

## The Gods 671

Chapter 671: Truth's Worst Chapter Ever

Hearing this, everyone turned to Allendor with curiosity. But Allendor had gone silent again. It was Mo Rabic — who hadn't spoken earlier — who answered instead.

"Lun Zol is my father. Scholar, the portrait you saw may have had the name mislabeled."

Wang Mou was stunned. He continued shaking his head:

"It can't be wrong!"

To find leads, I forced Tower of Logic scholars to sketch their likenesses and cross-referenced with scholars from several different eras just to prevent errors. I—"

"Hey, hey, hey — doesn't matter, doesn't matter!" Cheng Shi intervened hastily. He'd wanted to lighten the mood, not freeze it solid. How had the conversation gone off the rails?

The Grand Scholar who looked like Mo Rabic was Allendor's father. The scholar with Allendor's face shape was Mo Rabic's father...

'Wait — are you people doing cross-family inheritance here?'

'Given the circumstances, who's whose father is... really not something you want to think too hard about.'

'And here I thought the Tower of Logic was full of research-obsessed ascetics who couldn't care less about worldly matters. Turns out you're right on par with Falling Gate!'

Cheng Shi's mind went blank. He immediately cut Wang Mou off, fighting down the urge to dig for more gossip, and motioned for everyone to settle down:

"Let bygones be bygones. Memory isn't that interesting. What we should be enjoying is the present."

Come on — let's start the experiment. The moment of miracles is upon us. Once this experiment succeeds, I'll personally concede that Folly has beaten Truth this round.

As for you, Doctor — if you wish to continue observing, kindly shut that Truth-leaning mouth of yours. This is Folly's stage now."

"..."

Nobody present was a fool — and the only two non-players were intellectually brilliant Folly followers at that. Everyone knew what the discussion had really been about, and everyone fell silent over the conclusion forming in their minds.

Mo Rabic and Allendor threw themselves wholeheartedly into preparing the experiment. The five players, meanwhile, each privately mulled over the two wise men's tone when answering. They hadn't seemed to think this was anything unspeakable — they'd even emphasized their bloodlines. So in the Tower of Logic... this kind of thing wasn't considered shameful?

Every player's eyes widened. They studied the two wise men with amused, knowing smirks, then cast meaningful glances at the only Truth follower in the room. Even the usually quiet Blind One couldn't suppress a smile, ducking her head as her shoulders shook with silent laughter.

This was absolutely Truth's worst episode ever!

The experiment began. Mo Rabic replicated his earlier procedure, dutifully serving as the experimental stand. Allendor operated the legendary Grand Scholar's finger with meticulous care. Wang Mou stood closest, holding his breath in rapt concentration as he recorded every operational detail the two wise men performed.

But the Divinity extraction was painfully slow. As Allendor had mentioned, drawing out the Divinity from a head-sized chunk of Abyss Colorful Crystal would take at least an entire night.

The players saw no reason to waste the whole evening here. So after enduring two full hour-marks together, they devised a new rotation plan.

Wang Mou obviously wouldn't leave — he intended to observe the entire experiment from start to finish. Of the remaining four, the Investigator suggested that one person watching the Doctor would suffice; a pair could essentially guarantee no accidents caused by personal greed during the experiment.

But Cheng Shi played it safe. He recommended three watchers at once. That way, no matter how the remaining four were combined, at least one person from each camp would always be present — the most secure arrangement possible.

The two Torchbearers naturally had no objections and volunteered for the first watch. This freed Cheng Shi and Li Wufang to rest for a while before returning in a few hours to swap shifts.

Cheng Shi was very pleased, because he also wanted to find time to probe this Investigator who had inexplicably begun warming up to him — to ask what exactly had happened in the mine to cause these behavioral changes.

But to avoid arousing suspicion and make his approach seem natural, Cheng Shi casually invited Li Wufang to join him in visiting Shi Lolin's target — A Rad.

He wanted to use the Investigator's hands to deal with the Proxy Hand's boss.

Li Wufang readily agreed. And so, two players wearing fake smiles left the mine outpost warehouse — now designated as the experiment site — one behind the other, heading toward the hut where A Rad was being held.

Night had fallen by now. Though the sky in the far distance had visibly darkened, the entirety of Falling Gate remained illuminated by the inverted magma waterfall cascading from the Abyssal Volcano. It wasn't quite as bright as day, but "mountain fire blazing" came close enough.

The Fate Weaver and the Investigator walked in single file. Neither spoke first. Neither made any unnecessary moves.

Cheng Shi's brow was faintly creased as he kept his senses trained on Li Wufang behind him. But the Investigator showed no reaction whatsoever. He seemed to be simply following an invitation, trailing

behind Cheng Shi with an easy smile, as relaxed in both posture and expression as could be — with no intention of quickening his pace to walk alongside Cheng Shi, and not the slightest desire to start a conversation.

The eerie atmosphere only deepened Cheng Shi's uncertainty. They'd already put some distance between themselves and the experiment warehouse, and the hut holding A Rad was just ahead. Cheng Shi decided that if he didn't speak now, initiating conversation later would feel too deliberate. So he found a pretext, stopped walking, turned around with a smile, and began:

"You—"

But he'd barely gotten one word out when the quiet of the mine night was shattered by the soft crunch of footsteps.

Cheng Shi and Li Wufang exchanged a startled look. Their expressions hardened simultaneously as they whipped around toward the back wall of the hut holding A Rad. The footsteps crunching through dirt were coming from just behind it!

Someone!

Judging by the sound, not a careful person — yet whoever it was had somehow circled around the Screaming Servant's perimeter, approaching from the mine's far side.

Cheng Shi's brow tightened. He looked toward "Gongyang Jiao," still standing sentry at the outpost entrance. Sensing its master's summons, the Screaming Servant immediately shot toward the back of the building.

Li Wufang watched the skeleton go and smacked his lips: "Death's toys sure are handy, huh?"

"?"

'Are we that close?'

'Buddy, don't you think you're being a little too familiar?'

Cheng Shi grumbled internally but kept his expression neutral, pointing casually at the source of the noise with a smile: "What — you expect a priest to scout for you?"

The moment Li Wufang heard this, his expression snapped from playful to deadly serious. Without a word, he shot forward like a bolt, chasing after the Screaming Servant toward the intruder's position. Watching that strange reaction, Cheng Shi's already furrowed brow deepened three more degrees.

Why had the Investigator become so... agreeable?

Chapter 672: The Stowaway: I'm Here for Ad Ric

They caught him.

Li Wufang at full speed was considerably faster than "Gongyang Jiao." As a peak-level hunter going all out, the intruder didn't even see who'd grabbed him before his feet left the ground and he was deposited before Cheng Shi.

The Investigator's technique was so crisp that when the intruder found himself on his knees before Cheng Shi without warning, Cheng Shi instinctively stepped back — half-expecting Li Wufang to be using the man as a trap.

But his cautious reaction instantly changed Li Wufang's expression. The Investigator snapped to high alert, scanning the surroundings while backing toward Cheng Shi, tense and uncertain: "More trouble?"

"..."

A trace of embarrassment crossed Cheng Shi's face. There was indeed "trouble" — Li Wufang himself was the trouble. Setting him aside, this place was perfectly safe.

But Cheng Shi could hardly admit he'd been so cautious that he'd suspected his own teammate, so he laughed it off: "Just testing your reflexes. Pretty fast."

"..." Now it was Li Wufang's turn to be speechless. He sighed, looking like he wanted to say something, but with a peculiar expression, swallowed it back. He simply pointed at the intruder beside them and fell silent.

Cheng Shi chuckled awkwardly, grateful the man hadn't pressed. He wouldn't have known how to continue the conversation otherwise.

After dealing with Li Wufang, Cheng Shi turned his attention to the intruder. The man was clearly a stowaway — and a penniless one at that.

