

The Gods 1131

Chapter 1131: The First Fool Hunter in History

Cheng Shi had no idea what the situation inside the cell had devolved into.

He'd already stripped off the prisoner garb and grabbed a guard's uniform from a corridor rack, throwing it on before strolling right out of the prison as if he owned the place.

The moment he stepped outside, he realized the setting was a city built into the mountains. At a glance, peaks encircled the area on all sides, eerily reminiscent of the view from Katouting when gazing at the distant mountains.

He still wasn't sure if this was Redi Core, so he grabbed a random passerby, plastered on a professional fake smile, and asked politely:

"Excuse me, where is this?"

The robed passerby held his head high, "looked down" at Cheng Shi's uniform, then glanced at the prison behind him and let out a contemptuous snort:

"What's this? The Folly Prohibition Office didn't meet quota this month, so they've resorted to such crude tactics to drum up 'business'?"

"Even if you need to boost your revenue, at least come up with a better excuse."

"A question this stupid—even if I answered, I know you'd arrest me on charges of 'Knowing Folly.' So do you really think I'd humor you?"

"Imbecile."

With that, the passerby strutted away, nose in the air, leaving Cheng Shi standing bewildered in the wind.

'Excuse me, pal...'

'You say you won't humor me, so who was that just cursing me out?'

Cheng Shi stared down at his outfit in utter confusion, thinking this place was something else. Even law enforcement got trash-talked to their face? Apparently here, intellect outranked the law.

Not one to give up easily, he asked several more passersby—and received heaps of scorn for his trouble.

Now he believed it.

Folly's domain was truly remarkable. As long as you could seize the intellectual high ground and look down on others with withering disdain, tongue-tying them into silence, you were exempt from punishment. You could even replace the officer who'd challenged you.

Because during those exchanges, one passerby had actually started trying to strip Cheng Shi's clothes off mid-rant, declaring he was unworthy of serving as a Folly Prohibition Guard and demanding he surrender his authority.

Was Cheng Shi going to stand for that?

Shadow Cheng Shi circled behind the man and dropped him with a single chop. After dragging him into an alley for a heart-to-heart, it took only minutes for Cheng Shi to extract every bit of information he wanted.

This was indeed Redi Core—a city built atop the mountains.

Protected by the nearby Civilization Lonely Tower, the entire population worshipped Folly. The town was quite famous in this realm, because it was the birthplace of the very first Fool Hunter in history—and a prolific producer of Fool Hunters.

That was why the local law enforcement was called the Folly Prohibition Office, and its officers were called Folly Prohibition Guards. Because the birthplace of the Fool Hunter would tolerate no foolishness—all foolish acts were forbidden.

At this point, Cheng Shi nearly lost his composure.

'Does your Benefactor know—Him being the universe's number one practitioner of foolish acts—that you're simultaneously worshipping and blaspheming Him here?'

'Banning all foolish acts basically means banning your own god, doesn't it?'

'No wonder Wei Mu jumped off that cliff at the start. He must have known from the get-go that this place was impious...'

Then again, that was only idle musing. Cheng Shi was certain that Wei Mu wouldn't exit this early. From a swindler's perspective, when someone deliberately vanishes from everyone's view, they haven't actually disappeared—they've simply changed roles and returned to the stage.

He just didn't know why Wei Mu had come here, and therefore couldn't guess where the man had gone.

But regardless of Wei Mu's whereabouts, it didn't affect his own mission. Cheng Shi was only here to learn about the town of Redi Core. He hadn't expected to gain anything from this trial, so his mindset was completely relaxed.

Well, not completely relaxed...

The Prisoner and Mo Shu showing up still made him uneasy. He had to carefully manage his relationship with that unlucky Torchbearer while staying on guard against whether the Oblivion follower would make a move. Outwardly carefree, his nerves remained taut.

That's why he'd bolted at the first opportunity. Now he planned to head to the town center and examine the god-revering statue that honored the first Fool Hunter.

The interrogated passerby had told him that to commemorate the first Fool Hunter in history and express the people's devotion to their god, Redi Core had erected a massive stone statue in the town center.

Whenever someone in town committed a foolish act, the offender would be dragged to the statue and subjected to torture as tribute to the first Fool Hunter's god-revering will.

The players' identities in this trial were prisoners who'd been tortured just the day before. Their crime: losing a debate to an Executioner and then killing him in jealous rage—charged with Knowing Folly.

How absurd! They weren't convicted for killing a law officer, but for Knowing Folly!

Clearly, the people of Redi Core's rejection of foolishness far eclipsed their respect for the law.

The real prisoners' memories had been lost the moment the players arrived. Cheng Shi didn't know the specifics, but he knew that when you were out and about, identity was whatever you made it. So today he wasn't some prisoner—he was a Folly Prohibition Guard with real authority.

Cheng Shi followed the main road to the town center. The moment he looked up, he spotted the towering Fool Hunter statue—a figure drawing back a bow, gazing into the distance. The stone cape streaming behind it, though carved from rock, was so lifelike one could almost hear it snapping in the high-altitude wind.

But the statue's face was nothing like what Cheng Shi had imagined. He'd assumed the first Fool Hunter would be supremely arrogant—nostrils aimed at the heavens. But the face wasn't sharp or hard at all. It carried a faintly feminine quality; even the fiercely knitted brows held three parts melancholy.

The craftsmanship was exquisite—so detailed and refined that it re-created the first Fool Hunter's image with stunning precision.

Cheng Shi studied it for a long time, feeling that if this town harbored a secret, it had to be connected to this statue.

'So the Eye of Mockery—could it be hidden in...?'

With that thought, he raised his gaze to the statue's eye sockets. To his shock, those carved eyes seemed to sense his attention, swiveling slightly and casting a sliver of gaze downward at him.

Cheng Shi startled, pupils contracting. He retreated half a step and glanced around, only to realize that the passersby offering worship showed no surprise at all. Only then did he understand: the statue's eyes were designed to move.

"It's the wind!"

Just as Cheng Shi was reeling from the rotating eyes, a voice came from behind him.

Cheng Shi didn't need to turn—Shadow Cheng Shi had already identified the newcomer. It was none other than one of his trial teammates, the Erudite Scholar he'd once worked with: Ji Yue.

She'd changed clothes too, though her choice was subtler—one of the common long robes seen throughout town. She walked up beside Cheng Shi, looked up at the statue, and smiled:

"Quite an ingenious design."

"The higher the mountain, the stronger the wind. The statue towers above the surrounding buildings, so all they had to do during construction was hollow out the eye sockets and carve the eyeball into a lightweight sphere. Naturally, it moves with the wind, creating the illusion of a gaze surveying all creation."

"I must say—though Folly never shares, His followers possess remarkable mastery in many fields."

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow, stealing a glance at this Truth scholar from the corner of his eye, wondering what her real purpose was in deliberately approaching him.

'She shouldn't remember what happened before... right?'

Chapter 1132: Gathering Clues

"Cheng Shi, I know who you are."

While Cheng Shi was still sizing up Ji Yue from the corner of his eye, she took the initiative to introduce herself.

Those words made Cheng Shi's heart skip a beat, thinking she'd recovered her memories. But her very next sentence was:

"The great hero who thwarted the 0221 experiment and saved countless players!"

"..."

Cheng Shi's expression froze, though he quietly breathed a sigh of relief.

Thank goodness. Being praised was a bit awkward, but at least it seemed she didn't actually remember him.

He turned to face Ji Yue, studying her striking silver hair, and smiled:

"'Hero' is too generous. I just happened to be there and fought for survival—for myself and my friends."

Hearing such modesty, Ji Yue raised an eyebrow, clearly gaining a measure of respect for Cheng Shi:

"A gentleman judges deeds, not intentions. You saved people—that's a fact. You've earned the title of hero."

"My friend also suffered greatly in that experiment. In a way, you're his benefactor."

"I'd like to thank you on his behalf."

"?"

The more Cheng Shi listened, the odder it felt. He was certain Ji Yue had an ulterior motive for approaching him, yet she seemed to harbor no hostility. For the moment, he couldn't figure out what this Erudite Scholar was scheming, so he could only mask it behind his practiced fake smile.

"You're too kind. It was Fate that watched over him. As I said, my fight for survival was purely selfish."

"For your friends—hmm, it must be nice to be your friend."

Ji Yue studied him up and down with evident interest. Noticing Cheng Shi's heels lifting slightly, as if about to leave, she quickly steered the small talk back to the trial itself:

"Though Folly's trials come with no clues, they aren't entirely untraceable."

"Our identities are most likely the key to cracking this. So the crime that took place yesterday is probably the only lead."

"Unfortunately, it seems we didn't inherit the prisoners' memories. Any thoughts on that, Fate Weaver?"

Cheng Shi frowned, wondering if Ji Yue had simply pegged him as stable enough to team up with for the trial.

Not impossible, but she'd clearly entered with a specific objective—one very different from his reconnaissance purpose. Recklessly teaming up would do neither of them any good.

Add in the external threats lurking in this trial, and without understanding Ji Yue's current position, Cheng Shi couldn't afford to get too close to any teammate who'd approached him voluntarily.

Even if this teammate had once been his teammate.

So, erring on the side of caution, Cheng Shi recalled Ji Yue's previous behaviors while carefully choosing his words of refusal:

"You should have some idea of my identity."

