

## The Gods 1211

### Chapter 1211: An Unfamiliar Invitation

The Blind One had just said "[Order] has a problem" — and then [Order] really did have a problem. It was hard not to suspect that the omnipresent [Fate] was meddling behind the scenes again.

The prophets in this game were simply too powerful. Cheng Shi grew even more anxious about the Blind One's prophecy of the world's collapse.

With [Pride (Order)] fallen, he and Li Wufang had no reason to remain in the temple. After bidding farewell to the two, Cheng Shi returned to the Rest Area. Without pausing for a breath, he pulled out That Dream My Nightmare, crossed through the Memory Dump, and arrived before the Flame of Hope.

Today the Fire Passing Hall was unusually lively. Even from behind the door, Cheng Shi could hear the cheering inside.

Just as he was debating whether to crack the door open and peek at what was happening, the Candle Man suddenly appeared above his head, hanging upside down. Following his line of sight toward the door, it said:

"The 'God Creation Plan' you designed for them has finally made progress. They've found two carriers capable of enduring the pain of [Decay]'s Container corruption.

Coincidentally, both Torchbearers are newcomers — one old, one young.

The old one doesn't surprise me. After all, [Decay] inherently represents decline. The older one is, the better they can spark [Decay]'s power.

Unfortunately, he also carries the curse of an Oathbreaker. Though he can endure the Container's suffering, his body may not hold out long enough for the God Creation Plan to succeed.

As for the young one — now that's interesting. She isn't even a follower of [Decay]. She's actually an Oathbreaker who abandoned [Decay]. And yet she can endure the endless suffering [Decay] brings. In fact, she looks as though she's long since grown accustomed to it.

Another soul beaten down by fate. Before a rough stone becomes a blade, [Fate] has already tempered it a thousand times over."

Cheng Shi frowned as he listened. He had a nagging feeling that he might know both of the people the Flame of Hope was describing.

'Could it really be them?'

'If so, then [Fate] has indeed come full circle around me once more.'

But that was the Torchbearers' plan, not his concern. He didn't care about the details. He was here solely to finalize the plan to persuade Qin Xin to venture into the Real Universe.

He first expressed his concern, asking whether the Torchbearers would be left without a leader if Qin Xin had an accident and perished in the Real Universe.

Hearing the question, the Candle Man's expression grew solemn.

"We never deny that the first spark to light the torch is critically important. But you must understand — a single spark alone cannot guarantee the fire keeps spreading.

As they put it: a spark may die, but the passed flame never goes out. The fire passing is the will of many, not the will of Qin Xin alone.

He did find the Torchbearers. But to carry them to greatness... that person may not necessarily be him.

I'm not dismissing Qin Xin's contributions. I'm simply viewing things from [Fate]'s perspective of change, knowing that every stage of an era's evolution holds its own brilliance.

Besides, in my eyes, your existence is the Torchbearers' true hope.

Yu Xi — Qin Xin may sacrifice himself for the cause of fire passing, but don't let his sacrifice become meaningless."

"..."

Cheng Shi didn't like heavy topics, and he liked it even less when others heaped burdens on his shoulders.

He gave the Flame of Hope a strange look:

"I was just expressing a little concern. You don't need to emotionally manipulate me with Qin Xin's life and death.

For all we know, during this mission, after he claims [War]'s Authority, he might get the chance to seize Its Divine Throne directly. That would make the Torchbearers' God Creation Plan an instant success.

Then Qin Xin would be the new hope you're looking for. And I'll just be trying to scrape by and survive the Fun God's schemes until this era ends."

Something in Cheng Shi's words struck the Candle Man. Its flames suddenly flared in a brief eruption, and then It looked at Cheng Shi with mild surprise, speaking as if deep in thought:

"You will. Best if you write the era's closing line yourself. That would mean the Torchbearers' will endured through the era and reached the finish line."

"...I'm not a Torchbearer."

"Fire passing isn't about title. It's about whether you carry a flame in your heart.

I know you do. I don't know who lit the fire inside you, but I'm certain you are already walking the path of fire passing."

"..."

Cheng Shi's emotions were complicated. He didn't want to continue this conversation, so after confirming the action plan with the Flame of Hope, he bid a hasty farewell. The agreement was simple: the moment he found a way to reach the Real Universe, the Authority-salvaging expedition would commence immediately.

Now, the only thing standing between him and [War]'s Authority was a path to the Real Universe.

Cheng Shi figured that finding this path would inevitably fall on his other Benefactor, [Time]. The problem was, the Hour Hand identity might fool the Jokers, but he could hardly fool himself.

As the first Hour Hand personally crafted by [Time], the false Lord Hour Hand held no [Time] Authority whatsoever — and therefore had no means of breaking through the barriers of spacetime.

The Time Deduction technique could indeed take him to the Crevice of [Existence], but it couldn't carry anyone else along. That was awkward.

After much deliberation, Cheng Shi decided to shamefully go and beg [Time] once more. Even if [Time] had no time to respond, he at least needed his Benefactor to know he was planning a trip. That way, if [Time] ever got the chance to pitch in, perhaps out of appreciation for such devotion, It would lend a hand... right?

He sat atop the Rest Area's roof and began praying to [Time]. But instead of receiving a response from his Benefactor, he received a paper airplane.

Cheng Shi frowned slightly and let the paper airplane land on the ground at a distance. He was in no rush to pick it up; instead, he mentally ran through every friend who could have used this method to contact him.

Those he regularly corresponded with mostly used Big Cat's phone. Rarely would anyone resort to something this traditional.

The most likely candidate was undoubtedly Long Jing. After all, Cheng Shi himself had used this exact method to contact him — and at the time, he'd done it under the guise of the Dragon King. As an acrobat who aspired to reach the pinnacle of deception, Long Jing would likely want to "return the favor." That tracked with what Cheng Shi knew of the man.

Even more coincidentally, after the Joker gathering, the task assigned to Long Jing was to seek an audience with the Hour Hand and use that to find a path to the Real Universe.

'Could this acrobat have actually found the way?'

'Wait — no, he hasn't come to see me, has he?'

'He couldn't have bypassed the Hour Hand and gone straight to [Time]?'

'[Time] doesn't have time for me, but It summoned an acrobat?!'

Cheng Shi's expression darkened. Brimming with questions, he stood, picked up the paper airplane, and — fully expecting Long Jing to try to dupe him somehow — unfolded it.

"!!!"

It was a completely unfamiliar invitation.

And the sender — honestly, even if Cheng Shi had racked his brain for three days and three nights, he never would have guessed.

On the letter was a meeting location and method, with a single baffling line at the very end:

"What is [Oblivion]?"

...

## Chapter 1212: Oathbreaker or Traitor?

When a pastry chef stops making pastries and starts studying philosophy, you should be very worried that he's found a new way to annihilate you.

Cheng Shi never expected that before he could go looking for Mo Shu's trouble, the man had stuck his own head out.

'If I don't whack him, I'd be dishonoring every pastry I've eaten.'

But what was the Scavenger's purpose in inviting him to a meeting?

'Surely he's not trying to avenge [Oblivion]?'

'Don't be ridiculous. Even if he knows [Oblivion] is dead, It self-annihilated. It had clearly found a path to approach Origin and went to Its death willingly. What does that have to do with me?'

'Besides, even Herobos didn't blame me. No matter how you slice it, an [Oblivion] Chosen who lost his Benefactor's protection has no business playing arbiter of justice for [Oblivion].'

'Unless Mo Shu is approaching me on Jie Shu's orders. Could they be making their move?'

Cheng Shi was on high alert. He didn't trust Mo Shu's invitation. He tore the paper airplane to shreds, burned the scraps, and continued his plan to seek an audience with [Time].

But after a while, a second paper airplane arrived. This time, the message was slightly longer:

"I mean no harm. I just want to know: what is [Oblivion]?"

Cheng Shi still ignored it.

But then came a third, a fourth, a fifth... more and more, endlessly.

Those silent paper airplanes were like some bald man's incessant nagging — ignore it all you wanted, it was still there, drifting through your field of vision every now and then, demanding your attention.

Paper airplanes danced on the wind until they'd practically turned the rooftop into an aerial spectacle.

The eye-catching scene drew a curious neighbor. Xie Yang stood at the edge of his own roof, leaning out and shouting across the gap:

"Hey, bro! What's going on? This paper airplane shower is kinda romantic, actually. Did you find your own A Mian too?"

"..."

Hearing this, Cheng Shi's face turned flat with exasperation. 'Forget about A Mian — what I did find today were two people who might be clones of Chen Shu.'

He shot Xie Yang a sidelong glance and snapped:

"You've got time to gawk? Done passing the fire?"

"!!!?"

That nearly knocked Xie Yang off the roof. His pupils contracted as he stared at Cheng Shi, face ashen, mind racing to figure out whether the man actually knew something or was just talking casually.

But if it was casual, how could he have landed on the exact phrase "passing the fire"?

Testing the waters in alarm, he asked: "Who told you? Is someone recruiting you?"

Cheng Shi snorted a laugh but didn't respond. He intended to let this loose-lipped neighbor sweat for a few days.

Under the sound of Xie Yang's anxious calls, Cheng Shi picked up one of the paper airplanes and walked into his warehouse.

