

The Gods 341

Chapter 341: The Mediocre Person Society's Invitation

Over the next few days, Cheng Shi's life suddenly grew hectic.

The reason, naturally, was food.

After two months of spending without earning, his warehouse provisions had dipped below the warning line. He needed to stockpile food before the next Special Trial arrived, just in case.

So he began running solo dungeons like a madman, determined to fill both his warehouses this week—ensuring he wouldn't waste energy on food until the year-end Audience Meeting.

The saved time could then be devoted to studying how to effectively climb the ranks and become a Chosen One.

Cheng Shi's current Ladder of Ascent score was 172. His [Deceit] ranking was 47th, trailing the current [Deceit] Chosen One, Li Jingming, by 42 points. His [Fate] ranking was 39th, trailing the [Fate] Chosen One, Blind One, by 34 points.

He was a clearheaded person, and a cautious one. He knew that wanting to climb didn't mean endlessly queuing for different trials—that was too risky and exhausting. That's why he researched how to climb "effectively."

Based on his past performance and scoring patterns, he could reliably earn two to three points per session. At that rate, over the four-plus months remaining before year's end, he only needed a steady twelve points per month to be close enough to the target position before the Audience Meeting.

Of course, everyone's scores were constantly shifting. Even though the Chosen Ones' peak scores had plateaued around 210 for a while, nobody could predict what changes the coming months might bring. So the climbing plan couldn't be that crude.

He planned to assess his progress against the gap at mid-month and month-end every month, supplementing with additional Wish Trials as needed to cover any shortfall.

This way, he could advance steadily—inching closer to the Chosen One position without facing a barrage of top-tier players early in the climb.

The Chosen One title depended solely on Ladder of Ascent ranking. As for Road to Ascension ranking, Cheng Shi couldn't have cared less.

After all, his Road to Ascension score was flexible—the exact number depended entirely on his mood.

Meanwhile, based on information from various chat channels over the past few days, most of the Chosen Ones had returned to their rightful brackets—only a handful were still stuck below. Even "True Heart True Intention" had climbed back into the top ten.

The game was finally returning to normal.

Though many more people had died, the chat channels stayed lively. Even the usually quiet residential blocks would occasionally ring with laughter and cheer.

It almost reminded Cheng Shi of the early days when everyone had first been assigned to different zones.

But... it was precisely because everything was too normal that Cheng Shi found it abnormal.

He'd always believed the saying: madness is always bred beneath the calm.

Especially when the current calm was false. Superficial.

Because one of Them had fallen.

[Prosperity] had fallen. One of the gods who had signed the Pact and descended the Faith Game—gone without a trace. And aside from Hong Lin and himself, not a single player had noticed.

Even though he'd made some effort to spread the news of [Prosperity]'s death, there'd been zero relevant feedback in the chat channels. His little scheme had failed.

Of course, the fact that no outsider had noticed was partly because Hong Lin had inherited part of Her Pact authority, carrying out Her "duties" as proxy. But it still unnerved Cheng Shi.

The essence of the Faith Game was to make players walk different paths of faith, constantly drawing closer to the deity at the end of each path. But when the guide at the road's end had vanished, leaving only an empty Divine Throne—what was the point of drawing closer?

After all, Her death was the ultimate negation of every follower blindly trudging down that road.

Furthermore, if the presence or absence of a deity on the Divine Throne didn't actually affect one's approach toward faith—then who could guarantee that the being standing at the end of any other faith's path was truly the original deity of that faith?

Or—even more terrifyingly—did They actually exist at all?

Cheng Shi had pondered this question more than once. Ever since witnessing [Prosperity]'s fall, he'd been contemplating the meaning of the Faith Game. If faith had grown so fervent that a deity needed to self-destruct to fulfill Her will, then what exactly were the players—these beings who endlessly participated in the gods' trials—in Their eyes?

The "conspiracy theories about the gods" that had circulated among players all lost their meaning, because [Prosperity] had never intended to do anything to the players She'd "selected." Instead, in pursuit of so-called universal prosperity, She'd blown Herself up.

No matter how Cheng Shi turned it over, he couldn't construct a logic that even satisfied himself. So he set the thought aside for now—walking, watching, and thinking as he went.

He told himself that perhaps there simply wasn't enough intelligence about Them yet. He needed to gather more before new insights would come.

And as it happened, an opportunity to exchange intelligence with other players was approaching.

The Mediocre Person Society!

The golden card he'd recovered from the Wanderer had recently changed. When his gaze happened to sweep across it, he noticed a countdown and an invitation had appeared on the card's back.

The countdown was measured in days. It had started at three, and today, three had become one.

The delicately penned invitation was refreshingly direct: Welcome to the stage of the mediocre.

This was unmistakably a mysterious gathering organized by some player who fancied themselves "mediocre." Previously, Cheng Shi would have had zero interest in extracurricular meetings with other players—he didn't enjoy unnecessary risk.

But now, this kind of novelty stirred something in him. He desperately wanted to grow. He yearned to expand his intelligence network and connections, to understand more about the true nature of the Faith Game.

Cheng Shi had a vague sense that this was some kind of summoning mechanism, and the card was more like a key to another space. If he held the card when the countdown reached zero, he would likely appear on this so-called Mediocre Person Society's stage.

As for what awaited on that stage—he wasn't sure. But one thing he could be certain of: there would definitely be a clown there. Oh wait—a Fate Weaver.

During recent calls, he'd asked Hong Lin about this organization, but she didn't know much either. She'd even teased him, saying the Destined Ones were definitely not mediocre people and had no need to attend gatherings of self-proclaimed mediocrities. Instead, they should pull all the Destined Ones together for a sharing session.

Cheng Shi thought that phone calls with Hong Lin already constituted the Destined Ones' sharing sessions—after all, this great organization sheltered by [Fate] had a grand total of two members.

No—to be precise: one person plus one Envoy.

This was perhaps the most prestigious player-founded organization since the Faith Game's descent. Regardless of actual combat power, at least it had one of Them in it.

Thinking about all this, Cheng Shi couldn't help but curve his lips. Holding the card whose countdown was about to expire, he thought:

'I hope tomorrow's performance doesn't disappoint.'

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Chapter 342: New Trial: Born Equal ([Birth])

But before attending the gathering, he had one more thing to do—the cheating issue he'd discussed with Hong Lin on the phone.

He needed to get his hands on the mental-strength item before the meeting, so he could attend the unknown performance armed to the teeth with backup plans.

And so, today, Cheng Shi prepared to launch his Wish Trial.

Early that morning he sat at the rooftop's edge, enjoying breakfast at leisure while scrolling through chat channel messages as digital entertainment to accompany the meal.

To keep gathering intelligence, he still maintained his [Fate] faith disguise. After burning through a few more masks, Cheng Shi was fairly confident the prophecy's effects had dissipated. Not completely, but True Heart True Intention had climbed back into the Ladder of Ascent's top ten, and other Chosen Ones had gradually returned as well.

To keep pace with peak players, Cheng Shi had spent these past few days deliberately building preliminary impressions of each faith's current Chosen One.

[Birth] needed no introduction. Hu Xuan's Night Curtain Spring Whistle was still sitting in his spatial storage, and every time he saw it, his brain auto-played that spine-tingling "Come."

[Prosperity] hardly needed discussion either. Big Cat was arguably the biggest winner from the last trial—aside from his Benefactor [Fate] Himself.

[Death]'s Chosen One had been "Cemetery Management" before he dropped in rank. He'd been stuck around the thirties and forties on the Ladder of Ascent for a while with no movement, and nobody knew what he was up to.

[Corruption]'s Chosen One was called Poison. Cheng Shi suspected he might know this person, because shortly after the game's descent, he'd been matched with a female player who called herself Poison—a [Corruption] assassin who'd left an extremely deep impression. Their encounter had actually preceded the trial where he'd met the Grand Marshal, Hu Wei, making Poison the first Chosen One Cheng Shi had ever encountered—though she hadn't held the title back then.

[Decay]'s Chosen One was Lin Xi—a name he'd only recently heard. This Plague Cardinal who'd walked on foot to the Septic Final Tomb had originally been Big Cat's greatest rival. But now... he could only pray for his own safety.

[Oblivion]'s Chosen One was very low-profile, with scant information. But they were probably a Scavenger. Cheng Shi had picked up a few words about this person from Hu Wei, who'd called them "a janitor." Among [Oblivion]'s professions, only the warrior class Scavenger fit that description.

[Order]'s Chosen One had mountains of intel. Cheng Shi had even seen his work résumé posted in the mage channel. His name was Mo Li—an Arbiter—reportedly the consensus pick for the Faith Game's best support player.

[Truth]'s Chosen One had no name, only a serial number: "0221." Strangely, despite being an Erudite Scholar, his mentions in the mage channel were extremely rare.

[War]'s standard-bearer was his "generous" big brother Hu Wei. Not much more to say.

[Chaos] remained as mysterious as ever. All three faiths' Chosen Ones were seldom mentioned. But from Hong Lin, Cheng Shi did learn the name of the [Silence] Chosen One: The Prisoner.

As for [Existence] and [Void]—aside from the [Time] Chosen One "Lao Deng" being somewhat mysterious, Cheng Shi basically knew the rest.

These sixteen people might not be the strongest in the game, but they were certainly the most aligned with Their will—and the ones he needed to be most wary of going forward.

'I just wonder how long it'll be before I become one of those sixteen... and who the unlucky soul I squeeze out will be.'

Stop!

'Nah—better not jinx it. If I fail to climb and end up eating my words, that'd be way too clownish.'

Cheng Shi shook his head with an amused smile. His eyes filtered through streams of messages as he finished his breakfast. But just as he was about to stand, his gaze drifted involuntarily to the opposite rooftop.

Xie Yang had vanished again. Or rather, since their last encounter, he'd been gone for an entire week.

His routine over the past couple of weeks had been peculiar. He'd pop up briefly each time, always wearing a contented smile, chat for barely two sentences, and disappear again—leaving Cheng Shi deeply curious about how the girl downstairs was keeping him entertained.

But a few days ago, the girl downstairs had vanished too. Cheng Shi noticed that the window in that residential unit—the one that was always pushed open—hadn't been opened again. Not only that, it was now spattered with flecks of blood.

Cheng Shi's imagination conjured an indescribable romantic drama. He badly wanted to ask Xie Yang if his guess was right, but since discovering all this, Xie Yang hadn't shown his face.

This follower of [War] had become even more mysterious.

"Well, if I want to think positive about it—maybe it wasn't the girl who died, but Xie Yang?"

"That way no one was actually hurt, and my neighbor's disappearance would be explained. Wouldn't that be the best of both worlds?"

Lost in these thoughts, he laughed out loud.

Once all preparations were complete, Cheng Shi's expression turned serious. He produced the Die of Fate and began his prayer.

"Cannot distinguish true from false, nor discern void from real."

"Your devout follower prays to You—open a trial..."

"A trial of [Prosperity] that is extremely short, absolutely safe, and easy to clear!"

He'd prayed for this type of trial once before, long ago—only without specifying a particular deity.

