

The Gods 1031

Chapter 1031: Underground Melee

"We're here to help, not invaders from the underworld!"

Even as Cheng Shi made one last effort, the grand scholars ignored his explanation completely.

Burza let a sheet of black cloth slip from his cuff. A single flick — and the entire underground space plunged into absolute darkness. Wind whistled. Nelliel's silhouette flickered into existence beside Cheng Shi.

This was an Assassination Doctor. Her blade tip gleamed with a mysterious potion from the Creation Alchemy Department. One nick — and who knew if your body would become the next flesh experiment ground.

Cheng Shi reacted quickly. He instinctively stepped back to create distance, then snapped his fingers to swap behind the grand scholar. But Nelliel moved through darkness like water — her forward-thrusting dagger impossibly reversed 180 degrees and stabbed at his heart.

Cheng Shi frowned. Both hands came together in the darkness, doing something. The next instant, the dagger that should have pierced his chest grazed past his side — missing clean.

Nelliel clearly hadn't expected the opponent to possess the ability to redirect her blade path. She disengaged on one strike, giving Cheng Shi no chance to counter. Then she melted back into darkness, awaiting the next opening.

Then — the entire underground chamber's fire elements began to boil. Moisture evaporated. The air grew so dry that the slightest breeze struck sparks.

Fang Yuan's staff blazed to life. Dawn-like radiance shattered every shadow and flooded the space with absolute searing heat.

The flame that marked [Civilization]'s birth once again sheltered civilization.

"Fire born of civilization — order eternal!"

With the cold prayer's echo, a solar storm erupted from the staff's "blazing sun." Countless fire threads whipped outward, streaking toward the three grand scholars.

The scholars' eyes darkened. Each employed their own means to dodge the pursuing flames while continuing their attacks. But strangely, every assault aimed at the two players veered off at the last moment — curving away or losing force. Every point-blank strike was neutralized.

Recognizing they couldn't defeat these two intruders without damaging this space, they retreated. Spreading out, they began chanting large-scale magic.

Now Fang Yuan's expression finally shifted.

"Tusnat's [Truth] Strangling Formation. That's a legion-grade combat measure. They're deploying it here — against just the two of us?"

"Do we warrant this?"

"..."

Cheng Shi wasn't sure about the situation either. Honestly, disposing of these three would be ludicrously easy. One snap of his fingers and Zangier would gain three cellmates.

But he didn't believe these were real scholars. Their every move reeked of puppetry — like marionettes on strings, being controlled to block him and Fang Yuan.

Without understanding the experiment's status — or even confirming whether eliminating the scholars would affect it — Cheng Shi couldn't simply erase the threat. So he leaned toward Fang Yuan:

"How long can you hold alone?"

Fang Yuan's pupils shrank. Darkly: "Can't hold."

"..." Cheng Shi shot him an annoyed look. "You forget I'm a liar? What's the point of lying to me?"

If you hadn't immediately torn open the void to escape, you can definitely hold them. Just 3 — no, 5 minutes. I'll rush inside and assess the situation. After 5 minutes, I'll help you clean up. Deal?"

Fang Yuan paused. His eyes flicked toward the passage behind Asgis: "You can get through?"

Cheng Shi nodded. He raised his hand — four dice pinched between his fingers — and flicked. The four dice shot past Asgis like arrows that never fell, vanishing into the darkness beyond.

Fang Yuan's frown deepened.

"I can hold 3 minutes. But tell me — how did you deflect their attacks? Fate Weaver, I didn't see the rumored Go Lis or your warrior-like combat skills this time.

Your defense method looks more like..."

"?"

'Knowing this much detail — the Order Alliance president's done his homework on me.'

"A secret." Cheng Shi cut him off with a mysterious smile. "I said I could watch your back, and I can.

Trust me — I say 5 minutes, it'll be 5 minutes!"

A snap — and Cheng Shi vanished. Fang Yuan's square jaw stretched long. He howled down the corridor:

"3 MINUTES! One second longer and you'll be collecting my corpse!"

His roar echoed through the vast underground. No reply came from Cheng Shi — only the grand scholars' chanting gradually swelling to drown it out.

With no retreat, Fang Yuan took a deep breath and pulled from his personal space a golden key. Hooking it on his finger, he addressed the three grand scholars:

"Stand down, gentlemen. This is the key to the Wrath of Abomination's prison — and a special version blessed by the Iron Law of Order. I trust you know what that means.

Correct. The moment I crush it, unceasing meteor fire rain will flatten all of Tusnat. Turn it into purgatory.

Then — whoever you are, whichever side you're on, whatever you're planning — I guarantee you'll fail.

But I can also let your plans continue. Grand scholars, all I need is 3... 5 minutes of ceasefire."

By this point, Fang Yuan's voice was practically grinding through his teeth.

"Stop for 5 minutes. Stand here. Whatever happens inside — once 5 minutes pass, you can resume whatever you wish. Deal?

[Order] above — we don't need to fight. That's [War]'s job. As fellow losers to the Kingdom of War, I imagine you share my distaste for that warmongering [War] will."

Negotiation. In many ways, it was an advanced tool combining offense and defense. Especially in higher-tier matches, opportunities for negotiation multiplied.

Whether it would work — no one could say.

He'd also realized these three grand scholars were clearly puppets. Who controlled them was still unknown, so he had no certainty they'd agree.

Still, he was already preparing a backup combat plan. Brute-forcing 5 minutes seemed possible.

But then — the three grand scholars suddenly stopped chanting. As one, they looked contemplatively at the key in Fang Yuan's hand.

"You won't succeed."

Asgis dropped those words, then froze in place — motionless.

The other two stepped back, pressing themselves flat against the walls like puppets hung on hooks. Silent. Still.

Staring at this eerie tableau, Fang Yuan couldn't help wondering: who exactly was controlling these grand scholars?

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Chapter 1032: So This Is Where the Danger Lies

The underground space wasn't small, and Cheng Shi moved fast.

Nothing else blocked his path. He sprinted while thinking.

The investigation had gone too smoothly — filling him with suspicion. From the trial's start until now, he'd hardly taken a wrong step. It felt like someone was pushing him forward. But who was the hidden hand?

'Teammates?'

No — they seemed fine.

Hu Xuan went without saying. She'd never sabotage him. Meng Youfang and Chen Yi, though beyond normal logic, were "simpler" than most — their malice was always on full display.

Fang Yuan was a possibility. Though Cheng Shi had been driving the trial's tempo, this [Order] follower had appeared at every critical juncture. But from his observations, this player was far from malicious — and showed no desire or covetousness toward [Truth].

Wei Zhi reeked of covetousness. But his thinking was easy to guess. This deeply calculating Reason Association president was probably waiting for Cheng Shi and the grand scholars to destroy each other, then reap the spoils.

He'd come to assist the experiment, sure — but from the grand scholars' perspective, how could they trust a strange outsider? Conflict was inevitable. And Wei Zhi was probably waiting for exactly that.

His coveted prize was likely the Erudition Presidium's knowledge and the "omnipotent" Ritual of Truth. So he had motive to sabotage the experiment — a successful experiment meant he'd never get his chance to fish in troubled waters.

But Wei Zhi was more of a disruptor than a mastermind.

So who had orchestrated this setup?

Surely not Galusha — the idea was absurd. If Galusha could control the Erudition Presidium, she'd already have won. Why bother with false fronts? In this era's history, she had no enemies worth such elaborate attention. Unless... the target was the players...

But NPCs targeting players in a trial — was that even possible?

Cheng Shi's thoughts tangled. Regardless, understanding the experiment's status came first.

He ran full speed. The space ahead brightened rapidly. Rounding a corner, the familiar [Truth] experiment ground burst into view. The corridor before it was bustling with scholars rushing about. Cheng Shi failed to "dodge" in time and collided straight into one.

But this scholar clearly wasn't a grand scholar — just an ordinary academic, probably an experiment assistant.

So the Erudition Presidium hadn't escaped alone — they'd brought many students. Whether these students were assistants or fuel was uncertain, but at least it gave Cheng Shi an opening to exploit.

