

The Gods 991

Chapter 991: An Invitation from the Jokers

After a trial ended, Long Jing returned to the rest area. He immediately noticed something unusual in the theater and bent down in the aisle between audience seats to pick up a white paper airplane.

"Now this is novel. Though the delivery method is terribly old-fashioned..."

Let's see which old friend remembered me."

He unfolded the airplane with great interest. Inside was an invitation letter. His name was at the top. The body contained a gathering invitation and instructions for attending. And the signature was...

Cheng Shi!?

In that instant, even without the invitation specifying the gathering's purpose, the word "Joker" leaped back into Long Jing's mind.

A gathering connected to Cheng Shi might not necessarily be the Jokers. But the only thing Long Jing could think of was the Jokers!

He hadn't learned about them from this world's Cheng Shi, but he knew this world's Jokers had to be connected to him.

However, since the invitation didn't specify its content, the cautious Long Jing worried this was another trap — or worse, someone using the invitation to probe him.

After all, the things Cheng Shi had said during that extrapolation were terrifying. So much so that Long Jing's mindset had shifted in recent trials. He'd begun viewing his teammates through different eyes.

President Gong carried a certain dream of godhood. Or rather, all peak players wanted something from this Faith Game. The only paths to fulfilling their desires were getting closer to the gods — or becoming gods themselves.

Not everyone was as fanatical as the God Worship Society, but undeniably, godhood was the ultimate temptation.

Yet now, knowing that godhood might be nothing more than a soap bubble — that even gods might not truly be gods — he'd begun examining this game from a new perspective. He'd even started seeing himself as an "observer" hovering outside the world, watching teammates risk their lives in devotion and finding it all... somewhat laughable.

But the most laughable was undoubtedly his past self.

Even with these thoughts, Long Jing hadn't entirely given up on the Faith Game. At the very least, the Joker organization the other world's Cheng Shi had described still fascinated him.

According to that Cheng Shi, the Jokers were one of this world's few remaining hopes. And because the other world's Long Jing had contributed greatly to the Jokers, this world's Long Jing had been the beneficiary — receiving advance knowledge of "the world's truth."

So after his faith fusion, he'd been searching for any Joker-related information.

That weathered Cheng Shi hadn't revealed who the Jokers were. But the simplest logic dictated Cheng Shi himself had to be one. So Long Jing had been looking for Cheng Shi recently — just couldn't be too obvious about it, and luck hadn't favored him. Over a dozen consecutive trials without a meeting.

He was certain an opportunity would come. He just never expected it to come to him.

Actually, the moment he saw the letter, Long Jing had thought of Lord Yu Xi. He hadn't forgotten that Yu Xi had once impersonated Cheng Shi. Could this be an invitation from a god?

But having removed some of his divine filters, his former fervor toward Yu Xi had cooled.

Still, until he became one of Them — or could stand against Them — due respect was necessary. Not about devotion; about survival.

Smart as he was, Long Jing didn't jump to conclusions. He examined the invitation repeatedly, searching for clues beyond the text to determine whether this was genuine or a false probe.

Before long, he actually found something.

Incense ash!

In the handwriting on the paper airplane, Long Jing discovered several specks of incense ash — nearly imperceptible to ordinary eyes.

Though the ash pressed into the paper by the penstrokes was fine as dust, it told him a great deal.

In today's world where gods had descended, though some people had been assigned to various temples and shrines, the old offerings and incense of the past had long since died out. So this seemingly fresh incense ash became the crucial clue to determining the invitation's origin.

Who, at a time like this, would still come into contact with incense? Or even inadvertently press airborne ash into paper while writing...

Many answers were possible, but Long Jing's instinct told him one person was most likely:

The Dragon King, Li Jingming!

So this invitation wasn't from Cheng Shi at all — it was from Li Jingming!

Impersonating Cheng Shi certainly wasn't to continue San Dales's absurd farce. The Dragon King was most likely probing him. As for whether the probe concerned the Jokers or something else...

Long Jing chuckled softly and rolled the invitation into his breast pocket.

He accepted this "challenge." That's right — to him, this wasn't an invitation. It was a challenge.

He hadn't forgotten that during the San Dales trial, the Dragon King had deceived him the entire way. Even though their identities were practically revealed by the end, this "vendetta"... if he didn't swindle the man back, how could he justify his newly merged second faith?

'Dragon King, oh Dragon King. Times are progressing. You think only you possess two faiths?'

'No. I have them too. And it's also [Void] plus [Existence]. So why can't your probe of me become my probe of you?'

'Since we're all liars, let's settle this through craft.'

...

The appointed time arrived quickly. Long Jing looked at himself in the mirror — no, at Li Jingming in the mirror — and smiled with satisfaction. Then he donned a black robe and mask, left sufficient revival safeguards in the rest area, and performed the ritual as instructed to enter the so-called meeting grounds.

It was a stretch of void. Normal enough — all player meetings took place in the void. The only difference was how each host decorated it. And this time...

'Wait — did the Dragon King bury everyone he's killed here?'

'Where else would all these tombstones come from!?'

'This place is creepy beyond belief!'

Indeed. Creepy. Because what greeted Long Jing's eyes was a vast field of tombstones. Countless headstones stood in orderly rows, filling the entire space. In the endless darkness, faint ghostly will-o'-the-wisps flickered. The sight was bone-chilling.

At the center of the tombstone field lay a circular clearing. A stone chandelier hung above it, its dim yellow light illuminating a single figure. The person's attire was identical to Long Jing's: masked face, black robe. They sat on a front-row tombstone, and upon hearing his approach, slowly turned to look at him.

For a moment, Long Jing's scalp prickled and goosebumps erupted across his skin.

But he'd seen worse. The acrobat quickly regained his composure and cautiously stepped toward the center of the tomb field.

As he drew closer, the distant figure grew clearer. Fully concealed, identity impossible to discern. But Long Jing had already settled on his probing strategy.

Since the Dragon King had invited him, what if he walked up and introduced himself as: "Li Jingming, at your invitation"? How would the host respond?

At this thought, Long Jing was already smiling inside.

...

Chapter 992: Heh~ Just Wait Till I Snap All Your Masks Off

But things didn't go as planned. Before Long Jing could shout that name, the black-robed figure across from him struck first.

"Fascinating. Another Joker at last. I was starting to think I'd missed this splendid memory."

"?"

'Li Jingming, dropping the act already?'

'And... Joker!?'

'This really is a Joker gathering place?'

Long Jing didn't quite believe it. He'd never received a formal Joker recruitment invitation. Rather than trusting what he was seeing, he leaned toward this being a probe initiated by the other party.

Since it was a probe, saying more meant more mistakes. But saying nothing would confirm he knew about the Jokers. So the best option was... nonsense.

He strode forward two steps and laughed aloud:

"I was wondering why magpies kept calling when I left today. Turns out I've met the Dragon King.

How interesting — you really are one of the Jokers!

A pleasure. I'm Li Jingming. I wonder, Dragon King... have you looked in a mirror lately?"

"..."

As it turned out, when you out-crazied someone, silence favored the other person.

An awkward chill settled, but before long, the other party broke into hearty laughter.

"I knew the Joker Society would be rewarding. I didn't expect the memories to get interesting before it even began.

Very well. Of course I've looked in mirrors. Quite practiced at it lately, in fact.

Since you're here, have a seat. Once everyone arrives, let's you and I discuss our mirror-gazing experiences."

Long Jing had anticipated the other wouldn't fold easily, but he hadn't expected such composure — seemingly unconcerned about his identity. The speaking style, however, certainly resembled the Dragon King. Was this the real Li Jingming?

His probe having failed, Long Jing surveyed the surroundings.

"Looks like quite the grand performance today."

The other chuckled: "Grand or not depends on whether the actors give their all."

'Hm?'

'He figured out my identity?'

'Impossible. Where did I slip up?'

Long Jing's heart jolted. Though the word "actors" triggered a faint reaction, he hid it well, immediately pretending to browse the seating options as he scanned the area. And what he saw was quite telling.

There were many tombstones here, but the front row held exactly fifteen. Did that mean fifteen attendees?

'The Jokers are surprisingly large.'

He carefully assessed the venue's defensive terrain, searching for a suitable position. But this was all a feint — his attention had been entirely on the other person from the start.

No one could guarantee this cemetery-like venue didn't hide traps. He didn't dare relax, constantly on alert, hoping the other's reactions would betray a safe spot.

