

The Gods 631

Chapter 631: Prison Again, Always Prison

On the surface Cheng Shi appeared relaxed, but inside he was anything but.

Though the Blind One had revealed many truths he'd never known, his unanswered questions far outnumbered the answers he'd received.

Why had the Blind One suddenly tried to recruit him? Her demeanor differed from the phone call. In his mind, she'd always been a cool and mysterious woman—yet today she seemed lively, even testing him with probing maneuvers.

'Was it simply because the Mediocre Person Society events confirmed my identity, changing her opinion of me?'

'But here's the problem—if the Blind One is a Torchbearer, what about Zhen Xin?'

Given their famously close relationship, would she tell Zhen Xin about the organization? Or—would Zhen Xin tell her?

Cheng Shi hadn't forgotten: Zhen Yi had read his memories. Though she never mentioned the Torchbearers while playing "Cheng Dashi," who could say whether the Fun God had erased her awareness of them—or whether this unpredictable Master of Trickery had simply sensed the Fun God's intent and chosen to sit back, watching the fun unfold?

Both the woman and the god were impossible to read.

So for Cheng Shi, the timeline of the Blind One joining the Torchbearers was critical.

If she'd learned about the Torchbearers from Zhen Xin, then their motivations for approaching the organization needed careful scrutiny.

But if she'd joined first—before the trial where he'd encountered Zhen Yi—then she was far more trustworthy.

Bottom line: he had to stay wary of any entanglement between the Torchbearers and the Deceit Chosen.

Zhen Xin might not be frightening. But Zhen Yi's unpredictability was off the charts.

One moment she might respectfully leave the Fun God's protection intact. The next, she could trumpet the Torchbearers' existence to all the world. No one could predict what she'd do—and whatever she did would qualify as "fun," as an offering to the god.

That was the real headache.

Even worse: now that "Chaos" also counted as a form of "fun," exposing the Torchbearers would undeniably create massive chaos.

All Cheng Shi wanted to know was whether Zhen Xin had any means of controlling Zhen Yi.

Too many considerations. Part of him wanted to keep asking, to vet this organization for the sake of those who guarded beauty. But he also didn't want to get in too deep.

Fortunately, the Blind One had said they'd still use the Remembrance Needle. That meant once this trial ended, he'd return to his prior anonymity within the Torchbearers.

And that was exactly how Cheng Shi liked it—the most comfortable state. Both sides undisturbed, each at peace.

Still, learning this much about the Torchbearers wasn't without benefits. For this trial at least, he had one more person he could trust.

The Blind One was definitively not an enemy. As for Qin Xin, a fellow Torchbearer—maybe. He didn't distrust the Torchbearers, but Qin Xin's scrutiny of the Blind One felt odd, and the man seemed capable of detecting lies.

Walking and thinking, Cheng Shi soon found himself passing the inn where the trial had started. He stopped to ask a few casual questions, then pivoted in a different direction.

The Blind One trailed silently behind. Only when she noticed him heading back toward the town center did she frown and quicken her pace to walk beside him:

"The road outside town is the other way. Why are you circling back into the center?"

Cheng Shi flashed a mysterious smile without answering immediately. He walked on, casually surveying the weathered town's decaying scenery. That inexplicable sense of familiarity kept surging, but nothing in the visible landscape matched.

'Where have I heard of this place?'

His gaze swept the surroundings again. The mud-brick buildings along the streets bore an unfamiliar style. The red globular flowers growing in uneven heights beside the roads were a species he'd never encountered. The laundry hanging inside and outside yards—various styles and fabrics—had distinctive local character he'd never seen elsewhere. And the people of every conceivable ethnicity hurrying through the streets... they bustled about with lively but unremarkable expressions, looking like transients.

'Transients? Temporary stays?... Travelers?'

He frowned, pondered fruitlessly, and let it go—focusing on the present.

"I changed my mind. Since you're familiar with this area and know the mine has clues, the Truth follower probably knows things too.

We split up to improve efficiency. I trust he and Qin Xin will find the key you mentioned. So we don't need to join the crowd. I have a better destination—one that typically holds information outsiders can't easily access."

"An administrative office?" The Blind One looked mildly surprised. She'd guessed his thinking—and it was a legitimate investigative approach. "But Cheng Shi, this is Falling Gate, not some town under the Grand Tribunal or Tower of Logic. There's no governing authority here, no administrative center. Just a few major broker factions maintaining stability—or rather, protecting their own interests.

But as you should know, in an unregulated zone involving multiple competing interests, stability is a luxury."

"I'm well aware. But I'm a humble man—I don't need luxuries. Products for the masses are enough to satisfy my curiosity.

Where we're going does qualify as an administrative office. You're not wrong about that. But it doesn't handle governance—only... inmates."

"Inmates?" The Blind One blinked. "You want to go to a prison?"

Cheng Shi grinned. Hearing the word, that familiar feeling surged back.

"Exactly. Everywhere I go, I like to visit the local prison. The stories in there are always the most fascinating, and the fellows inside are always pleasant company. We'll definitely come away with something."

"..."

The Blind One's expression turned somewhat helpless. She conceded his reasoning had some merit, but thought there were better approaches—namely, following Fate's guidance and letting her lead the intelligence-gathering route for maximum efficiency.

But after meeting Cheng Shi, this Torchbearer had clearly stopped caring so much about trial efficiency. All she wanted now was to recruit this ally into the fold.

Still, out of habit, she quietly produced a die and ran a private divination on their upcoming route.

This was one of her talents—not the Prophet's prophecy per se, but similar in effect.

To her shock, the Fate Weaver who'd been defying Fate just moments ago had somehow chosen a path that scored near-maximum!

15!

Her sixteen-sided die had rolled a 15—meaning Cheng Shi's chosen direction very likely aligned with Fate's own guidance.

'How could...'

Her gaze sharpened. She pocketed the die and continued following in silence. But the way she looked at Cheng Shi now... grew markedly more curious.

Chapter 632: The Proxy Hand and the Torch Passer

Cheng Shi walked fast. Before long, the two had skirted past a sprawling shanty area—buildings of wildly varying heights, women standing outside every doorway—and arrived near an enormous, crude mud-brick structure. His eyelid twitched as he took in this so-called prison: doors hanging open, roof collapsed in places, one wall half-caved in. He was covered in black lines.

'If this counts as a jail, then the inmates' quality must be outstanding—otherwise, why wouldn't they just run?'

The Blind One smiled:

"Falling Gate is a tangle of competing factions, most fighting over resources flowing between the surface and the Underground. So unless absolutely necessary, they don't waste resources housing 'freeloaders.'

Most prisoners here get sent to the mines for hard labor. Only those too disruptive to work efficiently but still useful get temporarily held in places like this.

And the inmates stay voluntarily—because they need to make a living somewhere. Serve the sentence, and they can go back to doing what they were doing.

So today we're lucky. This... prison clearly holds a few fortunate souls."

Cheng Shi already knew people were inside, but her tone made his expression go strange.

'She's definitely mocking me. Her words are technically correct, but the inflection is all wrong.' He stopped short of entering and turned to face the Blind One:

"You know an awful lot about this place. Did the History School person tell you everything?"

The Blind One paused, then nodded with a smile: "Yes. Xin Xin runs the History School quite well."

"..."

'Listen to that. A Deceit follower running an organization dedicated to excavating the Land of Hope's memories.'

'So I'm not the only blasphemer in this game after all!'