He immediately grabbed the scholar and rolled across the ground. When the tumbling stopped, the scholar's clothes were on Cheng Shi, and the scholar himself lay unconscious in a corner.

The experiment ground hummed with noise. Nearby scholars glanced back at the commotion and saw a colleague clumsily getting up, bowing in apology. They assumed he'd tripped over the cables covering the floor. Nobody paid attention.

Just like that — wearing stolen clothes and carrying a clipboard — Cheng Shi walked openly into the vast experimental space.

This experiment ground was absurdly large. It didn't resemble an underground space at all — more like an extradimensional base embedded between reality and the void. The entire chamber was spherical, like a star's core. At its center floated two figures — one large, one small — connected by pipes and conduits. Iridescent streams of light overflowed through the space.

The Erudition Presidium's top three grand scholars stood in a triangular formation. Each operated control consoles while other scholars behind them recorded experimental data. Everyone's face held a trace of inexplicable anticipation — preparation was clearly in its final stage.

Nobody noticed a scholar had been replaced. Cheng Shi surveyed freely. But the more he looked, the more alarmed he grew — because the three grand scholars running the experiment were puppets too, just like the ones who'd blocked the corridor.

Only the ordinary lab assistants seemed real. But the strangest thing was that none of them noticed anything wrong with their puppet-like leaders.

Could this be the Erudition Presidium's own technique? Controlling themselves for absolute security?

Not impossible.

Cheng Shi frowned and continued observing. The experiment appeared to proceed smoothly. The two floating figures were obviously the Barren Walker's shell and the captured Pe Laya. The grand scholar who'd betrayed the Erudition Presidium had already lost consciousness. If her reflection had been right, this was a retrogression experiment using the Barren Walker and Pe Laya herself as the spacetime linkage.

The only question: who would be sent back to stop Pe Laya — or Galusha?

As if on cue, Volent spoke from his console:

"Intruders have found us and are breaching the corridor. Accelerate. All stations prepare for launch readiness."

The other two grand scholars responded. Every position began reporting in real time.

"Type I data nominal. Spacetime linkage coefficient stable."

"Type II accelerated cross-verification complete. Launch-ready status achieved."

"First experimental echelon standing by. Reserve echelon standing by. First echelon in position — 48 personnel, none absent."

Volent nodded: "Kadir, open the gate."

A scholar at the chamber's lowest point acknowledged. He pulled open a small door. Before long, rows of hooded scholars marched out, chanting "Eradicate error, restore [Truth]!" as they filed onto the platform below.

Cheng Shi had assumed that was just an equipment platform. He hadn't expected it was the retrogression experiment's "departure point."

He knew retrogression experiments required personnel to execute missions. In the Rosna trial, those "lucky players" had encountered him precisely this way.

But he hadn't expected the Erudition Presidium to send this many. Clearly, the grand scholars had staked everything on this experiment.

Normal data, stable progress, redundant personnel, three grand scholars presiding — the experiment seemed flawless.

The biggest flaw was probably himself infiltrating it.

But the smoother things went, the more anxious Cheng Shi became. 'When things are abnormal, there must be a hidden cause.' Historical failure meant the experiment must have gone wrong somewhere. But where?

'The scholars sent to the past failed their mission?'

Possible — but with this many people, how could they all...

'Wait.'

If he could infiltrate this easily, why couldn't others?

A chill shot through him. He immediately sprinted toward the departure platform.

His sudden movement alarmed nearby scholars. Platform guards blocked him, staffs raised.

Cheng Shi frowned, scattered dice across the platform, and shouted up at Volent:

"Personnel breach! There's a traitor in the first echelon! The experiment is compromised!"

He snapped his fingers and swapped onto the platform, grabbing startled scholars one by one to inspect them.

The scene exceeded the security team's expectations. Guards swarmed in. Even first-echelon scholars reacted, surrounding Cheng Shi.

But Cheng Shi didn't panic. Dodging scholars' grasps with fluid agility, he kept searching. Seeing that this intruder genuinely seemed to be hunting a traitor rather than causing destruction, Volent's eyes sharpened. He decided immediately:

"All personnel hold position! Level-one alert! First echelon, cease resistance! Security team, mount the platform for a secondary inspection!"

You — whose student are you? Who told you there was a traitor!?"

Cheng Shi didn't answer. Because right now, he was gripping a first-echelon member's arm — smiling broadly.

He reached out and pulled back the scholar's hood. As that wild tangle of chestnut curls tumbled into view, the wire-taut tension in his chest finally eased by half.

'So this is where the danger came from!'

"We meet again, Galusha!"

...

Chapter 1033: Trial Failed

Nobody knew how Galusha had infiltrated.

But it was easy enough to guess. The underground faiths had long since spread to the surface thanks to the Extreme Desire Brotherhood. And who exactly was mixed in among the refugees that flooded from Gasmira into the Tower of Logic's territory — even the Tower itself probably hadn't investigated thoroughly.

So with enough preparation time, Galusha — who possessed both truth-based scholarship and slice techniques — could surely find any crack to slip through.

But managing to embed herself among the scholars the Erudition Presidium took during their escape? That was genuinely impressive.

No wonder Galusha had shown zero reaction to the news of the Erudition Presidium's flight. It had all been within her calculations.

'Good thing she was caught at the last moment!'

Cheng Shi exhaled in relief. But the next second—

'Wait. Something's wrong!'

His smile froze instantly. He realized: if Galusha could truly infiltrate the experiment ground to sabotage the grand scholars' work, why would she keep her own face — letting anyone recognize her at a glance?

The underworld's counter-offensive hadn't started at Tusnat. The world tree's burning in Gasmira had placed Galusha's profile on the Erudition Presidium's desk long ago.

Every grand scholar knew this lunatic who wanted to destroy the Tower of Logic. They had every reason to screen these backup scholars. So how had Galusha hidden until now — until he found her?

How had she dared go without disguise?

If she'd simply changed her face, wouldn't the experiment have been guaranteed to fail?

The instant this thought formed, Cheng Shi knew he'd been played. The Galusha in the crowd was bait — designed to draw everyone's attention!

"Danger! There's more than one!"

He flung Galusha's arm away, spinning to warn the grand scholars. But he was one step too late.

Because the moment he'd grabbed Galusha — the instant every eye in the experiment ground was drawn to this unexpected spectacle — several head-bowed scholars silently approached the control consoles across each platform. In the single gap where the three grand scholars couldn't react in time, they directly activated the retrogression experiment!

Yes — they didn't destroy anything. They prematurely launched the experiment!

Even Cheng Shi, who'd cautiously retreated to safe distance, was dumbstruck.

He couldn't fathom why Galusha hadn't stopped the experiment but launched it. Was she that certain she wouldn't be affected?

Or did every scholar in the first echelon about to be sent to the past... belong to her!?

No time to think. The moment the experiment activated, a massive spacetime energy beam had already struck the departure platform. Non-echelon security scholars scattered in panic, leaping off the platform. The first echelon was frozen in confusion — unsure whether to proceed with their mission after this disruption.

Then — another surprise.

Galusha sneered at Cheng Shi. Then, provocatively, she extended her pinky finger toward the three grand scholars high above.

And before everyone's eyes — as countless spacetime energy beams hammered into her body — she drove that pinky finger into her own eye socket.

'SPLCHT—'

Blood sprayed. Thunder and fire detonated!

'BOOM—'

The entire departure platform exploded. The shockwave snapped the conduits connected to the experimental materials, hurling Pe Laya and the Barren Walker's shell to the ground.

Screaming flames instantly melted everything near the platform. The blast forced Cheng Shi back into the corridor for cover.

But his reaction was fast. He dodged only the first, most violent shockwave, then used his dice to teleport back into the experiment ground. Braving the explosion's aftermath, enduring fire's erosion, he watched helplessly as the only two survivors on the departure platform were transmitted to the past the grand scholars had anchored.

The experiment had technically succeeded!

But the plan had obviously failed...

Even ignoring whether two lone survivors could save the entire Tower of Logic — one look at their charred, half-dead state told Cheng Shi it was hopeless.

Surviving the spacetime corridor would be their best outcome. As for reversing the Erudition Presidium's defeat?

