

The Gods 1051

Chapter 1051: [Truth] Is Sheltering Its Followers

[Truth] was sheltering its followers!

The moment Fate Has Divergence failed to produce any effect whatsoever, this thought exploded in Cheng Shi's mind.

Whether it was Go Lis or the Wrath of Abomination — blocking them required at least a Servant God. But the Ritual of Truth was being used for the experiment, and a single artifact couldn't hold back two Servant Gods from different Paths simultaneously. So the answer had been staring him in the face all along: [Truth] itself had intervened!

It hadn't just told its followers how to "escape" — it had also severed every avenue the players might use to break the experiment from outside.

How ruthless!

Truly worthy of a god of [Civilization] — so civilized indeed!

After several failed attempts, the Grand Scholars' offensive grew fiercer. Seeing the tide turning, Galusha wheeled around, cracked her whip to scatter the closest Grand Scholar, and threw herself into defending Wei Zhi.

Her intent was clear — before she could replace Wei Zhi, the information in his head needed to come out first.

Whether or not this Wise Man truly wanted to become a Drifter, destroying the Tower of Logic and the Erudition Presidium was a mission she had to complete.

The battlefield descended into even greater chaos.

Fortunately, every player present was a top-tier fighter. In a head-on clash with the Grand Scholars, they might lack a decisive edge — but when it came to improvisation and adaptability, all the rigid scholars combined couldn't match a single one of them.

Especially with a certain [Order] follower in the group who excelled at exploiting loopholes. Seeing the situation had passed the point of no return, Fang Yuan whipped out two sheets of paper and shouted:

"Teleportation is prohibited in this area!"

"Group attacks are prohibited in this area!"

The instant those words fell, every coordinated assault on the field ground to a hard stop. In the momentary gap of everyone's confusion, the Order Alliance's leader fired off a point-blank Elemental Shock straight at the battered Wei Zhi.

Under [Order]'s constraints, any many-against-fewer attack was immediately nullified. But "no group attacks" never prohibited one-on-one. So as long as Fang Yuan struck first against Wei Zhi, no one else could touch him!

This was Fang Yuan's signature exploitation of [Order]'s rules, and Wei Zhi proved worthy of his titles as [Truth] Chosen and peak player — he caught on instantly and began play-fighting with Fang Yuan in a convincing show.

Right under everyone's noses, the two traded blows in the most theatrical fashion — a tap here, a hit there — gradually retreating as they "fought." The Grand Scholars went red-eyed watching this, but with [Order]'s power blocking them, all they could do was watch these two Drifters drift further and further away.

Chen Yi and Meng Youfang weren't fools either. Seeing the tactic work, they immediately copied it.

But these two had never gotten along to begin with, and their fake fighting rapidly escalated into the real thing. When Meng Youfang, disgusting as ever, summoned Zhen Yi, Cheng Shi's head nearly split open.

'Bro — you can't only act like a god when you're talking to other people! What's with this summoning-Zhen-Yi-at-the-drop-of-a-hat combat strategy? Who taught you that? The Divine Throne you're trying to reclaim isn't the Fun God's, is it?'

But their squabble had nothing to do with Cheng Shi. His sole concern was Wei Zhi. So when Fang Yuan and Wei Zhi were about to reach the edge of [Order]'s effective range, Cheng Shi appeared beside them, positioning himself just outside the boundary, and extended his hand toward Wei Zhi.

"Tell me where the Truth Limit is first. Then I'll let you out. Otherwise — don't blame me for joining the group attack."

Wei Zhi, mid-theatrical-swing, halted. His expression flickered between light and dark. "My safety isn't guaranteed, and your promise doesn't sound like a promise!"

"Not my problem. You should be thanking [Fate] for its generosity just for me standing here talking to you.

If my Benefactor didn't keep me in check, your little stunt of betraying the player camp would've earned you eight hundred deaths by now.

Enough stalling. You want to live — start talking."

Fury flashed in Wei Zhi's eyes, but he quickly reined it in and broke into a smile.

The abrupt expression shift made his face look somewhat twisted, but Wei Zhi paid it no mind:

"I'm not going to die.

Fate Weaver — as long as you can't find a way to clear this Trial, Meng Youfang will keep using [Time]'s power to reset this space for you. That is what you've been doing, isn't it — resetting the timeline?

Hmph. You can't fool me. The residual memories I have don't belong to my current self, which means Meng Youfang's time regression is a far cry from the Time Walker's Time Battlefield.

And here I thought he was a [Time] follower — what a clown."

"..."

'Say that again?'

Cheng Shi's eyelid twitched. He wanted nothing more than to blast a bolt of lightning straight into Wei Zhi's face, but he held back.

Now wasn't the time to waste. With [Order]'s power still lingering and the scholars yet to catch up, he had to extract the Truth Limit's location from Wei Zhi's mouth. After racking his brain, he decided to bring in reinforcements.

He called on Brother Mouth.

The Fool's Lips had come a long way since the old days — it was now the linked version paired with the Secret Peeping Ear. So if Brother Mouth agreed to help listen for truth and lies, the interrogation was as good as done.

Cheng Shi expected Brother Mouth to demand an outrageous price for this favor. To his astonishment, it agreed without hesitation.

The ease of it sent an uneasy thump through Cheng Shi's chest — had he just been tricked again?

"Brother Mouth, you really agreed?" Cheng Shi asked internally.

"Does the clock start from this sentence? If not — why are you talking so much?"

"..."

Terrified it might change its mind, Cheng Shi immediately turned to Wei Zhi: "Fine. I'll take a step back. I'll let you out first — but you swear that you genuinely know the Truth Limit's location!"

The Fate Weaver had been clever in his wording. He'd made a verbal concession without actually asking Wei Zhi to reveal the Truth Limit's location — he simply wanted confirmation that Wei Zhi truly knew where it was.

After all, everything so far was based solely on Wei Zhi's claim. Whether the man was using this as a pretext to buy survival space remained unknown. Cheng Shi had to play it steady and guard against a bluff.

When Wei Zhi heard the question, his eyes lit up. Without hesitation, he swore: "Of course I know!"

But the instant the words left his mouth, Cheng Shi's lips began moving on their own.

"Once I escape this space, what good does it do you to know that I don't know?"

If the time resets leave traces, then before the Trial ends, my past self and future self will eventually reconcile the information and keep me alive.

Fate Weaver?

Heh — seems he's not as clever as the rumors say."

"..."

"..."

"..."

Wei Zhi didn't know the location!

It was a bluff all along!

The moment those words echoed, Wei Zhi's face turned green. Fang Yuan gaped at Cheng Shi in disbelief: "You can read minds?"

Cheng Shi's eye twitched. He raised his hand and unleashed a barrage of lightning, blasting the frantically fleeing Wei Zhi off his feet for a moment of catharsis. Then he turned to face the Grand Scholars closing in from behind.

When the Grand Scholars realized Wei Zhi didn't actually know the Truth Limit's location, the tension visibly drained from their faces. But in the very next instant, Cheng Shi let out a derisive snort:

"So the traitor didn't know — but I do now. So that's where you've been hiding the Truth Limit!"

"!!!"

The words rippled through the Grand Scholars like a shockwave, their expressions changing in an instant. And the moment Cheng Shi read the alarm on Volent's face, his eyebrow arched — and he snapped his fingers.

Now he truly did know where the Truth Limit was.

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Chapter 1052: The Truth Limit Is Hidden In...

When Cheng Shi opened his eyes once more amid the ruins at the city center, every clue had already connected in his mind.

First: the Grand Scholars had also been fooled.

The shock on their faces when Wei Zhi claimed to know the Truth Limit's location hadn't been an act. And their immediate offensive against Wei Zhi proved they believed he might actually know.

Which meant either Wei Zhi had deduced the Truth Limit's position through his own understanding of [Truth] experiments, or at some point during the Trial — during the experiment — he'd come into contact with or passed near the Truth Limit, allowing him to guess the energy source's coordinates.

But here was the problem: if even Galusha, whose [Truth] knowledge was practically on par with the Grand Scholars', couldn't deduce the Truth Limit's location through scholarship alone — then how could Wei Zhi possibly have figured it out?

So the most likely scenario was the latter — somewhere along Wei Zhi's path through this Trial, he had come close to or made contact with the Truth Limit!

With that logical foundation, Cheng Shi began using the process of elimination.

The players had split up shortly after the Trial began. Wei Zhi had been on his own for a long stretch. By any reasonable deduction, his contact with the Truth Limit had most likely occurred during that unseen window.

But things always had exceptions. So Cheng Shi first eliminated the time he and Wei Zhi had been together — the opening introductions and the subsequent parting of ways outside Pe Laya's laboratory.

As for the method Cheng Shi used — simple:

A bluff!

As a born deceiver, he was far superior to Wei Zhi at the art of deception. So he'd told the approaching Grand Scholars that he already knew where the Truth Limit was hidden.

If he'd never come near or touched the Truth Limit, the Grand Scholars would have dismissed his claim with absolute contempt — they'd be certain Cheng Shi couldn't possibly have found it.

But if Cheng Shi had actually come close to the Truth Limit?

Then the Grand Scholars would inevitably react. They'd wonder whether Cheng Shi had truly pieced together the energy source's location from tiny clues — and their reaction would be the key to confirmation.

Sure enough, after Cheng Shi's probe, every Grand Scholar's expression had changed. The moment he saw the alarm flicker across Volent's face, he knew he'd found his answer!