The words on it were still few, but this time there was finally something that interested him.

"An equal exchange. You tell me what [Oblivion] is, and I'll tell you Jie Shu's plan."

That single sentence told Cheng Shi this probably wasn't Jie Shu's conspiracy — it was Mo Shu's own idea.

Granted, given the Scavenger's personality, the old Mo Shu wouldn't have done something like an "equal exchange." But considering the recent upheaval in the [Oblivion] camp, it wasn't hard to see that some people had... had their defenses broken.

Perfectly understandable. When [Fate] abandoned the Blind One, she too had been lost and confused. The more devout the Chosen, the more helpless they became when forced to stop — or even turn back — on the path of faith.

After all, not everyone could blaspheme the gods without batting an eye.

Cheng Shi pondered for a long while and decided to go meet this broken old acquaintance. Though for safety's sake, he wouldn't go in person. Instead, he sent Shadow Cheng Shi — the one bearing [Fate]'s faith — to keep the appointment in his stead.

When Shadow Cheng Shi arrived at the rendezvous point in the Void using the method specified, Mo Shu was still mechanically "manufacturing" messenger paper airplanes at a long table.

He heard the sound and looked up. The determination and ferocity that once filled his eyes were gone. Instead, he asked in a hollow, unfocused murmur:

"What is [Oblivion]?"

Shadow Cheng Shi frowned, shook his head, and scoffed:

"I'm not here to enlighten you. I'm here to hear things that interest me.

Mo Shu, your so-called equal exchange doesn't hold up at all. By agreeing to come, I've already made the first move. So before I answer your question, you need to balance the unequal scales first — and only then comes the second round of exchange."

Though Cheng Shi appeared relaxed and casual, not even looking directly at his counterpart, in reality he had already prepared a finger snap behind his sleeve. The moment the Scavenger made any suspicious move, he would snap his fingers and return to the Rest Area instantly.

This wasn't cowardice — there was simply no reason to waste energy before the journey to the Real Universe.

As he saw it, Mo Shu without [Oblivion]'s protection was like a stray dog on the roadside — not worth any more of his attention. He only needed to warn Herobos to keep [Oblivion]'s followers in check, and the Envoy — who had neither a Divine Throne nor a Container — would most likely handle these troublesome followers himself.

Times had changed. Before the coup attempt, Herobos could still use his position to temporarily shield [Oblivion]'s followers. But now, stripped of everything, his only option was to do everything possible to avoid a split with [Void].

So this meeting was inherently unfair. Cheng Shi held every advantage, while Mo Shu had no chips at all.

Seeing the Fate Weaver's uncompromising stance, Mo Shu didn't argue. He seemed to have lost all fighting spirit. He gave a general account of his meeting with Jie Shu.

And when Cheng Shi heard that the unknown person Zhao Xishi had once mentioned — the stranger traveling with Jie Shu — was a Master of Trickery surnamed Su, his scalp went numb and the words burst out:

"Who?"

Mo Shu was deflated, not stupid. He could tell Cheng Shi recognized this Master of Trickery. But he had lost all interest in the duels and schemes of peak players. All he wanted to know was whether his faith had ever meant anything — whether his years of devotion had been nothing but a joke.

But Cheng Shi cared. He cared deeply!

He couldn't help fixating on it. Players surnamed Su were common enough, and there was no shortage of Masters of Trickery. But the combination of those two identifiers kept pointing to a certain old acquaintance.

Cheng Shi could never forget: it was this very person who had lifted the curtain on the treacherous machinations behind the Faith Game. But hadn't he already died?

The Fun God had said so Himself — both in the future and the past, both versions of him were dead.

If this Master of Trickery surnamed Su really was Su Yida, then which world had this version come from?

Connecting this to what Ji Yue had once said — that Jie Shu had also risen to fame seemingly out of nowhere a few months after the game's descent — could it be that both of them, like Jiang Chi, came from other worlds?!

Long before Cheng Shi had even realized anything was wrong with this world, players were already crossing the barriers of spacetime to arrive here?

It made sense. It also aligned with Jie Shu's claim that he had broken through higher barriers.

But how had they reached this world?

Cheng Shi's brow tightened. A thought suddenly struck him, and he asked: "Does that Master of Trickery carry any trace of another god's power?"

Mo Shu hadn't expected Cheng Shi to ask something like that. He smiled bitterly and shook his head:

"Does this count as a second exchange, Fate Weaver?"

"..."

'You've got a lot of nerve for a pastry chef.'

'Do you still think this is back when I couldn't beat you?'

Cheng Shi laughed in annoyance. Just as he was about to snipe back with some sarcasm, Mo Shu spoke again:

"I know you're running out of patience. I'm not asking for anything else. Just tell me what [Oblivion] is, and I'll tell you everything you want to know."

"What makes you think I'd understand [Oblivion]?"

Mo Shu's expression grew stranger still. He stared straight at Cheng Shi, looking as though his soul had departed:

"Drop the act. Lord Herobos already told me everything.

He said our Benefactor was inspired by you and achieved true self-annihilation — discovering the essence of [Oblivion].

If you can lead a True God to enlightenment, how could you not know what [Oblivion] is?"

"?"

'Seriously, man?'

Cheng Shi was stupefied. He truly hadn't expected Herobos to go around sharing that. 'But if you told this to [Oblivion]'s followers, how are you going to explain your own role in that annihilation?'

Mo Shu went on:

"But I don't understand. If, in the end, the true essence of [Oblivion] really is self-annihilation — then what was the point of everything I've done?"

For a fleeting moment, Cheng Shi actually felt a twinge of pity for this pastry chef.

He looked at Mo Shu, slumped lifelessly in the Void, and scoffed:

"There was never any point. Nothing has any meaning.

This is the era of [Void]. The absence of meaning is the greatest meaning of all."

...

Chapter 1213: I Didn't Tell Him About Zhao Xishi's Death

What Mo Shu wanted to hear was clearly not such ethereal platitudes. He wanted to know how a True God that had annihilated Itself could still carry out Its own will.

All along, he had believed that [Oblivion]'s will was "while everyone else sleeps, I alone am awake."

Only "I" can bring rebirth to this world. Everything living aside from "me" is a bookworm gnawing the world to ruin.

That was why [Oblivion] ceaselessly annihilated world after world, and why Its Envoy bore the title Hand of Purifying Weevil.

But the moment news of his Benefactor's death arrived, Mo Shu shattered completely.

He couldn't comprehend why the only god capable of bringing rebirth to the world had chosen self-annihilation.

Looking at it from the old perspective, [Oblivion] annihilated the bookworms dragging the world down without knowing it. So wouldn't self-annihilation amount to admitting that It Itself was the world's greatest bookworm?

And even so — what good did annihilating oneself do?

The world was crawling with bookworms. What was left to bring about rebirth?

Mo Shu didn't understand. Just as he didn't understand why his father had stubbornly insisted on marrying that woman and abandoned the family without a backward glance. Why his mother would rather leave him behind than leave the stepfather who beat and cursed her every day. Why his little

brother had injured someone over a pittance and then pinned the blame on him. Why those bakery owners — whose businesses were thriving — would still hire thugs to overturn his stall at peak hours...

This world was rotten to the core. The ones who deserved annihilation were them. So why annihilate himself?

Mo Shu wept.

It was hard to imagine the scene. A Scavenger who had been cold, ruthless, merciless, and twisted was now sobbing aloud beside that long table.

In that moment, the pastry chef seemed to have returned to a certain day before the game descended — watching the cart he had painstakingly decorated and the pastries he had spent all night baking get shoved to the ground and trampled underfoot. Then, just as now, he had cried, helpless and lost.

"Don't rotten people deserve to die?"

Don't bookworms deserve to vanish?!

Why is it that when I finally have the power to make them disappear, the one who has to disappear is still me?!

Why?!"

As it turned out, empathy between people was very hard to come by.

Cheng Shi watched the scene unfold with cold detachment. From those few fragmented words, he roughly pieced together Mo Shu's past. But he felt not a shred of sympathy. Instead, he let out a cold laugh:

"Bad people absolutely deserve to die.

But you're no good person either.

If you hadn't forced your own will upon others, plenty of good people would've pulled you out when you were down.

Too bad — you're no different from them. The only distinction is that one version of you lived before the game arrived, and another after.

Looking back at the mud you've slogged through — it would be one thing if you left no footprints. But instead, you flooded the trail and made it even harder for those who came after. If that is your method of cleansing the world of bookworms, then all I can say is...

You had it coming.

The dragon-slaying hero became the very dragon. The power [Oblivion] granted you turned you into the thing you hate most.

Sure enough — some people don't hate the bullying. They just hate that they're not the bully."

Cheng Shi scoffed, growing visibly impatient:

"I don't have time to listen to you whine about your failures, and I have no interest in a grown man blubbering.

Scavenger, answer my questions. Afterward, I can grant you a release — at least let you die like a human being."

Mo Shu's sobs gradually subsided. His expression remained tangled. He lifted his gaze to Cheng Shi and asked with eyes full of desperate hope:

"Is there rebirth after death?"

"Tch—

Dream on.