Hah. Dream on.

And once the grand scholars' plan failed, the Tower of Logic's collapse was inevitable. The path of [Truth] severed — soon to become finite [Truth]...

The trial had spiraled beyond recovery.

"...Shit."

Cheng Shi never imagined that in a 3-day trial, they'd lose before the first day was even over. But fortunately, he always kept a card in reserve. If everything could be reset, there might still be a chance to turn things around!

So, face dark, at the moment the flames nearly melted him alive, he decisively snapped his fingers.

This snap no longer represented [Fate]'s favor — it manifested [Time]'s mercy.

In that instant — time froze. The universe crystallized. Everything reversed like a rewinding film. Flames contracted. Explosions collapsed inward. Figures flickered. Cheng Shi... returned to the starting point.

He snapped his eyes open. The sky still echoed with "Fabricated laws — a cosmic joke!" His fingers still held the shape of a freshly completed snap. Slowly, his lips curled.

He was back!

This was exactly why the esteemed [Chaos] agent, the Afterglow Church's puppet master, the mysterious Lord Ultraman, had desecrated [Chaos] to summon [Order]!

Because he needed the time battlefield to activate on a conflict-free whole hour. Only then could he try again and again!

Indeed — Cheng Shi had entered this trial as a Time Walker. The moment he learned this trial was granted by [Truth], he'd donned a mage's mask.

[Truth] demanded trial and error. And [Time] permitted trial and error!

So the technique that had deflected the three grand scholars' attacks in the underground corridor naturally came from his other profession: [Fate]'s mage, the Screenwriter.

For a Screenwriter without the relevant talent, Cheng Shi might not rewrite an opponent's will or influence an enemy's movements. But he could alter the status of insignificant objects in the script.

Making a blade miss. Making magic veer. These small tricks could all be rewritten — if his hands were fast enough.

And now, with a fresh chance, Cheng Shi's eyes hardened. He sprinted straight toward the west district. This time, before the rendezvous, he'd strangle every crisis in the cradle.

If once wasn't enough — twice. Three times. A hundred times!

Under the protection of the Time of Eternal Imprisonment, this [Time] follower would never be lost in the river of time.

...

Chapter 1034: Time Walker, Cheng Shi

The complexity people feel when understanding time mainly stems from the inability to anchor an absolutely perfect temporal reference frame.

Take the dice traces Cheng Shi had left in the underground experiment ground. For the current Cheng Shi — who hadn't yet visited the experiment ground — those traces represented a future. But for the Cheng Shi who'd used retrogression to return to the surface, they were already the past.

Regardless of future or past, under the talent Elusive Chip, these positions remained traceable — and separated by a very short interval.

So Cheng Shi was back. He hadn't even reached the west district timber warehouse. From a suitable distance, he simply snapped his fingers — and materialized inside the underground lab's corridor corner.

His only worry was whether his intrusion would be detected again by the three grand scholars who'd blocked him before. But this time, the infiltration was perfect. All the grand scholars were busy inside the experiment ground, methodically preparing the retrogression experiment. At this stage, the only experimental material was the Barren Walker.

Cheng Shi used the same trick. He hid a scholar, swapped clothes, and strolled in once more.

This time he caused no commotion. He went straight to the platform below Volent's position and requested to report experimental data to the security scholars on guard.

Scholars weren't fools. What experimental data would someone responsible for outer facility maintenance possibly have? Atmospheric dust particle density?

They drew their staffs to stop his approach and immediately triggered the alarm.

At this sensitive juncture, an experiment that determined the Tower of Logic's survival tolerated zero errors. Every scholar was on high alert. More security scholars converged. They eyed Cheng Shi gravely.

"Acier — what are you doing?"

Cheng Shi smiled: "I said — I have experimental data to report."

The lead security scholar didn't buy it. Frowning, he ordered Cheng Shi seized. But right then, Cheng Shi shouted up at the experiment platform:

"Grand Scholar Volent — I have experimental data regarding the traitors to report!"

The shout drew every eye. Soon, Asgis and two others appeared before him — the trio clearly in charge of security.

Asgis's shadowed gaze swept over Cheng Shi repeatedly. Only after confirming he bore no malice did he speak into the comm channel:

"Subject replaced. But doesn't appear hostile."

The channel replied: "Bring him up."

So, under bewildered stares, Cheng Shi was escorted by security scholars to the experiment platform. Six grand scholars stood in a row before him. Even as puppets, they radiated crushing pressure.

Think about it — the last individual worthy of the full Erudition Presidium's deliberation was probably some major experiment they'd been deciding whether to fund, or the strategy against Galusha. Now it was Cheng Shi.

When six gazes — solid as physical weight — pressed down on him, he realized: even sight had mass.

That mass was the hope carried by generations of Tower of Logic scholars — and the grand scholars' anxiety over this experiment's success.

Cheng Shi inhaled deeply. Without wasting time, he told them everything.

"You don't need to know who I am. Lengthy explanations are pointless. Just know that this experiment ground has been infiltrated.

Galusha is inside. She's hiding among the first echelon scholars. Every experiment platform has her people. She may not know the details of your contingency plan, but she's thoroughly prepared on the personnel front.

If they aren't purged immediately, this experiment will fail irreversibly.

Grand Scholar Volent — I trust you can determine whether I'm speaking truth. I may not like you, but right now, on the matter of preserving the Tower of Logic and ensuring this experiment's success, we are perfectly aligned!"

Cheng Shi's words changed every scholar's complexion. The six grand scholars exchanged dark glances, communicating silently. Then Ernie spoke:

"How do you know all this?"

Cheng Shi smiled: "As I said — explaining is pointless. Just launch the screening immediately. The facts will prove I'm not lying."

"..."

Volent studied Cheng Shi for a long moment, then once again demonstrated a [Truth] authority's decisiveness.

He nodded and immediately dispatched the three non-presiding grand scholars to begin a fresh round of screening. Then he turned to Cheng Shi:

"What do you want?"

'?'

'Are scholars really this perceptive?'

'I hadn't even considered asking for anything, and you're volunteering?'

'If I don't speak up, wouldn't that be disrespecting myself?'

Cheng Shi's eyes spun. Grinning: "I've heard the Ritual of Truth—"

"Understood. Escort our guest down to rest. Notify him when the screening results are in."

Without sparing Cheng Shi another glance, Volent returned to work.

'Bro — what exactly did you "understand"?''

'Come on, what negotiations don't start with opening high? At least give me a chance to lower my ask...'

Cheng Shi tried to protest, but objection denied — the security scholars dragged him straight out.

He could've resisted. But he didn't. Until Galusha's moles were purged, he wouldn't disrupt the scholars. So he went quietly.

On his way down from the experiment platform, another elevator rose carrying scholars clutching tablets, rushing to report data.

In that passing moment, Cheng Shi recognized one face.

He didn't know the scholar's name. But the build and features closely matched the person who'd activated the experiment from Volent's platform last time!

Back then, standing on the departure platform, Cheng Shi had not only grabbed Galusha but also looked toward Volent's direction seeking backup — inadvertently glimpsing the figure behind Volent. Now, encountering the same person again, recognition was instant.

"That one is Galusha's agent — careful!"

Cheng Shi pointed and snapped his fingers, teleporting back to the experiment platform. He seized a guard's weapon and, the instant the suspect scholar arrived, pressed the blade to his throat. Eyes sharp:

"Surprise, scholar. We meet again."

The reporting scholar froze. But his eyes flashed not with confusion — with alarm.

'Confirmed — compromised!'

The suspect's reaction told every surrounding scholar everything. Attention shifted from Cheng Shi's mysterious return to why their colleague had just exposed himself.

"Korius — since when!?"

Scholars formed a circle around the suspect. From behind, Volent's voice was cold:

"Take him down. Ensure the experiment proceeds orderly."

But at that command, Korius suddenly raised his right hand — pinky extended toward Volent — and without hesitation drove it toward his own eye, exactly like Galusha before him.

Too bad—

CRACK—

"GHLK—"

He failed!

'Are you kidding? The first time was inexperience. Now that I know what you people do — did you really think I'd let you detonate?'

