

## The Gods 224

Chapter 224: Selius

Li Yi fell silent, his expression shifting with complexity.

Seeing him clam up, Cheng Shi turned to Gao San. "Scholar—care to explain the experiments here?"

"...I told you, I'm a damn Warrior!"

"Oh? Your mother being a Warrior doesn't stop you from being a scholar."

"..." Gao San's voice dripped with gnashing fury. He looked at Cheng Shi, then at Li Yi. "Who exactly are you? And who are you?"

Li Yi pondered briefly, then spoke:

"Don't rush to conclusions. Judging by the current situation, I'm inclined to believe this is [Chaos] at work. He may be distorting our perception."

"Brother Gao San, you likely share my Master of Deception talent. I can't verify myself through your talent, but Cheng Shi... can let my Master of Deception tell me he's not me."

"Don't ask me why the phrasing is: he, is not, me..."

"Because whether by general logic or by experimental sequencing, Number One is always the first—and possibly the one who was copied."

"So I believe our condition has nothing to do with these duplicates. And I can confirm with one hundred percent certainty: my real surname is Li."

Gao San chewed on Li Yi's words, brow furrowed deeply. He addressed Cheng Shi in a grave tone:

"Then is your real surname Cheng?"

Cheng Shi nodded. "Genuine article."

Truth.

Gao San frowned and spoke solemnly:

"If that's the case, I think I understand."

"The test subjects here may each be identical to one another, but the duplicates in our group became targets for the Faith Game's placement."

"In other words, each of us became one of the duplicates within the same experimental set."

"This setup seems designed to make us believe we're merely copies of Li Yi—driving us to fight and kill each other like the other prisoners, competing for identity. But..."

"As I've said before, since the game's inception, there has never been a trial centered on conflict. Considering this is a trial of [Chaos], I agree with Li Yi."

"He is indeed warping our perception, blurring the lines between us, because He wants to make this trial even more chaotic."

"We... need to stay clear-headed."

Easy to say—but Gao San's posture remained wary.

True enough: five and a half followers of [Deceit] were chaotic enough. Adding this on top would be more [Chaos] than even [Chaos] could ask for.

But were Li Yi and Gao San's deductions actually correct?

A seed of doubt lingered in Cheng Shi's heart. A bizarre thought surfaced in his mind—one that startled even himself. But the absurd notion dissipated as quickly as it had formed.

'Scaring yourself' was never a healthy habit.

He shook his head with a wry smile and ventured one more probe:

"So I'm not Li Yi after all?"

"Cheng Shi—you know who you are. No need for the act."

"Under Master of Deception, you've got no lies to tell."

"Think about it carefully and the flaw is obvious. If—and I do mean if—you two were my experimental duplicates, how could you possibly be stronger than me?"

"Maybe you're hiding your true strength?" Cheng Shi countered with amusement. "Who knows if you're toying with us? Isn't that what Magicians do—play tricks on their audience?"

"There's no need to test me further. The very fact that you've 'deigned' to cooperate with me proves my life is still in your hands."

"The rat cage may be gone, but another invisible cage was probably draped over me long ago. Am I wrong, Cheng Shi?"

"..."

'Spot on, actually.'

Cheng Shi pursed his lips and pressed further: "Then is there any chance you're both my experimental duplicates?"

"Impossible!" Before Li Yi could respond, Gao San snapped—his answer iron-clad and absolute. "I know exactly who I am. You and I have nothing in common—except being liars."

"Tsk. Cold-blooded. Then let's just be ourselves, shall we? In that case—partnership..."

"Continues?"

Gao San didn't reply, but his stance made his answer clear enough. Li Yi nodded and pointed toward the depths of the laboratory.

"This hidden facility reeks of something wrong. I refuse to believe all the noise we've made hasn't drawn anyone's attention."

"Someone is probably already waiting for us in there. So—shall we press forward, teammates?"

Cheng Shi smiled, stepped back, and extended his hand in an "after you" gesture.

"Same rule as always. Warriors first."

Gao San's eyelid twitched. He barely contained his anger, forcing a few words through clenched teeth:

"Since when is that the rule? And wasn't I a 'scholar' just a second ago?"

"You're a Warrior. Your mother's the scholar. The rule was established just now. Any other questions?"

"..."

Huff—huff—

'If only I could take him in a fight...'

