

The Gods 621

Chapter 621: One Teammate Down Right from the Start

Dry. Impossibly dry.

The instant his five senses returned, Cheng Shi discovered his surroundings were blisteringly arid. The parched air scraped the last traces of moisture from his nasal membranes the moment it was inhaled—as if the air itself were more dehydrated than his flesh-and-blood body.

Consciousness rushed in next. He felt a tightness in his nose and instinctively wrinkled it. Before he could process what was happening, warmth trickled out.

Nosebleed.

Cheng Shi jolted, eyes snapping open. But he paid zero attention to the twin rivulets of blood running down his lips and chin; instead, he immediately pulled out his wristwatch and checked the time.

In a Time trial, no one could afford to ignore the clock.

And what he saw nearly scared his soul out of his body.

7:59:55!

Five seconds to the hour!

'This is bad—can't just sit here and die!'

Every nerve pulled taut. For Time, the hour mark was sacrosanct—its Oracle Act was precision and punctuality. In a Time trial, every stroke of the hour demanded utmost vigilance.

Especially after the stunt Pointer Knight Jiang Chi had pulled in the trial before last—that performance had permanently branded Cheng Shi with a deep wariness of the first hour mark.

So the instant he checked the time, this cautious warrior pulled out a lance—and without even looking, swept it behind him.

Someone was back there!

Though only two seconds had elapsed between opening his eyes and the backswing, Cheng Shi had used his peripheral vision to scan every inch of his surroundings.

He was unquestionably in a rundown inn. Mud-plastered walls and rotting plank beds told him the trial's starting locale wasn't exactly prosperous. The two beds crammed side by side also conveyed a crucial detail: this was a double room.

A double room in an inn wasn't unusual. But as a player's spawn point, it demanded immediate attention.

His hearing and smell had been working overtime too. At the moment he'd checked his watch, he'd caught heavy breathing, the scrape of metal—and a faint scent of blood drifting toward him.

Given every red flag, Cheng Shi had made the snap decision—and greeted his "roommate" with maximum enthusiasm.

A lance swing!

He wasn't picking a fight. He simply refused to be caught in another "Pointer Knight" scenario. At least at this particular hour mark, before confirming the identity of whoever was behind him, he couldn't let Time's tricks repeat.

The Time Battlefield's rules required activation on an undisputed hour—and the dispute had to be resolved by the next one. By starting a conflict before the hour struck, he could nullify the first hour's window for opening a Time Battlefield!

And so, the next second—

CLANG!

Steel met steel with an explosive ring. Cheng Shi's right hand went numb—his lance had struck something like a block of iron. He froze, immediately released his grip and dodged. In the split second he twisted aside, a silver gleam sliced through—a slender sword point thrusting at where he'd just been standing.

But the thrust was aimed low. Judging by its trajectory, it wasn't targeting a vital—more like the fleshy area of his thigh or hip.

"..."

Alarm flashed through Cheng Shi's mind. He kept retreating. One glance at the sword's angle told him his roommate probably wasn't a Time follower either—the man was defending against Time's tricks too.

Cheng Shi rolled clear. Seeing his watch had safely ticked past the hour, he rose from the corner with a light chuckle, brushed off the dust, and greeted his equally cautious teammate with a friendly smile:

"What a rare—"

But the words died in his throat. The smile froze. Surprise flooded his features. He studied the hulking man before him, looked him up and down several times, and finally clasped his fists in genuine respect:

"Impressive. You have my admiration. You're the first person I've seen bring cosplay into a trial.

But bro—who are you going as? Lü Bu? Xiang Yu?"

Indeed—the man before him was extraordinarily tall, at least six-foot-four, clad head to toe in battle armor and iron greaves. The exaggerated getup made it impossible not to mistake him for a cosplay enthusiast.

That also explained the metallic clang—Cheng Shi's backswing had struck the man's steel vambrace, leaving nothing but a faint gray-white streak. Zero penetration.

What was notable, though, was the slender sword in the armored man's grip—far too delicate for the rest of his ensemble. Like a legendary berserker picking up a rapier.

He wore no helmet. Cropped hair, blade-sharp brows, hawkish eyes—an imposing figure by any measure. But the twin red streaks beneath his nose mirrored Cheng Shi's own, instantly deflating the intimidation factor into something almost comical. Though it did soften the oppressive aura of all that heavy armor.

Cheng Shi bit his lip, barely keeping a straight face.

'Tsk—before the dry air, all men are equal.'

But beyond the nosebleed, Cheng Shi noticed the man was injured—and badly.

The faint blood-scent hadn't come from the man's face. That tiny nosebleed couldn't have produced a noticeable odor so quickly. What Cheng Shi had smelled was bleeding from under the armor—from the body itself.

'Fighting to the wire right before a special trial? Interesting.'

The armored man's sharp gaze tracked Cheng Shi's evasion path. When he registered his teammate's face, surprise flashed, then a rueful smile and shake of the head—eyes full of emotion.

"Cheng Shi. Never expected to run into you."

"..."

The smile vanished. The worst-case scenario had arrived. After the past few trials, his face had clearly spread through the peak player circuit. More and more people would recognize him going forward.

But the man's tone suggested genuine familiarity.

No hostility in those eyes. So—whose friend was he?

Cheng Shi's eyes rolled thoughtfully. He retrieved his lance from the ground, stowed it, and observed that the man made no threatening move—further confirming his guess. He straightened up, flashed a bright smile, and got straight to the point:

"My apologies—had to be careful in a Time trial. Nothing personal. Since you know me, I'll skip the introduction.

What should I call you, bro?"

"Qin Xin." The armored warrior laughed heartily and moved to step forward, hand extended in friendship—only for his face to drain white. He staggered and toppled backward.

Seeing this seemingly friendly teammate about to crash to the floor, Cheng Shi frowned, immediately raised his hands—

And clapped them over his ears.

BOOM—

The heavy armor slammed into the ground, shaking the entire room. Dust cascaded from the ceiling. For a moment, the room became a sandstorm.

Watching the scene, Cheng Shi's expression teetered between alarm and suspicion.

'Good thing I covered my ears fast. That impact—wait. Qin Xin?'

His eyebrow twitched. The last time he'd heard that name was from Zhen Yi's mouth.

Back then, Zhen Yi—posing as her future self—had pointed to a scar beneath her ribs and said: "Qin Xin did this. He's not a bad person, but his luck is atrocious. Avoid him if you can."

'So this is the Qin Xin who made Zhen Yi say "avoid him if you can"?!'

Cheng Shi's gaze instantly turned assessing. What had happened between this man and Zhen Yi to earn such profound grudge?

'Was she afraid of being punched into paste? Is that why she spoke so disparagingly?'

Still, just looking at the man's build and gear was enough to give most players pause.

'But why did she say his luck was bad?'

Thinking about it—in history, both Xiang Yu and Lü Bu had ended rather... poorly.

'Hiss—'

'Surely it's not like that... right?'

A thousand thoughts raced through his mind, but Cheng Shi snapped back quickly, studying the collapsed armored figure with renewed caution.

"Bro?"

No response from Qin Xin. Even his breathing had grown faint. This didn't look like an act. Cheng Shi's brow furrowed. He flicked a scalpel into his palm, dropped a die at his feet, and slowly approached.

Before long, he confirmed it: Qin Xin was genuinely wounded—severely so. That he'd managed to enter in this condition could only mean one thing: the battle he'd been fighting hadn't ended when the special trial pulled him in!

'What a warrior. Don't tell me he's... a War follower?'

Mid-thought, Cheng Shi abruptly halted and backed away—putting distance between himself and the fallen man once more.

He wasn't refusing to help. He was clearing himself of suspicion first—because he'd already heard hurried footsteps outside the door.

Chapter 622: A Familiar-Strangers Match

Within two seconds, the door was shoved open. An ethereal, slightly anxious female voice rang out first, followed by a woman in a black blindfold who hiked up her tattered black gauze dress and rushed in.

"Qin Xin!! Is that you?"

The moment she entered, she spotted Qin Xin on the floor. Without a word, she retrieved a healing potion from her inventory.

When she sensed someone staring blankly at her from the corner, she froze—then grew even more startled:

"Cheng Shi?"

Those black-cloth-covered eyes slowly "looked" toward Cheng Shi's legs, their "gaze" locking onto his feet.

