

## The Gods 297

Chapter 297: A Brand-New [Prosperity], An Absurd Faith

What a coincidence—the Tower of Logic again!

Wherever there were Gods, these scholars seemed to leave their mark.

No, wait!

The Puppet Master had mentioned that the Mushroom-Footed People's Tribe also contained items from the Tower of Logic. Could it be that...

Cheng Shi's heart lurched. He held his breath, inching toward the box one tiny step at a time. Only after confirming it wasn't some kind of trap did he finally steel himself to open it.

He first glanced at the two gigantic creatures still slugging it out, then exhaled heavily and carefully lifted the lid.

Inside the box was no specimen—just a single sheet of yellowed, aged paper.

Cheng Shi blinked, picked up the paper, and found it covered in writing he didn't recognize. It didn't resemble the scripts used by the Grand Tribunal or the Tower of Logic—it was a writing system he had never seen before.

But even without recognizing the characters, he could guess what the paper was. It was a contract!

At the very bottom of the page, he saw the oath symbols and residual Divinity used for contracts across the Land of Hope.

Only this time, one trace of the residual Divinity was [Decay], and the other was... [Prosperity]!

Cheng Shi was stunned. Here, in Eposka's territory, he'd found a contract co-sworn by [Decay] and [Prosperity]!

What on earth was written in it?!

Cheng Shi was burning with curiosity—so much so that he nearly forgot where he was. He examined the paper from every angle while mentally imploring the great Fool's Lips to lend a hand.

Brother Mouth was kind-hearted at his core. He agreed.

And so Cheng Shi's lips began to read aloud, carefully and clearly:

"To the supremely great [Barren Walker], this contract serves as the most devout offering from us, the abandoned followers of [Prosperity]!

If you abide by this covenant and shelter our wretched kin within this forest of [Decay], I shall rally every surviving soul to worship you for all generations, and we shall offer the flesh and blood of [Prosperity] as perpetual tribute!

An offering to the one who shelters us Mushroom-Footed People anew... our new... [Prosperity]!

Signed by the helpless, the humble, the devout—Abusfer."

The Fool's Lips only needed to read it once for Cheng Shi's mind to detonate like a bomb.

'What do you mean... a new... [Prosperity]?'

'Could it be that the one sheltering the Mushroom-Footed People wasn't [Prosperity] at all, but this...'

Cheng Shi whipped his head around in a daze and saw that the being the Mushroom-Footed People regarded as the true god of [Prosperity]—Eposka—was currently being pinned beneath Hong Lin's giant bear form and pummeled mercilessly.

'Baldy's brutal...'

'No—now isn't the time to be handing out compliments!'

'How could Eposka possibly be [Prosperity]??'

Cheng Shi's mind had just been crammed full of absurdity. He desperately wanted to know what had led to this preposterous contract, but before he could sort out his thoughts, Amir at his feet began stirring awake. And when Amir saw the corpses of his kin planted all around him, this warrior who had sworn to sacrifice everything for [Prosperity] suddenly... didn't seem quite so brave anymore.

He clapped his hands over his eyes in sheer terror and screamed at the top of his lungs, startling Cheng Shi half to death.

Cheng Shi hurriedly put the contract away and clamped his hand over Amir's mouth, shaking his head with a grave expression.

"Lord Baldy... what is... this place..."

The instant he spotted the Divine Envoy, the warrior's courage returned. Though he had no idea how he'd ended up here, the presence of the Divine Envoy meant that His shelter remained—and that meant his people were still under His watchful gaze!

Looking at the devout light in Amir's eyes, Cheng Shi pressed his lips together, at a loss for words.

He turned Amir's head away so the young warrior couldn't see the battle raging behind him, and asked quietly:

"Was the first chieftain of your Tribe named... Abuserfer?"

Amir froze for a moment, seemingly puzzled as to how the Divine Envoy could know their first chieftain's name. But in the next instant, he nodded frantically—because it suddenly made perfect sense. Why

wouldn't the Divine Envoy know? After all, this "Lord Baldy" had been sent to deliver a decree of forgiveness. Of course He would know everything about the Mushroom-Footed People!

With Amir's confirmation, Cheng Shi smiled—a deeply sardonic smile.

He knocked the bewildered Amir unconscious again, then unfolded the contract once more.

So this was it. This was the faith the Mushroom-Footed People had refused to abandon, generation after generation.

Devoting their entire lives—or their terror-stricken half-lives—to worshipping Eposka. A being that had betrayed [Prosperity], embraced [Decay], been killed by [Decay], and was reduced to a mindless, soulless husk!

Was it absurd? Was it preposterous? Was it laughable?

What devoted followers of [Prosperity], singing hymns and spreading the faith deep in the Sighing Forest!

What a brilliant chieftain, willing to commit the sacrilege of a false god to ensure his Tribe's survival!

Perhaps the Mushroom-Footed People would never realize that this chieftain they'd celebrated for centuries had, centuries ago, dragged every last one of them into the abyss of blasphemy!

