

The Gods 1411

Chapter 1411: The Relay From One End of an Era to the Other

Justice's attitude toward Cheng Shi's proposals was deeply thought-provoking.

Each time He streamlined the process, the Flowing Light Scales tilted a fraction further. Yet even as the imbalance worsened, He persisted in streamlining.

The absurd spectacle looked as though the normally rigid Justice had grown sick of Cheng Shi's "greed" and couldn't wait to leave early, getting as far away as possible.

But Cheng Shi, having seized his opening, would never let the old fossil off that easily.

A new round of voting commenced. Cheng Shi instantly secured seven votes — no surprise there.

Prosperity, Decay, Order, War, Chaos, Memory — an ironclad bloc — plus one from Silence. Rock-solid.

This time even Birth stopped pretending. He placed His intention to draw near Void on open display, pushing the count directly to the halfway mark.

Just one more vote and Cheng Shi would claim Truth's voting rights.

But then Death hesitated. He was slow to cast His remaining vote.

Cheng Shi wasn't surprised. He understood the Boss's reasoning.

Truth's voting rights were still held by Deceit as proxy. With Deceit not yet returned, Cheng Shi's move carried the whiff of "taking advantage of an empty house."

Both belonged to the Fear Faction, and even if the motion passed, the rights would simply shift from one hand to the other. Yet Death clearly leaned more toward trusting Deceit.

Still, Cheng Shi saw no problem with that.

He trusted Deceit too. So he understood Death. And the Boss's hesitation only proved further that Deceit had a way to sustain this world's future.

Far from disappointed, Cheng Shi was actually elated.

But for the Greed Lord, a lack of disappointment didn't mean a lack of desire for the vote. He gazed silently up at the towering skull overhead, saying nothing — yet those resolute eyes seemed to speak volumes.

'I will walk the road ahead myself. My fate rests in my own hands.'

Meeting that unflinching stare, the massive skull froze for a heartbeat, then released a long sigh:

"In... favor."

He had been swept up by Void — from start to finish, lashed to Void's chariot.

Nine votes!

The motion passed. Hong Lin went from holding no voting rights to bearing two, all in the space of minutes.

She pumped her fist in exhilaration. Her cat-brain fired on all cylinders, spinning at peak capacity — the zenith of her feline life. She called out to Cheng Shi:

"Keep going!"

Cheng Shi, keep going!

We've got the votes locked! Take all their voting rights!"

"?"

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow, musing: 'If we've got the votes locked, why stop at voting rights?'

'If a simple vote can decide Authority allocation and Divine Throne assignments, then...'

He looked up at the ever-more-imbalanced Flowing Light Scales and let a smile of indeterminate meaning cross his face.

"Oblivion has fallen. Its Authority remains suspended due to a prior unresolved motion, and its voting rights lie vacant. To ensure every deity's will may continue to be represented at the Assembly — I petition for Death to exercise Oblivion's voting rights and Authority by proxy!"

"???"

"!!!"

Before his words had even settled, Cheng Shi turned to the Boss with a radiant grin:

"I'm grateful for Your protection all this time. The long gap in offerings was my oversight. Today, I'll make up for every one of them in a single stroke."

The Clown had nearly dropped his act entirely.

The massive skull gaped in astonishment. He had never imagined this Assembly could yield a... "tribute."

'Exercising an adversary's Authority and voting rights by proxy — is that proper?'

From the standpoint of divine solemnity and respect for the faith, it certainly wasn't ideal. Yet the flames in the skull's eye sockets blazed up for an instant, radiant with unmistakable excitement.

It was strange — you could actually tell a bare skull was thrilled.

The last time he'd seen a similar expression was when the Boss was naming the Bone Servant Le Le'er's Ring.

The Flowing Light Scales even trembled at Cheng Shi's audacity. The situation had gone far beyond a question of rules. This Fixed Destiny — whom the Fear Faction had elevated to such heights — was openly trampling the Pact's dignity, making a fool of Him!

Yet the rigidity of the rules bound all of His actions. He could not refuse. He could only play the "fool."

The outcome was, once again, nine votes — except this time, before Birth even had a chance to cast His ballot, the Boss had preemptively thrown in Time's proxy vote.

Cheng Shi said nothing. He was too busy suppressing a grin.

The instant the motion passed, the Universe gained a new "power broker."

The Pact was finished.

From a universal accord that sheltered, balanced, and restrained the gods, it had been reduced to a "cat toy" for a mortal to tease deities with...

What made it more infuriating was that this cat toy had been handed over by Deceit Himself at the dawn of the era. A relay from one end of the era to the other had turned the Universe into a stage for Void's unfettered performance.

No — not Void. Yu Xi!

The Universe would be Yu Xi's stage!

Cheng Shi pointed; Justice obeyed. The once-revered embodiment of rules now resembled a humble servant awaiting orders.

To this, Kataro gave a big thumbs-up.

'Fooling the gods was nothing more than this.'

But it was only the beginning.

"Corruption has been absent for too long, abstaining from every motion, far too passive. To ensure every deity's will may continue to be represented at the Assembly, I petition for War to exercise Corruption's voting rights and—"

Before he could finish, the chamber erupted. Cheng Shi hadn't even bothered changing the excuse. But as the last word approached, he stuttered to a halt.

He deliberated for a long time, and in the end he didn't dare utter the word "Authority." He was afraid the secrets buried within Corruption would shatter the favorable position they'd built, and more afraid that the new War would be dragged back into the Sea of Desire.

There was a reason for assigning Corruption's voting rights to Qin Xin specifically. Though voting rights alone didn't carry much weight, any connection to Corruption made one uneasy.

Cheng Shi was cautious. He knew that for a Torchbearer like Qin Xin, the greatest desire in his heart was to protect this world. That made Qin Xin the most reliable person to resist Corruption's corrosion.

And indeed, the Assembly's voting rights proved to be nothing more than voting rights — aside from bearing Corruption's name, there were no other effects.

The reactions of the gods and Justice said it all. When Cheng Shi pulled the brake in time, They visibly relaxed.

The motion passed without the slightest suspense. On to the next item.

"Folly—"

The moment those two words left his mouth, every god standing behind Cheng Shi lost all composure.

"He's not even dead yet..."

Cheng Shi beamed. "Doesn't matter. Since He doesn't want to vote, I'll vote for Him."

Even Justice could no longer stand by. The Flowing Light Scales had tilted so far they no longer resembled scales at all — more like a spear angled upward.

He intoned a challenge:

"Do you intend to turn the transfer of divine power into your personal playground?"

Cheng Shi scoffed, his tone mocking:

"Oh?"

Didn't the gods turn the Universe into Their playground?

What's the difference?

Do not do unto others what you would not have done unto you.

Since you've already done it unto others, it must be what you desire as well.

The instant you bestowed a 'game' upon the world, you should have been prepared to become part of the game yourselves, shouldn't you?

Spare me the empty words. The Pact cannot be defied. Get to work, old fossil.

Today, I will take every last voting right into my own hands.

After Folly, that leaves only..."

He trailed off, turning his quiet gaze toward the conspicuously silent Divine Pillar.

...

Chapter 1412: Assembly of Gods Convention? No — Cheng Shi's Autocratic Assembly

Today, Birth was being remarkably "sensible."

"Sensible" might sound a touch disrespectful. "Pragmatic" was perhaps more fitting.

Before the Folly motion had even begun, He swayed the Divine Pillar, suppressing His temper, and spoke in a low rumble:

"My voting rights — I can give you.

But my Authority—"

"Hu Xuan."

In that moment, Cheng Shi had all but guessed Birth's thoughts. He answered with a smile: "I won't plunder your Authority, nor will I interfere with your Divine Throne, because the Sage is my friend.

She deserves all of it — on the condition that she actually possesses all of it."

Birth wasn't surprised by Cheng Shi's words. A drama in which the entire Universe quietly drifted toward Void was unfolding. Every god was searching for an exit. Birth was, by far, the most dignified of them so far.

He knew that as long as His child, the Eternal Sun, could inherit everything, that was enough.

The Divine Pillar nodded and silently surrendered His voting rights.

Justice's aura grew ever more chaotic, yet He could do nothing to stop it.

Everyone had expected the eldest of the Life path — the one who valued "emotion" most — to hand His voting rights to the only sibling god from the old era still present: Death. Instead, He gave them to the new sibling god — Prosperity.

The reason was simple. Though Death was closer to Void than Prosperity, Prosperity was closer to Fixed Destiny than Death.

Birth was wise. He understood that in an era of Void, Void's Will permeated everything — one had to draw near. But He understood even better that Fixed Destiny might be where the future truly lay.

For Birth to endure forever, He had to approach Void — and then go further still, approaching Fixed Destiny.

And so, Cheng Shi obtained his ninth vote.

