

The Gods 1421

Chapter 1421: No One Is More Suited Than Me

Could the Doctor's experiment be related to Time's "last words"?

Cheng Shi found it impossible to judge.

At this point, everyone in the Fear Faction was doing their utmost to avoid contaminating Fixed Destiny's will. They seemed intent on letting Cheng Shi walk the final stretch alone.

Cheng Shi, too, wanted to hold his fate in his own hands. The problem was that the myriad clues They'd left behind still shunted him onto a road he couldn't refuse. So much so that he had no way of telling whether everything that came next was the inertia of the Fear Faction's residual will dragging him along — or genuine rebellion born from his own heart.

'Perhaps it doesn't matter. I'm still resisting, and that's enough.'

Even if the horror story proved true — even if so-called Origin was nothing more than another version of himself, backed into a corner — at least in this moment, Cheng Shi had figured out how to search for a future.

He had intended to discuss it with Time. But Time... had no more time.

Seeing Cheng Shi sink into thought, the Doctor didn't disturb him. He simply stood there in silence, conflicted expressions chasing one another across his face.

The silence was shattered abruptly. Cheng Shi snapped his head up, startling the Doctor — but before the Doctor could decide whether to speak, Cheng Shi's expression shifted:

"Not good!"

He vanished in an instant, leaving the bewildered Doctor standing alone.

A second later, the Doctor stared at the spot where Cheng Shi's figure had disappeared. His face was a knot of complicated relief.

The good news: perhaps because his emotions had been too volatile, Yu Xi had failed to notice the anomaly in this stretch of Void.

The bad news: his devotion to Yu Xi had been desecrated. Even if there were reasons, it had shattered the equilibrium of faith in his heart, pushing the normally composed Yu Xi follower toward a feverish, almost warped zeal.

Wang Weijin's eyes were bloodshot. He watched the faintly stirring Void behind him, his expression in rapid flux.

He was struggling. He was asking himself whether he could be the one brave enough.

The direction the world was heading — new gods replacing old — was no longer a secret among the Jokers. Zhen Xin, the Dragon King, and others were already well down that path. By rights, as the number-one player on Truth's ladder, with Truth long since fallen, he was the overwhelming favorite to inherit Truth's Divine Throne. But now...

Two roads lay before him:

Either carry his devotion to Yu Xi and hurl this enormous problem outward, or find another "lucky soul" to handle it. But he couldn't decide on a candidate.

And compared to relying on others, he was far more inclined to handle it himself — because he feared someone else's cowardice might plunge Yu Xi and the world into crisis.

The trouble was, if he got tangled up in this, would anyone be left to inherit Truth's position?

Wei Zhi was one option. The question was whether his proximity to Fixed Destiny would earn Yu Xi's approval.

While he was mulling it over, another ripple spread through the Void. Thinking Cheng Shi had returned, the Doctor spun around, hastily acting as though nothing had happened.

But the figures who stepped out of the Void this time weren't Cheng Shi. They were Zhen Xin and Hong Lin!

The two new gods appeared before him side by side. The Doctor's expression flickered; he forced himself to look composed:

"What brings you here... Praise be to Yu Xi."

"?" Hong Lin, who hadn't seen the Doctor in a while, eyed him quizzically. "What kind of quirk is this? Are you cosplaying a Cheng Shi cultist?"

"Pfft..."

Zhen Xin couldn't hold back a laugh and offered Hong Lin a brief explanation. Hong Lin was stunned: "You can actually do that?"

"Why not?"

A perfect solution that integrates devout faith, focused efficiency, and emotional equilibrium all in one. You'd probably only see it in a Truth follower like the Doctor."

Zhen Xin smiled and turned to the Doctor. Noticing his evasive gaze, a glint of suspicion flickered in her eyes — but she didn't press him. Instead, she said lightly: "Enough about that. Let's talk about something else.

Doctor, we came to give you a heads-up. A certain someone is too busy to cover every base. We can't have you going into your succession confused.

We've already reclaimed Truth's voting rights — or rather, that hardly matters anymore. Cheng Shi has become the Pact's new Proxy; everyone's Divine Throne successions are inevitable.

Truth's voting rights are currently in Hong Lin's hands. Out of respect for a comrade, she insisted on coming to tell you in person before you inherit the Throne.

We may not get many chances to attend future Assemblies, or to cast votes, but she still wants you to know — before she casts Truth's ballot, she'll consult your opinion. Though I suspect most of the time it'll just follow Cheng Shi's lead anyway..."

Even Zhen Xin herself laughed at that.

Hong Lin wasn't the least bit embarrassed. She grinned broadly: "That's exactly right."

But in truth, Hong Lin's actual thoughts weren't so simple.

She could see Cheng Shi's confusion and wanted desperately to help. She knew, however, that strategizing wasn't her strength. So she'd settled on a different idea: during the "downtime" when Cheng Shi didn't need them, she would gather everyone together to brainstorm for the world's sake and lighten Fixed Destiny's burden.

The Jokers and the Destined Ones were all acquaintances. At this point there was no reason to deliberate separately. However those two organizations had been founded, ultimately they all stood together now.

And it wasn't just those two groups. Hong Lin's plan was to pull every sharp mind into one circle — including but not limited to the Doctor, Wei Mu, Sun Miao, and more. But since the Jokers were "closer," she'd asked Zhen Xin to forge the first connection.

What she hadn't expected was to stumble upon the Doctor's strange behavior the moment they arrived.

Zhen Xin — a trickster as sharp as they came, now wielding Chaos's Authority — spotted the anomaly in this stretch of Void at a single glance. She waited with a knowing half-smile, expecting the Doctor to give her an explanation.

Wang Weijin, realizing he couldn't hide it from her, heaved a deep breath:

"I can tell you. But he must not hear it."

Who "he" referred to needed no guessing.

The instant the words left his mouth, both Zhen Xin's and Hong Lin's expressions changed. The three exchanged glances. Under the Doctor's solemn, confirming nod, a violent surge of Chaos power swept over the area, shrouding it completely.

Prosperity's power seized every gap, sealing this patch of Void off entirely.

"What happened?" Zhen Xin's eyes were grave.

The Doctor gritted his teeth and withdrew the Eye No One he had been projecting across the entire stretch of Void.

And as the vast black curtain was torn away, an indescribably brilliant, seven-hued divine radiance sat quietly, flooding into both women's eyes.

"!!!!"

"What is this?!"

Feeling the overwhelming power radiating from it, both Zhen Xin and Hong Lin turned pale with fright.

"Origin's power."

The Doctor's expression was complex. "The second thing Time left behind before He departed.

He said it must never be touched by Cheng Shi. And it must never remain in this starry sky.

Cheng Shi had just left before you arrived. He didn't notice it. I was planning to embrace it with my own body and carry it away..."

Before he could finish, Zhen Xin cut him off: "Absolutely not. Truth's Divine Throne is vacant. No one can inherit it but you."

"Wei Zhi—"

"It's complicated..." Zhen Xin's face tightened. "There's a strong chance Wei Mu is Folly's Authority. He can't inherit Folly's Divine Throne. And after discussions between Qin Xin and me, Vice President Sun has also disappeared. That means Wei Zhi is most likely the candidate for Folly's Throne — because the true soul inside his skin is actually the Folly follower Galusha!"

The Doctor blinked, overwhelmed. There was too much shocking news at once; for a moment, he didn't know how to react.

'Wei Mu is Folly's Authority? Actually... that tracks.'

"But how did you learn that Wei Zhi is Galusha?"

"The Life Sage, Hu Xuan." Zhen Xin nodded with absolute certainty. "She told me. Wei Zhi is Galusha."

The Truth-following Doctor would normally have dug deeper, but the instant he heard the name "Hu Xuan," he understood.

'A reward for helping with the child, presumably?'

"I see. But that means—"

Their exchange continued, but Hong Lin suddenly stepped forward, raised a hand to cut them off, and declared with steely resolve: "I'll do it!"

"!!??"

"Absolutely not!" Zhen Xin refused without a heartbeat's hesitation.

But this time, Hong Lin's reasoning was razor-sharp:

"There's nothing 'not' about it. I'm the most suited person.

Power this terrifying — even the slightest leak would be a world-ending catastrophe. We've fought too hard to get here. We can't afford another mistake.

If I hand it to someone else, I won't be able to rest easy."

Zhen Xin's face shifted: "But you're Prosperity—"

Hong Lin flashed a brilliant smile:

"Prosperity, so what? I am Prosperity — but I can also be an old god.

After all, I'm not the only Prosperity candidate drawing near Fixed Destiny.

Fate works in mysterious ways. I knew my choice was right. Having that little fox in the Destined Ones was my blessing — and my confidence.

No one is more suited to do this than me!

And while I'm at it — with this power — I'd like to go ask that Creator a question. Ask Him what gives Him the right to be so heartless toward this world!"

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Chapter 1422: Death Embraced Death

Meanwhile — the Fishbone Hall.

When Cheng Shi realized that Time had truly left the world just like that, his first thought wasn't the clues Time had left behind. It was: where were the rest of the Fear Faction?

