

## The Gods 262

Chapter 262: Love Comes Too Fast, Like... a Boomerang!

After Zuo Qiu finished speaking, the cold-faced man who had remained silent finally opened his mouth:

"Zuo Qiu? Real name?"

"When has real or fake ever mattered? It's just a label."

"Heh. If you've already gone and changed it, why not just call yourself Zuo Qiuming?"

Zuo Qiu smiled casually. "History's still unclear. I dare not claim 'clarity.'"

"Interesting." Featherhead — Zhen — picked up the conversation, sizing up Zuo Qiu. "A historian from the History School. Looks like we won't be wandering blind this round. What's your research focus?"

"Underground Transitions!"

'Oh? What are the odds!'

The trial had been unexpectedly set underground, and along came a historian whose entire specialty was the underground!

Cheng Shi's dead-eyed numbness finally cracked. He was instantly reinvigorated.

The Land of Hope's history was simply too vast. No player could master all of it in a finite amount of time, so the History School's players — much like the Tower of Logic's research departments — had divided themselves into numerous specialized directions.

And underground history was the direction so universally reviled it was known as "the field even dogs wouldn't sniff."

Because, once again: no history to reference!

Underground tribes and settlements were scattered and sparse — clusters of desperate survivors clinging to life. They could hardly be called a true civilization, which meant there was almost no recorded history to speak of.

Researchers in this direction were doing thankless work. To fill in the underground's story, they had to personally seek out vanished peoples and events during trials and ask questions face to face.

But underground-related trials were far rarer than surface ones, which made the "underground historians'" source-tracing even harder.

So when Cheng Shi heard that Zuo Qiu was an underground historian, he actually considered whether he should give this [Memory] follower some face and overlook his faith for this trial.

Zuo Qiu's research direction clearly surprised everyone. Hong Lin grew interested too, raising an eyebrow:

"Hey, Poop Scooper — mind sharing what you've witnessed?"

Zuo Qiu smiled and declined: "Classified. Sorry."

"Sigh. Apocalypse at the door, and people still love locking themselves in their little circles. Admirable, truly admirable!" Hong Lin clasped her fists with a sigh dripping with sarcasm.

Cheng Shi couldn't help but laugh — the passive-aggressiveness was genuinely entertaining.

Zuo Qiu's expression turned awkward, though he didn't get angry. Seemed like a decent temper.

After the historian finished his introduction, the cold-faced man behind him finally wedged a word into the gap between conversations:

"Jiang Wumei. Trap Master. 2,319."

The instant the words dropped, Cheng Shi lowered his head and curved his lips.

'Interesting. Someone finally started lying.'

'Last round, he'd spent the entire time guessing under the watchful eyes of five Masters of Deception. This round, with his own Deception Master ability restored, he could finally save some brainpower.'

As for what this cold-faced teammate was hiding... well, that was a question for later.

Everyone was long accustomed to taciturn, stoic teammates, so after Jiang Wumei's introduction, all eyes promptly shifted to the round's other female player.

This woman — who appeared to be around thirty with a mature, commanding air — stood apart from the group, motionless before a Twisted Night Python. She'd been watching everyone in silence since the start. Not a single word.

When all eyes turned to her, she offered a faint smile — and suddenly dropped to her knees.

It was only when she sank down that the group could see another woman standing behind her!

A woman far more petite than the kneeling one!

Everyone's gaze sharpened. They'd guessed her identity!

Hong Lin even whistled and broke into applause:

"Bravo! Not even I noticed. So this round we've got a Puppet Master!"

Puppet Master — the assassin class of [Silence].

They were assassins lurking within shadows. Killers who moved through [Silence]. But their method of killing differed from ordinary assassins.

Puppet Masters wound their control threads around their targets. Then, amid the speechless shock and soundless terror, they converted their victims into puppets who would never speak again.

What they killed wasn't the body. It was the soul.

So the mature woman who'd knelt with a smile was no living person — she was a lifelike puppet.

Though "lifelike" was hardly the right word. The puppet had been made from a real person. Naturally, it was indistinguishable from the genuine article.

Hong Lin's praise drew no real response from the Puppet Master. Her puppet shot back upright to shield the small figure behind it, then smiled and nodded to the group — a rough greeting.

Having a puppet convey goodwill on the master's behalf was itself a signal. It meant this [Silence] assassin wasn't antisocial — she might even be willing to cooperate.

But Cheng Shi still studied the puppet with a measured, guarded look. A trace of gravity settled in his chest.

'This round is danger on top of danger.'

He didn't know the Puppet Master's score, but to have evaded the [Prosperity] Chosen One's perception, it couldn't be low.

Tallying it up: among his five teammates, two were feuding peak players; two were cold, detached observer-types; and the last one was a rival of one of his faiths...

'This is absolutely not a round where I can coast.'

The bold declaration he'd made before entering the trial had curdled into a fever dream in under five minutes.

'Fate? Maybe. Maybe not. But somebody out there is definitely a bitch!'

Cheng Shi shook his head in wordless exasperation. Seeing everyone's eyes turn to him, he gathered his thoughts and squeezed out a textbook fake smile.

