

The Gods 951

Chapter 951: The Cunning Rabbit's Three Burrows

Strangely, on the way out of the ravine forest, Cheng Shi didn't spot a single animal.

Although most creatures on the Land of Hope were naturally hyper-alert and might have sensed the approaching storm of war, the two sides hadn't even clashed yet. Running off this early seemed a bit excessive, didn't it?

Besides, even if every real animal had fled, what about tamed beasts? Wasn't Xiao Qi, who'd been planning to reap the benefits, going to at least check on how the fight between Cheng Shi and Lin Xi had turned out?

Without knowing the battlefield, how could he seize the right moment? And without the right moment, how could he strike?

Or had Vice President Sun from the History School actually followed through on her idea and already taken Xiao Qi's life, preparing to trade it for the intelligence she wanted?

At this thought, Cheng Shi frowned slightly. Even if Sun Miao wanted to kill, he doubted his childhood acquaintance was easy prey.

Sure enough, barely had the thought crossed his mind when Sun Miao came sprinting toward him from another direction. The Mime Master's face was as expressionless as ever, but the visible displeasure in her eyes made it abundantly clear that her "assassination" plan had failed.

Cheng Shi found this entertaining and asked offhandedly: "What, tough nut to crack?"

Sun Miao didn't answer for a long while. Only when the two of them had returned to the left-flank camp at the Boro Highlands did she silently produce her electronic beeper and type:

"The cunning rabbit has three burrows...

Today, a Beast Tamer gave me quite the education."

"Do tell." Cheng Shi stopped in his tracks, a smile of genuine interest crossing his face as he looked at Sun Miao.

Sun Miao's eyelid twitched. Another long silence passed before she finally recounted the "embarrassing" affair.

"Care to guess how many tamed beasts I killed?"

Cheng Shi blinked: "How many?"

"Seventeen. Not counting actual animals, just humans. Seventeen.

This Beast Tamer is an expert. A hidden expert. His vigilance is extremely high, and his control is absolutely superb. I estimate he still has at least five or six humanoid tamed beasts on hand. And when I say humanoid, I don't mean the native races of the Land of Hope. I mean..." Sun Miao paused, pointing at herself and then at Cheng Shi. "People like us."

"Players!" Cheng Shi's gaze sharpened instantly.

"Exactly. Players. This old friend of yours seems to enjoy company. He has quite the entourage of 'followers.'

And he loves dressing up his tamed beasts. All of these players have been disguised to look like him, used as decoys and for counter-ambushes.

I tracked a bird from the perimeter of your battle, followed it back the other way, and killed dozens of tamed beasts of all sizes. But I still couldn't find his true body...

Cheng Shi, no wonder you didn't want to make that deal with me. You knew all along he'd be difficult, so you didn't want to pay intelligence proportional to the effort. Am I right?"

"..."

'I didn't know a damn thing. But given that Xiao Qi has been a liar since childhood, it'd be weird if he were easy to handle.'

Cheng Shi smiled awkwardly and offered no response.

He was still processing the revelation that Xiao Qi used players as tamed beasts. A Beast Tamer wasn't the same as a necromancer. Their behavioral logic was closer to a class like Lord of Desire. They had to tame living beings to use them.

And the fact that Xiao Qi had this many "body doubles" meant he'd accumulated who knew how many lives along his journey.

No wonder he'd dared to partner with the ill-reputed Lin Xi. A venomous snake paired with a rat. A perfect match.

But wait. A Beast Tamer who delighted in controlling people... why did that sound like the one Xie Yang had mentioned?

At this thought, Cheng Shi's expression gradually turned cold. He still remembered that the Beast Tamer who'd abducted Xie Yang had once killed Torchbearers.

So... could that person have been Xiao Qi?

It seemed... not quite right, though.

Even if Xiao Qi claimed to have 2,600 points, anyone with eyes could see that at least 800 of those points were inflated.

True, he'd evaded assassination by a History School Vice President, but that might simply mean he had some unique trick for counter-tracking and escape. After all, the skill required for passive survival and

active offense were entirely different. The Beast Tamer Xie Yang described was undoubtedly a formidable expert. That image still differed significantly from the Xiao Qi before him now.

Then again, what were the odds of encountering two people-controlling Beast Tamers in such a short span?

For the moment, Cheng Shi couldn't be sure.

Perhaps sensing what was on Cheng Shi's mind, Sun Miao typed another message:

"Oh, and I noticed something else.

I suspect this Beast Tamer is paying some kind of price to amplify his ability to control tamed beasts. Otherwise, someone at his level couldn't possibly manage that many creatures while looking so effortless.

During my pursuit, I noticed that as his tamed beasts died, his combat ability kept rising, his tactical judgment kept improving, and his strategies and counters grew increasingly shrewd. It was like dealing with a completely different person.

If it wasn't a sudden awakening of wisdom or some breakthrough in combat technique mid-hunt, then the only explanation is that his method of taming isn't like other Beast Tamers'.

It seems he distributes his own strength and intelligence across different tamed beasts. So as they die, he reclaims a portion of his true power from each one.

Of course, I don't think he does this voluntarily. There's another reason..."

She suddenly stopped typing. She gave Cheng Shi a meaningful look, as though the switch to continue her analysis was somewhere on his person.

"..."

Cheng Shi blinked, regarding her with a hint of exasperation.

He had to admit: [Folly] believers were genuinely impressive, able to read an opponent seven-tenths through from a single confrontation. That kind of ability wasn't something just anyone had.

But Cheng Shi also knew these observations weren't free. She'd stopped here because she wanted to trade for other intelligence.

Normally, Cheng Shi wouldn't have cared to learn what was wrong with Xiao Qi. But now that a tenuous connection had formed between Xiao Qi and the Beast Tamer from Xie Yang's account...

Cheng Shi deliberated for a moment, then offered a piece of intelligence: "Lid Yara was killed by Keinlaur personally, with a blood-colored giant bow called 'Startled Bow.' And that bow is most likely what my old friend is searching for."

"!!!"

Sun Miao trembled all over and immediately typed: "So you did enter that consciousness exchange inside the dream! I knew you weren't telling the truth earlier!"

'Oh? So she really did have her doubts and hadn't fully bought my lie.'

Perfect. He'd use this intelligence exchange to put that matter to rest once and for all.

Cheng Shi curled the corner of his lips into a coy smirk but said nothing, clearly tossing the ball back to her. The message was clear: my turn is over. Now it's your turn to complete your observations.

Sun Miao took a deep breath, suppressed her curiosity, and divulged the rest of her assessment of Xiao Qi.

"...That's what I mean by 'price.'"

Because I noticed that as his combat power rose, his emotions also became visibly more savage and volatile.

By the time I killed the last tamed beast, he was already struggling to control his outbursts. He was spewing profanity, cursing heaven and earth, his fury repeatedly plunging him into danger. If not for his battle instincts keeping him alive that long, what I'd be bringing you right now would be a surprise rather than a warning...

So I suspect he doesn't willingly fragment his true power across his tamed beasts. He does it to suppress emotions he cannot control.

Therefore, the more beasts he tames, the more 'normal' he appears.

Of course, 'normal' is relative. We've both seen his true colors.

Strange, isn't it? And the stranger the player, the more dangerous they are. But I'll say it again: I can take him out for you, as long as you're willing to share more of what interests me."

Sun Miao paused, giving Cheng Shi ample time to think. Then she extended one hand, typing with the other:

"Now, my payment?"

Did you enter that consciousness exchange and witness that piece of history?"

Cheng Shi shook his head with a smile: "No. Everything I just told you came from Lin Xi right before he died. As for how he knew... sorry, he's dead. Not even a body left. No one can know now."

"..."

Sun Miao stared at Cheng Shi. Her face was as blank as ever, but the murderous intent in her eyes was barely contained.

She marveled at his shamelessness and was equally stunned by how quickly he'd dealt with Lin Xi. After all, the fact that Lin Xi had survived Chun's relentless pursuit and the entire [Prosperity] faction's encirclement to reach the pinnacle of Chosen proved he was one of the absolute best in this game.

Yet in this short span, she hadn't even managed to finish off Du Qiyu, while Cheng Shi had already eliminated a Chosen. What other trump cards was this Fate Weaver hiding?

Adding in his "track record" of dispatching Zangier, Sun Miao's eyes sharpened as a bold hypothesis formed in her mind.

'Aside from Go Lis, could Cheng Shi have... another Envoy standing behind him?'

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Chapter 952: The Battle

Cheng Shi had no idea what was going through Sun Miao's mind. All he knew was that if her assessment was correct, everything seemed to line up.

Xiao Qi... was very likely the Beast Tamer who'd abducted Xie Yang!

He had Torchbearer blood on his hands.

Noting this silently, Cheng Shi showed no visible reaction.

Seeing Sun Miao still sizing him up, he chuckled lightly and redirected his attention to the trial. He started wondering what had become of Keinlaur, whom she'd been tasked with watching, if she'd really gone chasing after Xiao Qi instead.

He'd been counting on extracting something useful from Keinlaur's mouth.

So on the way back to the Boro Highlands, Cheng Shi raised the question. Sun Miao cast a glance at the hilltop camp, her expression slightly stiff as she typed:

"Compared to your Beast Tamer friend, Keinlaur, who has long commanded the Grand Tribunal, is undoubtedly the harder target.

