."

"!?!?"

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted. "The Mirror of Delusion?"

"Correct — that was the Mirror of Delusion's prototype.

The Mirror People — those Seedling Followers of [Memory] — began praying day and night before the mirror, beseeching it to reveal their Benefactor and bring guidance to the world.

But [Memory] seemed unmoved by them. Year after year, the mirror showed nothing.

Back then, time meant nothing to me. So I watched them for many years, until their numbers swelled, their organization grew, and their prayers solidified. I thought: 'Surely this great a plea of faith will catch His eye.' Yet still — nothing.

By then, the voice of [Order] rang across the land. The call of [Truth] surged like tides. Even Wild Gods had their prayers answered.

[Memory] alone remained cold — more aloof than [Truth] itself.

Time meant nothing to me, but it was everything to mortals. With no light at the end of the tunnel, many elder Mirror People saw their faith crumble. They grew disheartened.

They looked ready to give up.

But how could desire be extinguished?"

"..." Cheng Shi understood. He sighed: "So you helped them once more?"

"Yes!

This time, I used my power!

I solidified their desire, thereby reinforcing the conviction of their faith. But I never imagined that this validation — born from desire — would drive them to the opposite extreme..."

...

"When any organization grows large enough, its members inevitably fall into power struggles — because the wills they champion diverge.

At the time, the Mirror People — their desires surging — split cleanly into two ideological factions.

One faction leaned traditional. They believed devotion alone was the key that could open the gates of the divine. They chose to continue spreading faith and praying day and night according to the Mirror People's existing path, pursuing the purest road of memory to the bitter end.

The other faction believed their faith's scale simply wasn't large enough to attract the Benefactor's gaze.

But reality was cruel. [Memory] had never appeared. The faithful dwindled by the day. Under these circumstances, the Mirror People couldn't possibly expand their faith's scale — let alone summon divine mercy through greater devotion.

So the radical faction devised a plan. They decided to...

...fabricate a God Descent!"

"?"

'Faking a God Descent — now that's something...'

Since time immemorial, conservatives weren't always conservative — but radicals truly lived up to their name in spectacular fashion.

Their intentions were still born of devotion. But using [Memory]'s devotion to pull off a [Deceit]-worthy feat... Sure enough, devotion taken to its extreme became blasphemy!

Cheng Shi wondered what the Fun God would think of it. He hadn't descended during that era, but when the scene replayed in the Void Era, He'd surely be delighted.

After that idle digression, Cheng Shi continued listening to Aph Ros:

"Only if a god truly manifested and responded to the world would more followers come to worship. And once the faithful grew in number again, the god might genuinely answer the call.

These radical Mirror People, drowning in extreme devotion, could seemingly already see the moment a new god descended upon the world.

They kept trying to recruit others, but this near-blasphemous behavior terrified the traditional Mirror People, who firmly resisted and refused.

Countless veteran Mirror People personally stepped in to reason with them — trying to prevent the radicals' sacrilege from ruining the conservatives' devotion. And the radicals did indeed appear to back down. All went quiet.

But it was all a façade. They knew tradition's shackles had already made the conservatives rigid. So instead of proselytizing, they secretly began scheming in the shadows.

They spent a full year preparing. When the second year's grandest collective prayer day arrived, they launched their God Descent operation!

But by coincidence — or perhaps the accumulated years of devotion had finally moved the divine, or perhaps He'd finally deemed this memory worth recording — on that very same day, as all the Mirror People chanted in unison, as the radical faction's mirror guardians splashed the Revealing Potion onto the glass... [Memory] truly cast down His gaze.

The God Descent appeared.

A ray of holy light poured over the altar, affirming that massive mirror forged from countless prayers, and bestowed upon it true meaning in faith.

Memory Delusion was born.

But the conservatives who witnessed it didn't believe it was a genuine God Descent. They assumed the radicals had revived their scheme within the organization and orchestrated everything — albeit with breathtaking results.

The radicals thought likewise. Most participants believed this was the fruit of a year's planning — they just hadn't expected the effect to far exceed their wildest expectations.

Only the radical leader knew it was all real. The god had truly descended. He prostrated himself, crying out [Memory]'s name, urging everyone to greet the true god together. But the conservatives couldn't let this farce continue. They had to ensure this scandal was strangled within the Mirror People's 'home' before word spread.

And so, a battle between convictions began — with both sides fighting over the enormous mirror.

Neither side knew the mirror had already been imbued with new meaning. The conservatives wanted to erase the stain on their faith, to prove their purity and atone. The radicals, rallied by their leader, were electrified — wanting to seize this god-blessed mirror and become the legitimate conduit to the divine.

Both sides' obsessions blazed. They grappled and tangled, and in the chaos — shattered the mirror.

Conservatives and radicals each claimed a fragment. And so, Memory Delusion broke in two on the very first day of its existence.

The names of those two shards were, naturally, the most fitting commentary He could give this memory."

Cheng Shi was stunned.

The Dreamless Mirror and That Dream My Nightmare!

The former represented the conservatives' devotion — their flawless dedication to memory granted the Dreamless Mirror its power to perfectly reproduce memories without omission.

The latter represented the radicals' ambition. "That Dream, My Nightmare" — the [Memory] followers corrupted by desire truly had a devout dream. But everything they did was, in [Memory]'s eyes, a genuine nightmare. Even though [Deceit] hadn't yet been formally named by Origin in that era, the opposition between faiths had already left ample traces throughout history.

So this was the truth behind the Mirror of Delusion's shattering. No wonder the Nightmare Shadows inside That Dream My Nightmare reeked of [Corruption] — it truly had been tainted by [Corruption]'s influence.

At this point, Cheng Shi finally understood why Aph Ros had practically "destroyed" the Mirror People yet never faced consequences from [Memory].

Because when He split Memory Delusion in two and bestowed each half, He'd already turned the page on this memory — filing it away in His Collection Hall. To Him, even faith being blasphemed was still a memory.

Moreover, Aph Ros's involvement bore no "malice." The desire He'd stoked had merely intensified the forms of devotion slightly.

But if [Memory] had already closed the book on this, why had [Time] imprisoned Aph Ros?

Cheng Shi looked at Him in confusion. Aph Ros read his puzzlement, and His expression grew complicated, tinged with bitterness:

"After the incident, I assumed the era's masters didn't oppose my identity or my actions. So a few hundred years later, when I came across a group of traveling bards who'd gathered out of shared devotion..."

"..."

'Dude — you went at it again?!'

Cheng Shi's scalp went numb.

Someone dancing on the edge of death without dying wasn't proof of being destined to survive — it just meant they'd gotten lucky.

Getting lucky once was one thing. But what made you think you'd get a second chance?

'Did you think you were like me — a sacrifice blessed by [Fate]?!'

Besides, [Time] wasn't [Memory]. [Memory] would pick up pieces of the past that interested Him. But the moment [Time] saw the evolution of His Existence warped by desire...

'Well — you've seen the result yourself.'

Cheng Shi's mouth twitched. With a half-smile he asked: "You helped again?"

Aph Ros laughed bitterly and shook His head:

"I didn't even get the chance. He locked me in this eternal prison before I could.

He said:

'You pollute the world with desire, taint devotion with pleasure. The paradise you seek does not reside within Existence. And where your Gate of Joyous Lust leads is most certainly not a reality the world would welcome.

Since you find [Memory] and [Time] so fascinating — then stay here, and experience memory and time for eternity."

Aph Ros grew increasingly agitated. By the end, He'd cast off every trace of bitterness, His face burning with fury:

"Even if I intended to help — I hadn't yet influenced His followers! On what grounds did He imprison me on fabricated charges?!

!! Will not! Accept this!"

"..."

Cheng Shi understood Aph Ros's point. But dude — the one you "provoked" was [Time]!

It bore repeating: future and past were nothing more than [Time]'s labels on Existence. He may well have already seen those bards' future — or perhaps the evil fruit of Aph Ros's meddling had already manifested in one of His simulations.

So the imprisonment looked "fabricated" — but could just as well be seen as prevention.

But Cheng Shi couldn't say any of this. Saying it would be tantamount to defending [Time].

Even if he was a [Time] follower, even if the answers he sought were with [Time] — here, on Dolgod's soil, he could only be Aph Ros's ally. Every strategy for approaching [Time] had to serve one purpose: joining forces with Aph Ros against this world-destroying demon king.

...

Then again...

Was Aph Ros truly so heinous that He deserved to be cast into eternity, never to escape?

He'd already been a dual Envoy at the time. Imprisoning Him meant simultaneously provoking [Birth] and [Corruption] — one being [Life]'s aloof, child-doting origin, and the other the mysterious, unapproachable sovereign of [Descent].

How much audacity did [Time] need to confront two gods at once?

Even if [Corruption] never showed Himself and never refused anything, did [Birth] truly have no objections?

Cheng Shi frowned. He had a growing feeling that Aph Ros's imprisonment wasn't as straightforward as he'd imagined.

And another thing: the Dreamless Mirror inheriting pure [Memory] power made sense. But the unmistakable stench of [Corruption] seeping from That Dream My Nightmare — could that really come solely from the ancient Mirror People's desires?

Even if [Corruption] had manipulated their desires, they'd never actually defected to [Corruption]. They were still devoted. Could this warped devotion truly "contaminate" a Servant God relic to such a degree?

He'd need to get his hands on That Dream My Nightmare before he could properly research what other secrets lay within — and whether the Nightmare Shadow Dragon King he'd suspected was truly plotting something.

Having finished recounting the past in one breath, Aph Ros regained His composure. The fury earlier had been nothing more than an emotional outburst triggered by memory. After countless washes of time in Dolgod, He'd long grown accustomed to it.

He put His clothes back on, returned to male form, walked slowly to Cheng Shi's side, and observed the frowning mortal with interest:

"Deduced anything?"

By then, Cheng Shi's mind had long since wandered. A thought suddenly struck him:

If both the Dreamless Mirror and That Dream My Nightmare were gathered, could they be reassembled into a complete Mirror of Delusion?

He now knew exactly who held both fragments.

And what power would the whole Mirror of Delusion possess?

Cheng Shi was burning with curiosity. So he asked this final question. Aph Ros blinked — He'd assumed Cheng Shi was pondering [Time], but the man was actually eyeing [Memory].

"Nobody knows what that mirror — representing [Memory]'s gaze — can do. It never displayed its true power.

But, my brother, why are you thinking about this? Aren't we targeting [Time]?"

"Ahaha..." Cheng Shi hastily reined in his thoughts and smiled evasively. "Two birds with one stone. Fighting [Time] is real, but so is getting you out.

I was thinking — if that mirror could be found and reassembled, wouldn't it prove you've recognized your crime and voluntarily atoned for the desire you once stirred? If so, for [Memory]'s sake, [Time] might just... let you go?"

"I! Am! Not! Guilty!"

The words barely left Cheng Shi's mouth before Aph Ros's eyes sharpened and He shook His head in flat denial.

"Embracing desire is life's very nature. I never twisted anyone's desire — I merely made them face the desires already in their hearts.

My brother, I know you mean well. But if I were to accept the charges, it would mean abandoning my own will, betraying my Benefactor's gaze, and forsaking [Corruption]'s core.

I cannot. Just as I cannot abandon [Birth]'s guidance.

One lives to revel. If even I cannot revel, how could I ever build a paradise of universal joy?"

"..."

'All right — as expected of a dual Envoy whose faith is perfectly self-consistent. You've really nailed that "born to revel, revel to be born" closed loop.'

Cheng Shi nodded, dropped the subject, and told Aph Ros he already had some ideas. The rest required further investigation before he could discern [Time]'s true intentions and respond accordingly.

They discussed a bit more. Aph Ros, while hostile toward [Time], was clearly more concerned about His own faith fusion. So the conversation circled back to Zangier.

Cheng Shi hadn't forgotten his other purpose here either — the Doctor's anomalous behavior and the suspected awakening of a second personality. He had to tread carefully to keep the Jokers safe.

With Wang Mou and Galusha's senses still sealed, Cheng Shi could speak more plainly — though he obviously couldn't mention the Joker audit. He concocted a cover story about player identities, saying he'd brought two [Truth] followers here to see if they could assist Dolgod's "laboratory."

He said one of them still harbored designs on Zangier. If that person tried anything here, they might as well keep him as Zangier's assistant — or feed.

When Aph Ros heard that this [Truth]-following mortal wanted to stand on a predecessor's shoulders and gaze toward distant truth, He burst into laughter.

"What's so funny? What happened with Zangier?" The laughter made Cheng Shi uneasy.

Aph Ros kept laughing:

"Since he so covets that prisoner's power, why not simply grant his wish?"

Trust me, my brother — this might actually work in your favor.

Come — since you're here, let me show you Dolgod's newly established faith research institution...

The Honesty Court."

"???"

'What now?'

Cheng Shi was dumbstruck.

This place had a track record. The Evil Infant Inquisition had birthed a genuine "evil infant." Would the Honesty Court spawn some bizarre version of himself he couldn't recognize?

This was, after all, [Birth]'s homeland. Who wouldn't be scared?

Cheng Shi halted mid-step, suddenly feeling that ending the visit right here would be just fine.

But Aph Ros was visibly excited. With a grand wave, He restored Galusha and Wang Weijin's senses, then led the way with servants clearing the path, guiding the three bewildered visitors toward the city's most massive building.

The Doctor noticed Aph Ros glancing his way repeatedly and frowned slightly. Galusha, having been "silenced" for so long, was brimming with curiosity. Walking behind Cheng Shi, she whispered:

"You're close with Aph Ros?"

Close?

'I am absolutely not close with Him!'

Well — not entirely not close either. Hmm... how to put it? Schrödinger's familiarity.

When he wanted secrets from Him, he hoped they could talk about anything.

When He started taking off clothes, he only wished [Corruption]'s followers would show some self-respect...

Cheng Shi sighed, said nothing, and walked on shaking his head.

The group soon arrived before the sprawling tribunal. When Cheng Shi saw the two bold Chinese characters for "Honesty" blazoned across the building, he knew: whatever was inside had to be supremely absurd.

"Chinese? So there's a player helping with Dolgod's research infrastructure?"

Fate Weaver — is that you?"

The Doctor studied Cheng Shi thoughtfully. Before Cheng Shi could answer, Aph Ros spoke first:

"Not him. A Wise Man far cleverer than any of you.

Compared to your restrained desires, I much prefer that candid, flamboyant puppet master."

Wise Man and puppet — anyone would know that meant Wei Mu!

The Doctor froze. He clearly hadn't expected that Wei Mu had outpaced him in the search — having already located Zangier.

"Come. Let me show you Dolgod's progress in faith research."

With that, Aph Ros pushed the doors open and strode inside.

Cheng Shi twitched at the corner of his mouth, politely letting the other two enter first. Only after all three had disappeared inside did he grip the doorframe and cautiously peek in.

But that single glance sent a seismic tremor through his pupils. He froze on the spot.

"This is..."

Both players stopped in their tracks. Wang Weijin's eyes blazed with piercing light, his voice trembling with excitement:

"The Stars Dagger!

The auras of [Birth] and [Corruption] are colliding and interweaving — yet not violently. As if they've found a path to fusion! This is nothing short of a flawless replication of a [Truth] experiment!

Only... that doomsday Hanged Man, holding the sun and moon aloft... why is he wearing a mask?"

"???"

'Yep — things are getting absurd. Just as I predicted.'

...

"This is..."

"As you can see, Zangier has resumed his role as the Doomsday Hanged Man. And everything before you is the [Truth] experiment he does best."

Aph Ros gazed up at the inverted Zangier hanging in the great hall of the tribunal, circling beneath it as He marveled:

"That puppet master truly has a brilliant mind. In merely three or five visits, he found a Time Knot void anchor point on this land that [Time] had exiled.

I'm sure you're wondering what a 'Time Knot void anchor point' is..."

Aph Ros was in rare high spirits, playfully taking on the role of a researcher as He introduced the setup.

Though most of the terms coming out of His mouth were things Wei Mu had said to Him at the time.

His mind flashed back. The puppet master had once stood in this very spot, pointing at a place in midair, and said:

"Lord Aph Ros — without Lord Yu Xi divulging any specifics, I cannot deduce what [Void]'s escape route actually is. But I do have some expertise when it comes to researching [Truth].

No matter what [Truth] experiment we're running, it requires massive manpower, resources, and time for repeated verification. Dolgod may be yours to command, and it has limitless biological material, but time remains the yardstick of [Truth]. We cannot skip the process and jump straight to results.

Fortunately, Dolgod isn't just the homeland of [Birth]'s followers — it's also [Time]'s prison. And that gives our concept a chance.

If we borrow a single 'brick' from [Time]'s prison 'wall' to build our experiment ground, we could potentially harness [Time]'s power for a [Truth] experiment.

To be specific — [Time]'s power has different properties: continuity, reversal, loops, acceleration, deceleration... We just need to try a few spots and find a void anchor point with the 'expansion' property. Then, using [Time]'s marvel, we could stretch time within the experiment ground infinitely — turning one day in Dolgod into one year inside the lab.

This way, within our current timeframe, we could witness far longer experimental progressions.

I call this void anchor point a Time Knot.

This is my personal insight from studying [Time]. I once envisioned finding such a point to accelerate my own growth. Unfortunately, I had neither [Time]'s power to borrow nor any Authority of my own.

But here... I could help You... give it a try."

Wei Mu never hid his intentions. He was the shrewdest player of all — even when forced to work for Yu Xi, he seized every chance to conduct useful experiments of his own.

And everything he did sprang from genuine will — which, in essence, was desire. In Aph Ros's eyes, such behavior wouldn't be rejected — only encouraged.

So Aph Ros agreed. And that "brick" was indeed found by Wei Mu.

Returning to the present — after Aph Ros finished recounting the esoteric theory, He wanted to see how these three would react. Would they show the same hint of astonishment He'd felt back then?

After all, He'd been imprisoned for countless ages. This was the first time He'd turned [Time]'s power against Him, and the shock had been real.

Yet of the three before Him, Wang Weijin's eyes blazed with excitement, Galusha arched a curious brow — and despite slight surprise, both seemed to fully comprehend.

Only Cheng Shi blinked, his gaze as clear and guileless as Aph Ros's own had once been.

Aph Ros felt warm. Just as He'd thought — only His brother truly understood Him.

But Cheng Shi wasn't thinking about that at all. His mind was entirely on the Benefactor with the black-hole pupils — [Time].

'Isn't this just time relativity?'

'What the hell did Wei Mu do before the game descended?'

Knowing and doing were different things. Doing and building were different things. Most people could be called clever for merely recognizing something they saw. But someone who transplanted real-world science into the game and achieved unity of knowledge and action...

No wonder he was the untouchable number one on the Road to Ascension.

'What a magnificent sacrifice he'd make. How could [Void] not want him?'

While Cheng Shi sighed over this Wise Man's inability to shoulder some of the Fixed Destiny's burden, Wang Weijin and Galusha had already moved close to the inverted Zangier to carefully observe the experiment.

Though Zangier was suspended at the void anchor point, his frame wasn't nearly as colossal as when Cheng Shi first saw him in deep space. Now he was only slightly larger than a normal human, and those eyes of alternating sun and moon appeared hazy and indistinct through the warped flow of time.

As for the Far Dusk Town he held aloft — no details were visible whatsoever.

The two could only vaguely sense that within those cascading torrents of time, countless lives rose and fell. As they were born and perished, the faith in Zangier's eyes hadn't grown more substantial. But the mask on his face — equally distorted by time — had grown ever brighter.

"...Why is there a mask here?!"

Wang Weijin had held back as long as he could, but couldn't resist the question. Even knowing the inquiry might invite Wei Zhi's scorn, he was too curious. He strongly suspected this mask was the very reason two opposing faiths had blended so seamlessly.

Galusha, wearing Wei Zhi's skin, didn't know either. She likewise couldn't figure it out — but to her credit, she held her tongue.

At minimum, the [Folly] follower claimed the moral high ground of silent disdain once again.

What neither could have imagined was that not even Wei Mu himself could have understood this scene — because it hadn't been part of his design. Aph Ros had done this personally.

Though Aph Ros had hoped to achieve faith fusion through [Truth]'s methodology, His recent observations told Him this experiment would produce two new Wild Gods at best — nowhere near fulfilling His dream.

Since it was useless to Him, He might as well plan for His brother Yu Xi.

So, during a dull intermission between cycles, He casually placed a mask on Zangier's face and, through the experiment's mechanisms, propagated a god called "Yu Xi" among the experimental world's inhabitants.

He understood faith. He knew Yu Xi was reclaiming old power. So He wanted to accelerate the condensation of faith through this method.

What He hadn't expected was that as the name of Yu Xi blazed ever brighter in the experimental world, the previously incompatible faiths of [Birth] and [Corruption] actually began to show signs of merging!

This left Aph Ros with one undeniable confirmation: in this [Void] era, faiths truly could merge — and they'd done so under the influence of [Void]'s ruler, [Deceit]!

Even opposing faiths!

And the timing of this act coincided precisely with Cheng Shi's return from San Dales, when he'd noticed the Divinity dripping rate in his [Deceit] container accelerating.

So it had never been someone spreading Yu Xi's name among the players. It was Aph Ros, quietly nurturing an entire town of Yu Xi followers within Dolgod!

If one were to ask where Yu Xi's faithful were most numerous right now, the answer was clear.

Dolgod.

A miraculous place, tied to Cheng Shi in a thousand invisible ways.

...

When he heard this conclusion, Cheng Shi was genuinely dumbfounded.

"You're saying that when Yu Xi's name spread through this experimental town, [Birth] and [Corruption] began to fuse?"

He blinked at Aph Ros, certain He was telling some absurd joke.

Aph Ros nodded with dead seriousness: "Indeed. It was the power of [Deceit] that made it all possible."

Cheng Shi's eye twitched. He rolled his eyes.

'Give me a break!'

'Others might not know the Fun God, but I do.'

'If He could influence faith to this degree, would any other god in this world even have a role to play? They'd have been conned into oblivion long ago.'

Logically speaking, faith fusion was something [Truth] had always been driving. Though Cheng Shi didn't know exactly how faith fused, given that this was fundamentally a [Truth] experiment, wasn't it possible that the active force wasn't [Deceit] at all, but [Truth]?

And only because [Deceit] had recently obtained [Truth]'s Authority did this experiment's results display [Deceit]'s apparent influence on faith fusion?

That was the only explanation Cheng Shi could think of.

Galusha arrived at the same conclusion — after all, she'd met the [Deceit] who was impersonating [Truth]. But the other person present, [Truth] follower Wang Weijin, couldn't for the life of him understand why [Deceit] could serve as a catalyst for faith fusion.

As far as the Tower of Logic's history went, every major [Truth] experiment site had guarded against this meddling god in the Void with utmost vigilance, terrified He'd contaminate the results.

But given what they were seeing now, Wang Weijin was beginning to wonder: could it be precisely because [Truth] experiments had eliminated the [Deceit] variable so thoroughly that the Grand Scholars had never found truth?

"..."

'What does that say?'

'The Tower of Logic — standing proud on the Land of Hope for thousands of years — had bricked up its own road to [Truth] with its own hands?'

'But why would the endpoint of faith fusion lie at [Deceit]'s feet?'

Then Wang Weijin recalled what [Deceit] had said when summoning him:

"Only when you take up this mask might you approach the real truth."

He felt the mask in his coat — one that didn't truly belong to him — and looked at the mask on Zangier's face. His mind roared.

He felt as if he could finally see the road of [Truth] that had always been a blur.

So the catalyst to truth really had been the mask all along!

One had to admit — the slice from another world had been extraordinarily lucky to receive His guidance. But now, all of that fortune belonged to him.

A glint of furtive glee crossed Wang Weijin's eyes before vanishing. He maintained his composure and continued listening to Aph Ros's explanation.

Aph Ros was busy explaining matters to Cheng Shi. He couldn't say exactly why [Deceit]'s power had this effect, but He could describe in detail what had occurred within the experiment.

"When I first propagated Yu Xi's faith, I hadn't considered faith fusion at all. I simply revealed Zangier's mask in the experimental town's sky for a brief moment, then introduced them to the Divine Name Yu Xi.

But what I hadn't expected was that the moment coincided with the experiment's day-night cycle. One of Zangier's eyes hadn't closed while the other opened — and for that instant, the blazing sun and blood moon hung in the sky together, sending every experimental life to their knees.

That very night, the name of Yu Xi spread through the entire city. Only — the interpretations of His nature were wildly different from what I'd envisioned..."

Aph Ros's smile turned playful as He glanced at Cheng Shi:

"They believed Yu Xi was a god who stood above both the blazing sun and the blood moon. That He commanded the cycle of day and night. The sun's protection and the moon's poison were both His tools for governing the world — which is why His revelation brought sun and moon together in the sky.

And so, these experimental lives developed many new faiths beyond worshipping the blazing sun:

Some converted to the blood moon, believing the god's punishment held its own meaning. Others began worshipping the alternation itself, seeing that as the world's true principle. Still others abandoned faith altogether, declaring that if a god existed above both sun and moon, then neither was worth worshipping...

But no matter what they believed in, every single one of them began to worship Yu Xi.

Because they understood: Yu Xi was the true god above all — above even the sun and moon!

And by the time I noticed this development, faith had already begun to fuse.

So, my brother — isn't this experiment telling me that Yu Xi is the answer I've been looking for?"

Aph Ros was considerate enough not to reveal Cheng Shi's identity as Yu Xi. But that consideration still made Cheng Shi's blood run cold.

"..."

Cheng Shi's face went rigid.

'If I say no — would you even believe me?'

Given the way He was practically reaching for His buttons, probably not.

No wonder today's subterfuge had gone so smoothly. He'd been in His crosshairs all along.

Cheng Shi forced two dry laughs and retreated two steps, making his stance abundantly clear through action.

Galusha stood to the side, watching their interaction, and nodded thoughtfully.

Only Wang Weijin remained true to his purpose — still studying Zangier. Taking advantage of Aph Ros's lecture, he feigned close academic scrutiny and inched two more steps forward, arriving directly beneath Zangier's dangling hair. The Hanged Man's head was now within arm's reach.

He believed his mask of [Truth]-obsessed fascination could fool everyone. Little did he know — every person present had their eyes fixed squarely on him.

Cheng Shi had never once looked away from the Doctor. He knew the man's eagerness to find Zangier meant something was afoot, and he was waiting for the moment the trap sprang.

Aph Ros, informed of the situation, watched Wang Weijin without the slightest judgment — only delight. He might as well have been a spectator munching popcorn, practically hoping this [Truth] follower would try something with Zangier.

Galusha was the same. She was too clever. From the moment the prisoner had brought her along to meet Wang Weijin, she'd recognized that Cheng Shi's interest lay not in her but in this [Truth] follower.

Everyone knew [Folly] and [Truth] were diametrically opposed. For a [Folly] follower to travel alongside a [Truth] believer meant one thing: finding flaws in the other.

Yet throughout the journey, their conversations revealed they were clearly allies. An ally you needed a third party to keep an eye on — the only possibility was a traitor.

And Galusha had considerable experience dealing with both [Truth] and traitors. She'd long since read Wang Weijin's intentions and knew he was eyeing Zangier greedily.

Only — since the two principals hadn't called it out, she was happy to stay silent and enjoy the show.

But now the show was getting dull. The stupid prey was about to walk straight into the trap. She decided it was time to act — and in doing so, test what kind of alliance the prisoner had with the others.

So she suddenly spoke up, addressing Wang Weijin as he crept closer to Zangier:

"Say... if I were to devour Zangier right now using Life Extension Department techniques, would I essentially inherit all of Zangier's experience and wisdom regarding the Stars Dagger and faith fusion?"

The moment those words fell, the entire room went taut!

Wang Weijin's gaze hardened. Without a heartbeat's hesitation, he thrust his hand straight at Zangier's scalp, now mere inches away.

...

Consume their flesh, commune with their truth — that was one of the Life Extension Department's techniques.

The former Wei Zhi had used this very method to devour a Grand Scholar's corpse, thereby making contact with the Erudition Presidium that lurked in the shadows.

And now, Wang Weijin was doing exactly what Wei Zhi had done.

In truth, the moment he'd seen Wei Zhi among the party, he'd understood: Cheng Shi had already seen through his intentions. Even if the man wasn't yet certain whether his identity was compromised, precautionary measures were already in place.

Anyone who knew Wei Zhi knew the Reason Association's president excelled at "consuming" people. Bringing him along to visit Zangier was undoubtedly a test.

Yet even having seen through it all, Wang Weijin hadn't called it out. He'd simply played along, feigning indifference, following Cheng Shi's lead all the way here.

So this was a farce in which all three participants knew exactly what the others were doing — yet everyone stayed silent by tacit agreement.

They were all waiting for the right moment.

Cheng Shi held home-field advantage with Aph Ros at his side — naturally unflappable. Galusha had no stake in this; getting closer to the prisoner was prize enough, so her calm was understandable. But Wang Weijin had walked straight into the lion's den. What gave him the courage to pull this stunt under three pairs of watchful eyes?

Because he had his own trump card!

Faith Synchronization!

The Consciousness Faith Department had experimentally proven the entanglement properties of slice consciousness. And Wang Weijin — being 0221's originating "host body," a [Truth] follower who'd schemed against his own slices — naturally knew every department's experiments inside out.

As long as the current slice obtained the knowledge inside Zangier's mind, the countless slices he'd prepared back at the experiment site would simultaneously launch a mental brainstorm, attempting to transmit this "truth" back through redundant entanglement.

This way, he could acquire what he wanted at the cost of a single slice.

And once he possessed Zangier's experience and knowledge, with Wang Weijin's abilities, he could replicate the experiment himself — enter the game personally, build his own Stars Dagger!

Even if the experiment only yielded half its potential, it could still push him toward becoming a Pseudo God!

This was Wang Weijin's entire plan — and the reason he'd bided his time just to get close to Zangier.

Of course, since Cheng Shi was already on guard, everything he was seeing might not be real. He needed to watch for this [Deceit] follower conspiring with Aph Ros to set up a fake Zangier and bait him into revealing himself.

That's why his earlier approach hadn't been purely about studying the experiment — it had also been about verifying authenticity.

Fortunately, after all his time working with Zangier, he recognized the real thing. The experiment before him was genuine — not only real, but showing unprecedented breakthroughs in faith fusion.

How could Wang Weijin not be ecstatic?

Just devouring Zangier — no, he didn't even need to eat all of him. Even a few bites could reveal a wide-open road to [Truth]. And if the secret of faith fusion could be extracted, then someday, with all sixteen faiths converged in one body, he would become the greatest [Truth] follower in history — or perhaps the next [Truth] itself!

A [Truth] far greater than the current one!

And so, when Galusha casually dropped that provocative line, Wang Weijin knew the reckoning had come. He acted without hesitation — hurling down countless tools, erecting walls of [Truth] to stall his opponents for an instant, while simultaneously ripping off Zangier's head and biting into it ravenously.

The scene was beyond insane — bordering on deranged.

True, from Wang Weijin's perspective, his decisiveness was impeccable and his plan was proceeding smoothly. But to any outsider, this looked grotesque.

How to put it — watching a madman wearing a Joker's skin gnaw frenziedly at Zangier's face: those in the know could understand he was extracting truth. Those who didn't would think the Doctor was making out with Zangier.

Cheng Shi desperately wanted to yell "No kissing allowed on the premises!" — but he'd been "silenced."

The instant Wang Weijin made his move, all three others acted simultaneously.

Galusha shot backward at breakneck speed, distancing herself from the chaos. She chose to watch. Especially since this show had been triggered by her own words — the plot felt even more entertaining.

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted. He snapped his fingers.

But the snap wasn't for himself.

He was currently [Deceit]'s priest-class Clown — lacking effective direct-combat options. Normally, he'd switch back to [Fate] and let the Hero of Today handle it. But now, he no longer needed to switch faiths.

One snap to draw everyone's attention, and his shadow instantly donned an assassin mask — transforming into a hybrid of the Another Day Assassin and the Fate Thief. Through shadow-swapping, it slipped into the Doctor's shadow, evading every eye, and silently drove a blade into the Doctor's flank.

Aph Ros moved at the same time.

Go Lis — who'd been absent all day — tore open the tribunal's roof and crashed into view. Countless pitch-black, viscous tentacles rained down like a monsoon, binding Cheng Shi and Galusha tight — yes, those two specifically — in a strangling embrace.

"???"

Tentacles exploded everywhere — yet the only one spared was the madly-gnawing Wang Weijin.

This turn of events, beyond everyone's predictions, made all three players' eyes go wide.

Wang Weijin instantly sensed a trap. But the "truth" in his belly confirmed Zangier was real. He couldn't parse Aph Ros's intentions in the moment, so he could only keep eating while watching — buying time to complete his plan.

Galusha hadn't expected Aph Ros to move against both Cheng Shi and her. But clever as she was, she quickly deduced this had to be a scheme — and the poor [Truth] follower had walked right into it.

'Heh — foolish [Truth].'

As for Cheng Shi, his heart lurched.

He wasn't afraid Aph Ros would betray their "friendship." He'd also guessed Aph Ros had set a trap for the Doctor. What he couldn't predict was what kind of trap.

He was terrified Aph Ros had secretly pulled some unpredictable stunt behind his back — like creating an absurd new god named Yu Xi who somehow reigned above the sun and moon in an experimental town.

"..."

'What is He doing?'

Aph Ros sensed Cheng Shi's confusion and flashed him a gleeful smile:

"Don't worry, my brother.

I told you — this [Truth] follower's covetousness toward Zangier might not be a bad thing.

As for just how good it is...

You'll see shortly."

Hearing that, Cheng Shi panicked even harder.

...

Though somewhat surprised by Cheng Shi's never-before-seen ambush technique, Wang Weijin still blocked the strike.

The instant Shadow Cheng Shi's dagger pierced his flank, an identical stabbing force erupted from inside his abdomen, colliding with the blade head-on. The two forces locked in a stalemate, preventing the dagger from advancing a single inch further.

Immediately after, the Doctor — still single-mindedly devouring Zangier's head — freed one hand and ripped open his own belly. As blood sprayed everywhere, the onlookers saw nothing inside but entrails hollowed out, replaced by arms clutching each other in a tangled mass.

The Faith Stitching Experiment!

The feat O221 had once pulled off behind Zangier's back was now being replicated here by his host body, Wang Weijin.

The arms burst into daylight and shot outward, latching onto the inverted Zangier, frantically tearing at his flesh.

Wang Weijin stood beneath, bathing in blood as he fed. The scene was nothing short of hellish.

Cheng Shi frowned deeply. Playing it steady, he had Shadow Cheng Shi activate the Another Day Assassin's ability to run simulations — but after dozens of attempts, the opponent never failed once. Cheng Shi's expression darkened further.

"You're not the Doctor. Who are you, really?"

Wang Weijin dropped the act. He could already feel the other slices' consciousness beginning to absorb the "truth" from Zangier's mind — proof his experiment had succeeded. He'd merged Zangier's knowledge in plain sight.

He threw back his head and laughed, tossing the gnawed skull aside, and looked at Cheng Shi — drenched in blood — shaking his head with a smile:

"Fate Weaver, I know you're a cautious man. But even the most cautious person slips up against a meticulous plan.

He always held out hope for you. Pity — this time, I can make him accept his fate."

"He"!

The moment Cheng Shi heard that pronoun, he realized his suspicion was correct. This person was absolutely not the Doctor — and "he" referred to the original Doctor he knew.

Given the personality on display, this was more like 0221!

Could the personality that split off during the Doctor's slice-fusion have been a dormant 0221?

"Who are you? A resurrected 0221?" he asked, voice low.

"Sharp guess — but wrong.

I'm not 0221. I'm... Wang Weijin."

With that, Wang Weijin produced a dagger with a sinister smile and without a moment's hesitation plunged it straight at his own throat.

Villains often die from talking too much. But Wang Weijin neither over-talked nor sought survival. Once the objective was complete, he intended to erase himself immediately to prevent further complications.

But this land ultimately belonged to Aph Ros. Without His permission, no one — mortal or otherwise — got to choose between life and death.

Go Lis's tentacles — which had never once restrained Wang Weijin — instantly coiled around every one of his limbs, hoisting him upside down in the air just like Zangier.

Restrained but unperturbed, Wang Weijin looked at the playfully smiling Aph Ros and laughed in return:

"I should thank You, dual Envoy. Were it not for Your arrogance, how could I have achieved my goal?"

But the one I must thank most is you, Cheng Shi.

If you hadn't killed my rebellious slice 0221, perhaps my return wouldn't have come so soon!"

'It's him!'

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted. He finally understood what the name "Wang Weijin" signified.

That wasn't the Doctor's name, nor a split personality. It was the original host body that both the Doctor and 0221 had branched from — the first [Truth] follower, Wang Weijin, who had sliced himself apart only to be killed by 0221.

He hadn't died!

No — more accurately, he'd left failsafes inside his slices. He was the host body, the original architect of the slice experiment. What hidden mechanisms had been edited into those slices? Only he would know.

'No wonder!'

So the Doctor had been compromised.

Fury kindled in Cheng Shi's heart, but his surface remained breezy as he mocked:

"Tch—

A con artist getting outplayed by a [Truth] follower. What a brain the Doctor had.

Oh, my apologies — I forgot. You're the same person.

Strange, then. If you're the same person, how is it that you alternate between stupid and... even more stupid?

Wang Weijin, you don't actually think you've won, do you?

Use that shriveled little brain of yours and think. Standing before you is a dual Envoy of [Birth] and [Corruption], a [Void] walker who subdued 0221, and a [Truth] top-ranker who's obsess... essed with the Life Extension Department's techniques!

Even if 0221 was your glorious past — do you really think you're stronger than he was?

And where does the confidence come from that you can escape unscathed right under our noses?

See what's wrapped around me? Go Lis's tentacles!

Aph Ros would rather bind me than bind you. Care to guess why He let you gnaw Zangier's skull clean?

Can't figure it out?

He's right here. Why not ask Him directly."

Cheng Shi's mockery was at maximum. Wang Weijin did have doubts, but he couldn't detect anything wrong. Unwilling to believe the experiment he'd completed had any flaws, he chalked it up to Cheng Shi throwing a tantrum of impotent rage.

Still, his gaze drifted to Aph Ros. And that's when Aph Ros began to smile.

Though Cheng Shi had spoken with absolute conviction, He knew His brother was actually burning with curiosity about what trap had been set. Yu Xi had simply used Wang Weijin's mouth to ask the question for him. Since it had come to this, it was time for the reveal.

He stepped forward with a light laugh, looked up at the dangling Wang Weijin and Zangier's carcass, and said softly:

"I did nothing."

"?"

"?"

"?"

All three were dumbfounded.

"But it seems you've all overlooked something. Haven't you considered..."

When this Stars Dagger experiment shifted every experimental life's faith to my brother Yu Xi — as the experiment's supporting structure, its very environment — what kind of effect would that have on this [Truth] follower Zangier?

Just as I thought. None of you considered it.

Well then — allow me to reveal the answer!"

Aph Ros threw back His head in uproarious laughter and casually withdrew all of Go Lis's tentacles.

Everyone present — including Wang Weijin and Zangier's remains — was unbound and dumped onto the ground. And before Wang Weijin could recover from his shock, a surge of devout faith suddenly flooded his consciousness, seizing complete control of his thoughts.

He clutched his head in panicked bewilder, yet his mouth moved on its own, pouring out praise:

"Praise be to the great Lord of the World. Praise to the Creator above sun and moon. Praise the protector of all people, the great Lord Yu Xi. Your most devoted follower... Wang Weijin... sends his respects."

With that, Wang Weijin collapsed to his knees and stretched his hands toward the sky in supplication.

"?????"

'Dude — what is even happening?!

Cheng Shi was stupefied. Galusha blinked — then burst out laughing.

"Do you know why Wei Zhi only eats [Truth] followers?"

Because he's afraid of swallowing the wrong faith."

"Precisely," Aph Ros laughed heartily. "The puppet master also shared a piece of wisdom with me: faith is, itself, a form of knowledge.

Zangier used to be an unwavering [Truth] follower. But under the experiment's influence — no, more accurately, under the influence of that mask — his faith had grown muddled.

He wouldn't have gone this way on his own. But the trouble was that every heart harbors desire. He wasn't content being an obedient prisoner. Just like before with the real Stars Dagger, he'd been searching for a way to escape.

And borrowing the Power of Faith from that mask was the first step of his prison-break plan.

I sensed his desire — but I didn't stop him. Because I found it amusing. Not only that — I helped him."

"..."

'Are you sure "helped" is the right word?'

Ever since learning what Aph Ros had done to the Mirror People, Cheng Shi could no longer look at the word "help" with a straight face.

"I snuffed out all his other desires, preserving only his obsession with faith. Through repeated filtration, his desire finally shifted.

In other words, Zangier's muddied faith pool now contained a new element called Yu Xi — one that grew stronger by the day.

So naturally, this young man who assimilated Zangier's faith... had his own faith muddied along with it."

"..." Cheng Shi seemed to understand. He stared, wide-eyed, at the kneeling Wang Weijin. "You mean..."

"Exactly what you're thinking. He's become a devout Yu Xi follower." Aph Ros cast Cheng Shi a meaningful look and smiled. "Let's hope he didn't share the knowledge with his other slices too quickly. Otherwise..."

The great Yu Xi is about to gain a whole new batch of devoted followers."

"..."

'Wait — hold on!'

'The Doctor... became my follower?!'

...

Meanwhile, on the other side.

Wang Mou — the original Doctor, locked in his cell — heard the experiment chamber echoing with chorus-like hymns to "Yu Xi." And despite himself, he too began to chant along.

"Praise be to the great Lord of the World, praise..."

He couldn't understand why a strange devotion had risen in his heart. He didn't know what was happening in Dolgod. But he knew it had to be Wang Weijin who'd been affected — and the effect had cascaded to him.

Though he and Wang Weijin were currently adversaries, it was important to remember: whether it was 0221 or the Doctor, they were all the same kind of slice — slices of a player named Wang Weijin.

So Faith Synchronization worked on them all the same.

...

The Honesty Court fell into a brief silence.

Aph Ros beamed, Galusha brimmed with curiosity, Cheng Shi wore no expression at all — and only Wang Weijin remained kneeling on the ground, still chanting prayers.

The sight of this fanatic was making Cheng Shi's eyelid twitch nonstop.

He studied the scene for a moment, then asked: "Now that Wang Weijin's personality has been affected — will the Doctor... be affected too?"

Aph Ros smiled: "If they share the same origin, then most likely, yes."

"..."

Cheng Shi rubbed his numb cheeks. His expression was something to behold.

Good news: the crisis was resolved. Yu Xi's will represented the Joker's will. Wang Weijin's host personality — now devoted to Yu Xi — would likely never pose a threat again.

Bad news: a new crisis had been born. If his identity were exposed, his equal-footing friendship with the Doctor could very well turn into a superior-subordinate relationship.

On second thought — hissss—

That wasn't exactly bad news either.

More than the Doctor's shifting status, Cheng Shi was concerned about his brain. After all, the current Wang Weijin didn't exactly look as... intelligent as before.

"Does assimilating another faith automatically turn you into a mindless zealot?"

"Not at all," Aph Ros shook His head. With a wave, He sent Wang Weijin off to dreamland. "The fanaticism is influenced by Zangier's memories. The experimental lives' worship of Yu Xi was fervent — years of accumulated frenzy poured into his consciousness all at once. Naturally, it causes a temporary shock.

Once he weathers this period, he'll return to normal. But... only intellectually.

Individual faith compared to collective faith is like a firefly against the full moon. His faith can never revert. The outward intensity of his zeal, however, depends on his personal emotional control."

Hearing this, Cheng Shi felt as though a weight had been lifted.

As long as the intellect was intact, that was fine. What the Jokers needed was the Doctor's brain — the rest didn't matter.

Besides, Yu Xi fanaticism was a bonus, not a penalty.

Even if the Doctor chanted Yu Xi's name every waking moment, the worst that could happen was a bit of personal embarrassment. The world had no shortage of lunatics — and least of all among the Jokers.

With the Wang Weijin situation settled, Galusha — who'd been observing from the side — let her eyes dart around, then smiled at Cheng Shi:

"This so-called Lord Yu Xi — is that you, Prisoner?"

"?"

'No — don't go making things up. That's not me.'

Until Cheng Shi understood why Galusha had been pulled out of the trial, he wasn't ready to deepen his rapport with such a keen Wise Man. He feared those sharp eyes would see too much and become an external variable affecting his judgment.

But before he could deny it, Aph Ros cheerfully answered for him:

"Oh?"

You didn't know?

The one you're following happens to be a divine favored of this era's greatest [Void] ruler — the Envoy of [Deceit], Yu Xi.

If you didn't know his identity and he's just a player to you, then why have you been watching him so closely?"

'The prisoner really is a Servant God?!'

Though she'd had her suspicions, Galusha's pupils contracted and her eyes went wide.

In that instant, every thread of evidence clicked together in her mind!

No wonder the [Truth]-impersonating deity had shown such favor. No wonder he had the power to pull her out of a trial. No wonder he dared defy [Truth] and challenge their experiments. He was like the other gods — a deity himself.

This made everything he'd done perfectly explicable. He and his Benefactor were clearly orchestrating a grand conspiracy.

As for what it was, Galusha couldn't guess. But she was intrigued. She realized the world was far more fascinating than she'd imagined. Now, beyond her dream of destroying [Truth], she harbored a new wish: to witness with her own eyes the moment this conspiracy detonated across the universe.

Watching the glint in Galusha's eyes, Cheng Shi was at a loss for words.

'Great — lately, this Yu Xi skin seems to be glued on for good.'

But since Galusha now knew, he couldn't let her imagination run wild unsupervised.

So he shifted back into Yu Xi's form, put on that eerie grin, turned to appraise Galusha, and said meaningfully:

"Very few know my identity — and most of them are [Folly] followers.

Galusha, if you're truly clever, you know what that means. Without my authorization, do not mention any of this in front of outsiders. Otherwise — I'll send you right back where you came from."

It was an unmistakably hard threat. But Galusha wasn't the slightest bit afraid. She was too busy wondering whether [Deceit] was trying to recruit [Folly] — why else would Yu Xi only reveal his true self to [Folly] believers?

She could see that Yu Xi had pulled her in as an ally. Combined with [Deceit]'s talk of a "backup substitute variable," her safety seemed assured for now.

But having no issue with her standing didn't mean things wouldn't get awkward. Facing two Servant Gods, she wasn't about to throw tantrums. Galusha nodded thoughtfully and agreed with a smile.

With the threat neutralized and new intelligence gained, Cheng Shi finally exhaled.

He pulled out the Lush Horn Crown, casually resurrected the gnawed-up Zangier so it could resume its labors at the Honesty Court, then had an in-depth discussion with the other two about why worshipping Yu Xi had caused [Birth] and [Corruption] to fuse.

But the question was too complex. The two who knew the full picture each had their own agendas. Only Aph Ros kept His gaze locked on Cheng Shi the entire time — the message crystal clear: Yu Xi was undoubtedly one of the keys to realizing His life's aspiration.

Cheng Shi's skin crawled under that stare. Before long, he hastily excused himself on the pretext of investigating [Time] and left Dolgod with Galusha in tow.

As for the Wang Weijin slice — he handed it over to Aph Ros as compensation and let Him feed it to Go Lis.

Someone had to answer for this farce, didn't they?

Back in reality, Cheng Shi promptly parted ways with Galusha — who clearly wanted to ask more questions — and headed alone to the Jokers' gathering place.

After an exhausting day, it was finally time to reap some rewards.

That Dream My Nightmare — no matter how ominous, it was still a [Memory] Servant God relic.

And the Dragon King was most likely still trapped inside that mirror. Day after day, he was running around gathering intelligence and now he had to rescue people too.

How strange — everyone else had the calabash brothers saving grandpa. How come for him, it was grandpa rescuing the calabash brothers?

Save one and there's another to save. Could you Jokers please give me a break?

'Ah, forget it. Dragon King, oh Dragon King — grandpa's coming to save you.'

Cheng Shi moved silently through the dim graveyard. The magic lamp fashioned from a [Deceit] tombstone at the center still cast its feeble glow. Beneath that light — no one. The hushed, murky atmosphere was eerily unsettling.

Fortunately, this wasn't a place just anyone could enter. At least there was no danger. Cheng Shi quickened his pace toward the [Memory] tombstone. Just as he was about to act, his steady instincts kicked in, and he bluffed casually:

"Stop hiding. You think I don't know you're there?"

Do I really have to call you out before you'll show yourself?"

The moment he spoke, a figure slowly materialized before the [Truth] tombstone.

The figure looked somewhat disheveled, but their spirits seemed intact. With a hint of apology, they addressed Cheng Shi's direction:

"Sorry — my negligence during the experiment put the Jokers in a security crisis.

Going forward, I'll review the experimental procedures and reexamine the failsafes those slices left behind, to ensure it doesn't happen again. Though given the current situation, even if their hidden personalities reemerge... it's meaningless now.

Praise Yu Xi."

"..."

'Doctor??'

'What's he doing here?'

Cheng Shi froze. To be honest, his little bluff hadn't been aimed at anyone in particular — well, it had been aimed at the fake Dragon King who'd hidden That Dream My Nightmare. After all, only that entity knew he'd be coming for the mirror.

But instead of smoking out the fake Dragon King, he'd flushed out the Doctor.

'What — it's pitch black in here. What are you even doing?'

...

"What are you doing here?"

Cheng Shi couldn't immediately tell whether the Doctor before him was the real one or the faith-tamed Wang Weijin. But judging by his demeanor, he seemed genuine.

Still, the timing was suspiciously convenient. They'd just dealt with his second personality, and now the real man shows up at the very spot where he was about to retrieve That Dream My Nightmare.

Had he received some tip-off? Or was this just coincidence?

Even if it was coincidence — what was he doing at the Joker Gathering Place at this hour?

Cheng Shi kept his doubts to himself. Rather than immediately confirming the Doctor's identity, he let his eyes dart around and tossed out a bluff:

"Did Zhen Xin call you, or Long Jing?"

The Doctor blinked — clearly not expecting those three had arranged a meeting. He shook his head:

"Nobody called me. I simply felt it was a shame not to attend the Joker Society in person, so I came to look around — to feel the convergence of Joker wisdom.

Even though I retrieved the memories from my slice, the 'me' at the time wasn't truly me...

Praise Yu Xi."

"?"

'Converging wisdom? More like converging scheming!'

Cheng Shi never in a million years expected that answer. He studied the Doctor with an odd expression and said:

"Playing the emotional card right off the bat — are you trying to con me again, you fraud? Really, nobody called you?"

"Truly, nobody. And I wouldn't deceive a friend who saved me from ruin at a time like this.

Cheng Shi — thank you.

I admit I underestimated Wang Weijin. No — it's more accurate to say that 0221's overwhelming power made me overlook the host body.

I know you stepped in. The moment Wang Weijin targeted Zangier, he was doomed to lose to the Jokers.

And you, as the Jokers' convener, would never have allowed his scheme to succeed.

Praise Yu Xi.

I just didn't anticipate your method of disposal would be so... distinctive.

A new faith has been anchored in my consciousness. As one of the slice collective, I can't shake off this influence. When the fanaticism has no outlet, the accumulating obsession makes me blind and inefficient.

So, after freeing myself from Wang Weijin's confinement, I immediately devised a method to balance emotion, efficiency, and religious fervor — namely, ending each sentence with a sincere praise to Yu Xi.

Direct expressions of devotion help me suppress the fanaticism in my consciousness, minimizing its impact.

Praise Yu Xi."

"..."

By this point, Cheng Shi had confirmed this was the genuine Doctor. Nobody else could deliver such bizarre content with a perfectly straight face.

It was truly bizarre.

"Every single sentence?" Cheng Shi's smile was somewhat rigid.

"Ideally, yes. For longer statements, additional praises should be interspersed.

I think the balance between forced-faith side effects and fanaticism venting methods is an excellent research topic in itself. However, since the second-personality research is still incomplete, this will have to wait.

Praise Yu Xi."

"..."

'You know what, Doctor — how about we shelve the second-personality research entirely? You barely started and it nearly dealt the Jokers a killing blow. Thank goodness Wang Weijin was single-mindedly focused on Zangier and held back from leaking what was discussed at the Joker Society.'

'But if you cook up another new personality — who knows whether it'll be friend or foe?'

The Doctor read Cheng Shi's concern and explained gravely:

"Wang Weijin had ulterior motives, but his core idea was sound. A single consciousness can only carry so much capability. Under Fixed Destiny rules, multiple personalities genuinely enhance individual power laterally.

However, after absorbing Zangier's knowledge, I believe the experiment's goal needn't be confined to 'human' personalities. If a [Truth] experiment could fuse a pseudo-divine entity like Zangier's god-status with my own personality, could that fundamentally transcend the bounds of mortal life?

I'd like to try. If it works, it would certainly benefit the Jokers' future.

Praise Yu Xi."

Cheng Shi felt numb. For a moment, he almost told the Doctor: even [Truth] itself believes there's no more truth in this world. Why are you still so obsessed with these not-quite-truths?

Divinity couldn't be stitched together — only dripped. Divine Thrones couldn't be reforged — only legitimized. This world was an elaborately preset "program." Nobody could break its rules to create new gods — not even [Truth]!

Then again, if the world really was a program, it didn't seem to run perfectly. At least there were some bugs.

Like the new authority of Fear that had germinated in the Divinity Germination Experiment. Or Aph Ros's modified Yu Xi experiment that enabled [Birth] and [Corruption] to merge. These results all pointed to one thing: faith was the sole clue to decoding the status quo of divine authority.

So if the Doctor had this much energy, why not channel it into researching the root of faith?

Cheng Shi shared his thoughts with the Doctor in a measured, methodical manner. Wang Mou paused, then mused:

"Your understanding of [Truth] seems to have undergone a qualitative leap. Cheng Shi, did recent experiences give you some sort of epiphany?"

This is indeed a worthy topic. If the Jokers need me to pursue this research, I believe I'm up to the task.

Hmm — I'll start with studying Yu Xi's faith. Leveraging my own condition for efficiency.

Although, if you could introduce me to Lord Yu Xi personally, I imagine efficiency would improve even further.

Praise Yu Xi."

"..."

'You're literally looking at him right now. Feeling any more efficient?'

Cheng Shi's expression was indescribable. He remained noncommittal, merely saying Yu Xi's movements were unpredictable and that even he rarely got an audience. In short: stalling with one word — delay.

The Doctor understood that gods weren't easily met. He said nothing more, thought for a moment, then asked: "You three arranged to... Praise Yu Xi."

'Arranged to praise Yu Xi?'

'That'd make us way too devout...'

Even knowing what the Doctor meant, Cheng Shi desperately wanted to clarify that this had absolutely nothing to do with Yu Xi!

"Oh — we're planning to sneak into [Memory]'s Collection Hall for a look. They haven't arrived yet, probably held up. We'll do it another day.

If there's nothing else, I'll head out?"

He said he was leaving, but his feet didn't budge.

The Doctor naturally caught the dismissal. Having no standing to challenge Cheng Shi's lie, he tactfully took his leave.

Watching the Doctor's retreating figure, Cheng Shi muttered with an inscrutable expression:

"Con artists really don't have a single honest word between them.

He wasn't here to 'feel the Joker Society's atmosphere' at all. He was trying to get closer to the Fun God's will.

Looks like the Doctor truly treats [Deceit] as [Truth]. Otherwise he wouldn't have come back.

Tch. How to put it — a happy accident.

After all, who could've imagined that one day, the world's [Truth] really would be [Deceit]?

[Fate]... sure has a way about it."

Cheng Shi chuckled softly. After confirming no one else was around, he turned and dug up the [Memory] tombstone.

And buried beneath it was indeed a mirror. Judging by the frame's patterns — it was That Dream My Nightmare!

Cheng Shi was overjoyed — yet dug with utmost care. He was terrified the fake Dragon King had booby-trapped it, leaving the mirror face-up so he'd accidentally look into it and get caught. So he excavated from the side the entire time.

Only after unearthing the entire mirror did he prop it up by the back, rap on it with a peculiar expression, and mutter:

"Hey — Dragon King, you in there?"

Grandpa's here to save you. Say something."

As expected — no response.

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow, rolled his eyes, and sent his shadow scurrying to the mirror's other side. It squeaked out a single syllable:

"Squeak."

And then, with deep satisfaction, he declared:

"Well, since you answered — grandpa has to rescue his grandson no matter how tired he is, right?"

...

Cheng Shi's operation wasn't really about taking advantage of the Dragon King.

He couldn't deny the thought had crossed his mind — but the primary motive was rescue.

His first attempt was to have his shadow look into the mirror!

Shadow Cheng Shi was now an intelligent life form enlightened by [Truth]. Logically, he should be capable of triggering the mirror. The cautious Cheng Shi would never look into the mirror himself, so his shadow was the natural first choice.

In Cheng Shi's subconscious, he didn't consider Shadow Cheng Shi an independent individual. He treated it more as a convenient "prop" — after all, it had been born from the Clown Substitute.

So he reasoned: if the rules Zhen Xin described were correct, then having Shadow Cheng Shi look into the mirror to swap out the Dragon King, then using his own talent and dice to perform a reversal — wouldn't that perfectly solve the problem of That Dream My Nightmare having consumed the Dragon King?

But reality proved this scheme overly fanciful.

When Shadow Cheng Shi stood before the mirror, That Dream My Nightmare showed zero response. This meant either Zhen Xin's rules were wrong, or shadows couldn't trigger the mirror's mechanism. Since Cheng Shi didn't dare test it himself, he could only pocket the mirror and brainstorm later.

Over the next several days, Cheng Shi sat atop the rest area's rooftop with the mirror, racking his brain — not only about how to crack the mirror, but why the Dragon King had been trapped inside in the first place.

One thing was certain: the Dragon King had definitely gone in. Otherwise, he'd never have allowed a fake Dragon King to "inherit" everything and walk around under his identity.

But what was his reason for entering?

After much deliberation, Cheng Shi could only arrive at one answer: whether the Dragon King entered willingly or was lured by a Nightmare Shadow, the mirror must have contained something he found irresistible!

But this mirror had fallen into his hands before the Joker Society. If the Dragon King were truly interested, he needn't have waited until after the gathering to act.

So two possibilities explained the timing:

Either what interested the Dragon King only appeared after the Joker Society — and since everyone had conveniently looked into the mirror during the meeting, this suspiciously designed coincidence likely meant That Dream My Nightmare had effects beyond merely reflecting one's innermost desires. The Dragon King had concealed this, and those effects probably related to memory. The Dragon King had gone in specifically seeking those memories.

Or the Dragon King had foreseen the mirror's danger. Before coming clean, he hadn't dared enter alone. Only after letting the Jokers learn of the mirror's existence did he have the courage to investigate — because he knew his fellow con-artist Jokers would definitely come to rescue him.

Not out of "goodness" — but because these schemers also wanted to know the secrets he'd glimpsed.

Either way, the Dragon King's manipulation of the other Jokers was a fact.

And it was an open scheme at that. Even though Cheng Shi had figured this out, he still had to follow the Dragon King's script, because he too was interested in the mirror's secrets!

Think about it — Li Jingming had taken on the most dangerous part alone. All they had to do was rescue him, then trade on that "debt of gratitude" for everything he'd seen. Zero risk for full intel. Even if some of those secrets concerned Cheng Shi himself, there were still four others' secrets to gain.