His face was caked with dirt, clothes in tatters. Apart from a small pack at the small of his back, he carried nothing of value. He was far more wretched-looking than the vast majority of stowaways Cheng Shi had encountered that day. Yet the reason Cheng Shi could identify him as a stowaway was because this man had the same shrewd, calculating eyes as the inn's guests.

Falling Gate's stowaways were all shrewd. They had to be — spotting opportunities here was the only way to accumulate enough wealth to buy their ticket out of the Underworld.

This man had obviously come for wealth too. Whether he was here to steal people or steal ore would have to be determined through questioning.

Cheng Shi wasted no time. He tossed a scalpel at his feet and asked with a smile:

"Here's your chance to live. Tell me who you are and why you're here. Make it clear and you walk. Fail, and you bleed."

"..."

The stowaway was terrified. Trembling head to toe, he collapsed to the ground and immediately began begging for his life.

"Don't kill me, don't kill me! I'm not here to steal anything! I came to find someone — I know a miner here. I came to him for help. We agreed on a time to meet, but he never showed, so I came to check on him!"

It's true, it's really true! Please don't kill me!!"

It was indeed true. Cheng Shi frowned and pressed further: "One more chance. I told you — be clear."

"Yes, yes, I'll be clear, I'll explain everything right now.

My name is Ger Si. I'm from the surface— no, from the Underworld, from the Underworld.

I'm a mixed-blood child of a Pomedar and a Far Furnace native. My father's name is—"

WHAM—

Before Ger Si could finish, Li Wufang kicked him flat.

"We told you to explain the situation clearly, not recite your family tree. What use is it knowing your parents?"

And are you from the surface or the Underworld? At a time like this, you're really going to try lying in front of him?"

Li Wufang jabbed a thumb at Cheng Shi, grinning brightly. But the words sent a jolt through Ger Si — and through Cheng Shi as well.

What was that about?

What had this Investigator figured out — or what did he know?

In front of a hunter, Cheng Shi didn't dare let suspicion show. He could only glance at Li Wufang with studied casualness, quietly raising his guard while keeping his ears pricked as the terrified Ger Si continued his frantic defense.

Ger Si had been kicked senseless. He curled up on the ground, shaking violently.

"I understand, I understand now. I'm from the Underworld. I was born here. But a few months ago, I got to the surface through Proxy Hand connections and became a citizen — no, a vagrant in Gasmira.

The city ruled by scholars really is wonderful. Life on the surface is so glamorous. But for people like us with no identity, city life is impossibly hard. We can't eat, can't stay warm, have no civil rights. If you die in the street, the ones who collect your body won't be research institutes or the cemetery — it'll be other hungry vagrants.

I was terrified. I knew I couldn't keep drifting like this. So when I heard that the Tower of Logic needed people to explore ore veins in the Abyssal Volcano, I signed up — hoping to earn legitimate Gasmira citizenship.

But then — while exploring — I fell back down!

I'd spent every last coin I had to buy a ticket to the surface! I'd clawed my way to Truth's paradise! And now it's all gone — I'm back where I started!

Destiny — how could you do this to me! How could you do this to me!!"

At this point, the grown man broke into sobs. He wailed with heart-wrenching anguish, as if falling back into the Underworld had murdered his future and erased every last trace of hope.

But listening to this, Cheng Shi found the taste... off.

'Buddy, this is what you decided to do with your own life. Why are you dumping blame on my Benefactor?'

'And the Abyssal Volcano's interior is extremely dangerous — even peak players rarely venture inside. Surviving one trip to the surface was already a miracle. And you survived the fall back down too? Don't you think that's because of Destiny's protection?'

'He went that far for you, and you still leave a bad review? Tsk — serves you right.'

'People like you are exactly why His reputation keeps tanking.'

Cheng Shi rolled his eyes and continued listening to Ger Si's tearful account.

"I was this close to getting Gasmira citizenship! This close! How could I just accept it? So I wanted to find my friend again and ask him for one more favor — to sneak me another spot to go back up. As long as I can get up there, I can become a real Tower of Logic citizen!

I can help them recruit business down here! I can be their contact person! I'm hardworking, I'm capable, I can endure anything, I—"

"Then why don't you endure hardship down here in the Underworld?"

"...?" Cheng Shi's question cut through Ger Si's wailing. He looked up in bewilderment, choking for a long moment before stammering: "The Underworld is nothing but suffering... I've already eaten it all... and there's no end to it... waaah..."

"..."

'I have a retort so massive I don't know how to get it out.'

Cheng Shi was equal parts amused and exasperated. Falling Gate really was a spectacular place. Everyone here was a genuine prodigy.

"Your friend works for the Proxy Hand? What's his name — don't tell me it's... A Rad?"

"A Rad? Who's that? I don't know any A Rad. My friend's name is Ad Ric. He's just an ordinary miner."

"?" Both players froze, stunned. "Who?"

Chapter 673: The Person You're Describing Sounds Like My Father

Ad Ric?

Ordinary? He was far from ordinary. Other people went to the shanties to indulge their desires. He went to the shanties to actually steal money.

How could a miner living below the poverty line get someone a ticket to the surface?

With stolen money?

Cheng Shi was speechless. He felt like every single person in Falling Gate existed to sandpaper his IQ. At least Ad Ric was already in the players' custody — one face-to-face meeting and they'd know exactly what story this newcomer was selling.

So Cheng Shi shook his head with a wry smile, hauled Ger Si to his feet, and walked toward the room where Ad Ric was being held.

"Let's go. Before we deal with A Rad, let's find out what other little secrets this stowaway friend has up his sleeve."

Li Wufang, naturally, was indifferent. He gave an amused snort and dutifully fell in behind Cheng Shi — again refusing to walk beside him. Watching this pattern repeat, Cheng Shi increasingly felt the Investigator was deliberately giving way — almost as if he were trying to follow Cheng Shi's lead. Where was this deference coming from?

Cheng Shi furrowed his brow, said nothing, but raised his internal guard another notch.

Ad Ric's cell was right next to A Rad's. Before long, Cheng Shi had tossed Ger Si at the feet of the equally terrified Ad Ric. But when both players saw the bewilderment and confusion in the miner's eyes, their expressions darkened instantly.

Ad Ric clearly didn't recognize this stowaway!

But if he didn't know Ger Si, how had Ger Si fooled the Master of Deception?

Cheng Shi's vigilance spiked. He let a scalpel slide into his grip and leveled a grim stare at Ger Si: "You'd better give me an explanation."

Ger Si had been dragged the whole way and was gritting his teeth against the friction burns. When he heard Cheng Shi address him, he quickly raised his head and looked around. But the instant he spotted Ad Ric, he froze too — eyes wide with frightened confusion:

"Explain what? I don't know this person..."

"Don't know him? What a coincidence. This is Ad Ric. Didn't you just say Ad Ric helped you? Why don't you know him now?"

"He's Ad Ric?" Ger Si rubbed his eyes in disbelief, then studied the man by lamplight once more before denying it with alarm: "He does look... somewhat similar. But I'm not confused. I know Ad Ric — and this is absolutely not him!"

The stowaway shook his head vigorously. But mid-shake, something clicked. His eyes widened with sudden realization:

"I get it — he's a fake! He stole Ad Ric's identity!"

He must be just like me — another stowaway — using a Proxy Hand identity to get out of here!

He's definitely a fake! Where's Ad Ric? What did you do with Ad Ric?!

You bastard — you didn't kill him, did you? He was my last hope! You destroyed my last hope! You bastard — give me back my Gasmira citizenship!"

The utterly overwrought Ger Si lunged at Ad Ric with his fists.

Ad Ric was genuinely dumbfounded. He had absolutely no idea who this lunatic was. But he was a miner, after all — even shackled in chains, his raw strength was far beyond what a scrawny stowaway could match. He straightened one leg and — WHAM — kicked Ger Si square in the chest, sending the furious, despairing man flying toward the doorway.

Had Li Wufang not caught him from behind, Ger Si might well have been kicked straight out the door.

