

## The Gods 701

Chapter 701: Wait — What Did You Just Say?

"Stop spacing out. We're facing a very serious problem."

Qin Xin walked over and patted Cheng Shi on the shoulder. Even though he wasn't the Qin Xin Cheng Shi knew, he seemed virtually identical to the real one.

"I never imagined the Torchbearers' will could transcend time to foster trust between us. Since we all share the same goal, let's skip the unnecessary formalities and get straight to business.

Honestly — the Torchbearers, at least those in my timeline, desperately need Mo Rabi's Divinity-extraction experiment. It's one of the few methods that could help the Torchbearers achieve a certain objective.

So whether or not I can return to my original timeline before the trial ends, the Folly experiment must be secured. That way, even if I can't go home, at least this world will have one more spark to preserve.

Ming Yu — we need to do this."

"..."

This Qin Xin's thinking clearly differed from the "fire-carrying is hard" Qin Xin's. The beauty he wanted to protect wasn't confined to a single world.

Yet the current An Mingyu obviously thought differently. Her convictions aligned more closely with the other Qin Xin's.

Still, she greatly admired the current Qin Xin's vision and nodded in agreement. Before they understood why so many discrepancies were occurring, locking down any advantage within reach was a sound choice.

As for Cheng Shi — he had no objections at all.

He'd come looking for clues in the first place. Since his first theory had been wrong, everything needed to be rebuilt from scratch. And the foundation of any new theory required understanding who had changed this time — only then could he identify the root cause hidden within Time's variations.

So he also wanted to return to the mine and check whether the Li Wufang with incorrect prophecy knowledge had undergone a third change.

The three exchanged glances, nodded simultaneously, and began walking toward the mine — maintaining a distance that was neither intimate nor cold. But after only a few steps, all three froze in place.

Not because they'd sensed a new threat. One of the two players still on the mountain had appeared right before them!

Li Wufang!

The Investigator had abandoned the Truth believer, ditched his surveillance responsibilities, and was strolling down the mountain without a care in the world!

Wasn't he worried about Wang Mou causing problems during the experiment?!

The three below obviously didn't look pleased. Cheng Shi especially — his heart pounded. His gaze locked onto Li Wufang, searching for some covert response. But...

Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

Li Wufang acted like an ordinary teammate. He showed zero reaction to Cheng Shi's "expectations." His sharp eyes swept across the three of them, then past them to the slightly distorted space behind. After a moment, he clicked his tongue:

"So the Oblivion believer was quite a handful. All three of you teamed up to deal with her?"

"..."

With that, Cheng Shi finally confirmed: Li Wufang had changed. He was no longer the "Destined One" Li Wufang, but a "stranger" — just an ordinary Investigator.

But this "stranger" was awfully cavalier. If he'd come down, then the Doctor was—

Li Wufang seemed to read their concern. He laughed: "Relax — trust in an Investigator's judgment. I'm an excellent read of people. In this trial, anyone might sabotage the experiment — but never the Doctor!

He values this experiment more than any of you. Before I came down, I asked him. He said all his life's luck was spent on encountering this experiment. So he'd absolutely never let anything go wrong.

Don't worry — your little skeleton puppet is up there watching. The experiment's security is well assured.

I was just curious who won. That's why I came down to check."

The moment Li Wufang finished, Cheng Shi's heart lurched. He suddenly realized something else was wrong in this trial — it wasn't just Li Wufang. The Truth believer seemed to have changed too.

Because he distinctly remembered: before heading downhill, Wang Mou had said: "Luck — an uncontrollable variable — can never be important!"

So how could a player who scoffed at luck possibly claim his life's luck had been spent on encountering a Folly experiment?!

The realization darkened Cheng Shi's expression. Time's third discrepancy seemed to have erupted.

Though the timing...

While Cheng Shi was frowning in contemplation, the Blind One suddenly raised her head to "look" toward the mine, pressing her lips together with evident concern — clearly disagreeing with Li Wufang's assessment.

Li Wufang's keen perception caught her reaction instantly. His smile faltered: "You don't trust my judgment, Chosen One?"

"It's not you I distrust — it's Time.

Even if the Doctor was normal before you left, how can you be certain he'll remain normal going forward?

And as for Wang Weijin as a player...

Sigh. He's not truly a player. He's 0221's slice."

"!!??"

Everyone present was speechless.

"He's a slice — you're sure?"

"Yes. I'm sure. I didn't figure it out — he told us himself.

In my world, the Doctor realized his own identity long ago. But he didn't seek revenge, nor did he complain. He simply lived quietly, mechanically completing trials — neither wanting to die nor harboring any ambitions.

He said Truth never brought truth — only endless illusions. Yet he depended on Truth's gifted power and couldn't bring himself to abandon his faith. So he drifted through life, and began worshipping every truth that wasn't Truth.

So I'll say this, Investigator: you're far too slow in registering Time's changes. If the Doctor was swapped during your absence for the version from my world... he won't care about any Divinity-extraction experiment.

We might even need to start praying — praying he doesn't infect the Folly believer with his apathy, convincing them both to 'relax and stop wasting effort'..."

"..."

Li Wufang's face instantly darkened. He turned to glance back at the mine, about to mount some defense — but caught Cheng Shi, who'd somehow emerged from his thoughts, seizing the gap to deliver a cutting jab:

"Tsk — the Investigator's legendary eye isn't all it's cracked up to be. First you missed the Extinguisher, now you've misread the Doctor. Your Order faith... running out of steam?"

Li Wufang couldn't hear the true meaning behind Cheng Shi's last line. Still, with a stiff, embarrassed expression, he tried to defend himself:

"The current Doctor is extremely dedicated to the experiment. As for Wu Cun..."

I wouldn't call it a miss. At least while she was in my sight, she wasn't that unhinged!

"—"

"Wait — what did you just say?!" Cheng Shi's expression snapped taut. He whipped his head up to lock eyes with Li Wufang, a gleam of insight flashing through his gaze. Word by word, with deadly gravity, he asked:

"What did you just say?"

Chapter 702: If So, Then I Think We've Found Our Answer

"I said it wasn't really a miss."

"No — the next part. What do you mean she was 'in your line of sight'? You separated?"

"Uh, yes. I thought she was fine. The Extinguisher wasn't an unstable factor at first. I just didn't expect that the moment she left my sight—"

Li Wufang stopped himself mid-sentence. His expression abruptly turned solemn.

And not just his — everyone's.

!!!

There were no fools present. The instant Cheng Shi adopted that posture and pressed Li Wufang's phrasing with such gravity, every player's mind lit up with a flash of insight. They all suddenly realized where the crux of this trial truly lay!

One by one they looked at Cheng Shi — awed by his acuity yet stunned by the trial's complexity — then furrowed their brows and retreated into their own memories. The scene fell silent.

Moments later, Cheng Shi was the first to break the silence.

Although Li Wufang hadn't answered his question directly, some questions no longer needed answering. He'd figured it out.

Just now — thanks to the Investigator's unwitting hint — everything had clicked.

He'd been wrong. He'd been wrong all along.

Every Time discrepancy in this trial had nothing to do with the Divinity-extracting Abyss Colorful Crystal. Because what changed the players wasn't any specific entity — it was a certain state related to their existence!

'Fine, fine, fine — I knew Time's trial wouldn't be simple. But I didn't expect Him to dig His own grave this hard!'

'But now I see it. Let's see how else You plan to bury me!'

Cheng Shi swept his gaze across everyone. After cataloguing every expression, he suddenly smiled with genuine sincerity:

"I know everyone here has already thought of something — you're just one step of verification short. To help you find your own answers, I'll throw out the first brick to attract jade: my own experience, to resolve your doubts.

Of course, I'm not a generous person. I'm just homesick and don't want to get lost in Time's maze. So I hope my honesty will be repaid with yours."

The clown's desire to trade for others' sincerity was genuine. How much sincerity he himself was offering, however, was debatable.

Going first — laying out his experience for others to verify — was admittedly a disadvantage. But not entirely. At least Cheng Shi could prevent others from lying to his face, and by observing everyone's reactions, he could confirm whether his theory held.

Of course, "lying" here didn't mean outright lies — it meant partial truths.

Peak players who'd dealt with con artists long enough always had countermeasures. Cheng Shi was confident he could fool everyone, but he couldn't guarantee he wouldn't be fooled himself.

So as the Blind One had once said: the clown never offered his own trust, yet always coveted everyone else's.

