

The Gods 521

Chapter 521: No One Can Always Enjoy Fate's Favor...

Old Gallon's words were not empty talk — he truly had the ability to restore that teleportation array.

Or rather, he hadn't actually destroyed the array that thoroughly in the first place. Not because he didn't want to, but because he couldn't.

It was a massive magical array etched beneath the imperial prison, where every inscription line was a narrow groove carved into solid stone slabs. Given the hardness of those slabs, the frail and aging Gallon couldn't have caused much damage to them even with tools.

What Gallon called "destruction" was merely selecting a few grooves out of the countless channels and carving a few subtle scratches at inconspicuous spots along their bases with his engraving knife.

Yet those few subtle scratches were enough to render the entire array permanently inoperative.

"This is an array that the Rainforest Tribe used for ultra-long-range hunting during the Life Era. After the civilizations of the previous epoch were annihilated, very few people knew of its existence.

The reason the Empire collected this array wasn't for strategic purposes — it was used by the royal family to...

punish blasphemous prisoners."

Old Gallon retrieved some yellow earth from the prison above the array. Wheezing heavily, he mixed the dirt into mud and packed it into the cracks he'd carved, explaining as he worked:

"The other end of the array, according to records, should be a gathering area for some kind of primate creatures. The Rainforest Tribe hunted them for food. In today's era where Decay reigns supreme, that place is considered an exile ground for blasphemers.

His Majesty would banish those who offended him — who desecrated our Lord — to that place, leaving them to live in constant terror of unknown creatures.

That's why His Majesty brought his guards for this retreat. Otherwise, the royal family, with no divine protection whatsoever, would have simply become food for those primates.

And that's also why I stayed behind. I couldn't provide combat strength for the fleeing royals, yet I'd still have to bring along Ai Lian — a child they considered dead weight. To keep Ai Lian alive, I..."

"..."

All three people present were rendered speechless. It wasn't that they found the Rosna royal family's flight undignified — rather, they found Old Gallon's thinking far too naive.

A child who'd lost her protector — how could she possibly be sheltered by such a treacherous royal family?

The best outcome for the child called Ai Lian would be if she truly possessed a divinely-gifted dagger. Only then, under the protection of that supposedly sentient dagger, might she have a chance at survival.

But if something went wrong before she could take the dagger with her — if it ended up elsewhere — then there was no question about it. The moment she was teleported, this child with no guardian would be immediately abandoned as dead weight.

Cheng Shi didn't believe the Historian couldn't see this. He'd probably simply run out of options and was gambling on one last possibility.

Old Gallon wasn't finished. He continued, hunched over:

"And the method to activate this teleportation array is..."

"Blood?" Da Yi suddenly interjected.

It wasn't really Da Yi's fault for thinking that. The array was covered in dried bloodstains, and there were even several buckets of residual blood at its edges. The scene clearly showed evidence of massive amounts of blood having been splashed around.

Combined with the grooves on the array and the prison above it — a place that rivaled a living hell — anyone's first reaction would be: blood was the activation material for this array.

But that was precisely where Old Gallon's cleverness lay. Although he couldn't guarantee whether the Rosna royal family would protect his Ai Lian, he could guarantee that his own line of defense would never let a single World Destroyer through to pursue the fleeing army.

Because the blood was itself one of his methods of sabotaging the array!

"No, my lord. The blood was a means of contaminating the array.

The Rainforest Tribe who worshipped Prosperity didn't prohibit killing, but they didn't like using fresh blood to invoke divine power. I splashed all this blood here specifically to mislead the World Destroyers and prevent them from activating the teleportation array."

"..." Da Yi shut his mouth. He glanced sideways at Qu Yan and, for the first time, felt that following Silence had its perks — at least you wouldn't suddenly embarrass yourself.

Cheng Shi let out a quiet laugh and asked:

"So to activate this array, all this blood needs to be cleaned off first?"

I see you've been very meticulous about filling those shallow scratches. If I'm not mistaken, this is related to the precise volume of the activation substance — even the slightest deviation would throw everything off completely. And this activation substance, even if it isn't blood, should be some liquid connected to Prosperity.

That reminds me of an old acquaintance and some matters from long ago.

Interesting. Using a Prosperity array as a place of punishment in an era of Decay — I must say, you Rosna people's devotion is quite... distinctive."

The two subordinates behind Cheng Shi were quite perceptive. The moment they heard the blood needed to be cleaned, they'd already sprung into action. As they scrubbed, they couldn't help wondering what kind of figure that old acquaintance their lord mentioned might be.

What they didn't know was that Cheng Shi had no such old acquaintance at all. It was nothing more than a casual lie he'd fabricated to maintain his mystique.

He blended false personal history with real historical knowledge, feeding it to the two in a mix of truth and fiction that left them thoroughly confused — and thereby preserving his air of mystery.

But his deduction was genuine. After extensive observation, he'd arrived at the most accurate conclusion about the teleportation array. And hearing Cheng Shi see through the array's secrets, Old Gallon grew even more respectful.

Not just respectful — a faint terror crept into his heart as well. His desire to save his child was sincere, but he simply didn't have the ability to do so.

These three, who did have the ability, seemed to harbor no compassion whatsoever for Rosna — or rather, for mortal lives in general.

So he couldn't even judge whether what he was doing would save Ai Lian or doom her. After everything he'd been through, Old Gallon had only one thought: if he and his daughter were fated to die, they might as well die together.

The array was nearly repaired. Old Gallon's breathing grew heavier and heavier. He patched the last scratch, then straightened up and addressed Cheng Shi respectfully: "My lord, the array restoration is complete. It can now be activated."

Cheng Shi smiled and nodded, but didn't move. Somehow, Da Yi experienced a flash of inspiration and immediately spoke up on Lord Ultraman's behalf: "Where's the activation material?"

Old Gallon's deference deepened:

"My lord, it's the sap of the round-leaf cold pine. We need twelve and a half buckets of round-leaf cold pine sap. This is the greatest secret held by the Historians of Rosna.

There are many broad-leaf cold pines in Kannar City, but very few round-leaf cold pines. That's because when the royal family learned of the World Destroyers' existence, every round-leaf cold pine in the city was chopped down and burned as firewood. The few that were spared were planted outside the city walls, hidden among other cold pines.

At the time, I didn't realize what that meant. Only now do I understand — perhaps His Majesty was already taking precautions back then.

The World Destroyers destroy everything in sight, so by the time they breached the city, the activation material would have likely already been destroyed by their own hands.

I... was merely the second line of insurance."

"..." Cheng Shi twitched the corner of his mouth at this revelation. 'Well, well. So the Rosna royal family isn't stupid after all. Could it be they channeled all their intelligence into running away?'

But for now, the World Destroyers hadn't arrived yet, so the activation material should still be available. Cheng Shi shot a glance at Bianse Long behind him. The chameleon understood immediately and left the underground chamber with an excited look on his face, heading off to carry out his "mission."

After a good while, the agile hunter returned with more than enough round-leaf cold pine sap. Old Gallon and the two players quickly spread the sap across the entire array — the amount perfectly precise, not a drop more, not a drop less.

Cheng Shi led the three of them onto the central platform of the array and waited for the teleportation to activate. But after waiting for quite some time, nothing happened.

Old Gallon froze. He looked around frantically, shaking his head in disbelief:

"Impossible — why isn't it working? This can't be!

Every step was correct. I did this exact same procedure when His Majesty escaped. Why won't it teleport? Why won't it teleport?!"

At this, Cheng Shi's expression gradually darkened. He realized he might have miscalculated one thing — since this array was designed for the Rainforest Tribe's hunting expeditions, there was very likely some kind of teleportation anchor at the destination.

The cowardly Rosna royal family, playing it safe, had probably destroyed that anchor as well. All their one-sided efforts here might have been for nothing.

But the situation was still uncertain, and he couldn't jump to conclusions. Yet facing the puzzled looks of his two subordinates, Cheng Shi had to offer some explanation.

This was no challenge for a liar — the words came to him effortlessly:

"Interesting. They've started meddling again.

It seems no one can always enjoy Fate's favor.

But...

Change never stops. We still have a chance."

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Chapter 522: Playing the Part of Decay's Envoy

"We still have a chance" — that wasn't just empty talk from Cheng Shi.

Before the time reset, he'd already contemplated methods for clearing this trial, and the chance he spoke of was embedded within those very methods.

Poison had mentioned that the reason she'd come to the Rosna Empire was because she'd seen a pictorial scroll depicting Rosna on the skin of that mummy. At this point, the gathering at the Recruitment Square clearly hadn't taken place yet, which meant the person surrounded in the center might not have appeared within Cheng Shi's group's line of sight.

After all, that person was holding a dagger — and Poison was quite certain it was the Gift of Sores.

Thinking along those lines, the teleportation array might not be the only lead. There was a good chance they'd overlooked some critical piece of information. The Gift of Sores might not have returned to Kannar via the teleportation array at all — it might have been here the entire time, simply undiscovered by Cheng Shi and his group.

But in a sea of people, where could the players even begin searching for the lost dagger?

They didn't need to search. Cheng Shi had never intended to expend great effort hunting for the dagger or the person holding it. He'd had a target in mind from the very beginning.

Using the teleportation array to trace back was the first solution. If that didn't work, then on to the second — which was also the method for clearing this trial.