He admitted that in that moment, he had genuinely panicked. He was terrified that the Boss would do the same thing as Time — quietly set down His Divine Throne and embrace death once and for all.

Thankfully, Death had not been that "heartless."

But the colossal skull seated upon the Divine Throne delivered another piece of devastating news:

Silence had departed alongside Time. They had gone to the Real Universe together.

"He... seemed... to have found... a new... direction... and was... unusually... joyful."

"!!!"

'A new direction? Meaning what?'

'Wandering through the Real Universe — like that enormous Leaking World Silent Puppet "corpse" out there?'

Cheng Shi was anything but joyful at the news. The resolve in his eyes wavered to its breaking point. He stared at the Boss, blank and lost. Not a trace of a smile could be summoned.

"Why?"

My lord, I may have taken the Fear Faction's voting rights, but I never intended to 'wipe out' the Faction entirely.

I truly want to find a road to the future where every member of the Fear Faction can see hope. I even have a direction already. But the Faction...

Does the new world truly require the fall of every old god?!"

The green flame in the massive skull's eye sockets had gone out. Those hollow eyes watched the staff inside the hall, and a faint sigh escaped.

He knew Cheng Shi understood perfectly well. He simply refused to accept it.

"I... know... your heart. But... old gods... do not fall... how can... new gods... be... legitimized.

I... have never... told you... of the future... to come. But... given... your... keen mind... I imagine... you have... long known... Deceit's... intent.

Cheng... Shi.

Your eyes... should be... on the road... ahead. Not... on us... old gods.

If... fear's... will... prevails in the end... who says... a fall... cannot be... the start... of a new chapter..."

Fine words. But if Cheng Shi truly didn't care about the fall of those around him — mortal or divine — he never would have passed the flame with his own body after the False Curtain Call, and he never could have pushed everyone this far.

Hearing Death's words, Cheng Shi fell silent.

The weight of the Fear Faction had finally, completely, come to rest on his shoulders alone.

"Are You leaving too?"

The massive skull's jaw parted. A long sigh. No response.

Cheng Shi nodded. Kept nodding. Nodded frantically — the amplitude growing wider and wider, fists clenching tighter and tighter.

"Fine. I don't blame You. I have no standing to argue. On the contrary — for the sake of this world, I should thank You. Thank You for everything You've contributed to whatever future may lie ahead.

Thank You for Your protection.

Thank You for this farewell...

I understand. I will carry the Fear Faction's will forward, and keep walking, until I reach that far shore where no Creator exists.

You may leave whenever You wish. No need to inform me."

Cheng Shi's voice grew smaller and smaller — the final sentence perhaps audible only to himself. Yet when he had finished, he lifted his head sharply to face the immense skull on the throne. Fighting to keep the tremor out of his voice, he asked, word by word:

"But before that — You must tell me: where is the Benefactor's Authority?!"

In truth, the question was moot. As the Pact's Proxy, Cheng Shi could find Deceit's Authority by the simplest of means. He also knew Deceit could never have taken the Authority out of the Universe. Yet he asked it anyway.

What he wanted wasn't the location of the Authority. It was an answer — a confirmation of his worst guess about Deceit's fate.

Had Deceit... truly fallen?!

The massive skull said nothing. He gazed at the "employee" before Him — begging for a mercy — and though His heart ached in every way, He still disgorged from His mouth several strands of "marrow inverted to bone, bone inverted to marrow" — Deceit's Authority!

That's right. Deceit's Authority had been inside Death all along!

"!!!!!"

Seeing this, Cheng Shi finally snuffed out the last flicker of fantasy in his heart.

"He... is gone.

After... the Void... collapsed... before you... requested... an audience... Justice... brought me... His... Final Oracle.

He... entrusted... everything... to me... temporarily... until you... inherited the Pact... and held... sway over... the Universe.

This was... His deal... with Justice... and the reason... Justice... was willing... to pass... the Proxy... to you.

Deceit... would not die... and Justice... dared not... depart.

I... did not... deceive... you... on purpose. He... urged... me... repeatedly... not to... let you... learn... everything.

While He... existed... you still had... motivation. But... had you... learned... of His fall... too early...p

Fear's will... would have... been unable... to march on.

Despair... can be... a weapon. But only... if a flame... is guiding... the way... ahead.

He... became... that flame.

Sadly... flames... are fleeting. The remaining... road... you must... walk... in the dark.

Cheng... Shi. Be... yourself."

"..."

The Boss had lied to him!

He had known everything, and He had still lied.

Not that Cheng Shi blamed himself for failing to see through it. Death's performance had been flawless — and with Deceit's Authority right in His hands, how could He not fool him?

And then there was Folly — that infuriating Wise Man who had seen through everything — who had also lied.

They had used one layer of despair to pave the way for the next, and in doing so, shoved the one person who should have drowned in despair to exactly this point.

'Final Oracle!'

'What a Final Oracle!'

'My Benefactor — these are the last words You left in this world, and You couldn't be bothered to say anything to Your follower?'

'Drop the load and dump it on the Clown. What is the Clown supposed to do?'

'The Clown is helpless too.'

He had ideas, clearly. But ideas he could share with no one — not even the Boss, who had treated him better than anyone. He didn't dare voice his conjecture.

He was afraid!

Afraid that the instant he gave the answer, the Boss — the last of the Fear Faction — would choose to embrace death on the spot, as a declaration of defiance against Origin.

Cheng Shi didn't fear death. He only feared the Fear Faction's will being severed because of it. Feared this world losing its future forever.

Perhaps Death wouldn't actually do that. But Cheng Shi refused to gamble even the smallest fraction.

One wrong step, no more smiles. The smiles he carried now were no longer his own — they belonged to every person who had fallen and every person who had fought for this cause.

Cheng Shi closed his eyes and turned to leave. But behind him, the Boss's voice reached him once more.

"His Final Oracle... contained... one more... message... for me... to relay... to you.

He... said:

The Screenwriter's... script... is finished. How... it's performed... is the Clown's... business.

No matter... what... He... will cheer... for the Clown.

But only... if... the Clown... doesn't cry."

"..."

Cheng Shi's stride faltered. His head hung low, his expression hidden. He beckoned — and Deceit's Authority returned to his hand. He drew out a wisp and held it, as though gripping a pen that had written the fate of the Universe.

"My lord — were those His words, or Yours?"

The massive skull fell silent. No answer.

"I see.

One last question: where is Fate's Authority?"

"Not... in my... keeping."

"Very well. Your part in this performance is wrapped up, my lord. I'll take over the screenwriting from here.

I will give the era, the Universe, and this world an answer."

With that, Cheng Shi left without looking back.

Behind him, countless white bones erupted skyward, dissolving into a torrent, scattering into nothing.

In that moment, Death finally embraced death.

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Chapter 1423: The Significance of the Dyeing Container

It was hard to fathom. A year ago, sixteen deities had descended to bestow the Faith Game upon this world. Now only two remained.

Corruption and Birth.

The Sea of Desire was rife with anomalies; whether Corruption was truly Corruption was still up for debate.

Only Birth — the deity who had never concerned Herself with the Universe and cared solely for Her children — still gave anyone a sense that a "living god" existed.

But today, even that last flicker of "living god" presence had gone out.

Hu Xuan found Cheng Shi wandering alone through the Void, and the moment she appeared, she delivered a piece of "bad" news that was entirely expected — or rather, "birth" news.

"She has fallen. She left the Divine Throne to me.

I thought I'd feel some joy upon receiving it. But facing Her departure, I felt an unexpected pang of loss.

She was not a good mother. Her love for Her children was laced with devotion to Origin.

But at least She did love Her children. And She always protected them. I was that lucky child.

To express my gratitude and offer my devotion, I requested that She give me a child. She agreed. And so my mother and I gave birth to — me.

The person standing before you is Hu Xuan, is the Life Sage, and is the child of the Eternal Sun and Birth.

Her departure was utterly silent. No Void collapsing, no Birth energy flooding outward. Only the life marker boards on the Divine Pillar detached one by one, presented themselves before my eyes, and then silently shattered.

She left no Final Oracle. But She said you would complete Her unfinished Final Oracle for Her..."

"..."

'Another one.'

It was as though they had all agreed to exit the stage collectively the moment he became the Pact's Proxy.

It should have been a somewhat sorrowful affair — after all, Birth's fall meant the era of the old gods was all but over. But Hu Xuan's account left Cheng Shi speechless for a good long while.

'Birth truly was beyond measure. Even in falling... what a performance.'

Cheng Shi nodded. Without convening an Assembly of Gods Convention — without summoning a single deity — he casually waved his hand and bestowed everything Birth had left behind upon the Hu Xuan standing before him.

Over half a year ago, the Sage had become Birth's offspring because of a single remark Cheng Shi made.

Now the Sage had become the true Birth because of a single gesture.

Hu Xuan's journey from start to finish had been nothing short of legendary.

Yet there was little joy on her face. Or perhaps from the moment she and her Benefactor had given birth to herself, her desire for the Divine Throne had dimmed. She was more interested in bearing another child. As for who the father would be...