"I've been searching for the cause of Time's discrepancies. At first I suspected the mine. Later I shifted suspicion to the Abyss Colorful Crystal. But after Qin Xin and I found evidence disproving that theory, I hit a dead end.

The discrepancies seemed to follow no pattern. We only realized we'd been affected by observing our teammates. I once thought this was a deliberate trap by Him — designed to keep me... us trapped here.

Until just now, when the Investigator inadvertently gave me the answer. And it turns out the solution was this simple.

I don't know what everyone else experienced today, so I'll speak only for myself.

The Doctor was affected during the first exploration. He was swapped — and at that time, he was on the mine. For a period, he was alone, because Qin Xin had already doubled back to Falling Gate to set up Memory contingencies and come find me and Chosen One.

Of course, that also means Qin Xin was alone for a stretch — with nobody around him.

Remember this point. It's critical.

Next: the Investigator and the Extinguisher.

Both were affected during the first exploration as well."

Cheng Shi paused. He turned to Li Wufang with a peculiar expression:

"You and Wu Cun were both swapped. I never knew the details — until you said just now... she left your line of sight. Mm. Good. That means there was a period when you and she were in a state of mutual non-visibility."

"But that window was extremely brief."

"Of course I know it was brief. But this may have nothing to do with duration.

Moving on. After this state ended, both of you changed. Wu Cun became the berserk Extinguisher who couldn't suppress her destructive impulses. And you became an Investigator who didn't believe in fate.

One more detail after the Oblivion disaster: when Qin Xin asked you all to set up countermeasures against Wu Cun, the Doctor briefly disappeared from everyone's sight again. This window also matters. Remember it — it'll be on the test.

Next: the second wave of discrepancies.

After the group discussion that afternoon, everyone split up again. The Investigator and Doctor went back to the mine — which kept making me think something was wrong up there. But that was actually a red herring. Or perhaps an inconsequential joke from Destiny.

We later learned the Investigator and Doctor briefly separated — and both were swapped again. The Investigator started believing in fate once more. The Doctor stopped believing in luck.

As for the other team: Qin Xin, Chosen One, and I were investigating the Shanty Area. Qin Xin changed — because we did separate at one point.

But here's the puzzle: we were separated for so long — why did only Qin Xin change, while Chosen One stayed the same?

Because..."

At this, Cheng Shi pulled out his watch and showed everyone the face.

The second hand ticked steadily along. Time read about a dozen minutes before the next hour mark.

But Cheng Shi's finger was pointing at the hour mark.

"The hour mark!" The Blind One said gravely.

Cheng Shi laughed — a laugh laden with layers of meaning. Exasperation, self-mockery, sardonic irony, and a breath of relief all at once.

"Exactly — the hour mark!

I distinctly remember: at the hour mark when I separated from them, I'd cautiously called Chosen One over and reminded her face-to-face to be careful. She responded. But by then, Qin Xin had already disappeared into the distance.

So afterward, Qin Xin changed — while Chosen One remained the same.

By now, I'm sure everyone can see where this is going. It's not definitive on its own. But what happened next provides powerful corroboration.

When Qin Xin and I went back downhill searching for clues, we encountered the revived Extinguisher and fought her. She was strong — it took considerable effort to kill her again. But Oblivion's power still shattered the local reality, knocking Qin Xin and me outside of Existence.

Fortunately, Chosen One foresaw the danger and came down in time to rescue us.

But the instant I was pulled free, I saw another hour mark arrive. And in the very next second — the Qin Xin who'd escaped right behind me had become a different Qin Xin.

Ladies and gentlemen: once is coincidence. Twice is luck. But three, four, five times?

My experience today has already made a great many things clear. So I ask each of you to think back on every anomaly today. Think about whether — every time you noticed someone wasn't right — there was invariably a period where they'd left the group, where they'd been out of everyone's sight, and where an hour mark had passed.

If so — then I think we've found our answer."

Cheng Shi finished with a smile, then let his gaze sweep rapidly across every face.

Chapter 703: What Is Time Trying to Express?

Cheng Shi had lied.

Everything he'd said about the trial was true. But the entanglements between himself and the Torchbearers had all been blurred into lies.

He was deliberately protecting himself — which, incidentally, also protected the Torchbearers.

However, since his analysis cut straight to the heart of the matter, nobody pressed him for details on what he and Qin Xin had actually done to Wu Cun.

Everyone began reviewing today's events. Before long, their experiences aligned perfectly with Cheng Shi's theory.

The Fate Weaver had it exactly right: whenever someone vanished from their teammates' sight at the hour mark, abnormalities followed.

So in this trial, the cause of the discrepancies wasn't some twisted temporal field or residual divine energy — it was... the players' line of sight?!

As long as a teammate couldn't see you, Time would eject you from your timeline?

This had been a trap targeting lone wolves all along?

For a moment, everyone's expression turned peculiar.

Li Wufang frowned slightly, puzzled:

"While this all fits the reasoning, it doesn't quite fit the logic.

You have to understand — the trials They bestow always carry layers of meaning. They're also expressions of something to us players. Whether or not we comprehend it, that expression is always there.

Time typically showcases the mystery and wonder of time itself. He isn't Deceit — He wouldn't deliberately toy with players. So in this incredibly elusive temporal entanglement, what is He trying to express?"

Express what?

Cheng Shi snorted softly. His peripheral vision caught Qin Xin's sidelong glance, and the two exchanged a knowing smile.

He didn't know what Time was expressing. But he knew what he'd gained from this trial.

He'd learned the true identity of the Torchbearers' founder. He'd discovered who the real Grand Marshal was. He'd glimpsed the terrifying truth hidden within parallel timelines. He believed he'd guessed part of the reason the gods formed the Convention. He'd deepened his resolve to keep living. And he'd even expanded the Destined Ones along the way.

Even if this trial scored him nothing, the clown felt the trip had been more than worthwhile.

Of course, losing points was unacceptable.

Also — he needed to get home first.

In truth, Cheng Shi did have some ideas about the discrepancy rule he'd just deduced. He'd thought of a few things.

Time had once said "time proves everything." But Deceit had countered: "the one providing the answer isn't Time." Cheng Shi had been pondering these two statements daily. Only today — after experiencing all these discrepancies — did an inkling of understanding emerge.

If the answer wasn't given by Time, yet Time had proven something — did that mean Time's enlightenment was embedded within the path to the answer?

And could that enlightenment be: "seeing is not necessarily believing, and unseen is not necessarily unreal"?

He could see his teammate, yet that person wasn't truly his "teammate." And the cause of the change happened where he couldn't look.

If he couldn't see it, did the change count as Existence?

It was like countless parallel worlds marching forward in lockstep. A being in one world might live its entire life never realizing that countless other worlds — and countless "identical versions of itself" — existed underneath the cosmos. It believed they didn't exist. But did they really not?

No — they had always Existed.

Mortals look up to gods but cannot reach them. Gods look down on mortals as ants.

This was the truth Cheng Shi had grasped after a day of exhausting pursuit. But he didn't dare breathe a word of it to anyone.

The clown had gotten smarter. He was afraid some god would overhear his sentiments and drag him off for another lecture. If it were any other god, that was manageable. But if it were Time...

He couldn't handle that.

Or if it were Deceit...

He'd be sarcasticked to death.

The clown could already picture his Benefactor's mocking face: 'Oh, the Chosen of Time has arrived?'

So Cheng Shi simply stopped talking. He focused solely on the trial itself — no more borrowing trouble.

'All I want right now is to go home. No one — no one — is stopping me.'

"Everyone — even if this theory is airtight, for safety's sake, we need one more verification.

The next hour mark is almost here. The Doctor's still on the mountain. If I'm right and we waste more time down here, the Doctor is about to change.

Of course, it wouldn't matter if he doesn't become the apathetic Doctor that Chosen One described. But nobody likes letting a duck already in hand fly away. So... shall we head back to the mine first, then figure out how to search for our respective worlds?"

Everyone exchanged looks and nodded silently.

Cheng Shi's proposal was undeniably the best strategy at present. Now that everyone knew how to crack the puzzle, solving it would accelerate rapidly. The priority was no longer the remaining six days of the trial — it was securing the Folly experiment and the Divinity within the Abyss Colorful Crystal.

Those were valuable assets no one could afford to ignore.

So the group hurried back uphill, racing against time. Before the hour mark struck, they had to ensure the Doctor was in everyone's sight.

