

The Gods 1111

Chapter 1111: Cheng Shi's Spark of Inspiration

Cheng Shi's operation wasn't really about taking advantage of the Dragon King.

He couldn't deny the thought had crossed his mind — but the primary motive was rescue.

His first attempt was to have his shadow look into the mirror!

Shadow Cheng Shi was now an intelligent life form enlightened by [Truth]. Logically, he should be capable of triggering the mirror. The cautious Cheng Shi would never look into the mirror himself, so his shadow was the natural first choice.

In Cheng Shi's subconscious, he didn't consider Shadow Cheng Shi an independent individual. He treated it more as a convenient "prop" — after all, it had been born from the Clown Substitute.

So he reasoned: if the rules Zhen Xin described were correct, then having Shadow Cheng Shi look into the mirror to swap out the Dragon King, then using his own talent and dice to perform a reversal — wouldn't that perfectly solve the problem of That Dream My Nightmare having consumed the Dragon King?

But reality proved this scheme overly fanciful.

When Shadow Cheng Shi stood before the mirror, That Dream My Nightmare showed zero response. This meant either Zhen Xin's rules were wrong, or shadows couldn't trigger the mirror's mechanism. Since Cheng Shi didn't dare test it himself, he could only pocket the mirror and brainstorm later.

Over the next several days, Cheng Shi sat atop the rest area's rooftop with the mirror, racking his brain — not only about how to crack the mirror, but why the Dragon King had been trapped inside in the first place.

One thing was certain: the Dragon King had definitely gone in. Otherwise, he'd never have allowed a fake Dragon King to "inherit" everything and walk around under his identity.

But what was his reason for entering?

After much deliberation, Cheng Shi could only arrive at one answer: whether the Dragon King entered willingly or was lured by a Nightmare Shadow, the mirror must have contained something he found irresistible!

But this mirror had fallen into his hands before the Joker Society. If the Dragon King were truly interested, he needn't have waited until after the gathering to act.

So two possibilities explained the timing:

Either what interested the Dragon King only appeared after the Joker Society — and since everyone had conveniently looked into the mirror during the meeting, this suspiciously designed coincidence likely meant That Dream My Nightmare had effects beyond merely reflecting one's innermost desires. The Dragon King had concealed this, and those effects probably related to memory. The Dragon King had gone in specifically seeking those memories.

Or the Dragon King had foreseen the mirror's danger. Before coming clean, he hadn't dared enter alone. Only after letting the Jokers learn of the mirror's existence did he have the courage to investigate — because he knew his fellow con-artist Jokers would definitely come to rescue him.

Not out of "goodness" — but because these schemers also wanted to know the secrets he'd glimpsed.

Either way, the Dragon King's manipulation of the other Jokers was a fact.

And it was an open scheme at that. Even though Cheng Shi had figured this out, he still had to follow the Dragon King's script, because he too was interested in the mirror's secrets!

Think about it — Li Jingming had taken on the most dangerous part alone. All they had to do was rescue him, then trade on that "debt of gratitude" for everything he'd seen. Zero risk for full intel. Even if some of those secrets concerned Cheng Shi himself, there were still four others' secrets to gain.

No matter how you looked at it, it was a net gain...

Still, it was infuriating. The Dragon King had played him again. That crafty Taoist priest really couldn't lose no matter whose hands he was in.

'What a grandson!'

But how to proceed?

The mirror needed a living being to trigger it. He couldn't very well go back to Dolgod for this.

Sure, Dolgod had inexhaustible life. But if Aph Ros learned That Dream My Nightmare was in his possession, that razor-sharp mind would immediately realize the earlier visit hadn't been for explanations at all — just to find leads on the mirror.

That would undo all the "reconciliation" — and he'd have to waste more breath talking his way out.

Unacceptable!

Nor could he pray for a trial just to grab an NPC for help.

Not that he couldn't — but caution demanded otherwise.

Right now, trials had too obvious a target. Once inside, you couldn't tell friend from foe among teammates, and divine wills were unpredictable. Bringing the mirror along would be walking into a trap — the most reckless option imaginable.

If trials were out and he couldn't use allies as guinea pigs — forget secrecy, whoever swapped the Dragon King out would get sucked in themselves, making the whole exercise pointless.

An enemy would be perfect — but where to find willing victims right now...

[Oblivion] followers?

Not impossible. But if he was going to use That Dream My Nightmare to scheme against an [Oblivion] follower, he might as well aim straight at Herobos. If a [Memory] artifact could trap this [Oblivion] Envoy...

Wait!

An Envoy?

Right — why limit himself to players? Gods were the ideal target!

That Dream My Nightmare was a "demon-revealing mirror" that exposed the desires in one's heart. True, it was only a fragment of Memory Delusion, mere Servant God relic — but what if it worked on gods?

Then he could peer directly into a god's mind!

Like [Deceit]. Like [Fate]!

Even if it couldn't reveal [Void]'s ambitions, he could blame the whole thing on the Dragon King afterward — claim the Dragon King had begged him to do this to save him. Even if the gods got angry, they'd have to pull the Dragon King out of the mirror first before passing judgment, right?

Once the Dragon King was out, what was a little injustice?

Besides — the injustice wouldn't even fall on him!

'I'm a genius!'

Cheng Shi's eyes blazed. He was ready to act — but the surge of excitement immediately stalled, because he faced a new choice:

Whom should he pray to?

Whether [Deceit] or [Fate], Cheng Shi wanted to glimpse their deepest intentions.

If That Dream My Nightmare truly worked, reflecting [Deceit]'s desires would be an offensive move — aiding future planning. Reflecting [Fate]'s desires would be defensive — useful for self-preservation.

Both paths were acceptable. But from another angle...

The Dragon King was also a [Deceit] follower. When it came time to shift blame, even if the Fun God held Cheng Shi accountable, He'd most likely still fish the Dragon King out.

But [Fate] was different. He had zero connection to Li Jingming. [Void]'s wrath would definitely land on the Dragon King's head. Though that had its upside too — thanks to Fixed Destiny's protection, Cheng Shi himself would escape unscathed.

One option meant predictable self-suffering. The other meant the Dragon King catching trouble as expected. The choice was obvious.

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow and decisively pulled out...

The dice of [Fate].

He was going to see [Deceit] one more time!

"As grandpa, I have to look out for my grandson. I really am too kind."

With that, Cheng Shi gripped the dice and chanted devoutly:

"Cannot distinguish true from false, need not debate void from real.

O great god of [Deceit], your devout — wait wait wait—"

Whoosh — and Cheng Shi vanished.

...

Chapter 1112: Taking That Dream My Nightmare to Mirror [Deceit]

Never in his wildest dreams did Cheng Shi imagine that the one who summoned him was neither [Deceit] nor [Fate] — but...

[Chaos]!

Granted, [Chaos] was the Fun God. But being summoned under a different guise had only happened once before — the last time the two sides of [Void] had gone to war.

So now what?

Cheng Shi's heart lurched. Something felt off — beyond his calculations. He looked up nervously at the massive hand of roiling yellow mist that hung above the temple, and said, expression priceless:

"My Benefactor... the two of you aren't still... fighting, are you?"

The colossal hand's fingers fell one by one, rhythmically tapping against the fog, its tone bizarre as it replied:

"Hmm~

Knowing we're in combat, and you still chose this moment to offend Him?

I was wondering why His divine power suddenly went berserk. Are you trying to make sure I lose this [Void] civil war?

You didn't seriously expect Him to relay the Clown's prayer while simultaneously launching an attack against me, did you?"

"..."

Cheng Shi's face crumbled.

'My mistake, my mistake. Please stop with the sarcasm, my Benefactor. How was I supposed to know you two could fight this long?'

'What's happening — is this the final showdown?'

'You can't actually be trying to settle all your differences in one fight — winner takes all?'

The chaotic giant hand seemed to read Cheng Shi's thoughts. It waved clear the fog before it and scoffed:

"Tch—

Simple-minded. Just like your Benefactor.

That is indeed what He's thinking. [Fate] has gone mad. He probably knows certain things can no longer convince even Himself, so He's using this as a final reckoning with me.

Tch — does He really think being the era's master makes Him invincible?

This era has two masters. And besides, apart from 'Him' who sits above the universe's experiment — what kind of masters are the rest?"

'Can no longer convince Himself?'

'What is [Fate] trying to convince Himself of?'

Cheng Shi's head filled with question marks. "My Benefactor, didn't you and [Time] erase [Fate]'s memories of the real universe? Then why—"

"I wasn't talking about that. And you needn't know the details.

Just stay away from Him for now. He's hit His mood swings — extremely volatile.

So, what brings you back this time?"

"I..."

Cheng Shi suddenly hesitated.

The timing couldn't have been worse. He hadn't known the [Void] war was still raging. If he used That Dream My Nightmare on the Fun God now and something went wrong due to [Memory]'s power, would the [Deceit] main body — currently locked in battle with [Fate] — suffer consequences?

That single beat of overthinking froze him in place — moving was wrong, not moving was wrong. In the end, he decided to make up some excuse, stall the Fun God, and wait until [Deceit]'s main body summoned him before executing the plan.

