

The Gods 1261

Chapter 1261: The Vanished Lake

Up to this point, Cheng Shi knew of four members in Jie Shu's team. Excluding the organizer Jie Shu himself, the remaining three were:

Mo Shu, Zhao Xishi, and Su Yida.

The Scavenger was already resolved to die. The historian and the Master of Trickery had long since been put in the ground. Failing to exploit an opportunity this gift-wrapped would be an insult to the destiny that had practically spoon-fed it to him.

So today—without Jie Shu's knowledge—the team had undergone a personnel change. Other than the organizer Jie Shu remaining the same, the three new members were:

Cheng Shi, Zhen Xin, and Long Jing.

Yes—Cheng Shi intended to borrow their identities and pay a visit to the Fool Hunter who was so eager to "get rid of him." This wasn't about revenge; it was about a plan that was gradually taking shape in his mind.

The plan didn't have a name yet, but Cheng Shi knew that when the time came, others would give it one.

He couldn't be sure whether Jie Shu's plan had changed over all this time, or what state Mo Shu was in. But it was safe to say that no matter how this round played out, three top-tier deceivers wouldn't find it particularly difficult.

When you thought about it, it was actually amusing. When an organization's "moles" vastly outnumbered its actual members, who did the organization really belong to?

Was it possible that Jie Shu was the outsider here?

'We Joker members are having a meeting—how did a Folly believer sneak in?'

The thought brought a knowing smile to Cheng Shi's face.

But even though the potential for fun was enormous, he still didn't feel fully confident about this plan.

Regardless, all of that could wait until after the trial. The pressing matter was the Deceit trial right in front of him.

Cheng Shi was curious about how Long Jing had impersonated the Master of Trickery. Long Jing didn't hide it—he said it was a Memory artifact he'd obtained from the Dragon King, one that could temporarily borrow the abilities of an enemy he'd previously fought.

Cheng Shi's eyes lit up. He asked to see it.

Long Jing spread his hands and claimed it was used up.

Cheng Shi didn't believe a single word. If it were truly used up, how was he supposed to keep up the act for the next four days?

But he also knew it wasn't easy to pick through someone else's pockets. So he could only take the roundabout approach: "How did you con it out of him?"

Long Jing's expression froze. He didn't want to admit it.

The truth was, he had indeed conned it. He'd painted Li Jingming a grand picture.

After killing Su Yida, he'd gone to the Dragon King and told him he was about to infiltrate Jie Shu's organization from the inside. He just needed a bit of support. In return, he'd give the Dragon King an exclusive share of any memories he gathered.

Li Jingming had deemed the trade worthwhile and agreed.

But now, Long Jing's plan had been wrecked by his "own people," and the wrecker even wanted him to join their plan instead... If he still shared those memories with the Dragon King, wouldn't he become "everyone's favorite" clown all over again?

'No—absolutely not!'

'For the sake of President Gong's reputation, this debt has to be welched!'

Long Jing clamped his mouth shut, standing firm like a righteous man sworn to protect the Dragon King's interests.

Unfortunately, he was facing two master deceivers. They didn't even need him to speak. Just from his posture, they could guess exactly what kind of promise the acrobat had made.

Cheng Shi and Zhen Xin exchanged a smile and decided to leave President Gong some face.

"President Gong, you've been here much longer than us. What have you discovered?"

This was another thing Long Jing didn't want to share. This stage was supposed to have been his alone. Now someone had barged in and hijacked the show; his perfect curtain-call plan was already bankrupt.

But he couldn't keep everything to himself forever. Who knew what tricks these two jinxes might resort to?

He wasn't afraid of a fight, but he was afraid of looking like a fool—and in front of these two, looking foolish was all too easy...

So Long Jing resigned himself to his fate and said wearily:

"Lake left under cover of darkness. I used a Memory artifact to witness the moment he departed.

He was utterly resolute. Before he left, he lingered at the circus entrance for a long time. It was clear he didn't intend to come back. That's why I decided to take his place and reverse the Sunset's ending.

I couldn't find any clues related to why he left, and I couldn't fathom why a clown with such deep feelings for the circus would make this choice.

The night he left, he was extremely tense—even trembling as he walked. For someone who'd spent years performing in front of audiences, who'd seen every kind of scenario and was an expert at commanding a crowd, this was completely illogical.

Of course, it's possible he was simply afraid of being seen, but given the bewilderment in his eyes, I'm more inclined to think his behavior reflected anxiety about an unpredictable future!

Due to the artifact's limited range, I wasn't able to find where he ended up. But the direction he went was into the city. It looked like he had an appointment with someone.

I suspect he was threatened, because I also saw traces of fear in his eyes."

As he spoke, Long Jing straightened up. He was clearly interested in Lake's disappearance too.

