

## The Gods 1391

Chapter 1391: Eras Change, but Birth Never Ceases

Meanwhile, elsewhere.

It was still the Void.

Before the Divine Pillar strung with countless Life Marker Boards, a striking figure stood in reverent silence.

Today's summons had come without warning, catching Hu Xuan completely off guard. Before she was called, she had been planning to have a child, still debating with her birthing partner over who would serve as the mother first.

But the very next moment, she was dragged directly into the Void and found herself before her Benefactor — Birth.

The Divine Pillar was quite pleased with the rich aura of Birth emanating from this child. Perhaps because she had been fortunate enough to ascend to the rank of Envoy in a mortal body, she walked the path of Birth with extraordinary devotion.

One could say she was the most obedient and most similar child Birth had ever had — one who had steadfastly and unwaveringly carried out Birth's Will.

"You — have done well —"

Birth never withheld praise, just as It never concealed Its disgust.

For instance, when encountering Deceit, other deities might keep a respectful distance, but Birth was different — It would actually lash out and strike It.

Being suddenly praised certainly made Hu Xuan happy, though a thread of nervousness ran through her joy. She couldn't recall any recent accomplishments on her part, aside from increasing the frequency of her self-birthing. The only other thing would be...

Wait, no — the child with Lu Xia was still in the planning stages. Surely the Benefactor's praise wasn't for that?

Could there be some important mission to be entrusted to her?

Unable to pin down her Benefactor's intent, Hu Xuan could only suppress her doubts and think optimistically. Even if there was a heavy burden to bear, it would be nothing more than some task related to Birth — hardly difficult for a seasoned Life Sage, and the more the merrier.

The Divine Pillar didn't waste words with Hu Xuan. It idly lashed at the Void and declared the purpose of summoning Its follower:

"The era of Void — is about to end —"

"!"

Hu Xuan was startled. She hadn't expected the Benefactor to bring up such a topic.

Birth was famously "neutral" — as long as the Universe didn't interfere with Its practice of Its own Will, It could ignore everything else.

In the past, every time Hu Xuan had tried to fish for information from her Benefactor through subtle hints, she had been swatted straight out of the Void. Yet this time, the Benefactor had voluntarily broached the subject...

Could it be that the state of the Universe had grown dire enough to threaten the stability of Birth's Will?

Hu Xuan held her breath and listened intently.

"This era is different from those before —"

No matter how much I keep to Myself — the successive falls of the gods tell Me —

For a deity to survive this calamity — it seems they must embrace Void —

They are straying further and further from Origin — and wish to drag the entire world with them —

Now all who opposed have fallen — and next —

It will be My turn —"

"!!!"

Hu Xuan's pupils trembled violently, and a strange surge of emotion welled up inside her.

She was a textbook god-worshipper — otherwise she would never have joined the Nature Sect, which had long since strayed from its original purpose. Her madness in daring to ask a god to bear her a child further proved how desperately she wanted to draw close to divinity and gain power.

After becoming the Eternal Sun under Cheng Shi's lucky protection, she had spared no effort in vying for her Benefactor's attention, striving to elevate herself.

Yet she had gradually realized that Birth, who so loved gathering Its children together, was not actually a "good mother" — but rather a "cold mother."

Its eyes held only Origin and the Will of Birth; nothing else mattered.

The "reunion" It sought was merely a pursuit of faith's stability — It needed children to rally behind It and spread Its Will.

But there was no denying that It was at least responsible toward Its own children, especially the obedient Hu Xuan, whom It cared for considerably.

As a deity worshipped for untold ages, Birth could see the scheming hidden within Hu Xuan's devotion, but It saw no issue with that. So long as Its followers still held Birth in their hearts, It could tolerate any desire that sprang from that devotion.

Only when a follower abandoned Birth's Will entirely, leaving nothing but raw desire, would they be cast out as a Corruption traitor.

And so, It often guided Hu Xuan, and the Sage was genuinely grateful for it.

That was why, when she heard her Benefactor say "It will be My turn," Hu Xuan's expression became deeply conflicted.

For a moment, this fanatical follower of Birth found herself at a loss for words to "comfort" either herself or her Benefactor.

But what she didn't know was that Birth needed no comfort at all. It saw things far more clearly than many deities — because It had never refused to embrace Void!

"You — are good —

But do not grieve for Me —

So long as Origin endures — the Will of Birth shall not perish —

No matter how Deceit resists — Origin will not vanish —

Therefore what We must do — is not slow the steps of those who fear —

But draw close to them — and within the new birth they so desire — continue spreading the Will of Birth —

I am Birth — but Birth need not be Me —

Child — you must remember these words —

This is the true essence of Birth's eternal existence and eternal continuation —

So long as living beings persist in the Universe — Birth will never disappear —

Let eras change — Birth never ceases —"

"!!!!!"

Hu Xuan was thunderstruck. This was the first time she had felt divine Will so raw and overwhelming. Every word from Birth was like wind-driven sand laced with gravel, scouring her face, slowly eroding the complex and wavering humanity in her heart and reshaping it into pure, eternal divinity!

This wasn't like the devious intrigues she heard from Cheng Shi's lips, nor the power struggles over Authority she had observed. These were words of faith in their truest, most unadulterated form. In Birth's eyes, there had never been a craving for survival — only an unwavering devotion to the continuation of Its Will.

What was terrifying was that this devotion was not for Its own sake, but for Origin!

One could say that devotion was Its piety, and piety was Its divinity.

The Sage was a clever woman, but even the cleverest mind needed sufficient information to interpret context. Clearly, Hu Xuan lacked the breadth of knowledge to fully grasp her Benefactor's words — though Birth hadn't expected Its follower to understand everything at once, either.

It spoke again:

"You will understand in time — just as Birth — will inevitably arrive —

I will eventually fall — just as Life — will inevitably meet Death —

But before that day comes — you must not speak of today's words to anyone —

Faith is never built in a single stride — and the Universe is never a simple matter of trust and piety —

He will come to find Me —

And the beneficiary — is you —"

"???"

Who would come to find Birth? And what did "beneficiary" mean?

A name flashed through Hu Xuan's mind almost instantly — someone she trusted more than she trusted Birth itself. And though the Benefactor had said today's affairs must remain secret, if that person was clever enough to figure it out on his own...

'That wouldn't count as me leaking it, would it?'

The corners of the Sage's lips curled slightly as she bowed to her Benefactor with genuine reverence:

"Yes."

The Divine Pillar lashed at the Void, taking in every nuance of Its follower's reaction.

It had foreseen everything, but It didn't mind — because It knew:

Any approach was still an approach.

...

Chapter 1392: The Torchbearer Mission

The perspective shifted once more — this time to the Fire Passing Hall.

Starting from some indeterminate moment, the Candle Man who had so often illuminated the Fire Passing Hall, joking and playing with the Torchbearers, had vanished. No one could find Him — not even Qin Xin.

But everyone knew He was still here, watching over the Torchbearers, never having left.

At first, Qin Xin had been puzzled, but once he considered that he himself was about to inherit a Divine Throne and become the new War, he seemed to understand the Flame of Hope's position.

When a true deity could shelter the Torchbearers beneath its sky, the Flame of Hope no longer needed to constantly cheer on its anxious charges.

Perhaps quietly illuminating some shadowed corner that needed light was what He truly wished to do.

And today, that corner held not only the Flame of Hope, but also a little bird.

Bai Ling.

The Audience Meeting had concluded. Regardless of how spectacular other faiths' audiences had been, regardless of what encouragement their attendees had received from their Benefactors, at least Deceit's Audience Meeting had been uneventful — no, "mysterious" was the better word.

Since it ended, every channel had been ablaze with discussion about the divine audiences, the topic refusing to cool. Yet from Deceit's Audience Meeting, there was not a single whisper of information.

Normally, those liars couldn't wait to attract the entire world's attention. The nonsense spewing from their mouths might not scare a person to death, but it could certainly make them die laughing.

Yet this time, not a single one of those apex fraudsters had breathed even a hint about what had happened inside the Audience Meeting!

Nobody knew what had transpired during Deceit's audience. The handful of liars who had been just a few points short of qualifying were going mad. They were convinced those bastards must have received some monumental boon inside — otherwise there was no way they'd be this united, all keeping their mouths shut without leaking a single detail.

Even close friends who had once fought side by side through life-and-death Trials couldn't pry out a single secret.

Did that seem right?

Absolutely not!

And so, every non-attending liar launched into wild speculation about that mysterious Audience Meeting. Some claimed the attendees had ascended to godhood; others said they'd become puppets of Deceit; still others insisted they'd touched a higher-dimensional world and no longer deigned to speak in the "newbie zone"... In short, the theories were as varied as they were outlandish.

Yet the actual participants were suffering in silence!

What could they possibly say?

That a group of apex fraudsters had been played by a single Fate Weaver at the Audience Meeting — played so thoroughly they'd been ejected from the Void without even laying eyes on their Benefactor?

Even if they said it, would anyone believe them?

Some might argue: never mind whether people believe you — just say it first!

Who said they hadn't tried?!

Someone had!

Old Eight, the Master of Trickery, simply couldn't stomach the "injustice." Using his perfected C-language skills, he laid out everything that had happened at the Audience Meeting in the mage channel — every last detail, complete and unabridged!

To emphasize authenticity, he even included the inner thoughts each person had experienced during the post-mortem review!

And then?

Then he was met with a torrent of furious rebukes from veteran mages, telling him that if he was going to fabricate a story, he should at least make it believable. Did he think apex fraudsters were idiots?

"..."

Weren't they, though?

He had no answer for that one.

What was even more infuriating was that someone actually accused him of being the Fate Weaver himself, disguising the boast to put gold on his own face.