Watching this absurd spectacle, Cheng Shi — for the very first time — didn't laugh.

He genuinely couldn't. Because the Master of Deception told him neither side was lying!

Which meant either this stowaway possessed an ability that could defeat the Master of Deception, or... a new "discrepancy" had surfaced, and the stowaway's cognition had most likely experienced a temporal displacement.

Ad Ric's identity was beyond question. Not only had Cheng Shi investigated him — so had Qin Xin with the Master of Deception Card, and the meticulous Truth follower Wang Mou. A regular NPC, no matter how well-hidden his secrets, couldn't possibly fool three peak players simultaneously.

So the issue almost certainly lay with this stowaway who'd shown up at the mine. And judging by his state — panicked, yes, but mentally lucid, with coherent speech and logical behavior — he clearly knew exactly what he wanted and what he'd lost. He seemed perfectly normal.

Which meant the only abnormality had to be in his cognition.

"Now this is interesting. Today's trial is straight-up bizarre — why does good fortune keep throwing itself at our feet?" Cheng Shi muttered. Then he looked at the groaning Ger Si by the door and asked once more: "Enough with the wailing. You're certain the Ad Ric you know isn't this man?"

"I'm certain! He definitely stole Ad Ric's identity!" Ger Si's eyes were bloodshot, his expression suggesting he wished he could swallow this hope-extinguishing imposter alive.

"Then what does the Ad Ric you know look like? What are his distinguishing features? Be specific — maybe I can still help you find him."

Hearing this, Ad Ric panicked.

"Sir! I'm the real one! I didn't steal anyone's identity!

I grew up right here in the mining district! I'm not a stowaway! All the old-timers in the Proxy Hand know me! The women in the Shanty Area know me too! I can prove it, I—"

CLANG—

A gleaming scalpel planted itself between Ad Ric's legs. The miner clenched every muscle from the waist down and immediately fell silent. But the sudden terror once again stimulated his bladder, and he... wet himself again.

"Nobody asked you. Keep your mouth shut. I'm talking to him.

Ger Si — last chance. I hope you use it wisely."

"I'll talk, I'll tell you everything!

Ad Ric is very burly — a bit burlier than this guy, but about the same height. He has a mole on his jaw. He's also missing half an ear — a shanty woman bit it off. And on his left arm, he has a blood tattoo of the first woman he ever slept with. He also—"

"???"

Before Ger Si could finish, Ad Ric snapped out of his terror and lapsed into total stupor. He instinctively scooted backward, then stared at Ger Si with utter disbelief and confusion:

"Wait... the person you're describing... sounds like my father."

"?"

Both players were shocked. Cheng Shi blinked: "Your father was also called Ad Ric?"

"Yes, sir. When I was little, everyone called me Little Ad Ric. My father was the real Ad Ric. After he died, I inherited his name and became the true Ad Ric."

"..."

'A lowly miner's name — what's there to inherit?'

Chapter 674: Ad Ric? That's My Father!

"???"

Ger Si was stunned too. Ad Ric's words hit him like a thunderbolt. He frantically shook his head:

"That's impossible! Ad Ric is the same age as me — how could he have a son this old?"

What's your father's name — I mean before he changed it? I know he changed his name once!"

"Han Kesi! Before the name change, he was Han Kesi!"

"!!!"

Hearing that name, Ger Si went completely blank.

Well, well — the puzzle pieces finally fit!

But the timeline was wrong.

Seeing the stowaway's reaction, a spark lit simultaneously in both Cheng Shi's and Li Wufang's eyes. They exchanged a glance, arriving at the same conclusion: the past discrepancy!

If nothing was amiss, this stowaway — who knew Ad Ric's father — had most likely been thrown from the past by Time and dropped into the present.

Yet he'd distinctly said he'd fallen from the Abyssal Volcano. Could all the "discrepancies" be connected to the Abyssal Volcano?

Previously, the Volcano had linked the surface and the Underworld within the same timeframe. But could it be that in this trial, the Volcano linked the past and future of the same location?

It wasn't impossible. If that hypothesis held, then Ad Ric's behavioral changes and Shi Lolin's anomaly might also trace back to the Abyssal Volcano.

Both players clearly recognized the issue. But the Investigator's curiosity was far keener than Cheng Shi's. He grinned, lifted Ger Si with one hand, and asked Ad Ric politely:

"Have you been to the Abyssal Volcano recently?"

"?" Ad Ric blinked, finding the question absurd. As a miner, aside from being locked up, he was at the Abyssal Volcano practically every day — though only at the outer magma crystal veins, not deep inside.

But of course he didn't dare say that. He answered obediently: "Sir, if 'recently' means this past week, then no — because A Rad had me locked up. But if you mean before that, I was working in the mine almost every day."

"A week ago? Did Shi Lolin come to see you a week ago?" Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow.

"Shi Lolin?" Ad Ric quickly ransacked his memory and nodded: "Yes, she did visit once. She wanted to bribe me into stealing Abyss Colorful Crystal for her. But I'm far too loyal to the Proxy Hand. How could I possibly—"

"Lie to me again and I'll split you in two." Cheng Shi smiled coldly.

"I'm telling the truth! I can't even access the Abyss Colorful Crystal — of course I couldn't agree to her..."

"..."

At this, something suddenly clicked in Cheng Shi's brain — a flash of "brilliance" that instantly connected all the threads and revealed the entire story.

"So after you refused her, she went to your coworker — the miner locked up with you?"

Ad Ric froze, then nodded awkwardly: "Yes."

"But he was just a regular miner too. How was he supposed to steal Crystal for Shi Lolin?"

Still, your coworker was greedier than you. He accepted Shi Lolin's request and seized the chance to name his own price.

And his price, in Shi Lolin's eyes, was simply an acknowledgment of desire — so she'd never refuse.

And while the two of them were celebrating their desires, you — Ad Ric, you loyal Proxy Hand miner — stole Shi Lolin's money. You took it to the Shanty Area to drink and indulge. You dragged Alo Manni to stroll around the Crystal Pool for an entire night. And then, right before dawn, you beat her up.

That... is the entire reason A Rad put you two in solitary, isn't it, Ad Ric?"

Cheng Shi's speech accelerated as he went, and by the end, his own words cracked him up.

Ad Ric, meanwhile, nodded like a chicken pecking rice, confessing to all his "crimes" without reservation — even squeezing in a couple of sycophantic compliments.

"Sir, you're truly brilliant. You figured out everything."

"..."

Cheng Shi was done. His only thought now was to drag the Prisoner here to Falling Gate. He desperately wanted to know whether someone of the Prisoner's caliber would end up receiving remedial education upon arrival, or whether he could enlighten the local residents and elevate their cognitive abilities to the next level.

But those were idle musings. What mattered was that the players had seemingly stumbled upon yet another "discrepancy" — and the evidence was crystal clear. Practically gift-wrapped.

This was simply unimaginable for a Time trial. Cheng Shi and Li Wufang locked eyes again. Under the weight of their shared astonishment, neither could find the right words.

After a long silence, Cheng Shi sighed: "This is Destiny. He's always so... miraculous."

Li Wufang burst out laughing, pressing his palms together and bowing skyward: "Praise be to Destiny! Truly — He's been watching over us all along."

On the surface, the words were innocuous. But hearing them, Cheng Shi's smile didn't falter — though his heart clenched.

Something was off. That feeling of wrongness was back.

He distinctly remembered that during their second group discussion at the inn, this Investigator had said outright that he didn't believe in fate. So why was he now loudly praising Destiny?

'Do you have flexible principles too, just like me?'

No — that wasn't it. Li Wufang had changed, but it seemed more like he'd changed back.

Cheng Shi frowned, recalling the very first meeting at the trial's outset. Right before leaving, Li Wufang had asked the Blind One for a divination about the trial. Back then, he'd genuinely seemed to need Destiny's guidance.

So the Investigator should have been a believer all along. But then, why hadn't the Master of Deception flagged his claim of disbelief during their second meeting?