Cheng Shi frowned, thinking carefully. To make a clown decisively abandon the career he loved most, leave behind his closest friends and colleagues, walk away from the "home" he'd fought for his entire life—how much power would someone need to wield to accomplish that?

He pondered briefly and quickly arrived at an answer. At the same time, Zhen Xin beside him offered her own theory:

"Whoever it was threatened to destroy the Sunset!

To protect the circus, the clown had no choice but to compromise."

Cheng Shi nodded. He'd been thinking the same thing. He sorted through every possibility, talking himself through the logic:

"Whoever arranged the meeting with Lake either commands immense power—enough to easily determine the Sunset's fate—or holds leverage that could destroy the circus's reputation.

If it's the former, there's no real reason to single out a clown unless it's for some incomprehensible perverse amusement.

The only people who could have both that kind of perversity and that kind of power would be the royal family.

Could there be a member of the royal court who favors Morning Joy and is using this to antagonize the Sunset?

But judging from the royal court's reaction to the Sunset explosion, and from my observations of the royal investigator I knocked out, they seem to favor the Sunset. After all, the Sunset is a legacy of the founding king—much more aligned with the traditionalists.

But if not the royals, does Canlival even have any other major powers?

Wait... even if there are, the same logic applies. If they wanted to bring the Sunset down, there'd be no need to target just the clown.

So it actually seems more like the second scenario.

Someone has leverage on the Sunset and used it to force Lake's hand.

But why Lake specifically?

Oh?

I think I know. It's very likely because..."

"Because the leverage involves the clown himself." Zhen Xin arched an eyebrow and pinpointed the crux. "Lake must have committed some transgression detrimental to the Sunset, and someone with an agenda witnessed it. That's how they got their hooks into him.

Otherwise, given his love for the circus, he would probably have defended the Sunset to the death.

We shouldn't confine our investigation to inside the circus. We need to find out what Lake was doing before he disappeared.

Only by uncovering the chain of cause and effect can we determine whether the Sunset's ending should be tragedy or triumph.

Heh—come to think of it, there's something rather poetic about it: a stage that provides emotion to the audience can't decide its own ending of sorrow or joy...

Surely the Fun God isn't hinting at something with this?"

Zhen Xin's eyes darted about playfully, clearly struck by some deeper thought.

"..."

"..."

Her sudden leap to a higher plane of meaning plunged the room into silence.

Cheng Shi pursed his lips, unsure how to respond. Long Jing, meanwhile, hadn't overthought it. Following the thread of their reasoning, he combined it with his own observations and produced a very logical hypothesis.

"There's no such thing as a threat without motive.

Whoever forced Lake to leave must stand to gain from it. If we set aside the minor details and ask only who benefits most from Lake's departure, the answer is obvious—there's only one:"

The three of them locked eyes and spoke in unison:

"Morning Joy."

Cheng Shi smiled. This was the kind of peak-level round he'd always dreamed of—one where everyone could carry.

Of course, it would be even better if no one was lying to each other.

"Looks like we need to pay Morning Joy a visit." Cheng Shi blinked. "And while we're at it, let's see how Old Zhang is holding up."

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Chapter 1262: Destination: Morning Joy Circus

The aftershocks of the explosion chaos still lingered.

Especially after someone discovered the royal investigator—knocked unconscious, stripped of his clothes—tossed in the woods. The entire circus erupted.

Then who was the person who had stayed in the office with the ringmaster?

Panic set in, and they rushed to check. When they threw open the office door and found it empty, the performers' world collapsed.

Where had the ringmaster gone?

Fortunately, Ringmaster Fate was soon found unconscious inside a supply tent. He had obviously been knocked out as well. Though deeply shaken, the troupe breathed a sigh of relief—at least the Sunset was a victim too, so they wouldn't face royal repercussions.

What they couldn't fathom was: if there really were impostors running around in other people's skins, stirring up chaos—why had they donned the investigator's and the ringmaster's disguises just to meet inside the Sunset's office?

As accomplices, couldn't they just meet anywhere without all that?

No one could give the Sunset's performers an answer.

Visitors dwindled. Soldiers multiplied. Everyone was as silent as winter cicadas, terrified of being dragged into this conspiracy-laden catastrophe.

Meanwhile, the three deceivers who had left this mess in their wake had long since departed the western district and set foot on Morning Joy's "territory."

The Morning Joy Circus's style was markedly different from the Sunset's. The visitors here were younger, and the performances more... open. Yes, open in the literal sense.

The moment Cheng Shi arrived, he caught a familiar scent.

"Corruption?"

Zhen Xin was slightly taken aback as well. She too had detected that faint but undeniable Corruption aura.

Long Jing wasn't at their side—he had assumed Su Yida's appearance and was skulking in the shadows. As he'd explained, to fool Jie Shu, he couldn't abandon Su Yida's identity; he needed to "leave traces" in this trial.