If the person holding the dagger hadn't appeared, then force them to appear. Force even Him to appear!

Consider this: anyone bold enough to rally the populace before the World Destroyers' siege must have a purpose. They couldn't possibly be doing it just to show off a divine gift at the moment of national collapse. Given the current situation, the person with the dagger was very likely the instigator trying to lead the people of Rosna in resistance against the World Destroyers' invasion.

Initially, Cheng Shi had thought this person might be the First Prince, but now it was clearly not the case. That coward didn't have that kind of courage — and more importantly, he was dead again.

So Cheng Shi planned to steal the nest before the bird arrived — rally the populace ahead of that person, then covertly watch for the "instigator" whose behavior seemed off. If that person truly

possessed the Gift of Sores and saw someone preemptively using their strategy to leverage divine might and stir up chaos, they surely wouldn't sit idle.

Of course, this wasn't merely an act of impersonation. Behind the performance, Cheng Shi had deeper calculations. Whether those calculations would pan out depended on whether this so-called "instigator" actually existed.

As for the biggest challenge in this performance — how to rally the entire city's population...

For a con artist who regularly impersonated others, this was almost laughably simple.

In a nation that worshipped the gods and teetered on the brink of destruction, what identity could command more authority than an envoy of a deity?

As long as he played the role of Decay's envoy convincingly and struck a savior's pose, bringing the entire city's population to their knees would be child's play.

And what Cheng Shi needed to do was play this role of Decay's envoy to perfection!

He'd even prepared props for this performance in advance — a black robe steeped in the heavy aura of Decay!

Cheng Shi didn't own such a robe, but that didn't mean no one else did.

Remember the Decay hunter Yu Mu, last seen strung up inside Go Lis's resentment? As it happened, this Twilight Hunter possessed exactly such a garment — a black robe, hooded no less.

When Cheng Shi recalled the moment during the Mediocre Person Society meeting when Yu Mu had lowered his hood at Hu Wei's behest, he'd immediately set his sights on this trapped Decay believer. That was why, when leaving the tribunal earlier, the request Cheng Shi had made to Aph Ros was to take Yu Mu's robe.

Now he had the perfect disguise for his cuckoo-in-the-nest scheme. All that was missing was an actor.

As for who that actor would be...

It absolutely could not be Cheng Shi himself.

The lure-the-snake-from-its-hole tactic was too dangerous. In the face of the unknown, there was no need to turn himself into a target.

Besides, he'd truly taken Aph Ros's warning to heart. Without sufficiently understanding that particular Him, Cheng Shi didn't want to prematurely risk getting involved in anything related to Him. So this time, he wouldn't be playing the Decay envoy — and there was a more suitable candidate present anyway.

Someone like... fellow hunter Qu Yan.

When a chameleon donned the twilight hunter's garments, who could say this chameleon couldn't become a twilight hunter?

And so Cheng Shi draped the black robe over Qu Yan and handed him something else as well.

"Your mission is to pose as an envoy of Decay and summon all the city's people to the Rosna Recruitment Square to worship you.

As for why — don't ask too many questions. Just know it's related to finding the Gift of Sores.

This is a gamble of faiths. I don't know the outcome until it's over, so whether we find that dagger depends on how convincing your disguise is.

But don't feel too much pressure — I'll be helping you. Take this. It's a Tomb End Stone from the lands of Decay. Its aura will make you more closely resemble a true avatar of Decay, but be careful not to let it corrode you.

Also, you only need to go to the Recruitment Square and stand there as I've instructed. I'll have Da Yi handle the rest.

When the people come to pay their respects, you still won't need to speak. I'll be behind you, giving you a voice.

If all goes well, we'll see that dagger appear. But if They circumvent Memory and intervene too deeply, this mission will probably fail.

Rest assured, though — I don't shortchange those who get the job done. Even if the Gift of Sores is taken away through Their divine intervention, the points you've earned and the trials you've won won't be lost for nothing.

That's all. Off you go."

With that, Cheng Shi also handed Da Yi a page of text. The moment Da Yi caught it, his expression changed dramatically.

"G-Grand... my lord, this is... the Dyeing Plague?"

Cheng Shi smiled faintly. "Correct. To make the people who worship Decay aware that His envoy has arrived, they need to physically sense the power of Decay. Take it into the city and make a round. I shouldn't have to teach you how to spread rumors.

Just remember one thing — don't kill all my extras. Be quick about it. Once the gathering is assembled, toss it outside the city walls.

We need some time. Conveniently, let this plague hold off the World Destroyers outside for us."

Da Yi nodded solemnly, then asked with a puzzled look:

"My lord, why not just go out and kill those damn World Destroyers directly?"

"?"

'Getting close to War was supposed to be an act, not an actual defection — how are you becoming more and more like the real thing, friend?'

Cheng Shi's eye twitched slightly. He replied with practiced mystery: "It's not that simple. Go."

Da Yi's expression froze for a moment. Something seemed to click, and he nodded, leaving with the hunter, one after the other.

Once the two had departed, Cheng Shi took the previously knocked-out Old Gallon and left the imperial court, climbing to a high wall of the palace that overlooked the square.

Old Gallon was jolted awake by the cold. The moment he opened his eyes, he stammered: "M-my lord, I... Ai Lian, she..."

Cheng Shi scoffed and shook his head. "Forget about her for now. What you should be praying for is that I gain something from this gathering. Otherwise, she's probably already broken her oath and turned to Death."

Old Gallon shuddered violently and fell silent. He followed Cheng Shi's gaze downward and saw, through the raging blizzard, countless figures converging on the Rosna Recruitment Square. The black dots gradually blanketed the snow, transforming the pristine white plaza into a seething mass of humanity.

"Praise Decay! Praise Decay!"

"We're saved! We're saved!"

"I told you our Lord wouldn't abandon us! It's our devotion that earned His gaze!"

"This is His envoy! This is supreme glory! Where is His Majesty? Why hasn't His Majesty come out to welcome our Lord's envoy?!"

Old Gallon was stunned. He rubbed his eyes in disbelief and stared at the figure standing in the center of the square, murmuring in bewilderment:

"That's... that's our Lord's envoy?"

My lord, is that truly an envoy of Decay?"

He couldn't fathom how today's Kannar could be so extraordinary. He'd just encountered three mysterious beings — clearly more than mortal — who'd rescued him in the midst of a blizzard, and now the envoy of his nation's patron deity had arrived.

But this nation's royalty had been so blasphemous toward their faith. So this envoy's arrival... did it bring salvation, or divine punishment?

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Chapter 523: I Bring You His Forgiveness!

It was a scam!

What Decay's envoy brought was neither His mercy nor His wrath, but... a con of Deceit.

More precisely, it was a con of Yu Xi.

The figure standing in the square draped in a black robe and hooded was, of course, Silence's hunter Qu Yan. He held aloft a dagger that appeared to be a divine gift, radiating a pure aura of Decay.

It was naturally no divine gift — just an ordinary dagger. The hunter had merely concealed a Tomb End Stone inside his sleeve, making the blade appear to possess boundless power of Decay.

But ordinary people couldn't tell the difference. Every resident of Kannar who'd been touched by the aura of Decay emerged from their warm homes, flooded into the streets, and followed His guidance toward the Rosna Recruitment Square. When they beheld this mysterious envoy brandishing a "divine gift," they prostrated themselves in devotion.

They didn't even dare to look directly at the divine envoy's face — all they could do was press themselves to the ground and shout fervently.

The populace knew nothing of the Rosna royal family's escape. They still held out hope that someone would lead the decaying Rosna Empire to victory against the World Destroyers. So when they saw this envoy raising a "divinely-bestowed artifact," hope was rekindled in many hearts — the hope of survival.

But was that truly the case?

Perhaps not entirely. How much genuine devotion lay hidden within that cacophony, loud enough to drown out the howling blizzard... no one could say.

All Cheng Shi knew was that the moment the first resident appeared in the square and dropped to their knees, the missing charge in his ring instantly filled back up.

He nodded thoughtfully, then casually fired a bolt of Lightning Punishment at the great hall of the Rosna Court behind him.

"BOOM—"

Thunder from a clear sky. The tremendous blast made the steadily arriving populace bow even lower, and the ring charge he'd just expended was instantly replenished once again.

Cheng Shi grinned. Without hesitation, he unleashed five consecutive Lightning Punishments, shattering and demolishing numerous palace structures. Yet even with such prolific use, the Fun Ring's charge never dropped at all.

Full. Always full.

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow. The lightning continued. Never before had he unleashed thunder so freely. Only after virtually every building in the imperial court had been swept by the raging bolts did he reluctantly stop — and still, the Fun Ring remained at full charge.

That meant the entire square was awash in fear — an overwhelmingly vast ocean of fear!

If everything these people shouted came from the heart, if all their reverence stemmed from genuine devotion, then why would such a massive concentration of fear gather in the square after the arrival of a savior deity's envoy?

"What a contradictory nation. The people worship Him yet receive no blessings. They try to appear more devout, yet it only weakens the empire further. When it grows so frail that a gust of wind could topple it, most abandon their faith entirely. But when annihilation looms, they cling to this singular faith with desperate hope — and the moment that hope appears, they're consumed by terror.

Look at this, Gallon. What a magnificent spectacle — truly one for the history books.

