

The Gods 1441

Chapter 1441: The Place Where All Memories Are Born

Cheng Shi never expected to find himself back in that Memory Junkyard.

That's right — the "depths of memory" that the Blind One spoke of was none other than the crystal world refracting infinite shards of memory light, accessible through the mirror That Dream My Nightmare.

And "the place where all memories are born" was somewhere Cheng Shi had visited before: the massive canyon fissure that cut across the crystal world!

Alongside Cheng Shi this time, besides An Mingyu who was leading the way, there was Zhen Xin — who refused to let her best friend endure any more surprises — the true wielder of That Dream My Nightmare and current master of Memory, Li Jingming — and Qin Xin, whose solemn expression betrayed the fact that he hadn't been able to see the Flame of Hope off.

The five of them pressed forward and arrived at the edge of the fissure.

Cheng Shi hadn't forgotten that it was from this very spot he had crossed the chasm to the far side, behind the Dreamless Mirror, where the Flame of Hope had pulled him out — their first encounter.

Back then, he had tiptoed across the abyss, never imagining there might be a path leading down beneath it.

An Mingyu pointed below the fissure and said:

"It's down there. Let's go."

Cheng Shi glanced at the Dragon King, only to find him with his eyes closed, seemingly drifting through these memory "scraps." After a moment, the Dragon King opened his eyes and stared at Qin Xin with considerable surprise, which left Qin Xin somewhat puzzled.

"What is it?"

Li Jingming shook his head, his expression peculiar.

"No danger. But I truly didn't expect it to be him.

Never mind... let's go. You'll understand once you see for yourselves."

With the answer right before them, no one pressed further. An Mingyu led the way, leaping straight down. Zhen Xin and Qin Xin followed close behind. Cheng Shi paused briefly and turned to the Dragon King once more.

"What were you about to say?"

Li Jingming spoke with feeling:

"I've come to realize that even Memory was not omniscient about the past.

The tampered Collection in the Hall is the best proof — that's where Memory kept the past that interested Him most. But here, beneath our feet, the memories aren't entirely devoid of interest either.

For example — do you remember the origins of That Dream My Nightmare?"

The origins of That Dream My Nightmare?

Cheng Shi thought for a moment and nodded.

Of course he remembered. It was actually connected to Aph Ros.

The "guidance" of the Gate of Joyous Lust had turned Memory's followers against each other. The moment Memory bestowed the Memory Delusion, the mirror shattered into two halves — one became That Dream My Nightmare, and the other became the Dreamless Mirror.

Come to think of it, the Dreamless Mirror was on Qin Xin's person, and Qin Xin was part of this very group.

What a coincidence.

Cheng Shi was mid-thought when he suddenly froze, seeming to grasp the Dragon King's meaning. "You mean... the Memory Delusion?"

A glint of light flashed in Li Jingming's eyes as he nodded.

"Precisely. The Memory Delusion.

Strange as it sounds, Memory appears to have created something that even He Himself kept forgetting about. So much so that after I inherited His Authority, I didn't think of it right away either.

It wasn't until I came here today that I dug out that particular past from the infinite heap of memory 'trash.' And interestingly enough, the memory of creating the Memory Delusion had been cast right here, in this junkyard.

No — I should say the Memory Delusion IS the 'soul' of this junkyard. His original purpose in creating it was to force Himself to forget all these trivial things, so He could focus solely on the Collections that interested Him.

Memory built the Collection Hall and handpicked items from the river of time to please the Origin. The memories discarded in this Memory Delusion junkyard are, naturally, the ones He deemed unworthy of pleasing the Origin.

Unworthy — and therefore not something He wanted the Origin to 'see.'

So the fact that the Flame of Hope chose this place for His farewell carries a deeper meaning...

Let's head down. I suspect the world's future might be hiding right here in this canyon fissure."

Not seen...

Cheng Shi felt he'd grasped something crucial, yet the flash of insight slipped through his fingers. He nodded and jumped down alongside the Dragon King.

With three gods present, no abyss — however deep — could pose any threat to Cheng Shi. Man and god floated gently to the bottom and followed the other three's trail into the depths of the canyon.

Before long, they arrived at the depression — and beheld a sight that shook them to the core.

The burly Qin Xin was cradling a frail figure in his arms. He turned slowly to face them, and the person's features, bathed in the surrounding azure glow, became clearer and clearer. When the face was finally, fully visible—

"Qin Xin?!"

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted. The Dragon King nodded quietly.

"I saw him in a Trial long ago, but he never showed his true face. You've heard of him too:

Like A Dream.

What a fitting name — Like A Dream.

So the Torchbearers, who crept forward in the world's shadows, were born from a grand dream of yours!

He should be the real Qin Xin!"

Cheng Shi stared ahead, dumbstruck. He turned to Qin Xin and saw a face overcome with emotion — the burly Qin Xin gazing at the thin Qin Xin in his arms. The frail Qin Xin slowly opened his eyes. He was terribly weak, barely clinging to breath, yet his eyes shone with the most brilliant, unwavering light.

He met the burly Qin Xin's gaze and cracked a bloodless smile.

"I can feel your strength, Qin Xin. Tell me — is this a good dream, or just the fantasy of someone who refused to give up?"

Qin Xin smiled. He wanted so badly to tell Qin Xin that this counted as a good dream. As for whether the good dream might turn into a nightmare...

He fell silent for a moment, then lifted his head to look at Cheng Shi.

Cheng Shi said nothing. He simply cast the purest healing spell he could muster at Like A Dream, his expression devoid of joy or sorrow.

"Of course it's a good dream.

The spark you lit with your own hands has now illuminated this entire starry sky. The Torchbearers are doing well. The world... perhaps not so well, but we are doing everything we can.

We found you because of the Flame of Hope's 'Final Oracle.'

It guided us here. Were you awake when It was still around? Did you see It?"

After the healing, Qin Xin looked noticeably better. He patted the burly Qin Xin's shoulder, motioning to be set down, then stood before the crystal Coffin and gazed at the spot where the Flame of Hope had once burned, lost in memory.

"No.

But no matter where It is, I know It lives on in my heart. No — in our hearts. In the hearts of every Torchbearer.

I know you're all curious about my existence. Truthfully, I thought I was dead too. But during that utterly hopeless Trial, Fate saved me."

"Fate?!"

The frail Qin Xin nodded.

"Yes. He struck a deal with my Benefactor.

He had Memory erase one of His own memories for Him, and the price was my fate — and so my life was spared.

My life is of little consequence, but this memory may be of use to all of you."

With that, the frail Qin Xin patted the Coffin. "This is the memory that Fate had stripped away."

Li Jingming's expression turned grave. He looked to Cheng Shi. Upon seeing Cheng Shi's nod, he activated the power of Memory and replayed Fate's lost memory for all to see.

It was a scene in the Void — Fate standing in confrontation with Deceit. Fate asked: "Who am I?"

Deceit brushed the question off casually. Fate pressed on: "Then who are you?"

Deceit answered with a laugh once more. Finally, Fate spoke: "I don't know who you are, but all I want is to be myself."

After this enigmatic exchange, Fate departed first. He descended upon another stretch of Void, His gaze piercing through the boundary of illusion and reality, settling on Cheng Shi atop the rooftop. Then He looked away and murmured into the pitch-black emptiness:

"I don't know who I am, but you want me only to be myself. So then...

I am me!"

"..."

Seeing this, Cheng Shi was moved once again.

So Fate had already noticed the clues back then. But for Deceit's sake, He chose to deceive Himself — having Memory erase this very memory.

Then who was truly driving Fixed Destiny? Was it really Fate?

And yet, the one who had guided the world to this point was clearly Deceit...

If every act of defiance was in fact drawing closer, then resistance itself — was that not also a kind of Fixed Destiny?

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Chapter 1442: I Refuse!

Qin Xin carried Qin Xin away.

After bidding the Flame of Hope a final farewell, An Mingyu left alongside Zhen Xin.

Cheng Shi did not hand over everything of Fate to the Blind One at this point. In his view, the Void of old had once taken the stage together — and the Void of today should do the same.

Deceit had waited an entire era for Fate. At the era's end, it was only fitting that Fate pause for a moment to let Deceit catch up and walk forward side by side.

The Dragon King lingered behind, clearly with more to say. But before speaking, he suddenly broke into a wistful laugh.

"Ever since I was a boy, copying the chronicles of my grandmaster, I admired him. Envied the freedom he lived with.

In peace, he'd sit in a pavilion watching cranes and weathering storms. In chaos, he'd seize a spear, slay the enemy, and die for a righteous cause.

After all these years of transcribing scriptures, I've finally found my chance to follow his example."

"?"

Cheng Shi didn't understand. He furrowed his brow at the Dragon King, only to see Li Jingming raise a hand with utmost solemnity and draw a memory from his own mind. He pushed it toward Cheng Shi, speaking with exceptional gravity.

"I shouldn't know these things. Fortunately, apart from me, no one else could see them either.

Qin Xin believes the Crystal Coffin only contains Fate's lost memory, but that memory is merely a surface — something to conceal the essence buried beneath. And that essence, too, is a memory.

