

## The Gods 531

Chapter 531: Gift of Sores — Dize!

The smoke gradually dissipated and the scene fell silent. No one answered Cheng Shi.

But Cheng Shi wasn't surprised. He simply retreated several cautious steps, then fixed his gaze on Nangong's form as it became clearer through the thinning fog, his brow deeply furrowed.

He wasn't actually certain there was another presence here, but he suspected there was. Based on the reflexes Nangong had displayed moments ago, she couldn't possibly have heard his careful approach through a blizzard.

So someone — or something — must have warned her.

The strangest part was: if this thing could alert her, why hadn't it warned her again when he approached a second time and tossed the smoke-rigged cola?

After thinking it through, Cheng Shi could only come up with one explanation — this unknown entity's method of communication wasn't some silent telepathy like his exchanges with Brother Mouth, but rather audible "speech" that couldn't be concealed. Only that would explain why it had stopped warning her after he got close. It wasn't that it didn't want to — it didn't dare. It was afraid of exposing itself!

Based on this reasoning, Cheng Shi had made his earlier probe. But that test sank without a ripple.

Still, he wasn't in a hurry. His gaze roved over Nangong's body, and before long he noticed the hand twisted and pinned beneath her. Unless he was mistaken, that hand was gripping a dagger. As for whether it was the dagger he was thinking of...

Cheng Shi decided to escalate. Time for another test.

He didn't dare approach Nangong in case something unexpected happened, but not approaching didn't mean he couldn't move her body. So Cheng Shi extended his hand again and gripped the ring on his finger.

Yes — he was preparing to send Nangong a Lightning Punishment.

Of course, as a friend, he'd find an opportunity to revive her afterward. It was just that right now he had no way to move her, so she'd have to suffer a bit of inconvenience first.

But the very instant he extended his hand, this "inhumane" probe finally drew a response!

"...It's Le Le'er's aura. So she really has encountered problems too...

You, boy — why do you carry His aura?"

"!!!"

Cheng Shi was stunned. Even though he'd already mentally prepared himself, telling himself this unknown entity was likely the soul of Dizel crystallized into the Gift of Sores — when that voice actually rose from beneath Nangong, he was still shocked for an instant!

There really was someone!

And what had it said? "Le Le'er." Those three syllables alone were practically enough to confirm this was Dizel!

This legendary Gift of Sores was in the hands of a healer player with barely over a thousand points!

How had she obtained it?

Where had she gotten it?

If she'd found it on the way here, Bianse Long and Qu Yan would surely have noticed. But if she'd found it here in the First Prince's quarters... that contradicted the facts from before the time reset.

Cheng Shi couldn't figure it out, but he didn't dwell on it. The party in question — no, the soul in question — was right in front of him. Overthinking was pointless when he could simply ask. So he suppressed his shock and delight, and let out a light laugh as though none of this surprised him in the least:

"Dizel. You've finally decided to show yourself."

"The name of Dizel perished long ago. Let it rest. Boy, you have yet to answer my question."

"Why should I answer your question?"

"?" Dizel was taken aback for a moment, then broke into hearty laughter. "You've got nerve, boy. Worthy of one fated to find me. I know why you seek me — to obtain the method of ascension to godhood.

Indeed! I do possess such a method. But without my aid, it can never come to fruition.

Boy, if you wish to break free of the gods' shackles and become an existence on Their level, you need only sign this contract with me. Once I've had my revenge, you shall...

Ascend to the Divine Throne!

Well? Do you have the courage to challenge Them?"

"?"

Now it was Cheng Shi's turn to be dumbfounded. Master of Deception admittedly didn't work on Them, but the thing was — he didn't even need Master of Deception for this. Anyone who'd ever been conned could hear how absurd this pitch was.

'Sign a contract and ascend to the Divine Throne'... Buddy, do you think I'm Qu Yan?

'Your scamming technique is a bit outdated, isn't it?'

'What era is this, still playing the grandpa-inside-the-dagger routine?'

And besides — your mother Prosperity died before all the other gods, your Benefactor Decay rejected your devotion, and you've even had your last remaining shell toyed to ruin by Truth. You're a lone, orphaned soul — what exactly are you bragging about?

If you had a method to ascend to godhood, wouldn't you have long since crushed Decay, slain your mother Prosperity in revenge, and annihilated Truth?

Why would you have fallen to such a state?

Cheng Shi wanted to laugh. This Dazel had clearly been isolated from the world for far too long. Its words were riddled with holes, and even its opening line had leaked a wealth of information.

What did "Le Le'er has 'also' encountered problems" mean? Who else could this child of Prosperity, who'd been turned into the Mother Tree of Fear, be compared to with the word "also" — if not the fellow child of Prosperity, Dazel itself!

So it wasn't hard to deduce: because of Prosperity's fall, the children of Prosperity were likely undergoing a massive change — a negative one at that — and Dazel's lament probably stemmed from exactly that.

Having worked all this out, Cheng Shi smiled. Truly smiled.

He looked toward the space beneath Nangong and let out a cold chuckle:

"Then let me ask you this — the path to godhood in your hands wouldn't happen to lead me to the Divine Throne your mother left vacant when she fell, would it?"

"!!!!!"

Dizel recoiled in soul-shaking terror!

It had never imagined a player could know about Prosperity's fall. Yes, it had indeed experienced some unfortunate changes due to Prosperity's demise, but in the eyes of mortals, it should still be one of those untouchably lofty existences.

So when it realized Nangong had encountered a clever person, it had immediately set its designs on this clever person as well.

It had spent a long time with Nangong. Though she wasn't exactly ambitious, for Dizel, slowly cultivating a thoroughly understood host wasn't a bad arrangement — at least within the timescale comprehensible to humans, it was in no rush.

But it had never anticipated Prosperity's fall. This sudden upheaval had thrown every one of its plans into disarray, creating an urgent need for a new host with drive and executive ability to help carry out certain schemes.

It had its eye on Cheng Shi. Little did it know that Cheng Shi had his eye on it too. Only this "mutual attraction" felt rather lopsided — one side was like a butcher searching for the right knife, while the other was like a customer picking through cuts of meat.

Cheng Shi didn't care whether the meat was fresh or not. What mattered was that it could be placed on his chopping block without fighting back!

So he dropped a bombshell of information and scared Dizel witless!

"You... what are you?"

Cheng Shi smiled and struck while the iron was hot:

"What am I?"

A Prosperity hunter!

I don't know if you've heard of me, but it doesn't matter. At least now you know.

I witnessed Prosperity's fall with my own eyes, watching as the gods devoured His authority.

I pulled Le Le'er's roots out with my own hands and forged His divinity into a ring...

And now I've found the soul of Prosperity's last remaining scion. Tsk, tsk, tsk — tell me, what should I make out of you, Di-zel?"

The moment those words fell, Cheng Shi felt the final bar of his ring fill completely.

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow.

'Heh. It believed me.'

...

Chapter 532: An Innocent Man Bears No Guilt — But the Jade He Carries Does

"...You're lying. Le Le'er has not perished. I can sense that she is still alive. You — need not try to deceive me."

'Huh?'

Dizel was nothing but a soul, yet it could still sense whether Le Le'er was alive or dead?

Why?

Simply because they were connected by the same roots — both children of Prosperity?

Being called out to his face was an unpleasant feeling, but right now it hardly mattered whether the bluff held. Because Cheng Shi had already achieved the effect he wanted — the other side was panicking.

Even though Dizel knew Cheng Shi had lied, it was still rattled. That meant its situation was dire. It absolutely didn't want to — perhaps couldn't afford to — encounter an existence on its own level, especially one who was privy to the details of Prosperity's fall!

That put it in an extremely passive position!

The Gift of Sores it had become couldn't operate as freely as a true Herald's soul. Now it could only pretend to be something mysterious in front of clueless players, using "deception" to advance its layout and schemes piece by piece, hoping to find a host capable of helping it "resurrect."

But now it had run into a far more skilled con artist. The two of them clearly knew nothing about each other, yet Cheng Shi had managed to project an air of "I know everything about you while you know nothing about me."

Normally, this kind of bluff would be difficult to pull off in front of a Herald, since players simply knew too little about Them and lacked the information to back it up.

But Cheng Shi was different. Though his knowledge of the gods wasn't extensive, his understanding of Prosperity specifically was more than adequate. He'd heard far too many stories about Prosperity from Their own mouths and had even witnessed Prosperity's fall firsthand.

So the moment he faced Dizel, the scales of fate had already been loaded entirely in Cheng Shi's favor!

In this contest of "lies," he simply couldn't lose!

Cheng Shi smiled. He didn't refute Dizel's exposure. He just grinned — that infuriatingly smug grin.

And that smile only made Dizel panic more.

If the person before it was just an ordinary player, it would merely assume the human had gotten carried away in their excitement at finding it. But if the other party was a so-called Prosperity hunter who knew everything...

"..."

'I can't just sit here and wait for death!'