Even back then, he'd already been testing every loophole in the Faith Game. The reason for praying for these "speedrun" trials was simply to farm some resources. But the Faith Game had apparently anticipated this, because such trials were invariably absurd—either a day-long wilderness sightseeing tour, or a one-day excursion through the Grand Tribunal's city dungeon, and so on. All utterly worthless trials where you couldn't scavenge a single thing.

Aside from wasting time, they were completely useless.

But this time was different. He had someone on the inside. Even if it was just a day of idle wandering, he could still get what he wanted.

'Now that's satisfying to think about.'

But what Cheng Shi absolutely did not expect was this: when he closed his eyes with a smile on his lips, the message that appeared before him wasn't quite what he'd prayed for:

[Wish Trial (Born Equal: [Birth]) has been initiated]

[Matching teammates (1/6)]

[Trial Objective: Every life has the equal right to be born, even if it should not have been born. (Time Limit: 7 days)]

'Hold on—what?'

'WHAT???'

Cheng Shi was dumbstruck. Staring at the scarlet characters "[Birth]" in his field of vision, his heart lurched and his legs clenched together instinctively.

'I prayed for a [Prosperity] trial! How did it turn into [Birth]!?'

'What's going on here!?'

'Great Benefactor—did You do this on purpose? Or did You do this on purpose?'

'Are You kidding me? We just said He wanted to meet me, and You send me straight to Him?'

'Could You maybe consult the person in question before making decisions!?'

"..."

'Though honestly, it has been a while since I was matched into one of His trials. The last [Birth] trial was that solo leftovers dungeon three months ago.'

[Birth]'s followers, in their zeal to make offerings to their Benefactor, often did things that were unfathomable—or downright unwatchable. Cheng Shi only hoped that in this trial, he wouldn't encounter too many of His followers. That way, perhaps he'd still have a chance to avoid becoming a father... or a mother.

'It probably just changed [Prosperity] to [Birth], right?'

'They couldn't have changed all my other stipulations too.'

'If You're really that heartless, then don't blame me for using a mask next time I pray for a trial...'

'Sigh—what even is my life.'

Cheng Shi's face went dark. His body vanished from the spot.

[Match successful (6/6) — Entering trial]

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Chapter 343: Hilarious — This Opening Is Way Too Hilarious

The air was thick with the scent of Infant Bell Flowers—rich and piercing.

Infant Bell Flowers were white blossoms shaped like tiny round bells. When first inhaled, the fragrance transformed at the tip of the nose into an intensely cool sensation. But as the scent seeped deeper, the odorless coolness gradually shifted toward something putrid, ultimately erupting at the back of the nasal cavity in a wave of nauseating stench.

Since smelling it induced retching—similar to morning sickness—many ancient civilizations associated the Infant Bell Flower with prayers for children. And thus, the flower's name.

This flower had become rare by the Civilization Era. Only a handful of nations within the Nature Alliance that worshipped [Birth] still cultivated it in large quantities. In the Life Era, however, it was everywhere.

A dry wind swept across his face, flooding his nostrils with the wretched smell and making Cheng Shi sneeze involuntarily.

Before even opening his eyes, he was already thinking: 'Please don't let this be Dolgod.'

'It can't be. What are the odds?'

He laughed at himself self-deprecatingly. Sensing his vision returning, he slowly opened his eyes—and when he saw the décor of the room, the church robes on himself and the five players across from him, and the conspicuous totem crests on those robes, his heart clenched.

'Well, damn—it really is Dolgod!'

'A place I've visited often enough to feel somewhat familiar.'

Right then, the teammates before him also opened their eyes one after another. They surveyed their surroundings and sized each other up with studied nonchalance.

"I can smell the disgusting Infant Bell Flowers. How are these things not extinct yet?"

"A church? Which church are we in?"

"Life Era. Not surprising—His most glorious period was the Life Era, after all."

"..."

"Dolgod?"

The last to speak was a male player who squinted around the room with furrowed brows. His tone carried uncertainty, as if speaking more to himself.

But Cheng Shi caught it. It wasn't often he ran into someone who recognized such an obscure little city. He looked at this teammate with interest and nodded amiably:

"Yes. This is Dolgod."

But to his surprise, this male player—wearing a loose robe and a deep hood that covered him thoroughly—didn't respond to his confirmation. Instead, the man furrowed his brow and began sizing up Cheng Shi from head to toe.

Just from that one look, Cheng Shi knew he was in for the usual treatment.

'A follower of [Folly]. Still as brazenly obvious as ever.'

"Dolgod? I recall this is a small city in the southern reaches of the Dol Empire." A brawny, muscular man grinned at Cheng Shi and gave a thumbs-up. "This place isn't exactly famous. You know your stuff, brother. Given that—you wouldn't happen to be... one of His followers?"

Clearly, the "His" in question meant [Birth].

?

Now Cheng Shi was displeased.

'What do you mean "given that"?'

'What about me looks like a [Birth] follower?'

'You can't just look at a handsome face and start making wild assumptions.'

'Whether I'm His follower is one thing—but you look more like His follower to me.'

Cheng Shi eyed the hulking man with a smirk, noting the contented ease in his eyes and the corners of his cheeks.

'Who gets happy about being matched into a [Birth] trial?'

Besides perverts, probably only His followers. So this mountain of a man was very likely one of His faithful. Combine that with his imposing physique, and Cheng Shi hazarded a guess:

"Chieftain?"

The big man blanked, then erupted into hearty laughter: "That obvious, huh? Fine, no point hiding it. I am indeed a Chieftain."

"Gou Feng. Chieftain. 2,381."

Chieftain—the warrior class of [Birth].

A profession with... extraordinarily potent reproductive capabilities.

The "Chieftain" title wasn't earned by recruiting tribe members. It was earned through the impregnation ability bestowed by [Birth].

Their attacks carried a terrifyingly potent pregnancy-inducing effect, giving enemies a chance of conceiving their offspring upon taking damage. When the Chieftain then killed a pregnant enemy, the fetus would burst from the corpse, devour the remains to grow, and become a new member of "the tribe"—a fanatical follower of the Chieftain.

Hence the name: Chieftain.

So as long as a [Birth] warrior was fierce enough, their tribe would grow with every kill. They could practically claim the title of the profession best suited for group warfare—because a single person was already a team.

Seeing that a Chieftain had shown up in a [Birth] trial, the others' expressions went stiff.

Gou Feng was well aware his profession often drew criticism, so he gave a self-deprecating chuckle:

"Relax—I don't attack teammates."

'You'd better not...'

Though no one said it aloud, the visible relief was palpable.

Gou Feng looked rough, but he was actually a shrewd player. When Cheng Shi dodged his question, he knew they weren't co-believers. He raised an eyebrow and tried again:

"Mage?"

After all, everyone knew that the well-informed intellectuals in trials were usually mages, followed by singers. Other professions didn't particularly stand out in that regard.

Cheng Shi wasn't sure how this unexpectedly-arrived [Birth] trial would unfold, so he decided on a different approach: lead with sincerity, make some friends, and rely on multiple layers of goodwill to hopefully avoid disaster in this accident.

He smiled and nodded earnestly:

"Yes, I'm a mage. Allow me to introduce myself."

"Cheng Shi. [Life]. Mage. 2,401."

"Whoa—another big shot!"

"Cheng Shi? I recently heard some explosive gossip. The male lead's name also seems to be Cheng Shi, though apparently he's a Fate Weaver?"

"..." Cheng Shi's expression stiffened. He forced a fake smile: "I've heard that too. Sharing a name with someone like that is kind of stressful."

The group reacted with mixed expressions, each lost in their own thoughts. Gou Feng just laughed heartily:

"[Life]?"

"No wonder you recognized this place so quickly—you're practically a colleague! Nice, I like you."

?

The instant those words left his mouth, Cheng Shi shuddered three times where he stood.

His spine going rigid, he stared at the man, running the phrase through his head several times before finally understanding that "I like you" was probably just a casual way of saying "not bad."

'Dude—could you please change that catchphrase? It's terrifying.'

'Being told "I like you" by a burly meathead is bad enough. Remember, you're also a Chieftain?'

'Stack those buffs together and you'll literally scare people to death!'

"..."

It took Cheng Shi ages to thaw the frozen muscles on his face back into something approximating a smile. He looked at the alarming Chieftain and laughed it off:

"So, big guy—what did you pray for?"

Gou Feng was a bold, detail-indifferent sort. He didn't hide anything, though he furrowed his brow with a touch of confusion:

"That's the strange part. I clearly prayed for a decent piece of equipment. How'd I end up in my own Benefactor's trial?"

"Normally with that kind of prayer, it should've been a [War] or [Truth] trial."

At this, the young man beside him—dressed in a slightly assassin-themed outfit—asked in surprise: "Bro, you're nearly at 2,400 and you don't have equipment?"

Gou Feng shook his head with a laugh:

"Brother, the difference between 2,300 and 2,400 is huge."

"I did have one piece. Got chopped to bits in my last trial. So I figured I'd try to score something less fragile."

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

Normally, when someone was asked about their prayer and answered, they'd return the question. But Gou Feng didn't—he seemed unconcerned about such things, still scratching his head over why he'd been matched into a trial from his own Benefactor.

Since nobody asked, Cheng Shi certainly wasn't going to volunteer. Making up a reason was tiring. So he turned his attention to the teammate beside him.

The [Folly] follower had his own rhythm, and Cheng Shi couldn't be bothered. So he looked to his left.

This teammate had squinty eyes—a squinty-eyed man in retro work overalls who looked like a plumber. A perpetual smile hung on his face, but since the moment he'd opened his eyes, his gaze had never left Cheng Shi.

'He's been watching me this whole time!'

...

Chapter 344: The Another Day Assassin

Cheng Shi was sharp. He'd noticed this teammate's scrutiny out of the corner of his eye long ago. Even with the man's eyes being that narrow, Cheng Shi had still caught his gaze.

But he didn't call it out. Instead, he carefully guided the rhythm of introductions, passing the next turn to him.

The squinty-eyed man studied Cheng Shi once more from head to toe, then spoke at a measured pace:

"What a coincidence—I'm also on the [Life] path."

"Zhang Jizu. [Life]. Priest. 2,490."

'Well, I'm screwed. Ran into an actual 2,400—no, 2,500!'

'And he's [Life] too!'

'What kind of [Life] follower could he be?'

Cheng Shi looked at this perpetually smiling teammate with a flicker of surprise. A single quick glance confirmed his identity.

A Gravekeeper.

Without a doubt—a Gravekeeper.

His neatly trimmed hair and untended sideburns ruled out Gardener. His cold aura—chilling even through that squinty smile, radiating an unapproachable chill—made him unlikely to be an Offspring Priest. That left only the Gravekeeper.

'Interesting. A 2,490-point Gravekeeper.'

'Could he be...'

Cheng Shi returned a smile at Zhang Jizu, then shifted his gaze to the next person.

But right then, the [Folly] follower standing beside Cheng Shi let out a scornful laugh and spoke up.

"Two 2,400-level players who don't have the guts to reveal their professions. How can you two even smile?"

"Did you really think you could hide your faith just because this isn't a 2,400-level match?"

The instant he opened his mouth, practically everyone pegged him as a [Folly] follower.

