

The Gods 691

Chapter 691: Battle Against Qin Xin! (1)

The Extinguisher Wu Cun!

Although this Oblivion believer had used her Oblivion Seed to once again immerse herself in studying her Benefactor's will, this time was different from the last — this time Wu Cun had left behind a body.

Granted, Qin Xin had stomped it beyond recognition, but as long as a body existed, a priest had the potential to resurrect its owner.

Cheng Shi wasn't sure whether he could use the Lush Horn Crown to "interrupt" the Oblivion Seed's gestation process and forcibly "revive" Wu Cun. But he'd kept the body as a contingency, stashing it in his personal space.

Of course, his original intent wasn't to weaponize it against Qin Xin. He'd been worried the brainless Extinguisher would wreak havoc again, so he'd hidden the card up his sleeve — planning to preemptively revive her at a crucial moment or when the trial reached a pivotal point, ensuring this elusive "enemy" would reappear somewhere convenient for him to deal with.

But now, the corpse's purpose had changed. It had suddenly become Cheng Shi's weapon.

Against a warrior with blinding speed, Cheng Shi knew a priest could never go head-to-head. So in a flash of inspiration, he hurled the Extinguisher's corpse — and as it arced through the air, he reached behind his back, pulled out the Lush Horn Crown, and cast a healing spell on the soaring body.

Simultaneously, he gripped the Smog Bomb he'd had on standby, thinking: if the Oblivion gambit failed, he'd dissolve into smoke the very next instant and dodge the first wave of attack.

But to everyone's surprise, the aura of Recovery genuinely brought Wu Cun back to life. The headless corpse was mid-flight when flesh buds suddenly sprouted from its severed surfaces and dented wounds. Before long, countless threads of blood and tissue wove themselves whole, and a perfectly intact Wu Cun opened her eyes in utter bewilderment.

She'd been in the Oblivion world, contemplating rebirth. Every time she reached a breakthrough, the Oblivion force — pushed to the extremes of destruction — would grant her a true new life. In the past, each rebirth had brought a tangible sense of growth. But this time...

Why did it stop?

And the cold-faced man in heavy armor before her — wasn't that Qin Xin?

How had he chased her into the Oblivion Seed?

No!! She'd been revived?!

The fight wasn't over?!

Wu Cun was stunned. But as a peak player who spent her days dancing at destruction's edge, her reflexes were no joke. The instant she realized she was hurtling toward Qin Xin, both hands swept outward. She vanished into Oblivion's shroud and hurled a storm of defensive items at the Mirror Person now inches away.

Boom — crash—

Explosions erupted. Streaks of light scattered in every direction. The ambush-turned-forced-engagement left neither combatant looking happy.

Wu Cun was terrified of dying again — she had no third Oblivion Seed!

Qin Xin was concerned that Cheng Shi's gambit reeked of desperation. Wasn't he afraid the Extinguisher would dedicate all of Falling Gate to Oblivion, destroying every lead?!

Of course, Qin Xin had already verified the key evidence. He'd scoured the target area in an impossibly short window, even expanding his search radius — possible only because he possessed a flawless tracking talent. And he hadn't lied to Cheng Shi: the target area held no trace of Abyss Colorful Crystal.

But his deliberate obstruction and creation of problems for Cheng Shi were also real. He had his own agenda, and this battle was one of the means to achieve it.

He just hadn't expected that the Fate Weaver would go so far as to revive a lunatic like Wu Cun just to fight him. Was the man serious?

Cheng Shi was absolutely serious. Right now, he didn't care about trust, or the fire, or teamwork. He only needed to confirm one thing: whether his hypothesis was correct — whether the Abyss Colorful Crystal was the cause of Time's discrepancies — whether he could find his way home.

So he'd taken the desperate gamble and revived Wu Cun.

Of course, the ever-prudent Cheng Shi never cut off his own path. If he dared unleash an Oblivion believer at the area richest in clues, it was because he had the confidence to still find his evidence in the aftermath.

As for where that confidence came from...

Thank the Dragon King, once again. The Memory notebook he'd received granted Cheng Shi a single use of Return of the Past. So no matter how badly Falling Gate got destroyed, Cheng Shi could recover what he needed from the resurrected past. But first — Qin Xin's momentum had to be checked.

So the clown moved. As Wu Cun fled, he quietly slipped on the Puppet Grip, then opened with a declaration-of-war Lightning Punishment aimed at Qin Xin.

Boom—

The howling plasma grazed Qin Xin's cheek and blasted a swath of buildings behind him into rubble. Seeing his opponent turn serious, Qin Xin's own fighting spirit surged. A crimson flash crossed his eyes. He laughed — a full, booming laugh — drew his blade, and charged.

When an imposing warrior was your ally, you could never truly feel his pressure. But when that same warrior — encased head-to-toe in heavy armor — became your enemy, every footfall was a micro-

tremor hammering through the ground like a war drum, pounding against your heart, pulling your nerves taut, making it hard to breathe.

The pressure was overwhelming. Cheng Shi was genuinely wondering whether he could survive the first strike. As a Hero of Today, probably. But right now he was just a clown.

So the clown chose to evade — no, evade wasn't quite right. Maneuver.

Between a thunderous counterattack and Self Sin Redemption, he chose to transform into an "assassin." He slammed the Smog Bomb into the ground and — in the razor-thin instant before Qin Xin's blade tip kissed his nose — melted entirely into the smoke!

The clown didn't rush to end the fight. He had his own tests to run. For instance: was this Mirror Person truly a warrior — or a hunter disguised as one?

And was this the man others called Like A Dream?

Truthfully, Cheng Shi had wanted to test this for a long time. He'd only held back out of respect for the Torchbearers. But this time — right here, right now — he'd found the perfect pretext. And so, a collision of probe against probe began in earnest.

And in the very instant Cheng Shi dissolved into the smoke, the distanced Extinguisher finally realized she was no longer in a one-versus-two. She was teaming up with this smoke-wielding Investigator in a two-on-one!

But why would an Order follower need smoke cover? That was a fisherman's go-to tactic, wasn't it?

No matter. The favorable odds re-energized Wu Cun. She locked onto Qin Xin's position and quickly found her opening.

Countless threads of Oblivion force threaded precisely between the dense smoke particles, thin as razor wire, and lanced straight at the red-eyed Mirror Person!

Oblivion's methods weren't always blunt. When precision was called for, it could be surgically exact.

And so—

"All things — extinguished!"

Chapter 692: Battle Against Qin Xin! (2)

Qin Xin got hit.

Countless Oblivion blades pierced his chest, shattered his armor, and annihilated his organs. The warrior — face frozen in shock — was cut down on the spot before he could dodge.

But neither Cheng Shi, who had a full-field view from within the smoke, nor Wu Cun, riding the Oblivion currents on the outskirts, dared relax for an instant. They both knew: Memory believers possessed a technique called "Reflection." Anyone with the right talent or tool could leave behind a past image of themselves to fool the enemy — buying time to break free, reverse the offensive, and strike when least expected.

Wu Cun had never believed Qin Xin would go down that easily. She kept shifting positions, vigilant on all sides — especially now, concealed within the smoke, where her movements were even harder to track.

As for Cheng Shi...

He was safe. Fused with the smoke, he'd become virtually untargetable — no need to worry about ambush. And he'd already located Qin Xin. Except Qin Xin's expression right now... looked somewhat savage.

In a smoke-shrouded corner, the Torchbearer knelt halfway, sword arm raised overhead, his entire body trembling. The next instant, he drove his blade into his own wrist, forcing it through the gap in his gauntlet with a vicious stab.

Thin threads of blood seeped from between the armored plates. Moments later, Qin Xin's body jolted — jolted awake by the pain for one lucid instant. He glared around with blood-red eyes, scanning for Cheng Shi. When nothing registered through his senses, his face turned ashen as he snarled:

"Despicable! Cheng Shi — is this how you fight?!"

Using Corruption's desires to tear apart another person's will?"

He stabbed himself again. Pain seemed the only thing that could buy him a moment of clarity.

Qin Xin backed away while mutilating himself, trying to leave the fog's area of effect. But the smoke was expanding too fast, as if drawn along invisible currents, silently engulfing the entire residential area.