Her gaze, from the very instant she appeared, had never once left Cheng Shi's face.

But Cheng Shi, deep in thought, hadn't noticed in the slightest. Or perhaps he had simply grown accustomed to the Sage's covetous looks. His brows were furrowed tight, growing tighter by the second. And just as the Sage was about to speak — in the precise instant before her courage could take shape — he cut it off, pulling from his breast the Dyeing Container. His eyes traced the iridescent Deceit-hued shimmer on its surface, then he looked up at the Sage:

"Sage — try dyeing it with your Birth power."

Hu Xuan blinked, puzzled, but her body was already moving before the question could form.

She channeled her vast Birth power and enveloped the container. Before long, the vessel — which had been dripping with the Divinity of laughter and flowing with grains of mask-sand — began to lose its color, fading to pure white. Then, gradually, it took on new hues, and from within, a crisp infant's wail was born!

It changed. It truly changed!

In that instant, the dazzling Deceit container had become an uncanny Birth container. The two ends of the hourglass morphed into a pair of fetuses suspended in amniotic fluid, their connected umbilical cord forming the sole passage linking the hourglass halves.

Witnessing this marvel, Hu Xuan gasped: "But this is—"

"The Birth container you could never materialize on your own. An exact match, isn't it?"

"Yes — why? Is this an innate trait of Deceit containers?" Hu Xuan was fascinated. "Can a Deceit container mimic the faith of any container, just like Lie Like Yesterday?"

Cheng Shi shook his head. A sharp gleam flickered in his eyes:

"No. This isn't a Deceit container's trait. It's the trait of a Dyeing Container!

The 'Deceit container' you just saw was itself dyed.

Sage, your arrival was pivotal. It triggered a chain of thought about this Dyeing Container in my hands.

When I first obtained it on that stage in San Dales, I thought I was drawing ever closer to becoming the true Yu Xi... Don't look at me like that. I truly am Yu Xi. But it's complicated. Don't dwell on it — just listen.

"..."

"But later, Deceit told me it wasn't merely a Deceit container — it was a Dyeing Container capable of absorbing any faith. Right before my eyes, He dyed it into Chaos.

At the time, I assumed He was laying the groundwork for me to officially take on the Ultraman identity... that's not important either.

What matters is this: from the moment I learned the container could be dyed, I believed it was the key to seizing divine power. It wasn't until I truly understood what it meant to be Fixed Destiny that I realized — the container could be dyed, but Fixed Destiny could not.

So the question became: if Fixed Destiny can't be dyed, can't inherit divine power, then what use was a Dyeing Container?

It could, perhaps, help my friends seize Authority. But the containers I'd given away were all independent entities. And eventually I no longer needed containers to push people onto Divine Thrones — I could anoint anyone at will using the Pact's voting rights. And finally I became the Pact's Proxy itself...

At that point, the Dyeing Container was all but forgotten.

But your arrival reminded me of it. Deceit never made a useless move. If the container were useless, why would He have shown me its wonders?

Deceit, Chaos, Time... Did those three dyed faiths hint at something, or did He embed a clue inside the container itself?"

Cheng Shi's brow was knotted tight as he scrutinized the container, seemingly on the verge of grasping something — yet the crucial thread kept slipping away.

Hu Xuan didn't dare disturb him. In a voice only she could hear, she murmured: "So He had already calculated this far, even back then?"

'Back then?'

'No — Deceit had likely calculated this far from the very dawn of the era!'

Cheng Shi, too, marveled at Deceit's machinations. Every single step seemed designed to extend the road toward the world's future. He always unveiled the next act's truth at the perfect moment, guiding Cheng Shi down the path of Fixed Destiny.

'Wait!'

'The perfect moment?!'

'When exactly did I obtain this Dyeing Container?'

'The Silence Trial in San Dales?'

'If memory served, by that time he had already met Birth — and had used the Time Deduction technique on Her!'

'Which meant he'd obtained the Dyeing Container after Deceit had connected the Mockery and Jeering to the Real Universe?!'

'By that point — had He already visited the Corpse Field of Gods?'

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted sharply. He gripped the container as if his life depended on it.

"I understand. Perhaps this is the significance of the Dyeing Container.

Fusing all faiths together... Could it be linked to that Divine Throne?

Sage — I think it's time to prepare for the era's curtain call.

Are you ready?"

...

Chapter 1424: Go See Him

She clearly had not.

Not that she wasn't ready — she simply had no idea what she was supposed to prepare for.

The confusion on Hu Xuan's face rivaled Cheng Shi's own from back in the day. It had always been this way. The Sage's path was unlike anyone else's. She never felt anxious about the future, because whenever the road ahead dead-ended — she would simply have a child.

'Sought a child from the Eternal Sun, and thus became Birth's offspring. Sought a child from Birth, and thus became Birth Herself...'

By that logic, if she sought a child from Fixed Destiny, then perhaps the world had a future after all.

If that was the kind of preparation required, she had long been ready.

Cheng Shi, however, had absolutely no intention of entertaining the Sage's "brilliant notion." He told her he would come find her again and explain the road ahead, but first he needed to visit one more place — somewhere he could settle the last lingering attachment in his heart before the final move.

With that, he departed.

Hu Xuan stood in place, pondering for a moment. Quite curious about this so-called preparation, and since Cheng Shi hadn't restricted her movements, her first instinct was to consult someone else.

As for whom — surely no one was more suited than her Life-path sibling god and Cheng Shi's good friend, Hong Lin.

But the moment Hu Xuan descended beside Hong Lin and caught sight of the iridescent seven-hued radiance swirling wildly over the woman's body, she froze on the spot.

"What are you—"

"One fewer person we have to hide it from. Long time no see, Sage, but your timing's bad.

Stay away from me. I'm very dangerous right now."

...

Elsewhere — the Void, Memory's Collection Hall.

Memory's collection was vaster than Li Jingming had ever imagined. Even after inheriting the Hall, he had yet to survey every memory within it.

Not because he didn't want to, but because there was no need.

Memory's Authority was sufficient for the Dragon King to know everything. But to Li Jingming, not every memory was interesting.

The memories of the Land of Hope, for instance, were far less fascinating than those of his own companions. Compared to the lives of unrelated strangers from ages past, he clearly preferred to commit the present to record.

Which also meant he had learned far too many secrets he was never supposed to know.

He had long anticipated that someone would come knocking because of those pasts. What he hadn't expected was that the first visitor would be none other than Cheng Shi.

When Cheng Shi materialized inside the Collection Hall, Li Jingming wasn't the least bit surprised. He had even guessed why he was here.

He smiled: "I thought you'd come later. What — did inheriting the Pact's Proxy accelerate the march of the era?"

Faced with the Dragon King's teasing, the heaviness on Cheng Shi's face finally cracked to admit a sliver of a smile — whether self-deprecating or resigned, perhaps a bit of both.

"You know it accelerated, and you still dare to laugh?"

"Aren't you worried your laughter might affect the Universe's search for its future?"

The Dragon King chuckled:

"If I were that important, I'd have inherited the Pact's Proxy, not Memory.

Whether we laugh or not means nothing to the Universe. But you, Cheng Shi — you should let yourself smile properly.

You're the world's guide. I know you've shouldered far, far too much on our behalf. But carrying that weight with such a grim face makes it hard for the people sheltered behind you to feel any hope.

Perhaps the future isn't that important. The journey we've shared — that's the memory worth enshrining forever.

Do you even remember the last time you laughed from the heart?

Not a surface smile — a genuine one. If you can't recall, I can help jog your memory."

"..."

Though Cheng Shi knew the Dragon King was trying to comfort him, the words still carried a whiff of self-congratulation. He curled his lip and waved dismissively:

"Yes, yes, we all know you're Memory now. Very impressive. Happy?

Want me to give you a round of applause?"

And he actually did clap — feebly, listlessly.

The Dragon King shook his head with a laugh, turned, and began walking:

"Only when I inherited the Divine Throne did I truly understand the meaning of remembrance. Only then did I find my own will of Memory.

Living beings fixate on the past. Perhaps it's because of the misfortune before their eyes — but more often, it's because they're chasing the person they used to be.

For many, who they were in the past feels more like who they truly are. The version of themselves struggling under present hardship? They refuse to accept it — won't even commit it to memory.

Yet Existence is Existence. It never bends to preferences or aversions.

All we can do is accept the present, look back on the past, rummage through our memories for who we once were, give ourselves a little encouragement — and grit our teeth to keep going.

I know where your encouragement lies. Come with me. I've already taken it out."

"...You peeked?"

"I did not peek. I looked, in broad daylight.

Don't forget — I am Memory."

"And don't you forget — I am the Pact's Proxy with unilateral voting power. In front of me, you can also not be Memory."

"..."

The Dragon King's stride hitched. His eyelid twitched violently. Then he walked on.

Cheng Shi followed behind, bantering on the surface — but inside, his thoughts were a tangled mess.

He was here to see Old Jia, of course.

