

The Gods 811

Chapter 811: Stay Away from Them

The intensity just went up a notch!

Sure enough, the instant the ear got involved, things started getting complicated.

The Cheng Shi in the jacket had pulled Long Jing's name seemingly out of nowhere. Whether he'd spotted some clue or not, the fact that he could name-drop that specific person meant this trial had just sprouted a host of new variables.

Could Long Jing be impersonating him?

Not impossible. The Acrobat was equally skilled at disguise, and they'd met face-to-face before.

So who the two in front of him actually were was genuinely up in the air.

Cheng Shi's eyelid hammered. His face tightened as he studied them both. Had this trial taken place anywhere else, he'd have the most convenient tool for exposing their identities — the Tongue of Eating Lies, which could devour their disguises whole.

But he'd come to this trial for the ear. And these two "hims" had almost certainly come for the ear too. That created an excruciatingly awkward situation: he couldn't casually reveal the Tongue, lest their covetous eyes shift from the ear to the tongue.

After much deliberation, Cheng Shi rotated his ring-bearing hand upward.

At the exact same moment, Trench Coat Cheng Shi scoffed, drew a dagger laced with Decay essence, slashed his own left arm, and transformed the entire limb into a withered Decay arm.

And Jacket Cheng Shi went even further — flinging a die into the air, catching it in his palm, then cracking a grin and dropping into a fighting stance. Clearly, he intended to settle this with force.

Once again, silence descended.

Face dark, Cheng Shi side-eyed the Decay arm that wasn't attached to his body, then glanced at the die sitting in someone else's palm. His eyelids wouldn't stop twitching.

'Well, well, well — you've done your homework!'

'Came prepared, did you!'

'Even your method for breaking the stalemate is identical to mine.'

'You're both this good at roleplay — why not go impersonate Zhen Yi?!'

'What's the point of playing the Clown?'

'Is it funny?!'

Cheng Shi was genuinely laughing from fury. He jabbed a finger at both of them. "Tch — interesting. But do the two of you honestly not know whether those items in your hands are real or fake?"

Jacket Cheng Shi smirked, his gaze dripping with scorn as he looked the other two over. "You've studied me so thoroughly for this performance — what, got a crush on me?"

Trench Coat Cheng Shi arched a brow and fixed his stare on Jacket. "I thought he was Zhen Yi. But now — you seem like the better candidate.

Zhen Yi, if you really have the skill, why not show me whether you can replicate my combat style from the Experiment Ground?

Illusions are just illusions. Fool other people all you want — just don't fool yourself."

"..."

Before Jacket could react, Suit Cheng Shi's composure cracked.

'Hey pal — don't fool yourself either! You actually think you're Cheng Shi now?!

'If you're Cheng Shi, then who the hell am I?!

His eyelid was thrashing even harder. But no matter how much trash was talked, no one threw a punch. Everyone knew that fighting here was pointless. Even if they ripped each other's covers off — then what?

The moment someone vanished, they'd reappear as another Cheng Shi.

This was clearly no longer a simple identification problem. From the instant three Cheng Shis laid eyes on one another, whoever got unmasked first was effectively admitting they were inferior to the other two.

So in this "contest," only the winner could afford to reveal their identity. The losers — whoever they were — would remain Cheng Shi till the bitter end.

"..."

Realizing this only infuriated the real Cheng Shi further.

But the anger didn't cloud his thinking. To figure out who they were, he first had to understand why they were impersonating him.

Zhen Xin — very low probability. She'd just incurred a debt to him. No reason to appear here masquerading as him. Even if she had, he was confident he could identify her once they split up.

Zhen Yi — no reason needed. For her, not causing chaos would've been abnormal. Besides, she knew he'd taken the Tongue of Eating Lies. Showing up despite that meant she was playing for high stakes.

And don't forget — she still had access to her sister's History School intelligence network. Knowing about San Dales was entirely plausible.

The Dragon King's presence, however, was more... thought-provoking. What exactly was this Memory follower after?

As for Long Jing... heh. The one in the jacket was probably him.

During the Truth Experiment Ground, the Fate Weaver's combat prowess had been on full display. If even Ai Si knew how the Experiment Ground had ended, then the story had clearly spread far and wide among the Players.

Great. He was officially famous now.

And Long Jing had likely seized on that buzz, using this opportunity to impersonate him. After all, who would dare disguise themselves as an overwhelmingly powerful warrior... right in front of the real deal?

Unless they were a warrior themselves!

He knew about the Tongue of Eating Lies, so naturally he could dig up intel on the Secret Peeping Ear. The only suspicious thing was the timing — arriving in San Dales at the exact same moment as Cheng Shi.

With that thought, Cheng Shi's gaze toward Long Jing gained a wry edge.

He had ways to handle this Acrobat.

But there was no need to sort identities out right here. With a third person watching, two liars would never drop their guards. The real chance to pick them off one by one would come after everyone dispersed.

So Cheng Shi lowered his hand — and as coincidence would have it, the other two did the same. The tension that had been running knife-edge between them inexplicably fizzled out.

Three pairs of eyes met. Every smile was loaded with unspoken meaning.

...

Meanwhile, elsewhere.

Zhang Jizu frowned and halted. He'd noticed that Ai Si's footsteps ahead had vanished — right around the bend at a nearby junction.

The War Supervisor hadn't told a single lie so far and her personality seemed normal enough, but prudence demanded caution.

So he palmed his scalpel, erased his own footsteps, and crept toward the passage.

Two seconds later, Ai Si's voice echoed from around the corner — though this time, her tone was grim.

"Found them. But we're too late. They're dead."

Zhang Jizu's brow tightened but he didn't quicken his pace. He advanced steadily until every angle of the junction was in full view, confirmed there was no threat, then narrowed his eyes and walked toward Ai Si and the corpse at her feet.

The last teammate, dead. Silently, in a pipe far from the others.

"Male. Early twenties. Also a priest — funny, this round doesn't just have three Cheng Shis, it's got three priests too.

Judging by the Grand Tribunal insignia on his robes and the Law Texts in his breast pocket, he's a Justice Official.

The only Order follower, dead at the trial's start. Does this mean this trial will be entirely lawless?

Interesting. Truly interesting.

As for the cause of death..."

Ai Si tapped the body lightly with the flat of her blade. The corpse looked intact, but under that gentle pressure, the chest and abdomen caved in entirely. The sight made Zhang Jizu squint hard.

"Oblivion."

"Correct. Looks like Oblivion. An Oblivion follower annihilated this Justice Official's every internal organ.

Which raises a question: in a trial with only six players, where did a seventh — an Oblivion follower — come from?

Unless one of those three Cheng Shis is an Oblivion Player fishing in muddy waters."

Not impossible — but unlikely. At least based on their earlier encounter, none of the three had the time to do this.

Though there was another possibility.

Zhang Jizu stepped closer and began examining the body in detail. Before long, he reached a conclusion.

"The body is fresh, yes, but the time of death is considerably older than the trial's start.

This wasn't a Player who died in this trial."

He extended a hand toward the corpse, but it produced no response. Narrowing his eyes further, even more convinced of his assessment, he arched a brow.

"The body can't be resurrected. That means our teammate prepared well in advance. It seems he planted a corpse to conceal the fact that he'd already left the scene.

He's definitely a lone wolf intent on staying hidden. The only question is — if he chose invisibility, why is his method so crude?

Even outside a Silence trial, this kind of conspicuous stunt would hardly cover his tracks.

So leaving this body here probably serves a purpose beyond simple disguise."

Ai Si picked up the thread instantly.

"Intimidation. Deterrence. Surveillance from the shadows?"

"Precisely. She's both notifying us that she's already gone, and warning us she'll be watching from the dark.

I've seen this approach before. But I would have expected... her to already be standing in front of us."

"Who?"

Ai Si's question had barely left her lips when a cold snort echoed from behind them in the main tunnel.

"Zhen Yi, of course. Same old tricks from a Master of Trickery!

But this makes things even more interesting. If the one who vanished is Zhen Yi, then the two of you... are who, exactly?"

The Trench Coat Cheng Shi at the front had whipped around, glaring at the other two trailing far behind.

During the brief separation, the three Cheng Shis had changed again. The Suit Cheng Shi was gone. Now there was one Jacket and two Trench Coats.

Someone had pulled a fast one and switched clothes. Based on the current circumstances, the swap appeared to be exposed.

Then again, maybe not — because nobody knew how many of the three had changed outfits.

Zhang Jizu looked from the corpse at his feet to the Cheng Shis behind him. His temple throbbed.

'As expected — any trial that involves Deceit is never going to be simple.'

"So what do we do?" Ai Si looked relatively at ease, treating the whole thing like a show.

Zhang Jizu pondered for a moment, then rendered the only correct decision available:

"Stay away from them."

...

Chapter 812: A Blame That Flew In from the Past

"Zhang-lao, that's too much. Not helping me is one thing — but 'stay away'?" The Trench Coat Cheng Shi closest to Zhang Jizu darkened his expression, jabbing a finger at the squinting man.