Cheng Shi seized the scholar's hand, dislocated his joints, and slammed an elbow into his upper abdomen — dropping Korius to the ground.

"Restrain him. Watch the others — they may be able to self-detonate."

Everyone stared at Cheng Shi with astonishment — as if this stranger-colleague were an omniscient prophet.

But a prophet could only foretell — not prevent what was coming.

Because just as this platform's threat was neutralized, violent explosions erupted from the other two experiment platforms.

The shockwave threw countless scholars to the floor. Cheng Shi's pupils contracted. He spun around — and through the chaos, saw the entire experimental apparatus activating again!

"!!!?"

Galusha's figure reappeared on the departure platform. Only this time, she was dragging several scholars' corpses.

Cheng Shi leaned forward, locking eyes with her — and saw madness so thick it couldn't be wiped away.

Chapter 1035: I Refuse to Believe This!

Something felt deeply wrong. Everything before him struck Cheng Shi as supremely bizarre.

Logically, this experiment was designed to counter Galusha. Now that she'd infiltrated — why didn't she destroy it? Why activate it instead?

The first time, Cheng Shi could rationalize: she'd seized the departure platform, ensuring the two charred survivors couldn't complete the Erudition Presidium's mission.

But this time? She'd literally blown up the experiment platforms. She could've strangled the experiment in its crib. Why trigger the activation again in the chaos?

Cheng Shi couldn't make sense of it. But there was no time to think. The experiment was about to fail — the departure platform cleared again. Through smoke and pandemonium, he glimpsed two shadowy figures still standing behind Galusha. Then, steadily, he snapped his fingers before the trial failure notification could trigger.

SNAP—

Time curled backward. Everything reset once more.

The echo of "Fabricated laws — a cosmic joke" faded. Cheng Shi's brow was tight. He immediately pulled out the Thorn Weeping Rite and strapped it to his arm.

"I refuse to believe this!"

He could see now: this might be a war of attrition.

From two retrogression attempts, the number of Galusha's moles embedded in the backup experimental team remained unknown. As an outsider, gaining the grand scholars' trust quickly was nearly impossible — which meant he couldn't rapidly screen the entire team.

And Galusha's agents were like suicide bombers — one misstep and they'd self-detonate to create chaos. Extremely difficult to handle.

So he needed a complete strategy before he could compete with the well-prepared Galusha inside that experiment ground — racing against the clock.

Cheng Shi sprinted toward the west, thinking. If the outsider identity didn't work, then... what about an insider?

His eyes lit up. A plan crystallized instantly — though he'd need someone's cooperation.

He stopped mid-sprint, turned, and probed toward the shadows amid the surrounding smoke and fire:

"Stop hiding. I know you're there."

No response. Just crackling flames and the occasional spray of sparks.

'Not here?'

Cheng Shi's brow twitched. He moved to leave — then paused and spoke again:

"I've found the Erudition Presidium's hideout. Instead of lurking in the dark debating whether to ambush me, go see if you can dig out the grand scholars.

Find them, let me get the Ritual of Truth, and I promise to craft you a pair of eyes perfectly resembling His — for you to admire day and night."

The moment those words fell, a figure emerged from the nearby shadows.

Chen Yi!

The Old Days Hunter appeared, expression frigid. He had zero interest in Cheng Shi's proposal — to him, it wasn't love. It was blasphemy.

But just as he was about to "judge" Cheng Shi and make a move against this [Deceit] follower who dared tempt him into sacrilege, Cheng Shi took all the blame upon himself.

"Easy. I know this is blasphemy — but the sin is mine alone.

I used the Ritual of Truth to create a sculptural replica of [Memory]'s eyes, intending to defile Him nightly. Then a devout [Memory] follower seized the sculpture from me — keeping it close, guarding it always.

Such pure faith — earth-shaking, heaven-moving. Surely worthy of being recorded as a memory and placed in His Collection Hall. Don't you think, Chen Yi?"

"..."

Chen Yi — dagger already drawn — froze mid-step. His expression shifted. Slowly, he moved his hand behind his back and slid the dagger right back into its sheath.

Fierce internal struggle played across his face. Seeing this, Cheng Shi knew the fish had bitten.

'Good lord. These fish are way too easy to catch nowadays.'

'Straight hook or not — the fish was willing to climb the line!'

Cheng Shi didn't want to waste more time. Seeing Chen Yi still agonizing — no, glancing repeatedly his way as if waiting for an exit — Cheng Shi caught on immediately. He turned and said:

"I was just talking to myself. Pretend you didn't see me.

I'm heading to the underground space beneath the west district timber warehouse. Unfortunately, the grand scholars sealed it with a formation. I can't get in.

And if I can't get in, I obviously can't get the Ritual of Truth. Sigh — I'll keep trying."

With that, Cheng Shi simply walked away.

Watching the Fate Weaver's retreating figure, Chen Yi clenched his fists, teeth grinding.

He knew he was being used. But thinking about having His eyes beside him always...

"West district timber warehouse!"

A swift-footed assassin vanished into the smoke-filled shadows.

Soon, formation-breaking explosions echoed from the timber warehouse — identical to the first time. Chen Yi had dragged Pe Laya over again to do his work. Clearly, after his fight with Meng Youfang ended in a draw, he'd encountered the isolated grand scholar.

As the formation neared collapse, Cheng Shi stood in an inconspicuous corner of the ruins, calculating the timing. He snapped his fingers — teleporting back into the experiment ground.

He knew that when the formation disturbance began, the three security-assigned grand scholars would head to the tunnel to intercept intruders. That window was his best chance to don a grand scholar's disguise.

So this time, he didn't play the unfortunate common scholar. At the corridor corner, he pulled out the grand scholar robes preserved from the corpse inside the Molten Coffin, smeared his face with a blood packet until his features blurred, donned a hood, and hurried toward the experiment ground.

Every scholar who saw him scrambled aside, bowing respectfully. Cheng Shi said nothing. Reaching Volent's platform, he waved — and the security scholars let him up.

The instant he faced Volent, the old fox's eyes narrowed. After a moment's pause, rather than exposing Cheng Shi, the grand scholar beckoned him close and asked quietly:

"Who are you?"

Cheng Shi smiled. His gamble had paid off. The Erudition Presidium's top-ranked grand scholar was deeply shrewd — genuinely unflappable. It was Volent's decisive handling in the previous two runs that had earned Cheng Shi's trust, making him believe this scholar could be a reliable "inside man."

"Forgive me, Grand Scholar Volent. I didn't mean to impersonate — but the problem you're facing is extremely severe..."

Cheng Shi shared every detail once more. Then, expression grave:

"To protect the Erudition Presidium's plan — to ensure the Tower of Logic can continue pursuing [Truth] — Grand Scholar, you must consider locking down the experiment first. Complete the screening and purge, then restart.

After everything I've said, you should realize I'm on your side. So — how we proceed is your call. I'll follow your lead."

Volent's eyes shifted again and again. He studied Cheng Shi for a long while before asking:

"Why help us? You're not a [Truth] follower."

Cheng Shi didn't hide it: "This is a transaction. After I help you through this crisis, I trust the Erudition Presidium won't shortchange me. Right, Grand Scholar Volent?"

Volent pondered with an inscrutable expression. Then he summoned several security scholars, issued final inspection orders, and instructed them to use magical barriers to isolate all suspects — preventing self-detonation from affecting the experiment ground.

Watching the security scholars bow in acknowledgment — then sneak glances at each other — Cheng Shi's heart dropped.

"No!"

The next second, every security scholar simultaneously drove their pinkies into their eye sockets.

"..."

BOOM — BOOM — BOOM —

Time rewound once more. [Time]'s kin returned to the beginning.

...

Chapter 1036: Alright, Alright, I Believe You...

'Isn't this a bit too absurd?'

The security scholars the Erudition Presidium had taken should've been the Tower of Logic's most loyal. How were Galusha's people among them?

And not just one — a whole group. Was this even plausible?

Cheng Shi stood atop the ruins, rubbing his head and replaying the events. He distinctly remembered those security scholars fighting Galusha's moles before the second explosion. Now they were all moles?

