

The Gods 230

Chapter 230: How Can She Be Galusha?

Cheng Shi slipped away.

It was hard to fathom how, with the office ceiling destroyed, the laboratory's director dead, and massive explosions having rung through the facility, this enormous laboratory had not a single guard in sight—not at the entrance, not in the corridors. Nothing.

Not only that, no lockdown protocol had been enacted. Not even an alarm had sounded.

For Montelani, this place was practically a blasphemous site that "exploited [Order]." Given the magnitude of the secrets hidden here, the security seemed terrifyingly sparse.

If not for everything he'd just experienced, his current surroundings alone would have made Cheng Shi think the facility had been abandoned.

He crept along for what felt like forever, nerves taut, drenched in sweat—and absolutely nothing happened. Even the other Selius who'd appeared in the experiment site was nowhere to be found.

Cheng Shi badly wanted to take a left and peek inside the other experiment workshop. But reason told him it was best to leave as quickly as possible.

'This is too strange.'

'Absurdly strange.'

But no matter how bizarre this place was, it was no longer his concern—because the laboratory's main door stood right before his eyes. He was about to escape with his life.

This door resembled a warehouse entrance more than the gateway to a secret laboratory. Standing guard at it was the one and only sentry Cheng Shi had encountered along the entire way—and it was a woman.

Unlike Niske or Figor, she wore no leather hood or black garb. Instead, she had on a face-concealing visor helmet. Long purple hair spilled untidily down, framing her gleaming breastplate—an appearance that was equal parts stern and alluring.

This was clearly a knight. A female knight.

She had spotted Cheng Shi sneaking up long ago but hadn't reacted. Only when he tentatively called out "Melina... ma'am?" did she finally turn toward him and nod solemnly.

"That's me."

"Hello. I'm Penal Knight Grind. A... well, a certain young lady asked me to find you. She said you'd take me out."

He touched his nose as he finished.

"Your name is Grind?" The female knight looked at him, her tone startled.

Cheng Shi plastered on a smile and nodded—but his heart lurched.

'She knows Grind? She's an Iron Law Knight too?'

'But no matter. People share names all the time.'

"How did a Penal Knight end up here? Who sent you?" As she spoke, Melina raised her lance and set it on Cheng Shi's shoulder.

Yet Cheng Shi didn't panic. If this female knight had wanted him dead, she would've struck the moment she spotted him—not waited until now.

So the current interrogation, in Cheng Shi's estimation, was her waiting for him to offer a suitable excuse—possibly even one that would help him leave.

'Interesting.'

The little girl in the laboratory was obviously someone of high status and power. Both she and this formidable-looking female knight seemed willing to silently let him go. Did that mean they...

Had known all along that Selius planned to leave—and specifically through the soul-hitchhiking method?

The logic tracked.

They knew Selius's plan, approved of his actions, and believed Selius was now parasitically attached to Cheng Shi. That was why they weren't "suspicious" of this stranger who'd appeared in the laboratory out of nowhere.

'Because it isn't a lack of suspicion—it's helping Selius "break out."'

'They're actually helping Selius leave!'

Considering the girl's attitude when she'd entered the room earlier—yes, it made perfect sense.

'Since they're not causing trouble, I just need to lie well enough.'

"The Colosseum explosion blasted me into the rubble. When I came to, I discovered the prison's foundations had been hollowed out. I suspected someone was attempting a jailbreak, so a powerful sense of knightly duty drove me to pursue. I followed the tunnel and fell in here."

Cheng Shi rubbed his nose with genuine sincerity. Melina studied him with an odd expression for a long while, then gave a curt "mm."

"Decent excuse. It'd be even better if you weren't so nervous. You've nearly rubbed your nose raw. What's the matter—never lied before?"

'Oh absolutely, I never lie. Why would I?'

Still, Cheng Shi offered a token defense:

"I'm a bit allergic to the air down here—"

"Not bad. A new lie to patch the hole in your previous lie. Follow me. I don't know who you are and I don't want to know, but I know you're definitely not Grind."

"Since that lady asked me to take you out, I'll fulfill my duty as her guard and let you leave."