'I got conned by the Fate Weaver, and now you're accusing me of being the Fate Weaver?!'

'The era of Void couldn't possibly be this absurd!!'

The Master of Trickery's composure shattered. He briefly considered breaking his oath and defecting to Silence.

It was amid all this clamor that Bai Ling quietly returned to the Fire Passing Hall.

She had gained much from the Audience Meeting. Not only had she untangled the knot of anxiety she'd always felt when facing the boss, she had actually "helped" him with something.

Though the boss had said she'd been "a huge help," Bai Ling figured he was just being polite and encouraging her at the same time. Still... even if it wasn't a "huge help," surely a "small help" counted?

That alone was enough to make her happy, but there was something even more joyful — she had finally confirmed the Flame of Hope's identity. It was the boss. It was Yu Xi!

What could be more heartwarming than learning that the same person who once helped her was also protecting a group of people just like her?

If anything could top that, it was being summoned by Him again after the Audience Meeting.

Like right now.

Bai Ling stood ramrod straight, outwardly calm, but her blinking eyes betrayed the emotions churning inside.

By contrast, the Candle Man facing her wore an expression far less relaxed. At the very least, this time He wasn't dangling upside-down from midair — He stood squarely before her.

He studied Bai Ling, seeming to have already seen through the source of her joy.

Yet He knew that the moment He opened His mouth, that joy would be stripped away.

So the Flame of Hope held His silence for a long while, until Bai Ling sensed something was off and asked in a small voice: "Boss?"

The Flame of Hope smiled. The face etched in flame arranged itself into Cheng Shi's signature grin.

"The Creator has visited."

"!!??"

Strictly speaking, only Fire Seekers and above within the Torchbearers were privy to that forbidden Divine Name. Ordinary Torchbearers would never know it.

Bai Ling knew, because she had already risen to the rank of City Breaker's Fire Seeker — otherwise she wouldn't have been qualified to recruit Xie Yang into the Torchbearers.

Her growth had ultimately earned the acknowledgment of all her comrades, and the blood on her arrowheads had shown Qin Xin her courage and resolve.

But no matter how brave or resolute a person was, hearing those two words — "the Creator" — would make them tremble. That was absolutely not something mortals were meant to face. It was the god above gods, the most remote existence there was.

The Flame of Hope gave her no time to catch her breath. He gently tapped her forehead, projecting a scene into the mind of this stalwart Torchbearer.

The instant she witnessed that image, the stalwart Torchbearer collapsed to the ground, her entire body shaking.

The Flame of Hope lifted her up, gripping her wrist tightly, channeling fire to dispel her terror, and spoke:

"This is a Torchbearer mission — highest classification. Apart from you and me, not even Qin Xin can know.

Remember this scene. Spread the word that He visited.

But remember — no Torchbearer must learn of the details."

Bai Ling was still trembling. The soul-piercing terror had drained nearly all her strength. She gasped for air in great heaving breaths, like a drowning person just hauled to shore.

A long time passed before she clawed her way out of that abyssal dread. Clenching her teeth, she looked up at the Flame of Hope — at the boss who had just delivered that devastating "blow" — and forced down her fear, replacing it with resolve:

"Alright. I know what to do.

But... boss, why did you, during the Audience Meeting earlier..."

The Flame of Hope knew what she was about to ask and sighed softly:

"I had no choice.

The Universe is not united. Some things cannot be said in His presence."

Bai Ling's eyes flew wide with disbelief. "Even Deceit can't be trusted?"

The flame swayed and flickered. The Candle Man's gaze was unfathomably deep.

"He is trustworthy. But me — no one trusts anymore.

Go. I will cover your tracks. Complete this as quickly as you can. Let the world know that He came."

Bai Ling was clever. As a follower of Deceit, she seemed to have already guessed the purpose behind spreading information on such a massive scale. But she didn't voice it, nor did she press further. She only paused at the threshold, lips pressed tightly together, and asked one final question:

"B-... Cheng Shi, will we ever see each other again?"

The Flame of Hope smiled:

"We will. Of course we will.

The new world we both dream of will come..."

Hearing that certain answer, Bai Ling's expression hardened with renewed determination. She nodded firmly and left the Fire Passing Hall.

After she was gone, watching that slender yet resolute silhouette recede, the Candle Man's tone shifted:

"...won't it?"

His voice was faint — as ethereal and formless as hope itself.

The words had barely faded when a figure stepped out of the darkness behind the flame.

The Flame of Hope spoke with His back to the figure, devoid of joy or sorrow:

"Knowing that He visited isn't enough. The world needs to understand just how merciless the Creator truly is.

Being abandoned... is still better than dying, or being imprisoned.

Go. Use your brilliance to make the world believe you."

The figure was silent for a long time before asking quietly:

"Why me?"

The Flame of Hope smiled. "I don't have many choices right now. Wei Mu and Jie Shu... aren't suitable. And they can't be used."

"I never imagined that getting close to you would lead to this."

"Regretting it?"

"No." The voice suddenly blazed with fervor and excitement. "Never. If the final act of an era's script contains a passage written by my own hand, I'll die without regret."

"But that contradicts your wish to become a god."

The figure suddenly burst into laughter — laughter that grew increasingly unhinged: "Become a god... How could that possibly be as interesting as killing one? Especially killing a god like this!"

The Flame of Hope's fire froze for an instant, then He slowly shook His head:

"Kill?"

How could anyone kill Him?

Wishful thinking is no different from self-deception.

That He managed to come this far has already exceeded anything I could have predicted."

...

Chapter 1393: Su Yida? No, No, No — Long Jing!

The Void. The Joker Gathering Place.

Mi Laozhang's return drew no reaction whatsoever from the Jokers. They had long known the Gravekeeper would come back, so his appearance caused no more stir than his absence had.

But Zhang Jizu himself was far from calm, because he had just learned from the Dragon King about the full scope of the Blood Exchange Plan and the news of Zhen Xin's ascension to godhood.

Zhen Xin's inheritance of Chaos was already a foregone conclusion, which left two questions squarely before the Gravekeeper:

First — would he himself inherit his Benefactor's Divine Throne, and what would happen to Death then?

Second — who would inherit the Deceit Divine Throne?

Zhang Jizu was the one Joker who understood best why Cheng Shi couldn't inherit Deceit. He had assumed Zhen Xin would step into that seat, but now it seemed... things had changed?

Puzzled, he glanced toward the Dragon King, only to find that Li Jingming didn't seem troubled by the question at all.

Zhang Jizu narrowed his eyes. "Someone's been chosen?"

Li Jingming gave a slight smile and said nothing.

Zhang Jizu nodded thoughtfully. He understood — the Dragon King's refusal to speak meant the matter likely involved someone's closely guarded secret, and a secret that a Joker would treat with such gravity almost certainly belonged to another Joker.

But who could it be?

The Doctor was out of the question — only he could fill the vacant Truth Divine Throne. Cheng Shi was also ruled out. Eliminating himself as well, that left seemingly only...

Long Jing?

Zhang Jizu looked at the Acrobat in astonishment.

He meant no disrespect to Long Jing. President Gong had certainly come a long way on the path of Deceit. But the question was — did his Will truly align with the Will of Deceit?

One hid behind the curtain manipulating the Universe; the other was desperate to take the stage and showcase himself. Though both he and It dealt in lies, not all lies were created equal.

Still, today's gathering was indeed focused on President Gong.

At that moment, President Gong — who had been unceremoniously dumped from the Void by Deceit mid-audience, gaining absolutely nothing — was loudly berating Zhen Xin for her disloyalty.

He felt that if she had told him sooner that she'd inherited the Chaos Divine Throne, he would have had far more room to maneuver and could have made those liars at the Audience Meeting look even more foolish.

To this, Zhen Xin gave a light snort and said with a mocking smile:

"Even if I hadn't told you, would that have stopped you from making things up?"

You were already lying through your teeth — why bother with facts?"

"?"

Long Jing froze. He felt his abilities had just been questioned!

But what infuriated him most was that the questioning seemed... valid.

'Right — why didn't I dare to fabricate something even bigger? Why was my perspective limited to impersonating Yu Xi... Could it be because I'd only ever seen Cheng Shi's portrayal of Yu Xi, so that was the only idea I could come up with?'

'Long Jing, oh Long Jing — you need to learn to innovate! Parroting others' ideas leads nowhere!'

In that moment, Long Jing spiraled into self-doubt again. He had genuinely thought that fooling so many top-tier liars at the Audience Meeting was rather glorious, yet the instant he returned to the Jokers, he was once again the one with the least imagination.

Whether it was Zhen Xin or Cheng Shi, these naturally gifted freaks on the path of Deceit always seemed to walk one step farther than he could.

With that thought, Long Jing swept his gaze around the room with a complicated expression, then consoled himself:

'At least the Dragon King, Old Zhang, and the Doctor are a little behind me. So I'm not dead last among the Jokers... right?'

The three who fell under President Gong's sweeping glance seemed to sense the emotional turbulence within him, and each broke into a knowing smile.

None of them pointed anything out. Instead, they went on contemplating their own thoughts.

Soon, the convener arrived.

The moment Cheng Shi entered the graveyard, he raised his head to gaze at the Tomb of Deceit suspended high above, its light illuminating the Joker Gathering Place, and his expression turned complicated.

Seeing this, Zhen Xin immediately asked: "What happened?"

"He's gone."

Cheng Shi's answer, though succinct, was also ambiguous — difficult to interpret on the spot.

Fortunately, Long Jing was present. The uninformed President Gong opened with a rapid-fire triple salvo of confusion:

"Who's gone?"

Deceit?

Where did He go?"