Though most of the players in this trial were familiar faces, there were still Hu Wei—who wasn't a Joker member—and another teammate whose identity remained unknown. A little caution never hurt.

The pair walked deeper into the circus grounds. Cheng Shi's gaze swept over the visitors and performers around them as he asked quietly:

"The History School has no records of Morning Joy—but has anyone documented what influence Corruption had on Canlival?"

Zhen Xin shook her head:

"There's no specific documentation, but desire permeates wherever people exist.

Where there are people, Corruption is never far. Besides, no one can say for certain this Corruption aura comes from the historical setting. It could be something we brought with us.

Don't forget—we still have one teammate who hasn't shown up."

Cheng Shi nodded, accepting the point.

He wasn't worried, though. With their current lineup, no Corruption follower could cause real waves—not even if Poison herself showed up.

If time weren't tight, Cheng Shi would have liked to stroll around and gather clues personally. But knowing that the chaos at the Sunset would soon bring the royal investigator to Morning Joy's doorstep, he realized they were once again in a race against the clock. They needed to personally interrogate this rising-star ringmaster before the authorities got to Madame Freud—and ask what role she played in Lake's disappearance.

"Old Zhang should have something by now. Let's find him." Even as the words left his lips, Cheng Shi's feet came to a halt.

The sudden stop put Zhen Xin ahead of him. She looked back in confusion, only to see Cheng Shi blinking at her:

"You lead."

"?"

Zhen Xin arched an eyebrow, teasing: "Given how well you two understand each other, shouldn't you be the one leading?"

Cheng Shi pursed his lips:

"I don't have as many gadgets as you. I can't locate where he is. Come on—if you've got props, why save them?"

The wealthy should do more of the heavy lifting. How else are us poor folk supposed to get ahead?"

"...You're not even remotely related to 'poor folk.'"

Zhen Xin shot him a disdainful look but still produced an artifact. It was a small branch with a leaf still attached. The single leaf trembled lightly in her palm.

"Actually, this little trinket was traded from Hong Lin.

A Co-Prosperity Leaf. Just feed it a snippet of faith essence, and it will guide you to wherever that faith 'flourishes' most strongly nearby.

Reportedly, it's a cutting from the ancestral tree in the rainforest tribe. The Prosperity singer's talent, Universal Harmony—which gathers and shares everyone's Prosperity essence—originates from the same source.

As it happens, the last faith essence I loaded in was Death...

And I doubt there's anyone on this land whose Death faith burns brighter than a Gravekeeper's."

As she spoke, the branch in Zhen Xin's hand slowly rotated, eventually vibrating intensely in Cheng Shi's direction.

She raised an eyebrow, pushed Cheng Shi aside, and started walking that way. Cheng Shi followed closely, his eyes drifting more than once to the small branch. He found it extremely appealing.

But he couldn't just shamelessly ask for it outright. He had to say something to redirect his attention and suppress the greedy impulse.

"Who did you use it to find last time?"

Any other notable players in Death's camp?"

"Not a player—Him!"

Cheng Shi blinked, startled: "You had an audience with that Lord?"

Zhen Xin nodded, her expression calm:

"That's right. You said the Bone Bell was that Lord's greatest support for us, so naturally I needed to meet the 'boss' who was sheltering us.

You had just left, and the Mockery and Jeering had vanished. So I asked Old Zhang to make an introduction, and I went to the Fishbone Hall for an audience.

The audience... didn't go well.

That Lord neither answered my questions nor offered any guidance. He simply locked eyes with me for a moment, then sent me back.

I figured I couldn't keep troubling the Gravekeeper every time, so I secretly captured a wisp of His essence in the Fishbone Hall—thinking I'd find another chance to visit Him through the Void.

So today counts as using a sledgehammer to crack a nut. Your lucky day."

"?" Cheng Shi objected. "How is it my lucky day? We're all searching for clues. At most I'm just riding your coattails—no, riding that Lord's coattails.

Praise be to Death."

That comment reminded Zhen Xin of how the deceivers had behaved during their audiences. She looked at Cheng Shi with a suddenly very strange expression: "Have you always been this much of a bootlicker?"

"You don't understand. This is devotion."

"Heh. So the simp never died—he just switched from simping over love to simping over faith."

"???"

'What do you mean, "switched"?''

'Xie Yang's simping is perfectly traditional!'

Cheng Shi seized Zhen Xin by the shoulders and corrected her with utmost gravity:

"It's bone-licking. That Lord likes skulls."

"..."

Zhen Xin couldn't hold it together. Her eyelids twitched wildly, and she desperately wanted to ask Cheng Shi if he was serious.

But just then, the leaf on the branch in her palm began to change—shaking more and more slowly, then slowly rotating to point behind them.