The Flame of Hope recorded everything It wished to say right here. I still have questions about how It was able to manipulate memory, but I imagine It used methods Deceit left behind — after all, He once stole Memory's Authority, and as you said, the False Curtain Call was entirely of His orchestration."

Hearing this, Cheng Shi suddenly felt a foreboding chill.

Why was the False Curtain Call involved again?

Li Jingming did not stop. He continued:

"Cheng Shi — have you considered why the Flame of Hope took Sun Miao away?"

"I know why. He's impersonating Wei Mu, spreading news about the Origin." Cheng Shi frowned. "I can imagine that letting the world know about the Origin might be connected to the world's future, but I haven't grasped the key. Is the reason in this memory?"

"It is.

Deceit truly was the greatest chess player in the universe. It seems He never made a single wasted move — not even the False Curtain Call!"

"!!!" Cheng Shi's pupils contracted sharply, his heart clenching.

"Even after inheriting Memory, I never could have imagined that a past only you remember was left lying here, naked and exposed, in Memory's junkyard!

The False Curtain Call was never false — it was a Change that had been memorialized.

What Sun Miao is spreading isn't a rumor either. It's something that truly happened during that Change.

The Origin truly did come. But that pair of eyes seen by the world — they don't necessarily belong to the Origin. They could also be..."

Li Jingming didn't say the final word. He simply stared, burning, into Cheng Shi's eyes — tracing the contours of those irises, stroke by stroke.

Not merely similar. Identical.

And seeing the Dragon King's reaction, Cheng Shi suddenly froze where he stood.

In that moment, he remembered the way Wei Mu had looked at him before leaving. When he himself had brought up the False Curtain Call, Wei Mu had gazed into his eyes in exactly the same way.

So what had truly happened at the end of that False Curtain Call?

Cheng Shi looked at Li Jingming, suspicion and alarm swirling in his eyes. The Dragon King pointed to the cluster of memory hovering before Cheng Shi and said:

"You'll find out. But I must not know.

Cheng Shi, promise me — extinguish the memory in front of you. Let me forget all of this.

The purpose of the Memory Delusion is to make Memory forget what He should not know. I will merge the Dreamless Mirror and That Dream My Nightmare, then forget my discovery — keeping the Flame of Hope's true Final Oracle a secret for all time.

This is the only way out. Even if it demands a price, it's one I'm willing to pay.

And I believe they would be willing too!

This may not be the future I envisioned, but at least we shouted and we fought. That's enough.

Do it, Cheng Shi. To prevent me from 'cheating,' you must personally extinguish this memory that was never meant to be mine.

Once you've done that, you'll be able to see what the Flame of Hope engraved on that Crystal Coffin — Its 'Final Oracle' for you."

Cheng Shi could feel the Dragon King's resolve. But without knowing what the "Final Oracle" contained, he couldn't understand this solemnity or gravity. After a pause, he said:

"It's just a memory. Is it really worth all this?"

You are Memory. Your very purpose is to preserve the past for the world. What could possibly be forbidden for you to know?"

"It is necessary," Li Jingming smiled. "As you said yourself, what I preserve is the past — not the future.

And the choice before us now concerns the future.

I do believe that even if I knew everything, I would still cooperate. But cooperation is a form of trust, not absolute belief!

At the very worst, once you learn what the Flame of Hope has arranged, even if I've forgotten all this, you can still choose to tell me again.

Everything hinges on you — but it cannot hinge on me.

Fate Weaver, you keep asking me to trust you. So now — can you trust me, just this once?"

"..."

Cheng Shi was no fool. The Dragon King's strange demeanor and his tone of peaceful acceptance left Cheng Shi deeply uneasy. He wasn't afraid of what the other might forget once the memory was extinguished — he was afraid that extinguishing it would carve not just a gap in memory, but a chasm of trust between himself and the Dragon King.

Die for a righteous cause...

Those words sounded noble, but for Cheng Shi at this moment, they sounded anything but good.

The Dragon King was so determined to forget — which meant he was certain that, after forgetting, Cheng Shi would never tell him these things again.

But the moment something was hidden, wouldn't trust become nothing more than a deception?

At the threshold of the era's end, was he really going to deceive his own friends?

Cheng Shi hesitated — but soon, he nodded with a resolve as firm as the Dragon King's.

If deception could bring hope, then why not deceive?

'I was always a deceiver, wasn't I?'

Cheng Shi made his decision. He extinguished the memory before him. While the Dragon King closed his eyes and merged the Memory Delusion, Cheng Shi retrieved every trace of memory the Flame of Hope had left upon the Crystal Coffin.

But when he saw what this so-called "Final Oracle" actually was, the color drained from his face and his entire body went rigid.

'How can this be...'

'How can this be?!'

'This is the future Deceit found for the world?!'

'But if this is the future — then what was the meaning of everything I've done to get here?'

Perhaps for Deceit, it did hold meaning. Resistance had to have a result. Even if the Origin could never be defeated, at least in one moment He had escaped the Origin's gaze and achieved defiance.

'But what about me?'

'What is this — ripping out every anchor I've cast into this world, retracting every thread that binds me to it, and then drifting away with this world into lonely exile?!'

'No. I won't accept this. I refuse!'

While Cheng Shi's expression shifted violently, the Dragon King slowly opened his eyes. He looked at Cheng Shi with puzzlement, uncertain.

"What are you thinking about? Shouldn't we get going?"

I seem to recall you were about to tell me something. Cheng Shi, you...?"

Cheng Shi turned to the Dragon King. He opened his mouth, ready to reveal the truth about the world's future — yet before the words could leave his lips, he forced them back down with painful effort.

After a long silence, he lowered his head, shook it, and spoke in a tone impossible to read.

"It's nothing.

Let's go. It's time to leave."

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Chapter 1443: Return to Dolgod

Cheng Shi sent the Dragon King to gather all the friends who had inherited — and hadn't yet inherited — their Divine Thrones, while he himself dragged a bone-deep weariness ahead to Dolgod.

He had finally returned to the place that had once lifted the curtain on the gods' secrets for him, and once again he saw the good brother who had been waiting for his return all along — Aph Ros.

He looked exactly the same as ever. A black robe inlaid with gold and silver moonlight draped like the night sky, framing that face of sacred purity intertwined with desire — a face luminous as the moon.

He leaned against the doorframe, watching Cheng Shi approach, His smile complicated.

"My brother — should I thank you for still remembering me after you've gained the universe?"

Cheng Shi walked up close. He could feel that Aph Ros's desire was no longer brazen, that those bright eyes no longer coveted. A fleeting pang of emotion washed over him before he quickly returned to calm.

"You know everything already?"

"Hard not to.

The Void Era certainly exceeded my expectations — no, I should say it shattered my understanding entirely.

In a remarkably short time, I met not only several new gods, but also the newly appointed warden... He found my existence quite fascinating. Unfortunately, not in that way.

If they hadn't all carried Authority, I might have thought you'd reclaimed everything and were pretending to be them just to toy with me.

If only that were the case. I think I could die content in such a beautiful dream.

But reality is too cruel. They are who they are, and their interest in that girl far exceeds their interest in me.

As expected — mortal or divine, once you step into Time's trap, you'll sooner or later become yesterday's news.

You've... come for her too?"

Cheng Shi wanted to muster a smile, but his face had turned terribly stiff. Expressionless, he looked at Aph Ros and told a "kind" lie.

"I came for you."

Aph Ros froze. Then delight crept up to His brow, moonlight brightened, petals fell and robes slipped — He wanted to burst through the door, but stopped Himself just in time, catching His sliding robe and leaning back against the door frame.

He remembered what the newly appointed warden had told Him: as long as He didn't use Corruption to pollute Yu Xi, there was a chance He would be granted freedom.

Though freedom held little meaning for Him now. His mother, Birth, had become Miss Sun...

While Miss Sun had indeed once been His mother, having the moon bow beneath the sun felt wrong. This was not the paradise of joyful descent He envisioned — and on this point at least, He did not feel joyful at all.

So His "concession" wasn't for freedom — He simply saw that Yu Xi had a reason he couldn't avoid going to find that girl.

Aph Ros studied Cheng Shi's expressionless face and exhaled in a soft, lingering sigh.

"This is exactly why I wanted to build a paradise. People carry too much, live in too much pain. Why can't everyone follow their hearts and embrace joy?"

Cheng Shi was silent for a moment. "I'd like that too. But I don't have a choice."

Aph Ros's expression shifted. He bit His lip, as though steeling Himself, and took the risk of saying: "You can choose, my brother. Starting now, let everything go. Let sorrow fall away, and let joy rise."

Let everything go?

'You mean — after Deceit has laid plans spanning an entire era, after the Fear Faction willingly paid the price of self-destruction to clear the stage — you want me to let everything go?'

'Or — after witnessing countless worlds crumble and be erased, after countless versions of Cheng Shi reached out their hands to lift me forward — you want me to let everything go?'

'Or — when all my friends trust me, believe I can lead this world to a future under the Origin's gaze — you want me to let everything go?'