'Wait — has the Erudition Presidium been infiltrated into a sieve!?'

'Don't tell me every single person in the experimental team — aside from the three grand scholars — is a mole!'

'Then this isn't the Erudition Presidium's experiment — it's [Folly]'s experiment!'

'Hold on!'

'[Folly]?'

Cheng Shi had never understood why Galusha kept activating the experiment rather than destroying it. But if he shifted perspective — when this experiment no longer belonged to [Truth] but to [Folly]...

'Hss—'

'Could Galusha have been driving this experiment all along!?'

The conjecture was so audacious it startled even himself.

He hadn't forgotten: this was the Erudition Presidium's trap, designed specifically against Galusha and Pe Laya. And it was likely improvised — not a pre-existing contingency.

If even an improvised plan was dominated by Galusha's will, then the assistants closest to the grand scholars — their students, their aides — had long been replaced by Galusha's people!

Only that way could they subtly influence every decision the grand scholars made.

If true, Galusha's infiltration was terrifying. She'd single-handedly turned the Tower of Logic into a sieve, silently steering the Erudition Presidium's choices. And possibly even—

The Barren Walker's shell that Pe Laya had "abandoned" in the lab could be another piece on the board!

And Pe Laya's betrayal was the masterstroke — threading that inconspicuous piece into the grand scheme.

Together, they'd placed countless subtle moves that collectively guided the Erudition Presidium into mounting this desperate "retrogression" experiment to save their collapsing tower!

So what exactly was this [Folly] Wise Man trying to accomplish through this experiment?

That wasn't the most critical question. The most critical was: if this experiment no longer belonged to [Truth]... what should the players do?

Help it succeed? Or sabotage it to abort?

Cheng Shi froze.

He wanted to discuss this with someone, but he still lacked a key piece: what exactly was Galusha sending back through the experiment?

He ran toward the west district once more, face grim.

This time, he wouldn't interfere with the experiment at all. He wanted to see what Galusha was truly after!

SNAP—

Fingers snapped. Body vanished.

Cheng Shi reappeared at the corridor corner. The environment was etched into his bones by now. He timed it precisely — dashed out, knocked over the unfortunate Acier again, stole his clothes, and blended in with the scholars.

The corridor scholars mostly did relay communication between the experiment ground's stations. Cheng Shi lingered in the crowd for a while before finally being summoned — joining several scholars heading toward the departure platform to inspect equipment functionality.

He didn't know how many of his group were Galusha's sleepers and didn't dare probe. If exposing someone's identity triggered those hotheads to pull out their pinky-finger detonators again...

So this time, he was perfectly obedient. Did nothing. Just worked quietly while observing everyone's body language.

And he noticed plenty. Among the dozen-plus scholars who'd come with him from the corridor, seven or eight had repeatedly glanced at the small door connecting to the first echelon beneath the departure platform — clearly awaiting Galusha's appearance.

Among the security scholars already guarding the departure platform, at least ten were exchanging glances with the infiltrators. Meaning in a group of thirty-plus around the departure platform, at least a third were Galusha's "rebels"!

'With those numbers, how could this experiment possibly "succeed"!?'

'Even if the grand scholars were half-blind, how had infiltration reached this level?'

'Or had they sat on their thrones so long they'd stopped caring about the people below them?'

Cheng Shi was staggered. His curiosity about Galusha's plan intensified.

But soon enough, corridor guards somehow discovered the real Acier stuffed in a corner. The alarm triggered immediately. Security scholars converged on Cheng Shi's position.

"..."

'Luck's a bit off. But not terrible.'

Because right then, vibrations rippled from the formation above — someone was attacking it!

Teammates!

Cheng Shi checked the time. The designated rendezvous had arrived. Someone had found this place — undoubtedly thanks to Wei Zhi's "tip." The only question was how the Life Sage would react to finding him missing.

The formation's disturbance drew the experiment ground's attention. Scholars exchanged alarmed, grave looks — giving Cheng Shi an opening.

He snapped to the spot where he'd hidden Acier. Then, to the man's utter confusion, knocked out the one scholar who'd been helping Acier up, changed into that scholar's clothes, and walked back into the experiment ground supporting the dazed Acier.

Acier was terrified. He tried to cry for help — but the next instant, a scalpel pressed into his ribs. Cheng Shi smiled warmly:

"The experiment belongs to the Tower of Logic, but this life belongs to you. If I were you, I wouldn't shout. Agreed?"

Acier bit down hard. Through gritted teeth: "[Truth]'s followers never submit!"

Cheng Shi blinked. He hadn't expected this one to be so fierce.

"Alright then. Guess I'll send you to meet [Truth] in person."

He moved to thrust upward. Acier frantically seized his arm, even angrier: "Why can't you just knock me out again!?"

"?"

Cheng Shi burst out laughing: "This is 'never submit'?"

"Not submitting doesn't mean not adapting! [Truth] that can't adapt is dead dogma — how is that different from [Order]?"

Acier lifted his chin, eyes silently urging: 'Hurry up and knock me out before someone notices!'

Cheng Shi rolled his eyes. One chop to the neck — then dragged the body into the experiment ground.

Incoming security scholars frowned and questioned him. Cheng Shi deflected each one. But everyone's attention was on the formation's massive reverberations overhead, so they let him haul Acier off to "rest" without thorough checks.

Cheng Shi edged closer to the experiment ground's center. Then, as before, Volent declared launch-ready status. First echelon scholars filed onto the departure platform.

Seeing he'd been forgotten, Cheng Shi dumped Acier in a corner, fixed his gaze on Galusha's position, and waited for her to make her move.

Sure enough — with the formation still intact and the experiment about to begin — Galusha struck!

This time, without any player interference, Galusha again removed her hood and confronted the grand scholars in a blaze of madness. She activated the experiment before they could, then slaughtered every scholar on the departure platform!

Cheng Shi watched the scene repeat. He still didn't understand her goal — until he saw Galusha's companions extract two scholars from the reserve team and shove them onto the departure platform. That's when it clicked: everything Galusha had done was to send those two people back!

Unfortunately, the explosions' shockwaves and flames blocked his view. He couldn't make out the two faces. By the time he found an angle, the experiment was done — the scholars had been blasted through the spacetime corridor.

"...Interesting. Now I've got you."

A glint flashed in Cheng Shi's eyes. He casually snapped his fingers.

At the formation entrance, Fang Yuan and Meng Youfang — who'd strained everything to finally break through — watched in bewilderment as the shattered formation runes repaired themselves, and their own figures vanished.

"?"

...

Chapter 1037: It Was Them!?

Fourth time.

Cheng Shi appeared in the west district again, called out Chen Yi, and used the same near-identical straight hook to bait the hunter into creating a disturbance.

Chen Yi took the bait — again. But staring at Cheng Shi's disappearing back, the hunter felt an eerie sense of *déjà vu*.

Then, under cover of the formation's thunderous assault, Cheng Shi slipped into the experiment ground, heading straight for his target.

His target was no longer Galusha. It was the two scholars in the reserve echelon — the ones whose faces he hadn't seen clearly!

But the small door beneath the departure platform was guarded. Cheng Shi wasn't even sure if the lone security scholar stationed there belonged to the Erudition Presidium or Galusha. So he had to use cunning.

He wove through the vast experiment ground, switching identities across multiple corners until he'd stolen a security scholar's uniform. Hood pulled low to hide his face, he approached the small door.

Before the guard could send him away, Cheng Shi struck first:

"Kadir, change of plans. The situation's shifted. I need to get inside and notify the commander."

The scholar called Kadir started, then frowned deeply. Without a word, he reached for the alarm lever.

'Fifty-fifty. Wrong pick.'

Cheng Shi was exasperated. So this one wasn't Galusha's man after all?

Fortunately, his reflexes were fast. He immediately waved him off:

"Relax — this is a new screening protocol. I'm conducting a covert inspection of all reserve personnel's loyalty before launch status.

Scholar Kadir, you passed. But now let me inside to accelerate the screening.

You can hear it too — the enemy's found this place and is attacking. We have to race against time."

