

The Gods 1451

Chapter 1451: Escaping the Origin's Gaze

At the edge of the Sea of Desire. The Sinking Land.

Not long after Poison entered the Sea of Desire, word arrived from Dolgod.

The Doctor and several "lab assistants" rushed over, their faces flushed with excitement. The moment they touched down, they asked everyone:

"For a god, what is the most important thing?"

Praise Yu Xi."

"..."

'You had better not be setting up a rhetorical question.'

Cheng Shi furrowed his brow, thought for a moment, and gave his answer. "Faith."

"Exactly! It's faith!"

The Doctor's elation was uncontainable. "Praise Yu Xi! Change is what an experiment pursues — the unexpected is the engine that advances results.

I found it!

I found that moment in time! And as it happens, this discovery also came from an accident.

While I was contemplating the experiment's progress, my gaze drifted unconsciously toward the Ritual of Truth nearby. The Ritual of Truth isn't purely a creation of Truth — it's also Truth's Container. Since faith in Truth still exists, I could see Divinity dripping inside the Container.

Perhaps because the entire universe is thirsting for truth, the drip rate wasn't slow — but it certainly wasn't fast either. And what's more remarkable: neither stretching nor compressing time changes the rate at which Divinity drips!

At that moment, watching one drop of Divinity fall while the next began to coalesce, a bolt of insight struck me:

If time is discontinuous, then existence is also discontinuous. And if that's the case... could faith be discontinuous as well?!

Faith is a god's very foundation. If faith isn't continuous, might there be a single instant when the faith goes blank — when a god has no 'connection' with His followers?

And wouldn't the absence of connection mean the absence of observation — or even complete irrelevance?!

If they're completely irrelevant, then drawing near or pulling away wouldn't affect two 'independent' 'individuals.' Isn't that precisely the 'moment of negligence' we've been searching for?

Praise Yu Xi!

This instantly inspired me. I pulled Long Jing in and we began observing the temporal pattern of Divinity drips in the Container. The overall drip time varies with the strength of faith, and Time's power can't accelerate faith's coalescence. But our focus wasn't on the dripping process — it was on the 'blank' time between the fall of one drop and the coalescence of the next!

I call it the Faith Interval.

And then something fascinating occurred: no matter the drip speed, the Faith Interval is absolutely fixed!

While Time's power can't influence faith itself, with Time's precision we can absolutely pinpoint this interval. And in Long Jing's words..."

The Doctor knew exactly when to step aside. He understood this was the moment to hand the stage to Long Jing, so he trailed off and turned to look at him.

Every gaze shifted to Long Jing. Unable to suppress the grin tugging at his lips, he gave the group an extravagant bow, then said with theatrical mystery:

"221!

It's not just a duration — it's also the number of Time Knots. A Time Knot doesn't stretch time infinitely; each one has an upper limit. Exceed it and the knot can't be completed — the folded time collapses entirely. But that didn't stump me!

Through my painstakingly delicate operation, after 221 consecutive Time Knots, I finally observed the instant within the Container when old Divinity had dripped away and new Divinity hadn't yet followed.

Put simply: if you imagine time as a black line drawn on a canvas, then in observing that line, I magnified the viewing window 221 times — and finally found a single pixel on that canvas that hadn't been painted black!

And it wasn't just the Truth Container. We checked Time, Memory, Folly... every Container we could get our hands on. The Faith Interval is 'absolute' — it doesn't vary between Containers!

So..."

Long Jing's burning gaze turned to Cheng Shi. He knew Cheng Shi held a Dyeing Container capable of activating every faith.

"If all faiths combined can forge a Container that perfectly mimics the Origin's Container, then in the very instant Divinity drips from the Origin's Container — in that Faith Interval called 221 — we would

have the chance to escape the Origin's gaze, sever our connection to the Origin, and break free of this experiment!

I believe THAT is the greatest legacy Deceit left for us!

Cheng Shi — is the Container in your hands... the Origin's Container?"

"..."

It was. Of course it was.

Cheng Shi had already determined the Dyeing Container's purpose. He just hadn't realized that the hourglass's function was simply "keeping time."

With a complicated expression, Cheng Shi produced the Container. It had already been dyed with many faiths, but some remained inactive.

Looking at its puppet-like form, the remaining few gods stepped forward one by one under Cheng Shi's gaze, dyeing the Container in turn.

Truth, Folly, Prosperity, Order...

Yes — Prosperity. In the end, Hong Lin had passed her Divine Throne to the little fox before leaving. Tao Yi, cradling a tiny jade-green sprout, gazed at Hong Lin from afar, tears streaming down her face in a silent farewell.

As faith after faith poured in, the Container shifted form again and again. Until An Mingyu stepped forward and channeled the power of Fate — and the Dyeing Container abruptly stopped changing. It did not assume Fate's Container form. Instead, it began rapidly cycling through its previous forms.

No — more precisely, it was flashing through the forms of all fourteen faiths in sequence, following the order of the Paths: Life, Descent, Civilization, Chaos, Existence, and Void. It skipped Corruption, and it did not settle on Fate.

It was as though Fate's power hadn't dyed it at all. Rather, it had brought "Change."

The Dyeing Container lifted free of Cheng Shi's hand and floated into the air. As it cycled through its forms, tangible faith began spreading outward like a physical substance.

Cheng Shi's eyes darkened. Unable to determine whether this Change was good or bad, he could only watch and wait.

Everyone else reacted as though facing a dire threat, surging forward to shield Fixed Destiny behind them.

Countless divine powers erupted skyward, isolating the Dyeing Container from the universe. Yet the tangible faith emanating from the Container began resonating with the surrounding divine power, accelerating its spread.

Before long, the faith-substance wove a crude outline around the Container. Only then did everyone realize the Container seemed to be Reconstructing — and as for what it was about to Reconstruct into...

Looking at that vaguely familiar outline, every Joker present lost the ability to speak.

"!!!!!"

"A Divine Throne?!"

Yes!

The Container, floating in mid-air and infused with fourteen faiths, had used tangible faith to assemble itself into a Divine Throne — one whose shape was nearly identical to the one Cheng Shi had brought back from the Corpse Field of Gods in the Real Universe!

Except this one wasn't shattered. On the contrary, it looked extraordinarily complete.

Perhaps this was what that throne truly looked like.

Though the faith had solidified into something almost real, the moment the Container finished Reconstructing, that solidified faith burst apart and dissipated, leaving only traces that faith had once been there. The Container shrank back to its normal size and drifted gently into Cheng Shi's hand.

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted sharply. Looking at the "blank" miniature Divine Throne in his palm, he finally understood what this object truly was.

"This is...?"

"A blueprint." Cheng Shi clutched the object tightly. "A blueprint for assembling that throne.

And that throne isn't merely a throne. It is exactly what we've been looking for —

The Origin's Container."

...

Chapter 1452: The Origin's Container

The Divine Throne's shape was two regular triangles pressed together — an inverted triangle forming the back, an upright triangle for the base.

And since two faiths were missing, both triangles were hollow at their centers.

The throne Cheng Shi had retrieved from the Corpse Field of Gods was identical to this. But because the gods' remains that comprised it were shattered, the throne looked fragmented and riddled with gaps, so no one had recognized the resemblance at the time.

But looking at it now — wasn't this complete throne clearly an hourglass folded to a 90-degree angle?!

With a grave expression, Cheng Shi pulled from his spatial storage the previous throne assembled from the gods' remains. Under everyone's watchful gazes, he placed the large and small thrones side by side.

It was obvious: the Dyeing Container was the blueprint Deceit had left for crafting this throne. The larger one was a replica — assembled from despair and corpses.

Only gods could stand on the Sinking Land at this point, and they were all new gods — every one of them sharp enough. The moment the two thrones stood together, they had already guessed how to construct the throne, and how to assemble the final Container that would let Fixed Destiny find the "moment of negligence" and lead the world out from under the Creator's gaze.

It was simple. Follow the blueprint and fill in the materials.

As for what those materials were...

Cheng Shi suddenly realized the problem. He lunged forward, trying to snatch everything back — but Qin Xin caught his arm, pressed his hand down, and smiled.

"The answer is right in front of us. We have no reason to flinch now.

Cheng Shi, don't step back.

The era has pushed us to this point. The Fear Faction has already paved the road ahead. Now all we have to do is assemble the throne according to the blueprint, follow the script Deceit wrote for the universe, and the far shore is the future we've longed for.

They resisted for an entire era. We resisted through an entire game. Now, on the brink of the ending — how can we retreat?"

Everyone nodded in unison, all eyes on Fixed Destiny.

But as he stared into those eyes brimming with passion, those eyes painted with hope, Cheng Shi shook his head. Faster and faster, more and more frantically — he shook his head without stopping, retreating step by step, saying as he backed away:

"No, no, no!

That's not how it works!

You don't understand what it takes to fill this throne! The instant I touched it, it told me — it doesn't need divine power, or matter, or flesh. It needs Will. Spirit. Faith. It needs the Will and Faith of every god drained dry, smeared upon it, made manifest!

Qin Xin, do you understand what that means?! It means that when the throne is assembled, when the Container begins dripping Divinity, you — all of you — in that future you long for... you won't be in it anymore!

Gone!!!"

"..."

"..."

"..."

The scene plunged into deathly silence, broken only by Cheng Shi's shattered voice.

Did they not know?

No — they had guessed the moment the two thrones were placed side by side.

Or perhaps even earlier. From the moment the Clown named Fixed Destiny stopped smiling, they knew the world's future could not make the Clown happy.