But just as he opened his mouth to speak, the giant hand spoke first.

He'd forgotten something: the Fun God could read minds.

"Tch—

Seeing as a certain someone still has a shred of devotion... take out your little mirror."

"!!!!!"

Cheng Shi jolted. A full-body shiver ran through him. He stared up at his Benefactor, wide-eyed and helpless — his expression so absurd it was comical.

Bathed in the chaotic radiance, he looked exactly like a clown.

Not the profession — but the real thing.

Still, even a clown had his merits. At the very least, he'd never let the stage go cold. So Cheng Shi's mind sparked, and in a flash, he converted mountains of embarrassment into pure flattery:

"Praise the great god of [Deceit]! It is Your selfless protection that allows all Your followers to follow with devotion!

If the Dragon— if Li Jingming knew that You could still spare a hand to save him even while battling another god, he would be immensely grateful."

"Oh? So you're saying you brought this mirror to me solely to rescue another follower of mine?"

"Of course...

not!"

Cheng Shi straightened his expression and began bullshitting with a completely straight face:

"Not entirely!

When I learned this [Memory] creation had trapped Your follower, I feared it was a dirty trick [Memory] aimed at You. He exploited Li Jingming's greed for memories and set a trap — and the true target couldn't possibly be His own follower; it could only be You, my Benefactor!

That's why, the moment I obtained the mirror, I brought it to You — so You could strangle every conspiracy before it surfaces.

This is what any devout follower of [Deceit] would do. I merely followed the devotion in my heart. It's nothing worth mentioning — certainly not worth... a reward."

The instant he finished, the giant hand exploded apart and reformed into a pair of eyes, swirling with chaos and starlight.

Those eyes angled upward at the corners, regarding Cheng Shi with a half-smile.

"Oh? You want a reward too?"

Does a certain someone actually think I don't know why he's here?"

Cheng Shi shrank back, muttering under his breath:

"I wasn't thinking that..."

But divine gifts are like corporate incentive programs — they genuinely make followers work more devoutly and efficiently."

Then, feigning a verbal slip, he waved his hands:

"Ah — please don't misunderstand, my Benefactor. That just came out. I was reminded of a management theory from the real world."

The eyes grew even more amused. They fixed on their follower and scoffed again:

"Then you don't want one."

Cheng Shi blinked. Instant pivot: "My Benefactor, you've misunderstood. When I said 'I wasn't thinking that,' I meant I never imagined You didn't know why I came... As for the rest..."

He peeked at the Fun God's expression, ready to steer with the wind at a moment's notice. But the Fun God snorted, cut off his daydream, and put the choice squarely before him:

"So do you want it, or not?"

???

'Wait — there actually is a reward?'

'This better not be a scam!'

'Could That Dream My Nightmare actually be useful to the Fun God? Otherwise, why this attitude?'

Cheng Shi froze. In the "should I be greedy" challenge, he capitulated in one second flat. He squeezed out a devout fake smile and declared with rock-solid conviction:

"Yes!"

"Tch—

And who's the greedy one here?"

With that, the eyes blinked twice and directly pulled That Dream My Nightmare from Cheng Shi's personal space. And the instant Cheng Shi saw the mirror, he knew he'd been wrong.

Dead wrong!

How could he have trusted the Fun God's words?

This wasn't any damn reward — this was punishment!!

He couldn't blame himself for thinking so. The mirror now floating in midair had its reflective surface pointed squarely at him. And within that glass, Li Jingming — whom he hadn't seen in ages — was staring back at him with a complicated expression.

Cheng Shi tried to speak but found his mouth wouldn't open. He could only listen as the Dragon King in the mirror addressed him:

"I imagined a hundred ways you might come to find me. The one thing I never imagined was that you'd dare face this mirror head-on.

It seems I underestimated how much the Jokers mean to you. For that, I apologize. But I believe the secrets inside are worthy of your courage.

I must warn you, though: the paths inside are far too complex. Choose only one direction and walk it to the end. Otherwise, you may lose yourself in there and never return.

Remember — you must walk out. If you don't, even if I stand before the mirror again, I'll never be able to see you."

With that, the Dragon King in the mirror reached out his hand toward Cheng Shi.

Cheng Shi's gaze hardened. Instinct screamed at him to retreat — but he discovered that not only couldn't he speak, he couldn't move either. He could only watch as that hand passed straight through the glass and seized him!

The next second, in bewildered shock, everything inside the mirror rushed toward him, magnifying at blinding speed — like a tidal wave of [Memory] — and swallowed him whole.

BOOM—

The Clown was gone.

Watching That Dream My Nightmare devour His follower, those eyes reformed into the murky yellow hand. It pinched the tiny mirror between two fingers and tossed it carelessly into the Void.

"That Dream My Nightmare... what a fitting name — 'That Dream, My Nightmare.'

Whose dream is it? And whose nightmare?

The Clown is bold indeed, thinking to use this thing on me.

Heh — I wouldn't mind looking into it. But...

Would they dare to see what's inside?"

...

Chapter 1113: Beyond the Mirror — [Memory]'s Labyrinth

Silence. Eerie silence. So silent that only the sounds of breathing and heartbeat remained.

When Cheng Shi's consciousness flooded back, his first thought wasn't where he was — but what the Fun God was up to now.

Why had He thrown him into the mirror?

For a fleeting moment, Cheng Shi even wondered whether the Fun God he'd just seen was actually [Memory] in disguise. Otherwise, he truly couldn't fathom why He'd use him to swap for the Dragon King.

Was this a rescue — or imprisonment?

It surely couldn't be a "reward"...

With that doubt lingering, Cheng Shi slowly opened his eyes. A sliver of faint light squeezed through his eyelids first, followed by a cascade of intricate engravings filling his vision.

The strange patterns were deeply familiar. He immediately recognized them as identical to the etchings on the back and frame of That Dream My Nightmare — just magnified countless times over.

Recalling how the mirror had rushed at him moments ago, he wondered: could there be an even larger mirror inside this world within the mirror?

He cautiously stepped back and looked up — only to realize it wasn't a mirror at all.

It was a wall. A wall that pierced the clouds like the barriers of Truth — a sky-reaching mirror-wall with no visible top!

And this wasn't the only one. Behind him, to his left, to his right, even around the corners — walls everywhere!

Cheng Shi was stunned. After surveying his surroundings, he reached a conclusion: he was standing at the starting point of an enormous labyrinth.

No wonder the Dragon King had warned him about "getting lost inside." So the secrets within That Dream My Nightmare were hidden in this maze.

It made sense. Even [Memory]'s trials took place in dream labyrinths where seekers searched for exits. A labyrinth concealed within a [Memory] creation wasn't exactly far-fetched.

But!

The labyrinth's existence might be reasonable — but the Fun God's actions were not!

Why throw him into the mirror?

Originally, he could've waited safely outside for the Dragon King to emerge, then traded that "debt of gratitude" for all the secrets — zero risk. Now? The secrets were still out of reach, but the risk had arrived ahead of schedule.

What was the point of this?

Was it because his prayer over the dice had offended [Fate], causing [Fate] to surging power that put the Fun God at a disadvantage in the [Void] civil war — and so He punished Cheng Shi under the guise of a reward?

'Seriously, my Benefactor — aren't you being a bit petty?'

'When I used to blaspheme your twin, you weren't like this at all. You laughed and had a great time.'

'How come now that it's your problem, you blame me?'

'Could you maybe learn from your twin's one good quality and be a little more forgiving?'

Cheng Shi felt numb. His first instinct was to "break out." He thought maybe the talent [Time] had granted him could rewind him to before he'd entered the mirror. But that involved another question: if Shadow Cheng Shi snapped his fingers and escaped, would the real him follow?

Probably not. So, playing it steady, he first swapped faiths with Shadow Cheng Shi, then snapped his own fingers.

Snap—

Nothing happened.

"..."

As expected — against divine will, mortal resistance was futile.

He checked with Brother Mouth too — no response. For a moment, the Clown seemed to have lost all his strength.

With a helpless sigh, he began investigating his surroundings.

He was already here. What else could he do? Whether this was punishment or a so-called reward, under His gaze, surely He wouldn't let him die inside a mirror?

With safety more or less guaranteed, he might as well see what secrets the labyrinth held.

Cheng Shi's fingertips traced the enormous wall's engravings. He raised an eyebrow. 'Nice stone. Could take some home and renovate the warehouse.'

Yet no matter how he slashed, hacked, or blasted the walls with lightning, they didn't budge — completely immune to external force. His jailbreak aspirations were officially extinguished.

So the labyrinth could only be walked.

His gaze sharpened. He began circling the starting point, and after mapping out several forks, he finally discovered what the secrets inside That Dream My Nightmare actually were.

Just as he'd suspected — the mirror held every Joker's memories!

Because at the starting point's perimeter, across the seven available paths, he saw the silhouettes of six Jokers — himself included!