No.

'I can't let go.'

Even though none of this brought him joy, letting go would certainly bring no joy either.

Cheng Shi looked into Aph Ros's eyes — tinged with something close to pity — and shook his head. "That wouldn't be my joy."

He dropped the matter and asked instead, "Where is she?"

Aph Ros closed His eyes, no longer looking at Cheng Shi.

"In your courthouse. Go find her."

Cheng Shi strode past the door without pause. As he brushed shoulders with Aph Ros, he didn't slow, leaving behind only one sentence:

"I'm sorry. I never found Tria's killer."

Aph Ros opened His eyes at the sound but didn't turn around. He stood staring at the full moon hanging over Dolgod's horizon, murmuring to Himself:

"My faith demands lies, so I spoke a lie to you. I embraced my own desire, then used it to draw closer to Corruption as a show of sincerity.

Ha. What beautiful words.

He drew close again — no, twice more.

This era wasn't exactly boring, but it was far too absurd. Those words are probably the finest thing to come of it. Let the next era hurry up and begin.

No matter who he is, I still hope to meet him again in the next era. My brother..."

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Dolgod. The Honesty Court.

Even though Cheng Shi's heart had been weathered by too much to show any emotion easily, upon seeing those enormous characters on the signboard, his eyelid still twitched.

He stepped inside. Before him lay a massive experiment ground resembling a sandbox, clearly simulating the terrain of the Land of Hope.

Cheng Shi understood immediately. Zhen Xin had definitely been here already, and had discussed with Galusha the things Deceit had left behind in the Temple of Chaos.

He scanned the sandbox. Galusha was nowhere in sight, but her voice reached him first.

"Had your reunion with your good brother?"

I thought you two would spend more time together. After all, the way He misses you reminds me of Pe Laya — back before she'd joined the Erudition Presidium."

Galusha walked out from behind the sandbox with a smile, looking slightly taken aback by Cheng Shi's blank expression before quipping, "Looks like the moon will be heartbroken tonight."

Cheng Shi glanced at her, ignoring the nonsense, and said flatly:

"Since you've met them, you must have guessed why I'm here."

"Of course I know." Galusha seemed entirely unsurprised. She smiled. "From the moment I slipped out of your so-called Trial, I knew I'd become a contingency piece and a backup.

Let me tell you something you don't know — I've met Him."

Cheng Shi's brow furrowed. "Who?"

"Deceit.

After that Trial, He summoned me and told me to stay alive — alive until the moment you needed me.

I believe now is that moment.

So, Mr. Prisoner — have all your Folly friends met with accidents?"

"..."

Galusha clearly knew quite a lot. Hardly surprising — anyone who had met all those new gods would have noticed things, and her being a follower of Folly only made it more obvious.

But to bring this traveler from the Land of Hope up to speed with everyone else, Cheng Shi laid out in full detail the current state of affairs facing the universe, every truth about the Creator's Experiment, and said at the very end:

"You still have the right to refuse. I can't guarantee what lies ahead, and becoming a god is far from the glory mortals imagine.

Mortals have no control over their lives. Gods... are no different."

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Chapter 1444: Yes — My Choice Is My Answer

Galusha pondered for a long time before lifting her head. Her gaze burned as she looked at Cheng Shi, the corner of her mouth curling into a scoffing smile.

"Becoming a god — in the Land of Hope, and certainly in the Underworld — is an unthinkable thing. Simply drawing close to the gods is enough for most people to live well. As for actually becoming one of them... many probably haven't even entertained the fantasy.

And yet here I am, being offered the choice of whether to ascend to godhood.

Ha. The Drifter's world is finally starting to differ a little.

Mr. Prisoner, if this is a test, I'll admit it's a clever one. You've laid the universe's situation bare, yet conspicuously neglected to tell me how many Folly candidates stand behind me. If I refuse, the experiment you've replicated in this courthouse — you wouldn't use it on me, would you?

Rather than being a 'passively consenting' Galusha, I'd prefer to be myself.

Of course, if this isn't a test, then allow me to apologize for what I just said. Your sincerity has touched me.

Few people in the Underworld think of others. Fewer still on the surface. For that, I'm grateful.

But you seem to have forgotten — Galusha is a lunatic."

"..."

"I've read quite a bit of my own 'history.' I know how the world sees me. Being a lunatic means I'm not bound by convention.

I have no such reservations, because I've always been a variable, haven't I?

You were the ones who pulled me out of that Erudition Presidium experiment. Here I'm still a variable, but when a minuscule variable leaps above its rank and becomes a parameter transcending the system — isn't that change, that breaking of shackles, precisely what you're hoping for?

For me, becoming a god isn't a bad thing. As Folly, I can better contemplate how to keep the world from tripping over its own foolishness...

If I still have the time."

Galusha was brilliant. Even learning the truth of the universe only now, she had in short order pieced together most of the world's future.

This wasn't merely due to her intellect, which far surpassed mortals, but also her sensitivity to Truth's experiments and her familiarity with the various experiments arranged within the Honesty Court.

After all, everything here had been built upon the foundations Wei Mu laid. The silent transmission between followers of Folly allowed Galusha to swiftly deconstruct the Creator's Experiment from the Real Universe, mapping it against everything she had learned. And then she felt herself approaching the answer — the real truth.

Cheng Shi said nothing. He knew that what came next would be nearly impossible to hide from the Wise Man, but he could no longer turn back.

With a casual wave, he bestowed the Authority and Divine Throne of Folly. As a wash of pure white light enveloped the figure before him, Galusha was reborn.

The instant she reopened her eyes, the Wise Man sneered at Cheng Shi:

"The world has no wisdom. Ordinary people tripping over their own foolishness — that's expected. But you, Mr. Prisoner — oh wait, what should I call you?"

Yu Xi? Fixed Destiny? Convention's Proxy? Or... the Origin?

Whoever you are — if you've already known the truth, why are you letting the truth trip you up?"

Cheng Shi didn't speak. He merely gazed at Galusha in silence until she put aside her mockery and condensed all her sentiment into a single question:

"Do you believe your foolish act will have an answer?"

Cheng Shi nodded, devoid of joy or sorrow.

"Yes.

My choice is my answer."

...

Some time later, Dolgod welcomed its most glorious day in history. Every god in the universe had gathered — and even for vacant Divine Thrones, at least one candidate was present.

Watching the gods descend, Cheng Shi stood in wordless silence. Galusha, meanwhile, stood at the entrance of the Honesty Court, counting the foolish acts, one by one.

Birth had returned to Her domain. Miss Sun appeared to comfort Dolgod's moon, shielding Him from the strain of so many converging divine powers.

Prosperity... why wasn't Big Cat here?

Cheng Shi's gaze swept over Tao Yi, only to see the Wood Elf avert her reddened eyes.

Cheng Shi's heart lurched. Before he could ask what had happened, the Doctor — brought by Long Jing — lunged forward and seized his arm, staring up at him with wild-eyed fervor, muttering incessantly:

"I found it! I found it!

I think I may have found a method to avoid the Origin's gaze! Praise Yu Xi!"

"!!!"

"What?!"

"Truly?!"

Everyone present was simultaneously shocked and elated. Cheng Shi's pupils contracted sharply. A flicker of conflict crossed his face. He gripped the Doctor's shoulders and said in a low, steady voice:

"Slow down. Calm yourself. Tell us from the beginning."

Under Cheng Shi's soothing words, the Doctor gradually calmed. Perhaps too swept up in the ecstasy of discovering "truth," the Doctor didn't notice anything amiss — but the sharp-eyed tricksters around them had almost all simultaneously caught Cheng Shi's expression.

Something was wrong. Very wrong.

As Fixed Destiny, the Fate Weaver had always been searching for a way to escape the Origin's gaze and reach the future. If the Doctor had truly found the key, Cheng Shi should have been excited — or at the very least, as someone who had been groping forward in the dark with the weight of the world on his shoulders, he should have shown some reaction.

But right now, Fixed Destiny was too calm.

Calm, as though he already knew how to reach the future.

Yet if Fixed Destiny truly knew everything, he wouldn't have responded this way. He would have said that line he'd been using the most lately — "I know."

Thinking it through, what Cheng Shi seemed to know wasn't the specific method for escaping the Origin's gaze. It was something beyond the method — as though he had skipped ahead and already learned the world's ending.

And by the look of it, that ending was perhaps not a satisfying one.

In that moment, the Jokers exchanged knowing glances, and every gaze turned simultaneously to the Dragon King.

The Dragon King was the last person to have seen Cheng Shi before the group assembled. If something had happened in between, he should know.

But the Dragon King shook his head quietly, indicating he knew nothing.

A silent wave of worry rippled through the group. Their expressions varied. Zhen Xin furrowed her brow, her gaze passing over the Doctor and Cheng Shi before settling on the figure behind Cheng Shi — Galusha, the new Folly.

The two of them had discussed many things recently. Zhen Xin wanted to find some explanation from Galusha. But Galusha offered no response. She simply listened intently to the Doctor's discovery, as though she had returned to those childhood moments of resonating with Truth.

