

The Gods 311

Chapter 311: The Gamble Begins—I'll Lead the All-In!

By his estimate, night was about to fall.

Looking at Hong Lin—now devoid of any trace of [Prosperity], her entire body wrapped in [Decay] instead—Cheng Shi sighed inwardly.

Though Baldy had been talked into joining this gamble, the "favor" he owed had grown rather large.

She trusted him too much. Trusted him enough to hand over every fragment of Divinity she'd spent so long collecting, all placed on his body. That trust was crushingly heavy—enough to make Cheng Shi suspect something:

'Could Baldy possibly be...'

'Playing dumb?'

'Had she figured out long ago that I respond well to this approach, and bet everything—all her trust—on a single all-in?'

'Was this seemingly dim warrior actually someone with even more tricks up her sleeve than him?'

'Hmm...'

'Doesn't seem like it.'

Regardless, Cheng Shi felt he could live up to that trust. So he spoke:

"Ready? We're heading out."

Wrapped in [Decay], Hong Lin was nowhere near as spirited as before. She was barely maintaining the balance between the two opposing faith forces within her body, struggling to keep [Decay] from fully corroding her into an "accidental Oathbreaker."

"Heh. Honestly, I'm suddenly a bit nervous. I'm worried a Fate Weaver like you can't actually protect me. I feel like I'm staring at my own doom."

"Relax. Right now you're [Decay]'s cherished child—an envoy from the Final Tomb. Every creature in this Sighing Forest ranks below you. They won't attack you; they'll follow you.

So as long as we don't run into Eposka, safety shouldn't be a concern.

The aura of the Final Tomb will make them submit."

"Heh. I'm a [Prosperity] player pretending to be a [Decay] envoy. Isn't that a blasphemy against Him too?

Cheng Shi, don't con me—when this gamble's over, I'd better not turn out to be the stake that gets lost."

"..."

'That's quite the stake you'd be—no wait, you're quite the pessimist.'

Cheng Shi slapped his cheeks, composing a confident expression:

"Don't fear sharpening the spear before battle—fear the loss of troops before the fight even starts. Relax, [Fate] will look after us.

Besides, think of it this way: isn't this equally a blasphemy against [Decay]?

The more you desecrate Him now, the more your Benefactor will be... well... pleased."

"..." Hong Lin shot Cheng Shi a strange look, sensing something off about that statement. "I suddenly feel that a [Prosperity] follower praying for [Fate]'s protection is also a blasphemy against Him."

"..."

'Enough with the blasphemy talk. We've got places to be.'

Cold feet at the moment of truth was never a good sign. Cheng Shi gave Hong Lin a push:

"Stop blaspheming. Let's go. Once the bow is drawn, there's no turning back. If you quit now, all that suffering from [Decay]'s erosion was for nothing."

Hong Lin let out a dry laugh and raised her hand.

"Rushing me won't help. I don't even have enough strength to open the Void right now. Cheng Shi, please don't tell me you can't even open the Void. Your move."

Cheng Shi smacked his lips and pulled out the Tongue of Eating Lies once more.

Truth be told, before obtaining this tongue, he genuinely couldn't have guaranteed he could slice open a Void rift from nothing.

If he switched to Hero of Today and fired five Lightning Punishments at a single point, there might be a chance. But a Hero of Today in the Sighing Forest at night couldn't protect the "helpless" Hong Lin beside him.

So Cheng Shi had no choice but to secretly play the Clown.

He used the tongue to lick open a Void rift, then looked back at Hong Lin, his expression turning serious:

"There's still time to back out. Otherwise, the moment we step out of the Void—the gamble is on!"

Hong Lin rolled her eyes with a sneer:

"You said it yourself—quitting now would mean everything I just went through was pointless.

I think you're right. If fate's script has already been written, then someone who's always been blessed by fortune won't die here.

So—I won't die. Right?"

Cheng Shi smiled, absolutely certain: "Right. You won't die. And neither will I."

"Then let's go. Time's wasting."

With that, Hong Lin stepped out first. Cheng Shi followed close behind.

But when they exited the Void and returned to the Sighing Forest, the first thing that greeted them wasn't the giant serpents slithering through the woods under the cover of night—but a pair of eyes blazing with blue flames, filled with desperation and frenzy!

Eposka!

This relentless Barren Walker, obsessed with [Prosperity], had been standing guard at the exact spot where they'd vanished, never once leaving!

The millisecond Cheng Shi spotted the colossal creature just inches away, cold sweat erupted across his body. He shoved the equally shocked Baldy in front of him and steeled himself to perform an Oracle Act.

But to everyone's surprise, when Eposka discovered Hong Lin had shrunk and no longer carried any [Prosperity] aura, it roared in fury several times—then left, reluctant but undeterred.

It had lost interest in Hong Lin.

Seeing this, Cheng Shi let out a massive sigh of relief. But the next instant, the Hong Lin he'd shoved forward slowly turned around, face ashen, and snarled through gnashing teeth:

"CHENG! SHI! Is THIS how you protect me???"

Cheng Shi flinched, but in the next heartbeat he assumed a composed, "all according to plan" posture:

"Easy, easy—everything's within expectations. See? It left, didn't it..."

Hong Lin glanced at the departing Eposka, then at the fraud of a "good teammate" behind her. She wanted nothing more than to stuff the Tomb End Stone down Cheng Shi's throat!

'That lying, deceiving, accursed mouth!'

"This is the last time! If you hide behind me again, don't blame me for flipping the entire gambling table!"

Cheng Shi laughed awkwardly, then quickly pointed at the stirring around them:

"Look! Look! They're coming! The show is about to begin!"

Hong Lin paused. Following Cheng Shi's gaze, she saw countless Twisted Night Pythons cautiously approaching now that Eposka had gone.

One by one, massive serpents writhed forward. Upon detecting the boundless [Decay] and Final Tomb aura emanating from Hong Lin, they began frantically hissing and trembling as they circled the pair.

Their piercing cries rapidly carried through the now-treeless "forest." Before long, answering echoes resounded from every direction!

One shadow after another came surging toward them like waves. The tide of serpents, as if they'd found the very meaning of their serpentine existence, raised countless pairs of eerie green eyes and fixed them unblinkingly on where Hong Lin stood. They gathered tighter and tighter, more and more of them, until before long, dense currents of Power of Faith began flowing through the contract in Cheng Shi's hands, converting into fresh [Decay] and rising within Hong Lin's body.

Hong Lin's features aged visibly. From the inside out, her entire being began radiating decay.

This kind of sudden, disease-like deterioration would be difficult for most people to endure silently. But Hong Lin endured it. She didn't make a sound, letting [Decay] pile up within her.

Cheng Shi, impressed by her tolerance for the changes in her body, whispered from behind her:

"More and more Twisted Night Pythons are gathering, but it's not enough yet. He hasn't cast His gaze. Hold on a little longer. Just a bit more!

Trust me—we won't die!"

"Cheng... Shi..."

Hong Lin's voice had begun turning elderly and hoarse. Her eyes flickered as she rasped:

"Don't... tell anyone... about me getting old..."

"..."

'Really, sis? At a time like this, THAT'S what you're worried about?'

'Besides—do you think everyone has a mouth as big as Tao Yi's?'

'These lips are sealed, I'll have you know!'

Cheng Shi nodded peevishly, then suddenly pressed a die into Hong Lin's hand.

Hong Lin took it with surprise. When she realized it was just an ordinary die—not the [Fate] token she wanted—she looked at Cheng Shi in puzzlement.

Cheng Shi grinned slyly:

"A die to strengthen your resolve. Feel [Fate]'s favor. I've got something to take care of, so I'll have to leave you for a moment.

Hold on. You must hold on!

Wait for me.

I'll be quick!"

With that, Cheng Shi vanished from the spot!

Watching the teammate who'd talked her into going all-in suddenly disappear right before her eyes, Hong Lin could no longer hide her shock.

This was NOT part of the plan!

This Fate Weaver who'd dragged her into the gamble had never once mentioned he'd vanish!

Hong Lin's expression transformed. She clutched the die in a white-knuckled grip, her eyes blazing with fury.

"CHENG! SHI! You..."

More and more serpents swarmed around her. The [Decay] inside her grew thicker by the second. Realizing there was no turning back, Hong Lin let out a furious roar, venting every ounce of frustration in her heart.

She told herself: 'This is the last time! This has to be the last time! This MUST be the last time!'

And hearing that roar, the sea of pythons prostrate and writhing around her simultaneously raised their heads to the sky and shrieked.

The chorus of [Decay] echoed across the heavens, lingering and unending. In the thick darkness of night, it finally caught the attention of someone who'd been watching.

Chapter 312: You Can Always Grab a Few Extra Chips From the Table's Edge

Countless pairs of metallic eyeballs emitting eerie blue light suddenly rose from beneath the rotting leaf cover all across the Sighing Forest. They pierced through soil and dead leaves, mechanically rotated a few times, then fixed their gaze in unison on the spot where the contract had reappeared.

Indeed—these mechanical eyes hadn't been tracking the Twisted Night Pythons. They'd merely sensed the contract's return and lit up to guide the "companions" searching for it through the forest.

As the blue lights converged, over a hundred mechanical serpents—identical in appearance to the Twisted Night Pythons—slowly crawled from their underground slumber, hissing and writhing, blending seamlessly into the rushing tide of snakes as they surged toward the contract's location.

Meanwhile, on the other side.

Cheng Shi had vanished—but he hadn't returned to the Void. Using a die he'd secretly stashed in the Mushroom-Footed People's Tribe, he'd transported himself back to the settlement that still desperately awaited its Divine Envoy's return.

When he and Hong Lin had been hammering out every detail of their plan in the Void, this pitiful Tribe abandoned in the Sighing Forest had never come up once.

Both of them had tacitly skipped past the Mushroom-Footed People, because they both knew—in the face of a trial, NPC lives didn't count as lives.

Sacrificed and gone. The deaths of a few hundred to a thousand people wouldn't cause a single ripple in the annals of history.

But Cheng Shi knew Hong Lin wasn't a cold-blooded player. She'd thought of them—she just couldn't afford to address it given his plan. So she'd chosen silence.

In truth, Cheng Shi had thought of them too. These were innocent lives. They shouldn't become sacrifices for an experiment or a gamble.

When caught between two harms, Cheng Shi had no choice but to pick the lesser. But if he could grab a little something on the side—this kind of "asset" that might turn into extra chips at the table's edge—he was willing to reach.

So when the timing was right, he'd rushed back for a look.