But the other was equally well-concealed, making no movements beyond turning his head. This only increased Long Jing's pressure. Especially when, after Long Jing hesitated too long, the black-robed figure suddenly laughed:

"What's wrong? Nothing you like?"

Long Jing froze on the spot.

Not because of the words — but because of what he'd seen.

'Like?'

'Tell me what exactly counts as "like"!?'

'You mean you just casually sitting atop a tombstone engraved with [Memory] and chatting me up!?'

'Holding the gathering in a cemetery was creepy enough. But you people carved divine names on the stones!?'

'They're not even dead yet and you're already mourning Them!?'

'So this masked gathering is sponsored by [Death] or something!?'

'Are the Jokers really this wild? Or is this how they recruit — dragging people into the pit of blasphemy so they have no choice but to join!?'

'Yes, I'm starting to believe the gods may not truly be gods. But I only believe — I'm not stupid!'

'Before I can say "no" to the gods, what makes me brave enough to sit on Their tombstone?'

'Who can guarantee that if I plop down, They won't personally descend on my grave tomorrow!?'

Long Jing hesitated. But he had to choose — showing cowardice would throw off his momentum. After a long struggle, he gritted his teeth and walked toward a particular tombstone.

When he stopped before the one inscribed [Time], the black-robed figure sitting on [Memory] blinked in surprise and smiled:

"A [Memory] believer wants to bury [Time] too?"

Long Jing snorted without reply, thinking: 'This was a desperate choice. I picked [Time] to prevent anyone else from "blaspheming" it. That way, even if Lord Shi Zhen finds out, He surely won't punish someone this devout?'

'But come to think of it — why isn't there a tombstone for the Fun God?'

As he pondered, another arrival appeared at the tomb field's edge. An identically black-robed, masked figure entered their line of sight. The matching outfits left both occupants momentarily stunned.

'What is this — telepathic coordination?'

'But we don't even know each other. Where's the telepathy?'

The newcomer was silent. Without a word, he walked forward, clearly familiar with the place. Seeing two others already present, he merely nodded in greeting — no speech — and under their suspicious gazes, climbed onto the [Death] tombstone.

His target was clear, his movements decisive. The instant the third Joker chose [Death], the figure seated on [Memory] smiled and offered a compliment:

"Nice venue."

The third black-robed figure nodded again. Still said nothing. Long Jing watched this exchange with growing unease.

These two clearly knew each other. The Jokers must have met before — otherwise the newcomer wouldn't be so familiar with this place, and they wouldn't be this at ease.

But who was he?

To brazenly blaspheme [Death] without flinching, and to remain silent throughout... could he be a [Silence] believer?

'The Prisoner!?'

An ill-omened name surfaced in Long Jing's mind. His expression darkened as he glanced at the newcomer. 'If that really is the Prisoner, this gathering is about to get interesting.'

'I didn't expect the second most cursed person to also be a Joker. So what's the recruitment criteria?'

'Being a Chosen?'

'Does that mean even without the Chosen title, I'm essentially Chosen-caliber?'

'But if that's the case, the most cursed one wouldn't also be a Joker, right?'

Speak of the devil. Before Zhen Yi's name had fully formed in Long Jing's mind, a familiar silvery laugh echoed from the tomb field's perimeter.

At the first note, all three present visibly flinched. They simultaneously turned to look, spotting a youthful, radiant figure — completely undisguised — skipping into the tomb field's center. Eyes sparkling, she pointed at the three black-robed figures and counted:

"1, 2, 3..."

Heh~

Guessing three people's names — so hard. Why don't you just introduce yourselves?

Hm? Why won't anyone talk? All gone mute?

Don't tell me you're all clones of my dear Brother Prisoner? But he loves to talk! Unlike you lot — utterly boring.

Hey, if nobody speaks up, I'm going to get physical!

Just wait till I snap all your masks off. Let's see where you hide then."

With that, the long-haired girl rolled up her sleeves. The next second, all three responded simultaneously:

"Interesting. Feel free to try."

"..."

"Ahem — I'm Li Jingming."

...

Chapter 993: Three Present, Only One Fooled

A person's name casts a shadow like a tree's.

The world had suffered under Zhen Yi for far too long. But once she realized the effect of her reputation, she'd gained another tool for mischief.

Just like now — three responses alone were enough to deduce a great deal.

Whoever introduced himself as "Li Jingming" was definitely not the real Li Jingming. Or rather, no one would believe such an introduction came from Li Jingming himself. On the contrary, the casual "Interesting" sounded eighty percent like the real Dragon King.

But was reality truly so simple?

No. Not at all.

The one who'd said "Ahem, I'm Li Jingming" was precisely the composed black-robed figure seated on the [Memory] tombstone. And the one who'd uttered "Interesting" was Long Jing — who'd channeled the Dragon King down to his bones.

Unfortunately, the talented performer President Gong was outmaneuvered at the critical moment, undone by the classic "wanting to deny but compelled to respond" technique.

Now, whether he played Li Jingming or not, he was Li Jingming.

Before Zhen Yi arrived, the disguise hardly mattered. But Zhen Yi had a "grudge" with Li Jingming. So the instant she guessed that the figure on the [Time] tombstone was Li Jingming, she lunged forward a step, startling the seated Long Jing into a visible flinch.

Long Jing wasn't scared exactly — even with a single faith, he'd never feared clashing with Zhen Yi. Now merged with [Time] and armed with the Pointer Knight's confidence, he feared no one in this hall. But Zhen Yi's lingering menace was overwhelming. Matching combat power didn't mean matching face.

This lunatic could throw away pride to mess with you. Could you abandon your dignity to mess with her in return?

You could. Of course you could. But since her notoriety had grown, everyone who'd opposed her — except a certain Fate Weaver — had become a laughingstock.

Long Jing was never insecure. Quite confident, in fact. But against Zhen Yi, an oppressive sensation simply wouldn't leave.

He often consoled himself that his time hadn't come, that he needed more experience. But by all appearances, he'd still lost.

Because just as he steeled himself for a potential battle, Zhen Yi suddenly stopped. Smiling, she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, then elegantly drew a playing card from her breast pocket.

It was a gold-edged poker card. Nobody caught what was printed on the face. They only saw her flip it, glance at it, and grin:

"Merged with [Time]?"

Not bad. So you've found Lord Shi Zhen. Yu Xi's guidance really was correct — which means that Cheng Shi wasn't lying either.

Though I will say, President Gong's deception skills are a bit lacking, but your luck is solid.

Want to go back?

Trade me details about your experience — how's that?"

"Zhen Xin!!??"

Long Jing was shocked. Gnashing his teeth at the smiling magician before him, he thought: 'One exchange and she extracted all my intel. This is humiliating.'

But the next second, the magician quietly pocketed her magic card, turned to the black-robed figure on the [Memory] tombstone, and said:

"Three present, only one fooled. Setting aside the one who's committed to silence — Li Jingming, since when have you been this lively?"

Li Jingming... correct. The figure on the [Memory] tombstone was indeed the real Li Jingming. He chuckled softly, lowered his hood and removed his mask, smiling faintly as he glanced at Long Jing. With identities blown, disguises were pointless. All four present were acquaintances — deception had lost its purpose.

"The fact that you stood there giving us a few seconds to prepare proves you're definitely not Zhen Yi. Her cursed aura doesn't come from conversation.

I know badmouthing someone to their face isn't great, but considering you might find her annoying too as her older sister, I'll scold her on your behalf. No need to thank me."

Zhen Xin snorted softly, unbothered, and fired right back:

"Thanks anyway. But I'll personally relay your words and make sure Zhen Yi comes to thank you in person."

Tension hung faintly in the air. Had the two not already interacted previously, this might have actually escalated.

Zhen Xin surveyed the room, taking in the divine tombstones, then turned to the black-robed figure on the [Death] stone and nodded:

"Where is Cheng Shi? Why hasn't he arrived?"

She'd clearly identified this figure. He shook his head:

"Have a seat. No rush. Besides, how do you know it's him who hasn't arrived?"

Perhaps the Fate Weaver has been hidden somewhere watching us the whole time."

The moment that familiar voice emerged, Long Jing recognized him.

[Death]'s Chosen — Zhang Jizu!

Sure enough, when the hood came down, those signature squinting eyes reappeared before everyone.

'Well, well, well!'

Now everything clicked — not about the current situation, but about the San Dales trial!

'So at the Joy Theater, five people onstage and off — and four of you were Jokers!?'

'I treated you as peers, and you played me like a dog!?'

'And what about Yu Xi?'