If dying was all it took to get what you wanted, the Creator sitting atop the Real Universe shouldn't be called Origin — It should be called [Death].

I'll tell you the truth. I didn't inspire [Oblivion] to self-annihilate. It simply couldn't find a path that belonged to It in this world any longer, so It chose to annihilate Itself.

To put it kindly, It had an epiphany about its own will, and with immense courage and resolve, set out to seek rebirth.

To put it bluntly, Wasn't Its method of self-annihilation just another form of running away?

It knew that in this era of [Void], It no longer had the means to build a world that belonged to Oblivion, nor could It spread Its will of annihilating everything to the end. So Its only option was to gamble on self-annihilation — to win Origin's gaze — so that He would know It had finally understood His will.

Desire unfulfilled, and so — annihilate.

Laughable. If that isn't running away, what is?

When the people of that age could no longer salvage their decaying world, of course they wanted to destroy it immediately and usher in rebirth.

What they didn't realize was that even if rebirth came, it wouldn't be the mud buried in the old world that was reborn!

Scavenger, it's useless. Stop dreaming about rebirth. Even if this world truly has a rebirth, it won't be brought by you and your Benefactor.

The only thing you and It have in common is that you both walked into a dead end in this world's script.

This world — with or without you — is the same."

Cheng Shi's words were razor-sharp and merciless. But in truth, there was one sentence he kept locked inside:

'This world — with or without us — is also the same.'

'This is a world He created with His own hands. Perhaps in His eyes, we are all "bookworms."'

Those words clearly shattered the last defenses of the already-broken Mo Shu. He slumped to the ground, every trace of a warrior's bearing gone.

"Why is it like this?"

Cheng Shi was thoroughly impatient. He waved a hand: "Su — that Master of Trickery, does he have a second faith?"

Mo Shu answered like a deflated puppet, his voice mechanical: "No..."

"What is Jie Shu's plan?"

"They're searching for a world without you — as their final refuge."

"!!??"

Cheng Shi's blood ran cold. This confirmed it beyond all doubt: Jie Shu and the Master of Trickery suspected to be Su Yida really had come from other worlds.

But the question remained: how did they get here?

Cheng Shi asked again, but Mo Shu didn't know. He shook his head:

"Jie Shu didn't say much. He was just rallying people for his plan.

The pool of usable people is too small. He needed to wait for Zhao Xishi's response before launching the next phase..."

At those words, Mo Shu suddenly straightened up, his expression complicated: "I didn't tell him that Zhao Xishi is dead, Fate Weaver. Consider this the second exchange. Thank you for scolding me awake.

But I still don't think I was wrong.

When the world treats me with cruelty, why can't I be cruel in return?!

Yes — I'm evil. But this world made me this way!

My kindness, my gentleness, my dignity — they were annihilated long ago!

Kill me.

Let me go to another world and reclaim the things that once belonged to me!"

With that, Mo Shu lifted his head, closed his eyes, and bared his neck to the blade.

He listened to the approaching footsteps, first clenching his fists in tension, then letting them relax in acceptance.

But a long time passed, and the Void fell utterly still.

He opened his eyes in confusion — and found no trace of the Fate Weaver anywhere. Only two letters neatly written on the topmost sheet of paper on the long table.

"SB."

Mo Shu's face flushed crimson in an instant. His gaze grew even more lost. He could almost hear that man's voice delivering a single verdict: "You don't deserve it."

'I don't deserve to live — and I don't deserve to die either?'

The helpless Mo Shu stared at that sheet of paper, drowning in endless bewilderment.

Chapter 1214: The Spider Web and the Mask

Shadow Cheng Shi returned to the Rest Area and reverted to a shadow. Cheng Shi himself was sitting cross-legged on the ground, brow furrowed in deep thought.

He was very concerned about Jie Shu's plan.

If Jie Shu was searching for a world without Cheng Shi in it, that meant he possessed a method of breaking through the barriers of spacetime — and right now, that was exactly the method Cheng Shi needed to reach the Real Universe and salvage [War]'s Authority!

For a fleeting moment, he nearly picked up his phone to call Big Cat and go beat the answers out of Jie Shu — at the very least, capture the Fool Hunter and put him through an interrogation to see if anything useful could be squeezed out of him.

But after a few seconds of impulse, he set the phone back down.

Not for any other reason — he had thought of Cheng Dashi.

Cheng Shi's expression shifted through something unreadable. After a long while, he let out a quiet sigh, abandoned the idea, and began contemplating how Jie Shu could possibly have broken through the spacetime barrier.

The man was indeed a [Folly] follower. But no matter how clever he was, he couldn't circumvent the fundamental rule of the spacetime barrier: to travel to another Slice Universe, one had to rely on the hand of [Time].

The Time Deduction talent was the best proof of this.

[Time] had always been aligning the "time" of the current world with that of the Real Universe. As long as [Time] didn't act, theoretically no one could shatter the shackles of spacetime.

Even if the [Folly] of another world still held its Authority intact, it could only have left its original world for other universes by stealing [Time]'s Authority.

But the subject of all these hypotheses was [Folly] — the wisest True God in the entire universe!

No matter how smart Jie Shu was, he couldn't possibly be [Folly] incarnate!

How could he, as a mere player, have shattered the spacetime barrier to arrive here?

Cheng Shi didn't believe [Time] would extend aid to a follower of [Folly]. From his limited observations of [Time], this Benefactor of his had no time to bother with [Folly]. Of all the gods, [Time] was the most like a "savior," silently upholding the world, ensuring this starry sky didn't anomalously collapse under Origin's Experiment.

Furthermore, [Folly] didn't seem like a god who would be "in cahoots" with the Fun God. At least on the path of defying Origin, [Time] and [Deceit] were the true allies. So the hypothesis of Jie Shu breaking the spacetime barrier via [Folly]'s power didn't hold.

But if he eliminated both [Time] and [Folly], who else could have helped Jie Shu achieve this?

Though the other world's development might differ entirely from this starry sky, based on Cheng Shi's deductions about each god's will, he couldn't identify a suitable answer — except for [Deceit].

The Fun God didn't need reasons to do things. Only fun. But was sending someone to eliminate another world's Clown considered fun?

Had the Fun Gods across the Real Universe already begun sabotaging each other?

'Surely not — that would be too...'

'Wait!'

Cheng Shi's expression hardened. He sat up straight.

'Why not?'

When something was absurdly ridiculous, no one paid it any mind. But when that absurdity involved [Deceit]...

'Hiss—'

...it became a bit hard to say.

This sort of baseless conjecture had no real answer, and Cheng Shi wasn't trying to link the Fun God to Jie Shu. It simply reminded him that the Fun God was also going to the Real Universe to claim Authority — and that undertaking carried enormous risk.

Given [Time]'s temperament of silently holding the world steady, would It tolerate the Fun God bringing such a massive risk to this starry sky?

Probably not.

But could [Time]'s refusal stop the Fun God from reaching the Real Universe?

Definitely not.

So the Fun God must have a way to bypass [Time] and reach the Real Universe. What Cheng Shi needed to figure out wasn't the relationship between Jie Shu and the Fun God — he only needed to guess how his Benefactor planned to "break out."

Once his thinking found the right track, Cheng Shi began recalling every connection he knew of between [Deceit] and the Real Universe.

The first thing that came to mind was how the Fun God had once hijacked Cheng Shi's Time Deduction talent, borrowing [Time]'s power to travel to the Crevice of [Existence] and meet with [Birth] from another world.

Consider: when a cunning prisoner discovers a gap in the prison wall, would he not memorize the location to make future trips more convenient?

Of course he would.

But how would he mark it?

The wall belonged to [Existence]. And he — a "Prisoner" of [Void] — where would he find...

Cheng Shi's eyes flew open as he realized he had been overlooking something.

'He doesn't need to find one. He doesn't need to find anything!'

'He already has it!'

'He secretly forged a crowbar from [Existence] — likely in preparation for this very jailbreak.'

'Mockery and Jeering!'

'That river of [Existence] flowing in the depths of the Void — isn't it the [Existence] He fabricated using stolen [Existence] Authority based on His own understanding?'

Before, not knowing the Fun God's relationship with [Time], he had simply assumed the Fun God robbed everything in sight, ransacking [Existence]'s house top to bottom. But now it seemed that [Time] had probably left the door wide open and let Him steal. As for [Memory]...

'Probably the only sucker in the deal.'

At this thought, a gleam of inspiration flashed in Cheng Shi's eyes, and excitement surged through him.

He was eager to verify his guess. He pulled out the Tongue of Eating Lies, licked open the Void, and licked his way all the way down to the deepest reaches of Nothingness.

When that river brimming with infinite, iridescent change appeared before him once more, he didn't so much as furrow his brow. Without hesitation, he jumped in.

'I'm home!'

An enormous spider web materialized at once within the kaleidoscopic current. Cheng Shi stared at himself in astonishment — the web's area had nearly doubled since his first time here.

Countless twisted strands of silk flickered in and out of existence, interweaving into a seamless web-bed. And at its very center hung a pure-white, complete mask!

The mask's shape was so familiar that Cheng Shi recognized Crown's face in an instant!

'Crown's mask?!'

