

The Gods 1251

Chapter 1251: King of the Black Market

The newcomer had clearly mistaken Cheng Shi and Zhen Xin for his lackeys.

It wasn't as if no one had done that before, but the last person to treat both of them as lackeys at the same time was named Deceit.

When a player had the strength, the confidence, and a clear objective, there was naturally no need to play make-believe with NPCs. So the very next second, Shadow Chengshi had the "wealthy merchant" pinned to the ground and said in a solemn tone:

"You have one minute. Explain this deal of yours, and while you're at it, tell us who you are."

The sudden takedown left the merchant completely dazed. His face pressed against the cold floor, his mind instantly sharpened, and he realized at once that the two people before him were not his lackeys at all—they were "bosses" from who-knows-where!

His home had been stolen!

But that was fine—as long as he stayed alive!

The merchant, quite experienced in such matters, wasn't particularly frightened. He simply complied with Cheng Shi's questions.

He did his best to avert his gaze, avoiding looking at any of their faces. His cheek, squished flat against the floor, deformed as he mumbled:

"My name is Blacks. I'm the King of Canlival's black market and the owner of the Golden House.

Just this morning, the boss of the Sunset came to me and asked me to secretly handle something for him."

"King of the black market?" Zhen Xin walked over to Blacks with obvious interest, smiling as she asked, "Is it the kind of black market I'm thinking of?"

Blacks saw the tips of her leather shoes, shut his eyes, and said:

"If you're referring to the black market that deals in human trafficking, weapons, intelligence, potions, and faiths—then yes, you've got the right idea.

I control the largest underground network in this country. Whatever you need, I can provide. There's really no need for violence."

"Faiths can be traded too?" Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow curiously. "How does that work?"

Blacks explained:

"Depends on which faith you need.

Here's the simplest example: just two days ago, the Golden House helped a client switch faiths at no cost, transitioning him from a Prosperity follower to a Death follower."

"No cost?" Cheng Shi was taken aback. "You can erase the Oathbreaking Curse? For all faiths? How do you manage that?"

Blacks finally opened his eyes, and a glint of pride even flashed through them.

"Well, not all faiths—but there's always a way.

Take that Prosperity follower, for example. We seized all his assets so that he was no longer 'prosperous,' then we personally killed him so he'd forever remain by Death's side.

That way, his faith was purified once again, and we fulfilled the client's request as promised.

Win-win, and completely cost-free!"

"?"

At those words, the two deceivers exchanged a glance, their expressions absolutely priceless.

Bro—you call that "no cost"?

Your "no cost" means no cost to you, right?

And honestly, even that's not quite right. You guys stuffed yourselves so full—didn't you choke?

Cheng Shi was speechless. Zhen Xin couldn't stop laughing:

"So that's why you're so rich?"

The Golden House... Nice codename. But for a black market merchant, isn't building your home out of gold a bit too flashy?

Doesn't Canlival have laws against underground trade?"

Perhaps because he hadn't sensed any genuinely malicious intent, Blacks gradually loosened up during the conversation and replied nonchalantly:

"Of course it's illegal—otherwise why would it be called the black market?"

But if you're in the black market business, you have to be flashy. It's an insanely profitable trade. If you don't let people see that you've made money from deals, why would anyone believe they can make money dealing with you?

This business logic has been tried and tested. You don't even under—Do you have any other suggestions?"

Blacks was clearly the type to push his luck. Accustomed to being arrogant in his daily life, the moment he reverted to his true nature he got a bit carried away. Fortunately, he caught himself just in time, realizing his situation wasn't exactly favorable, and quickly corrected course.

The two deceivers didn't bother with his aborted insolence. Cheng Shi continued asking:

"So what about this deal you mentioned?"

The Sunset... sounds like one of the businesses in your black market?"

Zhen Xin smiled, clearly familiar with the name, but before she could explain, Blacks was already shaking his head vigorously:

"No, no, no—Ringmaster Fate is not one of ours.

The Sunset is a circus's brand name. Their boss is Ringmaster Fate.

It's a circus with a long and storied history. When Canlival was first founded, the inaugural king wanted to boost troop morale during the harsh winters, so he gathered all sorts of talented performers from among the people and established the Sunset Circus.

They've always represented Canlival's highest level of circus artistry, touring the land with nonstop performances, and they've carried on to this day, becoming a national treasure.

But in recent years, their position has been challenged.

Previous ringmasters were set in their ways, refusing to embrace fresh acts from the outside world. That led to a massive loss of audience and growing resentment among their own performers.

Several young performers left in frustration and banded together to create another circus called Morning Joy—the idea being that after falling asleep to a spectacular show, even being woken at first light would bring a smile at the memory of last night's joy.

Because those spirited young performers brought audiences fresh, exotic acts from beyond Canlival, they quickly surpassed the Sunset Circus in popularity, threatening to replace it entirely.

Seeing their audience dwindle, Ringmaster Fate took up the mantle in the Sunset's darkest hour. On the brink of bankruptcy, he shattered the old rigid traditions and began importing outside culture as well, leading the Sunset back from the abyss to the very top.

And this month—five days from now, in fact—both circuses will hold their performances here, in Canlival's capital city of Kurd, on the very same day.

Each audience member can only watch one show, and whichever circus draws the bigger crowd wins!

They're using this to prove once and for all which is the superior circus.

Pre-sale tickets have been selling like crazy. Circus enthusiasts from all over the country are flooding into Kurd, and everyone is agonizing over which circus to attend for the latest performance."

The King of the Black Market, Blacks, was clearly a circus enthusiast himself—once he got started on the topic, the words just wouldn't stop.

But Cheng Shi had no interest in listening to this country's circus history. He had to interrupt, tapping Blacks on the head:

"Stop, stop, stop!

I don't care about their rivalry. I just want to know what this deal you mentioned is actually about."

Blacks blinked, mumbling:

"I was just getting to that..."

"..." Cheng Shi twitched the corner of his mouth. "Then go on."

"Where was I?"

Oh right—the competition!

A great circus show isn't just about fresh, thrilling acts. It also needs the perfect host.

And that host is the star of every circus, second only to the ringmaster—the Clown!"

"???"

At that word, a certain Clown's eyelid twitched involuntarily. His gaze toward Blacks now carried a few extra shades of suspicion.

He was wondering whether this King of the Black Market might be one of his disappeared teammates in disguise, deliberately messing with him.

But after observing for a long while, he decided probably not.

It was likely just a coincidence—after all, circuses having clowns made perfect sense.

Zhen Xin, on the other hand, was grinning even wider after hearing the word "clown."

"The Sunset Circus's clown is named Lake—a natural-born performer who could make the entire audience burst into laughter just by standing on stage.

To prepare for this battle of honor, Lake had been training intensely, secluding himself for quite some time.

But when Ringmaster Fate went to find him this morning to discuss the performance lineup, he discovered that Lake was gone!

Right on the verge of showtime, the Sunset's clown had vanished!

This would be explosive news. If it hit the black market, I'm sure Madame Freud of Morning Joy would pay a fortune to buy it and spread it across the entire country.

That way, she could win without even competing.

But unfortunately, we at the Golden House are principled black market merchants. Out of gratitude for Ringmaster Fate's trust, I promised him I'd find Lake before the final day.

But just as I came home to assemble my people, I found that... my home was gone."

As he spoke, Blacks sneaked a glance at Cheng Shi.

"..."

After learning the full story, Cheng Shi was thoroughly at a loss for words.

'This is... a trial?'

'Finding a lost clown?'

'You sure this isn't a metaphor for something?'

'If this were any other god's trial, fine—but this just had to be the Fun God's trial.'

'Come on, Benefactor—were you afraid I wouldn't find the clues or something? Did you really have to make it this obvious?'

'The stage has both a front and a backstage. Does the clown always have to stand under the spotlight and take the heat?'

His face darkened like the bottom of a pot.

Beside him, Zhen Xin's eyes spun with amusement, and she couldn't help but laugh:

"I never imagined the Fun God's trial would be this simple. You're just short one clown, right?"

Easy—just send one up there.

Cheng Shi, are you up for it?"

"???"

Before Cheng Shi could even fire back, Blacks's eyes lit up first. He looked at Cheng Shi with eager expectation:

"You... no, are you also a Clown?"

"..."

'Since when does just anyone get to call me a clown?'

Cheng Shi laughed in exasperation, slapped Blacks on the head, and huffed:

"I gave you one minute. Who told you to ramble on this long?"

"???"

Blacks ducked his head, utterly aggrieved.

'You two were listening so intently just now...'

'And besides, the one teasing you was that lady over there—so why are you hitting me?'

...

Chapter 1252: The Ringmaster of Sunset Turns Hostile

Without question, the "ending" this trial spoke of was—at least on the surface—the circus showdown between Morning Joy and Sunset.

The trial's hint was "Every performance has an ending," but right now Morning Joy's performance was guaranteed to have an ending. It was only the Sunset that, lacking a clown to host the show, would likely miss that same-day competition "ending."

The way to clear a Deceit trial had always been to "obey and act"—that is, follow the hints given and complete the assigned task. On the surface, it looked like the players' mission was to help the Sunset find that missing clown.

But was that really the case?

Absolutely not!

Every Deceit trial came with an extremely obvious hint, but ever since the Faith Game descended upon the world, every single hint Deceit had ever given had been wrong!

All lies!

Even the trial's title itself could be a lie.

Whenever players drew one of Deceit's trials, many of them would scrutinize every word, trying to discern the trial's true purpose, terrified of being led astray.

Viewed through standard Deceit logic, the trial's hint should actually be interpreted as:

No performance has an ending.

In other words: shatter everything as it stands and turn any predetermined course of events into its complete opposite!

This hint was deeply thought-provoking.

Both Cheng Shi and Zhen Xin were Deceit followers, and they quickly grasped the key point. However, rather than rushing off to destroy Morning Joy's "ending," they discussed it briefly and decided to visit the Sunset Circus first.