As you know, the Keinlaur at the left-flank camp is merely one of his slices. And since it's a slice, controlling it loses its meaning, because another Keinlaur can appear at any time, anywhere he needs to be, and accomplish whatever he wants to push forward.

The way I see it, rather than jousting with a veteran Inquisitor to uncover the past's truth, it's better to simply observe what he does.

Lies can deceive, but a person's actual actions never lie.

He wants to fulfill the Shared Law Faction's century-old vision, so he will undoubtedly make moves during this battle. All we need to do is watch him closely and find the reasons behind the Grand Tribunal's downfall and [Order]'s decline. And within that authentic past, you, too, can find what you're looking for."

Although Sun Miao's logic was sound, Cheng Shi's expression turned peculiar. He glanced at her and added a pointed remark:

"Vice President Sun, don't tell me you tried trading intelligence with him and got rejected?"

"..."

Seeing Sun Miao silently put away her electronic beeper confirmed it. Cheng Shi's amusement grew: "Did he kill himself? Otherwise, with your methods, even a forced interrogation should have yielded something, shouldn't it?"

"..."

"Heh, interesting." Cheng Shi stopped walking and turned toward the central camp's direction. "No big deal, though. Now that this slice is dead, we just wait for the next one to appear.

But Vice President Sun, I consider you an ally. Don't play games with me. I know the History School's specialty is extracting history from the dead, so what did the deceased Keinlaur tell you?"

"..."

Indeed, the reason Sun Miao had offered so much analysis was to divert Cheng Shi's attention, making him think she'd simply given up control of Keinlaur rather than driven him to suicide.

While Cheng Shi and Chun had gone to deal with Lin Xi, Keinlaur had decisively died in front of Sun Miao. He hadn't wanted to trade intelligence with an outsider, but the Supreme Inquisitor didn't know that his death was itself a kind of exchange, a one-sided one.

Sun Miao used the History School's techniques to invade the corpse's memories, and within its fragmented recollections she found an old conversation between Keinlaur and Lid Yara.

This was shortly after the death of Supreme Inquisitor Lo Yat, and only days after La Quis had been locked away in the Howling Iron Prison. Lid Yara, investigating these events, had sought out Keinlaur, who had rarely returned to Katouting. And what followed was the scene Sun Miao witnessed:

The two sat in a tea room within the Supreme Court, facing each other in silence.

After a long while, Lid Yara broke the quiet, probing: "You seem very busy lately. How are things at the border?"

Keinlaur smiled and shook his head. He didn't sidestep the question, but nor did he directly address the fires burning at the Grand Tribunal's frontier. Instead, he brought up the Tower of Logic.

"The followers of [Truth] seem to have chosen divergent paths, each firmly believing their road leads to the true [Truth]. I find this quite interesting. At least here, within the Grand Tribunal, we've never had such a schism."

Lid Yara frowned: "Don't the different legal factions sharing governance represent our way of handling disagreements?"

"No, it's different. We always worship the same [Order]. But them, each Grand Scholar believes they're seeing a different [Truth]."

Lid Yara thought for a moment and drained her teacup.

"You seem quite knowledgeable about [Truth]?"

Keinlaur gave her a meaningful look. "I have nothing to hide. I know you're investigating His followers, and I know you once looked into Galusha. But my understanding of [Truth] doesn't come from the people around me. It comes from the fires of war at the Tower of Logic.

I'm not interested in [Truth] itself. What interests me is this: if different followers pray to different [Truths], do all of those [Truths] still count as [Truth]?"

It was a terrifying question, one that in that era could easily be considered blasphemy. But the supreme authority sheltered by [Order] seemed unafraid to discuss his neighbor. Lid Yara tapped the table, puzzled.

"What are you trying to say?"

Keinlaur smiled faintly and shook his head. "Nothing. Just idle curiosity."

"The next scheduled audience and report to Him is coming up soon. Are you... going to be traveling again?"

Lid Yara's question all but laid her suspicion on the table, yet Keinlaur didn't deny it. He simply stroked his graying hair and gazed into the distance, his voice tinged with a sigh.

"Yes. The frontier is unsettled. The fighting continues to escalate. Time... is running short."

The memory cut off there. Corpse memories varied in completeness from person to person, but Keinlaur's were especially fragmented, perhaps due to the effects of being a slice.

This fragment was all Sun Miao had managed to extract. Seeing that Cheng Shi had seen through her cover, she had no choice but to share everything, not wanting to lose her most valuable "client." Then she added:

"Keinlaur had harbored treasonous thoughts long ago. He wasn't interested in [Truth] itself. What fascinated him was the fact that [Truth]'s followers each believed in 'a different [Truth].'

That's the logical foundation for his plan to overthrow the old [Order]. It's also why he could claim, with confidence, that he was still devout to [Order]. He truly was creating a new [Order], and he intended to use the method of faith transference to personally forge a new 'Order.'

Unfortunately, the Shared Law Faction's century-long scheme failed. Instead, it ended up handing everything to King Delvo."

"Delvo?" Cheng Shi blinked, unable to find the name anywhere in his memory.

"Yes. You might not know his real name, but you'll certainly recognize his other title:

The War Monarch.

He was the first War Monarch, the man who led the battered War Legion through every obstacle, smashing the Grand Tribunal and the Tower of Logic's will to fight with devastating force. He founded the Kingdom of [War] and planted war's bloody apricot tree in the Volbelli Court.

Right now, he's on the other side of the Boro Highlands, directly facing us."

Sun Miao pointed into the distance, her expression unreadable, typing one-handed:

"Perhaps from this moment on, this era no longer belongs solely to [Order] and [Truth]. It belongs equally to [War], whose creed is: 'How shall we survive? Through blood and fire alone!'"

It was meant as a passing reflection, but fate seemed to play a joke on the two players. The instant Sun Miao's words appeared on screen, against the fading glow of the sinking sun, war horns blared one after another across the entire Grand Tribunal battle line atop the Boro Highlands.

The horns shook the heavens. Battle standards blotted out the sky. The epochal battle had begun, and the Grand Tribunal's fate, like the dusk before them, began its westward descent into an irreversible decline.

Cheng Shi stared in wide-eyed shock at the device in the [Silence] believer's hands, thinking:

'That electronic beeper of yours must be blessed by a god.'

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Chapter 953: Who's Giving the Orders?

Author's note: The previous chapter's passage about Xiao Qi killing Torchbearers was an error carried over from an abandoned draft. It has been corrected. Xiao Shi does not know that Xiao Qi killed Torchbearers. Apologies for the confusion to those reading along!

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The war erupted without warning. No one could fathom why the Grand Tribunal would launch a full-scale offensive just as darkness was about to fall.

At this hour, visibility would plummet within minutes to levels wholly unsuitable for large-scale army operations. True, the Land of Hope's battlefields didn't lack for illumination methods, but wouldn't the resources spent on lighting be better used for offense? Why deliberately choose a time that created problems?

And even if it were a night raid, no one had ever heard of a night raid heralded by blaring war horns. That kind of fanfare could only signal the final decisive battle. So this baffling decision, which was practically synonymous with stupidity, was utterly incomprehensible. If history truly played out this way, it was small wonder the Grand Tribunal's defeat had come like a collapsing mountain.

Abandoning every advantage to impose a disadvantage on yourself. Even though the darkness interfered with the War Legion too, they had fire!

[War]'s flames would naturally dispel the dark, but [Order]?

All the filth and crimes that [Order] despised most loved nothing more than to unfold in darkness.

When Cheng Shi and Sun Miao saw the left-flank army actually mobilize, they knew the Grand Tribunal was already on the road to defeat. But their concern wasn't the Grand Tribunal itself. It was whoever was issuing orders from the central camp...

Could it really be Keinlaur?

Given the commanding genius Keinlaur had shown repelling the night raid on the left flank, it was hard to imagine him making such a decision.

But if it wasn't him... then who was the commander?

'Wait. Hold on!'

'There actually is someone!'

In that instant, Cheng Shi and Sun Miao reached the same conclusion simultaneously. Their expressions darkened in unison as they spoke at the same time:

"Xiao Qi..."

"The Beast Tamer!"

That's right. Cheng Shi's first thought was Du Qiyu.

It was known that Xiao Qi was searching for the giant bow lost somewhere on the Boro battlefield. He apparently didn't know the bow was in Keinlaur's possession. So after failing to find the real Keinlaur, it was entirely possible he'd assumed Keinlaur's identity to issue commands and accelerate the war's progress.

After all, he was a [Deceit] believer with ample disguise capabilities. Moreover, as a Beast Tamer, he could tame knights who shared the same military bearing and apply light disguises. Fooling players might be difficult, but fooling NPCs? That was more than enough.

So this historic defeat was actually engineered by Xiao Qi?

But even if he'd inadvertently replicated the historical outcome, who had given the order in the real history, the one that cost two nations their frontline fighting forces?

There was no time for further deliberation. Cheng Shi needed to confirm his suspicion while also mixing into the Grand Tribunal's battle formation, because the incoming meteor fire rain and elemental maelstrom wouldn't recognize any "Lord Yu Xi." If he got crushed by a falling meteor on this battlefield, forget the Fun God and Xiao Qi laughing themselves to death, even the Wrath of Abomination, his colleague currently lobbing fireballs at the Boro Highlands from inside its cramped cage, would laugh itself breathless.