"As a follower of Deceit, I naturally have no advice on recovering memories."

"If your purpose in finding me is to clear this trial, I'm afraid you've got the wrong person."

"I was just bored sitting around in the rest area and picked a random destination for some sightseeing. Whether we pass or fail this trial, I couldn't care less."

"Of course, with a scholar's vast knowledge and understanding of your rival faith, I'm sure you can find your own answers without any help. Am I right?"

Cheng Shi smiled, waving goodbye. "I'm just going to wander around. Do as you like."

With that, he turned to go.

But the next moment, Ji Yue extended a hand to block his path, her expression an ambiguous half-smile as she fixed him with her gaze and spoke word by word:

"If I'm not mistaken, this is our first meeting, Fate Weaver."

"Since we've never met before, how did you know I'm a follower of Truth?"

"My score and reputation haven't reached the point of being common knowledge."

"!!!"

'Damn—I kept mentally revisiting our previous encounter and slipped into the old perspective without thinking!'

Cheng Shi's heart clenched, but his face betrayed nothing.

For a swindler, getting called out in real-time was just another day at the office. Besides, as long as he could talk his way back, the whole exposure thing was still up for debate.

His eyes flicked, and the explanation came immediately:

"At this tier, if you still need a prior introduction to identify a teammate's faith, what's the point of all that score?"

"You can only be a Truth follower!"

"The only ones who can see something and instantly deduce its underlying principle are followers of Truth and Folly. But Folly never shares. So from the moment you told me 'it's the wind,' your way of thinking already revealed your identity."

"Still want to block me, Scholar?"

"This isn't the Tower of Logic. Even if tickets were being checked at the gate, it'd be Folly's followers doing the checking."

"As a Truth follower, you'd do well to keep a low profile on your rival's home turf."

With that, Cheng Shi casually pushed Ji Yue's arm aside and strode past her with a smirk.

Ji Yue frowned slightly but accepted the explanation.

Though she'd forsaken her oath, Truth's blessing still lingered, and she retained a Truth follower's way of thinking. Being identified wasn't unusual.

'But why do I keep feeling this inexplicable sense of familiarity about him?'

'Is it his methods? Or some faint magnetism of goodwill? Or is it the same mysterious Fate-linked sensation as the Flame of Hope?'

She wasn't sure. She turned to watch the direction Cheng Shi had disappeared and fell into thought.

Cheng Shi could sense that Ji Yue had grown suspicious. He quickened his pace, and the moment he passed an intersection, he ducked into the crowd filling the alley, weaving through rapidly until he was well beyond the town center before resuming his leisurely intelligence-gathering.

Aside from its less-than-friendly residents, Redi Core was actually a well-built city.

Every blade of grass and tree, every wall and road—everything exuded a near-obsessive refinement.

Cheng Shi could easily picture the craftsmen who'd laid these roads and planted these gardens thinking: "My roads and gardens are the finest in the land. These fools can't hold a candle to me!"

Perhaps it was precisely this "I'm the best there is" attitude that had produced such a stunningly beautiful mountain city.

He wandered along a quiet footpath, no longer asking questions directly. Instead, whenever someone passed by, he casually stopped to eavesdrop on their conversations.

This kind of passive intelligence-gathering let him get a feel for local gossip when he had no leads, and gossiping was one of ordinary citizens' favorite pastimes—even Folly's followers weren't immune. Such gossip tended to reflect current hot topics, always tied to whatever was happening in the present.

Sure enough, after listening to several conversations, one name kept surfacing:

Koshna.

The dead Executioner.

Everyone who mentioned Koshna wore a conflicted expression, their words becoming hesitant.

Nobody in town seemed to believe those arrested prisoners could have actually killed a physically imposing Executioner. Yet, confronted with the established facts, they chose to accept it anyway, convincing themselves that jealous rage had unlocked the prisoners' hidden potential.

Cheng Shi could easily see why the townsfolk chose acceptance. If they raised doubts but couldn't produce evidence, the doubter themselves might be charged with Knowing Folly—reduced to the same criminal status as the prisoners who'd murdered the Executioner in a jealous rage.

And even if they did have evidence, they probably wouldn't use it to overturn the case, because...

Folly never shares.

Those in the know were likely sitting somewhere, watching the birth of yet another foolish act with amusement.

Little did they know that while they sneered at folly, they were performing it themselves.

Cheng Shi wasn't in a hurry to investigate Koshna. He wanted to observe a bit longer, to see if any recent gossip connected to the Eye of Mockery. But after listening and listening, the closest thing to "eyes" he found was the townsfolk themselves...

Every last pair of eyes in this town might as well have been the Eye of Mockery—not a single person spared their scorn.

Cheng Shi sighed and decided to expand his search radius to other districts.

But just as he was about to leave the street, a gleam of light flashed at the far end of the lane.

A shiny bald head appeared in his field of vision.

"..."

"Brother-in-law?! Hey, don't walk away, brother-in-law!"

Chapter 1133: Otherwise, What Kind of Fire Are They Passing? A Dud?

"Brother-in-law, why aren't you talking?"

"Have you converted to my master's faith?"

"But you said yourself that my master is actually a chatterbox—He doesn't actually forbid speech! So if you're trying to embody His will through silence, you've already gone astray!"

At the word "astray," Cheng Shi's footsteps halted.

The Prisoner caught the sudden change instantly. His face lit up, and he said at once:

"You've really gone astray before?"

"No wonder you look a bit rough around the edges. Have you been under too much pressure lately?"

"Don't push yourself too hard—seize the day and enjoy life! That's the true meaning of existence."

"..."

"You disagree?"

"Then I'll have to explain this to you properly."

"See, the world's basically ending. If we keep wearing ourselves out over—"

"Oh wait, don't tell me you're actually honoring that promise we made at the 0221 Experiment Site—that you wouldn't speak to me if we ever crossed paths again?"

"That's totally unnecessary, brother-in-law!"

"You're the only one in this world who truly gets me. If you go silent, wouldn't I lose my one kindred spirit?"

"Then again, I didn't expect you to be such a man of your word. Hmm, the brother-in-law I picked really is dependable!"

"..."

Cheng Shi fought down the urge to throw a punch, took a deep breath, and said: "Are you done?"

"Hm?" The Prisoner rubbed his bald head, shaking it like a rattle drum. "Nope."

Cheng Shi's eyelid twitched violently: "Then can you at least come down to talk?"

The Prisoner blinked, agonized for a moment, then reluctantly hopped down from Cheng Shi's shoulders.

"The view up there was actually pretty great. Nice breeze, too."

"..."

Cheng Shi felt he was losing his mind. But then he recalled the image of his good brother Hu Wei with The Prisoner sitting in his lap, and suddenly this didn't seem so unbearable.

He snapped irritably: "Who taught you to have a conversation from someone's shoulders? You're an Ascetic Monk, not an Acrobat!"

The Prisoner grinned sheepishly:

"I could be an Acrobat too— hey, hey, hey, no hitting! Okay, okay, I'll explain. The truth."

"I noticed you seemed stressed, so I figured I'd balance you out physically."

"How about it—feel better now?"

"..."

'Thanks. I'm already dead.'

Cheng Shi's eyelid hammered away as his temples throbbed.

He wanted nothing to do with The Prisoner, yet he knew there was no shaking the man. So he resigned himself—consider it a free bodyguard—and strode toward the next district.

The Prisoner latched on tight, mouth never stopping. The density of his chatter only reinforced Cheng Shi's conviction: devotion taken to the extreme becomes blasphemy.

'The problem is, if you'd at least say something I didn't already know—even pointless gossip—I could treat it as fresh intel.'

'But all you've been doing is babbling nonsense...'

'Dude, that mouth growing on your face is truly cursed with blessings.'

Cheng Shi was at his wit's end. He finally understood how Brother Mouth felt whenever he pestered it with questions.

If not for The Prisoner's additional identity as a Torchbearer, today's Hero of Today would definitely be squaring up against the Ascetic Monk.

"Is this how Qin Xin taught you to pass the torch?"

When he couldn't take it anymore, Cheng Shi finally squeezed in a retort.

To his surprise, it worked wonders. The moment The Prisoner heard the words "pass the torch," the incessant chatterbox went completely quiet—actually acting like a Silence follower for once.

The sudden change was so jarring that Cheng Shi actually felt uncomfortable.

The Prisoner's expression turned opaque, unreadable. After a long silence, he asked just one thing: "Why don't you join the Torchbearers?"

"?"

Cheng Shi scoffed: "Why did you join?"

The Prisoner pondered with genuine seriousness, then said: "I'm afraid of death."

Cheng Shi froze. A complicated expression crossed his face, and his voice took on a wistful note:

"Me too."

For one fleeting moment, the two seemed to achieve a wordless, tacit harmony. By all past precedent, this was the point where they should lapse into silence, each drifting into their own thoughts.

But one of the people present was The Prisoner. So the instant Cheng Shi's words faded, The Prisoner beamed:

"I knew it—brother-in-law gets me best!"

"Taking this sister was absolutely worth it!"

"..."

WHAM—

Cheng Shi had reached his absolute limit. One punch sent The Prisoner flying.

