

The Gods 1321

Chapter 1321: True Fixed Destiny

Sure, it was there — but could they say so?

Everyone exchanged glances, looking to one another. Li Jingming pondered for a moment, then spoke with quiet gravity:

"The Bone Bell... did you ring it? Blaspheming against the gods so openly and brazenly — are you certain none of them noticed?"

Cheng Shi shook his head, pulled out the Bone Bell, and dropped it on the ground. Under the Jokers' startled gazes, he smiled.

"No need to ring it anymore.

This was never [Death]'s protection. It was the Fun God's deception.

He lied to old Zhang — a lie that saved the world — and used Zhang to keep that secret from the rest of us. So every bit of grievance you've aired against him has already been heard by that 'cunning, ruthless' god.

Everyone present — if we're measuring by the crime of blasphemy, none of you would walk free."

"..."

"..."

"..."

Seeing the tension crystallize across the room, Cheng Shi smiled again. "But don't worry. Even if blasphemy carries a death sentence, I'd be first in line. With me standing in front of you, what is there to be afraid of?"

Zhen Xin blinked, then let out a short, pointed laugh.

"That's not necessarily true.

We all know exactly how much [Void] watches over you. They may not be willing to let you die — but they'd have no problem letting any one of us die."

"..."

That shut him up completely, because she was right, and he had no counter.

Worse still — he'd already lived through it firsthand. Several of them had fallen right at his side, their bodies stacked into the road that led to Fixed Destiny.

The thought of so many friends dying because of him cast a flicker of grief across his eyes, but it vanished almost instantly. He forced a smile and looked around at the group.

"This time will be different. I'll be the one standing in front."

"?"

The phrasing was strange — nothing like what they'd expect from the Fate Weaver, whose whole instinct was to shield everyone before himself. But without having heard about the false Curtain Call, they couldn't pinpoint the source of this sudden surge of feeling.

So the Jokers listened on with quiet patience.

"We are going to play it openly. And we're going to do it within the rules — in a way that gives the gods no grounds to refuse.

The Convention is rigid to the point of being exploitable — and that makes it our best weapon for seizing divine authority. As mortals, if we die, we die. We leave nothing behind. But if we become gods, the Convention protects us. At least in death, we'd be able to leave something behind for others — a thread of hope..."

This was the truth Cheng Shi had drawn from Qin Xin's death. He had finally come to understand that spirit the Torchbearers called "success not mine to claim."

But he found that spirit too heartbreaking. Perhaps success could still be his — if the pieces were placed correctly, if the Fear Faction still stood by his side.

His thoughts tangled and churned. He let out a slow breath.

"Enough of the grand talk. Let's get to the practical.

You all still remember [Fate]'s Fixed Destiny. President Gong once mentioned that the Creator is searching through experiments for a successful 'sample,' and the measure of that success is Fixed Destiny.

I've now found what that Fixed Destiny actually is."

The Jokers didn't seem shocked. They looked at him, then said in near-unison:

"You?"

"You? Praise be to Yu Xi."

Cheng Shi laughed at himself.

"That's right. Again, it's me.

Looking back, from a long time ago — when I first returned to the path of [Fate] — [Fate] kept whispering about Fixed Destiny in my ear. And then when I later penetrated [Void], Fixed Destiny locked onto me like a chain, completely inescapable.

I was lost, confused, afraid — yet I could never understand what Fixed Destiny actually was. That confusion only deepened my resistance toward [Fate] and gradually drew me closer to the Fun God.

From there, under the Fun God's shelter, I moved between the gods — learning their histories, feeling their wills, uncovering the truths buried in history, and understanding [Void]'s true purpose. That was when I finally realized: Fixed Destiny is the sacrifice that [Fate] has been crafting for [Origin].

And I, as it turns out, am that sacrifice. The honor is mine.

[Fate]'s devout intention to forge a sacrifice was inscribed into its will at the moment of its descent. Combined with the fact that this universe is nothing but an experiment, it's hard for me to interpret that intent as anything other than an instruction manual — a directive sent from [Origin] to [Fate] about what it needs.

[Origin] told [Fate] what it wanted, and [Fate], ever faithful, forged it a throne.

You might not believe this, but I — a mortal — was chosen to serve as the binding agent for that throne.

Ha. Is that funny? You're allowed to laugh."

No one laughed.

Despite the self-deprecating tone threading through everything Cheng Shi said, the unbearable weight he carried pressed down on every Joker equally.

Everyone felt only a deep absurdity. A mortal — how could a mortal serve as the binding agent for a throne the Creator needed?

What about a body of flesh and blood resembled a binding agent in any way?

Actually... there was one thing.

Blood.

Perhaps only the heat of that blood could fuse the shards of a throne together.

But then again — wasn't the Creator's demand rather absurd?

Sitting high above the Real Universe, controlling all things across billions of parallel slices — why would [Origin] need [Fate] to build it a throne?

What kind of throne was it? A throne for [Origin] itself? Or just a "toy" — a perfect replica of [Origin]'s throne?

Either way, for the Jokers present, it defied easy understanding and struck them as deeply, fundamentally strange.

If what the Creator sought was the divine throne of [Origin] itself — then that would mean [Origin] currently had no throne. But a being without a throne couldn't possibly control the living creatures of the universe.

Fine. Say it had no throne. Then could a "lesser god" it had created piece one together on its behalf?

Clearly not.

So if all [Origin] wanted was a "tribute toy" — a perfect imitation of [Origin]'s throne...

Had this world lost its mind?

A Creator had built a universe experiment of such cosmic scale, conducted across billions of parallel slices — all to find one satisfying "toy"?

So this wasn't an experiment at all. It was a toy factory, towering over billions of parallel universes.

"..."

Sometimes seeking the truth of the universe led you here — you thought about it long enough and everything started to feel meaningless.

Seeing the Jokers all furrowing their brows in bewildered silence, Cheng Shi steadied himself and smiled again.

"Now for the reveal.

I know you're all wondering what the throne [Fate] was building actually looks like.

As it happens — I've seen it."

"!!??"

"You've seen it?!"

At that, no one could keep their composure any longer.

Cheng Shi's smile grew stranger. "That's right. Not only have I seen it — I've brought it... back."

With that, he produced the throne fragment he had never shown to anyone — retrieved from the Corpse Field of Gods — and cast it before the Jokers, directly beneath the long lamp forged from the [Deceit] tombstone.

It was said to be a piece of a throne. In truth, it was the remnants of a god's corpse. When the dim lamplight fell across those remains of a deity...

"...!"

Every person present felt a rush of cold crawl up their scalp, their whole body trembling.

"This is..."

"An unexpected find.

A souvenir I brought back from the Corpse Pit of the gods. In all likelihood, this is what I've been calling Fixed Destiny — the very thing [Fate] has been building since the moment of its descent.

Only [Fate] draws its materials from our world alone. But this throne fragment — who knows how many gods from how many parallel universes went into it.

Whether there are remains of gods from our world in here..."

Cheng Shi gazed at the frozen, dimmed stars locked within the throne fragment, and once again heard in his mind the Outer God [Fate]'s words from the false Curtain Call — words that had cut like a blade:

"Your patron's corpse is so useful..."

If the Curtain Call had only been a lie — if [Deceit] was not truly an Outer God — then which world's version of [Deceit] had died, drifting homeless through the Real Universe?

Chapter 1322: Speculation Regarding [Corruption]

You had to hand it to the Jokers — they were the Jokers.

Once the initial shock had settled, the schemers suddenly realized that this was one of the rarest — no, singularly unique — opportunities they'd ever had to get this close to a divine being's remains.

And so, one by one, they set aside their unease and fear, clustering around the throne fragment to examine it closely.

The shards appeared solid but felt incorporeal. When you touched them, you could sense their existence — yet they couldn't be grasped or held firm. They seemed to exist in some flickering state between reality and illusion, defying description by any mortal sense of touch.

Everyone observed with meticulous care, minds turning at full speed. Before long, fascination overtook mere looking, and they cautiously began to use their hands — tracing the fracture lines, reassembling the shards into the shape of a throne.

Honestly, before they actually put it together, the Jokers couldn't have imagined that these pieces would form a throne. The fragment shapes were too bizarre.

But when the throne finally took shape before them — "two triangles meeting point to point, an inverted one at the back and an upright one at the base" — the sight of this structure they'd never seen before struck every Joker into stunned silence.

The throne looked to be about person-sized, yet the moment it was complete, it seemed to expand infinitely — growing to something like a titan's seat, flickering between tangible and intangible, as if it had truly embedded itself between reality and illusion.

Of course, this was only an illusion the throne's aura projected upon their minds. It remained the same size and hadn't shattered the space around it.

Even so, the throne was incomplete. Two pieces were missing — one from its back, one from its base — leaving two holes.

The Jokers stared at those gaps, brows furrowed.

Long Jing pressed his face close, peering through one of the holes at Cheng Shi on the other side, puzzled.

"Why are there two missing pieces? Did you lose them?"

Cheng Shi shook his head. "No. They were always absent. The corpse field where I found this throne — not a single corpse from those two gods was there."

He gave a brief description of what he'd witnessed in the Corpse Field of Gods, startling the Jokers all over again.

"You're saying the gods' corpses there were piled up like garbage?"

"That's right. Probably worse than garbage."

"..."

It had fully exceeded any mortal frame of reference. The Jokers traded glances, having been shocked so many times in succession that they'd nearly forgotten how to express shock.