And taking his cue, the others also faintly guessed Cheng Shi and Zhang Jizu's professions.

Most likely a Necromancer and a Gravekeeper—because neither of them looked remotely like [Prosperity] people!

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow and smirked—because from that one sentence, he'd also deduced the [Folly] follower's score. This man wasn't above 2,400.

The squinty-eyed Zhang Jizu looked at this follower who literally peered down his nose at people. He wasn't angry in the slightest. Instead, he explained with methodical calm:

"The zygomatic major muscles in my cheeks pull up the corners of my mouth. The orbicularis oculi muscles around my eyes continuously contract to form crow's feet. That is how I smile."

"Any other questions?"

"Within my ability, I'm happy to explain."

"..."

"..."

"..."

'Oh boy, this is a real priest!'

Cheng Shi couldn't hold it and burst out laughing.

Following the explosion of laughter, the [Folly] follower's face went black.

He first shot Cheng Shi a look of displeasure, then turned a dark, cold gaze on Zhang Jizu and sneered:

"I hope your healing is as good as your mouth."

Zhang Jizu shook his head and corrected him again with perfect solemnity: "My professional abilities are stronger than my mouth—because my mouth, aside from eating and speaking, cannot influence other people. But my healing can."

"Pfft—"

"Kuh-huh-huh..."

Cheng Shi had completely lost it. And he wasn't the only one—several other teammates were pressing their lips tight, trying desperately not to laugh, lest the atmosphere become unbearably awkward before the trial even started.

Still, this priest teammate had one seriously sharp tongue.

'Bro—your mouth absolutely does influence people. It influences them way too much. This [Folly] guy's nostrils are practically sealing shut.'

Sure enough, having failed at looking down on anyone, the [Folly] follower clamped his mouth shut with a silent seethe and gloomily averted his gaze.

Cheng Shi watched the scene with unbridled inner glee.

'There's a reason the paths are arranged the way they are. On the [Chaos] path, [Folly] ultimately leads to [Silence].'

'Hilarious. This opening is way too hilarious.'

Seeing that Nostrils had gone quiet, the teammate on the other side—having laughed his fill—continued with self-introductions.

"Scorpio. [Existence]. Assassin. 2,179."

"I'm a total newb. Hope the big brothers here will take care of me."

'Lies—though the lie is probably the second part.'

This young man with the assassin-themed outfit was clearly the energetic, cheerful type. It immediately reminded Cheng Shi of Song Yawen, the contrarian assassin from before.

'Is the "contrast" archetype still trending in assassin circles?'

'Or is it already passé?'

'After all, trends are constantly changing.'

"No newb makes it past 2,100, little bro. You're being a bit modest." Gou Feng grinned, sizing up the assassin beside him. His tone carried some playful meaning: "[Existence] assassins aren't to be trifled with. We should be the ones asking you to go easy."

"Just joking, big bro. My core principle is sincerity. Others treat me well, I treat them with a true heart."

Hearing this, Cheng Shi's smile vanished in an instant. His spine snapped taut, and his eyes narrowed to slits.

'Zhen Xin? Where's Zhen Xin?'

But he immediately realized he'd been too paranoid. This "true heart" wasn't that Zhen Xin.

'Oh—just sincerity...'

'Treating people with sincerity is nice. After all, I'm all about sincerity too.'

At that thought, his rigid body suddenly relaxed. He laughed at his own jumping-at-shadows paranoia.

Seeing Cheng Shi laugh, the little assassin grinned back:

"What, big bro—don't believe me?"

"I'm truly honest and cooperative. The only reason I've made it this far is because I got carried by the big shots in trials. For big shots, I'm genuinely, sincerely obedient to the letter."

"..."

'Wait, wait, wait—could you please stop throwing around phrases that sound like names? It's giving me a headache.'

Watching this chatterbox go on about how honest he was, Cheng Shi's inner mischief bubbled up. He curled his lips and said:

"I don't disbelieve you—it just reminded me of something. A friend mentioned matching with someone called 'Earth Scorpion'—an Old Hunter. Had some skills but liked playing underling. That wouldn't happen to be your alt account, would it?"

"?"

Scorpio blanked. Then he frowned and shook his head—but the instant he finished shaking, he froze in place. He stared at Cheng Shi with startled eyes, his expression enormously complicated.

He clasped his fists toward Cheng Shi: "Well played, my respects!"

Cheng Shi waved off the compliment, but the curve of his smile only deepened.

Because he'd bluffed it out. This Scorpio was a follower of [Time]—an Another Day Assassin.

It wasn't just Cheng Shi who noticed. Everyone else astute enough had seen through Scorpio's identity, because his reaction was too precise.

When Cheng Shi said "Earth Scorpion," Scorpio hadn't reacted at all. But the moment Cheng Shi mentioned "Old"—as in "Old Hunter"—the little assassin had already begun shaking his head.

Anyone present who wasn't an idiot could tell Scorpio's denial was about the faith, not the name. That meant he could only be the other faith under [Existence]—[Time].

And upon learning he was an Another Day Assassin, everyone's guard went up a few notches.

They had to be cautious, because the Another Day Assassin was a profession that pushed [Time]'s path-reading to its absolute extreme. They could cross between different projected futures and kill their target in another timeline, then overwrite the result onto the current reality.

If an assassin like this also had some talent for disguise, then anyone targeted by them might die without ever knowing how they'd been killed.

Because they didn't die in the present—they died in a future fabricated by the Another Day Assassin.

Hence the name: Another Day Assassin.

But the group's wariness wasn't just about the assassin. It was equally about Cheng Shi's probe. Unraveling the little assassin's cover with a single sentence made this [Life] mage someone they couldn't underestimate either.

'Mage—truly the representative of intelligence.'

And this was exactly the effect Cheng Shi wanted. He needed to establish a "don't mess with me" image right from the start, so nobody in this unexpected trial would keep eyeing him.

Seeing Scorpio shake his head with a rueful smile, Cheng Shi seized the moment to ask:

"What did you pray for?"

"Uh... hard to say, but I can guarantee it won't affect anyone in this trial."

Everyone raised an eyebrow at that, expressions turning contemplative. Cheng Shi didn't push—whether someone shared was their right. He turned his gaze to the final teammate, excluding the [Folly] follower.

This teammate wore a long trench coat and carried a retro wooden case—looking every bit like a spy from some mysterious organization. Seeing everyone's eyes converge on him, his expression froze. He gave a nervous laugh:

"You big shots staring at me is making me anxious. I'm just a nobody—an even smaller nobody than the Another Day Assassin."

Cheng Shi wanted to laugh. 'Your outfit is anything but nobody material, buddy.'

The trench coat man noticed his teammates' odd expressions and realized his appearance wasn't exactly convincing. He shook his case and said with a casual laugh:

"A gift. This is a gift—nothing mysterious."

"I'm a pastry chef. Made some pastries for everyone."

"Oh right—introductions first. I'm Mo Shu. [Descent]..."

"Sigh, I probably can't hide it anyway. Fine, I'll come clean. I'm a Scavenger. A Scavenger at 2,116 on the Ladder."

...

Chapter 345: Can an Offering Made for the Purpose of Blasphemy Still Be Called an Offering?

Scavenger—the warrior class of [Oblivion].

A profession whose destructive and annihilative urges ranked second only to the [Oblivion] singer class, Destruction Declaration, within the [Oblivion] faith's hierarchy.

Destruction Declarations were the mindless-rampage type. They chanted psalms of destruction and carried out [Oblivion]'s will with the philosophy that if it could be destroyed, it must be, and if it could be trampled, no mercy would be shown—an endless, devout offering to their Benefactor.

But they were singers, after all. Their methods of annihilation typically involved inciting others' destructive urges, then celebrating the obliteration in wild song.

Scavengers were different. They had the strength to destroy everything themselves—and delighted in creating destruction.

True to the profession's name, they walked the path of [Oblivion], casually dragging everything in sight into the abyss of annihilation. Their every move was like cleansing the world of impurities—hence the name Scavenger.

But Cheng Shi clearly did a double-take upon hearing the man's profession. He noticed that this teammate called Mo Shu seemed to have had no particular urge to destroy the surrounding tables and chairs since their arrival. Not only that—he was actually creating things?

'He said what—pastries?'

'He made pastries?'

Right on cue, Mo Shu casually set his case on a nearby table, clicked it open, and revealed five neatly divided compartments inside. Each one held a beautifully wrapped little gift box.

As he took them out and arranged them on the table, he introduced them with a smile:

"Here we go. Today's menu is Shernira Sheep Fat Cake. The filling is over-extracted Shernira Sheep Blood Wine. I used a little trick to annihilate the alcohol, keeping only the wine's flavor without the buzz—won't affect the trial. Come on, everyone, give it a try."

He opened one box and lifted out a cream-colored cake.

Looking at all this, Cheng Shi felt his worldview still had some expanding to do.

It was rare to find someone who'd stayed true to their original passion and applied their faith's power to their craft. The last time he'd heard of anything like this was in the books Xie Yang had brought back.

Kanrival, that magical place, had a bunch of ordinary people who applied [Life] to everyday production. And now he'd encountered a pastry chef who followed [Oblivion].

'This is way too entertaining. He says he annihilated the alcohol in the wine. That sounds like an offering to his Benefactor. But then he "created" a new cake. So does that... count as blasphemy?'

'Can an offering made for the purpose of blasphemy still be called an offering?'

But setting faith aside, this pastry chef's pastry really did look tempting. Looked delicious just at a glance.

Normally, Cheng Shi would never touch anything of unknown origin before confirming its safety. But today was different—protected by Endless Life, he was fearless.

Poison couldn't one-shot you.

Curses couldn't one-shot you.

And cake definitely couldn't choke you to death.

So Cheng Shi was tempted. After all, the Shernira Sheep Fat Cake looked rather appealing—and no matter how bad it tasted, it couldn't possibly be worse than Finger Bread and snot-water.

But aside from him, everyone else was clearly suspicious. Their gazes swept from the cake to Mo Shu's face, seemingly calculating what this pastry chef was really after.

And that was when the long-silent [Folly] follower spoke up again.

The instant he opened his mouth, the room dripped with sarcasm.

"Hmph. Pathetic pandering."

"Who eats unidentified food from a stranger in an unfamiliar environment? When warmth can't be classified, it's often laced with ulterior malice. Your method of attracting attention is too—"

The [Folly] follower had finally found a new opportunity to look down on someone. But before he could finish, Cheng Shi—standing right next to him—stepped forward as if he were in his own kitchen, shamelessly snatched the opened cake, and wolfed it down in two or three bites.

"Munch munch—your sheep fat cake barely has any gamey taste. You sure this isn't fake sheep fat?"

"..."

"..."

"..."

Everyone was dumbfounded. Even Mo Shu froze for a moment before nodding with a glimmer of surprise:

"I annihilated the gamey smell. Was worried some people wouldn't like it."

Cheng Shi smacked his lips with lingering satisfaction and a touch of regret:

"That was a bit counterproductive—killed all the flavor. But since it's free, I'll give it a good review."

Everyone's expression shifted when they looked at Cheng Shi.