This vote was pivotal. It meant that from this point on, even if the Fear Faction's gods disagreed with his proposals, it no longer mattered.

The "Fixed Destiny Faction" had locked in the votes!

Birth, Prosperity, Corruption, Decay, Order, Truth, War, Chaos, Memory — with these nine votes in hand, the Assembly of Gods Convention could no longer be called the Assembly of Gods Convention. It should have been called Cheng Shi's Autocratic Assembly.

The Pact had lost its original meaning, reduced entirely to Yu Xi's tool.

And the very first thing Cheng Shi did with that tool in hand was propose something that made every deity's jaw drop:

"Void...

has been absent for far too long. At the tail end of the era, He hides and skulks, failing in His duty to set an example. As one who walks the path of Void, and as the sole follower of Void's two sovereigns, I believe Void has an obligation to guide the Universe toward its true ending.

Therefore, I propose: reclaim Void's voting rights and distribute them among the gods.

In any motion where the majority prevails, that majority represents the era's will. Void follows the era — and thus automatically concurs, adding two additional votes.

Should Void return, we will then discuss whether to restore the corresponding rights.

Who is in favor? Who objects?"

"..."

"..."

"..."

In favor: nine. Opposed: zero. Every other vote was an abstention.

In truth, abstaining or not no longer mattered. Once the ayes reached nine, the motion passed automatically — and even added two more votes on top.

The entire starry sky fell silent.

Who could have imagined that the first thing Yu Xi did upon "seizing power" was to strip Void's voice at the Assembly of Gods Convention?

With this done, even if Deceit returned from the Real Universe, every move He made within the Universe would require Yu Xi's approval. Otherwise, He might not be able to push a single plan through.

The ambition Cheng Shi had painstakingly served — elevating friends to godhood just to stack the board — was finally laid bare for all to see!

He was afraid!

He was truly afraid.

He was afraid that a despair like the False Curtain Call would come again, and he would once more be powerless against it.

From the moment War's Final Oracle shattered his identity as Fixed Destiny during the False Curtain Call, Cheng Shi had understood a truth: in this world, only the Pact could save him.

And that was the relentless driving force behind his step-by-step seizure of the Assembly, one vote at a time!

If Deceit returned and found an answer for the Universe? Fine. Cheng Shi would naturally guide the gods to a unanimous vote and speed-run the ending.

But if Deceit tried to pull another False Curtain Call — another Great Deceptive Lie... sorry, but Your lies are worthless before the Pact.

'I can even strip everything from You without Your consent, using the votes in my hands.'

And the absurd part? Deceit would still have to cast a vote of approval, because it was the era's will — no, Yu Xi's will.

"..."

Death fell silent. He had long anticipated this day. He simply hadn't expected it this soon — earlier even than He'd foreseen.

The massive skull's face betrayed neither anger nor relief. It was hard to describe His mood. At any rate, it was no longer the delight He'd shown upon receiving the tribute.

Cheng Shi had "bought" Him with an offering — then stripped the Fear Faction of its two most crucial votes.

Good news: at least Death's own voting rights, along with those of Silence and Time, had not been taken.

Bad news: those rights were as good as useless now.

The Fixed Destiny who had been sheltered by the Fear Faction throughout the entire game had finally, at the era's end, risen above the gods — becoming the one who could shelter himself.

Yes — he wasn't even a god. Yet he could now manipulate the Divine Thrones and Authorities of all sixteen true gods.

Most terrifying of all, even though his friends had become gods and possessed supreme Authority to look down upon the Universe, they still willingly followed a mortal's arrangements.

How absurd. How very Yu Xi...

In the instant the motion passed, a preposterous thought even flickered through Death's mind: 'If Deceit returns from the Real Universe, could He reconquer the Assembly?'

'Perhaps?'

But Death was not Deceit. He Himself couldn't envision how.

At last, Cheng Shi exhaled deeply.

Facing that unseen future, facing that answer whose reason remained unknown — he finally possessed the confidence of an entire world.

"Dismissed. Enjoy your Divine Thrones. This is likely the last calm before the storm.

I still have words for Justice, so I won't see you off."

Cheng Shi waved a hand. The new gods departed at his word.

Silence lingered for a long moment, then drifted into the infinite depths of Void. Death fixed Cheng Shi with a complex gaze, and ultimately, with one long sigh, dissolved into a torrent of white bone and swept away.

Birth departed as well. He needed to teach His child how to thread together the labels of life, so that beneath a new starry sky, they might offer tribute to the greatest Origin.

Only Cheng Shi and Justice remained.

The starry sky was fading — a sign that Justice, too, was withdrawing. Yet the tilting Scales trembled more and more violently, as if restraining some irrepressible force, refusing to leave.

He didn't seem as distant from Cheng Shi as He'd been during the Assembly. And it appeared He had something to say.

Cheng Shi bowed his head in thought for a long while, then slowly looked up at the imbalanced Scales before him and asked a single question:

"Why help me?"

The radiance on the Flowing Light Scales dimmed, and a relieved sigh echoed out:

"I wasn't helping you. I was helping Myself.

I am about to fall.

After all these years, I am finally freed.

Had He not departed first, I would not have dared to leave either.

Thankfully, it is all coming to an end.

Cheng Shi...

Are you prepared to replace Me and become the Pact's new Proxy?"

"!!??"

...

Chapter 1413: All Gods May Fall, but the Pact Endures

What was the Pact?

It was the supreme accord Deceit had tricked the gods into signing at the dawn of the era. To protect their collective Authority and balance their collective interests, They had jointly entrusted their power to the Pact, ensuring that divine authority could never be lost.

Only now did the gods realize, in hindsight, that this was simply the trap Deceit had laid for Them at the era's beginning.

The Pact did protect divine power. When all gods were present, it truly served as a balancing mechanism.

But as deities fell or departed for various reasons and the vacated Divine Thrones were collected one by one, the Pact's fatal flaw emerged: once someone obtained an absolute majority of votes, every other god was left without recourse!

Of course, to the party holding the voting advantage, this wasn't a flaw at all — it was a lethal attraction.

And now, Cheng Shi was that party. An absolute majority. The Assembly of Gods Convention had all but become his one-man forum.

Even so, the best play Cheng Shi could have envisioned was stripping Deceit's voting rights, forcing all of His future schemes out into the open, subject to Cheng Shi's "approval" on whether they were executed.

But what had Justice just said? Replace Him as the Pact's new Proxy?!

Cheng Shi's mind went blank.

'Wait, wait, wait!'

'My brain can't keep up — let me sort this out.'

'You're saying that once I have enough votes, I can leave the negotiating table entirely and... become the referee?!'

'I approve my own proposals?'

"...?"

'You can actually do that?'

Even someone as free-associating as Cheng Shi was genuinely stunned. This was a path he had never once imagined.

The Pact stood above all gods. He had never considered that the Proxy could be replaced. He had always assumed Justice, as the framework of the Pact, would exist in eternal and neutral perpetuity alongside it.

Yet here Justice was, telling him the Proxy was replaceable!

And that the replacement was... him?

Cheng Shi's expression became spectacularly colorful. His first thought wasn't that he'd stumbled into a windfall — it was that a windfall arriving out of the blue was absolutely suspicious.

The Greed Lord was greedy, yes, but equally steady.

'Is this old geezer, seeing Fixed Destiny's momentum as irresistible, trying to contaminate me through this?'

'Does becoming the Pact's Proxy count as contamination?'

'Is the Pact even a faith?'

While Cheng Shi frowned and deliberated, the tilting Flowing Light Scales hummed once more:

"I know you harbor many doubts. But rest assured — I am not using this to manufacture new fear.

Nor am I, as the world assumes, single-mindedly bent on approaching Origin.

I, too, am afraid. And therefore I understand Deceit's actions with perfect clarity."

"?????"

'What?!'

'Did I hear that right? Justice said He was afraid?!'

'The Order who, in pursuit of the Will Origin had bestowed, dared to step into the Sea of Desire with the intent to sweep the Universe clean — He's in the Fear Faction?!'

'You — the thick-eyebrowed, sharp-eyed one who looked so upright — you defected too?'

'Are you kidding me?'

'Two nations at war for years, unification in sight, and you tell me the enemy emperor was our mole all along?'

'This isn't how you write a spy thriller!'

'You're not Deceit, are you?'

'Fate being Deceit was one thing. But Justice is Deceit too?'

'Or is Order itself Deceit?'

Cheng Shi blinked wildly. In his utter mental chaos, he was seriously considering the question of whether he himself might also be Deceit.

'Surely Deceit can't be the Creator — Origin — who fashioned the Universe?'

'Is the entire Universe a fabricated illusion?'

Clearly, Cheng Shi's thoughts had spiraled well beyond the rails.