Dizel made its move. It couldn't flee, but it could use its residual divine power to attack Cheng Shi. If it could just eliminate this "hunter," then the current crisis might still be salvageable.

And the reason the Gift of Sores bore the name "Gift of Sores" was precisely because Dizel could still wield the power of Decay to corrode targets while siphoning their vitality to nourish itself.

However, as an imprisoned soul, every use of this power eroded its own sanity and memory. That was why it rarely deployed this ability, and why it had chosen a relatively non-aggressive priest as its first host!

During its time traveling with Nangong, it had only accumulated, never expended. As a result, by now it possessed an enormous reserve of Decay power at its disposal.

And so — it decided to stake everything on a single strike!

Cheng Shi wasn't foolish. He'd anticipated an attack — he just hadn't expected the timing to be so... terrible.

Who attacks during a silent lull in conversation?

The best moment to catch an enemy off guard was while they were speaking. Thinking and communicating divert attention and make people harder to defend — that's when a strike is most likely to land.

But once the enemy has fallen quiet, what else can they do besides stay on guard?

That was exactly Cheng Shi's state. He'd been braced for a sneak attack from Dizel the entire time — even while bluffing and intimidating, he'd kept his nerves taut. He'd expected to at least dodge the ambush, but...

He had underestimated the sheer power involved.

The Gift of Sores was ultimately a dagger forged from a Herald's very being. The Decay power contained within was vast beyond measure, especially after Dizel's policy of accepting everything and spending nothing. The destructive potential had reached a truly terrifying level.

Which meant that although Cheng Shi had been on guard — he'd completely failed to defend.

The dagger suddenly opened an eye. Then the entire blade transformed into a vine that crept and grew outward from beneath Nangong. As these vines trembled skyward, great fruits of Decay formed at their tips.

They were called "fruits," but in truth, they looked more like eyes!

Unlike the Mother of Prosperity's, however, these eyes were anything but bright and alert. Instead, they hung at crooked angles like melting wax eyeballs. And when all those drooping wax-eyes eerily snapped open simultaneously, countless threads of grayish-white light burst forth and struck Cheng Shi's body. The gray light even coalesced into withered Decay vines that bound him in place!

No one would have guessed that this dagger wasn't simply a brute-force weapon but also a horrifying crowd-control artifact. Even after abandoning Prosperity, Dizel still bore Prosperity's form. Though what should have been lush green vines had turned into gray, rotted, withered tendrils, the shape was unmistakable — one lineage, passed down without error.

Cheng Shi had been hit. The torrential power of Decay instantly corroded his flesh, sapped his spirit, and the vitality-draining beams carved away at his life force like the blade of a slow execution — piece by agonizing piece. In the blink of an eye, Cheng Shi went still.

He turned pale with shock. Then... mildly alarmed. And finally... perfectly calm.

"..."

Because he suddenly realized that in the face of this terrifying slow execution of his vitality... he simply wasn't going to die.

The Vitality authority!

This power, inherited from Dizel's own mother, was now acting like a true mother — shielding Cheng Shi, protecting him from her own child's attack!

The absurdity of this scene nearly made Cheng Shi laugh out loud.

'The dead Prosperity has finally stopped chasing me, but She's still "tormenting" Her own child.'

'I wonder what Dizel will think when it sees this...'

What did it think?

It went insane!

Dizel went insane!

It absolutely could not believe it was seeing Prosperity's authority in another person!

The Gift of Sores was ultimately a creation of Decay — its very name spelled out that what it bestowed upon others was always Decay, never Death.

It could inflict boundless Decay upon an enemy, reducing them to a withered husk, then let its host deliver the killing blow. That was why every assassin coveted it — because it was simply too effective!

But when its host had been put to sleep by a smoke bomb, and when its target's body contained the cheat code of Prosperity's authority — what could Dizel possibly do?

Apart from rage impotently, what could it do?!

"Impossible! Lies! It's all lies! She could never share Her authority with someone else!

She is Prosperity! She is the Prosperity who coveted the entire universe and sought to assimilate all things!

Even in death, She would never share a shred of Her authority!!"

"..."

...

Chapter 533: That Brilliant Gleam of Humanity

Dizel's defenses had crumbled. Watching this unfold, Cheng Shi let out a cold laugh in his heart.

'You're wrong, Dizel. Your understanding is hopelessly outdated.'

'Your great and glorious mother had long since drafted a new blueprint for universal prosperity — even laid the foundation for it — and gifted Her authority to all the gods...'

'Of course, you're right about one thing: She didn't share this authority with me willingly.'

'Because the one who shared it with me was my friend Big Cat — not the dead Mother of Prosperity.'

At this thought, Cheng Shi shook his head.

Seeing his disdainful attitude, Dizel was both shocked and furious.

Shocked because this person very likely really was the so-called Prosperity hunter — someone who'd even played the role of a scavenger during its mother's fall. Furious because such a powerful, well-connected being refused to cooperate with it, choosing instead to oppose it — even mocking it in what was clearly a one-sided curb stomp!

Who was he? Why was he doing this? What right did he have?

Years of suppressed frustration and simmering hatred erupted all at once. Countless negative emotions crashed against this Herald who'd lost everything, driving it to howl in fury:

"Why?!"

Why do this to me!

Prosperity possessed not a shred of maternal love — She only knew how to devour! Decay is a senile fool who refuses to abdicate! They've always been selfish — always!

And so are you!

You're doing this for yourself too! Fine Prosperity hunter you are — what possible benefit could hunting me bring you?

I've never harmed you! I only want to reclaim what's mine!

Why do this to me?!"

Dizel had truly snapped. It had lost all reason, its logic falling apart completely.

When you stripped it all down, it had always been acting for itself too. Since everyone was the same, what right did it have to criticize others?

It all came down to who had the bigger fist. That person called the shots.

Though — cursing those other two, Cheng Shi was a hundred percent on board. But cursing me? What's that about?

Cheng Shi scoffed, his expression mocking:

"Why?"

Dizel, I've never done anything to you!"

"You want to hunt me — isn't that enough?!" Dizel shook its withered vines, roaring maniacally.

"No, no, no — you've got it wrong. Even if I truly am a Prosperity hunter, it was you who made me one."

Cheng Shi struggled to raise a finger and wagged it at Dizel. Then he wiped away every trace of amusement and said coldly:

"Don't forget — between the two of us, the first lie was told by you.

In a liar's eyes, the moment the other party opens their mouth to deceive, the challenge has been issued. The conflict becomes inevitable.

In the name of Deceit — as His follower, in this duel of lies...

I cannot lose!"

With that, Cheng Shi quirked his lips and executed an elegant bow.

"Oh, right — I forgot to introduce myself.

You may call me Yu Xi. I am His Herald, and also a hunter who hunts Prosperity."

The moment those words landed, Cheng Shi broke free of the feeble withered vines, gripped the ring on his finger, and was about to use Le Le'er's divinity-forged ring to annihilate Le Le'er's own brother — when Dizel screamed and stopped him.

"You can't kill me! You can't kill me!

I have a contract with Nangong! If I die, she won't survive either!

You know her! She remembers you! She keeps a ledger of debts — and your name is written in it!

She wants to repay you! She says you're a good person!

You can't let her die! You won't let her die!!!"

Dizel was terrified. Fear was coalescing inside the hall. But the truth was, Cheng Shi hadn't actually intended to kill it. He'd figured that Lightning Punishment probably couldn't destroy it anyway — he'd only meant to make it behave. What he hadn't expected was that Dizel genuinely believed Cheng Shi could end its existence.

This Prosperity hunter carried its mother's authority and Le Le'er's aura. Dizel didn't dare gamble on whether his methods were lethal, because it didn't want to die. It refused to accept such an end!

But its words did remind Cheng Shi of something.

A contract!

Nangong had indeed been deceived into signing a contract with it. 'That poor girl — how much has she suffered under Dazel's thumb?'

'When other people pick up divine artifacts, their lives take off. How come you ended up with a ball and chain instead?'

'Lucky for you, you ran into me. For the sake of that... gratitude ledger... wait, who even keeps those in the apocalypse? Whatever — in honor of this so-called gratitude ledger, I'll save you one more time.'

'I hope I'm not wrong — you want to be free of it.'

With that thought, Cheng Shi smiled and hit himself with several healing spells. Dazel had already ceased its attack — the moment it realized it couldn't kill Cheng Shi, it stopped wasting its power.

Cheng Shi recovered his condition, then pulled something out of his personal space — a... grotesque tongue.

"Tsk. Come to think of it, the contract of the Barren Walker — your former shell — was also eaten by my Brother Tongue here.

I'm guessing the contract you signed with Nangong used the same pitch you just tried on me. And that means the contract is a lie.

Brother Tongue, today's your lucky day — bonus meal!"

The Tongue of Eating Lies instantly perked up, twisting its tip in excited circles on Cheng Shi's palm.

"Where? Where's the bonus meal? Hurry up and serve it!"