Kadir's hand paused. It sounded like a cover story after a failed passcode exchange. But coincidentally, the moment Cheng Shi finished speaking, Volent's voice from the experiment platform announced launch-ready status. Hard not to believe now.

Along with the launch command came another order from Volent: Kadir was to open the small door and release the first echelon.

Kadir froze. He looked at Cheng Shi — meaning: 'You haven't finished your screening and we're releasing them already?'

Cheng Shi improvised on the spot:

"The situation above must be worse than anticipated. Then we follow the grand scholars' orders first.

Scholar Kadir, you've earned absolute clearance. I need your help. Screen the first echelon for me — I'll go in and screen the reserve. Deal?"

Kadir hesitated briefly, then nodded. He opened the door and released everyone inside.

Cheng Shi stood right beside the door, watching Galusha pass by him head-down once more. He stayed absolutely still, perfectly inconspicuous. Only after every first-echelon scholar had boarded the departure platform did he turn and step through the door.

But just as he was about to search for those two figures, Kadir called from behind:

"Sbora — if you find something abnormal, what do we do?"

"?"

Cheng Shi froze. He hadn't expected to be tested now.

Master of Deception told him the statement was false — and the only falsifiable part was the name. So even after agreeing to his request, Kadir was still suspicious?

'Tch. Scholars are cautious, huh.'

But Cheng Shi couldn't be bothered. Without turning: "First, I'm not Sborá. Second, I already walked in — what's the point of testing me now?"

He flicked a scalpel to keep the guard back, shut the door behind him, and hurried toward the reserve echelon's prep room.

Beyond the door lay two spaces: a large standby room at the front, and a prep room connected behind it. When the first echelon boarded the platform, the reserve echelon moved forward from the prep room to standby.

Cheng Shi met the moving scholars head on. His sharp eyes swept the startled crowd, scanning for the two figures he'd barely glimpsed twice before. Soon he locked onto the last two people at the queue's tail.

At that moment, Kadir triggered the alarm outside, alerting the entire experiment ground. Departure platform scholars erupted in chaos. Several shoved aside teammates and leapt down, rushing toward the standby room.

Galusha led the charge. She kicked Kadir out of the way, cracked the small door with her whip, and stormed in without hesitation, face dark.

She'd never imagined the plan would break down here. Under her arrangement, agents in other departments had deployed enough smoke screens. The Erudition Presidium's fools shouldn't have traced things back to the reserve echelon — personnel with absolutely clean backgrounds.

But the last thing she wanted to see had happened. When she burst back into the standby room like a gale, she found the unidentified scholar standing at the far end — each hand gripping a reserve member's throat — facing her from across the room, shaking his head with a soft laugh:

"No wonder I couldn't figure out why you were so interested in an experiment meant to save the Tower of Logic. The answer was here all along.

Well, well, well!

The assassination wasn't assassination — it was instruction! The prevention wasn't prevention — it was enlightenment!

With this one move, you've eliminated your own future worries and left the grand scholars with nowhere to turn. What a masterful Wise Man, thinking ten steps ahead!

But I wonder — when you altered their memories, did you ever consider that the person secretly scheming against you from behind... was your future self!?

Ga. Lu. Sha!"

Cheng Shi interrogated her word by word, his tone nothing but shock — because the two people in his grip were all too familiar.

The gravely composed man in his left hand was unmistakably the vice-captain who'd commanded the Iron Law Knights' Seventeenth Squad in Montelani — Grind!

And the woman in his right hand? Not hard to guess — the female knight who'd once served as young Galusha's personal guard — Melina!

Who could have imagined that these two scholars, who'd infiltrated the Grand Tribunal to purge traitors from the Tower of Logic, had been dispatched from here!

'The Erudition Presidium you serve isn't the one at its zenith — it's the one at death's door!'

'What — in the last second before this divine nation's collapse, you still won't give up trying to seize [Time]'s authority?'

The "you" here didn't mean Galusha and the Erudition Presidium — but the Benefactors rising high behind each of them: [Folly] and [Truth].

Cheng Shi was overcome with emotion. Thoughts raced — if the experiment's truth was this, then should it go forward or not? Because either way, [Truth]'s will seemed destined to be severed from this continent.

He looked at Galusha, wanting to ask what she had to say about the fact that the hatred she championed had been birthed by her own hands from the future. But the answer didn't come from Galusha — it came from the "Melina" his left hand was restraining.

"Melina" gripped his hand with both of hers, struggling upward:

"This... isn't... a scheme..."

"?????"

The instant Cheng Shi heard that voice, he was thunderstruck.

It wasn't the Melina he remembered. It was a voice he'd heard only recently — within this very trial — mere hours ago!

'Pe Laya!!!'

Could you imagine Pe Laya's voice coming from Melina's mouth?

Cheng Shi's mind went blank. He snapped his gaze to his right hand — and in the instant he saw those eyes swimming with panic, yearning, and an indescribable emotion — a vicious whip crack sent him flying.

Then, countless surrounding scholars swarmed in. Synchronized detonation. The blast hurled a grim-faced Cheng Shi back to the surface ruins of Tusnat.

Fifth time.

Cheng Shi's eyes opened again. He stared up at the blazing sun overhead and, for the first time, felt he didn't understand this world anymore.

Because he was certain that in "Melina's" — no, Pe Laya's — eyes, he'd seen something called love.

That love obviously wasn't directed at him. As for who...

'Hss—'

'I always said you could learn things from watching your neighbor. If I hadn't observed Xie Yang every day, who'd have known what that kind of look meant?'

...

Chapter 1038: Facing Pe Laya Again

So — the "she" Pe Laya's reflection had been talking about was never her present self. It was Galusha!?

Once Cheng Shi figured this out, his expression became absolutely exquisite.

He'd imagined countless methods Galusha might have used to turn Pe Laya — but never this one.

'You're telling me that the [Folly] Wise Man — the person most likely to be a sapiosexual — used love... to turn a [Truth] scholar who needed emotion least of all?'

'Wise Man. Love. Scholar. Can these three form a coherent sentence?'

'Who said "sentimentality is the greatest obstacle on the road to [Truth] — it will trip you"?''

'Ha. Turns out you tripped yourself, didn't you!?''

Cheng Shi laughed in disbelief. But this only fueled his motivation.

Compared to studying how to clear the trial, gossip was the true engine of human effort!

His eyes lit up. He found a suitable spot for conversation, then summoned Chen Yi. He knew the hunter was currently controlling a Pe Laya — whether the original or a slice didn't matter. She would know the details of this so-called "love story." Cheng Shi was dying to eat this melon.

When Chen Yi heard Cheng Shi call him by name, he was puzzled — how had the other detected him? But then:

"I know Pe Laya is in your hands. You must have noticed the thing between her and Galusha by now.

With your sensitivity to emotion, you definitely picked up on her irregularity. Well — that unusual story is exactly what I want to hear. And I think it's quite the memory.

Think about it: [Folly] and [Truth] abandon rationality and spark love's flame — this scene that defies faith opposition is exactly the direction you should be studying, isn't it?

Humans and gods are also opposed in a way. How to dissolve that opposition, how to cast aside rational faith and merge as one — don't tell me that doesn't move you!"

Chen Yi emerged, face dark:

"You know nothing about love. Mortal love is fragile and twisted — not worth recording. How could it guide me? Absurd!"

"..."

Cheng Shi regarded the disdainful Chen Yi and thought: encountering both him and Meng Youfang in one trial was the ultimate duo of delusion. No wonder [Fate] had to rush in before the trial even started. If this wasn't fate, what was?

Seeing Chen Yi's revulsion toward mortal love, Cheng Shi recycled the Ritual of Truth sculpted-eyes excuse.

And the proof: folly was folly precisely because the hook worked every single time.

Chen Yi gritted his teeth and agreed. He'd trade Pe Laya for the chance. Even if Cheng Shi was lying — as the man himself had said, being willingly used was worth memorizing.

So under multiple straight hooks' stimulation, Chen Yi flung out the battered Pe Laya.

The moment the real Pe Laya appeared before him, Cheng Shi finally understood why she'd looked familiar.

'Bone structure!'

