

The Gods 277

Chapter 277: The Next Trial? Hold On — I Haven't Made It Up Yet

"..."

'Lord Baldie!'

Cheng Shi dug his hands behind his back, pinching his own waist with all his might to keep from laughing out loud. But before two seconds had passed, a second hand joined his — and this one squeezed far harder!

"Hiss—

This trial, ah... yes, well, I haven't yet...

I haven't yet explained the rules clearly. His trials can only be completed one per day. Today's trial is already over.

Tomorrow, you shall receive the next oracle.

Five consecutive days. Once all trials are passed, I shall relay His oracle to you.

Do not rush."

The Old Patriarch immediately bowed in alarm: "Of course, of course! We are in no rush at all. Our tribe has endured for centuries — we would never be hasty over a single moment. So long as He has not looked away, so long as He is still willing to grant us mercy, then even if we must drain the river of time itself, the Mushroom-Footed People will keep waiting!"

"Very good. Your devotion is noted. Since today's trial is concluded — Old Patriarch, use the remaining time to tell us about yourselves. Your history, your present — I need to understand your truest feelings.

Once I know the extent of your suffering, I shall put in a good word for you before Him."

At these words, ring after ring of Mushroom-Footed People — inside the room and out — prostrated once more.

"Praise [Prosperity]! Praise Lord Baldie!"

Hearing the thunderous praise, Cheng Shi was nearly moved to tears.

But the reality was:

'Can't move. Can't move! Sis — stop pinching — my waist is going to snap.'

"..."

Cheng Shi didn't actually care about the Mushroom-Footed People's feelings. He cared about only two things: what exactly was the "Eposka" the Old Patriarch mentioned, and why could a Fog Gate open directly on the Mushroom-Footed altar.

Both seemed potentially connected to the current trial. So he lobbed out an artfully vague question.

The Old Patriarch, eager to prove his tribe's devotion, began from the very beginning of their history.

When this branch of the Mushroom-Footed tribe was first exiled here, they hadn't immediately gained this sunlit, habitable zone. Their ancestors arrived in the Sighing Forest with nothing — forced to survive amid the mist.

"Survive" was generous. The Sighing Forest teemed with danger, especially after nightfall, when countless monsters roamed freely. The Mushroom-Footed People had no future except becoming prey — food and victims of slaughter. They weren't surviving. They were helplessly waiting to die.

But that changed one day. The first elected Patriarch — unwilling to let his people become [Decay]'s playthings — set out alone to prove his devotion. He ventured into the region of thickest [Decay] concentration to preach [Prosperity]'s name, hoping to earn His mercy anew.

And that bold, devout act moved [Prosperity] to pity. He granted the Mushroom-Footed People a small patch of land — the very one they now inhabited.

Here, no mist encroached. The Sighing Sorrow Tide held no sway. Even after nightfall, no [Decay] creature could breach the barrier. With a safe home, the Mushroom-Footed People stabilized and entered their own age of prosperity.

But a thorny problem remained: this land — over-eroded by [Decay] — contained no meaningful nutrients. The Mushroom-Footed People could no longer drive their roots into the soil for sustenance. So the first Patriarch once again used his "devout preaching" to beseech their patron for mercy.

[Prosperity] answered again. He bestowed an artifact — one that was both mercy and trial!

Indeed: He had given the Mushroom-Footed People trials long before Cheng Shi arrived. That was why they'd believed without hesitation when Cheng Shi claimed to bring five trials.

The artifact was the very lantern Zuo Qiu held: the "Never-Vanishing Desolate Lamp."

"Never-Vanishing?" Zuo Qiu murmured with a slight frown, producing the lantern once more and setting it before the group.

The Old Patriarch sighed and continued:

"This Desolate Lamp — as you surely know, honored ones — is a sacred artifact bestowed by His own hand. It belongs solely to us Mushroom-Footed People — our begging-lamp for sustenance.

When a tribesperson activates it with the power in their bloodline, it generates a Fog Gate within the settlement — the very gate through which you arrived, Lord Baldie.

The Fog Gate's far end opens at a random location. A tribesperson need only carry the lamp to pass safely through, arriving at a distant part of the Sighing Forest. There they search for food, gathering what they can to share with the tribe.

That is how we have clung to life. Nowadays, apart from driving roots into the ground when we sleep at night, the Mushroom-Footed People have long since lost the privilege of kissing Mother Earth for nourishment..."

Cheng Shi's doubts only deepened. But in his role as [Prosperity]'s divine envoy, many questions were inappropriate to ask outright. He could only smile and gesture for the Old Patriarch to continue.

"As for the trial I mentioned — we are humbled. This is merely our clumsy guess at our patron's intentions. It should not be taken as fact. Please, Lord Baldie, enlighten us."

"..."

Cheng Shi froze. He absolutely hadn't expected the Old Patriarch to punt the ball right back.

Behind him, Hong Lin let out a quiet snicker, her eyes rich with amusement.

'What are you laughing at? If I can't answer this, everyone's in trouble. Enjoying my suffering helps nobody.'

The others watched with open fascination, eager to see how this silver-tongued Fate Weaver would "mend" his lies next.

'Fine. Everyone's counting on me again, huh? All right then — today I'll hold a master class, live and in person, in the art of deflection.'

Cheng Shi's mind raced for a few heartbeats. An approach took shape. He spoke with measured calm:

"No matter. Your understanding and reflections on these trials are themselves part of what we came to assess.

Faith is not mere devotion. It should also encompass the wisdom of resonance. This, too, is His trial for you."

The Old Patriarch lowered his head, repeating the envoy's words under his breath several times. At last, something seemed to click. He nodded:

"Very well. Then I shall report the tribe's insights truthfully.

This Never-Vanishing Desolate Lamp has another function: it converts the [Prosperity] power in our bodies into [Decay] power. That [Decay] energy is what... what protects us during our foraging expeditions.

Although this appears deeply disrespectful to Him, the artifact was bestowed by His own hand. And so we believe it to be His test of our loyalty — testing whether the Mushroom-Footed People would abandon Him simply because [Decay] proves useful.

Furthermore, the [Decay] energy the lamp emits attracts a Sighing Forest creature called Eposka. It feeds on [Decay], ceaselessly hunting our tribespeople. We believe this, too, is part of our Lord's trial — perhaps testing our... courage?

But even when foraging tribesmen die out there, even when the Desolate Lamp is damaged and shattered beyond repair — His gift always returns to the settlement's altar each night, restored to pristine condition. And so, through these endless tests of loyalty and courage, we have held firm until now!

And at last — at last! — we have lived to see His forgiveness and the arrival of the divine envoys!

Lord Baldie, am I correct?"