

## The Gods 1231

### Chapter 1231: The Clown

Cheng Shi had fallen into a cognitive trap.

He had instinctively assumed both Real Universe swindlers were performing, so it never occurred to him they might be one person.

Now he had run what could barely be called an experiment: he simply switched his main body back to [Fate] and had Shadow Cheng Shi use Chaos Acting to become Hong Lin. Just like that, a single individual had perfectly impersonated both "himself" and "Hong Lin" simultaneously — with zero flaws.

Because the Hong Lin that "Hong Lin" saw was already Cheng Shi, and Cheng Shi himself knew exactly how to play the Hong Lin that existed in his own mind...

The method was virtually airtight. Stacked on top of the Real Universe's unknowns and complexities, even Cheng Shi hadn't pieced it together immediately.

Thankfully, Qin Xin's battle had tested the imposter's depth.

A Clown impersonating a Druid managing to hold against Qin Xin for any length of time was itself remarkable. But a Clown was still a Clown — head-on combat couldn't match a Druid's level. And it was that very crack that let Cheng Shi deduce the swindlers' identity.

There was still one thing he couldn't figure out, though.

What was their purpose?

They couldn't not have known that fighting Qin Xin would inevitably leave traces and expose them. Yet they had done it anyway — had even been the aggressors.

According to Qin Xin, even when Qin Xin was ready to stop, they had pressed on relentlessly. What was the point of this near-suicidal choice?

They couldn't possibly have hoped to defeat Qin Xin in a straight fight, could they?

Before the Authority, maybe. But now, with [War]'s Authority, how could they—

'Wait!'

Cheng Shi's eyes flew wide. He confirmed with Qin Xin once more:

"Did you inherit [War]'s Authority before they refused to stop, or after they insisted on fighting?"

Qin Xin blinked, thinking carefully: "After they continued attacking. Hong Lin's assault never stopped. She even..."

Midway through the sentence, Qin Xin's expression turned awkward. He couldn't very well repeat the previous "Hong Lin's" profanity in front of this one, so he deliberately paused, leaving the pair to fill in the blanks.

Cheng Shi knew all too well what a certain type of Clown was capable of. His eyelid twitched, and he said mournfully: "...She cursed at you? Did she perhaps express the heartfelt longings of an orphan craving parental affection?"

"?"

'Could profanity really be phrased that delicately?'

Qin Xin's expression froze and the words stuck in his throat.

Seeing his reaction, Cheng Shi was now certain: those two swindlers were "himself"!

Another world's version of himself!

Hong Lin, no matter how furious, probably wouldn't say something like that. But he couldn't guarantee the same about himself. In the heat of battle, just about any profanity could come flying out.

Especially after obtaining the Eye of Mockery — Cheng Shi felt his temperament had been corrupted. Without the occasional swear, his whole body felt off.

With that, Cheng Shi also understood the other version of himself's purpose.

The Clown drifting through the Real Universe clearly hadn't come to cause trouble. He had come to help!

The other him must have known that only a battle could summon [War]'s Authority. That was why he had fabricated a plausible excuse to fight Qin Xin.

From a liar's perspective, any action that risks exposing one's identity should normally be avoided. The fact that he risked exposure to attack Qin Xin could only mean one thing: it served the purpose of finding the Authority.

Of course, that Clown might not have been acting purely out of goodwill. He had most likely been searching for his own world's [War] Authority in the same fashion, and simply happened to run into Qin Xin.

Clearly, the initial plan to fool Cheng Shi and Hong Lin had also been aimed at provoking a fight. But compared to those two, Qin Xin — a [War] follower — was far more likely to trigger resonance with [War]'s lingering will. So upon finding a better option, the other Cheng Shi abandoned the first scheme and targeted Qin Xin instead.

As for why he had left behind such a mess regarding identity verification after the fight...

Probably just a Clown's idea of fun.

After all, Clowns were "competitors" with each other. When rivals in the trade met, a little professional spite was only natural.

Cheng Shi pondered in silence, piecing together the full picture. But all of this was still speculation. To verify, he would need to find them again.

Would an exposed swindler sit around waiting to be found?

No. They would have long since disappeared.

...

On the other side.

In the vast, desolate Real Universe, the enormous corpse of the Leaking World Silent Puppet drifted slowly on.

Beneath its shadow, two figures looked upward, their expressions unreadable.

The cheerful figure stared for a long time before sighing with feeling:

"Tsk — the kid probably really did go up there. Otherwise, with that greedy streak of his, he wouldn't have left so easily.

If he could climb up, why can't we?"

The cold figure snorted, dousing the idea: "He has his Benefactor's protection. Naturally, he's safe. Do you?"

The cheerful figure pursed his lips: "As if nobody else ever had one. Does 'used to have' not count?"

"It doesn't. The past can be the present, but only if [Time] is alive.

Unfortunately, He died many years ago.

They... all died many years ago."

Those words froze the smile on the cheerful figure's face. His tone turned wistful.

"Can you not say depressing things when I'm actually motivated? You're such a buzzkill.

Look, Cheng Fate — without Them, we've been getting by just fine, haven't we?"

The cold figure — no, [Fate] Cheng Shi — shook his head, neither joy nor sorrow on his face:

"Don't twist the narrative. Their sacrifices deserve to be remembered. It's only because of Their deaths that we've managed to survive this long in our deformed state.

But this path is still a dead end. It's not the universal solution, and the universe's answer doesn't lie with us."

Then, [Fate] Cheng Shi did something rare — he smiled. Looking toward the direction the real Cheng Shi had gone, he said with warm satisfaction:

"At least we finally succeeded once. We haven't let down the task Old Cheng Shi entrusted to us."

[Deceit] Cheng Shi also looked that way, stroking his chin in thought:

"Granted, beating Old Cheng Shi's record does feel pretty satisfying. But how do you know he wasn't lying when he found us?"

What if — and I'm just saying what if — he succeeded plenty of times, and he was just tricking us into thinking he never did? Then we'd still have lost."

[Fate] Cheng Shi shot a sidelong glare: "A man on his deathbed speaks the truth."

"The saying's fine, but whether he qualifies as a 'man' is debatable. Same as us — we're not exactly 'human' either.

If I were dying, I'd at least leave behind one massive lie, make sure whoever takes over lives in perpetual paranoia.

Tsk — thinking about it like that, I really do want to die."

"..."

[Fate] Cheng Shi went quiet. Clearly, he agreed with [Deceit] Cheng Shi's point — though as to which point exactly...

After a pause, he spoke again:

"Not yet. At least not now. If we die, the Real Universe loses its guides. Hope will have no way to be passed on.

So bear it. Bear it until we find the next successor, and then we're free."

Hearing this, [Deceit] Cheng Shi spread his hands and sighed once more:

"Fine. But I'm still curious — when he figures out it was us, will he feel gratitude and surprise, or will he be gnashing his teeth in fury?

This kid's sharper than the ones before. You can tell his Benefactor raised him well.

Hey — there's no way he'd guess what we're actually doing, right?"

[Fate] Cheng Shi shook his head, his voice still cold.

"The fortunate find it hard to see others' misfortune.

This misfortune belongs to us. But to witness a few strokes of fortune from within our unfortunate existence... I suppose that, in itself, is our fortune.

Cheng Deceit — do you have any regrets?"

"Regrets about what?"

"Taking this job from Old Cheng Shi's hands."

[Deceit] Cheng Shi pursed his lips, looked into the distance, and said with casual indifference:

"Someone has to do it... The dirty work, the thankless drudgery — isn't that what poor bastards are for?

I take the bad luck for them, and maybe they won't end up as miserable as we are.

Ah, why am I talking about this? Come on. Before we die, we owe Old Cheng Shi and Old-Old Cheng Shi and Old-Old-Old Cheng Shi an accounting. Let's see when the next poor bastard shows up.

When he does, I'm going to pull the biggest con of all time!"

"..."

"You smiled!

You agree with my plan, don't you!

I knew it — your coldness is all fake.

So what do you think — will we run into the next poor bastard first, or another little flower bud?

Hmm, flower buds are better. That way we get to have fun for a while longer.

This damn Real Universe is just too big... and way too boring..."

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Chapter 1232: The Way Home? A Wrong Turn? Or Another Con?

Though the theory couldn't be verified, Cheng Shi shared his deductions anyway.

The moment Hong Lin heard that the person who had duped her was another world's Cheng Shi, her expression turned beyond bizarre. Qin Xin's did the same — though it only reinforced his belief. In every world, it seemed, every Cheng Shi was "indomitably" striving.

With Qin Xin found and [War]'s Authority secured, Cheng Shi had fulfilled this Real Universe expedition's objectives.

In hindsight, aside from the agonizing first ten days, the rest had been remarkably smooth — so smooth it carried the distinct flavor of "fixed destiny."

Yet the one who had sent him and Big Cat here was [Deceit]. How could [Fate]'s shadow be in this?