Li Jingming studied the throne for a long while, his gaze grave and his expression earnest.

"The missing pieces appear to be [Corruption] and [Fate]. I can sense that the dim stars here resonate with [Deceit]'s power — which means the corpses within are [Deceit]'s, not [Fate]'s.

It seems a version of [Deceit] has died in the Real Universe."

Zhen Xin wasn't surprised by this, though the smile she usually wore had vanished from her face.

"Once the Fun God learned about the Real Universe, he would certainly have gone to explore it. But that's where the Creator's direct gaze falls — if [Deceit] made even one misstep, no one could save him... I just wonder how many versions of him have fallen there."

Cheng Shi let out a long breath in agreement. He deliberately moved past that sobering subject.

"Right. [Corruption] and [Fate] are both missing."

"Why?" Long Jing grew even more confused.

"I've been wondering the same thing. [Fate] is obsessed with Fixed Destiny — it likely wouldn't leave the original world so readily, not while building that throne. That's understandable enough.

But [Corruption]...

Up until now — has anyone ever actually encountered [Corruption]?"

The Jokers looked to one another, all shaking their heads. Indeed — none of them had ever heard of anyone gaining an audience with [Corruption].

At that moment, Cheng Shi snapped his fingers.

"Funny enough — I recently learned that someone may have seen [Corruption]."

"Who?!"

"The Sin of Desirelessness — Drasilco!"

Li Jingming jolted, disbelief crossing his face. "[Corruption]'s Envoy went to the Sea of Desire?"

"Exactly. The Black Dragon King went to the Sea of Desire." Cheng Shi's expression was grave. He shared with the group the secret that Poison had passed on to him. "My guess is that Drasilco came face to face with his patron. But the [Corruption] he found was nothing like the patron he'd imagined — so utterly different that when Drasilco emerged from the Sea of Desire, he was a changed being. He stripped Poison of her desires, turning her into someone without wants, and then self-destructed at the Sea's edge, right in front of her.

He died. The words he left behind were:

'It is not worthy of being visited. There is no [Corruption] in this world.

I believed I was myself — but I was never myself...'"

Everyone turned those words over in their minds, which were clearly riddled with contradiction, and the confusion in their hearts deepened.

Zhen Xin stood with her arms crossed, fingers tapping against her arm as she thought aloud.

"No [Corruption] in this world?"

Perhaps [Corruption] truly doesn't exist. But something must occupy that divine throne — otherwise, what has been responding to prayers and upholding the Convention?"

Responding... to prayers?

Cheng Shi's mind suddenly detonated. He caught onto something and his pupils shrank.

"[Corruption] never refuses — does that mean [Corruption] has never actually responded at all?!"

That was it. [Corruption]'s faith principle was to never refuse. But if it never refused, how could anyone prove that [Corruption] was responding — rather than simply never objecting?

And even the gods themselves couldn't locate [Corruption]'s whereabouts. Didn't that only reinforce the possibility that [Corruption] might not exist at all?

The thought hit everyone like ice water. Zhen Xin blinked, then her eyes flashed with sudden sharp clarity.

"Something is wrong.

Not with [Corruption] — but with whatever has usurped [Corruption]'s throne.

That thing definitely exists. Otherwise, if only an empty throne remained, the Sin of Desirelessness would never have said 'it is not worthy of being visited.'

This 'thief' has been using [Corruption]'s facade of never refusing to conceal the fact that it's occupying [Corruption]'s seat — until Drasilco discovered it.

But that doesn't add up either. Once discovered, why would the Sin of Desirelessness self-destruct?

Shouldn't he expose the usurper's crimes and reclaim 'justice' for his patron?"

"Because he found that none of it had any meaning. Praise be to Yu Xi."

The Doctor finally spoke. A discussion this momentous couldn't go without a scholar of [Truth]. The Doctor had been thinking at length, and he now delivered his conclusion with measured gravity:

"'I believed I was myself — but I was never myself...'

Drasilco is saying that his identity as an Envoy of [Corruption] had been meaningless from the start. If it was meaningless, why would he avenge [Corruption]?

He stripped Poison of her desires to warn her away from [Corruption]. So whatever hides in the Sea of Desire must be profoundly wrong — he didn't want more innocent people drawing near.

His death was both a release and a warning.

Praise be to Yu Xi."

A warning...

What kind of mysterious existence could compel a divine being to deliver a warning through death alone — while refusing to say more?

Cheng Shi furrowed his brow. He couldn't work it out.

The Jokers were each equally baffled, no answer in sight.

Then Long Jing — who had been idly turning the throne over in his hands — suddenly froze. He ran a finger along the throne's backrest and blurted out, seemingly at random:

"You don't think... it could be [Origin], do you?"

"?????"

The atmosphere in the room crystallized instantly.

Everyone stared at Long Jing, equal parts stunned and alarmed. Long Jing looked back at them, slightly at a loss. He swallowed and continued, a little nervously:

"It's just a guess. Just a guess.

[Origin] had [Fate] build it a throne, right?

What if [Origin] actually lost its throne somehow and has been hiding in the Sea of Desire?

If it were any other god, the Sin of Desirelessness wouldn't have reacted that way — he's a Servant God, not a mortal. He would have seen his share of true gods before. So which true god occupying [Corruption]'s throne could possibly produce that kind of reaction?

Not even the Fun God would do that.

So when I think it through... it really does seem like it can only be [Origin]... right?"

"!!!!!"

The words had barely landed before every Joker's mind exploded at once.

Chapter 1323: You Can't Be Serious — [Origin] Is Hiding in the Sea of Desire?

Was Long Jing's theory possible?

It couldn't be ruled out entirely.

After all, when Cheng Shi first reached the conclusion that the universe was nothing more than a Creator's experiment, he too had felt that existence was utterly meaningless.

The truth behind the world had a way of shattering those who sought it, leaving them in despair. With that in mind, Drasilco's self-destruction wasn't impossible to understand.

But here was the problem: Cheng Shi still had vivid memories of [Origin] casually erasing countless versions of [War] within the Real Universe. Compared to [Origin], the gods were like fireflies against a sun. [Origin] clearly still wielded that terrifying authority — so how could it possibly be a Creator who had lost its throne?

It could only be called a bold and wild theory.

Zhen Xin shook off her daze and shook her head.

"Interesting idea..."

But have you considered — given the Fun God's nature, he would never fail to probe the Sea of Desire and [Corruption]. Over so many years — an entire era, even — he found nothing. And yet Drasilco somehow uncovered the truth that [Corruption] was [Origin]? Does that make sense?"

"..."

It really didn't. If all it took was an Envoy of [Corruption] to find [Corruption], the Fun God would have long since impersonated one and gone swimming through the Sea of Desire.

Long Jing let out a slightly awkward laugh and scratched the back of his neck. "I did say it was a guess."

"The direction of the guess is sound though. Whatever that 'being' is — even if it's not [Origin] — it's most likely not of this world. Otherwise Drasilco wouldn't have reacted the way he did."

Cheng Shi pressed his brows together and continued analyzing.

"You may not know this, but at one point during an Assembly of Gods Convention, the Sin of Desirelessness helped [Deceit] — even if under duress — by indefinitely postponing [Deceit]'s challenge for the [Oblivion] throne."

"!!!"

That made everyone pause. "What — you've already launched a challenge for a divine throne before?"

How far ahead were you in the game compared to the rest of them?

They were all supposed to be peak players. The others had been losing their minds just to get by, while apparently he had been climbing actual peaks this entire time.

Cheng Shi paid no attention to their reactions and continued in his usual unhurried manner.

"And I strongly suspect that reason [Drasilco] was hiding inside That Dream My Nightmare was the Fun God's doing.

The Fun God had almost certainly already brought the Sin of Desirelessness under his influence — intending to use Drasilco's connection to [Corruption] to find [Corruption] within the Sea of Desire.

Given everything we know, the Sea of Desire must be hiding a secret that concerns the entire universe. Since the Sin of Desirelessness did find the so-called '[Corruption]' — do you think the Fun God actually met 'it'?

If yes, then 'it' absolutely cannot be [Origin]. If it were, given the Fun God's personality, he would have overturned the Sea of Desire entirely and made sure everyone knew.

But if no... that's impossible. He would never let Drasilco go meet 'it' alone.

So my original suspicion likely holds. 'It' is a being beyond even a Servant God's comprehension — and even the Fun God was affected by it, which is why he gave us this false Era Curtain Call: to show us the world's despair firsthand."

Hearing that, Zhen Xin recalled Cheng Shi's reaction to the trial results when he learned about the Brotherhood of Extreme Desire, and the implied significance of Madame Freud's identity. Realization broke over her.

"You're saying the Fun God was corrupted by that unknown entity hiding in [Corruption]'s place?!"

Cheng Shi nodded with grave seriousness. "It's not impossible."

He thought for a moment, then finally told the Jokers about the false Era Curtain Call — though he edited out many details, conveying only the essential thread of events. Partly because he didn't want to revisit that pain himself, and partly because he didn't want the Jokers to hear their own fates and "retrace those steps" in the future.

He couldn't bear to lose them a second time.

But schemers had sharp minds. Even from a few scattered hints, they could connect the dots and piece together the shape of that world-ending mutual destruction.

Silence fell over the room.

After Cheng Shi finished, he paused, then suddenly remembered something else. He looked at Zhen Xin.

"Do you remember that task we took to investigate the conflict between [Order] and [Corruption]?"

