

The Gods 681

Chapter 681: Can I Trust You, An Mingyu?

Qin Xin left. Clean and decisive.

But from his departure, Cheng Shi could still read quite a lot. At the very least, this version of Qin Xin was still a Torchbearer. At the very least, he harbored no malice. And he'd clearly sensed that the trial he was facing had changed — he knew that Time's "discrepancies" had begun affecting the players.

None of this surprised Cheng Shi. After all, if even the founder of the Torchbearers weren't perceptive enough, the organization would have crumbled to pieces at its inception.

As things stood, it seemed he could trust one more person in this chaotic Time trial.

But only on the condition that Time's discrepancies didn't strike again.

After Qin Xin left, Cheng Shi slowly walked to the Blind One's side. The warehouse was large. The Folly and Truth followers were running their experiment with meticulous attention at the center — the three of them cared about nothing beyond the work before them.

Seeing this, Cheng Shi smiled and mused:

"It seems desire and worry are directly proportional. The fewer desires, the fewer worries.

Take the Doctor. All he wants is to replicate this Divinity extraction experiment. Beyond that... he likely couldn't care less."

The Blind One tilted her head to "look" toward Cheng Shi, smiling in turn: "True enough — but you're only describing the current Doctor."

"!"

Of course — the Blind One knew too. Evidently, Qin Xin's anomaly had made both Torchbearers realize the trial had changed.

This was good news — at least it saved him the trouble of explaining. But... it wasn't all good, because it meant that before long, every player would know exactly what was happening in this trial.

"He... is he still worth trusting?" Cheng Shi asked, his tone slightly strained.

"..."

The Blind One paused, then shook her head with a wry smile.

"My, my — Cheng Shi, you're certainly honest.

First, I should thank you for your trust. But — Fate Weaver — I think you've asked the wrong person.

Qin Xin and I are both Torchbearers. Naturally, we're closer. I trust him far more than I trust you. So when you ask me something like this, what kind of answer do you expect?"

Hearing this, Cheng Shi let out a merciless scoff:

"Stop deceiving yourself, Chosen One. If you trusted him more than me, you wouldn't have stayed silent when he left.

Yes — he may still be a Torchbearer. But he's not the Torchbearer you know.

The fire he passes cannot light your dreams.

And your fire — he's never passed it.

So stop testing me. I'll ask you just one question: do you want to go back?"

"Go back where?" The Blind One tilted her head.

"Back to the place where you've always been passing the fire."

"How can you be certain that place isn't the ground beneath our feet?"

Cheng Shi laughed — a full, open laugh. He looked at the Blind One with a faintly mocking edge in his eyes and scoffed once more:

"So you're saying you know where you are?"

What — did our Benefactor tell you?

Did He tell you that you haven't been disturbed by Time's 'discrepancy,' that you're the sole lucky one in this trial?"

"..."

"Apparently not. Let me guess — your divination failed again?"

How many pips? Let's see them."

The Blind One pressed her lips together and extended her hand. In her palm lay a page inscribed with a Silence domain, and resting atop it was an eighteen-sided die showing two pips face-up.

The Blind One had once said that she rarely rolled a one except when divining about Cheng Shi. So two — for her — was the strongest negation Destiny could bestow.

And seeing those two pips, Cheng Shi's heart lurched and sank.

He'd been preparing himself for the possibility that Time had affected him — that he'd stumbled into the trap. But those had been worst-case defensive contingencies. Now, hearing confirmation from the Blind One's own divination, a genuine tremor of dread surfaced from the depths of his heart.

Just as he'd feared — the world had changed!

Or rather: he himself had been cast out of his original timeline and deposited in an unfamiliar world.

Cheng Shi's brow darkened. His steadfast heart stirred once more. Terrified of misinterpreting the result, he fixed the Blind One with a dead-serious look and asked: "What did you divine?"

The Blind One's expression was equally grave: "I asked Him a second time whether I belong to this starry sky. But this time... He said no."

"!!!"

"A second time? When was the first?" Cheng Shi froze, then realization struck: "You also have a Master of Deception Card!"

The Blind One nodded, though her expression was far from pleasant.

"The first was the moment I was revived. Being resurrected inside a Time trial — I had to stay cautious, to confirm I hadn't fallen into some temporal trap. So I deliberately cast a divination."

"..."

The worst-case scenario had finally materialized!

Now Cheng Shi wasn't just dealing with teammates from different timelines — he had to find a way back to his own timeline as well.

He refused to be inexplicably "exiled." He was not going to let Time toss him around like a juggling ball in a clown's hands.

And to achieve any of that, he had to quickly identify the conditions that triggered each "discrepancy" — and use those same discrepancies to find his way home.

So Cheng Shi decided to stop wasting time playing riddle games with the Blind One. He took out his own die, placed it in her palm, let its eternally fixed one-pip sit side by side with her two, then clasped her hand around both dice. His burning gaze locked onto her sealed eyes with absolute gravity and sincerity:

"Can I trust you, An Mingyu?"

This was the first time Cheng Shi had ever spoken the Blind One's real name. Her brow creased faintly. Feeling the warmth of the dice in her palm, she replied, word by careful word:

"You... can trust me. At least for the duration of this trial — you can trust me completely.

But once this trial ends, Cheng Shi... I won't remember what happened between us. And I can't be sure whether I'll still trust you then."

"!!!"

It was her. It was really her!

The Blind One hadn't changed. She'd heard through his probe and responded once again with the most genuine, honest answer!

Cheng Shi was overjoyed. This long-awaited confirmation — meeting an old friend in a foreign land — brought a measure of solidity back to his heart. Thank heavens. Amid all this misfortune, the slenderest thread of mercy held: the original Blind One had never changed.

"Then — Fate Weaver — can I trust you?" she asked.

Cheng Shi smiled. Broadly. Brilliantly.

"Of course. Whether it's a memory exchange or a heart-to-heart — you can trust me."

The Blind One finally let a genuine, knowing smile cross her face. She nodded, wasted no words, and gave Cheng Shi the most direct frame of reference she could.

"Qin Xin was swapped in the Shanty Area. The current version of him... comes from a world where carrying the fire is not easy.

And the me from that world has already become a true Torchbearer."

A true Torchbearer?

"That Qin Xin comes from the future?" Cheng Shi exclaimed.

"I'm not certain. A brief conversation isn't enough to pinpoint where he's from. But I lean toward... yes."

Cheng Shi nodded grimly.

"I can't pin down where Li Wufang comes from either. But I know he belongs to an organization called the Destined Ones — and in the present, that organization shouldn't include him."

"The Destined Ones?" The Blind One froze. She turned the name over in her mind, eyes widening: "That sounds like an organization devoted to Destiny."

"Correct. It is exactly that — an organization devoted to Destiny. But what they worship isn't the entirety of Destiny. They worship Destiny's Fixed Destiny."

"You know about this organization? No — you joined this organization?"

The Blind One was stunned. She'd assumed someone like Cheng Shi would never join any organization. Otherwise, given the Torchbearers' "generous" terms, he wouldn't have been completely unmoved.

Cheng Shi smiled. He shook his head and tightened his grip on her hand.

"Yes — and no. I didn't join this organization. I... founded it."

"What!?!?"

The Blind One went blank. And amid the shock written across her face, Cheng Shi reclaimed his die, casually tossed it at his feet, and extended the most sincere invitation he could to the Destiny follower before him.

"Chosen One — you are one of the precious few fortunate enough to learn of this organization. And now, I officially invite you to join us. To join the Destined Ones."

As he spoke, Destiny's die slowly rolled to a stop at his feet — showing a one.

And in that moment where destiny stood fixed, Cheng Shi bowed his head in reverent prayer:

"The paths we come from, the roads we take — all are destined!"

Chapter 682: An Invitation from the Destined Ones

This time, Cheng Shi's devotion was genuine.

Though his current identity was the clown — having switched back to Deceit — in this moment, he was suffused with a Destiny-fueled piety he'd never felt before. He truly wished that the prayer "The paths we come from, the roads we take — all are destined" could guide him home.

But the devotion lasted only an instant. The very next second, the reverence in his eyes transformed into a different kind of mania. He snapped his head up and beamed at the Blind One, asking again:

"Well? Interested?"

The Blind One's expression was... spectacular.

She didn't know how to describe what she was feeling. All she saw was the spider web before her expanding at a lunatic pace — countless silk threads weaving outward in every direction like a sky-blotting canopy of storm clouds rolling toward her.

She felt like prey about to be ensnared — no escape, no recourse — because within that web lay not just its suffocating pressure, but a faint, unmistakable call of Destiny.

Destiny was a miraculous thing. Even though An Mingyu had always prided herself on seeing through fate, the fate she could see through... had never once included Cheng Shi.