Cheng Shi was somewhat puzzled himself. This Smog Bomb was a settlement reward from a certain trial he preferred not to think about. He'd figured an A-rank item couldn't be that strange — at worst the smoke cloud would be bigger. And with his talent for fishing in troubled waters, the bigger the cloud, the bigger his advantage. That was why he'd chosen this particular bomb over some ordinary smoke that dispersed at the slightest wind.

What he hadn't anticipated was that this Corruption-branded Smog Bomb actually packed a hidden punch. The smoke was clearly laced with some kind of desire. As for what kind...

"?"

One look at Wu Cun — who'd just tumbled out of her Oblivion shroud — told the entire story. The previously berserk Extinguisher was flushed from head to toe, both hands clutching at her own body so hard the veins stood out. She was clearly straining to resist something, but her glazed eyes and uncontrollable panting betrayed the nature of the desire that had taken hold.

Carnal pleasure. The desire infused in this Smog Bomb was... carnal pleasure.

"..."

'Oh no. This is the episode where my reputation gets destroyed!'

The instant he saw Wu Cun's state, Cheng Shi knew his cover was blown. There was no way the Oblivion believer would allow the smoke affecting her to persist.

Sure enough — the very next second, Wu Cun annihilated every trace of smoke around her. Cheng Shi was forced to materialize, but thanks to his high-speed movement within the cloud and its vast range, he'd already slipped well away from the combat center, ducking behind a mud-brick house.

And behind that house, a bewildered little boy stood clutching a handful of tiny green ball-flowers, staring at him in terror.

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow, immediately fished out a stone, and pressed it into the boy's hand. Then he "fiercely" ordered: "Hit me with it!"

The boy was stunned. He dropped the flowers and the stone and bolted. But the next instant, the living terror grabbed him by the scruff and hauled him back. "Hit me with it, or I'll hit you!"

The boy burst into tears. He snatched up the stone, squeezed his eyes shut, and swung blindly — but the swing was so close-range that Cheng Shi had to extend his own arm just to intercept the "attack."

Yes — attack!

The distinction mattered, because Faded Majesty required a blasphemous attack from the Decay faith to activate!

Cheng Shi had no idea which god this child followed. He'd simply had a flash of inspiration — would a raw act of blasphemy alone trigger the "Faded" authority? After all, forcing a visibly healthy child to reluctantly wield a Decay artifact — wasn't that sacrilege against Decay?

And the Tomb End Stone embodied the purest Decay. Someone using a Decay stone to attack him — how did that not count as an attack rooted in the Decay faith?

It was a spur-of-the-moment shot in the dark. And it worked!

Cheng Shi hadn't expected the "Faded" authority to be so lenient with him. The instant his arm took the blow, the entire limb was blessed by Decay once more. Flesh and skin rotted away, exposed bone turned to deadwood, tangled veins faded into withered vines. A healthy arm became a Decayed claw in the blink of an eye — and boundless power surged upward through the limb, pumped through his bloodstream into every extremity.

The clown rose. But it still wasn't enough. A priest was a priest. No matter how strong, he couldn't outmatch a "warrior" with absolute agility.

But the clown didn't plan to remain a clown!

This was a rare opportunity — the perfect moment to test the founding Torchbearer. Cheng Shi knew he might never again find such a guilt-free chance to go head-to-head with a Torchbearer. He wanted no regrets. So he touched his shadow once more, switching faiths — and this time, he donned the warrior mask he'd personally claimed.

When a die showing one pip materialized at the Hero of Today's feet, the two "warriors" collided with a thunderous boom!

Qin Xin wasn't about to give Cheng Shi any breathing room. From the moment the Corruption smoke had polluted him, real fury had flared in his heart.

Carrying the fire was arduous. The path was never easy. Staying true to oneself was already the hardest challenge. If Corruption tainted them further, planting ugly habits — he couldn't imagine whether the Torchbearers could keep going.

So when he discovered his "friend" using Corruption items without the slightest hesitation, Qin Xin snapped.

He needed to beat some sense into this enigmatic Fate Weaver. And as it happened, the Fate Weaver also wanted to expose this Mirror Person.

And so — at the moment Destiny was fixed — two "warriors" collided exactly as expected.

BOOM—

Chapter 693: Battle Against Qin Xin! (3)

Cheng Shi stood rooted. Qin Xin went flying.

Defying all expectations, the massive, powerful Qin Xin couldn't last a single exchange against Cheng Shi. The Hero of Today's punch caved in the Mirror Person's armor and sent him tumbling like a rag doll.

Qin Xin's face was pure shock. He felt the tremendous force radiating from Cheng Shi's arm, looked at that withered-wood limb of Decay, and with a tightening of his eyes — spat a mouthful of blood.

"Corruption, Decay, dark powers...

Fine. Good. You really have no taboos."

Cheng Shi hadn't expected his opponent to crumble so quickly. He stared at his own hand in bewilderment, then at the direction Qin Xin had crashed, and — without a shred of sympathy — scoffed: "That's it?"

For a warrior, this was the ultimate taunt. Yet Qin Xin's fury didn't escalate. Instead, a "fiery" smile crept across his lips.

He saw it now — Cheng Shi wanted this fight too. No excuses, no justification. An all-out, no-holds-barred brawl. It just so happened he wanted exactly the same thing.

He'd been suppressed for too long. In that hopeless world, he'd been careful at every turn, cautious every second — spending every moment pouring his heart and soul into keeping the flickering, guttering flame alive. The despair of pressing forward without hope had nearly driven him mad. And now he decided: he needed to go mad — just once. In a world not his own, against a Cheng Shi who wasn't quite a friend, in a battle that had nothing to do with Memory!

And so, Qin Xin ignited — with real fire.

The blood he'd just spat transformed mid-air into sparks that cascaded back onto his hair and brows. The instant those embers touched skin and follicle, a roaring conflagration — like kindling exploding into flame — immolated Qin Xin's entire body.

A howling blaze erupted from nothing. Heat waves rolled outward in tidal surges. From within that near-blinding inferno, a longbow traced with crimson veins emerged first — and then a figure in armor, gleaming as if freshly forged, appeared before them all.

Reborn from fire!

Qin Xin materialized. The roaring flames gradually compressed against his body but never extinguished. Countless tongues of fire curled back to the crown of his head, dyeing his hair and eyebrows the searing color of flame.

No — that wasn't the color of flame. It was flame — real, living fire, on the edge of dying but burning still!

That was true fire!

And beyond that, countless crimson, jagged fracture lines crawled from Qin Xin's neck up to his jaw. Under the mingled glow of fire and blood, this "reborn" Torchbearer slowly raised a giant bow nearly as tall as himself — and aimed it at Cheng Shi.

Seeing this, Cheng Shi's pupils contracted violently. His heart pounded.

Just as he'd suspected!

This founding Torchbearer was no Memory warrior — no Mirror Person at all. He was a War hunter — a Hawk Eye Scout who'd fooled who-knows-how-many people!

"Good! Good! Good!"

In that moment, Cheng Shi felt no fear — only genuine exhilaration and a battle fervor as blazing as fire. He didn't know if Qin Xin's War aura was affecting him. He only knew: today, this fight had to happen. Otherwise, he might never get another chance like this in a lifetime.

So the Hero of Today curled his lip, raised a beckoning finger toward Qin Xin from across the distance, and introduced himself:

"Cheng Shi. Fate Weaver."

"..."

Who would believe that?

But what did it matter?

Qin Xin raised and drew his bow. The sheer pressure of the drawn giant bow alone was enough to throw Cheng Shi's heartbeat into disarray.

His voice was frigid. His eyes burned with scorching heat.

"Qin Xin. Hawk Eye Scout!"

The instant the words fell, an arrow wreathed in War's flames shrieked forth, grazing Cheng Shi's neck and embedding behind him. The moment the fire-arrow hit the ground, a dense wall of flame erupted outward, trapping all three combatants inside.

Yes — three. Including the "spectating" Extinguisher.

Honestly, Wu Cun felt a twinge of genuine fear. She wasn't affected by War's fervor, and she had zero excitement about joining a duel between monsters. She recognized clearly: neither of these two was someone she could survive a head-on fight against.

Whether it was Qin Xin — who'd gone from Mirror Person to Hawk Eye Scout — or Cheng Shi — who'd gone from Fate Weaver to... mummy?

Why did they both keep transforming?

"..."

At any rate, this level of brute force was not suited for a mage.

