

## The Gods 571

### Chapter 571: Back into the Trial

Though Cheng Shi still had countless questions, he knew many things couldn't be achieved all at once.

A Herald searching for lost memories might naturally stop by for information now and then. But interrogating someone relentlessly would be far too conspicuous.

He'd spent so long building his identity into something seamless. He couldn't create cracks just because of momentary urgency.

So after some brief small talk, Cheng Shi took Big Cat and departed from Aph Ros's Dolgod.

As for where to go while the trial hadn't ended... naturally, back into the Prosperity trial.

Cheng Shi had already identified where the trial was set. It was Katouting — the capital of the Grand Tribunal. Because only in Katouting would the tribunal's banners bear nothing but the Grand Tribunal's symbol, with no other city or faction's seal.

Speaking of Katouting, he'd always been curious about the Iron Law that had replaced Order. Since they were already here, and had a free bodyguard beside him, Cheng Shi naturally wanted to explore.

So he asked Aph Ros to use Go Lis's methods to "deport" them back the way they came. And then, inside a silent, deserted courtroom, two figures reappeared.

It was now the early hours of morning. Only five or six hours remained until the trial ended. The empty courtroom bore no trace of the daytime chaos. Not even Iron Law Knights stood guard outside.

Evidently, in this city permeated with Order's presence, no one believed anyone could possibly break the law.

Cheng Shi looked around and clicked his tongue:

"Shame — our teammates are gone. Wonder how they're doing."

Hong Lin snickered: "I take back what I said about you being a good person. Thinking about your teammates only now — isn't that a bit late, Lord Yu Xi?"

"..."

Cheng Shi's expression froze. He scratched awkwardly at his feet.

'Here we go. Just finished handling Aph Ros, and now it's right on to the next round of fast-talking.'

Hong Lin watched him with a half-smile, saying nothing, quietly waiting for an explanation.

Cheng Shi hadn't intended to hide it from Big Cat. So he laid out the truth: he'd once coincidentally encountered a Deceit Herald who was impersonating him.

"He bore no ill will. Perhaps it was just for fun."

Right off the bat, he established the tone regarding Yu Xi's approach.

"In that trial, he seamlessly impersonated me — to the point where my teammates all believed I'd never left their side. But in reality, I'd slipped away alone many times.

I don't know how He fooled my teammates. It wasn't until the last day of the trial that I noticed discrepancies in my teammates' words and realized someone had been playing me while I was absent.

And when I became aware of His presence, He smiled and waved at me from the far end of the crowd.

From that moment on, I learned: Void also has servant gods. Deceit also has a Herald. And I was the... lucky one He chose to play with."

"Ha — are you sure 'lucky' is the right word?" Hong Lin scoffed.

Cheng Shi's expression crumbled: "I can't exactly call myself unlucky, can I? Besides, knowing about one more Void servant god than everyone else — how is that not a kind of luck?"

Having the experience of impersonating Yu Xi under his belt, this particular lie was watertight. No matter how many questions Big Cat asked, he answered them all with perfect fluency.

And then — Big Cat believed him.

Or rather, she'd have believed no matter how he explained it.

Of course, she had her own shrewdness. Perhaps she didn't believe every word Cheng Shi said. But she believed in this person.

"So let me get this straight — after discovering He was impersonating you, you started impersonating Him?"

"Uh... that's roughly the gist?"

"Cheng Shi, do you take me for a fool?" Hong Lin was so annoyed she laughed. She pointed at the spot where they'd dropped in from. "Fine — even if I'm not that sharp, what about that Corruption Herald? The dual Herald Aph Ros?"

He's certainly sharp enough. Has He never once suspected you aren't a real Herald?"

"Of course He has. That's exactly why I dragged you in to borrow your prestige. For now, the lies should hold for a while longer."

"..." Big Cat was speechless. "What do you want from Him?"

"Intelligence!" Cheng Shi's voice rang with conviction. "Aph Ros knows a great deal about Them. And this is information we can never get from Their own mouths. Hong Lin — intelligence about Them is critically important. I think you understand that even better than I do."

"So, you know a lot about Them now?"

"Uh... not that much, actually. We'd barely started before He got suspicious. And I immediately called you over."

Hong Lin raised an eyebrow:

"Is that so?"

Then — Lord Yu Xi — could you tell me who that \*Him is? The one Aph Ros refuses to mention?"

"..."

Cheng Shi fell silent. He was weighing whether to tell Hong Lin about this now.

Hu Xuan may have known about \*Him, but she wasn't yet a true Herald — still a considerable distance from the Origin.

Hong Lin was different. She was... a bit too close to the Origin.

He feared that learning about \*Him might cause problems for her.

Hong Lin was no fool. One look at Cheng Shi's expression told her this was something she probably shouldn't know. And as always — she trusted her friend. She trusted Cheng Shi.

So she said: "Forget it — I don't want to know anymore. Too much trouble."

Cheng Shi blinked, then smiled warmly: "There'll come a time when it's not trouble. Trust me, Hong Lin, I—"

"Alright, alright — stop being so sentimental." Hong Lin's expression turned peculiarly uncomfortable. She glanced at Cheng Shi with a hint of distaste, then furrowed her brow in long deliberation before asking again: "Aren't you afraid the real Yu Xi will come after you once He finds out you've been impersonating Him?"

See — that was Big Cat. Always worrying about her friend.

Of course, how much of it was genuine concern and how much was teasing, even Cheng Shi couldn't quite tell.

So he could only give an awkward laugh: "Not afraid."

"Why?"

"Because..."

Cheng Shi's smile gradually faded into solemnity. He extended his hand toward Hong Lin — five fingers spread — revealing a die in his palm. One pip facing up.

"All paths traveled..."

He'd barely gotten halfway through the prayer when Hong Lin's eyes flashed. She too produced a die and, in perfect unison, finished:

"Are destined!"

In that instant, she remembered the words Cheng Shi had spoken when he'd recruited her into the Destined Ones: if the world's script had their names written in its final chapter, then no matter how they scribbled over their own scripts, they would surely appear on the universe's ultimate stage.

So Cheng Shi didn't fear Yu Xi.

More than not fearing Yu Xi — he believed in Fate.

This was reasonable. And entirely predetermined.

With that thought, the two exchanged a knowing look and smiled.

...

Chapter 572: The Most Law-Savvy Person in This City

But soon, Hong Lin's gaze shifted back to the dice resting in Cheng Shi's palm. When she noticed it still had only six sides, her grin grew even wider.

Hearing that grating laughter, Cheng Shi's expression darkened.

What, having more faces is something to brag about?

He pursed his lips and glanced at the twenty-four-sided die sitting in Hong Lin's hand. His mouth might stay stubborn, but the envious gleam in his eyes couldn't lie. He was jealous—exactly as jealous as he'd been when he learned Mi Laozhang possessed nine talents.

After a moment, he finally couldn't suppress his curiosity and muttered under his breath:

"Your die has that many sides—the probability of rolling the maximum must be... pretty low, right?"

Hong Lin shot him a sidelong glance, the corner of her mouth curled upward, barely suppressing a laugh as she nodded:

"True enough. But I don't use it often—only rolled it three times since I got it.

Once I got a twenty-one. Twice I got twenty-two. Never hit the max."

"???"

After hearing that, Cheng Shi wanted nothing more than to slap himself across the face.

Why the hell did he ask a Fate follower blessed by fortune this kind of question?

He was just making trouble for himself.

The corner of his eye twitched violently twice, and then, without a word, he strode toward the tribunal's exit.

Hong Lin burst out laughing at the sight.

She casually summoned her tree-servant Yu Mu, sending the Hunter out ahead to scout the path, then leisurely followed the emotionally devastated Clown.

Of course, in Hong Lin's eyes, Cheng Shi was no Clown. He was still the Fate Weaver who mended destiny wherever he went.

It was just that this particular Fate Weaver's die had... a few too few sides.

"This should be the East District Tribunal. During the day, I noticed the spectators at the trial were dressed lavishly—only the wealthy folk of the East District dress like that. Cheng Shi, where are you heading?"

Hong Lin's stride was wide, and she quickly fell into step beside him, asking with curiosity.

Cheng Shi didn't answer immediately. Instead, he countered with a question: "What were you after when you asked Aph Ros about Yu Go?"

Hong Lin blinked, then furrowed her brow:

"This Envoy of Decay seems to have awakened from the river of time. I've seen people mention him more than once in the Prosperity faith channel.

He's been hunting followers of Prosperity. At first I figured that, as opposing faiths, this behavior was weakening Prosperity's influence, but I could understand it—their positions demand it, after all.

But after hearing what you and Aph Ros discussed, I realized this Yu Go really is a coward."

"How so?" Cheng Shi's interest was piqued.

"He's just buried his cowardice deep inside. Even now, he doesn't dare confront Oblivion for an explanation, doesn't even dare take revenge on a few Oblivion players. All he knows is venting his frustration by hunting Prosperity followers.

Isn't that because he's perfectly aware that Prosperity won't personally intervene, and that there's no Envoy to step in either?"