The Doctor steadied himself, organized the threads of his experiment, and began unveiling his great discovery to all.

"This experiment shouldn't have yielded results so quickly. It was a single remark from 0221 that suddenly opened my eyes.

I told you before — when Time summoned me, I was conducting the Divinity Germination Experiment. I couldn't ignore the connection, so when I returned to the laboratory, I threw myself back into the experiment, searching for any guidance Time might have left.

As everyone knows, the prerequisite for this experiment is creating Slices — and by curious coincidence, 0221 resurrected once again within my Slice Experiment.

The probability is extremely low, yet I've managed to 'reproduce' him more than once.

And the last time I saw him, he smiled at me and said:

'Dozing off again?

Be careful — next time you zone out, the person standing in front of the Experiment Ground might not be you anymore, Wang Weijin.'"

At this point, the Doctor's face flushed with fervor once more. "Praise Yu Xi!

It was this very sentence that made me connect it to Time's Edict — the one where He told me never to close my eyes — and in doing so, I glimpsed what might be the closest thing to 'truth' that exists in this world!"

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Chapter 1445: The Truth Closest to "Truth"

"First, we must establish one thing: if the Slice Experiment originates from a single Experiment Material prototype, why do Slices with entirely different personalities emerge?"

Praise Yu Xi!"

The moment the Doctor finished speaking, Galusha, standing behind Cheng Shi, delivered an utterly deadpan, textbook-precise answer:

"The causes of deviation during consciousness formation are many. The Tower of Logic's academic community generally recognizes three:

First — differences in the canned memories fed into the Slice lead to complete deviation during consciousness formation.

Second — defects and fragmentation in the Slice itself naturally cause cognitive deviation during consciousness formation. Put simply, a mutation occurs during the experiment.

Third — if the Experiment Material prototype was still in the consciousness-formation stage itself, then the post-experiment consciousness-growth guidance becomes the decisive factor.

The first case is most widely applied. The second is the most common and the most uncontrollable. The third is rare, since young Experiment Material prototypes offer poor return on investment — few experimenters bother to nurture them until adulthood, unless the initiator has ulterior purposes. Like my grandfather, Lord Keinlaur.

Praise Yu Xi!"

"?"

Galusha's "Praise Yu Xi" stunned everyone present into silence. Among them, Long Jing — who knew about the Doctor's quirk — asked in bewilderment:

"Did you eat an Inzagir too?"

All eyes turned to Galusha. The new Folly merely scoffed. "I just found it amusing, so I'm trying to embrace foolish acts."

"Why embrace foolish acts?"

Cheng Shi had developed a certain aversion to "embracing foolish acts" by now. After all, both Folly and Wei Mu had departed because of it — and that was precisely what worried him most.

He feared that Galusha, upon becoming Folly, would grow too wise — so wise that she'd see through the truth of the universe and the world's future, and lose faith in a world with no answer.

So when Galusha uttered those words, Cheng Shi frowned reflexively. But what she said next made every face in the room twist into the same peculiar expression.

"If I don't embrace foolish acts, how can I sit at the same table and debate with fools like you?"

My intellect won't permit it. So I can only pollute myself.

Praise Yu Xi!"

"..."

"..."

"..."

There it was.

That familiar Folly seemed to have returned.

Not quite the same, though. The old god Folly had been sharper and colder. Galusha at least retained a trace of human warmth — she was still willing to explain herself to "the fools."

Cheng Shi waved his hand, unwilling to let the farce waste more time, and gestured for the Doctor to continue.

The Doctor nodded eagerly.

"Correct — the majority of discarded Slices result from the second case: mutations during the experiment.

Of course, we can't deny that many miraculous strokes of brilliance also stem from experimental mutations. It's precisely that completely unrestrained, uncontrolled, free Change that creates infinite possibilities for experimental outcomes.

But all along, we've overlooked one question: what causes mutations in the first place? Prai—"

"That question was not overlooked."

Galusha shook her head, cutting off the Doctor's praise. At this moment, she looked less like Folly and more like Truth — for no one present understood that era's Tower of Logic or that period's Truth experiments better than she did. Not even the Doctor.

Many of the experiment records that players had studied were ones that had survived from her era.

If those records were primary sources, then Galusha herself was the creator and firsthand witness of those sources.

"Shortly after I pushed Pe Laya into the Erudition Presidium, I found a proposal among the mountain of funding applications that intrigued me greatly.

A young scholar who had once studied under Selius's faction was investigating the probability of Personality Slice mutations in Slice Experiments. He had already identified several key research directions and discovered that the probability of Personality Slice mutations consistently showed sharp spikes during certain time periods.

I intended to fund this scholar and have him explore how to reliably manufacture more chaotic Personality Slices — thereby causing some trouble for the Tower of Logic.

Unfortunately, Pe Laya's single vote wasn't enough to sway the Erudition Presidium. The project was killed.

I believe this is what the scholar was trying to describe?"

"Exactly!"

The Doctor wasn't offended by the interruption. On the contrary, the way he looked at Galusha brimmed with the hunger of academic discourse. That pure essence of Truth overflowed so intensely that Cheng Shi experienced a fleeting illusion — as if the Authority of Truth was drawing toward the Doctor of its own accord.

"I discovered the same thing in my experiments. Moreover, thanks to 0221's repeated replication, I was able to narrow down a specific time window.

Historical research on this topic has always focused on the temporal correlation of high-mutation-probability points. Each run of a Slice Experiment generates a massive number of Slice individuals — scholars would identify the deviant personalities and attempt to find a logical time-based pattern.

But mutations are inherently uncertain. High probability is still just probability, not certainty — making it extremely difficult to reach definitive conclusions in correlation studies.

So I abandoned that approach. Instead, I focused solely on the temporal mutation mechanism of a single fixed mutation point. In simpler terms, I concentrated exclusively on understanding why, within the first five hundred Slices generated, 0221's mutation probability was significantly higher than that of other individuals. And this time, I not only ran a large number of low-scale Slice Experiments on repeat — I even added the experimenter, myself, to the observation list.

That was inspiration drawn from Time's guidance and 0221's mockery. I wondered whether some change in the Experiment Material prototype, or some change in the observer, was triggering the Personality Slice mutations.

When the results came in, even I was shocked!

Praise Yu Xi — the approach was correct!

I found the likely cause of personality mutation in Slice Experiments!"

The Doctor grew more excited with every word. He strode into the center of the group, pulled a handful of glass balls from his coat pocket, and scattered them casually across the ground. Countless glass balls rolled in every direction, settling everywhere.

After a moment, he pointed to a blank spot on the floor and asked Cheng Shi:

"What happened here?"

Praise Yu Xi."

Cheng Shi frowned. Truthfully, from the moment the Doctor had scattered the glass balls, he had been subconsciously tracking their dispersal pattern. He thought he remembered a ball landing there, but he wasn't certain. He hadn't paid close enough attention.

Seeing the puzzled look on Cheng Shi's face, the Doctor revealed the answer.

"There's one glass ball missing here. Just now — someone stole it.

Praise Yu Xi."

"?"

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted. He confirmed that he hadn't seen anyone make a move, yet the people around him — especially the new gods at his side — all wore expressions of dawning understanding. In that instant, he too seemed to grasp what the Doctor was trying to say.

Someone had tampered with the glass balls while he wasn't paying attention.

There was no question that, as a mortal, he couldn't detect a god's actions. But what relevance did this have to escaping the Origin's gaze? They possessed no power that could rival the Origin's.

Cheng Shi was puzzled, but the Doctor quickly clarified. "Someone did indeed make a move, but they didn't use any divine power beyond mortal comprehension. They simply found the right moment. Praise Yu Xi."

With that, the Doctor pointed to Long Jing, who stood amid the group. Long Jing smiled, holding up the glass ball in his hand for Cheng Shi to see.

"When the Doctor gave me this task, I didn't expect it to be so easy.

I simply took the ball as quickly as I could — during the instant you blinked."

"!!!"

In that moment, everything clicked for Cheng Shi.

The Doctor nodded as well, barely restraining the elation on his face. "Precisely! The experimental conclusion is this: when the observer loses observation of the Slice Experiment, the probability of Slice mutation increases dramatically!

Yet because Slice Experiments are enormously costly in time and resources, throughout history, virtually no experimenter has ever let an experiment run unsupervised. They used every means available to ensure they wouldn't overlook a single minor step...

And yet no one ever realized that overlooking was the key cause of deviation!

Praise Yu Xi!"

...

Chapter 1446: Universe Frame Rate — Even the Origin Blinks

Hearing this, Cheng Shi recalled Time's final summons.

He had told the Doctor not to blink — and yet the instant the Doctor blinked, He departed this starry sky. That blunt demonstration clearly meant the same thing as the Doctor's experimental conclusion:

Change always happens in the observer's moment of "negligence"!

Extrapolating that to their current predicament — the Origin was likewise an experimental observer. So would It have moments of negligence?

The answer was yes!

Without question, yes!

Otherwise, Time would never have left such guidance for the world!

