

The Gods 1351

Chapter 1351: Number One on the Road to Ascension

"Lord Yu Xi jests.

Compared to a marionette that can't be brought to any respectable stage, your achievements are the true 'cheat.' Otherwise, [Void] wouldn't have chosen you to become..."

The little puppet still didn't dare say the whole thing. He was waiting for Cheng Shi's response.

Cheng Shi guessed where Wei Mu was going. He made no move to stop him — he simply smiled and extended a hand, gesturing for the other to continue, letting the wise man perform freely.

Before asking questions of the Road to Ascension's top-ranked player, he needed to first confirm how far the other had already gotten on his own.

If Wei Mu truly had the ability, then sharing the latest intelligence to fill in any remaining gaps could come later.

Given the gesture, Wei Mu bowed once more and continued.

"...the sacrifice of this era.

I believe I've guessed the reason for your visit here, my lord. You're searching for a way to escape the identity of sacrifice — am I correct?

Thank you for that generous expression in response — I take it as confirmation. So this is the gathering place of a 'rebel' organization. And the flickering flame representing a divergence from [Fate], entrusted with the last glow of civilization, alongside a [War] successor who 'survives through whatever means necessary and does not fear bloodshed' — they are roughly the king and queen of this place.

Forgive me — merely a metaphor, no disrespect intended toward either of you.

When all the 'rebels' gather in one place, no one will believe they're here to discuss how to make the current ruling divine authority more stable.

And so I begin to understand.

I had long found it puzzling that the gazes of [Deceit] and [Fate] — the two [Void] rulers — upon you carried a slight distortion. Two entirely different wills somehow converging in an inexplicable intersection.

But when I learned that you resist the identity of sacrifice — it clicked. [Fate] was probably the one who truly found you first. And the identity of Yu Xi is connected to [Void]'s answer — am I right?

And that answer is very likely not a pleasant one for you, which explains the resistance. And that resistance gave [Deceit] the opening it needed — it used that will to bind you.

I believe I'm correct. And [Deceit]'s motivation isn't entirely without trace — in fact, the evidence stands right before us now:

It raised a [Fate] Envoy to shelter these 'rebels' — which tells us clearly that it favors this kind of defiance. And the result of this defiance is that [Void]'s two wills converge within you, drawing the attention of all the gods toward [Void]'s answer.

Come to think of it — I should be thanking you.

The day I became number one on the Road to Ascension, I realized the Road to Ascension might not be about drawing close to the gods themselves — but close to the gods' 'choice.'

I'd hesitated over whether to give up — but I also couldn't bring myself to abandon such a rare chance to draw close to divine beings.

But the longer I stayed at that position without receiving any 'feedback' from any divine being, the more I realized perhaps someone had already 'stolen' the Road to Ascension's divine gaze — making the gods

no longer care who was closest to them, because they had already found that 'choice'... the choice [Void] had made.

You 'saved' me, my lord. Wei Mu offers you his sincere gratitude."

"..."

The words weren't unflattering — and yet that "gratitude" sounded like contempt from any angle you looked at it.

So this is a wise man? So this is Wei Mu?

He'd never appeared in a single [Void] trial, and yet he could read both [Void] rulers' intentions with near-perfect accuracy from the universe's scattered traces alone.

Cheng Shi himself had no idea exactly why [Void] had chosen him — but based on everything he'd experienced, Wei Mu's interpretation aligned perfectly with his own.

Cheng Shi gave him a genuine round of applause for such an impressive deduction — but he knew this absolutely wasn't the full extent of this so-called top mind's understanding of the world. So he extended a hand again, inviting Wei Mu to keep going.

Wei Mu blinked. He understood what Yu Xi meant. He nodded, choosing his words carefully.

"A stepping stone again, is it..."

Since you've given Wei Mu this opportunity — then Wei Mu will offer a humble brick to invite your jade, and humbly present his shallow observations in hope of receiving your true knowledge.

Since last we briefly crossed paths, I suspected you were collecting certain special items — things like, say, the eyes found inside that Fool-Hunting statue?

Those would be pieces of a mask, would they not?

I'm not entirely certain whether that mask is connected to [Memory] or to my god's missing authority — but looking now, I believe it must be connected to [Void]'s answer. Am I right, my lord?

You haven't collected everything. You remain uncertain where the answer lies. The confusion on the faces of the other two also tells me — at least here, you won't find what you're looking for.

So you didn't come here for the possible mask pieces. You came for something else."

By this point, Qin Xin had entirely lost his expression. He stood in place in silence, listening — had it not been for the false Curtain Call laying a foundation inside him beforehand, his face would have been fully written over with shock by now.

The Flame of Hope was different. It was looking at the little puppet with boundless curiosity, hanging upside-down in front of it multiple times, clear as anything that it wanted to pry open the puppet's skull and see what was kept inside.

Only Cheng Shi remained composed — though it was performed composure.

He was more stunned than anyone, because he knew everything Wei Mu had said was correct. He himself had lived through countless fears, confusions, and despairs to reach this point — to know these things. What gave the wise man the right to know?

Just a brain that had started believing in [Folly]?

If that didn't qualify as a "cheat," the word deserved to be struck from the dictionary.

Of course, these musings were only self-deprecating. If the universe truly had such a cheat available, the Fear Faction and the Fun God wouldn't have been pushed this far.

He looked at the puppet's blank, wooden eyes and considered — seemed to recall something — and linking it to what [Time] had once said, Cheng Shi started suddenly and blurted out:

"Faith? You used the Container in your hands to borrow the power of faith!?"

"!"

The puppet froze. It was the first time Wei Mu had lost composure in front of another person — because someone had seen through his trick.

Yes. He had borrowed the power of faith.

Remember the meeting on the terrace in Dolgod? Wei Mu had mentioned then that he had obtained [Folly]'s Container — but that Container was meant for collecting faith condensed into divinity. Wei Mu was not [Folly]'s "divine being," and [Folly] had no servant god to lend him an identity. So initially, he had no way to use that Container.

But he had thought of a method: become the top-ranked player on the Road to Ascension, and make the world believe in — and chase after — his intelligence.

This way, once the belief that Wei Mu's intellect surpassed all players in the game had spread — he collected his first drop of divinity.

This divinity could be assembled into authority. But [Folly]'s authority was missing, leaving Wei Mu with no reference instructions. He could only try to piece it together himself.

The experiment of seizing [Folly]'s authority this way failed — though not entirely, because during the experimental process, he discovered that collecting faith to condense it into divinity produced results beyond divinity alone. A special connection that emerged between the faith-bearer and the faith-convergence process during the gathering of belief was itself a subject worth researching.

He shifted his focus to that domain entirely. While mastering the assembly of divinity, he also mastered the small trick of temporarily borrowing the intellectual processing power of faith-bearers by channeling the congregated belief.

In simpler terms: when Wei Mu thought, he was no longer relying solely on his own brain — he was borrowing a tiny sliver of computational power from every "devoted believer" of his intelligence.

That borrowed processing power was negligible from each individual — often merely the dormant, unused portions of individual consciousness — and yet they were passively lent to him by virtue of their "devoted belief" in Wei Mu.

While the contribution of each individual was tiny, stacked across an enormous base of believers, Wei Mu still gained considerable assistance when thinking. This was why he had been drawing ever closer to the "truth" in recent times.

He had mapped out for himself a prototype of how faith becomes authority — and was on the verge of discovering the assembly instructions for [Folly]'s authority.

And this was precisely why the gods placed such weight on faith — because authority and faith had never been two separate, independent things.

In a certain sense, what Wei Mu had done already matched the literal meaning of the Road to Ascension. He was drawing close to divine beings, step by step, in his own way.

Chapter 1352: Wei Mu's Conjecture

But Wei Mu had never shared this secret with the outside world. He understood perfectly that once it became known, the world's "faith" in him would cease to exist.

Even if all he was borrowing was the unused portion of people's cognitive capacity, no one would willingly allow their minds to be passively lent out. Fear would only drive the world to flee from Wei Mu's shadow.

Although this borrowed processing power was merely a supplement when he analyzed the world — going from frugality to abundance is easy, going back is hard. With the era's pace accelerating ever

faster, once he lost the ability to draw on faith-borrowed strength, he could not guarantee he'd still be able to stand at the era's forefront at all times, watching steadily as its tides moved forward.

Cheng Shi had gleaned something of the nature of faith from [Time]'s "faith lecture" — and that was what made his earlier guess possible.

And seeing the puppet's reaction, he had obviously guessed correctly.

A slight smile curled at the corner of Cheng Shi's mouth. He still couldn't determine exactly what Wei Mu was doing with faith — but he knew he had suddenly gained an additional card, a card he could hold over Wei Mu.

He and the little puppet exchanged a glance. He didn't linger on the topic. Before Qin Xin could fully process what had happened, Cheng Shi smiled again.