That "Where did He go?" immediately sparked something in Zhen Xin. She raised an eyebrow, instantly theorizing that the self-destruction might have been a faked death to slip away.

As for where Deceit had gone... at a time like this, with nowhere else to run, there was only one option: the Real Universe.

Zhen Xin gave Cheng Shi a meaningful look, seeking confirmation, but Cheng Shi offered no response. He seemed unwilling to waste time on the matter and cut straight to the point, bringing up Jie Shu's plan.

Among liars, however, sometimes no answer was itself an answer. Zhen Xin understood that Cheng Shi was doing his best to conceal this, so she dropped the subject and listened in silence.

"The situation surrounding Jie Shu's plan has far exceeded my original expectations.

To explain all of this properly..."

He looked toward the Dragon King and nodded in acknowledgment. "I'll need the Dragon King's help — to extract this memory of mine so everyone can see it.

I originally thought it was just an accident — a killing blow from the future, that a future version of me had gotten tangled up in some storm and was assassinated for it.

But as I've come to understand the truth of the Universe, to understand Cheng Dashi, the Torchbearers, and Su Yida... I realized I was wrong.

Perhaps the Master of Trickery I first encountered wasn't surnamed Su at all. His surname was..."

Cheng Shi's expression grew complex as he turned to Long Jing, locking eyes with the Acrobat. "...Long.

That's right, Long Jing. There's a very high probability that I met you long ago — even before the Mediocre Person Society.

But back then, I had absolutely no idea it was you.

Of course, he wasn't actually you — but he was also Long Jing."

"?"

What kind of tongue twister was this?

The Master of Trickery being surnamed Long made perfect sense — after all, in Jie Shu's plan, Long Jing's role was precisely that of the Master of Trickery. But what was all this roundabout nonsense Cheng Shi was spouting?

Long Jing furrowed his brows deeply. His bewildered gaze darted between Cheng Shi and the Dragon King, searching their faces for an answer.

Soon enough, the answer came.

The Dragon King nodded, placed his hand on Cheng Shi's shoulder, and moments later projected a memory for all the Jokers to see.

And when everyone had walked through that past memory alongside Cheng Shi, every Joker except Zhen Xin was left dumbfounded.

Long Jing most of all. He stared at Zhen Xin in utter disbelief, stammering:

"The prophecy the Blind One made was... was... was about a future version of Cheng Shi?"

Zhen Yi toyed with everyone, and you were the only one who found the answer to the prophecy?!"

Zhen Xin, both an insider and a firsthand participant, nodded:

"Yes.

And it was from that Cheng Shi's lips that I first learned the name of Origin."

Long Jing blinked furiously. He slapped his own cheeks, then looked back at Cheng Shi, eyes wide, his voice trembling with shock:

"And the one who carried all of this back was Su Yida? No... it was me?!"

At this point in time?!"

As part of Jie Shu's plan?!"

Cheng Shi nodded with grave solemnity:

"That's my best guess.

The reason we've been able to come this far, to have the chance to gather like this, is most likely because another world was passing the torch to us.

Countless slice universes sacrificed their own destruction to eliminate wrong choices for other worlds, and then countless failures pieced together clues, one by one, for those who came after.

Cheng Dashi's arrival didn't just bring me back to Fate — it raised the curtain on the truth of the Universe for all of us. And he 'took out' Prosperity — that was the key above all keys.

Another Cheng Shi once told me that Prosperity might not be the final answer, but it's the prerequisite that must come first. Only by cracking open that breach do we stand any chance of finding the ultimate answer.

And sure enough, after Prosperity fell, we made it to where we are now.

So now it's our turn — the turn of those of us who have 'arrived at the future' — to pass the torch to other worlds. That's why I call this the Fire Passing Plan.

And you, Long Jing, will be the most important figure in this plan — the Master of Trickery who goes back to the past and kills me with his own hands. Su Yida."

"..."

...

Chapter 1394: President Gong's Finest Hour

The curtain on the truth of the Universe in this world — was raised by my own hand?!

Once Long Jing learned all of this, he automatically filtered out Cheng Dashi's existence and claimed that other version of himself who had once visited this world as part of himself.

'So I was that important to this world!'

'So I made that enormous a contribution to the Universe!'

In that moment, all the frustration of being tossed out of the Void by his Benefactor evaporated. Long Jing felt as though he were radiating brilliance!

He fixed Cheng Shi with a burning gaze, desperately wanting to say "go ahead and thank me," but after holding it in for ages he couldn't get the words out. The glow faded, and he managed only an awkward smile before asking with some uncertainty:

"So what you're saying is, the so-called Fire Passing Plan means I play the role of Su Yida, travel to another world, meet another version of you, and raise the curtain on the truth of the Universe for that world?!"

"?"

What should have sounded rather noble and torch-passing had somehow turned into the Acrobat's personal showcase the moment it left President Gong's mouth.

'You enjoy one-man shows too?'

Cheng Shi's eyes darkened for an instant, then he curved his lips into a smile. "Yes. You've got it exactly right."

Long Jing beamed — but the grin didn't last long before his brow furrowed in confusion:

"If that's the case, why make it so complicated?"

What role does Jie Shu play in the plan? Can't we just bypass him and go ourselves?"

Cheng Shi shook his head. "There's no way out anymore. The passage has closed. Mockery and Jeering has run dry..."

"What?" The others stiffened, disbelief on every face. "Then what about the Nose of Verification?"

"...We'll need to think a little more about Brother Nose. He shouldn't be hiding his nose from us.

Of course, it's also possible the Clown has been wearing his nose all along — he just doesn't know it yet."

Cheng Shi gave a self-deprecating chuckle, then continued, "Time has also stopped seeing me. Right now, perhaps only Jie Shu has the means to open that passage out of the world.

So there's no getting around him, no matter what."

Long Jing nodded. How to get out wasn't the issue — the question was how to pass the torch. He frowned:

"We've been through all of this. We already know what the correct path looks like. Can't we just tell the other Clown directly?"

"I'm afraid not."

The answer came not from Cheng Shi but from Zhen Xin.

She tapped her arm with a fingertip and shook her head. "Back then, Cheng Shi didn't yet know the truth of the slice universes, didn't know you, and didn't even believe that a future version of himself could travel to the past to meet himself. If you marched up and told him all of this, in his eyes you'd be nothing but a liar.

The him back then wasn't like the current him..."

Zhen Xin glanced at Cheng Shi. "...who trusts people so easily."

Cheng Shi caught the teasing tone. He gave a helpless, self-deprecating smile:

"That's because all of you are worth trusting.

Under the lens of the Creator's Experiment, the development of worldlines is far from as simple as you or I might imagine. Based on my observations of different worlds within the Real Universe, the worldlines of different slice universes may have long since become entangled with one another for reasons unknown.

I don't know when this entanglement began, but I'm certain our world is already caught up in it — and these entanglements determine how far each world can 'travel.'

This means the slightest change could trigger not an earthquake in a single world, but a tsunami across who knows how many.

Unless we can be absolutely certain that revealing the truth outright would steer a given world's evolution in the direction we hope for...

Any unnecessary interference could turn passing the torch into 'spreading a contagion,' accelerating that world's destruction — or even triggering a chain reaction.

That's also why, despite versions of Cheng Shi drifting through the Real Universe, we've never learned the full truth from any of them.

Most likely even they can't be sure what consequences would follow from knowing certain things too early.

Nobody dares gamble. So everyone follows history's footprints, repeating the process again and again, until by chance a spark of destiny is struck that pushes some fortunate world one step further...

As it stands, we are very likely the luckiest world of all.

Therefore, what we must do is also repeat!

Long Jing, this is the most critical step. You need to memorize every detail of the memories I lived through, and then faithfully reenact everything Su Yida did.

A one-hundred-percent reproduction would be ideal. If that's impossible, at least don't arbitrarily alter the course of events.

Remember — every word you speak could affect not just the person named Cheng Shi, but the entire world he belongs to!"

"!!!"

Hearing this, Long Jing finally understood why this mission was so critical.

This wasn't about sharing a map they'd already explored with some later world. It was about guiding that world, with absolute precision, onto the exact same path they had walked!

Cheng Shi continued:

"Whether in the Real Universe or the interstices of Existence, every being from other worlds I've encountered has told me I'm the luckiest one. Perhaps it's their support that carried us this far — but that's as far as it goes. There are no more guides on the road ahead.

The good news is the Fear Faction hasn't abandoned us. The Benefactor is still the Benefactor. His Will aligns with ours — He's working for the world's future too.

The bad news is we won't know whether that effort will bear fruit until we try it ourselves.

The uncertainty is enormous. Before we lead the world down the wrong path, we need to pass on this stretch of the correct road first.

Passing the torch — truly passing the torch means the flame must be handed from one to the next.

We received goodwill from Cheng Dashi. Naturally, we must deliver that goodwill to the next world without the slightest deviation.

So, Long Jing...

Can we trust you?"

In that moment, every Joker's gaze converged on Long Jing. They all knew how daunting this mission was — and its difficulty lay not in how to portray Su Yida, but in whether the one carrying it out had the courage to face death!

Lest anyone forget — the Su Yida who came back from the future had died. Died at Tao Yi's hand. That, too, was part of history!

If history was to be replicated without the slightest discrepancy, Long Jing could not escape that death.

So this plan was not just about passing the torch — it was about marching to one's death!

A death in service of saving other worlds!

With President Gong's cunning and street smarts, he had never once placed himself in mortal danger.

Yet today, he accepted the mission — and with absolute decisiveness.