The two of them sprinted toward the central camp, determined to find out what had happened in the command tent before the Grand Tribunal's charging line made contact with the enemy.

This was a race against time. And with the situation between players now transparently clear, Sun Miao dropped all pretense. He burst forth from the Mime Master's belly, and with a flash of silver light, the horse-faced [Folly] believer Cheng Shi had only met once stood before him again.

Cheng Shi looked at the Mime Master behind him, her eyes gradually going vacant, and frowned: "I thought you'd reached an agreement. Looks like negotiations broke down?"

Sun Miao stood taller than Cheng Shi. He peered down his aristocratic nose at him and smiled:

"Either trade in silence, or die in silence.

She knew too many secrets but never wanted to share them. So, to help her keep those secrets as she wished, I had no choice but to assist her. I'll bury her here.

I'm not a man who kills for pleasure, but the God Worship Society is the kind of organization where you could throw a dagger blindly and never hit an innocent person."

Sound reasoning, yet somehow it reeked of sophistry.

Cheng Shi pursed his lips: "If ordinary members aren't innocent, then you, a Vice President, must be deeply sinful."

"I told you, their madness is real. Mine is fake. I only wanted to use them for intelligence. But they genuinely believed I was closer to the Gods than they were.

Heh, meeting the divine twice hardly counts as closeness.

If you want to talk about being close, that honor belongs to the Servant Gods and Envoys who attend Them constantly...

Never mind. Drop it. If I say too much, you'll think I'm another one of the God Worship Society's lunatics. Cheng Shi, I waited for you for a long time and you never tore open the Void. Something on your mind?

You're not planning to run back, are you?

Getting from the left flank to the central camp on foot takes all night. By the time we arrive, the battle will be half over.

You... won't contribute even a sliver of effort?

Or does every strenuous task have to be foisted onto someone else just to conserve a bit of unnecessary spiritual power?

You're a priest. A priest who can fight. If you're not going to use that spiritual power for something useful, what are you saving it for? To hunt down that old friend of yours?

He's directly in our path anyway."

Without the need to type, Sun Miao's speech finally carried a proper [Folly] flavor. Seeing Cheng Shi smile without responding, he drew a deep breath, irritably slashed open the Void with the dagger in his hand, and stepped through first.

Because he knew that if he hesitated for even a second here, Cheng Shi would never go first. Rather than gambling on whether the man would budge, it was better to save that second and reach the central formation faster.

And so the two hurtled through the Void, returning to the central camp's position in just a few hours.

But when they emerged, the entire central army had already charged down from the highlands, abandoning their superb geographic advantage to sweep across the flat valley toward the War Legion's encirclement.

Seeing this, Sun Miao shook his head:

"I'm now one hundred percent certain the person commanding this battle is an idiot. Quite possibly your old friend. Because only he would issue such a reckless charge order.

But what I'm curious about is, even if 'Keinlaur' lost his mind, wouldn't his battle-hardened subordinates try to stop him?

Unless..."

Cheng Shi's gaze sharpened as he spoke those two words again: "Tamed beasts."

Sun Miao nodded:

"Exactly. The only explanation I can think of is that the Beast Tamer took over the entire high command in one swoop, turning every officer into his tamed beast.

But what I'm even more curious about is this: even if the Beast Tamer altered history's presentation, what about the original history? Who launched this 'suicidal' charge?

If a single disguise could doom the Grand Tribunal, is it possible the historical defeat also resulted from a disguise? From the War Legion's disguise?

Could they have carried out a decapitation strike, eliminating the Grand Tribunal's command staff?"

Cheng Shi watched the fire-bright formation advance while war cries shook the sky. He frowned in deep thought for a moment, then shook his head.

"Keinlaur's slices would never fear a decapitation strike.

But you've actually reminded me of something. Where do you think Keinlaur is right now?

If his slices are everywhere, then why hasn't he stepped in to stop Xiao Qi's foolish act? Even just holding the left and right flanks back would give him more than half the army to reverse the tide."

Now Sun Miao understood too. His expression hardened, but his eyes blazed with scholarly fervor.

"Because he also wants the Grand Tribunal to fail. This is exactly what he wants to see.

You must break before you can rebuild. Well, well, well. So that's where his mind has been all along.

Perhaps you're right. The one who authored this defeat in history wasn't anyone else. It was Keinlaur himself.

Only, fate is cruel. In the end, everything the Shared Law Faction worked for only served to make a wedding dress for the War Legion."

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Chapter 954: The Deconstructor's Eye Looks Down on Others

Cheng Shi shared the same conclusion. Keinlaur was undeniably bold, meticulous, and a gambler at heart — one who'd accidentally gambled himself to death.

It seemed [Fate] had not sheltered this [Order] believer.

Sun Miao's nostrils flared ever higher. He was growing impatient to uncover the truth of this history.

"I've been observing for a while. The Beast Tamer hid the central camp's command banner. We can't determine where the command post is within this charging formation.

At the rate the battle line is advancing, it won't be long before the Iron Law Knights' tide crashes into the War Legion. Once the entire battlefield is engulfed in fire, finding him will be even harder.

Vice President Cheng, any bright ideas?"

This time Sun Miao wasn't passing the buck. He genuinely wasn't suited for searching out targets in such a massive, chaotic battlefield. At the end of the day, he was an assassin, not a hunter. His strength lay in one-on-one pursuit after the target was confirmed.

So the task of locating a target first fell to Cheng Shi.

Cheng Shi felt the difficulty too. Xiao Qi was no fool. He wouldn't just sit in one place waiting to be found. Fortunately, Chun had left Cheng Shi quite a number of items. He might not know how to use some of the tools, but that's what having a wise man around was for, wasn't it?

So Cheng Shi dumped out Chun's entire collection of hunting tools. Looking at equipment that clearly didn't belong to Cheng Shi, Sun Miao shook his head.

Cheng Shi glanced at him, his tone odd: "From the moment you met up with me, you haven't mentioned Chun once. Don't you want to know where she went?"

Sun Miao scoffed, tilting his nostrils skyward.

"Vice President Cheng, even if I'm not as strong as you, don't treat me like a fool.

Since you took care of Lin Xi for her, she had no second path to choose other than death."

Cheng Shi narrowed his eyes: "You'd already guessed."

"Simple logic. People need something to keep them going in life. When that drive disappears, 'living' ceases to exist.

Chun's goal was clear-cut: kill Lin Xi. So the moment Lin Xi died, she had no reason to keep living.

The reason many players who knew Chun only helped from the sidelines without personally finishing Lin Xi off was probably exactly this consideration.

Don't look at me like that. I'm not pointing fingers at you. I'm merely noting Lin Xi's bad luck in crossing your path... Anyway, forget it. Let me see whether these tools are of any use."

With that, Sun Miao picked up the hunting tools one by one and began studying them.

The Deconstructor's Eye was a truly remarkable profession. Blessed by [Folly]'s wisdom, its practitioners could deconstruct objects far faster than other [Folly] classes, often grasping an item's function and principles after only brief observation.

Of course, this wasn't purely divine power at work. It was equally inseparable from [Folly] believers' personal aptitude for research and their encyclopedic breadth of knowledge.

And Sun Miao was undoubtedly elite among Deconstructor's Eyes. Before long, he had each tracking tool operational. He didn't even ask Cheng Shi before producing from his own inventory items contaminated with Xiao Qi's scent.

Seeing this, Cheng Shi couldn't decide whether to laugh or cry.

So the Vice President held a grudge, too. Pulling out those samples meant he clearly had no intention of letting Xiao Qi go.

Setting aside his desire to trade Xiao Qi's head for Cheng Shi's intelligence, the wise man had probably been provoked into genuine fury by Xiao Qi's cunning during the hunt. What began as a calculated killing had gradually become a matter of personal pride.

Sun Miao was indeed angry about losing face in front of Cheng Shi, so he worked fast. Soon enough, he really did find something.

The wise man frowned, both hands pointing in two different directions: one toward the battlefield in front of the Boro Highlands, and the other toward the river valley behind.

His grave expression told Cheng Shi he'd made some significant discovery. But before Cheng Shi could ask, the wise man raised his nostrils and said:

"Are you certain Lin Xi is dead?"

"?"

Cheng Shi blinked, then his expression turned serious too:

"What I can confirm is that the Lin Xi in front of me was as dead as dead gets. And Chun also said he had no fallback plan.

I don't believe my understanding of Lin Xi exceeds Chun's. Besides, if she hadn't confirmed Lin Xi's death, she wouldn't have ended her own life in front of me.

Why? You've detected a presence resembling Lin Xi's?"

Sun Miao nodded. He conceded Cheng Shi's reasoning was sound, but the information from his senses told him an unignorable target was hiding in that river valley.

"This 'Corpse-Eating Vine' isn't meant for tracking specific targets. It can sniff out [Decay] aura across a wide area and give a rough bearing. This was probably one of Chun's key tools for tracking Lin Xi.

But right now, it's telling me there's a large, quiescent mass of [Decay] energy deep in the river valley.