He hadn't been sure if the Mushroom-Footed People were already exposed to the Sighing Forest the instant the contract was torn. He didn't know if Eposka, enraged beyond reason, had slaughtered them all before camping at the spot where they'd vanished. He couldn't be certain whether nightfall had already seen them gnawed to nothing by [Decay]'s creations...

But what if?

Clinging to that hope, Cheng Shi appeared in the Main House—and found countless trembling, terrified Mushroom-Footed People packed in circles around the building, softly praying to [Prosperity]'s name. The Old Patriarch stood in the center, holding up a blazing white lantern, ceaselessly comforting his clansmen as [Decay] gnawed at them and they slowly "withered."

He was saying: "The Divine Envoy will not abandon us. Amir's disappearance does not mean He has revoked His forgiveness. This may be the fourth trial—and this trial tests our courage.

We must summon our spirits, ignite our [Prosperity], and prove with our bodies and blood to our Benefactor that we, the Mushroom-Footed People, are His most devout followers!

Even in our final moments, we will not decay to [Decay]. We remain children of [Prosperity]!

My brothers and sisters, do not give up. The Divine Envoy is already on his way back!"

But this speech had been repeated so many times since nightfall that it was practically worn through. Almost no one believed the Old Patriarch anymore.

They believed Amir's performance had angered the Benefactor, prompting Him to withdraw His protection. And without [Prosperity]'s shelter, the Mushroom-Footed People were like rabbits tossed to wolves—no chance of survival.

The spread of [Decay] wasn't the terrifying part. What was terrifying was the despair rampaging through their hearts.

And precisely at this moment—Cheng Shi appeared!

As the Old Patriarch's trembling, hoarse words faded, Cheng Shi landed and immediately shouted to the sea of Mushroom-Footed People before him:

"Praise [Prosperity]!"

Every Mushroom-Footed Person froze, then looked up in disbelief at their returned Divine Envoy—Master Baldy!

He had come back!

At the Tribe's darkest hour, he had come back!

Cheng Shi's appearance instantly ignited their devotion. They were beside themselves with excitement, tears of fervor streaming down their faces, countless hands clasped over mouths as they prostrated on the ground, sobbing uncontrollably, hysterically crying out "Master Baldy" and [Prosperity]'s Divine Name as they released every shred of fear and gratitude in their hearts.

Even the Old Patriarch couldn't believe his own words had come true. The moment the Divine Envoy actually returned, he crashed to the ground with a thud, weeping louder and more mournfully than anyone else.

"Master Baldy, you've finally returned! He hasn't abandoned us—what I said was true! He hasn't abandoned us!"

'Hasn't abandoned them? Well... perhaps.'

Cheng Shi sighed inwardly and helped the Old Patriarch up from the ground.

The Old Patriarch quickly leaned close to Cheng Shi's ear and whispered:

"Master Baldy, is this truly His trial?"

Cheng Shi smiled and nodded. But what he said next stunned the Old Patriarch frozen on the spot—and instantly silenced the thunderous cheers of the entire Mushroom-Footed People's Tribe, leaving every voice of praise mute.

He cleared his throat and announced with an air both mysterious and sacred:

"What follows is your fourth trial—the courage of absolute obedience!

From this moment forward, all of His children must...

Cease resistance. Embrace [Decay]. Become part of this Sighing Forest. Through absolute submission and devotion, prove that you possess the unwavering resolve and... courage to return!"

"What?!!"

"Impossible!"

"Master Baldy, is the divine decree perhaps... mistaken?"

"How can this be... how can this be..."

The Old Patriarch was dumbstruck as well. His mind roared with white noise, all capacity for thought obliterated. After standing stunned for an eternity, he seized Cheng Shi's hand and stammered in disbelief:

"Master Baldy, we are children of [Prosperity]. If we're exposed to [Decay] without any resistance, we won't transform into [Decay]'s creations—we'll simply be corroded to death, right here in this forest..."

Has He... truly abandoned us after all?"

Cheng Shi looked at the crowd's reactions and gave a cold laugh:

"Do you know why your Tribe was exiled here in the first place?"

It's because during the campaign against [Decay], you disobeyed orders and fled. That is why our great Benefactor exiled you for eternity to this battlefield—to this enemy territory of the Sighing Forest—to atone and repent.

But He is merciful. He still gave you a sanctuary. And now, as the trials approach their end, you can no longer receive His protection. You must prove your courage in this Sighing Forest. The proof is simple: believe in the Benefactor's forgiveness. Believe that [Prosperity] will come.

In the moment you embrace [Decay], He will protect you. He will ensure you never die from [Decay]'s erosion.

Believe or don't believe. The choice is yours."

With that, Cheng Shi stepped back stone-faced, retreating to a corner.

The Mushroom-Footed People stared at their stern-faced Divine Envoy, hearts hammering, faces stricken with panic.

The Old Patriarch's expression shifted again and again. After glancing at Cheng Shi several times, he finally steeled his resolve—and accepted the trial.

"My people! We are [Prosperity]'s most devout followers! We must have faith! He has never abandoned us!

And Master Baldy's arrival is the finest proof of that forgiveness!

Now that the trial's challenge has been proclaimed...

Everyone—cease resistance. Embrace [Decay]!"

No sooner had the words left his lips than the Old Patriarch severed his own thread-thin "Prosperity" and let [Decay] flood into his body.

Seeing their patriarch's example, the Mushroom-Footed People outside the building wailed in terror—but they too abandoned resistance, letting their bodies decay and age.

And at that moment—watching nearly every Mushroom-Footed Person teetering at death's edge—a smile finally crept onto the face of the cold and distant Cheng Shi standing to the side.

An amused smile.

'Your lofty Benefactor up there... probably can't save you anymore...'

'But that's alright. You've still got me—your Divine Envoy.'

'Doesn't matter what kind of Divine Envoy I am. If I can save you, I'm a good one.'

Thinking this, he secretly clutched the Die of Fate behind his back. His lips moved, voice barely a whisper:

"Lie Like Yesterday, mock today.

Yesterday I deceived a follower of [Death], so today...

I am a follower of [Death]."

The instant those words fell, a ghostly green glow kindled in Cheng Shi's eyes. He gazed upon the prostrate crowd before him and murmured with a soft laugh:

"Today, my mouth is the Book of Life and Death in His Lordship's hands. Everyone who obeys—none shall die.

I guard the Gates of [Death] on His behalf, selecting Sacrifices. And today, not a single one of you will be offered up to Him.

I'm sorry for the deception. What keeps you from dying was never [Prosperity]—it was... the great [Death]!

Praise His Lordship. We shall...

See each other shortly."

With that, Cheng Shi dropped a die, snapped his fingers, and vanished once more.

Chapter 313: Who Says We Lost the Gamble?

Hong Lin was reaching her limit.

If it had been mere [Decay] erosion, she could have held on far longer. But starting moments ago, mechanical mimics—distinctly not Twisted Night Pythons—had appeared among the serpent swarm.

They lurked within the tide of snakes, biding their time, seemingly searching for something near Hong Lin. After circling several times without finding their target, the Flustered mechanical serpents launched their probing attack. They needed to know where the contract had gone.

One of them suddenly reared up, shrieked, and shot straight for Hong Lin's heart!

But at that critical instant, the most "devout" Twisted Night Pythons closest to Hong Lin screeched, rearing up to form a wall of rotting flesh before this "envoy" bearing the Final Tomb's aura—a barrier of [Decay]!

The mechanical serpent was too fast to dodge. It slammed into the living wall and instantly lost momentum, tumbling to the ground, where the surrounding enraged Twisted Night Pythons swarmed and crushed it into scrap metal.

Hong Lin watched from behind the blood-and-flesh barricade, her pupils contracting.

Before today, she never could have imagined that someone as powerful as her—a [Prosperity] warrior—would be standing helplessly on [Decay]'s soil like a fragile paper doll ready to topple in the wind. And even more absurd, the things shielding her from these Inexplicable attacks weren't the Fate Weaver who'd talked her into going all-in, but a pack of [Decay] creatures duped into oblivion by a stone in her hand!

'Dear God—if [Fate] really does have a script, what kind of plot is this?'

'Was He holding it upside down when He wrote it?'

[Decay] worshipping [Prosperity]. [Decay] defending [Prosperity]. [Decay] rallying behind [Prosperity]...

Each of those three sentences was a hellish joke on its own. Yet today, right before her eyes, the jokes had become actual hell.

Hong Lin couldn't tell who the joke was on anymore. All she knew was that Cheng Shi had guessed correctly—the Mushroom-Footed People in the Sighing Forest weren't simply exiles of faith. Because the shredded parts and debris told her the serpent that had attacked wasn't a Twisted Night Python at all, but a mimetic construct from the Tower of Logic's Mechanical Engineering Division!

[Truth]'s followers had indeed played a role in this filthy faith theft—possibly even the lead role!

But that wasn't the most pressing issue. After the first probe tore open a gap, the mechanical serpents in the swarm went berserk, lunging at her en masse.

Walls of rotting flesh couldn't last forever. The outer Twisted Night Pythons had no idea what was happening inside. The serpents closest to Hong Lin were still tearing apart debris on the ground. In the chaos, one or two mechanical serpents inevitably found openings, darting straight for her face.

By now Hong Lin barely had the strength to speak. Her skin was sagging and drooping, her organs withering, and even her consciousness had begun corroding under [Decay]—making her faith in [Prosperity] waver.

The last thread of [Prosperity] she'd kept to slow the erosion had finally, under the pressure of terror and fury, been exhausted.

"Cheng... Shi... this is... the last... time..."

Watching the mechanical serpent finally split its massive jaw to reveal wickedly serrated teeth, Hong Lin could no longer stand idle. She'd decided she couldn't wait for that gambler teammate to return.

So at this true moment of life and death, she clenched her teeth and produced from her storage space a decree radiating the light of [Order], preparing to use its power to end the trial!

Yes—Hong Lin hadn't fully gone all-in!

She'd genuinely bet her life for Cheng Shi, but it was a bet she could recall. She couldn't truly lose her life here. So she'd kept one last card—the deepest card, one she'd never played even when surrounded by armies of thousands on the battlefield!

[Order]!

She'd once found a remnant page of [Order]. The power within could teleport her directly out of the trial.

But given her current state, even if she escaped, the outlook wasn't optimistic.

Still, severe injury was better than death. So she acted.

But in that lightning-flash instant—just as she raised her hand, about to use the [Order] remnant page—a figure appeared.

Cheng Shi!

The Fate Weaver who'd told Hong Lin "I'll be right back" had finally returned at the moment her life hung by a thread.

The instant he materialized, he threw himself in front of Hong Lin, standing stock-still as a charging mechanical serpent bit clean through his shoulder.