Long Jing curved his lips. His hand flicked out, conjuring his signature top hat as if an actor stepping onstage. He spun the hat in a flourish, then pressed it to his chest, swept his gaze across everyone, and bowed with a smile brimming with grace:

"To raise the curtain for an entire world — it is my honor.

To pass the torch of Vitality for the Universe — death itself would be a glory."

He wasn't unaware that he would die. He simply chose to die brilliantly.

In his heart, Long Jing mused silently: 'I chose the role of Su Yida myself. As a consummate performer, of course I'll see it through to the final act!'

In that moment, he finally understood why the Cheng Shi of the other world had taken such care of him. 'So I, too, can do something for this world.'

"Clap!"

While Long Jing was immersed in that feeling, someone — no one knew who — started the first clap. An instant later, sustained applause echoed through the Joker Gathering Place.

"Clap, clap, clap—"

Every pair of hands applauded the Acrobat. This time there wasn't the slightest trace of mockery or teasing — only genuine, heartfelt recognition.

Zhen Xin, the Dragon King, the Doctor, Old Zhang... every pair of eyes was alight with encouragement and praise. In all his time as a Joker, this was the first time Long Jing had seen such emotion in these liars' eyes.

Normally, he would have shied away, afraid of looking like a fool.

But today he stood before them all and accepted it openly.

This was the Acrobat's finest hour — and the cheers and recognition he deserved.

The applause continued, yet the atmosphere in the room was anything but warm. Everyone had fallen silent. Bidding farewell to a friend was never cause for celebration. Even Old Zhang, who so loved carving tombstones for others, had his eyes narrowed tight, every trace of amusement gone.

And yet, right at that moment, Cheng Shi suddenly laughed and addressed them all:

"Don't be so grim.

I've said it before — I won't let my friends die for me again. Not even for another world's version of me.

Who says death must be irreversible?

Don't forget, everyone — I'm a Priest. And as luck would have it, a Priest who knows how to write scripts.

History can't be changed, true. But in the places the 'audience' can't see, miracles are always possible.

The Screenwriter who holds the pen is the one who creates miracles. No one is going to die in this plan.

I'm the Screenwriter. I decide."

...

Chapter 1395: Fire Passing Plan, Activated!

Cheng Shi handed Long Jing two items.

One was a fragment of divinity. The other was a die.

He looked at the divinity in his hand and explained:

"Before coming here, I made a special trip to see Hong Lin and obtained this strand of Prosperity divinity from her.

This is the divinity you'll need to bring to that world. If all goes well, a single fragment of Prosperity divinity should be enough."

Long Jing blinked, thinking carefully. "And if things don't go well?"

"Then front the cost yourself. I'll pay you back when you get home."

"???"

'Dude — are you seriously pulling a no-money-down scam on me?!'

'I'm already going to my death and you want me to chip in?!'

'Die and call it even, right?!'

Granted, the logic wasn't entirely wrong — making the best use of everything and all that — but Long Jing's face went dark all the same.

Seeing this, Cheng Shi chuckled and continued:

"I told you, stop being so pessimistic. I'm not letting you die.

Yes, Su Yida's death was personally verified by Deceit. But don't forget — that Deceit is only the Deceit within a slice universe. As long as It never left that world, It couldn't possibly know what happened outside it.

You've all looked through Su Yida's memories by now, I assume. I'd wager there's a gap — the period just before he arrived in our world — that you can't see, correct?"

The Dragon King and Long Jing both nodded. Clearly, to prepare for the impersonation, they had already combed through every memory the Master of Trickery possessed.

Getting the confirmation he expected, Cheng Shi's lips curled.

"Good. Long Jing — that gap is your lifeline.

I'll explain the specifics, but first we need a life-preserving prop that can sustain a dead soul — something like a keepsake that shelters the spirit after death for resurrection elsewhere. Old Zhang, do you have anything like that?"

Zhang Jizu narrowed his eyes, thought for a moment, then produced from his personal space a sliver of wood no longer than a finger joint.

"Death SS-grade pseudo-divine relic: the Epiphytic Wood. As you described — a life bound to it will not have its soul sent to the Fishbone Hall upon death. Instead, the soul clings to the relic, awaiting resurrection.

Its advantage is that as long as the relic isn't destroyed, resurrection is always possible.

Its disadvantage is that it can bind one person and one person only.

It's one of my backup lifelines. It hasn't been bound yet."

With that, Zhang Jizu held it out.

Cheng Shi took the Epiphytic Wood, examined it briefly, nodded, and tossed it to Long Jing.

"Everything's in place. Now for the operational plan..."

Cheng Shi laid out every detail of the plan with the utmost seriousness. As Long Jing listened, his eyes grew wider and wider.

"What?! You're coming with me?"

Cheng Shi smiled. "Of course. Otherwise, how would the other world's Cheng Shi meet his 'Cheng Dashi'?"

Relax — my main body still has work to do here. But my shadow will go with you.

Two traveling together — that should put your mind at ease.

That said, don't count on me helping you. To avoid unnecessary surprises and complications, I'll seal off everything and turn myself into an inert object — a prop on your person.

This die is carved from Prosperity wood. Crush it and it can fuse with Prosperity divinity. I'll hide inside the divinity until you reach that world, then reveal myself to fill in all the 'history' I lived through for that world's Cheng Shi."

"Absolutely not!"

The moment Cheng Shi finished, Zhang Jizu shook his head, his expression grave.

"This is far too reckless. With our current capabilities, we could easily use something like a puppet to simulate everything Cheng Dashi did.

Unless it's absolutely necessary, you'd better not leave this world.

The Real Universe is dangerous."

Cheng Shi had long anticipated Mi Laozhang's objection. He smiled at Old Zhang and asked a single question:

"Was the Real Universe not dangerous when you swapped places with the other me?"

Zhang Jizu froze, then narrowed his eyes. "My life is inconsequential. But you... you are Fixed Destiny."

Cheng Shi shook his head with a smile:

"No. Every life matters. I understand how critical Fixed Destiny is, but that shouldn't become the reason our hands and feet are shackled.

Like I just said — different slice universes are already entangled. If I don't go in person, how can we guarantee the torch gets passed?

Besides...

You might think this argument is sophistry, but let me put it this way: isn't it possible that we must live through this very moment — pass through this experience — before Fixed Destiny can see a road ahead?"

"..."

"..."

"..."

That single sentence silenced every Joker in the room.

When it came to clever arguments, who could out-argue Yu Xi?

If he insisted on tying the world's future to such ethereal, intangible things, who could refute him?

Zhen Xin felt as though she were watching a replay of Cheng Shi's earlier farewell to her. She sighed wearily:

"Letting you be yourself doesn't mean letting you throw your life away every single time.

Have you even considered what happens if you—"

"No!"

Cheng Shi's reply was ironclad.

The others' expressions turned solemn, assuming Cheng Shi had another card up his sleeve. Only Zhen Xin knew that his ace in the hole was none other than their Benefactor — the one who had faked His own death and slipped away!

'Is the Clown really insisting on passing the torch in person because of some nonsense about entangled worlds...? Hard to say. But he definitely wants to search for Deceit in the Real Universe.'

Thinking this, Zhen Xin sighed again and said nothing more. She didn't believe anyone could stop Cheng Shi from going.

Seeing that no one spoke up, Cheng Shi smiled:

"Don't worry. Someone will bring me back.

Have faith in Fixed Destiny. After all, in the whirlpool of Fate, he has never once lost his way."

Just as she'd thought!

Hearing those words, Zhen Xin finally let her heart settle.

...

A few days later, the date for the meeting with Jie Shu was finalized.

All along, Jie Shu had been invested in the plan but never in a hurry — which had given the Jokers time to prepare.

It wasn't until the lost and drifting Mo Shu "rediscovered his purpose in life," the vanished Zhao Xishi reappeared before everyone, and the ever-improving Su Yida finally acknowledged his own strength... Everything fell into place naturally. The plan commenced.

According to the arrangement Jie Shu had once laid out in Su Yida's memories:

They needed a follower of Memory to find the "path" they had come from, and then a follower of Oblivion to erode the thickness of the world-wall, allowing Jie Shu to construct a passage through which the Master of Trickery could leave this starry sky.

The reason the Master of Trickery had to be the one to go was a Folly theory called the Spatiotemporal-Trace Resonance Method, which could use the connection between two living beings to locate a similar world.

And so Su Yida became the heaven-chosen executor of the assassination plan — because among all the versions of Cheng Shi anyone had encountered, the one he had met was the weakest.

If the assassination succeeded, the Master of Trickery was to bring Cheng Shi's corpse back and hand it to Jie Shu, who would use it to construct a more stable spatiotemporal passage for everyone to flee this world and reach a utopia without Cheng Shi.

Every word in the memory was crystal clear on its own, yet strung together, not a soul could make sense of it.

But that was no great concern. After all, Jie Shu was about to face a true god, a candidate for godhood, the Universe's Fixed Destiny, and... an Acrobat.

Even without understanding the theory, improvising on the spot would be more than sufficient.

And so, Long Jing — playing Su Yida — with the Dragon King playing Long Jing at his side, strolled brazenly up to Jie Shu.

...

Chapter 1396: The Liar and the Wise Man Collide

The rendezvous point had been chosen by Jie Shu — the rooftop of an abandoned high-rise.

The layout here closely resembled Cheng Shi's rest area. According to Jie Shu, a similar setting would also improve the success rate of spatial targeting.

Zhao Xishi and Mo Shu had yet to arrive. Jie Shu watched the two approaching figures, his gaze darkening as it swept back and forth across Long Jing with undisguised suspicion.

He had heard about the incident during the Trial where someone had impersonated Su Yida. From that, he'd inferred a few things and had since subjected the Master of Trickery to a series of probing tests.