Though he had some guesses about the road ahead, he had no certainty about how things would actually play out. Whether the world's future could break free of Origin's control, whether he could win a tomorrow for the Universe — all of it remained unknown.

The greedy Cheng Shi wanted to win this gamble. But the steady Cheng Shi had already prepared for the worst. So before the world lost hope entirely, he wanted to see his father one last time.

He knew Old Jia was a good father. But he had never known how Old Jia had become one.

Cheng Shi's life contained only the second half of Old Jia's. What had the first half been like?

It wasn't curiosity. He simply missed his father.

He wanted to understand Old Jia. To know him. To reunite with him. To say goodbye to him... and then go make the decisions that had to be made.

As they walked, a pure-white wall of the Collection Hall blocked their path. On that wall, a single exquisitely framed Collection hung, within which a blurred silhouette flickered to and fro.

The Dragon King halted before the wall, gazed up at the piece, and murmured with infinite feeling:

"He was a great father. And only he could have raised a you like this.

Go see him. Love can transcend memory.

Rest easy. I swear on Memory — no, on the name of Cloud Field Temple — that as long as the world endures, as long as the Collection Hall stands, no one will ever tamper with these memories.

They will live here quietly, forever."

Cheng Shi nodded. He whispered a soft "thank you," then looked at the Collection, trembling hand reaching forward.

Fingertips touched the bubble. Ripples spread through memory.

A torrent of Memory's power surged forth and swallowed Cheng Shi whole, carrying him back to a past he had never known.

...

Chapter 1425: Getting to Know...

Memory — unknown time, unknown place.

Cheng Shi opened his eyes and found himself seated on a bus bouncing its way down a rough road. There were about a dozen passengers — all either rich or well-dressed — and most of them were grumbling and cursing under their breath.

They were complaining about the impossible mountain road. Up front, a man smiled apologetically, trying his best to placate them. After listening awhile, Cheng Shi confirmed this was a tour group that had traveled specially from the south for a mountain camping trip -- and his current perspective was that of one of the group members.

Of course, nobody could see him. This was the Memory Traveler's vantage point.

He had expected to find Old Jia on this bus. But the old man was nowhere in sight.

So why did the memory begin here?

The bus soon provided the answer.

It pulled up to the entrance of a small mountain village, hemmed in on three sides by peaks — clearly a mandatory stop along the hiking route. A lopsided wooden sign had been jammed into the ground at the village entrance. Words were pasted on it, though exposure to wind and sun had peeled away nearly everything. The remnant formatting vaguely suggested some kind of fee schedule.

The instant the bus stopped, someone hammered furiously on the door from outside. The driver didn't open up. The tour guide slid open a window and stuck his head out. Spotting a child, he cursed with a grin:

"Damn — scared the crap out of me. A little brat? Who taught you to stop buses like that?"

The passengers crowded over for a look. Sure enough, a child stood at the door — eight, nine years old at most, with dark weathered skin that carried a stubborn edge and a pair of bright, shrewd eyes glinting with mischief.

Cheng Shi recognized him in an instant. His eyes went red.

'The old man was actually kind of cute as a kid...'

But "cute" applied only to those who loved him. What this child said next was anything but cute to the tour group.

The dark-skinned child looked up at the tour guide and declared with utmost seriousness:

"The town issued a notice saying they're going to pave the village road, but they can't come up with all the money, so the village council has to chip in.

The village doesn't have any money either, so the village chief sent my brother with an ID badge to the entrance to collect. The old chief says since the road's really for you outsiders anyway, what's wrong with you pitching in?

Besides, nobody who makes it out here is short on cash. So — pay up!"

"?"

The guide nearly laughed in disbelief. He'd arranged for all these VIP clients to relax in the mountains — not to get "robbed." His pre-trip research had turned up no such fee. But he didn't refuse outright; he pulled out his phone to verify.

At that moment, one of the passengers — clearly a boss of some kind — grumbled: "This road really does need fixing."

The guide killed the call in one second flat, turned around with a conciliatory smile, then eyed the child, barely restraining his irritation:

"How much?"

The kid maintained a very "professional attitude," pointing at the nearly blank sign:

"Per head. Two hundred dollars a person."

Two hundred?

The guide had expected a holdup. Instead what he got was a beggar. At two hundred per head, how much could it be? He couldn't be bothered to verify the legitimacy of the fee schedule. With a snicker, he pulled out a thick stack of bills — no telling how much — and thrust it at the child:

"The extra's a donation from the bosses."

The kid's face lit up. He was about to reach for the money, but the guide yanked it back with a frown:

"Where's your brother?"

The child eyed the cash hungrily, then jabbed a finger toward a hillside on the other side:

"Taking a dump. He'll be back soon. Pay up, keep going straight, take the first right, and go to the village council for a donation certificate. Leave your names — when the road's finished, they'll carve your names at the entrance as a memorial.

With the certificate, you get ten percent off all food and lodging in the village. The old chief calls it 'economic stimulus.' You city folks know what economic stimulus is, right?"

"..."

The kid's pitch sounded too polished to be a scam. The guide checked his watch, decided he didn't want to waste more time, tossed the money to the child, closed the window, and waved the driver on:

"Let's go."

The kid pocketed the cash and stepped aside. The bus lurched back into its rocking rhythm. The passengers complained that the village road should have been fixed ages ago, griping all the way toward the village center.

Cheng Shi didn't follow the group. He stepped off the bus and trailed the child — who had snatched up the wooden sign and was sprinting away as though his life depended on it — along a narrow path into the village.

Before long, from the direction of the bus ahead, a hoarse voice boomed through the air:

"Hold on, hold on, hold on! The village is paving the road. All vehicles have to pay a toll. Per head — twenty bucks each. No money, no entry.

What?!

You already paid?!

Two hundred?!?

Well I'll be — I don't have a brother! Where's your receipt? Show me the damn receipt!

No receipt? Then what the hell are you on about? Today, even if the gods themselves showed up, it's twenty bucks to enter this village!"

"..."

How the passengers reacted, Cheng Shi had no idea. All he knew was that, apparently, his father had been a con artist from childhood.

'You lived like this yourself, and you had the nerve to teach me that honesty is the best policy?'

Cheng Shi stared at the little rascal's retreating back, torn between laughter and tears.

But what followed was even worse. He tailed little Jia through a maze of alleys to a ramshackle hut, where he watched the boy carefully count out the per-head amount, bury the surplus cash at the base of the wall, and then sit down at the doorway clutching the money, seemingly waiting for someone to return.

The instant little Jia sat down, Cheng Shi's brow arched. He'd already guessed who the boy was waiting for.

Sure enough, before long, a rough-hewn man returned. "Man" was generous — he was really a young fellow, but the weathering on his face made him look older. The second he arrived, he bellowed in that cracked-gong voice:

"Son of a — who told you to ask for two hundred! Didn't we agree on fifty—"

Before he could finish, little Jia handed over a stack of bills. The man blinked. A wide, satisfied grin split his face.

He licked his fingertips and began counting. When the headcount matched up perfectly, he let out a hearty laugh and smacked the kid on the forehead.

"You really got the balls to ask for that much."

Little Jia puffed out his chest proudly: "I saw through the window that they were dressed nice. I knew they had to be loaded."

"Clever little devil!" The man whacked the kid's head again, pulled a hundred-dollar bill from the stack... then stuffed it back in. He dug a twenty out of his pocket instead and pressed it into little Jia's hand.

"Yours."

Little Jia watched the hundred become a twenty without a flicker of resentment. He beamed like a child.

Which, of course, he was.

But Cheng Shi knew there was still over a thousand buried at the base of that wall. This kid had earned no less than the man.

'Liked hiding money in the wall, did he?'

'But there's no money buried at the base of our wall at home...'

Cheng Shi rubbed his chin, studying his father with great amusement. In this moment, he forgot every ounce of pressure. He smiled genuinely.

But it didn't last.

Because he watched, with his own eyes, as little Jia followed the man straight to a gambling den set up behind the village chief's house, sat down with practiced ease, and in under two minutes — lost every cent of his twenty.

Under the mocking laughter of the grown men around the table, little Jia's face turned beet red.

"What are you laughing at? Sooner or later, I'll win it all back."

...

Chapter 1426: ...Getting to Know...

The dream was beautiful. Reality was not.

Over the next few days, little Jia not only lost every cent he'd buried at the base of the wall — he even racked up a modest debt.

But the adults at the table didn't think he was good for it. They seemed to know all about his little "business."

Still, every con had its day of reckoning. The previous batch of mountain-climbing bosses had returned. They were staying in the village, and one man in sunglasses wandered into the village chief's gambling den by accident. He stood off to the side and watched for a while.

The villagers didn't mind outsiders. They called for him to join in — eager to fleece a lamb.

But the man gave a contemptuous smile. He wasn't the least bit interested. He seemed to be here only to rekindle a familiar feeling.

As chance would have it, little Jia was there today. The man noticed him and, seeing the cunning on the boy's face, grasped the village-entrance racket at once. He didn't press the matter, though. He simply smiled, studying the deftness of little Jia's hands as they shuffled paper chip-proxies. He even took off his sunglasses, a glint of interest in his eyes.