Did he also have the means to fool the Master of Deception?

Or had he just been joking around, and Cheng Shi was overthinking?

Something was wrong. Deeply wrong. When a trial presented too many anomalies, Cheng Shi's instincts screamed at him. He began replaying every event of the day, dissecting each detail, hunting for any trace or thread that might wake him up to a trap he'd unknowingly walked into.

But no matter how he scrutinized things, beyond a few teammates whose words and actions didn't quite match... nothing stood out.

Words and actions not matching... why wouldn't they match...

The room fell silent in the wake of Cheng Shi's contemplation. His gaze swept casually over everyone present, then drifted to the watch on his wrist — and realized the next hour-mark was almost here.

He jolted, instinctively sending a scalpel toward the Investigator. Li Wufang blinked, then caught the blade between two fingers. Surprise flashed in his gaze, quickly replaced by a helpless sigh:

"Come on, boss — you're guarding against even me?"

The words detonated inside Cheng Shi's skull like a cluster of thunderbolts!

What... did he just say?!

Chapter 675: Who Is He?! Who Exactly Is Li Wufang?!

Cheng Shi's cautious nature — his steadiness — had saved him once again.

He'd been puzzling over Li Wufang's inconsistent behavior for a while now, and wariness toward the man had been building silently. So when this baffling remark dropped, his first instinct was to lock down his expression and eyes, refusing to let even a flicker of shock slip through.

He knew the other man was a sharp-eyed hunter. Any abnormal reaction would put him on guard. His face did go slightly colder from the forced control, but fortunately, it stayed within an acceptable range.

His mind, however, had already erupted into full chaos.

The most explosive revelation wasn't what Li Wufang had said — it was that the Master of Deception told him the words were not a lie!

What did that mean? It meant that either the Investigator possessed a Master of Deception Card like Qin Xin, or he was a fellow fraud — a con artist wielding the Master of Deception talent!

Cheng Shi could conceive of no third option.

Moreover, reviewing every interaction with the Investigator throughout the day and tracing the shifts in his behavior, it was clear this fellow fraud's impersonation skills were nothing short of pinnacle-level — even more authentic than Zhen Yi. Had his fabricated persona not contradicted itself regarding its attitude toward Destiny — and had Cheng Shi not been someone who cared deeply about Destiny — he might never have suspected the man was a fraud at all.

But where did a fraud learn a hunter's combat skills and an Order follower's techniques?

Lies of Yesterday plus the Master of Deception?

Another goddamn Fraud civil war?

Cheng Shi panicked. He had every reason to panic — even now, the memory of that trial at the Montrani Coliseum still gave him chills.

But a con artist always had a purpose. So what was this "Li Wufang's" objective?

From the moment the words were uttered, Cheng Shi had been racking his brain: which fraud would call him "boss?"

After running through every possibility, only one name surfaced: Long Jing.

Was it him? The acrobat who excelled at disguise?

No — it shouldn't be.

Not because Long Jing lacked the ability, but because he lacked the nerve!

Even if Long Jing had determined that Cheng Shi's current identity was "Yu Xi," he would never dare casually address an envoy he'd only met a handful of times as "boss."

But if not Long Jing, then who?!

Cheng Shi's brain kicked into overdrive. He knew he couldn't stay silent forever, so he found a suitable excuse to explain away his earlier test-strike, disguising the probe as precaution:

"We found the trial's leads through Destiny's guidance, which means we can't ignore Time's counterattack. No god would tolerate its rival faith meddling in its own trial.

So we must be even more careful. I wasn't guarding against you — I was proving to you that I'm clean."

Li Wufang's expression turned deeply strange. He shook his head with an amused sigh: "Fine, fine — who could possibly out-argue you? But, boss — hasn't this trial been going a little too smoothly?

Shouldn't we first take him..."

Li Wufang's intimate tone sank Cheng Shi's heart further. He couldn't figure out why, so he could only listen in silence as the other man continued.

Li Wufang gestured at Ger Si and grinned:

"...hide him away? Buy us some time. That way this Time trial won't wrap up too fast.

With the remaining six days, we can take our time looking around — and maybe track down that backstabbing Jiang Chi and bring him back."

"!!!!!"

Who?

Jiang Chi?!

He really wasn't dead?

No, no, no — whether Jiang Chi was dead or alive wasn't even the point. What did Jiang Chi have to do with any of this? How had the conversation suddenly swerved to him??

Cheng Shi's mind went utterly blank. But he quickly sheathed his blade and seized the chance to turn away, letting out a casual snort to mask every trace of his expression. Because if he hadn't, his face — crumbling under the weight of shock — would have been impossible to hide.

And when he turned around, his gaze — laden with seismic alarm — fell upon Ad Ric at his feet. The miner, meeting a pair of terrifyingly dark eyes, was so frightened that his bladder failed him for the third time.

But Cheng Shi couldn't spare a thought for the stench filling the room. Because he'd suddenly realized he'd been wrong.

Catastrophically wrong!!!

This was bad. Very, very bad.

This man wasn't a fraud!

He seemed to be...

No — how was this possible? How could a gods' trial produce such an anomaly? Was this a flaw in the trial, a distortion of Time, or had Prosperity's fall finally ruptured the Convention?

Memory's power does not retroactively affect past trials. Time's divine authority does not impact present-day players. This was consensus. This was law.

In simpler terms: a player could not use Memory to travel back in time and kill other players in past trials. Nor could a player be affected by Time in a way that let them see players from a different timeline.

This had always been an unwritten but universally acknowledged truth among all gods and players alike. But now...

The former had already been shattered by Su Yida's arrival. And the latter... seemed poised to shatter today!

This Li Wufang...

Cheng Shi drew a long breath, his gaze heavy as lead, his expression grim to the extreme.

This Li Wufang appeared to be a player from another timeline!!!

And on that timeline, Cheng Shi — or at least the person sharing his name — was the "boss" Li Wufang referred to!

He, Li Wufang, and Jiang Chi all belonged to the same organization. But something had gone wrong within its ranks, leading Jiang Chi to "defect."

This wasn't speculation. This wasn't conjecture. When Li Wufang uttered the utterly unexpected name "Jiang Chi," countless threads suddenly connected in Cheng Shi's mind.

The meaningful wink Li Wufang had given him on the mountain path, hidden from the others' view. The deliberate way the Investigator had stayed behind rather than walking beside him after leaving the experiment lab. The instant, "obedient" compliance when Cheng Shi had said one word and the Investigator had immediately charged after the intruder...

All of it pointed to one conclusion: Li Wufang was someone's subordinate. And Cheng Shi had unwittingly "deceived" himself — he had never once considered the possibility that he might be someone's "superior."

He had absolutely no frame of reference for that identity.

Or rather: when a normal person noticed a teammate behaving oddly, their first assumption would always be hidden agendas, ulterior motives — perhaps a con artist. Nobody's mind would leap to "this is a person from another timeline."

But now, Cheng Shi couldn't avoid that conclusion. Because the logical foundation for deception had collapsed.

If everything prior had been a con artist's setup, then this moment should have formed the scam's payoff — but there was none. Because even if Cheng Shi didn't understand anyone else, he certainly understood himself. Whether or not he had subordinates was something he knew with absolute certainty.

Beyond temporary alliances in trials, he had never commanded anyone, nor did he enjoy doing so. Of course, "Gongyang Jiao" didn't count.

He wasn't human.

So the instant someone sincerely identified himself as a subordinate, the con lost its last shred of credibility. In a peak-level trial, in the absence of witnesses, no one would voluntarily assume a false subservient identity just to humor a fraud.

Cheng Shi should have realized this from the start. But he'd overthought everything — and in doing so, overlooked the simplest truth.

Now that he'd finally pieced it together, his mind began branching outward into new directions.

Chapter 676: Jiang Chi?

If the other man wasn't a fraud, then following the earlier hypothesis, he had to be an Investigator carrying a Master of Deception Card. Only that could explain how his contradictory attitudes toward Destiny were both genuine statements.

