

The Gods 25

Chapter 25: Fang Shiqing's Invitation: [Us]!

This was a cramped utility closet, packed with cleaning supplies and tools. The space was so tight, there was barely half a meter in which to stand.

And in that half-meter of space, Cheng Shi and Fang Shiqing stood face-to-face, practically touching.

Fang Shiqing wore a smile, while Cheng Shi had an expression of surprise on his face.

“So, this ‘fog of war’ was just an excuse to kidnap me?” Cheng Shi remarked, his face twisting into an odd expression as he surveyed the tight quarters. He had to admit, it was a pretty good hiding spot.

“‘Kidnap’ isn’t really the right word,” Fang Shiqing chuckled. She placed her hands on Cheng Shi’s arms to maintain a certain distance between them, all the while explaining seriously:

“The ‘prophet girl’ was sticking too close to us. This was the only way I could shake her for a bit.”

“Huh? You call her that too—‘prophet girl’?” Cheng Shi’s eyes lit up, feeling as if he had just found a comrade in arms.

“Of course, what else would I call her? But enough idle chatter; we don’t have a lot of time. Cheng Shi, I have something important to discuss with you.”

“I like men, thanks,” Cheng Shi interrupted, his mouth moving faster than his brain.

“.....”

Fang Shiqing was momentarily stunned, then burst into laughter.

“It’s not what you think, no need to reject me so quickly.”

Hearing this, Cheng Shi breathed a sigh of relief.

“Phew, good. In that case, I still like women.”

“...Do I not have any appeal at all?” Fang Shiqing asked half-jokingly, raising an eyebrow.

“Well, if you mean appeal like Bai Ling, then no, not really.”

“..... I’m not going to banter with you anymore.” Despite not being upset, Fang Shiqing quickly returned to her serious tone. She looked Cheng Shi in the eye and said, “Cheng Shi, I know you lied about your ladder score, and I know you’re far more capable than you let on. But I’m not here to probe into your secrets. I just want to invite you to join us.”

“‘Us’?”

Cheng Shi’s smile slowly faded, and he furrowed his brow thoughtfully, as if he had realized something.

“You’re with the Logic Association?”

The Logic Association was an organization formed by players, primarily followers of [Truth], who sought after the fundamental truths of the universe and the essence of the gods.

Under the influence of [Truth] and the “Tower of Logic” from the trials, these people had developed a fanatical thirst for knowledge regarding the origins of existence and the laws of the universe.

They had become completely irrational in their quest for [Divine Understanding] and the power of godhood.

Of course, the Logic Association was just one of many player organizations. There was also the “Order Alliance,” the “Nature Cult,” the “History School,” and countless others.

The root cause of these organizations' formation was humanity's innate desire for survival and power after being forced into the role of [Players].

So they banded together, tirelessly working to improve themselves.

Since Fang Shiqing was a follower of [Truth], Cheng Shi naturally assumed she was associated with the Logic Association.

However, Fang Shiqing shook her head and sighed.

"The Logic Association has abandoned logic. They've become so desperate to become gods that they've lost all sense of morality. They're no longer true followers of [Truth]. They're closer to followers of [Corruption] or [Folly], driven by ambition and consumed by their desires. They've become deranged and incomprehensible...

But we are not like that.

Cheng Shi, do you still remember your home?"

Her sudden heartfelt tone caught Cheng Shi off guard.

Home? Well, if you consider an orphanage utility closet to be "home," then sure, I remember.

After all, this cramped little space was starting to remind him of his childhood quarters at the orphanage.

Noticing his lack of reaction, Fang Shiqing continued:

"Everyone has a warm home. Everyone has loved ones.

But ever since They descended, all of us have lost the lives we once cherished.

The [Faith Game] shattered the world and pushed billions of people to the brink of destruction.”

Her tone was somber, and her grip on Cheng Shi’s sleeves tightened.

“Cheng Shi, not everyone is like you and me, able to win trial after trial.

Able to reach 2000 points.

Able to acquire S-rank talents.

Able to work hard and survive.

Many people... they take one misstep and find themselves falling into the abyss. And many more have already fallen.

But is that their fault?

They are innocent people, struggling to survive, compromising in every way they can, only to be labeled ‘Godforsaken’ when they die.

Among them are your family, my family. People who love you, people who love me.”

Her smile was tinged with melancholy, but she quickly found her resolve and continued:

“But is there really no way to stop this?

Are we truly doomed to lose everything we love and want to protect in the face of the gods?

No!

As long as we have blood, bones, and breath, we humans will not allow this to happen!

And that's why we were born!

We've gathered together, using every ounce of strength we have and uniting every friend we can, to protect everything that is worth protecting!