They didn't believe this trial about an "ending" could be that simple. They wanted to first verify whether what the King of the Black Market had told them was true.

Blacks certainly hadn't lied, but the world was never static. Nobody could be sure what changes might occur before the players laid eyes on Ringmaster Fate of the Sunset.

After all, it wasn't hard to guess: if this truly was Deceit's metaphor for certain endings, then Fate's will would inevitably be woven into the mix, attempting to twist Deceit's ending and impose its own interpretation.

Cheng Shi hauled Blacks up from the ground without a moment's hesitation and dragged him toward the Sunset Circus. Zhen Xin shifted back into An Mingyu's appearance and hurried after them.

Just as the sun rises in the east and sets in the west, Morning Joy was camped in eastern Kurd while the Sunset's grounds lay in the city's west.

The three of them rushed the entire way and soon arrived at the circus grounds outside the city.

As Canlival's time-honored "national treasure," the Sunset Circus's scale far exceeded Cheng Shi's imagination.

He had assumed that even the largest circus would be nothing more than one big tent surrounded by a few performers' tents, with some supplies, horses, and transport vehicles piled around at most.

But the circus before him was teeming with visitors even in broad daylight, a constant stream of people and carriages flowing through.

The roads between the tents were as wide as the city's main thoroughfares, and looking ahead, there was no end in sight.

Cheng Shi was stunned. Gazing at the enormous amusement grounds before him, he said in disbelief:

"This isn't a circus—it's... a theme park!

They're open during the day too?"

Seeing Cheng Shi's astonishment, Blacks beamed with pride.

"Of course. This place is open around the clock and never closes for snow or storms.

It's just that right now is Canlival's best season, so there are especially many visitors.

Um... sir, Ringmaster Fate's office is at the very back. If you'd let go of me, I can show you a shortcut."

Cheng Shi glanced at Blacks, whom he was still gripping. He knew the man wasn't offering to lead the way out of goodwill—he simply felt that being shoved along by the neck would damage the public image of the King of the Black Market and the Golden House. That was the true source of his sudden "enthusiasm."

Still, Cheng Shi wasn't entirely heartless. He could tell that while this King of the Black Market was slippery, the man also had the sense to read the room. Even setting aside concern for his own life, for the sake of the Golden House's reputation alone, Blacks would never try to run or make a scene here.

So Cheng Shi gave him a casual shove to set him free and let him lead the way.

He followed closely behind, glancing left and right as they walked.

Zhen Xin wasn't particularly amazed. With the History School at her fingertips, she had heard of just about everything. She only shook her head in passing when they walked by a few clumsy magicians performing, then turned her attention back to Cheng Shi.

She said softly:

"After we left San Dales, the History School continued investigating Yu Xi. In their source-tracing initiative, they traced the history of the Joy Theater backward and discovered that San Dales's ancestors were actually a branch of Canlival emigrants.

They'd had enough of the bitter cold and left the north, hoping to merge into the Tower of Logic and gain the protection of the Erudition Presidium and Truth.

The Erudition Presidium agreed to their request and dispatched scholars to take them in completely. That's how San Dales came to be."

"?"

Cheng Shi froze. "That doesn't add up. I remember San Dales being a faith-free haven built by the scholars, and the people inside were all experiment materials. How could they..."

He trailed off mid-sentence, because he had already understood what Zhen Xin meant.

After taking in those emigrants, the Erudition Presidium's scholars wiped their memories and deposited them in the San Dales experiment site, where they became its first residents.

'How ironic.'

'A group of wretched people who'd fled the northern cold only to fall into yet another frozen pit within the Tower of Logic.'

'The Erudition Presidium truly didn't treat people as human beings.'

'Neither did Truth.'

'And so they're all gone now.'

Blacks walked briskly, terrified that slowing down by even a step might offend the two "bosses" behind him. Without a single pause, he led them to Ringmaster Fate's office, then—under the astonished stares of numerous performers and visitors—knocked loudly on the office door for all to see.

Cheng Shi recognized this as one of Blacks's little tricks. He was trying to use the onlookers as witnesses, a form of insurance against disappearing without explanation. But Cheng Shi had no desire to waste his attention on such things right now. He just wanted to make sure the trial proceeded smoothly.

Before long, someone opened the door. The man inside wore an immaculate white formal suit—it was none other than Ringmaster Fate of the Sunset Circus.

The instant Ringmaster Fate saw Blacks standing outside, his expression turned utterly grim!

Blacks was the King of the entire black market, the master of the Golden House. He represented everything dirty and dark about Canlival. He should not appear here—especially not before the Sunset's battle to defend the highest honor of circus artistry!

Any association with a man like that would make everyone think the Sunset's victory had been engineered rather than earned through pure performance!

That was precisely why, when Ringmaster Fate had reluctantly sought out Blacks, he had insisted the man keep it quiet and search for the missing Lake in secret.

But Blacks's appearance had shattered all of Ringmaster Fate's plans. The ringmaster's face changed drastically, and in an instant he turned cold:

"Blacks, if you're here for pre-sale tickets, I can only tell you that everyone—even the royal family—must obtain tickets through proper channels.

I will not open any back doors for you, nor will I allow the Golden House to scalp front-row seats.

That's all I have to say. Please leave."

Ringmaster Fate was undeniably shrewd. In just a few sentences, he had explained the situation to the onlookers and severed any perceived connection to the Golden House.

Blacks was sharp too. He understood Ringmaster Fate's position, having been forced to use this tactic to protect himself.

But this time he hadn't come for himself—he had come because of the two terrors standing behind him. So while his mouth said "Sorry to bother you," his eyes were frantically signaling to Ringmaster Fate.

Ringmaster Fate didn't want to blow things up. After weighing his options, he decided to meet with Blacks in secret one more time.

And so, after their staged falling-out, Blacks led Cheng Shi and Zhen Xin on a roundabout detour, slipping past everyone to reach the lawn behind the office.

Ringmaster Fate was already waiting there. When he noticed people behind Blacks, he immediately assumed they were the man's entourage and spoke up at once:

"Blacks, I've made myself perfectly clear. I have no tickets."

Blacks blinked, thinking: 'There's nobody around us anymore—what are you still pretending for? You certainly didn't have this attitude when you came begging me this morning.'

'That tearful face, swearing to revive the Sunset, refusing to let a century-old circus go bankrupt—that look was a hundred times warmer than this cold mug you're wearing now.'

"Ringmaster Fate, you have a short memory. I'm not here for tickets. I'm here to confirm your commission—the matter of finding... that thing."

Blacks knew where the line was. He didn't say the name.

But Ringmaster Fate cut him off, his face icy.

"Commission?"

What commission?

I have no idea what you're talking about. Blacks, did you not sleep well, or do you have me confused with someone else?"

...

Chapter 1253: Seen Through

"???"

Blacks was dumbfounded. He shot a panicked glance back at Cheng Shi and his companion, then hastily said:

"It's not like that—I wasn't lying!"

He turned back around and explained patiently, "Fate, these two aren't outsiders. They're... extremely skilled private detectives I brought in. Just repeat what you told me this morning. Don't worry, we'll absolutely keep it confidential!"

"Confidential? Keep what confidential?"

I've been working in my office all day. I haven't stepped outside once, so what meeting are you talking about?"

Blacks, you must have the wrong person. Stop causing a scene here. If Freud sent you, forget I said anything.

Out of respect for the fact that the Golden House has sold quite a few tickets for the Sunset in the past, I won't hold today's blunder against you.

But I'm busy. I don't have time to keep up this farce with you."

With that, Ringmaster Fate turned on his heel and left the lawn.

Cheng Shi and Zhen Xin watched the scene unfold, a strange glint flashing simultaneously in both their eyes.

Blacks, still unwilling to give up, tried to step forward and argue, but Cheng Shi held him in place.

He let out a dry chuckle:

"Stop wasting your breath. Haven't you figured it out? He's obviously already found the person—that's why he won't admit to meeting you this morning.

But that's actually good news. After all, making someone disappear is much easier than finding them."

"!?"

Blacks froze where he stood, a chill racing up his spine.

'What on earth are these two terrors planning!?'

He didn't dare move, didn't dare ask. He just stood there like a wooden post.

Cheng Shi and Zhen Xin exchanged a look, both understanding exactly what needed to be done next. The ringmaster was important, but he wouldn't single-handedly affect the circus show itself. To keep the Sunset Circus away from its "ending," they needed to pay a visit to that clown who had vanished and then reappeared.

A clown who had suddenly disappeared and just as suddenly returned was suspicious in itself.

Without a moment's hesitation, the two vanished from Blacks's side. Suddenly freed of his "supervisors," Blacks didn't rush to flee. As the King of the Black Market, he had seen plenty of fools who thought they were clever.

These two terrors could come and go as they pleased—who knew whether they might return, whether they might still need him? The safest course of action right now was to stay put. At the very least, he should wait until he truly couldn't take it anymore before leaving; that way he'd at least have a justification for his departure.

But even if he wasn't going anywhere, certain arrangements had to be made. He couldn't risk the Golden House's vast empire on a gamble—not when these two outsider "bosses" might just put their new lessons into practice and toss him from the "Prosperity" camp straight into the "Death" camp.

While Blacks fretted over his black market empire, Cheng Shi and Zhen Xin had already made their way onto the roof of the ringmaster's office. They concealed their presence, intending to track Ringmaster Fate's movements to locate the clown Lake—only to discover that Lake was right there in the ringmaster's office, and the clown's return appeared to have preceded their own arrival by not very long at all!

Ringmaster Fate hadn't even had time to find out why Lake had disappeared before having to deal with Blacks.

The moment the ringmaster walked in, he locked the door tight, then bellowed at the clown seated by the desk:

"Why did you leave without a word?!"

Where on earth did you go?!

Do you have any idea that I was so desperate to find you that I even risked contacting the Golden House?!

Do you realize your stunt could have plunged the Sunset into ruin?!

Talk! Answer me!"

...

Meanwhile, on the other side.

