

The Gods 641

Chapter 641: No Peak Player Is Ever Simple

Law Commands materialized as barriers of holy light, sealing the dust-choked zone airtight. Meanwhile, the hunter Li Wufang—sprinting outside the affected area across rooftops—drew his bow again and again, unleashing an endless barrage of Discipline Arrows into the heart of the smoke.

The Investigator had given up on interrogation and arrest. Against a suspect like this, he'd chosen on-the-spot execution.

Cheng Shi's trio arrived at the scene just then. The sight made their expressions darken further.

The annihilated zone was enormous. The commotion had drawn attention from nearly the entire town—heads peeking from alleys and streets. Some were panicked, some rubbernecking. A few reckless fortune-seekers even tried to push into the dust cloud, hoping something valuable had fallen from the sky.

The holy-light walls of the Law Commands kept every last one of them out.

The battle within had clearly gone white-hot. From Li Wufang's stance, he plainly intended to fight to the death.

The three didn't know the full story and couldn't judge prematurely. But Wu Cun had obliterated an entire block—the kind of sabotage that forced every trial-minded player to pick a side.

"The biggest variable is the obstacle itself. This time I'll stand with Order. Perhaps Fate's prophecy is right before our eyes."

With that, Wang Mou produced several palm-sized mechanical mice from his inventory. Nothing but alloy skeletons—not a scrap of flesh—their empty eye sockets blazed with alarming red light the instant they hit the ground. Squeaking frantically, they charged into the smoke.

Explosions followed swiftly. The blasts rivaled the earlier devastation in sheer volume.

'Mechanical Engineering?!'

'He's a Mechanical Engineering Department scholar?'

Cheng Shi blinked. Then he recalled the Scholar's lie. If the man truly was a scholar... what had he lied about?

His name?

Lying about a name?

But "Wang Mou" was already a pseudonym. Even if it was a lie, why give a codename?

Something deeper was at play. Cheng Shi couldn't work it out—and there was no time. He turned toward the battlefield's center and sensed Oblivion power accumulating at insane speed. The Extinguisher apparently hadn't been wounded. Worse—she was preparing something even bigger for the "teammates" outside.

Cheng Shi's face soured. Her timing couldn't have been worse. He'd just removed his mask—losing Today's Hero's bonuses and reverting to Fate Weaver—right when combat erupted.

Still, he could play support. He stepped back half a pace, looking to Qin Xin—the main fighting force—only to find the Mirror Person showed no intention of engaging.

Qin Xin shifted one step sideways to shield Cheng Shi, sensed his gaze, and shook his head with a smile:

"Clues don't matter. The trial doesn't matter. Scores don't matter..."

Our friends matter most.

The Investigator and the Scholar can handle this. What I can do is make sure our priest friend isn't touched by Oblivion before the Blind One returns."

The instant he finished speaking, a tidal wave of berserk Oblivion power erupted from the smoke—radiating outward in every direction indiscriminately. From the look of it, Wu Cun intended to drag everyone into annihilation.

Including herself!

"!!!"

"This is bad—fall back!"

Sensing the catastrophic Oblivion force bearing down, Wang Mou's expression hardened. He vanished from sight—so fast that even Qin Xin, a warrior, was momentarily startled. One eyebrow rose:

"The Scholar isn't a scholar after all."

Indeed—Cheng Shi had noticed too. In a crisis, identities are the hardest to conceal. This "scholar" hadn't expected to walk into a world-ending cataclysm when he'd rushed over.

So his first instinct was to Flash away from the battlefield. And his method of escape...

Shadow Shuttle!

This was no Erudite Scholar. This was an Assassination Doctor!

The Truth follower who'd pulled out Mechanical Engineering tools was a pure-blooded assassin!

But personal revelations aside—shouldn't the two of them also be avoiding this?

Cheng Shi wasn't too worried. He'd scattered countless dice along the way and could teleport anywhere. He'd only stayed because Qin Xin hadn't moved. If he bolted first, he'd look like a clown in everyone's eyes. So he held his ground, planning to warp out at the absolute last second.

Normally, cautious Cheng Shi would never pull this kind of brinkmanship. But with Qin Xin tanking up front, he didn't want his image among the Torchbearers to collapse because of a single Oblivion blast.

The Oblivion storm howled, nearly reaching them—and at last the calm Memory player moved. With a soft chuckle, he drew a slender longsword and traced a circle in the air before him. Instantly, a mirror surface—shimmering like deep-sea sapphire—materialized. The rampaging Oblivion storm seemed to find an outlet: waves surging in every direction reversed course and crashed maniacally into the sapphire mirror.

Whatever lay behind that mirror connected to some unknown space. The onlookers watched as the god-powered storm was devoured whole—and then the Oblivion tsunami simply... disappeared.

Safe.

'That's it?'

Cheng Shi was stunned. He stared at Qin Xin's back, his gaze tracing past the man's shoulder to the mirror swirling with icy-blue crystalline light. His heart pounded with awe.

'What level of strength is this?'

This Torchbearer founder was still holding Ad Ric in his other hand. With one hand—drawing a single circle—he'd neutralized the Oblivion catastrophe that had sent Wang Mou running?

As the berserk power vanished, every eye in the area turned toward Qin Xin.

The dust had long been annihilated. Even the rubble at the center had been utterly erased. Reality bore no debris but was torn everywhere—Void rifts dotted the ground, howling winds of nothingness bleeding through, dropping the entire zone's temperature by several degrees.

Li Wufang stood on a distant rooftop, expression grim. His hawk-sharp eyes swept the devastated area again and again—but the Extinguisher had vanished.

The terrifying Oblivion storm hadn't annihilated a single person. It had seemingly only annihilated its own caster.

But Li Wufang knew the truth wasn't as simple as it appeared. As for where Wu Cun had gone—he'd have to ask the Mirror Person who'd just resolved everything: Qin Xin!

He turned toward Qin Xin. At the same time, Wang Mou—who'd fled the battlefield a step earlier—reappeared via Shadow Shuttle. Staring at the sapphire mirror before Qin Xin, he whispered in shock:

"The Dreamless Mirror?

You're Like A Dream?"

Chapter 642: The Dreamless Mirror and Like A Dream

'Hm?'

'Memory's former rank-two, current rank-one on the Ladder—Like A Dream?'

'Qin Xin is him?!'

Cheng Shi froze. The caution born of opposing faiths urged him to step back—but remembering that this man was a Torchbearer, its founder no less, he held his ground. Though his expression grew increasingly peculiar.

'Brilliant. I'm a follower of the Fun God, and I keep ending up with the Memory rank-one. If the god finds out, he'll definitely throw more shade my way.'

'Wait—if Qin Xin really is Like A Dream, why hasn't the Fun God targeted him? Li Jingming had zero connection to Deceit and still got drafted into the Void camp. This Mirror Person is literally under the god's protection as a Torchbearer. There's no reason to leave him "suffering" under Existence.'

He studied the mirror again—that gem-faceted surface swirling with crystalline blue light. 'Hiss—'

'Doesn't look like much suffering, actually.'

"An SSS-grade Servant God relic—the Dreamless Mirror! A Memory mirror that can overlay dreams onto Existence to reproduce past memories!" Wang Mou announced.

These words obviously hadn't come from Cheng Shi—he knew nothing about any dream-this or mirror-that. They came from the well-informed Truth follower.

Wang Mou seemed to deeply understand these matters—and Cheng Shi was more than happy to listen. He sent the man an encouraging look that plainly said: 'Keep talking. The more erudite you sound now, the more face you recover from that clown-like evacuation earlier.'

Wang Mou's eyelid twitched. Perhaps reading the implication, he cleared his throat and continued without a hint of embarrassment:

"Reportedly, this is Memory's only Servant God-tier creation: the Mirror of Delusion. After shattering, it became two SSS-grade Servant God relics.

One half became the Dreamless Mirror. The other became another SSS-relic—That Dream My Nightmare.

The latter vanished into the depths of history long ago—no trace remaining.

But I knew the Dreamless Mirror had to be in 'Like A Dream's' possession. Qin Xin—I never imagined you were him. Even more surprising: Like A Dream is a Mirror Person. I always assumed you were a Dream Peeping Ranger, given the name..."

Qin Xin just smiled, saying nothing. Cheng Shi, however, grew more curious.

"Doctor—since you've never actually seen 'Like A Dream,' how did you know he had this mirror?"

"Simple: intelligence.

Wei Mu once critiqued this mirror, calling it 'nothing more than a dream of delusion.' I've been matched against Wei Mu, so naturally I learned of it."

"Who's Wei Mu?" Cheng Shi blinked.

Qin Xin's smile faded. His expression turned complex: "The one from Folly."

Cheng Shi's eyes widened: "The Folly Chosen?"

"Yes. The highest known score on the Road to Ascension. The uncontested first on the Ladder. Folly's absolute devotée. A mind so brilliant it borders on madness—a Behind-the-Scenes Puppeteer no one can read."

'Behind-the-Scenes Puppeteer!'

Cheng Shi's gaze sharpened. 'So the Folly Chosen is also a mage?'

'The mage class is eating well—so many Chosen among them.'

While the group was exchanging quiet words, Li Wufang approached. His expression was sour—after all, the target had gone rogue under his watch. Regardless of the cause, he'd fumbled his own assignment, and that stung.

But his gaze, while embarrassed, wasn't defeated. That sunny disposition hadn't dimmed from the incident.