Before long, all four players stormed back to the warehouse. Seeing the Doctor absorbed in monitoring the experiment, Li Wufang exhaled with relief:

"See? I told you I wouldn't misjudge. The Doctor's fine."

He raised his watch. The hour mark was ten seconds away. And now Cheng Shi's countdown rang in everyone's ears.

"Keep your eyes on each other. This is no time to be verifying discrepancies — just make sure everyone stays at least in your peripheral vision. Otherwise, we'll be meeting new teammates again.

Ready — the hour mark is coming!

5, 4, 3, 2—"

BOOM—

The expected "1" never came. Instead — an explosion!

One second before the hour mark, a massive smoke bomb detonated at their feet, engulfing everyone in blinding, opaque fog.

Everyone reeled in shock — but it was already too late. The very next second, the discrepancy struck. And at that same instant, Cheng Shi — who'd already used a die to teleport beside the Doctor — stood motionless, staring at Wang Mou's face with a playful smile curling his lips.

'Sorry, everyone. Not one of you shares my timeline. So if fate allows it, let's meet again some other day.

Since discrepancies keep happening, and His hint includes only "past, present, and future" — then if I keep creating discrepancies, isn't it possible to cycle the lost teammates back from other timelines?

It's not impossible. At least the discrepancies can't endlessly introduce new timelines — because that would make the trial unsolvable.

After all, no matter how difficult a trial gets, no matter how "petty" the gods who designed it — there must always be an answer. The difficulty varies, sure — some trials are nigh-impossible.

So I'm curious whether my theory is correct. I need to test it urgently, but I can't be the one who changes. So I can only trouble you all to bear a little inconvenience.

I'll be grateful that you completed this final verification for me. As for compensation... the answer to this trial. I've already given it.

Except for the Doctor — whoever you become, I can accept it. Of course, if my Destined Ones and Torchbearers actually cycle back... that would be a god-tier opening and a royal-flush finish.

Time set a trap for me. I jumped out of it and spat into the hole.

Don't blame me for lacking manners. This isn't a manners issue — it's a faith issue.

I'm a follower of Destiny. Time was made to be spat on. What's wrong with that?'

Chapter 704: Royal Flush? Half Flush!

Cheng Shi's approach was sound. But his teammates' states were highly unsound.

The discrepancy had struck three players simultaneously. The instant the hour mark hit, a blinding holy light erupted from within the smoke, dispelling all darkness.

Order's power enveloped the entire room, forcibly implanting the urge to be law-abiding in everyone's mind. Cheng Shi's eyelid twitched — he nearly felt the impulse to go back and swallow the "spit" he'd hocked into Time's trap.

"..."

'Thank heavens this Order isn't strong. Otherwise, I'd be starring in "The Boy Who Ate His Own Spit"!''

As the smoke cleared, everyone's eyes on Cheng Shi were filled with suspicion and scrutiny. Though they'd changed, they clearly realized what had just happened.

The Blind One's gaze was especially complex. Standing closest to Cheng Shi, she'd guessed his intent — stared blankly for a long moment — then pushed up her sleeve to wipe the sweat from her wrist. She probed:

"Invitation, companionship, clues, mystery, death, reunion... Good. Your expression tells me this trial's permutations aren't infinite after all.

Fate Weaver — you truly are Destiny's Favored One. To use even this method to cycle us back to the same timeline."

The Blind One was clearly referencing everything that had happened during her time with Cheng Shi today. Hearing the familiar tone, Cheng Shi's heart leapt — thinking his recruited Destined One had actually returned. But he quickly steadied himself. Eyes shifting, he probed right back:

"I'd planned to use the smoke cover to take someone out — to make your prophecy come true. But... the Investigator was too alert. I couldn't find an opening. Pity. No telling who'll be eliminated next."

Hearing this, the Blind One frowned and glanced at the Investigator. In her mind, if someone had to be eliminated from the current lineup, Li Wufang was the best target.

Of course, "eliminated" here didn't necessarily mean death — it could mean disappearing or leaving the trial.

But it was precisely this deeply-agreeing glance that sank Cheng Shi's heart right back to the bottom.

There were five people on the field. He'd said he wanted to take one out, leaving four. Yet she hadn't questioned the number at all — which meant...

'Oh no. I've hit the jackpot in the worst way. The An Mingyu before me isn't the original — she's the An Mingyu from the four-person prophecy!'

It seemed the smoke trick hadn't turned his terrible hand into a royal flush. As for the other two...

Li Wufang's eyelid twitched twice at Cheng Shi's words. He instinctively stepped back, looking between the Blind One and Cheng Shi, then raised the Discipline Arrow in his hand and wiped the sweat from his forehead:

"Seriously, you two? You'd go after a harmless Order follower?"

Brother Cheng — and here I actually helped you get rid of your 'allergen'!

And you, Chosen One — I admire you so much I even specially requested a divination from you right at the start. Please don't shatter the good-person filter I've built around you.

But let me remind you of something: the surviving player count on the final day of your prophecy isn't four — it's five. So the people who survive to the end definitely include me. Not you."

Li Wufang's words obviously didn't mean the Blind One would die. He was simply expressing that he and the Blind One weren't from the same timeline.

Hearing this, Cheng Shi's eyes lit up. The Blind One's brow sank.

Clearly this seemingly unreliable Investigator was an extremely sharp individual. He'd already realized what was happening and was using his own logic to broadcast his identity.

He was describing his own actions from the trial's opening. By emphasizing that specific period, he could only mean he'd mastered enough clues for outsiders to verify who he was — using this method to find teammates from his own timeline.

And as expected of an Order follower — this approach of handing the judgment to others was one that might not work from anyone else. But Order believers had the highest credibility. When he acted this way, players who'd figured everything out would naturally project their own perspective to evaluate whether Li Wufang was from their world.

And the Investigator was the best at reading people. Once his observations bore fruit, he could use everyone's reactions to find his way home — or at least find his own teammates.

This was similar to Cheng Shi's earlier approach of sharing his experience first at the foot of the mine. Except Order believers were generally more trustworthy.

Clever! Extremely clever!

Having understood the Investigator's logic, Cheng Shi began evaluating his identity.

The Investigator's account matched Cheng Shi's own experience. And calling him "Brother Cheng" without hidden signaling ruled out the "Destined One" world's Li Wufang.

The Li Wufang before the smoke trick had been from the wrong-prophecy world. So this current Li Wufang belonged to neither a "future" nor a "past" — he could only be the present discrepancy, or the original.

Cheng Shi hadn't been sure whether a "present discrepancy" necessarily existed in this trial. But seeing this Li Wufang, he now knew: yes, it did.

Meaning each player in Time's game truly had four states: Original, present discrepancy, past discrepancy, and future discrepancy.

He remembered that after Li Wufang's first swap alongside Wu Cun, he'd become an Investigator who didn't believe in fate. But the Li Wufang before him, the "Destined One" Li Wufang, and the wrong-prophecy Li Wufang all believed in fate!

So the fate-denying Li Wufang and the current Li Wufang were different people — representing either the "original" or the "present discrepancy"!

Their pasts were identical. Only in certain attitudes toward people and things did they diverge!

Following this logic, the current Li Wufang was undoubtedly the original — perfectly matching the Li Wufang from the trial's start!

Of course, there was one other possibility: he wasn't the original and was simply lying.

The clown had been burned too many times. Every "truth-speaking disciple" had to be treated with suspicion. So he looked at Li Wufang and probed directly:

"Investigator — I think you've found the right path. But I can't guarantee it yet. If you trust me... how about telling a lie?"

Li Wufang blinked. A spark of understanding flashed through his eyes.

"I'm sorry — as an Order follower, I'm not particularly good at lying."

"..."

A lie!

How interesting — the Investigator had chosen to lie with precisely this statement.

Now Cheng Shi was sure. This was the Li Wufang from his own timeline.

'Great, great, great — finally someone from "home." And it turns out to be the "least important" one.'

Destiny's joke was still running!

What about Qin Xin — who was he?

Cheng Shi looked at Qin Xin. The other two followed his gaze. Qin Xin straightened, glanced at the Blind One, then smiled:

"It seems only Ming Yu doesn't belong here."

"?"

With those words, Qin Xin was claiming to have identified Cheng Shi and Li Wufang — and affirming he was from their timeline. Cheng Shi mused briefly, using his earlier reasoning to rule out both the "fire-carrying is hard" and "wrong prophecy" versions. But he still couldn't determine whether this Qin Xin came from the "original" or the "present discrepancy."