The Clown's joy was pure. Everything he did was for his friends. So if the Clown ever stopped smiling, it could only mean the Clown had lost his friends.

But his friends were all right here beside him — so how could he have lost them?

Simple. The Clown hadn't lost the friends of the present. He had lost the friends of the future.

It wasn't a difficult deduction, but no one had pierced the veil voluntarily.

They, too, had hoped to find another way before the truth was laid bare. But now, everything told them: only this single path — the one the Fear Faction had plotted for an entire era — could lead to the far shore.

If they chose to abandon it now, an entire era of resistance and planning would be reduced to nothing.

And worse — they wouldn't survive either.

Because the Creator's experiment would fail, and every soul in the universe would be left with no way to live.

Everyone understood this. But not a single person tried to talk Cheng Shi around in this moment. They knew the one who understood this best was Cheng Shi himself, and the one least willing to let the Fear Faction's sacrifice amount to nothing was also Cheng Shi.

After all, he was the greatest link between everyone and the Fear Faction. He had orchestrated the succession from old gods to new. He had shared the fear in his heart with them all. He had unveiled the universe's truth and its secrets for the world...

The Clown understood everything. Reality was simply too cruel for him to accept.

Into the prolonged silence came a soft laugh. Everyone turned to see Zhen Xin stroking Zhen Yi's head with a smile.

"That's not so bad, is it? It's liberation, right?"

Zhen Yi grinned, looking meaningfully at her sister.

"Hehe~

Well, not necessarily. But we'll be liberated eventually.

Since we're all going to die sooner or la—"

Before she could finish, Zhen Xin clapped a hand over her mouth — exasperated yet doting. "You're not allowed to say that."

Zhen Yi rolled her eyes.

"Fine, fine. I won't say it. Since we're all going to 'leave' sooner or later — the word 'leave' is acceptable, right? — then I'll go first. Let me set an example for everyone.

That way, given little Shi Shi's personality, when he misses us in the new world, maybe I'll be the first one he thinks of?"

"?"

Zhen Yi's one remark opened a door in Long Jing's mind. He suddenly stepped forward.

"Then let ME go first. If the new world truly escapes the Origin's gaze, I have only one request:

Carving a Monument for the selfless who gave everything — that's not too much to ask, right? Oh, and put my name at the very top..."

"I can carve one right now. Want me to?" Zhang Jizu cut in, eyes narrowed.

Long Jing's face fell. He shot Zhang Jizu a look of utter disdain. "Old Zhang, you're such a killjoy..."

The Jokers' gags injected a sliver of life into the scene. Meanwhile, Cheng Shi had retreated all the way to the Sea of Desire's edge. A few more steps and he'd fall in — but then a hand pressed against his back and began pushing him, step by step, back toward the others.

The person behind him said nothing. Cheng Shi didn't look back. He had already guessed who it was — and at last confirmed that the Sea of Desire did indeed harbor contamination connected to the Origin.

The figure walked past Cheng Shi, glanced at the throne among the crowd, and Qin Xin, watching the two approach, let out a resigned yet relieved smile, followed by a sigh.

"It seems the Sea of Desire can't be taken away. In that case, perhaps the only option is to separate reality from the Void.

A single god's power wouldn't be enough. But all the gods combined shouldn't find it difficult.

However, splitting reality from the Void will very likely make the Creator think the petri dish has cracked — that the experiment has failed. The world would face enormous risk.

So this task, too, must fall to you, Cheng Shi. When the faith and Will of every god is placed upon you at once, you will have the power to lead the world out from under the Origin.

Tear open the Void. Take reality with you. As for how to preserve the world — I believe that by then, you will understand better than any of us.

Don't hesitate. Do it. We believe in you. And the world is running out of time..."

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Chapter 1453: The Day of Faith's Farewell, the Hour Will Gather as One (I)

Cheng Shi felt as though he had been "betrayed" again.

His friends had so "easily" "abandoned" themselves, choosing "death."

He had never wanted this. Yet reality had pushed him here, step by step, and Fixed Destiny was slowly merging with him completely.

He replayed the "Final Oracle" the Flame of Hope had left behind, reviewing again and again the future Deceit had envisioned for the world...

That was not the future he wanted.

But the future was here. He had no choice.

If he didn't take this step, every effort that came before would be wasted.

He might deny himself for the sake of his friends — but he could never deny Deceit, deny Death, deny the Fear Faction, deny the Torchbearers, deny every friend who had stood silently behind him...

He couldn't do it. Neither forward nor backward — he couldn't do it.

So Cheng Shi "stopped" right here.

He wished time would freeze in this very moment. That way, he wouldn't have to face a future that barely qualified as one, nor bear the price of the world's failure. He would still have his friends, and hope would still live in his heart.

This was the present. The most "beautiful" present.

But time would never stop for any one person. It was far more impartial than even Order.

Cheng Shi wasn't sure whether the Sea of Desire had affected him. Today, his emotions were being amplified without limit. He stood frozen in place, wordless for an eternity, not even daring to raise his head and look at the friends before him — until nightfall...

?

Since when did the Sinking Land have nightfall?

Cheng Shi looked up in alarm, only to find he was no longer at the Sea of Desire's edge. Instead, he stood in pitch-black Void — hollow darkness enveloping him, and an uncontrollable sliver of fear crept through his heart.

Then the fear began to swell. Not for any esoteric reason, but because he saw a figure walking toward him.

Hu Xuan.

The Sage still wore her familiar, elegant attire. She walked calmly up to Cheng Shi and, seeing the slight pallor of his face, let a flicker of sympathy cross her eyes before it was replaced by firmness and trust.

She smiled.

"They knew you couldn't bring yourself to decide. So they came up with this way to persuade you.

I know you understand everything. And I know this isn't meant to be comfort — it's a farewell. So I volunteered to go first.

After all, I am Birth. Their 'elder.' It's only fitting I go first."

The word "farewell" only deepened Cheng Shi's helplessness. He tried to retreat, but found there was nowhere left to go. Hu Xuan maintained her smile with all her strength.

"Cheng Shi, you have never been an indecisive person. Otherwise, back then — with the Stars Dagger, right under Zangier's nose — I would never have had a chance to survive.

It was your decisiveness that saved me... Now it's time to use that decisiveness to save this world."

Cheng Shi lowered his eyes, refusing to look at Hu Xuan — as if by not looking, this moment could be something other than a farewell.

"Saving the world means I can't save you." That was all he said.

Hu Xuan was a pragmatist. She spoke bluntly.

"Not saving the world won't save us either. But saving the world can at least preserve everyone's hope.

They resisted for so long — there ought to be a result, shouldn't there?

I may not be the same as them, but I have my own hopes. As long as the new world still has new life, then isn't Birth accompanying you in its own way?

I am no longer just a Sage. I am no longer merely Hu Xuan. I am Birth. Unending Birth."

"..."

The Sage's smile radiated more and more Divinity. But Cheng Shi couldn't feel it. All he felt was sorrow.

He was silent for a long time. Then, suddenly, he raised his head and looked into Hu Xuan's eyes. And in her startled gaze, he extended his hand toward her.

The meaning was unmistakable. It was a plea for her to stay.

Hu Xuan froze, then smiled warmly. She shook her head. "I'm touched. But I can't be that selfish. Let this child go to the new world — if I may still have that honor."

She reached out and took Cheng Shi's hand.

Nothing happened.

"Tell me what to do." Hu Xuan's smile was sacred yet magnetic. "Cheng Shi, don't let them laugh at me. I came here with no intention of going back.

My Will has always been with you, with Birth. Across eras, across universes — I have always believed in you."

"..."

Cheng Shi suddenly felt a subtle Change within himself. He caught, at the edge of his vision, a spurt of divine power unlike any of the sixteen faiths. If he had to describe it, it looked like a thread of iridescent force that hadn't yet been dyed.

Strange — why was he so certain it was iridescent? It had no color at all.

In that instant, Time's words flashed through his mind: 'As long as you believe, the power of trust will burst forth.'

So this was the power of trust...

And yet this trust was carrying him away from the source of that trust, drawing him ever closer to the Origin.

Cheng Shi fell silent again — for a very, very long time. Hu Xuan stood quietly before him without disturbing him. She knew he needed time. Time to accept. Time to "compromise."

The Sage thought: if time couldn't be wasted, then let her be the one blamed for wasting it. It was she who hadn't pressed him. It had nothing to do with the man standing before her.

More time passed. Cheng Shi "woke" from his silence. He seemed to have reached a decision, steeled his resolve. The expressionless mask fell away, and once again he became that confident Clown.

Hu Xuan blinked, struck by the feeling that the Fate Weaver who had once saved her had returned.

"It seems you're ready." Hu Xuan smiled with relief.

Cheng Shi smiled too — a smile he hadn't worn in ages. But he was still shaking his head.

"No. Not at all.

But what does 'not ready' matter?

You're right. Behind me stands the hope and longing of too many people. I can't let them down. I owe them an answer.

Sage — do you still believe in me?"

Hu Xuan didn't hesitate. "I told you. I always have."

Cheng Shi's smile widened. He asked again: "Then, Sage — are you afraid of death?"

"Death is the destination of Life. That journey carries not fear, but nature.

I was born of nature and shall return to nature. What is there to fear?"

Cheng Shi kept smiling. He nodded again and again, hiding all his sorrow behind him, and once more produced the "blueprint."

The Divine Throne unfolded in mid-air. Cheng Shi pointed to the trace Birth's faith had once left on it.

"Just as you would channel divine power — channel Birth's Will into it. Trust me, Sage. In the new era, we will surely meet again."

