

The Gods 274

Chapter 274: The Exiled Mushroom-Footed Tribe

Just as the entire Mushroom-Footed settlement was drowning in wild jubilation, the cheering and shouting stopped dead.

The abrupt shift startled even the players. Cheng Shi followed the Mushroom-Footed People's gazes and turned his head — only to see Zuo Qiu at the very back, his expression unreadable, holding the shattered lantern out in front of the group.

Moments ago, shielded by the players' bodies, the tribespeople likely hadn't gotten a clear look at the lantern's condition. But now that they could see it — every last one of them knew the answer to the question they'd been asking.

Several young Mushroom-Footed children burst into tears. A beautiful female tribesperson dropped to one knee and gathered them into her arms, choking back sobs of her own.

The players exchanged looks but said nothing. The Old Patriarch let out a sigh, his voice laden with grief:

"Eposka took Abur from us. May his soul know no more suffering under the Prosperity Divine Shade. May the will of [Prosperity] protect the Mushroom-Footed People forever..."

The mournful tribespeople echoed in unison:

"May [Prosperity] endure. May the tribe know peace—"

The players were escorted down from the sacrificial altar. As this was the first group of visitors the Mushroom-Footed tribe had received in centuries, every member of the settlement treated them with extraordinary warmth.

But in Cheng Shi's eyes, the enthusiasm was a shade excessive. The light in their eyes looked less like hospitality and more like they'd been waiting for something anticipated.

He frowned and glanced at his teammates. Only Zuo Qiu wore the same oddly contemplative expression as he studied the tribespeople. Everyone else was still surveying the surroundings in bewilderment.

The Mushroom-Footed People chattered excitedly around the players until the Old Patriarch waved them all away and invited the thoroughly confused visitors into his home.

The Patriarch's dwelling was the largest structure in the settlement. But because the Mushroom-Footed People's way of life differed fundamentally from flesh-and-blood races, the interior was devoid of furnishings or decoration. It looked like a crude lean-to — one built from dead tree branches.

The instant Cheng Shi stepped inside, the building materials struck him as familiar. After surreptitiously running his hand along a door post, he confirmed it: the wood was Twisted Night Python!

'How strange. Why would a rainforest settlement use timber from the Sighing Forest?'

Zuo Qiu noticed Cheng Shi's gesture and gave him a knowing nod, then silently produced his history book. He'd evidently realized there could be an unusual story here.

After all, a Fog Gate connecting the underground and the surface was unthinkable in itself.

Throughout the entire recorded history of the Land of Hope, there had seemingly only ever been one passage linking the underground and the surface — the Abyssal Volcano, situated west of the Tower of Logic's Gasmira and east of the Grand Tribunal's Forest County.

So the very idea that the Sighing Forest contained a shortcut to the surface beggared belief. If the Fog Gate truly led to the southwestern rainforest, why hadn't the Sighing Forest's creatures used it to hunt on the surface?

They were far more terrifying than any jungle beast.

Carrying this belly-full of questions, Cheng Shi found a corner of the Patriarch's home and quietly... stood there.

Yes. Standing.

Because the Mushroom-Footed People rested by driving their fungal roots into the earth. Their homes didn't have chairs.

It was... quite tiring.

The Patriarch stood in a row with several young tribesman. No table, no chairs, no food. Everyone naturally formed a ring, launching what looked like a decidedly informal formal meeting.

"It has been a very long time since outsiders came to our tribe. For as long as I can remember, the mist outside has sealed every path leading away from the settlement."

The Old Patriarch's first sentence — a single sigh-laden statement — instantly changed every player's expression!

'Mist?'

'What mist?'

The players were taken aback. The hunter even murmured to himself:

"So this isn't the southwestern rainforest on the surface of the Land of Hope?"

The murmur reached the Old Patriarch's ears. His entire frame went still. Then his eyes filled with boundless longing.

"The rainforest?"

I have heard of it. In the previous Patriarch's notebooks, I found descriptions of one.

But even the previous Patriarch never saw it with his own eyes. He too had only heard of it from the Patriarch before him.

They say it is well-suited for our people — abundant rain, fertile soil, far, far better than this cracked and rotting earth.

Alas...

Our devotion was not enough to move our Lord. So He has not forgiven us, nor granted us the way home.

This is not the surface of the Land of Hope. This is still the underground. Because where we stand... is the Sighing Forest."

!!!

'The Sighing Forest?'

'Which part of this resembles the Sighing Forest!?'

'[Prosperity] has never so much as glanced at the Sighing Forest!'

A forest teeming with [Decay] and rife with danger — how could a tribe settle here? The place was choked with mist, virtually devoid of sunlight. Even the dark sun—

'Wait. Hold on. Sunlight?'

The thought hit everyone at the same moment. They looked toward the doorway in unison.

They suddenly recalled that the warm sunlight bathing every inch of the Mushroom-Footed settlement on their way in... had seemed... to carry no warmth when it touched their own skin!

'The dark sun!'

'Is it really the dark sun!?!'

The hunter, standing closest to the window, quietly stepped back to let the light fall across his arm. He felt it for a moment, then gave the others an almost imperceptible nod.

The players' expressions sharpened. This trial had taken a turn toward the absurd.

Inside a [Decay] forest lived a tribe of [Prosperity] followers. It was like a single dot of emerald green appearing on a monochrome ink wash painting — when the only pigment was black ink. Where did the green come from?

Exercising caution, the players said nothing, keeping their shock carefully contained. Only Cheng Shi's curiosity was piqued. He studied the Old Patriarch with interest, offering an ambiguous half-smile — clearly encouraging the elder to continue.

The Old Patriarch's expression was odd too. He'd deliberately shared this information. Seeing someone respond, however vaguely, he ventured another passage.

"According to tribal records, we were once a carefree Mushroom-Footed tribe in the southwestern rainforest you speak of. But one day, He... suddenly abandoned us. Cast the entire tribe into this place.

Yet in the Sighing Forest — where even [Prosperity]'s will can barely take a step — how could the Mushroom-Footed People possibly survive?

Perhaps our sin was not grave enough for death. Perhaps He still held some mercy for us. In any case, He turned His gaze upon this land of exile and, within the endless [Decay] forest, parted the mist just enough to let the underground's dark sun shine through — allowing generations of punished tribespeople to cling to life until now.

No one remembers what crime the tribe committed. And even if anyone does, those who knew the truth would never dare speak of that sacrilegious act again...

So exile became our reality. And this branch of the Mushroom-Footed People can only survive in this sliver of land — caught between [Prosperity]'s wrath and [Decay]'s erosion."