'No — Lord Yu Xi must have been real. Otherwise there wouldn't have been the Shi Zhen guidance afterwards. Thank goodness. At least [Deceit] was looking out for me. At least He tipped generously for that performance.'

'But the rest of you...'

Long Jing was furious. No — he gave up. Since you lot were all such accomplished liars, he'd stop lying. He couldn't beat them in scheming? Fine. Surely he could beat them at sincerity!

Besides, he already knew this universe's truth. At this gathering, he was essentially a prophet. With such knowledge, why waste brain cells on fellow victims still kept in the dark?

With that thought, Long Jing also pulled back his hood and removed his mask. When President Gong's face appeared, Zhen Xin chuckled again.

"Giving up already?"

Your mentality needs work, President Gong. There are still people who haven't arrived. Go win back your dignity against them.

How about this — tell me about Shi Zhen, and I'll help you fool the latecomers. Deal?"

The de-robed Long Jing completely ignored this "temptation." He sat cross-legged on his tombstone, cracked one eyelid at Zhen Xin, and scoffed:

"What do you want to know?"

"?" Zhen Xin raised an eyebrow. "Depends on what you want to tell me."

"Anything goes."

Zhen Xin's pupils shifted: "Who is Shi Zhen? Where is He? And why has He never been recorded in the Land of Hope?"

"Shi Zhen is the very first clock hand forged by [Time]'s own hands at the moment of descent. It's understandable that mortals don't know of His existence — because since the day He was created, He never once left the platform of the Universe Clock.

Everyone here was present at the time, so I won't beat around the bush. Lord Yu Xi's guidance was actually a test. He and Lord Shi Zhen had a misunderstanding, and I... well, I personally resolved it.

I earned Lord Shi Zhen's recognition and thus merged with [Time].

Satisfied with that answer?"

"..."

...

Chapter 994: Don't Worry, I'm the Older Sister

Satisfied? Sure. But perhaps a bit too satisfied.

When you start baring your heart before a group of liars, they won't examine whether your sincerity is genuine — they know it isn't. They'll only focus on how much falsehood is mixed into that so-called sincerity.

A competitive liar like Long Jing getting embarrassed and immediately sharing intel honestly? Was that reasonable?

Not a ghost believed it.

Zhen Xin certainly didn't, but that didn't stop her from extracting some key information to guide the History School's future work.

Li Jingming didn't believe it either. Since merging with [Deceit], he'd discovered a universal truth: no liar doesn't lie.

Even if someone was absolutely trustworthy, as long as they were a liar, at least one in ten of their words had to be false.

So lies were inevitable. The only question was how much was mixed in.

He silently noted the information about Shi Zhen, eyeing Long Jing with newfound appreciation. This acrobat's deception skills were clearly improving through practice.

While the four were exchanging words, another arrival came.

The newcomer wore identical black robes and mask. Familiar attire, miraculous coordination.

But when he drew near and found that no one present was disguised... he froze entirely.

And at that moment, Zhen Xin's smile turned eerily familiar.

"Heh~

Another one."

"..."

"..."

"..."

Even knowing full well the person before them was Zhen Xin — even having chatted with her for a while — all three veterans still tensed at that "heh." To say nothing of the newcomer.

His steps screeched to a halt. He immediately retreated two paces, and a scalpel had already slid from his sleeve.

Seeing the extreme reaction, Zhen Xin tilted her head thoughtfully and smiled:

"Interesting. But Cheng Shi, you're late.

Also — don't panic. I'm the older sister."

"???"

'What sane person introduces themselves by saying "I'm the older sister"?'

'And besides, who else could impersonate Zhen Yi this convincingly other than Zhen Xin? Well... maybe Cheng Shi...'

'But if she's Cheng Shi, then who's the "me" sitting on the [Death] tombstone!?'

The black-robed figure's eyelids twitching, he took a deep breath and removed his hood. When everyone saw those familiar squinting eyes, they all froze — then simultaneously turned to stare at the "Zhang Jizu" perched on the [Death] tombstone.

The imposter's face curved into a sly smile. He chuckled softly, shed his disguise, and revealed a brilliantly familiar grin, waving to everyone:

"Welcome to the Joker Society.

Miss Magician, I already told you I was hiding right here watching the show. So the latecomer isn't me — it's Squinty Zhang.

As punishment for tardiness, how about you kick things off for us, Squinty Zhang?"

"..."

Zhen Xin's smile vanished. The Dragon King's eye twitched. Long Jing beamed with glee!

His own failure was galling, but an opponent's failure was balm for the soul.

Zhang Jizu's eyes narrowed to slits. He nodded to everyone present, then silently walked to the [Death] tombstone. He pulled the "hey-hey-hey"-protesting Cheng Shi off, and took his seat.

With his spot stolen, Cheng Shi's face crumbled.

"You couldn't pick another one?"

"Trying to use devotion to that gentleman to offset blasphemy against all the gods?"

Heh. Cheng Shi, don't forget — I'm that gentleman's believer."

Zhang Jizu kicked Cheng Shi away irritably. Cheng Shi shrugged it off:

"Oh right, right, right. Now you remember you're that gentleman's believer. I preferred when you were in the Cemetery questioning me about why He doesn't favor you."

"..."

Some people were exactly like their Benefactor. You could never beat them in a war of words.

Squinty Zhang, deciding out-of-sight was out-of-mind, simply closed his eyes. But this brief exchange added another delightful anecdote to the Dragon King's memory collection. Cheng Shi hadn't forgotten the [Memory] believer present, so he immediately pointed at Li Jingming:

"That counts as a first share. Dragon King, you owe me one now. Pay up later."

"?"

Cheng Shi's peculiar logic and trademark greediness drew laughs from everyone. The inexplicable tension in the air dissipated.

Zhen Xin shook her head with a smile: "No wonder He chose you as spokesperson. You truly have the talent."

Cheng Shi played dumb: "Who?"

"Give it a rest, Fate Weaver. Everyone knows who I mean.

Also, aren't you spacing out the arrivals too much? So few people after this long...

Don't tell me this is everyone."

"How could that be?" Cheng Shi immediately denied her challenge. "Don't underestimate our Jokers."

'Give me a break — there's still one more!'

'One seat might not sound like much, but in a group this size it's a twenty-percent increase. Double digits! That's significant!'

But he couldn't exactly confess there was only one more. So he rolled his eyes and deflected:

"People will arrive when they arrive. But forget them — why aren't you sitting?"

Indecisive? Surely you don't prefer standing?

That's not the Zhen Xin I know. Where's that lightning-fast decisiveness?"

"..."

Zhen Xin eyed Cheng Shi strangely, then glanced around at the tombstones, her tone laden with meaning:

"Sitting is easy. Sitting correctly is hard.

Cheng Shi, where did the Fun God's tombstone go? As His believer, sweeping His grave wouldn't be bad."

'Sweeping?'

'I don't think sweeping is what you want. Everyone knows the Fun God doesn't care about that stuff. If I let you sit on His tombstone, that wouldn't be blasphemy — it'd be an offering.'

'Everyone else is blaspheming. You alone are demonstrating piety. Appropriate?'

Naturally not. So Cheng Shi had already hidden the [Deceit] tombstone. As for where...

Under everyone's questioning gazes, Cheng Shi casually looked up.

Every eye followed his, landing on the stone lantern illuminating the central clearing... which appeared to have been carved from a hollowed-out tombstone.

"..."

"..."

"...You hollowed out the Fun God's tombstone into a lamp?" Zhen Xin was dumbfounded. She blinked for ages, then burst out laughing and actually applauded. "Bravo. Nice symbolism — using darkness-dispelling light to metaphorize the Fun God's protection. Cheng Shi, I underestimated your devotion."

'Naturally!'

Had he been any less restrained, Cheng Shi would've struck a triumphant pose.

But Zhen Xin's next words were a bucket of cold water.

"Then again, dismantling the Fun God's tombstone smacks a bit of 'desecrating the corpse.' Seems your devotion has its impurities too. Hmm, next time I have an audience, I'll put in a good word for you."

"?"

'You'd better mean a genuinely good word.'

Zhen Xin waved dismissively and spun onto the [Chaos] tombstone. Her agile mounting drew everyone's attention.

Long Jing, unaware of the reasoning, teased: "What, you think [Chaos] is so chaotic He won't charge you with blasphemy?"

Zhen Xin sat with legs crossed, smiling elegantly:

"Of course not. I simply observe that everyone's words are razor-sharp without a trace of chaos. Doesn't that mean [Chaos] is receding from us?

