

## The Gods 651

### Chapter 651: A Small Request

Silence was the current state of the Void.

Though the enormous skull said nothing, it once again sent towering green flames sweeping outward, incinerating layer after layer of the Void inside and out. Now neither the surface Void nor the deeper reaches of Nothingness contained a single god who could peer through this boundless Death-fire to observe what transpired here.

When only two voices remained, the skull withdrew His scythe and rumbled:

"What — do — you — want?"

"Willing to talk?"

Good. I won't overly disturb you, and I won't push you to Their opposition. I've simply come to make one small request.

A wish you could grant with a blink of an eye."

A wish? Hmph.

"What — request?" The spectral flames in the enormous skull's eyes flickered between bright and dim. No one could fathom what this third god of Life was thinking.

"Grant that poor Destiny follower a new faith. My cold, heartless little sister has nothing but fixed destiny in Her eyes — She's completely forgotten that She has other followers.

Look at this poor little prophet — They keep watching her, trying to peer through her to see through Destiny. But what has she done wrong?"

"?"

The enormous skull fell silent again. This time, He genuinely hadn't anticipated Deceit's request being so outrageous.

The outrageousness wasn't that He couldn't fulfill it — rather, it was absurdly easy to do. Truly just a tiny "wish," exactly as the other had said.

But the problem was — He had gone through all this scheming and maneuvering, only to end with a request related to Destiny's... no, to a Destiny follower. A player.

What was He plotting now?

The Void's internal war hadn't ended yet — was He still trying to seize Destiny's Authority?

But what good would pushing a fusion between Destiny and Death do for Him?

The enormous skull was perplexed.

"Why — do — this?"

"Why? Naturally, I'm thinking of our Void's best interests. They represent the catalyst for godhood. I can't exactly sit back and watch my follower tear through trials with spectacular performances while letting Destiny's follower suffer so miserably.

I'm a very compassionate being, you know."

"Tell — the — truth."

"...Old bones always speaks so coldly. Fine, fine, I'll be honest.

Hee~

I'm interested in that fragment of the Origin's power. If you grant your faith to fuse with the Destiny on that little prophet, then with Destiny and Death two-against-one, I'm confident I can peel away that power belonging to the Origin and study it a bit.

How about it?

This time, it absolutely couldn't be more genuine."

"Deceit — this — is — My — final — act — of — goodwill — in — warning — you.

The Origin's — power — is — not — nectar — to — Us — but — poison.

The Origin — is — too — powerful. Such — terrifying — force — will — corrupt — your — Authority — and — may — even — take — your — life.

You — should — know — the — Convention — protects — Us — but — is — ineffective — against — the — Origin.

Folly's — retreat — behind — the — scenes — should — serve — as — warning — enough!"

Hearing this, Deceit's eyes lit up. Stars and spirals flickered wildly.

"So that foul-mouthed one really does have a problem?

Oh my, if I'd known earlier I should've picked a fight with Him — tested His mettle!"

"..." The enormous skull's fire went out. He simply couldn't keep up with the other's leaping logic. "You... suit yourself."

Though the words were a warning, Deceit still detected a different flavor in them. He blinked, His smile radiant beyond measure.

"You're agreeing, old bones?"

"The — fusion — of — faiths — requires — more — than — My — approval — alone. Destiny..."

"Don't worry about Her. I'll handle Void's affairs. You need only agree.

Hee~

Not a bad haul today. And regarding your fear, old bones — I'll keep it secret.

And of course, if my research into the Origin's power yields any insights, I'll share them with you as well. I'm not stingy like certain other gods.

Also, for our plan to proceed, you'll need to accept a small inconvenience first — transfer the divine power clash from that little player's body onto yours...

Hey, hey, hey — don't get worked up. If you don't mind me having a bit of Death's divine power, transferring it to me would work too. Once I've dealt with Destiny, you take back yours, I take what's mine, and we'll be even. No debts on either side.

How about it?"

"..." How about nothing.

The enormous skull would never give Deceit another chance to steal. So He transferred the divine power conflict from An Mingyu's body onto... the Fishbone Hall itself.

The moment this realm — practically solidified from His divine power — felt the Origin's force descend, every last one of the small skulls began trembling and shut their chattering mouths, silently awaiting the stripping that Deceit would perform at some unknown future date.

"How noble!

I won't let you suffer a loss, old bones. When the day comes that I find another god who rubs me the wrong way, I'll rip out His bones and build a new gate tower for your hall.

Hee~

I'm off now. Remember to send the poor Destiny follower back — don't keep your model employee waiting."

With that, amid the boundless green flames that sealed off everything, those eyes simply blinked twice and quietly vanished.

"!!!"

Watching this inconceivable scene unfold, the enormous skull's expression was grave.

He could swear that His divine power was capable of blocking every god's observation and movement. Yet Deceit had vanished right before His eyes, leaving no trace of His presence whatsoever.

"Whose — Authority — has — He — stolen — now...

He...

Sigh..."

The green flames in the skull's eyes went out.

He quickly abandoned any further inquiry. With a casual gesture, He tossed the resurrected Blind One back to reality, then departed in silence alongside the torrent of white bones that formed the Fishbone Hall.

And the instant Death left, a pair of eyes — scorched murky by the green flames — reopened in the very spot where He had previously vanished.

"...Credit where it's due, old bones — that fire of yours actually stings. Death, truly worthy of the crafty old fox who reaps others' spoils. He's probably fully absorbed every scrap of Divinity in His possession?"

These eyes were still being eroded by the endless flames. Threads of green fire clung like maggots in bone, melting every star in those eyes, collapsing every spiral. As time passed, it seemed these eyes would be completely dissolved.

But just as the final intact star was about to be swallowed by the green fire, the eyes — which should no longer have existed — gave a single, gentle blink. Instantly, everything that had been burned away was fully restored. Yet that last surviving star had become the sole particle of ash within the green flames.

One star fewer among the stellar eyes — but beneath a sky full of stars, who would notice?

"Hee~

Time to get to work."

Chapter 652: Destination: The Shanty Area!

Cheng Shi was already getting to work.

After a brief heart-to-heart with the two Torchbearers, the trio set out once more, continuing to dig up additional clues for the trial. Their destination was the Shanty Area — the district supposedly controlled by the Extreme Desire Brotherhood.

Before departing, the Blind One performed her customary divination, asking whether the Shanty Area would yield clues. The result was encouraging — a maximum roll on the die practically screamed that Alo Manni was the "discrepancy" from that midnight stroll and chat.

And so a delighted Cheng Shi led the two Torchbearers toward the Shanty Area.

Why so delighted? Because — praise be to Destiny!

The inn where they'd been staying was some distance from the Shanty Area. The three walked the whole way, taking in the local scenery and eavesdropping on passersby. Countless tiny orange globeflowers dotted both sides of the streets, lending the place a surprisingly vibrant feel.

The Shanty Area wasn't actually a nickname the players had coined for this district — it was its real name. That's what the locals called it.

Nearly every structure in this district was a shanty. Crumbling walls served as partitions, branches and leaves made do as roofing, a random pile of dry grass on the ground qualified as a bed, and if someone strung a length of sheer gauze across the entrance, the half-visible figure inside became the most alluring scenery in the entire Shanty Area.

This was probably the most pleasure-filled corner of Falling Gate. Every local Cheng Shi had chatted up along the way wore a genuine smile when mentioning this district.

Clearly, Corruption didn't suffer the universal condemnation here that it did on the surface. His will had quite the market underground.

A few mud-and-earth houses stood at the Shanty Area's periphery. Once the trio rounded these sparse sentry-like structures, a sprawling tableau of debauched ruins unfolded before them. Despite having steeled themselves along the way, the sight still left them momentarily speechless.

The place was genuinely decrepit, and the people were genuinely... bare. Though it wasn't just one complexion — you could spot every conceivable ethnicity here. The problem was matching the distinctive cultural garb you'd normally associate with each group to the various bodies flitting past at the moment.

And gender was even harder to identify.

After a brief attempt at classifying the individuals before them and failing entirely, the three gave up.

This place was extraordinary. In broad daylight, people were sunbathing everywhere.

Cheng Shi and Qin Xin — two grown men — surveyed the scene with deeply furrowed brows. The Blind One, meanwhile, remained utterly indifferent, her expression serene.

"Both of your heart rates just spiked. It seems the view before us is even more... unsightly than I imagined."

"..."

"..."

'Excuse me, Miss Prophet — what exactly were you imagining? The kind of image that gets projected straight into your consciousness like a prophecy? And if so, might I ask what reference material you were drawing on?'

'Because without any reference, you probably couldn't conjure up this kind of mess.'

Cheng Shi smiled politely and refrained from asking such an impertinent question. But he was still deeply curious about what this place looked like through the Blind One's Destiny-granted vision. Just as he was debating whether to ask, Qin Xin beat him to it.

"What do you see?"