Because throughout the entire trial, he'd never found a distinction between these two Qin Xins. They were too similar. The only notable difference was that the original Qin Xin studied the Blind One with a measuring eye, while the later Qin Xin showed the Blind One extraordinary trust.

But this "arguably normal" expression wasn't strong enough evidence to determine identity.

So right now, Cheng Shi found it difficult to pin down Qin Xin's identity. But he wasn't completely out of options.

He had one method — an exceedingly simple one:

Trust Qin Xin.

Because he knew that no matter how Qin Xin changed, every version was a true Torchbearer. Their wills were alike. Though they differed in how broadly they defended beauty, a man like Qin Xin wouldn't carelessly claim another timeline's Qin Xin's identity without his own independent judgment.

Because every world needed its own Qin Xin.

So Cheng Shi accepted him. Openly and without reservation — no self-proof demanded, no further tests.

There had been enough tests of the Torchbearers in this trial. And every time, the feedback was the same:

This was, without question, a great organization. Especially because they had a founder with extraordinary personal magnetism and unshakeable conviction.

And that founder was the Qin Xin standing before him.

"In that case, Chosen One... your situation seems rather... awkward."

Chapter 705: Truth Brought the Answer

The Blind One fell silent.

Indeed — in a room of five, three people shared the same timeline. Only she was the outsider.

As for the other outsider... the Doctor's function right now didn't really qualify as "person." He was the experiment's surveillance-reminder device — someone everyone would protect with eyes closed. As long as he could organize the experimental steps and ensure its completion, it didn't matter where he came from.

And judging by his behavior, he didn't seem to care about the timeline question either. After all, he was just a slice. "Home" was... he couldn't even say he had one.

But Qin Xin didn't let the silence linger. He moved to the Blind One's side, standing in front of her in a subtle protective posture.

"Ming Yu — you've been cooped up in your own world too long. A change of air won't hurt.

There are still six days in the trial. We'll find a way back. Don't worry — Destiny will guide your path.

Besides, numbers don't make truth in this world. We may be few, but we're on the truest path.

And who even knows which world this belongs to? Maybe we're the foreigners. Maybe you're the one who belongs here."

Though well said, Cheng Shi still made a face.

'What a warm-hearted big brother — consoling his Fire Seeker so beautifully. But what about the clown?'

'The clown barely had a sliver of hope, and your pep talk just crushed it.'

'So whose world is this, dammit?!'

Indeed — even though Cheng Shi had untangled the logic behind the discrepancies and verified his theory with the smoke trick, he still didn't know which world he was standing in.

Because a doubt lingered — one he'd discussed only with the original Blind One, never shared with anyone else. The logic behind his own and the Blind One's "discrepancy" seemed different from everyone else's!

Cheng Shi had mentioned that — prompted by Jiang Chi — he'd been wary of every hour mark throughout the trial. So at every single hour mark, he'd ensured his teammates were within sight.

See the problem?

Every hour mark.

That meant from start to finish, Cheng Shi had always had players sharing his line of sight!

Yet he'd still been thrown from his timeline — a fact the original Blind One had told him.

The Blind One said she hadn't changed during her first resurrection, and she'd been with Cheng Shi nearly the entire time afterward. Yet the timeline still shifted once they reached the mine.

This meant the trial contained a second layer of timeline logic — one that didn't manifest through player interaction, but lurked in some corner Cheng Shi hadn't discovered.

Cheng Shi even suspected Time had foreseen his caution and added an insurance policy to this hard-to-detect discrepancy logic — a fail-safe designed to trap the clown in the time labyrinth!

This worried him, but not excessively.

If the first rule could be found, the second one would surface before long.

He was grateful this was a genuine peak-level game. Every player could supply the team with vast amounts of deduction and intelligence. Without them, he might never have identified two teammates from his own timeline this quickly.

"Why make it sound so tragic?"

Nobody died — ugh, no, spit spit spit — it's just one more hour with us.

Chosen One, I don't know whether your next timeline will be safe. But I have to remind you: keeping yourself moving is the key to finding the way home." Cheng Shi offered this friendly advice.

The Blind One broke her silence. She seemed less fazed than everyone had expected.

"I think Qin Xin is right. You can't even confirm whether this world belongs to you. What makes you so sure it isn't my timeline?"

"..." 'What is this — I try to comfort her and she starts getting feisty?'

Cheng Shi shook his head with a wry smile. This Destiny Chosen's mentality was holding up well — at least she wasn't like the "fire-carrying is hard" An Mingyu, desperate to rush home.

And just as everyone was talking, Wang Mou — who'd been silently observing the experiment — suddenly spoke. His brow was deeply creased:

"If you really care so much about which world you're in, go down the mountain and check the Abyss Rainbow Orchids. Identify their colors. Then hurry back to your own worlds.

I admit my experimental focus isn't perfectly stable. But your chatter is making it impossible to concentrate.

So leave. I don't need you to anchor this world for me — because no matter where I am, Truth is always Truth."

"!!!"

'Wait, Doctor — this isn't about whether you'll get swapped. It's about us being afraid of you getting swapped!'

'If the apathetic Doctor the Blind One described shows up — sure, you can carry on admiring your experiment in whatever world you land in. But what about us? If we get stuck with that version, we can't exactly prop up a wall of wet mud!'

Moreover, Cheng Shi had a suspicion. He believed that during the first investigation split, the Wang Mou who'd returned empty-handed — bringing back only Alo Manni — was precisely that apathetic Doctor.

Running the numbers after several swaps, this Wang Mou could genuinely turn into that "wet mud" again.

'Terrifying!'

But wait...

What did the Doctor mean about the Rainbow Orchids?

Everyone's brows knit tight. Cheng Shi whipped around in shock, staring at Wang Mou's profile with dead seriousness:

"What's wrong with the Abyss Rainbow Orchids?"

Wang Mou didn't even look at him. He continued monitoring the experiment.

Cheng Shi's expression froze. He quickly slipped something into both Mo Rabi and Allendor's coat pockets. The motion caught Wang Mou's attention. Seeing the Doctor stare at him with cold severity, Cheng Shi smirked:

"Two Corruption candies. Carnal pleasure flavor. One snap of my fingers — next second — these two Folly believers will abandon their experiment, wrap themselves around each other, and become permanent slaves to Corruption.

At that point, I can't guarantee whether the experiment continues. But I can promise this: this state? You absolutely cannot dispel it, Doctor. Because these are gifts bestowed by Him personally — sediment dredged from the bottom of desire, from the deepest depths of the Sea of Desire."

"..."

"..."

"..."

Everyone present went silent. They'd never heard of such a thing. But that didn't stop them from believing Cheng Shi might actually possess it. From a Fate Weaver who played tricks on his own teammates, there seemed to be nothing he wouldn't do.

Wang Mou glanced at Cheng Shi, then at Allendor — whose face was now beaded with sweat. A sigh:

"Mortals cannot set foot in the Sea of Desire. Corruption has never summoned players there. Your item is fake. But the Folly believer bought it — he doesn't dare gamble.

As expected, the sprout of Folly only relates to 'foolish' and 'idiotic,' not to true Folly.

Fine. If he doesn't dare gamble, then neither do I.

Fate Weaver — I tell you the truth, and you give me peace?"

"You also need to tell me how you discovered the truth, and what exactly is going on with the Rainbow Orchids."

"Because of Truth. As I said — the circulation of knowledge allows more ignorant minds to discover truth.

The Abyss Rainbow Orchid was originally used by the Tower of Logic as a biological thermometer for locating Abyss Colorful Crystal deposits. It has its own systematic logic for changing color based on temperature."

"I know that. The volcano's temperature changes, and so do their colors. Today the orchid blossoms cycled through several color phases: red, orange-yellow, green, and blue-violet. Four states. That means the volcano's temperature has been dropping steadily.

Hm? Wait — that's not..."

Cheng Shi stopped. He realized the current temperature seemed to have risen back to the scorching heat of when they'd first arrived. Standing here for a moment, he was already sweating.

Had the Abyssal Volcano's eruption intensified again?

He peered through the window at the distant Abyssal Volcano. And at that moment, Wang Mou shook his head with a detached expression:

"You just listed four colors for the orchid yet remain oblivious to the implication. That alone proves you know nothing about the Abyssal Volcano.