He really had brushed past the Truth Limit without realizing it. As for where — the answer was easy to guess. The only places where his path overlapped with Wei Zhi's were the Tomorrow Truth Tower and Pe Laya's laboratory.

So the Truth Limit had to be at one of those two locations!

Cheng Shi's eyes blazed with rapid calculation. Now he only needed to pick one out of two — and he didn't even need to guess, because the Grand Scholars, unaffected by time resets, would inevitably rush to protect the Truth Limit before he could reach it!

All he had to do was wait, and the Grand Scholars would lead him straight to the answer.

The clown's plan was sound — but reality was cruel.

Cheng Shi stood at the junction of city center and the western district, waiting for a long time without seeing the Grand Scholars make a move. He counted the minutes — by now, Galusha should've already launched her attack — and still not a single Grand Scholar had appeared on Tusnat's surface. His face fell.

He looked toward the western experiment site and clicked his tongue:

"Tsk — Grand Scholars will be Grand Scholars. All experts. They've clearly guessed I was bluffing and they're watching to see if I can truly find the Truth Limit.

But every reaction maps to a different answer. Since they're not worried about me finding it, it means the Truth Limit is nothing like what I imagined.

Either it's hidden in something so minute it's nearly impossible to discover, or it's staring us right in the face but in a form we'd never guess!

Galusha said the Truth Limit is essentially a miniature Ritual of Truth. So does this miniature Ritual of Truth have capabilities similar to the full Ritual — like reshaping itself into..."

Cheng Shi's eyebrow arched. Without hesitation, he topped up his time again, and the instant he opened his eyes, he bolted straight for the Tomorrow Truth Tower.

It had to be there!

When Cheng Shi arrived beneath the Tomorrow Truth Tower, Galusha was still fighting her way up.

The crazed Wise Man glanced back at Cheng Shi, said nothing, and simply gave a slight nod — clearly retaining her memories of their alliance from before the reset.

Rather than feeling relieved at not having to re-explain the situation, Cheng Shi felt a creeping worry.

The Time Battlefield's effect was weakening further. He wasn't sure how many more resets he could afford. If after a few more everyone stopped being affected by the time loop, he'd lose every advantage he had.

Brow furrowed, Cheng Shi gave Galusha a concise summary of his theory and ordered the surrounding Death Knell Knights to storm the Tomorrow Truth Tower at all costs.

Soon, amid Galusha's manic laughter, the tower — symbol of Tusnat's highest power and prestige — fell. Cheng Shi stood once again at the Trial's starting point: beside the Erudition Presidium's round conference table.

He stared at the two "clothed corpses" that had been torn to nothing but scraps of flesh and bloodstains beside the table, then tossed out his own collected Grand Scholar corpse from the Molten Coffin. He turned to Galusha:

"Could the Truth Limit have altered its form, reconstructed itself, and become part of the experiment?"

Like, for instance — these Grand Scholar corpses that were planted as decoys!"

Galusha froze. She picked up the Grand Scholar corpse and felt it carefully, then shot Cheng Shi a look with something vivid in her eyes — unmistakable admiration.

"Rather than being a Drifter, I think you'd be better suited to stand with me and bring the world to its knees before [Folly].

Mr. Prisoner — have you ever considered changing your faith?"

"So it's true!?"

Cheng Shi paid no heed to the recruitment pitch. He'd fielded too many invitations from different faiths — he was numb to them. All he cared about was this: if Galusha wasn't lying, the key to breaking this experiment was found!

"I can indeed sense [Truth]'s essence flowing through the corpse. Without careful examination, it would be easy to mistake for lingering post-mortem faith residue from the Grand Scholars.

Volent is far more cunning than I imagined. He actually split the Truth Limit and disguised it as corpses. That way, even if I discovered them — no, even if you Drifters discovered them — you'd most likely collect them as critical clues, becoming the experiment's guardians in the Erudition Presidium's place.

After all, who would destroy the very clues needed to track down the Grand Scholars?"

Indeed — a brilliantly cunning move.

Too bad even brilliance couldn't hide from him!

A grin had just begun to form on Cheng Shi's face when his brow knotted again:

"So we need to gather all the corpses to restore the Truth Limit?"

But Wei Zhi already consumed two of them, which means he's..."

Halfway through, his expression changed:

"This is bad — he couldn't have merged with the Truth Limit and become the linchpin himself, could he?"

No wonder we've already stormed the Tomorrow Truth Tower and the old fossils haven't reacted — they must have already taken control of Wei Zhi!"

"Clever!" Galusha stood atop the tower with one foot planted on the Erudition Presidium's emblem, gazing toward the western district. "I'm genuinely curious about the Drifters' world now. Tell me — why do you think [Truth]'s will has such a grudge against a few mortals like you?"

"..."

Cheng Shi had his suspicions, but he wasn't about to voice them here.

Even if the current Galusha was merely a variable in the experiment, who knew what other tricks this [Folly] Wise Man had up her sleeve? If she learned the truth of the universe, who could predict what chaos would follow?

In a world where the future wasn't the future and the past wasn't the past, it was best to leave some things unsaid.

Cheng Shi stood beside Galusha, also gazing west. Pushing aside stray thoughts, he spoke with iron resolve:

"If [Truth] doesn't want me to win, then losing this Trial is fine.

But these old fossils trying to use this to replace us?

Heh — delusions.

Today, I'll sever the Tower of Logic's roots right here.

Afterglow Church — listen well! Send people to gather my companions. All other followers are to cease current operations immediately and surround the western district.

Today, even if we have to dig Tusnat down to bedrock, I want Wei Zhi brought back to me — even if it's just a corpse!"

"As you command!"

The iron hooves of the Death Knell Knights pivoted to the west in an instant. Galusha and Cheng Shi leaped down from the tower and sprinted toward the western district.

Meanwhile, near the western timber warehouse.

Wei Zhi, who had been hiding in the rubble waiting for Cheng Shi to come break the formation — still lost in fantasies of his impending merger with a Grand Scholar — felt a violent tremor ripple through his consciousness. A foreign awareness slipped through the cracks of his mind and rapidly seized control of his body.

Wei Zhi's consciousness retreated like a displaced native with no power to resist, forced to cede ground within his own fertile mental landscape. He was terrified, desperate to marshal every ounce of his strength against the invading will — but it was utterly futile.

Because everything he'd ever learned and accumulated originated from the Tower of Logic. Even the organization he'd founded was the Reason Association — an offshoot of the Tower itself. His resistance against this alien consciousness was nothing more than wielding an axe before Lu Ban — amateurish at best.

"No — you can't do this! I'm a follower of [Truth] too! I'm your collaborator! Galadry, you can't do this!!!"

"Oh?"

The fact that you recognize me shows your Life Extension Department studies weren't half bad. But it's too late.

Your companion has discovered the Truth Limit's secret. I'm afraid that for the sake of [Truth]'s greater cause, you'll have to be the sacrifice.

Since you consider yourself our Lord's follower — then serve as a stepping stone to pave the path of our Lord's pursuit.

Peer into essence, walk to find truth!"

"No!

You'll regret this, Galadry — you'll regret this!!!"

The body's original consciousness shattered in an instant. The presidency of the Reason Association had finally returned to the Erudition Presidium's hands — right here on the Tower of Logic's soil.

A hand — twitching and contorting — emerged from the rubble, pushing aside broken timber and shattered stone, dragging this "empty husk" out from beneath the debris.

Those lifeless eyes glanced once in the direction Cheng Shi and Galusha would come from, then turned without hesitation and ran in the opposite direction.

A game of hide-and-seek that would determine the experiment's outcome had begun.

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Chapter 1053: No Mediocre Hands at the Peak — Wei Zhi's Contingency

Wei Zhi had escaped.

Although the Death Knell Knights had spotted his figure appearing somewhere in the western district, expecting ordinary NPCs to keep up with a player controlled by a Grand Scholar was simply asking too much.

After all, Tusnat was the Erudition Presidium's home turf. No matter how many people the Afterglow Church had, their knowledge of the local terrain couldn't compare to the Grand Scholars who'd operated here for ages.

When Cheng Shi received the news, he showed no surprise. Of course the Grand Scholars would put up a fight. If they'd just sat there waiting for doom, that would've been far more worrying — it would mean these [Truth]-worshipping old fossils were digging yet another trap.

The situation had evolved from a direct physical confrontation to a chess match played across the void. Both sides knew the deciding factor wasn't either of them — it was the fleeing Wei Zhi. Blindly attacking the Grand Scholars was pointless now; what mattered most was finding the final puzzle piece needed to restore the Truth Limit.

The other players gradually returned to Cheng Shi's side. He explained the full picture once more to the newly arriving teammates, who were starting to grasp the situation. Under their varied expressions, he assembled the four Grand Scholar corpses — all except the two Wei Zhi had consumed.

At the start of the Trial, Fang Yuan, Meng Youfang, and Hu Xuan had each taken one corpse. They returned them all now — though the Sage had a visibly larger belly when she handed hers back, making Cheng Shi suspect this [Birth] follower had done something to the Grand Scholar corpse in her possession.

Seeing Cheng Shi's odd stare, Hu Xuan remained unfazed. She offered no explanation, instead reminding him:

"Relax — the gestation process is fast. If you'd like one too, there's plenty of time."

"???"

'Relax about what?'

'Want one of what?'

'Whose time is plenty!?'

'Lady, could you [Birth] followers please get a grip... Your childbirth timeline might be fine, but our Trial clock is absolutely not!'

Cheng Shi was speechless. He didn't bother investigating why she'd chosen such a critical moment to become pregnant. He simply organized everyone to fan out and search for Wei Zhi, reminding them that once they found him, they should not engage rashly — signal immediately and wait for the team to converge before making a move.