He scratched his head sheepishly, then addressed Qin Xin with genuine sobriety:

"Sir Qin—my apologies. Don't think me useless; I truly misjudged today. Wu Cun's emotional eruption came out of nowhere. I never saw it coming.

But I'm not always this blind. When you all arrived, I was already watching you. You...

Actually—let me just say it. I initially thought you didn't care about this trial. But the moment you pulled out that mirror, I knew you weren't indifferent—you'd already planted contingencies here. Right?"

Qin Xin smiled without speaking. But Cheng Shi's brow rose. He recalled what the Blind One had told him about the Mediocre Person Society—the staged dreamscape.

If Qin Xin had used this mirror to build that setup at the Mediocre Person Society... was it possible that the annihilated wasteland they now stood on was also his doing?

'!?!?'

'This Memory follower had already safeguarded against this accident?'

A gleam shot through Cheng Shi's eyes. He stared straight at Qin Xin. Sensing the attention, Qin Xin smiled and nodded:

"Correct. Plan for defeat before seeking victory—prepare for rain while skies are clear.

I did lay groundwork in advance. Separating from the Doctor wasn't solely to find you and Ming Yu. But this time, the credit isn't mine—it belongs to the Investigator for keeping the Extinguisher occupied long enough that her outburst came after my preparations were complete."

With that, he waved his hand and dismissed the mirror into his inventory. As it vanished, the onlookers felt an invisible barrier dissolve. The gray-white ruins ravaged by Oblivion began coming alive again.

Devastation receded. Color bled back into reality. Erased Existence reappeared piece by piece. The dead district was reborn—pedestrians weaving through streets, buildings standing tall in neat rows. Standing atop a rooftop, the group watched this miraculous restoration unfold and felt as though everything that had just happened was merely... a dream.

This wasn't Return of the Past—yet it was more breathtaking.

Who could have imagined that the entire catastrophe had genuinely occurred inside a Memory dream?

But it wasn't a pure dream. It was an Existence disguise running parallel to reality!

Look—Falling Gate before them was exactly as it had always been, as if no Oblivion disaster had ever struck.

Cheng Shi's jaw hung open. After collecting himself, he didn't look at the calm Qin Xin. Instead, his gaze fell on Ad Ric's corpse still dangling from the man's grip:

"So... is this NPC in your hand also fake?"

"No—he's real." Qin Xin smiled patiently. "I merely used the mirror's power to restore this section of Existence. And that's what makes the Dreamless Mirror so useful.

I know you're wondering how I memorized an entire town in three hours. You're wrong, Cheng Shi. Falling Gate's memories didn't come from me—they were already here.

Memory doesn't belong exclusively to individuals. It's the combined tapestry of all things intertwined. Even if I'd never set foot here, this place's Memory already Existed.

The Dreamless Mirror bears the name 'Dreamless' precisely because its collection of memory is flawless—without omission. Through it, I can tap directly into a region's memories, transform them into dreamscapes, and overlay them completely onto reality—temporarily altering Existence. Or rather, distorting it.

And once that Existence has been changed, I can collapse the dream and restore the damaged area to its original state.

This is the wonder of Memory. It's also why I never fear Oblivion followers.

So rest easy. The miner you found is real. The woman the Doctor found is real too.

Memory is never false. You could say the ground beneath our feet—just now restored—is equally real. It was only annihilated inside a dream.

And when the nightmare fades... the world is still beautiful."

Chapter 643: In Peak Matches, They're Each Sharper Than the Last

'Nice, nice—indeed not nice at all!'

Cheng Shi was amused. The Blind One and Qin Xin made quite the pair—one charged in "without thinking," the other moved only after thorough calculation. Their styles were polar opposites, yet both matched his understanding of peak players: these high-scorers always possessed qualities that made people marvel.

That included Wang Mou—who'd lied about his profession from the start but revealed himself at the critical moment—and Li Wufang—combat-sharp, observant, yet still caught off guard.

Looking at it this way, there truly weren't any weak links in this trial. And if there weren't... was Wu Cun, who'd tried to annihilate everything—including herself—really as simple and hot-tempered as she seemed?

'Probably not.'

If Cheng Shi could figure that out, so could everyone else. Li Wufang frowned and looked toward the corner where Wu Cun had stood. He detected a trace of lingering Oblivion power—but this power was different from the divine force they usually saw. It didn't feel like annihilation. It felt more like something being... nurtured.

The Investigator shared his observation. Cheng Shi and Wang Mou both froze—then blurted out simultaneously:

"Rebirth!"

The other two turned, drawn by their outburst. Cheng Shi and the Doctor locked eyes, both startled that the other knew about this.

Cheng Shi smiled. Rather than explain, he yielded the "spotlight" to the erudite Truth follower.

Wang Mou did seem to know something about Oblivion. He opened his mouth: "Wei Mu once said—"

"?"

'Wait—hold on!'

Cheng Shi couldn't help it. He snorted:

"Doctor—are you sure you follow Truth and not Folly?"

Or more specifically—you're not a follower of Wei Mu, are you?"

Wang Mou paused. His expression wasn't embarrassed at all—dead serious instead: "I pursue truth alone, regardless of faith. If Folly is truth, then yes—I'm a Folly follower.

All my devotion to Truth stems from my thirst for answers, and from the power it's granted me. I believe this world holds an underlying truth, and my journey's end is seeing it clearly.

Right now, in my assessment, Wei Mu is unquestionably the person closest to that truth. So I believe he's right."

"..."

This was hilarious to Cheng Shi. The typically cool, rational Truth follower was acting like a crazed, brainless Folly fanboy.

The most absurd part? He wasn't even a fan of Folly itself—he was a fan of the Folly Chosen, that enigmatic Behind-the-Scenes Puppeteer!

'Just how smart is this Wei Mu, to make a peak Truth player worship him like this?'

Cheng Shi found himself burning with curiosity about the Folly Chosen.

Seeing no further interruptions, Wang Mou continued with perfect gravity:

"Wei Mu once said: Oblivion's will isn't pure annihilation. This is evident when you investigate the World Destroyers' motivations.

The Hand of Purifying Weevil—Herobos—doesn't destroy everything just for the sake of offering. He's helping his Benefactor purify the universe's parasites. Both He and his Benefactor believe this world has been contaminated. The universe's filth should end at Descent's finale.

Herobos's bestowed divine name clearly confirms this.

So among high-score Truth and Folly players, there's a consensus: Oblivion is waiting for something. And the prerequisite for satisfying that expectation... is creating a brand-new world.

The current universe evidently can't fulfill this wish. That's why Oblivion keeps influencing its followers—handing down strange edicts.

And this is why it seeks to approach Void—perhaps hoping to borrow Void's power to accelerate its desire to annihilate everything."

Hearing this, Cheng Shi's impression of Wei Mu shifted.

He thought this Oblivion analysis was spot-on...

Grand Marshal Hu Wei had also said annihilation was for rebirth. As for why rebirth was the goal, Cheng Shi had never figured it out—but now, suddenly, it clicked.

Truth and Folly players didn't know what Oblivion was expecting. But Cheng Shi did. It was easy to guess: if something could make a god expectant, the object of that expectation had to be *It—the unmentionable!

'So Oblivion is also an "Approach Faction" member?'

'It wants to annihilate the old world and birth a new one to please Origin?'

Cheng Shi's brow furrowed slightly. He didn't dare show too much puzzlement—his expression might attract attention, and everyone present was razor-sharp. He couldn't afford trouble. So he steered the conversation back to Wu Cun, playing dumb with a deliberately naive question:

"So—she fused Birth?"

Wang Mou shook his head. His eyes held none of Folly's contempt—only Truth's corrective precision.

"No. She has no second faith. That Oblivion storm contained zero Birth energy. This Extinguisher must have found a Seed of Oblivion—which is why she suddenly attacked, wanting us to... annihilate her.

Her goal was never destroying Falling Gate. She created that spectacle solely to draw us—no, specifically you, Investigator—to annihilate her."

Li Wufang's smile stiffened. He'd clearly realized he'd been played.

Cheng Shi, meanwhile, wore his most studious expression—because once again, he was hearing about something entirely new.

'Seed of Oblivion?'

'Now we're talking. This is what a peak trial should feel like.' In a normal trial without conflict, scheming, or death matches, everyone should be furiously trading information. Only through clashing perspectives across different faiths—through torrents of intelligence—could each player gather enough "materials" to pave their own Road to Ascension.

This time it wasn't just Cheng Shi—Li Wufang hadn't heard of it either. He voiced his question first, and the answer came from the ever-smiling Qin Xin.

"Think of it as a blueprint for reconstructing a world.

I know—it sounds absurd. But despite being born from utterly annihilated worlds, the Seed of Oblivion is as wondrous as Memory's creations. It records certain memorable aspects of destroyed worlds.

Not memories per se—rather, different things' feedback to the force of Oblivion.

No one knows how Seeds of Oblivion are created. History School scholars generally believe they're stray thoughts that escape when Oblivion personally annihilates a world.

But I lean toward a different interpretation: Oblivion is trying to comprehend Existence through annihilation.

By deconstructing the Seed with Oblivion's perceptive power, one can extract the force of rebirth. The Civilization Lonely Tower during the Chaos Era studied these seeds to invent the beloved-yet-feared... Curtain Call Ball."

'Curtain Call Ball!'

Cheng Shi's brow rose. He still had one of Mo Li's water-orb gifts stashed in his inventory.

"Our Extinguisher teammate is probably trying to understand her Benefactor through rebirth.

She's no brute—she's an extremely shrewd and devout follower."