Since the same-day competition between Morning Joy and Sunset was practically the hottest topic in the entire country, Hu Wei and Zhang Jizu had learned about it shortly after setting out.

Both of them realized this was the key to solving the trial. The question was which side to head for.

Keen to stay far from the Golden House, when Hu Wei asked for his opinion, Zhang Jizu said casually:

"Morning Joy works. It sounds like the kind of lead the Fun God would give."

Hu Wei's expression turned peculiar. He seemed to feel that the word "Joy" wasn't exactly a great omen, but he didn't object. He went along with Zhang Jizu's suggestion and headed for the eastern part of the city.

Along the way, he no longer peppered his companion with questions about Yu Xi the way he had during the Mockery and Jeering. Instead, he settled down and earnestly gathered information for the trial.

And true to form, the ultimate extrovert's charisma was formidable. Before they even reached the Morning Joy Circus grounds, Hu Wei had already extracted from the local citizens and visitors practically everything—how many people were in the circus, their names, their specialties, their performance schedules, even the patrol routes of the security guards.

He even bumped into two black market brokers who, swayed by the Grand Marshal's bold and righteous aura, insisted on leaving the Golden House to follow him, claiming they wanted to make a name for themselves under his banner.

A true boss wherever he went.

Zhang Jizu had anticipated something along these lines, yet he was still caught off guard.

This was probably the first time he had ever seen Hu Wei approach a trial this seriously.

Based on everything he knew about Hu Wei, in a situation like this the Grand Marshal's typical move would have been to single-handedly besiege both circuses, then use some combination of threats and bribes to make them change their performance times—ensuring that neither could complete their final show within the trial's window, thereby effortlessly winning the round.

But right now, the man's every action defied the Grand Marshal's usual behavioral logic. Which meant something was definitely off.

As for what that something was...

His cover had likely been blown already.

The two of them stood before the entrance to the Morning Joy Circus. Zhang Jizu narrowed his eyes and asked with a smile:

"When did you figure it out?"

Hu Wei raised an eyebrow, turned to look at Zhang Jizu, and let out a soft scoff:

"When we left the Golden House."

Zhang Jizu was stunned.

'That early?'

He had assumed some flaw in his performance along the way had aroused the Grand Marshal's suspicion. He never imagined he'd been seen through the very moment they'd parted ways with Cheng Shi.

'Interesting. If he saw through me, why didn't he call me out this entire time?'

Zhang Jizu pondered briefly, then said:

"It seems you've also realized how important this trial is."

At that, Hu Wei roared with laughter and clapped Zhang Jizu on the shoulder:

"Brother Zhang, this trial may well be important, but it holds no meaning for me.

You should have figured out what I'm after by now. That's right—I want to align with Deceit. I want to meet Yu Xi.

Everything I've done has been for the chance to see Yu Xi.

My brother told me that clearing this trial would attract Yu Xi's attention. I believe him. But I figured that if I cleared a Deceit trial using my methods, it probably wouldn't draw the gaze of a Deceit envoy.

So I decided not to lift a finger in this trial—just let him handle it.

Following a Deceit follower's judgment is, in a sense, a way of drawing closer to Deceit's will.

I trust my brother will give me a pleasant surprise. Everything I've been doing is just killing time.

If you hadn't been willing to drop the act, I would have kept playing along. But it looks like you're pretty worn out from this performance yourself...

And honestly, impersonating Cheng Shi is no easy feat.

If there's anyone in this world who could pull off a lifelike imitation of my brother, I'd say the only person would be..."

At that, Hu Wei's words caught in his throat. His eyelid twitched, and he swallowed the name.

Zhang Jizu knew exactly who he was about to say. His own expression darkened momentarily, but then he frowned and asked:

"I'm curious—how exactly did you see through me?"

Hu Wei laughed heartily again:

"Brother Zhang, I have to say—your understanding of Cheng Shi is extraordinarily deep. You even nailed his expressions and mannerisms down to the smallest detail. Grafting all those subtle habits onto yourself couldn't have been easy.

But you overlooked one thing: my brother doesn't actually want to travel with me."

At this, Hu Wei's mouth twitched slightly, and he sighed:

"I know that slippery guy objects to my decisions at every turn. Every time we meet, he tries to slip away from under my wing.

But I really need a priest, so I've been all the more determined to keep him around.

You, though...

Today, you were too cooperative. You didn't show even a hint of wanting to get away.

Sure, taking the Deceit trial seriously is a plausible excuse, but compared to the real Cheng Shi, your act was a little too 'earnest'—it was missing that spark of cunning that deceivers have.

So when we left the Golden House and I noticed you still hadn't made any move, I knew you two must have switched."

"..."

Zhang Jizu had calculated everything—he'd only wanted to cooperate with Hu Wei to distance himself from Cheng Shi, to give Cheng Shi some breathing room. He never expected that very cooperation to become the key that gave him away.

But fortunately, while Hu Wei's heart was set on Cheng Shi, he also knew it wasn't wise to interfere with Cheng Shi during this trial. In that case, his own mission was essentially accomplished.

The two men shared a knowing smile. Zhang Jizu narrowed his eyes and asked:

"So shall we...?"

"Ha ha ha ha! Let's each do our own thing. What needs to be investigated still needs to be investigated. As for how to solve the problem—we follow the deceivers' lead.

Today I'm not the Grand Marshal. I'm just a soldier under the Deceiver Marshal's command.

Relax. Since the Marshal hasn't given orders yet, let's sit back and enjoy the circus."

With that, Hu Wei strode off on his own.

Zhang Jizu smiled softly, watching Hu Wei's retreating figure. It felt as though he was seeing the Grand Marshal in a new light.

Only after Hu Wei vanished from view did he turn his gaze toward the Golden House, silently thinking:

'I hope everything goes well.'

...

Chapter 1254: The Vanishing Clown Lake

Things had indeed been going quite smoothly.

Cheng Shi and Zhen Xin were still perched on the rooftop, eavesdropping on the conversation inside the office. The two people below had no idea that a pair of deceivers was crouching right above their heads.

Lake was a somewhat short clown performer. He was in full makeup at the moment and showed not the slightest remorse for his disappearance. No matter how Ringmaster Fate roared, he stuck to a single line:

"As long as I'm here, the Sunset will win."

These words were like a reassurance pill for Ringmaster Fate, gradually calming his fury. He pulled up a chair, sat down directly in front of Lake, stared at him unblinkingly, and asked, word by word:

"What have you been through recently?"

Did you sneak out to find a new act? Or did you figure out the other side's routine and come up with a way to beat Masford?

You definitely didn't run off after going into seclusion, did you?

When you said you were going into seclusion, I knew you weren't actually secluding yourself—you were going out!

I thought you just needed to relax and ease the nerves. I never expected you'd be gone this long!

Tell me, Lake—what's your new act? I can help you refine it. You don't seriously think I'd leak it, do you?

No one in this world wants the Sunset to win more than I do!"

Even from the rooftop, Cheng Shi could feel Ringmaster Fate's desperation. Yet Lake maintained his lukewarm demeanor, patting the ringmaster on the arm with a smile:

"You're the one who needs to relax. Trust me—we're going to win.

As for the rest, it's a secret.

Ringmaster, it's not that I'm afraid you'll leak it. I want to give you a surprise.

You've been too exhausted. Your nerves are wound too tight. You need a proper rest.

Let this curtain-call performance lead us to victory, and at the same time, let it be an 'award' of gratitude for all the years you've devoted to the Sunset.

Trust me. I won't let you down."

Ringmaster Fate was moved. He looked at Lake, lips trembling for a long moment, before everything dissolved into a single sigh.

He gripped Lake's hand tightly and nodded heavily:

"Fine. I trust you—I can only trust you.

But don't disappear again. We don't have that much time to waste.

Tonight at six, come here for a meeting. I'll notify all the performers so they can prepare for your hosting segments.

Also, when do you want your own act placed?"

"The finale."

"The finale?" Ringmaster Fate's voice jumped several octaves. He shot to his feet in disbelief. "You're a clown. What kind of act could possibly warrant giving a clown the closing slot?"

David's new magic tricks are showstoppers with spectacular results. Unless you perform for me right now, I can't risk putting you last."

Lake didn't insist either. He thought for a moment and smiled: "Then the penultimate slot works too."

"You..."

Watching his star performer insist on playing mysterious right before the showdown, Ringmaster Fate's expression shifted several times. In the end, he chose to trust his old partner.

"I'll go talk to the beast tamer about moving his act up. Lake—I hope your new act lives up to the Sunset's name."

With that, Ringmaster Fate pushed the door open and left.

The instant Ringmaster Fate departed, Lake slipped out through the back door and headed straight for his tent in the rest area.

His tent was tucked away in a corner far from the rest area—a standalone structure, quiet enough. The arrangement was likely meant to give the clown a peaceful environment for rest.

On top of that, most performers were currently working and performing inside the park, so the rest area was nearly deserted. That spared the two stalkers quite a bit of trouble.

The moment Lake entered, he walked toward the bed with clear purpose—and then pulled out a long row of stinger needles and daggers from beneath it!

Cheng Shi knew these tools all too well. During the Civilization Era, assassins in many cities used these basic weapons to eliminate their targets.

He had used them himself, though he'd eventually ditched them for being too conspicuous and switched to methods that were more colorless, odorless, and formless.

But what was a clown doing with assassination tools?

Cheng Shi and Zhen Xin froze in unison, then instantly understood what Lake's "guaranteed victory for the Sunset" actually meant.

'Well, well—so you're planning to play dirty.'

'Those days you were missing... you weren't scouting the eastern side of the city, were you?'

If Lake's idea of victory was to secretly assassinate Morning Joy's clown, then the "ending" this trial spoke of—should their job be to stop Lake from letting Morning Joy have a perfect ending, while the Sunset lost its honor and watched a new king be crowned?

For a moment, even the two deceivers were a bit confused.

But there was one thing they weren't confused about: regardless of what the ending might be, as long as they got control of this clown first, they could extract his true plan from him.

And once they knew the plan, they could trace the full course of events.