Hong Lin's eyes sharpened. Before she could shout a warning, a second serpent swept through and shattered Cheng Shi's right leg, grinding the broken bone to powder.

Yet Cheng Shi didn't budge. He merely coughed up blood with a wild laugh, still stretching out one arm to shield Hong Lin.

"You..."

Hong Lin struggled to raise her hand and braced his back to keep him from collapsing. Before she could speak, Cheng Shi turned his head with a grin:

"How about that, Baldy? This time I'm not standing behind you."

'Still smiling!'

'What time is it and you're still smiling!'

Despite gnashing her teeth, the boundless fury that had consumed Hong Lin evaporated the moment Cheng Shi stepped in front of her.

Something distinctly different glimmered in her [Decay]-clouded eyes—but it faded quickly. Her expression turned despondent. She seemed to want to speak, but her ravaged throat could no longer produce sound. So she could only shake her head, trying to tell Cheng Shi that this gamble was probably lost.

Even though he'd guessed everything right—that Eposka wouldn't attack a fellow "Decay" creature, that this was a Tower of Logic experiment, that the Twisted Night Pythons would follow the Final Tomb's aura—none of it mattered now.

This charade of a [Decay] envoy had attracted enough [Decay] followers. But her Benefactor still hadn't cast His gaze.

Clearly, [Prosperity] didn't want retaliation.

Perhaps the dying ember had been those poor Mushroom-Footed People all along. But with the contract rewritten and night fallen, they'd probably already...

'No—wait!'

Though the sluggishness was dragging her thoughts, something clicked. She looked at the smile lingering on Cheng Shi's lips and suddenly realized his disappearance might have been to—

She jerked her heavy eyelids open, searching Cheng Shi's face with the last shred of hope in her eyes.

Cheng Shi's breath was fading under the mechanical serpents' assault. He seemed to read the question in her eyes, but still shook his head:

"They've... already become [Decay]."

Hearing this, disappointment flickered in Hong Lin's gaze—but was immediately replaced by a glimmer of relief.

Relief that Cheng Shi truly was a friend worth having. Like her, he wasn't a bad person. He'd still cared about those innocent Mushroom-Footed People.

Disappointment that the gamble was still lost. Even after wagering so many chips, they'd still come up short.

But no matter. Where there's life, there's hope. She reached out, pulled the equally battered Cheng Shi to her side, and prepared to activate the [Order] remnant page.

But at that moment—Cheng Shi smiled again.

That amused, knowing smile.

"Baldy, you don't actually think we've lost, do you?"

Hong Lin froze, dull and disoriented, then lifted her head. And with that single glance, she saw a madman drenched in his own blood push her aside and stagger to his feet on one leg, laughing like a lunatic:

"The chips have barely hit the table! Who says we've lost?!"

Your Benefactor may despise betrayal, but I'd never dare gamble His favor on mere retaliation!

So the prairie fire was never meant to be a strike against [Decay]—it was always meant to be a tribute to [Prosperity]!

And right now, our tribute hasn't even begun. How can we surrender?!"

As Cheng Shi roared, more and more mechanical serpents broke through the perimeter and charged. But he showed no fear. With green light flickering at his fingertips, he tapped himself and Hong Lin once, his expression savage, his fervor unhinged:

"I told you—today, my mouth is the Book of Life and Death! As a Gravekeeper of [Death], unless I agree, no one dies a Sacrifice in front of me!"

Hong Lin jolted, then it finally dawned on her: this Fate Weaver was also grafted with the Gravekeeper's fate?

Or had he personally dispatched a Gravekeeper?

That was bizarre. What kind of Gravekeeper couldn't even guard their own life and got taken out by a Fate Weaver?

'Unless they, like me, were... talked into stupidity and then... conned to death?'

Regardless, seeing the green glow of [Death] swirling around her body, Hong Lin finally understood where Cheng Shi's confidence came from.

No wonder he'd dared to boast he could protect her. He'd had a [Death] card up his sleeve all along.

Yes—it truly was a [Death] trump card. But did Cheng Shi actually have it?

He didn't!

He absolutely didn't!

He'd already given that [Death] trump card to those poor Mushroom-Footed People!

When he'd switched to [Fate] faith and used Never Lost Gambling Gear to teleport to the Mushroom-Footed People's Tribe, he hadn't performed an Oracle Act under [Deceit]—which meant he still had one use of "Lie Like Yesterday" remaining.

So when he'd tricked the Mushroom-Footed People into embracing [Decay], he'd switched back to [Deceit] and played that [Death] trump card!

But when he switched back to [Fate] and used a die to return to Hong Lin's side, the effect of "Lie Like Yesterday" had already expired.

Reflection of Nihilism didn't preserve faith effects. So the current Cheng Shi wasn't a Gravekeeper at all. After switching back to [Deceit], he'd become a pure Clown!

The green light at his fingertips wasn't the color of [Death]—it was green fluorescent paint he'd carefully prepared beforehand!

This crude trick would never have fooled Hong Lin under normal circumstances. But right now, [Decay] had eroded her consciousness until it was hazy. She couldn't distinguish that the Gravekeeper standing

before her wasn't a Gravekeeper at all—wasn't even a Fate Weaver—but a Clown who'd tricked her from start to finish!

Even the lifeline card he'd given her was a lie!

'I'm sorry... I'm a liar. All I can give you are lies.'

'But I also happen to be a Clown. And with lies, I can heal others.'

'So when you believe I'm using [Death]'s power to keep us both alive—then our lives truly are sustained by [Death]!'

'Honest Clown. Honest Clown Cheng Shi!'

Cheng Shi was indeed a Clown, but he was an honest one.

'I said I could protect you. And so—you will not die in front of me.'

'Even if everything is a lie. A con from beginning to end.'

'At the very least, the promise is not.'

Chapter 314: If Faith Can Be Sophistry, Then [Decay] Might as Well Be [Prosperity]

Hong Lin knew none of this. All she knew was that something seemed to have gone wrong with Cheng Shi's brain.

Setting aside all the chaos, he was screaming about some "tribute." But where on earth was this tribute? Even the night sky was painted by [Decay]. Where in this forest was there the faintest hint of [Prosperity] to offer Him?

It wasn't just Hong Lin who was baffled. The scholars watching the Sighing Forest through their mechanical constructs were equally perplexed.

This faith experiment had been running for years, and nothing like this had ever happened.

The suitcase holding the "faith contract," left rotting in Eposka's garden bed for centuries, had never been picked up—until now.

For the scholars, whether or not someone found the box was irrelevant. The Sighing Forest was riddled with [Truth]'s eyes. They could detect the contract's location effortlessly and dispatch mechanical serpents to retrieve it.

But this time was different. The box was still there—the contract was gone.

Fortunately, the scholars had contingency plans. The instant the contract vanished, they began analyzing shifts in [Prosperity] throughout the forest, hoping to track down the petty thief.

But as it turned out, the one who'd stolen the contract wasn't a thief—it was a... lunatic!

An absolute lunatic!

This madman, still carrying the contract's aura, was letting serpents devour his body while smiling. Not only that, he seemed to enjoy this state of physical deterioration. The scholars grew so wary that they slowed the mechanical serpents' attack frequency, terrified the lunatic was cooking up some great conspiracy.

Cheng Shi was indeed cooking something up—but it wasn't a conspiracy. It was an Open Scheme.

He was deliberately driving his own body toward [Decay]. Hong Lin watched in bewilderment.

She couldn't understand why Cheng Shi would choose to be critically wounded at a time like this—much less grasp what "tribute" he kept babbling about.

'What tribute? Offered with what?'

'Surely he couldn't be offering [Decay] to [Prosperity].'

'That would be absurd...'

'Wait—no!'

'He wouldn't—?!'

Just as the thought formed, Cheng Shi turned to face her. This self-proclaimed darling of [Fate] looked at her with sheer madness in his eyes, blood spraying from his mouth as he laughed:

"Do you see it? You see it now.

This is the tribute I've prepared for Him. This is the final round of our gamble.

Baldy—think about it. Yes, there's not a shred of [Prosperity] tonight. But!

When everything the eye can see is [Decay]—doesn't that, in its own way, constitute a form of [Prosperity]!"

The words landed, and Hong Lin's mind erupted in white noise!

[Decay] everywhere... is a form of [Prosperity]?

'How blasphemous do you have to be to say something like that?'

'Isn't that just sophistry?'

Sure, the logic technically held. But if sophistry actually worked, the scholars of the Land of Hope who'd specialized in rhetoric would have unified the continent long ago. No—they might've even used it to topple the Gods themselves.

Because faith was faith. Authority was Authority. These were the foundations of the Gods, the very bottom line of Their existence—absolutely immovable by the glib tongue of mere wordplay!

If the Gods' foundations were that fragile, [Decay] would have become the biggest winner long ago.

After all, He excelled at this sort of thing.

But!

But the [Decay]-dulled Hong Lin had overlooked one critical detail: tonight was unlike any other night.

Because... tonight, all the faith had been stolen!

The countless [Decay] creatures of the Sighing Forest were simultaneously worshipping a false [Decay] envoy this very night—and behind that false facade was a child of [Prosperity].

The Mushroom-Footed People—[Prosperity]'s followers who'd been deceived for generations—had embraced [Decay]. But even after becoming [Decay], they still believed in [Prosperity]. Because the Divine Envoy had told them: embracing [Decay] was merely a trial. [Prosperity] would come to shelter them in the end.

And so, the most wondrous Change in faith was born.

Every [Decay] had been subverted. Every belief had shifted!

[Decay] was worshipping [Prosperity]. [Decay] was defending [Prosperity]. [Decay] was following [Prosperity]!

Every essence pointed toward [Prosperity].

Under these conditions, Cheng Shi's words were no longer sophistry—they were fact!

Because the [Decay] before their very eyes genuinely pointed toward [Prosperity]!

With the embers still burning and the wildfire lit, it took only the blink of an eye for the prairie fire to erupt.

Moments after Cheng Shi's words faded, in the Sighing Forest draped in dark moonlight, suddenly—

Dawn broke.

A warm, Vitality-brimming beam of light pierced through the dim night sky, pouring down from the forest canopy. It fell directly upon the Mushroom-Footed People's heads—and then countless verdant branches surged down along that column of light, instantly constructing a bridge of [Prosperity] between heaven and earth, swaying with lush new growth.

Then, in the sky illuminated by that emerald radiance, cracks began to spread. In the blink of an eye, the dark moon's sky shattered entirely like a spider web.

The spatial rifts widened. Countless vines and branches cascaded from beyond the sky, flooding in like inverted tides, extending in every direction.

