

The Gods 278

Chapter 278: You're Not Playing Me, Are You?

'Correct — so damn correct, old man. As long as you're willing to talk, you're absolutely right.'

'No wonder the Mushroom-Footed People didn't think to reclaim their lantern from Zuo Qiu. Turns out it resets on its own?'

Cheng Shi nodded approvingly, giving the Old Patriarch a praising smile that affirmed his "devotion."

Seeing the divine envoy smile, the Old Patriarch's anxious heart finally settled. The Mushroom-Footed People truly had earned His forgiveness — otherwise Lord Baldie would have refuted him.

By this point, the players had a solid understanding of the trial's full picture. Setting aside whether [Prosperity] had truly forgiven the Mushroom-Footed People, the players' objective might very well be Eposka — the creature relentlessly killing the tribespeople!

Cheng Shi glanced sideways at Hong Lin behind him. A brief exchange of looks.

Hong Lin read his intent. A silent nod.

And so Cheng Shi wrapped up the meeting in the most official tone imaginable, then asked the Old Patriarch to arrange lodging — no, standing-lodging — for the group.

Under the warm gazes of the entire tribe, the players were left in the Patriarch's main house — the largest building in the settlement. The Old Patriarch and a group of young tribespeople quietly relocated elsewhere.

They could tell the divine envoys had matters to discuss — and these matters almost certainly concerned the tribe's future. They dared not disturb, could not disturb. So they slipped away in silence.

For a brief span, the entire settlement fell so quiet you could hear a pin drop.

The Puppet Master wordlessly erected a sound barrier around the main house, ensuring nothing said inside could leak out.

And the moment privacy was secured, Hong Lin finally found her chance. She launched Cheng Shi across the room with a single kick, then said through a twitching eyelid:

"That kick was the one you asked for. But one kick doesn't settle the debt from using my ID.

So talk, our dear divine envoy. What exactly is going through your head?

If you can't convince me, someone's going to have a very bad day."

Before Hong Lin even finished, Cheng Shi grinned from the floor and asked:

"Have you ever despaired?"

"?"

"I'm asking you — have you ever truly despaired?"

Hong Lin's brow furrowed. "Don't change the subject."

"I'm not changing the subject. When you've truly despaired, you'll understand what giving up on yourself feels like.

Trapped in a tiny enclave surrounded by [Decay], holding a tool that generates [Decay] power, constantly hunted by [Decay] monsters — if on top of all that they lose hope...

How can you be sure they won't abandon [Prosperity] and embrace [Decay]?"

"They're Mushroom-Footed People — born kin of [Prosperity]. How could they possibly embrace [Decay]?"

"Why couldn't they? Everyone wants to survive. Whoever keeps them alive earns their faith. Simple logic, isn't it?"

"That's blasphemy!"

"Do you truly believe in your faith?"

"..." Hong Lin went still. She couldn't argue. After all, she herself was someone whose faith wasn't absolute — otherwise the Chosen One title and the divine envoy role wouldn't make her so uneasy.

"And besides — they're already committing blasphemy!" Cheng Shi laughed openly, pointing at the Desolate Lamp the Mushroom-Footed People had left behind. "A faith converter that turns [Prosperity] into [Decay] — even if it's a gift from [Prosperity] Himself, isn't using [Decay] to protect yourself fundamentally a desecration of [Prosperity]?"

If the Mushroom-Footed People truly had ironclad faith, they shouldn't use it at all."

"But it's His gift!"

"Exactly. And that's precisely what confuses me. Never mind how He pilfered [Decay]'s authority, or why He'd brazenly deploy stolen power in the Sighing Forest of all places. All I want to know is this:

Why would He use pilfered [Decay] power to shelter a tribe He Himself condemned to exile?

This isn't Far Dusk Town...

Hmm, though I suppose there's one possibility. You don't think [Prosperity] is, well... the indecisive type?"

"..."

Even the silent Puppet Master's expression shifted at that sardonic jab. She was privately grateful she'd sealed the room's sound. Otherwise, that one sentence alone would have sent the Mushroom-Footed People storming in to fight this blasphemous "envoy" to the death.

Hong Lin laughed from sheer fury. This man truly had no filter — every profane thought came straight out of his mouth. Wasn't he afraid of divine retribution?

She stood and pulled Cheng Shi to his feet, then sighed and asked:

"If they wanted to betray their faith, they've had centuries. Why would they wait until today?"

Cheng Shi smiled.

He said nothing — just locked eyes with Hong Lin in silence. He didn't believe for a second that the [Prosperity] Chosen One couldn't figure out the answer. She was just angry he'd used her name, leaving traces of her in this buried pocket of history.

Sure enough, when Hong Lin saw the knowing look in his eyes, her pupils contracted.

She knew why, of course. Because... the players had arrived.

People living in darkness can accept a life without sunlight. But once you let them taste a sliver of light and then snatch it away — the darkness that follows won't merely be darkness. It will be a grave with no sun.

They'll suffocate and die in despair, lingering until the next ray of light illuminates their corpses.

"Ah — so you've worked it out. That's exactly why I didn't dare let their hope die.

I'm not sure whether the 'prairie fire' in this trial refers to the hope the Mushroom-Footed People have been guarding in their hearts, or merely to biological prosperity in the literal sense.

I couldn't risk it."

Hong Lin studied him, her expression complicated: "I thought you loved to gamble."

"I do. But I only place bets in two situations:

One — there's no road behind me.

Two — I'm holding aces up my sleeve.

Outside of those conditions, I never gamble.

Right now, neither condition is met. So I'm playing it safe.

First, bamboozle them. Then find my opening to place a real bet.

You know how it is — we [Fate] followers are the best bamboozlers around."

'True. But compared to fate's bamboozlement, you're more like a...'

'Trickster!'

The word surfaced unbidden in Hong Lin's mind. She felt it captured Cheng Shi perfectly — same as Zhen Yi. A lie-spewing trickster through and through.

"I know it was wrong to act without consulting you all. Time was tight. But now we have a chance to discuss.

If anyone has a better idea, by all means — share it. Otherwise, we're committed to the divine envoy act until the end."

The players exchanged glances. Nobody spoke.

They clearly agreed with Cheng Shi's approach and were willing to follow his script.

But the unanimous compliance gave Cheng Shi pause.

'Hold on. Something's off.'

'I'm the lowest-scored player in this trial. How did I end up running the show?'

'Huh?'

'You're not all playing me, are you?'

'Your "high scores" are competing for who freeloads harder?'

Cheng Shi swept a suspicious gaze over everyone. Hong Lin: frowning in silence. The hunter: cold-faced, eyes closed. The assassin: mute as ever. Poop Scooper... was at least courteous.

He closed his history book and treated Cheng Shi to a broad grin — a face full of consolation-level fake-smile, plainly applauding Cheng Shi's hard work.

The familiar smile inevitably reminded Cheng Shi of his old boss. Once upon a time, a certain [Memory]-path manager had stood by his cubicle, clapped his shoulder, and said:

"Keep at it. Next year I'll give you a raise and make you team lead."

Cheng Shi had actually gotten a little excited about that. But then... there was no "then."

Because before the next year arrived, the Faith Game descended.