

The Gods 1221

Chapter 1221: Recognition

Silence is everywhere.

Cheng Shi never imagined that phrase could be physically, literally proven in the real world.

But why was [Silence] in the Real Universe? What purpose did It serve, drifting out here?

When the unknown becomes known, fear at least stops being quite so overwhelming.

The fleeing Hong Lin heard Cheng Shi shout "[Silence]" — but her mind didn't even go to the god [Silence]. She thought this fake Cheng Shi was speaking in riddles.

Then she glanced back... and her eyes flew wide.

"A puppet. Why is there such an enormous puppet here?"

It was silenced?

By whom?

Origin?!"

"..."

'Lady — who's the outsider here and who's the local?'

'You don't recognize anything, and you still had the nerve to try fooling me?'

Hong Lin's shock deepened Cheng Shi's suspicion about her identity. The familiar feeling surged again — she was so much like that brain-doesn't-engage Druid.

He couldn't help wondering whether she was deploying an even deeper layer of theater to earn his trust, or whether his own judgment about her identity was somehow warped.

He hadn't forgotten: before the fake Hong Lin reappeared, there had been a gap during which they were separated. Could something else have happened during that time when they couldn't see each other?

Cheng Shi was on the verge of a breakthrough — but the moment didn't afford him the luxury of deeper thought. More and more of the Leaking World Silent Puppet materialized, as if printed into existence by some invisible force. It slowly drifted above their heads.

Hong Lin was panicking. Teeth clenched, she sprinted while demanding: "Where's your plan?!"

'I don't have one.'

Cheng Shi's expression froze. The bravado of a few minutes ago had been nothing more than an excuse to catch his breath. Against this colossal Leaking World Silent Puppet, what plan could he possibly have?

'Not being assimilated is already the best-case scenario...'

'Wait!'

'Assimilation?!'

'Right — why hasn't the Silent Puppet assimilated me, even though it's right on top of us?'

He remembered the last time: a single glance at the puppet had nearly plunged him into eternal silence and merged him with It. Yet now, with the colossal puppet blotting out the skyline overhead, he could still move.

Divine power did exist in the Real Universe — his talents still worked, which was proof enough. So if this Silent Puppet truly was [Silence], why was Its divine power gone?

'Unless...'

A bold thought ignited in Cheng Shi's mind. He tapped Big Cat's tail and shouted:

"Stop running! Hold up!"

Big Cat didn't process it: "Quick — switch to your method!"

"...I don't have a method! I said stop running!"

"You don't?!"

Big Cat's voice warped too. She whipped around in fury — only to find Cheng Shi staring at her with absolute seriousness:

"There's no need to run anymore. If [Silence] has lost the power to silence the living, then the only explanation I can think of is...

It's dead."

An intense gleam shone in Cheng Shi's eyes. "This isn't the true [Silence]. It's a corpse. The corpse of a god!"

"!!!"

A tidal wave of terror swept through Hong Lin's heart. Her feet stuttered to a halt.

The Silent Puppet was still drifting. The arm — terrifyingly immense — had already passed overhead. A body even more massive than the arm stretched across half the universe, filling nearly all of their vision. Beneath that crushing pressure, the two mortal lives looked up — like mayflies gazing at the heavens.

"You're saying..." Big Cat swallowed involuntarily. "This is [Silence]'s corpse?!"

Cheng Shi nodded, though he wasn't fully certain. He couldn't figure out why a god's corpse would be drifting through the Real Universe. How had It died?

Who could kill a god?

Every divine death Cheng Shi had witnessed so far had been self-inflicted. He had never seen a god's complete remains before. The sheer novelty of it meant his mind hadn't even gone there at first.

The puppet appeared perfectly intact — not a scratch on its surface. It didn't look like something that had died in battle.

So the question became: who could make a god die this... cleanly?

If Cheng Shi were in his own world, he would have had to consider the relationships between the gods. But here, in the Real Universe, there was one existence that could serve as the answer to virtually any question.

Origin!

It was entirely possible that the Creator had killed [Silence]!

As for why — that was anyone's guess. Perhaps because It, too, was a "jailbreaker"?

Or perhaps It had learned a secret about Origin?

After all, It was [Silence] — the most secret-hungry god in the entire universe.

This, of course, raised yet another question: which world had this [Silence], slain in the Real Universe, come from?

With a god dead beyond the world, had that world already...?

Too many thoughts. Too tangled. Too chaotic. Cheng Shi locked eyes with Hong Lin, saw the flash of fear in her gaze, and realized they had been thinking the exact same thing.

That inexplicable synchronicity stirred something in him. He quietly palmed his scalpel and asked:

"Who are you, really?"

Hong Lin blanked, then snapped back with her own furious question: "I should be asking you that! Talk — who are you? Why are you impersonating Cheng Shi?!"

Hearing this, Cheng Shi's heart jolted. His expression shifted.

'This isn't the same one!'

In that instant, everything clicked. He understood why the Hong Lin who had vanished reappeared in an entirely different manner — running for her life and crashing into him — because these two Hong Lins were not the same person!

The impostor had fled. The one he had collided with was very possibly the real Hong Lin.

Joy surged through Cheng Shi — but the Real Universe could make anything happen. Terrified this might be another trap set by the other Hong Lin, using a god's corpse as bait, he asked one more question to be safe:

"The Authority you shared with me — was it 'Breeding' or 'Unsullied'?"

Hong Lin blinked again — and then her eyes went wide once more.

"Neither!" She fought to contain her excitement, enunciating each word: "It was 'Abundance.'"

"..."

Hearing "Abundance," Cheng Shi broke into a warm smile.

'Big Cat's grown up. She even knows how to counter-test now.'

He shook his head with a chuckle and let out a long, relieved breath:

"Fine, fine. You say Abundance, then Abundance it is. After all, [Truth] is dead — It can't exactly take 'Abundance' back from you anymore."

"!!!"

That single sentence obliterated every last shred of Big Cat's wariness. Her paw slammed into Cheng Shi's chest — joy, shock, fury, and fear all crashing together:

"You bastard — do you know I searched for you for ten days?! Ten whole days!

Just when I was about to give up hope, someone showed up and pretended to be you!

Do you have any idea how dangerous the Real Universe is?! Where did you run off to?!

If I hadn't been clever enough to see through him, I would've — you would've—"

Hong Lin was too agitated to form coherent sentences. But the gist of everything she said boiled down to one thing:

This is all your fault.

The blow had been savage. Cheng Shi coughed violently, frantically slapping at Big Cat's paw while consoling her:

"I know. Of course I know. Because everything you went through — I went through too.

I also searched for you for ten days. I also ran into another Hong Lin."

At the sound of her own name, Big Cat's fur stood on end. Without trying, her very presence radiated menace:

"Where is she?"

"Same as the fake Cheng Shi beside you — ran away.

She's probably hiding somewhere right now, watching the show.

We got played. The Real Universe's swindlers gave us a thorough lesson.

Great. Just great. Liars truly are everywhere. I must say, this Real Universe is quite fascinating."

Chapter 1222: [Silence]'s Corpse

Though the joy of reuniting tempered their fear, now was no time for idle chat.

Even if the colossal Leaking World Silent Puppet truly was [Silence]'s corpse, Cheng Shi couldn't guarantee the remains posed no danger. Otherwise, why had the fake Hong Lin and fake Cheng Shi fled so quickly?

Just to have a laugh at his and Big Cat's expense?

Probably not.

Who would be bored enough to mess with people for fun in a place as dangerous as the Real Universe? That would be beyond shameless.

And yet — it genuinely was shameless.

At that very moment, the two shameless silhouettes stood at a great distance, gazing at the Leaking World Silent Puppet. One clicked his tongue with interest; the other narrowed his eyes in suspicion.

"Tsk — plans can't keep pace with change. We finally found an opportunity, and then He drifts in...

You tell me — why did those two pick this direction of all directions? I guess that's just fate."

"That Spacetime Dolphin Bridge has existed for long enough. It should have been patched ages ago. But that's not what I'm focused on.

He has been drifting through the Real Universe for so many ages, always showing up wherever something interesting happens. If you tell me there's no secret behind it, I won't believe you."

The more cheerful figure stroked his chin, eyes sparkling with anticipation:

"Well — there they are, the ones who'll crack the mystery. I don't believe he can resist either."

The colder figure sighed softly:

"Even if he can't, what of it? When has a liar's mouth ever told the truth? Even if he uncovers the corpse's secret, he won't necessarily tell us.

No — he definitely won't tell us.

If only we could go up ourselves."

The cheerful figure blinked, then let out a wistful sigh of his own: "Forget it. They've got their Benefactors' protection. What are we, anyway?"

...

On the other side.

Just as the two shameless figures predicted, after nervously waiting beneath the Silent Puppet's shadow for a while and confirming the corpse truly posed no danger, the fire in Cheng Shi's heart rekindled.

The look in his eyes as he gazed at the corpse had changed — burning so brightly that it frightened Hong Lin.

Big Cat grabbed Cheng Shi's arm in alarm: "Don't look at it like that — you're scaring me. What are you planning, Cheng Shi?"

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow, barely containing his excitement: "Don't you want to know what treasure... information might still be on this corpse?"

"!!!"

'Treas-what? Treasure?!'

'I knew it. This greedy bastard is up to no good!'

"No!" Hong Lin rejected his proposal in an instant, hissing: "Are you insane? Have you already forgotten how we were just running for our lives? Getting out unscathed was lucky enough. How can you still be thinking of provoking It?!"

