

The Gods 227

Chapter 227: Why Is Your Shadow in Every Rotten Affair?

"I get it—your life is tragic. Your sob story already scared off my two teammates, and they're very important... 'assets' of mine. So you owe me compensation."

Cheng Shi twirled his scalpel and dragged a stool over to sit down.

In truth, whether the players were experiment material prototypes or not made no real difference. Even if they had been, that couldn't possibly remain true after the players' arrival. This experimental backdrop was merely another layer of [Chaos] filter slapped onto the trial. Just as Li Yi had said—it was His will driving everything.

Cheng Shi agreed with that assessment. So why had Li Yi and Gao San still bolted?

Because they'd been itching to escape for quite some time.

Nobody enjoys being at someone else's mercy—especially when that someone is impossible to resist. Both deceivers had been biding their time all along. The moment Selius dropped that earth-shattering revelation about the experiment, they seized the instant of mutual shock and fled at full speed.

The reason Cheng Shi hadn't left was simple: he was fed up with the prisoner helmet he couldn't remove. Seeing that Selius still had more to share, he raised a hand and cut the old man off.

"I do enjoy a good story. But before we continue, you need to settle my compensation first."

Selius understood Cheng Shi's meaning—and his purpose for being here. So he looked at Cheng Shi, nodded, and produced from inside his robes a stone swirling with dark, inky radiance.

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"Tomb End Stone. Found in the ruins of subterranean tribes that worship [Decay]. It's a rare mineral formed over eons as their faith eroded a special type of rock."

"To prevent the prisoner helmets from being broken by external force, I infused their construction with '[Prosperity] Leaf Veins.' These veins continuously circulate the power of [Prosperity] until they're fully consumed—but that timeframe exceeds any human lifespan."

"Therefore, the only way to remove one is with [Decay] power accumulated over an even longer period."

"Place this Tomb End Stone on your helmet. Before long, you'll be able to take it off yourself."

With that, Selius set the stone on the table.

Cheng Shi hesitated briefly, ultimately not daring to trust it completely. He first touched the stone with his scalpel. Only when rust stains began spreading across the blade—confirming the stone truly contained the power of [Decay]—did he proceed.

Using two scalpels as chopsticks, he pinched the Tomb End Stone and brought it close to his prisoner helmet.

Before long, he felt the pressure around his neck lighten. Cheng Shi's brow tightened, and he gripped the helmet with the divine strength of a Hero of Today.

To his surprise, with just that simple squeeze, the helmet that had plagued him for so long crumbled like dried tissue paper, crushed apart in his hands.

"That's it?"

Cheng Shi finally grinned. He had broken free of [Order]'s shackles.

He brushed every last fragment from his head, then suddenly grew remarkably patient as he turned to Selius:

"Good. I'm satisfied with this compensation. Now you may continue your story."

Selius was genuinely thrown by the whiplash of Cheng Shi's attitude shift. He stared at Cheng Shi's face for a long while, mulled in silence for even longer, then slowly resumed:

"While I am indeed a devotee of the Church of Life, I am also truly a scholar of the Tower of Logic. Under the Erudition Presidium's backing, my research project achieved breakthrough progress."

"Back then, I was brimming with confidence about 'nurturing' genuine Germinating Divinity—and burning with passion."

"So much so that in my fervor, I made decisions I now deeply regret. Namely..."

"I sliced myself, incubated the slices, and then participated in the experiment alongside them to accelerate the research."

"What I never anticipated was that the Erudition Presidium took a liking to the other personality of me. They saw greater promise in that unhinged persona, poured more resources into him, and laundered him from an experimental slice into the 'real' me."

"And I... became a disposable experimental slice."

'Par for the course for the Tower of Logic—or rather, par for the course for the Erudition Presidium.'

'Because that's exactly who they are.'

'When you're useful, you receive unstinting support. The moment you're not, you're discarded without a thought—or worse, repurposed as "funding" for their next star project.'

Selius's story continued. Like a lonely old man who hadn't had anyone to confide in for ages, he poured out every detail about himself and the Divinity Germination Experiment.

"By then I'd nearly given up. But to my surprise, an invitation from the Grand Tribunal pulled me back from the brink and gave me a chance to resume my work."

"So while everyone's eyes were fixed on that slice of mine, I used every last resource I had in the Tower of Logic to escape the laboratory, disguised myself, left Tusnat, and arrived in Montelani. With the benefactor's help, I rebuilt my laboratory and continued my research."

"Let me interject—is the person you're waiting for almost here?"

"...Not yet."

"Fine. Continue—while I still have patience." Cheng Shi waved his hand, signaling the scholar to go on.

"...To sustain the experiment, this benefactor even pushed through a new law in High Mountain Prefecture and built a Colosseum specifically for it. You should be quite familiar with that place."

"The Grand Tribunal's constitution forbids using prisoners for biological experiments. But the Deathmatch Final needed to be a legal spectacle. So I crafted indestructible prisoner helmets for the experiment materials heading into the arena."

"This way, the issue of identity-based Common Recognition could be disguised as cognitive conflict between prisoners, intensifying the clash between opposing parties."

"The Deathmatch Final not only solved the experiment's funding problems but also turned the experimental process into a legitimate, legal performance. Under the 'enthusiastic' patronage of Montelani's citizens, they even began hoping the Tribunal would sentence more and more deathmatch convicts—to satisfy their ever-growing appetite for entertainment."

Cheng Shi was genuinely at a loss for words.

'Sounds about right for the general public. Because the masses have always been ordinary people who simply crave spectacle.'

'They don't need to tell right from wrong, and they don't want to. The little energy they have is spent chasing whatever amusement they can find.'

"And so the experiment accelerated. Without my consent, the benefactor began rapidly expanding its scale. But manpower was limited—I alone could no longer sustain an operation this massive. So..."

"So you went down the same road as the Tower of Logic and started slicing yourself again." Cheng Shi was truly speechless now. He eyed the "pitiable" scholar with open mockery. "You never learn, do you? The Selius outside that door—he's trying to replace you, isn't he? But you don't seem as afraid of him as you were of the slice who stole your identity at the Tower..."

"Oh. I see. You did learn. You rigged your own slice experiment."

Selius smiled gently:

"Correct. During the slicing and incubation process, I tampered with it. Using methods provided by my brothers in the Church of Life within the Grand Tribunal's territory, I embedded certain [Death] mechanisms into the experiment materials."

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow. "What kind of mechanisms?"

"If any of my slices see me, then through the [Death] curse bound by Common Recognition, under the suppression of personality hierarchy, they will die instantly—becoming sacrifices for [Death]."

"It is an offering to Him. And it is also a curse... that I personally begged for."

"..."

'So you have a stake in this too, my Lord upon the Bone Throne?'

'Why does your shadow show up in every rotten affair?'

Cheng Shi smacked his lips. He understood now.

The curse—that was the source of Selius's confidence. He no longer feared his slice duplicate. It was the duplicate who feared him.

'No wonder the one outside didn't dare come in.'

'And no wonder that slice-Selius was so eager to lead me away to remove the helmet. Perhaps the price of removal was killing the original prototype on his behalf?'

"So what's the endgame? You've told me all this in such detail—what's it really for?"

"I refuse to believe you're some kindly professor who enjoys enlightening the confused out of the goodness of his heart."

"Who are you waiting for? Where is he now?"

"Or maybe you want me to do something for you?"

"Everything's negotiable—as long as..."

"You're willing to pay up."

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