Where?

'I'd like to know that too.'

Cheng Shi held Brother Tongue and looked toward Dizel, only to see its countless wax-eyes contract sharply in absolute terror:

"What are you doing?! I won't let you break my contract! Nangong won't agree to break it either!

Without me, she'd die immediately in the gods' trials!

It was me — I saved her all those times!"

"..."

That was genuinely a valid point. Cheng Shi furrowed his brow. He figured it was better not to handle this behind Nangong's back. Besides, without waking her, he probably had no way of even locating the contract.

So he tucked Brother Tongue at his waist and fired a Purification spell at Nangong.

Nangong woke. She frowned, feeling something hard digging into her from below. When she opened her eyes and saw the Gift of Sores in her hand had assumed its battle form, her entire body jolted.

Especially when she realized the enemy facing the dagger appeared to be Cheng Shi...

In that instant, strength surged from somewhere deep within Nangong. She gritted her teeth, hauled herself up, and in a flash threw her arms wide, shielding Cheng Shi with her body. She faced the battle-ready Gift of Sores with unwavering resolve, pleading desperately:

"Don't kill him! Please — don't kill him! He saved my life!"

"..."

"..."

Cheng Shi smiled. A genuinely happy smile.

Seeing this, he truly felt his heart warm for an instant. It reminded him of the day Old Jia had hauled an entire case of cola home for him — and once again, he felt the trust and warmth of human connection.

'What a silly girl. Even after I knocked her out again, she still shielded me.'

His gaze softened as he looked at Nangong's thin back. He spoke gently: "Thank you. Thank you, Nangong."

Nangong's mind was still foggy, but she knew one thing for certain — she absolutely couldn't let the Gift of Sores harm Cheng Shi. Failing to repay a debt of gratitude was one thing, but actively harming someone? That she couldn't bear.

Even if he'd discovered the secret she carried, he... was a good person. He probably wouldn't tell anyone. Probably.

Thinking this, Nangong clenched her fists, her eyes growing even more resolute.

In that moment, within the palace of the Rosna Court, the radiant gleam of humanity shone brilliantly.

Meanwhile, the "heartless villain" Dizel... couldn't bring itself to laugh at all.

'Wait — Nangong, who exactly are you shielding?!'

'The one you should be protecting is ME!!!'

'The one who's about to die is ME!!!'

But Dizel was already drowning in despair and couldn't even muster the energy to point this out. Because right now, its countless wax-eyes were watching the tongue tucked at Cheng Shi's waist suddenly leap onto Nangong, and then—

"Slap—"

Gave Nangong a vicious smack across the face.

Nangong was dumbfounded. She clutched her cheek in disbelief, frozen in place.

But in that moment of stunned silence, a soft "click" echoed through the air — and the invisible contract shattered.

From this moment on, one gained freedom. The other gained... self-imprisonment.

"Slurp. A snack's still a snack." Despite the words, the Tongue of Eating Lies still wriggled with satisfaction.

Cheng Shi chuckled and added:

"Tsk. Interesting.

Are you going to retract on your own, or should I help you pull out these rotted branches and spoiled fruit? Hmm, Dizel?"

"..."

"!!!"

The instant his words fell, the Gift of Sores reverted to an ordinary dagger. Not because it didn't want to resist, but because wisdom meant knowing when you were beaten. It understood it had lost, and its only hope was that submission might earn a better outcome.

And Nangong, watching all of this? Her mind went blank again.

She clutched her reddened-beneath-the-pale cheek, turning in disbelief to look at Cheng Shi. When she realized that the "villain" in this scene was actually this Offspring Priest...

The silly girl's world came crashing down.

...

Chapter 534: Yes — The Gift of Sores Has Always Been in My Hands

Nangong's bewilderment wasn't an act.

Cheng Shi casually glanced at her and could practically see smoke rising from her head.

'CPU fried, little lady?'

He chuckled softly, stepped around the motionless Nangong, and picked up the Gift of Sores that lay at a distance.

The unknown breeds fear. The moment Dizel learned it was facing a genuine Prosperity hunter, it lost all will to resist.

As a Herald's soul, it shouldn't have submitted so easily. But Dizel's situation was far too complicated — its own machinations had cost it virtually every source of protection. There was no one left to back it up.

Especially once it realized that this fellow Herald, Yu Xi, even had the credentials to partake in dividing Prosperity's authority — it surrendered completely. Absolutely and utterly.

Cheng Shi hadn't expected the process of subduing this dagger to go so smoothly. He quickly wrapped the Gift of Sores in the Tongue of Eating Lies and stowed it away in his personal space, then turned to deal with the aftermath.

But just as he was about to "wake up" the little priest before him, Nangong seemed to come back to herself. She looked at Cheng Shi with an indescribably complex expression, her mouth opening and closing for a long while without producing a single word. In the end, she pressed her lips together and managed only:

"I'm sorry..."

Cheng Shi blinked. "What do you have to be sorry about?"

Nangong didn't answer his question. Instead, she raised her hand, staring at the fresh cut on her wrist, then at the dagger that had vanished from her grasp, and at the contractual bond that no longer existed in the void. She murmured in disbelief:

"It's really... broken?"

"Yes. It's really broken." Cheng Shi smiled. Looking at the bewildered, dazed little priest before him, he thought for a moment and pulled out another bottle of cola.

At the sight of it, Nangong's entire body shuddered. She instinctively retreated a step.

Cheng Shi's pranks ended there. He laughed softly and produced a second bottle.

"Don't be afraid. This time it's real.

Talk to me, Nangong. I'm guessing you've been through quite a story. The wind is harsh and the snow is heavy today — perfect weather for drinking cola indoors and listening to stories."

With that, he pressed the cola into Nangong's hands, then crossed his legs on the floor, relaxing like two old friends catching up. He downed his own bottle in long, eager gulps.

He genuinely wasn't lying this time — the cola was real.

But Nangong didn't dare believe it.

She gave the bottle in her hands a strange look but didn't open it. Instead, she pressed her lips together and knelt down, her gaze drifting toward the battlefield where Cheng Shi and the Gift of Sores had just clashed. Her eyes grew hazy and distant.

"You're probably wondering why this dagger — the one every assassin dreams of — was in my hands.

Heh. When I say it out loud, it actually sounds unbelievable. I obtained it very early on. Even before many assassins had heard of it.

So early that it happened during my very first special trial...

Right here, in Kannar City of Rosna!"

"?"

Cheng Shi froze. He truly hadn't expected the story to begin so absurdly. So a dagger of this caliber had been picked up in the very first week?

'What?'

'The story of how I'm a beginner priest who found a divine artifact at the start of the game — is that it?'

And yet... why did this plot feel strangely familiar?

Despite wanting to interject badly, Cheng Shi kept silent and continued listening. He could tell that this Decay priest desperately wanted to share her story.

"It was a trial of Decay. Perfectly normal, right? Everyone's first special trial is bestowed by our Benefactor.

Our mission was to find a less-than-devout Decay believer here in Kannar City and make them devout again.

That trial was complete chaos. Since it was everyone's first special trial, six players all distrusted each other. There were people wanting to lead, people who refused to cooperate, people screaming about killing — I was terrified, so I slipped away when they weren't looking.

All I wanted back then was to find somewhere to hide until the trial ended.

But one player among us was extraordinarily perceptive. I don't know how he became so familiar with this divine game after just one week, or how he could generate all sorts of bizarre ideas about the trial scenarios.

He was a follower of Folly. He was brilliant, and he was the one who found the Gift of Sores... the one in your... in your hands now..."

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow. "You mean the first person to discover it wasn't you?"

Nangong pressed her lips together and nodded:

"That's right — it wasn't me.

He found the dagger and treated it like a priceless treasure. He even declared he would use it to restart the Rosna Empire's entire faith.

Of course, I only learned all this later, at the Recruitment Square in Kannar. Because just like the black-robed figure I encountered today, he stood at the center of the square, holding a dagger, and re-forged the devotion of the Rosna Empire."

"!!!" Cheng Shi's pupils contracted. His brow furrowed tightly. "You mean... you witnessed this piece of history? No — history had already been rewritten?"

"Yes. History was rewritten.

There was also a Memory singer in that trial — just like my teammate today. When he saw the Folly player's heroic act, he was so moved with admiration that he wrote what he'd witnessed into the historical record."

"..."

Cheng Shi was speechless. So the history they knew, the past they understood, even the treasure map Poison had used to trace her way here — all of it had been altered long ago!

Everything they'd experienced today was merely a reenactment of the previous alteration. The truth of history had long been painted over with graffiti, and today's overwrite was nothing more than a new layer of inverse-colored graffiti slapped on top of the old one.

Amid Cheng Shi's shock, Nangong's narration continued.

"But that wasn't the end..."

The Folly player was extraordinarily driven. He believed that returning Rosna to Decay wasn't the finish line — rescuing Kannar City from the World Destroyers before the trial ended was the real perfection.

