

The Gods 271

Chapter 271: A Corpse That Shouldn't Be Here

What exactly the two of them discussed remained unknown to outsiders. In any case, after a rather unpleasant exchange, Hong Lin the Big Cat padded off in the direction the others had gone. Featherhead, however, vanished.

He watched Hong Lin's retreating figure, then turned and walked deeper into the denser mist.

On the other side, the hunter led at a brisk pace. This [Truth] hunter was eminently practical — cold-faced, barely speaking throughout, only muttering under his breath when he reached a fork in the trail:

"Left... or right?"

A moment of thought, a decision made, then onward — leading the group ever deeper.

After following tracks only the hunter could see for quite some time, the four finally found a new clue beneath a Twisted Night Python tree. This time it wasn't a footprint — it was a corpse!

A body torn apart and chewed to pieces, carelessly discarded at the tree's base.

The hunter's gaze hardened. He scanned the surroundings with sharp vigilance.

"Something's wrong. The wounds are fresh. Watch our flanks — the real predator may not have gone far."

Everyone's nerves instantly pulled taut. Even Cheng Shi quietly palmed a scalpel.

Freeloading was fine, but you couldn't be blind about it. When danger struck, you at least had to avoid being dead weight for the carries.

On this point, the Freeloader Supreme was very self-disciplined.

Just then, Big Cat caught up. Still in beast form, she flipped through the shattered corpse with a forepaw, her eyes darkening:

"This person was chewed up and spat out. Judging by bite force alone, the beast or creature that attacked him is at least as large as I am.

No saliva or hair left at the scene — which is odd. From the mangled remains alone, there's no way to identify the attacker's species. But at least we can confirm that this unfortunate victim was a...

Mushroom-Footed Person."

!!!

A Mushroom-Footed Person?

How could it be a Mushroom-Footed Person? What were they doing underground?

Cheng Shi wasn't the only one baffled. Seeing everyone's brows furrow, Hong Lin continued examining the body:

"Although his feet have been completely gnawed off, look here — in the flesh of his knees, you can still see mycelium-like blood vessels.

That's the most distinctive biological trait of the Mushroom-Footed People.

And here — half a shattered skull. See how the remaining hair is virtually indistinguishable from fungal filaments.

He's definitely Mushroom-Footed. Which makes this trial deeply strange. Why would a Mushroom-Footed Person be in the Sighing Forest?

Even if this is His trial, it defies all logic."

Indeed. This was too bizarre.

Cheng Shi knew a bit about the Mushroom-Footed People. They were a [Prosperity]-worshipping tribe living in the rainforests of the Land of Hope's southwest.

Like the Wood Elves, they were born as [Prosperity]'s most devout followers. Their appearance was essentially human — without seeing their feet, hair was the only distinguishing feature, as Mushroom-Footed People had characteristically long hair resembling fungal filaments.

But if you could see their feet, identification became trivial.

As the name implied, their feet weren't flesh-and-blood appendages but masses of interwoven fungal roots forming a mimicry of human feet. Below the knee, their legs gradually transitioned into clusters of mycelial roots of varying thickness. These soil-borne fungal feet allowed them to walk as freely as ordinary humans — and also permitted them to drive their roots into the earth at any time to absorb nutrients.

So the Mushroom-Footed People were a race that never needed to forage. They simply had to "stand at attention" in fertile soil to feed themselves — or even transform into genuine fungal stalks and sleep standing upright.

In a sense, they resembled the [Decay]-transformed Twisted Night Pythons — both were dual-state organisms.

But the Mushroom-Footed People's heavy dependence on rainforest ecosystems and rich soil meant they almost never traveled far. Finding them outside their home turf was already strange enough, let alone underground.

Hong Lin — who knew [Prosperity]'s races inside and out — hadn't unfurrowed her brow since confirming the Mushroom-Footed identity.

Cheng Shi knew what she was thinking. Or rather, he could guess what everyone was worrying about.

'Is this dead Mushroom-Footed Person the "dying ember"?'

'Surely our luck can't be that bad.'

'Game over before it even started?'

'Isn't [Fate] supposed to be on my side?'

Before reclaiming his [Deceit] faith, he'd have been unshakably confident in his luck. But now... he wasn't so sure.