Those two Real Universe fakes ran away! We're newcomers here — don't cause trouble!

Cheng Shi, we came for [War]'s Authority! [Silence] is [War]'s opposite! Disturbing Its remains is bad luck!"

"?"

'Lady — in a world where gods literally walk the earth, you're going to preach superstition at me?'

Cheng Shi's gaze didn't waver. Big Cat's words clearly hadn't swayed him.

Hong Lin grew frantic: "Where's your steadiness?!"

Cheng Shi was perfectly steady. This wasn't greed clouding his judgment — it was the product of careful deliberation.

He pointed at the corpse overhead that blotted out half the universe and laid out his analysis with crystal clarity:

"Think about it. Even if the Real Universe's natives understand it far better than we do, they're still bound by its rules — still trapped within the framework of the Creator's experiment.

So if we can conclude that the Creator killed [Silence], they can too. But they can only conclude — never verify.

Because everyone knows that attracting Origin's gaze means only one outcome: obliteration.

Anomalous variables that don't belong to the experiment have no reason to exist within it.

Given that — do you think they dare approach this corpse?"

Big Cat blinked and digested this for a while before she grasped what Cheng Shi meant: the two impostors had fled not because the corpse itself was dangerous, but because they were afraid of any connection to Origin.

She still wasn't convinced: "That's all speculation."

Cheng Shi nodded:

"Correct — all speculation. But not groundless speculation.

In the Real Universe, Origin represents extreme danger. Everyone retreats from It. But precisely because of that, anything connected to Him could serve as camouflage for newcomers like us!

It's like someone smearing a predator's scent on themselves to brave the jungle. Yes, the dangerous act might attract the predator's attention. But at the same time, it scares off every other beast with designs on you.

In the law of the jungle, it's about who's bolder and who's tougher.

Fortune favors the bold, and the timid starve. Hong Lin, with your toughness...

Dare you gamble with me?"

"?"

When Hong Lin heard this logic, her brain short-circuited.

'Something everyone avoids at all costs — how did it become a weapon in our hands?'

'Sophistry has its uses, but you're just fooling yourself! Who can predict what dangers lurk on a god's corpse?'

Yet the phrase "gamble with me" instantly transported her back to that [Prosperity] trial. It was precisely that gamble that transformed her from an ordinary mortal into [Prosperity]'s Proxy!

So here and now, in the Real Universe — could this gamble let her take... one more step?

Perhaps even become that...

"..."

'Can't think about it. Don't dare think about it!'

Hong Lin's expression cycled through a dozen shades of conflict before everything finally condensed into a single question:

"What are our odds?"

Cheng Shi grinned: "We have no odds."

"!!!" Hong Lin was so tense she nearly crushed Cheng Shi's arm. "No odds?! Then what are you gambling with?!"

Cheng Shi's eyes flickered. From the corner of his vision, he looked into the infinite distance and answered silently in his heart:

'I'm gambling with their curiosity!'

'I refuse to believe those two fakes aren't interested in this corpse.'

'As long as we put on a show here and draw their attention, we'll naturally learn their attitude toward the corpse — and from that, whether there's any real danger on it, and what information it hides.'

'Unfortunately, I can't tell you any of this. Because they're liars too. The moment they read the truth on your face, this entire performance falls apart.'

'So forgive me, Big Cat. To fool them, I have to fool you first.'

...

Meanwhile, on the other side.

The two figures were still betting on when Cheng Shi would make his move. In the next instant, they saw plumes of smoke blossom beside the Leaking World Silent Puppet's massive elbow.

Compared to the colossal corpse, the smoke was little more than dust and mold clinging to the crease of an elbow — but it was enough to shroud Cheng Shi and Hong Lin completely, hiding them from outside view.

Seeing this, the cheerful figure raised an eyebrow:

"Ha — the liar's clever, all right. He's using our reaction to underwrite his gamble.

Normally, I wouldn't indulge him."

Despite saying this, his impatient little shuffling steps gave away just how interested he really was.

The cold figure let out a quiet snort:

"Go. Why wouldn't we go?"

If he doesn't climb up there, who's going to find out what's hidden on it?

They won't tell us. So we'll just have to let Their followers do the talking. Let's go — let him 'fool' us this once."

...

Chapter 1223: A Game of Wits Inside and Outside the Smoke

Hong Lin was extremely tense at this moment. Seeing smoke blanket the area around them, her heart leapt into her throat.

"What are you doing?"

Cheng Shi tossed smoke bombs methodically, stating with perfect solemnity: "Blocking the Creator's line of sight. So He can't see us touching [Silence]'s corpse."

"???"

'What?'

If it weren't obvious that Cheng Shi was speaking Chinese, Hong Lin would have thought she'd lost her ability to comprehend language.

'Whose line of sight are you trying to block?!'

'Is it your mouth that slipped, or my ears that broke?'

Hong Lin stared at the scene before her in disbelief. Several seconds later, enlightenment dawned: "Is 'deceiving yourself and others' a talent? What does it do?"

"?" Cheng Shi silently glanced at her and shook his head.

Hong Lin's face stiffened. Then another epiphany struck: "Then you must have struck [Death]'s Bone Bell again? Is He protecting us? But I didn't hear any sound."

Cheng Shi's expression grew stranger still. He shook his head again: "What does this have to do with the Boss of [Death]? This is just ordinary smoke. The most basic kind."

"The most basic smoke?!?" Hong Lin's face crumbled. Her voice warped, and she seized Cheng Shi's shoulders, shaking him back and forth: "Do you even know what you're doing, Cheng Shi? Have you lost your mind?"

No — are you possessed?

Is there something unclean in the Real Universe messing with your head, or are you pulling another scheme I can't possibly understand?"

Hong Lin's brow furrowed deeply, suspicion filling her eyes. "Wait — you're fooling someone, aren't you? Fooling whom? Those two Real Universe imposters?"

What are you trying to deceive them about — pretending we've touched [Silence]'s corpse so we can trade fake intel for real information about the Real Universe?"

At this point, Hong Lin's eyes suddenly lit up.

Not because she was confident in her guess — but because she saw Cheng Shi's face crumble too.

Indeed: crumbling was only ever transferred, never destroyed.

With confirmation that Cheng Shi wasn't possessed, Hong Lin's spirits lifted: "What's the plan? How should I support you?"

"..."

'Not figuring it out would have been the best support.'

Cheng Shi sighed. Having been deceived enough times, Big Cat had grown a brain. She could even read a liar's mind now.

But her every move was still far too "green" when measured against top-tier tricksters. Cheng Shi didn't dare gamble on whether a Big Cat who knew the truth could convincingly feign ignorance and fool those two. So he had to change plans. With an apologetic look, he said:

"Is your neck tough?"

"?"

Big Cat froze. Before she could react, Cheng Shi chopped the edge of his hand against her neck, and then...

Nothing happened.

"..."

Cheng Shi's smile froze on his face. He had just personally "chopped out" the answer to his own question:

Tough. Very, very tough.

In that instant, a colossal wave of embarrassment engulfed the entire fog. Cheng Shi's facial muscles twitched uncontrollably, caught between laughing and crying.

Fortunately, Big Cat understood his intent. She gave him a long look and said, somewhat indignantly:

"I can't fool anyone at all?"

"..."

It was self-deprecating, but to Cheng Shi's ears, the sarcasm in it was thicker than some [Folly] followers'.

Not wanting to be overly blunt, he could only wrestle his stiff facial muscles into a forced smile: "Weren't you the one who said we should be steady..."

As he spoke, he shrank his neck.

He saw Big Cat raise a hand chop of her own.

Hong Lin was furious. Her brows shot up and she burned to return the favor. But she didn't. She knew the smoke's cover was limited. If they didn't race against the clock now, Cheng Shi's entire plan might fall apart.

The hand she raised wasn't a "threat" aimed at Cheng Shi. She turned it on herself, chopping her own neck in one swift stroke.

THWACK—

With a crisp impact, Hong Lin's eyes rolled shut and she collapsed instantly.

Cheng Shi flinched in surprise. He caught Big Cat before she could float away into the starry void, his expression a masterpiece of conflicting emotions.

'Look — this is Hong Lin. Even in the completely unknown Real Universe, she can trust her friend this absolutely.'

'Who else could hand their life over to someone in a strange place like this?'

Cheng Shi gazed at the unconscious Big Cat with steely resolve. He knew he could not betray her trust. So the plan began the instant she lost consciousness.

He hoisted Big Cat over his shoulder, waited for the smoke to dissipate, and kept his eyes locked on the space beyond the fog — never once glancing at the colossal Silent Puppet.

He had no intention of climbing that enormous puppet corpse right now!

Yes, the Greed Lord's greed had stirred. But what he coveted most was his own life.

He needed first to gauge the level of danger on the corpse from the two tricksters' reactions before risking any further exploration for "treasure."

He was certain that swindlers who could operate in the Real Universe would be "greedy" too. They wouldn't abandon their targets just because of a wandering corpse. So long as they were still watching him — still trying to edge closer to see if he had truly climbed [Silence]'s remains — it meant that even if the corpse carried risks, those risks weren't guaranteed to be fatal!

The logic was simple: if every living thing that approached the Silent Puppet died or was erased without exception, the two would have cut their losses and left this area entirely, with no further thoughts.