His teammates set off. Even Chen Yi, who'd never had a kind word for [Deceit] followers, had to temporarily follow Cheng Shi's lead. After all, the Grand Scholars' actions were actively obstructing her relationship with her Benefactor — and compared to Cheng Shi, who hadn't actually done anything "wrong" yet, the Erudition Presidium was clearly the greater enemy.

After sending off his teammates, Cheng Shi sank into deep thought once more. They were in the western district now, the underground lab Galusha had blown open lying just ahead. Cheng Shi and the Grand Scholars stared at each other from afar — a triple contest of intellect, psychology, and logic.

Galusha watched Cheng Shi stand motionless and, after a moment's thought, smiled:

"Whatever tricks you still have, use them now. You said yourself we need to accelerate — don't waste time."

Cheng Shi tilted his head up slightly and chuckled: "How do you know I still have tricks?"

"Your companions have been gone for quite a while. If you didn't have a contingency, you'd have been frantically searching for Wei Zhi yourself — not standing here trying to look profound."

"..."

'I'm not trying to look anything — I'm genuinely thinking!'

Cheng Shi pursed his lips: "Can't I simply be standing here to draw the Grand Scholars' attention and buy my teammates the time and space they need?"

Galusha shot him a sidelong glance and snorted:

"Would you believe that yourself?"

I complimented your intelligence — that doesn't mean you should treat everyone else as idiots.

What — think you're a [Folly] follower now?

Even if you wanted to stand here as bait to draw Volent's attention, I'm still right here. If time were truly that pressing, you wouldn't pass up the chance to put me to work. But you haven't assigned me anything — which means your next move is where I'm supposed to come in.

Stop hiding it. Just tell me — what do you need me to do?

As long as [Truth] ends up beneath my feet, I'll do anything."

Cheng Shi nodded without speaking and sank back into thought.

It wasn't that he didn't trust Galusha, nor was he truly stalling to create search room for his teammates. He was weighing whether this contingency was genuinely a contingency — or just another trap.

Cheng Shi did have a contingency. Only — he hadn't set it up himself. It had been prepared by...

Wei Zhi!

The president of the Reason Association appeared to have left himself a failsafe from the very start — and that failsafe was...

Brains!

The brains of those two Grand Scholar corpses.

Wei Zhi's excuse for approaching Cheng Shi hadn't been suspicious at the time — he'd used Zangier as a pretext and handed over what he called "the best parts" of the corpses. And Cheng Shi had indeed accepted them.

Under those circumstances, Cheng Shi had assumed the combat expert was just making polite gestures while fishing for intel and looking for someone to clear the path ahead.

Once the cooperation with the Erudition Presidium came to light, Wei Zhi's behavior was stamped with the brand of betrayal. Revealing the western timber warehouse location was obviously bait meant to lure Cheng Shi in — a misdirection to obscure the Truth Limit's existence.

But things were never set in stone. Looking back at Wei Zhi's actions now, Cheng Shi couldn't help but wonder: had the Reason Association president anticipated from the start that his cooperation with the Erudition Presidium might fail, and therefore prepared a backup?

After all, peak players weren't just unhinged — they were exceptionally sharp.

The more he thought about it, the more the theory held up. So he led Galusha to a secluded corner of the ruins, well out of the Grand Scholars' line of sight, and pulled out the two brain specimens Wei Zhi had left him.

"If I told you these are the only remaining parts of the two consumed corpses...

Galusha — could we use them to restore the Truth Limit?"

Galusha's gaze sharpened. Looking at the two pale, glistening brains before her, she unconsciously licked the corner of her mouth.

That tiny gesture scared Cheng Shi half to death. He instantly snatched the brains back and took an instinctive step backward.

Galusha gave him a flat look:

"You pulled them away so fast I didn't even get a good look. How am I supposed to judge whether they're usable?"

Cheng Shi's expression brightened: "So there is a way to use them?"

"Of course. The brain is the vessel of wisdom. On Tusnat's tainted soil, there are countless methods to restore an original life form from such a consciousness carrier.

Whether the restored body still retains Truth Limit properties would need further verification, but I won't deny this is a viable approach.

Interesting — judging by your expression, these weren't something you prepared. Who gave them to you?

Let me guess — the traitor Drifter?

Heh. You really are all quite clever.

But... since he was able to leave you these — have you considered the possibility that one of these brains might be his own?"

"???"

Cheng Shi's mind went blank.

'What kind of ghost story is this?'

'One of these could be Wei Zhi's brain?'

'He scooped his own brain out? Wouldn't his body be an empty shell?'

Galusha snorted and elaborated:

"It seems you vastly underestimate [Truth]'s madness. A life form's existence is never limited to 'original equipment' and 'matching sets.' As long as it's relatively intact, in the scholars' eyes it's premium experiment material.

Of course, this is only my conjecture. I'm thinking: since the traitorous Drifter had already foreseen his own fate, then rather than having you restore Ernie and Galadry — why not just restore him directly?

So I suspect that one of these brains is very likely his own.

Care to show me, Mr. Prisoner?"

Watching the amused smile playing at the corners of Galusha's mouth, Cheng Shi's eyelid twitched violently. "Please tell me this isn't just because you want to eat brains."

"I'm nowhere near as terrifying as your traitorous friend."

"?"

'You're not terrifying?'

'Girl — who gave you the confidence to say that?'

'Was it the version of yourself who, in history, strung Grand Scholar skulls together and roasted them?'

Cheng Shi was numb. But to break the experiment, he had no choice — he took the brains back out and let Galusha examine them.

After frowning over them for a while, Galusha suddenly split into a peculiar grin:

"I was right. It is him.

Come with me — I'll take you to get your traitor back!"

Galusha grabbed the brain and sprinted off in a particular direction. With a thump of unease in his chest, Cheng Shi bolted after her, shouting as he ran:

"Where are you going?"

"I'm no expert in this field. Someone else understands restoration far better than I do. I'm taking you to her."

Cheng Shi started at that, and a name escaped his lips before he could even think:

"Pe Laya?"

Galusha's expression softened. She nodded: "Yes. Her."

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Chapter 1054: Cheng Shi's Concerns

Cheng Shi had assumed the real Pe Laya would be in the recently destroyed underground lab, waiting for the regression experiment to begin. But Galusha told him that had been a mere slice.

The one Chen Yi had captured was also a slice. In fact, throughout current-day Tusnat, slices of various people were everywhere.

They couldn't have placed all their hopes on the Erudition Presidium. After all, these old fossils hadn't even managed to hold Tusnat. As their most intimate enemy, how could Galusha possibly trust them to pull off one final experiment?

So they'd prepared a contingency as well.

In this Trial, everyone had a contingency...

The real Pe Laya was in a hidden experiment ground, replicating her own regression experiment. The material was a slice of Galusha, and the experiment's content was identical to the Grand Scholars' — to send Melina back in time, to meet the "pure and untainted" young Galusha.

If they succeeded in sabotaging the Grand Scholars' plan on the other side, the experiment would simply be cancelled. But if the Erudition Presidium's experiment proceeded smoothly, this one would serve as a backup — not only sending Melina into the past but also having her eliminate every scholar who had attempted to purge Galusha.

The chess match between Galusha and the Grand Scholars had reached the level of "I plan two moves ahead, she plans three."

But Cheng Shi had no interest in any of that. The unease in his heart was intensifying. All he wanted was to end this Trial as quickly as possible and tell the Fun God that [Truth] was planning something big — it had its eyes on [Time]'s authority.

The two quickly arrived at Pe Laya's location — an underground laboratory beneath the city center. True to form for alumni of the Erudition Presidium, the Grand Scholars' experiments were invariably buried underground.

When Pe Laya saw Galusha bringing a stranger, she furrowed her brow but asked nothing. The look in her eyes as she regarded Galusha no longer held the adoration that the "reflection" version of Pe Laya had shown — only calm composure and a yearning for the "future."

As Chen Yi had noted, the current Pe Laya had already "given her heart to another."

Galusha didn't seem to care. She explained the truth about the experiment and conveyed Cheng Shi's purpose. Pe Laya looked at Cheng Shi in astonishment, only for him to smile, place two brain specimens on the lab table, and greet her with a wave that spanned eras.

"Long time no see, Lady Melina. I'm the Punitive Knight Grind. A certain young lady..." — he glanced at Galusha, then turned back and rubbed his nose — "...wants you to get me out of here."

Cheng Shi understood people. He knew that the current Pe Laya's heart was set on going back in time to meet the young Galusha. So he deliberately assumed his identity from the previous Trial — partly to align with her emotional state, and partly to ensure the Grand Scholar's anger at the Erudition Presidium didn't spill over onto him, which might create resistance toward restoring Wei Zhi.

Pe Laya didn't have memories from those fabricated scenarios, but these fixed, real-world titles were enough to keep her from greeting Cheng Shi's arrival with outright hostility.

As for the word "out" in his last sentence — back then, Cheng Shi had been trying to leave Selius's laboratory. Now, it meant escaping the Erudition Presidium's terrifying experiment.

Pe Laya sensed the respect this stranger was offering. After a brief moment of contemplation, she said nothing and began the life-form restoration experiment.

Galusha quickly fell into step beside Pe Laya, assisting her.

The two never exchanged a word — never even met each other's eyes — yet their coordination was so seamless it was as though they shared a single mind. Every action seemed inscribed in their bones. When Pe Laya advanced, Galusha moved in perfect concert. When Pe Laya stepped back, Galusha had the right data waiting before her eyes. When Pe Laya began chanting an incantation, Galusha filled in the formation runes without missing a beat.