I can't think of any reason for such a dense [Decay] presence on the surface in an era when the Underworld hasn't yet counterattacked. If you're certain Lin Xi is dead, could someone have somehow put his body to use?"

"He left no body," Cheng Shi said with certainty.

"Then that's strange. Every oddity contains risk. I suggest we focus on the present.

After we've figured out this piece of history — or after you've found whatever you're interested in regarding [Order] — it won't be too late to investigate what's behind us. We have plenty of time..."

Cheng Shi naturally agreed. He had zero desire to go poking at some stray [Decay] aura. Even though he didn't fear [Decay]'s power, why take risks when there was nothing to gain?

So Cheng Shi and Sun Miao quickly disguised themselves as Iron Law Knights and plunged into the Grand Tribunal's charging tide of order.

The knights' steel tips were about to meet the enemy. In the distance, the War Legion's counter-fire was already blazing. The two of them wove through the soil of this battle-about-to-erupt like a pair of earthworms, following the trail. But every time they zeroed in on the Beast Tamer's aura, they found yet another tamed "eye."

After eliminating over a dozen tamed beasts this way, Cheng Shi was growing weary. He knew this would go on forever. Under Xiao Qi's deliberate concealment, they'd never find him at this rate.

But the sheer number of tamed beasts and the perpetually elusive command tent had already confirmed their theory: the current battle was not the work of Keinlaur. A player had "altered history."

Keinlaur still bore responsibility for the coming defeat, however, because he hadn't appeared to stop any of it.

After dispatching yet another knight-type tamed beast, Sun Miao's expression had turned truly dark. He stormed back to Cheng Shi's side, and the first thing out of his mouth was:

"If this Beast Tamer leaves this trial alive, it will be the greatest insult to [Folly]!"

Clearly, Sun Miao was genuinely furious now. Du Qiyu's "cunning rabbit's three burrows" made this wise man feel an intolerable sense of contempt.

Especially after seeing Cheng Shi's calm indifference, his anger tripled. He "stared" at Cheng Shi through his nostrils: "Vice President Cheng, I'm helping you deal with your enemy here. Don't you think you should show some appreciation?"

"Appreciation? What kind of appreciation did you have in mind?" Cheng Shi smiled.

"If coming back empty-handed could make a hunter happy, then I must say I truly marvel at the clown's gift for self-entertainment."

"?"

'Complain all you want, but keep the profession out of it.'

'I haven't even brought up that "Deconstructor's Eye looks down on others" pun, and you're already mocking clowns?'

'Can this clown find the Beast Tamer? Can you?'

Still, they were teammates. Cheng Shi thought better of provoking him further. He led Sun Miao away from the charging column to a nearby depression and pulled out a... mask.

The mask was merely a disguise, of course. Hidden behind it was a [Corruption] container.

Yes, Cheng Shi had taken the [Corruption] container out. A single mask could hardly conceal its aura, but that was precisely the point. Because the instant the container appeared, the agitated Sun Miao gradually calmed down.

"See? Even I'm not that angry. So why have you become so volatile?"

I suspect the tamed beasts' deaths don't just affect their master's emotions. They affect yours, too.

Wise man, when anger replaces wisdom, [Folly] becomes nothing but folly."

"..."

...

Chapter 955: Bait

Although Sun Miao didn't recognize the container, as the Vice President of the History School, his eye was keen enough.

He could tell the object behind the mask was at minimum an SS-rank quasi-divine artifact. His instincts even whispered that it might very well be an SSS-rank demi-divine artifact!

Combined with its influence on desire and emotion, the faith allegiance of this Servant God relic was hardly a mystery.

Sun Miao's pupils contracted. He instinctively backed two steps from Cheng Shi, but strangely, the fear in his heart seemed to be slowly fading.

This was the first time he'd taken a defensive posture against Cheng Shi, and the reason was simple: Vice President Sun clearly held [Corruption] at arm's length. This actually made Cheng Shi feel more confident that the man's earlier claims hadn't been lies. He truly was focused on gathering intelligence, not obsessing over some path to godhood.

Cheng Shi even had the sneaking suspicion that Sun Miao's so-called "only by becoming a god can I achieve my goal" meant that becoming a god would give him access to even more intelligence...

'What a gossip king.'

Seeing Sun Miao's guards go up, and wanting to prevent this sole and useful teammate from abandoning their partnership, Cheng Shi quickly gave the [Corruption] container a new name.

"Fear Heartwood. This was extracted from Le Le'er's trunk after she fell. It absorbs a person's desire and fear, along with some other emotions. After all, it's still [Corruption] in nature."

"!!!"

Hearing this, Sun Miao finally understood why Cheng Shi had fainted to conceal the fact that he'd entered that consciousness exchange. He should have known all along. The man had found an enormous boon inside that exchange, and that boon was this so-called "Fear Heartwood"!

"The Mother Tree of Fear fell? You took down the Mother Tree of Fear?!" Sun Miao asked in disbelief.

That genuinely startled Cheng Shi.

'Buddy, you can't just say things like that!'

'At most I desecrated a corpse. You can't pin the killing on me.'

'Le Le'er died because [Prosperity] self-destructed, and [Prosperity] self-destructed because...'

'Hmm, that's not quite right either. Forget it. In any case, it wasn't me. At least not the me of this world, right now!'

'In this abstract world, I believe it's necessary to pile on that many qualifiers for self-protection.'

The more he thought about it, the guiltier he felt. So he stopped thinking and shook his head vigorously.

"I don't have the strength to face an Envoy head-on. It was Keinlaur.

He broke Le Le'er's branches, forged that giant bow with Lid Yara's blood, and then fought Le Le'er in a pitched battle. I don't know why Le Le'er was so weakened, but in any case, Keinlaur cleaved open her trunk and found this heartwood.

I merely pulled a small, insignificant trick and swapped it out of his hands.

I'll admit that at the time, I was under [Corruption]'s influence. But I can also confirm that this heartwood doesn't amplify personal desire. It actually absorbs a person's emotions and desires.

You should be able to sense the change in yourself. And the fact that I can discuss all this with you so calmly proves it's affecting me, too.

So, Vice President Sun, put your heart back in your chest. I have no interest in you. I pulled this out in order to..."

"Fish!" Sun Miao blurted.

There was no denying it. The wise men of [Folly] were simply overpowered.

The instant Sun Miao heard Cheng Shi's explanation, he guessed Cheng Shi's plan. In a rare gesture, he lowered his upturned nostrils and looked Cheng Shi square in the eye.

"A great reputation is never undeserved. I've never believed that pure brute force alone can push anyone's fame this high.

Indeed, your wisdom is worthy of [Folly]'s gaze."

"..."

Coming from a [Folly] believer, that was high praise, but it still felt a bit... off.

'So no matter how smart someone else is, the best they can hope for is to be on equal footing with the wise men? Is that it?'

Cheng Shi pursed his lips, not entirely appreciative. He countered: "And what about Big... uh, Hong Lin?"

"..."

Now Sun Miao had nothing to say. His eyelid twitched, and he explained with a rigidly straight face:

"Whether it's an experiment or an observation, there are always uncertain special variables. One can't generalize. Clearly, Hong Lin is one such special variable in this theory.

But across the entire peak circle, she's the only such anomaly, isn't she?"

Cheng Shi nodded, barely stifling his laughter:

"Got it. So you're calling her dumb, and saying she's the only dumb one in the peak circle. Noted. I'll be sure to tell her next time.

Wise man, may you fare well."

"???"

Sun Miao should have panicked, but under the [Corruption] container's influence, he couldn't feel a shred of fear.

He gazed thoughtfully at the mask, catching a glimpse of the shifting radiance behind it through the cracks. With something like admiration, he remarked:

"This heartwood's effect is truly remarkable. I clearly know I should approach everything with awe, yet I can't feel any of it right now.

But Vice President Cheng, I should warn you: when it absorbs your desire and emotion for no apparent reason, even if you feel no fear, keep your guard up. Because you don't know what [Corruption] is using it for.

What if — and I'm just saying what if — it's the key to Le Le'er's resurrection? Then every emotion and desire it's absorbed will become an inextricable karmic link between you and the Mother Tree of Fear."

Perhaps because desire had been stripped away, Sun Miao's words rang unusually sincere. Cheng Shi blinked, thinking the concern was unnecessary since the absorbed desires and emotions would all drip

down and condense into [Corruption]'s divinity. But he appreciated the sentiment all the same. At the very least, it meant the Vice President genuinely "cared" about him — or at least about the intelligence on his person.

'Well, that's good enough.'

'In this world, nobody treats anyone with total selflessness.'

'Except Big Cat.'

Seeing Cheng Shi nod repeatedly, Sun Miao knew the message had landed. He dropped the unwelcome counselor routine and began seriously considering how to turn this Fear Heartwood into bait for Du Qiyu.

Bait, indeed.

Cheng Shi's reason for pulling this out was to go fishing.

If Xiao Qi's condition was truly as Sun Miao described — forced to fragment his power and intelligence across his tamed beasts to manage uncontrollable emotions — then the [Corruption] container in Cheng Shi's hand would be the single most attractive object in the world for Xiao Qi.

