

The Gods 581

Chapter 581: The Supreme Inquisitor's Anomaly

Lo Yat noticed La Quis's arrival and screamed for his help.

Even now, locked away in the depths of the Howling Iron Prison, La Quis had never forgotten what Lo Yat had said:

"Order has abandoned its own will! It has given up on order! It no longer deserves to sit atop the Supreme Court! La Quis—help me! Help me take it down!

Once I sit upon that Divine Throne, I promise you—on every inch of Grand Tribunal land, the song of order will ring eternal!

I... will be the new Order!"

'He's gone mad. Lo Yat has gone mad.'

That was the Grand Justice's first thought. He couldn't fathom that one of the nation's highest authorities was blaspheming the Benefactor of the entire nation, right here in the most devout, most orderly place in the land!

And more than that—he was trying to usurp the throne!

For a devout follower of Order, this was absolutely unacceptable.

So he acted. Without hesitation, he struck at the Supreme Inquisitor.

Bolstered by the dense power of Order, he subdued Lo Yat in almost a single blow. But what he didn't expect was that the binding cord—meant only to restrain an enemy—strangled the man to death right before his eyes.

The Grand Justice, under the Iron Law's witness, had executed a Supreme Inquisitor without trial!

The commotion was too great to conceal. Every power-holder in Katouting soon converged on the scene. The other four of the supreme six arrived in an instant—and beheld the Iron Law hovering in midair, a Grand Justice frozen in shock and terror, and a Supreme Inquisitor with a purple face and ligature marks covering his body.

Everyone was stunned. But all present were experts in judgment and investigation. The Grand Investigator, in particular, saw through the situation at a glance—Lo Yat's blasphemy had come first; La Quis had merely upheld justice.

By that logic, the Grand Justice had broken no law. He'd even acted meritoriously!

But how he'd ended up here alone, and how the vanished Supreme Inquisitor had descended into blasphemous frenzy—these remained mysteries to Lid Yara.

She wanted to conduct an on-site interrogation, but the other two Supreme Inquisitors and the Grand Executioner clearly preferred to keep this quiet. They decided to disperse everyone, suppress the information, and let La Quis's unauthorized presence go unpursued.

But just then, La Quis raised his head with a look of utmost gravity, shook his head with absolute seriousness, and said:

"Lo Yat was not killed by me. As Grand Justice, I would never overstep my authority to execute a criminal before he's been tried and given his right of defense.

He was killed by It!

Something is wrong with the Iron Law!"

"Watch your tongue!" Supreme Inquisitor Esa Res roared, waving his scepter to disperse every Iron Law Knight who'd come running. At the same time, Grand Executioner Artair invoked the power of Order directly, binding this "new blasphemer" in place.

"I am not lying. I saw Lo Yat go berserk, attempting to tear the Iron Law apart. Out of devotion to my faith, I restrained him.

But when I channeled the surrounding Order power, I found its force terrifyingly volatile—far beyond anything I'd imagined. Not only that, but within what should have been pure and holy Order power, there were countless other forces tangled together, impossible to distinguish.

These forces were intertwined and chaotic to the extreme. My mind was affected—my consciousness went blank for an instant.

By the time I regained my senses, Lo Yat... was already dead before me!"

"Enough!" Esa Res's stare was dark. "La Quis, do you have any idea what you're saying?! You are committing blasphemy! In the very halls of Order, you are blaspheming our Lord to his face!"

The Grand Justice spoke with conviction:

"I know!

But I am not blaspheming. I am demonstrating my most fearless devotion to the original, pure Order!

If I could be affected by the chaotic power he was emanating, then what about Lo Yat?

Was he influenced? Did he discover something as well? Esa Res—you clearly knew about this. What are you people hiding?

This is deeply wrong.

The Supreme Court, which has always represented Order, has developed an internal problem. This is not a small matter, and it must not be treated as one!

I, La Quis, in my capacity as Grand Justice, hereby petition the Grand Investigator for the highest-level investigation. And the targets of that investigation are...

You. You. And you!"

He pointed at each of the two Supreme Inquisitors and the Grand Executioner in turn, then raised a trembling finger toward the Iron Law floating in the air above.

"And... It!"

"You've lost your mind as well." A flash of complexity passed through Supreme Inquisitor Keinlaur's eyes. He sighed and turned to the Grand Investigator. "Lid Yara, I know you have many questions. But I trust you'll keep the bigger picture in mind."

Lid Yara's sharp gaze swept across every person present, cataloging each expression. She remained noncommittal—but she did not leave.

Seeing this, the two Supreme Inquisitors exchanged a glance, then jointly petitioned the Iron Law to bestow supreme adjudicatory authority. They sentenced the unrepentant Grand Justice to the Crime of Blasphemy, and the Grand Executioner personally escorted him to the deepest dungeon of the Howling Iron Prison.

And that was everything La Quis had experienced.

Cheng Shi listened to the entire account with a creased brow, his mind constantly turning over what those "other forces" jumbled within Order's power might actually be.

The source of those forces could very well help him uncover the true nature of the Iron Law—because logically, it shouldn't have backstabbed its own Benefactor, Order.

But based on La Quis's story alone, that question had no answer.

So he continued listening intently, waiting for Grand Investigator Lid Yara's own account.

Lid Yara's condition had deteriorated noticeably since she'd begun. Thinking and speaking were draining her fast, yet Cheng Shi couldn't offer treatment or assistance. He could only rely on her iron will to keep going.

Her persistence was clearly a testament to her devotion to Order—and to the trust she'd placed in the sliver of hope the God Upholders had brought.

"My observations were not as dramatic or profound as La Quis's, because my devotion told me that regardless of whether I believed the Grand Justice, I could not directly investigate our Lord Order.

So I chose to investigate his followers first—the Supreme Inquisitors and Grand Executioner who kept this nation running.

As Grand Investigator, I held the right of secret investigation. I began my first inquiry in silence, and my first target was Keinlaur—the one who'd told me to keep the bigger picture in mind.

Honestly, he had no problems whatsoever.

Rotating through the Supreme Court, attending every session required of a Supreme Inquisitor, actively promoting legislative enforcement, repelling the Tower of Logic's ideological spread and territorial encroachment...

While some of his relatives and subordinates were falling under Truth's influence, at least Keinlaur himself had not been drawn in.

He faithfully practiced Order's will. Even by my exacting standards, he was a model—a paragon of devotion to Order.

Until I discovered..."

Chapter 582: The Old Hothead's Student, the Young Hothead

"...one crucial detail, and only then did I realize that the Iron Law might truly have a problem."

"What detail?" Cheng Shi's expression grew grave, and he even lowered his breathing.

"Keinlaur stopped making contact with the Iron Law!

As the constitutional codex bestowed by our Benefactor, the Iron Law has always been regarded as his avatar—the sole guide he mercifully left for the world.

Every law that should be entered into the Grand Tribunal's constitution must be reported to it by the Supreme Inquisitors and recorded within the Iron Law.

In the past, this was mandatory work during each Supreme Inquisitor's rotation. But I discovered that for a very long time before Lo Yat's incident, Keinlaur had stopped offering devotion to the Iron Law entirely!

Whenever the Supreme Court had new legislation to promulgate, he'd leave Katouting on external business, pushing the honor of the divine audience—something practically equivalent to meeting god himself—onto Lo Yat. Lo Yat was the most devout among our Lord's followers. Naturally, he'd never refuse such an opportunity.

And Keinlaur's excuses were flawless—the Grand Tribunal's various territories genuinely needed a Supreme Inquisitor's attention. So for a long time, I failed to spot the problem.

Looking back now, Keinlaur had probably noticed the Iron Law's anomaly long ago.

What's even stranger is that this practice continued for an extended period, yet aside from the two men involved, even Esa Res never raised a single question.

The Grand Executioner, Grand Justice, and Grand Investigator only needed to perform the monthly devotion rites—we didn't have to pray to the Iron Law for every matter. But the Supreme Inquisitors interacted with it constantly. How could they have missed every sign?

That's precisely what made me suspect Esa Res had a problem too.

So I turned my attention to him and began investigating the second Supreme Inquisitor.

Esa Res was very old. Under the Supreme Court's governance laws and justice statutes, he would soon need to select a successor, then honorably step down from his burden and live out his twilight years amid the reverence and cheers of Order's citizens.

In his final years of tenure, he committed no errors—but neither did he distinguish himself.

He stopped balancing the political factions, stopped guiding legal trends, stopped making public appearances to tour the nation. He simply stayed put in Katouting, quietly offering his devotion to Order.

Esa Res had dedicated his entire life to this country. At his age, rest was well-deserved. But the Iron Law crisis had erupted at precisely this juncture, and I couldn't help suspecting he might be concealing the anomaly to protect his lifelong reputation of devotion from any blemish.

Otherwise, there was no explanation for why he'd never questioned the irregularity of Lo Yat taking Keinlaur's place at the divine audiences.

This Supreme Inquisitor deserved respect, so I didn't investigate him in secret. Instead, I visited him as a confused junior, hoping to awaken the last of his devotion and persuade him to tell the truth!"

At that, Cheng Shi froze.

