

## The Gods 711

Chapter 711: Destiny — Still Loves Its Jokes

(Extended plus-length chapter!)

To prevent accidents, Ad Ric, Shi Lolin, and A Rad had been held separately from the start. Now Ger Si's corpse dangled from the rafters where Li Wufang had tossed it; Ad Ric lay unconscious inside a territory he'd marked out with his own urine. Only Shi Lolin and A Rad remained awake.

The two siblings' relationship, however, was far from friendly. The bound Shi Lolin was belting out some kind of song at full volume, and in the adjacent room, A Rad — under the Siren's vocal influence — was frantically doing push-ups.

Nobody knew why he liked exercise so much, but he just kept going — even as his consciousness faded, his body moved on pure instinct.

Cheng Shi was deeply shaken when he saw this through the doorway. Yet he couldn't fault Shi Lolin. The Shanty Area's big sister operated with perfect control: her volume was calibrated so precisely that not a note leaked out to affect any player, while her brother drowned in illusory desire — unable to live or die.

Credit where it was due: when it came to tormenting people, Corruption had real chops.

Cheng Shi grinned. He flicked a blade through the window to drop the struggling A Rad, then walked straight into Shi Lolin's room. Looking at the panting Siren — spent from overexertion — he shook his head with a smirk.

Seeing the "King of Hell" arrive, Shi Lolin shuddered and knelt obediently on the ground, awaiting judgment.

"Had enough fun?"

"No. Never will..." When it came to her brother, Shi Lolin's expression remained one of grinding, tooth-grashing fury. "The Brotherhood gave him everything, and he still chose betrayal. I don't believe

anyone's desires can change that abruptly. He was probably brainwashed by that evil god Truth. So rather than hating my brother, I hate the puppet who crawled toward that evil god. He's not my brother anymore!"

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow. A Rad could very well have stopped being Shi Lolin's brother long ago.

Certainly, having a Falling Gate native control the Proxy Hand made the Tower of Logic's underground operations more convenient. But was this variable controllable?

Those Grand Scholars at the Tower were the world's foremost experts on variables. If they could turn a person into a variable, they naturally possessed the means to convert that variable into a constant.

A Rad's identity made him suitable for the Underground. But his mind was Corruption's. Such an agent could cause the Tower plenty of headaches. So how could they keep his identity while stripping his Corruption will and making him obey?

The answer was simple. Slicing.

The Tower of Logic excelled at slicing.

So Shi Lolin was probably right. A Rad had long since stopped being her brother — he'd been sliced by the Tower's scholars, and among the resulting slices, the one most loyal to Truth was deployed here as the Proxy Hand's head of operations in Falling Gate.

Perfectly logical. Very Truth.

Of course, Cheng Shi didn't need to share all this with Shi Lolin. He'd come only to reconfirm her status and ensure the trial could reach a perfect conclusion.

He hadn't forgotten the NPCs caught in the discrepancy. Though their discrepancy logic differed from the players', now that he understood the full picture, he believed these three would still form the trial's answer — just one that couldn't be submitted carelessly. Players had to find their own timeline first. Otherwise, submitting the answer on the wrong timeline could produce unknown consequences.

On the way here, Cheng Shi had pondered extensively. He felt the answer was like a "go home to your own family" gavel. Submit it on the wrong timeline, and it might become a lock, trapping you forever in the wrong world.

So, ever cautious, he needed to verify the answer was still valid.

He checked every detail with Shi Lolin again. She hadn't changed. She remained the "future discrepancy."

Cheng Shi was satisfied. He re-tightened her bindings, mercilessly declined the Shanty Area queen's leggy invitation, exited, and entered A Rad's room.

The thrown blade hadn't actually killed him — Cheng Shi had found the right angle to cause blood loss and collapse. Now he pulled out a healing potion, revived A Rad, and — looking at the dazed Proxy Hand leader — smiled:

"Tell me about you and your sister. If you talk well... I'll consider giving you a quick end."

"?"

Being bled out and revived was already "not quick." What "quick" was there to offer?

But sense prevailed. A Rad didn't dare protest. The muscular man lay face-down on the floor and began answering in a muffled voice.

"What do you want to know?"

"Do you know you're a slice?"

A Rad froze. A flash of complexity and fear crossed his eyes.

"I didn't know for certain. But I suspected."

"You suspected?" Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow with interest. "What — did your fragmented memories give it away?"

"No. My memories are complete. Every logical thread is self-consistent. Even the transition from Corruption to Truth was seamless.

But... Truth believers love research. Studying the self is also research. And since I constantly had to deal with the splinter faction of the Extreme Desire Brotherhood, I was forced to study my former faith — Corruption — in depth.

The more I examined, the more I realized: though my cognition and logic were self-consistent, my emotions had a gap.

My split with her... was too sudden. No buffer, no entanglement. Those lofty scholars probably considered emotion an obstacle to Truth and ignored it entirely. But... humans have feelings.

That's how I realized I might have been sliced. I'd heard of the technique — I just never thought it would happen to me.

My fanaticism for Truth drove me to study that emotion over and over, to study Corruption. Perhaps influenced by Corruption again, I found I'd recovered the feelings from childhood — remembering the sister who'd cared for me in every way..."

"?"

Hearing this, Cheng Shi blinked. He tasted the subtext now. He looked at the complex-faced A Rad before him with genuine surprise:

"You remembered how good Shi Lolin was to you. You noticed her hatred. But instead of explaining yourself, you bore her attacks and antagonism in silence. Was your purpose... to protect your sister? To protect the Extreme Desire Brotherhood?"

"..."

A Rad didn't want to admit it, but when Cheng Shi picked up the scalpel from the floor, he dropped his head and conceded.

"Yes. As long as I remain the Proxy Hand's representative in Falling Gate, the Brotherhood stays safe. But if I'm replaced... they have no understanding of surface civilization or the Tower of Logic. Those lunatics would do absolutely anything to seize resources.

Faiths may be equal, but Their followers differ vastly in numbers.

She can rule the wind and rain in Falling Gate, but in the Tower of Logic's eyes, she's just a flea that jumps slightly higher. If they wanted, they could crush her and destroy Falling Gate entirely.

The surface attacking the Underground might not be convenient, sure — it would cost enormously. But I can't help but fear, because the Tower has the means. So..."

"So you silently shouldered everything for Shi Lolin?"

"..." A Rad said nothing, but the silence spoke volumes. His expression and eyes told the whole story.

'Tsk — a real man. But sadly, not the original man anymore.'

At the end of the day, the current A Rad was just a slice of the original — a Truth slice re-awakened by Corruption's emotional stirrings. No matter how nobly he acted, in Shi Lolin's eyes, he wasn't the real A Rad.

Corruption indulged desire. Desire was simple and direct. She wanted her brother — not some slice silently looking out for her.

Heh. This was destiny.

Cheng Shi had always believed A Rad was an un-betrayed practitioner of Corruption's will — joining the Tower of Logic not out of betrayal but out of greed-driven desire. But now it was clear: this version was a genuine Oathbreaker who'd left Corruption's camp. He'd restrained his emotional desires, refused to explain things to Shi Lolin, pretended nothing had changed while secretly protecting her. He'd done "good" — but in Shi Lolin's eyes, he was purely "bad."

Cheng Shi pursed his lips. At this moment, he felt somewhat superfluous — because he could already hear Shi Lolin crying next door.

This woman — who hadn't shown an ounce of fear even facing death — was now sobbing uncontrollably after hearing A Rad's confession.

Truth was merciless. Corruption was indulgent. You two... could never go back.

And Shi Lolin wasn't even the current Shi Lolin. To this world, she too was an outsider.

A local man sliced by the Tower of Logic, and a "future" woman from beyond — brought together by a trial to produce the most genuine collision of hearts.

Sigh. You really do love Your jokes, don't You?

It might be Time's trial, but Your shadow was everywhere in it, my Lord.

Cheng Shi silently grumbled about his Benefactor, then knocked on the wall behind him and asked curiously: "Shi Lolin — is the commission still on?"

The sobbing next door stopped. After a moment, a teeth-grinding voice came through:

"Kill him, my lord! Kill him — and I'll offer you everything."

'Bravo — Corruption to the core!'

Never any pretense of mercy or morality. Hate was hate, love was love, and if you were an eyesore — kill. Simple and direct. In certain moments, it felt far more honest than Civilization's pretenses. Though such moments were vanishingly rare.

At its core, Corruption was desire — desire that people either chased madly or fled from at all costs.

Cheng Shi smirked. He looked at A Rad with a hint of pity and gave him one last chance for final words.

"Anything left to say?"

"I... may die, but there'll be another me after. The Tower of Logic won't abandon this place — just as the Brotherhood wants to spread Corruption's will upward through the Abyssal Volcano.

I have nothing to say. But I'd suggest you disguise my death as an accident. That's best for everyone.