I can't sense a single shred of devotion in this Rosna Recruitment Square. All I can smell is fear.

The people left their homes and poured into the streets, but probably not to follow the divine envoy in the square. They're likely no different from the Rosna royal family — simply afraid that hiding at home might anger the envoy and bring divine punishment upon them.

Ram, oh Ram — you died too soon. I wonder if you can sense this collected fear from inside the ring.

Are you afraid too?

I know you're in there. I know you can hear me. Don't worry — I haven't forgotten about you. Savor this fear, because there will come a moment when you can no longer feel it.

A Screaming Earl who fed on fear, dying by fear. A fitting closed loop of fate."

Cheng Shi spoke to himself about things Old Gallon couldn't possibly understand. The frail Historian's eyes went round as saucers. Though he couldn't comprehend the words, nothing stopped him from being overwhelmed by the thunder just now and the scene before him.

This was practically a gathering that would determine whether the Rosna Empire lived or died, because nearly every surviving soul in the city was likely here.

If these three lords wished for the Rosna Empire's destruction, all they'd need to do was unleash that same thunder upon the crowd, and this nation built on the worship of Decay would crumble to dust — scattered into the ashes of history.

But would this lord... actually do that?

Old Gallon didn't know. Yet as a Historian — one who wavered between devotion and doubt — a thought suddenly arose in his mind. A mad thought.

He wanted to record the final chapter of history for this nation where he'd once lived.

Even if the Rosna Empire ceased to exist after this, he would have fulfilled his last duty as a Historian.

Of course, this duty wasn't owed to the Rosna royal family, but to the Rosna Empire itself — the nation where he'd lived for over thirty years, a place that stirred complex emotions within him.

But he didn't know whether he still had the right to record any of this. So he looked up at Cheng Shi beside him. Just as he was about to speak, Cheng Shi gave him a meaningful smile and suddenly leaped off the high wall.

The moment had come. Cheng Shi seemed to read Old Gallon's mind, but he didn't respond. Instead, he jumped from the wall, melted into the crowd, and made his way to Qu Yan's side. It was time to perform his part — playing the mouthpiece of a divine envoy.

'Never thought the day would come when I'd become Brother Mouth myself.'

'Question Brother Mouth. Understand Brother Mouth. Become Brother Mouth!'

Now, with Cheng Shi transformed into "the mouth" and the mute Silence believer as his partner, the two of them would perform a ventriloquist act on this Recruitment Square — a lie that would deceive an entire empire.

And the very first line of this act sent the entire square into an uproar!

"I am an envoy of Decay, walking the mortal world on behalf of our Benefactor. I have come to bring His forgiveness to the people of Rosna."

Forgiveness!

Even if the people in the square heard nothing else, those two words alone drew gasps of disbelief. Some broke down weeping, clutching their heads, as if divine forgiveness could deliver them from perdition.

In that moment, they seemed to forget that it was Decay who had never once looked upon them, who had never bestowed a single blessing. If anyone should be offering forgiveness, it should have been them "forgiving" Him.

But in this era, the gods were everything. No matter how much suffering the people of Rosna endured, it was always because they weren't devout enough. And now, at last, their devotion had earned... the Benefactor's forgiveness.

Yet some harbored doubts, for only they themselves knew whether their devotion was genuine. In the past, even the most fervent piety had never drawn His gaze. Now, when that devotion had been ground down to nothing, would His envoy truly bring forgiveness?

Could this be a scam — a cunning divine punishment designed to purge the faithless?

No one dared say for certain. No one dared raise their head. Everyone remained engulfed in overwhelming fear, feigning agreement as they awaited the divine envoy's next words.

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Chapter 524: ...The Fate Weaver Favored by Fate

Cheng Shi took in the reactions of every person in the crowd. He smiled silently and spoke again — his second sentence plunging the entire square into deathly silence.

"I know that the Rosna Empire has never truly known devotion. And He knows this too."

"..."

The moment those words fell, the fear hovering above the square grew thicker. Cheng Shi even felt Gongyang Jiao inside his ring eagerly straining to resurrect — perhaps deterred by Cheng Shi's status, or perhaps resurrection within the Fun Ring wasn't as simple as the Screaming Earl had originally imagined. Either way, his desire to revive was intense, but he never followed through.

Cheng Shi paid him no mind. Having killed him once, he could do it again. His focus now wasn't on the Ram but on the potential target somewhere in the crowd.

Don't forget — this was a fishing operation. The bait had been cast, but the fish hadn't surfaced.

The other "fisherman," Da Yi, wasn't with Cheng Shi. Under Cheng Shi's orders, he was currently threading through the shadows at the square's edges, searching for suspicious individuals. But to an assassin's keen perception, virtually everyone in the square seemed suspect.

The biggest red flag was that none of them dared look directly at the divine envoy. Their expressions were panicked, terrified that raising their heads might draw attention.

Da Yi was sharp. He quickly identified the reason behind this phenomenon — exactly what Lord Ultraman had spoken of... lack of devotion.

These people weren't truly devout toward Decay.

And of course they weren't. With the World Destroyers bearing down on them and given Rosna's current condition, wanting devotion meant having no combat strength, while wanting combat strength meant abandoning devotion.

The desperate, survival-seeking populace had been trapped in the cracks of religious devotion, unable to break free, dragged along step by step to this very moment.

Perhaps they truly had been waiting for a "War Faction" First Prince to tell them they no longer needed to be devout — that they should use their own strength to resist the World Destroyers. But they'd waited and waited, and the First Prince was gone.

So many had resumed their "devotion," but this devotion was merely a plea for mercy from a deity who had never once gazed upon this land — not pure, untainted faith.

And that was precisely why this entire square's worth of people had generated such an enormous amount of fear.

They wanted to live. They were also afraid to die.

So when Lord Ultraman proclaimed that "the Rosna Empire has never truly known devotion," they were terrified.

Seeing this, Da Yi let out a cold laugh. 'Good — be afraid. Fear breeds chaos too. The more frightened you are, the more Lord Ultraman might enjoy it.'

But amid such a massive crowd of suspicious individuals, trying to find one who stood out as even more suspicious was like searching for a needle in a haystack. Still, Da Yi didn't dare complain and could only keep at it.

Cheng Shi was patient too. He had plenty of time to wait. Even if Da Yi found no one, he had other methods to continue fishing — methods that were not only effective but could also win this trial in the process.

As for how to win the trial — it was all contained within this ventriloquist act.

"Fear not, children of Rosna. He has never been angered by this, nor has He ever intended to unleash divine punishment.

Our Lord is loving. Compassionate. Merciful. He cannot look upon a flock of faithless believers, yet He doesn't wish to see the Rosna Empire gradually wither away in that faithlessness. So He has sent me here to bring you His forgiveness.

Children of Rosna, you need worship Him no longer. You need no longer offer Him trivial sufferings of flesh and skin. He permits you to break the oaths you have sworn, to release yourselves from Decay, and to return to who you truly are.

Yes, you heard correctly. From this moment, the Rosna Empire... is free.

You needn't fear the divine punishment of oathbreaking, nor agonize over the sin of blasphemy. He has never targeted you. Though Decay is the universe's final tomb, even within that tomb's depths lies love and compassion.

Praise Decay, children of Rosna!

Use your no-longer-frail bodies to build a wall. Take up the weapons in your hands and defend your homeland.

I shall bless you on our Lord's behalf — as the final repayment for a century of the Rosna Empire's devotion."

With that, Cheng Shi removed his own mask, silently pointed at his shadow below, and fired a healing chain imbued with the Shared Divine Grace effect at Qu Yan in the center of the square.

The healing chain spread from one to ten, from ten to a hundred. In the blink of an eye, rich healing energy blanketed the entire square.

The awestruck, speechless populace felt vitality returning to their bodies. One by one, their eyes went wide, their jaws dropped, and expressions of incredulous ecstasy spread across their faces. Heedless of the biting gales and piercing blizzard, they pulled open their clothes — and discovered that the Sin Cleansing Scars on their backs were truly, slowly dissolving.

Only when they witnessed the retreat of Decay with their own eyes did the square finally erupt in the most fervent, most joyous cheers:

"Praise Decay! Praise Decay!"

One had to admit — this was perhaps the most genuinely devout moment the people of Kannar City had ever shown toward Decay since the founding of the Rosna Empire.

But the absurdity was that this most devout moment occurred precisely when they believed they'd been released from Decay's chains of faith.

When the tide of belief receded, the foam left on the mudflats slowly burst apart with soft crackling sounds. But whether those sounds were a farewell to the waves or a celebration of seeing daylight again — no one could say.

As the mastermind behind it all, Cheng Shi smiled when he saw this scene — a bright, genuine smile. The tableau before him bore a striking resemblance to the scene Poison had described. Was this a coincidence?

No. It was entirely deliberate.

Cheng Shi's plan had never been a simple act of impersonation. When his performance failed to lure out Rosna's resistance "instigator," his target had already shifted — from a Rosna citizen to a Him. Or rather, two of Them.

He couldn't be certain exactly who was watching this trial, but he was certain that at least one — perhaps two — of Them would find the current scene extremely interesting.

Don't forget: this scene was practically a 1:1 recreation of the historical event Poison had discovered. This kind of drama — using the future to reenact the past — would surely delight both the ever-amusement-seeking Deceit and the destiny-is-predetermined Fate!