But these weren't physical forms. They were more like memory phantoms in dream-bubbles — oblivious to Cheng Shi's approach, each immersed in some scene from their past, performing their histories like actors on an invisible stage. They seemed to be pointing the way for whoever explored the labyrinth, awaiting the seeker's decision.

Seeing this, Cheng Shi understood: following any fork would reveal that person's memories.

So the Dragon King had indeed hidden information from the start. That Dream My Nightmare didn't just reveal one's innermost desires — it also preserved the memories of whoever gazed into it. The Dragon King had most likely ventured inside specifically for these memories.

And he'd said the only way out was to choose a single path...

So whose memories had the Dragon King chosen?

Cheng Shi frowned — not only wondering what dangers lurked in these memory paths, but also calculating whether to maximize his gain by picking a different path than the Dragon King's.

Before him, the current fork led to the Dragon King's memories.

He saw a young Dragon King practicing in a Taoist temple. The scene showed little Li Jingming sitting at a table with his master, transcribing the deeds of those who came before.

Logically, Li Jingming would never retrace his own past — it was his lived experience; he had no need for That Dream My Nightmare to remember it.

So choosing this path would definitely not conflict with the Dragon King's choice.

But... risking danger to explore a little Taoist priest's past — would that even be meaningful?

Apparently not.

He wasn't a [Memory] follower. He didn't practice his will by commemorating the past. So Cheng Shi studied the scene with an odd expression, watched it loop — little Dragon King finishing a page only to start recopying the same page — quietly freeloading the page's contents, and moved on.

The second fork held Zhen Xin.

This Zhen Xin was also a child. He had to admit — little Zhen Xin looked far cuter than the current version. But the memory on display was anything but cute.

Little Zhen Xin sat at a table, brow furrowed in thought, while behind her stood the silent, wordless An Jing.

Cheng Shi, who knew this history, immediately recognized this was the day Zhen Xin was adopted — and the beginning of her suffering.

He suddenly thought of himself. His expression turned inscrutable. He sighed and walked away.

The remaining forks showed: Long Jing drenched in sweat under his parents' coaching, the Doctor languishing in an unremarkable laboratory, and Mi Laozhang ostracized by colleagues on a lonely cemetery night patrol.

Facing these Jokers' pasts, Cheng Shi gave each only a glance, committing the scenes to memory — but never chose to walk any path to its end.

Until, after who knew how many rounds of hesitation, he finally stood before the fork bearing his own silhouette. Like a traveler afraid to go home, he watched Old Jia pointing at an adoption agreement, smiling awkwardly:

"No, no — you have a name. You have a name. I already picked one for you."

In that moment, Cheng Shi smiled. Memories surged like a tide, crashing against a dam called longing. The water overflowed, spilling as teardrops.

He was smiling — yet a single tear fell. It traced his cheek, and he spoke in unison with Old Jia:

"Cheng Shi. Cheng from Cheng Jia. Shi from honesty."

This was the first time, outside the Dream Peeping Ranger's dreamscape, that he'd seen Old Jia again. Even if the Old Jia before him wasn't real — it was enough...

A single fleeting glance was balm enough for a lifetime of longing.

He watched. The tear hit his shoe. Cheng Shi turned and walked away.

'If I want to see him, this world offers plenty of ways. The reason I don't is because I refuse to let this absurd game taint anything connected to him.'

'Yes — I miss him. But this is decidedly not a "reward."'

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Chapter 1114: The Riddle of the Path That Isn't

Before long, Cheng Shi arrived at the seventh fork.

No silhouette stood before this path. It was pitch-black and fathomlessly deep — one look and his gaze plunged into boundless darkness, as if it led to a devouring abyss.

Anyone with eyes would avoid this fork that bore no trace of [Memory]. But Cheng Shi was convinced this was the real answer.

The reason the Fun God had sent him in!

The Fun God would never have thrown him into the mirror just to swap for Li Jingming. There had to be deeper purpose. Though he didn't yet know what it was, the answer felt close.

Consider: inside a [Memory] creation, why would there be a path that seemingly led toward [Void]?

Blackness, stillness, the unknown — weren't these the very characteristics of the Void?

[Existence]'s marvels didn't manifest this way. Like the Cracks of [Existence], they were kaleidoscopic, dazzling, mesmerizing. Only [Void] was this hollow, lifeless, devoid of meaning.

Cheng Shi stood at the fork for a long while, brow deeply furrowed as though pondering whether to enter.

But in truth, he'd already entered!

Not his real body — but Shadow Cheng Shi.

When darkness stretched unbroken, a shadow with built-in camouflage became the uncrowned king of the dark. The moment Cheng Shi first circled past these forks, he'd guessed what the Fun God's intended choice was. His shadow had long since slipped into the seventh path to scout ahead.

His furrowed brow now was only puzzlement over whether this path had any end at all — because the shadow had been walking for a very long time.

The seventh path held nothing besides the mirror-walls on either side. Ahead: void darkness. Behind: the same. Not even a single branching turn. Arrow-straight — hardly fitting for a labyrinth.

After walking long enough, the unchanging environment nearly convinced Cheng Shi he was treading in place.

Yet every time he reversed direction and tried going back, the exit eluded him too. So he steeled himself and pressed forward once more.

Time crawled on. His frown deepened. He even began to doubt his choice — maybe he'd overthought it, and the Fun God had no deeper motive at all, just wanting him to pilfer some memories from this [Memory] creation.

But what if the answer lay just two steps further, and he gave up right at the threshold? That would be the ultimate clown move.

So, tangled in frustration, Cheng Shi gritted his teeth and marched on.

When the unchanging darkness grew tiresome, his real body wandered to the other fork entrances to rinse his eyes on those memory phantoms. When the monotony of exploration became suffocating, he made the shadow run, jump, cartwheel, and even handstand-walk. When he lost all sense of how long he'd been going, he traced the wall engravings and counted how many times the patterns cycled...

In short — anything that killed time and diverted attention, he did.

Yet the path ahead remained black. Seemingly endless.

At this point, Cheng Shi felt he'd been set up.

His own devotion had trapped him!

This didn't look like a road to secrets. It looked more like the ellipsis option among seven choices — fundamentally meaningless.

The shadow stopped, back against the mirror-wall, panting heavily. Cheng Shi's real body likewise leaned against a wall at the starting point, pondering how to break the deadlock.

Both Cheng Shis ran their fingers over the engravings, brows knotted. But breakthroughs often arise from details noticed by accident. When the magnified texture of the engravings' uneven grooves registered under his fingertips, a flash of inspiration blazed through Cheng Shi's mind. His eyes flew open.

Grooves!

He immediately turned to study the towering mirror-wall, running his hands along its patterns. Though the labyrinth walls were indestructible, the presence of grooves meant something: the surface offered handholds!

And if you could climb — was it possible that the labyrinth's exit wasn't at the end of the ground path, but above the walls?!

How else could a straight line qualify as a labyrinth?

Yes — this had to be it!

Excitement surging, Cheng Shi adjusted Shadow Cheng Shi — which had been in assassin form for scouting efficiency — switching to a warrior mask to become the Hero of Today. Gripping the grooves with both hands, the shadow began scaling the wall.

He climbed fast. Before long, the path below vanished from sight. But the wall above was equally endless. He climbed until even a Hero of Today's stamina showed signs of flagging before stopping mid-ascent, clinging to the heights, lost in thought once more.

The labyrinth's deadlock had returned — only now it had graduated from one dimension to two.

He looked up at the infinitely high wall disappearing into darkness, then left and right along the original path. Darkness pressing in from all sides formed a cage, trapping Cheng Shi where he hung.

The earlier excitement evaporated, replaced by that familiar deep furrow.

He weighed his options again and again but couldn't commit. From what he could see, the walls weren't the answer either. So how was he supposed to escape this labyrinth?

His steady instincts began rising. The idea of choosing one of the memory paths took root. He even stepped past a few of the memory phantoms to peek at what lay beyond those forks:

Ordinary labyrinths — nothing like the seventh path.

He guessed that following those labyrinth routes would reveal different memories of the chosen person, and those memories' clues would lead to the exit. But the seventh path offered no clues — only endless darkness and two unchanging walls.

What to do?

Hmm? Wait.

The other wall?

Cheng Shi frowned. He drove Shadow Cheng Shi to leap from the high wall to the opposite one — and continued climbing laterally for another half hour. Still nothing.

He was lost again. But this time, the bewilderment came and went quickly, because the feel of the grooves under his fingertips sparked yet another idea.

If the seventh path was also a labyrinth, it had to have clues. The darkness didn't look like a clue — so the clue could only be the walls themselves.

He'd first assumed the walls were climbable and theorized the exit was somewhere above. But what if the walls themselves were the labyrinth?!

What if the engravings on the walls formed a traceable pattern?

He'd run his fingers over them hundreds of times during ground exploration and wall-climbing, finding only repetitive cycles — nothing special. But who could guarantee that when the wall became a labyrinth, those engravings wouldn't form something?!

After all, labyrinth elements were nothing more than straight and perpendicular paths combined with forks in different directions — also a kind of repetitive cycle!