Zhen Xin's steps halted. Brow furrowing, she glanced back:

"That's odd. Old Zhang is nearby?"

She turned to scan the crowd, carefully examining every face among the visitors and performers.

Cheng Shi stopped too, following her line of sight. After a moment, he shook his head: "Impossible. If he's dealing with the Grand Marshal, he'd never change his appearance. He's not here—I'm sure of it."

"Then why did the leaf change direction? I clearly—

Hm?"

While Zhen Xin was still puzzling over the leaf's direction, the leaf in her hand subtly shifted its angle—and pointed straight at Cheng Shi.

An ordinary person might not have noticed such a tiny detail and would have assumed the target was simply moving. But this was Zhen Xin—she was far too perceptive. Recalling that the initial direction had also been where Cheng Shi stood, she immediately realized the leaf was pointing at Cheng Shi all along.

Her eyes widened, flickering: "How is that possible—you've merged with Death?"

Cheng Shi was stunned again.

'I definitely haven't merged with it, but even without merging, I'm as good as merged. My devotion to the Death boss is witnessed by heaven and earth.'

"This thing of yours... it's not a faith devotion compass, is it?"

Tsk. By that logic, Old Zhang's devotion to that Lord is rather mediocre—not even as strong as mine."

"...No, this artifact may be small, but I've used it for ages and it's never been wrong before.

You really haven't merged with Death?"

Cheng Shi was floored.

'Am I really that untrustworthy?'

He explained helplessly:

"Truly, I haven't. I'm devoted to that Lord, yes, but I've never walked His path.

If anything, I've probably come close to death itself more often than I've come close to Him..."

Before he could finish, his expression shifted, and he said with wary uncertainty: "Zhen Xin, this thing of yours isn't some kind of prophecy artifact, is it?"

"..."

Zhen Xin put the artifact away in irritation. "Maybe Their essence simply can't be tagged. Forget it—I don't need gadgets to find Old Zhang.

Earlier on our way in, I heard that Morning Joy has a theatrical performance about 'death.' I'm guessing he'd find that interesting.

Let's check there."

Cheng Shi pursed his lips: "Old Zhang doesn't seem like the type to watch plays for fun."

Zhen Xin smiled mysteriously: "That depends on what the play's about. This one tells the story of a strong-willed boy who learns of his parents' deaths and becomes fully independent.

I'm guessing he'd find that very interesting."

"?" Cheng Shi's gaze turned suspicious. "Do you know something? Does the History School investigate player backstories too?"

"The History School doesn't know.

But I... know quite a lot."

Zhen Xin narrowed her eyes, smiling like a fox.

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Chapter 1263: The Gravekeeper's Past

The two set off again. Cheng Shi and Zhen Xin walked side by side, heads down in silence.

Zhen Xin had somehow learned Old Zhang's story and didn't seem opposed to sharing it. But the question was—should he be hearing this?

Digging into someone's past without their consent felt somewhat unethical.

With that thought, Cheng Shi didn't hesitate for even a second. He spoke up immediately:

"Well, if you know something, just say it already. What's with the suspense?"

Don't tell me you're planning to trade it for something like the Dragon King does?"

Zhen Xin wasn't the least bit surprised by Cheng Shi's "greed." She glanced at him and smiled:

"If you have other people's stories to share, I wouldn't mind an exchange.

But if your bargaining chip is your own story... it's worthless. I already know it all."

"..."

Having his memories swindled away was the very first loss Cheng Shi had taken at the threshold of the peak rounds. Though he'd ultimately used Brother Mouth to expose the other party's identity—some consolation, at least—he hadn't truly profited from the ordeal.

Zhen Xin bringing up old business clearly meant she intended to treat Old Zhang's story as compensation.

Cheng Shi didn't mind. He listened attentively.

Zhen Xin smiled and asked: "Haven't you ever had even the slightest doubt about Old Zhang?"

"What doubt?"

"With his composure, his knowledge, his bearing, and his temperament—the work clothes aside, I'm talking about that quality so reminiscent of Truth—he's clearly someone who received excellent education. So why on earth did he become a security guard?"

"?"

Cheng Shi blinked. He had genuinely never thought about it from that angle.

'But what's wrong with being a security guard? It's an honest profession—no stealing, no robbing. In fact, you prevent stealing and robbing. What's not to like?'

Though admittedly, nobody was exactly robbing a cemetery.

He scoffed, accusing Zhen Xin of occupational prejudice: "Everyone makes their own choices. I don't see anything wrong with it."

Zhen Xin nodded:

"Indeed, everyone makes their own choices.

I'm not looking down on any profession. I'm questioning something that clearly defies common sense.

Death serves as camouflage—its aura keeps many players at arm's length from the Gravekeeper. But once people stop fearing Death—once you lift that veil—and look at this Death Chosen One again, you'll find a very different... Gravekeeper.