Hearing this, Cheng Shi paused briefly: "Hong Lin—is that what he thinks, or what you think?"

"Is there a difference?"

'Is there not?'

'Sis, why does everything you just said sound like you're pinning charges on Yu Go, building a case so you can go pick a fight with him?'

'What's that gleam of eagerness in your eyes about?'

'You can't beat Decay itself, so you're going after a Decay Envoy to test your strength, is that it?'

'Was it the undefeated record against the Barren Walker that gave you this confidence, or has wielding Prosperity's authority gone to your head?'

Cheng Shi's expression turned peculiar: "You... be careful."

Hong Lin hadn't expected her thoughts to be read so easily. A faint blush colored her cheeks as she turned away, murmuring a quiet "mm" with a nod, but she quickly changed the subject.

"You still haven't told me where you're going."

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow: "I'm going to find the most law-savvy person in this city. I want to get a read on the recent legal climate in Katouting—see whether something really is wrong with this Grand Tribunal capital."

"The most law-savvy person?" Hong Lin looked faintly startled. "You're going to see the three Supreme Inquisitors?"

"No, why would I? What if they beat me to death?"

"With me here, they couldn't kill you on their own." Hong Lin said it offhandedly, but the words set Cheng Shi's blood pumping.

Now that was confidence!

While other players—even some peak players—would take wide detours around the Grand Tribunal's Supreme Inquisitors, this Chosen of Prosperity—no, this Heir of Prosperity—was already bold enough to talk tough in Katouting, right under Order's nose.

But Hong Lin didn't truly mean it. She followed up with a puzzled look:

"Not them? Is there someone who understands the law better than the Supreme Inquisitors?

The Grand Executioner? The Grand Justice? The Grand Investigator?

None of them?

Cheng Shi, if not even the six highest authorities of the Grand Tribunal are your target... are you sure there's someone within Grand Tribunal territory who knows the law better than they do?"

"Of course!" Cheng Shi grinned, a playful smile laced with a hint of disdain. "Inquisitors only know how to convict. Executioners only know how to chop heads. Justices only know how to play mediator. Investigators only know how to arrest people. What do any of them understand about the law?"

"..." It was blunt, but it strangely made sense. Hong Lin blinked, then asked, "So who's your target?"

"Prisoners!

The people who truly understand the law are all locked up in the Grand Tribunal's prisons.

And the closer someone is to death, the better they understand the law. Those on the execution block understand it best!

And the place we're heading is the Howling Iron Prison, under the Grand Executioner's jurisdiction.

Hong Lin—look forward to hearing what these eloquent legal experts can tell us."

"..."

The two moved swiftly. With the tree-servant Yu Mu scouting ahead, they skirted around numerous patrolling knights and slipped silently into what was known as the most fortified stronghold in all of Katouting.

It was rather ironic, really. The safest place in the Grand Tribunal's capital wasn't the Supreme Court itself, but this prison packed with inmates awaiting execution—the Howling Iron Prison.

Didn't that only further prove how important these prisoners were?

When Cheng Shi voiced this line of reasoning, Hong Lin fell silent.

She knew she could never out-argue this silver-tongued Fate Weaver.

The two, plus one servant, threaded their way through the sparse gaps in the prison's outer perimeter defenses. After navigating layer upon layer of iron walls arranged like a labyrinth, they finally reached the heart of the facility—a steel fortress perched halfway up the mountainside.

In truth, the city of Katouting itself stood upon mountains. In the center-west of the Land of Hope lay a vast mountain range, where three great peaks were spaced equidistantly in a row, known as the Prologue Holy Mountains.

Katouting was a city suspended in the sky between those three peaks, linking them with bridges and enormous cables at their midsections, stretching between the mountains like the beam of a balance scale—displaying to the world the image of Order's fairness and justice.

The Howling Iron Prison sat on the northeastern edge of Katouting, beyond which lay nothing but sheer cliffs. Of course, it wasn't chosen for the geographical advantage or to save costs. The mountain beneath this particular peak had the hardest bedrock, making it ideal for constructing the infinitely descending... dungeons.

The prisoners held here numbered far more than a few hundred. This was very nearly the largest death-row concentration camp in the entire Grand Tribunal.

Once they reached this point, Cheng Shi was no longer the one leading the way. He quietly fell in behind Big Cat, letting this true great feline—who had shifted back into the form of a Dense Forest Spotted Leopard—take point, while he watched for any opportunity to slip into the dungeon.

If the outer defenses could be described as having "a gap in a hundred locks," then the dungeon entrance was an iron slab without a single crack. To get in, they could either force their way through, or somehow acquire a set of guard knight armor and blend into the shift-change formation, slipping in during the handover.

But even if Cheng Shi wanted to take the subtle approach, there wasn't enough time. The trial was about to end, and they still knew nothing about the dungeon's shift-change schedule.

So, after careful deliberation, Big Cat decided to...

Force their way in.

#### Chapter 573: Howling Iron Prison

One had to realize that the trial's imminent conclusion wasn't purely bad news. At least for players, the game's rules offered a kind of protection—essentially granting them a window of time to act freely and recklessly.

Of course, the prerequisite was being a peak player with the ability to protect yourself.

Big Cat clearly qualified. She launched herself from the high wall above the dungeon entrance, and before the garrison knights could even ring the alarm bells, every last knight stationed outside the door had been offered up to the One seated upon the Bone Throne.

"..."

Watching this unfold, Cheng Shi's expression was one of pure exasperation.

'Sis, no matter how fast you kill them, you can only take out the ones outside the door. There are sentries inside too—once they hear the commotion, can we even get in tonight?'

'We can't exactly spend the last few hours in an all-out war against the Iron Law Knights, can we?'

But just as Cheng Shi nervously scanned their surroundings, debating whether to follow her down, Big Cat's next move stunned him all over again.

The Dense Forest Spotted Leopard that she'd been a moment ago threw back her head with a low growl, and her entire feline body began to swell explosively. In the blink of an eye she had transformed into a colossal bear, all four massive paws planted on the ground.

The bear's entire body radiated terrifying battle intent. She extended one monstrous paw and brought it crashing down on the dungeon's iron gate—a slab that looked less like a door and more like a solid block of iron. A deafening boom rang out, and the door, thicker than a man's palm, caved inward like plastic under the blow.

Cheng Shi didn't even get a look at the interior guards before the gate—now crumpled into a wad of iron—blasted away like a cannonball, carving countless jagged scars into the floor.

Dust billowed. Rubble flew. As the mangled gate vanished from sight, crimson slowly seeped through the grooves and gashes beneath the settling dust, and before long it had painted a vast stretch of the floor inside the dungeon entrance a vivid scarlet.

"..."

The fight was over. Absurdly fast.

A genuine steamroll.

But a new battle was already brewing—Big Cat hadn't bothered to muffle any of the noise. The perimeter garrison knights had sounded the invasion alarm the instant they heard the thunderous crash, and a tidal wave of enemies was closing in fast.

Big Cat didn't care in the slightest. The great bear issued two low growls and curled a finger—a massive, clawed finger—toward Cheng Shi, who still sat atop the high wall watching the show. The meaning was unmistakable:

"Go ask your questions. These people—I'll hold them off for you."

Cheng Shi stared, his expression blank, his eyes glazed.

He dropped from the wall with a look of bewilderment, walked up to Big Cat's side, and craned his neck to gaze up at the royal war-bear, clicking his tongue in wonder:

"Hong Lin, you're making this much noise—don't tell me you actually want to throw hands with the Grand Executioner?"

Aren't you worried all six of them are in Katouting right now and they'll come out to gang up on you?"

He meant it as a tease, but to his surprise, a sharp gleam flickered through Big Cat's eyes the moment she heard it.

She grew even more excited.

"???"

Cheng Shi was speechless. At this point, how could he not see it? This Heir of Prosperity's hands were itching for a fight. Her real target had always been the Grand Tribunal's six supreme authorities!

Yu Go was far beyond reach, but the Grand Tribunal was right here.

"..." Cheng Shi went numb.

'Seriously, sis—is it Mo Li who's trying to align with War, or is it you?'

'Everyone else is still agonizing over their second faith, and here you are, already shopping for a third?'

Cheng Shi fixed Big Cat with a complicated look, and with his trademark steadiness, asked one question: "You won't die?"

The great bear snorted derisively, assumed a fighting stance, and then lightly flicked one leg—punting Cheng Shi straight into the dungeon.

"Stop getting in the way. Go do your thing."

"..."

'Fine, fine—I'm in the way. I bring you here and somehow I'm the one in the way!'

Cheng Shi laughed in frustration. He stopped paying any attention to the fight-hungry warrior, turned on his heel, and headed down into the dungeon. To avoid being captured by the knights on the lower floors, he didn't forget to snatch a few fragments of armor from the pool of blood at his feet and hastily paste them onto himself, disguising himself as a wounded knight.

And so, before long, a garrison knight who had narrowly escaped with his life came staggering down toward the lower levels.