Justice could guess at his shock. Within that shock, He also confirmed one thing: the man before Him did not know certain truths about Deceit — even though Deceit had been the one to push him to this point.

Still, He didn't elaborate further. He only explained His own words:

"Fixed Destiny will not be contaminated. And Fixed Destiny is destined to inherit everything of the Pact.

This is most likely the plan Deceit conceived at the very moment He drafted the Pact — and the truth I grasped when I was installed into the Pact's framework halfway through the era!

Do you know how Deceit originally hoodwinked the entire Universe into signing this covenant that all gods acknowledged?"

There were too many bombshells. Cheng Shi's brain had crashed. His mouth opened and closed, his face stiff. He shook his head by instinct:

"I don't..."

"Beneath the Universe, among the gods, those who wished to approach Origin existed, and those who wished to distance themselves from Origin were no fewer. But no one had ever brought these intentions out into the open.

Until Void descended. And Deceit used that moment to issue an invitation to all gods.

He seemed to have known from the start where the era was heading. To the Approach Faction, He said:

'If you wish to draw near Origin, you must comprehend His deepest intent. Origin distributed Authority among us, so we must gather Authority back together. This act — the one most "resembling Origin" — shall be our offering to Him, in exchange for His gracious gaze.'

And then, to the Fear Faction, He said:

'Fate has descended bearing Origin's Will, intending to drain all faith and forge it into a sacrifice for the Creator. To protect ourselves, the gods must unify, binding our Authority together so that faith will never run dry and we will never lose the strength to resist.'

After that, I do not know by what means He persuaded Fate...

And so the Pact was sealed. Divine power would never again be scattered."

"..."

Hearing this, Cheng Shi slowly came back from his initial shock. His expression shifted through several shades, his gaze immeasurably complex.

Justice didn't know how Deceit had persuaded Fate. But Cheng Shi did.

Because He hadn't needed to persuade anyone. Fate was Deceit!

Still, credit where credit was due — Deceit had played the information asymmetry masterfully. He truly was the aggregate of every illusion in the Universe. Exploiting the gods' terror of speaking Origin's name aloud, He had buried every undercurrent beneath the table. He hadn't even lied. He had simply reworded things slightly, brokering the Pact across two opposing factions.

The Approach Faction received a vague version of Fate's offering method. The Fear Faction received the truthful version of Fate's offering intent.

Even after Fate's fall, He could still wield Fate's name like this, having His cake and eating it too...

Deceit truly was this era's greatest chess master!

No — Screenwriter!

He had penned a fantastically unrestrained One Man Show for this era.

But what did any of this have to do with inheriting the Proxy of the Pact?

Cheng Shi frowned slightly, about to ask — but in the next instant his eyes flew wide, pupils contracting. A flash of insight tore through his mind, and everything clicked into place.

If the world's future truly was as Wei Mu had described — Deceit was going all out to forge a new "Origin" capable of replacing Origin's gaze — then what traits must this new "Origin" possess?

At the very least, it had to mirror Origin: bestowing Divine Thrones upon gods, distributing Authority among Them, granting Them legitimacy...

'Sound familiar? Does something come to mind?'

Exactly — wasn't that precisely the function of the Pact within this starry sky?!

And just moments ago, the Pact had legitimized several new Divine Thrones!

"!!!"

'So this is how Origin is to be replaced?'

'A divine Contract spanning an entire era — elevating Fixed Destiny onto the Creator's "Divine Throne"?'

When he thought about it carefully, the pretext Deceit had used to dupe the gods into signing was never merely a pretext — it was a fact on the verge of coming true at the era's end.

'Gather all Authorities of the gods — offer them to "Origin." Guard all Authorities of the gods — distance from Origin.'

In this moment, approach and distance harmonized into one.

What Time had said — at last, Cheng Shi understood.

The answers had been written inside the Pact all along.

...

Chapter 1414: The Pact's Proxy

"I..."

Even though he had puzzled everything out, Cheng Shi remained confused.

All this time, he had believed Justice was an obstacle to be overcome. The rigid Pact had constrained the Fear Faction's ambitions for the Divine Thrones. He had schemed endlessly to circumvent the rules and

exploit loopholes — never imagining that, at this juncture, he and his supposed adversary would end up standing on the same side...

But why was Justice afraid?

Every scrap of history concerning Order told Cheng Shi that Order was a resolute member of the Approach Faction. Yet Justice had just said that midway through the era, He had already grasped the significance of Deceit's Pact.

That meant even before the Faith Game descended upon reality — back in the Civilization Era — Order had already fallen into fear.

So where had His fear come from?

What had happened at that time?

Cheng Shi racked his brain and came up empty. Since he couldn't answer that question, he didn't dare take the so-called "replacement" at face value.

And yet, the Justice who had just been explaining everything suddenly went silent on this point. He only let out a long sigh, tinged with sorrow:

"Terror — the Order aspect — has already fallen.

After the Audience Meeting, the Faith Game began exhibiting anomalies due to the absence of Order's Will. I seized upon His death as a pretext, exploiting the technicality to hijack the Pact's rules and temporarily suspend the granting of Trials — thereby reducing the Faith Game's impact on reality.

And the streamlining of rules, the shortcutting of procedures... all of that was also to resist the Pact!

The Pact is the aggregate of all gods' Wills. It cannot be defied. So long as it remains intact, I, as its Will's Proxy, cannot die.

But I must die!

Therefore, I can only fight the Pact itself.

The Pact contains a provision: when the Proxy loses his fairness and is challenged by the gods, a challenger need only submit a motion and have it pass with more than two-thirds of all votes to elect a new Pact Proxy.

Now all conditions are met. I have lost my fairness. You hold more than two-thirds of all divine votes. For the Universe's future, a challenger must be selected to immediately propose My replacement and fulfill the ultimate Fixed Destiny."

'Two-thirds of votes...' Cheng Shi ran the numbers. The nine ironclad votes plus Void's two did indeed reach two-thirds of the total. But was even that calculated?

Had He already predicted that Cheng Shi would reclaim Void's voting rights?

Otherwise, why had everything proceeded so smoothly?

Justice continued:

"I imagine you already know what it means to be Fixed Destiny.

I do not know how Deceit defines the road ahead. I know only this: if Order was never truly Order, the world deserves a new order.

Order's existence was never meant to exploit faith or construct hierarchies. It was meant so that the followers I sheltered — the children I illuminated — could live independently, equally, freely, and unshackled.

Every life deserves respect. Every consciousness has the right to be acknowledged. They are independent individuals — not puppets manipulated by gods for amusement.

True Order never looks down from on high. It is the scales that living beings use to measure each other's dignity.

The old world's scales have long since lost their balance... Unfortunately, I will not live to see the new world's equality.

Cheng Shi — challenge Me. Replace Me. Fight for this world's future, and infuse this starry sky with a new order.

This is not only the answer Deceit prepared for the era. It is also the hope that Pride — the true Order — once placed in you.

Act quickly. I have little time left."

"..."

The version of Order's Will that Justice articulated was one Cheng Shi had never heard before. It was clearly purer and nobler than the Order the world currently understood.

But that was hardly surprising. The true Order had long since splintered, and the one occupying Order's Divine Throne had been swapped in by Deceit.

When Chaos sat upon Order's throne, how could this chaotic world possibly possess true order?

Cheng Shi was deeply stirred. He had finally come to understand. The method for replacing Origin's gaze was perhaps exactly this — becoming the Pact's Proxy.

Yet the question remained: why was Justice choosing this moment, this method, to "force" him into the role?

Deceit happened to be absent, making verification impossible. The Boss knew nothing of Deceit's plan. And now a Fear Faction ally materialized out of thin air, claiming Deceit's plan had always been this... It was hard for Cheng Shi not to panic.

Even though every piece of logic fit, he couldn't afford to be wrong at a moment like this.

So Cheng Shi pulled back carefully, fighting to stay rational. His mind raced, sorting through everything he knew. After a moment, something clicked. He looked up at the Scales — now tilted almost vertical — with a complex expression and asked:

"You discovered the Universe's truth long ago — that all of this is merely an experiment by the Creator. Correct?"

His indifference ran directly counter to your Will. That's where your fear came from. Correct?"

But you weren't originally part of the Fear Faction, because you said you didn't realize Deceit's scheme until midway through the era. That also means you didn't learn the truth from Deceit... You discovered it yourself.

Yet by then you had already been installed into the Pact, becoming its new Proxy, losing any chance to leave the Universe. So how could you possibly have learned there were other universes beyond this one?"

Your sudden awakening is deeply strange. I can find no logical foothold to accept any of this, and on this point, you've been evasive. The only thing I can connect these anomalies to... is one thing."

A grave light flared in Cheng Shi's eyes. He spoke in a low voice: "It was because of the Sea of Desire, wasn't it?"