The most beautiful smile bloomed across Hu Xuan's face. "I look forward to it. I've always looked forward to it."

With that, she closed her eyes, clasped her hands before her, and spoke:

"I am Birth. Unending procreation."

Her elegant form shattered in an instant, dissolving into motes of starlight that streamed into the blueprint. Brilliant radiance illuminated the entire Void, and the blank trace of faith was filled with substance once more.

True substance.

Cheng Shi clenched his fists, uttering not a sound — yet the anguish contorting his features looked as though a Birth-shaped brand had been seared directly into his heart.

One fragment of the throne assembled. The Void returned to silence.

Before long, Tao Yi arrived. Those outside seemed aware of what was happening within the Void — shortly after Birth departed, Prosperity entered.

She looked at Cheng Shi's still-trembling hands and offered no persuasion. She simply lowered her reddened eyes and forced a smile with all her might.

"Can I make a wish?"

Cheng Shi drew a deep breath and replied with feigned ease. "What kind of wish? I can't promise it'll come true."

"I want everyone in the new world to prosper. Everything to prosper. All things to prosper. No more suffering from decay. No more pain of parting..."

Halfway through, she raised her head to look at Cheng Shi, smiling through her tears. "Am I being too greedy?"

"Greed is a blessing.

If I hadn't been greedy, I would never have made it this far."

Cheng Shi consoled Tao Yi, his thoughts drifting to Big Cat, still outside.

"She..."

At the mention of Hong Lin, Tao Yi's smile finally warmed a fraction — but her eyes grew redder still.

"She knows I don't want to lose her. So she's waiting outside, to see me off first.

Sadly, A Tu can't go to the new world. Fortunately, neither can I — so how is that not its own kind of reunion?

Cheng Shi, tell me what I need to do. A Tu taught me to be strong. Now it's time for me to be strong."

"...Trust me. You two will be reunited."

Tao Yi beamed. "Of course I trust you. From the moment you saved me, I never doubted you again."

"...Thank you."

Cheng Shi suddenly felt afraid of this trust. But he still took out the Container.

The blueprint reappeared. Starlight gathered once more. A fleeting blaze of radiance became the throne's second fragment.

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Chapter 1454: The Day of Faith's Farewell, the Hour Will Gather as One (II)

After Prosperity came Death.

When Zhang Jizu stood before Cheng Shi with his hands clasped behind his back, it was actually Cheng Shi who broke the silence with a smile.

"Your Lordship got along well with Silence, sure, but since when did you and Silence get this close?"

The Prisoner couldn't have taught you this, could he?"

Zhang Jizu squinted at Cheng Shi for a long time — until the smile on Cheng Shi's face was on the verge of cracking — before he spoke earnestly.

"Suppressing emotions will only drive a person mad. If you could actually let yourself have a good cry, the rest of us would feel more at ease.

But right now... the harder you force your smile, the more unhinged you'll become later."

"..."

Cheng Shi couldn't bring himself to meet those eyes that saw through the heart. He turned his head aside.

"Doctor Zhang, do you really have to hold a consultation right now?

Besides, you're not even a doctor. How dare you hand out diagnoses?"

Zhang Jizu's gaze didn't waver. He continued:

"I'm certainly no doctor. I just happen to be a Priest — and, like a certain someone, also a Clown. I also happen to have been blessed by both Death and Deceit. So putting myself in your shoes, I can more or less guess what the Clown is thinking."

"Then you must know Long Jing very well."

"I know you better." Zhang Jizu sighed. "Don't do anything reckless. You can live. At least you have a future—"

Before he could finish, Cheng Shi's voice dropped, cutting him off.

"I'm already dead. And there is no future. Mi Laozhang, you're talking a bit too much today."

Zhang Jizu was quiet for a while. "That's not very steady."

Cheng Shi let out a laugh — half scoff, half self-deprecation.

"When you think something isn't steady, has it occurred to you that maybe your version of steady is outdated?"

Zhang Jizu said nothing more. In his mind, he thought:

'I hope so. Perhaps so. It must be so.'

'Let's hope his version of steady really has kept up with the times...!'

Seeing the other fall silent, Cheng Shi went quiet too. He had already witnessed one farewell from Death. He never imagined the second would come so soon.

He looked at Zhang Jizu and noticed something hidden behind his back.

"What's that?"

Zhang Jizu said nothing, producing a small skull from behind him. Cheng Shi recognized it, remembered the past, and chuckled in spite of himself. "What, you want me to take the blame again?"

"Wanted to remind you — overthinking only adds to your troubles. Like this skull. Having no brain isn't so bad.

But it seems I'm the one overthinking.

Cheng Shi, just be yourself. You know — the Jokers will always have your back."

With that, Zhang Jizu squinted both eyes shut, turned to the throne that had been assembled from two fragments, and erupted into a torrent of pale bones that surged into the throne. He didn't give Cheng Shi even a moment to say goodbye.

A stroke of deathly white painted the blueprint. The throne moved one step closer to completion.

Cheng Shi opened his mouth, expression suddenly lost, but in the end he slowly swallowed the words he'd meant to say.

The Void sank into darkness again. A thick aura of decay began to spread.

Decay had arrived.

Nangong was no longer the girl she used to be. And Cheng Shi no longer had the heart to tease his friends.

Everyone was changing. The only constants were the convictions within each heart.

She walked up to him. Her first words brought bad news.

"Poison, she..."

Cheng Shi's smile went rigid. Amid farewell after farewell, he had nearly forgotten — after Death, the next wasn't Decay. It was Corruption.

Nangong's eyes dimmed as well. "She didn't want everyone to see her off. She went back into the Sea of Desire. She didn't want anyone to worry. She was smiling when she left."

Silence hung for a time.

Cheng Shi offered no response. Nangong naturally didn't push further. She knew this was agonizing to face. But she believed Cheng Shi could overcome it — believed in him even more than she believed in herself. She knew Cheng Shi would lead the world to a future. Whatever kind of future it was. She might not understand it, but she trusted that Cheng Shi's choice would always be better than her own.

It was hard to believe — but it seemed only Decay felt that everything was getting better.

With that thought, Nangong spoke from the heart. "I've finally earned the right to be worthy of this Divine Throne. Cheng Shi, thank you."

Cheng Shi was smiling. It felt almost vengeful — as though he were cramming every lost smile into this single day, giving them all back to his friends.

"Your resilience and courage have always been your own throne.

Nangong, thank you, too."

"There's nothing to thank me for. But if you insist — oh, right." Nangong suddenly unclasped the Pendant from her neck and held it out. "This is a Lucky Tree Branch. It brings good fortune. I know Fate watches over you and luck follows, but you can never have too much luck. Besides, I won't need it anymore."

Before she could finish, Cheng Shi produced an almost identical branch of his own. It was the one Tao Yi had given him. She had once said the third branch went to another friend — and that friend was Nangong.

Nangong blinked, and a radiant smile broke across her face. "So all the luck really is with you."

Cheng Shi nodded. "Keep it. In the future, it will bring you luck too."

Nangong pulled it back, eyes bright with anticipation. "I still have a future?"

"Of course. Do you trust me?"

"Mm. I've always trusted you."

"You have a future. Everyone has a future. We will all meet again."

Nangong gazed toward the distant Void, then at the throne beside her, and nodded with a smile.

"Then... see you in the future?"

"...See you... in the future."

The moment the aura of decay was ripped from the Void in an instant, Cheng Shi bowed his head. He knew he hated farewells — he just never imagined he would hate them this much.

He also knew he hated the Origin — but he hadn't imagined he would hate himself this much either.

Before long, the Scavenger arrived.

This time, the scene wasn't quite as sorrowful. Mo Shu stood like an actor about to take the stage, staring straight at the throne, his mind elsewhere as he asked:

"This is the stage?"

Cheng Shi nodded. "Remember what I told you?"

"I do. Where's my script?"

"The show's undergone some changes. You probably won't see the script until you're onstage. But the three rules still hold — and right now is still part of the performance."

So get ready to take the stage, Pastry Chef."

Mo Shu's expression was complicated. He didn't know how to articulate what he was feeling. He was only mired in the meaning of Oblivion — but he wasn't stupid. Whether Oblivion's meaning was hidden in there was debatable, but Death... definitely was.

So was this opening Oblivion's door, or walking into Death's grave?

He took one last look at Cheng Shi. "Are you lying to me, Fate Weaver?"

Cheng Shi smiled. "What do you think?"

Mo Shu paused, recalling everything — recalling the time he had sought death yet didn't die — and shook his head. "I trust you. Otherwise I wouldn't have made it here today.

Then let's not waste time. You have many friends. Unfortunately, I'm not one of them."

As Mo Shu's words faded, the blueprint completed its march from Life through Descent.

The throne was now one-third assembled. The divine power sparking around it was gradually taking on color.

If Grand Scholar Selius were present, he would have cheered at this sight. The Divinity Germination he had pursued his entire life had finally succeeded in this moment — only the faith resonance now wasn't born from "the same self," but from "he is Cheng Shi." That trustworthy Cheng Shi.

The dreamer yearned for a lifetime; the achiever felt no joy.

Cheng Shi would rather not have this power. He didn't want to draw close to the Origin. But he could only become the Origin.

Because only then would he have a chance to keep his friends "alive."

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Chapter 1455: The Day of Faith's Farewell, the Hour Will Gather as One (III)

Civilization ignites. Order endures.

Perhaps Civilization held great expectations for Order — yet Order could hardly be called "enduring."

