

The Gods 229

Chapter 229: If I Say I Didn't Do It... Would You Believe Me?

"Brother Mouth, you finally spoke up. I thought you'd run off with my shadow."

Cheng Shi grinned like a little fox—the very picture of a villain whose scheme had succeeded.

"..."

"You've been awfully quiet lately. Did you convert to [Silence]?"

"Don't talk nonsense. I just woke up."

The moment those words left the lips, Cheng Shi's hand involuntarily reached up and touched his nose.

"?"

Cheng Shi blinked in confusion, then doubled over in hysterical laughter—tears nearly streaming down his face.

So the Honest Clown curse didn't just affect him—it even caught the Fool's Lips in its net. This was...

'Absolutely freaking perfect!'

"..."

"Brother Mouth? Why'd you go quiet again? Don't like lying anymore?"

"Brother Mouth? Had a change of heart?"

"Brother Mouth? You still there?"

"Hello?"

The Fool's Lips retreated into silence once more. But Cheng Shi was positively elated.

He'd been worried his mouth might lose its usefulness under [Fate]'s influence. But from what he could see, it had weathered the pressure just fine.

'Not bad, not bad. At least I'm not entirely alone.'

With that thought, he raised his hand and rubbed the tip of his nose, testing its state so he could better exploit nose-touching deceptions during whatever remained of the trial.

Unexpectedly, the Fool's Lips seized the moment he touched his nose to suddenly drop a line:

"Fate cannot be defied."

The smile froze on Cheng Shi's face.

He couldn't laugh anymore.

'What did Brother Mouth mean by that?'

'Was it the truth or a lie? Had it deliberately exploited a loophole in the [Deceit] curse, or had it not triggered the Honest Clown effect at all?'

'What was it trying to express? What was it trying to tell him?'

If this had been a conversation with an outsider, Cheng Shi would likely have mulled it over. But with the Fool's Lips, he preferred to ask directly—even though he knew there probably wouldn't be a response.

"Brother Mouth, you're a liar's mouth, not a riddler's mouth. Can you be any clearer?"

Predictably, the Fool's Lips gave no response.

'Fine, fine, fine. That's how you want to play? You just have to make me the clown, don't you!'

With his doubts unresolved and his "humiliated fury" boiling over, Cheng Shi had no choice but to channel his frustrations onto the only dead man in the room.

He picked up the Concentric Dagger from the table, intending to carve two words into scholar Selius's forehead:

"CLOWN!"

But the instant he raised his hand, the room's wooden door was pushed open from outside.

A little girl with shoulder-length hair bounced and skipped her way in.

"Grandpa Selius, I brought you your favorite—"

Her cheerful voice cut off mid-sentence.

The girl was stunned by the scene before her. She stared at Cheng Shi with the dagger raised high, at the scholar slumped in his chair with blood streaming from his chest, at that familiar face frozen in death with eyes that would never close. Plop—the bag in her hand fell limply to the floor.

Her skipping froze. Her happy smile solidified.

Eyes that had been curved into crescents a second ago flew wide open the next, rimmed with red. Two streams of tears flowed freely down her cheeks as joy and anticipation crashed violently into grief and sobbing.

Cheng Shi was startled too—he hadn't heard a single sound from beyond the door.

Facing the innocent little girl's terrified tears, all he could manage was a reasonably friendly smile and an impossibly awkward excuse:

"If I say I didn't do it... would you believe me?"

"Wuu... mm, wuu... I believe you. I do."

The girl sniffled and wiped her tears, picked up the fallen bag, turned back to close the door, then silently walked to Selius's side.

From that single sequence of movements alone, Cheng Shi knew this wasn't an ordinary child.

Composed. Steady. Methodical. Utterly fearless.

Even a grown adult, confronted by a suspect holding a blood-soaked dagger, likely wouldn't be this calm. Setting aside her personal qualities, the only explanation Cheng Shi could think of was the Penal Knight armor he wore—it made her neither hostile toward nor suspicious of him.

But if she visited here regularly, she should know Penal Knights didn't belong down here.

"Did he... suffer when he went?"

"My apologies—I didn't see it happen."

"By the time I arrived, Mr. Selius was already dead. All I found was this."

Cheng Shi rubbed the tip of his nose and waved the dagger.

"Then... did you see who killed him?"

"Yes. I saw a male Assassin with blond hair and a deathmatch convict wearing a prisoner helmet who burst through the door. They looked panicked, with blood on their hands. I attacked the blond Assassin with lightning, but he turned into a pile of poker cards and vanished."

"As for the convict—he ran too fast. I couldn't catch him."