But beyond that, there was another possibility — one Cheng Shi hadn't dared to imagine before. What if Li Wufang had also experienced one of Time's "discrepancies," just like Ger Si or Ad Ric? A discrepancy that had turned him into a completely different person across different segments of the day, and these segments were not two...

Wait — not two. Three!

Cheng Shi's eyes widened again. He reviewed every reaction Li Wufang had displayed throughout the day.

The first Li Wufang believed in fate but wasn't close to Cheng Shi. The middle Li Wufang claimed not to believe in fate — that Destiny could only protect his teammates. And the current Li Wufang... not only believed in fate but was also "Cheng Shi's" subordinate — a subordinate from an unknown, possibly alternate-timeline organization!!!

The other man's "Time" had shifted!

An icy current shot from Cheng Shi's tailbone straight to the crown of his skull. Terror bloomed from the deepest reaches of his heart, like a massive hand squeezing his heart in its grip.

'I should have known a Time trial wouldn't be this simple. But... can it really be this hard?'

'He deliberately scrambled the temporal dimension. Surely He's not doing this just to screw me over!'

'Or is He trying to prove that the Time of Eternal Imprisonment He bestowed was flawless — by turning me into a prisoner trapped in time, just like Aph Ros?'

Cheng Shi was rattled. His hands and feet went cold.

Though all of this was still personal conjecture with no hard evidence, verification didn't seem difficult. The one advantage Cheng Shi had was that the other man had misidentified him. And where misidentification existed, there was enormous room to maneuver.

And the clown was the absolute master of maneuvering in tight spaces!

So, with his mind racing, Cheng Shi spun around once more, blade flashing — and in a single stroke, slit Ger Si's throat as Li Wufang held him.

SHHK—

Blood sprayed. Life extinguished.

Under Ger Si's terrified, dying gaze — a scream that never came — Cheng Shi's lips curved into a cold smile. He caught the body and eased it to the ground. Hidden behind the curtain of spurting blood, one hand slipped behind Ger Si's back and, in a blind spot invisible to everyone, silently brushed against the shadow beneath.

DING~

In that instant, the Fate Weaver became the clown once more. And the clown's first act upon returning was to tuck a Smog Bomb into his sleeve cuff. He needed to guarantee that his "fishing in troubled waters" talent could fire the instant the other man caught on. Fraud no longer had the Never Lost Gambling Gear to save him.

But Cheng Shi didn't immediately deploy the smoke. With the situation still intact, he could continue playing the "Cheng Shi" that Li Wufang believed in, using the role to verify his hypothesis. So after killing Ger Si under that pretext, he said with a knowing smirk:

"Dead men are easier to hide than live ones."

Honestly, even if the hypothesis held, Cheng Shi had no idea what the alternate-timeline version of himself was like. But he knew that as long as he played the current version of himself convincingly, it would be enough to fool Li Wufang.

Not because the Chaos Acting technique had taken effect — but because Li Wufang's misidentification itself proved that the "other" Cheng Shi was very similar to the present one.

Li Wufang saw the scene and found nothing remotely suspicious. He tugged at the corner of his mouth and sighed: "Did you really need to make this much of a mess, though? Cleaning up after you is exhausting."

Despite the grumbling, the Investigator carefully eliminated every trace in the room. And when he wiped the last drop of blood from Ad Ric's body — looking at the miner, who'd been so terrified he'd long since lost the ability to speak — Li Wufang snorted:

"What about him?"

"Leave him here as bait. Don't worry about him."

Cheng Shi said it casually, though in truth he had no idea what he was saying.

The Lush Horn Crown's recovery effect only worked once per person. Cheng Shi knew he'd already lost the ability to revive Ad Ric a second time. So until he determined exactly who would be the "discrepancy" of Time, he couldn't risk gambling that someone else would resurrect this key NPC.

So he improvised a mysterious-sounding arrangement and let the other man fill in the blanks himself.

Whatever Li Wufang concluded, he paused briefly, then nodded: "Makes sense. Let's leave him here, then."

He knocked Ad Ric unconscious, then returned to Cheng Shi's side, expression deadly serious:

"Where do we go to find him next?"

Cheng Shi understood — the "him" clearly meant Jiang Chi. But he had no idea what role Jiang Chi played in this chaotic drama, nor where to find the Jiang Chi that Li Wufang sought.

Judging by Li Wufang's demeanor, was he thinking of doing what Grand Marshal Hu Wei had done — tearing open the void and crashing into someone else's trial to find the target?

Needle in a haystack. How could anyone find someone that way?

Though Cheng Shi was technically Hu Wei's "boss" in name, he certainly didn't possess Hu Wei's repertoire of abilities. Hu Wei could pinpoint someone in another trial; that didn't mean Cheng Shi could.

If forced to tear open the void, the most he could do was take Li Wufang for a spin through Mockery and Jeering — but could such a pointless trip silence the man's questions?

Absolutely not!

So how should he respond?

Cheng Shi was losing his mind. He had very little time to formulate an answer. To buy a few more seconds for brainstorming, he first pretended to check on Ad Ric with a worried glance, then furrowed his brow while looking toward the experiment site outside, adopting a weighing-his-options posture.

Finally! In those hard-won seconds of rummaging through memories, he suddenly recalled something Poison had once said during that earlier trial:

"Jiang Chi is probably a newcomer. A peak-level newcomer."

Poison had said she'd only met him once. Their next encounter was the collaboration during that trial. And before that, she'd never even heard his name.

But even if a player's position on the Ladder of Ascent had only recently entered the teens or twenties — at most they'd be unknown to the masses. How could they remain unheard of even in peak-level games?

Especially given that Jiang Chi was an extremely cautious Time walker. With his conservative approach to climbing the ranks, other players should have remembered him all the more vividly.

'Look at this Pointer Knight — he always makes the correct choice. Though he follows Time, it's as if Destiny itself protects him!'

That should have been the consensus among peak players with extensive intelligence networks.

And for Poison — a desire-peddling saleswoman who ought to have profiles on every potential client — if even she had never heard of this mysterious Time walker, didn't that mean Jiang Chi's appearance had been extraordinarily sudden? And could "sudden" be considered a type of... anomaly?

Time...

And conveniently, he was a Time follower.

So was it possible that Jiang Chi, even during that earlier trial, had already been one of Time's "discrepancies"?!

At this thought, Cheng Shi's pupils contracted sharply for just an instant.

Chapter 677: The Clown's Probe

Yes — if Time's "discrepancy" could enable a player to cross the barriers between different timelines and reach the other side, then why couldn't it have happened in the past as well?

Li Wufang could come from another timeline. So why not Jiang Chi before him?

And this would also explain why Jiang Chi had been so mysterious — because he had never belonged to this timeline at all. He was an outsider who had stolen the identity of this timeline's Jiang Chi!

But this theory still contained one irreconcilable contradiction: why hadn't Jiang Chi recognized him? No — more precisely, why hadn't Jiang Chi recognized the "Cheng Shi" who should have been part of his original timeline's organization?

Cheng Shi's impression of the Time walker was razor-sharp. Though Jiang Chi had called out his name during their encounter, all of it had stemmed from Zhen Yi's self-impersonation farce. At no point had the Time walker shown even a flicker of recognition — and Cheng Shi was certain it wasn't an act. He genuinely didn't know him.

So how to explain that?

A side effect of crossing timelines? Or had the "other" Cheng Shi joined their organization after Jiang Chi's "departure"?

"..."

No — he couldn't keep spiraling like this!

So far, this entire chain of speculation was a rootless water lily, backed by nothing. The trouble was that the building blocks stacked atop that lily were growing ever taller, and the higher they went, the more terrified Cheng Shi became. He desperately needed solid ground to support it all. Otherwise, fear mixed with conjecture would spiral out of control, and the "skyscraper" he'd imagined would crush him flat.