And Cheng Shi, the clown hiding behind the curtain, needed precisely Their delight!

Yes — his calculated targets were none other than his two patron deities, the twin gods of the Void path!

He wanted these two to inject a variable into this directionless search. Let Them play Their game against Existence, and within that divine contest, perhaps he could scavenge some winnings from the margins.

After all, Existence didn't like having existence distorted. But Void did. And when Void encroached upon existence, Existence would respond with corrections and compensations — producing wondrous changes. Those changes were what Cheng Shi truly wanted!

Just like now: this 1:1 recreation was a perfect opportunity to overwrite the past. To make this coincidental scene even more convincing, Cheng Shi had even deliberately spared Old Gallon's life — specifically to give the Historian a chance to record the present moment.

But understand: the three players present alone could never alter history, because none of them possessed Memory.

However!

Lacking it now didn't mean lacking it forever.

If one of the two within Void truly wanted to see the clown take the stage and intervened in this trial, then Existence would inevitably produce a deviation — making this scene become history in a perfectly logical way.

And Cheng Shi was waiting for exactly that.

He couldn't easily sense whether the gods had intervened, though. Out of caution, he could only wait. But when the cheers in the square grew louder and louder without any change manifesting, the clown started getting impatient.

Furrowing his brow slightly, he grabbed a shirtless Kannar citizen at random and asked:

"How do the Historians of Rosna... record history?"

The ecstatic citizen didn't even notice that Cheng Shi's question didn't sound like something a fellow countryman would ask. Lost in the euphoria of liberation, he nodded frantically:

"On human skin, of course!

Why else do you think Historians are called Cobblers? They record history while simultaneously making offerings to Him! But now we don't have to anymore!

We're free!

Praise Decay! He is so merciful and compassionate!

Ah, wait — who are you?"

"..."

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow and shoved the man back into the crowd. He looked up at the high wall where Old Gallon stood and the corners of his mouth curled upward:

"So it seems... it's Fate. The story has come full circle once again.

Well, since You've already turned Your gaze this way, I suppose Void has already encroached upon Existence. In that case, where exactly is the change that Existence has produced to compensate?"

The moment those words fell, five blood-soaked figures appeared atop the imperial court's high wall, buffeted by the wind and snow. They gazed down at the square below, their faces etched with shock. Among them, a tall, lean man crouched down and picked up something from the hands of an old man whose body was coated in frozen blood — a piece of human skin upon which the very scene before them was depicted.

"Just as I thought — this is the place! Pe Laya's experiment was correct. We really have come back!"

At the same time, another person pointed at Qu Yan in the center of the square and shouted excitedly:

"The Gift of Sores! That dagger is in that NPC's hands!"

...

Chapter 525: Existence's Compensation

A few figures appearing on the high wall wasn't inherently strange — after all, the populace didn't yet know that the Rosna Court had been emptied of its inhabitants.

But when those figures leaped down from the wall, laughing freely and making a grand show of it, a discordant note finally pierced through the thunderous cheers in the square.

People noticed their presence and ran screaming toward the exits. These Kannar citizens had clearly made the same mistake as Old Gallon earlier — mistaking these outsiders for the World Destroyers from beyond the walls.

In their eyes, the World Destroyers had already reached the gates and were beginning to probe the defenses!

But in fairness, the panicking crowd wasn't wrong this time. Among those five, there really were followers of Oblivion — and not just one, but two!

Because Cheng Shi had already detected singing infused with the aura of Oblivion. Moreover, the fanatical player charging at the forefront with a dagger in hand could make any civilian blocking his path

simply vanish with a casual gesture. This undisguised talent immediately brought to mind Oblivion's assassin — the Annihilation Apostle!

One Destruction Declaration, one Annihilation Apostle — it seemed these suddenly appeared players genuinely intended to play the part of World Destroyers.

But... how had they gotten here?

The moment Cheng Shi saw the five figures leap from the high wall, he'd quietly palmed a scalpel, distanced himself from Qu Yan's position, and followed the crowd toward the outer edges.

While retreating, he sent messages to Qu Yan and Da Yi, warning them about the newcomers. These people were very likely the variable in this trial.

This was obviously two trials colliding — a rare occurrence, but not unheard of. Cheng Shi's two "subordinates" were clearly quite familiar with this sort of scenario.

The opposing side, on the other hand — those who came charging forward like maniacs — appeared to have given no thought to the possibility that the scene before them might be the setting of another trial.

The assassin at the front had eager, gleeful light in his eyes — much like the Rosna citizens in the square moments ago. With agile movements, he sprinted toward the square's center, his target obvious: Qu Yan, who still held the dagger without moving a muscle.

Qu Yan hadn't moved, true, but that was because he'd noticed these rushing newcomers were all unfamiliar faces. Their charging formation was riddled with openings. How to put it — he silently calculated that if the approaching party wasn't deliberately exposing weaknesses to bait a preemptive strike, then eliminating these suddenly appeared foreign players would take him roughly... three arrows.

One arrow to pin down the Annihilation Apostle at the front. One arrow to disable the hooded female player lagging at the rear. And the last arrow could skewer the three in the middle like candied hawthorns on a stick.

Too careless. Too undisciplined. They dared to charge forward in an unfamiliar location, blindly following the point man's trail without a single adaptation.

Wasn't this just running straight to their deaths?

Players who would make such a move — their ranking had to be...

Hm?

'Did I just stumble into a low-tier match?'

Qu Yan's gaze sharpened, and he quietly raised his guard.

In high-tier matches, everyone was shrewd and calculating, and their thought processes largely followed traceable patterns. But in low-tier matches, things got complicated — the other side might not play by the rules at all, making their behavior entirely unpredictable.

Under normal circumstances, when facing low-tier opponents who served no purpose, Qu Yan preferred to simply kill them and be done with it. But this trial was no ordinary trial. He could no longer act on his own judgment — he had to follow Lord Yu Xi's arrangements.

Since the lord hadn't ordered him to strike, he'd simply... hold his position.

But just as that thought formed, someone else couldn't hold back.

The War believer Da Yi had somehow crept unnoticed to a position directly in front of the Annihilation Apostle. When the Oblivion assassin didn't even spare Da Yi a glance — treating him as just another inconvenient NPC blocking the way and casually trying to banish him into the oblivion realm...

That move completely floored Da Yi.

'Spotted?'

'Not good! There's an expert!'

His eyes hardened. Using the cover of wind and snow, he sidestepped the attack, then drove a thrust clean through his opponent's midsection in a single reverse strike. Three iron thorns flew out to delay the supporting players behind, while his right hand yanked the iron thorn back out of the Annihilation Apostle's torso.

The entire counterattack took but an instant. When Qu Yan looked again, the Annihilation Apostle who'd been charging at the front was already in several pieces, scattered across the ground.

The light in the dead man's eyes hadn't even faded yet. His pupils still reflected the covetous gleam he'd held for the dagger.

"..."

Da Yi was dumbfounded too. He hadn't expected his opponent to be this fragile — one hit and dead. But the perceptive assassin quickly realized these people weren't particularly strong, and that earlier detection had probably just been a lucky coincidence. So he disengaged immediately, slipping back through the chaos to Cheng Shi's side.

"Damn, that gave me a fright.

My lord, these people..."

Cheng Shi was amused. He'd seen everything, but said nothing. He simply raised a hand in a calming gesture and pulled Da Yi into the crowd.

All three of them were watching the show unfold, but this sudden turn of events had terrified the remaining four on the other side.

The player running second skidded to a halt. Without a thought for what his teammates behind him might think, he dropped into a crouch, wrapped his arms around his head, and rolled away.

By the time he'd melted into the screaming crowd nearby, the remaining two finally backed away with grim faces, rejoining the female player who'd been trailing at the rear.

The female player was short. She still didn't know what had happened up front. Gasping for breath, she looked up and asked: "What's wrong?"

A bespectacled heavy-set man extended an arm to block her path. His expression grave, he shook his head while retreating:

"Danger. We seem to have crossed paths with another group again.

There's a Gap Light Iron Thorn in the square! An extremely formidable Gap Light Iron Thorn."

"What?! Again?" The female player clapped a hand over her mouth, stifling a gasp. Instinctively, she drew a dagger and held it before her — but then, her expression turning to panic, she quickly stowed the dagger and raised her fists instead, asking tensely, "Is anyone hurt?"

The bespectacled man was scanning in all directions and didn't answer. The tall, thin man spoke in a low voice: "He Zu is dead."

The female player's pupils contracted, but moments later — when no one could see — she quietly exhaled in relief.

"What do we do now?"

"They've got eyes on us. Getting away won't be easy. I knew it — if this thing were so easy to grab, someone would've taken it long ago.

All we can do now is stay alert and retreat. We haven't directly clashed with them. They only killed one of us, probably as a warning.

Fall back. If we withdraw from this contest, we might survive."

The heavy-set man looked composed, but the cold sweat on his forehead betrayed the unease churning inside him.

The opponent was too strong. In a single exchange, they'd killed the strongest member of their group. He hadn't even seen where the attacker was — just a few iron thorns planted at his feet, a blur of motion, and He Zu was reduced to a pile of shredded meat.