'If I can't be a freeloader, at least I'll be invisible in this pressure-cooker of a lineup.'

"Cheng Shi—"

He'd barely started when Hong Lin whipped her head around, locked eyes with him, and cut him off:

"Cheng Shi? Which 'Cheng'? Which 'Shi'?"

"..."

'This is bad!'

Cheng Shi's heart dropped. He realized instantly that things were about to go very sideways.

Even though he couldn't immediately pinpoint which trial had leaked his name all the way to a [Prosperity] Chosen One, one look at her expression told him she wasn't asking about the Chinese homophone for "honest" — she was asking about a specific person named Cheng Shi!

And it wasn't just her. The instant he'd opened his mouth, every single teammate seemed to perk up at the name. Their eyes all burned with a feverish glint.

'Wait — what's going on?'

Cheng Shi's heart clenched, but he kept his surface casual: "The 'Cheng' and 'Shi' of Cheng Shi."

Hearing this tai-chi non-answer, Hong Lin raised an eyebrow, her expression turning playful:

"A... Fate Weaver?"

!!!!

'Holy—!!'

'Major problem!!'

He didn't need to think to know exactly which trial had caused this!

The round with Hu Wei! Bai Fei! The one where he'd impersonated Zhen Yi and fooled two peak players!

Being recognized wasn't even the scariest part. The scariest part was that to cement his cover identity and protect himself, he'd spouted all kinds of nonsense — including, while wearing Zhen Yi's face, declaring himself to be Zhen Yi's new flame!

'Oh god...'

But Cheng Shi knew that every micro-expression, every tiny movement was being magnified infinitely under these people's eyes right now. There was no hiding it. His only option was to change tactics and flail.

So he arched an eyebrow and fixed Hong Lin with a look of apparent surprise:

"That's right, I'm a Fate Weaver. What — has my name already reached the ears of peak players? I'm truly honored."

Hong Lin hadn't expected Cheng Shi to just... own it. She blinked in surprise and looked him up and down for a long moment before clicking her tongue in admiration:

"No wonder he became Zhen Yi's new flame. He really is quite good-looking."

The moment those words landed, all six people present — Hong Lin excluded — had the same reaction: their eyes lit up like fireworks!

Even the [Silence] follower had her puppet drop to its knees again, revealing a pair of bright, sparkling eyes behind it!

Clearly, everyone present knew Zhen Yi. And everyone had heard that Zhen Yi had personally confirmed the existence of a previously unheard-of male lover!

As for who'd actually started the "rumor" — that didn't matter. What mattered was that when the biggest piece of gossip in the entire Faith Game was sitting right in front of you, no one could resist taking a bite!

[The new flame of the most despised Master of Trickery]!

A title like that could make even a pig radiate glory.

And Cheng Shi wasn't bad-looking to begin with.

The group's probing stares raked across him like a plow — the longer they looked, the more they thought... mm, yeah, he does look the type.

Their expressions grew more and more priceless, each one outdoing the last.

But Cheng Shi himself...

Wore an expression like someone had just died.

"..."

'Of course.'

'Karma comes fast — like a tornado.'

'Every lie a person ever tells floats through the Void for a while, then turns into a boomerang and flies right back — straight into your forehead!'

'Except this time, the return trips been a bit too quick!'

'If you look at the boomerang sticking out of my forehead, you'll see two gleaming golden characters:'

'Bad luck!'

'How did this happen!?!'

'Whose mouth runs THIS loose!?!'

'I can understand the desperate need to get payback after being played by Zhen Yi, but isn't this a bit too eager!?!'

'It's only been a few days and already the whole world knows!'

Two faces flashed through Cheng Shi's mind: Grand Marshal Hu Wei's, and Xiao Bai, Bai Fei's. After careful consideration, he figured the culprit was almost certainly Hu Wei, whose defense had been broken so hard he'd blabbed.

After all, that perpetually cold, keeps-everyone-at-arm's-length Bai Fei didn't really seem like a blabbermouth.

But Cheng Shi's recovery was fast. After hearing Zhen Yi's name, his expression visibly darkened. His eyes grew so overcast they threatened to drip.

"She... said that?"

Hong Lin was clearly holding back laughter. She nodded and began to feel genuinely sorry for this officially-acknowledged new flame of Zhen Yi's.

Everyone knew this "Cheng Shi" couldn't possibly be Zhen Yi's actual lover. She had far too many conquests for that. But this was the first time she'd bestowed the title upon a man.

Which meant one thing: this person must have offended Zhen Yi grievously. Otherwise she'd never weaponize her own stellar "reputation" to drag an innocent stranger into the mud.

So Hong Lin was curious. Or rather, every melon-eating spectator present was curious. Just what kind of person was this Cheng Shi — someone Zhen Yi had taken such a personal interest in?

Watching the group's gossip-hungry gazes grow increasingly outrageous, Cheng Shi felt as if he'd been transported back to that moment beneath the Conjugate Whispering Tree — and had once again swallowed one of [Fate]'s bitter fruits.

'Bitter. So unbearably bitter!'

'But of course — the karma you plant yourself is always the bitterest of all!'