

The Gods 234

Chapter 234: Better Lucky Than Early

Cheng Shi feigned a retreat, but he hadn't actually left.

Because the Acrobat still hadn't come out.

If one stump could kill a rabbit, there was no reason it couldn't kill a second one.

But a fable is just a fable, and the ancients had already proven its accuracy with their wisdom — a single stump truly couldn't kill a second rabbit.

Cheng Shi waited there for five or six hours without any sign of the Acrobat. He reckoned it was already dark outside — the perfect time to slip away — so he reluctantly abandoned the idea of waiting any longer and left the mine.

'Could the one who died in my place have been Gao San?'

'He's a bit dim, but he doesn't seem genuinely stupid...'

'Maybe he crawled back through the pipe he came from?'

Cheng Shi mulled it over and decided that made sense.

In that case... he might as well go intercept him at the Colosseum ruins.

Come to think of it, Cheng Shi didn't really have any grudge against Gao San. Tricksters deceiving each other was the most natural thing in the world — as long as nobody pushed it to a lethal extreme, there was always a chance of working together again.

So his trip to the Colosseum ruins wasn't purely to corner Gao San. It was for another teammate — Zhao Si.

That clever Master of Trickery had thrown himself into danger to save his own skin. It was time to settle that account.

It was almost laughable — this trial hadn't even lasted a full day yet, but three of his five teammates were already dead, and every single one had died by his hand.

One couldn't help but lament the fickleness of fate.

Cheng Shi shook his head with a wry smile.

Though the trial hadn't gone on for long, after everything he'd been through, some peculiar ideas had begun forming in his mind about this utterly chaotic trial. But those rather absurd notions still needed verification, and the method of verification happened to involve that Master of Trickery.

So he had to find him.

Cheng Shi hurried out of the abandoned mine and returned to the surface.

The surface exit corresponding to this mine clearly wasn't outside the city walls. The laboratory couldn't possibly be as large as an entire city. When Cheng Shi climbed the last wooden ladder and pushed aside the shaft's cover, he found himself inside a residential house within the city.

It was deep into the night by now, and the moonlight was cold but far from dim.

By the light of the moon, Cheng Shi surveyed his surroundings and confirmed at least that no one lived in this house — it seemed like a disguise.

But an empty courtyard didn't mean quiet streets. On the other side of the courtyard wall appeared to be a rallying point for the city guard knights. Quite a few knights were holding up magic lamps and summoning their comrades, looking as though they were heading out to take over rescue operations.

His eyes darted, and he quietly scaled the wall, knocked out one lucky fellow at random, swapped into his armor, grabbed his lance, and followed the main force back to the Colosseum.

Only now, the Colosseum had become a massive sinkhole. Under the glow of magic lamps strung together in chains, the pit was visibly strewn with broken timber and twisted metal, ash-gray rubble and skeletal remains.

Countless grotesquely contorted corpses were being carried out of the wreckage by the knights. Recovering a body in one piece was considered the luckiest outcome in this wretched disaster.

Wails and sighs echoed across the sky, suffering and misfortune refusing to dissipate.

The scene was so devastating that the very air was saturated with grief. And as one of the "culprits" who had caused this catastrophe, Cheng Shi wore an equally sorrowful expression.

Unfortunately, the sorrow on his face wasn't born of genuine anguish — it was a disguise. After all, the entire squad looked grim. Standing out with a different mood right now would blow his cover.

He listened in silence for a long while, then finally, eyes reddened with grief, he turned to the man beside him and asked:

"Have they figured out what caused the explosion?"

"Apparently they have, but it hasn't been announced yet. When the captain received orders tonight, he heard the Iron Law Knights reporting to the Inquisitors. Sounds like it was an internal problem on their end."

"What?"

"Shh! Keep it down — you got a death wish? The Supreme Inquisitor hasn't left yet, and Iron Law Knights are all around us. You want them to know we're talking behind their backs?"

'...' Brother, I only asked one question. Everything else was all you. Why are you so dramatic?

Cheng Shi, equal parts exasperated and eager, leaned in closer, doing his best to project an air of fascination as he listened to this remarkably chatty comrade continue sharing what he'd heard.

"It wasn't the Iron Law Knights who discovered it first — it was us. Brothers from the city guard found unexploded ordnance in the rubble. Analysis showed the explosive compound matched a formula commonly used by the Iron Law Knights, so it got reported up the chain.