"So what do you think I'm here for?"

The little puppet's expression sharpened. He continued with uncharacteristic straightforwardness.

"Divine thrones!"

His tone was utterly certain. With a vulnerability now in someone else's hands, Wei Mu had no need to keep testing the waters. Yu Xi was clearly an expert-level player — and against someone like that, sincerity was more useful than probing.

"[War] has been silent too long. Even before, it wasn't active — but at least it would never have 'moved' to stand alongside the opposing faction.

I don't rule out that something happened to it, or that it's been trapped somewhere. But its situation would certainly be an opportunity for all of you.

You want to hold seats in the Assembly of Gods Convention?

No — two seats. [Prosperity] is also on Yu Xi's side, isn't it?

Rebellion never happens in a single instant. To throw off the fate that should have been yours, you must accumulate strength.

I mean no offense — but if I were you, my lord, I would first secure as many Convention votes as possible. Use the current era's rules as armor to protect yourself.

Of course, this armor might be able to withstand everything within this world — but once outside the world..."

There, the puppet fell silent.

The unknown cannot be deduced. His silence wasn't the end of the topic — it was an invitation for the answer. He was hoping Yu Xi would fill in the outside-world perspective for him. And he had already demonstrated one thing clearly: given any thread of information, he could keep reasoning indefinitely.

What Cheng Shi valued in Wei Mu was precisely his mind. He considered for a moment — and before sharing the truth of the universe, he asked a question.

"How do you compare to your patron, [Folly]?"

Wei Mu blinked. Without a moment's hesitation, he answered honestly.

"I fall short."

"?" Cheng Shi smiled. "Then why do you always seem to look down on it?"

"Angry that it doesn't strive for more."

"..."

Was this "angry that it doesn't strive," or was everything turned upside down?

Which one of you is the patron, exactly?

Cheng Shi shook his head and laughed — then immediately let his expression fill with gravity.

"If even your patron can't find the world's answer, what use is it telling you?"

The scheming clown pulled a small trick here. He didn't say it was he who sought the answer — he quietly shifted the premise, moving the motivation for uncovering the truth onto Wei Mu, making it sound as though Wei Mu had come of his own accord seeking information.

He used the comparison with [Folly] to stoke the puppet's competitive spirit, blurred the difference between host and guest to draw the wise man into the chessboard — and then used the leverage he'd just gained to shift the balance of momentum, instantly flipping who held the upper hand.

Wei Mu went from an intruder who had stumbled onto a secret back to the role of a "pilgrim" eager to glimpse a truth — just as he had been on the terrace in Dolgod.

And Wei Mu, who had seen through Cheng Shi's trick, raised no objection whatsoever. Because he genuinely yearned to know the truth of the universe — genuinely yearned to see through all the world's foolish acts. So rather than saying Cheng Shi drew him in, it would be more accurate to say he had thrown himself into the game.

This was an open scheme with mutual willingness. Both parties understood each other's inner desires perfectly. One was willing to ask. One was willing to speak. One wanted an answer. One wanted a clue.

So Wei Mu considered briefly — and landed on the best possible response to what Yu Xi had asked.

He said:

"[Folly]'s answer is the world's answer. My answer is your answer. It won't think what you think — but I will."

One sentence. It gave Cheng Shi the perfect stepping stone — and completely convinced him.

He looked at the puppet before him with genuine appreciation. Before sharing the full truth, he asked that one last "foolish" question:

"Can I trust you?"

The puppet's eyes revolved mechanically for a moment, then it said quietly:

"That depends on you, great Yu Xi."

Cheng Shi shook his head, laughed, and stopped holding back. He told the most intelligent player in the Faith Game everything he had seen and learned in the Real Universe, and everything that had occurred in the false Curtain Call.

When Wei Mu had absorbed the entirety of this vast and terrifying truth about the universe — his puppet body twitched twice and went still.

"?"

Qin Xin immediately drew his great bow. They'd just spoken of [Origin] — he wasn't certain where Wei Mu's sudden "offline" moment had come from.

The Flame of Hope looked on, shimmering. "He's coming."

"Who?"

"Still a puppet."

Before the words had fully landed, the original puppet suddenly burst apart, disintegrating into fragments and leaving only a mass of marionette threads coiled on the table. One by one, the threads stood upright, connecting outward into the void beyond the space — and then several threads pulled taut simultaneously, straining together, dragging a new puppet out from the void.

This puppet was slightly larger than the previous one. It landed on the table. Its expression remained just as rigid — but its voice was more substantial.

"My apologies. I simply felt that bringing the actual form would convey more sincerity."

The puppet bowed once more to the three present, then raised its head and looked directly at Cheng Shi. After a brief pause, it said:

"Lord Yu Xi — may I begin?"

"???"

Cheng Shi blinked. "You've already figured something out?"

Wei Mu shook his head heavily.

"No. This world may not have an answer to begin with. I've simply been using your perspective to deduce what kind of scheme [Deceit] and [Time] are actually building.

[Folly] once summoned me and said: if foolish acts could be ranked in this universe, [Deceit]'s foolish act stands highest, and [Time]'s foolish act stands lowest.

I asked it why.

It said:

To know folly and still commit folly — this is folly.

To know folly, commit folly knowingly, yet deceive oneself into believing it is not folly — this is ultimate folly.

[Time] is the former. [Deceit] is the latter.

At the time I didn't understand what it meant. Looking back now — [Folly] had probably already seen through both [Deceit] and [Time]'s intentions long ago."

"What intentions?" Cheng Shi asked, brow furrowed.

The puppet's eyes rotated, gaze drifting to one side. Word by deliberate word, it said quietly:

"They want to forge... an [Origin]."

"!!??"

Chapter 1353: The True God Creation Plan!

"If will is the projection of faith, then everything the gods champion will find its corresponding foolish act in the mortal world.

The Torchbearers are here scheming their God Creation Plan — yet unbeknownst to them, their protector [Deceit] may also be running a God Creation Plan of its own!"

"???"

At those words, everyone present was shaken.

Qin Xin's expression hardened immediately. He said in a low voice: "You know we're the Torchbearers? Who revealed the secret? Sun Miao?"

The puppet nodded.

"It was indeed her — but please don't blame her. A [Folly] believer has great difficulty keeping secrets in my presence. And she didn't reveal anything this time. I... used certain resourceful methods to find a few traces in her rest area."

"?" Cheng Shi blinked. "Don't tell me that you spent all that effort assembling teleportation arrays from divinity fragments not for any experiment — but to sneak into other people's rest areas to steal things?"

The puppet was silent. After a short pause, he corrected:

"Collect intelligence. I don't deny that breaking into others' rest areas is indeed a fine method for collecting intelligence — though this particular foolish act was my first attempt. Recent anomalies have been too many, and I failed to foresee them in advance. That troubled me somewhat, and I found myself stopping at nothing."

Showing up uninvited might sit poorly with the Torchbearers — but for Cheng Shi...

Con men and thieves. Six of one, half a dozen of the other.

So he just smiled. "Leave that method with me when we're done here — it'll make visiting friends much more convenient."

"..."

Every eyelid in the room twitched in unison. The looks they gave Cheng Shi were profoundly strange.

Is that what you call "visiting friends"?

Cheng Shi held his head high with complete dignity. What else?

Everyone shook their heads. Fine. If you say so.

No one spent further energy on that question. Attention turned back to what Wei Mu had just said.

A God Creation Plan!

[Deceit] and [Time] had hatched a God Creation Plan!

Mortals built gods so they could become gods. If the gods were building a god — then the only thing another god could still call a god was [Origin] itself.

When he first heard the words, Cheng Shi had gone numb all over. The reason he had interrupted with that joking comment was to forcibly loosen his own nerves.

This was not a trivial matter. Once anything became entangled with [It], the outcome seemed to be only destruction and oblivion.

Still — knowing the Fun God as well as he did, Cheng Shi couldn't call the God Creation Plan impossible. "Creating" an "[Origin]" was the greatest possible desecration of [Origin]. The perpetually contrary Fun God would absolutely not pass up this kind of fun.

But the question was — how? Could it actually be "created"?

Cheng Shi furrowed his brow in thought for a long while, then shook his head. "Why do you say that?"

Wei Mu was also thinking. Everything he was saying now hadn't been prepared in advance — it was being deduced in real time from the clues available, pushing toward the most plausible direction.

"In your account just now, you repeatedly mentioned [Time]'s will to save the world. This means you're firmly convinced that [Time]'s intention is to save the world. So [Deceit], who could work alongside

[Time], would absolutely not be walking a path of destroying the world — otherwise their wills could not have converged.

Just like the two completely opposing gazes from [Void] upon you — their convergence also has a reason.

And that reason is what you described: [Fate] wanted to forge a sacrifice that could draw close to [Origin], and [Deceit]... 'recognized' [Fate]'s 'devotion' and helped forge that sacrifice.