An assassination of that caliber — if the attacker had pressed forward even one more step... who would have died next?

So the heavy-set man was afraid. He kept retreating. But the tall, thin man beside him was clearly unwilling to accept this.

"We were so close! That legendary dagger was right there!"

"Hah, forget it. Think about it — if that Gap Light Iron Thorn was that powerful and still hadn't rushed in to seize the dagger, what does that tell you?"

It means the one holding the Gift of Sores — that black-robed figure — is even stronger!

The assassin has reservations, which is why he hasn't grabbed the dagger yet. But he's guarding it. In this contest, we're not even a side dish. Before they decide to target us, let's get out.

Staying alive is what matters most.

Besides, you've already witnessed two fragments of history. Isn't that enough?"

The tall, thin man grew agitated: "I used a Return of the Past — an incredibly precious one at that! This is going to bankrupt me! If I'd known we couldn't get it, why did I even bother coming?!"

"..." Hearing this, the female player behind them wore a complicated expression as she offered a word of consolation: "Don't panic. Maybe that War assassin can't get it either? We might not be completely out of the running."

That remark suddenly struck a chord. The tall, thin man nodded vigorously: "Right, right, right! Something of this caliber goes to whoever is fated to have it. There's no telling whose hands it'll end up in.

Even if they find it too, they might not be able to take it away.

No — I need to write myself into this piece of history. That way I can come back next time. Come back enough times, and one day I'll get it!"

With that, the tall, thin man opened a history book and penned the scene before him with sweeping, fluid strokes.

A flash of light — and history was rewritten once more.

It seemed Void had indeed encroached upon Existence. So Existence had repaired history in a logical fashion — by bringing a Memory singer here, one who committed everything they witnessed to the record.

...

Chapter 526: How Did You Get Here?

Just as expected!

Cheng Shi watched from within the crowd with great amusement. When he noticed the unexpected group included a Historian, he nearly burst out laughing.

'I think I'm... starting to understand Fate?'

'Does this count as using Fate's predetermination?'

'If so, then my concept of the Destined Ones is finally legitimate!'

Cheng Shi smiled, but Da Yi beside him was utterly bewildered.

"My lord... these people..."

"Aren't you curious how they got here?" Cheng Shi asked with a smile.

Da Yi froze. 'Of course I'm curious — I've been waiting for you to enlighten me. But from the sound of it... you don't know either?'

He furrowed his brow in thought, then his face lit up with sudden realization: "My lord, could it be that They... intervened again?"

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow, practically wanting to give Da Yi a round of applause!

'Now that's what I call reading the room!'

This was the most comfortable superior-subordinate relationship. As a leader, you didn't need to think about anything — a single glance and someone would pave the road ahead, even placing stepping stones beneath your feet.

Suppressing his amusement, Cheng Shi replied: "Correct. I sensed fluctuations from Void. Fate's wheel has begun to turn. It seems He's gained an advantage in His game against Time.

There's likely a lucky soul in this trial enjoying Fate's favor. But now, that fortune belongs to us.

Of course, you needn't concern yourself with these deeper matters. Go — capture that clever one who slipped into the crowd and bring him back. I'll personally ask him what happened."

Da Yi was confused, but he nodded firmly and went to carry out his orders. Once he'd left, Cheng Shi sent a message to Qu Yan, who still stood motionless in the crowd: "Disappear. Follow them."

Qu Yan was good at everything except being Lord Yu Xi's hype man. He gave a subtle nod and agilely melted into the crowd.

The scene was total chaos — screams and shouts everywhere. But to Da Yi, this was perfectly normal. After all, there was a Chaos envoy present. If there weren't chaos where He stood, that would be the strange thing.

In truth, amid this turmoil, many were also crying out for the divine envoy, pleading for the one who'd brought Rosna forgiveness to deal with these intruding World Destroyers.

But they seemed to have forgotten: as of moments ago, the Rosna Empire had completed its separation from Decay. They were no longer under His protection.

And when the panicking, scattering populace saw the divine envoy at the square's center quietly depart, despair spread like wildfire.

Fortunately, even in the darkest of times, heroes exist. Quite a few Rosna citizens in the square were willing to stand up and protect their city. They rallied together, shouting military slogans. Even without weapons in hand, they bravely formed a human wall and began encircling the three remaining World Destroyers.

Seeing this, the three players fled.

Of course, what frightened them wasn't the disorganized mob of NPCs, but the "divine envoy" who had vanished without a trace and the high-ranked assassin lurking somewhere in the crowd.

"Did you hear them? They called that black-robed figure a divine envoy!"

He's an envoy of Decay — possibly even a Herald!

I told you — a trial involving Them couldn't possibly be this easy. We already exploited a huge loophole back in the laboratory. Now things won't be that simple anymore. Staying alive is our only objective!

Stop overthinking."

The bespectacled heavy-set man was pragmatic to the core. He led the other two in a frantic escape, diving into a maze of twisting alleyways. Only when he confirmed no pursuers were behind them did he plant his hands on his knees and gasp for air.

The tall, thin man was equally exhausted. He leaned against a wall, heart pounding, wiping cold sweat as he said:

"Maybe we should go back. It's too dangerous here. I need to avoid that Gap Light Iron Thorn and come back on my own next time."

The sole female player blinked in surprise, her eyes heavy with fatigue:

"What on earth are you talking about?"

Setting aside whether we even can go back — go back to what? Even if we don't get killed by that Plague Cardinal's poison, could we survive the collateral damage from the Grand Marshal's clash with him?

Or are you confident you can escape that Acrobat's pursuit?

That's a peak-tier match, Cui Hong! With you as a singer, plus Bao Ge as a hunter, plus me as a priest — there's absolutely no way to survive!"

The tall, thin man fell silent at her words, but still managed to squeeze out: "It's dangerous here too. Besides, they can't keep fighting forever. What if they leave..."

"Enough. At least the Gap Light Iron Thorn didn't pursue us, which means he's really just guarding his prize. As long as we keep our distance, our lives should be safe.

As for the Gift of Sores... forget it. Being able to catch a glimpse of it is already our good fortune."

The tall, thin man wanted to say more, but after a moment's thought, he sighed and fell silent.

The female priest pressed her lips together, tugging her clothes to cover her exposed skin, and spoke in a tone laden with sentiment:

"Even if we got it, what good would it do? Who says the so-called Gift of Sores is necessarily a good thing?"

"You don't understand," the tall, thin man said through gritted teeth. "The dagger itself is secondary — what matters is the Herald's soul inside it! Whoever gets that thing just has to curry favor with the Herald's spirit, and it could be the opportunity of a lifetime!"

The female priest's body went rigid. She tugged at her hood and muttered softly: "What if it's the disaster of a lifetime?"

"..." At this, the tall, thin man didn't even bother arguing. He looked at his teammate with exasperation: "If you're not interested in the dagger, then why did you even end up teamed with us, Nangong?!"

"I..." Nangong's eyes hardened. She lowered her head and said nothing.

Silence finally settled over the group. Seeing the two had stopped arguing, the bespectacled heavy-set man cleared his throat twice and took the lead. He didn't know where they were, but he knew they needed to get as far from the square as possible. Relying on a hunter's instincts, he led the other two toward the outer districts. As for the teammate they'd lost in the square — all three, by unspoken agreement, didn't mention him at all.

After they left, Qu Yan gradually materialized from another alleyway. He'd heard every word of their conversation and furrowed his brow thoughtfully, then continued following in soundless pursuit.

Meanwhile, on the other side.

Da Yi quickly captured the Destruction Declaration who'd hidden in the crowd. The Oblivion singer never even detected Da Yi before a chop to the neck knocked him unconscious. Da Yi carried him back to Cheng Shi like a chicken dangling from his fist.

Cheng Shi was currently occupying the room where the First Prince had hidden. The prince's widow and child had long since vanished to parts unknown. Seeing Da Yi arrive with his quarry, Cheng Shi smiled and woke the unlucky captive with the cold tip of a scalpel.

The Destruction Declaration felt searing pain and snapped his eyes open. Before he could scream, another iron thorn pressed against his throat. He knew "the rules" well — he clamped his mouth shut instantly. But cold sweat was dripping from his forehead like rain, and his crimson lips had gone deathly pale from being pressed together.

"Good. Being cooperative is the first step toward a friendly partnership.

Now — I ask, you answer. Don't even think about lying. I can smell the scent of falsehood.

If you give me a wrong answer, you'll probably be seeing your companion again in that lord's halls."

Cheng Shi smiled and took two steps back, studying the utterly rigid, nerve-strung Destruction Declaration before him, and asked his first question.

"How did you get here? I mean — to the Rosna Empire of this era."

The man fought through the pain, trembling as he opened his mouth.

"The teleportation array... we deconstructed the array's spatiotemporal linkage and teleported back here!"

...

Chapter 527: Pe Laya's Experiment

The teleportation array?

Upon hearing this, both Cheng Shi and Da Yi were stunned.

What surprised Cheng Shi was the "deconstruction" the Destruction Declaration mentioned. It sounded very much like a technique of Truth or Folly, which meant the other group's arrival was likely connected to either the Tower of Logic — which had championed Truth during the Civilization Era — or the Civilization Lonely Tower, which followed Folly during the Chaos Era.