That one also has a conclusion now. [Order] once entered the Sea of Desire alongside [War], intending to settle the universe in one decisive battle — but it was during that very venture that [Order] was fractured at the Sea's edge.

The world, even the gods, assumed [Order] had been influenced by [Corruption] and could no longer hold to its own nature. But the truth was that [War] had split [Order] apart.

They fought inside the Sea of Desire, and afterward [Order] fractured into... the exact number doesn't matter. What matters is that I never understood why [War] moved against [Order].

Looking at it now — do you think what [War] did then bears some resemblance to what [Deceit] is doing now?"

"..."

They had already consumed so many divine secrets today that everyone was completely stuffed — too full to muster the energy to be shocked anymore.

Aside from Li Jingming, who was diligently committing everything to memory, Long Jing had simply let it flow in one ear and out the other.

From where he sat, Cheng Shi wasn't recounting the hidden affairs of gods. He was shouting directly at Long Jing's ears: "Aren't I impressive? Aren't I unbelievable?"

Sure, impressive. The most impressive. Are you happy now?

Watching others perform on a stage — that was genuinely entertaining. But the moment you had to perform yourself — well, wasn't that just being a clown.

Cheng Shi was supposed to be the clown. So why did Long Jing feel like the bigger fool?

He was an acrobat, for heaven's sake!

President Gong was done. He dropped onto the throne with a heavy thud and waved his hand dismissively.

"What's the point of all this guessing? Why not just go ask directly?"

By your own account, the Fun God must have already met 'it.' Why not go ask him?"

At that, Cheng Shi and Zhen Xin shook their heads at the same time.

"I've tried. He didn't respond."

"I've tried too. After the trial ended, I tried to ask him about the hidden meaning behind the story of Kanrival. Nothing. Silence."

Long Jing thought for another moment, then offered another idea.

"Then we go to the Sea of Desire and ask that 'being' ourselves.

If the Sin of Desirelessness could find it, why couldn't other Envoys of [Corruption] do the same?

[Corruption] has more than one Envoy, doesn't it?"

That fell into Li Jingming's domain. He nodded.

"The Gate of Joyous Lust — Aph Ros — is imprisoned in [Time]'s dungeon. Not a viable option.

The other one, the Mercy Lord — Tria. I know something of her past, but as for where she is now..."

"She's dead."

"?"

Cheng Shi sighed. He produced the [Corruption] Container, staring at it — and couldn't help feeling that everything seemed to have been calculated long in advance. But who the mastermind behind the curtain actually was...

Could it really be the Fun God?

"A familiar feeling... This is also a container?"

"Yes. The [Corruption] Container. It dropped when Tria died."

The Jokers were stunned. Long Jing's voice jumped a full octave. "You killed her?!"

Cheng Shi wasn't in the mood to tease him. He told it straight.

"No. I don't know why she died. I just happened to pick up her remains, and in doing so I made a promise to Aph Ros to investigate the cause of Tria's death — a promise I've made no progress on whatsoever.

So the route through Aph Ros is also a dead end. [Time] may not care about its prisoner, but I can't see any realistic way to get Aph Ros released and take her along to the Sea of Desire."

"Even if it were possible, we'd have to be extremely careful.

Don't forget — if your theory is right, even [War] and [Deceit] were swallowed by whatever's in there. For beings of our current level to enter the Sea of Desire would be no different from walking into our own graves.

This needs to be approached with great patience. At the very least, not before we ascend to divinity. Praise be to Yu Xi."

Chapter 1324: Let's Talk About Something Light

Once Long Jing's proposal was rejected, silence fell over the room again — and as time stretched on, the silence grew increasingly charged.

Cheng Shi's current situation was, in truth, deeply awkward. He had revealed his identity, which meant the Jokers now knew he was the answer to this world's equation — the sacrifice [Fate] intended to offer to the Creator.

If the Era Curtain Call had been real, with Outer Gods circling like wolves, they would have had no choice. To protect the world, they'd have had to guard Cheng Shi — that would have been the only option.

But now it had been proven to be nothing more than a "trial." And so, before the Jokers, a new road had opened up:

Hand over the sacrifice to [Fate], and complete the prescribed offering.

For clever people, that was the optimal solution for preserving their own survival.

The Jokers were, of course, clever. But not one of them brought it up. Why?

Because they were sharper than merely clever. Cheng Shi had said nothing explicitly — but the Curtain Call he'd described had said everything that needed saying.

The final image of "War" making its last stand against the "Outer God" had written one word in every drop of blood it shed: defiance.

Fixed Destiny was not something he would ever compromise on.

Of course, Cheng Shi's resolve mattered — but it wasn't the only factor. After learning all the details of the false Curtain Call, the Jokers couldn't help but think about what the Fun God had intended with this terrifying trial.

Did the Outer Gods truly exist?

Did that overwhelming [Origin] power truly exist?

And most importantly — if [Fate] completed the fixed sacrifice, did that guarantee this world would have a future?

Even the "Outer God" had failed once, hadn't it?

And with the parallel worlds numbering in the billions, Fixed Destiny must exist in billions of forms as well. Who could be certain that the throne their world produced would be the one to move [Origin]'s heart?

No one could. Not even [Deceit]. Otherwise, [Deceit] wouldn't have rebelled in the first place.

It wasn't ignorant of the fact that submitting to Fixed Destiny was one possible answer. That terrifying trial... looked at from a certain angle, it wasn't impossible that [Deceit] had used it as a kind of attempt.

But [Deceit] simply couldn't guarantee that its answer would be the one the Creator actually wanted.

Perhaps that was exactly why the Fun God feared.

In this moment, the Jokers felt it too — and for the first time, they resonated with the Fear Faction's intent.

Cheng Shi quietly took all of this in. Then he broke the silence with a laugh, cupping his hands toward the group in a mock bow.

"I thank the Jokers for sparing my life."

At that, Zhen Xin rolled her eyes, Li Jingming smiled quietly, the Doctor looked reverent, and Long Jing looked disdainful.

If this particular clown hadn't chosen to pull back the curtain on the Real Universe for the Jokers — even as the peak players that others looked up to — they'd be able to do nothing but keep their heads down and grind the game, living on like oblivious, clueless NPCs forever.

But now they were gathered here together, discussing gods, exploring the universe, probing the cosmos, speculating about [Origin] — all because one clown had chosen to extend his trust.

It couldn't be denied that the clown was doing it to survive — but his sincerity had been seen, and it had earned their sincerity in return.

Real friendship was exactly like that. When a friend was in trouble, you didn't think twice. You helped — that was it.

Seen in that light, Big Cat's "philosophy of flourishing" really was a step ahead of everyone else.

Watching his friends worry on his behalf over a fixed, uncertain future, Cheng Shi smiled — a genuine smile.

He had known the Jokers' positions all along. None of what had just happened was a test. It was him steadying his own resolve.

Whatever happens, he thought, I won't let my friends bear that despair for me again. I can't.

"You eat one bite at a time. You walk one step at a time. Some roads have been sealed off — so we walk the ones that are already paved.

Let's talk about something lighter.

Before I find the answers from the divine beings — let's first discuss a very important plan.

When are we... going to see Jie Shu?"

"?"

Everyone paused, and only the Doctor looked genuinely confused.

"Why are we looking for Jie Shu? Praise be to Yu Xi."

The others exchanged slightly awkward expressions, and it occurred to them that this Joker meeting — already missing one member — now seemed to have quietly "gained" one.

In the infiltration scheme targeting Jie Shu's circle, Cheng Shi, Zhen Xin, and Long Jing each had roles to play. Li Jingming, not wanting to lose this memory, had even added a personal note to the script himself.

Only the Doctor had been left out entirely — kept in the dark and still completely unaware.

Zhen Xin explained the whole scheme to the Doctor with a smile. Once he understood, the Doctor's voice took on a peculiar tone.

"Though I firmly believe that [Folly] is a blasphemy against [Truth]... well, [Truth] is gone now, so perhaps blasphemy is a moot point.

Jie Shu is a brilliant mind. Far simpler than you imagine him to be — he absolutely isn't.

His rank of second on the Road to Ascension says everything.

How many scholars and so-called wise men have tried to challenge him, only to find themselves unable to so much as see his back?

Are you certain your plan won't be found out?

Praise be to Yu Xi!"

"Precisely because we aren't certain — which is exactly why we're discussing it as a group." Cheng Shi smiled.

Long Jing beside him gave a dismissive wave. "That fanatic devotee of Yu Xi should stop putting himself down and elevating others. Ahem. This is my plan, backed by President Gong's reputation — just follow my lead and enjoy the applause that follows."

"..."

Everyone ignored Long Jing and began hashing out the details. Before long, they'd hammered out an infiltration scheme that satisfied the whole group of schemers. As the meeting was wrapping up, Zhen Xin smiled and asked:

"The stage is set — but the Fate Weaver still hasn't told us what any of this is really for. Don't just say it's to stop Jie Shu from plotting against you — if he could have handled you, [Fate] would have disposed of him long ago.

And this plan needs a name. Calling it 'Jie Shu' out loud is too easy to give away."

Long Jing immediately perked up and started racking his brain for a name. He looked up — only to notice every pair of eyes in the room was fixed on Cheng Shi.

"..."

Everyone was watching the clown — and yet somehow not watching the clown.

He sighed and followed their gazes toward Cheng Shi — only to find that Cheng Shi was the one looking at him instead, his expression carrying a weight that was entirely out of place.