"Yeah, stay away is right. You really think you're Cheng Shi, huh.

Fine, fine — you're all Cheng Shi. I'm Zhen Yi, how about that?

Heeheehee~

Mi... lao Zhang, wait up. I'll walk with you."

The sole Jacket Cheng Shi hurried over, but Zhang Jizu acted deaf. He sealed the corpse away using a specialized technique, then headed for what appeared to be the sewer's exit without looking back.

Ai Si shot the cluster of Cheng Shis a half-amused glance and chuckled.

"Liars will be liars. The moment I realized you were a liar, I understood your score couldn't possibly be some mere 1,501. I just didn't expect your rank to be even higher than I'd imagined.

Gentlemen — I've got a rough guess at who each of you might be, and this tier of trial is way above my pay grade. But I know my limits. I won't get involved in your feud. However...

Surname Cheng — you should know how to prove your identity to me. So if you need me, come find me. I'll repay the debt I owe you for saving my life.

Well then — good luck, everyone."

With that, Ai Si flicked her ponytail, dragged her massive blade, and fell into step behind Zhang Jizu. Once again, three Cheng Shis were left on their own.

They exchanged a three-way glance and, within this labyrinthine sewer network, chose completely different paths.

Direction didn't actually matter. What mattered was that to enlist teammates' help or accomplish their goals, each of them first had to shake the other two.

All three clearly thought the same thing. So they separated again.

Cheng Shi took the path he'd come from. He was now wearing the jacket, which meant another one of the "Cheng Shis" had also joined the wardrobe shuffle. Apparently every Cheng Shi here was "hiding something."

He retreated a long way, until both impostor silhouettes had vanished from sight, then furrowed his brow and returned to the spot where the dead Player's body had originally lain.

He meticulously scanned the surrounding traces, searching for any sign of the "hidden" teammate.

This was critical, because he too suspected the vanished teammate was likely Zhen Yi — or possibly even Zhen Xin, since the absence of Zhen Yi among the other two Cheng Shis made Zhen Xin's appearance far more probable.

He recalled that Zhen Xin still owed him a favor, and that she'd said she'd make it something tangible.

So...

Was it possible that her idea of "tangible" was fetching the ear and offering it as a thank-you gift?

If that was truly the case, he absolutely could not let her beat him to it.

'I'm already at the ear's front door. If I let you snag it under my nose and then gift wrap it for me, I lose twice!'

With that thought, he examined the traces even more intently.

Mi Laozhang had taken the corpse, which made reconstructing the scene significantly harder. Understandable choice, but still — were three Cheng Shis really that repellent?

'No — he's probably just avoiding those other nuisances.'

Searching, searching — and Cheng Shi found something. As his sweep widened, he discovered that one segment of the iron grate at the end of this branch pipe was loose.

He removed the segment, revealing a small gap at the grate's top. Too small for an adult — a child could squeeze through, at best. But for Players, such an obstacle was negligible. He demolished the entire grate and entered the far end of the branch pipe.

Meanwhile, elsewhere.

The sewer system was staggeringly vast and complex. Zhang Jizu led Ai Si through passage after passage, choosing his direction instantly at every junction, pushing steadily toward the "exit."

Ai Si observed him the entire way. It wasn't until she felt a whisper of cold at the end of one main tunnel that she realized the Death Chosen had been using temperature differences as his compass.

His meticulousness reminded her of certain Truth followers she'd met. So, after staying silent for nearly the entire walk, curiosity finally got the better of her.

"You've fused with Truth?"

"Yes." Zhang Jizu didn't turn around, still walking, eyes scanning every direction, ears tuned to every sound — all while casually chatting with Ai Si. "Sometimes Truth lets you see the world more clearly."

"Figures. The strong always gravitate toward Truth. But on that note — you and surname Cheng, are you close?"

"Not particularly.

We've been matched a few times. Same as you?"

Ai Si's footsteps hitched. Something clearly unpleasant surfaced in her memory, and she pursed her lips.

"I've only been matched with him once. And he did technically save me.

It was a Chaos trial in the Kingdom of War. We got caught up in a mutiny — targeted by a rebel army. We were on the brink of total wipe.

That liar — though I didn't know he was a liar at the time — was playing the role of a Mercy Lord.

Thanks to the collapsing situation, his compassion was fully condensed, so the two of us priests managed to keep our team alive through one crisis after another. But the mutiny was too massive. Six mere Players couldn't possibly survive its epicenter.

Just when we'd all given up hope, surname Cheng pulled out a small pouch of potions."

Here, Ai Si's tone turned to teeth-gnashing fury, punctuated by sidelong glances at Zhang Jizu.

"They were called 'Dead Disgust.' He said he'd purchased these life-preserving potions from the Death Chosen's own hands at exorbitant cost. Spent a fortune on them. If not for a situation that dire, he'd never have shared them."

"..." Hearing this, Zhang Jizu's eye twitched. This blame inexplicably flying at him from the past left him momentarily speechless. "I see. I take it the potions were expensive."

"Oh yes. We practically emptied our pockets. But can any potion be worth more than your life?!"

Stay alive and there's still a chance. Dead means game over.

The potions did work, fortunately. After they kicked in, we played dead among the corpses, let the soldiers stab us for good measure, and then — once the human wave passed — we dressed in rebel uniforms, morphed from the losing side into the winning side, and survived.

But when I tried to buy more bottles from him afterward, in the ruins where I'd scavenged plenty of loot, he flat-out refused to sell."

"Because there was never any such thing."

"Exactly. I only caught on later, spotting clues in the chat channel. Those potions never existed. It was all a scam — swindled from Void itself!"

Zhang Jizu paused mid-step, narrowed eyes turning to Ai Si with a slight smile.

"War Supervisor — say what you want to say. There's no need to share this much unprompted. Sincerity laced with ulterior motive is suspicious in its own right.

Yes, Cheng Shi deceived you all. But he did save you. You clearly hold a grudge over it, yet you keep circling back to those potions. Don't tell me you're hoping to trade for some life-saving supplies from me?"

"Yes." Ai Si admitted it freely. "My reason for being here is simple. I heard San Dales has leftover divinity fragments and wanted to try my luck.

But the instant I saw you and three Cheng Shis, I knew this trial had nothing to do with me anymore.

I may not be a textbook War follower, but when it comes to brainwork, I know I'm utterly outmatched by Deceit followers — to say nothing of two other people bold enough to impersonate one.

So my objective changed. Now I just want to stay alive.

And Gravekeeper — you understand keeping people alive better than anyone."

"If you're not lying, then you've made the right choice." Zhang Jizu smiled meaningfully and continued walking toward the distance. "Though I'm curious — when did that trial of yours happen?"

"End of the third month after the Faith Game descended. I remember clearly, because that day I changed my birthday. My day of rebirth."

"End of the third month... Dead Disgust..."

Hmm. Let's keep moving. The exit's just ahead."

...

Chapter 813: That Mutt Thinks He Can Trick Me? No Chance!

The exit was indeed close — but it wasn't the kind of exit Zhang Jizu had imagined.

At the end of the main tunnel stood an iron door, half of which had been torn open. Bitter wind howled through the gap, freezing the entire length of nearby pipe into a sleeve of ice.

The headwind and slippery surface slowed them to a crawl. Ai Si, seeing this, raised her great sword, ignited the "flames of war," and charged forward like an icebreaker, carving a path through the thick ice coating the walls.

War followers were supposed to be like this, and yet the sight left Zhang Jizu slightly taken aback.

He'd seen high-tier War Supervisors before. But at this level, most of them knew how to keep their combat tools close to the vest — because an unexpected "backstab" could turn the tide in a clutch moment.

But this one, swinging a great sword like a straight-up warrior? That was rare.

'How does she even heal? Slash her teammates with the great sword?'

'And you're sure the laceration won't partially negate the healing?'

Still, existence implies reason. Zhang Jizu didn't dwell on it. He followed Ai Si until they reached the wrecked iron door.

The moment they poked their heads through the half-open door, however, both of them froze — staring down into a bottomless, frigid abyss below their feet and up at walls of ice at least several dozen meters tall.

"..."

The door opened onto the face of a sheer cliff!

There was nowhere forward to go.

"This is...?"

"A sewage outlet dumping straight into a crevasse? Not unreasonable. But this door is odd." Zhang Jizu frowned and examined it thoroughly.

"The exterior was encased in ice, but the section you melted reveals paint underneath — designed to look like the ice layer. When the door is shut, this opening would be invisible from the outside.

And the engravings inside — this mark belongs to the Tower of Logic's Mechanical Engineering School. But I'd heard San Dales was strictly a dumping ground for experimental waste. If it's a junkyard, why build such a massive, hidden underground tunnel system?

War Supervisor, any thoughts?"

Ai Si shook her head. "My prior research described it vaguely at best."

'Vaguely?'

Zhang Jizu shot her a thoughtful glance but didn't press the issue. He was about to retrace their steps and try another route when — from beyond the door, fighting the screaming wind — a head popped through.