As Qin Xin spoke, he gazed toward where Wu Cun had vanished, sword flicking to send a wisp of Memory power outward.

"I've recorded the details of this location. If she appears again, these should help find traces.

But I'm just a warrior. Tracking and setting traps are better left to you two.

Wu Cun knows about the Dreamless Mirror. This trick worked once—do it again and it'll probably ignite an Oblivion follower's volatile temper.

So, gentlemen—time to show what you've got."

Sound reasoning. Neither of the others objected. Li Wufang quickly went to set tracking traps at the scene, while Wang Mou dropped all pretenses of his scholar disguise and slipped into the shadows to plant an Assassination Doctor's contingencies.

Watching Wang Mou leave, Cheng Shi remained puzzled. With no one else nearby, he quietly asked Qin Xin:

"This Doctor doesn't seem malicious. Why insist on hiding his profession?

The strangest part is he barely flinched when exposed. So what was the point? Any theories?"

Qin Xin frowned. After a moment's thought, he shook his head:

"I'm not sure either. But I have been matched with a high-scoring scholar surnamed Wang before. He also called himself 'Wang Mou,' and happened to belong to the Mechanical Engineering Department. But..."

Cheng Shi stiffened. It sounded like this Wang Mou was deliberately impersonating someone from Qin Xin's past.

"But what?"

"But he's dead. In a Chaos trial—died of a grief-driven suicide. Made quite an impression."

'Well then.' So it wasn't just the Master of Deception card—Qin Xin had actually encountered the original.

"Do you know the real person? His name?"

"Wang Weijin. If I'm not mistaken, his name was Wang Weijin."

At that, a barely perceptible light flashed in Cheng Shi's eyes.

Not because he recognized the name—but because...

How does a Memory follower say "if I'm not mistaken"?

If even Memory's followers can misremember, what hope do other players have?

'Interesting. Does this Torchbearer founder have even more stories hidden away?'

Cheng Shi silently glanced at Qin Xin, then thought of the Master of Deception card in his hand.

Things were getting more and more interesting.

Chapter 644: What Even Is the Extreme Desire Brotherhood?

A minor incident occurred while the Investigator and the Assassination Doctor were setting up.

The agreed rendezvous time arrived. Qin Xin's alarm rang at noon exactly. Li Wufang had just finished his preparations and returned to the rooftop, while Wang Mou was still lurking in some shadow, tinkering with who-knows-what.

Cheng Shi frowned. Letting the hourly mark pass without guarding against others felt unwise. But Qin Xin read his concern and said with a smile:

"Perhaps because we share Existence, I'm rather sensitive to Time fluctuations. At least just now, there hasn't been a single ripple of Time power within our visible range. So relax.

And don't be too cautious of Time. Its methods... are never underhanded, at least."

'Underhanded!'

'I think you're shade-throwing someone, but I won't say who.'

Cheng Shi chuckled, accepting the reassurance. 'Maybe I really am too paranoid.'

'Once bitten, forever shy.'

Still—that single remark added another notch to his suspicion of Qin Xin.

As a Mirror Person—a "rugged" warrior who fought head-on—Qin Xin's perception seemed absurdly sharp. He hadn't even moved, yet sensed divine power fluctuations across this massive area.

And his crisis management was too cerebral for someone his build. That hulking frame should have been charging the front lines, yet he constantly hung back, orchestrating from the rear with effortless composure.

'Does this... look like a warrior?'

'Has the assassin meta finally infected the warrior class?'

Suspicious noted. But now wasn't the time to investigate an ally—especially a Torchbearer. Better to scrutinize the other two teammates instead.

Just as the thought formed, Wang Mou returned with his habitually stern expression—though this time a thread of something dark lingered at the corner of his eye.

Li Wufang, seeing everyone present, raised an eyebrow: "Where's Chosen An? Does she have some secret mission too?"

"..."

'Well, you could call it a mission. Not very secret though—more like a... bare-bones operation.'

"Never mind her. Chosen players always have their own ideas. Since it's time, let's swap intelligence while the Oblivion incident is still fresh."

Cheng Shi smiled, gaze drifting to the unconscious woman Wang Mou had set on the roof.

He was beyond curious about her. Ad Ric's anomaly was virtually confirmed. Now it was up to this woman to write the ending to this love story.

The four exchanged glances, nodded, and headed back to the original inn for discussion.

Losing two teammates in the first round barely fazed these veterans—they were long accustomed to surprises.

Cheng Shi had switched back to Fate Weaver. He could revive Ad Ric at any time but chose to wait. Back at the inn, he gave a rough overview of the imprisoned miner's situation, then immediately steered the conversation toward Wang Mou:

"So, Doctor—wake this woman up. The miner's love story needs an ending."

Wang Mou frowned—his expression slightly odd—but followed Cheng Shi's suggestion. Under everyone's watchful eyes, he placed the shanty woman from the mine's medical ward on a table and roused her.

The moment Alo Manni opened her eyes, she didn't panic. Instead, she rolled her eyes, surveyed the room with practiced nonchalance, and—upon confirming she was in the familiar inn—addressed the four men present while rubbing her hair:

"Bit crowded, but not unacceptable. You really didn't need to drag me here so roughly—just pay extra.

Also, the smuggler inn charges steep room fees. Those are on you."

"???"

All four players were covered in question marks.

Cheng Shi's heart sank. The "love story" he'd been anticipating the entire journey was suddenly threatening to derail.

"You're Alo Manni?"

The curly-haired woman blinked. She eyed Cheng Shi suspiciously: "You researched me before making a move? Professionals. I'll have you know, my receptiveness to new arrangements is very—"

"Wait wait wait!" Cheng Shi hastily cut her off, torn between laughing and crying. "Your preferences are your business—but you're under no obligation to share them. And that's not why we're here.

We just want to know what happened that night between you and Ad Ric."

He pointed toward Ad Ric's corpse propped against the wall.

Alo Manni froze. Following his gaze, she saw the "regular customer" lying there, quiet and very dead. Her face finally changed.

She scrambled backward across the table, gripping its edges, and curled into a ball. Face pale, she forced out a threat through gritted teeth:

"I belong to Shi Lolin. You want to cross the Extreme Desire Brotherhood?"

"?"

'What even is the Extreme Desire Brotherhood?'

Cheng Shi had never heard of them. But the other three clearly had. Qin Xin looked thoughtful. Wang Mou's brow sank further. Only Li Wufang had an epiphany:

"So you people follow that god!"

Cheng Shi blinked blankly. Then—flash of insight: "Corruption?"

"Bingo!" Li Wufang smacked his palm. "Exactly. The Extreme Desire Brotherhood worships Corruption. They're well-known in the Underground. Or rather—notoriously known. All the vice industries are controlled by them."

Before the Investigator could finish, Alo Manni—face stern, body tense with mingled anger and anxiety—cut him off:

"It's not control—it's protection!

Our lord's followers love and cherish one another. We are united as one, like family. Together we sink into the pleasure of indulging ourselves—experiencing the most exquisite joy the world has to offer. This kind of happiness... people shackled by propriety like you could never understand."

"..."

'Wonderful! We don't understand!'

Being lectured by a Corruption follower was too much. Every person in the room fought to suppress laughter.

Cheng Shi was literally applauding as he nodded:

"Fascinating. This place really is fascinating.

Miss—oh, don't make that face—madam. Beautiful follower of Corruption. We have no intention of provoking any brotherhood. We won't do anything to you. We simply got tangled up with this miner and want to learn the truth.

We actually have more... convenient methods, and you know what I mean. But we chose not to use them. That alone should prove we're gentlemen. Reasonable people.

So truly—no need to panic."

Cheng Shi's "reassurance" worked—somewhat. Alo Manni detected no malice in any of their eyes. She relaxed a fraction. Her spirit returned. Eyes rolling calculatingly, she tossed Cheng Shi a flirtatious glance:

"So then, dear gentleman—will I be compensated for my answers?"

"?"

'You're really pushing your luck, aren't you?'

Cheng Shi laughed in disbelief. He flicked a scalpel that buried itself beside her foot, leaned in, and gave her his most "gentlemanly" smile:

"Naturally, miss. If your account is detailed enough, I might consider letting you walk out of this room on your own two feet."

"..."

Alo Manni flinched—but she seemed accustomed to threats. Her fear wasn't nearly as intense as before. She tucked her feet away from the blade...then, upon realizing her threatener was handsome, instinctively licked the corner of her lip and—couldn't resist—curled her toes at him.

"..."

The scent of Corruption saturated the room. Cheng Shi's smile froze solid on his face.

Chapter 645: What Are You Trying to Do to My Wife?!

Soft methods wouldn't work with this type. Time for the hard approach.

Cheng Shi smirked coldly and shifted the embedded scalpel three inches closer. That did the trick—Alo Manni spotted the flash of merciless indifference in his eyes, blanched, and hastily reined in her dripping desire:

"You'll let me go if I talk?"

"That's right. Talk and you walk."

"Wonder what he stole from you?" She sighed, all enthusiasm drained. "Don't look at me like that—I'm guessing. He's a repeat offender. He steals from Shi Lolin herself. Must've stolen something of yours, for you all to go through this much trouble.

Though I can't figure out who you people are.

Fine, fine—stop glaring! I'm scared. I'll stop asking.

Honestly, nothing really happened that night. Just a drunk slapping a prostitute twice. That's it."

"..."

'Prostitute?'