Long Jing blinked. Then he heard Cheng Shi address him with complete seriousness:

"Torch-Passing.

The name of this plan is Torch-Passing.

A single spark can set a prairie ablaze. Hope was never meant to be kept in just one place. I didn't understand that before, but now — I think I'm starting to.

I don't know if I'm the one who gets to receive the torch. But I want to try, while I still can, to be someone who can pass it on.

And the lead in this Torch-Passing performance — is you, President Gong, with your wealth of stage experience.

Long Jing. I'm counting on you. Don't let me down."

"???"

In that moment, and he couldn't explain why, Long Jing's spine straightened on its own.

Meeting everyone's eyes, he wore three parts confidence, three parts recklessness, three parts disdain — and ninety-one other parts of stiffness — as he said:

"...Just don't hold me back."

The Jokers fell silent for one collective second — and then erupted in laughter.

"Hahahahaha—"

"Laugh all you want! Laugh all you want! Keep laughing and I'm out!"

"We're done, we're done — kukukuku—"

"Still laughing! Do you people have no shame?!"

"Shame?"

Probably not.

And no one ever said the Jokers were normal anyway — aren't we just... a bunch of lunatics standing on [Void]'s stage, laughing at ourselves?"

Chapter 1325: Are You Ready for the Audience Meeting?

A faint note of levity finally broke through the heavy atmosphere.

This was how the Joker Society had always been at its core — gravity and laughter, never one without the other.

Before long the Jokers settled back into quiet, each lost in their own thoughts about the road ahead. Then the Doctor spoke, pulling everyone back from the vast cosmic perspective and into the game itself.

"Count the days — it's about that time.

There are 5 days left until the one-year anniversary of the Faith Game's arrival. That means this special trial was probably the last one before the anniversary, and though the Road to Ascension may be a long journey, the Ladder of Ascent is about to produce its results.

According to the game rules, at the end of the first year, the gods will summon the top ten players from each faith on the Ladder of Ascent for an Audience Meeting — a display of divine favor.

When the game began, everyone dreamed of gaining an audience with a god through this. But now... those who needed to meet the gods most likely already have. Still, as a special event in the Faith Game — are you all prepared for the Audience Meeting?

Praise be to Yu Xi."

"?"

The moment Cheng Shi heard "Audience Meeting," he felt almost disoriented.

So much had happened to him recently, so much endured, that he had completely forgotten that more than a hundred days had already passed in the real world since his return from the Real Universe.

Time to meet the gods?

But hadn't he been running into gods practically every day anyway?

Cheng Shi pressed his lips together. He suddenly wondered — was the Fun God ignoring him because he was busy preparing for the Audience Meeting?

The Fun God had lured him into the Real Universe, "fast-forwarded" the world's timeline, then hit him with a false Era Curtain Call he couldn't refuse — plunging him into despair — and then refused to summon him, simply waiting for an Audience Meeting to arrive...

Anyone who claimed that wasn't part of the Fun God's plan wouldn't be believed by anyone.

But what was the Fun God actually arranging? The hysteric despair of that experience still lay buried somewhere deep — and even if the Fun God was no Outer God, even if he was genuinely a member of the Fear Faction, truly devoted to resisting the Creator — how would he break free from the experiment's shackles and achieve victory over [Origin]?

Cheng Shi couldn't picture it.

The Fun God had once promised that if Cheng Shi attended the Audience Meeting as a Chosen One, he would bestow upon him the ability to deceive gods. And now...

Cheng Shi quietly glanced at the Ladder of Ascent rankings.

[Ladder of Ascent (Existence — Memory) / (Void — Deceit)]

1. True Heart (Deceit) — 235
2. Li Jingming (Deceit) — 234
3. Memory, are you okay? (Deceit) — 230

4. Seriously, Memory, are you okay? (Deceit) — 228

5. This Longing Endures (Memory) — 227

6. Memory's hopeless, the one above is a widow (Deceit) — 226

... (3 more Deceit, 8 more Memory omitted...)

18. Flawless Jade (Deceit) — 200

19. Middle-Aged Dementia (Memory) — 197

20. I Never Lie (Deceit) — 196

...

Dead last...

Perhaps everything had indeed been calculated in advance. After completing that trial of despair, Cheng Shi found himself sitting at exactly the tenth and final spot in the top ten of [Deceit] — barely scraping in, having "luckily" secured a ticket to the Audience Meeting.

The top few names were all familiar faces. No real surprises there. Only the player ID at rank 18 — "Flawless Jade" — gave Cheng Shi a moment's pause, as if something in him was trying to surface.

But he shook his head a moment later. He was probably overthinking it.

[Deceit] was barely in the clear. [Fate] was a little better — but not by much.

[Ladder of Ascent (Existence — Time) / (Void — Fate)]

1. Gods Forsake Me (Time) — 230

2. I See You (Fate) — 228

... (8 more Time, 7 more Fate omitted...)

18. I Never Lie (Fate) — 196

19. Nothing (Time) — 195

20. It's All Because Of (Fate) — 194

...

Scanning both lists quickly, one question jumped into Cheng Shi's mind: what exactly was the difference between second-to-last and last?

Answer: none. Because they were the same person.

He laughed at himself and shook his head.

"What do players need to prepare? If anything, the gods should be the ones preparing.

For instance — a certain cat who acts on behalf of [Prosperity] yet has never once shown her face to her followers. And a certain Qin who is about to ascend to the [War] throne and show his faithful who the true Grand Marshal really is...

Don't look at me like that. I mean exactly what you think I mean. You're all sharp people — you understand.

We've already staked our claim in two of those thrones. Which throne we challenge next — we'll need to gauge the gods' attitudes about the false Curtain Call first.

Some among the divine beings may still retain their memories. Before the Audience Meeting, I need to try gaining audiences with them individually.

Today's Joker Society meeting ends here. I'll be heading out — reach out any time."

Without hesitation, Cheng Shi left. There were still far too many things he needed to untangle, and the Audience Meeting looming up ahead felt like a new net being cast wide open, waiting for a clown to stumble in and be caught.

Before the Fun God's next "trap" sprung on him, Cheng Shi had to map out the current state of the world as clearly as he could.

He returned to the rest area and began his attempts to seek an audience with the gods.

After Cheng Shi left, the remaining Jokers were in no hurry to disperse. They looked to one another and slipped naturally into the next conversation.

Li Jingming's brow was tightly knit, each word chosen with deliberate care.

"Whether it was the false simulation or the forgotten memories — [Existence] has already entered the board.

It seems [Existence] is also standing on [Deceit]'s side. What I still don't know is what the ending of the Era's Curtain Call in that trial actually meant.

If Fixed Destiny is ultimately destined to be broken — then surely [Fate], with its ability to see through to the heart of things, would already know that?

The future is a fog for ordinary people — an unwritten blank. But for [Fate], it should already be filled in with answers.

If so, then why does [Fate] still insist the Fate Weaver is Fixed Destiny?

Is the problem with [Fate] itself — or have we simply been misunderstanding what Fixed Destiny means?"

Zhen Xin raised an eyebrow, tapped her finger rhythmically against her arm, and spoke with a peculiar expression.

"Could the problem simply be the Fun God?"

In the Curtain Call that the clown described, the Outer God [Fate]'s seizure of Fixed Destiny almost fooled everyone.

But it was just a story — a script. Doesn't that mean the Fun God's portrayal of [Fate] was convincing enough to fool even the believers? He understood [Fate] — understood Fixed Destiny even better than the [Fate] that burned itself out.

Doesn't that strike you as strange?

The surface appearance of [Void] — could it really be more profound than [Void]'s true nature?

No — that doesn't track. The Fun God never offers meaningless guidance. Whatever answer he intended to give us was probably hidden inside that Curtain Call performance.

Unfortunately, we've all forgotten it. No details — no way to guess at his intent."

"But Fixed Destiny hasn't forgotten!" Long Jing — fool as he might play among the Jokers — was nothing of the sort when it counted. By any measure, on the path of [Deceit], he ranked second only to Zhen Xin.

However you counted, that was second.

President Gong rubbed his chin with a meaningful smile.

"That means either [Deceit] has placed all its hope on Fixed Destiny — or it's laying the groundwork for an even greater despair.

Not going to lie — the lead performer really does get better treatment than all the supporting roles put together.

But supporting roles deserve their own moment in the spotlight too. Since the memories of this false Curtain Call still exist somewhere in this world, we'll find a way to retrieve them. What do you think — you, the [Memory] believer?"

Li Jingming blinked, then smiled and nodded.

"I'll think of something."

Chapter 1326: An Audience with [Death]

The rooftop of the rest area.

The moment Cheng Shi returned to the roof, his first prayer was directed at [Void] — but [Void] gave not the slightest response from beginning to end, silent as something long dead.

An inexplicable unease stirred in his chest.

He had to consider another possibility: had the two of [Void] truly taken their final bow through that false Curtain Call?

No. Impossible.

Without another word, Cheng Shi switched his prayer target to [Death]. In a string of fervent "devotions" directed at his boss, countless chattering small skulls rained down, piling up on the rooftop into a bone-white gate.

That lord had answered — and sent a messenger to escort him.

"Hurry! Faster! Don't keep him waiting!"

Strange how those same chattering skulls somehow looked endearing today, stripped of death's usual chill, radiating instead a warmth that was difficult to put into words.

Though that feeling extended only to these small skulls with no will of their own. As for the lord seated upon the Bone Throne...

