

The Gods 119

Chapter 119: The Clown and the Wind

Cheng Shi's mind was barely hanging on.

His ability to think clearly was slipping away, and the surgical scalpel buried deep in his chest only seemed to dig in further. Even though it had avoided his heart, without immediate healing, he might bleed out and die soon.

Out of the corner of his eye, he barely caught sight of Qin Chaoge, stumbling toward him. A smile crept onto his pained face, a sense of relief washing over him.

Finally, his strategy of exchanging sincerity for sincerity was about to pay off.

Throughout this trial, Cheng Shi had maintained an open and cooperative attitude, sharing everything he could with genuine honesty. All for this moment.

It was a gamble he had made many times before. No—bet on many times before, and he had yet to lose.

Not just because he had good luck, but because he understood people.

Just like this time, he had seen through both Qin Chaoge and Li Bola.

They were trustworthy allies.

As long as he contributed, they would undoubtedly return the favor.

But in his state, overtaken by the bloodlust, Cheng Shi had overlooked one crucial detail:

Why wasn't Qin Chaoge affected by the blinding red light?

From the moment she had entered the room, she had walked through all the restrictions as though they were nonexistent. Even though her steps were initially unsteady, she had steadily and surely made her way into the room.

And as she got closer to Cheng Shi, her hunched posture straightened, her steps became more confident.

By the time she reached Cheng Shi, Qin Chaoge was standing tall, her face flushed with confidence, and there was a playful glint in her eyes.

Through his blurry vision, Cheng Shi watched as she calmly walked past him, smiling all the while...

She walked past him, past Li Bola, and then...

Stopped right next to Ji Ran.

She leaned down and whispered a few words in Ji Ran's ear. Within moments, Ji Ran broke free from the grip of the red light, roaring as he pulled the giant sword from his chest, letting out a bitter laugh before collapsing to the ground.

"Clang—"

"Huff—huff—"

You came later than we agreed...

I thought our cooperation... was over."

Qin Chaoge let out a snicker and offered Ji Ran her hand.

"Let's go. Whatever we gain will depend on the secret hidden behind that door."

“And them... why not kill them...?”

“Leaving them to die is the same as killing them. No need to waste energy.”

With that, she pulled Ji Ran up, and without looking back, they pushed open the door at the far end of the room.

Cheng Shi heard the door close and let out a self-mocking laugh.

“I’m such a... clown...”

I was wrong about her.

But... why?

That door closing wasn’t just the sound of the room’s door—it was the sound of their hope for survival slipping away as well.

As the sound of the door faded into the distance, the sound of bodies hitting the floor echoed inside the room.

“Thud—”

“Thud—”

The clown was tired, and so was the wind.

And so, the clown died, and the wind stopped blowing.

...

Cheng Shi didn't know how much time had passed or where he was.

When consciousness finally returned, he opened his eyes in disbelief.

He felt a surge of life force coursing through his body, repairing his wounds.

He knew this power well—he had used it before.

The power of [Birth].

He looked at his hand, at the strange swelling on his arm where Hu Xuan had left the "Law of Pregnancy." The strange lump was now slowly deflating, and as it did, a force of rebirth surged out from it.

"This is..."

A gasp caught his attention, and when he turned to look, he saw the ranger struggling to lift her head. Two confused individuals, both locked in each other's equally bewildered gaze.

Cheng Shi suddenly started laughing.

His sincerity hadn't won over the bard, but it had earned the gratitude of the sage!

This follower of [Birth], this Sage of Life, this old acquaintance reborn...

Had given Cheng Shi a new life.

He laughed and laughed until tears streamed from his eyes.

Li Bola, too, was overwhelmed with emotion. With a smile, she pulled the bow from her abdomen.

Cheng Shi cast a healing spell over her and then asked a somewhat ridiculous question:

“Does this mean... I have a new mom?”

Li Bola was taken aback before breaking into laughter:

“If that’s the case, then you’ve also gained a sister.”

“Ha ha ha—ha ha ha—”

The clown laughed, and the wind joined in.