A pair of frost-encrusted eyes blinked stupidly at the two of them.

"Zhang-lao?"

"?"

It was a Cheng Shi. The jacket-wearing one.

Zhang Jizu blinked, eyes narrowing. He was about to ask "What are you doing out there?" — but then remembered who he was dealing with, swallowed the question, and asked a practical one instead. "Is there a path outside?"

"What, you think I can fly?"

Cheng Shi gripped the iron door, shivering, and caught his breath.

"Somebody left a rope along the cliff face — goes all the way up. The other end is tied to a small tunnel opening. I crawled from that opening to here. Saw this hole and ducked in to rest.

Tough climb. Quick, Zhang-lao — hit me with a heal to take the edge off."

Zhang Jizu narrowed his eyes even further.

"You're a priest yourself. Why are you asking me for heals?"

Cheng Shi blinked, perfectly righteous. "Why burn my own mana when I can freeload off someone else? You think climbing a wall isn't tiring?"

"..."

'Sounds like him. But still not sure.'

Zhang Jizu didn't immediately act. Neither did Ai Si raise a hand. Confronted by two "cold" faces, Cheng Shi sputtered with frustration.

"Suspicious of me?"

Fine! Then how about you two prove you're actually the Gravekeeper and the War Supervisor first!

If those two mutts can fake being me, they can just as easily fake being you. So here are your options:

Either — verify yourselves with a heal, and then climb up with me to see the real San Dales.

Or — I go up alone and cut the rope, and you two can keep playing maze runner down in the sewer.

Hurry up. Time is short, and my patience is shorter."

Cheng Shi was seething. Having a player who looked suspiciously like Zhen Yi go rogue was bad enough; running into two inexplicable doppelgangers of himself was even worse. He couldn't pin down who those two were, but based on their verbal sparring, the Dragon King and Long Jing were strong candidates.

Both "dragons" technically had ties to him — and yet here they were, stirring up chaos in his trial.

He had some guesses about their motives, but messing things up was still messing things up. 'If that's how you want to play, don't blame me for sticking thorns in your shoes later.'

Of course, the possibility of unknown teammates could never be ruled out, so recruiting allies remained priority one.

Cheng Shi had originally planned to climb the cliff and scope out the area above. Running into Zhang Jizu here conveniently saved him the trouble of looking.

Even better, the other two fakes were nowhere in sight — giving him room to maneuver.

But Zhang the Steady was clearly unfazed by the pressure. He squinted and challenged back.

"Neither of us has ever been to San Dales. How do you know the top of the cliff is the 'real' San Dales?"

As the Tower of Logic's waste dump, isn't it possible that these tunnels are San Dales?

Cheng Shi — today's you seems a little... different from the you I know."

"?"

Different?

I think the different one here is you, Mister Death Chosen."

Cheng Shi's eyelid twitched, and he went full passive-aggressive.

"Use that freeze-shrunken brain of yours and think. If there weren't climbing marks on this ice wall, do you think I'd just rope up and go?"

Where's your steadiness, Mi... lao Zhang?!

Those aren't one person's footprints — they're many. The climbing traces are so obvious they've left deep gouges in the ice.

Now look at my shoes. These aren't climbing boots — they're regular shoes. Without those carved-out footholds, how could I possibly climb here against this wind?

You didn't even step outside to check before doubting me. You don't look like the real Mi Laozhang to me.

Nice try, mutt. No chance! Bye!"

With that, Cheng Shi kicked off the iron door and swung out through the gap.

Just as he raised a scalpel to cut the rope behind him, a hand shot out from the half-open door and seized the rope. Another hand, holding a second scalpel, parried his blade aside.

Zhang Jizu's head emerged. He first cast a heal on Cheng Shi, then — mimicking Cheng Shi's method — half-tied the rope around his body and began climbing wordlessly.

Cheng Shi's eye twitched. He snorted. "Convinced now?"

Zhang Jizu squinted upward, shaking his head. "Not really. But considering you can scout ahead for me, I'll trust you temporarily."

"?"

Without thinking, Cheng Shi swung a kick downward. Zhang Jizu dodged nimbly — and the heel landed squarely on the crown of Ai Si, who'd just poked her head out to watch.

"..."

Seeing the War Supervisor's face blacken, Cheng Shi gazed innocently up at the sky.

"I suppose I'll drag you two along. Move it. Don't be deadweight."

He began climbing. Ai Si, face still dark, brought up the rear. Utterly baffled, she finally tugged Zhang Jizu's ankle and asked:

"How did you figure out that this surname Cheng is the real one?"

Zhang Jizu glanced down with a smile.

"When you question him and he explains himself, he's definitely a fake. But if he can't help cursing you — there's a fifty-fifty chance he's real.

Truth be told, real or fake doesn't matter much. I was only using him to gauge the cliff's safety. And it seems this is indeed a viable route."

"...Is it always this paranoid in Chosen-level lobbies?"

Zhang Chosen, you're the Death Chosen. If you're this cautious, when does your talent even get a chance to shine?"

"A careful ship sails for ten thousand years. A Gravekeeper who keeps graves his whole life gets tired too. So if you can avoid dying, don't die."

"You reached your current score with this blasphemous philosophy?"

Ai Si was genuinely shocked — so shocked her voice rose a tiny notch in the howling wind.

But this time it wasn't Zhang Jizu who answered. It was Cheng Shi, climbing at the top.

He hadn't heard what she'd said clearly — only the wind carrying the word "blasphemy" to his ears. His body went rigid instantly. He brandished his scalpel at the rope and snarled downward:

"War Supervisor, I'd advise you to watch your mouth. I am the picture of piety — who exactly have I blasphemed?"

One more word and I cut the rope."

"..." Ai Si blinked in bewilderment. She looked at Zhang Jizu, who was grinning with his eyes half-closed, and muttered flatly:

"So surname Cheng got here the same way. Am I right?"

Then she privately reflected:

'Am I stuck at 2,400 because I'm too devout?'

...

Chapter 814: The Real San Dales

Despite the howling wind and the slippery walls, all three climbed to the top without incident.

When Cheng Shi vaulted over the cliff's edge and planted his feet on solid ground, he finally understood why San Dales was called an experimental waste dump.

Because this place was... a pit. A colossal, abyss-like ice cavern!

Their landing was the only patch of land inside. Chasms yawned on every side, and beyond them rose another ring of towering cliffs that disappeared into the heavens. Looking up was like gazing at the sky from the bottom of a well. Looking down was like floating adrift above the void. Shrieking wind churned from both directions — gusting from the unreachable "skylight" high above and the impenetrable "darkness" far below.

Scanning the horizon, everything here seemed frozen in place. Enormous ice prisms jutted at crooked angles, carving the small town into separated zones.

Yes — there really was a town here. Only it looked abandoned. Countless experimental waste heaps and building ruins sat locked inside pillars of ice, painting the land in ashen-white strokes against the blue-cold world.

At a single glance, this wasn't merely abandoned — it looked like a dead zone!

The razor wind seemed to have scoured away every trace of life. And yet, in this seemingly hopeless land, within this wholly uninhabitable town, the three of them spotted a single flickering light.

That lone flame sat precisely at the far end of the trail of footprints beneath their feet.

"Our target's clear. Let's go. Hopefully we'll find some clues there."

Today's Cheng Shi seemed focused on efficiency. He didn't dwell on the earlier misunderstanding with Mi Laozhang and headed straight forward.

Zhang Jizu, however, didn't rush after him. He dropped the corpse he'd been carrying and called out:

"Where's your brooch? Ask it. See what it knows."

Cheng Shi paused mid-step, turned, and rolled his eyes. "Oh? You're sure it's me now?"

"If you can get an answer out of it, then I'll be sure."

"I refuse. If even you need an external prop to confirm my identity, I'd say identification has already lost all meaning."

But Cheng Shi didn't leave. Instead, he produced a brooch, pinched it between his fingers, held it behind his back, and showed it to both companions in a slow circle before darkening his face again.

"Still — for the sake of speeding things along, I will ask.

But I will NOT let you see the brooch, Mi. Lao. Zhang!"

A blue-green intertwined glow settled over the corpse — which didn't stir at all, rejecting the light's "inquiry."

The brooch failed. An awkward silence descended.

"I think He needs to do a bit more R&D on these things."

Cheng Shi's lips twitched. He pocketed the brooch and marched grumpily toward the firelight.

Zhang Jizu arched a brow, retrieved the corpse, and fell in silently behind him. Ai Si followed suit. Before long, they arrived at the crumbling shack that housed the flickering flame.

But just as they drew close, Cheng Shi stopped.

He sensed someone inside. Out came the scalpel; he refused to take another step.

Zhang Jizu frowned and halted three paces behind Cheng Shi.

Ai Si, the War follower, hadn't kept pace with the other two's instincts. Seeing them freeze, she frowned, dragged her great sword forward a few steps, and glanced back curiously. "Why'd you stop?"

Cheng Shi, noticing she'd already passed him, paled and pointed at the building. "Watch out!"