No matter how you looked at it, it was a net gain...

Still, it was infuriating. The Dragon King had played him again. That crafty Taoist priest really couldn't lose no matter whose hands he was in.

'What a grandson!'

But how to proceed?

The mirror needed a living being to trigger it. He couldn't very well go back to Dolgod for this.

Sure, Dolgod had inexhaustible life. But if Aph Ros learned That Dream My Nightmare was in his possession, that razor-sharp mind would immediately realize the earlier visit hadn't been for explanations at all — just to find leads on the mirror.

That would undo all the "reconciliation" — and he'd have to waste more breath talking his way out.

Unacceptable!

Nor could he pray for a trial just to grab an NPC for help.

Not that he couldn't — but caution demanded otherwise.

Right now, trials had too obvious a target. Once inside, you couldn't tell friend from foe among teammates, and divine wills were unpredictable. Bringing the mirror along would be walking into a trap — the most reckless option imaginable.

If trials were out and he couldn't use allies as guinea pigs — forget secrecy, whoever swapped the Dragon King out would get sucked in themselves, making the whole exercise pointless.

An enemy would be perfect — but where to find willing victims right now...

[Oblivion] followers?

Not impossible. But if he was going to use That Dream My Nightmare to scheme against an [Oblivion] follower, he might as well aim straight at Herobos. If a [Memory] artifact could trap this [Oblivion] Envoy...

Wait!

An Envoy?

Right — why limit himself to players? Gods were the ideal target!

That Dream My Nightmare was a "demon-revealing mirror" that exposed the desires in one's heart. True, it was only a fragment of Memory Delusion, mere Servant God relic — but what if it worked on gods?

Then he could peer directly into a god's mind!

Like [Deceit]. Like [Fate]!

Even if it couldn't reveal [Void]'s ambitions, he could blame the whole thing on the Dragon King afterward — claim the Dragon King had begged him to do this to save him. Even if the gods got angry, they'd have to pull the Dragon King out of the mirror first before passing judgment, right?

Once the Dragon King was out, what was a little injustice?

Besides — the injustice wouldn't even fall on him!

'I'm a genius!'

Cheng Shi's eyes blazed. He was ready to act — but the surge of excitement immediately stalled, because he faced a new choice:

Whom should he pray to?

Whether [Deceit] or [Fate], Cheng Shi wanted to glimpse their deepest intentions.

If That Dream My Nightmare truly worked, reflecting [Deceit]'s desires would be an offensive move — aiding future planning. Reflecting [Fate]'s desires would be defensive — useful for self-preservation.

Both paths were acceptable. But from another angle...

The Dragon King was also a [Deceit] follower. When it came time to shift blame, even if the Fun God held Cheng Shi accountable, He'd most likely still fish the Dragon King out.

But [Fate] was different. He had zero connection to Li Jingming. [Void]'s wrath would definitely land on the Dragon King's head. Though that had its upside too — thanks to Fixed Destiny's protection, Cheng Shi himself would escape unscathed.

One option meant predictable self-suffering. The other meant the Dragon King catching trouble as expected. The choice was obvious.

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow and decisively pulled out...

The dice of [Fate].

He was going to see [Deceit] one more time!

"As grandpa, I have to look out for my grandson. I really am too kind."

With that, Cheng Shi gripped the dice and chanted devoutly:

"Cannot distinguish true from false, need not debate void from real.

O great god of [Deceit], your devout — wait wait wait—"

Whoosh — and Cheng Shi vanished.

...

Never in his wildest dreams did Cheng Shi imagine that the one who summoned him was neither [Deceit] nor [Fate] — but...

[Chaos]!

Granted, [Chaos] was the Fun God. But being summoned under a different guise had only happened once before — the last time the two sides of [Void] had gone to war.

So now what?

Cheng Shi's heart lurched. Something felt off — beyond his calculations. He looked up nervously at the massive hand of roiling yellow mist that hung above the temple, and said, expression priceless:

"My Benefactor... the two of you aren't still... fighting, are you?"

The colossal hand's fingers fell one by one, rhythmically tapping against the fog, its tone bizarre as it replied:

"Hmm~

Knowing we're in combat, and you still chose this moment to offend Him?

I was wondering why His divine power suddenly went berserk. Are you trying to make sure I lose this [Void] civil war?

You didn't seriously expect Him to relay the Clown's prayer while simultaneously launching an attack against me, did you?"

"..."

Cheng Shi's face crumbled.

'My mistake, my mistake. Please stop with the sarcasm, my Benefactor. How was I supposed to know you two could fight this long?'

'What's happening — is this the final showdown?'

'You can't actually be trying to settle all your differences in one fight — winner takes all?'

The chaotic giant hand seemed to read Cheng Shi's thoughts. It waved clear the fog before it and scoffed:

"Tch—

Simple-minded. Just like your Benefactor.

That is indeed what He's thinking. [Fate] has gone mad. He probably knows certain things can no longer convince even Himself, so He's using this as a final reckoning with me.

Tch — does He really think being the era's master makes Him invincible?

This era has two masters. And besides, apart from 'Him' who sits above the universe's experiment — what kind of masters are the rest?"

'Can no longer convince Himself?'

'What is [Fate] trying to convince Himself of?'

Cheng Shi's head filled with question marks. "My Benefactor, didn't you and [Time] erase [Fate]'s memories of the real universe? Then why—"

"I wasn't talking about that. And you needn't know the details.

Just stay away from Him for now. He's hit His mood swings — extremely volatile.

So, what brings you back this time?"

"I..."

Cheng Shi suddenly hesitated.

The timing couldn't have been worse. He hadn't known the [Void] war was still raging. If he used That Dream My Nightmare on the Fun God now and something went wrong due to [Memory]'s power, would the [Deceit] main body — currently locked in battle with [Fate] — suffer consequences?

That single beat of overthinking froze him in place — moving was wrong, not moving was wrong. In the end, he decided to make up some excuse, stall the Fun God, and wait until [Deceit]'s main body summoned him before executing the plan.

But just as he opened his mouth to speak, the giant hand spoke first.

He'd forgotten something: the Fun God could read minds.

"Tch—

Seeing as a certain someone still has a shred of devotion... take out your little mirror."

"!!!!!"

Cheng Shi jolted. A full-body shiver ran through him. He stared up at his Benefactor, wide-eyed and helpless — his expression so absurd it was comical.

Bathed in the chaotic radiance, he looked exactly like a clown.

Not the profession — but the real thing.

Still, even a clown had his merits. At the very least, he'd never let the stage go cold. So Cheng Shi's mind sparked, and in a flash, he converted mountains of embarrassment into pure flattery:

"Praise the great god of [Deceit]! It is Your selfless protection that allows all Your followers to follow with devotion!

If the Dragon— if Li Jingming knew that You could still spare a hand to save him even while battling another god, he would be immensely grateful."

"Oh? So you're saying you brought this mirror to me solely to rescue another follower of mine?"

"Of course...

not!"

Cheng Shi straightened his expression and began bullshitting with a completely straight face:

"Not entirely!

When I learned this [Memory] creation had trapped Your follower, I feared it was a dirty trick [Memory] aimed at You. He exploited Li Jingming's greed for memories and set a trap — and the true target couldn't possibly be His own follower; it could only be You, my Benefactor!

That's why, the moment I obtained the mirror, I brought it to You — so You could strangle every conspiracy before it surfaces.

This is what any devout follower of [Deceit] would do. I merely followed the devotion in my heart. It's nothing worth mentioning — certainly not worth... a reward."

The instant he finished, the giant hand exploded apart and reformed into a pair of eyes, swirling with chaos and starlight.

Those eyes angled upward at the corners, regarding Cheng Shi with a half-smile.

"Oh? You want a reward too?"

Does a certain someone actually think I don't know why he's here?"

Cheng Shi shrank back, muttering under his breath:

"I wasn't thinking that..."

But divine gifts are like corporate incentive programs — they genuinely make followers work more devoutly and efficiently."

Then, feigning a verbal slip, he waved his hands:

"Ah — please don't misunderstand, my Benefactor. That just came out. I was reminded of a management theory from the real world."

The eyes grew even more amused. They fixed on their follower and scoffed again:

"Then you don't want one."

Cheng Shi blinked. Instant pivot: "My Benefactor, you've misunderstood. When I said 'I wasn't thinking that,' I meant I never imagined You didn't know why I came... As for the rest..."

He peeked at the Fun God's expression, ready to steer with the wind at a moment's notice. But the Fun God snorted, cut off his daydream, and put the choice squarely before him:

"So do you want it, or not?"

???

'Wait — there actually is a reward?'

'This better not be a scam!'

'Could That Dream My Nightmare actually be useful to the Fun God? Otherwise, why this attitude?'

Cheng Shi froze. In the "should I be greedy" challenge, he capitulated in one second flat. He squeezed out a devout fake smile and declared with rock-solid conviction:

"Yes!"

"Tch—

And who's the greedy one here?"

With that, the eyes blinked twice and directly pulled That Dream My Nightmare from Cheng Shi's personal space. And the instant Cheng Shi saw the mirror, he knew he'd been wrong.

Dead wrong!

How could he have trusted the Fun God's words?

This wasn't any damn reward — this was punishment!!

He couldn't blame himself for thinking so. The mirror now floating in midair had its reflective surface pointed squarely at him. And within that glass, Li Jingming — whom he hadn't seen in ages — was staring back at him with a complicated expression.

Cheng Shi tried to speak but found his mouth wouldn't open. He could only listen as the Dragon King in the mirror addressed him:

"I imagined a hundred ways you might come to find me. The one thing I never imagined was that you'd dare face this mirror head-on.

It seems I underestimated how much the Jokers mean to you. For that, I apologize. But I believe the secrets inside are worthy of your courage.

I must warn you, though: the paths inside are far too complex. Choose only one direction and walk it to the end. Otherwise, you may lose yourself in there and never return.

Remember — you must walk out. If you don't, even if I stand before the mirror again, I'll never be able to see you."

With that, the Dragon King in the mirror reached out his hand toward Cheng Shi.

Cheng Shi's gaze hardened. Instinct screamed at him to retreat — but he discovered that not only couldn't he speak, he couldn't move either. He could only watch as that hand passed straight through the glass and seized him!

The next second, in bewildered shock, everything inside the mirror rushed toward him, magnifying at blinding speed — like a tidal wave of [Memory] — and swallowed him whole.

BOOM—

The Clown was gone.

Watching That Dream My Nightmare devour His follower, those eyes reformed into the murky yellow hand. It pinched the tiny mirror between two fingers and tossed it carelessly into the Void.

"That Dream My Nightmare... what a fitting name — 'That Dream, My Nightmare.'

Whose dream is it? And whose nightmare?

The Clown is bold indeed, thinking to use this thing on me.

Heh — I wouldn't mind looking into it. But...

Would they dare to see what's inside?"

...

Silence. Eerie silence. So silent that only the sounds of breathing and heartbeat remained.

When Cheng Shi's consciousness flooded back, his first thought wasn't where he was — but what the Fun God was up to now.

Why had He thrown him into the mirror?

For a fleeting moment, Cheng Shi even wondered whether the Fun God he'd just seen was actually [Memory] in disguise. Otherwise, he truly couldn't fathom why He'd use him to swap for the Dragon King.

Was this a rescue — or imprisonment?

It surely couldn't be a "reward"...

With that doubt lingering, Cheng Shi slowly opened his eyes. A sliver of faint light squeezed through his eyelids first, followed by a cascade of intricate engravings filling his vision.

The strange patterns were deeply familiar. He immediately recognized them as identical to the etchings on the back and frame of That Dream My Nightmare — just magnified countless times over.

Recalling how the mirror had rushed at him moments ago, he wondered: could there be an even larger mirror inside this world within the mirror?

He cautiously stepped back and looked up — only to realize it wasn't a mirror at all.

It was a wall. A wall that pierced the clouds like the barriers of Truth — a sky-reaching mirror-wall with no visible top!

And this wasn't the only one. Behind him, to his left, to his right, even around the corners — walls everywhere!

Cheng Shi was stunned. After surveying his surroundings, he reached a conclusion: he was standing at the starting point of an enormous labyrinth.

No wonder the Dragon King had warned him about "getting lost inside." So the secrets within That Dream My Nightmare were hidden in this maze.

It made sense. Even [Memory]'s trials took place in dream labyrinths where seekers searched for exits. A labyrinth concealed within a [Memory] creation wasn't exactly far-fetched.

But!

The labyrinth's existence might be reasonable — but the Fun God's actions were not!

Why throw him into the mirror?

Originally, he could've waited safely outside for the Dragon King to emerge, then traded that "debt of gratitude" for all the secrets — zero risk. Now? The secrets were still out of reach, but the risk had arrived ahead of schedule.

What was the point of this?

Was it because his prayer over the dice had offended [Fate], causing [Fate] to surging power that put the Fun God at a disadvantage in the [Void] civil war — and so He punished Cheng Shi under the guise of a reward?

'Seriously, my Benefactor — aren't you being a bit petty?'

'When I used to blaspheme your twin, you weren't like this at all. You laughed and had a great time.'

'How come now that it's your problem, you blame me?'

'Could you maybe learn from your twin's one good quality and be a little more forgiving?'

Cheng Shi felt numb. His first instinct was to "break out." He thought maybe the talent [Time] had granted him could rewind him to before he'd entered the mirror. But that involved another question: if Shadow Cheng Shi snapped his fingers and escaped, would the real him follow?

Probably not. So, playing it steady, he first swapped faiths with Shadow Cheng Shi, then snapped his own fingers.

Snap—

Nothing happened.

"..."

As expected — against divine will, mortal resistance was futile.

He checked with Brother Mouth too — no response. For a moment, the Clown seemed to have lost all his strength.

With a helpless sigh, he began investigating his surroundings.

He was already here. What else could he do? Whether this was punishment or a so-called reward, under His gaze, surely He wouldn't let him die inside a mirror?

With safety more or less guaranteed, he might as well see what secrets the labyrinth held.

Cheng Shi's fingertips traced the enormous wall's engravings. He raised an eyebrow. 'Nice stone. Could take some home and renovate the warehouse.'

Yet no matter how he slashed, hacked, or blasted the walls with lightning, they didn't budge — completely immune to external force. His jailbreak aspirations were officially extinguished.

So the labyrinth could only be walked.

His gaze sharpened. He began circling the starting point, and after mapping out several forks, he finally discovered what the secrets inside That Dream My Nightmare actually were.

Just as he'd suspected — the mirror held every Joker's memories!

Because at the starting point's perimeter, across the seven available paths, he saw the silhouettes of six Jokers — himself included!

But these weren't physical forms. They were more like memory phantoms in dream-bubbles — oblivious to Cheng Shi's approach, each immersed in some scene from their past, performing their histories like actors on an invisible stage. They seemed to be pointing the way for whoever explored the labyrinth, awaiting the seeker's decision.

Seeing this, Cheng Shi understood: following any fork would reveal that person's memories.

So the Dragon King had indeed hidden information from the start. That Dream My Nightmare didn't just reveal one's innermost desires — it also preserved the memories of whoever gazed into it. The Dragon King had most likely ventured inside specifically for these memories.

And he'd said the only way out was to choose a single path...

So whose memories had the Dragon King chosen?

Cheng Shi frowned — not only wondering what dangers lurked in these memory paths, but also calculating whether to maximize his gain by picking a different path than the Dragon King's.

Before him, the current fork led to the Dragon King's memories.

He saw a young Dragon King practicing in a Taoist temple. The scene showed little Li Jingming sitting at a table with his master, transcribing the deeds of those who came before.

Logically, Li Jingming would never retrace his own past — it was his lived experience; he had no need for That Dream My Nightmare to remember it.

So choosing this path would definitely not conflict with the Dragon King's choice.

But... risking danger to explore a little Taoist priest's past — would that even be meaningful?

Apparently not.

He wasn't a [Memory] follower. He didn't practice his will by commemorating the past. So Cheng Shi studied the scene with an odd expression, watched it loop — little Dragon King finishing a page only to start recopying the same page — quietly freeloading the page's contents, and moved on.

The second fork held Zhen Xin.

This Zhen Xin was also a child. He had to admit — little Zhen Xin looked far cuter than the current version. But the memory on display was anything but cute.

Little Zhen Xin sat at a table, brow furrowed in thought, while behind her stood the silent, wordless An Jing.

Cheng Shi, who knew this history, immediately recognized this was the day Zhen Xin was adopted — and the beginning of her suffering.

He suddenly thought of himself. His expression turned inscrutable. He sighed and walked away.

The remaining forks showed: Long Jing drenched in sweat under his parents' coaching, the Doctor languishing in an unremarkable laboratory, and Mi Laozhang ostracized by colleagues on a lonely cemetery night patrol.

Facing these Jokers' pasts, Cheng Shi gave each only a glance, committing the scenes to memory — but never chose to walk any path to its end.

Until, after who knew how many rounds of hesitation, he finally stood before the fork bearing his own silhouette. Like a traveler afraid to go home, he watched Old Jia pointing at an adoption agreement, smiling awkwardly:

"No, no — you have a name. You have a name. I already picked one for you."

In that moment, Cheng Shi smiled. Memories surged like a tide, crashing against a dam called longing. The water overflowed, spilling as teardrops.

He was smiling — yet a single tear fell. It traced his cheek, and he spoke in unison with Old Jia:

"Cheng Shi. Cheng from Cheng Jia. Shi from honesty."

This was the first time, outside the Dream Peeping Ranger's dreamscape, that he'd seen Old Jia again. Even if the Old Jia before him wasn't real — it was enough...

A single fleeting glance was balm enough for a lifetime of longing.

He watched. The tear hit his shoe. Cheng Shi turned and walked away.

'If I want to see him, this world offers plenty of ways. The reason I don't is because I refuse to let this absurd game taint anything connected to him.'

'Yes — I miss him. But this is decidedly not a "reward."'

...

Before long, Cheng Shi arrived at the seventh fork.

No silhouette stood before this path. It was pitch-black and fathomlessly deep — one look and his gaze plunged into boundless darkness, as if it led to a devouring abyss.

Anyone with eyes would avoid this fork that bore no trace of [Memory]. But Cheng Shi was convinced this was the real answer.

The reason the Fun God had sent him in!

The Fun God would never have thrown him into the mirror just to swap for Li Jingming. There had to be deeper purpose. Though he didn't yet know what it was, the answer felt close.

Consider: inside a [Memory] creation, why would there be a path that seemingly led toward [Void]?

Blackness, stillness, the unknown — weren't these the very characteristics of the Void?

[Existence]'s marvels didn't manifest this way. Like the Cracks of [Existence], they were kaleidoscopic, dazzling, mesmerizing. Only [Void] was this hollow, lifeless, devoid of meaning.

Cheng Shi stood at the fork for a long while, brow deeply furrowed as though pondering whether to enter.

But in truth, he'd already entered!

Not his real body — but Shadow Cheng Shi.

When darkness stretched unbroken, a shadow with built-in camouflage became the uncrowned king of the dark. The moment Cheng Shi first circled past these forks, he'd guessed what the Fun God's intended choice was. His shadow had long since slipped into the seventh path to scout ahead.

His furrowed brow now was only puzzlement over whether this path had any end at all — because the shadow had been walking for a very long time.

The seventh path held nothing besides the mirror-walls on either side. Ahead: void darkness. Behind: the same. Not even a single branching turn. Arrow-straight — hardly fitting for a labyrinth.

After walking long enough, the unchanging environment nearly convinced Cheng Shi he was treading in place.

Yet every time he reversed direction and tried going back, the exit eluded him too. So he steeled himself and pressed forward once more.

Time crawled on. His frown deepened. He even began to doubt his choice — maybe he'd overthought it, and the Fun God had no deeper motive at all, just wanting him to pilfer some memories from this [Memory] creation.

But what if the answer lay just two steps further, and he gave up right at the threshold? That would be the ultimate clown move.

So, tangled in frustration, Cheng Shi gritted his teeth and marched on.

When the unchanging darkness grew tiresome, his real body wandered to the other fork entrances to rinse his eyes on those memory phantoms. When the monotony of exploration became suffocating, he made the shadow run, jump, cartwheel, and even handstand-walk. When he lost all sense of how long he'd been going, he traced the wall engravings and counted how many times the patterns cycled...

In short — anything that killed time and diverted attention, he did.

Yet the path ahead remained black. Seemingly endless.

At this point, Cheng Shi felt he'd been set up.

His own devotion had trapped him!

This didn't look like a road to secrets. It looked more like the ellipsis option among seven choices — fundamentally meaningless.

The shadow stopped, back against the mirror-wall, panting heavily. Cheng Shi's real body likewise leaned against a wall at the starting point, pondering how to break the deadlock.

Both Cheng Shis ran their fingers over the engravings, brows knotted. But breakthroughs often arise from details noticed by accident. When the magnified texture of the engravings' uneven grooves registered under his fingertips, a flash of inspiration blazed through Cheng Shi's mind. His eyes flew open.

Grooves!

He immediately turned to study the towering mirror-wall, running his hands along its patterns. Though the labyrinth walls were indestructible, the presence of grooves meant something: the surface offered handholds!

And if you could climb — was it possible that the labyrinth's exit wasn't at the end of the ground path, but above the walls?!

How else could a straight line qualify as a labyrinth?

Yes — this had to be it!

Excitement surging, Cheng Shi adjusted Shadow Cheng Shi — which had been in assassin form for scouting efficiency — switching to a warrior mask to become the Hero of Today. Gripping the grooves with both hands, the shadow began scaling the wall.

He climbed fast. Before long, the path below vanished from sight. But the wall above was equally endless. He climbed until even a Hero of Today's stamina showed signs of flagging before stopping mid-ascent, clinging to the heights, lost in thought once more.

The labyrinth's deadlock had returned — only now it had graduated from one dimension to two.

He looked up at the infinitely high wall disappearing into darkness, then left and right along the original path. Darkness pressing in from all sides formed a cage, trapping Cheng Shi where he hung.

The earlier excitement evaporated, replaced by that familiar deep furrow.

He weighed his options again and again but couldn't commit. From what he could see, the walls weren't the answer either. So how was he supposed to escape this labyrinth?

His steady instincts began rising. The idea of choosing one of the memory paths took root. He even stepped past a few of the memory phantoms to peek at what lay beyond those forks:

Ordinary labyrinths — nothing like the seventh path.

He guessed that following those labyrinth routes would reveal different memories of the chosen person, and those memories' clues would lead to the exit. But the seventh path offered no clues — only endless darkness and two unchanging walls.

What to do?

Hmm? Wait.

The other wall?

Cheng Shi frowned. He drove Shadow Cheng Shi to leap from the high wall to the opposite one — and continued climbing laterally for another half hour. Still nothing.

He was lost again. But this time, the bewilderment came and went quickly, because the feel of the grooves under his fingertips sparked yet another idea.

If the seventh path was also a labyrinth, it had to have clues. The darkness didn't look like a clue — so the clue could only be the walls themselves.

He'd first assumed the walls were climbable and theorized the exit was somewhere above. But what if the walls themselves were the labyrinth?!

What if the engravings on the walls formed a traceable pattern?

He'd run his fingers over them hundreds of times during ground exploration and wall-climbing, finding only repetitive cycles — nothing special. But who could guarantee that when the wall became a labyrinth, those engravings wouldn't form something?!

After all, labyrinth elements were nothing more than straight and perpendicular paths combined with forks in different directions — also a kind of repetitive cycle!

With this realization, Cheng Shi tried again. Shadow Cheng Shi stopped climbing upward and instead began circling the area, piecing together the engravings' pathways to see if they formed a giant labyrinth.

And after untold hours of effort, the shadow hanging on the high wall and the real Cheng Shi standing at the starting point simultaneously broke into wide grins and laughed aloud.

Found it!

The seemingly infinite walls were in fact one massive labyrinth diagram. The true labyrinth wasn't actually endless — it was countless identical labyrinths tiled together, creating the illusion of forever-repeating patterns.

Following the labyrinth's guidance, Shadow Cheng Shi quickly located the center of this wall-labyrinth — an ordinary-looking groove. Even when Cheng Shi pressed his hand against it, nothing happened.

But Cheng Shi knew [Memory]'s puzzles always worked this way. Even the exit would never be hidden in plain sight — just like [Memory]'s trials, where the dreamer had to realize they were inside a memory.

But the mirror-wall was an inanimate object. It had no memories. So Cheng Shi — who possessed no [Memory] power — devised a crafty workaround:

He began reciting the pasts of every Joker he knew to the "exit," while simultaneously recalling his own past in his heart.

Making others' memories "public" while keeping one's own memories hidden — this was the closest thing to [Memory] he could manage!

Whether because the "passcode" was right, or because individual memories genuinely resonated with the labyrinth's [Memory] power — as Cheng Shi kept reciting, the corresponding section of wall suddenly caved inward. The shattered surface erupted with violent [Memory] energy that engulfed Shadow Cheng Shi and plunged him into the unknown space beyond.

"!!!!!"

Sensing this, Cheng Shi... went blank.

"Wait — are you kidding me?"

What about me?

How am I still standing here?"

...

Setting aside how Cheng Shi was tearing his hair out in That Dream My Nightmare's labyrinth — Shadow Cheng Shi was having quite the fantastical adventure.

He'd fallen into a space he'd never seen — one that would have been unimaginable even before seeing it.

It was like a cavern — a bizarre space carpeted with crystals!

Enormous crystalline formations protruded from every corner of the cave — some long, some short, some brilliant, some dim. Even the ceiling and the ground were crystal, though in darker shades that, at a glance, could pass for rough black stone.

The place was self-luminous. Every cluster of crystals refracted shimmering light. But what glimmered across their surfaces wasn't merely physical radiance — it was also the faintest breath of [Memory].

Upon closer inspection, every crystal face — bright or dark — showed fleeting dream-like visions, like a revolving lantern. But they weren't the memories of any single individual.

Cheng Shi was thunderstruck. He stood rooted, scanning everything around him. Before long, he realized that compared to [Memory]'s Collection Hall, this place was the true "hall" of memories!

Because every inch of ground here erupted with memory. The cavern was like a misprinted history book, recording a jumbled past that stretched from the Land of Hope to the real world.

Only these fragments were chaotic, trivial, and dull. According to the elite [Memory] followers, this sort of thing wasn't worth remembering at all.

Within minutes, Cheng Shi had witnessed 12 fistfights, 37 affairs, 44 betrayals... and far more countless mundane moments of ordinary life — some so bland that they left zero impression even after viewing.

Exactly like the knowledge a teacher scrawled on a blackboard at school — seen and immediately forgotten.

He couldn't help but reflect: this was true history. What the world remembered as epic heroic history was merely spray kicked up by the vast sea of memory — visible only because the droplets had left the surface.

Yet what people always overlooked was that spray was the most insignificant part of the ocean. It was the intertwined lives of countless ordinary people that formed the so-called past of the world, gathering into this sea called memory.

Cheng Shi sank into the "world's past" and couldn't pull free. Before long, a violent wave of dizziness slammed him to his knees, retching.

His consciousness blurred. His cognition wavered. His emotions detached. When his memory became contaminated with too much foreign clutter and trivia, he began to grow confused.

No — "confused" wasn't quite right. "Stupefied" was closer. He froze. The retching motion locked in place. His entire being became dull and sluggish.

His human reason was slowly dissolving. His emotional core as a living being was evaporating thread by thread. His body began to change — crystallizing. Even though this Cheng Shi was only a shadow, crystalline veins crept across the pitch-black skin.

The real Cheng Shi suffered the same fate.

He collapsed at the labyrinth's starting point, his face covered in crystal scales. The crystallization was rapid — in an instant, his eyes, nose, and ears simultaneously turned to crystal.

But just as the crystals were about to consume his mouth, those lips somehow resisted the invasion and moved on their own, unleashing a soul-piercing roar:

"Who are you?!"

The sudden shout shattered the silence of both spaces — like a thunderclap exploding inside Cheng Shi's consciousness, jolting him out of his dazed stupor.

His body seized. Terror flooded through him. Mustering every last shred of strength, he crushed the smoke capsule in his sleeve, merging with the mist to wrench free of the crystallized state.

On the other side, once the real body was liberated, Shadow Cheng Shi clenched both fists and flexed every muscle, shattering the crystalline shell covering him entirely — reclaiming himself.

"Phew—"

The smoke hadn't yet dispersed, but Cheng Shi emerged from the mist and collapsed on the ground, spent.

Shaken by his survival after disaster, he looked up at the labyrinth walls and said, still trembling:

"I am Cheng Shi..."

I am... Cheng Shi!

Thank you, Brother Mouth.

If not for you, I'd have fallen straight into [Memory]'s trap."

The Fool's Lips didn't acknowledge the sincere gratitude. Instead, they sneered sarcastically:

"Weren't you enjoying all that gossip? Why'd you stop watching?"

"..."

'Not anymore. Definitely not anymore.'

Cheng Shi's expression froze. He laughed dryly: "Nothing worth watching. Gets old after a while..."

"Oh, now you realize you watched too much? Where was your caution earlier?"

And don't think I was saving you. I was saving myself."

Tch.

'A sharp tongue with a tofu heart, through and through.'

Cheng Shi knew exactly whom Brother Mouth had really been saving. But caught "in the wrong" and just rescued to boot, he wasn't in a position to argue.

So he smiled apologetically and seized the chance to ask:

"Brother Mouth, you're finally talking to me! So — where is that place?"

"What — been hanging around [Folly] followers so long you've gone stupid yourself?"

You saw it with your own eyes and still can't figure it out?

Everyone says [Memory] always plucks the finest pearls from the Sea of Memory and stores them in His Collection Hall.

But have you ever wondered — where do the memories that [Memory] didn't select as collection pieces end up?"

"!!!"

Of course Cheng Shi had wondered — he'd even thought of it the instant he entered that space. He'd only asked Brother Mouth for confirmation. And now the theory was verified!

This was the dumping ground for "rejected" memories.

In other words — this was the world's Memory Junkyard!

That's why the memories here were so vast, dull, and ordinary — utterly lacking interest. They were the pasts that mortals — no, even gods — deemed unremarkable.

But unremarkable didn't mean harmless. There were simply too many crystals in this cavern, too many accumulated memories. When the sheer volume exceeded the capacity of an individual consciousness, any "rememberer" who stumbled in would be drowned by the deluge — becoming just another heap of "junk" in this memory cavern.

Cheng Shi had already tasted that terror. So now, he did his absolute best to avoid looking at the visions flickering across the crystals. Unfortunately, every surface in this space was crystallized memory. Left with no choice, he pushed deeper through the limited open paths, hoping to distract himself with navigation.

He asked as he walked: "Brother Mouth, where does this lead?"

The Fool's Lips fell silent.

Undeterred, he tried again: "Brother Mouth, did the Fun God throw me in here specifically so I'd find this place?"

The Fool's Lips still wouldn't speak.

Cheng Shi had finally found a "conversation partner" and wasn't about to let it go quiet again. Eyes rolling, he tried another question:

"Brother Mouth — you say even [Memory] scorns the memories here. Doesn't that mean these are the rejects left over from what He curates for that Existence?"

So if I stand here and repeatedly chant that Being's honored name — drawing down His gaze — wouldn't that be like offering [Memory]'s rejects to Him?

If that happens, whether or not the blasphemy brings down His wrath, wouldn't [Memory] lose any chance of ever approaching Him again?

And maybe we'd even recruit a new member for the Fear Faction!

Though... this plan might be a bit costly in terms of people. Brother Mouth, do you think the Fun God could keep me alive?

You'd definitely give it your all, right? After all — saving me is saving yourself."

Before he even finished, the Fool's Lips hijacked Cheng Shi's speech, gnashing their teeth:

"You menace — have some decency!"

"?"

Cheng Shi's steps faltered. He suddenly realized that not only had Brother Mouth gained a "dad" — Li Jingming seemed to have acquired one too.

...

It seemed Brother Mouth had been frightened by the Real Universe as well.

From that moment on, he had stopped speaking entirely, and whenever Cheng Shi so much as attempted to mention that existence, Brother Mouth would manually mute him.

Still, that wasn't necessarily a bad thing—at least it added another layer of protection.

Cheng Shi continued pressing forward through the cave with his head down. As his pace quickened, the space ahead gradually widened, and soon a brighter glow appeared before his eyes. After rounding a massive cluster of crystal pillars, his field of vision opened up dramatically.

Beyond the cave lay a far more expansive crystalline world. Standing at the cave's edge, Cheng Shi looked like nothing more than a tiny dark speck projected onto the wall of an abyssal cliff.

He gazed down at the jagged ocean of crystals below, his eyes tracing a path forward until, in the far distance, he spotted a canyon rift that stretched across the landscape like a celestial chasm.

On the other side of that canyon, memory crystals blanketed the world just the same, but unlike this side, the radiance of Memory over there burned far more brilliantly, and the flowing breath of memory shimmered in a deeper, more vivid blue.

Clearly, the other shore of this Memory Dump led somewhere entirely different.

"Brother Mouth, is that where I'm supposed to go?"

Cheng Shi didn't expect Fool's Lips to actually respond. He furrowed his brow and peered toward the endless distance, estimating that if he tried to walk there, it would take him days and nights on end.

He wasn't sure whether time flowed differently here compared to the outside world. When the Special Trial arrived, would it be able to pull him back to reality from inside this mirror?

Probably not. The real question was whether he could participate in the trial from within the mirror.

Cheng Shi shook his head to dispel the stray thoughts and began marching toward the canyon rift. He had a gut feeling that the opposite shore was his destination—he just wasn't sure where it ultimately led.

The journey that followed was as unremarkable as the memories trapped in this crystalline world. All Cheng Shi did was walk and walk. To avoid being crystallized again, he never dared to glance at any of the images flickering across these crystals—he simply kept his head down and pressed on.

He silently counted the hours. In this unchanging space, he walked for dozens of hours straight. By his calculations, the next Special Trial should have already arrived, yet he still hadn't reached the rift.

Of course, the trial never came either.

This space seemed to be cut off from everything else, a self-contained system—much like the trials themselves, apparently consuming no real-world time.

Eventually, Cheng Shi went numb. He'd nearly forgotten why he was trudging through this place at all. Driven by nothing more than sheer willpower and the stubborn refusal to let this trip be for nothing, he dragged his heavy feet until he finally reached the canyon's edge.

The depths below the canyon weren't a pitch-black abyss—they too were covered in countless crystals. These crystals stretched like silken threads, stitching the torn halves of the canyon together. Cheng Shi only needed to follow those crystal bridges—some thick, some narrow—across to reach his "destination."

This time, however, he exercised a bit more caution. Before setting out, he made a point of asking:

"Brother Mouth, I have a feeling the other side is dangerous. I shouldn't go over there. What do you think?"

"If you don't say anything, that counts as agreement."

Fool's Lips let out a derisive snort but didn't bother to engage.

Yet Cheng Shi had already extracted his answer from that snort.

"A scoff still counts as a response—you spoke up, so you think I should go."

"Alright then, considering you saved my life earlier, Brother Mouth, I'll listen to you this time."

"...?"

With that, Cheng Shi gingerly stepped onto a refracting crystal and began making his way across the rift.

The crossing was excruciatingly long, but mercifully uneventful. Several times Cheng Shi nearly slipped and plummeted, but each time he managed to recover thanks to his Hero of Today reflexes—until he was close enough to the opposite shore for a single leap. He gritted his teeth and launched himself across.

But the moment he landed, he realized he'd made a mistake.

The azure radiance here did indeed signify a far denser concentration of memory essence than the other side. But that density brought a problem: the overwhelming mass of memories was viscous and almost tangible, ensnaring Cheng Shi the instant he touched down. They wrapped around him without giving him the slightest chance to react, threatening to drown him completely.

Cheng Shi's heart clenched. He mustered every ounce of strength to snap his fingers, attempting to use the power of Time—a fellow Existence path—to escape the crisis.

What he hadn't expected was that Time's power didn't spark any reaction against the local memories. Instead, it was the force of Fate that suddenly erupted, blasting him free from the endless cocoon of memories.

Fate had activated again!

Cheng Shi's vision went black, and he lost consciousness entirely.

By the time he awoke, he had no idea how much time had passed. He found himself no longer in the Memory Dump but in an unfamiliar room.

He was lying on a cold floor, one leg still draped inside an open wardrobe. Beside the wardrobe sat a minimalist plank bed. Beyond that, the room was completely bare.

'Where is this?'

'It's the apocalypse—who's still living in an unfinished apartment?'

Shadow Cheng Shi's bewilderment flipped to alertness in an instant. He sprang to his feet and began scanning his surroundings. The first thing that caught his eye was a neatly folded white garment inside the wardrobe, and beside it, propped against the closet wall, a mirror nearly identical in size to That Dream My Nightmare.

And as luck would have it, he had seen this object before.

"The Dreamless Mirror?!"

"Qin Xin's room?!"

"This is the Torchbearers' territory?!"

Cheng Shi's eyes went wide. At that very moment, a figure wreathed in faintly flickering candlelight descended from the ceiling of the bare room.

The candle flame guttered precariously, and compared to the brilliant azure glow of the Memory Dump, it looked almost tragically dim—barely worthy of being called light at all.

But no matter how it wavered, it never went out. Its feeble glow even traced the outline of an astonished smile on its face as it stared directly at Cheng Shi, clicking its tongue in appraisal:

"Well now, isn't this interesting—a life born in the shadows."

"!!!"

Cheng Shi whipped around, and the instant his eyes met those candlelit pupils, his mind thundered. Without a single conscious thought, the words tumbled out of his mouth:

"Flame of Hope?!"

"You know me?"

"But I don't believe we've met."

"Who are you? Why were you hiding inside the mirror?"

"And why do you carry the aura of Fate?"

"I'm..." Cheng Shi's words caught in his throat mid-sentence, and then realization struck him like a bolt of lightning. "So that's why the Fun God went through all that trouble—it was to arrange a meeting between me and you?"

The Candle Man's form stiffened slightly. He tilted his head with a frown and said:

"Deceit?"

"He sent you here?"

"That makes more sense, though it seems I should reintroduce myself."

"I am the Flame of Hope, burning at the margins. I am a Servant God of Void, and an Envoy of Fate."

"You could say I'm connected to Void, but I have never been directed by any deity—not Deceit, and not Fate either."

"Now then, little shadow, why don't you tell me what message He sent you to deliver?"

'???'

'Wait, hold on!'

'Aren't you one of Deceit's people? What do you mean by all of this?'

Cheng Shi was dumbfounded, but it didn't take him long to realize that something was seriously wrong with the Flame of Hope—something fundamentally off.

The Flame of Hope seemed to have a mistaken understanding of Deceit. He believed the Fun God had nothing to do with him?

'Huh?'

'But that's not what the Fun God told me!'

'Aren't you the Fun God's creation? When did you start thinking independently?!'

'Could it be that I'm the one who misunderstood?'

'...'

"Your voice and build remind me of someone."

The Candle Man dripped down from the ceiling, pooling on the floor before re-igniting into a humanoid shape.

"If I'm not mistaken, your name should be..."

"Cheng Shi?"

"A Fate Weaver."

"..."

Cheng Shi had originally assumed the other party didn't recognize him and was planning to fabricate a cover identity—at least until he could figure out the relationship between the Flame of Hope and the Fun God, he'd rather not be too forthcoming.

Now, clearly, there was no hiding it.

Since he'd been recognized, he might as well own it. After all, they were both followers of Fate—surely the other party wouldn't stab him in the back?

Besides, he'd accumulated more than enough "merit points" with the Torchbearers. There was no reason his reward would be a knife in the back instead of a warm welcome.

So Cheng Shi nodded and replied:

"Yes, I'm Cheng Shi."

"Is this... Torchbearer territory?"

The Candle Man circled Shadow Cheng Shi with curiosity, examining him from every angle while clicking his tongue in appraisal:

"Nice new skin. The shadow coloring hides your face, but if I mentally superimpose the face from my memories, it actually gives off an indescribable air of mystery. No wonder certain people can't stop thinking about you."

"But where did you get this dark skin?"

"Deceit's handiwork?"

"Hmm, that tracks. He does love messing with people—especially His own followers."

"Oh? I just had a thought. When you go back, ask Him something for me—how do I get a look like this?"

"If fire could hide in darkness, then its glow might stop attracting unwanted attention from the outside. That would make passing the flame a lot easier for them."

"..."

The erratic train of thought combined with the teasing tone left Cheng Shi momentarily dazed. 'This thing absolutely has to be hand-crafted by Deceit, right?'

'He's already shaped exactly like Deceit, and you're telling me he's a Servant God of Fate?'

'I wouldn't believe it if you beat me to death—unless those two somehow swapped "children" at birth.'

'But the problem is, Deceit doesn't have any "children" either. The only Envoy that the players know about—Yu Xi—is a persona I made up myself...'

Cheng Shi was confused. He secretly consulted Brother Mouth, but Brother Mouth maintained his silence.

'That mouth has probably straight-up converted to Silence at this point. Fine, fine—once I see the Fun God again, I'm absolutely filing a complaint against you.'

Cheng Shi furrowed his brow. Unable to contain his curiosity any longer, he asked: "You really weren't created by Deceit?"

"?"

The Candle Man froze. Every flame on his body flared for an instant, and his two fiery eyebrows shot upward—he looked genuinely angry.

"Fate Weaver, if you came here specifically to provoke me, then I'll admit you've succeeded."

"Deceit's little probe was a success too. I'm weak right now—I truly can't expel you. But just because I won't act doesn't mean Xin-Xin won't."

"If I call Qin Xin in here..."

"Go ahead and call him."

Cheng Shi cut him off in a peculiar tone, extending his hand in an inviting gesture as he said with amusement, "I'd love to see whether Qin Xin would actually throw out someone the Torchbearers owe a debt of gratitude to."

"..." The Candle Man faltered again. "He doesn't remember you doing anything for the Torchbearers."

"Then why haven't you called him yet? Want me to do it for you?"

With that, Cheng Shi cupped his hands around his mouth, pretending to shout. But the reaction he'd anticipated—the other party rushing to stop him—never came.

The Candle Man merely stared at him with an equally strange expression, the flame atop his head swaying back and forth as he murmured:

"Why'd you stop? Something on your mind?"

"..."

"..."

The scene fell into dead silence.

The first round of probing was over. There were no winners on the field.

Or perhaps they were both winners.

Through this exchange, Cheng Shi arrived at a deduction: the eruption of Fate's power in the Memory Dump had definitely been the Flame of Hope's doing.

He had sensed Cheng Shi's approach long ago and had personally pulled him out of the mirror.

His target was Cheng Shi all along. He had no intention of expelling him whatsoever.

Moreover, all of this had been done behind the Torchbearers' backs—otherwise he would never have bluffed so transparently about whether or not to bring Qin Xin in.

The Flame of Hope, in turn, had reconfirmed something as well: Cheng Shi had no desire to be openly associated with the Torchbearers—at least not on the surface.

Though he'd already gleaned this attitude from the Torchbearers' memories, people could change. He needed to verify that the Cheng Shi standing before him was just as resolute as before. And now he was certain.

Cheng Shi was indeed a perfect target.

He had indeed come specifically for Cheng Shi, but as for whether the Flame of Hope had any prior plan—no, he didn't.

He had simply detected the approach of an anomalous destiny, then discovered Cheng Shi's trail within the Dreamless Mirror and fished him out.

The plan was improvised after the retrieval. The Torchbearers' progress was currently "flourishing," but compared to the pace of change in the outside world, it was still far too slow.

He didn't have much faith in Qin Xin's so-called God Creation Plan, so he had no choice but to step in personally and give them a push.

However, his own identity restricted his room to maneuver, so he needed to find a proxy for his will. And Cheng Shi—a fellow Fate follower and player—was undeniably a perfect choice.

Cheng Shi carried goodness in his heart and wouldn't object to helping the Torchbearers, yet on the surface he had no connection to them whatsoever, making him impossible to detect. More importantly, he was a dual-faith follower of Void, which put him leagues ahead of other players when it came to understanding Void's will. This meant he could leverage Void's protection to maneuver between two gods, carving out far more room for future operations.

So the Flame of Hope had zeroed in on Cheng Shi at first glance. And when Cheng Shi sensed the other's gaze growing expectant, the smile on his face froze instantly. He stumbled backward:

"If I said I was just passing through, would it be too late?"

"Heh-heh-heh, far too late." The Candle Man's flames danced wildly across his body, the very picture of "unbridled audacity."

"..."

'Dude, that laugh is kind of giving villain energy.'

'You know people who laugh like that generally don't live very long, right?'

Cheng Shi pursed his lips. Seeing that the other party bore no ill will, he couldn't be bothered to keep guessing. He simply adopted an at-your-disposal posture, letting the other party clear things up for him so he could finally understand what exactly Deceit was scheming.

Or perhaps, what Fate was setting into motion.

Indeed, this affair had been initiated by the Fun God, but that didn't necessarily mean Fate's will wasn't involved. After all, Deceit had once spoken of Fixed Destiny. When Cheng Shi considered the Fun God's upward rebellion, he couldn't help but suspect that Deceit's purpose in "pushing" Fixed Destiny might be to use Fate's predetermination as a vehicle for expressing his own defiance to the universe.

And that would also mean the prospects for Void's sacrifice were perhaps not so bright after all.

Cheng Shi's brow furrowed slightly as he turned his gaze back to the Candle Man. He felt that this peculiar Flame of Hope—who couldn't quite pin down his own identity—bore an uncanny resemblance to himself. They were both puppet artists taking the stage under the control of the gods' marionette strings dangling above their heads.

This sudden sense of resonance sparked an idea. Before the other party could speak, Cheng Shi beat him to it:

"I have this feeling that we've both been set up."

"Little flame, can I trust you?"

"?"

"Mortal, you stand before a Servant God. I suggest you choose your words carefully."

Cheng Shi smiled and paid it no mind.

'Who isn't a Servant God these days, huh?'

'Out in the world, titles are self-given. If you insist on playing that game, then I might just have to trot out my own long list of credentials to intimidate you.'

Cheng Shi had read the other party's attitude perfectly—the Flame of Hope had business to discuss with him—so he didn't bother being polite. Seeing that Cheng Shi wasn't buying it, the Candle Man bristled, and the flames across his body flared with an audible whoosh, burning noticeably brighter.

He seemed startled by this himself. His gaze sharpened, and the way he looked at Cheng Shi turned keen once more as he mused thoughtfully:

"My instincts were right after all..."

"Tell me why you're here, Fate Weaver. If you want my trust, you'll have to offer your sincerity first, wouldn't you agree?"

Cheng Shi waved his hand dismissively:

"Wrong. You're the one who needs my trust."

"We may both be pawns in someone's game, true—but my game can exist without you. The question is whether your game can exist without me..."

"So, start with your purpose."

"Little... Flame of Hope, I've never had any desire to become a Torchbearer. If you want to use me as a windbreak, you'd better show me why this wind is worth blocking—and also..."

"The benefits?" The Candle Man blinked.

"..."

'Great, another episode of my reputation getting trashed.'

'Which Torchbearer has been gossiping about me behind my back?'

The Candle Man pondered for a moment, resting his chin on one hand:

"Fine. As a deity, I suppose I should set a proper example for mortals."

"I do have certain plans for you, but I'm not sure how to broach the subject. Hmm, let me think... Perhaps all the explanations can be distilled into a single question:"

"Fate Weaver, do you want to become a god?"

"!!??"

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted sharply. He fell silent.

This was the same question the Fun God had asked during their very first audience, long ago. Back then, Cheng Shi's answer had been unequivocal: No.

But now, he hesitated.

A mortal, no matter how many titles he accumulated, could never take a seat at the negotiating table of the gods—let alone compete for supremacy in the Real Universe.

So Cheng Shi thought for a long time before his lips finally moved: "Is godhood the answer to everything?"

The Candle Man's flames flickered gently across his body as he smiled:

"You could say that."

"Godhood was never a status—it's an admission ticket."

"Even if you get one, you might not win. But if you can't get one... you'll never be able to achieve what your heart desires."

"But you're already a deity. You have plenty of options. Why would you need to cooperate with a mortal?" Cheng Shi cut straight to the heart of the matter.

The Candle Man raised an eyebrow, looking impressed:

"Sharp. Worthy of the sacrifice my master has His eye on."

"Since you want honesty, I'll put it bluntly: it's precisely because not a single one of those sixteen gods upon their thrones shares my convictions. That's why I have no choice but to seek help beyond the divine."

"?"

Hearing this, Cheng Shi furrowed his brow.

Logically speaking, the other fourteen gods could be excluded—they didn't even share the same Path of Fate. But hadn't the Flame of Hope just claimed to be an Envoy of Fate?

If he truly was an Envoy of Fate, then his will had to be encompassed within Fate's will.

And even if he wasn't—even if he was Deceit's creation—then his will would still have been inherited from Deceit's.

So how could he claim his will differed from every single god's?

If his convictions truly were different, what god would grant authority to a Servant God who didn't share their purpose?

It defied all logic.

Cheng Shi frowned, increasingly certain that this little flame wasn't telling the whole truth.

The Flame of Hope, as if anticipating Cheng Shi's doubts, immediately followed up with an explanation:

"I'm different from other Servant Gods. I was born from the Change aspect of Fate."

"When our Benefactor interpreted his devotion to Origin as an embrace of Fixed Destiny, Fate's will became saturated with predetermination."

"And Change is the mortal enemy of Fixed Destiny—destined to be guarded against by Fate. To ensure that Fixed Destiny would prevail, He stripped away a trace of unforeseeable Change and severed all ties with it. It was in that moment that I was born."

"I am the antithesis of Fixed Destiny. A mayfly trying to shake a tree. A mantis raising its arms against a chariot. The last shred of mercy that Fate's most fundamental tolerance left for this world."

"No matter where the world is guided by Void's will, I will always represent the smallest minority's affirmation of the opposing will."

"That's why, when Xin-Xin founded the Torchbearers, I saw him in an instant."

"I knew I had to protect him, because only when people like him remain alive does my faith—the aspiration of the smallest minority—have a foundation of its own."

"Yet the weakness of that faith has left me equally feeble. I can scarcely reach beyond this space to do anything for them, nor can I directly shield them from the gods' gaze."

"Until one day, Deceit found me."

"He told me He found these mortals who wanted to defy the gods rather interesting. For the sake of more amusement, He was willing to invest a little in them—provide shelter, block the other gods' eyes and ears. But He had one condition."

"What condition?" Cheng Shi asked, curious.

"He said..." The Candle Man flickered dimly, seemingly lost in memory. "That I had to ensure these mortals achieved their goal. Otherwise, the first one to destroy them... would be Him."

"..."

'What does that mean?'

'The Fun God shelters the Torchbearers so they can overthrow the gods—even himself—but if they fail, He'll strike first to... cover His tracks?'

'Otherwise, why would the condition be so bizarre?'

And yet, no matter how bizarre it was, the Flame of Hope had agreed to it—because by his own account, the Torchbearers would never have survived this long otherwise.

But given the current trajectory, the Torchbearers' so-called rebellion...

Was nothing short of a pipe dream.

The gods beneath this starry sky alone were formidable enough, to say nothing of that One in the Real Universe beyond.

Compared to Origin, the gods were like fireflies before a full moon. So what did the Torchbearers—still mortals—amount to?

The light of the torches they carried was probably nothing more than the most inconspicuous pixel on a canvas of billions.

'That's exactly why they need to create a god. That's exactly why the Flame of Hope asked whether I want to become one.'

Cheng Shi's expression grew complicated:

"Why me?"

"If you truly have a method for achieving godhood, wouldn't it be better for that god to be born from among the Torchbearers themselves?"

"Besides, as you're aware, I'm His sacrifice. If you tamper with His sacrifice at will, how can you guarantee our Benefactor won't punish you for it?"

"Being marked by Fate... isn't exactly a blessing..."

The Candle Man's flames wavered between bright and dim—clearly, he agreed with this assessment.

Two followers of Fate, huddled together and talking behind their Benefactor's back. One had to admit, this sort of thing could probably only happen in the era of Void.

"My choices are limited."

The Candle Man's tone turned unusually solemn.

"The Torchbearers' path ahead is still unclear. I can't let go just yet and leave them to gamble everything on one throw. Though Deceit's lies are countless, I know His promise to me was no jest."

"I cannot let the torch be snuffed out by His hand. So right now, my only option is to seek reinforcement from outside."

"That way, I'll still have time to continue mediating between them and Deceit."

Cheng Shi paused, surprised. "You're dying?"

"?" The Candle Man's breath hitched. "You're the one who's dying!"

"...Then why did you say 'let go'? Wouldn't the Torchbearers achieving godhood be a boost for you?"

"If you and they joined forces, you'd only get closer to hope."

The words sounded nice, but Cheng Shi didn't actually believe them. This hope was too distant. Against a journey of millions of kilometers, millimeter-scale progress could hardly be called "getting closer."

The Candle Man sighed:

"If the Torchbearers achieve godhood, they'll inevitably draw the universe's attention. When that happens, countless covetous eyes will descend upon them—people who may not carry 'fire' in their hearts but who most certainly carry every variety of desire. Those impure ambitions will corrupt the will of the torch."

"I told you—the Flame of Hope only ignites at the margins. When this fire burns into a wildfire, I will no longer be 'hope,' and I'll lose the very soil from which my faith grows."

"When that time comes, I'll be powerless, able to do nothing but watch them stake everything on one final gamble. How would that be any different from letting go?"

"So, until the accumulated strength is enough for a decisive blow, the fire must not be passed carelessly, and gods must not be created recklessly."

"I need to find an ally on the outside—someone who can help me protect the Torchbearers."

"And the person I've chosen is you, Fate Weaver Cheng Shi!"

"You needn't doubt, needn't worry, and needn't feel too much pressure. This isn't some conspiracy, because this decision..."

"Is one I only made today, after seeing you."

"..."

'Gee, thanks. Now the pressure's even worse.'

"I've laid bare my will before you. Does this sincerity meet your standards?"

It certainly did. Though many questions remained unanswered, Cheng Shi had to admit that the Flame of Hope was the first deity to so openly reveal their will to him.

Combined with the dual identity of "ally of Deceit" and "protector of the Torchbearers," Cheng Shi had already begun treating the Flame of Hope as a new ally of the Fear Faction.

And of course he was. In a sense, fearing Fixed Destiny was the same as fearing Origin.

So Cheng Shi smiled again and asked, "Then what's your plan?"

The Candle Man shook his head and waved his hands, chuckling softly:

"No, no, no—this isn't a Q&A session."

"I've stated my purpose. Now it's your turn to show some sincerity and explain why you're here."

"Otherwise, I can't confirm whether my choice was the right one."

Though the words sounded somewhat scrutinizing, the bright glow in the Flame of Hope's eye sockets told Cheng Shi he'd already confirmed his choice long ago.

Still, the question genuinely stumped Cheng Shi, because his arrival here hadn't been entirely voluntary.

It had started when the Fun God, without any warning, swapped him for Dragon King inside That Dream My Nightmare. Then, while trying to decipher the Fun God's intentions—and refusing to leave empty-handed—he'd pushed deeper and deeper into the labyrinth until he found the Memory Junkyard, where the Flame of Hope detected him and pulled him out of the Dreamless Mirror.

If he had to pinpoint a reason beyond Deceit's external push, the rest was probably driven by desire and greed.

But saying that out loud would be mortifyingly embarrassing.

Here was a Servant God, talking to him face-to-face about "hope, rebellion, and passing the torch," and he was supposed to respond with "Are there any treasures here?" How would that make him look?

'Does my reputation even matter anymore?'

'I can't exactly let myself sink so low that I end up sitting at the same table as those unlucky bastards, can I?'

So Cheng Shi paused, sifted through his many unresolved questions, and picked the one with the most gravitas to serve as his "purpose."

His expression turned solemn as he declared:

"I came seeking an answer."

"I asked Deceit for guidance, and He sent me here. So I've been wondering—could you, Flame of Hope, be my answer?"

The Candle Man was visibly intrigued by Cheng Shi's air of mystery. His flames swayed across his entire body as he tilted his head and asked curiously:

"What answer?"

Cheng Shi drew a deep breath and decided to be genuinely honest for once.

He could sense that the Flame of Hope's will was authentic, which meant the other party's convictions were remarkably similar to his own. They were both members of the smallest minority, both "overreaching beyond their station." By that logic, they were natural allies.

Since that was the case, he would trade sincerity for an answer.

"I want to know how to escape this universal experiment—and how to break free from the Creator's control in the Real Universe!"

"..."

Upon hearing this, the Candle Man showed none of the shock, terror, admiration, or agreement Cheng Shi had expected. Instead, he murmured to himself in confusion:

"'Creator' I can understand—that probably refers to Him."

"But what do 'universal experiment' and 'Real Universe' mean?"

"You see this Faith Game as an experiment?"

"And the Real Universe—is that some mortal term for a particular stretch of the starry sky?"

"I don't think I've ever heard any of the Torchbearers use that kind of language..."

"?"

From that single remark, Cheng Shi realized the Flame of Hope knew nothing about the other slice universes beyond this one. His vision was still confined to the starry sky overhead!

'That's strange. The Fun God's every move clearly aimed to bring me face-to-face with the Flame of Hope. But if he doesn't even know about these things, what's the point of meeting him?'

'A Servant God of Fate who hasn't even grasped the bigger picture probably can't offer me any relevant "advice."'

'Wait—hold on!'

Cheng Shi's gaze sharpened. A sudden thought struck him: 'Could the Fun God have thrown me here because He wants me to reveal the truth to the Flame of Hope?'

'What?'

'He wants a clown—someone who's been traumatized by the Real Universe's bloody cessation and scarlet mockery—to deliver fresh "despair" to this Servant God of Fate who's still quietly protecting the Torchbearers in his little corner? To tell him that his so-called "burning at the margins" isn't nearly marginal enough—that on the scale of the Real Universe, he's nothing at all?!'

'Have some decency, my Lord.'

'Even if You wanted to tear off this bloody bandage for him, why not do it Yourself?'

'When Time reset the world, You could have simply preserved the Flame of Hope's memories. What possible benefit is there in making me the villain?'

Cheng Shi frowned. He didn't see how resetting the Flame of Hope's memories could serve as a valid excuse for engineering their meeting. Given the Flame of Hope's convictions, the moment he learned the truth about the universe, he would inevitably join the Fear Faction. They were natural allies—no contrived introduction was necessary.

Moreover, preserving memories through Time's methods could be done silently and seamlessly—far more efficient than having Cheng Shi deliver the revelation personally. The Fun God had absolutely no reason to orchestrate something so convoluted and pointless.

And yet He had. Why?

Unless...

Cheng Shi's eyes turned razor-sharp as he looked at the Candle Man before him, his mind racing at full throttle.

Unless this Servant God of Fate had never witnessed the Real Universe at all. When the world collapsed, he hadn't noticed the sky falling!

But how could a Servant God fail to perceive the world's collapse?

There seemed to be only one answer:

He had been deceived!

The Fun God had used an illusion to trick him, making him believe nothing had happened!

So even after the world was reset and some deities retained their memories, the Flame of Hope would never retain any—because he had never witnessed those events firsthand!

Yet this only deepened the mystery. The Flame of Hope's very will was about finding life in the face of death. Letting him know about the Real Universe would hardly be inappropriate—in fact, it might even unite the Fear Faction further. So why would the Fun God deceive his own ally?