Plenty of people sold their bodies and souls—but few acknowledged it so openly. The four players' gazes turned peculiar. Wang Mou's expression even bordered on admiration as he said, inappropriately:

"You have a clear understanding of yourself."

"Is that a compliment? Then thank you." Alo Manni tittered behind her hand, then explained cheerfully: "But it's not that I know myself clearly—I know my clients clearly.

I don't see anything wrong with devoting myself to Corruption. It's just that whenever I call myself a 'prostitute,' my clients get rather... excited. So...

You understand—pleasure shouldn't be repressed. If they like it, I say it more.

That night was the same. When Ad Ric pulled me out, I already knew he was plastered. A miner who could barely feed himself, planning some 'beautiful future' with me? Ha—adorable.

But the customer has needs. I can't refuse. Who knows if he had money stolen from Shi Lolin in his pockets?

Even if I can't steal it back or take it by force, earning back that stolen money counts as serving the Brotherhood, doesn't it?"

"..."

"..."

"..." Cheng Shi's gaze shifted. He decided Alo Manni was a genius.

'No—everyone in Falling Gate is a genius!'

"So I played along, performing the scene he wanted.

I'll admit—Ad Ric's character is awful and so is his drinking, but his acting wasn't bad. Drunk, he fully unleashed his desires and cast me as his wife. Tch—I've played many men's wives, but never a client's own wife.

His words were sincere. Touching. He painted my dream of a warm little home so vividly. I'd never imagined someone could want exactly what I wanted, know everything I loved.

But I quickly realized I was overthinking. This rambling drunk was probably just using sweet talk to weasel out of paying.

He must have researched me. He had ulterior motives.

After chatting all night, I was tired. Didn't want to keep performing. So I told him that if he didn't pay, I'd leave to attend to other clients who needed pleasure. And that's when the bastard hit me!

His fist was bigger than my head—swung straight at my face without warning. I was terrified. Thought I'd die right there by the Crystal Pool. But he didn't follow through.

His eyes in that moment were so complex. So bitter. So full of regret. For just an instant, I nearly lost myself in those heartbreaking eyes.

In that moment he wasn't the petty thief Ad Ric. He was a real man. A man of magnetic... someone else's... husband.

No wonder my clients always want me to play someone else's wife. So this is what it feels like...

It's nice.

But then he did hit. He pulled back his fist, pushed me to the ground, and smacked the dirt next to my face... fine, fine—I'll tell the truth. He didn't actually hit me. He just slammed his palms on the ground beside my face.

The rumor was Shi Lolin's invention—to squeeze extra benefits from her brother. Today's clinic visit was also her idea.

Those guys owed too much and stole too much. They've got to pay something back, right?

We eat less than they do, but we still have to eat. So I don't think there's anything wrong with what we did. Do you?"

"..."

"..."

"..."

Silence filled the room.

This shanty woman was describing her own embarrassments—yet delivered them with the flair of someone gossiping about strangers. At peak enthusiasm, she even flaunted her desires, treating the four men before her as anything but threats.

Every sentence was explosive. Even these seasoned players couldn't immediately formulate a response.

Cheng Shi went blank. He dug at his ear, blinked rapidly: "So the head of the Extreme Desire Brotherhood—Shi Lolin, who runs the shanty district—is mining captain A Rad's sister?"

"Obviously?" Alo Manni nodded as if this were the most natural thing in the world, then added with mild surprise: "You know her? She's done business with you?"

Tch—selfish woman. Such good customers, and she doesn't refer them to me?

Dear gentleman, considering how thorough I've been today—I even sold that old hag out—would you... consider patronizing my business?"

"..."

Cheng Shi's face darkened. Lip twitching, he raised his hand and chopped her unconscious on the table.

That done, he turned to Qin Xin. His meaning was clear: he wanted Qin Xin to weigh in on whether Alo Manni was lying—without revealing his own Master of Deception ability.

But Qin Xin either genuinely misread him or deliberately misread him. With an amused curl of his lips, he broke from his usual composure to crack a joke:

"Need me to step out?"

"?????"

'Buddy—when I type five question marks, it's not me who has a problem. It's you. Big problem.'

Cheng Shi was speechless. Qin Xin laughed heartily. Only after a good while did he nod: "I believe this... mm, this young lady wasn't lying."

Of course she wasn't. Her delivery while telling the story radiated more confidence than everyone in the room combined.

Li Wufang and Wang Mou both nodded. Though Alo Manni's account differed drastically from the bystander version Cheng Shi had shared, something fishy clearly lurked beneath the surface.

To get to the bottom of it, they'd have to wake the other half of this love story.

All eyes turned to Cheng Shi. No time to waste—he pulled out the Lush Horn Crown, strapped it on, and fired a healing spell at Ad Ric.

The long-dead miner revived in the wash of restorative power. When his eyes opened and found four men huddled around a woman on a table, he shot to his feet, crossed the room in two strides, and placed himself between them and Alo Manni—expression thunderous, arms spread wide in desperate protection.

At the same time, this miner locked eyes with the strangely-dressed men before him. Afraid yet brave, he trembled out:

"What are you trying to do to my wife?!"

"..."

"..."

"..."

Cheng Shi went numb. Ad Ric's reaction said more than a thousand words. But still...

'Bro—could you maybe engage your brain before you open your mouth? Listen to what you just said. Does that sound right to you?'

But nobody cared about the miner's soap-opera dialogue anymore. Everyone saw the anomaly. Cheng Shi had genuinely found the lead. This Ad Ric had clearly been affected by the trial—trapped in a Time anomaly that explained the discrepancy between his perspective and everyone else's.

So he was the "Discrepancy" the trial had described?

But which Discrepancy was he—past, present, or future?

The group's eyes lit up with excitement. They stared at Ad Ric in unison, eager to extract more secrets.

But four men's gazes were far too aggressive. The man who'd been so brave a second ago instantly broke into a cold sweat. His legs buckled. He stumbled backward, waist hitting the table edge, and swallowed hard—trying to look tough but turning ghostly pale:

"What are you... trying to do to me...?"

"..."

"..."

"..."

Cheng Shi's eye twitched violently.

'Like I said—corpses are way more pleasant than living people.'

Chapter 646: Past or Present?

"You're Ad Ric?"

"...Yes. I warn you—don't try anything. If you lay a hand on us, A Rad and Shi Lolin won't let you off—"

"Whoosh!"

Before Ad Ric could finish, Cheng Shi's scalpel threaded between his damp trouser legs and embedded itself in the floor beneath the table. The metallic ring scared him witless. The discerning miner immediately shut up.

Cheng Shi snorted. 'This guy's survival instincts are way slower than his mine buddy's.'

"When you were sleeping with A Rad's sister and stealing Shi Lolin's money, did you imagine one day you'd invoke their names for protection?"

The jab was casual, but the trembling miner actually grunted an affirmative.

That grunt broke Cheng Shi's brain.

'Wait—you actually planned for this?'

'What in the world—Abyssal Volcano fumes toxic or something? Why is everyone here mentally off?'

Cheng Shi opened his mouth, closed it, exhaled heavily, reconnected his train of thought, and chuckled despite himself:

"Last chance. I ask, you answer. One more nonsense reply, and I'll send you down to join... the Blind One."

"???" Ad Ric was baffled—afraid and baffled. He didn't understand what "going down to join the Blind One" meant, but he knew better than to ask. Another question meant death.

Cheng Shi cut straight to the point:

"When did you and Alo Manni become husband and wife?"

Every ear in the room perked up. This was clearly a question designed to pin down which "Discrepancy" the miner represented. His answer was critical.

Ad Ric was still reeling. He couldn't fathom why waking from a hangover meant four men interrogating him and Alo Manni about their marital status, like some court proceeding.

'Is love a crime now?'

Terrified—but he didn't dare not answer.

"I... just proposed. We haven't actually married yet."

"?" Cheng Shi's face shifted—nearly exploded, thinking the Death Master's Memory abilities had failed. "Then why call her 'wife'?"

"A fiancée is still a wife! She accepted my proposal, but I haven't had time to steal—no—I don't have the money to marry her yet."

'Brilliant. Steal money for the wedding. Steal from her boss. Steal from your boss's sister to fund the ceremony.'

'Life really is a broken game, and you've absolutely mastered it.'

Cheng Shi snort-laughed. Exasperated, he jabbed a finger at the man and ordered him to recount that night's events in full. Ad Ric dared not refuse. Cowering against the table edge, he spoke pitifully.

The miner's story was nothing like the woman's transaction.

He said he was poor and ashamed. Most shanty women looked down on him. Only Alo Manni didn't mind, still serving him even when he stole from her. So he fell in love with this "kindhearted" girl, and one bright evening, he confessed his feelings.

She accepted his proposal, he said. They spent all night planning their future. But just before dawn, she suddenly wanted to go back to work at the shanty. That abrupt coldness enraged him—so he struck her.

At this point, everyone frowned. The story could have been a trial lead—but now something felt off. Ad Ric might not be confused at all. He might simply have been duped by the "professional" Alo Manni.

But the shanty woman had also claimed she was deceived. So who was really fooled?

While the group pondered, the perceptive Qin Xin caught something. After a moment's deliberation, he stepped forward and woke the unconscious Alo Manni to confirm one detail:

"You said it was him who described your 'future'?" He pointed at Ad Ric.

Alo Manni stirred groggily. Seeing Ad Ric suddenly alive again, she shrieked and lurched backward—forgetting she was already at the table's edge with nowhere to go.

CRASH. The shanty woman toppled off the table and hit the floor.