Cheng Shi was stunned. His first instinct was to reach out and grab the "complete" mask. But he failed — every movement he made was even more distorted than before within Mockery and Jeering.

Under some mysterious force, the spider silk was growing slightly uncontrollable. The feedback on Cheng Shi's body made it feel as though his limbs had a mind of their own.

The distortions in his movements followed no pattern. In the constantly shifting tides, he had nearly lost the ability to touch himself.

After countless failed attempts, Cheng Shi gave up. He rested in place, panting heavily, and began pondering why the "complete" Crown mask had appeared in Mockery and Jeering.

'Where did the Nose of Verification come from?'

'Could it have been hidden within this twisted river of [Existence] all along?!'

A flash of inspiration struck. Cheng Shi's eyes went wide with sudden understanding. 'It's not impossible. Mi Laozhang once said the Nose of Verification was most likely a tool the Fun God used to steal [Existence]'s Authority. And isn't Mockery and Jeering precisely His tool?'

'The Nose really might be hidden here. And perhaps that's why, the moment I jumped in, the mask completed its assembly within Mockery and Jeering!'

'But since I haven't actually found the Nose of Verification, I can't take this mask yet.'

'Still — now that I know where the Nose is, even if I have to turn this entire river upside down, I will find it!'

"Brother Mouth, your family is about to reunite. Are you happy?"

No one answered within Mockery and Jeering. Cheng Shi gazed at the mask hanging on the spider web, his eyes burning.

Whatever secret [Memory]'s Collection Hall concealed — the answer was no longer far away.

...

Chapter 1215: Did You Laugh, My Benefactor?

Compared to risking everything on a journey to the Real Universe to salvage [War]'s Authority, Cheng Shi naturally preferred rummaging through the safe waters of Mockery and Jeering for the Nose of Verification — assembling the mask, pushing open [Memory]'s door, and gambling on whether [Folly]'s Authority was hidden there.

So he began drifting through the tides of [Existence] that flowed in the depths of the Void, hoping to use resonance from the mask's other fragments to locate the missing Nose.

But the Fool's Lips went utterly lifeless the moment they entered the river. No matter how Cheng Shi called out, they gave no response.

Left with no other choice, Cheng Shi had to rely on himself.

Mockery and Jeering was vast — it was the Fun God's channel for observing the entire universe. One could say it was essentially the distorted shadow cast by the universe itself. Finding a single nose in a space this enormous was a monumental task.

Worse still, everything that existed was twisted and deformed within Mockery and Jeering. Even Cheng Shi himself was nothing but a spider web. What the mask's nose looked like in here was anyone's guess.

Before long, the sheer impossibility of this needle-in-a-haystack task crushed his confidence. Grumbling under his breath, he wondered what the Fun God had meant by hiding the Nose of Verification in His own back garden.

Did He actually want Cheng Shi to uncover that memory — the one even [Memory] had forgotten? Or was He trying to prevent him from approaching it?

If He truly wanted to block access, He shouldn't have placed that mask bearing Brother Mouth at the Path Starting Point to begin with.

He had already given the clue. So why throw up one last obstacle?

Cheng Shi couldn't figure it out. He temporarily abandoned the search and returned to his original objective: determining whether Mockery and Jeering could serve as a passage to the Real Universe.

He didn't know exactly how the Fun God had broken out, nor whether Mockery and Jeering was merely a signpost pointing toward the "gap" or the actual passage to the world beyond. He could only test it bit by bit, using the [Time] power in his hand as a "compass" to sense where [Time] was most distorted.

His reasoning was that since the spacetime barrier was related to [Time], any point where the barrier was breached would necessarily show a fluctuation in [Time]. Finding that fluctuation would confirm whether Mockery and Jeering was the Fun God's jailbreak tool.

With that in mind, the spider web continued its lonely drift through Mockery and Jeering.

The endless, psychedelic changes gradually warped his vision. His mind began to fog. He didn't know how long he had been searching — only that if he kept going, he would certainly lose himself.

'But this is too embarrassing for a Clown. Who gets lost in their own home?'

'Me, apparently.'

'Because I actually am a Clown.'

Cheng Shi admitted defeat. He found the nearest Peeping Mirror and mustered every ounce of effort to break it, hoping to return to reality first, then call for backup.

But the moment he clumsily shattered the mirror before him, a terrifying surge of [Time] exploded outward, resonating wildly with the [Time] power in his hand. The rush snapped his deflated spirit taut as a bowstring, and he stumbled backward in shock and alarm.

"!!!"

Fortunately, this particular Peeping Mirror was unlike the others. Even in its broken state, it didn't suck Cheng Shi in and spit him out. Instead, it continuously poured forth a horrifying [Time] storm, as though the eye of an abyss was slowly opening, casting its gaze upon Cheng Shi's stunned face.

The spider web's flickering light and shadow clearly reflected Cheng Shi's extreme inner turmoil. He never imagined that a random attempt would lead him straight to a passage to the Real Universe. Mockery and Jeering really was the Fun God's crowbar for breaking out!

But this was too convenient!

Whether he had stumbled upon the right Peeping Mirror by chance or had been guided here by some invisible hand, the whole thing reeked of [Fate].

'Mockery and Jeering shouldn't have anything to do with [Fate]... right?'

Looked at from that angle, it seemed more like the Fun God had placed the answer right in front of his eyes all along. Perhaps every Peeping Mirror he had passed could have been the real passage — and yet he had searched blindly for so long without noticing.

And throughout all that time, the Fun God had watched His Clown flounder in stupidity without offering a single hint!

'Oh, I see how it is!'

"My Benefactor — did You laugh? Watching Your Clown be this ridiculous — are You satisfied?"

Mockery and Jeering naturally offered no response. Cheng Shi stood before the passage with a furrowed brow, thinking: the Fun God had hidden the Nose of Verification so deep, yet placed the doorway to the Real Universe right beside him. Did that mean that compared to [Folly]'s Authority, He would rather he go after [War]'s Authority?

'Regardless of whose Authority it is, as long as I can hold it in my hand, it's good Authority!'

The Greed Lord faced his own heart squarely. He carefully memorized the Peeping Mirror's location, then broke a different mirror — and this time, the mirror flung him out, tossing him back into reality.

When Cheng Shi's awareness returned, he found himself standing before an unfamiliar villa.

But before he could even make out the building's style, a spear whistled through the air and embedded itself at his feet. A furious roar followed, and a giant bear plummeted from the sky!

"Who dares — Cheng Shi?! Why is it you?!"

The bear, still mid-fall with nothing to push off of, could only flail its arms frantically to break its trajectory. It "swam" to one side in midair and — right before Cheng Shi's dumbfounded eyes — crashed into the ground.

Good news: at least she didn't land on Cheng Shi.

Bad news: not landing on Cheng Shi had nothing to do with the bear's efforts, because Cheng Shi had dodged at the first instant — and enjoyed a front-row seat with the perfect angle to witness this slapstick spectacle.

"..."

It had to be said, compared to Mi Laozhang's Cemetery defense mechanisms, Big Cat's method of repelling intruders was a bit rough.

But it was surprisingly in character.

Hong Lin climbed out of the crater in the ground. Yes — when a giant bear hit the earth, it wasn't the bear that got hurt, it was the ground. She dusted herself off, looked at Cheng Shi with surprise and suspicion:

"How did you come here directly?"

Cheng Shi gave a mysterious little smile, though internally he was utterly exasperated.

'I'd also like to know why the Fun God dropped me here. Benefactor, are You really that eager for me to start a grand adventure in the Real Universe?'

'You even saved me the trouble of sending a notification. How come it feels like You're more impatient than I am?'

Something was definitely off about the Fun God's attitude. Cheng Shi knew that much. But the thought that [War]'s Authority might lie just beyond that Peeping Mirror...

Reward and risk had always gone hand in hand, hadn't they?

Without taking a few small risks, how could one reap great rewards?

Besides, he still had Big Cat and Qin Xin.

With two such formidable warriors at his side, nothing should go wrong... right?

After a moment of deliberation, Cheng Shi ran through his thoughts one more time, then nodded at Hong Lin:

"Found the way. We leave immediately. But first I need to contact a few people — I need them to search for something inside Mockery and Jeering for me."

Hong Lin blinked: "What are they looking for?"

Cheng Shi touched his own nose: "A nose. My Clown nose fell off. I need the tricksters to help me find it."

"?"

...

Chapter 1216: Setting Off for the Real Universe!

Cheng Shi quickly contacted the Jokers and assigned them a new task.

Through That Dream My Nightmare, he notified the Flame of Hope that the plan would begin immediately — Qin Xin needed to get moving.

All of this was done right under Big Cat's nose, yet he didn't share the secrets hidden within That Dream My Nightmare with her.

Big Cat didn't ask. From start to finish, she hadn't made a peep — just stood silently at Cheng Shi's side, waiting.

Before long, Cheng Shi finished making all the arrangements. He exhaled and said:

"Ready, Hong Lin? This trip may not be easy.

You know how dangerous the Real Universe is. We'll do our best. If we can find it, great. If not..."

Hong Lin let out a hearty laugh and clapped Cheng Shi on the shoulder with brimming confidence:

"We come back alive.

Relax — that's not a flag. We will absolutely come back alive."