But The Prisoner wasn't the least bit rattled. He shamelessly dashed right back, falling into step behind Cheng Shi, and resumed his commentary:

"I know all about you and what you've done."

"You've clearly helped the Torchbearers before. Why won't you join our warm little family like I did?"

Cheng Shi scoffed again: "What's warm about the Torchbearers? Because you have a Flame of Hope that could snuff out at any moment?"

Hearing this, The Prisoner actually froze.

"What's the Flame of Hope?"

"!!!?"

'Seriously?'

'Bro, are you messing with me right now?'

'You're a Torchbearer and you don't know about the Flame of Hope that protects you?'

At this moment, The Prisoner's eyes were so clear you could raise two "Folly" fish in them. He seemed to grasp Cheng Shi's shock, nodding and then shaking his head:

"Qin Xin recruited me, but he said I'm an independent branch. I only communicate with the Blind One—he hasn't taken me to headquarters yet."

"So the Torchbearers are really hiding a flame called the Flame of Hope?"

"That is so cliched."

"..."

'What else?'

'What did you think they were passing?'

'A dud?'

Cheng Shi had come to a realization: it was nearly impossible to stay on the same wavelength as The Prisoner. Because the moment you synced with him, you became unlucky too. So this particular frequency was better left untuned!

He broke away from The Prisoner again and pressed forward. The Prisoner stuck close as ever, an unbroken stream of speculation pouring from his mouth—but Cheng Shi offered no further responses.

The pair continued their chase-and-follow routine as they left the district. But as they walked, both stopped simultaneously, brows furrowed, eyes scanning their surroundings.

Cheng Shi's gaze sharpened. "Don't tell me you silenced the residents around us. They seem to have stopped talking for a while now."

The Prisoner raised an eyebrow and shook his head: "Not me. It's a Historian! Zhao Xishi is here."

'A Historian?'

'A Memory follower?'

"That female player?" Cheng Shi blinked. "You have a grudge with her? I saw she knows Mo Shu—did your fight earlier get serious?"

The Prisoner stretched his arms and legs, grinning:

"There's a bit of history, but it's not from the fight just now."

"Actually, brother-in-law, you've got a bit of a history with her too."

"Her ID is 'Last Year Today.' She had a falling-out with my sister over some History School membership issue, so I think she's more likely coming after you than me."

"But don't worry, brother-in-law—I'll always have your back."

"Because I am a Torchbearer who protects all brothers-in-law!"

"..."

In that moment, Cheng Shi wished he'd never learned about the Torchbearers—and wished even harder that The Prisoner was on the attacker's side.

'How can one person be this unlucky?'

He didn't know much, but he knew one thing for certain: from this point on, the Torchbearers were well and truly doomed.

Chapter 1134: Ambush

Zhao Xishi's grievance differed from Li Jingming's.

Dragon King had been deliberately sabotaged by Zhen Yi and denied entry to the History School. Zhao Xishi, on the other hand, had joined the History School only to be vetoed by Zhen Yi when competing for vice president—after which she angrily quit the organization, becoming Zhen Yi's sworn enemy.

Nobody knew why Zhen Yi had shot down the most hardworking member of the school at the time. All anyone knew was that from then on, whenever a History School member crossed paths with Zhao Xishi, nothing good came of it.

Cheng Shi knew nothing of the specifics. All he wanted to know was what relationship this Historian had with Mo Shu, and how the two had ended up working together.

He'd hoped The Prisoner might know something, but this Chosen One of Silence—first-rate at running his mouth—had a pitifully thin intelligence file.

After getting nothing three times in a row, The Prisoner consoled him:

"Don't panic, brother-in-law. If you want the inside scoop, just beat her into submission. She'll talk."

"..."

'Like I need you to tell me that?'

'The problem is: where is she hiding?'

Cheng Shi held a smoke bomb at the ready, eyes scanning every direction, ears alert to the slightest sound—guarded to the extreme.

A lone Singer might not pose much threat, but paired with a Chosen-level Warrior, Cheng Shi had to take this seriously.

They'd clearly walked into a trap. Everything around them was likely a memory illusion. Without knowing where the enemy was, holding position was the safest approach.

Then again, with The Prisoner here, maybe going on the offensive wasn't a bad idea.

Silence's power could break through all techniques. Why not just shatter the memory illusion directly?

With that thought, Cheng Shi frowned and glanced at The Prisoner beside him—only to find The Prisoner's expression deadly serious, his stance combat-ready, a thread of blood oozing from the corner of his mouth.

'!?!?'

"You're injured?"

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted. His sharp gaze swept the surroundings as he casually flung a healing spell his way.

The Prisoner opened his mouth to respond, but instead—"BLEURGH!"—he sprayed out a torrent of blood.

"Cough cough... minor issue. Just ingested a bit of Oblivion power. Only now finding out those cakes were a trap."

"How devious!"

"Minor" it might be, but the problem on The Prisoner's body looked anything but minor.

A massive surge of Oblivion power erupted from within him. Veins bulged across his body as he fought with everything he had to prevent the Oblivion force from annihilating his organs.

Seeing this, Cheng Shi's gaze hardened. He drew the Thorn Weeping Rite, sending an endless stream of healing spells raining down on The Prisoner's head while tossing him a bottle of Prosperity of Yesteryear. His voice was grave: "Don't die."

He knew that even if The Prisoner lost his combat ability, as long as he stayed alive, he'd draw some of the enemy's attention. But the moment The Prisoner died, all the pressure would fall squarely on Cheng Shi.

The Prisoner was a battlefield veteran and understood this perfectly. He took the potion, nodded, and declared with iron resolve: "Don't worry—I haven't attended your wedding with my sist— hey, hey, hey! What was given was given! Why are you snatching it back?!"

Cheng Shi had changed his mind.

He grabbed the Prosperity of Yesteryear back, thinking: 'If it's The Prisoner who dies, maybe that's not so bad.'

But just as the two finished their dazzling exchange, the enemy hiding in the shadows finally responded.

The ground beneath the memory illusion suddenly split open. A fist the size of a basin came hurtling through, wind screaming, aimed straight at The Prisoner's face!

The Scavenger had made his move. His first target was still The Prisoner—the one who still had fight left in him.

But even in such a weakened state, The Prisoner didn't bat an eye. He even had the leisure to talk while blocking the blow:

"Comrade Scavenger, your cakes have a safety issue. They're not sanitary—I got a stomachache."

"I'm going to report you to the market regulatory bureau. They'll shut down your shop, fine you to oblivion, and award me emotional distress damages!"

Mo Shu's eye twitched violently. He sneered:

"This is your emotional comfort. Catch!"

BOOM—

A tremendous crash rang out. Two titanic forces collided, the shockwave rippling outward and kicking up endless clouds of dust. The two combatants held their ground, but the blast sent Cheng Shi—a mere Priest—flying.

Mid-flight, Cheng Shi twisted to look back. Through the dust, he saw The Prisoner drop his weakened facade entirely, lick the blood from his lips, and throw himself at the Scavenger with manic fervor.

Mo Shu was equally stunned. He gnashed his teeth:

"You weren't hit at all?!"

The Prisoner punched away while looking embarrassed:

"Sorry—digestive system's too good. Already passed it all. The only trace left in my stomach was the tiny bit I spent serious effort keeping in."

"You people have no idea how miserable it is when you can't finish your business!"

"What you owe me isn't food safety compensation—it's my intestinal regularity! Take this!"

"..."

"..."

"..."

At that moment, Cheng Shi swore he came dangerously close to switching sides and joining Mo Shu in beating The Prisoner.

But an instant later, he couldn't help laughing.

This was the second unluckiest man alive for a reason. If The Prisoner could be made to concede defeat, he wouldn't be this famous.

The warrior-on-warrior brawl raged on. Cheng Shi, having landed, stayed fully alert. He knew Mo Shu's real target was never The Prisoner. Mo Shu had probably identified the relationship between the two and prioritized eliminating Cheng Shi's support first.

But Mo Shu had his own backup. Where was the Historian?

Though she was a support-class Singer, at this tier, there was no such thing as a purely support class. Between their items and hidden potential, support players could always deliver a fatal blow when the target least expected it.

Like... right now!

Just as Cheng Shi was cautiously scanning his surroundings, a passerby who'd been scrambling away from the sudden fight went ice-cold in the face, produced a dagger, and charged straight at him.

Given that a few steps' distance was nothing to a peak player, before Cheng Shi could even turn around, the dagger plunged into—

'?'

A cloud of smoke!

'Where did he go?'

The assailant's pupils contracted. She spun to retreat, but a scalpel materialized directly in her path. It swept upward in an arc, and she held her breath, instinctively dodging, only to feel the blade graze her shoulder and slice through her hood—revealing a face of utter frigidity.

Historian Zhao Xishi!

'This Singer had the audacity to ambush me in the flesh?'

'Hadn't she heard about me going toe-to-toe with Zangier at the 0221 Experiment Site?!'

Cheng Shi's first strike missed. His eyes narrowed, and he flash-stepped backward. He didn't believe for a second that a peak player would use such a crude method of attack. Sure enough, the instant he pulled away, the memory illusion at his previous position completely collapsed—the entire scene crumpled inward, the compressed Memory power detonating with devastating force, blasting everyone in the vicinity away.

Thankfully, Cheng Shi had retreated in time. He tumbled and rolled, pulling back all the way to The Prisoner's side.

