

The Gods 156

Chapter 156: An Acquaintance, Running into Another One

“Big shot!?”

“Wait, wait, wait—don’t come... over...”

With a thud, Cheng Shi was slammed back into the pile of flesh and blood on the ground.

Except this time, someone had landed on top of him.

The woman who had rushed over and knocked him down was none other than Bai Ling, the Sensory Hunter whom Cheng Shi had once helped win a trial.

What a coincidence—another familiar face.

Looking at the three people in front of him, all battered and bruised with torn clothes, Cheng Shi immediately knew they had run into some serious trouble.

But...

How did Fang Shiqing manage to pull him into their trial?

It had only been a few days since they last met—had she already reached 2400 points too?

The [Death] song he’d heard earlier had been sung by her, so... was she also working for that entity now?

Was this one of His tricks?

Cheng Shi’s mind was filled with questions, but one thing seemed clear: this appeared to be a...

Torchbearer's game.

In fact, before Cheng Shi had jumped into the light, he'd already overheard bits of the conversation from the outside. And now, seeing these familiar faces, it wasn't hard for him to guess the connection between Bai Ling and Fang Shiqing.

Lying beneath Bai Ling, who was beaming with the joy of reunion and reflecting the flames of hope in her eyes, Cheng Shi smiled, feeling somewhat relieved.

"Get off, get off! You're crushing me! Have you gained weight?"

"Huh? Really? Maybe my chest got bigger." Bai Ling giggled as she lay on top of him.

"....."

Cheng Shi had almost forgotten—she was a follower of [Corruption]. Talking about this with her would only make her more excited.

Speaking of [Corruption]... it reminded Cheng Shi of another [Corruption] follower from a different trial...

Ew—get that dirty thought out of my head, quick!

Bai Ling, being a considerate person, only showed her excitement for a moment before rolling off him. She even helped Cheng Shi to his feet.

As Cheng Shi stood up, he casually pulled a long coat from his inventory and hastily wrapped it around his waist, not bothering to put it on properly.

Seeing this, Fang Shiqing, who had been wearing a worried expression, finally smiled.

"You're looking pretty breezy yourself!"

Cheng Shi smirked.

“I’ve got breezier looks, but those come with a price.”

No sooner had the words left his mouth than Bai Ling sidled up to him, grabbing his arm.

“I can pay, big shot. How much?”

“.....”

Cheng Shi was left speechless, staring at Bai Ling in exasperation.

“Why are you so cheeky now?”

“You like it when I play along, so I picked up a few things from... some people.”

“.....”

Thanks, but no need to flatter me like this. You’ve left me with no way to respond.

Cheng Shi shook his head with a helpless smile before turning to Fang Shiqing, who had been watching them the whole time.

Their eyes met, and both smiled knowingly, no words needed to express the shared sentiment.

“Fate sure works in mysterious ways.

It’s been a while, Guardian of the Fortress.”

“Good to see you again, Forgotten Doctor.”

“.....”

Cheng Shi’s smile faltered slightly but quickly returned to normal.

Thankfully, this cover could still be maintained.

If his identity had been exposed twice in the same day, Cheng Shi would have seriously questioned whether the one pulling strings behind this [Order] trial was truly [Order] at all.

After greeting his two familiar companions, Cheng Shi’s gaze naturally settled on the tall, muscular young man standing behind Fang Shiqing.

He had never met this male Torchbearer before, but to Cheng Shi’s surprise, the moment he looked at the man, he instantly knew his name.

He was a bit taken aback but kept smiling as he asked:

“Big sis, aren’t you going to introduce us?”

Fang Shiqing glanced back at the man, who stepped forward cautiously and greeted Cheng Shi politely.

“Cui Qiushi, Order Knight, Guardian of the Fortress.”

As expected!

He really was Cui Qiushi!

Cheng Shi's mind instantly flashed back to the image of Elder Cui. Looking at the young man before him, Cui Qiushi's face gradually merged with that of his father.

The resemblance was uncanny.

Especially his eyes—they were almost identical to Elder Cui's when he was younger!

But this Cui Qiushi was anything but thin. It seemed that in the past six months of trials and tribulations, the once-skinny son Elder Cui had mentioned had grown into a strong, reliable warrior.

A Guardian of the Fortress! And an Order Knight! Both titles spoke volumes.

Good!

Very good!

For the first time, Cheng Shi felt genuinely happy about recognizing a stranger's condition.

As for why he was happy—whether it was out of respect for Elder Cui or admiration for those who upheld noble ideals—he couldn't quite say.

Maybe it was both.