With this realization, Cheng Shi tried again. Shadow Cheng Shi stopped climbing upward and instead began circling the area, piecing together the engravings' pathways to see if they formed a giant labyrinth.

And after untold hours of effort, the shadow hanging on the high wall and the real Cheng Shi standing at the starting point simultaneously broke into wide grins and laughed aloud.

Found it!

The seemingly infinite walls were in fact one massive labyrinth diagram. The true labyrinth wasn't actually endless — it was countless identical labyrinths tiled together, creating the illusion of forever-repeating patterns.

Following the labyrinth's guidance, Shadow Cheng Shi quickly located the center of this wall-labyrinth — an ordinary-looking groove. Even when Cheng Shi pressed his hand against it, nothing happened.

But Cheng Shi knew [Memory]'s puzzles always worked this way. Even the exit would never be hidden in plain sight — just like [Memory]'s trials, where the dreamer had to realize they were inside a memory.

But the mirror-wall was an inanimate object. It had no memories. So Cheng Shi — who possessed no [Memory] power — devised a crafty workaround:

He began reciting the pasts of every Joker he knew to the "exit," while simultaneously recalling his own past in his heart.

Making others' memories "public" while keeping one's own memories hidden — this was the closest thing to [Memory] he could manage!

Whether because the "passcode" was right, or because individual memories genuinely resonated with the labyrinth's [Memory] power — as Cheng Shi kept reciting, the corresponding section of wall suddenly caved inward. The shattered surface erupted with violent [Memory] energy that engulfed Shadow Cheng Shi and plunged him into the unknown space beyond.

"!!!!!"

Sensing this, Cheng Shi... went blank.

"Wait — are you kidding me?"

What about me?

How am I still standing here?"

...

Chapter 1115: The Memory Junkyard

Setting aside how Cheng Shi was tearing his hair out in That Dream My Nightmare's labyrinth — Shadow Cheng Shi was having quite the fantastical adventure.

He'd fallen into a space he'd never seen — one that would have been unimaginable even before seeing it.

It was like a cavern — a bizarre space carpeted with crystals!

Enormous crystalline formations protruded from every corner of the cave — some long, some short, some brilliant, some dim. Even the ceiling and the ground were crystal, though in darker shades that, at a glance, could pass for rough black stone.

The place was self-luminous. Every cluster of crystals refracted shimmering light. But what glimmered across their surfaces wasn't merely physical radiance — it was also the faintest breath of [Memory].

Upon closer inspection, every crystal face — bright or dark — showed fleeting dream-like visions, like a revolving lantern. But they weren't the memories of any single individual.

Cheng Shi was thunderstruck. He stood rooted, scanning everything around him. Before long, he realized that compared to [Memory]'s Collection Hall, this place was the true "hall" of memories!

Because every inch of ground here erupted with memory. The cavern was like a misprinted history book, recording a jumbled past that stretched from the Land of Hope to the real world.

Only these fragments were chaotic, trivial, and dull. According to the elite [Memory] followers, this sort of thing wasn't worth remembering at all.

Within minutes, Cheng Shi had witnessed 12 fistfights, 37 affairs, 44 betrayals... and far more countless mundane moments of ordinary life — some so bland that they left zero impression even after viewing.

Exactly like the knowledge a teacher scrawled on a blackboard at school — seen and immediately forgotten.

He couldn't help but reflect: this was true history. What the world remembered as epic heroic history was merely spray kicked up by the vast sea of memory — visible only because the droplets had left the surface.

Yet what people always overlooked was that spray was the most insignificant part of the ocean. It was the intertwined lives of countless ordinary people that formed the so-called past of the world, gathering into this sea called memory.

Cheng Shi sank into the "world's past" and couldn't pull free. Before long, a violent wave of dizziness slammed him to his knees, retching.

His consciousness blurred. His cognition wavered. His emotions detached. When his memory became contaminated with too much foreign clutter and trivia, he began to grow confused.

No — "confused" wasn't quite right. "Stupefied" was closer. He froze. The retching motion locked in place. His entire being became dull and sluggish.

His human reason was slowly dissolving. His emotional core as a living being was evaporating thread by thread. His body began to change — crystallizing. Even though this Cheng Shi was only a shadow, crystalline veins crept across the pitch-black skin.

The real Cheng Shi suffered the same fate.

He collapsed at the labyrinth's starting point, his face covered in crystal scales. The crystallization was rapid — in an instant, his eyes, nose, and ears simultaneously turned to crystal.

But just as the crystals were about to consume his mouth, those lips somehow resisted the invasion and moved on their own, unleashing a soul-piercing roar:

"Who are you?!"

The sudden shout shattered the silence of both spaces — like a thunderclap exploding inside Cheng Shi's consciousness, jolting him out of his dazed stupor.

His body seized. Terror flooded through him. Mustering every last shred of strength, he crushed the smoke capsule in his sleeve, merging with the mist to wrench free of the crystallized state.

On the other side, once the real body was liberated, Shadow Cheng Shi clenched both fists and flexed every muscle, shattering the crystalline shell covering him entirely — reclaiming himself.

"Phew—"

The smoke hadn't yet dispersed, but Cheng Shi emerged from the mist and collapsed on the ground, spent.

Shaken by his survival after disaster, he looked up at the labyrinth walls and said, still trembling:

"I am Cheng Shi..."

I am... Cheng Shi!

Thank you, Brother Mouth.

If not for you, I'd have fallen straight into [Memory]'s trap."

The Fool's Lips didn't acknowledge the sincere gratitude. Instead, they sneered sarcastically:

"Weren't you enjoying all that gossip? Why'd you stop watching?"

"..."

'Not anymore. Definitely not anymore.'

Cheng Shi's expression froze. He laughed dryly: "Nothing worth watching. Gets old after a while..."

"Oh, now you realize you watched too much? Where was your caution earlier?"

And don't think I was saving you. I was saving myself."

Tch.

'A sharp tongue with a tofu heart, through and through.'

Cheng Shi knew exactly whom Brother Mouth had really been saving. But caught "in the wrong" and just rescued to boot, he wasn't in a position to argue.

So he smiled apologetically and seized the chance to ask:

"Brother Mouth, you're finally talking to me! So — where is that place?"

"What — been hanging around [Folly] followers so long you've gone stupid yourself?"

You saw it with your own eyes and still can't figure it out?

Everyone says [Memory] always plucks the finest pearls from the Sea of Memory and stores them in His Collection Hall.

But have you ever wondered — where do the memories that [Memory] didn't select as collection pieces end up?"

"!!!"

Of course Cheng Shi had wondered — he'd even thought of it the instant he entered that space. He'd only asked Brother Mouth for confirmation. And now the theory was verified!

This was the dumping ground for "rejected" memories.

In other words — this was the world's Memory Junkyard!

That's why the memories here were so vast, dull, and ordinary — utterly lacking interest. They were the pasts that mortals — no, even gods — deemed unremarkable.

But unremarkable didn't mean harmless. There were simply too many crystals in this cavern, too many accumulated memories. When the sheer volume exceeded the capacity of an individual consciousness, any "rememberer" who stumbled in would be drowned by the deluge — becoming just another heap of "junk" in this memory cavern.

Cheng Shi had already tasted that terror. So now, he did his absolute best to avoid looking at the visions flickering across the crystals. Unfortunately, every surface in this space was crystallized memory. Left with no choice, he pushed deeper through the limited open paths, hoping to distract himself with navigation.

He asked as he walked: "Brother Mouth, where does this lead?"

The Fool's Lips fell silent.

Undeterred, he tried again: "Brother Mouth, did the Fun God throw me in here specifically so I'd find this place?"

The Fool's Lips still wouldn't speak.

Cheng Shi had finally found a "conversation partner" and wasn't about to let it go quiet again. Eyes rolling, he tried another question:

"Brother Mouth — you say even [Memory] scorns the memories here. Doesn't that mean these are the rejects left over from what He curates for that Existence?

So if I stand here and repeatedly chant that Being's honored name — drawing down His gaze — wouldn't that be like offering [Memory]'s rejects to Him?

If that happens, whether or not the blasphemy brings down His wrath, wouldn't [Memory] lose any chance of ever approaching Him again?

And maybe we'd even recruit a new member for the Fear Faction!

Though... this plan might be a bit costly in terms of people. Brother Mouth, do you think the Fun God could keep me alive?

You'd definitely give it your all, right? After all — saving me is saving yourself."

Before he even finished, the Fool's Lips hijacked Cheng Shi's speech, gnashing their teeth:

"You menace — have some decency!"

"?"

Cheng Shi's steps faltered. He suddenly realized that not only had Brother Mouth gained a "dad" — Li Jingming seemed to have acquired one too.

...

Chapter 1116: The Other Shore

It seemed Brother Mouth had been frightened by the Real Universe as well.

From that moment on, he had stopped speaking entirely, and whenever Cheng Shi so much as attempted to mention that existence, Brother Mouth would manually mute him.

Still, that wasn't necessarily a bad thing—at least it added another layer of protection.