The little assassin swallowed hard and subtly backed away a step. The [Folly] follower's eyes narrowed, his thoughts unreadable. Chieftain Gou Feng scratched his head, thinking this mage was even more reckless than him. And they all shared the same thought:

'So Necromancers really aren't afraid of death, huh?'

Even the perpetually composed squinty-eyed man widened his eyes slightly at this scene.

He carefully examined Cheng Shi's physical state, then also picked up a piece of cake. A delicate little spoon materialized from thin air, and he scooped a small piece into his mouth.

"Not rank. Not greasy. Slightly sweet. Rich wine flavor, but truly no alcohol—no buzz. The sweetness comes from aftertaste flower pollen. The cake itself is sugar-free, but the fat content is high—not suitable for those with elevated blood lipids."

"I don't have elevated blood lipids, so I can enjoy it."

And with that, he began eating the cake in small, methodical bites.

Seeing two people accept his pastries, Mo Shu quietly exhaled and his tense expression eased somewhat.

Anyone with eyes could see that this 2,100-point Scavenger had been worried about the attitude of two 2,400-level players whose faiths directly opposed his. Especially after Cheng Shi had bluffed out Scorpio's faith, Mo Shu had grown even more uneasy.

But thankfully, the opposing-faith conflict didn't erupt at the start, and these two [Death] followers didn't seem so cold and heartless after all.

Mo Shu quickly opened the remaining boxes and set them before the others.

He seemed to be using this somewhat stiff sincerity to declare his peaceful intentions. But at this tier, the number of people who'd actually trust him was probably vanishingly small.

Everyone's expressions varied, but nobody reached for the cakes.

Only Cheng Shi—after polishing off his piece—looked curiously at the now-relaxed Scavenger and suddenly asked:

"So this is your understanding of [Oblivion]? Having things you created with your own hands annihilated in your teammates' mouths?" Cheng Shi wiped the last trace of cream from his lips and grinned. "You're less like a Scavenger and more like a Destruction Declaration."

Mo Shu had never expected his little scheme to be seen through at a glance. He blinked in bewilderment, then felt a chill of lingering fear.

Fortunately, this 2,400-level teammate didn't seem like a scathing adversary. Otherwise, things would've been really uncomfortable.

He nodded somewhat sheepishly:

"Impressive, big shot—you even caught that."

"Yes, that's exactly what I meant. Though it's just my humble opinion."

"I've always felt that getting others to also practice [Oblivion]'s will might draw His gaze better than practicing it alone."

'Tsk—logic isn't bad, though that mindset is a little too [Prosperity].'

Cheng Shi let out a soft laugh without replying. Instead, he turned to the [Folly] follower and teased:

"Hey, Mr. Hot Take—care to share your sharp commentary?"

The [Folly] follower shot Cheng Shi a sideways glance, snorted coldly, and walked away without another word.

"Pointless exchange. Waste of time."

He left—departed the room that resembled a church lounge all by himself.

Seeing him go, Cheng Shi grinned with irrepressible delight and turned to Mo Shu:

"Since he's not eating, mind if I have his?"

Mo Shu had never met a teammate this relaxed. He nodded instinctively, then watched this "Necromancer" demolish another cake in a single bite.

He knew his decision to share food right off the bat would make teammates wary. But he hadn't tampered with the pastries, so scrutiny and skepticism didn't faze him. What he truly hadn't expected was someone trusting him this readily—and even getting hooked.

The little assassin watched, speechless, his mouth twitching.

"Big bro, if you're really that hungry, take mine too."

Gou Feng scratched his head and bellowed a laugh: "He can have mine too."

Hearing the others, squinty-eyed Zhang Jizu paused mid-bite. He suddenly held out his half-eaten cake:

"The silver spoon is self-sanitizing. This half hasn't been touched. If you'd like—"

Before he could finish, both half-cakes were whisked away by Cheng Shi and tossed into spatial storage.

"Not hungry right now, but I'll take them to go. Many thanks for everyone's generous contributions!"

He even threw in a mock bow for good measure.

"But I'm curious—pastry chef, what did you pray for? Surely you didn't enter a dungeon just to feed people cake?"

Mo Shu smiled awkwardly, his bashful expression completely at odds with his getup.

"I prayed for my Benefactor's gaze. But somehow I got matched into a [Birth] trial."

'Prayed for [Oblivion]'s gaze?'

Cheng Shi frowned. That prayer was anything but ordinary—it seemed a bit too "big." Conceptually big.

'What would have to happen in this trial to draw His gaze?'

'How much would need to be offered to Him? Annihilate all of Dolgod?'

It looked like there might be a major variable in this trial. But since they'd just begun, Cheng Shi wasn't about to start making grim predictions. He shrugged with a casual smile:

"Spoken like His truly devout follower."

"And what about this [Life] big brother—what did you pray for?"

Zhang Jizu turned his narrowed eyes on Cheng Shi and countered: "How about you? Not going to tell us yours first?"

"Me? I prayed to make friends during the trial. And from what I can see, everyone here is friend material—oh, except for Nostrils over there."

"Friends?" Zhang Jizu murmured the word a few times, then said with a squinty smile: "What a coincidence—my prayer was also because of a friend. Someone I've yet to meet, most likely."

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow, his expression turning peculiar.

Because his Master of Deception told him this squinty-eyed man didn't seem to be lying.

'Now that's interesting.' The vague, noncommittal answer clearly signaled that Zhang Jizu didn't intend to share his secrets. Since that was the case, Cheng Shi didn't press. He gave the man one thoughtful glance, then addressed the group:

"Right then—let's hope we all find what we're looking for."

"Time waits for no one. We really should get to work. No matter how long the trial is, our first step should be gathering intelligence, agreed?"

Gou Feng laughed heartily at the sight, his appreciation for this easygoing teammate growing by the second. He scratched his head:

"I really like you."

"What's the plan? You seem to know this place well, Mage. Why don't you give us some pointers?"

Cheng Shi went rigid for an instant, then quickly replaced it with a smile. Like a genuinely erudite mage, he explained the situation to the group:

"I wouldn't say I know it well—just a passing familiarity."

"This is Dolgod, a small southern city of the Dol Empire during the Life Era. Historically insignificant on a global scale, but quite famous within the Dol Empire."

"Because this is a city that worships [Birth] in its entirety. Every doctrine and law here serves procreation."

"We're in the parishioners' lounge of the Dolgod Theocracy of Growth. The Theocracy is the governing church here, which holds that all acts of procreation are the highest worship of Him, and that every person has the equal right to procreate."

"This isn't a patriarchal society, nor a matrilineal community. Every person here is raised under the Church's care, then becomes a devout [Birth] follower, joining the great enterprise of worshipping Him through procreation."

"?" The little assassin frowned. "What do you mean 'the right to procreate'? Isn't that just... having babies? Without the Church, people here can't have kids?"

Gou Feng scratched his head and grinned:

"Don't forget—this is my Lord's trial. The 'procreation' you're talking about probably isn't as simple as ordinary childbirth."

"I'm guessing everyone here can have children regardless of gender?"

"That should be the right the Church guarantees."

To be fair, men giving birth would be mind-blowing anywhere else. But in a place under His gaze, it was probably the most mundane thing imaginable.

But Gou Feng had only gotten it half right.

Cheng Shi shook his head and pointed toward the door with a smile:

"You're half correct."

"Out the door, turn left for 100 meters, then turn right, and walk straight to the end. There you'll find a Prayer Room."

"When you enter with the desire to bring new life into the world, the Prayer Masters of the Theocracy of Growth will listen to your prayer and then grant you the corresponding power."

"The power to give birth—or to help others give birth."

He put it delicately, but some people caught on.

Squinty-eyed Zhang Jizu looked at the still-smiling Cheng Shi and raised an eyebrow: "If I understand correctly, you're saying the Prayer Masters here can change a follower's sex?"

"Bingo! Correct!" Cheng Shi snapped his fingers cheerfully. "Men here really can't give birth—but they can become women first, and then give birth."

"So any brothers interested in transitioning, better seize the opportunity. Great chances don't come around twice. Just one prayer and you can go from 'he' to 'she.'"

"Most importantly, this is a civic right upheld by the Theocracy of Growth—so it's free, and requires no sacrifice."

"Of course, the disappearing body parts don't count as a sacrifice."

"..."

This time, even Chieftain Gou Feng, a [Birth] follower, wore a strange expression.

"Brother... how do you know this place so well? You weren't... a woman before, were you?"

"..." Cheng Shi's face went dark. He couldn't laugh anymore.

'Dude, if you really can't speak properly, you can just not speak. I'd appreciate it.'

As for why he knew this place so well...

It was quite the coincidence. The solo food-gathering dungeons he'd prayed for kept sending him to bizarre locations—and Dolgod happened to be one of them.

In this city where gender could be swapped at will, Cheng Shi had lost count of how many confused citizens he'd helped deliver their babies. Practically every underground clinic in town bore traces of Cheng Shi's work.

Of course, those traces had long since been annihilated in the void of history. But that didn't stop him from feeling a strange attachment to Dolgod.

'I'm probably a... spiritual citizen of this place?'

'What even is this.'

Cheng Shi shook his head, flinging the stray thoughts from his mind, and continued:

"Any more questions? Let's talk while walking—time waits for no one."

He took the lead, striding out of the lounge toward the church's exit.

Gou Feng and the little assassin blanked, then hurried after him. Mo Shu hesitated a beat, annihilated his pastry box, and hustled after the group.

Zhang Jizu, seeing everyone else leave, furrowed his brow. He quietly regurgitated the cake he'd swallowed, tossed it aside, wiped his hands, and followed at an unhurried pace.

Watching Cheng Shi take the lead in this "walking tour," pointing here and there with intimate familiarity, Zhang Jizu trailed at the back with an amused shake of his head.

"No matter how you look at it, this seems like his home turf. The danger He mentioned—could it be the danger he poses to everyone else?"

"So am I supposed to be his bodyguard, or his teammates' bodyguard?"

"Cheng Shi..."

"Truly interesting."

...

Chapter 346: The Evil Infant Inquisition

[Birth]'s trials were generally not that difficult. The entire trial invariably revolved around the two characters "birth" and "growth," and His hints were usually obvious enough—without too many twists and turns. Even so, [Birth]'s trials remained a nightmare for many players.

Because the difficulty was never in solving the puzzle. It was in... the cognitive impact.

You never knew what kind of twisted [Birth] ideology you'd encounter in His trials, nor what reality-shattering revelations awaited.

The history of the Life Era was far from as civilized as the Civilization Era. The insane, the fanatical, the bizarre, the uncanny—every story about "birth" and "growth" was like a bottle of indelible ink. Once it accidentally seeped into a player's lake of consciousness, no matter how pure that lake had been, it would be irrevocably muddied.

That was what players truly feared about [Birth]'s trials.

Though the terror wasn't entirely unknown—everyone anticipated that reality-breaking revelations would revolve around "birth and growth"—the most absurd part was that it always managed to shatter your worldview from some completely unforeseen angle, tearing at your fragile nerves and leaving you slack-jawed in shock.

But His trials weren't all drawbacks. There were upsides.