At that moment, this unexpected reunion kept the smile plastered on Cheng Shi's face, but deep inside, he was far from relaxed.

Because...

He thought of someone else.

Zhao Qian!

The Hawkeye Scout who had been so tight-lipped in front of Elder Cui must have known Cui Qiushi.

Looking back on Zhao Qian's behavior toward Elder Cui, could it be...

That he, too, was a Torchbearer?

It made sense. If Zhao Qian were a Torchbearer, then everything Su Yida had done would be easier to explain.

Because Cheng Shi knew that His Lord, the Patron, was aware of the Torchbearers' existence.

Not only that, His Patron might have even helped cover their tracks.

If Su Yida, with his knowledge of the future, had figured this out, then perhaps that's why he used Zhao Qian's death to put an abrupt end to that deadly plot.

Of course, Su Yida hadn't done it for Cheng Shi—he had done it for himself.

After all, a master trickster who had escaped right under the noses of the top-tier players from the future was bound to earn their ire.

Nobody likes being played for a fool, especially by someone they thought they had under control.

So Su Yida used Zhao Qian's death to silence everyone.

It was both a threat and a declaration of the end of their cooperation.

Whether those involved in that future assassination plot had truly stopped, Cheng Shi didn't know. What he did know was that the master trickster, Su Yida, had stopped.

And he would never have the chance to act again.

But all of this was still just Cheng Shi's speculation.

He couldn't be certain of Zhao Qian's identity unless he asked Fang Shiqing directly.

Normally, Cheng Shi wouldn't bother asking such questions. But the three people standing before him now seemed trustworthy.

So, he spoke up.

Facing Cui Qiushi, he asked:

"I once met a Hawkeye Scout. He was probably one of your companions."

The moment Cheng Shi said this, there was a noticeable shift in the group's expressions.

Fang Shiqing's face darkened as she nodded.

"You're talking about Zhao Qian, aren't you?"

As expected!

Cheng Shi sighed. "Yes. He's dead—he died in a trial."

It seemed that the three Torchbearers had already known about Zhao Qian's death. Yet, even so, they fell silent. Even the ever-spirited Bai Ling lowered her head, clasping her hands over her chest and softly reciting:

"Sparks may fade, but the fire will never die.

Goodbye, friend. May you be freed from suffering, and may your wishes be fulfilled.

May the new world of our dreams... be on the horizon."

Feeling the weight of sorrow in the air, Cheng Shi remained silent, offering no further words.

When the moment of remembrance concluded, Cui Qiushi raised his head, his eyes slightly reddened as he looked at Cheng Shi.

"He was a pioneer, a Builder of the Fortress, and a brother who joined the cause with me."

A Builder of the Fortress!

So Zhao Qian had been a Builder of the Fortress!

The ideals of the Builders were quite different from those of the Guardians. They sought to carve out a new path in this broken world, using their divine talents to build a new world for humanity.

But in doing so, they trusted no one but themselves and their fellow Torchbearers.

They believed that only the strong could serve as the foundation for the new world, and they relentlessly pursued strength along that path.

With this revelation, Cheng Shi finally connected Zhao Qian's personality with his actions.

Everything he had done had been in pursuit of strength, hoarding power to build his dream of a new world.

So, an elitist through and through—never one to trust the weak.

Cheng Shi couldn't help but reflect that, perhaps, the Guardians of the Fortress resonated more with his own values.

But even that was limited.

Because, while he admired the Torchbearers, he didn't want to be a part of them.

He had long since lost anything worth defending, and besides, he wasn't exactly a "good person."

Dozens of thoughts raced through Cheng Shi's mind in an instant. He let out a heavy breath, pushing those thoughts aside, and arranged his expression into a smile. Looking at Fang Shiqing, who had pulled him into this place, he spoke in a lighthearted tone:

"It seems like things aren't going well for you guys.

Why didn't you call 911?

My house calls aren't cheap, you know.

But, since we're all old friends, I'll give you a discount.

So, big sis—tell me.

How did you manage to pull me from somewhere else to here?

Consider that answer part of your first payment for the consultation.”

Fang Shiqing had been studying Cheng Shi, still unsure whether he had changed during their time apart.

But at that moment, Cheng Shi’s heart seemed more alive than the last time they met, filled with sunshine, at least for a brief instant.

However, when she heard his question, her smile froze.

She gave Cheng Shi a strange look before responding with her own question:

“You... don’t know?”

It turns out that not smiling is contagious.

Cheng Shi’s smile froze, too.

Huh?

“I... I’m supposed to know...

Aren’t I?”