

The Gods 248

Chapter 248: Today's [Prosperity] — Feeding Complete

Reality. A laboratory in some unknown city and province.

Li Zhi awoke on a surgical table. He opened his eyes slowly and removed his glasses.

They were non-prescription — a small trick he normally used to disguise his vision. But it obviously hadn't come into play this round.

He stood up, first examined himself, and then began carefully surveying the operating room he'd been calling home for "quite some time."

It was a completely sealed surgical suite — three walls and one door, the latter a slab of steel thick enough to rival the walls. Ventilation came exclusively from an air duct above the air wall overhead. He'd always assumed this was a medical bay in some underground military facility, but today, that assumption shifted.

If he was a slice, his original would never simply let him grow into an independent player. His original had to have been watching him from the shadows — observing, and perhaps never truly relinquishing control.

So... was this really just an operating room?

Could it be connected to other spaces? Logically, it shouldn't be — Li Zhi had verified that the air walls around these rooms didn't appear to be fakes.

But today it struck him that he'd overlooked one thing — the ventilation duct!

In his memories, he'd once tried to climb into it, only for the air wall to repel him.

But note — that was in his memories!

So Li Zhi gripped a scalpel and began searching the space once more. This time he wouldn't trust his memories, because a slice's memories were meaningless.

After examining all four walls again and finding nothing, his gaze finally settled on the lone ventilation duct.

He dragged the surgical table over and tried to climb up — but at that exact moment, the vent, barely large enough for one person to squeeze through, opened on its own!

Yes — opened on its own!

The hum of mechanical gears filled the room. The vent's louvers slid apart horizontally, revealing a pitch-dark passage. And from the far end of that passage, a raspy voice was chuckling.

"So you figured it out after all. Come — come through. Everything you want to know is right here."

Li Zhi's pupils contracted violently. His entire body went rigid.

He had a premonition — this speaking entity might just be his original.

The moment had finally arrived. Slice and original, face to face.

Li Zhi gripped his blade so tightly his knuckles went white. Only after casting three consecutive Calming Spells on himself did he crawl into the unknown depths of that passage.

The entity at the other end made no move while he inched his way through.

When Li Zhi finally emerged into the other space and poked his head out of the vent, he was stunned. The room contained more than a dozen apparatuses identical to Selius's cultivation vessels. And there in the center stood a bizarre figure — simultaneously young and ancient — squinting at him.

"You're a smart man. Come down. I won't hurt you."

Li Zhi's breathing hitched. He dropped down cautiously.

Standing before this half-young, half-elderly anomaly, his eyes were filled with shock and suspicion.

"You're..."

"You know who I am, don't you?"

That's right — your guesses are mostly correct. One look at me and you should understand: I'm both this experiment's beneficiary and its victim.

And you... like me, are this experiment's victim."

"Heh." Even someone as even-tempered as Li Zhi couldn't suppress a sarcastic laugh. "So I was never a beneficiary."

"Our goals are the same. Someone had to sacrifice themselves for the experiment, didn't they?"

"Then why wasn't the someone who sacrificed — you!?"

"How do you know I haven't? Look at this [Prosperity] flowing through me. Look at this [Decay] rotting my body. Look at what I've become — neither man nor monster. Doesn't that terrify you?"

That is my sacrifice."

"So you cultivated your former self — me — as the vessel for shedding your skin? A new body!?"

"No, no, no. That's not my intention at all. Don't get agitated."

"None? Then why did you create me? To prove your research capabilities can replicate Selius's slice experiment?"

"You're still as obsessive as ever. Beneath all that composure and steadiness hides the most irreversible kind of fixation." The anomaly sighed. "It was precisely so I could continue my experiments in peace that I separated you out. This way, you walk your path and I walk mine. Isn't that better for everyone?"

"I'm sorry — I can't determine whether you're telling the truth. But then again... I don't need to. The moment you let me through, you should have known — this wasn't going to end peacefully!"

Li Zhi's gaze hardened. He drew the Concentric Dagger he'd traded from Cheng Shi, then lunged, exploiting the split-second pause in conversation to drive the blade straight at the hybrid original's heart.

But to his astonishment, the anomaly didn't dodge. He simply stood there, perfectly still, and let Li Zhi plunge the dagger into his chest.

"Shhk—"

The blade pierced flesh and punctured the heart — yet not a single drop of blood escaped.

Li Zhi stared at the still-living anomaly, horrified!

"You... how is this possible!? How can you not die!? This is—"

The anomaly smiled — a grotesque, eerie smile. He reached out with a withered hand, gripped the Concentric Dagger, and slowly, inch by inch, pulled the lethal weapon from his rotting heart.

"This is slice-Selius's Concentric Dagger? That's what you were about to say, isn't it?" His laughter was like a dying man's last gasps — halting and deeply unsettling.

"!!!"

Li Zhi's pupils contracted to pinpoints. He stared at the anomaly in utter disbelief, too stunned for words.

He knew!

He'd planned for this all along!

"Surprised?"

Wondering how I knew the dagger in your hand was slice-Selius's Concentric Dagger?

There are two Concentric Daggers. One is Selius's — specifically designed to excise weaker personalities. If identical personalities come into conflict and one possesses the dagger, it can be used to eliminate disobedient slices. Supremely effective.

The other belongs to slice-Selius.

As a slice, he obviously couldn't carry a weapon that could kill him at any time. So he modified it — turning it into a weapon that kills only dominant personalities.

It was his tool for overthrowing the original. And you tried to use that same Concentric Dagger to kill me. Li Zhi — you're clever, but you overlooked one thing!"

With that, the anomaly gripped the dagger's tip and — "whoosh" — at a speed the eye couldn't follow, drove the blade into Li Zhi's chest. But he drove it in backwards — hilt-first — embedding the entire dagger in reverse into Li Zhi's heart.

"Pfft—"

Li Zhi coughed up a spray of blood, clutched his chest, and staggered to the ground. The terror on his face deepened — he could feel his life draining away, his personality dissolving.

The Concentric Dagger designed to kill dominant personalities... was killing him!?

How was this possible!?

"You..."

"Confused? Bewildered? Shocked?"

A dagger that only kills dominant personalities just killed you. I love that expression on your face, Li Zhi. Even though I've seen you terrified and bewildered countless times before, every fresh encounter fills me with such pleasure.

Yes — like you, I'm also a slice. And not just any slice — the weakest of them all. That's exactly why I used Divinity to complete my own personality.

As for our great and mighty original? I killed him long ago, using this very same method.

Ha. Hahahaha! How about that — turns out I'm every bit as clever as you!

And on top of that, I planted this knowledge inside your memory.

Have you considered — if the memory about the ventilation duct was false, then couldn't the method you 'remembered' for killing me also be false?

The method was real enough. But the pity is — I'm the one who deliberately taught it to you.

Ha! Fun, isn't it?

Yes — that's the look! I love your fear!"

With that, the anomaly lifted Li Zhi with one bloated hand, and before he'd fully died — slowly, bit by bit, with an expression of pure relish — shoved Li Zhi... entirely into a jaw that gaped open like a python's maw.

Swallowed whole.

"Crunch, crunch, crunch..."

"Ahh—

Today's [Prosperity] — feeding complete.

A pity, though — no Germinating Divinity. It seems the fear still wasn't quite enough."