But to her dismay, there was no way out. The flame wall severed space itself, locking all three of them inside like prisoners in a cage.

And at that moment, Qin Xin and Cheng Shi both shot her a sidelong glance and said — one cold, one hot — in perfectly synchronized warning:

"Don't move. Move and you die."

The next second, a rain of dice clattered down and the giant bow was drawn to full moon once more.

Whoosh—

Whoosh-whoosh-whoosh—

The blazing fire-arrow left the string, but it wasn't the only light in the arena. The flame walls themselves — as if foot soldiers responding to a marshal's signal — erupted skyward at the instant the arrow flew, rolling like storm clouds before crashing down like a deluge of burning rain on Cheng Shi's position.

Cold steel had yet to arrive, but the heat came first. The entire enclosed space was saturated with searing fervor.

Yet before the fire rain could scorch the ground to cinder, the Fate Weaver who'd been standing there had already vanished.

Cheng Shi moved. He knew he couldn't play long-range games with a hunter, so the fight's first priority was closing the gap. A snap of his fingers swapped him to Qin Xin's flank. The instant the towering frame filled his vision, the lightning howling between his fingers blasted toward the Scout at point-blank range.

The Hero of Today didn't hold back in the slightest — opening with a kill shot. As lightning flashed, the Decayed arm was already winding up a devastating punch aimed at Qin Xin's midsection.

In a flicker, Qin Xin took the hit and crumpled. But the next instant, the real Qin Xin appeared behind Cheng Shi, wielding his bow like a spear, sweeping it at the Fate Weaver's skull.

Fast — the hunter was too fast!

So fast Cheng Shi hadn't sensed a thing before a Reflection had been planted and the real Qin Xin had reappeared at his back. His gaze hardened. He threw himself forward without hesitation, and seeing no way to dodge, he glanced past Qin Xin's shoulder and snapped his fingers again.

But after this snap, Cheng Shi didn't actually teleport. Instead, while Qin Xin's eyes instinctively flicked backward for a fraction of a second, Cheng Shi ducked and used his Decayed arm to hard-block the sweeping bow strike — absorbing the cost of a shattered shoulder blade and a torn left chest — and grinned a savage, teeth-bared grin through the agony before launching upward off the ground and driving a fist straight at Qin Xin's exposed throat.

A feint east, strike west — courtesy of a clown!

Ha — even when the person before you is a Hero of Today, I'm sorry, but my soul is still a clown. A clown who follows Deceit.

So even mid-battle, I will seize every chance to take deception as far as it goes.

Lightning danced with flame. Civilization dissolved into Void.

Cheng Shi connected. The near-suicidal trade sent Qin Xin flying once more. But War never falls — in the instant Qin Xin was blasted away, the blood-red fracture lines on his nearly-wrenched neck swelled and pulsed. The blood spraying from him boiled before it left his body. A crimson glow swept across his eyes as he jolted awake from the momentary blackout, drew his bow mid-flight, aimed at Cheng Shi, and—

A sky full of fire-arrows, pouring down like rain!

The ground shook. Thunderous impacts, on and on.

In the blink of an eye, the Bone-Clinging Blaze scorched the earth inside the flame wall down a full meter.

Cheng Shi's eyes were wide with awe. Only constant teleportation kept him from being burned to ash. He knew he was trapped — and this was War's battlefield.

How to survive? Only blood, and fire!

Chapter 694: Not as Strong as Big Cat, but Far More Troublesome

If you had to name the most miserable person in this firestorm, it wasn't Cheng Shi — the designated target — but "innocent" Wu Cun.

Of course, her suffering wasn't from the fire itself. Oblivion's power was woven into a shield around her body, and the falling flames posed no real threat. What truly threatened her was... a certain person who looked suspiciously like a mummy.

Yes — her "innocence" had been imposed by Cheng Shi.

Cheng Shi was desperate too. When he realized there was nowhere left to stand and no respite from the fire above, he figured he needed to break the stalemate and catch his breath. And the only way to do that was to force the relentlessly-shooting Hawk Eye Scout to stop.

But Qin Xin was far more troublesome than he'd imagined!

The moment the Torchbearer realized Cheng Shi could inflict close-range damage on him, he simply refused to let Cheng Shi get close again.

No matter how Cheng Shi tried to approach, Qin Xin leveraged his hunter's agility to instantly create distance and snap off a couple of shots, making the fire rain even fiercer. After four or five rounds of this, Cheng Shi had exhausted nearly every means of closing the gap. Even the dice he'd planted were being incinerated by the all-consuming blaze.

Left with no choice, Cheng Shi fell back to his next best option.

'When I can't beat a War follower, I can at least take a step back — and beat an Oblivion follower.'

And just like that, Wu Cun had become Cheng Shi's shield, muddled and bewildered.

Cheng Shi didn't treat Wu Cun as a person. He seized her ankle with his nearly-indestructible Decayed arm, spun her like a top, and spread the Oblivion force clinging to her body into an umbrella overhead — blocking the rain of fire.

At this point, in a pure one-on-one assessment, Cheng Shi had more or less lost. Though the opening had been his one concession — tacitly allowing Qin Xin to fence off the arena with fire arrows — failing to close out the fight in an enclosed space was an undeniable fact.

But battlefields and duels were not the same. "Anything that can be used is a weapon in my hand" was a basic military principle. Even Qin Xin cracked a grin of appreciation at the sight, then — laughing — amped the fire rain's intensity by another thirty percent.

Now it was truly a sea of fire.

Old flames hadn't died before new ones crashed down. The blazing inferno inside the fire wall had scorched nearly every inch of the cramped arena. Space itself began warping. A little longer, and reality might burn through entirely — plunging everything into the Void.

Feeling his skin melt and slough off continuously, Cheng Shi furrowed his brow tight.

He'd launched several more probing attacks during this time, but every one was read in advance and deflected by Qin Xin.

The man's fighting style was a self-contained system. The Hawk Eye Scout's traits gave him a panoramic view of the battlefield, letting him read the flow of combat from the subtlest details, anticipate the enemy, and seize every advantage.

After several exchanges, Cheng Shi felt he wasn't facing a wall of flame but a towering volcano — one utterly impossible to climb.

The last time he'd felt this kind of pressure was watching Big Cat go blow-for-blow with Eposka.

Of course, Qin Xin and Hong Lin were completely different. Big Cat's momentum lay in her fortress-shattering force and fearless charge. Qin Xin's lay in the precision of his "troop deployments" and the accuracy of his "tactical commands."

He was acutely sensitive to shifts in the battlefield and devastatingly precise in seizing openings. Where Big Cat fought on sheer hot-blooded momentum, Qin Xin's combat was devoid of emotion — pure technique.

He distilled War's grandeur into micro-precision, using pinpoint judgment to force Cheng Shi into retreat after retreat.

This Hawk Eye Scout might not be as powerful as Big Cat — in the same time frame, Big Cat might have already sealed the win — but he was far more troublesome.

A fire prison plus a fire rain made the Scout nearly invincible!

War's followers truly excelled at war.

A faint sense of helplessness crept into Cheng Shi's heart.

He figured maybe only Big Cat could brute-force a bloody path out of this kind of deadlock, powered by sheer talent alone.

Of course, the clown wasn't out of options. He was just reluctant to use them.

The Curtain Call Ball — he still had one that recorded the Grand Tribunal's Elemental Judges flooding a city. Replaying that scene here would undoubtedly drown the endless flames. But... was it worth it?

Non-consumable tricks could be used freely. But the moment he burned a consumable, this would become a genuine fight to the death.

Cheng Shi had already achieved what he'd set out to test. He naturally wasn't willing to waste another shred. But if this war of attrition dragged on — even with the Thorn Weeping Rite replenishing him — he couldn't be certain he'd be the last one standing. Especially since Wu Cun, currently serving as his shield, was being suffocated by the extreme heat.

Nobody could endure an offensive of this scale for long — including the attacker. Player mental energy wasn't infinite. No matter how many item boosts you stacked, exhaustion would come.

Cheng Shi couldn't quite figure out why Qin Xin dared spend so lavishly. But he wasn't entirely without countermeasures.

In fighting technique, the clown might be inferior to the Hawk Eye Scout. But in unconventional... magic tricks, ten Hawk Eye Scouts couldn't match a single clown's cunning.

So, to dodge his opponent's sharpest moment, Cheng Shi was forced to make a painful decision. He killed the Extinguisher — again.