Also — not all Underworld factions are allies. Be wary of Folly. They're... very similar to Truth.

Don't be controlled by the clever. Because we can never escape."

A Rad closed his eyes calmly and waited for death.

But at that moment, Cheng Shi withdrew his blade and frowned slightly.

"You... know about Folly?"

Chapter 712: The Conjecture of Eras and Epochs

Even A Rad was stunned. He opened his eyes and craned his neck to look at Cheng Shi, puzzled by the question.

"I don't know when His name first started spreading, but I know that in the surrounding towns, there's always some eloquent scholar preaching His name.

Shi Lolín sent people to investigate him. She even had me make contact with that scholar — back before I'd joined the Proxy Hand.

But he was slippery. Never revealed his whereabouts.

At the time, I didn't understand what use these people had. She told me that underground scholars who didn't worship Truth were most likely Truth's enemies. Anyone who could topple an evil god would be a potential ally for the Extreme Desire Brotherhood. So she'd always been interested in Folly's followers.

But I later learned these Folly believers were most likely Tower of Logic people themselves. I couldn't read their intentions, so I always considered them untrustworthy."

Cheng Shi froze too. The eloquent scholar sounded like Allendor, but that wasn't the key issue. The critical point was: Shi Lolín didn't know about Folly. She'd even assumed Folly was a Wild God. And if she didn't know, how could she have sent A Rad to contact Folly's followers?

Frowning, he hauled A Rad up and dragged him into Shi Lolín's room. Under Shi Lolín's venomous glare, Cheng Shi asked again:

"You truly don't know about Folly?"

"I swear — I'd never heard His name until those two scholars showed up. I didn't even know the words 'foolish' and 'idiotic' could represent a deity! Even Wild Gods wouldn't take a name like that — no wonder He's called Folly!"

"..." 'Ma'am, that's the second time — the second time you've blasphemed Him. Good luck.'

Cheng Shi twitched. To be safe, he frowned: "Tell me a lie. Careful, Shi Lolín — you only get one chance."

Shi Lolín was sharp. She guessed his purpose and replied with dead seriousness: "I've heard of Folly's name."

A lie! Definitely a lie.

Now Cheng Shi was truly confused. He recalled the thought he'd had when he first saw the compressed Silence Divinity inside the Abyss Colorful Crystal — that speculation about the nature of Eras.

In Aph Ros's description of Eras, each successive Era contained one additional Epoch. The Descent Era had one more Descent Epoch than the Life Era. The Chaos Era had one more Chaos Epoch than the Civilization Era. Eras grew progressively longer from inception to finale.

That pattern only shifted with the dawning of the Existence Era.

Setting aside Epoch-length variations, if you looked at the earlier Eras and Epochs alongside the gods' chronological order of descent, a question emerged — one Cheng Shi had been pondering continuously:

After They'd already descended but before Their respective Epoch arrived, what were They doing?

The simplest example: by the time the Descent Era ended, its three gods had already been legitimized by Origin into true deities, freed from any Era's influence, independent of the river of Eras.

So when the next Era — the Civilization Era — opened its first Epoch (the Life Epoch), why were those three gods nowhere to be found?

Cheng Shi couldn't be certain about this. The Faith Game's trials were chaotic. Players had no concept of Eras, and nobody could tell which Era a trial's background Epoch belonged to. Still, based on his experiences, the Life Epoch had few Descent adherents — at most, some Corruption seedling believers.

So if the legitimized Descent trinity held the authority to oversee Eras, why didn't they appear at the Epochs' beginning?

Or take this very trial, set in the mid-Civilization Epoch. But from the Civilization Era onward, four different Eras all contained a Civilization Epoch. So which Era did this one belong to? And how did identical Epochs across different Eras differ?

Cheng Shi had never been able to puzzle this out — until he'd confirmed the Fear Faction and Approach Faction from the Fun God himself, and learned that Void had given humanity the entire Faith Game. Only then, viewing things from the Approach Faction's perspective, did he finally catch a glimpse.

He believed the gods stuck to their "timelines" — never appearing early nor missing their historical cue — because they didn't want to influence an Era's trajectory. Remember: an Era's conclusion involved Origin. And the act of Origin legitimizing them — nobody knew the true reason. Who was to say Origin didn't determine each deity's status based on how the Era developed?

After all, the very naming of the Paths of Fate already revealed a great deal. And the Fun God himself had said: the evolution of Paths was inherently the progression of life and civilization.

So if you were a god born from a particular stretch of history — standing before an all-powerful supreme deity — would you dare smear the history you'd walked through?

No! You wouldn't dare!

No god would!

Except Deceit!

He wasn't just smearing — He was defecating on Existence's head!

But He was Fear Faction. Were the others?

No. Most were Approach Faction. The most daring were neutral, and neutrality meant "don't cause trouble." So how could they possibly "defy" That One?

From that point on, Cheng Shi had understood: when gods had already been legitimized but their ruling Epoch hadn't arrived, they hadn't failed to descend — they were hiding behind the world's curtain, quietly waiting for their turn to take the stage.

But now, the Silence Divinity compressed inside the Abyss Colorful Crystal made Cheng Shi realize: during their off-stage wait, They were significantly more active than he'd imagined. Even if They didn't alter the Era's main narrative, they were probably far from idle in the peripheral details.

If faith truly mattered, who wouldn't want to spread their faith early? Who wouldn't want more followers sooner?

Gods, after all, had desires too!

Following this logic, Cheng Shi confirmed that the current Civilization Epoch likely belonged to either the Existence Era or the Void Era — because only in those two Eras would Silence have already been legitimized and be waiting backstage.

That alone explained why — in the mid-Civilization Epoch, before His official descent — His Divinity had already been compressed into mineral form.

As for telling these two Eras' identical Epochs apart, Cheng Shi currently had no leads.

Returning to Shi Lolin: Cheng Shi had mulled over her ignorance of Folly extensively but made no headway — until just now, when hearing Folly's name again, everything clicked. A breathtakingly bold idea emerged.

He thought his reasoning had been wrong again.

Shi Lolin might not be from the future. She might be from... the past?

Could she be from a Civilization Epoch's mid-point in some Era before the Existence Era — an Era where Folly hadn't yet descended?

In other words: could Shi Lolin's displacement span not just forward and backward within an Epoch, but also across Eras?

She was from the future in terms of Epoch — but clearly from the past in terms of Era!

Chapter 713: The Trial's Answer Is Nearly Within Reach

Because only this could explain why a woman in power had never heard of Folly, yet had once arranged to contact His followers — and why she'd forgotten those arrangements. In the Civilization Epoch of her Era, Folly truly hadn't descended, and He couldn't influence much from behind the world's curtain.

With this realization, everything in Cheng Shi's mind connected. But at the same time, cold sweat trickled down his back.

Because the trial's difficulty was still climbing!

Time hadn't just set a trap — He'd built a labyrinth inside it. And when Cheng Shi gritted his teeth and fought his way through the maze, the escape door he'd spotted from afar had suddenly become a stone wall.

He apparently never intended to let anyone return. Never intended to let the players win.

This... was Time's gift to a Destiny believer?

'Fine, fine, fine!'

'Well played, Time. Well played, Existence. This grudge...'

'I'll swallow it for now — before some deity decides to bully a junior with impunity.'

'Praise Destiny — He taught me patience.'

Now that he had a theory about Shi Lolin, did the same issue affect the other two Time "discrepancies"?

What secrets were Ger Si and Ad Ric hiding?

Cheng Shi frowned, left the room, and headed to where Ad Ric was held. He dragged both the unconscious bed-wetter and the stowaway dangling from the rafters back to Shi Lolin's room. After careful deliberation, he decided to switch back to the clown and save Ger Si's miserable life.

He wanted to win. That conviction burned even fiercer now that he'd felt Time's deliberate obstruction.

'You won't let me return? Won't let me win? Then I'll return anyway. I'll win anyway.'

'I refuse to believe that when I crack every puzzle and win this trial fair and square under the Faith Game's own rules, the two Lords of Void will let You, Time, snatch me away right under Their noses!'

And so the Hero of Today took his final bow. The "deranged" clown returned to the stage.

One healing spell later, Ger Si awoke — but what greeted his new life was neither cheers nor applause, nor the administrators of Gasmira. Instead, it was the same gleaming silver scalpel that had killed him before.

The clown pressed the blade against his freshly healed wound.

"Ger Si. One chance. I ask. You answer. Wrong answer — you die.

First question: what's different between this world and yours?"

"???"

Ger Si's mind was blank. He hadn't even fully recovered from revival's stupor and thought the whole thing had been a nightmare.

He stared at Cheng Shi, blinked, and offered uncertainly: "I think I used to be a citizen of the Tower of Logic... and now I'm not?"

"?"