'What—are you insane? How could you do something this stupid?'

'The Grand Justice's arrest already made everyone's stance crystal clear. How could you still make such a blunder?'

He stared at the Grand Investigator with bewilderment etched across his face, barely suppressing the urge to voice his complaints as he waited for an explanation.

Lid Yara let out a bitter laugh at this point in her story. In those still-sharp eyes, a rare flash of sorrow appeared.

"He... was my foster father."

"???"

"He was the one who rescued me from a war zone during an inspection tour of the Grand Tribunal's territories when he was young, and brought me back to Katouting.

He was the one who taught me how to follow Order, who awakened my intellect and discovered my abilities.

He was the one whose lifetime of devotion showed me that Order is the greatest Lord in all the world.

I couldn't go against my own heart—I couldn't investigate his Benefactor behind his back in his old age, let alone secretly investigate him.

I understood him. I knew his devotion was different from others'. What he wanted was for the world to be watched over by Order. What he wanted was eternal peace across the Land of Hope."

"Tch—" Cheng Shi couldn't hold back this time. "What a touching story. I suppose your foster father understood you just as well—which is why he put you in here. Am I right, Grand Investigator?"

The instant the words left his mouth, he regretted them, terrified Lid Yara would faint from the provocation like La Quis.

Fortunately, the Grand Investigator's willpower was stronger than the old man's.

Grief was written all over her face:

"Ridiculous, isn't it?"

But no matter how ridiculous, could it possibly be more ridiculous than Order ceasing to be orderly?

His followers built a nation devoted to his worship across this vast land. The whole country was flourishing. And right at that moment, his own will developed a problem.

Now that is the most ridiculous thing in the world."

Cheng Shi furrowed his brow and sighed: "So, Grand Investigator—you never found direct evidence of what exactly went wrong with the Iron Law, did you?"

All your investigation confirmed was something La Quis had already said."

"...No. I didn't."

"..." Cheng Shi went numb. He drew two deep breaths and checked the time, sensing tonight's harvest might be rather slim.

But things were far from over. Lid Yara continued:

"I never faced the altered Iron Law directly. The only ones who did were La Quis—and his student, Chernosly."

"?" Cheng Shi blinked. "Chernosly is La Quis's student?"

"Correct. He was also Esa Res's chosen successor for the Supreme Inquisitor seat. Had nothing gone wrong, he should have been the next generation's Son of Order—assuming Esa Res's position in a few years, ascending to the Supreme Court's bench.

But now..."

"Wait—hold on!" Cheng Shi's eyes suddenly blazed with energy. He fixed Lid Yara with a piercing stare: "You're saying Chernosly confronted the Iron Law directly?"

He was imprisoned because of his teacher?"

"Yes. The boy refused to believe his teacher would betray Order, so he launched his own secret investigation, just as I had.

But none of us imagined that this audacious Inquisitor would actually sneak into the Supreme Court and investigate the Iron Law face to face!"

'Well, well!'

'What guts!'

'What a hothead!'

'The old hothead's apprentice, through and through!'

Whether or not Chernosly learned anything else from his master was debatable—but the reckless streak? He'd inherited that in full.

"What did he find?"

"He..." Lid Yara's expression darkened. "He went mad. Just like Lo Yat.

The Chernosly of today is no longer the upright, capable First-Class Inquisitor he once was. He's become a delusional paranoiac.

And all of it...

I believe was a gift from the Iron Law."

Chapter 583: Lighting the Dream Peeping Candle

Paranoia? What paranoia?

The Chernosly he'd met beneath Eternal Bloom Town hadn't shown the slightest hint of paranoia.

If anything, the man had been brimming with rapturous visions of a new god's descent.

Of course, Chaos's version of "wonderful" might be "dreadful" to everyone else.

Cheng Shi froze. He recalled everything Chernosly had told him and considered Moxius's attitude, then suddenly realized his previous understanding of both men might not align with the actual truth.

So he turned his gaze toward Chernosly with fresh eyes, reassessing this future seedling follower of Chaos.

"Did he ever say what he saw?"

"No." Lid Yara shook her head sadly. "And that's the biggest problem.

He... rejected his teacher La Quis's judgment entirely. He insisted the Iron Law had no issue whatsoever.

Everything that happened to him and La Quis, he claimed, was the result of other inquisitors smearing and envying his right to succeed as Supreme Inquisitor.

He didn't believe that It had a problem. He believed Its followers had a problem.

They'd been conquered by their lust for power, committing actions that violated Order's justice, and had locked him away on fabricated charges.

So after his imprisonment, Chernosly's thinking shifted. He no longer wanted to investigate Order. He wanted to defend himself before the Benefactor!

He wanted to confront the 'vermin' who'd framed him and his teacher in open court, under the Iron Law's witness!

He even believed the Supreme Inquisitors and the Grand Executioner were blameless—yet he'd forgotten that the reason he was here in the first place was that Artair had locked him up with his own hands!

It was precisely because La Quis saw his own student descend into the same madness as Lo Yat that he truly realized Order's nation had lost its order.

And he despaired..."

"..." Cheng Shi listened with a storm of emotions, but he still hadn't found the key clue.

What he wanted wasn't the surface—it was the essence. What exactly had transformed Lo Yat and Chernosly?

The Iron Law had obviously done something. But the question was: how had it done it, and what exactly had it done?

Why could it replace Order and sit upon Order's Divine Throne while the other gods said nothing?

Was the real Order fractured or dead? And what secret lurked within—one so grave that every god kept silent about it?

Cheng Shi was desperate to know. And he had a method right at hand.

The Dream Peeping Candle!

The one Li Zhen had produced earlier was the most direct route to the truth.

Because Chernosly had stood face-to-face with the Iron Law. If Cheng Shi entered his memories, he'd surely find some trace of what had happened.

But it was risky.

The target of his investigation was one of Them—a being powerful enough to usurp Order's Divine Throne.

Within memories, They weren't mere phantom images. They were real presences. Using the candle to probe for truth was extremely dangerous.

But sometimes curiosity was like wildly spreading weeds—impossible to root out entirely.

Cheng Shi stood there with the candle, agonizing for a long time, torn between the greed for intelligence and the prudence demanded by safety. Finally, he gritted his teeth and decided to take a look.

Even if it was just a single glimpse—look and leave. No lingering.

But as a precaution, he had to leave himself some contingencies. This time, for the sake of Big Cat's Prosperity rewards, he hadn't used the Clown Substitute to enter. So keeping himself alive required maximum caution.

He scattered dice into every corner of the stone cell, then tucked several bottles of Prosperity of Yesteryear into the most accessible spots on his body. He even pre-loaded the Lush Horn Crown rather than risk wasting a single second opening his storage in a moment of crisis.

After getting himself ready, he double-checked Li Zhen's condition. Only after confirming there was no threat did he return to the center of the cell and set the Dream Peeping Candle at Chernosly's feet.

"Can I trust you, Grand Investigator Lid Yara?"

Lid Yara blinked, her gaze falling to the candle in his hand. She seemed to guess his intentions. With a slight frown and a pale face, she nodded.

"You can trust me. But in here, there's nothing I can do to help you."

"I don't need you to do anything specific. I just need you to wake me up immediately if that man behind me makes any movement.

He and I have... a disagreement. I'd rather not be disturbed.

Of course, my assistant is watching him too, so this little adventure shouldn't pose too many problems."

"What are you going to do?"

"Me? I'm going to peek inside Chernosly's memories—see what he actually found!" Cheng Shi's lips curved as he slowly lit the candle at his feet. "Give me just a moment. Soon, we'll have our answer."

With that, he crossed his legs beside the candle and gradually closed his eyes.

Before long, Cheng Shi's body gave a sudden jolt, his head drooped, and he drifted into sleep.

But not long after he fell into slumber, Li Zhen—bound into a bundle and smeared head to toe with knockout drugs—quietly opened his eyes.

A strange gleam flickered in them, the corner of his mouth curving into an amused smile. With Yu Mu's arrowhead still pressed to his back, he straightened up, burst free of every rope in an instant, and slowly rose to his feet.

The tree-servant Yu Mu, bow drawn and aimed squarely at him, behaved as though the man beneath had done nothing at all—head still lowered, staring at the now-empty patch of ground.

Lid Yara saw everything. But before she could call out to wake Cheng Shi, she suddenly forgot the agreement she'd just made. Her eyes filled with bewildered suspicion as she turned to the stranger before her.

Her hawk-sharp gaze swept rapidly around the cell. When she realized the dungeon contained far too many people who shouldn't be here, her brow creased, and she whispered weakly:

"Who... are you people?"

Li Zhen chuckled softly, rolling his wrists as he strolled closer. His eyes drifted across the three hanging "sinners" before he spoke with casual disinterest:

"Just a passerby who collects memories, that's all. Thank you for your story, Lid Yara. It was magnificent.

Magnificent memories deserve to be remembered."

Lid Yara was confused. She'd only just noticed someone entering the dungeon—so why was he thanking her for a story?

Had the Supreme Inquisitors leaked everything she'd been through? Had they twisted the truth and turned it into a joke that was common knowledge throughout the Grand Tribunal?