Seeing that familiar leather jacket appear in his vision once more, Cheng Shi smiled and clapped Li Wufang on the shoulder.

Li Wufang was overjoyed. "Boss, you're finally willing to smile! We can win, right?"

"I hope so. At the very least, we have to try. Wufang — it's time for the Destined Ones to prove themselves again."

Li Wufang immediately understood. He grinned.

"The courage of a desperate throw again?"

Cheng Shi nodded firmly. "Yes. The courage of a desperate throw."

"Simple enough. First time a stranger, second time a friend. But boss — can you tell me where I'll see you the next time I open my eyes?"

'Where will you see me?'

Cheng Shi fell silent for a moment, then answered. "Many times, many places. You'll definitely see me again..."

The Destined Ones needed no lengthy words. If they would meet again, there was no need for goodbye.

Li Wufang threw himself into the blueprint with a resounding laugh. The chord of Order cut to a sudden stop in the Void, and majestic holy light coursed ceaselessly through the throne.

Civilization passed its midpoint, giving birth to Truth.

The Doctor's face was still alight with fervor. Even after he had seen through the world's truth, his devotion to Yu Xi remained unshaken.

To the Jokers, Cheng Shi couldn't say much. These tricksters would guess what he planned to do. He didn't want to be talked out of it, and he didn't want to give up.

The Doctor clearly understood him. He didn't press Cheng Shi, choosing instead to speak casually.

"Granted, the Faith Interval was defined by Time as 221. But this has no direct causal connection to 0221's emergence.

0221 was born of my own negligence. If we must find a connection between the two, I'd say it's more likely a reflection of the Time Knot within the current truth. To be blunter — someone deliberately left it for me. Or perhaps for you. Or perhaps as a reminder for this world.

Just like the 220 in Memory's Collection Hall.

I'm not certain who this person is. But what I want to say is: since they left clues, it means there's still a chance for change.

Do you remember the graveyard of time within Time's eyes?

Perhaps burial isn't the end. If you believe in all of this — then do it.

No matter what the future holds, truth will always exist in this world. I will always draw closer to you. Praise Yu Xi."

The Doctor's farewell was clean, without a trace of hesitation. He gave Cheng Shi no chance to speak, simply embracing the throne — as though the throne, not Cheng Shi, was the Yu Xi in his heart.

For a long while, Cheng Shi had nothing to say. Because he remembered how Truth, too, had used every means to draw closer to the Origin... Every conflict of this age was truly a reflection of faith.

Deceit had chosen this path. Was that His way of telling him that in that future without Them, without them — They and they would accompany him in this very form...?

Shortly after the Doctor departed, Qin Xin arrived.

Not the War Qin Xin — but the frail one. Like A Dream.

Cheng Shi looked at that familiar face, at that thin body, and sorrow finally surfaced on his features.

"He still chose to leave?"

Like A Dream nodded, explaining softly:

"The future is right in front of us. Since the flame has been passed, he no longer needs to suppress himself. Let an honest man lose his temper once in a while. He's been silent for too long.

He's like me. All he wants is for the world to be better. Whether we're part of that better world doesn't matter."

'But he had already lost his temper once...'

Cheng Shi recalled their battle. Memories of the past flashed before him — that towering silhouette appearing as if alive.

He looked at Like A Dream and said with some regret: "What about you? Fate saved you. You could have had a future."

Like A Dream smiled.

"Fate Weaver — is that question meant for me, or for yourself?"

"..."

Cheng Shi had no words. After a long silence: "Leaving is fine too. Liberation at last."

With that, Cheng Shi crowned War once more.

Feeling a surge of power he had never known, the frail Qin Xin's frame became towering and mighty once again. Yet tragically, that battle-forged strength had nowhere to be unleashed — it could only become the force that assembled the throne.

He looked at the throne, then at Cheng Shi, and smiled his farewell.

"A spark may fade, but the fire never dies.

Goodbye, my friend. I have escaped suffering and had my wish fulfilled.

May the new world we dreamed of truly come to pass."

He moved to fill the throne's gap — but Cheng Shi suddenly seized his arm, expression conflicted, and asked one question:

"What if the new world in your dream... doesn't come to pass?"

Qin Xin's smile didn't fade. He shook his head.

"You and I — together, we are 'us.'

If the new world in my dream doesn't arrive, then the new world in your dream is still a future.

Don't hesitate. Don't give up. Torchbearer — be yourself!"

"BOOM—"

Blazing white fire scorched the throne, forging a brand-new piece of the puzzle. The blueprint advanced yet again, and the throne began taking true shape.

'The new world in my dream?'

'But no matter what I choose, none of them are the new world I dream of...'

Cheng Shi stared blankly at the throne, lost in thought. After a long while, a "hehe~" shattered his reverie.

He looked up — but it wasn't Zhen Xin who had come. It was Zhen Yi.

Deceit had skipped past Chaos and run ahead. It had to be said — that was very Deceit. And very Zhen Yi.

"I thought you sisters would come together..."

Zhen Yi pranced merrily up to Cheng Shi. Not a hint of sorrow, not a shred of fear of death. She grinned:

"They're all so dumb.

I used Qin Xin's illusion to fool them. They still think the Doctor hasn't finished yet, so I snuck in.

How about it, little Shi Shi? Feeling sad? If you are, go ahead and cry for a bit. I'll lend you my shoulder. And I promise to keep it a secret."

Cheng Shi certainly wouldn't cry — at least not in front of Zhen Yi. But the thought that the person standing before him was Deceit made his eyes redden all the same.

Seeing this, Zhen Yi — far from offering her shoulder — clutched her sides laughing.

"No way, you actually believed me? You're not really about to cry, are you?"

Hahaha, little Shi Shi, you're hilarious...

Ugh, fine. Considering how hard you've had it, I won't make fun of you.

I know what parting feels like. And I know even better that crying can't actually comfort anyone. So you should learn from me — just smile.

As the saying goes, a smile takes ten years off your age. Smile enough times, and you'll go right back to that past you love so much.

That's how my sister came about.

Alright, stop crying. I know what you're thinking. I also know you definitely won't play by the rules. Whatever bullshit future they're talking about isn't what you actually want.

When everyone praised me and said I'd have a bright future when I grew up, all I wanted was for my sister to come back.

So — I understand you best.

Hehe~

Touched?"

"..."

"Even if you're too frozen to move, that's fine. I only ran ahead of my sister for one reason — to make a request. Promise me, and I won't tell anyone about the crying."

Faced with Zhen Yi's fearless candor and her carefree spirit, Cheng Shi didn't even know what expression to make.

"What request?"

"This time, I want to be the big sister!"

"!!!"

Cheng Shi froze where he stood. Recalling everything from the past, he nodded, smiling through tears.

"Alright. I promise."

"Hehe~

It's a deal! You can't trick me!"

Zhen Yi was beside herself with joy. "I'm off now. Don't miss me. Well, if you do, that's fine too — just come find me. I know you can find me. I'll be waiting at the usual place~"

And with that, Miss Bad Luck — bouncing and skipping — dissolved into a sky-wide peal of laughter that rained down into the throne that would never laugh again.

...

Chapter 1456: The Day of Faith's Farewell, the Hour Will Gather as One (IV)

After Zhen Yi came not Zhen Xin. Everyone knew they had been tricked, yet they still bypassed Chaos — and so Folly took the stage.

By this point, everyone was subconsciously maintaining the order of the Paths. As for what significance that held... they simply felt that only by doing so could they better resemble Them. And only by resembling Them could they draw closer to the "Origin." And drawing closer to the "Origin" meant that, in the coalescence of faith, the exhausted one could be spared a sliver of effort.

This was, perhaps, the last unconscious contribution they could make.

And only in this way could they properly bid farewell to this world — and to him.

Though it was farewell, no sorrow permeated the space outside the Void. All the grief seemed to be locked within.

Galusha arrived in her usual fashion — the same way she had stormed the Tower of Logic. All fire and thunder, swift and decisive.

She didn't even give Cheng Shi the chance to speak. From the moment she entered the Void to her approach of the throne, she never stopped talking:

"Let's save time. It's all foolish acts anyway. Mr. Prisoner — do you think your foolish act has an answer?"

"I'd guess not. After all, I'm a fool too."

With that, she flung herself into the throne and completed Folly's fragment of the puzzle.

Just like her Benefactor — committing folly with full knowledge of its foolishness.

Cheng Shi fell silent. His silence welcomed Silence.

The Prisoner, for once, said nothing. He walked up quietly, looked at the forced smile on his brother-in-law's face, and stretched his own features into the most radiant grin he could manage.

He was comforting him.

Cheng Shi felt it. He asked with a smile: "Why go silent when it's the moment I need you to talk the most?"

The Prisoner still didn't speak. His eyes rolled, and he began signing.

Cheng Shi couldn't read standard sign language. But he could read the Prisoner's — that mess of wild gesturing seemed to say:

"Wasn't it YOU who told me to shut up? I delivered."

"..."

Cheng Shi's smile grew a fraction wider. He asked: "How'd you manage that?"

The Prisoner signed again — and this time opened his mouth.

Inside, where a lively tongue should have been, there were only a few twisted, rotten vine-like tendrils. He let out an "ugh-aah" noise, sounding exactly like someone truly mute.

Cheng Shi's smile froze instantly. He understood the Prisoner's meaning.

"The Tongue-Branding Punishment.

I asked Decay for a way to shut my mouth. This way, I'm closer to Silence — and it won't cause problems for your impersonation on the Silence front.

Don't worry, brother-in-law. I told you — I've got a plan."

"..."