This Fate Weaver was strange beyond measure. Throughout the trial, she'd invited him again and again to join the Torchbearers, and he'd refused every time. And now, come nightfall, he'd turned around and invited her instead.

What was this?

'I don't want to carry the fire, and I'm even poaching from the Torchbearers?'

'This "Destined Ones" isn't some enemy of the Torchbearers, is it?'

The Blind One was stunned. The Blind One was amused. The Blind One laughed.

Her expressions shifted so rapidly that no single word could capture her state.

Cheng Shi only noticed her gazing meaningfully at his sleeve cuff. His smile froze as he discreetly nudged the scalpel peeking from his sleeve three centimeters higher.

"I have this odd feeling," the Blind One withdrew her "gaze" and "looked" at Cheng Shi's face, "that if I don't agree, I might not get a chance to go back?"

Cheng Shi's smile was radiant, as though absolutely nothing had happened.

"What are you saying? I'm simply reinforcing mutual trust. Being part of the same organization with a shared purpose makes for better teamwork — don't you think?"

"Oh? Is that so? Then why don't you trust that Destined One Investigator?"

"..." Cheng Shi's smile stiffened slightly. "His destiny and mine... aren't the same."

"Not the same?"

Fair enough — after all, Qin Xin and Qin Xin aren't the same either.

But I have another question. If belonging to the same organization strengthens mutual trust, then — Cheng Shi — why won't you carry the fire for this world alongside me?"

"..." This time, the clown's smile froze completely.

"Cat got your tongue? Am I wrong?" The Blind One tilted her head with a smile. "From the gravity of your tone, I can tell the Destined Ones must mean something important to you. But — Cheng Shi — I don't see your sincerity."

Cheng Shi frowned: "My longing to go home is my sincerity. That should be beyond question, Chosen One."

"Yes, you truly want to go back. I do too: I understand your urgency in seeking a teammate's trust. But I cannot agree with your definition of trust.

As a Torchbearer, I should indeed be grateful for everything you've done for the Torchbearers, and I should respond with the utmost honesty while I still have my memories.

But I can't feel your sincerity. As things stand, Fate Weaver, you're not inviting me. You're inviting a Destiny Chosen who will forget you the moment the trial ends.

Beneath your trust lies a bottomless void. Just as you keep refusing the Torchbearers — wherever you go, you never truly surrender your trust to anyone."

"..."

The Blind One's words struck Cheng Shi into silence. And the worst part was — he had no rebuttal.

This was the first time anyone had so nakedly peeled back his disguise and laid bare the true nature of his trust. She was right: he genuinely struggled to trust others. Among the precious few people he walked alongside, the Blind One wasn't among them.

He'd always been wary of this prophet who had an unclear relationship with Zhen Xin. He'd always kept the Torchbearer identity at arm's length. His real plan had been to trade temporary "sincerity" for the Blind One's trust, then wait for the Torchbearers to fulfill their promise and use the Remembrance Needle to erase everything.

But now, with his scheme laid bare so bluntly, the clown...

...smiled again, utterly unabashed.

'Small potatoes. Don't panic. Let me talk my way out of this — or better yet, be a little more "sincere.'"

He piled on his best smile, leaned into his greatest strength, twisted the meaning of the Blind One's words inside out, and argued with righteous conviction:

"Now, now — is fake 'sincerity' not still sincerity?"

When I'm willing to dress up this fakery in the packaging of sincerity, doesn't that mean the current me has nothing but sincerity in his eyes?"

Think of it this way, Chosen One: you bought a box of exquisitely wrapped pastries from me. The instant the package is in your hands, the beautiful wrapping makes you happy. That's enough!

The trial lasts only seven days. I guarantee my pastries have a very long shelf life. You don't need to eat them right away. Just let that happiness last for seven days. That'll do.

As for what happens after seven days—"

"As for after seven days — setting aside whether I'd even want to eat them — once I've forgotten I ever bought this box, it wouldn't really matter if there were dung inside the gorgeous packaging. Would it?"

The Blind One shook her head with a reluctant laugh. She bowed before his shamelessness. She had never imagined anyone could have skin this thick.

But Cheng Shi heard her analogy and "unhappily" corrected her.

"That's outright slander! I'm an honest merchant. How could I possibly feed a customer dung?"

The customer is god. God shouldn't have to eat dung.

Besides — you haven't even opened the packaging yet. How would you know what's inside?"

"..."

The Blind One went blank. For a split second, she felt that the Prisoner and Zhen Yi's rankings might be a little inflated.

"So — want to buy a box, Chosen One?" Cheng Shi was still sincerely hawking his wares.

The Blind One's expression shifted several times. Finally, she sighed:

"Sold. Sigh — definitely sold.

If only for the sake of a certain Fire Seeker — one must bring home souvenirs from foreign lands.

But Cheng Shi, even if I join the Destined Ones, can a name with no binding power actually put your mind at ease?

Rather than fussing over labels, why don't you first tell me what this Fixed Destiny you champion actually is?

Perhaps reflecting on Destiny might spark some genuine interest in this organization I've never heard of."

Hearing the affirmative, Cheng Shi grinned with delight.

'See? There's no unsellable dung — er, product. Only unskilled salespeople!'

'But if you want to discuss this topic... well, I've got more reflections on Destiny than I know what to do with.'

"Chosen One — do you believe in fate?"

"?" Hearing this absurd question, the Blind One laughed in exasperation. "You're a Destiny follower too. Asking the Destiny Chosen this question to her face — is there any point?"

"There is — because I'm not asking whether you believe in His guidance. I'm asking whether you believe in His protection!

Do you think you can survive under His protection... all the way to the end?"

The Blind One's brow tightened, her expression turning grave: "What counts as 'the end'?"

"The universe returns to the Void. The day Origin is revealed — that's the end!"

The moment he finished, Cheng Shi snatched the dice right out of the Blind One's hand.

'Girl — just listen, alright? Please don't start divining again.'

'I'm genuinely terrified of you lot and your compulsive fortune-telling.'

Chapter 683: This Is the Real Him

"!!!"

The Blind One was stunned. She turned Cheng Shi's eight-word declaration over and over in her mind, instinctively clenching her hand — but the clever clown had already snatched her divination tools away. The sudden emptiness left her momentarily bereft, and then the implications of her own impulse sent a chill of cold sweat down her spine.

It couldn't be divined. Origin could not be divined!

A trace of pallor crept across the Blind One's face. She raised a hand to wipe the cold sweat from her forehead, exhaled deeply, and said: "Why do you know so much about... that existence?"

This time she'd learned her lesson — she didn't even speak its name.

Cheng Shi smiled and returned the dice: "Join the Destined Ones. Then you'll know everything."

"Done." Never had the Blind One sounded so resolute. She nodded with a grave expression, then extended her other hand toward Cheng Shi.

"?"

"This time it's my personal choice. Nothing to do with the Torchbearers, nothing to do with the Fire Seekers. Cheng Shi — I'm genuinely interested in this Destined Ones of yours. I can join, but not as a temporary cameo within this trial.

Give me a token. After the Torchbearer An Mingyu forgets you, the Destiny Chosen An Mingyu will take that token and search through the sea of humanity to find your Destined Ones once more."

"...?"

Cheng Shi was speechless. He'd just spent all that effort talking his way around her, and she hadn't shown a shred of interest. The only reason she'd agreed to help was that he'd once aided the Torchbearers. Yet now — just from hearing Origin's name again — the Destiny Chosen had committed on the spot. Not only that — she wanted to truly join the Destined Ones.

'Girl, you just have to know what It looks like, don't you?'

'But you're scaring me with this.'

'Big Cat is wild enough as it is. She goes around under the Destined Ones banner practically looking for fights with Servant Gods and Envoys, testing whether her luck is tough enough.'

'If I add you on top of that...'

'Good lord — am I going to get a notification one day from that certain someone, telling me to come collect two skeletons from the Fishbone Hall?'

'Could your ambitions possibly be any more obvious?'

'I used Fixed Destiny to string you two along, and you two actually went and believed it wholeheartedly.'

'If our Benefactor could truly protect you, would you have died divining about that thing?'

'Don't tell me you think surviving that is His protection.'

"..."

But Cheng Shi didn't immediately refuse. Or rather, he was actively weighing the pros and cons of truly inviting the Blind One into the Destined Ones.

Granted, it would be ideal to keep his distance from the Torchbearers — to sever all ties within this trial. But... Cheng Shi had to admit: a Blind One guided by Destiny's hand could be an enormous asset. She could also bring enormous trouble.

Though the asset and trouble in question had nothing to do with the Torchbearers — they had everything to do with that unlucky woman and her sister.