'To prevent fear from becoming despair?'

That didn't seem right either, because without despair there could be no Flame of Hope. His faith was rooted in exactly that. He wouldn't cease to exist just because of despair.

As he himself had said, only when the flame of hope grew large enough to become a wildfire would he potentially cease to be. So even if only a single person remained on the path of rebellion, he would appear and shelter that last spark.

If that wasn't the reason, then what was?

Cheng Shi pondered for a long time—so long that even the Candle Man realized the earlier question had touched upon something critically important. Just as he was about to ask what Cheng Shi was thinking, Cheng Shi jolted, and a hypothesis so incredible that even he could scarcely believe it surfaced in his mind.

The illusion the Fun God had woven prevented the Flame of Hope from seeing the Creator and the Real Universe. Viewed from another angle, what He had done could be interpreted not as deception, but as... concealment.

He didn't want the Flame of Hope to see Origin!

Or, more boldly—regardless of whether Origin was truly omniscient—the Fun God equally didn't want Him to see the Flame of Hope!

Cheng Shi's eyes went wide. He thought he had finally glimpsed the Fun God's reasoning.

He was trying to tell Cheng Shi that the significance behind the Flame of Hope was quite possibly far greater than anything he had imagined!

"You seem to have figured something out. Interesting—care to share what's on your mind?"

"Is it related to the universal experiment and the Real Universe you mentioned?"

"I can understand interpreting this era's Void game as an experiment, but this 'Real Universe' concept—I'll need you to explain that one yourself."

The Candle Man watched Cheng Shi with considerable curiosity, unaware of just how turbulent the Fate Weaver's thoughts had become.

Cheng Shi didn't know where to begin, so he started with a question:

"Flame of Hope, what does the world look like from your perspective?"

The Flame of Hope raised an eyebrow, shaking his head with a smile: "I told you, this isn't a Q&A session. True cooperation isn't just one-sided taking. You—"

"This is important." Cheng Shi cut him off with absolute conviction. "Trust me. Answer my question, and then you'll know everything I know."

"Including what answer I'm pursuing, and why I ended up here."

Seeing Cheng Shi's grave expression, the Flame of Hope's tone faltered, and his gaze turned deep.

He deliberated briefly, then decided to trust Cheng Shi once more.

"Eras shift, faiths change. The supreme Creator made all things, then inscribed several full stops in His book of creation—and those full stops became the gods of the universe."

"They represent the conclusion of each phase of faith, collectively anchoring the path of past beliefs for the Creator."

"Some of Them are devout, others fearful. Their views of the Creator differ—the fearful ones keep their distance, while the devout ones wish they could serve at His side, even merge with Him entirely."

"Deceit is one of the fearful. And our Benefactor is the devout one who yearns to become one with Him."

"When the era turned to Void, Fate sought to forge a sacrifice from the universe's power to please Him. Such an act would inevitably bring about the universe's collapse, because He is the aggregation of all faith—to draw close to Him requires draining every last drop of it."

"The gods regard their respective faiths as their very foundation, so they would never agree. Deceit, in particular, pushed the Convention among the gods to ensure His own authority remained intact."

"But none of this could deter our Benefactor's determination to march toward Fixed Destiny."

"A decisive battle awaits the universe. A final reckoning awaits the gods. When it's over, either Fate achieves Fixed Destiny, or the universe is dragged into Void by His misfortune..."

"As the Change that Fate discarded, I represent this world's tiniest minority of rebellious will. I am sworn to find a path of survival for this world—and that is why I protect the torch."

"Is that enough, Fate Weaver? These are my innermost convictions. Surely they're sufficient to earn your sincerity."

Cheng Shi nodded silently and began sharing everything he knew.

But the shock he delivered to the Flame of Hope was far more devastating than anything the Flame of Hope had anticipated.

His very first sentence rooted the Candle Man to the spot.

"The Creator isn't a creator—He's an Experiment Master."

"What I called the 'universal experiment' is meant literally. The starry sky you and I see is this experiment—or rather, one of its samples..."

"?"

The Candle Man blinked, seemingly unable to comprehend. But as Cheng Shi continued, the light in his eyes gradually dimmed. Even the flames across his body lost their heat, and his entire being seemed to wilt.

This time, Cheng Shi held nothing back. He told the Flame of Hope everything—from Truth's experiment to the bloody cessation, from the world's reset to the Convention's gambit. He laid it all bare, wanting to discover what secret the Flame of Hope harbored that was so important even Origin "must not see it."

After hearing everything, the Flame of Hope clearly sensed his own significance. He furrowed his brow and brooded for a long time before recovering some of his vigor. His tone turned deeply solemn:

"This truth exceeds anything I'd imagined. My mind is still in turmoil."

"However... there are things I know that do align with your timeline, so I believe you. This shouldn't be a lie."

He let out a bitter laugh.

"Who would fabricate such an earth-shattering falsehood just to erode my hope?"

"If Deceit truly wanted the Flame of Hope extinguished, He could have acted long ago. He wouldn't even need to withdraw His protection—He could simply let me vanish in this world that our Benefactor refuses to accept."

"I think I understand what you're looking for now, and I can guess why He sent you to me."

"When you think about it, what you've come here seeking and the reason I chose you—they're really the same thing."

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted. He immediately responded: "Godhood..."

"Exactly. Godhood."

"The same principle applies: the status of a god is an admission ticket to the grand table. Only now it carries an additional meaning—it's also the ticket to the Real Universe."

"Before a mortal achieves godhood, there's no point in even discussing how to escape His experiment. After all, between you and Him stands an entire pantheon of beings that mortals consider omnipotent."

"So whether you want it or not, becoming a god is the only path forward."

The Candle Man seemed to reignite. Perhaps it was the faint spark of determination in Cheng Shi's uncertainty that rekindled his own hope. He cracked a smile and regarded Cheng Shi appraisingly:

"But you're fortunate."

"I can't say how much good luck our Benefactor has wagered on you, but at the very least, on the road to godhood, you still have a choice."

"And even if you don't truly wish to become a god, you can achieve your goal while simultaneously becoming one!"

"?"

That statement left Cheng Shi genuinely baffled.

"How can someone become a god while not becoming a god at the same time?"

"Isn't that a paradox?"

"That's—"

'Wait!'

Cheng Shi seemed to have guessed something. He shuddered, and the word burst from his lips:
"Deceit?"

"Exactly! Deceit!" The Candle Man clapped his hands, his voice laden with meaning. "Though I am merely the unpredictable fragment of Change within Fate, I am still an Envoy of Fate, and I possess the ability to perceive essence."

"I've long wondered—our Benefactor created me even while discarding me, so why has Deceit never elevated an Envoy to serve at His side?"

"Now I see it clearly. It's not that He was unwilling—He was waiting."

"He reserved that opportunity for His fear, and for those who share that same fear."

"And that person..."

The Candle Man didn't say the name outright, but his gaze made it abundantly clear.

Cheng Shi's expression cycled through a spectacular range of emotions—and he couldn't argue, because he really had obtained Deceit's container.

Once the divinity belonging to Yu Xi filled to the brim and assembled itself, he would possess every qualification needed to wield Deceit's authority. All that would remain was Deceit's personal decree.

But the Flame of Hope clearly didn't know any of this. He was still explaining his theory of godhood to Cheng Shi.

"Deceit is deceit—it lies in the deceiving, and it lies in the fraud."

"I realized long ago what form His Envoy would take. Just as you're struggling right now—you want to seize a god's power, yet you don't want to be lumped in with what you understand gods to be."

"But the Envoy of Deceit is unlike any other Servant God. He doesn't need to possess a true divine status the way I do, because his status doesn't reside in himself—it resides in deception, in whether the world is fooled!"

"When the world is deceived into believing he is a god, then he is."

"When the world sees through the lie and believes he is not, then he is not."

"This is the Envoy of Deceit's path to godhood, and it is the secret I share with you today."

"!!!!!"

The instant he heard this method of apotheosis, Cheng Shi's mind—

BOOM—

Exploded.

When it came to becoming a god, Cheng Shi had always believed the aspiring deity had no real agency in the matter.

Even if they did, it was useless—because true gods required Origin's endorsement, and Servant Gods needed a true god's permission to wield their authority.

This created an awkward reality: all of a mortal's efforts could only ever amount to begging for a god's favor, after which they'd be "bestowed" a divine seat.

He had never imagined there could be a type of god that didn't require recognition from any other deity.

His mind flashed back to the small note Mi Laozhang had slipped him after San Dales—the one transcribing the Fun God's words when Mi Laozhang had asked about Yu Xi's existence. The Fun God had said:

"He has never appeared, nor has He ever vanished."

"When you know of Him, you do not truly know Him."

"When you understand Him, you do not truly understand Him."

"Only He knows and understands Himself. And the moment an outsider truly knows Him, truly understands Him—then He..."

"Is no longer Him."

Now, combined with the Flame of Hope's words, it all clicked into place.

So even back in San Dales, Deceit had already given the answer to godhood. Cheng Shi simply hadn't connected the dots at the time, still fixated on the container, searching everywhere for clues—until today, when the Flame of Hope spelled it out once more.

'Yes—right now is the moment "He" knows and understands Himself.'

'In truth, Yu Xi probably "came into being" the very instant I jokingly said that name while bantering with Brother Mouth!'

While Cheng Shi was still sorting through his thoughts, the Flame of Hope assumed he was still reeling from the revelation and continued explaining the "path to godhood" he had prepared for Cheng Shi.

"Based on my understanding of Deceit's will, to become His Envoy, first you'll need a divine name compelling enough to make the world 'hear it and believe.'"

"The name can be strange, but it must maintain an air of mystery."

"Then comes the most critical step—spreading your faith and gathering followers!"

"Faith is the foundation of any god, and spreading it takes time. The method of propagation is paramount, and since you'd be becoming an Envoy of Deceit, you inherently won't be trusted by the masses. A strategy of announcing yourself to the whole world right off the bat simply won't work."

"I'd recommend starting small. Though you're a Fate Weaver, I know you're also a seasoned con artist. Use your tricks to deceive a few mortals—ideally followers of Deceit."

"Once you outmatch them in trickery, they'll be naturally drawn to you. Then you need only display a hint of knowledge or ability beyond what any mortal should possess, and given the... disposition of Deceit's followers—ahem, their way of thinking—they'll probably start speculating wildly about your identity without you saying a word."

"Once that step succeeds, the power of faith will flow to you of its own accord."

"I understand His followers. These tricksters will spare no effort to borrow your name as a tiger's pelt, thereby spreading your divine name by proxy. You'll only need to show yourself periodically, leaving

breadcrumbs among different mortals, and they'll naturally connect the dots—digging you out of history on their own."

"After that, you just need to claim a singular event from the historical record, and your lie becomes established fact in mortal consciousness. Your supporters will write footnotes proving you existed all along."

"This is how Deceit corrupts Memory—your trickster of a Benefactor is well-practiced at it. I'd imagine you're no slouch yourself."

"From there, you'll harvest a wave of faith from Deceit's followers. But that won't be enough, because this is still Deceit's faith pool—doing this only counts as riding your Benefactor's coattails."

"Faith isn't about hoarding—it's about competing."

"So what you must do is spread your faith beyond those boundaries. Ideally, you'd recruit a new batch of believers through some grand feat visible to the entire world. Once achieved, your faith will be deeply rooted, and your divine status firmly established."

"Finally, you— What's wrong with you?"

"Why do you keep blinking like that?"

"Are you questioning my strategy?"

"Hmph, do you have any idea how long I spent refining this method for creating an Envoy of Deceit?"

"Over the years, during every exchange with Deceit, I've quietly studied His will. And thanks to my origins in Fate, I can at least perceive essence to some degree. Gradually, I came to understand His will and His temperament."

"This is absolutely the method of elevation He'd be delighted to see. All you need to do is follow it, and that divine seat will—"

"Enough, Fate Weaver—you're looking at me like I'm an idiot!"

"I'm warning you, you're not His Envoy yet. As an ally—and a mortal, at that—you owe me, the sole remaining Servant God of Void, a modicum of respect."

"..."

Cheng Shi blinked, shook his head, then nodded—looking like a malfunctioning robot.

Not because of shock. Because of sheer bewilderment.

He was truly dumbfounded.

'I'm not disrespecting you. If anything, I have too much respect for you.'

'Everything you said is spot-on. That's exactly how an Envoy of Deceit should be born.'

'The problem is—why are you describing the path I've already walked?'

'Did you install surveillance on me?!'

Though most of what the Flame of Hope described was already Cheng Shi's past, he felt no satisfaction at having gotten a head start. All he felt was a crushing sense of helplessness against Fixed Destiny.

That's right—Fixed Destiny, again!

Without a god orchestrating events behind the scenes, how could he possibly have progressed so smoothly?

But was Deceit really the only god pulling the strings?

Granted, his path was leading toward the seat of Deceit's Envoy. But think about it—if even an Envoy discarded by Fate could figure out this road, then surely Fate Himself, Deceit's sibling god with the power to perceive essence, couldn't possibly be blind to it.

Had He foreseen all of this from the start? Was that why He'd agreed to merge with Deceit?

Was He using Deceit's favoritism toward Cheng Shi to complete the refinement of His sacrifice?

Had the so-called "predetermined" path Cheng Shi had walked been a conspiracy from the very beginning—designed to draw the Fear Faction's attention to him, so he could win the divine support of the various fearful gods who had nothing to do with Fate, allowing the sacrifice to achieve a "fusion" of all faiths?

Cheng Shi's thoughts spiraled. The deeper he went, the more inescapable the game seemed.

His answer, his aspirations, his future, and his fears had long since merged into one inseparable whole.

Silence fell over the room once more. In that stillness, Cheng Shi silently posed a question to Brother Mouth:

'Brother Mouth, are even you part of this Fixed Destiny?'

Cheng Shi remembered that the name "Yu Xi" had been locked in precisely because Brother Mouth affirmed it at first mention. He couldn't help suspecting that Fool's Lips might also be a crucial piece in this game.

Perhaps... had it even betrayed Deceit and defected to Fate at some point?

While Cheng Shi was stewing in his suspicions, Fool's Lips finally responded. And its response was, as always...

"Weren't you supposed to be a person? When did you turn into a chicken butt?"

"...?"

Cheng Shi's eyelid twitched violently as he counted on his fingers just how many insults were packed into that single sentence.

Embarrassing as it was, Cheng Shi had no choice but to come clean to the Flame of Hope about certain things he'd already accomplished.

And when the Flame of Hope learned that Yu Xi had long since manifested in the world—and that the mortal playing the role of Yu Xi had already obtained Deceit's container—he was genuinely dazed.

The Candle Man circled Cheng Shi, scrutinizing him with sharp eyes:

"You're not actually some lost Envoy of Deceit who fell through history's cracks and just woke up, are you?!"

"???"

Cheng Shi couldn't help but laugh. He pointed at the other and said:

"Everything I've done is exactly what you just described. How am I suddenly a real Envoy now?"

"Tch, hard to say."

"Every god knows Deceit is full of tricks. Who's to say He didn't tamper with the true records while Memory wasn't looking, making the gods forget you ever existed? I certainly don't remember."

"Otherwise, this is too much of a coincidence."

"Even with Fate's favoritism, your path has been suspiciously smooth."

That remark actually jolted Cheng Shi's thoughts in a new direction. He suddenly remembered Cheng Dashi, who had come to this world and triggered Prosperity's downfall, and Scarred Cheng Shi, who had detonated the scarlet mockery in the Real Universe. They...

Were probably the real reason his own path had been so effortless.

Cheng Shi sighed and shook his head:

"If I had a choice, I'd rather not have this favoritism."

"Actually, I've always been curious—why me? Flame of Hope, do you... know?"

The Candle Man's flames swayed. After a long deliberation, he shook his head as well:

"Having been discarded by Fate, I naturally can't fathom His true intentions."

"But everything has its upside. You should count yourself lucky—being chosen as a sacrifice beats rotting in the mud of this world. At least the 'you' of right now can still resist, and still has the right to resist."

"Whether it's Fate's Fixed Destiny or Deceit's rebellion, Void's gaze has always been on you. That scrutiny has certainly brought trouble, but there's no denying They've also pushed you to where you stand today."

"Hmm, since you've exceeded all expectations and already completed the early accumulation of faith, we should move on to discussing the real issue—how to pass the torch."

"The truth about the universe that you've brought me is far removed from my previous understanding. When I revisit Fate's actions through the lens of the Real Universe, it's hard not to think that the Creator is having His samples produce their own 'experiment results.'"

"And that so-called result is very likely the sacrifice that Fate is forging—namely, you."

"Don't look at me like that. It's the most logical conjecture."

"Think about it: if your so-called Experiment Master is using slice universes to conduct an experiment, then He must be anticipating some experimental result."

"Therefore, everything happening in every slice universe—good or bad—should be a necessary step toward that result."

"You said it yourself: beyond this starry sky, countless 'yous' have failed. They died before the Creator's eyes. If the dead ones aren't the answer, then perhaps the 'you' who survived—along with the 'yous' in other rebooted slice universes—might be."

"The evolution of faith follows a traceable pattern. The alternation of Paths isn't meaningless either. The wheel of eras has ground its way here, and the consensus among the gods is that after Void's curtain falls, only endless void remains."

"Those who don't know the universe's truth assume a new era will eventually dawn. But from the perspective of the Creator's universal experiment, doesn't the phrase 'ending in void' suggest that before this era concludes, He will certainly find the experimental result He seeks?"

"If so... I can't help but think that result must come from Fate's hand!"

"Because He is the essence of Void—the god most capable of perceiving the universe's truth!"

"His will is very likely the guiding direction that the Creator hard-coded into this experiment."

"..."

The moment the Flame of Hope finished speaking, Cheng Shi admitted that his fear had grown a little larger.

Befitting a Servant God of Fate, his insights and deductions were razor-sharp. Even Cheng Shi found himself convinced.

He just couldn't figure out one thing: had the Creator gone to all this trouble crafting such an elaborate experiment just to produce a sacrifice?

What did the sacrifice truly represent?

Of course, "all this trouble" was Cheng Shi projecting from a mortal's perspective. Perhaps in the eyes of the true Creator, this experiment—one that squeezed the Real Universe's fear to its absolute limit—was nothing more than something done on a whim.

This heart-to-heart with the Flame of Hope had been tremendously fruitful. Cheng Shi's mind was once again stuffed with a mountain of conjectures.

With the situation growing clearer, it was time to discuss the road ahead—how to resist, and how to break Fixed Destiny.

The Flame of Hope's suggestion aligned perfectly with Cheng Shi's own thinking: as a sacrifice, he needed to throw himself into the game and accelerate Fixed Destiny, amassing as much power as possible along the path of becoming a sacrifice, so that when the time came, he could flip the entire table in one decisive blow.

But when it came to the direction of acceleration, the two had differing views.

Cheng Shi's idea was still to lean on the Fear Faction's protection, play along with Fate, and unite the fearful gods against the Creator.

The Flame of Hope immediately shot this down and told Cheng Shi that the Fear Faction might not be as reliable as he thought.

"The will of gods differs from that of mortals. They've benefited from the Creator's endorsement, ruling the world for countless ages. Even if they learn that this world is nothing but an experiment, would they truly want to break free of it?"

"All because of that so-called fear He told you about?"

"No."

"Fear is Corruption's domain, not Deceit's."

"Deceit disguises, deceives, schemes, swindles, and fabricates illusions to mask the truth. The one thing He would never do is share His genuine feelings with a mortal."

"If fear alone were enough to unite god and man... then wouldn't Corruption be the true god most worthy of protecting humanity?"

"And where is He now?"

"!!!"

What the Flame of Hope had just said went beyond mere advice—it was practically heresy.

He was dismantling Cheng Shi's only lifeline, questioning his source of strength, and striking at the heart of his own ally.

Cheng Shi could tell the Flame of Hope wasn't lying. The problem was that he might be weaving his own agenda into his words.

So after hearing all of this, Cheng Shi's brow furrowed deeply as he asked:

"You're also part of the Fear Faction. You're also cooperating with the Fun God. Why are you telling me this?"

The flames in the Candle Man's eyes flickered faintly, his tone unusually solemn:

"I told you—I represent the will of the smallest minority amidst despair."

"Before today, the Fear Faction was that smallest minority."

"But after meeting you today, I realized that someone exists who is even more fearful than they are. And that someone..."

"Is you."

"Your path of rebellion is the continuation of my will. That's why I can no longer treat you as merely a Fear Faction ally. I need to approach this from your perspective—to find, within this truest form of despair, a road that can carry hope forward."

"This is what it means to pass the torch. And the fire being passed is the fire of your will to survive."

"..."

'Sure enough, the more people gather, the more cliques form—and that logic holds just as true among gods.'

The Flame of Hope was essentially saying that the Fear Faction under Deceit was unreliable. At best, they could use them, but ultimately they had to rely on their own strength.

The problem was that even the Yu Xi Envoy identity had been "inherited" from the Fear Faction, not to mention the fact that virtually all of Cheng Shi's abilities stemmed from the Fun God's machinations. So even knowing he was a puppet, how was he supposed to break free?

The puppet strings in Deceit's hands were far more numerous than Fate's.

The Flame of Hope clearly recognized this as the central problem. After deliberating for some time, he said:

"I'll figure something out. What you need to do right now is accumulate every ounce of strength you can along the path toward Fixed Destiny. As for the rest—we'll have to play it by ear."

"Of course, from your perspective, severing ties with the Fear Faction might be difficult. But think carefully—what I've told you is no deception."

"Nobody knows what Deceit is truly thinking. I find it hard to believe He would sever ties with the Creator and stand alongside a mortal out of simple fear—unless He has some unspoken secret..."

"If I'm overthinking this, then so much the better. But if my suspicions are correct..."

"Your fears may run far deeper than you realize."

Despite their differing stances on the Fear Faction, the mortal and the god had at least reached a consensus: whether it was the Torchbearers or Cheng Shi himself, surviving this experiment required accelerating the accumulation of power.

Seizing the opportunity, Cheng Shi brought up his plan to venture into the Real Universe and collect scattered authorities.

He shared the plan without hesitation—and only after the words had left his mouth did he catch himself with a start, realizing he'd been a bit too forthcoming today.

There seemed to be some ineffable power about the Flame of Hope that made him trust unconditionally.

When the Candle Man noticed Cheng Shi's reaction, he smiled:

"You're perceptive."

"This is one of my abilities, but your sincerity wasn't forced—it's because the hope in your heart is naturally drawing closer to my will."

"The survival instinct drives the helpless to huddle together for warmth, and I am the faint flame that warms them. So as long as you truly carry hope in your heart, you will inevitably be drawn to me."

"Qing-Qing is like this, Xin-Xin is like this, and you... are no different."

"..."

'What's with all these cutesy nicknames? Gross.'

Cheng Shi nodded silently, accepting the explanation, but he made a mental note to look more carefully into the Flame of Hope's true identity later.

Everything he trusted about the Flame of Hope was built on a foundation laid by the Fun God. Yet the Flame of Hope was now warning him to be wary of the Fun God. Cheng Shi knew he should be cautious—but knowing wasn't the same as being able to act on it.

He was already in too deep to pull out.

After a brief silence, the Flame of Hope's fires swayed:

"Through the Prophet's conversations with Xin-Xin, I've already learned a few things about Civilization. Looking at it now, that was probably you passing information to the Torchbearers, wasn't it, Yu Xi?"

"..."

Being called Yu Xi was one thing, but what was this "Prophet" business about?

Fang Shiqing was "Qing-Qing," Qin Xin was "Xin-Xin," but when it came to An Mingyu, she just got her job title?

'Hold on—isn't the Blind One also a Torchbearer? Why the double standard?'

The Candle Man noticed the confusion in Cheng Shi's eyes and said in an inscrutable tone:

"I noticed long ago that the Prophet was different from the girl she used to be. At first, I assumed she'd simply taken a blow from Fate—our Benefactor is rather cold-hearted, after all. Beyond Fixed Destiny, He rarely concerns Himself with anything else."

"But now I understand. She really did change—into a different her."

"I should have realized sooner. Every trace of Change brings new turning points, and the truth about the universe was right in front of me the whole time, yet I still missed it..."

"In the end, I'm not the complete Change..."

"And Xin-Xin too—hiding this from me. But then again, that's classic Xin-Xin."

"A Xin-Xin who protects the Prophet is a true Torchbearer."

"..."

'The Chosen One of Fate really gets the short end of the stick. Abandoned by her own Benefactor was bad enough, but now she's being treated as an outsider even by the Flame of Hope. If she ever found out...'

'Hmm?'

'Wait, that doesn't add up. The Flame of Hope is supposed to embody the will of the smallest minority. Doesn't An Mingyu qualify as one of the smallest minority?'

Though being called "Prophet" wasn't inherently malicious, why was the Flame of Hope treating the Chosen One of Fate differently?

Just because she was a devout follower of Fate?

But her circumstances were the same as the Flame of Hope's—both had been discarded. Shouldn't they be huddling together for warmth?

The Flame of Hope himself didn't seem to notice this inconsistency. He continued:

"Xin-Xin is a follower of War and the best candidate. But given your insistence on keeping your distance from the Torchbearers..."

"Never mind, I'll figure out a way. When you're ready to set out, remember to use this mirror to contact me. I'll find an excuse to send Xin-Xin away so he can 'coincidentally' meet you in the Real Universe."

"However, the method for breaking through the spacetime barrier will have to come from you. I'm confined to this little corner and can't help you with that."

Cheng Shi naturally knew Qin Xin was the ideal choice. If this could work, it would add another layer of probability to the authority retrieval mission.

Even if, for whatever reason, Qin Xin couldn't make it, Cheng Shi had backups. Mo Li, who had switched from Order to War, or Hu Wei, who used a body of Chaos to continuously impersonate a War follower—either would likely suffice.

With that matter settled, the mortal and the god spent a while discussing the current state of the pantheon. Cheng Shi didn't reveal everything, only providing a vague update on the gods' various wills. The Flame of Hope, in turn, gave Cheng Shi a rundown of potential power sources for accelerating toward Fixed Destiny. Then they parted ways.

Not because they'd run out of things to discuss—but because Qin Xin had returned.

Upon hearing footsteps outside the room, the Candle Man froze and glanced at Cheng Shi. Cheng Shi shook his head, smiled, and waved farewell to the Flame of Hope. Then, with a snap of his fingers, he transported himself back to the void where he'd had his audience with Deceit.

Time within the mirror didn't count toward reality, so from the moment the Fun God had thrown him in to now, only the duration of a single conversation had passed.

Such a brief window meant Shadow Cheng Shi could easily return to his original position using his talent. As for the main body... he was still working on that.

But just as Cheng Shi was contemplating whether to retrace his path through the Dreamless Mirror to return to the void, his vision went black. An invisible force yanked him out of That Dream My Nightmare.

Before his consciousness scattered, he caught a fleeting glimpse of an enormous shadow—a turbid, yellowed giant hand—flashing past. When he came to, the first thing he saw was Kataro's smiling face.

Kataro gently helped Cheng Shi to his feet and said respectfully: "You're awake, my lord."

"Is this the temple? He sent me back again?"

Cheng Shi blinked, looking around. Only Kataro and himself were present—Dragon King and the mirror had vanished, and the Fun God was nowhere to be seen.

He glanced down and found that his shadow had already safely remerged. He breathed a sigh of relief.

"Where's our Benefactor? Has He left?"

Kataro nodded with a smile: "Yes. He returned you to the temple and then went straight to His next audience."

"Who is He meeting?"

Kataro's expression shifted. He hesitated a moment, carefully scanned their surroundings, then lowered his head and whispered uncertainly: "I don't know, but it's probably not a player."

"?"

'Not a player?'

Cheng Shi blinked. 'If it's not a player, what kind of "audience" would it be?'

'He couldn't be meeting another god's Envoy, could he?'

'Which Envoy would be blind enough to request an audience with the Fun God? Did they want to become the entertainment?'

While Cheng Shi was puzzling over this, Kataro bowed again: "My lord, your own audience should begin as well. The believers are already waiting at the foot of the divine steps outside the hall."

'Huh?'

"Whose believers?"

"The followers of Chaos..."

The Void.

A flicker of candlelight swayed in the hollow, boundless darkness—now bright, now dim—as if it could be swallowed by nothingness at any moment.

Yet no matter how precariously it wavered, that faint glow never went out. It was like a luminous nail hammered firmly into the void, quietly waiting until...

A pair of eyes opened above it, their upturned corners offering a playful greeting.

"Well, well~"

"A rare visitor! Instead of seeking out your cold and heartless Benefactor, you've come to see me?"

"I have neither Change nor hope here. I can't give you what you want."

The candlelight, ringed by darkness, slowly took shape, reforming once more into a Candle Man. He raised his head, his flames roaring as he gazed at those eyes, then gave a self-deprecating smile:

"I don't want anything. I only want an answer."

"Just as you tossed your follower before me seeking an answer, I've come to seek one of my own."

Those eyes rolled, amused:

"Then I'm afraid you're asking the wrong god."

"I am the facade of Void, the sovereign of all falsehoods beneath this sky. There are no answers in my mouth."

"And even if there were, they'd be lies."

"If you want an answer, go ask Truth... oh wait—Folly, I mean."

"He knows a lot. And even when He doesn't, He can pretend He does and make something up for you."

"Fine. Then let me go see Folly." The Flame of Hope's tone was devoid of emotion.

"?"

Deceit's gaze faltered, then spiraled slowly as He said, "Interesting. You are a Servant God of Void, an Envoy of my foolish little sister. You are the Change that exists independent of Fate. Since when does the word 'let' have anything to do with me?"

"You are free. Go wherever you wish."

"You don't need my permission."

"Is that so?" The Candle Man lifted his head, his eyes complicated and distant. "Then I can go seek an audience with Origin too?"

"..."

Deceit fell silent.

A heartbeat later, a strange divine power emanated from Him, freezing the surrounding void solid so that no one could spy on this place.

The starry points in His eyes flickered rapidly, spiraling in mesmerizing patterns. Every trace of playfulness vanished from His voice. His entire gaze turned dead serious.

He looked at the Flame of Hope, His tone so tangled with emotion it was impossible to parse:

"Why would you want to see Him?"

"Do you think He hasn't brought enough despair to this world already?"

The Candle Man's flames flared once, and he shook his head:

"Was this world's despair truly brought by Origin?"

"Then by whom?"

"How did He bring it?"

"Why play dumb? Didn't that little clown of yours tell you everything?"

"Our Creator is far, far more than you or I ever imagined."

"Put nicely, we're variables in His experiment. Put bluntly... gods, authority? Heh—nothing but dispensable trifles in the vast Real Universe."

"When the will you've championed for countless ages turns out to be nothing more than grains of sand casually scattered by someone else's hand, wouldn't you be terrified?"

"Of course I'm terrified." The Flame of Hope's reply was absolute. He gazed at those eyes that occasionally flickered with prismatic light, his voice both resolute and lost: "But what terrifies me even more is... who am I?"

Deceit's pupils contracted. A beat later, He burst into hearty laughter:

"Who are you?"

"You are, of course, a Servant God of Void, an Envoy of Fate—the Flame of Hope, formed from the Change that Fate discarded."

"That identity is something you told me yourself when we first met. Why are you asking me now?"

"Yes, my memories tell me I am the Flame of Hope."

"But I've decided I no longer want to trust my memories. Memory is your mortal enemy—surely I can't be wrong in distrusting Him?"

"So I've come seeking an answer. A new answer."

"If you can't tell me, then I'll go ask Fate Himself!"

"I believe He'll tell me who I truly am."

Deceit let out a derisive snort:

"Tch—"

"Fate has always been cold. Since He discarded you, why would He still agree to see you?"

"The world says Fate is heartless, never knowing He's even more heartless toward Himself."

"Save your breath. Even if you were once part of Him, He will never acknowledge your identity. There has never been a place for hope in His eyes."

When Deceit spoke those words, His tone was laced with both gnashing fury and wistful sighs. The Flame of Hope could tell His emotions were deeply complicated right now—but he didn't believe a single word.

Because the being before him was the Benefactor of every swindler in the universe, the greatest liar beneath the starry sky. He'd seen this routine countless times before, and this time, he absolutely wouldn't be fooled again.

So he declared with unwavering conviction:

"Whether He acknowledges me or agrees to see me—that's His business."

"What I can decide is whether I go and whether I ask."

"Since I am free, then I shall go."

The Candle Man's flames erupted across his body as he made to leave. But in the next instant, Deceit swept away every emotion in His eyes. With a languid blink, He conjured countless howling winds of nothingness throughout the void, extinguishing every last spark of the Flame of Hope's light and merging him completely into the surrounding darkness.

When it was done, those eyes gazed down at everything below, enunciating each word with deliberate gravity:

"I do not consent."

...

The Void. At the foot of the Chaos Steps.

Facing the bewildered Hu Wei and the restless Da Yi, Cheng Shi fell into thought.

He hadn't expected the fallout from War's demise to hit the players so quickly. After War's authority scattered into the Real Universe, His followers could still participate in trials under the Convention's protection. But His creations...

Looking at the flickering, phantom-like greatsword in the big brother's hand and the no-longer-sentient Iron Thorn between Da Yi's fingers, he suddenly realized it was time to find a suitable new home for Ultraman's followers.

The Fun God already knew the answer from the Sea of Desire incident. Though it still wasn't clear why War had "torn apart" Order, the god in question was gone—so probing the War camp had lost all meaning.

So how should he settle these two Chaos subordinates?

The grand curtain of faith fusion had been raised for some time now. Before, when most players hadn't yet fused, Hu Wei and Da Yi had managed a combat-tier "faith fusion" by borrowing War's power.

But now, with War's strength gone, they were falling behind.

Of course, fusion opportunities were plentiful. For peak players at this stage, choosing an additional faith was hardly difficult. The reason these two still hadn't fused was their devotion.

Without a decree from Lord Ultraman, they could only keep postponing—until now, when postponing was no longer an option and they had no choice but to request another audience.

Cheng Shi knew what Hu Wei wanted. The big brother had decided to go all-in on the path of Chaos and wished to fuse with Deceit.

But this matter had been discussed for so long, and the Fun God hadn't responded to Hu Wei at all. Could it be that He had no intention of letting Hu Wei fuse with Deceit?

Cheng Shi pondered for a moment, then recalled what the Flame of Hope had said: faith isn't about hoarding—it's about competing.

He needed to actively recruit new followers and expand his territory in the realm of faith. So if the Fun God didn't want Hu Wei, could Yu Xi take him instead?

His eyes gleamed with an idea. He addressed Hu Wei:

"I am aware of your wishes. You performed adequately in the initial phase of approaching Void, and my master's cooperation with Deceit has made some progress."

"Such a minor matter needn't bother the Sovereign of Void. Go and see His Envoy instead—I'm sure you've heard of him."

Hu Wei froze: "That Servant God of Void... Yu Xi?!"

"Yu Xi, precisely."

Every time he introduced his alter ego to someone else, Cheng Shi felt a crushing wave of secondhand embarrassment.

He lived in constant dread that one day all these masks would fall away and the world would discover that everything had been a single player improvising his way through every gap—and at that point, he'd truly be reporting for full-time duty before Death's Bone Throne.

"Come to think of it, I once shared a stage with this Envoy of Deceit—we played the same mortal."

"That Fate Weaver is without a doubt the finest opportunity for approaching Void. Should you have the chance to meet him again, the two of you would do well to grow closer."

"In the era of Void, drawing near to Void can never be wrong."

That might be true, but in Cheng Shi's private definition of Void, Fate had already been quietly excised.

Hu Wei nodded thoughtfully, thinking: 'Cheng Shi and I are brothers—comrades who've stared death in the face together. We're already as close as it gets. Next time I see him, I'll definitely pump him for more of Void's secrets.'

Da Yi was also nodding enthusiastically. From every angle, he had no reason to oppose the Fate Weaver. After all, Cheng Shi had saved his life at the 0221 Experiment Site—even if he'd split half the credit with Lao Hu.

Cheng Shi shot Da Yi a peculiar glance, fairly certain the twitching corner of the man's mouth was him suppressing a colorful expletive.

Perhaps sensing his lord's gaze, Da Yi instantly schooled his expression, standing at rigid attention. 'Finally, my turn.'

Lao Hu's path to fusing with Deceit had been charted. So where was his guidance?

He'd been waiting for this day for so long that before Cheng Shi could even open his mouth, Da Yi blurted out: "My lord, then what about me..."

Faith fusion was ultimately the gods' decision, but under the circumstances, it seemed only right to ask the individual in question.

If Da Yi's wish was too outlandish—wanting to fuse with the "untouchable" Folly, or the reclusive Birth—then Cheng Shi's hands would be tied.

Then again, looking at Da Yi, the man probably didn't have the brain for becoming a Wise Man, and he certainly didn't seem inclined to father a litter of Little Yis...

So after a moment's thought, Cheng Shi tossed the question back:

"What are your thoughts?"

As it turned out, Da Yi really had given this some thought.

Since his Benefactor and his lord were both moving toward Void, and Lao Hu wanted to fuse with Deceit, maybe he should go for...

Fate?

Fate was also Void. And the Fate Assassin—the Fate Thief—to a certain extent carried the ability to confuse and misdirect.

When the Refracting Phantom could steal an enemy's destiny on the battlefield, the only outcome awaiting that enemy was death—no second possibility.

This idea hadn't materialized overnight. It had started as a seedling, but given the current state of affairs, he felt the odds were good.

So he steeled himself, made his decision, and voiced his plan.

And when Cheng Shi heard this choice...

"..."

'You'd have been better off with Folly or even Birth.'

He couldn't spell out the reason directly, so he tried to nudge him away: "Fate... isn't entirely out of the question, but He's far too aloof. Much harder to approach than Deceit."

Da Yi shook his head vigorously:

"Grand... boss, He's not that alo— He's not so aloof anymore."

"Uh, my lord, what I mean is that the old Fate was indeed aloof, but He's changed!"

"You've been busy with important matters and may not have noticed the shifts in the game, but recently, many players—even those below peak level—have been praying to fuse with Fate."

"And as long as you pray, He agrees!"

"Aside from Oblivion players, who've never succeeded, I've already heard of numerous successful dual-faith cases involving Fate. That's why I figured if I could get your approval to fuse with Fate right now, I might even be able to infiltrate and investigate—to see what changes are happening within Void on your behalf!"

'Fate has opened the floodgates on faith restrictions and started fusing indiscriminately?'

'How come I didn't know about this?'

Cheng Shi's heart lurched, and an ominous premonition rose instantly.

It had been some time since he'd had an audience with Fate. What had triggered this change?

Had he learned of this before today's encounter with the Flame of Hope, he might have puzzled over it for a while. But after their exchange, a possibility clicked into place immediately:

Fate was using this to expand His faith pool!

He seemed to be going all in!

In hindsight, the early stages of faith fusion among the gods had been cagey—veiled maneuvers, mutual probing. No one was certain who to merge with. Only Deceit had a clear objective, consistently working to bolster the Fear Faction's ranks.

The middle phase saw accelerated fusion, with probes coming from all directions. Occasionally, the gods would bestow a second faith to forge alliances or broker deals with target faiths.

Of course, "early" and "middle" were relative terms for those in the know. For the uninformed gods, perhaps only now were they seeing the tidal wave of faith fusion rushing toward them—and Fate was among them.

Fate had indeed undergone a dramatic turn, but what had caused it remained unknown to Cheng Shi.

The one thing he was certain of: this was Fate seizing new power!

According to Da Yi, this shift might have started before the Truth experiment even erupted—meaning Fate had begun His territorial expansion in the realm of faith before the Real Universe was even revealed to the gods.

This would certainly let Him rapidly concentrate more power of faith, but it also invited more covetous gazes.

What the gods who'd agreed to fuse with Him were truly scheming in their hearts—nobody could know. Especially the Fear Faction...

'Wait—the Fear Faction?'

Cheng Shi frowned and asked:

"With all the recent work on our Benefactor's behalf, I've had no time to spare for you."

"You just said Fate has been lavishing second faiths left and right. Have you heard of any Deceit followers fusing with Fate?"

"Yes!" Da Yi wasn't stupid. He could see the gravity of the situation, and his expression turned stern: "Cheng Shi is one such case."

"..."

'I didn't mean me, you—!'

'I meant besides me!'

Hu Wei, being the sharper of the two, noticed the lord's momentary pause and realized his brother didn't count. After a brief think, he shook his head:

"No, my lord. At least among the current peak players, Deceit's followers have each found their own paths, but none have fused with Fate."

"That said, this is only what I've personally observed. I hadn't been investigating this specifically. If you'd like to know more..."

"Mm, look into it. Let's see what kind of storm Void is about to stir up."

Cheng Shi nodded casually, then sank into renewed contemplation.

Oblivion's absence made sense—Oblivion wanted to annihilate Fate's sacrifice, and Fate would never leave the door open for that.

But if the Fun God hadn't made a move either...

Was it because He didn't want to, or because Fate wouldn't allow it?

Either way, both scenarios pointed to the same conclusion: Void's fracture seemed imminent. The internal Void war that had raged for some time was the clearest proof that the opposing wills within Void had reached a breaking point.

And once Void truly split, what would happen to him—currently the only known Void walker—in terms of his power? What kind of changes would he face?

At that thought, Cheng Shi paused.

Because he realized the Fun God seemed to have planned for this contingency long ago. His shadow had already been carrying a separate set of faith, split from the main body...

Cheng Shi didn't say more. He genuinely needed someone to help probe Fate's intentions. Even if Fate was inscrutable, he still had to gather perspectives from other faiths.

So he approved Da Yi's request and cautioned:

"Be careful with Fate."

"Fate is about Fixed Destiny, not Change."

"For Him to stir up this much Change now, He's probably about to go all-out for Fixed Destiny."

"You two just need to monitor the movements of Fate's followers. Don't get too close to Him, and absolutely don't try to provoke Him. Right now... He's very short-tempered."

"That's all for today. I have other matters to attend to. I hope you find what you need within Void. When the mission is complete, I'll petition our Benefactor to let you both walk the Chaos Steps again."

"Dismissed."

"!"

The words "walk the Chaos Steps again" sent a jolt of excitement through both Chaos followers, because that meant an audience with their god. No matter how many divine audiences one had elsewhere, nothing compared to the gaze of one's own Benefactor.

Watching Hu Wei bow with renewed vigor and stride away, Cheng Shi's expression was indescribably odd.

'The big dreams my good brother once fed me have finally been rebaked and stuffed right back into his mouth.'

Some things were just that poetic—cyclical, as fate would have it.

After sending off Hu Wei and Da Yi, Kataro reappeared at Cheng Shi's side. He stood at respectful attention, silent, waiting for his lord's inquiry. Sure enough, it didn't take long:

"Has Dragon— has Li Jingming gotten out?"

"Did you see him?"

Kataro shook his head with a smile:

"My lord, I didn't meet the Memory follower. Our Benefactor didn't summon him, either. He awoke in the void on his own, still believing it was you who risked your life to rescue him."

"He waited in the void for quite some time. When he couldn't find any trace of you in the mirror, he returned to reality."

'Memory follower?'

Hearing that label, Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow. 'Kataro was rather "exclusive" with his categorization—he'd already bumped Dragon King out of the Deceit camp.'

Then again, fair enough. Though Dragon King was a follower of the Fun God, he didn't know that the Fun God was actually Chaos. And the Memory scent on him was so strong that revealing these secrets would be unwise.

If Memory learned about Chaos's identity through one of His followers, it could cause unpredictable damage to the Fun God's grand design.

Better to play it safe.

Cheng Shi nodded, then turned to Kataro again: "Did He leave any instructions?"

Kataro's expression immediately turned peculiar. After deliberating for a moment, he relayed the words Deceit had left before departing.

But first, a disclaimer:

"My lord, every word I'm about to speak was bestowed by our Benefactor. I have not added or omitted a single thing, nor would I dare."

"He said:"

"The clown's performance isn't confined to the present. And the clown on stage may not truly be called 'clown.'"

"As for what he's called—that depends on what the audience thinks he's called..."

"?"

After hearing this, Cheng Shi's brow twisted into a knot.

The Fun God was clearly conveying something, but come on—He was Deceit! Why did He have to play the riddler like Fate?

Would it kill Him to just speak plainly?

Oh, right. Sorry. Forgot—He's not human.

Cheng Shi pursed his lips. Cursing was out of the question—at most he could grumble internally.

He felt certain these words were an extension of his conversation with the Flame of Hope, likely tied to Yu Xi's identity. But while he understood the "clown" part, the "audience"—who was that?

Seeing the lord's bafflement, Kataro hesitated, weighed his options for a while, then clenched his fist and whispered a cautious hint:

"My lord, forgive my presumption."

"In my humble opinion, having served our Benefactor for so long, the 'clown' He speaks of... is most likely you."

"..."

Cheng Shi shot Kataro an unamused look, his expression plainly saying:

'No kidding. You think I don't know the clown is me?'

'But if you don't make yourself clearer today, which one of us is the real clown here becomes debatable.'

Sensing his lord's piercing gaze, Kataro hastily added:

"And the 'audience' in His words, I believe..."

"Those two Chaos followers would be the audience of Lord Ultraman."

"Meanwhile, that Memory follower counts as roughly half an audience of Lord Yu Xi."

"?"

'Ultraman is me, Yu Xi is also me—how is what you said any differ—'

'Wait!'

'There actually is a difference!'

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted as understanding detonated in his mind. So the Fun God wasn't talking about a stage and an audience at all—He was talking about deception and faith!

Of course! Viewed from the broadest perspective of faith, Ultraman had long since been inscribed in history and possessed a far deeper foundation of faith than Yu Xi. The proof was that the Chaos container accumulated divinity far faster than the Deceit container.

But the truth was, Ultraman was Yu Xi. They were simply different roles performed by the same person before different "audiences." So why would the same person's faith diverge into different types?

Because under Origin's naming conventions, the world had faith categories for Chaos and Deceit—but there had never been a category called "Cheng Shi."

"Cheng Shi" would never become a symbol of faith worshipped by mortal lives. But Yu Xi just might!

Not only might it be possible—Yu Xi could potentially devour Ultraman's faith entirely, grafting Chaos's faith onto the Envoy of Deceit!

As for how to blur and graft that faith...

The Fun God had already supplied the answer:

"As for what he's called—that depends on what the audience thinks he's called."

Was this sentence saying that when believers believed you were someone, their faith would flow to that someone?

Put simply: Chaos followers worshipped Ultraman, which was why the Chaos container's divinity accumulated faster. But if they came to realize that the Chaos Envoy Ultraman was actually the Deceit Envoy Yu Xi...

Wouldn't the faith directed at Ultraman then redirect to Yu Xi?

It wasn't impossible!

After all, the Chaos Envoy's identity had been created by Deceit using Deceit's own methods to corrupt Memory. It inherently carried Deceit's DNA.

Furthermore, the true Chaos had long since become Order. Today's Chaos had been replaced by Deceit—which laid the very foundation for conflating the two faiths.

A performance of fooling history and deceiving the masses also aligned perfectly with the public's understanding of the Deceit path. So revealing this "truth" wouldn't strike anyone as jarring—it would feel surprisingly logical. After all, the name Ultraman was inherently playful. If a Servant God of Void who toyed with the mortal world had deliberately chosen that name to corrupt memory...

Let's just say it would be reasonable squared—reasonable to the nth degree.

And with that, the Flame of Hope's earlier words...

"So what you must do is spread your faith beyond those boundaries. Ideally, you'd recruit a new batch of believers through some grand feat visible to the entire world. Once achieved, your faith will be deeply rooted, and your divine status firmly established!"

...would be accomplished. And accomplished in the past!

Just as the Fun God had said: the clown's performance isn't confined to the present.

"!!!"

The realization made Cheng Shi's entire body tense, his scalp tingling.

Deceit had seen through everything long ago and had laid the groundwork for all of it.

Every move He made seemed designed to elevate His own Envoy. He had played Chaos, scattering traces throughout history, all so that a Servant God of Void named "Yu Xi" would have evidence to stand upon.

He had paved the road to godhood for His Envoy. And now, the man who had once declared "I don't want to become a god" had become the one reaping all the rewards.

'You saw this day coming all along, didn't You, my Lord?'

After bidding farewell to Kataro, Cheng Shi returned to the rooftop rest area.

He'd been mulling over how to orchestrate the revelation that Ultraman was actually Yu Xi, but no matter how he turned it over, this kind of trick would at best enlighten the players currently in the game. The Chaos followers who had long since vanished into the river of history obviously couldn't convert to Yu Xi.

But that was enough. Compared to the long-lost Land of Hope, in this era, the players' faith clearly mattered more.

This had to be done without a trace—leaving just enough breadcrumbs for the game's sharp minds or the History School to discover the inconsistencies on their own and expose Ultraman's true identity. Only then would the players believe that history had already been tampered with by Deceit.

Cheng Shi pondered this for a long time, until a phone call interrupted his train of thought.

He glanced toward the warehouse. Though he hadn't picked up yet, he seemed to already know who was on the other end.

He raised an eyebrow, strode over to the warehouse, and answered with an opening line that left the other party speechless:

"It's me."

"..."

Silence followed those two words. After a moment, soft laughter came through.

"So you really did escape the mirror!"

"I sat outside it for ages without seeing any sign of you, so I figured you might have found another way out. That's why I called."

"So tell me, Cheng Shi—how did you do it?"

Cheng Shi was amused. He wanted to drop a breezy "Grandpa has his ways," but thought better of it.

Dragon King had clearly spent a good while sitting outside the mirror, moved by Cheng Shi's self-sacrifice in swapping places with him. A rare personal favor like that shouldn't be squandered. So he smiled and said:

"Does this count as the first memory exchange?"

"..." Li Jingming paused briefly on the other end, then chuckled and shook his head. "No. I'm merely voicing my curiosity. Whether you choose to answer is up to you."

"?"

'Hey, that's not how this is supposed to go.'

'What kind of new-age con is this?'

'Playing the emotional card to freeload other people's memories?'

'Just because you sound magnanimous doesn't mean I have to bare my soul. Do you know how hard it was for this old grandpa to rescue his grandson on these creaky old bones? If you don't cough something up today, it won't do justice to the Fun God's torment of me.'

Just as Cheng Shi was figuring out how to ask what Li Jingming had seen, Li Jingming spoke up first.

"Since you've already escaped, I imagine you're wondering what memories I witnessed."

'?

Cheng Shi's expression froze.

'I am not! Stop making things up—I'll sue you for slander!'

"Mm, it was always meant to be shared with you. The thing is, what I witnessed is something you already know. If you don't mind, I can tell you again."

"What do you mean?" Cheng Shi frowned, a note of surprise creeping in. "You revisited your own past?!"

Li Jingming nodded, a misty nostalgia filling his eyes.

"Yes. I chose my own past."

"!!!"

Cheng Shi was stunned. He'd assumed Dragon King would never choose his own memories over the Jokers' memories—after all, the whole point of entering had been to scheme for the Jokers' memories and commit them to record. He'd even been preparing for how to respond if Dragon King had chosen his memories, and how to navigate that revelation.

Yet against all expectations, this Memory follower who perpetually sought new memories to record had chosen to re-record one he'd experienced before.

"Why?" Cheng Shi asked, genuinely curious.

Li Jingming replied with a light laugh:

"I've said before—I constantly record the world's memories because I want to do something for this world."

"But at the end of the day, I'm just an ordinary person. Though I came from a Daoist temple, I can't cleave away my seven emotions and six desires. I have my own joys and sorrows."

"And when I stood before the Jokers' memories—when I saw my master's face appearing in a different form before my eyes—I realized that sometimes, it's worth making a record for myself."

"I don't have perfect recall. I can remember eight or nine tenths of my days at Cloud Field Temple, but even that remaining one or two tenths holds a beautiful memory."

"So I chose to step back into my past and grow up at Cloud Field Temple once more. I committed to memory every blade of grass and tree, every flower and grain of soil, every roof tile and wall, every master and disciple—so that my longing would be free of regret..."

"I imagine you chose to return to your past as well."

"I could see the love in your father's eyes. So all this time, everything you've been fighting for... it's been for him..."

Dragon King's voice was thick with emotion and wistful sighs, but to Cheng Shi's ears, it painted a completely different picture.

The memory at the starting point had been nothing more than the scene of Old Jia coming to adopt him. The two had only just met. Even if Old Jia had taken a liking to him, where was this profound, visible-to-Dragon-King fatherly love supposed to come from?

So Cheng Shi punctured Dragon King's lie immediately, snorting:

"Alright, alright—so you're a sentimental guy, I get it. But before you circled back to Cloud Field Temple, you peeked at quite a few other people's memories, didn't you?"

"You probably walked a good stretch of the maze, freeloading plenty, and only then doubled back to pick Cloud Field Temple, right?"

"Now I understand why you warned me on your first trip into That Dream My Nightmare to pick one path and stick to it. You couldn't find your way out through someone else's memories and had to retrace your steps, didn't you?"

"Tsk, Dragon King, oh Dragon King—look at you now. What, did you develop an interest in my profession?"

"..."

The scene turned excruciatingly awkward. On the other end of the line, even breathing stopped.

When Dragon King stayed silent, Cheng Shi knew he'd hit the mark. His eyes gleamed with mischief, and he deliberately let a few stifled "pfft" laughs leak through from his end, making the other party's predicament even more unbearable—payback for Dragon King's little fib.

He didn't actually care how many surface-level memories the other had seen. What he cared about was: however many you saw of others', that's how many you owe me.

Li Jingming was quiet for a long time. Then he sighed, let out a resigned laugh, and conceded:

"I admit defeat this time."

"I knew this gambit was risky, but I insisted on taking the bet because I didn't want you to see my sorry state."

"I got lost in the mirror with no way out. I didn't manage to dig up any of the Jokers' deep memories, and I burned through a lot of my items. In the end, I had no choice but to retrace the old path before I could finally meet up with you..."

"But through this experience, I've also realized something. Recording memories is one thing, but indiscriminately recording every last detail of someone else's memories can destabilize a person's consciousness."

"It's not like acting—it's more like splitting."

"Perhaps it's a method for splitting off a new personality, but it's far too dangerous. Even a god wouldn't dare attempt it."

"Otherwise, His Collection Hall would be crammed with complete, uninterrupted memories of every kind, instead of only select masterpieces."

This actually struck a chord with Cheng Shi.

He'd just traversed the Memory Junkyard, and the kaleidoscopic memories there truly could blur a person's consciousness—even contaminate them until they became memory refuse themselves.

But he obviously wasn't about to let Dragon King's deflection slide. He gave a chuckle and said:

"So? Don't change the subject. Tell me what you saw and how much. I'm quite curious—what exactly is lurking in the Jokers' surface-level memories?"

Left with no choice, Dragon King shared the surface-level Joker memories he'd witnessed with Cheng Shi.

However, most of it was mundane trivia from the past—nothing particularly thought-provoking. What he'd seen aligned with the dreamlike fragments Cheng Shi had observed on the maze's surface layer and with what he already knew about everyone's histories.

By the end, Cheng Shi was pursing his lips with diminishing interest.

Who would've guessed that the greatest reward from That Dream My Nightmare would be watching Dragon King make a fool of himself?

'Rare indeed—even this Memory follower had an off day.'

"You didn't try the seventh path?"

"Seventh path?" Li Jingming's voice halted on the other end. "What seventh path?"

"!?!?"

'Dragon King didn't see the seventh path?!'

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted, his expression freezing momentarily.

'No wonder!'

'I knew something was off—why would there be a path leading to Void inside an Existence artifact stuffed full of memories? Turns out it really was a backdoor the Fun God opened just for me!'

'But why can He even tamper with an Existence artifact?'

'Did Memory get robbed? He can't possibly have lost His authority without even realizing it, can He?'

'Deceit can't be that powerful, can He? Otherwise, what's He waiting for? Why hasn't He unified the universe already?'

In that instant, Cheng Shi recalled what Wei Mu had once said to his Benefactor, Folly: "If you're truly so wise, why would you let the other fifteen gods stand as your equals?"

Right now, swapping "wise" for "powerful" fit perfectly.

After a long silence on the other end, Li Jingming spoke again, puzzled:

"Cheng Shi, is this seventh path you found the reason you escaped?"

Cheng Shi reined in his thoughts, utterly unflustered, and lied on the spot:

"Exactly. I followed the seventh path straight out."

"I didn't expect it to lead directly to the void outside the mirror."

Li Jingming's brow tightened. He carefully reviewed the maze's layout in his memory, confirmed he absolutely hadn't missed any path, and grew even more curious: "Where was this seventh path?"

Cheng Shi smirked:

"Dragon King, you seem to have gotten dumber. I think you must've left your brain inside the mirror."

"Think carefully—you and I entered the same maze. When you couldn't see that path, shouldn't you ask yourself whether you missed something?"

Li Jingming was far from stupid. There had been no such path before him—naturally he couldn't see it. But Cheng Shi's hint immediately pointed him toward the one direction in the maze besides the cardinal points: up!

A sharp gleam flashed in his eyes as he said gravely: "The walls?! You climbed out through the mirror walls of the maze?"

"Exactly!" Cheng Shi curled his lips and spun his yarn along Dragon King's line of reasoning. "I nearly got lost in the memories too. In desperation, I went all in and scrambled upward as hard as I could. Then, in a daze, I found an exit in the wall and jumped into the void."

"But when I woke up and tried to retrace it in my mind, I couldn't remember how to get there."

"..."

This was practically an open admission of lying, yet Li Jingming couldn't challenge it—because the power of Memory genuinely could produce such effects.

But the main reason was that he'd lied too, which left him no ground to expose Cheng Shi.

Silence settled over both ends of the line. After a long pause, Cheng Shi finally asked, curious:

"Has something like this ever happened before?"

"If the person swapped in escapes on their own, does the Nightmare Shadow automatically get pulled back into That Dream My Nightmare?"

"No, and it can't."

Li Jingming's tone shifted, becoming rather laden with meaning: "Because my Nightmare Shadow—the fake Li Jingming who'd been impersonating me—has already left."

"?" Cheng Shi blinked, a little lost. "What do you mean, 'left'?"

"He left Cloud Field Temple. And before he did, he even left me a letter."

"Wait, hold on—you're saying the Dark Dragon King didn't return to the mirror and has become an independent entity that left your rest area?!"

'Dark Dragon King...'

Li Jingming's eyelid twitched. He gave a quiet affirmation.

Cheng Shi was dumbstruck: "Huh? Then the mirror..."

"I don't know if it's because of his departure, but I no longer have a Nightmare Shadow inside the mirror. That Dream My Nightmare seems to have stopped working on me."

"!!!"

'Stopped working?'

'No way—then how am I supposed to contact the Flame of Hope in the future?'

Cheng Shi's brow darkened as he hurriedly asked: "Has it stopped working on just you, or..."

"I don't know. I haven't had a chance to have someone else test it."

Before Li Jingming could finish, Cheng Shi jumped in:

"I'll do it—let me test it. Just bury the mirror at the Jokers' meeting graveyard like the Dark Dragon King did. I'll go retrieve it when I have time."

"Don't worry, I won't have any funny ideas about your mirror. I'm simply overcome by an urge to help others."

"..."

'More like you're overcome by an urge to lie.'

Li Jingming shook his head with an amused laugh and agreed:

"Fine. Since this mirror is no longer of use to me, it can be 'donated' as shared Joker property, so all of you can access His Collection Hall whenever you wish."