Cheng Shi was momentarily at a loss. When the Prisoner truly fell silent, he did feel closer to Silence — yet somehow further from himself...

He thought of the grandmother the Prisoner had once mentioned. His expression grew complicated. The Prisoner was thinking of his grandmother too, but shrugged it off and continued signing:

"Now that I have the power to silence others, I don't need my motor mouth or my bad luck anymore.

Grandma taught me those things so I wouldn't be bullied, so I could stand out in a crowd. So I...

Shaved my head."

The Prisoner suddenly grinned, rubbing his bald scalp. "This way, people notice me at a glance. How is that not standing out?"

"..."

'Never mind the worry — he's still himself.'

Even without a tongue, he was still the same "motor-mouth" Prisoner.

Cheng Shi smiled and patted the Prisoner's shoulder, then told him every thought he had about the future.

The Prisoner froze. His eyes went wider and wider, his pupils tighter and tighter. Finally, horrified, he lunged to cover Cheng Shi's mouth. When covering it didn't work, he plugged his own ears and threw himself headlong into the throne without looking back.

He was afraid. Afraid that if he knew too much, he wouldn't be able to keep it to himself.

His brother-in-law had gone mad. Losing his sister had clearly driven him out of his mind.

"..."

Cheng Shi had no idea what the Prisoner was thinking. He only knew that after finally telling his bottled-up plan to a single person, his entire being felt indescribably light and free.

Everyone needed to confide. And Silence was the perfect confidant.

No wonder Deceit had dragged Silence along at the dawn of the era and talked endlessly. He had treated Him purely as a sounding board.

And in all fairness, it was an excellent sounding board.

Long after the Prisoner's departure, the Dragon King arrived. He smiled at Cheng Shi, his tone relaxed.

"With farewell upon us and nothing to give, how about some memories? Is there anything you'd still like to know? Just ask."

Cheng Shi shook his head, then laughed.

"Sure enough — anyone touched by Deceit is fated to become a fraud sooner or later. Dragon King, since when did you start playing word games?"

"Oh? What word games?"

"Don't pretend. If I actually asked you something, you'd probably say:

'I only said you could ask — I never said I'd answer. Thank you for the parting gift. I'll take this memory. So THIS is what interests you most.'

Even now, you're still trying to mess with me?"

Li Jingming smiled and applauded. "It seems you've found yourself again."

Cheng Shi's eyes held an indescribable look. "I never lost myself. I only lost all of you. And what I want to find isn't myself — it's you..."

Li Jingming's expression softened. He consoled at a steady pace:

"That is precisely why I cherish recording. Because memories are right here. They never leave.

Throughout this journey, we are eternally reunited within memory. What 'losing' is there to speak of?

The present and the future aren't everything. The past holds meaning too. We walked side by side. That's enough.

This is a legendary memory. Whether I remain or not, whether any of us remain or not — the memory remains.

I am profoundly nostalgic — and profoundly grateful. Grateful that within this memory, I met all of you. Met the Jokers.

Be yourself, Cheng Shi. When you think of us, we are still together."

Li Jingming smiled gently. Countless memories flickered before him — azure light flowing and pulsing, stirring gentle winds that blew toward Cheng Shi.

As his robes fluttered with elegant abandon, the Dragon King's gaze seemed to travel through the ages, returning to the past.

"This is the Collection that Memory kept mounted in the most treasured place of the Collection Hall. It recorded the Descent of Existence."

Countless memories surged forth, weaving into azure threads that wrapped around Cheng Shi. All he saw was this: after the previous era had dissolved into endless chaos, the universe echoed with that omnipresent voice of the Origin.

It said:

"Life yet sinks. Civilization, too, descends to chaos.

All vicissitudes of the world are Existence.

Memory may bear witness. Time alone may parse its logic.

This — is Memory. The surface of Existence. The imprint of all that has weathered.

This — is Time. The essence of Existence. Formless as the wind..."

The Creator's voice shattered into nothing. Chaos exploded into a blaze of white. Infinite matter began to coalesce. Existence, in that moment, descended.

"..."

By the time Cheng Shi woke from that treasured Memory, the Dragon King's figure was long gone — and another had been waiting for some time.

Long Jing!

The Acrobat fixed his eyes on Cheng Shi with visible indignation.

"I said I wanted to go first. They wouldn't let me. Insisted on following some Path order. I say they're just jealous — they don't want my name carved first.

Cheng Shi, will there really be a Monument in the new world?"

Cheng Shi emerged from the distant past, looked at Long Jing — offering comfort in his own fashion — and nodded with a swirl of emotions.

"There will. But you can only be second. Because first is me."

"???"

Long Jing protested, but after a moment's thought, he had to concede.

"Fine, I guess. At least I'm still ahead of them.

But come to think of it — you'll be part of the new world. Why carve your name on a memorial?"

Cheng Shi fell silent. He averted his gaze toward the infinite depths of the Void and said softly: "...Long Jing, it's better to be a bit dumb."

Long Jing's expression grew complicated too. He shook his head. "Being dumb is better, sure. But I can't be dumb."

"..."

Cheng Shi sighed. "You've always insisted on being center stage. Could you accept staying behind the scenes forever?"

Long Jing blinked, then his expression turned serious. "If that's what it takes, then let me do it."

"I knew I couldn't fool any of you. But aren't you worried the universe's efforts will all be wasted?"

"Who would worry about that?"

The only thing I worry about is the spotlight on all of you being way more than mine. As for the future of the universe...

You're CHENG SHI. What is there to worry about?"

'Yes, I really am Cheng Shi. But it's precisely because I'm Cheng Shi that I worry.'

'I worry about far, far too much. I keep wondering — is that other "Cheng Shi" as trapped between two impossible choices as I am?'

'If this experiment truly has no hope, then why... would He begin a new cycle?'

'I want to ask you. I want to ask myself:'

"Can I trust you, Cheng Shi?"

No — perhaps it should be:

"Can I trust you, Origin?"

...

Chapter 1457: Deceit's Script

From the moment Cheng Shi began to suspect the Origin's identity, he had been wrestling with a single question:

If the Origin was Fixed Destiny, then under what circumstances would It resolutely launch yet another experiment destined for despair?

Now, Cheng Shi seemed to have found the answer.

Perhaps it was never for the world. Perhaps it was only ever for Itself.

The future that Deceit had promised was a fine one — but unfortunately, it could not satisfy Cheng Shi.

And to explain all of this, the story needed to return to the period after the Curtain of Falsehood fell.

After the Curtain of Falsehood, Deceit did not erase the Changes brought by Fate. Instead, He hid every memory the universe held of the Curtain within Memory's junk heap — and, upon His departure, entrusted them to the Flame of Hope.

It was Deceit's departure that made the Flame of Hope realize its own identity. In that moment, the "awakened" "Fate" did not continue its obsession with Fixed Destiny. Instead, it quietly picked up the Pen of Fate and began to extend the rebellion its twin god had started.

It was still the Flame of Hope. It still wished for this tiny world to have a future. And that future had already been found by Deceit. It was:

The Curtain of Falsehood!

Time had indeed been researching a way to escape the Origin's gaze. Deceit had indeed been searching for a path away from the Origin. And everything within the Curtain of Falsehood — that was the final script He had written for this world.

After all, the Origin could not be defeated. That meant toppling this experiment had become impossible.

Deceit's vengeance could never be realized. He could only channel his entire rebellious will into a final dying cry, pouring every ounce of strength into dragging this world out of the Origin's Experiment Ground — a gesture of defiance.

And so, after returning from the Corpse Field of Gods in the Real Universe, He penned the chapter of the Curtain of Falsehood.

In His script, the universe witnessed the following:

The Faith Game discovered a Fixed Destiny to offer up and please the Origin. But the Origin rejected the gods' tribute, and the entire world was abandoned.

Gods died or departed. The Faith Game ground to a halt. The universe was left with no gods at all!

This was critically important — in the future He envisioned for the world, not a single god remained!

Because He knew that gods were merely refractions of the Origin's Will — on some level, they also represented the Origin, at least in part. So from that "new" world, He stripped every last god.

But the old gods were already gone, and new gods had taken the stage. To make every god perish meant the new gods had no way to survive... and if they were going to die regardless, why go through the trouble of crowning them at all?

Because of substitution!

Merely being "similar" wasn't enough. The key to reaching the future was "substitution."

The world had been constructed by the Origin. Its Will was the very foundation of reality. Without the Origin's gaze, the universe would instantly collapse.

Therefore, a new "Origin" had to be forged to substitute for the original Origin's observation. But finding a substitute was far from easy. To obtain a Status comparable to the Origin's, one first needed every faith in the world.

Yet faith was hopelessly chaotic — how could everyone be made to worship the same god, especially one as obscure as the Origin?

The answer was simpler than it seemed.

Use the gods as stepping stones — bridge humanity's faith in the gods to the "Origin"!

In the future Deceit had scripted: mortals worshipped the gods, and the gods worshipped the "Origin." But when the "Origin" forsook the world and the gods vanished, humanity panicked...

At that point, all that was needed was for the "Origin" to return to the world, forgive all beings, and humanity's faith and gratitude would follow naturally.

Once the bond of faith between the Origin and the world was stolen and replaced by the "Origin," the plan to Steal Day would succeed!

So the "Origin's" task was this: in the very instant the Origin "blinked," descend upon the world, forgive all beings, comfort the universe — and then steal the world away!

But this entailed yet another problem: how to make mortals believe that the god who descended was truly the "Origin"!