This was a veteran gambler. And very likely a card sharp.

Cheng Shi was nothing if not perceptive. A single glance told him the man's true nature — and more than that, he could already guess where this story was heading.

'Little Jia is about to be taken away.'

This wasn't idle conjecture. When Old Jia had come to adopt him all those years ago, the light that had glinted in his eyes had been identical to the look in this man's now.

Sure enough, one phrase — "ten bets, zero losses" — was all it took for the man to spirit away the boy who dreamed of nothing more than conquering every gambling table. He led him out of the village where the child had no family.

That hoarse-voiced young man wasn't his brother. No real brother would drag a kid into a gambling den.

The bus retraced its route. The road was just as bumpy. The bosses on board didn't seem the least bit surprised that sunglasses had brought a child back. They appeared well accustomed to it.

At this, Cheng Shi's brow darkened. He knew little Jia had walked straight into a trap.

This man was far from ordinary.

"What's your name?" Sunglasses asked cheerfully.

Little Jia, bouncing on the bus, watched his hometown scenery receding without a shred of nostalgia — only excitement: "My surname's Jia. I don't have a first name. Everyone calls me Little Jia."

"Surname Jia?"

Little Jia swung around and nodded vigorously: "Yeah! This is Jia Village. Most people here are surnamed Jia. Why?"

The man looked satisfied: "Good surname. Very good surname. Because what we do is fake."

"!!??"

Hearing this, Cheng Shi went rigid. He turned in disbelief to the boy beside him — Little Jia — no, Little Jia... For a moment, his mind was utterly blank.

He had never imagined that the father who taught him to be honest had been deceiving him for over a decade.

A scene flashed before his mind's eye — his very first meeting with Old Jia, the man fidgeting awkwardly:

"Oh, oh, I see, I see. My surname is Cheng..."

"My name's Cheng Jia. The name stuck, so they call me Old Jia — you know, 'jia' as in 'second to none'..."

'Liar.'

'It's all lies!'

'Your surname is Jia. Why did you tell me it was Cheng?'

...

Cheng Shi's guess was dead on. The man was trouble. He wasn't just a common card sharp — he was the behind-the-scenes boss of an entire cheater syndicate.

This boss's business was simple: adopt gifted children from far-flung places, train them into card sharps, and send them to bleed casinos dry.

It was fast money. Naturally, it was fast death too.

Cheaters caught by casinos never came back in one piece. Missing arms and broken legs were par for the course. And once a casino blacklisted you, stripping you of entry, what awaited wasn't just disability — it was abandonment.

The boss didn't keep useless people.

The moment a cheater failed, he lost everything. His assets were confiscated; he was dumped on some roadside to fend for himself. They wouldn't even treat his wounds.

The stakes were enormous for both boss and cheater. And so the "training" before deployment was brutal.

Saying the children were beaten black and blue was no exaggeration.

Only now did Cheng Shi understand where Old Jia's lifelong ailments had come from.

From the day he was "adopted," not a single day passed without beatings and curses. Yet after adopting Cheng Shi, Old Jia never once raised a hand or his voice.

Except for that one day — when Cheng Shi had scammed a bottle of cola using a bottle cap.

Cheng Shi wanted nothing more than to snap his fingers and obliterate every lackey who had ever hurt Old Jia. But he knew that if he interfered inside this memory, Old Jia's memories would no longer be complete and pure.

Fortunately, Old Jia was no pushover, either. Some battles didn't need his son's help.

Through the relentless beatings, Little Jia's card skills grew sharper and sharper — eventually surpassing even the boss to become the organization's unrivaled ace. At the table, no one could catch him cheating.

This was no longer simple card sharpening. Cheng Shi could see plainly: the man had achieved mastery in the art of deception. And by now, Little Jia was no longer young.

Old Jia, card skills in hand, bided his time. After his name had spread, the first thing he did was gamble his boss into bankruptcy.

He mimicked the boss's own methods and tossed the man onto the roadside like a stray dog. The boss may have kept all his limbs — but at his age, he probably wouldn't survive that bone-chilling downpour.

"Those who cheat, get cheated in return.

That's the lesson you taught me. Now I believe it."

With that, Old Jia turned and walked away. He knew the same fate would catch up with him, sooner or later. But he'd grown up in this world. Beyond gambling and lying, his life had no other meaning.

And so, Old Jia's card skills brought him wealth far beyond any ordinary person's — and along with it, the covetous eyes of countless others.

Everyone who knew him wanted a slice of his fortune. None of them expected that the first person to share it would be a hostess standing at a casino's front door.

The injuries from his youth tortured Old Jia day and night. One evening after a winning session, a stab of agony made him stumble. The new hostess at the door — in her heels — trotted over and caught him, twisting her own ankle in the process. She could barely stand.

For a moment, neither was sure who was supporting whom. They ended up clutching each other, neither toppling over.

By then, Old Jia had seen enough of the world to stop trusting anyone. The look he gave her was pure suspicion. But the hostess didn't care. Her kindness was genuine.

Once she saw he was fine, she limped back to her post, returned to her position, and carried on working — not a single word spoken the entire time, smiling through the pain, consummate and professional.

Old Jia watched her for a while. Then he left in silence.

The next day, the hostess received an anonymous thank-you payment. She had never seen that many zeros on a check in her entire life.

She was overjoyed — and terrified. She knew who it was from. But from that day forward, she never ran into him again.

She used the fortune to settle the headache of her family affairs, quit her job, and began searching the city for her "savior." In yet another rainstorm, she found Old Jia collapsed in agony in an alley.

She wasn't a strong woman. But that day, she carried Old Jia on her back through the rain for several kilometers. The hospital doctors said Old Jia had been lucky to survive. Any later and he'd have been gone.

The woman was immensely relieved. Old Jia, however, wasn't grateful. He still believed she was there for the money.

But a few days later, every major casino in the city knew that the infamous Old Jia now had a sharp, capable assistant at his side.

Her surname was Sun. Nobody knew her real name. Cheng Shi did.

Because the Aunt Sun of this era looked virtually no different from the first time he'd met her. The only distinction was that she hadn't been wealthy yet.

Having witnessed Old Jia's half-life, Cheng Shi now knew exactly where her money had come from.

'Turns out, I was the rich kid all along...'

Cheng Shi had always sensed that Old Jia's past was complicated. He just never imagined it would be this colorful — let alone that the bed full of cash at Aunt Sun's place had all been won at casinos.

'So were the loans for college actually loans?'

'Turns out Old Jia repaid Aunt Sun's favor a long, long time ago.'

Up to this point, the memory had been more or less normal. But what happened next began to give Cheng Shi — immersed as he was in nostalgia — a creeping sense that something was off.

Because as he followed Old Jia's footsteps through the memory, he started encountering familiar faces — or rather, the pasts of familiar faces.

Why were they appearing here?

Was it coincidence... or Fate?

...

Chapter 1427: ...Reunion, and Farewell

The first time Cheng Shi noticed something was wrong was when he saw the sickly old man that Old Jia bumped into outside a certain casino.

Fellow sufferers appreciating each other's company — that seemed innocent enough. Yet in that instant, he recalled the childhood story Nangong had once told him. His entire body went rigid, as though struck by lightning.

For the first time inside the memory, he left Old Jia's side and cut into the alley. There, huddled and waiting for her grandfather to return, was a tiny Nangong.

Cheng Shi recognized her at a glance. Only now — belatedly — did he realize that the uncle who had helped Nangong's father bankrupt the casino had been Old Jia.

From that moment on, the memory was no longer ordinary.

Because shortly afterward, he spotted the very same leather jacket that Li Wufang used to wear — on Old Jia.

A single jacket might not trigger much. But when Old Jia, wearing that jacket, appeared before a young, awkward Tao Yi... Cheng Shi knew none of this could be coincidence.

Especially when Old Jia turned to leave in the rain and tossed out casually:

"Go repay my son instead."

Cheng Shi stood in the street, slack-jawed, all but merging with the downpour.

At the time, Old Jia didn't have a son. That line was a joke, at best. But... was it really just a joke?

If Cheng Shi had never entertained these thoughts, perhaps it was. But every inch of this memory now reeked of something uncanny, so he no longer believed it was a quip. The so-called "repayment" didn't seem aimed at getting anything back. And the remark didn't sound as though it was directed at Tao Yi.

But aside from Old Jia, Aunt Sun, and Tao Yi, there were barely any passersby. Who else could it have been meant for?

'Unless it was for—'

In that instant, Cheng Shi clenched his fists. Conjectures raced through his mind.

The rest of the memory unfolded as he anticipated. While drifting between cities, Old Jia also crossed paths with Li Wufang.

Crossed paths — though truthfully, Old Jia's route that day was odd.

Li Wufang's little plaza was to the east, while Old Jia had been walking north. But at the intersection, the red light malfunctioned, its countdown stuck at 99 seconds. The impatient Old Jia changed course on the spot and headed east toward the plaza instead.