But the Master of Trickery's responses had been flawless. He couldn't claim to remember every detail of their past exchanges, but the critical points were spot-on, while trivial details were peppered with convincingly vague recollections — exactly what you'd expect from a normal person's memory. Jie Shu had found no cracks.

Long Jing had been secretly relieved at the time. Thankfully, Jie Shu hadn't asked about anything beyond the world's borders — or the cover would have been blown for certain.

But the Wise Man was inherently suspicious. Once Jie Shu started doubting, the matter wouldn't simply be set aside.

Originally, the only ones who knew about the plan and had shown interest were Li Jingming and Long Jing, both of whom had caught wind of it during that Trial.

Li Jingming was the sort who would use only straightforward means to preserve a memory — Jie Shu was actually unconcerned about him.

But Long Jing...

Liars had too many schemes. Jie Shu couldn't predict what the Acrobat might do to achieve his ends.

He had assumed Long Jing would try to eliminate one of the plan's members and take their place, fishing in muddy waters. The Master of Trickery was the weakest link, making Su Yida the most likely target.

But the stubbornly proud Master of Trickery had refused all warnings and insisted on pushing himself harder during Trials. This had forced Jie Shu to constantly monitor his movements and ensure his safety.

Fortunately, Long Jing had also shown up today — so that particular concern could be shelved for now. What was troubling, however, was the attitude implied by the Master of Trickery and Long Jing secretly teaming up without informing him. When the two appeared, Jie Shu's expression turned sour.

Su Yida, too, knew that unilaterally bringing someone to a plan like this broke the rules. But considering he was the star of this plan, he offered his explanation with a mixture of arrogance and stiffness:

"The Acrobat helped me during the Trial. And I've looked into it — he genuinely has a grudge against Cheng Shi. He can be an asset for us."

Long Jing flashed a grin and gave Jie Shu a casual wave. His beaming face seemed to say: 'See? I came without needing your invitation.'

A muscle twitched in Jie Shu's face. "Where did you 'look into it'?" he asked in a low voice.

Su Yida paused, then furrowed his brow. "Through my own channels. They're absolutely reliable."

"..."

Jie Shu said nothing.

Based on what he knew of the Master of Trickery, this reaction tracked perfectly. Su Yida was a stubborn, arrogant, ambitious man with no self-awareness — otherwise he would never have agreed to the plan in the first place.

What Jie Shu had actually been watching for was the opposite: if the two of them had explained, in meticulous detail, the process of how they just happened to meet and reach some kind of agreement, he would have been certain Su Yida was being controlled and that this Long Jing was compromised.

But right now, Su Yida was almost too perfectly Su Yida. Jie Shu couldn't find a single flaw.

What was even more impressive was that Long Jing — who clearly didn't belong to this plan and might very well be saboteur material — carried himself with an air of "my presence here is a favor to you," without the slightest trace of the nervousness one would expect from someone harboring ill intent and fearing exposure...

It had to be said: in this moment, the Master of Trickery and the Acrobat were a rather perfect match.

Perfectly nauseating.

Jie Shu drew a deep breath, deliberating whether to let Long Jing stay — and then Zhao Xishi arrived.

The long-absent Historian still carried that composed look of someone holding all the cards. The moment she appeared, the shrewdness on her face rivaled Jie Shu's own.

She greeted everyone. When she noticed Long Jing's presence, she merely raised an eyebrow, looking unsurprised.

Jie Shu caught Zhao Xishi's expression and frowned slightly:

"You disappeared for a long time."

Zhao Xishi gave a light laugh. "That's why I'm still alive."

"?" Jie Shu's pupils contracted. "You ran into trouble. Who was it?"

"Who else? An old rival."

At the mention of her rival, Zhao Xishi's laugh turned cold in an instant, her voice bitter with resentment. "The Magician gained something at the Chaos Temple. She's probably about to shed her mortal shell and ascend to godhood.

I couldn't accept it. I tried to test her — and got chased like a homeless stray dog. Spent ages hiding out in the wild."

"Ascend to godhood? Zhen Xin is going to become the Envoy of Chaos?!" Jie Shu started. He genuinely hadn't known.

"What — you still didn't know?"

The Magician secretly merged with Chaos. Her deceptions have become even more masterful because of it.

I'd advise you all to stay well away from her for the time being. If you get burned, don't say I didn't warn you."

There was a distinct edge of gnashing teeth in Zhao Xishi's tone, and a barely perceptible flash of defeat in her eyes.

Both Jie Shu and Long Jing were consummate judges of character. They could see the shift in the Historian's temperament, but neither offered consolation.

For one, the ever-proud Historian might not welcome comfort from others. For another, everyone present was merely in a working relationship — one held together by mutual interest, not friendship. Nobody had standing to comfort anyone.

Long Jing did mutter a few grumbled curses under his breath upon hearing that Zhen Xin had merged with Chaos, and then silence settled over the rooftop once more.

Zhao Xishi swept her gaze across the group, her expression cool, and moved a little closer. Behind her, an aura of Chaos quietly unfurled and slowly blanketed the rooftop.

Jie Shu had still had questions on his lips — but the moment he opened his mouth, his mind churned with confusion. He seemed to forget what he'd been about to ask, and decided everything was perfectly reasonable after all. With a nod, he said nothing more and waited in silence for the final member to arrive.

Before long, Mo Shu appeared.

This time, unusually, he wasn't carrying his pastry box. Instead, he held a pen. The instant he materialized, he addressed everyone present:

"What, truly, is Oblivion...?"

"..."

Jie Shu's eyelid twitched violently. Looking at these decidedly unreliable members standing before him, he felt a kind of indescribable "grief and fury" welling up inside!

'The plan wasn't supposed to be like this! How has it been only a few months and everything feels so different?!

Stubborn, reckless, defeated, deranged... These were no longer the spirited peak players of before. This was a lineup of lunatics!

Watching Mo Shu's manic appearance, Long Jing burst out laughing.

"Ha ha ha..."

It wasn't a break in character — it was mockery of the members in Jie Shu's plan.

President Gong's acting was always on point. With everyone else having changed so dramatically, it would actually look suspicious if he didn't react.

"Now this is entertaining. Is this so-called plan of yours still even viable?"

Su Yida, don't forget what we agreed on. I'm here seeking a partnership — not doing charity work.

If your plan can't deal with the Fate Weaver, don't blame me for turning around and walking out.

I don't see where your edge is."

The provocation clearly struck a nerve with the Master of Trickery. Su Yida's expression hardened:

"The plan hasn't even started yet. It's too early for talk like that.

Wise Man — everyone's here. Let's begin."

Jie Shu forced down the swirling unease in his mind, his brow furrowed tightly:

"Don't assume that just because the Master of Trickery vouches for you, I'll trust you too.

President Gong — give me a reason to believe in you. Why should I think you won't sabotage the plan mid-execution?

Rumor has it you and Cheng Shi have fought side by side before. Your relationship with him... seems rather amicable, doesn't it?"

...

Chapter 1397: Jokers Surrounding Jie Shu, Jie Shu Trapping the Jokers

"You didn't know?" It wasn't Long Jing who stepped up to explain, but Zhao Xishi.

"?" Jie Shu frowned. "Know what?"

"The Audience Meeting."

At those words, something flickered in Jie Shu's eyes. "Of course I know about it. But I didn't attend."

"???"

Jie Shu didn't attend the Audience Meeting?

Long Jing blinked, curious. "Why not?"

The answer came not from Jie Shu, but again from Zhao Xishi.

The Historian studied Jie Shu with an amused smile playing on her lips:

"Why?"

My guess is he was afraid of running into Wei Mu.

He's been chasing Wei Mu for ages and still hasn't caught up. If his lack of conviction got exposed again, wouldn't the whole plan... have to be scrapped?"

A flash of caution crossed Jie Shu's eyes, but he said nothing.

Everyone present knew—Zhao Xishi had guessed correctly.

The terror of the number-one seat on the Road to Ascension was such that the number-two didn't even dare attend the Audience Meeting!

Zhao Xishi snorted twice and stopped needling Jie Shu. Instead, she began explaining on Long Jing's behalf. "I learned through certain channels that the Deceit Audience Meeting descended into utter chaos. The whole lot of them got played by the Fate Weaver — including that hapless Acrobat standing right before you, who can do nothing but rage impotently.

The Fate Weaver stole his identity, wrung benefits out of every liar there, then dumped all the blame squarely on President Gong's head.

So I'm not the least bit surprised to see him here. Ha — an internal Deceit civil war. I love it."

Long Jing had been swindled by Cheng Shi?

Jie Shu turned to look at Long Jing — only to find that the humiliated and furious President Gong had already vanished from where he'd been standing. He had materialized behind Zhao Xishi, bringing a knife-hand strike down toward the Historian's neck.

"Mind your own tongue!"

Seeing the Acrobat strike so decisively actually eased Jie Shu's suspicions somewhat.

Since time immemorial, success lay in secrecy. The fact that the Acrobat had swaggered in this boldly already cleared roughly seventy percent of suspicion.

Someone with truly malicious intent would never paint a target on themselves — even if they craved the spotlight, they wouldn't choose this most sensitive of moments to do so.

And so, after a moment's deliberation, Jie Shu nodded, provisionally accepting Long Jing's presence — though his caution would keep Long Jing away from any critical step of the plan.

Nobody paid attention to what the Wise Man was thinking. Everyone's focus was drawn to the skirmish. The Historian was no pushover either — she might be a Singer-class, but she had plenty of tricks. For a brief moment, the two genuinely clashed.

As the convener, Jie Shu neither intervened nor hurried them along. He watched the altercation with perfect calm, knowing that as long as both parties still wanted the plan to succeed, neither would go for a killing blow.