But what [Deceit] wanted to forge was not a sacrifice that 'draws close to' [Origin] — but a sacrifice that 'becomes' [Origin].

Only this way could [Void] walk the same road."

"..."

Truthfully, Wei Mu's conjecture was deeply staggering. For those directly involved, it was like detonating ten thousand nuclear warheads inside the mind.

But unfortunately, the directly involved party was Cheng Shi — a thinker so lateral that the clowns who tried to trick him ended up being tricked themselves. He had long since imagined in sweeping strokes every possibility of the Fun God's scheming, and naturally had also wondered whether he was gradually becoming some unspeakable entity.

That was also the reason why, since his audience with [Time], he had done everything necessary to keep his own fixed-destiny identity intact.

He hadn't forgotten — the "guidance" [Time] had offered was... draw closer to [It].

If a divine God Creation Plan truly existed, then he, as its prototype, was doing exactly that — drawing closer to [It]!

He simply couldn't reconcile "drawing closer" to [Origin] with "moving away" from [Origin] as a unified thing.

And today — in Qin Xin's room in the Torch-Passing Hall — Wei Mu gave him an answer.

"Continuing from before, the internal rift within [Void] is resolved. Now what remains is the rift between [Existence] and [Void].

[Time] intends to save the world — so [Deceit] would not be destroying it. But I believe that what [Deceit] is currently doing, including the scheme to drag the gods off their thrones one by one, is in a sense also world-destruction.

Only — the 'world' being destroyed may not be what we mean by that word. The old world is what it wants to destroy. The new world is what it wants to save.

In other words: everything we see driving this universe toward its end is a façade — a performance [Deceit] has staged to mask its will to save the world. It wants to bring down this old world that [Origin] gazes upon — and then, beyond that Creator's gaze, rebuild a brand-new world."

"!!!"

Even the battle-hardened Qin Xin couldn't hold his composure at this.

He clapped a hand on Cheng Shi's shoulder — first in consolation, then turned to face Wei Mu with a grave voice.

"This is only your conjecture. If the Creator cannot be defeated — how would they deceive [It]?"

Wei Mu didn't deny it. He nodded.

"This is indeed only conjecture. Given my mortal perspective, I cannot fathom how [Deceit] and [Time] would deceive the Creator in the Real Universe. But based on what I currently know, this may be the world's only chance.

[Folly] was right — this is undeniably a foolish act.

The rebels rebel endlessly, yet can never truly rebel. The saviors pour themselves into saving, yet can never truly save.

A scheme stretching across an entire era, all for the sake of making one world truly a world — rather than a specimen in the Creator's experiment...

I confess — I had never truly seen [Void]. Had never truly seen [Deceit]. It is far more deceptive than I imagined. And far greater."

"..."

Cheng Shi fell silent. Not because he didn't understand — but because he had finally understood what it meant for drawing closer and moving away to exist in harmony.

Become "Origin." Replace [It]. Look out upon this world. Sever the experiment.

This was at once the grandest deception — a theft of sky and swapping of sun — and also the sacrifice offered to [Void].

Chapter 1354: While the Old Gods Yet Live, an [Origin] Cannot Be Born

Wei Mu's conjecture was completely coherent. Even as speculation, Cheng Shi couldn't find a single flaw.

The countless signs of the universe seemed to have already revealed the ending to those who could read them — that [Origin] was simply impossible to defeat. Even the Fun God had no choice but to use something that looked like escape as its method for fleeing this despairing Creator experiment.

But could it actually escape?

As Qin Xin had wondered — what gave [Deceit] and [Time] cause to believe they could deceive the Creator of this cosmic experiment? Was it that sliver of [Origin]'s power which the clown had drawn out in the false Curtain Call?

But once the new world became entangled with [Origin]'s power again — would [Origin] truly not know?

These questions were a bottomless abyss. No one, no matter how long they thought, could come to an answer.

The only thing Cheng Shi was certain of was that he had already, undeniably, been walking the "fixed-destiny" path. He was carrying out the Fear Faction's will — dragging every divine being that drew close to [It] off its throne, one by one. This wasn't simple resistance against the Creator. It was [Deceit] landing its pieces, one precise move after another.

Because it knew — while the old world's divine beings still lived, the new world's "[Origin]" could never be "born."

So that was what [Time] had meant by "departing." They had already made all their preparations. They only waited for the era to reach its ending.

And in that moment, Cheng Shi finally understood why the Cheng Shi of the other world had clung so fixedly to the blood exchange.

Yes — the blood exchange was necessary. But the unfortunate truth was that the other Cheng Shi had exchanged the wrong position. He should not have taken [Deceit]'s place — because the throne waiting for him should have been... "Origin."

The room fell silent.

When they understood that the Fate Weaver beside them was quite possibly about to become this world's "Origin" — no one could help but fall silent.

Even Wei Mu stopped pursuing his deductions. He shook his head in self-deprecation.

"Much as I continue to look down on [Folly] — I cannot deny that it has truly seen through the universe's essence. Once [Deceit]'s foolish act begins, the world may no longer [Exist], and may no longer be [Void]. This is probably the most 'foolish' — and most 'perfect' — answer it could submit in this era."

Cheng Shi's mind was a churning storm of thought, consciousness scattered in fragments. He — who had always so desperately wanted to find answers from the Fun God — now found himself, in this moment, somewhat afraid to pull back the curtain on the truth.

As long as the Fun God hadn't confirmed it in person, everything discussed today would remain conjecture forever.

But once these conjectures were confirmed by the Fun God...

Cheng Shi didn't know how to face the so-called answer — or the future.

[Deceit] — born to defy everything — apparently wanted to carry out its defiance in this way. But per Wei Mu's reasoning, it would die. And the Fear Faction's gods would die too.

[Death], [Silence]... did they know? Would they agree?

And — if the [Void] era's ending was like this, what did the false Curtain Call the Fun God had personally directed even mean?

Cheng Shi's brow stayed tightly furrowed. Wei Mu read his thoughts and exhaled quietly. He said nothing. He had already dimly guessed at [Deceit]'s intent — but he couldn't speak it. There were things he had no right to meddle in on someone else's behalf.

"Then what about the mask?"

Cheng Shi was reluctant to accept the Fun God's "compromise." He began to deceive himself. "Crown's mask can't be without meaning. The truth hidden in the [Memory] Collection Hall — couldn't it be another path?"

A puppet was a puppet. Cold wood had no feelings for anyone. He punctured Cheng Shi's wishful thinking once more.

"The mask won't be without meaning. But it isn't necessarily the answer.

Before you told me about the Real Universe, I had already guessed that beyond this world lay another starry sky. At the time I wondered — when the gods face what lies beyond their world, are they cautious explorers or brazen conquerors?

Now that I know everything, I can say: neither.

They are lowly prisoners. Helpless beggars. Before the vast expanse of the Real Universe — even 'infinitesimal' is too grand a compliment for them.

That brings us to a question.

How did a group of divine beings ruling over the universe learn that another domain existed outside their world? Before making that discovery, they would never have considered themselves mere variables in an experiment.

So I think what the mask has sealed within it is very likely the reason they came to see through the universe's truth. It's hidden in the [Memory] Collection Hall — so naturally it would be a memory. And the only past significant enough to occupy a schemer's mind like that, when I think about it from every angle, could only be... the terror of that moment's discovery.

When a divine being realizes it is not truly divine — I imagine that feeling would be more despairing than any mortal witnessing a god descend."

"..."

Far more than that.

Just revisiting the scene in the mind was enough to bring a suffocating feeling from the depths of the soul. If that was truly what happened — no one dared imagine what kind of collapse the one who first glimpsed the truth of the universe must have experienced.

Was it the Fun God?

Or [Time], who had been calibrating the universe's time since the beginning?

Whoever it was — that despair had been stretched by time into fear, and had become the force driving them to turn their back on [Origin].

The irony was that a group of gods trying to break free from [Origin] seemed to be building an "Origin" with their own hands. And even more ironic —

I am "Origin"?

Cheng Shi's chest was full of a thousand tangled feelings. He looked at Qin Xin with a complicated expression, then at Wei Mu, not knowing what face to make.

"So... in that new world — you should be [War], you should be [Folly], and you..."

He turned slowly toward the Flame of Hope. The upside-down Candle Man looked back at him with a calm smile and tilted its head.

"There's probably no place for me in that world. I am a remnant of the old era — I don't belong to that new world. I'll die, and then return to [Fate]."

Why are you looking at me like that — don't be so sad. You said it yourself: only when change returns to [Fate]'s embrace can the final Container be left behind. I'll leave the [Fate] Container for whoever needs it. That's... a small final thing I can do for this world.