"I've tested it—the Collection Hall can still be reached."

No sooner had the words landed than Cheng Shi said shamelessly: "What a coincidence—the Jokers just appointed an asset manager, and that would be yours truly. Rest assured, I'll take excellent care of this first piece of communal property."

"...When was this appointment? How come I don't know about it?" Li Jingming's eyelid twitched again.

"What do you mean? You know now, don't you? And you're the first to know, at that."

"..."

Li Jingming's mouth twitched violently. 'Classic him.'

Though still bantering, Cheng Shi hadn't forgotten that the Dark Dragon King had left Dragon King a letter. He wanted to ask what it said, but then he heard Dragon King say with deliberate weight:

"That falls outside our earlier 'debt repayment.' If you want to know what the letter says, let's trade."

"Tell me what you saw on your way out of That Dream My Nightmare, and I'll tell you the message he left me."

"?"

Cheng Shi didn't miss a beat: "The back of the mirror's engravings, repeating patterns, and endless darkness. There, I'm done. Your turn."

Li Jingming chuckled: "What I want is the truth, not lies. You can't fool me, Cheng Shi. Think it over and come find me when you're ready. I have things to attend to."

With that, Dragon King hung up.

Cheng Shi stared at the phone in his hand, his expression odd as he muttered under his breath:

"It's not like I can tell you the Fun God opened a backdoor for me inside That Dream My Nightmare. If a Memory follower like you found out about that, what would I do if you got jealous?"

"Sigh, the hardships of being a grandpa—always worrying about the grandkids..."

...

Reality. An unknown Daoist temple in an unnamed province.

Li Jingming sat cross-legged on a meditation cushion. Before him lay six thick accordion-fold books arranged side by side, each bearing a name on its cover. A closer look revealed they belonged to the six members of the Jokers—himself included.

The edges of these books were dark with dense ink, clearly filled with writing. Judging by their thickness, the stories recorded within were far more extensive than what he'd shared with Cheng Shi.

He stacked all the books together, carried them into the scripture vault, and pressed them beneath a stone. Then he returned to the main hall, lit incense, and prayed:

"All mortals suffer, whether the gods descend or not."

"All deeds are virtuous, whether the world crumbles or not."

He bowed three times, placed the incense in its holder, and glanced at the white paper on the desk. Eight characters were written on it:

"Desire is no sin. I'll spare you this once."

Li Jingming's eyebrows drew together slightly. After a moment of silent contemplation, he soundlessly mouthed a name.

The matter of the Dark Dragon King weighed on Cheng Shi's mind.

He had a nagging feeling that That Dream My Nightmare harbored secrets beyond its connection to the Dreamless Mirror, but he couldn't find an excuse to wheedle the information out of Dragon King. For now, he'd have to shelve the issue and observe quietly.

Two tasks currently lay before Cheng Shi. The first was venturing into the Real Universe to retrieve War's scattered authority. The second was investigating the Folly town that Scarred Cheng Shi had mentioned, to search for clues about the Eye of Mockery.

The former still required finding a method to break through the spacetime barrier, and the Flame of Hope hadn't sent word about arranging Qin Xin yet—that one couldn't be rushed. So the only viable option at the moment was the latter.

He'd originally planned to recruit some Joker members to investigate together, but considering that information from the other world might differ slightly from his own, he ultimately decided to scout first and call for reinforcements once he had more accurate intel.

Still, for safety's sake, he brought along one person.

The call connected, and Cheng Shi got straight to the point: "Hey, Old Zhang—there's news about the Fool's Play Mask. Come with me somewhere."

Zhang Jizu's expression turned serious on the other end. He replied immediately: "Got it. When, who else, and where?"

"Leaving now. Just the two of us. Chaos Epoch, Civilization Lonely Tower, Folly town."

Cheng Shi wasted no words, quickly relaying the prayer time and invocation. Then he sat cross-legged on the ground and waited for the appointed time.

Meanwhile, in the void, Zhang Jizu set down his phone and looked up at those spiraling, star-speckled eyes with a grave expression, squinting:

"You foresaw this call, didn't You, my Lord?"

"That's why You summoned me beforehand and pulled me into the void."

Those eyes chuckled softly:

"I'm not Fate. What are you going on about, 'foresaw'?"

"It was merely a coincidence."

"In recognition of your devotion, I summoned you to bestow a grace. I know the ambition in your heart runs deep—but a bit of ambition is always good. Otherwise this world grows far too dull."

"Aren't you carving tombstones for the gods? Finish Truth's tombstone. He'll be needing it."

"!!??"

Zhang Jizu's eyes went wide.

Well, not that wide...

He said in disbelief: "You're making a move against Truth?"

"Any moves worth making have already been made. Don't ask what you shouldn't ask—just keep your head down and carve your tombstones."

"Also, make mine look nice. Even if it never gets used, it'll make a fine decoration."

"I am your Benefactor, after all. Surely mine shouldn't look worse than Old Bones's, right?"

"Hee~"

"That's all. I have other matters to attend to. You're dismissed."

With that, those eyes brooked no argument, whipping up a gale of nothingness that swept Zhang Jizu away. A final remark trailed after him:

"Oh, and one more thing—ignore the clown. Anyone can visit Folly's territory. Old Bones's little bones, however, cannot go for now."

Landing back in the cemetery, Zhang Jizu stood before the tombstones of the gods, staring blankly. His gaze swept across the three Civilization graves, lingering for a long time on Truth's unfinished tombstone, his mind churning with shock and uncertainty.

'Why has Truth fallen?'

'And why can't I go to Folly's territory?'

...

On the other side.

Completely unaware, Cheng Shi closed his eyes in devout prayer when the appointed time arrived:

"Truth and lies, indistinguishable. Reality and illusion, beyond debate."

"Your devoted follower prays to You. Open a trial..."

"A trial of 'observing the daily life near the town of Redi Core beside Civilization Lonely Tower No. 413!'"

The prayer faded. His vision bled red.

[Wish Trial (Session No. 12814229109136, Foolish Act — Folly) has begun]

[Matching teammates (1/6)]

[Trial Objective: Yet Another Foolish Act (5-day time limit)]

"?"

'As expected—it's a Folly stage!'

As the pinnacle of universal wisdom, every trial He administered came without guidance of any kind. Just two words: "Foolish Act."

Perhaps in His eyes, everything in this world was a foolish act—including Himself.

'But this time I'm only going to scope things out. I won't do anything. That can't possibly count as a foolish act, right?'

While he was thinking this, Cheng Shi's vision gradually went dark.

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

...

A dry wind roused Cheng Shi. The moment consciousness returned, searing pain erupted from every inch of his body.

His eyes burned as though set ablaze. His torso felt pierced by a thousand needles front and back. His wrists and ankles felt like the bones had been ground to powder, leaving him unable to feel his hands or feet at all.

The sudden agony triggered his brain's emergency response, cutting off all pain sensation instantly—but it also put him on high alert.

He needed to determine whether his current state was a product of the trial environment, or whether a teammate had ambushed him from the very start.

Fortunately, though Cheng Shi lay on the ground with eyes full of blood and no light in sight, Shadow Cheng Shi could still see the surroundings.

This was clearly a prison cell, built into the side of a cliff. The iron bars facing the interior were embedded deep in the stone wall and looked impossibly sturdy, while the exterior was completely open, dropping straight to a sheer precipice.

The gaping opening let in gusts of mountain wind that dispersed the smell of blood in the cell—but couldn't budge the six critically wounded prisoners lying on the floor.

These appeared to be all the players in this trial. At least he wasn't the only one injured, which meant the situation wasn't completely dire.

'Makes sense—it's supposed to be an observation-only trial. No way the difficulty is this extreme, right?'

'Though... prison again... prisoners again...'

'Does this cursed game have to chain me to inmates every single time?'

Cheng Shi sighed helplessly. Unable to lift his arms, he had his shadow extend a hand behind him to quietly heal himself. Before long, he was back on his feet.

And when he stood up and got a clear look at the teammate lying closest to him, the smile of recovery froze solid on his face.

"Brother-in-law!! Save me, brother-in-law!"

A certain bald man opened his mouth and immediately started running it. "I knew it—when I heard the magpie outside my window this morning, I knew something good was coming! What are the odds, huh? Warrior plus priest—we're invincible, brother-in-law!"

"..."

'Why is it him?!'

Cheng Shi went numb. He'd never imagined running into The Prisoner in a place like this.

Running into The Prisoner was bad enough—but where was Mi Laozhang? Had the matching system failed to pair him?

And even if it missed the Chosen One of Death, surely it didn't have to match him with the Chosen One of Oblivion?!

'What kind of brain-dead matching algorithm is this? Is it trying to make sure Oblivion's followers can find me?!'

Sure enough, the second person to stand was none other than Mo Shu—luggage case in hand despite both arms being broken. And the instant Cheng Shi laid eyes on him, all the memories about this Scavenger that had been blurred and erased came flooding back, letting him recognize the man immediately.

'What's going on—did the power of Memory vanish here?'

Not far from Mo Shu lay two women. One Cheng Shi recognized—Ji Yue, the Erudite Scholar he'd hoodwinked during that Chaos trial where they'd plucked Fate's bitter fruit. The other was a cold-eyed female player he'd never seen before.

She looked at him with thinly veiled hostility. Clearly, she knew who he was.

As for the last teammate in this cell...

It was an unfamiliar man. He had a very plain face—the kind you wouldn't notice in a crowd, wouldn't remember afterward. An utterly unremarkable everyman.

Yet he studied Cheng Shi with keen interest, completely ignoring his own injuries. He stood up directly and offered a greeting:

"We meet again, lo... Fate Weaver?"

Cheng Shi's brow furrowed. 'I've never seen this person before—so why does he seem so familiar with me? And that aborted word—what does he know?'

Just as Cheng Shi was blocking out The Prisoner's chatter and racking his brain to identify the man, The Prisoner's booming voice blew the stranger's cover wide open.

"Wei Mu?"

"Are you washed up or something?"

"How else did you end up matched with me and my brother-in-law?"

"..."

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted violently, his heart clenching.

'WHO?!'

The man with the forgettable face was indeed Wei Mu.

Cheng Shi knew this couldn't be his true body—that was a puppet marionette. The flesh-and-blood form before him, impervious to pain, had to be one of his actual puppets.

'Where did he hide the real one?'

Cheng Shi instinctively scanned the surroundings. Wei Mu, meanwhile, smiled and nodded to everyone, then swept his gaze around the cell. He pinched some soil from the ground and studied it briefly, then leaned out through the cliff opening for a look before declaring with total certainty:

"Red volcanic ash, a mountain prison, machine-spun coarse clothing, sacrificial garments. If I'm not mistaken, we're somewhere near the Civilization Lonely Towers in the four-hundred sequence."

"To be more precise, given the severity of the punishment inflicted on our bodies, we're likely in the early range—under four hundred twenty."

"The History School originally numbered the Civilization Lonely Towers of the Chaos Epoch to help pinpoint the location and historical context of trials as quickly as possible. It seems they succeeded—at least for players who enjoy studying Folly, it's extremely useful."

Wei Mu's presence was commanding. Though he knew full well that Cheng Shi was Yu Xi, he made no indication of it whatsoever, simply doing what he felt needed doing.

When he finished, he walked to the cliff's edge, turned to face the group, and gave a casual wave. Then, before everyone's astonished eyes, he fell straight backward.

He'd thrown himself off the cliff!

His only parting words: "I've found my answer."

Moments later, a thunderous crash echoed from the base of the cliff. The group flinched. The Prisoner, ignoring his injuries entirely, sprang to his feet with a carp-like flip, rushed to the opening, gripped the cliff face, and peered down.

While watching, he muttered:

"Come on, it's not that bad. Getting matched with me isn't exactly shameful. Why end it all?"

"..."

"..."

"..."

The shock of Wei Mu's suicide instantly curdled into something else entirely. The scene lapsed into silence.

But while the non-Silence followers fell silent, the actual Silence follower kept right on yapping.

The Prisoner turned around to face his remaining cellmates, stepped aside, pointed at the opening, and offered:

"If any of you feel too embarrassed to stay, you're welcome to jump too. Don't worry about my feelings. Really, I can take it."

"..."

"..."

"..."

'I don't know about your resilience, but I could definitely offer a review of your shamelessness.'

Cheng Shi had lost the will to speak. He rolled his eyes at The Prisoner while keeping all his attention fixed on Mo Shu.

This Scavenger had too many overlapping identities stacked on him: the twisted pastry chef, the delivery boy for Deceit's items, the life-or-death rival who'd barely fallen short, the lackey of the Oblivion camp...

Cheng Shi had to stay wary of whatever tricks the man might pull with that luggage case. He was also wondering—now that even Mo Shu's power of Memory had vanished, would that old "trick" for testing whether someone carried Oblivion's will still work?

While he was pondering this, Mo Shu opened his suitcase with a stony face and crammed all six cakes inside into his own mouth.

With each swallow, the wounds on his body healed a little more. By the time the last one was gone, he was fully recovered.

Seeing this, Cheng Shi was confused.

'What's the meaning of this?'

'No more testing other people for Oblivion's will?'

'But as the cakes get annihilated, your body recovers— isn't that the opposite of Oblivion's will?'

'What, did you also figure out that "the pinnacle of devotion is blasphemy"?''

Mo Shu glanced up at Cheng Shi. As if reading his confusion, he snorted coldly:

"This isn't recovery—it's the oblivion of self-inflicted pain."

"Fate Weaver, you've clearly strayed from my master's will."

"?"

Hearing that, Cheng Shi gave a dry chuckle.

'Sorry, but I was probably never anywhere near Oblivion's will. It's your Benefactor who keeps shamelessly trying to sidle up to me.'

'And if eating a few mutton-fat cakes counts as "drawing close to Him" ...'

'I can throw them back up and return them.'

Of course, trading barbs before understanding the situation would only create headaches. Seeing that Mo Shu wasn't about to attack immediately, Cheng Shi held his ground and continued observing the relationship between the Scavenger and the unknown woman.

They clearly knew each other.

Because right after Mo Shu devoured his first suitcase of cakes, he produced a second one—and this new case appeared to be prepared for the female player.

"..."

'Dude, are you running a wholesale bakery?'

Mo Shu was being cautious as well. He pulled the female teammate close and fed her the cakes, obliterating the pain from her wounds. But he'd barely fed her two before he reached for another and found the case empty!

His brow sank, his gaze sharpened, and he whipped around—only to find The Prisoner had somehow materialized right behind him, mouth packed to bursting with cake, chewing furiously while gesturing with both hands:

"Deesh ahr... wawwy gwood."

"..."

"..."

"..."

The scene turned excruciatingly awkward. Cheng Shi nearly failed to hold in his laughter.

He might be laughing, but that didn't mean the aggrieved parties found it funny.

Mo Shu's expression turned arctic. Without a word, he drove a fist straight at The Prisoner's face. But The Prisoner didn't even dodge—he actually opened his mouth wider and leaned into it.

BOOM—

The fist connected dead-center with The Prisoner's mouth, sending him flying. The explosive force of Oblivion also annihilated every crumb of cake in his mouth.

The Prisoner tumbled across the ground, completely unharmed, yet still looked pained as he lamented:

"What a waste! Such delicious cake, all gone."

"Comrade Scavenger, no more wasting food in the future! Choking me to death is one thing, but wasting food is a disgrace!"

"DIE!"

Mo Shu had reached his limit. Or rather, for a Scavenger, problems that could be solved with violence were best solved with violence. In an instant, the two warriors collided.

They were evenly matched, blow for blow. After a brief exchange, neither could gain the upper hand—but they'd nearly demolished the cliff-side cage in the process.

Seeing things going south, Cheng Shi frowned slightly. Spotting an opening, he slipped through the shattered bars and out of the cell.

He knew he'd come here with a mission and couldn't afford to get tangled up with these people for long.

The prone Ji Yue watched the two combatants with an eager look, as if she wanted to jump in, but after careful deliberation, she chose to follow Cheng Shi's lead—escaping through the broken bars and vanishing from sight.

Her injuries seemed to have never affected her at all. In fact, "watered" by her own blood, this Purgatory Bishop moved with the agility of a warrior.

She left without hesitation, sparing no lingering glance for anyone present.

The Prisoner, for his part, showed zero reaction to her departure—he was too busy fending off Mo Shu's attacks with body and mouth alike.

"Comrade Scavenger, I think you're—"

"How are you even—"

"Hey, I'm trying to say—"

"You are so unreasonable... let me finish..."

"Wait!"

"Brilliant! Obliterating someone else's words—that's the very essence of Silence! Why not join us? Together with my brother-in-law, the three of us could... hm?"

"Why'd you stop obliterating?"

"Scavenger, you've strayed from my master's will this quickly?"

"..."

The boomerang spun back with devastating precision, catching Mo Shu completely off guard.

He'd never imagined there would come a moment when he'd feel this conflicted. Obliterating The Prisoner would prove the point, but not obliterating him was just as problematic. He was stuck—trapped between two equally terrible options, left with nothing but revulsion.

'What rotten luck!'

Cheng Shi had no idea what the situation inside the cell had devolved into.

He'd already stripped off the prisoner garb and grabbed a guard's uniform from a corridor rack, throwing it on before strolling right out of the prison as if he owned the place.

The moment he stepped outside, he realized the setting was a city built into the mountains. At a glance, peaks encircled the area on all sides, eerily reminiscent of the view from Katouting when gazing at the distant mountains.

He still wasn't sure if this was Redi Core, so he grabbed a random passerby, plastered on a professional fake smile, and asked politely:

"Excuse me, where is this?"

The robed passerby held his head high, "looked down" at Cheng Shi's uniform, then glanced at the prison behind him and let out a contemptuous snort:

"What's this? The Folly Prohibition Office didn't meet quota this month, so they've resorted to such crude tactics to drum up 'business'?"

"Even if you need to boost your revenue, at least come up with a better excuse."

"A question this stupid—even if I answered, I know you'd arrest me on charges of 'Knowing Folly.' So do you really think I'd humor you?"

"Imbecile."

With that, the passerby strutted away, nose in the air, leaving Cheng Shi standing bewildered in the wind.

'Excuse me, pal...'

'You say you won't humor me, so who was that just cursing me out?'

Cheng Shi stared down at his outfit in utter confusion, thinking this place was something else. Even law enforcement got trash-talked to their face? Apparently here, intellect outranked the law.

Not one to give up easily, he asked several more passersby—and received heaps of scorn for his trouble.

Now he believed it.

Folly's domain was truly remarkable. As long as you could seize the intellectual high ground and look down on others with withering disdain, tongue-tying them into silence, you were exempt from punishment. You could even replace the officer who'd challenged you.

Because during those exchanges, one passerby had actually started trying to strip Cheng Shi's clothes off mid-rant, declaring he was unworthy of serving as a Folly Prohibition Guard and demanding he surrender his authority.

Was Cheng Shi going to stand for that?

Shadow Cheng Shi circled behind the man and dropped him with a single chop. After dragging him into an alley for a heart-to-heart, it took only minutes for Cheng Shi to extract every bit of information he wanted.

This was indeed Redi Core—a city built atop the mountains.

Protected by the nearby Civilization Lonely Tower, the entire population worshipped Folly. The town was quite famous in this realm, because it was the birthplace of the very first Fool Hunter in history—and a prolific producer of Fool Hunters.

That was why the local law enforcement was called the Folly Prohibition Office, and its officers were called Folly Prohibition Guards. Because the birthplace of the Fool Hunter would tolerate no foolishness—all foolish acts were forbidden.

At this point, Cheng Shi nearly lost his composure.

'Does your Benefactor know—Him being the universe's number one practitioner of foolish acts—that you're simultaneously worshipping and blaspheming Him here?'

'Banning all foolish acts basically means banning your own god, doesn't it?'

'No wonder Wei Mu jumped off that cliff at the start. He must have known from the get-go that this place was impious...'

Then again, that was only idle musing. Cheng Shi was certain that Wei Mu wouldn't exit this early. From a swindler's perspective, when someone deliberately vanishes from everyone's view, they haven't actually disappeared—they've simply changed roles and returned to the stage.

He just didn't know why Wei Mu had come here, and therefore couldn't guess where the man had gone.

But regardless of Wei Mu's whereabouts, it didn't affect his own mission. Cheng Shi was only here to learn about the town of Redi Core. He hadn't expected to gain anything from this trial, so his mindset was completely relaxed.

Well, not completely relaxed...

The Prisoner and Mo Shu showing up still made him uneasy. He had to carefully manage his relationship with that unlucky Torchbearer while staying on guard against whether the Oblivion follower would make a move. Outwardly carefree, his nerves remained taut.

That's why he'd bolted at the first opportunity. Now he planned to head to the town center and examine the god-revering statue that honored the first Fool Hunter.

The interrogated passerby had told him that to commemorate the first Fool Hunter in history and express the people's devotion to their god, Redi Core had erected a massive stone statue in the town center.

Whenever someone in town committed a foolish act, the offender would be dragged to the statue and subjected to torture as tribute to the first Fool Hunter's god-revering will.

The players' identities in this trial were prisoners who'd been tortured just the day before. Their crime: losing a debate to an Executioner and then killing him in jealous rage—charged with Knowing Folly.

How absurd! They weren't convicted for killing a law officer, but for Knowing Folly!

Clearly, the people of Redi Core's rejection of foolishness far eclipsed their respect for the law.

The real prisoners' memories had been lost the moment the players arrived. Cheng Shi didn't know the specifics, but he knew that when you were out and about, identity was whatever you made it. So today he wasn't some prisoner—he was a Folly Prohibition Guard with real authority.

Cheng Shi followed the main road to the town center. The moment he looked up, he spotted the towering Fool Hunter statue—a figure drawing back a bow, gazing into the distance. The stone cape streaming behind it, though carved from rock, was so lifelike one could almost hear it snapping in the high-altitude wind.

But the statue's face was nothing like what Cheng Shi had imagined. He'd assumed the first Fool Hunter would be supremely arrogant—nostrils aimed at the heavens. But the face wasn't sharp or hard at all. It carried a faintly feminine quality; even the fiercely knitted brows held three parts melancholy.

The craftsmanship was exquisite—so detailed and refined that it re-created the first Fool Hunter's image with stunning precision.

Cheng Shi studied it for a long time, feeling that if this town harbored a secret, it had to be connected to this statue.

'So the Eye of Mockery—could it be hidden in...?'

With that thought, he raised his gaze to the statue's eye sockets. To his shock, those carved eyes seemed to sense his attention, swiveling slightly and casting a sliver of gaze downward at him.

Cheng Shi startled, pupils contracting. He retreated half a step and glanced around, only to realize that the passersby offering worship showed no surprise at all. Only then did he understand: the statue's eyes were designed to move.

"It's the wind!"

Just as Cheng Shi was reeling from the rotating eyes, a voice came from behind him.

Cheng Shi didn't need to turn—Shadow Cheng Shi had already identified the newcomer. It was none other than one of his trial teammates, the Erudite Scholar he'd once worked with: Ji Yue.

She'd changed clothes too, though her choice was subtler—one of the common long robes seen throughout town. She walked up beside Cheng Shi, looked up at the statue, and smiled:

"Quite an ingenious design."

"The higher the mountain, the stronger the wind. The statue towers above the surrounding buildings, so all they had to do during construction was hollow out the eye sockets and carve the eyeball into a lightweight sphere. Naturally, it moves with the wind, creating the illusion of a gaze surveying all creation."

"I must say—though Folly never shares, His followers possess remarkable mastery in many fields."

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow, stealing a glance at this Truth scholar from the corner of his eye, wondering what her real purpose was in deliberately approaching him.

'She shouldn't remember what happened before... right?'

"Cheng Shi, I know who you are."

While Cheng Shi was still sizing up Ji Yue from the corner of his eye, she took the initiative to introduce herself.

Those words made Cheng Shi's heart skip a beat, thinking she'd recovered her memories. But her very next sentence was:

"The great hero who thwarted the 0221 experiment and saved countless players!"

"..."

Cheng Shi's expression froze, though he quietly breathed a sigh of relief.

Thank goodness. Being praised was a bit awkward, but at least it seemed she didn't actually remember him.

He turned to face Ji Yue, studying her striking silver hair, and smiled:

"'Hero' is too generous. I just happened to be there and fought for survival—for myself and my friends."

Hearing such modesty, Ji Yue raised an eyebrow, clearly gaining a measure of respect for Cheng Shi:

"A gentleman judges deeds, not intentions. You saved people—that's a fact. You've earned the title of hero."

"My friend also suffered greatly in that experiment. In a way, you're his benefactor."

"I'd like to thank you on his behalf."

"?"

The more Cheng Shi listened, the odder it felt. He was certain Ji Yue had an ulterior motive for approaching him, yet she seemed to harbor no hostility. For the moment, he couldn't figure out what this Erudite Scholar was scheming, so he could only mask it behind his practiced fake smile.

"You're too kind. It was Fate that watched over him. As I said, my fight for survival was purely selfish."

"For your friends—hmm, it must be nice to be your friend."

Ji Yue studied him up and down with evident interest. Noticing Cheng Shi's heels lifting slightly, as if about to leave, she quickly steered the small talk back to the trial itself:

"Though Folly's trials come with no clues, they aren't entirely untraceable."

"Our identities are most likely the key to cracking this. So the crime that took place yesterday is probably the only lead."

"Unfortunately, it seems we didn't inherit the prisoners' memories. Any thoughts on that, Fate Weaver?"

Cheng Shi frowned, wondering if Ji Yue had simply pegged him as stable enough to team up with for the trial.

Not impossible, but she'd clearly entered with a specific objective—one very different from his reconnaissance purpose. Recklessly teaming up would do neither of them any good.

Add in the external threats lurking in this trial, and without understanding Ji Yue's current position, Cheng Shi couldn't afford to get too close to any teammate who'd approached him voluntarily.

Even if this teammate had once been his teammate.

So, erring on the side of caution, Cheng Shi recalled Ji Yue's previous behaviors while carefully choosing his words of refusal:

"You should have some idea of my identity."

"As a follower of Deceit, I naturally have no advice on recovering memories."

"If your purpose in finding me is to clear this trial, I'm afraid you've got the wrong person."

"I was just bored sitting around in the rest area and picked a random destination for some sightseeing. Whether we pass or fail this trial, I couldn't care less."

"Of course, with a scholar's vast knowledge and understanding of your rival faith, I'm sure you can find your own answers without any help. Am I right?"

Cheng Shi smiled, waving goodbye. "I'm just going to wander around. Do as you like."

With that, he turned to go.

But the next moment, Ji Yue extended a hand to block his path, her expression an ambiguous half-smile as she fixed him with her gaze and spoke word by word:

"If I'm not mistaken, this is our first meeting, Fate Weaver."

"Since we've never met before, how did you know I'm a follower of Truth?"

"My score and reputation haven't reached the point of being common knowledge."

"!!!"

'Damn—I kept mentally revisiting our previous encounter and slipped into the old perspective without thinking!'

Cheng Shi's heart clenched, but his face betrayed nothing.

For a swindler, getting called out in real-time was just another day at the office. Besides, as long as he could talk his way back, the whole exposure thing was still up for debate.

His eyes flicked, and the explanation came immediately:

"At this tier, if you still need a prior introduction to identify a teammate's faith, what's the point of all that score?"

"You can only be a Truth follower!"

"The only ones who can see something and instantly deduce its underlying principle are followers of Truth and Folly. But Folly never shares. So from the moment you told me 'it's the wind,' your way of thinking already revealed your identity."

"Still want to block me, Scholar?"

"This isn't the Tower of Logic. Even if tickets were being checked at the gate, it'd be Folly's followers doing the checking."

"As a Truth follower, you'd do well to keep a low profile on your rival's home turf."

With that, Cheng Shi casually pushed Ji Yue's arm aside and strode past her with a smirk.

Ji Yue frowned slightly but accepted the explanation.

Though she'd forsaken her oath, Truth's blessing still lingered, and she retained a Truth follower's way of thinking. Being identified wasn't unusual.

'But why do I keep feeling this inexplicable sense of familiarity about him?'

'Is it his methods? Or some faint magnetism of goodwill? Or is it the same mysterious Fate-linked sensation as the Flame of Hope?'

She wasn't sure. She turned to watch the direction Cheng Shi had disappeared and fell into thought.

Cheng Shi could sense that Ji Yue had grown suspicious. He quickened his pace, and the moment he passed an intersection, he ducked into the crowd filling the alley, weaving through rapidly until he was well beyond the town center before resuming his leisurely intelligence-gathering.

Aside from its less-than-friendly residents, Redi Core was actually a well-built city.

Every blade of grass and tree, every wall and road—everything exuded a near-obsessive refinement.

Cheng Shi could easily picture the craftsmen who'd laid these roads and planted these gardens thinking: "My roads and gardens are the finest in the land. These fools can't hold a candle to me!"

Perhaps it was precisely this "I'm the best there is" attitude that had produced such a stunningly beautiful mountain city.

He wandered along a quiet footpath, no longer asking questions directly. Instead, whenever someone passed by, he casually stopped to eavesdrop on their conversations.

This kind of passive intelligence-gathering let him get a feel for local gossip when he had no leads, and gossiping was one of ordinary citizens' favorite pastimes—even Folly's followers weren't immune. Such gossip tended to reflect current hot topics, always tied to whatever was happening in the present.

Sure enough, after listening to several conversations, one name kept surfacing:

Koshna.

The dead Executioner.

Everyone who mentioned Koshna wore a conflicted expression, their words becoming hesitant.

Nobody in town seemed to believe those arrested prisoners could have actually killed a physically imposing Executioner. Yet, confronted with the established facts, they chose to accept it anyway, convincing themselves that jealous rage had unlocked the prisoners' hidden potential.

Cheng Shi could easily see why the townsfolk chose acceptance. If they raised doubts but couldn't produce evidence, the doubter themselves might be charged with Knowing Folly—reduced to the same criminal status as the prisoners who'd murdered the Executioner in a jealous rage.

And even if they did have evidence, they probably wouldn't use it to overturn the case, because...

Folly never shares.

Those in the know were likely sitting somewhere, watching the birth of yet another foolish act with amusement.

Little did they know that while they sneered at folly, they were performing it themselves.

Cheng Shi wasn't in a hurry to investigate Koshna. He wanted to observe a bit longer, to see if any recent gossip connected to the Eye of Mockery. But after listening and listening, the closest thing to "eyes" he found was the townsfolk themselves...

Every last pair of eyes in this town might as well have been the Eye of Mockery—not a single person spared their scorn.

Cheng Shi sighed and decided to expand his search radius to other districts.

But just as he was about to leave the street, a gleam of light flashed at the far end of the lane.

A shiny bald head appeared in his field of vision.

"..."

"Brother-in-law?! Hey, don't walk away, brother-in-law!"

"Brother-in-law, why aren't you talking?"

"Have you converted to my master's faith?"

"But you said yourself that my master is actually a chatterbox—He doesn't actually forbid speech! So if you're trying to embody His will through silence, you've already gone astray!"

At the word "astray," Cheng Shi's footsteps halted.

The Prisoner caught the sudden change instantly. His face lit up, and he said at once:

"You've really gone astray before?"

"No wonder you look a bit rough around the edges. Have you been under too much pressure lately?"

"Don't push yourself too hard—seize the day and enjoy life! That's the true meaning of existence."

"..."

"You disagree?"

"Then I'll have to explain this to you properly."

"See, the world's basically ending. If we keep wearing ourselves out over—"

"Oh wait, don't tell me you're actually honoring that promise we made at the 0221 Experiment Site—that you wouldn't speak to me if we ever crossed paths again?"

"That's totally unnecessary, brother-in-law!"

"You're the only one in this world who truly gets me. If you go silent, wouldn't I lose my one kindred spirit?"

"Then again, I didn't expect you to be such a man of your word. Hmm, the brother-in-law I picked really is dependable!"

"..."

Cheng Shi fought down the urge to throw a punch, took a deep breath, and said: "Are you done?"

"Hm?" The Prisoner rubbed his bald head, shaking it like a rattle drum. "Nope."

Cheng Shi's eyelid twitched violently: "Then can you at least come down to talk?"

The Prisoner blinked, agonized for a moment, then reluctantly hopped down from Cheng Shi's shoulders.

"The view up there was actually pretty great. Nice breeze, too."

"..."

Cheng Shi felt he was losing his mind. But then he recalled the image of his good brother Hu Wei with The Prisoner sitting in his lap, and suddenly this didn't seem so unbearable.

He snapped irritably: "Who taught you to have a conversation from someone's shoulders? You're an Ascetic Monk, not an Acrobat!"

The Prisoner grinned sheepishly:

"I could be an Acrobat too— hey, hey, hey, no hitting! Okay, okay, I'll explain. The truth."

"I noticed you seemed stressed, so I figured I'd balance you out physically."

"How about it—feel better now?"

"..."

'Thanks. I'm already dead.'

Cheng Shi's eyelid hammered away as his temples throbbed.

He wanted nothing to do with The Prisoner, yet he knew there was no shaking the man. So he resigned himself—consider it a free bodyguard—and strode toward the next district.

The Prisoner latched on tight, mouth never stopping. The density of his chatter only reinforced Cheng Shi's conviction: devotion taken to the extreme becomes blasphemy.

'The problem is, if you'd at least say something I didn't already know—even pointless gossip—I could treat it as fresh intel.'

'But all you've been doing is babbling nonsense...'

'Dude, that mouth growing on your face is truly cursed with blessings.'

Cheng Shi was at his wit's end. He finally understood how Brother Mouth felt whenever he pestered it with questions.

If not for The Prisoner's additional identity as a Torchbearer, today's Hero of Today would definitely be squaring up against the Ascetic Monk.

"Is this how Qin Xin taught you to pass the torch?"

When he couldn't take it anymore, Cheng Shi finally squeezed in a retort.

To his surprise, it worked wonders. The moment The Prisoner heard the words "pass the torch," the incessant chatterbox went completely quiet—actually acting like a Silence follower for once.

The sudden change was so jarring that Cheng Shi actually felt uncomfortable.

The Prisoner's expression turned opaque, unreadable. After a long silence, he asked just one thing: "Why don't you join the Torchbearers?"

"?"

Cheng Shi scoffed: "Why did you join?"

The Prisoner pondered with genuine seriousness, then said: "I'm afraid of death."

Cheng Shi froze. A complicated expression crossed his face, and his voice took on a wistful note:

"Me too."

For one fleeting moment, the two seemed to achieve a wordless, tacit harmony. By all past precedent, this was the point where they should lapse into silence, each drifting into their own thoughts.

But one of the people present was The Prisoner. So the instant Cheng Shi's words faded, The Prisoner beamed:

"I knew it—brother-in-law gets me best!"

"Taking this sister was absolutely worth it!"

"..."

WHAM—

Cheng Shi had reached his absolute limit. One punch sent The Prisoner flying.

But The Prisoner wasn't the least bit rattled. He shamelessly dashed right back, falling into step behind Cheng Shi, and resumed his commentary:

"I know all about you and what you've done."

"You've clearly helped the Torchbearers before. Why won't you join our warm little family like I did?"

Cheng Shi scoffed again: "What's warm about the Torchbearers? Because you have a Flame of Hope that could snuff out at any moment?"

Hearing this, The Prisoner actually froze.

"What's the Flame of Hope?"

"!!??"

'Seriously?'

'Bro, are you messing with me right now?'

'You're a Torchbearer and you don't know about the Flame of Hope that protects you?'

At this moment, The Prisoner's eyes were so clear you could raise two "Folly" fish in them. He seemed to grasp Cheng Shi's shock, nodding and then shaking his head:

"Qin Xin recruited me, but he said I'm an independent branch. I only communicate with the Blind One—he hasn't taken me to headquarters yet."

"So the Torchbearers are really hiding a flame called the Flame of Hope?"

"That is so cliched."

"..."

'What else?'

'What did you think they were passing?'

'A dud?'

Cheng Shi had come to a realization: it was nearly impossible to stay on the same wavelength as The Prisoner. Because the moment you synced with him, you became unlucky too. So this particular frequency was better left untuned!

He broke away from The Prisoner again and pressed forward. The Prisoner stuck close as ever, an unbroken stream of speculation pouring from his mouth—but Cheng Shi offered no further responses.

The pair continued their chase-and-follow routine as they left the district. But as they walked, both stopped simultaneously, brows furrowed, eyes scanning their surroundings.

Cheng Shi's gaze sharpened. "Don't tell me you silenced the residents around us. They seem to have stopped talking for a while now."

The Prisoner raised an eyebrow and shook his head: "Not me. It's a Historian! Zhao Xishi is here."

'A Historian?'

'A Memory follower?'

"That female player?" Cheng Shi blinked. "You have a grudge with her? I saw she knows Mo Shu—did your fight earlier get serious?"

The Prisoner stretched his arms and legs, grinning:

"There's a bit of history, but it's not from the fight just now."

"Actually, brother-in-law, you've got a bit of a history with her too."

"Her ID is 'Last Year Today.' She had a falling-out with my sister over some History School membership issue, so I think she's more likely coming after you than me."

"But don't worry, brother-in-law—I'll always have your back."

"Because I am a Torchbearer who protects all brothers-in-law!"

"..."

In that moment, Cheng Shi wished he'd never learned about the Torchbearers—and wished even harder that The Prisoner was on the attacker's side.

'How can one person be this unlucky?'

He didn't know much, but he knew one thing for certain: from this point on, the Torchbearers were well and truly doomed.

Zhao Xishi's grievance differed from Li Jingming's.

Dragon King had been deliberately sabotaged by Zhen Yi and denied entry to the History School. Zhao Xishi, on the other hand, had joined the History School only to be vetoed by Zhen Yi when competing for vice president—after which she angrily quit the organization, becoming Zhen Yi's sworn enemy.

Nobody knew why Zhen Yi had shot down the most hardworking member of the school at the time. All anyone knew was that from then on, whenever a History School member crossed paths with Zhao Xishi, nothing good came of it.

Cheng Shi knew nothing of the specifics. All he wanted to know was what relationship this Historian had with Mo Shu, and how the two had ended up working together.

He'd hoped The Prisoner might know something, but this Chosen One of Silence—first-rate at running his mouth—had a pitifully thin intelligence file.

After getting nothing three times in a row, The Prisoner consoled him:

"Don't panic, brother-in-law. If you want the inside scoop, just beat her into submission. She'll talk."

"..."

'Like I need you to tell me that?'

'The problem is: where is she hiding?'

Cheng Shi held a smoke bomb at the ready, eyes scanning every direction, ears alert to the slightest sound—guarded to the extreme.

A lone Singer might not pose much threat, but paired with a Chosen-level Warrior, Cheng Shi had to take this seriously.

They'd clearly walked into a trap. Everything around them was likely a memory illusion. Without knowing where the enemy was, holding position was the safest approach.

Then again, with The Prisoner here, maybe going on the offensive wasn't a bad idea.

Silence's power could break through all techniques. Why not just shatter the memory illusion directly?

With that thought, Cheng Shi frowned and glanced at The Prisoner beside him—only to find The Prisoner's expression deadly serious, his stance combat-ready, a thread of blood oozing from the corner of his mouth.

'!?!?'

"You're injured?"

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted. His sharp gaze swept the surroundings as he casually flung a healing spell his way.

The Prisoner opened his mouth to respond, but instead—"BLEURGH!"—he sprayed out a torrent of blood.

"Cough cough... minor issue. Just ingested a bit of Oblivion power. Only now finding out those cakes were a trap."

"How devious!"

"Minor" it might be, but the problem on The Prisoner's body looked anything but minor.

A massive surge of Oblivion power erupted from within him. Veins bulged across his body as he fought with everything he had to prevent the Oblivion force from annihilating his organs.

Seeing this, Cheng Shi's gaze hardened. He drew the Thorn Weeping Rite, sending an endless stream of healing spells raining down on The Prisoner's head while tossing him a bottle of Prosperity of Yesteryear. His voice was grave: "Don't die."

He knew that even if The Prisoner lost his combat ability, as long as he stayed alive, he'd draw some of the enemy's attention. But the moment The Prisoner died, all the pressure would fall squarely on Cheng Shi.

The Prisoner was a battlefield veteran and understood this perfectly. He took the potion, nodded, and declared with iron resolve: "Don't worry—I haven't attended your wedding with my sist— hey, hey, hey! What was given was given! Why are you snatching it back?!"

Cheng Shi had changed his mind.

He grabbed the Prosperity of Yesteryear back, thinking: 'If it's The Prisoner who dies, maybe that's not so bad.'

But just as the two finished their dazzling exchange, the enemy hiding in the shadows finally responded.

The ground beneath the memory illusion suddenly split open. A fist the size of a basin came hurtling through, wind screaming, aimed straight at The Prisoner's face!

The Scavenger had made his move. His first target was still The Prisoner—the one who still had fight left in him.

But even in such a weakened state, The Prisoner didn't bat an eye. He even had the leisure to talk while blocking the blow:

"Comrade Scavenger, your cakes have a safety issue. They're not sanitary—I got a stomachache."

"I'm going to report you to the market regulatory bureau. They'll shut down your shop, fine you to oblivion, and award me emotional distress damages!"

Mo Shu's eye twitched violently. He sneered:

"This is your emotional comfort. Catch!"

BOOM—

A tremendous crash rang out. Two titanic forces collided, the shockwave rippling outward and kicking up endless clouds of dust. The two combatants held their ground, but the blast sent Cheng Shi—a mere Priest—flying.

Mid-flight, Cheng Shi twisted to look back. Through the dust, he saw The Prisoner drop his weakened facade entirely, lick the blood from his lips, and throw himself at the Scavenger with manic fervor.

Mo Shu was equally stunned. He gnashed his teeth:

"You weren't hit at all?!"

The Prisoner punched away while looking embarrassed:

"Sorry—digestive system's too good. Already passed it all. The only trace left in my stomach was the tiny bit I spent serious effort keeping in."

"You people have no idea how miserable it is when you can't finish your business!"

"What you owe me isn't food safety compensation—it's my intestinal regularity! Take this!"

"..."

"..."

"..."

At that moment, Cheng Shi swore he came dangerously close to switching sides and joining Mo Shu in beating The Prisoner.

But an instant later, he couldn't help laughing.

This was the second unluckiest man alive for a reason. If The Prisoner could be made to concede defeat, he wouldn't be this famous.

The warrior-on-warrior brawl raged on. Cheng Shi, having landed, stayed fully alert. He knew Mo Shu's real target was never The Prisoner. Mo Shu had probably identified the relationship between the two and prioritized eliminating Cheng Shi's support first.

But Mo Shu had his own backup. Where was the Historian?

Though she was a support-class Singer, at this tier, there was no such thing as a purely support class. Between their items and hidden potential, support players could always deliver a fatal blow when the target least expected it.

Like... right now!

Just as Cheng Shi was cautiously scanning his surroundings, a passerby who'd been scrambling away from the sudden fight went ice-cold in the face, produced a dagger, and charged straight at him.

Given that a few steps' distance was nothing to a peak player, before Cheng Shi could even turn around, the dagger plunged into—

'?'

A cloud of smoke!

'Where did he go?'

The assailant's pupils contracted. She spun to retreat, but a scalpel materialized directly in her path. It swept upward in an arc, and she held her breath, instinctively dodging, only to feel the blade graze her shoulder and slice through her hood—revealing a face of utter frigidity.

Historian Zhao Xishi!

'This Singer had the audacity to ambush me in the flesh?'

'Hadn't she heard about me going toe-to-toe with Zangier at the 0221 Experiment Site?!

Cheng Shi's first strike missed. His eyes narrowed, and he flash-stepped backward. He didn't believe for a second that a peak player would use such a crude method of attack. Sure enough, the instant he pulled away, the memory illusion at his previous position completely collapsed—the entire scene crumpled inward, the compressed Memory power detonating with devastating force, blasting everyone in the vicinity away.

Thankfully, Cheng Shi had retreated in time. He tumbled and rolled, pulling back all the way to The Prisoner's side.

The Prisoner was also battered head to toe, not a patch of intact skin remaining.

The two instinctively went back-to-back—and spat out the exact same words in unison:

"How are you this bad?"

"..."

"..."

One second of silence. The next, The Prisoner beamed: "I knew it—brother-in-law, you get me best!"

Cheng Shi's forehead was pulsing. He shot a glare at Mo Shu, who stood some distance away with a dark, uncertain expression, and yelled:

"How are you this bad?! You couldn't even kill him?!"

"I—"

Mo Shu ground his teeth, ready to charge again, when a voice from behind hissed: "No chance now. We're leaving." His brow sank as he glanced forward one last time, then obliterated his own silhouette with a wave of his hand.

Seeing the attackers withdraw, Cheng Shi sneered.

But The Prisoner beside him said: "You're the one who got beat up—what are you smiling about? Brother-in-law, don't tell me they knocked you stupid."

"..." Cheng Shi's smirk died on the spot. "You're the stupid one, you—"

Before he could finish, a thud came from behind. The figure at his back crumpled to the ground.

The Prisoner's mouth was full of blood, his gaze unfocused. He clutched Cheng Shi's leg and nodded weakly:

"I... really did... get knocked stupid..."

"Cakes... not tasty..."

"Brother-in-law... save me..."

With that, he collapsed face-first with a splat.

'!?!?'

Cheng Shi was dumbfounded. He couldn't tell whether The Prisoner was messing with him or genuinely done for.

But he didn't rush to treat him. Instead, he grabbed The Prisoner and bolted for a dark alley, asking as he ran:

"You said you passed it all—how did you still get hit?"

Blood flowed ceaselessly from The Prisoner's mouth, his words delirious:

"I lied to him... I've been constipated lately..."

"This is bad... I think I really did get knocked stupid..."

"Brother-in-law... how come I can't see your shadow anymore..."

"..."

On the other side.

Two cold-faced figures stood atop a building, gazing toward the direction Cheng Shi had vanished, neither speaking.

After a long while, Mo Shu said gravely:

"The fact that we were matched with him—does that mean Jie Shu's deduction was correct? The secret of that matter lies either with Wei Mu or the Fate Weaver?"

Zhao Xishi nodded:

"I'm more inclined to say it's the Fate Weaver. Otherwise, given Jie Shu's intelligence, he would never challenge Wei Mu's authority."

"Outsiders already look at Wei Mu like gazing up at an unclimbable mountain. But only Folly's followers themselves know what their Chosen One truly represents."

"I'm not belittling Jie Shu. Among peak players, he's practically a summit of intellect. Unfortunately, not every summit is called Everest. The fact that he can't match Wei Mu is simply indisputable."

"But this Fate Weaver..."

"I keep hearing his name lately. An interesting person."

"I've also heard that Zhen Xin has been quite close with him. Heh—that fox never does anything without gain. I refuse to believe she's cozying up to a con artist for something as naive as friendship."

"Her capacity for friendship was spent entirely on the Blind One."

Mo Shu pondered briefly, offering no comment, then continued:

"Could either of the other two be a lead?"

"The Prisoner..."

At the mention of The Prisoner's name, Mo Shu's eyelid twitched. He fell silent for several seconds, skipped right past the topic, and went on: "That female player is no pushover, either."

Zhao Xishi glanced in another direction and smiled: "Why do you think so? Just because this is a Folly trial?"

Mo Shu nodded:

"Precisely. In His eyes, everything is a foolish act. Countless past experiences have proven that in the trials He bestows, we can only ever act out foolishness."

"So I'm wondering—could our entire line of thinking be wrong?"

"No need to overthink it. Who's to say the counter-logic you're toying with right now isn't itself the foolish act?"

"Though that beauty is probably a Truth follower..."

"She's composed and measured, acts with discipline—obviously not low-ranked. By my read of people, she's likely a member of some organization, here with a mission."

"And Truth has nothing to do with the truth we're searching for."

"If Truth could actually deliver truth, why would He keep putting His followers through such misery?"

"It shouldn't be her."

"As for The Prisoner..."

"Jie Shu once said that Silence probably knows this universe's greatest secret. As His follower, if The Prisoner knows something, I wouldn't be surprised."

"But if it really is him, then what we're doing truly is a foolish act."

"Nobody can pry anything from Silence's mouth. Not even Folly."

"Jie Shu said that too. I think it makes a lot of sense."

Mo Shu gave Zhao Xishi an odd glance, thinking she really did "trust" Jie Shu.

He'd always suspected that Zhao Xishi's adulation of Jie Shu stemmed entirely from the fact that Jie Shu was one of the rare players who could surpass Zhen Xin in at least one area.

Of course, surpassing Zhen Xin wasn't what mattered. What mattered was suppressing Zhen Yi.

As a Memory follower, being expelled from an organization devoted to studying history and memory—especially one controlled by a follower of Deceit, her rival faith... this was an obsession Zhao Xishi could never put down.

But voicing such speculation would only invite trouble, so he simply nodded:

"Then we proceed as planned."

"I'll carry out our Benefactor's edict. You investigate the secret he's hiding."

Zhao Xishi cast her gaze once more toward where Cheng Shi had disappeared, eyebrow raised:

"I've always been curious—why would a god lower Himself to issue an edict for His followers to obliterate one mortal?"

"Do you think it's related to the secret he carries?"

"Is your Benefactor also searching for the truth that Jie Shu spoke of, just like us?"

Mo Shu's gaze sharpened, but he didn't respond.

His heart held only devotion, never doubt. Besides, he'd already received that lord's promise. Soon, he would take the next step and widen the gap between himself and ordinary mortals.

Seeing Mo Shu fall silent again, Zhao Xishi gave a dismissive snort and said no more—until he spoke up with "Let's go, time to move," at which point she followed his silhouette and vanished from the rooftop.

The mountain wind swept past, leaving behind only a few fragmented lines of conversation:

"The cakes you gave me—they don't have a hidden trick in them too, do they?"

"That depends on whether you stand with me."

"Heh. Honest, at least. And utterly dull."

...

Cheng Shi pulled back his arm, fought down the urge to turn the charred corpse into a Screaming Servant, sighed, and used the Lush Horn Crown to resurrect The Prisoner.

It wasn't that he hadn't wanted to heal him—after weighing his options, he'd concluded that killing him first and then reviving him cost far less mental energy than direct healing.

So at The Prisoner's most agonizing moment, Cheng Shi had granted him a quick death—using the fear extracted from interrogating a passerby in the alley.

But when The Prisoner leapt up, seized Cheng Shi's hand, and started shouting "miracle doctor" nonstop, Cheng Shi immediately regretted it.

He should've turned him into a skeleton. At least bones wouldn't be this clingy.

Cheng Shi shook off The Prisoner's grip and headed toward the alley's exit. This time, The Prisoner actually didn't stick to him. Instead, he trailed behind, studying the ground beneath Cheng Shi's feet with an uncertain expression:

"Your shadow... was it obliterated by the Scavenger?"

Cheng Shi blinked. 'Here I was worrying about how to explain this, and he comes up with an excuse all on his own.'

So he kept a grave face and nodded:

"Yes. I trust you're aware of the divine edict that Oblivion's followers have received. They're hunting me with everything they have."

The Prisoner's curiosity only deepened. To most people, this would be a catastrophe of apocalyptic proportions. But in The Prisoner's eyes, this was cool beyond words!

Being hunted by a god!

What could possibly be more thrilling?!

"Why does He want to obliterate you?" The Prisoner asked eagerly, hurrying to keep up.

Cheng Shi answered honestly:

"I made a face at Him, He got embarrassed and furious, so He issued the edict to obliterate me."

"What do you mean, 'made a face'?"

"I blasted Him with a bolt of lightning right to His face. Like the one I hit you with earlier."

"..."

The anticipation in The Prisoner's eyes collapsed in an instant. He rubbed his bald head, eyed Cheng Shi, and said with dissatisfaction:

"Lying is no fun."

"We've literally been through life and death together. Can't you level with me?"

"You think I'd blab? You've seen it yourself—I'm reliable!"

He thumped his chest for emphasis.

"..."

'In what universe are you reliable?'

Cheng Shi rolled his eyes, thinking the only thing reliable about this man was how reliably unreliable he was.

"I am telling the truth. Whether you believe it is your problem."

"Fine, fine, I believe you—happy? Is that good enough?" The Prisoner nodded furiously, then, still unwilling to let it go, pressed on: "Besides that lightning bolt you hit Him with, what else happened between you and Him?"

"Are you conducting a census?"

"Not really. Is Oblivion your family?"

"..."

'Is Oblivion your family!'

Cheng Shi clenched both fists. He'd truly reached his breaking point. He stopped, turned, and spoke to The Prisoner word by word:

"Option one: shut your mouth and follow me."

"Option two: leave here and babble to your heart's content."

"Pick one. Otherwise, I'll tell everyone you're a Torchbearer."

"!!!"

The Prisoner's pupils contracted. Seeing that Cheng Shi didn't seem to be bluffing, he scratched his head with some embarrassment: "But then wouldn't you be exposed too?"

Cheng Shi sneered: "I'm not a Torchbearer."

"...Oh right. So, is it too late to quit?"

"..."

Cheng Shi took a deep breath, now absolutely certain that Qin Xin had misjudged this one.

But Qin Xin hadn't misjudged. His eye was startlingly accurate.

To protect the Torchbearers, The Prisoner actually fell silent.

It was hard to imagine that this reckless, unlucky-aura troublemaker would shut his mouth over a threat that barely sounded like one—simply because the threat mentioned the Torchbearers.

A flicker of surprise entered Cheng Shi's gaze. It seemed this Silence follower wasn't entirely unreliable after all.

The two continued exploring the town in silence. Cheng Shi didn't explain his objectives, and The Prisoner didn't ask, simply trailing behind Cheng Shi lost in his own thoughts.

Along the way, they ran into city-wide patrols and learned that the six escapees had made it onto Redi Core's wanted list.

Luckily, they'd both changed clothes by now. The only identifying feature matching the wanted posters was The Prisoner's bald head.

But The Prisoner was well-versed in the concept of a blind spot hiding in plain sight. When he saw officers carrying sketches and searching everywhere, he didn't hide—he strolled right up and helpfully pointed them toward the direction Mo Shu and Zhao Xishi had vanished.

The Folly Prohibition Guards didn't suspect the bald man could be a fugitive. After all, Folly's wisdom dictated that escaped fools would never dare approach them so brazenly.

Watching these so-called Folly Prohibition Guards perform a textbook foolish act right before his eyes, Cheng Shi was speechless. After a few more rounds with The Prisoner that turned up nothing new in other districts, he decided to double back and investigate the dead Executioner, Koshna.

The town was full of "Eyes of Mockery," and yet there was no actual intel about the real Eye of Mockery. To gather as many clues as possible, he had no choice but to redirect his attention to the trial's puzzle, hoping that within Folly's riddle he might find that mask fragment that sounded like a Folly creation.

As they passed through the town center again, someone was being publicly punished beneath the massive Fool Hunter statue!

The two exchanged a glance, immediately recognizing this as an excellent opportunity to observe local justice, and pushed through the crowd. By the time they reached the front, they found Ji Yue already standing in the first row, watching the proceedings with a faint smile.

Cheng Shi froze, wanting to avoid her, but The Prisoner cheerfully squeezed forward and asked without a trace of restraint: "Don't tell me you arranged this?"

Ji Yue frowned slightly at The Prisoner's arrival, but when her gaze swept past him and landed on Cheng Shi, her eyes flickered for a moment before she nodded:

"That's right. I believe this statue hides a secret—likely connected to... the trial. So I employed certain methods to make a few of them commit Knowing Folly."

"You've got nerve. You're wanted and you still waltz up to watch? Aren't you worried about being dragged back by these guards?"

The Prisoner studied her with an odd expression: "You're not worried, so why would I be?"

Ji Yue glanced at his bald head and smiled:

"First, I don't have such a conspicuous feature as yours. Second, I'm not on the wanted list."

The Prisoner blinked: "Why not?"

Ji Yue smiled: "Because I'm the one who reported all of you and provided your portraits. I drew myself as a different woman, so naturally I wouldn't be wanted."

"???"

The Prisoner was floored. He turned to look at Cheng Shi, his wide-eyed expression practically screaming: 'You can do that?!'

Then he spun back around: "Why would you do that?"

"I kept feeling our identities are linked to this trial, but I couldn't dig up any clues. So I figured I'd let the clues come to me."

"Whoever is most interested in our identities naturally becomes my lead."

"..."

The Prisoner scratched his head. He was about to say more, but one look at those eyes brazenly sizing him up made him close his mouth. He retreated to Cheng Shi's side and whispered:

"This woman is trouble. Something about her feels off every time I see her. Do you know her?"

Cheng Shi avoided Ji Yue's probing gaze and nodded:

"Ji Yue. An Erudite Scholar."

"Truth's way of exploring the world is through experimentation. So it wouldn't surprise me if she used anyone as a test subject—including herself."

"Just stay alert. Don't become her expendable."

While they were talking, the punishment had begun.

Since the previous Executioner had died unexpectedly and the town hadn't held elections for a replacement, the punishment was being administered by several Folly Prohibition Guards.

Supervising them was Kandert—the runner-up from the last election who'd been named deputy—and now the most popular candidate for the upcoming one.

But at this moment, Kandert's face bore not a trace of a smile. He kept looking up at the statue as if in prayer, then turning to whisper urgently to the guards maintaining order. Anxiety was written all over his face.

His unusual behavior was quickly noticed by the players in the crowd. Both Cheng Shi and Ji Yue were wondering: could this so-called candidate be connected to Koshna's death? Could he be a lead to what they were searching for?

The punishment itself was unremarkable. The players had already gotten a firsthand taste of the local penalties when they'd woken up at the start. When it was over, the guards dispersed the onlookers and returned to Kandert for orders.

The candidate Executioner rattled off instructions to several guards. Since they were too far away to hear, Cheng Shi glanced at The Prisoner.

As everyone knew, controlling sound was a Silence follower's specialty—and they didn't just snuff it out. A second later, perched on a rooftop, the pair could hear Kandert's conversation with the guards from a great distance.

"Are you certain only one person fell from the cliff?"

"Sir, we haven't confirmed yet. Prisoners in other cells only heard one crash. We can't rule out two people hitting the ground simultaneously, but any more than that would have produced multiple sounds."

"I've sent men down the mountain to investigate. We should have results within two days."

"Bring the bodies back. There's something suspicious about Koshna's death. I don't believe those people could have killed him."

"Yes, sir!"

"Also, round up every outsider in the city. Until we find the cause of Koshna's death, we cannot overlook a single suspicious target."

"Yes, sir!"

"However—sir, his death isn't exactly bad for you. You..."

Kandert's gaze turned razor-sharp:

"There won't be a next time. Don't make me execute you personally for Knowing Folly."

"Koshna was one of our lord's devout followers and an outstanding Executioner. His passing is a loss for Redi Core and for the Folly Prohibition Office."

"Though he was my rival, I refuse to claim victory by such an accident. Investigate with everything you have. Don't let a single trace go unexamined."

"Yes, sir!"

Kandert sounded like a fair and righteous law enforcer. But the moment his words faded, Cheng Shi and The Prisoner exchanged a look, their expressions turning odd.

He'd been lying.

This Kandert really was suspicious!

Cheng Shi thought briefly and decided to tail the man, hoping to dig up something more. But just as he was about to leave with The Prisoner, Ji Yue—who'd disappeared into the crowd only moments ago—reappeared before them. She stood at the base of a townhouse, looking up at the two on the roof, and said with a meaningful smile:

"Fate Weaver, there's something I'd like to discuss with you. If you wouldn't mind, could this... skill—um, this kung fu Ascetic Monk step aside for a moment?"