Cheng Shi continued pressing forward through the cave with his head down. As his pace quickened, the space ahead gradually widened, and soon a brighter glow appeared before his eyes. After rounding a massive cluster of crystal pillars, his field of vision opened up dramatically.

Beyond the cave lay a far more expansive crystalline world. Standing at the cave's edge, Cheng Shi looked like nothing more than a tiny dark speck projected onto the wall of an abyssal cliff.

He gazed down at the jagged ocean of crystals below, his eyes tracing a path forward until, in the far distance, he spotted a canyon rift that stretched across the landscape like a celestial chasm.

On the other side of that canyon, memory crystals blanketed the world just the same, but unlike this side, the radiance of Memory over there burned far more brilliantly, and the flowing breath of memory shimmered in a deeper, more vivid blue.

Clearly, the other shore of this Memory Dump led somewhere entirely different.

"Brother Mouth, is that where I'm supposed to go?"

Cheng Shi didn't expect Fool's Lips to actually respond. He furrowed his brow and peered toward the endless distance, estimating that if he tried to walk there, it would take him days and nights on end.

He wasn't sure whether time flowed differently here compared to the outside world. When the Special Trial arrived, would it be able to pull him back to reality from inside this mirror?

Probably not. The real question was whether he could participate in the trial from within the mirror.

Cheng Shi shook his head to dispel the stray thoughts and began marching toward the canyon rift. He had a gut feeling that the opposite shore was his destination—he just wasn't sure where it ultimately led.

The journey that followed was as unremarkable as the memories trapped in this crystalline world. All Cheng Shi did was walk and walk. To avoid being crystallized again, he never dared to glance at any of the images flickering across these crystals—he simply kept his head down and pressed on.

He silently counted the hours. In this unchanging space, he walked for dozens of hours straight. By his calculations, the next Special Trial should have already arrived, yet he still hadn't reached the rift.

Of course, the trial never came either.

This space seemed to be cut off from everything else, a self-contained system—much like the trials themselves, apparently consuming no real-world time.

Eventually, Cheng Shi went numb. He'd nearly forgotten why he was trudging through this place at all. Driven by nothing more than sheer willpower and the stubborn refusal to let this trip be for nothing, he dragged his heavy feet until he finally reached the canyon's edge.

The depths below the canyon weren't a pitch-black abyss—they too were covered in countless crystals. These crystals stretched like silken threads, stitching the torn halves of the canyon together. Cheng Shi only needed to follow those crystal bridges—some thick, some narrow—across to reach his "destination."

This time, however, he exercised a bit more caution. Before setting out, he made a point of asking:

"Brother Mouth, I have a feeling the other side is dangerous. I shouldn't go over there. What do you think?"

"If you don't say anything, that counts as agreement."

Fool's Lips let out a derisive snort but didn't bother to engage.

Yet Cheng Shi had already extracted his answer from that snort.

"A scoff still counts as a response—you spoke up, so you think I should go."

"Alright then, considering you saved my life earlier, Brother Mouth, I'll listen to you this time."

"...?"

With that, Cheng Shi gingerly stepped onto a refracting crystal and began making his way across the rift.

The crossing was excruciatingly long, but mercifully uneventful. Several times Cheng Shi nearly slipped and plummeted, but each time he managed to recover thanks to his Hero of Today reflexes—until he was close enough to the opposite shore for a single leap. He gritted his teeth and launched himself across.

But the moment he landed, he realized he'd made a mistake.

The azure radiance here did indeed signify a far denser concentration of memory essence than the other side. But that density brought a problem: the overwhelming mass of memories was viscous and almost tangible, ensnaring Cheng Shi the instant he touched down. They wrapped around him without giving him the slightest chance to react, threatening to drown him completely.

Cheng Shi's heart clenched. He mustered every ounce of strength to snap his fingers, attempting to use the power of Time—a fellow Existence path—to escape the crisis.

What he hadn't expected was that Time's power didn't spark any reaction against the local memories. Instead, it was the force of Fate that suddenly erupted, blasting him free from the endless cocoon of memories.

Fate had activated again!

Cheng Shi's vision went black, and he lost consciousness entirely.

By the time he awoke, he had no idea how much time had passed. He found himself no longer in the Memory Dump but in an unfamiliar room.

He was lying on a cold floor, one leg still draped inside an open wardrobe. Beside the wardrobe sat a minimalist plank bed. Beyond that, the room was completely bare.

'Where is this?'

'It's the apocalypse—who's still living in an unfinished apartment?'

Shadow Cheng Shi's bewilderment flipped to alertness in an instant. He sprang to his feet and began scanning his surroundings. The first thing that caught his eye was a neatly folded white garment inside the wardrobe, and beside it, propped against the closet wall, a mirror nearly identical in size to That Dream My Nightmare.

And as luck would have it, he had seen this object before.

"The Dreamless Mirror?!"

"Qin Xin's room?!"

"This is the Torchbearers' territory?!"

Cheng Shi's eyes went wide. At that very moment, a figure wreathed in faintly flickering candlelight descended from the ceiling of the bare room.

The candle flame guttered precariously, and compared to the brilliant azure glow of the Memory Dump, it looked almost tragically dim—barely worthy of being called light at all.

But no matter how it wavered, it never went out. Its feeble glow even traced the outline of an astonished smile on its face as it stared directly at Cheng Shi, clicking its tongue in appraisal:

"Well now, isn't this interesting—a life born in the shadows."

"!!!"

Cheng Shi whipped around, and the instant his eyes met those candlelit pupils, his mind thundered. Without a single conscious thought, the words tumbled out of his mouth:

"Flame of Hope?!"

"You know me?"

"But I don't believe we've met."

"Who are you? Why were you hiding inside the mirror?"

"And why do you carry the aura of Fate?"

"I'm..." Cheng Shi's words caught in his throat mid-sentence, and then realization struck him like a bolt of lightning. "So that's why the Fun God went through all that trouble—it was to arrange a meeting between me and you?"

The Candle Man's form stiffened slightly. He tilted his head with a frown and said:

"Deceit?"

"He sent you here?"

"That makes more sense, though it seems I should reintroduce myself."

"I am the Flame of Hope, burning at the margins. I am a Servant God of Void, and an Envoy of Fate."

"You could say I'm connected to Void, but I have never been directed by any deity—not Deceit, and not Fate either."

"Now then, little shadow, why don't you tell me what message He sent you to deliver?"

'???'

'Wait, hold on!'

'Aren't you one of Deceit's people? What do you mean by all of this?'

Cheng Shi was dumbfounded, but it didn't take him long to realize that something was seriously wrong with the Flame of Hope—something fundamentally off.

The Flame of Hope seemed to have a mistaken understanding of Deceit. He believed the Fun God had nothing to do with him?

'Huh?'

'But that's not what the Fun God told me!'

'Aren't you the Fun God's creation? When did you start thinking independently?!'

'Could it be that I'm the one who misunderstood?'

'...'

Chapter 1117: A Flame of Hope in the Shape of Deceit

"Your voice and build remind me of someone."

The Candle Man dripped down from the ceiling, pooling on the floor before re-igniting into a humanoid shape.

"If I'm not mistaken, your name should be..."

"Cheng Shi?"

"A Fate Weaver."

"..."

Cheng Shi had originally assumed the other party didn't recognize him and was planning to fabricate a cover identity—at least until he could figure out the relationship between the Flame of Hope and the Fun God, he'd rather not be too forthcoming.

Now, clearly, there was no hiding it.

Since he'd been recognized, he might as well own it. After all, they were both followers of Fate—surely the other party wouldn't stab him in the back?

Besides, he'd accumulated more than enough "merit points" with the Torchbearers. There was no reason his reward would be a knife in the back instead of a warm welcome.

So Cheng Shi nodded and replied:

"Yes, I'm Cheng Shi."

"Is this... Torchbearer territory?"

The Candle Man circled Shadow Cheng Shi with curiosity, examining him from every angle while clicking his tongue in appraisal:

"Nice new skin. The shadow coloring hides your face, but if I mentally superimpose the face from my memories, it actually gives off an indescribable air of mystery. No wonder certain people can't stop thinking about you."

"But where did you get this dark skin?"

"Deceit's handiwork?"

"Hmm, that tracks. He does love messing with people—especially His own followers."

"Oh? I just had a thought. When you go back, ask Him something for me—how do I get a look like this?"

"If fire could hide in darkness, then its glow might stop attracting unwanted attention from the outside. That would make passing the flame a lot easier for them."

"..."

The erratic train of thought combined with the teasing tone left Cheng Shi momentarily dazed. 'This thing absolutely has to be hand-crafted by Deceit, right?'

'He's already shaped exactly like Deceit, and you're telling me he's a Servant God of Fate?'

'I wouldn't believe it if you beat me to death—unless those two somehow swapped "children" at birth.'

'But the problem is, Deceit doesn't have any "children" either. The only Envoy that the players know about—Yu Xi—is a persona I made up myself...'

Cheng Shi was confused. He secretly consulted Brother Mouth, but Brother Mouth maintained his silence.