So the two struck without hesitation, dropping their concealment. They materialized behind the clown in an instant, and before Lake could finish organizing his gear, they pinned him down without a word.

Cheng Shi was about to tell him not to struggle when something bizarre happened!

The very moment they each gripped one of his shoulders, the person between them—Lake—simply vanished!

That's right. He just disappeared into thin air, right under the noses of two players!

Cheng Shi's gaze hardened. Zhen Xin's expression shifted.

Not because they'd been fooled, but because they recognized the technique. This was absolutely not something an ordinary circus clown could do. It was unmistakably a Master of Trickery's phantasm!

Was Lake a Master of Trickery?

Of course not!

He was just a circus clown. The question was whether the "Lake" they'd just been facing was the real Lake at all.

Remember—so far, only four players had appeared in this trial. The other two hadn't been seen anywhere.

So could this Master of Trickery be one of their teammates in disguise?

Perhaps that person had already figured out the chain of cause and effect and was trying to clear the trial this way, once and for all?

It wasn't impossible.

But that was an unusually lone-wolf approach. If you had such a good plan, why not discuss it with your teammates?

This didn't look like someone who preferred working alone—it looked like someone who was hiding from something!

Who was this person hiding from?

In that moment, the two deceivers who'd just been given the slip exchanged a glance, a strange light flickering through their eyes.

Things had suddenly gotten interesting.

Cheng Shi scanned every direction, a mocking grin playing on his lips:

"Come to think of it, Master of Trickery is your little sister's class. Should be your comfort zone, right? And yet you couldn't even spot it—you actually let someone pull one over on you..."

Tsk. You're the Deceit Chosen One. Isn't that embarrassing?"

Zhen Xin listened in all directions, a sardonic smile on her face:

"Wasn't a clown just deceived by another clown?"

It seems only when two clowns meet does anyone find out which one is the real clown.

Before you complain about others, maybe take a look at yourself first, Mr. Clown. Your nose fell off."

As she spoke, Zhen Xin nudged Cheng Shi's arm with her elbow. The two fingers holding a magic playing card subtly pointed downward.

Cheng Shi glanced where she indicated and noticed an extra patch of shadow nestled between their own two shadows. His eyebrow arched, and he instantly commanded Shadow Chengshi to trace the shadow upward, yanking the cloaked figure hiding on the tent's main beam down to the ground.

The moment the figure fell, the magician's cards flew from her hands like rain, forming a cage that locked the person in midair.

"Got you."

Zhen Xin chuckled softly and moved to tear the cloak from the figure. But Cheng Shi grabbed her arm and pulled her into a rapid retreat.

"Watch out—it's a trap!"

Sure enough, before his words had even finished echoing, the cloak imprisoned by the playing cards unfurled on its own, revealing what was inside—a neatly bundled package of explosives.

The fuse had clearly already been lit, yet it burned in absolute silence.

Both their pupils contracted. A split second later, the detonation blasted them clean off their feet.

...

Chapter 1255: Which Master of Trickery?

"BOOM—"

A massive fireball instantly illuminated the entire circus grounds. Scorching tongues of flame devoured every tent in the vicinity, and cries of alarm erupted from all directions.

Ringmaster Fate was the first to arrive at the scene. Horror plastered across his face, he immediately called for the security team and rallied everyone to fight the fire.

The guards rushed over in a panic, and numerous performers abandoned their acts on the spot, grabbing buckets and sprinting to help extinguish the blaze.

By the time the park's visitors crowded around, the fire had been mostly put out. But where the tent had stood was now a flattened crater—even a pit had been blown open. Everyone's face was as dark as that charred hole.

They knew whose tent this was. Yet they hadn't seen any trace of its owner—not even a silhouette among the embers.

One of the performers choked out in disbelief: "Ringmaster, Lake is..."

Ringmaster Fate clenched his fists so hard they shook, his face ashen as he shook his head:

"Impossible! He's fine—he has to be fine!

Go—everyone, search for him! Lake wasn't in his tent. He told me he was going out.

Guards, report everything exactly as it happened to the royal court. I want to know who had the audacity to commit arson and assault inside this circus at a time like this!

Whoever thinks they can climb to the top by trampling on the Sunset's reputation—I won't stand for it!"

The explosion instantly became the biggest news in all of Kurd. Countless people followed Lake's whereabouts, wondering whether the Sunset could still compete in five days.

There were spectators, agitators, opportunists fishing in muddy waters—but most were audience members who genuinely mourned the loss.

It was clear that Lake's reputation was excellent. His skill was outstanding, and his contributions to the circus rivaled Ringmaster Fate's own. One only had to look at the grief on the performers' faces to know how beloved the clown was. Some in the crowd were even shouting Lake's name, calling him the ringmaster.

Had things gone as expected, Lake would likely have succeeded Ringmaster Fate once his term ended.

But all of that had shattered in this chaotic explosion.

On the outer edge of the commotion, a spotless Cheng Shi stood facing a soot-covered Zhen Xin.

Regarding Cheng Shi's decision to shove her in front of himself as a human shield against the blast, Zhen Xin protested with a blackened face:

"This is the second time!

Cheng Shi, did Fate bestow all that attention on you just so anyone near you gets to eat an explosion?!"

Her words seemed to trigger a memory. Cheng Shi smiled awkwardly and waved a hand:

"Last time it was your sister who got blasted—that doesn't count. You two settle your own scores.

Besides, compared to saving your life, taking a little explosion is nothing.

As long as the healer doesn't die, it doesn't matter if you die or not—I can always pull you back."

He even tossed her a healing spell, though unfortunately, healing spells only mended people, not clothes.

Zhen Xin was completely unharmed—just her outfit had been singed.

Her eyelid twitched, and she snapped:

"An explosion this small isn't nearly enough for you to need to 'pull me back.' Even if it went off right in my face, I wouldn't necessarily get hurt."

"Right, right, right—of course. You're a Chosen One, after all. How could ordinary explosives possibly hurt you? But if you knew it was explosives, why did you rush in? What, did believing in Chaos make you chaotic too?"

Zhen Xin glared at him, gnashing her teeth:

"I was baiting!

Act one step, plan three ahead—that's how you break the game.

Since I knew the explosives couldn't hurt me, I should have entered the game personally to play along with the opponent's act. Only by falling into their rhythm would there be any chance of drawing out the lone wolf hiding behind the scenes.

You're so cautious about everything, so painfully careful, that you wasted the opportunity. And now how are we supposed to figure out what our lone-wolf teammate is planning?

Unless you've developed mind-reading abilities like the Fun God and already know what that Master of Trickery intends to do?

If so, it's simple—just tell me where he is. You don't even have to lift a finger. I'll drag him here myself.

Well?

Go on. Tell me."

Zhen Xin stood with her arms crossed, her fingertips rapidly tapping against her arm. She was clearly genuinely angry.

Cheng Shi's smile froze. He looked slightly guilty.

Ever since returning from the Real Universe, even with his nerves relaxed, the fears he had collected there still lay buried deep in his heart. No wonder he was more cautious than before.

But the situation wasn't as hopeless as Zhen Xin made it sound. They hadn't completely lost their chance to find the person.

Entering the game personally was ultimately just a means to determine the opponent's identity. And a Master of Trickery bold enough to attack Cheng Shi disguised as Zhang Jizu and Zhen Xin disguised as the Blind One in this kind of scenario—there weren't many in the entire peak circle who'd dare.

Cheng Shi hadn't fought many peak-level deceivers, and even fewer Masters of Trickery. Most of the ones he knew were already in the Joker. So after thinking it over fruitlessly, he turned his gaze to Zhen Xin.

Zhen Xin quickly arrived at the same conclusion. Her brow furrowed as she carefully sifted through possible suspects, but the longer she thought, the deeper her frown became.

She couldn't figure out who this Master of Trickery might be either.

"If we weren't disguised right now—if we were just Cheng Shi and Zhen Xin—there'd be several candidates.

Among deceivers, fights come down to who can out-deceive whom. They'd have plenty of reasons and motives to move against us.

But right now, in their eyes, their teammates are Zhang Jizu and An Mingyu. A Master of Trickery willing to attack Mingyu... I can't think of a single one.

Unless this person has a phantasm-fabrication artifact. But if so, the suspects would expand to every faith, and blind guessing would be pointless."

As he listened, a name suddenly flashed through Cheng Shi's mind.

He actually did know a Master of Trickery who might be capable of all this.

More importantly, that particular Master of Trickery genuinely had reason to avoid Zhang Jizu and the Blind One—to refuse to meet them. Because this person was scheming to "eliminate" Cheng Shi, and he should know that both of them were Cheng Shi's friends.

Seeing the spark in Cheng Shi's eyes, Zhen Xin said in surprise: "You've figured out who it is?"

Cheng Shi nodded:

"It's possible it's him, but I can't be certain yet.

It's someone you know too... Su Yida."

Zhen Xin froze, recalling the figure she had seen within Cheng Shi's memories.

"The Archmage of the Demonic Realm?"

But isn't he dead?"

"He certainly was dead back then, but the current him isn't the one from back then.

I suspect he's a stowaway from another slice universe, just like Jie Shu. As for his purpose..."

Cheng Shi told Zhen Xin everything he understood about Jie Shu and about running into Jie Shu in the Real Universe. Zhen Xin listened, pondered for a moment, then said gravely:

"How can Jie Shu's objective be the complete opposite of what we're working toward?"

If the attention Void has cast upon you really is the world's answer, and you're also the 'sacrifice' to be offered to the Creator, then they should be looking for a world that must have you in it and ensuring the sacrifice's integrity.

Only that way would they have any chance of surviving the Creator's experiment, right?

So why are they looking for a world without you?

That doesn't sound like the judgment or choice a Folly believer who knows about the Real Universe and can cross spacetime barriers would make.

Unless..."

At that, Zhen Xin's gaze flickered. She lowered her eyes and fell silent.

But Cheng Shi had already understood what she meant.