Even so, Cheng Shi felt the hand on his shoulder trembling ever so slightly.

To be honest, he was scared too. But some things couldn't be avoided just because you were scared.

When you didn't fight for what needed fighting, you would die when the time came to die.

To make the road ahead easier, he had to wade through the mud now, no matter how deep.

Cheng Shi nodded, gave Hong Lin a look of trust, then licked open the Void once more and plunged toward Mockery and Jeering.

Before jumping in, he paused and silently asked Brother Mouth a question:

"Brother Mouth, why don't any of you speak inside Mockery and Jeering? Has the Fun God restricted your freedom?"

The Fool's Lips didn't respond. Instead, the Eye of Mockery answered with contempt:

"Idiot. You saw it yourself — we merged into the mask. How are we supposed to talk?"

Have you ever seen a mask that can open its mouth and speak?"

"..." Cheng Shi's expression darkened. He pressed further: "Since you've merged into the mask, you should be able to sense where the Nose of Verification is, right?"

"Calling you stupid is a compliment. Of course it's on the mask."

"..."

His fists clenched.

Cheng Shi fought back the urge to gouge his eyes out and said in a low, dangerous tone:

"Ever since Eye Bro showed up, Mouth Bro has gotten a lot more... 'refined.'"

But his attempt to recruit Brother Mouth to his side backfired spectacularly. Instead of winning Mouth's support, it pushed Mouth right into the Eye of Mockery's camp.

"Dumbass — do you even hear what you're saying? The phrase 'refined features' literally praises the eyes and brows, not the mouth.

If you can't compliment, just don't. No need to force it. Thanks."

"..."

'Burn it all down. Forget the mask — just destroy the whole thing!'

Cheng Shi's temples throbbed with pain. Without waiting for Big Cat, he jumped straight down. Big Cat flinched, then followed — and the moment she entered, an enormous spider web unfurled before her eyes.

As for herself, she had turned into a kitten. A very, very small kitten — smaller than the mask hanging at the center of the web. If the mask had nostrils, her current size would fit snugly inside one.

Because Big Cat had become such a tiny cat, Cheng Shi couldn't even find Hong Lin at first in the kaleidoscopic river. And when he finally spotted her, he understood at last why this fearsome Druid rarely traveled through Mockery and Jeering.

"...Pfft."

"Cheng Shi, what are you laughing at?" The tiny cat lifted its head and mewed.

"Huh? I'm not laughing. Throat's a bit dry — just coughed a couple times. Let's go, the passage is right there."

"You'd better not be laughing!"

At the mention of the passage, Big Cat's expression turned serious. Crossing the barrier to the world beyond was no laughing matter. No one knew what risks lurked inside the passage, and no one knew how great the danger on the other side might be.

Cheng Shi steadied himself. As the Destined Ones' anchor, he knew his resolve had to be iron at this moment. Any wavering would only heighten Big Cat's anxiety. So he prepared to go first — leading by example.

This wasn't recklessness, and it wasn't about saving face. He simply didn't believe the Fun God would throw the Fear Faction's only subordinate into a deathtrap.

But before he could take a step, the spider web was yanked back by the tiny cat.

"Hong Lin, you—"

"I'll go first!" The tiny cat's gaze was unwavering. She hung a small ball of fur on the spider web and instructed: "A [Prosperity] tool — the Root of Symbiosis. I don't know if it'll still work in the Real Universe. But Cheng Shi — if it withers, it means I've encountered a disaster I can't fight. At that point, you must not follow me in."

Cheng Shi's expression hardened: "No—"

"Swear it. If it withers, you will never step through."

"..."

Cheng Shi fell silent. After a moment, he produced a die — though in the spider web, it appeared as a cocoon wrapped in silk.

Seeing this, Hong Lin also pulled out... a tiny fur ball.

Their eyes met, and with utmost reverence, they spoke in unison:

"The road we've come and the road we'll go — all is destined."

With that, the little cat let out a booming laugh: "Don't worry. I'm tough to kill. By the time you see me on the other side, I might have already found the Authority."

Cheng Shi looked into the little cat's eyes and couldn't help but smile: "Then I'll pop a bottle of champagne and toast your success."

"Deal! Here I go!"

Before the words had fully left her mouth, the tiny cat dove headfirst into the broken Peeping Mirror's [Time] storm and vanished.

Cheng Shi's heart clenched. For the first time, he felt this level of nervousness. His gaze darted rapidly between the storm's eye and the fur ball on the web. After several seconds with no change, he finally exhaled. He cast one look toward the depths of Mockery and Jeering, then summoned his courage and leaped into the [Time] storm vortex.

The instant he left Mockery and Jeering, somewhere else deep in its reaches, an identical Peeping Mirror shattered before a suit of heavy armor.

The heavy armor felt the pull of the [Time] storm before it and spoke with immense gravity:

"So this is the road to that world.

I wonder what the Flame of Hope traded with [Deceit] in exchange for this opportunity."

The heavy armor was Qin Xin. At this moment, he recalled the scene when the Flame of Hope had given him instructions in the Fire Passing Hall.

It had said:

"[Void] once had a fight within itself, and [Deceit] took the opportunity to steal some of [Fate]'s Change Authority.

Through the resonance of that Change Authority, I sensed a new change in [Deceit].

I know you lack a decisive finishing move, which is why the God Creation Plan exists. And this new change may lead you to a new path to godhood.

[War] has fallen — fallen outside the world. I know you've heard rumors about other worlds. [Deceit] kept this secret locked tight — even the other gods don't know. I glimpsed fragments of truth through

the Change Authority and suspect [War]'s Authority may have been hidden outside the world by [Deceit].

It is a place brimming with risk and opportunity. Of course, the risk outweighs the opportunity ten-thousandfold. Normally, I would never let the Torchbearers learn of that starry sky. But this truly is a rare chance.

If you really do find [War]'s Authority, given your qualifications, becoming the new [War] may not be impossible.

But you also know — becoming a god is no simple matter. How to locate Its Authority is a challenge in itself.

First, whoever goes must be able to resonate with [War]'s power. And second..."

"I'll go." Qin Xin was no fool. He understood the Flame of Hope's implication — this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for the Torchbearers, but the risk was enormous.

Yet the path of fire passing had always been treacherous. As its leader, if he could blaze a new trail and lead everyone onto smoother ground, he would do so without hesitation.

So he accepted the Flame of Hope's proposal and came here.

Now, seeing Mockery and Jeering cooperating with the Flame of Hope's plan, he understood this was no mere case of the Flame of Hope peeping into [Deceit]'s secrets. Some kind of agreement had been struck between Them.

That was why he mused: for the sake of the Torchbearers, the Flame of Hope had probably sacrificed something mortals could never comprehend.

The heavy armor drew a deep breath. Its entire form radiated unyielding resolve and, without a moment's hesitation, leaped in. Then Mockery and Jeering returned to stillness.

Two shattered Peeping Mirrors reassembled, racing toward each other before merging within the shifting tides of [Existence] into a pair of mirthful, star-studded eyes.

They looked toward the direction leading away from this world. Between those brows, a dazzling smile bloomed.

"Hee~

Good luck to you all."

...

On the other side.

In the unknown wilderness of the cosmos, two wandering figures slowly came to a halt. They both looked in the same direction. One of them clicked his tongue:

"There are always fools brazen enough to leave their cozy little homes at the doorstep of the apocalypse, hoping to find weapons out here to fight it off. Tell me — is that kind of behavior overconfidence, or just pure stupidity?"

"Cut the chatter. Start working. Let's hope this time is a success."

The other's tone was distinctly colder. He gazed toward the source of the disturbance and murmured: "Let's also show them that this world isn't home to just good people."

"Heh — which world are you talking about?"

"Every single one."

...

## Chapter 1217: Lost Contact

A body like a mayfly, with nowhere to rest.

That was exactly how Cheng Shi felt while drifting through the Real Universe.

He had thought that gazing upon the Real Universe from beneath the world meant he had seen its truth. He never expected that only by venturing inside would he understand its true vastness.

This starry sky was completely unlike the Void. The Void was equally hollow and expansive, but at least darkness was the Void's camouflage. Wrapped in endless black, one's vision never extended infinitely — you could only focus on the space directly in front of you.

But the Real Universe was not dark. Lonely, distant stars illuminated the entire sky, making you feel as though your vision stretched on without limit.

Those brilliant stars hung overhead like guiding signposts. Yet the moment you tried to follow their light, you discovered that no matter how hard you pushed forward, they remained just as impossibly far away.

In that moment, the phrase "fate like stars — gaze but never reach" was made utterly, painfully real.

Awash in unprecedented solitude, Cheng Shi felt no sentiment in his heart — only gravity.

Big Cat was gone.

Sure enough, the unexpected had arrived the very instant he stepped beyond the world.

What made it worse was that in this starry expanse, it was nearly impossible to find a reference point for navigation. A single person's movement was negligible compared to the distance to any of those faraway stars. No matter which direction Cheng Shi went or how far he traveled, the positions of the bright stars in his field of vision never changed.

Stable as a 360-degree wallpaper.

With no other option, Cheng Shi pulled out the Thorn Weeping Rite and used his mental energy as a standard for measuring distance.