Cheng Shi couldn't make sense of it. He shoved the thought aside and addressed the other two:

"Authority secured. Now we need to think about getting back.

I'm not sure if you noticed, but none of our arrival points have a passage back to the original world. That means returning won't be as easy as arriving.

If this were a trial, given what I know about the Fun God, He might set up some prank to torment the play... ers. But this is the Real Universe — a place even the Fun God can't fully reach. He wouldn't just send us here without planning how to bring us back.

So my guess is that something changed in the Real Universe that severed our 'homeward' path, and that change is most likely tied to spacetime.

Whether it's the other-world Cheng Shi traversing freely, or the Silent Puppet that drifted in from nowhere — clearly the Real Universe operates under spacetime rules we don't understand, and those rules are probably what's 'blocking' our way home."

Qin Xin frowned and mulled it over: "So before we can return, we need to figure out these spacetime rules and find a path home within them?"

"Exactly. That's all we can do for now. Unless..."

Cheng Shi gave a self-deprecating smile and offered an unlikely possibility: "Unless the path home reappears on its own.

But regardless, the first thing we should do is return to our 'starting point.'

Qin Xin — can you still find your way back to where you arrived?"

Qin Xin nodded. Like Cheng Shi, he had prudently scattered [War] markers along his route, markers only he could trigger. No matter where he wandered, he could always trace them back to his "starting point."

The problem was that ten days of exploration had taken him very far from it.

Hong Lin was the same. Like the "Hong Lin" Cheng Shi had encountered, she had scattered [Prosperity] seeds across the Real Universe. In fact, this cautious approach had been suggested by the Cheng Shi she had met.

After a rough calculation, the three realized Cheng Shi's "starting point" was the closest. So they decided to investigate his first.

That was when Qin Xin raised another question:

"If the Hong Lin you encountered was actually another you, then the [Prosperity] seeds you left as markers... are they safe?"

Cheng Shi had been wrestling with that too.

Logically, since the other him bore no "ill will" — and had even helped Qin Xin acquire the Authority — he shouldn't have sabotaged something as critical as the route home.

But then again, the other him was a liar...

Cheng Shi sighed and opted for the cautious play.

"Let's go to the farthest starting point instead. Qin Xin, lead the way.

With the Authority boosting you, you should be able to retrieve all your [War] markers."

Qin Xin smiled, turned, and led the way. Hong Lin naturally had no objections, though something else was eating at her.

The person who had tricked her was another world's Cheng Shi. Worse, she would probably never get a chance to settle the score. So... could she punch the Cheng Shi in front of her to vent?

The looks she kept giving Cheng Shi were peculiar indeed. But Cheng Shi was completely oblivious, assuming Hong Lin was pondering the other Cheng Shi's motives.

Several times along the way, Cheng Shi felt a chill on the back of his neck. Each time, he took it for approaching danger and warned Qin Xin to watch their surroundings — never once suspecting it was Big Cat behind him, staring at his exposed nape.

Luckily, [Fate]'s mercy had rubbed off on Big Cat, teaching her forbearance. And so Cheng Shi narrowly escaped disaster.

The three traveled for several days, relearning just how vanishingly rare it was to encounter another soul in the Real Universe.

When they finally reached Qin Xin's "starting point," the desolate starry sky crushed every hope of a pleasant surprise. There was nothing here — absolutely indistinguishable from the endless starscape they had been crossing.

Cheng Shi frowned and studied the area from every angle. Big Cat and Qin Xin threw everything they had at it too. But even wielding the Authority's power, the local spacetime remained utterly calm and stable. Not a ripple, not a change.

All three were momentarily lost.

...

On the other side.

The two figures drifting through the Real Universe suddenly sensed something. They stopped and turned toward the direction of Cheng Shi's group.

[Deceit] Cheng Shi curled his lip, grinning:

"The spacetime storm's coming. Wonder where they'll be when they receive the Real Universe's warm greeting."

[Fate] Cheng Shi, for once, showed a glimmer of interest. He barely suppressed the upturn of his lips and said coolly:

"Care to bet?"

[Deceit] Cheng Shi's eyes lit up. He nodded vigorously: "Given how sharp the kid is, they definitely won't go to the starting point I marked with [Prosperity] seeds. So I'm betting they'll go to the one Big Cat marked herself."

[Fate] Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow: "Why not Qin Xin's?"

[Deceit] Cheng Shi laughed: "Compared to Qin Xin, I trust Big Cat more. He is me, so I'm betting on Big Cat."

[Fate] Cheng Shi nodded: "You're sure you swapped all the markers? Both Qin Xin's and Big Cat's?"

"Of course. When I do a job, you can rest easy."

All that awaits them is a spacetime storm. As for the homeward path...

Tsk, they'll have to wait for their guardian to come pick them up. This dirty work's fee should be settled face to face, don't you think?"

A brief silence fell. Then [Deceit] Cheng Shi pressed:

"You still haven't placed your bet. Who are you backing?"

[Fate] Cheng Shi snorted: "I don't bet. If I don't bet, I can't lose."

"???"

[Deceit] Cheng Shi eyed him with disdain: "But you can't win either."

"I can afford not to win. But right now, I absolutely cannot lose."

"...You know, you are so boring. Why do you always have to make everything profound?"

...

Back to Cheng Shi's group.

Just as the three sat around the starting point trying to puzzle out the Real Universe's spacetime rules, the sky above them suddenly went dark.

All three jolted in alarm. They scattered instantly, and only after gaining some distance did they look up — to find that, at some unknowable moment, countless chaotic, agitated orbs of pitch-black light had appeared high overhead, pulsing in erratic patterns.

At first, the black spheres were only fist-sized, like light-devouring black holes warping every ray around them. But in the blink of an eye, the three found themselves swallowed by darkness. Not a trace of light remained.

Time collapsed. Space twisted. Consciousness dissolved. Bodies fragmented.

The silent spacetime storm arrived, swallowing the three who had no time even for fear.

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Chapter 1233: Inside the Storm

The spacetime storm was a phenomenon unique to the Real Universe.

Despite being called a "storm," it was actually quieter than a real-world gale. Because it involved the distortion of spacetime, it resembled a storm only on the spacetime dimension — hence the name.

Cheng Deceit and Cheng Fate hadn't coined the term. They had learned everything from Old Cheng Shi. As for who the original namer was — perhaps not even Old-Old-Old-Old-Old Cheng Shi would know.

Perhaps the spacetime storm had drifted through the starry sky in solitude for countless eons before the first "jailbreaker" ever set foot in the Real Universe. It only gained a name when it first bloomed before a jailbreaker's eyes.

At fixed intervals, at certain spacetime-fluctuation nodes, the storms formed with mechanical regularity.

Storms were supposed to be synonyms for chaos and destruction, yet in the Real Universe they were strangely "obedient." Their intervals were stable. The locations of their fluctuation nodes were relatively fixed. Even the duration from inception to conclusion was consistent. The only unpredictable element was the person caught inside — no one knew where the storm would carry them.

But regardless of destination, the storm was never lethal. It just ensured that every survivor was left with a bone-deep understanding of their own insignificance — and of what they called "fate."

Cheng Deceit and Cheng Fate had been through one. Since then, they had sworn never to endure a second.

In their words:

'The lucky stay lucky. The unlucky stay unlucky. The ones who should "suffer" aren't us — it should be those greenhouse flower buds.'

So they had calculated meticulously, laid the trap with care, and personally shepherded Cheng Shi's trio right into it.

After being swept up by the storm, Cheng Shi's consciousness went through four stages: collapse, reconstitution, haze, and clarity. When he realized the Real Universe's terrifying accident hadn't annihilated him outright, the joy of survival and the chill of retrospective terror hit simultaneously, leaving his mind blank for a long stretch.

He couldn't tell whether those chaotic black spheres were the culprit behind the vanishing homeward path, nor whether this disaster was pure accident or deliberate sabotage.

The same old refrain: the Real Universe was simply too complex. Too complex to judge — using the original world's experience — whether this was a conspiracy or a random catastrophe.

Regardless, Cheng Shi knew he had to get out. His vision was still pitch-black. The boundless darkness was more terrifying than the Void.

At least the Void's blackness was stable and didn't spread. But the darkness here was like a virus, relentlessly corroding his field of vision — churning, shifting, warping, advancing as if to consume him entirely.

Hong Lin and Qin Xin had disappeared again. After a long search, Cheng Shi found no other living being in this dark space.

He tried using Elusive Chip to hop to the past or future, but that failed too. Spacetime here seemed self-enclosed. He could swap positions freely within the darkness, but couldn't break through it or reach whatever lay beyond.

As a last resort, Cheng Shi pulled out the [Corruption] Container to drain his fear, forcing himself to calm down. He began scanning his surroundings, seeking a way out of the endless dark.

Perhaps [Fate] was watching. Perhaps the storm simply wasn't as dangerous as imagined. After observing for a while, he actually found a single wisp of white light amid the churning blackness.