The branches didn't just grow longer—they grew thicker, larger. By the time the two gamblers stared slack-jawed at a sky that had transformed entirely into a dense canopy, thousands of trailing tendrils poured down like a torrential green rain upon the mist-shrouded Sighing Forest.

At the same time, a second beam of light struck Hong Lin.

When this limitlessly vital green light healed the [Prosperity] Chosen One, it transformed—like the Sighing Sorrow Tide before it—into a tidal wave of [Prosperity], sweeping outward in all directions!

The moment this surging tide of Vitality washed over the collapsed Cheng Shi, it carried away every wound and trace of decay. Cheng Shi leapt to his feet in astonished delight, just about to open his mouth and praise [Prosperity]—but in the next heartbeat, his joy froze on his face.

Because he realized this healing light wasn't merely a gracious [Prosperity] blessing for the two of them—it was...

A retribution beyond imagination!

[Prosperity]'s tide surged in every direction like man-eating waves. Before Cheng Shi and Hong Lin's eyes, countless Twisted Night Pythons writhed and wailed in agony as the deluge swept over them.

But all their struggling was futile. How could insignificant creatures withstand His fury? The serpents that had been defending [Prosperity] mere moments ago were instantly consumed by this wild call of [Prosperity]. They shed their cold, rotting serpent husks, rooting themselves in place as they sprouted and budded, transforming into slim saplings within seconds, then squat trees, then—in another blink—towering, Vitality-rich giants.

Cheng Shi and Hong Lin watched the spectacle unfold, their pupils violently contracting!

This seemed like more than just a gaze...

In this moment, He had actually descended!

[Prosperity]'s Will smashed through the barriers of reality, descending directly into [Decay]'s Sighing Forest, transforming the entire fog-laden, decayed, treeless wasteland into a dense, lush, vibrantly green Underworld rainforest!

The Prosperity Divine Shade followed, and the canopy's shadow blanketed the entire land.

Watching every shade of grey and white recede as layers of emerald surged forth, Hong Lin—body restored to boundless Vitality—nearly dropped her jaw.

This gambler of [Fate] had actually offered [Decay] as tribute to [Prosperity]!

And the most astonishing part—He had actually accepted it!

Personally accepted it!

"You..."

Cheng Shi was stunned too. But the smile at the corners of his mouth hadn't stopped—not once, from start to finish.

"See? I told you. My gambling luck is excellent.

Looks like we've won.

Though... Baldy, could you hold off on the questions for now? I'm still... cough...

Let's deal with these metal lumps first.

The Priest has played his part. Now it's the Warrior's turn."

'His part?'

'What a death-defying performance this was!'

Hong Lin was still reeling from the utter shock, but hearing Cheng Shi's words brought her partway back to her senses.

She gave a heavy snort—'I'll settle the score with you later'—then fixed a razor-sharp gaze on the mechanical serpents that had nearly killed her.

These serpents were still staring at the sky. The scholars behind them remained trapped in the shock of [Prosperity]'s descent.

Just then, a furious roar erupted from the Sighing Forest—no, from the lush rainforest—and when the mechanical serpents lowered their heads, they found a bear standing before them.

A bear with fire blazing in both eyes!

'What...?'

'What is...?'

The scholars no longer had any idea what they were looking at. Every last one of their visual feeds went dark at the same moment—all their mechanical constructs crushed into scrap simultaneously.

In that instant, the scholars who'd been secretly observing for countless ages suddenly lost all control over their faith experiment.

No—perhaps they'd lost control long ago. The moment a certain gambler discovered that contract of faith theft, the Tower of Logic's experiment had likely already begun its march toward failure.

Meanwhile.

In the Tribe that had surrendered to [Decay], when that thread of light representing Vitality and [Prosperity] descended from the sky, every last Mushroom-Footed Person wept uncontrollably.

They cried out, "Praise our Benefactor! Praise His forgiveness! Praise Master Baldy!" as they raised both hands high to the heavens, wholly embracing their own, true [Prosperity] at last.

...

At the edge of the Sighing Forest. An Underground Observation Station.

A handful of young scholars stared at a wall of static-filled monitors, frantic as ants on a hot pan.

They immediately contacted the Grand Scholars in Gasmira, but the Grand Scholars had no ready countermeasure for a crisis this deep underground. Their only option was to reach out to the Erudition Presidium—the all-seeing eye of the world.

When the Presidium members appeared via projection in the Underground Observation Station, one white-haired elder paused briefly before presenting his Ritual of Truth.

The moment this model of the universe—orbited by countless rising and falling stars—materialized, the air filled with the complex, arcane, impenetrable hymn of [Truth].

A moment later, a voice sounded—hollow, as though revealing the very laws of the cosmos. Its first decree was:

"Find the Barren Walker. It must not die."

Chapter 315: The Weeping Final Tomb, the Universe's Sorrow

Don't forget—there were more than just two players in this [Prosperity] trial.

Rewinding slightly, before [Prosperity] had descended, several figures deep in the Sighing Forest were staggering through dense fog and countless prowling Twisted Night Pythons, step by labored step, out of this treeless forest.

But with all the trees gone, how could they tell they'd left?

Because underfoot was no longer the carpet of shed snake-skin leaves, but blood-soaked, crimson mud that squelched red with every footstep!

The landscape before them had transformed into a boundless scarlet desolation—the Barren Soil. And at the center of this uncovered wasteland sat a jarring, wave-churning Blood Lake!

Zuo Qiu and An Jing stared at the undulating scarlet waters, the shock and dread in their hearts refusing to settle.

Who could have imagined that at the heart of the Sighing Forest lay a lake churning with putrid blood?

Who could have fathomed that the so-called Septic Final Tomb wasn't a stone monument standing on the ground, but an inverted pyramid suspended in the sky—a mausoleum that [Decay]'s pilgrims were meant to gaze up at!

The tomb hung overhead like a floating colossus, with uncountable facets, each one etched by corrosive black blood into illegible [Decay] script.

Whenever the rotting black blood completed its circuit across every facet and through every inscription, it converged at the pyramid's point, condensing into a single viscous droplet—wailing, shrieking—that fell into the Blood Lake below.

And when the accumulated blood finally filled and overflowed the lake...

The Sighing Sorrow Tide would erupt.

Septic blood surged like a reversed tide into the Barren Soil, propelling dense [Decay] outward. The rising fog of evaporating blood grew ever thicker, its crimson hue fading as it spread until, upon reaching the forest proper, it became the Sighing Sorrow Tide that players knew.

Zuo Qiu and An Jing had arrived just as a fresh surge was winding down—yet even its tail end nearly shattered their defenses and aged them to death on the spot.

The Historian clutched a page he'd acquired from some unknown source—a Learned Poet's page—face pale, body taut. But despite the crushing pressure of death, his eyes still blazed with hunger for historical truth.

He kept searching for weak points in the crimson tide, trying to push through the fog toward the Blood Lake's depths, but attempt after attempt failed.

While the Sighing Sorrow Tide raged, probably no one could get through.

"Puppet Master, help me—I can't hold on! This is my last Page of the Great Wall of Holy Light. I've burned through every reserve I had. It's your turn!"

An Jing lived up to her name—completely silent. The cool-beauty Puppet Master didn't lift a finger. Instead, she frowned and looked off to the side.

Zuo Qiu grew anxious. He called out again, but An Jing simply made a hushing gesture.

The Historian's breath caught. Following the Puppet Master's gaze, he discovered that in another direction beyond the Blood Lake, a person—a living person—had just spread his arms wide and plunged buck naked into those horrifying waters.

The man's body was so covered in scars and rotting flesh that they recognized him instantly!

Zhen!

The one who'd split from the player team at the very start and gone alone into the forest's depths!

This follower of [Decay], at this [Decay] Pilgrimage Site, had committed himself to His embrace in a way neither of them could comprehend.

Zuo Qiu's pupils shrank violently. He shouted in disbelief:

"He's lost his mind! He's insane!

He actually dared enter the Blood Lake?

Does he have a death wish?

The [Decay] legend is false!

How could anyone bathe in putrid blood and come back alive?

Not even Lin Xi could do it!"

"What legend?"

Curiosity flickered in An Jing's eyes. She turned back and seamlessly took over the defenses.

Countless puppet strings suddenly burst from the Ranger puppet's nostrils and mouth, then lashed the air around the pair, weaving into a translucent silken "cocoon."

The raging [Decay] tide flowed around the seemingly fragile cocoon walls as if the space within contained nothing but empty air—no living beings at all.

Zuo Qiu watched this marvel, eyes gleaming.

"[Silence] truly excels at concealment. Brilliant."

"A parlor trick, nothing more. Far less fascinating than the history you speak of. Go on—I'm curious about this legend."

"It's just a rumor."

After the [Decay] Chosen One, Lin Xi, walked out of the Septic Final Tomb alive and ascended to the top, a story began circulating in the [Decay] channels: anyone who could bathe their entire body in the putrid blood of the Final Tomb would receive His direct blessing.

But it was all false."

"Interesting. Your shock at seeing this place seemed genuine—this must be your first time here. Yet you know so much about the Septic Final Tomb?

This Blood Lake clearly comes from the blood droplets falling from the tomb above us. And that floating tomb is very likely the vessel of His descent. So—what exactly is false?"

"It is my first time. But I do possess certain memories regarding the Septic Final Tomb. I know that no one has ever walked out of that Blood Lake alive.

Even if he's a [Decay] follower, against the accumulated sediment of tens of millions of years of [Decay], he's nothing more than a sheet of white paper with a faint red stain!

He actually thinks he can dye himself by jumping into this viscous [Decay] blood? Hah—a fool's dream.

Paper this thin won't take any color in that lake. The moment white paper hits the water, it'll be dissolved and shredded by the thick plasma, reduced to [Decay]'s ash and piled alongside the rest—becoming part of this Barren Soil!

How else do you think this vast wasteland came to be?

Over tens of millions of years, countless [Decay] pilgrims who sought His blessing leapt into this lake, only to be ground to nothing by its thick waters—washed and compressed into the bleeding mud beneath our feet.

What we're standing on isn't dirt. It's the blood and flesh of tens of thousands of [Decay] followers!"

'Not dirt... but blood and flesh?'

The Puppet Master was shaken. She directed the Ranger puppet to lift its foot and grind the soil beneath, watching black blood seep up and cover her foot. A tremor ran through her heart, her gaze settling into something solemn.

'So this is faith.'

The obsession of pursuing faith was so fervent that countless nameless pilgrims, dying one after another, decorated the flowing history of [Decay].

No wonder this Historian was willing to risk his life just to see this with his own eyes, even though he'd already had the memories. Because everything before them now was living history—history forged from blood, flesh, and faith.