With it, Xiao Qi would no longer need to divide his strength to control his emotions. He could reclaim all his power and become the true Beast Tamer Xie Yang had described — one that was genuinely difficult to deal with.

For certain players who obsessively chased power in this game, that temptation was irresistible. All they had to do was let the word out, and the current wild-goose chase would reverse itself. Instead of the two of them hunting Xiao Qi, Xiao Qi would come to them.

After that, once they dealt with Xiao Qi, the trial would return to its proper course.

The only question was: how to let Xiao Qi know Cheng Shi possessed such a thing?

"The exposure has to feel completely natural. Given his level of vigilance, the Beast Tamer won't deliberately approach a tool that's been obviously dangled in front of him, no matter how useful it is.

So the key right now is using this prize you swiped by passing it off, applying it on this battlefield in a way that feels entirely reasonable and justified."

Sun Miao frowned, thinking hard. He didn't seem to have found the perfect idea yet.

Meanwhile, Cheng Shi, fear stripped clean away, simply smiled at ease. He'd already had a complete plan in mind for a while now. And the first step of that plan was...

Kill himself first.

...

Chapter 956: Step One of the Plan: Kill Yourself First

"Vice President Sun, have you considered that on a battlefield with such an overwhelming disparity in forces, even setting aside the Tower of Logic's combat power, the Grand Tribunal could still steamroll the War Legion through sheer attrition...

And yet they still lost.

So if you were in their position, how would you manage to lose a battle you should have won?

I'm not asking about the deeper reasons. Just the war itself."

Sun Miao had, of course, given this thought. Underdogs could win, but not when the gap was this enormous.

He didn't know the specific details of this battle, but reverse-engineering from its result, the Kingdom of [War] had drenched the founding of their nation in the blood of countless Grand Tribunal knights and Tower of Logic scholars. They must have punched through the entire battle line.

Given the current troop disparity, that seemed like a fairy tale.

So the answer was obvious: either internal strife had erupted between the two encircling nations, causing them to attack each other until both were spent, or the allied front's own offensive backfired and handed the War Legion an opening.

Factoring in Keinlaur's "you must break before you can rebuild" philosophy, the Supreme Inquisitor had probably intended to use a savage cut to excise the Grand Tribunal's deep-rooted maladies. Which meant the latter scenario was far more likely than the former...

"You're saying..." Sun Miao's tone turned subtle. "Keinlaur didn't just allow the Grand Tribunal to fail. He actually helped push it over the edge?"

"Exactly. Think that makes for compelling history?"

"If it's true, it's certainly compelling enough. But for now, this is all our own speculation. It can't be taken as fact."

"Then let's make it fact." Cheng Shi flashed a broad grin.

"?"

"You yourself said that history is painted by people. And if any person can pick up the brush, why can't that person be us?"

Besides, we're not altering history's course. We're just accelerating its pace a little, same as Xiao Qi.

Since those poor [Order] knights are destined to die at the hands of 'new order' anyway, why can't we be good Samaritans and beat Keinlaur to it? We'd be lightening the old man's guilt, really.

This way, history's trajectory stays intact, and my plan gets to proceed."

"..."

Sun Miao was no fool. He could tell this was the "standard" problem-solving approach of [Deceit] believers. What concerned him was controlling the degree of intervention.

If Cheng Shi's plan interfered too heavily with the battlefield, the historical truth they sought would be permanently buried under the ashes of war, never to see daylight again.

He frowned: "What's your play?"

Cheng Shi looked at the container in his hands and laughed out loud.

"I once fled in terror under the meteor fire rain. Now that my fear's been stripped away, I rather fancy a nostalgic revisit. Time to see one of the Land of Hope's most terrifying forbidden arts up close."

"?" Sun Miao's pupils shrank. "You want to impersonate Keinlaur, issue a military order, and bring the meteor fire rain down on the Grand Tribunal's own formation?"

"Not impersonate. Restore the historical truth.

Painted-over history is still history. As long as no one else knows, the story that comes out of your mouth becomes the true historical record.

You'll be the sole witness, Vice President Sun.

Besides, you said it yourself: this is exactly what Keinlaur intended. So we're not painting over anything. At most, we're... tracing the lines ahead of time."

"Justification? The Elemental Judges would hardly follow such an absurd order without question."

"Isn't the justification obvious?" Cheng Shi spread his hands. "A traitor has been discovered in the rear ranks, conspiring with the War Legion to attack from within. To ensure absolutely security behind the front line, a preemptive meteor fire rain sweep of the area is perfectly reasonable, no?"

At this point, Sun Miao's focus had already shifted from the battle to the bait in Cheng Shi's hand.

This near-"suicidal" operation obviously wasn't about restoring some proclaimed historical truth. The real purpose was to fling the bait and lure the Beast Tamer in.

That was why the Fate Weaver kept stressing plausibility. Only if the motive was reasonable could the act fool Du Qiyu. Indeed, one purpose of impersonating Keinlaur was to deceive Xiao Qi, who currently controlled the command tent. It would make him believe the real Keinlaur had appeared and was reasserting command of the battlefield.

In response, to protect his war-acceleration scheme, Xiao Qi would redirect his firepower to deal with the "real Keinlaur." And Cheng Shi had already prepared the justification for him: rebels within the battle line.

For Xiao Qi, those "rebels" weren't the rear troops that "Keinlaur" had designated. The rebel was... "Keinlaur" himself!

It was obviously a dirty trick by the War Legion: impersonating the supreme commander. So to maintain unified command and army morale, the imposter had to be purged immediately.

And so, a second meteor fire rain would likely crash down right on the spot where "Keinlaur" appeared. After being caught in the blast, a certain player pulling out a critical item or two to survive would seem entirely natural.

The thought that this Fate Weaver had engineered so many layers of manipulation just to make the Fear Heartwood's appearance feel organic filled Sun Miao with... satisfaction on behalf of the Beast Tamer about to walk into the trap.

After all, Du Qiyu's name was in Vice President Sun's little book, too.

He wanted Xiao Qi dead even more than Cheng Shi did.

After reviewing the plan thoroughly and finding no issues, Sun Miao nodded:

"Sooner is better than later. Let's move quickly. The longer we wait, the more I worry the real Keinlaur will appear and introduce new variables.

Don't forget, his goal isn't the Grand Tribunal's total annihilation. He's saving this nation. He's just using rather extreme medicine."

Cheng Shi agreed wholeheartedly. He quietly slipped toward the nearest Elemental Judge formation within the battle line, found an inconspicuous corner, and disguised himself as Keinlaur, preparing to add some real fire to this war.

But just as he'd completed every preparation and was about to reveal himself and issue the order, a familiar figure beat him to it, delivering an unquestionable military command to the vast Elemental Judge echelon.

"Elemental Judges, hear my order! Begin meteor fire rain incantation. Target: the central army's direction. Indiscriminate bombardment!"

"!!!"

"Milord Keinlaur, why are you delivering the order in person..."

"Milord, that's your own personal guard!"

"Milord, what's happened!?"

The Elemental Judges were stunned. It wasn't that they refused to obey, but the order was so unthinkable that anyone would find it suspicious.

But soon enough, Keinlaur — yes, the real Keinlaur — produced the command token that proved his identity and spoke with an anguished expression:

"Some among us have already forsaken their devotion, turned away from our Lord's gaze, and betrayed His trust.

Judges, the time has come to purge these worms corroding [Order]. We must show the entire continent the fury of [Order]. His majesty shall never be profaned.

All for a new order!

FIRE!"

"The flames of civilization rise! Order endures!"

Now, having received their "just cause," the Elemental Judges raised their hands in unison and began chanting the forbidden art, summoning the imprisoned Wrath of Abomination.

Watching this unfold, Cheng Shi silently shifted into the guise of an Elemental Judge and blended into the formation without a word.

'Hold on...'

'I thought bombarding the rear was already crossing a line. Keinlaur, you're blasting your own personal guard?!'

'Huh?'

'You're actually going through with it?'

'If Master of Deception hadn't told me you slipped in one lie, I'd almost think Xiao Qi had beaten me to the same idea.'

'Cutting away rotten flesh is indeed a treatment. But the flesh you're cutting can't be critical to the patient's survival. You just lopped off the head. Can the patient...'

'...even survive?'

...

Chapter 957: Severe Illness Demands Strong Medicine

The instant Keinlaur appeared, whether as a slice or his true self, Cheng Shi knew their hypothesis had been confirmed completely.

This Supreme Inquisitor from Katouting hadn't merely allowed the Grand Tribunal to fail. He'd played the role of an irredeemable mastermind behind it all!

Before, Cheng Shi had assumed the Grand Tribunal's collapse was due to Keinlaur's lack of military acumen. But after witnessing the man's commanding ability, he now understood it was never about incompetence. Keinlaur was far too capable. Capable to the point of arrogance, having vastly overestimated his ability to turn the tide from the brink. He'd played a winning hand and forced it into a loss.

But now wasn't the time for analysis. Cheng Shi had to be ready to bolt at any moment, because the moment the first meteor crashed into the central army, the counter-strike would come immediately.

Keinlaur's slices could die as many times as they pleased. Cheng Shi, however, had only one life.

Whether the Vitality authority could withstand a direct meteor hit remained to be tested, but Cheng Shi had no intention of testing it with his own body. So as planned: run first, ask questions later.

