

## The Gods 222

### Chapter 222: The Prerequisite for Cooperation

Keinlaur?

Cheng Shi had heard the name before. In fact, any player who'd ever been assigned a Grand Tribunal trial set in the mid-Civilization era had heard of him to some extent.

He was one of the last three Supreme Inquisitors of the Grand Tribunal during the mid-Civilization period, and reportedly the most aggressive, most hawkish representative of the Shared Law Faction.

The Shared Law Faction differed from other factions within the Grand Tribunal. They believed that every living being in the world—regardless of faith—should exist under [Order]'s watchful eye, obey His rules, exalt His will, and achieve universal law across the cosmos.

As such, the Shared Law Faction was generally considered the most intent on unifying the Land of Hope. They had designs on virtually every other power on the continent.

Keinlaur was remembered by players not for his ideology, but for his military record.

It should be noted: hawkish does not equal competent in war.

Historically, during a pivotal battle concerning the founding of the Kingdom of War, Keinlaur had ordered a military advance at precisely the wrong moment, plunging the Grand Tribunal's main forces into an encirclement by the Kingdom of War's armies. This tore an irreparable gap in the entire southern front, causing the offensive of every allied army besieging the Kingdom of War to collapse completely.

He had single-handedly ended a war that spanned over a century—and handed victory to the nearly desperate Kingdom of War.

This campaign was a favorite among players for mocking [Order]'s limited military prowess. It was also one of the few historical moments memorable enough to astonish even casual players.

But here and now, in this time period, no one yet questioned a Supreme Inquisitor's authority or command ability—especially one whose stance on outward expansion was always so unyielding.

And yet this leader of the Shared Law Faction was secretly "collaborating" with a scholar from the Tower of Logic—all for the sake of what appeared to be rather dubious war machines.

It was almost too absurd to believe.

But absurdity, no matter how extreme, had to be accepted when it was fact. After all, absurdity was reality's baseline—and history's recurring motif.

Still, Cheng Shi wanted to verify one more thing. He picked up the experimental documents from the desk, held them in front of Niske's eyes, and had him "read aloud with feeling" for everyone's benefit.

Niske was dumbfounded. He'd never heard of an interrogation that included a reading session. But he complied—beggars can't be choosers.

As he read, however, the expressions of all three deceivers grew visibly more fascinating.

Because the contents of the experimental proposal matched virtually everything Niske had described.

In truth, Niske had never actually read these plans before. His understanding of the laboratory came entirely from his own observations and guesswork. Yet when he discovered his observations aligned almost perfectly with the official plans, a brief flash of self-admiration pierced even through his terror.

'My observations truly are meticulous! Apart from a few extremely specific procedural details, I got nearly everything right.'

Cheng Shi, however, did not share this assessment.

'Just as I thought,' he mused, then tossed the documents aside.

Fake.

Both the experimental process described in the documents and the "full picture" Niske had pieced together were fake.

Because if these documents were genuine, Selius wouldn't have merely glanced at the desk when he entered the office moments ago. He would have lunged for it—frantically checking whether any of these "spread openly on the desk yet supposedly confidential" plans had gone missing.

He had been too calm. So calm that he clearly didn't care whether these experimental plans leaked.

From that moment, Cheng Shi knew the documents had to be compromised. And now that a mere laboratory guard could recite contents identical to the plans, what purpose did this deeply buried, hidden facility even serve?

So everything was fake. The real experiment wasn't some Life Assimilation Experiment. As for what it actually was—perhaps the answer lay beyond this door.

Cheng Shi's peripheral vision slid toward the office door. Then he turned to Li Yi:

"It seems we're about to embark on a new adventure. Can I trust you, my Magician teammate?"

Li Yi smiled with resignation:

"I believe you can. But you won't."

"Then again, there's no cage big enough for me this time. So what method do you plan to use to keep me in check... my Priest teammate?"

"Smart!"

Cheng Shi snapped his fingers and held up the same black pill he'd rolled across Niske's face.

"I was bluffing earlier. This isn't 'Chaotic Sediment.' It's an A-rank item called a 'Shadow Oath Pill' that can—"

Before he could finish, Gao San interrupted—cutting off Cheng Shi's nose-picking mid-motion.

"We're all ghosts here. There's no need to keep lying to each other—especially when you can't fool us anyway."

"Shadow Oath Potion, used to bind shadows through oaths, is a liquid—not a pill. Even if you could precipitate it into a pill, you'd need a critical ingredient: un-withered Conjugate Whisper Petals."

"If you possessed something that precious, you wouldn't need to waste time talking to us."

"We do need to cooperate. But the prerequisite is giving each other a measure of trust."

"?"

Cheng Shi studied Gao San thoughtfully. This former follower of [Truth] seemed to know quite a lot.

"I trust you completely, of course. It's you all who seem to have trouble trusting me."

He laughed self-deprecatingly, then popped the pill into his mouth.

Crunch—the candy crumbled. Not sweet. Slightly bitter. Rich in flavor.

This was no ordinary candy, but rather a pellet Cheng Shi had made in his spare time by grinding up the toenails of an Ice Canyon Lizard and pressing them into a ball.

Since the bluff had failed, he might as well use it as a snack.

Li Yi watched Cheng Shi eat the "Shadow Oath Pill" and his eyelid twitched. He sighed:

"At the very least, there's no deep enmity between us. Even if we've used each other, isn't that simply how deceivers communicate?"

"Besides, you know all about us, while we've never understood you at all. I still don't even know what kind of deceiver you are."

"What's more, your combat power is practically crushing compared to ours. Cheng Shi—honestly, we should be the ones afraid of you, not the other way around."

Cheng Shi pursed his lips, not believing a single word.

'It's useless for the weak to guard against the strong. It's the strong who should guard against the weak.'

But Li Yi had gotten one thing right: Cheng Shi was confident that in a face-to-face confrontation—even a one-versus-two—he could take down both former colleagues.

This wasn't solely because he was the valiant Hero of Today. It was also because both of these two had contributed energy to the [Death] Fun Ring—just moments ago, when he killed Su Wu.

Cheng Shi's gratuitous second lightning bolt hadn't been merely a show of force. It wasn't simply to demonstrate that his devastating output wasn't a one-time trick. Most importantly, it was to harvest fear.

And as it happened, the two spent charges of Fear Fodder had been replenished by the two people standing before him.

Which meant Cheng Shi's Lightning Punishment would land on Li Yi and Gao San with guaranteed accuracy.

'So this—this is the true prerequisite for our cooperation.'

'I have never given deceivers my trust. It is simply that your lives dangle between my fingers.'

"Alright. I'll trust you both for now. Since we've learned everything we need to, let's move out."

The moment he finished speaking, Gao San shifted from his contorted state back to normal, while Li Yi casually snapped Niske's neck.

In Li Yi's eyes, a person who'd outlived his usefulness had no reason to exist—especially when that person was merely an NPC.

Cheng Shi was noncommittal about the Magician's action, but on principle of never wasting a corpse, he extended his hand toward Niske's head.

"The lab's security layout—why not share it with us?"

Blue-green light alternately illuminated Niske's eye sockets as he opened his mouth and squeezed the raspy voice of [Death] from his throat.

"There is no special security deployment. The routine patrol route is..."

As Niske's corpse laid out the laboratory's patrol routes and defensive positions in perfect detail, the expressions on Gao San and Li Yi's faces grew increasingly grim.

They weren't shocked because the lab's defenses were flimsy. They were shocked because, for a teammate at the same tier, Cheng Shi's arsenal of tricks was simply too vast.

'Is he... really a follower of [Deceit] like us?'

'No—is he really a player at this level?'