Witnessing it firsthand was incomparably more staggering and real than revisiting memories.

Silence fell again. The fog gradually thinned, the thick blood in the lake beginning its next cycle of accumulation. Only then did the Puppet Master break the quiet. She raised an eyebrow and regarded Zuo Qiu with keen interest:

"Your memories—they couldn't have been shared by Lin Xi, could they?"

Zuo Qiu sighed and shook his head:

"I'm just a 2,300-point Historian. Beyond knowing the name, I have zero connection to that Chosen One. My memories...

Are from the People in the Coffin."

An Jing blinked, then it hit her—a sudden realization.

"So the History School was the one who consumed the People in the Coffin?"

That means Lin Xi took the fall for you, and in a huge way!

Nearly everyone believes he received [Decay]'s blessing and then killed the guides who showed him the path."

"No. The People in the Coffin's 'disappearance' was indeed connected to us.

But their deaths... had nothing to do with us."

'Huh?'

An Jing found the statement contradictory—but the Historian immediately resolved her confusion.

"The History School has always sought to complete the Underworld's historical record, but that work is inseparable from researching the Sighing Forest. [Decay]'s history has always been scarce. Supposedly only the [Decay] script carved on the Septic Final Tomb records some fragments of [Decay]'s past. So everyone desperately wanted to find a path there.

Long before the People in the Coffin even existed, we'd identified several possible routes through old records. But given how perilous the deep Sighing Sorrow Tide was, we abandoned the effort after many failed attempts.

Until all history was understood, we didn't want to become history ourselves.

But we never imagined anyone could surpass the History School in their obsession with uncovering the past. And that obsessive group was the People in the Coffin.

This organization of barely a hundred [Decay] followers sought to etch their names into the annals of history—and to do so, they intended to pave a road to the Septic Final Tomb with their own lives!

They used a so-called 'overlapping zones' method to progressively narrow the search area, marking each stage with the death of a different member, inching their way toward the Final Tomb.

Realistically, even if all six players in a trial were People in the Coffin, the ground they could cover in the vast Sighing Forest was a drop in the ocean. It was a virtually impossible quest.

But [Fate] favors madmen. Even the People in the Coffin themselves never expected that, at the brink of total wipeout, one lucky survivor among them actually located the Septic Final Tomb!

Not only that—he witnessed a ritual there: a [Decay] pilgrim sacrificing himself as an offering.

The suicidal pilgrimage terrified him. Without a second thought, he fled. He ran until he reached a zone free of the Sighing Sorrow Tide, then hid, planning to wait out the trial and spread the explosive intel afterward.

And that's when the most ironic twist occurred.

A [Corruption] player who'd embraced the desire of greed somehow discovered his hiding spot. And merely for the sake of an exquisitely carved Magic Lamp in his hands, killed the one and only Person in the Coffin who knew the route to the Septic Final Tomb.

The History School never even met the People in the Coffin. They'd nearly all died in the trials spent searching for the route.

But the History School was also fortunate. In one particular trial, a [Memory] believer among us killed in self-defense a [Corruption] teammate who'd tried to rob him—and from that player's memories, extracted everything related to the People in the Coffin!

But since the People in the Coffin only existed as a memory within a memory, we couldn't reconstruct all the details. Even at our best, we only recovered the portion about the Blood Lake.

So we impersonated the People in the Coffin and planted clues, hoping to use the deaths of fanatical worshippers to fill in the missing route. After that... Lin Xi successfully made it here."

An Jing was so stunned by the absurdity of this historical truth that she was momentarily at a loss. She looked at the Historian, opened her mouth, but no words came out.

"That's just how history works, isn't it?"

The past is passed from person to person. We remember their stories. In the future, someone else will remember ours.

All I do is verify whether those stories are true—and fill in the details to make them more vivid."

Chapter 316: Upheaval at the Septic Final Tomb

Though Zuo Qiu spoke these words with casual ease, An Jing kept sensing a madness beneath his calm tone—one no less intense than the People in the Coffin's.

This Historian's devotion to history mirrored the Rot Chanter's fanatical pilgrimage to [Decay]. Terrifyingly fervent.

But what was he chasing?

With the survival pressure lifted, Zuo Qiu finally let his excitement show. He grew talkative, eager to share. Reading the confusion on the Puppet Master's face, he laughed openly:

"Don't you find history fascinating? Of course, the history of the Land of Hope that came after the descent of the Gods is even more compelling!"

There are stories here utterly unlike anything in reality—countless extraordinary, bizarre, spectacular tales. And the closer you get to the Underworld, the stronger that pull of the unknown, because so few know the history down here. When you uncover a story that only you know, that sense of achievement, that satisfaction—it's more beautiful than anything else in the world."

An Jing was silent for a moment, then nodded thoughtfully.

"You're using these fresh memories as an offering to Him?"

"Fresh?"

No, no, no—you've got it wrong, Puppet Master. These stories may be fresh to us, but for my Benefactor [Memory], who has already witnessed every history across the Land of Hope, they're probably nothing worth noting.

I'm not a devout [Memory] believer. I merely use [Memory]. His blessings give me the ability to explore the unknown, and in return I conveniently transcribe the old stories I've memorized for Him. That's all.

I do this mostly to please myself. Life needs a little excitement, doesn't it?

Just like you—even as a [Silence] follower, you came all the way here for one chance to catch a glimpse of Them.

Puppet Master, the [Decay] Pilgrimage Site now lies at our feet. The Septic Final Tomb, the vessel of His Will, floats right above our heads. Look up at that inverted pyramid in the sky. How does it make you feel?"

'Feelings?'

'I may not have any feelings about the Septic Final Tomb. But about you... this lying Historian... I do have a few thoughts.'

Yes—Zuo Qiu had lied.

The Master of Deception Card in An Jing's hand told her that the portion where the Historian described his own faith had been entirely fabricated.

There were many lies in what he'd said, but she'd already guessed where the deception lay!

He'd claimed he wasn't a devout [Memory] believer. But that was false—he was deeply devout. Even just now, in this conversation by the Blood Lake's edge, he'd been practicing his devotion to [Memory].

But this devotion wasn't a simple offering of memories. It was...

Making memories live on!

Just as the Historian himself had said: personal memories might be lonely and secret, but history wasn't—because it was always passed from person to person.

Right now, her silent self had become yet another chronicler of the Historian Zuo Qiu's story.

She'd witnessed him arrive here, witnessed him share his tales, witnessed his devotion to [Memory].

This Historian wasn't sharing his knowledge at all. He was passing the torch of [Memory]. He could have kept these secrets hidden, but he'd chosen to speak them—not for her awe or admiration, but to make her remember [Memory] for him.

So this was his path?

This 2,300-point Historian was anything but simple.

An Jing frowned in lengthy silence, contemplating how she should walk her own road ahead. But mid-thought, her eyes flew wide in utter disbelief:

"The Septic Final Tomb is... sprouting?!"

"Huh?" Zuo Qiu blinked, then laughed. "So it's not just me hallucinating from excitement. You too—"

But he stopped mid-sentence. Because the flash of emerald that had suddenly appeared in their blood-streaked, black-and-white world seemed to be...

Not a hallucination!

He froze, then his face contorted with extreme exaggeration, his voice climbing several pitches to an ear-piercing shriek:

"How is this possible?!"

How? Nothing was impossible.

Just as the two were still trying to figure out how to approach the churning Blood Lake, the unthinkable happened.

Of course, "unthinkable" wasn't quite right—everything before them was Cheng Shi's handiwork. He'd stolen [Decay]'s faith and offered it to [Prosperity], calling [Prosperity] down into the Underworld. And now, boundless Vitality and [Prosperity] swept forth like a crushing wave, surging straight toward the [Decay] Pilgrimage Site—the Septic Final Tomb!

The two stood rooted in shock, and in that single moment of stunned paralysis, they watched the massive serpents in the distance, fleeing and writhing, transform back into trees—but no longer rotting deadwood. These were towering giants of [Prosperity].

The fog rolled back in retreat. The blood-red wasteland beneath their feet gradually shed its scarlet hue.

Every drop of putrid blood on the vast ruin retracted into the Blood Lake, then rose as countless viscous droplets—a curtain of rain flying upward, returning to the Septic Final Tomb.

In every carved groove of the inverted pyramid, tiny green shoots had sprouted. When the ascending blood droplets washed over these newborn buds, the fresh life instantly withered into [Decay]'s residue, scattering from the sky like ashen snow.

For a breathless stretch, [Decay] and [Prosperity] warred endlessly atop the floating tomb while below, a rain of stillborn life fell.

And when the Septic Final Tomb drained the entire Blood Lake dry in its struggle against [Prosperity]'s invasion, the lake-bottom scenery—never before seen by mortal eyes—was finally revealed to the Historian and the Puppet Master.

With the fog gone and visibility crystal-clear, Zuo Qiu and An Jing quickly made out what lay buried at the bottom of that viscous crimson lake.

One glance was enough to root them to the spot, scalps prickling.

People!

No—more accurately, people on the threshold of death who hadn't yet fully died!

Countless decaying bodies sat like blood-encased chrysalises at the lake's floor, stretching endlessly in every direction—dense, packed, beyond counting.

"They... they're..."

Staring at the nightmarish vista, An Jing felt an electric current of pure soul-shock rip through her body. She finally understood who Xin Xin had warned her to watch out for.

Throughout their journey, they hadn't encountered a single [Decay] pilgrim. They'd had no idea who was actually worshipping at this Pilgrimage Site. But now she understood—perhaps even Zhen Xin hadn't known that [Decay]'s pilgrims had long since merged with the Blood Lake, becoming part of the Septic Final Tomb itself.

So the Historian had been wrong too. These pilgrims who'd sought [Decay]'s favor hadn't crumbled into ash. They'd sunk to the lake's bottom, becoming one among the densely packed chorus of blood-soaked voices!

And the reason they were called a chorus was this: the instant the Blood Lake ran dry, countless wails, howls, shrieks, and lamentations erupted from its bed. Tens of thousands of pilgrim voices resonated in unison, forging a dirge of [Decay].

The song was so achingly moving, so pitiable, that Zuo Qiu and An Jing found themselves wanting nothing more than to join in—to contribute their own strength, helping the Septic Final Tomb above resist [Prosperity]'s invasion!

But the urge lasted no more than a second before it shattered.

Because An Jing reacted with blinding speed, silencing their surroundings and instantly yanking both of them from the trance.

By the time the sound vanished, Zuo Qiu jolted awake, clutching his knees and gasping for air: "Thank the fates you're here... Puppet Master, if not for you, I might've Oathbroken and joined them today..."