The Doctor continued:

"Similar speculations actually existed in the real world even before the Faith Game descended. Many scholars had long believed that time is not continuous — it possesses a minimum unit, and what exists within that smallest time interval is something humanity can neither know nor observe. We call it the 'Universe Frame Rate.'

Now, Time's guidance is telling us that this Creator's Experiment also has a 'Universe Frame Rate' — or perhaps we should call it the Origin Frame Rate, because it represents the discontinuity in the Origin's observation of this experiment.

In plain terms: the Origin blinks too!

And as long as we find that gap between blinks, it may be possible to achieve the incredible feat of evading the Origin's gaze!

Praise Yu Xi!

I believe this is the future They designed for us!

Limited by my mortal body, I wasn't able to pinpoint that exact temporal node. But if..."

The Doctor's fervent gaze locked onto Cheng Shi. The searing light in his eyes reminded Cheng Shi of the Truth he had once seen conducting the Faith Resonance Experiment in the Void.

And right now, the universe truly did need a Truth.

So Cheng Shi waved his hand and bestowed the Divine Throne and Authority of Truth. As an endless torrent of Truth's essence surged into the Doctor, Wang Weijin drew a deep breath, spread his arms, and closed his eyes.

Bathed in the radiance of Truth, he murmured:

"I see time. I see space. I touch Existence. I sense Void.

I marvel at the wonder of creation and stand in awe of the universe's splendor. I understand what 'He' expects of me, and at last I know what Truth is.

I am Truth!

Praise Yu Xi — I must continue my experiment. I will find the moment of the Creator's negligence for this world!"

"..."

Cheng Shi had assumed that inheriting a Divine Throne would temper the Doctor's "religious fervor." But he had underestimated just how high Yu Xi stood in the Doctor's heart.

The Doctor's expressions may have become more restrained, but the reverence packed into every "Praise Yu Xi" was palpable to everyone present.

For a moment, more than a few faces twisted into peculiar expressions. The Dragon King seized the opportunity to walk over to the Doctor and murmur something. Meanwhile, Long Jing raised a slightly puzzled question:

"By all rights, if Truth can find the Origin Frame Rate, the previous Truth should have known about it."

The Doctor didn't get a chance to answer, because Galusha beat him to it.

"Tch —

Because the old god Truth sought truth, yet never questioned the Origin.

Everything He sought was in pursuit of drawing closer to the Origin, not distancing Himself from It. Under those circumstances, why would He ever pay attention to the moments when the Origin wasn't watching?

Only Time, who was coerced by Deceit, would have conducted such research. You have to feel for Him."

Hearing this, Long Jing raised an eyebrow. "Did Folly know about it?"

"...?"

Galusha wasn't sure whether Long Jing was asking about the old god Folly or the new god Folly — or perhaps both at once with a side of mockery. She glanced at him and sneered.

"Whether He knew or not is irrelevant. What matters is that you don't know whether He knew.

Your foolish act... I'll answer it for you: there is no answer."

"???"

Long Jing blinked, momentarily tongue-tied. He was about to retort when Cheng Shi raised a hand, quelling the sideshow once more. He turned to the Doctor.

"How much time do you need?"

The Doctor's eyes blazed with eagerness. "Hard to say, but I don't think it will take long. The Dragon King's clue has given me new inspiration. Perhaps 0221's appearance wasn't random in the mutational sense."

The Dragon King's clue?

Cheng Shi glanced at the Dragon King, recalling the bizarre 220 seconds connected to Old Jia's memory in the Collection Hall of Memory.

Come to think of it, the number after 220 was 221...

Could that be a coincidence?

He nodded and told the Doctor to work right here in Dolgod, using whatever materials were at hand. The Honesty Court could provide ample space and raw materials, and equipment was no issue for Truth. He even produced the Ritual of Truth and lent it to the Doctor — all in the name of finding the so-called Origin Frame Rate as quickly as possible.

The future seemed to be drawing near.

At the same time, he distributed the remaining unassigned Divine Thrones one by one, watching with an impossibly complex expression as two new Voids were "born."

Deceit and Fate — standing before him once again, as though summoned by destiny.

Looking at Zhen Yi, who had split from Zhen Xin's consciousness with a mischievous grin plastered across her face, and An Mingyu, whose expression was equally complicated as she stood in wordless silence — Cheng Shi felt as though he had been thrown back in time, to the first moment he had ever seen both of Them together.

But things had changed. The old gods were gone.

He was silent for a long while before exhaling in a quiet, lingering sigh.

"Everything at hand is more or less settled. Now — can someone please tell me where Hong Lin... went?"

The moment the words left his mouth, the entire assembly fell still.

Silence. Endless silence.

The Prisoner swore he hadn't activated the Authority of Silence — everyone simply couldn't bear to meet Cheng Shi's eyes.

Cheng Shi's gaze swept across the gods and finally settled on Tao Yi. The Wood Elf crumbled at his glance, instantly clapping a hand over her mouth and spinning away. Even with all her strength, she couldn't stifle the sound of her weeping. Her shoulders heaved in sharp spasms, as if that alone were answer enough.

Everything before him told Cheng Shi a single, undeniable fact: Big Cat was in trouble.

So it had really...

Cheng Shi's heart plummeted.

In truth, from the moment everyone had gathered and Big Cat was absent, he had already guessed what she was doing.

After all, during his second trip to the Real Universe — transporting the gods' remains and bringing Mi Laozhang home — Cheng Shi had encountered a Hong Lin out there.

At the time, that Hong Lin had said: "Maybe you don't understand yet, but at your current pace, it won't be long..."

Cheng Shi had feared ever since that this "pace" might consume the Hong Lin of his own world. He just never imagined it would happen so soon!

That other Hong Lin had been tainted by the Origin's power. Cheng Shi had been meticulously monitoring every trace of the Origin's power beneath this starry sky, terrified that Hong Lin might approach that virus-like force and walk the same path as her alternate self.

Yet somehow, he'd still been careless.

When had she found the Origin's power?

Cheng Shi's brow creased. In the end, he let every guess and hope dissolve into a single sigh.

"Where... is she?"

Tao Yi, comforted by Zhen Xin, turned back around, her voice choked with tears.

"The depths of the Void. The edge of the world. She's waiting for you."

Cheng Shi vanished instantly. In the next heartbeat, he materialized in the deepest reaches of the Void — and there she was. His body seized. He saw once more the woman wreathed in iridescent light, her hair cascading like a waterfall of life — the Daughter of Prosperity.

The Hong Lin before him looked exactly like the one from the Real Universe.

Cheng Shi's eyes reddened in an instant. He sucked in a breath, unable to look straight ahead.

"Are you leaving me too?"

Seeing Cheng Shi arrive, Hong Lin choked up as well, but she quickly composed herself into that bold, spirited demeanor and forced a grin.

"Farewells are part of life, Cheng Shi. Don't be a crybaby. Be a man."

"Why?"

Hong Lin's smile faltered for an instant. She spoke with absolute seriousness: "I don't trust anyone else with this."

Cheng Shi's fists clenched. "But I told you — the Destined Ones would live to see the world's final chapter. I don't want to lie to you..."

Hong Lin laughed heartily. In the split second that Cheng Shi bowed his head, two crystal-clear tears slipped from the corners of her eyes.

"You didn't lie. You've never lied to me. You've already done more than enough. This IS the world's final chapter.

When you recruited me into the Destined Ones, you told me I would live — under Fate's protection — until the moment the world's script needed me to take the stage.

That moment has arrived. It's my cue.

I don't especially love this world full of suffering. But I love all of you. I'm willing to do something for my friends.

I'm willing."

...

Chapter 1447: I Want to Go to the Sea of Desire

Meanwhile.

While Cheng Shi was "saying goodbye" to Big Cat, the entirety of Dolgod roared into motion.

As the prison's sole prisoner and its nominal master, Aph Ros now had no say whatsoever over what happened to Dolgod.

All He could do, under Miss Sun's protection, was watch helplessly as the gods transformed His cage. What they intended to turn this place into, no one knew — because the experiment was already underway.

After transcending mortality and ascending to godhood, the Doctor's talents were finally free of the constraints of laboratory equipment and facilities. The Ritual of Truth reached its full potential in his hands. He was utilizing the knotted time of this place to ceaselessly search for the moment that could evade the Origin's gaze.

The Dragon King and Long Jing were helping. Galusha was sparing no effort either.

Everyone else was busy too — some left, some gathered, but all were working toward the world's future in their own way.

Qin Xin, the Prisoner, and Nangong were the first to depart. They left Dolgod immediately after Cheng Shi. What the Torchbearers intended to do was anyone's guess, but An Mingyu had a suspicion.

The three remaining Destined Ones drew together instinctively. The Blind One watched Qin Xin's receding silhouette with visible concern.

"Qin Xin... I'm afraid he has other ideas."

Li Wufang blinked. "What kind of ideas?"

"The return of his original self has rekindled the fire in his heart. Having worked with him this long, I know well that he isn't someone who likes to endure in silence. He's held back because he had no choice — he carries the hopes of two Qin Xins on his shoulders, the future of the Torchbearers, the expectation of protecting Fixed Destiny and saving the world. So he endured.