The upside was that, setting aside players' mutual suspicions and personal schemes, His trials rarely presented lethal risks. At most, there was some... pregnancy risk.

Cheng Shi couldn't fathom why his [Prosperity] prayer had become a [Birth] trial. But since he was already here, he might as well clear the trial and grab some points. Plus, the location was his extremely familiar "home turf." So he decided to lead the team in a speedrun.

A genuine speedrun.

"Where are we heading?"

The group followed Tour Guide Cheng like a package-deal tourist group, asking curious questions. Cheng Shi didn't just barrel ahead according to his own plan—as he led the way, he quietly observed his teammates, occasionally posing questions to assess their capabilities and reasoning.

To achieve a speedrun, you needed to understand your teammates well enough to put every bolt in the right socket and maximize the team's potential.

So Cheng Shi walked and smiled: "Think about the trial objective. I'm taking you somewhere that'll easily yield clues."

The little assassin and the shy Scavenger trailed behind without saying much. Most of the talking came from the bold-natured Gou Feng exchanging ideas with Cheng Shi.

The trial objective wasn't difficult, and Gou Feng had long formed his own theory. Combined with observations along the way, he ventured a guess:

"The objective clearly wants us to ensure the birth of a life that shouldn't have been born."

"If I recall, brother, you said this place's Theocracy of Growth exists to serve procreation?"

"And from what I know, among my Benefactor's followers, the Conception faction and the Birth faction have completely different ideological platforms."

"The local church guarantees citizens' right to conceive and be conceived. So this church worships 'conception'—not 'birth.' Am I right?"

As expected of a [Birth] follower—he had some knowledge of the history of His era.

Cheng Shi gave Gou Feng a thumbs-up, then explained rapidly:

"Exactly. The Theocracy of Growth has 'growth' in its name, but what it truly worships is 'conception.'"

"They believe all conception is His blessing, and every follower should enjoy this right. But the outcome after conception depends on each person's devotion. If someone becomes less devout during pregnancy, then the life she births will inevitably be undevout as well."

"The Theocracy of Growth will not allow the birth of such blasphemous infants. So there's an institution within the church specifically responsible for identifying and handling these cases."

"That institution is called the Evil Infant Inquisition. We should be able to find plenty of useful information there."

After a long walk, Cheng Shi stopped the group before a building enclosed by towering walls. He turned around, threw his arms wide, and beamed brilliantly.

"Dear tourists—last stop, the Evil Infant Inquisition. We've arrived."

The group was momentarily infected by Cheng Shi's cheerful energy, then smiled and began surveying the area.

"These walls are way too high. Feels like they're even taller than the outer city walls we saw earlier?"

"They have to be. This job is incredibly dangerous. Because once a staff member determines that a citizen's unborn child is an evil infant, it's practically a verdict of blasphemy against that citizen."

"Think about it—if she really is guilty of blasphemy, fine. But in the case of a misjudgment, the enraged citizens would never let off a church worker who tried to kill their child—or even them."

"Walls this high exist solely to protect the staff."

At this, everyone was stunned.

Squinty-eyes finally caught up. Hearing this, he smiled: "There are misjudgments? So the method they use to make determinations isn't a tool bestowed by Him, but manual evaluation?"

Cheng Shi was honestly puzzled about that too. But all his knowledge came from things pregnant women—or pregnant men—had told him during deliveries. He hadn't verified any of it. Today would be his first time investigating in person.

"Trying to understand the past from the present always has limitations. Prior research wasn't thorough. But I expect today we'll be able to uncover the truth of this history."

"Tearing away history's veil with your own hands is quite fascinating, don't you think?"

The little assassin glanced at Cheng Shi with an expression that was both approving and odd:

"Well put. But big bro, that speech sounds a lot like something a follower of [Memory] would say. Are you really a Necromancer?"

Everyone turned to Cheng Shi—only to see him spread his hands and shake his head: "Who told you I was a Necromancer?"

"Huh?"

Several teammates were baffled.

They'd all been assuming their tour guide was a Necromancer. But now that they'd arrived, he'd denied it himself.

"You're not a Necromancer?"

"Impossible—you can't be a Wood Elf?"

"Bro, you don't look like a [Prosperity] person at all. You're messing with us, right?"

'A Wood Elf?'

'Ha—what about him looks like a Wood Elf?'

Just as Zhang Jizu was sure Cheng Shi had argued himself into a corner and was about to reveal his true identity, he heard Cheng Shi nod with a face of utter sincerity:

"Correct—I am indeed a Wood Elf."

"What did you think I was eating that cake for? Even starving, nobody eats like that. It was an Oracle Act—an offering to my Lord!"

"..."

'What a boldface liar!'

...

Chapter 347: Okay, Okay, Okay — You Really Know Your [Prosperity]!

After hearing Cheng Shi's effortless lie, Zhang Jizu widened his eyes slightly. He smiled helplessly to himself, recalling the scene in the Fishbone Hall when his Benefactor had summoned him.

"I... made... a deal... with [Deceit]."

"The contents... you... need not know."

"After this... audience... you will return... and pray to Him... for a trial."

"Then... during the trial... try your best... to keep... a certain follower of His... alive."

Zhang Jizu, transformed into a skull, stared at his Benefactor in disbelief and asked:

"[Deceit] made a deal with You... to protect one of His followers?"

The green flame in the massive skull's eye socket upon the Bone Throne flickered, then gave a heavy "Mm."

Upon receiving the affirmative, Zhang Jizu immediately thought of one person—Zhen Xin!

Only she—only the Chosen One of [Deceit]—could possibly warrant a True God's personal intervention. Had she... no, had that unreliable sister of hers gotten her into trouble again?

Trouble so dire that it required True Gods to communicate between themselves to resolve?

But if the deities had already taken action, why not just save her directly? Why drag him into it?

The baffled Zhang Jizu asked bluntly:

"So, my Lord—am I going to be Zhen Xin's bodyguard?"

"Not. Her."

"!!!" The perpetually composed Zhang Jizu panicked. For the first time, his eye sockets went perfectly round, his voice trembling: "Bodyguard for Zhen Yi???"

"Also not. Her."

"Phew—" But confusion quickly returned. "My Lord, which liar has caught [Deceit]'s eye this time?"

"If I'm to protect him, I should at least know his name."

"His name... is Cheng... Shi."

"?"

'Honest? Cheng Shi?'

Zhang Jizu blanked, then suddenly recalled the gossip that had swept through the entire peak player circle.

Wasn't Zhen Yi's new flame—the Fate Weaver—also named Cheng Shi?

'That's quite a coincidence.'

'Same name?'

The massive skull seemed to read Zhang Jizu's confusion and offered a sparse response.

"It is... exactly... the person... you're... thinking of."

"But isn't he a [Fate] follower?"

Zhang Jizu was utterly lost. He had no idea what had transpired behind the scenes, let alone why his Benefactor would issue an edict assigning him bodyguard duty.

But after a moment's thought, a possibility occurred to him: this Cheng Shi, like Zhen Xin, might have a secondary personality—one that happened to be a [Deceit] follower!

Only that could explain how a Fate Weaver and a [Deceit] follower could be the same person.

'This is absurd. [Deceit] went to [Death] and asked [Death]'s follower to protect Zhen Yi's little boyfriend—who's very possibly a multi-personality player like Zhen Xin and Zhen Yi!'

'Is everyone on the [Void] path this... void?'

The moment the logic clicked, Zhang Jizu's mind went blank.

He looked up at the Bone Throne in bewilderment, hoping the divine oracle might elaborate. But that Lord clearly had no patience for further explanation. All Zhang Jizu saw was a bone whip lashing toward him—and then everything went dark as he was whipped back to reality.

From the moment he returned, he'd worn a complicated expression while following his Benefactor's instructions, praying to [Deceit] for a trial. Absurdly, [Deceit] had never responded.

Until today. He'd tried on a whim first thing in the morning—and finally matched with this honest liar!

He really was "honest" indeed. First time Zhang Jizu had ever seen a Wood Elf who lied without batting an eye!

Gou Feng heard Cheng Shi's claim and shook his head with a sigh:

"C'mon, brother—lying isn't cool. Could it be that someone in our group is your rival, so you're hiding your faith?"

"Are you a [Fate] follower?"

At the sound of [Fate]'s Divine Name, the little assassin Scorpio suddenly fixed Cheng Shi with a grave stare. If this group leader was from the antagonistic [Fate], he'd need to watch his back.

Mo Shu, on the other hand, quietly exhaled in relief. At least one of the two 2,400-level teammates wasn't [Death]—pretty good news for him.

Before Cheng Shi could respond, Gou Feng scratched his head again:

"Actually, doesn't seem right either. [Fate] is all mysterious and cryptic—you don't look like a charlatan."

"Don't tell me it's [Corruption]?"

"You're my rival?"

"All about embracing—what, control? Toying with teammates, commanding everything?"

"If you're really one of His, just say so. I'm a team player. I can work with a rival—but if you hide it, I'm not going to like you as much."

"..."

'Dude, that pitch almost makes me want to defect to [Corruption].'

Cheng Shi shook his head with an amused smile. He knew that without proof, nobody would believe him. So he extended his hand and subtly emanated a wisp of Le Le'er's aura.

This was the aura of ancient [Prosperity]—far purer than the [Prosperity] energy players carried.

The reason he chose not to activate the "Vitality" Authority or [Prosperity] divinity was naturally out of caution.

Cheng the Steady, even when going wild, did so steadily. He wasn't about to reveal all his trump cards at the start.

He knew this wisp of ancient [Prosperity] aura would most likely fool these teammates. And if there were any holes, a lie or two could patch them easily enough.

Sure enough, upon sensing this distant, ancient [Prosperity] aura, everyone froze.

"Bro, you really are a Wood Elf? But your hair..."

"Interesting. The scent of ancient [Prosperity]. Being at 2,400 really is different. I genuinely like you."

"..."

Zhang Jizu likewise felt this wisp of ancient [Prosperity] aura and chuckled inwardly.

He considered himself quite shrewd, but even he couldn't avoid being jerked around by liars—because there were always liars more cunning than him. And at this level, there were plenty.

But today was different. This was the first time he got to watch a scam unfold from an omniscient perspective. Watching his teammates get played, he suddenly understood why liars were so obsessed with deception.

Watching a monkey show was genuinely entertaining—especially when you weren't the monkey being made a fool of.

Seeing the group's doubts mostly assuaged, Cheng Shi smiled. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a glimmer of amusement at the corner of squinty-eyes' expression. He blinked thoughtfully but said nothing.

Scorpio, being an assassin, had sharper perception than the rest. While the others had been chatting, his ears had been subtly twitching, listening for sounds from within the walls. Once the conversation died down, he spoke with a peculiar expression:

"Strange. I've been listening for a while, and the compound inside seems to... have no one."

"No one?" Cheng Shi blanked, glancing up at the sky. The sun hadn't reached its zenith yet—this was clearly during the Theocracy of Growth's working hours. How could nobody be there?

He furrowed his brow, sensing things might not be as straightforward as he'd imagined.

"Let's go in and see. Seeing is believing."

Everyone nodded, then—each displaying their own unique talents—made their entrance.