Pe Laya and Melina shared no obvious surface features — but their underlying bone structure was nearly identical. This confirmed that "Melina" was indeed Pe Laya in disguise. The question remained: why had Pe Laya willingly gone back in time — and taken Melina's appearance?

Baffled, Cheng Shi went straight to the point. He told Pe Laya everything he knew and asked why she'd personally returned to the past.

Realizing the entire plan had been exposed, Pe Laya froze. Her first instinct wasn't to explain or plead for her life — she clutched something inside her clothes, apparently trying to signal Galusha.

Fortunately, the assassin Chen Yi was sharp-eyed and quick-handed. One kick sent Pe Laya sprawling. He crushed the signal gun from her coat, voice cold: "Last chance. Any more tricks and I'll kill you."

"Then kill me!" Pe Laya wore the face of someone ready to die.

Chen Yi glanced at her with contempt, snorted, and stepped aside.

Cheng Shi smiled, ready to continue questioning — when Pe Laya turned to Chen Yi:

"If the one you loved was in danger, would you abandon them?"

Chen Yi's face darkened. Then a cold smile: "He wouldn't be. How could mortals comprehend a true god's magnificence?"

"?"

Pe Laya blanked. Something in her muddled brain told her she hadn't misheard. This pale, cold man's beloved was actually a... true god?

'True god — or true lunatic?'

Her train of thought derailed. She went speechless.

But Chen Yi wasn't done. He continued in disdain — on matters of love, he was even more of a [Folly] devotee than Galusha:

"Besides, your love for her has already withered. Stop pretending. I can see it — there's no love left in your eyes."

"?"

Now Cheng Shi froze.

'No love? I just saw Xie Yang-level adoration in Melina's eyes. What do you mean "no love"?'

Chen Yi quickly answered: "You've already transferred your affections."

"!!!"

'There's another player!?'

Cheng Shi was like a dedicated melon-eater — gaze bouncing between the two, providing maximum emotional engagement. Sadly, neither appreciated it.

One had a shattered gaze and ghostly face — as if her deepest secret had been laid bare. The other was cold and lofty — feeling that mortals' sordid affairs didn't deserve to touch his pure love.

'Pe Laya transferred to who?'

'I haven't even figured out how those two got together, and we're already fast-forwarding to the love triangle?'

Cheng Shi's eyes glowed brighter. He looked at Pe Laya for an explanation. But she was set on dying — and refused to speak.

Out of options, Cheng Shi turned to [Memory]'s follower.

Chen Yi's mind might be "special," but his skills were genuinely useful. Without wasting time, he used a straw-like tool to extract Pe Laya's memories and tossed them to Cheng Shi:

"I have zero interest in mortals' unfaithful love. Remember your promise. I'll come find you the moment you attempt to defile my Lord.

But remember — only attempt. Do not let me discover you actually defiled Him!"

Then Chen Yi vanished again.

Watching this singularly focused teammate leave once more, Cheng Shi was momentarily speechless.

No wonder Zhen Yi had loved toying with him so much. A con artist meeting a simpleton — who wouldn't want to see what happened?

"..."

'Not me. Definitely not me. I'm not that unlucky!'

Cheng Shi shook his head, clearing the noise. After confirming Pe Laya was unconscious, he began carefully reviewing memories of her and Galusha.

The tool's contents had already been filtered by Chen Yi — nothing but love-related memories. Whether the man was secretly dying to record this love story despite his protests... well, Cheng Shi couldn't explain the Memory follower's efficiency otherwise.

That whole performance earlier had clearly been an act.

'Tch. Hard to judge.'

Cheng Shi settled his mind and dove into Pe Laya's perspective, exploring this deliciously gossip-worthy memory. But the very first scene yanked his thoughts back to that afternoon in Dolgod.

Because he saw young Pe Laya happily flipping through her great-grandmother's diary. And the name written on the diary's title page was—

Melina.

"!!!?"

So — which came first: Pe Laya, or Melina?

...

Chapter 1039: "Inherited" and Corrupted "Love"

It was a diary that laid bare the heart.

Melina had meticulously recorded how she'd received the Erudition Presidium's commission alongside Grind to travel to the Grand Tribunal and eliminate the defecting scholar Selius.

In Katouting, the neighboring nation's capital, her outstanding performance earned her a place among the Iron Law Knights. Keinlaur himself had assigned her to young Galusha's side as personal guard.

From there, she began getting close to little Galusha.

At that time, Galusha was simply a precocious girl. She had sharp eyes that could vaguely discern the motivations behind adults' actions — yet her attempts to read interpersonal dynamics remained endearingly naive.

She often sought Melina's guidance. And Melina, no matter how hard she concealed it, carried traces of a will fundamentally different from [Order] — the unmistakable shadow of [Truth]. Coupled with her loyalty and devotion to the Erudition Presidium, she reasoned: if she could draw an [Order] leader's descendant toward [Truth], perhaps someday the friction between the Grand Tribunal and the Tower of Logic could ease into coexistence.

So she began her path of "education."

And it was this mentorship of young Galusha that eventually led her alongside the girl to Selius — giving her a glimpse of mission completion.

But the Grand Tribunal wasn't calm waters either. Just as grand scholars backstabbed each other for experimental resources and stopped at nothing to enter the Erudition Presidium, factions within the Grand Tribunal were investigating Keinlaur's ties to [Truth].

Melina's proximity to Galusha made her a target. She survived multiple ambushes. The worst one nearly cost her all consciousness — but when she woke to find little Galusha tending to her bedside, something in Melina broke open.

Not in any forbidden way. She wholeheartedly took young Galusha as her student — her only student — because she wasn't yet senior enough to formally take one on.

From then on, her attitude toward Galusha shifted. She wanted to lead the girl away from [Order]'s quagmire and become a true [Truth] follower. But she knew it couldn't be rushed. So she redoubled her efforts to reshape every perception and thought of this ruler's heir.

Galusha truly changed. She began seeing the world through [Truth]'s eyes.

Shamefully, this wasn't Melina's doing alone — Selius had played his part. His reasoning was predictable: befriending a leader's heir would improve his position in Montelani. But this created an agonizing dilemma for Melina.

Her mission was to kill Selius. But she didn't want to make little Galusha sad. A wild thought even took root: if things stayed this way, then as long as Selius lived, she could remain in the Grand Tribunal — watching over her student until she grew up.

But individual reluctance was useless. Grind dreamed of glory. He planned attack after attack, finally striking during a deathmatch sentence exhibition — and killing Selius.

From that moment, Melina knew her time with Galusha was over. She had to return to the land where [Truth] flowed.

Still, she wanted to say goodbye. She'd even prepared a reason for her disappearance — one that could comfort both herself and the girl.

But before the words left her mouth, Galusha died. Died because of her moment of distraction.

The unbearable reality shattered Melina's defenses completely. She hated herself, hated the Grand Tribunal, even began hating the Tower of Logic. She didn't know why there was so much hatred inside

her. She only knew that her student — the perfect student she'd watched grow for so many years — was just... gone.

She set fire to Selius's laboratory and returned to Tusnat.

Thanks to Melina and Grind's exemplary service, their standing within their departments rose. They became pillars of their fields, taking on more experimental projects and teaching responsibilities.

But no matter how many students Melina mentored, she never found another as brilliant and flawless as Galusha.

Her obsession drove her to record her longing in a notebook every day. That evolved into daily meditative recollection. As she aged, the accumulated obsession outgrew mere daydreaming. She decided to secretly conduct forbidden experiments — writing Galusha's existence into her own genes.

'This way, Galusha wouldn't truly be dead.'

The diary's later entries were mostly mundane, but they revealed Melina's fixation had crossed normal emotional boundaries — warping into a pain she couldn't release and refused to release.

And this "twisted pain" grew more entrenched with each generation of genetic inheritance — until it reached Pe Laya's generation...

Young Pe Laya was a rare genius. From childhood, she displayed dazzling intellect and remarkable [Truth] talent. Everyone in the family said she was Melina the Grand Scholar's perfect successor — a star of [Truth] rivaling the one called Galusha.

Blood's pull and public praise drew Pe Laya ever deeper into fascination with Galusha. She believed her great-grandmother's obsession had been etched into the genes passed down through generations — shaping her into Galusha's "likeness."

