

The Gods 284

Chapter 284: It's Not Hunting [Decay] — It's Craving [Prosperity]!

While the rear guard was slacking, the front had erupted into chaos.

With the hunter and assassin joining the fray, Eposka was taking noticeably more hits. But the core problem remained — he barely took damage. Even when slightly outmatched, he couldn't be fully suppressed.

He could even use his agile frame to create gaps and buy himself breathing room.

And it was during one such gap that Hong Lin's momentum from a massive swing carried her past her target by a full position. Eposka lunged and landed directly in front of the Puppet Master, who'd been hiding behind a tree. The puppet — its control threads freshly severed — was staggering and couldn't return in time.

The trial's most dangerous moment arrived.

The petite Puppet Master was completely exposed before Eposka. The creature was sprawled on the ground, its enormous maw of rotting decay mere meters from the [Silence] follower.

Every player's heart clenched.

This was undeniably a coordination failure. A top-tier warrior couldn't allow such errors. Hong Lin roared and wheeled around, diving for Eposka's hind legs. The hunter's eyes sharpened as he drew and fired at its forelimbs. Zuo Qiu — abandoning his usual composure entirely — gripped his history book and charged.

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow at the sight. 'The historian cares a little too much about the Puppet Master.'

'Why?'

'Surely they hadn't developed something called "love" during the few hours they'd spent apart...'

'Even if the Puppet Master had saved the historian's life at some point, a competent singer shouldn't make "charge" his go-to response here.'

'Simply singing a couple of disruptive songs would have been far more effective than running in himself.'

Regardless, the Puppet Master was a solid teammate. At least she wasn't like other [Silence] followers who refused all communication. People who weren't antisocial tended to earn goodwill. So after a moment's calculation, Cheng Shi decided to swap faiths with his shadow — switching back to priest — and protect this seemingly decent little assassin.

Thick fog meant no natural shadows. But that was no obstacle for Cheng Shi.

He'd considered every possible scenario when first setting up his dual faith. Seeing no shadow available, he instantly produced a small magic lamp from his personal storage, covered half of it with his palm, and held it before himself. The faint light from the uncovered half cast his silhouette onto the ground. Without looking, he reached toward the shadow behind him.

But just as the shadow's hand rose from the ground — about to make contact — the battle shifted.

Eposka never targeted the Puppet Master at all. Instead, It howled and whipped around, slamming back into the giant bear.

Its eyes were fixed solely on Hong Lin!

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted. He snatched back his hand and the lamp. Zuo Qiu likewise halted mid-charge, retreating while singing.

The moment Zuo Qiu returned to Cheng Shi's side, he asked with genuine puzzlement:

"I caught a flash of light near you just now. What was that?"

Cheng Shi laughed coldly inside. 'Nice try — almost had me.'

'You were charging in the exact opposite direction from where I was standing. Which eye caught my movement?'

'The one on your backside? You're not wearing split-crotch pants.'

'Or maybe the "charge" was purely for show — just an excuse to observe my reaction?'

'Sneaky bastard. Trying to play tricks with ME?'

Cheng Shi sneered internally but kept his face perfectly neutral — still wearing that signature "look how much I contributed" expression:

"Spirit Spell. I fired off another Spirit Spell. Under my spirit enhancement, Baldie right now is... terrifyingly strong!"

Zuo Qiu's eye twitched once more. He nodded with a complicated expression.

BOOM — BOOM — CRASH —

Bear-form Hong Lin was indeed terrifyingly strong. After several failed attempts to dominate Eposka, she abruptly shifted strategies, switching from an oppressive style to a probing one.

She'd clearly noticed Eposka's bizarre behavior earlier and began deliberately hurling the creature toward her teammates.

Risky — potentially lethal for allies. So to protect Cheng Shi, she limited her throwing directions to only the Puppet Master's and the hunter's positions.

Both of their faces went black.

The assassin who'd been looking for openings and the hunter who'd been sniping from cover suddenly became panicked clowns thrust onto center stage, scrambling desperately under everyone's gaze.

