

The Gods 228

Chapter 228: Scholar's Bane: Cheng Shi

Cheng Shi had always sensed that this mysterious scholar was orchestrating something. The scheme was most likely not aimed at the players, but at the other Selius outside the door.

As for what exactly the scheme entailed, he couldn't guess—nor did he want to. Right now he was a "brainless" Hero of Today, not the "fragile" Clown who needed to constantly outsmart others just to survive.

This shift in identity finally let Cheng Shi experience what people meant when they said "all fear stems from insufficient firepower." His firepower was more than sufficient right now—so much so that all he needed was a target to unleash it on.

Selius watched helplessly as his assets were stolen right before his eyes, and said nothing.

"If you're not going to talk, I'm leaving." Cheng Shi rose to his feet.

After being prodded repeatedly, Selius finally dropped his reserve. He sighed and addressed Cheng Shi:

"I... do have a request."

"And I am indeed waiting for someone. A witness."

"A witness?" Cheng Shi frowned. Was [Memory] involved in this too?

But he immediately realized that the "witness" Selius spoke of wasn't a profession—just a literal witness.

"Witness what?"

"Witness... my death."

"?"

As he spoke, Selius pulled a peculiar, finger-thin short blade from the drawer beneath the experiment table.

"This is the tool I use for slice operations in the experiment—a Concentric Dagger. If it's not too much trouble, I ask that you drive this into my heart and end this endless suffering..."

"I've had enough of all this. Enough of being manipulated by benefactors. Whether at the Tower of Logic or the Grand Tribunal, they can't appreciate the joy of experimentation, can't understand its purpose—they only want results. Results that serve them."

"Even if those results contribute absolutely nothing to the experiment's future..."

"Short-sighted. Ignorant. Arrogant. Fanatical!"

"These benefactors always wear the same face. I've seen through them—seen through every last one of those clueless fools!"

Selius's monotone finally cracked with the faintest tremor of emotion. Eyes shining with quiet intensity, he looked at Cheng Shi and raised the dagger.

"Do not doubt my sincerity. I cannot end my own life—it is a shackle [Order] has placed upon me."

"That is why I'm asking you. Please—help me end this. I've had enough."

"Let my slice continue serving them. I have no attachment left to this world devoid of kindred spirits."

"I've been waiting for this moment for so long. At last, an outsider has come."

"So, young man—please. Help me."

"If only for the sake of helping you remove your Gladiator Mask."

Seeing Cheng Shi unmoved, Selius stoked the fire further.

"I am the mastermind behind every misfortune in your life. Don't you... want revenge?"

"Tsk."

Cheng Shi's previously idle brain started turning again. He studied Selius thoughtfully, then suddenly asked: "Why does it have to be your own slice dagger? What are you trying to say?"

Selius was taken aback. He'd never expected anyone to fixate on that.

"I... don't mean anything by it. It's simply the closest thing to a weapon in this workshop. If you're a deathmatch convict who, in a fit of rage, plunges a laboratory tool into the one who ruined his life—that's perfectly reasonable, isn't it?"

"Ah. I see. So you don't just want to die—you want the so-called witness to see a plausible homicide."

"That doesn't match the mentality of someone with no attachment to the world. Why go through all this staging if you truly don't care?"

"..." Selius's face contorted with inner turmoil. "I don't want anyone to know I'm a coward. I don't want them to know I'm terrified of a world governed by power, where I can never freely approach Them. I don't want the name of a scholar to be tainted by a shadow that can never be washed away."

"Hmm. Fair enough. But I have a more reliable method."

With that, Cheng Shi raised his hand and without warning fired a Thundering Judgment at the spot where Li Yi had vanished.

BOOM—

Lightning scorched the scattered poker cards on the ground into char. The blinding flash made Selius flinch, his pupils contracting violently.

He was afraid!

Cheng Shi noticed that the Fun Ring, which had just burned through one charge of Fear Fodder, was fully recharged again.

'Interesting. Why would a man begging for death still fear it?'

Cheng Shi eyed the Concentric Dagger on the table with amusement, then picked it up with a smile.

"With this? Straight into your heart?"

"...Yes." Selius looked at Cheng Shi and suddenly seemed to waver.

"Any preferences for the death pose?"

"...No."

"I don't see a clock in your workshop. How much longer until your witness arrives?"

"...About five more minutes."

"Plenty."

With that, Cheng Shi drove the Concentric Dagger into Selius's heart without hesitation. A single, lethal blow. The immense force pierced clean through his body, sending an arterial spray of blood erupting from his back.

"Cough..."

Selius was dead. His final words were a single, heavy cough.

Cheng Shi watched the scholar slump backward in his chair with eyes that would never close, and slowly withdrew his hand.

'Another one. Another Grand Scholar has died before my eyes.'

'History is truly fascinating—always casting a Clown in one absurd role after another throughout the absurd past.'

But this time he didn't activate Surge of Raging Waves, nor was it necessary to etch this unremarkable bit of history into the record. This was merely trial scenery. No matter how much players stirred up history in here, the old pages of the Land of Hope would never change.

Yet while change was absent, surprise never was.

The instant Cheng Shi withdrew his hand and moved to discard the Concentric Dagger, a vigorous soul-force laced with the power of [Death] erupted from the dagger's tip and surged straight at his face.

Cheng Shi scoffed. He'd been expecting this.

Honestly, Selius's hidden agenda beneath his calm facade had been a bit too obvious—obvious enough that Cheng Shi hadn't needed to use his brain to see through it. He'd been waiting for the scholar to make his move all along.

When nothing happened after the physical body died, Cheng Shi had briefly worried he'd been measuring a gentleman's heart with a villain's yardstick.

But now it was clear his instincts had been right. Selius really had designs on him—or rather, on any outsider capable of reaching this place.

Just as the scholar had claimed, he probably hadn't meant harm. The soul force was restrained, more parasitic than hostile—a temporary parasitism.

He apparently wanted to use Cheng Shi's body as a ride out of this [Order] prison, just as he'd once escaped from the Tower of Logic. Under pressure from his slices and benefactors, Selius was once again abandoning an experiment that belonged to him.

'But whether you get to hitch this ride depends on whether the driver agrees, doesn't it?'

Cheng Shi didn't know what Selius's exact method was, but he had plenty of contingencies and overwhelming combat power to handle anything. He'd never once panicked.

But when he realized that the trump card Selius had been hiding all along turned out to be [Death]...

In that moment, Cheng Shi nearly burst out laughing.

'Buddy—your luck is so bad you should've bought a lottery ticket before you died.'

'Do you have any idea what kind of clout an unofficial [Death] employee carries?'

Right now, if Cheng Shi wanted, he could take this apparently vigorous soul and offer it up as a sacrifice to the Lord upon the Bone Throne at any time.

But he didn't.

Because sometimes, hitching a ride isn't just up to the driver—the passenger already in the car also gets a say.

And so the driver obligingly opened the door. The new passenger scrambled aboard impatiently. And then...

The driver's mouth began chewing uncontrollably.

Cheng Shi felt a single wail from the depths of his soul, followed immediately by that long-silent, familiar voice:

"Sour. Not tasty."

Cheng Shi laughed—a genuinely happy laugh.

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