An ordinary person's survival instinct would drive them toward that light immediately. But Cheng Shi was no ordinary person. With his steadiness amplified to its peak by the [Corruption] Container, he pretended not to see the light. He continued probing the darkness until he had circled the entire area,

confirming there was no second light source. Only then did he accept that the white glow was this crisis's sole "guide."

A choice had to be made.

Cheng Shi stood still, looking down toward his invisible shadow:

"Who'd have thought — right when Fate Has Divergence is on cooldown, fate's divergence actually arrives..."

This time, [Time] might not be able to save us. All we can do is trust [Fate]."

He held a die, establishing an anchor for Shadow Cheng Shi.

Shadow Cheng Shi separated instantly, becoming a streak of darkness that glided toward the white light. An instant later, it slipped into the glow without resistance — and then went silent!

Cheng Shi panicked. This was the first time he had ever lost contact with his shadow.

Even on [Silence]'s corpse, he had at least felt Shadow Cheng Shi's consciousness gradually stiffening. But now he had completely lost all perception of the shadow. His expression turned gravely dark.

Instinct screamed that he shouldn't stay. Yet the shadow's loss made him dread leaping into what might be a white-light trap. Caught between fight and flight, Cheng Shi faced the greatest crisis since the gods' descent.

Right now, he had no Benefactor's protection. No experience to draw on. Facing the unknown fork ahead, Cheng Shi gritted his teeth and...

...kept gritting his teeth for a while.

By the steadfast school of thought: so long as this spot was safe and the final deadline hadn't arrived, there was no reason to rush into unknown risks. His only means of testing had been lost. All Cheng Shi could do now was wait.

Wait for the storm to dissolve. Wait for fate to shift. Wait for the crisis to leave on its own. Wait for a lifeline to stumble into view. He had no other cards to play.

Of course, it wasn't pure idle waiting.

During the agonizing wait, he tried tossing everything that could prove his identity into the white light. Nothing responded.

He even threw in his mask and his dice, hoping the other side was a space his two Benefactors could sense — so They would know he was in jeopardy.

None of it worked.

In that moment, Cheng Shi suddenly understood Skart's despair. In a darkness where no cry for help was answered, the only thing he had left seemed to be... his body.

Cheng Shi fell silent. The Fool's Lips hadn't spoken in ages. Brother Tongue, Brother Eye, Brother Ear — all silent. The only option seemed to be throwing one of his Eyes in, relying on the link between the pair to see what lay on the other side of the white light.

He held no hope — after all, even his shadow had been lost in there. But he couldn't sit waiting for death, either. So he plucked out an eye and tossed the silent Eye of Mockery into the light.

The next second... nothing happened.

The Eye of Mockery remained silent. Cheng Shi resigned himself to fate.

He was certain this storm would end eventually. He just wasn't sure whether his mortal lifespan was long enough to outlast a cosmic-scale accident.

Thinking this, he couldn't help wondering: if it were Big Cat and Qin Xin, would they have found a way out?

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Chapter 1234: A Predicament? Whose Predicament?!

Nothing.

Not a single way out.

The instant darkness flooded in, Hong Lin felt as though she had been thrown back to ten days ago — the very moment she first set foot in the Real Universe.

The resemblance was uncanny. Aside from the absence of starlight and the impossibility of seeing into the distance, the state of being utterly alone and without anchor was virtually identical.

The only difference was that now, having experienced the Real Universe's horrors firsthand, her fear was far more acute.

In the original world, her strength had been enough to shatter any terror beneath the gods. But now the gods themselves had been relegated to "beneath Origin," and she had hit a wall.

Thankfully, the mental fortitude honed across countless trials still held. After fumbling through the darkness for a long time, she too discovered the wisp of white light.

Faced with the only anomaly in the black, Big Cat's choice was the polar opposite of Cheng Shi's.

She knew "unusual" meant higher risk. But she was certain there was no trace of her friends in this darkness. That wisp of light was her sole chance to find them.

She had promised Cheng Shi she would bring him back alive. She couldn't simply stand still and wait the storm out.

She was more pessimistic than Cheng Shi. Even with Authority extending her lifespan indefinitely — enough, in theory, to outlast any accident — she wondered: what if this Real Universe incident lasted longer than their original world's "lifespan"?

When faith lost its soil and the world marched toward destruction, would she still have Authority to weather a dark storm?

No!

So finding her companions had to happen now!

Hong Lin stepped before the white light, activated every ounce of Authority, and in her most "invincible" state, charged straight in.

Endless white consumed the darkness in reverse, magnifying across her vision. She felt no approaching danger — yet she sensed her body slowly twisting into abstraction.

Flesh vanished, but she wasn't dead.

The sensation was like a dream — dreaming of becoming air, drifting through a room both strange and familiar, able to survey the scene below yet having no idea what she was doing.

But the white was boundless, with no walls in sight. Why did it feel like a room?

Battered by one shock after another, Hong Lin couldn't place why this "room" looked so familiar. Not until she saw an even more familiar figure, emerging faintly beyond the room's threshold...

In that moment, Hong Lin's mind — BOOM — exploded.

Because the figure coming into focus inside the "room" was none other than herself — the version of herself who had lived in a tank, tubes protruding from every limb!!!

Herself from over half a year ago, appearing before her present self in this impossible way!

In that instant, Hong Lin finally remembered what this place was:

The Path Starting Point!

This was unmistakably the day the gods descended. The very opening of the Faith Game!

And now, that ignorant, dying Hong Lin was about to step into this "room" and choose her faith!

Hong Lin was stupefied. Her first impulse wasn't to tell her past self which path to take. She only wanted to find a way out. She feared this was a dying vision — the final flicker of memory before life ends.

She hadn't found Cheng Shi yet. Hadn't brought him back. Hadn't even managed to say goodbye to the little fox. She didn't want to die here. Much less die without understanding why.

The gods hadn't been defeated. The Faith Game wasn't over. The Destined Ones hadn't yet reached their final curtain. How could she stop halfway through the world's script?!

Hong Lin panicked. She thrashed outward in every direction, but it was futile. This white "room" was both her past self's starting point and, it seemed, her present self's terminus. It held her fast with nowhere to run.

When a person is utterly terrified and utterly helpless, they often veer to extremes — from one end to the other. But Hong Lin didn't. Perhaps from spending so much time with Cheng Shi, this player who had always been synonymous with unmatched combat finally, in this moment, grew the mightiest of all... cat-brains.

In the depths of her terror, she finally noticed that this white "room" was slightly different from the one in her memory. Before her past self entered the room, only two faith tokens floated within!

[Decay]'s dagger, and [Fate]'s die!

When she spotted this, Hong Lin froze.

'Why only two?'

'At my Path Starting Point, there were clearly three tokens to choose from. Where did [Prosperity]'s green branch go?'

That single discrepancy told Hong Lin this was absolutely not a dying flashback. This was a new Faith Game!

This was most likely another world, another god descent. After all, the storm had originated in the Real Universe — the place closest to Him, where all possibilities could erupt. If she'd been hurled by this dark storm into a brand-new world, Hong Lin didn't find it the least bit strange.

But why was this world's version of her missing one token?!

As everyone knew, what tokens appeared at the Path Starting Point depended on which divine will resonated most deeply with the first half of your life.

Put simply: before the game descended, your life's imprint already carried a certain god's will. That god would then grant you Their gaze at the Starting Point.

Hong Lin reflected on her own history. Though "decay" had dominated the vast majority of her life and "fate" had toyed with her repeatedly, her fierce will to survive should have earned her [Prosperity]'s recognition.

Yet now it seemed... had this world's version of her lost the survival instinct entirely?

No. That wasn't right.

Hong Lin looked down again. She saw her past self crawling agonizingly toward the "room." That Hong Lin was on death's doorstep. At this moment, the game's descent was the only lifeline that could save her. She just had to endure until she entered the Starting Point, chose a token, and through [Prosperity]'s blessing, she could survive the game — become a Chosen One, protect her friends, meet Cheng Shi, join the Destined Ones...

And she clearly hadn't given up. She was struggling. She was crawling forward!

But where had [Prosperity]'s token go?!

Watching the version of herself grow closer and closer to the "room," Hong Lin felt an inexplicable surge of anxiety. Even knowing this world's her wasn't truly herself — just another individual surviving inside Origin's experiment — when you actually saw your former self, no human being could remain unmoved. Least of all someone like Hong Lin.

And so the moment of reckless impulse arrived.

Hong Lin could not accept watching another version of herself — one who had struggled through over thirty real years — be forced to chose [Decay] and keep rotting, or chose [Fate] and leave survival to chance.

She knew [Prosperity] was the best fit for herself. And the best fit for her friends. So in this Path Starting Point, floating like air, Hong Lin's blood ran hot and she made the craziest decision of her life.

She used her own Authority to forge a [Prosperity] green branch for the Hong Lin below — the one who hadn't yet opened the Starting Point's door!

Yes — she cheated!

Cheated for another world's version of herself.