No guards stood outside the mud-walled prison, but several "inmates" were indeed held within. When Cheng Shi cautiously pushed open the door and stepped inside, the first thing he saw was seven or eight burly men sprawled on the ground, dead drunk.

The floor was a disaster—overturned barrels and food scraps everywhere. The stench of alcohol and bodily odor hit him like a wall, making him physically recoil.

'Bro—this house doesn't even have a ceiling and it still reeks this bad? Were you drinking booze or piss?'

He clamped a hand over his nose and scanned the room twice. Apart from these unconscious drunks, the place was empty.

The Blind One followed him in. Seeing the mess, she frowned, sidled up to Cheng Shi, and said nasally through her own covered nose:

"This is where a Fate Weaver shines. Bless them with a sobering charm, Cheng Shi."

'?

Cheng Shi's lip twitched. 'What does a Fate Weaver's business have to do with Today's Hero?'

'I walked in wearing a warrior disguise. I don't have priest skills right now.'

But for simple sobering purposes, magic wasn't strictly necessary. Physical methods worked just fine.

So Cheng Shi smiled, flicked a scalpel from his sleeve, and—thwip—buried it in the nearest drunk's thigh.

The man shrieked awake, clutching his leg, and began howling before he'd even sat up. He rolled around like a steamroller, flattening the garbage beneath him, and before long, an even more potent aroma erupted.

Cheng Shi's face shifted colors. He immediately retreated a step. The Blind One stared at his handiwork, slack-jawed, unable to recover for quite some time.

"You—"

"Huh? Strange—you can't see, but can't you smell either? This isn't bothering you?"

"..."

For a split second, the Blind One felt disoriented. If her "vision" weren't fundamentally different from normal sight—letting her clearly identify the person before her as Cheng Shi—she'd have sworn this teammate was a certain Chosen surnamed Chen's long-lost brother.

"Doing this only lowers our information-gathering efficiency, Cheng Shi."

Sighing with resignation, she retrieved a small vial from her inventory and tossed it onto the thrashing man. The potion burst on contact, instantly healing his wound and sobering him up.

He stopped howling. His bewildered eyes blinked between the blindfolded woman before him and the smirking man in the distance.

"Who... are you?"

"Just passersby. Saw you'd been stabbed. Came in to save your life." Cheng Shi replied with shameless fluency. "No need to thank us—it's what any torch passer would do."

"?" The memory-addled man grew more confused. 'What the hell is a torch passer?'

He scratched his head, frowning: "What are you doing here?"

The Blind One looked somewhat resigned. She was about to ask something properly, but Cheng Shi beat her to it:

"We're freelance journalists. Here looking for story material. Anything strange happen in town lately?"

The big man blanked for several seconds—seeming to remember who he was and what had just happened. His face darkened. He sat up sharply, eyeing Cheng Shi and the Blind One with hostility:

"The hell? You here to laugh at us?"

Being stuck in here is humiliating enough. I don't have time to—"

Before he could finish, a gleaming scalpel whooshed past his inner thigh and embedded itself in the ground between his legs with a metallic clink.

The man shuddered violently. His tone shifted on a dime: "Time is the one thing I've got plenty of. What would you like to know?"

Both Cheng Shi and the Blind One were amused by the man's instant about-face. Cheng Shi snorted, stepped forward again, and twirled a scalpel between his fingers:

"Like I said—what's been interesting around town. Talk well and you'll be fine. Talk poorly... and my throwing aim isn't always this accurate."

The man's face blanched. He immediately spilled like a burst dam—household gossip, mine politics, factional feuds, newcomer drama—pouring out everything he could think of. By the time he finished, he was drenched in so much cold sweat it looked like he'd been fished out of a river, nearly collapsing from exhaustion.

Cheng Shi and the Blind One listened intently, their frowns deepening as the monologue dragged on. He'd said a lot, but nothing of substance—just petty affairs. Not even interesting, let alone useful.

Cheng Shi finally clicked his tongue in irritation and used the scalpel to cut the man off:

"How'd you end up in here? What crime?"

The man's voice hitched. He answered sheepishly: "Slept with a shanty woman. Couldn't pay. A Rad locked me up."

"?"

Cheng Shi frowned. The man's euphemism told him exactly what the shanty district was—and he immediately recalled the area they'd skirted earlier. So that's what kind of place it was.

The Blind One frowned too: "Who's A Rad?"

"Mining team captain. A Proxy Hand top brass here at Falling Gate," the man stammered.

Cheng Shi was still puzzling over what the Proxy Hand was when the Blind One started explaining:

"An organization that extracts Underground resources for surface powers. They cooperate extensively with the Tower of Logic and monopolized certain rare underground resources for a long period.

So this trial takes place in the mid-Civilization Era—the Proxy Hand's active period."

Cheng Shi nodded in sudden understanding. He turned back to the man, curious: "Your discipline isn't bad. Is the shanty district also a Proxy Hand operation?"

"No..."

"?" Cheng Shi blinked. "No? You stiffed someone else's business and your own people locked you up? The Proxy Hand is that law-abiding?"

The man shrank, embarrassed:

"That's not it either... The shanty place belongs to someone else, but the woman I was with is A Rad's sister. I couldn't pay her, she came to the mine to raise hell, and A Rad threw me in here."

"???"

Chapter 633: Fate's Guidance Begins to Take Effect

The moment those words left his mouth, the entire prison fell silent.

'Wait—hold on. What did I just hear?'

'Your boss's sister works the shanty district at someone else's establishment, and you went there for a visit without paying?'

'What kind of business ecosystem is this?'

'This is the Abyssal Volcano?'

Cheng Shi blinked in bewilderment, then turned to the Blind One with a peculiar tone: "Does the History School know about this?"

The Blind One's eye twitched. No words.

"Sorry—the History School doesn't exactly record every piece of trashy gossip."

'What's wrong with trashy gossip? The really juicy stuff is in the tabloids!'

'Without tabloid history, at least ninety percent of the entertainment value of history would vanish. Straightlaced scholarship would become the undisputed norm.'

Cheng Shi pursed his lips. Suddenly energized—gossip was far more interesting than intelligence—he flashed a beaming smile and pointed at another unconscious man on the floor:

"What about him? Why's he locked up?"

"He's a prison guard..."

"?" Cheng Shi couldn't hold it. He snorted out a laugh. "Fascinating. Absolutely fascinating."

"And this one?"

"Also a guard..."

"..." Even the Blind One broke.

'Beautiful!'

Cheng Shi burst out laughing and began pointing at the remaining bodies one by one.

"Him?"

"Came to the shanty with me. Also couldn't pay."

"Him?"

"Went to the shanty to steal money. Got beaten up. Too injured to mine."

"...And him?"

"That's A Rad." The man winced.

"???" Cheng Shi's grin froze. It took a while for his brain to catch up. "Wait—who is this? Your captain?"

"Yes..."

"You slept with his sister. He locked you up. And now the two of you are in here drinking together?"

"Yes..."

'Based.'

'Absolutely transcendentally chill. The vibe in this Proxy Hand organization is just too relaxed.'

Cheng Shi was speechless. For the first time in his life, he felt genuine admiration for a local ecosystem. He and the Blind One "exchanged glances," thoroughly amused. After a good long while, he pointed at the last man:

"And the last one?"

"He... his name's Ad Ric. Also came with us to the shanty..."

"..." 'Great—walked straight into a hornets' nest of degenerates.'

Cheng Shi sighed. The entertainment value had been stellar, but useful intelligence? Not a scrap. The Blind One was right—Fate's guidance didn't point here.