'That mouth has probably straight-up converted to Silence at this point. Fine, fine—once I see the Fun God again, I'm absolutely filing a complaint against you.'

Cheng Shi furrowed his brow. Unable to contain his curiosity any longer, he asked: "You really weren't created by Deceit?"

"?"

The Candle Man froze. Every flame on his body flared for an instant, and his two fiery eyebrows shot upward—he looked genuinely angry.

"Fate Weaver, if you came here specifically to provoke me, then I'll admit you've succeeded."

"Deceit's little probe was a success too. I'm weak right now—I truly can't expel you. But just because I won't act doesn't mean Xin-Xin won't."

"If I call Qin Xin in here..."

"Go ahead and call him."

Cheng Shi cut him off in a peculiar tone, extending his hand in an inviting gesture as he said with amusement, "I'd love to see whether Qin Xin would actually throw out someone the Torchbearers owe a debt of gratitude to."

"..." The Candle Man faltered again. "He doesn't remember you doing anything for the Torchbearers."

"Then why haven't you called him yet? Want me to do it for you?"

With that, Cheng Shi cupped his hands around his mouth, pretending to shout. But the reaction he'd anticipated—the other party rushing to stop him—never came.

The Candle Man merely stared at him with an equally strange expression, the flame atop his head swaying back and forth as he murmured:

"Why'd you stop? Something on your mind?"

"..."

"..."

The scene fell into dead silence.

The first round of probing was over. There were no winners on the field.

Or perhaps they were both winners.

Through this exchange, Cheng Shi arrived at a deduction: the eruption of Fate's power in the Memory Dump had definitely been the Flame of Hope's doing.

He had sensed Cheng Shi's approach long ago and had personally pulled him out of the mirror.

His target was Cheng Shi all along. He had no intention of expelling him whatsoever.

Moreover, all of this had been done behind the Torchbearers' backs—otherwise he would never have bluffed so transparently about whether or not to bring Qin Xin in.

The Flame of Hope, in turn, had reconfirmed something as well: Cheng Shi had no desire to be openly associated with the Torchbearers—at least not on the surface.

Though he'd already gleaned this attitude from the Torchbearers' memories, people could change. He needed to verify that the Cheng Shi standing before him was just as resolute as before. And now he was certain.

Cheng Shi was indeed a perfect target.

He had indeed come specifically for Cheng Shi, but as for whether the Flame of Hope had any prior plan—no, he didn't.

He had simply detected the approach of an anomalous destiny, then discovered Cheng Shi's trail within the Dreamless Mirror and fished him out.

The plan was improvised after the retrieval. The Torchbearers' progress was currently "flourishing," but compared to the pace of change in the outside world, it was still far too slow.

He didn't have much faith in Qin Xin's so-called God Creation Plan, so he had no choice but to step in personally and give them a push.

However, his own identity restricted his room to maneuver, so he needed to find a proxy for his will. And Cheng Shi—a fellow Fate follower and player—was undeniably a perfect choice.

Cheng Shi carried goodness in his heart and wouldn't object to helping the Torchbearers, yet on the surface he had no connection to them whatsoever, making him impossible to detect. More importantly, he was a dual-faith follower of Void, which put him leagues ahead of other players when it came to understanding Void's will. This meant he could leverage Void's protection to maneuver between two gods, carving out far more room for future operations.

So the Flame of Hope had zeroed in on Cheng Shi at first glance. And when Cheng Shi sensed the other's gaze growing expectant, the smile on his face froze instantly. He stumbled backward:

"If I said I was just passing through, would it be too late?"

"Heh-heh-heh, far too late." The Candle Man's flames danced wildly across his body, the very picture of "unbridled audacity."

"..."

'Dude, that laugh is kind of giving villain energy.'

'You know people who laugh like that generally don't live very long, right?'

Cheng Shi pursed his lips. Seeing that the other party bore no ill will, he couldn't be bothered to keep guessing. He simply adopted an at-your-disposal posture, letting the other party clear things up for him so he could finally understand what exactly Deceit was scheming.

Or perhaps, what Fate was setting into motion.

Indeed, this affair had been initiated by the Fun God, but that didn't necessarily mean Fate's will wasn't involved. After all, Deceit had once spoken of Fixed Destiny. When Cheng Shi considered the Fun God's upward rebellion, he couldn't help but suspect that Deceit's purpose in "pushing" Fixed Destiny might be to use Fate's predetermination as a vehicle for expressing his own defiance to the universe.

And that would also mean the prospects for Void's sacrifice were perhaps not so bright after all.

Cheng Shi's brow furrowed slightly as he turned his gaze back to the Candle Man. He felt that this peculiar Flame of Hope—who couldn't quite pin down his own identity—bore an uncanny resemblance to himself. They were both puppet artists taking the stage under the control of the gods' marionette strings dangling above their heads.

This sudden sense of resonance sparked an idea. Before the other party could speak, Cheng Shi beat him to it:

"I have this feeling that we've both been set up."

"Little flame, can I trust you?"

"?"

Chapter 1118: A Heart-to-Heart Between "Light" and "Darkness"

"Mortal, you stand before a Servant God. I suggest you choose your words carefully."

Cheng Shi smiled and paid it no mind.

'Who isn't a Servant God these days, huh?'

'Out in the world, titles are self-given. If you insist on playing that game, then I might just have to trot out my own long list of credentials to intimidate you.'

Cheng Shi had read the other party's attitude perfectly—the Flame of Hope had business to discuss with him—so he didn't bother being polite. Seeing that Cheng Shi wasn't buying it, the Candle Man bristled, and the flames across his body flared with an audible whoosh, burning noticeably brighter.

He seemed startled by this himself. His gaze sharpened, and the way he looked at Cheng Shi turned keen once more as he mused thoughtfully:

"My instincts were right after all..."

"Tell me why you're here, Fate Weaver. If you want my trust, you'll have to offer your sincerity first, wouldn't you agree?"

Cheng Shi waved his hand dismissively:

"Wrong. You're the one who needs my trust."

"We may both be pawns in someone's game, true—but my game can exist without you. The question is whether your game can exist without me..."

"So, start with your purpose."

"Little... Flame of Hope, I've never had any desire to become a Torchbearer. If you want to use me as a windbreak, you'd better show me why this wind is worth blocking—and also..."

"The benefits?" The Candle Man blinked.

"..."

'Great, another episode of my reputation getting trashed.'

'Which Torchbearer has been gossiping about me behind my back?'

The Candle Man pondered for a moment, resting his chin on one hand:

"Fine. As a deity, I suppose I should set a proper example for mortals."

"I do have certain plans for you, but I'm not sure how to broach the subject. Hmm, let me think... Perhaps all the explanations can be distilled into a single question:"

"Fate Weaver, do you want to become a god?"

"!!??"

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted sharply. He fell silent.

This was the same question the Fun God had asked during their very first audience, long ago. Back then, Cheng Shi's answer had been unequivocal: No.

But now, he hesitated.

A mortal, no matter how many titles he accumulated, could never take a seat at the negotiating table of the gods—let alone compete for supremacy in the Real Universe.

So Cheng Shi thought for a long time before his lips finally moved: "Is godhood the answer to everything?"

The Candle Man's flames flickered gently across his body as he smiled:

"You could say that."

"Godhood was never a status—it's an admission ticket."

"Even if you get one, you might not win. But if you can't get one... you'll never be able to achieve what your heart desires."

"But you're already a deity. You have plenty of options. Why would you need to cooperate with a mortal?" Cheng Shi cut straight to the heart of the matter.

The Candle Man raised an eyebrow, looking impressed:

"Sharp. Worthy of the sacrifice my master has His eye on."

"Since you want honesty, I'll put it bluntly: it's precisely because not a single one of those sixteen gods upon their thrones shares my convictions. That's why I have no choice but to seek help beyond the divine."

"?"

Hearing this, Cheng Shi furrowed his brow.

Logically speaking, the other fourteen gods could be excluded—they didn't even share the same Path of Fate. But hadn't the Flame of Hope just claimed to be an Envoy of Fate?

If he truly was an Envoy of Fate, then his will had to be encompassed within Fate's will.

And even if he wasn't—even if he was Deceit's creation—then his will would still have been inherited from Deceit's.

So how could he claim his will differed from every single god's?

If his convictions truly were different, what god would grant authority to a Servant God who didn't share their purpose?

It defied all logic.

Cheng Shi frowned, increasingly certain that this little flame wasn't telling the whole truth.

The Flame of Hope, as if anticipating Cheng Shi's doubts, immediately followed up with an explanation:

"I'm different from other Servant Gods. I was born from the Change aspect of Fate."

"When our Benefactor interpreted his devotion to Origin as an embrace of Fixed Destiny, Fate's will became saturated with predetermination."

"And Change is the mortal enemy of Fixed Destiny—destined to be guarded against by Fate. To ensure that Fixed Destiny would prevail, He stripped away a trace of unforeseeable Change and severed all ties with it. It was in that moment that I was born."