She curled up and crawled toward the nearest person—Qin Xin. He didn't move, merely propping her up with his thin sword while gently reassuring her: "Calm down. He's not dead. He fainted just like you did."

Alo Manni clutched his armored thigh like a lifeline. Peeking from behind the metal plates, she nodded frantically:

"I'll talk! I'll say everything! It was him! He told me about all the things I wanted—the things I dreamed of! He definitely researched me! He had ulterior motives!

That's all I know, I swear! Let me go—or Shi Lolin will really come for you!"

Ad Ric—who'd been about to help Alo Manni up—froze in disbelief. He stared at the "fiancée" hiding behind Qin Xin's leg, utterly stunned:

"Alo Manni, why are you lying?!"

You're the one who said all that! You told me what you loved! You drew up the detailed plan for our home! You gave me a goal to work toward! Why are you saying I said it?!

You're scared of them?!

Yes—I'm scared too! But no amount of fear would make me desecrate our love!

This is love! How could you—!!!"

Before he could finish, Wang Mou—who'd been deep in thought—suddenly cut in:

"Speculation proves nothing. Only practice yields truth. If only one person can leave this room alive today—do you choose yourself, or give that chance to your fiancée?"

Ad Ric jolted as if electrocuted. He stumbled back, clutching the table. After agonizing for exactly one second, resolve flash-froze in his eyes. Face ghostly white: "Myself! I choose myself! Let me go! Please let me go!"

"..."

"..."

"..."

Every head turned toward the man who'd been swearing to protect love just moments ago. Each expression was more colorful than the last.

Alo Manni, still huddled at Qin Xin's feet, seemed to have predicted this. Not only was she unfazed—she praised him: "Following your heart's desire is the finest offering to our lord. Ad Ric—you don't belong with the Proxy Hand. I suggest you join us. Join the Extreme Desire Brotherhood!"

'These "spouses"...'

'Fantastic! Recruiting right in front of us!'

'Is this absurd or is this absurd?!'

Cheng Shi went numb. Brain smoking.

'This isn't Falling Gate. This is clearly "the Prisoner's House."'

'If either of you had even one functional brain cell between you, my scalp wouldn't be short-circuiting like this!'

A long, long silence. Broken only by the smell of urine. Ad Ric had wet himself—whether from terror or last night's alcohol, no one could say.

Cheng Shi and Qin Xin exchanged a glance. A silent, wordless, definitive nod.

Confirmed: one of these two was definitely a Time "Discrepancy." Because Master of Deception confirmed—neither was lying.

Meaning during that night's private "confession"—an event only the two of them witnessed—one of them had been replaced.

Since no outsider knew the content of their conversation, identifying who was the anomaly would take more investigation.

But it wasn't hard. If one of them was the "Discrepancy," then that person must differ from who should exist in the current timeline. The next step was following their memories to investigate their pasts and determine whether the Discrepancy belonged to the present or the past.

Time trials typically offered temporal clues—though rarely as straightforwardly as providing three explicit time nodes.

Based on past experience, anomalies from the past were easiest to identify. With sufficient legwork and investigation, clues about people or objects would always surface.

Present anomalies were trickier. Players first had to establish which exact time period "the present" corresponded to.

The hardest—the future—could probably only be resolved after all other clues had been sorted and analyzed.

Still, finding a lead in the first round of exploration heartened all four players. Following this thread should yield deeper discoveries soon.

They exchanged decisive glances and prepared to split up again. But before moving out, Investigator Li Wufang spoke up:

"Chosen An still hasn't appeared. Has she... left the trial?"

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow with a smile: "Why—does her presence matter?"

Li Wufang nodded: "I don't believe in fate. But with Fate's guidance, this trial might be easier—at least for you all."

'Doesn't believe in fate? Then who went begging the Blind One for guidance at the trial's start?'

Cheng Shi chuckled. The Investigator clearly wasn't above bending the truth for face.

"I'm also a Fate follower. Maybe I can sense its guidance too?"

Li Wufang was unimpressed: "But Brother Cheng—you're a Fate Weaver, not a Prophet."

'I can be... just not right now.'

Cheng Shi shook his head, smiling:

"This trial is already easy enough.

In half a day, we've found a solid lead—one with clear potential for deeper investigation. Isn't that its own form of Fate's guidance?

You should know—Fate's guidance isn't some cheap signpost. It's the quietly predetermined.

When you obsess over chasing Fate, you've already drifted from its trajectory.

So don't be so fixated. Relax. Fate... is watching you."

Every player in the room fell into contemplation. Wang Mou mused: "No wonder they always say the pursuit of truth isn't just about strength. Luck... is equally important. I've learned something today."

Cheng Shi offered an elegant, guru-like smile: "My pleasure."

And just as the Fate Weaver was in the midst of enthusiastically proselytizing, a familiar, cool voice drifted from behind him:

"Your understanding of Fate is as profound as ever, Cheng Shi."

Chapter 647: The Blind One Returns! An Shenxuan, What Did You See?

An Mingyu!

She was back!

Cheng Shi and Qin Xin whipped their heads around, only to find that a ghastly white Bone Gate connecting to the Void had silently opened in the earthen wall of the inn behind them at some point.

And that Destiny Chosen who had died from peering at the Origin simply lifted the hem of her black gauze dress and stepped out from the Bone Gate with a smile.

Only this time, the black cloth that once blindfolded her face was gone, and a pair of tightly shut eyes had become the most striking finishing touch on her serene features.

She truly looked like a prophet.

Her hair fell in loose curls, bangs parted slightly, and her sculpted features were refined and precise. Especially those eyes — clearly shut tight, yet they always gave the impression of radiating a mysterious glow.

Her return was most comforting to Qin Xin, but most thrilling to Cheng Shi!

Though Cheng Shi wasn't excited because he'd brought the Blind One back to life, nor because Brother Mouth had finally stopped lying to him, nor because his part-time employer had been so accommodating — it was because he desperately wanted to know what she had seen that led to that death from which there was no resurrection!

What he cared about wasn't her, wasn't it, wasn't Him — but the Origin!

Cheng Shi nearly couldn't contain himself and almost blurted out his questions right there in front of everyone. Fortunately, reason ultimately triumphed over curiosity, and he swallowed the words that had already reached the tip of his tongue. He put on an air of casual indifference, nodding toward the Blind One as if greeting just any old teammate, though he still couldn't resist slipping in a quip at the end.

"Well, well — if it isn't Destiny's very own Chosen, An Shenxuan. So you actually remembered to come back for the trial?"

"..." An Mingyu stumbled mid-step at his words, her expression flickering between laughter and exasperation. But she didn't say much — just offered a smile to the players present before falling silent.

After all, for those who sat atop the Ladder of Ascent, they hardly needed to explain their whereabouts to everyone.

Li Wufang was also pleased to see the Blind One return. He didn't care where she'd been — he simply asked the Destiny Chosen for another prophecy. A prophecy about the trial's prospects, naturally. He clearly understood her talents.

An Mingyu didn't refuse. She pondered for a moment, then produced a twelve-sided die.

But for some reason, the moment Cheng Shi saw the Blind One pull out a Destiny die, his heart gave an involuntary shudder.

PTSD.

These mad women always managed to leave him with one kind of trauma or another.

'Lady, you just came back from the dead — please don't go doing anything reckless again!'

Of course the Blind One wasn't about to divine that unknowable existence again. She cast a smiling glance at Cheng Shi, then tossed the die onto the ground.

The pale Destiny die rolled across the floor in a lazy arc before wobbling to a stop right at Cheng Shi's feet, landing on a twelve.

Maximum roll!

Everyone froze, then immediately asked in unison: "What did it prophesy?"

The Blind One gave a mysterious smile and casually addressed the two NPCs still trembling nervously in the room:

"It prophesied whether your decisions were correct. And from the looks of it — you've done very well."

"!"

Li Wufang stared at the die on the ground, let out a snort-laugh, and shook his head. His reaction made it clear he wasn't particularly impressed by Destiny's guidance. But he still refrained from dampening the group's spirits, tossing out a casual word of encouragement:

"All that effort's finally paying off — not a bad start!"

Wang Mou heard this and shot him a peculiar look, correcting him with a straight face: "Ad Ric was found by the Fate Weaver, Alo Manni wasn't found by you either, and your so-called 'effort' probably only amounted to provoking the Extinguisher. Investigator, what you just said — it doesn't hold up logically."

"..." Li Wufang's smile froze on his face. He stared at Wang Mou in disbelief for a moment, then let out a helpless sigh. "How are you more Order than I am? Doctor, I always thought you were the open-minded type."

"I am not a doctor. Assassination Doctor is merely a profession — addressing me as such is also inappropriate. My name is Wang Weijin. You may continue calling me Wang Mou, or simply use my real name."

"..."

Li Wufang was left speechless. He suddenly felt the man had become rather cutting. But as long as it didn't affect the trial, cutting was still better than dead weight. So he gave an awkward chuckle and decided to put some distance between himself and the Doctor.

But soon enough, when he caught the strange expressions on the three people across from him, his face fell again.

"Don't tell me you three are planning to go together?"

Qin Xin smiled without a word, the Blind One wore her trademark mysterious look, and Cheng Shi furrowed his brows slightly.

He was a bit puzzled as to why Wang Mou would suddenly reveal his real name.

'Could it be that since his true profession was exposed, he figured there was no point hiding anymore?'