The assassin Scorpio vanished into the shadows on the spot. Gou Feng looked up at the towering walls, coiled his strength, and launched himself clean over the top.

Mo Shu cautiously edged away from Zhang Jizu, gave the two a smile, then annihilated a person-sized hole in the wall and walked straight through. Cheng Shi was about to piggyback through, but the hole sealed itself after Mo Shu entered.

Watching this, Cheng Shi didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

'Now that's a Scavenger who's good at creating!'

'But seriously—are you all this antisocial? I guided you all the way here, and this is the thanks I get?'

'Fine then—let me show you what a clown can really do.'

Yes—Cheng Shi was a clown this round.

He hadn't brought any masks with him. The reason: when he'd started the prayer, he'd never expected to land in a real trial.

Before praying, he'd deliberated at length. He'd figured that praying to [Fate] might get him thoroughly manipulated, so he'd switched back to clown mode and prayed to [Deceit] instead. And yet he still got thoroughly manipulated.

So now he'd lost the Hero of Today's divine protection and become a "powerless" priest.

But the current challenge wasn't combat, and a priest had a priest's methods.

Just as he was about to pull a rope ladder from spatial storage and fling it over the wall, the squinty-eyed man who'd been standing to the side spoke up.

"That big tree has a nice shape. Wood Elf—how about using it to make a tree ladder and carry me over?"

Cheng Shi's lips curved in anticipation. He'd deliberately hung back, waiting for Zhang Jizu to approach him. And sure enough—the man was suspicious!

His gaze had lingered on Cheng Shi for far too long. Either he'd heard Cheng Shi's name from previous teammates, or he'd known him from the start.

'Interesting. Whose friend is this one?'

But Cheng Shi betrayed none of this. Since the priest brother was also hiding things, they might as well compete over who could hide better.

He put on an "oh, right!" expression, turned back, and looked at Zhang Jizu apologetically:

"Forgot—there's a priest here too. Don't worry, let this Wood Elf take you in."

With that, he extended his hand.

Zhang Jizu froze internally, wondering if this [Deceit] follower was perhaps a Master of Trickery with the Lies of Yesterday talent—who'd swindled a [Prosperity] follower last round and literally turned into a Wood Elf.

'A Wood Elf isn't bad. At least climbing walls is easy.' So he smiled and reached out.

But the instant Cheng Shi gripped Zhang Jizu's wrist, he...

...shoved one end of a rope ladder into the man's hand.

"???"

Looking at the dumbfounded squinty-eyes, Cheng Shi explained with perfect solemnity:

"I'm a member of the Plant Protection Association. I never abuse plants, nor do I force them into manual labor."

"This is a rope ladder I made by using [Prosperity]'s power to accelerate the growth of some found vines. Throw it over the wall, and we can climb up nice and safe."

"How about that—convenient and efficient?"

"..."

The retort opportunities in that sentence were so numerous that Zhang Jizu had a whole salvo of colorful language jammed in his throat, unable to decide where to start.

He was so exasperated that he laughed. While laughing, he snatched the rope ladder from Cheng Shi's hand and, exactly as described, flung it over the wall. Then he tidied the bottom end and side-eyed Cheng Shi with a wry smile:

"[Prosperity]'s power can do that?"

Cheng Shi blinked. He looked at Zhang Jizu's palm and noticed a white product tag still dangling from the ladder's end. Only then did he recall that this rope ladder hadn't come from a prayer at all—he'd looted it from someone's backpack during a past trial.

'How strange—it's the apocalypse and people still use tagged products?'

But he felt zero embarrassment. Without so much as a blush, he defended himself shamelessly:

"Clearly my Lord is very sentimental—He even recreated details that only existed before the Game descended."

"So you see!"

"Who says prosperity only exists in the present? Look at this spray-printed tag— isn't it living proof that the manufacturing industry once prospered?"

"..."

'He can tie even this to [Prosperity]?'

'Okay, okay, okay—you really know your [Prosperity]!'

Zhang Jizu was numb. He decisively shut up, swallowed all his retorts, and stood quietly to the side.

Seeing that the other man refused to go first, Cheng Shi had no choice but to climb up ahead, with Zhang Jizu close behind. Once both reached the top, Cheng Shi pulled the ladder over to the other side and climbed down slowly.

When he'd safely reached the ground, Zhang Jizu—still atop the wall—twitched irritably and jumped straight down from the towering height.

THUD—

Cheng Shi saw dust explode in front of him. Through the cloud emerged a figure rubbing his knees.

His gaze sharpened as he studied this physically robust priest. A slow smile spread across his face.

'This squinty-eyes... has some tricks up his sleeve.'

...

Chapter 348: The Erudite Liar and The Steady Teammate

"A Wood Elf who refuses to command plants—what else can he do?"

"Eat, drink, pee, and poop. Plenty of things. Problem?"

"...No."

The two exchanged a peculiar glance and, by unspoken agreement, dropped the probing. Each began surveying their surroundings instead.

From outside the walls, Cheng Shi had thought this was a reasonably well-maintained religious institution. But once inside, he realized the so-called Evil Infant Inquisition seemed to have gone unattended for a very long time.

The outer courtyard's lawn was overrun with weeds. The water in the central pool had long since dried up. Even the two deity statues—a pregnant man and woman—flanking the main hall's entrance had chipped and faded to the point where they no longer looked sacred.

At first glance, you'd think this place had been seized by [Decay]'s followers.

"Judging by these weeds' growth, this place has been abandoned for quite some time." Zhang Jizu frowned with some confusion: "Where did you learn about this place's history? Did the records mention Dolgod shutting down the Inquisition?"

Cheng Shi pursed his lips, thinking: 'If I'd known it was shut down, why would I have brought you here?'

He shook his head: "Let's search for clues first. If the Evil Infant Inquisition truly doesn't exist anymore, our trial is in serious trouble!"

Indeed—if this era's Dolgod had already eliminated the concept of evil infants, where would they find this "life that should not have been born"?

Cheng Shi was about to stride toward the inner hall when his feet halted mid-step.

"Strange—our three teammates have been too fast. Where'd they go?"

Zhang Jizu, trailing behind, narrowed his eyes: "They've been silent since earlier. The footprints lead to the inner hall, but there's only one set—Gou Feng's."

"Stay alert. Something in here might be off."

Cheng Shi furrowed his brow and pressed onward in silence.

Before long, he spotted some clues. On the main path outside the great hall, certain gaps between paving stones had noticeably fewer weeds. Connecting these sparse patches revealed a trail—worn by years of foot traffic. On the opposite side stood the Inquisition's sealed main doors.

So people did still come regularly—just not many. But that also meant something had gone wrong with the Evil Infant Inquisition.

He raised an eyebrow, then turned toward the hall's interior.

Still no sign of their three teammates. Cheng Shi cautiously entered and immediately spotted an enormous round conference table.

The table was thick with dust, the surrounding chairs either cracked or shattered. Only the chair at the head—facing the entrance—remained intact, its section of the table polished to a gleam. Someone clearly sat there regularly.

Behind the round table loomed a massive stone relief mural depicting countless nude men and women gathered before an enormous deity statue, devoutly sharing [Birth]'s Authority.

Neither newcomer batted an eye at this fertility-worship art. After a brief examination of the roundtable area, they circled behind the stone wall to see what lay beyond.

Behind the massive relief stood several sparse bookshelves. This was probably the cleanest area in the entire Inquisition—every shelf wiped spotless, packed tight with identically bound volumes. From the symbols marked on each shelf, Cheng Shi guessed these were chronologically arranged case files.

The information he needed might be right here.

He approached and randomly pulled out a volume, flipping it open. Zhang Jizu noticed his absorbed reading and stepped closer with surprise:

"You can read Life Era script?"

Cheng Shi curved his lips. "More or less," he said aloud, while secretly laughing inside.

'I can't read squat. But I've got Brother Mouth.'

Squinty-eyes was genuinely astonished this time. Plenty of people understood Civilization Era languages—especially among the veteran mages who loved researching the game's lore, where true scholars existed. That was also partly because the vast majority of trials took place during the Civilization Era.

But Life Era trials were exceedingly rare. Research in that direction was the most niche of niche—only marginally more popular than studying the Underworld.

So being able to read this era's language and script was genuinely impressive in the Faith Game. Zhang Jizu wasn't even sure how many independent players outside the History School could decipher Dol Empire text.

No wonder this "honest" player had caught [Deceit]'s eye. Experts truly had their unique strengths.

This appeared to be an erudite liar.

'I just wonder what his other personality—the Fate Weaver who's Zhen Yi's new flame—is like.'

Now genuinely intrigued, Zhang Jizu edged closer to Cheng Shi and asked with a touch of admiration:

"What does it say?"

On the surface, Cheng Shi looked calm and composed. Internally, he was panicking. From the moment he'd picked up the book, he'd been desperately begging—not a person, but a mouth.

Yet Brother Mouth, usually so eager to "help," had gone completely unresponsive today. Cheng Shi was so anxious his shoes were about to get shredded from fidgeting.

But even without the Fool's Lips' help, this little scene was child's play for a con artist. Cheng Shi hummed thoughtfully, waited a few more seconds to confirm Brother Mouth wasn't cooperating, then made a show of flipping two pages before furrowing his brow slightly:

"These appear to be records of the Inquisition's past handling of evil infants."

Zhang Jizu noticed nothing amiss and nodded: "Oh? Just as expected. What does it say specifically?"

"..."

Cheng Shi's toes curled. He gave a light cough and continued:

"These pages describe how the Inquisition staff dealt with a certain evil infant. After locating the citizen carrying the evil infant, they used a Palace Saw to cut her open, splitting both mother and evil infant in half. Then they burned everything to ashes."

"That's... brutally simple? No purification ritual? No ceremony begging for His forgiveness?"

Cheng Shi shook his head stiffly: "Doesn't say."

Zhang Jizu's eyes narrowed with some doubt: "I saw you turn four or five pages. That's all it recorded?"

"Well... it's a work report, you know how it is—they're always excessively long. There's all sorts of baffling rhetorical flourishes in here padding the word count. Nothing worth reading."

"Fair point. But what year did this happen?"

"..."

'Can you stop with the endless questions?'

'You're asking me—who am I supposed to ask?'

Cheng Shi's face darkened. He slapped the book back onto the shelf.

"Old news from decades ago. I don't see any recent records here. Let's look elsewhere for clues."

With that, Cheng Shi turned and walked away. Squinty-eyes cast a puzzled glance at the bookshelf, but despite his confusion, he followed.

The two continued deeper into the inner hall. Before long, they came upon a long spiral staircase. Like everywhere else, the steps were coated in dust—but several fresh footprints marked the surface.

Judging by the footprint contours, they belonged to...

"Gou Feng." Zhang Jizu identified the print immediately, then furrowed his brow: "The edges are blurred, and the ball of the foot is pressed harder than the heel. He was climbing fast. As if..."

"Someone was chasing him."

Cheng Shi's gaze sharpened. A scalpel slid from his sleeve into his hand.

At the same instant, Zhang Jizu also produced a scalpel from his sleeve.