But Hong Lin's instinct was spot-on. Eposka genuinely had no interest in anyone else. Its only target was the bear!

Seeing this, the picture finally crystallized for Cheng Shi. He shouted at the bear:

"Baldie — the Baptism of New Life! Throw it to me!"

The bear froze for a heartbeat, then flung the tender sprig straight over.

Cheng Shi caught it and grabbed Zuo Qiu, dragging him toward Eposka.

Zuo Qiu wasn't stupid. He immediately guessed Cheng Shi's intent and fought for his life:

"Fate Weaver! What are you doing!? I'm a singer! I'm a support! You can't use me as bait!"

"Relax — I'm the bait. You just support me. We're testing a theory. There's no danger."

"Let go of me! We can test it another way!"

Zuo Qiu struggled with everything he had. But against a Hero of Today's grip, what chance did a historian have? He failed. Predictably.

Cheng Shi dragged him to Eposka's rear, then shoved the Baptism of New Life into Zuo Qiu's arms.

Zuo Qiu's face went white.

"You—"

"I told you — your job is to hold this for me. Don't drop it. Otherwise I can't save you."

With that, Cheng Shi spun around. Three scalpels slid from his sleeves and flew in rapid succession.

All three embedded themselves in Eposka's ravaged, crusted back with soft thunks — but dealt zero damage.

The ambush was enough for Eposka to turn around, though. And the instant It caught the scent of the Baptism of New Life in Zuo Qiu's arms, Its eyes blazed. A ravenous, frenzied roar erupted.

"ROAAAAR—"

It abandoned the bear entirely. Full sprint toward Zuo Qiu and Cheng Shi.

Watching this, Cheng Shi's last doubt evaporated.

Eposka wasn't hunting [Decay]. It was craving [Prosperity]!

'So... the historian's theory was correct?'

'He should help It — not kill It?'

While Cheng Shi's mind raced, Eposka was closing the gap at terrifying speed. Cheng Shi's expression didn't change — but his eyes kept flicking to Zuo Qiu's reactions.

Zuo Qiu was still in Cheng Shi's grip. Nowhere to run. With Eposka about to crash into them, all he could do was stand ashen-faced and "wait for death" alongside the Fate Weaver.

But both men had better luck with people than they deserved. Those who cared about them wouldn't let them die.

Hong Lin had apparently anticipated Cheng Shi's gambit. The instant Eposka turned, she'd already reverted to the Dense Forest Spotted Leopard and given pursuit. Her whip-like tail lashed out, snaring Eposka's ankle and jerking the Desolate Walker to a violent halt.

Simultaneously, the Puppet Master's puppet appeared from nowhere, hurling countless control threads that snagged Zuo Qiu and dragged him to safety.

This time Cheng Shi didn't interfere. He released Zuo Qiu willingly — snatching the Baptism of New Life back in the same heartbeat and stashing it in his personal storage.

He glanced at the Puppet Master's hiding spot, brow furrowed briefly, then turned without hesitation and sprinted toward Eposka.

He no longer held any [Prosperity]. He wouldn't be the creature's target.

"Move! Can't win this — fall back! We try again tomorrow! The dark sun is setting! We have to get back before nightfall!"

Cheng Shi wasn't running toward Eposka to fight. He was running toward... the Big Cat express.

Hong Lin had clearly guessed his intent. With a furious snarl, she smacked Eposka with her tail, then swatted Cheng Shi onto her back with one paw. With a single "rawr," she bolted toward the Fog Gate.

"Hunter, run! Little Assassin, run! You're too slow — if we close the gate, we're not waiting!

Oh right — Poop Scooper, you too. Hustle."

"..."

Being dragged across the ground by the mature puppet at a dead sprint, Zuo Qiu heard Cheng Shi's "caring" words and spat viciously. But a second later, he shook his head and laughed in spite of himself.

"Cheng Shi. Interesting."

The Puppet Master, cradled in her puppet's arms, glanced back at Zuo Qiu with surprised curiosity.