Before he could determine whether [Death] knew of the false Curtain Call, or what the god's stance toward that trial was, Cheng Shi's heart was in knots. He didn't know how to face him.

True, the [Death] lord had ultimately appeared on the battlefield when the Outer Gods struck. But [Death]'s final choice had not been the outcome Cheng Shi had hoped for.

Much like Cheng Shi's last farewell to [Death] before he died — by that point, what choice was made no longer mattered, because the only ending was destruction.

But now things were different. Now there was still a choice.

Cheng Shi had to confirm: was this lord who had long sheltered him still part of the Fear Faction? Would he continue to shelter him as before?

If [Death]'s choice was still to hand Fixed Destiny back to [Fate]... then this audience might very well end as another "mutual destruction."

It was with that kind of "resolved-to-die" dread that Cheng Shi bounded up those long Fishbone Hall steps once more.

When he arrived beneath the great skull's throne in his own skull form and looked up at that towering face, his heart clenched. He opened his mouth:

"Great—"

"You. What are you. Scheming. Again?!"

The great skull cut off his greeting before he could finish. Green flames surged in the empty sockets, carrying a note of irritation.

"Where have you. Hidden. My follower. This time?"

"?"

Cheng Shi was taken aback. He hadn't expected that after everything, the first thing [Death] would say was to demand where Zhang Jizu had gone.

A gleam flickered in Cheng Shi's hollow sockets. He countered:

"My lord — do you not know where he went?"

The great skull paused, then let out a heavy rumble.

"You grow. Ever closer. To [Deceit]. Most vexing.

I have continuously. Indulged. [Deceit]'s unreasonable. Demands. Yet you. Once and again. Test. My patience.

Cheng Shi. Tell me. Did [Deceit]. Conceal. My follower's. Location?"

Hearing that, Cheng Shi had a fairly good idea of where things stood — [Death] had no memory of anything that happened during the trial.

Yes. Even this cornerstone of the Fear Faction had forgotten the era-ending invasion of the Outer Gods. This didn't seem like an act. The swaying green flames in those great sockets carried the same quality as ever — flickering with exasperation at [Deceit] and anxious urgency to find his missing follower.

That meant [Death] had not "betrayed" him. Though it was also possible that [Death] had simply forgotten those "uncomfortable memories."

Either way — at the very least, they had both been reset back to the same crossroads. And where there was choice, there was hope.

Cheng Shi deliberated a moment, then decided to tell the truth.

He didn't start with Zhang Jizu's whereabouts. Instead, he recounted the entire false Era Curtain Call from beginning to end, leaving nothing out.

It took a long time. When he reached the part where [Death] himself appeared in the story, the Fishbone Hall erupted — pillars of white bone surged skyward and deathly green flames spread across every surface — and it interrupted him. But he only paused briefly, gritted his teeth, and pressed on, until he reached the moment [War] closed its eyes and the universe fell into void. Only then did he exhale.

Cheng Shi was gambling — gambling on [Death]'s reaction.

He had always believed that a lord who cared so deeply for his follower could not possibly be a heartless god.

And he had been right. When [Death] heard every last word of the story, the god first vanished from the Bone Throne in an instant. When that imposing presence returned moments later with a darkened expression, the first words out of his mouth were:

"[Deceit] — as expected. Cannot be reached.

[Deceit] has no intention. Of meeting me. Nor any intention. Of offering. An explanation.

The [Death] you saw. At the edge of the era. Was not me."

Cheng Shi smiled, and it reached his eyes. "I know. That wasn't you."

"You do not know."

The great skull sighed, a complex weight in the sound. The green flames in those vast sockets reignited and burned low and deep.

"You may have guessed. That this was not. A reset. Carried out by [Time].

Nor was it. A forgetting. Carried out by [Memory].

Nor a phantom. Conjured by [Deceit].

It was instead a Variation. Brought about. By [Fate]."

"WHAT?!"

Cheng Shi was stunned. He could barely believe what he was hearing, his chin practically hammering the floor in disbelief.

"[Fate]?!"

The great skull gazed into the depths of the void, and slowly nodded.

"Correct.

[Time] holds. The Authority of Simulation. And in counterpart. [Fate] holds. The Authority of Variation.

Simulation and Variation. Entangle and oppose. Whichever prevails. Will determine. The world's future.

So Variation and Simulation. Are similar — both can generate. Entirely new. Possibilities.

But [Time]'s Simulation. Seeks truth. Through reality. While [Fate]'s Variation. Writes boldly. Without restraint.

By my will. I would never. Surrender the world. To the hands. Of an Outer God.

The 'me' you saw. Was not me. But another 'me'. Born from. The Variation.

[Deceit] must have. Stolen. [Fate]'s Authority. But [Fate]'s power. Alone could never. Have altered everything. To make. The universe perform. Its own absurd. Farce."

Here the great skull paused, and its voice shifted suddenly in tone, dropping into a deep resonance:

"I do indeed. Fear. [Origin]."

"!!!"

Cheng Shi had never imagined a day would come when he'd hear the words "I fear [Origin]" from the mouth of any Fear Faction member besides the Fun God.

He felt both elated and afraid.

Elated, because [Death] speaking this openly could only mean the god had begun to open his heart — to place genuine trust in him. What trickster ever dreamed that a heart-to-heart game could one day be played between a mortal and a god?

Afraid, because nothing had actually changed — they'd only lived through one illusory trial — yet [Death] had shed the wariness he'd always maintained and was now speaking to him like this. That said everything. [Death] had read [Void]'s intent within that false Curtain Call — at the very least, [Deceit]'s will — and had deeply recognized it. He no longer regarded Cheng Shi as a mere mortal or a "toy" of [Void].

[Death] had placed him on the same level as the gods — and clearly, this change came from an acknowledgment of the "Fixed Destiny" identity.

Finally, [Death] had begun to face it directly — this one thing that could give the world an answer.

"[Origin] is the patron. Who granted all things. And also the abyss. That devours all things.

Any death. That becomes entangled. With [Origin]. Will no longer. Be a true death.

I feared. And felt powerless. So I listened. To [Deceit]'s urging.

Now, looking back. [Deceit] was right.

Fixed Destiny... is the answer.

[Deceit] allowed you. To keep your memories. You should have deduced. That [Deceit] holds. A thread. Of supreme. [Origin] power.

This very. Unparalleled power. Allowed [Deceit] to deceive the world. And script. A cosmic tragedy. Guided by. Variation."

"BOOM—"

Cheng Shi's mind exploded.

This was the first time a true god had confirmed his theory with their own words.

Though the Outer God had spoken it aloud within the false Curtain Call — that had still been fiction, and there was no guarantee [Deceit] hadn't lied in the script.

But now it was confirmed. [Deceit] truly possessed a thread of [Origin] power — enough to influence the entire universe.

Cheng Shi's scalp prickled. The question burst out of him:

"Where did it come from?"

The great skull gazed down at the small skull beneath the throne.

"Death always has. A destination.

When death. No longer belongs. To [Death]. It can only. Belong to. [Origin].

The Bell Ringer. Rang her own. Death knell. Not only did she perish. Beyond this world. She also brought. A thread of [Origin]'s. 'Gaze'. Into this world.

Just as you did. In that trial.

Have you ever considered — that [Deceit]'s use of a Curtain Call. To deceive you. Was not for any. Other reason — but for that thread. Of [Origin]'s 'Gaze'. Drawn down. By your defiance?

Before the trial ended. As the void. Began to swallow all...

Did you. See. [Origin]?"

"!!!!!"

Chapter 1327: I'm the Bait?

Cheng Shi's mind went completely blank.

What did you just say?

An Shenxuan's death handed the Fun God a thread of [Origin]'s power — and then the Fun God used that thread to lay a trap, with Cheng Shi himself as the bait?!

No wonder he'd said that when the world-ending tide came, he could steal a thread of [Origin]'s power from [Origin] itself. Apparently the so-called "world-ending tide" was the fiction, while stealing the [Origin] power was the reality.

He was bait?

All that desperate, defiant resistance — and in the end it had only served the Fun God's schemes?!

Cheng Shi fell silent for a long time. Then he burst into wild laughter.

Oh sure, sure, sure — he was the bait, the binding agent, the goddamn Fixed Destiny. Everything except himself.

Wonderful. Just look at how red that clown's nose is up on the stage!

The great skull watched the small skull lose itself in self-deprecating laughter, then spoke in that deep resonant voice once more.

"This. Is merely. My speculation.

To resist. [Origin]. With the world's power. Alone — holds no hope.

The only option. Is to seize. [Origin]'s power. But one for one. Is not favorable. And even carries. The risk. Of [Origin] noticing.

I likewise. Do not know. [Deceit]'s full plan. I can only. Speculate as much.

But you. May truly be. The world's key."

I have absolutely no desire to be any world's key.

Though all of this was just [Death]'s guesses, Cheng Shi felt this theory wasn't impossible. After all, the world had been reset once before — which meant the Fun God's thread of [Origin] power had already been spent at least once.

Trading old for new was something even he himself would do. A sharp operator like the Fun God would do no less.

Followers reflect their patron. Cheng Shi knew the Fun God's nature all too well.

Looking at him was practically like looking in a mirror.

But all of this speculation rested on one premise — the Fun God could not be an Outer God.

After living through that nightmare, Cheng Shi had developed what you might call Outer God PTSD.

"So this suffocating, desperate false Era Curtain Call — it was actually the Fun God using [Origin] power to ignite the stolen Change Authority of [Fate], producing a doomsday simulation of his own imagination?"