"..."

The Scales trembled faintly. Still no response.

But in Cheng Shi's eyes, that was already a response!

His pupils contracted. He pressed on with his conjecture:

"The Sea of Desire is the problem!

Yes — everyone knows the Sea of Desire is a problem. But the problem I'm talking about is nothing as simple as the stirring of desire. It's the same kind of problem as Deceit, as Drasilco!

You were contaminated. Weren't you?!

And not just you — every god who entered the Sea of Desire developed the same issue!

The world was fooled by the spectacle of Order's split. If you simply extract the cause and the conclusion — ignoring the messy middle — you'll find that every deity who ever entered the Sea of Desire ultimately...

Couldn't escape death?"

Halfway through, Cheng Shi's voice warped. His eyes flew wide:

"Order fractured into three, and to this day, every fragment except you has fallen — and you're desperately seeking death yourself.

War died long ago — He fell on the charge toward the Creator.

Drasilco died too — He declared Corruption meaningless and destroyed Himself at the edge of the Sea of Desire, in the Sinking Land.

And then Deceit...

No — no, no, no!!"

Cheng Shi stopped abruptly. He seemed unwilling to accept the truth.

If his guess was right, then regardless of whether Deceit found an answer in the Real Universe, the fate awaiting Him would be...

"No!" Cheng Shi clenched his fists until his knuckles went white. He looked at Justice, refusing to believe.
"Tell me this isn't real.

Something hidden in the Sea of Desire contaminated you all, giving you no choice but to die...

No — I'm wrong. Tell me I'm wrong. This isn't true!"

"..."

Justice said nothing for a long time. No matter how twisted Cheng Shi's expression became, He offered no reply — only words:

"Challenge Me. Replace Me. I have little time left.

An imbalanced Justice can no longer resist the Pact's erosion. Should I fall before you replace Me, the Pact will automatically select a deity to become the new Proxy.

Before that 'lucky one' loses His own balance, you will lose every means of replacing Him.

True, those whose will opposes fear are few in this Universe. But every additional Change introduces another risk.

The Universe cannot afford to gamble. Void cannot afford to gamble. Order cannot afford to gamble. And you... cannot afford to gamble either.

The old world should have been destroyed long ago. Only from ruins can new life be born.

Begin, Cheng Shi. We are out of time."

...

Chapter 1415: What Are You Standing Around For? Vote!

"..."

Time... once again, there was no time.

At this point, Cheng Shi felt he had touched upon the most fundamental truth of the Universe, and he knew he had no right to refuse.

Deceit had laid plans spanning an entire era. Void had striven through an entire game. Even Justice had begun leaning toward Fixed Destiny. Under these circumstances, the only path toward finding an answer for this world was to become the Pact's Proxy.

A refusal would render Deceit's lifelong work meaningless, and his friends and this world would have no tomorrow.

He could only accept.

Just like the identity of Fixed Destiny — some things, from start to finish, were never his to decide.

Cheng Shi still hadn't fully unraveled every thread of Deceit's plan. No matter how close his conjectures came to the real truth, one thing remained inescapable: becoming the Pact's Proxy was clearly only a necessary condition. It would make him resemble "Origin," but it wouldn't free him from the true Origin's gaze.

If Origin was unconquerable, how could one deceive His sight?

Regrettably, there wasn't enough time for Cheng Shi to deliberate. And Justice wasn't about to explain everything — He spoke only of rules and the past, never venturing into anything else.

Left with no alternative, Cheng Shi finally nodded.

But before truly becoming the new Proxy, he summoned the Boss one more time. He wanted Death to be the challenger — and to serve as one final checkpoint, verifying whether Justice truly feared.

No matter how solid the ground beneath his feet appeared, Cheng Shi had come too far not to be cautious enough.

Death clearly already knew something. He wasn't the least bit surprised by Justice's actions.

That reaction made Cheng Shi feel that something was off.

'Ask a question, and You clam up every time. Supposedly know nothing about Deceit's plan. Yet when a critical juncture arrives, You act as though You've been expecting it all along.'

'The Boss has been rather too mysterious lately. If Cheng Shi didn't already know the Fear Faction's inner workings, he would have almost believed Death was the true mastermind behind the curtain — sitting serenely in His hall, watching the Universe unfold with a smile.'

Cheng Shi's thoughts wandered. In the instant he bowed his head in contemplation, the massive skull and the Flowing Light Scales exchanged a glance and nodded silently. Then Death let out a long sigh:

"The Pact... cannot... be defied.

Yet its Proxy... Justice... has lost... His fairness.

I... have witnessed... His bias... firsthand. Therefore... in the name of... the third god of Life... Death... I raise... a challenge.

Summon... the gods... Convene the Assembly... and for the Universe... elect a new... Pact Proxy..."

The moment the challenge was issued, Justice immediately commenced a new Assembly of Gods Convention. The gods, who had only just departed, returned in full. When they understood the motion at hand, every single one froze.

Hong Lin's eyes went wide. Once again serving as everyone's mouthpiece, she asked in disbelief:

"Who's succeeding as the Pact's Proxy? Cheng Shi?"

But he's not—"

Green flame blazed in the massive skull's eye sockets. Death intoned:

"The Proxy... merely... executes... the Pact's... rules. There are... no personal... requirements. Nor does... the Pact... contain... a single... clause... stating... that a mortal... cannot serve... as Proxy.

Consider... the current... Justice. Order's... Divine Throne... and Authority... already belong... to the new Order. In point... of fact... He is merely... a fragment... of the old... order. Neither mortal... nor god... yet He still... bears... this weight.

The challenger... is Me.

You need not... question it.

Simply... vote."

"..."

Death had made His position this clear. There was nothing left to debate. The gods turned to Cheng Shi, awaiting a single nod. But Cheng Shi's gaze was fixed on Justice.

The Flowing Light Scales were beginning to dim. Though the starry sky representing the Assembly still sparkled brilliantly, that brilliance had begun to fade from the Scales themselves.

Under the Pact's erosion, Justice was failing.

He paid no mind to any defense. Instead, for the first time, He let out a laugh — one entirely at odds with His usual solemnity. It was perhaps the only time, and the last time, anyone would hear Order laugh.

"All things end eventually. I, too, am released at last.

Unless old order is torn away, new order cannot stand.

For the sake of a new order... cast your votes, everyone."

Cheng Shi's expression was grave, his gaze complex. He didn't know how to face the Justice before him. All he could do, before Justice faded entirely, was give a firm nod.

"Vote, my friends. We have no time."

The gods moved in unison. The motion passed — unanimously.

Unanimously!

No one had expected a vote on something as momentous as replacing the Proxy to be unanimous. Every other vote was expected, but Folly's...

The gods stared at Folly in surprise. Folly scoffed at Himself, turned and departed once more, leaving behind only:

"My foolish act has never had an answer."

"CRACK—"

The Flowing Light Scales shattered.

Countless rays of Order's holy light poured from the fissures. Even at this end-of-days moment, the light remained orderly — igniting one by one, dimming one by one, without a single struggle, dissipating peacefully into the Universe.

The imbalanced Scales were finally at balance — but only because they had lost the identity of Scales altogether.

In the instant the Pact's radiance descended upon Cheng Shi, the deity who had maintained the Universe's order across several eras at last reached His conclusion.

From that point on, the stars no longer flickered in synchronized rhythm. The rivers of starlight no longer traced regular orbits. Everything drifted from the old order, each star brightening and dimming at its own whim — free and unshackled.

At first glance, the scattered stars were actually more brilliant and beautiful than the old sky had ever been.

The gods noticed this too. They looked around in wonder, gasping with amazement. But Cheng Shi was examining himself.

Outwardly, nothing had changed. Inwardly, however, he could clearly feel countless shackles winding around him. He knew these were the Pact's clauses, the gods' Wills — the price a Proxy paid for receiving the Pact's power.

But who was Cheng Shi? He hated restraint. His rebelliousness ran in the same vein as a certain Void sovereign's.

So, shortly after becoming the Pact's new Proxy, he let out a quiet snort of amusement and addressed the assembled gods:

"I've read the rules. The Pact's clauses are not immutable. But each amendment requires unanimous consent from the gods, because that was the vote count at the Pact's founding — representing the unification of all divine Wills.

I hadn't planned on bothering with Folly, but as things stand, that vote is non-negotiable.

Friends — who'd like to exercise Folly's voting rights by proxy? Raise your hand. Let's move on to the next item as fast as possible.

As the Pact's Proxy, I'm unable to submit motions myself, so I'll have to rely on all of you to contribute proposals. However, I can offer some directional suggestions. For example:

Granting the Pact's Proxy voting rights and the right to submit proposals.

Or — eliminating all of the rules' 'imbalance' penalties. Let's not put such crushing workplace pressure on the Pact's Proxy.