No—they wouldn't dare let the public know!

Lid Yara's anger flared. The indomitable Grand Investigator glared at the man before her, about to demand more answers—but Li Zhen shook his head and traced a strange symbol in the air before her face. In the next instant her eyelids grew heavy, and she slumped unconscious.

The dungeon fell silent in an instant.

And at last, he had time to properly observe the legendary... Fate Weaver.

"Cheng Shi. Interesting."

Li Zhen made no move to disturb Cheng Shi's slumber. He simply paced, his footsteps light, circling the man again and again, scrutinizing every detail of this legendary Fate Weaver and cross-referencing each observation against his own memories until the image in his mind grew vivid and unmistakably real.

The process took a long time, but his patience was inexhaustible.

Yet as he watched, he noticed something unusual—Cheng Shi's face seemed to be gradually turning red.

Hm?

Had something intense happened inside the dream?

No—the Dream Peeping Candle didn't produce that kind of effect!

Something was wrong!

The moment he spotted the anomaly, he suddenly realized he'd overlooked a critically important detail: there seemed to be one fewer breathing sound inside this dungeon!

Not counting the tree-servant, who was corpse-like in his stillness, there were five people in the room. So why was he only hearing four sets of breathing?

He himself was definitely breathing. So which one of them had stopped breathing while asleep or unconscious?

Unconsciousness was involuntary—the body would continue breathing. So who would deliberately hold their breath?

He froze mid-stride and snapped his gaze to the slumbering Fate Weaver at his feet. And at that exact moment, the silence of the dungeon shattered with a sharp gasp.

"Whew—had a good enough look? Much longer and I'll have suffocated!"

Cheng Shi's eyes snapped open, his face a mask of mischief as he sat cross-legged on the floor.

He'd said it before: he never dreamed.

And that went double for playing possum.

Chapter 584: Going Head-to-Head with the Dragon King!

Li Zhen's expression changed.

Not because Cheng Shi had opened his eyes—but because the Fate Weaver sitting on the ground had... vanished.

The moment Cheng Shi opened his eyes, he disappeared from Li Zhen's sight. Using the dice scattered across the floor and his Never Lost Gambling Gear talent, he blinked behind his opponent. Li Zhen had been wary of those dice all along, but it didn't matter—Cheng Shi was simply too fast.

The Fate Weaver hadn't spared a single thought for talk, negotiation, or probing. The only thing on his mind was to strike!

The scoffing ambush closed on Li Zhen's back in an instant. Before the man could react, the scalpel was already driving toward the back of his skull—exactly like that initial test.

Li Zhen was hit. His head burst open with a crack, eyes wide with terror as he pitched forward.

But Cheng Shi didn't celebrate the clean hit, because the texture of striking that skull... felt wrong.

Fake—no, not exactly fake. It didn't feel like a Void illusion. It felt more like an Existence artifact—a snapshot of the past.

He'd apparently killed a past version of Li Zhen.

Seeing this, and connecting it with the strange things he'd heard Lid Yara saying, Cheng Shi's eyes narrowed. He realized immediately that the opponent before him was no follower of Order at all—but a Favored One of Existence, a follower of Memory. The enemy!

The Li Zhen who'd just died was obviously a Reflection from the Sea of Memory!

Memory. Surname Li. Skilled in "deception"...

The instant those keywords aligned, a name exploded in Cheng Shi's mind.

'Could it be him?!'

The thought only made him more excited.

But along with the excitement came the whistle of an attack from behind!

The enemy had counterattacked—and lightning-fast at that.

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow, ducked the sneak attack, and snapped his fingers. He vanished again.

Rather than spinning around to engage, he rapidly disengaged from the center of the dungeon and appeared beside the tree-servant Yu Mu. He hadn't forgotten—he had backup. This bodyguard, commanded by Big Cat to protect him, had apparently been distracted by some trick. If he could get Yu Mu moving again, the situation would tilt sharply in his favor: two against one.

As for how to reactivate him—Cheng Shi had no idea.

But he could try.

He smashed a bottle of Prosperity of Yesteryear against Yu Mu's face, then seized the tip of Yu Mu's own arrow and drove it into his left arm. The instant the point broke through fabric and touched skin, Faded Majesty erupted in full force, channeling a torrent of Decay power that transformed his left arm once more into an impossibly hard vine-like limb.

Yes—Cheng Shi was exploiting a loophole again.

To boost his combat power, he'd used Yu Mu's arrow against himself, exploiting the fact that the Faded authority triggered Faded Majesty whenever it encountered a Decay-based attack.

But that wasn't his only purpose. Primarily, he wanted to use the purest Decay aura surging from his arm to try reawakening the tree-servant.

Yu Mu might be a tree-servant of Prosperity, but there was no denying that the source of his power still flowed from the second god of the Descent path—the one currently pursuing its own decay.

The Decay aura washing over Yu Mu from point-blank range "reactivated" the Decay follower in the blink of an eye.

It worked!

Cheng Shi was elated—but didn't relax for a single instant. The next second he vanished from Yu Mu's side, flashing toward the figure across the room.

A Hero of Today bolstered by Decay was about to go head-to-head with the Dragon King—right here, right now!

Indeed, Cheng Shi had already guessed the man's identity: the oathbreaking Dragon King who had forsaken his own Benefactor to join the Fun God's banner, only to keep blasphemously walking the path of Memory even there—Li Jingming!

But was that who it really was?

It was.

Li Zhen was Li Jingming.

Facing Cheng Shi's relentless onslaught—combined with Yu Mu's opportunistic sniping from the flanks—Li Jingming showed no fear. But his face was flooded with shock.

He'd seen plenty of aggressive warriors and cunning, suspicious players. He just hadn't expected to run into a... Priest who could fight like this!

He'd noticed Cheng Shi's Decay-infused arm before descending into the dungeon, but he never imagined it wasn't some mind-altering trinket or a purely defensive blessing. It was the hard-hitting weapon of a true warrior!

Dual-class?

How else could this level of combat ability be explained?

Even a mummy shouldn't be this good in a fight!

Every impression he'd stored of Cheng Shi was filed under "cunning." Even before the fight erupted, the feeling had been the same. But now he knew he'd been wrong.

Judging by this offensive posture, Cheng Shi seemed intent on... going for the kill?

Li Jingming frowned. The situation was veering in an unfavorable direction, running counter to his original intentions. He didn't fear combat—but pointless fighting only wasted time.

And in the few hours that remained, he had much left to do.

So after dodging another of Cheng Shi's attacks with a Memory Reflection, Li Jingming drifted backward and raised both hands in a gesture of parley:

"Cheng Shi, I know you've recognized me. I..."

"I don't know you!"

Cheng Shi barked a laugh and lunged forward again.

He was having the time of his life!

The Hero of Today clung to the Dragon King like a parasite on bone, relentlessly devouring every inch of standing room. Combined with a peak Hunter's harassing arrows, not even Big Cat could have emerged unscathed from a pincer like this—let alone Li Jingming, who was a Mage.

But he was a leaderboard-ranked player, after all. After tanking a few hits—sporting several bruises and thoroughly shredded clothes—he retreated a considerable distance with a look of cold fury.

Seeing the Dragon King battered, Cheng Shi's eyes nearly disappeared behind his grin.

Was the man strong?

Strong. The Dragon King was undeniably powerful.

He'd been dodging the entire time, and his few counterattacks had been tentative probes at best. Cheng Shi could tell the man wanted to resolve the conflict peacefully and clear up the "misunderstanding." The problem was, Cheng Shi didn't want to.

Not yet, at least.

Because he was enjoying himself too much.

Of course, Cheng Shi wasn't Big Cat. He wasn't a violence addict. His all-out aggression wasn't because the man was the former Chosen of Memory—it was because he'd already seen through Li Jingming's intentions, understood the man wanted to cooperate. So he was demonstrating his strength to earn more leverage at the negotiating table.

Li Jingming definitely wanted to cooperate. Otherwise, he would've struck while Cheng Shi was "asleep."

The fact that he didn't could only mean his deception was purely about observing Cheng Shi, understanding him, memorizing him.

And this—right now—was the price the Dragon King owed for that little memory-gathering session.

But pumping up his bargaining chips wasn't Cheng Shi's only motive. More than pressing the advantage, he was using the man's strength as a whetstone—slowly integrating his own diverse combat abilities, honing his fighting technique.

Enemies who fought to the death were easy to find, but battles waged with mutual annihilation as the goal didn't last long. They were great for tempering will but terrible for refining technique. A well-matched opponent, on the other hand, was rare—and this was the perfect opportunity to let loose and give the Dragon King a small dose of... madman shock.

And Li Jingming was, indeed, shocked. He hadn't expected Cheng Shi to come at him as though avenging a murdered father.

No wonder the man had outmaneuvered Zhen Yi. With this brand of ruthless insanity, he could succeed at anything.

Li Jingming dodged yet another attack, his face dark as storm clouds—but still he held back, still trying to defuse the "misunderstanding" with words.

"I didn't set out to deceive you. I was simply too curious about you. You..."

"Cut the crap—stand still if you've got the guts!"