She hadn't even imagined this absurd act could actually work. She couldn't escape this place, but the power of faith concentrated here successfully caught her "gift" — at minimum, it produced a branch visible enough to be seen!

And when she mustered every last drop of strength to place that green branch beside [Decay]'s dagger just before the Hong Lin below stepped into the "room"...

BOOM—

Hong Lin's mind exploded a second time.

Because she remembered: the branch she had grasped back then was exactly this shape, exactly this position, exactly this angle. Even its placement relative to the dagger and the die was identical.

Of course, Hong Lin was certain all of this was colored by her own memories. But when coincidences pile up past a certain threshold, even the densest person should realize something.

She suddenly understood: she had been wrong all along. Her first half of life, spent lying in that tank, had contained no [Prosperity] whatsoever. The "Prosperity" in her hands had most likely been brought by a Hong Lin from another world!

Exactly as she herself was doing right now — exactly the same!

The moment Hong Lin's brain blue-screened, the Hong Lin below finally crawled into the Path Starting Point. Upon seeing the green branch that could restore her, she didn't even glance at the other two tokens.

She seized the "Prosperity" bestowed by the divine.

And in that instant, the [Prosperity] native to this world felt for the very first time that "Prosperity" from beyond the world. A true will of "Universal Prosperity" germinated.

He opened His eyes and cast His gaze down upon the Hong Lin in the Starting Point.

And so, a Druid was born by divine decree.

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Chapter 1235: Passing the Flame? Passing the Flame!

Qin Xin was experiencing something similar.

After being swallowed by the darkness, he leapt into the white light without a moment's hesitation — for the sake of the light in his heart and in the future.

With [War]'s Authority wrapped around him, his concerns were far fewer than Cheng Shi's or Hong Lin's. As he saw it, the only things that could kill him in the Real Universe now were the unmentionable Creator and gods from other worlds.

If this was the Creator's handiwork, jumping or not made no difference. If it wasn't the Creator's "trap," then whatever lay behind it, Qin Xin was confident he could put up a fight — at the very least, he wouldn't die looking pathetic.

If he had to die, the only death he could accept was dying on the road of passing the flame — not rotting inside a "cabinet."

So his leap was decisive.

He had expected a battlefield on the other side. When he regained consciousness, what awaited him was indeed a battlefield that belonged to Qin Xin.

What he never imagined was that this battlefield didn't belong to him. And this Qin Xin... wasn't him!

He had seemingly become a cloud in the sky. Beneath that cloud, a gaunt player stood atop a mountain of corpses, his skeletal arm dragging bloodied fingers across a worn-out longbow, loosing arrow after arrow, pinning the last few war machines to the base of the corpse pile.

All his teammates were dead. Only he remained. Fortunately, the enemy had been whittled down to almost nothing as well — otherwise, he wouldn't have lasted even this long.

This was the twilight of the Civilization Era. The Tower of Logic's internal chaos had already begun to fester and spread unchecked. The Underworld's counterattack loomed imminent. The scholars of the Southern City Alliance, unwilling to accept the rogue scholars' devastation of southern lands and their betrayal of faith to establish the Kingdom of [War], had seized the moment of the Erudition Presidium's waning control to muster their forces for a retaliatory offensive against the Kingdom.

They sought to reclaim resources once theirs from this war-torn, turbulent nation — and to divert the Underworld's chaos toward land that didn't belong to the Tower of Logic.

The battlefield below was the Kingdom of [War]'s southeastern flank — a defensive engagement.

This battle, Qin Xin remembered vividly.

Players had arrived on the battlefield as inspection officers dispatched from Volbelli, tasked with reinforcing the southeast. But no one had anticipated that the commanding officer had long been infiltrated and replaced by [Chaos] followers.

Halfway through the battle, the elite guard defected outright, leading the central army in a reverse charge that shattered the entire defensive line — then surged toward distant Volbelli.

The Afterglow Church was leveraging the chaos to strike directly at the Kingdom of [War]'s capital!

History had told the players that the Church ultimately failed. What history hadn't told them was just how catastrophically the southeastern line had collapsed.

With the center betrayed, the left flank routed, and the right flank annihilated, six players became the last living souls on the front line.

What followed was predictably brutal.

Against an ocean of enemies, six players fought in terror.

Had the Southern Alliance army not been entirely drawn away by the Afterglow Church's thrust toward Volbelli, following them in pursuit, not a single player would have survived this trial.

The Qin Xin who endured to the very end collapsed face-up atop the corpse mountain, more dead than alive. He was utterly spent. Two days and two nights without rest had pushed him far past his body's limits. The only thing keeping him alive at this point was willpower.

But it wasn't the will to survive. It was the will toward a different kind of rebirth!

He had come to this trial for a heavy armor — the heavy armor of [War]'s war beast.

In the Kingdom of [War]'s archives, he had found descriptions of that armor. It wasn't just a suit with extraordinary defense — it was a vessel for the soul. It could house a broken soul and allow it to rejoin the battlefield in a renewed form.

This was the rogue scholars' latest research into [War]'s power. Unfortunately, the research never reached completion before the Tower of Logic came crashing down on them.

The frail Qin Xin wanted it desperately. He knew a fire burned in his heart. He wanted to pass that fire on. But his body couldn't carry him that far. So he had thought of this workaround.

As a Dream Peeping Ranger with considerable expertise in the Dream Realm, Qin Xin intended to craft a grand dream of his own. And this heavy armor would serve as the foundation of that dream.

After catching his breath atop the corpse mountain, Qin Xin leaned on his longbow and began searching through the blood-soaked chanel for what he needed.

The trial had left him precious little time — only half a day. Yet by the time sunset fell and the trial neared its end, he still had not found the heavy armor anywhere on the battlefield.

In that moment, as the last glimmer of daylight bled away beneath the crimson horizon, he crumpled to the ground. The fire in his eyes was dying too.

And the Qin Xin watching from above was stricken with shock.

At first, he had assumed this was his own memory. But the more he watched, the clearer it became that it wasn't — because in his memory, the heavy armor should have appeared right where the frail Qin Xin now lay. Yet the battlefield's Qin Xin still hadn't found it.

Why?

Had this world's Qin Xin failed? Had he lost the possibility of passing the flame from the very beginning?!

No — that couldn't be!

Watching a spark about to die with no power to save it — this was every Torchbearer's deepest, most devastating fear.

Perhaps even when facing the gods, learning of Origin, or stepping into the Real Universe, Qin Xin had never felt terror as acute as this!

He saw himself — helpless, past, future. He knew that if he did nothing, the fire in his heart would never be passed on.

Since it was all about passing the flame — since it was all about passing on hope — why limit it to a single world?

Before, he had trudged forward enduring hardship, swallowing bitterness, bearing the weight in silence to protect what everyone held dear. All because mortals compared to gods were as earth to sky — the slightest breeze might snuff out that fragile candle.

But now, with [War]'s full Authority upon him, he had the power to hold up the sky for the Torchbearers. And if he still had strength left over, shouldn't he also add a piece of kindling to the flickering flames of other worlds?

'What makes kindling?'

'Born to be kindling!'

So Qin Xin moved. He ignited every ounce of Authority, resonating with the battlefield's [War] power below. Though his body was but a cloud, he wielded divine force like a great hand, removing the heavy armor from his own form and placing it gently beside the frail Qin Xin.

This armor was his soul's anchor — the root of his existence. Losing it could very well turn him to ash...

But!

The frail Qin Xin of the original world had found him another soul vessel before dying. The Startled Bow could also nurture a soul — enough to sustain him and serve as the armor's replacement.

So rather than saying the armored Qin Xin had passed hope to another world's frail counterpart, it was more accurate to say the frail Qin Xin had given another world's version of himself a "new life."

On the battlefield, the frail Qin Xin drifted into unconsciousness. The trial's concluding light transported him and the heavy armor beside him away together. As hope sailed toward the distance, the cloud in the sky quietly dispersed into the night.

This world's beauty need never fear the eternal night again — for the flame called hope was about to kindle in the darkness.

...

## Chapter 1236: The Choice

While Hong Lin was bestowing prosperity upon herself, and while Qin Xin was passing the flame to Qin Xin — what was Cheng Shi doing?

He was sleeping.

The Clown had laid flat.

Seeing that the white light was impassable and the darkness posed no danger, he simply closed his eyes and enjoyed a good rest in the endless dark.

Cheng Shi never dreamed. But perhaps the Real Universe had affected him, stripping his self-hypnosis of its effect. Today, he had a grand dream.

He dreamed he had already leapt into the white light — and met someone. No, not someone — a mouth...

Perspective shift: Shadow Cheng Shi.

When the dark silhouette melted into the white light, Shadow Cheng Shi had genuinely believed his main body was dead — because he could no longer sense it.

Of course, "main body" was merely a label distinguishing the original from the shadow. It implied no hierarchy. In his own consciousness, he was Cheng Shi — the one and only Cheng Shi. It was just that this time, excessive caution had cost him his physical body and half his faith within the dark storm.