Cheng Shi asked himself: in future trials, encountering Zhen Yi was virtually inevitable. Peak-level games were a small world. Sooner or later, their paths would cross. So if he could use the Blind One to dig up more intelligence on Zhen Xin, he might be able to prepare in advance and guard against Zhen Yi.

More importantly, the Blind One and Zhen Xin were exceptionally close, and Zhen Xin was the founder of the History School. Getting the Blind One on his side meant Cheng Shi had slipped one hand into the History School's pocket.

And let's not forget — in his other hand, he already held a Dragon King Li Jingming, whose intelligence network rivaled the History School's!

With both in play, virtually the entire elite player circle's intelligence — indeed, the Faith Game's most concentrated knowledge — would fall into his grasp!

That was what truly made Cheng Shi's heart race.

Of course, he knew a "backyard organization" with barely any members couldn't compete with two best friends' deep bond. The Blind One had no reason to "betray" her own people — and this was precisely why Cheng Shi had always been reluctant to open up to her. But now, having sensed the Blind One's inexplicable obsession with Origin, he suddenly realized... maybe he did have bait capable of hooking the Blind One after all?

"You're serious?" Cheng Shi studied her expression carefully and asked again. "But given who you are — how could it possibly be unrelated to the Torchbearers and Zhen Xin?"

"You know the Torchbearers' creed. We never coerce — only invite through free will.

As for Xin Xin — you're making her out to be far more frightening than she is...

We are first and foremost independent individuals, and only then inseparable sisters. Yes, I'll admit Zhen Yi sometimes creates trouble. But you should know: any trouble can be solved, even traced.

Once you find Zhen Yi's 'traces,' trouble can sometimes become a weapon.

Cheng Shi — I've never shared this with anyone. That should be proof enough of my sincerity."

"!"

'Well, well — I haven't even started baiting you, and you've already hooked me with exactly what I wanted!'

Cheng Shi fell deep into thought again. After furiously weighing the pros and cons... it wasn't actually all that furious. The moment he realized he could simultaneously control two top-tier intelligence pipelines, a certain someone's greed had already won by a landslide.

So he simply extended his hand and clasped the Blind One's once more in a firm grip.

"You — truly are one of the Destined Ones!

Even the power of Origin couldn't kill you. That alone proves you are Destiny's favored child!"

With that, Cheng Shi pressed an unremarkable die into her palm and smiled: "This is the Destined Ones' token. Of course — when we're ready to welcome you, you won't need to find us. We'll come to you."

"Oh? Is that so? I'm already looking forward to it. Though..." The Blind One rolled Cheng Shi's die between her fingers, puzzled. "I'm curious — who else is in the Destined Ones? Cheng Shi, surely that's not a secret? After all, no matter what, I'll forget everything after this trial."

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow. This time, he genuinely didn't hold back.

"You. Me. And... Hong Lin.

The three of us — that's the Destined Ones."

"Hong Lin??? She actually—" The Blind One was dumbfounded. She trailed off mid-sentence, shifted her expression several times, then nodded with a peculiar look: "Well... that is indeed pretty destined."

"Pfft—" Cheng Shi couldn't help it. The Blind One's deadpan observation cracked him up.

"Doesn't it bother you that our organization is so... small?"

The Blind One shook her head with utmost solemnity: "The Destined Ones. There won't be many — there can only be few."

"!"

'Look at that! Look at that! What do you call this? This is the insight of the number-one Destiny ranker! This is a Chosen player's enlightenment! "Too few members"? "Backyard operation"? All wrong — the Destined Ones were never meant to be many!'

'A kindred spirit! I just love people who can patch up my lies for me.'

Cheng Shi was grinning from ear to ear. But his expression quickly turned serious.

"Alright — since we're all on the same side now, I won't waste any more time. I've already pieced together some ideas. Chosen One, what I need from you now is to check my reasoning for gaps.

I need to comb through every detail in my memories. Find every useful lead. Use the little Memory we have to chart a path through Time — a path home.

A Void walker will never be trapped by Existence. So — let's begin immediately."

The Blind One had never seen Cheng Shi in dead-serious mode before. She nodded gravely, holding her breath in concentration, ready to hear his deductions. But the next thing out of his mouth was:

"Ah — wait, I forgot something. Could you, um, do what Qin Xin did? Lend me your Master of Deception Card for a bit, then tell me a lie?

Otherwise my heart just won't settle."

"..."

The Blind One went numb. She raised her head to "look" at Cheng Shi. Behind her sealed eyelids, a twitch was impossible to suppress.

Of course. This was the real him.

Chapter 684: I Suspect Time's Trap Is...

In the end, Cheng Shi didn't ask the Blind One to hand over her card. He chose to trust her, just this once.

Of course, this was absolutely born from genuine trust — and definitely not because she'd asked him to hand over his card first.

Facing the Blind One's knowing half-smile, Cheng Shi rubbed his nose and finally got serious.

"There are only two things we need to sort out right now. First: how did the Time 'discrepancy' appear on us? Second: when exactly were we affected?"

Once we figure out these two points, we'll find our way home safely under Destiny's protection."

The Blind One nodded in agreement. At the same time, she turned to "glance" toward the warehouse door. Sensing that Qin Xin had left, she frowned slightly:

"Qin Xin is probably quite interested in that Investigator. He's noticed our changes, so naturally he'll investigate the other teammates' changes too.

He won't stand in our way, but he probably won't be our ally either.

He truly is a flawless Torchbearer. But as you said — the fire he carries has nothing to do with ours."

'Not "ours" — yours. Carrying fire has nothing to do with me in the first place.'

Cheng Shi grumbled internally but didn't press the point. He stroked his chin and looked toward the three experimenters in the center of the warehouse.

"The Doctor was the first anomaly I detected. His attitude toward concealing his identity shifted before and after the first investigation. After that came Li Wufang's anomaly — his attitude toward Destiny became different from the start..."

Cheng Shi quickly laid out his earlier reasoning before the Blind One, then waited for her to fill in the gaps. After a moment's thought, she picked up:

"What you've described largely matches my thinking. But since I... was absent during the Oblivion disaster that Wu Cun triggered, hearing you say this now makes me wonder — could Wu Cun have changed too?"

"?"

Cheng Shi's gaze sharpened. He frowned and thought for a moment, then nodded:

"It's entirely possible. Li Wufang is a shrewd Investigator with a talent for reading people. If he was so worried about the Oblivion threat, he'd have no reason to let a walking disaster disappear from his sight.

The only explanation is: the Wu Cun we originally met could suppress the fury inside herself. But after splitting from Li Wufang, she fell into Time's trap and was swapped with a Wu Cun from another timeline — one who couldn't contain her inner rage.

Mm — it's a plausible theory, but we're missing key evidence.

Still, these changes confirm that Time's first 'discrepancy' must have occurred during our split-team investigation period. And at that point, Qin Xin... didn't seem to have any issues.

Though it's also possible he'd already changed and I simply didn't notice.

Wang Mou said he's Like A Dream. You know about that, right?"

Hearing that ID, the Blind One's brow tightened: "I asked him. He said it wasn't him."

"Wasn't?!" Cheng Shi looked stunned. "He drew the Dreamless Mirror. That mirror is supposedly in Like A Dream's possession."

"The Dreamless Mirror is indeed with Like A Dream. But from what I know, the number-one Memory ranker isn't a warrior — he's a... hunter.

He's a Dream Peeping Ranger."

"A hunter?"

Cheng Shi froze. He furrowed his brow and began meticulously reviewing every detail about Qin Xin from today. When he recalled Qin Xin's performance during the Shanty Area exploration, he realized that the hunter designation wasn't impossible.

"His speed... really wasn't warrior-like.

A hunter pretending to be a warrior isn't hard. But a warrior moving with a hunter's speed... that's not easy.

Though... by that point, he'd probably already changed?"

"Correct. By then he'd already become who he is now. The Qin Xin we knew was probably cast out by Time into another timeline.

So his reactions in the Shanty Area alone aren't enough to determine whether he'd changed during the first 'discrepancy.'"

"Now this is interesting. Even at the highest difficulty, any trial must follow a set of rules. So what happened during that first investigation period to make them all fall into temporal discrepancies at different locations?

And why were the two of us affected?"

Cheng Shi sank into thought again. Just then, the Blind One furrowed her brow:

"Time's Oracle Act is precision and punctuality. Could it be... some rule tied to the hour marks?"

"Possible — but unlikely!" Cheng Shi shook his head slightly. "I'll admit without shame — because of some tricks Time followers pulled on me before, I'm abnormally sensitive to every hour mark. All day today, I've been bracing for each one.