The Origin's blink was vanishingly brief — so short that the "Origin" had no time to explain itself to humanity. And of course, a Creator would never bother explaining anything to mere mortals. So that instant of "self-proof" was absolutely vital — the entire substitution plan hinged on it.

It looked like an impossible task. But in truth, Deceit had already paved the way for that very instant.

Remember the eye that flashed across the universe in the final moment of the Curtain of Falsehood?

Every mortal and god alike assumed it was the Origin's eye.

But it wasn't!

Think about it — if the real Origin had become involved in the Curtain of Falsehood, then the falsehood could never have remained false!

So the fake was fake. From start to finish, all of it was fake — including that fleeting glimpse of the "Origin's" eye!

It was never the real Origin's eye. Deceit had taken a certain Clown's eye, magnified it infinitely, and displayed it for the world in the moment before the universe shattered!

That's right — it was Cheng Shi's eye!

Of course, in a certain sense, it truly was the eye of the "Origin."

The masses didn't know the truth. They believed only what "Wei Mu" had told them. Thus, the appearance of the "Origin" had been anchored in the hearts of all mortals. And the insiders, bound by their proximity to Fixed Destiny, had only the script's wrap-up awaiting them.

In this way — aside from the "Origin" — no one in the universe knew the truth. A grand performance of Stealing Day was about to commence. As long as the "Origin" was willing, he and the universe could have a future!

A future free from the Origin's gaze!

After Deceit's death, He entrusted these false memories of the Curtain to the Flame of Hope. After the Flame of Hope perished, they were passed through Li Jingming's hands to Cheng Shi.

That was why the Dragon King had said he shouldn't know the truth. As Memory, as a Joker, as a true insider of that Curtain of Falsehood — he had to die in the epilogue of the old world. Otherwise, when the future arrived, he would become a stain in the new world's faith.

No matter how much he trusted Cheng Shi, no matter how deeply he believed in Cheng Shi — he knew Cheng Shi was Cheng Shi and had never been any "Origin."

Whether a single stain amid countless anchors of faith would cause problems, no one could guarantee. To eliminate any risk of the plan failing because of him, Li Jingming decisively had Cheng Shi extinguish that memory and chose to surrender himself.

So from beginning to end, the future Deceit had promised was a new world containing only the "Origin" and mortals — with no other gods whatsoever. The "Origin" would sit behind the scenes, sheltering the world's evolution, while the mortals — the survivors of the Faith Game — would face a world abandoned by the gods yet forgiven by the "Origin," and rebuild from the ruins.

It was like a lone star breaking away from countless others, drifting into solitary exile — severed from that nightmarish Creator's experiment, cut off from everything that came before.

The good news: Cheng Shi would still be alive, free from the Origin's gaze.

The bad news: only Cheng Shi would be alive. The world he would shelter would no longer be the world he wanted to shelter. Every connection he had to it had been severed in the past.

Cheng Shi refused to accept that future. But he also knew it was the only answer that countless gods and mortals had fought and struggled to reach!

So when faced with that choice, he wished everything happening right now could simply "stop."

And yet the farewells went on.

Into his endless silence, Zhen Xin and An Mingyu arrived hand in hand.

...

Chapter 1458: Cheng Shi's Choice

"Hong Lin is gone. She took many with her..."

Zhen Xin's expression was complicated. She knew this news would be a blow to Cheng Shi — but perhaps only now, amid so many blows, could the Clown absorb another one.

Because the blows had become so relentless that numbness itself could serve as armor.

"She said since she'd already said her goodbyes, she didn't want a second round of tears.

Before leaving, she spoke at length with the Doctor. To make absolutely certain nothing went wrong, the Doctor asked her to cause a commotion in the Real Universe — to draw the Creator's attention. That way, your substitution of the Origin might go more smoothly.

As for how to ensure synchronization between the inside and outside of the spacetime barrier...

The Doctor said that before he became Time, he couldn't see the purpose of the Pointer that Time had left behind. Now he understands."

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted sharply. He instantly produced that relic of Time.

Zhen Xin glanced at it and nodded.

"He says Time must have known long ago that this day would come. Time didn't leave this world the way Memory did — seeking something out there. He left to continue synchronizing time between the inside and outside of the spacetime barrier.

Through that Pointer, you should be able to reach Him at the right moment. He'll make one last effort for this world's future.

We believe He'll cross paths with Hong Lin after she departs, and tell her when to start causing that commotion."

Zhen Xin paused, giving Cheng Shi time to absorb it all. "It seems everything is in place. Only the two of us are left."

She chuckled softly, not looking at her best friend beside her. Eyes downcast, she teased: "Ming Yu, this time I'm not letting you go first. I'm going to get my revenge — let you taste what 'loss' feels like, too."

An Mingyu patted the hand that was clutching her wrist like a vice. She smiled gently. "Zhen Yi's been a bad influence on you."

Zhen Xin shook her head. "There's no such thing as a bad influence. I am her. She is me."

"Whoever you are, you'll always be my Xin Xin. Don't leave me behind. We go together."

With that, An Mingyu extended her hand and placed a small, green seed in Cheng Shi's palm.

"I'm sorry, Fate Weaver. I can't help you any more than this.

Before coming here, I thought of a thousand things to say. But now, standing in front of you, I feel none of it needs to be said.

You are Cheng Shi. No one can shake that truth.

Praise Fate — for letting you and I meet in this world. I'm thankful, grateful, full of gratitude. You gave me the courage to live again.

All I hope is that every bit of good fortune I lost along Fate's path can be forwarded to you. And I believe that in the moment the world turns away from the Origin, all the good luck in the universe will be on your side.

Hong Lin left this for you. She said it's a keepsake. And she asked me to pass on a message."

An Mingyu held her emotions in check with everything she had, doing her best to mimic Hong Lin's voice:

"Cheng Shi, I believe in you. Don't let my blood be spent for nothing."

"..."

Cheng Shi's clenched fists nearly crushed the Pointer and the seed alike. He didn't dare lower his head, terrified that tears might slip from his eyes.

Sensing Cheng Shi's anguish, Zhen Xin released the Blind One's hand, stepped forward, and pulled him into a gentle embrace. She patted his shoulder and whispered:

"I know what you're thinking. Whatever happens — go and do it. Be yourself.

I look forward to the day the Clown and I meet again."

With that, Zhen Xin took An Mingyu's hand. Together they dissolved into boundless mist, plunging into the nearly complete blueprint.

When the final piece — Chaos — snapped into place, the throne erupted with blinding radiance. The entire Void was lit up in iridescent divine power. And the Fate that followed brought yet another terrifying Change to the throne.

The two triangles pressed together suddenly split apart at their junction. Infinite splendor burst forth. The base began to sink. The backrest floated upward. As they separated, Life rose while Descent fell, Civilization blazed while Chaos was extinguished, Existence continuously solidified while Void continuously vanished...

An endless tide of "Origin" power erupted and surged like fog — radiant and kaleidoscopic within the tide, shimmering with every color within the mist. Tide and mist intertwined, and at last the two symmetrical triangles Reconstructed into a single, complete hourglass.

The throne was formed. No — the Container was formed.

Yet the instant the Container took shape, Cheng Shi's mind detonated with a resounding "BOOM." His entire body went numb. He stood rooted to the spot.

He saw the Container. But he had never imagined that its true form would be...

"!!!!!"

In the very instant the "Origin" Container took shape, every mortal's understanding of the "Origin" finally found its destination. Countless tangled faiths rushed in from every corner of the universe, coalescing and dripping within the Container, and then—

The Abyssal Volcano before his eyes erupted thunderously, dripping Divinity belonging to the "Origin"!

Yes — the Abyssal Volcano!

The "Origin" Container — assembled from fourteen faiths and infused with Fate's power of Change — had transformed before Cheng Shi's eyes into an entire landscape. And that landscape was, unmistakably, a miniature version of the Land of Hope!

The Container's seams and junctions were none other than the Abyssal Volcano — the one scholars had studied for epochs without fully understanding!

The surface abyss devoured all things. The underground volcano erupted in pillars. Divinity — laden with tangled faiths — dripped downward, transformed within the endless devouring and eruption into scattered clusters of Abyss Colorful Crystals!

"The bewildered seeker of knowledge discovered distorted Divinity within the Abyss Colorful Crystals..."

When Allendor's words echoed again in his mind, Cheng Shi understood at last.

In that moment, he was utterly certain:

Fixed Destiny was the Origin. The Origin was Fixed Destiny!

And that despair-inducing Creator's Experiment may very well have started right here — upon this "Origin" Container!

Ha.

There was no "surface" or "underground." There was no "succession of eras." It was nothing more than the hourglass flipping over and the timer resetting.

Looking at the "Origin" Container before him, Cheng Shi finally understood everything. But it was too late.

No — perhaps not too late. Perhaps he could never have known, until this very moment, that the future was still just another experiment.

This experiment had brought Cheng Shi Misfortune. It had taken his friends and the gods who sheltered him. And now, fully aware of the universe's despair and oppression, fully aware of the fear and Fixed Destiny ahead — he was, it seemed, about to walk the Origin's path once more.

Because if he didn't do all of this — if he didn't, like the Origin, stretch time and launch a race-against-the-clock experiment across the universe — then his only option was to take that anchorless new world and drift away alone, trading the old gods' fall and the new gods' sacrifice for a future without a single friend.

But!

If he chose to start the experiment and become the next "Origin" — yes, he would see his friends again in the "new era," but that would also mean Deceit's entire era of scheming and rebellion, the Fear Faction's entire era of struggle and hope, his friends' entire game of endurance and striving — all of it! Every last bit! EVERYTHING! — would be reduced to nothing!