The Prisoner was also battered head to toe, not a patch of intact skin remaining.

The two instinctively went back-to-back—and spat out the exact same words in unison:

"How are you this bad?"

"..."

"..."

One second of silence. The next, The Prisoner beamed: "I knew it—brother-in-law, you get me best!"

Cheng Shi's forehead was pulsing. He shot a glare at Mo Shu, who stood some distance away with a dark, uncertain expression, and yelled:

"How are you this bad?! You couldn't even kill him?!"

"I—"

Mo Shu ground his teeth, ready to charge again, when a voice from behind hissed: "No chance now. We're leaving." His brow sank as he glanced forward one last time, then obliterated his own silhouette with a wave of his hand.

Seeing the attackers withdraw, Cheng Shi sneered.

But The Prisoner beside him said: "You're the one who got beat up—what are you smiling about? Brother-in-law, don't tell me they knocked you stupid."

"..." Cheng Shi's smirk died on the spot. "You're the stupid one, you—"

Before he could finish, a thud came from behind. The figure at his back crumpled to the ground.

The Prisoner's mouth was full of blood, his gaze unfocused. He clutched Cheng Shi's leg and nodded weakly:

"I... really did... get knocked stupid..."

"Cakes... not tasty..."

"Brother-in-law... save me..."

With that, he collapsed face-first with a splat.

'!?!?'

Cheng Shi was dumbfounded. He couldn't tell whether The Prisoner was messing with him or genuinely done for.

But he didn't rush to treat him. Instead, he grabbed The Prisoner and bolted for a dark alley, asking as he ran:

"You said you passed it all—how did you still get hit?"

Blood flowed ceaselessly from The Prisoner's mouth, his words delirious:

"I lied to him... I've been constipated lately..."

"This is bad... I think I really did get knocked stupid..."

"Brother-in-law... how come I can't see your shadow anymore..."

"..."

Chapter 1135: Is Oblivion Your Family?

On the other side.

Two cold-faced figures stood atop a building, gazing toward the direction Cheng Shi had vanished, neither speaking.

After a long while, Mo Shu said gravely:

"The fact that we were matched with him—does that mean Jie Shu's deduction was correct? The secret of that matter lies either with Wei Mu or the Fate Weaver?"

Zhao Xishi nodded:

"I'm more inclined to say it's the Fate Weaver. Otherwise, given Jie Shu's intelligence, he would never challenge Wei Mu's authority."

"Outsiders already look at Wei Mu like gazing up at an unclimbable mountain. But only Folly's followers themselves know what their Chosen One truly represents."

"I'm not belittling Jie Shu. Among peak players, he's practically a summit of intellect. Unfortunately, not every summit is called Everest. The fact that he can't match Wei Mu is simply indisputable."

"But this Fate Weaver..."

"I keep hearing his name lately. An interesting person."

"I've also heard that Zhen Xin has been quite close with him. Heh—that fox never does anything without gain. I refuse to believe she's cozying up to a con artist for something as naive as friendship."

"Her capacity for friendship was spent entirely on the Blind One."

Mo Shu pondered briefly, offering no comment, then continued:

"Could either of the other two be a lead?"

"The Prisoner..."

At the mention of The Prisoner's name, Mo Shu's eyelid twitched. He fell silent for several seconds, skipped right past the topic, and went on: "That female player is no pushover, either."

Zhao Xishi glanced in another direction and smiled: "Why do you think so? Just because this is a Folly trial?"

Mo Shu nodded:

"Precisely. In His eyes, everything is a foolish act. Countless past experiences have proven that in the trials He bestows, we can only ever act out foolishness."

"So I'm wondering—could our entire line of thinking be wrong?"

"No need to overthink it. Who's to say the counter-logic you're toying with right now isn't itself the foolish act?"

"Though that beauty is probably a Truth follower..."

"She's composed and measured, acts with discipline—obviously not low-ranked. By my read of people, she's likely a member of some organization, here with a mission."

"And Truth has nothing to do with the truth we're searching for."

"If Truth could actually deliver truth, why would He keep putting His followers through such misery?"

"It shouldn't be her."

"As for The Prisoner..."

"Jie Shu once said that Silence probably knows this universe's greatest secret. As His follower, if The Prisoner knows something, I wouldn't be surprised."

"But if it really is him, then what we're doing truly is a foolish act."

"Nobody can pry anything from Silence's mouth. Not even Folly."

"Jie Shu said that too. I think it makes a lot of sense."

Mo Shu gave Zhao Xishi an odd glance, thinking she really did "trust" Jie Shu.

He'd always suspected that Zhao Xishi's adulation of Jie Shu stemmed entirely from the fact that Jie Shu was one of the rare players who could surpass Zhen Xin in at least one area.

Of course, surpassing Zhen Xin wasn't what mattered. What mattered was suppressing Zhen Yi.

As a Memory follower, being expelled from an organization devoted to studying history and memory—especially one controlled by a follower of Deceit, her rival faith... this was an obsession Zhao Xishi could never put down.

But voicing such speculation would only invite trouble, so he simply nodded:

"Then we proceed as planned."

"I'll carry out our Benefactor's edict. You investigate the secret he's hiding."

Zhao Xishi cast her gaze once more toward where Cheng Shi had disappeared, eyebrow raised:

"I've always been curious—why would a god lower Himself to issue an edict for His followers to obliterate one mortal?"

"Do you think it's related to the secret he carries?"

"Is your Benefactor also searching for the truth that Jie Shu spoke of, just like us?"

Mo Shu's gaze sharpened, but he didn't respond.

His heart held only devotion, never doubt. Besides, he'd already received that lord's promise. Soon, he would take the next step and widen the gap between himself and ordinary mortals.

Seeing Mo Shu fall silent again, Zhao Xishi gave a dismissive snort and said no more—until he spoke up with "Let's go, time to move," at which point she followed his silhouette and vanished from the rooftop.

The mountain wind swept past, leaving behind only a few fragmented lines of conversation:

"The cakes you gave me—they don't have a hidden trick in them too, do they?"

"That depends on whether you stand with me."

"Heh. Honest, at least. And utterly dull."

...

Cheng Shi pulled back his arm, fought down the urge to turn the charred corpse into a Screaming Servant, sighed, and used the Lush Horn Crown to resurrect The Prisoner.

It wasn't that he hadn't wanted to heal him—after weighing his options, he'd concluded that killing him first and then reviving him cost far less mental energy than direct healing.

So at The Prisoner's most agonizing moment, Cheng Shi had granted him a quick death—using the fear extracted from interrogating a passerby in the alley.

But when The Prisoner leapt up, seized Cheng Shi's hand, and started shouting "miracle doctor" nonstop, Cheng Shi immediately regretted it.

He should've turned him into a skeleton. At least bones wouldn't be this clingy.

Cheng Shi shook off The Prisoner's grip and headed toward the alley's exit. This time, The Prisoner actually didn't stick to him. Instead, he trailed behind, studying the ground beneath Cheng Shi's feet with an uncertain expression:

"Your shadow... was it obliterated by the Scavenger?"

Cheng Shi blinked. 'Here I was worrying about how to explain this, and he comes up with an excuse all on his own.'

So he kept a grave face and nodded:

"Yes. I trust you're aware of the divine edict that Oblivion's followers have received. They're hunting me with everything they have."

The Prisoner's curiosity only deepened. To most people, this would be a catastrophe of apocalyptic proportions. But in The Prisoner's eyes, this was cool beyond words!

Being hunted by a god!

What could possibly be more thrilling?!

"Why does He want to obliterate you?" The Prisoner asked eagerly, hurrying to keep up.

Cheng Shi answered honestly:

"I made a face at Him, He got embarrassed and furious, so He issued the edict to obliterate me."

"What do you mean, 'made a face'?"

"I blasted Him with a bolt of lightning right to His face. Like the one I hit you with earlier."

"..."

The anticipation in The Prisoner's eyes collapsed in an instant. He rubbed his bald head, eyed Cheng Shi, and said with dissatisfaction:

"Lying is no fun."

"We've literally been through life and death together. Can't you level with me?"

"You think I'd blab? You've seen it yourself—I'm reliable!"

He thumped his chest for emphasis.

"..."

'In what universe are you reliable?'

Cheng Shi rolled his eyes, thinking the only thing reliable about this man was how reliably unreliable he was.

"I am telling the truth. Whether you believe it is your problem."

"Fine, fine, I believe you—happy? Is that good enough?" The Prisoner nodded furiously, then, still unwilling to let it go, pressed on: "Besides that lightning bolt you hit Him with, what else happened between you and Him?"

"Are you conducting a census?"

"Not really. Is Oblivion your family?"

"..."

'Is Oblivion your family!'

Cheng Shi clenched both fists. He'd truly reached his breaking point. He stopped, turned, and spoke to The Prisoner word by word:

"Option one: shut your mouth and follow me."

"Option two: leave here and babble to your heart's content."

"Pick one. Otherwise, I'll tell everyone you're a Torchbearer."

"!!!"

The Prisoner's pupils contracted. Seeing that Cheng Shi didn't seem to be bluffing, he scratched his head with some embarrassment: "But then wouldn't you be exposed too?"

Cheng Shi sneered: "I'm not a Torchbearer."