Ai Si's face hardened. Without a thought, she swung her blade in a reverse slash. BOOM — half the shack was sheared clean off, exposing the fire pit — instantly snuffed by the wind — and a rough-faced man who screamed and threw himself flat on the ground.

"Don't kill me! I haven't found anything!"

'Found? Found what?'

Once they confirmed no further danger, Cheng Shi and Zhang Jizu stepped forward in unison and took charge.

Watching this, Ai Si finally realized she'd been used as a living shield — scouting the path for these two "steady brothers."

'Oh, come on! Is this really necessary?!'

'One's a Death Chosen who can keep himself alive no matter what. The other's a peak-level priest who mowed his way through 0221's Experiment Ground. And in front of one crappy shack, you need a 2,400-point War Supervisor to go first?!'

'Is that reasonable?!'

Ai Si's protest went thoroughly ignored. Cheng Shi smiled, hoisted the rough-faced man upright, and got straight to the point.

"Who are you, where do you come from, and what are you looking for? You get one chance."

The man shook like a leaf. Seeing their unfamiliar faces, he stammered out an answer.

"M-my name's Han Mo. I'm a scavenger, just like you. No, no — I'm nothing like you fine lords. I just came down looking for something to stay alive. Not looking for divinity fragments.

I don't want to become a god. I just want to survive!"

"Divinity fragments?"

Three Players heard this and each reacted differently. Zhang Jizu narrowed his eyes at Ai Si with a loaded glance. Ai Si quietly turned her head, a near-imperceptible flicker crossing her eyes.

Cheng Shi arched a brow, amused. "You're saying these ruins of San Dales have divinity fragments?"

"Huh? You lords didn't come for the divinity fragments? Then why'd you jump down here?"

"Jump?"

Zhang Jizu looked up at the abyss opening overhead — its top invisible in the dark.

"You mean 'jump' — as in, from up there?"

Han Mo nodded frantically. "Y-yes! All scavengers jump down from up there. Most of them come hunting for godhood secrets. But not me — I was being chased. Couldn't survive up there anymore, so I came down looking for a way to live."

The three exchanged curious looks. At this height, even a Player would be dead or crippled on impact. How did these so-called scavengers land safely?

Ai Si asked first. Han Mo blinked.

"You didn't jump?"

Strange. You're right — nine out of ten who jump die. Dying in San Dales is actually the lucky outcome. The truly terrifying part is falling into the abyss below. They say it connects to a 'demon's lair.' Fall down there, and living is worse than death.

The survivors — like me — got caught by massive wind cyclones during the fall, which bled off our momentum and tossed us onto the ground.

They say achieving godhood starts with surviving the jump. The test is your courage before Death, and the fortune of being watched by a god.

But even so, nearly everyone who survives lands injured.

Luckily, there's enough experimental waste here. Find something that restores life, and you can heal yourself.

The only problem is the side effects. A lot of people keep eating the waste and end up... mutating."

"Waste... divinity..." Cheng Shi and Zhang Jizu exchanged a look, arriving at the same thought simultaneously. "You're saying the divinity fragments are inside the experimental waste?"

"I don't know! Please don't hit me! I really don't know.

I haven't been here long. You can tell from where I live that I'm nowhere near qualified to approach the central zone. Only the veteran scavengers who've lived here for years actually know what secrets this place holds.

Newcomers like us... we have to ensure survival first before thinking about anything else."

Han Mo cast a pitiful look at his freshly bisected shack. He was on the verge of tears.

"It took me ten days to find this house..."

"..." Cheng Shi pursed his lips, immediately redirecting blame at Ai Si. "Why'd you go and chop his house?"

Ai Si's jaw dropped. "???"

"What are you staring at? Wasn't you? Don't tell me you're offended — wanna fight?"

Cheng Shi scoffed, brandishing a scalpel. "Care to guess whether my blade is faster, or your heal?"

Ai Si's raised great sword froze mid-swing. Remembering the legendary tales of Cheng Shi's terrifying combat power, she drew a deep breath, closed her eyes, and lowered the weapon.

'This girl does NOT pick fights she can't win.'

Watching Ai Si swallow her frustration, Cheng Shi chuckled, dropped Han Mo, and pressed onward.

"Let's go, Zhang-lao. We need to pick up the pace. Before those two mutts catch up, we have to understand what this place is.

And don't forget — there may still be a mysterious trailblazer ahead of us."

With someone volunteering to take point, Zhang the Squint would never refuse. And so the trio vanished once more into the wind and snow.

After they left, Han Mo — who'd been wailing on his knees in the snow over his lost home — abruptly went still. He stood, shed the disguise, and slowly transformed into a trench-coat-wearing... Cheng Shi.

"Interesting. If that one is who I think it is, then the other one — who could it be?"

Trench Coat Cheng Shi pondered for a moment, unearthed the real Han Mo — buried beside the ruined shack — and dumped him on the ground. Then, soundlessly, he set off in the direction the three had gone.

Following them.

...

Chapter 815: The Scavengers

The roads inside the town were far worse than any of them had imagined.

Ice prisms jutted everywhere. Rather than walking through a town, it felt more like scaling a series of frozen hills.

Along the way they found a few more scattered scavenger traces. After grabbing and interrogating some, they finally pieced together a basic picture of this town at the bottom of the abyss.

Setting aside how San Dales had become the Tower of Logic's waste dump in the first place — what mattered now was the scavenging ecosystem. Just as Han Mo had described: newcomers who survived the fall could only eke out an existence on the outskirts. Only once they adapted to the climate and could sustain themselves through scavenging would they earn the right to move toward the town center and join the long-established scavenging groups there.

These territorial groups were the current "bosses" of San Dales. They clustered around the center's perimeter, hoarding the most resource-rich zone while guarding against lone-wolf scavengers and unfamiliar faces. To keep outsiders from breaking through to the center, these normally feuding factions had even pooled efforts to erect an enormous protective barrier along the center's boundary — all to safeguard the town center's... treasure!

Yes. Treasure.

According to the scavengers, every secret of San Dales lay at the town center. But outsiders couldn't get close enough to know what was there.

The veterans' public story was "divinity fragments." But the sheer amount of effort they'd poured into "rebuilding" a kind of Order in this nearly lawless dead zone suggested the prize was worth far more than mere fragments.

Given the purpose of his visit, Cheng Shi began to suspect the scavengers' treasure was the Secret Peeping Ear.

He shared his hypothesis with Zhang Jizu, who nodded. "Sounds like you already have a plan. What do you want to do?"

Cheng Shi stood on a high ridge between ice prisms, surveying the even more shattered town center in the distance.

"Since the scavengers are the stars of this show, the performance will go smoother if we give them more stage time.

What if we unified every scavenger faction here? Then they'd become our eyes.

We'd be able to track those two mutts — and our vanished mystery teammate — with barely any effort.

Of course, considering the 'natives' pose almost no threat to them, we could give the scavengers a little boost — plant something on them so that when they're attacked, they passively release an alarm signal.

Explosive traps, flash arrays, that sort of thing. What do you think, Zhang-lao?"

"Sit inside, lure the enemy outside — sounds feasible. But it's a huge time sink.

Don't forget, we only have three days. The others probably share our goal. Are you sure you want to spend a large chunk of time tracking the other two 'yous' before finding what we're looking for?"

"I know time's precious. But I can't shake the feeling that those mutts are hiding somewhere, watching us, waiting for us to blaze the trail — then swooping in at the perfect moment to scoop up the spoils."

As he spoke, Cheng Shi cast a meaningful glance behind him, expression taunting.

Zhang Jizu's squint narrowed further, his own look turning slightly peculiar. Still, controlling the local intelligence network was never a bad move. As long as they sped up the "unification," it'd be a classic case of sharpening the axe before felling the tree.

He nodded again.

"Then go ahead. We'll await your good news."

"???" Cheng Shi was flabbergasted. He stared at Zhang Jizu. "Mi Laozhang, you used to not be like this."

"People change."

"Then why don't you change for the better?"

Zhang Jizu chuckled, eyes half-shut. "You become who you hang around. The ancients weren't wrong."

"???"

'Bro — what exactly are you implying?'

Cheng Shi was dredging up his reservoir of snark to unleash on Zhang Jizu when Ai Si tightened her fur collar and sighed.

"I know this is bad timing, but — gentlemen, there'll be plenty of chances for... verbal sparring later. If you don't move now, the unification plan is toast.

No — it's already toast. Looks like someone beat us to it and already took care of the scavengers here."

She narrowed her eyes and launched a driving kick at her sword tip, punting the blade — lodged in the ice — straight into a shadowed patch of ruins nearby.

BOOM — a scream burst from the shadows. A limping old man was blasted out, crashed to the ground, and scrambled to flee.

But with three Players present, a lame old man wasn't going anywhere. Cheng Shi arched a brow, flicked a die, and in a snap of his fingers swapped positions with it — materializing right in the old man's path.