But if they still attempted to close in, it could only mean they knew there was a chance of survival on the corpse — and that anyone who climbed it might bring something valuable off it. They wanted to intercept, to claim someone else's prize without lifting a finger.

And that was exactly what Cheng Shi wanted to confirm.

'You're using me — but little do you know, I want to use you too.'

A game of wits, divided by a curtain of smoke, quietly began. And just as Cheng Shi predicted, the two shameless swindlers were slowly inching toward the smoke.

They weren't walking together. They maintained a wide separation, keeping themselves far enough from the corpse while staying close enough to support each other in an instant.

In a wide-flanking formation, they "encircled" the dissipating smoke from afar, waiting for Cheng Shi to bring them good news.

They were confident their approach would ignite Cheng Shi's gambler's instinct. And no matter what he retrieved from this long-drifting corpse, they would intercept it — and glimpse the secret of a god's death.

They had a method of long-range communication. The cheerful figure watched the distant smoke begin to thin and smirked:

"Careful — the liar is clever. Even if he finds something, he'll never surrender it willingly.

Watch the smoke. Don't let him fool you."

The cold figure nodded and was about to respond when — sudden chaos erupted from within the smoke.

Plumes that had been on the verge of fading suddenly burst open in fresh explosions, thickening once more and concealing the figure barely visible inside. More than that, the new smoke blossomed in a deliberate straight line — like a "covert" tunnel, hiding whoever traveled within.

It was obvious: someone was trying to use the smoke as cover to flee the scene.

But the technique was laughably crude. The two outer figures spotted the ruse instantly. In perfect unison, they snorted a laugh, then — without a glance at where the smoke tunnel led — whipped their heads in the opposite direction.

You must never trust the surface. Because everything you see is what the liar wants you to see.

To track a trickster through the dazzle, you must understand a trickster's heart — must know what all the flashy misdirection is actually for.

The target in the smoke was clearly trying to escape. And given his caution, he would never expose his actual escape route to his enemies.

So the smoke tunnel was definitely a decoy — a textbook feint, east while striking west!

The cheerful figure laughed aloud and vanished in the opposite direction:

"He won't get away!"

The cold figure matched his course. He, too, was certain Cheng Shi couldn't escape.

...

Chapter 1224: Deceiving and Being Deceived

Cheng Shi got away.

When the two figures converged again and sensed no third presence nearby, the cheerful one was no longer cheerful, and the cold one turned even colder.

They'd been fooled!

Who could have imagined that a trickster, at the supposed brink of life and death, would forgo all the flashy plays and instead employ the most direct, most crude method to slip right out from under their noses?

By the time they had lunged in the wrong direction and tried to turn back, a figure came bursting from the far end of the smoke tunnel — battered head to toe, an unconscious companion slung over his shoulder — disappearing into the distance without so much as a backward glance.

The expressions on both their faces were a sight to behold.

This round, Cheng Shi had been playing on the third level.

Of course, you could also argue Cheng Shi was only on the first level. But neither hunter would accept that — they refused to believe a trickster with only one layer of logic had fooled them both.

They watched Cheng Shi retreat along the marked [Prosperity] seed route but made no move to chase. Instead, their exchange was animated:

The no-longer-cheerful figure stroked his chin, pensive: "Did he actually go up there? Those injuries didn't look fake, and that big cat wasn't faking unconsciousness either."

The even-colder figure snorted: "Would you trust what a liar shows you?"

The no-longer-cheerful figure blinked and pointed at the ground beneath their feet:

"Well — I didn't trust him. And that's exactly why I got tricked.

So should I trust him this time?"

"..."

The even-colder figure fell silent. That Cheng Shi would gamble his escape with such a method genuinely didn't look like acting. The panicked, desperate flight served as its own proof.

But the real question remained: what had he found on the corpse that was worth such an enormous risk?

The two figures exchanged a glance, curiosity surging in tandem.

"Follow them?"

"Are you sure we'll actually find him when we get there? Don't forget, he still has the dice. He can swap back here. If we show up and he's gone, and we've lost his trail on top of it... the humiliation would be catastrophic."

"...It's not like anyone would know. Let's just eat the embarrassment.

If I don't find out what he saw up there today, I won't be able to sleep. I'll have nothing but nightmares."

"You don't dream in the first place."

"..." The cheerful figure shot his counterpart a sidelong glance, his mouth twitching: "Never mind me — are you sure you didn't misplace those [Prosperity] seeds?"

"Don't worry. They won't find their way back.

Come on. Let's wait for them at the 'starting point' we prepared."

The cheerful figure blinked, a nagging feeling that things might not go as smoothly as planned.

This liar had provided far too many surprises already.

Would they actually corner him this time?

...

They didn't.

The now-withdrawn-to-the-point-of-shutdown figure and the now-emotionally-broken cold figure stood at the "starting point" they had prepared for Cheng Shi — and didn't catch so much as a hair.

Without question, Cheng Shi had doubled back halfway along the [Prosperity] seed trail. Using his [Time] talent, he returned to the base of the colossal Leaking World Silent Puppet's corpse — at least for this moment, completely shaking off the two liars' surveillance.

In truth, Cheng Shi hadn't actually seen through the trap of the rerouted [Prosperity] seeds. He had simply followed his original plan: extract confirmation that the corpse wasn't a death trap, then ditch the hunters behind him.

He couldn't be sure when they would come looking, nor how large a window of time he had. He only knew that right now was his one and only chance to approach [Silence]'s corpse. If he missed it, finding another opportunity in the hostile unknown of the Real Universe would be next to impossible.

So he immediately woke Big Cat and had her carry him toward the puppet's head at full speed.

His plan was a "beach landing" on the Silent Puppet's skull.

Hong Lin only regained full awareness after running for a while, accepting the reality that Cheng Shi had single-handedly shaken two pursuers all by himself.

It wasn't that she doubted Cheng Shi's abilities — she was simply in awe that even in the Real Universe, this Fate Weaver could keep performing miracles.

She even caught herself thinking: if only Cheng Shi could just keep pulling miracles forever. She'd just need to nap, and when she woke, every problem would be solved. She'd cooperate with anything, no complaints.

After all, who can't sleep?

But Hong Lin knew that was fantasy. Right now, her heart was still racing. Since she had to face the unknown dangers head-on, she could only grit her teeth and stand in front of the Fate Weaver, using her combat prowess to scout the way for his mind.

Time crawled by. Only when Cheng Shi was certain the two liars could no longer keep up did he and Hong Lin finally reach the vicinity of the Silent Puppet's head.

Looking at the skull that dwarfed a celestial body, even Cheng Shi felt his scalp tingle.

The corpse was impossibly vast. Even if they "landed" on it, how long would it take to find what they were looking for?

Was there even anything up there worth finding?

If after all this risk and all this effort, they came up empty-handed, then...

'Stop thinking like that!'

'The die is cast. Even with fear roiling inside, I have to try.'

Cheng Shi's gaze hardened with resolve. He patted Big Cat's back and said gravely:

"Let's stop here. Wait for my signal."

That nearly gave Big Cat a heart attack. She bucked Cheng Shi off her back and spun around, snapping:

"Who told you to go up? Stay right here — and wait for my signal!"

With that, the leopard prepared to charge upward. Thankfully, Cheng Shi was fast enough to grab her tail, caught between laughter and tears:

"Hong Lin, hold on, don't be rash.

Relax — neither of us has to take the risk. Our exploration plan is perfectly safe. Someone has already gone up."

"!!?"

Big Cat was stunned: "You brought another ally? Who? Who could be more... well-suited than me?"

Cheng Shi was fairly certain she had wanted to say "better at fighting." His expression turned a shade peculiar:

"Nobody else. It's my shadow.

He's perfect for this kind of work. Don't worry. Let us...

Hmm?!

Something's wrong — it doesn't look good up there!"

...

On the other side.

Two black-faced figures were deliberating a new strategy.

In the Real Universe, they too were merely passing travelers — not omniscient "masters." They had found Cheng Shi through their understanding of the Real Universe's spacetime and their sensitivity to its fluctuations.

Even knowing where Cheng Shi was, doubling back to chase him would leave them trailing by a wide margin. In that window, they had no power to stop whatever he chose to do.

So their opinions diverged.

The no-longer-cheerful one — now so withdrawn he had shut down entirely — refused to go near the trickster again. He wanted a new target.

The cold one — whose emotional defenses had been shattered — absolutely refused to admit defeat and insisted on getting even with Cheng Shi.

Thus, a deadlock.

Neither could convince the other, until the cheerful figure proposed a new plan:

"They're a team. What does it matter who we fool?"

As long as we hook one of them, we'll have new leverage. Instead of trying to save face inside his game, we set up a new game and wait for him to step in. Once he shows a crack, are you really worried the two of us can't outwit one man?"

The cold figure's expression cycled through several shades before he finally agreed.

They exchanged a look and silently shot off in a certain direction.

And at that very moment, at the infinite end of that same direction, a man in heavy armor wandered lost, swinging a longbow in his hand to vent his frustration.

"Ten days.

Who knows how many more tens of days lie ahead.

[War]'s Authority is nowhere to be found. The way home has vanished.

Is [War]'s flame truly going to be extinguished here in the Real Universe?

No — a spark may die, but the passed flame never goes out.

The fire in my heart will never be extinguished!"

...

Chapter 1225: [Silence]'s "Deception"

Cheng Shi had been duped — duped by his own greed.