The entire process flowed like water — a sight that filled Cheng Shi with admiration.

This was what it looked like when the continent's finest Grand Scholars conducted an experiment. From start to finish, not a single wasted motion — the entire procedure was confident, elegant, efficient, and swift.

Cheng Shi felt as though he'd just watched a performance, and he was still savoring the final act's brilliance when the president of the Reason Association opened his eyes on the experiment table.

The moment Wei Zhi realized his own contingency had brought him back to life, he let out a chilling, manic laugh.

"Ha ha ha ha! Galadry — bet you didn't see this com—"

BOOM—

Before he could finish, a bolt of lightning turned his brand-new body into a charred corpse.

Whether or not Galadry had seen it coming — Wei Zhi certainly hadn't seen this coming.

As lightning crackled through the air, Galusha stepped in front of Pe Laya, swatting away the stray sparks with her whip. She turned to Cheng Shi with a grave expression:

"The traitor had a problem?"

Cheng Shi spread his hands and smiled:

"No, nothing at all. The experiment was a complete success. I just couldn't hold back my frustration.

Ladies — since the Grand Scholar corpses are all viable, this traitor doesn't necessarily need to be alive, does he?"

Galusha froze, then her expression shifted to a half-smile — clearly mocking Cheng Shi's pettiness. Pe Laya, standing behind Galusha, frowned deeply:

"If the goal is to reconstruct the Truth Limit, active cooperation from a decomposed subject is far faster than passive deconstruction. Knight Grind — you've introduced an unnecessary blemish that slows down efficiency."

"..."

Cheng Shi's eyelid twitched, but he didn't feel a shred of embarrassment.

After all, Grind's mistakes had about as much to do with him, Cheng Shi, as a tin can did.

Besides, a dead Wei Zhi was far easier to handle than a living one. If Wei Zhi actually woke up again, who knew what treacherous moves the Reason Association president might pull?

At this stage of the Trial, there was no room for another mistake.

So Cheng Shi said nothing, merely gazing at Wei Zhi's corpse in silent declaration of his stance.

Seeing the Drifter wouldn't budge, Galusha huffed and began persuading Pe Laya to proceed with restoring the Truth Limit.

Pe Laya wasn't particularly stubborn. Compared to the other Grand Scholars, she was almost normal — almost "human."

That is, if you didn't consider it insane that she'd fallen in love with the leader of an opposing faith and brought ruin to the Tower of Logic in the process...

Soon Pe Laya got to work, assembling all the corpses, verifying the Truth Limit's integrity, and reconfiguring the experiment ground. Galusha assisted silently beside her. Everything was heading in the right direction.

But Cheng Shi didn't share their optimism.

Whatever could make a lunatic temporarily set aside her lunacy had to be something even crazier. From the very start, Cheng Shi had suspected that Galusha's interest in Wei Zhi's identity was more than idle talk.

She was cooperating so readily now — but when the Trial ended, what if she truly demanded an identity? Would he give it to her or not?

Perhaps the question of Wei Zhi's identity wasn't his to decide. But Wei Zhi had already become a bargaining chip, beyond his own control. If Galusha eventually asked Cheng Shi to help her secure a Drifter identity — how should he respond?

Thinking this far, Cheng Shi's smile stayed on his face, but inside, the gravity was immense.

Of course, there was someone in this experiment far more weighed down than he was. The moment the Grand Scholars learned that the Wei Zhi under Galadry's control had suddenly died, they realized Cheng Shi — with Galusha's help — had recovered the Truth Limit's final piece.

In that instant, offense and defense reversed. The ones who needed to stop the experiment from succeeding were now the Grand Scholars.

On the western ruins, the six Grand Scholars' faces were each grimmer than the last. They struck in unison, broke through the Death Knell Knights' encirclement, and raced toward Pe Laya's secret laboratory.

The task bestowed by their Benefactor was still incomplete. No matter what — these Drifters must not escape!

...

Chapter 1055: Truth Limit

An ordinary person would have trouble imagining a pile of flesh "evaporating" into the air and reorganizing its tissue, reconstructing into another form entirely.

Cheng Shi watched as several corpses slowly disintegrated and then merged into a sphere — a miniature celestial body radiating [Truth]'s brilliance, overflowing with the breath of knowledge.

The sphere had the luster of metal yet the texture of soil. It wasn't merely an isolated star — countless orbiting satellites, stellar rings, and faintly visible nebulae circled around it.

Every element was strung together by [Truth]'s laws — blinking in orderly patterns, their stellar tracks traceable. It looked exactly like a precision-engineered orrery. And yet upon closer inspection, it was so profoundly enigmatic — all the knowledge seemed to be laid bare right there, yet when you looked, it was as though a thick veil of gauze covered everything, forever just out of comprehension.

"So this is the Truth Limit — a miniature Ritual of Truth? Does the real Ritual of Truth look like this too?"

Galusha recoiled with a disgusted frown, clearly repelled by such a dense concentration of [Truth]. Pe Laya, on the other hand, extended her hands to receive the completed Truth Limit and nodded:

"Yes. The real Ritual of Truth looks even more wondrous and arcane. This is only its reflection — the [Truth] power it commands can only alter this current experiment."

Cheng Shi's curiosity was piqued, but the moment he stepped forward to examine it more closely, Pe Laya retreated two paces with the Truth Limit, avoiding his scrutiny. Her expression turned severe:

"How can I trust that you won't use the Truth Limit to do something harmful to..." Her gaze slid briefly toward Galusha before she forced the rest of her sentence out. "...to me?"

Cheng Shi froze, then spread his hands with a smile:

"Grand Scholar — have you forgotten? This is merely a fabricated experiment. The Erudition Presidium gathered enough fuel from somewhere and replicated you and Galusha within this experiment.

Your true selves should still be outside the experiment — quite possibly doing exactly what they're doing now, rampaging across Tusnat.

Only by destroying this experiment can I prevent the Grand Scholars from using Drifter identities to escape history and perpetuate [Truth]. So in a sense, we're on the same side. I'm helping you — why would I harm you?

I assumed you would've figured this out before the experiment even started. That you're still questioning our camaraderie at this point is, frankly, a bit hurtful, Lady Melina."

Pe Laya was not swayed by the name "Melina." She stared intensely into Cheng Shi's eyes, fell silent for a moment, and then said something that left him dumbstruck.

"She is she. I am me.

I wasn't talking about you harming her — I was talking about you harming me.

I... haven't seen her yet. I don't want to die here!"

"!!!"

Those words sent an electric shock through Cheng Shi's entire body. Goosebumps erupted, his pupils contracted — because he heard it. The "her" in Pe Laya's mouth didn't all refer to Galusha. At least the first "her" referred to herself!

To the Pe Laya that existed outside the experiment — her original body!

This Grand Scholar, replicated by the Erudition Presidium within the experiment, wanted to sever ties with her original self — to exist as an independent entity!

She didn't care what happened to the original. She only wanted to go back in time and see the young Galusha she couldn't stop thinking about!

Insane!

They were all insane!

[Truth]'s followers truly deserved their reputation as madmen. They never stopped reminding him — they were, through and through, a pack of lunatics.

Cheng Shi had encountered plenty of slices before, but this was the first time he'd seen a slice diverge from its original without any conflict of interest or identity coercion!

And the cause was love!

'Girl — did the Erudition Presidium's replication process twist your obsession with Galusha even further? Or did those old fossils deliberately plant something in your consciousness to create a slice at odds with the original Pe Laya, a weapon to turn against yourself? How could you possibly have this kind of thought at such a critical juncture?'

'And what am I supposed to do about it?'

'I'm here to destroy this experiment. Once it fails, every variable inside it — including you — will vanish. Am I seriously supposed to figure out how to protect you now, and even Galusha standing right here?'

"..."

Cheng Shi was numb. He studied Pe Laya's face for a long while, confirming she wasn't joking. And Galusha beside her hadn't reacted at all — clearly, she agreed with Pe Laya's position.

What was he supposed to do?

Take it by force?

Cheng Shi's expression darkened. He touched the ring on his finger and discreetly produced a Warrior Mask from his sleeve.

This was the most promising opportunity yet. If he could secure the Truth Limit before the Grand Scholars arrived, he might not need to reset time at all — he could end the Trial and leave right here.

But honestly, he didn't want to do this. He felt it wasn't yet time for a complete falling-out with Galusha and Pe Laya. Besides, he didn't know how to destroy the experiment even after obtaining the Truth Limit — everything after this still depended on these two women. So for the moment, he was stuck in indecision.

Galusha's amused gaze bounced between Cheng Shi and Pe Laya. Seeing neither of them willing to advance their cooperation nor to escalate the tension, she suddenly let out a snort and broke into raucous laughter:

"People always overestimate themselves. They love to flaunt the wisdom they think is so superior, and sometimes they even hope the other person possesses equally lofty intelligence — so their exchange can be more efficient and smooth.

What they don't realize is that wisdom itself is the greatest barrier to communication.

If either of you had just spoken more plainly, this massive misunderstanding would never have happened.

The old fossils are on their way. Stop standing here in this awkward standoff. All Pe Laya wants is to go back in time. As long as she gets one glimpse of the me from that era, she won't care where this experiment ends up.

As for me...

Mr. Prisoner — I'm sure you guessed long ago. I've set my sights on your traitor's identity!