So he rallied every devout citizen in the city, led them in a counterattack, and charged out beyond the walls."

"..." Cheng Shi blinked, then suddenly laughed. "I think I know how you ended up with that dagger."

"..."

Nangong awkwardly tried to smile but couldn't quite manage it.

"It's exactly what you're thinking. They died. All those teammates whose heads had been clouded by Folly's passion — they died on the high wall.

But I didn't know that at the time. I hadn't dared to join the battle. I stayed hidden in the city. But when I thought about how my teammates had won us the trial while I'd contributed nothing, the guilt was overwhelming.

So..."

"So you climbed the wall wanting to fulfill your duty as a priest, only to find them all dead. And then you suddenly became the body-recovery team.

And Dizel — that's when it found you, right?"

"..." Nangong nodded, her eyes laden with complicated emotion. "You're as smart as that teammate of mine."

"..."

...

Chapter 535: Nangong — Have You Ever Considered Changing Your Faith?

Cheng Shi froze, then laughed despite himself.

'No, no, no — please spare me that particular compliment. Bad luck.'

Nangong seemed to realize she'd said the wrong thing. Her face reddened and she hurriedly changed the subject: "But back then, I had no idea it was some Herald named Dizel. I only knew it as the spirit dwelling within the Gift of Sores."

"So you signed a life-and-death contract with a weapon spirit?"

"It said I had to sign..." Nangong shrank into herself.

"..." Cheng Shi smiled politely and rolled his eyes. "And now? Why are you back here?"

"I never planned to return here. I didn't even know I'd end up here today. The weapon spirit... Dizel said the rules of the game had changed, that the gods were accelerating things. It needed to advance further and couldn't keep tagging along with someone as unambitious as me.

I'd been suffering from the offerings Decay demands. I wanted to be free of it but couldn't shake it loose. When it said all that, I followed its guidance and prayed for a...

'Transfer of ownership' trial."

"A transfer of ownership trial?"

"Mm. It said it needed an ambitious person — preferably one consumed by desire. I didn't care who it wanted to switch to. I just wanted it to dissolve our contract so I'd stop enduring the extra suffering...

I've always believed it wasn't a blessing of Decay, but Decay's curse. Whoever obtains it will become unfortunate.

Dizel... truly helped me many times. But my offerings to it far outweighed what it gave in return. I... don't owe it anymore.

But now I owe you again, Cheng Shi. Thank you. Truly, thank you."

Cheng Shi didn't bother with pleasantries — he accepted her gratitude without pretense. But her words made something click. He suddenly understood that earlier, when Nangong had recognized him and tried to hide the Gift of Sores from his sight, she hadn't been afraid of him exposing her secret — she'd been afraid the Gift of Sores would target him!

She'd been afraid it would harm him.

Even in that desperate moment, this kind-hearted girl's instinct had been to repay her debt. She didn't want Cheng Shi to suffer the same curse of Decay she'd endured — even though the entire reason she'd come here was to rid herself of that very curse!

Looking at Nangong's sincere face, Cheng Shi smiled radiantly once more.

His gaze burning with intensity, he suddenly asked:

"But even if you've freed yourself from it, Decay still demands your offerings. The core of being a Blood Exchange Priest is the blood exchange — as long as you continue to follow Him, you'll keep suffering.

Can you still bear it, Nangong?"

Nangong's expression froze, then she gave a resolute nod: "As long as there's no extra suffering, I can endure the price of faith."

"You can endure it... I see. In that case — Nangong, have you ever considered changing your faith?"

"???"

At those words, Nangong's head filled with question marks. She covered her mouth in shock and stared at Cheng Shi, her baffled eyes clearly asking: 'You can do that? Just... switch?'

Honestly, Cheng Shi wasn't entirely sure either. But he wanted to try.

And the reason he could even suggest switching someone else's faith was that he had, well... a tiny bit of confidence to back it up.

That confidence stemmed not only from Void's protection but also from his understanding of — and guesses about — Decay.

Just as he'd done today — stripping the faith from an entire city of Rosna citizens and returning their freedom — Cheng Shi had been probing Decay's true will from the very beginning.

He'd treated that probing like a key — a hastily crafted key meant to unlock the door to clearing this trial!

Indeed, the scene where Cheng Shi had Qu Yan play the black-robed figure wasn't merely bait for the original black-robed person and his patron deities. He'd had a third target: Decay itself!

He was using what amounted to the ultimate blasphemous oathbreaking feast to test Decay's true intentions.

Because he'd never forgotten what that withered giant had said when he'd sought an audience with Decay:

"I summoned you here... merely to see if this Deceit believer who made me realize... that the past was useless... is like me... also a pitiful soul..."

That sentence actually contained an enormous amount of information. At the time, Cheng Shi had been too deep in shock and confusion to catch the deeper meaning. But after learning more about Decay through his subsequent conversations with Aph Ros, he'd formed a tentative hypothesis about Decay's true will.

Aph Ros had mentioned that Decay was originally a god without compassion — yet as the ages progressed, He gradually developed it.

So what had caused this change?

That question, too, had an answer. Because Aph Ros's warning had stated that His change was connected to that unnameable Him!

With this knowledge, revisiting Decay's words and reflecting on what He'd meant by calling himself a "pitiful soul"...

Pitiable — a word meaning worthy of compassion. The only target a person could beg compassion from was an existence that, on some level, stood above them.

Beggars don't beg from other beggars. The poor don't ask the poor for money!

But!

Decay was already a god — one of those who sat upon the sixteen lofty Divine Thrones, looking down upon virtually all of existence. What compassion could He possibly still be seeking?!

If He truly was "begging," the target could only be Him — the Origin, that omniscient and omnipotent god!

The logic seemed to hold. But what was He begging for? Why, exactly, was He pitiable?

Normally this would have been impossible to figure out — after all, Cheng Shi was just a mortal. Even draped in enough terrifying titles to give anyone a heart attack, he had to admit he wasn't one of Them. He didn't know Their past.

But fortunately, he'd witnessed quite a bit related to Them, and his thinking was unconventional enough. He drew a connection to the scene of Prosperity self-sacrificing for universal flourishing. If even Prosperity could fulfill Her will through death, then could Decay's championing of decay... itself be the fulfillment of His will?

Not the version of Decay's will that players understood — but the one Cheng Shi had just deduced. The will of "begging."

Was it possible that He wanted to use universal decay as a way to beg for Him's attention?

Just as His believers used the same method to beg for His attention?

And it was this rot of body, mind, and soul that had turned Him into a "pitiful soul." Could He be using this near-"self-mutilation" to bid for Him's concern?

It wasn't impossible. Though it was a bold and unreliable guess, observations of other gods showed they clearly "wanted" something from Him.

For example — the Convention!

...

Chapter 536: Speculations on Decay's True Will!

As everyone knew, the establishment of the Convention was definitely connected to Him. Though Cheng Shi didn't know the specifics of its content or purpose, by studying the behavior of his two Benefactors, it wasn't hard to see that they held different attitudes toward Origin!

The toppling of eras was connected to Origin. Fate championed predetermination and pushed Void's era toward its end — so it could be interpreted that He leaned toward "approaching" Him.

But Deceit was different. He disagreed with Fate's stance, which meant He likely favored distancing from Him.

Since every member of the Convention had their own preferences, looking at Decay through this lens — did He have His own preference too? Could He also be a member of the "Approach Faction?"

Perhaps even an impatient member of it, using His own actions to seek Him's gaze ahead of schedule!

And there was supporting evidence for this in the history of the gods — just as Aph Ros had described the changes.

Decay had originally felt no compassion, which meant He didn't need followers. But how could a deity possibly not care about spreading His own faith?

If this were truly the case, it could only mean that at the time, He had something far more important to do — like single-mindedly trying to "move" Origin.

He wanted to obtain Him's gaze!

And when He discovered that Origin had not looked upon Him, He changed strategies, attempting to attract Him's attention through an even grander display of decay. But He'd failed again — because He'd personally uttered the words "the past was useless."

It was crucial to note the timing of those four words — they were spoken in the present, after Cheng Shi had used Prosperity's specious argument to consume Decay's faith. This meant "the past was useless" didn't negate His first phase — it negated His second.

So was it possible that He'd discovered the truth: that even universal decay couldn't "move" Origin? And that was why He'd given Himself the title of "pitiful soul?"

He felt He'd been "abandoned." He felt He needed to change strategies once more...

Because by this point, Decay's faith had already spread throughout the universe. Decay was no longer "decaying." Since His will permeated all existence, "pitiful" was no longer truly pitiful.

Based on this, Cheng Shi theorized that this "begging" deity was perhaps entering His third phase. And the essence of this phase was to make Decay across the universe... recede!

When only a single Decay remained in all of existence, perhaps that would be the moment this god upon His throne became truly, maximally pitiful — and that, in a specific sense, would be the ultimate universal decay!

Furthermore, during that previous Decay trial, His inaction as Prosperity's forces invaded the Sighing Forest was powerful evidence supporting this theory!