At every hour mark, I clearly remember who was in front of me and whether they did anything strange. Naturally, the person I observed most was you. But neither you nor anyone else showed anything unusual at the hour marks.

Actually... I already have a hypothesis. I just haven't verified it yet."

"What?"

"The Abyss Colorful Crystal!" Cheng Shi was facing the Blind One, but his peripheral vision drifted toward the scholars and wise men experimenting in the warehouse's center.

"The initial spark came from noticing the changes in Wang Mou and Li Wufang. Both underwent some kind of attitudinal shift after returning from their mine search.

That made me certain the mine harbored a secret. Later, when I learned Time's discrepancy had affected us too, I immediately realized the answer might lie there — the rule governing the discrepancies.

Then there's Qin Xin's change..."

"But Qin Xin was with us during the second investigation. He never went near the—" She stopped mid-sentence, freezing. She'd just remembered: the Shanty Area was also hiding two pieces of Abyss Colorful Crystal!

Those two crystals were part of Shi Lolin's collection from the Extreme Desire Brotherhood.

The Blind One's brow creased: "You suspect Qin Xin wandered close to the Crystal during the search and was affected?"

"Yes. Remember where Qin Xin went to search for the Abyss Colorful Crystal? Only he took that direction. You and I both converged with him from the other side."

Cheng Shi's eyes blazed brighter with every word. "Wang Mou must have found Crystal during the first investigation — only he couldn't be sure of Qin Xin's position, so he abandoned taking it.

Of course, it's also possible that when he first found the Crystal, the discrepancy hit him right then — and his covetousness toward the Abyss Colorful Crystal changed, even leading him to voluntarily leave it behind. But that's pure speculation. A Truth follower would almost certainly never abandon experimental material of that caliber.

So following this line of reasoning, the only reason Qin Xin wasn't affected during the first discrepancy is that he happened to avoid every hiding spot containing Abyss Colorful Crystal in the mine!

And for us — the discrepancy probably struck the moment we witnessed the Wise Men replicate their experiment!"

The Blind One listened to Cheng Shi's analysis, nodded thoughtfully, but then quickly shook her head:

"Brilliant reasoning. But I have to point out — Li Wufang's first change, and that first change of Wu Cun's that might or might not have happened... they never went near the mine during the first investigation!"

"Of course I remember. And that is precisely the direction we need to investigate next. If I'm right, somewhere near the residential area they searched — no, very likely right around the alley where they split up — another piece of Abyss Colorful Crystal is hidden!"

Cheng Shi fixed the Blind One with a burning stare and spoke with deliberate weight: "If we can find that Crystal there, we may have truly found the reason behind the 'discrepancies.'"

Chapter 685: Who Goes?

Sharp observation. Outstanding memory. Excellent logic.

The Blind One could find no holes in Cheng Shi's reasoning. She even tested it against Ad Ric and Shi Lolin's "discrepancies" and found everything checked out. The only loose end was the stowaway Ger Si, who'd just appeared...

Had this stowaway fallen into the discrepancy the same way?

It wasn't impossible. As someone desperate to return to the surface, his target would obviously be the Proxy Hand on the mine. Stumbling into Time's trap while wandering the mine was entirely plausible.

Having worked this out, the Blind One's expression turned slightly peculiar:

"You've already figured out every key point. You practically guessed the discrepancy's rules while I was still getting up to speed on the trial's changes.

Cheng Shi — you don't need to work with me at all. Your reasoning alone is more than enough to find the way back.

Now it occurs to me — I have trouble pinning down your motives. I keep feeling you don't actually want to cooperate with me. You want to help the Torchbearers. The only thing I'm grateful for is that we're from the same timeline, and that I happen to be a Torchbearer.

This so-called 'Destined Ones' — I can't even tell whether you dragged Hong Lin's name in just to pad the numbers and make it sound real. It sounds like a lie fabricated to distance yourself from your own goodwill.

Do you...

really not want any ties to the Torchbearers?

Then why keep helping us?"

Help?

Who's helping whom?

'I just wanted to play it safe and find a teammate I could temporarily watch my back. How did you manage to turn that into something noble?'

'You Torchbearers — why do you always morally guilt-trip people in reverse?'

"..."

Hearing this, Cheng Shi knew she was overthinking it. But given the circumstances... well, it did look exactly like the Blind One was guessing. Trying to explain would only make things "worse."

So Cheng Shi curled his lip and simply didn't respond.

"Stop wasting time. Nobody knows when the next discrepancy will hit. What we need to do — while we still understand the current situation — is verify our theory as fast as possible. We need to go to that area and check whether there really is an Abyss Colorful Crystal that triggered the discrepancies!"

The Blind One raised an eyebrow:

"From your tone, it sounds like you don't want to go yourself?"

Why — you keep glancing at the Doctor. You want his help?

Truth's thirst for knowledge comes first. Right now, he probably wouldn't give us the time of day."

"No, no, no — the Doctor staying glued to the experiment is the greatest 'support' he can give us. I truly don't want to go myself, because I'm afraid that the moment I approach that area, I'll get hit again. And then my only ally would be gone.

So I want..."

"?" The Blind One froze. "You want Qin Xin to go?"

"Exactly!" Cheng Shi nodded vigorously. "That's right — Qin Xin!

He's not your Torchbearer's founder. He's the leader from another timeline. Sending him to verify — first, we needn't worry about him deceiving us; even from another timeline, he's still an empathetic Torchbearer. Second, if he trips the Time trap again, the original Qin Xin might actually get swapped back.

From Li Wufang, we can deduce that the discrepancy has at least three states — corresponding to the trial's theme: past, present, and future.

The current Li Wufang and Qin Xin are clearly from the 'past.' Which means if Qin Xin gets swapped again, there's a one-in-two chance he turns back into one of ours!"

As he spoke, Cheng Shi fixed the Blind One with a blazing stare. He knew only she could convince the alternate-timeline Qin Xin to undertake this "risky" mission. He couldn't do it alone.

After all, he and the current Qin Xin shared no bond whatsoever.

The Blind One fell silent. She had to admit — Cheng Shi's calculations were impeccable. No wonder he'd come to find her. He'd probably mapped out every solution on the walk over and was just waiting for this "key" to agree to help.

But from either the Torchbearer's perspective or the shared-timeline perspective, she had no grounds to refuse.

So after a moment's deliberation, the Blind One nodded — but then frowned slightly:

"Who told you he's the founder of the Torchbearers?"

"?" Cheng Shi blinked, then laughed. "Chosen One — we're all smart people here. Let's drop the riddles. If I still couldn't see something that obvious, I'd be too ashamed to come ask you for cooperation."

The Blind One sighed internally. The Torchbearers would inevitably forget Cheng Shi, yet Cheng Shi was coming to know the Torchbearers better and better.

Letting a Fate Weaver with this much "personality" — and this much knowledge of the Torchbearers — roam free out there... was that safe for the Torchbearers?

Perhaps this was something that truly needed to be discussed with Qin Xin — but only during this trial, while they still remembered Cheng Shi.

Hopefully Cheng Shi's reasoning held. Hopefully the next step would swap the real Qin Xin back.

"...Fine. I'll go find him. You watch the Doctor.

This experiment is crucial. What we need isn't just the Divinity — it's the experimental steps stored in the Doctor's memory.

As long as we ensure the Doctor gains something, it means we... gain something too."

The phrasing was admittedly a bit dark, but Cheng Shi understood instantly. He waved her off: "Relax. Once something lands in my pocket, nothing escapes."

The Blind One chuckled at that. She nodded, turned, and strode toward the exit. But the instant she was about to step forward, Cheng Shi suddenly pulled her back.

"What?" She turned in surprise.

Cheng Shi didn't answer right away. He shook his head, glanced at the watch on his other wrist, and counted down: "Three... two... one. The hour mark. Better safe than sorry."

The moment the words fell, the hour ticked over. Cheng Shi released her hand. The Blind One caught his meaning, gathered her skirt, and strode swiftly out of the warehouse.

Now, she had to have a proper talk with the Qin Xin from another world.

...

Meanwhile, on the other side.

After leaving the warehouse, Qin Xin had sensed the last teammate's position. He knew he'd been caught in Time's "discrepancy," yet he felt no panic — not even mild concern — because...

He'd known all along that Time's trials had exploitable loopholes. That Time's disturbances could transport you to a timeline not your own, where you might encounter people from any past or future.

Among peak players in his timeline, this was no secret. But how to trigger such disturbances, or how to use them to break free of one's original timeline — no one could say for certain.

Perhaps some people knew. But secrets of that magnitude circulated only in the smallest circles. The Torchbearers, at least, were not among them.