"I won't investigate what happened in there. But remember this: once you're out, go to the South City market in Montelani, buy a coach ticket, get far away from High Mountain Prefecture, and never come back."

With that, Melina flicked her lance and pried Cheng Shi's armor open.

"?"

Cheng Shi couldn't react in time. He was stripped bare.

To be clear—it was the armor that was stripped. Underneath he still wore the red prison garb. And now everything was exposed.

He looked at the female knight with a grimace, racking his brain for another excuse—but Melina had apparently dropped all pretense.

"Gr... Grind. From this moment on, you are a newly hired servant in the household of Supreme Inquisitor Lord Keinlaur. Today, you accompanied Lady Galusha here to consult Mr. Selius on a matter, and you accidentally contracted an illness inside the laboratory. For the next few days, you'll be taking sick leave to recover at home—"

Melina's words weren't even finished before Cheng Shi froze on the spot.

"Ga... Galusha?"

The female knight frowned. "Lady Galusha. Mind your role, servant Grind. Is there a problem?"

'A problem?'

'A massive goddamn problem!'

'Why is she Galusha!?'

'How can she be Galusha?'

'She's the madwoman Zhen Yi described—the one who buried the Tower of Logic with her own hands?'

Of course, that history might have been fabricated by Zhen Yi. Back then, she'd borrowed a historical figure and concocted a cause-and-effect narrative to gain Cheng Shi's trust and complete her disguise.

But it could also be true. Zhen Yi was a deeply knowledgeable player with an extensive understanding of the Land of Hope.

So...

If that history was real, was the Galusha he'd just met the same Galusha Zhen Yi had described?

'No way. It must be a coincidence—same name, different person. She's just a child!'

'Besides, this is only the tail end of the mid-Civilization era. The Tower of Logic doesn't fall until the end of the era—five or six hundred years from now. How could she possibly...'

'Wait!'

'Why couldn't she?'

Cold sweat beaded on Cheng Shi's forehead.

'The Slice Experiment...'

'If what Galusha came here to learn from Selius was the Slice Experiment—or the Divinity Germination Experiment—doesn't that mean she could spend the next five hundred years continuously slicing herself, living "forever" through that method?'

'Or perhaps, over those five centuries where even the reality-illusion conjugation experiment had never succeeded, she somehow managed to pull off the Divinity Germination Experiment and gained her own divinity?'

'Only that could explain how she'd have the power to topple the Tower of Logic and the Erudition Presidium.'

'No wonder they called her a lunatic. After the endless attrition of personality slicing, how could anyone not go insane!?''

'Following that line of reasoning... maybe this terrifyingly composed little girl really is the Galusha Zhen Yi spoke of?'

'Sssss—'

'What did I just tell her?'

'That the Tower of Logic killed Selius?'

'She wouldn't have set her sights on—'

'No—she wouldn't! Absolutely not!'

Cheng Shi caught himself. He hadn't activated Surge of Raging Waves. He had no means of altering history. And judging by Galusha's attitude, she didn't seem to care much about who actually killed Selius—because right now, she presumably believed Selius was still alive, living inside Cheng Shi's body.

"..."

'This is bad. I need to leave. Now. Even if Zhen Yi's story was fabricated, it's best not to get entangled with someone like this.'

'At least I gave a fake name. No need to panic too much.'

A thousand thoughts churned through Cheng Shi's mind. His brow furrowed so deeply it resembled a mountain range, and still he hadn't responded. Melina, who'd been watching him this whole time, finally lost patience. She tossed him a white linen tunic and urged:

"Stunned by her ladyship's reputation? Put this on. Quickly. We need to go."

'She's right. If I don't move now and someone finds me here, I won't be leaving at all.'

Cheng Shi hurriedly changed clothes, discarding the prison garb and the shattered armor on the ground. He asked "anxiously":

"These..."

Before he could finish, Melina aimed her lance tip at the discarded pile. A burst of light erupted from the tip, and every scrap of fabric and iron disintegrated into nothing.

Fire.

Explosively powerful fire.

This was possibly an Elemental Judge with devastatingly potent fire-element mastery.

Cheng Shi's eyes sharpened. He kept his head down, his posture meek, and followed behind her toward the exit.

...