The [Deceit] faith was gone. He was now a pure [Fate] follower.

Though no expression could be read on his pitch-black face, there was no denying: right now, Cheng Shi's expression was extraordinarily grim.

He was facing the greatest crisis of his life.

He had been "abandoned" by the Fun God...

Or rather — through his extremely cautious choice, he had voluntarily shed [Deceit] from himself.

This was undeniably fatal. A pure [Fate] adherent seemed only capable of marching toward fixed destiny.

Thoughts raced through his mind. The situation before him was no more optimistic.

He had no idea where he was. Beyond the white light lay another starry sky — one that felt both familiar and foreign.

This sky wasn't as desolate as the Real Universe. At the very least, the stars still twinkled — and they were growing brighter.

From that alone, Cheng Shi could determine that the black storm had hurled him into a slice universe.

He just didn't know whether this slice universe was his own world. So he began cautiously probing through the starry expanse.

Soon he saw countless streamers falling from the zenith, transforming into hazy white silhouettes that enveloped the universe.

Cheng Shi was profoundly tense. At first, he thought these were weapons deployed by this sky's inhabitants to capture him. But he quickly realized the white silhouettes weren't "weapons" at all — they were "starting points"!

Path Starting Points!

Cheng Shi's eyes went wide in disbelief:

"I've actually arrived at the beginning of another world?!"

After experiencing so much "fixed destiny," Cheng Shi's understanding of [Fate] had long diverged from everyone else's.

His gaze dropped to the mask and die in his hands. His expression turned infinitely complex.

'Has losing the [Deceit] faith turned me into a cast-off piece — one that can only fulfill its purpose by "passing on hope"?''

'Otherwise, why would a "failed" Clown be dropped at another world's starting point?'

'My Benefactor — whichever Benefactor You are — do You... want me to place this mask and die before the eyes of the Clown who hasn't yet entered his Starting Point?'

'So my die and mask were always "relics" left behind by a failed version of myself?'

For a long moment, Cheng Shi was silent.

He still couldn't understand how the reasonably smooth Real Universe journey had suddenly turned into this. He couldn't help but suspect the Fun God's — no, [Deceit]'s — purpose in shoving him into the Real Universe.

'Was it really to disrupt [Fate]'s fixed destiny in this way?'

'Then what about this scene before me?'

'Did [Fate], in order to preserve the fixed path, give me this chance?'

'But how could He possibly influence the Real Universe's dark storm?'

'The [Fate] of his world might not even be aware the Real Universe existed. How could He extend His hand beyond the universe to influence fate within the Real Universe?!'

'But if it wasn't Him... who else could it be?'

'The only entity capable of orchestrating all this in the Real Universe seemed to be that lofty Creator. No — that was too absurd. What would the cold-hearted Creator have to do with any of this...'

Cheng Shi forcibly cut off his spiraling thoughts. He looked down at the countless white silhouettes below. Among them, one was radiating a familiar and fatal pull toward him.

In the end, he couldn't resist curiosity. He drifted silently downward. The instant he touched the white silhouette, his dark body was assimilated. Like Hong Lin before him, he became the "ceiling" of this "room."

Cheng Shi was certain this was the same Path Starting Point he had once experienced. But strangely, there were no faith tokens inside this room.

Not a single one.

He looked again at the mask and die in his hands. The sensation of "fate" urging him forward grew stronger.

But at the same time, he thought: 'If I don't place these tokens at the Starting Point, does that mean this world's Cheng Shi won't have to bear such crushing pressure? Won't become part of the so-called fixed destiny?'

Cheng Shi hesitated. Never before had he been so deeply torn.

Was it better to be a Prisoner — shackled, stumbling forward, never seeing daylight? Or should he keep shouldering the gods' heavy gaze and remain the Clown — shackled and dancing on stage to entertain the audience?

The choice wasn't about right or wrong. It was about Cheng Shi's state of heart.

As figures gathered beyond the room and a blurred silhouette drew closer, a flash of resolve crossed Cheng Shi's eyes. He decided to...

...do nothing.

He hadn't chosen the former. He had simply recognized that the person outside wasn't truly himself.

That person was a brand-new, untainted, bewildered Cheng Shi — not a downtrodden, half-faithful, suffocating Cheng Shi.

This new Cheng Shi shouldn't carry his past. He had no right to become someone else's vessel of hope.

He hadn't yet experienced [Deceit]'s deceptions, [Fate]'s fixed destiny, or Origin's terror. The direction of his path was still in "flux."

A Cheng Shi like that should walk his own road.

As an "outsider," he could follow the example of other Cheng Shis and offer help. But the one thing he must never do was make the choice for him.

Because Cheng Shi was Cheng Shi. He was no one else's vessel of hope.

Except for Old Jia.

Thinking of Old Jia, Cheng Shi finally smiled.

Only — the smile carried a bitterness that perhaps no one but he would ever know.

He hid inside the room, watching as the Cheng Shi outside pushed the door open. And in the very instant that the door to faith was about to swing wide, two streaks of light fell from above.

[Void]'s tokens had arrived. Nothing had changed.

Cheng Shi looked at the tokens beneath his feet and suddenly wondered: would he meet another Brother Mouth here?

At the thought, a pang of sorrow flickered through him.

The Fool's Lips here would be brand new. The old, well-worn Fool's Lips that belonged to him had vanished alongside his body in the dark storm...

Cheng Shi's expression turned unreadable as he pulled out his last remaining Eye of Mockery. And at that very moment, another streak of light sliced through the air and plunged straight onto the mask.

Almost immediately, a puzzled voice sounded from the mask:

"Hm?"

"That's weird. I could've sworn I sensed that stinky eyeball around here somewhere. Where'd it go?"

It was Brother Mouth!

It had been drawn here by the aura of the Eye of Mockery in Cheng Shi's hand?!

Cheng Shi was stunned. He never imagined that his casual action had already influenced this world's "flux." And it was precisely as the Fool's Lips' voice fell that the Cheng Shi outside pushed the door and stepped in.

Another player was about to receive the baptism of faith. But this player was clearly different from the rest.

He stood before the two tokens, agonizing for a long time, before finally asking the exact same question Cheng Shi had once asked:

"What should I choose?"

The Fool's Lips, having arrived here by "accident," naturally wouldn't pick a host with "no mind of his own." So, with mischief in its heart, it spoke up in its mysteriously conspiratorial tone:

"Choose the Die of Fate."

The player very "obediently" chose the Die of Fate.

The Fool's Lips curled into a sneer on its mask, seemingly full of contempt for the player's "naiveté."

But very quickly, that sneer froze in place — because the player, in the same instant he picked up the Die of Fate, reached out his other hand toward the Lips itself.

In that moment, the Cheng Shi who had hidden inside the room and done nothing at all finally let a smile break across his face.

'To hell with fixed destiny. That was his own choice.'

'And it was my own choice too.'

...

## Chapter 1237: Reunion

When Cheng Shi's main body woke from its dream, the surrounding darkness was already fading.

Memories flooded back in a torrential rush, leaving him dizzy. When his awareness returned, he realized that hadn't been a dream at all — it was Shadow Cheng Shi's experience after separating. Now that the shadow had returned, those memories had naturally been written into his mind.

Yes — the shadow was back.

The wisp of white light was gradually expanding, spitting out everything Cheng Shi had thrown in.

Cheng Shi stood rooted to the spot, mechanically catching the items he had already discarded once. When the Eye was ejected, he snatched it up, pressed it back into his socket, and asked himself quietly:

"I always thought meeting you at the Path Starting Point was the Fun God's arrangement...

Turns out you came because you sensed Brother Eye's presence, Brother Mouth?"

The Fool's Lips gave no reply. In the Real Universe, they had never uttered a single word.

Cheng Shi fell silent once more.

Viewed from any angle, it seemed like a string of accidents. But when the same kind of accident followed by the same kind of accident, on and on without end — could it still be called "accidental"?

Their infinite extension, their infinite convergence — wasn't that what people called "fixed destiny"?

But how could fixed destiny's influence penetrate the universe and take effect even in the Real Universe?

Could it truly be as he suspected — that fixed destiny was nothing more than the experimental protocol written by the Creator for His experiment?

Cheng Shi's heart clenched. He dared not think any further.

His current situation didn't allow for deeper reflection, either. Since the white light had begun expanding and taking shape, Cheng Shi had guessed it was a storm opposite to the dark one — a white storm.

He couldn't be sure what lay behind the relentlessly spreading whiteness, or whether it was still that same world he'd just seen. All he could do was retreat — endlessly retreat.

Fortunately, the white light expanded slowly, and the darkness behind him was still infinite. Cheng Shi pulled back with total focus, cautiously observing every change in his surroundings, terrified that another surprise would leap out and drag him through yet another body-and-soul-crushing ordeal.

But as he retreated, he froze.