And guess what happened next? When the Iron Law Knights investigated, they found someone had been purchasing gunpowder ingredients throughout the city — and that person turned out to be one of their own. What was his name again... Grin..."

"Grind!"

"Oh right, right! Wait — you knew?"

"Nah, just a lucky guess."

"Well, that's one hell of a guess. It was him!

He'd been stationed at the Deathmatch convicts' prison for a while, and the blast points excavated at the site all line up with the areas where he was posted. Quite the coincidence, wouldn't you say?"

"Coincidence indeed. Quite the coincidence."

"And here's an even bigger one — this Grind guy was clearly rescued and brought to the surface, but then he vanished in the blink of an eye. Now the Iron Law Knights have lost their minds. The whole city is searching for him. Since they're shorthanded, we got drafted to dig through this pit."

"I see..."

Cheng Shi understood now. He'd assumed all along that his teammates had rigged the Colosseum to blow, but as it turned out, the players had merely stumbled into perfect timing. The question was what Grind had intended by planting explosives beneath the Colosseum.

Where had he come from?

Was he trying to create chaos, or was his target the laboratory hidden beneath the arena?

Cheng Shi had a strong suspicion it was the latter. If so, had Grind approached him precisely because of this planned explosion?

Had Grind intended to use him as a pawn — a fuse to detonate the charges? Then why had the explosion gone off prematurely, before Cheng Shi had even finished the Deathmatch Final?

Had someone triggered his explosives?

Who — a player?

Had a player accidentally set them off?

No — perhaps it wasn't accidental at all. Thinking from the perspective of these tricksters: if they stumbled upon a cache of explosives while making their escape, failing to light the fuse would be an insult to the Fun God's blessing hanging over their heads.

So it was very likely that a player had detonated Grind's charges. But the question remained: who?

The answer seemed to point to only one person — Zhao Si.

The thought made Cheng Shi even more restless. He desperately wanted to meet this Master of Trickery again, to go another round and see whether Zhao Si's silver tongue was sharper or Cheng Shi's fists were bigger.

Still, when he thought about it, Grind's story was probably just as thrilling.

Interesting. So the players weren't the only protagonists of this trial after all. So this was the true face of [Chaos]!

Countless hands grasping in the mire, each searching for what they desired. No matter who won and who lost, not a single participant in this game would come out with clean hands.

Beneath the orderly surface churned currents of disorder, just as a drama of [Chaos] played out upon the stage of [Order].

So this was [Chaos] — and he felt himself drawing ever closer to it.

With that thought, Cheng Shi lowered his head once more and marched forward in silence.

"Hey, brother — I don't think I've seen you around before. Do you have family or friends... uh, sorry, what I mean is, you're crying so hard your nose is all red, so I was wondering if someone you care about might have been caught in... well, you know what I mean."

"Yes. No point in avoiding it. I had five brothers. Three are dead. The other two are missing."

"Good lord..." The surrounding city guard knights cast pitying glances his way. "Our deepest condolences."

These kind-hearted comrades began consoling Cheng Shi, promising they'd do their best to find his brothers — or at the very least, recover their remains intact.

"Can you describe any distinguishing features of your brothers? It'll help us identify them."

"One of them was spineless. The other was treacherous."

"?" The knight blinked. "Is that how you describe your brothers? Are you really... brothers?"

"Absolutely. The genuine article."

"..."

The knight looked at Cheng Shi's sorrowful face, that nose rubbed raw and red, and believed him.

Before long, the city guard knights arrived at the disaster site and completed their handover with the Iron Law Knights who had been excavating the area, beginning their own "search for a brother's brothers."

And right then — the very moment Cheng Shi stepped to the edge of the sinkhole and peered down — his gaze was instantly drawn to a striking flash of red amid the wreckage.

Zhao Si. Still wearing his prisoner helmet, still clad in his crimson convict garb, the teammate was being dragged by the ankles like a discarded rag toward the pile of corpses at the rim of the pit.

Civilian bodies might require next of kin to identify and claim them, but convicts warranted no such courtesy. They deserved nothing more than a pyre of judgment — letting their shattered flesh and tainted souls repent for past sins together in the flames of [Order].

Cheng Shi saw this, and he smiled again.

A Master of Trickery — dying in an explosion he'd triggered himself? Not a chance.

And so...

"Better lucky than early."