

The Gods 219

Chapter 219: Is Backstabbing Teammates the Essence of Cooperation?

One man and one rat, facing one man and one rat.

When Gao San and Su Wu saw Cheng Shi crash down with such a tremendous commotion, they instantly tensed to maximum alertness. Their wary gazes scrutinized both Cheng Shi and the rat in his hand, while their peripheral vision kept darting toward the door—terrified that the noise would bring the laboratory's guards running.

Every laboratory had guards. That was common sense—and the more hidden the lab, the more formidable its security.

What had been a simple one-on-one negotiation instantly devolved into a four-way standoff that could be busted by guards at any moment.

Of course, Cheng Shi didn't know there were four people present. He saw the rat beside Gao San, but his first thought wasn't "Beast Tamer"—it was "Li Yi." Another Li Yi.

Having been deceived so many times, Cheng Shi was accustomed to betrayal. He'd even developed expertise in it.

So the moment he spotted this "one man and one rat" arrangement—an exact mirror of his own—his instinct told him he'd been backstabbed again, lured here by Li Yi's sweet words into this unknown office to face Gao San.

Then again, judging by Gao San's expression, it seemed he'd been duped too.

What did that mean? It meant Li Yi truly was an expert liar—and probably had more than one rat body.

Upon realizing he'd trusted a deceiver yet again, Cheng Shi was "furious"—"humiliated" into "fury."

Whether that anger was genuine or merely opportunistic was anyone's guess. Either way, his response was decisive—and utterly unexpected.

Before the dust from the collapsed ceiling had even settled, Cheng Shi used the cloud as cover, extended his right hand toward the rat at Gao San's feet, and—

BOOM!

Lightning roared. Plasma surged!

The earlier explosion had fed the Fun Ring a feast of terror from the panicking audience, so the Thundering Judgment unleashed now was devastatingly fierce.

Based on past experience, while Thundering Judgment didn't guarantee a hit against targets that hadn't contributed fear, that depended on the "target."

Some were agile with lightning reflexes and dodged successfully—like Gao San.

Others... were rats with stubby legs, all bluster and zero defensive capability, and didn't dodge at all—like Su Wu.

And so, Su Wu died.

Before he could exchange a single word with his reunited teammates, before the thousand calculations and negotiations churning in his mind could produce a single syllable—he perished in the lightning strike that came without warning.

A baffling, inexplicable death.

When the roaring bolt hit the ground and reduced the rat to a lump of charred ash, Cheng Shi cast a contemptuous glare at Li Yi inside the cage and sneered:

"Good. I can feel your fear. Terror is the foundation on which our partnership continues."

"But don't let there be a next time—or this lightning falls on your head."

"As for your little clone over there... well, I'm sure you won't mourn a mere double. Right?"

Li Yi had indeed felt the lightning's raw power and was trembling violently, but he forced through the terror and shakily scratched four characters onto the cage floor:

"That wasn't me."

"?"

'When I write a question mark, it doesn't mean I have a problem. It means I think the world has a problem.'

Cheng Shi froze.

He turned in bewilderment to stare at the floor, blinked dryly, then looked up at Gao San with an expression of utter confusion—only to find the Acrobat tense in a defensive stance, seemingly ready to escape through the duct at any moment.

'That wasn't Li Yi?'

'Then who was it?'

'Su Wu? The Beast Tamer?'

'Dead?'

'Huh?'

'No way.'

'Why didn't he dodge?'

'Don't tell me he only had the one rat body.'

'Well... if he's really dead, that saves him from suffering elsewhere. After all, he didn't survive in my prophecy either.'

'My accidental act freed him from his tightly wound fate. Thinking about it that way... sigh, I suppose I'm practically a saint.'

Cheng Shi wasn't the only one stunned. Gao San was equally rattled—he never expected this teammate who'd stolen his identity to wield demigod-tier offensive power.

'Could he be not a Warrior but a Mage? A Mage of [Deceit]?'

Su Wu's death certainly didn't look like an illusion.

Gao San's expression turned grim. The situation had just gotten considerably worse for him.

As for Su Wu...

Never mind. There was nothing left to say. No meaning left to find.

The "end of fate" he'd discovered had buried him once more.

It had to be said—borrowing fate's name for profane purposes would catch up to you sooner or later.

[Fate] never tolerates anyone who desecrates Him, and Su Wu was the perfect example.

Whatever the Acrobat was thinking, Cheng Shi had no way of knowing. He snapped out of his momentary daze, then pointed at the little mound of charred ash on the floor with barely suppressed amusement:

"So—shall we talk about a partnership?"

"As you can see, I just solved a big problem for you. Didn't I?"

He had no idea what Su Wu and Gao San had been up to, but since things had come to this, failing to capitalize on Su Wu's death would be a disservice to the teammate who'd died so bewilderingly. So Cheng Shi continued:

"Well, perhaps you don't have a choice either. Because..."