The instant Shadow Cheng Shi set foot on the Silent Puppet's skull, a familiar force seized him in its grip.

Senses fading. Consciousness dimming. Movement slowing. Speech silencing...

He was being assimilated.

Cheng Shi had never imagined that dwelling in the Silent Puppet's shadow for so long would leave him untouched, yet the moment of physical contact triggered the assimilation.

What was this?

A trap to lure the greedy in and kill them?

Cheng Shi's expression darkened, but he didn't panic. He had left contingencies for every possible outcome. His only uncertainty was whether his shadow's predicament was a trap set by [Silence] or a stroke of Misfortune from [Fate].

That was right — he had activated Fate Has Divergence.

To be precise, Shadow Cheng Shi had activated it before setting foot on the Silent Puppet. Though this [Fate] talent would make everything worse, it wasn't without its advantages.

At the very least, supplemented by [Time], this talent could serve as a "temporal anchor" — a starting point for temporal regression.

Time Has Path!

[Time]'s blessing allowed Shadow Cheng Shi to regress to the moment before fate diverged. This meant the shadow gained one additional chance to make a mistake on the timeline.

More importantly, regardless of Shadow Cheng Shi's class, he could use this talent. The cost was merely a lengthy cooldown on Fate Has Divergence.

But cooldown time weighed nothing against a life saved.

So before the very last shred of consciousness was stripped from Shadow Cheng Shi, he decisively triggered Time Has Path and reverted to the instant before "landing."

When consciousness flooded back and all five senses returned, Shadow Cheng Shi rocketed backward and merged with Cheng Shi.

Watching Cheng Shi's expression cycle rapidly, Hong Lin asked tensely:

"What happened?!"

Cheng Shi looked up at the "corpse" with grim eyes, his heart sinking. Uncertainly, he said:

"I concluded this was [Silence]'s corpse because It had lost the power to assimilate everything.

Believe it or not, I once had the 'privilege' of being assimilated by [Silence]. I'll never forget the feeling of the world sinking into dead silence.

So when I was this close without being assimilated, I determined It was 'dead'...

But just now, the instant my shadow touched the corpse — the shadow was assimilated!"

Hong Lin's eyes went wide: "How can you separate your own shadow?"

"???"

Cheng Shi was thrown off by this completely unexpected question. Hong Lin instantly realized her focus was off. Her face froze, followed by a flash of alarm in her eyes.

"You mean... It's still alive?!"

Big Cat bristled. In a flash she became a leopard, scooped up Cheng Shi, and bolted. Under such bizarre circumstances, Cheng Shi didn't dare linger either. He stayed silent, only staring upward at the colossal puppet, wondering what had turned a god into this.

A perverse [Silence] that no longer broadcast Its will, only assimilating whatever touched It?

Why would It do this? Why "play dead" here?

Or perhaps It truly was dead, and Its death in the Real Universe had transformed into a drifting tomb — the only thing left being Its body, narrating Its final vision?

Regardless, what Cheng Shi wanted wasn't on this corpse. It seemed those two swindlers had been fooled by the corpse as well. There was nothing atop the puppet — only the dregs of [Silence]'s will.

Lying flat on the leopard's back with the wind howling in his ears, Cheng Shi's mind raced.

Everything in the Real Universe was vastly more complex than the original world. The gods' positions and the threads of history from beneath their world offered zero reference in this sprawling expanse of spacetime.

Here, virtually every occurrence instinctively traced back to the Creator, meaning the terror descending from higher dimensions was inescapable.

The oppressive atmosphere clashed starkly with the vastness of the starry sky. The dissonance was maddening.

Cheng Shi could only count himself lucky that he had enough tricks up his sleeve. Otherwise, escaping [Silence]'s "deception" unscathed would have been nearly impossible.

Yet even with no real "losses," his brow stayed tight. The two of them were now facing the same question all over again: where to go next.

Given the Real Universe's incomprehensible vastness, all they had discovered so far were two swindlers and a "corpse." As for the whereabouts of [War]'s Authority — there was still no lead whatsoever.

In the heavy silence, it was Big Cat who spoke up first with a suggestion.

"Since He died on the road of His charge — do you think..."

Cheng Shi immediately grasped her meaning. His face changed sharply: "Don't even say it!"

Hong Lin knew her idea was even more dangerous than Cheng Shi touching the Silent Puppet. But she was completely out of options. They couldn't very well go back and ask those two "natives" for directions to the Authority, could they?

Actually — Cheng Shi was genuinely considering that.

He was thinking: if he proactively offered the "secret" of the corpse as a bargaining chip, would they tell him where [War]'s Authority had been lost?

After all, Authority was tied to faith. His world's Authority would be utterly useless to them. So would this be a fair trade?

...

On the other side.

When Qin Xin spotted two figures in the distance, his shock was no less than when he had first heard from the Flame of Hope that [War] had fallen.

'Why are they here?'

'What are they doing here?'

'How did they get here?'

Questions abounded, but the surprise of meeting familiar faces far from home still lifted his spirits. Especially after wandering alone for so long, finding a sliver of comfort in the Real Universe was precious beyond words. Seeing that the other party had noticed him too, Qin Xin immediately called out a tentative greeting.

Unfortunately, his greeting was not met in kind.

The two figures froze for a beat upon spotting him, then immediately assumed defensive stances and started shouting at him.

"Still trying to fool us! Still?!"

You know a lot, we'll give you that — but you think we'll fall for it again?!

Where are we? This is the Real Universe! There's no way Qin Xin would be out here!

He's no ordinary player — he's a Torch... bah, I'm not telling you.

Don't think one successful con makes us idiots!

If you've got guts, stand still! Let's settle this the old-fashioned way!"

As he ranted, the shouting man pushed his female companion in front of him. Clearly, he was in charge of the cursing, while the other handled the hitting.

Watching this eerily familiar scene, Qin Xin stood dumbfounded.

From that tirade, he could be fairly certain those two were indeed Cheng Shi and Hong Lin. The problem was — they didn't believe he was the real Qin Xin.

Setting aside why they were here, just the information packed into that rant told him their experience had been far more eventful than his.

It sounded like... there were other tricksters in this Real Universe?

Who?

Natives of this place, or "Prisoners" who had "broken out" from a smaller world like he had?

Qin Xin frowned, remained skeptical, and after a moment's thought, spoke firmly:

"I am Qin Xin. The genuine article.

I won't bother proving my identity. Instead, you two need to explain why you're here.

Otherwise, I will treat you both as illusions born of the madness that has kept me lost and trapped here — and eliminate you without mercy."

With that, the [War] follower drew his bow. The man-height giant bow bent into a full moon. Its string let out a teeth-grating creak, and even the wind around them seemed to hold its breath in terror.

...

Chapter 1226: Summoning [War] with "War"

The situation spiraled out of control. A full-blown battle was imminent.

But this time, no one held back. The pair across from him had clearly been swindled past their breaking point and refused to believe Qin Xin could possibly appear in the Real Universe.

Qin Xin even heard Hong Lin turn eagerly to Cheng Shi and say:

"Watch yourself. The instant I charge in, I might not be able to cover you — but only for that one instant. He won't last a single breath against me."

"?"

Qin Xin's eyelid twitched. He knew Hong Lin's imagined opponent was the trickster who had fooled them, but being told that to his face still ignited the pride of a [War] follower.

Meanwhile, Cheng Shi remained as steady as ever. Pressing Hong Lin's shoulder, he whispered:

"Don't underestimate him. He's not the real Qin Xin. Even though his con has kept him looking like he doesn't dare make a move, no one can be sure of his true strength.

If we can win, we fight. If we can't..."

Cheng Shi's eyes darted around, scanning the area, his voice dropping further: "...we run. We don't know how many are backing him up. Whatever happens, we can't fall into his trap."

Cheng Shi had tried to keep his voice as low as possible, but as a Hawk Eye Scout, Qin Xin heard every word crystal clear.

That gave him ninety percent certainty these two really were Cheng Shi and Hong Lin. The final ten percent he'd confirm through combat. So he had no intention of pulling his punches, and he also wanted to use this "war" to vent ten days' worth of pent-up frustration.

He needed an outlet!

Qin Xin was human, not a god. When pressure stacked into mountains so heavy he couldn't breathe, he too needed to offload the weight.

In the original world, he had guarded the secret of fire passing, tended to other Torchbearers' emotions, and even at his most bitter, exhausted, and lost, could only swallow it all — licking his wounds alone in some hidden corner.

But here in the vast Real Universe, aside from the two people before him, nobody knew him. No need to worry about appearances. He only needed to throw everything into battle, and through war, rediscover himself — while simultaneously confirming whether these two were verbal fraudsters or genuine friends.

Of course, the prerequisite was: he absolutely could not lose!

So the instant Hong Lin transformed into a giant bear and charged at him with a roar, Qin Xin narrowed his eyes, released the bowstring, and let the Long-Feathered Flying Arrow scream through the air. It detonated mid-flight into countless streaks of fire, raining down as a cage that stopped the bear dead in its tracks.

Flames surged and reversed like a waterfall flowing upward!

The tongues of inferno rolling skyward bloomed in reverse like rewinding fireworks, condensing into buds that locked Hong Lin within, burning through everything.

But even a cage of fire capable of incinerating every living thing on earth couldn't breach Hong Lin's defenses, much less withstand her full-force blow.

In the blink of an eye, the giant bear shattered the cage and burst free.

Yet even at her speed, it still took that one blink!