His father was an outstanding young forensic doctor. His mother was an authoritative safety expert. How could such an exceptional household produce an ordinary child? Old Zhang was once a top student at a prestigious university, expected to achieve great things..."

"?"

'Old Zhang betrayed the revolution?'

'He rolled that well in the birth lottery?'

But the better the birth, the less he should look like his current self. Cheng Shi knew all too well how fate could twist. He blinked, said nothing, and kept listening.

"He dropped out.

In his final year, right before graduation, he chose to quit and become a security guard at that cemetery. Small wonder his colleagues were always snide about it.

When someone suddenly appears in a place they clearly don't belong, rumors naturally follow.

But fortunately, the Gravekeeper's will was iron. He didn't care about any of that."

Even Zhen Xin grew a bit emotional as she spoke. As someone who understood cold glances and the ways of the world better than most, she knew the Gravekeeper's days during that period couldn't have been easy.

"Why?" Cheng Shi seemed to have guessed the answer, but he wasn't sure.

Zhen Xin's smile faded, replaced by an expression of quiet respect.

"Because his parents are buried in that cemetery."

"..."

'As expected.'

"They were brilliant. But they pushed too hard—always wanting to see as much of the world as possible within their limited lifetimes. The more they wanted to see, the more they did. And grinding a body past its limits only makes a limited lifespan even more limited..."

They both collapsed in the same year—even the same month. The rest of the story is the answer to the question I raised.

So Old Zhang wanting to live forever is probably one final act of 'rebellion' against his parents.

And that might also be why the Fun God took notice of him.

He loves rebellion, doesn't He?"

"..."

Cheng Shi fell silent.

He remembered what Old Zhang had once told him—"Live longer, see more." He had always assumed the first half was what mattered to Old Zhang. He never realized the second half was equally important.

'Was he commemorating his parents through those words?'

'Then what's with his obsession with burying people?'

'Eagerly "forwarding" the world's little moments to his mom and dad on the other side?'

'Huh—you know what, that's actually pretty filial.'

Everyone carries their own misfortune. Cheng Shi had grasped this truth about the world a long time ago. He didn't feel offended by learning Old Zhang's past. He simply raised an eyebrow at Zhen Xin, something clicking:

"You got this from the Dragon King?"

This Li Jingming—always going on about respecting the Joker members' personal memories—then turns around and sells Old Zhang out?"

Zhen Xin just smiled. She didn't speak, didn't confirm, didn't deny.

Cheng Shi's face turned deadly serious:

"That won't do. I need to teach him a lesson.

If he won't tell me something new, I'll expose his loose lips and make him die of shame!"

"..."

Zhen Xin rolled her eyes at Cheng Shi, knowing when enough was enough, and dropped the subject.

They had arrived at the venue of that theatrical performance. Not far ahead in the crowd, Zhang Jizu stood quietly, silently watching the show.

Noticing the movement behind him, he turned to face the two, surprised they'd found him so quickly.

The pair walked up beside him. Watching the performance onstage, Cheng Shi suddenly thought of Old Jia, and for a moment didn't know what to say. Zhen Xin, on the other hand, had no particular reaction to the subject of "parents." She smiled and asked:

"You've actually got the leisure to watch a show? That tells me you've found something. Go ahead, Old Zhang—what's the deal with Morning Joy?"

The tone clearly couldn't belong to An Mingyu. Zhang Jizu narrowed his eyes, unsurprised by her true identity.

Seeing this, Zhen Xin's face fell.

'Sure enough—these two deceivers had seen through my disguise long ago.'

Zhang Jizu nodded as a greeting, then gave a clear and organized summary:

"Morning Joy's background is complicated, and Madame Freud's identity is anything but simple. She's not just a circus ringmaster—she's also a member of the Extreme Desire Brotherhood."

"???"

'What the—?'

Cheng Shi whipped his head around in shock: "She's one of Corruption's people?"

"Yes. To explain all of this properly, we have to start from when Madame Freud rallied the young performers to leave the Sunset with her.

Madame Freud was restless from a young age, born with a rebellious heart. But it was precisely that rebelliousness that drove her to constantly question and reform traditional circus arts—once even bringing a breath of fresh vitality to the Sunset.

But the conservative old ringmaster refused to embrace these innovations. Gradually, Madame Freud was pushed to the margins. After enduring prolonged suppression, she finally couldn't take it anymore. She took the performers closest to her and broke away from the Sunset.

They had nowhere to go. Fortunately, on their journey in search of a new life, they encountered the Extreme Desire Brotherhood, which was at the time infiltrating the surface world.

What Corruption represents hardly needs explaining to you two. It resonated perfectly with Madame Freud's spirit, and she joined them without hesitation. Through sheer force of action, she became the leader of this particular surface unit.