Yet Qin Xin had stumbled upon whispers of certain unorthodox methods capable of cracking Time's barrier. So in this special trial, he'd decided to test them.

He himself hadn't expected this experiment — one he'd held zero hopes for — to actually succeed. But looking at the situation now, it seemed less like his own doing and more like Time had orchestrated it deliberately.

Why?

What was He up to?

Chapter 686: Probing

Qin Xin couldn't figure it out. All he knew was that he had to seize this opportunity — because the whole reason he'd jumped out of his original world was to find a new chance for that shattered world!

He was searching for "the future" and seeking guidance from "the past." He hoped that within Time's "discrepancies," he could glimpse hope from another timeline and replicate it in his own world.

And this also meant that in his world, the Torchbearers had almost no fire left to pass. Otherwise, he wouldn't have traveled to another world in search of new kindling.

Qin Xin's goal was crystal clear. He knew exactly what he wanted. So from the start, he'd been observing the Blind One and Cheng Shi. Through his exchange with the Blind One especially, he'd confirmed that the Torchbearers in her timeline — while not yet without fire — weren't burning particularly bright either. They... were not his target.

Wang Mou was even less of a prospect. Qin Xin knew Wang Mou's true identity. A person with no sense of belonging could never inspire the Torchbearers.

So his current target was singular: Li Wufang, sitting motionless in that other room.

No matter what, he had to meet this Investigator. He had to determine whether the man was what he suspected — a "discrepancy from the future." So shortly after leaving the warehouse, Qin Xin made his way toward the room where Ad Ric was being held.

The hunter inside had heard activity long before Qin Xin arrived. Before the Torchbearer had even reached the door, Li Wufang considerably pushed it open and warmly ushered him in.

Looking at the intensely familiar face, Qin Xin smiled casually: "You remind me of an old acquaintance."

"Old acquaintance?" Li Wufang grinned. He studied the heavily armored warrior up and down, then raised an eyebrow: "If being matched in a few trials counts, then sure — old acquaintances we are."

"No — not from trials. An acquaintance from home."

Hearing this, Li Wufang's brow creased imperceptibly. A flash of gravity passed through his eyes, but he quickly piled on another smile: "What — you were from the north too, before the Faith Game descended?"

Watching Li Wufang play dumb, Qin Xin dropped the probing and cut straight to the point:

"You've probably guessed it's me. I didn't expect to run into you here either. Interesting. I always knew you belonged to some mysterious organization, but I never imagined you people were the ones studying Time. What are you... looking for through Time?"

Li Wufang scoffed: "Oldest trick in the book, Qin Xin. Listening to you spout things I can't understand is exhausting."

"How interesting. Let me think..."

In truth, every one of Qin Xin's deductions about Li Wufang's identity had come from reading Cheng Shi's reactions. When Cheng Shi had arranged for him and the Blind One to take the first watch while "taking" Li Wufang away, Qin Xin had sensed the two had something to discuss.

It just so happened that in his own world, those two had a rather good relationship. So he'd been wondering whether Li Wufang might be from the same timeline as himself.

But there was a wrinkle. In Qin Xin's experience, given the Investigator's keen perception, he shouldn't have misidentified Cheng Shi.

The current Cheng Shi clearly wasn't from Li Wufang's timeline. If Li Wufang showed no reaction to Qin Xin's words, it either meant he hadn't yet realized that Time's discrepancies had affected the players, or he'd already noticed the anomaly — and perhaps, as Qin Xin was probing, had come here the same way — deliberately, through Time's flaws.

If the former, it would mean Cheng Shi was an extremely skilled impostor. If the latter, things got truly interesting. What on earth was Li Wufang's organization doing?

"Never mind. I must have mistaken you for someone else." Qin Xin smiled, then pointed at the body at his feet: "Who's he?"

"A john who snuck in at midnight trying to assault a miner. I couldn't stomach it, so I killed him."

"?"

But the wound on his neck looks like it was made by a scalpel?"

"What — can't an Investigator carry a scalpel?" As he spoke, Li Wufang actually produced a scalpel and began spinning it between his fingers, flipping it up and down — just like Cheng Shi. In that moment, even his speech and posture carried a whiff of the clown.

"Very well. It seems Falling Gate's stowaways are a spirited bunch. Even when they're not chasing wealth or tickets, they'll climb a mountain to assault a rough-looking miner. Mm — this place is truly fascinating. As fascinating as you and Cheng Shi.

I see your bloodlust hasn't been fully vented. I won't intrude any further. I'll go find somewhere to sleep."

With that, Qin Xin waved and turned toward the door with a smile.

But the instant his back was turned, the smile vanished from Li Wufang's face. His eyes blazed with ferocious killing intent, and the hand hidden behind his back was a hair's breadth from pulling a longbow out of his personal space.

He clearly wanted to kill — and the target was the retreating Qin Xin.

But in that lightning-fast instant, Qin Xin suddenly turned his head back toward Li Wufang, wearing a half-smile:

"The Fate Weaver went through a lot of trouble to revive Ad Ric. Before you strike, think carefully — if Ad Ric dies, would our priest friend really be willing to save him a second time?"

That said, Qin Xin glanced at the hand Li Wufang had hidden behind his back, then turned and walked straight out the door. Li Wufang's expression shifted several times, but ultimately, the arrow in his hand never flew.

He stared at Qin Xin's departing figure, brow knotted, and spat:

"If you weren't on the boss's whitelist, I wouldn't care what Chosen you are.

Damn. Annoying.

What are you looking at? Enjoying the view? I'll give you something to look at!"

"???" Off to the side, the cowering, silent Ad Ric began trembling even harder. The stench of urine wafted through the room once more.

After leaving the room, Qin Xin didn't go to rest. He stood casually on a small mound, gazing up at the distant cascading magma waterfall, brow deeply furrowed.

He too was pondering the cause of Time's "discrepancies." The "folk remedy" he'd received before coming specified that in a Time trial, you simply blunder around blindly. He'd indeed blundered into a discrepancy. The problem was that none of his current teammates represented the future. He'd yet to glimpse anything about the players' future in this trial.

So this founding Torchbearer couldn't help but wonder: what kind of manifestation on a player would qualify as "the future"?

Before multiple timelines collided and overlapped due to Time's errors, their states must have been extremely similar — possibly identical at a certain moment. Only then could the players caught within them fall into the trap without noticing.

But this created another puzzle. In this temporal discrepancy, "past" and "present" were both easy to understand. "Past" simply meant the same player with different life experiences. "Present" was presumably himself. But what about "the future"?

How would something that hadn't yet happened manifest at an extremely similar point in time?

And even if he found a discrepancy from the future — would that future timeline truly contain the Torchbearers and the answers he sought?

For a moment, Qin Xin was lost.

And just then — the Blind One arrived.

Chapter 687: Replay — The Oblivion Disaster!

The prophet, skirts gathered, hair disheveled, was almost unfairly beautiful under the volcano's glow.

The seemingly scorching light illuminated every inch of her, yet could never dispel the mist-like aura of mystery cloaking her form.

She walked toward Qin Xin, but before she could speak, he chuckled without turning: "You want me to do something for you?"

The Blind One paused, stopping short: "That doesn't sound like you."

"I thought you'd say, 'You're back?'"

Qin Xin laughed heartily. He turned around, and his massive frame, backlit by the distant glow, loomed like an ink-black tower, casting a wide swathe of shadow over the Blind One.

She didn't move an inch. Draped in her black gauze, she seemed to melt seamlessly into the darkness beneath the tower's shadow.

A lighthouse could indeed illuminate the Torchbearers' path forward. But what many overlooked was that the tower's shadow could also shelter those in darkness from being spotted by outside dangers.

"I understand gallows humor, but that joke wasn't funny. I'm sorry." The Blind One pressed her lips together.

"..."

"Still — the reason I didn't think it is that the Fate Weaver seems to have identified the cause of Time's discrepancies. I'm here to..."

A keen gleam flashed through Qin Xin's eyes. He'd just been puzzling over how to exploit Time's flaws, and here the Blind One was, bringing news of a breakthrough.

Cheng Shi... this Fate Weaver seemed to be brilliant regardless of which timeline he was in.

Qin Xin glanced silently toward the warehouse, then cut the Blind One off: "Keep it brief. I'm not entirely sure whether Li Wufang came here with me. If he did, he likely has purposes I don't know about.

The sooner we find the cause of the discrepancy and return you and me to where we belong, the better for both me and your Qin Xin.

So tell me — what do I need to do?"

The Blind One was unsurprised by his response. Wasting no time, she explained that the Abyss Colorful Crystal might be the key to the discrepancies, then pointed him in a direction.

"Cheng Shi, he..."