"Those feet. That's you?"

"???"

'What feet?'

'Whose feet?'

'I have no feet!'

Cheng Shi's mind blanked. His first instinct was to deflect blame—and when he realized there was no blame to deflect, he snapped his gaze to his own feet.

For some reason, under this woman's "stare," he suddenly wanted to hide them. But then it hit him: the "feet" she was talking about weren't his current physical feet. They were... feet from a prophecy?

'She saw me in a prophecy?'

Entirely possible. After all, she was a Prophet—the Chosen of Fate—the one they called the Blind One: An Mingyu.

Indeed, Cheng Shi had recognized her. He'd never actually met her in person. Her appearance alone wouldn't have immediately connected to the Blind One—there were plenty of eccentrically dressed people in this world, and who knew what teammates were hiding under their odd outfits.

But the moment he heard that faintly familiar voice, the blank image of "the Blind One" crystallized in his mind. He confirmed she was the An Mingyu he'd spoken to on the phone.

'Another Chosen. Another Chosen-level match!'

The interesting part? She was the Chosen of Fate. And as it happened, Cheng Shi ranked highest on Fate's Ladder of Ascent. So if he were to take out this Chosen right now—

"You didn't attack him, did you?" An Mingyu knelt beside Qin Xin, slowly pouring the potion into his mouth. She turned to look at Cheng Shi, more puzzled than accusatory.

Cheng Shi was even more lost.

'Lady—where did you learn this instant-familiarity thing? We've only spoken on the phone once. You don't even know for sure it was me. How are you already tossing blame and suspicion?'

'I'm a law-abiding citizen. How could I possibly—'

'Oh wait. I actually did attack. But testing the waters counts as attacking? And that little tap couldn't even scratch his armor—no way I knocked him out.'

'He fainted from an old wound. What's that got to do with me?'

A thousand rebuttals flashed through his mind, but in the end Cheng Shi just shook his head slightly.

He chose not to explain. Because as the Blind One administered the potion, another person strolled in through the door.

A tall, lean man in casual clothes. Expression somewhat stern, but not unapproachable.

He first frowned at Qin Xin on the floor, then gave Cheng Shi a brief nod—a greeting. His alert eyes swept the room twice before he remarked thoughtfully: "Looks like we've got a familiar-faces match."

He clearly wasn't referring to himself—but to the three before him.

Cheng Shi's lip twitched. His expression turned odd.

'Familiar? Sure—we all know each other's names. But that's literally the extent of it. This is the first time we've actually met.'

'Great. A first-meeting "familiar faces" match.'

Qin Xin's thunderous crash had drawn every eye in the inn. Soon, a crowd of rubberneckers gathered at the door.

From his position deep inside the room, Cheng Shi glanced sideways and noticed the inn's guests seemed... unusual.

Some dressed lavishly, others in rags. Every ethnicity seemed represented, with almost nothing in common—except for one detail: they all gave off the vibe of shrewd, calculating merchants. Pairs of beady, rat-like eyes glittered as they sized up the room, clearly assessing whether this "commotion" might be profitable.

Before long, two more players pushed through the crowd—unmistakably players by their gear.

Leading the way was a man in fitted leather, smile radiant and manner sunny. When someone blocked his path, he'd offer kind words while politely squeezing past. Of course, if someone refused to budge, his broad shoulders would teach them a quick lesson.

Behind him followed a woman with a short bob and princess-cut bangs, wearing a pure-white trailing mage robe. Her face was ice-cold—eyes brimming with barely restrained killing intent.

She kept close behind the man. As she passed, the inn's guests shrank back a step from her bone-chilling aura. Those too slow earned a venomous glare—eyes that all but screamed: 'Do you want to die?'

The pair shouldered their way in. Leather-jacket politely dismissed the onlookers with a couple of throwaway lines, then closed the door behind him, mopping his brow.

At last, all six players of this trial stood face to face in the sweltering room.

Meanwhile, Qin Xin—revived by the potion—opened his eyes on the floor. Those sharp hawk-eyes swept across the faces before him, and the taut wire of tension in his chest loosened a fraction.

"Mingyu. It really is you. I—"

He cut himself off mid-sentence. Then slowly tilted his head upward—toward Cheng Shi's feet.

The sudden attention made Cheng Shi flinch. Worse, as Qin Xin turned to look, every person in the room followed his gaze—all staring at Cheng Shi's feet.

"..."

'Okay, people—if I've done something wrong, just kill me. Don't let me die of embarrassment like this.'

'You're all staring so hard I don't even dare curl my toes. Afraid it'll turn into a foot performance for your entertainment.'

Perhaps sensing Cheng Shi's discomfort, Qin Xin thumped back flat on the ground with a BANG and burst out laughing:

"So those feet... they're him?"

An Mingyu shook her head with a helpless smile—one that seemed to be growing louder by the second.

Cheng Shi had reached peak speechlessness. Eyes twitching, he addressed the two giggling conspirators:

"You two. If you don't explain what this is about, and keep laughing like that, don't blame me for wiping the smiles off your faces."

At this, everyone in the room perked up. The other three members, eager spectators, each took a step back—fully committed to their ringside seats. The Blind One's eyebrow arched upward. She actually looked... expectant.

As for Qin Xin, he reined in his laughter. His lips still strained with suppressed amusement, but clearly, he was trying to give Cheng Shi due respect.

"I'm curious about you, Cheng Shi. Before I explain anything—I'd rather see just how you plan to wipe the smiles off our faces."

It was the Blind One speaking. Her face was covered in black cloth, yet Cheng Shi could swear he saw a pair of curious eyes gleaming underneath.

Those eyes didn't look like Fate. They looked more like... Deceit.

'Fine. You really think I have no temper.'

Cheng Shi gave a cold snort. In an instant, his expression transformed. He whipped out a several-meter-long white cloth strip from his inventory and, in the blink of an eye, swaddled both legs and feet like a mummy—wrapped tight from top to bottom.

Everyone stared in stunned silence. Then, one by one, their expressions became more spectacular than the last—because clearly printed at the end of that white cloth were four bold characters:

PAY TO VIEW.

He hadn't just written these on the spot. He'd simply pulled out a pre-made strip, which meant the Fate Weaver standing before them had been keeping a "PAY TO VIEW" cloth in his inventory all along.

So... what kind of normal person stores a "PAY TO VIEW" banner in their inventory?

The Blind One stared, slack-jawed. She'd been half-considering pushing Qin Xin to test Cheng Shi's combat prowess—but he hadn't made a single aggressive move. And yet he'd genuinely stopped her laughter, because he'd snuffed out the very source of their amusement.

"..."

An Mingyu tilted her head dazedly. After several furtive "glances" at the cloth on Cheng Shi's legs, she finally conceded with genuine wonder:

"No wonder Xin Xin had such a strong impression of you. You... really are an extraordinary person."

Chapter 623: The Trial's First Lie

"No need to be tense. We mean no harm."

The awkward atmosphere lingered for a while before Qin Xin, still on the floor, sat up, rolled his shoulders, and spoke with a smile:

"You've probably figured it out. We ran into some trouble—serious trouble. So I asked Mingyu to make a prophecy.

The prophetic vision showed me 'dying' at someone's feet..."

Cheng Shi's eyelid twitched. He understood now.

At the trial's start, Qin Xin had fainted from his wounds. Cheng Shi had tiptoed over for a look—and that scene had become the Blind One's prophecy.

They'd assumed someone had killed Qin Xin. But in reality, it was a complete misunderstanding.

'And what a painfully awkward misunderstanding.' Cheng Shi irritably stowed his performance cloth, casting a faintly mocking glance at Qin Xin and the Blind One.

"So the Chosen of Fate's divination skills aren't all that impressive.

Maybe Fate... doesn't care for you much?"

"..."

"..."

Qin Xin's smile froze. The Blind One stiffened in place. Even the others looked at Cheng Shi with a new hint of respect.

'Mocking the Fate Chosen to her face about Fate not favoring her? Does this guy not know how to write those two characters?'

"Alright, I'm not petty. Luckily a misunderstanding is just a misunderstanding—aside from making me sweat a couple extra drops, no real harm done. Otherwise you two would've owed me."

As he spoke, Cheng Shi surveyed the five others in the room, committing each face to memory. Then he pulled a fresh smile and took the initiative to introduce himself:

"Most of you probably know me, but let me do this properly.