"You were about to say 'unlucky,' weren't you?" The Prisoner's head popped over the roof's edge, his gleaming bald scalp dangling like a streetlight from the eaves. "Don't think I didn't hear it. We Silence followers have sharp ears."

"..."

Ji Yue's smile stiffened. She eyed The Prisoner with an odd look and said with "candid honesty": "Then could the unlucky one please leave for a bit?"

"?"

The Prisoner blinked, then instead of getting angry, he grinned.

"You seem to be deliberately provoking me. Are you looking for a fight?"

A flash of excitement crossed Ji Yue's eyes, but then the fist she'd been clenching behind her back loosened. She shook her head: "No."

Unfortunately, that was a lie—and both Cheng Shi and The Prisoner caught it.

They both froze for a beat.

'Since when did Truth followers become this reckless?'

Cheng Shi thought: this did match his memory of Ji Yue's fiery temper, but did she even know who she'd be facing?

Second only to Zhen Yi in bringing bad luck. The Chosen One of Silence. An Ascetic Monk whose mouth ran dense enough to crush a person to death!

'Did you really think the reason he'd survived this long despite his catastrophic luck was just because nobody wanted to catch it? Dead wrong—it's because he can fight, sister! What are you thinking?!

If not for that earlier encounter, Cheng Shi wouldn't have spared Ji Yue a second glance.

But her dead-serious expression suggested whatever she wanted to discuss might actually be important. Listening wouldn't cost him anything—might as well freeload some intel.

So after a moment's thought, Cheng Shi agreed and sent The Prisoner away.

The Prisoner stared at Cheng Shi in utter disbelief, looking positively wronged: "Men truly can't be trusted. You meet a new woman and just toss me aside?"

"..."

Cheng Shi's face darkened. He silently raised his hand, lightning crackling at the ready. The Prisoner took one look and, without another word, bolted two miles down the road.

Ji Yue shook her head with a laugh and turned to Cheng Shi. After confirming no one was around, she asked a question that made Cheng Shi's scalp prickle.

"Fate Weaver, do you know what it means to pass the torch?"

"?"

Every expression on Cheng Shi's face froze solid.

His brain was running at full speed, trying to figure out whether she'd recovered her memories and come to "reunite," or whether she hadn't recovered them and was testing the waters!

Of course, there was a third, far more terrifying possibility: that after losing her memories, Ji Yue had joined the Torchbearers all over again—and this new Torchbearer had selected him, just like Fang Shiqing had before!

Cheng Shi couldn't accept any of the three.

Though if it really was the third option, he wasn't particularly surprised that Ji Yue could join the Torchbearers. After all, this Erudite Scholar had already articulated a will nearly identical to a City Builder's back in the void.

After thinking for ages without an answer, Cheng Shi opted to say nothing at all. He simply put on a puzzled expression that clearly asked:

'You sent The Prisoner away for this? Passing what fire?'

Ji Yue seemed to have anticipated his reaction. She swept a hand through the air, deploying a barrier around them, and smiled:

"Why not come down and talk in detail?"

"I'm not that scary, am I?"

'Lady, right now you're a little scary.'

Cheng Shi pursed his lips, hopped down from the rooftop, checked the time, and said: "Vacation time is precious. Make it quick."

Ji Yue shook her head with a soft laugh:

"You're resisting me, which means you absolutely understand what I meant by 'passing the torch.'"

"Makes sense. You're a person with goodness in your heart, so naturally you can intuit my purpose."

"I won't beat around the bush, then."

Her expression turned serious:

"The gods descended and bestowed upon us a Faith Game."

"They call it a game, but I'd call it theater."

"They sit high above, pulling the strings of faith, puppeteering people through act after act on Their stage—all to inch closer to some purpose They keep hidden."

"But since it's theater, there must be tragedy and joy, reunion and parting. The joy belongs entirely to Them. The tragedy falls squarely on us."

"Mortals cannot struggle free. We can only endure Their manipulation and watch friends and loved ones be taken from us... Just as you said—we have to do something for ourselves and our friends!"

"So, Fate Weaver—are you truly content to remain at Their mercy forever?"

"..."

'This scene feels familiar.'

At this point, how could he not know? Ji Yue had definitely joined the Torchbearers. The only question was who'd recruited her.

'Surely not Fang Shiqing?'

'She shouldn't have any memories. Unless something happened afterward that I don't know about?'

Though many thoughts swirled, Cheng Shi's response came almost instantly:

"I'm content."

"???"

Ji Yue froze. Her momentum broke for a split second as she stared at Cheng Shi in disbelief, studied him for a moment, then burst into laughter.

"You're not content at all!"

"The faster you answer, the more it proves you're desperate to push me away. And the more you push, the more it proves you're discontent."

"I understand the feeling of having reservations that prevent you from taking the plunge. Just like how you saved all those people yet still insist you were just looking out for yourself."

"I was just looking out for myself." Cheng Shi's expression was strange.

"Really?"

"Then why is it that among all the people fighting for self-preservation, everyone else only thought about saving themselves—while you rescued every last soul in an entire experiment site?"

"..."

Cheng Shi was stunned. The question left him genuinely speechless, his cerebellum practically boiling.

'Excuse me, sister, since when did you analyze things from this angle?'

'Aren't you supposed to need an explanation when you do something bad? How does doing something good land me with this kind of "blame"?''

'In heaven's name—the situation was that if I didn't fight back, Zangier would've squashed me flat! Was I supposed to just stand there?'

'And besides, I only sent Zangier into Dolgod because I wanted his knowledge and treasures. How did I become a saint in your version?'

The word "goodness" wasn't one just anyone could shoulder.

Cheng Shi shook his head, deciding he couldn't keep chatting with Ji Yue. Muttering "you're insane," he turned to leave—only for Ji Yue to grab his arm.

This Torchbearer's blazing eyes locked onto his:

"The goodness in a person's heart can't be hidden."

"I'll admit my read of people isn't as sharp as his, but I'm still certain you belong with us."

"Fate Weaver—join us. Let us be your shield. Let us clear away your worries."

Cheng Shi scoffed, turning his head:

"Do you even know what my worries are? And you want to clear them? Bold words."

"Fine. I'll give you a chance. Prove it."

"If you can clear my worries, I'll agree to join."

Ji Yue's eyes lit up. She was about to make a promise when Cheng Shi continued:

"Kill Oblivion. Then I'll go with you."

"..."

Ji Yue's smile solidified. It took her a good while to confirm that Cheng Shi wasn't talking about the Oblivion follower in this trial—he meant the god Oblivion Himself.

How could the Torchbearers possibly kill a true god?!

If they could, there'd be no need to pass any torch. The spark would've become a wildfire long ago.

Seeing her reaction, Cheng Shi scoffed again:

"What's the matter? Can't do it?"

"If you can't, then don't make big promises. As everyone knows, Oblivion's followers are hunting me. The root of it is my undying enmity with Oblivion."

"If you can't resolve a problem this fundamental, then stop bothering me."

"Besides, Scholar—when you came to recruit me, was it for the City Defenders or the City Builders?"

"!!!"

Ji Yue's face changed dramatically. Her gaze turned cold in an instant, fist clenching as if ready to strike at any moment. But she quickly realized that Cheng Shi had been deceiving her all along—he'd probably already turned down the Torchbearers before.

She shook her head with a rueful laugh, then sighed bitterly:

"I see. No wonder you resisted so strongly when you heard 'pass the torch.'"

"Who approached you before?"

"Fang Shiqing?"

"It could only be her. This might be hard to believe, but I actually came to recruit you as a City Defender too."

"Because I can tell the goodness in your heart is about protecting, not attacking."

"I may be a City Builder's Fire Seeker, but I couldn't resist the urge to bring a peak player with genuine goodness into our fold."

"But coming now... was my own wishful thinking..."

She released Cheng Shi's hand, her eyes still brimming with admiration.

"You know the name of 'passing the torch,' yet you've never done anything to extinguish it. You may not be a true Torchbearer, but you will always be a friend of the Torchbearers."

With that, she bowed deeply to Cheng Shi.

When met with force, Cheng Shi only pushed back harder. But when you played this card...

Cheng Shi eyed the back of Ji Yue's bowed neck, debating whether to give this second Fire Seeker a chop.

But after thinking it over, he let it go. Ji Yue wasn't Fang Shiqing. If the chop didn't knock her out, he'd end up fighting a Torchbearer.

Ji Yue of course had no idea what filthy thoughts Cheng Shi was entertaining. She wanted to make one final pitch—even an honorary membership would do—but when she raised her head, Cheng Shi was nowhere to be seen.

Staring at the empty alley, Ji Yue didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

"...This Fate Weaver really is something."

"She's a Torchbearer too?!"

"Then we're colleagues!"

The moment The Prisoner said that, Cheng Shi knew he'd never shake this deadweight.

After leaving Ji Yue without a word, he hadn't gone looking for The Prisoner. Instead, he'd quietly chosen another direction and, after asking a few passersby, headed straight for Kandert's residence.

But he hadn't made it two blocks before The Prisoner materialized at his side again, completely unfazed by Cheng Shi's attempt to ditch him, chattering away as always:

"Do you think I should tell her I'm also a Torchbearer?"

"Qin Xin is so inconsiderate—he never even mentioned my name to the Fire Seekers."

"What if I mistake another Torchbearer for an enemy and pick a fight?"

"I left a pretty decent impression on her just now, right? Surely I fit her image of a covert special operative?"

"..."

'If you fit even a little, why do you think she approached me instead of you?'

Cheng Shi couldn't be bothered to burst that bubble and pressed on alone.

Seeing Cheng Shi ignore him, The Prisoner pondered for a moment, then announced: "I think I should come clean, so she knows she can call me for backup if things get dangerous!"

He stopped and turned to leave, but his eyes stayed glued to Cheng Shi—clearly gauging his reaction.

Cheng Shi didn't spare him a glance. He'd already slipped into Kandert's house and begun carefully searching the place.

Kandert was currently out leading the Folly Prohibition Guards in hunting down the escapees, leaving the home empty. Cheng Shi went straight to the study and began rifling through documents, hoping to find some lead on the Eye of Mockery.

He hadn't been at it long before The Prisoner came in too. He stood off to the side with an odd expression, quietly protesting: "How come you didn't stop me?"

Cheng Shi continued working, answering offhandedly: "Why would I stop you?"

"If I went to talk to the Scholar out of the blue, anyone watching would get curious. And curiosity leads to digging, which increases the Torchbearers' risk of exposure!"

"You're smart enough to see that, and you've helped the Torchbearers before—you're a friend. So if you thought of this, why didn't you stop me?"

"..."

'Seriously, have you Torchbearers caught some kind of disease before you've even managed to pass the torch?'

'You're just like Ji Yue—I did absolutely nothing, and somehow I'm stuck carrying the blame.'

'Do I look like a field cook to you?'

"I didn't think of it."

Cheng Shi had figured it out: to beat The Prisoner at his own unlucky game, your logic had to either be straighter or more bizarre than his.

He couldn't out-bizarre the man, so blunt honesty was all that was left.

'Never thought I'd see the day when a follower of Deceit was forced into playing the honest man.'

But the answer clearly didn't satisfy The Prisoner, who proceeded to pace around Cheng Shi, droning on endlessly.

"I thought she made a great case. Why won't you agree?"

"If you agree, we'll be colleagues! Isn't that great?"

"Sure, we're already family, but joining the Torchbearers would make us doubly connected, brother-in-law!"

"Why won't you look at me? You feel guilty!"

"Not looking means you're dodging, and dodging means you actually want to join. Am I right?!"

"..."

Cheng Shi had truly reached his limit. He couldn't make heads or tails of the documents on the desk to begin with, and with a fly buzzing nonstop beside him, his frazzled nerves snapped. He snatched a file from the center of the desk and shoved it into The Prisoner's arms:

"If your mouth absolutely cannot stay idle—if you must say something—then read me what's in this file."

The Prisoner blinked, looked down at the document, and began reading aloud without thinking:

"Investigation Report on the Fool-Hunting Statue Ravings Incident... huh, sounds like a local urban legend."

"???"

Cheng Shi was stunned.

Not because of the content—but because The Prisoner could actually read the writing here!

This was a Civilization Lonely Tower from the Chaos Epoch. The script had evolved beyond recognition from the Civilization Era's baseline. He'd never expected The Prisoner to know this text.

He'd been pestering Brother Mouth to no avail, resigned to missing this information. Now that The Prisoner was literate, Cheng Shi's brow lit up with delight:

"Keep reading! What else does it say?"

The Prisoner gave him a strange look, closed the file, and studied him skeptically:

"You're overdoing the act."

"You obviously already read it. Why do you need me to read it out loud? You're just deflecting, which only proves the Scholar was right."

"The more you resist, the closer your heart is."

"..."

Every trace of delight froze on Cheng Shi's face. He slapped his own cheeks and decided to try a different approach.

His eyes turned, and he nodded:

"Yes. I admit I'm resisting. I also admit I'm drawn to it. As long as you stop talking and read this entire file to me, I'll consider joining the Torchbearers."

The Prisoner wasn't stupid. He rubbed his bald head and gave Cheng Shi a disdainful look: "You're lying. Don't take me for an idiot."

Cheng Shi smirked: "How do you know I'm lying if you don't try?"

"..."

That single line shut The Prisoner up.

An open scheme. An utterly naked open scheme!

The Prisoner couldn't refuse—because he genuinely wanted Cheng Shi to join the Torchbearers. After his expression cycled through several phases, he obediently read the report aloud.

But through it all, he never once believed that either of the two people present was illiterate. He was convinced this was just Cheng Shi using the document to plug his mouth.

"Over the past several months, residents have intermittently reported hearing ravings emanating from within the Fool-Hunting Statue as they passed by. The following cases were documented:"

"Lophis—heard the ravings while passing the statue after drinking. Anludes—heard the ravings while praying before the statue after drinking. Makabaka—after drinking..."

"Funny, they were all drunk. I told you it was an urban legend..."

"The content of the ravings could not be transcribed into text. According to the witnesses, it felt more like a call from the blood."

"The Folly Prohibition Office assigned personnel to investigate. Guards were ordered to drink and then perform worship before the statue—no anomalies detected... Sound-capturing equipment was deployed—no anomalies detected... Witnesses accompanied investigators to the site—no anomalies detected..."

"Gotta hand it to Folly's followers—their investigation methods are more rigorous than Truth's. Though for something this minor, it's a bit much."

"...(Various investigation methods omitted)..."

"Lord Koshna personally conducted a night vigil... hm? Where's the rest?"

"Oh, page turn..."

"The statue was deemed free of any raving anomalies. Investigation closed by order."

When he finished, The Prisoner raised an eyebrow, amused:

"This report is a real bootlicking piece. After pages and pages of rigorous testing that could've already reached a conclusion—why shoehorn in the Executioner's personal decision at the end?"

"Seems like no matter where you go, you can't escape workplace sycophancy."

Hearing this, a sharp gleam flashed in Cheng Shi's eyes.

True, the report did have a problem—but it wasn't about bootlicking. The tone shifted dramatically between the first section and the last.

Even if they wanted to flatter the Executioner, why wouldn't the Folly Prohibition Office at least make the cosmetic effort look convincing? They could've easily written up Koshna's contributions in greater detail.

Coupling that with Kandert's lie, Cheng Shi suspected the investigation report had been tampered with—and the altered section was precisely the part about Koshna's personal investigation!

Cheng Shi took the report back from The Prisoner, spread it across the desk, and carefully compared the paper's traces. Before long, he pointed to some barely noticeable paper fragments in the binding and grinned.

The Prisoner's eyes followed Cheng Shi's finger. He gaped: "Pages were torn out of the report?"

Cheng Shi drummed his fingers on the desk, his smile mocking.

"Exactly. Someone concealed part of this report's conclusions."

"I just don't know whether someone was trying to deceive Kandert, or whether Kandert read it and then destroyed the key pages himself."

"But regardless—the fact that even the locals have doubts about the statue confirms my growing suspicion. Redi Core's secret is hidden inside that statue."

The Prisoner nodded earnestly, his expression dead serious:

"I agree completely. But let's shelve that for now."

"I finished reading the file, so we're officially colleagues now, right, brother-in-law?"

"...?"

"Aren't we already colleagues?"

Cheng Shi's eyes rolled as he argued: "Teammates traveling together in a trial with different objectives— isn't that basically colleagues from the same company working on different projects?"

The Prisoner's expression stiffened: "You're going back on your word?"

Cheng Shi spread his hands with a smile:

"How is this going back on anything?"

"I only said I'd consider it after you finished reading the file. Well, I've considered—and the Torchbearers aren't for me."

The Prisoner's eyelid hammered. He felt like he was looking in a mirror.

"Why won't you join?"

Seeing how stubborn The Prisoner was, Cheng Shi asked curiously: "Why do you insist I join?"

"Because I believe you're the answer to this world. Only if you join the Torchbearers will the Torchbearers have any hope of carrying the flame forward!"

"!?!?"

Hearing this, Cheng Shi's expression changed. Every look on his face vanished as he fixed The Prisoner with a heavy, searching gaze—trying to determine whether the man was spouting nonsense or actually knew something.

'He can't possibly have memories of the Real Universe. Otherwise, why would he suddenly say something like that?'

The incident at the 0221 Experiment Site had quickly boosted his reputation, but nowhere near enough to earn him a title like "the world's answer."

Besides, The Prisoner wasn't a Joker. He had no idea about the truth of the universe, and the Jokers would never leak a secret this life-or-death. So for the moment, Cheng Shi couldn't think of a single reason that would lead to such a statement.

Except pure bluffing.

But the bluff was terrifyingly precise—hitting Cheng Shi's exact weak spot and carrying an unmistakable flavor of "fixed destiny." That's why he was now wondering whether The Prisoner had somehow retained his memories.

Yet that seemed impossible. Even the gods' memories had been jointly erased by the Fun God and Time. A mortal—one who hadn't even been at the storm's epicenter—how could he have survived the world's destruction, witnessed that scene, and still have memories of it?

If the one retaining memories was his Benefactor, Silence... that might make a little more sense. But then again, Silence had personally moved against Cheng Shi before. Logically, He could be on either side, and if Silence truly had retained memories and shared them with The Prisoner...

'That makes no sense at all.'

At this point, his speculation was no different from wild guessing. It was more rational to believe The Prisoner had just said it offhandedly to trick him into joining the Torchbearers.

But what Cheng Shi didn't know was that his wild guess was at least half right.

The Prisoner had indeed come for Cheng Shi—but not for Cheng Shi the player. He'd come for...

Yu Xi!

The Flame of Hope had moved fast. After parting from Cheng Shi, he'd casually dropped Yu Xi's divine name during a conversation with Qin Xin, subtly hinting that the success or failure of the Torchbearers' God Creation Plan might hinge on this Deceit Envoy.

Qin Xin had been startled to hear the name—he hadn't known a Servant God lurked within the Void path. But thinking about it, he found it understandable. Of course Deceit's Envoy would be shrouded in mystery.

To learn more about this unknown Envoy, Qin Xin gave an assignment to The Prisoner—someone he'd never before given any orders to.

He felt that among the Torchbearers' current ranks, very few could investigate an Envoy. The Prisoner happened to be an unusually suitable candidate.

The Prisoner was thrilled. The moment he received the mission, he felt he'd finally earned recognition. His motivation was sky-high.

But investigating a Servant God no one had ever heard of was staggeringly difficult. He wasn't the intel-rich History School. So the clever Ascetic Monk devised two approaches:

One—rob the History School. Two—go ask his Benefactor directly.

The first method failed. He did manage to get matched with a key History School figure in a trial, but Zhen Xin saw through him immediately and conned him instead.

As it happened, the History School was also investigating Yu Xi. So Zhen Xin goaded The Prisoner into asking his Benefactor himself.

The Prisoner was many things—unlucky at times, yes—but brave, without question.

He actually went. He plainly stated his desire to learn about Yu Xi, using it as his prayer to request an audience.

To his utter astonishment, the colossal Leaking World Silent Puppet actually granted him an audience!

Though one god and one mortal stared at each other in the void without a word, silence could hardly stop The Prisoner of all people. The Silence follower started babbling right in front of his Benefactor's face.

"Lord Benefactor, I know You like to keep everything bottled up inside. But that's fine—I can speak on Your behalf."

"I am Your mouthpiece, the channel through which You express Your heart to the world."

"I'm searching for information about the Deceit Envoy Yu Xi. You must know about Him. The fact that You granted me an audience means You're willing to let me approach Him. So where can I find Your guidance?"

"Want to spell something out using these puppets? Or assimilate me into a signpost and then un-puppet me? Or just throw me somewhere I'd bump into Him?"

"None of those work? Let me think..."

"The History School knows about Yu Xi, but they won't tell me. Those Zhen sisters are both rotten to the core—no chance of getting the truth from them. But..."

"Hey, wait—if the Zhen sisters know about Yu Xi's existence, then other people might know too. Could You give me a nudge? Send me to someone in the know so I can feel them out?"

"Who knows—maybe I'll even convert Yu Xi to our Silence faith!"

Whether it was that last line that did it or not, the massive Leaking World Silent Puppet shifted ever so slightly—and hurled The Prisoner out of the void.

When he opened his eyes again, he was in this Folly trial.

So from the very first moment he saw Cheng Shi at the start, The Prisoner's instincts told him: the answer he sought lay with this brother-in-law.

And logically, since even Zhen Xin knew about Yu Xi, Cheng Shi—as "family"—had no reason not to know. So he followed his gut and began his campaign to get close to Cheng Shi.

And this line about being "the world's answer" was the ultimate probe—born from combining his guesses about Yu Xi with what Qin Xin had revealed about the God Creation Plan.

Cheng Shi's reaction alone told The Prisoner everything he needed to know.

This man definitely knew something—especially about that Yu Xi who could aid the Torchbearers!

Cheng Shi also knew his reaction had leaked information. But he couldn't help being shocked, because the statement was too perfectly "fated."

He recovered quickly, however, and pivoted into an act:

"Sorry to disappoint—you're wrong."

"I don't know how to pass any torch, and I have no idea how it's done."

"If you absolutely insist on connecting me to fire, then all I can tell you is: I know how to start one. Specifically, a big one!"

With that, Cheng Shi produced a lighter from his personal space, lit the file in his hand, and tossed the burning pages at the curtains behind him.

Flames quickly raced along the flammable fabric, spreading in every direction, making the already bright study even more blindingly vivid.

The Prisoner's eyes went wide at the spectacle:

"If you came here specifically to find clues, why are you burning them all?"

Cheng Shi curled his lips, gazing toward the courtyard with a cryptic smile:

"You're the one who kept whispering 'pass the torch, pass the torch' in my ear. If I can't see any fire, how am I supposed to pass it?"

"When you think about it, this is me getting closer to your side."

"Hmm... good point." The Prisoner nodded thoughtfully. A second later, right in front of Cheng Shi, he produced a barrel of gasoline.

"?"

Flames consumed the entire house in an instant.

If Cheng Shi hadn't run fast enough, this fire really might have been "passed on"—through his own body, no less.

When the two stumbled out of the roaring inferno, covered in soot, Cheng Shi glared at The Prisoner with a face blacker than coal, barely restraining the urge to punch him into the ground.

He snarled through clenched teeth:

"How did you dare pour gasoline on yourself?!!"

That's right—The Prisoner hadn't splashed the gasoline on the study furniture. He'd doused himself and Cheng Shi with it.

The Prisoner still held the empty barrel. He rubbed his bald head, looked at Cheng Shi, and genuinely couldn't see the problem.

"You said you wanted to pass the torch. If the fire doesn't reach your own body, how do you pass it?"

"|—"

Cheng Shi had gone numb. He decided humanity still understood far too little about this man.

Though The Prisoner's statement did raise a real point—not about his motor-mouth, but about willpower.

If one only acted after the fire reached their own body, that wasn't passing the torch—that was desperate survival.

The Torchbearers' situation might be dire, but they weren't the type to wait until the flames singed their eyebrows before mobilizing. Their will was far nobler and far clearer than that of mere survivors.

Of course, Cheng Shi hadn't set the fire to "get closer to the Torchbearers." That was just an excuse to shut The Prisoner up. His real goal was still the investigation.

Since clues had surfaced at Kandert's place and Cheng Shi now suspected the man was hiding something, he might as well use a fire to light his own way forward.

If Kandert truly had a guilty conscience, the firelight would flush out his shadow.

Sure enough, upon receiving word that his own house was ablaze, Kandert dropped everything and rushed back at top speed. He led his Folly Prohibition Guards in extinguishing the fire, and before the last embers had even died, he strode into the ruins with an ashen face, surveying everything.

He went straight to the study. But after a single glance at the desk's ashes, he left. Then he moved to the bedroom, entering and exiting the ruins multiple times, checking something unknown—until his brow finally relaxed. Without a word, he departed the scene.

All of this was observed by the two players hiding nearby. The Prisoner pointed toward the bedroom and whispered:

"So you wanted Kandert to find the clue for you?"

"You're really sharp, brother-in-law."

Cheng Shi's eyes glinted as he stared at the bedroom. He knew the fire had been worth it. But his mouth still snapped: "Don't call me brother-in-law."

"Did you two have a fight?"

"..."

"But if I don't call you brother-in-law, it feels like something's missing. Like we're not close anymore."

"We were never close!"

"That really hurts, brother-in-law. I—okay, okay! No more brother-in-law! But I do need to call you something. 'Fate Weaver' sounds too formal, and just using your name feels off..."

"Oh, I've got it! How about I call you Cheng Jie?"

"The World's Answer! How about that?!"

"?????"

Kandert was about to order the area sealed off and leave the fire scene. Cheng Shi had been ready to move in for a closer look, but The Prisoner's "Cheng Jie" hard-locked him in place.

His eyelid twitched violently. He held back for a long time before reminding himself it wasn't worth getting angry at an idiot.

But "Cheng Jie" was truly revolting. If that nickname got out, he'd be nailed to the pillar of shame!

So Cheng Shi exhaled forcefully, his face dark: "Just go back to calling me brother-in-law."

"You two made up?"

"You weren't secretly calling my sister while we were chatting, were you?"

"..."

'Who on earth ranked this guy second?!'

'I object!'

'Make him first!'

WHAM!

Enough was enough.

Cheng Shi's true body might not be a Hero of Today, but he packed a decent punch. One blow drove The Prisoner straight into the dirt. Then, dodging the perimeter guards, he slipped back into the ruins.

He retraced Kandert's route and arrived at the bedroom wreckage. After scanning the area, he found nothing—and frowned.

The Prisoner's mouth had no filter, but he also knew that interrupting Cheng Shi's train of thought right now would earn him another beating. So he managed a rare stretch of silence.

It was precisely those few breaths of precious quiet that produced a flash of inspiration. A possibility lit up in Cheng Shi's mind.

He snapped his fingers and pointed at the ground beneath The Prisoner: "Move."

The Prisoner looked wounded: "I promise I won't question you and my sister's relationship ever again. Don't make me leave."

"..." Cheng Shi's eyelid convulsed. He squeezed the words from his throat in a barely contained growl: "Move. You're standing on the clue."

"Huh?"

The Prisoner blinked, then looked down. Beneath his feet were countless footprints—Kandert's, left from pacing in and out. The ash-blanketed floor naturally showed many prints.

But the odd thing was: only the footprints under The Prisoner's feet were noticeably deeper. Everywhere else in the bedroom, the prints were shallow.

The Prisoner wasn't stupid. He understood in a second. "There's something under me?"

"Exactly—something's buried here!"

"Kandert kept going in and out of the bedroom not because the room itself held anything important, but to verify whether whatever's beneath this patch of ground had been disturbed!"

"His repeated trampling was his way of confirming the object was still safe. But with everyone watching, he couldn't do anything more."

"So move—right now. This is our only window to discover what he's hiding down there."

The Prisoner's excitement surged. Nothing thrilled a Silence follower more than uncovering someone's secret.

He stepped back immediately and stomped at the edge of the area. The massive force caused the surrounding ground to collapse—yet the central section rose up in an almost magical fashion.

The mastery of force was nothing short of miraculous. Even Cheng Shi had to silently applaud.

Better yet, this man was a Silence follower—meaning no matter how much noise occurred here, the guards outside would hear absolutely nothing.

And so, before their eyes, the earth erupted—and from underground came a...

Corpse!!

The body had been partially melted and charred by the heat above, but it still looked fairly fresh. Time of death: yesterday at the latest.

The corpse was completely naked—its clothes clearly stripped—but even with the face twisted and warped, both of them immediately recognized who it was.

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted. He let out a cold laugh and clapped his hands:

"What a lovely little masquerade!"

"All I want to know is—if the man before us is the real Kandert, then who was the 'Kandert' who came here just now?"

The Prisoner rubbed his head, looking thoughtful:

"Strange. I didn't detect any trace of disguise on that Kandert. If he really was a fake, then it could only be one of your Deceit followers."

"But a Deceit follower showing up here feels a bit illogical."

"Though it does confirm one thing: whoever killed Kandert and impersonated him is definitely trying to get close to the statue's secret!"

For once, The Prisoner was serious—and it actually impressed Cheng Shi.

He nodded:

"Your reasoning should be correct. But whether this person is a Deceit follower remains to be proven. In this era, there's one god whose followers appear far more frequently than the Fun God's."

"Chaos?"

"Exactly—Chaos!"

"I want to know who's actually fishing in these muddied waters."

"So why don't we ask Kandert himself?"

With that, Cheng Shi produced his Finger Bone Brooch.

That lord's mastery of Memory's authority was limited, meaning the Finger Bone could only conduct one effective Q&A per use.

So how to phrase the question to maximize the information gained was a problem Cheng Shi wrestled with every time he used the brooch.

Fortunately, he wasn't here to solve a case—he was here to find leads. So without hesitation, he asked the question that interested him most:

"What secret is hidden inside Redi Core's Fool-Hunting Statue?"

Green light flashed in the eye sockets of Kandert's corpse, driven by the Finger Bone. A raspy voice croaked:

"Ravings... the statue manifested divinity... bestowed upon Koshna... a divine gift..."

Its power spent, the corpse collapsed back to the ground. Both players present stared wide-eyed.

'A divine gift?!'

Cheng Shi's gaze sharpened. 'Could Folly have actually cast His gaze upon this place?!'

It wasn't impossible. Object Worship was historically the most devout form of faith expression in the Land of Hope, and its ability to draw a god's attention had been proven—such as with the Mirror People and their mirrors...

But just because Memory would cast His gaze didn't mean Folly would. With His lofty disposition, would He really look here?

If Cheng Shi had to find a reason for Folly to turn His eyes this way, he was certain it wouldn't be the accumulation of faith. It would be because a grand foolish act was about to unfold here.

But whose foolish act? The people of Redi Core's, or the players'?

And what exactly had He bestowed?

The Prisoner was shocked too—but not about any divine gift. He was shocked that Cheng Shi could make a corpse talk!

He'd seen items like this before, but none were clearly reusable like Cheng Shi's. Even the most adept necromancers rarely had tools that could make corpses answer honestly, since that involved Memory's domain.

Memory's followers could utilize corpses, but they searched corpses' memories—they didn't interact with them.

Dealing with the dead was infinitely easier than dealing with the living, and Silence's followers loved secrets above all else. If this item were his, The Prisoner couldn't even imagine how much fun he'd have chatting with corpses.

'This is way too cool!'

He eyed Cheng Shi's brooch with transparent envy: "A treasure like this must come at a steep price, right?"

'Price?'

Cheng Shi blinked, suddenly realizing he hadn't made an offering to that lord in quite some time. Being a "premium depositor" truly did come with all sorts of perks.

But seeing The Prisoner's expression, Cheng Shi knew that if he didn't say something negative about the Finger Bone Brooch today, the memory-retrieving brooch would become the next topic the man wouldn't shut up about.

So he tossed out a casual deflection:

"You know why I only asked one question? Because any more and the corpse starts babbling nonsense. It's far harder to use than you'd think."

"?"

'How is that a downside? That's a feature!'

'Normal conversation doesn't excite me. What I want IS the babbling nonsense.'

The Prisoner's envy only intensified.

"..."

When he noticed The Prisoner's expression growing increasingly strange, Cheng Shi knew it was time to leave.

He stored Kandert's corpse in the Molten Coffin, then dodged the guards and slipped out.

The Prisoner followed close behind, whispering: "Is there anything I could trade you for that brooch?"

Even if Cheng Shi wanted to trade—which he didn't—he didn't dare give away an item bestowed by the lord of Death.

That lord wasn't exactly magnanimous. If He summoned Cheng Shi to the Bone Throne for permanent attendance, who would Cheng Shi complain to?

So Cheng Shi rolled his eyes: "Shut up."

The Prisoner's steps faltered. He caught up again, his expression tortured:

"Can't do that. Not speaking is blasphemy against my master."

"I can't trade my devotion for some little trinket."

"..."

'What devotion?'

'Doesn't your Benefactor find you annoying?'

Cheng Shi had gone completely numb. Apart from those moments when he used The Prisoner as a tool and couldn't help feeling a flash of appreciation, every other second of hearing the man speak made his head throb.

He said nothing more for the rest of the walk. He led The Prisoner back to the Folly Prohibition Office, and in the dying light of sunset, the two stood in the alley shadows beside the building, watching for an opening.

The Prisoner seemed to read Cheng Shi's mind. He rubbed his head: "You want to find Koshna's body?"

Cheng Shi nodded:

"Exactly. All the clues now point to the statue being strange, and the only person who ever investigated the statue was the Executioner, Koshna. His death is definitely connected to that divine gift."

"It's not dark yet and there are too many people in town to approach the statue safely. I can only clear the peripheral clues first and hope Koshna's body has something I need."

With that, he sent The Prisoner in first, and the two slipped back into the Folly Prohibition Office.

The complex was built into the mountainside—sprawling and spacious, capable of holding many people. But at the moment it was understaffed. Beyond the extra patrols added for the jailbreak, guards were scarce—most had been dispatched into town to hunt the escaped prisoners.

It didn't take long before they found Koshna's body in the morgue beside the prison.

But when Cheng Shi opened that coffin and saw the body inside, a jolt ran through him. He froze where he stood.

The Prisoner leaned over, curious:

"Huh? Someone removed his eyes?"

Indeed—both of Koshna's eyeballs were gone!

And that was precisely why Cheng Shi was stunned.

If he'd truly been here on vacation, he might not have connected the missing eyes to anything. But he was here searching for the Eye of Mockery!

And by a twist of fate, he knew the Eye of Mockery could be removed—because Scarred Cheng Shi had personally demonstrated it for him.

So this Koshna—who'd allegedly received a divine gift from the statue—could his gift have been the very eyes he'd lost? Could they be the Eye of Mockery that Cheng Shi was looking for?!

In that moment, Cheng Shi's expression turned serious, his eyes filled with gravity.

If this was truly the case, he had to unravel Folly's puzzle. Because the Eye of Mockery may very well have appeared right here!

He desperately wanted to ask the corpse directly what the divine gift was, but he couldn't find an excuse to do so out of The Prisoner's sight. So he could only feign an autopsy, carefully examining Koshna's body.

And the examination actually did reveal something.

Koshna had died from a knife wound to the neck. The cut was offset to the right—a single upward thrust that pierced clean through the throat, causing fatal blood loss.

To land such a precisely angled strike on an Executioner built even larger than The Prisoner, there was almost no way to do it without first pinning the victim down and killing him at close range.

Cheng Shi had never seen the original prisoners the players had replaced, but from the townsfolk's conversations, it was clear nobody believed those prisoners had the ability to kill the Executioner.

So in all likelihood, someone had used the chaos as cover to eliminate the Executioner—and that person's objective was clear: to take Koshna's eyes.

The question was: who? And had Koshna seen the killer before dying?

That determined how Cheng Shi should phrase his question.

Just as Cheng Shi was deep in thought, a figure was quietly approaching from the other side of the Folly Prohibition Office's outer wall.

Ji Yue had come for the Torchbearers' God Creation Plan.

Though Sun Miao had already provided a direction, the path to seizing Decay's Divine Throne remained uncharted territory.

To smooth the way for the plan, Ji Yue had prayed for a trial to seek "inspiration for creating a god"—and then she'd run into the famous Fate Weaver from the 0221 Experiment Site.

Ji Yue's favorable impression of Cheng Shi didn't stem solely from that incident. In past discussions among the Torchbearers about the overall situation, the Fate Weaver's name came up regularly. Every Torchbearer who'd dealt with him had given him a decent review—"cunning lone wolf" at worst, and never a truly negative word.

On top of that, An Mingyu—who had stepped down from her Fire Seeker role—had also affirmed Cheng Shi's capabilities. Gradually, Ji Yue had become curious about this person.

She believed she was a fair judge of character, so the moment she met Cheng Shi in person, she felt he was worth inviting.

Unfortunately, the Fate Weaver had refused to join the torch-passing cause. There was nothing she could do.

After Cheng Shi left, she'd spent a long time investigating the statue without finding any clues about ascension. Then she turned her attention to Kandert, who was frantically hunting the escaped prisoners.

By then, Cheng Shi had already burned Kandert's house. When Ji Yue arrived at the scene, all she found was the blasted-open ground beneath the bedroom—whatever had been buried there was long gone.

She realized Kandert might be a lead too, but when she searched for him, the candidate Executioner was nowhere to be found. So she came to the Folly Prohibition Office to try her luck.

But before she could even climb over the wall, someone intercepted her.

The person's appearance caught her off guard. She raised an eyebrow and smiled: "What should I call you?"

"Zhao Xishi."

Zhao Xishi smiled, appraising Ji Yue up and down with a loaded look:

"I imagine you've already figured out the relationship between us and them. That's right—I'm helping the Scavenger hunt the Fate Weaver."

"All of Oblivion's followers are hunting him. A player who's angered a god won't live much longer."

"I noticed you approached him, but he... rejected you?"

Ji Yue tensed inwardly but kept her composure, tossing out a casual smile as noncommitment.

Zhao Xishi pointed at the Folly Prohibition Office behind her and continued:

"The Fate Weaver is inside right now."

"What I'm saying is: rather than cooperating with a dead man walking, why not cooperate with us?"

"Scholar, whatever you want—we can provide it."

"Victory in the trial, life-saving items, guidance for the road ahead... even divine secrets that ordinary people can't access. As long as you work with us, it's all yours."

"I know you have reservations—after all, this is a Fate Weaver who dealt with both 0221 and Zangier."

"But rest assured, you won't need to take any risks. All you need to do is set up some barrier formations around the perimeter to cut off their escape routes. Scholars are best at this, aren't they? In return, you'll receive the fullest goodwill from me and the Scavenger."

"I think this is a very cost-effective deal—especially given that the Fate Weaver already refused your cooperation."

"Give this ungrateful fool a taste of his own medicine. Show him that a Scholar has a temper too."

"What do you say?"

Zhao Xishi's tone was utterly confident. She seemed unable to imagine why a Scholar would refuse her.

Hearing all this, Ji Yue was actually relieved. So they'd mistakenly assumed she'd approached Cheng Shi for trial cooperation.

'No exposure. Good.'

But even though Cheng Shi hadn't agreed to join the Torchbearers, the Torchbearers would never betray a "candidate" who'd turned them down.

Not only that—the Torchbearers would protect these good-hearted people, because in their eyes, each one was a potential future kindling.

The methods of protection simply varied. City Defenders, being the conservative faction, would probably play along and tip off the target at the right moment.

But City Builders...

Ji Yue swept a hand through her hair. From the void behind her, she drew a long spear, raised the tip until it kissed the bridge of Zhao Xishi's nose, and burst out laughing:

"I thought a friend had come. Turns out it's a gutter rat."

"You want to use my hand to do your killing?"

"You. Are. Not. Worthy."

On the word "worthy," Ji Yue spat on the ground. The void behind her tore open with a roar, and countless spears and short swords came screaming out, riding a tide of War's might straight at Zhao Xishi.

"!!!"

Zhao Xishi had never imagined that a failed negotiation would lead to a fight, let alone that this Scholar—who practically reeked of Truth—was actually a Purgatory Bishop who'd merged with War!

When the blood river from the void battlefield poured into reality, the Historian's pupils contracted violently. She retreated at high speed, her expression darkening:

"Have you lost your mind?!"

Of course she thought Ji Yue had gone insane. Every strike was aimed to kill. The intent was clearly lethal—yet they had no grudge between them. At worst, the partnership had fallen through. Was that really worth trying to murder each other over?

Worse, the commotion was enormous. The Fate Weaver inside the Folly Prohibition Office had certainly noticed. After half a day of careful tracking, she'd been "treated" to an involuntary tip-off that startled the snake from the grass. How could Zhao Xishi not be furious?

She endured the pain and threw out several items to block an attack, then slipped away with a face dark enough to drip ink.

Zhao Xishi suddenly felt she'd been played. She whirled on Ji Yue and screamed:

"You're working with the Fate Weaver?"

"You were baiting us?!"

Ji Yue blinked, then let out a deeply meaningful laugh: "Don't tell me the 'foolish act' in this trial actually refers to you, Zhao... what was it again?"

"Fine! Fine! FINE!"

Zhao Xishi was apoplectic. Her expression went frigid in an instant. With a cold sneer, she tore a page apart. Truth's light surged from it—and Ji Yue immediately recognized that the woman had already laid

numerous formations throughout the area. The cooperation offer had merely been an attempt to make things more convenient.

'They certainly took Cheng Shi seriously.'

But Ji Yue wasn't actually on Cheng Shi's side. Creating this much noise to warn him was already more than enough to live up to her name as a Torchbearer.

She couldn't waste time here. She certainly wasn't going to fight Zhao-whatever to the death. She needed to preserve herself for the Torchbearers' search for kindling. So when Zhao Xishi activated the formations, Ji Yue abruptly pulled back—and along with her endless arsenal, dove into the void and vanished.

"!!!!!"

No one could match a void-specialist Scholar's mastery of spatial energy—even a former Scholar.

So Zhao Xishi could only watch Ji Yue disappear.

Now her target had been alerted, her formations wasted, and half a day's setup had become a joke. She stood on the rooftop, staring at where Ji Yue had vanished, grinding her teeth so hard she could have bitten through steel.

Mo Shu detected the formation's fluctuation and appeared at Zhao Xishi's side in an instant, brow furrowed:

"Why didn't you notify me before attacking?"

Before Zhao Xishi's iron expression could form a reply, a bald head popped up from inside the Folly Prohibition Office.

The Prisoner gazed at the pair from below, never one to pass up a commotion. He rubbed his head and grinned:

"Ooh, fireworks?"

"What's the celebration—you two finally tied the knot?"

"..."

"..."

In that moment, Zhao Xishi's emotional defenses crumbled completely.

"KILL HIM! KILL THEM ALL!!!"

Face frozen, she began chanting buffs for the Scavenger. Enhanced, Mo Shu spotted Cheng Shi's figure appearing below and flashed forward to engage both men, two-against-one, with unstoppable ferocity.

But the instant he charged to the front line, his shadow seemed to peel away from him—splitting off into a dark figure that took his original position, standing beside Zhao Xishi.

Consumed by rage, Zhao Xishi hadn't even registered the switch when a pair of pitch-black hands clamped around her throat.

Shadow Cheng Shi locked her from behind, and into her ear he whispered without mercy:

"I heard what Ji Yue said. She was right—you're not worthy."

The words had barely faded when the sound of breaking bone followed.

The Historian fell into history.

But history could never truly bury a real Historian.

Because they were history's researchers and recorders—never its participants.

They were the ones who'd pieced together a land's past from scattered words and fragmented texts, assembling the tapestry of history. So even if a Historian truly died, they would only die within the history they themselves had composed.

The Zhao Xishi whose neck Shadow Cheng Shi had snapped was a stand-in.

Anyone who'd managed to tangle with Zhen Yi was no ordinary person—especially Zhao Xishi, who'd come from the History School.

The reason she'd been expelled wasn't a lack of talent. It was because she'd stubbornly insisted on using later generations' wisdom to fill in history's gaps. In short, she wanted to fabricate history!

But her fabricated history differed from the kind peddled by certain unscrupulous officials. She didn't consider what she wrote to be false. In her eyes, history was always a story written through the will of later generations. She was merely adding her own personal seasoning to these dull tales, making them more "flavorful."

Coupled with the History School's "authority," once these stories spread widely and became generally accepted, what wasn't true would effectively become true.

This way, history would become a resource under Zhao Xishi's control—not mere data—and the History School's power and prestige would soar even higher.

The History School had been doing exactly this all along. The disagreement between Zhao Xishi and the current School was merely a matter of how much water versus how much rice.

The current History School served a porridge called "history." Granted, it was mixed with dirt, blended with mud, and possibly even laced with filth—but at least it could fill the stomach.

Zhao Xishi, however, believed outsiders didn't need to eat their fill. So she wanted to eliminate all the rice entirely, feeding everyone nothing but mud and filth.

That was also why Zhen Yi had vetoed her.

Of course, history was biased. Whether the one who'd actually vetoed her was Zhen Yi—or whether the History School's true leader had actually awoken her sister before casting the deciding vote—that was another question entirely.

Regardless, all of the above proved Zhao Xishi was exceptionally talented at constructing historical narratives. So from the moment she'd left the Folly Prohibition Office at the start of the trial, she'd woven herself a false stand-in within Redi Core's history—a "Zhao Xishi" who existed in this era.

Thus, what had fallen to history wasn't the real Historian, but the Historian's fabricated history. Even though Cheng Shi, ever cautious, had driven his Flaying Bone Knife into her corpse, what failed to resurrect was still just the decoy.

When the historical Zhao Xishi collapsed, Mo Shu had already locked into combat with The Prisoner again.

You could disdain this Silence follower's chattering, but you couldn't deny his strength—otherwise he'd never have lived this long.

The same applied to Mo Shu. You could question his pastry-making skills, but you couldn't underestimate the capabilities of an Oblivion Chosen.

Even when Cheng Shi and Shadow Cheng Shi simultaneously closed in, Mo Shu was still able to obliterate the surrounding threats, managing a temporary one-against-three standoff.

Ever since Cheng Shi had tricked him and blown him up inside a house, Mo Shu had paid special attention to Cheng Shi's attack methods. He'd even developed a defensive technique against lightning: wrapping himself in Oblivion power to obliterate all projectile attacks.

But this defense drained mental energy at an alarming rate. Without Zhao Xishi's support, he couldn't sustain it for long.

So when he saw his teammate fall, Mo Shu had no choice but to retreat and seek another approach.

But Cheng Shi was done tolerating harassment. He had no intention of letting Mo Shu escape. The instant Mo Shu had appeared, Cheng Shi had already marked the pastry chef.

He felt Aph Ros's cook was subpar—the long table at the terrace banquet didn't have a single decent pastry. So he'd decided to send Aph Ros a new chef.

But to his surprise, just as he was about to activate Sinner Redemption, the mark on Mo Shu was obliterated by an unknown force!

The source of that power felt disturbingly familiar. Cheng Shi's pupils contracted. Something was wrong. He immediately turned and pulled back.

The Prisoner had been enjoying the fight. When he saw his brother-in-law suddenly withdraw, alarm bells sounded in his gut. He vanished right after.

Instinct told him that when it came to sensing danger, his brother-in-law's abilities far surpassed his own. He wasn't stupid—he wasn't about to risk his life just for a good brawl.

And so both sides disengaged on contact. Soon, the area outside the Folly Prohibition Office was left to nothing but a group of belatedly arriving guards standing in the alley, staring at the demolished buildings and cratered ground, exchanging bewildered looks.

"Someone dared attack the Folly Prohibition Office?"

"Report to Lord Kandert immediately!"

"Captain, Lord Kandert has gone missing."

"...Forget what I just said. As enforcers, we must not commit Knowing Folly."

"Too late, Captain. Allow me to address you as 'Captain' one final time. You are no longer fit to serve as an enforcer. Men—arrest him."

...

After retreating, Mo Shu arrived at a house on the outskirts of town.

Zhao Xishi sat pale-faced at a table, working to collect herself.

Dying through a historical body wasn't without cost. She'd temporarily lost all combat ability. If Mo Shu turned on her now, she had no stand-in left to save her.

So from the moment Mo Shu walked in, her gaze was laden with suspicion.

Mo Shu glanced at her coldly and snorted: "If I wanted to obliterate you, you'd already be gone."

Zhao Xishi's expression shifted, though the wariness in her eyes lessened considerably. She said weakly:

"Of course I know you won't. Until we've verified the truth Jie Shu spoke of, we remain allies—don't we?"

'Allies?'

Mo Shu frowned, noncommittal.

"How long until you recover?"

Zhao Xishi's face darkened: "Nourishing my body with Time of History... it'll take a while."

"So we just sit here and wait?"

"We could skip the waiting—if you can handle both of them alone. I'll be happy to cheer your triumphant return from right here."

"..."

Mo Shu shot her a frigid look and casually obliterated the chair beneath her. Zhao Xishi's legs gave out and she crashed to the floor with a thud.

"You—?!" Her face flushed crimson, eyes blazing.

Mo Shu ignored her:

"Failed fighters should watch their tongues."

"I'm not here to play house with you. If you came just to prove how strong the Fate Weaver is, I'll consider finding Jie Shu a different ally."

"Put away your anger and your grievances. They're useless."

"And if you can't control them, I don't mind obliterating those for you, too."

"..."

In a world ruled by strength, everything the weak said was wrong.

Zhao Xishi knew this better than anyone. That's exactly why she wanted to grow stronger—to seize control of the narrative.

She fell silent. Then she pushed down every emotion and became icily calm.

"When I recover, I've already identified someone who can help us deal with the Fate Weaver."

Mo Shu frowned slightly: "Wei Mu?"

"No—Ji Yue!"

"My trump card tells me her memories have been contaminated. And the one who contaminated them was the Fate Weaver!"

"So her hostility toward us makes perfect sense."

"Once I've recovered and 'helped' her retrieve her memories, we may gain a cannon fodder willing to charge to her death."

"That Purgatory Bishop is formidable. When the two of them destroy each other, we'll naturally reap the benefits."

"Why didn't you use this earlier?"

"The wonders of Existence's gods are beyond what Descent can fathom. If Ji Yue hadn't attacked me, how would I have sensed the corruption in her memories?"

"But one sows and one reaps—such is destiny."

"She refused me once. I will not allow her to refuse me a second time."

The plan sounded solid, but Mo Shu felt something was off. He frowned: "How can you be certain Ji Yue will turn to our side?"

Hearing this, Zhao Xishi smiled.

"People erase others' memories to cover their own sins."

"Let me ask you: if you'd done something beneficial for me, would you want to erase my memory of it?"

"..."

'Why wouldn't I?'

'The little cakes I fed the world were helping them get closer to Oblivion—yet afterward, I made them forget me.'

But thinking was one thing. Mo Shu conceded he wasn't exactly a normal person, so he admitted Zhao Xishi had a point.

In this world, even a villain might leave behind a false kindness just to survive. How much more so a good person?

And the Fate Weaver was certainly the good one here.

The golden cicada sheds its shell—disappearing right under everyone's watchful eyes.

Cheng Shi went all out this time. During his retreat, he swapped faiths with Shadow Cheng Shi, snapped his fingers to teleport himself back to an alley he'd passed earlier, and had Shadow Cheng Shi activate Chaos Acting to blend into the crowd as an ordinary passerby.

The reason for such caution was that he'd recognized the force that had erased the Sinner Redemption mark—it was Herobos's Oblivion power!

In the previous Corruption trial, Herobos had used this exact technique to dispel Golis's Grudge the moment it was summoned, catching him completely off guard.

So the instant he sensed danger, Cheng Shi bolted—and chose to split from The Prisoner.

This wasn't just about saving himself. It was about saving The Prisoner too.

As long as the chattering Torchbearer wasn't with him, the man shouldn't become Herobos's target.

He had to admit, an Oblivion Envoy executing his Benefactor's will this relentlessly was truly a headache.

He didn't know why Mo Shu hadn't summoned Herobos immediately, but running forever wouldn't solve anything. Cheng Shi was already thinking about whether there was a way to end this once and for all—to rid himself of this threat permanently.

The simplest method was obviously to kill Herobos. But a god—even a mere Servant God—how could a mortal possibly kill one?

But what if the one killing Him wasn't a mortal?

Cheng Shi's brow rose as a plan took shape. He suddenly felt he might be able to gamble big in this trial.

Big enough to drag a god off His pedestal!

While one side was scheming against an Envoy, the other side's Prisoner was already frantic.

He'd watched his brother-in-law vanish right beside him. His first instinct was that Mo Shu's group was genuinely dangerous, and his brother-in-law was using this method to separate from him!

It never even occurred to him that Cheng Shi might have disappeared just to ditch him.

After all, in his own eyes, he wasn't unlucky at all.

Of course, The Prisoner's worry over Cheng Shi went beyond some absurd "brother-in-law" title. He genuinely believed Cheng Shi held the key to the Torchbearers' plan.

Yu Xi was Deceit's Envoy, and among all the players present, the only one connected to Deceit was Cheng Shi. Factor in Cheng Shi's past assistance to the Torchbearers and his reactions—The Prisoner was convinced the link between the Torchbearers and Yu Xi almost certainly ran through this man. He couldn't let him fall into danger.

Call it loyalty, appreciation for Cheng Shi, belief in the torch-passing cause, a declaration of his own will, a desire to outdo the Scavenger—it was a bizarre cocktail of all these things stirred together.

So after searching for Cheng Shi in vain, he wrestled with himself briefly and decided to find someone else.

The Torchbearers' Fire Seeker—Ji Yue.

He would team up with Ji Yue to protect Cheng Shi. Not only would this push Cheng Shi toward the torch, it might also create an opportunity to uncover the Deceit Servant God, Yu Xi.

But Ji Yue wasn't easy to find either.

As a Purgatory Bishop, she knew she'd stirred up trouble. She'd slipped away silently, moving from the open into the shadows, and begun her low-profile investigation of ascension methods within the town.

Perhaps because everything revolved around the statue at the town center, on the first night—under the cover of darkness—several figures converged on the Fool-Hunting Statue from different directions.

The first to appear in the moonlight was a local.

Red-faced and reeking of alcohol, he crawled before the statue, mumbled a string of incoherent words, then promptly passed out face-down on the ground.

He didn't wake until an hour or so later, when the mountain night winds chilled him enough to shiver his way home.

Not long after, the second figure appeared.

A hooded, cloaked silhouette landed atop the statue's head, waved a hand across the stone—but the statue showed no reaction.

After a moment of surprise, the figure decisively erased their own presence.

More time passed before the third figure crept forward. This one moved far more lightly. The shadow circled the statue again and again, touching and examining its surface, even tracing various markings. But after pausing a moment, they too came up empty.

However, this person didn't leave. After confirming no one else was around, they tore open the void above and unleashed the ancient battlefield's torrent of blades and swords onto the statue in a full-force deluge!

Yes—this was Ji Yue.

When Truth's methods couldn't decode something, it was time for a different angle: try War.

War was always blunt, but in the wreckage it left behind, there were always useful fragments to find.

Ji Yue understood this deeply—hence her decisive strike.

What she hadn't expected was that the tidal wave of weapons never reached the statue. They lost all momentum midair and shattered in front of it.

Countless weapons clattered to the ground—yet eerily, they made no sound at all.

Seeing this, Ji Yue's pupils shrank. She immediately realized someone else was hiding nearby, and it could only be the Chosen of Silence—universally acknowledged as the second unluckiest person alive.

Ji Yue's face hardened. She promptly withdrew her attack and spoke in a cold voice: "Come out!"

No sooner had the words left her mouth than a bald head hopped down from the billowing cloak behind the statue. Who else could it be but The Prisoner?

The moment he landed, The Prisoner held a finger to his lips, then pointed toward an alley, gesturing for Ji Yue to take cover with him.

Ji Yue sensed no hostility. After a moment's deliberation, she followed.

The instant they entered the alley, The Prisoner whirled around and whispered conspiratorially:

"I knew you'd all show up here. Good thing I was smart enough to hide nearby early—otherwise, where would I have found you?"

"Found me? Who's looking for me?"

Ji Yue blinked, then frowned: "The Fate Weaver? Did he send you to find me?"

The Prisoner pouted: "Why is the Fate Weaver all you see? Can't I look for you on my own? He's the outsider—I'm the one who's actually on your side!"

"You?"

Ji Yue laughed in spite of herself, giving him a once-over:

"Sorry, but your lane is way too... specialized. I can't squeeze in."

"If he's changed his mind, tell him to come find me himself. Otherwise, I'm not getting involved in your squabble."

"..."

If not for wanting to make a good first impression on his new colleague, The Prisoner would've snapped long ago. Now, seeing Ji Yue turn to leave, he had no choice but to play his trump card:

"The spark may die, but the torch never goes out!"

The moment those words rang out, Ji Yue—mid-turn—thrust her spear backward in a single fluid motion. Her gaze was piercing as frost, as if she intended to pin The Prisoner to the Redi Core night right then and there.

She recognized the Torchbearers' code phrase—but the problem was, she knew every single Torchbearer. The Prisoner's name wasn't among them.

So her first instinct was to imagine a scenario where someone had tortured the information out of a Torchbearer and was now using it to expose her identity. She struck immediately, prepared to strangle the security leak in its cradle.

The blow packed serious force—enough that even The Prisoner had to take it seriously. He tilted his head, clamping the spearhead between his neck and shoulder, and uttered four more words:

"God Creation Plan!"

"!!!?"

Ji Yue's eyes flew wide with shock. Her forward thrust lost all power as she stared at The Prisoner, completely stunned.

She was floored. The God Creation Plan was currently known to only a handful of Torchbearers. The fact that he could say those four words meant his identity was far more significant than a mere informant or leaker.

So who had told him everything? And what was this Chosen of Silence's relationship with the Torchbearers?

Could he be some hidden card Qin Xin had kept secret?

The Prisoner read the confusion on Ji Yue's face. He removed the spear from his shoulder, straightened his expression with utmost gravity, and declared in a tone of absolute solemnity:

"You guessed right. I am the man behind Qin Xin!"

"...?"

"You're saying Qin Xin and An Mingyu recruited you together?"

Ji Yue studied The Prisoner with a furrowed brow. Some doubt remained, but she'd largely accepted his identity.

After all, someone who knew both Qin Xin's name and the former Fire Seeker An Mingyu couldn't possibly not be a Torchbearer.

The Prisoner nodded vigorously: "The moment they laid eyes on me, they declared me a genius. They practically begged me to join the torch-passing cause. Kindhearted soul that I am, after some pushing and shoving, I gave in."

"..."

'Am I supposed to believe that?'

Ji Yue rolled her eyes in disdain:

"What, you've been famous in the peak circle for ages—and those two are only just now seeing you for the first time?"

"If not, why the sudden 'genius' declaration?"

"And honestly, aside from that forehead of yours being reflective enough to bounce sunlight, what exactly about you screams 'torch-passer'?"

Ji Yue's real question wasn't about Qin Xin's judgment—it was about Qin Xin's intentions. This was her first time learning the Torchbearers truly had hidden cards.

Then besides The Prisoner, were there others?

Like... that Fate Weaver who was so desperately trying to distance himself from the Torchbearers.

Could he also be some kind of hidden card?

The Prisoner hadn't expected to be mocked by a colleague for his appearance. He pointed at himself indignantly:

"I carry gasoline on me. How am I not suited for passing the torch?"