Perhaps as her desires continued to swell, her restless heart finally erupted one day. She confronted her true desires head-on, gathered the performers around her, and returned to Canlival—swearing to defeat the Sunset and make the people here acknowledge that her art was the greatest circus of all.

And so Morning Joy was born."

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Chapter 1264: Madame Freud

"Because the Extreme Desire Brotherhood permits everything, supporting anything that aligns with desire, the Corruption followers provided Morning Joy with enormous backing—including everything you can see here...

And everything you can't.

They corrupted the younger members of the royal family, swaying the new generation of royals toward trendy circus arts. With the royals setting the example, the nation's youth naturally came to prefer Morning Joy over the Sunset.

But before long, Madame Freud realized this kind of victory wasn't what she truly wanted. So she began to rein in her methods, restrain her approach, and focus single-mindedly on surpassing the Sunset through the quality of her circus alone.

She managed the troupe, unearthed talent, and mentored the next generation. Under her bold and aggressive leadership, Morning Joy flourished rapidly—and eventually produced the genius who could succeed her as the star clown: Masford.

Masford was the child of two of the performers who had originally left the Sunset with Madame Freud. Raised in the circus since birth, he was prodigiously gifted. Madame Freud recognized his potential and cultivated him into Morning Joy's most talented clown, one who drew in audiences by the thousands.

By then, the Sunset had finally realized it was falling behind the times and began its own revolution.

What happened at the Sunset—you've been there, so you know more than I do. In any case, everything culminated in the current 'Imperial City Showdown.'"

Zhang Jizu's investigation was more thorough than Cheng Shi and Zhen Xin's. Yet after hearing all of it, Cheng Shi's expression turned distinctly odd. He had nearly interrupted several times to ask questions, but he waited until the very end before pursing his lips:

"Old Zhang, you didn't bury Madame Freud, did you?

Where else would you learn all this?"

Zhang Jizu shook his head with a smile: "I didn't ask these questions. Don't forget—there was someone else who came to Morning Joy with me."

Speak of the devil. Before Cheng Shi could react, a burly, strapping man pushed through the crowd and appeared before the three of them. Seeing two Zhang Jizus standing so close together, he was still trying to tell them apart when the real Zhang Jizu narrowed his eyes and casually pointed—straight at Cheng Shi.

In his view, the fact that Cheng Shi and Zhen Xin had come to find him meant they were ready to lay their cards on the table. And since the Grand Marshal had already admitted he wouldn't interfere with the puzzle-solving, Zhang Jizu could finally drop the tedious job of playing Cheng Shi.

When Cheng Shi saw Old Zhang point at him, he thought he'd been sold out and started to formulate an excuse. But then Hu Wei clapped him heartily on the shoulder with a roaring laugh:

"Brother Cheng, you can drop the act. I know it's you.

Relax—there won't be any other agendas this round. Focus on clearing your trial, and just say the word when you need anything.

I only want one thing, and you know what it is. Whether I get my wish depends entirely on how well you perform!"

The Grand Marshal's heavy slaps on Cheng Shi's shoulder made his eyelids twitch.

'Great, so you two had already come clean and have been strolling around without a care in the world this whole time?'

'Then what was the point of my performance?'

'Pure clown duty?'

Cheng Shi's mouth twitched violently. With his cover blown, he naturally shed his disguise and reverted to himself.

When the real Cheng Shi appeared before him, Hu Wei suddenly felt a bit disoriented.

He gripped Cheng Shi's shoulder and muttered to himself:

"This time... this really is the real Brother Cheng, right?"

Cheng Shi nearly lost it. He'd actually given the big guy PTSD.

Beside them, "An Mingyu" saw everyone coming clean and naturally removed the black cloth from her eyes as well. But the moment Hu Wei caught sight of that tailored little suit, his reflexes kicked in—he leapt back half a step and drew his greatsword in one fluid motion.

Zhen Xin smiled with fox-like eyes, tilting her head at Hu Wei:

"Is the Grand Marshal about to perform some acrobatics for us?"

"Zhen Xin?"

'Not Zhen Yi!'

'Thank goodness.'

Hu Wei's face twitched. Looking at the three deceivers before him, his temples throbbed.

But a battle-hardened Grand Marshal didn't do embarrassment. Facing the bewildered stares of the surrounding onlookers, he roared with laughter:

"If it puts you all in a good mood for exploring the trial, why not give you a performance?"

Though I'm no expert. For real acrobatics, you'd want President Gong."

"?"

Hidden in the crowd and minding his own business, "Su Yida" silently absorbed a critical hit that was never meant for him.

'What does any of this have to do with me?'