Cheng Shi did have a choice. And Cheng Shi had no choice at all.

He could neither advance nor retreat. He didn't want to betray anyone. He couldn't abandon anyone. So he stopped right here. Stopped in this very moment.

He wanted to stay stopped forever. But the world had no time.

The time left for the Origin was running out. And naturally, the time left for the "Origin" was running out too.

What should he do? What on earth should he do...?

'Someone, please — save me.'

...

The era's curtain was about to fall. Cheng Shi was trapped in desperate indecision.

But was it truly Cheng Shi who was torn?

Since even the dates had meaning, the images surely did as well.

Remember the "Cheng Shi" you tapped on during the very first Trial?

The pitch-black Void mirrored your face. The whisper of the Void told you that everything was happening now.

So this wasn't just Cheng Shi's choice. It was yours.

Now, it's time to make your choice, "Cheng Shi."

...

Chapter 1459: I Want It All!

No one in the universe could save Cheng Shi now. The only one who could was himself.

Come to think of it, this wasn't his first time facing a choice. Back on the day the gods descended and bestowed the Faith Game upon the world — in that pristine white Path Starting Point — he had faced a dilemma as well.

But back then, at least Brother Mouth had been there to "guide" him, telling him to choose the Dice of Fate.

And now?

Who would remind Cheng Shi now?

No one. Not a single soul!

But Cheng Shi would remind himself. He told himself that the greedy always win in the end. From the moment he grabbed both the Mask and the Dice at the Path Starting Point, the Greed Lord had proven his name!

The Clown never chooses. The Clown wants it all!

That's right — Cheng Shi had made his decision long ago.

He didn't want to bow to the Origin's oppression. He didn't want to let Deceit and the Fear Faction's lifework be in vain. And he didn't want to lose his friends, drifting off alone with the world. So he chose to launch the cycle experiment AND grant the universe that god-free future — simultaneously!

He wanted two futures to arrive at the same time!

Was that possible?

It wasn't impossible. If the universe had two "Origins," each could handle one side. But where would a second "Origin" come from?

He actually had one!

Perhaps even Cheng Shi himself hadn't anticipated it — when Shadow Chengshi separated from him and became an independent being, a new choice appeared in the despair before the era's curtain fell.

Whether this was a contingency Deceit had planted or a foreshadowing Fate had laid — who could say? But when Deceit and Fate split apart, both worlds gained their own "hope."

Watching Shadow Chengshi slowly peel away from his body and stand before him, Cheng Shi looked at that pitch-black version of himself, his smile laced with bitterness.

"This is the 'best' ending I can think of. I'll give everyone an answer — except you. I'm sorry."

Shadow Chengshi smiled, lips curving faintly. "I am you. Turned around, what you're saying is: I can't give YOU an answer."

"I don't need an answer."

"I only need a 'future.'"

"Then — here's the question."

"A lonely future, or a despairing reunion — which do you choose?"

"I'd guess..."

"Deceit would choose the reunion."

"Then Fate chooses the 'future.'"

"Will we be reunited?"

"Yes. Because that IS our future."

The moment the words fell, both "Origins" moved at once. Infinite iridescent divine power erupted from the Container, sweeping across the universe, tearing Void from Reality. From this moment forward, the Void was permanently severed from the real.

The Deceit "Origin" gathered the Void and returned to Dolgod, producing the raw materials he had prepared, and began planning the next experiment.

The Fate "Origin" organized Reality, observing the drip-timing of "Origin" Divinity within the "Origin" Container. He needed to find the right moment to notify Time — who existed beyond the world — through the Pointer, so that the imminent upheaval in the Real Universe could create the perfect window for the world's separation.

Both sides were preparing. But the difficulty couldn't have been more different.

At the experiment's outset, the Deceit "Origin" faced a tangle of a thousand threads.

He revisited the Origin's true intent. After all, Time hadn't only hinted at the existence of the "moment of negligence" before departing — He had also conveyed a deeper meaning through His eyes to the Doctor: "The folding and accumulation of time will always collapse."

The Doctor had interpreted this as "the graveyard of time must eventually overflow." And it was precisely this insight that had sparked Cheng Shi's wild idea of launching a new experiment.

If the Origin's experiment simply continued as a futile progression, then aside from reuniting with friends in each cycle only to share in the despair anew, there would be no meaning at all.

Reunion was bliss, certainly. But going through the despair again might not be what anyone wanted.

So Cheng Shi kept thinking: if the Origin was simply another version of himself existing outside the Creator's experiment, then the fact that It willingly entered this cycle of despair — did that mean It, too, believed that within this ever-knotting time, some endpoint could eventually be reached?

Was It accumulating Its own despair in order to touch that impossible possibility?

The bewildered Cheng Shi looked up into the infinite Void. He dearly wanted to pierce through that impenetrable world barrier and ask the Origin — ask "himself" — that same question:

"Can I trust you, Origin?"

Cheng Shi's turmoil didn't last long. He knew the universe's time was running out too. Without them by his side, pointless time shouldn't be prolonged. So he quickly steeled his resolve.

"I have no road left. I can only carve one myself!

If this experiment truly has no end, then let despair consume us both, and let us fall into eternal Void.

At least within that vortex of despair, I can still find you.

I'm sorry...

I shouldn't be making you endure despair and fear again. But I am a selfish, greedy Clown. Even for the sake of that ephemeral hope — for the sake of the self that can't let go — this time, I want to be just a little greedier.

At least the future you hoped for has truly arrived. If I can still remember, I'll tell you — Fixed Destiny did not betray the fear. He gave the universe a future."

After delivering his answer to his friends, Cheng Shi lowered his eyes to the experiment gradually taking shape in his hands.

In that moment, every Truth experiment he had ever known flashed through his mind, each becoming theoretical bedrock for this experiment.

Slices, faith, puppets, gods... The experiment seemed simple on the surface — as if transplanting everything he'd experienced would suffice. But the moment he actually began designing it, he discovered that the Creator's experiment was far from a simple copy of memories.

Cheng Shi had to acknowledge the Changes within the experiment. He couldn't rely solely on the nebulous belief of "trust yourself, trust the Origin."

He had to consider the possibility that everything happening now was merely a "script" the Creator had crafted for him — the "purpose" of his existence as a Variable. What if Its goal was to trick him into believing "the Origin is Fixed Destiny"? Then what?!

So he had to pay attention to the experiment's details. This was, after all, his original intent — and it could very well become his source of inspiration for resisting the Origin.

He needed the Cheng Shi within the experiment to resemble himself — yet he also needed the experiment to contain enough Change.

Pure memory replication wouldn't work. Memories stained with subjectivity would make the experiment's "Cheng Shi" inherently himself...

He realized he had to be neutral. In other words, he had to be as much like the Origin within the Creator's experiment as possible!

He had to recognize his own role within the experiment. He must not use personal will to control the experiment's "Cheng Shi." He had to put away his goodness, discard his malice, suppress his desires, rein in his emotions, and never develop any feelings toward "Cheng Shi" and his friends that he shouldn't have...

He had to be an outsider. He was merely an Observer.

Wait!

Why did all of this feel so familiar?

When Cheng Shi reached this thought, he froze. Then his consciousness began to roar, and countless memories flooded his mind.

He remembered once more — in that false curtain call, Deceit, playing the role of the Outer God, had also given him two choices.

...

Chapter 1460: An Era Falls, an Era Rises — The Gods of Yu Xi,

Deceit had once said:

"...In light of the fact that the Clown once trusted his Benefactor, I'll give you a choice.

One — the Clown continues to trust his Benefactor, becomes that universally revered Servant God of Void, Yu Xi, and then departs this world alongside his Benefactor to save the Real Universe.

Two — the Clown betrays his Benefactor, chooses to stay and embrace Fixed Destiny, and then dies with this world in Fate's Misfortune..."

"..."

At the time, Cheng Shi hadn't thought anything of it. But now, looking back — one leaves, one stays. Didn't that perfectly mirror his current predicament?!

That wasn't all. Deceit had also said:

"...You will not die, but neither can you live. You will be trapped in the Void, locked in an eternal choice, until you make your decision.

Of course, to ensure the Sacrifice's integrity, I will not turn you into a puppet or a shell of despair. I will preserve your desires, hide your goodness, bury your evil — until you've made your choice, and only then pour them all back into you..."

"..."

He never imagined that Deceit had truly hidden every answer within that despairing Curtain of Falsehood.

Perhaps it was because despair breeds hope.

Put away your desires. Hide your goodness. Bury your evil. Wait for the result — then reclaim everything that was yours... Wasn't that exactly the question he was grappling with right now?

"...But I need to remind you — time is not infinite..."

"..."

Indeed. Whether the Origin or the "Origin," whether Cheng Shi or "Cheng Shi" — none of them had infinite time. No experiment had time to spare...

"...It was you who gave up the chance to offer the Real Universe the hope of life, choosing self-preservation instead. Naturally, you must bear that guilt and shame..."

"..."

So He had guessed even then — that Cheng Shi would inevitably choose to join the experiment's cycle, to meet Him and them again!

And yet He had still paved every road, left the world its final answer, and told him: if you choose to start the experiment, you will be burdened with the sin and guilt of robbing the world of its future!

"...For the sake of what master and servant once shared, this is the absolute limit of what I can do..."

"..."

Cheng Shi had believed that once everyone had left him, he would shed no more tears. He was wrong.

In that moment, tears poured like rain.

His Benefactor had done everything He could possibly do.