'Unless Fate's sacrifice is simply wrong. Unless the current predetermined course isn't the answer that saves the world from disaster, but rather an accelerant that breeds greater terror and hastens the world's collapse!'

'Otherwise, a wise man would never desperately seek a world without the "answer."'

At the thought, both of them fell into silence.

Of course, whether this deduction held remained to be seen. A wise man, however wise, was still mortal. Jie Shu's vision might not reach as far as the gods'. Yet the implication behind it was extraordinarily thought-provoking.

Cheng Shi laughed self-deprecatingly, rubbing his nose:

"Before, I was afraid of being the answer, and equally afraid of not being the answer.

But after going through the Real Universe, I've gained a lot of new insight.

Whether or not I'm Fate's answer, the predetermined answer, or—if I may be so arrogant—this world's answer... none of that matters.

What matters is that I'll write my own answer with my own hands.

A clown's job is to entertain the audience onstage. But before I can entertain them, I have to entertain myself first.

Only when I can laugh out loud will they laugh even louder.

As for how to entertain the audience... the gods don't get to decide that. Only I do!

The Fun God is also accelerating the predetermined course. Both members of Void have clearly reached a consensus on this. I can't read his mind, so I have no choice but to put him in the 'enemy camp' as well.

Miss Magician, the Joker's playbook needs to change. The Fun God may not be protecting us at all—he may be our 'enemy' too.

And so is Fate.

Heh. Destiny—sometimes it really is that strange.

I never imagined a day would come when the Joker and the Destined Ones would become something like the Torchbearers—entities standing against the gods.

Of course, this is just my wishful thinking. Whether the members of the Joker are willing to defy the so-called predetermined path alongside me... I'll probably have to ask each of them one by one.

No time like the present. Now that you know what's on my mind—stay or go, it's entirely up to you."

The phrase "entirely up to you" made Zhen Xin's eyebrow quirk upward.

She tilted her head, studying the resolute look in Cheng Shi's eyes. The deceiver before her felt completely different from the one Zhen Yi had once fooled—as though he'd undergone a total rebirth.

Back then, Cheng Shi had been crafty and clever, but he'd possessed nothing close to the mettle and courage he displayed now.

They had both been cautious, but the old Cheng Shi wore his wariness on his sleeve, while the current Cheng Shi buried all his anxiety about the future deep inside. At least when speaking his mind aloud, he was utterly resolute.

As for whether that resolve was genuine or whether he'd deceived even himself... it didn't matter. Either way was fine.

With that thought, Zhen Xin's lips curled into a radiant smile.

"Why not?"

Otherwise, wouldn't this game be far too short on fun?"

...

Chapter 1256: You're Not Cheng Shi

Meanwhile.

While Cheng Shi was having a rather distinctive heart-to-heart with the magician, Zhang Jizu over at Morning Joy had also made some headway.

He had been lurking in the performers' administrative area, collecting useful information about the circus.

Compared to the storied Sunset, Morning Joy lacked the same depth of heritage—but that didn't mean the newcomer's scale was any smaller. Quite the opposite: the circus park in the east was even larger and more diverse than its western counterpart.

Their philosophy was to replace the old with the new, which had drawn the adoration of countless young people across the country.

Morning Joy's ringmaster was a woman named Madame Freud—one of the performers who had originally left the Sunset. As it happened, she was also a clown.

She was the one who had led a group of passionate young people to found Morning Joy, and within a few decades had elevated it to the same heights as the Sunset.

During Morning Joy's explosive growth—during the peak years of her personal career—Madame Freud had quietly stepped behind the scenes. She selected her most favored successor within the troupe, Masford, to take over the clown position and become Morning Joy's new pillar.

Under their combined leadership, Morning Joy marched from triumph to triumph, forcefully bursting onto the national stage to become one of Canlival's twin stars of circus artistry.

Around the circus, people frequently spoke of Madame Freud, describing her as decisive and bold in action—a powerful woman brimming with passion for life, whose energy was infectious to all around her.

Moreover, Madame Freud and the young Masford shared a relationship that was equal parts mentor and friend. They got along wonderfully and spent long hours together almost every day. In recent days, however, their meetings seemed to have grown less frequent.

It wasn't that Madame Freud was too busy—it was that Masford had been hiding backstage to rehearse alone, refusing to see anyone. Perhaps sensing his immense pressure, Madame Freud hadn't disturbed him.

With the final showdown approaching, a clown working this hard was perfectly logical.

Yet in Zhang Jizu's eyes, all of this was far too reckless.

If any other performer ran into trouble, they could be swapped out for a backup act. But if the clown ran into trouble, whether the backup clown had the same brilliance—whether they could serve as the soul that strung the entire show together and left the audience spellbound—was a very different question.

Honestly, it was a bit of a risk-management failure that such a massive circus hadn't managed to develop a second Masford.

Zhang Jizu narrowed his eyes, slipped away from the performers' area without a sound, and prepared to explore elsewhere.

But just as he tried to skirt around everyone's line of sight and leave via a side path, a familiar figure suddenly appeared before him.

The newcomer wasn't an NPC but a player. What stunned Zhang Jizu was that one of the two missing teammates in this trial turned out to be her!

That's right—her.

She was a female player, and a very recognizable one at that. One glance at that gradient cyan wolf-tail haircut and those suggestively flickering eyes was enough to know this woman was not someone to be trifled with.

Poison—the Corruption Chosen One. A villainess who fascinated some players and made others gnash their teeth.

She wore her usual outfit: a long-sleeved hoodie that covered her upper body tightly, its hem draping past her shorts, leaving only a pair of legs so pale they almost glowed.

Her appearance made Zhang Jizu's eyes narrow to slits.

He didn't have any issue with Poison. There was no friction between them whatsoever. She had even been his comrade-in-arms before—they'd fought Mo Shu together.

He simply couldn't understand why Poison would play the vanishing lone wolf in a trial like this, only to now seek him out.

But he quickly figured out the reason.

Poison brought a finger to her lips, her smiling eyes narrowed to silky slits as she let out a soft "Shh." Then her gaze darted about playfully as she began to lean into Zhang Jizu's arms, murmuring as she drew closer:

"Little priest, I haven't seen you around lately. Have you been... avoiding me on purpose?"

Zhang Jizu immediately realized the Corruption Chosen One wasn't looking for him at all—she was looking for Cheng Shi!

She had mistaken him for Cheng Shi.

It made sense. By basic logic, if one of the two Zhang Jizus was actually Cheng Shi, the likelier candidate would be the one at Hu Wei's side.

Poison was the foremost expert on desire. She might not be able to read Cheng Shi, but she could definitely read the Grand Marshal. So she had trusted her read on the Grand Marshal and used it to locate "Cheng Shi."

But Zhang Jizu was not Cheng Shi. Seeing Poison about to fall into his arms, he narrowed his eyes without an ounce of hesitation, drew his scalpel, and placed it exactly where her forehead was about to land.

Poison's tilting motion froze. She stopped dead, balanced perfectly on the blade's tip. Her bodily control had reached an almost inconceivable level.

She then lifted her eyelids to gaze at "Cheng Shi" with a pitifully wounded look:

"I'm so tired. Lend me your shoulder for just a moment. Just once—please?"

Zhang Jizu let out a dry chuckle and shook his head:

"No shoulder available. But I've got plenty of empty grave plots. If you're truly that exhausted, eternal rest underground might be the ultimate release.

How about it? Interested, Miss Poison?"

"???"

'He's not Cheng Shi!'

Poison was shocked. Her leaning body snapped upright in an instant, like a clock hand rewinding to its proper position.

A flicker of surprise crossed her face, but it was quickly replaced by a knowing smile:

"Willing to stand in for the little priest and distract the Grand Marshal... You and he must be quite close, hmm?"

Zhang Jizu smiled back:

"Decent enough, I suppose. But probably not as close as you are with him."

Poison lowered her head coyly: "It's not quite as close as you're imagining..."

"?"

When you were truly at a loss for words, you really were at a loss—because you could never be sure whether what a Corruption follower said meant what you thought it meant.

Zhang Jizu studied Poison thoughtfully. He could indeed see undeniable exhaustion in her expression. He was curious: how could someone who toyed with desire in the palm of her hand, someone who understood "catering" to others' wishes better than anyone—how could she possibly look this drained?

And she didn't look like someone who had come through a brutal fight. She looked more like someone who had endured something that had worn her down body and soul.

He waited for Poison to ask something, but she said nothing.

It wasn't that she didn't want to—she simply had no leverage against Zhang Jizu.

She understood this Death Chosen One well. Beyond guarding his little cemetery and surviving to the very end, this "pure doesn't-want-to-die" player had virtually no other desires.

Though not wanting to die was itself a kind of desire, Zhang Jizu's identity as a Gravekeeper already made him self-sufficient in that regard. Which meant her techniques were completely useless against a player of such "pure desire."

Unable to use her faith's advantage to pry anything from Zhang Jizu's lips, she could only sigh and try another approach to communication.

She looked at Zhang Jizu, mimicked his signature fox-eyed squint, and asked with a smile:

"Do you know that the little priest is Yu Xi?"

"?"

Zhang Jizu's eyes narrowed until they vanished entirely.

...

Chapter 1257: It Really Is Him—Su Yida!

Could Cheng Shi possibly be Yu Xi?

Of course he could—and the probability was extremely high.

It wasn't as though Zhang Jizu had never considered the possibility. He had simply never raised it with Cheng Shi, because there was no need.

First, whether or not Cheng Shi was Yu Xi didn't change Zhang Jizu's fundamental goal of surviving until the very end. Second, whether or not he was Yu Xi didn't change their friendship.

Cheng Shi's nostalgia for the past wasn't fake, and his desire to live could not be counterfeited.

That was enough.

During the trial in San Dales, the Joker members had learned that Crown had sacrificed himself for the cause and never became Deceit's envoy. So the only person who could carry the mantle of Yu Xi was his "successor."