"...Oh right. So, is it too late to quit?"

"..."

Cheng Shi took a deep breath, now absolutely certain that Qin Xin had misjudged this one.

Chapter 1136: The Executioner and the Executioner Candidate

But Qin Xin hadn't misjudged. His eye was startlingly accurate.

To protect the Torchbearers, The Prisoner actually fell silent.

It was hard to imagine that this reckless, unlucky-aura troublemaker would shut his mouth over a threat that barely sounded like one—simply because the threat mentioned the Torchbearers.

A flicker of surprise entered Cheng Shi's gaze. It seemed this Silence follower wasn't entirely unreliable after all.

The two continued exploring the town in silence. Cheng Shi didn't explain his objectives, and The Prisoner didn't ask, simply trailing behind Cheng Shi lost in his own thoughts.

Along the way, they ran into city-wide patrols and learned that the six escapees had made it onto Redi Core's wanted list.

Luckily, they'd both changed clothes by now. The only identifying feature matching the wanted posters was The Prisoner's bald head.

But The Prisoner was well-versed in the concept of a blind spot hiding in plain sight. When he saw officers carrying sketches and searching everywhere, he didn't hide—he strolled right up and helpfully pointed them toward the direction Mo Shu and Zhao Xishi had vanished.

The Folly Prohibition Guards didn't suspect the bald man could be a fugitive. After all, Folly's wisdom dictated that escaped fools would never dare approach them so brazenly.

Watching these so-called Folly Prohibition Guards perform a textbook foolish act right before his eyes, Cheng Shi was speechless. After a few more rounds with The Prisoner that turned up nothing new in other districts, he decided to double back and investigate the dead Executioner, Koshna.

The town was full of "Eyes of Mockery," and yet there was no actual intel about the real Eye of Mockery. To gather as many clues as possible, he had no choice but to redirect his attention to the trial's puzzle, hoping that within Folly's riddle he might find that mask fragment that sounded like a Folly creation.

As they passed through the town center again, someone was being publicly punished beneath the massive Fool Hunter statue!

The two exchanged a glance, immediately recognizing this as an excellent opportunity to observe local justice, and pushed through the crowd. By the time they reached the front, they found Ji Yue already standing in the first row, watching the proceedings with a faint smile.

Cheng Shi froze, wanting to avoid her, but The Prisoner cheerfully squeezed forward and asked without a trace of restraint: "Don't tell me you arranged this?"

Ji Yue frowned slightly at The Prisoner's arrival, but when her gaze swept past him and landed on Cheng Shi, her eyes flickered for a moment before she nodded:

"That's right. I believe this statue hides a secret—likely connected to... the trial. So I employed certain methods to make a few of them commit Knowing Folly."

"You've got nerve. You're wanted and you still waltz up to watch? Aren't you worried about being dragged back by these guards?"

The Prisoner studied her with an odd expression: "You're not worried, so why would I be?"

Ji Yue glanced at his bald head and smiled:

"First, I don't have such a conspicuous feature as yours. Second, I'm not on the wanted list."

The Prisoner blinked: "Why not?"

Ji Yue smiled: "Because I'm the one who reported all of you and provided your portraits. I drew myself as a different woman, so naturally I wouldn't be wanted."

"???"

The Prisoner was floored. He turned to look at Cheng Shi, his wide-eyed expression practically screaming: 'You can do that?!'

Then he spun back around: "Why would you do that?"

"I kept feeling our identities are linked to this trial, but I couldn't dig up any clues. So I figured I'd let the clues come to me."

"Whoever is most interested in our identities naturally becomes my lead."

"..."

The Prisoner scratched his head. He was about to say more, but one look at those eyes brazenly sizing him up made him close his mouth. He retreated to Cheng Shi's side and whispered:

"This woman is trouble. Something about her feels off every time I see her. Do you know her?"

Cheng Shi avoided Ji Yue's probing gaze and nodded:

"Ji Yue. An Erudite Scholar."

"Truth's way of exploring the world is through experimentation. So it wouldn't surprise me if she used anyone as a test subject—including herself."

"Just stay alert. Don't become her expendable."

While they were talking, the punishment had begun.

Since the previous Executioner had died unexpectedly and the town hadn't held elections for a replacement, the punishment was being administered by several Folly Prohibition Guards.

Supervising them was Kandert—the runner-up from the last election who'd been named deputy—and now the most popular candidate for the upcoming one.

But at this moment, Kandert's face bore not a trace of a smile. He kept looking up at the statue as if in prayer, then turning to whisper urgently to the guards maintaining order. Anxiety was written all over his face.

His unusual behavior was quickly noticed by the players in the crowd. Both Cheng Shi and Ji Yue were wondering: could this so-called candidate be connected to Koshna's death? Could he be a lead to what they were searching for?

The punishment itself was unremarkable. The players had already gotten a firsthand taste of the local penalties when they'd woken up at the start. When it was over, the guards dispersed the onlookers and returned to Kandert for orders.

The candidate Executioner rattled off instructions to several guards. Since they were too far away to hear, Cheng Shi glanced at The Prisoner.

As everyone knew, controlling sound was a Silence follower's specialty—and they didn't just snuff it out. A second later, perched on a rooftop, the pair could hear Kandert's conversation with the guards from a great distance.

"Are you certain only one person fell from the cliff?"

"Sir, we haven't confirmed yet. Prisoners in other cells only heard one crash. We can't rule out two people hitting the ground simultaneously, but any more than that would have produced multiple sounds."

"I've sent men down the mountain to investigate. We should have results within two days."

"Bring the bodies back. There's something suspicious about Koshna's death. I don't believe those people could have killed him."

"Yes, sir!"

"Also, round up every outsider in the city. Until we find the cause of Koshna's death, we cannot overlook a single suspicious target."

"Yes, sir!"

"However—sir, his death isn't exactly bad for you. You..."

Kandert's gaze turned razor-sharp:

"There won't be a next time. Don't make me execute you personally for Knowing Folly."

"Koshna was one of our lord's devout followers and an outstanding Executioner. His passing is a loss for Redi Core and for the Folly Prohibition Office."

"Though he was my rival, I refuse to claim victory by such an accident. Investigate with everything you have. Don't let a single trace go unexamined."

"Yes, sir!"

Kandert sounded like a fair and righteous law enforcer. But the moment his words faded, Cheng Shi and The Prisoner exchanged a look, their expressions turning odd.

He'd been lying.

This Kandert really was suspicious!

Cheng Shi thought briefly and decided to tail the man, hoping to dig up something more. But just as he was about to leave with The Prisoner, Ji Yue—who'd disappeared into the crowd only moments ago—reappeared before them. She stood at the base of a townhouse, looking up at the two on the roof, and said with a meaningful smile:

"Fate Weaver, there's something I'd like to discuss with you. If you wouldn't mind, could this... skill—um, this kung fu Ascetic Monk step aside for a moment?"

"You were about to say 'unlucky,' weren't you?" The Prisoner's head popped over the roof's edge, his gleaming bald scalp dangling like a streetlight from the eaves. "Don't think I didn't hear it. We Silence followers have sharp ears."

"..."

Ji Yue's smile stiffened. She eyed The Prisoner with an odd look and said with "candid honesty": "Then could the unlucky one please leave for a bit?"

"?"

The Prisoner blinked, then instead of getting angry, he grinned.

"You seem to be deliberately provoking me. Are you looking for a fight?"

A flash of excitement crossed Ji Yue's eyes, but then the fist she'd been clenching behind her back loosened. She shook her head: "No."

Unfortunately, that was a lie—and both Cheng Shi and The Prisoner caught it.

They both froze for a beat.

'Since when did Truth followers become this reckless?'

Cheng Shi thought: this did match his memory of Ji Yue's fiery temper, but did she even know who she'd be facing?

Second only to Zhen Yi in bringing bad luck. The Chosen One of Silence. An Ascetic Monk whose mouth ran dense enough to crush a person to death!

'Did you really think the reason he'd survived this long despite his catastrophic luck was just because nobody wanted to catch it? Dead wrong—it's because he can fight, sister! What are you thinking?!'

If not for that earlier encounter, Cheng Shi wouldn't have spared Ji Yue a second glance.

But her dead-serious expression suggested whatever she wanted to discuss might actually be important. Listening wouldn't cost him anything—might as well freeload some intel.

So after a moment's thought, Cheng Shi agreed and sent The Prisoner away.

The Prisoner stared at Cheng Shi in utter disbelief, looking positively wronged: "Men truly can't be trusted. You meet a new woman and just toss me aside?"

"..."

Cheng Shi's face darkened. He silently raised his hand, lightning crackling at the ready. The Prisoner took one look and, without another word, bolted two miles down the road.

Ji Yue shook her head with a laugh and turned to Cheng Shi. After confirming no one was around, she asked a question that made Cheng Shi's scalp prickle.

"Fate Weaver, do you know what it means to pass the torch?"

"?"

Chapter 1137: This Scene Feels Familiar

Every expression on Cheng Shi's face froze solid.

His brain was running at full speed, trying to figure out whether she'd recovered her memories and come to "reunite," or whether she hadn't recovered them and was testing the waters!

Of course, there was a third, far more terrifying possibility: that after losing her memories, Ji Yue had joined the Torchbearers all over again—and this new Torchbearer had selected him, just like Fang Shiqing had before!

