

The Gods 236

Chapter 236: An Absurd Ending, A Terrifying Beginning

"You..."

"Oh, I'm just going to check whether this escaped deathmatch convict is actually dead. Be right back."

Watching Cheng Shi still "grieving" with his nose-rubbing, his knight companion understood immediately.

No wonder the man was so heartbroken. Even some of those damned convicts had survived, yet his brothers...

What a pitiful soul. Best to let him vent his sorrow.

"Go ahead. Make it quick — I'll cover for you with the captain."

"...You're actually a decent person."

Cheng Shi smiled, waved dismissively, and dragged Zhao Si's corpse away without hesitation.

Make it quick? Not a chance. This was going to be a one-way trip.

The area around the ruins was brightly illuminated, offering no obvious spot for Cheng Shi to conduct his private affairs. But light and shadow were always born together — even the brightest places had their dark corners.

And Cheng Shi excelled at finding those inconspicuous spots.

So he dragged the body beneath a particularly unassuming — and somewhat "antisocial" — magic lamp. Though the area was far brighter than its surroundings, that very brightness caused anyone looking this way to squint or avert their gaze to avoid the glare, unable to make out the person or events beneath the light.

Once he confirmed that no knight's attention was on him, Cheng Shi's expression turned grave. He fished the pilfered Tomb End Stone from his personal space and carefully pressed it against Zhao Si's prisoner helmet.

This was his verification plan!

Although he believed Li Yi's assessment — that the true identities of all players in this trial weren't slices of a single person — he still wanted final confirmation.

Something about this trial felt strange. The pacing was absurdly fast, and the development of "fate" had threaded together virtually every trajectory of "deceit."

This unprecedented sensation had stirred a faint unease in Cheng Shi's heart. So, to be safe, he intended to remove Zhao Si's gladiator mask and see whether the face hidden beneath it was...

His own.

He hoped it wasn't. Otherwise...

A while later, a crisp "crack" rang out. The Prosperity Vein within the helmet was spent.

Cheng Shi swiftly pocketed the stone and used the tip of his lance to carefully pry apart the brittle "iron paper."

"Thump-thump... thump-thump..."

His heart was pounding — and accelerating — but his hand moved agonizingly slow, as if he didn't dare lift the final veil of mystery.

Yet every story needed an ending. After a prolonged bout of self-reassurance, Cheng Shi finally steeled himself and swept aside the troublesome helmet.

But the instant the helmet's fragments fell away and Zhao Si's face appeared in his field of vision, Cheng Shi lost all composure. He drove the lance in his hand straight into the dirt beside Zhao Si's head!

His pupils convulsed. His spine went rigid.

Because the teammate before him wore a face absolutely identical to his own!

He was another Cheng Shi!

A Master of Trickery "Cheng Shi" who believed his surname was Zhao!

Cheng Shi's eyes flew wide, brimming with shock — which then rapidly twisted into dark amusement and self-mockery.

"Heh. So they really are slices after all..."

Then my teammates — are they all slices of me?"

He stared at the scene before him in a daze for a long moment, then laughed. A laugh that was utterly inexplicable. A laugh that was eerie and unsettling.

What chaos indeed!

Who was behind this?

And who had tampered with his perception?

[Chaos]? [Order]? [Deceit]? Or [Fate]?

Why did his teammate have a face identical to his own?

Had the man imitated him?

No — he was already dead. Dead beyond any doubt. Even an SSS-grade talent should have deactivated by now.

So this had been his true face all along? He'd always looked the same? Or perhaps... he had always been Cheng Shi himself?

Another self?

Or rather... five other selves?

Fake. All of it was fake.

Impossible!

I am only myself. There are no slices — and I certainly can't be someone else's slice!

Cheng Shi's smile vanished abruptly. His gaze turned cold as he surveyed his surroundings, searching for traces of a trap or a magic formation.

He was certain something had gotten to him. Even if it wasn't another "person's" doing, it had to be another "god's."

Something had to have distorted his cognition, inducing a hallucination of this magnitude. Players were players — they couldn't be anyone's slices. But the question was: what was "it" trying to achieve?

Cheng Shi observed and pondered simultaneously. Before long, his thoughts circled back to this trial's theme:

Rebirth!

Throughout the day, Cheng Shi had assumed "rebirth" referred to a convict's exoneration or escape from the cage. But now, it seemed that "rebirth" might point to something else entirely...

Rebirth. Rebirth. What kind of rebirth, exactly?

Just as his train of thought reached this point, a burst of chaotic, disordered roaring erupted without warning inside his skull.

Then everything before his eyes — the ruins, the knights, the light, himself — retreated like a receding tide, and his vision plunged into boundless darkness.

Just as Cheng Shi struggled against the helplessness and terror gripping his heart, a shrill "beep-beep-beep—" alarm pierced through from the depths of his soul. In an instant, countless memories surged back like a tidal wave, drowning him once more.

The darkness before his eyes shattered like a spider's web, and countless threads of brilliant light poured into his vision.

Cheng Shi seized upon them like a drowning man clutching at a lifeline, thrashing free from the Sea of Memory's submersion... and jolted awake!

Yes — he was awake. Awake in a brightly lit interior. Awake on an operating table to which he was strapped tight.

Around him blared piercing alarms, accompanied by a flat, emotionless mechanical warning:

"Beep-beep-beep — experiment material has awakened prematurely. Slicing failed! Beep-beep-beep — experiment material has awakened prematurely. Slicing failed!"

!!!

???

What was this sound?!

As the baffling alarm filled his ears, Cheng Shi snapped his eyes open — and the instant he did, he saw a familiar figure holding a familiar dagger, turning around from another operating table before him.

He recognized who it was, and a chill shot from his tailbone straight to the crown of his skull!

Selius!

The scholar from the Life Extension Department was studying Cheng Shi with keen interest, as though he'd discovered something novel and fascinating.

"I'm genuinely surprised. In all these years, you're the first experiment material to awaken early. Let me see what exactly changed in you."

With that, Selius approached at a measured pace, Concentric Dagger in hand.

He paid no attention to the shock and confusion plastered across Cheng Shi's face. His fingers danced across a screen beside the bed as he scrolled through experimental results, clicking his tongue in admiration:

"Fascinating. Within nineteen hours of the slice personalities being born, the primary personality successfully killed every last one of them. Such rapid self-repair can only mean one thing — your sense of self-existence is extraordinarily strong.

And yet, what's strange is...

Such a powerful degree of self-affirmation failed to generate 'Common Recognition' among the slice personalities... Why is that?

Where did the experimental data go wrong?

Hmm... the data doesn't appear to be wrong.

It seems the slices' own sense of self-affirmation was equally too strong, causing the 'Common Recognition' to fail.

How fascinating. So when self-affirmation exceeds a certain threshold, it produces this kind of problem. This opens an entirely new avenue of research. I need to note this down — from now on, this criterion must be added when screening experiment materials.

Subject 1172, I'm growing more and more curious. What exactly did you experience before your imprisonment?"

What did I experience?

I'd damn well like to know what I experienced!

But not before my imprisonment — just now!

Cheng Shi narrowed his eyes at the scholar fiddling with the screen, his voice cold as a biting winter wind.

"Don't you owe me an explanation, Mr. Selius?"