The question sounded rude, but all three of them understood — Qin Xin was simply asking about clues. From the moment they'd left the inn, the Blind One had been tracing threads from Alo Manni, and she'd been the one guiding them here.

"Desire.

Thick desire surging and overflowing like churning mud. Destiny's threads have been dragged into the swamp of desire and rendered completely murky, making it very difficult for me to follow His guidance. From here on, we may need to actively seek out information about Shi Lolín from the people here.

Gentlemen — who's going?"

Indeed, their primary target was the actual ruler of this district — A Rad's sister, Shi Lolín.

As the Extreme Desire Brotherhood's agent in this area, she was probably one of the people most familiar with the Shanty Area. She undoubtedly held a wealth of information and intelligence about Falling Gate, and should also have some knowledge of Alo Manni's past. From any angle, she was the ideal lead to pursue.

After the Blind One posed the question, both men fell conspicuously silent.

Honestly, players had seen all manner of bizarre and grotesque scenes throughout their trials, especially peak players whose scores were built on trial after trial. They'd long since developed a certain immunity to spectacular sights.

But today was genuinely difficult to approach.

As for the reason...

Qin Xin's sharp gaze swept across the area once more, his expression slightly rigid: "I suggest we walk a bit farther in before finding someone to ask for directions."

"Seconded!"

Cheng Shi nodded vigorously and charged ahead — only to abruptly double back after two steps, a new flash of shock in his eyes as he looked at Qin Xin.

Qin Xin just smiled, said nothing, and led the three of them onward.

The Blind One was puzzled. In her understanding, any entrenched organization's members grew more loyal the closer you got to the center, which naturally made them harder to pump for information. So why not test the waters with a few perimeter grunts first?

She voiced the question. Cheng Shi's answer was remarkably brief:

"They're probably busy."

"?" The Blind One blinked, then understanding dawned and she shook her head with an amused smile. "My apologies — the desire flowing through this place is so viscous that my perception of the surroundings has dulled somewhat. I didn't hear those... sounds. I assumed..."

Cheng Shi's mouth twitched: "I didn't hear them either. But if you'd like to experience the 'heat' of this place firsthand, just take a couple more steps forward."

The Blind One frowned and was about to do just that when Qin Xin's hand settled firmly on her shoulder.

"I've filtered out some of the noise. Trust me — you don't want to hear those... cries."

He then turned to Cheng Shi with a smile, pointing ahead: "There's a... um, unoccupied lady over there. Cheng Shi, why don't you go ask?"

Cheng Shi followed Qin Xin's gaze and spotted a woman sitting inside one of the shanties along the narrow street, hand pressed to her forehead with an expression of pain. A colorful gauze scarf wrapped her figure in an exceedingly provocative way, and her bold sitting posture made her look like desire personified.

Normally, a small, risk-free task like gathering information was something Cheng Shi would handle without a second thought. But this time...

He took a step back, nudged Qin Xin forward with his shoulder, and gave a dry laugh: "How about — gentlemen first?"

Qin Xin smiled: "What kind of gentleman would visit a place like this?"

"The way you say that — gentlemen are exactly the type who should visit places like this."

Cheng Shi pursed his lips. Just as he was trying to figure out how to minimize his association with Corruption, the quietly smiling Blind One unexpectedly stepped forward, breaking away from Qin Xin's protection and heading straight toward the woman.

She'd barely taken two steps before the various indescribable sounds around them reached her ears. Her stride faltered, the skin behind her ears flushing crimson. After a moment's pause, she drew a deep breath and pressed on.

Qin Xin shook his head helplessly and followed. Cheng Shi trailed close behind, terrified that Corruption's ambient audio would contaminate his pure and innocent soul.

"Hello..."

The Blind One's approach was entirely different from Cheng Shi's. She was genuinely friendly. Seeing the woman seated on the ground, she bent down into a crouch rather than loom over her, and extended a hand — a full display of goodwill.

But the alluring woman across from her didn't accept the gesture. She didn't move, didn't even shift her posture. She merely lifted her eyelids to reveal a pair of sharp eyes, swiftly appraising the Blind One from head to toe. Then her gaze swept past the Blind One to Cheng Shi and Qin Xin, and her brow relaxed slightly:

"Stowaways? Coming from the surface, or heading up?"

Got money?

Three people together will cost a pretty penny. Before you make your decision, I suggest you check whether your pockets are deep enough.

I've got quite the appetite."

"I'm not—"

"You're not included?"

Fine, that works. If the two males behind you are wild enough — actually, never mind, just this one will do. If this strapping male is wild enough, I might even waive the fee."

As she spoke, the woman licked the corner of her lips and tossed Qin Xin a smoldering look.

"..."

"..."

"..."

The scene fell silent, save for the shanty woman's scorching gaze roaming freely over Qin Xin's frame.

The Blind One shook her head with an amused smile, then stood up and stepped back — clearly ceding the battlefield to the gentlemen behind her.

Cheng Shi's face darkened. Don't ask how — he didn't know either. All he knew was that the Fate Weaver had once again pulled out his scalpel, deciding that a violent solution was simpler. But just as he was about to flick the blade, Qin Xin moved.

He lunged forward in a single stride, seized the shanty woman by her collar, and hoisted her clean off the ground — lifting her overhead until she was pressed against the shanty's flimsy grass-leaf roof. Then he flashed a genial smile:

"Is this — savage enough for you, ma'am?"

Chapter 653: I Am Shi Lolin

The shanty woman froze — but she wasn't afraid. If anything, her eyes grew even more heated.

She didn't resist Qin Xin's roughness. Her hands latched onto his forearm as she arched her waist and pressed her hips forward, and her full, shapely thighs wrapped without hesitation around his... chest and upper back.

Honestly, the shanty woman wasn't short at all, but she still looked petite next to Qin Xin. Her proudly long legs couldn't quite conquer his waist, but they seized the chance to press closer to his heart.

The sight left the two behind them utterly dumbfounded. Cheng Shi's jaw practically hit the floor as he eagerly awaited the premium content, half-tempted to hang a white banner from his personal space reading "Pay-Per-View" across the shanty's entrance.

The Blind One was equally astonished. In her "vision," all she saw was the surging tide of desire that permeated the entire district — a terrifying wave that instantly swallowed Qin Xin whole, engulfing the "lighthouse" that radiated brilliant Memory luminance.

"..."

"..."

Silence descended. The atmosphere grew tense.

Several breaths later, Cheng Shi suddenly sensed something was wrong. Qin Xin showed no reaction whatsoever to the "enemy's" "attack" — the Torchbearer hadn't rejected the shanty woman's advance at all!

'Wait — bro, are you actually enjoying this?'

But then he frowned and looked at the hand gripping the woman's collar. That hand was clearly straining — but some force seemed to be suppressing it, rendering it ineffective!

A former second-ranked warrior on the leaderboard couldn't shake this shanty woman off his body!

How was that possible?!

Something was wrong!!

Cheng Shi startled, and an absurd thought suddenly blazed through his mind.

"Shi Lolín?!"

Three simultaneous gasps of shock rang through the tiny shanty. The woman had still been indulging in the warmth radiating from Qin Xin's armor, greedily siphoning his desire. Hearing her own name called out so suddenly, she blinked in surprise, raised an eyebrow, and hopped off Qin Xin.

"So you're not strangers?"

Yes — I am Shi Lolín.

Interesting. Who sent you?"

It really was her!

This shanty woman was actually the district's boss — Shi Lolín!!

But what was she doing in a place like this — the most remote, most ramshackle corner of the Shanty Area?

Cheng Shi and Qin Xin were both stunned. The Blind One even more so.

She turned her head slightly toward Cheng Shi, her belief in Destiny's blessing of the one who'd ascended the Ladder ever more unshakable.

Qin Xin stepped sideways to shield the other two, his expression somewhat grim:

"A Siren. One with corruptive power, at that."

Shi Lolín lightly licked the corner of her lips, savoring the warmth from the embrace just moments before:

"Sharp eyes. Not bad. What's the matter — didn't you like it?"

Oh, I see. You reject my Lord. So you're from the surface?

Want to go back up?

I'd advise you to give up. Setting aside the fact that the Abyssal Volcano has been violently unstable lately, making smuggling nearly impossible — what's so great about the surface anyway? A bunch of evil-god worshippers who do nothing but follow rules and bury their heads in research...

Ha! What's there to research? Wouldn't it be better to research how to embrace desire?

The universe is full of suffering, the world brimming with setbacks. Why oppress yourselves? What matters most is learning to be tender — especially to yourselves. And if you can't figure that out on your own, well... perhaps I could show you some tenderness..."

With that, Shi Lolín rose on her toes and glided with sinuous steps to Qin Xin's side, pressing herself against his arm once more. Her entire body undulated like a water serpent against his armored sleeve, as if trying to warm that cold exterior with her searing body heat.

Qin Xin made no move. He simply let Shi Lolin writhe against him.

