

The Gods 281

Chapter 281: The Second Trial — Devotion in the Shadow of Decay

Cheng Shi slept like a baby.

Honestly, even on the rooftops of the rest area he'd never slept this soundly. But last night he'd been out cold until morning — body and mind completely at ease.

He'd even had a nightmare that wasn't quite a nightmare. Something about amusing childhood antics.

Truly interesting.

Cheng Shi savored the dream's lingering fragments for a moment, then kicked himself upright from the floor. A quick scan of the room showed only Hong Lin, standing at the doorway with an odd expression.

He arched an eyebrow. Clearly, the Druid hadn't felt comfortable leaving him unguarded.

In most trials, it was already a kindness if unfamiliar teammates didn't stab you in your sleep. Those who woke early certainly wouldn't waste time waiting around — they'd be out gathering intel.

Zuo Qiu was right. Baldie was a player who honored her debts. Even if that loyalty was probably directed at Tao Yi rather than himself, Cheng Shi appreciated it all the same.

He broke into a bright smile: "Thank you."

Cheng Shi's guess was correct. Hong Lin had indeed been watching over him — not just for the recent hour, but all night.

She simply couldn't fathom how — in an unfamiliar environment, with unclear dangers ahead and teammates whose temperaments he barely knew — this smooth-talking Fate Weaver had the nerve to sleep like a log.

She'd only dozed cautiously for a moment before opening her eyes again. Blessed by [Prosperity], she didn't actually need rest. But adopting a resting pose served as excellent camouflage.

Because when a [Prosperity] Chosen One was napping right beside you, the person who needed to stay alert wasn't her — it was you.

You'd have to carefully consider whether the Chosen One was fishing for a reaction, or waiting for the right moment to strike.

That was the pressure of a Chosen One!

She'd been awake when Jiang Wumei entered. She sensed the hunter quietly settling near Cheng Shi, but since he made no suspicious moves, she didn't intervene.

Zuo Qiu was the only player she hadn't seen all night.

And so, through the long hours of darkness, she'd sat peacefully in place, waiting for Cheng Shi to wake.

This vigilance wasn't about keeping the "fake divine envoy" plan going. It wasn't bleeding-heart altruism either. She was simply repaying a debt on Tao Yi's behalf.

Cheng Shi had saved Tao Yi's life. To Hong Lin, that mattered greatly.

So from the moment she'd learned Cheng Shi was the "trickster" Tao Yi had spoken about, she'd made up her mind. Even if the trial went sideways, she would not let Tao Yi's savior die here.

In this [Prosperity] trial, she'd already had someone to protect.

But it wasn't the Mushroom-Footed People. It was Cheng Shi.

She'd never cared about scores. Only about friendships — and only the ones she personally acknowledged.

Yet she remained puzzled. Cheng Shi seemed utterly certain nothing would happen to him. Why?

Logically, he couldn't have predicted that she — a near-stranger with whom there was still friction — would guard him all night.

So when she heard his thanks, Hong Lin arched an intrigued brow:

"Why did you dare sleep that soundly? Weren't you afraid someone would make a move on you?"

"Who would make a move on me?"

"Who knows? Maybe the person you already duped — me. Or perhaps... that little assassin who likes turning people into puppets?"

Cheng Shi jolted, instinctively grabbing his waistband: "I knew it — no wonder I slept so well! Did you drug me?"

?

Hong Lin laughed from sheer exasperation.

She thought Cheng Shi's relaxed demeanor was a lot like her own. If he hadn't disgusted her with his "Zhen Yi act" at the trial's opening, she'd probably be in exactly the same state right now.

Spouting nonsense at every turn, never taking anything to heart.

But she knew Cheng Shi's ease wasn't simple carelessness. Beneath it, the Fate Weaver's nerves were likely strung wire-tight at every moment. This was easy enough to guess from the way he perpetually deflected with cheap jokes, burying his real thoughts under layers of banter.

Every word, every gesture was calculated to keep people guessing.

But her own ease came from genuine confidence. What was Cheng Shi's confidence rooted in?

It seemed this Fate Weaver was far more than just a priest.

She gave him a thorough once-over, then scoffed:

"Heh. No wonder Tao Yi called you a shameless rogue. Apt assessment."

?

Cheng Shi's face stiffened. 'I didn't even do anything! How'd I get slapped with that label?'

He pursed his lips and gave Hong Lin an odd look:

"Do Tao Yi a favor and take her to a doctor, will you? Or send her to me — I can treat it too."