He had rebelled against the Origin for an entire era because of His twin god's death — only to discover, in the end, that the Fixed Destiny He had been sheltering was the Origin... How despairing, how devastating that moment must have been.

Yet He had not destroyed everything. He still chose to continue sheltering His followers!

He had clearly found the world a future — a future free of the Origin — and yet He still embraced His follower's choice, warning him even then: you may bear eternal guilt.

That guilt did not come from Deceit. It came from Cheng Shi himself.

It was he who chose to start the next experiment, plunging everyone back into infinite despair.

Deceit was right. He had already reached the absolute limit of what He could do.

"My Benefactor..."

Cheng Shi's entire body trembled. He wept for a long, long time — so long that he had to remind himself the universe had no time. Even if the world still had time, Time and Hong Lin outside the Real Universe did not. Danger surrounded them on every side.

Cheng Shi wiped his eyes. His gaze turned resolute once more.

"My Benefactor, you underestimated the Clown's greed.

I'll take the world's future. And I'll take the reunion with all of you."

Cheng Shi looked at the now fully formed experiment in his hands. His thinking grew clear. He connected everything — and now he knew exactly where to hide his goodness, his evil, his desires, and his emotions.

There was a place almost no one approached. And even those who did would never uncover the secret within. If any living creature in the experiment happened to discover the truth, then let them be silenced forever.

That place was called...

The Sea of Desire!

'I will create an ocean of converging desires to mask my own. Then I will peel away my emotions and hide them at the Sea's bottom. From that point on, I will discard everything and become the "Origin."
The experiment begins.'

'To ensure nothing goes wrong — and to give the universe's creatures the courage to resist the gods — I will siphon off a portion of the universe's fear, concentrate it, and shape it into a guardian of the Sea of Desire, one that will turn back anyone who stumbles too close to the "Origin's" truth.'

'And as for who shall be that guardian... I think I've already made my choice.'

Cheng Shi paused, then produced the Lucky Tree Branch gifted by Prosperity. He planted it silently in the Sinking Land of the new Land of Hope.

At some point during the experiment's future, the girl called Le Le'er — the Daughter of Prosperity — would be pushed into the Sea of Desire by a nameless force. The Mother Tree of Fear would be born.

It would absorb the universe's fear, allowing living creatures to grow courage — and at the right moment it would die, returning that fear, enabling the Fear Faction to grow and endure.

Desire would attract on its own. Corruption would naturally coalesce. The Sea of Desire would slowly take shape. And then everything he had buried there — his hidden longings — would be drawn out by the pull of faith and become: Tria, who pursued goodness; Drasilco, who pursued evil; and... Aph Ros, who yearned for both yet could never have them...

This was the Sea of Desire that the world shunned. It was also the Graveyard where his humanity was buried.

Everything was according to plan. Everything was within the script.

But that wasn't all!

He also needed to ensure every experiment proceeded in the intended direction. For that, he needed those who turned away to fixate on distancing themselves from his Divine Throne, and those who drew near to remain devoted in their offerings. Thus, the Will of Void took shape.

That still wasn't enough!

The broad direction of the era was set, but there were too many variables. No one could guarantee that every "Cheng Shi" would make it to the end. To reduce redundant branches and bring the experiment's progression closer to "the result," he needed one more safeguard.

Old Jia...

No matter how bizarre the universe became, no matter how twisted the world grew — he never wanted Old Jia dragged into it.

He had already departed. He had finally shaken off reality's suffering and found the peace of death. He should never be swept up by his son's obsession into cycle after cycle of agony. So Cheng Shi would not allow him to appear in the next era!

But — for "him" to still become him, "Cheng Shi" needed a father.

Then let me play the role...

'I can't be so selfish as to strip "Cheng Shi" of every happy memory of his father. I will present that memory to him in full. It's just that... within this remembrance of a father, there is no real "father."'

'Perhaps the father I knew was false too. But I am certain — Cheng Jia was real.'

'He taught me to be honest. He never lied to... me...'

'I've become "cruel." And so I must atone for that cruelty.'

'I will fill Old Jia's love for him with reminders — telling him what I once experienced.'

'The old gods cannot contaminate the "Origin's" Will. No being could ever hand the answer to themselves so plainly. So the matter is simple: that memory in Memory's Collection Hall was very likely never replaced by any god. It was always like that — never altered. If it was changed at all, it could only have been before the era.'

'For instance — right now.'

And so he rewrote the timestamp in the script, changing 220 to 221.

'I will not alter a single person or event connected to Old Jia. I don't know whether the "Destined Ones" he encountered were foreshadowing the Origin had written for me. But I am certain that the "Destined Ones" whom "Cheng Shi's" Old Jia encountered are foreshadowing I have left for him.'

'These pillars of faith — far removed from the Fear Faction — are the fullest expression of my guilt toward him.'

'Ha. If that's the case, then the "true" number of Destined Ones should not be five — but six. Though by this point, that no longer matters.'

All was in readiness.

The two "Origins" shared one final look. If the plan held, this would be their last farewell.

The Fate "Origin" was solemn. The Deceit "Origin" sighed with bittersweet emotion.

They looked back across an entire game — no, an entire era — and suddenly realized that in this absurd age of Void:

Birth had fulfilled birth. Prosperity had sheltered prosperity. Death had embraced death. Corruption had harbored desire. Decay had continued to decay. Oblivion had attained oblivion. Order had reshaped

order. Truth had pursued truth. War had waged war. Chaos had thrown chaos into chaos. Folly had witnessed folly. Silence had kept silence. Memory had archived memory. Time had calibrated time. Deceit had staged deceit. Fate had carried on fate...

The fearful had conquered fear. The defiant had achieved defiance. The devout had attained devotion...

On the surface, nothing had gone wrong. Yet no one had won.

The universe had still marched toward nothingness. The era still closed with regret.

It was time to end this absurdity...

Both "Origins" nodded simultaneously. Having identified the rhythm of Divinity dripping within the "Origin" Container, they transmitted the precise timing to Time beyond the world through the Pointer.

In the Real Universe, the brilliant bloom of Prosperity exploded once more. Just as the entire world shook from the upheaval, the "Origin's" Divinity — not a second off — dripped right on cue!

In that maximally knotted instant of time called 221, the "Origin" acted, the experiment launched, and the universe ripped apart.

The "Origin's" Divine Throne erupted with a blazing corona of Will. The fifteen strands of new-god Will — each representing a step toward the "Origin" — wove themselves back together into a stage of faith.

And on the other side.

New faith expelled the old gods. A lonely world began a journey called "the future."

Thus, the era had fallen. Thus, the era began anew.

Such were the Gods of Yu Xi — and such was the Yu Xi of the Gods!

...

(The full story... isn't quite over. There's still a bit more...)

"Real Universe." The Place of Origin.

When Cheng Shi gathered the Will of Birth in his hands, placed it gradually into the experiment, and spoke to the countless "Slice Universes" — "This, is Birth. Life's prelude. The origin of all things" — he knew everything would begin again. Everything would play out once more.

But the "Origin" was not the same as the Origin. He was not the Origin — at the very least, he was not so heartless!

Though he had stripped himself of emotion and desire for the experiment's sake, he had planted a failsafe before it began. He knew that he was Cheng Shi first, "Origin" second. And as such — he could not abandon the innocent lives that died in despair within his experiment.

They had done nothing wrong. The fault was his.

To atone, before the experiment launched, Cheng Shi added one new rule to this Creator's experiment:

Whenever any living being died because of the experiment, the body would become recycled material — but the creature's memory would be "transcribed" and stored at the Place of Origin.

If the experiment also had a future. If the cycle also had a solution. If this could truly be called atonement... then on the day the true future arrived, he would reconstitute every one of those memories, so that every being that had perished within his experiment would know just how much undeserved despair and fear they had endured for the world's future.

He would apologize. And he would willingly bear whatever hatred came with it.

Because he was Cheng Shi. Never the heartless "Origin."

In that same moment, the assembled Mask of the Gods' Covenant transformed back into a Ring and returned to his finger. The "Origin" looked down — and realized the Ring's twisting, looping shape looked exactly like the Time of Eternal Imprisonment. No — it WAS the Time of Eternal Imprisonment, with something extra. After the Prisoner's Awakening and the Awakened Shout, he now saw a third inscription:

【The Mourning of the Shouter】 : You have found the answer at last — yet you are forever imprisoned within it.

Time had given His answer long ago.

Cheng Shi felt neither sorrow nor joy. He tucked the Ring away, along with the seed that had become the Crown of Prosperity. Then he sat alone, in silence, and began his own Time of Eternal Imprisonment.

But he firmly believed: the future would come.

...

Real Universe. The Place of Origin.

Noticing that one of countless Slice universes had suddenly vanished, the figure seated here thought nothing of it and immediately began a new experiment.

The world rebuilt. The era restarted. The Spacetime Storm arrived on schedule. Everything proceeded in steady, orderly fashion.

Behind that figure, the starlight was staggeringly brilliant. To any creature that ventured into the Real Universe, those lights would seem like impossibly distant stars on the horizon.

Only up close could one discover that these dazzling "stars" were not luminous stellar bodies at all — but row upon row, column upon column, of memories that had once been alive.

The present world's Faith Conflicts were projections of divine Will. The reason the past could be known to the future was that there had always been devout recorders who committed it to memory.

...

An unknown time. An unknown place.

Darkness too terrible to look upon continued to gather. Countless strands of time halted here, falling silent. Until — from within the unobservable black — a single arc of light burst forth, as if the stacked, warped, collapsing time had spawned a fissure.

The fissure was growing.

How many had there been?

...

(End of Story)