Cheng Shi. Fate Weaver. Probably the Fate Weaver you've heard of."

His directness earned glances from the others. The leather-jacket man studied Cheng Shi with interest and asked:

"Did a god really summon you for an audience?"

"Bro, we're not close enough for that kind of opener. I don't even know your name."

Leather-jacket blinked, then scratched his head with a sheepish laugh. He addressed the room:

"There are a few familiar faces here. Equal parts acquaintances and strangers—this match certainly feels balanced.

Li Wufang. Investigator."

"?"

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted the moment Li Wufang finished speaking.

'Surname Li. Talkative. And an Investigator.'

'This setup... why does it feel so familiar?'

His eyelid jumped. He immediately swept the man with a scrutinizing gaze—determining whether this so-called Investigator might be one of the Jokers he'd just recruited.

'No way it's that coincidental... right?'

'Even if not, I should study this Order follower carefully. Need to gauge his attitude toward opposing faiths—since the Clown has already fused Chaos. Technically, Order is the opposition now.'

One thing Li Wufang had done well: following Cheng Shi's lead, he'd quietly skipped the score-reporting step.

And this was precisely one of Cheng Shi's motives for speaking first. He was "conserving" his lies.

Though fabricating a Road to Ascension score was trivial, the higher you went, the fewer players there were—close scores made it dangerously easy to expose true identities. So Cheng Shi had chosen not to report one for this match.

He wasn't gambling. Through his pre-introduction observations, he'd already assessed that this group had no dead weight. Among peak players, scores likely mattered little—so even the sharp-eyed Investigator had unconsciously glossed over the detail.

Cheng Shi smiled inwardly. 'My 1,501 is safe.'

After Li Wufang's introduction, the woman behind him spoke up. This cold-faced beauty with the short princess-cut had a notably low voice and spoke concisely:

"Wu Cun. Extinguisher."

Oblivion!

'No wonder she radiates such killing intent. That's not murderous aura—it's barely suppressed destruction-lust!'

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow and studied her carefully.

Extinguishers were Oblivion's mage class—a profession that could disregard the world's rules and casually erase any physical existence from reality.

Unlike other Oblivion classes, the Scavengers and Final-Walkers typically banished whole objects into a soon-to-be-annihilated sub-world. But Extinguishers had their own distinct method.

They channeled Oblivion's power to wipe out selected areas from their field of view—entire sections, erased wholesale. This area-erasure ignored object integrity, meaning battlefields in their wake were left in especially horrific disarray.

They were notorious team-fight specialists. At sufficient numbers, they could literally erase an entire city from existence.

When Cheng Shi had confronted Herobos's World Destroyers before his previous trial, the bulk of that force had been Extinguishers.

Upon hearing that Wu Cun followed Oblivion, everyone's brow twitched almost imperceptibly.

Oblivion followers loved erasing traces of existence. And Time trials relied heavily on following trails. Time's challenges, like Memory's, demanded restoring the accuracy of Existence.

Memory trials meant untangling real dreams from false ones. Time trials meant finding anomalies within a fixed spacetime that didn't belong—objects or people out of place. So encountering an Oblivion follower in a trial that required extensive investigation and preservation was... not encouraging.

Their impulse to destroy everything only grew with their power level—not diminishing, but compressing, until it all erupted in one uncontrollable surge.

At this, Cheng Shi pursed his lips wearily. 'Here's hoping this teammate doesn't crank up the difficulty.'

After Wu Cun spoke, silence briefly filled the room. It was the tall, lean man beside her—the one who'd entered with the Blind One—who cleared his throat and broke the tension:

"Names aren't terribly important, so you may simply call me Wang Mou. I'm a mage—an Erudite Scholar following Truth."

The moment he finished, Cheng Shi went still. The corner of his mouth curved into an amused arc.

'Interesting. The trial's first lie has arrived.'

This seemingly mild-mannered, lanky man had decided to start things off with dishonesty?

'Which part of that was the lie? Or was the entire sentence false?'

Cheng Shi fought back the urge to scrutinize Wang Mou, keeping his eyes forward while his peripheral vision kept drifting sideways. His eyes rolled twice without catching anything unusual about Wang Mou—but he did notice, sharply, that in that same instant, Qin Xin's lips had curled upward in exactly the same way.

"Hm?"

'What's Qin Xin smiling about?'

'Could he also have caught Wang Mou's lie?'

'Now that's really interesting. A man who looks every inch like a War player—how does he have the ability to detect an unverifiable lie?'

Cheng Shi casually averted his gaze and silently filed this away.

Chapter 624: The Most Interesting Match—"Enemies" Everywhere You Look

By the room's standing order, the Blind One should have been next. But she was too famous—every player present knew her. So everyone's gaze naturally skipped past her to the heavy-armored Qin Xin behind.

Qin Xin laughed heartily and rose to his feet. He glanced around, then sheathed his sword as a gesture of goodwill. With a slight nod, he said:

"In remembrance I am forever inscribed. In flowing light, my shadow is cast.

Qin Xin. Mirror Person."

The moment those words left his mouth, a bright yellow question mark appeared above Cheng Shi's head.

'Memory?!'

'He's Memory?!'

'Since when can Memory followers detect lies out of thin air like con artists?'

'Does he know that scholar?'

Cheng Shi's brow furrowed. His appraisal of Qin Xin gained several more degrees of caution.

Mirror Person was Memory's warrior class—a "speed-memorization" profession that could rapidly duplicate an opponent's combat system by committing their techniques to memory.

Without powerful talents to forge a unique fighting style, Mirror Persons devolved into what others called "fifty-fifty warriors"—meaning:

They couldn't beat anyone, and no one could beat them.

That sentence worked equally well whether you were the Mirror Person or their opponent.

Like Today's Hero, this was a rare profession at high levels—too mediocre. Copying others' paths could never surpass the originals, and constant imitation risked losing yourself entirely.

But looking at Qin Xin's build... who could he even mirror?

Cheng Shi figured the best candidate was probably Big Cat in her bear transformation. Both were oversized—at least there'd be some resemblance.

But speaking honestly, wasn't this match a little too "unfriendly"?

The moment Qin Xin revealed his Memory allegiance, Cheng Shi could count every one of his five teammates as a potential "enemy."

One opposing Deceit: a Mirror Person.

One opposing Chaos: an Investigator.

One "colleague" who'd opened with a lie—a "Erudite Scholar" who might not be one at all.

One who was catastrophically incompatible with the trial environment, likely dead weight—a "terrorist."

And one heavyweight: the single biggest obstacle on Cheng Shi's path forward—the Fate Chosen, a "defending champion." A Blind One who claimed to see through Fate yet had never met Fate.

'Tsk. This match composition is way too complicated.'

These identities gathered around one table gave Cheng Shi a mild headache. He needed to turn some "enemies" into "teammates" first—otherwise, a Void Clown in an Existence trial would be stuck at every turn.

And An Mingyu, the Blind One, was undeniably the best recruitment target.

Not for her reputation. Not for faith camaraderie. But because of... Big Cat's phone call.

If Big Cat had given her the communication device, then An Mingyu wasn't a bad person. So before he reached the point of competing for Fate's title, they could likely cooperate.

This was the first step of his breach plan, formulated during introductions.

"Let's save time, friends. Though the gods generously gave us seven days, we all know that in a Time trial, too much time is never a good thing—it means the difficulty scales exponentially."

Li Wufang was a sunny man. He peeled off his leather jacket, revealing a pair of powerfully built arms. The flawless definition of his muscles made him look less like a hunter and more like a warrior.

"The trial's hint mentions past, present, and future. So I have reason to believe there may be three anomalies waiting for us to uncover.

Since we all know each other now—should we split up immediately, gather intel, and regroup at an agreed time? Or shall we explore together and get better acquainted?"

Though Li Wufang delivered this with a smile, his emphasis fell squarely on the first option. Clearly a pragmatist—efficiency was his priority.

But sometimes splitting up didn't improve efficiency. The moment he finished, the Erudite Scholar Wang Mou shook his head in refusal:

"Too rough. Before we optimize for efficiency, we need to identify what helps and what hinders it.

Last-minute preparation isn't just a saying. On a seven-day timescale, the sooner we determine the most efficient approach, the greater our returns."