He quickly slipped out of the chanting Elemental Judge formation. In a lineup where everyone was united in righteous fury against traitors, this kind of desertion stuck out like a sore thumb. Keinlaur spotted Cheng Shi immediately.

But the gray-haired old man didn't call him out. His gaze didn't even linger on the skulking judge, because he knew that in the flood tide of war, individual actions had negligible impact. No matter how much someone like Cheng Shi schemed, it couldn't change the outcome of the war.

So Cheng Shi slipped away clean. But when he reunited with Sun Miao, the wise man, who should have been waiting in place, was running toward him from a completely different direction. His expression was peculiar.

"There's no doubt now. You were absolutely right. We are restoring history.

Guess who I saw?"

Cheng Shi's heart seized: "Keinlaur?"

"Exactly!" Sun Miao's eyes lit up. "Keinlaur truly intends to perform surgery on the Grand Tribunal with his own hands. I spotted him heading toward an Elemental Judge formation in an outlying sector, tailed him quietly, and heard him give the exact same orders as the ones you fabricated... nearly word for word.

If I didn't know the full context, I'd almost think you'd already witnessed this history."

"..."

'This is bad. The situation might be even worse than I imagined.' Cheng Shi's chest tightened. "Which direction? Also the central army?"

"Central army? No. Keinlaur doesn't even care whether Xiao Qi has usurped his position. His order was to bombard the right flank. If I remember correctly, a large portion of the right flank is garrison troops recruited from the Nature Alliance.

So it seems our Supreme Inquisitor doesn't just want to rebuild the Grand Tribunal's order. He wants to annihilate every admirer of the old [Order]... Ruthless methods, vicious style!"

The right flank!?

Two Keinlaurs appearing had already targeted half the battle line. Who knew how many more there were!?

'Shit. History might be even crazier than I thought. Keinlaur may not have just nudged the Grand Tribunal's defeat along. He may have personally engineered the entire thing!'

'Has he lost his mind?'

'Cutting off the head? On a good day, you're left with a bowl-sized scar. On the Land of Hope under the gods' watch, you could arguably survive that. But if you burn the whole body to ash...'

'Buddy, sure, the "virus" is dead, but so is the patient!'

Cheng Shi panicked. Without a word, he pulled out the [Corruption] container again to absorb his fear, then shoved Sun Miao along and charged toward the outside of the Grand Tribunal's battle line.

Sun Miao noticed the direction wasn't toward the rear as planned but rather cutting through the formation toward the war's front line. He frowned: "Plan's changed!?"

"Changed?"

Everything's changed!

Keinlaur isn't just nudging this defeat along. He's trying to use the meteor fire rain to punch straight through the Grand Tribunal's rusty ship. I also ran into a Keinlaur, and his target is the central army!

Given this, there's no telling how many Keinlaurs are appearing across the entire battle line. I bet every single Elemental Judge formation is about to receive a visit from one!

Do you understand? In moments, the only color above our heads will be falling meteors!

God knows how many slices issued the order simultaneously!

Run! Run toward the War Legion! If he's committed to this, he'll have sealed off every retreat behind the Grand Tribunal's armies. The fire rain behind us will be even worse than at the front, because at the front, he still needs to personally crush the War Legion to restore his men's morale.

So the front line might actually be the safest place! RUN!"

"???"

'What?!'

Sun Miao froze. Even his stride stuttered involuntarily.

'Wait, what are you saying? Is this even official history?'

'Even unofficial accounts wouldn't dare write this.'

The [Corruption] container had absorbed his fear, but reason still told the wise man that Cheng Shi was right. It was time to run.

Seeing Cheng Shi's pace wasn't what it used to be, Sun Miao assumed his combat buff had expired. He didn't question it, just grabbed Cheng Shi and sprinted toward the front line.

This scene drew stares from the other knights, causing a stir in the ranks.

You could call these two knights cowards, but they were charging toward the very front.

You could call them brave, but their running posture looked exactly like people fleeing for their lives...

And so the two of them cut through formation after formation, drawing every knight's bewildered gaze, everyone wondering what the hell these two were doing.

Cheng Shi was nothing if not steady. He would never use his own life to investigate [Order] and [War]. So as they ran, he repeatedly reminded Sun Miao: if things went south, tear open the Void and flee immediately. This time he didn't dare hold anything back. He'd secretly tucked his tongue-switch into his palm, ready to vanish at a moment's notice.

But they hadn't run far before the very scene they dreaded arrived. A streak of crimson light flashed across the darkened sky, and then a meteor appeared in everyone's vision, plummeting from the heavens, dyeing the entire firmament a blazing red.

The meteor fire rain had come!

What was even more terrifying was that this meteor wasn't aimed at the central army, nor the right flank, nor even the Grand Tribunal's line at all. This meteor, trailing its long fiery tail, plunged under the horrified gaze of every soul on the battlefield straight toward...

The Tower of Logic's central army!

The Grand Tribunal had finally struck at the Tower of Logic, and on the very allied front that had been encircling the enemy together!

"Holy shit!"

You'd be hard-pressed to hear this kind of profanity from a wise man known for his composure. Keinlaur's divine masterstroke had stunned even the History School's Vice President into speechlessness.

Honestly, if Sun Miao had read this scene in an unofficial history, he'd have cursed the author for three days straight.

Because in all records pertaining to the Tower of Logic and the Grand Tribunal's wars from the mid-Civilization Era onward — no, add the Kingdom of War's founding history on top of that — not a single passage in any of these annals documented this absurd scene.

The Grand Tribunal striking not the remnants of the War Legion but the Tower of Logic. How had such critical information been omitted from all three nations' histories?

Sun Miao couldn't fathom it. Cheng Shi couldn't either. All they knew was that the only thing left to do was accelerate, because from the moment the first meteor fell, countless more emerged in rapid succession, piercing the sky, painting the entire Boro Highlands into something resembling hell.

In that moment, the firelight of war danced on every terror-stricken face, bringing eternal dread upon this land.

The entire encirclement line descended into chaos. Only the War Legion, witnessing what appeared to be divine intervention, erupted in thunderous cheers:

"How shall we survive? Through blood and fire!

For [War]! CHARGE!"

In that moment, the morale of [War]'s soldiers soared beyond the clouds!

...

Chapter 958: Wait, This Medicine Is Way Too Strong

The entire battle line had devolved into porridge.

The Tower of Logic was no punching bag. Upon discovering their ally's betrayal, countless scholars cursed [Order]'s narrow-mindedness and bias while launching a ferocious counter-attack against the Grand Tribunal.

Of course, they hadn't forgotten their original target — the War Legion that had been ravaging their borders for so long. So in an instant, numberless War Machine Pawns were released from their shackles, sweeping toward both their flanks and front like a tide of steel.

Simultaneously, countless defensive formations rose in succession. Overlapping incantations rolled across the sky like crashing waves as the scholars deployed [Truth]'s power to erect towering walls that blocked the meteor fire rain. And after the fires had spread across the entire field, they drew from the river valley below the highlands, summoning a torrent of rain to cool the scorched earth.

The situation spiraled beyond control, and the battle itself slipped free of any commander's grasp.

Listening to the dense, whistling barrage of meteor after meteor, Cheng Shi and Sun Miao had no choice but to pour every ounce of energy into dodging.

Under this kind of indiscriminate bombardment, Keinlaur's defeat suddenly seemed far less baffling. The real mystery was how the man called King Delvo had managed to win.

The War Legion certainly hadn't been watching from the sidelines. The moment the meteors started falling, they charged straight into the encirclement and clashed with both nations' alliance — no, there was no alliance anymore. It was a three-way melee.

The meteor fire rain from the Elemental Judge formations didn't look like the Grand Tribunal's weapon at all. It looked more like the War Legion's rallying call.

Strange. Supremely strange. If Delvo had delayed his order by even one minute, he could have watched tens of thousands of enemies get blasted to ash. So why had he insisted on charging at this exact moment?

It wasn't just Cheng Shi who was puzzled. Sun Miao was practically clawing at his own heart with curiosity. He desperately wanted to understand the decisive factor in this battle's outcome. The two exchanged a look and, so long as their own safety was assured, immediately pivoted toward the same destination:

The War Legion's command banner!

Since Delvo ultimately won the war, staying near him would be the safest bet. They moved without hesitation. What they didn't know was that in this chaotic battlefield, more than one group shared the same idea.

Fate, like a deft seamstress, had woven countless threads of destiny together.

When the two of them stripped armor from a pile of corpses, disguised themselves as [War] soldiers, and raced through a gauntlet of attacks to reach the War Legion's central camp, they spotted an elite squad of knights cutting in from the Grand Tribunal's side at a pace matching their own.

And the knight leading the charge, his white hair dyed crimson with blood, was none other than the Grand Tribunal's commander: Keinlaur!

The Supreme Inquisitor had truly come. Just as Cheng Shi had predicted, he intended to carry out an audacious decapitation strike amid this "surgical" battle, using the enemy commander's bones as the foundation for a new order!

The Iron Law Knights who'd fought their way through beside him were undoubtedly the Grand Tribunal's most valorous. Lance tips thrust forward, they charged relentlessly, a blade cutting straight into the War Legion's heart.