"...Don't you want to know what actually changed about Order?"

'Yes! Obviously yes!'

But Cheng Shi's expression locked down, and he shot back stubbornly: "No."

"Yes you do!"

"Fine, fine—yes I do! I want to chop you! Hold still!"

"..." There was no getting through to this man. Absolutely no communication.

Li Jingming fancied himself rather even-tempered, but under Cheng Shi's unrelenting pressure, even his composure had begun to crack. He dodged one of Yu Mu's shots with a sharp sidestep, then flicked his wrist to pin the tree-servant to the ground with Memory's power. His eyes hardened, and his entire aura began to climb without limit.

Li Zhen's appearance and clothing disintegrated off his body in an instant, revealing a face that was austere yet resolute. His hair was pulled into a high topknot, his frame wrapped in rough linen—and from his fingertips, intricate runes materialized from nothing. Were it not for the brilliant azure glow of Memory spilling from every line, one might have mistaken him for a reclusive Daoist monk who'd stepped out of an ancient scroll.

A torrent of Memory power surged toward Li Jingming's fingertips. He was fast—in the split second it took to disengage, he'd nearly completed the preparation.

But just as he was one stroke away from finishing, the Fate Weaver—who'd been pressing the close-quarters assault the entire time—suddenly stopped. Ignoring whatever "surprise" Li Jingming had prepared for him, Cheng Shi raised his arm and flashed to Chernosly's feet, extending his hand toward the unconscious First-Class Inquisitor, a taunting smirk on his face:

"You hit me, I hit him.

You can't kill me. I can kill him.

You lose a memory. I gain..."

He'd been about to say "a good time," but then realized that right now he couldn't be the Fun God's follower. His mind pivoted on a dime, the correction flowing seamlessly:

"...change.

And that is the fate we both face today."

Chapter 585: Let's Be Friends

Cheng Shi couldn't tell what talent Li Jingming was preparing, but he could feel it was powerful.

So he employed a roundabout strategy, forcing the man to stay his hand.

He knew that as long as a window of opportunity remained, the other side would never burn bridges. A Memory fanatic would never abandon a memory related to the Iron Law. So as long as he held Chernosly hostage—the only person in this bottom-level cell who'd confronted the Iron Law face to face—he could squeeze the Dragon King's lifeline and force him to stand down.

Sure enough, Li Jingming stopped. Seeing Cheng Shi seize the "hostage," the corner of his eye twitched violently. His expression turned frigid: "Kill him, and you'll lose your chance to learn about It too."

"I don't want to learn about It."

"Yes you do."

"Are you a parrot? The Dragon King Parrot?"

"..." Li Jingming had been matching Cheng Shi's push-and-pull with practiced composure, but the moment the words "Dragon King" hit his ears, the twitch worsened. "What do you want?"

"What do I want?" Cheng Shi laughed—laughed until he was doubled over. "Shouldn't I be the one asking what you want, Dragon King?"

"Simple enough. We cooperate. Light the Dream Peeping Candle again and enter Chernosly's memories together to find secrets lost in the river of time."

"Cooperate? This is how you cooperate? Disguising yourself as an Investigator and luring me down here?"

"I couldn't have lured you. You were already coming down." Seeing the standoff stabilize, Li Jingming's tone softened slightly.

Cheng Shi scoffed:

"You're the Chosen of Deceit—how could you not trick me? If I hadn't been extra careful, I might be dead by now.

What, you wanted me to go into Chernosly's memories and scout the path for you?"

"..." Li Jingming said nothing.

"Wait—you actually did?! You bastard!" Cheng Shi laughed in outrage, jabbing his finger at Li Jingming. "You Deceit followers are all scheming degenerates."

"..." Li Jingming let out a soft sigh. "I'm not a Deceit follower. I follow Memory."

"Oho—should I praise your loyalty to your old employer, or should I call you an ungrateful wretch on the Fun God's behalf?"

"On the Fun God's behalf? On what grounds would you speak for him?" Li Jingming's brow furrowed, suspicion stirring.

"Uh..." Cheng Shi's heart lurched. He recovered immediately: "We're both on the Void path. He's my Benefactor's brother-god, after all. And you, as a faithless Void walker, deserve a scolding."

Li Jingming sighed again. He could tell Cheng Shi wasn't going to keep fighting. The man's concern was entirely about his own safety during the cooperation—hence the refusal to budge.

Of course, he also recognized Cheng Shi's anger over the identity deception. He genuinely had intended for Cheng Shi to scout ahead. In his original plan, after observing the Fate Weaver, he would've followed him into the dream and done his best to help if danger arose—building goodwill to smooth over the earlier disguise.

But now, the plan had gone completely sideways.

The man's excessive caution left Li Jingming with no opening.

'How is this man even more careful than that squinty-eyed Death follower?'

Cooperation between peak-level players often worked this way—one second you're backstabbing each other, the next you're allies against a common enemy because interests align. How had this rhythm completely failed where Cheng Shi was concerned?

Li Jingming revised his assessment yet again: beyond shrewd and unhinged, there was now cautious.

A Fate Weaver who was clearly powerful yet excessively cautious.

He frowned, glanced at the time, and realized they were running short. If this stalemate continued, every surprise this unexpectedly rewarding trial had offered would be erased by the clock.

After a moment's deliberation, Li Jingming chose to concede—for the sake of collecting Memory.

"I'm willing to compensate you for my earlier deception." He fixed Cheng Shi with a steady gaze, his expression suggesting absolute certainty the man would take the bait.

And sure enough, the instant the words left his mouth, Cheng Shi's eyes lit up.

'What? Compensation?'

'Well... if you compensate enough, that tiny-tiny-tiny little misunderstanding between us... ahem, isn't entirely impossible to move past.'

'After all, meeting through a fight is how bonds are forged quickly, right?'

Seeing the excitement in Cheng Shi's eyes, Li Jingming nodded thoughtfully. Recalling how the man had extorted his teammates above the dungeon, he added one more trait to his mental profile:

A Fate Weaver who was shrewd, unhinged, powerful, warrior-priest dual-classed, excessively cautious... and greedy.

"So—the misunderstanding between us is resolved?"

Cheng Shi shook his head rapidly:

"That depends on what you're willing to compensate.

Let me tell you—being deceived leaves lasting scars. I've never been deceived before. Having it happen for the first time hurts even more, and it's going to make it very hard to trust anyone in the future.

So..."

"You want extra?"

Cheng Shi's eyes gleamed: "How considerate! So yes, you'll need to add a mental-distress surcharge."

"..."

'He isn't greedy. He's extremely greedy.'

Li Jingming was speechless. He couldn't even fathom how greed and caution could coexist in one person.

But overthinking was pointless. Every second saved mattered now. He reached into his storage and produced a single page—a sheet of shimmering azure light, stretched from "foam that never bursts."

"One page from his Chronicle of Time. Originally good for three uses of Return of the Past—but only one remains.

I trust you understand the value of Return of the Past."

'Understand? You bet I do!'

A sharp gleam flashed through Cheng Shi's eyes and vanished. He slowly withdrew the hand he'd been extending toward Chernosly as a gesture of goodwill, nodding with satisfaction—then promptly shaking his head:

"That only covers Li Zhen's hiring fee. Next comes the compensation for Dragon King Li Jingming himself."

"..." Li Jingming's eyelid spasmed. A fire ignited somewhere inside his chest and began climbing. "Cheng Shi, I should tell you—sometimes, memories don't absolutely have to be collected."

"Oh really?" Cheng Shi snickered, extending the threatening hand once more.

Seeing this, Li Jingming gritted his teeth, closed his eyes, and drew a deep breath: "I'd originally hoped we could be friends."

"We absolutely can. Just add a friendship welcome gift and we're golden."

"..."

Fists clenched.

Never in his life had Li Jingming felt so powerless in a negotiation. This man was impervious to both hard and soft tactics—and the most maddening part was that he was clearly fascinated by the Iron Law situation, had even specifically returned from the Void to reach the Howling Iron Prison, yet he refused to value time, instead squabbling over petty trifles in this pointless standoff.

What was he doing?

Whose will was he practicing?

Was this really how you walked Fate's path?

It felt more like the path of Deceit. He wasn't demanding compensation—he was manufacturing entertainment.

Li Jingming's mind blurred. In that moment, the images of the two gods of Void seemed to overlap faintly in his consciousness.

Was this the true path of Fate? If not, why had Fate itself deigned to summon Cheng Shi for an audience?

But if Cheng Shi's path was the real one, then how had the Blind One become Fate's number-one-ranked Chosen?

While Li Jingming was lost in thought, Cheng Shi cleared his throat with helpful timing.

"Ahem—watch the clock. Class is almost over."

"..." 'Class is almost over.'

Li Jingming's eyes snapped open. Gnashing his teeth, he pulled two more items from his storage.

A thread of hazy, barely-there gossamer light—and an exquisitely crafted miniature wooden mallet, two fingers long and one finger wide.

"Memory's Past Reflection and Memory Sea Insight. One lets you leave a shadow of your past self behind. The other grants you historical revelations about your current time and place.