And Cheng Shi had collected nearly every one of Crown's masks—he was missing only the "clown nose." With such a blatant hint, it wasn't just Zhang Jizu—nearly every member of the Joker had at one point or another suspected that Cheng Shi was Yu Xi.

Yet none of them had ever brought it up. Why?

Because there was no proof.

Don't forget—Cheng Shi had once impersonated Yu Xi right in front of them. If he truly were Yu Xi, that performance would have been no different from toying with idiots.

Cheng Shi could easily have stayed better hidden, yet he deliberately took the risky approach of resuming his true form in front of them while claiming it was merely an act. Deliberately putting the

spotlight on himself like that was foolish, it was risky, and it wasn't the sort of thing a steady clown would do... so some people used that reasoning to talk themselves out of suspecting him.

Besides, everyone was searching for a path to godhood. Whether it was the God Worship Society or the Reason Association, there were zealots everywhere, and none had ever succeeded. And now someone was going to tell him a clown had become an envoy right under everyone's noses?

No—Yu Xi's existence had a traceable lineage. He didn't seem like a servant god elevated from within the Faith Game.

All in all, through a series of strange coincidences and silent calculations, the Joker members had tacitly agreed never to speak of it.

Zhang Jizu understood a bit more than the rest. After all, he had once deceived the Joker members on behalf of the Fun God's "world-saving plan." Given the Fun God's focus on Cheng Shi, the identity of Cheng Shi as Yu Xi was not far-fetched—it was actually quite logical.

So when Zhang Jizu now heard from Poison's lips that Cheng Shi was Yu Xi, he felt not the slightest surprise. He shook his head calmly:

"I don't know."

Though Poison couldn't directly see through lies, she was extraordinarily perceptive about the human heart. Seeing Zhang Jizu's reaction so placid, she gave a soft "Oh" and smiled:

"Sounds like you've thought about it.

Since you have, have you also wondered why he hides it from the rest of you—but chose not to hide it from me?"

Zhang Jizu's brow furrowed slightly. He was indeed a bit puzzled, but he didn't speak. He could tell that today's Poison had a strong urge to share.

Or perhaps "share" wasn't the right word. It was more like venting.

She had too many secrets bottled up inside her.

Sure enough, when Zhang Jizu offered no response, Poison leaned sideways against the wall and began muttering to herself, a troubled look on her face.

"Actually, it's not just me. There's one other person who also learned his identity as Yu Xi.

Qu Yan. I don't know if you know him—he's a chameleon who follows Silence.

Letting a Silence follower know a secret isn't a big deal. They're experts at being silent, and they can keep secrets.

But why tell me?

I always thought it was the little priest's way of treating me differently from everyone else. I thought he said no with his lips but kept me in his heart, and that he was willing to throw me a lifeline in this tedious game.

He even introduced me to Aph Ros, who helped me find a second faith... Time.

I was so happy about it. I looked forward to meeting him with my new identity and hoped I could navigate toward a future where he wouldn't reject me getting close.

But sadly, it was all my delusion.

When I met that person, I finally understood—gods are gods. Every step they take has an ulterior motive.

He told me his identity not to let me get closer to him, but because he was quietly getting closer to me.

What he wanted from me was..."

At that, Poison stopped. She looked at Zhang Jizu with deep concern, pursed her lips, and asked:

"Can I trust you?"

"?"

For just an instant, Zhang Jizu drew his scalpel again.

He suspected the coy Poison before him wasn't the real Poison at all—she might very well be a certain Fate Weaver who was begging for a beating!

He still said nothing, and even took a few cautious steps backward.

Seeing this, Poison's troubled expression froze on her face. The awkward silence spread instantly.

"...Am I really that untrustworthy, or are you—"

"If you have something to say, say it. If not, goodbye." Zhang Jizu retreated another step, preparing to take a detour.

Poison's mouth twitched. Looking at this Death Chosen One of "pure desire," she said wistfully:

"Fine. It's rare I find someone to confide in, so I'll just say it.

Yu Xi's reason for getting close to me wasn't at all pure. He did all those things for me because what he wanted from me was...

pleasure."

As she spoke, Poison lowered her head in a mix of shame and anger. But when she looked up again, Zhang Jizu was nowhere to be seen. Only empty air remained before her.

"?

Was my lie that obvious?"

Yes, Poison had lied. She had never intended to share her inner secrets with Zhang Jizu. She had merely wanted to observe this Death Chosen One's reactions to verify certain theories she had about Cheng Shi. But steady old Zhang hadn't given her the chance.

Poison stared blankly at the now-empty path, then laughed at herself. She slid down the wall until she was sitting at its base, gazing up at the sky. With the tip of her Dance With Desire blade, she gently traced the shapes of the clouds above, murmuring in an indescribable tone:

"What exactly is desire?"

Why... why would He do this?"

...

Meanwhile.

The two deceivers who had just "resolved to defy" Deceit didn't linger. They sprang into action once more, infiltrating the explosion site and combing through it for any trace of their missing teammate.

They found clues quickly.

Zhen Xin was absurdly wealthy. She was probably the richest magician in the entire game. Setting aside the sheer resources a History School could provide her, her arsenal of deceptive tricks alone must have swindled countless magic cards from others.

While the outer perimeter was cordoned off, the two used illusions to conceal the scene, then stood brazenly in the blast's epicenter and searched to their hearts' content.

Of course, there wasn't much searching involved—it was all Zhen Xin tossing cards outward.

Memory cards, Time cards, Truth cards, Folly cards... For the first time, Cheng Shi learned how the "wealthy" played the game. As the cards fluttered down, the destroyed tent reconstituted itself, replaying scene after scene from before the explosion.

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted. His tone carried a hint of sourness: "In this moment, you really do look like someone who walked out of the Golden House."

Zhen Xin shot him a glare, then pointed at the entrance of the tent in the reconstructed memory field, and whispered: "Here he comes."

No sooner had she spoken than a figure pushed the door open and walked in.

Dawn light leapt over his shoulder, tracing his silhouette—but in its haste to embrace the darkness within the room, it missed his face.

Yet a silhouette alone was enough, because Cheng Shi would never forget the face of the Master of Trickery who had howled in frenzy across the ice plain!

It really was him—Su Yida!

...

Chapter 1258: The Morning Joy That Doesn't Exist in History

Zhen Xin recognized him as well.

Facing this Master of Trickery who had crossed the barriers of spacetime to reach this world—back before she had even learned the name of Origin—she was equally filled with curiosity.

She couldn't understand why a wise man like Jie Shu would choose Su Yida. Setting aside comparisons with her own sister, even among the ranks of ordinary deceivers, this Master of Trickery was utterly unremarkable, possessing no notable strengths. The only thing that had ever caught her attention was the fact that he had infiltrated Cheng Shi's memories and gotten himself entangled with Cheng Shi...

But too many deceivers had gotten entangled with Cheng Shi. Wouldn't literally anyone have been a better strategic ally than a mediocrity like Su Yida?

Was there really no one else to choose?

While Zhen Xin pondered, the Su Yida in the memory field had already entered the tent. He showed no interest in anything inside—the moment he walked in, he hid behind the door, holding his breath like a predator waiting for its prey.

Clearly, he had deciphered the Fun God's trial hint and believed he'd found the method to clear the trial.

Neither circus should have an ending. Kill the key figures in the circus performances, and the round would be won effortlessly.

Soon, there were sounds outside the door—but Su Yida hadn't expected his visitor to be not the returning Lake, but Ringmaster Fate coming to check on him!

By this point, Ringmaster Fate had long discovered Lake's disappearance and had already contacted Blacks of the Golden House. He was simply clinging to the hope that "maybe Lake has come back," so he stopped by every so often to check.

The undisguisable anxiety on his face made Su Yida realize the situation was far from what he'd imagined. Lake might genuinely be missing—and that meant his plan needed an immediate adjustment. For the Sunset, the "reversed ending" should be successfully completing their performance!

And so, his assassination having failed to materialize, Su Yida decisively changed strategies and reappeared before Ringmaster Fate disguised as the missing Lake.

To play the role convincingly, he had conducted extensive research within the circus, gathering every scrap of information about Lake.

As luck would have it, just as he confidently went to meet Ringmaster Fate... Cheng Shi and Zhen Xin had already returned from the Mockery and Jeering and were visiting the Sunset Circus with Blacks in tow.

Everything strange about today's events now made sense.

Blacks hadn't lied. Lake had indeed vanished. The only twist was that Cheng Shi, having now "witnessed" it all, realized Lake's disappearance wasn't as straightforward as they'd imagined.

After Ringmaster Fate left, Su Yida had thoroughly searched Lake's tent. Everything inside was intact and in order—no signs of a struggle, no missing money. It didn't look like a robbery or a kidnapping.

The performance props were all present in the prop box. Only a few articles of clothing were gone from the wardrobe. By all appearances, he had left of his own accord.

But based on everything Cheng Shi had seen and heard at the circus today, Lake was universally described as a deeply devoted and professional clown whose commitment to the Sunset rivaled the ringmaster's own. Even his contributions weren't any less than Ringmaster Fate's. An artist like that, even if he needed to clear his head, would never choose to leave without a word at such a critical time.

Didn't he know that his very presence was the Sunset's anchor?

Was he not worried about causing panic among the troupe?

Cheng Shi was deeply puzzled. Just as the memory field was about to dissipate, he furrowed his brow and asked:

"Can you trace Lake's memories?"

Zhen Xin gave him a sidelong look and said helplessly:

"Don't treat me like I'm a Dragon King. I have plenty of props, yes, but I'm not a wish-granting machine.

This is all the intel we've got. Judging by what we see now, Su Yida's choice wasn't wrong.

If anything, it's our appearance that interrupted his plan.

But I doubt the Archmage of the Demonic Realm will give up so easily. Since he wanted to ditch his teammates and pursue victory alone, he might look for another opportunity to reappear as Lake.

How about... we let it go and allow him to keep performing?

When the trial's final tally comes, we settle the score—grab him and ask what Jie Shu and his people are actually thinking.

What do you say?"

He did not say yes.