His talents still worked — which meant he could use the dice to swap back to his "starting point." By controlling the timing and maxing out the dice's swap distance, he could explore the surrounding area as efficiently as possible.

He knew this cautious method would never lead him to the Authority. But finding Big Cat or Qin Xin before the Authority was the steadiest approach.

Yet the search dragged on for who knew how many days.

Good news: in the Real Universe, the Faith Game's constraints no longer applied. Even when the usual time came around, Cheng Shi didn't have to undergo a special trial.

Bad news: he still hadn't found anyone, and he was going out of his mind.

The eternal solitude was not a joke. Combined with the anxiety of the Real Universe's uncertainty, the oppressive weight of the Creator looming above, and the maddening silence from Brother Mouth and Eye Bro alike, Cheng Shi had already steeled himself for the worst.

The only reason he hadn't given up was his ironclad belief that the Fun God would never just send him and Big Cat to the Real Universe to die. As for whether that belief was itself a lie — whether it was just another tool He used to shatter what was "fixed and destined"...

Cheng Shi didn't dare think about it. He couldn't afford to.

The moment a new fear was born, the endless spiral of doubt would become the last straw that broke him.

So he cast aside every distracting thought and searched in grim silence.

Several more days passed. Only after confirming that every area within the radius of his "maximum swap time" had been thoroughly covered did he finally decide to try another approach:

Create some massive noise — loud enough for Big Cat to know he was here.

He knew Big Cat must also be searching for him. Given her fear of the Real Universe, she would never advance recklessly. She was most likely anchored in one spot, carefully exploring her surroundings.

If they were too far apart, two people turning in circles would never meet. There was even a more absurd possibility: their search radii might actually overlap, but they had explored the overlapping zone at different times — dooming them to never cross paths.

So Cheng Shi decided to make some noise and break the deadlock.

But this carried risk. The reason he hadn't done it earlier was the fear that the commotion would attract not Hong Lin, but something else lurking in the Real Universe.

No one knew what was hiding out here. Even though his days of exploration suggested he was the only living thing in the Real Universe, Cheng Shi still refused to take the gamble — until every steady, cautious plan had been exhausted and he was left with nothing else.

Cheng Shi pulled out a small magic bomb, detonated it instantly, and swapped back to his position from a few minutes earlier.

This way, he could observe the blast point while maintaining enough buffer distance if danger approached. His steadiness was pushed to its absolute limit — but even that limit yielded no answer.

The Real Universe remained as silent as ever.

Cheng Shi's expression was dark and unreadable. He appeared out of options, but in truth, a new idea had formed.

Since the explosion hadn't attracted any other life, he could safely use timed bombs to extend his search range. His supplies were limited, but it was better than doing nothing.

He couldn't afford to waste all these days only to return home with bad news for the Destined Ones. That would make a mockery of their destiny.

Cheng Shi let out a heavy breath. He realized he had still been thinking too simply. Some things the Fun God could do — but a mere mortal possibly couldn't.

The identity of Yu Xi could fool people in the original world, but when divine power was truly needed, a fake was still a fake — like a pale lie that crumbled at the first touch, offering no one any backbone.

After three more days of exploration in the Real Universe, the accumulated pressure nearly drove Cheng Shi insane. He detonated his last bomb, watched from afar for a moment, and when no response came, closed his eyes. Silently, he turned and walked back toward the "starting point."

It was time to go back. But this wasn't surrender — it was a supply run. He would never abandon Big Cat in the Real Universe, and he trusted Big Cat wouldn't be foolish enough to just wait in place either.

Maybe she had already returned to the original world and was waiting for him.

But how to get back was another problem entirely. There was nothing resembling a "Peeping Mirror" near his arrival point. The area was completely empty — just a "starting point."

He had anchored that location because he feared it might be connected to the way home. And now, returning to the starting point, he fell into a second predicament.

'Where is the road?'

In that instant, a sliver of genuine panic crept into the heart of a man who had been deceiving himself all along.

He began to think the thoughts he'd been too afraid to think.

This only made his state worse. He floated limp among the stars, like a walking corpse.

The grand adventure he had so boldly proclaimed seemed to have reached its end — a tragedy, cut short and unceremonious.

But would it really end this way?

Beneath this starry sky, every period had a magnificent and unforgettable story before it. This moment was no exception. And so, the turning point arrived right on schedule.

Right there at the starting point, right before his eyes, a figure materialized. Looking at Cheng Shi's ever-shifting expression, she gasped in shock:

"Cheng Shi?!"

"How did you get here before me?"

"!!!!!"

It was Big Cat!

Hearing her voice, Cheng Shi jerked his head up. At first, he couldn't even believe Big Cat had really appeared. He was still questioning whether it was just a hallucination born of his spiraling delusions.

He slapped himself hard across the face. When the sharp sting of real pain registered, he suddenly burst into wild, almost manic laughter and pulled Big Cat into his arms.

"Wait — hey, you—"

But just as Big Cat stood there, startled and flustered, the cold point of a blade pressed against the back of her neck.

The man who had been laughing wildly a second ago turned ice-cold in an instant. His voice was utterly frigid:

"You're not Hong Lin. Who are you?"

...

Chapter 1218: You're Not Hong Lin — Who Are You?

The instant Hong Lin felt the killing intent, her entire body tensed. With her strength, she could have instinctively broken free of Cheng Shi's embrace at any time. But she didn't. Instead, she clenched her fists, furrowed her brow, and asked cautiously:

"Easy — it's me. What happened?"

It was precisely her restraint that loosened the knot in Cheng Shi's chest. Yet he still couldn't believe the timing of Hong Lin's appearance was this convenient — arriving at the exact moment of his deepest despair, claiming she had somehow gotten here first.

The excuse was masterfully crafted. None of them had ever breached the spacetime barrier head-on, and no one knew whether temporal distortion existed within the Real Universe. Cheng Shi couldn't find a flaw in the logic, so he could only tentatively accept that the Big Cat before him was real.

Of course, "real" here meant she was an actual living being, not some hallucination born of his own delirium. Whether this living being was actually Big Cat remained to be seen.

Cheng Shi frowned and thought for a moment. He didn't move the dagger. Instead, with his other arm still locked around Big Cat, he produced a die and gently pressed it against her back.

Hong Lin understood. She slowly, carefully pulled out her own die and murmured:

"The road we've come..."

Cheng Shi relaxed slightly. He withdrew the scalpel, touched his die to hers, and completed the phrase:  
"...all is destined."

Hearing those words, Hong Lin visibly eased. Her expression softened as she surveyed their surroundings:

"This is the Real Universe?"

Why is there nothing here?

Cheng Shi, what happened?"

Cheng Shi stared straight into Big Cat's eyes. First came a self-deprecating snort of laughter, then a sigh and a shake of his head:

"I should be the one asking you that.

When I got here, you were nowhere to be found. So I spent ten days searching for you in this desolate universe.

Ten entire days!

And now you're telling me you just arrived..."

Hong Lin stiffened in alarm, disbelief written across her face: "How is that possible! I only felt a single instant of darkness! When I opened my eyes, I saw you! How could it have been ten days?!"

Cheng Shi studied her expression carefully. He found nothing unusual. Frowning, he shook his head:

"I don't know either. But at least I found you.

Though my supplies are running low for what comes next. Do you..."

Before he could finish, Hong Lin reached into her personal storage and pulled out the food she had prepared.

"Here — I packed plenty. More than enough!"

Cheng Shi smiled with relief. With food to sustain them, they could indeed continue the search for the Authority. But the instant Hong Lin turned to gaze into the distance, a razor-sharp glint flashed through Cheng Shi's eyes.

'She is absolutely not Hong Lin!'

Even if nothing in their conversation had been a lie, the food in her hands couldn't be faked.

He had to remember who Hong Lin was now. She was Frazor, the eldest daughter of [Prosperity] — the [Prosperity] candidate recognized by the Convention to hold a seat at the Assembly of Gods Convention. She bore the Authorities of both "Vitality" and "Abundance." She had no need for external supplies whatsoever. Why would she stock food in her personal storage?

Even if she had stored some food for emergencies to share with friends, she would never have said "more than enough." She only needed to share her Authority to let both of them roam the Real Universe freely. Yet this Big Cat hadn't mentioned [Prosperity] at all!

This discovery set Cheng Shi's nerves on edge once more.

If this had happened inside a trial, Cheng Shi had ten thousand ways to determine the imposter's identity. After all, the only ones capable of such tricks were players, and the pool of suspects would narrow to just five.

But this was the Real Universe — a place Cheng Shi had never set foot in before. He didn't even know whether anything happening here could be explained by the rules of the original world!

Take the Hong Lin before him. Was she some "intelligent predator creature" roaming the Real Universe? Or a cunning native of this wasteland, skilled at playing roles?

Or — more terrifying still — could she be a Hong Lin from another starry sky?

If so, the Big Cat before him wasn't an enemy at all. At most, she was a familiar stranger. But if not...

Then Big Cat's identity was nothing less than a landmine buried at Cheng Shi's side.

Given Cheng Shi's usual steady approach, he would never keep such an uncertain threat nearby. But this time was different. He chose not to expose the "lie."