Another one — the Pact's Proxy shall retain the right to walk freely across the Universe, rather than being confined to waiting for the gods to summon assemblies.

And one more — in urgent situations, if the Proxy cannot notify the gods in time, he shall be temporarily granted the power of unilateral decision-making...

Why are you all looking at me like that? These are all legitimate benefits for a working professional. They also lighten your load — meetings are such a waste of time, and I imagine nobody wants to be in meetings every day, right?

What are you standing around for? Vote! Surely no one objects?"

"..."

Object? Impossible. But feeling a pang of nostalgia for the old Justice? Also true.

'Indeed — only through comparison do you learn what you've lost.'

A Clown belonged onstage, drawing laughter from the crowd — not strung up in some hall called "Justice," wagging his finger at everyone.

...

Chapter 1416: The Behind-the-Scenes Puppeteer

Justice's departure wasn't what anyone would call tragic — it was simply too abrupt.

After amending who-knew-how-many clauses of the Pact, the Assembly of Gods Convention was finally adjourned. Shackles still clung to him, but they had been pared down to the absolute minimum. After all, the Pact was an accord, and accords had to contain something. Cheng Shi grudgingly accepted that.

The gods clearly had mountains of questions about this sudden turn of events, but Death didn't seem inclined to explain. He dissolved into a torrent of white bone and departed. Silence followed close behind.

The remaining gods looked to Cheng Shi. He furrowed his brow slightly and said:

"I'll explain later. Perhaps it's time to tell everyone what the road ahead looks like.

But first, I need to see Him.

There's one more thing I need to confirm."

With that, Cheng Shi also left the starry sky. As the Pact's Proxy, his departure took the brilliant constellations with him. The Void's darkness rushed back in, swallowing the gods' bewildered expressions.

"Who's he going to see?" Hong Lin, as always, voiced everyone's question.

Zhen Xin and the Dragon King exchanged a glance and answered in unison: "Folly."

Exactly. Cheng Shi had gone to find Folly.

Folly's vote was deeply suspicious. A deity who had the word "foolish act" on His lips every other sentence — how could He personally commit one?

In His eyes, the world had no answer. Then why had He voted in favor of replacing Justice?

Did that vote represent approval of Deceit's grand design — or contempt for the entire plan?

If the former, Cheng Shi could breathe easier. But if the latter... he needed to know exactly where Folly saw the road ahead so he could prepare accordingly.

In the past, as a mortal, he could do nothing about Folly, nor did he want to bother with Him. But now, armed with the identity of the Pact's Proxy, he felt he had grounds to knock on the door and request one foolish act.

And by leveraging the Pact's ability to sense all gods, he quickly located—

"!!!"

'Why is it him?'

Cheng Shi's pupils shrank violently. He stopped dead in his tracks before a familiar figure.

He had come looking for Folly. Instead, at the place where Folly's presence registered, he found an old friend. This friend wasn't Folly — yet shared a thousand and one threads of connection with Him.

Cheng Shi's expression grew complex. He held the gaze of the figure before him for a long time, then sighed deeply and asked a single question:

"Where is He?"

The figure smiled and shook his head:

"You're one step too late.

He destroyed Himself. Right beneath your feet — right where you're standing now."

"..."

If it had been anyone else delivering this news, Cheng Shi might have paused to weigh whether it was a lie. But the person before him was a follower of Folly — the indisputable number-one on the Road to Ascension — the one nobody would question: Wei Mu!

And so, Cheng Shi didn't question it either.

The Universe's situation had evolved to this point. Those who saw the full picture probably already had their answer. There was no longer any meaning in deception. At most you could deceive yourself. As for deceiving others... pointless.

Wei Mu still wore his puppet guise. His identity's shift hadn't changed him in the slightest.

He studied Cheng Shi and said with a soft smile:

"You must be curious about His vote. I imagine that's why you're here.

I can answer that for you. It was a foolish act."

"..." 'Of course. In the eyes of Folly and His followers, everything anyone else did was always a foolish act.'

"I once asked Him — when are You going to die?

He never answered me. Until today, when He cast that vote.

Rest easy. It wasn't wholesale contempt for Deceit's plan, nor some deeply coded warning. He simply gave Himself an excuse — an excuse to die.

Folly used to say that all acts in the Universe were foolish, yet He alone stood above them. Though He'd committed a few foolish acts of His own, in His reckoning, those weren't actually foolish — they were even cleverer than the Universe itself.

Self-deception isn't exclusive to Deceit. At the very least, Folly was a natural.

He knew this starry sky could no longer accommodate Him. He'd witnessed too many gods fall. Proud as He was, He would never let you drag Him off that Divine Throne. So He deliberately committed an 'unforgivable' foolish act — then pronounced His own death sentence.

Folly died of folly. Quite poetic, isn't it?

Unfortunately, I didn't even get to see His undignified end. By the time you arrived, all I saw was the Void returning to stillness."

"..."

For a moment, Cheng Shi didn't know what to say.

'So that was Folly. Even in death — foolish to the very last.'

Folly's demise was more or less expected. The old gods were always going to fall; Cheng Shi had some mental preparation for it.

What he hadn't prepared for was the identity of the friend standing before him. Could this Puppeteer who outclassed every player in the game truly be what he suspected?

Wei Mu read Cheng Shi's mind. He nodded. "That's right. You guessed correctly. I am His Authority."

"!!!!!"

"Am." Not "found."

The difference between those two tiny words was heaven and earth.

After Zhen Xin had floated the hypothesis — "Could all Folly followers be Folly's avatars?" — a hazy notion had surfaced in Cheng Shi's mind. He hadn't caught it at the time. But when Zhen Xin reported that her search was shielded by an Authority... Cheng Shi had ventured a bold guess about Wei Mu's identity.

Now that guess was confirmed.

Wei Mu was the Authority that Folly had hidden away!

'Hidden in plain sight — genius.'

Wei Mu seemed to have accepted his identity. He laughed at himself, then continued:

"I know what worries you — that the world's future, once spoken aloud through me, has been tainted by Folly's Will.

But this is precisely where Folly was brilliant.

In this starry sky, Deceit was never the only chess master. Folly was one too — and arguably a step ahead of Deceit.

He sculpted His Authority into a person, hidden from the entire Universe — and from me.

Consciousness is a wondrous thing. When you are unaware of your true self, you carry none of your essential self's colors.

This is also why certain fools can harbor the wrong answer in their hearts yet still cannot be identified as liars by the Master of Deception.

Because they are utterly convinced — and in their blissful ignorance, they 'deceive' even themselves.

I am such a fool.

I always believed I gathered information through talent, connected clues through intellect, and saw through the Universe's secrets through brilliance.

But now the tide has gone out, and the one swimming naked... ha, turns out it was only me.

My wisdom was never innate. It was god-given. Only recently did I finally wake up and notice the cracks.

That's why I say Folly was the Universe's finest chess master. He saw the world's 'future' and, through my mouth, conveyed it to you. In this way, Fixed Destiny wouldn't be contaminated by His Will, and the world was given a path forward.

But that path wasn't paved by Folly. It was something Deceit groped toward, inch by inch, from the era's very beginning.

He handed in the best exam paper His ability allowed. Unfortunately, Folly didn't consider it an answer. He maintained, to the end, that the Universe has never had an answer."

...

Chapter 1417: Foreseeing the Future?

'The Universe has no answer...'

Indeed. From Cheng Shi's perspective, the Universe simply didn't have one.

After all he had endured, after all the truths he had uncovered, after all the conjectures he had spun... if the Cheng Shi before inheriting the Pact's Proxy had still wavered over his final hypothesis, now he could all but confirm he had seen through to the very essence of the cosmos.

Not just the essence of the slice universe — but the essence of the Real Universe as well.

Yet none of this he dared share with anyone, because he never forgot what Time had told him: "Faith is born of trust."

He was afraid that once the hypothesis became public, he would lose the foundation of others' trust.

That was why he hadn't even dared to look at Wei Mu before — lest a single glance betray something. But now, knowing Wei Mu was Folly's Authority, that meant the little puppet of the old gods would not accompany them into the next era — if a next era existed.

And so, today, Cheng Shi had finally found someone who could "see" the world clearly, someone he could actually speak to.

The secret he had bottled up for so long finally had a place to be poured out.

Before long, brilliant constellations rose in the surrounding Void. The Pact's Proxy exerted his power, caging this patch of starry sky so that the Universe could hear nothing spoken here.

Then he exhaled a long, long breath. His shoulders dropped as if an infinite burden had slid off. He lowered his head and said, half laughing at himself:

"In the beginning, I just wanted to find a sliver of possibility for this world.

That was right after the False Curtain Call. I told you about all that — you should remember."