And in that single instant, Qin Xin reclaimed the initiative. He drew and nocked again — this time aiming at a different target: Cheng Shi, hiding far behind.

The moment Cheng Shi felt the crosshairs lock onto him, his expression went black.

He was fairly certain he couldn't survive this arrow.

Qin Xin showed no mercy, either. He hadn't even considered whether Cheng Shi could withstand it — because he knew: even if the Clown couldn't, the Druid would absolutely shield him.

So his gaze hardened, and his fingers released.

WHOOSH—

The white-feathered arrow erupted into a skyful of flaming missiles the instant it left the string. Closing in, the flames poured down like rain. By the time they reached Cheng Shi, it was a dam-burst — a torrent of blazing fire.

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted. There was nowhere to dodge. Just as the all-consuming inferno was about to reduce him to ash, a spotted-yellow blur streaked past, bringing a howling gale that extinguished the surrounding fire and wrenched Cheng Shi from the kill zone.

Hong Lin was back. Between attacking the enemy and protecting her ally, she didn't hesitate — Cheng Shi's life superseded everything.

Qin Xin was wholly unsurprised. His next arrow was already aimed at Hong Lin.

One arrow to block the enemy. One arrow to harass the backline. He intended to grind Hong Lin down through this endless loop of forced rescues.

As the other side of this battlefield, Hong Lin naturally saw through Qin Xin's pattern. But for now, she had no counter.

Cheng Shi treated the burns on Hong Lin's skin, his own expression equally grave.

This was undeniably a clash between a stats-monster and a mechanics-monster. Hong Lin charged forward with unstoppable force, shattering every formation — raw power incarnate. But she couldn't outlast Qin Xin's steady, composed command, his effortless deployment of "soldiers" and "generals" across the field.

This [War] follower understood the strengths and weaknesses of both sides intimately. Every decision dodged the bear's headlong charges and struck the Clown's vulnerabilities.

After only a short exchange, Cheng Shi realized they couldn't keep this up. At this rate, Hong Lin might genuinely be ground to death here.

His eyes flickered. As the leopard carried him clear of the inferno, he whispered to Hong Lin:

"Take this. Watch for my signal — then forget about me and take him down!"

Hong Lin grasped his meaning instantly. Weaving through the rain of fire, she shook the Clown off her back and, without a word, charged Qin Xin again.

Qin Xin repeated his earlier tactic — blocking her for an instant. But when he turned to aim at Cheng Shi once more, Cheng Shi was gone. Only a cloud of smoke remained where he had been.

If the target were simply hiding in smoke, burning the whole cloud away would suffice. The problem was, Hong Lin's flight path was also lined with smoke.

These clouds were spaced far apart. Hitting every possible position simultaneously would cost enough time for Hong Lin to close the gap.

And once a furious warrior got within arm's reach — honestly, even as [War]'s Chosen, Qin Xin wasn't confident he could stand against Hong Lin's full fury head-on.

He didn't fear close combat. He was simply weighing whether it was necessary to let the situation escalate further.

A Hawk Eye Scout excelled at reading the battlefield. Based on everything this fight had revealed, these two couldn't possibly be fakes. Every move and technique matched his understanding of them. So with their identities confirmed to one hundred percent — did this battle still need to continue?

His counterparts had surely identified him by now. So Qin Xin hesitated, debating whether to call a ceasefire and talk things through.

But his tactics had left Hong Lin deeply frustrated. Battle rage fully ignited, the instant she broke free of the cage, the giant bear howled and leapt skyward, one paw hammering straight down at Qin Xin's skull.

Qin Xin raised his bow to intercept but was a half-beat slower than the bear. Left with no choice, he tried to dodge through brute force. And so—

BOOM—

The impact thundered across the starry sky. The [War] follower paid his respects to another relic of his Benefactor.

Blood!

Blood sprayed everywhere!

The heavy armor caved inward. His body went flying. Qin Xin was swatted clean out of the air.

Feeling the force behind that blow, Qin Xin frowned slightly.

Hong Lin's attack looked devastating, yet it was actually weaker than expected. She was enraged — but she had still pulled her punch.

Qin Xin knew he had been the one to force this fight, so he'd take this hit as an apology. Just as he expected both sides to cool down and start feeling each other out, Hong Lin attacked again.

And the fury in her eyes made it clear — she was going all the way!

Qin Xin's expression hardened. He spoke gravely: "Are we still doing this?"

It wasn't Hong Lin who answered. It was Cheng Shi, hidden somewhere in the smoke.

"You think you get to decide when we stop?"

Today I'm going to beat you to death, you hard-shelled old turtle bastard!

Big Cat — bite him!"

"..."

Both Hong Lin and Qin Xin's faces twitched. They collided savagely, but Qin Xin was ultimately a hunter — in a contest of raw strength against a Druid, he was quickly overwhelmed.

He looked at Hong Lin inches away, practically foaming to pound him into paste, and his brow tightened again.

"Hong Lin isn't this weak. Who are you, really?"

The giant bear's fury doubled. She roared:

"I'm your mother!"

With that, the bear's paw came crashing down again, sending Qin Xin flying once more.

Seeing his opponents refuse to relent, Qin Xin had no choice but to take the fight seriously — this baffling, increasingly absurd fight. He kept re-examining the pair, slowly beginning to question his earlier identification.

As things stood, his only option was to seize the window while Hong Lin wasn't at full power and end the fight decisively. Only with absolute control of the battlefield could he interrogate these two about why they had appeared in the Real Universe.

So Qin Xin rode his momentum backward, rolled to absorb the impact, and opened the distance. He drew and nocked once more, preparing to counterattack.

Only this time, flames began licking along the arrow before it even left the string. Sparks scattered in every direction, dancing in the wind, quickly catching his brows and hair alight.

With a roar of fire, the man wreathed in flames returned!

The [War] follower bathed in conflagration once more.

Seeing this, Hong Lin paused mid-attack, her brow furrowing deep. Cheng Shi too stepped out of the smoke, his expression grave.

But what put them on high alert wasn't Qin Xin's transformation — it was the fact that the very instant he transformed, a beam of celestial light, as if answering a summons, plummeted from some unimaginably distant corner of the starry sky and poured directly into Qin Xin's body.

The flames engulfing the Hawk Eye Scout turned white-hot and savage in an instant — terrifyingly so!

The blood on his body seemed drawn by some invisible call. It leapt upward in defiance of gravity and merged with the fire, whirling into a sky-blotting vortex of blood and flame.

In that moment, Qin Xin opened his eyes within the fire — and looked exactly as if [War] Itself had descended.

...

Chapter 1227: The Echoes of Blood and Fire

"Authority."

Cheng Shi recognized the celestial light instantly. Without question, it was Authority — and specifically, the [War] Authority belonging to Qin Xin's world!

When a god died in the Real Universe for whatever reason, the Authority crystallized from Their faith didn't dissolve. Instead, it transformed into intangible "legacy," drifting through the Real Universe.

However, this legacy couldn't simply be picked up by anyone "fated" to find it. Authority from different worlds could not be shared across worlds. Only a faith vessel from the original world could locate and "reclaim" it.

This rule also prevented any "jailbreaker" from gorging themselves into a "god blob" in the Real Universe.

A world was the soil in which faith took root. Once the world crumbled and faith ceased to exist, the orphaned Authority became nothing but scrap.

The Cheng Shi and Hong Lin here were, of course, not the real Cheng Shi and Hong Lin. The two of them had been drifting through the Real Universe for ages, witnessing the birth of countless such scraps, and knew full well how difficult it was to reclaim Authority belonging to one's own world beneath this starry sky.

The Real Universe was simply too vast. So vast that anyone who came searching would most likely return in despair.

And Authority itself wasn't easy to find. It wasn't some conspicuous floating object. It was an abstract, indescribable existence. To discover it, one first had to trigger a resonance between the Authority and divine power.

For example: offering birth to honor [Birth]. Offering decay to please [Decay]. Offering war... to summon [War].

So when Qin Xin made his decision to end the fight decisively, the [War] divine power he unleashed rang out like a great bell, radiating outward in every direction.

Of course, this divine ripple couldn't propagate infinitely through the Real Universe. Beyond a certain range, if the Authority wasn't within reach, no resonance would be triggered and no trace would be found.

Fortunately, "fate" was watching. [War]'s lost Authority was distant, but not beyond that range.

And so, the instant Qin Xin erupted with [War]'s divine power, the Authority belonging to his Benefactor answered the call and came home!

When faith found its vessel, when devotion reclaimed its place, the indomitable will of [War] roared as it poured into Qin Xin, igniting every cell in his body.

Qin Xin couldn't move. He felt his lungs burning, his blood boiling, his soul ablaze. Before he could even process what was happening, the fervor had already carried him through — and he inherited [War]'s full Authority.

As he stood motionless during the inheritance, the two figures watched from afar — equally still. Whether frozen in anger or in fear, it was impossible to tell.

The cheerful figure, playing the role of Cheng Shi, pursed his lips and whispered: "Fight — or go?"

The cold figure, playing Big Cat, frowned: "We can't beat him, but the play must go on. Leaving now would ruin everything."

The cheerful figure shot her an odd glance, his voice dripping with disdain: "Cold as ice any other day, but the second there's acting involved, you throw yourself in heart and soul. Guess everyone secretly wants to be a screenwriter."

With that, he fell silent and quietly waited for Qin Xin to complete the inheritance.