When an unknown lifeform tries to approach you through deception rather than direct predation, it means either it can't take you head-on, or it wants something from you.

And as it happened, when it came to out-scheming those with "ulterior motives," Cheng Shi had yet to lose.

After all, he wasn't just a liar — he was a gambler. A reckless gambler.

Since this Hong Lin was "fake," her apparent bewilderment toward the Real Universe was likely "fake" as well. If he played along for now, he might be able to unravel clues from her words and actions — getting closer to the truth about the Real Universe.

So Cheng Shi held his ground, putting on a thoughtful expression:

"Based on my days of exploration and what I've gathered, the Real Universe is nothing like what we saw from within our world.

It's vast, barren, and endlessly silent. We could exhaust ourselves and still find nothing. So I suspect there are mechanisms here we don't understand — related to time, or space — that could let us explore more efficiently."

As he spoke, he glanced at Hong Lin. She furrowed her brow deeply, looking utterly lost — clearly knowing nothing.

Seeing how guarded she was, Cheng Shi continued:

"Of course, that might just be my imagination. The Real Universe is truly infinite. We humans are simply too small — naturally, we can't comprehend the 'reality' of Reality.

But regardless, let's get moving. If there's no road, we'll carve one ourselves."

Hong Lin nodded and asked: "Which direction?"

Cheng Shi smiled and raised a die: "Let it tell us."

Hearing this, Hong Lin rolled her eyes: "Your dice never have answers. Let me do it."

With that, she tossed a 12-pointed die, rolled a 7 in her palm, glanced to the rear-left, and jerked her head:

"Shall we?"

Cheng Shi eyed the seven o'clock direction, lost in thought.

That was the exact opposite of his own one — the direction diametrically opposed to his own roll. The last time he had walked this way was during the [War] trial.

'Defying fate again?'

Cheng Shi said nothing. He nodded, fell in behind Hong Lin, and set off toward seven o'clock. Before long, he asked:

"How do I get back to the original world?"

Hong Lin, leading the way, seemed not to have heard. She stopped and turned: "What?"

Cheng Shi smiled and shook his head: "Nothing. Let's hope this trip goes smoothly."

...

On the other side.

Hong Lin — the real Hong Lin — had spent ten days searching for Cheng Shi without finding a trace, and she was losing her mind.

Unlike Cheng Shi, her strategy was simple: search, search, and search some more. [Prosperity]'s Authority could sustain her until the world crumbled and the Authority faded. But at this rate, she feared the original world might be destroyed before she ever found Cheng Shi.

'The Real Universe is this enormous, and I lost Cheng Shi.'

Big Cat was both despondent and furious.

At her most desperate, she had even considered charging in a single direction like [War] had — just so Cheng Shi could see she was here. But she was terrified that "awakening" the Creator would cause Him to purge everything in the Real Universe.

Not finding someone meant at least she could tell herself he was alive. But if He intervened... then there really would be no one left to find.

Hong Lin grew more frantic, more helpless. She kept herself as far from the "starting point" as possible — terrified that simply looking at it would flood her mind with the scene of standing before the Destined Ones and trying to explain.

She couldn't bring herself to tell them Cheng Shi was gone. She would rather it had been herself.

But she had no choice. She had to go back for reinforcements.

And it was at that exact moment — right as Hong Lin mechanically returned to the starting point — that a figure suddenly appeared at the "starting point" that had been empty for ten days.

"Cheng Shi?!?"

Hong Lin's eyes went wide. She slapped herself in disbelief, then without a word shifted into a leopard and pinned the wretched Fate Weaver beneath her paws.

She extended a single claw, pressed it against the Fate Weaver's forehead, and roared hysterically:

"Cheng Shi!!!

Why are you only showing up now?! Why are you ten days late?!

Do you have any idea what these ten days have been like for me?!!!"

As she spoke, the leopard's eyes turned red.

Pinned beneath her, Cheng Shi's eyes were filled with nothing but bewilderment.

"Hong Lin, what happened?"

What ten days?

I came right after you..."

...

Chapter 1219: He's Not Cheng Shi!

Hong Lin's pockets were full of useful things — like seeds that could hover in midair and pulse with light.

These [Prosperity] seeds became convenient markers for her and Cheng Shi to trace their route. As long as they followed the markers back, they could always find the starting point.

Traveling together was infinitely better than searching alone. Even if her companion was suspect, at least having someone around eased the crushing loneliness.

Cheng Shi trailed behind Hong Lin, keeping a deliberate gap. This wasn't his idea — it was Hong Lin's suggestion.

She said the Real Universe held unknown dangers; if two people stayed too close and a threat suddenly appeared, they could be wiped out together. Keeping some distance while watching each other's front and rear was the safest choice.

When it came to combat instincts, Cheng Shi never doubted Big Cat. But whether this was truly Big Cat remained uncertain, so he was more inclined to think she had some secret she didn't want him observing at close range.

He didn't refuse, because he also needed that buffer space.

And so the two searched in this "aimless" fashion. Under "fate's" guidance, the seven o'clock direction yielded nothing.

After a long while, Cheng Shi stopped and frowned: "Looks like there's nothing in this direction. Should we try another?"

Hong Lin halted, casting a reluctant glance ahead, hesitating:

"Getting through the last stretch is always the hardest. Maybe we're almost there?"

Cheng Shi was smiling on the surface, but his guard intensified. It seemed his companion very much wanted to lead him in that direction. But what was out there — an ambush? A trap?

Or something else entirely beyond his comprehension?

Cheng Shi's heart pounded. He felt this situation had pushed past the boundary of his steadiness. He couldn't keep going this way. Even if this Hong Lin couldn't take him alone, who knew if she had allies waiting ahead?

He had to find a way to change direction.

A plan formed in his mind. His eyes shifted subtly, and he shook his head with a smile:

"I made an error in judgment.

We came here to defy [Fate]. So [Fate]'s guidance shouldn't count.

Even if Its will may not work properly out here in the Real Universe, I think we should change direction just to be safe — lest we stumble right into Its trap."

These words were rather transparent. Though he used [Fate] as a pretext, anyone with eyes could tell who he was really hinting at.

Conveniently, Hong Lin was not someone with sharp eyes for subtext — or at least, the Hong Lin before him wasn't acting like one at the moment.

She widened her eyes, seeming to find his reasoning sound, then asked where they should head instead, apparently deferring to his decision.

Her easy surrender raised more suspicion. 'She can't possibly have backup in every direction, can she?'

He thought for a moment, then pointed casually: "This way."

Hong Lin blinked. A flicker of something strange crossed her eyes, gone in an instant.

"Okay!"

Both turned and shot off into the distance.

...

On the other side.

An almost identical scenario had unfolded before Hong Lin — the real one — only here, it was Cheng Shi who rolled the dice.

Looking at the one-pip result in Cheng Shi's palm, Hong Lin said flatly:

"Can you roll anything else?"

Cheng Shi chuckled:

"One direction is enough. The Real Universe is massive, and we know nothing about it. Rather than wandering aimlessly, we might as well bet on a single direction.

Maybe we'll actually find something.

Ready, Hong Lin? It's time to go."

Despite her lingering doubts, Hong Lin chose to trust Cheng Shi. She charged ahead, leading him toward the one o'clock direction.

Naturally, the journey turned up nothing. Hong Lin wasn't surprised. But inexplicably, a wave of irritation welled up from the deepest part of her being.

This was the sixth sense of her combat instinct. She kept feeling that she was teetering on the brink of battle — but in this empty Real Universe, who could possibly be her opponent?

If she had to pick one, the only candidate was the Cheng Shi trailing behind her. But why would she fight Cheng Shi?

The agitation was completely groundless. Cheng Shi would never turn on her.

So it couldn't be his problem. It had to be that she had gone mad.

Hong Lin laughed at herself in self-mockery — but in the very next instant, her feet froze.

'Why can't it be Cheng Shi's problem?'

Her sudden halt put the Cheng Shi behind her on alert. The Fate Weaver flicked out a scalpel, swept his gaze cautiously around them, and said with gravity:

"See something?"

Hong Lin turned back with a pensive look and began re-examining Cheng Shi. Her suspicious gaze unnerved him, until he couldn't stand the scrutiny and asked again:

"What's wrong?"

Hong Lin frowned and countered with a question: "Why did we come up here?"

Cheng Shi froze for an instant, then broke into an understanding smile.

"Ah, Hong Lin, Hong Lin — we've walked this far and you're only now starting to question my identity...

I don't know whether to be happy about your vigilance or sigh at your thought process.

But it's fine — at least being cautious is never wrong.

We came here to retrieve [War]'s Authority and defy [Fate]. Right now, [War]'s Authority is nowhere to be found. Don't tell me you want to fight me — use a battle to resonate with Its Authority?"

Those words made Hong Lin's fingertips itch with excitement. She flexed her wrists and asked eagerly: "Would that work?"

"..."

Cheng Shi was dumbfounded. He blinked, then sighed helplessly before his expression turned serious: "The road is long and hard, Hong Lin. We need to endure the loneliness."

Hong Lin's brow remained tight, but she nodded.

"I know. But my instincts tell me there's danger ahead in this direction. Since we're defying [Fate], maybe we should switch.