Seeing this, Cheng Shi could barely contain his amusement. He shuffled sideways with a crab-like step until he was next to the Blind One, muttering under his breath:

"You Torchbearers really have a few tricks up your sleeves — a honey trap?"

What — does he use this often?"

The Blind One tilted her head with a smile and shook it: "Under normal circumstances, when Qin Xin goes quiet, it means he's charging up."

"Charging up? Charging up what?"

Before Cheng Shi could process that, a violent gust of wind swept past him. Qin Xin's arm shot skyward once more — along with the beauty-snake wrapped around it — punching straight through the shanty's roof. Then, amid Shi Lolin's stunned expression and startled scream, he slammed downward with devastating force, cratering the ground beneath the entire shanty.

BOOM—

The ground itself trembled. The violent shaking sent Cheng Shi stumbling half a step as he gawked at this "titan of brute force" before him, blinking in stupefied silence.

'Wait — bro...'

But the spectacle wasn't over. Just as Cheng Shi expected the Extreme Desire Brotherhood's leader to immediately counterattack, he watched Qin Xin plant one foot squarely on Shi Lolin's chest. Both iron arms shot downward — and then he heard the sickening sound of tearing gauze layered with the grinding crack of shearing bone and ripping sinew, all punctuated by the woman's agonized scream.

Blood sprayed. A severed arm flew. Shi Lolin's hands had been torn clean off.

"..."

Staring at what looked like a scene straight out of a torture chamber, Cheng Shi was genuinely in shock. His bewildered eyes darted between Qin Xin and the Blind One, as if wondering whether this was really the Torchbearer organization he thought he knew.

The Blind One let out a soft laugh, entirely unsurprised:

"We understand well that goodwill alone won't carry you far. So the Torchbearers possess not only flames that warm the heart, but also the thunder that sweeps away vermin.

City Defenders are worthy of admiration. City Builders are worthy of fear."

At those words, Cheng Shi's brow shot up. He snapped back to focus, a sharp gleam in his eyes as he studied Qin Xin's back with a knowing smile:

"I always assumed you were a City Defender. But now the Blind One tells me you're actually a City Builder?"

Interesting. Though you don't strike me as the elitist type, Qin Xin.

Unless you're actually... hmm?"

Cheng Shi's implication was clear enough, but Qin Xin still didn't answer. The Mirror Person simply smiled, then extended a hand toward Cheng Shi.

"The warrior's work is done. Now it's the priest's turn. Leave her a breath of life, Cheng Shi. We still have plenty of questions to ask — let's hope she can hold out long enough."

Cheng Shi pursed his lips, then glanced at the Blind One with a teasing grin: "Let me throw your earlier questions right back at you — your Torchbearers just attacked directly. Aren't you worried about failing the trial?"

The Blind One shrugged, pulled the gauze curtain shut — not that it concealed much of anything — and turned back with a smile:

"That's what we have you for. You said it yourself — death is never a simple matter. Only that great one can define death. And you, Cheng Shi... you happen to be quite close to Him. Am I right, lifesaver?"

"..."

Well, he'd talked himself right into that one.

His teasing hadn't yielded any fun — instead, it earned him a probing counter.

Cheng Shi raised his hands in surrender, thoroughly outmaneuvered, and quickly flung a healing spell onto the already-unconscious-from-blood-loss Shi Lolin. At the same time, he warily scanned the area outside the shanty — only to discover that the enormous commotion just now hadn't drawn a single onlooker's gaze. This brought his mind back to whatever sound-filtering technique Qin Xin possessed.

Qin Xin noticed Cheng Shi's curiosity. His expression turned solemn as he opened his hand, revealing a polished white object.

Cheng Shi knew a thing or two about the human body. After studying it for a moment, he realized it appeared to be a... toothless jawbone?

He blinked, seeming to recall something, and asked with a note of surprise:

"A Silence follower's bone?"

Is that thing 'eating' the sound?

Qin Xin — you didn't pry this out of someone's mouth, did you?"

Qin Xin nodded with utmost gravity, a trace of nostalgia flickering in his eyes: "I did. But I didn't remove it — he removed it himself."

"???" Cheng Shi's pupils contracted sharply, a mix of shock and unease: "A Torchbearer?"

"That's right. He was a Torchbearer — the very first one I personally recruited. When he learned that passing the flame required absolute silence and could never be known by the gods, he went behind my back and followed one of Folly's experiments from the Civilization Lonely Tower. He forged himself into the Torchbearers' first silence tool."

"..."

"His wish was simple. He felt his own strength wasn't enough to save anyone, so he decided to become part of that 'strength' — to help others, to protect others.

He sheltered many people. He protected many people. And those he sheltered and protected... right now, at this very moment, they carry his dying wish forward. In silence."

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted. His heart trembled. He pressed his lips together, momentarily unable to find any words.

Guarding beauty was never a simple thing — especially in this apocalypse where everyone had gone mad. Perhaps pure goodness alone could never protect what was beautiful. Only a madness that matched this world's own color had any chance of fulfilling their wish.

So who says the Torchbearers weren't a group of madmen?

They were the most insane people in this entire world!

Chapter 654: The Big Sister of the Extreme Desire Brotherhood

The silence didn't last long this time, because the battered Shi Lolin soon regained consciousness.

The first thing she did upon waking wasn't scream or cry for help — it was to clench her teeth against the excruciating pain wracking her body, eyes wide and calculating as she continuously assessed the three powerful outsiders before her.

There was no anger in her gaze, no fear, not even panic — only calm appraisal.

She never once considered fighting back. The gap in power was too vast. She knew she had no chance. Judging by the devastating blow she'd just taken, even if you combined the entire Extreme Desire Brotherhood's forces within Falling Gate, they probably couldn't handle a single one of these three — let alone the other two standing off to the side, playing good cop. And those two didn't look like pushovers either.

But Shi Lolin wasn't worried either. With such an overwhelming power disparity, they clearly could have killed her instantly yet chose to save her instead. That meant they had something to "ask." She could see the playful glint in the trio's eyes and was certain they hadn't come for revenge — they'd come for information.

And as it happened, here in Falling Gate, she was confident she possessed enough information to buy her survival.

So shortly after regaining consciousness, she seized the initiative to bargain for her life.

"It seems I offended you. We could have had a far more pleasant exchange, but as things stand — you call the shots."

She stretched her lips into a grimace, sucking the blood from her mouth. Seeing both severed arms lying far from her body, she let out a bitter, miserable laugh:

"Whatever you want to know — go ahead and ask. I'll answer like a good girl."

"..."

Despite the Shanty Area leader's pragmatism in reading the situation, her tone and expression still gave Cheng Shi the distinct impression that she was the one controlling the room.

He raised an eyebrow. To discourage this sharp and capable woman from getting too clever during the interrogation, he chuckled, stepped around Qin Xin, went outside the shanty to retrieve one of the severed arms, then casually rinsed it with liquor from the table. He produced a needle and thread set from his personal space and held it up against the arm's stump, looking as if he intended to stitch it back on.

But that single gesture was enough to drain the color from the previously unshaken Shi Lolin's face.

Cheng Shi noticed her expression and gave a friendly smile:

"Why the look? Scared?"

Relax. I'm a doctor — an excellent doctor. Well, more accurately, I'm an excellent Fate Weaver. My specialty is stitching together other people's destinies. A limb is a vessel of destiny, which naturally falls under fate's domain, so I'm equally skilled at this.

Don't worry — you'll be good as new in no time."

Shi Lolin bit her teeth and nodded, not daring to refuse. Her face was ashen, cold sweat streaming down, and at the sight of the knitting needle and ball of colorful yarn in Cheng Shi's hands, her entire body began to tremble.

The two Torchbearers could hardly bear to watch Cheng Shi's brand of "friendliness." Qin Xin cleared his throat twice and fell silent. The Blind One simply found a stool, sat down, and listened placidly to the Fate Weaver's performance.

Cheng Shi really was masterful at interrogation — oh no, at "conversation." He threaded the knitting needle — only slightly thicker than a scalpel point — through a strand of yarn, held it beside Shi Lolin's severed limb, and asked with a smile:

"Know her?"

Shi Lolín blinked, following the direction the needle pointed, and finally spotted Alo Manni, whom Qín Xín had tossed outside the shanty. A flash of shock crossed her eyes, quickly followed by something sorrowful.

"Is she dead?"

"So you do know her. But sorry — wrong answer."

With that, Cheng Shi drove the needle into Shi Lolín's shoulder. The resilient Siren couldn't hold back any longer, collapsing to the ground in a wail of agony.

But Qín Xín had long since blocked all sound from escaping. No one cared about her cries. He had no sympathy for Corruption followers — the moment she'd "poisoned" him with her powers, she should have anticipated this outcome.

"I... know her!" Shi Lolín ground her teeth and gave a proper answer.

"Good. Second question — has she behaved unusually lately?"

Unusually?