But now that he has a fallback — no, now that he has someone to lean on, a new hope — will he keep enduring?

He IS War. The beast forged in blood and fire harbors war's savagery within. He used to lock everything inside, unable to vent. But now... the time to unleash may have come."

Li Wufang and Tao Yi understood, but that didn't mean they could guess where Qin Xin had gone. Both had their own concerns weighing on them, and they didn't dwell long on the Torchbearers' affairs.

Tao Yi was fighting through the grief of parting, over and over, trying to convince herself to accept everything.

When Cheng Shi had left to say goodbye to Hong Lin, she hadn't even dared follow. She didn't want to lose Hong Lin, of course — but the universe couldn't afford to lose Prosperity either. If she wasn't strong enough, it could very well doom Fixed Destiny's mission to save the world and rob it of a future. Worse, it might make Hong Lin's departure meaningless.

She couldn't accept that outcome. So she had to suppress her grief and become stronger.

Li Wufang's mind was in turmoil too. As the embodiment of Order — the faith that craved universal order above all else — one concern had never left his thoughts:

Corruption!

He had never forgotten how Order died. And it wasn't just Order — War, Deceit, the Sin of Desirelessness... every god that had entered the Sea of Desire had met a terrible end.

Some things hadn't been laid on the table, but that didn't mean no one harbored theories.

To Li Wufang, the Sea of Desire was the single biggest ticking bomb in the universe!

With the future approaching and a new order on the horizon, he had to help the universe defuse this bomb. Even if it couldn't be defused, at minimum they needed to understand how it worked — so it never detonated again as it had in this era.

But he knew there was a very real chance he wouldn't come back. So after much deliberation, he came clean with the Destined Ones.

"I want to go to the Sea of Desire."

"!!??"

Tao Yi and An Mingyu stared in shock. Before they could voice their refusal, Li Wufang continued:

"Like A Dream's return inspired me. Someone has to do these things.

Don't panic. And don't tell the boss about this yet. This isn't a rash decision — I've thought it through carefully.

I know the universe needs Order, but I'm not the only candidate for Order.

Mo Li and Fang Yuan both drew close to Fixed Destiny, and both carried Order in their hearts. If I die in the Sea of Desire, at least Order will have successors. Right?"

Wrong. Absolutely wrong!

Even if Order had a contingency, they had already lost one Destined One. The Wood Elf and the Prophet could not accept losing another.

Seeing the worry on their faces, Li Wufang reassured them with a cheerful grin.

"I don't want to die either. I want to follow the boss, to walk alongside the Destined Ones, alongside everyone, and witness the future together. But somebody has to do this!

The Sea of Desire is too bizarre and too unstable. We can't carry an old era's festering wound into a new age.

It's decided. You two — keep my secret!"

With that, Li Wufang vanished from Dolgod's courtyard.

At the same time, by sheer coincidence, the Jokers were discussing the very same subject.

During a previous Joker Society meeting, they had debated this issue. Long Jing had even offered an outrageously bold hypothesis: that the Origin might be hiding within the Sea of Desire!

The theory was too extreme and had quickly been dropped. But today in Dolgod, in Long Jing's absence, the topic resurfaced.

With Existence helping Truth's experiment, the Jokers' little side-meeting became an intimate council among Zhang Jizu and the Zhen sisters.

The ever-steady Mi Laozhang voiced his concern. He, too, believed the problems of the Sea of Desire and Corruption had to be resolved now — they couldn't be left for the day the future arrived. He proposed scouting the way himself. Under the protection of Death's power, he might be able to survive — but all of it would require Deceit's cover, or the mission would be impossible.

He hadn't even finished the proposal before Zhen Yi shut it down.

"If Death could truly survive the Sea of Desire, why do you think Deceit never invited Death to go sightseeing inside when He was still around?"

Didn't find it appealing?"

"..." Mi Laozhang was left speechless.

Of course he knew Death couldn't survive either. But precisely because death was inescapable there, he believed he was the most suitable candidate — because he WAS Death.

He owed it to the Will his Benefactor left behind, owed it to the Divine Name he carried, and owed it to the words he had once spoken:

Before he himself died, no god would fall.

Yet before the Zhen sisters, Mi Laozhang had absolutely no say.

Zhen Xin smiled at the two of them and said, in the calmest tone imaginable:

"Death, Memory, Time, Deceit — none of them can be risked. Truth is occupied with the experiment, so that's out too. That makes me the most suitable.

I'll go.

Under Chaos, there are still Hu Wei and Da Yi. Even though those two have no attachment to this world, there's no denying they're still viable successors.

Besides — getting to walk this far alongside everyone, getting to see my little Yi Yi from this perspective... I'm already more than content..."

Zhen Xin looked at Zhen Yi, who was perched on her shoulder. But Zhen Yi bolted upright, all traces of playfulness gone, and shook her head with fierce resolve.

"No! Absolutely not!"

"No! Absolutely not!"

It wasn't just Zhen Yi. An Mingyu had somehow overheard Zhen Xin's voice and was already walking over, shaking her head with unwavering determination.

"I know what you're all thinking. The Sea of Desire does need to be investigated. But I don't think anyone has to risk their lives for it.

I've inherited Fate now. I could use prophecy to—"

"You are NOT allowed to prophesy!" x4

A collective Prophet-related PTSD erupted. Among the Jokers and Destined Ones present, four pairs of eyes as sharp as a hawk's talons locked onto An Mingyu simultaneously, "pinning" her hands in place.

At this point, if An Mingyu so much as produced a single Dice, forget about Cheng Shi — everyone here would lose their minds.

What if the Origin truly was hiding inside the Sea of Desire? Who could fill Fate's position then?

Anyone could go, but prophecy was absolutely off the table!

An Mingyu, all of Fate's power rendered useless, could only press her lips together and sigh.

"You're too late. Order has already left."

"!!!"

...

Chapter 1448: The Scene at the Sea of Desire's Edge

Hearts heavy with worry, the group rushed to the edge of the Sea of Desire, hoping to stop Li Wufang and discuss things further. To their surprise, the Sinking Land was even livelier than Dolgod — everyone who had left earlier was already assembled here.

Qin Xin had caught Li Wufang at the Sea of Desire's edge. The Prisoner, meanwhile, had one hand clamped on Nangong's shoulder, silencing her in place.

Seeing more and more people converge on this dangerous place, Qin Xin flung Li Wufang back into the crowd, planted himself with his bow, and stood alone between them and the Sea of Desire with a grin.

"A single spark can set the prairie ablaze — and so it has.

That the universe has come this far means the fire-passing is complete! I am at peace!

I can see the flame burning in each of your hearts. But the darkness of the road ahead still needs all of you to illuminate it. So today's journey — leave it to me!"

Only then did everyone realize that the Torchbearers had left early because they, too, had their sights set on the universe's last uncharted crisis.

But what was the deal with the Prisoner and Nangong? Judging by the scene, the one who had initially tried to compete with Qin Xin for the "spot" was that frail little girl?

Indeed — Nangong had been fighting for it. And to explain everything, the story had to begin from the Torchbearers' departure.

Just as An Mingyu had guessed, after finding his other self, Qin Xin's confidence had grown boundless. He knew that in the universe's current state, his "original" would never die again. That meant the seat of War had a fallback.

He had immediately taken the Prisoner and Nangong back to the Fire Passing Hall and solemnly placed his other self in their care.

He said:

"War must raise its voice at the right moment.

I've leaned toward the City Defenders for too long, but the Torchbearers aren't just Defenders — there are City Builders and City Breakers too. It's time I leaned their way for once.

For the sake of the fire, I've always marched in silence. But now, I refuse to stay silent any longer.

After inheriting War, I could feel His indomitable Will. The moment He returned from the Sea of Desire, He hurled Himself at the Origin without hesitation. That wasn't merely a roar born of war — I suspect it was, even more so, a clue He left for the world in blood and fire.

Corruption within the Sea of Desire is very likely connected to the Origin. At this critical juncture before the future arrives, I cannot leave this threat lingering for the universe.

I will enter the Sea of Desire as War. If I fall..."

Qin Xin gripped Nangong's and the Prisoner's shoulders with solemn gravity, then turned around, put on a brilliant smile, and looked at his other self.

"You are me. You are the new War!"

Like A Dream smiled too. He wasn't surprised by Qin Xin's choice — after all, he WAS him. The Torchbearer he had dreamed into being, the beast of War born from his own imagination.

If he himself could march willingly toward death, then the War known as Qin Xin would only be more "willing"!

So he did not refuse. He couldn't.

Qin Xin had done more than enough for the fire and for the world. He needed release. From here on, it was time for these thin shoulders to carry his burden.

Like A Dream nodded and laughed. "You'd better not be getting back at me for how abruptly I left that first time. Hahaha — go. Go boldly!

The Torchbearers will never fall because one person disappears.

A spark may fade, but the fire never dies. When the flames have already spread to fill the sky, this world's future will surely be one of light!"