Wang Mou frowned slightly, glancing past Li Wufang at the silent, eyes-closed Wu Cun behind him, then back at Li Wufang. The look clearly asked about their relationship.

Li Wufang didn't dodge the question. He answered with an open smile:

"I'd love to accompany a beautiful lady, but Order tells me that fabricating connections isn't very orderly.

I don't know her. I suspect it's the same for everyone—random pairings upon descent."

Wu Cun offered no comment. She irritably cracked one eye open, shot the Erudite Scholar a glance, and said coldly:

"You don't trust me?"

Wang Mou felt no embarrassment. He nodded: "Correct. If there's an efficiency liability here, currently it can only be your destructive urge."

Wu Cun's expression froze further. Both eyes opened, drilling into Wang Mou with an icy stare: "Bold. Doesn't a seeker of Truth fear being erased?"

"I'm merely stating facts."

Tension spiked instantly. Cheng Shi looked left, looked right, thoroughly entertained.

He'd been planning to warn everyone about the Oblivion follower himself, but this truth-seeker with the fake identity had beaten him to it with far more bluntness.

'Excellent. Free entertainment.'

Just as Cheng Shi was savoring the exchange of hostile expressions, Li Wufang stepped between the two, playing peacemaker:

"Easy now, easy. It's already sweltering in here—if your tempers burn any hotter, I'll have to take my pants off.

Scholar, I understand your concern. And, ah... ma'am—I think this trial's location is very likely underground. It's not safe, so it'd be best if someone paired up with you.

I'm not questioning your strength. But when annoying flies come buzzing around, a gentleman should step up to swat them away, no?

Beauty tends to attract trouble in chaotic places. I've seen it too many times. So I think perhaps this gentleman..."

Li Wufang's gaze drifted toward Qin Xin—clearly suggesting the biggest body escort the most beautiful face. But before Qin Xin could respond, Wu Cun shot the Investigator a cold look and nodded irritably:

"Fine—you come with me. Pairs of two. That should ease your suspicions and improve efficiency.

If you don't trust Oblivion, surely you trust Order?

Hmph—Truth isn't the only faith that can solve puzzles."

With that, she ignored everyone and shoved through the door.

Her temperament was exactly as explosive as any typical Oblivion follower.

Chapter 625: Wait—Again?!

Everyone exchanged glances—you looked at me, I looked at you—and then all eyes converged on Li Wufang. His face darkened as he heaved a long sigh:

"What a golden opportunity... This Warrior Qin... never mind, you and the Fate Chosen are clearly close—I'd better not assign anything awkward. As for the Scholar... you and the beauty clearly clash. So forget that too.

But Brother Cheng, don't you want to—"

"?" 'How did this get to me?'

Cheng Shi blinked, looking thoroughly apologetic: "Sorry, Investigator bro. I really wish I could help, but I have a condition—allergies. Specifically, I'm allergic to people who wear white robes, have princess-cut hair, and follow Oblivion. When I get too close, my consciousness goes haywire—I start wanting to destroy things. That would definitely drag the team down."

"..."

"..."

"..."

Dead silence. Li Wufang's brain practically short-circuited.

'Bro—could you be any more transparently fake? Just refuse if you want to. What's with the painfully specific allergen list?'

'You might as well hold up a sign saying "I'm making this up on the spot."'

Seeing Li Wufang frozen, Cheng Shi smiled and didn't forget to add: "So this trial—how many clues get preserved depends entirely on you, Investigator."

Li Wufang's eye twitched. He sighed and nodded, then checked his watch. Before heading out, he offered one last suggestion:

"Eight twenty-seven. Let's sync. We regroup here at noon—twelve o'clock—and share everything we've gathered. Agreed?"

Everyone nodded. The Investigator's expression finally eased slightly. He turned to the Blind One, mustering a strained smile:

"Chosen An—given that I've sacrificed for the team here, could I get a prophecy? Any predictions left for today?"

The Blind One chuckled softly and nodded. She casually produced a die and tossed it to the floor. The twelve-faced Fate die wobbled and rolled to a stop on... maximum!

Eyebrows rose across the room. Every gaze locked onto the Prophet. But the Blind One's brow creased tightly the moment the die showed its result.

Li Wufang's heart dropped. His face stiffened: "Bad news?"

The Blind One deliberated for several seconds, then pressed her lips together:

"Not terrible. But there's a complication.

As you all know, the more precise a prophecy, the lower the success rate. So for accuracy's sake, I generally use vague phrasing in trials. This time, I prophesied the final day's situation.

You saw the perfect roll. What it means, I trust I don't need to spell out. And what I saw in the vision was...

Five people seated around a table, brows furrowed, expressions grave."

The moment the words left her mouth, every face went dark.

Five!

This prophecy clearly pointed to the players' count. So before the trial ends, one would be eliminated?

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow. His meaningful gaze swept across the other four.

The Blind One looked perfectly composed—she hadn't lied. The prophecy was real.

Qin Xin's brow was knotted tight, his expression awash with confusion. He was also quietly studying the Blind One, apparently perplexed by this sudden divination.

Wang Mou maintained his perpetually somber look. Li Wufang looked even more awkward—he'd definitely not expected his request to produce this result.

'How convenient. Five of us are standing right here. And the sixth? The Oblivion follower had already left.'

The prophecy's timing was exquisite. Its content was sufficiently "precise." But among the five present, who would willingly become that vanished sixth?

Probably no one.

So in this very moment, among these five exchanging glances, an unspoken understanding had already formed—never to be voiced, yet clear as day:

That sixth person should ideally be the Oblivion follower who hadn't heard the prophecy.

Li Wufang's expression shifted through several shades. His gaze swept across each of them before settling into a grimace. With a bitter smile, he nodded his thanks to the Blind One and hurried out after Wu Cun.

Regardless of who vanished, at least until they found the trial's key—he needed to keep Wu Cun's destructive urges in check.

Watching him leave, Cheng Shi noted: this Investigator wasn't just someone who wanted to win. He was a man confident in his own strength—completely unafraid of being annihilated into that sixth spot by an Extinguisher.

Shortly after Li Wufang departed, Wang Mou spoke up with deadpan gravity:

"Li Wufang's gaze toward Wu Cun held no pleasure. He acknowledges her beauty but harbors no other feelings. They genuinely have no relationship.

However, before we met, they shared a room. We have no idea what they may have discussed. Leaving the initial assignments intact risks introducing hazards from the experiment's very start. Randomness is, after all, a critical variable in any experiment.

I believe the Fate prophecy. But I must remind everyone—the vanished sixth... may not be Wu Cun."

"..."

Cheng Shi eyed this "Erudite Scholar" with a peculiar expression. 'At minimum, he didn't lie about his faith. He has to be a Truth follower. I just can't figure out what this Truth follower is hiding by lying at the outset.'

"So, Scholar—who will you travel with?"

This wasn't Cheng Shi asking—it was the Blind One. She turned to Wang Mou with a light smile.

No one in the room was stupid. They instantly understood the implications: she was endorsing the pair-up plan while subtly indicating she didn't want to travel with the Truth follower.

Wang Mou was pragmatic, not dense. He nodded thoughtfully, his gaze bouncing between Cheng Shi and Qin Xin before settling on Cheng Shi:

"I'll—"

"How about I pair with you, Scholar?"

Qin Xin suddenly cut in. Though his brow hadn't unfurrowed since the prophecy, he still managed a smile as he walked toward the lean scholar.

"A wise scholar deserves a brute bodyguard. We're a perfect match."

Wang Mou paused, glanced at Cheng Shi and the Blind One, then nodded quietly: "Fine. Efficiency first—let's move."

With that, he and Qin Xin stepped out. Suddenly the room held only two Fate followers, facing each other in silence.

Cheng Shi was mildly surprised—he'd wanted to pair with the Blind One too, but her approach was fascinating. She'd wanted the same?

'She seems to have something to say to me.'

Cheng Shi arched an eyebrow. For once playing the gentleman, he broke the silence with a smile:

"You—"

He got exactly one syllable out before An Mingyu, who'd been standing quietly, swayed without warning and—thud—collapsed onto the floor.

Her fall looked exactly like Qin Xin's earlier.

"???"

Cheng Shi was dumbfounded. He stared, slack-jawed, at yet another teammate crumpling before him. Question marks flooding his brain.