"He certainly knows how to work the angles. Stays well clear of any danger, doesn't miss a single benefit." Qin Xin laughed. Cheng Shi's little calculations couldn't fool him, but Cheng Shi's suggestion wasn't some devious scheme — it was a straightforward, open strategy.

Or perhaps "strategy" was too strong a word. The clown had merely put himself in others' shoes, "considered" things from their perspective a bit more than usual — which was how he'd presented Qin Xin with a choice impossible to refuse.

Hearing the gentle jab, the Blind One chuckled too: "That's just him. This Fate Weaver is quite the greedy one."

"Greed is the start of digging one's own grave. He can be greedy, but Torchbearers cannot. We can't afford a single misstep.

Ah, never mind — why am I telling you all this?

Simple enough. Wait here. I'll be back shortly."

With that, the powerful warrior launched himself off the ground, his soaring figure like a cannonball, slamming down beyond the perimeter. He swung his arms into a dead sprint, transforming into a hurricane that vanished from the Blind One's perception in an instant.

It was clearly not the kind of agility a warrior should possess. The Blind One noticed it too — he seemed to be deliberately showing off these qualities for her benefit.

What was he trying to say?

Was he telling her he wasn't a warrior, but a hunter? Was he exposing his own identity?

Could he really be Like A Dream, that Memory hunter?

No — he wasn't even the Qin Xin of this timeline. Why would he expose himself?

Wait — he wasn't exposing himself! He was... exposing the other Qin Xins?

He felt his own life was too bitter, so he wanted to make things harder for his other selves?

Where did that childishness come from...

The Blind One laughed out loud despite herself. But her smile quickly faded.

The more you lack something, the more you crave it. If this Qin Xin's humor was so flavored with gallows comedy, the world he came from must be... far more bitter than she'd imagined.

She hoped he'd find what he was searching for in this trial. With that thought, the Blind One turned toward the warehouse and prayed silently.

And she hoped the Fate Weaver would remain under Destiny's protection and find the right road home.

Whether the Fate Weaver had found his road was unclear. Qin Xin had found the wrong one.

He'd assumed retracing his path would lead quickly back to the town center's residential area. Instead, the moment he descended the mine, he realized something was off.

If his memory served, rounding the hill at this path's end should reveal a scattered cluster of dwellings. Instead — nothing. The area was flat and empty. Every building, every resident, every trace of habitation had vanished.

Had Time's discrepancy begun reshaping the trial again, altering Falling Gate's terrain?

Qin Xin's brow tightened. He stopped and cautiously circled half the suspicious area. Just as he was about to step in for a closer look, he suddenly detected a trace of something seeping from the zone ahead...

The scent of Oblivion!

Oblivion?!

Wu Cun!

Qin Xin's gaze sharpened. His reflexes were lightning-fast — he drove his sword into the ground at his feet, not because he'd spotted the enemy, but to summon the SSS-grade Dreamless Mirror.

And in that very instant, a tsunami-like surge of Oblivion power erupted from the empty zone ahead, sweeping toward him in an all-consuming tidal wave.

The Oblivion force erased the entire space in a heartbeat. Qin Xin's figure simply vanished. Even his Servant God relic couldn't withstand the annihilating power and shattered on the spot.

But the instant the Dreamless Mirror broke, a vigorous pulse of Memory surged from the countless shattered fragments. Deep azure light refracted and leaped between the mirror shards. In moments, the blue beams wove together at the center of the space, forming a clear silhouette — heavily armored, powerfully built, eyes cold as ice.

Qin Xin had said he was never afraid of Oblivion's meddling. No matter which timeline's Qin Xin it was, he had every right to say those words.

So after the Extinguisher's trap detonated, the Mirror Person's counterattack... began.

A flash of crimson fire flickered through Qin Xin's eyes. His pupils were ignited by some power, turning deep and blood-red. He swept his gaze rapidly across the emptied space, searching for something — and within moments, the corner of the Torchbearer's mouth curled upward.

"Found you."

The instant the words left his lips, Qin Xin vanished from the spot. His slender longblade lashed through the air in a single strike, shrieking as it tore open a zone of distorted space — popping it like an invisible balloon with a resounding boom, scattering wild ribbons of Oblivion force in every direction.

A figure was blasted out with a sharp "Wah—!" but vanished into the bright night sky almost immediately.

"Interesting. If you were an Annihilation Apostle, I might genuinely have trouble finding you. But you're just an Extinguisher.

Mages don't play the game like this."

Mid-sentence, Qin Xin vanished again, reappearing behind another pocket of Oblivion presence. Once more, his blade didn't stab — it lashed. Once more, it whipped the hiding Extinguisher out of Oblivion's invisible protection.

Twice now!

Two savage strikes had shredded the mage robes on Wu Cun's back. Twin vivid red welts blazed across her unblemished skin — raw and jarring.

The Extinguisher was furious. Eyes ablaze, she whipped her hand outward. Qin Xin dodged the Oblivion blast in time, but the small hill behind him was erased outright — simply vanishing before everyone's eyes.

Yes — everyone's.

Three people makes a crowd.

When the hill disappeared, a mortified Investigator stood exposed behind the now-"transparent" mound, watching the two fighters go at each other tooth and nail. The corners of his mouth twitched stiffly.

"So, uh... if I said I was just passing through, would either of you believe me?"

Chapter 688: Investigator, How Long Are You Going to Hold Back?

Believe him?

Like hell!

The enraged Wu Cun spotted the even more insufferable Li Wufang, and without a word she raised her hand in his direction. But Li Wufang was far faster. The instant her eyes so much as flicked his way, he'd already thrown himself sideways, produced a plain longbow, and shouted:

"This area — Oblivion is forbidden!"

The declaration startled both combatants.

Edict Sung Afar was indeed a potent support tool in the Order arsenal, but these temporarily decreed laws never involved Them directly. The moment a prohibition referenced a god's power, the flimsy edict would crumble under divine interference.

There were, of course, exceptions. If someone held a Law Contract blessed by the Iron Law of Order, or possessed a talent boosted to extraordinarily high levels like Mo Li's, they could indeed suppress a form of Divinity for a brief window. After all — when Order intervened, everyone had to follow the rules, at least temporarily.

So both Wu Cun and Qin Xin froze. Wu Cun especially — the instant she heard those words, she wisely withdrew her hand, unwilling to waste mental energy testing whether the edict was real.

Even if it were genuine, divine suppression would only last a few seconds. She just needed to dodge Qin Xin's pursuit, and then she could obliterate the other chattering flea at her leisure.

As for Qin Xin... she was well aware of her limitations. Their brief clash had shown her she couldn't defeat him. But killing her wouldn't be easy either — she still had an Oblivion Seed in reserve!

So Wu Cun flickered away again, scattering countless seeds behind her to block Qin Xin's pursuit.

Qin Xin eyed the seedlings, which bore no trace of divine energy, and frowned. He couldn't identify what kind of item they were. He suspected she was using ordinary seeds as a bluff to slow him down. But cautious as ever, he chose not to test them — instead circling the cluster and resuming his chase.

Just then, Li Wufang's voice rang out across the field again.

"Miss Wu, you came back from an Oblivion Seed and all you learned was how to scatter seeds?"

Who do you think you're fooling? I can tell — your trick is fake, pure bluster. Don't worry, Mr. Qin — just go hit her."

Qin Xin's eye twitched. Wu Cun's face frosted over. She didn't dare let her guard down, worried the peak hunter was using taunts to find her openings, so she counted the seconds and once again slipped through the about-to-be-annihilated space, dodging Qin Xin's third lash.

Watching Qin Xin's fighting style, Li Wufang frowned privately, thought hard for a moment, then bellowed:

"Mr. Qin, you can't go easy on her just because she's pretty! The Extinguisher is about to annihilate every clue in the trial! You're a warrior — act like one! That sword technique looks like you're cracking a whip, not swinging a blade. Don't tell me you're deliberately hiding your true strength?"

Qin Xin snorted a laugh, burst another pocket of Oblivion essence, and cast an appraising glance toward Li Wufang.

"Pot, meet kettle. Investigator — how long are you going to hold back?"

I don't normally question others' motives, but today your behavior makes me think you're waiting for us to wear each other out.

You want to play the fisherman? But the fisherman's role isn't that easy to fill.

Even if you wanted to — would Order agree?"

With that, Qin Xin pivoted his blade and — shockingly — abandoned his pursuit of Wu Cun to charge straight at Li Wufang. The Investigator's face changed. He drew his bow instantly: "This area — Memory is forbidden!"

Qin Xin scoffed, ignoring the edict entirely. He charged faster and faster. Li Wufang's expression darkened further. His simple wooden bow was drawn nearly to full moon, yet he held the shot — suspicion flickering in his eyes as he called out again: "This area — War is forbidden!"