Yes — the man who'd revived Wu Cun had now killed her with his own hands at the moment of her near-death.

The Extinguisher didn't even understand what was happening before her few-minute guest appearance in this show was over.

Naturally, Cheng Shi didn't bother fabricating excuses like "I'm relieving your suffering early." He didn't have time.

The instant he snapped Wu Cun's neck, he pulled out the Door Key and transmuted her bones into a bone gate wreathed in spectral flame. Then he stepped through, using the gate to the Abyss of Desire as his new shield against the heavenly fire.

The move was devastatingly effective!

Because War's flames truly could not burn through the corridor forged by Death's own hand. And Qin Xin — watching this unfold — was so stunned that the arrows on his bow actually froze mid-draw.

Corruption again!

He could already smell the dense Corruption aura seeping from beyond the gate. Watching Cheng Shi borrow Corruption's power for the second, third time — the Torchbearer's expression grew darker and darker.

"When you sought its shelter, did you ever consider that every compromise with desire is a chip it silently collects?"

Your resistance threshold will only sink the closer you drift to the Sea of Desire. And when the debt accumulates, Cheng Shi — aren't you afraid you'll slip and plunge into the Sea?!"

Qin Xin was livid. He drew his bow once more, aiming at the gap in the Bone Gate, clearly intent on blasting Cheng Shi out with a single shot.

But Cheng Shi didn't open the door. He didn't go deeper, didn't step back — just hung in the threshold, wedging a Destiny die in the crack, and peered out through the gap with a grin:

"Tell me — have you never sought His shelter?"

"Never. I believe only in the fire I hold in my own hands." Qin Xin's tone was absolute.

"Heh — if War's fire could burn forever, how would the Era of Chaos have ever begun?"

There'll come a time when your fire isn't enough. What then?"

"Then I'll bleed every last drop.

Give it everything. Die with no regrets!"

"..."

'Damn. He actually out-cooled me.'

Chapter 695: Qin Xin's Escape-the-Class Strategy

Cheng Shi smacked his lips and offered no comment.

Setting aside whether Qin Xin's words rang true, the current situation had become crystal clear. The man's target was indeed Cheng Shi, and he'd genuinely wanted a fight — but his purpose extended beyond Cheng Shi alone.

As he'd just reasoned: nobody could sustain an offensive of this scale for long. Qin Xin's choice to burn this much mental energy in a fight with him couldn't be for a quick finish.

Because this level of overkill would only make the "quick finish" happen to the attacker himself!

Case in point: Qin Xin's face had already lost its icy composure. He was flagging.

This was definitely not a trap designed to lure the snake from its hole. Cheng Shi had run the numbers. If he himself had been releasing attacks at this scale, even with the Thorn Weeping Rite doubling his capacity, he'd have blown far past his mental energy ceiling.

Which meant Qin Xin's current expenditure was at a terrifying level — and he was still going. Even with Cheng Shi turtled inside the Bone Gate, this War follower continued torching the entire enclosed space.

What did that tell him?

Was this barrage truly meant to burn him to death?

No!

Not at all!

Qin Xin wasn't trying to crush Cheng Shi's survival space — or rather, he had been at the start, but by now his target had shifted entirely!

His target was no longer Cheng Shi. It was the space they stood in — this pocket of Existence!

He wanted to burn through reality!

A gleam of insight flashed through Cheng Shi's eyes. He saw it now: this slice of reality was abnormally stubborn. Under normal attack intensity, fire this extreme would have burned clean through reality and opened straight into the Void long ago.

Yet here the entire space was warping — and reality still hadn't shattered!

The strength of Existence here was far too high. So high that the caster trying to break through was running himself into the ground!

Qin Xin's final arrow was clearly meant to be the last weight on the scales tipping reality into collapse. But could he succeed?

Cheng Shi had his doubts. In a trial involving timeline disruption, attempting to skip class was unimaginably difficult.

Yes — skip class.

Qin Xin's attempt to shatter reality wasn't a whim. He had a purpose: to bypass Time's shackles and search the Void for a method of escape, or a way to approach "the future."

Because he'd already searched the target area and confirmed Cheng Shi's theory was wrong. This Time trial was far more complex than they'd imagined. And Qin Xin had just stumbled into an opportunity to fight Cheng Shi, which sparked his own solution: break reality, enter the Void.

Nobody knew where the Void connected to from this world. But the Void was Void's territory. The interference of Existence would be weaker there than anywhere in the trial. It was a sound line of thinking.

Moreover, Qin Xin remembered that the Flame of Hope — who had always sheltered the Torchbearers — once said: if you encounter a problem you can't solve, come find Me in the Void.

Qin Xin didn't want to dwell on why the Flame could help from the Void. He only needed to know there was an ally there. So yes — he was skipping class. Time's class.

By the time the battle's outcome was all but decided, Qin Xin was already figuring out how to throw Cheng Shi clear. Not that he didn't want Cheng Shi to skip class with him — he just wasn't sure his method would work, and refused to risk dragging Cheng Shi into danger.

Of course, this wasn't his nobility or kindness protecting "the weak." It was face he was saving for the An Mingyu of another world. He could see that the Blind One and Cheng Shi got along well, and he didn't want to create trouble for this world's Torchbearers.

So when Cheng Shi summoned a Bone Gate to protect himself, Qin Xin feigned "rage" — drawing his bow with all the fury of a lion — and loosed his final arrow, hoping it would simultaneously slam that gate shut on Cheng Shi and shatter this pocket of space, giving him the answer he sought.

The arrow's presence was staggering. From behind the door, Cheng Shi watched through the crack as a fireball swelled from a distant point to fill his entire vision — a miniature sun descending — scorching even the surrounding air until it boiled.

He felt fire creeping into his nostrils. His heart clenched. He snatched back the die and closed the Bone Gate another fraction.

And at that instant — BOOM — the "sun" crashed against the gate. War's inferno consumed every last inch of space within the fire wall.

Space twisted even further. Existence itself was being roasted into abstraction. And yet — the space still didn't break!

It was like an endlessly inflating balloon. The walls were paper-thin, transparent, stretched to their absolute limit — yet they refused to burst from the inside!

Qin Xin failed. His face went white. He dropped from the fire back to the ground — a ground no longer recognizable, scorched down who-knew-how-many meters.

War's flame couldn't harm a War follower. But the fire in this War follower's heart was undeniably cooling.

This path seemed blocked. Time had forestalled every possibility of skipping class.

He knelt on one knee and laughed at himself, then raised his eyes to glance at the Bone Gate — hoping to check on the perpetually-turtling Fate Weaver. But to his surprise, a die came sailing through that hairline crack — a Destiny die, immune to flame.

The die rolled slowly through the fire and landed at Qin Xin's feet, one pip facing up. Looking at that crimson dot, more vivid than the scarlet flames themselves, Qin Xin felt it was the ultimate mockery.

It seemed to say: Look, clown!

"You..."

"You what? Are you ready?"

"?" Qin Xin's head snapped up toward the Bone Gate. Through the raging inferno, a withered-wood hand was poking out of the gap... jabbing a finger at him.

"Yeah, you — the mopey Torchbearer. Are you ready?"

Qin Xin blinked. He furrowed his brow, drained: "Ready for what?"

"Ready... to go home?"

With that, the dead-wood hand snapped its fingers. And as the sound rang out, the sea of fire — like a reformed army answering a bugle call — erupted in a deafening war cry, as if welcoming its "new marshal."

And in that instant, the blazing flames within the arena surged to more than double their intensity. The balloon, stretched to its absolute limit, could no longer withstand the monstrous pressure. Within the roar of eldritch fire—

BOOM—

It burst!

Reality shattered!

Time's shackles broke!

Everything inside the fire wall plummeted into the Void.

And the reason for all of this was simply...

Destiny, too, has its deviations!

Chapter 696: This Really Is the Wrong Path

That's right — Cheng Shi had activated Fate Has Divergence. He'd read Qin Xin's plan and realized: if the Torchbearer had resorted to this "skip-the-class" approach, then his claim of "no Abyss Colorful Crystal" could only be the truth.

Which meant his entire hypothesis was wrong. Time's discrepancies weren't caused by the Abyss Colorful Crystal at all. So with no second theory in sight, Cheng Shi chose at the last moment to give Qin Xin a hand.