His gaze flickered imperceptibly over Wang Mou. He quietly filed this away, then put on a nonchalant expression and turned to Li Wufang with a grin:

"One Civilization team, one Void team — works out perfectly, doesn't it?"

"But your Void team has an Existence member in it! Besides, who says we have to split by Path of Fate?"
Li Wufang winced at the thought of being paired with this acerbic Truth follower. His temples were already throbbing.

"Why not?" Cheng Shi smiled, gesturing between himself and the Blind One. "The two of us — one Priest, one Singer — we're lacking in combat power. Qin Xin happens to be the main fighter who lacks support. We complement each other perfectly.

By your own logic, Existence and Void together creates balance. Isn't that the very doctrine of balance you advocate, Investigator?"

"Order has never been about balance — otherwise, how would justice triumph over evil?"

But fine. I'll go along with the arrangement."

Li Wufang couldn't shake the feeling that his luck had been terrible. Nothing had gone smoothly from start to finish. He let out a resigned sigh and shuffled grudgingly toward Wang Mou.

"Let's go, Doctor. Give them some space. I can see what's going on here — they're the inner circle, and we're the outsiders.

Alo Manni was the one you brought back, so we'll head to the Shanty Area to investigate.

Don't look at me like that — I'm a decent man. This is purely for the investigation. I've got no ulterior motives whatsoever.

What's with that look? I'm a follower of Order!

The most law-abiding group of players in this entire game!"

"True, but this has nothing to do with Order.

Cross-referencing yields more accurate results. The Fate Weaver's team has already investigated the Proxy Hand once, so this time it makes sense for us to go instead. If you want to come with me, then we'll head to the mine first and find A Rad.

As for the Shanty Area — leave it to them."

With that, Wang Mou hoisted the reeking Ad Ric and strode out of the room without giving Li Wufang a chance to object.

This Truth follower was every bit as shrewd as the Investigator. He'd long since noticed that the other three had things to discuss. Since he couldn't wedge himself into their circle, there was no point forcing it.

Besides, he had his own matters to attend to — so he left without hesitation.

Li Wufang watched the familiar scene unfold with a spectacular array of expressions crossing his face. It took him a good while to compose himself before he waved halfheartedly at Cheng Shi and the others, then hurried after Wang Mou with a deep furrow in his brow.

With their two teammates having tactfully excused themselves, Cheng Shi couldn't hold back any longer. He exchanged a glance with Qin Xin, and upon receiving the all-clear to speak freely, he immediately stepped forward...

And knocked Alo Manni unconscious again.

Then, in this room that now held only Torchbearers and the Torchbearers' "friend," Cheng Shi asked — with equal parts anticipation and trepidation — the question that weighed heaviest on his mind.

"An Shenxuan... what did you see?"

Chapter 648: An Mingyu: I Had an Audience with Death

What did she see?

A good question. The smile gradually faded from the Blind One's face, her brow furrowed slightly, and a flicker of worry crossed her features.

She suddenly realized just how little she actually knew about Them — even after having audiences with several of Them, she still knew nothing about Them. No — about the one beyond Them. The Origin.

So there was actually a god in this world, in this game, that no player had ever known about?

And one that could not be gazed upon, could not be fathomed, could not be prophesied!

If the Origin was so mysterious, then how had Cheng Shi come to know of it?

Who had told him?

The Blind One's mind was in turmoil. She wasn't just afraid for her own ignorance and recklessness — she was far more worried about the Torchbearers who walked alongside her.

She had seen her own future standing with the Torchbearers, so she feared that this divination attempt might have exposed the secretive Torchbearers to the gaze of some irresistible existence.

This god that Cheng Shi called the Origin must hold a higher Status than the sixteen existing Them — otherwise it couldn't have directly shattered her Destiny die and taken her life through her Benefactor's own protection.

What kind of existence was the Origin, and what did it look like...

The Blind One's thoughts circled back to this question. She had always been searching for her own cognitive anchor point among all existences in the universe. Destiny's "vision" had helped her accomplish this feat — but this time, she had failed.

Because she had seen nothing. Not even darkness!

The moment she'd shaken the die, she was already dead.

As for what number her twenty-three-sided Destiny die had landed on before crumbling to ash — she hadn't the faintest idea.

All she knew was that her largest die... probably wasn't coming back.

"I'm sorry, Qin Xin. Until I've fully investigated this matter, I can't share it with you," An Mingyu said, shaking her head apologetically at Qin Xin. "The Torchbearers are special. Until the cost can be properly assessed, they should be kept as far from danger as possible."

Qin Xin raised an eyebrow thoughtfully. He seemed to have already guessed something, but since even the Fire Seeker wasn't sure whether to share with him, he naturally wouldn't press for answers.

So he nodded and smiled at the two before him:

"Likewise, I apologize — this identity of mine creates weighing difficulties for you. In that case, I'll just go stand guard outside like a proper bodyguard. At the very least, a burly bodyguard won't let anyone disturb you."

And with that, the founder of the Torchbearers actually left without a shred of curiosity, even remembering to take the unconscious Alo Manni with him. Now only two followers of Destiny remained in the room, and a conversation between riddlers began anew.

But this time — was it really riddles?

No!

Not at all!

The moment Qin Xin closed the door, An Mingyu shook her head with a bitter expression: "I didn't see anything. This time, there wasn't even darkness."

Cheng Shi's expression shifted slightly. The heart that had been hanging in suspense finally sank. He wasn't surprised by her answer — if a single suicidal divination could reveal the Origin, then during those fervent ages of faith when Aph Ros was active, some Servant God would surely have already attempted it.

Soon enough, a smile returned to Cheng Shi's face. Since the weightiest topic had yielded no results, it was time to discuss something lighter — such as how this Destiny Chosen had been resurrected with the help of that certain someone.

'Your recklessness killed you, and I saved you. Regardless of what drove your recklessness — An Shenxuan, shouldn't you show a little gratitude for saving your life?'

That was exactly what Cheng Shi was thinking. He knew he didn't need to needle a Torchbearer, but passing up the chance to snag a bonus while he was at it — that would be doing a disservice to his very nature.

So Cheng Shi opened with a classic Deceit-style backhanded remark, a single sentence that completely overturned the heavy atmosphere in the room.

"Are you a fan of Liang Jingru?"

"?" The Blind One blinked, her mind still whirling with a thousand thoughts. She didn't immediately grasp Cheng Shi's meaning, and simply nodded: "I don't listen to her often, but sure, I suppose so. Why?"

But the moment those words left her mouth, both she and Cheng Shi fell silent at the same time.

The Blind One fell silent because she realized her foggy brain had made her miss the joke entirely. Cheng Shi fell silent because he was genuinely stumped.

'Seriously, sis? You can't tell a loaded question when you hear one? You actually took it at face value!'

'What — one death and resurrection in Falling Gate and you've synced up with the local brain frequency? You're on the same wavelength as that married couple now?!'

Cheng Shi rolled his eyes in exasperation, then burst out laughing in spite of himself. He found a stool and plopped down, tilting his head to signal the Blind One to be sensible and share everything that had

happened to her, so the person who'd saved her could at least appreciate the full scale of his own heroism.

The Blind One got the hint. She sat down at the table as well and began recounting with a serious, measured expression:

"I... had an audience with Death."

Cheng Shi's brow quirked. No surprise there. He silently thanked Brother Mouth in his mind — but soon realized he'd expressed his gratitude a bit prematurely.

"He... seemed somewhat disgusted with me. No — it was more like He was disgusted by the stench of death on me.

Although my consciousness was in utter chaos at the time, as if someone had taken over my body, under Void's protection I could still sense faint changes in the outside world. Especially after entering the Void — that perception amplified slightly.

So I sensed His disgust. And I felt His refusal.

He did not want to resurrect me.

At that moment, genuine terror took root in me, growing stronger by the second. I thought my recklessness had buried my path forward in this game. But for some reason, after a long silence... He chose to save me after all.

Praise be to Death.

If one has never lost, one cannot truly appreciate the beauty of life.

No wonder He is the finale of Life. Before that rest composed of a thousand vibrant lives, what He gives the universe has never been an abrupt silence — but rather a lingering resonance that invites deep reflection.

I suddenly understand why you want to draw closer to Death, Cheng Shi. Have you also truly... died once?"

Died once?

Cheng Shi twitched the corner of his mouth and let out a silent scoff.

'If I hadn't died enough times, I wouldn't have the nerve to sit beneath the boss's Bone Throne and claim I had career ambition.'

'Besides, you can't call an audience with that great one "dying."'

'That's called answering the call!'

'But you — you genuinely died. Your kind of death and my kind of death are different. Yours was courting death.'

Cheng Shi pursed his lips and studied the Destiny Chosen before him, who had lapsed into silence once more. He waited for a good while before realizing that... apparently, that was it.

"That's it? That's all?"

The Blind One looked up, a hint of bewilderment on her face: "What... were you still expecting?"

"Your audience — didn't you say you had an audience?"

He didn't even chat with you a bit?"

"?" The Blind One frowned faintly, puzzlement rising between her brows. "Being granted an audience is already a blessing. Whether He bestows words is entirely the gods' will — how could that be my decision?"

'Wait — what...'

Cheng Shi nearly choked. He stared at the Blind One in slack-jawed disbelief. "So you just... appeared in the Fishbone Hall, He glanced at you once, and then sent you back?"

"Yes." The Blind One nodded, then added thoughtfully: "So the place where Death dwells is called the Fishbone Hall..."

???

Huh?

'Sis — are you messing with me right now?'

'You didn't even know about the Fishbone Hall, and you call that an audience?'