He reached the newsstand, spotted little Li Wufang in the fountain pool, and listened to the stand owner recount the boy's story. Heart stirred, he casually roped in a bystander also reading the paper and staged a little performance with him.

The amusing part was that after handing over the money, Old Jia didn't give the bystander's reaction a second glance. He wasn't worried the man would simply pocket the cash and leave. It was as if all that mattered was the act of kindness — wherever the thread broke after that was no longer his concern...

But fortunately, the bystander was a very orderly sort. Handed an unexpected windfall for no reason, his only thought was to play his role well and secure the money. And so, little Li Wufang got to see the leather jacket he would never forget for the rest of his life.

That year was also Old Jia's year of retirement. He hadn't planned to leave the game. His body simply wouldn't let him continue.

In a high-stakes hand with chips piled like mountains, Old Jia — on the verge of sweeping the table — was ambushed by a spike of pain and fumbled. He was caught. And that was when the world learned that the so-called King of Gamblers was no king at all — he was a King of Cheats.

The aftermath needed no elaboration. Old Jia was cornered in the casino and beaten to within an inch of his life. It was Sun Yuying, carrying every asset under Old Jia's name, who plunged into the crowd and begged a few bosses she knew to spare him.

From that day forward, there was no longer a place for Old Jia in any casino.

"Cheat others, and others will cheat you. Those who live by fraud never end well."

Disheartened and spent, Old Jia finally recognized he had walked a wrong road. Battered and broken, he left the south and vanished without a trace.

And so, the legend of the "King of Cheats" drew to a close. The south no longer had a figure named Old Jia. But little Cheng Shi, waiting in an orphanage, was about to receive his stroke of fortune.

When Cheng Shi, trailing Old Jia, stood outside the orphanage and looked at "himself" — he was reunited with his father.

'So the old man had his eye on me long before.'

'Good taste, though.'

Cheng Shi laughed and cried at the same time. He watched the old performer once more, inside the adoption office, trick him into saying the name "Cheng Jia." He wiped the tears from his eyes and strode away.

'Enough. Time to say goodbye.'

'No matter who he is, no matter what his name is — I only know he's my father, his name is Cheng Jia, and my name is Cheng Shi.'

'Cheng from Cheng Jia. Shi from honesty.'

Cheng Shi stepped out of the realm of memory. He was now all but certain: Old Jia's memories had been tampered with. But he knew the Dragon King would never alter them. In that case, the only ones capable of meddling with memories inside the Collection Hall seemed to be Memory Himself... and Deceit?

Memory, who had always despised tampering, would never do such a thing. So, by process of elimination, it had to be Deceit.

And looking at the people Old Jia had encountered, every single one was a friend whom fate had pushed to Cheng Shi's side.

And Deceit was Fate.

Moreover, with all the keen sensitivity Cheng Shi had developed for hidden clues, he noticed that these friends had each inherited Divine Thrones whose wills were not naturally aligned with Deceit's — at least, in previous eras, those gods had not always stood on Deceit's side.

Decay, Order, Prosperity...

Was it coincidence?

Probably not. It looked more like someone's contingency plan. Could Deceit have been using this to secure more support and voting rights?

But the issue was: when Deceit was still alive, those votes hadn't aligned with Him. It was only after His departure that they...

'Wait!!!'

'These contingencies were left for me?'

Cheng Shi's eyes flew wide. If that was truly the case, then whoever was behind this had determined the ownership of certain Divine Thrones from the very beginning. Could the people sitting on those Thrones be compromised?

Cheng Shi's mind replayed every experience he'd shared with Hong Lin, Li Wufang, and Nangong — and he dismissed the suspicion.

'Even if the world has problems, at least Big Cat never will.'

She would sacrifice herself for her friends without a moment's hesitation. A person like that was incapable of betrayal.

So both the Divine Thrones and the people on them were fine. The problem lay with whoever had tampered with the memories.

As long as his vision was limited to the Universe, the only "black hand" Cheng Shi could think of was Deceit. But the moment he widened his perspective and connected it to the "truth" he feared most, an absurd yet audacious hypothesis surfaced:

The only ones who could alter memories were deities. Was it possible that this deity was... Origin?!

As the Creator, He wouldn't even need to tamper. He would only have to write "inevitability" into the blueprint at the moment of Creation, and the fate of every living being would be sealed from the start.

The thought startled even himself. Just then, he exited the memory and returned to the Collection Hall. Seeing the gravity on Cheng Shi's face, Li Jingming's expression also grew solemn.

"Did you see it? Discover anything?"

The Dragon King didn't ask about the past. Didn't ask for feelings. He asked what was discovered — which meant he, too, had spotted the anomalies in that stretch of memory.

Cheng Shi nodded. But his conjectures about Origin and the experiment were words he could not say aloud. He could only ponder them in silence.

Li Jingming didn't press further. Instead, in a tone tinged with uncertainty, he said:

"220."

Cheng Shi blinked: "What?"

"Time." Li Jingming's expression was complex — and a touch apologetic. "Sorry. I've gone through this memory many, many times and noticed a few things that struck me as unusual. Of course, it could just be me being paranoid.

But where Fixed Destiny is concerned, I don't dare take chances."

...

Chapter 1428: The Anomaly in the Memory — 220

"The first time I noticed something was off, it was before your father ran into Li Wufang — the glitch in that red light felt jarringly abrupt.

My curiosity was piqued. I rewound the past and used Memory's methods to view every recorded moment at that intersection. And what I found was that the red light hadn't malfunctioned at all.

It had been working normally the entire time. The only difference was that the red-light duration had been stretched — stretched to an unthinkable length:

220 seconds.

Granted, when setting traffic-light timings, engineers do account for intersection traffic and tilt the green phase toward the heavier lanes. But no red light should ever be this long. Nearly four minutes of standstill would only cripple traffic flow.

Besides, that intersection didn't carry enough volume to justify such a design.

Once I caught that anomaly, I began scrutinizing this memory far more closely.

I'm not particularly sensitive to numbers. Fortunately, this wasn't just a number — it was a span of time. Since Memory and Time both belong to Existence, inheriting Memory's Authority gave me at least some sense of Time.

And so I discovered that your father's memory is riddled with a recurring duration!

From the moment he flagged down the tour bus at Jia Village to the moment he grabbed the money and bolted — the time he spent chatting with the tourists was exactly 220 seconds, not one more, not one less.

And when the man in sunglasses sized him up at the village chief's gambling den — the length of the game little Jia played in was also 220 seconds!"

"!?!?"

By now, shock was stamped across Cheng Shi's face. He was almost unnerved.

Li Jingming's eyes glinted. He wasn't done:

"There's more. The length of time Old Jia stood at the casino entrance, studying Aunt Sun. The length of his conversation with Nangong's grandfather outside the casino. The span from spotting Tao Yi to opening his mouth and speaking to her. The time he spent crouching in an urban village, waiting for little you to 'run away from home.' Even the duration of a chat he had one day with An Mingyu's uncle — right before you came home...

Every single one — 220 seconds!"

'Wait, wait, wait — An Mingyu's uncle? When did I ever meet the Fate Chosen's uncle?'

Cheng Shi's brain could barely keep up.

The Dragon King didn't give him time to think. "One is an accident. Two is coincidence. When the third, fourth, and fifth appearances stacked up, I knew this duration was anything but random.

At first glance, it looks like one of Deceit's pranks. But even Deceit couldn't possibly hide precise alterations from Memory inside His own hall.

In fact, every time He tampered with a Collection piece, Memory selected the alteration itself as a new Collection. That includes the past of a certain Chaos Envoy named Ultraman."

"..."

On any other day, Cheng Shi would have seized on that remark for a round of banter to mask his embarrassment. Today, his brain was overloaded. He couldn't care less about trivialities.

He kept turning it over: what could 220 seconds possibly mean?

The Dragon King was a sharp mind. Even lacking the full scope of Fixed Destiny's secrets, his limited information was enough to form ideas:

"Ruling out Memory and Deceit, the number of deities who could have touched Memory's Collections is extremely small."

He glanced meaningfully at Cheng Shi, then quickly changed tack. "Setting that aside — Zhen Xin learned from Qin Xin about the future Wei Mu described. When I turned my attention in that direction, I found myself wondering: could this time measurement be connected to the world's future?

Did Deceit — or any other deity — ever mention something similar to you?"

Cheng Shi racked his brain for a long time, then shook his head:

"The only thing related to time that comes to mind is the span of the era itself. From the moment Void descended and Fate fell, the era's length was locked in.

Could this 220 be tied to the era's duration?"

"?"

Li Jingming went blank for a second. "Fate fell? When was this?"

"...A very, very long time ago." Cheng Shi sighed, a flicker of nostalgia in his eyes. "It no longer matters. The past is past.

If Time were still here, there'd be someone to consult. But He too...

Wait!"

Cheng Shi froze. A thought struck him: "Time was ceaselessly busy, never once having time. I always assumed He was synchronizing the Universe's time so it wouldn't cause an accident inside the Creator's experiment.

But before Existence descended, how was the Universe's time synchronized?"