Nobody knew how many floors the Howling Iron Prison's underground extended, but the deeper one went, the more dangerous the offenders against Order became. Armed with that knowledge, Cheng Shi set his sights on the very bottom from the start, his steps never faltering.

The tremendous noise from the surface had clearly alarmed the underground guards as well, but the chaos hadn't spread down here. Even the prisoners in their cells showed no reaction to the commotion.

In their eyes, presumably, no one could breach the most fortified stronghold in all of Katouting under the radiance of Order.

The garrison knights followed protocol, ascending in orderly fashion to reinforce the upper levels. But when they encountered a fellow soldier stumbling down in a panic, their expressions finally changed.

"The gate's been breached! Hurry, send reinforcements—go, now!"

The squad leader of a garrison patrol grabbed hold of the soldier who was about to collapse, his face grave and shocked: "What happened?"

"Something—no, a bear smashed through the dungeon's iron gate!" The blood-soaked knight wheezed feebly.

"A bear?"

"One single bear?"

Every knight around him froze in place. Their expressions turned strange beyond words.

When something is too absurd, the tension in people's hearts gets displaced by the sheer bizarreness, and calm replaces alarm.

Something else occurred to the squad leader. His face hardened, and he fixed the wounded knight with a suspicious stare.

"What's your name? Wipe the blood off your face. Let me see you."

"..." The knight startled, clutched his cheek with a groan of agony, and cried, "I can't go on—you need to send reinforcements, hurry!"

"We will, but first—what is today's shift-change password?"

'Huh? There's a password too?'

'Wasn't that ridiculously thick iron gate above enough? You've got passwords down here as well?'

The wounded knight was, of course, Cheng Shi. Seeing no way to dodge the question, he rolled his eyes, struck by sudden inspiration:

"The flame of Civilization rises?"

The squad leader nodded: "Order endures!"

But the instant the words left his mouth, he hurled Cheng Shi to the ground, drew the longsword at his hip, and together with every knight around him pressed their blade-tips against every inch of Cheng Shi's skin.

"We have an intruder! Sound the alarm—enemy attack!"

All personnel, hold your positions! The radiance of Order stands with us!"

"The flame of Civilization rises—Order endures!"

"..."

Feeling countless pairs of razor-sharp eyes boring into him, Cheng Shi's face collapsed in an instant.

'Wrong password...'

'But if it was wrong, why did you go ahead and finish the phrase?'

'You made me look like a fool who pops champagne at halftime!'

The squad leader didn't strike immediately. He was cautious.

"Surrender peacefully. Under the Grand Executioner's watch, intruder—you have nowhere to run!"

Cheng Shi let out a helpless sigh:

"Well, can't talk my way out of this one. Looks like we're doing this the hard way. Good thing I brought enough dice. I wonder, have any of you ever seen...

A real rain of dice?"

The words had barely left his lips before countless dice exploded outward, scattering across the sky.

Chapter 574: What Crime Did You Say You Committed?

"Form up! Kill the—urgh... ghhk..."

Before the squad leader could finish the order, his face contorted in horror as he clutched his throat and crumpled to the ground.

Even in death, he couldn't comprehend how an intruder pinned to the floor by countless blade-tips had blinked into existence right before his face in the span of a heartbeat.

Nor could he fathom what that fleeting silver flash in the man's hand had been—what divine weapon could slit a throat with such surgical precision that its victim retained a few seconds of consciousness before the end.

Thud.

The body hit the ground. Blood sprayed everywhere.

As the sound of the fall echoed, Cheng Shi moved. He materialized behind each knight in succession like the spray of blood-foam from the corpse—ephemeral, sequential—drawing a single streak of light with his scalpel, gone before anyone could react.

In the blink of an eye, a crimson line had appeared across every knight's throat. Those vivid red marks intertwined with the blood-mist hanging in the air and the yet-unfaded silver reflections, as though someone had sketched staves of sheet music into thin air. For one fleeting instant, accompanied by Cheng Shi's quiet hum, they played a soaring movement of fate overturned.

And the final chord of that movement was a cascade of thuds—bodies hitting the floor one after another.

In that moment, the elegant Clown staged a dazzling performance that glorified Fate and paid tribute to Death alike.

But the show wasn't over yet, because reinforcements from below had arrived.

Cheng Shi watched as squad after squad of knights poured from the stairwell, charging at him with cries of "Order above!" He let out a weary sigh and readied his stance, preparing to take the stage for an encore.

But just then, his own reinforcements showed up.

Whoosh-whoosh-whoosh—

A rapid volley of bowstring snaps rang out, and a curtain of arrows like a sudden downpour came streaking in from behind Cheng Shi.

Each arrow carried the terrible power of Decay. The instant they pierced the garrison knights' bodies, they consumed every shred of vitality—transforming each victim into a desiccated corpse of pallid, sagging skin, wasted flesh clinging to protruding bone, features withered beyond recognition.

And the most terrifying part was that these husks numbered not one, but a heap.

Every knight who had charged at Cheng Shi had been struck by the Sudden Dusk and reduced to decay. They weren't dead yet, though—each one clutched their wounds and collapsed helplessly, their brittle bones too fragile to withstand even the impact of the fall, producing a chorus of dry, crunching snaps.

"..."

Cheng Shi froze. He turned in astonishment to find Yu Mu—the tree-servant Hong Lin had refined—standing at the entrance in a drawn-bow stance, slowly advancing toward him.

Honestly, if he hadn't already seen the knights' wretched state, the sight of Yu Mu approaching like that might have made Cheng Shi think the man was coming for him.

Thank goodness he was an ally!

His expression flickered from delight to annoyance. He stopped worrying about the old knights who lay groaning around him, their swords scattered, too feeble to even rise, and instead bent down to start picking up dice from the floor.

"If you'd shown up a few seconds earlier, would I have had to scatter dice everywhere? These things are hard to come by—every one I use is one I can't replace..."

Yu Mu was merely a tree-servant now and wouldn't play the fawning lapdog the way Qu Yan once had by helping Cheng Shi gather his dice. His orders were to protect Cheng Shi—so he focused solely on monitoring the surroundings for threats.

Seeing the lack of reaction, Cheng Shi pursed his lips, swiftly collected his dice, cleared a path through the immobilized old knights, and continued downward.

As for the knights who'd survived—they might as well have been dead.

"Keep up."

Cheng Shi moved quickly. Now that he had muscle with him in the dungeon, there was no need to waste time playing dress-up as a knight.

Though the Howling Iron Prison's inmates were all death-row convicts, there were differences even among the condemned. When he'd run into that squad of knights earlier, Cheng Shi had noticed the prisoners on that level staring with vacant, lifeless eyes, utterly indifferent to everything happening around them—clearly tortured into soulless husks during their interrogation.

He didn't know if every prisoner in this place was the same. If so, this entire trip was a waste—and he'd look like a fool.

He and the tree-servant descended rapidly through several more levels, dispatching a few more waves of knights heading upstairs to reinforce. It wasn't until approximately the seventh underground floor that Cheng Shi suddenly spotted several familiar faces among the vast rows of cells.

Well, "familiar" was a stretch. They were the four teammates he'd been assigned when the trial began—every last one of them present, neatly strung up on iron frames.

Of course, this floor held many other prisoners besides these four, but none of the others were nearly as "lively." These four appeared to be actively working on freeing themselves, attempting a jailbreak.

They looked thoroughly exhausted, though—as if they'd already failed many times over.

Seeing this, Cheng Shi grinned. He ducked back into the corridor, stripped a set of knight armor off one of the fallen guards, pulled it on, then smeared some fresh blood across his face to refresh the dried, caked layer that was already there. He shifted his bearing entirely, feigning injury, and staggered toward the four.

The four—who had been in the middle of attempting to gnaw through their own wrist bindings—saw the knight who'd just gone upstairs to reinforce now stumbling back with a blood-drenched face. Every one of them felt their hearts sink, their expressions filling with gravity.

They had no idea what was happening outside. They'd hoped to use the chaos as cover for an escape, but now it seemed the chaos had come—while their opportunity had not.

Eight eyes tracked Cheng Shi's approach, wary and alert. Cheng Shi played his part, lurching and stumbling closer, his head slightly bowed to conceal his gaze—but his eyes never left his teammates for an instant.

After studying them briefly, he concluded that none of these four were amateurs. Even if their scores fell short of peak status, they were at minimum experts in the two-thousand range.

The problem was that right now, all of them appeared to be shackled by Order's restraints, stripped of every talent and ability.

'Perfect opportunity. If I don't shake them down right now, I'd be insulting this gift from the heavens.'

He ducked his head to hide the smile tugging at the corners of his eyes, then violently coughed up a mouthful of blood and rasped hoarsely:

"Someone actually dared challenge the Grand Executioner's authority—absolutely suicidal! Order above, they will not succeed.

Nothing like this has ever happened in the Howling Iron Prison. And today, you four are the only ones brought in. Talk—are the intruders above connected to you?"

