

## The Gods 261

### Chapter 261: Underground — This Trial Is Actually Underground

Damp air. A chill that crept into the bones.

Before he even opened his eyes, Cheng Shi was covered in goosebumps from the ghostly breeze drifting all around him.

Cold — but not a wind chill. A dank, subterranean cold.

When his sense of smell returned, he caught the rich, putrid stench saturating the air — like rotting leaves piled up in a stagnant pond.

Under this barrage of sensory input, a thought flashed through his mind:

'A rainforest? Don't tell me this trial's in the wilderness again.'

He snapped his eyes open the moment his consciousness fully reassembled — and saw thick layers of decaying branches and rotting leaves beneath his feet, surrounded by a forest of half-dead, rotting trees.

!!!

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted sharply. A startled guess escaped his lips:

"Underground?"

But the word hadn't come from him alone — three or four voices said it in perfect unison.

His heart lurched. He immediately surveyed his teammates. Five figures, all appearing relatively composed — though their furrowed brows betrayed their own disquiet.

It seemed most of them hadn't expected a [Prosperity] trial to be set underground.

The underground was fundamentally different from the surface. This was the nest of [Descent], the stronghold of [Chaos]. The Gods of those two Paths held absolute dominion over underground faith. The deities revered by surface dwellers were considered, to put it bluntly, heretical gods down here.

And in a place like this, [Prosperity]'s will was practically inaudible.

Completing a [Prosperity] protection mission in a place with virtually no [Prosperity] faith — the difficulty was self-evident.

Cheng Shi had never imagined the trial would open with this kind of bombshell!

'Great. Just great.'

The only good news was that the teammates looked puzzled but not scared. That suggested everyone had decent scores — likely a high-level lobby. There was still room to coast.

Sure enough, while the group was sizing each other up, a bespectacled man in a gray windbreaker spoke first:

"Twisted Night Pythons... everyone, our situation is rather dire."

"The Sighing Forest!" A long-haired woman frowned, kicked at the rotting leaves underfoot, and said with undisguised disgust: "The stench of [Decay]. Every breath is nauseating."

Cheng Shi silently glanced at her and was almost certain she was a [Prosperity] follower. Not just because her revulsion toward [Decay] was written brazenly across her face, but because of that hair — cascading past her thighs.

Absurdly long. Just like [Prosperity]'s will — growing wild and unchecked.

Her appearance was eye-catching too. Up top, nothing but an animal-hide bandeau. Below, ultra-short beast-skin shorts. She wasn't even wearing shoes. The primal, untamed look radiated raw wildness.

At first glance, she seemed to belong to the forest.

But unfortunately, this was a forest shrouded in [Decay]. Though this trial belonged to her patron, this environment was anything but friendly to a [Prosperity] follower.

The Sighing Forest was a [Decay]-blanketed woodland located in the northeastern reaches of the underground world. It was arguably the most expansive forest across the entire Land of Hope — underground and surface combined.

It was called the Sighing Forest because a perpetual mist known as the Sighing Sorrow Tide seeped through the woodland. This mist was saturated with the power of [Decay]. Any living thing swallowed by it would lose all sense of direction before embracing [Decay], becoming part of the rotting woodland.

The Twisted Night Pythons were among the creatures reforged by [Decay].

When the underground's dim sun rose, they transformed into the gnarled, twisted deadwood the players now saw before them — indistinguishable from real trees. But when night fell, the deadwood gradually stirred to life, becoming massive rotting serpents under the moonlight — hunting, devouring — and shedding their skins before the next dawn to become deadwood once more.

Those shed skins became the "leaves" carpeting the ground beneath their feet.

These rotting leaves served as nourishment for [Decay], fueling the conversion of even more unwitting lives that strayed too close.

This was [Decay]'s ecosystem. This was the Sighing Forest.

"The dark sun has just passed its zenith. About five hours until nightfall. I believe that's enough time to find His trail," said a tall, thin man draped in a feathered cloak.

"You can see the dark sun?" The windbreaker-clad glasses man perked up at the latest speaker.

The feathered man nodded, then shook his head:

"Looks like our teammates are still a bit green. Wouldn't you say... Baldie?"

'???'

'What?'