'Wait—AGAIN?!'

Chapter 626: Do You Always Like Testing People?

Cheng Shi still didn't approach. In fact, he instinctively wrapped his feet.

Nobody understood why he did it—not even Cheng Shi himself. He was fairly certain his brain had briefly short-circuited.

A moment later, half-laughing, half-crying, he pulled off the white cloth. Then his eyes rolled, and he addressed the fallen Blind One with a teasing smile:

"Drop the act. I've studied medicine—I can tell breathing patterns apart. Your breathing is steady but not faint. That's not what unconsciousness looks like.

If you're just tired and want to lie there a while, be my guest.

I'm on a clock—I'll head out first."

With that, Cheng Shi walked straight for the door—seemingly abandoning any plan to travel with the Blind One.

One foot crossed the threshold before he paused. He pricked up his ears, listening for any sound from inside. But nothing changed. The collapsed An Mingyu didn't stir—even her breathing remained precisely consistent.

This made Cheng Shi frown. He'd been probing, but she hadn't taken the bait.

'Did she actually faint?'

'No way. The timing was too perfect. Doesn't look real at all.'

Despite his doubts, Cheng Shi's movements betrayed zero hesitation. He crossed the threshold in an instant and swung the door shut behind him.

But right as the two panels were about to meet—with barely a sliver of gap remaining—that crystal-clear female voice rang out again from inside the room. Only this time, tinged with confusion:

"Xin Xin told me that when faking unconsciousness, you have to adjust your breathing to be faint yet steady. I did exactly that—flawlessly, in my opinion. There's absolutely no way you detected it from my breathing alone.

So you were bluffing. Cheng Shi, you really are extraordinarily sharp. But how exactly did you—"

BANG—the door shut completely.

"?"

The Blind One, eyes cracked open as she lay on the floor, froze in embarrassment. Because her "plea to stay" had accomplished nothing. This Fate Weaver who claimed to have been summoned by Fate played by no one's rules—he'd heard her voice and still chosen to close the door and leave.

Yes. Cheng Shi had simply walked away.

He enjoyed fishing—but only when he was the angler, not the fish.

The Fate Chosen had sent Qin Xin to divert Wang Mou, clearly wanting to talk privately. But just talking would have been fine—why throw in theatrics before opening up?

'I don't like insincere heart-to-hearts. So I refuse to have one.'

And so Cheng Shi walked out of the inn—weathered and worn but not quite dilapidated—and stepped onto a street so cracked and arid it barely deserved the name.

The Underworld!

This trial really was set in the Underworld!

The Investigator was well-traveled—one glance at the inn's layout had been enough for him. But Cheng Shi had needed to step outside before he could confirm it.

And what confirmed it wasn't the surrounding architecture or décor. It was that thing looming before him, so massive it was suffocating:

The Abyssal Volcano!

This trial was set near the Abyssal Volcano—extremely near!

This perpetually erupting volcano was the most critical passage linking the surface and the Underworld. Given the trial's length, Cheng Shi wondered whether some of the anomalies might actually be on the surface.

'Will players need to use the Abyssal Volcano to reach the surface?'

'But I have no idea how to navigate the volcano's passage. Underground trials were already rare, and the Abyssal Volcano was insanely dangerous during eruptions. Very few people knew how to use it for round trips.'

Many high-level players with sufficient strength preferred the safer Void route instead. So for most, the Abyssal Volcano remained an unsolved mystery.

What Cheng Shi did know was that towns had sprung up around the volcano, built by people traveling between worlds. These towns harbored self-proclaimed "shuttle brokers" who openly ran transit businesses between the Underworld and the surface.

They claimed to deliver people safely to the surface—for a steep price—but their reputation was generally solid. So the towns had gradually gained a foothold.

The ground beneath his feet was clearly one such town.

'But why does this place feel... familiar?'

Cheng Shi frowned. He turned to study the inn, its sign cracked and peeling, and rapidly searched his memory for any resemblance. But after a long while, nothing surfaced.

'I've never been near the Abyssal Volcano. How could I possibly feel familiar with some random town at its base?'

'An illusion?'

He frowned again and turned his gaze to the massive volcanic spectacle erupting downward from above.

Indeed—the Abyssal Volcano wasn't a normal volcano. "Abyssal" wasn't so much the volcano's name as a parallel entity. The surface's "abyss" and the Underworld's "volcano" together formed this unparalleled geological wonder.

The volcano was straightforward—a towering cone. The abyss was an inverted, funnel-shaped bottomless pit.

On the surface, it manifested as a massive crater with inward-tapering rock walls plunging to infinite depth. Down here in the Underworld—yes, the "bottomless" pit had a bottom after all—it appeared as the sky's inverted reflection of the volcano!

In other words, what Cheng Shi saw was a pair of volcanic craters facing each other: one upright, one suspended upside down—an entangled dual-volcano system.

Right now, the inverted volcano was erupting, scattering countless streams of red-glowing "lava" down into the Underworld—a crimson waterfall plummeting from the heavens.

Many had explored the Underworld, but few tackled the Abyssal Volcano. The earliest curious players had returned with nothing but reports of teammates' deaths—never any tangible benefits. However, the erupted "lava" was rich in minerals useful for experimental research.

So gradually, aside from Truth and Folly followers, exploration of the phenomenon dwindled.

A trial set in such a location posed real challenges for Cheng Shi—he knew virtually nothing about this area. A genuine blind spot.

But a little unknown territory couldn't stop him. One circuit around this scorching little town, and he was confident he'd accumulate plenty of fresh intelligence to fill the gaps.

Just as he was deliberating which direction to start investigating, the Blind One's voice appeared behind him again.

An Mingyu had come out. She'd finally risen from the "cold" floor and drifted wearily to stand behind him.

"Do you always dislike helping others?"

"Do you always like testing people?"

"..."

An Mingyu faltered. Something complicated flickered in her expression.

"I'm sorry. I wasn't deliberately testing you. It's just—your image in my mind feels... insubstantial. The feedback I've received from every angle suggests you're a deeply contradictory person. I simply wanted to sort that out."

"Heh. Chosen An, not everyone is obligated to help you sort out your thoughts. But enough about that—I'm heading right. What about you?"

"The dice say left is the better choice." An Mingyu produced a twenty-sided die. The nearly spherical Fate die sat in her palm, showing an 18.

Cheng Shi's eyelid twitched. Without a shred of envy at the 18, he nodded:

"Then we go right. I never believe in Fate!"

Chapter 627: Breaking News—They Killed...!!!

"..."

Cheng Shi walked away without looking back. The Blind One followed silently behind. If she wanted to tell him something, she naturally wouldn't insist on a pointless direction choice. And she wasn't the stubborn type.

But as they headed toward the town center, neither spoke. Cheng Shi kept his eyes sweeping, ears tuned, without the slightest intention of breaking the silence. The Blind One seemed the same. So the two-person party drifted into quiet.

Eventually, Cheng Shi couldn't stand the awkward atmosphere. He stopped and turned to face this blind woman who couldn't see the road yet never walked crooked:

"Found anything useful?"

"What do you want to know?" The Blind One looked up.

"?" Cheng Shi blinked, then laughed in exasperation. "Anything I want? I'd like to know where we are. Where the trial's anomaly is. Where Time's foreshadowing is. Where Fate's trap is. You can tell me all of that?"

The Blind One frowned, pondered briefly, then nodded with perfect gravity:

"This is Falling Gate—the closest town to the northeast of the Abyssal Volcano. Its surface equivalent sits in the woodland southwest of Gasmira.

This is a notorious shuttle broker stronghold, reputedly the first Civilization outpost developed by underground creatures yearning to return to the surface.

Its defining feature is proximity to the volcano. So the trial's anomaly is most likely volcano-related. Instead of wandering through town, we'd be better off heading down to the Magma Crystal Mine outside town—check in with the miners. That's more likely to yield results.

Also—Time never writes foreshadowing. The one who loves scattering setups everywhere is our Benefactor, Fate.

And Fate has never set traps. What lures people in and locks them there... is typically our counterpart, Time."

"..."

The Blind One's barrage left Cheng Shi completely stunned.

'Lady—you actually know all this?'

'If you knew so much, why didn't you say so earlier? I walked all that way for nothing!'

