

The Gods 293

Chapter 293: A Deal with the Puppet Master

"You should know that the Sighing Sorrow Tide doesn't appear out of thin air. Deep within the Sighing Forest lies a pilgrimage site for Decay followers, where a massive tombstone stands — one that endlessly oozes corrupted blood. It's called...

"The Septic Final Tomb.

"Whenever the corrupted blood traces out the words of Decay across the tombstone's surface, a new wave of the Sighing Sorrow Tide begins.

"Every Decay follower who's heard of it dreams of witnessing this magnificent divine creation firsthand. But no one ever knew where it stood.

"Still, there were always fearless lunatics willing to risk their lives. Over time, someone actually narrowed down its approximate location.

"An organization called 'People in the Coffin' was the first to share their findings on the Decay channel. They'd painstakingly gathered countless scraps of intelligence about the Sighing Sorrow Tide's reach and attempted to use an overlap method to pinpoint a rough area within the Sighing Forest.

"At first, nobody thought they'd succeed. Information on the Sighing Sorrow Tide was far too scarce, let alone enough to map out a range.

"So when they shared their theory, no one believed it — until one lunatic took the theory at face value, ventured into the marked area, actually laid eyes on that Decay tombstone, and walked out alive. After that, every single Decay follower went wild.

"That person is now the Chosen of Decay — the one who sits atop the Ladder of Ascent and makes our Prosperity players hang our heads in shame: 'Rotten Wood,' Lin Xi.

"But after that, the People in the Coffin organization vanished without a trace.

"Heh. I don't suppose I need to explain the old saying about an innocent man drawing trouble for carrying a precious jade.

"And as luck would have it, I was fortunate enough to be matched with a member of the People in the Coffin before they disappeared. After our... ahem, friendly exchange, we swapped some intel — including the approximate coordinates of that area!

"I didn't kill that stinking bird. I just pointed him down a path to his death."

!!!

So Feather-boy had gone deep into the Sighing Forest?

It seemed Baldy really did have a deal going with this woman.

Cheng Shi understood now. He looked at An Jing in some shock and asked with a frown:

"So you plan to go to the Septic Final Tomb and seek out traces of Him?"

"How absurd. A 2,400-point Silence follower, willing to break her oath just to get closer to the Gods?"

"Am I wrong, Puppet Master?"

An Jing was silent for a moment, then controlled Zuo Qiu to nod.

"Yes. This world should belong to Them. We should be Their servants.

"I've heard that some players have already had an audience with a God. Since He has never summoned me, then I'll go to Him myself!"

"Heh. Even if it's a different God?" Cheng Shi's tone dripped with mockery.

"Yes — even if it's a different God!" The Puppet Master and all three of her puppets turned their heads toward Cheng Shi in unison, their faces lit with an eerie, fanatical fervor — utterly unlike the quiet, unassuming An Jing from before.

As expected. Madness often hides beneath a calm surface.

"So your so-called 'waste not, want not' was never about preserving combat power for us — it was about padding your own expedition force, wasn't it?"

Cheng Shi frowned, then added with some confusion:

"But why did you kill a historian who specialized in underground history? With his help, wouldn't it have been far easier to find what you're looking for down here?"

"I wanted a win-win too. But he rejected my offer. So to keep my road ahead clear, I had to cut off his."

"Oh? Now I'm curious, Baldy — what did she promise us?"

The word "us" made Hong Lin chuckle. She glanced at the Puppet Master and jerked her chin.

"Let her tell you herself."

The fanaticism on the Puppet Master's face eased slightly. She spoke through Zuo Qiu once more:

"Divinity! Prosperity Divinity!

"I'm leaving to go deep into the Sighing Forest. To bring myself closer to Him, I'm willing to shed the Prosperity Divinity sealed within me. If you want it, the trade is done — after all, the two who died were nothing to you.

"All you have to do is let me go once the trial is underway.

"A guaranteed profit with zero risk. Don't you think?"

Divinity?

And Prosperity Divinity at that?

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow and looked at Hong Lin. Hong Lin's expression didn't change as she gave a slight nod.

So — if even the Chosen of Prosperity was willing to nod, this Divinity was either exceptional in quality or substantial in quantity.

Guaranteed profit? No — this sounded more like a windfall of epic proportions.

Just as the Puppet Master said, Cheng Shi's original concern had only been that she might be scheming against him. But now she hadn't lied — her heart was set on leaving the party to go deep into the Sighing Forest. Even though this would reduce the trial's participant count from "five" to two, there didn't seem to be any other option.

A fight to the death with the Puppet Master here would serve no one's interests. So the deal was as good as done.

Although... the price could perhaps be negotiated a bit further.

Cheng Shi's eyes darted as he stared intently at the Puppet Master and said:

"I'm starting to believe you. But there are a few things you still owe me an explanation for."

"Explain what?"

"How do you know so much about Baldy?"

Hearing this, Baldy raised an eyebrow too. Her affairs were an open secret among peak players, but 2,400 points seemed just a tad shy of that circle. She looked at the Puppet Master with renewed interest.

An Jing paused again, then spoke through Zuo Qiu:

"I possess a Memory artifact that can read other people's memories. I absorbed part of Zuo Qiu's memories. Everything I know about Baldy comes from those.

"And, of course, the Prosperity-related history as well."

"I see. Then I have another question. Since you killed Zuo Qiu early on, that means yesterday's probing was all your doing. In that case — how do you know about me?"

"You were testing my identity with a level of familiarity that suggests prior knowledge. I'm no Chosen One — I'm not worth a historian's careful investigation, and his memories probably don't contain my information.

"And Jiang Wumei is even less likely, because by the time you took control of him, he was already dead inside my dream.

"So, Puppet Master — give me an answer. If it's reasonable, I'll consider going through with this deal."

The Puppet Master was about to speak when Cheng Shi suddenly held up his hand and pointed at Jiang Wumei:

"This time, don't use the historian's mouth. Use the Ranger puppet."

Cheng Shi had noticed that whenever the Puppet Master spoke on her own initiative, she always used Zuo Qiu's puppet. It wasn't terribly strange — she'd had him the longest, after all — but something about it just felt off.

An Jing paused, stared at Cheng Shi for a moment, then spoke through the Ranger:

"I know Zhen Yi."

?????

The instant those words left the puppet's mouth, both Cheng Shi's and Hong Lin's faces fell.

God damn it. What a jinx!

And the worst part — it wasn't a lie!

Unexpected, yes, but not illogical. After all, birds of a feather flock together — one lunatic knowing another was hardly surprising.

But Cheng Shi was still so furious he laughed.

Great. Just great. His biggest vulnerability to date was that unhinged woman having read enough of his memories. But he'd taken a measure of comfort in the fact that she was, well, unhinged — nobody would believe a word she said anyway.

Not that he could do anything about it even if he wanted to. He simply didn't have the means to deal with her.

But now, it turned out this woman's mouth might be even bigger than his big bro Hu Wei's — and that guy had already managed to blow Cheng Shi's emotional defenses wide open!

Cheng Shi was so angry his teeth were grinding. He glared at An Jing:

"You believe whatever she tells you? Just because that lunatic mentioned me, you came to test me?"

"What did she say about me?"

"Nothing much. She just shared some anecdotes about the Gods that she'd learned from you, and said you were a rather interesting person. So I wanted to see just how interesting 'interesting' really was."

Cheng Shi's face was pitch black: "And? What did you find?"

All three puppets pursed their lips in unison. Then the Ranger fell silent, and Zuo Qiu spoke:

"Nothing, really. Moderately interesting, I suppose."

"What?"

Now he was even angrier!

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