"No, absolutely not!" All four of them were terrified. One tall, thin man shook his head frantically: "Sir Knight, I'm a follower of Order too! I have no idea what happened in the Tribunal today. I've been wrongly accused!"

"Wrongly accused? Heh. The Howling Iron Prison has never wrongly accused a single death-row prisoner. You don't know what crime you committed?"

"I really am innocent!" This Order-following player was on the verge of tears. "I was just too devout toward Order—I couldn't stop thinking about witnessing the glory of the Inquisitors. So I borrowed an identity to attend a Tribunal hearing, letting my Benefactor's radiance cleanse my soul. Yes, I'm not a citizen of Katouting, but... I didn't do anything wrong! I don't even know what the Lin Renyu Crime is, sir!"

"?"

'What the hell?'

'The Lin Renyu Crime?'

'Is that the Lin Renyu I'm thinking of?'

'Holy crap—they actually codified it into law?'

'No wonder Lin Renyu hated the Prisoner so much—causing havoc everywhere under his name. So this is how he got himself "immortalized."'

'That's actually kind of impressive... though I wonder what exactly the Lin Renyu Crime entails?'

The other three players chimed in too, each insisting they'd been wrongly accused, that they weren't Lin Renyu, didn't know anyone by that name, and couldn't even begin to explain how they'd ended up arrested.

Cheng Shi nearly broke character laughing. He put on a pensive expression, as if genuinely reconsidering their defense. The four players saw the opening and immediately turned enthusiastic.

One of them—a stocky, somewhat short man—said eagerly:

"Sir, the intruders have absolutely nothing to do with us. Think about it—if we were connected, why would we have surrendered so meekly at the Tribunal? With that kind of power, we obviously would've fought back! We're truly innocent. We want to file an appeal with the Tribunal.

But in here, there's no way for us to appeal. We can only beg you to help us—put in a word with the higher-ups. And of course we wouldn't ask you to help for free. I've still got a few things in my pockets..."

## Chapter 575: You Owe Me Two Lives

Before he could finish, Cheng Shi stepped forward two paces, gave the man a teasing once-over from head to toe, and scoffed: "Everyone's belongings are checked before entering the prison. How could you possibly still have anything in your pockets?"

Cheng Shi's challenge left the man speechless. His expression shifted, but a vicious look quickly surfaced on his face.

"Clever, aren't you? Too bad it's already too late! Attack!"

The instant the words left his mouth, the stocky man snapped his own left ankle with a single kick, and with his other foot freed from the chain, he lunged upward. Using his waist to power his legs, his entire body whipped horizontally through the air like a staff, his right leg lashing out at Cheng Shi's skull.

The tall, thin man beside him struck simultaneously, violently wrenching both arms. Ignoring the excruciating agony of his wrist bones shattering, he ripped both hands free, then used his still-bound legs as a pivot point and spun his entire body in a wild rotation, driving a headbutt straight at the point-blank Cheng Shi.

This was a premeditated ambush. Their timing was impeccable, and the ferocity of their self-sacrificing attacks was nothing short of extraordinary. Had there actually been a wounded garrison knight standing here, the blow might well have landed.

But unfortunately, they were dealing with Cheng Shi.

When Cheng Shi was on the scene, the one with the premeditated plan wasn't these four prisoners—it was this fake garrison knight.

That step forward just now? Deliberate.

As a Priest who frequently treated the wounded, he had long since noticed the injuries on their wrists and ankles. He also knew that in a prison where talents were sealed, the only way to break free of the shackles was to sever your own limbs. So he'd anticipated their move.

But then why did he step closer?

Because he... wanted to shake them down.

These four teammates had almost certainly been exposed and imprisoned because of his and Big Cat's disappearance. In a sense, he was responsible for landing them in jail.

Screwing over your teammates once was bad enough. To then turn around and ask the people you'd screwed for favors? Cheng Shi's conscience wouldn't allow it.

So he decided to screw them over a second time.

A negative times a negative equals a positive. Screw them twice and it cancels out. Plus, they'd just attacked him—so from the moral high ground, he could righteously pass judgment on them!

After all, this was Order's turf!

Praise Order!

And so Cheng Shi moved—but he'd overlooked one thing: someone was far faster than him.

Yu Mu!

The instant Cheng Shi's teammates launched their attack, the tree-servant had already loosed his Sudden Dusk arrows. The whistling of wind-splitting shafts screamed past Cheng Shi's face, on a collision course with both attackers.

The tall, thin man and the stocky man were both startled, but mid-attack and fully committed, they had neither the timing nor the strength to dodge. The wounded knight before them hadn't been reached yet, but the arrows were already upon them. Their faces went white, and both men simply resigned themselves to fate.

But just then—clang—a powerful, withered hand materialized before them, snatching the screaming arrow out of the air and halting the point barely an inch from their chests.

The arrow had stopped. The men had not.

Their all-out blows carried irreversible momentum. Two impacts thudded against the armored knight standing before them. They'd expected their devastating strikes to at least worsen his injuries and knock him down, if not kill him outright. They were sorely mistaken.

The knight didn't budge an inch.

Not only that—the hand that had caught the arrow mid-flight was his.

All four went pale with shock, staring at the withered arm that looked like an ancient vine, hearts pounding.

Decay!

This was actually a follower of Decay—wait. He was no knight!

Realization struck the tall, thin man like lightning. He twisted his bent body to look up, and when he saw the blood-smeared face at close range, his expression changed yet again. "It's you!" he cried.

"Yeah, it's me. Is this how you treat a teammate who came to rescue you?" Cheng Shi scoffed, casually tossing aside the thorned arrow of withered vine, shaking out his hand, and tucking the arm that surged with terrifying Decay power behind his back.

He had saved his teammates, and the means by which he'd done so was the Faded authority that Decay had bestowed upon him.

The authority's accompanying Faded Majesty effect allowed him to borrow a portion of the authority's power to strengthen himself whenever he was struck by a blasphemous attack from his own faith. He'd

deliberately extended his hand into the arrow's path moments earlier to test this very effect, then snatched the arrow out of the air.

As for how a Priest could react so quickly—naturally, it was because Cheng Shi was no longer a Priest. He was neither Clown nor Fate Weaver. Right now, he was a Hero of Today.

Back when he'd scattered that rain of dice, he had already completed the Oracle Act and was ready to strike. Yu Mu's arrival had spared him the trouble—and just now, he'd used Yu Mu's shot to covertly test Faded's effects.

One couldn't call it "strong." The word "strong" would, in a sense, be a blasphemy against a true divine authority.

If he had to sum up this arm in four words, it would be: absolutely flawless.

No weaknesses. Strength at full marks. Attack at full marks. Defense at full marks. The only shortcoming was that speed hadn't been enhanced.

But that made sense. Decay's will was about rot—making one arm as impervious as a ten-thousand-year-old vine was already an enormous boon for Cheng Shi.

Most importantly, when this arm came into contact with external Decay power, it could use Faded's force to effortlessly... decay that foreign Decay away.

So what had just happened was Decay decaying Decay.

After Cheng Shi's little performance, the four prisoners found themselves in an exceedingly awkward position.

The man was clearly a heavyweight. While technically they'd been imprisoned because he'd abandoned the trial on his own, he hadn't directly harmed them—so they could only chalk it up to being outmatched.

And just now, this heavyweight had saved their lives. Sure, they could see his twisted sense of amusement in all of this, but a heavyweight's twisted amusement could hardly be called that—it was more like... sharing joy with the common folk.

So all four of them froze in place.

The two who hadn't attacked were merely wearing complicated, embarrassed expressions. But the two who'd broken their own limbs to launch the assault—one dangling from the frame with blood gushing from his leg, the other sprawled face-first on the ground with blood streaming from his cracked skull—their faces were black as ink, their bodies trembling, not daring to utter a word.

"Still want to fight?"

Cheng Shi posed the considerate question, and it plunged the entire scene into dead silence.

"..."

"Then let's talk compensation, shall we? You two are the masterminds, you two are the accomplices. All four of you tried to kill me, yet I saved your lives instead. One attempt, one rescue—by my count, you owe me two lives. Did I calculate wrong?"

"..."

Chapter 576: Who's Locked Up in Here?

All four went dark-faced the moment they heard that.

"Come on, one at a time. Buy your lives back. Once the ransom's enough, I'll cut you down."

Cheng Shi grinned like a swindler. He propped up the teammate who'd slammed face-first into the ground so the man couldn't hide his embarrassment behind a bowed head, then paced shamelessly back and forth in front of the four, waiting for them to figure out how to pay up.

The male player standing at the far end watched all of this with a mixture of apprehension and genuine awe. His gaze followed Cheng Shi's back, and he asked cautiously:

"Boss... you fought your way in here alone?"

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow without turning around: "Not exactly. I've got a bodyguard."

A bodyguard?

Everyone peered into the corridor's depths, where they could vaguely make out a figure lurking in the shadows—a Hunter. Those thorned-vine arrows from earlier had clearly come from that direction.

This bodyguard's strength was terrifying too—at minimum a peak player!

