

The Gods 269

Chapter 269: Clues in the Mist

Cheng Shi felt like a medieval slave being whipped to work by a "cruel" master.

But not entirely — because slaves didn't dare fight back. He did.

Seeing himself demoted to an expendable scout, Cheng Shi sighed and stowed the bottle of Prosperity of Yesteryear.

'Since when does a worker pay for his own work injuries?'

Clinging to this honest working-class principle, he extended his hand toward Hong Lin outside the mist.

Hong Lin gave a light laugh and didn't refuse. She pulled a tender young sprout from her storage space and tossed it over. One look told Cheng Shi it had to be something good. He caught it and asked in an aged, raspy voice:

"What's... this?"

"Baptism of New Life. Wet it, then sprinkle it on yourself. [Prosperity]'s will shall wash away [Decay]'s deterioration."

"?" Cheng Shi blinked. 'So I still have to supply the water myself?'

Hong Lin had apparently anticipated exactly this reaction. She snorted: "Heh, saliva works too."

That quip alone showed how the [Prosperity] Chosen One had finally shifted from guarded wariness to something more resembling a newly acquainted friend.

The Baptism of New Life was an S-grade item bestowed by [Prosperity], specifically designed to counter [Decay]'s erosion. That she'd offered it to Cheng Shi meant she'd accepted this friend that Tao Yi had spoken about.

But even if her reverence for her patron wasn't the most devout, Hong Lin certainly couldn't let Cheng Shi literally spit on a divine gift. She'd already palmed a bottle of water behind her back, ready to "bestow" it once Cheng Shi proved sufficiently "helpless" and "stingy."

But she didn't understand Cheng Shi at all.

Because the instant she said it, his saliva had already "departed his mouth."

The man who'd looked rather dignified just moments earlier transformed instantaneously into a street urchin. He spat — "ptoo ptoo ptoo" — all over the tender sprout, then rapidly smeared the spit-droplets across every inch of his own skin.

Not the slightest revulsion toward his own saliva. And not the faintest sense that anything was wrong.

Watching this alarmingly practiced performance, Hong Lin's eyes screamed "SHOCK."

A pupils-quaking earthquake of shock!

"Hey, I gotta say — this stuff works great! I'm young again!"

"..." Hong Lin's mouth twitched. She silently crushed the water bottle behind her back into oblivion. "Just... find the person!"

"Oh." Cheng Shi pulled himself together, casually stashed the Baptism of New Life "temporarily" into his storage, and sauntered deeper into the mist with a swagger.

Hong Lin watched the bold, thieving silhouette retreat. Her expression cycled through several changes before settling into an inexplicable snort of laughter. She shifted back into the Dense Forest Spotted Leopard and followed.

In her transformed state, the Druid was suffused with His blessing — naturally immune to the Sorrow Tide's erosion.

The two resumed their exploration, taking turns at point. After some time, Cheng Shi actually found something.

Footprints!

In the mist's severely limited visibility, he spotted a single footprint glowing faintly blue.

Cheng Shi was overjoyed. He crouched to examine the area around the footprint for any traceable evidence. But the print was far too faint — conventional tracking methods had no chance.

So the priest looked to the warrior.

The warrior blinked, then turned her head away.

'Well, well. So even the Chosen One isn't much of a tracker. Dense Forest Spotted Leopards are supposed to be master predators. Don't tell me that giant body of yours is only good for fighting?'

Cheng Shi kept the thought to himself — he didn't dare voice his mockery. Instead, he stifled his laughter, produced the signal flare the historian had provided, and fired it skyward.

Time to summon the hunter teammate. True, that teammate wasn't entirely honest — but who didn't have a lie or two to tell? Right?

'Well, except for me.'

The signal flare made no sound — just a bright burst of light blooming through the mist-filled sky.

Before long, two figures approached. They turned cautiously — and saw the historian and the Puppet Master arriving first.

The petite Puppet Master girl was controlling her mature puppet. One arm cradled the girl herself; the other dragged the historian along, trudging forward step by labored step.

The girl's condition seemed passable. But the puppet's movements had already grown stiff under [Decay]'s erosion. The historian's condition was far worse — he'd long since collapsed unconscious.

His skin was aging and festering. His body was tangled with the puppet-control threads the Puppet Master had used to tow him.

Cheng Shi frowned, pulled the Baptism of New Life from storage, and glanced at Hong Lin.

It belonged to someone else, after all. He couldn't be generous with other people's property. He could only decide for himself, and his decision right now was to temporarily set aside faith-rivalry and save this historian who had deep knowledge of the underground.

Honestly, he'd never put much stock in faith rivalries. Same rule as always:

As long as you don't screw me over, I don't care who you are or what you worship.

Conversely — even a same-faith brother who crosses me will get the bill just the same.

And if you could avoid losing teammates at the trial's opening, you should preserve your fighting strength. That was the freeloader's cardinal rule.

Hong Lin clearly shared the same philosophy. High-level players never wasted potential allies. She nodded and reached into her storage for a bottle of—

She put it back.

Because Cheng Shi's saliva had already been deployed.

Big Cat's face twitched. All four paws unsheathed their claws and dug savagely into the rotting leaves. As if she were squeezing something that would help her vent.

Meanwhile, the enthusiastic Cheng Shi hadn't noticed at all. With utmost seriousness, he wielded his spit-soaked twig and sprinkled it across both teammates' skin, striving for even coverage on every inch.

The Puppet Master girl appeared somewhat "socially anxious." Her face showed no expression, but when Cheng Shi drew near, she instinctively shrank back a step, controlling her puppet to shake its head.

Cheng Shi understood. He sprinkled only a little on her puppet instead.

The historian, however, received a generous coat. When he was done, Cheng Shi helpfully fanned the man's face, rousing the [Memory] follower on the spot.

Zuo Qiu's eyes opened. Finding teammates gathered around him, his alarmed expression softened considerably.

"Thank you..."

I was too reckless. I thought that since there were no leads outside the mist, perhaps I could search inside. But this Sighing Sorrow Tide was far fiercer than I'd imagined."

He turned to the Puppet Master girl, his eyes full of gratitude:

"Thank you for saving my life."

The girl's face remained blank. The mature puppet smiled and nodded.

Watching the harmonious scene, Cheng Shi suddenly felt that this round's teammates were far friendlier than expected. Not a bad start at all!

Aside from being played by Brother Mouth...

But the camaraderie ended right there — because the sinister Featherhead had arrived.

He walked through the Sighing Sorrow Tide as if he'd come home. Not only was he perfectly at ease, he'd fully let himself go — throwing open his feathered cloak to reveal the riddled, rotting body beneath.

"Gilded exterior, rotten core" was perhaps the most fitting description. When the feathered cloak concealed him, Featherhead at least resembled an aesthetically challenged ordinary person. But with the costume spread open, that festering mass of putrefied flesh, oozing sores, black blood, and exposed white bone left any observer with exactly one thought: revulsion.

No wonder Big Cat called him "Stinking Bird." He looked like he reeked.

One glance was all Cheng Shi needed to conclude that today's meals were going to be very hard to swallow.

"Stinking Bird — cover up that nauseating bag of bones. Or I'll pluck every last feather."

Big Cat let out a disgusted growl — which startled not the target, but the historian who'd just struggled to his feet.

Featherhead scoffed. Not only did he refuse to comply, he went full street thug and shed the cloak entirely.

"Baldie, this is my Lord's domain. If you don't like it, you can leave."

"Oh my, I'm so scared. Since He's watching from here — how about I kill one of His followers to liven things up!"

With that, Big Cat launched from the ground without warning, pouncing straight at Featherhead.