Li Jingming blinked, then quickly offered: "I've viewed memories from previous eras. Back then, They may not have known the Universe was an experiment."

Cheng Shi nodded, then shook his head:

"You're right. Time's constant synchronization may well be because this era has too many gods who stir up trouble. Deceit was never one to sit still — They were all probing outward.

But here's the thing: no matter how 'lively' Deceit was, He couldn't have been jumping in and out of the Real Universe constantly. So why was Time perpetually without time?"

"..." The question stumped Li Jingming. The Collection Hall held no memories of Time. He had no idea what Time had been doing all along.

And at that moment, Cheng Shi's gaze sharpened: "Before He left, He summoned the Doctor."

"The Doctor?!" Li Jingming's brow furrowed. He, too, couldn't understand it. The Doctor had essentially no connection to Time.

"Exactly!"

The Doctor represents Truth. He's our candidate for Truth's Divine Throne.

Could Time's summoning of the Doctor be a message to us — that whatever He had been doing was related to Truth?

But that scope is far too broad. Truth has done countless things. Which aspect could it be?"

"Experiments?" Li Jingming offered. "Isn't Truth most famous for experiments?"

What experiment would be both connected to Time and also the most representative?"

The Dragon King's words jolted Cheng Shi awake. His pupils contracted:

"The Faith Resonance Experiment!"

Truth once used that very method to reconstruct the world — searching the Real Universe for a slice identical to Himself!"

"???"

Li Jingming was lost:

"When did this happen?"

Why isn't it in Memory's Collection Hall?"

No — wait. There might be something. There's one piece in the Hall that's been heavily tampered with by Time. Could that be it?"

Cheng Shi nodded firmly:

"Exactly — that was it. The reason Memory lost His memory of it was because Deceit used Origin's power to reset the world. So apart from the Fear Faction members He handpicked to retain their memories, no other deity knew.

Truth conducted that experiment in pursuit of truth. If Time's hidden message really points to this, can we conclude that Time never had time because He had been conducting a secret experiment the Universe knew nothing about?

And the purpose of that experiment was also the pursuit of truth?"

Hearing this, Li Jingming's brow arched: "The only truth worthy of Time's pursuit would be... the road to the future?"

Cheng Shi nodded rapidly:

"Exactly. A perfectly reasonable deduction.

Ever since Wei Mu spoke of that future, I've been wondering: even if I can replace Origin's gaze, how could They deceive Origin?"

Those are two entirely different directions — and presumably, their division of labor.

What Deceit needed to accomplish was completing my impersonation of Origin. That's why He culled the non-Fear Faction gods, consolidated voting rights, cooperated with Justice, and ensured I inherited the Pact's Proxy.

Meanwhile, Time must have been ceaselessly running His 'experiment' — searching for a method to deceive Origin.

He must have found it. Otherwise He wouldn't have left.

So what is this method He discovered?

Was it He who altered the timestamps inside the Collection Hall? Between Memory's departure and your succession, you controlled the Hall but hadn't yet become a deity. If He tampered with the Collections during that window, is it possible?

It seems so. But wouldn't such methods still count as contaminating will?

And could those 220 seconds be the clue He left behind?"

Watching Cheng Shi sink into contemplation once more, Li Jingming pondered briefly, then offered a suggestion:

"After inheriting Memory, I gained many insights that are unique to the divine dimension. So perhaps if someone succeeds to Time's Divine Throne, we could find more precise hints and clues from Time's insights?

Cheng Shi — have you thought about who should ascend to Time's Throne?"

Cheng Shi paused. A name flashed through his mind — no, a figure:

'Under the gaze of every god, a Singer stepped forward.'

"Nice to see you again, old friends..."

Cheng Shi's eyelid twitched violently. He hurried to shut down the memory.

'That mad genius...'

'Who knows if old Meng has realized that his "old friends" are now all gone.'

...

Chapter 1429: My Divine Name Is Origin

The Dragon King's suggestion was a good one. Cheng Shi resolved to have a chat with old Meng.

But before leaving, he pulled out the dyed container once more.

Seeing two fetuses connected by an umbilical cord, Li Jingming's expression turned slightly peculiar: "A Birth container? You prepared this for the Life Sage?"

"No. She's already inherited the Divine Throne. She no longer needs an external vessel for validation.

This is a Dyeing Container — the one thing Deceit left me.

It can be dyed into any faith. Try activating it with your Memory power. I suspect it's part of impersonating 'Origin.'

The Pact's Proxy merely resembles Origin but isn't the real thing. Origin is unconquerable — meaning He possesses the power to annihilate all things. The Pact, on the other hand, only shelters gods; it has no jurisdiction over beings beyond the divine.

So I've been wondering: what method could allow 'Origin' to directly wield the gods' powers?

And this Dyeing Container in my hands may well be the key.

'Origin' legitimizes the gods, bestows Authority — and then holds faith containers, wielding divine power as a proxy.

He would be both the source of faith and faith's 'Envoy.' Perhaps only through this approach can one approximate the real Him to the greatest possible degree..."

"???"

Li Jingming couldn't believe his ears.

'What — Origin is the gods' Envoy?'

'What kind of mental gymnastics does it take to arrive at that relationship?'

But the Dragon King quickly caught on. The "Origin" in Cheng Shi's mouth wasn't the Creator orchestrating experiments in the Real Universe — it was the road ahead for Fixed Destiny.

The future Wei Mu had described hinged on "replacement." And since it was replacement, Fixed Destiny naturally had to draw as close to Origin as possible.

So Cheng Shi's reasoning was entirely logical. This Fate Weaver, shouldering the weight of everything, was still dragging the world forward.

A smile of agreement crossed Li Jingming's face. He stirred the ever-present Memory power within the Collection Hall, transforming it into a surging Sea of Memory that instantly submerged the container in Cheng Shi's hand. Inside the sea, the container's color faded once more, then was dyed into a brilliant crystal.

Cheng Shi nodded, retrieved the container, and said:

"The era's curtain call is imminent. If I'm not mistaken, the path forward lies at our feet.

Perhaps the world's future will look a bit different from what everyone imagines. But I'll do everything I can — at the very least, to see everyone safely into the next era.

Whatever future They envisioned, we must ultimately walk our own road.

Dragon King — once I've arranged everything, I'll give everyone an explanation.

Please keep looking into that strange duration. I'm going to have a talk with Time's candidate."

With that, Cheng Shi bid the Dragon King farewell and left the Collection Hall, descending directly upon a spot in the real world.

Li Jingming watched his departing figure, sighed once, then smiled:

"I told you — memory is the most precious thing. Having walked this road alongside all of you is the greatest fortune of my life."

...

The real world — a private courtyard in an unknown city and province.

Meng Youfang sat cross-legged in the yard, deep in meditation. Before long, a figure appeared across from him, mirroring his posture exactly.

The bard sensed the arrival but didn't open his eyes right away. Instead, he let out a languid sigh:

"Which old friend has finally deigned to visit?"

You've paused the Trials. Is it because my performance has gone far beyond the scope of the test?

Honestly, I haven't yet exhausted the full breadth of mortal suffering. It's too early for me to return to my Divine Throne. But if you insist, I suppose..."

Mid-sentence, Meng Youfang opened his eyes. But when he saw not a deity but Cheng Shi, delight flashed across his brow. He shot to his feet, grabbed Cheng Shi's wrist, and exclaimed:

"Brother! What brings you here?"

Did Deceit send you to deliver the news that my trial is over?"

"..."

Quick-witted as Cheng Shi was, even he found himself outmatched by Meng Youfang's "the world revolves around me" cadence. His lip twitched faintly; he had no idea how to begin this conversation between a human and a delusion.

He could only shake his head with a weary smile, look at this long-absent "friend," and toss out his question directly.

There was no matching the man's rhythm — the only way to break it was to introduce a new one. So he cut straight to the point:

"Brother Meng — are you interested in Time's Divine Throne?"

"?"

Meng Youfang froze for a beat. Then his gaze narrowed. He slowly released Cheng Shi's wrist, his expression turning grave:

"So Void is finally making a move on Existence?"

I always assumed Deceit had His eye on Memory. I never imagined He was coveting Time's Throne.

Brother Yu Xi — Time is my old friend. He's done His duty and sheltered me well throughout this trial. I appreciate your thinking of me, but I, Meng Youfang, could never betray a friend.

I have my own Throne. Why would I covet another's seat?

You... sigh, you've come to the wrong person. You shouldn't have told me any of this.

I haven't reclaimed my divine position yet. If Time comes after you because of this, it'll be very hard for me to protect you."

"..."

For one brief, shining instant, every ounce of pressure and frustration in Cheng Shi's heart simply evaporated. His sole desire was to deploy a Silence field right here and now to shut this "Time candidate" up.

But he knew it would be futile. A normal person's brainwaves could never sync with a case of megalomania.

Fortunately, Cheng Shi was hardly a normal person. He fell back on old habits — opening his mouth and fabricating on the fly:

"Brother Meng, the situation is far more dire than you imagine. Did you hear nothing at the Audience Meeting?"