And these were the furthest-reaching conclusions Cheng Shi could draw about Decay based on everything he knew!

Decay... was going to disappear!

Just as Prosperity had self-sacrificed, this god who'd lost His counterpart was also self-sacrificing!

The only difference was that Prosperity had sacrificed Her life, while He was sacrificing His faith!

Of course, until any of this was confirmed by one of Them, everything remained Cheng Shi's speculation. That was why he'd said he wanted to try.

He wanted to test whether his guesses were correct. And right now, the perfect opportunity had presented itself.

Nangong — this girl who'd suffered so much under Decay's cruelty — if she could successfully break free from that suffering today, it would mean his theory was at least partially right.

Cheng Shi looked at Nangong and smiled with a nod: "You heard correctly. I'm really asking if you'd like to change your faith."

Nangong was thunderstruck. Her pupils contracted violently, her entire body visibly tensing. Goosebumps rose across her rough, scar-covered skin.

She stared at Cheng Shi in disbelief, unconsciously swallowing as she stammered: "Who... who are you really?"

"Cheng Shi. The genuine article."

"Then why would you..."

Cheng Shi raised a hand to cut her off: "Don't worry about the details. Just tell me — do you want to switch or not?"

"I..." Nangong probably wanted to. Her eyes brightened for an instant, and she was about to say something — but just as quickly, the light died. She shrank back. "Forget it. Without the weapon spirit's help, and saddled with an oathbreaking curse on top of that... I probably wouldn't survive."

"Mm, that's a valid concern. Though I suspect He might not actually curse you, it's certainly one of the risks.

But wanting gains always means accepting risks. No gamble is ever a guaranteed win. All I can say is, if you want to try, I'll do everything in my power to mitigate the fallout of any Decay curse.

But I can't promise anything, because as I said — this is a gamble. Once you're at the table, Nangong, you bear the risk yourself."

"..." Nangong studied Cheng Shi for a long while, seeming to detect something in his words. She asked nervously: "Have you... already prepared a new faith for me?"

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow and smiled.

"Smart."

"Can I ask..."

"Prosperity. Your Benefactor's counterpart — Prosperity!"

"?" Nangong froze again. For a split second, she was certain Cheng Shi wanted her dead. "I... can I refu—  
"

"You might want to think it over carefully." Cheng Shi cut her off with a meaningful look, then quietly closed his eyes and said nothing more, giving her ample time to consider.

Nangong watched Cheng Shi simply close his eyes, and the turmoil inside her nearly broke through the ceiling.

She could feel his good intentions. But Cheng Shi had also said this carried risk — potentially significant risk.

She'd also picked up on his uncertainty. Though she couldn't fathom the reasoning behind it all, this didn't feel like a gamble prepared specially for her. It felt more like an experiment — one that Cheng Shi wanted to push forward unilaterally.

That realization made the inner conflict even worse.

Thoughts raced through her mind, but before long she recalled the notebook where she logged debts of gratitude. Those densely written pages still bore Cheng Shi's name.

And now... it wasn't time to cross his name off. It was time to add another entry.

He'd saved her once more — this time, freeing her from the suffering of the Gift of Sores.

He...

Nangong gritted her teeth and suddenly asked: "Will I die?"

Cheng Shi slowly opened his eyes and shook his head firmly: "Absolutely not."

Nangong clenched both fists, as though steeling herself for a great decision. In her heart she whispered: 'I'm not afraid of dying. I'm only afraid of dying before I've repaid what I owe. I'm sorry, Cheng Shi — I have too many debts outstanding. I can't die here yet.'

'But if I won't die...'

"All right! I want to try!"

The moment those words left her mouth, Cheng Shi's gaze sharpened. He spoke solemnly: "You've decided?"

"Mm. I've decided. I want to try.

What do I need to do?"

Cheng Shi smiled. He pointed skyward and said: "Pray to Him. Yes — Him. Your Benefactor, Decay. Tell Him of your suffering. Then beg Him to release you from the shackles of your faith."

"!!!!!"

Nangong was dumbfounded. Her brain buzzed again. Now she was sure — Cheng Shi wanted her dead!

"..." She looked at Cheng Shi with an incredibly complex expression, mustering her courage several times only to swallow the words back down. It was only when she noticed the gentleness in his eyes that some calm returned to her heart. She pressed her lips together and asked hesitantly: "Are you lying to me?"

Cheng Shi smiled — radiant and joyful.

"I never lie."

...

Chapter 537: When the Tide Has Already Receded...

"However, the prayer needs a bit of revision.

Here — I'll dictate, and you repeat after me."

Nangong's expression turned strange. She stared blankly at Cheng Shi and unconsciously nodded.

Cheng Shi chuckled softly, cleared his throat, and spoke while carefully crafting the words:

"How does life decay? How does all creation rot?

O supreme Lord of Decay, Your devoted follower has perceived Your true will and wishes to answer Your call with her very being, to contribute however humbly to Your grand enterprise of universal decay.

This lowly one knows she can no longer walk at Your side. The regret weighs heavy — yet to fulfill the true Decay, she hereby prays to You...

Prays that You release the shackles of her faith, so that Your follower might sing praises for the coming universal decay upon another path.

And so...

Life need not decay, nor need all things rot.

Decay's glory shall return entirely to You alone, and when that moment comes — that shall be the true universal decay!"

"..."

For a brief instant, Nangong felt that Cheng Shi was the real Decay believer, while she was just a fraud who couldn't even compose a basic prayer or hymn.

But since she'd chosen to believe, she followed through.

She repeated Cheng Shi's words verbatim, not missing a single syllable. And the moment the last sound left her lips, a peculiar ripple passed through the void above the imperial court — which had already been ravaged by countless bolts of Lightning Punishment.

A massive vortex suddenly tore open amid the heavy, layered clouds. A phantom giant's hand descended limply, its fingertip delivering the lightest of touches — and a thread of grayish-white radiance fell from above. That light, though brilliant as starlight, couldn't illuminate the real world. It streaked across the firmament like a meteor, then plunged straight downward, passing through the roof to strike Nangong directly.

Nangong's entire body shuddered. She looked up in terror — and saw that as the light descended, every trace of "decay" in the imperial court vanished entirely. Ruin restored itself. Decrepit surfaces were renewed. Damage was mended. Withered things revived. Even she herself felt a wave of unbearable tingling across her own body.

She pulled back her sleeve in shock — and found the arm that had once been covered in scars was now flawless and pristine white, without a single trace that Decay had ever touched it!

She inspected her body in disbelief, then turned to Cheng Shi with a gaze that was both lost and elated.

He hadn't lied. Everything he'd said was true!

Decay had let her go. The shackles of faith had been unlocked. Her oathbreaking was forgiven. No curse had been imposed. From this moment on, she... was simply herself. A pure, faith-free person!

"Cheng Shi..."

Nangong's heart overflowed with gratitude she wanted to express, but the words caught in her throat. So she could only stare at Cheng Shi, letting her eyes say everything.

But at this moment, Cheng Shi was far more stupefied than Nangong.

Based on what he'd just witnessed, Decay had indeed receded. But...

'Your tide...'

'Didn't it recede in the wrong direction?'

'???'

'Why did it recede toward me?!'

Cheng Shi was dumbstruck. Because that heavenly light hadn't only struck Nangong — there had been two beams of grayish-white divine radiance, and one had landed squarely on him!

'Bro — I was the emcee! I said those words so your follower could pray to you! I wasn't praying for myself!'

'Besides, I'm not even a Decay believer! Why are you zapping me?!'

'This is a misunderstanding! A pure, absolute misunderstanding!'

But was it really a misunderstanding?

No...

When Cheng Shi noticed the nail on his left pinky finger beginning to change color, he knew this was no accident.

Decay! The fingernail!

His divine gift had returned to Cheng Shi's hands, manifested in this form.

And this meant his hypothesis about Decay was correct — He had shifted strategies and begun sacrificing His own faith.

"..."

'What does this even count as?'

'What's meant to be mine... stays mine?'

Cheng Shi swallowed and studied his left pinky nail. The nail that had once been a healthy pinkish hue was now even more vibrant. It displayed none of Decay's typical characteristics, yet it had unmistakably become Decay's representative!

The nail had merged completely with Cheng Shi!

He'd initially assumed this was yet another servant god's relic. But he was wrong — wildly wrong.

Because...

Decay Authority "Faded" (Partial): A true divine authority recognized by the Convention, bestowed by its wielder. The user holds partial proxy rights to exercise this authority.

Authority Effect — Faded Redemption: Under this authority's influence, the proxy may grant forgiveness on behalf of the authority's wielder, freely dissolving the faith contracts of His believers, recognizing their oathbreaking, and erasing any curses they bear.

Authority Effect — Faded Majesty: Under this authority's influence, when the proxy faces blasphemous attacks against this faith, they may borrow a portion of this authority's power to strengthen themselves and confront the crisis.