An Jing didn't acknowledge Zuo Qiu. Her gaze had drifted to the spot where Zhen had entered the Blood Lake. There, a "living person" whose body was still not entirely coated in blood was clawing his way out of the drained basin.

This supposedly most devout Rot Chanter was desperate—wishing he'd been born with two extra pairs of limbs—anything to escape this place that had nearly claimed his life and soul. He roared. He cursed. He thrashed with every limb, scrabbling upward. Yet he couldn't free himself from the great [Decay] chorus's pull.

But just then, among the shower of [Prosperity] ash raining from the sky, a single thread of green that hadn't fully decayed fell before his eyes.

The Rot Chanter made some unknowable decision. He lunged and seized that last scrap of green. In that instant, every trace of blood drained from his body, his flesh healed, and he ran laughing wildly out of the lake bed.

The two watched in silence for a long moment.

"Heh—a [Decay] follower who Oathbreaks at [Decay]'s own Pilgrimage Site. Look at that—now this is the kind of spectacular history I live for!"

With that, Zuo Qiu pulled out his History Book.

An Jing was Noncommittal. She turned to peer into the depths of the rainforest, brows slightly furrowed, apparently wondering what terrifying force had caused all of this—and whether Xin Xin had found the person, and the answer, she'd been waiting for.

Chapter 317: It's Him!

Whether Zhen Xin found what she'd been waiting for was still up in the air. But Cheng Shi definitely had.

What he'd found was an unexpected fright!

He'd assumed that after joining Cheng Dashi's scheme, he could sit back and watch from the sidelines—observing what kind of gambit his future self had set up in the present. But shortly after [Prosperity]'s descent, his vision went black and he lost consciousness entirely.

When he opened his eyes again, he was no longer in the Underworld's newborn rainforest. He stood atop an endless Canopy Sea, and in the brilliant light of dawn, he beheld a colossal tree that pierced the starry sky.

The tree was impossibly lush and unfathomably thick. Its wildly spreading branches filled nearly his entire field of vision, and its height was enough to make one's neck snap just trying to look up at it.

But none of this was the most staggering part. What made Cheng Shi's pupils constrict as he froze in place was the realization that this colossus was no ordinary plant. The pulsating outer layer on its trunk and branches looked less like bark and more like an animal's skin—and upon closer inspection, the gently contracting surface was unmistakably raw flesh covered by a thin membrane of sinew!

This giant tree was a hybridization of flesh and wood!

Cheng Shi's breath seized. He had a guess about who stood before him, but the conjecture was so absurd it set his brain rattling.

'How can it be Him?'

'It probably should be Him. But the trial isn't even over—how did things jump straight to an Audience with God?!'

'What's going on? Was this what Cheng Dashi had been scheming for?'

'Did he want me to have an audience with [Prosperity]? Or was he planning to meet [Prosperity] himself?'

Anxiously, Cheng Shi swallowed and glanced down at his own shadow.

But he found none—not because the shadow had Changed again, but because this Canopy Sea was bathed in dawn-light from every direction. Under the glare of countless blazing suns, there were no shadows at all.

Cheng Shi's heart dropped. He suddenly realized that what he was facing wasn't the tree-god said to appear within the Prosperity Divine Shade, but rather...

His true form, manifested above the Prosperity Divine Shade?!

He looked at the canopy beneath his feet and the realization hit—of course. Below was the so-called Prosperity Divine Shade, the Pilgrimage Site every [Prosperity] follower dreamed of. And above it...

There was only one being—a monstrosity fused of flesh and wood. A... true God!

'Phew—'

He'd slammed the brakes just in time. Otherwise he'd have been slapped with another blasphemy charge.

Just as Cheng Shi's mind churned in turmoil—not knowing what to think or how to speak—the colossal tree radiating terrifying Vitality spoke first.

This was the first time during an Audience that Cheng Shi hadn't managed to voice his praise. But remarkably, [Prosperity] didn't seem to mind his "disrespect." His voice was like a warm breeze, carrying infinite [Prosperity] across Cheng Shi's face, clearing his mind and calming his spirit.

"Lift your head. Let Us see you."

His voice was androgynous—crisp, pleasant, and powerfully charismatic. It made listeners' blood surge and spirits ignite, entirely unlike the maternal, kindly female voice Cheng Shi had imagined for the "Prosperity Mother."

Nervously, Cheng Shi raised his head and looked at the towering tree once more. But the moment his gaze swept past the massive trunk, terror constricted his pupils, stiffened his spine, and locked his fists. He didn't dare look any higher.

Because he saw, clear as day, that the trunk—which moments ago had been a fusion of flesh and wood—had opened mouth after gaping, tree-hollow mouth. From each rough-barked maw protruded a vivid red tongue, varying in length and size.

The horrific sight paralyzed Cheng Shi's brain. He immediately recalled the [Birth Divine Pillar] he'd once been fortunate enough to glimpse—but compared to the motionless, fossilized mouths on that Pillar, the many great mouths before him now were far more... lively.

"..."

'So this... is [Prosperity]?'

'This is the second God of the [Life] Path?'

'Seriously—why do all of you in the [Life] Path look like this?!'

'Does that mean the one sitting on the Bone Throne actually has the most normal appearance?'

'Ha—a skull being the most handsome of the three. What kind of hellish joke is that!'

'But since He has mouths, does that mean...'

Cheng Shi swallowed again, forced down his terror, and looked higher. Then he saw what hadn't been there before—but whose appearance was entirely expected: noses, ears, and eyes.

Except the breathing noses were attached to the junctions between branches like new buds. The twitching ears hung from every fork like leaves, rustling softly. And the eyes—like clusters of ripe fruit dangling from every bough, blinking in random disorder—turned in unison to stare at him the moment he raised his head.

Cheng Shi decided he'd been wrong. What he was having an Audience with wasn't [Prosperity]. It should have been... [Chaos].

'Too chaotic. So chaotic that my rational mind just went on strike.'

'Ababababa...'

"..."

Seeing Cheng Shi stunned into a stupor, the great tree spoke again:

"You are clever. No wonder [Deceit] has listed you as a prized possession."

Hearing this, Cheng Shi finally snapped back to himself. He hastily bowed his head and offered the most "devout" "praise" he could muster:

"Praise [Prosperity]. May life's breath endure eternally. May decay never touch the universe again."

"You seem to be afraid. Is it because Our appearance has stirred fear in you?"

How curious. We deliberately altered Our form to approach humanity. Our current appearance most closely resembles humans. You who do not fear even [Death] should have no reason to dread Us."

"..."

'Most closely resembles humans...'

'Excuse me?'

'I'd like to ask—on what basis did You arrive at that conclusion?'

'The countless leaf-ears? Or the grape-cluster eyeballs?'

'With all due respect, even [Birth]'s Divine Pillar looks more human than You do.'

"..."

But these were words Cheng Shi absolutely could not say. He could only keep his head bowed, suppress the discomfort, and offer platitudes:

"I am not afraid. I am merely overwhelmed by [Prosperity]'s magnificence—so awed that I'm at a loss."

"You are lying. Your Vitality has become erratic—fluctuating strong and weak, just like that lie-loving Benefactor of yours.

No matter. We do not worship hierarchy the way They do. You need not be so constrained before Us.

We summoned you because We found your deeds to be quite aligned with Our Will. Such a devoted servant walking the path of [Void]—what a waste.

So, human—are you willing to step beyond [Void], cease [Deceit], rewrite [Fate], embrace [Prosperity], and then... become one with Us?"

Countless tree-hollow mouths spoke those astonishing words, and Cheng Shi's brain detonated with a thunderous ring.

He understood now: [Prosperity]'s recruitment was nothing like [Memory]'s or [Chaos]'s. He wasn't simply looking for a follower to carry out [Prosperity]'s Will. It was more like He was extending an invitation to... merge.

He seemed to want Cheng Shi to embrace the great work of [Prosperity], to fuse completely into this supreme [Prosperity], to become part of this colossal tree that pierced through the sky and the universe—to share the glory of [Prosperity] together.

A Deity was inviting him to share His Authority?!

Was that possible?

Was this real?

Could humans and gods even share Authority?

Could this be an illusion planted by Zhen Yi?

Cheng Shi was dumbstruck. His heart clenched as he instinctively swept his surroundings—but sensing the boundless, endless Vitality engulfing him, he knew for certain: what stood before him was no hallucination. It was the genuine [Prosperity]!

He was inviting him to become one!

Chapter 318: The Situation Exceeds Comprehension—and Spirals Out of Control

There's no such thing as a free lunch. Old Jia had taught Cheng Shi that.

So when such a "magnificent offer" landed in his lap, Cheng Shi had already instinctively shifted into fraud-detection mode, analyzing what exactly the [Prosperity] before him was trying to con.

His tone wasn't disingenuous—one could even call it completely sincere. But Cheng Shi knew that the more sincere something sounded, the more likely it was a scam.

After all, the scene of Big Cat being talked into a coma by his own silver tongue was still fresh in his memory. He himself was the world's foremost expert at using sincerity to deceive!

So Cheng Shi began to deliberate. To dissect. Every impression of [Prosperity] he'd ever gathered surfaced in his mind as he connected the dots, trying to decipher His true meaning.

And the first thing that came to mind was Hong Lin's attitude toward [Prosperity].

She'd never truly believed in [Prosperity]—had even been quietly on guard against Him. Because she'd said so herself: everything she thought and did ran counter to [Prosperity]'s Will of universal flourishing. Her prosperity was selfish—plundered from others. [Prosperity]'s Will, by contrast, was selfless flourishing.

Yet despite this, [Prosperity] still awarded her points in every trial.

That was the strangest part to Cheng Shi. He had an inkling that when the Gods scored their followers in trials, it was never arbitrary. The points had to be an acknowledgment that their followers were either spreading Their faith or enacting Their Will.

Well—for the sake of rigor, let's exclude [Chaos] from that claim.

But if Hong Lin so brazenly defied [Prosperity]'s Will yet still earned His favor, then somewhere, the logic had to break down.

[Prosperity] wasn't [Chaos]. He shouldn't be scoring randomly. So the problem couldn't lie with Him. That left only one possibility:

The players' logic was wrong.

But Cheng Shi also knew that plenty of players who perfectly enacted His Will were being rewarded too. So perhaps the players' interpretation of [Prosperity]'s Will wasn't wrong per se—but what if everyone had misunderstood it?

What if the universal flourishing He championed was only part of His Will? And the other part was... self-flourishing?

Or, phrased more terrifyingly: what if universal flourishing was merely the surface, and self-flourishing was His true Will!