How about... this way?"

She pointed to one side at random.

Looking at that direction, a fleeting oddness crossed Cheng Shi's eyes.

"Your understanding of [Fate] is deepening, Hong Lin. Your call — let's go this way."

Hong Lin smiled and resumed leading the way. But the instant she turned around, every trace of that smile vanished. A shadow of graveness flickered through her gaze.

'He's not Cheng Shi!'

His patter was flawless. He even knew they were here to salvage the Authority in the Real Universe. But Hong Lin had still found the crack — because...

He had never once questioned whether she was real!

Hong Lin knew exactly what kind of person Cheng Shi was. If her vigilance scored a 100, that man was at least 1,000. He was cunning and steady to the bone. After discovering they had been separated for a full ten days before reuniting, how could he not have questioned whether she was the real Hong Lin?

In the initial rush of joy at their reunion, Hong Lin had overlooked this. It wasn't until her combat instincts made her suspect Cheng Shi that she realized: today's Cheng Shi had never once doubted her.

Was that normal?

Back in the original world, absolutely — because Cheng Shi trusted her.

But where were they now? This was the Real Universe, a place where everything was unknown and anything was possible. Why wouldn't he doubt her?

Because her performance was convincing?

No — even so, he should have verified her identity. Doing so would have simultaneously proven his own.

But he hadn't done that.

So — who was he?

A Cheng Shi from another world? A hallucination conjured by her own madness?

Or something more terrifying still — the Creator's...

"Eyes"?

...

Chapter 1220: Crisis Approaching

Theater is absurd. Reality is no different.

The absurdity at hand was that Cheng Shi and Big Cat would never know: had they not changed direction, they would have soon met in the very same stretch of space.

At that point, the fake Cheng Shi and the fake Big Cat would have found themselves in an extremely awkward situation. But as things stood, the ones in an awkward position were the real pair.

The newcomers had been taught a lesson. Their "instructors" were naturally delighted.

Hong Lin — the fake one — curled her lips into an amused smile and continued silently blazing the trail ahead.

But her smile didn't last long. Because up ahead, something actually appeared. She had anticipated this. She just hadn't expected it so soon.

An enormous log — with no warning whatsoever — suddenly intruded into both their fields of vision and continued to grow. Its scale was staggering. If not for the clearly visible wood grain on its surface, Cheng Shi might have believed, for one harrowing instant, that Origin Itself had extended a finger to roll them flat.

The oppressive weight of the colossal object arriving made every hair on Cheng Shi's body stand on end. His pupils contracted, and he leaped backward, his voice unsteady with shock:

"What is that thing?!"

Hong Lin retreated first too — shifting into a leopard, her speed even half a body-length faster than his. But then she seemed to realize something, stopped short, and instantly transformed into a bear spirit to shield Cheng Shi, her expression grave:

"I don't know..."

"..."

Cheng Shi nearly exploded.

'Lady — at a time like this, you're still keeping up the act?'

'This thing is obviously radiating massive danger! You ran away faster than I did, and now you're pretending you don't recognize it?'

'Can we at least prioritize survival before trying to pull one over?'

'If you're dead, who are you going to con?'

Cheng Shi's eyelid twitched violently. Watching the log continue to grow, he had no choice but to keep retreating, moving faster and faster — clearly intent on putting distance between himself and Hong Lin.

He couldn't tolerate an unknown time bomb at his side when facing danger of this magnitude.

Hong Lin also realized Cheng Shi had seen through her identity. Since neither wanted to keep performing, she dropped all pretense and instantly vanished from before Cheng Shi's eyes.

Yes — vanished. Disappeared on the spot.

This mind-boggling sight only deepened Cheng Shi's alarm, but it also confirmed his earlier suspicion: the Real Universe must have mechanisms for spatial — possibly even temporal — traversal.

But he had no time to dwell on it. The log was still "falling." It appeared slow, yet its share of his visual field kept expanding.

Fear was undeniable. Cheng Shi gritted his teeth, pushed his mental energy to its absolute limit, and used the dice to reverse time again and again. But his speed was laughable compared to that log.

Before long, he was entirely swallowed by its vast shadow.

In that moment, terror ran rampant.

...

On the other side.

Hong Lin had also spotted the anomaly ahead. One second, the view was an endless, desolate expanse. Then she blinked, and a colossal log was blocking the path they had to take.

"Watch out!"

Big Cat's fur bristled. She instinctively shifted into leopard form and charged straight for the Cheng Shi behind her. In the face of the unknown, her first reaction was to grab her friend and run — as far as possible.

In that split second, she had even forgotten that the Cheng Shi behind her wasn't the real one.

So what reminded her of the truth?

The Cheng Shi behind her was gone.

The fake Cheng Shi had already bolted without a trace!

"!!!"

Hong Lin was livid. She retreated while snarling through clenched teeth:

"Great — the one thing about you that does resemble him is how fast you run!

Don't let me catch you again!"

After snarling out that threat, she remembered she wasn't in a trial — she was in the Real Universe. The fleeing Big Cat instinctively hunched her shoulders and added under her breath:

"And don't come looking for me either. If we fight, it's not a given who'd win."

Perhaps "fate" truly did exist in the Real Universe, and perhaps "It" happened to hear Big Cat's "prayer" — and so "It" acted.

Before long, the sprinting Hong Lin suddenly spotted a figure in the far distance, also running for dear life. And that figure was none other than the Cheng Shi who had vanished moments ago.

Her eyes flew wide. First came shock — then a taunting smirk tugged at her lips.

She assumed the fake Cheng Shi had run the wrong way and been herded back by the terrifying log. What she didn't know was that the Cheng Shi on the other side had thought the exact same thing about her.

From afar, the two locked eyes. Though they couldn't make out each other's expressions, each could feel the other's contempt.

But those petty emotions were crushed in an instant by the weight of the crisis bearing down on them. Since the other was just as afraid of this monstrosity, that meant they could at least be allies in the business of survival. And so they drifted closer, the instinct to survive pulling them back together.

Cheng Shi couldn't hold back any longer. As his mental energy began to bottom out, he asked that same question again:

"What the hell is that thing?!"

Hong Lin snapped: "How would I know! I should be asking you! You're the one who chose this direction!"

This was pure deflection born of fury; but for Cheng Shi, the words landed perfectly — he had chosen this direction.

He was momentarily lost for a response.

Good news: there were, in fact, no traps from the fake Hong Lin in this direction.

Bad news: there was a much bigger trap — and it had swallowed the fake Hong Lin too.

Cheng Shi was out of options. He didn't have the "Abundance" Authority. With his mental energy nearly drained, his eyes darted as a plan formed, and he barked:

"If you don't have an idea, then I'll handle it!

Buy me some time — I'll take care of this!"

"!!!"

Hong Lin's entire body shuddered in disbelief.

'If you could deal with that thing, you wouldn't be running just as desperately as me!'

'Besides — how am I supposed to buy you time?'

'Go back and throw my life away?'

'If you were the real Cheng Shi, I'd turn around without a second thought. But you're a fake — why should I trust you? Why should I risk my life for you?'

Hong Lin ignored him completely and kept running. She figured that since Cheng Shi was heading this direction, this way was at least safer.

Cheng Shi read Big Cat's expression in an instant. For one fleeting moment, the familiarity was so strong he almost believed this Hong Lin was the real one.

The impersonation was too perfect. Apart from the missing critical information, she was virtually identical to Hong Lin.

But he couldn't be sure whether she was simply refusing to cooperate, or genuinely didn't know. And if she really wouldn't help — why had she run back to him?

He decided to try one more time:

"I'm not asking you to go back and die. Just pull me along — let me catch my breath.

Once my mental energy recovers, I can get us both out of this!"

Hearing those words, Hong Lin hesitated.

Honestly, given the circumstances, she had no better plan either. Just running like this would never outpace the shadow of the log.

Her only worry was that once this fake Cheng Shi recovered, he would turn on her — drag her down to buy himself time and space to escape.

But Cheng Shi's next words settled it entirely.

"If I die, whatever you want from me becomes a moot point.

There's no need to push things this far. I can tell you what you want to know."

"ROAR!

You'd better not be lying to me!"

Big Cat didn't actually want to learn anything. She only wanted to find Cheng Shi. And so she coiled her tail around him and ran for her life.

Though the leopard tail's crushing grip pinned Cheng Shi in place, at least he no longer needed to burn mental energy to flee. In the precious breathing room he gained, Cheng Shi snapped into overdrive — not only analyzing what this being could possibly want from him, but also constantly observing the log behind them, calling out optimal escape directions to Hong Lin.

And it was during one of those backward glances — rocking with the sway of the leopard tail — that Cheng Shi went rigid with shock.

Looking at the log as it grew ever larger, revealing ever more of its form, he finally understood what it was.

It wasn't a log at all. It was the arm of an unfathomably enormous puppet!

And he had seen this puppet before — the very same Leaking World Silent Puppet that had once tried to assimilate him in the Void!

Only now, in the Real Universe, the Silent Puppet was tens of thousands of times larger than it had been then.

Cheng Shi was utterly stunned. His voice warped with disbelief.

"[Silence]?!"

...