Wouldn't you say so, Fate Weaver?"

Cheng Shi smiled dismissively, not engaging her loaded words. He was silently counting time, wondering: would the Doctor show up today?

...

Chapter 995: Opening with a Royal Flush — The Gods Aren't Gods

Unfortunately, the Doctor's experiment didn't seem to go well. He didn't show up at the Joker venue.

After waiting fruitlessly for a while, Cheng Shi gave up, picked out a new seat, and planted himself on... the [Fate] tombstone. He announced to the group with an awkward nonchalance:

"Everyone's here. We can begin."

"?"

"What about the people you were waiting for?" Zhen Xin blinked.

"Didn't you notice? He stood us up. The livestock industry's really booming these days — there's always someone who loves releasing pigeons."

"He?"

So you were only waiting for one person?

Anticipated six, present five. Cheng Shi, this is your mysterious Jokers?"

Zhen Xin didn't know whether to laugh or cry. This wasn't even the size of the History School's History Correction Meeting.

Long Jing was stunned blank.

By now he knew perfectly well he'd been duped. That invitation letter was never from the Dragon King — it was Cheng Shi's own handiwork.

The Fate Weaver had been using deception on every attendee to build up gravitas for this gathering. But... five people? Even today's attendance was only five liars!?

If he'd known beforehand that the so-called Jokers were a five-liar organization, he might have never believed — back when meeting the other Cheng Shi — that these five could be the world's hope.

'Are you kidding me?'

'A group of people incapable of speaking truth — what hope could they bring?'

'Weaving lies into gauze to bandage the world's wounds?'

'Hilarious. What clown behavior.'

Long Jing scoffed: "What an old joke, Fate Weaver. Don't tell me you're about to claim this place is full of people we just can't see?"

Cheng Shi spread his hands with unusual sincerity:

"I never said that. If you're seeing people everywhere, I suggest finding an ophthalmologist. Of course, you could also come to me — I may not specialize in eyes, but I'm still an excellent doctor.

Every patient in Dolgod can vouch for that.

But today isn't my delivery room. It's the Jokers' home court.

As you can all see, the Joker Society is about to begin."

He picked up his mask, gestured invitingly to all present, and assumed a solemn expression of utmost devotion:

"I know you've all guessed it. Yes, the Jokers were indeed born of Him. In that case, before we begin, let us loudly praise this universe's greatest deity.

Cannot distinguish truth from falsehood..."

Cheng Shi's call rang out, his smiling gaze sweeping every face.

The others felt helpless but couldn't resist the atmosphere. They raised their masks, pressed them to their faces, and chanted in unison: "...nor debate reality from illusion."

"Excellent. Everyone is very devout.

However, I must remind you — our Lord favors falsehood. Performing such devout sincerity is, by nature, blasphemy against the Fun God. Dragon King, please note this down. If anyone later does something unworthy of the Jokers, I'll file a complaint using today's memory."

"..."

"..."

"..."

Li Jingming was numb. He hadn't expected Cheng Shi's single sentence to trap him. If he memorized it, he'd validate the absurdity — creating evidence of his own blasphemy. If he refused, it would blaspheme his faith in [Memory]. Blasphemy either way. For a moment, the [Memory] follower was utterly speechless.

Long Jing rolled his eyes at the twisted logic. Squinty Zhang, accustomed to the other's chaotic thinking, didn't even bother reacting. Only Zhen Xin watched Cheng Shi with a half-smile, tapping her heel against the tombstone:

"I hope your next sentence gets to the point. Otherwise mine will."

"..."

'That "point" wouldn't happen to be a "heh," would it?'

Cheng Shi pursed his lips. 'Kids these days are so impatient. Can't wait at all.' Fine, if they didn't want to wait — let's go.

He rose from the tombstone, gave an exaggerated bow, sat back down, and behind his back tapped the bone bell hidden beneath the tombstone. With perfect seriousness, he dropped the gathering's first bomb on every Joker watching him.

"The gods are not gods."

"!!!"

Every brow furrowed. This wasn't Cheng Shi's usual storytelling style.

Based on what they knew of the Fate Weaver, if he didn't fleece you of at least two rounds of intel before sharing, whatever came out of his mouth was suspect — possibly not even lies, but random jumbles of text.

Yet today's atmosphere was clearly different. Cheng Shi seemed driven by a powerful urge to share. And beneath that urge lurked a wisp of barely detectable... fear?

Something that frightened a friend of envoys? Interesting. Zhen Xin couldn't help wondering: what truth about the world could make this Fate Weaver — usually as playful as her younger sister — feel fear?

Yes. Sharp as she was, she'd already guessed Cheng Shi's direction. His opening line would inevitably lead to that omniscient, omnipotent [Origin]. So just by watching everyone's reactions, she'd know which attendees were truly Jokers.

Unfortunately, scanning the room, she found everyone unfazed by his premise. This meant every Joker present already possessed a deep understanding of the current world.

This was indeed a rare intelligence feast — not just the spoken words, but every gesture could be intelligence.

Long Jing's eyes gleamed even sharper. He was wondering: did this world's Cheng Shi discover this conclusion himself, or did someone tell him? If the latter — was it a player, or... one of Them?

Different answers implied vastly different degrees of complexity.

Minds raced in all directions. Cheng Shi knew everyone here had some awareness of [Origin] — if not the title, at least the concept.

So he didn't pause long. He continued:

"What I just said may have been ambiguous. What I mean is: the gods are not omniscient, omnipotent deities. They are created gods. And the one who created Them — that is the true supreme divine.

For the safety of this gathering, I won't name this genesis entity here. And I advise anyone who knows the name to refrain from dwelling on it, lest it invite disaster.

That aside, everything about the gods is fair game today. I guarantee your blasphemous words will not be heard by Them."

At this, Li Jingming's interest piqued. He glanced at Zhang Jizu with raised brows: "You succeeded?"

Zhang Jizu nodded without concealing it, then pointed at Cheng Shi: "It's with him. He said that surrendering this artifact exempts me from all future intelligence-exchange costs at Joker meetings — I'd only need to listen. I thought it was a fair deal, so I agreed."

"???"

'Wait, Squinty Zhang, you're making things up now?'

'When did I—'

Before Cheng Shi could process, the only uninformed person — Long Jing — spoke up: "What does that mean?"

Zhen Xin chuckled softly:

"The secrets this Fate Weaver carries are likely too complex to discuss under the gods' surveillance. So we've been trying to find a way to block Their vision and hearing.

It seems [Death] and the other gods don't see... eye to eye.

But I'm curious: has the 'omnipotence paradox' been solved by higher-dimensional power? If not, doesn't [Death] hear everything we say today?"

'Blocking the gods' surveillance!?'

Hearing this, Long Jing's entire body trembled. Goosebumps erupted across his skin.

He knew the gods weren't truly gods. But he'd never fantasized about one day escaping divine control.

Because he knew: once that door opened, the next steps — criticizing gods, spying on gods, resisting gods, even slaying gods — might no longer be fantasy!

What did this mean? It meant these five-person Jokers might truly become this world's hope.

So would their future resemble that other world's Cheng Shi?

If he remembered correctly, that Cheng Shi hadn't fared well at all...

For a moment, Long Jing was lost.

...

Chapter 996: A Mature Assembly Line — The Gods' Production Mechanism

"Everyone, no need to worry about that gentleman learning what's said here."

Cheng Shi smiled and offered his explanation:

"The moment He chose to bestow this artifact, He was declaring Himself on our side. Isn't that so?"

Since time immemorial, those plotting rebellion either had a powerful minister to shield them or military might to back them. The latter clearly doesn't apply to us mortals. So having His protection isn't bad at all."

The phrase "plotting rebellion" elevated the gathering's atmosphere to an entirely new level. Zhen Xin frowned slightly:

"An additional god's protection is welcome. But I'm curious — aside from the blasphemy-laced prayer at the opening, you haven't once mentioned the Fun God.

The Jokers were born of Him, yet you say nothing about Him. Am I to understand this 'rebellion' is aimed at the Fun God?

Or do we need to fight the gods, but the Fun God also can't be fully trusted?"

Talking with smart people saved effort, but Cheng Shi smiled and didn't follow Zhen Xin's thread. Instead he continued his own script.

"Everyone, relax. 'Rebellion' is just a figure of speech. We're not truly opposing the gods. On the contrary, we may need to get closer to them. The Jokers' purpose isn't a simple yes or no — it's far more involved.