After all, when He was sufficiently [Prosperous]—prosperous enough to absorb [Decay] and everything else, just as He had today—wouldn't His Will be perfectly realized?

'Universal flourishing!' When the entire universe was [Prosperity]—or when only [Prosperity] remained—everything in existence would be His Will, wouldn't it?

The moment this thought crystallized, cold sweat soaked through Cheng Shi's back in an instant.

'Oh no. This isn't an invitation to share Authority. He's treating me as fertilizer!'

'He wants to eat me!'

'Mom, help!'

Cheng Shi had been silent too long. So long that the gentle breeze around him was beginning to die. Feeling the increasingly oppressive pressure, his heart was in full panic.

'No good—sitting here and waiting for death won't end well. The only thing I'll become is a tasty fruit. I need to take action!'

'Cheng Shi, save yourself!'

His mind raced. He realized he probably couldn't deceive a Deity who could read shifts in Vitality. So he "pragmatically" gripped the die in his hand and decided to call for backup before refusing.

He hung his head as if flustered, and secretly mouthed the words:

"Lie Like Yesterday, mock today!

Help! Lord Benefactor, save me!"

But what he could never have anticipated was that the instant his words fell, a pair of eyes—swirling with spirals and dotted with stars—snapped open in the sky above the Canopy Sea!

The colossal tree's branches shuddered violently. Countless portions of flesh receded and vanished, returning the colossus to pure wood. Then the tree itself began to fade. The overwhelming Vitality pervading the space erupted, transforming into cloud after cloud of emerald fog that rose and coalesced into a pair of bright green eyes—and turned their gaze upon the cold, watching eyes in the sky above.

"[Fate]. Why have you come?"

'Huh?'

Cheng Shi went slack. He'd never imagined the one who'd come to his rescue would be his other Benefactor—[Fate]!

'Wait—didn't I chant "Lie Like Yesterday"? How—'

Cheng Shi froze, then looked at the die in his hand.

'The Die of Fate.'

He remembered now. His prayers were never received by [Deceit] first—they were always relayed through [Fate].

So when He heard the distress call, He'd come directly?

Even though Cheng Shi was currently a Clown—a Clown who hadn't even switched back to the [Fate] path—He'd still come?

'Huh?'

Recalling the "Lie Like Yesterday" he'd blurted out, Cheng Shi wanted to slap himself across the face.

'I take back every prejudice I ever had about Fate. I am such a goddamn fool!'

And it was at that moment that the eyes adorned with spirals and stars first glanced at the unharmed Cheng Shi, then turned toward [Prosperity] with neither joy nor sorrow—and spoke in a tone of absolute coldness:

"[Prosperity]. You have not abandoned your delusion. Assimilating [Decay] through Faith Grafting violates the Convention and defies [Fate].

I have seen the destiny about to be rewritten. I have come to correct it."

"Oh? Is that so?" The emerald fog of Vitality grew denser, nearly filling the entire space, wrapping [Fate] tightly within. "If every fluctuation in destiny bears the brand of 'rewriting,' then the Authority of [Change] you wield—does it not become meaningless?"

At these words, the spirals stopped spinning. The stars blazed wildly.

"You think I am jesting with you?"

"[Fate] has always been the one most fond of jesting. Is that not so?"

"Obsessed and unrepentant."

[Prosperity] laughed—elegant and exaggerated.

"Obsessed and unrepentant?"

No, no, no. Obsessed We certainly are. But the unrepentant ones are all of you!

Your human follower spoke one line that was quite apt. Allow Us to adjust it and offer it back to you as counsel.

If all life in the universe blames its Misfortune on [Fate], then is [Fate] not also a form of Misfortune's [Prosperity]?

So, [Fate]... set aside your prejudice. Become one with Us."

'Huh?'

BOOM—

Before the dumbstruck Cheng Shi could process what he'd just heard, an explosion ripped through the Void and sent him hurtling off the Canopy, consciousness extinguished.

When he opened his eyes again, he found himself slumped against Hong Lin's leg. She was drenched in sweat, her back rigid with tension.

Seeing the combative Chosen One this wound up, his heart lurched—fearing something terrible had happened. But scanning his surroundings, he found nothing obviously amiss, so he tried to sit up.

The moment he raised his head, Hong Lin's hand pushed him back down. Then he watched her shake her head stiffly, a glance flicking toward the sky.

Cheng Shi followed Hong Lin's gaze upward in alarm—and saw pair after pair of the Eyes of the Gods opening across the infinite canopy above!

These eyes, each bearing a different Will and aura, swept the [Prosperity]-transformed Sighing Forest with absolute, crushing authority, before lifting their collective gaze to peer above the canopy.

Seeing this, Cheng Shi felt thunder rip through his skull in an unending roar. His face drained of color. He went rigid on the spot.

They... seemed to have descended. All of Them. Together.

"Shit..."

Chapter 319: Again?

"So this is how you Destined Ones Pierce the Sky and face the Gods head-on?!"

Watching more and more divine-aura eyes open across the canopy, Hong Lin asked the question with Trembling Fear.

She was afraid. Genuinely afraid. Probably no player could remain unafraid in a scene like this.

She'd assumed Cheng Shi's claim about the Destined Ones had been an outrageous boast. But she'd never dreamed... he'd actually been telling the truth?!

The Destined Ones actually dared to pull something like this?

Was [Fate] really this powerful—able to protect the Destined Ones even with this many of Them showing up?!

Hong Lin's eyes shifted from terror to blazing fervor. Never in her life had she revered [Fate] as much as she did right now!

The excitement in her heart even drove away some of her panic. Her burning gaze locked onto Cheng Shi—no, onto Cheng Shi's hand. She was searching for that die!

The Die of Fate!

She wished she could snatch it this very second and join the Destined Ones!

This was too cool. Too fierce. Too exhilarating!

Meanwhile, the Cheng Shi beside her...

'Don't @ me. System crashed.'

Cheng Shi was hunched behind Hong Lin, shivering, not daring to make a sound.

'Huh? Are you talking to me?'

'No idea, man. First time I've seen this too.'

'They're... probably not here for me, right?'

His mind was in shambles—even more so than the day the Faith Game had descended.

Everything before him had far exceeded his predictions. But was this still within Cheng Dashi's predictions?

Cheng Dashi had pushed him to "complete" this trial, to attract [Prosperity]'s gaze and even drag [Prosperity] into the game. But what had that been for?

[Fate] had just mentioned Assimilation. [Prosperity] had spoken of symbiosis. So [Prosperity] was indeed exactly as he'd guessed—a Being whose so-called universal flourishing meant something entirely different from what everyone assumed.

He was clearly the most selfish, the most predatory of Them all!

His Benefactor [Fate] obviously wasn't buying any of it, which was why They were clashing above the canopy right now.

'But this wasn't how my script was supposed to go...'

Earlier, when he'd been hoodwinking Hong Lin, he'd painted [Prosperity] and [Fate] as allies on the same side. But now both gods were fighting overhead. How was he supposed to explain this to her?

'Do I tell her that the whole second-faith-being-[Fate] thing is dead in the water?'

'Huh?'

'Big Cat won't beat me up... will she?'

But even if [Fate] had engaged [Prosperity] to protect him, what were all these other eyes in the sky doing?

Watching the show?

No way. The Gods didn't need to come in person to spectate. And They certainly didn't need to descend and reveal Their divine eyes. So anyone who'd bothered to show up definitely had something in mind...

But what exactly were They thinking?

As the thought churned, Cheng Shi's pupils suddenly contracted. He'd realized something: could They be here to fish in troubled waters?

Whether through theft, exchange, or fusion, all Gods coveted each other's Authority. And since an opportunity had presented itself here, had every last one of Them come sniffing for it?

So who was Their target?!

That question wasn't hard to answer.

Cheng Shi swallowed and looked toward the depths of the rainforest.

Obviously, the weakest one here was... [Decay].

[Decay], whose faith had been stolen and offered to [Prosperity]—who'd then been beaten back to His very doorstep!

'Wait...'

'Don't tell me this was Cheng Dashi's goal all along?'

'Use [Prosperity]'s descent to weaken [Decay], then lure the Gods here to gang up on Him?'

'His target was [Decay]? I guessed wrong?'

'No... that still doesn't seem right.'

Cheng Shi's brow furrowed deeply. Hong Lin, who'd been lost in the spectacle of the divine descent, noticed his complex expression and quietly asked:

"You just went to—"

Before she could finish, Cheng Shi vanished with a whoosh.

"..."

Left alone once again, Hong Lin stared at the star-like eyes flickering across the sky and seemed to guess something.

Her expression turned grave, but she didn't speak. She simply kept her eyes fixed on the canopy above.

And thought:

'Which one of Them... has summoned him?'

...

The Void.

No—it didn't seem to be the Void.

Though it was dark like the Void, the Void had never felt this sorrowful.

Yes—sorrow!

The instant Cheng Shi opened his eyes, he was engulfed by infinite sorrow permeating the air, stirring an involuntary compassion inside him.

He didn't know who this compassion was for. He simply felt he should offer sympathy—even the tiniest, most insignificant shred—to this dense, overwhelming grief.

His senses felt submerged in water—muffled, indistinct—everything dulled and sluggish. The sensation felt hauntingly familiar, but no matter how long he searched his memory, he couldn't place it. Even his thoughts seemed to slow, becoming as lethargic as an old man in his twilight.

'Wait... twilight... old man...'

Cheng Shi jolted, suddenly remembering something.

And at that moment, the endless darkness lit up.

A blinding crimson flared first, then thick black blood gradually peeled away and drained from his vision, letting his sight slowly clear.

When he could finally make out his surroundings, he found himself standing inside a palace built of jet-black stone. No—"palace" wasn't quite accurate. The interior was far too spartan: austere and bare, more like a... tomb. A tomb with simple lines and not a single furnishing.

Only the sheer enormity of the space had given him the illusion of a palace.

And at the very center of this mausoleum, a decrepit, ancient giant lay half-collapsed on the ground beside a blood-red Divine Throne, perfectly still.

The giant's body was ravaged with festering sores. His left hand—nothing but exposed bone—rested feebly against the Throne forged from congealed black blood. His right hand's single long fingernail, sharp as a blade, scored line after line into the only intact patch of skin on his abdomen.

But the flesh was so withered with age that not a single drop of blood seeped from even the deepest cuts.

Seeing this, mournful black blood wept from his wax-melted eye sockets.

The black blood trickled down his wrinkle-stacked cheeks, dripping to the ground, seeping through the floor, and vanishing.

But Cheng Shi could feel it clearly: the instant that blood disappeared, horrifying, terrifying [Decay] power surged from beneath his feet.