Two S-rank items plus one SS-rank Return of the Past. Is that enough to cover the fee, the compensation, and the consolation money?"

Cheng Shi stared at the three high-tier Memory items in Li Jingming's hands, sucking in a sharp breath.

'Good Lord!'

'What kind of big-spender behavior is this?!'

No wonder the man always managed to trade for other people's memories. If the Dragon King was this generous every time, who wouldn't want to swap memories with him?

Dragons of legend loved their jewels. This might just be the genuine article.

Cheng Shi did his best to mask the shock and satisfaction in his eyes, nodding with feigned nonchalance—an attitude so casual it almost looked like he was the magnanimous one granting forgiveness.

But then—

"Ahem. And don't forget about Li Zhen's ransom—the three A-rank Law Texts."

"..."

"...Fine! Fine! FINE!"

Li Jingming couldn't even identify the emotion behind those three words as they forced their way out of his throat. Face black as coal, he handed over every last item. Cheng Shi received them with a beaming grin and swept his rightful compensation into his storage.

'Mm, another day of bountiful harvests!'

Once the "fair" transaction concluded, the Fate Weaver—whose heart was blooming like a garden—lifted his head with a warm, pleasant expression and said, all smiles:

"So... Dragon King, are we still on for that friendship thing?"

"?"

The sound of tightening fists echoed through the dungeon once more.

Chapter 586: Deceiving Each Other

Cheng Shi quit while he was ahead.

He had a feeling that if he opened his mouth to ask for one more thing, Li Jingming would genuinely abandon the entire expedition and blow up at him.

And while he wasn't particularly afraid of the man's temper, he was curious about whatever secret the Grand Tribunal was hiding.

So, with all the spoils safely in hand, Cheng Shi voluntarily, magnanimously, and very slightly stepped back.

"However, if you want to cooperate with me, I have one more condition."

"..." Li Jingming drew a deep breath and raised his hand again, looking as though his patience had finally snapped.

Cheng Shi wasn't fazed. Grinning, he raised his own hand even higher—nearly touching Chernosly's knee—and said cheerfully:

"Relax, I'm not going to make you bleed this time. But you are Deceit's Chosen, and I now have post-deception PTSD. It's very hard to trust you again. So—why don't we sign a contract?"

He produced the same sheet of A4 paper that his four teammates had already signed.

One look at this "contract" and Li Jingming's face went darker still.

"Sometimes I think you're more Deceit than Fate, Cheng Shi. You can't possibly expect to fool me again with this blank piece of paper that has zero divine energy?"

Hearing that, the corners of Cheng Shi's mouth stretched to their absolute maximum.

"Oh? You think it's fake?"

Interesting—then let me show you whether it's fake or not!"

With a sharp rip, he tore the contract in half—the one bearing four signatures.

The instant the paper split, Li Jingming's expression hardened. Both hands swept outward simultaneously as he threw up a spell shield with lightning reflexes.

And yet, as the two halves of the A4 sheet drifted gracefully to the ground, the dungeon... remained entirely undisturbed.

Cheng Shi's laughter grew even louder. He looked at the wary Li Jingming and teased:

"Sharp eyes. It was indeed fake."

"..."

Li Jingming had reached his limit. For the second time, he felt his normally impeccable temperament being ground to dust by a single player. The first time had been his initial encounter with Zhen Yi.

'Impressive, Void path. Truly impressive!'

'The fact that Deceit and Fate each have a follower like you is... completely meaningless!'

Li Jingming moved—because he felt that if he didn't do something, even the most precious memory in the world wouldn't save tonight from being a sleepless exercise in frustration.

He raised one hand. A ring on his finger, swirling with three-colored iridescent light, blazed brilliantly and illuminated the entire dungeon. Then, under Cheng Shi's somewhat guarded gaze, a symbol eerily similar to Order's materialized between them, flickered several times, and shattered into nothing.

The dungeon went dark again. In barely a blink, Cheng Shi felt as if some irrefusable, special agreement had been forged between them.

Now it was his turn to look displeased.

"What did you just do?"

"A Fair Exchange Accord." Li Jingming's face was cold. "A Memory-class contract initiated by me, witnessed by Order. I'm required to share a memory with you. If you wish to execute the accord, you can share a memory in return. If you decline, the accord breaks automatically and has no further effect on you."

Cheng Shi froze.

'What kind of deal is this?'

'A one-sided surrender?'

'I provoke him a bunch and he comes running to give me a memory?'

'What a bargain!'

'Wait—did I read this wrong? This isn't the Dragon King's revenge for being humiliated?'

'No... something feels off. The way he reacted was clearly a man pushed past his breaking point. He'd never throw out a meaningless accord—especially one that appeared to have no downside and might even net a free memory. Things this good don't just happen.'

Cheng Shi's gaze darkened.

When you encounter something bad yet can't find the catch—you're already close to danger.

He frowned, raised his hand, and edged closer to Chernosly once more.

"Li Jingming, if you don't explain this right now, not only will there be no memory to explore—this 'friendship' is off the table entirely."

"Unless you're prepared to have your identity stolen, Cheng Shi, I'd recommend not being friends with him at all."

Before Li Jingming could respond, another voice drifted down from the stairway.

Both men turned in surprise to see Big Cat's dashing silhouette striding straight toward them.

Hong Lin had come down. Completely unscathed. She'd evidently won.

As for who she'd beaten... that remained to be seen.

With Big Cat's arrival, Cheng Shi's eyebrows rose and a happy grin spread across his face. Li Jingming, on the other hand, gave a thoughtful glance toward Yu Mu's direction, then turned back with a slight smile and a courteous nod.

"Long time no see, Hong Lin."

"Long time no see, Dragon King Li."

"..."

'Ha—using that title. So these two really are on good terms.'

Cheng Shi was amused, but the smile quickly faded from his face. He turned to Li Jingming with a trace of irritation in his eyes.

"Out of respect for... Hong Lin, release this accord and I'll let you enter Chernosly's memory to find what you're looking for."

Before Li Jingming could respond, Hong Lin frowned: "What accord?"

"The Fair Exchange Accord," Cheng Shi said.

"?" Hong Lin paused, then recalled something and laughed. "Oh, I remember now. Isn't that the one where if you both hold off on sharing a memory, you end up sharing each other's location permanently?"

"?"

Now it was Cheng Shi's turn to freeze. 'What the hell—a tracking device?'

'So what? What's the point?'

'It really is useless then?'

'Even if the Dragon King holds out forever and never triggers the accord, knowing where I am accomplishes what, exactly?'

'Unless he...'

The thought was barely half-formed when Cheng Shi's expression locked up, then turned pitch-black.

'He tricked me.'

'That damn Memory follower tricked me!'

The Dragon King hadn't been retaliating at all—he'd been setting a trap. He'd used the exact same method as Cheng Shi's torn contract ruse—and conned him right back!

'Fine! FINE!'

'What an actor!'

'The Oscars owe you a statuette!'

Cheng Shi laughed in fury. He turned to Li Jingming, jabbing a finger at him for a good long while, and finally said through gritted teeth:

"Worthy of the Chosen of Deceit. I bow to the master. Well played."

Li Jingming's expression finally looked a shade more pleasant. He chuckled softly and inclined his head: "Likewise."

Cheng Shi gave a self-deprecating laugh, then couldn't resist one more jab: "Tell me—does being this petty run in the family? Did you inherit it from your Benefactor, Memory?"

At that, Hong Lin blurted in surprise: "His Benefactor isn't Deceit?"

"..." Cheng Shi went numb. He turned speechlessly to Big Cat. 'Sis, you really just said that out loud. Aren't you afraid the Fun God will take back his authority blessing after you call him petty?'

Big Cat looked confused. Li Jingming, however, caught the barb perfectly. His smile stiffened and he looked away, refusing to meet the infuriating Fate Weaver's eyes any longer. Brow furrowed, he turned to Hong Lin:

"What's the situation upstairs?"

Even though we can be woken by external force during the dream-state, it's best not to be interrupted at a critical moment. Hong Lin—if you left a mess up there, then today's trial will just have to end here."

Chapter 587: Where Three Walk Together, Cheng Shi Is Always One

The question made Hong Lin choke, because she had indeed left a mess upstairs.

She hadn't won the surface battle—or rather, the fighting up there was far from over.

Exactly as Cheng Shi had predicted, all six of the Grand Tribunal's supreme figures were in Katouting today—minus the deceased Lo Yat. But with two already down in the dungeon, only three remained above.

When the Iron Law Knights encircled the Howling Iron Prison, Grand Executioner Artair arrived first and was the first to engage Hong Lin. But this highest-ranked warrior among the supreme six seemed to be nursing an injury. His movements were sluggish, and only by channeling the dense Order power offered up by the Iron Law Knights' collective faith did he manage to fight Big Cat's giant bear form to a standstill.

Soon, though, the other two Supreme Inquisitors arrived. Under the Iron Law's blessing, their entrance immediately reversed the Grand Executioner's disadvantage. The knights pressed forward, driving Big Cat back step by step.

Ants could topple an elephant. Against a human-wave strategy, Big Cat didn't dare get careless—so she rolled her dice.