Authority!!!

Cheng Shi had never imagined that the fingernail he'd once discarded was actually Decay's authority!!!

'Huh?'

'HUH?!'

'He's that generous?!'

'What does this mean? He saw that I already carry Prosperity's "Vitality," so He came over personally to balance things out?'

'Is this a rule of the Convention, or a voluntary gift?'

'If that's the logic, should I go ask my Benefactors for a couple of authorities to play with, then go mess with the two Existence deities?'

'Forget it — no point courting death. After all, even Aph Ros acts like a well-behaved student in front of Time. Those two don't seem like pushovers.'

'That said, this "Faded" authority from Decay... feels a lot like Time's "Eternal Imprisonment."'

'A specialized tool against one's own faction?'

Looking at the authority's description, the message was clear — from now on, he could "persuade" any Decay believer to leave the faith at any time. And if a Decay believer refused to listen and tried to resist, he could even borrow the authority's power to teach the rebel a harsh lesson!

'Nice, nice, nice!'

'I see now — the essential business of the gods isn't just stealing each other's authority. It's also about stabbing their own believers in the back!'

'Right, exactly! Doesn't the Fun God also treat me like a clown every single day?!'

"..."

'From today on, I seem to have yet another identity — a "Faded One" of Decay?'

'Tsk, tsk, tsk — if I can personally unlock the shackles of His faith, then why shouldn't I be called His Herald?'

'A Decay "Herald" who acts as proxy for the authority of Fading!'

'What a win. Another day of temporarily having the surname Lü!'

Cheng Shi gradually recovered from his shock. He looked at the emotionally complex Nangong before him and smiled:

"Don't panic. Shedding Decay was only the first step. The next step is joining Prosperity.

After this trial ends, Nangong — go pray. Pray to Prosperity. The words don't matter, just include my name.

Don't ask why. Just do it.

Though I will say — even though I'd anticipated it, I really didn't expect Decay to actually recede..."

Nangong gradually calmed from her excitement too. Hearing this, she looked up in surprise:

"Recede? What's receding? The snow tide? Actually, it does seem like the snow has stopped."

"...?"

Cheng Shi froze, then turned to look outside the hall.

Decay had indeed stripped away the imperial court's decay, but the heavy snowfall was just ordinary weather — it couldn't be classified as decay and shouldn't have been affected.

The snow hadn't even stopped when the gray light had descended moments ago. How could it suddenly stop now?

His gaze sharpened. Something felt off — and then in a flash, realization hit. His eyes snapped wide.

'This is bad — the World Destroyers have arrived!'

...

Chapter 538: And So the Story Ends

The enemy's approach meant danger was imminent, but Cheng Shi wasn't afraid in the slightest.

Because just now — at the very moment Nangong shed Decay's colors — the trial had ended.

Though the trial hadn't ejected Cheng Shi yet, the notification he'd received clearly said it was over. He could leave whenever he wished — leave this Rosna Empire where devotion no longer existed.

And it wasn't just him — Nangong's trial had ended too.

She stared at Cheng Shi in bewilderment, unable to fathom why clearing trials always seemed so effortless whenever she ran into Cheng Shi.

Cheng Shi glanced at Nangong and read her confusion. He chuckled inwardly: 'This girl really needs to see more of the world. Wait until you actually use my name to pray your way into a Prosperity trial — then you'll learn what "easy" really means!'

'Big Cat will certainly arrange everything perfectly for you.'

"Leave this place. Follow my instructions and pray for a trial as soon as possible. The road ahead might become a bit smoother.

Though it's cruel to say, I have to remind you, Nangong — not every trial is this simple, and not every person..."

Cheng Shi had been about to say that not everyone on her gratitude ledger was still a good person. Different circumstances shape different personalities, and she should be careful.

But on second thought, he swallowed the words.

Everyone had their own choices — he had no right to interfere. Perhaps for Nangong, personally coming to understand someone was its own form of repaying a debt.

Cheng Shi gave Nangong one last look laden with complex emotion, then repeated: "Leave this place. Your trial is over."

Nangong's eyes were even more complex. She seemed to grasp what he meant and understood that without faith and without her talents, she would only be a burden here. So she nodded firmly.

"Cheng Shi, I will remember you."

With those words, the little priest's form gradually faded away. And at that very instant, from the sky above Kannar City came the sound of a whistling arrow.

Both Da Yi and Qu Yan were signaling for assembly. Cheng Shi furrowed his brow, looked beyond the imperial court, and darted out with agile steps.

Before long, the three reconvened in the First Prince's room. Da Yi's expression was grave, and the moment he spotted Cheng Shi, the words tumbled out:

"Grand... my lord, the trial is over! The two players I was following vanished!"

Bianse Long had obviously lost his targets too. Departing from a trial was a power governed by the game's rules — he couldn't prevent it. So he considered the mission a failure on his part.

But strangely, Qu Yan didn't look depressed. Or rather, he was trying to look disappointed, but the barely concealed glee in his eyes was far too obvious — completely impossible to hide. So he settled for controlling the corners of his mouth, lowering his head, and avoiding Lord Yu Xi's gaze.

Cheng Shi shot Qu Yan a contemplative glance. Something seemed to click, and his expression turned peculiar — but he quickly turned to address Da Yi's anxiety. He didn't blame either of them. Instead, he smiled and nodded:

"Don't panic. I know the trial has ended.

I told you — even if we couldn't find the Gift of Sores, I wouldn't let you leave empty-handed.

I found the key to clearing the trial and ended it."

"Huh?" Da Yi blinked, about to offer thanks — but then his expression darkened as realization struck. Lord Ultraman's words implied that the dagger... still hadn't been found!

"My lord, did They interfere again...?"

'Yes! Perfect! That's exactly what I was waiting for you to say!'

Cheng Shi gave a somber nod, his expression clearly conveying that the gods had meddled too deeply and the dagger had been lost once more.

However, to prevent lingering mission complications, he added:

"We've lost the opportunity to obtain Dizel's soul. The mission is void. I need time to carefully consider our next move...

But for now, before we leave — come with me to the city walls. The World Destroyers appear to have arrived."

Da Yi was deeply disappointed about the mission's failure, since that had been his only path to earning his Benefactor's attention. Cheng Shi saw his dejection and smiled reassuringly:

"No need to worry. After this trial ends, you two might...

just get a chance to take a walk on the Chaos Steps."

"!!!" Da Yi's eyes went wide with disbelief. "My lord — truly?!"

"If you'd rather not, then don't." Cheng Shi snorted with amusement, ignored him, and took the lead toward the Kannar City walls.

Da Yi followed behind, brimming with excitement. He clenched his fists tight, wanting to express his elation but unable to find words better than "damn" — so after a moment's hesitation, he gave up.

He turned instead to Qu Yan, wanting to share his joy with this temporary recruit who'd joined halfway through. But to his surprise, a single glance revealed that the other man seemed even more excited than he was.

'What's with you, Chameleon? Already taking on my colors?'

'How come I'm the one who got good news, but you're the one bouncing off the walls?'

Bianse Long naturally knew Da Yi was watching him, but he had no idea what the man was thinking. He'd had no bandwidth for Da Yi's thoughts since earlier. He was drowning in euphoria, completely unable to surface.

As for the reason behind this euphoria...

Praise be to Lord Yu Xi — it was his masterful arrangements that had allowed him to... successfully obtain a second faith!

That's right — Qu Yan had become a dual-faith hunter. At this stage, at a time when even many Chosen Ones hadn't found their second faith, he — Silence's sixth-ranked — had become a dual-faith player just by standing on the right side!

And his second faith was none other than... Decay.

At this very moment when Decay's tide was already receding, he'd inadvertently become a twilight hunter!

In truth, Qu Yan's second faith was indeed connected to Cheng Shi, but Cheng Shi himself was completely unaware of it.

When Cheng Shi had ordered Qu Yan to play the role of a twilight hunter, this God Worship Society chameleon had begun obsessively analyzing Lord Yu Xi's intentions. He couldn't fathom the depths of a Deceit follower — especially a Deceit Herald — but he knew how to obey.

He'd chewed over and over on that phrase: "Whether we can find that dagger depends on how convincing your disguise is." Then he'd poured everything into becoming a twilight hunter. He'd even torn open several wounds on his own body to sell the illusion, allowing the Tomb End Stone's aura to appropriately corrode his flesh.

This way, unless someone recognized him outright, a casual glance would convince even peak players that he was a genuine Decay believer!

He'd even found himself wishing he really were a Decay believer — that way, Lord Yu Xi's plans could proceed even more smoothly.

Under this conviction's influence, he'd maintained the twilight hunter disguise even while tailing the other players, constantly reinforcing the self-suggestion that he was a Decay believer.

And at precisely that moment, Cheng Shi had received Decay's attention and the gift of "Faded."