So his gaze sharpened once more. He resolved to pry something useful from the other man's mouth — to play a round of "confused honesty" with Li Wufang, using Jiang Chi's identity as the thread.

"No need to look for him." Cheng Shi rapidly shifted his expression, curled his lips, and regarded the bewildered Investigator with a knowing smile. Before the man could ask, he pressed on: "He's already dead."

"Dead?!" Li Wufang's eyes went wide with shock. "Who killed him? Wait — boss, did you find the Time breach?"

Time breach!

Just those two words, and Cheng Shi gleaned a wealth of information. His heartstrings pulled taut — his hypothesis was about to be confirmed.

"No. But just because I didn't find it doesn't mean no one else could."

Cheng Shi's words were deliberately vague. He knew that the moment the conversation extended to Jiang Chi, Li Wufang, or that organization, he'd be utterly incapable of answering.

So the purpose of his statement was to redirect Li Wufang's attention toward the trial's other teammates. No matter whom the Investigator then questioned, Cheng Shi could offer a response based on current information.

Sure enough, after hearing this, Li Wufang's expression hardened. He furrowed his brow:

"You suspect someone came through the Time breach... to our side?"

"!!!!!"

What did "to our side" mean?!

'I don't understand yet, but... this is exactly what I was waiting for!'

A barely perceptible gleam flashed through Cheng Shi's eyes. Behind his back, his hand clenched into a fist. He nodded with practiced inscrutability, now virtually certain: the Li Wufang before him was absolutely one of Time's "discrepancies"!

More than that — every earlier speculation about Jiang Chi might also be correct. The person this Investigator was hunting was indeed a Jiang Chi who had left their organization — or rather, their timeline — by crossing through spacetime!

The question was whether this Jiang Chi was the same one he'd met.

Li Wufang wasn't finished. He pressed further: "Or did you, boss, see them pass through the breach to the other side?"

Cheng Shi didn't know how to answer that. But in the brief pause before Li Wufang continued, his mind was racing far ahead — all the way to another terrifying question: if the Investigator had truly become one of Time's "discrepancies," what about the others?

Time probably wouldn't "contaminate" only one player who happened to have a "connection" to him... right?

If Li Wufang was a "discrepancy," and Jiang Chi might be one too — what about the Assassination Doctor?

Had this Truth follower been "contaminated"?

And more frighteningly — what about the two Torchbearers?

Qin Xin and... hmm, wait — Qin Xin?

At the thought of Qin Xin, Cheng Shi's fist behind his back clenched three degrees tighter.

Bad. Qin Xin seemed to have a problem too.

He suddenly recalled the moment he'd commanded "Gongyang Jiao" in front of Qin Xin. The Torchbearer had asked a question he'd already once asked — whether Cheng Shi was trying to merge with Death...

But Cheng Shi had already used the Screaming Servant technique right in front of Qin Xin during the Blind One's death. Why, upon seeing it a second time, would Qin Xin ask such a strange repeat question?

Didn't this suggest that Qin Xin — the founding Torchbearer himself — had also fallen into Time's "discrepancy"?

Cheng Shi meticulously reviewed Qin Xin's behavior, sifting through every detail in his memory. The more he scrutinized, the more anomalous the second-meeting Qin Xin appeared. And the Blind One seemed to have noticed it too.

So... this founding Torchbearer, supposedly under Fraud's protection... had also been affected?

Cheng Shi didn't dare think further. With a hunter at his side, he had no time for deeper reflection either. Seeing Li Wufang's increasingly suspicious gaze, he forced out a casual smile and offered an ambiguous response:

"I didn't see anything. But I noticed that the Blind One seems... somewhat different from who she was at the trial's start.

Don't forget — this is His trial. Who knows if the Blind One's 'difference'..."

Here, Cheng Shi took a gamble. He voiced his greatest speculation of the day, hoping to use it as a bargaining chip to extract more information from Li Wufang.

"...might also be a so-called 'discrepancy'?"

The moment the words landed, Li Wufang's expression transformed — but his thoughts weren't on the absent Blind One. They were on the man standing right before him. The man he called "boss."

He seemed entirely unsurprised by Cheng Shi's theory. And he knew his superior far too well. If the trial's "discrepancies" had truly fallen upon the players themselves, then the hardest one to identify would undoubtedly be the man before him!

But before Li Wufang could voice his suspicion, Cheng Shi preemptively loosened the tension on his nerves.

"That's exactly why I told you just now — I don't have a problem."

Li Wufang paused, then let some of the gravity drain from his features. He exhaled heavily.

But just as the Investigator had worked it all out and was about to relax into a smile, Cheng Shi struck. In one fluid step, he pressed his scalpel directly against the other man's throat, wearing a half-smile that was equal parts warmth and menace:

"The question is — how do I confirm that you don't have a problem?"

Chapter 678: The Destined Ones?! How Can It Be the Destined Ones?

Cheng Shi was exceedingly careful. He didn't know what rank Li Wufang held in that organization, nor how the other Cheng Shi addressed him, so he avoided every possible term of reference — expressing his meaning as simply as possible.

And this sudden shift from defense to offense finally hooked the single most earth-shattering piece of information of the day from Li Wufang's mouth.

"Come on, boss — 'Destined Ones never doubt their own.' That's your rule! So why today are you—"

"!!??"

What?!

Destined Ones?

Li Wufang's organization was actually the Destined Ones from another timeline?!

Cheng Shi was thunderstruck. He nearly broke the fingers clasped behind his back just to keep his expression from cracking.

No wonder!

No wonder, when he'd credited everything to Destiny's guidance, this Order-following Investigator had loudly praised Destiny right to his face. The man was one of the Destined Ones!

So in another timeline, the Destined Ones had already grown to this extent!

Cheng Shi had no time to process. His gaze shifted instantly, and he found a new excuse for his lapse:

"Don't blame me for doubting you. Regardless of what you say, for the sake of the Destined Ones, I can only maintain suspicion.

Because just now... He actually sent me an oracle."

"!!!" Li Wufang's pupils contracted sharply, his face draining of color: "What oracle?"

"Be careful." Cheng Shi's expression was steely, eyes boring into the other man. In that moment, he was the investigator — and Li Wufang merely the suspect under scrutiny.

"He told me just two words: Be careful.

But consider — what kind of situation would compel Him to personally deliver those two words?

If it were an outsider, He wouldn't need to warn me. So... you understand what I mean.

What we're doing — you and I both know what's at stake. If Time is interfering here, I wouldn't be the least bit surprised.

So — sorry, brother. Until everything returns to normal, you'd better stay here with this stowaway for a while.

He's likely one of the trial's answers. Entrusting him to your watch is already the greatest trust I can offer.

Don't betray that trust."

With that, Cheng Shi smiled, stepped back, and slid the scalpel into his sleeve — simultaneously tightening his grip on the Smog Bomb at his cuff.

He'd packed several probes into one move. He'd even called the man "brother." He had no idea if the term was correct, but even if it wasn't, under these tense circumstances he could argue he'd used a false address to test the other man.

Of course, sophistry didn't always work — which was why his escape mechanism had to stay in hand at all times.

But Li Wufang accepted it without hesitation. He wasn't the least bit surprised by "brother." It was Cheng Shi's arrangement that irked him.

"Come on, boss — just because the Blind One changed doesn't mean you should suspect me too. I'm innocent! I wasn't even by your side today, so now I can't even prove myself."

Cheng Shi smiled:

"You don't need to prove yourself. Once I've sorted everything out, I'll personally confirm you're clean.

But... before I figure this out, I need to verify whether Jiang Chi is truly dead."

Li Wufang blinked: "But didn't you say—"

"The Blind One told me. She and Qin Xin both seem different from this morning. I can't be sure about either of their states, so I probed her first.

The Blind One is clever. She probed me right back. And during that exchange, I heard about Jiang Chi.

She asked me: why was I so intent on killing Jiang Chi?