An ordinary follower of the Extreme Desire Brotherhood. A woman whose looks and figure weren't even outstanding by Shanty Area standards. What could possibly be unusual about her? Why would anyone bother paying attention to Alo Manni's behavior?

Shi Lolín stared wide-eyed, a flicker of confusion passing through her gaze. But she didn't dare disobey. She frantically rummaged through her muddled memories, but the pain was too intense — she could barely keep going.

Just then, a genuine healing spell settled over her, dramatically easing the agony. Feeling the healing energy wash through her, she looked at the "doctor" in disbelief, stunned to discover he was actually, truly healing her.

But that yarn...

She glanced at her arm and saw that a strand of yarn had already joined the severed limb to her shoulder. Under the healing spell's influence, the bleeding had visibly stopped.

'Madman.'

The word leapt unbidden into Shi Lolin's mind. But soon she calmed herself and began recalling everything she knew about Alo Manni.

She wasn't cooperating out of gratitude — she was cooperating because she was too terrified to resist.

"Nothing. Everything was perfectly normal."

"You're sure?" Cheng Shi frowned, threading another stitch through the Siren's shoulder. "I heard that one evening, she was beaten by a miner?"

"?" Shi Lolin gritted her teeth again, shuddering as she wheezed through the pain: "Getting beaten is the most normal thing in the world for people who live in these shanties. I get beaten often myself. That doesn't count as unusual.

If a day went by without anyone getting beaten — now that would truly be unusual."

"???"

Cheng Shi blinked, momentarily stunned. He even forgot what he was doing with his hands.

"Interesting. So... the desire you embrace is the desire for suffering?"

"No, it has nothing to do with our desire — it has to do with the desires of the clients who come here.

Since you've found me, I assume you know about our Extreme Desire Brotherhood. Don't worry — I won't threaten you with the Brotherhood. Distant water can't quench a nearby fire.

What I want to say is this: for the Brotherhood to expand, we must guide people to acknowledge desire and let it run free.

Therefore, being beaten isn't misfortune — it's glory. The scars on our bodies have never been suffering — they're medals earned from devoutly spreading His will, and they represent the desire that those who've seen the light and cast off their confusion will ultimately embrace!"

"..."

Good grief. This Extreme Desire Brotherhood really was something else. Even in this state, she could still proselytize?

Cheng Shi was speechless. He thought back to Alo Manni's words at the inn. These two shanty women were remarkably similar in their devotion to their Benefactor.

Most Corruption followers loved wrapping their desires in a veneer of piety. But this one before him... she seemed genuinely devout. If that was the case, then the Brotherhood's spiritual core and cohesion were indeed worthy of "admiration."

He shook his head with a wry smile and asked several more questions about matters Alo Manni had mentioned. Shi Lolín's answers contained no lies — other than unintentional lapses in memory, there were essentially no discrepancies.

Hearing all this, all three furrowed their brows. So the one with the problem wasn't Alo Manni — it was Ad Ric?

Cheng Shi's gaze drifted toward the mine in the distance. Something told him things weren't going as smoothly as he'd anticipated.

Seeing that one-sided questioning wasn't yielding any leads, Qin Xin brought Alo Manni back inside the shanty. He woke the woman, and then — amid Alo Manni's terror and Shi Lolin's sighs — cross-referenced their accounts of the past one more time.

Yet aside from a few minor details still requiring verification, nothing substantial emerged.

This meant the "discrepancy" between the two was indeed Ad Ric. Alo Manni appeared to have no connection to the trial whatsoever.

In that case... had Destiny's guidance run dry?

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow and looked past his shoulder at the Blind One — only to see her suddenly stand, placing a die flat and steady on the table. It was a seventeen-sided die, showing seventeen.

"I was worried my divination was too broad, so I narrowed the location specifically to the Shanty Area. Even though the desire here obscures my vision, it can't obstruct His guidance. He tells me we've found the right place.

That being the case, the other 'discrepancy' must be somewhere in this Shanty Area right now.

Three of us moving together is too slow. To improve efficiency, I think we should split up.

Qin Xin and I will canvas the rest of the Shanty Area. As for you, Cheng Shi — please stay here and keep an eye on this Siren. I have a feeling she'll be useful for the next phase of our trial."

Cheng Shi heard the plan and instantly grinned:

"You? Canvassing the shanties?"

What happened to 'I can't read destiny here — all I see is surging desire'?

Changed your mind about taking a dip in the river of desire?"

The Blind One seemed accustomed to Cheng Shi's teasing by now. She shook her head with a light laugh:

"I know my efficiency may not be the highest, but this is still the optimal solution.

With Shi Lolin subdued, the desire outside has calmed significantly. On the other hand, staying here to watch over her would actually be the hardest task for me.

But she's important. Until we find a lead, we need to keep her alive. So..."

"Hiss—"

THUD!

"?"

Before the Blind One could finish, Cheng Shi moved. He drove the long needle straight through Shi Lolin's neck. Then, as her expression contorted in horror, he tossed the Shanty Area boss's corpse to the equally dumbfounded Qin Xin.

Chapter 655: The Anomaly of "Not Getting Beaten"

"She was in too much pain. I gave her a temporary release — now we've got three units of manpower.

What a shame about that ball of yarn, though. Bit of a waste.

Why are you looking at me like that? I've always been this kind. No need for compliments — offer all your praise to our Benefactor instead. It was His guidance that led me to do this.

Let's go, my friends. Now we have the most efficient arrangement.

As for you, Alo Manni — I trust you'll be a good girl, stay here, and help us gather whatever useful information you can. Right?"

Alo Manni was terrified out of her mind. Ashen-faced, she nodded like a frantic chicken pecking at rice.

"I like the Shanty Area. The people here are really easy to communicate with."

'Is that really how you measure communicability?'

The Blind One sighed helplessly, shaking her head: "Every time my impression of you begins to crystallize, you promptly demolish and repaint it. Cheng Shi, are you always this guarded?"

"Guarded? About what? Is there an enemy here?"

"...Never mind. Perhaps you've always been this cautious. But the Torchbearers aren't worth expending so much mental energy over. Qin Xin — let's go."

With that, the Blind One took the lead and stepped out of the shanty. But after only two steps, she suddenly turned back and asked Cheng Shi with a puzzled expression:

"Oh, by the way — why didn't you use Death's Memory this time to verify the things you just asked about?"

Cheng Shi blinked, then a knowing smirk tugged at his lips: "Why show off in front of a master? There's a Memory follower right here — and he hasn't made a move. Who am I to embarrass myself? Wouldn't you agree, Qin Xin?"

Qin Xin gave a faint smile, glanced at the Shi Lolin in his hands, and shook his head: "No need to waste the effort. I trust our friend. Your questioning was thorough — Memory had no role to play."

With that, this time it was he who led the way out of the shanty. The Blind One raised an eyebrow and followed close behind.

Watching the scene, Cheng Shi furrowed his brow as well.

This Memory follower was growing more and more mysterious. From the start of this trial, it seemed... he hadn't once used Memory's power.

Of course, what Cheng Shi meant by "used" was personally wielding the power of his faith — not borrowing some Memory artifact.

But that wasn't even the strangest part. The strangest part was the Blind One's attitude. The question she'd paused to ask didn't look like it was aimed at him at all.

'Hiss—'

'Does she also have doubts about Qin Xin's identity?'

'Could the Torchbearers' founder and the Fire Seeker still be keeping little secrets from each other?'

Cheng Shi was amused. He quietly filed this away, then picked a random direction and headed toward the deeper reaches of the Shanty Area.

But the moment he stepped through the door and lifted his foot, he suddenly realized he'd almost lost track of time. He quickly checked his watch and found that — what perfect timing — the hour mark was just seconds away.

Cheng Shi's gaze sharpened. He instantly looked up and saw the Blind One already far ahead, about to round a street corner. He called out to stop her, tapped his wrist, and said: "You two — be careful."

The Blind One understood. She nodded with a hint of appreciation. But when she turned to find Qin Xin, she discovered their leader had already rounded the corner and departed without a care.

It seemed there was no danger here.

She smiled faintly, made a quick divination, then continued forward — carrying a die showing two — with a peculiar expression.

'Seems like I picked the wrong direction?'

Cheng Shi couldn't see any of this. He immediately sprang into action as well, retracing his earlier path back to the Shanty Area's perimeter. Enduring the vile, raucous chaos surrounding him, he dropped his dice one after another at the entrance of every shanty he passed.

Yes, he'd retreated from the center and decided to re-explore the edges instead.

Two Torchbearers were plenty for the core district. What Cheng Shi cared about more were the sentry-like mud-and-earth houses ringing the Shanty Area's outskirts. These structures were like tentacles extending beyond the shanties, maintaining close contact with Falling Gate's other districts, factions, and people. Investigating here would clearly unravel more networks and expand the web of leads.

So he set his target and began canvassing the Shanty Area's outermost ring.

He'd assumed that no matter how debauched, how depraved, how devoutly Corruption-worshipping the Shanty Area was, the watchtower-like outposts would at least have a few people doing actual work.