Cheng Shi's face had turned red from holding back. He couldn't shake the feeling that the clown legacy was alive and well. Then again, his big brother really was going all out to merge with Deceit—throwing dignity to the wind. Who knows where he picked that up.

After the brief "chaos" subsided, the group returned to the trial at hand. When the conversation turned to the events at the Sunset and Lake's disappearance, Hu Wei raised an eyebrow, turned on his heel, and walked off, waving for everyone to follow.

They assumed Hu Wei had found the missing Lake—but instead of taking them to some obvious destination, the Grand Marshal led them through a winding route to a deserted stretch of wilderness outside the circus grounds.

The area was barren, forming a stark contrast to the bustling energy just a short distance away inside the circus. The Grand Marshal raised his sword and pointed at a patch of visibly disturbed soil:

"Want to guess what I found here?"

Cheng Shi blinked. 'Shouldn't we be guessing how you found this place?'

Seeing everyone's puzzled looks, Hu Wei laughed heartily and cleaved the fresh earth open with his sword, revealing a palm-sized box buried beneath the dirt.

He used the tip of his blade to flip the lid. Inside was a handful of burned ashes.

Just as everyone assumed these were someone's cremated remains, Zhang Jizu shook his head. He crouched down, pinched some of the ash between his fingers, and examined it carefully:

"No bone ash. These are the remnants of fabric and wood shavings. This is a cenotaph."

The Grand Marshal looked thoughtful:

"Someone buried this here. It looks like a memorial for someone.

I have a theory, but I'm not sure. That's why I brought Brother Zhang here—so he could investigate what 'person' is buried in this 'grave.' This is his area of expertise, after all."

Unfortunately, Death was only useful for actual dead people. Tracing objects required Memory. Cheng Shi instantly looked at Zhen Xin.

Given what he knew about deceivers, now that they were aware the Dragon King held Joker secrets, there was no way they'd only squeeze one measly story out of him. If they didn't extort a couple of extra things, they'd be unworthy of the Joker name.

Even Long Jing, who spent all his time aspiring to be a clown, knew to dangle a carrot in front of the Dragon King—let alone Zhen Xin, who was the ultimate expert at resource collection.

Sure enough, unable to withstand Cheng Shi's questioning gaze, Zhen Xin sighed helplessly and produced yet another Memory artifact from her personal space.

It was a small pinch of something resembling grains of sand.

"Who's extorting whom, exactly?"

Object-Gazing Reminiscence. This little trinket can restore the original form of damaged objects—only as a projection, of course. It's a B-rank artifact designed for commemorating memories.

I've always believed rank doesn't determine everything. Used in the right place, a B-rank artifact can produce S-rank results.

SS-rank, though—let's not push it. The gap is too wide."

With that, Zhen Xin sprinkled the sand over the ashes. Azure Memory energy surged forth, enveloping the remains, and before long, the ashes were restored to their original form.

They were several articles of clothing and a small wooden plaque.

The clothing was ordinary—slightly showy in style, like something a performer might wear. But the plaque was anything but ordinary, because it bore a single line of text:

The Sunset's Eternal Clown: Lake.

This was clearly Lake's "name tag"!

This was Lake's grave!?

Was he dead?

Everyone froze, eyebrows furrowing.

Cheng Shi's gaze sharpened. He turned to Hu Wei: "How did you find this?"

Hu Wei smiled mysteriously: "Care to guess who I caught paying their respects to this Sunset clown?"

Judging from the Grand Marshal's expression, the person's identity was certain to be highly "illogical." Zhen Xin's eyes spun in thought. She tilted her head and guessed: "Don't tell me it was Madame Freud?"

"Even more interesting than that." Hu Wei laughed uproariously. "It was Masford—Morning Joy's clown!

Surprising, right? I don't know if it's because they're both clowns and Masford empathizes with Lake's situation, but when I noticed him slipping away from everyone, passing by this spot while casting a strange, anxious look at it—I knew there had to be a story here."

"This goes beyond just a story."

Cheng Shi studied the projection at his feet, his voice grave.

"What we need to figure out first is how Masford knew about Lake's death.

The Sunset and the Golden House are still searching for him, yet Masford has already started holding a memorial.

It's hard not to suspect that Lake's death was Morning Joy's doing."

Zhang Jizu narrowed his eyes, puzzled: "But Madame Freud's wish is to win fair and square. That doesn't seem—"

"There's no contradiction. She wants to win fair and square, sure. But does everyone under her share that sentiment?"

Take this Masford, for instance—the one who came to 'pay his respects' in secret.

Until we've met this clown face to face, we can't say whether this was a genuine memorial or a silent act of mockery.

It seems it's time we paid a visit to this clown who knew before anyone else."

...

Chapter 1265: Clown Versus Clown

Though the Morning Joy Circus was bold and trendy in style, the clown's tent was surprisingly understated.