Cheng Shi's expression became supremely peculiar. He studied the sealed eyes beneath the black cloth for a long time before blurting:

"You haven't gone and opened a third eye like Erlang Shen, have you?"

The Blind One shook her head with a smile: "Everything I know came not from seeing—but from Fate's guidance."

"..."

Cheng Shi pursed his lips. He suddenly suspected this Fate Chosen was actually... rather lively?

"Alright, stop steering every topic back to Fate. Does your god even know you're doing that?"

What do you really want to tell me?

Asking about my audience with Fate?

If you truly see the full picture, you should know—that was an accident.

Based on others' descriptions, I always imagined you as this serene, mysterious player. But today... your obsession with divine audiences runs pretty deep.

Are you jealous of me?"

The Blind One laughed softly and shook her head:

"Precisely because I see the full picture, I know it genuinely summoned you.

Cheng Shi, don't forget—Xin Xin was in that trial too. Even if you shifted the blame to Zhen Yi, Xin Xin knows it was fake.

And I'm not jealous of your audience. Because... I've seen it too."

"!!!"

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted. Shock flooded his voice: "It summoned you? Recently?"

Truthfully, Cheng Shi hadn't learned that "Fate never summons anyone" from Fate itself—he'd heard it from other players. He didn't know why Fate was reluctant to meet its followers, but he knew Big Cat had been summoned.

So Fate wasn't heartless. At least before the predetermined ending, it would still grant audiences.

In that light, summoning the Blind One wasn't strange at all.

But what concerned Cheng Shi was the timing. After he'd been "forced" to approach Chaos, the previously unsummoned Chosen was suddenly called. It felt suspiciously like someone whose main account had been wasted deciding to level up an alt.

'Fate... didn't actually get angry, did it?'

His expression turned complicated. But before he could think further, the Blind One spoke again—still shaking her head:

"No. It didn't summon me. I saw it."

Cheng Shi froze: "What do you mean?"

Seeing his bewilderment, the Blind One finally let out a soft laugh:

"Li Jingming always likes exchanging memories. He's traded with me a few times. I think it's a good method. So, Cheng Shi—why don't we try something similar?"

'Exchange memories?'

'No no no—we Deceit followers don't do Memory things. We have our own way of communicating.'

A sharp gleam crossed Cheng Shi's eyes. His gaze toward the Blind One gained an edge of scrutiny.

"You want a heart-to-heart?"

"Heart-to-heart?"

That sounds like con-artist speak. You—"

"Can I trust you?" Cheng Shi cut her off.

"..." The Blind One fell silent. She was the first person to meet that question with utter stillness—no reaction at all. Her response was so strange that Cheng Shi's brow creased slightly.

"You... can trust me. At least for this trial, you can trust me completely."

But after this trial ends, Cheng Shi—I won't remember what happened between us. So I can't guarantee I'll still trust you then."

"?" Cheng Shi's frown deepened. "What does that mean? Chosen An, if you want sincerity, stop playing the riddler.

Don't forget—I'm also a follower of Fate. If we keep talking like this, seven days won't be enough to finish our riddles.

Be honest. At least, as you said—be honest within this trial."

An Mingyu nodded gently. She did look genuinely more sincere. But what Cheng Shi didn't expect was that her first honest sentence would make the Clown's face change dramatically.

"I know about the Torchbearers. And I also know that you, Cheng Shi, once helped several Torchbearers. Among those who received your help without knowing it, one was a Torchbearer Fire Seeker named Fang—"

Before she could finish, Cheng Shi's scalpel was pressed against An Mingyu's throat.

His gaze was ice-cold as he stared at this Fate Chosen who'd just dropped an earth-shattering secret:

"There's no way you could know these things. Prophecy isn't some master key to every question. So— who are you, really?"

An Mingyu showed no fear. She smiled lightly and tilted her chin up to meet those eyes—so cold they could kill:

"Why couldn't I?"

Have you ever considered—if someone knows the Torchbearers exist... couldn't she also be a Torchbearer?"

"!!!"

'You're a Torchbearer?!'

'You've got to be kidding!'

Cheng Shi was stunned.

'Even if Fate never summoned you, you're still Fate's Chosen—the person who's walked furthest on Fate's path. How could Fate allow you to join an organization protected by the Fun God?'

'The Torchbearers are obviously the Fear Faction's "toy." You're the Approach Faction's frontrunner, and you're telling me this?!'

'You're a mole?!'

"You don't seem to believe me. Then what if I told you I'm not just a Torchbearer but one of only two Fire Seekers—how would you feel about that?"

"..."

'I don't dare feel anything.'

Cheng Shi silently withdrew his scalpel.

He knew the Blind One wasn't lying. She truly was a Torchbearer—and very likely one who wanted to recruit him.

'How convenient. The Torchbearers have exactly two Fire Seekers, and I've met them both. And they both want to pull me into this organization that guards all things beautiful.'

'So the Blind One's earlier testing wasn't pointless foolishness. She'd probably been integrating her impressions, building a three-dimensional profile of him—evaluating him as a "candidate," just like Fang Shiqing had.'

'Except Fang Shiqing had taken a leap of faith after observation. While the Blind One...'

'She knows too much. Possibly more than even Fang Shiqing herself. Or rather—Fang Shiqing wouldn't remember those things.'

'So...'

"How do you know all this?"

Also—are you a City Defender, or a City Builder?"

"Borrowing the greatness of gods, striving to build a new nation. I'm not a conservative—but I am the most conservative person among the radicals.

There's much more I know. And the source of every secret is that gathering of the Mediocre Person Society—the one you attended disguised as Zhen Yi!

Cheng Shi, aren't you curious why Qin Xin and I were badly wounded?"

'Qin Xin...'

'So this "modern-day Xiang Yu" is also a Torchbearer!'

'He's genuinely injured though. As for you... jury's still out.'

'But honestly—at the Chosen level, Qin Xin can't be a nobody within the Torchbearers, can he?'

Cheng Shi's brow furrowed. He was about to ask more when the Blind One lobbed an even bigger bombshell—one that blew his mind clean open.

"Your identity was exposed. Your connection to the Torchbearers was exposed. Several people learned who you are. So to protect you, the Torchbearers had to... handle it.

Unfortunately, one person refused to forget. So we had no choice but to... kill him.

Just now. Right before the trial."

"!!!!!"

Cheng Shi's pupils shrank to pinpoints. Something grave flickered through his eyes.

"Who?"

"Lao Deng. The Chosen of Time."

Chapter 628: The Reason the Blind One Lost Her Sight!! Lunatic +1

'Lao Deng?'

Cheng Shi recognized the handle. Another enigmatic player—but beyond the name, he knew nothing.

How had Lao Deng learned his identity? How had he discovered his connection to the Torchbearers?

And how had the Torchbearers recovered their memories from that trial? Had Memory's divine intervention failed?

'Did Memory skip the interrogation and backstab me through this kind of petty scheme instead?'

'But even so—which of the three Torchbearers I saved would have told the Blind One everything?'

'Fang Shiqing? Bai Ling? Cui Qiushi?'

'No—none of them. They'd never expose their benefactor. Especially not as City Defenders sworn to protect what was precious to them!'

'The moment their memories returned, they should have understood I didn't want publicity...'

'But honestly, Memory had no logical reason to do this.'

'The Torchbearers were under the Fun God's protection—invisible to the other gods. If Memory didn't know about them, there'd be no reason to unravel a trial that looked perfectly normal.'

'So what happened in between that I don't know about?'

Cheng Shi's brow knotted tight. But despite his swirling doubts, he wasn't completely led by the Blind One's words. He recognized her phrasing was deliberately crafted—yes, very "skillfully" crafted.

Even if the Torchbearers knew everything, even if they felt indebted enough to protect him, the desire to repay a favor alone would never justify hunting down a Chosen.

If Lao Deng had discovered Cheng Shi's link to the Torchbearers, then he'd also discovered the organization itself. And as Fate's counterpart, how this Time follower would view an organization trying to resist the gods was anyone's guess.

So rather than saying the Torchbearers acted to protect Cheng Shi, it was more accurate to say they were protecting the entire organization.

With that settled, Cheng Shi stopped pressing. He scanned their surroundings, confirmed no teammates were nearby, and quietly changed direction—heading back the way they'd come.

The Blind One read his intent. Without a word, she followed. Before long, the two found themselves in the town's darkest alley.