After circling halfway around, Cheng Shi discovered he was wrong. Dead wrong.

The outside was no different from the inside. Revelers — check. Drinking buddies — check. Whip-crackers — check. Willing recipients — check. The sheer variety and volume of activities was staggering.

These Extreme Desire Brotherhood members didn't treat these posts as guard stations at all. They'd turned them into novelty experience zones offering ambiance different from the standard shanty fare.

Look at that — even during shift rotations, they could still serve clients. What dedication.

"..."

Cheng Shi felt numb. He walked along, rinsing his eyes with water as he went, thinking that the Corruption faith truly was something you couldn't touch even a little.

Fortunately, he held firm to his convictions and would never bow to desire.

After exploring a while longer, Cheng Shi reached the Shanty Area's opposite side. A bit further northeast from here lay the cell where Ad Ric had been detained. He figured that if this search yielded nothing, he might as well swing by and bring Shi Lolin's brother back — controlling two local power brokers at once might smooth things out for the next few days.

But just then — precisely when Cheng Shi had all but given up on the Shanty Area — the anomaly appeared.

Just as Shi Lolin had said: when everyone's getting beaten and you're the one who isn't, you're the anomaly.

And inside the mud-and-earth house before Cheng Shi, there were exactly two people who "weren't getting beaten."

It was far too quiet in here. While everyone else was busy with "extracurriculars" during working hours, these two were... actually working?

Cheng Shi grinned. He felt he'd finally found something interesting. After dropping a die outside the door, he knocked and stepped inside.

The two reasonably burly men inside both froze at the knock. When they saw Cheng Shi's unfamiliar attire, their eyes lit up. They rushed over in a single stride, seized his hands without preamble, and practically vibrated with excitement:

"Mr. Mo Rabic? Three days — we've been waiting three whole days for you! If you hadn't shown up soon, I'd have lost all my regulars!"

"???"

What?

Cheng Shi was dumbstruck.

He suddenly found himself conflicted about whether to play along or not.

Under normal circumstances, whenever someone mistook him for another person, he would immediately slip into that identity and pump them for information.

But today, he was facing two men from the Shanty Area — quite possibly Extreme Desire Brotherhood members. In front of people like these, was it safe to put on that disguise?

'They wouldn't strip me down along with the disguise... would they?'

Chapter 656: The Client Who Waited Three Days

Cheng Shi didn't dare risk it, so he chose the safer approach — posing as Mr. Mo Rabic's liaison.

Clearly, these two didn't actually know what Mo Rabic looked like. Otherwise, they couldn't have mistaken him for the man. Since they didn't know him, the room for improvisation was enormous.

Of course, he had an even simpler option: blast one of them away with Death's Fun Ring, adding a Screaming Servant bodyguard in the process, and then interrogate the other to his heart's content amid the terror.

But using Lightning Punishment on a small-time grunt was like firing a cannon at a mosquito. More importantly, he was the only player in the vicinity. If the massive thunderclap attracted something dangerous, his current Fate Weaver identity wouldn't handle it well. So when the brain could do the job, there was no need to reach for fists every time.

He spoke up, slathering his face with an expression of flustered alarm, shaking his head nonstop:

"No, no, no — you've got the wrong person. I'm not Lord Mo Rabic. I'm just a subordinate he sent ahead."

Cheng Shi had carefully skirted every minefield. Liaison identity, purpose of visit, his own name — he volunteered none of it. He simply offered a vague role and waited for their reaction.

The two men blinked. They hadn't expected their visitor to be the target's underling rather than the target himself.

They exchanged a glance, their eyebrows furrowing with mild suspicion: "Lady Shi Lolin didn't mention anything about a subordinate. Are you Mr. Mo Rabic's liaison?"

Shi Lolin?

They'd been ordered by Shi Lolin to wait here for someone. Why hadn't she mentioned this earlier?

Then again, Cheng Shi wasn't particularly surprised. After all, external dealings were perfectly normal for an organization's leader. In Shi Lolin's eyes, any affair within her authority probably didn't even register as noteworthy.

But who was this Mo Rabic?

Cheng Shi considered briefly, then nodded with a straight face: "Yes. Mo Rabic sent me here. You see..."

"You're alone?" The burlier man on the left was clearly the sharper one. He poked his head outside, circled around, and only after confirming no one else was there did he return looking puzzled, tossing out a casual gripe: "First you don't trust us enough to come yourselves, but then you won't bring extra hands. Then you say you're cautious, but you send a liaison to scout ahead first."

Whatever. Doesn't matter. Did you bring the goods? I don't see anything outside. You're not thinking of canceling the deal, are you?"

Goods?

Shi Lolin was trading goods with some faction?

Cheng Shi's brow quirked. From the big man's words, he gathered that this "goods" was apparently sizable — at least too large to carry on a person. Otherwise, the man wouldn't have said that. So his eyes darted and he quickly replied: "Something this important obviously can't be carried by someone like me. Lord Mo Rabic will personally come to deliver the goods. I'm just here to..."

As he spoke, he leaned past the two men and peered behind them, clearly searching for something.

The two men understood. They exchanged a look, then snorted with amusement: "Don't bother looking. The payment's not with us. Shi Lolin's been having a spat with that son-of-a-bitch A Rad lately — he won't give in. But sit tight, Lady Shi Lolin's already working on it. She'll have the Abyss Colorful Crystal delivered to your people soon enough."

Abyss Colorful Crystal?

What was that?

And Shi Lolin and A Rad's relationship apparently wasn't as harmonious as he'd imagined — there was friction between them?

Cheng Shi's brow quirked again as he suddenly recalled the scorching look Shi Lolin had given Qin Xin.

'Could it be that the Extreme Desire Brotherhood's boss wasn't eyeing Qin Xin's body after all — but rather wanted this imposing outsider to take out her own brother?'

'Hiss— that's entirely possible.'

Cheng Shi filed this away while continuing to banter casually with the men: "Is that so? But I heard A Rad is actually Lady Shi Lolin's brother. For you to speak of him so disparagingly, Lady Shi Lolin might..."

"What's wrong with that? I wasn't lying. A Rad really was raised by a whore, and so was Lady Shi Lolin for that matter. Their mother was one of our Shanty Area people. What's the problem?"

But I'm not stating facts here — what I said just now was expressing my emotions. Emotions — get it?

No wonder Lady Shi Lolin said your people's brains work funny. What normal person concerns themselves with that kind of thing?"

"..."

'How did I end up being the one in the wrong?'

Cheng Shi was momentarily stumped. He thought to himself that Chen Shu really was something — just saying the man's name left him speechless.

But he genuinely didn't know what to say next. Fortunately, the big men opposite him were rather "enthusiastic." Seeing that today's deal was a bust, they asked irritably:

"So how do you actually want to do this trade? Give us a specific time. Lady Shi Lolin has had the two of us waiting here for days. We finally get someone, and it's just a liaison? Are you people being overly cautious?"

In this Falling Gate, who'd dare mess with the Brotherhood's clients?"

"Yes, yes — it's precisely because of the Brotherhood's reputation that we're willing to do this deal."

The big man scrutinized Cheng Shi once more, then laughed: "You don't seem as unreasonable as Lady Shi Lolin described. Not bad. So what's the plan going forward? Where has Mr. Mo Rabic gotten to? Need someone to meet him?"

Let me be straight with you, brother — the Extreme Desire Brotherhood may only control the Shanty Area, but every single deal in Falling Gate runs through us.

You've got good taste. Work with us and business will only grow. After all, we're the people who understand desire best.

Oh, and one more thing — I'm a bit curious. Lady Shi Lolin was vague about it, and we didn't dare ask too many questions. But now that we're dealing with the man himself, let me just ask: can you people truly extract Divinity from Abyss Colorful Crystal?

That stuff — can mortals actually use it?"

"!!??"

What?

Divinity?

Extracting Divinity from ore?

Shi Lolin was trading in Divinity with a mysterious organization?

Cheng Shi was jolted. His pupils contracted sharply — no time to overthink — and the words tumbled out: "Of course we can. Without genuine capability, how would we dare do business with the Brotherhood? But this is all very complex. It's beyond a foot soldier like me. All I know is that it can be done — for the specifics, you'd need to ask Mr. Mo Rabic."

"I can tell — you're not lying to me. I like honest people like you." The big man nodded thoughtfully, laughing in approval of Cheng Shi's forthrightness. But his expression suddenly darkened, his eyes narrowing with suspicion: "But if you can extract Divinity, why don't you keep it for yourselves?"

Something this valuable — shouldn't you monopolize it?"

"?"

'You're not as dumb as you look.'

It was a good question — one Cheng Shi had been pondering himself. If someone truly had the means to extract Divinity, why would they trade it with others?

But this was child's play for Cheng Shi. He spun up an answer without missing a beat:

"You gentlemen are the ones who understand desire best, so I won't mince words. If we controlled the mine, nobody would get a share.

