

The Gods 285

Chapter 285: Trial Cleared — A New Choice

The players were racing back. Eposka was in pursuit. But under constant interference, even its agility was hampered.

In the end, Hong Lin didn't abandon anyone. After flinging Cheng Shi to the Fog Gate's threshold, she circled back, snagged the stragglers with her tail, and dragged them all home.

The entire group burst through the Fog Gate amid Eposka's enraged howls and the fading dark sun — back into the Mushroom-Footed settlement.

The instant they landed, the entire settlement erupted in cheers.

Cheng Shi clearly noticed that in the split second before they emerged, the Mushroom-Footed People's faces had been stricken with grief — as if they believed the hard-won divine envoys had died out there. But the moment five figures leapt through the gate, every tribesperson flooded toward them in a frenzy.

The Old Patriarch watched Cheng Shi with reverent eyes — his devout, anxious gaze clearly awaiting a verdict.

Cheng Shi swept his gaze across the assembly and smiled:

"Congratulations. The second trial — you've passed."

"Ohhh — Praise [Prosperity]! Praise the divine envoy! Praise Lord Baldie!"

Thunderous praise shook the sky. Cheng Shi smiled and nudged Hong Lin with his elbow, murmuring:

"See? That's your reward for today's hard work. How does it feel, Lord Baldie?"

Hong Lin looked at these cheering, tear-streaked, hope-filled Mushroom-Footed People and forced an odd smile.

She clearly wasn't infected by the joy.

Her mind was elsewhere. If Eposka was truly hunting [Prosperity], then the future of these tribespeople was far from certain.

She might be standing here — cheered by people who were already dead men walking. And the ones who would kill them... might be her and her teammates.

The others had reached the same conclusion. Their gazes toward the Mushroom-Footed People were tinged with complexity.

This was merely background history. But the history's ending had already spelled out these tribespeople's tragedy.

Cheng Shi understood. He told the Old Patriarch and the tribe that "today's excursion was exhausting," shooed everyone away, and led the players back indoors.

Once the Puppet Master sealed the main house's sound again, Hong Lin looked at Cheng Shi and asked the question that had been burning inside her:

"Who... are the dying embers?"

Cheng Shi glanced at Hong Lin, at the Puppet Master, at the hunter, at Poop Scooper — and suddenly laughed.

"Don't be so grim. It depends on how you want to win."

"What do you mean?" Hong Lin was caught off guard.

"Before that, let me confirm one thing. These Mushroom-Footed People genuinely carry [Prosperity] power, correct?"

"Yes." Hong Lin didn't fully grasp his meaning, but answered honestly: "I can feel the [Prosperity] aura in their bodies. It's extremely faint — so weak they barely qualify as His followers. But given that this is the Sighing Forest... it's understandable."

Cheng Shi nodded.

"Good. Since these Mushroom-Footed People are indeed His followers, interpreting their lives — or the hope in their hearts — as 'dying embers' is legitimate."

Hong Lin considered this, then guessed: "You mean... quality versus quantity — pick either one, and both are valid?"

"Yes and no." Cheng Shi paced as he analyzed. "His guidance is far too vague. Judging purely by Eposka's behavior, He does seem to intend for these sinners to awaken Dizel. But during today's fight, a strange point occurred to me:

Where is [Decay] in all this?

The Sighing Forest is His domain. Right under His nose, surface-exiled sinners are shielded by [Prosperity] AND being used as fuel to wake [Prosperity]'s son? To [Decay], this should be unforgivable sacrilege. Why is He tolerating it?

After all, not every god is as... er... as... as patient.

So what's He doing?

Allowing all this to unfold must serve some rational purpose. I can't fathom why, but I can guess the ending of this irrational arrangement.

Go ahead — guess what that ending is."

Hong Lin's brow creased. She blurted: "The embers will die!"

Cheng Shi gave her a thumbs-up.

"Yes! The embers will die!

Under [Decay]'s watch, Eposka can probably never be awakened by [Prosperity]. Which means the Mushroom-Footed People are likely trapped here for eternity — generation after generation of fuel. For [Prosperity], that's a lose-lose.