The old man careened headlong into Cheng Shi — and actually shoved the Fate Weaver back a fraction. Zhang Jizu's eyes glinted; his lips curled. Ai Si, meanwhile, was visibly shaken.

"Fate's die?!"

He's supposed to be a liar! Wasn't the Fate Weaver identity his cover? How is he still using Fate's power?"

Zhang Jizu smiled and said nothing, scanning the surroundings cautiously before walking toward Cheng Shi.

"Did he deceive Fate's followers? No — that's a universal Fate talent, not a Fate Weaver-specific one!"

He fused? He fused with Fate?"

Ai Si pressed after them, astonishment spilling out.

"It's complicated. For now, you can think of it that way."

"..."

'Complicated?'

Ai Si's expression was even more complicated. She'd thought getting matched with Chosens was demoralizing enough. But now, realizing that the only two teammates in this trial had both completed faith fusions — and the people bold enough to impersonate Cheng Shi had almost certainly fused too — a wave of helpless defeat washed over her.

'So this is what the absolute peak tier of Players looks like?'

'Their pace is insane. While ordinary people are only just learning that a second faith exists, these people are already pioneers on the dual-faith path!'

'And if they've already fused, why are they still here hunting for opportunities?'

Watching Cheng Shi's playful expression as he interrogated the old man, and Zhang Jizu's composed, steady silhouette, Ai Si quietly clenched her fist. If there was any chance at all, she had to seize something from this trial.

Her gaze drifted toward the town center. A glimmer of desire — invisible to anyone else — flashed through her eyes.

'Is it true... that there are faiths to choose from just sitting there?'

'And if there are... could one of them be mine?'

...

Chapter 816: The Faith Theater and the Devout Land

What Ai Si was thinking, Cheng Shi naturally had no idea. All he wanted to know was what was going through the head of the old man pinned under his scalpel.

The lame old man lay prostrate, shaking head to toe. Feeling the bone-piercing cold of the blade's tip, he warmed his rapidly cooling body the only way available — by wetting himself.

Watching the snow beneath the old man melt into a damp puddle, Cheng Shi's eye twitched. He silently withdrew the scalpel and wiped it vigorously on Zhang Jizu's sleeve.

Zhang Jizu froze. In a heartbeat, his eyes narrowed to slits. Sensing the brewing storm, Cheng Shi hastily pocketed the blade and spoke up.

"Answer my questions. You have my word you'll live. But remember — one chance only.

Name. Where you came from. Who sent you.

Don't answer, or answer wrong — see the grim reaper with the squinty eyes? He'll personally escort you to meet the esteemed Death."

The lame old man raised his head, caught the simmering fury on Zhang Jizu's face, and immediately broke into a wailing confession.

"...I'll talk! Don't kill me! I'll talk!

Well Si sent me. He's the boss of the southern scavengers, stationed at the southern edge of the Devout Land.

Just a while ago, a bunch of unfamiliar scavengers went crazy — broke through the barricade and charged toward the Faith Theater's perimeter. They charged in without a care, completely fearless of the Devout Land's trials. They even triggered the Theater's Ghost Frenzy.

Well Si was furious. He sent us out to patrol. If we spot any unknown scavengers, we either chase them off on the spot or signal him to send a cleanup crew.

They have to make sure no more outsiders burst in and cause trouble before the Ghost Frenzy subsides.

It's all true, I swear! Don't kill me! I hadn't even fired my signal before you found me — really!"

The old man produced a corroded signal gun — clearly some antique dug out of the waste piles.

But the three Players couldn't have cared less about his signal gun. What mattered was the density of information packed into his words — so dense that for a moment, nobody could sort it all out.

"Wait — one thing at a time. First: what is the Faith Theater?"

The lame old man blinked. These people were clearly newcomers. New scavengers this strong? San Dales was about to get a serious shakeup. But regardless of how things changed, for a powerless nobody like him, it was all the same. So he held nothing back and spilled everything he knew.

"The Faith Theater is the biggest building at the center of San Dales. It's the place every veteran scavenger here dreams of entering. Legend says it holds the method to become a god directly, so everybody wants to get inside.

But the place is terrifying — not easy to approach at all. The Theater's outer perimeter is perpetually shrouded in fog. Inside the fog, an invisible specter patrols. Anyone who tries to approach gets detected... and executed."

Hearing this, Cheng Shi frowned at Zhang Jizu. "Sounds like your Benefactor's handiwork."

Zhang Jizu looked puzzled too but stayed silent, listening.

"It's not a simple death — it's a double desecration of body and soul!" The lame old man shuddered, apparently reliving something nightmarish. "Once it finds you, it comes silently behind you and announces your deepest secret to everyone. Then, when your terror hits its absolute peak, it..."

The old man curled into a ball. His eyes darted. His voice trembled — then erupted without warning into a screaming shout:

"'Snap' — it wrings your ne—

OW!"

He didn't get to finish. Cheng Shi punt-kicked him across the ice. A scalpel whizzed after, embedding itself above the old man's head, shaving off a few strands of hair. Face black as thunder, Cheng Shi snapped:

"I told you to give me intel, not tell me ghost stories! And you're sitting here hamming it up for dramatic effect!

Seriously, old man — are you actually scared, or do you just enjoy performing?

Afraid of ghosts but not people, huh."

Another scalpel appeared in Cheng Shi's hand.

The lame old man wet himself again. Curled up on the ground, he poured out the rest in a frantic stream, rapid as dumped beans.

After a long listen, they understood.

The town's ultimate secret lay inside the fog-shrouded Faith Theater. But because of the "specter," no one could get in.

The scavengers had tried countless methods. Any sound during approach — even the faintest — let the ghost pinpoint the "intruder" and kill them, complete with a public strip of their deepest secret before death.

After all these years, the scavengers' persistent exploration had managed only to glimpse the Theater's exterior, never to enter.

But not everyone possessed infinite patience, and there were clever minds among them. One night, the eastern and northern scavenger factions betrayed the joint exploration pact and launched a combined assault on the Theater.

Their logic: no matter how powerful the specter was, it had to kill one at a time. Sacrifice enough bodies, and someone with enough luck would slip through while the ghost was busy — reach the Theater doors and push them open. Those doors to the divine throne.

Every person believed they'd be the lucky one. Reality, as always, was cold.

Total annihilation. Not a single survivor.

Those watching from outside spent the entire night just listening to the "gossip" — the parade of exposed secrets.

And that night, the sheer death toll caused the fog surrounding the Theater to boil. Afterward, anyone who entered the fog died instantly — regardless of whether they made a sound. The horrifying phenomenon lasted a long time before subsiding. The remaining scavengers realized: too many simultaneous deaths inside the fog would trigger this lethal state.

So they erected barbed wire around the fog's perimeter, formed patrol squads, and strictly prohibited lone wolves from reckless intrusions that could jeopardize the factions' cooperation and fog research. That cordoned-off zone became what they called the Devout Land.

Today, yet another batch of scavengers had recklessly charged in. The Devout Land's fog was already boiling — meaning for a time, the town center was completely off-limits.

After hearing all this, every Player's expression soured.

Cheng Shi, brow knotted, asked: "How long does the fog boiling last?"

"I... don't know. Only Well Si knows. All the research data is in their hands. We're just begging for scraps to survive. Really."

It was true. Every word from start to finish had been true.

And precisely because all of it was true, Cheng Shi felt uneasy.

"You — say something false."

"?" The lame old man was confused. He didn't understand what this lord wanted.

"Tell me one lie. Don't make me say it a third time."

"I... don't hate you."

'?'

'That is indeed a lie, but...'

'Old man, you've got some nerve.'

So — under Zhang Jizu's quiet laugh and Ai Si's doubled-over gaze — Cheng Shi slit the old man's throat with a single stroke, then produced the brooch. He kept it hidden in his palm, not letting Zhang Jizu or Ai Si see it, and addressed the corpse.

"Did you see any other unfamiliar scavengers like us today?"

The lame old man's corpse said no.

Somewhat relieved, Cheng Shi casually brought the old man back to life with a wave of his hand.

"The mana I spent on resurrection goes on your tab, you two. Remember to reimburse me. Let's move — Well Si is clearly the key to this trip.

If we want to find what we're looking for before the trial ends, we need to pick up the pace."

Cheng Shi set off at the front. Ai Si followed with a bemused expression. Zhang Jizu squinted, ran his hands over the old man's body, confirmed this was indeed just a weak old man, then ambled after them.

Once all three had left, the lame old man wobbled upright, exhaled with profound relief.

'These strangers are going after Well Si, so the base is definitely out. Better hide on the outskirts!'

He hobbled off in the direction they'd come from.

But he hadn't gotten far — just to the ice prism where Cheng Shi had stood earlier — when, to his horror, the very lord who had just killed and revived him appeared before him again!

Only now he was wearing a trench coat.

The old man instantly prostrated, wailing.

"My lord, I was wrong! I'm truly sorry!"

"What are you sorry for?" Trench Coat Cheng Shi arched a brow, seemingly piecing together what had happened.

"I... I shouldn't have said I hate you! I really don't hate you!"