Of course, from Cheng Shi's perspective, this wasn't exactly altruism. He also wanted to test whether the Void held Time's answer. After all, when it came to going home, he and the current Qin Xin shared the same goal.

But the instant reality shattered and everything plunged into the abyss, both Cheng Shi and Qin Xin realized they'd been wrong.

Terribly wrong!

This wasn't the Void.

Though the space they'd fallen into was equally dark, any player with Void experience could tell at a glance: this was not the Void. Because while darkness surrounded them, the "horizon" at the outer perimeter blazed with blinding white light!

Fragments of Existence — twisted and chaotic like a revolving lantern — flickered and flowed across the outermost layer of this dark space. In his shock, Qin Xin suddenly realized this might not be Void territory at all. They were still within Existence's domain — just no longer on the orderly surface of reality. They'd plummeted into the disordered, chaotic gaps between layers of Existence.

Qin Xin had never been here before. But his understanding of Memory and Existence told him this place resembled an interlayer between Existence planes. In other words: within a trial built on intersecting timelines, what they'd broken wasn't simply one world's reality — it was the outer wall of the chaotic Existence construct woven from overlapping timelines!

They'd fallen into Existence's crevice — the gap between interwoven timelines. And from the looks of it, they'd keep falling... until...

Forgotten by Memory. Blurred by Time!

Qin Xin panicked. He tensed his entire body, mustered his last reserves, drew his bow, and fired a rope-tethered arrow at Cheng Shi high above — apparently hoping to use Cheng Shi's higher position as an anchor to arrest his own descent, then slowly figure out how to climb back up from this Existence gap.

But why was Cheng Shi falling more slowly than Qin Xin?

Was it because without heavy armor he was lighter?

No!

It was because he wasn't falling at all!

He hadn't plummeted endlessly like Qin Xin. He was still standing inside the tunnel forged by Death, one hand gripping the pale-white Bone Gate, sensibly motionless!

And that corridor — built by Death's own hand — stood like the most indestructible fortress in a space capable of eroding Existence itself, saving Cheng Shi's life once more.

Whether it was Death's protection or the steadiness he'd learned from Mi Laozhang — both had saved him at this critical juncture!

So this gate-clutching Hero of Today had suddenly become the sole lifeline in this entire space — the only anchor point that wouldn't sink in Existence's crevice!

But Cheng Shi wasn't happy. He realized the class-skipping had failed. Destiny was right — this really was the wrong path...

So, with a face full of black lines, Cheng Shi casually caught the arrow Qin Xin had shot up, tied it to the gate, and — wearing the mantle of last-resort lifeline — engaged in a "friendly" "exchange" with the survival-seeking teammate dangling below.

He first checked his watch, noticed even the timekeeping device had frozen, then leaned out to look down at the hanging Qin Xin and said with dripping sarcasm:

"War followers really are meatheads. Your archery's fantastic — did you craft the arrowheads from your brain?"

He even tapped his own temple. "Empty up here?"

"..." Qin Xin's expression stiffened. He sighed. "I didn't anticipate His trial being this thorough. But, Fate Weaver — that final blow that broke the barrier? That wasn't me."

"?"

'Oh, so now it's my fault?'

Cheng Shi scoffed and immediately started loosening the rope tied to the gate.

Qin Xin dropped three measures. He quickly corrected himself: "You were helping me. And for that, I'm grateful."

Cheng Shi yanked the rope taut again, tied it back, and leaned out to survey the "abyss" below, grinning ear to ear: "Mr. Qin's quite the fair-weather friend. Life's kicked you around a bit, has it?"

"..." Qin Xin could feel his energy recovering at a glacial pace. He sighed in resignation: "Getting kicked around every minute of every day. I'm used to it."

"No wonder you're so bitter. So you took it all out on me?" Cheng Shi laughed in exasperation. He leaned cautiously against the gate, eyes scanning their surroundings while continuing to chat with Qin Xin.

"Where are we?"

"I don't know. But my guess is the crevice of Existence."

"Crevice of Existence? Existence has crevices?" Cheng Shi blinked.

"It does. But I've only heard rumors — never been here myself."

"Interesting. Where did you hear about it? Has your world already started researching this kind of thing?"

Research?

Qin Xin frowned slightly and shook his head:

"I wouldn't call it research. Everyone's just been forced into corners and has to explore unorthodox options."

Destiny is fickle. Time has many threads. Since Destiny can't be read, the only thing anyone can do is study Time more deeply.

I've heard that certain organizations have been researching Time for a long time. They seem to have found a method of using Time's gaps to send people into other timelines.

Whether the method exists, whether it works, whether it succeeds — I have no idea. Because the Torchbearers... don't possess it.

And we don't want to go to other people's worlds.

Cheng Shi, I can accept every accusation you've thrown at me — except that one. That one I will not and cannot accept.

Qin Xin has never wanted to carry another world's fire. What we do is protect beauty — not search for it.

Other worlds' beauty is none of our concern. Our own world must be guarded by our own hands!"

"..."

Hearing this, Cheng Shi's heart churned with mixed emotions.

The good news: this Qin Xin, despite being an eyesore, was at least a genuine man.

The bad news: his suspicion was correct. Jiang Chi had very likely arrived in his timeline through just such a Time gap — a "discrepancy."

Of course, "discrepancy" was just a label. Jiang Chi's existence meant the Faith Game's crises no longer arose solely from player-versus-player conflict, nor entirely from Them. Now there was a new threat: ambitions from anyone who coveted timelines beyond their own.

They would always find reasons — all sorts of reasons — to cross over. So what exactly had happened in Qin Xin's world?

Cheng Shi frowned, reached out to grip the rope, and — looking thoroughly disgusted — hauled Qin Xin up bit by bit.

"This so-called difficulty of carrying the fire — what caused it? What happened in your world?"

Being pulled up slowly, Qin Xin's face flickered with complexity. He gazed down at the abyss beneath his feet, a mix of five emotions churning inside him, and sighed:

"Decay fell. The balance of faith shattered. The entire world became fodder for Prosperity's rapacious consumption. The gods reignited their wars. Whether in reality or in trials — everything grew more and more dire.

The Faith Game... seems to be reaching its breaking point."

"!!??"

What?

Decay fell?

In that timeline, Decay was the one that fell?

What was going on — was He devoured by Prosperity?

But...

That doesn't make sense!

Weren't They supposed to be existences transcending the dimension of time?

If in his own world Prosperity was the one that fell, then logically, in Qin Xin's world it should also be Prosperity that fell. How could it possibly be Decay?

Where had things gone wrong?

Chapter 697: He Is the True Grand Marshal!

Cheng Shi wasn't the only one pulling. Qin Xin climbed fast. Before long, the massive hunter had clambered up to Cheng Shi's eye level — one hand on the gate, one on the threshold — and was about to haul himself in.

But at that moment, Cheng Shi furrowed his brow tight and pressed his hand flat against Qin Xin's chest, barring him from entry.

Qin Xin froze. He stared at Cheng Shi in bewilderment: "You still don't trust me?"

Cheng Shi shook his head. He lowered his hand from vertical to horizontal, expression dead serious:

"I trust people very easily. But this has nothing to do with trust.

If you want in — you pay the entrance ticket first."

"???" Qin Xin's mind went blank. He blinked a few times before the meaning of "entrance ticket" registered.

'Hold on — Fate Weaver, have you really gone Corruption?'

'I was even starting to convince myself that I'd misjudged you — telling myself a Fate Weaver might just be wearing Corruption's coat to conceal his Void nature. And now here you are, waiting for me at the gate?'

'Yes, you literally saved my life just now. But this fee... why does paying it feel so wrong?'

Qin Xin's face darkened. He looked at Cheng Shi with a peculiar expression. He was close enough to jump up in one step. He was absolutely certain he could push the gate open right in front of Cheng Shi without breaking a sweat. But... he didn't. He chose to compromise.

Whether this compromise was "payment for survival" or something else — no one could tell. His expression was too complex.

Under Cheng Shi's unblinking stare, Qin Xin sighed and produced a Remembrance Needle. He explained: this thing could make someone forget specific memories connected to certain people or events.

Cheng Shi suspected there was a subtext to Qin Xin's words, but he accepted the "entrance ticket" regardless.

He didn't want to shake down a Torchbearer any further. But having come this far — if he walked away empty-handed, today's roasting would've been for nothing.