Cheng Shi couldn't accept any of the three.

Though if it really was the third option, he wasn't particularly surprised that Ji Yue could join the Torchbearers. After all, this Erudite Scholar had already articulated a will nearly identical to a City Builder's back in the void.

After thinking for ages without an answer, Cheng Shi opted to say nothing at all. He simply put on a puzzled expression that clearly asked:

'You sent The Prisoner away for this? Passing what fire?'

Ji Yue seemed to have anticipated his reaction. She swept a hand through the air, deploying a barrier around them, and smiled:

"Why not come down and talk in detail?"

"I'm not that scary, am I?"

'Lady, right now you're a little scary.'

Cheng Shi pursed his lips, hopped down from the rooftop, checked the time, and said: "Vacation time is precious. Make it quick."

Ji Yue shook her head with a soft laugh:

"You're resisting me, which means you absolutely understand what I meant by 'passing the torch.'"

"Makes sense. You're a person with goodness in your heart, so naturally you can intuit my purpose."

"I won't beat around the bush, then."

Her expression turned serious:

"The gods descended and bestowed upon us a Faith Game."

"They call it a game, but I'd call it theater."

"They sit high above, pulling the strings of faith, puppeteering people through act after act on Their stage—all to inch closer to some purpose They keep hidden."

"But since it's theater, there must be tragedy and joy, reunion and parting. The joy belongs entirely to Them. The tragedy falls squarely on us."

"Mortals cannot struggle free. We can only endure Their manipulation and watch friends and loved ones be taken from us... Just as you said—we have to do something for ourselves and our friends!"

"So, Fate Weaver—are you truly content to remain at Their mercy forever?"

"..."

'This scene feels familiar.'

At this point, how could he not know? Ji Yue had definitely joined the Torchbearers. The only question was who'd recruited her.

'Surely not Fang Shiqing?'

'She shouldn't have any memories. Unless something happened afterward that I don't know about?'

Though many thoughts swirled, Cheng Shi's response came almost instantly:

"I'm content."

"???"

Ji Yue froze. Her momentum broke for a split second as she stared at Cheng Shi in disbelief, studied him for a moment, then burst into laughter.

"You're not content at all!"

"The faster you answer, the more it proves you're desperate to push me away. And the more you push, the more it proves you're discontent."

"I understand the feeling of having reservations that prevent you from taking the plunge. Just like how you saved all those people yet still insist you were just looking out for yourself."

"I was just looking out for myself." Cheng Shi's expression was strange.

"Really?"

"Then why is it that among all the people fighting for self-preservation, everyone else only thought about saving themselves—while you rescued every last soul in an entire experiment site?"

"..."

Cheng Shi was stunned. The question left him genuinely speechless, his cerebellum practically boiling.

'Excuse me, sister, since when did you analyze things from this angle?'

'Aren't you supposed to need an explanation when you do something bad? How does doing something good land me with this kind of "blame"?''

'In heaven's name—the situation was that if I didn't fight back, Zangier would've squashed me flat! Was I supposed to just stand there?'

'And besides, I only sent Zangier into Dolgod because I wanted his knowledge and treasures. How did I become a saint in your version?'

The word "goodness" wasn't one just anyone could shoulder.

Cheng Shi shook his head, deciding he couldn't keep chatting with Ji Yue. Muttering "you're insane," he turned to leave—only for Ji Yue to grab his arm.

This Torchbearer's blazing eyes locked onto his:

"The goodness in a person's heart can't be hidden."

"I'll admit my read of people isn't as sharp as his, but I'm still certain you belong with us."

"Fate Weaver—join us. Let us be your shield. Let us clear away your worries."

Cheng Shi scoffed, turning his head:

"Do you even know what my worries are? And you want to clear them? Bold words."

"Fine. I'll give you a chance. Prove it."

"If you can clear my worries, I'll agree to join."

Ji Yue's eyes lit up. She was about to make a promise when Cheng Shi continued:

"Kill Oblivion. Then I'll go with you."

"..."

Ji Yue's smile solidified. It took her a good while to confirm that Cheng Shi wasn't talking about the Oblivion follower in this trial—he meant the god Oblivion Himself.

How could the Torchbearers possibly kill a true god?!

If they could, there'd be no need to pass any torch. The spark would've become a wildfire long ago.

Seeing her reaction, Cheng Shi scoffed again:

"What's the matter? Can't do it?"

"If you can't, then don't make big promises. As everyone knows, Oblivion's followers are hunting me. The root of it is my undying enmity with Oblivion."

"If you can't resolve a problem this fundamental, then stop bothering me."

"Besides, Scholar—when you came to recruit me, was it for the City Defenders or the City Builders?"

"!!!"

Ji Yue's face changed dramatically. Her gaze turned cold in an instant, fist clenching as if ready to strike at any moment. But she quickly realized that Cheng Shi had been deceiving her all along—he'd probably already turned down the Torchbearers before.

She shook her head with a rueful laugh, then sighed bitterly:

"I see. No wonder you resisted so strongly when you heard 'pass the torch.'"

"Who approached you before?"

"Fang Shiqing?"

"It could only be her. This might be hard to believe, but I actually came to recruit you as a City Defender too."

"Because I can tell the goodness in your heart is about protecting, not attacking."

"I may be a City Builder's Fire Seeker, but I couldn't resist the urge to bring a peak player with genuine goodness into our fold."

"But coming now... was my own wishful thinking..."

She released Cheng Shi's hand, her eyes still brimming with admiration.

"You know the name of 'passing the torch,' yet you've never done anything to extinguish it. You may not be a true Torchbearer, but you will always be a friend of the Torchbearers."

With that, she bowed deeply to Cheng Shi.

When met with force, Cheng Shi only pushed back harder. But when you played this card...

Cheng Shi eyed the back of Ji Yue's bowed neck, debating whether to give this second Fire Seeker a chop.

But after thinking it over, he let it go. Ji Yue wasn't Fang Shiqing. If the chop didn't knock her out, he'd end up fighting a Torchbearer.

Ji Yue of course had no idea what filthy thoughts Cheng Shi was entertaining. She wanted to make one final pitch—even an honorary membership would do—but when she raised her head, Cheng Shi was nowhere to be seen.

Staring at the empty alley, Ji Yue didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

"...This Fate Weaver really is something."

Chapter 1138: Investigation Report on the Fool-Hunting Statue Ravings Incident

"She's a Torchbearer too?!"

"Then we're colleagues!"

The moment The Prisoner said that, Cheng Shi knew he'd never shake this deadweight.

After leaving Ji Yue without a word, he hadn't gone looking for The Prisoner. Instead, he'd quietly chosen another direction and, after asking a few passersby, headed straight for Kandert's residence.

But he hadn't made it two blocks before The Prisoner materialized at his side again, completely unfazed by Cheng Shi's attempt to ditch him, chattering away as always:

"Do you think I should tell her I'm also a Torchbearer?"

"Qin Xin is so inconsiderate—he never even mentioned my name to the Fire Seekers."

"What if I mistake another Torchbearer for an enemy and pick a fight?"

"I left a pretty decent impression on her just now, right? Surely I fit her image of a covert special operative?"

"..."

'If you fit even a little, why do you think she approached me instead of you?'

Cheng Shi couldn't be bothered to burst that bubble and pressed on alone.

Seeing Cheng Shi ignore him, The Prisoner pondered for a moment, then announced: "I think I should come clean, so she knows she can call me for backup if things get dangerous!"

He stopped and turned to leave, but his eyes stayed glued to Cheng Shi—clearly gauging his reaction.

Cheng Shi didn't spare him a glance. He'd already slipped into Kandert's house and begun carefully searching the place.

Kandert was currently out leading the Folly Prohibition Guards in hunting down the escapees, leaving the home empty. Cheng Shi went straight to the study and began rifling through documents, hoping to find some lead on the Eye of Mockery.

He hadn't been at it long before The Prisoner came in too. He stood off to the side with an odd expression, quietly protesting: "How come you didn't stop me?"

Cheng Shi continued working, answering offhandedly: "Why would I stop you?"

"If I went to talk to the Scholar out of the blue, anyone watching would get curious. And curiosity leads to digging, which increases the Torchbearers' risk of exposure!"

"You're smart enough to see that, and you've helped the Torchbearers before—you're a friend. So if you thought of this, why didn't you stop me?"

"..."

'Seriously, have you Torchbearers caught some kind of disease before you've even managed to pass the torch?'

'You're just like Ji Yue—I did absolutely nothing, and somehow I'm stuck carrying the blame.'

'Do I look like a field cook to you?'

"I didn't think of it."

Cheng Shi had figured it out: to beat The Prisoner at his own unlucky game, your logic had to either be straighter or more bizarre than his.

He couldn't out-bizarre the man, so blunt honesty was all that was left.

'Never thought I'd see the day when a follower of Deceit was forced into playing the honest man.'

But the answer clearly didn't satisfy The Prisoner, who proceeded to pace around Cheng Shi, droning on endlessly.

"I thought she made a great case. Why won't you agree?"

"If you agree, we'll be colleagues! Isn't that great?"

"Sure, we're already family, but joining the Torchbearers would make us doubly connected, brother-in-law!"

"Why won't you look at me? You feel guilty!"

