

The Gods 237

Chapter 237: A Crazy Trickster, or a Pure Lunatic?

The patient got out of bed.

Under Selius's utterly astonished gaze, Cheng Shi flexed his strength and snapped the restraints binding him, then casually rose and hopped off the table.

He snatched the Concentric Dagger from Selius's hand. The blade danced nimbly between his fingers as he toyed with it, while his other hand commandeered what had been Selius's experiment screen — apparently curious to see the data his own body had generated.

Selius stared at Cheng Shi in disbelief, then furrowed his brow tightly.

There was no fear in his eyes — only bewilderment.

He was trying to figure out how this experiment material had shaken off the effects of every sedative and regained consciousness, and why there wasn't a trace of fear in those eyes — how the man even knew his name!

"Who... are you?"

"Me? You've already forgotten? Am I not your so-called 11... Subject 1172?"

Cheng Shi's gaze lingered on the screen for a moment, but he couldn't make sense of the data. He silently pleaded with Brother Mouth for a while — no response — so he gave up on collecting his own data and turned back to the scholar beside him.

Feeling the aggressive scrutiny, Selius asked with some surprise: "You're not a deathmatch convict who was dragged in here?"

"A deathmatch convict?"

Yes, I am a deathmatch convict. I was one before, I was one just now — but right at this moment, perhaps not anymore.

You look quite shocked. What, is it rare for an experiment subject to slip free of your control? Then congratulations — today you've met one.

No need to guess my identity. I have no ties to any faction or any person. I was simply tossed in here by the Grand Tribunal's knights through a twist of fate.

And now, I intend to leave.

Mr. Selius — do you still wish to escape this cage of [Order]? If so, I believe we may yet have an opportunity to cooperate.

But before we cooperate, you must tell me the truth about what I just experienced."

Selius pondered for a moment, then eyed Cheng Shi with a strange expression, apparently jumping to conclusions:

"So even that lord miscalculates from time to time. When Montrani's Inquisitors threw you in prison, how did they fail to account for this? Why didn't they use [Order]'s power to seal your abilities..."

?

'He thinks I'm one of Keinlaur's enemies?'

'Well, that works. It makes the foundation for cooperation even more solid.'

Cheng Shi smiled. To avoid triggering Honest Clown, he replied with deliberate vagueness:

"Probably a blessing from [Fate], I suppose."

He wasn't lying. Surviving that memory ordeal truly had been [Fate]'s favor.

But in Selius's ears, the words carried an entirely different meaning. He nodded and began regarding the escaped experiment material with genuine seriousness.

"I've never heard of you. How do you know about me, and about..."

"The fact that you want to escape from here?" Cheng Shi helpfully finished the sentence Selius couldn't bring himself to say.

"Yes." Selius's expression turned guarded.

"Scholar, you're a smart man. Think about it — how could I, some unlucky wretch forcibly hauled in from outside the laboratory, possibly know a reclusive scholar's 'secret'?"

So, someone must have told me. Now take a guess — who might that person be?"

Cheng Shi had no intention of drowning the conversation in lies. The top priority was figuring out what had just happened — understanding the nature of that trial where he'd killed all his teammates, or rather, killed every version of "himself" — and determining which scene of the trial's script they'd now arrived at.

So he chose to let Selius deceive himself.

As everyone knew, smart people loved to overthink. The more they overthought, the more mistakes they made, and the more mistakes riddled their logic, the more gaps opened up for exploitation.

The wise were often undone by excess deliberation.

Selius frowned and thought for a long time — long enough, presumably, to have cycled through every possibility — before suddenly raising his head with a startled look, asking with some uncertainty:

"Galusha? Were you sent by Galusha?"

"Correct!" Cheng Shi snapped his fingers cheerily and casually rubbed his nose. "I had a bit of a run-in with the Grand Tribunal. That girl spotted me when I entered the city. She happened to need a helper she wasn't too close with, so she slipped me in here on the quiet.

I don't know what relationship this girl named Galusha has with you, scholar. All I know is that I came here to help, not to suffer.

So — explain clearly what I just went through. Once I've confirmed nothing's wrong with my body, I'll keep my promise and help you get out of here."

Cheng Shi's hands never stopped moving — flipping the dagger, snapping his fingers — his furtive nose-touches disguised amid the fidgeting, making him look like a patient with a hyperactivity disorder.

Suspicion flickered in Selius's eyes. He didn't entirely trust what Cheng Shi was saying, because his relationship with Galusha was hardly a secret among those who had access to this laboratory.

Still, he decided to cooperate with Cheng Shi — not because of any great urge to share, but because it would be nearly impossible to encounter another "lucid" outsider.

He felt the man had a point. Regardless of what motives had brought him here, Selius's own desire was simply to die. He wasn't afraid of the other party having ulterior motives.

What he feared was the other party having no motives at all — because then he'd lose his bargaining chip and remain a prisoner trapped in [Order]'s cage.

"Your body hasn't undergone any changes. All readings are within normal parameters."

Selius made his decision to "cooperate" and began explaining to Cheng Shi everything that had just occurred. He pushed the screen toward him and pointed at the data:

"Both vital activity and consciousness stability are well within normal ranges. This means the slicing process caused you no harm whatsoever.

Your consciousness is remarkably strong, your degree of self-affirmation extraordinarily high. You successfully killed every personality slice within twenty-four hours of their emergence. As a general rule, personality slices that don't survive past twenty-four hours are classified as invalid slices. Therefore, no residual split personalities remain in your consciousness.

It's that simple. You were sent to the laboratory as experiment material, and I immediately used the Concentric Dagger — the one now in your hand — to slice your personality.

Under normal experimental protocol, the next step would be to slice your memories as well, then separate the surviving personalities and memories, create physiological hosts for them, place them in cultivation vessels, and wait for them to grow into another you — a brand-new you carrying partial personality and partial memories.

Unfortunately, such excellent material failed at the very first step of the experiment."

Cheng Shi frowned. Even though he couldn't decipher the data on the screen, he feigned understanding and responded:

"So what I just experienced was a war of slices within my own consciousness?"

"A war? No, no, no.

That's far too dramatic a description. Personality separation merely isolates a few uncommon aspects of yourself that differ from the primary personality within your consciousness. Your primary personality may instinctively perceive these unfamiliar facets as outsiders, but under normal circumstances, no conflict arises between them — because they share a 'Common Recognition.' They all belong to you.

Of course, there are exceptions. You, for instance.

Before encountering you, I genuinely had no idea that if a person's self-affirmation was too strong, it could produce the anomaly of every personality being utterly convinced of its own existence.

There was no 'Common Recognition' among your personality slices. They each believed only in themselves. This shouldn't happen in a normal person — do you understand? — because this level of consciousness independence is found only in cases of extreme dissociative identity disorder.

Of course, there's another possibility: you are someone who habitually impersonates others and believes absolutely in each assumed identity every time you do it. In that case, every personality in your cognition carries that blurred memory, and the moment they emerged — they became independent.

Put simply, either you're a crazed trickster, or you're a pure lunatic.

So...

Which one are you?"