'Baldie?'

Cheng Shi followed the feathered man's gaze to the knee-length-haired woman and barely suppressed a laugh.

'You call THAT bald?'

'Brother, your eyesight must be—'

'Wait. No. That's not right!'

Cheng Shi's half-formed grin froze. His pupils contracted violently, and he looked at the woman with super-long hair again.

'A [Prosperity] follower... called "Baldie"... the leaderboard has someone named "Bald Guy Uses Rejoice"... the mage channel data said [Prosperity]'s Chosen One hasn't returned to the top yet...'

'Huh?'

'Don't tell me she's—!?!?'

The horrifying suspicion barely had time to form before "Baldie" spat in disgust:

"Since when do you get to call me that?"

Featherhead. Guard those plumes of yours, or I'll find an excuse to pluck you bare."

With that, she casually reached out and — light as a breeze — uprooted a Twisted Night Python. Then, right in front of everyone, she ran one merciless iron hand from top to bottom along the twisted trunk, stripping it clean in a single pass into a pure wooden spear!

She planted the spear upright in the rotting leaves, draped both arms over its butt end, and with an easy, devil-may-care tilt of her head, grinned at the rest of the team:

"Relax. Personal grudge. Nothing to do with you all.

Let me introduce myself. Hong Lin, Druid. Score: 2,567."

Druid — the warrior class of [Prosperity].

A combat profession that could shapeshift across multiple species. Most of its offensive capabilities were ferocious. Tanky yet hard-hitting. Truly all-around.

Great class. High score. Nice legs— sturdy legs. But Cheng Shi... wanted to run.

"..."

2,567!

A player at that score had no business being matched with him!

'Who the hell is running this garbage matchmaking system!?'

'Out of a dozen-plus Chosen Ones, only a handful haven't reclaimed their thrones, and THIS round I get matched with one!?'

'No — maybe not just one. Anyone who's got a personal vendetta with a Chosen One can't exactly be a nobody. So Featherhead here...'

Cheng Shi quickly turned to the feathered man, who smiled with narrowed eyes, completely unperturbed:

"I look forward to it. I hope you'll put some force into it when the time comes."

"..."

'Wait — you're [Corruption] too?'

Cheng Shi was numb. He figured he'd stepped in something foul again. But the man's actual introduction proved to be even worse than having a [Corruption] teammate.

"Zhen. You can call me Zhen — as in 'drinking poison to quench your thirst.'

Rot Chanter. Score: 2,538."

Rot Chanter — the singer class of [Decay].

'Perfect. Running into one Chosen One in a trial was already enough. Now there's a high-scoring [Decay] follower too!?'

'This is a [Prosperity] trial!'

'Setting aside their personal grudge — with faiths this diametrically opposed, can Featherhead here even let this trial proceed normally!?'

'Losing a few points is probably easier for people like them than drinking water.'

At this point, Cheng Shi's brow was twisted tighter than a pretzel. He sighed internally and turned his gaze to the next teammate.

"Baldie? Bald Uses Rejoice? You're the [Prosperity] Chosen One?" the windbreaker glasses man blurted in shock, staring at Hong Lin, then pivoting in astonishment to Zhen. "And you're the one with the ID 'Zhen Poison' — former number four in [Decay]?"

Hong Lin didn't seem particularly proud of her Chosen One status. She pursed her lips in a vague acknowledgment. Featherhead also nodded with that narrow-eyed smile.

"Well, this round just went from zero to a hundred."

"You seem to know a lot. What's your name?"

"Zuo Qiu. [Existence]—" The windbreaker glasses man pushed his glasses up, expression complicated. "Ah, forget it. Can't hide anything in front of you two. I'm a historian. From the History School. Ladder score: 2,343."

The first part was a lie. The second, true.

His name wasn't Zuo Qiu. But he really was a historian.

"..."

'Incredible!'

Cheng Shi's face had gone completely stiff. He was numb from head to toe.

'I just got burned by one historian, and now here's another!?'

'And I get matched with one right after regaining my [Deceit] faith!?'

'What — is the God who enjoys watching clown performances now two Gods!?'

'If you're going to play it like this, don't blame me for dusting off that legendary catchphrase!'