Qin Xin's consciousness went blank. He seemed to have fought through a battle — no, through countless battles. The suffocating pressure of a never-ending battlefield closed in from all sides, engulfing him like a sea of blood. He struggled, wavered, feared, and despaired — but he never once thought of surrendering.

From being pushed to the brink of death to finding life within death, a spark of fire ignited in the field of his heart as his defiant roar rang out.

That ember — barely worthy of being called light — illuminated one small corner of the thick, crimson sea. And with that faint glow, Qin Xin dragged his heavy legs forward. He hacked away his shackles, shoved aside the surrounding corpses, and step by step, pulled himself free of the blood-soaked quagmire.

When he stood on solid ground, drenched in blood, Qin Xin shook off the last trace of mire and carried the fire in his heart back onto the battlefield.

And so, [War] returned.

He had earned [War]'s Authority's recognition. Reborn in flames, he became Its sole Envoy of this era.

A Servant God — elevated by a true god's will after that god's death!

Seeing that the Authority's bestowal was irreversible, the cheerful figure's eyes darted. He immediately pulled Hong Lin back, clasped his hands toward Qin Xin, and offered congratulations:

"Now, you are a true Torchbearer.

The irony, of course, is that the moment you gained the power to truly pass the flame, you became exactly the sort of god the Torchbearers most want to overthrow.

But congratulations all the same, Qin Xin. What should we call you from now on?

Oh — forgive me. I should say 'you,' formally. What is your Divine Name...?"

This congratulation, laced with barbed innuendo, left the freshly battle-scarred Qin Xin somewhat dazed.

He steadied himself, frowned in deep thought, and soon had an epiphany: Cheng Shi and Hong Lin had come to the Real Universe for the same reason he had. They, too, were searching for [War]'s Authority?!

But he had learned of [War]'s fall from the Flame of Hope. How had they found out?

Just as Qin Xin was about to ask, Cheng Shi beat him to it with a smile and an explanation:

"[Fate]. It was [Fate] that brought us together here.

We too learned of [War]'s fall by chance, and came to try our luck.

As for how we got here — everyone has their secrets, no?

I can only tell you that [Void]'s ranks aren't exactly harmonious. Whatever the Fun God is plotting in his world-ending scheme — [Fate] is doing everything in Its power to save this world.

Hong Lin and I wanted this Authority to help Him. Now, it seems fortune wasn't on our side.

Still, it's far better for you to have it than for the Fun God to get his hands on it.

The Torchbearers want to pass the flame. The Destined Ones want to save the world. At least our goals align."

By this point, the shock surging through Qin Xin was too immense to contain. His face still appeared composed, but his mind was a maelstrom.

He suppressed his doubts and probed carefully:

"I always thought your devotion lay entirely with [Deceit]. I never expected you'd chosen [Fate]."

Cheng Shi snorted softly: "What else? False devotion is precisely [Deceit]'s definition of deceit. I use it to win His support while walking the razor's edge of faith — the better to see this world clearly.

I used to think the Fun God, rebelling against heaven and earth and Origin, would bring this world hope. Now I've finally seen the truth: only [Fate] can save everything.

The signs were always there. Otherwise, why would I have walked alongside you Torchbearers?

The Flame of Hope — isn't He [Fate]'s Envoy?"

"You—" Qin Xin was once again stunned by the breadth of Cheng Shi's knowledge, never suspecting this was already the limit of what the imposter knew.

Seeing the conversation heading toward exposure, the cheerful figure in Cheng Shi's guise smiled enigmatically, waved farewell, and said:

"This isn't the place for a chat. When we're back in our world, we'll find a time — I'll talk with you properly.

We can meet in the Fire Passing Hall, or at the Destined Ones' gambling table.

The Real Universe is too dangerous. You've got the Authority. Hurry back. We still have other business here.

It doesn't involve your world. No need for your help.

Rest assured — Hong Lin and I will keep the Authority matter absolutely secret. After all, the world's survival hangs in the balance.

We've never wanted to see the world destroyed."

He paused. His tone turned wistful.

"Not a single one."

With that, he and Hong Lin turned and left without hesitation, leaving Qin Xin standing there in a stupor — thoughts in chaos, staring blankly into space.

The shock of inheriting the Authority, it seemed, was somehow smaller than the shock of what had just come out of Cheng Shi's mouth.

'The Destined Ones...'

'A group suspected of being [Fate] followers... is trying to save the world?'

'[Deceit] is trying to destroy it?'

'If the gods themselves have fractured, does that mean the best moment to pass the flame has finally arrived?'

Qin Xin's expression hardened with resolve. He looked toward the starting point he had come from, his eyes burning with unshakable determination.

...

Chapter 1228: Who Are You? The Liars Cheng Shi Mentioned?

Sadly, iron will and unwavering conviction offered Qin Xin no help whatsoever in the Real Universe.

After parting ways with Cheng Shi and Hong Lin, he used his own methods to return to his arrival point. But there was no longer a single trace of the passage. He had, it seemed, lost his way home.

Qin Xin didn't give up. He tried every tool at his disposal — even harnessing the Authority's might to attempt tearing through the spacetime barrier. All of it failed.

Worse, the enormous noise drew the attention of other beings in the Real Universe.

Before long, two blurred figures came streaking toward him. Fragments of their conversation lingered in the rushing wind.

"I can feel the aftermath of [War]'s power erupting. Think this could be where the Authority fell?"

"Maybe. But we need to be fully prepared — in case those two liars are using this to bait us into a trap.

Careful. The ambient temperature is rising."

While the pair was still cautiously feeling their way forward, Qin Xin — who had exhausted every option — had long since detected their presence through [War]'s "vigilance."

And when he saw Cheng Shi and Hong Lin had come back, a thread of confusion rose in his mind.

'Why did they return?'

Qin Xin frowned, sensing something was off. He quickly suppressed the Authority's aura, withdrew [War]'s power, and edged warily toward the approaching pair. He made no effort to hide his own form, however, and his position was quickly exposed to their senses.

Hong Lin was the first to register the approaching presence. She halted abruptly, staring ahead in disbelief:

"Qin Xin?! How can he possibly be here?"

Wait — this has to be a trap!

Those two liars disguised themselves as Qin Xin — it's just like you said. They released [War]'s power to lure us in.

Damn it, we fell for it! Let's go!"

Big Cat turned to bolt. But this time Cheng Shi held her back with all his might.

'Wait, Big Cat!'

'If that really is Qin Xin, this might not be a trap at all.'

Cheng Shi's face showed excitement tempered with suspicion.

He knew Qin Xin was sharp. To prevent Qin Xin from reading any tells off Big Cat — and thus piecing together that Cheng Shi had been secretly communicating with the Flame of Hope — Cheng Shi had never told Big Cat that Qin Xin would also be coming to the Real Universe. So the Qin Xin before them might be genuine.

Then again, a fake was far more likely. Cheng Shi didn't believe his luck could be this good after defying [Fate] — unable to find anyone for ten days, only to run into two teammates on the same day.

He frowned and thought for a moment. Even if it was a fake, engaging was worthwhile. After all, he still planned to use [Silence]'s "secret" to extract useful intelligence.

He calmed the alarmed Big Cat, shook his head at her, then looked toward the approaching silhouette of Qin Xin. After a moment's deliberation, a plan formed. Putting on a thoroughly shocked expression, he acted as if he knew nothing:

"Qin Xin?"

"What are you doing here?"

The performance was flawless. Unfortunately, the timing was all wrong.

Had this been Qin Xin's first encounter, the battle that had just taken place might never have happened. But as it was, Qin Xin had already heard this exact question once before.

So when he heard the same words a second time, Qin Xin's face hardened. He understood immediately: these two were most likely not his friends at all — they were the very tricksters Cheng Shi had warned him about!

'So these two unknown imposters have set their sights on me?'

'Are they after the Authority too?'

Qin Xin's gaze went cold.

Dealing with the Real Universe's swindlers required not kindness, but fire. Unless you burned them enough to hurt, they would never learn restraint.

In the next instant, Qin Xin raised the giant bow, his expression frigid.

The hostile stance left no room for negotiation. Cheng Shi instantly realized he had underestimated the situation. Then, sensing the searing heat of the arrow blazing with the aura of Authority, Hong Lin shouted in alarm:

"Authority!

Cheng Shi, [War]'s Authority is in his hands!"

'What?!'

Cheng Shi was dumbfounded. He never imagined their combined efforts could be less efficient than Qin Xin working alone. In the time they had been apart, Qin Xin had already reclaimed [War]'s Authority?

'That smooth?'

'We're wandering lost in the Real Universe, and you're treating this like your own living room?!'

Cheng Shi didn't particularly care who held the Authority. To him, Qin Xin was actually the optimal vessel.

On one hand, as the founder of the Torchbearers, Qin Xin needed the strength to lead them through the coming crisis. On the other, a Qin Xin who had drawn infinitely close to a god's throne could silence the Flame of Hope — preventing the little candle from putting all its hopes on Cheng Shi alone.

In fact, one of Cheng Shi's purposes in bringing Qin Xin here had been to turn him into the Authority's "Container."

So when Cheng Shi realized the mission might already be accomplished, he was genuinely happy.

Whether that happiness could be cashed in, though, remained to be seen.

Because he couldn't confirm whether this Qin Xin was from his world.

And also because Qin Xin's arrow had already been loosed, screaming straight at his face.

An identical scene replayed itself — only this time, two-thirds of the performers on stage had been swapped out.