Meng Youfang frowned, dead serious:

"The Audience Meeting?"

Why would I attend an Audience Meeting? Time is my old friend. Between us, there's no such thing as 'an audience.'

That's His reward for His followers. Naturally, I can't bully the little people by taking a mortal's spot."

"..."

Honestly, Cheng Shi nearly turned and walked out. Were it not for the fact that there simply weren't many Time followers connected to Fixed Destiny, "Origin" would have just lost His Time.

"Fine. Then let me tell you everything.

The gods have sacrificed themselves one after another in defiance of Origin. Many Thrones sit vacant. For the Universe to carry on, we must step up. Your—"

Before he could finish, Meng Youfang seized his wrist, eyes alight with barely contained excitement:

"The Origin you speak of — could it be..."

Cheng Shi assumed the man already knew something. After all, the Chosen Ones sat at the top of the Faith Game's intelligence chain. Delusions of grandeur or not, his strength alone should have given him access to what mattered.

So he nodded: "That's right. He is—"

"I knew it!" Meng Youfang cut him off again, face radiant with joy. "Hahahaha! My good brother — I've finally recovered my Divine Name! So my Divine Name is Origin!"

"?"

For a moment, Cheng Shi was utterly at a loss.

Because he realized he couldn't actually refute the man.

'Old Meng has always called himself the Universe's seventeenth god. And in this entire cosmos, the only being that could be called the seventeenth god truly is... Origin.'

'By that logic, Meng Youfang being Origin... isn't technically wrong?'

...

Chapter 1430: Meng Youfang — I Am the Eighteenth God, Not Time

"Wrong!

Completely wrong.

Brother, my old friends didn't sacrifice themselves to oppose me — they were tempering me.

My limited memory tells me I must have done some terrible things in a previous era. Now I'm atoning for those mistakes.

But why did you say they fell one after another? Has another God War begun?"

"..."

'When a man is delusional enough to genuinely resemble a god, he becomes a god.'

'And gods and mortals are very difficult to communicate with.'

It took Cheng Shi a good long while to recover. He even replayed all the despair he'd been through just to flush the absurdity from his brain and relocate his emotions. He freed his wrist from Meng Youfang's grip and said with absolute gravity:

"You are not Origin!

You've forgotten Origin's existence. That's not your fault, because you were once the vanguard of the rebellion against Origin. On that charge, you lost your Divine Throne and your memories. To protect you, the gods brought about the Faith Game, stuffed the Throne-less you into it, and hoped you could at least live in peace — with your life intact.

But Origin's oppression never stopped. He is the Creator — the supreme existence who can create all things and destroy all things. No one knows what about this world provoked Him. Now Origin is moving to annihilate it all again. The gods shielded this world and many of Them fell. Time, too, departed in this unequal struggle.

But we still refuse to submit. Someone has to step up and take Time's place — to keep charging at Origin.

I know this is a lot to take in. But Brother Meng — same question. Will you become the new Time?"

"..."

Meng Youfang went rigid. His expression shifted violently. A moment later, with a solemn air Cheng Shi had never seen from him, he said:

"I can accept that."

"!"

Cheng Shi exhaled deeply, thinking that "selling" a Divine Throne — the thing the entire world would kill for — was surprisingly difficult. Unreliable as old Meng was, at least he wasn't a bad person. He—

He'd barely finished the thought when Meng Youfang continued:

"But I cannot take my old friend's Throne!"

"???"

'...'

'My fists are itching.'

Instinctively, Cheng Shi clenched his fist and hurled a bolt of thunder — only to remember that the thunder had long since vanished into the past.

In that instant, Meng Youfang should have thanked the departed Death. If the Boss hadn't destroyed Cheng Shi's Death Fun Ring, Meng Youfang would already be a corpse.

Meng Youfang wasn't stupid. He could see that Cheng Shi desperately needed him to become Time. But how could he covet the Divine Throne of an old friend who had fallen to protect him?

Meng Youfang understood now. Origin was destroying the world. And the reason was that the gods had sheltered him. To keep him alive and safe, They had even gone so far as death itself to withstand Origin's fury.

'This is the bond between gods!'

'My old friends — you've given far, far too much for me!'

Meng Youfang was deeply moved, his eyes nearly red. The look he gave Cheng Shi brimmed with gratitude. Yet he still could not accept inheriting Time's Throne.

He shook his head:

"Yu Xi — as a god, the will of one's faith cannot be changed.

Even though I've fallen to mortal status, even though I can no longer remember my own Divine Name — on the road of faith, I've never walked alone.

Behind me stand countless people who trust me, who believe in me, who worship me. For their sake, I must be me!

I am this Universe's eighte— no, eighteenth god. Never Time.

I know the Universe has paid too great a price for me. If Origin's wrath was all because of me..."

His gaze hardened, as though a decision had crystallized. Word by word, he declared: "Then let me end it all!"

With that — hand up, blade down.

"Shk—"

"Thud—"

Meng Youfang's eyes snapped shut. He toppled straight into Cheng Shi.

"..."

At last, the scene was quiet.

A second later, Shadow Cheng Shi tossed the dagger he'd snatched away and retreated to Cheng Shi's feet with a look of utter resignation.

Cheng Shi gazed down at the unconscious old Meng, momentarily at a loss for words.

'You call it megalomania, but the man is sincerely devoted.'

'You call it sincere, but the man is absolutely a megalomaniac...'

'Megalomania really does cause harm.'

Cheng Shi smiled bitterly. Still, old Meng had said one thing that resonated:

'Behind me stand countless people who trust me, who believe in me, who worship me. For their sake, I must be me!'

Cheng Shi shook his head, flinging away the tangle of thoughts. Resolve returned to his eyes. He left a note for Meng Youfang, turned, and departed.

Since old Meng insisted on being himself and refused Time's succession, Cheng Shi would have to find another way — reach out to an earlier friend.

Come to think of it, Time followers weren't entirely absent. Long Jing, at least, was one.

But the problem was: the person best suited to inherit Deceit's position also seemed to be Long Jing.

'President Gong has finally, in the late game, become the most sought-after man around.'

Cheng Shi left the real world and stepped back into the Void. He was searching for the whereabouts of past friends — when suddenly, countless rivers of white bone cascaded from above, coalescing before him into a bleached-white throne of bone.

But seated upon that throne was no longer the massive skull representing Death. Instead, it was a man in a funeral suit — a Gravekeeper.

Zhang Jizu had arrived.

He descended from the Throne. Behind his perpetually narrowed eyes lurked a trace of sorrow. With a casual wave, countless tiny skulls from the path of the Fishbone Hall chattered their way toward him and merged in his hand into a miniature cascade of white bone. The pale torrent twisted and wove, forming the shape of an hourglass.

He walked to the end of the hall and locked eyes with Cheng Shi. Neither spoke.

Death's departure was a heavy blow for them both. The good boss who had sheltered His employees, the kind benefactor who had always favored His followers — He was gone.

After a long silence, Zhang Jizu spoke first.

"Death is not truly the end. Departure is the most enduring form of companionship.

When I buried them with my own hands, I understood: they had merely changed the way they stood beside me.

As had the Benefactor.

Since He entrusted these things to me — from today onward, I am the Universe's Gravekeeper.

Walk the road to the future with confidence. At the very least, as long as I draw breath, no god in this world will fall."

"..."

Zhang Jizu's words reminded Cheng Shi of the old Zhang from another world. 'Turns out it's not just me — in every world, they're all alike.'

Cheng Shi waved his hand and invoked the authority acknowledged by all gods. With the Pact Proxy's sanction, Zhang Jizu — Death's container cradled in his arms — inherited everything the Boss had left behind.

As green flames blazed and white bones cheered, something crossed Cheng Shi's mind, and for the first time in a long while, a genuine smile surfaced on his face.

Zhang Jizu peered at him through narrowed eyes, puzzled — only to hear Cheng Shi clear his throat and suggest with utmost seriousness:

"Old Zhang, why don't you take a page from the Boss's book and transform into a giant skull? Might do wonders for that eye-size problem of yours."

"?"

Seeing the Squinty Zhang's face darken, Cheng Shi's expression snapped back to business:

"Lend me your faith for a moment. I need you to dye this container.

This concerns the world's future. It's critically important — I'm not joking.

But now that I see you, another question comes to mind. Oblivion's Authority was in the Boss's hands. Now that He's gone, who should inherit Oblivion's Divine Throne?"

Zhang Jizu channeled Death's power to dye the container. After a moment's thought, he offered an answer:

"Mo Shu."

"I recall you two had some friction?"

"Personal grudges are nothing before the Universe's road ahead.

What matters most is that he's close enough to Oblivion. And the current Mo Shu no longer harbors the desire to annihilate the world.

Whoever inherits Oblivion must be stable.

Without a follower like Mo Shu — someone who witnessed firsthand the Benefactor's self-destruction — any succession could easily spiral into the next cosmic crisis.

We can't afford more risk. From now on, the Universe must be united. He's not the best choice, but he is the steadiest choice."

Cheng Shi pondered for a moment, then nodded:

"Understood."

...