Just as he prepared to leave and try somewhere else, the big man—terrified he'd angered the "sir"—convulsed and blurted out another torrent of stories in a desperate bid for survival.

"S-s-sir, if you want interesting, Ad Ric's situation is actually far more entertaining than ours.

It's complicated. He came to the shanty with us but didn't stay the night. Instead, he drunkenly dragged a woman off to the Lava Crystal Pool for a walk and started spouting all kinds of nonsense."

Cheng Shi stopped mid-step. Eyebrow raised: "What kind of nonsense?"

"He said he saw love in that woman. Which is ridiculous—this is the same guy who used to skip out on his tabs. He's never talked like that before."

"...?"

The big man didn't notice Cheng Shi's strange expression. Head bowed, he was solely focused on appeasing the deadly stranger.

"Ad Ric was obviously hammered. God knows what that shanty woman was thinking, but she actually believed him. Said she'd quit, leave the shanty, and build a warm little home with him.

Except when Ad Ric heard that, he went absolutely berserk—beat her viciously and started raving about how she'd 'desecrated love' or some other lunatic garbage...

Don't—don't hit me! Sir, I didn't say it! Everyone outside knows! Tons of people saw it!

The whole thing infuriated the shanty women, so A Rad had to lock him up to appease them.

But even after sobering up, he keeps complaining about that shanty woman. Says he'll never marry—even though he's never been married. His fantasy of perfect love apparently only exists inside his hung-over brain.

This is honestly the juiciest thing we've heard happen lately, sir. Other than that... nothing.

Of course, if you'd like more, I have methods. We think Ad Ric's whole meltdown was caused by bootleg booze. I can find the exact same bootleg, drink it, and improvise something similar for you. Would that... work?"

"..."

Cheng Shi's expression went through quite the journey.

The man's groveling was pathetic, but every word had been true.

'Bro—you really think your buddy just drank bad booze?'

'Has it occurred to you that the booze might be fine, and the broken parts are your brains?'

Looking at the man's anxious face, Cheng Shi's expression was odd—but a gleam soon flashed through his eyes. Because the story had suddenly gotten very interesting.

A miner named Ad Ric had behaved bizarrely toward a shanty worker. Alcohol was a factor, sure—but who could guarantee there wasn't something more beneath the surface?

Most critically, even after sobering up, his perception still diverged from everyone around him. Didn't that sound an awful lot like this trial's theme?

'What a coincidence—the prison actually had a lead?'

Cheng Shi and the Blind One had clearly reached the same conclusion. They "locked eyes" and simultaneously "looked" toward the story's protagonist, each privately marveling:

'Fate really is... extraordinary!' (Indeed—Fate's guidance had quietly begun to take effect.)

With a lead in hand, the first order of business was verifying the hypothesis.

The Blind One considered using some Fate techniques to divine the man's past, but thought better of it and addressed Cheng Shi instead:

"I have some Memory items on me, but they're not particularly useful for tracing memories.

We should bring him back to the inn and let Qin Xin handle it. He has the tools to ensure this miner's memories are accurate. What do you think?"

"I don't think so. Too inefficient." Cheng Shi smiled and pulled out another scalpel. "We agreed to split up. Going to someone else for help at this point would be embarrassing. I can't let this go—I'll handle it myself."

"..." The Blind One hadn't expected his sudden competitive streak. But when she sensed his "intent to kill," she sighed and produced another potion.

She'd assumed whatever came next would be a repeat of the earlier performance. But this time Cheng Shi didn't fling the scalpel into a limb. Instead, he crouched down and neatly slit Ad Ric's throat.

The miner died—just like that, killed in his drunken sleep by Cheng Shi's hand.

Chapter 634: Who Doesn't Have a Few Memory Tricks?

The revelation terrified the only conscious man. But he neither screamed nor ran—he just clamped both hands over his mouth, went rigid, and dropped back to the ground, hoping to play dead in front of this executioner.

The Blind One frowned deeply. She didn't mind killing—she just couldn't understand why Cheng Shi had to kill the man.

What happened next genuinely surprised her.

Cheng Shi produced a bone-white Finger Bone Brooch from inside his coat and gently touched Ad Ric's corpse. The dead man's eyes snapped open—ghastly green light pouring from them.

"See? Memory isn't the only faith that understands memories. Death knows a thing or two as well."

Seeing the Blind One's confused frown, Cheng Shi smiled mysteriously and addressed the reanimated corpse:

"What's your relationship with the woman you hit?"

The corpse sat up, body swaying, and answered in a rasping, skin-crawling voice:

"Alo Manni... is my... wife... my beloved... other half... I cannot tolerate... her going behind my back... committing such disgraceful acts... that desecrate love... I cannot accept it..."

'There it is!'

When the dead Ad Ric declared the shanty woman was his wife, Cheng Shi's eyes lit up. He immediately spun around, hauled the playing-dead man upright, and asked with grave precision:

"Confirm—Ad Ric has no wife?"

The man was petrified. The words tumbled out:

"S-s-sir! Ad Ric's reputation in the shanty district is the absolute worst! We only couldn't pay—but he steals from the women! The guy who got caught stealing earlier? That was his protégé!

The shanty women live far more freely than us. A man like that—who would ever marry him?

He's incorrigible. If A Rad hadn't kept covering for him because he's strong, the shanty women would've beaten him to death ages ago.

Sir, surely you don't expect me to tell you the woman fell in love with her own pickpocket?"

"..."

'Bro—you're a freeloader yourself. How can you stand on moral high ground judging a petty thief?'

'You two are basically the same.'

'And how do you know feelings can't be stolen? Love is way more mysterious than fate.'

Cheng Shi's train of thought nearly derailed. But he confirmed the man wasn't lying.

So Ad Ric really did have a problem.

Either the miner had hidden a secret "love" from everyone, or something had altered his cognition—and the most likely candidate was the trial's key:

The Discrepancy of Time.

Given the trial's hints referencing past, present, and future, Ad Ric's anomaly probably involved either the past or the present.

Just as Cheng Shi prepared to probe further, the Blind One finally acted. She extended one hand, a cocoon of gentle light cupped in her palm. Her five fingers opened, releasing a delicate white glow that drifted upward and spread into gossamer threads—a spider web that wound around Ad Ric's corpse.

The web kept expanding. Several threads connected to the unconscious men on the floor, while one noticeably thicker strand wrapped directly around Cheng Shi.

Watching this unfold, Cheng Shi didn't resist. He'd already sensed the Fate power embedded in the web—clearly a formidable Fate technique from the Chosen herself.

"Unraveling the cocoon—a minor support talent. It helps us quickly locate individuals whose fates are entangled with his."

As she spoke, the silk strands continued stretching. The intertwined threads pierced through the broken roof and extended rapidly toward the edge of town.

Cheng Shi was genuinely impressed. After a moment's thought: "You're tracking Alo Manni's location?"

"Correct. Ad Ric's testimony and this prisoner's account alone aren't enough to determine anything. Finding Alo Manni is the key. But Cheng Shi—aren't you worried about killing an NPC who might be part of the trial's answer? What if the trial just fails?"

"Death is never simple. Aside from Death itself, no one gets to define it.

I didn't want to kill him. But my Memory abilities all stem from Death's domain—I had no choice.

As for why Death understands Memory—don't ask. I don't know either.

Of course, there's another consideration: transporting a corpse is far simpler than moving a living person. At least corpses don't fight back or require surveillance. So really... I'm improving efficiency.