When the die wobbled to a stop on twenty-four, the Grand Tribunal's most feared garrison force—the Iron Law Knight Order whose name resounded across the entire Land of Hope—began to crumble under the roar of a giant bear.

A max-roll Hero of Today was beyond reason. She charged alone into the formation like a tiger among sheep. Every pounce and leap claimed lives, every roar and howl conjured terror. Just as she was hitting her stride... Cheng Shi called.

No—Yu Mu called.

She sensed Yu Mu being controlled, and alarm shot through her. Thinking Cheng Shi was in danger down in the dungeon, she swatted away the Grand Executioner's counterattack, stretched the battered iron door back into shape, and jammed it into the doorway to buy a moment. Then she followed Yu Mu's signal downward.

That was when she walked in on Cheng Shi and Li Jingming's standoff.

Honestly, Hong Lin's relationship with Li Jingming was fine. Then again, everyone's relationship with Li Jingming was fine—except Zhen Yi's.

The Memory follower was, as he claimed, genuinely good-natured. He chose cooperation over confrontation with other Chosen Ones and peak players. That was precisely why he could trade for all sorts of different memories from so many people.

When peak players thought of cooperation, two names always came up: Zhen Xin and Li Jingming.

The catch with Zhen Xin was her insufferable sister. With the Dragon King, the relationship was far cleaner.

So Li Jingming had a solid reputation.

But only solid—because the moment he started using memories to impersonate others, every other player's guard went up.

Big Cat felt the same way: cooperation was fine; friendship... no thanks.

She cleared her throat, still pondering how to answer his question without making things too awkward—but Cheng Shi had already read the reason for her descent. Heart warmed, he immediately spoke up on her behalf:

"No big deal. Who says we have to explore memories in a place like this?"

It's stuffy down here. I've been wanting to leave for a while. Hong Lin—you held off the Grand Tribunal's strongest offensive. Don't tell me you can't snap these Order chains or blast through these dungeon walls."

'Right!'

'Why stay here and accept the risk?'

'No time to fight? Then run first.'

Hong Lin's brow arched. She grinned and aimed a huge thumbs-up at Cheng Shi.

Li Jingming watched the exchange between them, combined it with his earlier phone probes of Hong Lin, and reached a firm conclusion: these two were far closer than he'd imagined.

'Interesting. Is this the kinship of warriors?'

Hong Lin didn't spare Li Jingming another thought. With a low growl, she shifted back into her giant bear form.

But this bear still carried the max-roll blessing of Fate—outrageously strong. One step forward, one straight punch, and the dungeon's reinforced rear wall collapsed. Then she roared, rampaging through the empty cell, demolishing everything in sight.

Hong Lin wasn't stupid—at least not when it came to combat instinct. She could tell she probably couldn't unlock Order's shackles directly. But that didn't stop her from demolishing the entire dungeon and hauling prisoners and shackles out together.

'Can't crack the safe? Fine—I'll take the whole safe with me.'

And so she really did demolish the dungeon.

A dungeon was a dungeon because it was buried deep underground. Had the cell been at surface level, the three of them would already have escaped with the Grand Tribunal's prisoners. But they were below ground, and the moment Hong Lin reduced the cell to rubble, the compacted earth around them began caving in. The entire structural collapse happened in an instant.

None of the three were afraid, though.

Cheng Shi saw the wall of earth rushing toward him, pulled a shovel from his storage, and spun it in both hands—left-right, left-right—fast as rowing a boat. In no time he'd carved a spacious tunnel through the collapsing soil.

Hong Lin growled again, recalled the tree-servant Yu Mu, yanked the three prisoners—still tightly bound by Order chains—close, then shifted into a Dense Forest Spotted Leopard, tossed all three onto her back, and charged headlong after "Cheng-Shi-brand Excavator."

Li Jingming stood on the last patch of uncollapsed ground, watching the two execute this... brutally unsophisticated jailbreak, and opened his mouth. Nothing came out for a long time.

'Hotheads. Both of them.'

As peak players, they clearly had far more efficient and elegant methods of escape. Yet they'd chosen the clumsiest, most physically exhausting option.

So...

'Being a warrior makes you special?'

'Does nobody consider the Mage teammate's feelings?'

Li Jingming sighed. He genuinely didn't want to get himself this filthy. So he activated the contingency he'd planted outside the Howling Iron Prison and teleported directly to the surface.

Cheng Shi was right—they could continue the memory exploration elsewhere. But the Grand Tribunal's search-and-pursuit operation remained an uncertain factor.

So he used this opportunity to do something—slow the Supreme Inquisitors and the Grand Executioner down a little more.

The instant Li Jingming vanished, Cheng Shi suddenly stopped, his spinning shovel going still. He stood in place and started laughing.

Big Cat skidded to a halt behind him. "Come on—why'd you stop?"

Cheng Shi looked back at the collapsed tunnel behind them: "The Dragon King's gone?"

Big Cat batted the dirt off her massive head with one paw and nodded: "Gone. Now move!"

"Good that he's gone. We're going a different way!"

"?"

"Right now we've got the people, the Dream Peeping Candle—everything's in our hands. Why would we share with him?"

Quick, Hong Lin—you take point and dig. Your claws are sharper; you're faster."

"???" Hong Lin froze, then shot Cheng Shi a disdainful look and scoffed: "You seem to have forgotten he has your location."

"Haven't forgotten. That's exactly why we split up."

He tucked a die into Big Cat's paw.

"You take the prisoners and the die and head that way. Dig out the other side of Prologue Holy Mountain, away from Katouting.

I'll go this way. I'll come find you soon.

If we're lucky, we might even get the jump on him before the trial ends."

"..." Hong Lin's expression turned strange. "Cheng Shi, Li Jingming isn't someone you want as a friend—but he's definitely not someone you want as an enemy either."

"I'm not trying to make him an enemy. Besides, we're both Void brethren. There are no enemies here."

"...Then why are you screwing him over?"

"How is this screwing him over?"

When you gave me that thumbs-up, the thumb was separated from the other four fingers—symbolizing our need to part ways with him.

I'm only acting on your suggestion, Hong Lin!"

"???" Big Cat was dumbstruck—then her fur bristled. "CHENG SHI!!!"

But the man had already finished talking and was tunneling away at top speed in the opposite direction.

Even faster than before.

Big Cat gnashed her teeth, smashed the wall of dirt in front of her flat with one swipe, and furiously began digging the other way.

Chapter 588: Fine, Fine, Fine—I'm the Clown

One hour until the trial ended.

Back on the surface, Li Jingming couldn't erase all memories from the Grand Tribunal's pursuers under the Iron Law's influence—but he could blur a window of their recollections. One hour was the limit of what he could manage.

It would cost him yet another precious item, though.

He'd already paid a steep price today just to witness Order's secret. He could only hope the rest went more smoothly.

Once finished, Li Jingming followed the accord's directional indicator and raced toward Cheng Shi's position. In the time that remained, he had to rejoin these two hothead teammates and enter the dream together to find the clue.

Cheng Shi was fast, but no amount of underground speed could outpace a surface-running Chosen One. Li Jingming closed in quickly—only to discover that Cheng Shi's position was still inside Prologue Holy Mountain, some distance below the surface.

Sensing the man's location, Li Jingming frowned. Cheng Shi had no intention of coming up. He was still digging deeper!

'What is this Fate Weaver planning?'

His trajectory was clearly aimed at putting more distance between himself and the surface. Was he actually going to hoard that memory all to himself?

He'd taken that much loot and still wanted to hoard the memory?!

'Insatiable. Absolutely insatiable!'

'This isn't a Void walker—this is a Descent devotee, a Corruption lackey!'

Li Jingming's expression turned cold. As a Mage, he wasn't without the means to carve through a mountain—but his elemental affinity wasn't earth. He could only use off-element basic spells to break rock, and the efficiency was dismal.

He did have large-scale destructive options, but they were too close to Katouting. Any major disturbance would draw the Grand Tribunal's attention again, and third-party interference would eat up the remaining time, making the memory pursuit impossible.

The situation looked like a dead end. The Dragon King had only two choices: blast the mountain open and find Cheng Shi to vent his rage, or let the man tunnel beyond reach and watch quietly as he and Hong Lin lit the Dream Peeping Candle and monopolized the memory.

Either way, he couldn't win.

But Li Jingming didn't give up. After acclimating to Cheng Shi's rhythm, he'd more or less anticipated this.

He knew the Fate Weaver was also adjusting his strategy based on Li Jingming's position—and burrowing deeper to keep him out might not be the only play. The man likely had backup plans, impossible to predict.

Facing a situation where there was no obvious line of attack, how should one break through?

Simple: since the opponent was unpredictable, make yourself equally unpredictable.

So Li Jingming acted. Through the accord, he shared a memory with Cheng Shi. The sharing didn't require face-to-face communication—he simply uploaded his memory, and the other party would receive it. The content was a rather interesting little story.

Cheng Shi received the memory. He'd been digging furiously at the mountain's base when a short fragment of a Dream Peeping Ranger's memory gradually materialized in his mind.