That single question woke me up. It made me realize that Time's 'discrepancies' had appeared among you — and that's exactly why I maneuvered the two of them into taking the first watch.

Because I needed time to confirm that my brother — you — was clean."

Li Wufang's expression shifted several times. In the end, he let out a helpless sigh.

The one wrong choice he'd made today was not staying at Cheng Shi's side. Now that the Blind One had turned "problematic," he had no way to prove his innocence.

Yes, he could recite shared history — but he knew better than anyone that Cheng Shi understood Time's mysteries best. No one could guarantee that a "discrepant Li Wufang" wouldn't share an identical past.

This was the deadliest puzzle within a Time trial — and the worst consequence of Time breaking its own rules upon the players.

So Li Wufang fell silent. He accepted Cheng Shi's arrangement and chose to stay and guard the trial's answer. Whether the "answer" still mattered was beside the point — his compliance was, in itself, a demonstration of loyalty.

"The Blind One is far easier to test than Qin Xin. I'll swap Qin Xin out and find a chance to compare notes on 'Time' with the Blind One.

If Qin Xin comes looking for you, you might as well test him too — see whether he's also become someone else.

As for the Doctor...

Until we have the Divinity, don't bother with him. Changed or not, as long as he's willing to share the Abyss Colorful Crystal, he's harmless."

Cheng Shi placed himself in Li Wufang's shoes, analyzed every teammate in the trial, then waved to the Investigator with a smile — signaling him to relax and stay optimistic. And under Li Wufang's resigned sigh, Cheng Shi turned without looking back and strode out of the room that had left him spiritually suffocating.

The instant he stepped through the door, his eyes turned ice-cold. Because at that very moment, he truly received an oracle from his Benefactor.

Only it wasn't from Destiny — it was from the clown's Benefactor: Deceit.

And the oracle's content was...

"Be careful."

The Fun God had chosen the moment of Cheng Shi's greatest tension to bestow upon him the very lie he'd spoken.

"..."

Well, well, well!

The trial was growing more chaotic by the minute — but also more interesting.

Everything Cheng Shi had told Li Wufang was fabricated. Nothing remotely exciting had happened between him and the Blind One. In fact, in his current assessment, the Blind One was probably the only person who hadn't changed from start to finish. Even Qin Xin... seemed to have shifted.

So there was one thing Cheng Shi hadn't lied to Li Wufang about: right now, he truly wanted to find the Blind One and talk things over. In a trial where players themselves might be "discrepancies," he needed a trustworthy ally to watch his back.

And from the trial's very beginning, that position had always belonged to the Blind One.

Li Wufang trusted him, but Cheng Shi couldn't bring himself to trust a Destined One he'd never recruited into the Destined Ones!

So Cheng Shi drew a deep breath, gazing at the distant Abyssal Volcano's inverted magma cascade, keen light flickering in his steely eyes.

What had really happened in this trial? Where had Li Wufang come from? Was the Jiang Chi he'd encountered truly one of Time's "discrepancies"? Had Qin Xin — the founding Torchbearer — been "replaced" like the Investigator?

And the Blind One — the only one showing no signs of change — had she truly remained unchanged?

Too many questions. So many they beggared imagination.

But no number of questions was unsolvable. And for a Fraud follower, the approach to problem-solving always began with launching a probing con.

So... would the next mark be the prophet who had once seen Destiny's face?

At the thought, Cheng Shi's cold gaze dropped, a self-deprecating smile crossing his lips as he strode toward the experiment site.

Today, this clown of the Void would test whether a single con could tear through Time's disguise — and strike at the very essence of Existence!

Chapter 679: What Triggered Time's "Discrepancy"?

The path to the mine warehouse was short, but in those precious moments alone, Cheng Shi's mind was working furiously.

With every step, he sorted through everything he'd seen and heard throughout the trial. Previously overlooked details sharpened once more under the weight of his concentrated recall.

When had Li Wufang started to change?

If he treated every small inconsistency as a signal of a "discrepancy's" arrival, then without question, the anomalies had begun before the very first group discussion.

And the first "anomaly" Cheng Shi had personally "witnessed" wasn't actually the Investigator Li Wufang — it was the Truth follower, Assassination Doctor Wang Weijin!

Wang Mou had deliberately concealed his identity from the outset, yet when the Extinguisher triggered the Oblivion disaster, he'd carelessly exposed himself — and afterward openly revealed his real name.

At the time, Cheng Shi had found the shift puzzling but chalked it up to a change of heart. Now, however, things appeared far less simple.

Perhaps before the Oblivion disaster, Wang Mou had already stumbled into Time's trap and become a different "Wang Mou" from another timeline.

Li Wufang, too. At the trial's start, he'd sought Destiny's guidance from the Blind One. Yet during the first group discussion, he'd declared "I don't believe in fate." That was clearly no longer the same person.

Judging solely by the anomalies in these two, the first temporal disruption seemed to have occurred within the trial's opening hours.

The first — yes, the first!

Because Cheng Shi remembered that Qin Xin's change had only manifested after exploring the Shanty Area. So Time's "discrepancies" had likely occurred at least twice — possibly more!

After all, he couldn't be certain how many rounds of "discrepancies" had produced the teammates he was currently seeing. The strongest evidence of this was Li Wufang's attitude changes — Cheng Shi had confirmed that he'd encountered at least three "different" versions of the Investigator.

Which meant that once a player fell into Time's trap, they could continue being affected by "discrepancies" — their identity shifting again and again.

So what was affecting them? And how had they blundered into the trap? That was the critical question. Only by finding the cause could he untangle all the truths hidden within this Time trial.

And there was Qin Xin... had he truly ceased to be the original Qin Xin?

And the Blind One he intended to find — who could say with certainty that she'd never changed?

Cheng Shi's frown deepened. He wasn't simply worried about the Torchbearers' safety — his greater concern was himself.

If Time's trap had been laid from the beginning and the trial's "discrepancies" had already started affecting the players... then what about him?

Was it possible that he, too, had already been affected?

Even knowing he was the Void's favored child, he was certainly not Existence's favored child. If Time was raising the difficulty, could that difficulty have landed on his own head?

Clearly, the "discrepant" Li Wufang hadn't realized that he or his teammates had problems. As an Investigator famed for keen observation, if even he hadn't noticed — then Time's alterations were virtually imperceptible to the affected players. Every discrepancy arrived in absolute silence. So who could guarantee that Cheng Shi hadn't changed?

No one could. Not even Cheng Shi himself.

All he could guarantee was that his consciousness and memories were continuous. That today's experiences contained no gaps. But once a "discrepancy" occurred and different timelines' spacetime collided and entangled — as the affected party, the only thing he could confirm was that his outward sensations felt unchanged. Everything else was beyond his control.

For instance: if he truly had become a "discrepancy," then it meant the original him had already been replaced. And the current him was the one "abandoned by the original timeline," appearing in another spacetime.

In other words, Cheng Shi didn't know whether he was still in the timeline he was supposed to inhabit. He didn't know whether the teammates he faced had "invaded" his timeline through Time's discrepancy, or... whether they belonged to the current timeline all along, and he was the outsider!

And all of this — every last question — required first identifying where Time's trap lay and why the trial's "discrepancies" had occurred before any conclusions could be drawn. And that was what terrified Cheng Shi the most right now.

But no matter how fear bred and spread within his heart, at least under the Door Key's protection, he could still maintain control.

Next, it all came down to whether the Blind One would be the lifeline he was looking for.

With that thought, Cheng Shi's gaze hardened. He shifted his expression in an instant and pushed open the warehouse doors, striding in with an easy smile.

Inside the warehouse where the two Folly followers were conducting their experiment, Qin Xin had long since sensed Cheng Shi's approach. He'd only just left — why was he now walking slowly back?

What had he discovered? Or rather — had he discovered him?

The founding Torchbearer's lips curled into a faint smile. He said nothing, continuing to sit facing the Blind One.