And whoever did go for the kill most likely had a problem.

Sure enough, after a while of finding that neither could overpower the other, both parties grudgingly disengaged.

Long Jing pointed and grumbled; Zhao Xishi smirked and scoffed.

The Master of Trickery stood to the side in silence, as if none of this concerned him. He was steeling his focus for the dangers that lay ahead.

As for Mo Shu — his murmured mantra of "what is Oblivion?" never ceased, though his voice had dropped so low it was unclear whether he was asking himself or answering himself.

"..."

'Idiots. Every last one of them — idiots!'

At the end of his patience with these "teammates," Jie Shu addressed Zhao Xishi in a low voice:

"Let's begin. Proceed according to plan.

You will read the Master of Trickery's memories. Find the precise coordinates of the spatiotemporal singularity from when he and I first arrived. After that, the Scavenger will use those worlds on the verge of oblivion to blast open that stretch of Void and thin the world-wall.

Then I'll open a tunnel here — one that passes through the spatiotemporal singularity and can traverse the spacetime barrier — to send you through."

Jie Shu turned to Su Yida, his tone inscrutable: "Once you've entered the Real Universe, use the method I taught you to seek out the world with the deepest resonance, infiltrate it, and find an opportunity to complete your assassination!

If you succeed, bring his corpse back. I'll use his body to build a more stable passage for all of us to leave this world.

Everyone — finding a world where the Fate Weaver doesn't exist is far too difficult. We can only create one ourselves.

I hope we can all cooperate. A bright future is within reach!

As for you, President Gong — you may participate, but do not act on your own. I'm not opposed to bringing along one more refugee, but I won't tolerate a reckless stowaway."

The plan was laid out clearly. Yet when Jie Shu's words fell, a jolt ran through every person present.

Their faces betrayed nothing, but inside, waves were crashing.

Because they had discovered a problem in Jie Shu's words. They had reviewed Su Yida's memories — which mentioned the method but contained no specific implementation steps!

The worst-case scenario had arrived: the method for locating the connected world had very likely been disclosed to Su Yida outside of this world.

That meant even if they used Jie Shu's spacetime tunnel to escape the world, they couldn't find the target universe they needed to pass the torch to.

For a moment, the Jokers sank into silence.

They had schemed to deceive the Wise Man — and yet a single sentence from the Wise Man still had them "trapped."

Zhao Xishi frowned slightly. She immediately activated her Authority to scramble Jie Shu's senses, ran a quick check, and then — right in front of the Wise Man — spoke directly to Cheng Shi, who was disguised as Mo Shu:

"It's not the Master of Deception at work. What he said is true — it seems Jie Shu prepared for this long ago.

But something's strange. I keep feeling like he doesn't actually care whether the plan succeeds. What he seems to need is simply for the Master of Trickery to make a round trip through the Real Universe... That's an unsettling feeling.

Should we dig through Jie Shu's memories for the method?"

All eyes turned to Cheng Shi. He pondered for a moment, then nodded.

The Dragon King understood the signal. He stepped forward, placed his hand on Jie Shu's shoulder, paused briefly, then frowned and shook his head:

"He's shrewd. Most of the scenes in his memory are silent contemplation, not conversations or actions. That means I can't see what he's thinking — can't find the method.

Perhaps his real memory truly was left outside the world. Memories that were never recorded there don't fall under Memory's jurisdiction."

"As expected. A wise man with a thousand plans — he's been preparing for this for a long time."

Cheng Shi sighed. "Jie Shu's identity is far from simple. I've always felt there was something subtle about his and Su Yida's arrival. What I fear most right now is that they, too, are a link in the entanglement between different slice universes, and the continuation of this plan may yet impact our world — or the next one.

After all, Su Yida's appearance was what raised the curtain on the truth of the Universe. Even if the Su Yida I met wasn't the real Su Yida, the two share a deep connection.

Seeking connections...

If Folly can locate connections, perhaps we should ask Wei Mu?"

Cheng Shi turned to Zhen Xin. "How long can you keep him under like this?"

Zhen Xin smiled:

"Forever.

The authority of a true god is hardly something a mortal can resist. But time isn't the issue. As you yourself said — we can't afford delays. If we drag this out too long, the Wise Man will wake and detect the anomalies, and the effect you're hoping for won't be achieved.

Even if we had time, do you know where to find Wei Mu?"

Cheng Shi's expression darkened. He genuinely didn't know.

Just as everyone was mulling over what to do next, Long Jing — still playing Su Yida — suddenly stiffened, eyes going wide as he stared at Cheng Shi in disbelief:

"Old Self in Memory..."

"???"

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted sharply. "What did you say?"

"The Memory talent you saw in your memories — Old Self in Memory..."

Do you remember what that future Su Yida said to you?

He used Old Self in Memory to reach our world. But the spacetime tunnel Jie Shu described is clearly not a talent — so where did Old Self in Memory go?

I've always been puzzled. Until you all mentioned connections..."

Long Jing raised his hand. Resting in his palm was a ring. "I, too, share a connection with you."

Everyone stared, eyes wide with uncertainty. "What is that?"

Long Jing looked up at Cheng Shi, his expression dead serious, enunciating each word:

"A ring you gave me.

A ring the other world's you... gave to me."

Cheng Shi instantly realized what it meant. His face went blank with shock. "Blind Long Jing?!"

Long Jing, too, was learning for the first time that his other self had gone blind. He recalled how the other Cheng Shi had described that other Long Jing: 'A warrior!'

It seemed that Long Jing really was a warrior.

"Yes. This was the fallback he prepared for me — but I believe it should be my way forward!

I just tried activating it, and that's when I found this inside the ring."

With that, Long Jing activated the ring again, projecting a memory before everyone.

In that memory, a Cheng Shi stood on a rooftop. He turned around quietly, his expression warm, and smiled at Long Jing:

"It seems the road ahead of you isn't easy.

But that's alright. I've said it before — because Long Jing is a warrior, you don't have to be that warrior yourself.

This is a gift I received from Memory when I encountered It again in the Real Universe. A talent It wanted to place into the game but never had the chance to.

Old Self in Memory.

A method that lets you find a former 'me.'

Crush this ring, and Memory's lingering aura will guide you to a version of me who is still uninitiated. That world should not yet have fallen into the predicament you now face.

You'll have an overwhelming information advantage to plan, to prepare, to scheme... There, whether you're the director behind the curtain or the actor onstage — the choice will be entirely yours.

But please, do me a favor. Please try your best to protect that world's Cheng Shi.

Dropping you into that world so abruptly is irresponsible of me. I don't know what impact it will have on that world, but I do know that if nothing ever changes, this Experiment will only produce more of me — and more of you.

So go boldly, Long Jing. Believe in yourself. Believe in Cheng Shi. And believe that all belief, in the end, will create a miracle."

...

Chapter 1398: What a Naive Past

So "Old Self in Memory" didn't refer to the user's own "old self," but rather to a still-uninitiated Cheng Shi hidden somewhere in the tapestry of recollection?

Cheng Shi never could have dreamed that the key linking all the past threads together would trace back to the Time Deduction he had once used on Long Jing.

But this also reinforced his conviction: countless slice universes had long since become entangled. The world beneath his feet was not a single, isolated spacetime — it was a condensed mosaic, formed from the converging gazes of innumerable timelines, each pinning its hopes on the future.

The group exchanged glances, a complex mix of emotions on every face.

It seemed the plan had sprung a leak, but it could still proceed.

Silence settled. Before long, Cheng Shi shot Zhen Xin a look loaded with meaning. She understood instantly and released her hold on Jie Shu.

Jie Shu emerged from his mental haze. Seeing that Zhao Xishi and Mo Shu had finished their work and Su Yida was "ready to depart," he paused for only a beat, then frowned and tore open a passage to the world's exterior through the fractured Void behind the rooftop door — a spacetime tunnel leading beyond the world.

The tunnel looked precarious, fragile beyond measure, yet the maelstrom of multicolored divine power howling through it was awe-inspiring all the same.

Zhao Xishi stared in astonishment and asked curiously, "What kind of power is that?"

Jie Shu replied in a low voice:

"Blended divine power — extracted, refined, and pieced together from players of different faiths. When I realized there was no way back after falling into this world, I began experimenting with breaking through the spacetime barrier.

Using nearly identical divine-power structures, I continuously reconstructed the spacetime composition I'd felt on the Dolphin Bridge. After countless experiments, I finally found an approximately correct

method and developed a kind of loophole tunnel capable of temporarily breaching the spacetime barrier.

It's not a true passage. It's more like a workaround that bypasses the barrier's obstruction and taps into the properties of the Dolphin Bridge.

As a result, it's extremely unstable — but sufficient for one person to make a round trip.

After you leave, remember to use the method I told you. When it's time to return, simply jump off the Dolphin Bridge. The matching aura will guide you back here."

With that, Jie Shu glanced at Su Yida. "Time to go, Master of Trickery."

All eyes turned to Su Yida, who furrowed his brow and gave the wildly unstable tunnel a dubious look. "This is it? You're sure I can actually come back?"

Jie Shu smiled. "That question isn't for me. It's for you to answer yourself."

"..."

Su Yida clenched his fists, as though steeling his resolve. Before leaving, he tossed one last declaration over his shoulder:

"I'll show you all the true power of the Master of Trickery."

With that, he leapt decisively into the tunnel and vanished from sight.

Watching Su Yida's figure disappear, Zhao Xishi cast a sidelong glance at Jie Shu, her smile full of meaning:

"Well then — you've shipped off the fool. Now let's have some honest talk, shall we?"

Jie Shu, what are you really scheming?

