

The Gods 291

Chapter 291: Puppet Master, An Jing!

Cheng Shi didn't get up right away. He was sensing the changes around him.

After Jiang Wumei died within the dream, his body would become an empty husk devoid of consciousness. But to guard against any filthy resurrection tricks the Ranger might possess, Cheng Shi needed to finish off the corpse before he could rest easy.

So he sat up quietly and drew his scalpel.

But just as he was about to stand — something bizarre happened!

Jiang Wumei woke up too!

Right before Cheng Shi's eyes, the Ranger opened his eyes, stood up, casually nodded at Cheng Shi as if nothing had happened, and walked toward the other side of the room.

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted sharply. He sprang to his feet and stared at the Ranger — only to see Jiang Wumei walk straight up to the Puppet Master and then, slowly...

Kneel.

Just like the mature-looking puppet already in her hands, he knelt facing Cheng Shi, right in front of the little girl.

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted once more. The unthinkable scene before him could only mean one thing: Jiang Wumei had been refined into one of the Puppet Master's puppets!

When?!

Just now?

In that single instant after the Ranger died and before Cheng Shi opened his eyes?

Too convenient. Suspiciously convenient.

Had the Puppet Master converted a resurrected Ranger, or merely claimed a soulless husk?

Or was this all just a puppet show — with Jiang Wumei never actually turned into a puppet, and the revived Ranger putting on an act with the Puppet Master?

Cheng Shi didn't dare bet on whether Jiang Wumei and the Puppet Master were working together. His gaze swept past Hong Lin — who looked equally stunned — and his fingers quietly closed around his ring.

The Hero of Today was about to go on a rampage.

But at that moment, Jiang Wumei spoke!

He raised his head and, smiling at the two of them, said:

"Sorry for startling you. I can explain."

The voice was Jiang Wumei's, but the tone and attitude...

It was the Puppet Master speaking?!

Cheng Shi stared at the Puppet Master in shock. Beside him, Hong Lin's eyes turned razor-sharp as she rose to her feet: "You can talk, Puppet Master!"

The little girl nodded, but the voice still came from Jiang Wumei's mouth:

"Yes. Every time I make someone who doesn't understand Silence become silent, I earn a window of time during which I can speak.

"Let me introduce myself. An Jing, Puppet Master, 2467."

Truth!

A 2,400-point Puppet Master.

It seemed Jiang Wumei really was dead.

Cheng Shi's gaze hardened. He looked at An Jing, his tone grave: "Why did you kill him? Did you have a grudge against this Trap Master?"

An Jing shook her head and spoke through Jiang Wumei:

"Cheng Shi, there's no need to try and trap me with words.

"You're the one who killed him. You knew he was a Dream Peeping Ranger and you killed him inside the dream. I have nothing to do with this Ranger.

"I simply noticed that he'd become much more silent, and I seized the opportunity to turn him into a puppet. Waste not, want not — right?"

The room fell dead quiet.

Fair enough in theory — but hearing a freshly killed Ranger's own mouth say "waste not, want not" about himself was genuinely unsettling.

"Resourceful scavenger, aren't you?" Hong Lin scoffed, then turned to Cheng Shi. "But I am curious — Cheng Shi, what did Jiang Wumei see inside your dream that made you kill him?"

"Don't tell me he really discovered some sordid little story between you and Zhen Yi?"

"..."

'Thanks a lot, sis. Can we maybe not bring up that jinx right now...'

Cheng Shi's eye twitched. His gaze dropped onto the Puppet Master, cold and probing: "What are you after?"

The Puppet Master manipulated her puppets — all three heads swiveled toward Cheng Shi in unison, wearing identical eerie smiles.

"I don't have any hidden agenda. I just want to preserve a combat asset. One more body means one more advantage.

"Besides, if the Mushroom-Footed People found out that someone in the Divine Envoy's party had died, that wouldn't exactly help the trial's progress, would it?"

A lie!