'Was that a nightmare? That was a toad-marrying-a-swan fantasy!'

'Do you think I'm joking around here?'

Cheng Shi laughed in anger. He casually flicked the blade and buried it in Ger Si's thigh. The stowaway's face contorted in agony. He howled, finally snapping fully awake, and clutched Cheng Shi's arm, begging desperately:

"I'll talk, I'll talk, I..."

The stowaway was terrified. He had absolutely no idea what Cheng Shi meant by "worlds." He racked his brains through every memory, clawing for survival in his chaotic recollections.

And remarkably — he actually found something.

"The Abyssal Volcano!

I don't know anything about different worlds, my lord. All I know is — when I fell, the Abyssal Volcano was supposed to be erupting upward. But now it's changed direction.

Maybe that's why I fell?

I really don't know anything else, my lord!"

The Abyssal Volcano changed direction?

Cheng Shi frowned, recalling everything he knew about this mysterious tunnel connecting the Underground to the surface. Honestly, he knew very little — only that the people of the Land of Hope could travel through this volcano to the other side.

After all, just two months ago he'd been a nobody who rarely even entered the Void. Even now, amid peak-level games where everyone routinely passed through the Void, he mostly traversed it because gods summoned him — not because he voluntarily tore open reality himself.

The clown's game progression differed from every other player. His "knowledge" came mostly from the gods' own mouths. History had been literally "chewed up and fed" to him by peak players. This left him missing many exploration-based historical details about the Land of Hope — he couldn't choose what was "spoonfed."

Still, he'd heard murmurs about this space-time tunnel's "chaos."

The chat channel occasionally mentioned the Abyssal Volcano, where mage players and history buffs debated endlessly. Nearly all players agreed the Volcano scrambled people's perception — because both Underground and surface factions had officially recorded that its eruption direction never changed.

Yet players who found themselves near the Volcano during trials invariably observed that its eruption direction was random and unpatterned, regardless of Epoch. You never knew whether the Abyssal Volcano was erupting up or down. It could even contradict your own memories.

It seemed to exist independently of the Land of Hope's world — unaffected by history, unconstrained by the game — like Those lofty Ones above.

This was the one place even the History School had never been able to explain.

But today — having deduced the relationship between Eras and Epochs — a flash of inspiration struck Cheng Shi. He'd thought of a theory that could explain the seemingly random eruption patterns.

The Land of Hope's records weren't wrong. The Underground and surface NPCs weren't lying. In their eyes, the Abyssal Volcano truly never changed — because their experience covered only a single Epoch within a fixed Era.

But the Faith Game's players were different. They'd experienced far too much. When players approached the Abyssal Volcano, they weren't just seeing a single Epoch's volcano — they were seeing the Abyssal Volcano across different Eras!

So was it possible that the Volcano's eruption direction had nothing to do with Epochs — and was instead linked to Eras?

Only this could explain why — within the same Epoch and time period — players still saw different eruption directions while NPCs remained adamant the Volcano never changed. The players' Epochs might match, but their Eras were completely different.

And because this phenomenon was so bewildering — and ordinary players had no concept of Eras — not even the history-researching History School could produce a reasonable explanation!

At this thought, a sharp gleam flashed through Cheng Shi's eyes. He'd seized the crucial thread. He re-examined each person before him and asked, one by one, which direction the Volcano had been erupting in their memories.

Chapter 714: Qin Xin Died — at An Mingyu's Hands

The results partly matched Cheng Shi's expectations. Except for Ger Si, all three confirmed that the Abyssal Volcano had always erupted downward!

This gave Cheng Shi an even bolder hypothesis about the Time discrepancies affecting the NPCs.

If his theory about Shi Lolin crossing Eras was correct, then she was someone from the "future" in Epoch terms yet from the "past" in Era terms. Setting aside A Rad's "present" status — applying this same logic in reverse to Ger Si meant the stowaway should be someone from the "past" in Epoch terms yet from the "future" in Era terms.

And his earlier deduction had confirmed the current period must be either the Existence Era or the Void Era. That meant Ger Si's Era could only be Void — no other possibility.

Which further confirmed: the present was the Existence Era!

So in terms of the Civilization Epoch alone: in the Void Era, the Abyssal Volcano erupted upward; in the Existence Era, it erupted downward!

This might be the Abyssal Volcano's greatest secret!

Then which Era did Shi Lolin come from?

Life and Descent were ruled out — neither contained a Civilization Epoch.

So she could only be from the Civilization or Chaos Era. Which one, Cheng Shi couldn't determine — but he suspected the Volcano's eruption direction was a supremely critical clue.

As for Ad Ric — nothing unusual stood out. No further associations could be drawn. He was simply an ordinary discrepancy from a parallel world.

Having deduced all this, Cheng Shi pondered at length and made a bold decision.

He would use this trial's answer to verify whether his reasoning was correct. But a decision this massive couldn't be made alone in a team game. So he headed back to consult his teammates — especially the two Torchbearers, to see if they'd back him.

"You've all been... very helpful. If everything checks out, you'll eventually earn your freedom.

Oh — and A Rad, your freedom isn't in my hands but Shi Lolin's. If she—"

"There's no 'if,' my lord. Your commission isn't finished yet!"

Shi Lolin turned her head away as she said it. Cheng Shi nodded with a flat expression and sent a thrown blade straight through A Rad's throat.

"Commission complete. Everyone behave. I hope the next time I come back, you haven't caused any trouble."

Though it was a warning, he didn't give them the chance to misbehave. He knocked each one out, pressed powerful sedative-soaked cloths against their noses and mouths, and rigged the entire room with alarm traps before finally returning to the warehouse with peace of mind.

But the instant he stepped through the warehouse door, his pupils violently contracted.

Because what met his eyes wasn't two NPCs and three players — it was four living people and one corpse.

Qin Xin was dead. Stabbed to death by An Mingyu with a dagger, right there in the warehouse.

"???"

For a split second, Cheng Shi felt he'd dropped his mask too soon. But in the next, he raised an eyebrow and sneered:

"What — couldn't win the argument, so you resorted to violence?"

I didn't realize the prophet lady had the strength to kill... a Mirror Person."

Could the Blind One kill Qin Xin?

Yes — but only if she were Zhen Yi. Only then would she have both the motive and the combat ability.

If she was merely the Blind One, she absolutely could not kill Qin Xin. Cheng Shi was rock-solid certain. Absolutely impossible!

Unless Qin Xin had killed himself — merely using the Blind One's hand.

So once Cheng Shi confirmed this Time trial contained only different-timeline Blind Ones and no... unsavory entities, he concluded that Qin Xin's death was no accident.

What on earth had these two Torchbearers discussed? How had they talked someone to death?

Cheng Shi couldn't guess, so he threw out a taunt to probe. But the Blind One didn't take the bait.

She turned to face him, dropped the dagger, and offered a small nod:

"We cross-checked our respective knowledge several times and confirmed that death can, to a degree, let you 'skip class.' No matter which world you die in, as long as vision is 'passively closed,' you'll no longer participate in Time's discrepancy shifts.

In other words: no matter which timeline's world this becomes, as long as you can revive him, Qin Xin will still be the original Qin Xin.

So Qin Xin chose death to lighten our burden — same purpose as when you killed the Investigator."

Cheng Shi pursed his lips: "Obviously I know that. But why him?"

"That's a foolish question, Fate Weaver.

The Doctor can't die — the Torchbearers still need the experiment's contents and Divinity.

You can't die — because you'd never agree to cooperate through death.

I can't die — because I'm not the An Mingyu from your timeline.

So only Qin Xin could die.

He understands me. He understands you even better. So he chose to trust you.

Fate Weaver... don't let him down."

"Heh. Then why not let me be the one to kill him?"

"Does it matter who killed him? What matters is — the hour mark is almost here.

Fate Weaver, watch the Doctor. I'm leaving. Is there... anything you want to say to me?"

"?"

Cheng Shi felt this other-timeline Blind One's tone was strangely loaded.

'What's going on — we've known each other for an hour at most. Where's all this bittersweet farewell coming from?'

He studied her for a long while, then shook his head with a sigh: "May you all... walk further than anyone. I think you know what I mean."

The Blind One finally smiled. Though colder than her counterpart, her smile was also more beautiful.

"I hope that's the most sincere blessing. And I hope it's the guidance Destiny has given me.

Fate Weaver — next time you see Xin Xin, pass her a message for me."

"?" Cheng Shi frowned again. "What — you're interested in another world's Zhen Xin? She's probably the same con artist as me, no different."

"No. Very different. Consider this my request — a greeting from another world.

Just tell her: 'I'm fine. Really fine.'"

With that, the Blind One pulled a strip of coarse black cloth from her pocket, expertly retied it over her eyes, and strode resolutely out of the warehouse, brushing past Cheng Shi.