When the time's right, I'll bring him back.

I'm a Fate Weaver. What I do best is..."

'Lying.'

He couldn't exactly say that. Cheng Shi smiled, effortlessly hoisted the burly Ad Ric over his shoulder.

"What I do best is mending other people's fates. And life—well, life is also a form of fate."

He strode off, following the aerial web's trajectory.

Something flickered behind the Blind One's expression—surprise, interest, consideration. She raised a brow, nodded thoughtfully, and fell in step behind him.

After the two living nightmares departed, the sweat-drenched man collapsed onto the ground, gasping for air. He desperately wanted to wake A Rad and warn him that terrifying strangers had come to town—but remembering that everything they'd learned had spilled from his own mouth, he

immediately abandoned the idea. Instead, he frantically snatched up several barrels, drained every last drop of residual alcohol, and passed out once more.

"Are you looking to fuse Death?" The Blind One seemed genuinely interested. She quickened her pace to walk beside him, asking with a light smile.

Cheng Shi's mouth held precisely zero truth. He brushed her off casually:

"Not at all. I'm a devout Fate follower. I'll always walk the path of Void."

He'd cleverly swapped the second "Fate" for "Void," but the Blind One heard nothing wrong. She understood his meaning and nodded approvingly.

Seeing her reaction, Cheng Shi grew curious about what the Fate Chosen thought about fusion. He bounced the question back—and heard her repeat his own answer almost word for word:

"I too am a devout Fate follower. I will firmly walk the path it has forged. No other considerations."

"..."

Cheng Shi fell silent—not because they'd had another round of riddle warfare, but because when he'd said those words, they were lies. When the Blind One said them... they were true.

'She genuinely doesn't want to fuse!'

Even without Master of Deception, in this setting, with that tone—Cheng Shi could tell: An Mingyu's devotion was real. So real it practically glowed.

'Why?'

'Isn't she afraid of falling behind?'

'Or did that so-called "gift of the Void" give her enough confidence to walk far on a single faith alone?'

He frowned. Couldn't figure it out. But he did figure out one thing: when fake piety meets real piety, someone's nose... starts to itch.

Scratch, scratch, scratch.

ACHOO!

Cheng Shi's face darkened. 'Who's trash-talking me behind my back?!'

Chapter 635: The Theory of Fate's Performance

The silk threads kept spreading overhead, but Cheng Shi could no longer see them clearly—only a faint, mystical pulse of Fate power too weak to guide him.

So the Blind One became his human GPS, leading him through the town toward the mines beyond its edge.

Falling Gate's layout differed drastically from surface civilization. The living areas weren't densely packed—buildings scattered haphazardly, a cluster here, a cluster there. The town plan looked as if outsiders had stumbled across inhabitants, picked random spots along the outskirts to settle, and gradually grown into new districts.

This made the town's footprint enormous. The two walked for quite a while.

But Cheng Shi didn't idle. He observed everything, occasionally chatting up passing strangers, treating the investigation like a sightseeing stroll. When the mood struck, he even picked two orange ball-flowers from the roadside and stuck them in Ad Ric's nostrils—"beautifying the corpse to please his companion," he claimed.

The corpse's beauty was debatable. The companion was decidedly not pleased.

Watching his antics, the Blind One sighed. 'He's far too relaxed. But the more relaxed, the further this Fate Weaver strays from his true nature.'

As the Fate Chosen—confident in her Void-granted ability to see through essences—everything Cheng Shi displayed was, to her, a deliberate distancing from the world.

He locked his core self away deep inside, projecting a carefree façade as a universally recognized Fate Weaver. Wasn't that its own form of Void? A void of self-not-self.

"Have you always been like this?" she suddenly asked.

"?" Cheng Shi blinked, feigning confusion.

"Sometimes you feel more like a Clown than a Fate Weaver."

"..." 'That "Clown" better be a profession name.'

Lip twitching, he pursed his mouth: "You can really tell fortunes?"

The Blind One nodded, then shook her head:

"A little. But not through calculation—through observation.

Fate doesn't need to be computed. It has always been right before everyone's eyes. It hangs labels on every possible path, then waits quietly as each life chooses its own road.

It has never interfered with anyone's choices. Yet people always blame their misfortune on its indifference.

What they fail to understand is that Fate doesn't perform destiny—each person performs their own destiny.

It writes countless scripts and creates innumerable characters. But there are always those who frantically search through the pile, pull out the most miserable roles, and fit them onto themselves.

I can't see how those scripts end. But I can glimpse blurred images—knowing who is about to perform which drama..."

Hearing this theory of Fate, Cheng Shi realized the Blind One's ascent to Chosen wasn't a matter of luck after all.

She truly understood Fate. In certain respects, her comprehension nearly rivaled his own.

His interest spiked. Tilting his head to study his black-veiled companion, he asked with genuine curiosity:

"Can you see what kind of fate I'll perform?"

The Blind One said nothing. Instead, she opened her palm to reveal a six-sided die—its glaring red 1 burning into Cheng Shi's vision.

"Sorry—divination is a personal habit. When combat isn't needed, I regularly divine my own choices. Not to predict the future, but to calibrate the present.

I'm constantly checking whether I've drifted from Fate's guidance. The method has always worked—it's carried me all the way to Chosen.

But...

Cheng Shi, you're a very strange person. When I divine matters related to you, the readings come out perfectly normal.

But the moment I try to investigate you as a person, my die rolls a 1 without exception."

The Blind One stopped walking. She turned to him, curiosity etched into her features:

"Today alone, my curiosity has earned me eight 1s.

I don't believe this is coincidence. Nor do I believe Fate has some error regarding you. When something repeats this consistently, I can only conclude: this is your fate.

So I'm very curious about what story you're living—what kind of performance would make my die produce an immovable 1.

Cheng Shi, I'll ask one more time—can today's sincerity earn me an answer?"

"..."

'If I could give you an answer, would my name still be Cheng Shi?'

'I'd just change it to "Fate" and be done with it.'

Her question was posed with curiosity, but what Cheng Shi heard stirred something closer to helpless dread.

If even other Fate followers only saw a 1 when divining his destiny—then could this so-called predetermined ending ever be changed?

Had Cheng Dashi's regression and Prosperity's fall made any difference at all?

Would the world, the universe, the era... still march along the script toward total Void?

His mind churned. He stared at the glaring 1 in her palm, and couldn't shake the feeling that it wasn't Fate's fixed destiny—but a certain clown's red nose...

After a pause, he didn't answer her question. Instead he asked one of his own.

"Secretly divining me isn't exactly sincere, Chosen An.

But I'm a magnanimous person—I won't hold it against you. However, before answering that question, you'll need to answer one of mine first."

The Blind One didn't refuse. She nodded: "Go ahead."

"Good. My question is: if I shared my story with you, would Zhen Xin... know?

And that jinx—Zhen Yi—would she know too?"

"That's what you're worried about?" The Blind One blinked, then laughed softly. "It's true—Xin Xin and I hide nothing from each other. But even the closest friends keep some secrets. As long as you mean Xin Xin no harm, I don't see a problem.

As for Zhen Yi... even if Xin Xin knew, she can control Zhen Yi's memories. Otherwise, the messes she'd cause would be far worse than what we already have."

'Knew it!'

Zhen Xin could control Zhen Yi's memories!

That explained everything. Cheng Shi nodded privately, then asked with lingering curiosity: "If Zhen Xin also considers Zhen Yi a liability, why not take back all her memories?"