The girl wiped her tears again. Her small hand rested on Selius's aged knuckles as she cried for a long while. Then, following Cheng Shi's gaze, she looked at the charred poker cards scattered across the floor.

"Poker cards... I don't think Grandpa ever mentioned that kind of ability. Thank you. I don't believe we've met—may I ask who you are?"

"Grind. Little p—Miss, my name is Grind. I'm a Penal Knight who was buried in the rubble by the explosion, accidentally stumbled upon an escape tunnel dug by a prisoner, and accidentally fell down here."

"When I found this place, I spotted the escaped convict and gave chase. But..."

"I'm sorry. I was one step too late."

The girl pressed her lips together tightly and studied Cheng Shi. After sizing him up for quite a while, she chose to believe him.

"In that case, Mr. Grind—do you happen to know of anyone with the ability to turn into poker cards? Even knowing where they're from would help."

"I'm sorry, miss. My knowledge is limited. But I imagine every murder has ample motive behind it. Whoever wanted Mr. Selius dead the most is the most likely killer."

The girl lowered her gaze in thought. After a moment, she ventured uncertainly:

"Are you saying... the Tower of Logic found this place and killed Grandpa Selius?"

"Uh..." Cheng Shi blinked, then nodded. "To be honest, I don't know the full picture here. But if the Tower of Logic you're referring to is the one I'm thinking of, then I'd say it's very possible."

"Because the Erudition Presidium would never allow a Tower scholar to use 'truth' they've learned to serve someone else. They have the means—and the motive."

"Mm. Thank you, Mr. Grind. But this area doesn't permit Penal Knights. I suggest you leave immediately and explain the situation to Aunt Melina, who's guarding the laboratory entrance. She'll help you get out and return to your post."

"You're... letting me go?"

"You don't want to?"

'Hm, interesting. This little girl knows quite a lot.'

'She's letting me leave without asking a single question?'

"I do. Melina... understood. Thank you. I'll take my leave then."

Cheng Shi turned without hesitation to go—but the moment he lifted his foot, the girl called after him.

"Um... Mr. Grind? Could you leave the murder weapon behind? I think the Iron Law Knights who come to investigate later might find it useful."

"..."

'Sharp eyes for a little brat.'

"My apologies—I forgot in the heat of the moment." Cheng Shi put on a smile, drew a clean scalpel from his sleeve, stealthily smeared some blood from the Concentric Dagger onto it, and placed the substitute on the table in lieu of the real weapon.

The girl watched him silently throughout, saying nothing until he'd finished. Then she suddenly asked:

"Why do you keep touching your nose?"

"Uh... I'm a bit allergic to the air down here. Not feeling great." He rubbed the tip of his nose again as he spoke.

It was red. Red as a Clown's nose.

"Once more, my apologies. I believe I should go."

He turned and walked away. This time, the girl didn't stop him.

Her gaze lingered on his retreating back until he'd left the room. Only then, with a stifled sob, did she close Selius's eyelids for him.

"Grandpa Selius, why did you insist on leaving? Don't you like me anymore?"

"Boo hoo..."

Quite some time later, the Iron Law Knights guarding this place finally "arrived" at a leisurely pace.

They still wore the leather hoods that concealed their faces. Upon discovering Selius dead in the workshop, these knights showed no great shock—they merely looked at the little girl beside him and spoke in gentle tones:

"You shouldn't be here. Something unpleasant has occurred. May we escort you back?"

The girl had long since regained her composure. Her eyes were no longer red. She stared straight at the indifferent knights, her expression deadly serious:

"It was the Tower of Logic that killed Grandpa Selius."

The lead knight frowned. "Are you hurt? You shouldn't have let Melina stand guard at the door—she should be at your side protecting you."

"No. Melina has nothing to do with this. I'm telling you: it was the Tower of Logic that killed Grandpa Selius."

"Mr. Selius is not dead. He's currently tidying up the experimental documents in his office. I assure you, what you've witnessed here is very likely a prank."

"I'm not a fool, gentlemen. Are you suggesting that people from the Tower of Logic went through enormous trouble to infiltrate this place just to prank me?"

"Do you think the Grand Scholars of the Erudition Presidium are idiots?"

"Um... you make a fair point. They're not idiots. But why are you so certain the Tower of Logic is responsible?"

"Because... I can't think of anyone else."

The knight couldn't hold back a laugh. But he quickly schooled his expression and nodded with utmost gravity:

"We will investigate this matter thoroughly. Rest assured—under the Supreme Inquisitor's radiance, no evil can escape."

The little girl still trusted the knights. She let out a soft "mm" and finally agreed to leave.

The knights hastily made way.

"You two—escort Lady Galusha back to Lord Keinlaur's side. Ensure her safety at all costs."

"Yes, sir!"

...