"I am the antithesis of Fixed Destiny. A mayfly trying to shake a tree. A mantis raising its arms against a chariot. The last shred of mercy that Fate's most fundamental tolerance left for this world."

"No matter where the world is guided by Void's will, I will always represent the smallest minority's affirmation of the opposing will."

"That's why, when Xin-Xin founded the Torchbearers, I saw him in an instant."

"I knew I had to protect him, because only when people like him remain alive does my faith—the aspiration of the smallest minority—have a foundation of its own."

"Yet the weakness of that faith has left me equally feeble. I can scarcely reach beyond this space to do anything for them, nor can I directly shield them from the gods' gaze."

"Until one day, Deceit found me."

"He told me He found these mortals who wanted to defy the gods rather interesting. For the sake of more amusement, He was willing to invest a little in them—provide shelter, block the other gods' eyes and ears. But He had one condition."

"What condition?" Cheng Shi asked, curious.

"He said..." The Candle Man flickered dimly, seemingly lost in memory. "That I had to ensure these mortals achieved their goal. Otherwise, the first one to destroy them... would be Him."

"..."

'What does that mean?'

'The Fun God shelters the Torchbearers so they can overthrow the gods—even himself—but if they fail, He'll strike first to... cover His tracks?'

'Otherwise, why would the condition be so bizarre?'

And yet, no matter how bizarre it was, the Flame of Hope had agreed to it—because by his own account, the Torchbearers would never have survived this long otherwise.

But given the current trajectory, the Torchbearers' so-called rebellion...

Was nothing short of a pipe dream.

The gods beneath this starry sky alone were formidable enough, to say nothing of that One in the Real Universe beyond.

Compared to Origin, the gods were like fireflies before a full moon. So what did the Torchbearers—still mortals—amount to?

The light of the torches they carried was probably nothing more than the most inconspicuous pixel on a canvas of billions.

'That's exactly why they need to create a god. That's exactly why the Flame of Hope asked whether I want to become one.'

Cheng Shi's expression grew complicated:

"Why me?"

"If you truly have a method for achieving godhood, wouldn't it be better for that god to be born from among the Torchbearers themselves?"

"Besides, as you're aware, I'm His sacrifice. If you tamper with His sacrifice at will, how can you guarantee our Benefactor won't punish you for it?"

"Being marked by Fate... isn't exactly a blessing..."

The Candle Man's flames wavered between bright and dim—clearly, he agreed with this assessment.

Two followers of Fate, huddled together and talking behind their Benefactor's back. One had to admit, this sort of thing could probably only happen in the era of Void.

"My choices are limited."

The Candle Man's tone turned unusually solemn.

"The Torchbearers' path ahead is still unclear. I can't let go just yet and leave them to gamble everything on one throw. Though Deceit's lies are countless, I know His promise to me was no jest."

"I cannot let the torch be snuffed out by His hand. So right now, my only option is to seek reinforcement from outside."

"That way, I'll still have time to continue mediating between them and Deceit."

Cheng Shi paused, surprised. "You're dying?"

"?" The Candle Man's breath hitched. "You're the one who's dying!"

"...Then why did you say 'let go'? Wouldn't the Torchbearers achieving godhood be a boost for you?"

"If you and they joined forces, you'd only get closer to hope."

The words sounded nice, but Cheng Shi didn't actually believe them. This hope was too distant. Against a journey of millions of kilometers, millimeter-scale progress could hardly be called "getting closer."

The Candle Man sighed:

"If the Torchbearers achieve godhood, they'll inevitably draw the universe's attention. When that happens, countless covetous eyes will descend upon them—people who may not carry 'fire' in their hearts but who most certainly carry every variety of desire. Those impure ambitions will corrupt the will of the torch."

"I told you—the Flame of Hope only ignites at the margins. When this fire burns into a wildfire, I will no longer be 'hope,' and I'll lose the very soil from which my faith grows."

"When that time comes, I'll be powerless, able to do nothing but watch them stake everything on one final gamble. How would that be any different from letting go?"

"So, until the accumulated strength is enough for a decisive blow, the fire must not be passed carelessly, and gods must not be created recklessly."

"I need to find an ally on the outside—someone who can help me protect the Torchbearers."

"And the person I've chosen is you, Fate Weaver Cheng Shi!"

"You needn't doubt, needn't worry, and needn't feel too much pressure. This isn't some conspiracy, because this decision..."

"Is one I only made today, after seeing you."

"..."

'Gee, thanks. Now the pressure's even worse.'

Chapter 1119: Conjectures About Deceit and the Flame of Hope

"I've laid bare my will before you. Does this sincerity meet your standards?"

It certainly did. Though many questions remained unanswered, Cheng Shi had to admit that the Flame of Hope was the first deity to so openly reveal their will to him.

Combined with the dual identity of "ally of Deceit" and "protector of the Torchbearers," Cheng Shi had already begun treating the Flame of Hope as a new ally of the Fear Faction.

And of course he was. In a sense, fearing Fixed Destiny was the same as fearing Origin.

So Cheng Shi smiled again and asked, "Then what's your plan?"

The Candle Man shook his head and waved his hands, chuckling softly:

"No, no, no—this isn't a Q&A session."

"I've stated my purpose. Now it's your turn to show some sincerity and explain why you're here."

"Otherwise, I can't confirm whether my choice was the right one."

Though the words sounded somewhat scrutinizing, the bright glow in the Flame of Hope's eye sockets told Cheng Shi he'd already confirmed his choice long ago.

Still, the question genuinely stumped Cheng Shi, because his arrival here hadn't been entirely voluntary.

It had started when the Fun God, without any warning, swapped him for Dragon King inside That Dream My Nightmare. Then, while trying to decipher the Fun God's intentions—and refusing to leave empty-handed—he'd pushed deeper and deeper into the labyrinth until he found the Memory Junkyard, where the Flame of Hope detected him and pulled him out of the Dreamless Mirror.

If he had to pinpoint a reason beyond Deceit's external push, the rest was probably driven by desire and greed.

But saying that out loud would be mortifyingly embarrassing.

Here was a Servant God, talking to him face-to-face about "hope, rebellion, and passing the torch," and he was supposed to respond with "Are there any treasures here?" How would that make him look?

'Does my reputation even matter anymore?'

'I can't exactly let myself sink so low that I end up sitting at the same table as those unlucky bastards, can I?'

So Cheng Shi paused, sifted through his many unresolved questions, and picked the one with the most gravitas to serve as his "purpose."

His expression turned solemn as he declared:

"I came seeking an answer."

"I asked Deceit for guidance, and He sent me here. So I've been wondering—could you, Flame of Hope, be my answer?"

The Candle Man was visibly intrigued by Cheng Shi's air of mystery. His flames swayed across his entire body as he tilted his head and asked curiously:

"What answer?"

Cheng Shi drew a deep breath and decided to be genuinely honest for once.

He could sense that the Flame of Hope's will was authentic, which meant the other party's convictions were remarkably similar to his own. They were both members of the smallest minority, both "overreaching beyond their station." By that logic, they were natural allies.

Since that was the case, he would trade sincerity for an answer.

"I want to know how to escape this universal experiment—and how to break free from the Creator's control in the Real Universe!"

"..."

Upon hearing this, the Candle Man showed none of the shock, terror, admiration, or agreement Cheng Shi had expected. Instead, he murmured to himself in confusion:

"'Creator' I can understand—that probably refers to Him."

"But what do 'universal experiment' and 'Real Universe' mean?"

"You see this Faith Game as an experiment?"

"And the Real Universe—is that some mortal term for a particular stretch of the starry sky?"

"I don't think I've ever heard any of the Torchbearers use that kind of language..."

"?"

From that single remark, Cheng Shi realized the Flame of Hope knew nothing about the other slice universes beyond this one. His vision was still confined to the starry sky overhead!

'That's strange. The Fun God's every move clearly aimed to bring me face-to-face with the Flame of Hope. But if he doesn't even know about these things, what's the point of meeting him?'

'A Servant God of Fate who hasn't even grasped the bigger picture probably can't offer me any relevant "advice."'

'Wait—hold on!'

Cheng Shi's gaze sharpened. A sudden thought struck him: 'Could the Fun God have thrown me here because He wants me to reveal the truth to the Flame of Hope?'

'What?'

'He wants a clown—someone who's been traumatized by the Real Universe's bloody cessation and scarlet mockery—to deliver fresh "despair" to this Servant God of Fate who's still quietly protecting the Torchbearers in his little corner? To tell him that his so-called "burning at the margins" isn't nearly marginal enough—that on the scale of the Real Universe, he's nothing at all?!'

'Have some decency, my Lord.'

'Even if You wanted to tear off this bloody bandage for him, why not do it Yourself?'

'When Time reset the world, You could have simply preserved the Flame of Hope's memories. What possible benefit is there in making me the villain?'

Cheng Shi frowned. He didn't see how resetting the Flame of Hope's memories could serve as a valid excuse for engineering their meeting. Given the Flame of Hope's convictions, the moment he learned the truth about the universe, he would inevitably join the Fear Faction. They were natural allies—no contrived introduction was necessary.