I don't believe you went through all this just to kill some Cheng Shi and find a world without a Fate Weaver.

Sure, I'll admit the Fate Weaver's reputation looms too large, and his closeness to that Zhen woman rubs me the wrong way too. If I could leave this disheartening world, I'd be willing.

But that doesn't mean I have to play dumb and ignore your scheming.

Everything you've done looks more like you're setting up the Master of Trickery you brought along to be slaughtered.

What — does he have a grudge with you? Otherwise, why are you manipulating him like this?"

Long Jing and Mo Shu turned to look as well. Jie Shu took in everyone's expressions, then gave a cold chuckle:

"The Master of Trickery and I are partners. No grudge, no grievance — why would I manipulate him?"

"We're simply getting what we each need."

"Getting what, exactly?" Long Jing perked up, asking with an amused grin.

Jie Shu gave a cryptic smile.

"Wait for him to come back. Then you'll know."

...

Beyond the spacetime barrier — the Real Universe.

This was Long Jing's first time setting foot in the Real Universe. The instant he passed through the spacetime tunnel and left the world behind, he was hit by a suffocating loneliness.

Even though the starry sky here looked no different from the one inside the world — simply vaster, more remote — he couldn't find a single thread of familiarity.

He felt like a lone skiff, adrift on the boundless sea of stars, with nothing to anchor him ahead.

At least he had the Clown for company!

Even if the Clown was currently fused into the divinity, hidden somewhere on his body and unable to move, simply knowing someone was there brought a sense of security.

Long Jing drew a deep breath. He couldn't afford to waste time. Without hesitation, he crushed the ring.

The image of the other world's Cheng Shi appeared before him once more. This time, the spectral figure didn't look at Long Jing. Instead, it closed its eyes, sensing for a long moment before pointing him in a direction.

The memory figure immediately set off. Long Jing followed without missing a step, and before long they plunged headlong into a spacetime storm.

The Acrobat was terrified by the sudden encroaching darkness. If he hadn't trusted Cheng Shi, if he hadn't watched the memory figure dive straight in, he would never have stood still and let that pitch-black maelstrom swallow him.

A spacetime storm's formation signaled a world's destruction — and heralded a world's rebirth.

Within that vortex of new creation, Long Jing and the figure drifted down onto the Spacetime Dolphin Bridge.

The memory figure smiled and pointed beneath the bridge, saying nothing.

By now it no longer resembled a vivid recording. It was more like a pre-written program — mechanically and flawlessly guiding Long Jing to the Dolphin Bridge, then providing an anchor for the consciousness-targeting beneath it.

That anchor was Old Self in Memory. It pinpointed a world inhabited by a past version of Cheng Shi.

Long Jing held that same kind of world in his mind, but the intent was broad and vague — enough only to ensure that jumping from here would lead to such a world, without any certainty of which specific one.

Seeing the memory figure gesture downward, Long Jing understood instantly. He gritted his teeth and leapt off the bridge.

Enormous silhouettes of Void-Whiskered Swallowing Dolphins crisscrossed beneath the bridge, swimming freely, as though opening a gate through spacetime for Long Jing.

...

The Void. The Void once more.

When Long Jing regained consciousness and opened his eyes again, he found himself already standing on the "stage."

In the distance, a figure was slowly approaching through the Void.

That figure was unmistakably familiar — identical to the Master of Trickery he was impersonating.

Except this Master of Trickery didn't look like he'd weathered any hardship. His face was still youthful, almost boyish — yet those eyes, burning with hunger for power, couldn't fool anyone.

Even back then, he was an ambitious Master of Trickery.

'Here it comes — it really is that Trial!'

The approaching Su Yida naturally noticed the figure in the Void as well. At first he was afraid, terrified he'd stumbled upon some unknown entity floating in the emptiness.

But when he saw that the figure looked like a person — and moreover a person who couldn't move — he swallowed his fear and crept toward the silhouette.

His thoughts blazed with excitement, though his posture grew ever more cautious.

But against a sufficiently vast power gap, caution was meaningless. Before he could even draw close, a force seized him and locked him in place within the Void.

Then came a derisive laugh:

"Su Yida, how did I never notice you had this much nerve back then?"

More than a Master of Trickery, you're practically a Lord of Desire, aren't you?"

As he spoke, the figure rose to its feet and revealed, right before Su Yida, a face identical to his own.

"What a naive past. I'm back.

What — not going to welcome me?"

"!!!"

In that instant, the past Su Yida's pupils trembled violently, his entire body going numb.

...

Chapter 1399: The Exchange — Su Yida's Ambition

"You... you're...!!!"

Su Yida was already beyond words — not just because he was staring at a perfect copy of himself, but because the other had restrained him in the Void with effortless ease!

What kind of power was this?

What level of strength?!

As a follower of Deceit, he had enough mental elasticity to process even an unthinkable scene like this. He had even formed a few guesses about what he was seeing.

So the trembling wasn't only from fear and unease — there was also a thread of exhilaration and delight.

He seemed to be looking at his own... future.

'I become this powerful?'

'Is this an illusion, or a delusion?'

Who was Long Jing? An apex liar. Number two on the Deceit leaderboard. The highest-achieving Acrobat in history. Against a Master of Trickery who was still wet behind the ears, a single glance was enough to read every thought in his head.

'No wonder Jie Shu was willing to bring the Master of Trickery along — with a temperament like this, who wouldn't want to try conning him?'

It was like a painter encountering a sheet of blank paper that fancied itself a kaleidoscope. Not to leave a few strokes on it would be an utter waste.

But even cons needed structure. In the Clown's script, this Su Yida was to be swapped to "the future" — and he was also the key to Long Jing's eventual return home.

So Long Jing didn't dare slack off. He slipped into character in a heartbeat, sauntering up to Su Yida with a taunting grin, appraising his "past self" from head to toe, clicking his tongue:

"A person who's never experienced defeat will never see themselves clearly.

I've seen myself clearly — but I envy the you of right now.

You're clever, and you guessed right. It's exactly what you're thinking. I am Su Yida — I'm the you from the future."

"!!!"

'Destiny has arrived!'

The phrase blazed across Su Yida's mind for reasons he couldn't explain.

Even as a Master of Trickery, his instincts screamed this could be an elaborate mirage. But the other looked too much like himself — the gaze, the expression, the bearing... apart from the slightly weathered face, this was purely another him!

If it truly were a mirage, the only being capable of such flawless replication would be the legendary Chosen One of Deceit — True Heart.

Yet for some reason, Su Yida was more inclined to believe this really was himself. The future version of himself.

His eyes brimmed with longing for that power.

Seeing this, Long Jing scoffed again.

"You might think I'm powerful. But in their eyes, I'm still trash."

Though it sounded self-deprecating, Su Yida had a nagging sense the other was mocking him.

His expression shifted. He wanted to retort, but thought better of it and swallowed his pride, converting the challenge into a question: "Why are you here?"

Long Jing raised an eyebrow, his grin mischievous:

"What — scared?"

I told you, you're clever. So you've guessed right again.

Know what 'soul expropriation' means?

A failed me meets a past you. I've walked the road ahead of you, so I know the fastest, easiest route.

All you need to do is hand over your body, and we can reach the pinnacle together — ahead of schedule.

So? Sounds like a win-win, doesn't it?"

"!!!!!"

In that instant, Su Yida was truly afraid.

He trembled — but only for a moment.

As the same individual, his keen senses caught the flash of mischief in the other's eyes. His pupils contracted, and he blurted out with anxious suspicion: "You're lying!"

"When two false meet, they become true. You can't see through my lies."

"I can see through it! You're conning me!"

You won't take my soul — but you really have suffered a failure."

Su Yida jutted his chin defiantly as he delivered his judgment, even allowing a hint of disdain for his future self.

'Someone as talented as me — fail? You must have taken a wrong turn!'

Long Jing was stunned. He'd never met a specimen so bold as to look down on his own future self.

'Bro — are you following Folly or something?'

'This road wasn't one you walked yourself?'

'We might be from different worlds, but you don't know that! Where do you get off splitting your future and past like this?'

Long Jing was amused. He seized Su Yida by the throat, baring his teeth in a grin. "Think I won't kill you?"

Su Yida's face turned purple, but he choked out regardless: "You won't — otherwise you wouldn't have come looking for me!"

"..."

'Tch. Reminds me of a certain Clown.'

Long Jing released his grip in an instant and gave a cold snort. "You're clever. Worthy of being me."

He waved a hand, freeing Su Yida from his restraints. Turning his back on the gasping man kneeling on the ground, he spoke:

"I didn't come back on my own. They sent me back.

In the future, every god has fallen. The Divine Thrones sit empty. Everyone is eyeing those sixteen seats that stand above the Universe.

People band together to fight over them. I was one of them.

But I still haven't reached the heights they occupy. My companions questioned me at every turn. So I came back.

This isn't a reunion. It's a test. I need to prove myself in the past — to meet their expectations.

But I... don't want to."

"Why not?!" Su Yida demanded, his expression wild. "Those are Divine Thrones! Don't you want them? Have you forgotten what we set out to do?!"

'Already using "we," are you?'

Long Jing glanced back at the frenzied Su Yida and shook his head. "I want them. But I know I can't beat them to it.

What they need isn't a friend to share the thrones with. They need cannon fodder to pave the road there.

I know my limits.

Rather than fighting them for those thrones, it's better to come back and lay the groundwork early — to prepare for the future.

So I negotiated this opportunity and returned."

With that, Long Jing turned around, his smile laden with hidden meaning. "Unfortunately, one timeline can't hold two identical Masters of Trickery. If I'm here, you shouldn't exist here any longer."

"!!!"