Even when surrounded by forces several times their number, this lightning-fast squad showed not a hint of disorder in their formation.

Their morale was like a rainbow, their fighting spirit burning high. It seemed they would pin the [War] soldiers to this blood-and-fire-baptized earth for good.

Seeing such "divine soldiers" among the Grand Tribunal's forces, Sun Miao's pupils shrank. He frowned slightly:

"Has the trial been altered?"

Delvo's [War] soldier bodyguards clearly can't match this knight squad. If Keinlaur charges to close range at this pace...

Unless this Delvo is a Favored One blessed by [War] with extraordinary martial prowess, how can he possibly win?"

Sun Miao scanned the surroundings for variables in this localized engagement, but no matter how many times he looked, he couldn't see a single opening for Delvo to turn things around.

Even with the [Corruption] container absorbing emotions nearby, his mental strings drew taut.

But right then, Cheng Shi went rigid. He seized Sun Miao, who was still advancing, and asked with a frown:

"Which one is Delvo?"

Sun Miao's gaze sharpened. He pointed to the figure at the very front of the War Legion's command post, clad in blood-red armor and wearing a helmet engraved with flame motifs.

"That should be him. His aura is unremarkable, but true dragons always lurk in the deep. Perhaps when Keinlaur fights his way to him, he'll give us the surprise of a lifetime!"

Sure enough, within a few breaths, amid the combined encirclement of the [War] soldiers and even some Tower of Logic War Machine Pawns, Keinlaur used his bow as a spear, led his Iron Law Knights through the siege, and killed his way straight to Delvo's position.

This "red-haired" old man was drenched in blood, his expression iron-hard. When his gaze met Delvo's, he reined in his horse, its hooves rearing high. He raised the great bow, drew the string, and loosed three arrows in rapid succession at the enemy commander — arrows bearing the century-long vision of the Shared Law Faction, arrows of [Order].

Watching this blood-pumping scene unfold, Sun Miao held his breath, his mind focused on recording every detail. But Cheng Shi's pupils contracted sharply. Something was wrong.

'Wrong. Completely wrong!'

The great bow in Keinlaur's hands looked similar to the Startled Bow, but it was entirely different from the one he'd seen beneath the Mother Tree of Fear.

The shapes were roughly seventy percent alike. The blood-red patterns were nearly identical. But the bow Keinlaur now held lacked the uncanny, flowing radiance that had danced ceaselessly across the Startled Bow. At a glance, it didn't seem like a creation born from the Mother Tree of Fear at all.

Someone who'd never seen the original might not notice the difference, but Cheng Shi had watched Keinlaur draw that bow with his own eyes. He spotted the discrepancy instantly.

'Why?!'

'Keinlaur has fought his way to the enemy's doorstep. He can't still be hiding his strength!'

'If he's not holding back, why isn't he using the bow strung with Lid Yara's blood of [Order] to fire this final arrow?'

'Could this be the reason he failed?'

Cheng Shi's mind was in turmoil. He couldn't figure it out. But the next second, the battlefield before his eyes delivered the most unbelievable answer.

At the critical moment, the hitherto motionless Delvo suddenly burst into action. This supreme commander of the War Legion, who had risen from the Tower of Logic, snorted coldly. He shoved his bodyguards aside to clear space, picked up a great bow from the ground at his feet, and stepped forward. Bow stance like an arrow, he nocked fear itself as his string, drew the bow into a full moon, and—

WHOOSH!

An arrow named "Fear" howled from the string with terrifying force, splitting apart Keinlaur's triple volley and pinning the blood-soaked, death-resolved Inquisitor straight through to the scorched earth!

In that instant, the once-unstoppable Iron Law Knight squad tumbled from their horses, clutching the Supreme Inquisitor's corpse and wailing in anguish. But the surrounding [War] soldiers grew even more electrified, erupting in thunderous cheers at the same moment.

"How shall we survive!"

Delvo raised high the great bow in his hand, its surface alive with relentless, bewitching radiance. His voice rang out with absolute conviction:

"Through blood, and fire!"

...

Chapter 959: Keinlaur Never Lost

Cheng Shi was dumbstruck.

Before Delvo spoke, he'd been the only one stunned. But the moment Delvo roared the war prayer, Sun Miao's jaw dropped too.

He might not have known which of the two similar bows was the real one, but that voice...

The last shred of shock in Sun Miao's heart made him whip his head toward Cheng Shi, disbelief written on his face: "He's..."

Cheng Shi nodded, still reeling: "Keinlaur!"

In that instant, the two witnesses to history's truth finally linked every thread together and understood why the battlefield was rife with impossibilities.

There was no century-long vision of the Shared Law Faction. There was no creation of a new order. Nobody had told them that the "new order" Keinlaur spoke of was...

[War]!

One of the Grand Tribunal's supreme rulers had, at this pivotal moment, defected to [War]!

No!

He hadn't just switch sides now. He'd been a [War] believer all along!

"We were wrong. So-called 'history' blinded us. The resources the Shared Law Faction funneled into the Tower of Logic were probably never meant to achieve some universal shared law. They were most likely kindling [War]'s flames!

What the Shared Law Faction nurtured over all these years wasn't devotion to [Order]. It was a hunger for [War]!"

Sun Miao's eyes blazed. He counted off on his fingers, piecing together Keinlaur's plan point by point.

"This is a scorched-earth extermination strategy! I always wondered why Keinlaur had been so tireless in recruiting soldiers along the border. Look at what happened: every trooper he recruited who revered [Order] is going to die in this meteor fire rain feast!

He's trying to shove the entire Grand Tribunal into the abyss in one stroke, leaving it without the strength to ever climb out!

Same for the Tower of Logic. War has ravaged it for years, and its interior is already riddled with holes. The Erudition Presidium had finally scraped together a battle line to purge the heretical scholars, and now what?

Not just the front line — the entire nation is about to be gone!

Ha! The self-proclaimed geniuses of the Erudition Presidium, prideful for millennia, outplayed by a Supreme Inquisitor from the Grand Tribunal!

No wonder all three nations' histories say nothing about this battle's truth. Heh. Who would record something this humiliating?

History is the victor's anthem and the ambitious villain's twisted slander. The one thing it never is, is an honest record of one's own disgrace.

And Keinlaur would never write it down either. The moment he killed his own slice and chose to establish the name Delvo... he was no longer an [Order] believer. He was the first War Monarch who had made a clean break with his 'old employer.' [War]'s most devout champion!

As for the title of Supreme Inquisitor... the Shared Law Faction's blunder. What does that have to do with the War Monarch?

What a masterful swap of heaven and earth! What brilliant diplomacy! Turns out, the one who lost the battle was never Keinlaur. It was us, the ones reading history!"

Sun Miao was beside himself with admiration. He kept replaying everything he knew, gradually stringing together the full narrative, his eyes filled with growing awe.

"Who says [War] believers are brainless? They know patience all too well.

Come to think of it, the War Legion's 'night raid' yesterday probably wasn't a raid at all. The Keinlaurs... were using the pretext of a night raid to exchange intelligence, weren't they?

Heh. We were the real clowns, running back and forth."

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'Alert! Element detected!'

'What did clowns ever do to you!'

Cheng Shi silently rolled his eyes at Sun Miao.

He was equally stunned, but his shock extended beyond the present — it reached into "the past."

Consider: if Keinlaur was a [War] believer, then the one who killed the [Order] believer beside the Sea of Desire was actually...

!!??"

At this moment, even with the [Corruption] container in hand, nothing could suppress the shock erupting in Cheng Shi's chest.

He felt he'd stumbled upon an enormous secret. One even more terrifying than [Order]'s schism or [Chaos]'s impersonation.

If the conflicts between faiths truly had reflections in the mortal world, then the answer... was self-evident, wasn't it?

Cheng Shi shuddered. On this danger-laden battlefield, there was no time to delve deeper. Now that he'd witnessed history's truth, it was time to extricate himself from a battlefield about to be cratered into a basin.

But before that, there was one more matter to handle.

Cheng Shi's gaze abruptly turned toward where the Grand Tribunal's central army had been. Since that was the area blanketed by meteor fire rain, where was Xiao Qi — who had been controlling the command post — right now?

Speak of the devil.

Xiao Qi was no fool. After losing a dozen-plus tamed beasts to the meteors, his wits and faculties had returned. His true body was more volatile than ever, but on a battlefield painted in blood and fire, volatility was actually an asset.

And so, to survive, to dodge the relentless meteor barrage, Xiao Qi had sprinted toward the front line where impacts were sparse.

At first he hadn't noticed Cheng Shi or Sun Miao, nor had he witnessed Keinlaur killing his own slice. All he saw was the Supreme Inquisitor lying dead amid the War Legion's formation, and his eye fell immediately on the blood-red great bow Keinlaur had discarded on the ground.

The Startled Bow!

Du Qiyu's eyes lit up instantly.

"Son of a bitch, so the bow was in your hands all along! I should have killed you earlier! No, I should have found every last one of your doubles, tamed them all into slave dogs, broken your legs, and used the bones to make a bow rack!"

Seeing his prize, he let out a cold laugh and moved to claim the bow. But at that precise moment, a thrown blade embedded itself in his path, stopping him dead.