Cheng Shi didn't understand her meaning. He grabbed her shoulder, but she swiftly removed his hand.

She bent close and whispered beside his ear:

"Trust in the fire-carrying. Trust me. The Torchbearers will never betray a friend."

And then she was gone.

Cheng Shi's expression was grave. He sensed these two Torchbearers had done something behind his back. But the hour mark was imminent, and despite his suspicions, he could only prioritize protecting himself and the Doctor — otherwise this trial would fail at the last hurdle.

So the clown rushed to stand in front of the Doctor, forcing the man to look at him. And at that very second — the hour mark struck. Time's discrepancy played out once more. Only this time, the Blind One who pushed the door open wore a face full of smiles.

"We meet again, Cheng Shi."

Right!?

This time — right!

Somehow — perhaps Destiny's guidance had truly arrived — Cheng Shi felt a surge of inspiration. He beamed at the Blind One in the doorway:

"Welcome home, Chosen One."

...

Trial ends tomorrow. Over.

Chapter 715: The Divinity Extraction Experiment — Success!

The words were warm. The reality was cruel.

The instant the Blind One pushed the door open, Cheng Shi's gaze swept to the Rainbow Orchid bouquet on the floor. The ball-flowers that had been red moments ago were now orange-yellow.

The discrepancy had caused the world to change again!

The right person may have come home — but the "home" wasn't right.

And whether the right person had returned was debatable too. Though Cheng Shi had verbally acknowledged her identity, expecting this "Steady Cheng" to believe someone based on a single smile was pure fantasy.

So the very first thing after the hour mark, Cheng Shi "confiscated" her Master of Deception Card and made her state her judgment of his identity — plus countless lies for verification.

As it turned out, the original Blind One was indeed warmer in personality. She cooperated with Cheng Shi's interrogation without complaint — right up until his questions grew absurd and he started asking how to handle Zhen Yi. Only then did she take back her poker card and tease the clown:

"Outcon her. Otherwise, you'll be the one getting conned."

Since she could "load" the Master of Deception, Cheng Shi couldn't tell whether the statement was actually useful.

He scrutinized her expression, searching for tells. But her composure was watertight. Nothing to harvest.

So Cheng Shi pursed his lips and cautiously shared a fraction of his theories with the Blind One.

The relationship between Destined Ones far exceeded ordinary teammates in trust. He believed she could offer professional insight. But after hearing things she'd never heard before, her expression grew progressively more solemn.

She said gravely:

"Cheng Shi, you... truly live up to the Destined Ones. I can't fathom where your logical foundations come from, but everything you've said practically overturns my understanding of the Land of Hope's history.

Rest assured — I will never share what you've told me with the History School, unless the Destined Ones require external negotiations.

And I will absolutely use that Remembrance Needle.

Now I'm even more curious about you and Hong Lin. Cheng Shi — remember to come find me. Don't keep me waiting too long."

"..."

Cheng Shi looked at the Blind One, caught between laughter and tears. He always felt that the moment she learned even a sliver of information about That One, her attitude became exceptionally sincere and earnest.

'Prophet, you're... really persistent!'

"Go ahead and do what you must. Winning or losing the trial may not matter much — but your hypothesis is critical. It could fundamentally reshape every player's understanding of the Land of Hope. Even if this kind of intelligence stays within a certain circle, it would be enormously advantageous for us.

Also, Cheng Shi — I hope you'll share this information with..."

"The Torchbearers?" Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow.

"...I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. But this really is important to the Torchbearers."

"I'm sorry too. I won't share it."

Cheng Shi refused without a second thought. But almost immediately, a flash of distaste crossed his face:

"Theoretically speaking, I don't know a single Torchbearer. However, if some Torchbearer happened to retain their memories, or if someone blurted out their conjectures at some Torchbearer debriefing... well, I... wouldn't be able to hear that.

As for how said Torchbearer originally heard all this Era stuff — don't ask me. I don't know any Torchbearers. Not knowing is perfectly normal, right?"

The Blind One laughed. She couldn't possibly skip the Remembrance Needle, but hearing Cheng Shi's words, she laughed anyway — perhaps the brightest smile since she'd entered the trial.

"Cheng Shi, you're a good person."

"???"

'Excuse me, ma'am — I'm literally lying through my teeth to myself and everyone, and I still get a "good person" card?'

'That doesn't taste right at all.'

So Cheng Shi curled his lip and fired right back: "So are you."

"..."

He was still so very... Cheng Shi.

Mm. Very Cheng Shi style.

The Blind One smiled, then — sensing the Rainbow Orchid bouquet had changed — frowned slightly:

"It seems the trial is far from over. What's your plan now?"

Keep triggering discrepancies to shift the world and find our way home? Or wait for the Doctor to finish documenting the experiment, then wait for the two Wise Men to process the Divinity from the crystal — and only then start a new round of discrepancies?"

"Let's wait. We need rest, too. Every additional variable compounds our predicament.

Since they're already dead, let them stay dead a while longer."

Cheng Shi let out a long sigh. His gaze drifted across the corpse on the floor, then to the Abyssal Volcano beyond the window — erupting upward in reverse. His thoughts wandered somewhere far away, eyes full of layered complexity.

After a moment he snapped back, then suddenly asked the Blind One: "By the way — would you be interested in a Zhen Xin from another timeline?"

"?" The Blind One frowned. "Why do you ask?"

"Your previous An Mingyu asked me to pass a message to this world's Zhen Xin. Out of respect for another you, I won't say what it was. I'm just curious about the mindset behind it.

She didn't even send regards to you — but went out of her way for your best friend?"

The Blind One looked equally puzzled.

"If you're asking whether I'm curious, naturally I am. But since Xin Xin isn't in this game, passing a disembodied message probably wouldn't affect her much. The one who'd suffer would be me — because Xin Xin's relentless personality means she'd pry everything out of me.

And by then, I'll have long forgotten you. So what kind of answer Memory's compensation will fabricate for her... I can't predict.

Thinking about it that way — the other me might be using this method to create trouble for the current me?

Interesting. My trouble is small, though. Cheng Shi — yours is enormous.

Let's hope Xin Xin doesn't figure you out from what she extracts from me."

"..."

'I'd have been less worried if you hadn't added that "let's hope." Now I'm covered head to toe in flags!

'Scared (Cheng Shi PTSD edition)...'

"Let's just end this already. For the remaining time, I hope Destiny gives us only the fixed path — no more changes." Cheng Shi rubbed his forehead, exhausted.

The Blind One also "gazed" out the window and began to pray devoutly.

Time trickled past. Before long, the entire night had passed. Through every hour mark during that long night, Cheng Shi and the Blind One stood on full alert. Finally, as dawn broke, Allendor lived up to his mission — using Zangier's finger, he successfully extracted the first complete thread of Divinity from the Abyss Colorful Crystal.

When that gossamer-thin strand of Divinity broke free from the crystal and leapt into the air, it swelled violently — exploding into the familiar orb of divine light known to all players. And the Divinity's affiliation was, as luck would have it, the very Benefactor that Mo Rabic and Allendor had spent their lives searching for:

Folly.

Chapter 716: Praise Destiny... Twice

Can you imagine how ecstatic those two Folly believers were?

When they'd been pressing forward blindly just to prove that truth existed beyond Truth — that Folly's will was on the verge of descending — they suddenly extracted their own Benefactor's Divinity from an Abyss Colorful Crystal!

Faced with something this bizarre, the two Wise Men had abandoned any attempt at scientific explanation. Because this world didn't run on science alone — it ran on theology too!

This was clearly their devotion drawing their Benefactor's gaze, followed by a bestowed revelation of wisdom!

The two Wise Men erupted in joy. They embraced, cheering, and were just about to assemble their precision instruments to contain the Divinity — when the clown beside them, clicking his tongue in admiration, swiped it.

Cheng Shi confiscated the Divinity and gave the two Wise Men a thumbs up.

The Wise Men were furious. In their rage, they... raged for a moment.

"Excellent — even your Benefactor is praising you. Keep up the great work. I see there's still plenty of Divinity in this crystal. Try to extract it all over the next two days.

Don't think of this as pointless labor. The more skilled your extraction technique becomes, the more your Benefactor will appreciate you, my Wise Man friends.

And don't worry about running out of practice material. We have plenty more Abyss Colorful Crystals."

With that, Cheng Shi kicked the stack of ten additional crystals toward them.

"..."

Mo Rabic and Allendor's excitement froze on their faces. They stiffly twitched their mouths but couldn't manage a complete smile no matter how hard they tried.

Wang Mou, however, pondered for a long moment, then nodded: "I've roughly memorized the experimental procedures and techniques. I probably do need hands-on practice next. What types of Divinity do you two need? I'll try to avoid those. The first few attempts will inevitably waste some, so I'll try to save more for you."