An Mingyu's face was tinged with a quiet melancholy. Her brow was faintly creased, as if turning something over in her mind. And the reason for her expression was clear: just moments ago, after Cheng Shi had left, she and Qin Xin had engaged in a Torchbearer-exclusive "memory exchange."

Rewinding slightly — the moment Cheng Shi and Li Wufang had shut the warehouse door behind them, the Blind One "watched" Wang Mou intently observing the experiment. Then she shifted slightly, turning toward Qin Xin at her side.

Her sealed eyes couldn't see a thing, yet they seemed to emit some mysterious luminescence that made Qin Xin visibly uncomfortable.

But Qin Xin didn't respond. He simply stood with arms folded, utterly silent.

After a long while, the Blind One sighed and said softly: "Don't you have anything you'd like to tell me?"

Qin Xin smiled and shook his head: "Should I?"

"Mm. I see." The Blind One smiled too. "Xin Xin once told me that the best way to break silence is to force someone's hand. I don't know whether our teammate can hear what I'm about to say, but I have to warn you — if you don't want to tell me something, then with my very next words, I'll reveal our identities."

Qin Xin froze, then let out a startled laugh: "You're serious?"

"Torchbearers. You and I — we're both Torchbearers."

"..."

As her words faded, she looked down at Qin Xin's hand. And there — gripped at some unknown point — was a jawbone, polished to a smooth white sheen from years of handling.

"You're... livelier than I expected."

"And you're more silent than I imagined."

Chapter 680: Torchbearers, Plural.

"I don't much care for expressing myself. I've always believed that doing far surpasses saying." Qin Xin smiled. He held up the Silence Tool in his hand, then added with a note of disappointment: "You shouldn't have gambled. Because you can't be certain that he and I are the same kind of person."

He!

The instant Qin Xin uttered the word "he," every question in An Mingyu's heart unraveled. And she knew — no matter how different this Qin Xin might seem, he was still Qin Xin.

But the Blind One didn't address that point. She merely lowered her gaze to "look" at the Silence Tool in Qin Xin's hand, sensing that the tiny cracks on its surface had multiplied considerably since she'd last felt it.

Her expression grew complicated. She asked in a low voice: "Would you grieve for his death too?"

This was unmistakably a classic Destiny-style question — dripping with the riddler's enigmatic air. But as luck would have it, both people present today were sharp minds. Qin Xin heard the question, let his smile fade slightly, though traces of it still lingered:

"The departure of every Torchbearer is enough to fill us with sorrow. Especially me."

"But I think you like smiling more. More than he... ever does." The Blind One lifted her head, her expression quite complicated.

Hearing this, Qin Xin stopped smiling entirely. He shook his head with self-deprecating candor:

"The more you lack something, the more you crave it.

If survival weren't so bitter, perhaps I'd be like him — not so fond of smiling either."

They... suffer greatly?

The Blind One furrowed her brow and said nothing more. Silence descended once again. Unlike before, these two no longer spoke to each other with that easy, boundless openness.

After a while, Qin Xin smiled again: "Still, this is a good thing. At the very least, you've given me motivation to keep fighting — shown me that the road I walk isn't as impossibly hard as I'd thought."

"Is it the Torchbearers that are hard... or the world itself?"

Qin Xin paused briefly, then smiled: "Why do you ask?"

The Blind One considered for a moment, then answered with solemn sincerity: "You find me lively. You find the Fate Weaver sunny. So I wonder — she and he, perhaps they're both like you, inclined toward silence?"

I don't consider myself a silent person. And Cheng Shi even less so. So it's hard for me to imagine what a world inclined toward silence would look like."

"..." Qin Xin sighed. "As expected of you. Not a single careless word can be spoken before a prophet.

You're right — the world is brutal, every step an ordeal. And it isn't just us. Everyone is struggling."

"What happened?" The Blind One raised her head sharply — but immediately felt her own question was redundant. Her expression shifted awkwardly. She withdrew the question and lobbed back a cold joke instead: "Never mind. It seems Silence is the biggest winner."

"Watching without acting isn't necessarily winning.

Enough, Ming Yu. I know what you're worried about, but you needn't fret.

What Qin Xin has always aspired to isn't the beauty that's easily within reach — it's the ability and the true heart to protect that beauty.

Remember: Torchbearers were never meant to pass fire just to warm themselves. A roaring torch can only be passed further when it's held far enough from one's own body."

When Qin Xin spoke these words, his tone was so unwavering, his gaze so luminous, that he seemed a true lighthouse illuminating the path ahead for every Torchbearer. And the source of that light was the undying sincerity burning at the core of his heart.

Even the Blind One — whose cursed vision was nothing but void — nearly felt blinded by that radiance. She stood stunned for a moment, then shook her head with a rueful smile.

"You really are the same kind of people. Always managing, in some chance instant, to shake me to my core — and then remind me:

You're merely someone fortunate enough to walk beside the Torchbearers. You are not a true bearer of the fire."

Hearing this, Qin Xin's expression flickered. But almost immediately, he broke into hearty laughter.

"What's so funny?" The Blind One was puzzled.

"I'm laughing because it turns out the gamble I won wasn't yours — it was mine."

"Why?"

"Because... she once felt the same way you do. But now — she is one."

Is what?! A Torchbearer?!

She became a true Torchbearer?!

The Blind One's eyes flew wide open — so wide that even her perpetually sealed lids nearly cracked apart from the shock. She stared at Qin Xin in utter disbelief, and only after he nodded repeatedly did she recover, letting out a long, heavy breath before breaking into a radiant smile:

"How wonderful."

"Yes. Truly wonderful."

The two Torchbearers exchanged a few more whispered words. It was only just now that they'd each fallen silent, and it was precisely at this moment that Cheng Shi arrived.

The clown pushed the door open without ceremony. Seeing Qin Xin turn to look at him, he smiled and nodded — then, without uttering a word, directed his gaze straight at the Blind One's back.

An Mingyu felt Cheng Shi's stare. She was mildly surprised — clearly sensing the Fate Weaver had something to tell her — so she rose, turned to face him, and beckoned him over.

She was obviously inviting him into the space that the Torchbearers had already sealed with silence.

But Cheng Shi didn't move. He simply stood where he was, smiling at the Blind One, saying nothing.

He wasn't posturing. He had already launched a probe.

But the target of this probe wasn't the Blind One — it was Qin Xin!

He knew Qin Xin was someone who valued consideration and accommodation above all else. Back at the inn, he'd voluntarily excused himself from the room just because his identity might inconvenience others.

This probe was testing whether the "anomalous" Qin Xin would still demonstrate the same consideration and accommodation.

If yes — if Qin Xin read the situation and quietly made room for Cheng Shi and the Blind One — then at the very least, Cheng Shi could add one more chip to his trust in the Torchbearer.

But if not...

Honestly, Cheng Shi had no backup plan. Even this probe was a flash of inspiration that had struck him the instant before he walked through the door.

He couldn't even be sure: if this Qin Xin was indeed a "discrepancy," would the Mirror Person from another timeline also possess a Torchbearer's will to guard beauty?

He wanted a good outcome. But reality denied his request — because Qin Xin stood right where he was, smiling at him, perfectly still.

He really had changed!

The current Qin Xin was definitely one of Time's "discrepancies"!

If that was the case — what about the Blind One? She seemed entirely unsurprised by Qin Xin's reaction. So this Chosen of Destiny, this Torchbearer he'd personally pulled from Death's grasp — was she or wasn't she the same Torchbearer who had walked with him all day?

Cheng Shi's gaze turned deep and probing. His eyes darted between the two Torchbearers, searching for any sign that they already knew something.

And then — just as the scene was about to curdle into awkwardness — Qin Xin moved.

He curled his lips, stepped toward the warehouse door, and as he brushed past Cheng Shi, patted him on the shoulder with a smile laden with meaning.

"It seems someone wants an early shift swap. In that case, I'd better go get some proper sleep.

I hope tonight... there won't be any nightmares."