Sensing the dim, deserted surroundings, An Mingyu shook her head with a smile: "You certainly know how to pick a spot."

'Of course—I noticed this empty corner on my first pass. A mature con artist must always have eyes that spot darkness wherever he goes!'

Cheng Shi smiled and gestured "after you" to the Blind One.

"Begin your performance, Chosen An. Once I know what I should know, you'll naturally learn what you want to learn."

An Mingyu's smile froze for a beat.

'Why does what you need to know get the word "should," while what I need to know becomes "want"?''

'So me sharing intel with you is an obligation, but you sharing with me is a discretionary right?'

Her eye twitched, but she didn't argue. She felt she owed him this explanation—and these revelations were key to bringing this Fate Weaver into the Torchbearers.

Indeed, An Mingyu wanted to recruit Cheng Shi. Through various channels, she'd already formed a clear picture of who he was. But without seeing him firsthand, her admiration remained guarded.

When every one of her tests failed, she became even more convinced that someone this cautious deserved an invitation. After all, he'd been connected to the Torchbearers all along—yet had never breathed a single word about the organization!

'So he's worth trusting!'

Qin Xin had once said something true: as a Fire Seeker, she wasn't the perfect embodiment of the Torchbearer ideal—but her recruitment efficiency was exceptional. She excelled at integrating useful forces, amplifying advantages just as her support role demanded.

After thorough deliberation, she concluded Cheng Shi was a perfect fit for the Torchbearers—or more precisely, a perfect match for her personal vision of torch-bearing.

If Qin Xin carried the grand passion of nations and worlds, then Big Cat held the quiet love of friends and well-being. An Mingyu fell between the two. She lacked Qin Xin's sweeping ambition, yet her heart wasn't confined to a handful of personal bonds. She yearned for beauty—hoping that those who warmed others could themselves be warmed, that those who showed the world beauty could possess it in return.

But... only to that extent. As for the world's dregs—the parasites and garbage of society—she wanted nothing to do with them. In her view, those people deserved to rot in the old world's hypocrisy and filth.

So at her core, she was a City Builder.

Building a beautiful new world for beautiful people.

The cloth-covered eyes of the Blind One drifted toward Cheng Shi. Behind the sealed lids, something bright seemed to glow.

"Where do you want to start? The Mediocre Person Society gathering?"

"No. I need to confirm something first. You said you saw Fate, but Fate never summoned you. So...

When did you see it? And how?"

This question burned with genuine curiosity. He needed to read Fate's current attitude from her answer. Not crucial for his piety, perhaps—but critical for his "power level."

The difference between one sponsor and two sponsors was something he could plainly tell.

The Blind One pondered briefly. A look of reminiscence crossed her face. She held nothing back:

"I suspect... I was the first player to ever see it."

"?" Cheng Shi blinked. Suspicion crept into his gaze.

"You don't believe me?"

Fortunately, I have evidence.

Let me think...

On the very afternoon the Faith Game descended—at the Path Starting Point bestowed by the gods—I picked up a Fate die and became a Prophet.

And at that exact moment, I made the game's very first prophecy."

Here, Cheng Shi's expression shifted. His pupils constricted violently—he'd guessed what came next, and it was almost too incredible to believe.

"You've guessed it. That's right—I prophesied Fate itself.

The very instant I became its follower, I prophesied my own Benefactor. The content of the prophecy was: what does a deity actually look like?

I cast the Fate die onto the ground. It rolled slowly and came to rest at my feet, showing...

A 1.

That was my first-ever die roll. And my first-ever natural 1.

The moment the die stopped, my consciousness was ripped away—into the Void. I didn't see where it was. I saw only endless emptiness and eternal darkness. But I knew—it had to be hiding beneath the Void.

I was quickly expelled from the Void, returning to the Path Starting Point. But from that moment on... I was blind.

And this black cloth over my eyes is the evidence of everything I've just described."

"!!??"

'Lunatic!'

For some reason, that was the very first word that thundered through Cheng Shi's shell-shocked brain.

'Birds of a feather, indeed. Anyone who could befriend Zhen Xin was either a lunatic or a lunatic.'

Chapter 629: This Isn't Being Helpful—It's Being Devout

'How dare she?!'

What kind of player, at the very moment of divine descent, would announce to the gods' faces that she intended to "spy" on them?

'You think this is a dream?'

Even though many considered that afternoon a dream—even so, when you lacked the ability to wake up, how did you muster the courage to confront a "dream-maker"?

Cheng Shi was numb. Scalp-tingling numb.

He gazed at the composed Blind One as if staring at a monster.

Her tone was so casual. She'd just casually narrated something terrifying.

Yes—prophesying a deity was terrifying enough. But when the target of said prophecy was the one who governed Fate and bestowed the power of prophecy in the first place, the horror became almost conceptually infinite.

Still, the Blind One had paid the price for her "blasphemy." The cost of staring directly into the Void was permanent blindness—seeing nothing but darkness ever after. For anyone, that would be a lifelong shadow. For many, the instant of transgression would have been their last.

But she'd survived. More than that—she'd become Fate's Chosen.

'Hiss—'

'This Chosen... is pretty hardcore.'

"Do you regret it?" Cheng Shi asked, his tone complicated.

"Regret what?"

"Void stripped your sight."

"It wasn't stripping. It was a gift."

Though I can no longer see the world's surface, I've drawn closer to the universe's essence.

Fate... is guiding me toward understanding all that is real."

"..." 'Confirmed lunatic.' Cheng Shi sucked air through his teeth. "So how do you perceive the world now? For instance, me—when you look at me, do you see any specific image?"

"Perception is abstract—it has no concrete form. But combining my pre-blindness understanding of the world, I can roughly align the two sensations.

For you, Cheng Shi, my perception is... hmm, strange. It's a vast spider web."

"!?!?"

'Mockery and Jeering!'

The instant she said "spider web," Cheng Shi's mind leapt to the Fun God's creation deep in the Void—Mockery and Jeering.

His brow furrowed. Something felt deeper than surface level. He probed further:

"What about the Grand Marshal? How does he appear to you?"

"Hu Wei? Why bring him up?" The Blind One seemed mildly surprised.

"I'm on good terms with the Grand Marshal. Just curious. If a Fate follower looks like a spider web, that's somewhat logical. So what does a War follower look like?"

Surely not a weapon?"

The Blind One frowned and shook her head: "No. Hu Wei gives me a very chaotic impression—no fixed or distinct form. He's more like a constantly shifting, unpredictable fog..."

'Fog... The yellow fog of Chaos...'

Very close.

If only the Blind One had seen that chaotic yellow fog before losing her sight, she'd have identified Hu Wei's true faith in an instant!

Cheng Shi's gaze sharpened. He suddenly found himself believing that rumor he'd heard—"only the Blind One can see through Fate."

This Fate Chosen was genuinely something else.

"Is this a talent bestowed by Fate?"

"No. It's not a talent. As I said—it's a gift from the Void."

"..." Cheng Shi shot her a strange look.

'Right, right—you're all Fate's darlings, so impressive. Meanwhile, a certain unlucky Fate Weaver still doesn't know whether his Benefactor is actually upset.'

'But as long as Fate didn't summon the Blind One recently, it probably means it's not as petty as—it's very magnanimous!'

Cheng Shi hastily derailed his irreverent train of thought and switched tracks:

"Got it. Now—tell me about the Mediocre Person Society. How did you kill Lao Deng?"

The Blind One paused, then "looked" into his eyes with a rueful smile:

"Whether it's Memory's exchange or a con artist's heart-to-heart, there's never been a rule where one side only asks and the other only answers. Cheng Shi—your turn. I answered your question. Now answer mine."

His bluff having failed, Cheng Shi dry-laughed and looked up: "Ahem—naturally. Sincerity is my specialty. Ask away."

"Why did you help them?"

"Who?"

"Torchbearer Fire Seeker Fang Shiqing and the other two City Defenders."

The moment he heard this, Cheng Shi's gaze hardened. He immediately realized it wasn't a Memory malfunction after all. Fang Shiqing and the others probably hadn't recovered those memories. The Blind One had clearly learned the details from elsewhere—otherwise she wouldn't be unaware of his past relationship with them.

Connecting this to her previous mention of the Mediocre Person Society, it clicked.

'Cui Qiushi!'