"...You say your lies with such conviction." Trench Coat Cheng Shi snorted a laugh, crouched down, and patted the old man's shoulder. "Talk. Repeat everything you told me just now, and I'll let you go."

The old man was dazed but spilled everything at lightning speed.

Trench Coat Cheng Shi kept his word and let him go. But the old man hadn't hobbled far before he encountered the lord once again — this time outside a ruined shack.

Only now, he was back in the jacket.

"..."

The lame old man was stunned. Terror and confusion warring on his face, he slapped himself across the cheek.

For one fleeting moment, he thought the Devout Land's eerie fog might have spread outward. Why else would this lord keep hounding him, asking about "secrets" that hardly mattered?

But he'd learned his lesson this time. Before Jacket Cheng Shi could even open his mouth, the old man blurted out every last thing he knew in one nonstop torrent.

Jacket Cheng Shi pursed his lips and gazed toward the town center with a loaded smile.

"They're fast, I'll give them that. But sometimes... fast isn't always a good thing."

He released the lame old man and plunged into the wind and snow ahead.

...

Chapter 817: If I Trust You Again, I'm a Dog!

There was no doubt — the specter inside the Devout Land that could expose people's deepest secrets had to be connected to the Secret Peeping Ear. The question was exactly how.

And what was the so-called "method of becoming a god" hidden inside the Faith Theater?

These two questions spiraled through Cheng Shi's mind the entire way, unresolved. If such a method actually existed, how could the Tower of Logic have abandoned this city?

But the lame old man hadn't lied. That meant whatever the scavengers were hunting for had likely appeared after San Dales was abandoned. So what force had birthed this "path to godhood"?

On the road toward Well Si's southern stronghold, they encountered plenty of scavenger sentries similar to the old man. Their stories were largely identical, and the closer the trio drew to the mysterious Devout Land, the more their curiosity deepened.

Ai Si trudged ahead, clearing the path with her great sword. Behind her, the two "steady bros" were already whispering again.

"Zhang-lao, didn't you research San Dales' history at all before coming?"

Zhang Jizu narrowed his eyes and shot Cheng Shi a mildly contemptuous sidelong glance.

"That should have been your job, Cheng Shi. I expected detailed briefing materials before departure. Instead I received nothing but a prayer time."

"..." Cheng Shi's step faltered. A dry laugh. "Right — been busy saving the world, forgot. No big deal though. We'll find out what happened here soon enough. I've got a feeling this Well Si knows quite a lot."

Even as the words left his mouth, he discreetly pointed at Ai Si — ears pricked up front. Zhang Jizu caught the gesture and gave an imperceptible nod.

That confirmed it: their former acquaintance knew more than she was letting on.

Interesting.

Nothing wrong with that per se — but her decision to hold back warranted a closer look.

Cheng Shi quickened his pace to walk alongside Ai Si, striking up a casual tone.

"War Supervisor, what brought you here?"

Ai Si's great sword paused. She side-eyed him. "I already told your partner."

"But you haven't told me." Cheng Shi smiled.

Ai Si scoffed and glanced back at Zhang Jizu. She shook her head with a dry laugh as she walked.

"Surname Cheng — you and Zhang Chosen clearly share the same goal, even came together by arrangement. I can spot that much.

So given your relationship, telling one of you versus the other — is there really a difference?"

"Absolutely!" Cheng Shi's voice dropped conspiratorially. He leaned closer, deliberately shielding his words from Zhang Jizu. "The man behind you is too scheming, too crafty. Team up with him and you'll never get a bigger cut. But I'm different. I'll..."

"You'll badmouth him to his face?" Ai Si's expression turned half-amused.

"?"

Cheng Shi blinked, instantly realizing the two had already struck some kind of deal.

'When?'

'Back in the sewer?'

With renewed interest, he glanced over his shoulder at Zhang Jizu, then turned back to Ai Si with a dead-serious look.

"Seems there's been a misunderstanding. No matter — whatever Zhang-lao promised you, I'll double it. Is that enough to make you my mole inside your little two-person alliance?"

"Why are you guarding against your own teammate?"

"Come on — the other two impersonating me are my teammates too. Should I not guard against them?"

This is called preparing for a rainy day.

Zhang-lao, I trust. But I worry he'll blunder — mistake one of those two for me and make a wrong call. So I need someone keeping tabs on him."

"Why not watch him yourself? And aren't you worried I'll blunder too?"

"You won't. You're already... enough—"

'Crap. Said it too fast.'

Seeing Ai Si's face darken, Cheng Shi pivoted instantly.

"—smart enough. All War followers have sharp minds. Yep, I trust you."

The barely-veiled lie left Ai Si momentarily speechless.

'I can't even trust my own colleagues, and you trust me?'

"..."

'Wait — that train of thought basically calls me stupid too!'

Ai Si fumed. She glared daggers at Cheng Shi, but took no further action. After a moment's thought, she — to his surprise — actually agreed.

Whether she was honoring her opening proclamation of cooperation, or simply acknowledging that she'd lose a fight anyway, the War Supervisor gave a slight nod.

"Fine. I can help you. But I want one thing."

Cheng Shi beamed. "Name it. I'll check with Zhang-lao if he's got any."

"?"

Ai Si stared. She could not believe the audacity of this liar-teammate.

'You're just... running a middleman scam with bare hands, skimming profit on nothing?!'

She laughed from sheer anger. "He doesn't have it. Only you do. I want 'Dead Disgust.' Give me a few bottles, and I'll prioritize helping you."

The instant the words landed, Cheng Shi produced three dark vials and pressed them into her hands.

"???"

Ai Si finally snapped. She hoisted her great sword, eyes blazing.

"Clown — you think you can play me again?! Don't think I won't draw my blade just because you outmatch me!"

"..."

'Hey sis, we can disagree on the deal without hurling insults!'

'I have a name, you know. Why do you keep reminding me I'm a clown?'

Cheng Shi shrugged, unfazed, and grinned.

"You think these are fake?"

"Obviously! You scammed them from Void. Right now it's just the three of us — even if I didn't know the backstory, these potions can't be real. Your 'audience' isn't big enough!

You're trying to trick me AGAIN?!"

"Cute. Then if you think they're fake, why haven't you dropped those three 'fake' bottles when you raised your sword?" Cheng Shi's grin sharpened.

"..."

She hadn't dropped them. She was thinking: what if there was even a sliver of a chance they were real? At least they might carry her a little farther.

But were they real? She looked down at the vials once more.

"They're definitely fake..."

"You—!!!" Ai Si exploded.

"But the name is." Cheng Shi's pivot was silky smooth. He snorted a laugh. "They're not really called 'Dead Disgust.' They're called 'Never Defeat' — a War potion I picked up during the Kingdom of War's fall. I had six. Three for you. Sound like a fair trade?"

...

Chapter 818: Woof!

"If I trust you one more time, I'm a dog." Ai Si's face was granite.

Cheng Shi scoffed and extended his hand. "Then give them back."

"I..." The War Supervisor didn't move. She looked down at the vials once more, expression warring between suspicion and desire. "These are real?"

"What, you want to test them right now?"

I'll tell you: unless you're at death's door, they do nothing. Only when you're truly on the brink does drinking one keep you alive. They're good stuff.

If you don't accept the deal, hand them back."

He reached for the vials.

Ai Si's face shifted. She stepped back and stuffed them into her pocket — then caught the taunting appraisal and sardonic grin on Cheng Shi's face. Flushing with anger, she fired off a single fierce protest:

"Woof!"

"..."

That single bark launched Cheng Shi straight back to Kannar City, to the memory of Poison voluntarily becoming someone's dog.

Speaking of which — that pretty boy who'd been "offered" to the Warden by Aph Ros, how was he doing now?

Funny how things circled around — some people ended up in the same line of work as Poison.

Fate really was something.

Cheng Shi fell quiet for a beat, then pulled the teasing smile back into place.

"Impressive, War Supervisor. Now I'm thoroughly convinced you won't do anything stupid..."

Hey hey hey — put the sword down! But I am curious. What's the deal with your life?"

Ai Si, mid-swing with the great sword, froze. A complicated flicker crossed her eyes. She pulled back, shook her head slightly.

"Nothing. Just preparing for the unpredictable dangers ahead. A rainy-day precaution.

Anyway — huh? Where's the Gravekeeper?"

They'd been walking side by side for a while. Only now, looking back, did they realize Zhang Jizu had fallen far behind. Watching his pace slow to a crawl, Cheng Shi's chest tightened. He stopped and scanned the surroundings.

"Spotted something?"

Zhang Jizu didn't answer until he was beside them. Then, face smiling and tone dead-serious:

"I noticed two people openly strategizing about how to deal with me. Didn't want to spoil the mood, so I slowed down to give you space.

Didn't spot anything, no."

"..."

"..."

Cheng Shi's guarded expression froze on his face. He rotated his stiff neck toward Zhang Jizu, lips twitching.

"Zhang-lao, you seem like a different person."