It was the exact instant when Decay's true will was understood by a mortal — when the vision of universal decay resonated with another soul. This "begging" deity's capacity for compassion reached its zenith. He sensed Qu Yan's "plea," and following His own deepest desire, bestowed upon the "pitiful one" Qu Yan a Decay identity.

Of course, during the recession of Decay's tide, He shouldn't have been expanding His faith. But it was precisely because He sensed the subordination between Qu Yan and Cheng Shi — knowing this particular gift wouldn't hinder the grand cause of universal decay and might even assist His chosen Faded One in advancing the great enterprise — that He acted.

In the end, this wasn't a simple act of mercy toward a "pitiful soul." It was more like a small bonus attached to Cheng Shi's "alignment of wills."

But acquiring a second faith wasn't that simple. It didn't happen just because the second Benefactor agreed. To fuse faiths, the prerequisite was always obtaining the original Benefactor's approval.

And here, the coincidence was beautifully perfect — because Bianse Long's original Benefactor was that deity who "never expressed, never commented," who only ever observed from the sidelines: Silence!

He had likely already noticed everything happening here. But He would never offer comment — and no comment meant... no refusal.

And so, through a cascade of strange coincidences piling atop one another, the chameleon Qu Yan had silently "earned" something big.

He attributed it all to following the right master. His gaze toward Cheng Shi grew ever more fervent. But what he didn't know was that his master, Lord Yu Xi, was still puzzling over the Decay power he sensed pulsing within Qu Yan.

'What's going on — did I misunderstand the whole recession thing?'

'How did we gain a new Decay believer?'

'The tide just went out and it's already coming back in?'

Cheng Shi did feel somewhat muddled, but it didn't dampen his mood. Because he suddenly realized that now that this chameleon possessed a Decay faith, if the man ever rebelled... he could give him a taste of "Faded Majesty!"

'Ha! That "bear the consequences yourself" written on that blank A4 paper is no longer just empty words!'

'So should I praise Fate for this outcome, or Decay?'

'Forget it — praise them both.'

'Praise be to Fate — may You finally see predetermination fulfilled.'

'Praise be to Decay — may You... decay swiftly.'

...

Chapter 539: Trial Cleared! Kannar City Shall Be Annihilated...

The three quickly ascended the city walls. Though the wind and snow had ceased, the entire city remained shrouded in gloom.

From atop the high wall, Cheng Shi gazed into the distance. Before long, he spotted what appeared to be dense clusters of black dots emerging from shadows as thick as ink. Those ant-like dark figures were clearly individual people, and the only ones who could be converging on Kannar City at this hour — besides the World Destroyers that the Rosna populace so feared — were nobody.

He furrowed his brow. These World Destroyers had arrived far too quickly.

The trial had allotted five days, and this was only the first. Yet these Oblivion believers had already massed outside the city. If the time reset hadn't accelerated Cheng Shi's clearance speed, how were they supposed to find the Gift of Sores under the World Destroyers' siege, let alone comprehend the trial's true meaning amid the war that would destroy city and nation alike?

Something about this didn't add up.

Cheng Shi pondered for a moment, then something clicked. He asked casually:

"Where have those two Oblivion believers been?"

Da Yi blinked, scratching his head as he recalled:

"The Annihilation Apostle was a total coward — found himself a basement and hid until the trial ended.

The Destruction Declaration was braver though. Went up on the walls and sang for ages. But in that blizzard, his singing..."

Midway through, Da Yi's expression changed. He stared blankly toward the city's exterior, eyes widening:

"Grand... You're saying the Destruction Declaration's singing drew the World Destroyers here early?"

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow. 'Just as I suspected.' This scenario was entirely possible — otherwise it would be hard to explain why the World Destroyers had arrived so fast.

But fast as they were, they were still one step too late. The trial had already been speed-cleared.

It was just the Rosna citizens within the city... Perhaps no one would be left to shield them from the World Destroyers beyond the walls.

Da Yi nodded in sudden realization. Then he pulled out all of his iron thorns, his expression eager:

"My lord, these iron thorns tainted by War can be driven by the power of faith, but they need warfare to sustain them. I haven't encountered a major battlefield in quite some time.

We've stumbled onto one today, and with you here, so I was thinking..."

Cheng Shi paused, suddenly understanding. So Da Yi could use War's techniques not because he'd gained War's attention, nor because he was simulating War's power through Chaos — but through a set of weapons?

These iron thorns were that versatile, capable of simulating faith's power?

'Isn't this the same kind of thing as that battlefield Ji Yue collected?'

'You carry these in your hands every day — doesn't War's power corrupt you?'

'I'd bet it already has. That personality... very War-like indeed.'

But he also wanted to test the mettle of these World Destroyers. Since the trial was already over and everyone could exit at any time, there shouldn't be much danger. So he smiled slightly and spoke a single word:

"Go."

Da Yi's face lit up with joy. He bowed his head in salute, turned, and leapt down from the high wall. Using the shadows of the pines beyond the city, he charged toward the endlessly advancing World Destroyers in the distance.

Before long, visible chaos erupted in the far distance. Shortly after, scattered curses and screams drifted back. This Chaos assassin truly fought like a War soldier — in his wake, there was nothing but spraying blood and a carpet of shredded corpses.

It seemed these World Destroyers weren't all that powerful after all.

But just as both Cheng Shi and Qu Yan were thinking this, Da Yi's figure came scrambling back in disarray. He flashed over the wall in a flurry, face covered in blood and wearing an embarrassed expression as he spat:

"Damn — there's an expert in there. Nearly got me killed!"

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow. He was surprised but kept silent. He didn't understand this group of World Destroyers well enough to provide answers, so playing the mysterious sage was the best move.

But Da Yi, seeing Lord Ultraman's expression, felt his heart skip a beat. The assumptions started spinning again.

He recalled how, when he'd asked earlier why they didn't just wipe out these World Destroyers, his lord had said "it's not that simple." Now, looking at things, there was clearly more going on!

And for a Herald to say something like that, the other side must also have... a Herald?

Da Yi was instantly drenched in cold sweat. He looked anxiously at Cheng Shi, about to speak — but noticed Cheng Shi gazing into the distance beyond the city, eyes deep and unfathomable.

Da Yi and Qu Yan followed his line of sight and saw the World Destroyers suddenly part, forming an open space in the snowy field. In that clearing stood two figures, one in front of the other, clearly exchanging words.

The person leading the group apparently spotted the three of them on the wall too. He frowned and spoke in a low voice:

"The Rosna people have found allies. Who are they?"

The subordinate behind the leader stepped forward respectfully, head lowered in reply:

"Probably some stubborn resisters. They lack divine wisdom and cannot embrace the tide of world destruction. Pitiful souls unworthy of our Lord's gaze.

Why not let us help them? We shall bring Oblivion's will into this city of Decay and reduce them to cosmic dust. By your command, Lord Herobos."

Herobos nodded without expression. Then, with a sweep of his right hand, he commanded: "Bestow upon the ignorant enemy — the Judgment of Oblivion!"

The moment his words fell, countless World Destroyers raised their hands and unleashed the power of Oblivion toward the distant city.

Sensing the entire fabric of space being wrenched by Oblivion's force, Cheng Shi's heart lurched. He knew he couldn't stay any longer.

"Let's go. No need to clash with him."

With that, he waved his hand — a seeming farewell to the enemy — and exited the trial directly.

Da Yi and Qu Yan exchanged a glance. The same name surfaced simultaneously in their minds — not a person, but a Him. The legendary, never-before-seen Oblivion Herald: the Hand of Purifying Weevil, Herobos.

So He was the leader of these World Destroyers?!

Both of them went pale with shock. They hurriedly followed Cheng Shi out of the trial. And not long after the three vanished from the city walls, this capital that had stood for a hundred years was gradually dragged, piece by piece, into Oblivion's domain — completely disintegrating into cosmic dust.

[Wish Trial (How Does Life Decay, How Does All Creation Rot — Decay) Challenge Successful]

[Calculating score and settling rewards...]

[Player: Cheng Shi, Performance Score: S]

[Items Obtained: None]

[Road to Ascension +0, Ladder of Ascent +0]

(Empty Joy effect activated — no score or rewards obtained)

[Current Road to Ascension Score: 2204, Global Ranking: 389,630]

[Current Ladder of Ascent Score: 175, Path Ranking: 49]

[Trial Cleared — Initiating Exit]

...

Chapter 540: Each Reaps Their Own Rewards

Reality. Some barren mountain in an unknown province.

Moonlight hung like white silk, embroidering dappled patterns through the forest.

A gentle breeze swayed the leaves, startling the hunter perched among the treetops.

Qu Yan snapped his eyes open. Lingering in his gaze was a mixture of trepidation and thrilled shock. In a single trial, he'd encountered two of Them. Granted, neither was among the supreme sixteen — but who said servant gods weren't gods?

Lord Yu Xi especially — this Void servant god who'd bestowed upon him a servant's contract — was, in Qu Yan's eyes, an absolutely flawless master!