Cheng Shi frowned, his expression darkening. He couldn't tell Hong Lin that his Master of Deception talent had seen through the Puppet Master's lie, but words weren't always necessary — action said everything.

If this Puppet Master had hidden motives, better to have it out right here, right now, in the safety of this room, rather than waste energy watching her while exploring the Sighing Forest.

With that thought, Cheng Shi revealed his scalpel. His message was unmistakable: 'I don't trust you.'

'And if you won't tell the truth, don't blame me for what happens next.'

Hong Lin raised an eyebrow at Cheng Shi's sudden aggression — then smiled and cracked her knuckles, her own message equally clear:

'The Fate Weaver might not be able to beat you. But I can.'

The Puppet Master watched the two of them coiling to strike and directed her two puppets to shield her real body.

The tension in the room ratcheted up to a knife's edge.

And then, at that exact moment, Zuo Qiu — who had been absent all night — pushed through the door. He took one look at the standoff, froze for a beat, then quickly shut the door behind him and delivered bad news to everyone with a grim expression:

"We have a problem. The Never Vanishing Desolate Lamp hasn't reset. The lamp on the altar is gone."

!!??

Alarm rippled through the room. Every pair of eyes turned toward the player who had last handled the Desolate Lamp — Hong Lin.

Hong Lin was stunned too. She frowned and rummaged through her personal storage space. Sure enough, the lamp she'd carelessly tossed in there the day before was still inside.

She pulled it out with a grave expression. The moment everyone saw the lamp still in her hand, their hearts collectively sank.

Prosperity's gift rules had changed.

And change meant new risk.

So — why had the Desolate Lamp stopped resetting?

"The Mushroom-Footed People are in a panic. The Old Patriarch is leading a group here to see you — the Divine Envoy. Look, if you all have issues with each other, could you maybe...

"deal with the current crisis first?"

"Lord Divine Envoy, you're running out of time to cook up an excuse..."

Cheng Shi studied Zuo Qiu for a moment, then shifted his gaze back to An Jing. A thought struck him: if An Jing could still speak after taking control of her puppet, then was it possible that the Zuo Qiu standing before him was also one of her puppets?

After all, on the very first day when the two of them had paired up, Zuo Qiu had literally been dragged over by a bundle of puppet strings. At the time, such blatant behavior hadn't aroused Cheng Shi's suspicion. But now that he thought about it — what if the historian had already been converted back then? Was it possible that only three living people remained in this party?

Hong Lin, himself, and this Puppet Master who now controlled three puppets!

Was she... collecting puppets?

Did she intend to turn everyone into her dolls?

Cheng Shi's face grew grim. He had never encountered such a brazen Puppet Master. Then again, this was still just speculation — and there was a simple way to test the theory: grab Zuo Qiu and cut him open.

So even as the whole room reeled from the news, Cheng Shi said nothing. Without a word of warning, he launched himself off the ground and charged straight at Zuo Qiu.

The Puppet Master reacted fast. The instant she saw Cheng Shi move, she sent both her puppets hurtling at his flanks. But fast as she was, she wasn't faster than Hong Lin.

The Chosen of Prosperity moved like lightning — as though she'd predicted that Cheng Shi wouldn't bother "dealing with external threats first." The very instant the puppets stirred, she vaulted over Cheng Shi's head mid-charge, shot both iron hands out to either side, and slammed the two puppets flat into the floor.

It all happened in a flash. One second, four people stood at the four corners of the room. The next, they had collided in two-on-two confrontation.

Zuo Qiu was terrified by the sudden assault, but his reflexes were anything but slow.

The historian nimbly backstepped, first yanking open the closed door behind him. Then he dodged Cheng Shi's opening grab with a sidestep, and the very instant Cheng Shi whipped around for a second swipe — Zuo Qiu vanished into the shadow Cheng Shi's body cast on the floor under the dim sun.

One blink, and the historian was gone.

Shadow Shuttle!

So he really was an assassin-puppet!