But as luck would have it, we only have the technology — not the mine. So..."

"Ohh~" The big man got it immediately. Now that was desire at work.

"You're alright. If all future dealings go through you, I think our two organizations have a real future together.

What are your people called again... ah, look at me — three days without clients and my brain's already going soft."

"?"

'What does entertaining clients have to do with your brain?'

Cheng Shi blinked, not daring to make a sound.

The other burly man next to him had a better memory and promptly reminded his partner: "Folly, remember? You even said there aren't supposed to be any fish in Falling Gate. They follow Folly."

The moment those words landed, a thunderclap detonated inside Cheng Shi's skull.

"!!!"

Folly??

Where did Folly come from?!

The current timeline should be mid-Civilization Era. War hadn't even descended yet — only watching from afar. Chaos was barely sprouting. So how was Folly's divine name already circulating in the Underworld?

Was His gaze really cast this early?

Could this Mo Rabic be... yet another Seedling Follower?

Chapter 657: Mo Rabic and Allendor

Cheng Shi knew he couldn't keep chatting. Although he could easily string these two idiots along with a few random fabrications, lingering here any longer served no purpose.

These two might have abnormal brains, but their thought processes were perfectly normal. They clearly weren't the anomaly.

And the appearance of Folly followers and the trading of extracted Divinity — that was no small matter. It was just that the news had come so abruptly, catching Cheng Shi completely off guard.

He figured that even disregarding the trial's outcome entirely, simply getting to the bottom of how Folly followers extracted Divinity would make this trial worth it — even if he lost. The payoff could rival stumbling upon a Servant God relic lying on the road.

This was Divinity! The one thing every single player desperately coveted!

This was an explosive revelation. So explosive that Cheng Shi didn't hesitate for even a moment — he just wanted to slip away and find the two Torchbearers to discuss.

Yes, his first thought was of the Torchbearers.

But this wasn't his subconscious trying to do the Torchbearers a favor. Cheng Shi had a crystal-clear understanding of his own situation. In a trial this drawn-out, even if he tried to hide it, there was no way he could keep a secret for seven days under the noses of teammates whose observational skills were extraordinarily keen — terrifyingly so, even.

And to actually make contact with these Folly followers, he'd need backup. So the Torchbearers came to mind first. This wasn't charity — it was collaboration.

He needed the Torchbearers' help to seize the prize, and he didn't mind splitting the spoils with them under these circumstances.

So Cheng Shi immediately found an excuse to leave, mentioning he'd go right back to notify Mr. Mo Rabic and that they absolutely must not move from this spot.

The two big men seemed to see the light at the end of their assignment. They nodded vigorously and urged Cheng Shi to hurry there and back.

But Cheng Shi didn't trust these two fools at all. He turned around and scattered knockout powder at the doorway — enough to render a crowd unconscious — and set up several hard-to-spot tracking traps.

He had to be thoroughly prepared — to give himself the chance to insert himself into this deal between two organizations.

With everything in place, he sprinted decisively toward the center of the Shanty Area, in the direction where Qin Xin and the Blind One had last been seen.

He needed to seize this window of perfect timing and terrain to achieve the final piece — the human element. He had to investigate this matter concerning Folly and Divinity before his other teammates found out!

Meanwhile, on the other side.

Qin Xin had been wandering around with Shi Lolin's body for a while. Despite the bizarre picture they made — an armored man apparently abducting the local leader through the Shanty Area — what was arguably stranger was that nobody here reacted at all. A few people even poked their heads out of their shanties to cheer him on.

This deepened Qin Xin's impression of the Extreme Desire Brotherhood's total indulgence. They probably assumed he was doing some kind of roleplay with Shi Lolin?

Well, that certainly made things more convenient.

Qin Xin smiled as he continued weaving through the Shanty Area's center. He didn't need to deliberately strike up conversations — simply passing through an area was enough for every sound in the vicinity to pour into his ears without exception. From the streets to the shanties to the diverse cast of inhabitants, every visual detail fell under his eagle-sharp surveillance, leaving no gaps.

He quickly covered most of the shanties. As expected, nothing was out of the ordinary. Nothing but thick, clashing desires and meaningless gossip — or in some cases, arguments between two people about who had the upper hand. Same difference, more or less.

After confirming he'd missed nothing, he turned to head toward the Blind One, intending to regroup with his teammate. And just then, he picked up a hushed conversation drifting from a decrepit corner at the Shanty Area's edge.

"Mo Rabic, the Sea of Desire knows no bounds. I hope you're actually here for our plan."

"Allendor, take back your stupid remarks. If you insist on looking down at me from some moral high ground, I'd prefer it be from experimental prowess, not from running your mouth."

This was clearly two men talking. From the ambient sounds, they seemed to be hiding somewhere, observing the Shanty Area.

"Arrogance is where mistakes begin."

"Fool, this is confidence."

The Proxy Hand is controlled by Truth followers. They'll never cooperate with the likes of us. After all, Truth is nothing but a thief who scavenges our Lord's scraps. If even His followers can't see that reality, how can you expect the puppets they manipulate to understand the greatness of our experiment?"

"Heh — and you think Corruption's followers can understand it?"

"What do they do besides vent and copulate?"

"Their venting and copulating is precisely what I need. Tell me — would you cooperate with an ally far smarter than yourself?"

"..." The other man fell silent for a moment, then rumbled: "No, I wouldn't."

"Exactly. Neither would I. And I never have."

"..."

That last line landed like a killing blow, ending their exchange.

But to Qin Xin's ears, the conversation was even more intriguing.

'Interesting. That sounds an awful lot like... Folly followers?'

'We're barely past mid-Civilization Era. How would Folly be present in the Underworld?'

'Could His gaze have been cast far earlier than I thought?'

Qin Xin's interest was piqued. This was undoubtedly the most rewarding moment of his entire sweep. He glanced at the Shi Lolin in his hands and decided to bury her temporarily. Once he'd figured out the identities of these two suspected Folly followers, he'd dig the Extreme Desire Brotherhood's boss back up. Maximum efficiency.

No sooner said than done. He quickly found an empty shanty, stashed Shi Lolin away, and ghosted toward the source of the voices. But just as he was about to close in on the pair, he noticed a woman in a black gauze dress standing far across from him, gazing curiously toward the exact same spot.

An Mingyu — the Destiny Chosen — had been guided here by Destiny as well.

The two Torchbearers exchanged a knowing smile and silently crept closer, encircling the two oblivious "outsiders."

"Mo Rabic, what are we still waiting for? We should go find the leader of this place and talk. As long as the woman called Shi Lolin can procure the Abyss Colorful Crystal, we'll have an immediate chance to directly receive an audience with Him!"

"Fool. Before acting, you must consider your exit. I'm thinking about how to retreat safely from the Shanty Area if negotiations fail.

See that road? Behind the first shanty on the side, there's no wall. We can cut through the drapes and run straight out. If things go south, head that way. And if we're caught — destroy the components on your person.

Materials are expendable. But before we summon our Lord, the experimental apparatus must not be exposed!"

"Obviously. Minor details like that don't need your reminders. Stop racking your brain trying to play prophet over trivialities. I'm not worse than you."

"I hope not. I keep feeling like we're being watched. I hope it's just my imagination."

"It's definitely your imagination. We haven't even gone inside — how could anyone be watching us? You think those wastes in the guard posts with their shaking legs could possibly spot us?"

The words had barely left his mouth when a slender sword planted itself in the dirt between Mo Rabic and Allendor.

Chapter 658: "Folly"

Spotted!!

The two men saw the sword's glint and froze. They exchanged a glance and, without a word, bolted with everything they had.

But Qin Xin had no intention of letting them escape. The Mirror Person delivered two casual sword-tip strikes, knocking both fleeing figures to the ground. Allendor cried out in pain and collapsed, unable to rise. Mo Rabic grunted, and his hands immediately dove toward his chest.

Seeing this, Qin Xin planted another sword-point on the back of Mo Rabic's skull and smiled genially: "I suggest you don't move. Otherwise, the next audience you attend won't be with your Benefactor — it'll be with Death."

Mo Rabic went rigid. Every muscle in his body locked tight. With good sense, he spread his hands wide, signaling his surrender to the person behind him.

At that moment, the Blind One strolled over as well. Sensing the aura emanating from these two, she spoke with puzzlement:

"It really is the aura of Folly. Faint, but unmistakable. How could His presence exist in this era...

Are you wise men who follow Folly?"

Wise men?

Someone actually knew their Lord and called them wise men?

In that instant, Mo Rabic and Allendor — crushed by fear — felt their terror melt away for a fleeting moment. Not only that, but a joy too private for words blossomed in their hearts.

'They know of Folly. They understand our Lord!'

'Praise be to our Benefactor — Your wisdom has finally begun spreading through the Underworld.'

Of course, these thoughts lasted but a moment. Being "wise men," they still knew how to read a situation.