We bow our heads and accept the gods' blessings, but we also raise our heads to challenge Their authority.

We turn our backs to each other, entrusting ourselves to one another, vowing to protect the trust of our friends.

We forge weapons and build new walls, and we delve into the darkness to pass the torch of hope.

That's who we are!

For the sake of those we care about, we must stand up!

Cheng Shi, do you understand?

This is who we are.

A group of warriors who dare to stand against the gods, a group of madmen who still believe in 'goodness.'

We strive for all of this, even as we crawl through the darkness, never revealing ourselves lightly.

But you, Cheng Shi—I believe you’re worth the risk.

And so, I solemnly invite you to join us. Will you... accept?”

Cheng Shi listened quietly to her words, his face obscured in the shadows, making it hard to read his expression.

Fang Shiqing eagerly tried to detect some emotion on his face, but it was clear she had failed.

After a long silence, Cheng Shi’s lips curled into a smile, his tone playful as he asked:

“You’ve said so much, Ms. Torchbearer, so tell me—are you a Guardian, or a Builder?”

“!!??”

Fang Shiqing’s eyes widened in disbelief. She stared at Cheng Shi, trying to suppress her shock as she whispered, “You know about us? You...”

But then something occurred to her, and the shock and hope in her eyes faded, replaced by deep regret. She smiled bitterly.

“It seems... you’ve already rejected us.”

Cheng Shi’s expression faltered slightly. He shook his head.

“No, I’ve never been invited before. You’re the first.”

Fang Shiqing’s shock deepened. She raised her head, her voice filled with surprise.

“That’s impossible. No player who hasn’t been contacted by the Torchbearers could possibly know about us! Where did you hear about us?”

“Where did I...?”

Suddenly, Cheng Shi’s gaze turned distant and contemplative. His eyes drifted past Fang Shiqing’s hair, as though he was staring into the darkness behind her, lost in some long-forgotten memory. His voice grew melancholic as he murmured:

“Where, indeed? I guess... I must have heard it from some fool.

Tell me, have you ever seen someone sacrifice their life for a complete stranger?”

“Why not?” Fang Shiqing’s gaze became resolute, her voice firm as she said:

“A Torchbearer will do whatever it takes to protect what they hold dear, even at the cost of their own life.”

“Even a stranger is considered part of what you call ‘goodness’?”

“Maybe not for me, but certainly for him—the Torchbearer you’ve met before. In his eyes, that stranger was... what he considered ‘goodness.’”

Fang Shiqing’s voice was filled with a passionate sense of righteousness, and even the usually facetious Cheng Shi found himself slightly moved.

“So, that’s how it is...”

He shook his head, the smile returning to his face as he lifted his gaze back to Fang Shiqing’s eyes. Her eyes were filled with hope, shining brightly.

Even in the fog, even in this dreary utility closet, her eyes were still so bright.

“I’ll remember you, Ms. Torchbearer.”

Fang Shiqing was momentarily stunned. She hadn’t expected Cheng Shi to see through her identity so easily, but she didn’t mind.

“And so, what’s your answer this time?”

“More than that, I want to know—why did you choose me? I’ve never thought of myself as a good person,” Cheng Shi said with a casual shrug.

Fang Shiqing chuckled. “The word ‘good’ is too heavy for the world we live in now. We don’t expect to meet good people, only that our partners aren’t bad people.”

“And how do you know I’m not a bad person?”

Fang Shiqing loosened her grip on Cheng Shi’s sleeve and gestured toward her ear.

“My S-rank Bard talent, Resonance of the Heartstrings. I can hear the music of everyone’s inner self. I’m very familiar with the tunes of evildoers, and you’re not one of them.”

“?” Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow, intrigued. “And what’s mine like?”

“Hmm... it’s strange, unpredictable, and low... but not dark.”

Cheng Shi pondered that for a moment and then suddenly burst into laughter.

“Why are you laughing?”

“Sorry, I’m laughing because you’ve misheard.”

As soon as he finished speaking, Cheng Shi struck swiftly, delivering a karate chop to Fang Shiqing’s neck before she could react.

Thump!

“You...”

Her eyes widened in shock before they fluttered shut, and she fell unconscious in his arms.

Cheng Shi rubbed his sore wrist, and with a strange expression, looked down at the unconscious Fang Shiqing lying in his arms.

“People who stand in the light shouldn’t trust those in the dark. After all, those who dwell in the dark... aren’t usually ‘people.’”

“But still... thank you.”

He smiled bitterly, hoisting Fang Shiqing up by the waist and pushing the door open as he carried her out of the utility closet.