But the thing is, [Fate]'s Variation Authority has already been..."

Cheng Shi thought of the Flame of Hope — but considered more carefully, the Flame of Hope was only the part of [Fate]'s Variation that [Fate] had willingly cast away as unacceptable. [Fate] itself still retained the Change Authority.

"Precisely. So it is.

All the details. Of that script. Were fabricated. By [Deceit]'s pen.

Do not let. The script. Mislead you. Into confusing. The true wills. Of the other gods.

[Birth] may speak. For [Birth]. But [Silence]. Would never express. Doubt. In such a way."

"Hm?" Cheng Shi's attention snapped up. "[Silence] is also part of the Fear Faction, right? My lord?"

"Fear Faction..."

Apt. Description.

Yes. [Silence] also. Fears.

Perhaps [Silence]'s fear. Is different. From mine. But [Silence]. Has always. Walked. Alongside [Deceit].

[Silence] would never. Doubt [Deceit]. Nor would [Silence]. Violate its own will. To break its silence."

Ha.

So the distorted wills and disfigured postures of the gods were simply the Fun God's most vicious smear campaign against his own allies.

This was no [Deceit]. This was pure Zhen Yi-level scheming.

Hearing this, Cheng Shi finally felt a weight lift from his chest.

Even if he still didn't know how the Fun God planned to resist [Origin] — at least he had confirmed one thing: the Fear Faction was still standing.

That was enough. Enough to let him catch a single breath in the gap between despairs.

Bad news had come in such waves that he'd forgotten how to receive good news. He only wanted to gather information from the Fear Faction gods as quickly as possible, map out the Fun God's layout, and never again be as powerless as he had been in that trial.

But [Death] could only offer commentary on the false Curtain Call. As for what [Deceit] actually intended to do — no one could guess.

"I understand. Your urgency. I will also. Go speak. With the other gods. To verify. A few things.

But before that. The whereabouts. Of my follower..."

Cheng Shi paused, his voice carrying a slight heaviness. "He's no longer in this world."

"BOOM—"

World-scorching flames nearly consumed the entire void in an instant. The great skull stared directly at Cheng Shi, asking each word with deliberate weight:

"Where. Did he. Go?"

"To save one clown — he went behind the curtain of another clown's stage.

But my lord, please don't worry. He will return.

Trust your follower not to yield so easily to another [Death]'s throne.

And trust the clown standing before you — to bring a miracle to this world.

I'll go retrieve him myself.

I'll win it back myself."

...

Meanwhile, elsewhere.

The Jokers had finally dispersed. Li Jingming — who had promised to recover the lost memories for everyone — once again made his way to the [Memory] Collection Hall.

He was here for his patron.

Whether or not [Memory] possessed the memories Cheng Shi had described, Li Jingming was confident he could learn something from his patron's words. He knew his patron — if [Memory] hadn't known, his offering would be enough to pique its curiosity, drawing a god who governed memory into the excavation of those very memories. If [Memory] did know, then what Li Jingming already understood would become "conversation currency," allowing him to learn more details in return.

Li Jingming's plan was sound. There was only one thing he hadn't accounted for.

[Memory] wasn't here.

The entire [Memory] Collection Hall was utterly still. The artifacts that were always faintly blurred in the past had, strangely, become sharp and vivid today. Li Jingming stood before one of the walls, cast a single sweeping glance — and found over a hundred years of vivid, winding stories from some long-past era on the Land of Hope flooding into his mind at once.

He hadn't "read" these memories. They had surged toward him.

The deep blue light was like a tidal wave from the Sea of Memory, swallowing Li Jingming whole and drowning him in the churning currents of memory. Every breath he drew was no longer air — it was pure, unfiltered memory.

Memories that didn't belong to him crashed into his mind in waves, and within moments, they threatened to overwhelm his sense of self.

Li Jingming realized that if this continued, he would cease to be himself. He had to struggle free — but how could he climb out from the torrential Sea of Memory...

The answer was simple enough, in retrospect. As he sank, he spotted a gleam of light. That pinpoint of brightness was the only guide in the black depths of the sea, drawing him toward the light.

Li Jingming forced himself to endure the overwhelming discomfort of memory flooding his mind and fought forward desperately. The memories of the Cloud Field Temple were shrinking, disappearing in the deluge of countless others. The silhouette of his master was blurring beneath the weight of tens of thousands of remembered faces. Li Jingming couldn't accept this — he loved to record, but never by erasing what came before.

All of his memories had meaning. But now, true "memory" was slowly eroding that meaning.

Fortunately, the struggle was worth it. He reached the gleam of light just before his sense of self was extinguished — and then he simply blacked out.

In the final moment before his consciousness dissolved, he felt all awareness returning to him at once. And in his hand, there was now something crystalline and radiant.

What... was this?

Chapter 1328: Where Has [Memory] Gone?

After taking his leave of that lord, Cheng Shi prayed without pause — seeking an audience with the next divine being.

[Time].

Since [Void] was proving impossible to reach, he could only set his sights on the gods of the Fear Faction, hoping to find more clues about [Deceit]'s plans and the true meaning of the trial in their words.

And [Time], from everything he could see, was the one most deeply bound to the Fun God's designs.

It was entirely possible that [Time] had long since seen through every detail of this trial — otherwise, why would [Time] have made no appearance in the Era Curtain Call performance?

Truthfully, Cheng Shi had never formally sought an audience with [Time]. The only face-to-face encounter they'd ever had was in Dolgod, when [Time] had bestowed upon him the ring Time of Eternal Imprisonment. He turned the ring over between his fingers and felt little hope for this visit.

A patron who hadn't even deigned to appear when granting a second faith — why would such a being bother coming to answer his questions now?

Cheng Shi had nearly given up — when the clouds in the sky were suddenly swept by the wind into a single straight line, blocking the sun and casting one long shadow down across the rooftop.

The cloud drifted on the wind, and the shadow rotated like a clock's hand.

The moment that shadow fell over Cheng Shi, the clown who had been turning over who to visit next was yanked clean out of the physical world.

When he opened his eyes again, he found himself in the crevice of [Existence] — the churning [Existence] in the infinite distance glowing like a blazing white ring of stars, set against the dead and frozen darkness all around.

And in that darkness, a pair of eyes black as empty void stared directly toward the Real Universe — and let out one long, slow sigh.

"I should not be meeting you."

[Time]'s very first words sealed Cheng Shi's mouth and sent his prepared words of praise sliding back down his throat.

In that moment, Cheng Shi was extraordinarily tense. He knew he couldn't waste this chance — but he also couldn't figure out where to begin. Rather than be dropped off immediately, he started coaxing Brother Mouth to speak for him.

He knew the Fool's Lips could hold a conversation with [Time] — even if none of those conversations went particularly well.

But before the Fool's Lips could respond, [Time] spoke again.

"I know your heart is full of confusion. But within me and within [Deceit]... it is the same.

[Fate] tells us there is no road forward.

[Deceit] refuses to accept this. And applies pressure to me.

In countless simulations, I have glimpsed one possible path — but whether that path is truly a path, someone must walk it first before we can know."

Cheng Shi's heart leapt into his throat. He stared with wide, expectant eyes, waiting for [Time] to tell him where that path was, how to walk it — he was willing to try.

But there was nothing more.

[Time] let out a quiet sigh, and shifted direction entirely.

"What is faith?"

"?"

Cheng Shi was thrown off. He couldn't follow [Time]'s rhythm. He wondered — was this a test that preceded the revelation of the final path? Or was it a question [Time] itself was still wrestling with?

Because from where he stood, faith was the foundation of every divine being — the ultimate essence threading through the entire Faith Game.

This question was hard to answer. At least for a mortal, any understanding would inevitably be incomplete.

Cheng Shi was still working out his response when, in the very next moment, [Time] asked and answered itself:

"Faith is venerating through belief.

Only through absolute belief can the power of trust be ignited.

That is also the reason behind the new Authority you encountered before — it bypassed the existing container and let fall a brand-new drop of hope."

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted. He immediately understood — the New Authority [Time] mentioned was the new-authority divinity that had been squeezed out by sheer terror during Selius's Divinity Germination Experiment.

So what was [Time] trying to say?

To escape everything that currently trapped them, they needed to bypass the existing containers and create an entirely new divine being?

But didn't all divine beings require [Origin]'s recognition to be legitimate?

Was the answer to the universe's tragedy to forge a new god — one who, after the era of [Void] ended, could gain the Creator's approval, be officially recognized, and open the next era?

Wasn't that just surrendering?

No — something was off. That route aside, the Fun God would never accept that kind of ending.

That was absurd.

Then what did [Time] mean by New Authority? Unless — unless the goal was to use it to forge a new... [Origin]?

Cheng Shi's thoughts exploded outward in all directions. For a moment he didn't know what he was even thinking anymore.

Shock and confusion tangled together in his chest, and the expression on his face was impossible to describe.

He hated riddles. He genuinely wanted to ask [Time] why nothing could just be said plainly. Those eyes that had seen through all of past and future looked into his confusion and, without any hurry, asked another question:

"What is will?"

"..."

Cheng Shi's expression froze. He went still.

Right. A lecture, then.

If it was a lecture, the teacher would always answer questions in the end. This time Cheng Shi held himself together, said nothing, and waited. Sure enough, before long [Time] continued:

"A fixed goal is intent. To walk a fixed path with fixed intent — that is will.