"That's a second question, Cheng Shi. You're cautious enough when sharing your own story, but plenty greedy when coveting others'. Your behavior is no different from those inmates back in the cell—or the Ad Ric on your shoulder."

"???"

Chapter 636: An Mingyu's Death

'Lady—that charge is a bit heavy. Those guys were freeloading and shoplifting. I'm trading in good faith here. Even if my offering's a bit light, I've still got some credibility... right?'

'Even the Dragon King praised me—how can you slander me like this!'

Cheng Shi pursed his lips. He felt the urgent need to prove himself. So after a moment's thought, he made a decision—and revealed a monumental secret to the Fate Chosen.

"The universe will ultimately march into Void. But that script wasn't written by Fate—it was written by *It!"

"!!!"

The instant the Blind One heard "It," she recognized the pronoun as fundamentally different from the usual Them on the sixteen divine thrones. But beyond this "It," the sentence itself was staggering enough that she froze for several seconds, completely forgetting to ask who *It was.

And at that very moment, Cheng Shi helpfully supplied the name.

"Origin. *It is Origin.

Your Fate theory is solid, but you got one thing wrong. Those countless scripts may not have been written by our Benefactor. *It wrote everything—and merely granted Fate the authority to 'observe.'"

"!!!?"

At this, the Blind One could no longer hide her shock. She stood rooted, blank-faced.

But her stupor didn't last long. Her brow soon twisted—and then her face contorted. Before Cheng Shi could process what was happening, she violently vomited blood, crumpling backward like a kite with its strings cut.

"Pfft—"

"???"

Now it was Cheng Shi's turn to be thunderstruck. His pupils contracted violently. He lunged forward to catch the Torchbearer, now devoid of any life force—but someone was faster. A muscular, scale-armored arm appeared in his field of vision. In the instant he halted, it caught the Blind One by the waist and gently lowered her to the ground.

Qin Xin had arrived. He scanned the Blind One from head to toe, confirmed no external injuries, then raised his head to give Cheng Shi a grave look.

But what surprised Cheng Shi was that this fellow Torchbearer's eyes held no accusation or blame—only confusion:

"What happened to Ming Yu?"

'What happened?'

Cheng Shi wanted to know too. Who could've guessed she'd—

'Wait!'

'She couldn't have...'

"???"

Cheng Shi's mind went blank. He thought he understood. In a single stride, he reached her side, crouched down, and pried open her clenched right fist. The instant those slender fingers parted, his solemn face discovered... a pile of white ash.

"What's this?" Qin Xin's brow locked tight.

"Her die shattered..."

Cheng Shi's pupils quaked. His voice was layered with complexity and disbelief. He didn't even know how he'd instantly recognized this ash as the "cremated remains" of a Fate die—but he was certain.

'An Mingyu, you... you're insane?!'

"..."

He was shaken to his core—even frightened. Among the players he knew, Hu Xuan was crazy enough, Hu Wei wild enough, Big Cat fierce enough. But right now, all of them were nothing compared to this outwardly quiet, enigmatic Fate Chosen.

'How dare she?!'

'Was this also Fate's guidance?'

When everyone who heard Its divine name trembled in fear—when even Aph Ros dared not say an extra word about It—this "brave"... no, this wasn't bravery anymore. This was reckless. This was certifiably unhinged!

This unhinged player had just prophesied Origin?!

A prophecy about the being that reigned above all sixteen divine thrones!!

Cheng Shi's scalp tingled. Cold sweat streamed down his body. His legs felt weak.

'Not everything in the world can be divined, lady!'

'Do you even know what you just tried to prophesy?!'

'Well... looks like you won't get the chance to know.'

Cheng Shi stood dazed over her corpse, his mind racing—could the backlash from *It be reversed by normal means?

Then Qin Xin, silent until now, spoke again:

"What did she encounter?"

'What did she encounter?'

'I do know, but right now... I don't dare say.'

'A "gentle, delicate" woman just divined Origin without a second thought. You're a fully-armored, heavily-built warrior... please don't give me a one-man-versus-the-heavens encore.'

'Enough. You Torchbearers terrify me.'

He shook his head and exhaled deeply:

"There was a minor complication.

As for how it happened—unless the Blind One wakes up and volunteers the information herself, I think I'll... stay quiet.

Don't worry. Death is never a simple matter. Even if she wants to die, she might not get her wish."

Chapter 637: Torchbearer, Qin Xin

Cheng Shi spoke with certainty, but in truth he had zero confidence.

The Blind One hadn't died by his hand—yet she'd ultimately died because of him. Whether viewed through Big Cat's friendship or the Torchbearer lens, he couldn't shirk the responsibility of bringing her back.

Part of it was the values Old Jia had drilled into him. The other part was sheer caution regarding An Mingyu's potential calculations. He couldn't let this become a debt owed to the Torchbearers.

A shrewd Chosen—a high-level player accustomed to leveraging informational asymmetry—couldn't have been completely blind to the consequences. To recklessly divine something she didn't even know about?

Reckless or not, shouldn't she at least have found out what *It was before deciding whether to act?

So Cheng Shi harbored doubts. He needed to remain cautious through this sudden crisis.

Then again—since the Blind One genuinely knew nothing about *It and had dared to divine it without fear of death—didn't that suggest this really was a pure accident?

'Can't figure it out...'

Confusion flickered in Cheng Shi's eyes. He raised his head and gravely addressed Qin Xin:

"Can I trust you?"

Caught off guard by the sudden sincerity, Qin Xin froze.

Honestly, given the scene—his own companion lying dead in front of Cheng Shi—it should have been him asking the question. Yet Cheng Shi had preempted him.

Qin Xin's brow rose slightly. His sharp gaze scanned the area, and he quickly answered:

"Absolutely. Ming Yu must have spoken with you. You've done favors for us Torchbearers. At least until we forget you, Cheng Shi—you can trust us unconditionally."

Master of Deception confirmed: truth. But Cheng Shi pushed a little further.

"During introductions, you seemed to catch the Scholar's lie. Don't ask how I know—I have a Master of Deception card—"

Before he could finish, Qin Xin produced a gleaming golden playing card right in front of him—its face bearing a closed-eyed silence mask.

A Master of Deception card!

Qin Xin had one too!

"..."

Cheng Shi was numb.

'Today's been nothing but bad luck for the fake—every person I meet turns out to be the genuine article.'

He stammered briefly, twitched his lip in mild embarrassment, and nodded: "No wonder. So you have one too."

Qin Xin smiled. Then he did something Cheng Shi absolutely did not expect: he pressed the card into Cheng Shi's hand and deliberately spoke a lie:

"I am not a Torchbearer."

He paused. The smile faded. Then, with complete sincerity and solemnity, he spoke truths that could not have been more true:

"You've probably heard about us from the Fire Seekers already. We never betray anything beautiful. And friendship is the most beautiful of all beautiful things.

Cheng Shi, perhaps you don't endorse the Torchbearers' ideals. Perhaps you don't want to be weighed down, don't want to disrupt your current state of play. I understand all of that.

We have never been an organization that forces anyone or coerces choices. What we want is for every person who joins us to genuinely want to protect beauty—or to hold fast to themselves.

So even if you don't want to walk alongside us right now, please don't treat Ming Yu and me—don't treat the Torchbearers—as a burden.

And we're doing our best not to become one.

Whether or not you believe me—I can see the kindness buried in your heart. That single spark of goodness you've hidden so deep... is precisely the kind of beauty we Torchbearers want to protect.