Let me explain it more simply with a single question:

Why are you attending this Joker Society?"

He waved his hand. "Don't say exchanging intel or memories. That's surface level, not the essence. Ask your own hearts. Be honest with yourselves for once.

I don't need your answers. But I can tell you mine:

To stay alive."

The simpler the truth, the more sincere. Those four characters clearly struck a chord. The Jokers gazed at Cheng Shi's beaming face and felt a disconnect between the warm smile and the weight of those words.

"As you probably all know about my dual [Void] faiths — thanks to a certain someone's refusal, both [Void] rulers turned their gaze on me. I don't know what [Void] is pushing toward. I only know that, influenced by this era, I've received more and more attention.

Among those gazes was a servant god of [Void], an envoy of [Deceit] — Yu Xi.

Under His guidance, I learned more and more of the world's truth — discovering that even the gods are struggling to survive in this 'game.' This deepened my fear, leaving me lost on the road ahead. So I gathered you all to pool our wisdom.

Hence: to stay alive.

Of course, if anyone here still has reservations or simply isn't interested in the universe's truth, you may leave now. We can continue exchanging intel regularly — being information partners isn't bad.

But if you choose to keep listening... leaving afterwards may no longer be an option."

"..."

Everyone present was sharp enough not to be intimidated by Cheng Shi. They knew he wasn't threatening — merely emphasizing the gathering's gravity. And the Fate Weaver's uncharacteristic solemnity raised their expectations infinitely.

Except for Long Jing.

This acrobat already knew the world's "truth" — had even started giving up because of it. He simply couldn't envision a path to survival through such absurd reality. His expectations weren't about truth, but about method.

He was deeply curious: how could a handful of liars come up with a way to survive? Especially Cheng Shi. The other world's Cheng Shi, that powerful, still couldn't break free of the universe's fence. What made this [Void] walker think he could?

Seeing everyone's silence, Cheng Shi sensed the timing was right. He dropped the gathering's second bomb.

"I said before that the gods are not gods. This isn't fear-mongering — because the gods were mass-produced!"

"?"

This claim made even the unflappable Squinty Zhang narrow his eyes further. Cheng Shi took in everyone's expressions and pressed on:

"You may know about that supreme existence and have guessed that It created the gods. But do you know how the gods were created?"

In a way, they are... assembly-line products, mass-manufactured by that supreme existence.

To explain this properly, we need a concept: eras."

"The cause behind the scrambled epochs and memory gaps?"

"Precisely." Cheng Shi nodded and began outlining the relationship between eras and epochs for the Jokers. Then he steered back to [Origin].

"That supreme existence observes the progression of each era. Then, at an era's end — or beginning — It formally names the deities that emerged during that era.

Based on current evidence, every named deity arose from the development of life and civilization. The Paths of Fate come from this. True gods are born from this.

Of course, why Its descent timing varies remains a mystery. But undeniably, this existence that created the gods is the only one who truly qualifies as a god.

And if we want to survive, we'll probably have to escape Its grasp. So the 'rebellion' I mentioned isn't about this moment. Nor against the sixteen true gods including the Fun God. It's against the one — and only — true deity above the true gods!"

"..."

Though the Jokers' thoughts varied, they were all moved. Viewing it purely from the "staying alive" angle, the world's layered oppression was suffocating. The question remained: they still didn't understand why Cheng Shi needed to stay alive so desperately.

The "why" wasn't about his inner desire. It was about what kind of terrifying pressure this world — this game — exerted on a player. Even its very top player. So much that his fear was spreading through the Joker Society itself.

Zhen Xin and Li Jingming frowned simultaneously. They weren't strangers to fear, but under high-intensity trials, such emotions had grown rare. Now, from a mere glimpse of the world's truth, faint fear had crept in again — even though Cheng Shi hadn't even explained the source. Why?

They scanned the room and accidentally locked eyes, reading mutual confusion and suspicion. They even wondered whether the gathering's organizer was using special means to achieve his goals...

[Corruption]?

Not impossible. But was Cheng Shi really playing this dirty?

Of course not. Cheng Shi hadn't done a thing. This was his most sincere presentation yet. The stakes were too high — he knew only sincerity would earn sincerity. So regarding divine intelligence, there wasn't a trace of fabrication.

Non-essential lies were a different matter, naturally. Forbidding a liar from lying was like demanding a mute to speak. Too much to ask.

Long Jing, hearing such detail, grew uncharacteristically serious. The other Cheng Shi had told him much of what mortals shouldn't know, but their meeting was brief — only the essentials were shared. What Long Jing had was a rough framework; the details were blank.

Precisely because the framework was so overwhelming, he'd felt powerless.

Now, as Cheng Shi gradually filled in the flesh and blood of that framework, Long Jing's understanding of the world crystallized. Connecting it with what he already knew, a thought suddenly flashed:

"You're planning to become a god?"

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow, thinking Long Jing was sharp this time. But wrong.

"No. I don't want to."

"How can mortals escape the cage the gods built? Without becoming one of Them, you can never break free. What else is there?"

Hearing this, Cheng Shi smiled.

"I only said I don't want to become a god. I didn't say no one wants to.

Since we've come to this — let me ask: among those present, does anyone want to become a god?"

...

Chapter 997: What Mass Production Means — This World's Absurdity Far Exceeds Your Imagination

Come to think of it, the Jokers' thoughts were quite easy to guess.

The more Cheng Shi understood them, the better he could think as they did.

Zhen Xin's interest in godhood probably wasn't about herself, but about An Mingyu, An Jing, and possibly even Zhen Yi...

If someday she needed to become a god to protect these people, given Zhen Xin's personality, she'd agree in a heartbeat. No — she'd probably already started preparing. Because she had to ensure that when the moment came, she could smoothly claim that divine throne.

That was Zhen Xin: the History School president who planned one move and calculated three.

The Dragon King's position was even clearer. Whether he wanted godhood himself was debatable, but if anyone wanted to become a god and do something for this world, he would undoubtedly be the greatest ally.

Squinty Zhang, with his fearless taboo-breaking nature, definitely harbored some godhood aspirations. Remember — the tombstones in the Cemetery still displayed his ambition to bury the gods. If he were merely mortal, how could he bury Them?

So on the question of "staying alive," he was probably the one who resonated most with Cheng Shi.

As for Long Jing... Cheng Shi's understanding of this acrobat came from Brother Mouth's leaks and the other world's Long Jing. He seemed like a resilient, good person. His fawning attitude toward superiors showed competitive drive. But that fire appeared to have gone out.

The change was most likely connected to the other world's version of himself. Putting himself in those shoes, he could guess at the acrobat's shifted mindset. Still, the fact that Long Jing had kept the truth secret showed he was trustworthy. If he could reignite that drive, the performance-hungry actor might develop aspirations toward godhood.

Cheng Shi had thought it through, but no one spoke up. At a gathering of liars, nobody would crack open their chest to show a beating heart. Cheng Shi didn't mind. He continued at his planned pace.

But before he could proceed, the perceptive Dragon King raised a question:

"Cheng Shi, as you said, eras and epochs have a progressive relationship. Yet since ancient times, the gods have only been created once. Since They've weathered the tidal waves of shifting eras, what do you mean by 'mass production'?"

Mass production is about scale. For the creation of gods to be linked with quantity... could it be that each extrapolation isn't merely an extrapolation but a genuinely existing world?

Can [Time]'s power trigger the supreme assembly line, making the gods from every extrapolation materialize?"

"?"

'Not a bad theory, but human cognition was shackled by what they could see. Still lacked imagination.'

Cheng Shi shook his head with a wry smile and explained:

"Good question, but wrong answer.

Mass production is indeed about scale. It's actually quite simple: if one world's gods can be compared to a single production run, then scaling it up — manufacturing gods for countless worlds — turns it into an assembly line."

"Parallel worlds." Zhen Xin had been waiting for this truth. Her gaze sharpened. "So how do these countless worlds you describe differ from [Time]'s extrapolated parallels?"

"The difference is enormous.

Let me use a current example. [Prosperity] has fallen. In the parallel world as you understand it, would she still be alive?"

"Of course not. The gods' existence transcends time. They express themselves consistently beyond temporal constraints—"

Before she finished, Zhen Xin's expression changed.

"So beyond the parallel worlds, there exists a world entirely separate from our universe — with the same gods, the same parallel extrapolations, but completely unaffected by our present reality!"

Cheng Shi nodded gravely: "Exactly. The answer you've been seeking comes from there."