This time Qin Xin reacted. He halted in his tracks, frowning as he felt for any shift in the divine forces around him. When he found not a whisper of Order's power, the Mirror Person's eyes turned glacial.

He'd been played. It was all bluster.

Qin Xin laughed at himself, then tensed. He was done with this game of mutual probing. Eyes locked on Li Wufang's position, he triggered a flash step—

And didn't vanish.

Space had been locked!

Because at that exact moment, the distant Investigator had finally unleashed his true Order power. This time it wasn't a fake. It was real.

"This area — teleportation is forbidden!"

That single command froze not only Qin Xin in place but also Wu Cun, who'd been slipping away to find another opening. The spatial lock jarred her body, instantly revealing her silhouette from within the Oblivion shroud. Li Wufang saw it, curled his lip, and immediately trained his arrowhead on the now-exposed Extinguisher.

"The opening — I've given it to you, Qin Xin. You don't really think she and I are on the same side, do you?"

Qin Xin's ability to seize opportunities was truly formidable. The instant Li Wufang's Order power manifested, he knew — however unreliable this Investigator might be — the man was at least on his side. The target had been the Oblivion believer from start to finish. The Investigator just happened to have... a rather chatty mouth.

But Qin Xin didn't waste the opening. His gaze hardened. He drove his sword into the ground, stomped both feet against the flat of the blade, and using the near-full-moon curve of the embedded weapon as a bowstring and his own body as the arrow — whoosh — he launched himself forward.

Order's power forbade teleportation. It didn't forbid high-speed movement. With velocity like a loosed arrow, Qin Xin closed the distance to Wu Cun in the blink of an eye.

The Extinguisher had never imagined — she'd barely caught her breath after escaping the chase, and with the other two seemingly about to fight each other, they'd snapped right back to targeting her in the span of a heartbeat.

A beautiful feint east, strike west. The real clown was her all along!

Wu Cun erupted with fury. The raging annihilation desire in her heart was ignited completely. Eyes blazing, hair streaming, she flared countless roiling surges of Oblivion force around her body, clearly about to raise her hand and erase everything before her.

And at that instant — Qin Xin arrived. And Li Wufang's... edict arrived with him.

The Investigator, in the end, never fired his Discipline Arrow. Instead, he played the Extinguisher one final time — because his next edict was:

"This area — anger is forbidden!"

"..."

You know the feeling. It's like being pushed beyond the brink of rage over something — and then, at the very peak of seeing red, suddenly forgetting why you were angry in the first place.

That single instant of confusion slowed Wu Cun by a beat. The arrow-swift Qin Xin seized the millisecond window with ferocious precision. In the fraction of a second before impact, he shot out his hand and extended the "arrow's" reach, clamping down on the Extinguisher's throat. Then, the instant Wu Cun's bewilderment shifted back into fury, he crashed into her like a heavy crossbow bolt, and with one colossal heave of his arm—

Rrrrip—

—tore the Oblivion believer's head clean off her body.

Chapter 689: Tag Along If You Want

Blood sprayed. The severed head tumbled through the air.

The light in the Extinguisher's eyes went out. But it wasn't over — a booming crash followed as the armor-clad Qin Xin, completely unfazed, simply stomped down on the headless corpse and cratered straight into the ground!

Dust billowed. The kill was final.

Launching himself as a human arrow from a hundred paces out, plucking an enemy's head in the blink of an eye.

In all fairness — even though Li Wufang had created every opening — in the Investigator's eyes, Qin Xin's finishing blow was absolutely stunning.

That massive frame paired with arrow-like speed. Those crisp, decisive strikes married to razorsharp instincts. This Mirror Person had transformed combat into art. Even in the moment of the kill's aftermath, he managed to paint a heart-stopping "closing frame" from the spraying blood and swirling dust. The heavy-armored warrior looked like a war god incarnate, presenting the aesthetics of violence in all their glory before Li Wufang.

"Clap, clap, clap—"

Li Wufang broke into actual applause, admiration plain on his face: "Incredible. Truly incredible, Qin Xin. If someone told me you were a War follower, I wouldn't bat an eye. Your every move is the finest offering to that god."

Silence from within the settling dust. Then a slender blade, catching the volcano's firelight, shot out of the still-falling ash and debris like an arrow and embedded itself in... the empty ground.

Li Wufang had vanished the moment his compliment ended. Qin Xin's probing strike hit nothing.

The Mirror Person emerged from the dust with a frown. With each step, the blood and gore caked on his soles stamped an exaggerated heavy-armor footprint into the earth. He retrieved his sword, extended his senses for a moment, and confirmed: the hunter was truly gone.

"Quick on his feet, at least."

Qin Xin smiled faintly, glanced back toward the mine, then turned his gaze downhill toward Falling Gate. Just then, the watch in his vest chimed.

Another hour mark had arrived.

"Investigator — I should warn you: Wu Cun isn't dead. Her Oblivion Seed activated.

I don't know how much she's annihilated. I need to go check. Tag along if you want. But I'd appreciate it if you'd stay on my side next time we run into her."

That said, Qin Xin left without hesitation.

After his departure — as the dust and debris finally settled — Li Wufang's silhouette slowly materialized at the edge of the dissipating cloud. He watched Qin Xin's retreating figure, brow furrowed, deep in thought.

...

Elsewhere.

The violent tremors from below the mine had alerted even those on the mountain. The Blind One stood at the warehouse entrance with a heavy expression, gazing downhill, a shadow of worry crossing her face.

She'd been standing there for a while now. Her watch showed the hour mark had just passed. The battle below was subsiding. The whole affair hadn't lasted long, but who'd won, who'd lost, and who'd been fighting whom remained a mystery.

She had her suspicions but didn't dare commit. Sharing her uncertainty was another figure — one who'd stepped out of the room after the commotion below died down.

Li Wufang sauntered forward, studying the scene below with interest. He cast a sideways glance at the prophet standing by the warehouse door and clicked his tongue:

"These are truly restless times. All that racket in the middle of the night — a man can't get any sleep.

Though I suppose it's no surprise. Everyone's carrying their own agenda. How could the trial ever be simple?

Don't you agree, Chosen One?"

The Blind One frowned slightly but didn't respond.

Li Wufang seemed to have lost all interest in sleep. He leaned against the doorframe, chatting idly with the Blind One — though in truth, he was doing nearly all the talking. She was only listening.

Mid-conversation, his eyes shifted. He suddenly asked:

"Chosen One — I've always felt Destiny's guidance is never without purpose.

So... the four people your prophecy showed surviving to the final day — that wouldn't happen to be the Doctor, you, me, and whoever won that fight down there, would it?

My math's pretty good. That adds up to exactly four."

"!!??"

Four?

How could it be four?

This wasn't a probe — the Master of Deception Card hadn't flagged it. So in the Investigator's genuine understanding, her prophecy had only four survivors at the end?

The Blind One's expression tightened. Her heart sank as a sudden realization hit: could Time's discrepancies have occurred among the players as well?

How else could she explain Li Wufang's current knowledge?

An Order follower didn't worship Chaos. These people were clear-headed.

This was bad. If her suspicion was correct, then Qin Xin and Cheng Shi... had they changed?

A chill crawled up the Blind One's spine, raising a fine layer of cold sweat on her back. But she betrayed nothing outward, forcing a smile as though nothing had happened:

"Why wouldn't you count the Fate Weaver?"

Li Wufang snorted a laugh and idly glanced at the warehouse behind her:

"Now that's no fun, Chosen One. I'm a hunter — maybe my score isn't as high as yours, but my eyes are still — er, sorry — my ears are still perfectly sharp.

The thing watching the Doctor in that warehouse right now isn't a living person. It's that skeleton puppet the Fate Weaver controls, isn't it?

He was supposed to be on lookout outside but he's gone.

So I've been wondering since earlier — what exactly is our priest friend up to?

You three seem to get along well. This doesn't look like infighting. So the only explanation is the two of them went out to fight someone. And who's the target? Heh — I haven't forgotten this is a six-player game. That Extinguisher who's been missing this whole time... has she shown up again?

Did they go to hunt the mage, or did they have another purpose and just ran into her on the way?

Come on, Chosen One — give me a hint? I think we could be friends. Order followers never have bad intentions."

Li Wufang's smile was brilliant, but the Blind One remained unmoved. Her mind was in chaos. Noticing that Li Wufang was yet again different from before only reinforced her suspicion — Time's discrepancies were truly playing out among the players themselves.

Qin Xin... the folk remedy he'd heard about was actually real?

That actually worked?

Where on earth had he gotten such a method?