Help me secure that identity, and I'll help you destroy everything here. After all — I want to stay alive too, don't I?"

"!!!"

Galusha had also awakened her own self-awareness — she wanted out of this experiment, free from being a mere variable?

Cheng Shi had assumed all of Galusha's calculations were for the benefit of her original self. But her words "I want to stay alive too" — didn't that mean she, like Pe Laya, intended to part ways with her true self outside the experiment?

If so, the Galusha of history never escaped history. The one who'd become a player was merely a variable from an experiment... Wouldn't that also reduce the karmic consequences?

Cheng Shi's brow furrowed deeply as he turned the idea over and over. He felt this was probably the most acceptable solution — but he had no idea how to actually procure a player identity. That might require consulting the Erudition Presidium itself, since this experiment was designed to steal Drifter identities in the first place.

But stealing an identity required the experiment to succeed — and Cheng Shi's goal was to make it fail. The contradiction was glaring.

Sharp as his wits were, even Cheng Shi couldn't conjure a solution that satisfied everyone.

And just as the three stood in the laboratory, eyeing each other in silence, the Grand Scholars arrived at last, finally reaching the door.

...

Chapter 1056: Who's crazier than whom?

Volent's fight to get here had been thoroughly humiliating.

Logically speaking, every Death Knell Knight within the experiment ground was nothing more than a variable they'd created — trivially erasable in the eyes of these "gods."

But due to the experiment's unique nature, the Grand Scholars couldn't exert much influence over the variables beyond their ability to transcend the experiment's confines and observe the full picture.

Moreover, they bore an edict handed down by their Benefactor. Until the Benefactor gave the word, they didn't dare intervene too much with certain variables — otherwise, they could have simply seized control of all the players and waited for the experiment to succeed.

So the six of them had battered their way through half the city's worth of Death Knell Knights before finally reaching Pe Laya's secret laboratory — only to find Drifters rallied by the news already waiting at the entrance.

Fang Yuan, Meng Youfang, and Hu Xuan — the latter sporting a conspicuously swollen belly — barred the experiment ground's doorway, cutting off the Grand Scholars' path.

Chen Yi, meanwhile, had been called inside by Cheng Shi to "send off" Pe Laya, completing the exchange for the Truth Limit.

Chen Yi had initially resisted being ordered around by a [Deceit] follower. But when Cheng Shi mentioned that defying [Truth] would earn [Memory]'s favor, the Old Hunter obliged.

Cheng Shi couldn't help but roll his eyes at that.

Was this man not sharp? No — anyone who'd climbed to the Chosen One rank had to be sharp.

But sharp or not, the instant a lie touched the word "[Memory]," this assassin seemed to receive a permanent "willing" debuff — falling for it every single time.

Cheng Shi was beginning to pity him. If [Memory] didn't meet with this follower soon, he was starting to think the problem lay with [Memory], not with Chen Yi.

Under the Old Hunter's operation, Pe Laya got her wish and was banished into the past. And naturally, the Truth Limit fell into Cheng Shi's hands.

Although Cheng Shi hadn't yet made Galusha any promises, she didn't seem to think he'd deceive her — or perhaps more accurately, she didn't think he could.

Cheng Shi held the miniature Ritual of Truth in both hands, listening to the fierce combat raging outside, and asked with solemn gravity: "What do I do?"

Galusha's expression was serious as well — this was, after all, directly tied to her future identity. She explained with meticulous precision:

"Channel [Truth]'s power. Feel its existence — not its physical presence, but its existence in terms of [Truth].

Once you do, your perspective will leap beyond the present. You'll assume the vantage of a 'Creator,' surveying the entire experiment. The current Tusnat will appear before your eyes as something like a sandbox. You can freely mold the sand within it to craft whatever experimental environment you desire.

Of course, if you don't need a new environment, simply flatten it. That will cause everything within the experiment to dissipate into dust, and the Truth Limit will self-destruct.

But before that, Mr. Prisoner — remember to sort out my identity."

Cheng Shi first nodded, then shook his head. "Wei Zhi's body is gone. I..."

Before he could finish, Galusha dragged a fresh Wei Zhi body from an adjacent room within the laboratory. She regarded Cheng Shi with a half-smile:

"Don't worry. When I restored his body, I made an exact one-to-one replica of his flesh. I'll merge with it on my own. You only need to worry about what's on your plate."

"..."

Blame deflected — unsuccessfully.

Cheng Shi gave a dry laugh, then refocused on the Truth Limit. It was time to operate the experiment and bring this Trial to a close.

But just as he was rolling up his sleeves, his expression froze. He stood stock-still, realizing he'd overlooked something — something critically important.

"Why aren't you doing it?" Galusha frowned. "Mr. Prisoner, don't even think about renegotiating the deal at this point."

Cheng Shi's face crumbled into pure mortification: "The thing is... I don't seem to have any [Truth] power?"

"?"

Now Galusha was stunned. She'd never imagined that the Drifter who'd arrived at this step with such mysterious confidence would get stuck at the very threshold of destroying the experiment.

"You... don't have [Truth] power?"

Cheng Shi's eyelid twitched violently: "I'm not a [Truth] follower. Not having [Truth] power seems fairly reasonable, no?"

"Tch—

Reasonable — but in the wrong place!"

Galusha's eyes turned instantly crimson. She raised her chin high, looking down at Cheng Shi with absolute contempt.

"Then why did you rush to send Pe Laya back in time?"

"That was your idea... wasn't it?"

"Heh. The mysterious Mr. Prisoner — when did you become a yes-man? What happened to all that backbone from before?"

"..."

Cheng Shi was utterly numb. He'd kept his nerves strung taut for the entire gambit, his mind racing at full throttle — only to stumble over such an elementary blunder at the finish line. But there was no time for self-recrimination. To complete this final step, he had no choice but to turn his gaze toward the only [Truth] follower present:

Wei Zhi's...

...corpse.

He decisively pulled out the Lush Horn Crown and prepared to remove his Mage mask to resurrect the man — the only way to destroy the experiment.

But he knew full well that reviving Wei Zhi would unleash a cascade of problems. The man's sole desire was to merge with a Grand Scholar. Meanwhile, Galusha was right there, eyeing Wei Zhi's identity like a hawk. Balancing the interests of player and NPC was the greatest obstacle standing before him.

Just thinking about it gave Cheng Shi a headache. So, clinging to the faintest unrealistic hope, he ventured: "Your power... can't operate the Truth Limit?"

If Galusha's contempt could drip into water, Cheng Shi would have drowned a hundred times over by now.

"You're fantasizing that a [Folly] follower could freely trample [Truth]'s creation right under its nose?"

"..."

Yeah, that was a bit far-fetched.

"Instead of fantasizing, why not try using your own divine power to drive the Truth Limit?"

Honestly, no experiment has ever proven that the Truth Limit can't be activated by other divine powers. After all, the Ritual of Truth has always been in the hands of the Tower of Logic and the Erudition Presidium. So if you carry the divine power of another faith — give it a shot.

Who knows? It might work."

'You think I haven't tried?'

Of course Cheng Shi had tried. The instant he'd realized he lacked [Truth] power, he'd attempted to drive the Truth Limit with [Fate]'s power — and failed. That was precisely why he'd contemplated resurrecting Wei Zhi.

But hearing this, he decided to try one more divine power.

If — just if — [Deceit] or [Chaos] power could fool the Truth Limit into recognizing it as an authorized activation energy, could it be possible to enter "Creator" mode?

Cheng Shi wanted to try, but first he had to rule out [Time] power.

It was probably useless...

So with the resigned mindset of wasting a mask, he mustered [Time]'s power and made contact with the Truth Limit — and that single hopeless touch caused the Truth Limit to erupt in blazing radiance. The entire nebula surrounding the stellar body solidified in an instant.

Cheng Shi's vision went dark. His consciousness ripped free of the experiment and ascended to a higher dimension. Here, gazing at the sphere in his hands — at the miniaturized Tusnat on its surface — he was utterly stunned.

It... worked?

But why would [Time] power activate the Truth Limit?

No time to think. The moment Cheng Shi saw the entire experiment laid out before him, his to reshape at will, the thought that had driven him all along — destroy the experiment — suddenly stalled. In its place rose a far bolder idea.

Who said the Grand Scholars stealing player identities to escape history was the only way to perpetuate [Truth]?

And who decided that only [Truth] followers could perpetuate truth?

The Trial's hint was "finite truth is never truth." So if he became the one to perpetuate [Truth]... wouldn't the result be the same?

In that moment, Cheng Shi's hand — already descending to flatten the sandbox — paused.

'I might not be great at running experiments, but sculpting a sandbox? That's too easy. And with the Truth Limit sharing the Ritual of Truth's properties, as long as I understand its function, this Trial doesn't have to end in failure!'

'So why not give it a try?'

'Yes — it's time for my own [Truth] experiment!'

'Everyone else is going mad. Why can't I!?!'

Cheng Shi gritted his teeth, something like resolve crystallizing within him. His hands flew across the "sandbox" like butterflies. The ruined hues of Tusnat receded like a tide, and a familiar, otherworldly little town materialized before his eyes.

...

Chapter 1057: Experiment Master — Cheng Shi!

When a dry, hot wind brushed across Hu Xuan's cheeks, the [Birth] Sage stood on a hillside below the mine, gazing up at the unmistakable Abyssal Volcano. Her eyes were wide with shock.

She recognized where she was immediately — but she couldn't be sure of her exact position in the Underworld.

That's right — this could only be the Underworld!