If this world is truly just one of the Creator's countless specimens — then helping it break free from the experiment and become a real world, isn't that its own kind of flame of hope, burning from the smallest ember?

It turns out it wasn't lying to me after all. It always stood beside me.

And I... will stand beside you, in that beautiful future."

"..."

Looking at the Flame of Hope before him, for just one instant, two words flashed instinctively through Cheng Shi's mind: "[Fate]."

[Fate] — come on, do something!

Was this kind of future a wrong path, or was it fixed destiny?

Since returning from the Real Universe, [Fate] had disappeared entirely. Had it refused the road [Deceit] had painted out for it — or had it reconciled with a different way of drawing close to "Origin"?

Was this truly the only path left for the world?

No. I don't believe that.

Cheng Shi clenched his fist. After a long mental storm, he seemed to reach some sort of resolution. He looked at Wei Mu, and smiled again with that characteristic crack of confidence.

"A good conjecture. I'll go find confirmation from the gods themselves.

But before the Fun God's plan is fully revealed — I'm not willing to just accept this. Wei Mu — wait for my word. I'll need your help soon."

The puppet blinked. Its eyes rotated once. It looked back at Cheng Shi with genuine interest.

"My lord — you are preparing to embrace another foolish act?"

"A foolish act?" Cheng Shi nodded, smiling mysteriously. "Exactly right — another foolish act!

If the road ahead is nothing but foolish acts — I don't ask to be the first to recognize the folly. But I will be the first to commit every last one of them.

The Fear Faction is not the Despair Faction.

As long as they still stand at my back — I won't despair. I still want to try."

Chapter 1355: How Rare — That I Should Encounter You at a Time Like This

The heavy silence in the room was dispersed considerably by that single smile from Cheng Shi.

At this point in the conversation, what followed could only be unfounded speculation built upon speculation — no longer meaningful. If they truly wanted to verify any of it, they only had to go ask the Fun God.

Before today, Cheng Shi had desperately wanted to go see it. After today... he wished the Assembly of Gods Convention could be delayed indefinitely, giving him enough time to carry out the plan forming in his mind.

Wei Mu was also curious — faced with this apparent "dead end," what kind of plan would this Lord Yu Xi, selected as "Origin," come up with?

Cheng Shi didn't elaborate. He said his farewells to the Torchbearers and told Wei Mu not to leave this world — he would be back soon.

The moment he heard "come back," Wei Mu had already guessed where Yu Xi was going.

The Real Universe.

Yes — to carry out the plan forming in his mind, Cheng Shi still lacked some preparation. So he needed to make another trip to the Real Universe. And Mi Laozhang was still out there and hadn't been brought back — the Gravekeeper's participation would be essential to that plan.

Only — at this point, given how critical Fixed Destiny was, the Fun God probably wouldn't agree to let him leave again. The Real Universe was full of risks at every turn. There, even the Fear Faction couldn't protect him. And bringing friends along this time would be nearly impossible.

Moving as a group would certainly be detected by the Fun God. But taking this risk was unavoidable — for no other reason than: without personally walking every road of despair to its end, he refused to believe that [Deceit] and [Time]'s method was the world's only answer.

Only when he could see with his own eyes that every path was a dead end would he accept such a compromise.

And so, after leaving the Torch-Passing Hall, Cheng Shi moved quickly back to the [Chaos] Temple, where he reunited with Zhen Xin.

He didn't rush to share Wei Mu's conjecture with her. He only said a single sentence.

"I need to go out."

Zhen Xin blinked. She naturally understood what "go out" meant — but did it have to be right now? When scheming around the Iron Law of [Order], they'd had to consider whether his fixed-destiny identity might be compromised. Once he left the world for the Real Universe — who could guarantee the person who left would come back unscathed?

She furrowed her brow. She almost said something to stop him — but looking at Cheng Shi's utterly serious expression, she exhaled softly instead and said: "All right. Tell me your backup plans. Every backup plan for returning to this starry sky. I'll coordinate with you."

Cheng Shi was quiet for a moment. "I'll send my shadow. The true body won't take the risk."

Zhen Xin shook her head. "We can't confirm whether Fixed Destiny refers only to you, or to you and your shadow as a whole. That's not a backup plan. That's a gamble."

"..."

Cheng Shi was out of answers. When it came to the Real Universe, there could be no backup plan. That was [Origin]'s territory. No life in this universe could guarantee roaming freely there without consequences.

But precisely because it was [Origin]'s territory, every life that entered would proceed with extreme caution — and other people's caution was his opportunity.

He wouldn't leave his shadow or his true body behind. When no one could help him, he had to ensure he kept his full strength.

Cheng Shi laid out this reasoning for Zhen Xin. It earned him nothing but an eye-roll.

She knew con men too well — she was one herself. That persuasive-sounding logic might have worked once upon a time. But when she had become a god — one of the sixteen ruling divine beings of this starry sky — she would no longer be taken in by childishly absurd nonsense like that. The schemer in front of her had an incurable gambling habit. He had absolutely no backup plan.

If she didn't know the world's future rested on this person's shoulders — she'd let him go recklessly, and it wouldn't matter. But knowing that the universe's future was all riding on the Fate Weaver standing before her — how could she possibly agree to his recklessness?

So she looked directly into Cheng Shi's eyes, half-smiling.

"When will you be back?"

"Life is just gambling anyway... hm?" Cheng Shi had already worked himself up and prepared a whole speech for further persuasion — but Zhen Xin was simply agreeing, just like that?

He looked up and blinked. Zhen Xin shot him a sidelong, disdainful glance.

"You are Fixed Destiny. You are this world's key. I'm just a Magician who was pushed onto a divine throne by Fixed Destiny. What would I know about what the future holds? If my own foolish act slows your steps in finding the world's future — I will have committed a crime no death can atone for."

"..."

"And besides — who could ever convince Lord Yu Xi of anything?"

If I kept refusing, wouldn't you craftily bring up Ming Yu's situation to tell me: when the path ahead is uncertain, every choice anyone makes is a gamble?"

"..."

In that moment, Cheng Shi felt Zhen Xin wasn't like [Chaos] at all — she was more like [Deceit], seeing straight through people. And she wasn't wrong. That was exactly what he'd planned to say.

Though the tactic was a fairly lowly one, he was out of options.

Seeing the Fate Weaver avert his gaze, Zhen Xin knew she had guessed correctly — he truly had been thinking that.

"Despicable," Zhen Xin said, with feeling. Then she closed her eyes, drew a deep breath, and said seriously: "So what do I need to do? [Chaos] doesn't have the authority to let you leave this starry sky."

A slight smile crept onto Cheng Shi's lips. He said to Zhen Xin once again: "Thank you." He'd been saying thank you far too often lately. "I thought you wouldn't agree."

Zhen Xin lifted her eyelids and looked at him, exhaling once more.

"I told you before — Cheng Shi, be yourself. When you're trapped in the endless pressure of a mud pit, you cannot take the step that breaks destiny. You've started believing in yourself again — that's good. But don't forget: this world also has many people who believe in you. I won't say more than that. While you've been here only a short time and before the Fear Faction reacts — tell me what I need to do."

Cheng Shi smiled faintly:

"We can't hide it from them — at least not from [Time]. I'm not even certain another version of you would have the ability to take me out. But... it's worth a try. I trust [Time] will understand me. If there were any other way — who would want to leave this world?"

With that, Cheng Shi extended his hand toward Zhen Xin and activated the Time Deduction method. He needed to find another version of Zhen Xin — to see whether there might be an opportunity, hidden in the cracks of [Existence], to find a shortcut to the Real Universe.

His vision went instantly dark. In the moment his consciousness was pulled away, Cheng Shi knew the Time Deduction method had succeeded — [Time] had not refused him after all.

But when he opened his eyes again — everything before him made him freeze completely where he stood.

Because what was in front of him wasn't another version of Zhen Xin. It was mass upon mass of disordered chaos-fog — as though being pulled by some immense force, torn apart and flattened like cotton.

The process was slow. The chaos-fog's appearance — being slowly shredded — gave anyone who looked at it for even a moment a visceral, empathic sense of anguish.

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted sharply. He stepped back half a pace and called out uncertainly:

"[Chaos]?"

The churning yellow fog lurched to a sudden halt — then boiled up all at once, hiding the wound that had been steadily torn open deep within the fog. Several wisps of smoke drifted down and solidified into a physical form before Cheng Shi.

That figure was unmistakably familiar. It was the Magician who had just stood before him — Zhen Xin.

"How rare — that I should encounter you at a time like this. Are you all right, Fate Weaver?"

Chapter 1356: That Is Not a Path Forward — It Is a Trap

The Zhen Xin before him had an extraordinarily hoarse voice, and her complexion was alarmingly pale. Though she was working hard to conceal something, Cheng Shi could see it clearly — the yellow fog dripping steadily from her back was not overflowing [Chaos] power. It looked more like... blood, disguised as fog.