'Oh — well, actually, fair point. Strictly speaking, the one waiting for resurrection was Gongyang Jiao, exposed to the bone. The fact that you, a dead person, could sense anything at all was already a stroke of Destiny's favor.'

'But still — wasn't that audience a bit too bare-bones?'

'And besides, wasn't that great one supposed to be neutral? Why would He be disgusted by the Blind One's death? Was that genuine disgust, or was it just her misreading things?'

'And what made Him change His mind and resurrect her? Don't tell me it was actually because of the message I delivered?'

'Hiss — am I really that influential? No way... right?'

'Brother Mouth, are you screwing me over again?'

'And that great one isn't going to put this on my tab as a huge debt, is He?'

'Am I going to be working on loan from now on?'

'Absolutely not! Saving someone is one thing — but I can't just take a massive loss for nothing!'

'Who's going to make up for this deficit?'

Cheng Shi felt numb. He scratched his head, his speechless gaze landing squarely on the Blind One before him.

"You..."

"What?"

Cheng Shi opened and closed his mouth for a long while, but in the end let out a sigh and decided not to "fleece" this Torchbearer after all.

"Your previous audiences — were they like this too? They took one look at you and sent you back?"

As they talked, the Blind One had gradually regained her sharpness. Hearing Cheng Shi's question now, she nodded with a smile: "You want to know who I've had audiences with?"

Cheng Shi dropped the pretense. Having taken such a big loss, he needed to recoup something elsewhere. Gathering intelligence was its own form of recovery. So he nodded directly: "Yes. Can you tell me?"

"War, Folly, Time, and... our Benefactor's sibling god within the Void — Deceit."

"...?"

Chapter 649: Audience Discourse

When Cheng Shi heard the divine name of Folly, a sharp glint flashed through his eyes.

Just as he'd suspected — it wasn't only Destiny that had been seeking to draw closer to Folly. Folly, it seemed, had also been observing Destiny.

Cheng Shi perked up. He leaned forward, half-sprawling across the table, and asked with genuine interest:

"You've even had an audience with Folly — what does He look like?"

Cheng Shi had actually seen Folly before. At that Assembly of Gods Convention when Prosperity had annihilated itself, he'd seen those pure white eyes that radiated the pinnacle of sardonic wit the moment they opened, and the impression had stuck with him.

But he had never been summoned by Folly, so he naturally had no idea what this second god of Chaos — the continuation of Chaos — what His personal domain actually looked like.

'Surely it can't be a tower draped with white-eye wind chimes?'

The Blind One pondered for a moment, unsure how to answer. She shook her head, stood up, and walked straight to the door, inviting the bodyguard outside back in. Then she smiled at Cheng Shi:

"If you want to learn about Folly, perhaps you should ask Qin Xin. He's had... an exchange with that one."

"!?!?"

Cheng Shi froze, then whipped his head toward Qin Xin.

Qin Xin looked equally stunned. He hadn't expected the two of them to burn through their secret exchange so quickly — he'd barely had time to catch a nap outside before being pulled back in.

Still... Folly...

At the thought of that existence, Qin Xin's expression grew somewhat grave.

"It could hardly be called an exchange, but...

He seemed to know what I was doing."

"!?!?"

Cheng Shi was stunned again. He stared at the two Torchbearers before him in shock, barely able to believe it: "There's a Him who—"

But he instantly realized he'd misspoken. His gaze sharpened and he quickly corrected himself: "He knows you're passing the flame?"

When the two Torchbearers saw Cheng Shi's shocked reaction, both raised their eyebrows. Clearly, the half-word "There's a Him" that Cheng Shi had initially blurted out had caught their attention. So the first "Him" in the Fate Weaver's mouth... was that referring to Folly?

A faint gleam flickered in Qin Xin's eyes. He sensed that Cheng Shi might know things they didn't, but he didn't press the matter. Instead, he quickly shook his head in response to Cheng Shi's question:

"I'm not sure. Because at the time of my summoning, He asked..."

'Do you think your foolish act will have an answer?'

"..."

Hearing this, Cheng Shi's scalp went numb. He could scarcely imagine — beneath the gaze of a god whose every utterance proclaimed "all civilization is folly, all life is foolishness," before a deity whose followers revered Him as the supreme wisdom of the universe — could a mortal, a player, truly have any secrets?!

Was He asking a genuine question, or was it mockery?

If the latter, then Folly had long since seen through Deceit's lies.

But if the former — how could one possibly answer in a way that expressed the meaning without revealing any cracks?

Cheng Shi mulled it over but found no answer, so he turned expectantly to Qin Xin, hoping for some unexpected, perfect reply from the founder of the Torchbearers.

Qin Xin sensed Cheng Shi's anticipation, but smiled ruefully:

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I never had the chance to answer.

His question seemed more like thinking aloud. By the time I'd fully processed what He'd said, I'd already been dismissed from the Void."

"..."

Cheng Shi blinked dryly. That answer was indeed unexpected.

Somewhat disappointing, but it fit what he knew. Perhaps this second god of Chaos never expected to hear an answer from other gods, let alone from mortals. After all, in His eyes, everything in the universe was foolish.

"So He summoned you in the Void? Not in some divine realm like the Civilization Lonely Tower?"

"Yes. In the Void, there was only a pair of eyes wreathed in chaotic white miasma. The entire audience consisted of nothing more than my praise and His question.

I wasn't sure whether I'd revealed anything, so I..."

At this point, Qin Xin trailed off with an awkward expression. He'd been about to say he'd gone to the Flame of Hope afterward for confirmation, but he suddenly realized that no matter how much he trusted Cheng Shi, he shouldn't expose the mysterious existence that had been shielding them in front of a player who wasn't a Torchbearer. The room fell awkwardly silent.

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow. He could roughly guess what Qin Xin meant. Regardless of who he'd gone to for confirmation, regardless of whether the Torchbearers had some visible entity helping them behind the scenes — in Cheng Shi's understanding, that "person" could only be Deceit. It had to be Deceit.

Because He had said it Himself — it was His concealment that kept the Torchbearers hidden from the other gods.

But now it seemed the question of whether Folly knew deserved a question mark.

Seeing that Qin Xin was struggling for how to continue, Cheng Shi didn't press further. Instead, he considerably shifted the topic, sparing the two Torchbearers from prolonged discomfort.

"I think I understand. Thank you both for sharing — this is extremely important to me."

In truth, Cheng Shi hadn't gleaned much from Qin Xin's account. The idea that Destiny was seeking to approach Folly couldn't be confirmed by a single audience. What he was really thinking about was asking

the Fun God about whether the Torchbearers had been discovered by Folly the next time he had an audience.

The Fun God might be able to deceive the entire universe, but the other party was the universe's most "wise" being. So when a liar collided with a sage — who would be the one left standing?

He quietly filed this matter away, then picked up the thread of his earlier conversation with the Blind One.

"From what you've said, War was the first god to summon you?" Cheng Shi turned to the Blind One.

At the mention of War, the two Torchbearers' expressions shifted in different ways.

A bright gleam flickered through Qin Xin's eyes, though no one noticed before it vanished into his gaze. The Blind One's brow furrowed with renewed puzzlement, as if she'd been transported back to that moment of summoning.

"You seem very interested in Their summons. Are you using them to study the gods?" the Blind One asked curiously.

"Don't you study Them?"

When you get down to it, whether it's the History School scouring the Land of Hope for historical records, or the veteran mages constantly trading and sharing intelligence — the fundamental purpose behind all the information they harvest from the game and from fellow players is to understand Them.

The only difference is that the 'ink and brush' they use to paint Their portraits all comes from other people's understanding.

I've simply taken a shortcut."

Qin Xin and the Blind One assumed the shortcut Cheng Shi referred to was gleaning information from other people's audiences. How could they possibly imagine that a player existed who regularly received audiences from the gods themselves, extracting first-hand intelligence about Them straight from Their own mouths?

This clown before them was using his performance on stage to amuse the "audience" below — and through that, to observe Their reactions.

This path — no, in other players' eyes it wouldn't even qualify as a path. It was more like a deluded detour aspiring to reach the heavens. And yet somehow, someone had actually walked this impossible detour all the way through.

The Blind One nodded thoughtfully: "I can't fathom your method of understanding Them, but I can share what I've witnessed, to thank you for helping us again. No — for helping me. Thank you for saving me, Cheng Shi."

"..." Cheng Shi gave a dry laugh, unable to find the right words.

He desperately wanted to tease her, because honestly, the urge to roast was irrepressible. But out of respect for the Torchbearers, he held back.

'Sis, maybe do a little less divination from now on.'

"About that — War summoned me very early on. The first time I reached the top of the Ladder of Ascent, He summoned me to a desolate, annihilated battlefield within the Void."

Cheng Shi's gaze sharpened: "When was that?"

"The end of the first month after the Faith Game descended. He seemed to be searching for some answer in me, but He was disappointed. All I heard in the dawn of that battlefield was a single sigh, and then I was returned to reality."

"?" Cheng Shi frowned, feeling a strong sense of déjà vu.

'Mi Laozhang seemed to have had the same treatment — he'd also spent a night on a blood-soaked battlefield before being sent back. So... what exactly is this third god of Civilization doing?'

'Is He observing Death and Destiny?'

'But His method of observation doesn't feel very War-like at all!'

'A finished battlefield — doesn't that mean the fire has gone out?'

'And combined with His reputation... could it be...'

'Hiss—'

'Has War truly gone cold?'