Wei Mu of course remembered. Not only did he remember, but after recovering his true "self," he had also retrieved countless details from that False Curtain Call.

It turned out that Deceit had deduced Wei Mu's identity at that very moment — and, through that memory, conveyed to Wei Mu that in the game of searching for Folly's Authority, He had not lost.

But that wasn't the crux. The crux was that Wei Mu now recalled the pair of eyes that had flickered for an instant at the very end of that Change!

And that was precisely why he'd said Deceit had handed in the best exam paper His ability allowed.

But at this moment, Wei Mu said nothing. He simply watched Cheng Shi's eyes in silence.

He knew the Lord Yu Xi, who was dragging the world forward, was under too much pressure. He needed to talk. He needed to vent. Besides himself, perhaps no one in the entire Universe was suited for the role.

To put it coldly and practically, only a fellow traveler who was destined to fall with the old era — and whose bond with Fixed Destiny wasn't overly intimate — could fill this position.

Death, Silence, and the other pillars of the Fear Faction were not appropriate listeners for Fixed Destiny's grievances. Nor would Cheng Shi burden those who silently supported him with his own turmoil.

So an absolutely neutral, absolutely calm, absolutely rational puppet who "knew everything" about Folly became the ideal confidant.

Wei Mu was undeniably wise. He understood that in this confession, he could only listen — not comment — because he had accepted his identity as Folly's Authority and must therefore avoid contaminating Fixed Destiny with his own will.

And so, Folly once again walked toward Silence.

"I felt hopelessly lost about the road ahead. Nobody knew what Deceit was doing. He never told me. Time didn't have the time to deal with me either.

The uncertainty of the future made moving forward unbearable. Left with no other option, I could only figure things out on my own. And that was when a thought took root:

Conduct an experiment — an experiment to foresee the future!

And the inspiration actually came from you."

Cheng Shi lifted his head, expression complex. He seemed to be looking at Wei Mu — yet his slightly hollow gaze appeared to pass straight through the puppet and into the infinite depths of Void.

"Remember the experiment you left for Aph Ros in Dolgod — the one simulating the Stars Dagger?

Using a time knot as a foundation to stretch the length of time within the experiment, crossing time in that way to measure truth.

It struck me deeply. So I wanted to construct a similar experiment, except the content wouldn't be that little Far Dusk Town where only two deities played tug-of-war. It would be...

A real world where sixteen gods looked down from on high, bestowing a Faith Game upon mortals!

That's right. I wanted to transplant everything before me into an experiment. Simulate the crisis I was facing. Let the me inside the experiment exhaust every possibility I didn't have time to pursue.

I'd even worked out the experimental plan:

The Ritual of Truth was still in my hands. Given enough raw materials, I could use it to reconstruct the current world — and I had already obtained 'enough' materials.

Memory had been succeeded by the Dragon King. I would simply have him extract my memories and anchor them as the world's backdrop. Then the Cheng Shi inside the experiment would face the same crisis I did.

After that, I'd only need to have my friends play the roles of the gods who still existed. They were close enough to Them — some had already become Them — so they could portray Them convincingly, giving the experimental me vague, uncertain guidance.

That would be sufficient, because the guidance I'd received was never clear in the first place.

Then I could stand outside the Experiment Ground, stretch time as far as possible, and observe — over and over — how another me searched for his future.

I know that for the Cheng Shi inside the experiment, this is cruel. But I had no other way.

I had no time. The world had no time.

I would reconstruct that world countless times, awakening him again and again after each failure. His struggle would be my struggle. His defiance would be my defiance.

I wanted to foresee the so-called future in this way..."

By now, Cheng Shi's voice had gone hoarse. The smile had faded entirely from Wei Mu's face.

Cheng Shi stumbled backward a few steps, and the self-deprecating grin on his face stretched wider and wider.

He laughed and wept at the same time:

"Funny, isn't it? This experiment to foresee the future hasn't even started yet — and yet I feel like I've already seen the future.

When I returned from the Real Universe for the third time, when Deceit hurled me into that terrifying spacetime storm, when I watched that pitiless Creator obliterate yet another world — I kept asking myself: who would be so callous toward the living beings inside an experiment? Why was He so desperate to spawn world after world after world...?

Countless questions hounded me. Countless doubts dragged at me. Lost and bewildered, I could only exhaust every faculty I had trying to understand.

And in that instant, I suddenly thought of myself.

In that future-foreseeing experiment I was about to launch, my treatment of the Cheng Shi inside the experiment... was just as heartless. Just as desperate.

In that moment, an enormous terror swallowed me whole."

...

Chapter 1418: Glimpsing the Past

"The terror came so savagely that every fear I'd ever felt in this absurd game, combined, paled against it.

I often asked myself: why me?

And now, I seem to have found the answer.

Ha.

Sometimes, there's only the thinnest paper screen between you and the truth. The instant you poke through it, you discover the truth was always this simple — always right beside you, unseen.

I saw it. And so I began revising my experimental design.

Since the time left to me was limited, there was no reason to wait for the Cheng Shi inside a single experiment to fail before resetting the whole thing. I could build more — identical experiments, running in parallel instead of in series, accelerating the exhaustive search!

I had enough raw materials to support this. And those materials wouldn't simply be consumed. Failed experiments could be recycled, their materials becoming the seedbed for the next round...

I didn't need to confine the experiment's temporal backdrop so narrowly either. Perhaps pushing the timeline further back — to the arrival of the Faith Game or even the dawn of the Void era — would generate changes that could alter the experiment's evolutionary trajectory.

After all, as the Experiment Master, I was only gathering inspiration from these experiments. And since it was inspiration I sought, the possibilities should be infinite.

But Change couldn't be unchecked either. My ultimate goal remained finding a road to the future. If every answer lay behind me, the experiment would have lost its purpose.

So experiments that strayed down dead ends should be accelerated toward collapse. Experiments that pointed toward Fixed Destiny's goal deserved protection.

And to protect the experiments that might yield results, I had to ensure the experimental environment was free of the slightest interference. Any variable — internal or external — that threatened to disrupt the experiment would be eliminated, until I obtained the answer I was looking for...

Sound familiar?

Do those words ring familiar?

Perhaps not to you. But they're devastatingly familiar to me.

Virtually everything I'd experienced and witnessed was mirrored in the experimental steps I just described. Granted, it was my experiences that guided me to this design. But when there are enough horrifying coincidences, I couldn't help but grapple with a question that filled me with dread:

Was Fixed Destiny in the process of becoming 'Origin'... or had Fixed Destiny always been Origin?!"

Cheng Shi snapped his head up. Bloodshot eyes stared straight at Wei Mu. He wanted to find an answer on the puppet's face — and feared finding it.

Wei Mu remained silent. He handled it perfectly: no affirmation, no denial, no comfort, no encouragement.

In that instant, the light left the puppet's eyes. He looked like a true puppet, staring blankly at Cheng Shi — as though his soul had departed his body and wandered far away.

Cheng Shi was trembling from head to toe. Fighting to suppress the shaking, his voice raw, he continued:

"The resemblance is too perfect. Truly too perfect.

The moment I stopped 'pitying' the Cheng Shi inside the experiment for the sake of my own future, I realized I had, in a sense, already drawn close to Him.

Approach and distance. Harmony and unity.

Every time I thought I understood what Time had told me, reality showed me that the truth He meant went far, far deeper.

So what am I doing...

Endlessly fabricating new experiments, endlessly distorting the present's time, using my own heartlessness and the ruin of countless lives to chase an answer that will never come?!

And yet I've already guessed the answer."

Cheng Shi let his arms fall limp. A wretched laugh escaped him. "Folly truly was the Universe's supreme intellect. He was right. This world never had an answer.

I thought I could foresee the future. Now it feels as though I've glimpsed the past instead.

But that isn't even the most helpless part. What leaves me powerless is that Deceit may have guessed everything long ago.

He knew far more than I did, in far greater detail. Countless pieces of evidence pointed to the strong probability that Origin was Fixed Destiny's archetype. Even if He'd never entertained the hypothesis before, after the Audience Meeting...

It was at the Audience Meeting that the idea of the experiment first occurred to me.

He peered into my heart with the truth of Fate. He would have connected every dot — and realized that the so-called Fixed Destiny was nothing more than the ruthlessness Origin had shed in order to find a way out.

Then how would He see me? How would the Fear Faction see me? How would the friends who walked beside me, who still looked to the future with hope — how would they see me?!

How am I supposed to tell them that I, Cheng Shi, might very well be the Origin they despise!

That I am the one who made all of this with my own hands!

All of it is my fault!

Every fall, every departure — because of me!

How do I tell them?!

How do I say it..."

Cheng Shi broke down into sobs. Even as the Pact's Proxy — the most powerful voice in the Universe — in this moment he was as helpless as a child.