"..." Zhen Xin froze, then lowered her head with an inscrutable expression. "So my preparations were for nothing. Ha. I was actually planning to gather [Time]'s power to pry open the parallels and investigate. Turns out... she was already so far from me."

'Who?'

There weren't many people who could make Zhen Xin this dejected. Li Jingming stole a peripheral glance and silently filed away another hazy memory.

But then Cheng Shi burst out laughing:

"Not wasted at all — because [Time] remains the key to breaking through this space-time barrier!"

This time Cheng Shi leaped straight off the [Fate] tombstone. He couldn't sit still anymore. Revealing the secret he'd held for so long felt liberating — at least from now on, he wouldn't be the only one carrying the fear.

"Remember what I said earlier?"

Above the gods stands a supreme existence. That existence truly stands high above all. But the way It towers over everything may be completely different from what you imagine.

Let me put it differently for easier understanding. It's not just a creator. It's more like the director of a grand experiment. Yes, you heard correctly — an experiment!

And this universe-spanning experiment bears a striking resemblance to [Truth]'s slice experiment. The only difference is the content being sliced — because It doesn't slice Itself. It slices the universe!

In Its experiment there are countless sliced universes, each an independent entity. Our universe is merely one insignificant slice among infinite others!

In other words, everything we once understood — [Time]'s constructed past, future, and even parallel universes — is merely part of this single sliced universe. It's a subset relationship, not a parallel one.

True parallelism isn't the parallel created by [Time]'s extrapolation. It's the countless new 'petri dishes' that this existence opened within Its experiment!"

Cheng Shi was pacing with apparent calm, but his entire being radiated a frenzied intensity.

He alternated between cold laughter and mockery, jibes and sarcasm, but none of it seemed directed outward. It all pointed inward — at himself.

What should have been a revelation and a sharing looked, in everyone's eyes, like Cheng Shi laughing bitterly at his own pitiable state.

But if this Fate Weaver — who knew the universe's truth — was pitiable, what did that make them...

Not even worthy of pity?

Cheng Shi's long-suppressed madness continued.

"As for why I call them petri dishes... remember the era-naming I mentioned? What does that make you think of?

Perhaps I'm overthinking it, but there's a voice in my head repeating — over and over — that the so-called 'naming' is simply that supreme existence labeling the specimens in its petri dishes!

This is the true meaning of mass production. This world's absurdity far exceeds mortal imagination.

Nobody knows what this experiment spanning infinite sliced universes is truly for. But I can confirm one thing: not just you and me — even the gods are nothing more than insignificant variables in this grand experiment.

The only difference is that the parameters they influence far exceed a mortal's. And as for us players... only those of you present here barely qualify as marginal node parameters."

"..."

"..."

"..."

As Cheng Shi's final syllable faded, the room fell deathly silent.

The Jokers' expressions froze on their faces. Only after a long stretch did color gradually return to their eyes — though it was unclear whether that color was shock or dread. They exchanged glances, looked at each other blankly, all momentarily robbed of speech.

When your estimate is 1 but the truth is 2, you feel surprised. When your estimate is 2 but the truth is 4, you're stunned but can cope. But when your estimate is 4 and the truth is 10,000...

Ha. This world is insane.

Of that, I'm certain.

...

Chapter 998: The Final Proposition — So-Called Fixed Destiny

Fear? Some. Despair? Probably that too.

But the despair and fear here were merely reactions to the universe's chaotic, absurd truth — the bewilderment of the infinitesimal facing the immense, the shock of lower dimensions confronting the higher.

When the gods descended, many players realized mortals were nothing but cosmic dust — puppets in a toy pile. Adding [Origin] simply raised the puppet-master's dimension further.

Fireflies can't compare to the full moon — that was already an accepted fact. Swapping the moon for a giant sun was far less shocking than the first glimpse of moonlight.

Humans had limited capacity for empathizing with grand narratives. But they could always find resonance in the fine details.

Cheng Shi understood this well. He also knew that human fear never came from what was seen — it always lurked within. External forces merely triggered it.

So at the very end, after unveiling the universe's truth for the Jokers, he brought up the urgency of the present.

He paced back to the [Fate] tombstone, traced the characters of "fate" with his fingers, and asked in a tone of absolute calm:

"How do you all view Fixed Destiny? [Fate]'s Fixed Destiny?"

Though [Fate] was also a god, jumping from the grand [Origin] experiment to the "narrow" concept of Fixed Destiny was quite a leap.

The dazed listeners all frowned. The Dragon King pondered a moment before speaking: "This is connected to the fear in your heart?"

"You noticed?" Cheng Shi turned with a smile.

The Dragon King nodded gravely: "Yes. I can feel it."

"How?"

"It's funny. After hearing everything you've said, a trace of uncontrollable fear appeared in my own heart.

So when I say I can feel it, I don't mean I felt your fear. I mean I felt my own. Projecting from myself to you — whatever has been suppressing you this long is probably the same thing."

Cheng Shi smiled. He nodded and sat back down on the [Fate] tombstone.

"Yes. I am afraid. And the source of that fear is [Fate]'s Fixed Destiny."

"This universe's experiment is connected to [Fate]?" Zhen Xin also frowned.

"Not to [Fate] — but to Fixed Destiny!"

"?"

Everyone turned, because this emphatic response wasn't from Cheng Shi — it was from Long Jing!

The acrobat had finally burst. Throughout Cheng Shi's revelations, he'd been dying to interject — to prove he already knew all this. But Cheng Shi's pacing was compelling and the details too specific for him to contribute, so opportunity never came.

Now, the moment Cheng Shi mentioned Fixed Destiny, Long Jing knew his moment had finally arrived!

The other Cheng Shi had repeatedly emphasized Fixed Destiny in his warnings. Long Jing was thoroughly versed. At last, he could seize his spotlight — especially on the Joker Society's stage!

Even Cheng Shi looked at Long Jing with mild surprise. But he'd already guessed what the acrobat would say. Good — he'd listen to how the other version of himself had explained the inescapable Fixed Destiny.

Seeing every face turn toward him, Long Jing instantly slipped into President Gong's performance mode, delivering everything he knew in an appropriately mysterious tone.

"As I mentioned, I received an audience with Shi Zhen. Through a stroke of fate, I resolved the misunderstanding between Yu Xi and Shi Zhen.

Because of that, during the audience, I was granted an opportunity."

'An opportunity?'

Zhen Xin raised an eyebrow: "Merging with [Time]?"

Long Jing's expression stiffened. That was supposed to be a bombshell too — enough to stun the room. But Zhen Xin had sussed it out on first contact. Bringing it up now was like salt in a wound.

"...The faith fusion was only part of it. The most important thing was receiving guidance from [Time].

The guidance's content was nothing less than letting me cross the space-time barrier and meet another..."

Long Jing's tone hitched. He stole a glance at Cheng Shi, then took a deep breath:

"...me. Another me!"

"?"

Hearing this, Cheng Shi nearly couldn't hold back his laughter. He'd already figured out Long Jing's angle.

Clearly, the acrobat was determined to scrub out every "Cheng Shi element" from the story, building his own mysterious, knowledgeable persona. Indeed, perhaps only this could wash away the clownish impression he'd left on everyone.

But would it really be that simple?

Don't forget — every Joker present was sharper than the last. Surely they could read between the lines?

Of course they could. In fact, everyone had been approaching all information with caution. The Jokers knew a liar's words were the least trustworthy. But through cross-referencing, truths could still be extracted.

So everyone's state was: you say yours, I'll hear mine. Whatever agenda you're pushing is your business — I only take what I need.

And so, in this atmosphere of tangled sincerity and deception, Long Jing continued his "spotlight" moment.

"That world was miserable. Because [Time] — the god they followed — had fallen."

"WHAT!?" Every eye went wide. Cheng Shi's too. Faked.

"[Time] fell?"

"That's right. Unlike the [Prosperity] death we see here, their [Time] vanished.

But not completely. Through the Fun God's machinations, all living beings bore [Time]'s divine authority. Players walked weighed down by ages, and after countless attempts, they found a way to contact other sliced universes.

I don't know if their efforts prompted our world's Shi Zhen to respond. But He did indeed send me to meet that... myself.

The other me told me they'd contacted countless worlds and tried countless methods, yet still couldn't find the so-called 'answer.' Because the only deity who knew the 'answer' — [Time] — was gone.

Their world had nearly lost all hope.

And this 'answer,' my other self speculated, was becoming a 'successful specimen' in this universe-slicing experiment.