Every person's will is different. For the gods, the same.

That is why [Deceit] cannot find [Origin]'s path — and why I do not accept [Fate]'s path.

I know where that path lies, yet I cannot speak it into the world — for when the world's will draws close to me, it draws further from [Origin]'s true intent.

To escape all of this, what you must do is draw closer — not further away.

[Deceit] cannot do this. So [Deceit] will never find the answer.

But [Deceit] is clever. It found an answer for itself."

Those eyes, deep with the weight of countless ages, swept briefly across Cheng Shi like an abyss that could swallow a person whole — enough to make his scalp tingle.

"These words should not have come from me.

But unfortunately — [Deceit] has lost the right to give guidance.

[Origin] went too far. Fortunately — everything will come to an end.

I will leave. When you need me."

With that, [Time] turned back to gaze beyond the universe, toward the Real Universe, its eyes syncing the flow of time inside and outside the Fence with absolute precision. Those eyes seemed to dissolve into the surrounding darkness, becoming invisible.

Yet Cheng Shi knew [Time] was still here. Right in front of him.

He couldn't decipher everything that had just been said — but that final statement, that [Time] would leave, made his heart seize.

"Why?!"

If you're trying to save this world — why would you need to leave?"

If even the "saviors" were departing, could this world still be saved?

Seeing no response from [Time], he turned toward where [Time] had been and called out in desperation:

"Where... are you going?"

[Time] stayed silent for a long while, then finally let out a sigh.

"To meet [Origin]. To see whether [Deceit]'s theory is correct."

"You're going to meet [Origin]?" Cheng Shi was stunned. "War fell on the road to meeting [Origin]. How can you guarantee you'll survive the encounter? You know better than anyone how ruthless the Creator is — don't you?"

[Time] gave no reply — but that silence was itself an answer.

Cheng Shi's eyes went wide, pupils narrowing to a point.

He understood what [Time] meant. It didn't seem to be planning on surviving.

Could it truly be that only when all the old gods stepped down and new gods ascended could this world be saved?

But... the other world that tried this — it also failed, didn't it?

My blood exchange — I just wanted to make sure I had enough of a voice within the rules. I never intended for the Fear Faction to step aside too...

Cheng Shi fell silent, his heart a tangle of conflicting feelings.

The good news: there is still one path remaining that holds hope for this world.

The bad news: that hope apparently no longer includes [Time].

Without [Time] — how could the era of [Void] not have room for even one [Existence]?

[Existence]...

Right — there was still [Memory]!

Cheng Shi's head snapped up. He immediately made to seek an audience with [Memory] — but the crack in [Existence] abruptly collapsed, flinging him back into the world. And among the distorted currents of fading time, one last sigh reached him:

"[Memory] has left.

The world's future has no need of memory. Everything in the Real Universe holds far more appeal to [Memory] now.

Cheng Shi — walk your own path.

Believe this: there will always be someone who believes in you."

Chapter 1329: Hey Mute, Say Something

Cheng Shi returned to the rooftop more confused than ever.

He simply could not make sense of [Time]'s guidance.

The hesitation in [Time]'s words clearly told him that to find a path to survival within this experiment, he needed to draw closer to [Origin]'s will — to align his own frequency with that of the Creator.

Was it joking?

This entire journey, he had feared [Origin], resisted [Origin], fled from [Origin] — and now he was being told to draw closer to [Origin]?

Wasn't that just accepting his fate? Embracing Fixed Destiny?

But at the very end, [Time] had also said to walk his own path...

Wasn't that a contradiction?

How could moving away from [Origin] and moving toward [Origin] possibly coexist in harmony?

The Fun God had hidden behind the curtain and laid out a plan of this scale — even going so far as to use [Origin]'s power to show Cheng Shi the despair of a universe reduced to ash. To go that far and then push him toward [Origin]? That made no sense whatsoever.

Not a single piece of logic supported the idea that the Fun God agreed with [Time]'s suggestion.

Cheng Shi couldn't convince himself. He was left with nothing but confusion.

He asked Brother Mouth, asked his ears, asked every presence on the rooftop that could be asked — he even turned to their neighbor Xie Yang — but beyond a "Did you get dumped?" he received no useful answer from anyone.

[Time] would never deceive. Every being with enough feeling could sense the love and conviction [Time] held for this world. Cheng Shi also understood [Time]'s reluctance to pollute him with its own will — but he couldn't grasp what "drawing closer" was actually supposed to mean in practice.

Still, it wasn't a complete loss. At the very least — understanding [Origin] was apparently the absolute prerequisite for finding that path.

Cheng Shi sat in thought for a long time, then made his decision: push forward. Not a single moment of seeking audiences with the gods could be wasted.

He had a nagging feeling that a few days from now, the Audience Meeting would bring something major. He didn't want to be manipulated again — at least not without understanding why. So he steeled himself and, for the very first time, attempted to seek an audience with the god he'd never approached:

[Silence].

Among players, there was a widely accepted belief that [Silence]'s followers knew many secrets — whether by intent or by accident, their inability to speak meant secrets constantly flowed toward them.

So as the patron of those "secrets" — did [Silence] know even more?

Perhaps even the Fun God's plan?

After [Death] confirmed [Silence]'s alignment with the Fear Faction, Cheng Shi had been eager to ask this "ally" to leak something — just this once.

But he was still nervous. The last time he'd met this third god of [Chaos], he'd nearly ended up as a little puppet before the Leaking World Silent Puppet.

And Cheng Shi hadn't forgotten — somewhere in the Real Universe, a Leaking World Silent Puppet "corpse" was still floating around, feigning death.

What was [Silence] doing out there?

That might actually make a surprisingly useful icebreaker.

So Cheng Shi sat cross-legged on the rooftop and recited [Silence]'s prayer. In the next instant, his vision went dark — and he was pulled directly into the void.

The Leaking World Silent Puppet, towering and unsettling, appeared before him. It was as mechanical and expressionless as ever, like a true black hole, absorbing every trace of feeling and expression from the surrounding void.

Cheng Shi had only to look at it for a moment before he found himself completely unable to speak. His mind was full of questions, but his mouth opened and closed without producing a single word.

The silence was profound.

Fortunately, [Silence] really was an "ally." This time it made no move to "attack" him. Even with the towering Leaking World Silent Puppet looming close, he wasn't being assimilated — his body remained free.

Cheng Shi smiled.

No speech was fine. As long as the body could move, he could find a way to say what he meant.

He began working his arms, using frantic, untrained, barely-coherent gestures that could generously be called sign language, silently asking his questions of [Silence].

And then, in the very next second, all his efforts were rendered completely meaningless.

Not by the god before him. By his own mouth.

"Did you develop Parkinson's?"

The Fool's Lips said this.

"???"

Cheng Shi was stunned.

He hadn't even considered that in this void, in the presence of [Silence], his own lips would produce sound.

He jolted with shock, barely believing what he'd heard.

Wait — Brother Mouth, you can still talk here?!

The Fool's Lips gave a dismissive sniff, answering Cheng Shi's unspoken question.

"I am a mouth. My only ability is to speak. Just like a certain someone is a clown whose only ability is to make the audience laugh."

"..." Cheng Shi blinked rapidly, thinking: I have a mouth too. Why can't I speak?

"Probably because a silent clown is funnier than a noisy one. Tell me what you want to ask. I can ask for you."

"!!!"

In that instant, Cheng Shi was deeply moved.

He even found himself briefly grateful for the false Curtain Call — if the Fun God's script hadn't shattered Brother Mouth's composure, how could Brother Mouth possibly be this thoughtful?

Harsh voice it might still have — but the softness underneath it was practically leaking out at every seam and couldn't be hidden anymore.

Long live Brother Mouth!

Cheng Shi's expression turned serious. He spoke quickly in his mind: Brother Mouth, tell [Silence] everything that happened in that trial and ask if [Silence] knows the truth of it.

"..." The Fool's Lips pursed, then said, "Too long. Rephrase."

"?"

Cheng Shi paused. He supposed that was fair — if it was someone other than himself doing the talking, complaining of fatigue was understandable. So he scaled it back. "Then just summarize — ask [Silence] about its perspective on this 'Variation.'"

The Fool's Lips understood. It immediately conveyed the message:

"Hey, mute. [Deceit] played the Outer God [Fate] and killed you once. Do you hate [Deceit] for it?"

"!!??"

No —!

By the time Cheng Shi registered what the Fool's Lips was saying, it was already too late. Brother Mouth's words had fired faster than any machine gun, and by the time Cheng Shi reached up to cover his own mouth, a complete "story" — no, a complete disaster — had already unfolded before them.

Technically, yes, Brother Mouth had "relayed" his request exactly as asked. But —

This was NOT what he meant by relay it!

You treacherous mouth, and here I thought you'd actually softened up!

Apparently you were the same as ever — the Fool's Lips that opens its mouth and immediately gives someone a heart attack!

Ha. And apparently, I was the same as ever too — still the clown who naively trusted a foul-mouthed liar.

Well, Brother Mouth was right — a silent clown really is funnier than a noisy one...

Just end it all now. It would be simpler.

Cheng Shi let the light fade from his eyes. He dropped his hands, stopped resisting, and prepared himself with the posture of a man awaiting divine judgment to receive whatever storm was about to break over him.

He was certain he was about to become a puppet again — he just didn't know who would come save him this time.