Both looked at the blade in the other's hand and froze—then simultaneously let out knowing smiles.

"Oh? Wood Elves like scalpels too?"

"For trimming overgrown hair. But I'm curious—since when do Gravekeepers use scalpels?"

"The cemetery always has vagrants trying to scavenge. Holding a knife helps with the nerves."

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow: "Cemetery Management. So it really is you."

"And you, Cheng Shi—should I keep calling you Wood Elf? Or would you prefer Master of Trickery? Or perhaps... Fate Weaver?"

?

Cheng Shi blanked. 'Master of Trickery? What the hell?'

'He thinks I'm actually a mage?'

'Interesting. Whose friend is this guy?'

Cheng Shi had a mountain of questions, but he didn't dwell on them. He quickly responded: "I don't know what you're talking about. After all, I'm merely a Wood Elf who joined the Plant Protection Association."

"..."

"Fine. You seem like a good person. I don't know how you learned about me or through whom, but a friend's friend is still a friend. I'll come clean."

"That's right—I really am a Master of Trickery. On behalf of that Lord's goodwill, can I trust you?"

"..."

Zhang Jizu had genuinely believed the Cheng Shi before him was a Master of Trickery. But the instant the man "confessed," it threw his confidence into disarray. He studied the liar before him for a moment, then said irritably: "Shouldn't I be the one asking that? Follower of [Deceit]."

"Of course you can trust me. Because I never lie."

Zhang Jizu's eye twitched. 'If I hadn't watched him lie through the entire session, I might have actually believed that.'

Just as the two were locked in an identity tug-of-war, a horrifying scream suddenly echoed from above.

"AAAAHHH!!!"

The sound was deafening. In the emptiness of the building, eerie echoes ricocheted between floors.

Both their expressions darkened simultaneously at the scream. They exchanged a glance—and decisively chose to...

...retreat.

In this moment, Cheng the Steady had finally met another player on his wavelength: Zhang the Steady.

"That's Gou Feng's voice!"

"Heard it. Let's pull back and wait until he's calmed down before going in. He is a teammate, after all—can't just leave him. Recovering the body and all... oh wait, you're probably better at that than me."

Zhang the Steady glanced sidelong at Cheng the Steady, narrowed his eyes, and nodded in approval.

...

Chapter 349: The Deceased: Gou Feng

There was only one scream. After it faded, the entire Inquisition returned to silence.

Once they'd retreated from the inner hall to the outer courtyard, Cheng Shi's eyes stopped watching the hall and instead swept cautiously over the surrounding area.

He feared the scream might be nothing more than a distraction—and that the real danger lay elsewhere. His expression was deadly serious.

Zhang Jizu shared the thought. But when he noticed Cheng Shi guarding the perimeter, he instinctively shifted his own gaze toward the hall interior, complementing Cheng Shi's watch zone perfectly.

Just because of that Lord's involvement, after a few rounds of tentative probing, the two had somehow clicked into seamless cooperation—neither seriously entertained the idea that the other would betray them.

Zhang Jizu was here on a bodyguard mission, so he'd never pull a Grand Marshal Hu Wei and eliminate the person he was supposed to protect. As for why Cheng Shi trusted him so readily—it probably came down to that Lord upon the Bone Throne.

He could hardly imagine the expression on that Lord's face if He found out His own Chosen One had killed the protection target—and then, upon Cheng Shi's next audience in the Fishbone Hall, the two came before Him to "litigate."

He disliked commotion; He'd almost certainly not allow such a situation to occur.

So Cheng Shi wasn't worried about Zhang Jizu causing problems. What concerned him were his other three teammates—big problems, possibly.

Why had people who'd walked together the entire way vanished after entering the compound, leaving only a single scream for the two of them?

It was too strange. Defied all logic.

Cheng Shi cautiously felt out every change in the surroundings and whispered:

"Can you sense any [Time] fluctuations?"

Zhang Jizu's eyes narrowed. He shook his head slightly.

"You suspect Scorpio is hunting?"

"It's not impossible."

"But I haven't detected any residual [Time] projections. At least not in the courtyard."

Cheng Shi frowned, then his eyes darted: "It's been a while. Go in and check?"

"Sure. You take point."

"?"

Cheng Shi shot him a sideways look, silently indignant:

'Isn't that exactly what I used to pull when I was a priest? How is this guy so practiced at it?'

"You're not afraid of death—why don't you go first?"

Zhang Jizu explained with perfect seriousness:

"First, I'm a priest. I naturally lack offensive capabilities and am unsuitable for scouting ahead."

"Second, even though I am His follower—guarding [Death]'s gate and selecting sacrifices—I can't casually perform needless exchanges. It's a matter of devotional sincerity."

"Third—"

"Third—I'll go first! Master, stop chanting! I'll take point, okay?"

Cheng Shi hurriedly interrupted the incantation, face dripping with exasperation as he strode forward.

'What kind of person is this? Blabbering like a Buddhist monk.'

'Going on and on about "devotion." I don't think it's devotion you're worried about—it's your career prospects.'

Seeing Cheng Shi agree to his plan, Zhang Jizu followed with a squinty-eyed smile.

And so the two retraced their steps from the outer courtyard, returning through the same path. Upon reaching the spiral staircase, Cheng Shi stared up at the dim second floor and suddenly bellowed:

"Big bro—still alive up there?"

The hollow sound echoed through the hall for a moment. No one answered.

Cheng Shi furrowed his brow. He held his scalpel across his front while pinching the ring between his fingers, ascending one step at a time.

Zhang Jizu followed closely, continuously studying the footprints on the stairs. He murmured:

"Something's not right."

"The inner hall door was wide open. We're not far from the courtyard. There's no way we wouldn't have heard stomping of that intensity. And besides—he clearly knew people were behind him. Why didn't he call for help while being chased?"

Cheng Shi paused mid-step without turning back:

"First possibility: the footprints are a projected outcome from the [Time] assassin. He overwrote the result of a chase from a projected timeline onto the present. We wouldn't hear stomping from another timeline."

"Second possibility: someone annihilated the sound."

"Since you didn't detect any [Time] residue, the second option seems more likely."

"Of course, Scorpio might be skilled enough to erase residual traces."

"But regardless—it means our tourist group has officially disbanded."

"Tsk. Just moments ago we were on a nice city walk together. Turn around, and the knives come out. Human nature—truly hard to read."

"At least we liars are straightforward. Never a malicious bone in our bodies."

'Didn't you just claim to be a Wood Elf from the Plant Protection Association? Now you're a liar?'

'Dropping the act, are we?!'

"..." Zhang Jizu's eye twitched violently. He had no comeback.

The two crept forward with utmost caution. Before long, they reached the second floor. The windows all appeared to have been sealed. Only slivers of light leaked through gaps in the boarding—far too dim to illuminate the space.

Cheng Shi poked his head out and found the entire floor shrouded in darkness. Near the stairway entrance, several rows of tall bookshelves blocked his line of sight. Through gaps between the overlapping shelves, he could faintly make out objects arranged on the floor deeper in—and what looked like decorations on the ceiling.

Beside the bookshelves were several scattered footprints. The pattern suggested Gou Feng had charged behind the shelves, doubled back, and then charged in again.

The layered footprints betrayed shock and unease. Seeing this, Cheng Shi hesitated and shrank back slightly.

Something might be wrong behind the bookshelves.

He signaled squinty-eyes to stay alert, then pulled a spherical magic lamp from spatial storage and lobbed it high. It arced over the bookshelves and crashed into the second floor's depths.

The orb bounced on the floor with a series of thuds, rolling until it struck a corner wall—and burst into brilliance. Bright light flooded the entire second floor in an instant. Cheng Shi, prepared, shielded his eyes to avoid the glare, then quickly lowered his hand and looked.

But that single look sent cold sweat streaming down his spine.

"What is..."

Peering through the gaps between the maze-like bookshelves, the first thing he noticed was the ceiling—densely packed with infant corpses, covering every inch. They were curled into fetal positions as if still in the womb, each wrapped at the ankle by an umbilical cord-like tendril and dangling upside-down from the ceiling.

The sealed space was windless. These eerie infants should have been motionless. But as sounds gradually emerged, they began swaying to the vibrations—slowly, rhythmically—like strings of horrifying human wind chimes.

Cheng Shi was genuinely startled. He instinctively retreated a step, only for a hand to press against his back and push him forward again.

Zhang Jizu walked up with a furrowed brow, his eyes sweeping over the hanging grotesque infants. Not a shred of shock in his expression—only deepening confusion:

"Evil infants?"

"Something doesn't add up. Didn't you say the evil infants were split open and burned?"

"..."

That one sentence nearly blew Cheng Shi's earlier lie wide open. It instantly purged the terror from his mind, replaced by the involuntary curling of his toes against the floor.

He didn't dare turn around for fear of revealing a crack. Face stiff with awkwardness, he kept walking forward while saying:

"...That was the punishment method from a specific era. Perhaps it's been changed by now."

"That does make some sense." Zhang Jizu nodded lightly and matched his pace.

"Still—if evil infants represent the Theocracy of Growth's rejection of faith, why would they hang them here instead of destroying them?"

"To me, this looks more like a heretical ritual than any method of disposing of evil infants."

Cheng Shi couldn't answer that. He deflected with a laugh:

"You're overthinking it. What if it's not that complicated?"

"Maybe after the Inquisition was abandoned and funding dried up, the staff just wanted to air-dry some jerky to eat. See—doesn't that make a lot more sense?"

Zhang Jizu didn't argue, but he did add: "Air-drying meat requires open windows for ventilation. Sealing them shut doesn't really track."

"..."

'Dude—I cracked a joke to lighten the mood. You didn't have to be that rigorous...'

Cheng Shi twitched his mouth shut and redirected all his attention to the "human wind chimes" overhead.

The hanging dead infants were clearly arranged in a pattern. They were spaced at identical intervals and even formed some kind of symbol.

Out of prudence, Cheng Shi didn't touch them. But he wondered whether someone was genuinely blaspheming [Birth] here—and this place was a secret sacrilege ground.

Then again, he recalled the Theocracy of Growth. This church that glorified "conception" didn't seem to value newborns as highly as the "birth"-focused followers of [Birth] did. Combined with the stigma of "evil infant," perhaps they really did dispose of evil infants this way after all?

After all, he hadn't actually been able to read those files.

And Brother Mouth still refused to make a peep.

'Cold-blooded! Heartless!'

If this truly was the Theocracy of Growth's method of dealing with evil infants, the approach was admittedly crude.

But that fit the pattern. Life Era civilization had never been refined. It had always been rough.

As [Memory] had said—the gods of [Life] were rough too.

While Cheng Shi studied the ceiling, Zhang Jizu wasn't idle. With narrowed eyes, he kept nudging Cheng Shi forward, observing their surroundings as they walked.

Just as they emerged from the bookshelves into the open space behind—both froze in their tracks.

Because there before them, on the floor, spread an appallingly vast pool of blood.

And in that still-warm lake of crimson, a severed hand lay forlorn to one side. The body that should have been attached to it sat slumped on the floor between two rows of bookshelves, leaning against the wall with its eyes already closed.

"!"