As the most mysterious spatial conduit on the Land of Hope, the Abyssal Volcano's cycle of change is measured in centuries. If the cycle spans that long, how could Falling Gate — situated right next to the volcano — experience such dramatic temperature fluctuations within a single day?"

"!!!!!"

The instant Wang Mou pointed out this phenomenon — overlooked by everyone — every player present realized the marker for world-shifts had been staring them in the face all along.

The little ball-flowers!

If the volcano's state was essentially stable on a day-to-day scale, then Falling Gate's Rainbow Orchids should never have changed color at all!

So every color change they'd witnessed today had happened because the world beneath their feet had changed!

Indeed — Time never wrote foreshadowing. He placed the answer in the most obvious spot. And even so, they hadn't escaped His trap!

Cheng Shi stared in the direction below the mine, wiping the hot sweat from his forehead with an indescribable expression.

'Oh no — this really is the episode where the bad student scores a zero!'

Chapter 706: Praise Destiny — The Goodness of Hearts

The hour had just passed. This was clearly the trial's safe window.

Cheng Shi was eager to verify the Doctor's revelation, so he headed downhill again. This time he didn't request company, but the scene's sole Order follower — uneasy about this Fate Weaver who'd already demonstrated "chaotic behavior" — volunteered to accompany him.

On the way down, Li Wufang kept studying Cheng Shi with subtle glances. Cheng Shi noticed but said nothing — he was quietly studying the Investigator right back.

The fact that a "future" Li Wufang had joined the Destined Ones had made quite an impact on Cheng Shi. He didn't yet understand this Order believer, so amid all the temporal shuffling, he'd developed a certain curiosity.

Li Wufang felt the same. And the reason for his curiosity was simple...

When he'd been swapped to another timeline, a different Fate Weaver named Cheng Shi had unceremoniously barked a string of orders at him. He had no idea why the other Cheng Shi knew him so well, nor where the man found the nerve to boss around a hunter stronger than himself — but every single command had cut straight to the heart of their problems, resolving each difficulty with surgical precision.

Because of that, he'd discovered he didn't actually mind being directed. After all, obeying orders was itself a form of Order.

And this fate-believing Investigator even felt it might be some kind of Destiny's guidance.

So his curiosity grew, and he began studying Cheng Shi — not for the first time, but the first time he'd had the chance to study the original one.

Halfway down, Cheng Shi could no longer endure the staring. He stopped and turned with a half-smile:

"See anything interesting, Investigator?"

"You don't seem to believe in fate."

"???" The comment blindsided Cheng Shi. He eyed Li Wufang suspiciously, wondering if this was some kind of trick.

Li Wufang coughed lightly and — with a peculiar expression — demonstrated his keen observation:

"You're very careful going downhill. You only take paths you've walked before. Some forks are obviously shorter with the end clearly visible — zero danger — yet you... instinctively take the first step toward them, then immediately pretend nothing happened and backtrack.

Your subconscious points you in a direction, but you refuse to walk into the unknown — even when it's only a brief stretch.

So I say you don't believe in Destiny. Because Destiny is full of unknowns."

Hearing this, Cheng Shi scoffed.

"Investigator — don't tell me you don't know Destiny has its fixed path. I only walk the path that's fixed."

"Of course I know. But fixed paths have no variation. If you truly commit to the fixed path, you wouldn't instinctively want to take shortcuts at forks. I'd say you're simply avoiding risk. You walk the fixed path not because you prefer it, but because you sense the 'safety' on it."

"..." Cheng Shi choked. His gaze darkened as he glanced at Li Wufang: "Who are you?"

"As you can see — Investigator Li Wufang." He peeled off his leather jacket again. "Sorry — it's really too hot."

"..."

Cheng Shi was speechless. He was certain the man was flexing — physically flexing — and that his freewheeling personality did bear a passing resemblance to his own.

But why did this Investigator have such a unique understanding of fate?

"You really believe in fate?"

"Mm. Whether you're re-confirming I'm the original me, or just genuinely asking — the answer is:

Yes. I believe.

Brother Cheng, I've always thought the world's composition is the interweaving of all living beings' destinies. So only under Destiny's guidance can we truly belong in this world."

"?" Cheng Shi laughed — entirely mocking. "And yet you chose Order? Are you another... um, blasphemer who enjoys blaspheming?"

"Blaspheme? No, no, no — I never blaspheme. I deeply respect Them."

Cheng Shi's expression turned icy: "God Worship Society or Descent Faction?"

Li Wufang blinked, then shook his head:

"Neither. My understanding of Them is perhaps a bit... unconventional.

I've always felt the world inherently follows patterns. But not everyone perceives or understands those patterns. Their descent made the abstract concrete. So as long as everyone chooses a faith, they can live well in this world. That's why I respect Them — They made the world simpler."

"..." Cheng Shi couldn't keep up with this Investigator's logic. He pointed at the ground, caught between laughter and tears: "You call this trial 'simple'?"

"The current trial certainly isn't simple — because Time has blocked Destiny's guidance, leaving us with no trace to follow. But fortunately, both you and Chosen One are His followers. Stay close to you, and I can feel His guidance again."

Cheng Shi had never been this speechless. Since everything the man said was genuine, he couldn't tell whether this Investigator was earnestly sharing his philosophy of destiny — or shamelessly buttering him up.

'Talk like that, and if you followed Destiny, your ranking would be seriously impressive.'

"Sounds like you truly care about Destiny. So why not choose Destiny instead of Order?"

"Because... Destiny cannot make people believe in destiny. If I want others to accept my perspective, I first need to be credible.

And Order is the most credible. So I chose Order — not Destiny."

"?"

The statement stunned Cheng Shi. He blinked in bewilderment. 'What is this — a die-hard Destiny fan wearing an Order skin?'

'I use Order's power to take the stage, all so I can sing praises of Destiny's greatness before a trusting audience?'

'Dude, your gameplay is dirtier than mine!'

'That's Order? That's pure Chaos!'

'And with a mindset like that, Order still gives you points? He really is...'

'Oh right — He really is Chaos now.'

'Makes sense. Makes perfect sense. The most logical episode yet!'

Cheng Shi was deeply moved. Behind every seemingly absurd story lay a perfectly rational inner logic. Li Wufang played the Order follower beautifully. The only question was: what had happened to make this man believe so fervently in Destiny?

"So? What are you trying to say?" Cheng Shi smacked his lips and continued walking.

Li Wufang hurried to keep up, talking as he walked — though his mismatched stride always left him half a shoulder behind.

"I'm just saying: if a Fate Weaver who doesn't believe in Destiny can still earn Destiny's favor — then you're most likely Destiny's darling.

Walking beside His darling — that's the life answer I've been searching for.

So — has the evaluation period ended, Brother Cheng? Do I have the honor of joining you?"

Cheng Shi stopped again. He shot the man a cold sidelong glance: "What did you learn in the other worlds?"

"I know nothing. Whichever version of you it was, they were all cautious enough. But — based on how a certain Fate Weaver treated me, I suspect a certain me joined a certain remarkable organization.

I just wanted to test whether such an organization actually exists. And your reaction tells me... it seems it does.

So — am I qualified to join this... organization that houses Destiny's darling?

Trust me, I'm an extremely efficient Investigator. And I'm an Order believer — my reputation in peak-level games is solid. Whatever you need, I can help."

Cheng Shi frowned, pondered briefly, then nodded with gravity — as if he'd made a decision.

Li Wufang's eyes sparked with anticipation. He waited for the glittering offer. But instead of Cheng Shi's answer, he got Cheng Shi's "résumé."

"I'm actually pretty interested in that organization you described. If you ever track it down, give me a shout — I'll come too.

Room and board not required. Just carry me through trials."

With that, Cheng Shi strode off, leaving the Investigator standing alone in the sweltering night, thoroughly discombobulated.

"..."

This Fate Weaver... was truly a fascinating person.

Chapter 707: What Have I Done to Deserve This!

The two of them soon arrived at the site where Cheng Shi and Qin Xin had fought. Cheng Shi remembered a bed of Rainbow Orchids growing in front of the residential section here.

Though the area was patchwork-ruined from Existence's repairs, not a single building was missing. Cheng Shi quickly spotted the red orchid bed and found a crimson bundle of small ball-flowers by the roadside.

Judging by the location, this was likely where the boy he'd "extorted" earlier had dropped his bouquet.