Cheng Shi grinned. He studied the Doctor with interest: "Doctor — though you found all these Abyss Colorful Crystals, you can't deny that we provided the most critical experimental procedures and the key artifact. And we invested considerable effort in setting up this experimental environment. So if you're thinking of—"

Before he could finish, Wang Mou suddenly produced a thick notebook. He placed his hand on it and murmured something. A blue miniature spell circle lit up on the cover. After a moment, he flipped through the contents and tossed it straight into Cheng Shi's arms.

Cheng Shi blinked, caught the notebook, and opened it — only to find detailed records of every experimental step, along with the Doctor's personal observations and insights.

"Understanding doesn't mean executing. While we have materials, personnel, and a venue, I can make this notebook far more comprehensive. So — do you both agree?"

Cheng Shi said nothing. His actions spoke his support.

He snatched Zangier's finger from Allendor, pressed it into Wang Mou's hand, prepared a fresh Abyss Colorful Crystal for him, then turned to the Blind One with a beaming smile: "What kind of Divinity do you need?"

The Blind One shook her head — she was more interested in the notebook. The type of Divinity didn't matter.

So Cheng Shi gave the Doctor carte blanche.

"Better to teach a man to fish. Doctor — how much fish we eat in the future is entirely up to you."

Wang Mou nodded gravely and — without even resting — launched into his hands-on experiments. Cheng Shi, terrified the man would collapse from exhaustion, quickly fired several Spirit Spells at him.

With everything arranged, time began to fly.

Five days passed without notice. Throughout those five days, the entire "research team" — or rather, every living soul on the mine — survived on the clown's Spirit Spells alone. As for where the clown's mental energy came from...

Don't forget — he still had unused Prosperity of Yesteryear in his pockets.

To ensure Time's discrepancies caused no more surprises, and to guarantee everyone could go home with a bountiful harvest, Cheng Shi gritted his teeth and downed several bottles of Prosperity of Yesteryear. He didn't rest for a single second.

Of course, the stingy clown couldn't bleed alone. The Doctor and the Blind One both became his targets for extortion. The Blind One directly surrendered her claim on all extracted Divinity. The Doctor paid with insights and manuscripts from numerous other experiments.

Under this atmosphere — where a certain greedy player was making an absolute killing — the Divinity extraction experiment finally reached its conclusion. The Doctor's notebook had become as detailed as it could possibly get.

At this point, gazing at the floor littered with shattered Abyss Colorful Crystal fragments and the many Divinities stored within his body with the Blind One's help, Cheng Shi smiled with satisfaction.

Time to find the way home.

And so, as the next hour mark approached, the three remaining players stood before Li Wufang's corpse, awaiting Cheng Shi's operation.

To reclaim their original world, the only method was to keep triggering discrepancies and cycling worlds. Cheng Shi's objective was therefore clear:

He himself couldn't change. The Torchbearer couldn't change either. The Doctor had earned his keep — it would be poor form to discard him after use. That left only one candidate: the Li Wufang who desperately wanted to join the Destined Ones.

Revive the Investigator, let him trigger a discrepancy, and use that to search for the original world — this was everyone's current plan. The Doctor had volunteered to "adventure" himself, but Cheng Shi refused.

Because Li Wufang — despite personality differences across timelines — was demonstrably more stable than the Doctor. Cheng Shi's decision wasn't born from the fact that he held leverage over Li Wufang's desires. It was the most advantageous, most steady judgment for the current situation.

He needed Li Wufang to keep triggering discrepancies to discover the world-shifting pattern. And he was willing to open a genuine Destined Ones door for the man in return.

Even if that door had arguably already opened the moment Li Wufang slit his own throat... well, the capable should do more work, right?

'After all, I'm not capable. I'm a nobody.'

So Cheng Shi acted. Using the Lush Horn Crown, he revived Li Wufang. But the instant the Investigator returned to life, everyone was stunned to discover the ball-flowers — their world-anchor markers — had turned red again!

Temperature began rising. The original scorching world had returned!

"?"

What was this phenomenon?

Death couldn't trigger discrepancies — that had been verified through the Blind One's death. So why had reviving one Li Wufang caused the world to shift?

Though returning to the original world was good news, the ever-tense Cheng Shi's brow furrowed deeply. Anyone hit with sudden good fortune would instinctively turn cautious. He gripped a smoke bomb, scrutinizing every teammate — terrified this was a hallucination or a new Time trap.

But everyone seemed perfectly normal. No signs of anomaly.

Especially Li Wufang. The moment his eyes opened and he saw his teammates surrounding him, genuine joy bloomed across the Investigator's face.

"Brother Cheng... you really didn't deceive me. Destiny truly protected me.

Praise Destiny! Praise the Destined—"

Perhaps guessing what he was about to say, both Cheng Shi and the Blind One's expressions turned cold. Li Wufang — still groggy from revival's daze — suddenly realized his blunder. He swallowed the remaining words and hastily corrected himself:

"...estiny. Twice."

"..."

Chapter 717: Trial Cleared — Welcome Home!

Everyone fell silent. The Doctor studied Li Wufang with curiosity for a moment, then asked, puzzled:

"You're a 'rigid' Order believer, yet you want to join the most changeable Destiny?"

I see genuine devotion in you — even more devout than these two Destiny followers right here. That's fascinating. Investigator, could you explain why you chose self-sacrifice?"

Li Wufang froze briefly, then quickly recovered. Climbing to his feet with a smile, he said:

"Do I even need to explain? Precisely because I'm an Order believer, I have unwavering faith that order still exists.

When corruption isn't dragged into the open, the scales of trust won't tip. I believe in my teammates, just as my teammates believe in me.

Praise Order — He saved us all."

"..."

Though the words dripped with piety, Cheng Shi couldn't shake the feeling that the Investigator's next line would be a Destiny pitch aimed at the Doctor.

His devotion to Destiny far outstripped his devotion to Order.

Li Wufang's burst of sincere rhetoric genuinely threw the Doctor for a loop. Wang Mou's expression turned strange as he nodded and said no more.

The Blind One, however, smiled softly and "watched" this man who was practically a confirmed Destined One — seemingly pondering his connection to Destiny.

She didn't believe Cheng Shi would recruit an Order believer into the Destined Ones without reason. Especially not once she noticed Li Wufang's personality bore a faint resemblance to Cheng Shi's own — that made her even more curious.

What quality had the Fate Weaver spotted in this man? Or was it that Destiny's next guidance would somehow fall upon this Investigator?

Cheng Shi shook his head with a wry smile and ignored Li Wufang. Instead, he began cross-referencing the trial's details with his other two teammates, running through every fact about the original world again and again. Only when every detail matched did he confirm that his good fortune was real.

This sudden "reset" seemed to mean Time had given up His deliberate obstruction at the trial's end.

After all, the rules had been thoroughly mapped. No matter how much changed, the players only needed time to find their way home.

Cheng Shi's heart eased. His expression turned wistful.

It seemed nothing had changed. It seemed they'd finally found the home they started from.

"One, two, three, four, five... Mm, Chosen One — your prophecy came true again.

Time to bring our last lucky soul back to life."

Cheng Shi chuckled softly and walked toward Qin Xin's body. But this mundane movement suddenly froze the clown in his tracks, expression kaleidoscoping across his face.

Everyone looked at him in confusion. He pointed at his own feet, then turned to the Blind One:

"Chosen One — that prophetic scene you saw earlier... it wasn't about right now, was it?"

The Blind One's expression stiffened. She recalled the prophecy she'd seen before entering the trial — the one about Qin Xin's fate — and "looked" at the scene before her. She was stunned speechless.

"..."

Just as she'd thought! Identical!

The prophecy hadn't only applied to the trial's beginning — it had reappeared at its end!

Qin Xin really had died. And those feet really were Cheng Shi's.

Only, Qin Xin's death had nothing to do with Cheng Shi. And Cheng Shi's presence wasn't to kill Qin Xin — it was to save him...

'So this is the revelation You granted me, my Lord? Using two identical scenes to tell me: "Seeing is not believing, and existence itself can breed illusions"?'

The Blind One bowed her head slightly, thoughts branching outward.

Looking back across the entire trial, she realized this trial bestowed by Time was riddled with Destiny's hidden traces.

'So even during trials, You're locked in combat with Your rival?'

'It seems what I told the Fate Weaver was right — You really did plant foreshadowing throughout Your opponent's trial.'

The Blind One's thoughts ran deep. But Cheng Shi didn't let this interlude distract him for long. He smoothly revived Qin Xin and — meeting the Torchbearer founder's somewhat complex gaze — extended a friendly hand.

"Welcome home, Mirror. Per. Son."

Qin Xin was pulled to his feet by Cheng Shi. He nodded awkwardly, then turned toward the Blind One beside him. But she was still contemplating Destiny, oblivious to the first complicated look Qin Xin had cast her.