He had used Faith Grafting—a technique no mortal would dare even conceive of—to find his people a new protector in the Sighing Forest... a "new [Prosperity]." And this so-called [Prosperity] was none other than the Barren Walker Eposka, who ceaselessly hunted and killed the Mushroom-Footed People every single day!

What a masterful gambit!

On [Decay]'s own hallowed ground, he had stolen [Prosperity]'s faith!

'Of course—I should have realized it sooner. The real [Prosperity] would never use the power of [Decay] to shelter a bunch of exiled criminals.'

'Only [Decay] could give rise to [Decay]!'

But this trial was still called "The Dying Embers." Was He truly that forgiving? Even after these Mushroom-Footed People had been exiled for centuries, had worshipped a false god for centuries—they were still His embers?

No wonder Hong Lin had said the [Prosperity] within the Mushroom-Footed People was pitifully scarce. Of course it was—because it had never been power bestowed by Him!

Wait.

Hold on—that didn't add up. If their faith had been grafted long ago, then where did the Mushroom-Footed People's [Prosperity] power come from?

Surely Eposka couldn't have granted it. Eposka was a soul-stripped Envoy of [Decay], a Barren Walker roaming the lands of [Decay] in search of prey. With [Decay] so thick and pungent clinging to its entire being, how could any trace of its former [Prosperity] power possibly remain?

Just as his thoughts reached this point, the battle underwent a dramatic shift.

Hong Lin, unable to bring down her opponent, had finally lost her temper. She pulled a porcelain jar from her storage space, and before Eposka could launch its next assault, she tilted her head back and poured the jar's contents straight down her throat—honey.

Cheng Shi gaped at the scene, genuinely worried the giant bear might choke to death on the endless stream of honey mid-battle.

'Seriously—who stops for a snack in the middle of a fight?'

'Sis, are you for real?'

Hong Lin was indeed about to get serious.

The giant bear that had rapidly drained the honey now had both eyes radiating a green glow. Unlike the cold, ghastly green in the eyes of that certain someone upon the Bone Throne, this was a verdant, life-brimming emerald. Two gemstone-like eyes snapped open, blazing with light, and with an earth-shattering roar, the bear charged Eposka once more.

The two colossal beings collided with a thunderous boom. Hong Lin reared up and slammed a paw into Eposka's chest, blasting the withered tree spirit flat on its back. More than that—her claws, now pulsing with green energy, pierced through Eposka's thousands of layered, wrinkled folds of skin for the very first time, raking across its chest and sending blood spraying everywhere.

But when Hong Lin and Cheng Shi saw the blood clearly, the battlefield fell momentarily silent.

The bear froze. The Clown lost his voice.

Because the blood splattering everywhere from Eposka's body wasn't red at all. It was a blue, luminescent liquid.

Blue! Luminescent! Liquid!

Cheng Shi chuckled dryly and raised the Desolate Lamp in his hand.

'The Never Vanishing Desolate Lamp... so that's what "never vanishing" means.'

'No wonder it always resets back to the Altar no matter where it's lost. Someone has been manufacturing it from their own blood all along...'

'Right—if the faith was grafted, then the "god's" gift would naturally be a counterfeit too.'

'Heh. No wonder Eposka always managed to find the Mushroom-Footed People. It wasn't tracking [Decay], and it certainly wasn't hunting [Prosperity]. It simply smelled itself—and then, per the "terms of the agreement," came to collect its due sacrifices.'

So where, exactly, was the forgiveness in all of this? Where was the hope?!

Cheng Shi had thought impersonating a Divine Envoy was outrageous enough, but it turned out the first chieftain of the Mushroom-Footed People had found a monster to impersonate his people's god!

What a brilliant move!

Setting aside the question of which God had been desecrated, the results spoke for themselves—Abusfer had achieved his goal.

At the very least, within this Sighing Forest drenched in [Decay], the Mushroom-Footed People had survived.

Perhaps not freely. Perhaps in constant terror. But as "followers of [Prosperity]," they had indeed endured in this land of [Decay] for an impossibly long time.

And the mortal sin of blasphemy had been borne almost entirely by one person alone. Every Mushroom-Footed Person alive today remained completely ignorant, still believing they worshipped the true [Prosperity].

The so-called "ignorance is no crime"—perhaps that's exactly what it meant here.

The Mushroom-Footed People's sin of ignorance had ultimately earned [Prosperity]'s forgiveness. The very premise of this trial made that clear enough.

In that case... He really was rather forgiving after all.

Once the initial shock subsided, Cheng Shi and Hong Lin's giant bear exchanged a glance. In each other's eyes, they saw the same look of bittersweet marvel.

The dying embers had finally been found. So what did "ignite a wildfire" actually mean?

Surely it couldn't mean getting more lives to worship this... "new [Prosperity]"?

But beyond that, Cheng Shi was even more interested in another question: What benefit did this contract—one Eposka had faithfully honored for centuries—hold for the Barren Walker itself?

Was it stealing [Prosperity]'s Authority?

On behalf of [Decay]?

Or... for itself?