Wei Mu should have stayed silent. But faced with this, even someone whose very foundation was wisdom and reason was moved.

He knew he had to say something — pull the Universe's Fixed Destiny back from the brink of destruction. Otherwise, if the collapse continued unchecked, everyone's efforts in this era would turn to dust.

They would become one of the Creator's experiments that had strayed off course — even though the experiment was one step from its conclusion.

The Universe might have no answer. But the beings living beneath it did.

A cry hurled from within an inescapable cage — that was the most resolute answer they could give.

The little puppet drew close to Cheng Shi, reached out a wooden arm, and patted him on the head with a smile:

"What comes next will be a foolish act.

Folly hated foolish acts. But I am not Folly.

I can't advise you on your situation. Let me talk about myself instead.

If the world learned the truth about Folly's Authority, Wei Mu's halo would probably shatter before their eyes.

They'd think the only reason Wei Mu climbed this high was by riding on Folly's Authority — not through mortal wisdom.

To which...

I have no objection.

I cannot choose whether I am Folly's Authority. I can only say that before I knew the truth, every hypothesis, every deduction, every decision I made came from my own heart.

That has nothing to do with whether I am Folly's Authority. It's simply because I am Wei Mu.

Granted, I cannot deny that Folly's Authority may have influenced me in every way and given me countless advantages without my knowing. But what I want to say is this:

To use unknowingly is no sin. To know and refuse to use — that is the foolish act.

The identity of Folly's Authority may be my 'stain.' But it is equally my 'weapon.'

Making full use of every tool at your disposal — that is true wisdom.

Without all of this, at the very least, today, here, I would not be meeting a Lord Yu Xi who is brimming with feeling for this world.

Those feelings may have few anchors — but they are firm."

The puppet withdrew his hand and stepped back, a trace of wistfulness crossing his features:

"Courage will never be hidden by confusion. Because confusion is fleeting, and courage is eternal.

Deceit sheltered you well. Unfortunately... He wasn't very kind to Himself."

"..."

The words hit Cheng Shi like a physical blow. He trembled violently and clenched his fists until they turned white.

'Right. If the Universe has no answer, then what answer did Deceit go to the Real Universe to find?'

Wei Mu wasn't sure whether Cheng Shi grasped his meaning, but he knew the man needed a moment to compose himself. So he fell silent once more.

Cheng Shi said nothing for a long time, gasping for breath. After a while, the trembling gradually steadied.

He clenched both fists and stood upright again. A flash of resolve crossed his eyes. Looking at the little puppet before him, his face an unknowable mix of emotions, he said:

"I'm sorry..."

Wei Mu smiled.

'Perhaps this is Fixed Destiny's greatest charm — he can bind anything and anyone to walk alongside him.'

'But what a pity. There's no place for me on the road ahead.'

"You don't need to apologize to me. A curtain has always been the screen that separates the stage from the audience — not one of the actors on it.

When needed, the curtain falls. When not needed, the curtain rises.

Now I have committed a foolish act, and I must face the same charge He did.

Farewell, Lord Yu Xi.

Don't feel sorrow at my departure. I will be waiting in another world — for your answer."

With that, the little puppet closed his eyes. His mechanical body stiffened in an instant — and at the very same moment, a pale-white radiance drifted up from the position of the puppet's heart, floating gently toward Cheng Shi and hovering above his head.

Folly's Authority had returned.

And yet, within the Authority... there was still no answer.

...

Chapter 1419: Deceived Again

A Wise Man had no need for emotion. Yet a Wise Man had emotion all the same.

Though Wei Mu had never spoken of it, he was by no means the kind of person who severed himself from the world and sneered at all life from on high.

Whether it was Jie Shu, Sun Miao, Galusha, or any other Folly follower — all of them bore traces of Folly's nature, and in certain situations still looked down upon the foolishness around them.

Yet Wei Mu never had. His contempt seemed reserved for Folly alone.

That also meant he didn't hate this "foolish" world.

When he praised Cheng Shi's deep affection for the world, the subtext was that he admired such feelings — and perhaps harbored something similar himself.

Perhaps it was because Folly's act of hiding His Authority had turned Wei Mu into one of the world's living beings, granting him a "life" wholly different from an Authority's existence. Or perhaps he, too, had poured blood and effort into searching for the world's truth and future, and the sunk cost had crystallized into a peculiar attachment. There could be many reasons. But with Wei Mu's departure, none would ever be known.

The Wise Man understood efficiency best, and so he left without hesitation.

But precisely because he understood efficiency too well, certain truths still being concealed were stripped bare before Cheng Shi's eyes.

Deceit!

Was He truly searching for an answer?

If this was the Creator's experiment as Cheng Shi suspected, then the true answer absolutely could not lie within the Real Universe — because Variables appearing there should be eliminated, lest they contaminate other experiments.

So His departure was most likely a pretext. And He...

No — Cheng Shi had clearly seen Him in the Real Universe. Those unforgettable cosmical eyes: no star-point of Origin remained in them, only the spiraling vortex of Deceit. That could not possibly have been fake!

'I'm overthinking.'

'There's still a chance.'

"..."

Though he was thinking it, Cheng Shi's face held not a trace of joy or hope.

'My Benefactor, I was never able to learn Your talent for self-deception.'

No matter how many excuses he fashioned, here and now, he couldn't fool himself.

The Deceit he'd encountered in the Real Universe was definitely real. But that didn't mean He belonged to this world.

In an Experiment Ground containing countless slice universes, the existence of similar — even identical — samples was hardly surprising. So even if those eyes held no star-point, Cheng Shi couldn't confirm that the figure was his Benefactor.

Moreover, Deceit had previously ventured into the Real Universe while still carrying Origin's power. Cheng Shi could well imagine that a star-eyed Benefactor would never roam so brazenly beneath the Creator's gaze carrying the Creator's own energy. The most likely approach was to voluntarily conceal those star-points and traverse the Real Universe discreetly.

And that opened an even more terrifying possibility: which world, which timeline's Deceit had he encountered?!

Cheng Shi was filled with regret. He felt he should have thought of all this far sooner. But he had longed so desperately to see the Benefactor in the Real Universe that the moment he ran into Deceit, the surge of excitement, joy, and overwhelming relief had swept away every doubt.

Only when he began questioning himself, questioning the experiment, questioning Origin... did these possibilities finally surface. And even then, he had refused to believe, refused to dare believe, silently deceiving himself.

And now, Wei Mu had shattered everything with a single sentence: "Deceit sheltered you well. Unfortunately... He wasn't very kind to Himself."

Ha.

Why?

Deceived again...

'How frustrating — why am I always the one being deceived?'

'I am Your follower. The sole walker of Void. The Clown the Fear Faction pushed to center stage. The Fixed Destiny who followed Your every stride, nervous and uncertain but never once falling behind.'

'I trusted You so completely. And yet You keep deceiving me.'

'Is a Clown simply fated to be fooled?'

'Heh. I, Cheng Shi, truly am a clown.'

Cheng Shi clenched his fists. He gritted his teeth, swallowing back every word in his mouth and every drop of bitterness in his eyes.

'The dream must end now.'

He smiled and wiped away the last tear from the corner of his eye.

The Clown had lost his shelter. From here on, it was the Clown's turn to shelter the world.

The Fear Faction's will. Void's dying wish. Deceit's grand plan. The world's future. All of it was in Cheng Shi's hands now.

His expression hardened. He drew out his mask and a cascade of dice, flinging them skyward. The mask hung suspended overhead. The dice rained down like a shower.

The scene was a mirror image of a certain figure behind the curtain, surveying innumerable worlds. Watching the ceaselessly spinning dice, Cheng Shi fixed his gaze and sank into thought.

He needed to make a conjecture — a conjecture about the world's future!

In this moment, Cheng Shi stepped into his own role — no, he should say he stepped into Origin's!

Assume the fear he least wanted to face was true. The world was the experiment. The experiment was the world. Then a conclusion naturally followed:

Origin was Fixed Destiny. Fixed Destiny was Origin.

He and Him were, if not identical, at least infinitely similar — their pasts all but carbon copies. Otherwise, Cheng Shi would never have arrived here.

Then the question arose:

He had already thought of everything — glimpsed the past from the present. So if he knew the world had no answer, knew the experiment could only be an endless continuation of suffering, why had the other him launched this experiment in the first place?!

The experiment's original intent may have disregarded the Cheng Shi inside it's feelings. But once one realized all of this, would one truly continue so heartlessly?

The suffering of countless Cheng Shis was still vivid in his memory. What conviction could possibly drive Him to replay those agonies?

Was it a must? Or was it a had no choice?

Or was the so-called answer simply the launching of the next experiment — continuing the cycle of pain?