So, ticket acquired, Cheng Shi pulled Qin Xin up himself. Though his expression remained thoroughly strange.

Qin Xin sat on the gate's edge, cast a disgusted glance toward the Abyss of Desire beyond, then turned to Cheng Shi: "I assumed you'd resist using Memory items."

Cheng Shi held up the Remembrance Needle:

"This?"

No — I have no faith preference issues. Whoever gives me — actually, I do have faith preferences. I only believe in Void. But that doesn't stop devout me from using Existence items to wreak havoc on Existence believers!

When I use Memory's oblivion to erase a Memory believer's memories, who wouldn't hail me as the most devout Void walker?

Why are you looking at me like that? I won't use it on you. You're not a Memory believer.

But seriously, Qin Xin — you're a War follower. Where did you get all these Memory items?

And the Dreamless Mirror — everyone says it belongs to Like A Dream. So how did it end up in your hands?

What are you hiding?

You..."

Cheng Shi had been about to say: 'With that much concealed, don't tell me you're the Grand Marshal whose title Hu Wei stole.'

But he suddenly remembered that explaining how he knew Hu Wei's identity would be... awkward. So he swallowed the question. Then he realized: this Qin Xin wasn't even from his timeline. If he outed Hu Wei now, it would only affect the Hu Wei in that world. And since even the gods were different there, what did it have to do with him?

So he asked after all.

And unexpectedly — while Qin Xin had worn a cryptic smile through the first few questions, refusing to answer — the instant he heard that final question, his face went rigid for a split second.

That split second was all Cheng Shi needed. His jaw dropped.

It really was him!!!

He was that Grand Marshal — the one as enduring as his Benefactor War!

Of course — Qin Xin's bearing in battle, his aura — it was that of a commanding general. And the way he shouldered the Torchbearers' mission and marched silently forward was a perfect match for Cheng Shi's earlier hypothesis about the true Grand Marshal's temperament of forbearance.

'Well, well, well — that title suits him perfectly. Leading the Torchbearers against the gods — he's basically a rebel commander raising the flag of revolution!'

'And to think — the title stolen by a Chaos follower protected by the Fun God actually belongs to a Torchbearer also protected by the Fun God!'

'My Lord, You're out here doing clown tricks, swapping colored balls from left hand to right!'

Cheng Shi was floored. He studied the true Grand Marshal from head to toe, trying to understand how a single person could endure so much.

Qin Xin was equally shaken. He'd never imagined anyone could pierce Hu Wei's disguise. After all, from any War believer's perspective, Hu Wei's "performance" was entirely worthy of the Grand Marshal's name.

So how had Cheng Shi figured it out?

Qin Xin desperately wanted to ask, but Cheng Shi clearly didn't want to explain. He pivoted the conversation straight back to Them.

Compared to the drama between Chaos and War, he was far more interested in why the gods differed across timelines.

If everything Qin Xin said was true, did that mean Deceit and Destiny had both lied?

Were all Their commentaries on the gods and Existence just smoke and mirrors?

Did each timeline actually have its own set of gods?

That didn't work either. It couldn't explain Time's behavior. Time's trial clearly spanned multiple temporal dimensions. If each timeline had its own Time, why would those Times agree to cooperate with one Time and run a trial that let players discover "the gods' true state"?

Cheng Shi was drowning in questions he couldn't resolve alone. So after much deliberation, he chose to trust the current Qin Xin and shared the truth about his world: Order had fallen.

"Order fell. Chaos has been spreading. But under the Convention's constraints, the Faith Game still follows its rules. So, Qin Xin — why are the gods we face different?"

Aren't They supposed to transcend everything?"

"..."

The revelation was so explosive that even Qin Xin was stunned. Before hearing Cheng Shi's account, he'd always assumed his world's collapse wasn't simply because Decay fell — but because Prosperity had seized an opportunity in this world.

Clearly the entire cosmos was the gods' playground. As for what They were actually doing — no one could know. But one thing was certain: They were constantly observing the entire cosmos — all pasts, all futures, all parallel worlds. Their gaze was never limited to a single space-time. This was the consensus among peak players.

Yet today, two players from different timelines had exchanged intelligence — and shattered that consensus.

Qin Xin gripped the Bone Gate with white knuckles, brow deeply creased:

"I don't know.

But I suspect... this is just my guess. I suspect that the Them in each timeline might not be the totality of Them?"

"What do you mean?" Cheng Shi blinked.

"Have you heard of Truth's Slice Experiment?"

"???"

Cheng Shi's eyes flew wide open. He suddenly understood what Qin Xin was driving at.

"You're saying that the Them in each timeline... are just their slices in different worlds?"

Chapter 698: The True... Slices

"Exactly. Perhaps we've both misunderstood Them all along. When all the slices across the cosmos are assembled together — only then do they constitute the true Them. And that would explain why Order fell in your world while Decay fell in mine!

And there's also... the Convention you mentioned.

So you know about it too. I've been wondering why the gods would sign a Convention to restrict themselves...

Hm? That look in your eyes — you didn't know about this?

No, you're curious how I learned about it?

Heh — funny story. It was the one and only thing my Benefactor ever told me. War said the Convention was the greatest restriction placed upon Him."

Cheng Shi was stunned: "War?"

"Indeed — War. So I figure: if the Convention only restricted Him, He would never have signed it. But if the Convention restricts all gods, then there'd be no reason for Them to voluntarily forge shackles for Themselves.

But if... hypothetically... the Convention's restrictions are merely a side effect, and its true purpose is to fuse the gods' powers together — to create sliced deities across the cosmos's countless timelines...

Tell me — is that possible?!"

"!!!!!"

Absolutely possible. Entirely possible!

Cheng Shi even felt that the Convention's true nature — which had baffled everyone — had just been guessed outright by Qin Xin, today, right here and now!

Why was he so sure? Because of... Truth!

Truth was undoubtedly the god who understood slicing best among all deities. And one of the Convention's purposes was to approach that omnipotent Origin. Faith Fusion was one method pushed by Truth under precisely this framework.

But who could guarantee a fusion would be correct from start to finish?

If it went wrong, wouldn't They face the end of the Void Era head-on?

True — real gods didn't fear the tides of eras. According to Aph Ros, They could simply start over in the next era. But who wanted to relive failure after failure — loop after loop?

As always: whether human or divine, everyone had desires. Most of the gods' desires revolved around approaching It. Since someone had championed this "cause," they couldn't possibly give up right away as Cheng Shi had — otherwise the Convention wouldn't exist, and the Tower of Logic wouldn't be so fanatically devoted.

At the very least, Truth would never give up. Truth was eternally pursuing the most fundamental truth of the cosmos — approaching that omniscient, omnipotent Origin!

So Truth's stake in the Convention was very likely exactly what Qin Xin described: divine slices distributed across different worlds!

It all fit. Everything seemed to fit!

Not just the present — looking back at Cheng Dashi's actions, had that alternate self truly been trying to create a chance for "change"?

He'd returned from another timeline and plucked the strings of fate here. Perhaps some of it was a soft heart — an inability to watch a world march inevitably toward Void. But surely he'd had other motives too!

This greedy version of "himself" — wasn't he also testing a hypothesis? Wanting to see whether a timeline he'd influenced would diverge from his original world's trajectory!

So the "future" truly had been changed — because every "future" was inherently independent!

Yet the future also hadn't changed — because They were probably gazing down from the cosmos's highest vantage point. When They noticed a single timeline shifting, perhaps in Their eyes it was nothing more than one infinitesimal fluctuation among tens of thousands, billions, trillions, quadrillions of samples in Their "divine slicing experiment" — not worth a second glance from the real Them...

The moment he realized this, Cheng Shi suddenly felt the despair Cheng Dashi must have carried.

When he'd discovered the world's truth, perhaps the despair had been real.

What did this make them? Just "cells" under a microscope?

No, no, no — perhaps this world didn't even qualify for the microscope stage, because the sample size was... simply too vast.

"Heh. No wonder I'm a clown. Turns out I really am a clown."

Cheng Shi laughed. His laughter was wild and unrestrained — seemingly mocking himself, seemingly mocking the gods. He laughed at a world that didn't truly Exist. He laughed at a cosmos that was indeed Void.

But mid-laugh, the laughter died.