And more importantly — was he still him? Or had the current Qin Xin already been replaced by one from another timeline, without her even noticing?

What about Cheng Shi? Was this laughing, carefree Fate Weaver still the same mysterious, standoffish friend of the Torchbearers?

At the thought, the Blind One clenched her fists, her expression grave, and turned back into the warehouse. But the instant she pushed the door, Li Wufang called out behind her:

"Chosen One — you look a little off. Do you need some rest?"

How about I swap shifts with you early?"

Li Wufang was just being chatty. But to his surprise, the Blind One's steps actually halted — and she agreed.

"Sure. I could use some sleep."

"?"

The words barely left her lips before she reversed course, walking past Li Wufang toward the other room. The bewildered Investigator watched the Destiny Chosen brush by him and enter the room reeking of stale urine, where she laid her head on the table and closed her eyes.

"You're... serious?"

"Watch the Doctor. Unless you don't want the Divinity." The Blind One's voice grew weaker with every word. Li Wufang's eye twitched. He glanced toward the warehouse, sighed, and trudged over.

"Fine, fine, fine. Order has always been close to Truth anyway. Civilization huddles together for warmth — not a bad arrangement."

But the moment he left the room holding Ad Ric, the Investigator's expression turned utterly calculating.

The prophecy had changed? Or had the three of them truly turned on each other? An Mingyu's expression was anything but natural. Was she heading downhill to find someone?

How interesting. Could Qin Xin and the Fate Weaver have found something better than Abyss Colorful Crystal?

Chapter 690: Nothing! How Could There Be Nothing!

That's right — the "Li Wufang" who'd teamed up with Qin Xin to kill Wu Cun was Cheng Shi.

The clown was a man of prudence. Even after devising the most sound plan to send Qin Xin searching for the truth behind Time's discrepancies, he still wouldn't trust an "outsider" at such a critical juncture without witnessing things firsthand — much less an outsider from another timeline.

So shortly after Qin Xin departed, he'd said goodbye to the Blind One and followed. In his plan, even if the Abyss Colorful Crystal truly was the cause of every anomaly — even if Qin Xin genuinely triggered a discrepancy at the site where Li Wufang and Wu Cun had first changed — Cheng Shi needed to see it all with his own eyes. He had to ensure Qin Xin wasn't influenced by anything else during the round trip.

This was about whether the clown could find his way home. He was cutting no corners.

What he hadn't anticipated was that despite keeping his distance, the irrational Oblivion believer had obliterated an entire hillock in front of him. So the instant before his cover was blown, he'd had no choice but to use Chaos Acting to "present" himself as Li Wufang, pulling out the only longbow in his personal space and cosplaying brazenly in front of two peak players.

In all fairness, the performance was a success — not because Cheng Shi's combat timing was impeccable, but because he owed it to the Dragon King.

Thank the Dragon King for gifting him those A-rank Law Texts. They'd won Qin Xin's trust at the crucial moment and finished off the freshly revived, still-troublemaking Wu Cun.

Honestly, Cheng Shi hadn't wanted to kill Wu Cun. He'd never exchanged a single word with this volatile version of her. He desperately needed to extract intelligence from her. But time waited for no one. Leaving the Extinguisher alive would likely mean every lead in the trial got annihilated clean.

Cheng Shi couldn't gamble. He was terrified she'd obliterate his road home. So, reluctantly, he chose to protect the clues first.

And in the moment the dust settled, Qin Xin's sudden probe had forced him to hide within the smokescreen and fish in troubled waters.

Chaos's talent had saved him twice. Cheng Shi should have been grateful, but in this impossibly chaotic situation, he truly couldn't bring himself to praise Chaos anymore.

He was afraid Time would render him thoroughly chaotic.

So with painstaking caution, the clown trailed Qin Xin's path downhill — though he didn't dare follow too closely, keeping well back.

Along the way, Cheng Shi's nerves were wound tight. Not from fear of Qin Xin spotting him, but because of the devastation lining both sides of the main road to Falling Gate...

Wu Cun, that harbinger of destruction, had genuinely annihilated everything in her path while tracing the players' trail.

'Good, good, good! If I can't find any leads today, every last one of you Oblivion believers is going to have a very bad future. Mark my words!'

Cheng Shi was grinding his teeth in frustration, yet utterly helpless. After all — when every teammate's contingency plan had failed to stop the Oblivion believer's resurrection — the best he could hope for was that her next revival timer would be as long as possible.

Preferably not until after he'd uncovered the truth.

But what you fear most has a way of showing up. The moment Cheng Shi crept off the mountain and rounded a relatively intact residential zone, Qin Xin — who'd moved far faster — was standing right at this zone's edge, his expression grave as he watched Cheng Shi approach.

Of course, Cheng Shi was still wearing Li Wufang's face. The alias was already on — might as well keep it. Let the real Investigator take the fall. After all, Li Wufang was... his "brother" in another timeline.

What kind of brother doesn't take the blame for you?

So when he saw Qin Xin spot him, Cheng Shi didn't panic. He squeezed out an awkward grin and greeted: "Fancy meeting you again, Mr. Qin."

But to his surprise, Qin Xin completely ignored his cosplay. One sentence pierced straight through his disguise — and delivered a result that left Cheng Shi reeling.

"I've got one good piece of news and one bad.

The good news: the area you mentioned wasn't damaged by the Extinguisher. It's perfectly intact.

The bad news...

I'm sorry. You guessed wrong. There's no Abyss Colorful Crystal there. Not even a sliver."

"!!!!!"

Impossible!

Cheng Shi's face darkened. He fixed Qin Xin with a grave stare and enunciated every word: "Take out your Master of Deception Card. Say that again."

"?" Qin Xin shook his head with a wry smile and flatly refused. "Pointless gesture. If you believe in the fire, you wouldn't question me."

"To hell with the fire," Cheng Shi scoffed coldly. A scalpel materialized in his hand, leveled at Qin Xin. "The Qin Xin I know wouldn't joke about something like this at a time like this. And you — you're not one of the Torchbearers I believe in either.

I don't know what world you come from. I don't want to know. All I want right now is confirmation that what you said is true.

Given your speed descending the mountain and the distance I was trailing at, even with teleportation, you'd have had at most ten seconds to explore that area. Heh — ten seconds, and you're telling me there's nothing there?

Qin Xin, you're not the Doctor. You're not Wang Weijin. You're not a Truth or Folly believer. You're not even a genuine 'hunter.' What makes you qualified to rule out all trace of Abyss Colorful Crystal across such a wide region in ten seconds?

If your perception were that sharp, you wouldn't have merely 'passed by' the Crystal's location in the Shanty Area — you'd have dug out the whole deposit on the spot."

Cheng Shi's barrage drew an appreciative nod from Qin Xin. But the Torchbearer still showed no intention of proving himself. He studied Cheng Shi for a moment, then smiled:

"And? Regardless of what you say, it doesn't change the fact that 'I spoke the truth.'

I know your methods. The Master of Deception Card is vital to the Torchbearers. I won't hand it over — especially not to someone who refuses to stand with the Torchbearers. And besides, you're not the person who refused me either.

But — for Ming Yu's sake — I'll step aside and let you search the area yourself."

"Don't you realize how absurd you sound, Qin Xin?" Cheng Shi smiled — but there wasn't a trace of warmth in it. Only ice. "I have no desire to oppose you, nor any Torchbearer. But your behavior and attitude leave me no choice but to suspect you have an ulterior motive.

The Blind One told me you come from a world where carrying the fire isn't easy. So — have you already figured out which world we're standing in?

Is this one... easier to carry fire in than the one you came from?

In other words, Qin Xin — you, the founding Torchbearer — do you even want to go back to that staggering world? Or has the fire you want to carry become the fire of the world beneath our feet?!"

It was a brutally pointed accusation. Cheng Shi had sensed deliberate obstruction, and he was forced to assume the worst about the Qin Xin before him.

And the moment those words left his mouth — Cheng Shi moved.

At such a pivotal juncture, he couldn't trust a "Qin Xin" whose personality was so unlike the real one's. He had to verify the truth of the man's words and confirm he hadn't pocketed the Abyss Colorful Crystal — the key to unraveling Time's discrepancy — for some sordid reason of his own.

So he flung a scalpel at Qin Xin. But a clown's wrist strength at best bullied NPCs; against a peak player, the throw was laughably feeble.

Qin Xin flicked away the blade — which barely qualified as an attack — with a finger, then fixed Cheng Shi with a meaningful smile:

"You want to fight me?"

"You're the one who wants to fight me!

But — the one fighting you won't be me. It'll be her!"

The instant the words landed, Cheng Shi spun and hurled a headless corpse straight at Qin Xin.