He probably gains nothing. Because the embers are destined to go out!

That's why I say either side could be the right answer. Perhaps winning just one of the two is enough to ignite the prairie fire that clears the trail.

But one side has to take the hit. Either Eposka, or the Mushroom-Footed tribe.

Right now, helping Eposka eliminate the Mushroom-Footed settlement is the simplest option. At least the Mushroom-Footed People... can be killed."

The instant those words left his mouth, Cheng Shi swept his gaze across his teammates, hunting for reactions.

Hong Lin frowned. She clearly found the mass slaughter of innocents distasteful.

The hunter remained ice-cold, but a glint passed through his eyes — suggesting he wasn't opposed if it meant points.

The Puppet Master was invisible behind her puppet. As for Zuo Qiu — when Cheng Shi looked his way, their eyes met. The historian immediately broke into applause:

"Brilliant! Absolutely brilliant. I owe you an apology for my shallow analysis earlier.

Truly worthy of the man who outsmarted Zhen Yi. While I thought you were slacking, you'd already figured out the entire situation. Impressive — truly impressive."

Being praised was usually pleasant enough. But with Poop Scooper peppering every sentence with "Zhen Yi" this and "slacking" that, the compliment reeked of sarcasm.

More importantly, the extravagant praise had neatly obscured his own stance on the either-or dilemma. Seeing a deflection technique that mirrored his own, Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow in genuine surprise.

'He can't actually be a trickster, can he?'

'A con artist impersonating [Memory]?'

'The impersonation is too thorough. Unless it's... Lies of Yesterday?'

Cheng Shi's heart sank slightly, but his surface remained cordial:

"Likewise, Poop Scooper — you've scooped some fine poop yourself. When are you going to share last night's harvest?"

Zuo Qiu's face stiffened. An awkward chuckle:

"I'm embarrassed, actually. I didn't find any new historical material last night. I was simply fascinated by the ecosystem of a Mushroom-Footed tribe surviving in the Sighing Forest, so I wandered around studying it. Just surface-level trivia — nothing worth telling."

"Trivia is still history. History has its serious side, naturally — but it has its humorous side too. Everyone's exhausted today. Share something to lighten the mood."

Zuo Qiu scratched his head, growing more uncomfortable by the second.

"Sigh — I'll be honest. I really didn't find anything. Going out in the middle of the night was just a personal quirk. I like to... ahem... observe other people's lives after dark. Adds some spice to my dull historian's existence. So please, let it go. I genuinely have nothing to say."

The moment this self-deprecating plea-for-mercy fell, every player's expression shifted — however slightly.

The hunter's reaction was smallest, but his internal shock was greatest. He was wondering whether the historian had discovered his identity and was feeding Cheng Shi coded messages.

Hong Lin's face stayed neutral — her lips even curved — but her peripheral vision clearly darted to Jiang Wumei beside her.

The Puppet Master's perpetual concealment made her unreadable. Cheng Shi, meanwhile, blinked in genuine surprise, as if he hadn't expected the historian to harbor such a... humanly twisted hobby.

He looked at Zuo Qiu with undisguised contempt:

"You snuck out to peep on couples' pillow talk?"

Buddy, that's a bit wild.

I've heard the Mushroom-Footed People's nighttime activities involve intertwining the fungal roots of their two feet. You were out all night for THAT?

Got hooked? Or do Sighing Forest Mushroom-Footed People do things differently — got some new tricks?"

Jaws dropped across the room.

[Silence] descended on cue. The perpetually impassive Puppet Master's puppet finally crumpled to its knees again, revealing a pair of wide, blinking eyes brimming with thirst for knowledge.

Zuo Qiu's face went rigid. He couldn't tell whether Cheng Shi had deliberately derailed the topic or simply hadn't deduced the Dream Peeping Ranger's identity. In any case, after that remark, no one could follow up.

"Come on, Poop Scooper — keep going. I'm genuinely curious here."

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