BOOM!

Cheng Shi casually unleashed another Thundering Judgment. The bolt struck the exact spot where Su Wu had turned to ash, obliterating the last remnants of the rat-shaped cinders into scattered dust.

"I hit harder than you."

Cheng Shi grinned at the fear in Gao San's eyes.

Gao San fixed Cheng Shi with a guarded stare, hesitated a moment, then spoke in a low voice:

"What kind of partnership?"

"There are a lot of documents here. If you're willing to let me have them, I'll give you a chance to walk away safely. Deal?"

Cheng Shi picked at his iron nose hole as he strolled to the desk, his peripheral vision scanning the documents while his eyes stayed locked on Gao San's every move.

But even that sideways glance jolted him to the core.

Because he spotted the Tower of Logic's emblem.

The Tower of Logic—again!

Wherever experiments existed, the Tower of Logic's shadow seemed inescapable!

How had they built a laboratory beneath the Grand Tribunal's own territory?

High Mountain Prefecture sat deep in the Grand Tribunal's heartland—it didn't even border the Tower of Logic's domain. Even if unofficial cooperation existed, it couldn't be housed here. And certainly not underground, beneath a Colosseum of all places!

What secret was buried down here?

Gao San noticed Cheng Shi's pupils contract. And even without that tell, he'd already seen through the lie—because Master of Deception told him Cheng Shi had no intention of letting him leave.

The tables had turned. Gao San was now in the weaker position, and to survive he could only probe cautiously:

"If you want to uncover this place's secrets, you'll need help."

"?"

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow, studying Gao San with growing amusement. "So?"

"I can help you."

Cheng Shi lifted the cage in his hand with a smile. "I already have help."

Gao San had already noticed the caged rat and the poker card stuck to it. He didn't seem shocked by Li Yi's methods, and simply pressed on: "Compared to a Magician who lies through his teeth, I'm more trustworthy."

"That's hilarious. What deceiver doesn't lie? A Magician lies, and an Acrobat doesn't?"

"You think I'd believe you?"

"No. But one more person means one more set of hands."

"..."

Gao San had struck the mark. Cheng Shi was genuinely fascinated by this laboratory buried beneath the Colosseum. And the reason he wasn't opposed to working with Gao San was that finding both him and Su Wu here proved neither of them was behind the explosion.

If they'd arranged the bombing and still fled this desperately, it wouldn't have made any sense.

But that wasn't the most important thing. What mattered most was this:

The Tower of Logic's "gifts" to Cheng Shi in the past had been far too generous. Every time he encountered one of their experiments, he'd walked away with a haul. After one or two such windfalls, the sheer satisfaction of those gains had become addictive.

He wanted to gamble—to bet that this laboratory held good things too.

Normally, his cautious nature would have quickly vetoed such impulses. But this time, once the itch started, he couldn't shake it.

'Could this be [Fate]'s guidance again?'

Cheng Shi frowned slightly. Behind his back, his hand secretly tossed a die, and in his mind he thought: 'If it's anything but a one, I won't take the risk.'

The die tumbled briefly, then helplessly rolled to a one.

Cheng Shi smiled. He looked at Gao San, tucked away the die, and extended his hand.

"Here's to a pleasant partnership."

The words had barely left his mouth before that outstretched hand curved back to pick at his iron nose hole.

"..."

'Well, that's awkward.'

Fortunately, Gao San had no intention of shaking hands with this deceiver of a teammate anyway. He simply nodded and relaxed his defensive stance.

"How do you want to—there are sounds in the corridor. Someone's coming!"

Cheng Shi's ears twitched and he caught the hurried footsteps as well—three people, by the sound of it.

He glanced up at the gaping hole in the ceiling, knowing there was no way to conceal it. But the other traces might still be erasable. He sprang into action immediately, sweeping the room clean of any evidence.

Gao San caught on instantly and began erasing all proof that anyone had been here.

"I have a plan that could net us one more helper. But first, you'll need a tool that can mask our presence. Consider it part of the partnership. What do you say—deal?"

"..." Gao San offered a polite smile and pulled a transparent length of fabric from his personal storage space.

One look was all Cheng Shi needed to identify it: Silent Lizard Skin.

He'd seen this A-rank item during a previous end-of-month settlement. Drape the lizard skin over yourself and you'd merge completely with the environment—no collision volume, no sound leakage. An absolute must-have for anyone engaged in shady business.

Unfortunately, there'd been a better gourmet item available at the time, and Cheng Shi had reluctantly passed on it.

And so, concealed beneath the lizard skin, as the footsteps drew closer and tension thickened, two humans and one rat shifted positions and melted entirely into the shadows of the corner.

...