His eyes went wide with shock — not because he'd stepped into a trap, but because a bridge had suddenly appeared before him. A long bridge of black and white, reality and illusion, twisted and entwined!

If it had been just a bridge, no matter how bizarre, it wouldn't have shaken him this badly. But all around, above and below the bridge, he could see countless enormous silhouettes weaving through the space!

These silhouettes were staggeringly massive — nearly as large as the Leaking World Silent Puppet they had encountered earlier. And the most critical thing was that Cheng Shi recognized what they were!

Void-Whiskered Swallowing Dolphins!!

The great beasts that devoured [Existence] for [Void]'s sake had appeared in the Real Universe!

And from the looks of it, the white light's expansion was the trail left by their rampant swimming!

These creatures — which all players had identified as beings of [Void] — were here in the Real Universe devouring darkness and exhaling light!

But wasn't [Void] supposed to be darkness? Wasn't [Existence] supposed to be light?

Why were the Void-Whiskered Swallowing Dolphins of the Real Universe the exact opposite of their slice-universe counterparts?

Everything before him was too staggering. Cheng Shi couldn't process a response.

Instinct told him he should step onto that bridge and seek a new path forward. But his caution dragged at his feet, holding him back.

As the white light spread further and the dolphins swimming across the sky drew closer, Cheng Shi had no choice. He accepted that "light was about to consume the darkness completely," gritted his teeth, and stepped onto the bridge.

The instant he set foot on it, he knew he had been wrong.

It wasn't a bridge at all. It was a twisted, tangled spacetime tunnel!

The moment he entered, countless versions of himself hurtled past. Each behaved exactly as he did — looking around, marveling — but at most they could exchange a single glance. Some didn't even manage that before their forms warped into streams of light and dissolved into the bridge.

On this surreal bridge, the only thing Cheng Shi could clearly see was himself.

He couldn't see the bridge's end. Looking back, he'd lost sight of the darkness below. This place was like an infinitely extending corridor — once you stepped inside, the exit vanished.

Cheng Shi pressed forward with furrowed brow and careful steps. After only a few, he received the first piece of good news since the dark storm had erupted.

Big Cat appeared!

Unlike Cheng Shi's cautious creeping, Hong Lin was sprinting full tilt across the bridge.

She was shouting Cheng Shi's and Qin Xin's names. Before long, she spotted Cheng Shi's silhouette ahead of her.

Joy flashed first — then she froze. She stared at the figure before her, claws extended, and asked in a low voice:

"Which world's Cheng Shi are you?"

Faced with such a blunt question, some of the tension in Cheng Shi's chest finally eased. He was about to answer when heavy, sprinting footsteps sounded behind him.

He didn't dare turn around, fearing a baiting tactic. So he sent Shadow Cheng Shi to look in his stead. The sound belonged not to any enemy but to Qin Xin — the very same companion they'd been separated from!

Only now, Qin Xin wore no heavy armor, revealing — for the first time — the powerful physique beneath it.

He was genuinely formidable. So formidable, in fact, that his body was almost too perfect. His muscles were like armor made of flesh and blood — so full and defined that even a peak warrior would feel inadequate by comparison.

Hong Lin noticed the change immediately. Her pupils contracted, and she growled again:

"And where did this Qin Xin come from?"

Seeing her certainty, Qin Xin momentarily doubted their identities as well. Thankfully, Cheng Shi immediately spoke up and broke the stalemate of suspicion. He said only two words:

"Authority!"

Both of them understood at once. They instantly used the Authority-sharing method to confirm all three identities — they were the same unlucky trio from the same world!

The joy of reunion sent Big Cat lunging forward. She slapped a paw onto Cheng Shi's shoulder, her mouth working silently. She clearly had a thousand things to say, but the words jammed in her throat.

She didn't know whether her actions had changed anything in that other world. After agonizing over it for a long time, she could only manage one question:

"Everything we just went through — was it fate? Or... a trajectory someone already arranged?"

As she spoke, she raised her eyes toward that distant direction. It was obvious: the only being capable of arranging trajectories for all of existence was the lofty, omnipotent Creator.

Qin Xin's expression turned complicated. He said nothing.

Cheng Shi didn't know what to say either. Answering "yes" would be too demoralizing. After all, all three of them wanted to defy "fate." If fate couldn't be defied, what meaning did their perseverance hold?

Yet he couldn't bring himself to say "no." Everything they'd just experienced had shown them that even in the Real Universe, fate left its tracks. Self-deception could only provide fleeting comfort.

Cheng Shi thought for a long time. Only after Big Cat finally lowered her paw did he rub his stiff cheeks and squeeze out a brilliant smile:

"I never believe in fate.

And we don't need to chase after meaning.

We only need to know that we are remembering the people we want to remember, protecting the friends we want to protect, and holding onto the beauty we want to hold onto. That's enough.

We're writing our own story. All we need is our own conviction — emotional coherence with ourselves. Whether the force behind all of this is so-called 'fate' or some bullshit experimental protocol — it doesn't matter.

What matters is that we believe our choices are right.

[Fate]'s fixed destiny will be broken.

[Deceit]'s schemes will come to nothing.

Even the Creator's experiment will fail...

As long as you and I never give up."

...

Chapter 1238: Silhouettes on the Spacetime Dolphin Bridge

Rousing words always rekindled fighting spirit.

Qin Xin had always been resolute and was barely shaken to begin with. Big Cat, on the other hand, had been deeply affected by "fate." Having just witnessed a "transmission of destiny" with her own eyes, her emotions were complicated.

Fortunately, her self-recovery was equally powerful. Before long, she had climbed out of her haze. Looking at the blurry silhouettes streaming across and beneath the bridge, she asked with curiosity:

"Why are there Void-Whiskered Swallowing Dolphins in the Real Universe?"

Neither of her companions could answer that. Qin Xin thought for a moment and offered his theory:

"During that dark storm, the spacetime barriers between different worlds seem to have developed 'breaches,' which is why we were flung into other worlds.

But we were ejected back fairly quickly. That means either the spacetime barriers have a self-repair mechanism, or there's something in the Real Universe — some rule — that patches the breaches caused by the dark storm.

I lean toward the latter, because our world has its own 'spacetime travelers.'

They were never 'returned' to their original world. That tells us the barriers' self-repair doesn't affect individual lives — at least it doesn't expel them. So the Void-Whiskered Swallowing Dolphins before us are most likely patching those breaches. They may be one of the rules that maintain the Real Universe's stability!"

Qin Xin's theory had merit. It also reminded Cheng Shi of something else.

The trial where he had first encountered Void-Whiskered Swallowing Dolphins happened to coincide with Su Yida's return from the "future."

Given Cheng Shi's current understanding of spacetime and the universe, the "future" Su Yida had returned from was probably not a parallel timeline of their world but rather a separate slice universe entirely.

He had always wondered how Su Yida had traveled back. Now it seemed likely he had exploited these spacetime "breaches." And the path he had taken had drawn the Void-Whiskered Swallowing Dolphins in to patch it up.

The Void-Whiskered Swallowing Dolphins that players knew from trials might simply be the projections of these Real Universe "breach repairers" inside slice universes... As for what they were truly called — probably no one knew.

Still, the Real Universe's repair rules seemed rather rigid. When the dolphins appeared, they "rejected" variables that didn't belong to a given world. Yet in the [Oblivion] trial, Su Yida hadn't vanished. He had simply used his original-world counterpart to take his place in the "rejection," then slipped into the world like a stowaway.

Of course, he didn't "stow away" for long before Tao Yi killed him.

Thinking it all through, fate seemed to have looped closed once again.

One thing still eluded Cheng Shi, though: why did the breach-patching dolphins project into slice universes as creatures of [Void]? Did it imply that [Void] created breaches, or that [Void] repaired them?

The three discussed it briefly but reached no conclusion. They didn't dare linger on this bridge of rules, so they quickly set off again to find a way out.

Cheng Shi observed and pondered simultaneously. After much deliberation, he formed a bold hypothesis: the bridge stretched on endlessly, so the exit couldn't be at the far end. To escape this place, they might need to leap off the bridge at some specific location.

As for where to jump — he had no clue.

Qin Xin agreed the logic was sound and began examining their surroundings in detail, searching the fading darkness beyond the bridge for any spacetime anchor point to use as reference. He found nothing.

Hong Lin was trying too, using her speed to repeatedly gauge the bridge's length, hoping to find a "terminal" on its surface.

She didn't find a terminal. What she found instead were two figures!

There were other people on this bridge!

Big Cat was startled. She immediately raised the alarm. Cheng Shi and Qin Xin heard her roar and rushed to support. Before long, they saw two hooded silhouettes standing on the bridge ahead, facing off against Hong Lin.

'Two again?'

The familiar number instantly reminded Cheng Shi of the other version of himself who had tricked them.

'Could it be him?'

Cheng Shi's expression turned strange. He eyed the two hooded figures and muttered: "Again?"