After Cheng Shi seized the Truth Limit — the key to the entire experiment — the players who had been blocking the Grand Scholars outside the experiment ground soon felt the world lurch violently beneath them.

Then their vision went black. When they opened their eyes again, everything had changed.

Tusnat was gone. The Afterglow Church was gone. The Grand Scholars were gone. Even Galusha was gone. All that remained were six — no, five players!

They turned around in surprise, but where the experiment ground had been, Cheng Shi was nowhere to be seen. Only Wei Zhi remained, staring blankly at the scene before him and muttering under his breath:

"Falling Gate..."

"Falling Gate!?" Fang Yuan's heart lurched. Something felt wrong about the Trial. "How can this be Falling Gate?"

Isn't this the Extreme Desire Brotherhood's forward base — Galusha's home turf in the Underworld?

What is Cheng Shi doing? Why did the experiment change instead of ending?"

Hearing this, the group reacted differently.

Meng Youfang and Chen Yi looked at Wei Zhi, suspecting the resurrected Reason Association president had tampered with something to cause the experiment to go wrong.

Hu Xuan, meanwhile, scanned the area with mild concern, searching for Cheng Shi. She wasn't worried about Wei Zhi sabotaging things — in her eyes, nobody could outplay the shrewd Fate Weaver.

Nor did she fear Cheng Shi doing something reckless. After all, if he hadn't been reckless before, she never could have escaped Zangier's gaze alive — let alone claimed the Eternal Sun's identity.

The Sage simply wondered whether something had gone wrong that delayed the experiment's end, and whether Cheng Shi needed her help. After searching everywhere without finding him, her heart actually settled.

Not seeing him meant the trickster was at it again. At this point, it was better to worry about the people right in front of her — like whether the Wei Zhi standing behind them was actually Wei Zhi.

His flesh had been used to reconstruct the Truth Limit. So what contingency had brought this Wei Zhi back?

Without enemies in sight, the five players exchanged glances and fell into silence simultaneously.

As the Sage correctly guessed, Cheng Shi had indeed begun his operation — or more precisely, he'd begun deceiving people.

And this time, he was even deceiving himself!

This was indeed Falling Gate — the place where six players had witnessed a legend of [Time].

When Cheng Shi entered "Creator" mode and surveyed the experiment, he'd been thinking: if [Truth]'s will could reach into the Trial and influence the Grand Scholars' decisions, pushing them to steal player identities and escape history's shackles, then [Truth] must have an agenda.

Combined with the omnipresent hints of [Time], he'd briefly concluded he was witnessing [Truth] steal [Time]'s authority.

In the past, even if true gods stole each other's authority, Cheng Shi would've considered it normal. But this particular case was different — [Truth] was going after [Time]'s authority. And [Time] happened to be the key that "connected" countless slice universes by breaking through spatiotemporal barriers. So Cheng Shi couldn't help but wonder: was [Truth] using this method to explore what it considered the universe's "truth"?

This chain of logic was flawless — virtually impossible to fault. From Cheng Shi's perspective, there was nothing to add. Up until now, this had been his working theory.

Before seizing the Truth Limit, his plan had been simple: finish the Trial quickly and inform the Fun God about [Truth]'s ambitions. Whether the god already knew or not, at least Cheng Shi — as a member of the Fear Faction — would have peace of mind.

But from the moment he'd seized the Truth Limit and entered the experiment's "Creator" perspective...

Everything changed.

He was more than just Cheng Shi. He was also Little Greed, the Greed Lord — the man who held [Corruption]'s Container.

Under [Corruption]'s influence... oh, forget the pretense. He was greedy, plain and simple. But it wasn't pure greed — he had his reasons.

First, he was an undeniable [Time] follower. Regardless of how much attention [Time] as a Benefactor paid him, [Time] was part of the Fear Faction. So when a god came to seize his Benefactor's authority, as its follower, Cheng Shi had every reason to retaliate.

Second, after the Joker Society, the Jokers had established many objectives — one of which was to attempt breaking through temporal barriers to explore other slice universes, drawing on the experiences of other universes to protect their own world.

Under [Time]'s shelter, Cheng Shi's Time Deduction talent had given him many opportunities to make contact with alternate selves in other slice universes. But those interactions always felt off — as though separated by a thin veil, blurry and unclear. He'd always wondered if there was a way to meet another version of himself face to face.

Months ago, before learning the truth about the universe, Cheng Shi would never have entertained such thoughts. He'd always minded his own business. Even if he met another self, he'd at most lurk in a corner and watch the entertainment.

But now his thinking had changed. He did feel some confusion about the road ahead. He wouldn't deny that his ultimate reason for living was to honor Old Jia's "last wish." But merely wanting to survive didn't feel like enough motivation to talk about "saving" anything.

The notion that he'd draw close to a "rebellious" god and rally the game's sharpest players into a collective breakout — all just because he wanted to stay alive — was a self-deceiving proposition. Because in the process, he was already performing acts of salvation whether he admitted it or not.

Cheng Shi didn't consider himself that noble. Yet he couldn't bring himself to simply give up his life either. So he could only be pushed forward, stumbling down this murky path ahead.

He'd been asking himself the question for ages. But he couldn't find the answer. So he decided to ask another version of himself.

The other Cheng Shis had to be struggling too. Judging by the feedback from Cheng Dashi and Long Jing's alternate-universe counterpart, they weren't just struggling — they were actively transmitting hope outward.

Since everyone wanted to say something to the outside world, why not meet up and talk it out face to face?

And right now was the best opportunity he'd encountered in a long, long time.

Using [Truth]'s power — the same power that sought to steal [Time]'s authority — as a foundation, he could leverage the Truth Limit's power to recreate the scene of that past Trial.

After all, the Truth Limit was a miniature Ritual of Truth. And the Ritual of Truth possessed the power to reshape a "world." So in Cheng Shi's view, [Truth]'s method for stealing [Time]'s authority was actually quite straightforward. It didn't need a Trial at all — it simply needed to redirect the Ritual of Truth's world-reshaping power toward repositioning a single entity.

The simplest example: someone starts in the eastern district and walks to the western district. What they experience in between is time. So without altering the person's state, if you used the person in the west as fuel and employed the Ritual of Truth to reconstruct an identical copy standing in the east — then [Truth] would have effectively mastered [Time]'s authority. And that particular aspect of the authority might be... "regression."

Based on this understanding, Cheng Shi reconstructed the experiment. He decided to pull the timeline back to Falling Gate, craft a variable version of himself — and then transform himself into the variable "Qin Xin" within this experiment.

When "Qin Xin" met his other self within the experiment, couldn't he then activate Time Deduction against the experimental variable version of himself — and thereby use "Qin Xin's" identity to meet a version of himself from another slice universe?

It wasn't impossible — but it was still a massive gamble!

Cheng Shi had to bet that his understanding of the Ritual of Truth was correct. He also had to bet that [Time] would allow him to use barrier-breaking [Time] power under [Truth]'s covetous gaze.

As for [Truth] — it naturally wouldn't refuse, because it was already in the process of stealing [Time]'s authority. And it appeared to be nearly finished — the fact that [Time] power could activate the Truth Limit was probably proof enough.

Since [Truth]'s theft of [Time]'s authority was a foregone conclusion, the only rational move was to claim as much advantage as possible from that fait accompli.

And so, driven by all of these considerations, Cheng Shi personally hosted this experiment of "reunion" — one that spanned time and even dimensions. He took on the identity of "Qin Xin" and stood before another version of himself.

And when he said, with that loaded tone, "You want to fight me?" — the experimental-variable Cheng Shi immediately launched an attack, hurling a headless corpse straight at him!

...

Chapter 1058: Borrowing [Truth]'s Hand to Paint [Time]'s Wonder

At this point, Cheng Shi was certainly stronger than the version of himself from the [Time] Trial. Unfortunately, he was currently a Mage, while the "other him" was a Warrior — and a maxed-out Hero of Today at that.

He wasn't the real Qin Xin, so he couldn't tank "his own" assault. But he hadn't planned to anyway. The instant the other him hurled Wu Cun's corpse, Cheng Shi dodged nimbly and immediately activated his [Time] talent — Time Deduction — against his other self.

In that instant, Cheng Shi's consciousness was ripped away.

After an indeterminate stretch of darkness, he awoke again. Looking at the soil beneath his feet and the iridescent, roiling rift of [Existence] in the distance, he knew Time Deduction had succeeded. The only question was what kind of being this bug-exploiting method would summon — and whether it would truly be another version of himself.

He could feel a presence behind him. Heart racing between anxious anticipation and nervous tension, Cheng Shi first flicked a scalpel out of his sleeve before slowly turning to face whoever stood behind him.

What he saw was a pair of eyes that regarded everything with utter contempt — looking down at him from a subtly elevated angle, dripping with disdain.

For a moment, Cheng Shi's mind went blank.

Good news: it was indeed himself.

Bad news: this version of Cheng Shi appeared to have fused with... [Folly]?

Before Cheng Shi could recover from the shock, the other Cheng Shi spoke first.

With a scornful chuckle, the other him casually loosened his shirt collar, snapped his tie off, and revealed a horrifying, vivid blue-green scar running across his neck. His sharp gaze raked over Cheng Shi as he laughed:

"Well, well — legs intact, spine unbowed, head still attached. And what's this — quite the pretty-boy vibe you've got going. Seems like you lot took the right path.

Don't mind the harsh words, but all those surface-level blessings? Temporary. People always end up on the wrong road eventually.

As much of a bitch as [Fate] is, there's some merit to its stubbornness.