If even the bodyguard was peak-level, then the boss standing before them had to be on the leaderboard, right?

But the top spots on the Decay rankings didn't seem to include any... famous mummy!

This boss had to be a mummy. That arm of his, which looked rock-hard at a glance, practically screamed Decay's blessing upon a Warrior.

"Boss... you're..."

"Don't try to cozy up. Got money, hand it over. No money... hand over your life." Cheng Shi's smile was sinister enough to make everyone flinch.

"I'll pay!" All four had figured it out by now—this boss was shaking them down, sure, but he clearly had no intention of killing them.

Still, though—you're a peak player. Isn't robbing a bunch of small fry like us a bit... desperate?

Then again, it did align with their understanding of peak players. After all, "peak" meant "peaked"—and anyone who'd peaked that high had to be some flavor of unhinged.

These people acted purely on whim and preference. They couldn't care less about opinions or scores.

Just as Cheng Shi was gleefully preparing to collect, the tall, thin teammate he'd propped up suddenly stiffened. He clenched his jaw, and after a moment of hesitation, ventured:

"Boss, I've got three blank A-rank Law Texts in my storage. Each one lets you skip incantation and instant-cast Edict Sung Afar for five seconds, three uses total. Is that enough to buy my life?"

'Oh ho—good stuff!'

Cheng Shi nodded, fairly satisfied.

Edict Sung Afar was one of the most versatile S-rank Order talents. By singing the Judgment Song, the user could proclaim temporary laws—every "this area forbids..." effect he'd previously encountered was a product of this ability.

An A-rank item replicating five seconds of an S-rank talent effect was top-tier even among A-ranks.

The thought of cosplaying as an Order follower himself drew a smile to Cheng Shi's face when he decided to accept. As for the S-rank part—whatever. Nothing could possibly be more S-rank than the Death Fun Ring.

He was about to agree, but then the Order follower spoke again:

"However, Boss—I have one more request."

Cheng Shi's gaze turned cold: "I'd advise you to think carefully before speaking. Right now, you're in no position to negotiate."

The tall, thin man seemed to have made up his mind. He pressed forward regardless:

"I want to hire you. Help me fulfill a wish."

"?" Cheng Shi blinked.

'A job offer, huh? Not out of the question—depends on whether you can afford the fee.'

He slowly dropped the hostile expression, turned around to hide the greed that was a little awkward to display openly, and resumed pacing. "Let's hear it. What wish?"

The tall, thin man replied with dead seriousness: "I'm an Investigator. The entire purpose of my prayer was to come to the Howling Iron Prison to investigate a truth. I never dreamed I'd actually make it inside the most fortified stronghold in all of Katouting. The process was nothing like I imagined—but the outcome is exactly what I wanted!"

At that, one of the other teammates exclaimed: "So that's why you told us not to resist! You had an ulterior motive!"

The tall, thin man gave a bitter smile:

"I wouldn't call it an ulterior motive. In that situation, if we'd resisted, everyone would've been executed on the spot. You think it was Iron Law Knights who captured us?"

No. The Grand Executioner himself was inside the Tribunal at the time. If we'd kept fighting, we might not even have had the chance to be locked up alive."

"..."

Cheng Shi's eyebrow twitched. He stopped and turned: "You know the Grand Executioner?"

"Yes. This era's Grand Executioner is called Artair—known as the Blade of Punishment. I... had the privilege of being slain by him once."

"..." Silence fell again. Cheng Shi was amused. 'Quite the introduction story you've got there.' But he quickly refocused: "Stop getting sidetracked. Get to the point."

"I know that an extremely important prisoner is being held in here. Before I came in, I did my research—in this timeline, he's still locked up inside.

I want to hire you to take me to him, and then pry some clues out of his mouth. Clues that are critically important to me.

I've been chasing the truth about this for two months. This may be the closest I've ever come to finding it.

Boss, I'm begging for your help. And the fee will absolutely satisfy you."

"Oh? You've got more good stuff?

Good stuff that you're saving for a hire rather than using to buy your life?

Interesting."

Cheng Shi's curiosity was piqued. He walked over to the Order follower and asked with a grin: "What truth is so important that you've got the guts to target the Howling Iron Prison?"

Spell it out. I'll consider it."

"..."

The tall, thin man hadn't wanted to say, but the opportunity before him was too rare. He'd stumbled upon an expert who'd solo-infiltrated the Iron Prison, and—most crucially—this peak player was actually reasonable enough to talk to. With the answer he'd been seeking potentially within reach today, he agonized for a long moment, then chose honesty.

"I suspect that my Benefactor—Order—something has gone wrong with him!"

"!!!"

Cheng Shi's eyes narrowed, his gaze turning razor-sharp in an instant.

Truth. This Order follower had been speaking the truth the entire time.

'What a sharp Investigator—he's actually traced the problem all the way back to his own god.' But questions lingered: Order really did have problems, sure—but how would a non-peak player even know?

After a moment's thought, Cheng Shi figured the answer probably lay with the important prisoner the man had mentioned. He regarded the Investigator with renewed interest, letting a flicker of willingness show:

"That is interesting. Who's this prisoner you want to find?"

"You'll do it, Boss?"

"Don't rush. Tell me first, and then I'll decide."

The Order follower had no road left to retreat on. His expression tightened, he gritted his teeth, and finally gave up the name.

"Chernosly. A former First-Class Inquisitor of the Grand Tribunal—currently imprisoned in the deepest level of this very Howling Iron Prison!"

"!!!"

Cheng Shi's expression changed entirely.

Who?!

Chapter 577: An Old Acquaintance Beneath the Dungeon

Chernosly!

This seedling follower of Chaos who had left such a staggering impression on him—he was still in the Grand Tribunal? And locked up in the lowest level of the Howling Iron Prison?

He used to be a First-Class Inquisitor! What charge could possibly land someone of that stature in a place reserved exclusively for death-row inmates?

Cheng Shi's brow furrowed. He couldn't help recalling what Chernosly had told him back then. The man had been quite explicit—he'd suffered unjust treatment and was being suppressed from within. From the looks of it, the Grand Tribunal's crackdown on him had gone... far too far.

He was about to be executed?

'Damn—don't tell me I'm the one who ends up setting him free.'

Cheng Shi's eyes narrowed. A sudden hesitation gripped him. This inescapable sense of destiny was frightening. He seemed to see again the circle drawn by Time—a single gap left in its circumference—and when he filled that gap in the near future...

He raised his hand and looked at the ring on his finger, the Time of Eternal Imprisonment.

...time would close its loop once more.

'I save Chernosly. Possibly I even bring him the first wisp of Chaos's will. Then he leaves the Grand Tribunal, goes underground, meets a group of like-minded exiles, becomes a seedling follower of Chaos. Later, in Eternal Bloom Town, he encounters my past self, pushes me to the forefront, and I become... Ultraman—the Envoy personally acknowledged by Chaos.'

'Seamless. Perfect.'

'So just how many gods are pulling the strings in this game?'

'What roles are Fate and Time playing in all of this?'

'Does a chess piece have any choice beyond moving forward?'

Cheng Shi's brow creased deeply as he stopped in his tracks. As he fell silent before the four, these teammates—still awaiting rescue—held their breath and dared not make a sound, terrified of disturbing the boss's train of thought.

He deliberated for a long time, and ultimately decided to go down and take a look.

This wasn't capitulation to the "puppet master behind the curtain," nor was he abandoning other options. He simply felt that some things required deeper understanding.

Without seeing the full picture, one had no right to comment.

The same applied to Order, as the tall, thin teammate had described it.

Cheng Shi knew Order had a problem—that a so-called Iron Law had stolen its identity. But whether this Iron Law had backstabbed its benefactor using Order's own divine gift, or whether some other entity had replaced it entirely—he currently had zero information.

Combined with the truth about Order that the Investigator claimed to be pursuing, perhaps this teammate genuinely held bombshell intelligence concerning the gods.

That rare intelligence alone was worth taking a risk.

Besides, Big Cat was right there. Even if danger arose, someone could tank it.

So Cheng Shi steeled himself and leaped straight into what appeared to be a trap the gods had dug for him in advance.

He extended his Decay hand without expression, wrenching apart the chains binding the Investigator, then freed the other three in turn. Under their panicked gazes, he collected every last bit of their meager "ransom."

Once that was done, Cheng Shi asked with a grave expression:

"Is any one of you a follower of Memory?"

"..." The four exchanged bewildered glances, unsure what the boss was getting at—though he sounded distinctly hostile toward Memory.

They sized each other up. A Combat Expert, an Investigator, a Sore Eye, and a Bell Ringer. Truth, Order, Decay, and Death—but not a single follower of Memory among them.

"No one?"

Good. Then another question—does anyone have a Memory item on them?

If so, I'd appreciate you handing it over honestly. Otherwise, if I find out you've been holding something back—sorry, but I'll have no choice but to string you back up."