In it, a Dream Peeping Ranger he didn't recognize used Memory techniques to detect the dream-wave fluctuations of his quarry, tracked the quarry down, and killed them.

At the end of the memory, the Ranger had mused: "Dreams are but ripples of memory—with form and trace, and therefore a trail to follow."

The memory ended. The Exchange Accord placed the choice before Cheng Shi: he could share a memory of his own in return, or he could decline and go their separate ways.

This should have been an inconsequential choice—no strings attached, entirely up to him. By all appearances he'd already seized the high ground.

But right now, Cheng Shi couldn't bring himself to smile.

Because the moment the Dragon King shared the memory, the mutual location tracking ended.

Which meant that regardless of what he chose, he could no longer know the other man's position.

That wasn't bad in itself—Li Jingming had also lost Cheng Shi's location. But the problem was, in that memory shared right before the link severed, the Dragon King had revealed that a Memory follower could locate a dreaming person!

The Ranger in the memory was a Dream Peeping Ranger, sure—but who could guarantee that a former Chosen of Memory lacked the same trick?

"..."

And just like that, Cheng Shi was pinned—pinned by an open scheme of Memory.

Li Jingming had used a seemingly unrelated memory to build a deterrent from the unknown, successfully stripping all meaning from Cheng Shi's digging—because he couldn't risk Li Jingming finding them when he and Big Cat finally shared Order's memory.

If the Dragon King did find them, he'd be seething. The only outcome would be mutual destruction.

Now neither side could guarantee safety once they entered the dream.

Cheng Shi's face blackened. He abandoned the downward excavation without hesitation, used a die to teleport to the surface, then sprinted at full speed toward the spot where Li Jingming had last disappeared.

Now he was the one racing against time.

'Well played, Li Jingming! Well played, Dragon King! Well played, Chosen of Memory!'

'Definitely interesting.'

Cheng Shi wasn't annoyed or frustrated. He even felt a flicker of mutual respect for the Dragon King's counter-move.

He'd been testing the man's caliber all along, wanting to understand why—beyond faith-based retaliation—the Fun God had recruited the Dragon King into Deceit's fold.

Now he knew. Li Jingming was worthy.

Among all the Chosen Ones and peak players he'd encountered, plenty could counter him. But the number who'd forced him to swallow the bitter fruit he'd cultivated with his own hands, using this particular method? So far, just one.

His interest in the man deepened, and his vigilance sharpened in equal measure.

Li Jingming hadn't moved from his spot. He was waiting for Cheng Shi. He couldn't be certain the man would come, but he suspected this greedy Fate Weaver wouldn't pass up the final chance to explore the Iron Law's secrets.

And sure enough, a few minutes later, the greedy Fate Weaver appeared—sprinting down Prologue Holy Mountain's slope and skidding to a halt before him.

Li Jingming didn't waste a single word. He glanced at the time and said: "Forty minutes until the trial ends."

Cheng Shi's face went dark. He jabbed a finger toward the distance: "See that river below the mountain? Meet there in five minutes. If you're late, don't blame me for taking the candle and leaving."

With a snap of his fingers, he vanished—going to redirect Big Cat.

But when he appeared beside her, what he found caught him off guard. The Prosperity heir hadn't dug very far from the demolished dungeon at all. She'd hollowed out a spacious cavern and was lounging inside in leopard form, resting.

Seeing this, Cheng Shi went blank. He blinked at Big Cat, suspicion dripping from his voice: "You knew?"

Big Cat rubbed her face: "Knew what?"

"Don't play dumb. You knew I couldn't shake the Dragon King, so you just waited here for me?"

Hong Lin, you've changed.

You didn't used to be this..."

Big Cat eyed Cheng Shi with a half-smile, extending one claw and flicking up a single razor-sharp nail.

"This what?"

Cheng Shi's expression instantly shifted as he course-corrected: "Doesn't matter—there's still time. Let's get moving."

Big Cat scoffed, scooped up the three shackled prisoners, tossed Cheng Shi onto her back, and charged in the direction he pointed.

She didn't bother digging. She rammed. The maxed-out Dense Forest Spotted Leopard was a nuclear-powered, annihilation-class boring machine, punching straight through Prologue Holy Mountain's midsection in a dead line.

"I really didn't predict anything. But I do know Li Jingming doesn't take losses.

You shouldn't have underestimated him. He's the only person who's never come out on the losing end against Zhen Yi."

"?" Cheng Shi faltered, then snapped irritably: "You couldn't have told me that earlier?"

"What good would that have done? You were obviously testing him. Might as well let you.

Besides, if I'd told you, how would I get to watch you make a fool of yourself? You spend all day scheming—getting outmaneuvered once is good for you."

There was undeniable mockery in Big Cat's grin. Cheng Shi felt his scalp itch under all those invisible barbs.

'Fine, fine, fine. I thought I was the screenwriter—the director—the audience. Turns out, the script was the only part I wrote. The director was someone else, and the audience was laughing at me, not with me.'

'I'm nothing. I'm just the clown.'

Cheng Shi touched his nose with a rueful laugh.

'Heh. The clown.'

Chapter 589: Entering the Dream

Big Cat was fast. Even tunneling through a mountain, she arrived ahead of the Dragon King on the surface.

The two of them arranged Chernosly and the other two prisoners by the riverbank and waited quietly. They could already see Li Jingming atop the mountain—half a minute at most before he'd reach them.

Right on cue, the violent jostling revived Chernosly and his teacher La Quis from the Order chains' earlier punishment. When they saw they were no longer in the dungeon—and recognized the familiar silhouette of Prologue Holy Mountain in the distance—a flicker of bewilderment crossed their eyes.

But their reactions couldn't have been more different.

Chernosly's eyes blazed with mania. He glared fixedly toward Katouting, seething with impotent fury:

"Running is the coward's choice—and I'm no coward! Let me go back!

I am First-Class Inquisitor Chernosly, student of the greatest Grand Justice in history, La Quis himself! I cannot let the Grand Tribunal lose its justice!

These termites gnawing at Order's foundations must be exterminated! Factional infighting and political games can exist—but they must exist within Order's rules!

They shattered Order!

They betrayed Order!

He betrayed me!

Why did he betray me?!"

Chernosly still hadn't grasped the real problem. Some unknown force continued to influence him, and he remained convinced that all of this stemmed from an internal crisis within the Grand Tribunal.

La Quis seemed not to hear his student at all. He stared skyward with those clouded old eyes, his voice saturated with the bleakness of despair and the grief of shattered faith.

"Why... would you let this world... lose Order.

Oh, supreme Order... why..."

Watching the scene, Cheng Shi let out a soft scoff.

There was no pity in his heart. When gods erred, mortals had no obligation to mourn for them. He wasn't mocking the Grand Justice's devotion—he was mocking the order that the Grand Tribunal championed.

Hong Lin raised an eyebrow with curiosity: "What's funny?"

Cheng Shi spread his hands: "The Grand Tribunal."

"How so?"

For all its problems, the Grand Tribunal is still better than most other nations in recorded history. At least there's order here. Ordinary people can enjoy a modest measure of the justice and fairness they dream of."

Cheng Shi shook his head. "What kind of order do you think the Grand Tribunal maintains?"

Hong Lin furrowed her brow and considered: "Citizens' lives and liberty? Social progress and stability?"

"No. Not even close.

Strength protects life. Power begets freedom. These things concern citizens, but citizens don't get to decide them.

I've visited many of the Grand Tribunal's cities, gone deep into numerous local prisons, and carefully observed their enforcers and convicts. I reached a personal conclusion:

The Grand Tribunal took a wrong turn.

They don't defend the people and protect the faithful because they champion rule of law. They do it to ensure those people retain the right to be judged!

To ensure that when his followers stand before his judgment, they accept their guilt willingly, allowing Order's radiance to shine forth without obstruction.

They never cared about what's below. They only ever cared about what's above. The order they want to maintain isn't the order ordinary people depend on for survival—it's the order required by the one seated upon the Divine Throne.

Hong Lin, you're right—the Grand Tribunal is better than other nations. But that's not because the people in power love their citizens or govern wisely. It's because these people were lucky enough to encounter a deity whose will isn't entirely dark and destructive!

From everything I've observed about the Civilization gods, Order may have genuinely championed order once. But he never corrected his followers' deviation—and that derailed the entire Grand Tribunal.

Fortunately, a will that champions order, even when it drifts slightly off course, still benefits civilizational development more than wills of chaos and annihilation.

But the hidden dangers were planted long ago. So when this deity developed a problem, order ceased to be order entirely.

Because the Grand Tribunal's rulers were devoted to his will. When he himself was no longer orderly, what meaning did order have?

Look—the Supreme Inquisitors threw the Grand Justice in prison. That's the most absurd consequence of this change."

"Quite the 'Order Doctrine' you've constructed. Impressive. I imagine you and Mo Li would have plenty to talk about."

Li Jingming had arrived. He'd caught the tail end of Cheng Shi's speech, and a light of appreciation gleamed in his eyes.

Cheng Shi glanced up, rolled his eyes, and sneered: "He's already gone to find War. What's there to talk about?"