Da Yi's shock, on the other hand, stemmed from a sudden realization about why Lord Ultraman had them go through all that trouble at the teleportation array for seemingly nothing... Looking back now, it wasn't for nothing at all. Every step of the lord's plan had a purpose. The teleportation array wasn't useless — the timing simply hadn't been right!

And now, look — someone had actually come back through that array!

'Lord Ultraman truly deserves his reputation!'

His gaze toward Cheng Shi grew even more reverent.

Cheng Shi felt Da Yi's blazing stare, but he had no time to wonder what the man had fabricated in his imagination this time. Outwardly serene as a still lake, yet inwardly burning with curiosity, he addressed the Destruction Declaration:

"Continue. In detail.

Start from your trial. What did you do? What did you experience? And why did you come here? Tell me everything clearly, and I can let you go."

The Oblivion singer was extraordinarily cooperative — almost too cooperative. He clearly had doubts about Cheng Shi and Da Yi's identities and was confused by everything around him, yet he didn't ask a single question. Whatever Cheng Shi asked, he answered — promptly and thoroughly.

"I... prayed for a trial to witness Oblivion's great endeavors, and was then matched into a War scenario.

Our trial took place in the Tower of Logic near the end of the Civilization Era, right when Pe Laya — a member of the Erudition Presidium — was staging her rebellion. We..."

"Who the hell?" Da Yi blurted out in confusion, but then it clicked. "You came back through Pe Laya's experiment?"

The Destruction Declaration seemed unsurprised that a high-tier player would know this history. He nodded quickly, but Da Yi immediately launched into a tirade:

"With just you lot, you managed to replicate her experiment?"

The only opportunity in that piece of history was beating the Erudition Presidium to the punch — and snatching food from a tiger's mouth requires the strength to fight the tiger! You're at best tiger food. What were you going to snatch with — your heads?

Or what, are your skulls so hard they chipped the tiger's fangs?"

"..." Da Yi's wave of contempt left the Destruction Declaration speechless. Cheng Shi said nothing, though the information in that exchange was substantial.

Pe Laya!

Pe Laya again!

What kind of experiment had this Grand Scholar of the Tower of Logic been conducting?

Cheng Shi genuinely didn't know this part of history, so he chose to keep silent. He couldn't afford to reveal his ignorance, so he simply played mysterious and kept his mouth shut.

"..." The Destruction Declaration wiped the cold sweat from his forehead and hastily explained: "No, no — we did replicate the experiment, but the opportunity was seized by the Grand Marshal and his people. We just..."

"Lao Hu?!" Da Yi's voice jumped up three octaves. "You were even matched with Lao Hu? With his rating — even if the game's matching system is absurd, how could it pair him with small fry like you?"

"..."

'Bro, can you stop being so aggressive? I'm trying to listen to a story here!'

Cheng Shi shot a subtly disapproving look and cleared his throat as a reminder. Da Yi heard the cough and instantly realized he'd disrupted his lord's interrogation rhythm. He snapped his neck straight and fell silent.

The Destruction Declaration suppressed his terror and hurriedly continued his explanation to Cheng Shi:

"We weren't matched with the Grand Marshal — we collided with his trial. No, wait — he and his people crashed into our trial.

Our trial wasn't going well from the start. Grand Scholar Pe Laya flipped the table at the Erudition Presidium meeting and used spatial deconstruction to warp the Death Knell Knights directly into the heart of Tusnat.

We'd barely set foot in the Tower of Logic's research wing when droves of Death Knell Knights trapped us inside. Fortunately, we had a Lord of Desire among us. He converted their fear, took control of several scholars, and used them to skirmish with the Death Knell Knights. Combined with everyone fighting tooth and nail, we barely survived.

But the situation was far too chaotic — way beyond anything we could handle. We even suspected it was a special trial rather than a wish trial.

Staying in the research wing meant certain death. There was no way out. So we ran — fleeing in a rout toward Tusnat proper.

Just as we were looking for somewhere to hide until the trial ended, the Grand Marshal and several others split the void open and dropped down right above us.

I don't know how they found this place, but their appearance definitely relieved the pressure on us. He's truly worthy of being War's Chosen One. He was so powerful — he..."

'Wait, wait — kid, do you even realize what you're saying? You're turning into a Grand Marshal fanboy mid-interrogation!'

"Ahem. The point."

"Oh, oh right. The point is — he led his people and cut straight through the Death Knell Knights. We were afraid to die, so we followed in their wake and broke through together."

At this, both Cheng Shi and Da Yi wore peculiar expressions. Clearly, they both knew that regardless of what faith Hu Wei professed, he should have been on the same side as the Death Knell Knights.

'You're Chaos's muscle. Why are you hacking your own people?'

Da Yi gave Cheng Shi an odd glance, afraid his lord might take issue. But Cheng Shi wasn't about to fuss over something so trivial. He lifted his chin, signaling the captive to continue.

"But it turned out they weren't fleeing at all — they had a different objective. They charged into Pe Laya's laboratory. This Grand Scholar of the Existence Origin Department was famously known for deconstructing spacetime, and in her possession..."

"We know all that already — get to the point!" Da Yi barked.

'Hold on just a moment!'

'You know, but I don't!'

'This IS the point for me, now shut your mouth!!'

Cheng Shi was furious. He shot Da Yi an icy glare, and Da Yi instantly felt the weight of his lord's displeasure. He clamped his mouth shut and stared at the ground, as docile as a student sent to stand in the corner.

The Destruction Declaration froze too. He sensed that the person in charge wanted him to keep going. So he swallowed nervously, testing the waters as he resumed his thread:

"Grand Scholar Pe Laya possessed the corpse of the Barren Walker. It was left over from a failed faith experiment in the Tower of Logic's underworld. It was precisely because she held this servant god's shell that she commanded such authority within the Erudition Presidium.

The scholar team she led had been continuously researching the Barren Walker's origin. They sought to deconstruct the associated spatiotemporal links to locate His soul — namely, the Gift of Sores — and then stitch this Decay Herald back together, creating an artificial Herald.

The Grand Marshal led his people to her laboratory. We followed behind and also saw the Barren Walker's corpse. Unfortunately, by that time, Grand Scholar Pe Laya had already lost all interest in these experiments. She'd fully devoted herself to Chaos and the rebellion against Truth, so the experiment had been shelved.

Someone in the Grand Marshal's group tried to restart the experiment, but that's when several Grand Scholars from the Erudition Presidium arrived at the Tower of Logic, intending to reclaim the experimental materials — no, not reclaim. Confiscate. They declared that Pe Laya had betrayed the Tower of Logic, and her experimental resources needed to be redistributed."

"..."

...

Chapter 528: Wondrous Fate

Hearing all this, Cheng Shi nearly burst out laughing.

So the Tower of Logic's Grand Scholars didn't particularly care about the Tower's survival either. The Death Knell Knights had already punched through their defenses like a sieve, yet instead of uniting against the external threat, they'd decided this was the perfect time to confiscate Pe Laya's experimental assets?

'Confiscating assets is the excuse — coveting the Barren Walker's corpse is the real motive.'

The Destruction Declaration's voice had gone hoarse, but he didn't dare stop.

"The newcomers were powerful and extremely difficult to deal with. Then the Grand Marshal had a falling out with one of his own teammates — a Plague Cardinal who wanted to divide up the Barren Walker's corpse and go their separate ways. The Grand Marshal disagreed, so they started fighting among themselves too.

With a three-way brawl erupting, our little group didn't dare show our faces. We could only hide in the laboratory and watch.

Probably because we were so weak that nobody cared where we were. But then our teammate named Cui Hong — that tall, thin Historian — stepped forward and said he understood this experiment. He could replicate it while everyone was distracted and take us to find the Herald's soul.

He also said that even if we failed, there'd be no consequences. But if we succeeded, we wouldn't just witness one piece of history — we might even find that legendary dagger.

We didn't actually want to stir up trouble. But He Zu — the one who was... who was just killed by you two — the Annihilation Apostle, the moment he heard there was a chance to find the Gift of Sores, he went absolutely berserk. He insisted we had to try.

I swear, even the Lord of Desire wasn't as driven as him in that moment. The Lord of Desire thought it was far too dangerous — way beyond our tier — and didn't want to do it. But He Zu refused to back

down, so the two of them started arguing. Then my fellow Oblivion believer turned out to be a wolf in sheep's clothing — he took out the Lord of Desire in one blow.

We couldn't resist...

But deep down, I suppose everyone wanted to see what that legendary dagger looked like. So nobody agreed, nobody refused — we all just silently watched as the Historian got to work.

Who could have guessed that he'd directly use a Return of the Past, copying down every step of the experiment. Then, while the Grand Marshal's three-way battle raged on, we secretly pilfered Pe Laya's experimental results and arrived here — materializing on that teleportation array in the underground prison.

Actually, it didn't work at first. But for some reason, there was a split second when the spatiotemporal response suddenly connected, and then we just..."

The Destruction Declaration finished his account, his voice completely shot. By the time he'd nervously swallowed his way through the entire story, Da Yi's expression had turned deeply skeptical. He'd wanted to interrupt and challenge the account multiple times, but each time he caught Cheng Shi in his peripheral vision, he held back.