Indeed — even a picked bouquet had changed color. The Rainbow Orchids were Time's markers for different worlds — and the clues He'd left for the players.

'That's Truth for you — even if His followers are all eccentric, those brains of theirs... genuinely work.'

Now that he knew the world-anchoring markers, Cheng Shi began analyzing the entire trial's world-shift patterns — undeniably his paramount concern, and the key to finding his way home.

That said, the orchids he'd first seen were red, and they were red now too. Did that mean he'd returned to the original world?

Clearly yes. When he mapped each player's state against the orchid colors, the day's full timeline of shifts unraveled quickly.

At the trial's start, every player was "original." The world was "original." The Abyss Rainbow Orchids were red.

They'd stayed red through finding Ad Ric and bringing the miner back to the inn.

The first time Cheng Shi saw orange-yellow orchids was outside the Shanty Area before the second exploration — meaning the world had changed for the first time somewhere between the latter half of the first exploration and the end of the first group discussion.

This change corresponded exactly with the first wave of player discrepancies.

The green orchids appeared on the trail up to the mine after the second exploration — so the world had shifted again during the second exploration. That, too, coincided with the second wave of player discrepancies.

The pattern now seemed "obvious."

Even with someone in Cheng Shi's field of vision at every hour mark, the world he stood in still changed. This meant it wasn't only being ejected from a timeline that altered your world — the space-time itself could shift according to the players' discrepancy states.

For Cheng Shi, the most visceral proof was his own smoke trick. After that triple-discrepancy, the orchids had shifted from blue-violet back to red — confirming the hypothesis. World changes were strongly correlated with player discrepancy states.

In other words: as long as discrepancies erupted, even if a player didn't personally trigger the rule, the world could still be dragged into a discrepancy state.

So if someone wanted to keep the current world stable, they'd simply need to ensure nobody left anyone else's field of vision at each hour mark.

But was that feasible?

No. Because the Blind One wasn't currently her original self. She was bound to change eventually.

And the moment she changed, nobody could guarantee the world wouldn't change with her.

So the dilemma facing Cheng Shi was once again "random" permutation. He had to push the Blind One's transition while praying the world didn't shift in tandem — and simultaneously ensuring nobody else sabotaged the experiment of finding the way home.

This was impossibly hard.

Pinning his hopes on the Torchbearers was acceptable. But there were still two outsiders. Though their attitudes were passable, they remained uncontrollable variables.

Cheng Shi couldn't guarantee that over the next seven days, everyone would share his "desperation" to go home and cooperate obediently. So he devised a more reliable method — one that left absolutely no room for accidents.

Namely... kill the uncertain elements first!

The fewer people remaining in the trial, the higher the odds of returning home.

And when only he, Qin Xin, and the Blind One were left — three people who trusted each other — they could boldly play a permutation game against Time.

Having reached this conclusion, Cheng Shi immediately turned to the Investigator beside him with a friendly smile.

Li Wufang tensed. Catching the shift in Cheng Shi's expression, he quietly retreated half a step, one hand behind his back.

Cheng Shi leaned over to peek at his hidden hand: "Why so nervous?"

"..." Li Wufang's mouth twitched. He retreated another step. "Your eyes carry the same destructive urge as the Extinguisher. I don't want to assume the worst — but I need to make sure you won't silence me to protect your organization's secrecy."

'Tsk. The Investigator's too sharp. Hard to make a move on him.'

Cheng Shi frowned and switched tactics.

"I'm a priest who couldn't tie up a chicken. You're a hunter renowned for agility. How could I possibly silence you?"

Relax — you're too tense."

Cheng Shi's fingers caressed the Fun Ring, his smile growing ever more genial.

"What I wanted to say is — do you really want to join us?"

"?" The Investigator blinked, stunned: "You people actually have an organization?"

"We do. Of course we do. You're clever and perceptive — you nearly deduced our existence.

That's right — we're indeed an organization that reveres Destiny. We have quite a few of these so-called Destiny's darlings you mentioned. But as you may have gathered, not just anyone can join.

At minimum, you'd need to be a Destiny's darling yourself to qualify for a seat at the same table.

Do you think... you are?"

Cheng Shi's smile grew radiant. He could see Li Wufang was tempted. But unfortunately, the man shook his head.

"No. I'm not.

I'm searching for Destiny's darlings, but I don't consider myself one.

I've certainly benefited from Destiny's guidance. But I have enough self-awareness to know — a single stroke of fortune isn't perpetual luck.

And your attitude makes me afraid to say 'yes.' I may believe in fate, but I'm not stupid."

"..."

'People are getting harder to scam these days. No matter — the con man adapts his con to the target.'

After sizing Li Wufang up once more, Cheng Shi smiled again:

"Be more confident, Investigator. How do you know you're not one? Nobody receives His gaze and guidance for no reason.

Having received even the smallest gift from Destiny means you've already traveled further down the path of fate than most.

So you can absolutely claim to be Destiny's darling."

"What are you actually trying to do?" Li Wufang panicked — not from fear of ambush, but because Cheng Shi's words were genuinely swaying him.

He'd even started wondering if Destiny had always favored him.

"What am I trying to do?"

Obviously, I want to invite you to join us — to join the family favored by Destiny. Isn't that what you wanted? What — having second thoughts?"

"..." Li Wufang looked at Cheng Shi, conflicted: "What do I have to give up?"

"Smart!"

Every gift from Destiny comes with a price. Some can afford it. Some can't.

I'll be straight with you: we have a method for testing whether someone is truly a Destiny's darling. It also serves as the initiation ritual. Pass it, and I'll happily introduce you to the other members.

Their identities will exceed anything you can imagine."

"Is Chosen One... one of them?"

"?" The smile froze on Cheng Shi's face. 'Dude, are you cheating?'

'How do you know everything?'

"No. A mere Chosen One? She's not worthy."

"..."

'Right, right, right — Destiny's own Chosen One isn't worthy, but I am!'

'What have I done to deserve this?!'

Chapter 708: Bro, You Blaspheme Deceit This Much — the Fun God Doesn't Mind?

Li Wufang was lost for words. He felt he'd stumbled into the greatest con since the Faith Game's descent — and simultaneously, the greatest crisis.

Though the crisis wasn't the con itself. The crisis was that — despite facing a con this absurd — he was actually tempted.

An irrepressible urge surged inside him, like a moth drawn to flame, yearning to plunge headlong into Destiny's resplendent fire!

He stared into Cheng Shi's eyes, expression agonizingly conflicted, his mind frantically weighing pros and cons. Cheng Shi read the hesitation and placed one more tiny weight on the scales about to tip inside the man's heart.

A weight called "self-persuasion."

"Tell me about yourself, Investigator. Why do you believe in Destiny so fervently?"

The conflict on Li Wufang's face froze. Soon, the light of memory rose in his eyes.

He didn't say much — just fished an old photograph from his discarded jacket and handed it to Cheng Shi. Cheng Shi examined it: a cityscape photo, centered on a fountain. Inside the pool stood a sopping-wet child, clutching something in his hand, wide eyes searching for something.

That was the entire photo. Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow in surprise — he recognized the child as Li Wufang.

"That's you?"

"Yes. Me, as a kid." Li Wufang nodded.

"Were you... playing in the water?"

"No. I was... following Destiny's guidance."

"?" Cheng Shi frowned slightly and said nothing more, listening quietly.

"I'm an orphan."

"..." 'Congratulations — you've already got protagonist marks.'

Li Wufang didn't catch Cheng Shi's colorful expression. He gazed at the photo with nostalgia, cracking a small smile:

"I was raised by my grandmother. When I was twelve, she got sick. Very sick. The kind of sick no amount of money could fix.

There was nothing I could do — just watch her lying in bed, her spirit fading a little more each day.

Then one day I realized: if I didn't act soon, I'd lose her. So I copied what I'd seen on TV — dressed myself up as a beggar and went out to the streets.

The funny thing was, I barely had to dress up. A little dirt on my face and everyone believed I was a real little beggar.

I went to the city square — the most crowded spot. All those uncles and aunties, brothers and sisters were so concerned for me. They asked after me, comforted me, cared for me — only, none of them gave me anything.

I couldn't blame them. They didn't owe me anything.

Grandma always said being poor is no reason to lose your pride. But I couldn't afford pride — because if I didn't speak up, Grandma was going to leave.

So I cried out in the square, begging people for money. But the moment I started crying, all those people who'd just been comforting me scattered like birds — leaving me alone by the pool, weeping my heart out.