"You're injured?"

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted sharply. He couldn't believe it. Who could wound a divine being to this degree?

The chaos-fog Zhen Xin smiled and shook her head.

"No. You're seeing things — it's my [Chaos] power spilling out and polluting you, giving you an illusion.

Perhaps you're curious why I would have [Chaos] power... Hm? You're not curious at all. You knew about the [Chaos] Authority being inherited?"

At those words, the yellow fog before Cheng Shi began to boil again. The smile on Zhen Xin's face vanished in an instant. Her eyes flashed first with shock, then urgency. She stepped forward, wanting to

grab Cheng Shi and say something — but afraid her own aura would contaminate him. She could only force down the emotion surging inside her and say with utter gravity:

"So she's inherited [Chaos]'s authority too. Then you're very close to us now.

But this is not a good thing.

Remember every word I say next: do not touch [Origin]'s power. Do not use [Origin]'s power. Do not retain [Origin]'s power.

It is not sweet honey that can be consumed safely — it is poison that kills.

No matter where your future leads, discard it. All of it.

Because once you make contact with it — no matter how brilliant the future you envision looks — that is not a path forward. It is a trap.

[Origin]'s power should not belong to any world. It can do anything, yes — but it has never represented new life. Only destruction.

We only understood this after failure — only realized, with hindsight, that when the first thread of [Origin]'s power entered our world, that world had already entered a countdown to destruction.

The pathetic irony is that we still treated that power as our final backup — deluding ourselves that we could use it to reset the world one more time when all else failed.

There is no second chance. [It] does not leave much time for any world. Unless...

No. We never walked that road. So we cannot give you guidance on it.

Cheng Shi — you only need to remember: whatever your plan is, let go of [Origin]'s power. Otherwise, everything will continue to lie under the Creator's shadow. Just as... we do."

As she spoke, the chaos-fog behind Zhen Xin began churning once more. The sight of it being steadily torn apart reappeared before Cheng Shi.

Zhen Xin glanced back at it with self-deprecating resignation. "You see that? True void is devouring everything. When the chaos has been fully consumed — the spacetime storm will arrive. That is the destruction of the old experiment, and the beginning of the new..."

Spacetime storm!

The moment he heard those words, Cheng Shi's mind went directly to that pitch-black storm — and the long bridge that could carry life to wherever the will pointed. So its appearance actually signified one world's destruction and another world's birth?

Then the spacetime storm he had once experienced — which world had silently ceased to exist at that moment?

Cheng Shi was shaken deeply, but what shook him more was the revelation that [Origin]'s power was actually killing poison.

Then why had the Fun God gone through the trouble of the false Curtain Call to lure a thread of [Origin]'s power?

Breaking the pot because it was already cracked? Giving up?

No — the Fear Faction was still alive. They had to still be finding a way.

Cheng Shi steadied himself, forcing down the turbulence of shock and suspicion. Facing a divine being, he had no way to judge whether her words were true or false — but out of respect for the Jokers and trust in Zhen Xin, he chose to believe.

He drew a deep breath and said once more: "Thank you, Zhen Xin."

The chaos-fog Zhen Xin visibly blinked — clearly not expecting him to address her that way. The gaze she turned on Cheng Shi carried a thread of longing. She smiled faintly.

"Just the obsession of someone about to die. It may have frightened you — but Cheng Shi, don't doubt yourself. You must believe in yourself.

I have a rough idea of why we're meeting like this. You need a spacetime storm to get to the Real Universe?"

"..."

At those words, Cheng Shi's expression shifted. He didn't dare keep engaging. The fact that she could ask this question meant she had the ability to "create" a spacetime storm at any time. But storms like this only appeared at a world's destruction. Zhen Xin was a living being within that world — even having inherited a divine throne and become a god, could she represent the entire world?

She could. She absolutely could.

On the condition that she was all that remained of that world. Then her destruction would be the world's destruction.

"They..."

Zhen Xin was quiet for a long time. She lowered her head. "They still wanted to try. But the more they tried, the fewer of them remained. Until at last there was truly no road left.

The reason I've survived until now isn't that I was waiting for you. I was waiting to see if there might still be a chance to see her... any version of her would have done.

But it seems all of that was wishful thinking after all.

If my death lets you move one step further than we did — then doesn't that mean I beat all of them?

Heh. I'm the last winner. They were just so bad at this."

Then the chaos-fog went completely and utterly still.

Cheng Shi's heart clenched. He reached out instinctively to hold her back. But it was already too late.

That lone, resolute defiance had finally found its true freedom — and at the same time, put the final period on the last line of that world struggling desperately to survive.

The Magician within the chaos-fog completed her curtain call through a scattering. She left the only audience member before her with an unimaginably terrifying spacetime storm.

Watching restless, disordered orbs of pitch-black light flood his entire field of vision, Cheng Shi held his breath, expression blank.

He was somewhat numb to everything before him now.

Every world had its wrong turns. Who could be certain their own path forward wasn't also a wrong turn?

No one could. No one.

All there was to do was grit your teeth and keep walking.

Darkness descended. Time collapsed. Space fell. The silent spacetime storm swallowed the flash of a black-hemmed dress vanishing through the crack of [Existence].

A pity she never got to see it after all.

...

The storm in [Existence]'s cracks proved different from the Real Universe's. This time, Cheng Shi didn't enter any dark space and wasn't swept into an unfamiliar world. He was thrown directly into the Real Universe — deposited onto the Spacetime Dolphin Bridge in the storm's wake.

Watching the enormous Void-Whiskered Swallowing Dolphins swallow darkness and exhale light, something in Cheng Shi's chest stirred with a strange sense of "as if it were just yesterday." For real this time. He had seen these massive creatures so recently — how did it feel as though an enormous amount of time had already passed?

Cheng Shi shook his head and cleared his mind. He knew time waited for no one, and he didn't have much to waste here. From this moment on, he had to accomplish the purpose of coming to the Real Universe quickly.

And the first step was to find a fellow traveler on the Dolphin Bridge.

He hadn't forgotten — only when two lives with the same destination met each other would the bridge below them anchor toward a target world. A single person alone could not use the spacetime bridge's power to move.

He had tried using his shadow. Perhaps the "split" wasn't thorough enough — he had failed.

But Cheng Shi wasn't in a rush. He knew how to find another person's presence on the bridge. Even not knowing who he would encounter — he was certain that somewhere in the Real Universe would be someone like that.

So with a thought, Cheng Shi disappeared from where he stood.

When he opened his eyes again, a figure had indeed appeared at the far end of the long bridge — but the identity of that figure was far beyond anything Cheng Shi had expected.

How could it be—

"Big Cat?!"

Chapter 1357: Hong Lin? Hong Lin!

Indeed — the figure appearing at the far end of the long bridge was none other than Hong Lin.

This Hong Lin was clearly different from the one Cheng Shi knew. She still wore her animal-hide outfit, but her entire body was radiant with seven-colored luminescence. Her flowing hair shimmered like a crown of prosperity and cascaded like a waterfall of life, trailing across the bridge beneath her like a gown woven from vitality itself.

From her end of the bridge, Hong Lin also turned and looked back. But when she saw it was Cheng Shi who had come, she blinked first — and then her expression gradually darkened.

She raised her spear, leveling it at Cheng Shi from afar.

"You shouldn't be seeing me."

Cheng Shi's breath caught. He said nothing.

Her aura of pressure was overwhelming — greater, even, than any of the divine beings he had encountered. But what stopped him from speaking wasn't Hong Lin's presence. It was the meaning behind her words.

He truly should not be here — but he had never expected to see Big Cat here, of all places. Because the destination he had been thinking of was nowhere other than the coordinates of where [War] made its charge toward [Origin].

He knew that among the countless sliced universes, there would always be someone no longer restrained by anything who wanted to go "meet" [Origin]. He had assumed he'd encounter another version of himself — but instead...

"How are you here?"

He asked a question that needed no answer — not because he was playing dumb, but out of pure instinct.

Looking at Big Cat's posture, if he had arrived even slightly later, that vitality-surging figure might have already charged directly toward [Origin].

She too must have been waiting for a "fellow traveler" to arrive alongside her — she simply hadn't expected it to be Cheng Shi.

Seeing that Cheng Shi bore none of the same battle-readiness as herself, Hong Lin smiled, relieved. That meant his world hadn't sunk to this level yet.

She turned her gaze toward the sky and said nothing.

Cheng Shi's brow creased slightly. He moved to draw closer — but before he'd even lifted his foot, Hong Lin's spear rose again, pointed directly at him.

"Stop. Don't come any closer."

"!!!"

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted. He looked at the divine light surrounding Hong Lin — a light he had never seen before — and seemed to understand something.

"This is...!?"

"Where are you going?" Hong Lin cut him off, her voice heavy.