Mercifully, the power radiated outward rather than targeting him. But he still shuddered involuntarily and retreated half a step.

[Decay]!

Standing before him was unquestionably the second God of the [Descent] Path—[Decay]!

Why was He here too?

No—had He come looking for trouble?!

After all, [Prosperity]'s descent upon the Sighing Forest was entirely a result of Cheng Shi's offering. And what he'd offered was nothing other than [Decay]'s faith.

Every scrap of [Decay] in sight had been converted by Cheng Shi into Sacrifices for [Prosperity]. He'd essentially helped [Prosperity] demolish His neighbor's walls—no, uproot His rival's entire foundation. Given the magnitude of this home-wrecking grudge, the fact that this Being was letting him live long enough to lay eyes upon Him was already the greatest mercy imaginable.

Chapter 320: [Deceit], [Existence], and the Shadow

But Cheng Shi knew full well that mercy had its limits. His heart clenched as he unhesitatingly slipped a hand behind his back and gripped a Mask.

If the die could summon [Fate], then logically, the Mask should be able to summon [Deceit].

So before [Decay] could speak, Cheng Shi clutched the Mask and silently recited:

"Fate like stars, within sight but Out of Reach..."

But the Mask didn't budge. No response at all.

Cheng Shi's heart plummeted. He scrambled to switch: "Come and Go, all is destined!"

"Lie Like Yesterday..."

"Cannot distinguish true from false..."

His mind was practically smoking with panic, but the Mask remained dead silent.

Cheng Shi's heart sank like a stone. [Deceit] wasn't answering. [Fate] was busy fighting. This was bad—really bad.

Cold sweat erupted across his forehead and back. He retreated another step and quietly squeezed the [Death] Fun Ring on his finger.

He was using it to bolster his courage, hoping the aura of [Death] might give the Being before him some pause.

But obviously, a mere artifact meant nothing in Their eyes.

The aged giant slowly opened his eyes. Those clouded orbs were saturated with sorrow and anguish. He seemed to harbor some unfulfilled wish—something yearned for but never achieved. And yet His body appeared to have already reached its very end.

He gazed down at the tiny Cheng Shi and squeezed out a rasping whisper from his nearly dry throat:

"[Deceit]'s... follower... you did... well..."

'Huh?'

That single sentence nearly blew Cheng Shi's skull off!

'What did He just say?'

'He's praising me?'

Think about it: if you just demolished someone's house, and the next moment that person walked up and complimented your work, what do you think they're about to do?

Wasn't this a Feint Move before sneaking a club upside his head—a Sarcastic death sentence?

Cheng Shi panicked. But then he steadied himself.

Because in an instant he realized: if He didn't want him alive, Cheng Shi never would have heard those words in the first place.

So he steeled himself, suppressed the fear, stepped half a pace forward, and opened with the most reverential praise he could fake:

"Praise You, great God of [Decay]!"

May all beings in the world decay into rot..."

'Except me.'

"May all things in the universe wither as they walk!"

'Also except me.'

Then, with the most self-reproaching sincerity, he bowed his head in contrition:

"Bound by the trial's rules, I—Cheng Shi, walker of the [Void] Path, second Collection of [Deceit], beloved of [Fate], part-time employee of [Death], candidate Envoy of [Chaos]—committed a small, tiny act of blasphemy against You..."

But please allow me to explain: I never harbored a single shred of genuine disrespect toward You, and those so-called 'offerings' were never born of devotion to [Prosperity].

I simply wanted to clear the trial. And in the process, my methods may have been... slightly... a touch... intense. For any inconvenience caused, I am deeply remorseful and willing to assume a certain degree of... not-exactly-fatal... responsibility."

The already sluggish giant grew even more sluggish after hearing this string of smooth talk.

He stiffly turned his head. When his eyes settled on Cheng Shi again, the black blood was dripping even faster.

"You need not... fear..."

I summoned you... only to see... whether this [Deceit] follower who made me realize... the futility of the past... is also... a pitiable soul like myself..."

Alas... you are too much like Him... incompatible with my Will...

[Deceit]'s follower... you did well... but remember to stay far from [Prosperity]..."

'Huh?'

Cheng Shi went blank. The staggering volume of information packed into [Decay]'s words crashed his brain on the spot.

'He really is praising me!'

'Wait, what?'

'What exactly about me pleased You, big guy?'

'Has the world turned upside down?'

'I make an offering to [Prosperity], and He hits me with questions. I sacrifice [Decay]'s stuff, and He gives me praise?'

'Hold on—is this a script written by [Deceit]?'

'Why does everything behind the scenes seem to flicker with the words "Fun God"?!'

...

Speaking of the Fun God—[Deceit]'s situation wasn't exactly rosy right now.

The moment the Faith Game erupted with anomalies—the moment [Prosperity] shattered the rules and descended into the trial—those spiral-and-star-speckled eyes had instantly sensed the disturbance and vanished into the Void, rushing to the front lines of entertainment.

But when He opened His amused eyes, He found Himself beneath a sky of wildly flickering stars. Looking around at time itself warping from excessive acceleration, He...

Smiled even wider.

"[Time]. How rare."

Beneath the starry sky, the distorted flow of time crumpled further. Countless rays of light collapsed into two terrifying black-hole pupils, and they turned to gaze at Him—simultaneously fast and slow.

"It's been a long time."

"Indeed it has. You're as irritating as ever." The star-and-spiral eyes blinked, searching for cracks in the time flow.

"So are you."

The black-hole eyes were apparently always terse. He stood amid the Starry Sky, and with every blink, time surged forward in a brief torrent—stars rising, dawning, and dying in dazzling splendor across the heavens.

When the eyes were open, the distorted timescape froze utterly, solidifying into an Unchanging eternity.

These stuttering fluctuations of speed gave [Deceit] no window to escape. So He abandoned the attempt and heaved a long sigh.

"I can't even deceive myself into thinking this is merely a memory—that all of this happened a million years ago.

So... [Memory] is here too. You brothers really are in perfect sync."

The instant those words faded, a new star was born in the silent sky. It swelled with the flow of time, then collapsed. Across countless iterations of the temporal river, it lived and died, shifting through endless forms, until every trace of its existence linked together to sketch a pair of eyes—etched with the weathering of history.

Those eyes flickered with the star's many pasts. From the moment they appeared, they seemed to have weathered eons of time, suffusing the entire sky with an ancient, mysterious aura.

The spiral-and-star eyes turned toward Them with a scoff:

"Two against one. What, waiting for me to make the first move?"

The history-worn eyes regarded [Deceit] without joy or sorrow, their voice heavy with the weight of ages:

"There's one more."

The moment those words landed, a figure materialized directly beneath those mischievous, spinning eyes.

It really was just a figure—a shadow. A human silhouette floating in the Starry Sky, bodiless. A shadow with no original.

The shadow flapped and twisted like a paper cutout in the temporal storm. After much effort to flatten itself out, it extended one hand and waved at the three pairs of eyes before it:

"Tch—three waiting for a fourth? So what's it gonna be today... poker or mahjong?"

[Time]—Unchanging. [Memory]—without joy or sorrow. [Deceit]—pointing fingers.

He glanced at the shadow, eyes tinged with displeasure.

"Sneaking back is one thing. But when there's a good show, why didn't you call me ahead of time?"

The shadow froze, scratched its head, and gave an awkward laugh: "Didn't quite have the chance."

"Then how'd you have time to notify [Fate]?"

"Uh... just bumped into Him. Couldn't hide it."

"Tch. You think I don't know He helped cover your tracks?"

Eating inside, crawling outside!"

"..." The shadow sighed helplessly. "The [Void] is one whole, my Lord. There is no 'outside.'"

"Oh, how eloquently put. In that case, why not send my dear sister back to serve my sentence while I go pick a fight with [Prosperity]?"

The shadow nodded vigorously:

"Sure! As long as these two are willing, I'm all in—hands and feet.

The question is, do these two agree?"

It looked toward [Time] and [Memory].

[Time]—Unchanging. [Memory]—without joy or sorrow. [Deceit]—marveling in mock wonder.

He sneered:

"If [Existence]'s choice is [Silence], then please do notify me before you fully embrace Him. I'd like to join in the festivities."

Hearing this, the shadow burst into laughter.

But no matter how hard the two of them cackled, the time and memory imprisoning this space remained utterly unbreakable.

Finding no opening, both the eyes and the shadow stopped laughing.

It and He exchanged a glance and sighed in unison.

"Lord Benefactor, the deception failed. Now what?"

"How is that my problem? You weren't calling for me. I'm just bitter about missing the front row of a great show. But you—you're in real trouble. Before you get sent back, any 'last words'? Better make them quick."

The shadow rubbed its nose and grinned: "Nothing much to say. I just wanted to come back and have a look."

Seeing the two still running their mouths, the long-silent [Memory] finally spoke again.

"No one can break the Convention and kill [Prosperity]. [Truth] cannot. And [Deceit], neither can you.

Whatever you covet, it is futile.

The Convention stands above all. You and I both know this.

I can choose not to investigate whether this was an accident. But I will be guarding my Collection Hall—ensuring no uninvited guest sneaks in again."

[Deceit] scoffed and turned his Sarcastic gaze on [Memory]:

"Since [Existence] is so confident I can't kill [Prosperity], then what are you two brothers doing surrounding me here?

Watching me and my follower sink into the Sea of Desire and share the Authority of [Birth]?"

"..."

"..."

"..."

The shadow went rigid. It coughed twice and offered a friendly reminder: "Humans... and... Gods... cannot share the Authority of [Birth]."

Those eyes let out a snicker and turned toward it: "Are you human?"

"..."

'Well, when you put it like that...'

'I'm really not...'

Unable to refute, the shadow chose to go silent.

With the shadow's silence, the flow of time normalized. The black-hole eyes sketched in light spared a single glance at the shadow, and the shadow began to fade.

It could feel [Time]'s power pulling it back to its original space. So before vanishing, it threw back its head and laughed:

"I knew [Time] was a bitch too!"

The words echoed—and the shadow was gone.

Every temporal crack in this space sealed shut.

[Time] said nothing. He glanced once at [Deceit], then departed without a sound.

[Memory] watched [Time] leave, heaved a sigh, and closed His eyes:

"Would it truly be so bad... to draw closer to [*Him]...?"

Those star-and-spiral eyes blinked, feigning ignorance: "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"You understand perfectly."

"Fine, fine, fine—I understand. Now that we're on the same page, why don't we celebrate? With a fight?"

"..."

The eyes of history collapsed without a trace, giving Him no opportunity to strike.

"Tch. Boring."

No sooner had the word left Him than He too dissolved into the Starry Sky.