By the time she raised her head, he'd already replaced it with a warm smile.

"We meet again, Ming Yu. Welcome home."

The Blind One beamed — radiant.

"That should be my line. Welcome home, Qin Xin."

"Alright, alright — if we keep exchanging pleasantries, the next hour mark's coming. I don't want to live through another one. Even knowing none of us would let a discrepancy happen, just — stop here.

Time didn't leave us much time. This trial's dragged on long enough. It's time to end it."

Cheng Shi waved his hand, cutting off the reunion's niceties. Decisively — before the next hour mark could arrive — he gathered every NPC and submitted what he believed to be the trial's answer.

He knew Qin Xin wouldn't refuse his verification. He also knew Li Wufang and the Doctor had no voice to object right now. So, in front of everyone, he wagered — reversing the original discrepancy answer and hammering out his final verdict on the Time discrepancies afflicting the three NPCs.

"The trial's hint was: 'Whether past, present, or future — time has never aligned.' After days of verification, we've identified three discrepancies. But the current situation may differ from everyone's earlier conclusions. Allow me to restate:

The three discrepancies are:

Shi Lolin, the Extreme Desire Brotherhood's boss of the Shanty Area. Though her behavior suggests the 'future,' she actually comes from the 'past.'

Ad Ric, a member of the Proxy Hand. This miner — who unknowingly became the 'present' — muddles along as the 'present' discrepancy.

Ger Si, the stowaway. He sounds like someone from the 'past' — a man from Ad Ric's 'father's generation' — but the truth is, he comes from the distant 'future.'

That is the trial's answer. If nobody has objections, I'll submit it on behalf of us all."

The moment he finished, someone spoke up.

"I have an objection!"

Though the Doctor couldn't refuse submission, he still had the right to challenge. He couldn't understand why a perfectly good answer had been turned on its head by Cheng Shi. Regarding Shi Lolin and Ger Si's identities, he had ten thousand reasons to disagree.

But the instant he voiced his objection, the warmly smiling Li Wufang and the subtly frowning Qin Xin flanked Wang Mou from both sides. The Doctor's expression froze, and he promptly swallowed every subsequent question.

Cheng Shi scoffed and didn't bother engaging the Doctor. With a playful grin:

"It seems nobody has questions. Wonderful. Then thank you all for your support — this trip's been very rewarding. I trust everyone's wishes have been fulfilled.

In that case... let's meet again if fate allows!"

With that, Cheng Shi submitted the answer.

The next second — the trial froze. Time halted. Existence shattered. The players vanished.

Everything seemed to end.

[Wish Trial (Discrepancy — Time) Challenge Successful]

[Grading in progress, calculating rewards...]

[Player: Cheng Shi — Performance Rating: S]

[Obtained Item: Persistence Mask (S) x1]

[Obtained Item: Change Mask (S) x1]

[Obtained Item: Destined Mask (S) x1]

[Obtained Item: Stowaway Mask (S) x1]

[Road to Ascension +18]

[Ladder of Ascent +3]

[Current Road to Ascension Score: 2,242 — Global Ranking: 359,190]

[Current Ladder of Ascent Score: 181 — Path Ranking: 40]

[Trial Cleared — Exiting Now]

Chapter 718: Destiny Does Guide — Only Time Had Long Since Shifted

The trial was over. But history was far from finished.

The answer Cheng Shi submitted was merely a key. The key opened the door to victory — but unlike a consumable, it wouldn't vanish after a single use. So the moment those "lords" disappeared into thin air, the trial's "answers" exchanged bewildered glances, as if reborn.

They looked at each other briefly, then sprang into action.

Shi Lolin was the first to react. Though she was the most tightly bound, ropes could restrain her body but not her voice. The moment she realized she was "free" again, she threw back her head and sang — a filthy Corruption anthem so vulgar it was unfit for ears, aimed at every man present.

The next second, two Wise Men, one stowaway, and one miner became entangled in a knot of primal desire.

Once she confirmed no threat remained, Shi Lolin wriggled to the side and searched for a way to escape her bonds.

The Siren was clever enough. She freed herself quickly, then — brow furrowed tight — knocked out the urine-stinking miner and the disheveled stowaway, tied the two Wise Men (who clung to each other and refused to let go) in a basement room, and hurried down the mountainside.

She'd been away from the Shanty Area too long. She needed to check on the Brotherhood's situation and arrange an effective response to current affairs.

Though the mysterious overlords had used up all the Abyss Colorful Crystals, Shi Lolín was no short-sighted woman. She knew that as long as the Tower of Logic on the surface still stood, the Proxy Hand's mining operations would never stop. More crystals would be mined. So as long as she kept these two powerless Wise Men under her influence — no, simply befriended them — the Brotherhood could seize resources from the Proxy Hand to strengthen itself.

Ad Ric mattered too, of course. As the miner who'd witnessed A Rad's death, keeping him alive would let her reach deeper inside the Proxy Hand.

As for the stowaway...

Useless. Kill him and be done.

Lost in thought, Shi Lolín soon reached the base of the mountain. She returned to the Shanty Area looking exhausted — but what greeted her wasn't anxious subordinates or panicking underlings. It was... a wall of decadent music, suffusing the air.

The Shanty Area was running perfectly fine. As if it didn't need anyone in particular.

Shi Lolín was rather gratified. She rang the Brotherhood's communication signal. Before long, several members converged from all directions.

Alo Manni was among them — only this time, she'd brought someone along. A beautiful woman Shi Lolín had never seen before.

This stranger wore a tattered form-fitting warrior's suit. Golden curls cascaded loose around her shoulders. Her face was smeared with grime, her appearance thoroughly disheveled — yet even so, nothing could conceal those fierce, sharp features and that cutting aura.

She looked like a princess in exile. Completely out of place in the Shanty Area.

Shi Lolín raised an eyebrow. Intrigued by this unfamiliar woman, she looked at Alo Manni, awaiting an explanation. Alo Manni stepped forward, somewhat nervous, and clasped Shi Lolín's hand, whispering close:

"I think there's something wrong with this one's head. She says she's here to help us overthrow the Proxy Hand."

"?" Shi Lolin blinked, then turned to the blonde woman with a smile: "You think the Extreme Desire Brotherhood wants to take down the Proxy Hand?"

The golden-haired woman showed no warmth. Cold and clipped, she replied:

"Perhaps not. But you won't have a choice.

The Tower of Logic won't tolerate an organization that continuously undermines their underground exploration efficiency lingering around the Abyssal Volcano forever.

I'll concede: no one can truly destroy the Extreme Desire Brotherhood. Desire can't be suppressed or extinguished. But your problem right now is that your desires flow in too many scattered directions. You can't concentrate force.

The consequence? The Proxy Hand will keep nibbling away at your territory until... you're reduced to vassals. Or their playthings.

I can help you break the imbalance. Tip the scales of victory in your favor."

Shi Lolin laughed. Though her smile dripped with ridicule, she still afforded this beauty maximum respect.

"Well said. But here's what I want you to know: the Proxy Hand can't be destroyed.

Even now, even though I killed A Rad — the next leader was immediately dispatched from the Tower of Logic. Those evil god worshippers on the surface will never give up the Underground's resources. So tell me — whose daughter are you? You look a bit rebellious.

But that's fine. The Extreme Desire Brotherhood loves rebellion. Join us. I, Shi Lolin, can shelter your rebellious spirit and let you bloom into the most beautiful flower of desire right here."

As she spoke, Shi Lolin's hand crept along the woman's collarbone and up her neck. But the blonde didn't flinch. She simply said, even colder than before:

"Nothing in this world is indestructible. If the Proxy Hand is backed by the Tower of Logic, then destroy the Tower of Logic — and the Proxy Hand crumbles with it. Simple, isn't it?"

"???"

Shi Lolin was stunned. Now she believed Alo Manni's assessment. This woman's head really was screwed on wrong.

Her hand froze on the blonde's neck. Looking at those seductive lines, Shi Lolin felt she could wring this cold beauty's life out in a single squeeze. But the woman didn't appear to fear death.

Shi Lolin studied her for a moment. Her gaze darkened.

"Who are you? Who sent you? You don't look like someone from the Underground."

The golden-haired beauty glanced at Shi Lolin's wrist and finally allowed herself the faintest smile.

"Galusha.

I do come from the surface. But I'm here... for myself."

"Galusha?" Shi Lolin silently repeated the name twice, furrowed her brow, withdrew her hand, and turned to whisper a string of instructions to Alo Manni — to head up the mountain first and bring down several important people.

Strange events had been multiplying in Falling Gate lately. She couldn't afford to be careless, in case this Galusha turned out to be another being like those mysterious overlords from before.

Alo Manni took a squad and departed. Shi Lolin brought Galusha into her own shack for further questioning. Before long, Alo Manni returned — face pale. She'd brought back only the two Wise Men. No sign of Ad Ric.