"?" Hong Lin blinked. "Treat what?"

"Spinal problems. All that blame she carries is going to curve her backbone."

"..."

Hong Lin's eye twitched. Without another word to this Fate Weaver who was every bit as insufferable as Zhen Yi, she turned and walked out.

Cheng Shi hurried after her, looking around as he asked:

"Where is everyone?"

"The Puppet Master is guarding the altar. The hunter is watching the forest perimeter. Poop Scooper is wandering around with his poop book, looking for poop.

I asked this morning — the Desolate Lamp has already returned to the Old Patriarch's hands. Truly miraculous. I still can't figure out the lamp's reset mechanism. Given what I know of Him, He wouldn't go to such lengths for a group of sinners."

"So you lean toward Zuo Qiu's theory?"

"I need to see that Eposka before deciding. We have to find it today.

Mushroom-Footed People came earlier to ask you — the fake divine poop — when today's trial would begin.

So, Lord Divine Poop, what exactly is today's trial? Have you finished making it up yet?"

Cheng Shi's expression turned peculiar. He couldn't shake the feeling that Hong Lin's words carried hidden barbs.

"I'm not fake. I am currently a genuine [Prosperity] divine envoy!"

"Yes, yes, you're divine poop, you're divine poop. Nobody's competing with you."

"?"

Cheng Shi's face grew stranger still. He was about to ask whether Hong Lin's pronunciation of "envoy" was deliberate, but the Mushroom-Footed People who'd spotted the awakened messenger were already swarming over with reverent greetings.

"Greetings, Lord Envoy!"

"Good morning, Lord Envoy!"

"Lord Envoy, this way please — the Patriarch awaits you at the central altar."

'See? It's not like I gave myself the title. They all agree.'

Cheng Shi smiled in acknowledgment, tidied his appearance, then quickened his pace past Hong Lin to take the lead.

Before long they arrived at the settlement's central altar.

The Old Patriarch rushed over the instant he saw the envoy, but Cheng Shi cut him off before he could utter a word:

"I'll be brief, children of His. Today, our Lord ordains the second trial: Devotion in the Shadow of Decay!

The 'Never-Vanishing Desolate Lamp' He bestowed contains the faith-corroding power of [Decay]. This has been His test of your devotion all along. And without question, over these centuries you have proven yourselves through action. But whether that devotion is genuine remains to be verified.

Today, we shall verify it.

We will take the Desolate Lamp and roam the Sighing Forest for one full day, returning only at sundown. This will let us test whether [Decay]'s corrosive properties within the lamp remain active — or whether they've been tampered with."

"Lord Envoy, we—" the Old Patriarch blurted, suddenly anxious. But Cheng Shi raised a hand, cutting off his explanation.

"No need to explain. We already confirmed the lamp's properties during yesterday's journey. I'm aware of your circumstances and I believe in your devotion.

But our Lord's trials are not to be taken lightly. Today's task must proceed.

Relax. Simply await tomorrow."

Hearing this, the Old Patriarch visibly relaxed. As long as the envoy overseeing the process already believed in the Mushroom-Footed People's devotion, what was there to worry about?

Better still, this trial didn't even require the Mushroom-Footed People's participation. They'd already proven themselves over the past centuries.

The tribespeople prostrated once more, crying out in unison:

"Praise [Prosperity]! Praise the divine envoy!"

The Old Patriarch added a worried reminder: "The Sighing Forest is fraught with peril. Though I have faith in your abilities, please be careful — especially of Eposka, the one that hides in the mist..."

'Hey — what a coincidence. That's exactly who I'm looking for. I'd be disappointed if it didn't show up.'

Cheng Shi smiled gently and nodded:

"Fear not. His radiance shall shield us."

With that, he signaled Hong Lin to activate the Desolate Lamp and open the Fog Gate leading beyond the settlement.

The moment the gate materialized, the players gathered round. Cheng Shi glanced at Zuo Qiu — who was bowing his head over something nearby — and raised an eyebrow:

"Meat shield, shall you go first?"

Zuo Qiu's face darkened. Through gritted teeth: "Not even pretending anymore, are you?"

"I could pretend. Share what you did and where you went last night, and I'll let you walk behind me."

The instant the words landed, Zuo Qiu squared his shoulders, set his jaw, and marched straight through the gate.

Cheng Shi watched his retreating figure, thoughtful.

"Interesting. Seems he found something after all."