

## The Gods 1081

Chapter 1081: ...Still an Audience

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"?

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Chapter 1082: The Blank Collection in the Collection Hall

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.

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Chapter 1083: The Children of [Birth]

[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.

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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.'

...

Chapter 1084: The "Savior" Has Arrived

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?

...

Chapter 1085: Where Do You Go for Justice?

"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.

...

Chapter 1086: A Warning and a Gift

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."

...

Chapter 1087: Chain Reaction...

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.

...

Chapter 1088: Meeting of the Two Dragons

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?"

...

Chapter 1089: A Brief Respite

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.

...

Chapter 1090: Entering the Game in Person, Accelerating the Fixed Destiny

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 O221'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?'

...