Cheng Shi had listened for a long while with his eyes closed, feigning profound contemplation. He had plenty of questions himself. Only when the captive finished did he slowly open his eyes, smiling at Da Yi with a shake of his head. Putting on the look of a considerate commander, he lifted his chin — signaling that Da Yi could ask whatever he liked.

Given permission, Da Yi raised an eyebrow and fired away:

"Like hell — Lao Hu is one of the sharpest people alive. You think he'd let you mess around in that laboratory for that long?"

"If even you lot made it back here, how could he not have followed you through?"

The Destruction Declaration answered tremulously:

"They... he and that Plague Cardinal had gotten so heated that the other one swore he'd rather let us have it than let the Grand Marshal succeed. Then that Decay believer pinned the Grand Marshal down."

"..." Da Yi stiffened, then spat in disgust. "And what about Lao Hu's teammates? Were they all dead?"

"There was an Acrobat who was also incredibly strong — he held off two Grand Scholars single-handedly, but couldn't break free himself.

The remaining Scarlet Hunter and Purgatory Bishop each took a side and were locked down by their respective opponents. There were only five of them total, and the whole situation was an absolute mess.

So we just..."

"..."

At this, Da Yi finally understood what Lord Ultraman had meant by "there's likely a lucky soul in this trial enjoying Fate's favor." Unless someone was blessed by Fate, there was simply no way such an absurd exploitation of loopholes could have worked.

Respect flashed in his eyes. He asked one final question: "So there's a Fate believer among your group?"

The Destruction Declaration paused, then counted off on his fingers, looking baffled:

"No... I don't think so?"

One Corruption mage, one Oblivion assassin, one Prosperity hunter, one Memory singer, one Decay priest, plus me. I'm certain there's no Fate believer."

"...Damn, that's weird. Who's the lucky one then?" Da Yi muttered to himself in confusion.

Watching this, Cheng Shi desperately wanted to pat him on the shoulder, point at his own nose, and declare with full confidence:

'Me! It's me! I'm the lucky one!'

But he didn't, because that would have been far too undignified.

Still, to be fair, it wasn't unreasonable that this Oblivion believer had ended up at the Rosna Empire — because right now, a grand spectacle of Oblivion was about to unfold here as well.

So as always — fate was truly wondrous.

Now that he'd untangled the full story of how the other group had arrived, Cheng Shi began pondering where exactly the change brought about by Fate would manifest.

Since the only variables were these five suddenly appeared players, if the Gift of Sores could truly be found within this trial, then logically, its trail would have to be connected to these five in some way.

Therefore, as long as he monitored every move these people made, there was a strong chance of finding a new lead on the Gift of Sores.

But the prerequisite was... these five needed to be out and moving.

Having them tied up in a room wouldn't do. The Gift of Sores wasn't the Barren Walker — a dagger didn't have legs to walk over and find these players on its own.

So Cheng Shi gave Da Yi a look, signaling him to release the Destruction Declaration.

...

Chapter 529: A Long-Awaited Reunion

Da Yi didn't understand why his lord had done that, but he knew he didn't need to understand. So he casually tossed the unlucky captive a healing potion.

The Destruction Declaration was dumbfounded. He'd never imagined they would actually let him go. He stared at the potion in his hand in disbelief, then looked up at Cheng Shi, wanting to say something but unable to form the words.

Cheng Shi chuckled. "You didn't lie, so from now on, you're free.

Go. Find your teammates, or find a place to hide until the trial ends, or go witness the Oblivion spectacle you wished for.

Kannar City is large. Plenty of room to wander."

The Destruction Declaration's heart clenched for an instant. He realized they truly intended to release him. But having witnessed the overwhelming power of these two — especially the mysterious air of this clearly-in-charge figure — a bold idea suddenly emerged in his mind.

He didn't want to leave.

The other side was obviously made up of players too. Since both sides were players, why would he go back to a bunch of low-scoring nobodies instead of clinging to the leg of high-scoring veterans?

So he shook his head with fierce determination, then nodded just as fiercely, and spoke to Cheng Shi with an attitude that all but offered to rip his own heart out to prove his sincerity:

"Boss, I want... to join you. Can I?"

"..."

"..."

Cheng Shi blinked and nearly laughed out loud again.

'Kid's got a keen eye, but the problem is — if you stick around and don't leave, where am I supposed to find the Gift of Sores?'

Da Yi snorted derisively, openly looking down his nose at the man. His contemptuous gaze clearly said: 'Who do you think you are, trying to follow the lord alongside me?'

The Destruction Declaration could see the rejection in their attitudes, but he wanted to try one more time. Cheng Shi, however, wasted no more time. He pointed at the window and said:

"Throw him out. We're leaving too."

With that, he strode toward the door.

Da Yi carried out the order and tossed the man out the window, then followed Cheng Shi as they gradually disappeared into the raging blizzard. Before long, his figure too had vanished from sight.

As for the defenestrated Destruction Declaration, he was now lying in an alley, gazing up at the narrow strip of snow-filled sky above, lost in a daze.

He felt he'd experienced too much over the past two days. High-tier players he'd never encountered before kept appearing one after another. Their world was so vibrant — they could even clash with named historical figures, and had the strength to covet artifacts connected to the gods Themselves.

Meanwhile, himself...

Apart from smashing and burning his way through doomed worlds, venting his destructive urges on lifeless objects, he'd never accomplished anything. To be this much of a failure as a person...

When his teammates had always been players of the same tier, the sense of inadequacy wasn't so strong. But today — repeatedly suppressing his instinct to destroy everything, playing the subordinate everywhere — this intense emotional impact and stifled frustration finally broke through his defenses.

"No, I can't keep drifting through life like this. I need to do something big and prove myself!"

With that thought, he shouted a couple of times at the snow-filled sky, then scrambled to his feet and marched out of the alley.

"I need to first figure out what's going on here. And then — leave a big mark on this piece of history!"

The Destruction Declaration left. And after he was gone, on a rooftop beside the alley, Da Yi spat impatiently.

"Damn, took him long enough. If the lord hadn't ordered me to tail him, I'd have just killed him and been done with it."

With that, his figure flickered and he resumed the pursuit.

With this, the three "original players" in the trial had split into three paths. Silence's hunter tracked three variables. Chaos's assassin shadowed another variable. One variable lay dead in the square — and what Cheng Shi needed to do now was resurrect him, then set this immobile variable back in motion.

At this stage of the trial, he didn't want to bet that the Annihilation Apostle would be the one lead that went nowhere. So for the sake of prudence, better to put this reckless fool back on overtime.

He made his way to the square and found the heap of shattered remains, now frozen solid like cuts of meat. Using an iron thorn borrowed from Da Yi, he gave the corpse a gentle poke, then retreated beyond the square. He donned his crowned helm to conceal himself and fired a healing spell infused with the aura of Recovery at the frozen chunks.

The Annihilation Apostle quickly reassembled and came back to life. The moment his eyes opened, cold sweat had already soaked through every stitch of his clothing.

Cold. Bone-chilling wind!

But colder still was his heart.

He snapped to clarity, realizing this trial wasn't simple at all. The legendary dagger — the Gift of Sores — wasn't something he had any right to covet.

But at least, whoever had killed him had also revived him. That meant they bore no genuine malice — it was merely a warning to stop eyeing the dagger.

Once that clicked, He Zu immediately used the cover of wind and snow to slip away into the shadows. He didn't dare linger for even a second — he just wanted to get away from the place where he'd been obliterated.

Cheng Shi watched him leave with a smile, thinking that all he needed to do now was keep tabs on these five people's movements. Da Yi could track the scent of his own iron thorns, so the surveillance required no effort on Cheng Shi's part.

Of course, as the one controlling the board, he couldn't pin all his hopes on these five variables alone. What other clues might this vast city of Kannar still be hiding? What was the current state of the teleportation array? Could the Grand Marshal and his group, who hadn't pursued, still arrive? These were all things he needed to verify.

And so Cheng Shi vanished once more into the wind and snow, searching for more leads.

After a chaotic day, Kannar City fell silent again. Frightened citizens either huddled in groups or retreated to their homes, locking themselves inside. Self-organized warriors blocked the entrance to the imperial court, petitioning to be sent to battle. The Rosna royal family hadn't reappeared since the divine envoy's arrival. Although many believed the envoy's thunder had purged the disloyal royals, they still hoped someone would step forward — someone who at least knew how to lead an army — to help them defend their homeland.

They didn't know this was a pipe dream, but much like the Rosna Empire's history of faith, these brave souls persisted in their futile efforts.

Old Gallon's corpse lay upon the imperial court's high wall. A large patch of skin was missing from his chest and abdomen. The flesh beneath, which should have been red, had been frozen deathly pale. This Historian who'd wanted to die alongside his child had ultimately failed to fulfill his wish — but at least in death, his body still witnessed the Rosna Empire's last gasp of courage.

Cheng Shi walked through this eerie atmosphere and re-entered the imperial court, heading straight for the First Prince's former quarters.

That secret chamber he'd heard about so many times from others — he'd never actually visited it himself. Now he needed to see it with his own eyes, to check whether any other clues remained.

But just as he reached the door to the First Prince's bedchamber, he heard muffled rustling sounds from inside.

Cheng Shi's gaze sharpened. He stopped in his tracks, tilting his head slightly to listen more carefully — and at that very moment, he noticed a limp arrow falling from the distant sky, gently "drifting" toward him.