"The Corpse Field of Gods. I need to go there to find some... materials."

Hong Lin's brow furrowed — she obviously knew the place. "It's not safe there. Where is your companion? She... why didn't she come with you?"

Cheng Shi knew Hong Lin was asking about his world's Hong Lin — but this time, bringing a group wasn't possible. He had slipped away from under the Fun God's gaze with [Time]'s protection. If he'd told his companions, this venture would likely have gone far less smoothly.

Though fortunately — he wasn't without allies even outside his world.

"[Deceit]'s plan has reached its most critical stage. She's being watched. I couldn't go to her. But don't worry — I'm not going alone. Old Zhang is also out here somewhere."

When Hong Lin heard Cheng Shi mention Zhang Jizu, she gave a quiet nod. She evidently found the Gravekeeper reliable.

"Where is he?"

"..." Cheng Shi paused and touched his nose. "I haven't found him yet. That's also why I came here. I just didn't expect to find you instead. Hong Lin, you..."

His tone became extraordinarily complex. "I know you have your reasons for going. I won't try to talk you out of it — and even if I tried, it wouldn't work. But I want to ask you a favor. Help me anchor to a world, and let me bring Old Zhang back. The Gravekeeper in that world has inherited [Death]'s authority — actually, they all have inherited authority there. Maybe they would have a way to help you with your current situation?"

Listening to Cheng Shi, Hong Lin laughed.

"Cheng Shi, you said you wouldn't try to talk me out of it.

If you've guessed why I have this divine power — then you should already know that divine authority is useless to me. I have my mission. And it is also my path.

Enough of that. As it happens, I have a favor to ask you too. I'd been waiting for a fellow traveler — but that person I'd never met has still not come. So let's make one last deal, Fate Weaver. I'll help you find the Gravekeeper; you send me to where I need to go."

"..."

Cheng Shi didn't want to make this exchange. He knew what it meant — that the Big Cat before him would come to rest on the same starry sky where [War] had vanished.

But he couldn't refuse either. Because Big Cat had called it a mission.

What a weight to carry in one word. What had their world gone through to lead Hong Lin here, to this mission?

Was a death march also a mission?

There wasn't much time, and there wasn't time to leave Cheng Shi wallowing in indecision. Perhaps he had worked through something — his gaze grew increasingly resolute, his expression increasingly calm.

He gave a nod. "All right. Let's begin."

Cheng Shi had never been to the world where Zhang Jizu had gone. He could only describe as clearly as possible the [Death]-version Zhang Jizu he had seen, and Old Zhang himself — using their two existences as anchor points to lock onto that world, then share the "coordinates" with Hong Lin.

The two of them looked at each other from a distance, and simultaneously began to visualize the destination where two versions of Zhang Jizu existed at once.

But several breaths later, Hong Lin's expression subtly shifted. She seemed to be sensing a quiet change below the bridge. Before long, she shook her head toward Cheng Shi.

"I'm sorry. The place you anchored to... no longer exists."

"!?!?"

At that moment, Cheng Shi's mind went completely blank.

"What did you say?"

Hong Lin's expression was one of reluctant sorrow. She sighed deeply. "Either the anchor has disappeared, or the world itself has. But either way — I don't think it's the result you wanted."

"That can't be right..." Cheng Shi's fists clenched instantly. "How could this be? Something must have gone wrong somewhere. Hong Lin — is it possible you sensed incorrectly?"

Hong Lin shook her head. "You know. In the influence of this kind of power, I cannot sense incorrectly."

"..."

Cheng Shi went silent. He had never expected this result.

But that [Death]-version Zhang Jizu had clearly said — even as that world moved toward its end, it would easily allow a mortal to live until old age. How could the destination no longer exist?

Could his disappearance from that world have triggered some kind of chain reaction? But the Fun God couldn't personally kill a clown.

Cheng Shi was stunned. He stared blankly at the ever-shifting bridge surface beneath him, watching countless shadow-figures weave through it, feeling momentarily helpless.

Old Zhang...

Seeing this, Hong Lin let out a long, slow sigh.

"People must learn to accept loss. My time is short. So is yours.

Since you haven't found him — about the Corpse Field of Gods, I'd suggest you..."

"I have to go." Cheng Shi's voice steadied once more. "Whether or not Old Zhang is there, wherever he is — this concerns the world's future, the universe's hope, and the path forward of all that is fixed. I cannot stop.

I am not so fragile. Let's begin. I'll return on time to send you to your new battlefield."

Cheng Shi's gaze became extraordinary in its clarity, his eyes like a bottomless abyss looking straight through the spacetime bridge. His fingertip pinched a single die, then let it fall gently onto the bridge's surface — leaving both an anchor in time and what felt like an offering to the memory of a friend.

"No more wasting time. Send me across."

Chapter 1358: Old Zhang? Old Zhang!

This time it went very smoothly. The instant he saw Hong Lin give her nod, Cheng Shi dived off the Dolphin Bridge and plunged straight down into the Corpse Field.

His previous visit had been a scene of pure shock — all his attention had been captured by the endless cascade of divine bodies, and in that terror, he hadn't truly absorbed what "death" felt like. This time, perhaps affected by the news of the Gravekeeper's disappearance, somewhere in the descent, Cheng Shi felt for the first time an actual trace of [Death]'s aura seeping through him.

That genuine sense of mortality settled in his chest and wouldn't leave, making his expression grow uncommonly grave.

Something had changed in the Corpse Field of Gods. A dense concentration of [Death]-force permeated every corner.

But why would [Death]-force be here? The death in this place had nothing to do with [Death].

Any anomaly was a harbinger of danger. Sensing something wrong, Cheng Shi put himself on full alert and halted his descent mid-fall, drifting quietly toward the field's edge.

He wasn't here to take risks. He was here to find something.

The most valuable thing inside the Corpse Field of Gods was undoubtedly the divine throne that some unknown person had assembled here. Since Cheng Shi had already pocketed that throne, what had he come back for?

The answer was simple. Being in a corpse field — naturally, he had come for corpses.

Yes. Cheng Shi was here to collect divine bodies. Not to replicate an identical divine throne, but to conduct a mad experiment — one he intended to use to verify what he was thinking. And the materials for that experiment were right here.

Cheng Shi moved carefully toward the edge of the corpse pit. He wouldn't venture deep inside this time — just taking a few bodies from the outskirts would be enough to accomplish his purpose.

So he moved with extraordinary caution. He confirmed three times that nothing stirred around him, then approached one divine body with extreme care — reaching out carefully to touch the broken arm of a scattered remnant. But in the very moment he was about to retrieve it, a terrifying wave of [Death]-aura erupted from the broken arm with no warning and swept over him completely.

Cheng Shi's expression changed drastically. His pupils contracted to points. He snapped his fingers in an instant — but instead of reverting to a past position, his body dissolved into smoke and passed cleanly through the dense [Death]-aura.

In that process, Cheng Shi realized the [Death]-aura was extraordinarily strange. It wasn't lethal. It wasn't anything like an attack. It felt more like... a signal.

When the signal was triggered, a chain reaction began. The divine bodies scattered along the pit's edge began to tremble simultaneously — and then from the depths of the pit's abyss came a sound like a

surging tide, as if some force was pushing a great gust outward. A thundering blast filled the entire Corpse Field.

"Gods... perish..."

Though the terrifying sound-wave lasted only a single breath, it was enough to shatter the composure of any life that had wandered in here, sending them fleeing in panic. And before that wave had even fully dissipated, from the pit's depths came another roar of surging sound.

Any ordinary intruder who heard this — if they still had legs to run — would be long gone by now.

But Cheng Shi had been here before.

He knew where those sounds came from. Not some unknown creature — just the sound of air currents funneling through the divine throne, the voice of an inanimate object.

So he was unnerved, but not panicked.

The problem was — hadn't he already taken that throne?

So why was this sound still here?

More strangely still — what explained the trembling of the divine bodies along the pit's edge, and this great tide of surging pressure? He had only barely touched a broken remnant — how had that triggered a reaction this large?

Even beyond that: from the initial [Death]-signal just now to this cascading chain reaction — all of this felt strangely familiar to Cheng Shi. He had the persistent sense that he had experienced something like this before, somewhere.

But why?

Cheng Shi's brow furrowed tighter and tighter — the more he thought, the stranger it felt. At that very moment, the second shockwave erupted, blasting through the Corpse Field once more.

"Universe... collapses..."

A noise this deliberate didn't feel like a natural phenomenon. It felt more like someone was doing it intentionally.

But this sound contained secrets about the divine throne. Who would be so reckless as to "broadcast" that openly?

And for that matter — a noise this terrifying would have driven everyone away. So who could still be...

"!!!"

Wait.

What if this wasn't a broadcast at all — but a scare tactic?

Was someone using this shockwave to drive intruders away?