I'm curious, though. If you've already found the right path, why go to all this trouble seeking answers from someone else?

Only wretches like us would need to ask where the road ahead even leads, right?"

"..."

Cheng Shi was battered speechless by the barrage of mockery. His expression shifted — first moved, then flooded with guilt, and finally settling into regret. His lips trembled several times before he managed to squeeze three words from his throat:

"I'm sorry."

He realized he'd made a mistake — a severe, almost absurd one.

[Time] was never an isolated entity. Even if every slice universe had its own [Time], breaking through the spatiotemporal barrier to bring two people from different worlds face to face could never be accomplished by one side's [Time] alone.

So this randomized, lottery-like conversation had never been a one-sided "I call, you answer." It was a two-way convergence between worlds — he was "calling out," and the other was "calling out" too.

And therein lay the problem!

While Cheng Shi had been racking his brains trying to get answers and guidance from another version of himself, that other Cheng Shi had been using the same method to find answers of his own. The two had collided.

If both their worlds hadn't yet tasted despair, a meeting like this — even without guidance — could still be a productive discussion. But that clearly wasn't the case here.

The other Cheng Shi bore obvious signs of suffering and hardship. That was why he'd asked the question:

'If you haven't despaired yet, why are you looking outward for answers?'

The question wasn't about right or wrong. What mattered was that this collision had wasted the other's chance to "ask for directions." Because given the experience of Cheng Shi's current timeline, he wasn't in a position to help anyone.

So he said "I'm sorry." And when Scarred Cheng Shi heard the apology, his disdainful expression vanished instantly, replaced by uncontrollable amusement:

"How was that — convincing enough?

Did it have the [Folly] flair?

Scared you, didn't I?

Yeah — greenhouse flowers like you need a good scare now and then. Otherwise, when a real fright comes, how will you cope?"

With that, the other Cheng Shi raised two fingers and plucked his own eyeballs clean out of their sockets.

The sight left Cheng Shi gaping in utter shock. For a split second, he wondered if Galusha had disguised herself as him and was staging another kamikaze ambush.

"..."

'The insanity of [Folly] is still chasing me!'

Seeing the alarm on Cheng Shi's face, Scarred Cheng Shi laughed even louder.

"Looks like you haven't found it yet. Makes sense — your progress is a bit slower than mine.

This is Eye Bro — full name, Eye of Mockery. Here — go play, Eye Bro. I'll have a chat with him."

Scarred Cheng Shi casually tossed the eyeballs at his feet. They bounced like marbles and rolled off into the distance — though interestingly, the left eye and the right eye seemed to loathe each other, rolling in completely opposite directions.

After "releasing" the Eye of Mockery, the scarred version closed his eyes gently. When he opened them again, a new pair of pupils had appeared — ones Cheng Shi recognized immediately. They were identical to his own.

At this point, Cheng Shi knew he'd been played. But the prank was real, and wasting the other's opportunity was equally real. So his expression remained grim as he could only manage a self-deprecating, bitter smile.

Scarred Cheng Shi didn't seem to mind. He waved Cheng Shi over, produced two bottles of cola from his spatial inventory, and tossed one over.

Without outsiders present, there was no need to drink the disgusting mucus water.

Cola was Cheng Shi's one true love — in every universe.

Scarred Cheng Shi cracked open his cola, dropped to a cross-legged seat on the ground, took two huge gulps, and said with a grin:

"Don't sweat it. I was just messing with you. When this idea first popped into our heads, we already knew there was a chance another version of ourselves would lose an opportunity because of our reckless move. But we did it anyway.

I know what you're thinking — because I think the same way.

Even without guidance for ourselves, being able to offer guidance to someone else in this desperate world — that's something, isn't it?"

"..."

Was that really how it was?

Cheng Shi blinked in confusion. His expression grew even more awkward.

"?"

Scarred Cheng Shi's chugging stopped mid-motion. He studied Cheng Shi with a peculiar look, then burst into hearty laughter once more:

"Ah — I get it. Going through the fog phase.

Interesting. Does every version of me have to go through this?

Don't beat yourself up. I went through it too. If the world didn't force people forward, who would willingly leave their comfort zone?

While the despair hasn't spread yet — do some emotional prep work.

I'm grateful this world has Old Jia. But I'm equally grateful it has so many friends who believe in me."

With that, Scarred Cheng Shi drained the rest of his cola, crushed the bottle, and flicked it to the ground.

Cheng Shi's expression remained shadowed. He plopped down on the ground, guzzled his own cola in one go, wiped the foam from his lips, and looked at his other self. In a low voice, he asked:

"Who died?"

His gloom wasn't merely from guilt over wasting the other's opportunity. He'd also sensed the sadness emanating from this other version of himself.

That sadness was so obvious, so utterly unmasked — it had already manifested in what the other wore.

Because Scarred Cheng Shi wasn't wearing casual clothes. He was dressed in a somber black funeral suit, a strip of black cloth wound around his arm.

Someone had died. That was Cheng Shi's first thought.

He didn't think the question was inappropriate. Putting himself in the other's shoes, this might be one of the few chances his counterpart had to unburden himself.

And as it turned out, no one understood him better than himself.

"Heh."

Scarred Cheng Shi removed the black cloth from his left arm, folded it neatly, and tucked it into his breast pocket. Watching this, Cheng Shi's heart sank.

He recognized it. That was the black cloth the Blind One used to wrap her eyes.

[Fate] had indeed abandoned her.

But what he didn't know was that in that world, [Fate] hadn't only abandoned the Blind One.

"All of them are dead.

Goddamn deserters, every last one."

...

Chapter 1059: I Took the Wrong Path — I Can't Guide You

Cheng Shi was stunned.

His ears were ringing; his skull was buzzing.

Scarred Cheng Shi had only spoken a few words, yet each one fell like a sledgehammer smashing against his brain.

"What do you mean... all of..."

Scarred Cheng Shi tugged at his collar again. The too-tight suit seemed to choke his neck — like fate closing around his throat, impossible to get used to.

"Literally that."

He let out a self-deprecating laugh, then sniffed.

"[Decay] fell. The universe [Prospered]."

The branches that pierced the heavens finally discovered the truth behind the cosmos. It no longer believed that [It] was the eternal ultimate — and grew increasingly radical.

Every living thing became nourishment for It to devour at will. It resolved to carry the will of 'Universal Prosperity' into countless different worlds. The gods had no choice but to resist, to protect this world.

Whether for them or for us, the truth was clear: the moment [Prosperity]'s anomaly attracted the attention of the experiment's Observer, this world would instantly be erased as a failed product.

So while the gods were tied down, all we could do was try to break the stalemate ourselves — to face [Prosperity] head-on.

Unfortunately, even though they aren't true gods, they're far beyond what a handful of mortals can shake. So you see the result..."

Scarred Cheng Shi pointed at his scar, his eyes reddening:

"I walked away with a medal of service. And they — as if they'd planned it — gave me a mass funeral."

[Decay] fell, and [Prosperity] went berserk!?

The script sounded disturbingly familiar.

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted sharply. Something clicked, and he looked at Scarred Cheng Shi in shock:

"Passing the Flame is never easy?"

"Hmm?" Scarred Cheng Shi startled, then studied Cheng Shi up and down before breaking into a smile through his tears — a strange, crooked smile. "Oh — so it's you..."

Ha. [Fate], you dog. Not bad — really not bad.

Come to think of it, it was a shame we missed each other last time. I'd wanted to ask why your [Prosperity] fell first. Now I finally have the chance.

But before that — say hello to Wufang. You two have met, after all."

Li Wufang!?

Where was he?

Cheng Shi straightened up and looked around frantically, but saw no one else. Then Scarred Cheng Shi, eyes red, tugged at his own suit with an odd tone:

"Right here.

These are his clothes. Besides a [Order] follower who worshiped [Fate] with all his heart, who else would pray for a suit this solemn and stuffy?

He probably never imagined he wouldn't even get to wear it himself — that I'd end up using it to see everyone off."

"..."

Cheng Shi fell silent.

He could genuinely feel the other's grief. But at a time like this, could they please not crack jokes from the depths of hell?

Perhaps because the person across from him was himself, the sadness slowly seeped over like contagion.

Cheng Shi felt the weight in his own chest. To change the subject, he answered Scarred Cheng Shi's earlier question, relaying every detail about Cheng Dashi's visit. When Scarred Cheng Shi learned that the apparent smoothness of Cheng Shi's world wasn't self-generated — that external help had been involved — he suddenly erupted into manic, almost deranged laughter:

"Then I was right!

I wasn't wrong!

The facts prove it: fixed destiny can never be altered by individual effort alone. Without external forces to break the stalemate, it's simply impossible.

You're lucky — one of us chose you.

It's a pity our world came up a little short on luck. No — we came up far too short. There's no hope left.

But... other worlds still have hope.

As long as I'm still struggling, as long as [Time] still lives, I can transmit hope to countless versions of myself just like you.

The road beneath my feet might be wrong — but the path I chose was right.

Even if I ultimately kneel beneath [Fate]'s gaze, you — all of you — countless versions of me — one of us, through this chain of hope, will stand up under its watchful eye. Spine straight. And break this goddamn fixed destiny!

That's enough. Ha — that's enough!"

Watching the other version of himself scream and pound the ground in frenzied abandon, Cheng Shi felt a storm of emotions. But he knew he couldn't keep wasting time. The Time Deduction talent had a limited duration; he needed to absorb as much of the other world's failed experience as possible to make the foggy road ahead more solid.

So he started to ask a question — then withdrew it. His gaze hardened with resolve:

"What can I still do to help you?"