It wasn't that Cheng Shi was dead-set on capturing Su Yida. He was simply thinking that the matter of Lake's departure remained unresolved. Nobody knew why he had actually disappeared. If Lake truly came back midway and found another version of himself inside the circus, then as a clown who had been "abandoned"—what would he think?

Would he publicly confront Su Yida to reclaim his identity? Or would he be so deeply hurt by the betrayal that he'd leave for good?

These two divergent paths determined how the trial's ending should be "reversed"—and this was precisely what made Deceit trials so thorny. Everything was laced with uncertainty.

Cheng Shi shook his head, thought for a moment, then asked:

"As a monumental event for Canlival, two top circuses competing on the same day must be pretty big news historically, right?"

The History School has no records of this?"

Zhen Xin's expression turned strange as she shook her head:

"There's something I've been meaning to tell you, but I haven't because I hadn't seen it with my own eyes and couldn't confirm whether it was true.

In the records the School compiled about Canlival, the Sunset Circus's rise and decline are indeed documented. But in all those historical fragments, there is never any mention of a circus called Morning Joy."

"???"

Cheng Shi froze, his pupils quaking:

"No Morning Joy?"

How is that possible? Are you saying this trial's setting is fabricated?"

Zhen Xin's face turned grave, her tone enigmatic:

"Not necessarily.

History isn't necessarily all true either.

The history we see is nothing more than the story the gods want us to know. Every corner of the Land of Hope is inscribed with their will. So which parts are real and which are false—we'll have to see for ourselves.

The reason I agreed to visit the Sunset first was precisely to check whether everything here matched the School's records.

So far, it's remarkably close.

Next, we need to see whether Morning Joy—which the historians found no trace of in the historical fragments—also matches what's before us.

If He intends to correct this piece of history—to give an ending-less future to the Sunset, whose story had long been concluded, while letting the historically nameless Morning Joy replace it...

Then perhaps we need to figure out how to weave a lie grand enough to deceive both established history and the historians obsessed with it."

"..."

'Passing off the fake as real!'

This was a trick Cheng Shi knew all too well. That was exactly how the Ultraman identity had come into being.

'What is the Fun God trying to do now?'

'He wants to tamper with history?'

'But what's the point of altering this particular piece of history?'

'Last time, the tampering created a Chaos envoy. So this time... it couldn't be for Yu Xi, could it?'

'If that's the case, then the target is me.'

Seeing Cheng Shi's expression shift continuously, Zhen Xin arched an eyebrow: "Any brilliant insights?"

No brilliant insights—just a few steady ones.

Cheng Shi's expression grew solemn as he thought carefully:

"We can't just ignore Su Yida. This isn't about personal grudges. I simply feel that every player who appears in His trials has a purpose behind their presence.

This is definitely not a random gathering. Everyone here probably has a reason for being here.

A Master of Trickery carries too much uncertainty. Even if we don't consider the Archmage a real person, to the NPCs he's essentially an unbreakable 'god.'

We need to get hold of him first—before he gives up entirely and sabotages us instead of helping.

As for the other missing teammate...

Once we've caught the Master of Trickery, we'll head back to the Golden House and look for that one's trail."

Zhen Xin had no objections. After the memory field dissolved, she casually glanced in a certain direction and smiled:

"Since you've made up your mind, let's go. Wouldn't want to keep the Master of Trickery waiting."

Cheng Shi looked in the same direction and nodded slightly.

Deceivers always understood deceivers best. Before two "master" deceivers, a certain "junior" deceiver had absolutely nowhere to hide.

...

Chapter 1259: Explain to Me Why You're Here...

Finding someone in deliberately engineered chaos might be difficult, but as long as you stripped away the irrelevant clues and peeled back the layers, you could still locate the instigator hiding behind it all.

The Lake who had led them into the tent was a phantom. And since Lake had never left their line of sight, that meant even back in the ringmaster's office, the figure had already been a phantom.

No matter how powerful a Master of Trickery's abilities were, his illusions couldn't operate too far from his real body. That meant the Master of Trickery had actually been lurking nearby the whole time, maintaining his decoy, and had almost certainly spotted them long ago.

Viewed this way, the explosion hadn't been an improvised reaction—it was a premeditated trap!

He had actually dared to strike at "Zhang Jizu" and "the Blind One" during a trial?

Had Su Yida lost his mind?

Whether he had or hadn't, one thing was beyond doubt: at the moment of the explosion, he had definitely been nearby!

He had very likely watched with his own eyes as Cheng Shi and his companion were blown away.

When deceivers "dueled," quite a few liked to personally witness their opponent's defeat. But such risky behavior also left behind vulnerabilities—once their position was narrowed down, who would be the last one standing was anyone's guess.

After all, between victory and defeat there was only one deception's difference.

And what that deception was—Cheng Shi and Zhen Xin had already guessed the answer.

Ringmaster Fate!

Strange, wasn't it? The clown's tent was tucked away in such a remote corner, yet the first person to arrive at the explosion site was none other than the Sunset's Ringmaster Fate!

He had only just parted ways with the clown in his office and was supposed to be summoning other performers for a meeting. At that hour, all the performers were working throughout the park, and the rest area was nearly deserted. There was no logical reason for him to be anywhere near there.

For Ringmaster Fate to appear so quickly defied all logic.

But under a different logic, his appearance made perfect sense. For example...

What if someone had quietly taken control of Ringmaster Fate when he left his office, then used the ringmaster's identity to appear at the chaotic scene at the critical moment—openly confirming the results of the ambush while clearing himself of suspicion?

'What a perfect blind spot!'

No wonder he had dared to strike at "Zhang Jizu" and "An Mingyu"—he'd had everything planned from the start!

Unfortunately for him, the two people he'd truly been facing were the two most cunning deceivers of all. His scheme had been laid bare from the very first moment.

Having reached this conclusion, Cheng Shi and Zhen Xin didn't rush to counter him. Instead, they shared a glance and wordlessly initiated their cat-and-mouse plan.

The chaos continued for some time.

Before long, a royal investigator arrived at the scene with troops in tow. The fury on the investigator's face made it clear he was a Sunset fan. He found Ringmaster Fate with a grim expression, suppressed his rage long enough to hear the ringmaster's account, then immediately rendered his judgment: the explosion was an act of malicious competition that desecrated the honor of circus artistry.

He decided to first detain Morning Joy's key personnel, then convene a three-way tribunal with the emperor, the Sunset, and the public—nailing Morning Joy to Canlival's pillar of circus shame.

To this, Ringmaster Fate said nothing—but his silence spoke volumes of approval.

He, too, believed Morning Joy was behind it.

After the official business concluded, the royal investigator didn't leave immediately. Instead, he dismissed everyone else, leaving only Ringmaster Fate in the office. His voice turned heavy:

"Lake... is he really dead?"

Ringmaster Fate's eyes reddened instantly. Fighting back his grief, he shook his head, his clenched fists trembling as his voice came out distorted:

"I don't know... but I can't bring myself to believe any of this is real."

The investigator shared in the sorrow. With a sigh, he stepped closer and placed a hand on Ringmaster Fate's shoulder in comfort:

"I can't believe it either... but death isn't necessarily forever."

"!?"

Ringmaster Fate's body went rigid. He looked up at the investigator in utter disbelief:

"What are you saying...?"

The investigator's eyes flickered:

"This world is far more extraordinary than we imagine. I've seen many people die, only to quietly come back to life.

For example...

you!

Su Yida—care to explain why you're still alive?"

Before the words had even fully landed, a mocking grin spread across the investigator's face. As Ringmaster Fate's pupils contracted in shock, the investigator's shadow tore free from his body, flashed behind the ringmaster, and locked him in a chokehold—arms threading under armpits and around the neck, clamping down tight!

Ringmaster Fate went white: "Investigator, what are you—!?"

Seeing Su Yida still putting on an act even at death's door, Cheng Shi scoffed and played along:

"Like I said—this world is beyond your imagination.

The one who needs to come back to life isn't actually you—it's me. I'm the world's first Scarlet Hunter, trapped inside a human body. Once I devour you, I'll be reborn. Heh heh heh—"

With that, the investigator opened his mouth wide.

"..."

Ringmaster Fate's twitching face was on the verge of full-on convulsions. When pushed to the absolute limits of speechlessness, a person truly would resort to profanity.

Faced with this scene, the words burst from his lips:

"What the f—"

"CRACK!"

Before Ringmaster Fate could finish expressing his warm regards to the investigator, his limbs were snapped one by one by the investigator's shadow. Each crisp snap was accompanied by a howl, and the circus ringmaster crumpled to the ground, his supports knocked out from under him.

The investigator planted a foot on the ringmaster's chest and stomped him straight back to his true form.

Su Yida!

It really was Su Yida!

Looking at that face—familiar beyond any possible mistake—appearing in his field of vision, Cheng Shi... yes, Cheng Shi let out a cold laugh.

"Long time no see, Archmage!

Not a bad plan—impersonating Lake yourself while sending the investigator to detain Morning Joy. One move to reverse both sides' endings. Pretty clever brain you've got there."

Su Yida's mouth overflowed with blood. Burning with hatred, he glared at Cheng Shi and cried out defiantly:

"Why is it always you!?"

I refuse to accept this!"

Cheng Shi's cold laughter didn't stop:

"Between deceivers, it's always been you trick me, I trick you. If you get tricked, you swallow it—and then trick them back. What good is shouting?"

Unfortunately, it looks like you won't be getting that chance."

With that, Cheng Shi thrust his scalpel toward Su Yida's throat with lightning speed.

He didn't actually want to kill him. He was following Zhen Xin's suggestion—entering the game personally to thoroughly flush out any contingencies the Archmage might have left behind.

But to his shock, faced with such a blisteringly fast strike, Su Yida—whose limbs had all been broken—raised his limp hands as if nothing were wrong, seized Cheng Shi's ankle, and hurled him across the room with inexplicable force. Then he snapped upright, launched himself at the ceiling, and blasted through the tent's roof at terrifying speed, escaping into the open air.