I know this might sound long-winded, but Cheng Shi—you helped us. Out of the goodness in your heart, you helped us.

Don't look at me like that. And don't feed me those self-disguising lines. I've spent a long time thinking about your motives, but I can't find a single reason why someone with 'impure intentions'—someone supposedly exploiting the Torchbearers—would erase his own existence afterward.

If not for the Mediocre Person Society accident, we might never have known who our benefactor was.

I'm sorry... I don't mean to expose you. But you needn't worry. After this trial, the Remembrance Needle will make me forget everything about you.

I've said it: the Torchbearers are doing their best not to become your burden.

So, Cheng Shi—you can trust us unconditionally. That trust is guaranteed in the name of the Torchbearers—until the day the flame in our hands... goes out."

"..."

Cheng Shi stood frozen. He'd met every kind of speaker—witnessed every shade of genuine and false performance—yet in this moment, he was moved. Something like admiration glimmered in his eyes, as if pierced by an arrow called "charisma." A feeling that defied language rose from the depths of his chest, leaving him momentarily at a loss.

In this instant, the earnest invitations once extended by Fire Seekers Fang Shiqing and An Mingyu seemed... almost pale, compared to Qin Xin's words from the heart.

Who could refuse such a Torchbearer's approach and spiritual magnetism?

This Qin Xin was truly formidable. To deliver words of such infectious power—to trust him so completely—to place such an important card in a stranger's hands just to prove his sincerity.

'I'm a con artist, you know. Aren't you afraid I'll—'

Cheng Shi's gaze drifted upward over the man's body—leg armor, arm plates, breastplate...

"..."

'Forget it. Can't win that fight.'

For a split second, he even wondered whether this was actually a Corruption follower hiding beneath Memory—using such "filthy" tactics at a moment like this to awaken every yearning for beauty in his heart!

"You..." Cheng Shi's expression was complex. "You're the Torchbearers' true founder?"

Qin Xin blinked. He glanced at the Master of Deception card in Cheng Shi's hand but didn't answer directly, smiling instead: "Why do you ask?"

Cheng Shi frowned, quickly realizing his question had been presumptuous. With a sigh, he returned the card.

But the blurted question no longer needed an answer. The moment Qin Xin avoided a direct response, Cheng Shi knew he'd guessed right.

This Mirror Person was indeed the Torchbearers' founder!

Probably only someone this inclusive, this resolute in "faith," this magnetically charismatic could build such an admirable organization.

But if Qin Xin truly founded the Torchbearers—was he really a Memory follower?

Would a Memory believer really create an organization that must never be known or remembered by Memory, then use it to overthrow the gods and build a new world?

Cheng Shi frowned again. He casually glanced at the Master of Deception card in Qin Xin's hand, deliberated, and—out of respect—swallowed his doubts.

Then he gently touched his own face, removing the warrior mask. He pulled out the Lush Horn Crown, strapped it to his back, and cast a genuine healing spell on the Blind One lying on the ground.

In this Time trial, someone reliable now stood behind him. There was no need to cling to Today's Hero's combat power—even if this reliable person was technically his faith's opponent. Cheng Shi understood: Torchbearers were Torchbearers first, and only then followers who borrowed greatness from the gods.

Just as he himself had to be Cheng Shi first—everything else came after.

Chapter 638: This Fate Weaver Really Does... Have Something Special

Holy healing light bathed the Blind One's body, rippling with Revival energy. Normally, this effect would have pulled a dead person back—they'd have opened their eyes.

But the corpse at Cheng Shi's feet showed no reaction. His heart sank.

'Not good. Death caused by *It really is different from normal death. Even the Lush Horn Crown can't revive this Fate Chosen.'

'What now?'

Cold sweat erupted across Cheng Shi's body. Just a second ago he'd been boasting to Qin Xin about "death never being simple"—and now? Death might or might not be simple, but revival sure as hell was complicated.

Qin Xin noticed the anomaly too. Carefully feeling the Revival power within the healing spell, he asked:

"Such pure reviving force—I can even detect a trace of Prosperity in it. But why isn't it working?"

Could it be because Prosperity has fallen?"

'Hm?'

Cheng Shi froze, then instantly perked up.

'Yes yes yes—bro, you're absolutely right! That's exactly it! Prosperity fell, so its Revival artifact lost its power!'

He knew perfectly well Qin Xin was wrong—he'd used this item to save multiple people after Prosperity's collapse. But this wasn't about being right or wrong. This was about whether the blame could be successfully deflected.

'Praise Prosperity—still helping people even in self-annihilation.'

'And praise the Torchbearers—blessed to have such a brilliant leader. You'll do just fine!'

Cheng Shi nodded vigorously, withdrew his healing hand, and said with barely concealed embarrassment:

"I knew Revival of this level couldn't bring her back. I was merely conducting a small experiment. After all, Chosen An's manner of death is exceedingly rare—I wanted to collect some uncommon data. I had to, er... ahem, be a bit disrespectful. My apologies."

Qin Xin wasn't without suspicions—he was perceptive enough to notice the revival had gone wrong. But he trusted Cheng Shi, or rather, he trusted someone who'd once helped the Torchbearers anonymously. So he didn't press.

"Then what now?" he continued. "I have a few revival items, but honestly, their quality probably isn't as good as yours. Besides, Ming Yu should have safeguards from Zhen Xin—she shouldn't have died this suddenly."

"..."

With every sentence, Cheng Shi's embarrassment deepened. He was on the verge of crumbling under that piercing gaze when—his mouth moved on its own.

Fool's Lips seized control of his "speaking rights" without warning. With a lazy hum and a smirk, it said:

"Don't panic. Those safeguards haven't triggered because she died in an unknown manner and exists in an unknown state of death. Simply put... she isn't fully dead.

Since she isn't fully dead, she naturally can't be revived.

So just give her another push. Send her to see the Master, and presumably she'll be properly dead."

The words landed. Qin Xin's brow knotted. Cheng Shi's heart seized.

'Bro—Brother Mouth—of all the times, you pull this now?!'

'What do you mean "not fully dead"? If she's not fully dead, then the Blind One is—'

'Wait!'

'Why did Brother Mouth mention the Master?'

Cheng Shi's expression turned grave. He replayed every word, especially the final sentence, running it through his mind several times. Then—a flash of insight. An incredible conclusion:

Perhaps only the one seated upon the Bone Throne—the Master—could save this unfortunate Fate Chosen.

Because Death was one of the sixteen true gods personally sanctioned by Origin. It bore the divine name of Death and wielded the authority of Death. If the backlash from gazing upon *It had made the Blind One's death irreversible, then perhaps the only being in the entire universe who could use their authority to make the irreversible reversible again... was the Master.

'So this time, Brother Mouth isn't screwing me—he's helping me!'

'Long live Brother Mouth!'

'But why the change of heart?'

'Whatever—save the person first.'

Energized, Cheng Shi now had a plan. While Qin Xin still looked on in confusion, he raised his right hand, gently pinched the Death Fun Ring—now charged two notches by his own fear—and aimed it at the Blind One beneath his feet.

Now he'd give her the big treatment.

"You—"

BOOM!

Before Qin Xin could ask what the plan was, world-ending lightning erupted and devoured the Blind One's body. Under Qin Xin's horrified stare, the thunder consumed every scrap of flesh, leaving behind nothing but a bare skeleton.

The skeleton creaked, mouth yawning open amid the thunderclap, and released a hoarse, ear-splitting shriek. Then, the instant the lightning faded, it sprang nimbly to its feet, scuttled behind Cheng Shi, and stood at attention—empty eye sockets staring at the flabbergasted Torchbearer founder across from them.