Scarred Cheng Shi lifted his head, crimson eyes fixed on Cheng Shi, and smiled:

"Live. Live until the end and shatter fixed destiny. That will be the greatest comfort — to yourself, to me, and to every version of us that's already lost hope.

I'm not worth your investment anymore. While we still have time, I'll tell you everything I can.

I took the wrong path — I can't guide you. But I can share my conjectures with you.

Whether you listen or not is your choice. And even if you listen, don't take it all as gospel — I am, in the end, a failure.

First — Crown's mask definitely hides an enormous secret. That secret is very likely the key to why the Fun God walked his irreversible path, and it may also be the key to breaking free.

Believe me — he would never just sit there and wait for death. He would never launch a counterattack without any hope at all. So figuring out what happened to him is absolutely critical.

You haven't found the Eye of Mockery yet. In our world, the Eye of Mockery was enshrined by [Folly] followers in a small town called Redi Core, within the territory of Civilization Lonely Tower No. 413. You could try your luck there.

As for the final piece of the puzzle...

Brother Mouth told me that even he doesn't remember where the Nose of Verification ended up."

The Nose of Verification?

So that was the nose's name. But why would his Brother Mouth share that kind of information?

Cheng Shi tried calling out to Brother Mouth internally several times. As usual — dead silence.

"..."

He sighed quietly and continued listening.

"Second — [Prosperity] may not be the final answer, but it's definitely the first prerequisite.

From my own experience, and from cross-referencing with other versions of us, I have a persistent feeling that [Prosperity]'s fall doesn't just point to [Prosperity] itself, or even [Life] — it points to [Descent]. To [Corruption]!

Remember Le Le'er?

The Mother Tree of Fear is absorbing the universe's fear. And as [Prosperity] grows stronger, Le Le'er's ability to absorb fear multiplies as well — at the end of the day, mother and daughter share the same root.

But precisely because of Le Le'er's acceleration, our entire world nearly lost its 'fear'...

Maybe mortals standing against gods looks like a foolish act to you. But I only realized it in hindsight — by that point, we'd already lost ourselves as fear evaporated around us, becoming absurdly inflated and overconfident.

Of course, that confidence has already exacted its price.

So do you understand? Fear is crucial. Whether it's finding more allies for the Fear Faction or keeping the entire world on its guard — Le Le'er must die.

I suspect this is also why another version of us helped you eliminate [Prosperity]. When you go back, you need to confirm as soon as possible whether Le Le'er might have, because of [Prosperity]'s fall—"

"She's already dead."

"Mm, good... wait, what?" Scarred Cheng Shi's voice caught. He looked up and blinked. "Already... dead?"

"Yes." Cheng Shi nodded solemnly. "Just as you guessed — [Prosperity]'s fall severed her root, and she fell as well."

"..."

Scarred Cheng Shi pursed his lips, seemingly jealous of Cheng Shi's good fortune. But soon his expression brightened — because the smoother Cheng Shi's world ran, the "brighter" his so-called hope became.

And when he realized that some of that brightness carried his own contribution, Scarred Cheng Shi broke into a wide grin — as if everything he'd done had finally been worthy of his friends' trust.

After all — if Cheng Shi could live, then they, in that other world, could live too.

...

Chapter 1060: Always Trust [Time] — Go Find [Folly]'s Authority!

"Good. Very good. So good that I'm genuinely jealous of you.

But I'm not jealous that other versions of us corrected your trajectory. I'm only jealous that your friends are all still alive.

Being alive is wonderful. Being alive means there's still hope.

Ha — how strange. It's only been a day since we parted, and I already miss them.

Forget it. Enough useless talk. Let me move on. Third...

Always trust [Time]!

[Time] is the only key to finding the answer. These aren't my words, and they're not my guess — the Fun God said them.

The fact that you've made it here means you already know that [Time] is the linchpin keeping every experiment synchronized. Only while it exists can our slice universe remain normal and stable under the Observer's gaze.

That's the absolute prerequisite for preventing the world's destruction. As for how to find a way out of that desperate annihilation... the Fun God probably knows, but He won't say.

All I can infer is that this path of survival runs contrary to His will. And the only thing that runs contrary to [Void] is [Existence].

[Memory] concerns the past — but the past is a wrong turn already taken; naturally there's no hope there. The only thing left is [Time]!

Get to know [Time]. Understand It anew. You still have a chance. We...

Forget it, I said I wouldn't go there."

Scarred Cheng Shi forced a bitter smile and pulled out another can of cola, chugging it down.

Cheng Shi watched him and furrowed his brow in thought.

This was the second time his counterpart had called Origin "the Observer." The term wasn't wrong per se, but compared to "Experiment Master," "Observer" seemed to carry far fewer connotations.

But Cheng Shi wasn't about to fixate on minor details. He could feel Time Deduction's duration depleting faster now — this meeting was about to end.

He'd barely opened his mouth to say something when the other him, clearly anticipating this, waved him off and continued:

"Fourth!

This is my conjecture and may not apply to your world.

[Folly]'s authority may not be lost at all — It simply hid it."

"What!?"

Cheng Shi was stunned, but in the very next instant he realized the idea wasn't far-fetched.

This was supposedly the wisest god in the universe. If It had foreseen that Its authority would be lost, how could It have possibly risked exploring the so-called truth in person?

With mortal wisdom, Cheng Shi couldn't calculate as far ahead as a true god. But with hindsight, it was easy to see — [Folly] had far too many methods to verify the universe's truth, none of which required going in person.

Yes — Wei Mu had said that even if it was a foolish act, [Folly] insisted on being the first god to attempt it. But once It lost Its authority, how could It guarantee It'd be the "first" in all the foolish acts that followed?

A strange light flickered in Cheng Shi's eyes.

"You want me to find [Folly]'s authority?"

Scarred Cheng Shi nodded, his voice tinged with emotion:

"It's the stupidest approach — but also the one with the most hope.

Getting [Folly]'s authority would let you see through everything in this universe just as It does. You'd understand the Fun God's strategy, uncover the experiment's flaws, and find that one and only path to survival.

Of course, that path certainly doesn't exist in my world. But your world still has hope.

The crucial thing is — in [Folly]'s eyes, searching for Its authority absolutely qualifies as a foolish act. And since it's a foolish act, It would have no inclination to stop you.

So Its authority is, theoretically, the 'easiest' among all the gods' authorities to obtain.

But actually finding it might be the hardest thing in the world...

By my knowledge, even [Folly] Itself doesn't remember where Its authority is. So isn't that, too, a foolish act in its own right?

Tch—"

"..."

Indeed.

If a mortal managed to find [Folly]'s authority, then [Folly]'s act of hiding it would qualify as a grand-scale foolish act. It probably wouldn't want to become the universe's laughingstock — so this task might not be any easier than finding the one path to survival itself.

But they had to try, didn't they? For the sake of staying alive.

After saying all this, Scarred Cheng Shi's figure was already beginning to blur. Seeing his other self about to return alone to face that desperate world, Cheng Shi's heart clenched. Once more, he spoke:

"What else can I do for you?"

Scarred Cheng Shi looked at his own dissolving limbs and burst out laughing:

"Don't help me. Help yourself.

I am you, so I understand you. I know your confusion comes from locking yourself inside the emotional prison of Old Jia's departure — not knowing how to accept other people's kindness.

But you need to understand: friendship is never a shackle for people like us. It's the key that frees prisoners like you and me.

It's not just the world that needs saving. We do too.

Staying vigilant is right. But opening your heart from time to time yields different rewards — and on that point, we're both liars enough that I needn't belabor it.

If you want to be stubborn about it — fine, we don't have to care about the other people in this world. This world's fate has nothing to do with us. But we do have to find a way to keep the friends who've helped us alive.

It's just that in the process, the world happens to benefit from our friends' good fortune and gets to survive.

Think of it that way — doesn't the pressure feel a bit lighter?"

Cheng Shi's expression grew animated. He had the distinct feeling that another version of himself was using [Deceit]'s talent on him. But he couldn't deny it — deceiving yourself was, in fact, an acceptable attitude toward the road ahead.

"Did you catch that from Big Cat?" He seemed to accept the idea, and laughed. But the laughter died almost instantly — because in that world, Big Cat might already be...

"More or less.

Big Cat was right. Her philosophy toward friends was simple and ahead of its time. Only friendship is worth going this far for. Worth her...

Forget her. Never mind.

Ha — I finally understand how Qin Xin felt when he shouted those words.

Sparks fade, but the flame passes on... What a rallying cry — the flame passes on!

In this desperate experiment, someone has to survive!

Someone has to shatter fixed destiny, break free of the game's shackles, and breathe a single breath of fresh air outside this experiment!

Even if only for an instant.

So... I can die. But this bullshit slice-universe experiment dies with me.

Since we're 'one of our own' — remember to cheer when I die. Because it won't be humiliation, and it won't be surrender. It'll be mockery drawn in blood. I will laugh in the face of that Observer — watched by billions of lives across billions of worlds — and tell It: Your experiment will never produce an answer!"

The words faded. The figure vanished.

Cheng Shi, deeply moved, dropped back into the experiment's reality. He stared blankly at the variable version of himself and found that the variable Cheng Shi was also staring blankly back at him.

"You're not Qin Xin. Who are you, really?"

Cheng Shi's heart was a churning mess of emotions. He looked into the variable Cheng Shi's eyes with a thousand feelings warring inside him: "I'm the future you."

And then, silently, he added in his mind:

If...

You still have a future.

...