

The Gods 157

Chapter 157: The Torchbearers' Dire Predicament

Cheng Shi curiously examined the golden mask in his hand.

To be honest, he had never expected this mask to actually be useful to someone else.

He had originally thought that the mask he gave to Fang Shiqing was a worthless item, which was why he had also given her a healing spell imbued with Shared Divine Grace as a backup.

Looking back, that was a big mistake!

However, the mask in his hands now wasn't the same one that had brought him here. That one had disappeared after summoning him to this place.

Masks were always consumables.

"So, you're telling me you used up this mask to summon me here?"

After their earlier conversation, Fang Shiqing realized that Cheng Shi hadn't known what the mask actually did.

She was a bit taken aback, but internally, she felt a sense of relief.

Thank goodness! I took a gamble, and it paid off. Otherwise...

She had no idea how she would have explained herself to the other Torchbearers.

"It was your own item, and you didn't even know what it did?"

"....."

What kind of question is that? Just because it's in my hands, it's mine?

And because you're holding it, it can't possibly be mine?

Existence is existence; why make such clear distinctions?

Cheng Shi wasn't sure how to respond. Clicking his tongue, he handed the golden mask back to Fang Shiqing.

"So, what's this one do?"

Fang Shiqing took the mask and gave it a glance:

Mask of No Regrets (S): When you wear this mask, your battle spirit will be unstoppable. If you use this mask for defensive spells, all defensive effects and their duration will be doubled.

The effect had changed—this was a defensive mask.

She furrowed her brow, pondering for a moment before carefully phrasing her next question:

"This might sound a bit rude, but Cheng Shi... these masks..."

"I found them."

"Oh." Fang Shiqing gave him a look as if to say, "I figured as much," shaking her head with a smile. "This is a defensive mask. It can enhance defensive effects and extend the duration of defenses."

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow, thinking of Elder Cui's profession.

A warrior of [Decay], a mummy.

Could it be... that these masks were related to the professions of the players who provided them?

“Interesting.”

He nodded, took the mask back, and then shoved it into Cui Qiushi’s hands.

Cui Qiushi wasn’t expecting Cheng Shi’s sudden gesture. He stood there wide-eyed, stunned.

“What are you staring at? Take it. You guys look like you’ve been through hell. Looks like there’s a tough fight ahead.

Here, this will help you take a few more hits for me.”

Even though Cui Qiushi was a seasoned warrior, hardened by battles, he was still a bit dumbfounded by how casually Cheng Shi handed over an S-rank item.

What’s more, this guy wasn’t even a Torchbearer.

“I...”

“Just so we’re clear, this isn’t a gift. Once we deal with this mess, you Torchbearers owe me.

Hmm... Let me think... What should I ask for?”

Before Cheng Shi could finish his thought, Bai Ling crept over, tugging at her tattered dress.

“Big shot, take me. I’ll repay the debt with myself.”

Cheng Shi rolled his eyes in exasperation.

“Yeah, right. You think I’ll let you enjoy yourself for free? Not only am I down a mask, but now you’re trying to score a freebie? Your plan’s a little too obvious.”

“?”

Even Bai Ling was momentarily taken aback. She double-checked that the person in front of her was indeed Cheng Shi, before bursting into laughter. She clutched her stomach, leaning into Cheng Shi’s shoulder, unable to stand straight from laughing so hard.

“Hahahaha... So what should we do then?”

“No way I’m letting you get away with that for nothing.”

“Well, how about I pay you?”

“?”

Are you serious right now?

Do you think I’m that kind of guy?

How much are we talking?

Ah! Cough cough—what am I thinking? Why does it feel like I’m evolving into something... indecent?

I only want to negotiate with fate, not actually become... that.

“Alright, alright, let’s focus. Time for business!”

Although Cheng Shi was still puzzled as to how a mask had allowed him to jump between trials, now that he was here, he had to treat this trial as his own.

After all, no one could confirm whether dying in this trial would result in actual death.

Nor could anyone tell him whether failing this trial would mean losing points.

To be honest, even Fang Shiqing hadn't anticipated the current situation.

She had thought she would summon a puppet modeled after Cheng Shi's abilities, but instead, the real Cheng Shi had been pulled into their trial.

That meant Cheng Shi was now caught in the same dire situation as they were.

And the one responsible for all of this... was her.

Though Fang Shiqing maintained a calm and composed exterior, even managing to smile, deep down, she felt incredibly guilty.

The Torchbearers' mission was to protect what was beautiful, not to have "beauty" protect them.

But what could she do now? She couldn't send him back, so she looked at Cheng Shi, silently making a decision.

While she couldn't speak for all the Torchbearers, she could make one promise for herself:

No matter what, at least one person would survive this trial.