Zhang Jizu squinted at him. His look said it all: somebody's influence has been considerable.

...

Meanwhile, elsewhere — as the trio explored toward the edges of San Dales' center, near an ice prism they'd passed earlier, two figures collided.

Jacket Cheng Shi looked up and found himself face to face with none other than Zhang Jizu, Death Chosen.

He arched a brow, halted, the corner of his mouth curving into an amused grin.

"Interesting. You waiting for me, Zhang-lao?"

What — finally figured out that other guy isn't me?"

Zhang Jizu's squinting eyes measured Cheng Shi top to bottom. After a moment, he said:

"All is given to Void."

Cheng Shi blinked, then snapped irritably.

"Great. So now you're testing me, Zhang-lao?!"

Cut the mystical mumbo-jumbo. Did he send you, or are you here on your own?

I'm not thrilled about your behavior, but the fact that you came to probe means you've started doubting that counterfeit too.

Interesting — if the impostor were Zhen Yi or the Dragon King, they probably wouldn't show any cracks. So whoever it is, their impersonation isn't perfect.

That narrows it down to a handful of players on the Deceit leaderboard.

Add in the combat prowess I displayed during 0221's Experiment Ground, and we can rule out everyone who isn't primarily a fighter.

Which leaves exactly one person who can replicate both my identity and my combat ability — Long Jing.

So the one traveling with you is Long Jing. Am I right?

You saw through him and came to me to 'leave the darkness for the light'?"

After that speech, Zhang Jizu's eyes narrowed to mere slits. He nodded, then shook his head, and smiled.

"Wrong."

"?" Cheng Shi frowned. "Impossible. If not Long Jing, I can't think of anyone else capable of pulling this off. Zhang-lao — have you identified his real identity?"

"I haven't identified his. But I've identified yours."

Long Jing — impersonating Cheng Shi and then pinning your own name on someone else. Clever trick, isn't it?"

"!!!"

The instant the words landed, Zhang Jizu's scalpel slashed for his chest. Cheng Shi didn't flinch; one hand clamped the blade mid-arc. Face dark as coal:

"Did the cold freeze your brain?"

What did Long Jing drug you with, that you trust him over me?"

Or have you two teamed up to strip me of my identity?"

Zhang-lao — I consider you a friend. Don't make me regret it."

Zhang Jizu didn't press the attack. He simply felt the strength in the other's grip and spoke with a loaded tone. "You seem... considerably stronger."

"Drop the probing. You know my full hand. I fused with Fate. My Fate-side class is Hero of Today."

Zhang-lao — I've been this transparent. You still doubt me?"

Keep being this 'obstinate' and I'll have no choice but to beat some sense into you."

As he spoke, his free hand produced a die. The face showing: six.

The instant Zhang Jizu saw that six, he smiled.

The impersonation was superb — the impersonator had even reverse-engineered the Hero of Today class from Cheng Shi's performance at the Experiment Ground. But no plan was flawless. That six? Zhang Jizu had never once seen Cheng Shi roll it.

But he didn't call it out. Instead, he withdrew his hand with a smile and a parting suggestion.

"I have a rough idea why you're here. But I don't think you'll get it. Good luck."

He turned and walked away, leaving one last line:

"Also — watch out for Zhen Yi. I'm certain she's here."

After Zhang Jizu vanished around the bend, Jacket Cheng Shi's face turned to stone.

He picked up the flawless Fate die and frowned hard, trying to figure out where he'd gone wrong.

"Doesn't make sense. I researched it over and over — Cheng Shi's die has exactly six faces.

Could there be... some trick I'm missing?"

Jacket Cheng Shi climbed an ice prism, squinting through the driving snow at scattered firelight beginning to converge in the distance. His gaze sharpened. Leaning into the wind, he swapped outfits.

Once the trench coat replaced the jacket, he pocketed the die and crept cautiously toward the flickering lights.

The wind in the frozen abyss grew fiercer, shaking the frost-covered plants that clung upside-down to the prisms. Like the Cheng Shis' identities — about to slip free at any moment.

...

Chapter 819: One Step Too Late

At the same moment, the southern stronghold at the edge of the town center received three guests amid the raging blizzard. The hosts were less than welcoming — countless scavengers grabbed their weapons and encircled the trio on the spot.

After the outer perimeter sounded the alarm, a leader-like figure burst from the largest, most intact building at the camp's center. He had delicate features, a pale complexion, and a face full of fury. Whip in hand, he stormed out bellowing about teaching these perpetually clueless outsiders a lesson.

Unfortunately, before his whip could crack, the War follower at the front taught him a lesson instead.

He got chopped. Ai Si's great sword, launched in a long-range throw from a considerable distance, took his arm clean off. The sight sent scavengers scattering in panic — and even Cheng Shi clicked his tongue in wonder.

"I say, Zhang-lao, when did priests start hitting this hard?"

Zhang Jizu side-eyed Cheng Shi, apparently reading his real intent. "If you want to compliment yourself, just do it. No need for the roundabout."

"???" Cheng Shi blinked. "Is that what I meant?"

"Isn't it?"

Well, if you were complimenting me — then thank you."

And with that, he walked right past Cheng Shi to stand beside Ai Si, curious to see how this War priest would pacify the camp.

Nothing fancy. Ai Si simply declared, "Move and you end up like him." Every fleeing scavenger froze.

The great sword might have limited reach, but she could throw it far enough.

Nobody who'd survived the "fall" wanted to die here for nothing. So nobody moved.

Simple. Efficient.

Honestly, San Dales was probably the trial with the fewest obstacles the Players had ever faced. These peripheral scavengers didn't even register as combat units. They were mere decorations in the frozen landscape — serving as little more than guides.

The real danger lay inside that boiling fog.

Grayish-white mist churned with dark gray plumes, so dense that even the biting wind couldn't thin them. The sight was suffocating.

Cheng Shi observed it for a while, then stepped forward and kicked the downed man's severed hand away.

"You're Well Si?"

The one-armed scavenger was terrified. Clutching his shoulder, he howled incoherently. "No — I'm not Well Si! I'm his assistant, Ber To..."

"An assistant with that much attitude? Where's Well Si? Don't tell me our heroic and awe-inspiring Lady Ai Si scared him to death in there?"

Cheng Shi tossed the joke out casually, even winking at Ai Si over his shoulder.

Ai Si was speechless. She quietly retrieved her great sword.

'Traveling with two of the absolute peak Players, and the one doing the fighting is a priest? This makes no sense.'

She'd been matched with peak Players before. She'd even met the Grand Marshal once. He always took point; everyone else just followed. And now?

The only conclusion: comparing yourself to others is a recipe for rage.

Cheng Shi was clearly joking — but to the three Players' surprise, Ber To's face actually drained of color. Through tears and wails, he nodded.

"Well Si is dead. He's dead inside the house."

"???"

It wasn't just the Players. Every scavenger outside froze in horror, all eyes turning to the central building.

"Dead?"

The grin vanished from Cheng Shi's face. Brow darkening, he pushed Zhang Jizu and Ai Si toward the building, grumbling as they went.

"War Supervisor — this is on you!"

"???" Ai Si's brain stalled. She could barely walk. "How is this my fault?"

"If you'd been gentler, would Well Si be dead?"

"..."

'You actually think he was scared to death by me?!'

Ai Si snapped. She raised the great sword without a word — then caught herself, stiffened, and lowered it.

"I'm not falling for it again. You just want me to slice the building open so you don't have to go in first. Forget it."

Hearing this, Cheng Shi pursed his lips and edged an inch farther from her.

"As expected — the same trick never works twice..."

Hmm? Zhang-lao, why've you stopped?"

"There might be clues on these scavengers outside. If we all go in, nobody watches them.

So you go in. I'll stay out here."

Zhang Jizu produced his scalpel with a perfectly straight face and stood his ground — but his squinting gaze never once left the building's interior.

"...Could you be any more transparent? Letting your teammates scout ahead — is this your idea of camaraderie?"

"I don't have teammates. All I see are two traveling companions plotting to screw me over."

"..." Cheng Shi was dumbstruck. He pointed at Mi Laozhang for a long moment, a thousand thoughts distilling into one sentence: "Today I finally realized your heart is as narrow as your eyes."

He then nimbly dodged the Death Chosen's scalpel swipe, and — face as dark as ever — entered the building with utmost caution. He dragged Well Si's corpse outside.

But his joking expression was gone. His face was grim.

"Can't be resurrected. Can't be questioned. Our 'friendly teammate' did this.

And I'm guessing the scavengers who charged in were incited by her too.

Zhang-lao — we're way behind. She's not only ahead of us, she's torched the only path in."

Cheng Shi stared into the fog, a shadow of gravity crossing his eyes.

"The History School knows a lot more than I expected..."

"You're sure it's Surname Zhen?" Ai Si asked, skeptical.

"Surname Zhen'? Nice name for her. Besides her, who else has the skill to puppeteer people like this?

One step behind means every step behind. If those two mutts hadn't insisted on playing dress-up as me, I never would've lost track of this most annoying pest.