Gao San drew two deep breaths to suppress the urge to throw all pretense aside, then marched wordlessly into the depths.

Cheng Shi stayed put, waiting for Li Yi to follow. Li Yi pocketed his dagger poker card and fell in cautiously behind Gao San. Only after the two had pulled far enough ahead did Cheng Shi drop his pose, scan the surroundings once, and silently bring up the rear.

The path leading into the laboratory's depths was long. Gao San walked in uneasy silence for quite some time. When a plain wooden door finally appeared in his field of vision, his already-taut nerves wound three notches tighter.

"Careful, up ahead—"

Before he could finish, a tremendous crash erupted from somewhere to their right.

BANG!

CRASH—

Something had been smashed.

Yellowish-green liquid immediately began spreading across the floor between the rows of experimental vessels.

Cheng Shi's nerves fired. He gripped the scalpel in his hand, hunched low, coiled to strike.

Li Yi conjured a glowing poker card out of thin air and flicked it away. A shimmering butterfly emerged from the card, wings fluttering as it flew toward the source of the noise.

A Sound Seeking Butterfly—Cheng Shi had seen them in his monthly ladder settlement. A B-rank creature native to the Land of Hope. The sparkling powder shed by its wings could project whatever it observed as a floating image in midair.

Because the species was drawn to sound, it was commonly used for reconnaissance and target acquisition on suppression battlefields.

Gao San also reacted instantly—but instead of taking a defensive stance, he seized the moment while Cheng Shi and Li Yi were stopped and bolted toward the wooden door.

Right then—just as Cheng Shi was frowning and debating whether to fire a Thundering Judgment at Gao San first to eliminate one variable—a heavy cough came from the side.

Cheng Shi's heart clenched. He spun around.

Then he and Li Yi watched as an old man with a full head of silver hair slowly emerged from behind the puddle of yellowish-green liquid.

There was no need for the Sound Seeking Butterfly's reconnaissance—the person who'd made the noise had stepped forward on his own.

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted. He recognized the man.

Selius. Grand Scholar of the Tower of Logic's Life Extension Department. The true master of this underground laboratory.

"Ahem... my apologies. Old age makes one clumsy—broke a cultivation vessel. But don't worry, the liquid isn't volatile or toxic. No need for alarm."

He walked toward Cheng Shi and Li Yi with a smile. He'd barely taken a few steps before Li Yi halted him, his expression gravely intense:

"Stay back. Another step and I will act."

As he spoke, Li Yi punched the nearest experimental device.

But the apparatus hidden beneath its black cloth merely let out a dull thud and showed no other reaction.

"I'm curious, Mr. Selius. How exactly did you manage to break glass this sturdy?"

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow and discreetly lifted the hand bearing his ring.

"I was checking the status of the experiment materials and accidentally pressed the wrong button..."

"Enough. Spare us the clumsy excuses. I inspected these vessels carefully just now—there isn't a single external port or control switch anywhere on the glass. Who exactly..."

"Are you?"

"And what do you want?"

"Heh heh. Young man—you know me, you know my name, and you know I'm the scholar in charge here. So why ask such meaningless questions?"

"Furthermore, this is my laboratory. If anyone should be asking questions, it's me."

"You shouldn't be here at all. Especially with those things on your heads—the 'Gladiator Masks' I crafted with my own hands."

'Gladiator what?'

Cheng Shi touched his prisoner helmet in bewilderment, laughing inwardly.

'Apparently everything gets to be called a mask now. At this rate, doesn't that make me a three-faced man, one mask beyond shameless?'

'Actually... not bad at all.'

'Ha—a deceiver should have plenty of masks.'

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Meanwhile, on the other side.

The instant Gao San burst through the door, he spun around, slammed it shut, and pressed himself flat against the wall—guarding against another blast of Cheng Shi's terrifying lightning from behind.

He waited a long time. No pursuit came. He exhaled half a breath of relief and began nervously surveying the pitch-black room.

But just as he was about to grope his way forward, the lights came on.

A warm beam illuminated a lab table not far away. Behind it, an old man with a full head of silver hair slowly raised his head, looked at the uninvited guest, and smiled kindly.

"It seems the laboratory has visitors. And, well—a visitor who shouldn't be here."

The moment Gao San laid eyes on the old man, his expression changed violently—because he had seen this man before. Or rather, he had seen this scholar before.

"It's you!"

"Selius!"

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