It just happened that he had heard this sound before — so he wasn't frightened. Any other intruder, faced with this, would have long since fled.

Cheng Shi went cold with sudden understanding. He realized immediately that there might very well be another person still inside the Corpse Pit — someone who had arrived earlier than him, and had already set up this "frightening trap" as a deterrent.

Who could that person be?

Another version of himself?

That didn't feel right.

Death. Trigger. Reaction. Trap...

A flash of sudden insight struck Cheng Shi's chaotic mind — and he finally remembered why this all felt so familiar.

Wasn't this the exact same mechanism as Old Zhang's cemetery?!

All these reactions inside the Corpse Field bore a startling resemblance to the defensive mechanisms of the Gravekeeper's cemetery!

The very moment that thought formed, Cheng Shi felt someone approaching from behind. His whole body froze — but he didn't move. A second later, a scalpel emitting a ghostly light pressed cold against the back of his neck.

A voice — impossibly familiar — came quietly from behind him.

"Fate Weaver. You've become far too reckless."

At that moment, Cheng Shi's mind went boom.

"Old... Old Zhang?!"

Cheng Shi didn't dare turn around. Even feeling that familiar aura, he didn't dare confirm it — afraid it was a mirage born of shock, a hallucination conjured after hearing terrible news. This was the Real Universe, and the Corpse Field of Gods. Here, anything was possible — so he didn't dare be certain of who this Zhang Jizu was.

Zhang Jizu was equally cautious. Even if the person truly was the Fate Weaver — he had no way of knowing which world's Fate Weaver this was.

So he said nothing in response.

But that single silence confirmed everything Cheng Shi needed. This was absolutely a Gravekeeper. No matter which world — the identity was right. That was enough.

What was a Gravekeeper doing here instead of keeping his cemetery? What had brought him all the way out here?

In that instant, a rush of inexplicable feeling surged straight to Cheng Shi's head. He felt the cold of the blade at his neck. He let out a short, sharp laugh — and without warning, threw his head backward, as if ready to test the hardness of his fragile neck against the tip of that icy scalpel.

And he started swearing as he did.

"Reckless, he says! Keeping graveyards, he does! Burying gods, he does!? What the absolute hell! Is this your graveyard, that you just come here?! And set up your array while you're at it! Who sent you here? What happens to your actual graveyard while you're gone? What — someone else's graveyard looked easier to keep, or did you just lose the way home?"

Cheng Shi's "suicide charge" had no effect. Zhang Jizu instantly pulled the scalpel back and brought the flat of the handle down on Cheng Shi's shoulder, spinning him around.

Those perennially half-shut eyes met Cheng Shi's gaze — complex with tangled feeling — and nearly closed to a single line. Zhang Jizu took half a step back, his own expression equally complex, and gave a nod.

"Yes. I really did lose the way home."

"..."

Chapter 1359: The Full Story, Beginning to End

The scene went quiet. Even the trembling divine bodies around them stilled, and everything fell back into silence.

Cheng Shi's chest tightened. From that single sentence alone, this person felt exactly like the Gravekeeper who had gone missing — but he still didn't dare confirm it. It was all too convenient. He had to be sure.

"What happened?"

Steady-Cheng asked the universal question.

Steady-Zhang half-shut his eyes and looked the other over from head to foot, then delivered the universal answer.

"Nothing happened. I'm waiting for someone."

"Who are you waiting for?"

"A clown who wants to get buried in a cemetery but can't find the cemetery manager to buy a ticket."

Cheng Shi blinked — then gave a half-amused look. "What a coincidence. I'm also looking for someone."

"Oh," said Zhang Jizu, and then said nothing more.

"?" Cheng Shi's expression stiffened. "Why don't you ask who I'm looking for?"

Zhang Jizu's eyes narrowed to a line. He slowly put away the scalpel and said with absolute deadpan seriousness: "Don't want to get yelled at. So I won't ask."

"What the—"

Cheng Shi was already pointing a finger at Zhang Jizu's nose, ready to let rip — but when he saw the smile beginning to spread across the other man's face, every choice word stuck in his throat.

At that same moment, the Gravekeeper reached out and landed a solid clap on Cheng Shi's shoulder.

"You're still alive. The world is still there. Good."

Cheng Shi stopped. He felt the warmth of Old Zhang's palm — and finally let out a long, deeply relieved exhale.

A living Gravekeeper. It was him.

But then Cheng Shi's expression shifted again. He retracted the pointing finger and replaced it with a different one — a thumbs-up — and said in that characteristic sarcastic drawl:

"I suppose I should thank Comrade Gravekeeper for giving this humble one a second life? Praise the universe's greatest Gravekeeper — truly I should give you an award. But before that — I'm curious why you didn't stay in that world peacefully waiting for a bus ride home, and came all the way out here instead. You didn't decide the credit for saving the world was too enormous and thought you'd reward yourself by annexing the Corpse Field of Gods into your graveyard, did you? Ha. Not a bad idea — but the execution was far too reckless. I have an easier method. Want to hear it?"

"I..."

"You do. Good. I'll tell you: just change your name. 'Zhang Jizu' becomes 'Zhang Origin.' After all, you're scrounging wool from right under [Origin]'s nose — what's a little more?"

"!!!"

Zhang Jizu's whole body went rigid. His eyes widened by about two degrees. He nearly yanked the scalpel back out to sew Cheng Shi's mouth shut on the spot.

Where did he think he was?! This was the Real Universe — the place where gods fell. Something unknown lurked beneath the pit below, and he was shooting his mouth off like this? Wasn't he afraid of attracting catastrophe?

This had nothing to do with being reckless or careful. This was flat-out courting death.

Seeing Old Zhang's reaction, Cheng Shi understood immediately that the other man didn't yet know what was generating the sounds from below. Understandably — stuck in a place like this, with no knowledge of what lay above or below, boldly engraving arrays and using sound to scare off intruders and hold the territory was still impressively gutsy and careful on Old Zhang's part.

But Cheng Shi still wanted to know — why had Old Zhang come here? Had something really gone wrong in that other world?

"What happened?" He asked the question again.

This time Zhang Jizu's brow creased slightly. He glanced down into the pit below — and upon seeing that the depths showed no reaction to Cheng Shi's "blasphemy," something seemed to click. He gave a slow nod and said, heavy-voiced:

"He died."

"???" Cheng Shi's pupils contracted. "Who?"

"The other me. The Gravekeeper who inherited [Death]'s authority."

"!!!"

Cheng Shi's eyes went wide. He finally understood why the anchor on the Dolphin Bridge had failed. It wasn't just that Old Zhang had run into trouble — the other Zhang Jizu had also met with an accident.

"How did he die?"

Zhang Jizu's expression darkened. He exhaled. "He used the authority to die in place of another Cheng Shi. He was atoning for something. He died at peace."

Cheng Shi's eyes went wider still. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. He thought he might have misheard.

"Who did you say died? That Cheng Shi died? How is that possible — the outer god was a fake, the Fun God in disguise. Why would it personally kill a clown?"

"???"

What — the outer god was fake?

Now Zhang Jizu was also stunned.

Before seeing Cheng Shi, he had spent a long time searching for the original world and failing to find it. He'd even started to think that the world might have already reached its tragic [Void] ending. Then the moment he saw Cheng Shi and confirmed this was the Fate Weaver from his world — he had felt an enormous relief, interpreting it to mean that the [Deceit]-path Cheng Shi from that world had saved it through self-sacrifice.

But now you're telling me the outer god was fake — was the Fun God all along?

Because the whole thing was a [Deceit] trial?

Zhang Jizu's eyes narrowed to nothing.

If Cheng Shi was right, then the other Cheng Shi's death was indeed a little strange. His brow furrowed deeply. Both of them stared at each other, each equally shaken.

"What happened in the trials after that?"

Cheng Shi didn't hesitate. He told Zhang Jizu everything about the false Curtain Call in a low, steady voice. And Zhang Jizu told Cheng Shi everything he had seen and experienced — and that was when Cheng Shi finally understood why Old Zhang had ended up here.

It had been, in truth, a chain of accidents.

After the [Death]-version Zhang Jizu fell, he had rushed to confirm the state of the original world. In [Death]'s cemetery, he found a path leading to the Real Universe, and through it, entered the Real Universe.

But newly arrived and completely without guidance, he had no idea how to navigate the place — until he encountered the enormous floating "corpse" of the World-Leaking Silent Puppet that Cheng Shi had once described.

Zhang Jizu found it like a beacon. He planted himself beside the Leaking World Silent Puppet and refused to move. Wherever the puppet drifted, he followed — and following it for some time, whether because his "navigation method" had somehow worked, or because fate had quietly chosen to protect him again, he and the Leaking World Silent Puppet were jointly swept into a spacetime storm.