Shi Lolin's brow tightened. She was about to ask when Alo Manni blurted out, still shaken:

"Shi Lolin, I think you were under an illusion.

A Rad isn't dead. He never died. He discovered the mine's anomalies and is currently rallying the miners to sweep the entire Crystal Pool.

Ad Ric was killed by him. Your brother seems to have..."

"He's not my brother!"

Shi Lolin shot to her feet, sweeping everything off the surface beside her.

The most nauseating scenario had materialized. After losing contact with A Rad, the Tower of Logic had deployed yet another "A Rad" to take over Falling Gate.

She had a brother again. A slice whose personality she couldn't predict.

"Can you... really bring down the Tower of Logic?"

Shi Lolin felt she was losing her mind. In a moment of dazed impulse, she turned to Galusha and asked this absurd question.

Galusha smiled again. It seemed she only showed genuine warmth when discussing how to annihilate the Tower of Logic.

"If you believe me... why not let me try?"

Chapter 719: Winds of Change

The Void. The Fire Passing Hall.

An imposing figure sat at a table, both arms resting on its surface, his interlocked fists rhythmically tapping against the wood—one beat after another.

His brow was furrowed tight. After a while, he picked up a pen and wrote two words on the paper beside him:

Prosperity.

But almost immediately, he crossed them out and wrote two different words:

Decay.

Staring at these two Divine Names, his expression grew heavy.

"What's the matter—still haven't made your choice?"

Just as the figure lapsed into wordless contemplation, a voice suddenly rang out from above his head.

He looked up in surprise and found a silhouette traced in candlelight hanging upside down in midair, tilting its head to study him. The man blinked, then shook his head with a wry laugh.

"Why do you always insist on sitting upside down in the air? And we had an agreement—you knock before coming in."

"Qin Xin, perhaps you should consider who you're speaking to. Standing before you is the great Flame of Hope, who risks everything to shield you from the gods!

This is truly heartbreaking."

As he spoke, the Candle Man actually began to weep with little sobs—only his tears weren't water. They were tears of fire.

Those fiery droplets traced a path across his forehead and through his hair, dripping down like melted wax onto the crown of Qin Xin's head.

The seemingly playful little flames instantly ignited Qin Xin's hair. With a helpless, bitter smile, Qin Xin shook his head and transformed his own hair into flames to ward off the prank.

Normally, the melodrama would have ended there, because the Candle Man knew full well that his fire couldn't actually harm Qin Xin. But today was different. Watching Qin Xin's reaction, he doubled over with laughter.

Qin Xin sensed something was wrong, too. The fire atop his head seemed to be burning bigger and bigger—his War flames couldn't immediately overpower the Flame of Hope.

???

Qin Xin stood frozen, because he distinctly remembered being told that the Flame of Hope's strength hadn't fully recovered. Shielding the Torchbearers had already drained every last ounce of his power, leaving his flames with form but no substance—a truly ethereal, illusory fire of hope.

But today, this fire... suddenly had warmth!?

"You've recovered!?"

Qin Xin's shock gave way to elation. He sprang to his feet, stepped aside to clear his line of sight, and gazed up at the Flame of Hope hanging inverted above. He stared at the brilliant firelight radiating from the entity's body, felt the searing heat within that glow, and his expression grew more joyful by the second.

"You've reclaimed your lost power?"

"Some of it. Only a portion—don't make such a fuss," the Flame of Hope said modestly, though the fire blazing ever brighter across his form made it abundantly clear that he was happier than anyone.

"What happened?" Qin Xin was elated too. What could possibly be more thrilling than the being who sheltered the Torchbearers growing stronger? He instantly cast aside his earlier worries, leaned back against the table's edge with arms folded, and asked with a broad grin.

"It's complicated, and it involves too many of Them. For the sake of keeping this place hidden, I'll keep it brief.

Put simply—when They were pushing forward with their Faith Fusion, I managed to snatch an opportunity and reclaim a portion of my power. Now, I might be able to offer you all a small measure of help inside the Trials."

"Truly!?" Qin Xin's eyes flew wide. He felt that having a divine being's aid would be nothing short of monumental for the Torchbearers.

Of course, he wasn't thinking of himself. Whether operating as a disguised Mirror Person or a true Hawk Eye Scout, he had more than enough strength to handle any trouble the Trials could throw at him.

But not every Torchbearer was Qin Xin. The vast majority of them were ordinary players whom the Fire Seekers had discovered when they were still nobodies—and those players were the ones who truly needed the Flame of Hope's help.

"Absolutely." With that, the Candle Man hopped down from his inverted seat, waved a hand before Qin Xin, and let a few more droplets of flame fall.

Those droplets gradually cooled as they descended, and by the time they touched the tabletop, every last one had crystallized into Flame Crystal Diamonds shimmering with a mysterious, fiery light.

"These little trinkets are for all of you. Whenever danger strikes, remember to hurl one as far as you can. That way, hope's fire can help you burn away every obstacle and reach whatever shore lies within sight."

"An offensive item?" Qin Xin picked up one of the Flame Crystal Diamonds and examined it closely.

"Not just that. If you're wounded, you can also crush one and press it into the injury. The little flame will soothe your pain and rekindle hope. Pretty impressive, right?" As the Candle Man said this, the look he directed at Qin Xin was laden with meaning.

"Impressive!"

Qin Xin's praise was entirely genuine. How valuable a dual-purpose offensive and defensive item could be—any player would know the answer in a heartbeat. He nodded solemnly, carefully pocketed the Flame Crystal Diamonds, and then asked one more question:

"Got any more?"

"?" The flames roaring across the Candle Man's entire body stuttered. He fixed Qin Xin with a long, flat stare. "What did you just say? You don't seem like the type to say something like that."

Qin Xin froze for a moment, instantly realizing he'd been influenced by a certain someone. He let out an awkward chuckle, slapped his own cheeks, and then apologized with a hearty laugh: "Sorry—we really do need these."

The Candle Man sighed. "I'm not some inexhaustible mine, you know. I can spare you a few more, sure, but use them sparingly. Until I reclaim more of my power, I can't possibly arm this many people."

There really were more!?

Qin Xin's face was a picture of astonishment. He suddenly realized that asking for extras every now and then might not be such a bad habit after all.

"Praise be to the great Flame of Hope—it is You who let hope rise once more from the smallest ember."

"...Sycophant. Forget it—you're no fun at all. I'm going to find Qing Qing. At least she's cute."

"Shiqing? She's here?"

"Mm-hm. Just arrived. Why—want to see her?"

Qin Xin's expression hardened with gravity, and he gave a solemn nod. "Yes. There are things I need to discuss with her properly."

The Candle Man shot Qin Xin a displeased glance, but there was nothing to be done. He obligingly played the role of messenger. Before long, Fang Shiqing walked into the Fire Passing Hall looking thoroughly puzzled. The moment she stepped through the door, she asked:

"What's wrong with him? He seems happy and unhappy at the same time."

"?" What kind of description was that?

Qin Xin laughed. He shook his head without answering, beckoned Fang Shiqing over, and once she stood before him, addressed her with an utterly serious expression:

"The Torchbearers can't function without a Fire Seeker. I'm planning to—"

"!!!?" The words hit Fang Shiqing like a thunderbolt. She seized Qin Xin's hand, terror flooding her face. "Ming Yu—what happened to her?"

"...Relax. She's fine. She just has other matters to attend to for a while, so I need to find you a new partner."

Qin Xin's expression was complicated, but there was no grief in his tone, and that let Fang Shiqing breathe again.

She threw him an exasperated glare. "Since when did you start playing the suspense card?"

"...My bad." Qin Xin smiled. "So—want to meet the new one first?"

"Ming Yu, she..."

"I told you, she's fine. She'll still be one of us—she's just stepping down from the Fire Seeker position for now."

Fang Shiqing frowned. She was confused, but she knew that everyone was entitled to their secrets. She nodded, then asked curiously: "Who's the new Fire Seeker? Don't tell me it's another fresh recruit you just pulled into the Torchbearers."

Well—there had indeed been a new recruit recently. But that particular newcomer wasn't suited for the Fire Seeker role. He was... better fitted as a pure enforcer. A Silence enforcer, at that.

"It wasn't me who brought her in. It was you.

She's in the next room. Go say hello to our new City Builder. I'm tired—I need some rest."

Fang Shiqing didn't doubt him for a second. She waved goodbye to Qin Xin and headed to the adjacent room. There, seated in the center of a circle of chairs, she found a silver-haired beauty dressed in a blazing crimson mage's robe.

"Long time no see, Lady Fire Seeker."

The instant the woman turned around, Fang Shiqing gasped and clapped a hand over her mouth. "It's you—Ji Yue!?"

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Chapter 720: Sudden Upheaval

It was once again the Fire Passing Hall.