Besides, I walk the Void path. Everything I think, say, and do is meaningless. I have nothing in common with Civilization's kin."

Li Jingming blinked, taken aback, and looked at Hong Lin.

"You two... really don't keep secrets from each other."

'Intelligence gathered is meant to be shared with friends. If you hoard everything, what makes you different from a Folly follower?'

Hong Lin shrugged with a casual smile and waved—another informal greeting.

Cheng Shi wasted no more time. He produced the remaining Dream Peeping Candle flame and pointed at Chernosly:

"Let's pick up the pace, Dragon King. The trial's about to end."

Li Jingming nodded in agreement. Without bothering to listen to whatever Chernosly and La Quis were saying, he traced several symbols in the air and sent both men into slumber.

Cheng Shi watched the trick with raised eyebrows, admiration plain on his face:

"Now that's way more useful than Deceit's hypnosis talent. But 'Dragon King,' you seem awfully practiced at putting people to sleep.

Tsk, Memory really does play dirty."

"..."

Li Jingming auto-filtered out "Cheng Shi's" commentary, sat cross-legged on the ground, and pulled a small wooden bird from his storage, setting it beside him.

"A Time trinket. Before the trial ends, it'll sing a hymn that wakes us up. When we hear the song praising Time inside the dream, that's our cue to find an exit."

The other two nodded and sat cross-legged as well.

The cooperation was now unavoidable. Hurrying to work together and make the most of the remaining time was the most pragmatic course.

But Cheng Shi eyed the motionless wooden bird on the ground with unmistakable interest: "Single-use?"

"..." Li Jingming gave Cheng Shi a look of profound complexity, then sighed. "It's just a B-rank item. You can have it."

Cheng Shi's face lit up. He rubbed his hands together: "Oh, I couldn't possibly—"

His mouth said one thing, but his rear was already scooting closer to the bird.

"..."

Li Jingming took one look at this, wordlessly closed his eyes, and adopted an out-of-sight-out-of-mind policy.

Hong Lin, on the other hand, chuckled softly, pointed at the little wooden bird, then pointed at herself, and mouthed silently:

"Cute. Gimme."

"?"

Cheng Shi's expression immediately soured. He was about to refuse—but then he reminded himself that Big Cat had gone through a lot of trouble coming with him. So he sighed, shot her a mildly disgusted look, and scooted away again.

Once all three were ready, the Dream Peeping Candle flickered to life. Taking advantage of the moment when the other two had their eyes closed, Cheng Shi quietly gave himself a mental cue, undoing the psychological trap he'd set earlier—the one that prevented him from dreaming.

And so, a dream quietly descended upon them all.

Chapter 590: Chernosly and... That Man

All three opened their eyes simultaneously and found themselves in a bedroom unmistakably styled after the Grand Tribunal. Traces of Order were everywhere—the Grand Tribunal's insignia emblazoned on every surface.

Thanks to the Dream Peeping Candle's effect, they existed in the same phantom state as a Dream Peeping Ranger infiltrating someone else's dream: invisible to the dream's inhabitants, yet unable to stray too far from the memory's host.

Since this was Chernosly's dream, they floated beside the First-Class Inquisitor.

At this moment, Chernosly stood in the center of the room, face grave, gripping another man's shoulders. His voice dropped to a fierce whisper:

"You're the only one I can trust! There's no way my teacher is a blasphemer—he must have discovered something!

But Lord Esa Res won't hear any defense, won't allow any appeal. He insists my teacher blasphemed Order. I... I still can't accept it!"

The man facing him frowned: "Then what do you plan to do?"

"I want to..." Anguish flickered across Chernosly's face, but it quickly hardened into resolve. "I want to bypass the Supreme Court and petition him directly for the truth!"

"Have you lost your mind?!" The man seized Chernosly's arm, about to shout—then caught himself and hissed: "Have you forgotten how La Quis ended up in prison?"

You can't provoke the Supreme Court the same way!

Wake up, Chernosly. You're the Son of Order—Lord Esa Res's chosen successor. If you do this and you're caught—no, you will be caught!

He'll strip your successor status. Your own teacher will lock you in the Howling Iron Prison with his own hands!

You'd be betraying Order. Do you understand that?!"

Chernosly's expression shifted wildly. His heart refused to settle. But after several deep breaths, the determination in his eyes grew even fiercer.

"But what if... as my teacher said... he has a problem?"

"Chernosly! Watch your tongue!" The man pulled him back, shot a panicked glance at the door, then dragged him deeper into the inner room. In an even lower voice he growled: "How could he possibly have a problem?! How?!"

He is the foundation of all order in the world! The source of fairness and justice across the entire universe! He is a god! He is HIM! He is our Benefactor!

How dare you question your own Benefactor!"

Chernosly spoke with full gravity: "My teacher said he..."

"Enough! You'd sooner doubt your Benefactor than doubt your teacher. Has it occurred to you that maybe Grand Justice La Quis was wrong?!"

"Impossible!"

"You..." The man faltered, then snapped: "Fine, fine—La Quis is never wrong. Then have you considered that Lord Keinlaur could be wrong?"

That Lord Esa Res could be wrong?

That my own teacher, Lord Artair, could be wrong?

That all three of them would make the same mistake simultaneously?!"

"..." That silenced Chernosly.

Indeed—in his eyes, those three were equally noble and just.

"But..."

"And Grand Investigator Lid Yara—our Lord's sharpest eyes—chose not to publicly challenge Lord Esa Res's verdict on the spot. That means... that means..."

The man trailed off into silence as well. Clearly, voicing the idea that La Quis—the most just man in the Grand Tribunal—had committed blasphemy was agonizing for him too. He didn't believe it either. But facts were facts, and he couldn't overrule the Supreme Court's judgment.

"Heh. You don't believe it either, do you."

Chernosly managed a bitter laugh, then immediately reclaimed his previous resolve.

"I have to try. This is my only chance!"

"You..." The man's expression grew conflicted. He knew the man before him. Once this senior of his made up his mind, no one could talk him out of it.

The determination in Chernosly's eyes burned brighter.

"If Order can be questioned, then he should grant everyone the right of defense.

If Order cannot be questioned, then he... already has a problem.

I refuse to believe that my teacher—the most just, most orderly Grand Justice under heaven—would blaspheme his Benefactor.

And I refuse to believe that my Benefactor—the most revered, most exalted Order in all the universe—could develop a problem.

So I must uncover the truth of this myself. I cannot let his radiance fail to reach the Supreme Court's filthy corners!"

"...Filthy corners, is it? Even you've started imagining injustice. Heh. How ironic."

"..." Chernosly paused, then seized the man's arm again. "I need your help, Moxius. Will... you help me?"

Indeed—the man facing Chernosly was none other than his junior fellow disciple, Moxius.

The moment Cheng Shi realized who it was, his eyes went wider than saucers.

'Him!'

'The Son of Order who inherited the Grand Tribunal's Execution's Hour!'

'So the "Son of Order" title had originally been Chernosly's—and only passed to Moxius after Chernosly's fall?'

Cheng Shi's startled reaction caught Hong Lin's attention. She raised an eyebrow and leaned in: "Know him?"

"Moxius. After Chernosly's disappearance, he succeeded him as Son of Order. A First-Class Inquisitor hailed as the Grand Tribunal's rising star—Supreme Inquisitor Esa Res's second-choice successor.

Sadly, he died young. Killed while investigating a case involving the Nature Alliance within Grand Tribunal territory.

He also lost the Grand Tribunal's legendary scepter, Execution's Hour."

Those words came not from Cheng Shi but from Li Jingming beside them. The man's gaze was fixed on Chernosly, watching the scene unfold—yet his ears stood tall like antennae, absorbing every scrap of surrounding information. The instant a question arose, he delivered the answer without hesitation, narrating like a film's voiceover.

Cheng Shi was genuinely impressed. The Dragon King's encyclopedic knowledge of history was undeniable—he seemed conversant in virtually every detail of the Land of Hope's past.

Fortunately, the man appeared unaware that it was Cheng Shi who'd killed Moxius and stolen Execution's Hour.

Still... at this point in time, Execution's Hour was probably still in the Grand Tribunal's possession?

If he could get his hands on it, wouldn't that complete a full set of Thundering's divinity?

His eyes blazed momentarily with avarice. 'Could I actually exploit this loophole?!'

Oh wait—this was a dream... Never mind. No point dreaming about it.

The corner of his mouth twitched. He nodded to acknowledge the Dragon King's historical expertise, then scooted closer to Hong Lin and whispered: "He's not the leader of the History School, is he?"

"Hm? You didn't know?" Hong Lin looked mildly surprised.

'Oh no—what am I supposed to know?'

"He's not even considered a member. The History School's founder rejected his application to join."

"Huh? Why? Who could possibly know history better than the Chosen of Memory? Has the History School lost its mind, turning away talent like that?"

Hong Lin's expression turned peculiar. She shot a glance at Li Jingming and whispered with a smirk:

"The History School isn't crazy. But it's not really about knowing history—it's about faith.

Because their leader is...

Zhen Xin."

"???" Cheng Shi's mind blanked. His voice came out in a stunned yelp: "Who?!"