Afterward, the Leaking World Silent Puppet disappeared without a trace, and he was thrown into the Corpse Field of Gods.

Initially, seeing this place, Zhang Jizu was anything but thrilled. Cheng Shi had shared his earlier exploration of the Real Universe during a trial — but at that time, he hadn't yet mentioned the Corpse Field of Gods or the divine throne to his companion clown in the trial. So Zhang Jizu had no idea where he was.

Boundless terror engulfed him. But fortunately, nothing here posed a direct threat. After adapting to the fear, he began to explore the area.

And then he found the voice coming from below the corpse pit.

Anyone who heard someone speaking disrespectfully of [Origin] in a place like this would naturally assume it had something to do with the real [Origin]. The Gravekeeper was no exception.

But unlike a certain spectacularly bold clown, once he realized there was a living presence beneath the pit, he suppressed his curiosity entirely. He refused to descend. He stayed put, waiting for a chance to leave.

At the same time, uncertain whether any outside threats might come, he used whatever materials were nearby and the new knowledge he'd absorbed in the [Death]-version Zhang Jizu's cemetery — and set up the triggering mechanism to scare away intruders. Which was precisely what Cheng Shi had activated.

And so the Gravekeeper began a long wait.

Though he called it waiting, the hopeless Zhang Jizu had long since accepted this as a new cemetery. He didn't believe hope would come. Just like the news of [Deceit]-Cheng Shi's death — he believed he would eventually be buried in this strange and foreign graveyard.

But no one could have guessed that on the very first day after the trap was finished, the intruder he had been cautiously guarding against showed up. And that intruder was the clown who embodied all hope — Cheng Shi.

Chapter 1360: I Want to Run an Experiment

Cheng Shi finished listening with an expression of complete shock — and Zhang Jizu was no less shaken. He had been so vigilant about the source of the sounds below the pit — how could he have imagined it was just a divine throne producing them?

"You're saying you took that throne?"

Cheng Shi gave a firm nod. "Yes. At this very moment it's in my personal space."

As he spoke, he produced one of the throne's puzzle pieces. As luck would have it, it was the broken, tightly-shut Starry Eye.

Zhang Jizu blinked. "[Deceit], it..."

"This isn't its body. I also have no idea which divine being these remnants belong to — I detached this piece from the throne. It's enough to prove the throne is in my hands. So why would another throne be here?"

The two looked at each other and their expressions simultaneously darkened.

Mortal logic simply couldn't explain any of this. To investigate the cause, the only option was to go deeper again — to the space beside the pit's wall — and see with their own eyes whether a new throne had appeared.

Cheng Shi was clearly inclined to go. But Zhang Jizu grabbed him first.

"Any anomaly is a harbinger of danger. You didn't know there was another throne here before you came — which means this wasn't your purpose. Finish the main task first. Other things can wait."

Typical Old Zhang — steadiness as always. Cheng Shi nodded. Under the current circumstances, he could only choose to be steady too.

Zhang Jizu was still puzzled. He half-shut his eyes. "Since you already took the throne, what did you come back for?"

Cheng Shi gestured at the divine bodies surrounding them and said in a grave tone: "To collect materials."

"These corpses?"

"Yes. I intend to use them for an experiment to glimpse the future."

"?"

Zhang Jizu blinked. By his understanding, there didn't seem to be any experiment in the world that needed divine bodies as ingredients — or rather, across the entire long history of the Tower of Logic, there had never been such a thing either. Faith had persisted to the present, and however fanatical a believer, even they couldn't bring themselves to drop their patron into an experiment chamber. They

might want to. They simply couldn't do it. And today, Cheng Shi was doing exactly that — because he had an abundance of material right in front of him.

The clown spoke as he moved, rearranging divine bodies around him. "Bring as many as we can. I'm not certain how many I'll need, or whether the experiment will succeed — but it has to be tried. A lot has happened while you were away. I went to see Wei Mu and laid out some of the universe's truths to him. Using that cheat-code brain of his, he told me the future the Fun God described for the world might not be what any of us imagined.

[Origin] cannot be defied — so the hope the Fun God offers looks more like despair born from having no other option. I'm not willing to accept that. I keep feeling there's still a path out there..."

As he said this, Cheng Shi's expression was extraordinarily complex. He wasn't certain inside. Even the gods hadn't been able to find a better way — and he was just one mortal carrying a "fixed destiny" title. Could he?

But his tone was firm — because he understood that if even he, who was supposed to be the world's key, gave up, then what reason would the Jokers, the Destined Ones, the Torchbearers, and this world have left to keep fighting?

Zhang Jizu was a sharp man. He heard the lost uncertainty buried in Cheng Shi's words — and equally heard the courage in the clown choosing to step to the front. So he cut Cheng Shi off promptly, not allowing those words to land without an answer. He just nodded, steadily and unreservedly, and said:

"There is always a path. Even if there isn't one — everyone will carve a new one together. Fixed Destiny may be the world's hope — but this world is also everyone's world. Don't carry all the weight on your own. At least the Jokers... will always share the burden with you."

And with that, Zhang Jizu got to work.

For a Gravekeeper, handling corpses came with better storage methods than even a personal space. That was a delightful bonus Cheng Shi hadn't counted on — because on his own, he would have struggled to carry back this much material.

The two of them worked heads-down at the pit's edge, deeply focused on laying a solid "foundation" for the experiment — or at least stockpiling enough for extra failed attempts — and completely forgot how Cheng Shi had gotten here in the first place.

Far away on the Spacetime Dolphin Bridge, a certain Big Cat was waiting, ready to make her charge!

When Cheng Shi didn't return for a long time, Hong Lin's brow sank. She jumped off the bridge directly and dropped into the Corpse Field of Gods. Whatever her own mission was, letting a Fate Weaver she had personally sent into danger vanish without returning — that she couldn't do. No matter which world this Cheng Shi came from, since she had gotten involved, she would see it through to the end.

So she came — and found two porters grunting and "stealing" things in the pit.

At that sight, even the seven-colored divine aura surrounding Hong Lin couldn't stop her eyelid from giving one very hard, very involuntary twitch.

She felt as if she were looking at the same hopelessly lying, utterly unreliable Fate Weaver from a long, long time ago. Back then, he'd been exactly like this too — reach for anything that looked useful without a moment's hesitation.

Still, seeing this, Hong Lin didn't rush them. She stood quietly at the center of the pit, keeping watch over the two thieves.

Zhang Jizu never stopped being alert. A short while later, he detected someone approaching from behind — startled, he shoved Cheng Shi into the pile of corpses and drew his scalpel in one move, standing guard at the pit's edge to face whatever quiet threat had arrived alone.

But when he saw the newcomer was Hong Lin, Zhang Jizu's eyes went momentarily wide.

"Hong Lin?"

Hong Lin gave that maximally-half-shut gaze of his a glance of amused interest and snorted.

"Not exactly me — but also me. Have you two stolen enough? If you have, come back with me. My deal with the Fate Weaver is still ongoing. My time is limited. We should set off."

"?"

While Zhang Jizu was still stunned and confused, Cheng Shi crawled out from the pile of bodies, patted Zhang Jizu on the shoulder to signal "it's all right," then tilted his head back and smiled up at the Hong Lin hovering above.

"Enough, enough — just one last step. Very simple. We only need to take one look, and then we go."

Hong Lin raised an eyebrow. She guessed what Cheng Shi wanted to see. Her gaze swept across the abyss at the bottom of the pit, her tone layered with too many things to name.

"You don't need to look. I'll tell you instead. Your guess was right — the divine throne has 'refreshed.'"

"!!??"

Cheng Shi's whole body jolted. His pupils contracted. "What do you mean, refreshed?!"

Hong Lin exhaled, seemed to think of something, gave a smile of resigned acceptance, then explained for the benefit of the two bewildered figures below her:

"Literal meaning. Approximately every so often, the throne here reappears. So — not just you. Many versions of you have probably taken that throne. Including the you from our world."

"!!!"

At those words, a chill shot from the base of Cheng Shi's spine straight to the top of his skull.

From beginning to end, he had believed that taking the throne was his own daring act of adventure — and because of it, he had finally understood the true nature of [Fate]'s Fixed Destiny.

And now Hong Lin was telling him countless versions of him had taken the throne?

Then what was this throne? Was it a mission checkpoint that kept refreshing with each instance of Fixed Destiny as they arrived across different timelines?

But descending into the pit had clearly been his own choice — influenced by no one. How had it become a "mass-replicated" act?

Cheng Shi's mind was in complete chaos. A faint, half-formed fear began spreading inside him.

Seeing this, Hong Lin exhaled.

"I shouldn't have said this to you. But even if I hadn't, you would have gone down, and the result would be the same. Let's go. You've finished your task — it's my turn now. This is not a good place."

Hong Lin raised her spear in a wide sweep — and in an instant, whisked both figures out of the pit.