Though the invisible-text contract written on A4 paper seemed like child's play, the pie this lord had drawn was anything but distant!

In this trial, he'd done negligible work — no, not even negligible. Any random previous trial had been harder and more complex than this one. But this time? He barely needed to lift a finger, and the clear time had been compressed to a single day!

One day!

In peak-tier matches, some people couldn't even figure out the situation on the first day, let alone clear the trial!

And all he'd done was tag along with Lord Yu Xi to admire the elegance of Deceit, play the amateur role of some Decay envoy, and tail two people. That meager workload, and in return he'd earned a second faith?!

What boss draws a pie like this? This wasn't pie-in-the-sky — it was freshly baked flatbread! Still sizzling from the oven!

Qu Yan laughed — a wild, borderline manic laugh.

He'd been in the God Worship Society for so long, and finally he could see a glimmer of hope for advancement. Not advancement within the Society, of course — with his strength, he could easily rank in the top five there. No, this advancement meant he'd finally latched onto Their leg.

At this thought, the chameleon extended his hand. The arm that should have blended with the bark's color was now threaded with black fissures oozing with the aura of rot. This was Decay's gift!

No wonder everyone wanted to develop a second faith. Though it didn't bring an additional talent, gaining the blessing of a second profession was an enormous boost even at the peak tier.

Though Qu Yan hadn't originally been pursuing Decay, at this moment he was deeply satisfied.

After admiring his new skin tone, he produced an arrow from his storage space. The slightest activation of his Decay power transformed the arrow into a thorned vine shaft. Eyes gleaming, he drove the thorned arrow into the trunk beneath him.

The power of Sudden Dusk erupted instantly, and in the blink of an eye, the once-lush tree had become dead wood. Seeing that this arrow's power was every bit the equal of a true twilight hunter's, Qu Yan's eyes burned with increasing fervor.

'Praise be to Silence. Praise be to Decay. Praise be to the great... Lord Yu Xi!'

...

Reality. Some uninhabited zone in an unknown province.

A campfire crackled vigorously, casting dancing light. In its glow, a burly, hulking man sat cross-legged on the ground, staring at the flames with a wonderfully complex expression. He seemed to be recalling something amusing.

Before long, someone arrived.

Before the voice came the sword — a massive blade dripping with blood and flame was thrust into the ground beside the campfire. The big man looked up in surprise to see the newcomer approach with cold, grim features, sitting down with a darkened expression.

The big man blinked. "Damn. Lao Hu — what did the lord send you off to do?"

"?"

The big man was Da Yi. The newcomer was the Grand Marshal, Hu Wei. Hearing Da Yi's question, his brow furrowed deeply and he shot back coldly: "What do you mean?"

Da Yi froze. 'Makes sense he wouldn't know.' So he relayed everything about his encounter with Lord Ultraman in a steady, unhurried manner, capping it off with:

"Damn — if I'd known I could earn a faith this way, I would've volunteered for the black-robe acting gig myself. That chameleon lucked out.

Hey, Lao Hu, why have you gone quiet again?"

Quiet?

The moment Hu Wei heard Da Yi say Cheng Shi was Lord Ultraman, he'd lost all desire to speak.

He hadn't witnessed Da Yi's experiences firsthand, so he naturally couldn't empathize as strongly. Even though Da Yi was sharp enough not to be easily fooled, and the quoted words did sound like Lord Ultraman's style, the problem was...

'My brother Cheng — how many identities do you have?'

He could be Zhen Yi. He could be Lord Ultraman. But apparently, he just couldn't be himself?!

So what was it about the identity of "Cheng Shi" that was so special, that even Lord Ultraman would impersonate him?

When had He started the impersonation?

Who was the Cheng Shi in the Mediocre Person Society?

Where had the real Cheng Shi gone?

It was too convenient. Every time he encountered Cheng Shi, the man wore a different identity. So was it different people stealing his identity, or had he deceived everyone?!

But seeing Da Yi's rock-solid conviction, Hu Wei didn't want to argue. Since Da Yi was certain it was Lord Ultraman, whether it was or wasn't could be settled by simply asking.

Hadn't Da Yi also mentioned he'd earned the right to walk the Chaos Steps? This was the perfect opportunity to go back and compare notes with Lord Ultraman in the temple...

A face-to-face verification.

"Damn it, Lao Hu — what are you brooding about with that face?"

"Does he know you're the Refracted Light Shadow?"

"Who?" Da Yi blinked.

A strange light flickered in Hu Wei's eyes. The name nearly escaped his lips, but he swallowed it and said instead: "The chameleon."

Da Yi scratched his head. "Damn, who cares if he knows or not. The way I see it, the lord's already got that one wrapped around his finger. Our little meetings might be gaining a new mute soon."

"..." Hu Wei said nothing, just nodded and fell silent.

Seeing Lao Hu refuse to talk, Da Yi figured the man had probably fought a tough battle. His expression turned serious: "Damn. Who did you run into?"

"Lin Xi. He's merged with Oblivion. It's a bit of a problem."

"?"

...

A trial. Some city in an unknown location.

In a blood-reeking basement, six players bound to the walls opened their eyes one after another. Once they'd sized each other up, a pastry chef easily broke free of his restraints and produced an antique wooden box.

He smiled with amusement, took a cake from the box, and — before everyone's eyes — made it vanish into thin air from his palm.

"What a shame. It seems someone won't get to taste my pastries."

He then set the box on the ground and politely addressed the group:

"Allow me to introduce myself. I'm Mo Shu, a pastry chef. I'd originally intended to treat everyone, but something unexpected has come up today. I probably won't be able to attend to you all, so please help yourselves. Make yourselves comfortable.

As for me... I've encountered someone I can't stand the sight of, and I've got a bit of a temper to vent."

With that, he raised his hand and obliterated the ropes before him, releasing the player bound to the wall directly across from him.

"Cockroach skeleton — today, I'm going to find out just how many lives you have!"

Indeed, the player facing the pastry chef was none other than squinty-eyed Zhang Jizu. But the Death Chosen had clearly forgotten who this opponent was. However, after sensing the other's Oblivion power, he nodded thoughtfully.

'Since we're natural enemies, hostility makes sense.'

Zhang Jizu surveyed the room through nearly closed eyes. After identifying his teammates, he nodded with sudden understanding:

"So it's you. It seems something unpleasant happened between us last time we met.

However, I must point out that cockroach exoskeletons are external by nature, making 'cockroach skeleton' a redundant expression. I hope you'll correct this in the future.

Also, I'm not sure how many lives I have. But I suspect it's at least a few more than yours."

"..." The spectating teammates' eyes suddenly blazed with interest. The opening salvo was packing a bit too much gunpowder.

Mo Shu snorted coldly. He didn't waste more words on Zhang Jizu. Instead, he charged straight at him in the cramped underground space. For a warrior, actions always spoke louder than words.

Though if he could manage to disgust the enemy with some verbal barbs during the fight, he wasn't above using those tactics either.

"Heh — after I'm done with you, I'll take your head and go meet that Fate Weaver surnamed Cheng!"

Mo Shu moved fast. He obliterated every obstacle in his path and drove a fist straight at the squinty-eyed man's face. Zhang Jizu's reactions were no slouch either. Seeing the incoming fist, he instantly assumed a fighting stance, ready to exchange blows with this natural enemy.

But no matter how quick a priest's reflexes were, they couldn't possibly match those of a...

Assassin!

"Boom—"

Mo Shu's fist didn't connect with the squinty-eyed man's face. Nor was it deflected by Zhang Jizu. Instead, a nimble assassin reached out and caught it, stopping the blow a hair's breadth from its target.

The basement's occupants all raised their eyebrows at this. Zhang Jizu's eyes narrowed even further. Mo Shu's expression darkened. He turned to face the assassin who'd unexpectedly intervened and spoke coldly:

"You're going to protect him?"

"No, no, no — the Death Chosen doesn't need me to save him. I just wanted to ask — the Fate Weaver surnamed Cheng that you mentioned..."

"That wouldn't happen to be Cheng Shi, would it?"

Mo Shu's gaze sharpened. He instantly retreated, fixing a hard stare on the assassin without a word.

The squinty-eyed one, however, nodded and replied in his characteristically measured tone: "It is."

The assassin's lips curled into a delighted grin. "And you two are...?"

"Not close." Zhang Jizu's face was expressionless.

"Oh~ Got it." The assassin nodded meaningfully, then looked at Mo Shu in the distance with a smile.  
"Hey, pastry chef — I feel like I've seen you somewhere before. Can't remember, but it doesn't matter.  
What I want to say is — you've got beef with the little priest?"

"So what if I do?"

"Simple. If you do, then how about we resolve that conflict right here?"

Sounds fair... doesn't it?"

The moment those words fell, a dark flash blazed across the dim basement as an all-out brawl erupted.

Powers of faith intertwined and clashed. Before long, the space could no longer withstand the terrifying fluctuations of power, and with a thunderous "BOOM—" it collapsed entirely.

...