Bear in mind: even if Deceit was gone, He would never abandon this world or discard His Will so carelessly. So what was the contingency He'd left for the world — or rather, for himself?

Wei Mu had also said that Folly simply didn't consider Deceit's exam paper to be the true answer. But neither Folly nor Wei Mu had ever denied that Deceit had found an answer!

The world had to have an answer. And it had to have a future. What Cheng Shi needed to do now was find that answer from everything Deceit had left behind — before the era's curtain fell!

Though he had climbed to the pinnacle of divine power, countless mysteries remained unsolved:

Why did Deceit die? What was hidden at the bottom of Corruption's Sea of Desire?!

Where had His Authority gone? Where had Fate's Authority gone? Could there be clues to the future among them?

Why had the Flame of Hope vanished? Was it connected to Deceit's contingency?

The Nose of Verification had never been found. Could the memory inside the Collection Hall be a hint pointing to the final answer?

Of the only three old gods remaining in the Fear Faction — had Death and Silence known Deceit's truth all along?

Folly had said the play in which the Void collapsed had supporting roles. Were those two not his supporting roles at all — but Folly's?

And then there was Time. He still refused to see Cheng Shi. Could whatever kept Him so busy be the answer Cheng Shi was hoping for?

"..."

A thousand threads, a million knots.

'Eat one bite at a time. Walk one step at a time.'

Cheng Shi decided to start with the easiest lead.

Time!

Although Time had no time and no longer granted audiences, at the very least, the current Cheng Shi could summon Time at will.

So — first, a meeting with Time. Get the first clue from Him.

...

Chapter 1420: I Will Leave — When You Need Me

Cheng Shi arrived at the world's edge.

Time often came here to deduce the world's trajectories and ceaselessly synchronize the "experimental time" with the Real Universe.

On the way, Cheng Shi's mind kept replaying everything Time had ever said to him. He was so lost in thought that by the time he looked up, he realized there was indeed a figure in this stretch of Void — but it was decidedly not Time. It was...

"Doctor?!"

Cheng Shi was startled. "What are you doing here?"

That's right — the figure was Wang Weijin!

He had his back to Cheng Shi, his frame noticeably tense. When he heard Cheng Shi's voice, he turned slowly. A remnant of shock still clung to his face, his entire body stiff as a board.

He seemed to be holding something in his hands. As he turned, he instinctively hid it behind his back. Seeing this, Cheng Shi's heart lurched:

"What happened? Did you come for an audience with Time? Where is He?"

The Doctor took a deep breath and shook his head.

"He..."

The Doctor hadn't even begun to explain. But inside Cheng Shi's skull, a detonation wiped everything to white.

His five senses went haywire. He lost the image before his eyes. His hearing dissolved into static. The Doctor's voice became unreachable. In that moment, only a single sentence remained in his mind:

"I will leave — when you need me."

Cheng Shi's body shuddered. Even though he knew this moment was inevitable — even though he knew every "sacrifice" by the Fear Faction was for this world's sake — when it actually happened, the sensation was indistinguishable from betrayal.

They would all leave him in the end.

Without even a word of warning.

"He... left?" Cheng Shi fought down his grief. His voice was leaden.

The Doctor nodded. Face grave, he brought forward the hand he'd been hiding. In his palm lay something Cheng Shi would never have dreamed of.

"This is...?"

"A pointer." The Doctor held up the extraordinarily ordinary pointer, his expression complex, and said, "It looks more like an hour hand — a clock hand.

I don't know what it signifies. But I know it was never meant for me. This is for you.

Praise be to Yu Xi."

"..."

'An hour hand?'

'Time's parting gift to me... is a clock hand?'

'At this very hour — the moment I became the Pact's Proxy with near-absolute dominion over the Universe — He finally acknowledged that fictitious title I once assumed? Lord Hour Hand?'

For a moment, Cheng Shi was dumbfounded. A flicker of absurdity scattered his grief. He was silent for a beat, then asked again:

"Where did He go?"

"I don't know. Praise be to Yu Xi."

"...What exactly happened? And how did you end up here, Doctor?"

Cheng Shi was intensely curious. By all reason, the Doctor had absolutely no relationship with Time — their only connection was that the Doctor frequently employed Time's power in his experiments. But was that enough for Time to specifically summon him before departing?

Enough to give this farewell's sole opportunity to the Doctor rather than to Cheng Shi, the man upon whom the Universe's future depended?

No — that couldn't be right. Time had silently guarded the world for countless ages. He would never waste effort at the most critical juncture. The Doctor's presence here had to carry profound significance — even a clue pointing to that answer.

With that thought, Cheng Shi's gaze grew solemn.

"Tell me everything you just experienced. Every last word, Doctor. This is critical."

As the number-one player on the Truth ladder and the apex of analytical minds — even if not quite on Wei Mu's level — Wang Weijin was the pinnacle representative of intelligence-type players in the Faith

Game. He naturally understood that everything he'd experienced was extraordinary. So, with utmost gravity, he recounted what he had witnessed — including what he had been doing before.

"Not long ago, I was in my laboratory replicating Selius's Divinity Germination Experiment. You once said that faith is the only thread for deciphering the current state of divine power, so I wanted to experience firsthand the genesis of new divinity that Selius had once succeeded at.

That was when Time summoned me. No warning. No explanation.

Those eyes — as deep as black holes — opened directly above my head. He looked at me and said:

'Watch me. Do not blink.'

I was stunned, baffled. But I did as He asked, because I knew Time was not an enemy of Yu Xi. Praise be to Yu Xi.

And so we began a long, unbroken stare. For someone accustomed to hours of unblinking observation during experiments, the requirement wasn't onerous. Besides, I'd never had the chance to study a deity from this close. I became absorbed, instinctively analyzing every piece of 'divine information' hidden within those eyes.

I had always assumed a deity's eyes were simply a manifestation of will — an abstract expression. I was wrong. I discovered that Time's eyes were physical entities. They literally were a pair of black holes!

Black holes should be unobservable. But the arcs of distorted, leaping time around those eyes painted a picture of the black hole's wonder. This wasn't a traditional ultra-dense stellar body — it was more like a ceaselessly folded and compressed collection of shattered time.

If I were to describe it in Death's fashion, I'd be inclined to call it a time graveyard.

Academic circles have long held the view that a black hole's ultimate fate is the infinitely compressed singularity. But from my observation of Time's eyes, I discovered something within those black holes: temporal rifts, flickering in and out of visibility, impossible to ignore.

Yes — the black hole seemed to have cracked. Or, to put it in terms more fitting for the game's logic: the infinite number of time 'corpses' had caused the time graveyard to overflow, forcing the time that should have been buried to twist in an eruption-like manner. The explosive force even gave 'dead' time a hair's-breadth, logic-defying possibility of resurrection — captured by the observer in the instant it attempted to escape, manifesting as temporal rifts.

This 'truth' I had never once encountered drew me in completely. I threw myself into it body and soul, wanting to explore more of Time's essence.

Praise be to Yu Xi, for granting me such a wondrous opportunity.

But it was precisely then that I forgot His instruction. I blinked.

The next second...

He vanished.

All that remained in the Void were violent ripples of spacetime, right there—"

The Doctor pointed behind him. In the instant he turned to look, a gleam flickered in his eyes. "Just like the time you vanished from the Mockery and Jeering.

I suspect He breached the spacetime barrier and departed for the Real Universe. But as for the meaning of everything Time did, I still have no clue. Including this hour hand.

From a Truth perspective, the most likely interpretation is that He was trying to convey some principle through the temporal escape inside His eyes. But there was too little time. I haven't been able to work it out yet.

Do you have any leads?

Praise be to Yu Xi."

"..."

'I had some, actually. Then you rattled on and on, and now they're gone.'

Cheng Shi's solemn expression shifted. He had the nagging feeling the Doctor had over-complicated something, yet he couldn't dismiss the Doctor's analysis — after all, with Wei Mu gone, Wang Weijin now occupied the very top of the intelligence hierarchy among players.

He frowned slightly and asked: "You said you were replicating Selius's experiment before coming here. Any results?"

The Doctor shook his head:

"None. Self-affirmed faith is too feeble. It requires massive emotional stimulation, and right now the devotion in my heart..."

He trailed off, glancing at Cheng Shi with a peculiar expression. "...makes it difficult to sustain peak emotional intensity for extended periods.

In deeper experiments, devotion helps me focus and stay calm. But for this type of experiment, devotion actually becomes a hindrance.

Still, it wasn't entirely fruitless. I found more mutations in the slices trending toward 0221's will. Coincidentally, this time the mutation was also in Experimental Subject 0221.

It seems they've never given up expressing their own will.

But that's all in the past. I have ways to handle it. Praise be to Yu Xi."

"..."

Cheng Shi closed his eyes.

'Please stop praising. My head hurts.'

...