Du Qiyu's face flushed with rage. He spun around to find the horse-faced [Folly] believer smirking at him from the distance, making a throat-slitting gesture. The message was crystal clear: You're dead.

This detonated the last of Du Qiyu's restraint. Or rather, the volcano of suppressed emotion he'd been sitting on finally erupted.

"Son of a bitch, I spared your life and you dare come back! Perfect! I'll rip your dog bones out for my bow rack!

And while I'm at it, I'll grind that stray dog Xiao Shi's bones to dust too! Keep smiling at me, will you? You can all go to hell and cry there!"

Du Qiyu knew that engaging players now instead of grabbing the bow was unwise. But at this point, fury had consumed him entirely. Heedless of consequence, he charged like a madman toward Sun Miao and Cheng Shi.

Watching this decidedly unclever scene, Cheng Shi frowned slightly.

He could tell the Du Qiyu charging at him wasn't the real Xiao Qi, just a tamed beast with seventy percent resemblance. But its attitude made clear this was going to be a fight to the death.

Fine. That saved him the trouble of going to look.

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Chapter 960: Encounter, Crisis, Escape

People's greatest delusion was always thinking they were the protagonist of the story, the center of the world's stage.

But reality invariably delivered an ice-cold slap to wake these fools, telling them: in a universe where mortals are as insignificant as dust, you are nothing.

Cheng Shi's plan was solid. Sun Miao's reflexes were sharp. Xiao Qi's assault was fierce enough to be called ferocious. A war between players seemed on the verge of erupting.

But just as all three were about to collide, the sky fell!

By sheer misfortune, four meteors came crashing down in rapid succession on the front line — a zone that wasn't even a primary bombardment target. All four descended from similar heights at close distances, and when they hit simultaneously, a vast area centered on the War Legion's command post would become genuine hell.

The Grand Tribunal's fury didn't care whether you were an Oathbreaker or a player. If you were distant from [Order], you'd suffer His "divine punishment."

In that instant, soldiers across the entire area scattered in all directions. Countless [War] soldiers chanted their legion's motto as they fled outward, only to run into furious blockades from the Tower of Logic mid-retreat.

The scholars valued their lives too, of course. Nobody wanted to die alongside their enemy under meteor fire rain. So what stopped the [War] soldiers wasn't the scholars themselves, but [Truth]'s creations: War Machine Pawns.

The Mechanical Engineering Department's constructs showed their greatest value in this moment. Born without fear, they couldn't care less about dying in the fire rain. Under standing orders, their mission was simple: drag as many enemies as possible to a mutual end.

Even Delvo's personal guard panicked now. They raised their spears and fought desperately to carve a bloody path for their commander. Yet Delvo moved at a leisurely pace, as though telling everyone he wasn't afraid to die here. He simply gazed toward the Tower of Logic's battle line, apparently calculating his next move on the spot.

But Delvo's fearlessness didn't mean everyone else shared his calm. Especially... Cheng Shi.

Having no fear in your heart didn't mean having no fear on your face.

Cheng Shi was a seasoned actor. The moment he saw the meteor fire rain descending, he executed his plan: he raised the [Corruption] container high, made a show of having his fear absorbed — producing the look of someone forcibly calmed — and then, composed, pulled Sun Miao along as they fled into the distance.

Du Qiyu, mid-charge, caught this scene. His sharp eyes were instantly drawn to the object in Cheng Shi's hand.

It definitely wasn't just a mask. As for what was hidden behind it, it looked like some kind of calming tool.

But the current Du Qiyu didn't dwell on it. Mainly because there was no time to dwell.

His position was awkward. His earlier rush toward Cheng Shi had taken him far from the great bow beside Keinlaur's corpse, and now Cheng Shi and Sun Miao's rapid withdrawal put both targets beyond reach.

Unable to grab either prize, he had no choice but to memorize the bow's location, hoping to dig it out of the rubble later. Then, seething with hatred, he fled toward the nearest safe direction.

He wasn't idle during the retreat, though. To keep his rage from interfering with his escape, and to give Cheng Shi and the horse-faced wise man some trouble, Xiao Qi tamed over a dozen fleeing [War] soldiers along the way, commanding them to stop, draw their bows, and unleash a volley of arrows at the two retreating figures.

Honestly, this kind of barrage was virtually negligible to players. At best, it was entertainment.

The steady Cheng Shi at least glanced back to stay alert. Vice President Sun didn't even look, fully focused on dragging Cheng Shi through the shadows.

While running, Sun Miao wondered aloud: "A single glimpse won't be enough for the Beast Tamer to understand the Fear Heartwood's effect. What exactly is your plan? Don't you think it's time to share?"

Cheng Shi surveyed the surrounding situation, mentally counting, and shook his head: "Wait a moment. Xiao Qi has another trick up his sleeve."

The words had barely left his mouth when Xiao Qi's trick arrived!

Sure enough, the volley from the fleeing soldiers was nothing but a distraction to split their attention. As the two charged outward, a soldier ahead of them suddenly halted, whipped around, and thrust his spear in an unthinkable counter-charge straight at... Cheng Shi's face.

After cursing the wise man for so long, Xiao Qi had saved his most lethal strike for his dear old friend Xiao Shi. And he'd specifically targeted Cheng Shi's face.

Facing this ambush, Sun Miao's reflexes as an assassin were visibly faster than Cheng Shi's. He instantly severed the spear shaft with his dagger. But the throw had been devastatingly powerful. Even with the shaft broken, the spearhead continued its trajectory straight toward Cheng Shi's eye.

Under the [Corruption] container's influence, Cheng Shi was at the pinnacle of calm. In a flash, dozens of solutions to the tamed beast and spear attack presented themselves. But he used none of them. He didn't even move to counter. Instead, he squeezed out a flicker of panic on his face, bit it down instantly, and instinctively raised his left hand — the one holding the container — to block for a split second. The spearhead precisely flicked the container free and scraped along his cheek, opening a thin line of blood.

Only after feeling the pain from his face did his gaze harden. He unleashed a terrifying bolt of lightning at the tamed beast from point-blank range.

BOOM!

The tamed beast dissolved into ash with an amused smile. The last image it transmitted to Du Qiyu carried a message:

Even if Xiao Shi was the legendary Fate Weaver, he was nothing special. Under panic, he'd even used his hand to block. His reputation was clearly built on tools, nothing more. Though that lightning bolt was genuinely terrifying.

Of course, nobody knew what Du Qiyu was thinking. All Sun Miao knew was that his various emotions had come flooding back, which meant Cheng Shi had put the Fear Heartwood away again.

Perhaps the slight edge of fear actually sharpened one's survival instincts. Sun Miao erupted with far greater speed than before, dragging Cheng Shi through shadow after shadow until they'd escaped the fire rain's kill zone.

Just as they cleared the valley — BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM — four consecutive impacts flattened the land behind them.

The flames surged skyward without wind. Smoke and ash churned across the earth.

Cheng Shi watched Delvo fail to escape the fate of being reduced to scorched ash by a meteor. But he also knew that even if this War Marshal died, the next Delvo would rise again, appearing before the Tower of Logic's or Grand Tribunal's routed lines, rallying every surviving [War] soldier to drive these "invaders" out of [War]'s territory for good.

Seeing Cheng Shi look back with a complicated expression, Sun Miao caught his breath and spoke with a frown:

"Vice President Cheng, while overdependence on external tools isn't the right path, I must say your timing for putting away the Fear Heartwood was terrible. Staying calm gives us more options than blind flight.

Also, don't you think it's time to tell me your plan? Surely you don't want to turn down a free helper?"

'Free?'

'Free sounds great.'

Cheng Shi smiled, looked toward the valley blazing with meteor fire, and spread his hands: "Sorry, I didn't choose to put the Fear Heartwood away. Xiao Qi's ambush caught me off guard, and the Fear Heartwood was... knocked from my hand."

"!!!?"

Sun Miao's pupils shrank. He pointed at the burning wasteland in disbelief: "You just left the Fear Heartwood sitting there as bait!?"

"I told you, he accidentally knocked it loose."

"Do I look like I believe that? Heh. I didn't expect you to be even bolder than I imagined. Aren't you afraid someone will play the fisherman and the Fear Heartwood will be lost forever?"

"Afraid? Of course I'm afraid." Cheng Shi curled his lips into a smirk, swept his gaze around, and continued pushing Sun Miao toward the battlefield's outermost edge. "But in a situation like this, no fool would turn back into that scorched wasteland. Unless someone left behind something they desperately wanted in there.

Something like... a certain great bow crafted by a Supreme Inquisitor."

'Brilliant move!'

At this, Sun Miao finally understood the full plan. Now he simply looked forward to seeing what expression the Beast Tamer would wear when, driven by curiosity, he picked up the Fear Heartwood.

Like Cheng Shi, he wasn't the least bit worried that Du Qiyu would simply leave after finding the heartwood. Because once that man felt what the tool could do, this "old friend" who despised Cheng Shi would undoubtedly make the most rational decision: seize this golden opportunity to settle, once and for all, the "knot" in his heart during this trial.

Sun Miao looked in the direction Du Qiyu had fled, his gaze deep and contemplative.

'So that's what desire looks like. Desire so powerful that even a [Corruption] container cannot fully absorb it.'

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