"?"

A chicken talking to a duck. Casting pearls before swine.

Ji Yue took a deep breath and decided to save time: "If you have something to say, say it fast. No nonsense—only business!"

"The business is that Cheng Shi has disappeared, and we have to find him!"

Ji Yue was stunned, then laughed in frustration:

"You risked blowing your cover to make contact with me—just so I'd help you find the Fate Weaver?!"

"The Prisoner, have you ever done any self-reflection? If you'd just talked a little less, maybe the Fate Weaver wouldn't have ditched you!"

"I reflected on it. That's not why." The Prisoner said with absolute certainty.

"..."

"You—" Ji Yue wanted to leave. She had no desire to become a piece of whatever inexplicable game these two were playing.

But then The Prisoner dropped all pretense and said with dead seriousness:

"He's connected to Yu Xi."

Ji Yue's footsteps halted. She frowned: "Who is Yu Xi?"

"Qin Xin says Yu Xi is the key to the Torchbearers' God Creation Plan. He specifically assigned me to investigate. Now I've found out: Cheng Shi knows Yu Xi."

"!!!"

Ji Yue finally took this seriously. She seemed to connect several loose threads and nodded: "So that explains why my prayer matched me with him."

She turned to The Prisoner with newfound appreciation: "My apologies. War ruined my temper. I shouldn't have questioned a Torchbearer's professional judgment. Tell me—how did you find this out?"

"Intuition."

"...?"

Ji Yue's expression reverted instantly. She blinked, needing several seconds to confirm she hadn't misheard.

"You... based this entirely on a guess?"

The Prisoner shook his head with absolute gravity: "Not a guess. Intuition."

"...Fine. I suppose that's not entirely unacceptable. A peak player's intuition is a legitimate ability." Ji Yue sighed, then thought carefully: "So what we need to do now is find Cheng Shi, learn about Yu Xi from him—maybe even make contact with Yu Xi. Correct?"

"Right! And ideally, pull him into the Torchbearers!"

"But how do you know he isn't already one?" Ji Yue raised an eyebrow.

"?" The Prisoner blinked, rubbed his head, and mused: "Could it be that when I doused him with gasoline, he was already initiated?"

"..."

Helpless. Completely helpless.

Ji Yue hadn't felt this powerless even on the day the world ended and the Faith Game descended.

For a moment she suspected Qin Xin's only purpose in recruiting The Prisoner was to keep this outrageous weapon of bad luck from being aimed at the Torchbearers. But reality proved that weapons like this were AOE—they hit friend and foe alike.

Ji Yue was at a loss. She sighed: "What's your plan?"

"My plan was to find you first."

"And then?"

"Then find him."

"How?"

"That's your department."

"..." Ji Yue's fists clenched. "What exactly is inside your head?"

The Prisoner sheepishly pointed at his gleaming scalp and declared with sacred reverence: "A torch waiting to be passed. And a brilliant light."

"..."

'Why does Fang Jue suddenly seem kind of adorable by comparison...'

Ji Yue wasted no more words and spun on her heel. The Prisoner followed in quick little steps, chattering: "As expected of a Scholar—already thought of a plan! Where are we going to find my brother-in-law?"

"We're not going to find your brother—the Fate Weaver!"

The Prisoner rubbed his head, confused: "Then what are we going to do?"

"Eliminate the problem."

Ji Yue swung her spear with surging battle intent:

"You said it yourself—the biggest danger to the Fate Weaver comes from the Scavenger and the Historian."

"So why not remove the danger first?"

"Take those two out. With the external threat gone, the Fate Weaver can be found anytime—or maybe he'll show himself on his own once it's safe."

The Prisoner's pupils contracted. He saw the logic, but still had reservations.

"The Historian's nothing special, but the Scavenger is dangerous. This won't be easy."

Ji Yue walked into the moonlight, laughing heartily:

"No matter how hard..."

"Can it be harder than passing the torch?"

"!!!"

War's indomitable spirit ignited something in The Prisoner at that very moment. He nodded fervently, deeply inspired:

"Right! Can anything be harder than passing the torch?!"

"Truly worthy of a Torchbearer's Fire Seeker—a few words and I'm fired up!"

"Let's go! Take them down!!"

It should have been a moment of surging heroism—War's will made manifest in reality's finest hour. But Ji Yue froze mid-stride, the color draining from her face as her eye twitched violently:

"PUT OUT THE FIRE ON YOURSELF!"

"It's pitch dark and you set yourself on fire—WHAT FOR?!"

"Do you WANT them to see us?!"

"I'd rather not have my teammate turn into a charred corpse before we even find the enemy!"

"The Prisoner! PUT IT OUT! NOW!!!"

In that moment, The Prisoner looked like a scolded schoolboy being called out by the teacher.

"You're the one who fired me up in the first place..."

"..."

'Can this torch really be passed on?'

Ji Yue, who had never once wavered, now felt a flicker of doubt.

...

Meanwhile, on the other side.

While two Torchbearers danced with fire, a sudden scream erupted from a quiet alley on the opposite side of the plaza.

But the scream had barely surfaced before it was smothered. What followed was a quiet, sinister chuckle from the alley's depths.

"Tsk tsk tsk. I knew tonight would be productive—just didn't expect the harvest to come so fast."

"Who are you? What are you doing here?"

Shadow Cheng Shi gripped the drunk by his hair while covering his mouth. Cheng Shi held a scalpel, its edge kissing the bulging vein on the man's neck, and spoke with enigmatic menace:

"Don't even think about lying. I can tell you were faking sleep."

"Interesting—a man who pretends to pass out drunk at the foot of the statue... If I said you knew nothing about the statue's ravings, even you wouldn't believe that, would you?"

The instant the words "statue ravings" left his mouth, the drunk sobered completely, cold sweat pouring from his scalp.

Seeing this, Cheng Shi's smile widened.

"It seems you're ready to talk?"

The drunk's eyes were wild with terror. He nodded frantically.

Shadow Cheng Shi eased his grip slightly and released the man. The drunk immediately blurted:

"Spare me—spare my life! I'll tell you everything! Just please don't kill me!"

"I really did come for that thing, but I swear I don't know where it is!"

'That thing!'

A gleam flashed in Cheng Shi's eyes. He uttered two words: "The divine gift."

"Yes! The divine gift!"

"Have you seen it? What is it?"

"Never seen it!" The drunk shook his head faster than a rattle drum. "I only saw Kandert kill Koshna to steal it. I—"

"Wait—who? Kandert killed Koshna?"

Cheng Shi blinked. "Wasn't Koshna killed by a group of jealousy-crazed citizens of Redi Core?"

"Yes, that's also true—but those people were sent by Kandert! He bought emotion-manipulating potions on the black market, dosed them, and then—while they were out of their minds—secretly restrained Koshna and let the poor fools stab their daggers into Koshna's throat."

"So the mastermind behind everything was him!"

Hearing this, Cheng Shi had an epiphany: "Then the one who killed Kandert and impersonated him... was you?!"

The drunk's pupils contracted violently. His eyes went wide and the words flew out: "No!"

But under Cheng Shi's piercing stare, he quickly crumbled, hanging his head in defeat:

"...It was me."

"I didn't mean to kill him. I just wanted a glimpse of the god's gift. But he wouldn't give me a single chance—even threatened me with a blasphemy charge. I had no choice but to fight back."

Cheng Shi hadn't expected his stakeout—an unintentional gamble—to reel in such a big fish. He said with great interest:

"Talk. From the beginning. Tell me everything."

"If you don't lie, I might consider letting you live."

Under the threat of death, the drunk held nothing back and spilled every last detail.

The drunk's name was Max—a black market merchant who drifted between the undergrounds of several cities. Kandert's potion had come from him.

"Folly's followers rarely buy potions from me. My customers are usually non-devout multi-believers."

"So when I recognized the man doing secret deals with me as Kandert from the Folly Prohibition Office, I kept my eye on him."

"I knew that when people like them risked embracing a foolish act, enormous profit had to be involved."

"I've always been interested in profit. So I followed him in secret."

"Until one day, he used the potions he'd bought from me to poison several citizens' judgment—drove them insane—and used the confusion to secretly pin Koshna down, letting those poor wretches plunge their blades into Koshna's throat... That's when I knew I'd bet right. I was holding this town's biggest secret!"

"After witnessing it, I spent a long time debating whether to use it as leverage to extort some treasure from him. But curiosity won out in the end. I wanted to know why a Folly Prohibition deputy would murder his own superior."

"Jockeying for rank isn't exactly a secret, but Folly's followers rarely use such unconvincing methods to prove themselves. As you must know, they're impossibly proud—they can't accept embracing foolishness themselves."

"So the night Koshna died, I snuck into Kandert's home. I found Koshna's body and the report on the desk."

"That's when I learned the statue could produce ravings, and that Koshna's investigation had yielded results—the statue had bestowed a divine gift upon Koshna one night!"

"Kandert killed Koshna for that divine gift. He wanted to keep the god's blessing all to himself!"

"I made a slight noise from the shock, and Kandert discovered me. But since I wasn't a local and had no direct conflict of interest with him, I wasn't worried."

"I only wanted a peek at what the divine gift was. But Kandert refused repeatedly—even tried to kill me. I had no choice but to fight back."

"I killed him, but still couldn't find where the divine gift was."

"So I decided to impersonate Kandert, retrace his daily routine—hoping I'd discover where he'd hidden it."

"But on my very first day on the job, I discovered someone had dug up Kandert's body..."

"That person... was you, wasn't it?"

"..."

'Sharp enough.'

'But... the divine gift is gone?'

Cheng Shi's expression darkened. He hadn't expected he'd done something stupid.

He'd assumed Kandert's killer was the mastermind who knew everything. Instead, the murderer had stumbled into the role and knew nothing.

If he'd known, he should've asked Kandert's corpse where the divine gift was hidden. Now his one-and-only question had been wasted.

'Sigh, if only Dragon King were here. At least a Memory follower would have a way.'

There was technically a Memory follower in this trial, but unfortunately he'd killed her. And even alive, with her attitude, she'd never have cooperated.

Cheng Shi frowned and asked: "Were you the one who tore pages from Koshna's report?"

Max blinked and immediately shook his head:

"No! I deliberately left it in the most conspicuous spot, hoping that someone close to Kandert would notice and react—so I could observe and find new leads."

"But everyone respected him. Nobody committed Knowing Folly."

'Not him?'

Now Cheng Shi was stumped. 'Could there be a fourth player in all this?'

"What did the last few pages of the report say?"

Max recalled carefully:

"It was about Koshna's methods of verifying the ravings..."

"He replicated every behavior of every person who'd heard the ravings, but found nothing unusual. Until finally, fed up, he drank a bottle of wine and truly passed out drunk before the statue—that's when the statue bestowed its divine gift upon him."

"I was pretending to sleep in front of the statue just now to replicate his behavior—clinging to a one-in-a-million hope that I might receive another divine gift..."

"But the statue didn't react at all. I haven't even heard the ravings. Probably because I'm not a local believer."

'The statue protects believers. Non-followers can't feel its gaze. That makes sense.'

Cheng Shi nodded and asked offhandedly: "Who do you worship?"

At this question, Max instantly sobered. He bowed his head and intoned:

"Fabricated laws, the universe's punchline. My lord... Chaos!"

"?"

Though he'd suspected as much, the moment he confirmed that this black market merchant stirring up chaos in Redi Core was "one of his own," Cheng Shi felt a bizarre wave of absurdity.

'What is this?'

'Chaos's underling in a trial, making a mess on behalf of Chaos's big brother?'

'But you've made such a mess I can't even find the divine gift anymore.'

Cheng Shi pursed his lips and continued:

"So your manhunt for the escaped prisoners was also about finding clues?"

"Yes, I was grasping at straws—anyone who'd been in contact with Koshna or Kandert was a potential lead."

"I hadn't been thinking about those unfortunate prisoners, but when I heard that half-dead fugitives had broken out, I assumed the divine gift had activated. So I sent men to—"

'Reasonably thorough thinking. As expected from one of Chaos's own.'

But it was all useless information. After listening this long, Cheng Shi had the full picture of the incident—except for the most critical part.

Was the divine gift the Eye of Mockery? And where had Kandert hidden it?

He thought briefly, then asked: "What happened to Koshna's eyes?"

"I don't know. When I saw his body at Kandert's place, the eyes were already gone. I figured Kandert was afraid someone would extract information from the residual data in the eyes and trace it back to him—so he destroyed the evidence..."

"You know how it is. Folly followers—their eyes are always a little... odd."

"..."

'I have a feeling you're throwing shade at Folly's followers. But I like it.'

Cheng Shi snorted, then released Max.

"You can go."

Max's eyes lit up with joy: "Really?"

"Really."

"But you can't leave Redi Core. At least not until I find where the divine gift is. Stay here and be ready when I call."

"Of course, I won't restrict what you do. If you manage to find it before me and bring it to me..."

"I wouldn't mind putting in a good word for you with Lord Ultraman."

"!!!"

At the mention of that lord's name, Max trembled from head to toe: "You... you know Him?"

Cheng Shi curled his lips into a deeply meaningful smile.

"Know Him? We go way back."

"You're from the Afterglow Church?"

Max's eyes widened, brimming with anticipation.

During the Civilization Lonely Tower era, Folly's will reigned supreme while Chaos's influence waned. The Afterglow Church had lost its power and declined to near irrelevance. Yet even so, it remained a pilgrimage site for Chaos followers.

But the Afterglow Church was beneath his station. Cheng Shi adopted an air of mystery:

"The Afterglow Church is a relic of the past. It doesn't deserve to be mentioned in the same breath as me."

"You don't need to know more than this: I too am a follower of Chaos."

"Enough talk. I have more questions for you. Besides the ravings, what else do you know about this statue?"

Max turned out to know quite a lot. Under the warm glow of shared faith, he dumped every bit of information he had.

Most of it Cheng Shi already knew from passersby. But one detail was entirely new.

"You're saying the Fool-Hunting Statue was built directly on top of the first Fool Hunter's grave?"

Max nodded:

"Yes, my lord."

"Skart—the very first Fool Hunter in history—was the one who proposed the supreme principle that 'Folly equals a capital offense.' He further distilled the Civilization Lonely Tower's concentration of Folly, giving Folly's armies greater combat power and sweeping away the remnants of Truth's attempted restorations and the Afterglow Church's provocations..."

At this point, Max stole a cautious glance at Cheng Shi.

"After his death, he was buried here. In his honor, the Civilization Lonely Tower erected a statue atop his grave, making it a convergence point for the masses' faith—so that he could draw nearer to their Benefactor, Folly."

"There are even rumors that Skart was elevated to Envoy long ago. People claim to have witnessed it firsthand: when criminals guilty of Knowing Folly were punished before the statue, strange waves would surge from within, drawing something out of those sinners."

"The townsfolk believe it's the merciful Skart stripping the folly from the guilty. But this sort of thing is hard to verify, and it hasn't happened for a very long time."

Cheng Shi had little interest in Redi Core's history. What he really wanted to know was whether this so-called Folly Envoy actually existed.

Folly had His nose so high in the air that He looked down on every living thing in the universe. If He ever did take notice of something, it would probably only be That lofty Creator of the Real Universe.

Come to think of it, an interesting thought: had Cheng Shi ever wondered whether Folly disdained Origin? Did He consider Origin's Universe Slice Experiment yet another foolish act?

No one could answer that question. After pondering, Cheng Shi concluded that a true Envoy probably didn't exist—but the absence of an Envoy didn't mean there were no Servant-God-level creations.

According to Dragon King's theory, since Truth had the Ritual of Truth, then logically, Folly should have a similar creation.

And every mysterious aspect of the Fool-Hunting Statue pointed to it being extraordinarily close to Folly.

So was it possible that a clue to His creation was hidden here?

If so, then even if this trial didn't yield the Eye of Mockery, finding clues about Folly's creation would be a tremendous gain. After all, a creation was the crystallization of an authority's power. Finding it might bring him one step closer to that authority.

Cheng Shi's heart burned with anticipation. His gaze toward the statue brimmed with eager... greed.

He patted Max on the shoulder, secretly slipping a die into the corner of the man's garment. Then, true to his word, he let Max go.

After Max reluctantly departed, Cheng Shi quietly changed positions, ducking into an alley's shadows while Shadow Cheng Shi darted through the darkness toward the statue.

The night was still, the wind calm, passersby long gone. Cheng Shi wasn't about to waste this perfect opportunity. He intended to study the statue up close and determine whether it hid a secret even greater than the Eye of Mockery.

Just as Cheng Shi began his examination, Max—now several blocks away—suddenly stopped in the middle of the road.

His expression vanished in an instant, becoming utterly blank—no joy, no sorrow. He slowly retrieved the die from his shoulder seam, examined it for a long moment, then tucked it back into place exactly as before.

Then he turned his head toward the towering statue. His eyes were unreadable.

...

On the other side.

The Torchbearer Threat Elimination Plan had collapsed.

Ji Yue genuinely could not fathom how the Fate Weaver had managed to coexist with this never-silent Silence follower for an entire day.

After barely half an hour of searching with The Prisoner, she used the edge of her spear to metaphorically "cut ties," sending him off to search in a different direction with orders to signal via fire message if he found anything.

She'd even torn open the void for him to travel through—terrified he wouldn't get far enough away fast enough.

Initially, The Prisoner objected. He worried that if they split too far apart and Ji Yue encountered both enemies, he wouldn't make it back in time to support her, leaving the Torchbearers' Fire Seeker in danger.

But his concern was expressed in the wrong way. To a War follower's ears, his nonstop chattering translated to:

'Can you handle it? Can you handle it? Can you handle it?'

He'd forgotten that War and Silence were rival faiths. A single doubt from an opposing faith's believer ignited Ji Yue's fury. If not for one last thread of restraint, her spear would've run him through for the second time that night.

But the butt of her spear did send him tumbling into the void.

With no other choice, The Prisoner compromised. Before leaving, he still managed to squeeze in a parting compliment:

"No wonder you can pass the torch—your fire's burning strong."

"...Get lost!"

Ji Yue didn't even know how she'd forced that word out of her throat. All she knew was that her battle spirit blazed so intensely she wanted to find someone—anyone—and unleash the fury building inside her.

And as luck would have it, shortly after The Prisoner left, a figure appeared in her line of sight.

Zhao Xishi!

The Historian wore a cold smirk, studying Ji Yue with an amused gaze:

"Bishop. When you refused me, you should have expected this moment would come."

"Ready to receive news of your own death?"

"War has winners and losers. His followers don't win every time."

"So—how would you like to die?"

Before the last word had faded, an iron fist came hurtling straight at the Torchbearer's face. Ji Yue's eyes sharpened—she raised her spear to block—only to discover the weapon in her hands had already been obliterated without a trace.

Her pupils contracted. She ducked, but how could a mage stop a warrior at point-blank range—especially when that warrior was ranked number one on the Chosen leaderboard?

The punch caught the side of Ji Yue's face and sent her flying. But this War follower didn't choose defense even after being hit—she tore open the void and summoned countless ancient battlefield weapons back into the light of day.

Only the void didn't tear open behind her as usual. It opened behind Mo Shu—at the exact spot where she'd first encountered the enemy.

The positioning was subtle. It was far from Mo Shu but very close to Zhao Xishi.

Distant water couldn't save a nearby fire. Even if the deluge of weapons could hold Zhao Xishi, it certainly couldn't stop Mo Shu. And compared to a support Historian, the Scavenger was obviously the real lethal threat.

By all appearances, Ji Yue had made a wrong decision under the shock of being struck.

But had she really?

Not at all!

War wasn't just about fighting technique—it was about tactical deployment.

When Zhao Xishi steeled her expression to defend against a Purgatory Bishop's wrath, she spotted something within that storm of spears and swords: a gleaming bald head, plummeting toward her like a meteor.

Her pupils shrank. She cried out in shock and fury: "The Prisoner! You didn't leave?!"

"If I left, how would I make my way into your heart?"

The Prisoner roared with laughter and cannonballed straight into Zhao Xishi's midsection.

Behind her, Ji Yue coughed blood as Oblivion's infinite power forced her steadily backward. But she looked at Mo Shu and sneered:

"Like Tian Ji racing horses—which inferior horse do you think dies first?"

Mo Shu was decisive. He wasn't distracted by The Prisoner's appearance and continued pressing forward, crushing Ji Yue's space to survive.

While obliterating her counterattacks with one hand, he looked down and sneered:

"How do you know it won't be you?"

Ji Yue was coughing blood, yet she laughed uproariously:

"Because I'm not the inferior horse!"

"Every drop of blood a War follower spills counts for something. You think constantly obliterating my vitality will kill me?"

"But you've forgotten..."

"How does one survive?"

"Through blood! And fire!!"

The instant those words faded, boundless flames erupted—racing along Ji Yue's blood trail, blazing tongues of fire that swallowed Mo Shu whole. The inferno towered like the dawn sun, chasing away Redi Core's night for a single breathtaking instant.

For one moment, night became day!

Yet even under that apocalyptic blast of flame, Mo Shu emerged with nothing more than a few singed hairs. He pulled back from Ji Yue with a dark expression, never imagining the defensive technique he'd prepared for Cheng Shi's lightning would be needed here.

But he wasn't concerned. He could tell Ji Yue was a spent force. The Purgatory Bishop was genuinely formidable—if they'd squared off from scratch, he might've needed more time and resources to deal with her.

But there were no second chances. She was gravely wounded. Once the flames' momentum died, the only fate awaiting the Purgatory Bishop was obliteration.

So Mo Shu held back, content to let the storm pass.

But time waits for no one—and certainly not for him. Just as the worldburning fire lit up the night sky, The Prisoner had already flash-stepped to Zhao Xishi's front. Looking into her eyes—rage contracted to a pinpoint, firelight dancing in her pupils—he threw a single devastating punch and shook his head:

"Your eyes don't deserve to hold fire."

BOOM—

The titanic blow shattered Zhao Xishi's skull—but the expected spray of blood and brain never came. Her body disintegrated, dissolving into motes of azure light that vanished into the flame-lit brilliance.

The Prisoner landed, killing his momentum, eyes wide.

"Past Reflection?!"

"Heh. The Bishop was right—an inferior horse always dies first. But which one do you think that'll be?"

Zhao Xishi reappeared at the edge of a rooftop. Arms crossed, bathed in moonlight, she gazed down at the battlefield with amusement, then extended a hand toward Ji Yue below.

Countless threads of azure light shot out like strands of hair, piercing into Ji Yue's skull. Even when Ji Yue "set herself ablaze," the flames couldn't burn through these foreign objects.

Watching Ji Yue struggle on death's doorstep, it was Zhao Xishi's turn to sneer.

"Useless. It may only be a quasi-divine artifact, but its effects rival a Servant God's relic."

"This was prepared for the Fate Weaver. Using it on you is giving you more credit than you deserve!"

"Now tell me—who's the inferior horse?"

With a flick of her wrist, she severed the threads. Countless broken strands burrowed back into Ji Yue's body like parasites.

Watching his comrade about to die, The Prisoner felt neither grief nor rage. He simply let every expression drain from his face in a single instant. With solemn gravity, he raised a fist and slammed it into the ground, bellowing:

"All things return to silence. The universe... goes mute!"

WOOOOM—

A heart-shaking soundwave swept outward in concentric rings. Everything around them froze.

Ji Yue's struggle. Mo Shu's advance. The flames' wild dance. The threads' writhing. Everything visible, everything audible—form and sound alike, silenced!

In that razor-thin window—practically equivalent to Silence's own descent—The Prisoner launched himself up, ripped the azure threads from Ji Yue's body before they could fully burrow in, scooped her up, and vanished from the lost battlefield in the blink of an eye.

Moments later, the "silence" departed and the world came alive again. But the flames had died, the light was gone, and endless night rolled back in.

Mo Shu watched the direction they'd fled but didn't pursue. Instead, he hopped onto the rooftop and stood beside Zhao Xishi with a furrowed brow:

"You were gambling with your life."

"If The Prisoner had chosen to kill you instead of saving her, you'd already be dead."

Despite her palms being drenched in sweat, Zhao Xishi allowed herself a small smirk:

"But I bet correctly, didn't I?"

"History is a mirror—look into it and you see the person."

"The Prisoner I've studied may be insufferable, but he's never once abandoned a companion."

"Counterintuitive, isn't it?"

"But that's the fact. Even though his companions are few, even though everyone rejects his company—he's always been this way."

"Of course, there's a prerequisite: it only works if he chose you. Not if you chose him."

Mo Shu heard this and was briefly taken aback, then nodded.

Zhao Xishi caught his reaction from the corner of her eye and sneered:

"Don't tell me you think that's some kind of admirable quality."

"It's stupidity. Naked, undeniable stupidity!"

"In this world, all sincerity is dead weight. It only drags you into the abyss."

"Hmph."

Mo Shu returned her look with cold eyes, feeling that the "sincerity" on her lips was really meant to be "Zhen Xin."

Zhao Xishi didn't notice Mo Shu's subtle expression and continued:

"What a pity. His sincerity will become the blade that kills him."

"Just wait. He won't give up trying to save her. He'll go find the Fate Weaver. And the moment the Fate Weaver heals the Purgatory Bishop, they'll have dug their own grave. Recovered memories will turn War's flames into our weapon—burning away every last defense our enemies have."

...

The Prisoner sprinted with Ji Yue in his arms. Seeing the blood she coughed increasing with every step, he set his jaw, emptied every potion from his personal storage, and poured them into Ji Yue's mouth one by one.

But the Oblivion power saturating her body was overwhelming. He himself hadn't been able to withstand it—let alone a mage.

And beyond the Oblivion force, the threads in Ji Yue's brain were the real problem. They were bottomless pits, greedily devouring every drop of external healing energy while writhing and thrashing chaotically through her mind.

Ji Yue was dizzy and drained. She couldn't fight anymore. She managed to tap The Prisoner's arm and give him a look that said: slow down.

Her body couldn't handle this violent jostling anymore.

The Prisoner's eyes darkened. All trace of his usual chatter evaporated. He ducked into an alley, picked a random house, kicked in the door, knocked out the sleeping resident, and gently laid Ji Yue on the bed.

He poured the last potion down her throat, his voice low and grave: "I'm going to find brother-in-law. He's a Priest—he'll know what to do."

He turned to leave.

Ji Yue used her last ounce of strength to catch one of his fingers. She turned her head, coughed up a mouthful of blood, and with a ghastly pale face managed a smile:

"You shouldn't have saved me... cough cough... Battle opportunities vanish in a flash. You should've killed Zhao Xishi."

The Prisoner paused. He turned and looked at Ji Yue, shaking his head:

"Then you'd die."

Ji Yue laughed out loud:

"Cough cough cough... Everyone dies. But as long as my death means something, I can accept it."

"What meaning?"

"Just to kill a Historian that even Zhen Yi didn't think was worth her time?"

The Prisoner seemed genuinely angry. He jabbed a finger toward where Zhao Xishi had been and cursed:
"She's not worthy!"

Ji Yue smiled. For the first time, she found this so-called second unluckiest Silence follower almost endearing.

"No wonder Qin Xin recruited you."

"He really does have an eye for people..."

"Though it's a shame—another City Defender. That Fang Shiqing girl sure is lucky."

The Prisoner patted Ji Yue's hand: "Stop talking. I'm going to find him. There's still time."

"There's no time left..."

"I know my own body. The ancient battlefield's corrosion already has me running at maximum capacity year-round. Add this tidal wave of Oblivion power, plus whatever those Memory threads are doing..."

"Don't say—"

"Let me say it. Let me finish."

"War followers aren't brainless. City Builders aren't impulsive."

"Everything I did wasn't reckless bravado. I just wanted the Fate Weaver—the one you called the Torchbearers' answer—to draw closer to us."

"Mo Shu is too hard to kill. Killing Zhao Xishi was a golden opportunity, but... it didn't work out."

"I know that using emotion to manipulate someone isn't noble. But for a greater light, I'm willing to shoulder a moment of darkness."

"City Builders never fear death. We only fear dying without meaning. If my death could advance the God Creation Plan... then I can face all those City Builder predecessors hanging on that wall..."

"Cough cough... The Prisoner. As fellow Torchbearers—promise me one thing."

"Burn my body. Let me return to the embrace of flames."

"I don't know what the Historian planted in me, but I don't want to become your enemy after I'm gone..."

"Why are you crying... cough cough... Promise me. Please?"

"..."

In that moment, every trace of the second unluckiest man alive vanished from The Prisoner's face. His fists clenched white-knuckled, veins bulging, as he choked back fury and grief. He stepped forward, planted his foot on his own fallen tear, seized Ji Yue's hand, and nodded—hard.

"I... promise."

The words had barely died when the door behind him was kicked clean off its hinges. Before any figure could be seen, a healing spell of staggering density crashed down on both of them like a tidal wave.

At the same time, a scoffing voice drifted in from outside:

"Tch—"

"I don't."

"No Priest would tolerate a teammate dying in front of them."

"You want to die? Did you ask me first?"

"You cried?"

"I did not!"

"Then what's this?" Cheng Shi nudged The Prisoner's foot aside and pointed at the wet spot on the floor beneath it.

"Gasoline."

"?"

"Ji Yue said she wanted to die in fire. I was getting ready to burn her."

"..."

There was no possible response to that, because Cheng Shi could actually see The Prisoner holding a barrel of gasoline.

'Dude—?!'

'How did you manage to cry and pull out a gasoline barrel at the same time?'

'And where do you keep getting all these gasoline barrels?!'

'Did you rob a gas station?!'

Cheng Shi had expected to encounter a different side of The Prisoner. But reality proved he'd overthought it.

The Prisoner was still The Prisoner—just with a little less of the chatty camouflage.

He shoved The Prisoner aside with an irritated huff, sat at the bedside, and carefully examined Ji Yue's injuries. Hidden from The Prisoner's view, he quietly traced an Order symbol on Ji Yue's back.

Her wounds were genuinely severe. Any Priest would take one look and shake their head. Healing alone couldn't save this Torchbearer—not unless a Gravekeeper personally sustained her life force.

But Mi Laozhang hadn't been matched into this trial, and Cheng Shi wasn't a Gravekeeper today. So he could only use another method to share her burden.

Justice Official!

An Order Priest could balance vitality between two people—functioning just like the Symbiotic Ribbon Mi Laozhang had once used. And as luck would have it, Cheng Shi had conned an Order follower in his previous session. So the moment Shadow Cheng Shi relayed news of Ji Yue's critical condition, Cheng Shi already had a plan.

He blasphemed a certain Benefactor once more, borrowing temporary Order power. Then, using his Endless Life ability, he slowly eroded the threats within Ji Yue's body. After relentless effort, he finally pulled her back from the brink, and she fell into a peaceful sleep.

Drenched in sweat, Cheng Shi exhaled deeply and gave The Prisoner a nod.

Seeing Ji Yue saved, The Prisoner's tension drained out of him. He collapsed onto the floor.

Cheng Shi shot him a half-amused glance, stood up, and casually surveyed the room:

"What were you two trying to do?"

"The commotion was a bit much, don't you think? Since when is night brighter than day?"

"You... didn't hear everything?"

"Hear what? I'm just a Priest. Getting here already took everything I had—you think I had time to eavesdrop on your deathbed drama?"

The Prisoner's expression turned peculiar. He stared at Cheng Shi and blurted: "If you didn't hear anything, how do you know it was dramatic?"

"I guessed." Cheng Shi held back a grin, but sighed inwardly.

This was exactly why he preferred City Defenders over City Builders. You couldn't say the Builders were wrong, but they truly would "stop at nothing" for their goals.

It reminded him of Zhao Qian.

When City Builders believed hope lay within themselves, they could disregard everything else in the world. But the moment they learned hope rested in someone else, they'd sacrifice every last thing they had—like Ji Yue just now.

Qin Xin commanded both the City Defenders and the City Builders. Two conflicting wills clashing daily—did the man never get a splitting headache?

Cheng Shi's thoughts wandered, and the room fell silent.

After a while, he smiled, shook off the tangent, and continued:

"I know you were looking for me."

"I suspect even people not in Redi Core could see the sky change color over here, let alone me—the person she was trying to signal with her flames..."

"Tch. The Scholar plays a mean game. Creative way to find someone, I'll give her that."

"But those methods were too aggressive. Use them less from now on, or it'll end badly."

"So what did you need me for?"

"Wait—before that, Ji Yue's house call fee. You Torchbearers should settle that first, shouldn't you?"

"House... call fee?"

The Prisoner blinked, staring at Cheng Shi: "You charge your own teammates for healing?"

"Hey now, who said anything about money?"

The Prisoner's eyes flickered. He thought maybe he'd misjudged after all.

But then Cheng Shi added:

"Equivalent items work too."

"..."

The Prisoner's expression became exquisitely complex. He stared at Cheng Shi for a long, long time—long enough to make Cheng Shi avert his eyes in mild embarrassment—before finally drawling:

"Fine. I'll pay."

Cheng Shi's eyes lit up. But suspicion crept in as he looked at The Prisoner: "Pay with what?"

"I'll owe you."

"???"

'Running a tab?!'

Cheng Shi said disdainfully: "How is that different from not paying? Do I owe you something?"

The Prisoner shook his head vigorously: "No, brother-in-law. I owe you."

"..."

One sentence silenced Cheng Shi completely.

Bad news: freeloaded again.

Good news: The Prisoner seemed to have snapped out of his earlier mood.

Then again, the latter might not actually count as good news either.

Cheng Shi dragged over a chair, sat down, and rolled his eyes:

"Go on then. Tell me what two broke Torchbearers accomplished during this earth-shattering night. Let me—the Priest who'll never see his payment—have my eyes opened."

"..."

For a fleeting moment, The Prisoner felt his brother-in-law had been infected by this Folly town's atmosphere—everything he said reeked of sarcasm.

But he still laid out everything he and Ji Yue had done, and at the end fixed Cheng Shi with a burning gaze:

"You know Yu Xi. Don't you?"

Cheng Shi blinked. His smile was unreadable.

'Know Him? I even know what underwear He's wearing today.'

But no matter how much he knew, he wasn't about to be freeloaded a third time. Did they think the intel he'd risked his life gathering outside was free?

He needed to earn a margin.

Cheng Shi's current smile was peculiar—so peculiar that The Prisoner read his "needs" at a single glance. After a moment's hesitation, as if steeling himself, The Prisoner pulled a palm-sized wooden puppet from his personal storage. He didn't hand it over immediately, but cautiously tested:

"Family discount?"

"Sorry. I don't have family."

"That's too cruel, brother-in-law. Just this afternoon, wasn't Oblivion your family?"

"..." Cheng Shi choked, then laughed despite himself: "Fine, fine, fine. Family discount it is. Outsiders get face value. Family gets 110%. Now what you're holding isn't enough."

"?"

The Prisoner's eyes went wide. A second later, he lobbed the wooden puppet into Cheng Shi's lap and immediately distanced himself:

"Zhen Yi and I don't have any kinship. We're outsiders. This is more than enough."

"Brother-in-law, hurry up and talk."

"..."

Hearing this, Cheng Shi snarled through gritted teeth: "Then why are you STILL calling me brother-in-law?!"

"You don't want me to call you Cheng Jie either."

"..."

"Besides, even if she's not my biological sister, we can call it honorary kinship. By that logic, you're still my brother-in-law. Perfectly reasonable."

'Reasonable my *!'

Cheng Shi wanted to call off the whole deal, but when he squeezed the little puppet in his arms, he couldn't bear to let go.

After all, it was for spreading Yu Xi's divine name. A little humiliation... he could endure it.

"What is this?" Before opening the Yu Xi lecture series, Cheng Shi asked one more question.

For once, The Prisoner explained with genuine seriousness:

"Descending Silent Puppet. S-class Sacred Artifact. I received it as a blessing from my Benefactor through personal prayer. Think of it as Him sealing my 'All Things Return to Silence' punch inside this little puppet. When you shatter it, it silences everything around you."

'Good stuff!'

Cheng Shi's eyes lit up—then immediately narrowed with suspicion: "Including myself?"

The Prisoner nodded: "Naturally. You're not a Silence follower, so you can't avoid it."

"..."

'How is this good stuff?!

Cheng Shi's face went dark. But he rubbed the puppet again and thought:

'Even a mosquito leg is still meat. I'll endure it. At least it beats being freeloader.'

"I can tell you everything I know about Yu Xi. But first—you tell me why you're looking for Him."

Cheng Shi sat upright, asking with deadly seriousness.

At this point, there was no need for secrecy. The Prisoner laid out everything Qin Xin had told him, only substituting the God Creation Plan with "a prophecy about the path forward," saying Yu Xi was the answer for the Torchbearers.

"If you truly know Him, please help the Torchbearers once more."

"For the sake of..." The Prisoner glanced at Ji Yue lying on the bed, rubbed his head, and finished: "...the Descending Silent Puppet."

"..."

'You really do know how to read people.'

Cheng Shi naturally knew that this so-called "prophecy" was just the Flame of Hope's method of spreading Yu Xi's divine name within the Torchbearers. He could also guess these two had likely come for the God Creation Plan.

Only, by happy coincidence, his own ideas aligned perfectly with the suggestion Sun Miao had given the Torchbearers. Decay's container had already been transferred through this Vice President's hands to the Torchbearers. So when Sun Miao brought the container back to the Fire Passing Hall, the name of Yu Xi would spread from there.

He had to admit: Fate did have something going for it. His casual actions from not long ago had inadvertently lent credibility to Yu Xi's cover story.

So he trotted out the same tale that had fooled countless people—with a few updates and iterations on the original version.

"...He's different from every other god we know."

"He shows no respect for the sixteen gods sitting on their Divine Thrones. He may even be plotting something."

"I can't fathom a god's mind, but I can see His ambition is enormous—at least bigger than yours."

The Prisoner frowned at this. The Torchbearers' will was to protect what was beautiful and resist the gods. If Yu Xi's ambition exceeded even that, then this Yu Xi couldn't possibly be trying to...

"His target is the one above all gods?!" The Prisoner blurted, stunned.

"!!??"

'He knows about Origin?!'

Cheng Shi was floored. He raised an eyebrow at The Prisoner: "You certainly know a lot."

"There really IS one?!"

The Prisoner was equally shocked, pawing at his bald head in bewilderment.

Now Cheng Shi was thoroughly confused.

'Wait—dude, what?'

'Don't tell me you just guessed your way into knowing about Origin's existence?'

Cheng Shi's brain started buffering. The Prisoner scratched his head and explained:

"I wasn't sure..."

"When I had my audience with my Benefactor, I asked Him: 'Why do You look like a puppet? Is it because there's a higher being above You pulling the strings?'"

"He didn't respond. So I took that as confirmation."

"..."

'This man is beyond mortal!'

Once again, a single remark left Cheng Shi totally speechless.

He didn't even know how to respond. 'How is that any different from a wild guess?'

'Though, to be fair, the gods really are marionettes...'

The air grew awkward again. Of course, it was only awkward for Cheng Shi; The Prisoner didn't care and pressed on:

"So how can we find this Yu Xi?"

"He's rebelling, we're rebelling—logically, we're family."

"..."

'Like hell you're family.'

"A god isn't exactly easy to find," Cheng Shi deflected. He wasn't ready to have too much direct contact with the Torchbearers as Yu Xi. "If He doesn't want to see you, your only option is to wait for a summons."

"True enough..."

The Prisoner nodded, thought for a moment, then suddenly brightened: "You said He harbors rebellious intent. Does His Benefactor, Deceit, know about this?"

'?'

Cheng Shi's gaze immediately turned strange. 'Should I tell him that the Fun God is actually the biggest rebel leader in the entire world?'

He feigned curiosity: "What does Deceit have to do with it?"

The Prisoner slapped his thigh:

"Everything!"

"Think about it—if Deceit doesn't know, then I just report Yu Xi to Him. That gives us a chance to meet Yu Xi!"

"???"

"Hmm, though getting to Deceit is also a problem... Oh wait—brother-in-law, you ARE a Deceit follower!"

"See? I told you you're Cheng Jie and you didn't believe me! It all connects! You help us request an audience with Deceit, then we report Yu Xi, and we get to meet Him!"

"And under Deceit's interrogation, as fellow rebels, we'd naturally get even closer to Yu Xi!"

"I mean, it'd require you to take the heat as a snitch, but no worries—just blame your sister-in-law!"

"She's got so many lice already, one more won't itch!"

"This way, you help pass the torch, we find Yu Xi, Zhen Yi gets her kicks—three birds with one stone! The whole family wins, brother-in-law!"

"..."

Cheng Shi's scalp went numb.

In that moment, he was suddenly certain that if The Prisoner died, Birth's Life Marker Board would sprout a brand-new entry.

Because there was no way this creature was human!

'Seriously...'

'Is it physically possible for a carbon-based lifeform to come up with something this deranged?'

'Is this how Silence teaches you to exploit people's secrets?'

'Report myself to myself. Wonderful...'

His fists itched.

Cheng Shi's lip twitched. He let out two cold laughs and said nothing more.

Seeing Cheng Shi had zero intention of agreeing, The Prisoner sighed regretfully:

"Yeah, I suppose it would affect your relationship with my sister."

BOOM—

The roof went flying. A second moon rose over Redi Core's sky—just slightly smaller than the real one.

"Ku... cough cough... ku ku..."

A sound—half cough, half laugh—drifted from the bed. Cheng Shi darkened his face and snapped:

"Having fun pretending to sleep?"

"What's so funny?"

"Don't forget—this man is one of your Torchbearers. Still laughing?"

"..."

Dr. Cheng's medical skills were truly exceptional. One sentence instantly calmed the patient.

The only side effect was that her eyelid wouldn't stop twitching.

Ji Yue took a deep breath and weakly opened her eyes. She turned her head toward Cheng Shi and said: "Thank you."

Cheng Shi grunted and ignored her.

Ji Yue forced a pained smile and added: "...I'll pay the house call fee."

"Anything else bothering you?"

Cheng Shi sat back at the bedside and flicked another healing spell her way.

"..."

Ji Yue had been feeling somewhat recovered, but now her vision seemed to be malfunctioning—because the man with hair sitting at her bedside looked an awful lot like the bald Prisoner who'd just been launched through the roof.

She coughed twice more, then addressed Cheng Shi:

"I know my methods might not sit well with you, but—"

"Don't bother." Cheng Shi shook his head, cutting her off. "The world doesn't revolve around anyone. Everyone has their own agenda."

"When it comes down to it, no matter how many times our paths cross, I'm just a passing stranger to you Torchbearers."

"You act according to your torch-passing goals. That's your prerogative—I don't care."

"After all, none of this affected me. Your fee is paid, and this was just a transaction."

"But next time..."

Cheng Shi's gaze sharpened, his voice dropping three degrees.

"Scholar, you'd better pray it doesn't affect me. Otherwise, this business relationship might not survive."

Ji Yue wasn't the least bit surprised by his attitude. She smiled: "I look forward to our next transaction."

Cheng Shi rolled his eyes and asked offhandedly:

"How are you feeling? The Oblivion force is dissipating. You're out of danger."

"I feel good. And even if I didn't, I brought it on myself. I'm just curious—why do I sense traces of Order on my body?"

"Probably because Torchbearers are too orderly?"

"I expect The Prisoner will be back soon. Since you're awake, I should get going."

"I still haven't found the statue's secret, and I don't have time to play attending physician."

"But I thought you were here on vacation?"

"..." Cheng Shi's expression darkened. "You're Torchbearers, not infection-bearers. One Prisoner and you've already been infected?"

Ji Yue stiffened, then laughed helplessly: "Sorry. Truth's logical framework always drives me to dig deeper. I said too much."

"Good to know. Goodbye—no need to see me off."

Cheng Shi moved to leave. But Ji Yue's voice drifted after him:

"Um... Dr. Cheng? I'm curious—before today, have we ever met?"

"!!!"

Cheng Shi's footsteps froze. His answer was absolute: "No. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, it's nothing. I just had a strange dream."

"Bits and pieces of many people... and you were among them."

"Today's events were so bizarre that my thoughts must have gotten jumbled. I'm sure it'll pass once I've recovered."

"Mm."

Cheng Shi's expression was peculiar. He said nothing more and strode out of the house.

The moment he crossed the threshold, he broke into a full sprint. The moonlit alley returned to silence, with only a murmured question lingering from within the room.

"Have we really never met?"

Cheng Shi couldn't be certain whether Ji Yue's "have we met before" was a deliberate probe, or a side effect from her clash with the Memory follower Zhao Xishi.

All he knew was: if she truly recovered those memories, the one dying of embarrassment would be him.

And of course, the three other Torchbearers who'd been present at the time.

Just thinking about the nonsense he'd spouted in the void about becoming a god made his scalp tingle and his toes curl. Sure, he really was walking the path of godhood—but who wanted to look back at their dark history?

So he didn't want to stay a second longer. While the night still held, he planned to continue investigating the statue's secrets. He'd already found something, and hoped to find the answer he wanted before dawn.

But fate wasn't cooperating. Despite deliberately avoiding the direction he'd "launched" The Prisoner, he turned a corner—and there was that familiar gleaming head.

The bald scalp caught the moonlight, shining like a faded red traffic light, telling Cheng Shi: road closed.

Cheng Shi's eyelid twitched. He turned to leave.

But The Prisoner didn't try to stop him. He just stood there, gazing up at the night sky, eyes glimmering, voice low:

"This is how Granny went too..."

"?"

'Granny?'

That single sentence rooted Cheng Shi's mid-turn body to the spot. His ears perked up like gossip radar.

He wasn't leaving anymore.

The Prisoner didn't look at Cheng Shi. He rubbed his head and gazed at the stars, as if some emotion had pulled him into memory.

"I was born a stutterer. Unwanted from the start."

"They didn't like me, so they dumped me with Granny and took my flawless little sister off to live somewhere else."

Hearing this, Cheng Shi blinked. So The Prisoner really did have a sister?

"Granny..."

The Prisoner paused here and let out a sudden laugh—though the emotions tangled in that laugh were too many for Cheng Shi to sort.

"...wasn't what you'd call a good person. Sharp-tongued, mean, petty, and held grudges. Like a villain grandmother straight out of a TV drama."

"But no matter how the world saw her, she was always the only decent character in my life."

"Neighbors, classmates, teachers, villagers, random passersby—every one of them mocked me and bullied me. But whenever they hit me or cursed me, only Granny would step up and curse them right back, one by one."

"She'd take my hand and march up to their doors, stand at the threshold, point at every family's lintel, and let them have it—never repeating the same insult twice. And when she really got going, even I caught some shrapnel."

"She'd yell at me for being spineless—for not daring to curse them back the way she did."

"I wanted to. But I couldn't get the words out. I couldn't learn how."

"She was formidable. She knew every family's dirty laundry. Whoever she targeted became the village's laughingstock for days."

"Eventually, people couldn't afford to cross her, and they went easier on me too."

"But I'd been insecure since childhood. I could never lift my head around others, and I spoke less and less."

"She berated me daily for having no spine—yet the second someone else laughed at me for it, she'd grab a broom and chase them down."

"But one time... that chase went wrong."

"She ran too fast and fell—right at our own doorstep."

"By the time I came home from school, she'd been lying there for hours."

"Hours..."

"Our house wasn't on some remote back lane. People passed by constantly. Yet not a single one was willing to help her up."

"By the time I got there, she was nearly gone."

"I wanted to run and get a doctor. That's when she stopped me."

"She said: 'It's too late.'"

"She knew karma would catch up. She wasn't afraid of that. She was only afraid that after she was gone, no one would curse people for me anymore."

"I tried to carry her to the clinic. She refused. Said she'd just insulted someone yesterday and didn't want to go there and take their spite."

"In her last breath, she scolded me one final time: 'You don't know how to make people hate you. What are you going to do?'"

"I wailed. I thought every person in that village was a murderer. I wanted to kill them all."

"Granny saw it in my eyes. She gripped my hand and said:"

"There are still more good people in this world. They're just not here..."

"And then she was gone."

"I carried Granny inside and cried for a day and a night. I cried until I passed out, then hunger woke me up."

"When I woke with my face pressed against Granny... I realized my stutter was gone."

"Granny had left me the thing she was most 'proud of.'"

"Of course I know what being 'unlucky' means. But aside from this, I don't know how else to face the world's cruelty."

"Because this is all she ever taught me."

In the dead-silent night, the sound of teardrops hitting the ground rang clear.

Cheng Shi turned to face The Prisoner, a storm of conflicting emotions written across his face. He pressed his lips together, unsure what to say.

He didn't know why he'd suddenly been drawn into a heart-to-heart. He hadn't known The Prisoner's past was this painful.

Everyone had their own struggles, it seemed. No matter how unlucky a person appeared, there were always memories too heavy to let go of.

Cheng Shi sighed. He knew Ji Yue's words today had stirred The Prisoner's memories. But this sadness ran too deep, too heavy—he wanted to steer away from it, to keep the grief from lingering.

So he pointed at the teardrops by The Prisoner's feet and smiled with a complicated expression: "Is that gasoline too?"

The Prisoner wiped his face clean and nodded firmly:

"Exactly—brother-in-law, you really get me!"

"Is that how they taught you at home too?"

"..."

'A Masterclass in Destroying the Mood in One Second and Successfully Making Everyone Think You're Cursed.'

Cheng Shi was genuinely laugh-crying. He jabbed his finger at The Prisoner, but in the end couldn't bring himself to say anything harsh.

'After hearing his story, cursing him feels... wrong?'

'Wait—could this have been the Silence follower's plan all along?'

'I actually fell for that?!'

Cheng Shi's expression cycled through several phases before he exhaled:

"Show some mercy with that mouth of yours, Prisoner. For your granny's sake."

"But Granny never showed mercy with hers."

"..."

'If I respond to one more thing this guy says, I'm the idiot.'

Cheng Shi's face darkened and he turned on his heel.

The Prisoner didn't stop him. Only after Cheng Shi had gone far down the road did he rub his head and muse:

"Why didn't it work?"

"It works perfectly on Qin Xin and Li Jingming."

He crouched down, pulled out a match, struck it, and lit the "teardrop" at his feet.

Watching the tiny flame rise beside his shoe, The Prisoner said to himself in a strange tone:

"Granny, your tricks don't always work either."

"Sigh. Still need to practice. Still need to improve."

As the flame burned through its fuel and slowly died, The Prisoner stood and started walking back toward Ji Yue. He looked up at the sky as he went, eyes finding the brightest star in the night.

He smiled:

"In a world where evil outweighs good, who says death isn't a release?"

"He left?"

Ji Yue was already half sitting up in bed, smiling at The Prisoner as he pushed through the door.

The Prisoner nodded, dragged a chair over, sat by the bedside, and stared unblinkingly at Ji Yue—stared until her skin crawled.

In that moment, she remembered what Cheng Shi had said:

"Don't forget—this man is one of your Torchbearers. Still laughing?"

'Not funny at all!'

The smile froze solid on her face.

But she couldn't stay frozen forever. Unable to bear that guileless stare any longer, she looked away and changed the subject:

"Why did you join the Torchbearers?"

Torchbearers seemed to have a natural reservoir of conversation topics—beauty, dreams, purpose... When you thought about it, Ji Yue's pivot wasn't exactly abrupt. Two Torchbearers who'd just acknowledged each other really should understand each other's will to carry the flame.

The Prisoner blinked, fell silent for a moment, then said with absolute seriousness:

"Granny said the world had more good people than bad. But I never found them. So I figured the world was wrong, and I needed to fix it."

"..."

Ji Yue hadn't expected such a reason. She stared at The Prisoner in surprise, and before long, a smile blossomed across her face:

"So that's the kind of beauty you want to protect. Not bad at all."

"Qin Xin's eye for people is as sharp as ever."

Whenever the topic turned to the torch, The Prisoner actually dialed it down. He laughed awkwardly, rubbed his head, and said:

"And you? What's your reason?"

"My reason..."

Ji Yue's eyes went hazy for an instant. She shook her head:

"Honestly, it was an accident."

"Fang Shiqing—the City Defenders' Fire Seeker—let something slip during a trial, and I accidentally learned about the Torchbearers."

"She probably figured I wasn't a bad person, so she invited me."

"Logically, with my temper, someone as gentle and calm as Shiqing would never have been able to convince me. But there was a fire burning inside me. I always felt like some impassioned speech had persuaded me, pushing me onto the path of passing the torch."

"But whenever I tried to recall and savor it, it would vanish."

"So I assumed it was fate, guiding me from the shadows."

"But today... I dreamed of chaotic fragments again. Those fractured images suggested that impassioned speech really did happen at some point... which is why I'm confused now."

"Though even without any grand speech, I believe in what the Torchbearers are doing."

"When Fang Jue and I founded the Mutual Aid Society, I said it then: the harder and more dangerous things get, the more people need to stick together."

"Too many have already lost themselves in pointless faith and misplaced devotion. But those gods sitting high above... they don't necessarily see us as people."

"And if that's the case, then humanity must stand up for itself!"

"I refuse to grovel as a worm. So I said yes to Shiqing and joined the torch."

"Even if taking that step only transforms a worm into a moth, I'll accept it."

"Because there cannot be no fire in my life!"

Clap clap clap!

The Prisoner actually started applauding. Ignoring Ji Yue's embarrassment, he said admiringly: "Is that why you chose War?"

Ji Yue's expression froze. She turned away: "That was also an accident."

"Another accident?"

"Lots of variables in your destiny, huh." The Prisoner clicked his tongue. "Do you think our next plan will have any accidents too?"

"...I'm not a Fate follower."

"But the plan you're talking about... what plan?"

The Prisoner sat up straight:

"The Find Yu Xi Plan!"

"You must've heard the news about Yu Xi by now. Since we know His position, we should be reaching out even more proactively!"

"My brother-in-law responds to soft approaches, not hard ones, and he's the linchpin of this whole plan. So to get his help, we need to make him owe us another favor."

"When can you recover? Once you're back on your feet, I'll take you to settle the score!"

"Kill the Historian and the Scavenger?"

"Not just those two—every clueless Oblivion follower too! This time we keep killing until my brother-in-law agrees!"

"..." Ji Yue studied The Prisoner with a strange look for a long moment. "I assumed you were a City Defender. I never expected you'd be a City Builder too?"

The Prisoner thought about it, then shook his head:

"No, I think I'm a Cheng Shipper. He and my sister are just too perfect together."

"..."

...

By the time Cheng Shi returned to the statue, the night sky was already fading.

The town streets in the hour before dawn were at their most deserted. Even the patrols had thinned. Not a soul was in sight, giving him room to work freely.

Cheng Shi tapped and prodded around the statue, growing more certain it was hollow. Something was definitely hidden inside.

His earlier reconnaissance had already revealed the statue's properties. Despite being a stone sculpture, it was impervious to force, immune to fire and water, and beyond the reach of the void. No ordinary person could break through, let alone peer inside.

But Cheng Shi wasn't ordinary. He'd thought of a method.

Since the statue's eyeballs could move, there had to be a gap between the eyeball and the socket. If he could squeeze a die into that gap, he could use his talent to swap himself inside.

So Cheng Shi climbed to the statue's peak, hung from the eye socket, and after some groping around, actually found a small hole worn into the socket's seam—apparently from years of erosion.

And that hole just happened to be big enough for a single die!

Overjoyed, Cheng Shi tossed in a handful of dice for insurance. But when he activated his skill—nothing happened. He was still hanging outside.

"?"

This only strengthened his conviction: the statue possessed some mysterious force that severed all divine power.

What now?

He dropped from the statue and frowned in thought. Dawn's glow was already creeping over the mountains. If he couldn't figure something out, he'd have to wait until the next night—but with Mo Shu and Zhao Xishi lurking nearby, anything could change by then. He didn't want to wait.

After a moment's deliberation, Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow and produced from his personal storage a... shovel.

He was going to abandon all power and dig his way in using nothing but human muscle!

He could touch it. He could stuff dice into it. That meant the statue didn't reject all contact—it likely only blocked divine power. So if he willingly forfeited his powers, wouldn't that open a path inside?!

No sooner planned than done. Cheng Shi eyed the direction of the coming dawn, pried up the first paving stone from the plaza in the statue's shadow, then spun his arms like windmills, racing against the rising sun.

Perhaps the people of Redi Core had never imagined someone would come to undermine their statue's foundations—and that this someone would be remarkably efficient at it.

In no time at all, Cheng Shi had excavated a "coffin camp" beneath the statue.

Only this time, the coffin camp wasn't the underground shelter players built against danger. There was literally a coffin down here!

Cheng Shi had dug into the tomb of the so-called first Fool Hunter, buried beneath the statue.

Seeing a coffin under a statue would make anyone nervous—that was just human nature. But Cheng Shi had seen enough in his day. He fought down the urge to retreat and gently tapped the coffin wall with his shovel.

And then he understood what the statue's ravings truly were.

"Save... save me..."

"!!??"

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted. He vanished from the spot in an instant.

He hadn't been dragged inside—he'd retreated a full two li.

For a player of the cautious persuasion, willingly answering a creepy call from inside a coffin was absolutely unacceptable. Who knew what lurked in there?

For a moment, he even considered going back for his tool—his designated errand-runner—to scout ahead. But then he remembered that the only tool available this round was The Prisoner...

Forget it. Whatever was in that coffin couldn't possibly be more "dangerous" than The Prisoner.

After all, this was a Torchbearer who wanted to set himself on fire.

So Cheng Shi changed tack. After a moment's thought, he crept into a few nearby houses in the pre-dawn darkness, selected several lucky winners, woke them up, and dropped them into the hole.

Folly's followers weren't stupid. Any of them could see that this villain who'd interrupted their beauty sleep was after the statue's secret!

This criminal had dared to dig up the statue's foundation, desecrating their faith's purity! Someone like this deserved to be hacked to pieces at the statue's foot—punished and executed!

And so, the enraged Folly followers raised their scalpels, glared viciously at the instigator before them, and brought their blades down again and again on...

Themselves.

They hacked themselves to pieces.

Simple reason: they weren't idiots.

Between punishment and death, the former was clearly the wiser choice.

They could only accept punishment—willingly, at that—because they knew that satisfying this villain's twisted desires was their only chance at survival.

And so, in the hour before dawn, the brilliantly wise little town of Redi Core staged a rather unwise spectacle.

Every time Cheng Shi let out a contemptuous snort, the Folly followers' fury deepened. The angrier they became, the more viciously they carved into their own flesh. But watching their "cleverly calculated" "foolish acts," Cheng Shi sneered again with even greater disdain.

A vicious cycle between Deceit and Folly was born.

Of course, for Cheng Shi, it wasn't really vicious—because just as these Folly followers' wounds deepened, something miraculous happened!

Wisps of red light seeped from their wounds, formed into threads, and burrowed toward the coffin beneath the statue's feet. The coffin trembled slightly, emitting the faint sounds of greedy sucking.

Cheng Shi was stunned. But even more shocked were the self-mutilating Folly followers. Horror and disbelief painted their faces as they stared at the coffin:

"This is impossible! We're not sinners—how can the statue be draining our primal folly?!"

"I've been careful my whole life! When did I ever commit the crime of Knowing Folly?!"

"No, this isn't real. This is a hallucination! I'm still dreaming—hahaha, I get it now, I haven't woken up! This is just a nightmare!" Saying this, the man plunged his scalpel into his own heart, snarling: "I'm about to wake up. I can't commit... Knowing Folly... in a dream..."

He died.