The cold-faced threat shook all four to the core. Three of them shook their heads frantically, insisting they truly had nothing related to Memory. Only the Investigator went pale, and said cautiously:

"I... I have a Dream Peeping Candle. It's for investigating the truth..."

"..."

'Why did it have to be you?'

'Who sent you to my side?'

Cheng Shi fixed him with a chilly stare, his face grim: "Just the Dream Peeping Candle? Nothing else that could rewrite history?"

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing!"

Boss, you have to believe me. I'm an Investigator—I despise people who tamper with history. Altering the past always destroys what few historical clues exist, making our investigations impossible.

I swear the Dream Peeping Candle is all I have. Not a single other Memory item!"

Cheng Shi gave him a sidelong glance, nodded, then pulled out a blank sheet of A4 paper.

"This is a Clown Contract of Deceit. Sign your names on it. If, before this trial ends, any of you use Memory powers without my consent, the consequences..."

Heh. You don't want to find out."

The four stared at the absurd blank sheet of paper, their minds going blank for a moment.

'A blank piece of paper can be a contract?'

'This has to be a bluff, right?'

'But wait—he said it's a Deceit contract?'

'Hmm, in that case it might actually be real.'

'The Fun God, after all. You know how it is—totally capable of producing something this ridiculous.'

With varying expressions, all four dipped their fingers in blood and signed. The Investigator, whose arms were completely shattered, couldn't apply any force, so Cheng Shi reluctantly tossed him a healing potion to fix his hands first.

The Investigator thanked him nervously, then firmly wrote down his name.

"Li Zhen."

Zhen—as in "truth."

Cheng Shi glanced at the name, silently pocketed the contract, and headed for the lower levels without the slightest hesitation. Li Zhen watched him go, blinked, looked at the other teammates, and hurried after him.

The others seemed inclined to follow—sticking close to the boss was far safer than staying put—but before they could take a step, Cheng Shi flatly refused.

"Don't follow. I'm not a babysitter. Fend for yourselves until the trial's over.

Though I will give you one friendly warning—don't try going upstairs either. Unless you want to get swatted by a bear."

While the other three stood there scratching their heads trying to figure out why there'd be a bear in here, Cheng Shi had already vanished with the Investigator.

The tree-servant followed close behind. Three figures in single file descended the dim stairway toward the lower floors, all silent.

Calling it a stairway was generous—it was more like a tunnel.

Unlike the stairs in an ordinary building where you could see the floor above and below, the connections between dungeon levels resembled staggered corridors, their walls blocking all sightlines. The three could only see as far as the next turn—only after rounding each thick wall did the next stretch of downward path reveal itself.

The loss of peripheral vision was oppressive. The cramped, narrow space, combined with the wall-mounted lamps growing dimmer by the step, made the atmosphere of the descent increasingly eerie.

Hollow footsteps echoed through the empty stairwell like the unsettling beat of a drum.

Cheng Shi, of course, was not afraid—because he walked in the middle of the formation. The Investigator led the way, the Dusk Hunter brought up the rear, and the strongest combatant was safely protected between them.

As the seemingly endless tunnel stretched on beneath his feet, Cheng Shi gradually began to frown. He even wondered whether he'd already walked into an Order trap—gone astray without realizing it.

'No. Can't keep going blindly. Let the tree-servant scout ahead first!'

Just as Cheng Shi was about to push Yu Mu forward, Li Zhen halted abruptly, his expression taut: "We're here."

"?"

Cheng Shi instinctively took a step back, shoved Yu Mu in front of him, and swept a cautious gaze over the solid walls flanking the stairway. "Investigator," he said darkly, "you seem to be hiding quite a few secrets from me."

Li Zhen went pale: "Boss, I'm not hiding anything.

The reason I didn't tell you the dungeon's location in advance is that I only just figured it out myself!

I learned from a Tribunal Inquisitor that the final level of the Howling Iron Prison isn't at the bottom of the dungeon stairs—it's inside one of the walls beside a step.

I don't know which one exactly, but I can feel Order's power seeping through this wall. So I think... it should be right here.

Right in front of us!"

As he spoke, he drew out an arrowhead. Its tip emanated a faint but pure aura of Order. Under that resonance, the wall beside them silently rippled into translucent waves of light, dissolving to reveal an enormous underground stone cell.

At the center of that cell, three prisoners in fully intact clothing hung suspended in midair, bound tight by chains forged from Order's holy radiance.

One of them was Cheng Shi's old acquaintance—the Grand Tribunal's First-Class Inquisitor, the seedling follower of Chaos.

Chernosly.

Chapter 578: The Grand Justice and the Grand Investigator

As for the other two...

"La Quis and Lid Yara—what?! How can they possibly be here?!" Li Zhen's eyes went wide, an involuntary cry of disbelief tearing from his throat.

Cheng Shi's gaze sharpened but he didn't act rashly, staying hidden behind Yu Mu as he frowned and asked: "Who are they?"

Li Zhen still hadn't recovered from the sheer shock. He pointed stiffly at the elderly figure hanging in the middle and said in a trembling voice: "La Quis. The Grand Tribunal's last Grand Justice."

Then he pointed to the haggard-looking woman on the far right: "Lid Yara. The Grand Tribunal's second-to-last Grand Investigator. According to historical records, she was ambushed and killed by Truth followers while investigating a Tower of Logic Grand Scholar incursion. In this current timeline, she... should already be dead."

Cheng Shi felt his heart lurch. If this Grand Investigator wasn't actually dead but instead locked away in the Howling Iron Prison, then her story involved many people—and might well point directly to the Grand Tribunal's dirty secrets.

Coming here today had truly been the right call. But things were going a little too smoothly.

His eyebrow rose as he suddenly turned to study Li Zhen's profile: "Are you sure you're not mistaken?"

"I'm not! There's absolutely no way I'd misidentify them. I've seen them in countless historical records. As a follower of Order, I know the Grand Tribunal's history well enough."

"Mm, I can tell. But Li Zhen—I suspect you're not just an ordinary Investigator, are you?"

Order is still your Benefactor, after all. Even if you suspect something's wrong with him, I'd think you wouldn't use such extreme measures to investigate a god.

Your devotion is eroding, and that means your power could vanish—but you don't seem afraid at all.

So what conviction drives you to pursue this investigation so relentlessly, even at the cost of hiring me?

Faith? No, clearly not.

I've been mulling it over the entire way down and couldn't figure it out. Now I think I finally understand.

You're... part of the History School?"

Li Zhen went rigid. He stole a sidelong glance at Cheng Shi and nodded with visible anxiety.

"Yes... I'm from the History School."

"Heh, no wonder. No wonder you despise those history-erasing hacks." Cheng Shi let out a self-deprecating laugh. "I should've guessed sooner. Clever, though—you told half-truths the whole time."

"Boss, I wasn't deliberately hiding anything. My identity has no bearing on our arrangement, and it's not important."

"It's true it doesn't matter much. But I don't like being deceived."

Who knows what other half-truths you've told me.

That Dream Peeping Candle of yours—is it real?"

Li Zhen froze, taken aback by the leap in logic. How did the conversation suddenly circle back to the Dream Peeping Candle?

"Of course it's real."

"Take it out. I want to see it with my own eyes." Cheng Shi's voice was quiet and cold.

Li Zhen didn't refuse—he was about to use it anyway—and pulled it from his personal storage.

"How does it work? Tell me, word for word. And remember—don't even think about deceiving me."

Li Zhen nodded in bewilderment and rattled off the explanation:

"Light the Dream Peeping Candle near the target. When everyone is enveloped in its smoke, we'll be able to trace back through the target's dreams and see the most deeply hidden, most memorable secret in their heart.

It works almost identically to the Dream Peeping Ranger's talent."

Truth. The Investigator wasn't lying—and this wasn't a conclusion drawn through Master of Deception. Cheng Shi already knew what this item was. He'd simply wanted to test whether the man was concealing anything, but nothing surfaced.

Cheng Shi nodded, then feigned ignorance: "So we'll all fall unconscious?"

"Yes. But there shouldn't be any danger in here. Besides, you've got your... bodyguard. As long as he stays back a distance, he should be able to wake us if trouble comes.

As for the three in the cell—under Order's suppression, once we knock them out, they shouldn't be able to wake for quite a while."

"Thorough. Seems you've thought of everything. In that case—let's go." Cheng Shi gave an appreciative clap.

Li Zhen's face brightened now that the boss had finally stopped questioning him. The tension eased slightly as he gripped the Dream Peeping Candle and strode into the stone cell.

But he'd barely taken two steps before Cheng Shi lunged forward in a flash, a scalpel sliding from his sleeve into his fingertips. Without a word, he drove it toward the back of Li Zhen's skull.

The surprise attack was so fast that the Hunter ahead had zero time to react. Just as the blade was about to end his life, the scalpel's tip grazed Li Zhen's hair—and Cheng Shi frowned, pulling the blade back. In a split-second shift of force he converted the thrust into a knife-hand strike, chopping down on Li Zhen's neck.

Thwack!

Thud—

Li Zhen hadn't even processed what happened before he was on the ground.