Hong Lin reacted in a flash. With a roar, she became a giant bear and threw herself in front of Cheng Shi, catching the arrow bare-handed.

The arrow packed force, but it was still a probe. [War]'s flames hadn't flooded the battlefield. Qin Xin merely wanted to gauge how troublesome these Real Universe opponents would be.

White flame wrapped around the bear's paw but failed to singe a single hair.

[Prosperity]'s power and [War]'s aura wrestled on her paw. Feeling the threat of [War], Hong Lin forgot her fear entirely. Excitement took over. Every fiber of her being itched for a fight.

Cheng Shi could see it: Big Cat wanted to brawl. Especially after he had hinted the opponent might not be an enemy — she wanted to throw down even more!

'Lady — which one of you is [War] again?'

Cheng Shi's eyelid twitched, his expression grave.

Hong Lin could afford to shut her brain off. He couldn't. He had to work out what Qin Xin's opening shot meant. He knew Authority wasn't easy to find, so he couldn't guess what Qin Xin had paid for it. But he was certain the man had gone through something involving betrayal or deception. Otherwise, upon running into the two of them, he wouldn't greet friends with an arrow — he'd greet them with a smile.

To prevent the misunderstanding from deepening, Cheng Shi chose not to retaliate immediately. He held the agitated Hong Lin in check and explained — calmly, composedly:

"Whatever you've been through, whoever you've met — Qin Xin, I need you to know: I am Cheng Shi, and she is Hong Lin. Our identities are real.

As for whether you're Qin Xin... I think you probably are. Otherwise, [War]'s Authority wouldn't be on you.

But even if you are Qin Xin, we're not necessarily 'friends.'

This is the Real Universe — the breathing space beyond ten thousand worlds' cages, and the graveyard from which countless 'jailbreakers' can never escape. I can't confirm where you're from. But I'll say this: no matter which world you hail from, if you are Qin Xin, we should at least not be enemies.

The Torchbearers... actually, forget the Torchbearers. Let's talk about you personally.

Even if you don't trust me, you should trust Hong Lin. With her personality, in any world, she'd be your friend. Isn't that right?

So relax. If there's a misunderstanding here, we can absolutely clear it up.

And to preempt any suspicion that I'm stalling for an ambush, let me lay my cards out.

We came here to find [War]'s Authority. And the reason we sought the Authority..."

Cheng Shi paused. Only after feeling Qin Xin make a subtle adjustment to his arrow's angle did he continue:

"...is to hold power in our own hands, so that before the ending [Fate] has written for the universe arrives, we can find a path of survival for me and my friends within the unbreakable 'fixed destiny.'

And you, the Qin Xin of that world — you're one of my friends."

'[Fate]'s ending?!'

Hearing this, Qin Xin slowly lowered the giant bow. He could feel the sincerity behind those words. But...

Why were the two Cheng Shis describing completely different "futures"?

The Cheng Shi before him — which world's Cheng Shi was he?

...

Chapter 1229: That Was Dirty!

When a certain liar surnamed Cheng tries to have a heart-to-heart with you, the best course of action is to disbelieve every word that follows, refuse to be drawn into his rhythm — and simply walk away before the con is complete.

Unfortunately, hindsight is twenty-twenty. Not everyone can break free of Cheng Shi's sincerity play. Nearly every person who feels his "authenticity" will linger for just a moment, offer their own genuine response — and then get taken in, catching a peculiar condition called "trust."

Qin Xin was one of them.

Regardless of faction, he truly could not make himself an enemy of Cheng Shi. Especially after sensing such raw honesty, there was even less reason to attack without listening first.

He lowered the giant bow and spoke with a furrowed brow:

"I'm sorry. If you know of the Torchbearers, you should understand — I won't and can't abandon them.

I must return to my world and bring this Authority back. It is vital to the Torchbearers.

So no matter what attachment you have to the Authority, I will not compromise.

But for the sake of the Cheng Shi in my world — a friend of the Torchbearers..."

His gaze swept carefully over them, and he nodded:

"I'm willing to give you both a chance to explain your identities.

You're right — if you come from another world, we shouldn't be enemies.

Not long ago, I already met both of you. The reason I accepted them as my friends is that they witnessed the entire process of me acquiring the Authority and harbored no covetous intent — they even 'protected' me from the outside until I completed the inheritance.

I believe that only someone who can watch another take the Authority with nothing but goodwill and blessing deserves to be called a true friend."

"???"

Hearing this, Cheng Shi finally understood what kind of setup those two swindlers had prepared for him.

'Well played. That was filthy!'

Using the information gap around Authority knowledge to hoodwink Qin Xin, while simultaneously leaving behind a mess that made it nearly impossible for the real Cheng Shi to prove himself — as a tactic, it was truly nauseating.

The crux was that Authority was notoriously hard to verify. Nobody in the Real Universe would share their Authority with a stranger whose identity was unconfirmed.

Hong Lin didn't understand the finer points. Hearing Qin Xin's words, she was stunned. She looked at Qin Xin, then at Cheng Shi, and had no idea how to refute it.

Honestly, if she were standing in Qin Xin's shoes, she probably couldn't believe that someone willing to leave her the Authority would turn out to be a fraud either.

'But that makes us the frauds!'

'Those two liars didn't just fool me — they stole my identity!'

Hong Lin was livid and protested outright: "Even so, they're the fakes! We're the real ones!"

But the denial was too flimsy. Qin Xin couldn't possibly buy it.

He knew Hong Lin. He knew the answer to this puzzle would never come from her. From start to finish, he had been waiting for Cheng Shi's response.

Cheng Shi's expression had turned supremely strange. He wracked his brain but couldn't find a single method to prove their identity from his own vantage. So he could only lob the ball back to Qin Xin.

He explained to Qin Xin the principle that a world's existence was the foundation of its faith, telling him that another world's Authority could not be inherited or proxied by a being from a different world. Therefore, those two swindlers hadn't been unconcerned about the Authority — they simply couldn't use it even if they took it, because what Qin Xin could obtain was inherently impossible for them to acquire.

Unless they truly were fellow swindlers from the same world as Qin Xin.

But the original world's most elite liars — the ones who could actually fool Cheng Shi — were at this very moment inside Mockery and Jeering, searching for the Nose of Verification on his behalf. They couldn't possibly be here.

So Cheng Shi told Qin Xin: he had been tricked. Tricked by the Real Universe's own swindlers.

Qin Xin understood the rule. On reflection, it made sense. He was even willing to believe Cheng Shi wasn't a liar. But he still posed a question Cheng Shi couldn't answer:

"What's in it for them?"

"..."

Honestly, Cheng Shi wanted to know the answer to that too.

Throughout this entire ordeal, he had been matching wits with those two swindlers. Yet they hadn't managed to extract anything from him. He couldn't even guess their goal — he only knew they were lying. As for why they were lying...

'Surely they're not doing it for fun...'

Besides, this question should be asked of the perpetrators, not the victims!

Cheng Shi's face was stiff. His expression cycled through several contortions before he decided to play an "honesty" card.

"No idea." He laughed at himself with a helpless sigh. "Funny, right? I don't know why they deceived me, Hong Lin, and you.

But the fact is, they did."

This explanation was even flimsier than Hong Lin's flat denial.

Qin Xin smiled. For the first time, his expression relaxed.

He had always been a leader with an eye for people. With [War]'s Authority now augmenting his perception, his ability to read others had transcended its previous level. He was essentially certain the Cheng Shi before him was the real Cheng Shi. He just wasn't sure whether this Cheng Shi belonged to his world.

Then again, even if he did, Qin Xin didn't want to disavow the earlier Cheng Shi and Hong Lin. He felt they were all good people — at most, they simply came from different worlds.

And from Qin Xin's perspective, at least in the Real Universe, he had yet to encounter a single "bad person."

If so, then perhaps the universe still had hope after all.

Just when the explanations were growing paler and the heart-to-heart had reached a stalemate, a flash of inspiration struck Cheng Shi. He slapped Big Cat's bear leg, his face alight with excitement:

"I've got it! I know how to prove it!

Should've thought of it sooner — it's actually simple. Since worlds and Authority are 'bound,' we just need to test whether we can proxy each other's Authority!

Qin Xin, I know you're suspicious — worried we covet the Authority on you. But rest easy. You don't have to do a thing. We can complete the verification ourselves!

Allow me to solemnly introduce the person beside me:

She isn't just my friend Hong Lin — she is the daughter of [Prosperity], Frazor, [Prosperity]'s candidate, the sole Proxy of [Prosperity]'s will!

She carries [Prosperity]'s Authority. So all we need is for Hong Lin to 'share' her Authority with you. The result will tell us whether you and I come from the same world.

I think you wouldn't refuse something this reassuring?"

"!!!"

Qin Xin was floored.

"Hong Lin is the new [Prosperity]?!"

He hadn't forgotten Sun Miao's analysis in the Fire Passing Hall. The "Vice President" had said someone had already usurped [Prosperity]'s Divine Throne. It seemed she had been right on every count.

He simply hadn't expected Hong Lin to be the lucky one.

Of course, Hong Lin had the strength and the will to come this close. It was just that...

Never mind. Qin Xin didn't pursue the thought further. He looked at Hong Lin in considerable astonishment — and saw that she had no objection whatsoever to the suggestion.

What did that say?