This was the communication method he'd arranged with Silence's hunter. Cheng Shi carefully plucked the arrow from the air, then ran his fingers along the shaft, finding two lines of small text.

The first line described the tracking situation: "Three intend to hide in one building. The priest found a chance to slip away. Heading toward the imperial court. Target not lost."

The second line held a name: "Wither Priest. Nangong."

"?"

Cheng Shi froze, then the corners of his mouth curved upward.

That name — why did it suddenly remind him of someone he once knew?

...

Chapter 530: How Nostalgic — The Familiar Fish Pond Match

"Who's there?!"

The person making noise inside the palace was indeed Nangong. This Decay priest appeared highly alert, seemingly having detected Cheng Shi outside the chamber.

But in truth, she hadn't heard anyone approaching at all. With the wind howling and snow raging outside, she — a low-ranked priest — couldn't possibly have sensed the light-footed Cheng Shi through a blizzard.

Yet she still looked toward the entrance. Not because she was bluffing, but because someone had told her that someone was coming.

Cheng Shi hadn't expected the Blood Exchange Priest to have become so sharp in the months since they'd last met. Since he'd been discovered, there was no need to hide from an old acquaintance.

So he intentionally made a bit of noise, letting Nangong know someone really was approaching.

Nangong's heart sank at the sound. Her entire body tensed. She gripped her dagger and looked toward the stone pillar outside the entrance where the noise came from, simultaneously backpedaling several steps in the opposite direction. Her face was painted with panic as she shouted: "Come out! I can see you!"

But the moment those words left her mouth, she saw a hand reach past her shoulder from behind, holding a bottle of cola right in front of her face. Then she heard a voice from behind — one that seemed vaguely familiar.

"People say when a friend visits, you offer them a cola. So how come when you bump into me, you're reaching for a knife, Nangong?"

"!!!"

Nangong's mind went blank with an audible buzz. She'd never expected the noise to be a diversion — the intruder had already crept behind her. She was so panicked she didn't even have the bandwidth to wonder why her assailant's weapon of choice was a bottle of cola!

She was too frantic — as though some secret that would crumble under scrutiny had just been exposed. Like a startled animal, she instinctively ducked beneath the cola bottle's "sneak attack," then blindly swiped behind her. Without checking whether the dagger had connected, she scrambled on all fours toward the exit in a frenzied... "hop."

Yes, her coordination had completely collapsed. Her escape turned into an awkward same-side stumble — like a startled roe deer lurching its way out.

"..."

Watching this unfold, Cheng Shi was stunned too.

It had been a long time since anyone's physical comedy had left him this taken aback. Even an Acrobat probably couldn't have choreographed something this bizarre and slapstick.

But his attention wasn't on Nangong's embarrassing display. He was wondering why she was so... terrified.

'Interesting. What's this Blood Exchange Priest doing here?'

'She's after the legendary Gift of Sores too?'

'But who told her that the First Prince's quarters would contain clues about the dagger?'

After all, the First Prince's residence wasn't in any prominent location within the imperial court. Even wandering aimlessly, it would be nearly impossible to end up here by chance.

When something was this profoundly unreasonable, it meant there were secrets he didn't know about.

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow and watched with great interest as Nangong continued her performance.

But to her credit, the old friend still had some reaction time. Midway through her "hop," she suddenly froze. She turned around with an expression of pure shock to stare at Cheng Shi behind her, then widened her eyes and asked in disbelief:

"Cheng... Cheng Shi?"

The Blood Exchange Priest had a decent memory.

Cheng Shi smiled and nodded. "It seems I owe you an apology — turns out you were just performing an acrobatics routine for an old friend. Not bad, not bad at all. Quite spectacular."

As he spoke, Cheng Shi wickedly started applauding.

Nangong's face turned crimson in an instant. She scrambled to her feet, tugging her clothes to cover her scar-riddled body. She awkwardly hid the dagger behind her back, then retreated two steps with a face that was half red, half white.

Though there was a flicker of joy in her eyes at seeing a friend, it was far outweighed by wariness toward Cheng Shi. This priest friend had clearly learned enough hard lessons by now — even a former acquaintance couldn't be easily trusted.

"You..."

Nangong took several deep breaths, trying to calm her nerves. She was about to ask why Cheng Shi was here, but he immediately cut her off and reversed the question:

"What are you doing here?"

"..."

Nangong was tongue-tied. The composure she'd barely regathered was shattered again. Her nerves were taut, her expression ugly, and she squeezed out the thinnest of smiles, scrambling to think of an excuse — only to hear Cheng Shi "oh" with feigned realization:

"I see — you're here looking for the Gift of Sores too!"

"!!!"

When those words came out of Cheng Shi's mouth so bluntly, Nangong broke into another round of cold sweat. But amid all these layered shocks, she finally regained her clarity and realized something monumental: the high-tier match her team had stumbled into contained a player named Cheng Shi!

And he was the Offspring Priest she'd been matched with months ago!

He really was an expert — just as Song Yawen had said. He had to be at least 2000 points!

No — a player in a 2000-point match couldn't have slaughtered an 1800-point Annihilation Apostle like chopping vegetables. He had to be well above 2000. Possibly 2400!

This revelation made Nangong even more nervous. But at least she knew this Offspring Priest wasn't a bad person — or at least, not bad enough to make her despair.

But was he... also here for the dagger?

Nangong pressed her lips together and answered in a pale voice: "Yes... I just wanted to take a look, to see if there was a chance..."

Cheng Shi sighed and shook his head.

No need to hear more. His Master of Deception talent had already told him — she was lying. She wasn't here for the dagger!

But if not, then why had she quietly slipped away from her three-person team and risked coming here?

Cheng Shi's brow furrowed slightly. His gaze casually drifted to Nangong's right hand, the one behind her back.

She was holding a dagger, but had hidden it behind her...

Under what circumstances would a panicked player hide their defensive weapon behind their back?

Sure, even if she recognized him and felt that her initial slash was stupid and embarrassing — the issue was that this Blood Exchange Priest's face was still plastered with caution. Someone this wary of him would never instinctively hide their weapon.

Even if she wanted to avoid embarrassment, she could have at least tucked it into her sleeve. After all, she was bundled up so tightly — those long sleeves could easily conceal a dagger.

But she didn't. She chose the method that kept the dagger furthest away from him.

'Interesting. She doesn't want me to see that dagger?'

He couldn't blame himself for overthinking. In a place where a dagger was supposed to appear, encountering a friend who was deliberately hiding a dagger — anyone would overthink!

'She... Nangong... found the Gift of Sores?'

'It was still in the First Prince's quarters?!'

'No, impossible. Da Yi had searched this place. If there was a dagger here, he couldn't have missed it.'

'So the dagger wasn't originally here — but someone... brought it back?'

At this thought, Cheng Shi's eyes narrowed slightly. And at that moment, Nangong noticed his gaze too. She tensed, took another step back, and gripped the dagger behind her even tighter.

"Are you afraid of me?" Cheng Shi smiled.

Nangong stiffened, then nodded and immediately shook her head: "No. I know you're a good person."

"Mm, I'm a good person, absolutely. A great person, even.

You know I'm a priest too. The hardest part of being a Blood Exchange Priest is managing your self-inflicted wounds. You look a bit weak. Tell you what — let me give you a free healing session. Consider it a gift from an old friend."

With that, Cheng Shi extended his hand.

That made Nangong stumble backward in fright.

She was terrified — the last thing she wanted right now was to end up pregnant with some bizarre child. But Cheng Shi didn't give her a chance to refuse. He simply flicked his wrist and...

Tossed over a bottle of cola.

"...?"

Nangong had been ready to dodge a healing spell, only to find a cola bottle rolling to a stop at her feet. It reminded her of that other trial — the two hours she'd spent knocked out by Cheng Shi.

'He still loves his cola.'

"You..." For a moment, Nangong didn't know what to say.

She'd always remembered that trial. She remembered Cheng Shi's kindness too. But right now she truly had secrets she couldn't let him discover. Still, seeing him use this gesture to remind her he meant no harm — as memories flooded back in that instant — Nangong pressed her lips together and finally smiled.

"I... won't fall for it again. Your cola has powerful sedatives in it. You'll sleep right through it. I won't drink it."

The moment those words left her mouth, the cola bottle at her feet burst open with a "pop," releasing a cloud of gas. Nangong didn't even have time to react. Pure instinct made her tense up and inhale sharply — and then her eyes rolled shut as she collapsed unconscious.

"Thud—" The priest girl hit the floor. Seeing this, Cheng Shi clicked his tongue and said:

"One trick after another — each one different from the last.

How could the same ruse fool the same person twice? When you want to deceive someone, you obviously switch up the routine. But I have to say, this feeling is really nostalgic. That familiar fish pond match energy — one scam, one knockout, never misses.

The road to fraud prevention is long and arduous. Nangong, oh Nangong — when will you learn?"

Cheng Shi chuckled at his own words. But as the laughter faded, his expression gradually turned cold. His aura began climbing steadily. Twin scalpels appeared in his hands, and with razor-sharp eyes trained on the dissipating smoke, he spoke in a soft, mocking tone:

"You've been watching this show for quite some time now, haven't you? It's time to show yourself.

Or would you prefer I come and invite you out personally?"