And that's when the person who changed my life appeared...

That day, he was wearing a leather jacket just like mine."

Li Wufang even held up his jacket — though to Cheng Shi, the gesture looked more like he was flexing his biceps.

"..."

"I've forgotten what he looked like. I only remember his voice was very hoarse. He said he was someone favored by Lady Luck — so lucky that he could bring good fortune to others too.

But not everyone gets luck. Only those who believe in destiny get lucky.

So he asked me: did I believe in fate?

I asked him: if I believe, will Grandma get better? He said yes. So I said I believe.

Then he gave me a die and told me to throw it as high as I could. When it fell, he said, the good luck would come.

I did as he said. The die landed in the fountain.

I froze, wanting to ask him where the luck was — but he'd already disappeared.

I didn't think twice. I just wanted that luck so Grandma could get better. So I jumped into the water to find the die, hoping it would guide me.

And it actually did.

The die had landed right on top of a coin. I picked up both. While I was examining them, a man passing by spotted me, scooped me out of the pool.

Later I found out he didn't pull me out to save me — he'd noticed the coin in my hand.

That coin... was extremely valuable to collectors.

I don't know why it was there. I don't know why that man happened to walk by. I chalked it all up to good luck. He bought the coin from me — and the price was exactly enough for Grandma's surgery.

Later, someone told me the coin was worth far more than one surgery. That the man had cheated me. That I could have used it to change my destiny.

But I'd already changed my destiny. Because the luck I prayed for was simply for Grandma to get better. Destiny favored me. So I was grateful.

From that day on, I believed in fate. Through Grandma's passing. Through the game's descent. That belief has never changed.

This photo was restored from a newspaper clipping — back when 'Lucky Boy' made the headlines."

"So your way of repaying Destiny was to choose Order at the Path Starting Point?"

Cheng Shi nearly laughed out loud. To him, this was clearly an anonymous good deed — and the "good Samaritan" was very likely the same man who'd bought the coin.

The method was so crude Cheng Shi couldn't even bring himself to critique it. But one thing he couldn't deny: meeting that anonymous benefactor was, in itself, genuine good fortune for Li Wufang!

"..." After hearing Cheng Shi's teasing, Li Wufang fell quiet. He sighed, expression impossibly layered: "Though what I said about 'spreading Destiny through Order' is true — I actually did want to choose Destiny. But at my Path Starting Point... there was no Destiny die for me to choose.

I worship Him, yet He didn't give me the chance."

"..." Cheng Shi froze. Something felt off. Based on his understanding of the Path Starting Point, the artifacts there mostly correlated with a player's life experiences. So why would the "lucky" Li Wufang not have a Destiny die?

"Then what was in front of you?"

"The codex of Order... and the mask of Deceit."

"???"

'Excuse me — what?'

'The Fun God's mask?'

'You had the Fun God's MASK?!'

'Right — the Investigator had uttered one lie, and that lie was "I'm not particularly good at lying." So this guy actually lies frequently?'

'Oh no — have I bumped into a high-level colleague?'

Cheng Shi's gaze sharpened. He looked at the Investigator with growing suspicion.

"Tell me a lie — right now!"

Li Wufang blinked, nodded: "I'm not particularly good at lying."

"..."

Still a lie!

'A con artist who can lie... could he be... Zhen Xin?'

For one second, Cheng Shi nearly bristled. But the next moment, Li Wufang openly explained why he lied so often.

"That's exactly what I was talking about — why Order is trustworthy. When I try to spread the doctrine of Destiny's favor, nobody believes me. So I have to resort to tricks — harmless little cons to make people believe in luck.

I do lie often. But I've never profited from a single lie. I only lie to make people believe in good fortune. That... shouldn't be wrong, should it?"

"..."

It wasn't wrong. Not wrong at all. Absolutely, perfectly right, bro.

Cheng Shi's scalp was tingling. He suddenly wondered: was this Li Wufang actually the protagonist of some other world?

'You blaspheme Deceit this hard for Destiny's sake — you're really not afraid the Fun God might object?'

'Clearly you've never taken a beating in the Void!'

Chapter 709: How to Join the Destined Ones

Interesting. This Investigator was definitely interesting.

After hearing Li Wufang's backstory, Cheng Shi was genuinely considering pulling him into the Destined Ones.

Though the current roster was all Chosen Ones, a closer look revealed no real pattern to the organization's growth. Cheng Shi hadn't been deliberately recruiting Chosen Ones — it was just that in every Chosen-tier game, he kept running into crises that required conning a teammate into doing something. Hence the Destined Ones were born.

So in the end, there wasn't any real entry condition. If one existed, it was probably "serve as a clown's tool once."

And right now was Li Wufang's best opportunity...

Could Cheng Shi beat Li Wufang? The answer was certainly yes. As a Hero of Today, he feared no one in this trial except Qin Xin when the man unleashed War's full power.

But the problem was that Li Wufang was a hunter. He was fast. If Cheng Shi didn't end him in one shot and he escaped, the rest of the trial would become unpredictable.

Moreover, influenced by their relationship on another timeline, Cheng Shi kept feeling there was no need to be this ruthless.

After all, this Investigator had been vetted by Cheng... Er-shi? Whatever-shi. Point was — vetted by another him.

So recruiting Li Wufang into the Destined Ones now had a perfectly logical rationale — because Cheng Shi genuinely needed his cooperation. Only, this "cooperation" was...

Cooperating by dying.

He hadn't forgotten his original goal: finish the trial as steadily as possible.

"To be honest, Investigator — you're a bit underpowered. Normally, you wouldn't qualify for the Destined Ones. But... I appreciate you. I can pull some strings."

"Destined Ones!?" Cheng Shi didn't even need a sales pitch. The name alone nearly shattered Li Wufang's hard-won caution and made him agree to anything. "That name... perfectly captures His guidance."

"You have excellent taste."

The coming path and going road — all are destined."

With that, Cheng Shi tossed a die at Li Wufang's feet. As always, it rolled to one. The Hero of Today smiled and raised his scalpel.

"I'll skip the pleasantries. The Destined Ones match every fantasy you've ever had about Destiny. But joining us isn't easy."

Beyond believing in Destiny, you must prove your courage — the courage of a desperate throw.

And that courage will be the testament of Destiny's favor upon you. Well — want to try?"

By the time he finished, Cheng Shi had already entered combat readiness. If Li Wufang refused, a clash of Order and Destiny was inevitable.

Li Wufang saw it too. He was confident he wouldn't die at Cheng Shi's hands. But... that figure from his memories held too great an influence.

Yes — perhaps when an adult looks back on childish acts, they can easily spot every flaw in every youthful experience. But hindsight is only hindsight. You can never deny how important a certain event was to your childhood self.

Just as "luck's embrace" and "Destiny's guidance" had essentially raised Li Wufang. Even after the grown-up Li Wufang saw through the ruse, years of self-persuasion had already transformed him into a devout Destiny believer.

Destiny may not have given him the chance — but that wasn't his fault. After all, Destiny was a... ahem.

So when Cheng Shi declared the name "Destined Ones" with unwavering conviction, this Investigator who'd spent his life spreading Destiny through Order could no longer contain his worship and love for Destiny.

"You... want me to die?"

"No — it's not that I want you to die. It's that you yourself want to use death's courage to verify whether Destiny favors you." Cheng Shi corrected the phrasing with a straight face. "I think you've already guessed my purpose. That's right — I'm also stabilizing the trial.

Fewer variables, higher odds of winning.

If you believe in Him, then before this trial ends, His protection will be enough to bring you back.

But if you don't believe... then please stop praising Him. Otherwise, what you're blaspheming is more than just one deity.

There — I've said what needs saying. Now the choice is yours."

"..."

The scales of Order swayed. Li Wufang was caught in agony once more. But before long, he recalled how different versions of Cheng Shi had reacted throughout the trial, and how different An Mingyus had treated Cheng Shi — and he seemed to see Destiny's guidance converging. The convergence point was unmistakably what Cheng Shi called the Destined Ones.

Listen — Destined Ones. What a name. If that wasn't Destiny's guidance, what would be?

Once this clicked, the hesitation in Li Wufang's eyes slowly hardened into resolve. He looked at Cheng Shi, then at the scalpel in his hand. Then — to Cheng Shi's jaw-dropping astonishment — he took the blade from him. Without leaving a single message or "last words," he simply drew it across his own throat.