And so, the clown awoke, and the wind began to blow once more.

Cheng Shi picked up all the surgical scalpels scattered across the floor and tucked them into his newly donned clothes.

He and Li Bola gathered themselves, preparing for the battle that would soon follow.

A hunter and a healer against a warrior and a bard—the odds were about fifty-fifty.

But given that Qin Chaoge was likely hiding something, it was impossible to predict who would come out on top.

Why had she done this? What benefit could she gain from collaborating with Ji Ran?

Cheng Shi couldn't figure it out.

Neither could Li Bola.

She prided herself on her ability to read people, and though she had been betrayed before, there were always signs.

But this time, the betrayal had been sudden and without warning.

The two of them exchanged a glance and decided to focus on the present.

Judging by the time, only about half an hour had passed since they had "just died." The black-robed figure, still battling his bloodlust, had his sharp claws buried deep in his own chest.

The red light in his eyes had faded, but he seemed trapped in some bizarre state, clawing at his own heart, unable to die, yet unable to wake.

The two of them stared at the scene, confusion settling over them.

"Is this the price of invoking [Corruption]?"

Li Bola voiced her question aloud, but Cheng Shi shook his head.

He didn't think so. To him, the black-robed man seemed more like he was stuck in a self-perpetuating loop—a glitch, almost.

After all, the figure was a puppet.

A puppet made of flesh and blood!

Cheng Shi carefully reached out and removed the black-robed figure's hood, revealing a scarred, grotesque face. Both Cheng Shi and Li Bola grimaced at the sight.

The scars on his scalp were like the ritualistic self-mutilation of a devout ascetic. They were jarring to behold.

"[Decay]!?"

"No," Cheng Shi shook his head again, "It's an obsession. A flesh puppet can't act entirely according to how it was designed to behave because its flesh carries an obsession. It will always make moves outside the intended rules."

"A puppet? He's a puppet?"

Li Bola looked at Cheng Shi in shock, wondering if he was making this up.

During their battle earlier, she had noticed that the black-robed figure's decisions were oddly decisive, but she hadn't considered the possibility that "he wasn't human"!

"Let me reintroduce myself—Cheng Shi, alchemy enthusiast."

Cheng Shi wasn't making this up. He had read about this in Ardos' Alchemy Notes.

Turning oneself into a flesh puppet might seem cool, but over time, unexpected "bugs" would emerge.

And obsession was one of those bugs.

Puppets, originally human, carried intrinsic obsessions. To achieve their goals, they had to cast aside those obsessions, turning themselves into puppets that only acted according to strict rules.

But as time passed and the puppet aged, the rules that governed them loosened, allowing the obsessions from their former lives to resurface and grow increasingly uncontrollable.

So, when the right trigger came, if the puppet broke free of the rules and gave in to its obsession, it could end up trapped in a self-destructive loop, unable to wake.

This was one of Ardos' theories, which he had developed during his studies at the Tower of Logic.

At that time, neither he nor the field of alchemy had figured out how to turn oneself into a puppet. All of this was based on their "theory of creation."

Now, it seemed that theory had been proven true.

Ardos had returned years later and added to his notes after he figured out how to turn himself into a flesh puppet. He had written about how to break a puppet out of that self-perpetuating loop.

The solution? A reset word.

Every flesh puppet had a reset word. When they heard this word, their internal rules would temporarily override their obsession, allowing them to function properly again. However, this was only a temporary fix.

The obsession would continue to build up, waiting for the next trigger.

With this information in mind, an idea began to form in Cheng Shi's mind.

He leaned in close to the black-robed man's ear.

Li Bola was startled by his action and quickly grabbed his arm, speaking in a low voice:

"There's another fight ahead. Think carefully, Cheng Shi."

Cheng Shi locked eyes with Li Bola, his gaze burning with intensity. Then, suddenly, he smiled.

“Ranger, if you were protecting a secret and didn’t know how many more people might come looking for it, would you really choose a suicide attack just to kill the ones in front of you?”