The Sea of Desire mission was settled. Qin Xin turned to leave.

Yet the very instant he departed, Nangong vanished right behind him.

The Prisoner, still savoring the stirring moment, belatedly noticed both had disappeared. His face changed drastically as he raced after them.

Sure enough, he found Nangong at the Sea of Desire's edge, clutching Qin Xin from behind.

Qin Xin could plainly see Nangong's intent. He tried to dissuade her, but she looked at him with absolute resolve.

"If War enters the Sea of Desire, the only outcome is death..."

President, I'm not saying this to jinx us before the battle. The old god War's fall has already shown us the result.

So why not let me go instead? At least Decay and Corruption both belong to Descent — there's some connection. What if — and I mean what if — I can resist its influence..."

Even as she spoke, Nangong's own confidence wavered. Against the enigmatic Sea of Desire, she truly had none.

But the uncertainty quickly faded from her face. She steeled herself, her expression fierce with determination.

"I've always felt this Divine Throne of Decay came too easily. It's never sat right with me. I'm grateful to everyone, and I want to help. Now I finally have the chance..."

I have to be worthy of Cheng Shi's trust in me. I have to repay the kindness of everyone who's helped me. And I have to be worthy of the Authority I carry.

I am Decay. I need mercy. President — show me mercy, just this once. Let me be of some worth."

"..."

Faced with a plea that verged on begging, the gentle-hearted Qin Xin couldn't bring himself to refuse outright. But he knew he couldn't let Nangong stand in front of him. So he hardened his heart and began:

"Decay cannot—"

Before he could finish, Nangong cut in:

"Grandpa Cui!

When I inherited the throne, I purged the corruption pain the Container had left in his body and re-bestowed the faith of Decay upon him.

I know Old Cui is getting on in years and shouldn't have to suffer again. But if I truly fall in the Sea of Desire, I'm afraid I'll have to trouble him to walk a few more steps for this world.

I know he'd be willing. He said so himself — trading his old body's decay for the new world's prosperity is something he would be more than happy to do, because he is the indomitable Cui Dingtian!

So let me—"

She didn't finish. Nangong was interrupted — and not merely that. She couldn't utter another word.

The Prisoner had stripped her of the right to speak, then shook his head at Qin Xin. Clearly, he too felt Nangong was not the most suitable candidate.

The heart of fire-passing never measured worth by rank or value. The Prisoner hadn't been with the Torchbearers long, but he felt this truth deeply.

With the Prisoner's help, Qin Xin smiled and gently pried Nangong's fingers from his arm. Without looking back, he strode toward the Sea of Desire.

But the company today was far larger than anticipated. Two steps later, he found himself doing exactly what Nangong had done to him — grabbing Li Wufang, who had been trying to rush past him into the sea.

"..."

"..."

The two men locked eyes, each understanding the other perfectly. Neither said a word.

Moments later, Zhen Xin, An Mingyu, and the rest arrived. The scene fell into silence.

Seeing this, the Prisoner scratched his head and offered a quiet remark:

"I only silenced Nangong. The rest of you CAN talk, you know. Say something, please — listening to nothing but the tides of the Sea of Desire is rather unsettling..."

What was there to say? Gazes crisscrossed, everyone knowing the others were working for the universe's sake. But to decide who should be the one to march to their "death" ... perhaps no one could make that choice for another.

And just as the standoff dragged on, a clear voice rang out from behind the group.

"I'll go.

Looking across the entire universe, I'm probably the most suited for this right now.

Stop fighting. Trespassing on another faith's domain never ends well. This is my Benefactor's territory — naturally, I should be the one to go.

Besides, the Sea of Desire preys on desire. Everyone has desires. Can you withstand it?

Probably not.

But I can. Because I have no desires.

As a matter of fact, I'd like to go find some desire in this sea. And maybe, while I'm at it, find the meaning of my life."

With that, a gradually greening silhouette entered everyone's view.

Poison!

This emotionless god of Corruption twirled the dagger Dance With Desire in his hand, walking step by step to Qin Xin's side.

...

Chapter 1449: Then Let the World Remember Me

And just when you thought it was over — there was more!

...

Poison hadn't arrived by coincidence. She too had attended the gathering at Dolgod.

Corruption may not have had a Divine Throne, but Corruption did have a Chosen One.

When the Dragon King was assembling everyone on Cheng Shi's behalf, he hadn't known how Cheng Shi planned to handle this Chosen One without a throne. But regardless of Fixed Destiny's plans, at the very least someone from Corruption's side needed to be present. So the Dragon King had sent word to Poison as well.

He sought her opinion. Poison did not refuse.

Yet her attendance — much like Corruption's situation itself — was painfully awkward.

From start to finish, perhaps because of the Doctor's discovery or Big Cat's farewell, the gods had not immediately paid her any attention.

Poison didn't mind. She had lost her desires, and with them, the capacity to care.

But when she watched all the gods come together, working as one to find a future for this world, her heart gave a single, uncontrollable lurch. She wanted to join in — yet she couldn't find the drive to do so.

Everyone knew desire was a terrifying thing. What they didn't know was that the absence of desire could be equally terrifying.

Poison kept stirring with the thought of belonging, but such thoughts were like rootless duckweed — impossible to build grand aspirations upon. So even after Cheng Shi left and the gods busied themselves, she still stood rooted to the spot, lost and directionless.

Until she faintly overheard the Destined Ones' and the Jokers' conversations, then quietly followed them to the Sea of Desire's edge.

This was her "home turf."

Poison took her place beside Qin Xin, a smile blossoming on her face. But everyone knew the smile was a mask — a person who had lost all desire could feel no emotions. Poison was simply playing the part of who she used to be.

Qin Xin couldn't deny Poison's courage. He only furrowed his brow and said worriedly:

"You haven't inherited a Divine Throne. You're still mortal. The Sea of Desire is this dangerous — you..."

Poison glanced at Qin Xin, lips curving upward.

"Is it any less dangerous for a god?"

"I've only ever heard of gods dying in the Sea of Desire. I've never heard of a mortal dying there. Who knows — maybe mortals actually have the advantage inside?"

"..."

The remark left everyone speechless. It was true — they didn't yet know the Sea of Desire's effect on mortals. But then again, no sane person would take a swim in the Sea of Desire for fun.

Zhen Yi, upon hearing this, leaned toward her sister and muttered under her breath: "No matter how you spin it, that sounds like a Clown's sophistry. As expected — he really is the universe's greatest source of contamination..."

Speak of the devil.

While the standoff over who would enter the Sea of Desire continued, Cheng Shi returned — and Hong Lin was with him.

They hadn't said their final farewell yet. Cheng Shi, recalling the mission that the other Hong Lin had mentioned in the Real Universe, felt her departure was too rushed. He had gently asked her to stay a while longer.

Hong Lin wanted to spend more time with her friends, of course. But she declined Cheng Shi's approach and stood alone at the farthest edge.

Tao Yi saw Hong Lin arrive, bit her lip, and forced herself to stay put, fighting the impulse to rush over and say goodbye. She watched her best friend from afar. Hong Lin, seeing the little fox hold together so bravely, felt a swell of relief.

It was amid all this that Cheng Shi walked slowly to stand before Poison. His face — like someone who had truly lost all desire — was devoid of joy or sorrow.

"This isn't about faith, and no one person is indispensable for this. We may still find a better way. When the future arrives, you may yet find the meaning of who you are. Poison, you..."

Before he could finish, Poison let out a bright laugh.

"I don't like your current identity. I prefer the little Priest you used to be.

So tell me, little Priest — will you remember me?"

"..."

Cheng Shi gazed out at the distant Sea of Desire, his lips moved faintly — and as always when Poison drew close, he gave no answer.

Poison smiled. A smile radiant to the point of blinding.

"Then let the world remember me. And you'll remember me by default."

With that, she stopped looking at Cheng Shi and turned to face everyone standing at the Sea of Desire's edge.

"Ever since the gods descended and the game began, I've been satisfying everyone's desires, using that to speculate on Corruption's Will and draw closer to the divine.

Now it's time to show myself a little tenderness.

Since we're all such good friends, won't you satisfy one desire of mine? Even though I've long since lost my desires, I still 'want' to find the person I used to be.

Let me go in your place. It satisfies the world's need, and it satisfies my own 'pursuit.' Everybody wins.

Besides, I may not even bring back an answer. The Sea of Desire is boundless — I can't guarantee where its currents will sweep me. If you don't hear from me for a while, you can resume fighting over that spot. It won't diminish your spirit of sacrifice one bit.

So give me this chance. It's settled. Remember to miss me."

With that, Poison swept aside her fading-green bangs with effortless grace, and without a backward glance, strode toward the Sea of Desire.

The instant she turned away, every trace of her smile shattered. Her face became identical to Cheng Shi's at this moment — utterly expressionless.

Qin Xin startled, reaching out to pull her back, but Poison nimbly dodged. Then Cheng Shi's voice rang out from behind:

"Poison!

Remember — if you discover anything connected to the Creator inside the Sea of Desire, and that thing is contagious, then from the moment you discover it, don't speak another word.