'My interaction with Cui Qiushi at the Mediocre Person gathering caught someone's eye—and that's how the Blind One pieced together my identity?'

'No, that doesn't fully add up either. Even if I'd deliberately approached that Torchbearer, how could she know the details of a story that had been erased from memory?'

"Lost in thought? You're not fabricating an answer to brush me off, are you?" The Blind One watched his furrowed brow with a knowing smile.

"No—just remembering that trial. Feeling a bit wistful.

But since when does helping people require a reason?"

The Blind One blinked. Then she smiled: "So you're saying you're the helpful type?"

"No. It has nothing to do with being helpful—more like pleasing myself.

I'm only responsible to myself. Act on impulse, save when I feel like it. And honestly, my motivation back then wasn't even rescue—it was mischief.

I simply gave them a little push. Let them approach and discover the truth themselves. Then I erased my traces, leaving them mired in confusion without even knowing why.

I was fabricating the mystique of Fate—making those lost souls marvel at destiny's grandeur, offering that wonder up to our shared Benefactor.

So if you insist on labeling that behavior, I'd suggest not 'being helpful.' Try 'devout faith' instead."

"..." The Blind One's face froze.

Shamelessness among peak players wasn't unheard of. But someone spinning this length of sophistry to justify himself while simultaneously gilding his own reputation? That was rare.

For a split second, Zhen Yi's shadow crossed her mind.

'They're... actually somewhat alike. No wonder he dared impersonate Zhen Yi right in front of the real one.'

Chapter 630: The Shocking Truth Behind the Mediocre Person Society

But none of that mattered. She'd never needed Cheng Shi to acknowledge any specific behavior. What she was reading was his attitude. As long as the Fate Weaver didn't deny helping those people, it proved he wasn't a bad person.

And as the conversation deepened, the Blind One became increasingly convinced that Cheng Shi was perfect for the Torchbearers.

Of course, Cheng Shi wasn't empty-handed either. His probe had paid off.

The fabricated trial details he'd casually spun weren't challenged by the Blind One—meaning she knew nothing about the Torchbearers' actual trial. She only knew he'd helped Torchbearers.

So the answers all lay in that Mediocre Person gathering—and the breakthrough was his attitude toward Cui Qiushi!

Cheng Shi's heart tightened. He silently vowed: next time he encountered someone whose memories had been erased, he couldn't make one-sided suspicious moves again.

"Is it my turn now?"

The Blind One nodded slightly:

"I know what you want to ask. No need to voice it—I'll just tell you directly.

The Mediocre Person Society. All answers lie in that gathering.

We believe it was originally organized by a Folly follower. But in the end, the Torchbearers co-opted it.

We used dreamscapes to decorate that rust-covered stage, and then..."

The Blind One held nothing back. She recounted everything that had happened at the Mediocre Person Society in full—continuing past the point where Cheng Shi had dragged everything visible into Go Lis's Grudge, narrating the story's unfinished aftermath with perfect clarity.

She even knew what happened after she and Qin Xin had left—including Lao Deng's appearance and the Prisoner's return!

Yes—she even knew what occurred after their "departure."

"Qin Xin's senses are far sharper than mine. During the conversation, his eyes signaled that others were present in the venue. So we staged a fake withdrawal, creating the space for whichever person was hiding to reveal themselves.

We just didn't expect that hidden figure to be him—the Time Chosen, Lao Deng.

It's not that I don't want to use his real name. He only ever called himself 'This Deng.' Nobody ever knew his true name.

He appeared, and the Prisoner scared him off. But Memory's dreamscape hadn't dissipated. We'd set a trap outside—and immediately caught him as he fled... along with the Prisoner, who'd followed right behind.

A Torchbearer's name must never be shared outside of recruitment. So we had to handle both of them knowing about the organization. Of course, given their strength, we offered a peaceful solution first.

Qin Xin provided two vials of Remembrance Needle. But both Lao Deng and the Prisoner refused to use them.

Their attitudes, however, were completely different.

The Prisoner..."

At the name, the Blind One paused several seconds before continuing with a peculiar expression: "The Prisoner said he had a better method for resolving the situation—one that didn't require him to lose his memories. After significant deliberation, Qin Xin agreed to his proposal."

"..." By this point, Cheng Shi was already speechless.

That name had a kind of magic. Simply hearing it induced silence. He could practically picture exactly how the Prisoner had gotten Qin Xin and the Blind One to silently accept his solution.

'Hiss—'

'Don't tell me he... wanted to join the Torchbearers.'

"He chose to join the Torchbearers," the Blind One said, her tone layered with complexity.

"..."

'Called it!'

Cheng Shi went numb.

'As expected from the Chosen of Silence plus the second most jinxed man alive. That thought process is absolutely sublime!'

The Blind One paused for a long while before continuing: "But Lao Deng rejected every option. He refused to forget, and he tried to break out of Qin Xin's dreamscape.

So, reluctantly—together with the Prisoner—we killed him."

"A Chosen... just died like that?" Cheng Shi still struggled to believe it. He almost wanted to switch back to Fate and check whether the Time Ladder had actually lost its top name.

"Not yet. The special trial's arrival bought him a few extra days.

But the moment this trial ends, he'll be dead.

This is the Fixed Destiny within Fate. The extinction within Silence. And the forgetting within Memory."

Regarding Cheng Shi's solemn expression, the Blind One smiled again: "I think I've been sincere enough. What about you, Cheng Shi?"

"What about me?" He raised an eyebrow and glanced at his pocket watch. The next hour was approaching. He whipped out a scalpel and slashed toward the Blind One's throat.

Out of respect for the Torchbearers, the strike carried no real force—purely precautionary. The Blind One didn't even dodge. She "stared" straight into his eyes and smiled:

"You're more like the Torchbearers than you realize. The only difference is you refuse to admit it, while we mean what we say.

Cheng Shi, join us. You don't have to see the Torchbearers as a burden. You could entirely—"

"What's Qin Xin's role?" The scalpel stopped just short of her neck. Unable to determine whether a completely unresisted attack counted as a "conflict," he pivoted from slash to tap—flipping the handle and lightly rapping her shoulder.

Despite the gentle touch, it was enough to stagger her.

Her face darkened. She opened her mouth—but Cheng Shi cut in with a smile:

"Sorry—precautions. I meant his role within the Torchbearers."

The Blind One frowned briefly, sighed, and decided not to press the matter. She answered quietly: "If you want to know, you can ask him yourself."

"He's not the Torchbearers' founder, is he?"

A Memory follower created an organization that opposes the gods?

What—does he want to dedicate the blasphemous memory of it to his 'terrifying' Benefactor?"

The Blind One "looked" at Cheng Shi with a weird expression: "No need to bluff me. I won't take the bait. I've said enough for today. Have these secrets swayed you?"

"Hmm—almost. Just a little more." Cheng Shi gave a half-laugh, showing zero awareness that he'd gained every advantage, and continued shamelessly: "I'm curious—what did you mean earlier about 'trusting you within this trial'?"

As if she'd predicted this question, the Blind One smiled and produced a slender vial from her inventory.

"This. Regardless of whether you join, after this trial Qin Xin and I will use this unused Remembrance Needle.

This isn't deliberate forgetting. It's the Torchbearers' respect—for those who've helped us, and for the other Fire Seeker's principles.

So while I still remember your connection to the Torchbearers, I naturally trust you, Cheng Shi.

But if I forget all of this..."

Cheng Shi smirked and shook his head: "If I chose to join, and you forgot everything about me—how would I prove my identity?"

"The Fire Passer Proof." The Blind One's expression turned grave. From her sleeve she produced a brilliantly glowing flame-patterned emblem and displayed it briefly. "I'll give you this to verify your identity. When Torchbearers see this emblem, they'll know you're a trustworthy... one of us.

So, Cheng Shi—have you decided?"

"Yes. I've decided!" His expression cycled through several changes before settling into absolute seriousness.

The Blind One's head snapped up. Behind the black cloth, something like hopeful light blazed in her sealed eyes. "You—"

"I've decided to take your advice and check out the Magma Crystal Mine outside town.

Let's go—right now!"

With that, Cheng Shi charged ahead, striding into the alley's dry breeze.

"..."

The Blind One stood frozen. But a moment later, she burst into rueful laughter.

"This Fate Weaver really is... quite the character."