He said [Fate]'s Fixed Destiny was essentially this: if our sliced universe doesn't succeed, then as a discarded specimen, we'll be abandoned entirely by the experiment's director.

But if our sliced universe succeeds..."

Here, Long Jing suddenly halted. An inexplicable flash of fear shot through his heart.

He'd been running this information through his mind for days on end. His emotional response to these "truths" had grown duller each time. So why, right now, did the fear return?

Even more curious — no one knew why Long Jing had paused. But Zhen Xin, sharp as ever, immediately guessed his next words. A flicker of gravity crossed her eyes as she finished for him:

"...If it succeeds, then this world will be scooped up by It, becoming the 'fortunate ones' who face the ultimate directly.

And whether that fortune is truly fortunate... I suspect it's not the kind of fortune we'd want."

Long Jing recovered. He nodded with rare agreement:

"Correct. Where a successful world leads is unknown. And the unknown is fear. Compared to outright annihilation, perhaps facing the experiment's director would be even more terrifying. So he said:

This is [Fate]'s Fixed Destiny. Whether the outcome is good or bad, the world will drown in fear. And the universe will return to [Orig—"

"!!!"

Long Jing caught himself just in time. He froze, then broke into cold sweat.

The others tensed at the syllable too. Cheng Shi's scalp went numb, a finger-snap already at the ready.

He glared at Long Jing, wishing he could sew the acrobat's mouth shut. Feeling the Fate Weaver's gaze, Long Jing hunched his shoulders and forced out a rigid smile.

"I... didn't say it. It should be... fine?"

'Heh. Let's hope so. Otherwise the Jokers would truly be "dead before they even got started.'"

Everyone waited anxiously. When nothing happened, they finally relaxed and resumed contemplating Long Jing's words about Fixed Destiny.

Cheng Shi's brow furrowed deepest. This was his first time hearing what the other version of himself had said — via Long Jing's mouth. As for how much was true and how much false, most of it was likely genuine, since the reasoning aligned with what he already knew.

The only difference: Cheng Shi's understanding of Fixed Destiny oscillated between [Deceit]'s world-destruction and [Fate]'s offering. The other Cheng Shi's understanding framed it as the success or failure of [Origin]'s experiment.

Two perspectives, one macro, one micro. But regardless of which version of Fixed Destiny, both Cheng Shis agreed on one thing: Fixed Destiny was a tragedy.

And this realization had dawned on Cheng Shi back when "Cheng Dashi" had "returned." Only now, with deeper understanding of the universe, could it be confirmed.

So every world's Cheng Shi was searching for a way to break Fixed Destiny. Searching for hope to keep their world going. Yet as far as anyone knew, none had succeeded.

At this thought, fear stirred in Cheng Shi's heart once more, adding a shadow between his brows.

...

Chapter 999: Congratulations Everyone, Welcome to the God Worship Society

"Comedy's core is often tragedy. So can I interpret the relationship between [Deceit] and [Fate] the same way?"

One crafts illusions through fun. The other is the despair of Fixed Destiny."

Zhen Xin blinked at Cheng Shi. She wanted to know how his understanding of Fixed Destiny differed from the other-world Long Jing's.

The idea wasn't fresh. Cheng Shi had considered it initially too. But things were different now. Drawing ever closer to the Fun God, he'd discovered that this [Void] comedy might not even require seeking its core — its surface might already be a tragedy.

He sighed, casting aside tangled thoughts, and spoke with perfect seriousness:

"Perhaps it's all tragedy. 'Everything returns to [Void]' isn't just a saying.

Given how much truth I know, our Benefactor knows far more.

Even Lord Yu Xi is still lost and searching. How much more so can we be? That's why I'm afraid.

Let me ask everyone: based on what you know of the Fun God, when He learned this universe was merely an experiment — what do you think He would do?"

"..."

After a moment of silence, Zhen Xin's eyes lit up: "He's preparing to make a move against that supreme existence?"

'?'

'Sis, what are you getting excited about?'

'You're hoping that after He wrecks this experiment, you can seize the chance to find your An Mingyu?'

'Give it a rest. Even if you did meet, maybe all you'd find is your arm and the Blind One's leg. Or worse — everyone becomes cosmic dust, mixed together. Then you two really would be "one body, one heart, never separated"...'.

"Quite possible. At the very least, He won't sit around waiting to die." The Dragon King sighed, looking at Cheng Shi. "The supreme being is the external cause. He is the internal cause. Together they form your fear."

"Yes. That's precisely my greatest worry." Cheng Shi's gaze sharpened. "From detecting the first signs to accelerating His arrangements, the Fun God has been preparing for who knows how long. Even if you guess the direction of His goal, it's nearly impossible to deduce exactly what He plans to do.

[Fate] is the same. Though He doesn't know the universe's truth...

Yes, you heard correctly. Not all gods know about this. So in this regard, from a certain angle, everyone present here has already surpassed the gods in awareness.

This is the miracle of the Jokers... and an absurdity that could only occur in the [Void] era.

Though there's nothing to be proud of. Powerless spectators are still just spectators. No matter how much they know — the ones writing the script are Them, not us.

Even though [Fate] doesn't know about this experiment, His actions inherently align with the supreme existence's will. He passively shapes the entire world into what Long Jing called the 'perfect specimen.'

And this is the Fixed Destiny beneath our feet:

Either follow [Deceit] in defying the divine face, or be offered up by [Fate] before the divine altar...

Beyond that, there are no other choices."

"..."

Present realities struck harder than distant vistas. Now everyone understood what "the universe will ultimately return to [Void]" truly meant.

The fact was: regardless of what the Jokers individually desired, under the machinations of [Void]'s two patriarchs, their wishes were nigh impossible to fulfill.

No wonder Cheng Shi's only wish was to stay alive...

To know so many secrets, to bear pressure no mortal should bear, and still fight to survive — in a way, that was already a kind of success.

The atmosphere turned oppressive again. Threads of confusion and fear wound around every heart.

But fear didn't always sound the retreat. At the very least, it was fuel for the weak to push forward. So after giving the Jokers ample time to digest, Cheng Shi smiled again.

It was a somewhat lost smile, but at least it was warm.

"I wonder if today's intelligence satisfied everyone. They say intelligence is for trading, but I doubt anyone here has equivalent-tier intel to exchange. So why not change the format?"

Sitting around waiting to die only lets fear pile up. That's why I gathered you — to pool our wisdom and see if the Jokers' collective intellect can find a way through."

The moment he finished, Zhen Xin tapped her heel against the tombstone:

"So that's why you earlier asked if anyone wanted to become a god.

How interesting. After all that roundabout talk, it turns out the God Worship Society was actually ahead of everyone.

Cheng Shi, by your logic, in this utterly hopeless hyper-dimensional experiment, becoming one of Them is the only answer visible to mortals... well, the prerequisite for the answer.

Whether gods are merely experimental variables or not, They've at least been 'labeled' by that existence. And that is the closest 'connection' a specimen within the 'petri dish' can have to the experiment's director.

Let me say something discouraging: right now, we have absolutely no right to discuss survival. Because we lack the capacity to survive.

You've gathered us and shared such horrifying truths — there's certainly Yu Xi's authorization behind this, perhaps even the Fun God's will.

So may I understand it as: the Fun God is pushing His followers to steal the gods' thrones?

Hmm, this definitely ties into His plans.

Leveraging believers' survival instinct to help Him complete His arrangements, while simultaneously using those arrangements for 'retribution' against that supreme being — very [Deceit].

Although sudden godhood is obviously impossible for mortals. With the Convention above protecting all divine authority, our real target is the servant god tier beneath the true gods' status, correct?

Securing a servant god position is the key to the first breakthrough!

It seems only through this can we gradually seize divine authority and survive.

And once we establish divine status and build a connection to It, we'll finally have the chance — like mortals studying the gods — to study the experiment's director. Only then can we begin thinking about how to stay alive.

Heh. Looks like we have an answer. Congratulations everyone — welcome to the God Worship Society."

"..."

"Joining the God Worship Society" was jest, of course. But Zhen Xin was right, and it largely matched Cheng Shi's thinking.

Hearing this, the Dragon King spoke seriously:

"This is indeed one direction for survival. But fixating solely on godhood makes us no different from the God Worship Society.

We may have other options. Opportunities lie both within and without.

Long Jing just said that under Shi Zhen's guidance, he met another version of himself in another world. So if [Time] truly has the power to let mortals contact other worlds, then..."