Mo Rabic didn't dare twitch. Only when the Blind One circled around to face him and he slowly raised his head to behold a woman with both eyes firmly shut did this Folly follower blink — then murmur with genuine emotion:

"Praise our Lord. So it was Folly's wisdom that blessed you to see the world's truth."

The other one didn't quite understand, but "cleverly" chimed in: "Indeed. The fact that you found us proves your wisdom. He truly has begun to influence all living beings."

"?"

Hearing this, even the Blind One was exasperated into laughter.

These Folly followers were clearly different from the ones she knew. Their speech carried some of the typical condescension common among Folly believers, but their brains seemed... not particularly sharp either.

They lacked the cunning that other Folly followers — especially Folly players — typically possessed.

"Wise men, I cannot determine whether you're playing dumb while biding your time, or whether you genuinely don't grasp the situation. But either way, it doesn't matter.

We're very interested in the 'audience' you mentioned, and we're somewhat curious about the Abyss Colorful Crystal as well. So — you two are welcome to discuss which of you would like to explain why you're here, and how exactly one goes about having an audience with your so-called Benefactor — Folly."

"I'll do it!"

"I'll do it!"

Both voices rang out, firm and unyielding. When they heard each other's response, they lay face-down in the dirt and craned their necks around to glare at one another — gazes dripping with boundless contempt.

"Mo Rabic, you obsess over details and can't match me in grand narrative at all. This moment of proclaiming our Lord's wisdom should be mine."

"Fool, they're trying to pump us for information about our experiment. You can't even tell that?"

"Obviously I can tell. But I'll use the wisdom bestowed by our Lord to convert them — to make them followers as devout as ourselves!

What about you? If you know they're trying to extract our experimental secrets, why did you agree to talk?"

"You idiot — because I want to live!"

"..."

"..."

'Hold on — we told you to discuss, and you two aren't even pretending to be discreet? You're just debating openly right in front of us?'

'What — did you figure out that we Torchbearers don't kill indiscriminately?'

Qin Xin and the Blind One were stupefied. They stood behind the two "fools," their expressions a masterpiece of bewilderment.

At this point, their image of Folly followers had cracked somewhat. They were even beginning to wonder whether these two's brand of "folly"... might actually be literal.

Qin Xin could barely contain his amusement. He sheathed his sword, deciding that enemies like these required no force whatsoever. He studied Mo Rabic closely for a long while, then rendered his "verdict" on the pair's little "competition."

"Then you go ahead. Allendor, was it? You talk."

Qin Xin could see that Mo Rabic's "emotional intelligence" was indeed a notch above Allendor's, so he decided to interrogate the "dumber" one first. The Blind One concurred with his choice, and both turned their attention to this wise man — still lying face-down, neck craned around, face alight with excitement.

Allendor was thrilled. With permission granted, he scrambled to his feet, dusted himself off, and launched into his explanation with utmost gravity. Though what followed felt less like an explanation and more like a lecture...

"As you know, we are followers of the most wise existence in the universe — the wellspring of all the world's knowledge — the God of Folly.

We've come here to spread His wisdom and, while we're at it, to collect essential experimental materials. We intend to complete a great experiment that will bring us closer to Him.

The foundation of this experiment lies in the fact that some... some rather confused seekers of knowledge have discovered distorted Divinity within the Abyss Colorful Crystal. And we — we have already mastered the method of refining it out!

Imagine it — when a mortal can hold Divinity in their hands, the wisdom and courage contained within will surely earn His divine favor!

When that day comes, we shall become the vanguard that summons the God of Folly into this world — flinging open a door to the very essence of reality for this lost world that has nowhere to seek knowledge!

All life, beneath His gaze, will undergo an evolution of intellect — a rebirth of knowledge!"

"..."

"..."

"Well? Are you trembling yet? An experiment worthy of a divine audience may very well be born from our hands — no, from mine and Mo Rabic's hands.

Mortals are but dust. Knowledge, a sea of stars. Gods — they surpass the cosmos itself!

Once we complete this experiment and gather the gaze of the entire universe upon this place, we shall have the chance to rise from the dust and, under our Lord's gaze, ascend to become a star in the firmament — wielding the Authority of knowledge, becoming His most devout and diligent followers!"

Allendor was indeed skilled at grand narrative — but "grand narrative" wasn't exactly a compliment here. Put another way, it could also be called... painting a pie in the sky.

Qin Xin and the Blind One were genuinely dumbstruck — but not because of Allendor's experiment. It was the will radiating through his words. This wasn't Folly's will at all. If anything, it sounded rather more like Truth's will.

'These two aren't actually Truth followers wearing Folly's skin, are they?'

'What are they doing?'

'Stealing from another god's house to show devotion?'

'But there's no Folly house to steal from right now — He hasn't even descended yet!'

Qin Xin frowned, his curiosity piqued: "You two... are scholars from the Tower of Logic?"

"No!"

"How do you know?"

"..."

"..."

Chapter 659: The Clown Arrives

Silence fell once more. Mo Rabic glared furiously at Allendor, his contemptuous gaze practically willing his partner into the dirt. His expression screamed: 'Can you keep a secret for even one second?'

But Allendor didn't care. He wasn't the least bit afraid of his past being exposed.

"Devotion need not conceal its origins. Our roots do indeed trace back to the Tower of Logic, but at the end of knowledge, the Tower of Logic has no place.

However, you're wrong about one thing — the ones from the Tower of Logic were not us, but our fathers. They saw that the Tower of Logic had no future, so they abandoned the pursuit of Truth, leapt from the Abyssal Volcano into the Underworld, and raised the torch of knowledge high, determined to spread wisdom's light throughout this dark underground."

Hearing this, the Blind One furrowed her brow. The flavor felt right for Folly, but the faith's core essence seemed slightly off.

Their version was far too archaic.

Seedling Followers?

Several thoughts flashed through her mind, and then — recalling and questioning simultaneously — she continued:

"I recall that the Tower of Logic has an exile punishment called 'Sinking Abyss.' The Erudition Presidium periodically audits all experimental teams within the Tower. When they discover that someone has been misappropriating forbidden experimental resources without producing corresponding results, the entire team is dissolved. The leads and the misappropriators are imprisoned in Gasmira to await the next eruption of the Abyssal Volcano, at which point they're cast into it...

Your fathers — they didn't come down here that way, did they?"

"..."

"..."

At this, both Folly followers descended into Silence. They exchanged a glance, awkwardly looked away, and after a moment, Mo Rabic finally sighed and addressed the Blind One:

"You truly are a fortunate soul blessed by wisdom."

"I am indeed fortunate. But what blesses me isn't wisdom — and it certainly won't be your Benefactor Folly, whom you've never even met.

So the extraction method you speak of was brought down from the Tower of Logic?" the Blind One pressed with genuine interest.

"..."

"Moreover, it's a method that was tested — and failed — in the Tower of Logic.

Given the Erudition Presidium's rigor and obsessiveness, if your fathers' experiment had shown even the slightest potential for success, they probably wouldn't have been held accountable at all. So that experiment was already a total failure. Am I right?"

"..."

"Then I'm even more curious. If you're so certain you can successfully extract Divinity from the Abyss Colorful Crystal, it means you must have improved upon that experiment. But how could exiled prisoners manage such a thing?

Merely surviving the plunge into the Underworld was already miraculous. Without any resources, how could you talk about improvements?

Furthermore, the most critical criterion for determining a Sinking Abyss sentence was the charge of reckless misappropriation of forbidden resources. That means the experiment couldn't have been completed with ordinary materials or standard equipment — forbidden experimental resources were essential to it.

It follows, then, that your fathers must have deceived the Tower of Logic and smuggled the experiment's most critical instrument down from the surface. That's the only way they could have restarted and even improved the experiment underground.

Clever people, indeed — even under exile, they ensured their experiment could continue.

So, wise men — might I ask: what exactly was the thing your fathers stole from the Tower of Logic?"

"..."

"..."

Allendor fell silent. He could no longer bring himself to face his own past. Mo Rabic sighed repeatedly, then lifted his head and gazed at this gentle-faced yet razor-tongued blind woman, his expression immensely complex:

"Who... are you people, exactly?"

Are you from the Tower of Logic, sent to deal with us?"

"No — we're here to help you!"

"!!!"

The words stunned everyone present except Qin Xin — because the speaker wasn't the Blind One. It was Cheng Shi!

The clown had arrived. He'd finally tracked down the Torchbearers — and discovered a bonus surprise.

Qin Xin had actually sensed Cheng Shi approaching for some time, but he hadn't reacted. In his mind, at least, Cheng Shi wasn't an enemy.

Cheng Shi had indeed followed the general direction of the two Torchbearers to trace his way here. If not for a few Shanty Area residents who'd noticed these two strangers, he genuinely wouldn't have known how to navigate through this smog-choked swamp of desire.

Corruption followers were terrifying. Unless you went for the kill, you couldn't tell whether your attacks actually hurt them — or rewarded them.