After death, the red light pouring from his wounds blazed even brighter, flowing in rivulets straight into the coffin.

Cheng Shi retreated half a step cautiously, then pointed his shovel at one of the survivors on the ground:

"What is the 'primal folly'?"

The man still couldn't believe what he was seeing. His expression crumbling, he explained:

"In Redi Core, not everyone guilty of Knowing Folly carries true foolishness. Some merely committed folly on impulse. When those sinners are punished, the statue gives no response."

"But there exists a type of person with absolute foolishness. When they're punished, their foolishness is flayed out of them, and the Fool-Hunting Statue, sensing the primal folly, absorbs it—keeping foolishness from remaining in the world."

"That red light was clearly primal folly. But we've never even committed Knowing Folly—on what grounds are we being judged as possessing it?!"

"This only happens a few times a year in all of Redi Core's history! Why us?!"

'So that's how it works?'

Cheng Shi blinked. 'Surely it can't be that coincidental—that every random person I grabbed is an absolute fool?'

'Something's not right!'

The red light didn't look like "foolishness" at all. It looked more like blood essence.

And after absorbing so much blood essence, the voice from inside the coffin grew slightly more solid.

"More... I need more blood..."

'It IS blood!'

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted. He suddenly suspected that what was buried inside the coffin wasn't the first Fool Hunter's actual corpse—but some sealed abomination!

The Folly followers had clearly realized this too. Terror gripped them as they felt the most sacred pillar of Redi Core's faith had been trampled!

What on earth was hiding in there?!

Cheng Shi narrowed his eyes, mind spinning. He didn't ask why and didn't agree—just spoke two words to the coffin: "Beg me."

"?"

The surviving Folly followers froze, turning to stare at this villain, thinking: 'Of course his desires are twisted. Even now he's getting off on his power trip.'

But what shocked them even more was that the coffin actually responded.

"Please... more..."

"..."

'No wonder this coffin keeps trembling. It's genuinely trembling...'

The scene fell silent.

Cheng Shi arched an eyebrow. The fact that this thing would beg and grovel to survive meant the being sealed inside couldn't be that high in status. At the very least, the gods on high would never utter such words.

'Not a god. Good.'

Somewhat relieved, Cheng Shi pressed: "Who are you?"

The coffin paused. When the voice came again, it was even weaker.

"I am... Skart."

"!!!"

Before Cheng Shi could react, the Folly followers in front of him lost it.

"Impossible! Lord Skart can't possibly still be alive!"

"My ancestor personally confirmed Lord Skart's death and buried him with his own hands! How can you be him?!"

"This has to be a monster! A blasphemous abomination!"

"I understand now—you're not the villain! The real villain is the monster in the coffin!"

"You came to expose it, didn't you? You woke us up and used our blood to awaken this monster—all so you could drag this thing that tramples our faith and honor into the sunlight, reveal it to the people! Isn't that right?!"

In an instant, the Folly followers' eyes shone with hope as they gazed at Cheng Shi. In that moment, they seemed to forget that one of their own had died beside them.

Then again, perhaps they'd convinced themselves—after all, revelation always demands sacrifice.

But Cheng Shi had no time for theatrics. He scoffed:

"Wrong."

"..."

They collapsed back to the ground, hope giving way to despair.

Cheng Shi ignored them and addressed the coffin: "Who are you really? Last chance. Tell the truth and you'll get blood."

Master of Deception hadn't activated due to the statue's interference, so Cheng Shi couldn't tell whether "Skart" was a disguise or had some other purpose. But the coffin held firm—only weaker this time.

"I... really... am... Skart..."

"Then why are you still alive?"

"Or did the power of faith resurrect you?"

"No, that doesn't work either. Your blood-drinking behavior doesn't look like Folly's blessing. Who ARE you?!"

"..."

The coffin went silent. It seemed to have run out of strength.

Cheng Shi frowned, hauled up one of the lucky winners at his feet, and ended the man's suffering.

A trickle of red light fed into the coffin again. Ragged, gasping sounds returned.

"More... too little..."

'You're getting picky now?'

Cheng Shi's lip twitched. He kicked the coffin:

"Answer my questions, and you'll have an endless supply of blood. Otherwise... dawn's coming. I'll fill this hole back in, and whether you see me again depends on my mood tomorrow night."

"Or maybe this is your only chance."

"Perhaps once the sun comes up, I'll report everything here to the Folly Prohibition Office. Under the zealotry of their faith's judgment—do you think you can stay hidden?"

"..."

The coffin fell silent. After a long pause, it whispered:

"I am Skart... but I was never a Fool Hunter..."

"Because I was a Scarlet Hunter..."

"I was a follower... of Death..."

"!!!?"

'Wait—WHAT?!'

"Utter nonsense!"

As it turned out, Folly's followers were genuinely devout. Even at this point, the survivors had the nerve to curse the thing in the coffin.

They shouted abuse and kicked and punched the coffin.

"This is Folly's sacred ground! The place where our Lord bestows His blessings! How dare a foul demon spew such lies!"

"Lord Skart was the greatest Fool Hunter in history! After his death, even our Benefactor acknowledged his status and let him act as proxy to purge the world of folly!"

"He CANNOT possibly be a Death follower!"

"I understand now! I know what you are!"

"You must be the incarnation of foolishness—a projection of the world's absolute folly!"

"Lord Skart sealed you here to ensure no folly remains in this world!"

"Great Lord Skart, you succeeded! What you sealed was indeed the most foolish creature in existence!"

"..."

The outburst silenced both Cheng Shi and the coffin.

After a moment's contemplation, Cheng Shi raised his blade and dispatched them all in quick succession. As bodies thudded to the ground, wisps of red light streamed into the coffin. But even after feeding it this many people, the "Skart" inside still sounded feeble.

"I'm not foolishness... The truly foolish ones... are those Folly followers..."

"?"

'Do tell!'

Cheng Shi caught the scent of prime gossip. His expression sharpened as he silently assessed the situation.

Regardless of what was inside, he'd already planned his response:

If the "Skart" in the coffin was telling the truth, then a hidden history lay within. And against a being that was merely "human," he likely had a fighting chance.

But if the coffin actually imprisoned some demon or embodiment of absolute folly, and he accidentally released it—well, he'd simply divert the disaster straight to Mo Shu's doorstep.

That way, he might still play the fisherman reaping rewards while others fought in muddy waters.

With that reasoning, Cheng Shi took the gamble.

He sliced a small cut on his arm with a scalpel, letting blood drip down and condense into blood essence, which the coffin eagerly captured.

At first, the coffin absorbed slowly. But when it discovered this particular supply seemed inexhaustible, it accelerated.

Cheng Shi merely frowned slightly—no real reaction.

Blood essence was just another expression of vitality. Under the protection of his Vitality authority, sustained damage was the least of his concerns. The coffin could gorge itself to bursting and still never drain him dry.

What he hadn't anticipated was that the coffin nearly did burst.

Like rain after a drought, the "Skart" who'd starved for who-knows-how-many years finally had a feast. He guzzled Cheng Shi's blood essence with reckless abandon. Before long, retching sounds echoed from inside.

Years of atrophy had left him unable to handle the sudden richness, producing vertigo and nausea.

Hearing the genuinely unforced vomiting, Cheng Shi finally accepted that whoever was in there did sound like a Scarlet Hunter.

The retching didn't last long. Soon the coffin settled. Dawn light was already reaching the mountain peaks—time was running out. Cheng Shi frowned and was about to press for answers when the sated "Skart" pulled himself together and spilled everything at once.

"I really am Skart—the one Redi Core's history calls the first 'Fool Hunter.'"

"But I wasn't lying. I was never a Fool Hunter. I was a genuine, authentic, devout—well, not that devout—Scarlet Hunter!"

"It's a long story. Could you, or rather, could You perhaps—"

"Then make it short."

"...Very well. You've shown me a chance at escape. I'll answer every question you have."

"I was originally a hunter from a Death tribe in the surface-dwelling Nature Alliance. Truth followers fleeing the Civilization Lonely Tower's pursuers passed through our tribe and were spotted by Folly believers. Fighting broke out."

"Seeing a once-in-a-century opportunity, our entire tribe deployed, hoping to seize the chance to seek an audience with our Benefactor."

"But I... was still young. I hadn't yet grasped the value of drawing closer to my Benefactor. So I panicked. I ran."

"But it's not exactly easy to flee a battlefield saturated with large-scale magical attacks. I was hit by a Folly spell, hurled into the void, spat out by the current, and crash-landed on Folly's territory."

"Lucky me—at least I wasn't killed on impact. I landed on a Folly follower."

"The first thing I did was endure the pain and ask him where I was. But I'd... crushed him to death."

"While I stood there dazed and lost, an entire squad of Folly believers rounded the low hill ahead."

"They were a reserve force of the Civilization Lonely Tower. Seeing a foreigner who'd killed one of their own on Folly's home turf, they moved to execute me on the spot."

"But I didn't want to die. Driven by desperation, I argued and babbled. I remembered my tribespeople once telling me that Folly prized wisdom above all and despised foolishness. So I said: this man's death wasn't unjust. If he were truly smart, he wouldn't have been crushed to death by me."

"He died—therefore he was foolish. And the foolish deserve to die."

"I don't know which words got through to them, but they stopped attacking. They looked at the bow in my hands, began to cheer, and hailed me as the 'Fool Hunter.'"

"From that moment, I—Skart, a Scarlet Hunter from the Nature Alliance's Death tribe—became the first Fool Hunter, celebrated across the Civilization Lonely Tower..."

"And to survive, I had no choice but to fake my faith and pretend to be a Folly devotee who hunted foolishness in Folly's name..."

"That's the whole story. I know it sounds absurd, but I haven't told a single lie. Can You find a way to get me out?"

"..."

Cheng Shi was dumbfounded.

'Are you telling me that the Folly hunter class "Fool Hunter" actually originated from a national case of mass misidentification?!

'What is this—to hunt the foolish, one must first be foolish?'

'Yeah. That's very Folly.'

But Cheng Shi wasn't in a rush. He frowned and asked: "Then why are you sealed in the coffin? Did they find you out?"

"...This isn't a seal."

"I was originally a Death follower. Blasphemy against my faith distanced me from death itself. For decades I didn't die—but Folly's followers don't live forever. They age and pass on. If I kept living, I'd become undeniable heresy."

"So I devised an exit strategy."

"After decades building my reputation, I had plenty of power. I staged a fake death, planning to escape this blind, foolish land once I was buried."

"But..."

"I never imagined their devotion to me would be so fanatical. The day after my burial, they worked through the night to build a divine throne above my grave—trapping me inside this coffin!!"

"To make my fake death convincing, I'd already weakened myself to the brink. With the statue pressing directly on the coffin, I couldn't break free!"

At this point, Skart's voice dripped with grievance.

Even though centuries had passed, he spoke about it as though it had happened yesterday.

"I was trapped like this for over ten days. Without food or water, I could practically see the end of my life. Just when I thought my Benefactor had finally forgiven my betrayal and was summoning me..."

"A turning point appeared."

"In my honor, the people of Redi Core held a Knowing Folly lashing ceremony at my statue's foot."

"The blood essence leaking from the sinners' bodies gave me hope for survival. I sipped it through the coffin's cracks—just barely enough to cling to life. But I didn't dare take too much, terrified that these 'smart' people would notice something. So I could only sip here and there... and survive until now."

"..."

Cheng Shi paused, then shook his head with an incredulous laugh: "Your blood-drinking was mistaken for Folly's proxy power—a divine gift of purging foolishness. And your cries for help were heard as the statue's ravings!"

"More or less..."

"No wonder only drunks heard the statue's ravings."

"With how cowardly you are, how would you dare openly deceive a sober Folly follower?!"

"Your plan wasn't bad, I'll give you that."

"Too bad you're a bit stupid."

"Then again, you're not the only foolish one here. Otherwise, how would you have survived this long?"

"But I still have one question. If everything is fake, then what exactly was the so-called divine gift that Koshna received?"

"A pair of eyes."

"!!!?"

Cheng Shi's whole body jolted. The words flew out: "The Eye of Mockery?"

Skart in the coffin paused, confused:

"What's that?"

"I don't know any Eye of Mockery. All I know is that what I threw out... was my own eyes."

"Huh?"

Cheng Shi blinked, not processing: "Your eyes?"

"You gouged out your own eyes and threw them out?"

"But you've been trapped in this coffin clinging to life for ages—how did you manage to throw your eyes outside?"

"If you could throw out your own eyes, then couldn't you just dig—"

He stopped midsentence. Because he remembered the small hole in the statue's eye socket—the one that looked worn through by years of friction. So the one who made that hole was Skart?

"I have been digging. But that's all I could manage."

"I knew that passively drinking blood wasn't safe, so every time I regained some strength I'd let a little of my own blood, tear strips from my burial shroud, harden them with blood, and use them as tools to chisel the coffin."

"As a Scarlet Hunter, blood is second nature to me. Blood-soaked cloth becomes hard as iron. But to avoid alerting the Folly believers outside, I could only absorb tiny amounts of blood essence each time, limiting my digging to brief sessions."

"Time, however, I had in abundance. So over the span of a century, every time I woke I'd chisel a little more—until I bored a small hole through the coffin and followed the statue's only ventilation shaft to drill a gap through the statue's eye."

"Then I spent several more centuries accumulating Folly's power of faith, wrapping my eyeballs in it to preserve their vitality."

"That way, once I threw my eyes out, I could reverse the blood-absorption process—feeding on my own blood through the eyes—and use them as a foundation to rebuild my body."

"Even if the reborn shell would be weak, at least I'd be free."

"And so, after preparing for heaven knows how long, the opportunity finally came."

"I sensed someone approaching outside, investigating my sounds. I knew they'd leave soon and clear the area to prevent drunks from defiling the statue in their stupor."

"So the moment I heard silence outside, I executed my plan and threw out my eyes..."

"But you didn't realize Koshna hadn't left—he'd just fallen asleep." Cheng Shi's expression was priceless—torn between laughing and crying.

"...Yes."

Who could've imagined that Skart's escape plan, centuries in the making, would be foiled by a modern-day hangover?

Koshna, investigating the statue ravings incident, had drunk wine to replicate the conditions. But he couldn't hold his liquor and fell asleep during his worship. Skart, thinking the coast was finally clear, launched his eyes.

Then Koshna woke from his nap, mistook the thing for a divine gift, and carried it away.

Without sensing his own blood essence, Skart's eyes couldn't rebuild his body. He'd failed—and lost his eyes in the process.

And Koshna receiving the "gift" had been witnessed by Kandert, who then orchestrated a Knowing Folly case to get at Koshna and stole the dead man's eyes.

But Kandert's actions were in turn discovered by Max, leading to everything that had unfolded in this trial...

From the moment Skart entered the coffin—no, from the moment he crash-landed on this soil—Redi Core's chain of foolish acts had never once been broken.

The shame of it was: the so-called divine gift was no divine gift at all. Just a pair of Scarlet Hunter eyeballs.

Did this mean the trail to the Eye of Mockery had gone cold?

No—not necessarily.

After all, the Eye of Mockery was part of that mask, making it one of Deceit's "creations." Whether or not it was Folly's divine gift didn't matter. What mattered was whether it carried Deceit's comedic gene.

And as it stood, these eyes—even originating from a Death follower—were absolutely hilarious.

So he couldn't rule out the possibility that Skart's discarded eyes were the Eye of Mockery.

One question remained, however: even if Kandert had witnessed Koshna receiving the "gift," what made him certain the divine gift was hidden in Koshna's eyes?

Unless he'd actually watched those gifted eyes merge with Koshna's. Otherwise...

Thinking of this, Cheng Shi frowned and asked:

"If someone else picked up your eyes, how would they maintain their vitality?"

"I refuse to believe that a plan centuries in the making had zero contingencies. Tell me. This is the last question. Answer it, and I'll bring you back to the light."

The coffin fell silent for a moment—an internal struggle. But in the end, the desire for freedom overwhelmed everything, and Skart yielded:

"There was a contingency..."

"If the eyes were unfortunately picked up by someone else, and that person had any wound on their body, the eyes would burrow inside like a parasite and fuse with that person's own eyes to preserve themselves."

"But that's all they can do. In my weakened state, I couldn't arrange anything more. I could only hope that someday, after escaping, I'd track down my eyes through the connection."

"But I know that's unlikely. The faith force sustaining them comes from Folly, and I'm not a true Folly believer. Once they're away from me for too long—no, not even a few days—they'll probably stop being mine..."

"Eye of Mockery?"

"Nice name. Eyes that return to folly—what else would you call them but the Eye of Mockery?"

"..."

Cheng Shi pursed his lips, thinking: 'The Eye of Mockery I'm talking about isn't Folly's contemptuous gaze.'

Still, the eyes Skart had lost matched every known characteristic of the Eye of Mockery. To avoid dismissing a lead through premature judgment, Cheng Shi decided he still needed to search.

The question was: where exactly had Kandert hidden these eyes?

'Could they be in his own eyes?'

"If the eyes have already fused with one person, could they fuse with a second person's eyes?"

As he spoke, Cheng Shi produced Kandert's corpse from the Molten Coffin.

The coffin-bound Skart considered briefly: "Of course. Think of my eyes as the most primitive lifeform possible—no intelligence, just survival instinct. To stay alive, their only option is to parasitize..."

"Then check whether this body has your eyes."

"..."

A long silence. Then Skart sighed: "Setting aside the fact that I have no vision right now... You haven't let me out. With the coffin lid between us, I can't see anything."

'Oh right, forgot about that.'

Cheng Shi laughed awkwardly, glanced at the sky outside, stowed the corpse, and said with a half-smile to the coffin:

"Then come on out."

"...I'll need Your assistance for that."

"Tch—"

"I think not."

"When you were weak, you managed to chisel through this coffin with nothing but bloody rags. Now that you're well fed, don't tell me you suddenly can't?"

"You keep insisting I do the work. Is it because you're trying to provoke me—make me feel resistant or concerned so I leave?"

"After I leave and there's no more external threat, you can just break out on your own, right?"

"Nice little scheme."

"Too bad for you—you've run into the big scheme."

"Come out!"

"I'm counting to three. If I don't see your head, don't blame me for sending you to meet your Benefactor."

"THREE!"

"!!??"

BOOM—

A thunderclap split the air, and dawn broke over Redi Core.

Balf jolted awake at the commotion outside, hands shooting to his neck.

Drenched in cold sweat, he sat up and found no wound on his throat. He was actually alive.

'But didn't I die at that villain's hand?'

'How am I still alive?'

'Was it just a nightmare?'

He scrambled to his feet, examined every inch of his body, checked the mirror again and again—not a single wound. Every cut he'd made with his own scalpel had vanished without a trace.

"Phew—"

"It really was just a dream!"

"But it felt so real."

Balf was overjoyed. Basking in the ecstasy of "rebirth," he cheered aloud, then pressed himself against the window to see what all the ruckus outside was about.

After a bit of asking around, he learned that a bolt of dry lightning at dawn had shattered the ground at the statue's feet, exposing Lord Skart's tomb.

A chill ran through him. Without bothering to dress properly, he bolted outside toward the gathering crowd.

Four or five others had rushed out in equally disheveled states—exactly matching the number of lucky winners Cheng Shi had chosen.

They pushed through the crowd to the front row. As the Folly Prohibition Office guards cleared the blast site and maintained order to protect the slumbering soul beneath the statue, each of them wore a peculiar expression, eyes darting nervously.

Before long, they noticed one another. When their gazes met in pairs, their hearts lurched in unison—the realization that their earlier experience wasn't just a pre-dawn nightmare but something that had actually happened.

They just couldn't explain what had happened to them. Or why the villain had brought them back to life.

But as long as they were alive, nothing else mattered.

One by one, they kept their mouths shut. Even upon seeing the coffin's corner blown apart with no body inside, they said nothing. When the guards questioned them, they shook their heads and claimed they were just there for the spectacle.

As for where Lord Skart's remains had gone...

If lightning could shatter the ground, it could certainly reduce a body to ash. And the mountain wind would carry the ash away. So naturally, nothing remained in the coffin.

What was so hard to understand about that?

...

The Eye of Mockery's trail hadn't gone cold yet. Cheng Shi still needed to stay in Redi Core and investigate, which was why he'd staged this whole scene.

Of course, the lightning hadn't actually targeted Skart. He'd simply run out of time to refill the hole he'd dug, so he faked a lightning strike instead.

But the cowardly Skart, having felt the thunderbolt's fury a hair's breadth away, was markedly more obedient now. He crawled out of the damaged coffin and followed Cheng Shi away from the plaza without a word of protest.

His face, though, was a picture of lingering dread the entire way.

Cheng Shi paid him no mind. While the Folly Prohibition Office guards were all out maintaining order at the statue, he brought the blind Skart back to the office and had him feel Koshna's corpse to search for the missing eyes.

Skart, expression odd, groped the body for a long while before shaking his head.

Seeing this, Cheng Shi sighed. Of course—once the Fun God was involved, nothing was ever simple.

With the trail cold again, Cheng Shi reluctantly turned to Brother Mouth. He wanted to know if the Eye of Mockery had any other distinguishing features besides being removable.

For once, the Fool's Lips didn't stay silent—though their words were harsh as ever.

"A clown truly earns his keep by acting stupid for the audience's amusement. And in that regard, you've reached the absolute pinnacle."

"..."

'You've also reached the pinnacle of insults, Brother Mouth...'

Cheng Shi went numb.

'If you don't want to tell me, fine—but why the personal attack? What did clowns ever do to you?'

'And aren't you a clown yourself?'

'Past life or present, you've always been a clown's mouth.'

He didn't dare snap back. After all, he'd need Brother Mouth's help going forward. But Brother Mouth never said anything without purpose. Had he really overlooked something? Did the Eye of Mockery have some obvious feature he'd missed?

Cheng Shi sank deep into thought.

Beside him, Skart didn't dare interrupt. He stood obediently to the side, "eyes" fixed straight ahead, carefully avoiding "looking" at this terrifying lord, lest he provoke another thunderbolt.

Cheng Shi ruminated for a long time. Nothing. Frustrated, he turned to Skart:

"Have you ever thought about meeting your Benefactor? The one on the Bone Throne?"

The question scared Skart half to death. He dropped to his knees, prostrating himself:

"Please spare me, my lord! Please!"

"Yes—I'm a coward, I deserve to die, I desecrated my own faith! But I've been desecrating it for centuries now, which means I've lost all right to an audience with Him!"

"I can't sully His temple with my filthy, faithless presence! I can't dirty His eyes and ears! I'm not worthy! Just let me rot in the mortal world! Let me suffer every worldly torment, forever cast aside by my Benefactor in contempt!"

"..."

'Good lord, are you making birthday wishes over here?'

'Nice try. Being cast aside by that lord in contempt is basically immortality.'

'I'd like some immortality too. The question is, does that lord actually get to decide?'

Cheng Shi rolled his eyes and said flatly:

"I see. So you just don't want to dirty His eyes and ears—but it's not that you don't want to see Him. Right?"

"I..." Skart stammered, tears and snot streaming. "Can I possibly not want to?"

Cheng Shi grinned:

"No wonder you were the first 'Fool Hunter.' You really are clever."

"No, you can't."

"I want you to want to, so you have to want to."

"Let's go, blasphemer. Let's see what that lord thinks of you."

With that, Cheng Shi plunged a blade into Skart's heart and began to pray in place:

"Soul sleeps in peace, life comes to an end."

"Great God of Death, your most devoted employee has been so busy with work lately that he hasn't reported in. The guilt has been unbearable. Today, there happen to be some matters I'd like to report to You. Might You have a moment to spare?"

An ordinary sacrifice couldn't reach the Fishbone Hall directly. Cheng Shi's confidence in speaking to that lord came from the fact that upon entering the Folly Prohibition Office, he had secretly struck his Bone Bell.

In other words, everything he'd done was happening right under that lord's watchful gaze!

That was why Cheng Shi felt so relaxed.

Of course, he wasn't doing this to show the lord a disloyal follower. Skart wasn't important enough to warrant a god's judgment of his devotion.

The real reason Cheng Shi wanted to see that lord was an entirely different plan.

But to his surprise, this "deeply moving" "heartfelt appeal" received no response whatsoever. The body slid off his blade and crumpled to the floor. Apart from the dripping of blood, total silence.

Cheng Shi was dumbstruck.

'Is the boss not home?'

'That can't be right. Even if He's not in the Fishbone Hall, He can't possibly not hear my call.'

'Unless... to avoid suspicion, He can't respond to prayers within the Bone Bell's coverage area?'

'Oh no. Then this was all pointless?'

Just as Cheng Shi stood there in stunned blankness, Skart's corpse at his feet popped open like a jack-in-the-box—BANG—exploding into countless chattering little skulls. They jabbered and clattered, assembling before Cheng Shi's eyes into a Bone Gate, and cried out in unison:

"Hurry! Faster! Don't keep Him waiting!"

Cheng Shi was overjoyed. He stepped through without hesitation.

"Coming, coming! My lord—your top sales champion is here to report!"

The Fishbone Hall was unusually quiet today.

Within the torrent of white bone, countless little skulls watched Cheng Shi's arrival with varying expressions, not uttering a word—as though a storm were brewing.

Cheng Shi was startled too. He thought perhaps the boss wasn't pleased about him using the Bone Bell to make contact, because all his earlier elation had vanished, replaced entirely by unease.

Naturally, you couldn't read unease on a tiny skull—but you could read pure death energy.

And that death energy came not just from Cheng Shi, but from another little skull: Skart.

Although his corpse had exploded into the Bone Gate, Death had still pulled him in. But Skart had never seen anything like this. The instant he materialized on the steps of the Fishbone Hall, he shuddered head to toe, rolled himself off the path and into the bone torrent, and found the spot where he belonged.

With his companion gone, Cheng Shi felt the atmosphere grow stranger by the second. He carefully hopped his way up to the Bone Throne, craned his skull upward at the massive cranium above—its eye sockets devoid of even a flicker of green flame—and wondered: 'What is He thinking?'

'Surely He's not thinking about how to punish me?'

'He wouldn't. I'm an exemplary employee. Even without a bonus, punishment doesn't apply!'

His gut told him this wasn't the time for flattery. He didn't dare disturb that lord's contemplation, so he simply stood quietly beneath the Bone Throne and waited.

It was as good a time as any to organize his thoughts and the pitch he'd prepared for the boss.

But the wait stretched on, indeterminate.

Not until the massive skull emitted a resonant hum did Cheng Shi snap back to attention.

"You... came here... to seek... an audience... or to... take shelter... from the trial... and slack off?"

"You have... been here... for so long... without uttering... a single word."

"?????"

Cheng Shi was dumbfounded. He jerked his head toward the lord, his hollow eye sockets radiating shock.

"My lord, weren't You deep in thought?"

"I didn't want to interrupt Your contemplation!"

"Who... told you... We... were thinking?"

"..."

'Nobody, technically. But...'

"...You were completely still. I assumed the trivial matters of the universe had caught Your attention, preventing You from looking down upon this humble employee."

A wisp of green flame ignited in the massive skull's eye, and it huffed heavily:

"Since you... set foot... in this hall... We have been... watching you."

"Yet you... ignored this completely... and sat there... lost in your own... thoughts."

"Cheng... Shi."

"Do you... treat this... as your... Void... domain?!"

'Oh no, the boss is angry!'

Cheng Shi's heart clenched, but outwardly he remained calm. Steeling himself, he nodded:

"My lord, as a Void walker, the Void is indeed my home."

"But this place—this is my home too!"

"Home is home. So You speak correctly—if I may be so bold—though I am but a mortal, I truly do think of this place as home."

At these words, the bone torrent in the Fishbone Hall surged once, then each skull settled back into place. Silence returned.

Cheng Shi ducked his head, thinking he'd played the wrong emotional card. But from an angle he couldn't see, the massive skull actually contorted into an expression of extreme distaste—before reverting to its cold mask:

"Your... silver tongue... is the spitting image... of your... wretched... Benefactor's."

"Speak... why... have you come?"

"?"

'Did I pass?'

Cheng Shi brightened and looked up again:

"Well... Esteemed Lord, besides returning a wayward follower to the fold, I do have something else."

"But I'm not quite sure how to put it."

"Then... don't." The massive skull hummed.

"?"

'That won't do!'

Cheng Shi had a creeping suspicion the boss found him annoying today, though he couldn't pinpoint why. To ensure his plan went smoothly, he needed to clear this hurdle with the Death lord first.

So after weighing his words, he began:

"Then I'll just say it, my lord."

"You remember the time I intercepted a flood of Oblivion sacrifices for You, yes?"

The massive skull went still. Then it said ominously:

"If... you are here... to ask for... a reward... you may leave... now."

Cheng Shi panicked:

"No no no!"

"My lord, those were offerings from Your humble employee's own devotion. How could devotion be measured by rewards?"

"Of course, if there happened to be one, that wouldn't be unwelcome either—"

"Why are Your flames flaring up? Please, stay calm—that's not what I meant!"

"What I mean is: after extensive preparation, Your employee is preparing a second offering for You. And this devotion is far, far greater than the first!"

These words sent the green flames in the massive skull's eyes blazing for an instant. Interest flickered, but the voice remained stern:

"Those who... curry favor... always want... something."

"As We see it... you show no such... devotion... even to your... two annoying... Benefactors..."

"So... now... what do you want... from Us?"

"..."

Cheng Shi's jaw clicked a couple times. He felt a twinge of injustice.

'Is that really how You see me? Your outstanding employee—just some insatiable greed machine?'

'Can't I be genuinely devout?'

'Never mind. Fooling myself is pointless. I do want something. But this time, it costs You nothing!'

Steadying himself, Cheng Shi shook his head:

"My lord, with all respect—You're wrong."

"My devotion to You has never wavered. Even if I have received blessings from Your hand, those were affirmations of my devotion—not the grabbings of a greedy employee."

"Especially this time. I guarantee this offering will satisfy You."

"In fact, You'll be so satisfied that You'll want to give Your employee the greatest reward of all."

"..."

The green flames in the massive skull's eyes hitched. He sensed that no matter how many times the conversation circled, it always came back to "reward" with this person. Although greed bordered on the sin of Corruption, He chose not to dampen Cheng Shi's enthusiasm and hummed:

"Very well... Let Us... hear... what manner of... surprise... you have... prepared."

Cheng Shi's expression turned deadly serious:

"Oblivion's Divine Throne!"

"Are You interested?!"

"?"

The massive skull froze solid.

"What... did you say?"

Cheng Shi repeated with solemn gravity:

"Oblivion's Divine Throne!"

"My lord, if You're interested—I want to help You knock Oblivion off His throne!"

"Does an offering like that satisfy You?"

"...Utter... nonsense."

"If... a mortal... could shake... the seat... of a true god... this world... would have long since... escaped... the gods'... control!"

"But the universe isn't under the gods' control anyway, is it, my lord? The one truly pulling the strings in this world—shouldn't that be the one sitting high above all... Him?"

Cheng Shi lowered his head, staring at the ground, enunciating every word.

"..."

The massive skull's gaze shifted. It fixed Cheng Shi with a cold stare, but made no move. After a long pause, it spoke—voice deep and measured:

"Tell Us... your plan."

Cheng Shi's jaw worked twice. In his mind: 'It worked!'

"My lord, before anything else, I need to confirm something with You."

"As You must know, Oblivion has been targeting me relentlessly. Of course, I realize He isn't doing this simply to avenge a mortal who intercepted a few sacrifices."

"I despise Oblivion, yet I know a true god wouldn't be that petty. So today I'd sincerely like to ask: why does He want to obliterate me so badly?"

The massive skull snorted:

"You should... ask... your own... Benefactors."

"Ask Them... why... Oblivion... is so... 'fond'... of you."

Though Death's tone was cold, the sentence carried an unmistakable note of satisfaction.

Cheng Shi had a realization. So Oblivion's hunt for him was definitely a plus in the boss's ledger.

'But what good is asking those two Void ancestors? They're not Oblivion's rivals...'

'Wait!'

Cheng Shi froze. 'Could Oblivion's "excessive attention" actually stem from the Void's gaze?'

'Could it be that the "sacrifice" He's fixated on isn't me per se?'

Alarmed, Cheng Shi looked up: "It's because of the Void's sacrifice?"

"Sacrifice..."

"An apt... description."

"Not entirely... wrong... nor entirely... right."

"Oblivion... has always... coveted... the Void... yet your... two Benefactors... have never... given Him... the time of day."

"After years... of this... prejudice... He refuses... to accept... the 'sacrifice'... endorsed by... the Void's... masters."

"It seems... you already... understand... the significance... of the Convention... Not bad... Oblivion's... fixation on you... does partly... stem from this... but more of it... is about... pleasing... Himself."

"What is not... forbidden... is permitted... The Convention... brought about... the Faith Game... and set its rules... but how... to select... what you call... a 'sacrifice'... that clause... was never... set in stone."

"Therefore... His actions... cannot be... sanctioned by... the Convention... nor can you... receive... the rules'... protection."

"However... if merely... for this... you think... to scheme... for His throne..."

The massive skull studied Cheng Shi and shook.

"You're... delusional."

"Not a single... rule... of the Convention... would permit... you to do so... let alone... that you are... merely a mortal... outside the Convention's... protection."

"You have met... Order—Justice... You should know... His fairness... borders on... inflexibility."

Cheng Shi hopped forward, words tumbling out in excitement:

"My lord, it's precisely because His fairness borders on inflexibility that I believe there are loopholes in the rules!"

"I won't mince words with You. Let me ask directly: if I wanted to inherit Oblivion's Divine Throne and authority—what would I need?"

The massive skull spoke gravely:

"When... Prosperity's Mother... fell... I already... told you... When a true god... is trapped... or falls... their Envoy... under the Convention's... witness... may inherit... their throne... and authority."

"Frazor... was a lie... but at least... it was... believable."

"But... Oblivion... is not dead... and due to... His authority... He can never... be trapped."

"Setting aside... His status... He has... but one... subordinate... the Hand of Purifying Weevil... How do you... intend to... replace him... and become... another... Oblivion... Envoy?"

Cheng Shi shook his head and smiled:

"My lord, You've misunderstood. When did I say I wanted to become Oblivion's Envoy?"

"I belong to the Void. I am close to You. Even if Oblivion stopped hunting me and offered me the Envoy position as an apology, I still wouldn't—"

"Hsss—"

Cheng Shi clamped his mouth shut. He'd almost said "wouldn't say no."

He cleared his throat hastily and corrected course:

"I absolutely could not accept such a position!"

"But think about it—there's already a ready-made Envoy. Why does it have to be me?"

"From start to finish, what I've been discussing with You is pulling Oblivion off His throne—not putting myself on it!"

"!?"

Green flames erupted in the massive skull's eyes. Spectral fire illuminated every corner of the Fishbone Hall. He spoke with considerable astonishment:

"You want... to turn... the Hand of Purifying Weevil?"

Cheng Shi nodded vigorously:

"Exactly!"

"My lord, I want to turn Herobos—offering him the condition that he stops hunting me, in exchange for a genuine Divine Throne!"

"Absurd! Preposterous! Outrageous!"

"Even... your Benefactor... Deceit Himself... would not dare... promise anyone... a Divine Throne... and you... a mere mortal... presume to... discuss... the transfer... of a god's seat!?"

"Did We... hear wrong... or—"

"You heard correctly!"

"My lord, every word I've said is fact."

"Why else would I insist on a personal audience before daring to speak of this?"

"I have a method—with a very high probability of success—but the prerequisite is Your full support!"

The massive skull grew even more bewildered. No matter how He calculated, He couldn't fathom how a mortal could scheme against a god who still possessed freedom.

But He was also growing more intrigued, because He could see that this "employee" was brimming with confidence.

After careful deliberation, He spoke, eyes blazing:

"Very well... We... believe you... this once."

"We can... give you... every support... you desire."

"But... you must... tell Us... have you... contacted... your several... Benefactors... or other... true gods... to jointly... hunt down... Oblivion?"

Cheng Shi paused, then shook his head: "No."

"No!?"

The massive skull released a thunderous hum: "Oblivion... commands... the authority... of obliteration... He can... obliterate... His own form... at any moment... He is... nearly impossible... to kill... even harder... to trap!"

"Without that... how do you... plan to... inherit... His authority... and throne?"

"Why does it have to be that way?"

Cheng Shi smiled. He dropped all pretense and laid it out with absolute certainty:

"My lord, You said it Yourself: when a true god is trapped or falls, their Envoy may—under the Convention's witness—inherit their throne and authority. This is a clause of the Convention, correct?"

"You confirm my understanding is accurate?"

"We... confirm."

"Then here's my question: does the Convention anywhere state that when a true god is not trapped and has not fallen, their Envoy cannot inherit the throne and authority?"

"?????"

'WHAT?!'

The green flames in the massive skull's eyes snuffed out instantly. It was as though He'd just heard the most inconceivable thing in the entire universe. His entire skull went blank.

The sudden silence startled Cheng Shi. He thought he'd misunderstood the "concept" and hurried forward, bouncing a couple of hops, cautiously peering up: "My lord?"

"HA HA HA HA HA—"

The massive skull burst into laughter that shook the universe—and for once, didn't stammer at all.

He surveyed the tiny skull before Him with satisfaction, nodding repeatedly:

"Not bad... The Convention... indeed... never made... such an... explicit... provision."

"If you... raise this... as a motion... and petition... Order—Justice... to invoke... the Pact of Gods... convention... with... Order—Justice's... rigidity... He would... certainly... acknowledge... the motion's... validity."

"Then... a simple... vote... would decide... the fate... of Oblivion's... throne!"

"And at that point... the Void... to protect... Their 'sacrifice'... would naturally... cast their votes."

"We... understand... You have come... for Our... vote."

"Exactly!"

Cheng Shi gazed up at the lord on the Bone Throne, eyes shining with anticipation: "Then... do You agree?"

Green flames flickered in the massive skull's eyes. He weighed and calculated every angle for a long while before finally nodding:

"The opportunity... is rare."

"Were the target... not Oblivion... this would be... impossible."

"With Civilization... in chaos... and a surplus... of votes... to gather... it is... worth... a try!"

Though the Death lord agreed without hesitation, that final remark sent a jolt through Cheng Shi.

Because this lord clearly hadn't lost His memories of the Real Universe—otherwise He'd never have said "with Civilization in chaos."

He truly was a member of the Fear Faction!

With this realization, Cheng Shi's confidence solidified, though he didn't point it out.

Securing this vote brought him one step closer to pulling Oblivion off His throne.

'Heh. You want to kill me?'

'Then let's see who finishes first—you losing your throne, or me losing my life!'

"The Pact of Gods... convention... requires... more than half... the votes... to pass... a motion."

"Your two... Benefactors... don't get along... with Oblivion... They will likely... support it."

"Deceit... holds proxy... for Truth's... vote. Fate... holds proxy... for Prosperity's... vote. Add... Our vote... that's already... 5. You need... at least... 4 more."

Hearing this, Cheng Shi asked in confusion:

"My lord, but Prosperity and War have both fallen. Can those still count?"

Green flame swayed gently in the massive skull's eye sockets as He explained:

"If... a god's fall... meant one fewer... seat... then if... accidents... kept happening... wouldn't the gods... be completely... wiped out?"

"The Convention... permits... other gods... to hold proxy... for votes... which means... it already... acknowledges... that vacant thrones... count as... voting seats... Otherwise... the rules... break themselves."

"Of the remaining... 4 votes... Chaos... has long... cooperated with... Deceit... and may be... winnable. Time... is also... your Benefactor... If He... wishes to... protect you... that counts too."

"As for... the last... 2 votes..."

"We... have thought... hard... and see... great difficulty."

"Birth... though Our... sibling god... never pushes... nor hinders... such matters... Even if We... personally lobbied... He would likely... abstain."

"Decay... has long... distanced Himself... from the gods... Even if He... once noticed you... under Oblivion's... influence... He would never... vote in favor."

"The Iron Law of Order... would never... permit... such a breach... of order... That vote... is certain... opposition."

"Folly... never obstructs... foolish acts... but asking Him... to commit one... Himself... is nigh impossible."

"Silence... votes purely... by His own... heart... Nobody knows... what He... is thinking."

"By this... calculation... only Memory... remains."

"But even if... an Envoy... replacing... a true god... on the throne... is itself... a memory... as the Void's... opposite... He would likely... struggle... to cast... that vote."

"So... to claim... Oblivion's throne..."

"Cheng... Shi... you still have... work to do."

"We... will inform... the Void... and do Our best... to maneuver... within the Chaos camp... But the other... votes... do you... have a plan?"

'As expected—the gods' business requires gods to handle.'

After Death's analysis, Cheng Shi immediately realized he needed to secure at least one vote from Birth, Decay, or Memory, while hoping the boss could lock down at least one from Folly or Silence. Only then would there be a chance to take down Oblivion!

He wasn't worried about the Chaos and Time votes. When you traced all the threads, the Fun God was the one calling the shots.

But if the Fun God Himself didn't support this bit of entertainment that Cheng Shi had initiated—then Oblivion could go fight His own battles.

'Fear Faction?'

'Whoever wants to deal with it can deal with it!'

'I quit.'

Just as this thought crossed his mind, green flames blazed again in the massive skull's eyes. Cheng Shi quickly looked up to ask if the lord had further instructions—only to hear the boss snort coldly:

"No plan... no method... yet you speak... of usurpation?"

"Time... is short... Go... and get to work!"

With that, He commanded the bone torrents flanking the hall to sweep Cheng Shi off his feet, tumbling him into the void and back to the trial.

After Cheng Shi's figure vanished, the sea of bone vanished with it. The massive skull on the Bone Throne disappeared, replaced by a pair of upturned, starry eyes.

Stars flickered and spiraled in those eyes as they gazed toward where Cheng Shi had vanished, grinning:

"What a teachable lad. He only observed two Convention assemblies and already figured out how to exploit the loophole."

"Worthy of being my follower!"

But then the grin faded into a slight frown:

"That last vote will ultimately fall on the Clown's shoulders. Will He... cast it?"

"Ah well, why overthink it? As long as the entertainment value is high enough."

"Even if they refuse to vote, I still have to try."

"After all, this is the first motion the Clown has ever proposed. If it fails..."

"Hee~"

"How heartbroken would the Clown be?"

"Come to think of it—win, and I lose a threat. Lose, and I harvest entertainment. Hmm. Not a bad deal either way."

Those starry eyes laughed to themselves in the void for a good while before blinking and summoning the single little skull that had been left behind, examining it with a meaningful look:

"That foul-mouthed one really is clever—started probing Old Bones so early."

"Who knows what He figured out."

"But no matter. Every foolish act will be laughed at eventually."

"When that day comes, I'd like to see who exactly ends up being the butt of the joke."

Then, turning to the little skull, the voice became gentle:

"You... what did you hear?"

The little skull didn't react. It looked around blankly and murmured: "How did I get here? Where is this? Where did that lord go?"

The moment those words left its mouth, its own voice echoed back through the void:

"I don't know anything, I didn't see anything, don't kill me, I swear on the true gods, don't kill me, I played dumb well enough."

Hearing his innermost thoughts spoken aloud, cold sweat beaded on Skart's skull—despite being nothing but bone.

But the master of the void didn't torment him. A single scoff, and He departed, leaving Skart adrift in the starry expanse.

Skart was stunned. He watched the direction the eyes had gone, wanting to beg for mercy but not daring to open his mouth, wanting to play dumb but unable to keep the act going. So he could only let himself float through that empty void, thinking in despair:

"Is this the price for blaspheming my Benefactor?!"

"But this isn't the kind of immortality I wanted..."

...

The moment Deceit departed, He sought out His follower's other Benefactor—Fate.

Though the Clown's motion would inevitably receive Fate's support once proposed—after all, it was about protecting what was Fixed—the matter was too significant for Deceit not to ensure that Fate's two proxy votes were ironclad.

So He came.

Yet upon seeing Deceit, Fate didn't even acknowledge Him and turned to leave.

Deceit wasn't surprised. He didn't block the way—just grinned and laid out the Clown's plan, certain that even if Fate refused to engage with Him, He would never abandon His follower.

Sure enough, upon learning that His follower intended to launch a bid for a Divine Throne, Fate stopped.

He didn't question it once. He only said coldly:

"How do you guarantee Herobos will agree?"

Deceit's eyes sparkled with glee: "Can't guarantee it. That's up to the Clown to persuade him."

Fate's expression darkened, His voice growing icier:

"Then there is risk."

"I didn't spare his life back then to create risk for my follower."

"I agree to the motion. I'll go find Herobos and make him agree too."

Deceit blinked: "How would You guarantee that? Don't tell me You're going to beat him into submission?"

"What else?"

"..."

Deceit blinked again. Words failed Him. After a pause, He shook His head with an incredulous laugh: "Is fighting really the only thing You know? You plan to punch the universe into Fixed Destiny?"

Fate's eyes grew even colder. The void around them began to stir with bitter wind.

"You want a fight?"

"Tch—"

"Don't think that collecting stray believers makes You strong enough to beat me."

"A rabble's hearts are filled with desire, not devotion."

"And don't mistake me for a fool either. I may be the Void's surface, but I have the ability to see through to the essence."

"What you really want isn't that pitiful trickle of mortal faith—it's the authority of Assimilation from Corruption's ever-open hands, isn't it?"

"Tsk tsK tsK. You're actually getting close to Him, trying to borrow His power to strengthen the universe's Fixed Destiny..."

"Have You lost Your mind?"

Certain gods' talent for passive aggression was truly off the charts. The moment those words left His mouth, the entire void was dragged into a storm.

Fate glanced sideways with cold indifference—no joy, no sorrow:

"Someone has indeed lost their mind."

"I saw traces the Void had left at the edge of the Sea of Desire. But before that, I had never made contact with Him."

"So which member of the Void went to Him first—and for what purpose?!"

"Can You tell me that, Deceit?!"

"..."

Not grinning anymore.

When Cheng Shi returned to the trial and found that Skart hadn't come back with him, he was momentarily stunned.

But then it clicked.

'Seems that lord really likes the Scarlet Hunter. Why else would He keep him at the Bone Throne as an attendant?'

Being rid of a complication that wasn't even a real lead lightened Cheng Shi's mood considerably. Now, he needed to continue his lobbying campaign.

Birth was out of the question. The first god of the Life path had explicitly said He never wanted to see Cheng Shi again. No point poking that hornet's nest—if he annoyed Him enough to switch from abstaining to voting against, it would be a farce even if it didn't change the outcome.

Decay, however, was still worth a shot. True, this god shared the Descent path with Oblivion, but Cheng Shi did hold proxy over His authority, didn't he? For the sake of "Faded," maybe—just maybe?

So Cheng Shi decided to first see if he could reach this god he hadn't visited in ages. He found an empty corner, hid himself away, posted Shadow Cheng Shi as a lookout, then sliced his arm with a dagger and prayed over the wound:

"All beings shall rot, all things shall decay."

"Great God of Decay, Your dedicated Faded authority proxy, Cheng Shi, sends his greetings."

"Having walked the path of universal fading for some time now, certain new ideas have formed in my mind. But whether these ideas serve the withering of Decay's faith requires counsel from You—the universe's most accomplished 'Faded One.'"

"Should You have a moment to lend an ear, it would be the supreme honor of both myself and the universe."

Prayer was prayer, but honestly Cheng Shi wasn't expecting much. This old relic had long since shut His doors to visitors and didn't even attend the Assembly of Gods Convention anymore. Cheng Shi doubted any excuse he concocted would rank higher than the Convention assembly.

After a beat of silence—nothing.

As expected. Cheng Shi shrugged, preparing to head to the Joker Gathering Place, unearth That Dream My Nightmare, and use it to ascend to Memory's Collection Hall for a chat with Memory.

But just as he was about to slip into the void, a torrent of Decay force erupted from his arm wound, dragging everything around him into decrepitude.

Walls faded. Earth rotted. Vegetation withered... Everything in sight lost its vitality in an instant. Even Cheng Shi, proxy of Decay's authority, couldn't withstand the erosion—he crumbled to a mound of yellow earth within moments.

When he opened his eyes again, he was back inside the Septic Final Tomb. Within the massive palace built from dark stone blocks, the ancient giant had tumbled from His throne and lay on His back beside the bloodstained seat, half His body already stripped to bone.

If not for the rotting flesh still clinging to the skeleton, Cheng Shi would've thought he'd stumbled into his boss's cosplay.

'Decay's will is being carried out thoroughly, I see. He really is even more "pitiful" than before.'

But pitiful or not, this was still a god. Cheng Shi didn't dare show the slightest disrespect. He hurriedly bowed and offered praise:

"Praise to the great God of Decay!"

"May You be withered wood and rotting timber, on death's very doorstep. May Your faith wither, forever parted from prosperity."

"May no one in the universe spare You a thought. May the Creator at last look down and grant You mercy..."

Cheng Shi knew exactly how to flatter Decay. He understood that Decay was a die-hard Approach Faction member—everything He did was to draw closer to that *Him. So Cheng Shi steeled himself against the revulsion and fear, and wove the Creator into his praise.

The tactic worked.

The giant slowly raised His head, leaning against the throne. Tainted blood trickled down the chair's back, dripping onto the tomb floor. In the weakest possible voice:

"Deceit's follower... you've done... well..."

The same opening line. The same familiar scene.

One sentence dragged Cheng Shi all the way back to that Prosperity trial—back when Prosperity was still alive and he was just an ordinary player.

But now...

The person was still the same simple soul. But quite a few gods had fallen, and Civilization had only one left.

Cheng Shi sighed wistfully. He didn't dare take credit, merely bowed: "It's all thanks to You."

'And naturally, the blame is Yours too.'

The giant had no idea the Clown was muttering under his breath. He wheezed feebly:

"Faith... has not yet... withered... Faded... need not... be reclaimed..."

"Why have you... come...?"

"?"

'Wait—the Faded authority can be taken back?'

Cheng Shi was alarmed. But a moment's thought made it clear: if the goal was universal decay of all faiths, only Decay Himself could remain. A proxy authority holder couldn't be allowed to exist at the end.

Given the contributions Cheng Shi had made to Decay's fading cause, He probably wouldn't kill him—but He would definitely reclaim the authority.

This forced Cheng Shi to reevaluate his role as a "Faded One."

'Time to slow things down.'

Next time he encountered a Decay follower, he couldn't rush to fade them. But he couldn't just let them pass either.

If Decay happened to be watching and saw him slacking, all his prior merit would be wiped out. So he needed a plausible excuse to stall—something convincing enough to slow the fading without raising suspicion.

After mulling it over and deciding the approach was viable, Cheng Shi said with utmost deference:

"Great One, this visit isn't about the authority. It's about accelerating faith's decline."

The giant's clouded eyes brightened. He nodded weakly:

"Speak..."

Cheng Shi held nothing back. Given his standing in Decay's eyes, one proposal wouldn't undo everything. So he shared his plan to topple Oblivion—though he wrapped it in a reason Decay couldn't refuse.

"The shifting of paths is also that Being's will. I'm sure You understand this far more deeply than I do."

"If so, then I've been thinking—perhaps Decay shouldn't only decay from within. It should also be obliterated by Oblivion."

"But Oblivion probably won't do this. He still needs Descent's support, and He doesn't want You drawing closer to the Creator before He does."

"He may not want to do it—but plenty of others would!"

Hearing this, Decay understood.

"You mean... to replace... Oblivion..."

"Exactly!"

Cheng Shi nodded and launched into an impassioned pitch.

"Think about it—if a new Oblivion is installed and an agreement is reached, having Him obliterate enough sources of faith after taking power would bring You even closer to that Being!"

"Moreover, a newly enthroned Oblivion would have the self-knowledge not to compete with a senior like You for the Creator's mercy. That way—You, I, and Him—we all benefit. A win-win-win!"

"..."

The giant fell silent.

In His view, Cheng Shi's intentions were good, but the idea was wildly unrealistic.

He harbored the exact same doubts Death had: Oblivion wasn't that easy to deal with. And who would take His place?

He glanced at Cheng Shi. The implication was obvious.

Cheng Shi naturally couldn't reveal his full plan to this god. So he kept things vague, saying only that he'd exploit the Convention—but didn't specify how, or who would replace Oblivion. The gist of every sentence boiled down to two words:

Vote, please.

The giant pondered for a long time, then coughed heavily:

"I understand."

Then, without ceremony, He flicked Cheng Shi back to reality.

A bewildered Cheng Shi stood in the alley's shadow, face darker than the darkness itself.

'What does "I understand" mean?'

'You understand but I don't! Did you agree or not?!'

On a matter this important, he couldn't afford to be careless. With no other choice, he had to treat it as a rejection.

Which meant he still needed to visit Memory.

Just thinking about that rival god summoning him while wearing his boss's face made Cheng Shi's scalp tingle.

'What choice do I have? A wage slave's fate is to report and be rejected.'

'Sigh. Onward.'

Having retrieved the mirror from the Joker Gathering Place, Cheng Shi recalled what Dragon King had once said:

'Black Dragon King is free now.'

He still had no idea what the Black Dragon King inside the mirror actually was—something that could walk right out of its own reflection.

But upon reclaiming the mirror, Cheng Shi confirmed one thing: with the Black Dragon King's departure, That Dream My Nightmare truly could no longer reflect a person's innermost desires.

At this point, calling it a mirror was a stretch. It was more like a door—one leading both to Memory's Collection Hall and to the Dreamless Mirror.

Cheng Shi waved at it for a while. Seeing no mirror-image whatsoever, he pursed his lips in mild regret. This had been a perfectly good "anti-Doctor weapon." Now that it was gone, if the Doctor ever pulled his Eye No One stunt again, probably nobody would be able to spot him.

No time to waste. Cheng Shi touched the mirror's frame, silently recited the Memory prayer, and ascended once more to Memory's Collection Hall.

In the vast, empty hall, he bellowed without restraint:

"Great God of Memory, I come here boldly to propose a deal!"

"A deal involving the most spectacular memory of this era."

"Would You be interested?"

His voice echoed. No response.

Cheng Shi blinked in surprise. He mustered his courage and shouted again—but after a long wait, the Collection Hall remained silent save for his own echo.

The master of this place seemed to have completely ignored the intruder's "insolence," leaving him to his own devices.

'What?!'

'What's going on?'

Cheng Shi was baffled.

'Last time I came, Memory was desperate to catch every liar who broke in. And now He just... doesn't care?'

'I figured "stranger the first time, friends the second" would apply to uninvited me, but Memory adapted this fast?'

'This forgiving...'

'Don't tell me You caught Fate's bug too?'

Utterly mystified, but unable to give up on that crucial vote, Cheng Shi wandered the halls, shouting as he went.

At this point he probably didn't even realize that to an outside observer, he looked exactly like The Prisoner had—equally insufferable.

But he wasn't the only one enduring this noise. Time was suffering too.

Because Memory wasn't in His Collection Hall.

Right now, those ancient eyes—saturated with the history of countless stars—were open at the very edge of the universe, gazing at the eyes before Him: irises where time itself collapsed into black holes.

Neither spoke.

After a long silence, Time finally couldn't take His follower's racket anymore. He sighed, cut the "live feed" from the Collection Hall, and asked with neither joy nor sorrow:

"Why have You come?"

Memory chuckled softly—and answered the question with a question:

"Does Existence have meaning?"

Time looked at His sibling god and shook His head with a gentle sigh: "If Existence itself has begun to doubt its own meaning, then Existence truly has no meaning."

"Is that why You draw close to Deceit?"

"No. I'm simply answering Your question."

"Deflecting."

Though Memory didn't understand many of Time's choices, He hadn't severed ties with His sibling the way the two Void gods had.

From the very beginning, even when He disagreed with Time, He'd never once blocked any of Time's decisions. Because He'd always believed that all forms of Existence carried meaning.

He was simply curious: why had a sibling who'd always been closer to Origin than Himself now turned to stand on Origin's opposing side?

The traces scattered across the universe had long made Him realize a cataclysm had once occurred—one that had been suppressed by some force.

The Void alone couldn't possess the power to reverse everything. At minimum, They couldn't overly influence Existence. So Memory's first suspicion fell on His sibling, Time.

That was also why He'd wanted to search for the erased universal memory through Cheng Shi—because the gazes of both the Void and Time converged on this Clown.

Of course, Memory wasn't solely interested in collecting that lost memory. More than anything, He wanted to know what these gods who sought to distance themselves from Origin were really planning.

So He asked again:

"Drawing close to Him... is that not good?"

Time was no Deceit. He wouldn't lie through His teeth. He averted His gaze toward whatever lay beyond the universe, and after an eternity spoke in a weary voice:

"How do you know which direction is 'close'?"

Memory was taken aback, then smiled: "As I thought—after getting close to Deceit, even Your speech sounds like His. You mean to say that what I've been doing is actually moving away, while what You've been doing is drawing closer?"

A rare flicker of confusion appeared in those black-hole eyes—there and gone in an instant, but Memory caught it.

"Perhaps. I don't know either."

Memory's brow furrowed. A bold conjecture suddenly formed in His mind. He looked at His sibling in astonishment:

"Who is trying to replace Him?"

"You? Or Deceit?"

"Or is it... Fate—the one who pretends to be at odds with Deceit?"

"Replace Origin?"

Time laughed bitterly. "Who could replace Him? Who would dare?"

"Even if someone must eventually take His place, it will never be any of the gods present."

"Deceit has His schemes, but His schemes are wrong."

"Fate is the one who's right. This universe... will ultimately return to the Void."

With those words, the time crystallized into a black hole in the void shattered and dispersed—as though all of time had been sucked into a singularity.

Memory stood frozen, chewing on His sibling's words for a long while before departing with furrowed brows.

He reappeared behind a certain noisy Clown.

No matter how sharp Cheng Shi's senses were, he couldn't possibly detect a true god's approach. By now, after several laps, equally hoarse and exhausted, he'd lost all patience. His shouts had devolved into something extremely blunt—and blasphemous.

He'd changed tactics, trying to provoke Memory into showing Himself. He was certain that given Memory's hunger for memories, He couldn't possibly ignore this deal.

If He'd just come out, Cheng Shi was confident he could secure the vote.

And so, in the empty Collection Hall, the following sound rang out:

"Memory! Come out and see me! I'm counting to three! If You don't show, I'm calling the Fun God!"

But before the echo faded, he shouted "THREE!" and then cackled ominously:

"Heh heh heh, You forced my hand!"

"Cannot distinguish true from false, never debate void from real."

"Benefactor! Memory's not home! Get over here, quick!"

Having reached a dead end, Cheng Shi turned around—

and found himself face-to-face with his boss's face, inches away.

The boss's expression was cold, hovering between a smile and not:

"Keep counting. I'd like to see if He dares come."

"!!!!!"

Cheng Shi's brain went blank. His hand, hanging at his side, pinched his thigh with white-knuckle force. Only one thought screamed through his mind:

'Stupid leg—STOP SHAKING!'

Chapter 1043: Another Failure

Cheng Shi, having regressed back to the ruins, didn't rush to the western district. Instead, he first headed south to find Fang Yuan and gave him the code phrase.

When Fang Yuan heard the word "Ah Kuan" come out of Cheng Shi's mouth, he froze for a long while before collecting himself.

He looked at Cheng Shi, eyes brimming with suspicion:

"Who reset time?"

You, or Meng Youfang?"

"Meng Youfang!"

Cheng Shi felt that hesitating even one second would be an insult to the scapegoat's generous gift of calling him "old friend."