"Smuggling?" Long Jing's eyes flashed with inspiration. "Perhaps we can find a more hopeful world?"

Zhang Jizu squinted and shook his head:

"Meaningless. The 'hope' you speak of — do you mean getting closer to 'perfect specimen,' or getting abandoned sooner by the experiment's director?"

Rather than swapping worlds, learning from other worlds' experiences is what we should be doing.

The Long Jing you met clearly went through more. They found a way to pierce the space-time barrier. That means this method isn't exclusive to gods — perhaps we can try it too."

"But don't forget — they bore [Time]'s burden. Our [Time] hasn't fallen," Long Jing sighed.

"But we have Shi Zhen. Since He was willing to give mortals this opportunity, there might be more to it than meets the eye." Zhen Xin smiled, pulling out a wristwatch and studying its hour hand. "And Shi Zhen is subordinate to [Time]. So do you think [Time] might also be 'different-hearted' from the other gods, like [Death]?"

"..."

'Sharp intuition.'

Hearing this, Cheng Shi gazed at Zhen Xin with undisguised admiration. But her reasoning wasn't finished.

"Looking at it this way, the gods aren't united. They've split into many factions.

Regardless of whether They've perceived the universe's truth, we can identify potential allies and obstacles simply by Their attitudes toward the supreme being.

With divine assistance, mortals can continue on the road to godhood.

So at the end of the day, mapping the gods' relationships is the first step to walking freely. This gathering still has value as an intelligence exchange. The History School's research on the gods has never stopped — I should be able to help."

"Memory is equally useful. Seeing the large through the small, understanding the whole from the minute. I've been trying to gauge divine will through traces of faith — I never imagined those old contemplations would find their purpose here."

Seeing fear's influence dissipate and the discussion's atmosphere steadily improve, Cheng Shi smiled slightly and quietly slipped the [Corruption] container back behind him.

A host always needed a few tricks up his sleeve.

Too much fear was counterproductive. But zero fear wouldn't do either. After all, the rope that bound the Jokers to the Fear Faction's great ship was precisely fear itself.

So this balance — he absolutely had to get it right.

...

Chapter 1000: Heart-to-Heart — Zhen Xin's Sincerity

The Jokers discussed for a long time, each sharing their views. The final consensus was a multi-pronged approach: not only should they seek opportunities for godhood, but they also needed to contact the outside world through [Time] for more information.

Local intelligence gathering couldn't fall behind either. The historical folds within this space-time might hold traces for understanding the Fun God's arrangements. And the more they understood Him, the more room the Jokers had to plan for themselves.

Pooling wisdom was indeed effective. Everyone's ideas were solid. But there remained a problem: general discussions could set direction, but couldn't translate into concrete steps.

No shortage of pragmatists were present. Before long, Zhen Xin raised an eyebrow:

"We've established a basis for trust and a framework for cooperation. Now it's time to discuss the details.

Everyone here is among the best in this game. I know you can each hold your own. But against that supreme being's experiment, a mortal standing alone is useless. Only by combining forces can we 'break through and achieve something.' So let's all be a little more sincere..."

"How so?" Cheng Shi chuckled. He seemed to have guessed where Zhen Xin was going. "A genuine heart-to-heart session?"

"You could say that."

Zhen Xin snapped her fingers lightly and smiled:

"Even if this is an unprecedented honesty round, everything we've discussed so far has been 'outward-facing.' Valuing the external over the internal will reduce our cooperation to a pile of loose sand. How to effectively consolidate strength is something every organization agonizes over.

But I think everyone here is smart enough to understand: the deeper the mutual understanding, the better we complement each other's strengths. This will help us assess our situation and make the globally optimal decision.

So if anyone has particular abilities, lay them on the table. I can tell this is the first time most of us are meeting face to face. If seeds of distrust are planted now, future Joker gatherings will only become... more interesting."

Zhen Xin truly was the master of cooperation. Everything she said was correct. But the truth was, liars could never bare their hearts to each other.

Baring hearts to Zhen Xin, however, was another matter.

Even now, everyone was holding back.

Cheng Shi had already shared what he could. As for the containers... the Jokers weren't yet strong enough to learn about containers. Whether or not Cheng Shi had suitable ones to give wasn't the point — even if he did, could they protect them?

Hu Xuan had [Birth] backing her. Big Cat had [Fate] supporting her. Wei Mu... well, he wasn't a normal player. [Folly] had given him a container and wouldn't let it slip away. But the others?

Even if the Jokers feared no player, at this level the threats didn't come from players alone. [Oblivion] was the perfect example.

So until the Jokers learned about containers' existence — until they became some god's "fixed destiny" — Cheng Shi felt it wise to play it safe.

However, since his recent revelations had been shocking enough, Zhen Xin didn't turn her "spear" toward him. Instead, she aimed it at... herself.

Zhen Xin scanned the room. Seeing everyone silent, she snort-laughed, leaned back against the tombstone with hands braced behind her, and spoke in a relaxed tone:

"Since everyone has reservations, I'll start.

You all know about the History School, so I'll skip that. If there are new discoveries about the gods going forward, I'll try to contact everyone immediately.

As for the rest...

I've merged with [Chaos]."

"!!!"

"???"

At this, everyone stared at Zhen Xin in shock.

Especially Cheng Shi and Zhang Jizu. The prudent pair understood that in this world, keeping a card up your sleeve meant keeping a life. They hadn't expected Zhen Xin to just volunteer her faith fusion like that.

'Wait — sis, you're serious?'

Long Jing was stunned, murmuring: "No wonder you chose [Chaos]. You're... really going heart-to-heart?"

"Why wouldn't I?" Zhen Xin shrugged with an easy smile. "Knowing each other is the foundation for seamless cooperation. The more you know about me, the more likely you'll think of me when you need me.

For example, when investigating [Chaos] or approaching that [Chaos] Envoy, Ultraman."

Saying this, Zhen Xin shot Cheng Shi a casual glance — not because she'd seen through Ultraman's identity, but to remind him that whatever happened at the [Chaos] temple was certainly part of [Deceit]'s plan.

But Li Jingming, hearing this, had a flash of insight and suddenly spoke:

"The one who merged with [Chaos] — was it you, or Zhen Yi?"

"Sharp. It was me." Zhen Xin's smile turned shrewd. "And that's my second point. In terms of increasing personal power, I have an advantage over all of you — because Zhen Yi... hasn't fused yet."

"Three faiths — no, four faiths!?"

Long Jing immediately saw the crux and exclaimed. Li Jingming's eyes kept flashing with insight, deep in thought.

Zhang Jizu had long since forgotten about Cheng Shi's personality split, so Zhen Xin's dual-personality revelation was genuinely intriguing to him. Only Cheng Shi, hearing Zhen Xin lay even this bare, felt a brief twinge of emotion.

'What a fine liar. Baring everything for the Jokers' development.'

'But what are you actually scheming with this kind of generosity?'

Cheng Shi hadn't forgotten that Zhen Xin had said Zhen Yi didn't intend to merge faiths. So what was she gaining by stripping herself completely bare?

If it was purely for the heart-to-heart, that was impossible. For the Jokers — even more absurd. All Cheng Shi could conjure was the excuse of "saving every An Mingyu" — and as for Zhen Xin's true purpose...

Perhaps only she herself knew.

As it turned out, heart-to-hearts could actually happen among liars. When Zhen Xin showed such sincerity, a chain reaction followed.

Li Jingming hesitated briefly, then lowered his gaze and spoke in a deep voice:

"Increasing personal strength is indeed the best way to boost investigation efficiency. Before faith fusion, I'd tried similar methods too. But stable personality splitting isn't so easy. Once a personality has formed, without a major life event it's nearly impossible to split and separate — unless you use [Truth]'s methods."

'[Truth]...'

Come to think of it, had the Doctor been here, he should have held a [Truth] symposium with the Dragon King. But this [Truth]-believing liar had missed the gathering. A shame.

The Dragon King continued.

"However, I recently stumbled upon a method to witness one's other personality..."

"?"

"Witness?" Everyone's interest piqued. Even Zhen Xin looked startled — since regarding personality splitting, she too could offer advice. But the standard approach was [Truth]'s toolkit.

"That's right. Witness." The Dragon King looked at Long Jing and smiled. "Remember when I mentioned mirror-gazing?"

I truly have become quite experienced at it lately."

The words barely left his lips before a full-length mirror with intricate patterns materialized before the group.

"This is...!?"

"That Dream My Nightmare."

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