Chapter 650: Some People's Rebellious Phase Comes in Old Age

Whether War's fire had gone out was anyone's guess, but the green flames in Death's eyes were about to.

Rewinding a bit — back to the moment An Mingyu had been transformed by Cheng Shi into a "Gongyang Jiao" and sent back to the Fishbone Hall.

When that enormous skull sat high upon the Bone Throne and watched a ghastly white skeleton plummet from the torrent of white bones before it, He immediately sensed that trouble had arrived.

Regardless of whether the Screaming Servant bore that off-the-books employee's praise, the mere fact that it appeared meant there would inevitably be a "demand" following the praise.

This was an employee who enjoyed "bossing around" his boss.

Still, He did genuinely appreciate Cheng Shi — particularly the man's efficiency and his understanding of divine will. The problem was that sometimes admiration wasn't necessarily a good thing; it could invite trouble instead.

After the two Void gods had come knocking one after another, He'd grown somewhat "afraid" to summon Cheng Shi. He dreaded His two Benefactors using Cheng Shi as a "dagger" to slice open His pocket and help themselves to whatever was inside.

So after the last confrontation with Deceit, He'd prepared to give Cheng Shi the cold shoulder for a while.

He hadn't expected that even without summoning Cheng Shi, Cheng Shi would come chasing after Him. What was even more unexpected was that this Screaming Servant tumbling down hadn't even brought a word of "praise" — it opened its mouth and the very first word was "Save me!"

The flames in the enormous skull's eyes surged violently. The entire atmosphere of the Fishbone Hall froze in an instant. It appeared He was angry.

Of course, the anger wasn't about the missing praise — it was because He sensed a power on this Screaming Servant's body that had no business being here!

The power of the Origin!

This dead skeleton was tainted with the Origin's power, and that power was clashing with His own. The violent collision of divine forces had trapped this corpse in a state between life and death.

From the players' perspective, An Mingyu was thoroughly dead after Cheng Shi's finishing blow — reduced to bare bones. But from a god's perspective, that wasn't the case at all.

The death inflicted by the Origin was pulling the Blind One's "existence" toward some unknown realm beyond the universe. Yet as the ultimate destination of all death within the universe, Death's power was simultaneously trying to pull everything about her back to the Fishbone Hall.

It was this tug-of-war over the dominion of death that had placed An Mingyu in a most peculiar state.

What was even more peculiar was that Destiny's power was acting as a buffer between the two, preventing His follower from shattering into oblivion amid the collision of divine forces.

This was no ordinary phenomenon. So when the enormous skull witnessed this scene, He knew exactly who had sent this corpse before His eyes.

It certainly wasn't Cheng Shi. No matter how much that employee understood about the Origin, he could never have devised a method to ensnare Death's power in a tangle with the Origin's force.

This was utterly beyond mortal comprehension. And the beings capable of engineering such a "scheme" — thinking it through, there were only a select few.

Truth advocated fusion. Folly was keen on experiments. They both had motive, but Their targets had never been Death, so they could be tentatively ruled out.

Oblivion regarded Himself as His own enemy — He might well cause trouble. But the problem was that He loved "annihilation," not "schemes," so He too could be eliminated.

But speaking of "schemes"... there existed one being — no, one Void — who both "advocated" fusion and was "keen on" experiments. One whose whims changed with His mood and never held steady. Whether He deigned to notice something depended entirely on how much "fun" was hidden within it.

And most conveniently of all, He also happened to be that off-the-books employee's Benefactor!

So... it had to be Him!

There could be no other god!

And so Death erupted in fury. He soared above the hall and unleashed a roar that shook the universe and trembled the world.

"Deceit!

What — do — you — think — you're — doing?!"

The words had barely faded when a pair of eyes — woven from starlight and spirals — opened within the enormous skull's... eye sockets.

Yes. Eye sockets.

His appearance was so perfectly placed that the "bare" skull was instantly adorned with a pair of huge, glamorous eyes.

"Oh my, oh my — let me see who's being so inconsiderate, screaming and shouting while someone's trying to rest?"

This time Death's fury was too immense. He did not "indulge" Deceit's "playfulness." With a slight narrowing of His gaze, green flames fierce enough to burn through the Void erupted, engulfing His entire skull in a seamless blaze and instantly incinerating every trace of Void around Him.

Deceit was burned to death.

Just kidding.

His figure quietly fractured and dissolved into the fire, but soon another pair of stellar eyes opened across from Death, their corners upturned in a grin:

"Hee hee~

Easy now, old bones. At your age, if you throw out your back, Life will only have one god left. Imagine how lonely He'd be."

The enormous skull didn't deign to acknowledge the Fun God. The green flames in His eyes blazed fierce and hot. A single glance and the sky-spanning fire ignited the winds of Void, trapping the "pitiful" Deceit in the midst of the Void, unable to move.

Those eyes, seeing the old bones still hale and hearty, had been about to crack another joke. But when He spotted a massive scythe materializing atop the skull, radiating the boundless aura of Death, the spirals swirling in His eyes briefly stuttered.

A flash of gravity crossed His gaze, though on the surface He maintained His grin:

"Going all out, are we, old bones?"

"You — deliberately — contaminated — My — divine — power — entangling — it — with — the — Origin's — force.

What — is — your — purpose?!

Deceit — you — had — best — explain — yourself — clearly."

"Genuinely angry?" Those eyes blinked with an air of innocence. "I had no idea what happened. I simply caught a whiff of Destiny's aura and came to take a look — how was I supposed to know I'd stumble into your epileptic fit?

Hee~ Oh, sorry, sigh~

What rotten luck."

"..." The green flames in the enormous skull's eyes blazed even brighter. "Incorrigible.

I — had — no — intention — of — involving — Myself.

Whether — you — worship — or — fear — it — is — merely — your — own — choice.

You — have — tested — Me — time — and — again.

Do — you — truly — believe — My — Authority — cannot — bring — death — to — a — god?!"

"Of course it can, of course it can — why else do you think you were brought into the Convention?"

The spirals in those eyes began spinning again, faster and faster, as He giggled:

"That old fossil Order said it well — the Convention cannot be violated. Old bones, as long as I don't go the way of the Prosperity Mother, even if you swing that scythe of yours — cobbled together from who knows how many shards of Divinity — you still can't kill me.

But credit where it's due — Life really was crude. If the Divinity from Their fallen had ended up in Truth's hands, He might have crafted something far more interesting. In your hands, it's rather wasted.

A scythe...

In human terms, your aesthetic sensibilities are a bit outdated."

"..."

The enormous skull fell silent.

Infuriating as Deceit was, He spoke the truth.

Even if Death could wield the scythe to reap Deceit's life, under the Convention's protection, Death's divine power would uncontrollably "resurrect" the other party.

This was the advantage of the Convention — ensuring no divine Authority was ever truly lost. And of course, it was also the cost.

This was precisely why the gods couldn't stand Deceit — He loved causing trouble and picking fights, yet you simply couldn't kill Him.

No one could endure that kind of incessant noise. That was why Death usually resorted to fleeing as far as possible to avoid Deceit. But today, His fury was beyond measure — because Deceit's actions had all but crossed His bottom line. And that bottom line was...

Dragging Him into another entanglement with the Origin.

Indeed — Death did not want any connection to the Origin!

The clue was visible in An Mingyu's death itself. Deaths caused by the Origin pulled the deceased life toward a direction outside the universe. Those who died this way effectively departed from Death's dominion over death, drifting beyond the reach of His Authority.

After all, death had always been the greatest offering to Death — the purest form of devotion. But if even death itself no longer belonged to Death, then what kind of god would He — the one who bore Death's divine name and wielded Death's Authority — become?

That was why Death had always sought to prevent such situations. Fortunately, for all life within the universe, the Origin was inconceivably distant. Even if, on rare occasions, some being died from learning the Origin's divine name, He needed only to let that solitary "death" follow its unknown guidance and dissipate.

But this time was different. An Mingyu's death had been steered by certain "individuals" into a direct connection with Him — the one who governed Death within the universe. And so, the forces of Death and the Origin became entangled.

The Origin had created everything. Not even the gods could defy it. Though on the surface every god "worshipped" the Origin, who could say how many of Them harbored ulterior thoughts?

Deceit was one — and on the surface, the only one. And He was looking for a second.

"Hee~

Old bones, your Death aura has sealed off the Void inside and out. Perfect — why don't we take this opportunity to be candid with each other today?

The instant your fury ignited, you should have known you'd exposed yourself.

You're afraid of the Origin too, aren't you?"

"The — Origin — bestowed — upon — Me — My — divine — name — and — granted — Me — My — Authority. I — naturally — hold — reverence.

Reverence — naturally — includes — fear."

"No, no, no — I notice your technique for muddling concepts is remarkably similar to mine. Seems you've learned quite a few tricks from My Authority.

But you know full well that's not the kind of 'fear' I'm talking about.

Fine. Since that's how you want to play it, let me rephrase the question.

You could have reclaimed your Death power with a simple flick of the wrist and let that player dissipate toward the Origin's realm. So why didn't you?

Don't tell me it was for some clown's sake — ha, a clown's face doesn't carry that much weight.

And don't tell me it was out of respect for Destiny — His reputation isn't worth much with you.

I'm guessing...

You probably just couldn't bear to watch yourself 'lose' to the Origin. You couldn't stand seeing a death contaminated with your power slip beyond your control.

My, my — your obsession runs deep.

It seems some people's rebellious phase comes in old age."

"..."