In that instant, Su Yida understood what his future self meant.

"You really want me dead?"

If I die, there's no you!"

"Wrong. The original self and the alternate self aren't distinguished that way. I may be the future you, but I have no connection to your future.

Of course, you don't have to die either. I think you understand what I mean."

"..."

He understood. Of course Su Yida understood.

If one timeline couldn't hold two Masters of Trickery, then putting one in each world solved everything.

His future self was telling him to go to that future where everyone was scrambling for Divine Thrones. Honestly, the moment the other had uttered the words "the Thrones sit empty," Su Yida had wished he could be the Master of Trickery in that future world — to compete alongside everyone for those seats.

'The gods have all fallen — wasn't that to make way for mortals?'

'The Divine Thrones belong to whoever has the ability to claim them. Why can't I be that person?'

Already maddened enough by his desire for godhood, Su Yida had been tempted from the start. He'd simply kept his covetousness hidden in front of his future self.

And now, his future self had given him the perfect opportunity — a chance to be "forced" into going to the future world.

Su Yida's heart stirred!

Long Jing saw it clearly.

And "helpfully" offered a word of advice: "It's merely the difference between dying sooner and dying later. If I were you, I'd choose to die right here — at least the suffering would be less."

Su Yida's face darkened. "Aren't you afraid I'll seize a Divine Throne and come back to settle accounts?"

"???"

'Bro — how many bottles have you had?'

'We're not even out of the gate and you've already claimed a Divine Throne?'

'If fish in the pond were this easy to catch, there'd be no such thing as going home empty-handed!'

Long Jing laughed. "If that day ever comes — you'd be more than welcome."

Su Yida couldn't laugh. He felt that from this moment forward he had to endure in silence. For the sake of a Divine Throne, for the sake of Authority, he needed to step into character immediately — become the future Su Yida.

So he addressed Long Jing with utmost gravity:

"What's the mission?"

How do I earn their trust?

Does your group have any kind of token?"

"..."

Hearing this, Long Jing couldn't help but sigh inwardly. 'The Fate Weaver really did calculate everything to the letter.'

'Is he even a Fate Weaver? He's practically a Prophet!'

Long Jing furrowed his brow. "You're sure? You really want to go?"

Su Yida gave a cold smile. "Isn't this what you were hoping for?"

Long Jing nodded and began walking toward the direction Su Yida had come from.

"Wait here. I'll bring you the corpse of the assassination target, along with my token.

With those, you'll have everything you need to report back.

But a word of warning — every one of them is the peak of the peak. Watch yourself. Try not to die too quickly."

Su Yida watched his future self descend from the Void, expression shifting between emotions, a flash of fanaticism and madness in his eyes.

"I will not die. I will become a god!"

...

Chapter 1400: Seeing His Past Self

There is no need to recount everything that followed in detail.

As a performer with professional integrity, apart from the improvisational act of guiding Su Yida toward the future, Long Jing spent the rest of his time adhering scrupulously to the actor's code — reproducing, with painstaking fidelity, every event Cheng Shi had lived through.

Since it was every event, Cheng Shi's death was naturally an unavoidable scene.

This was arguably the most satisfying act Long Jing had ever performed. Cursing the Clown to his face without fear of reprisal — the sheer unbridled pleasure of it nearly broke his composure and made him laugh several times.

Yet when he wrapped his hands around the Clown's neck and squeezed the life out of him, even knowing it was scripted, his heart still lurched.

'It's all Su Yida's fault!'

'How did the script ever devolve into this?!'

Cheng Shi's corpse crumpled to the ground. Long Jing glanced down at the body, his face still performing the role — but inside, the storm of emotions was so intense that character and actor merged seamlessly into one as he sighed:

"I killed Cheng Shi. Ha. Who would believe it?"

The subsequent standoff with the Torchbearer, Zhao Qian, didn't appear in Cheng Shi's memories, so Long Jing had to improvise once more.

By rights, in this fabricated history there was no reason for the Torchbearer to die again. The problem was that the Jokers couldn't be certain whether leaving Zhao Qian alive would affect this world's path forward. So they made the decision on behalf of this admirable Torchbearer — persuade him to die here, then resurrect him in another world.

That was also why Su Yida hadn't done the deed himself. As Cheng Shi had said: a Joker must never blow out another's torch.

And so, Zhao Qian took his own life once more.

Long Jing carried Zhao Qian's charred remains to Su Yida, who was waiting in the Void, and tossed him the Epiphytic Wood:

"Target and token. Good luck."

Su Yida was beside himself with excitement. Barely suppressing his trembling, he asked: "How do I get back?"

'Back...'

'How easily you say "back." You've certainly slipped into character fast.'

Long Jing smiled mysteriously:

"Wait. Wait for the right moment to leave. Take this, hide yourself well in the Void, and someone will come to send you on your way."

Su Yida caught the die, confusion written across his face.

'A die of Fate?'

'The one coming for me is a follower of Fate?'

'Is there a second person on this mission?'

After bidding farewell to Su Yida, the remaining acts progressed smoothly. Long Jing witnessed, as he'd hoped, the Fate Weaver who from this point onward would steadfastly uphold "kindness." When he pulled the fragment of Prosperity divinity from his pocket in the ice plain and tossed it to Cheng Shi, he felt as though the torch inside his heart had been given physical form.

But...

'I strengthened your shadow. Shouldn't you at least say thank you, Clown?'

Yet Cheng Shi had collapsed on the ice plain during the Trial and couldn't possibly give him the response he wanted.

The Oblivion Trial swiftly approached its end, and Long Jing, amid the Wood Elves' cunning scheming, quietly exited the stage. His soul returned to the Epiphytic Wood.

At the same time, Shadow Cheng Shi took up the baton and made his entrance upon Destiny's stage.

The instant the Trial concluded, he emerged from the Prosperity divinity, rose into the Void above, produced his Mask, and used it to request an audience with his Benefactor — Fate.

He had been crafty about it: he sent a secret invitation to Fate through the Mask. Fate, upon hearing it, chose not to relay the message to Deceit, but came in person to meet this follower who shouldn't have been here.

Looking upon Fate — whom he hadn't seen in so long — Cheng Shi, who understood everything now, held back his anguish and forced a smile:

"It's been a while, my Benefactor."

Fate was as cold as ever. Even though this Cheng Shi was indeed Cheng Shi, he was not this world's Cheng Shi, after all.

"You should not be here."

That icy gaze could raise bitter gales in the Void with a single glance, yet Cheng Shi found the howling wind around him unexpectedly warm.

'This is also Him. It has always been Him...'

Fortunately, the faith carried by the shadow was Fate, which meant Fate bore no real hostility toward his presence. It also meant He had been willing to accept the invitation and come here — to meet this Fixed Destiny that belonged to the future.

"It seems Time's Deduction was not entirely useless. At minimum, even the oversights of Existence acknowledge that Fate is the fixed future.

You... what brings you here?

Existence does not tolerate errors. You will not survive here for long."

"..."

The Fate of this era still knew nothing of the Universe's truth. He still believed Cheng Shi to be an error escaped from Time's Deduction.

And that, in itself, proved that the so-called "Fate who sees through all truth in the Universe" could no longer see through anything at all...

Cheng Shi didn't reveal the truth. He simply smiled and said:

"My Benefactor — Fixed Destiny is so terribly dull."

Before the words had fully left his mouth, the gales of the Void lashed out as if to tear Cheng Shi apart. But Cheng Shi showed no trace of fear. Instead, he opened his arms wide and embraced the chill of Fate, eyes tinged red, his smile unchanged:

"The Fixed Destiny of Fate is immutable, running through the entirety of an era.

I don't reject Fixed Destiny. I understand it's what brought me this far. But my Benefactor — you play favorites far too much...

True, Fixed Destiny is Your Authority. But so is Change!

Since the beginning and end of every era bear Fixed Destiny's silhouette, might the middle of the era give Change a little more of the stage?

That wouldn't do any harm, would it, my Benefactor?"

Cheng Shi's tone was a tangle of contradictions — deep yet sunny, radiant yet choked with grief. Even Fate, who prided Himself as the Void sovereign who saw through every truth in the Universe, couldn't discern where this follower, who had walked out of an error, truly came from.

But it was undeniable: he drew close to Fate and upheld Fixed Destiny. That alone was enough.

Fate fell silent.

He championed only Fixed Destiny and had no fondness for any form of Change. Yet sensing the sorrow — its origin unknown — emanating from this follower, He found Himself unable to speak a refusal.

After long deliberation, He chose leniency once more.

"What do you wish to do?"

"I..."

For a moment, Cheng Shi didn't know what to say. His heart was brimming with boundless emotion and sighs. Everything Cheng Dashi had once done was now playing out upon his own stage, scene by scene.

'So he really did come here.'

'So... he is me.'

"It's not about what I want to do. It's that You, my Benefactor, should treat both equally — and give Change a chance to show itself.

Of course, since I'm already here, please indulge a small wish of mine before Existence corrects the error.

I want to see him — just once. I won't disturb him. One silent look will be enough.

May I, my Benefactor?"

Fate said nothing. He turned and departed.

And Shadow Cheng Shi, wrapped in the aura of Fate, was personally placed by Fate into that unforgettable Trial of Fate. As the Stars Dagger materialized before the younger Cheng Shi's eyes, the gear called Destiny began its repetitive turn once more.

When the Trial ended and the Zhen Yi who had been probing repeatedly vanished at last into the Void, Shadow Cheng Shi emerged silently. He rubbed his own neck.

"...Will any of this even matter?"

Considering his current situation, he shook his head with a rueful smile and slipped away in silence.

Cheng Dashi had been here.

He had seen his past self.

...