He looked up at Qin Xin, clapped him firmly on the shoulder, and said with dead seriousness: "Let's get out of here."

Qin Xin studied Cheng Shi's eyes with curiosity: "You're... not afraid anymore?"

"Afraid?"

I'm afraid. Of course I'm afraid.

From the very first day this shitty Faith Game descended, I've been scared to death!

I'm afraid that if I die, no one will remember him. I'm afraid the gods will use dirty tricks to bother him. I'm afraid that when we meet again in that certain someone's hall, he'll feel sorrow at my arrival. And I'm even more afraid he'll feel joy — because he'd never want me to meet him in a place like that. His joy could only be a mask...

There's so much I'm afraid of. But...

Does being afraid help?

No!

The thing he taught me most was to never let fear hold me back. He always said: if even a junk collector can live a decent life, what does a bookish kid have to be afraid of?

As long as your conscience is clear, just move forward.

I can't live up to his words. But I know — as long as I live the way he told me to, that's enough. Who cares about gods, or slices, or Origin, or all those densely woven timelines? What do any of those things have to do with me — not even worth a single aluminum can?

I'm alive in this world not for any grand reason — just because he once lived here too."

And of course — if he could win the top score for him, then he'd have no regrets at all.

Cheng Shi added this last bit silently in his heart.

Honestly, Cheng Shi had never laid himself this bare in front of anyone. This time was purely a matter of timing: in the crevice of Existence where nothing Existed; at the disorienting moment of seemingly glimpsing the cosmos's truth; in a place beyond his own world's boundaries; before a Torchbearer who would soon choose to forget him — he'd let himself speak freely for once, venting every ounce of fear, confusion, shock, and frustration he'd bottled up before the Faith Game and the gods.

The sight left Qin Xin clicking his tongue in wonder.

Fascinating. Truly fascinating. A Void walker using Void to etch memories.

Was that not, in itself, the purest form of Void?

Though — the person this Fate Weaver remembered so fiercely... who were they?

Qin Xin was deeply curious, but he chose not to ask.

Everyone had secrets. He understood their importance. So rather than prying, he simply joined in with Cheng Shi's earlier laughter — a full-throated, booming laugh.

Once Cheng Shi collected himself, he felt he'd said too much. But no matter — once those words left his mouth, they'd no longer weigh on his mind. As for Qin Xin...

'Why are you laughing so hard? Laughing at me?'

Cheng Shi "snapped." He shot the man a look and growled: "Think that's funny? Funnier than your thankless fire-carrying?"

"No — definitely not. I'm the funnier one. I'm laughing at myself.

I've had it up to here with this goddamn fire!!"

Qin Xin seemed to have found his own release. He spat viciously into the Existence abyss below, then slapped Cheng Shi's shoulder with one heavy palm and said, dead serious:

"Let's go. There's still fire to carry."

"..."

Cheng Shi blinked. He leaned out to watch the glob of spit plummet into the abyss, and grinned.

Turns out this guy was actually kind of adorable.

Chapter 699: The Blind One to the Rescue

"..."

"..."

You know what the most awkward scene imaginable is?

It's when two people — having just bared their souls and made grand declarations — are about to spring into action, only to realize everything they just said was for nothing, because they literally couldn't get out!

After breaking through the time-interlaced barrier, they'd lost their anchor point in the original trial timeline. No trace of reality was visible anywhere. They couldn't find a way back — let alone a way home!

Moreover, the passage to the Abyss of Desire was also severed. The isolated Bone Gate hadn't fallen, but it had become a castle in the sky — useful for nothing except providing two people a safe place to stand.

And so the clown and the "fake red monkey" stood staring at each other in frozen silence, expressions growing more embarrassed by the second, toes curling tighter and tighter.

Excruciating. Absolutely excruciating.

Those rousing cries of "let's go" and "let's get out" echoed back like the Fun God laughing at them from the Void — replaying over and over in their minds, hardening their expressions one wince at a time.

At this point, even Cheng Shi's legendary thick skin couldn't conjure a way to break the impasse.

He knew that no matter what he said, the very next word from either of them would only deepen the embarrassment — until they became actual clowns.

Of course, they were already pretty close.

But... things always have a way of turning around.

Some Benefactors enjoyed mocking their followers. Others preferred protecting them.

Just as Cheng Shi and Qin Xin stood utterly lost, a clear, cool voice — like heaven's own melody — drifted in from every direction, breaking the deadlock completely.

"Qin Xin, are you there?"

"!!!"

The Blind One!

She'd come down from the mine to search for them!

Cheng Shi and Qin Xin both jolted to attention, scanning in every direction. But Cheng Shi quickly realized something was off.

Wait — the person the Blind One came looking for was... Qin Xin?

Cheng Shi blinked and glanced at Qin Xin, but the Torchbearer hadn't registered the discrepancy yet. He was too busy shouting back.

"Ming Yu! I'm here! I'm in the crevice of Existence — can you hear me?!"

Ming Yu, I'm right here!"

Watching Qin Xin respond by simply... yelling, Cheng Shi rolled his eyes: "Dude, are you filming a drama? Who taught you this? Can you make some actual noise?"

You're making it very hard to reconcile you with the fire-haired Super Saiyan from five minutes ago..."

Qin Xin froze mid-shout. Without a word, he turned around, grimaced at his own embarrassment, and swiftly unslung his giant bow. He fired War-flame arrows in all four cardinal directions — up, down, left, right.

These arrows flew far slower than his combat shots, but they had endurance on their side — sailing through the darkness at length without dropping.

Whether it was Qin Xin's signal that worked or the Blind One finding a method from Falling Gate — before long, a die materialized in mid-air not far from them. A pristine Destiny artifact: a Destiny die!

Not only that — this die seemed to... belong to him?

Cheng Shi was stunned. He had indeed left this die at Qin Xin's feet earlier. At the time, he'd already been planning a contingency — thinking that if this indestructible die could stay close to Qin Xin, maybe he could hitch a ride when the man "skipped class."

What he hadn't anticipated was reality shattering entirely, dumping them into Existence's crevice, where the die had seemingly plummeted out of contact.

Yet here it was — reappearing before him in this bizarre fashion!

The instant both men saw this die from the outside world, they immediately thought of the same escape method!

Without hesitation, Cheng Shi snapped his fingers. Never Lost Gambling Gear had finally found a real-world anchor target, swapping its Destiny follower directly across. Simultaneously, Qin Xin fired another arrow toward the die's location — this one trailing a tether. The instant Cheng Shi appeared on the other side, the Hero of Today seized the incoming arrow and was once again linked to Qin Xin.

And at that moment, the Blind One outside also sensed the die's change. She shouted:

"There are more out here! Hurry — come out! Swap out!"

Cheng Shi's eyes sharpened. He finally sensed his contingency dice in the real world. First he hauled Qin Xin close, then repeated the process — and this time, he felt his passage punch through some fragile membrane. His vision blazed white, and when it cleared, the Blind One stood before him, the Abyssal Volcano's cascading falls looming in the distance.

A wave of pure, heartfelt joy erupted from within.

Saved!

Cheng Shi grinned — truly, happily grinned.

And at that exact moment, the watch in his hand — returned to reality — began ticking again. The hands spun wildly for several rotations, catching up on the frozen time. Then, one second later, they ticked steadily to the next hour mark.

The hour mark — again!

Cheng Shi blinked, thinking how conveniently timed that was. But he had no time to dwell on it, because he quickly detected Qin Xin's second arrow nearby. The blazing fire-arrow was like a worm crawling beneath the surface of some massive, fleshy skin. When Cheng Shi found it, he tore through that "skin" and yanked the "worm" straight out.

As the War arrow burst back into the world, a fire-red figure vaulted from the unknown space into reality.

Both heard a resounding BOOM, and a heavy-armored silhouette appeared before them.

At last — the Failed-Class-Skippers Duo had seen daylight again.

The moment Qin Xin touched ground, he lifted his head with a warm smile, looking at the Blind One. Trust and admiration flickered in his eyes.

"Ming Yu — how did you find us?"

Cheng Shi was equally curious. He turned to the Blind One, thinking: surely this wasn't actually Destiny's guidance?

But the An Mingyu before them said nothing. Worse — she retreated half a step, brow furrowed slightly, and "scrutinized" the two freshly-freed "teammates." After a long moment, she pressed her lips together with a complicated expression.