She grew more and more enamored with the "Galusha" who resembled herself. She even began confiding in her.

Whenever experiments went wrong or lab politics left her frazzled, she'd sit before a mirror and pour out her grievances to "the other self" — just as Melina had written in her diary, unburdening every pressure to the reflection within the glass.

Over the years, the "Galusha" in the mirror became Pe Laya's spiritual anchor. She felt only that reflection could understand her — could accompany her on this lonely road of [Truth].

Up to this point, everything was still "normal." But the fates of [Fate] loved their cruel jokes. One day, when Pe Laya was pouring her heart out to "Galusha" after yet another devastating experimental failure — the real Galusha climbed in through the window.

She'd been listening for a long time. Without a single wasted word, she pulled over a screen and, under Pe Laya's stunned gaze, began writing and sketching.

She explained why the experiment had failed. Analyzed optimization steps. Even offered suggestions so unthinkable they bordered on impossible — claiming that with these changes, the experiment would likely succeed.

Pe Laya was dumbstruck. She stared at this familiar yet stranger woman and asked who she was.

A breathtaking smile bloomed on Galusha's face. She said her name.

"Galusha."

In that moment, no one could comprehend the sense of salvation flooding Pe Laya's heart. And in that moment, the [Truth] in Pe Laya's soul was given form in the world.

...

Chapter 1040: Tch, [Deceit] Followers Really Are Too Wicked

The later memories barely needed looking — Cheng Shi could guess the rest.

Galusha had come to Tusnat as a vanguard. To destroy the Tower of Logic, she had to lay pieces on the board here. But what Cheng Shi never imagined was that her very first pick was Pe Laya — of all people.

From there, Galusha used her [Folly]-born brilliance, guiding Pe Laya through experiment after experiment until she'd climbed into the Erudition Presidium. At that point, the Tower of Logic's downfall was all but sealed.

Pe Laya had tripped herself on a twisted emotion inherited from her ancestor — and tripped the Erudition Presidium with her. Yet here and now, the grand scholars had no idea they were about to send this "original instigator" back into the past!

The memories ended there. But Cheng Shi still couldn't find the "transferred affections" Chen Yi had mentioned.

Though even the most emotionally obtuse person could guess: Pe Laya could only have fallen in love with Galusha. There was no "transfer" possible — because this emotion was genetically inherited from Melina, etched into bone. Even if she did transfer... the object wouldn't be a stranger. It would be—

Another Galusha.

Cheng Shi was silent for a long time before waking Pe Laya, his expression peculiar:

"So this is why you want to go back?"

Her [Folly] and your [Truth] run in opposite directions. You felt betrayed?"

Hearing this, Pe Laya knew her memories had been laid bare. Face ashen, she collapsed sideways and shook her head:

"She didn't betray me. I betrayed her..."

I can't see [Truth]'s path forward — not because [Folly] interfered, but because [Truth] was always cold and heartless.

I grew accustomed to [Truth]'s indifference. But I couldn't bear watching her grow more deranged in her obsession with destroying [Truth].

Perhaps I can accept a road that will never reach [Truth]. But I cannot accept my beloved changing beyond recognition.

So it was I who proposed going back — to meet the version of her who hadn't yet embraced [Folly], who was absolutely perfect in Melina's eyes.

She... agreed."

"..."

'Of course Galusha agreed. If she could sabotage the Erudition Presidium's last resort while satisfying your wish — why wouldn't she?'

"But why did it have to be Melina?"

Don't you see the problem with that?"

Grand Scholar, you're intelligent. If your return to the past is inevitable, then taking Melina's identity will trap you forever in [Time]'s prison — a prisoner bearing the weight of both [Time] and [Truth].

Galusha may want to eliminate the Erudition Presidium's legacy. But you? You'll become the sole victim. Aren't you afraid?"

Pe Laya blinked. Then suddenly smiled.

Her smile was radiant — utterly content.

"Afraid?"

What is there to fear?

If that prison is filled from beginning to end with her — her childhood, her growth — then isn't that exactly the world I've always longed for?"

"..." Cheng Shi paused. "Even without [Truth]?"

Pe Laya smiled and shook her head:

"You're wrong. The present and future may have no [Truth]. But in the past — He was always there.

And so was she."

"..."

'Ha. What a grand scholar — running from reality.'

'Who says love makes people blind? She was calculating perfectly. As long as she lived in the temporal loop woven from [Time] and [Truth], she'd be "the happiest" person forever.'

The gossip was done. But Cheng Shi felt no satisfaction — because one question had nagged him throughout: [Truth] appeared determined to seize [Time]'s authority. He just didn't know what He'd seized, or what terrifying experiment He planned to use that temporal power for.

[Time] surely knew. But He didn't have the time to intervene. So did the Fun God know?

Hmm. To be safe, he'd need to report to the Fun God immediately after the trial ended.

Cheng Shi thought for a long while. Having learned the full story, he began evaluating how to crack this trial.

Simply completing the experiment wouldn't work. Galusha's success equaled the Erudition Presidium's failure, and the grand scholars' failure meant [Truth] couldn't continue.

That directly contradicted the trial's objective. Definitely not the solution.

But with so many moles, how could the grand scholars succeed?

Actually, Cheng Shi had already thought of a simple, effective plan: clear the departure platform, send a player back to prevent young Galusha's growth — or more historically accurate, just eliminate Selius. Because without slice technology, Galusha could never have survived to the present.

Also, eliminating Selius might mean Keinlaur didn't last long either. Then the Common Law Faction's funding of the Tower of Logic's internal wars would stall — letting the Tower stand longer and stronger.

Sounded solid. One problem: who could guarantee they'd return from that historical retrogression after completing the mission?

One wrong step, and the person sent back could end up like Aph Ros — lost forever in [Time]'s cage...

He was a [Time] follower, true. But he couldn't risk it. Better to send a teammate. Someone like the Old Days Hunter — a [Memory] follower who could traverse history...

Besides, [Memory] and [Time] both belonged to [Existence]. Surely they wouldn't be that cruel to each other.

So... how to dupe — no, how to persuade Chen Yi into biting?

Cheng Shi stroked his chin, deep in thought.

'Not this time. I already promised him a sculpture via the Ritual of Truth. Before fulfilling that promise, he probably won't trust me again. So the only option is...'

Cheng Shi snapped his fingers without hesitation. Once more, he returned to the city center ruins.

Sixth time.

His objective was crystal clear: use the same pitch to lure Chen Yi into the experiment ground and have him replace Grind and Melina — go back in time, eliminate Selius (or even Galusha), then return to the trial victorious.

Of course, as a peak player, perhaps no one wanted to target Galusha directly. Just killing Selius would suffice.

Cheng Shi quickly found Chen Yi. He made lavish promises again — but this time Chen Yi agreed to nothing. He simply stared at Cheng Shi, brow tight, feeling he'd somehow lived through this scene before.

He rummaged through his memories to confirm this wasn't delusion. Seeing the hook go untouched, Cheng Shi pivoted, offering a condition Chen Yi couldn't refuse:

"Have you... ever had an audience with your god?"

"!?"

Chen Yi froze. He looked up in shock, seemingly guessing what Cheng Shi was about to say. Cheng Shi didn't hide it, nodding firmly:

"That's right. Exactly what you think. If you've never had an audience with Him...

I happen to have one opportunity to meet [Time]. I can transfer it to you. As for how you'd convince [Time] to connect you to [Memory]... that's your problem.

Well? Is this enough?

Don't forget — winning the trial earns points too. If you're the key player who clears this trial, [Memory] will see you.

Usually His gaze might be a casual glance. But if this time you're standing before [Time]... do you think there's a chance you might..."

He didn't need to spell it out. The moment these conditions left his lips, Chen Yi's eyes went crimson.

"What do I need to do?"

Watching the Old Days Hunter pant and tremble with his whole body, Cheng Shi felt he'd suddenly acquired a puppet that could be deployed at will and would obey without question.

'Tch. [Deceit] followers really are too wicked.'

'Good thing I'm a [Time] follower.'

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