Looking down at the felled Investigator, Cheng Shi's brow furrowed tightly.

Something was wrong. Profoundly, deeply wrong.

This man knew too much. He could identify faces on sight, was well-versed in history, and—most critically—he was intimately familiar with the Howling Iron Prison.

Not "familiar" in the sense of knowing the route or the location of the final level. No—he had clearly studied this dungeon extensively beforehand.

Because just now—just now, when Cheng Shi had invited him to enter, a man who was a Hunter by class had walked toward a cell holding three of the most important prisoners without a shred of caution or fear!

Wasn't he worried about Order traps inside the cell? Or Grand Tribunal mechanisms?

Even a player who wasn't part of the steady-and-cautious school of thought would show some wariness in an unfamiliar place—let alone a Hunter whose defining trait was supposed to be keen awareness!

Cheng Shi had been suspicious of him all along. The only thing about Li Zhen that had slightly lowered his guard was that he was a genuine Order follower—in this game, Order's followers were generally dependable.

But he was a little too dependable. He hadn't told a single lie.

This wasn't Li Zhen's fault for being honest. The problem was that Cheng Shi now suffered from "full-truth PTSD"—he was genuinely wary of the "All-Truth Sect."

So he'd struck preemptively as a test. And the results...

This Li Zhen did seem ordinary enough.

But as a veteran advocate of caution, Cheng Shi wasn't about to let it go at that.

He looked at the unconscious Li Zhen, pulled out a handful of knockout drugs from his storage, and smeared them all over the man's... entire body.

Then he took out the Umbilical Shackles, measured them against Li Zhen a few times, but after a moment's thought put them back for some reason, swapping them for several thick ropes and binding him tight.

Even that wasn't enough. He positioned the tree-servant Yu Mu in a drawn-bow stance with the arrowhead aimed squarely at Li Zhen's back. Only after completing all of this did he pick up the Dream Peeping Candle and carefully make his way into the stone cell.

Cheng Shi advanced with extreme caution, scattering dice behind him while tossing bricks ahead. A distance that should've taken a dozen steps somehow consumed nearly a hundred.

Not until he saw Chernosly's familiar face hanging above him did he finally exhale, confirm that everything was safe—and grow even more certain that Li Zhen had to have a problem.

The man had known all along there were no traps in this cell!

But Cheng Shi couldn't afford to dwell on Li Zhen now. The three feeble prisoners before him had sensed someone's arrival and simultaneously opened their eyes, slowly turning their heads toward him.

Cheng Shi's heartbeat quickened slightly, though his expression remained calm as a breeze:

"Chernosly. La Quis. Lid Yara. It's been a while."

The three prisoners frowned faintly, seemingly unable to recall this "old acquaintance." Their lips parted weakly, but no words emerged.

Seeing this, Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow, took out a healing potion, and poured it over Chernosly's body.

But before the liquid even touched him, threads of holy scripture-light blazed to life, instantly weaving into a golden-radiance cocoon around Chernosly—a Holy Cocoon that sealed him tight and blocked every drop of the potion.

Worse still, within that cocoon of radiant scripture, the thunderous tones of divine judgment began to resonate. As the holy light circulated, the chains binding Chernosly grew tighter and tighter, cutting into his flesh until they squeezed the pale, enfeebled Inquisitor into unconsciousness. Only then did the Order light dissipate with a rumble, and the stone cell fell silent again.

"..."

Cheng Shi watched the scene unfold, the corner of his eye twitching violently.

He never imagined his well-intentioned gesture would trigger Order's punishment on Chernosly.

The situation had turned awkward.

Bad news: his only acquaintance was unconscious.

Good news: when it came time to light the candle, he might not need to figure out how to knock the man out first.

Chapter 579: Not a Coward, But a...

Despite their cellmate collapsing right before their eyes, the other two showed no alarm.

The still-conscious man and woman seemed long accustomed to this sight. They merely withdrew their gazes in silence and closed their eyes once more.

'Failed to impress...'

'At least nobody noticed.'

Cheng Shi cleared his throat twice, shuffled over to the middle prisoner with practiced nonchalance, and studied the Grand Justice hanging before him—a wrinkled old man with salt-and-pepper hair.

He had once been one of the six supreme authorities of the Grand Tribunal. What crime could have landed him in a place reserved solely for the condemned?

In every past encounter, Cheng Shi had approached with subtlety and tact. But today was different. This was a dungeon, with no one around who required discretion—so he cut straight to the point.

"I know you, but you don't know me. Grand Justice La Quis—a stranger with no ties to the Grand Tribunal just walked up to your face. Aren't you the least bit curious?"

"..."

The aged La Quis didn't even open his eyes. His lips moved for a time, but then he seemed to give up on speaking entirely and lapsed back into silence.

"Don't you want to know what happened in the Howling Iron Prison today?"

"..."

"Ah, I see now. So you weren't framed at all—you've accepted your guilt. You don't want to leave this place. You're using this imprisonment to atone before Order. Am I right?"

"..."

La Quis opened his eyes. With great effort he lifted one eyelid, the clouded orb beneath it flicking briefly toward Cheng Shi. Then his gaze drifted downward, and he fell silent again. Every shred of his spirit seemed to have been ground away to nothing.

Seeing this, Cheng Shi frowned.

What had he been through? What crime could reduce a Grand Justice at the height of his power to this—a man who'd lost all interest in anything around him, who'd even lost the will to survive?

Cheng Shi couldn't puzzle it out. The only clue he'd gleaned was the man's faint reaction to the word "Order." Perhaps he... was still devout?

'No good. Need a different approach. Normal conversation won't extract anything.'

So Cheng Shi shifted his eyes, raised an eyebrow, and adopted a dismissive, mocking tone:

"It would seem our Grand Justice has abandoned the defense of justice.

How pitiful. Even the follower closest to Order has lost his devotion. It appears that Order...

Has reached the end of its road."

The moment the words left his lips, La Quis slowly raised his head. And at last, a voice answered from within the stone cell.

But it wasn't him. It was the woman dangling to his left—Lid Yara, the former Grand Investigator. Her voice was frail beyond measure, yet the words she spoke rang with iron resolve.

"There is no more Order in this world."

"?"

Cheng Shi's gaze sharpened as he turned to look at her.

Lid Yara was as gaunt and haggard as La Quis, but she was far younger.

Close-cropped hair. Chiseled features. A jaw clenched tight. No matter how long she'd been imprisoned here, beneath the exhaustion this Grand Investigator still harbored a pair of eyes as sharp as a hawk's.

She stared at Cheng Shi with burning intensity, and in the weakest of voices delivered the most resolute blasphemy: "We... lost the one we followed long ago..."

Hearing this, Cheng Shi's eyes went wide, his pupils contracting sharply.

They knew Order had a problem?!

Had they been thrown in here specifically because they'd discovered something was wrong with Order?

Then who had imprisoned them?

Had Iron Law issued a false edict? Or had the Supreme Inquisitors passed the sentence?

If the former, then at least some glimmer of Order's light still existed within the Grand Tribunal. But if the latter...

A chill ran through him.

These people in power knew Order had a problem and chose to follow it anyway?

Then what exactly were they following—"order"? Power? Or... desire?

Had Corruption clawed its way up from the Underworld?

Alarm flared inside Cheng Shi, though his face betrayed nothing. He nodded in agreement:

"So my suspicion was right. You do know something's wrong with him."

Hearing Cheng Shi's words, the two hanging prisoners stiffened. La Quis finally lifted his head. A flash of despair cut through the murk of his eyes, and his lips trembled:

"Has he... begun openly championing a new will?

Has he... stopped considering the countless followers within the Grand Tribunal?

Why... why has he chosen to walk this path of corruption with no intention of turning back?!

Why would he let this world—already so short on justice—lose justice entirely!

Why! Why! WHY!"

The old man's voice rose higher and higher, the anguished roar tearing at his throat. His eyes were bloodshot, nearly unhinged, and the spittle flying from his mouth pelted Cheng Shi's head and face.

But as every ounce of fury and resentment was spent, La Quis's vigor collapsed in on itself. By the time the last three hoarse syllables scraped free, his state resembled the guttering flame of a lamp whose oil had run dry—a final flash of radiance before extinction. The light in both clouded eyes dimmed, and the old man slumped unconscious.

Watching the second insider pass out right in front of him, Cheng Shi wordlessly wiped his face with his sleeve.

'That old man better not have anything contagious...'

"..."

That wasn't the point. The point was the utterly critical piece of information he'd extracted from those few frantic words: the Grand Justice apparently didn't know that Order had been replaced by Iron Law. In his understanding, Order itself had fallen.

No wonder!

No wonder this Grand Justice had lost all will to live, all fighting spirit. This devout follower of Order must have been marching along his path when he suddenly looked up and saw—at the end of the road, just short of the destination—that the radiant Divine Throne had crumbled to ruin at some unknowable point!

It was like walking along and suddenly discovering a cliff yawning beneath your feet—a jolting realization that the road of faith had long since ended!