That one sequence of micro-reactions sent Cheng Shi's pupils contracting and his heart dropping like a stone.

"Chosen One... you..."

Which timeline's An Mingyu are you?"

When he asked this question, Cheng Shi's expression was deadly grave. But in his heart, he already knew the answer.

If the Blind One calling only Qin Xin's name during her search was ambiguous at best, then her guarded behavior now made it crystal clear: this An Mingyu was from the same world as the Qin Xin he'd just fought — the world where carrying the fire wasn't easy!

They were wary of everything outside!

An Mingyu had changed. She'd been affected again!

Cheng Shi broke into a cold sweat. He'd barely found one ally, and now the ink on their pact was still wet and the person was already gone. Worse — the Blind One's behavior revealed an even bigger problem: Qin Xin had changed too!

Why else would Cheng Shi's inner monologue have used the phrase "the Qin Xin from just now"?

Because the Blind One's defensive posture and refusal to respond proved she hadn't found the Qin Xin she was looking for — which meant the current Qin Xin was no longer the Hawk Eye Scout he'd just fought and befriended!

And the change had happened in that one second — right around the moment of his escape!

Time, it seemed, had no intention of sparing anyone!

"Hoo—"

Cheng Shi's expression grew heavier by the moment.

"So let's be honest with each other, Torchbearers. Which world... do you come from?"

Chapter 700: Uh-Oh — They've All Got Problems

"When did he disappear?"

The first to respond to Cheng Shi was the Blind One. But she didn't answer his question directly — instead, she voiced her own doubt.

Cheng Shi glanced at her impassively. He understood her meaning and nodded: "So you are from the same world as that Qin Xin. Then what about you, Qin Xin — which version are you?"

It was a bizarre question. Qin Xin was obviously Qin Xin — who else could he be?

Yet this Qin Xin showed no confusion at the situation. He seemed to have guessed something, furrowing his brow slightly: "Your friend. Qin Xin."

My friend?

Cheng Shi paused, then understood: this Qin Xin was saying they'd communicated and cooperated successfully before. So...

He was the Qin Xin who'd witnessed Cheng Shi blast the Blind One with the Fun Ring and explored the Shanty Area together?

He was back?

"..."

Cheng Shi's eyelid twitched. How absurd — they hadn't found the cause of the discrepancies, hadn't found the original timeline, had lost the Blind One — and yet the Qin Xin he was "familiar" with had circled back.

What was this — a comedy?

He'd barely recruited a new member of the Destined Ones and she'd vanished?

Was this Destiny's joke, or Time's mockery?

Still, Cheng Shi didn't dare assume the Qin Xin before him was definitely the one who'd walked with him. He needed verification. After all, Time's hint had specified three periods: past, present, and future.

So he looked at Qin Xin, held out his hand, and made a straightforward test.

"My request may be forward, but I think my friend would help me cut through the trouble. If you are my friend, Qin Xin, please hand over your—"

Before Cheng Shi could finish, Qin Xin stepped forward, pulled out the Master of Deception Card, and placed it directly in his palm. Then, expression grave:

"I'm not your friend."

A lie!

That was a lie!

He was indeed the Qin Xin who'd walked the Shanty Area with him!

Cheng Shi's sunken heart floated back up slightly. At least — amid all this temporal chaos — he still had one trustworthy teammate.

Though this bond of trust, after being washed by Time's discrepancy, might need rebuilding from scratch.

But just as Cheng Shi was re-evaluating Qin Xin, the Blind One suddenly spoke again, asking Qin Xin a seemingly random question.

"The trial keeps getting stranger. Qin Xin — in the prophecy I made at the start of the trial, the four players who survived to the end... who do you think the fourth would be, besides us three?"

"???"

Qin Xin hadn't even processed the question when Cheng Shi was already floored.

Wait — four? The prophecy showed five, not four!

Cheng Shi was stunned. Then a chill erupted from beneath his skin, covering him in goosebumps.

He whipped his head toward the Blind One to confirm whether this was one of her discrepancies — and immediately heard Qin Xin muse behind him:

"You're serious?"

I'd say it'll be the three of us — though not the current three of us. Sorry, Ming Yu, but the ones who'll win in the end must be the Ming Yu, Cheng Shi, and Qin Xin from our own world.

As for the fourth... I can't guess."

"!!!"

'Dude... you actually answered? And you don't see anything wrong with four people in the prophecy?!'

Oh no!

This was correct!

Qin Xin apparently didn't think this question had a problem — which meant he was the one with the problem!

Cheng Shi's pupils were practically numb from all the contracting. His gaze darted between the two Torchbearers from different worlds. Moments later, catching the "just as I suspected" expression on the Blind One's face, he felt the tension that had just barely eased snap taut to the breaking point!

He saw it now: the Blind One was correct. Qin Xin was wrong!

This had been a probe by the Blind One, and Qin Xin had revealed his flaw. Of course, for him it wasn't a flaw — the prophecy in his world genuinely had only four people.

The current Qin Xin was not the one who'd walked the Shanty Area with him!

He closely resembled the previous Qin Xin, but he carried a cognitive discrepancy — the so-called Time "discrepancy."

"The result of the initial prophecy wasn't four people. It was five." The Blind One sighed, then turned to Cheng Shi. "Your expression tells me your understanding matches mine. So, Fate Weaver — this Qin Xin is not the friend you were hoping for. He... also comes from another world."

"..."

"..."

Case solved. The Blind One before him was from the "fire-carrying is hard" world. The Qin Xin before him was from the "wrong prophecy" world. And this Qin Xin from the wrong-prophecy world closely resembled the original Qin Xin.

At minimum — they both dared to hand over the Master of Deception Card, which was critically important to the Torchbearers!

Cheng Shi's brow sank. He gripped the card tightly.

If the "fire-carrying is hard" timeline was more like some kind of future, then the "wrong prophecy" timeline was more like the past — since the prophecy was made at the trial's beginning.

So the current situation: the original Blind One had been replaced by a future Blind One, while the future Qin Xin had been replaced by a past Qin Xin.

But even with the situation mapped out, Cheng Shi's brain still felt utterly scrambled. He took several deep breaths, then turned suspicious eyes on the Blind One once more:

"How did you know Qin Xin's version of the prophecy was wrong?"

"I didn't." The Blind One shook her head. "I simply wanted to verify."

"That doesn't add up. If you didn't know, you couldn't have probed with the prophecy specifically!"

Cheng Shi's expression turned cold. With so many possible variables in the past, a random probe couldn't have pinpointed one particular error so precisely. The Blind One must have known something.

She didn't deny it — because she, too, wanted to find her way home.

Just as the previous Qin Xin had said: this true Torchbearer An Mingyu from his world had no designs on other worlds' beauty. What she wanted was to protect her own.

"It was Li Wufang who let it slip. The Order follower shared his expectations about Destiny with me. He's the one who said he'd heard only four in the prophecy. So I noted it."

Li Wufang?!

The "Destined One" had changed too?

No — not necessarily. A single prophecy error wasn't enough to determine his state. The "Destined One" identity and the prophecy error might belong to the same Li Wufang, meaning this Investigator who'd joined the Destined Ones could be from some version of the past, not the future.

But all of this required Cheng Shi to go up to the mine and verify in person.

Before that, though, he needed to understand one more thing: exactly how had the Blind One rescued him and Qin Xin, and whether her rescue method had inadvertently carried Time's magic — causing Qin Xin to be swapped right before his eyes.

So Cheng Shi turned to the Blind One again, eyes burning with the question.

Her answer stunned him all over again. She gestured at the surrounding alleys, houses, shaken passersby, and the flower beds of blue-purple Abyss Rainbow Orchid swaying in the courtyards:

"Return of the Past.

By the time I arrived, this area had already self-repaired through Existence's automatic restoration. I could only sense traces of War and Destiny intertwined here but had no idea where you'd gone.

So, to find... him, I used a page inscribed with Return of the Past.

The Destiny die you saw was the one from within the recreated past — frozen at the instant reality shattered, moments before falling.

In other words: a Destiny die from Memory saved you. Your original Destiny die may have already plummeted beyond Existence and vanished.

You blasphemed against Him. Yet He forgave you.

Praise Destiny — He is... so very forgiving.

At least toward you."

"..."

This relic... He had sent it back personally?

Cheng Shi stared at the crimson pip on the die in his hand, his expression indescribable.