The Investigator had proven his courage. He was dead. Death by his own hand.

Cheng Shi was shocked. Genuinely shocked this time.

He'd long acknowledged peak players' propensity for insanity, but this still stunned him.

'Dude — I say something and you just believe it?!'

'I can tell — you've really never been beaten down by Void.'

'But you slit your own throat this decisively. That makes my position very awkward. Why do I suddenly feel guilty?'

Cheng Shi blinked. Seeing no trace of divine energy flowing through the corpse before him, he let out a heavy sigh.

'Damn. This guy was a true Destiny believer.'

'Your Order people really are chaotic as advertised.'

But the objective was achieved. One more uncontrollable variable removed from the trial. Next step: go back and handle the other one.

Cheng Shi hoisted Li Wufang's body onto his shoulder without fuss, picked up the bunch of Abyss Rainbow Orchids from the ground, and headed back up the mine with a smile on his lips.

When Qin Xin and the Blind One saw that Cheng Shi had left with a living Investigator and returned with a corpse, their questioning gazes might as well have said:

'Fate Weaver — can you not function without a body?'

'Are you really a Fate Weaver, or are you a Gravekeeper?'

Cheng Shi didn't bother explaining. He set Li Wufang's body aside, pulled Qin Xin over to stand in front of the Doctor, and called back to the Blind One with a grin:

"The hour mark's almost here. Chosen One — go find yourself an adventure somewhere. We won't be joining you.

The moment Mr. Allendor finishes the experiment, this trial will march toward its conclusion without a single surprise. This time it's not a flag. I said it. Guaranteed."

"..." The Blind One's eye twitched. She nodded, then quietly left the warehouse that "didn't belong" to her. And the instant she closed the door and faced the distance — the hour mark arrived.

She stood there for two seconds, then frowned, turned back, and pushed the door open.

Chapter 710: This Should Be the Original Blind One

Cheng Shi looked at the door. When a black-dressed blind woman with a faintly cold bearing pushed her way in, he raised an eyebrow in surprise.

Not her!

But honestly — this was exactly how Cheng Shi had always pictured the original Blind One. A mysteriously cool woman who perfectly matched every archetype of a prophet. Except for the reckless fortune-telling.

He was about to tease this "outsider" again when Qin Xin — having laid eyes on this particular Blind One — broke into a knowing smile.

"Destiny has always favored you, Ming Yu. Welcome back."

The Blind One smiled faintly and nodded to Qin Xin:

"An interesting trial. I've met many versions of you — and many versions of the Fate Weaver."

She turned to Cheng Shi, a trace of complexity crossing her face.

"Qin Xin varies slightly across every timeline. But you're different. Every version of you... is nearly identical.

Besides minor differences in awareness and experience that let me tell you apart, I almost can't distinguish one of you from another. And... I'm sorry, Qin Xin. Though the Torchbearers try not to bother our friends too much, I couldn't resist — I secretly invited him each time. I don't know how many versions I met, but without exception, every one refused me.

What a failed day. At least today, He doesn't seem to have granted me any luck."

"..." Qin Xin was obviously exasperated by the Blind One's invitations. But Cheng Shi — hearing these words — felt his brain nearly explode.

"!?!?"

Something was wrong. Very wrong!

This was definitely not the Blind One who'd been with him from the start!

That Blind One was far warmer — in both attitude and tone. This An Mingyu was too cold. She did resemble a mysterious prophet — but she didn't resemble the Destined One he'd recruited today!

Yet Qin Xin said she was the right one. What was going on — was his judgment off? Was Qin Xin compromised too?

Impossible!

The Torchbearers would never pull off a Deceit-style trick in this regard. They had no reason to. So had Qin Xin misjudged?

Also impossible. Could the Torchbearers' founder fail to recognize his own Fire Seeker?

Absurd.

If Qin Xin couldn't tell, he wouldn't have exposed the previous Blind One's identity with those revealing words. He was clearly searching for his Fire Seeker too. So why would he be wrong?

Cheng Shi's gaze darkened. He produced the Rainbow Orchid bouquet and asked both of them with utmost gravity:

"Set down your Master of Deception Cards. Answer my next question. Qin Xin, Chosen One — this question is critical. Critical enough that I may need to re-evaluate my teammates."

Both Torchbearers froze. Seeing Cheng Shi's seriousness, they frowned, exchanged a "look," then nodded and tucked their cards away.

With no Deceit protection left, Cheng Shi asked directly: "During the trial's first morning — when we split up for the first time — what color were the ball-flowers you saw?"

"Red."

"Blue-violet."

"???"

"!!!"

As expected — someone was wrong!

The two answers rang out simultaneously. But when the words landed, both Torchbearers stared at each other in disbelief. A sharp gleam flickered through Qin Xin's eyes. His piercing gaze drilled into the Blind One — clearly stunned that she wasn't from this timeline after all.

The Blind One was even more shocked. She'd tracked Qin Xin using Void's perception — a sense that had convinced her she'd found the right person. How could it still be wrong?

Could the Cheng Shi and Qin Xin before her both be "present discrepancies" from her perspective?

Regardless of what An Mingyu labeled Cheng Shi, he'd confirmed she was definitely a discrepancy. Meaning the last hour-mark swap hadn't brought back the real An Mingyu!

So the "present discrepancy" Blind One was a cold-tempered prophet?

Cheng Shi looked to Qin Xin for confirmation. But Qin Xin's brow was deeply furrowed — clearly unwilling to accept his own misjudgment.

The Torchbearers' founder raised a silence tool, approached the Blind One with a tight expression — apparently about to compare private details. At that moment, the Doctor — who'd been silently observing — suddenly spoke, back still turned to Cheng Shi:

"It's not her. I have a clear impression of the prophet who originally traveled with you. She was far warmer than this An Mingyu."

"?"

Cheng Shi wasn't sure what the Doctor's sudden offer of help meant. He eyed Wang Mou suspiciously — but the Doctor's gaze hadn't shifted. Instead, he slightly raised both hands, as if showing Cheng Shi something.

"I have no Deceit protections. What I'm saying is: that was the truth. And I can also tell a lie."

After a pause, the Doctor delivered his lie:

"I've mastered every step of the experiment."

Then, with a straight face: "The experiment is complex. The step of isolating from mixed Divinity alone is immensely time-consuming. I'm telling you this because I want you to be an asset to my observation — not noisy distractions arguing about identity in my ear.

If you really care so much, do me a favor. Throw me out of this timeline. Maybe I'll find a quieter world to study my experiment in peace."

Cheng Shi curled his lip: "Doctor — has it occurred to you that maybe the current world is the quietest one?"

"..."

Indeed, the clown's sarcasm was inherited straight from his Benefactor. Before long, Wang Mou decided he shouldn't have engaged.

But before the Torchbearers reached a conclusion, Cheng Shi added: "Do you know your own identity?"

Wang Mou frowned slightly and sighed: "If you mean my identity as a slice — then yes. I've always known."

"!!!" Cheng Shi was stunned. "You don't seem to care?"

"I don't concern myself with useless things. Scattered thoughts only slow my approach to Truth.

Until someone has drawn sufficiently close to Him, nobody can declare with certainty whether they're a slice. If I approach Truth more closely than every other slice — or even the original — I can entirely rewrite and overrule the cosmos's laws, making the whole world believe I am the original and the so-called original is the slice.

Though by that point, I probably won't care about such distinctions anymore. Even now, I hardly care.

Fate Weaver, if you need someone to chat with, I suggest you go talk to the NPCs. The Abyssal Volcano — a subject even the Tower of Logic hasn't fully cracked — remains a rich trove of knowledge. Searching for worlds and teammates here is a complete waste of time. Compared to knowledge, personal identity is worthless."

"..."

You couldn't have a lengthy conversation with a true Truth believer. They might not look down their nose at you like a Folly follower, but their blunt corrections were even more infuriating — because you knew they were usually right.

'Fine, fine, fine — that single-minded efficiency-über-alles attitude is exactly like the original Wang Mou.'

So if even the Truth believer confirmed the Blind One was off, then the current Blind One really did have issues.

Seeing Qin Xin still arguing with the placid An Mingyu, brows locked tight, Cheng Shi sighed. He decided to follow good advice and go talk to the local NPCs.

He'd brought Shi Lolin up here a while ago. Time to complete her commission. Right now was safe — and before the next hour mark, hopefully the Torchbearers would reach some conclusion.