Still — outwardly and inwardly, he was currently a [Fate] follower. So hopefully a certain patron wouldn't be as cold-hearted as before.

After letting his mind run wild, Cheng Shi returned to examining the Mushroom-Footed corpse.

"What about... Featherhead? Why didn't he come back with you?"

He's a [Decay] follower. Shouldn't he know more about the Sighing Forest's creatures? Maybe he knows—"

"He doesn't."

"..." Cheng Shi stared at Hong Lin, who'd cut off Featherhead's capabilities without a second thought. 'Lady, you didn't actually kill him, did you?'

Hong Lin sniffed and said nothing, turning to survey the surroundings.

Seeing no response, Cheng Shi pointed at the corpse's hand instead.

"What's he holding?"

Zuo Qiu crouched and retrieved the object. After studying it briefly, he said:

"A lantern — insect-lamp type — except the bioluminescent insects have been replaced with a fluorescent liquid. The faint blue glow we saw earlier was probably leaked from this."

"But this fluorescence..." Cheng Shi pinched a drop between his fingertips, held it up for inspection: "...can't illuminate the Sorrow Tide's mist. So why was he carrying a lamp that glows but does nothing?"

Everyone fell silent. It was genuinely inexplicable.

"Don't dwell on things we can't figure out. When we can't find the answer, it means we're missing clues. Hunter — can you still pick up a trail?"

Zuo Qiu wiped his corpse-touched hand on the rotting leaves, pocketed the broken lantern, and looked to the hunter. The hunter — whose tracking method remained a mystery — gave a confident nod, then resumed leading the way with that perpetual cold expression.

The group's expressions shifted subtly as they followed. Every player silently prayed that this trail would lead to another clue — not a dead end.

Cheng Shi lagged half a step, falling to the rear. He walked alongside Big Cat and whispered:

"Don't you find it strange?"

"Of course. A Mushroom-Footed Person has no business being here."

"No — that's not what I mean." Cheng Shi shook his head. Despite the mist cutting his visibility, he kept scanning their surroundings. "I mean, why did the creature that attacked him chew him up and spit him out instead of swallowing him?"

"That's not it either. Don't you think his corpse is oddly intact?"

'Intact?'

Hong Lin froze. 'The body was chewed to pieces — how could you call that inta—'

'Wait!'

Big Cat's stride faltered. She suddenly realized what Cheng Shi meant.

The dead Mushroom-Footed Person's body — aside from the attack and chewing damage — bore no signs of [Decay]-induced aging or deterioration!

"Got it, right? Strange, isn't it? We're fine because of your Baptism of New Life.

Featherhead's a [Decay] follower — basically coming home — so he doesn't count. And the hunter probably has his own covert methods.

But a Mushroom-Footed Person — a [Prosperity] worshipper in a place utterly devoid of [Prosperity]'s will — how is he also unaffected by the Sorrow Tide?

And with no weapon on him, what gave him the nerve to walk through the Sighing Sorrow Tide alone carrying nothing but a lamp?

Where did he get the courage? They don't have pop icons on the Land of Hope."

"..." 'What does any pop icon have to do with this?'

Hong Lin was exasperated, but she got the point. She shot Cheng Shi an appreciative glance: "The lamp is suspicious!"

Cheng Shi nodded, his eyes on the historian's back.

"Zuo Qiu already noticed this. But he didn't say anything — and he pocketed the lamp right in front of us.

It looked like he was preserving an item, or maybe collecting a 'relic.' But he cut that thread of investigation.

Our historian is more than he seems."

"Hmph. All these roundabout games — exhausting. Just ask him directly."

Hong Lin snorted, took several long strides, and slapped a paw onto Zuo Qiu's shoulder — nearly sending the historian stumbling.

"You—"

She was about to voice Cheng Shi's suspicions when Zuo Qiu cried out toward a dense wall of fog just ahead:

"A Fog Gate! We've actually found a Fog Gate!"

The hunter's eyes tightened. He retreated half a step: "The Mushroom-Footed Person's fluorescent trail disappears inside this. Careful — the concentration of [Decay] in there is dangerously high."

Everyone went rigid. Every nerve pulled taut.