It wasn't just Qin Xin. Cheng Shi was dumbfounded too.

This was his first time using the Fun Ring since its upgrade. He hadn't expected the so-called Screaming Servant to be this... bare-boned. Er—this crude.

'Great. The necromancer cover story is completely blown now.'

'Actually, maybe it doesn't matter. The only person who knew about his necromancer identity—that War neighbor—hadn't returned yet.'

"You... fused Death?" Qin Xin was shaken.

"?" Cheng Shi shook his head frantically. That was absolutely not something to admit—otherwise all the groundwork with the Dragon King and Mi Laozhang would be wasted. "Just an item. A revival method. Standard procedures can't break the status on Chosen An, so only this approach can bring her back to us."

With that, he ordered the Screaming Servant to return to the Master's Bone Throne and deliver a message. As for what that message was—he leaned away from Qin Xin and whispered two words: "Save me."

The Screaming Servant was obedient. It nodded, let out a piercing shriek, and tore open a ghastly green flame-portal in the void ahead. Then it charged through without hesitation.

Its resolute bearing carried a faint echo of Gongyang Jiao's assault on him.

"..."

'How bizarre—imagining the dead An Mingyu turned into a bare-boned Gongyang Jiao Almost makes me laugh. Where does this absurd sense of comedic timing even come from?'

Watching "the Blind One's skeleton" rip open a Death portal and vanish before his eyes, Qin Xin opened his mouth. Nothing came out for a long time.

He'd seen absurd stories. He'd lived through bizarre trials. But a scene this relentlessly confusing from start to finish? First time.

From the moment he'd found them—to the Blind One dying for no apparent reason—to Cheng Shi's dazzling sequence of moves that blasted away her flesh and "released" her skeleton into the wild... this chain of bewildering events made him feel like a clueless rookie all over again.

He stared at Cheng Shi, deeply moved by a single thought:

'This Fate Weaver really does... have something special.'

Chapter 639: The Trial's Difficulty Just Spiked

"You're alone?"

Where's the Erudite Scholar?"

After sending the Blind One off, Cheng Shi turned back to Qin Xin. Finally he had a chance to properly talk with this Memory follower—the suspected founder of the Torchbearers.

Qin Xin smiled faintly. He first glanced at the other corpse lying before Cheng Shi, then pointed toward the outskirts:

"The Scholar trusts me enough to split up for efficiency's sake.

He knows the Magma Crystal Mines, so he headed there. I stayed behind to wander the town."

Cheng Shi's expression turned peculiar: "He ditched you to go to the mines alone, and you're not even suspicious?"

"Of course I am. I tailed him for a while. He's cautious—seemed to sense someone, so he played it normal.

This is a trial that requires trust. I can't waste time following a teammate without cause. So after finding nothing, I came back."

"You came looking for us?" Cheng Shi was mildly surprised—the man's tone suggested he'd been heading toward him and the Blind One specifically.

"Correct. Compared to the Scholar's private agenda, I was more interested in your results. And now... I've learned them.

Unfortunate."

"..." 'Shrewd—every last one of them. Nobody needs to say a word; one look at the scene and they've deduced everyone's relationships.'

Cheng Shi was quietly impressed. But then he frowned, remembering Qin Xin's attitude at the inn—it didn't match his current demeanor. Back then, Qin Xin had repeatedly shot puzzled glances at the Blind One, clearly surprised by her prophecy and her decision to stay. Yet now...

"Who's this?" Qin Xin interrupted his thoughts, nodding toward Ad Ric.

"Ad Ric. An imprisoned miner. We found his memories were confused—possibly a trial breakthrough. We were carrying him to find a second lead: a shanty woman named Alo Manni."

Cheng Shi glanced up at the sky. The tracking threads—invisible to him since earlier—had already vanished completely with the Blind One's death.

Qin Xin nodded: "Sounds like we should rendezvous with the Scholar."

"Interesting. You don't seem worried about the Blind One's death, and you don't care whether I join the Torchbearers?"

Her invitation—that had your approval, didn't it?"

Cheng Shi hefted Ad Ric again, preparing to head for the mines with Qin Xin. As for the Blind One—until she returned, standing around was a waste.

Qin Xin smiled slightly and took the miner's corpse from him. The burly Ad Ric looked almost dainty next to the fully-armored warrior.

Instead of shouldering the body, Qin Xin simply dangled it at his side and walked forward effortlessly.

"You're very curious about my identity. Perhaps you've guessed right—but perhaps not entirely.

I told you, Cheng Shi—I trust you. So I'm not worried about the Blind One.

As for whether you'll join the Torchbearers... I discussed the invitation with her beforehand. She's someone with sharp instincts for the future—actually quite similar to you. She's not a true Torchbearer in spirit either. We're companions on the same road, and she chose to join while walking it. You chose to refuse.

Perhaps that's exactly why she wanted to recruit you.

I thought it'd be an intrusion—I knew that if our other Fire Seeker encountered you, she'd probably extend an invitation too, given her personality. But you went anonymous and stayed hidden, meaning you'd already rejected us once.

Still, the Blind One insisted. She persuaded me. She said it wasn't an opportunity for you—it was an opportunity for the Torchbearers. She could sense your potential value to us, just as clearly as she sensed she'd one day stand alongside us.

But I'd already anticipated your refusal.

Cheng Shi—I'm sorry. Perhaps we're just too weak, which is why we wanted to seize this one chance. But don't worry about it. After this trial, the Remembrance Needle will make the Blind One and me... forget everything.

Lao Deng will die at the Torchbearers' hands. And the Prisoner... though he chose to join us, I still had him swear an Oath of Silence. So—you're safe.

And I'm glad the Torchbearers haven't burdened you further."

"..."

For the first time, Cheng Shi had no idea how to respond. Qin Xin's words covered every angle—cause, process, outcome—all laid out in perfect detail. Even the cleanup he'd normally handle himself had been pre-addressed. Beyond listening, he could do nothing.

Silence fell. A heavy-armored warrior carrying a corpse walked shoulder to shoulder with a Fate Weaver toward the mines beyond town.

They hadn't gone far when they ran into Wang Mou returning from the mines. The Erudite Scholar, like Qin Xin, carried an apparently unconscious woman—and the two groups nearly collided on the narrow path out of town.

Cheng Shi's eyebrow rose with amusement: "Scholar—the lady in your hands wouldn't happen to be a shanty woman named Alo Manni, would she?"

Wang Mou blinked. He tilted his head toward the corpse in Qin Xin's grip and nodded:

"Seems we've both found something. I discovered this confused woman in the mine's medical ward, being treated by some quack.

Though I couldn't tell if it was treatment or a transaction. In any case, their conversation revealed something fishy—this woman's memories appear to be... problematic.

So I removed the quack and brought her back, planning to question her in front of everyone."

Qin Xin nodded approvingly. Cheng Shi just grinned.

He studied the Scholar with interest: "Why not question her in private first? Surely you know—sometimes leads have a very short shelf life."

"We have plenty of time. Besides, the Investigator follows Order. I'd rather not invite his suspicion with unauthorized questioning—that would only hurt efficiency."

'Reasonable enough. Cautious too. But...'

Cheng Shi's lips curled: "Scholar—since you care so much about efficiency, did eavesdropping on someone's medical treatment... not affect efficiency?"

