

The Gods 265

Chapter 265: Stay Right Here — Don't Move

"I'd love to—" Cheng Shi caught Hong Lin's half-amused expression and immediately course-corrected. "Naturally I would, but some things you can't have just because you want them. Let's go, Lady Chosen One. I'm sure a warrior of [Prosperity] doesn't mind leading the way."

"Don't be snarky. Nobody could stay calm facing that woman!

If you've really encountered her, you'd know I'm right."

'She's absolutely right!'

'Even if I disagreed with every single one of her other opinions, I'd still have to give this one a like!'

Cheng Shi pursed his lips. His face was a wonderfully complicated cocktail of appreciation and disgust.

Hong Lin glanced at his bizarre expression and continued:

"You can call me Hong Lin. You can call me Baldie. But don't call me Chosen One.

Chosen One this, Chosen One that — who knows what the Gods chose us for? Bad luck. Don't call me that again."

"..."

'Superstitious, are we? Though to be fair, in this era, superstition probably isn't exactly a character flaw.'

Cheng Shi blinked, nodded, and made small talk to bridge the gap:

"Bald Uses Rejoice... interesting name. You seem fairly level-headed, so why would you pick that ID—"

"You interested in me?"

"?"

Cheng Shi's forehead erupted in question marks. Where did that come from?

Hong Lin snorted:

"This isn't a blind date. If you're not into me, why ask so many questions?"

Got nothing better to do?

You and I are just temporary teammates. And cooperative only on the condition that you're not Zhen Yi, and that she's someone we mutually despise.

I still don't know if you're lying to me. Why are you acting like we're best friends?

But you'd better not be. And even if you are, don't let me catch you — or there'll be hell to pay!"

"..."

'Lady, are you always this laid-back?'

'How does your train of thought leap around even more than mine? One minute it's over here, the next it's over there.'

'But honestly — your paranoia's getting a bit extreme.'

'I've already explained myself this clearly and you still think I'm Zhen Yi?'

Cheng Shi shook his head with an incredulous smile, touching his nose out of habit:

"I was joking. I said it that plainly — practically announced I have a vendetta with Zhen Yi — and you still suspect me?"

Paranoia is also a condition, you know. It needs treatment. Lucky for you, I happen to be a doctor. Want me to take a look?"

"I'm not your 'lady.'

Fate Weavers don't really qualify as doctors either. When you people get serious, you're not much cleaner than anyone else. I'll pass on the treatment.

Keep up. Don't slow me down."

With that, Hong Lin spun on her heel and strode forward.

Watching the Druid's explosive figure from behind, Cheng Shi couldn't shake a sense of *déjà vu*.

'Qin Chaoge!'

This [Prosperity] Chosen One's personality seemed somewhat similar to Qin Chaoge's — a touch reckless, a touch erratic.

But Qin Chaoge was a singer who could restrain her inner desires. What about Hong Lin?

What kind of warrior would she turn out to be?

Cheng Shi shook his head, flinging the idle thoughts out, then clicked his tongue twice, pulled out the wooden spear she'd left behind, and followed at an unhurried pace.

"Hey lady, you forgot your spear."

"Last warning. Don't call me that."

"I've got plenty of spears. Keep it."

"..."

Cheng Shi blinked. The way she said it — as if he didn't have any himself...

The two of them walked single file, scanning the environment as they went. But since the Twisted Night Pythons shed a fresh carpet of "leaves" every night, ground-level tracks were nearly impossible to trace.

After roughly an hour of sporadic, half-hearted conversation, Hong Lin stopped with a frown.

Cheng Shi had been scrutinizing the surroundings and noticed the halt. His brow furrowed: "Find something?"

"Too slow."

"?"

"This pace is too slow." Hong Lin smacked her lips, turned around, and fixed Cheng Shi with a playful stare. "I'm going to speed up the search. You stay right here. Don't move."

"?"

'I suspect you're insulting me, but I have no proof.'

Cheng Shi's mouth twitched, but he didn't object. He'd already guessed what the Druid was about to do.

Sure enough — the [Prosperity] Chosen One began stretching her limbs in place, giving the forest a full display of her flawless physique. Then she threw her head back and let out a howl — "AWOOO—" — and her hair erupted upward in an instant. Muscles across her entire body swelled at breakneck speed.

Her surging hair swirled skyward, cocooning her head in a chrysalis of luminous jade-green light. Moments later, an enormous feline skull pushed through the cocoon. Her body elongated into a beast's frame just as rapidly. Powerful limbs slammed onto the rotting leaf carpet with a resounding "BOOM."

In the blink of an eye, the wild beauty with knee-length hair had transformed into a terrifyingly massive cat — two grown men tall!

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted. He recognized the species: a Dense Forest Spotted Leopard!

A predator native to the southern jungles of the Land of Hope. Blindingly fast — especially adept at sprinting through forested terrain. Its agile frame could weave through any cluster of trees with impossible grace to chase down prey.

But ordinary Dense Forest Spotted Leopards weren't large at all. A full-grown adult barely reached a normal human's waist. And this [Prosperity] Chosen One's leopard form was nearly twice the height of an average adult!

'Isn't the size difference a bit... extreme?'

'What kind of [Prosperity] talent is this?'

Watching the Big Cat — which could probably swat him to death with one paw — take a step toward him, Cheng Shi hastily assembled a don't-you-dare-say-a-word smile and offered helpfully:

"Come back soon."

"Tch—"

Hong Lin the Big Cat snorted and rolled her feline eyes at him. Then she crouched low, locked onto her heading, and vanished with a "WHOOSH."

Cheng Shi felt his vision blur. One second she was there. The next — gone.

'Incredible speed!'

He couldn't help but wonder: if that velocity were directed at him, even if he transformed into a Hero of Today, he probably couldn't withstand the initial impact without taking a nasty hit.

Which immediately made him grateful.

'Good thing I salvaged the catastrophe Brother Mouth created. Otherwise, I wouldn't even know how I died.'

Watching his teammate "get productive," Cheng Shi was perfectly content to lounge in place and embrace his role as designated freeloader. He counted time silently, planning that if she wasn't back within a certain window, he'd fire the signal flare and summon the other teammates to search with him.

'Doing the looking myself? Not a chance. The Sighing Forest is too dangerous. What if I run into a monster?'

'I'm a freeloader. I can't fight these things.'

But Murphy's Law was in full effect. Just as Cheng Shi was pondering how to explain Hong Lin's disappearance to the others, the distant forest erupted with the thundering footfalls of a massive beast at full sprint.

Cheng Shi's heart lurched. He snatched up the spear and leapt to his feet, peering into the distance.

And there it was — the figure barreling toward him at full tilt was none other than the long-absent Big Cat, Hong Lin!

"Damn — don't tell me she's holding a grudge and coming back to beat the crap out of me!"