The two hooded figures were equally startled when they spotted Hong Lin. They stood rooted in place — neither attacking nor retreating. Only when Cheng Shi and Qin Xin arrived did they shuffle back a few steps.

Clearly, they were backing down. They didn't want conflict.

Cheng Shi's remark also made Hong Lin and Qin Xin think of the other Cheng Shi. They studied the pair with suspicion. But the strangers' response made all three realize they had been completely wrong.

They were not Cheng Shi!

The leading hooded figure showed no aggression whatsoever. He merely snorted through his nose:

"Hmph. Looks like we took the wrong path.

No wonder the 'compass' pointed the wrong way. So this is where they are. Good thing we didn't jump."

With that, he took two more steps back, then turned decisively, grabbed his companion, and both vanished instantly from before the trio.

They clearly hadn't jumped off the bridge. They had simply... disappeared.

This eerie sight made all three expressions darken simultaneously. Qin Xin and Hong Lin reacted even more severely — their faces drained of color, as if they had heard something utterly unthinkable.

Cheng Shi blinked, realizing the pair must have recognized the speaker. He blurted out: "Who was it?"

Qin Xin's brow furrowed deeply as he spoke a name that made Cheng Shi's scalp tingle.

"Jie Shu!"

'Who?'

'That Jie Shu who wanted him dead?!'

Cheng Shi was floored. He had long suspected Jie Shu came from another world. But he'd never expected to run into him here!

Then who was the person beside Jie Shu?

'Su Yida?!'

'What were they doing — had the plan already started?'

'But Mo Shu had said they'd wait until they found Zhao Xishi before...'

'Wait — he'd been in the Real Universe for over ten days. Nobody knew what had happened in the original world during that time. It was entirely possible Jie Shu's group had launched their plan ahead of schedule.'

'But wasn't their plan to find a world without him in it?'

'Following that logic, stepping into the Real Universe should mean they were here to kill him. So why did they run? Was it because they saw Qin Xin and Big Cat alongside him and couldn't risk a fight?'

Cheng Shi frowned. Something still didn't add up.

He didn't know Jie Shu's combat power, but the Master of Trickery beside him — assuming no faith fusion — wouldn't even last a single exchange against Cheng Shi.

Bringing just one helper to pick a fight made no sense. It didn't match his understanding of [Folly].

So what exactly were they doing?

Being able to appear and vanish at will on this bridge clearly meant they understood its rules. How had they learned all this?

Were [Folly] followers really this overpowered??

Cheng Shi's mind was spinning furiously. He felt like his brain was about to combust.

Then Big Cat tossed out a casual question that hit him like lightning:

"Which world's Jie Shu was that?"

Cheng Shi froze — then everything clicked.

'Right — why assume it has to be our world? They could be another world's Jie Shu and Su Yida!'

'Which would mean...'

Cheng Shi's gaze snapped toward the direction the pair had vanished. His eyes filled with astonishment.

It seemed yet another world's version of himself was about to enter that [Oblivion] trial, and in the void woven by the Void-Whiskered Swallowing Dolphins, was about to see Su Yida's silhouette arriving from the "future."

Fate truly did loop in upon itself at every moment.

This inescapable fixed destiny — why was it still so terrifying, even in the Real Universe?

Cheng Shi lowered his gaze, his expression unreadable.

"Let's go," he murmured. "I think I know how to get home."

...

Chapter 1239: Speculations About the Spacetime Dolphin Bridge

"???"

Hong Lin was still baffled. She couldn't understand how simply bumping into Jie Shu and a stranger had shown Cheng Shi the way home.

Qin Xin seemed to have an inkling but wasn't certain yet.

Before long, Cheng Shi gathered his composure and explained to the other two:

"From the moment they appeared on this bridge — no, the moment I ran into both of you — I started wondering why I could see your physical bodies so clearly.

You've seen it too: this bridge is full of countless versions of you and me, but they're like fleeting light — gone in a flash, leaving behind nothing besides a glance that barely counts as a look.

At the time, I wondered whether we could see each other clearly because we came from the same world.

But it was only a guess, impossible to verify. Until... Jie Shu and Su Yida arrived."

"!!!"

Qin Xin's eyebrow shot up: "You know the person beside Jie Shu?"

Cheng Shi nodded, then shook his head:

"I'm not sure, but I suspect it was him.

Regardless of who it was, it doesn't affect my theory.

That clearly wasn't our world's Jie Shu. You may not know this, but our world's Jie Shu is actively trying to eliminate me — to find or create a world without me in it..."

"What?!" Hong Lin cut him off, bristling with fury. She looked ready to chase after the Jie Shu they'd just seen and take her "revenge" on him. But she realized she was far from omnipotent here — she couldn't even find Jie Shu's silhouette. So she deflated with a huff: "He wouldn't dare!"

Cheng Shi smiled knowingly and gestured for Hong Lin to calm down.

"Indeed he wouldn't. At least not while you two are at my side.

But even if he wouldn't dare, he wouldn't use such a vague excuse to justify himself. I'd imagine Jie Shu is the same type as Wei Mu.

I refuse to believe that a man seeking to 'solve' the world lacks grand ambition."

Qin Xin nodded:

"True. I've crossed paths with him a few times.

He views Wei Mu as both his greatest rival and the person he admires most.

He chases Wei Mu's footsteps, aims to challenge Wei Mu's authority, yet knows he's still far beneath him. So he's been holding back, itching to prove himself.

I just never imagined his method of proving himself would be..."

He trailed off, casting a sympathetic glance at Cheng Shi.

Hearing this, Cheng Shi grew even more certain of his theory. His gaze sharpened:

"Exactly.

He is Jie Shu — a [Folly] follower, number two on the Road to Ascension, the only player who looks up at Wei Mu while looking down on all of creation.

He wouldn't use a hasty act of folly to mask his failure. If today's encounter really was a thwarted assassination attempt, he absolutely would not have uttered those words in front of you two.

Refusing to confront failure would only push him further from Wei Mu.

Naturally, in a [Folly] follower's eyes, this doesn't count as failure — they can always rationalize anything.

But it proves that those two were definitely Jie Shu and Su Yida from another world.

And here's the interesting part: if they came from another world, why could we see them clearly — when we can't even make out other worlds' versions of ourselves?"

Qin Xin frowned, mulling it over:

"Maybe they figured out the rules and used some rule-based power? After all, only seeing people from your own world is just your hypothesis..."

But halfway through, Qin Xin's eyes lit up with sudden understanding: "You want to test the hypothesis!"

Cheng Shi snapped his fingers and laughed:

"Exactly!

Remember what Jie Shu said before he left?

'So this is where they are. Good thing we didn't jump!'

If Jie Shu is anything like Wei Mu, he never wastes a word. Even under the pressure of improvisation, his deception would only draw you in using knowledge you don't possess.

So his mention of 'jumping down' was deliberate. He wanted me to understand how to leave this twisted spacetime tunnel."

"Why? Is he really that kind-hearted?" Big Cat was confused again. She couldn't fathom why an enemy would help them at a time like this.

A keen light flashed in Qin Xin's eyes. He had already grasped Cheng Shi's meaning:

"This isn't kindness. It's pure 'malice.'

Remember what Cheng Shi said? Jie Shu wants to find a world without Cheng Shi.

He probably used some method to lock onto our world — because our world's Cheng Shi had vanished. But when he arrived at this spacetime breach, he discovered that not only had this world's Cheng Shi not disappeared — he was standing right in front of him.

With a Cheng Shi this 'powerful' already present, this world obviously no longer met his requirements.

So he urgently needed the powerful Cheng Shi to return to his original world. Only then could he continue searching for the Cheng Shi-less world unimpeded!

But he couldn't tell us the exit method outright. He could only use that ambiguously defiant [Folly]-like tone to drop us a hint..."

"Exactly!" Cheng Shi grinned. "I now suspect that simply jumping off will lead us to the way home. And the method of anchoring the correct world is probably our meeting.

I don't understand spacetime, but I understand [Folly].

They have genuine talent for looking down on others. And they never assume the world is full of wise men. Only by telling 'those idiots' in the most blunt way possible can they achieve their intended goal.

On this unknown bridge, both sides were on edge. They could easily have retreated to a safe distance before departing. Yet Jie Shu chose the most 'aggressive' option — vanishing right before our eyes.

If that move had no deeper meaning, would you call it reasonable?

Obviously not. So he was definitely using that display to tell us: people from different worlds can meet on this bridge when they share a common purpose — and can become invisible to each other again by changing that purpose!

Linking the limited information together, there's only one conclusion I can draw:

When beings who want to reach the same world encounter each other on this bridge of twisted spacetime, the distortion has already anchored the world beyond the bridge for them!

In other words, as long as we can see each other, it means our purpose is aligned. At that point, anywhere we leap — we may find our way back to our original world!"

His tone grew progressively more serious. "But before that, we need to run a few tests!"

After listening this long, Hong Lin finally began to understand. She stared past the bridge's edge in astonishment:

"You're saying this bridge is subjective? As long as you want to go to the same place, you can see the people heading there?"