They could even be a come-on...

Fortunately, Cheng Shi had found his people at last — and what's more, he'd stumbled upon the very Mr. Mo Rabic he'd just been "yearning for"!

What luck. So this Folly follower had already reached the Shanty Area. If he hadn't gotten to Shi Lolin's contacts first, these two sides really would have connected.

Praise be to Destiny — it was all His guidance.

Cheng Shi beamed at the two Torchbearers and gave a quick summary of everything he'd encountered at the drop point. Then he turned to the downed Mo Rabic, his face all smiles as he helped the man to his feet.

"Mr. Mo Rabic, I have a business proposition I'd like to discuss. But of course, before we talk business, we can first chat about matters of faith.

We've long admired Folly and yearned to enter His embrace, but we've never found the way. Now, at last, we've met His followers — who's to say this isn't Destiny's favor?"

And so Cheng Shi began working his charm. After all, high-level academic talent couldn't be treated like common grunts. He was counting on these two to extract Divinity from that Abyss Colorful Crystal for him, so there was no way he could play hardball.

With experiments, beyond procedures and processes, feel and experience mattered enormously. As long as he couldn't guarantee he could replicate the operation himself perfectly, keeping the core experimenters stable and cooperative was the safest approach.

And Cheng Shi was well-versed in this "art" — though the "art" in question wasn't the diplomatic skill of winning hearts but rather the dazzling craft of deception.

So he began cozying up to them, not forgetting to signal the Torchbearers beside him with his eyes, urging them to play along.

The Blind One was easy enough — as a fellow Destiny con artist, she simply smiled and ceded the stage to Cheng Shi. But Qin Xin's expression was distinctly strange. He kept looking from Cheng Shi to the Blind One and back, and when he noticed the Blind One's attitude toward Cheng Shi was remarkably trusting, he raised an imperceptible eyebrow and elected to maintain a prudent silence.

Mo Rabic was flattered and somewhat overwhelmed. He couldn't quite read the dynamic between the three, but that didn't stop him from recognizing that Cheng Shi "wanted" something from him. It was just that this person's way of "asking" was far more roundabout — and far more insincere — than those other two.

Chapter 660: The "Discrepancy" Wasn't Alo Manni — It Was Shi Lolin?

He had no choice. His options beyond "cooperate" amounted to "die."

But regardless of cooperation, there was one thing he needed to clarify first.

"My still-unenlightened wise friend, I think there may be a misunderstanding.

This is our first time visiting the Shanty Area in Falling Gate. The idea of approaching the Extreme Desire Brotherhood only occurred to us this morning. So when you say the Brotherhood has arranged a rendezvous — are you certain it's a rendezvous with me and Allendor?

We hadn't even made it inside before we were... kindly intercepted by your companion. The name Shi Lolin was something we picked up from people on the street. We've never even met her. So — might there be some kind of misunderstanding?"

"!?!?"

A misunderstanding?

Just arrived?

Never contacted Shi Lolin?!

Hearing this, Cheng Shi's expression shifted. His pupils contracted as his gaze upon the two men slowly grew heavier. Simultaneously, the two Torchbearers also realized something was off — what Mo Rabic described clearly contradicted what Cheng Shi had just reported.

But Qin Xin's Master of Deception told him Cheng Shi wasn't lying. Which meant the scene unfolding before them was very likely an anomaly within this trial — a Time "discrepancy"!

The clue had materialized before all three of them out of nowhere. And as if on cue, the hour struck at that very moment, and a faint hum emanated from somewhere on Qin Xin's person.

The Blind One glanced over with mild surprise, tilting her head: "You set a timer?"

Qin Xin blinked, then nodded with a slight frown: "In a Time scenario, it pays to be cautious."

Sound reasoning, yet Cheng Shi felt an instinctive prickle of unease — something not quite right — but the excitement of finding a lead quickly buried that subtle doubt. He turned to the two men before him, the corners of his mouth gradually curling upward.

If the people the Shanty Area was expecting to meet weren't them, then who?!

That big man had clearly spoken Mo Rabic's name. If these two really had only just arrived, then the Time "discrepancy" might be standing right in front of them!

Cheng Shi was elated. But before confirming whether these two were the anomaly, he had one more thing to do. He stepped forward, seized Mo Rabic by the collar, and the smile slid clean off his face as he asked in a chillingly quiet voice:

"What did you just call me?!"

"I said... might there be some misunderstanding?" Mo Rabic repeated awkwardly.

"Not that one — the sentence before!"

"?" Mo Rabic pursed his lips, thought for a moment, then ventured uncertainly: "The Brotherhood has arranged a rendezvous?"

"No, no, no — the one before that!" Cheng Shi's tone grew ever more "menacing." But Mo Rabic racked his brain and couldn't figure out what was wrong with the sentence before that. It was just a greeting, wasn't it?

And yet that greeting was precisely what Cheng Shi cared about!

"What do you mean, 'still-unenlightened wise friend'?"

Who's still unenlightened?

Are you calling me stupid?"

"???"

Mo Rabic was stumped. And it wasn't just him — everyone present froze. Technically, the phrase did carry that implication, but considering the speaker was supposedly a Folly follower, it wasn't entirely unreasonable.

But was now really the time to be hung up on this?

Qin Xin's gaze had been peculiar for a while now. His eyes kept bouncing between the Blind One and Cheng Shi. After a lengthy observation, he still chose to stay silent, listening quietly.

The Blind One, on the other hand, was genuinely amused by Cheng Shi this time. She knew by now that the Fate Weaver's logic operated on its own trajectory. She shook her head with a laugh:

"I'm increasingly convinced that the name 'Fate Weaver' doesn't suit you at all. 'Clown,' on the other hand — that fits perfectly.

Enough, Cheng Shi. Let's not waste time. I just performed another divination, and this time the result is quite clear."

With that, the Blind One produced a twenty-sided die. The number showing in her palm was only four.

"What did you divine this time?" Cheng Shi twitched, his expression stiffening.

"I wanted to know if these two have any connection to Time. His answer is a strong probability of 'no.' So I'm wondering — what if the Time 'discrepancy' isn't them, but rather Shi Lolin, the one who issued the rendezvous order?

After all, both the two contacts you mentioned and Shi Lolin herself know of Mo Rabic's existence. But surely all three of them can't all be the anomaly?"

"That possibility can't be ruled out. Looks like I need to bring those two over for another round of questioning.

By the way — where's Shi Lolin? Qin Xin, I remember she was with you. Where did you stash her?"

Cheng Shi looked at Qin Xin quizzically.

"Somewhere no one would find her. You run into surprises during exploration — better safe than sorry. But given the way things are shaping up, it's time to dig her out."

Dig her out?

Where on earth had this Torchbearer hidden the woman?

When had he become as cautious as Cheng Shi himself?

Cheng Shi spared Qin Xin a thoughtful glance, then nodded: "Let's split up. An Shenxuan, stay here and don't move. I'll bring my people over right away."

"Then let's see who's faster." Qin Xin let out a hearty laugh and vanished in a gale, moving with the speed of an agile hunter as he disappeared from sight.

Cheng Shi was stunned. This was the first time he'd seen the man's true power on full display. If a warrior could move that fast, every other class might as well pack it in.

But then again... so what if he's fast?

Peak players don't run — they teleport!

Cheng Shi chuckled, snapped his fingers, and vanished from the spot.

Never Lost Gambling Gear!

The Blind One recognized Cheng Shi's talent and was surprised that a Fate Weaver would choose such an ability. Useful as it was, for a Fate Weaver there were far better talents that aided professional growth. A pure mobility talent like this had a rather poor cost-benefit ratio.

"What a character. Truly, what a character.

And where do you gentlemen think you're going? Let me guess — you saw those two leave and thought you could sneak past a weak little woman who can't see where you are?"

The Blind One's words struck Mo Rabi and Allendor like a thunderbolt. They'd been hunching over, trying to inch away behind the Blind One's back. But barely one step in and they were caught red-handed. Both froze stiff, their faces a portrait of panic.

Of course, these two wise men hadn't stopped out of sheer guilt. They froze because the Destiny Chosen had taken action.

Singers may have been a support class, but they still had essential tools at their disposal — especially the Blind One, who, with Zhen Xin's help, had quite a few tricks up her sleeve.

"Relax. I won't tell them about this — especially not that Fate Weaver who just finished 'interrogating' you. But how he treats you going forward will depend entirely on your own behavior."

The words had barely faded when Qin Xin returned, Shi Lolin in tow. He arrived like a gust of wind, dropped Shi Lolin's corpse on the ground, and then burst into laughter as he faced the direction Cheng Shi had departed from.

"Looks like I won."

The Blind One glanced at him with mild surprise, shaking her head with an amused smile: "I've never seen such a competitive — or should I say, childlike — side of you."

Qin Xin slowly turned to face the Blind One, a meaningful smile on his lips:

"Then don't miss this chance. Take a good look."