The two stared at the corpse. Their gazes sharpened simultaneously, faces darkening in unison.

Gou Feng!

This follower of [Birth] apparently hadn't even survived half a day in his own Benefactor's trial.

...

Chapter 350: The Pure Healer Chosen One

Cheng Shi meticulously checked every inch of the area around the bookshelves. Only after confirming there was no second person did he frown in puzzlement:

"A Chieftain on the verge of 2,400—just dead like that?"

"Who killed him?"

"Why is there so much blood?"

"Interesting. Where's the pastry chef?"

"And our [Time] teammate—where did he go?"

"Tang—I mean, Gravekeeper, it's your time to shine. Take a look—what do you see?"

Zhang Jizu didn't mind the teasing. He used his scalpel to lift the severed hand, studying it through narrowed eyes:

"The muscle nerves at the cross-section still show faint vitality. That means when we heard the scream, he probably wasn't dead yet."

"Perhaps his hand was severed while we were climbing the stairs."

"But the strange thing is—with someone this big going down, why didn't we hear anything?"

Zhang Jizu frowned in puzzlement, then nodded thoughtfully:

"You're right. Someone most likely annihilated the sound."

He held up the severed hand, directing Cheng Shi's attention to the cross-section.

"Look here. This isn't a cut from a sharp weapon—it's erosion from [Oblivion]'s power. This is a limb that fell off after part of its flesh was annihilated."

He reattached the hand to Gou Feng's left arm. When the two cross-sections met, it was clearly visible that the reattached arm was noticeably shorter.

Cheng Shi seemed unimpressed, pursing his lips: "Anything else?"

"The fatal wound isn't on the chest—it's on the back." Zhang Jizu flipped Gou Feng's corpse, pointing at the torn wound on the upper back. "A short blade wider than three fingers, thrust straight into the heart. One-hit kill. Very standard assassination technique. A rear attack—doesn't look like a warrior's work."

"So you're saying Mo Shu severed the hand, but Scorpio made the kill?"

"They double-teamed Gou Feng and killed him here?"

"Can't rule it out, but the sequence is wrong. The kill came before the severance. And..."

"The corpse itself is problematic."

Cheng Shi finally perked up, raising an eyebrow: "Problematic how?"

"He... might not actually be Gou Feng."

"?" Cheng Shi's eyebrow rose higher. Now he was genuinely interested.

Zhang Jizu pointed to the corpse's neck and the corners of its eyes, then pinched the skin on its face.

"Gou Feng wasn't young. At least thirty-five. I observed him at the start—his skin had traces of aging. Faint, but definitely there."

"But look here. This corpse is identical to Gou Feng in appearance, yet there are no fine lines on the neck or around the eyes. Not even forehead wrinkles. Skin might tighten from a warrior's physical tempering, but [Birth] isn't [Prosperity]—it doesn't bless its followers with youth. Unless..."

"Unless he's a newborn!" Cheng Shi's eyes sharpened as he finished the thought.

"Exactly! Unless he's a newborn that Gou Feng birthed through [Birth]'s blessing. Otherwise, the skin wouldn't present this way."

"I know there's a [Birth] blessing that allows one to 'birth a copy of oneself.' Given the Chieftain class's traits, perhaps he killed someone and spawned a newborn from the corpse. When the newborn consumed the corpse and grew to full size, someone else killed it."

"And that would also explain the massive bloodstain beneath our feet—because this is blood from two bodies. It's just that one of them was eaten."

Cheng Shi listened to Zhang Jizu's deduction and nodded with a smile.

'Very clear thinking. He's got something—just not quite everything.'

The examination had been flawless, but Cheng Shi couldn't shake the feeling that something was missing. He rubbed his chin, studying the [Death] Chosen One, and clicked his tongue:

"Bro, you're not holding back on me, are you?"

"?" Zhang Jizu's already-narrow eyes squeezed even thinner. A touch of confusion crept in: "Did I overlook something?"

"You didn't miss anything, but... you are His follower. That Lord's top lieutenant!"

"When you encounter a dead body, all you do is look?"

"Where are your talents? His blessings?"

"Whip them out! You can't seriously expect a Wood Elf to solve the case?"

'You really think you're a Wood Elf, don't you?'

"..." Zhang Jizu gave Cheng Shi a strange look and said flatly: "I'm a priest."

"Yeah, and?"

"My talents are all healing-related or survival-related. Even my equipment is the same. I have no other abilities."

"???"

'Not lying!'

Cheng Shi was floored. He gaped in genuine disbelief:

"A pure healer?"

"Wait—bro—you, the [Death] Chosen One! A pure healer?"

"What?"

"The term 'pure healer' sounds a bit odd, but if we must summarize it that way—yes, I'm a pure healer."

"...Then how on earth have you made it this far? Not a single other trick up your sleeve?"

Zhang Jizu smiled, as if finding the question rather silly:

"Simple. No matter how hard the trial, no matter how many teammates died, I never died. That's how I made it this far."

"..."

'Damn. He's got a point.'

Cheng Shi was stupefied. He'd genuinely never encountered a healer this pure at this tier. But still disbelieving, he pressed on:

"So when you pulled out that scalpel earlier—that's literally your only weapon?"

Zhang Jizu seemed to see nothing wrong with this. He nodded: "Not entirely. I also have hand-to-hand combat."

'Hand-to-hand combat? Against the monsters in trials? Or against these peak players?'

'Can your martial arts survive one tail-whip from Big Cat? Probably not.'

'Then again, Big Cat probably can't kill him either...'

Cheng Shi suddenly had an epiphany. Zhang Jizu's approach wasn't wrong at all—in fact, it was simple and brutal. This game really didn't have to be complicated. As long as you guaranteed you'd never die, you could genuinely outlast everyone.

'Damn—no wonder he's this steady. That game philosophy is absolutely insane.'

Deeply shaken, Cheng Shi pressed his lips together: "Doesn't that Lord equip you with anything else?"

"Equip? What do you mean—His bestowals?"

"Yeah. [Death] never lacks offensive items. Many of them are instant kills. Are they no good? Or do you just not like using them?"

"For every trial reward, I chose survival gear. Rather than killing others, I prefer keeping myself alive."

"..."

Cheng Shi was utterly convinced. Completely and thoroughly convinced.

'Well, well, well. I thought I was already extreme about preserving my life, but this guy is even more hardcore!'

'Truly worthy of His general!'

He fixed Zhang Jizu with a peculiar look and asked in a haunted tone the question that had been burning inside him:

"Is there anyone alive right now who could kill you in a trial?"

Zhang Jizu's gaze sharpened. This touched on his hidden cards—something he shouldn't share. But since his Benefactor had sent him to keep Cheng Shi alive, he naturally inferred that Cheng Shi's Benefactor must have a decent relationship with his own.

Since the two of Them were drawing closer, he should open up more to his protection target.

After a moment's hesitation, he said quietly: "No."

Those two weightless syllables didn't sound like much. But to Cheng Shi's ears, they rang like steel!

No!

This Gravekeeper had flatly stated that no one could kill him in a trial!

'How many survival tools does a person need before they can say something that audacious?!'

Cheng Shi was paralyzed with envy. Even carrying a partial "Vitality" Authority, he wouldn't dare make such a brazen claim.

"Impressive. You have my respect!"

"Alright—since the priest is a professional priest, let's leave the detective work to us Wood Elves."

"..."

With that, under Zhang Jizu's mildly confused gaze, Cheng Shi produced the hand-bone brooch bestowed by [Death].

The instant Zhang Jizu saw the brooch, he froze—then stared in disbelief, examining it closely.

'This thing... it looks like something my Lord crafted.'

'No—this IS something my Lord crafted!'

'The [Death] aura on it is far too pure. Identical to the aura beside the Bone Throne!'

'He made it Himself?'

'Seems like it!'

'But what is this thing, and why does a liar have it?'

He narrowed his eyes further, asking in confusion: "This is..."

"Oh, this? That Lord was contemplating [Memory] one day and idly molded a little toy. He wasn't satisfied with it, so He tossed it to me."

'Idly... molded... a little toy?'

'Why does this look like an S-rank Sacred Artifact to me?'

'How come I've never seen this among His rewards?'

'And what does "contemplating [Memory]" even mean?'

'Why would [Death] contemplate [Memory]?'

'Did my Benefactor steal [Memory]'s Authority?'

Zhang Jizu's brow knotted tightly. Something didn't add up.

'How come I never heard about this?'

'Why would He give a [Memory]-related artifact to a liar?'

'Just because [Deceit] is [Memory]'s rival?'

'Wait—no. Could it be that [Deceit] helped my Benefactor steal [Memory]'s Authority?'

'Is that why the two of Them are drawing closer?'

A cascade of thoughts flooded his mind. Just as the question marks over his head multiplied beyond counting, Cheng Shi had already activated the Departed's Recollection on the corpse.

Blue-green luminous flows filled "Gou Feng's" nostrils and mouth once more. His eyes snapped open.

Seeing the reaction, Cheng Shi smiled and asked:

"Before you died—what happened here?"

The corpse's lips writhed for a moment before it rasped:

"The Chieftain awakened me. But the Scavenger killed me."

!!!

That single sentence confirmed it: the dead man was not Gou Feng himself, but a newborn he'd spawned through his talent.

So who did the Chieftain kill?

If the Scavenger had killed the Chieftain's tribesman, did that mean the unlucky soul Gou Feng originally killed was Scorpio?

No—that didn't make sense. The tribesman's back bore clear signs of an assassin's strike. If Scorpio was dead, could the Scavenger have done it? A warrior using assassin techniques?

Questions abounded. Zhang Jizu raised an eyebrow and immediately pressed:

"Who did your Chieftain kill? Where did he go? Where did the Scavenger go? What about Scorpio?"

He fired off several questions in succession, but the corpse answered with only one line:

"Don't be afraid. It won't hurt. Just let me throw one punch. One punch, and you'll be pregnant."

"..."

Zhang Jizu went rigid. His perpetually squinting eyes flew wide open as he stared at Cheng Shi, his gaze screaming bewilderment.

Cheng Shi snorted a laugh and spread his hands.

"What did I tell you? A toy. Something He casually molded. Only the first question works. By the second, it's already glitched."

'It really is just a toy?'

Come to think of it, such a bestowal actually made sense.

Followers of the Fun God—of course they loved tinkering with bizarre, flashy gadgets like this.

After the little brooch interlude, both their brows furrowed again simultaneously.

They were both wondering why that seemingly shy and reserved Scavenger had turned lethal the instant the group split up—attacking a Chieftain who wasn't even a faith rival. It made absolutely no sense.

Unless a conflict had erupted between them the very instant they entered the compound.

But that possibility was too slim to serve as a logical foundation.

Moreover, if Mo Shu were a bloodthirsty killer, his pastries should logically have been tampered with. But Cheng Shi hadn't detected anything wrong with the cake.

"Strange. What do you think?" He looked at the Gravekeeper beside him.

Zhang Jizu pondered for a beat and was about to speak—when a thunderous crash erupted from downstairs.

BOOM!

CRASH—

Both jolted. They locked eyes—then simultaneously flicked scalpels from their sleeves and gripped them tight.

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