It wasn't merely a testament to the deep friendship between the pair. It also meant Cheng Shi could influence the "distribution" of a true god's Authority — with nothing more than words!

Could it be that Hong Lin's Divine Throne was his doing? That he had pushed her onto it?

Otherwise, why would she trust Cheng Shi this absolutely?

An epiphany struck Qin Xin.

'No wonder they also came looking for [War]'s Authority. This Fate Weaver wants to push another player onto [War]'s Divine Throne.'

Qin Xin deliberated for a moment. He neither accepted nor refused. Instead, he asked with curiosity:

"Who is the person you've chosen?"

"What?" Cheng Shi instantly played dumb.

Qin Xin smiled and pressed more directly: "Who are you trying to push onto [War]'s Divine Throne?"

Seeing that the clever man couldn't be fooled, Cheng Shi pursed his lips:

"You.

No one is more suited to that seat than you.

This isn't flattery, and it isn't a bid for your trust. It's the plain truth.

Whether it's the inferno that dares challenge everything, or the last warm ember of a dying world — you are the best vessel for both.

Some fires were always meant to burn on you."

With that, Cheng Shi was about to have Hong Lin test whether she could share her Authority. But before she could act, Qin Xin had already kindled a wisp of flame at his fingertip, flicked it gently, and sent it floating toward Cheng Shi.

Under the pair's baffled gaze, Qin Xin smiled and said:

"Passing the flame — that's never been something one person can do alone.

I never expected you to accept our invitation and join us. But in you, I see the same defiance we carry.

This is [War]'s Authority: 'Indomitable.'

I share it with you not to ask for anything in return, nor to drag you into the Torchbearers' cause. I simply want to tell you:

You, Cheng Shi, have always been the same kind of person as us Torchbearers."

As he spoke, the ember swayed and drifted into Cheng Shi's chest, sinking into his heart. A burst of heat flared through his body, and in the field beneath his heart, a new, indomitable glow took root.

Proxy successful. Identity verified.

Qin Xin wore an expression of 'I knew it.' He threw back his head and laughed:

"It really is you.

Good to see you again, Fate Weaver."

...

Chapter 1230: We Were Tricked

[War] Authority "Indomitable" (Partial): A true god's Authority recognized by the Convention, bestowed by its custodian. Grants the holder limited power to proxy this Authority.

Authority Effect — [Unyielding Arrogance]: The proxy is affected by the Authority, gaining divine presence. The holder is no longer subject to any form of pressure or intimidation, and will exert suppressive presence over those of lesser standing.

Looking at the Authority's effects, Cheng Shi had to admit — Qin Xin understood him.

Given Cheng Shi's current standing — above "human" yet below "god" — proxying a single Authority couldn't advance his power or influence any further. Yet this "Unyielding Arrogance" effect let him hold his head high before the gods, let him sit at the negotiation table with far more composure and calm.

Of course, such a precisely fitting "gift" wasn't because Qin Xin knew everything about Cheng Shi. It was more a reflection of his sincere hopes for this Fate Weaver — that "Indomitable" would mark a beginning. The beginning of this world's mortals challenging the gods with human bodies.

Cheng Shi's expression was complicated. He felt the weight of Qin Xin's expectations. Though the man had explicitly said he asked for nothing in return, the expectation alone was already heavy enough.

Feeling the [War] Authority coursing through him, Cheng Shi was silent for a moment before smiling:

"Verification complete. Our luck is indeed quite good.

In that case, Qin Xin — take your Authority back. You know I wasn't exaggerating before. I really don't—
"

Before he could finish, Qin Xin shook his head:

"No need.

You know what I mean. This isn't coercion. It's not a moral shackle. It's a gift between friends — a small one."

"...If Authority counts as a 'small' gift, I genuinely can't imagine what would qualify as a big one."

Qin Xin smiled gently: "If it truly feels like a burden, then, Fate Weaver — let's make a trade."

Cheng Shi was far too sharp. The moment Qin Xin uttered those words, he had already guessed what would come next.

"You want me to push you onto that Divine Throne?"

A keen light flashed in Qin Xin's eyes:

"So you really can influence the gods — even seize a Divine Throne!

I thought Hong Lin's throne was something you stumbled into by chance. But judging from how certain you look...

I'm curious, Cheng Shi — [Deceit] still reigns. You may not yet be a god. But are you still human?"

"..."

'You'd better not be insulting me.'

Cheng Shi smirked, his tone pointed:

"Compared to you, I'm admittedly less 'human.' But compared to certain others, I at least border on it.

Since we've come this far — I won't hide it from you anymore. That's right. We are actively pushing humans to usurp the gods and ascend. You were always one of our targets."

"The Destined Ones?" Qin Xin raised an eyebrow.

"...So they already told you." Cheng Shi's gaze sharpened, reminded once again of being tricked.

These two Real Universe swindlers knew far too much. So much that it felt as though they had personally lived through something.

Cheng Shi had been suspicious of their identities from the start. Now, with the conversation reaching this point, he asked Qin Xin to tell him the full story of the impostors.

Qin Xin was equally curious. So he recounted everything about that "Cheng Shi" — yes, even now, he still believed they were Cheng Shi and Hong Lin, just from a different world — lay it all out for Cheng Shi to hear.

When Cheng Shi finished listening, his brow knotted into a tight ball.

'Could they have been sent by [Fate]?'

'Otherwise, why fabricate a "lie" about [Deceit] destroying the world and [Fate] saving it?'

But the things they had said sounded too authentic. If there truly was a world where [Fate] needed to save everyone, Cheng Shi reckoned that even he couldn't have phrased it much better.

Which meant those two swindlers were extraordinarily skilled performers.

No — "performers" didn't capture it. They didn't just act. They profoundly understood him, and Hong Lin, and Qin Xin.

They were like shadows of the three people standing here — perfect, one-to-one replicas.

'Wait!'

'Shadows?!'

Cheng Shi suddenly looked down at his own shadow. A flash of insight sparked in his eyes.

"You said the Hong Lin who fought you wasn't very strong?"

Qin Xin blinked and nodded: "That's right. That was my impression."

"When was the last time you sparred with Hong Lin?"

Qin Xin glanced at Hong Lin, thinking carefully: "Quite a while ago. Back when we first met. You could say we got to know each other through fighting."

Hong Lin shot Qin Xin a sidelong look. Clearly, even then, she hadn't considered him a match for her.

Of course, she didn't know Qin Xin was the Grand Marshal, nor that he had a second form.

Qin Xin knew even less about how powerful the current, throne-ascending Hong Lin had become.

Cheng Shi thought briefly, then patted Big Cat's shoulder:

"Show him."

"?"

Big Cat flinched and instinctively scanned the perimeter: "Who's coming?"

Cheng Shi shook his head with a smile: "Nobody. Under your combined vigilance, no one would dare approach."

"I'm saying — attack Qin Xin. He needs to see your true strength. And I need to gauge the fake who was impersonating you."

Hong Lin understood. A flash of wild delight crossed her eyes.

"Right now?"

Though she was still politely confirming, she had already shifted into a giant bear and was hurtling toward Qin Xin.

The howling wind swallowed Hong Lin's words. Cheng Shi didn't even catch what she said before the two collided with a thunderous BOOM.

This wasn't a duel between two peak players. It wasn't even a mortal contest. This was a clash between two Authority Proxies!

The unstoppable Hong Lin versus the indomitable Qin Xin. Under the dual augmentation of [Prosperity] and [Fate], the giant bear could only barely budge Qin Xin an inch!

The Authority-wielding Qin Xin was terrifyingly strong. Even [Order] had fractured before [War] — let alone [Prosperity].

And Big Cat's current Authority wasn't complete. In pure combat power, she could no longer defeat the Authority-empowered Qin Xin.

Still, Qin Xin was startled. If the earlier Hong Lin had been slightly weaker than the one he first met in his own world, this Hong Lin was multiple times stronger than the earlier version.

From Qin Xin's reaction alone, Cheng Shi knew the imposter who had fought him couldn't match Big Cat's current strength. Which meant the one who had posed as Big Cat before him was likely skilled only in deception — not in combat.

'How convenient. A Cheng Shi who's my perfect double, paired with a "Hong Lin" who excels only at trickery. This combination is practically...'

A realization struck Cheng Shi like a bell. His expression turned strange as he snapped his fingers.

Neither of the other two noticed the shift. Hong Lin and Qin Xin were deep in battle. Not wanting to spoil his friend's fun, Qin Xin had held nothing back, and quickly pressed Hong Lin into a corner.

Hong Lin wasn't the least bit discouraged by her "defeat." Under [War]'s relentless pressure, she became the "indomitable" one.

She fought with uninhibited abandon — no sulking over the gap, no resentment over the reversal. This was the real Big Cat. She never fussed over petty things.

But mid-battle, both fighters sensed something wrong in their surroundings.

They disengaged simultaneously and turned toward Cheng Shi — only to find that, at some unknown point, another "Hong Lin" had appeared at his side!

Hong Lin's pupils contracted. She warned instinctively: "Watch out!"

But Cheng Shi only smiled. He pointed at the Hong Lin beside him, his expression a masterwork of mixed feelings:

"I think I've figured out who those two liars are."

"Who?!" Qin Xin and Hong Lin exclaimed in unison.

Cheng Shi rubbed his nose. His laugh was impossibly layered — part self-deprecation, part bitter amusement:

"Probably one supremely bored Clown.

Yeah. We were tricked. They weren't two people. They were one.

One Clown."

...