But events didn't unfold the way Cheng Shi expected. No matter how long the defeated clown waited, the punishment he'd braced for never came. He blinked, confused, and looked up at the Leaking World Silent Puppet — only to find that it had looked exactly the same from the very beginning. It hadn't changed at all.

No expression, no assimilation, no response. Just the same as it always was — silent, still, eternal.

Cheng Shi blinked again, puzzled.

If [Silence] had no desire to express, then why had it answered his prayer and granted him this audience in the first place?

He was still thinking it over when Brother Mouth got back to work.

"Hey mute, speak up. What kind of mute just... stays mute?"

"..."

Cheng Shi's face went rigid. He trembled slightly as he turned his gaze toward the Leaking World Silent Puppet's eyes — and when he saw those eyes flicker ever so faintly in response to the Fool's Lips' challenge, every last part of him went numb.

Just die. That would solve everything.

Chapter 1330: [Silence]'s Expression

Today, [Silence] was rather like [Fate].

That wasn't a criticism — it was praise for its forbearance.

Even though the eyes of the Leaking World Silent Puppet had stirred faintly at the Fool's Lips' blasphemy, [Silence] still made no move to punish Cheng Shi. True to its nature, even forgiveness came without a word.

Of course, it was also possible that Cheng Shi's identity simply left [Silence] without any good options. Either way, Cheng Shi was grateful.

He pointed at his own mouth, then at himself, his expression clearly pleading:

O great [Silence] — you allowed that one to speak, so why not let me speak instead?

The Leaking World Silent Puppet found this deeply reasonable. In the next instant, the Fool's Lips was muted, and Cheng Shi regained the ability to speak.

It was a peculiar feeling — as if someone had snapped their fingers right beside his mouth, and then his voice simply worked again.

"I... can talk now?"

He touched his own lips, then suddenly allowed a smirk to curl at the corner of his mouth.

"Brother Mouth, oh Brother Mouth — thank you. Your foolish act brought me the solution.

I'm sure you understand exactly how pleased I am right now.

Oh, I see you do. Your silence says it all. That means you agree."

Having said his piece, he turned his full attention away from the visibly trembling Fool's Lips and bowed solemnly to [Silence].

"Praise be to... fear. It is fear that brought us together.

My lord, I'm certain you know why I'm here, so I'll waste no time. I want to know — are you aware of the Variation that [Deceit] brought upon the universe?"

Cheng Shi's tone was deeply sincere — even more so than it had been in the Fishbone Hall. If he'd delivered that same sincerity during an audience with [Void], no one could have imagined what glory might have filled that void.

But here — his sincerity seemed to land on deaf ears. No response.

The mechanical, expressionless Leaking World Silent Puppet sank once again into eternal silence. It didn't move, didn't speak — just stared straight at Cheng Shi, making his heart grow more anxious by the second.

Would you please say something?

I'm speaking to you with such sincerity, and you don't react at all — but the moment the Fool's Lips insulted you, your eyes moved slightly. My lord, your response system really makes it hard not to draw certain conclusions. Are you into that sort of thing?

"..."

Cheng Shi was at a loss. He didn't dare curse the god — but he needed results. Left without options, he switched to a backup plan.

He had to walk away with something!

"My lord, I know you uphold your own will at every moment, never once breaking it.

But I also know that you must hold a feeling for this world that is different from others. Otherwise you would never have chosen [Deceit]'s side against [Origin].

Everyone believes [Silence] never expresses — but I believe you are expressing at every moment. The presence of silence everywhere is the clearest proof of that.

It's only because people have so little understanding, and their actions are so foolish, that you chose not to share with them.

[Folly] will ultimately arrive at [Silence] — the evolution of the Paths already confirms it.

I understand you. And I know my own limits. I may not be wise — but I am not a fool.

I never expect you to break your vow of silence for something as small as me. I only want to receive even the faintest trace of guidance from you — for the sake of this poor Fixed Destiny that I've become, for whatever small use I might still be to this world, and for the sake of the fear we both share...

Shelter this world once more — great god of [Silence]!"

"..."

Those were Cheng Shi's truest words. He had very little sincerity left to give the gods, and almost all of it had been staked on the Fear Faction.

The false Curtain Call had shown him that without divine support, a mortal had almost no chance of turning the tide. So the last of his sincerity was all he had left as a bargaining chip — to earn the backing of the gods.

Especially now that he could feel [Silence]'s lack of hostility toward him — his urge to press harder had only grown.

Seeing the Leaking World Silent Puppet remain unmoved, Cheng Shi gritted his teeth and tried one last underhanded ploy.

"If you don't object... I'll take that as a yes?"

"..."

In that moment, the Leaking World Silent Puppet finally understood the true value of Fixed Destiny. It was as if one of its own followers had stood before it again.

"Fine!" Cheng Shi was out of options. He pivoted abruptly. "I'll assume you don't know anything. All of this was the Fun God's doing — he deceived all the divine beings, determined to make the Era Curtain Call feel absolutely real..."

But I still have one question.

You must know about the Real Universe. In the Real Universe, I encountered a massive puppet corpse — still alive, playing dead.

I originally thought there might be some secret hidden on that puppet's body... something connected to the Creator. But when I approached, I found it was attempting to assimilate me.

My lord, I'm not saying the assimilation itself was wrong — but it wasn't assimilating everything around it. It was specifically targeting living beings who climbed onto its body.

This I find difficult to understand. If it was spreading your will, the range was far too limited. But if not — what would you say it was... doing?"

This question finally got a response.

Cheng Shi hadn't expected that [Silence], unmoved by everything, would actually begin to stir upon hearing this description.

The eyes of the Leaking World Silent Puppet began to shift with larger movements — an expression of shock, perhaps. At the same time, its limbs, which had been locked in rigid stillness, began to extend with agonizing slowness, until the puppet lay flat out in the void.

When Cheng Shi saw the puppet's final position, he went completely blank — because it was a perfect, one-to-one recreation of the Leaking World Silent Puppet he'd seen in the Real Universe.

[Silence] — a god who never expressed — had reproduced the scene Cheng Shi had described from the Real Universe after hearing him speak.

It had arranged itself into the posture of a corpse.

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted. He had no idea what this meant.

But when he saw the giant head of the Leaking World Silent Puppet tilt and slowly drift toward him, a sudden flash of insight struck him. He understood.

[Silence] was... inviting him to climb on top?

Just like in the Real Universe — onto its head?

Could it possibly have a secret that could only be whispered directly into his ear?

A flare of excitement — followed immediately by a flare of alarm.

He hadn't forgotten what had happened in the Real Universe. A lesson learned is a lesson earned — especially for schemers, one painful lesson translates to ten new survival instincts.

He watched that enormous head drifting closer and quietly left a die floating in the void. He then activated his shadow's Fate Has Divergence talent, set a [Time] anchor point, and only then — with extreme caution — did he hop up onto the puppet's head.

But the instant Shadow Cheng Shi landed —

Hmm.

The exact same sequence played out again.

[Silence]'s assimilation began.

It wasn't assimilating anything else in the void — only the dumbstruck Shadow Cheng Shi had been targeted.

Cheng Shi's mind went blank. For one moment, he honestly wondered if [Silence]'s alignment with the Fear Faction was a lie — no, this wasn't even [Silence]. This might be [Deceit] in disguise.

Only [Deceit] could pull something this underhanded — luring someone in with such convincing bait!

Shadow Cheng Shi immediately activated his talent and retreated back to Cheng Shi's side. Feeling his consciousness lag and blur, fighting through the loud internal alarm blaring "steady — stay steady," Cheng Shi forced himself not to step back. He looked straight at the puppet still lying in the void and asked:

"What are you trying to do?"

The Leaking World Silent Puppet sank back into silence. It only slowly adjusted the tilt of its head, that slight movement like a continued invitation for Cheng Shi to "come up."

Silence fell over Cheng Shi too.

It was obvious that [Silence] had no intention of harming him — otherwise he wouldn't be standing perfectly fine in the void. But why had [Silence] replicated the form of the puppet from the Real Universe? And why was it trying to assimilate his shadow?

Could it be that [Silence] had understood what that puppet was trying to communicate — and was now using this method to convey the same message to him, repeatedly?

"!"

That was it. It had to be.

Cheng Shi's eyes lit up. He finally felt sharp.

He studied the Leaking World Silent Puppet's posture closely, trying to find clues in the rhythm of its gentle swaying — but before long, the rhythm became irregular. Clearly, [Silence] was telling him: the swaying carried no meaning.

Cheng Shi furrowed his brow and looked back toward the puppet's head. Could it be that everything was still hidden on the puppet itself?

He reviewed the speed of the previous assimilation in his mind — and concluded that even a simple dice switch would probably be enough to escape in time. So he sent Shadow Cheng Shi carefully climbing up again.

Sure enough — the assimilation swept back in, pulling Shadow Cheng Shi into a mechanical, stupefied fog.

Shadow Cheng Shi quickly withdrew. Cheng Shi stared at what was in front of him, brow creasing deeper.

He sent Shadow Cheng Shi up again, then pulled him back. Up, and back. A few rounds later — Cheng Shi froze completely. He stood motionless, staring, until his eyes went wide.

His expression shifted to shock. Uncertain, he slowly raised his head and asked:

"My lord... are you saying that... to learn what you know — one must be willing to bear the risk of assimilation?"

The moment those words left his mouth, the Leaking World Silent Puppet slowly rose, returned to its original form, and blew a stunned Cheng Shi back into the physical world.

It had expressed what it wished to express.

That was enough.