Speaking of, the other two teammates should be close. We need to speed up.

Zhang-lao — round up the scavengers. Don't let them scatter. I'll handle the interrogation."

He flung a scalpel that embedded itself next to Ber To's neck, stopping the man's pathetic attempt to roll out of sight. One foot on the man's chest, he spoke low.

"When does the Ghost Frenzy end? And don't say you don't know. Wrong answer, and you can join Well Si."

Ber To blanked for a second, then wailed out his answer.

"Day after tomorrow! The shortest Ghost Frenzy lasts at least two days. So the earliest the fog will start to settle is the day after tomorrow."

'Day after tomorrow?'

The trial was three days total. If it ran until then, game over — forget the Secret Peeping Ear; they wouldn't even clear the trial.

"Who charged in? How many?"

"D-don't know them. They were all new scavengers from the outskirts — faces we'd never seen. Tons of them. They hit the Devout Land from every direction. Our forces were too concentrated at the stronghold, and they slipped right through the gaps."

"When did Well Si die?"

"Don't know. When I saw the Frenzy, I went to alert him. He was already dead inside when I opened the door. No one else was around. To avoid suspicion, I passed along his expulsion order and faked his time of death. I just wanted to clear my own name — nothing more." Ber To was shivering with pain, his body losing heat in the blizzard.

But Cheng Shi had zero intention of sparing a heal to keep the man alive. He kept pressing.

"So your little gang isn't all that united, huh. The specter — what does it look like?"

The question was loud — clearly not directed at Ber To alone. And when Cheng Shi finished, the assembled crowd fell dead silent.

"..."

The three Players scanned the faces. Nobody was refusing to answer — these scavengers genuinely didn't know what the specter looked like. Put simply, none of them had ever seen it.

'Formless? Invisible?'

'Interesting. If nobody's ever laid eyes on it, then does it...'

'Actually exist?'

...

Chapter 820: God Concubine...

Cheng Shi kept pondering the connection between the specter and the Secret Peeping Ear, but no amount of speculation could replace seeing it firsthand. So he decided to confront this Theater guardian that had every scavenger too spooked to utter a word.

"So nobody's ever seen it. How convenient.

Happens that my eyesight's rather good — I can see through illusions to the truth. Today, I'll do you all a favor and take the first look."

With that, he hoisted Ber To off the ground and started marching toward the barbed-wire perimeter.

Ber To realized what was about to happen. Convinced he was about to become a lab rat, he was scared witless. He thrashed uselessly, then resorted to sniveling pleas.

"My lord, I was wrong! Please don't throw me in! I'll die, my lord! I'll die!"

"Shh — quiet.

Don't be afraid. I'll have you know — I am the finest priest in this entire world. No matter who dies, I can snatch them right out of Death's hands!"

Ber To froze mid-struggle. He pointed shakily at Well Si's corpse. "Then... Well Si...?"

"Ahem. That's not important."

Cheng Shi quickly clapped a hand over the man's eyes and spoke soothingly.

"Relax. You and him are different. You absolutely won't die. At most you'll suffer a little.

But you look like you've got plenty of... masculine vigor. I'm sure you can handle a trifle of pain."

"I don't have vigor! I can't handle it! I really can't, my lord!" Ber To babbled in terror, but his protests went unheard.

Cheng Shi stopped just outside the barbed wire. Smiling that half-smile, he gazed at the scavenger in his hand and delivered his ultimatum.

"I'd suggest you think carefully before you speak. Die in there, and maybe I'll resurrect you. But die out here...

Then you really will have to go keep your boss Well Si company before Death."

"I..." Ber To was on the verge of collapse. His face contorted, as though making the hardest decision of his life. Then, in a mournful voice: "I choose to go straight down and join Well Si."

"?"

Cheng Shi's expression went cold. "Very well. Brave man. In that case, after I toss you in, I simply won't resurrect you. That way you get your wish and I get my result. Win-win, no?"

"..."

"..."

"..."

Every scavenger in earshot went as silent as cicadas in winter. Even the howling wind seemed to pause in fear.

Zhang Jizu and Ai Si exchanged a look. Two peculiar gazes completed an entire conversation in the wordless void.

'Is surname Cheng a demon?' / 'Has he always been like this?'

'Yes.' × 2

"NOOO — HELP ME!"

Just as the silence set in, a scream tore through it. Cheng Shi smirked and hurled the scavenger faction's second-in-command through the gap in the barbed wire. THUD — and the wailing cut dead.

Even though Ber To had clearly been injured by the impact, the man who'd been screaming bloody murder an instant ago clamped shut like a spring-loaded trap. He curled into a ball on the ground and didn't dare make a single sound.

The Devout Land's fog slowly swallowed him, leaving only a blurred silhouette. The scene remained silent.

Zhang Jizu and Ai Si crept up. All three Players pressed against the wire, senses straining. They detected nothing. The so-called specter hadn't appeared.

"Hmm? I thought anyone who entered during the Ghost Frenzy would die.

Why's it gone quiet?"

Cheng Shi frowned. He was about to pull Ber To back when the scavenger's body involuntarily twitched in terror — scraping against a small piece of metal beneath him. The friction produced a teeth-grinding squeal.

The next second, an eerie laugh drifted from deep within the fog. Then a shrill, distorted voice exploded in everyone's ears.

"Well Si is dead — what do I do now?

How will I endure so many long, freezing nights alone?

Who else will love me the way he did — who else would promise to make me his 'God Concubine' after he ascends?!"

"?????"

The voice came fast and left faster. While every soul outside the wire stood dumbstruck with jaws agape, the shadow inside the fog twitched once — then went still forever.

Ber To was dead.

But nobody cared about that anymore. Every face wore the same bewildered expression as they processed what "God Concubine" meant.

"..."

'So this is what "exposing someone's secret" sounds like?'

'Assistant by day, armrest by night?'

'Well, well, well — San Dales is every bit as spectacular as Dolgod!'

Cheng Shi's eye twitched violently. Still, straight-faced, he turned to Zhang Jizu. "Did you see anything?"

Zhang Jizu's eyes were nearly shut. Gravely, he shook his head. "Nothing. Not a thing. Even the fog's wind-displaced pattern didn't change. It's as though nothing ever entered this area."

Ai Si nodded in agreement.

"Truly — no anomaly at all.

But... that voice, the 'God Concubine' thing — is that what I think it is?

Ber To — wasn't he a man?"

"..."

Cheng Shi used to be fairly certain the answer was "yes," but now... less so.

"Let's broaden the definition. Who says only women can be a God Concubine?"

Besides, you can't judge someone's software version by their hardware specs — especially when you haven't even inspected their hardware. What if it's not so... hard?"

"?"

Zhang Jizu was at a loss for words. Ai Si, on the other hand, looked entirely convinced. She peered at Ber To through the wire and nodded.

"Hard or not before, he's definitely hard now."

"..." Zhang Jizu was even more at a loss. He looked between Cheng Shi and Ai Si, increasingly certain these two were on the same wavelength.

Cheng Shi ignored the tangent and rubbed his chin. "Let's leave the God Concubine business aside. We've got a major problem — time is genuinely running out."

He frowned, and using thread wound around his hand, reeled the corpse back through the wire. Then he pitched it back out the gap and — in full view of the gathered scavengers — left the resurrection... to Mi Laozhang.

Zhang Jizu blinked.

"What are you looking at me for? Mi Laozhang, you can't possibly think I'm the only one who has to work this whole trial.

Stop staring. Resurrect him — he's still got intel we need."

"..."

'You knew there was intel and you tossed him in anyway?'

Zhang Jizu nearly laughed from fury. He drew a deep breath.

"Resurrection was your promise to him. Nothing to do with me. Also — are you sure he even wants to be resurrect right now?"

You'd be better off just using the brooch to ask him."

Cheng Shi waved the suggestion away.

"Oh, come on — aren't we inseparable teammates?"

If so, why split hairs over 'mine' and 'yours'?"

Use the brooch as little as possible. Don't forget — there might be a Memory follower in this trial. I'd rather not leave too many 'memory traces' here.

As for whether our God Concubine wants to be resurrected... how would you know unless you resurrect him first?"

If he doesn't want it, just kill him again. Sound good?"

'Sound good?'

'I think you're a living devil.'

'No — even the devil would put you on the altar.'

Zhang Jizu's eyelid hammered. But he resurrected the poor wretch anyway. As for why — nobody knew. call it a contribution to the team effort.

And when Ber To awoke, he felt the collective gaze upon him shift.

That formerly pale, delicate face flushed liver-red. Every fiber of his body clenched into a ball, and he refused to budge.

Cheng Shi, expression inscrutable, tapped the man with his scalpel to snap him out of it, then grabbed him by the collar and hoisted him up.

"You and Well Si ran this place for years. Surely you know secrets the rest don't.

Out with it. If I absolutely need to enter the fog today — how do I do it?

Answer, and I'll erase everyone else's memory.

Can't answer...

Then sorry — I'll erase your neck."

...