"?" Wang Mou's face stiffened. He glanced at Cheng Shi, then at the ever-smiling Qin Xin, and his gaze shifted away: "I happened to overhear while looking for clues nearby. Actually—"

"Fine, fine—not important. Just a joke. Why so defensive?" Cheng Shi teased. "The mine seems big. Besides this woman, any other leads?"

"Yes. But one person's effort was far from enough for proper investigation. Since we've set a regrouping time, we should share intel first, make a deeper plan, and then return as a full team.

Work methodically, achieve efficiently. I suggest—"

BOOM!

Before he could finish, a deafening explosion rocked the town center. By the time the three turned with grim faces, they saw—with shock—that an entire section of the town's southeast had been wiped clean from reality.

"!!!"

The Extinguisher!

The volatile mage had ultimately failed to control her destructive urge—and cranked this trial's difficulty straight up.

Wang Mou's gaze darkened. Qin Xin's brow furrowed. Cheng Shi stared in disbelief.

At this level, any Oblivion follower who couldn't properly suppress their annihilation drive would be dogpiled by every other player. Normally, anyone who'd climbed this high had developed methods to balance the urge.

But Wu Cun had seemed fine just moments ago. What went wrong?

The three exchanged grave looks. Reading in each other's eyes the shared desire to clear this trial, they spoke in unison—"Go!"—and sprinted toward the erased zone.

Before the Extinguisher could obliterate every last clue, they had to find a way to restrain her. If she spiraled further, there'd be zero hope of completion. And if worst came to worst—teammate or not—she'd have to be killed.

As the thought formed, the Blind One's prophecy echoed in his mind.

Five!

On the last day, only five would sit around the table.

He checked his watch. Just past the hour—barely two and a half hours since they'd split up. Was this prophecy about to come true on day one's morning?

Chapter 640: Oblivion Starts the Raid

On the other side.

Rewinding slightly—Li Wufang had been wandering town with Wu Cun for some time now. The Order follower knew full well that splitting up would be fastest in an area this large. But his current mission wasn't just investigation—there was something more important: keeping a close eye on Wu Cun and ensuring this Oblivion follower didn't casually make offerings to her Benefactor.

Contrary to Li Wufang's expectations, though, Wu Cun's murderous aura was intense but never uncontrolled. She seemed to channel every ounce of destructive desire into her eyes alone—at a glance, Li Wufang might have been walking alongside a Folly follower instead.

But whatever faith she followed—as long as she wasn't a threat to the trial, she was a good follower.

Li Wufang was actually quite relaxed this round. When he'd spotted both a Truth follower and the Blind One at the start, he'd known the trial wouldn't be too difficult.

Truth followers excelled at solving puzzles. The Fate Chosen could see through destiny itself. So as long as no one caused trouble, he figured he could coast through.

And the only player likely to cause trouble was currently walking beside him with a cold expression—who actually didn't seem unreasonable.

"Miss Wu, found anything?"

Li Wufang wasn't a quiet person. Though Grand Tribunal investigators were famously stern, he was still a player—he needed to unwind during investigations.

Wu Cun, however, was not a friendly conversationalist. He'd asked this question countless times. The only responses were cold snorts or cold stares.

But this time, the Oblivion follower finally broke her cold-shoulder routine with a sneer:

"I hate noise. My only thought right now is annihilating the sounds that shouldn't exist."

Li Wufang blinked. He squeezed out an awkward smile:

"I'd advise reconsidering. While that would honor Oblivion, it also looks suspiciously like honoring Silence. Miss Wu—you're not planning to fuse Silence, are you?"

Wu Cun frowned with disgust: "Silence doesn't fuse. Everyone knows that. You're dressing up small talk as idle chat, but every line is a test. What—am I that interesting to you?"

She stopped walking. She turned and flicked one glance at Li Wufang's face—then her gaze slid downward, landing with a half-smile on his crotch.

That look made the Investigator damn near jump. He instantly shut up.

"Enough, Li Wufang. Drop the act. You're a hunter—an Order hunter at that. One of your god-given talents is reading people. You've tailed me long enough to know I can handle myself.

So let's pick up the pace. I know what you're thinking. I know you'd rather coast this round.

But I don't want to be the slacker sitting in back row when we regroup. And I definitely don't want that Truth idiot's side-eye and mockery.

One hour left. We split up and investigate separately. With your speed—as long as you're still nearby—even if I lose control, the damage should be minimal, right?"

Wu Cun's cold laugh carried an unquestionable edge.

Li Wufang scratched his head awkwardly. He had indeed seen her "stability"—but for safety, he didn't agree immediately.

"Have I been rejected by the beautiful lady?"

"Should I say yes or no? I despise hypocrites. If you actually meant to try something with me, I'd respect you for it. But you're all timid hesitation, just like your boring master. What good is a mouth alone?"

Judgments aren't won with words—at minimum, your fists need to be big.

That's enough. You go left, I go right. Stop following me. My patience has limits."

Without looking back, Wu Cun headed for the right fork. She wasn't trying to shake Li Wufang's surveillance—she genuinely wanted to improve investigation efficiency and find useful information to avoid the others' contempt.

Oblivion followers had always suffered terrible reputations in trials. That negativity fed back into them, compounding their irritability—a vicious cycle that made every Oblivion follower struggle harder against their annihilation drive.

They battled constantly against the rage that demanded they erase everything. Added pressure only made it worse.

Li Wufang understood the principle of "too much is as bad as too little." So when she rounded the corner and disappeared from view, he frowned—but didn't follow.

His Order talent truly had let him read Wu Cun. She was clearly an "ambitious" high-scorer. Players like her understood discretion and knew how to manage relationships. Separated for just an hour, she shouldn't cause any—

Right as the thought formed, his wristwatch alarm chimed. 11:00. One hour until the rendezvous he'd set.

"Time to speed up. If I'm going to coast, I should at least help the others eliminate some wrong answers."

A light chuckle. He started to turn—but before he could, before his raised heel had even touched down, catastrophe struck without warning. In the instant between checking his watch and looking up, entire blocks of housing vanished from reality before his eyes!

Oblivion's power erupted nearby, annihilating every human-height space in range. Houses lost their walls but kept their roofs. Tall trees lost their trunks but kept their canopies. Boulders and hillocks shattered. Every living thing—every blade of grass—blinked out of existence!

Li Wufang's head snapped up. Before him lay a sudden expanse of white nothingness. And at the center of that void—stretching to an unknowable distance—stood a cold-faced beauty in white mage robes, sneering with undisguised contempt as their eyes met!

She was watching him too.

But their gazes held for less than a second. Because in the next instant, the unsupported ruins—rooftops, treetops, debris—came crashing down with a thunderous BOOM, kicking up waves of dust and sending tremors through the ground.

Li Wufang's eyelid twitched. His face went absolutely black.

He'd been toyed with. No—provoked!

Wu Cun had deceived his observation, then from this close range unleashed an apocalyptic annihilation to pluck his nerves like strings.

'Well, well, well!'

'Some Oblivion follower!'

Li Wufang's eyes went cold. But instead of flying into a rage, he summoned his longbow from thin air, nocked several arrows in rapid succession, and sent Discipline Arrow after Discipline Arrow piercing into the billowing dust clouds.

Simultaneously, he launched himself skyward, sprinting across the rooftops of the still-intact outer buildings. As he moved, he "proclaimed" special laws unique to this zone:

"Hereby—teleportation is forbidden.

Hereby—elevated jumping is forbidden.

Hereby—sprinting is forbidden.

Hereby—life transfer is forbidden!"