"Not looking means you're dodging, and dodging means you actually want to join. Am I right?!"

"..."

Cheng Shi had truly reached his limit. He couldn't make heads or tails of the documents on the desk to begin with, and with a fly buzzing nonstop beside him, his frazzled nerves snapped. He snatched a file from the center of the desk and shoved it into The Prisoner's arms:

"If your mouth absolutely cannot stay idle—if you must say something—then read me what's in this file."

The Prisoner blinked, looked down at the document, and began reading aloud without thinking:

"Investigation Report on the Fool-Hunting Statue Ravings Incident... huh, sounds like a local urban legend."

"???"

Cheng Shi was stunned.

Not because of the content—but because The Prisoner could actually read the writing here!

This was a Civilization Lonely Tower from the Chaos Epoch. The script had evolved beyond recognition from the Civilization Era's baseline. He'd never expected The Prisoner to know this text.

He'd been pestering Brother Mouth to no avail, resigned to missing this information. Now that The Prisoner was literate, Cheng Shi's brow lit up with delight:

"Keep reading! What else does it say?"

The Prisoner gave him a strange look, closed the file, and studied him skeptically:

"You're overdoing the act."

"You obviously already read it. Why do you need me to read it out loud? You're just deflecting, which only proves the Scholar was right."

"The more you resist, the closer your heart is."

"..."

Every trace of delight froze on Cheng Shi's face. He slapped his own cheeks and decided to try a different approach.

His eyes turned, and he nodded:

"Yes. I admit I'm resisting. I also admit I'm drawn to it. As long as you stop talking and read this entire file to me, I'll consider joining the Torchbearers."

The Prisoner wasn't stupid. He rubbed his bald head and gave Cheng Shi a disdainful look: "You're lying. Don't take me for an idiot."

Cheng Shi smirked: "How do you know I'm lying if you don't try?"

"..."

That single line shut The Prisoner up.

An open scheme. An utterly naked open scheme!

The Prisoner couldn't refuse—because he genuinely wanted Cheng Shi to join the Torchbearers. After his expression cycled through several phases, he obediently read the report aloud.

But through it all, he never once believed that either of the two people present was illiterate. He was convinced this was just Cheng Shi using the document to plug his mouth.

"Over the past several months, residents have intermittently reported hearing ravings emanating from within the Fool-Hunting Statue as they passed by. The following cases were documented:"

"Lophis—heard the ravings while passing the statue after drinking. Anludes—heard the ravings while praying before the statue after drinking. Makabaka—after drinking..."

"Funny, they were all drunk. I told you it was an urban legend..."

"The content of the ravings could not be transcribed into text. According to the witnesses, it felt more like a call from the blood."

"The Folly Prohibition Office assigned personnel to investigate. Guards were ordered to drink and then perform worship before the statue—no anomalies detected... Sound-capturing equipment was deployed—no anomalies detected... Witnesses accompanied investigators to the site—no anomalies detected..."

"Gotta hand it to Folly's followers—their investigation methods are more rigorous than Truth's. Though for something this minor, it's a bit much."

"...(Various investigation methods omitted)..."

"Lord Koshna personally conducted a night vigil... hm? Where's the rest?"

"Oh, page turn..."

"The statue was deemed free of any raving anomalies. Investigation closed by order."

When he finished, The Prisoner raised an eyebrow, amused:

"This report is a real bootlicking piece. After pages and pages of rigorous testing that could've already reached a conclusion—why shoehorn in the Executioner's personal decision at the end?"

"Seems like no matter where you go, you can't escape workplace sycophancy."

Hearing this, a sharp gleam flashed in Cheng Shi's eyes.

True, the report did have a problem—but it wasn't about bootlicking. The tone shifted dramatically between the first section and the last.

Even if they wanted to flatter the Executioner, why wouldn't the Folly Prohibition Office at least make the cosmetic effort look convincing? They could've easily written up Koshna's contributions in greater detail.

Coupling that with Kandert's lie, Cheng Shi suspected the investigation report had been tampered with—and the altered section was precisely the part about Koshna's personal investigation!

Cheng Shi took the report back from The Prisoner, spread it across the desk, and carefully compared the paper's traces. Before long, he pointed to some barely noticeable paper fragments in the binding and grinned.

The Prisoner's eyes followed Cheng Shi's finger. He gaped: "Pages were torn out of the report?"

Cheng Shi drummed his fingers on the desk, his smile mocking.

"Exactly. Someone concealed part of this report's conclusions."

"I just don't know whether someone was trying to deceive Kandert, or whether Kandert read it and then destroyed the key pages himself."

"But regardless—the fact that even the locals have doubts about the statue confirms my growing suspicion. Redi Core's secret is hidden inside that statue."

The Prisoner nodded earnestly, his expression dead serious:

"I agree completely. But let's shelve that for now."

"I finished reading the file, so we're officially colleagues now, right, brother-in-law?"

"...?"

Chapter 1139: You Are the World's Answer

"Aren't we already colleagues?"

Cheng Shi's eyes rolled as he argued: "Teammates traveling together in a trial with different objectives— isn't that basically colleagues from the same company working on different projects?"

The Prisoner's expression stiffened: "You're going back on your word?"

Cheng Shi spread his hands with a smile:

"How is this going back on anything?"

"I only said I'd consider it after you finished reading the file. Well, I've considered—and the Torchbearers aren't for me."

The Prisoner's eyelid hammered. He felt like he was looking in a mirror.

"Why won't you join?"

Seeing how stubborn The Prisoner was, Cheng Shi asked curiously: "Why do you insist I join?"

"Because I believe you're the answer to this world. Only if you join the Torchbearers will the Torchbearers have any hope of carrying the flame forward!"

"!!!?"

Hearing this, Cheng Shi's expression changed. Every look on his face vanished as he fixed The Prisoner with a heavy, searching gaze—trying to determine whether the man was spouting nonsense or actually knew something.

'He can't possibly have memories of the Real Universe. Otherwise, why would he suddenly say something like that?'

The incident at the 0221 Experiment Site had quickly boosted his reputation, but nowhere near enough to earn him a title like "the world's answer."

Besides, The Prisoner wasn't a Joker. He had no idea about the truth of the universe, and the Jokers would never leak a secret this life-or-death. So for the moment, Cheng Shi couldn't think of a single reason that would lead to such a statement.

Except pure bluffing.

But the bluff was terrifyingly precise—hitting Cheng Shi's exact weak spot and carrying an unmistakable flavor of "fixed destiny." That's why he was now wondering whether The Prisoner had somehow retained his memories.

Yet that seemed impossible. Even the gods' memories had been jointly erased by the Fun God and Time. A mortal—one who hadn't even been at the storm's epicenter—how could he have survived the world's destruction, witnessed that scene, and still have memories of it?

If the one retaining memories was his Benefactor, Silence... that might make a little more sense. But then again, Silence had personally moved against Cheng Shi before. Logically, He could be on either side, and if Silence truly had retained memories and shared them with The Prisoner...

'That makes no sense at all.'

At this point, his speculation was no different from wild guessing. It was more rational to believe The Prisoner had just said it offhandedly to trick him into joining the Torchbearers.

But what Cheng Shi didn't know was that his wild guess was at least half right.

The Prisoner had indeed come for Cheng Shi—but not for Cheng Shi the player. He'd come for...

Yu Xi!

The Flame of Hope had moved fast. After parting from Cheng Shi, he'd casually dropped Yu Xi's divine name during a conversation with Qin Xin, subtly hinting that the success or failure of the Torchbearers' God Creation Plan might hinge on this Deceit Envoy.

Qin Xin had been startled to hear the name—he hadn't known a Servant God lurked within the Void path. But thinking about it, he found it understandable. Of course Deceit's Envoy would be shrouded in mystery.

To learn more about this unknown Envoy, Qin Xin gave an assignment to The Prisoner—someone he'd never before given any orders to.

He felt that among the Torchbearers' current ranks, very few could investigate an Envoy. The Prisoner happened to be an unusually suitable candidate.

The Prisoner was thrilled. The moment he received the mission, he felt he'd finally earned recognition. His motivation was sky-high.

But investigating a Servant God no one had ever heard of was staggeringly difficult. He wasn't the intel-rich History School. So the clever Ascetic Monk devised two approaches:

One—rob the History School. Two—go ask his Benefactor directly.

The first method failed. He did manage to get matched with a key History School figure in a trial, but Zhen Xin saw through him immediately and conned him instead.

As it happened, the History School was also investigating Yu Xi. So Zhen Xin goaded The Prisoner into asking his Benefactor himself.

The Prisoner was many things—unlucky at times, yes—but brave, without question.

He actually went. He plainly stated his desire to learn about Yu Xi, using it as his prayer to request an audience.

To his utter astonishment, the colossal Leaking World Silent Puppet actually granted him an audience!

Though one god and one mortal stared at each other in the void without a word, silence could hardly stop The Prisoner of all people. The Silence follower started babbling right in front of his Benefactor's face.

"Lord Benefactor, I know You like to keep everything bottled up inside. But that's fine—I can speak on Your behalf."

"I am Your mouthpiece, the channel through which You express Your heart to the world."

"I'm searching for information about the Deceit Envoy Yu Xi. You must know about Him. The fact that You granted me an audience means You're willing to let me approach Him. So where can I find Your guidance?"