After Fang Shiqing left, Qin Xin gradually let the smile fade from his face. The flame-colored hue in his hair receded little by little, and even his complexion turned pale.

He suddenly doubled over with a violent cough, then lightly raised a hand and wiped the streak of blood from the corner of his mouth.

He was wounded—and the wound was far from light.

As for where this injury came from, that required rewinding to the moment right after the Trial had ended.

Don't forget—before entering the Trial, Qin Xin and the Blind One had been hunting the Time Chosen, Lao Deng. They had assumed that even though Lao Deng had stalled for time with everything he had, his situation was already beyond salvaging.

Once the Trial ended, this Rank 1 player should have died on the spot. But no one anticipated that an accident would occur.

To explain this accident properly, the clock needed to rewind a bit further—all the way back to the Mediocre Person Society gathering, after certain "orioles" had left the scene.

The Void. Inside the Existence apparition that the Dreamless Mirror had projected over the Mediocre Person Society's venue.

The true venue belonging to a certain someone was a stage rusted and corroded beyond recognition. Everything the assembled players had witnessed inside the Mediocre Person Society had taken place within the Existence apparition that Qin Xin had constructed using the Dreamless Mirror.

So when Lao Deng left that apparition, he hadn't truly escaped into the Void—he had stumbled straight into the trap the Torchbearers had laid for him.

Lao Deng wasn't actually old at all. On the contrary, he was exceedingly young—so young that when the two Torchbearers faced him, neither could be certain whether the boy had even come of age.

As everyone knows, there is a period before adulthood when people tend to be at their most rebellious. So no matter how the two Torchbearers tried—gentle persuasion or threats laced with bribery—none of it could make Lao Deng "bow his head." The young man had made up his mind to leave, and he declared outright that such an entertaining affair ought to be shared with all.

Left with no choice, Qin Xin and the Blind One made the hardest decision they could. They clashed with this Time Chosen in a cataclysmic battle within the Void.

By the time both sides had exhausted every trick in their arsenals, Qin Xin was drenched in blood, the Blind One's spirit was spent, and Lao Deng had taken several sword wounds and lay pinned underfoot by a false Memory follower.

But right at that moment, the Trial that Lao Deng had desperately stalled for finally arrived. In the very instant Qin Xin was about to take his head, all three of them were pulled into the Trial.

His blade and Lao Deng's cervical vertebrae had been separated by nothing more than the width of a bowstring.

Yet that hair-thin distance was enough to contain an entire Trial.

And then came the moment the Trial ended.

When Cheng Shi submitted his answer, Qin Xin had in fact already been prepared. He had even adjusted his posture to match the exact stance he'd held before entering the Trial, so that the instant he exited, his body's instinct would finish the kill on the spot.

The Blind One had done the same. Before the Trial released them, she had poured every support skill she possessed into Qin Xin—all for the sake of a single, decisive strike.

Yet no one could have predicted that, even with preparations this thorough, the unexpected still happened.

In that stretch of Void sealed and locked in every dimension of space and time by the intertwined divine power of Memory and Fate, a strange surge of divine energy suddenly erupted. A violent force entangled with the power of War and Fate leaked out from somewhere unknown, disturbing that sealed space-time and giving the Time Chosen—pinned underfoot—an opening he seized in an instant. In the final heartbeat before his death, he triggered the deduction power of the Another Day Assassin.

Consider this: to climb to Rank 1 on the Time ladder with an assassin's build meant that Lao Deng's entire talent framework had likely been built around deduction.

He might not have been the "strongest"—but there was always a version of "him" that could dodge every countermeasure and fight to the bitter end.

Just like now. Lao Deng once again drew revelation from Time's deduction, overwriting the present with the future most favorable to himself.

And so that sudden eruption of entangled force veered a fraction off its original trajectory as it spread—and by sheer coincidence, it interfered with the direction of Qin Xin's strike. The Mirror Person's blade scraped down along Lao Deng's shoulder and neck, missing the cervical spine by a hair's breadth, shearing away the entire right half of his body instead.

A chance to escape had appeared.

But this crazed assassin spared not a thought for breaking free. Instead, he grinned savagely, twisted his mangled frame, and let a spray of blood and shredded flesh scatter into the Void. He flipped his dagger upward and materialized directly in front of the Blind One, driving the blade straight at her eyes.

He knew the Fate Chosen was already blind. But he wanted her blinder still—the kind of blind from which there was no coming back.

A Prophet may be known for prophecy, but at its core the class remained a Singer—a support profession capable of bolstering other players. Fate's support talents were numerous, and among them the most useful in combat was undoubtedly the Triumph Song.

This melody allowed its beneficiary to sense an enemy's attack during battle, granting the foresight to anticipate and seize the initiative.

And that buff was active on Qin Xin right now. He was already a Hawk Eye Scout, the class most adept at reading a battlefield. Layered with the Blind One's enhancement, he had felt Lao Deng's killing intent in the very instant the strike had missed.

Only this death-throes counterattack wasn't aimed at him—it was aimed at the Blind One. And that meant Lao Deng's unguarded back was laid bare before his eyes.

In that lightning-flash of a moment, Qin Xin faced two choices:

Abandon the Blind One and kill Lao Deng. War's techniques gave him full confidence that he could strip the boy of every resurrection in the same instant he ended his life. But that would mean the Blind One would die too—and there was no telling whether Lao Deng also possessed means to destroy every chance of revival.

Or protect the Blind One and let Lao Deng go. Because this move was clearly the boy's gambit—"threaten the Blind One to save himself." Then again, it might just as well be a genuine trade: his life for hers.

Every fiber of this impossibly young Time follower radiated a savage, reckless ferocity. Watching the way he threw himself into the fight, it seemed entirely possible he truly intended to take the Blind One down with him before he died.

By all rights, a Torchbearer should not have hesitated at a moment like this. Such things had happened far too many times before. Torchbearers who sacrificed themselves for the cause were beyond

counting, to the point that the Void Grave Forest they themselves had established was filled with more life stories than could ever be fully read or told.

But this time, Qin Xin hesitated. He did not seize the chance to kill Lao Deng. He chose to save the Blind One instead.

With a precisely aimed upward parry—so accurate it was almost inhuman—he deflected Lao Deng's dagger. Lao Deng seized the momentum to spring backward, opening distance between them, then let out a wild laugh and dove headlong into the zone where that berserk, entangled force was still spreading, vanishing without a trace.

The Blind One was stunned. She turned toward Qin Xin, her expression a tangled knot of emotions.

"Qin Xin, you..."

Qin Xin gave a bitter smile and swallowed the blood pooling in his mouth. "You're not a true Torchbearer. If the Torchbearers want to go further, they can't abandon their friends. I didn't dare gamble."

"Thank you..." The Blind One pressed her lips together so tightly they went white, then reached behind her back and produced a poker card from inside her coat. "Don't panic just yet—the Flame of Hope can still shelter us, and we still have a chance to deal with this. I'll go find Xin Xin. She can definitely help."

Though the words leaving her mouth were "don't panic," the urgency etched across her face made it plain that the situation was spiraling toward collapse.

She saw it. Or rather, both she and Qin Xin saw it.

What they were facing was no mere accident. That sudden eruption of entangled War and Fate power hadn't appeared without reason. Both Qin Xin and the Blind One had sensed something hauntingly familiar within it.

As for where that familiarity came from...

Hero of Today versus Hawk Eye Scout.

Yes—that inexplicable surge of berserk divine energy was unmistakably born from the violent entanglement that had torn through reality when Cheng Shi fought Qin Xin inside the Trial.

And so the question arose: why would power from inside a Trial manifest in the real Void?

Perhaps the answer didn't need thinking about at all.

Time had intervened.

It had used this "accident"—or rather, this deduction—to save its follower's life.

And when the Blind One spoke of finding Zhen Xin, it wasn't to seek reinforcements. It was to reach Zhen Xin and, through her, find a way to petition the Void—to claw back an outcome from the defeat that Existence had handed them.

Qin Xin understood all of this perfectly. But there were no other options left. The safest strategy now was to return to the Fire Passing Hall and weather this storm under the Flame of Hope's watchful gaze.

And that was how the scene of Qin Xin sitting calmly at his table had come to be. He had to gauge the Flame of Hope's demeanor to determine just how dire the situation facing the Torchbearers truly was.

But from what he could see, the Flame of Hope showed no sign of alarm—which meant everything was still within manageable bounds.

Qin Xin let out a sigh and rubbed his forehead. Too many surprises lately, too many threads to untangle. He was genuinely exhausted.

Next, there was still the God Creation Plan to push forward—the plan they had settled on long ago—and two new Fire Seekers who needed to find their rhythm together. As for the previous Fire Seeker...

He wondered how Ming Yu's conversation with Zhen Xin was going.

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