He smiled at Fang Yuan and said: "I don't know how he acquired this power either. All I know is that we were trapped in a hopeless dead end at the time, with zero chance of clearing the Trial.

And when he offered to reset this space-time, the first person I asked about was you. I knew that only you — a believer of [Order] — could help us win this Trial."

Fang Yuan fell silent.

"Ah Kuan" wasn't the name of anyone important. It was Fang Yuan himself — a nickname his childhood bullies had given him, a humiliation that followed him through his entire school years.

That was precisely why he'd chosen to follow [Order]. He understood better than anyone that when he couldn't fight back against external oppression, "order" was the only weapon that could help him escape.

Of course, whether in the past or the present, [Order] wasn't exactly orderly anymore — which was why he'd learned to exploit loopholes.

The reflection and reminder triggered by the name "Ah Kuan" was meant to help him find loopholes in time-reset abilities like the Time Battlefield.

After mulling it over for a long time, Fang Yuan decided to trust this liar — just this once. He could detect a peculiar aura of "order" emanating from Cheng Shi. It probably had nothing to do with the god who governed the universe's order, but it was enough.

"What do I need to do?"

Cheng Shi's eyes lit up. He immediately laid out the entire experiment's process and said:

"Right now, we need to lock down everyone except the Grand Scholars and hold them until the experiment concludes. Can you do that?"

If not, even controlling half of them would be enough. The other half... we have another ally."

"The Life Sage?"

"Yes — the Sage. Trust that [Birth]'s power can bring 'harmony' to the experiment ground."

"..."

'That "harmony" of yours better be actual harmony.'

Fang Yuan gave a strange look but agreed, then turned and followed Cheng Shi toward the northern district.

Hu Xuan was easy to find. The Sage never bothered hiding her tracks. But when the two of them located her, she appeared to have just parted ways with someone.

The moment Hu Xuan saw Cheng Shi arrive, her eyes sharpened. Before Cheng Shi could even speak, she said with utmost gravity:

"Watch out for Meng Youfang. I keep feeling like several scenes today seem oddly familiar. Our time might have been reset!"

"?"

Cheng Shi blinked. Hu Xuan shouldn't have been aware of the Time Battlefield. But considering she already possessed a Container, perhaps [Birth]'s protection had let her sense the surging tide of [Time] power?

He smiled, then reassured her:

"Don't worry. I'm the one who told him to do it. Time was indeed reset. Now come with me."

Hu Xuan was taken aback as well. But since the issue traced back to Cheng Shi, she had nothing to worry about. She simply answered:

"Okay."

Fang Yuan watched the two of them, his expression growing increasingly peculiar.

The [Birth] Chosen — who normally scattered offspring everywhere she went — obeyed the Fate Weaver without question. It was hard to believe their relationship was purely academic.

She hadn't even asked what Cheng Shi needed her for. How did someone build that kind of trust with a liar?

Then, recalling the scent of "order" he'd detected on Cheng Shi, Fang Yuan gazed thoughtfully at the man's back.

Before long, the three found Chen Yi. Cheng Shi used the same old trick, and under Hu Xuan's and Fang Yuan's dumbfounded stares, he baited the hook without bait and reeled Chen Yi in hook, line, and sinker.

Then everyone moved together according to Cheng Shi's plan.

This time, Cheng Shi had eliminated every variable. He couldn't see a single possibility of failure.

And the facts unfolded exactly as he'd predicted. Working in concert, they sliced through the void into the experiment ground and achieved absolute control over every person on site, catching even the Erudition Presidium completely off guard.

The Grand Scholars' faces darkened as they prepared to counterattack — but the next second, Cheng Shi laid his cards on the table, declaring he was here to help, not to interfere. Then he dragged out the immobilized Galusha and, right in front of the scholars, identified every one of her hidden contingencies and moles.

Events had so thoroughly exceeded the Grand Scholars' expectations that they digested the situation before them with inscrutable expressions. After lengthy deliberation, they had no choice but to accept Cheng Shi's arrangements and start the experiment themselves.

When Volent said to Cheng Shi, "All data is normal — there absolutely won't be any problems," half the weight on Cheng Shi's heart finally lifted.

He smiled, patted Chen Yi on the shoulder, and said:

"The chance is in your own hands. Give it all you've got, Old Hunter."

Chen Yi's eyes blazed with the manic fervor of one about to meet his god. He willingly embraced the roaring beam of spatiotemporal energy and plunged into the past once more.

Minutes ticked by in silence. Everyone in the experiment ground waited quietly.

Cheng Shi's gaze never left Galusha. He watched the [Folly] follower — face darkened, about to die within this Trial — and his heart swelled with emotion.

Who could have imagined that such an adorable little girl would grow into such a terrifying lunatic? And who could have foreseen that the madwoman who'd toppled the Tower of Logic in history would die at the Erudition Presidium's hands within this very Trial?

Karma truly was a circle.

[Fate]...

Never mind — better not curse It. Any more complaints and It might get angry, and then who knew what fresh nonsense It'd cook up.

The thought had barely settled when, the next second, Chen Yi returned.

And the instant the [Memory] devotee confidently announced his success, Cheng Shi's expression visibly sank.

Because the Galusha standing before him was still very much alive.

Galusha was stunned too. She'd assumed her life had reached its end — yet these people had actually failed.

The gravity that had filled her eyes a moment ago vanished, replaced by a mocking smirk. As long as altering the past hadn't killed her, then here in the present — among countless slices — this group had even less chance of destroying her.

"Mr. Prisoner — it seems your plan has come up short."

"!!!"

"This is impossible!" Chen Yi snapped again, screaming about everything he'd done and lunging to finish Galusha off himself.

But this time Cheng Shi didn't let him. Instead, he flicked out a scalpel, pressing its edge against Galusha's neck while raising his head — expression thunderous — to address the Grand Scholars on the platform above:

"Volent. I need an explanation."

Volent frowned, ran through every piece of experimental data one more time, and spoke with a grave tone:

"There's no anomaly. I don't see a single contaminated parameter. The entire experiment proceeded smoothly. The only deviation from the plan is that the operative you selected didn't return through the regression channel — he chose to return on his own.

While that's a significant procedural lapse for experimental oversight, it shouldn't affect the results in any way.

So I, too, would like to know where the problem lies."

For a long moment, all six Grand Scholars furrowed their brows and exchanged bewildered glances.

...

Chapter 1044: Something's Wrong — This Experiment Is All Wrong!

All eyes turned to Galusha.

Everyone present knew that the only person in the room who wanted the experiment to fail and the Tower of Logic destroyed was this follower of [Folly].

But Cheng Shi didn't think Galusha could give him an explanation, because her reaction just now hadn't seemed faked at all — which meant that even Galusha herself didn't know why she hadn't died.

Since the person who was supposed to die had already lost every means of influencing the experiment, the one who'd carried out the mission had confirmed the task complete, and the one overseeing the experiment had verified all parameters were correct... the only logical explanation was that the experiment had encountered an unforeseen problem.

Cheng Shi didn't understand [Truth] experiments, but he did know a thing or two about [Time]. So when everything appeared fine yet the outcome was wrong, his mind went to one possibility — could this regression experiment have sent Chen Yi into a parallel timeline?

In other words, Chen Yi had indeed killed young Galusha, but it was the Galusha of another timeline who'd died, which was why the present Galusha was still alive.

He looked up with uncertainty and asked Volent whether such a thing was possible. Volent froze for a moment, then furrowed his brow in deep thought before answering:

"The question of parallel timelines has indeed been a subject of study for countless scholars. We've detected the existence of such timelines more than once in past experiments, which is precisely why we developed spatiotemporal anchoring as a calibration method.

Spatiotemporal anchoring was created to establish fixed coordinate points for the regression process, preventing the regressed subject from drifting off the temporal corridor.

But time is, after all, enigmatic — beyond the full comprehension of mortals. So if an unexpected deviation occurred during spatiotemporal regression, it wouldn't be impossible."

"Are you saying this failure was just a deviation?" Hearing this, Cheng Shi's spirits lifted.

"Until other evidence proves the experiment was flawed, that's the only conclusion we can draw.

I must say — luck is also part of any experiment, and a critical part at that."

Volent reviewed the experimental data once more with a pained expression, then let out a despairing sigh:

"A deviation may be small, but it is often fatal.

It appears [Truth] has rejected us once again. There's no time left.

Between Galusha's machinations and the Afterglow Church's rampage, we've completely lost any chance to start over. The path of [Truth] is about to be severed. Everyone — pray with me.

May [Truth] still shelter us. May knowledge never be buried beneath slaughter.

Peer into essence, walk to find truth!"

"Peer into essence, walk to find truth!"

With that, all six Grand Scholars bowed their heads and began chanting the [Truth] prayer.

Clearly, the Erudition Presidium — standing tall for thousands of years — had, in this moment, surrendered in despair.

But...

'You're the ones out of time. What does that have to do with me — a Time Walker?'

A gleam flashed in Cheng Shi's eyes, and confidence surged back.

If one experiment had a deviation, then he'd run a second. If that didn't work, a third, a fourth — even if it took dozens of attempts, a single success would mean victory in the Trial!

Besides, deviations couldn't possibly happen every single time, and he only needed to win once.

With that mindset, Cheng Shi initiated the regression once more.

But what he never expected was that what awaited him wasn't that one successful experiment — it was an endless, bottomless streak of failure.

Experiment launched — Galusha alive. Launched again — still alive. Launch, alive. Launch, alive...

After the seventeenth regression — ten consecutive failures — Cheng Shi finally realized that something had gone terribly wrong.

It wasn't just the experiment. The Time Battlefield itself was beginning to malfunction.

His teammates' voices questioning the time resets were growing louder. Even right after a fresh reset, the moment Cheng Shi found them, they already had a vague sense that time had been rolled back.

Hu Xuan kept warning Cheng Shi to watch out for [Time] followers. Although the real [Time] follower was Cheng Shi himself, the fact that this was happening sent a chill down his spine — it meant the Time Battlefield was still functioning, but its effect on those within it was steadily weakening.

Why?

Was the power of [Time] fading?

There was another oddity — the Grand Scholars' responses were becoming increasingly mechanical. Volent's explanations were converging, growing more and more identical to what he'd said in previous iterations. Even the sentence lengths stayed the same, with only a few pronouns swapped out.

These robotic, NPC-like replies made Cheng Shi's frown deepen. He couldn't help but question whether the so-called "deviation" the Grand Scholars kept citing actually existed, and who was truly pulling the strings behind these puppet scholars.

At first, given how cooperative the Erudition Presidium had been with the experiment, Cheng Shi had assumed these puppets were simply husks the Grand Scholars controlled remotely for their own safety.

But as the experiment failed again and again, he was forced to scrutinize whoever was behind these puppets. Were they really the Grand Scholars?

Could it be someone else entirely — like... Galusha?

No — Galusha seemed unlikely. If she'd already seized control of the Erudition Presidium, there'd be no need for this elaborate theatrical performance. She could've just toppled the Tower of Logic directly.

But if not Galusha, then who else would want this experiment to fail?

Cheng Shi racked his brain but couldn't find an answer. However, he did come up with a method that could definitively eliminate the mastermind's influence — use the experiment itself as leverage to force the puppet master into the open!

As long as he could confirm that the person controlling the Grand Scholar puppets truly was the Erudition Presidium, then this experiment could only continue through infinite trial and error.

And so, after the eighteenth reset, Cheng Shi spoke to Volent before the experiment began:

"Grand Scholar, I know you're a puppet body. I can understand that you'd hide elsewhere for your own safety. But...

This is an experiment that will determine the survival of the Tower of Logic and the Erudition Presidium. I believe we should all face each other in our true forms.

Drop the puppets. Only when the real you personally oversees this experiment can the margin of deviation be minimized and the experiment's success be ensured. Isn't that right?"

Volent was silent for a long while before shaking his head. "The shift in spatiotemporal regression anchor coordinates is an absolute anomaly — it cannot be influenced by human will. Even if I came in my true body, it wouldn't change a thing.

And while you've come to help, your identities remain unknown. Cooperating with you through puppet bodies is already the greatest concession the Erudition Presidium can make.

In this hour of existential crisis, mutual understanding is the foundation of cooperation. This is all the Tower of Logic can offer.

Now — let us begin the experiment. There's no time to waste."

"Wait!"

Cheng Shi's expression suddenly turned grim. His startled gaze fixed on Volent as he raised one hand, clenching the Fun Ring and aiming it squarely at the scholar. His voice dropped to a cold, deliberate tone as he questioned, word by word:

"Grand Scholar — I only mentioned a deviation in the experiment. How did you know the deviation would specifically occur during the spatiotemporal regression process, and that it would be a shift in the regression anchor coordinates?"

The experiment hasn't even started yet!"

"!!!"

The moment those words left his mouth, the entire room froze.

The faces of all six Grand Scholars turned gravely serious in an instant.

...

Chapter 1045: So This Is the Real Experiment

Something was off!

The moment Volent's words slipped up, Cheng Shi knew he'd been deceived.

Over a dozen failures — and the fault lay not with the experiment, but with people!

The Erudition Presidium — no, the six Grand Scholar puppets were the problem!

Although everything they'd said had technically been true, in hindsight, not a single word of that truth was genuine.

It was even possible that they hadn't been affected by the Time Battlefield's resets at all, retaining their memories from every previous iteration of the experiment.

What did that imply? It meant either they possessed some means of resisting [Time], or the mastermind behind this experiment had long since transcended the Time Battlefield's domain and was manipulating everything from a dimension above it!

Only that could explain why these puppets reset alongside him time after time yet retained memories spanning every iteration!

'This is bad. I knew this Trial couldn't be that simple!'

But the question remained — what were they after?

The atmosphere inside the experiment site tensed instantly. The six puppet Grand Scholars fixed the players with grave stares, as if they were about to launch an ambush on the very people who'd come to help.

And right then, Cheng Shi heard Galusha snicker behind him.

"Heh. So it wasn't me they were waiting for — it was you.

How interesting. Volent, I'm rather curious — just how many of my slices did you capture before you reconstructed me here?"

"!!!"

What did she mean?

Cheng Shi's heart sank like a stone. His mind raced, trying to decipher what "the Grand Scholars were waiting for 'you'" meant — who exactly did that "you" refer to?

It couldn't possibly be the players!

Impossible!

As NPCs within a Trial, no matter how vast the Grand Scholars' perspective might be, they shouldn't be able to know about players' existence. That was a fundamental rule of the Faith Game — a right protected by the Convention.

And even if the Grand Scholars had somehow learned of the players' existence, what would be the point of targeting them?

Players weren't the ones destroying the Tower of Logic. Even if you killed all six players in the Trial, would the Tower be rebuilt? No!

Would [Truth] endure because of it? Also n—

Wait!

At that thought, Cheng Shi's pupils contracted and his eyes flew wide open.

Why couldn't it?

The Trial's hint was "finite truth is never truth." He'd previously interpreted this as meaning the players needed to ensure [Truth] wasn't severed on the Land of Hope — save the Tower of Logic, help the Erudition Presidium complete the experiment.

But what if, instead of thinking from the angle of "truth being severed," he approached it from the angle of "truth enduring"? Wouldn't that free him from the geographical constraint of the Land of Hope?

Once his perspective leaped beyond the Land of Hope — no longer confined to the crumbling Tower of Logic — and he considered that the Erudition Presidium's true targets weren't Galusha but the players...

All of these threads, woven together, seemed to form one possibility — an unthinkable yet perfectly fitting possibility:

These old foxes appeared to be using this experiment as bait, intending to steal the players' identities! By doing so, they could break free from the shackles of history and perpetuate their "truth" in the current era!

As for how they'd break free...

The Ritual of Truth!?

Pe Laya had said that anything containing a core truth could serve as fuel for the Ritual of Truth to reconstruct all things. People lived by following natural laws and inherently possessed core truth — so what difference was there between players and NPCs, aside from their identity?

Probably none. And even if there was, under the universal laws of [Truth], as long as the players were used as "fuel" and "templates," whatever was produced should come out roughly the same!

The realization hit Cheng Shi like a thunderbolt, sending chills crawling down his spine.

It wasn't the threat of being targeted by NPCs that frightened him. What terrified him was the implication — if this theory was correct, it didn't just mean NPCs had their eyes on the players. It could mean a higher existence had told the NPCs at the very start of this Trial that "escaping" was an option!

And who could that higher existence be?

Who else!

[Truth] had gone mad!?

How could a god do something like this!?

What about the Convention — wasn't it supposed to stop this kind of cheating?

Unease flickered in Cheng Shi's eyes. He turned to look at Galusha, who let out another derisive snort:

"Looks like you're not as stupid as I thought. What's wrong — figured it out?"

My guess is that everything we've seen was an experiment from the start. We just happen to be variables within it.

And here I was, carefully approaching this regression experiment, trying to thread a connection through time to awaken a future version of myself. Turns out even my current self is a fabrication.

This is the Ritual of Truth — the power to reconstruct everything!

Who would've guessed that the Tusnat we've been seeing is actually a city reconstructed into an experiment ground by the Ritual of Truth?

Heh. But if that's the case, then it seems you aren't the chess masters on the board I imagined, Prisoner. You're merely a different kind of chess piece than us.

Volent and the others seem to have grown tired of being pieces. They want a new identity to live as — and you're the unlucky souls they've chosen.

Tsk, tsk, tsk. What a truly fascinating world this is!"

"!!!"

'This is all an experiment, and we're just variables within it!?'

Cheng Shi froze, staring at everything before him as a sudden wave of familiarity washed over him.

His thoughts instantly flew back to San Dales — that abyssal city fabricated by the Tower of Logic. He remembered Crown, the countless citizens screaming in despair through the blizzard, and the Consciousness Faith Department.

Yes — Cheng Shi recalled that a similar "Creator" experiment had been conducted by the Consciousness Faith Department. And now... the man standing atop the experimental platform, looking down at him — Volent, the first Grand Scholar of the Erudition Presidium — was the very pioneer who'd founded the Consciousness Faith Department!

He was intimately familiar with this kind of experiment!

So everything Cheng Shi had experienced was a lie — nothing more than an experiment!

It all made sense now. The power of [Time] had been contained within this experiment, and as the experiment's controllers, the Grand Scholars had been silently observing everything from beyond its boundaries.

They were likely searching for the right moment to move against the players. They just hadn't expected a minor verbal slip to trigger a cascade of unpredictable experimental deviations.

Now the variables within the experiment seemed to have uncovered this massive deception. So what would the Grand Scholars do?

The real Tusnat.

In the underground laboratory beneath the western timber warehouse, the six Grand Scholars listened to the sounds of the Afterglow Church's pillaging and slaughter outside. They stared at the massive observation screen before them in collective silence.

After a short while, one of them spoke: "Just as the Benefactor said — they are not foolish. Volent, what do we do now?"

Standing at the experiment master's station, Volent raised his eyelids calmly and replied:

"No need for alarm. We can deal with this after we complete the task our Benefactor has bestowed upon us.

The second activation of the Ritual of Truth also requires time. Let them fumble about in their fear a while longer. Once the fuel has been marked... you and I shall have new identities to accompany our Benefactor once more.

Peer into essence, walk to find truth!

We are no longer far from the real [Truth]."

...

Chapter 1046: It Seems the Prisoner Wants to Destroy This World?

The instant the true enemy was identified, Cheng Shi decisively had Fang Yuan release the restraints on Galusha.

Galusha let out a cold snort, looked at Cheng Shi, and sneered once more:

"Mr. Prisoner, you sabotaged my experiment and now you want my help? Since when does the world work that way?"

Cheng Shi felt a twinge of embarrassment, though it didn't show through his gravely serious expression.

His mind was terrifyingly clear at that moment. He met Galusha's gaze and mirrored her smile:

"If anyone else were standing before me right now, I wouldn't hold out any hope. But you, Galusha — you'll definitely help me take down these old fossils!"

Cheng Shi was so furious he'd dropped the honorific "Grand Scholar" entirely. Since they'd shown no courtesy, he saw no reason to hold back either.

"Oh? And why is that?"

"Because their victory means the continuation of [Truth]. You want to purge [Truth] from the world — which means these old fossils absolutely cannot be left alive.

We are natural-born allies!"

Those words struck right at the core of Galusha's heart. She threw her head back and laughed, wild as a madwoman:

"Exactly!

Whatever the Erudition Presidium seeks to do — I will destroy!

Whatever [Truth] champions — I will forbid!

Only when [Truth] no longer exists in this world will people stop wielding foolish wisdom to suffer pain that was never meant to be theirs.

You have a keen eye, Mr. Prisoner. I always said we'd end up on the same side. Rest easy — I shall be your most reliable ally, because I am terrified that [Truth] might not die completely enough!"

With that, Galusha raised her whip and charged straight at Volent.

Cheng Shi's eye twitched at the sight. Truthfully, if everything they were experiencing was just an experiment, Galusha's assault amounted to little more than venting frustration — it wouldn't help them escape this experimental space in the slightest.

He'd wanted to ask how one could break free from a Consciousness Faith Department experiment from the inside, but that clearly wasn't an option now. His only choice was to stir up chaos alongside Galusha first and figure things out later.

At the very least, after being deceived this long, he had plenty of pent-up fury. An eye for an eye, a grudge for a grudge — the old fossils had no right to complain about his heavy hand. After all, they weren't exactly upstanding themselves.

Cheng Shi moved — and every player in the room moved with him.

There were no fools in a Trial of this caliber. Once the situation became clear, anyone who'd been inexplicably stuffed into an experiment as raw material would be livid. The players struck with lethal intent, clashing with the six Grand Scholars in an instant.

Violent explosions flattened the entire space. The massive experiment site couldn't withstand such ferocious combat, and within a blink it collapsed in on itself.

When the experiment site ruptured and the liminal space between reality and illusion was exposed to the surface of Tusnat, the Death Knell Knights, drawn by the explosions, began converging on the scene.

Also appearing was Wei Zhi, who had remained hidden until now. The moment he spotted everyone fighting the Grand Scholars, his entire demeanor shifted to excitement. Cracking his knuckles, he launched himself like a cannonball straight at the nearest Grand Scholar — Burza.

Everyone assumed he was about to devour the scholar alive to once again "commune with his truth." But no one expected that the instant Wei Zhi tore off Burza's arm, he would immediately reverse course, slam into Galusha's arms, and sink his teeth into her neck.

Blood sprayed. Grinding teeth filled the air.

In a single heartbeat, the light in Galusha's eyes shattered.

This deranged president of the Reason Association had just bitten the equally unhinged Galusha to death — right in front of everyone!

"!!!?"

Cheng Shi's mind went blank.

'Whose side are you even on, man!?'

'I was counting on Galusha to help me analyze how to break this experiment, and you just went and ate her?'

'Assimilating [Truth] wasn't enough — you needed a side of [Folly] too!?'

'Great, just great. Nowhere to be found when there's work to be done, but dead-on reliable when it comes to sabotage. You don't look much like a teammate — could you be a mole planted by the Erudition Presidium?'

Wait!

A mole?

Cheng Shi's brow tightened as he suddenly recalled that the location of the western timber warehouse had been given to him by Wei Zhi. Viewed in this light, this "teammate" might genuinely have been compromised.

After all, Ernie wasn't dead. And the real Ernie was very likely one of the experiment's overseers, observing from beyond this "world." So the information Wei Zhi had obtained by consuming his flesh could well have been deliberately fed to him by Ernie.

That alone wasn't enough to determine whether Wei Zhi had been duped or had willingly chosen to cooperate. But now that he'd turned around and killed Galusha, only one possibility remained:

This lunatic had learned part of the truth through Ernie and had chosen to cooperate with the Grand Scholars to serve his own ends.

As for what those ends were...

Heh — as the leader of those madmen in the Reason Association, his wish was probably to merge with a Grand Scholar.

Why else would a [Truth] follower be so obsessed with Zangier? In his own words, standing on the shoulders of giants saved a great deal of effort — and what he sought was to become one with those giants.

Lunatic!

Cheng Shi's expression darkened in an instant. He fired a bolt of lightning at Wei Guan, then snatched Galusha's corpse during the dodge. Although his next move would be to regress and face all of this over again, given that the regression's effectiveness was weakening, he had to make a gesture for his new ally — to show his willingness to cooperate.

The battle raged on, but wasting time like this was pointless. Cheng Shi snapped his fingers without hesitation and reset time once more.

Even if the reset had no effect on the Grand Scholars, at the very least his ally needed to come back first.

This time, upon returning to the ruins, Cheng Shi didn't seek out anyone else. He rushed straight to the vicinity of the Three Suns Tower to meet Galusha.

On the way, one thought consumed him: since the Grand Scholars behind the scenes hadn't immediately dismantled and reconstructed the players, this experiment was clearly not that simple. It couldn't be executed at the Erudition Presidium's whim.

That was why Volent and the others had been communicating with Wei Zhi in secret — to lure Cheng Shi to the western warehouse.

Which confirmed it — the underground laboratory had to be the linchpin of this fabricated experiment.

Furthermore, since the Time Battlefield couldn't affect the Erudition Presidium beyond the experiment, his time resets were effectively stretching the temporal dimension in their eyes. The fact that they allowed him to reset without interference meant the Grand Scholars were also preparing. They needed time too!

In that case, both sides were racing against the clock.

The question was — who would be faster!

Before long, Cheng Shi arrived back at the Three Suns Tower and spotted Galusha beneath it. This time he felt no revulsion at her violence. With a casual bolt of lightning, he blasted the scholars resisting before Galusha into charred husks.

Surrounded by her Death Knell Knights, Galusha whipped around in fury, searching for whoever had interrupted her revelry. But the moment she saw it was Cheng Shi, a brilliant smile bloomed across the Wise Man's face.

"It seems Mr. Prisoner has decided to destroy this world alongside me?"

Cheng Shi's smile was equally radiant. He stepped forward and extended his hand.

"The moment I decided to shatter this godforsaken world, my only regret was that the lightning in my hands wasn't fast enough.

So — can I trust you, Galusha?"

...

Chapter 1047: The Key to Breaking Free — Truth Limit

"If your enemy is [Truth], you have no reason not to stand with me."

Galusha smiled at Cheng Shi, seemingly waiting for him to explain something.

Seeing this, Cheng Shi knew the Time Battlefield's effect was growing weaker by the minute — she'd definitely retained some fragments of memory from before the reset.

Sure enough, upon noticing Cheng Shi's scrutinizing gaze, she nodded candidly:

"That's right — I did receive some fragmented memory scenes, though these events clearly haven't happened yet.

It seems this world is more interesting than I imagined. Go ahead and talk, Mr. Prisoner. Let's see what I can help you with."

Standing on common ground as fellow experimental variables, this time it was probably a genuine heart-to-heart.

Cheng Shi wasted no time. He told Galusha everything that had happened, including the fact that he could reset time.

This kind of secret was something a player would normally keep hidden as a trump card. But for an NPC — especially a Wise Man renowned for her intellect who was actively helping him — Cheng Shi felt the more he revealed, the better she'd understand their predicament and the more comprehensive her escape plan would be.

Cheng Shi was a man with a keen sense of self-awareness. His knowledge of [Truth] experiments wasn't exactly nonexistent, but it was limited. He'd been through enough to have a general idea — as the saying went, even if you'd never eaten pork, you'd seen pigs run. But asking him to analyze his way out of an experiment where he himself was a variable? That was asking too much.

This wasn't something you could solve by having an audience with a god a few times. It required a deep foundation of [Truth] knowledge to analyze the experiment and the situation, finding a possible path where none seemed to exist.

Cheng Shi knew he didn't have that kind of knowledge base. That was why he'd placed his chips on Galusha.

The lunatic he'd once avoided like the plague had now become his teammate, and his own identity happened to be that of a Screenwriter. So how was this not [Fate] drawing closer to [Folly]?

So this was what the god meant by "fixed destiny" — it happens whether you want it to or not.

After finishing his account, Cheng Shi fell silent. From this moment on, the Trial was essentially unwinnable for him. To clear it would mean helping the Grand Scholars steal his identity. Of the six players in the Trial, probably none — aside from Wei Zhi — would agree to that.

So now it all came down to how Galusha could help him sabotage this experiment.

Galusha's expression shifted repeatedly as she listened. When she'd finally pieced together the chain of events, she looked at Cheng Shi with newfound interest in her eyes.

"You really are a Drifter."

"A Drifter?" Cheng Shi blinked. What was that?

Galusha smiled and pointed at the charred corpses beneath her feet:

"Throughout the long history of [Truth], there have been many mysterious individuals like yourself. Most were never recorded in any ledger, but some managed to linger in memory through various forms.

And as it happens, within the Tower of Logic there exists a group of fanatical scholars who study these special cases.

They firmly believe this world may not be a true world — that something else might be hiding beyond it. And by that, they don't mean the gods. They mean beings who drift outside the world yet seem to share the same faith as its inhabitants.

They call them Drifters.

I imagine that's precisely what you people are?"

"!!!!!"

The moment Galusha said this, electricity jolted through Cheng Shi's scalp as goosebumps erupted across his entire body.

Drifters — that was just another word for players!

No wonder!

No wonder Galusha had been so composed when facing him — she'd already guessed he was a player!

She might not know the word "player," but she'd realized that a group of such people had appeared throughout history — active, brilliant, and even documented!

"The Consciousness Faith Department again?" After the initial shock, Cheng Shi's thoughts turned to Volent.

"Correct. They always pursued speculative research, but because the subject was too niche — and given past precedents — the Erudition Presidium shut them down repeatedly.

In hindsight, Volent's vision was vindicated. These experiments were indeed worth investing in."

"..." 'Thank heavens they weren't funded. Otherwise, who knows what kind of nightmares would have awaited the players assigned to the tail end of the Civilization Era.'

"But none of the current situation has anything to do with your identity.

I don't care who you are. All I need to know is that you stand on the opposite side of [Truth].

Let's get back to this experiment that contains the both of us. I have some ideas. To break free of the experiment's constraints, we first need to find its 'Truth Limit.'"

"Truth Limit... what's that?" Cheng Shi blinked, his eyes terrifyingly innocent.

"The foundational core of any large-scale experiment built around the Ritual of Truth. Think of it as the foundation, or the eye of a formation.

When the Ritual of Truth activates, it reshapes everything within its scope according to a predetermined design framework, constructing the ideal experimental environment. But everything in that environment is sustained by the power of [Truth], so once the experiment launches, the Ritual of Truth can't be withdrawn all at once.

The Grand Scholars must use it to continuously power the experiment until it conjugates a reflection of itself within the reshaped experiment ground — like a snake shedding its skin. This reflection then replaces the Ritual of Truth itself as a stable energy source for the experiment. We call that the Truth Limit.

In a sense, the Truth Limit is a smaller version of the Ritual of Truth — it can only affect things within the experiment.

All experimental content must occur within the pre-set [Truth] constraints. If the experiment exceeds those preset tiers — if the reflection can't provide sufficient [Truth] energy at that level — the entire experiment collapses.

The Grand Scholars have always claimed this characteristic is a rule [Truth] set to protect its followers. I see it differently.

My guess is that these crazed scholars kept tinkering with things they shouldn't, and [Truth] was afraid they'd cause unnecessary trouble in the struggle for faith, so it imposed restrictions — to prevent its own followers from making problems for it.

After all, [Truth] has always been that heartless.

Why are you laughing — do you think the same?

It seems we're quite compatible."

"..."

'Girl, "compatible" is really not the vibe we should be going for here!'

Cheng Shi gave a dry laugh and quickly changed the subject, steering back to the experiment: "So in this experiment, the Truth Limit definitely won't be in that fake underground lab. Otherwise, all those contingencies you've prepared would've already destroyed it, and the Grand Scholars would never have led us there. Right?"

"Correct. The Truth Limit has to be somewhere outside. As for where exactly... that's going to be quite the project.

Mr. Prisoner, time to put those silver-tongued skills of yours to work again. I see the old men of the Afterglow Church can barely contain their eagerness for an audience."

Galusha cast an amused glance at the surroundings. Several of the Afterglow Church's leaders had indeed gathered at the perimeter, waiting for Cheng Shi's summons.

Cheng Shi nodded and, without a shred of concealment, donned the church's vestments in front of everyone. He delegated the task of locating the Truth Limit, then had the Death Knell Knights relay his orders to bring his teammates back — with a special note that a certain individual named Wei Zhi needn't come back alive.

Having received their audience, the Afterglow Church departed in high spirits. Watching all of this, Galusha shook her head with a wry smile:

"I spent years in the Underworld dealing with these [Chaos] followers, and the best I ever managed was mutual exploitation.

Yet all you need is to throw on a different skin and they'll run errands for you without question.

Mr. Prisoner, I'm curious — how did you know what the man behind the curtain wears?

Is that a Drifter's gift, or was the Afterglow Church always a Drifter's con?"

Cheng Shi smiled enigmatically. "I have no idea. These robes were mine to begin with."

"?" Galusha froze for a moment, then let out a derisive snort. "That joke wasn't funny.

If you were truly the Afterglow Church's mastermind, those old fossils in the Erudition Presidium wouldn't dare scheme against you. Forget it if you don't want to say.

But before we move on to the next step, there's one more favor I need to ask.

You mentioned earlier that you have a companion who can banish a target into the past?"

Cheng Shi paused, instantly guessing what Galusha meant.

"You want to banish Pe Laya? But you know this is all just an experiment — why bother with something so pointless?"

The madness in Galusha's eyes softened for the briefest instant. She gazed in a certain direction and, for once, let a tender smile grace her lips.

"It may be pointless to you, but to her — it means everything.

She's always felt she missed the best version of me. And I don't want to leave her with any regrets."

"Even though you're a fabrication, and she's a fabrication, and this is all just an experiment?" Cheng Shi's expression turned deeply strange.

"So what if we're fabrications? Some things have never been fake."

"..."

Cheng Shi wrinkled his nose and sniffed the air, feeling as though some kind of smell was leaking out.

What was that?

Oh — the sour stench of love.

Tch. Absolutely unbearable.

...

Chapter 1048: Keinlaur Is Still Climbing the Rankings!

Cheng Shi had never denied Pe Laya's feelings for Galusha, but he'd always assumed the Wise Man's relationship with the scholar was purely exploitative. He never expected the feelings to run both ways.

What was going on — had spending enough time together actually sparked something?

In that moment, the flames of gossip blazed fiercely in Cheng Shi's heart, nearly eclipsing the urgency of escaping with his life. Without thinking, he blurted out:

"Back when you first found Pe Laya — did you ever imagine things between you would turn out like this?"

Galusha gave Cheng Shi a sidelong glance and snorted with amusement:

"Mr. Prisoner, you've got the question wrong. I didn't find her — someone led me to her."

"?"

Cheng Shi froze. Several faces flashed through his mind, all belonging to the Afterglow Church's leaders — because he couldn't think of anyone else with designs on the Tower of Logic.

But what came next was an answer Cheng Shi absolutely didn't expect.

"No need to guess. It wasn't those old fossils from the Afterglow Church. It was a different old fossil — my dear grandfather, the Supreme Inquisitor of the Grand Tribunal, Lord Keinlaur."

Who!?

Keinlaur?

How could it be Keinlaur?

The founding monarch of the Kingdom of War hadn't even lived to this era!

"Surprised?"

You've met him — you should know he's exactly the kind of man who schemes decades in advance.

If the Kingdom of War hadn't disrupted the Shared Law Faction's plans, I imagine the bells of [Order] would already be echoing throughout the Tower of Logic's territory.

Of course, the piece he originally placed wasn't Pe Laya — it was Melina. But Pe Laya was influenced by Melina, which is how she ended up feeling... toward me... Forget it. Ancient history. No point bringing it up."

'How can you not bring it up!?'

Cheng Shi was practically beside himself. But as the words Melina had spoken flashed through his memory, realization suddenly struck. He blinked in bewilderment:

"The one who tried to assassinate you wasn't sent by Lid Yara — it was your grandfather, Keinlaur!?"

"Oh? Mr. Prisoner certainly knows a lot. You've met her?" Galusha regarded Cheng Shi with a half-smile. "You didn't mention that part just now. What else are you hiding from me?"

"..." 'Nothing — I told you everything except the gossip.'

Cheng Shi smiled awkwardly and ad-libbed: "I simply found the feelings between you two rather... admirable, so I did a bit of extra digging."

"How admirable?"

If Mr. Prisoner truly wants to experience this kind of feeling, I think we could squeeze a spot for you between the two of us.

Perhaps with the boost of romance, our alliance would become even more solid. What do you think?"

"???"

'I do NOT think so!'

Cheng Shi's expression turned deadly serious as he took a step back, putting distance between himself and Galusha.

Galusha let out a derisive snort, ignored the foolish act before her, and continued:

"That's right — you guessed correctly.

Lady Lid Yara is an absolutely law-abiding [Order] follower. She upholds the principle of procedural justice and would never resort to extrajudicial violence during an investigation.

But my grandfather is different. He doesn't care about any of that — just as he doesn't care what's gone wrong with [Order].

He had Melina gravely wounded. Of course, it wasn't a warning to [Truth] followers — it was the opening move of his chess game.

You know that completing a slice experiment takes time, so..."

"!!!" Cheng Shi's face changed color, disbelief written all over it. "The Melina who returned to the Tower of Logic after completing her mission back then — she was a slice!?"

"Yes... The real Aunt Melina died. She was already gone before I could form any attachment to her.

The one who stayed alive was always a paranoid slice. And it was precisely because of that paranoia that she became so obsessed with my death.

It was a brilliant move by Grandfather — planted to be useful when the time came to annex the Tower of Logic. But in the end, that chess piece fell into my hands.

Though I never expected...

Never mind. It was all fate."

Hearing this, Cheng Shi didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

[Fate], which had been trying so long to get close to [Folly], had finally earned a glance back.

The tapestry of destiny was truly something wondrous.

Galusha shot a sidelong glance at Cheng Shi's peculiar expression, then huffed:

"Satisfied your curiosity?"

If so, perhaps we should get moving. Regardless of the circumstances, confronting our opponents head-on is the most effective way to deconstruct their intentions.

So before we find the Truth Limit — it's time to pay a visit to those Grand Scholars sitting so high above."

No sooner had she finished than a violent explosion erupted from the western district — Galusha's moles had clearly blasted open the underground lab. Taking the cue, Cheng Shi immediately dispatched the Afterglow Church to lay siege while he followed Galusha toward the west side.

Along the way, teammates — all except Wei Zhi and Chen Yi — began converging. Fragmented memories lingering in their minds left them brimming with questions. Cheng Shi patiently explained, dramatizing the Erudition Presidium's "crimes" to the hilt and taking every opportunity to throw shade at [Truth].

Hearing the truth, the stunned teammates all had the same thought: the Trial had only been running for a few hours — how had the Fate Weaver already taken control of the entire situation?

Where did he find the time to accomplish so much? Not only had he pinpointed the Grand Scholars' location, he'd rallied every available force for a "palace coup." What kind of efficiency was this?

Was this the power of a Fate Weaver who'd single-handedly taken down Zangier and 0221!?

Meng Youfang's gaze at Cheng Shi was strange. Once he learned that [Truth]'s will was "meddling" with this Trial, he surmised that his own trial was being accelerated.

And his good friend Yu Xi was apparently using transcendent Envoy-level powers to cheat — all to lower the difficulty for him.

While he sincerely appreciated the help, such cheating would inevitably taint his path to reinstatement. After much deliberation, he decided to gently remind Cheng Shi not to go too far.

Cheng Shi, knowing that unifying every available force was essential right now, naturally couldn't ignore Meng Youfang's concerns. He'd already prepared an excuse and told him privately:

"This isn't a test — [Truth] has its eyes on your position and is actively blocking your return.

A new round of divine struggle has begun among the gods. But don't worry — [Void] will support you, Brother Meng!"

"!?"

Meng Youfang froze, his gaze turning instantly cold.

"[Truth] dares to declare war on me?"

"..."

Cheng Shi stared blankly, bit back a retort, and nodded vigorously.

Meng Youfang's eyes hardened again: "Understood. From here on out — don't blame me for going all out."

"..."

'Brother, just unleash your divine powers already. If you can squash [Truth] directly, I'll kowtow to you twice.'

'Who knows what got into that god's head — trying to pull its own followers out of history.'

'You're doing this, [Truth]? Did you even ask [Memory] if it's okay?'

'Don't tell me you want to steal [Memory]'s authority too?'

Cheng Shi was livid, but for now all he could do was take things one step at a time, pooling everyone's wisdom to find an opportunity to break through.

Just as he finished briefing everyone, Hu Xuan approached, brow deeply furrowed as she repeatedly confirmed with Cheng Shi whether this Trial was truly just an experiment. Cheng Shi affirmed it with a puzzled look, and Hu Xuan nodded:

"There's something I need to verify. If you have enough people to face the Grand Scholars, I'd like to..."

Cheng Shi frowned, recalling the figure he'd glimpsed earlier while searching for Hu Xuan.

"A friend?"

"Yes. A friend."

Who could the Eternal Sun consider a friend?

Since Hu Xuan wouldn't elaborate, Cheng Shi didn't press. He trusted that the Sage would never betray him, so he simply nodded:

"Come back quickly. I need your help."

Hu Xuan nodded solemnly and brushed her hand lightly in front of Cheng Shi. "Alright. Wait for me."

With that, the Sage turned and left. Cheng Shi raised his wrist and saw a wisp of [Birth] energy coalescing on his arm once more, swelling into a new "Pregnancy Rhythm."

...

Chapter 1049: The Standoff Before the Experiment Ground

Only two people remained in Cheng Shi's current squad: Fang Yuan and Meng Youfang.

Fang Yuan wasn't entirely convinced, but given that Cheng Shi had at least been orderly, he decided to see the Grand Scholars first before passing judgment.

Meng Youfang needed no persuading — he was already plotting how to leverage his limited identity to strike back against [Truth].

Chen Yi was actually there too, lurking in the shadows as before and overhearing everything Cheng Shi had said. But his distaste for [Deceit] followers made him unwilling to believe it.

However, if Cheng Shi's words were true, the Grand Scholars' schemes against the players would cost him any chance of getting closer to [Memory]. So he'd tagged along as well — he wanted to see for himself whether the Erudition Presidium had truly discovered these so-called Drifters.

The moment he confirmed that the Grand Scholars were also obstacles on the path of his devotion, he would spare no cost to eliminate them — and, just as he despised [Deceit], he would begin an endless hunt against the followers of [Truth].

Only Wei Zhi was absent. The combat expert had vanished the moment he'd given Cheng Shi that location, just as before.

Cheng Shi knew he was lurking nearby, waiting for his opening. As a "traitor" who'd abandoned the player camp to cooperate with the Erudition Presidium, there was nothing this lunatic wouldn't do for the success of the [Truth] experiment. Cheng Shi would have to stay vigilant.

Soon, they arrived at the western experiment site. By now, the Grand Scholars had been reduced to isolated remnants by Galusha's contingencies — the entire underground lab was extensively damaged, and the Erudition Presidium's sham experiment was on the verge of collapse.

Death Knell Knights formed ring after ring around the perimeter, coiled and ready, awaiting their master's final order to charge.

But Cheng Shi didn't rush the attack. He knew that defeating or even killing the Grand Scholars was pointless — they were only puppets. Unless he found this experiment's Truth Limit, no matter how many times the Grand Scholars died, the players could never win.

So rather than forcing the issue with brute strength, it was better to extract information through the standoff.

He firmly believed that these old foxes were still human, and humans always had gaps in their armor. Otherwise, he never would've seen through the entire Tusnat deception in the first place.

With that reasoning, Cheng Shi stepped forward to the edge of the collapsed crater, looked down at the six Grand Scholar puppets with their varying expressions, and opened with a mocking jab:

"Give it up, you old fossils. I know the truth might feel devastating, but facts are facts — you're yesterday's news, sunk into the silt of history like discarded waste.

I am indeed a Drifter — but not one drifting outside this world. I drift outside this era.

The Tusnat you see now, from our perspective, has long since been sealed away in the dusty past. Want to know how the Erudition Presidium ends? Want to know how the Tower of Logic falls?

Look right here."

With a grin, Cheng Shi pointed at Galusha.

"The great [Folly] follower personally strung your skulls together and ended everything by boiling your wisdom dry.

Tsk — how pitiful. Even as you watched your own followers suffer, [Truth] never chose to protect you. And you never found the real [Truth].

Perhaps even [Truth] itself doesn't know what universal truth looks like. So the Tower of Logic's path was wrong from the very start.

No matter how hard you struggle, all you're doing is blindly charging down a dead-end road. What awaits you isn't the [Truth] you've yearned for over millennia — it's a wall called ignorance. You'll only dash your heads against it until you're broken and bleeding, and then — then you'll realize one simple thing:

The world is nothing but a massive cage, and [Truth] is merely the tallest jailbreaker inside it."

The moment those words fell, every Grand Scholar's expression turned ugly. Only Galusha's eyes shimmered with a strange gleam as she broke into wild laughter:

"Is what you said true?"

"?"

'Girl — is that really the point right now? I'm putting pressure on the enemy, can't you see? Why are you jumping in?'

'Do you really want to roast their skulls on a skewer that badly?'

Cheng Shi secretly rolled his eyes and ignored Galusha. After a pause, he looked back at Volent and said in a heartfelt counselor's tone:

"Scholar Volent — you and I actually share a connection.

San Dales is practically my second hometown, which makes the Consciousness Faith Department, in a sense, my field of study. And you, as its founder, would be something like half a teacher to me.

Teacher — I'm a kind person. I'll give you a chance.

I know that behind the scenes, you've struck a deal with my teammate Wei Zhi. Whatever his reasoning, the fact remains — he's betrayed the Drifter camp. He won't survive this experiment.

If Teacher Volent can see the light and guide us past [Truth]'s facade — help us see through [Truth]'s indifference — then I can guarantee that after this experiment, regardless of the outcome, I will lend you Wei Zhi's identity. You'll be free of history's shackles, free of ignorance, and welcome to join us — to join the great Drifter camp.

[Truth] is not the end of the universe. Only by joining us will you discover that this world is far vaster than you ever imagined.

What do you say?

"I'll give you time to think it over. I hope you seize this opportunity, Teacher."

"..."

"..."

"..."

Cheng Shi's barrage was undeniably persuasive. Never mind the other five scholars shooting changed looks at Volent — even Galusha's eyes beside him had begun to glitter.

The pie the Drifter was painting was far too tempting. Even this Wise Man was starting to want a taste of that particular foolish act.

"Mr. Prisoner — are there any other traitors among your people?"

As she spoke, Galusha's crazed eyes swept over Fang Yuan, Meng Youfang, and even Chen Yi hiding in the distant shadows.

"..."

Cheng Shi's expression froze. He got the distinct impression that Galusha wasn't asking a question — she was calculating which of his teammates she could turn.

'This is bad. I need to stop painting pies. If I keep going, the Erudition Presidium won't be the thing that falls — I'll have shot myself in the foot.'

Cheng Shi cleared his throat twice, pointedly ignored Galusha once more, and after a beat of silence called out to the Grand Scholars again:

"How's the thinking going, Teacher Volent?"

"Not well."

The one who answered wasn't Volent — it was Wei Zhi, crawling out from the rubble around the experiment site.

The combat expert had no choice but to show himself. If he hid any longer, his identity was about to become Cheng Shi's bargaining chip.

His position was precarious. Although fragmented memories had put him on alert early, he still couldn't figure out — even now, having watched Cheng Shi shatter everything — how he'd been discovered when he'd hidden so well.

But discovered he was, and the president of the Reason Association harbored no regrets about his cooperation with the Erudition Presidium. In fact, right here and now, he wanted to persuade Cheng Shi to join him — to embrace this glorious fusion.

"Fate Weaver, you truly are remarkable."

Yes — the Grand Scholars' offer interested me. Just think about it: when a Grand Scholar who's accumulated thousands of years of knowledge from the Tower of Logic wants to merge with you — why wouldn't you be tempted?

The fusion of flesh is the natural direction of life's evolution. As long as consciousness remains independent, what's so hard to accept?"

Cheng Shi let out a derisive snort:

"Just the flesh? I'd say the Grand Scholars' appetite goes far beyond that. And when the one who climbs to the top of [Truth]'s Ladder of Ascent turns out to be one of the Erudition Presidium's Grand Scholars — will you still be laughing then?

Oh wait — by that point you'll have been devoured. Obviously you won't be laughing.

Wei Zhi, what baffles me is this: all your knowledge, all your understanding of experiments — it all comes from the Tower of Logic. So what makes you think the Erudition Presidium, which has run the Tower of Logic for millennia, would lose to you in a game of scheming?

Is it that brain of yours — the one even [Folly] wouldn't bother with?"

...

Chapter 1050: The Standoff Beyond the Experiment

"Nice burn!"

Just as Wei Zhi's expression was growing increasingly twisted, Galusha was having the time of her life.

Somehow, she caught the purest essence of [Folly] in Cheng Shi's tone, which only deepened her appreciation for him.

"Mr. Prisoner, my earlier offer still stands. There's room for a third in what Pe Laya and I share.

Of course, once you're in — you wouldn't be an outsider anymore, would you?"

"..."

'Like hell!'

'Lady, whose side are you even on?'

'I brought you on as an ally, not to undermine me. If you're going to derail the conversation, at least derail the enemy's!'

'Don't tell me you're a mole too?'

Cheng Shi's expression was indescribably strange. Galusha flashed a manic grin, threw her head back with a few peals of laughter, then turned toward Wei Zhi, whip raised:

"Why bother talking? If these old fossils are dead set on stalling for time, then let me save some instead.

An opportunity a [Truth] follower abandons is too good to pass up."

With that, Galusha charged straight at Wei Zhi — clearly having taken a genuine liking to the idea of claiming a Drifter's identity for herself.

Wei Zhi wasn't fazed by Galusha's attack, but what weighed on him was that this Trial had slipped beyond his calculations and was no longer going smoothly.

Setting aside whether his wish to merge with a Grand Scholar could even be fulfilled — in this dead-end situation where players had turned against him and NPCs surrounded him on all sides — survival itself was a question mark.

So to stay alive, and to bolster his leverage, Wei Zhi chose not to engage Galusha head-on. Instead, he directed his next words at Cheng Shi, his face dark with calculation:

"Fate Weaver — my wish and your goal aren't necessarily incompatible.

If you promise to let me merge with one Grand Scholar afterward, I'll turn around and help you foil the Erudition Presidium's conspiracy. What do you say?"

Cheng Shi snorted derisively. "You? A fish — or rather, a fool — who took the bait hook, line, and sinker, and you still think you can play both sides?"

"You don't believe me!?" Wei Zhi dodged another lash from Galusha and let out a cold grunt. "The Truth Limit — do you believe me now?"

"?"

Cheng Shi's gaze sharpened. "You know where the Truth Limit is?"

"Of course!"

Wei Zhi was about to elaborate with more convincing details, but the moment the words "Truth Limit" left his mouth, every Grand Scholar's expression shifted.

They stared at Wei Zhi in alarm, and in the next instant they attacked — alongside Galusha.

Burza plunged everyone's vision into darkness once more. Six figures surged toward Wei Zhi's position in unison.

"!!!

Volent — have you lost your minds!?"

No matter how confident Wei Zhi was in his own abilities, he couldn't solo the entire Erudition Presidium. Before long, their coordinated assault drove him into a corner.

Watching the "teammate" who held the key to breaking free struggle under fire, the equally stunned players began lending him a hand. They couldn't just let their only lead be snuffed out — even if what Wei Zhi claimed might be false, it was worth trying.

And so the situation shifted once more.

The fractured player camp, through Wei Zhi's maneuvering, reunited. Meanwhile, the Grand Scholars and Galusha — lifelong enemies — found themselves temporarily allied out of individual self-interest.

In an instant, the scene devolved into total chaos.

Cheng Shi didn't make a move. In the split second before Burza's darkness fell, he'd studied every Grand Scholar's expression, and he realized that Wei Zhi might truly have found the Truth Limit's location — or at least guessed it. Otherwise, the Grand Scholars wouldn't have panicked enough to try silencing him.

But how had he figured it out?

If Cheng Shi could retrace Wei Zhi's logic, this Trial might still be winnable.

While he was still thinking, the battle on the field had escalated into genuine fury.

Fang Yuan once again summoned the Blazing Sun atop his staff and, standing behind Meng Youfang with furrowed brows, declared in a deep voice:

"If this is all just a game within a game, why not just crack the shell?"

Fate Weaver — why can't we simply destroy this experiment with brute force?"

"?"

'What — you think I haven't thought of that?'

'Even Go Lis was blocked from entering outside the experiment. What other means do I have to destroy it from the outside?'

'Be my guest if you can.'

Cheng Shi pursed his lips and, considering that Fang Yuan might actually have some secret [Order] trick up his sleeve, rolled his eyes and said:

"It might work, but I don't have anything powerful enough."

"I do!"

This was no time to debate who was biting whose bait. Fang Yuan gritted his teeth, had Meng Youfang shield him from the Grand Scholars' attacks, then pulled a key from inside his robes. Gripping it tightly, he declared:

"Grand Scholars — today, Tusnat will be reduced to utter ruins under the gaze of [Order]."

Your [Truth] experiment is finished."

With that, he channeled the power of the Wrath of Abomination, calling down a forbidden meteor fire rain from the heavens!

The entire western district froze for an instant at Fang Yuan's battle cry. Everyone looked up — and saw...

Nothing.

Apart from the glow atop Fang Yuan's staff, not a single spark flickered across the sky.

"..."

"..."

"..."

The intensity of the Order Alliance president's rally cry was now matched only by the crimson shade of his mortification.

Cheng Shi never expected to witness a clown act at a time like this. But rather than simply watching the spectacle, a flash of inspiration struck. He snapped his fingers and activated his [Fate] talent — Fate Has Divergence.

He theorized that any external force capable of destroying the experiment must be blocked from outside the true experiment — and that "outside" still technically fell within the Trial. So if the entire Trial's destiny veered onto a divergent path, perhaps in the depths of catastrophe a single thread of hope might appear. He tried it, and then...

Still nothing.

The sky was terrifyingly clear. Even under Burza's "lights-out" technique, not a flicker of fire or change could be seen.

In that moment, the divergent path of destiny seemed to have vanished entirely.

But had it really?

Not at all!

Beyond the experiment, beyond the Trial, beyond reality itself — pairs of divine eyes opened across the infinite void.

[Fate] was seething with rage. [Deceit] was no longer laughing.

[Void]'s gaze should have pierced into the Trial, but it was blocked by a massive Starlight Canon.

Also blocked was the fury of the Wrath of Abomination. His prison gate had been flung open, but when he saw that his wrath hadn't rained down at all, this Servant God of [Chaos] — this prisoner of [Order] — roared and thrust his head out of his cage, only to find three gods arrayed before him, the air crackling with tension.

"..."

The Wrath of Abomination's fire extinguished in an instant. Scrambling frantically, he gathered up the scraps of fury that had spilled past his cage door and swept back inside like a gust of wind.

He didn't dare intervene. He didn't want to intervene. But the situation left him no choice.

[Fate]'s power, triggered by a follower within the Trial, manifested as a great hand of misfortune that once again pulled open — no, outright ripped off — the Wrath of Abomination's cage door, forcing him to unleash his fury upon this bizarre Trial.

The Wrath of Abomination trembled, not daring to refuse. After all, [Void] had two against one — even if [Truth] settled accounts later, that was still better than being dispatched on the spot.

But just as he was mustering his emotions for another howl, [Order] descended.

Precisely — [Order]. Or rather, the Iron Law!

The instant this [Order] — purged of every trace of [Chaos] within itself — appeared, it stuffed the Wrath of Abomination's roar right back down his throat. The Iron Law personally sealed its old subordinate's cage door shut, then, before all the assembled gods, hurled the hapless Wrath of Abomination into the depths of the void.

[Fate]'s gaze grew colder still. It turned toward [Order] and spoke in barely contained fury:

"It seems [Civilization] wants to go to war with me?"

Very well. If so — then where is [War]?"

"..."

At those words, the most uncomfortable god present was, ironically, not either member of [Civilization] — it was [Deceit].

[Deceit] was the one who'd hidden [War] for its own plans. It could hardly embarrass its sibling god now by announcing that a two-on-two sounded lovely. [Fate] had, for once, stood beside [Deceit] because of its follower — it couldn't very well undercut its own position.

But if [Deceit] wouldn't do the undercutting, someone else would.

The massive Starlight Canon flipped its pages rapidly, turning to [Deceit] with a smile:

"I'm curious too — why hasn't [War] come?"

[Deceit] wouldn't badmouth its own sibling in front of other Paths, but that didn't mean it wouldn't take a jab at [Truth]. Hearing this, it immediately fired back:

"Is this how you pursue truth?"

'A hundred thousand whys'?

If asking questions were all it took to get answers, the universe would've already been flooded with truth.

Tch — you bookworm. You don't actually think the two of you can stop [Void], do you?"

Before [Truth] could respond, [Fate] cut in coldly:

"I came to protect my follower. This has nothing to do with you.

And your own affairs — don't drag [Void] into them."

"..."

'Whose side are you on!?'

[Deceit] was so angry it nearly laughed. The starry points within its eyes began flickering wildly.

"Fine, fine, fine. Go protect your follower. I'm staying out of this."

Then it glanced at the looming [Order] and sneered:

"Some gods forget their roots far too quickly. Think stealing someone else's throne means you can replace them?"

[Order] is long gone. And the scraps of paper it left behind — what kind of order do they represent?

Hmph!"

With that, [Deceit]'s eyes gradually faded. But no one believed it would simply walk away.

Sure enough — upon discovering that its roundabout approach was useless — [Deceit], face dark, reappeared exactly where it had been. It peered into the depths of the void and spoke with merciless mockery:

"You really think [Void] is your backyard?"

[Oblivion] — just what do you think you are?"

Indeed — [Oblivion] had arrived. It was the one that had forced [Deceit] back. Of course, [Oblivion] alone wouldn't have been enough — but if [Truth] insisted on getting an answer here, and with [Civilization]'s backing, [Oblivion] was willing to try.

Seeing the standoff deepen, the pages of the Starlight Canon turned faster still.

"Everyone, please remain calm. The experiment will begin shortly — and it will end shortly as well."

Fine words, but [Fate] had run out of patience. Provoked by the gods time and again, unable to protect its own follower, [Fate] erupted in fury — directly invoking the authority of Misfortune and dragging the entire universe into true misfortune!

In an instant, the void began to crumble. Vast swathes of blackness peeled away, revealing the even more hollow nothingness beneath.

Every god present changed color.

Those who hadn't yet appeared began descending one after another — all except [Time] — each radiating divine power to prop up the collapsing universe.

[Fate] held nothing back. None of them dared take it lightly. A single moment of carelessness, and this world would truly be done for.

"Have you gone mad!?"

[Oblivion] couldn't stay seated any longer. This was the second time it had felt [Fate]'s wrath, and this time it was far more violent than the last.

[Fate]'s gaze grew colder than ever, as though a single look could freeze the void for eternity. It swept its eyes across the assembled gods and spoke without a shred of emotion:

"Since my follower wishes for fate to diverge — then [Fate] shall diverge!"

"..."

"..."

"..."

Who was whose Benefactor, exactly!?

And who was devout to whom!?!?

For a moment, the gods stared at each other in utter speechlessness.

Only [Deceit] looked at [Fate] — the corner of its eye lifted, though there was no joy in it.

...