We'll be waiting for you at the Sea's edge..."

There was one more sentence Cheng Shi left unspoken, murmured only in his heart: 'We'll see you off one more time.'

Cheng Shi had already formed a vague guess about the Sea of Desire's secret.

Whether mortal or divine, anyone who came into contact with what lay inside the Sea of Desire would likely not escape death. But the timing and manner of that death were very telling.

Cheng Shi re-examined everything he knew about the Sea of Desire, and finally uncovered a few more telling details.

Order and War had entered the Sea of Desire long ago, yet they didn't die until the current Epoch — a gap spanning several Epochs.

Deceit, on the other hand, went from entering to dying in a span so short it could be counted in days. Drasilco was even more extreme — he died practically the moment he emerged.

This meant the "contamination" inside the Sea of Desire had no fixed "shelf life."

And the strangest part: none of the aforementioned gods had died from the "contamination" itself!

They had either self-destructed or died by external forces — and even when external forces were involved, those forces had been invited by the gods themselves. War, for example.

All of this led Cheng Shi to believe that the "contamination" itself might not be lethal. It was more like a curse — or, seen from another angle, it looked more like the resolve of those gods to "free themselves from the contamination"!

Cheng Shi's line of reasoning wasn't unfounded. Drasilco's dying words had led the Jokers to connect the Sea of Desire's secret to the Origin. And as it happened, among those gods: Deceit was Fear Faction. Order had said He sided with Deceit — Fear Faction as well. War wasn't exactly fear-aligned, but His resolute charge at the Origin certainly wasn't the Approach Faction either...

All three had sought to distance themselves from the Origin, and all three had chosen death after being "contaminated." Did that mean the secret hidden in the Sea of Desire was truly inseparable from the Origin?

...

Chapter 1450: The Secret in the Sea of Desire

But how could the secret be brought out?

They had all entered the Sea of Desire, yet not a single one had ever shared the specifics of what they saw and heard inside!

It wasn't that they couldn't remember — Drasilco's dying words clearly showed he recalled everything. And it wasn't fear of death — neither Deceit nor Order had revealed anything even before they resolved to die.

This forced Cheng Shi to entertain a possibility:

A rule prevented them from speaking!

Some rule had forced their silence — perhaps a compulsory block, perhaps some other mechanism.

This was the one piece Cheng Shi hadn't been able to puzzle through. But during his parting conversation with Big Cat, something she said had sparked a flash of insight.

Hong Lin, wielding the Origin's power, had stared at the iridescent divine energy on her hands and mused:

"I can feel the immense power contained within. And I can feel it clinging to me like maggots on bone.

It fills my flesh with Abundance and enriches my spirit, yet it also gnaws at my will and devours my reason.

Every now and then, I fantasize about drawing closer to It — about wanting to become Its puppet.

The Origin's power is truly terrifying. This thing must never be left in the world!"

It was those very words that made Cheng Shi suddenly wonder: could what lay inside the Sea of Desire be the same kind of contamination as the Origin's power — something that turned people into the Origin's "puppets"?

Or could the contamination not only infect those who entered the Sea, but also spread further using the contaminated individuals as vectors?

If so, that would explain everything the universe had witnessed. But it also raised a problem: no matter who discovered the secret inside the Sea of Desire, there was no way to bring it out!

Because they could not speak of it!

Based on this hypothesis, Cheng Shi had spoken those words to Poison before she entered the Sea.

He had told her that if she found anything connected to the Origin — anything contagious — she must not utter another word. If Poison could make it out alive and remain silent, that alone would confirm his guess!

The elegance of this method was that Poison's silence perfectly satisfied whatever unknowable speech-prohibition rule was in place, while still revealing a corner of the Sea of Desire's secret to the world.

Of course, the true nature of the secret might never be known to anyone outside the Sea. But as he'd been thinking — knowing the principle behind the ticking bomb was enough to help the universe avoid countless crises.

This approach was also inspired by the Will of Silence.

Silence was never truly without expression — His expressions were simply all rendered silent.

Wait!

At this thought, Cheng Shi froze — because he suddenly recalled the massive, drifting corpse of the Leaking World Silent Puppet in the Real Universe!

Could that wandering Silence have been expressing this very meaning?

Draw close, and you will be contaminated?!

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted sharply. He stared in alarm toward the distance, but the Sea of Desire's surging tides had long since swallowed Poison's figure, dragging her mortal body into the ocean of desire.

...

Deep within the Sea of Desire.

Strangely enough, from the Sinking Land the Sea of Desire appeared ferocious — desire surging in terrifying waves. But only from within could you discover that beneath the roaring surface, desire was startlingly orderly.

And the deeper you went, the clearer it became — the waters grew thicker near the top but more transparent below. Poison, descending all the while, was bewildered. She even wondered whether

Order, upon setting foot here, had remarked that this place felt more like a domain of Order than of Corruption.

She followed the guidance that lay before her — guidance that came in the form of corpses, all manner of them, drifting through the Sea of Desire!

Corpses, yes!

Since the Sea of Desire had always been here, a steady stream of living creatures had inevitably discovered it since the dawn of life and "accidentally stumbled in."

From the grotesque expressions frozen on their faces, most had clearly died of different desires. Perhaps because her own heart held no desire, Poison felt no resonance with the flowing tides of want.

It didn't feel like exploring a deadly maelstrom. It felt like deep-sea diving beneath a calm surface. As she sank deeper, the corpses grew fewer and the flowing desires grew more "transparent."

The descent wasn't entirely uneventful. Every so often, a tidal wave of desire would churn up from the seabed, muddying the path behind her and pushing the desire upward toward the surface.

Fortunately, Poison was a decent "swimmer." She wasn't swept up by desire, and after gritting her teeth through several tidal surges, she dove ever deeper.

Until, after some time, she saw the ocean floor — a vast expanse of blood-red soil. She touched down. And there she found the very last corpse.

She recognized it.

But without desire, she felt little emotion at finding someone she knew. She walked over quietly, looked upon the fallen comrade who had taken his own life here with a smile, the Torchbearer elite who had let go with a grin — and nodded in wordless acknowledgment before pressing on.

After walking for a while longer, Poison had no idea where she was. The surroundings were monotonously unchanging — the transparent desire had vanished like the water itself. She felt as though she were strolling through a Void that happened to have a floor of crimson earth. In every direction — empty, barren, devoid of landmarks.

No wonder no one had ever found Corruption. With the Sea of Desire this vast, how could anyone find the so-called secret?

She didn't know. She just kept walking.

The blood-red soil beneath her feet would quake like an earthquake from time to time, kicking up clouds of sediment and sending new tidal waves surging toward the surface.

Poison kept her balance nimbly and marched on in silence.

She had been walking for a very long time — so long that she grew tired. She sat down right where she was on the seabed to rest.

But as luck would have it, another tremor struck at that very moment. The crimson ground heaved violently. A massive upwelling burst from the surface, sediment exploding everywhere. Caught off guard, Poison was finally swept up by a vortex of desire and flung far from the seabed. She hurtled upward — but her reflexes were quick. She soon gritted her teeth, broke free from the rising vortex, and began swimming back toward the bottom.

And then she froze.

An instant later — even she, devoid of desire and emotion — trembled violently from head to toe as an overwhelming terror surged through her.

"!!!!!"

Because from her current vantage point, looking down, that seabed coated in blood-red sediment — that faintly murky ocean floor — looked unmistakably like...

An enormous, crimson eye staring right at her!

"BOOM—"

Poison's consciousness shattered to blank static. The next instant, she began plummeting toward the seabed.

When she regained awareness and saw the blood-red earth inches from her face, she clawed upward in a frenzy, swimming for her life. She could feel the desires around her — desires that didn't belong to this world — sliding past her sides. She wished she had two extra arms so she could flee the seabed faster.

She didn't know where the terror came from. She only knew she had to run — run now — get away from here!

She swam harder, harder — but mid-stroke, she lurched to a halt. Her gaze snapped to her own arms.

On skin that had been snow-white moments ago, countless blood-red veins had spread at some unknown point, tracing pattern after pattern of eyes across her flesh. Those eyes blinked in unison and, in the same instant, turned to look at her.

"..."

It was a terrifying exchange of gazes.

From that single glance, Poison understood. She had been "contaminated."

She had become the Origin's eyes.

That's right — the Origin!

Ha. Who could have imagined? The Experiment Master sitting high above in the Real Universe wasn't merely observing the entire experiment from out there. He had hidden His eyes at the bottom of the Sea of Desire...

He cared that much about His experiment — enough to use this method for up-close observation of every world's evolution.

And in that moment, Poison finally understood why those gods had sought death so desperately.

Because the Origin could not be looked upon, and could not be spoken of!

The rule that had forcibly seized her consciousness told her: the moment she revealed this to any other living being, all that awaited them was contamination!

Until every creature in this petri dish became His eyes — and the experiment failed, and the world collapsed.

Poison fell silent.

She swam toward the surface with all her might. She would use her silence to tell everyone the secret of this place.

...