Moreover, preserving memories through Time's methods could be done silently and seamlessly—far more efficient than having Cheng Shi deliver the revelation personally. The Fun God had absolutely no reason to orchestrate something so convoluted and pointless.

And yet He had. Why?

Unless...

Cheng Shi's eyes turned razor-sharp as he looked at the Candle Man before him, his mind racing at full throttle.

Unless this Servant God of Fate had never witnessed the Real Universe at all. When the world collapsed, he hadn't noticed the sky falling!

But how could a Servant God fail to perceive the world's collapse?

There seemed to be only one answer:

He had been deceived!

The Fun God had used an illusion to trick him, making him believe nothing had happened!

So even after the world was reset and some deities retained their memories, the Flame of Hope would never retain any—because he had never witnessed those events firsthand!

Yet this only deepened the mystery. The Flame of Hope's very will was about finding life in the face of death. Letting him know about the Real Universe would hardly be inappropriate—in fact, it might even unite the Fear Faction further. So why would the Fun God deceive his own ally?

'To prevent fear from becoming despair?'

That didn't seem right either, because without despair there could be no Flame of Hope. His faith was rooted in exactly that. He wouldn't cease to exist just because of despair.

As he himself had said, only when the flame of hope grew large enough to become a wildfire would he potentially cease to be. So even if only a single person remained on the path of rebellion, he would appear and shelter that last spark.

If that wasn't the reason, then what was?

Cheng Shi pondered for a long time—so long that even the Candle Man realized the earlier question had touched upon something critically important. Just as he was about to ask what Cheng Shi was thinking, Cheng Shi jolted, and a hypothesis so incredible that even he could scarcely believe it surfaced in his mind.

The illusion the Fun God had woven prevented the Flame of Hope from seeing the Creator and the Real Universe. Viewed from another angle, what He had done could be interpreted not as deception, but as... concealment.

He didn't want the Flame of Hope to see Origin!

Or, more boldly—regardless of whether Origin was truly omniscient—the Fun God equally didn't want Him to see the Flame of Hope!

Cheng Shi's eyes went wide. He thought he had finally glimpsed the Fun God's reasoning.

He was trying to tell Cheng Shi that the significance behind the Flame of Hope was quite possibly far greater than anything he had imagined!

Chapter 1120: The Envoy of Deceit's Path to Godhood

"You seem to have figured something out. Interesting—care to share what's on your mind?"

"Is it related to the universal experiment and the Real Universe you mentioned?"

"I can understand interpreting this era's Void game as an experiment, but this 'Real Universe' concept—I'll need you to explain that one yourself."

The Candle Man watched Cheng Shi with considerable curiosity, unaware of just how turbulent the Fate Weaver's thoughts had become.

Cheng Shi didn't know where to begin, so he started with a question:

"Flame of Hope, what does the world look like from your perspective?"

The Flame of Hope raised an eyebrow, shaking his head with a smile: "I told you, this isn't a Q&A session. True cooperation isn't just one-sided taking. You—"

"This is important." Cheng Shi cut him off with absolute conviction. "Trust me. Answer my question, and then you'll know everything I know."

"Including what answer I'm pursuing, and why I ended up here."

Seeing Cheng Shi's grave expression, the Flame of Hope's tone faltered, and his gaze turned deep.

He deliberated briefly, then decided to trust Cheng Shi once more.

"Eras shift, faiths change. The supreme Creator made all things, then inscribed several full stops in His book of creation—and those full stops became the gods of the universe."

"They represent the conclusion of each phase of faith, collectively anchoring the path of past beliefs for the Creator."

"Some of Them are devout, others fearful. Their views of the Creator differ—the fearful ones keep their distance, while the devout ones wish they could serve at His side, even merge with Him entirely."

"Deceit is one of the fearful. And our Benefactor is the devout one who yearns to become one with Him."

"When the era turned to Void, Fate sought to forge a sacrifice from the universe's power to please Him. Such an act would inevitably bring about the universe's collapse, because He is the aggregation of all faith—to draw close to Him requires draining every last drop of it."

"The gods regard their respective faiths as their very foundation, so they would never agree. Deceit, in particular, pushed the Convention among the gods to ensure His own authority remained intact."

"But none of this could deter our Benefactor's determination to march toward Fixed Destiny."

"A decisive battle awaits the universe. A final reckoning awaits the gods. When it's over, either Fate achieves Fixed Destiny, or the universe is dragged into Void by His misfortune..."

"As the Change that Fate discarded, I represent this world's tiniest minority of rebellious will. I am sworn to find a path of survival for this world—and that is why I protect the torch."

"Is that enough, Fate Weaver? These are my innermost convictions. Surely they're sufficient to earn your sincerity."

Cheng Shi nodded silently and began sharing everything he knew.

But the shock he delivered to the Flame of Hope was far more devastating than anything the Flame of Hope had anticipated.

His very first sentence rooted the Candle Man to the spot.

"The Creator isn't a creator—He's an Experiment Master."

"What I called the 'universal experiment' is meant literally. The starry sky you and I see is this experiment—or rather, one of its samples..."

"?"

The Candle Man blinked, seemingly unable to comprehend. But as Cheng Shi continued, the light in his eyes gradually dimmed. Even the flames across his body lost their heat, and his entire being seemed to wilt.

This time, Cheng Shi held nothing back. He told the Flame of Hope everything—from Truth's experiment to the bloody cessation, from the world's reset to the Convention's gambit. He laid it all bare, wanting to discover what secret the Flame of Hope harbored that was so important even Origin "must not see it."

After hearing everything, the Flame of Hope clearly sensed his own significance. He furrowed his brow and brooded for a long time before recovering some of his vigor. His tone turned deeply solemn:

"This truth exceeds anything I'd imagined. My mind is still in turmoil."

"However... there are things I know that do align with your timeline, so I believe you. This shouldn't be a lie."

He let out a bitter laugh.

"Who would fabricate such an earth-shattering falsehood just to erode my hope?"

"If Deceit truly wanted the Flame of Hope extinguished, He could have acted long ago. He wouldn't even need to withdraw His protection—He could simply let me vanish in this world that our Benefactor refuses to accept."

"I think I understand what you're looking for now, and I can guess why He sent you to me."

"When you think about it, what you've come here seeking and the reason I chose you—they're really the same thing."

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted. He immediately responded: "Godhood..."

"Exactly. Godhood."

"The same principle applies: the status of a god is an admission ticket to the grand table. Only now it carries an additional meaning—it's also the ticket to the Real Universe."

"Before a mortal achieves godhood, there's no point in even discussing how to escape His experiment. After all, between you and Him stands an entire pantheon of beings that mortals consider omnipotent."

"So whether you want it or not, becoming a god is the only path forward."

The Candle Man seemed to reignite. Perhaps it was the faint spark of determination in Cheng Shi's uncertainty that rekindled his own hope. He cracked a smile and regarded Cheng Shi appraisingly:

"But you're fortunate."

"I can't say how much good luck our Benefactor has wagered on you, but at the very least, on the road to godhood, you still have a choice."

"And even if you don't truly wish to become a god, you can achieve your goal while simultaneously becoming one!"

"?"

That statement left Cheng Shi genuinely baffled.

"How can someone become a god while not becoming a god at the same time?"

"Isn't that a paradox?"

"That's—"

'Wait!'

Cheng Shi seemed to have guessed something. He shuddered, and the word burst from his lips:
"Deceit?"

"Exactly! Deceit!" The Candle Man clapped his hands, his voice laden with meaning. "Though I am merely the unpredictable fragment of Change within Fate, I am still an Envoy of Fate, and I possess the ability to perceive essence."

"I've long wondered—our Benefactor created me even while discarding me, so why has Deceit never elevated an Envoy to serve at His side?"

"Now I see it clearly. It's not that He was unwilling—He was waiting."

"He reserved that opportunity for His fear, and for those who share that same fear."

"And that person..."

The Candle Man didn't say the name outright, but his gaze made it abundantly clear.

Cheng Shi's expression cycled through a spectacular range of emotions—and he couldn't argue, because he really had obtained Deceit's container.

Once the divinity belonging to Yu Xi filled to the brim and assembled itself, he would possess every qualification needed to wield Deceit's authority. All that would remain was Deceit's personal decree.

But the Flame of Hope clearly didn't know any of this. He was still explaining his theory of godhood to Cheng Shi.

"Deceit is deceit—it lies in the deceiving, and it lies in the fraud."

"I realized long ago what form His Envoy would take. Just as you're struggling right now—you want to seize a god's power, yet you don't want to be lumped in with what you understand gods to be."

"But the Envoy of Deceit is unlike any other Servant God. He doesn't need to possess a true divine status the way I do, because his status doesn't reside in himself—it resides in deception, in whether the world is fooled!"

"When the world is deceived into believing he is a god, then he is."

"When the world sees through the lie and believes he is not, then he is not."

"This is the Envoy of Deceit's path to godhood, and it is the secret I share with you today."

"!!!!!"

The instant he heard this method of apotheosis, Cheng Shi's mind—

BOOM—

Exploded.