"Want to spell something out using these puppets? Or assimilate me into a signpost and then un-puppet me? Or just throw me somewhere I'd bump into Him?"

"None of those work? Let me think..."

"The History School knows about Yu Xi, but they won't tell me. Those Zhen sisters are both rotten to the core—no chance of getting the truth from them. But..."

"Hey, wait—if the Zhen sisters know about Yu Xi's existence, then other people might know too. Could You give me a nudge? Send me to someone in the know so I can feel them out?"

"Who knows—maybe I'll even convert Yu Xi to our Silence faith!"

Whether it was that last line that did it or not, the massive Leaking World Silent Puppet shifted ever so slightly—and hurled The Prisoner out of the void.

When he opened his eyes again, he was in this Folly trial.

So from the very first moment he saw Cheng Shi at the start, The Prisoner's instincts told him: the answer he sought lay with this brother-in-law.

And logically, since even Zhen Xin knew about Yu Xi, Cheng Shi—as "family"—had no reason not to know. So he followed his gut and began his campaign to get close to Cheng Shi.

And this line about being "the world's answer" was the ultimate probe—born from combining his guesses about Yu Xi with what Qin Xin had revealed about the God Creation Plan.

Cheng Shi's reaction alone told The Prisoner everything he needed to know.

This man definitely knew something—especially about that Yu Xi who could aid the Torchbearers!

Cheng Shi also knew his reaction had leaked information. But he couldn't help being shocked, because the statement was too perfectly "fated."

He recovered quickly, however, and pivoted into an act:

"Sorry to disappoint—you're wrong."

"I don't know how to pass any torch, and I have no idea how it's done."

"If you absolutely insist on connecting me to fire, then all I can tell you is: I know how to start one. Specifically, a big one!"

With that, Cheng Shi produced a lighter from his personal space, lit the file in his hand, and tossed the burning pages at the curtains behind him.

Flames quickly raced along the flammable fabric, spreading in every direction, making the already bright study even more blindingly vivid.

The Prisoner's eyes went wide at the spectacle:

"If you came here specifically to find clues, why are you burning them all?"

Cheng Shi curled his lips, gazing toward the courtyard with a cryptic smile:

"You're the one who kept whispering 'pass the torch, pass the torch' in my ear. If I can't see any fire, how am I supposed to pass it?"

"When you think about it, this is me getting closer to your side."

"Hmm... good point." The Prisoner nodded thoughtfully. A second later, right in front of Cheng Shi, he produced a barrel of gasoline.

"?"

Chapter 1140: So You're Cheng Jie

Flames consumed the entire house in an instant.

If Cheng Shi hadn't run fast enough, this fire really might have been "passed on"—through his own body, no less.

When the two stumbled out of the roaring inferno, covered in soot, Cheng Shi glared at The Prisoner with a face blacker than coal, barely restraining the urge to punch him into the ground.

He snarled through clenched teeth:

"How did you dare pour gasoline on yourself?!!"

That's right—The Prisoner hadn't splashed the gasoline on the study furniture. He'd doused himself and Cheng Shi with it.

The Prisoner still held the empty barrel. He rubbed his bald head, looked at Cheng Shi, and genuinely couldn't see the problem.

"You said you wanted to pass the torch. If the fire doesn't reach your own body, how do you pass it?"

"I—"

Cheng Shi had gone numb. He decided humanity still understood far too little about this man.

Though The Prisoner's statement did raise a real point—not about his motor-mouth, but about willpower.

If one only acted after the fire reached their own body, that wasn't passing the torch—that was desperate survival.

The Torchbearers' situation might be dire, but they weren't the type to wait until the flames singed their eyebrows before mobilizing. Their will was far nobler and far clearer than that of mere survivors.

Of course, Cheng Shi hadn't set the fire to "get closer to the Torchbearers." That was just an excuse to shut The Prisoner up. His real goal was still the investigation.

Since clues had surfaced at Kandert's place and Cheng Shi now suspected the man was hiding something, he might as well use a fire to light his own way forward.

If Kandert truly had a guilty conscience, the firelight would flush out his shadow.

Sure enough, upon receiving word that his own house was ablaze, Kandert dropped everything and rushed back at top speed. He led his Folly Prohibition Guards in extinguishing the fire, and before the last embers had even died, he strode into the ruins with an ashen face, surveying everything.

He went straight to the study. But after a single glance at the desk's ashes, he left. Then he moved to the bedroom, entering and exiting the ruins multiple times, checking something unknown—until his brow finally relaxed. Without a word, he departed the scene.

All of this was observed by the two players hiding nearby. The Prisoner pointed toward the bedroom and whispered:

"So you wanted Kandert to find the clue for you?"

"You're really sharp, brother-in-law."

Cheng Shi's eyes glinted as he stared at the bedroom. He knew the fire had been worth it. But his mouth still snapped: "Don't call me brother-in-law."

"Did you two have a fight?"

"..."

"But if I don't call you brother-in-law, it feels like something's missing. Like we're not close anymore."

"We were never close!"

"That really hurts, brother-in-law. I—okay, okay! No more brother-in-law! But I do need to call you something. 'Fate Weaver' sounds too formal, and just using your name feels off..."

"Oh, I've got it! How about I call you Cheng Jie?"

"The World's Answer! How about that?!"

"?????"

Kandert was about to order the area sealed off and leave the fire scene. Cheng Shi had been ready to move in for a closer look, but The Prisoner's "Cheng Jie" hard-locked him in place.

His eyelid twitched violently. He held back for a long time before reminding himself it wasn't worth getting angry at an idiot.

But "Cheng Jie" was truly revolting. If that nickname got out, he'd be nailed to the pillar of shame!

So Cheng Shi exhaled forcefully, his face dark: "Just go back to calling me brother-in-law."

"You two made up?"

"You weren't secretly calling my sister while we were chatting, were you?"

"..."

'Who on earth ranked this guy second?!'

'I object!'

'Make him first!'

WHAM!

Enough was enough.

Cheng Shi's true body might not be a Hero of Today, but he packed a decent punch. One blow drove The Prisoner straight into the dirt. Then, dodging the perimeter guards, he slipped back into the ruins.

He retraced Kandert's route and arrived at the bedroom wreckage. After scanning the area, he found nothing—and frowned.

The Prisoner's mouth had no filter, but he also knew that interrupting Cheng Shi's train of thought right now would earn him another beating. So he managed a rare stretch of silence.

It was precisely those few breaths of precious quiet that produced a flash of inspiration. A possibility lit up in Cheng Shi's mind.

He snapped his fingers and pointed at the ground beneath The Prisoner: "Move."

The Prisoner looked wounded: "I promise I won't question you and my sister's relationship ever again. Don't make me leave."

"..." Cheng Shi's eyelid convulsed. He squeezed the words from his throat in a barely contained growl: "Move. You're standing on the clue."

"Huh?"

The Prisoner blinked, then looked down. Beneath his feet were countless footprints—Kandert's, left from pacing in and out. The ash-blanketed floor naturally showed many prints.

But the odd thing was: only the footprints under The Prisoner's feet were noticeably deeper. Everywhere else in the bedroom, the prints were shallow.

The Prisoner wasn't stupid. He understood in a second. "There's something under me?"

"Exactly—something's buried here!"

"Kandert kept going in and out of the bedroom not because the room itself held anything important, but to verify whether whatever's beneath this patch of ground had been disturbed!"

"His repeated trampling was his way of confirming the object was still safe. But with everyone watching, he couldn't do anything more."

"So move—right now. This is our only window to discover what he's hiding down there."

The Prisoner's excitement surged. Nothing thrilled a Silence follower more than uncovering someone's secret.

He stepped back immediately and stomped at the edge of the area. The massive force caused the surrounding ground to collapse—yet the central section rose up in an almost magical fashion.

The mastery of force was nothing short of miraculous. Even Cheng Shi had to silently applaud.

Better yet, this man was a Silence follower—meaning no matter how much noise occurred here, the guards outside would hear absolutely nothing.

And so, before their eyes, the earth erupted—and from underground came a...

Corpse!!

The body had been partially melted and charred by the heat above, but it still looked fairly fresh. Time of death: yesterday at the latest.

The corpse was completely naked—its clothes clearly stripped—but even with the face twisted and warped, both of them immediately recognized who it was.

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted. He let out a cold laugh and clapped his hands:

"What a lovely little masquerade!"

"All I want to know is—if the man before us is the real Kandert, then who was the 'Kandert' who came here just now?"

The Prisoner rubbed his head, looking thoughtful:

"Strange. I didn't detect any trace of disguise on that Kandert. If he really was a fake, then it could only be one of your Deceit followers."

"But a Deceit follower showing up here feels a bit illogical."

"Though it does confirm one thing: whoever killed Kandert and impersonated him is definitely trying to get close to the statue's secret!"

For once, The Prisoner was serious—and it actually impressed Cheng Shi.

He nodded:

"Your reasoning should be correct. But whether this person is a Deceit follower remains to be proven. In this era, there's one god whose followers appear far more frequently than the Fun God's."

"Chaos?"

"Exactly—Chaos!"

"I want to know who's actually fishing in these muddied waters."

"So why don't we ask Kandert himself?"

With that, Cheng Shi produced his Finger Bone Brooch.