Cheng Shi nodded. In his mind, he swapped his desperate desire to "go home" for the wish to visit the swindler Cheng Shi's world. And then he...

...failed.

He neither vanished from the other two's sight nor saw any "fellow travelers."

In that instant, the Clown's nose turned faintly red.

Thankfully, he had tried in secret, drawing no attention. But the result still made his heart sink.

Failure didn't necessarily disprove the theory. It was possible that no one on the bridge wanted to go to that world — or that world had long since...

In any case, many explanations existed. Not just one.

Cheng Shi buried the flicker of emotion in his eyes and turned to the other two, signaling them to give it a try.

Qin Xin was still deliberating which alternative destination to choose. Hong Lin, on the other hand, was brimming with ideas. She arched an eyebrow, and before she could even speak, her entire body vanished from sight.

It actually worked!

The remaining two exchanged a sharp glance and were about to test it themselves when Hong Lin reappeared before them the very next second.

Looking at her "lost-and-found" friend, Hong Lin nodded, visibly shaken.

"Cheng Shi, you were right. The spacetime distortion here really is subjective."

Cheng Shi smiled broadly: "What destination did you switch to?"

Hong Lin's voice hitched. She shook her head: "Nothing. Just a random thought."

Hong Lin had lied.

It wasn't random. She had wanted to revisit the world where she'd left [Prosperity]'s token — to see whether the other version of herself had fared as well after leaving the Path Starting Point.

But she had given up.

Compared to a self who had already been "looked after," her friends clearly needed her more. So she had immediately switched back.

She wanted to go home. To her own home. To see her own friends.

"Let's go. Let's leave this terrifying place." Hong Lin's voice carried both wistfulness and urgency.

Qin Xin nodded. He looked past the bridge's edge, gazed into the abyss below, and answered firmly:

"Yeah. It's time to go home."

...

Chapter 1240: Can't Go Home at All

Just as Hong Lin and Qin Xin were about to leap, Cheng Shi grabbed them both.

"Wait!"

Both flinched in alarm, assuming Cheng Shi had spotted another danger. Little did they know this wasn't caution at work — it was greed.

Cheng Shi had developed second thoughts.

He still couldn't let go of [Silence]'s corpse!

Perhaps countless divine corpses drifted through the Real Universe. But what he hadn't encountered, he wouldn't covet. Having actually stumbled upon one and walking away empty-handed felt no different from losing something he already owned.

Cheng Shi couldn't accept that. Since this bridge could traverse spacetime, why not take one last look? What if only the head of the enormous Leaking World Silent Puppet possessed the assimilation force?

After all, the head was where thoughts converged and will crystallized. Perhaps the other parts didn't manifest posthumous will and might still yield something useful.

So he shared the idea with Qin Xin and Hong Lin. Qin Xin frowned and began pondering the deeper implications. Big Cat, on the other hand, reacted instinctively and seized Cheng Shi's arm:

"Getting home alive is what matters most!

Cheng Shi, don't forget why we came. [War]'s Authority is in hand. There's no need to waste more time here.

The Real Universe is too unpredictable. That dark storm from earlier — who knows if there'll be another.

And what do you expect to find on His corpse?

Authority?

This isn't our world's [Silence]. You said it yourself — another world's Authority is useless to us.

And if not Authority, then whatever else remains — does it even matter to us right now?"

Hong Lin was uncharacteristically clear-headed for once. But she still couldn't sway Cheng Shi.

Cheng Shi knew this move was risky. Yet his instinct told him that a divine corpse interesting enough to draw another Cheng Shi's attention couldn't be meaningless.

At this point, he no longer hoped to salvage any treasure from [Silence]'s remains. He only wanted to comb through the corpse for more "useful" information.

He wanted to know what [Silence] had experienced before death. How He had died. Whether His death held any relevance to their own world's predicament. Whether he could even glimpse — through the lens of this death — something deeper about Origin.

This was the real reason he couldn't let go.

Qin Xin understood Cheng Shi. As the leader of the Torchbearers — beings who had defied the gods from the start — he knew that only by understanding the gods could they be overthrown.

And the greatest god of the Real Universe was Origin. Even if the Torchbearers were "fortunate" enough to topple the gods of their world, they would still have to face Origin in the end. That confrontation was unavoidable.

Gathering intelligence on the Creator while the window remained open was certainly worthwhile. The question was: how much risk should they take for information that might not even exist?

Would they be able to come back from this detour?

Qin Xin didn't fear death. But he had just obtained the Authority. He had advanced one step further on the path of passing the flame. His only thought now was that even if he died, he needed to at least leave the Authority behind for the cause. That way, even in death, the flame could continue.

After a long deliberation, he asked gravely: "How confident are you?"

Cheng Shi answered honestly:

"Zero. Not a shred.

But some things don't require confidence to be worth doing. Friends — the Real Universe isn't a place just anyone can reach, and it's not somewhere you can come anytime you wish. If we pass up this chance when we can still act, will there... be another chance for us next time?

I know you're afraid. I'm afraid too. I can't even be sure this gamble won't destroy the 'excellent position' we've already secured...

Honestly, every fiber of caution in my body is screaming 'go home' right now. But I feel that if I don't find something more in this Real Universe, I won't feel safe even if I do make it home."

"..."

"..."

The vanishing homeward path had made Cheng Shi realize the Fear Faction could no longer serve as his safety net. At the very least, whether the Fun God would continue sheltering him was genuinely uncertain.

There was an even more terrifying conjecture he hadn't voiced: he feared this entire Real Universe trip might not have a return route at all. That it was exile. A means the Fun God had chosen to break the original world's fixed destiny.

Otherwise, why would this particular moment be used to "plant a seed of flame" in other worlds?

Silence fell.

The silence existed because both of them knew Cheng Shi was right.

Though their immediate target was limited to the gods, everyone knew that once they climbed over that mountain, an even more head-craning peak waited behind it.

Origin would eventually be their "enemy." If they didn't use this finite opportunity to learn about the adversary, how could they ever hope to win?

Qin Xin lived up to his title of Grand Marshal. He made his decision immediately.

"Go. But do you have a plan for where to go?"

Cheng Shi didn't answer right away. Instead, he glanced at Hong Lin. Her gaze tightened. She clenched her fist:

"I don't think that far ahead. I just want my friends alive.

Name the place. I'll go. Deal?"

Cheng Shi smiled and patted Big Cat's shoulder in reassurance:

"If you go, how will you get back?"

I carry [Time]'s power. I can return here in a short time.

Relax. I promise — this time, I absolutely won't get close. I'm just going for one last look.

One look will be enough!

As for whether I can extract anything from it — that'll come down to luck."

But before Hong Lin could even object, Qin Xin shook his head:

"No one should go alone in this dangerous Real Universe.

Either none of us go, or all of us go.

I still have some [Memory] tracking tools on me. They can anchor our positions and 'reprint' us back here within a set time. So don't worry about the return trip. As for getting there..."

Big Cat was nodding furiously — clearly signaling that if all three went together, she was willing to try.

Cheng Shi was smiling on the outside, but inside he had no confidence whatsoever. At least Qin Xin's and Big Cat's company gave him enormous courage. After a moment's thought, he addressed the other two:

"Since the spacetime bridge is subjective, we need to take the following precautions against accidents:

First, anchor your mental destination to any location other than the original world. Only after confirming the other two have vanished should you switch your destination to the location of [Silence]'s corpse.

When we can see each other again, it means we've succeeded. If, after three minutes, any of us is still invisible or only one is visible, switch back to the original world at the three-minute mark and abort the observation plan.

Clear?"

Qin Xin and Hong Lin nodded in unison. Each produced a pocket watch and began synchronizing.

Lives were at stake. No one dared be careless.

Once synchronized, the three exchanged one last look and began switching destinations. Before long, the three who had vanished converged again. The entire process was smoother than imagined.

Yet the smoother it went, the tighter the knot in Cheng Shi's chest.

He kept feeling that this current luck was being traded for future hardship.

No time to deliberate. He glanced at the other two, gave them a look of steely resolve, and all three mustered their courage and leapt from the bridge.

Space wrenched. Time tore away. Cheng Shi's vision went black, and he lost consciousness entirely.

When he opened his eyes, he did not see the massive Leaking World Silent Puppet's corpse. Instead, before him, countless divine radiances were plummeting like rain!

"!!!!!"

The scene was nearly identical to the one that had been erased as [War] charged toward the heights — except that back then, the cry of "to survive — only blood and fire!" had echoed across the universe. But now...

Everything unfolded in total silence. Even as divine power disintegrated into mist across the sky and discarded Authority tumbled like mud, the entire starscape — no, the entire corpse field — made not a single sound.

This was indeed where the silent god's body lay. But it was not the [Silence] corpse Cheng Shi had been looking for!

Three insignificant figures stood at the bottom of the Corpse Field of Gods — scalps tingling, hands and feet frozen, not daring to breathe.

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