Cheng Shi was stunned. His pupils contracted as he tumbled to the ground. Watching the figure vanish through the tent, his expression turned strange as he sent Shadow Chengshi in pursuit.

But before Shadow Chengshi could catch up, the bloodied figure came flying back through the hole in the roof and crashed to the floor.

"WHAM—"

Su Yida coughed blood as he hit the ground, accompanied by a rain of countless magic cards.

Miss Magician used a playing card balanced on her fingertip as an umbrella, drifting down with grace. Gazing at the equally disheveled Cheng Shi, she teased:

"What's the matter?"

Did the cat get scratched by the mouse?

Though I can't really blame you—we both underestimated the Archmage of the Demonic Realm.

If you hadn't insisted on having me set up extra layers of nets outside, he might actually have gotten away."

Then Zhen Xin's gaze sharpened as she looked down at Su Yida:

"What I'm curious about is—where does a Master of Trickery get that kind of brute strength?"

Su Yida lay flat on his back, limbs twisted at grotesque angles, staring vacantly at the hole in the ceiling. He said nothing, as if he'd resigned himself to his fate.

Cheng Shi slowly rose to his feet. Rather than rushing to restrain the man, he dragged a chair over, dropped into it, and then jabbed a finger toward the figure on the ground, his tone far from pleasant:

"Hey—did you hear the question?!"

Talk!

Explain to me why you're here, Long—Jing!"

"?"

"..."

...

Chapter 1260: ...Long Jing?

A Master of Trickery didn't possess that kind of physical strength, nor could one use their hands and feet as if nothing were wrong after having all four limbs snapped.

But just because a Master of Trickery couldn't do it didn't mean others couldn't.

For an acrobat, at the very least, those movements were child's play.

That's right—the person lying flat on the ground wasn't Su Yida. It was Long Jing!

Sometimes Long Jing felt the world bore an unreasonable grudge against him, especially when Cheng Shi and Zhen Xin were involved.

At first, he hadn't known who he'd run into in this trial. He'd only noticed it was the Fun God's trial, and since the objective involved a "curtain call performance," he felt his moment had arrived.

He would blaze a trail in this trial—find every clue before any of his teammates, solve every puzzle, and then, amid their collective shock, ascend to the final stage and deliver a spectacular curtain call performance!

The most brilliant part was that after this curtain call, no one would remember him—and yet he would have simultaneously completed his debut on another stage outside this trial.

Because the role he was playing in this trial was a fellow professional—the Master of Trickery who walked alongside Jie Shu!

To explain all of this properly, one had to start with the mission Cheng Shi had assigned to the Joker.

When the Joker members learned that the Nose of Verification was in the Mockery and Jeering, every one of them was bursting with competitive energy, eager to be the first to find it.

Well—that was what Long Jing thought. As for whether the others actually felt the same... he was convinced they did.

But who could have predicted that the moment Cheng Shi left, the Mockery and Jeering would simply vanish?

With nowhere to go, the Joker members went back to their own affairs, and Long Jing refocused his attention on Jie Shu.

He had assumed the little performance he'd put on for the Dragon King was quite convincing, and that Jie Shu would come looking for him sooner or later. But he waited and waited, and Jie Shu never came. Instead, he heard about another deceiver at Jie Shu's side.

A Master of Trickery surnamed Su.

?

'Other than a certain Master of Trickery surnamed Zhen, what kind of trickster dares to dump on my territory?'

'Why does Jie Shu seek him out but not me?'

'What's wrong with being an acrobat?'

'So what if an acrobat is more of a clown? Doesn't it depend on the occasion?'

'When everyone in the Joker is a clown, what difference does it make?'

In that moment, Long Jing's competitive spirit ignited. Initially, he'd only been interested in the fact that Jie Shu's group was targeting Cheng Shi. But from that day forward, he decided to teach this organization a lesson—to show them that a Master of Trickery was useless, and that he was the better choice.

He just hadn't expected the Master of Trickery to be that useless.

Long Jing had prayed his way into a trial where he'd encounter the Su-surnamed Master of Trickery, and sure enough, he got his wish. During that Fate trial, he merely tailed Su Yida for two days of observation before successfully stealing the man's identity on the third. He maneuvered the other teammates into "exposing" Su Yida's "disguise" and condemning him for impersonating a teammate with ill intent.

Having his identity stolen and being slandered on top of it, Su Yida had his emotional defenses completely shattered. That night, he set up a kill trap and moved against Long Jing under cover of darkness.

And then he quietly died in the night.

Long Jing swore that when he killed him, he had taken into account that any Master of Trickery chosen by Jie Shu couldn't be simple and would surely have backup plans. So he intended to take one of the man's lives as a show of force.

Who could have known that Su Yida was as fragile as paper? He'd merely snapped the man's neck, and the guy had actually died.

After Su Yida's death, Long Jing—still unable to believe it—had even tried snapping his own neck. He didn't die... which only proved the Master of Trickery truly had been made of paper.

But Su Yida's death had genuinely given Long Jing a fright.

Of course, it wasn't solely a fright—there was a pleasant surprise in it too.

It seemed Long Jing no longer needed to insist on joining Jie Shu's team under his own name. He had unexpectedly acquired a brand-new identity.

'The one who died was someone impersonating Su Yida. What does that have to do with the real Su Yida—me?'

And so, a new "Su Yida" was born.

Long Jing felt he was just one opportunity away from presenting himself to Jie Shu in his new guise. Afraid Jie Shu might grow suspicious, he wanted to cause a big enough stir as Su Yida to divert Jie Shu's attention, so that when they next met, the man would focus on current events rather than past details.

That would be much easier to handle.

And before long, the special trial arrived.

But just as he finally had his chance to accomplish a "great feat" in Su Yida's skin... he ran into Cheng Shi and Zhen Xin in this very trial.

'Damn destiny.'

'Who could have known that the Zhang Jizu and An Mingyu he'd blown up were actually these two jinxes?'

Honestly, to have a Master of Trickery's techniques fool two Chosen Ones—that would have been something worth bragging about regardless of the circumstances.

But now...

'What dignity? All that's left is a clown nose!'

'Forget the Nose of Verification—just rip my actual nose off and use that instead.'

Thinking this, Long Jing's gaze toward the ceiling grew ever more vacant.

Meanwhile, when Zhen Xin heard that the Su Yida at her feet was actually Long Jing, she paused briefly before bursting into laughter.

"President Gong, is this the surprise performance you prepared for everyone after disappearing for so long?"

Hmm, I have to say—it does have a certain novelty.

I think being an acrobat is a waste of your talents. Why not follow the example of the gentleman in front of you and become a clown instead? After all, the world is short on laughter, and you can never have too many clowns."

"..."

"..."

One remark that skewered two people at once. 'Who could tell whether that was Xin or Yi speaking?'

Cheng Shi had said it before—the older sister was every bit as much of a jinx as the younger, and there was a strong possibility that some of the misfortune the world attributed to the younger was actually the older sister's handiwork, dumped on her sibling.

Zhen Yi really was too pitiable.

But she deserved it.

'The Zhen family—two sisters, double the jinx. A true honor to the family name!'

Cheng Shi darkened his face and ignored the laughing Zhen Xin. He nudged the unfocused Long Jing with the tip of his foot:

"Is playing dead also a required course for acrobats?"

Esteemed President Gong, would you care to explain what exactly you're doing?

Why were you impersonating the Archmage?

Where is the real Archmage?"

Long Jing partially snapped back to reality but didn't bother getting up. He just lay there spread-eagle on the ground and said flatly: "Dead."

"!!!"

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted. His tone turned serious: "Dead? You killed him?"

Long Jing didn't want to take the blame, but he couldn't deny the facts. He could only nod: "Yeah. But I didn't mean to kill him. He was way too easy to kill."

"..."

There was something inherently sarcastic about that statement, but Cheng Shi wasn't laughing at all. Not only was he not laughing—he'd broken out in a cold sweat.

Because he had just recalled the scene from after that Oblivion trial where Su Yida had appeared—when he'd had his audience with the Fun God.

He had asked the Fun God whether Su Yida had succeeded, and the Fun God's answer was: he's dead. Both of him are dead.

At the time, Cheng Shi had assumed the "both" referred to the future Su Yida who had come to the present and the present Su Yida who had gone to the future. But thinking about it now—if that "future" was actually another slice universe, how would the Fun God, who existed in the current world, know whether the Su Yida who'd gone to another slice universe had died or not?

So was it possible that one of the "two" the Fun God referred to was the Su Yida right here, right now?

The Su Yida Long Jing had killed!?

'But You're Deceit—where did this Fate-like scent come from?'

Seeing Cheng Shi's expression change dramatically, Zhen Xin dropped her smile and asked curiously: "What's wrong?"

"Nothing—just remembering some things from before."

Cheng Shi shook his head, clearing away the stray thoughts, and turned his attention back to Long Jing.

By now Long Jing had also somewhat recovered thanks to Cheng Shi's shift in demeanor. He slowly sat up, only to hear Cheng Shi ask in a strange tone:

"You wanted to impersonate Su Yida and infiltrate Jie Shu's team?"

President Gong, don't tell me you were trying to sabotage Jie Shu's plans so I'd owe you a favor.

Or had you already been sick of me for a while and planned to hitch a ride with Jie Shu to give me a beating?"

"!!!"

Whether the former or the latter, Long Jing couldn't admit to either. He deliberately zoned out again, refusing to respond. Before long, he heard Cheng Shi continue:

"Still, this actually aligns perfectly with something I had in mind.

Come to think of it, I've got an identity that could be useful too—no, possibly more than one."

He turned to Zhen Xin, the corner of his mouth curving upward:

"Since we've already come this far, Miss Magician—interested in joining a new plan?"

I've tailored a script just for you. All you have to do is play your role."

Zhen Xin raised an eyebrow with interest: "Play whom?"

Cheng Shi's grin was dazzling:

"Your old friend—the historian, Zhao Xishi."

...