In La Quis's eyes, Order was no longer orderly. And if so, then what did that make him—a follower still walking the path of Order?

This weary old man had never once despaired over the world's lack of justice. But this time, he'd despaired deeply and completely.

A keen light flashed in Cheng Shi's eyes. He grew intensely curious about what change had revealed Iron Law's flaw—and kept turning over how he could leverage this information gap to extract even more intelligence.

But extracting intelligence required someone conscious to talk.

Only one lucid prisoner remained. Cheng Shi couldn't afford any more accidents, so he quickly turned to Lid Yara, carefully modulating his tone to avoid provoking her while still piquing her interest.

"Grand Investigator Lid Yara—if you still wish to make one final effort for the last ember of Order, then don't pass out like that coward La Quis."

Lid Yara blinked, then slowly shook her head:

"La Quis was never a coward. He was the one who discovered the anomaly—and called it out publicly."

"?"

Hearing that, Cheng Shi was genuinely caught between laughter and exasperation.

'Well, well. So the old man wasn't a coward at all—he was a hothead!'

'A devout hothead!'

'You ended up in here because you were reckless, and frankly, you earned it...'

Chapter 580: Something Is Wrong with Order

"Grand Investigator Lid Yara—I must ask: have you, in your lofty positions, forgotten what the Crime of Blasphemy means?"

No matter how deep your doubts about your Benefactor, surely you wouldn't confront him openly. With your power and status, you had more than enough means to build alliances, marshal every available force, and slowly overturn—no, correct him.

Why not choose a steadier approach?"

Cheng Shi's point was valid. But Lid Yara's eyes flickered, and she refuted him in a voice thick with complexity:

"Because La Quis was... the Grand Justice!

If even the Grand Justice cannot defend justice openly and righteously, then how can Order be called order?"

"..."

Cheng Shi fell silent. What an unadorned, straightforward reason.

In that moment, a trace of genuine respect crept into his gaze as he looked at the old man hanging between the others.

And yet...

'Heh. How absurd. The most devout, most revered follower of Order is locked inside the most impregnable, most soul-crushing prison of Order.'

"And what about you?" Cheng Shi asked again. "Grand Investigator Lid Yara—were you thrown in here because you publicly backed La Quis's views? Or because you chose to investigate alone after his imprisonment—and got caught?"

I'm guessing the latter. And you actually found something, didn't you?

You discovered that the Grand Justice had been telling the truth. That your Benefactor—the one who bestowed the Iron Law upon the Grand Tribunal—had long since ceased to be orderly. Am I right?

What a shame your investigation was discovered. And so here you are, sharing a cell with this poor Grand Justice."

Lid Yara gave a bitter, self-deprecating press of her lips: "Who... are you? You're not a follower of my Lord."

"Devout to the end. Even after falling this far, you still call him your Benefactor." Cheng Shi gave a soft clap and smiled. "You're right—I'm not his follower. But I appreciate order. Or rather, when I'm not the one making the rules, all I can do is appreciate order.

So rest assured. At least on the road of 'correcting' Order, we're walking the same path."

Lid Yara studied Cheng Shi for a moment and nodded.

Cheng Shi blinked. "You believe me?"

"You're not here to correct Order. You have other motives.

But I can tell—what you want to do doesn't conflict with our goals. So I think you can be trusted."

'Impressive!'

Worthy of the Grand Tribunal's greatest expert in evidence-gathering and interrogation—able to see through a person's intentions from only a few words.

"Fair enough. Regardless, trust is the foundation of cooperation.

Since Grand Investigator Lid Yara is willing to cooperate, why not start by sharing what you know? Once I've cross-referenced your information with mine, perhaps we can reach some interesting conclusions.

And those conclusions will be crucial references for our next steps."

Cheng Shi spoke in a patient, persuasive tone. The Grand Investigator lifted her gaze to him, neither refusing nor immediately agreeing. In a feeble voice she said:

"First, tell me what you meant by Order's 'last ember.'"

'Oh? Starting to negotiate?'

Cheng Shi grinned—genuinely pleased.

As long as the other party was willing to negotiate, the conversation ahead would flow much more smoothly. Because in this intelligence exchange, Cheng Shi's hand was overflowing with chips.

He had no obligation to be responsible to a figure long vanished into history. Even if she was a devout follower of Order—by all accounts a good person in the broadest sense—that good person was dead, lost in the currents of time past.

He didn't even need to wager real chips. A handful of virtual tokens reeking of Deceit would be more than enough to extract genuinely explosive material from her.

Because he had Master of Deception!

Cheng Shi spoke, and from the very first word, the lie was unabashed.

"Your path of Order has not reached its end.

Perhaps in your eyes, Order has strayed from its own will—like an aging man shuffling off course. But all of that is an illusion.

And I happen to be someone who excels at discerning truth within illusions.

I have good news for you: the Order you've seen—the one sheltering the Grand Tribunal yet clearly compromised—is, in fact, not your Benefactor at all.

Don't be shocked. This means Order still exists. Perhaps he has never strayed from his own will.

But there's bad news too. You know how it is—fortune and misfortune always go hand in hand.

The bad news is that the real Order... is trapped.

Just like the three of you—confined in a place outsiders cannot reach."

"!!!"

The moment he finished, a blazing intensity erupted in Lid Yara's eyes. As if strength had returned to her from nowhere, she jerked her head up, her raptor-like eyes locking onto Cheng Shi as she spoke, word by deliberate word:

"What you're saying... is that true?!"

"Of course..."

Cheng Shi nodded with a smile, though inwardly he added:

'...it's a lie.'

Yes, Cheng Shi was lying. He had absolutely no idea what had become of Order.

All he knew was that Iron Law had usurped Order's Divine Throne, and that an entity called "Order (Fear)" had taken Order's place within the trials.

As for where the real Order had gone...

Who the hell knew?

Probably trapped somewhere. If he weren't imprisoned, why would he have abandoned his followers?

So this was all Cheng Shi's speculation—speculation he'd presented to an Order follower as established fact.

The Order follower believed it. What she didn't know was that the truth Cheng Shi had spoken was actually a lie—yet this lie happened to be the actual truth.

And so, in this particular moment and circumstance, a small joke of Fate completed its loop.

Lid Yara's "final burst of radiance" lasted only an instant before she weakened again. But the tenacious Grand Investigator forced herself to remain alert, and in a trembling voice managed one more question:

"Where... is he?"

Cheng Shi was moved for a moment by the depth of her devotion—but as an emotionally detached con artist, he declined to answer.

"One question, one answer. It's your turn now, Grand Investigator.

Start by telling me how you discovered something was wrong with him."

"You already know he's not really him. What use is learning how we found out?"

"It matters greatly. Most people care only about results, but I'm different—and so are the people behind me. We care about the process.

To achieve our vision, understanding everything about them is an essential step.

And by 'them,' I mean entities like the one that replaced Order."

Lid Yara's gaze sharpened with alarm: "Who are you people?"

"God Upholders.

We acknowledge that every Divine Throne has its rightful occupant. We firmly believe that the gods of this universe are irreplaceable.

We are zealots who worship the divine—and cleaners who sweep the path to the Divine Thrones, clearing away all impostors."

'God Upholders...'

Lid Yara repeated those words several times under her breath, then gave a weak nod, and began her account.

"It all started when La Quis noticed something abnormal about Lo Yat..."

Cheng Shi didn't know who Lo Yat was, but that didn't stop him from listening patiently.

Before long, he'd pieced together the full chain of cause and effect.

Setting aside the political scheming and treacherous hearts involved, the matter was actually quite simple.

The Grand Tribunal's Supreme Court typically operated on a rotation among three Supreme Inquisitors. During their rotation, they reviewed new legislation and promulgated new policies. But for unknown reasons, one of the three Supreme Inquisitors—Lo Yat—had vanished.

The Supreme Court entered a two-person era, rotating between Esa Res and Keinlaur.

This was a constitutional violation under Grand Tribunal law. The Grand Justice raised the issue multiple times, but each time was rebuffed by the other two Supreme Inquisitors, who claimed Lo Yat was carrying out a divine oracle.

Until one day, the Grand Justice attempted to bypass the Supreme Inquisitors entirely, remove the Iron Law, and petition Order directly for a demonstration of justice. It was then that he discovered the Iron Law—the divine artifact bestowed by Order—had vanished from its place.

Realizing something was wrong, he began searching the Supreme Court where the Iron Law had been enshrined.

Soon, he found the missing Iron Law. And the missing Supreme Inquisitor, Lo Yat.

But when the Grand Justice discovered "It" and "him," the two were locked in a standoff.

Lo Yat's eyes were bloodshot, his breathing ragged, fragments of broken Law Chains still clinging to his body. From his appearance, he seemed to have been trying to tear apart the holy codex bestowed by Order.

He was committing blasphemy! La Quis made that judgment instantly.

And the blasphemed one was using supreme Order power to suppress Lo Yat's frenzy.

Witnessing this mad scene, the Grand Justice froze where he stood.