Her hand tightened around her Book of Truth, her fingers resting on the page marked "Bone Warrior."

Amid her swirling thoughts, she began to explain their situation to Cheng Shi.

The trial had begun because the Torchbearers were searching for something of great importance to them.

They had rallied many fellow Torchbearers to make the same wish, but not everyone had been matched together.

Where the other Torchbearers had gone was irrelevant. What mattered was that Fang Shiqing, Bai Ling, and Cui Qiushi had been matched into the same trial.

A [Chaos] trial.

Yes, a [Chaos] trial!

The name of their trial was The Crown Jewel of Truth (Chaos), but the clue given for the trial was:

[When the bell tolls, cry out in anguish! (Time Limit: 5 Days)]

The name and the clue were practically unrelated.

But based on previous [Chaos] trials, clues from Him could generally be ignored.

That's because His trials were filled with all sorts of chaos and disorder. Players didn't need to worry about looking for trial clues—just surviving until the end was the biggest victory.

And the scoring logic in His trials was different from other trials. You never knew what He was thinking, nor would you ever know why He gave you points, or why He deducted them.

So, in His trials, there was no need to cater to anything or care about anything else. The only goal was to survive.

Cheng Shi finally understood why the three of them looked so worn out.

They had survived four days in this chaotic mess.

Today was the final day.

The group was currently in what seemed to be an underground wine cellar. The air was thick with the smell of alcohol, and weak flames flickered in torches along the walls, barely lighting the cramped space.

The Torchbearers had likely taken refuge here, using it as a temporary safe zone. Whatever lay beyond would soon be their battlefield.

War often meant chaos, perfectly aligned with His theme.

Since they didn't have a dedicated healer, Fang Shiqing, who wielded the Book of Truth, had been forced to take on the role of a healer for the past four days.

Thankfully, she had plenty of resources stored up, allowing the team to hold out until now.

But the pages of her book, which contained her copied talents, weren't infinite. Now, only a few remained, and her teammates were nearly drained of their mental strength.

"So you have three more teammates who are still alive?" Cheng Shi asked, surprised.

Fang Shiqing nodded, pointing in a direction beyond the cellar.

"That's right. They're in some nearby ruins, together with the NPCs.

We couldn't hide our identities from those NPCs, so we came clean, claiming to all be from the same organization. This way, it's easier to move together.

Right now, my team and I are acting as lookouts for the others."

"Organization? What organization?" Cheng Shi chuckled. He knew Fang Shiqing wouldn't claim to be a Torchbearer outright.

"The Necromancer's Guild."

"Tsk, you guys are getting good at lying, huh?"

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow, a sly grin forming on his lips.

He had heard of the Necromancer's Guild, a group of somewhat fanatical [Death] followers.

Most members had some control over corpses or necromantic summoning abilities. They claimed that "bringing corpses back to the battlefield is the best way to honor the dead," earning them a notorious reputation as a small faction.

The Torchbearers had likely fabricated this identity because the guild was obscure enough that few people knew much about it. Plus, it solved the problem of Fang Shiqing's necromancy pages.

But looking at Fang Shiqing and her team, aside from Bai Ling, none of them really fit the image of necromancers.

Also, big sis seemed to have quite a collection of [Death] talents. This wasn't something you'd get just by trading.

Could it be that there was a high-ranking [Death] follower among the Torchbearers?

Cheng Shi's mind raced, but he decided not to probe too deeply in that direction.

"They bought it?"

"They didn't believe us, but they probably think we're planning to split off from the main group.

After all, in a battlefield this vast, moving as a small team is much more practical for ensuring survival and covering our tracks, if not for completing the trial's objective."

"What's the setup of the other three?"

"One is an expert in Void Matter Theory, close to 2600 points—his heartstring is strong and fervent. The second is a 2500-point Elemental Judge with a balanced and steady heartstring. The third is a prisoner—his exact situation is unknown, but he has [Silence]'s protection, so his heartstring can't be heard."

Cheng Shi was briefly stunned. This lineup wasn't bad at all.

One warrior, two mages, two bards, and a hunter. All that was missing was a healer.

And now, the healer had arrived.

"Oh wow, you guys are all over the place in terms of points, huh? I remember Bai Ling was..."

Bai Ling beamed and confidently introduced herself:

"Big shot, let me reintroduce myself. Bai Ling, Sensory Hunter, Guardian of the Fortress, 1447."

"Cui Qiushi, Order Knight, Guardian of the Fortress, 1964."

“Fang Shiqing, Truth Bard, Guardian of the Fortress, 2114.”

Cheng Shi raised his eyebrow, contemplating for a moment before making his decision.

“Cheng Shi, Forgotten Doctor, 2401.

If you don't mind, I'll be taking over this game.”