Masford's quarters were somewhat similar to Lake's—tucked away in a corner far from the rest area. When the group arrived, the tent was empty.

The Grand Marshal, unable to stand the pace of a slow investigation, saw no one around and immediately set off to find someone. Before he left, Cheng Shi asked how he'd learned about Madame Freud's detailed history. Hu Wei tossed over two diaries with a grin:

"It's all in here—written in Madame Freud's own hand.

Come to think of it, I haven't seen the ringmaster at all today. Let me take another lap outside and see if I can drag both of them back."

The Grand Marshal strode off. Cheng Shi opened the diaries and studied them carefully—everything Zhang Jizu had recounted was indeed recorded within these pages.

There didn't appear to be anything else of value in the diaries.

But sometimes the written word was magical that way. The very same story, told in someone's own hand versus relayed through another person's words, could convey profoundly different things.

For instance, when Madame Freud described the first time she recognized Masford's talent as a clown, her penmanship became forceful and exuberant. Even just looking at the words on the page, you could feel her excitement and joy.

But gradually, the entries about Masford grew more hasty, broken, and at times the same stroke was traced over and over again.

It wasn't hard to imagine that Madame Freud had gone through a period of inner conflict and struggle. Once that period passed, however, the handwriting in subsequent Masford-related entries became neat, careful, and gentle.

Those brush strokes alone told a story. But what truly convinced Cheng Shi this story had occurred wasn't just the penmanship—it was the content distribution.

Entries about the circus grew shorter and shorter. Entries about Masford grew longer and longer.

It was obvious who weighed more heavily in Madame Freud's heart. No words were needed.

These small details might be useless for the current trial, but they vividly showed him how a mentor had endured inner turmoil while nurturing a successor—and ultimately reached a compromise with herself.

Yet the story had no ending. Everything had come to an abrupt halt two days ago.

Madame Freud's final diary entry was dated two days prior. She wasn't a daily writer, but the ending of that last entry was visibly more hurried than usual.

She had recorded a conversation with Masford from that day, promising to give him an answer after the final showdown. But before she could write what the answer would be, a long, violent stroke slashed across half the page—even tearing through several pages beneath it, leaving a savage punctuation mark at the story's end.

Something had happened!

Anyone could see that Madame Freud, while writing her diary, must have received shocking news—so urgent that she hastily ended her entry, threw down the diary, and rushed from the room.

Cheng Shi was dying of curiosity. He handed the diary to Zhen Xin, hoping the resourceful magician could somehow reconstruct the scene from that moment.

Zhen Xin was equally curious, but she wasn't running a prop shop—her arsenal had its limits.

She shook her head. No luck.

Cheng Shi then turned to Zhang Jizu. Old Zhang simply closed his eyes, pretending he hadn't seen.

Not that anyone could tell whether his eyes were open or closed.

"Tsk, Old Zhang—you really have changed."

With the diary trail gone cold, Cheng Shi exchanged a helpless glance with Zhen Xin. In that single look, the same thought struck both deceivers:

'Why did it have to be Long Jing instead of the Dragon King?'

'Both have "Long" in their names, but the gap between them is astounding.'

'What good is Long Jing besides being a clown?'

"Achoo!"

Long Jing, who had split from the main team to search for clues on his own, suddenly sneezed. He had no idea anyone was badmouthing him—he just assumed the tingle meant he was about to find something.

And then he ran straight into Poison, who was also lurking in the shadows!

When Poison—an assassin by class—sensed someone tailing Cheng Shi with "ill intent," she had chosen a quiet spot to intercept the stalker.

Looking at the unfamiliar face before her, Poison frowned, then gave a light laugh:

"Whatever. I don't care who you are. If you're making a move on the little priest, that's reason enough to die.

This should... count as my desire, right?"

No sooner had she spoken than Dance With Desire shattered the silence, slicing through the air and stopping right before "Su Yida's" face.

"!!??"

Long Jing was dumbfounded.

When Cheng Shi had told him to keep playing "Su Yida" and stay hidden outside, he most certainly hadn't mentioned anything about fighting a villainess!

'Why is Poison in this trial too!?'

...

The Grand Marshal's efficiency was extraordinary. While Cheng Shi's trio was still ribbing each other about not having a single Memory artifact between them, Hu Wei had already returned to the tent with Masford in tow.

He dropped the fully made-up clown on the ground and shook his head:

"Unfortunately, I was a step too late.

Madame Freud has gone to the palace. Apparently there's a royal-exclusive performance today, and she went to coordinate relations.

Couldn't find her—only the clown.

Don't worry, no collateral damage. The clown was just rehearsing backstage, and he doesn't have any upcoming performances anyway.

Strange thing is, I checked the venue's performance schedule, and all of the clown's acts have been removed recently. It's even drawn complaints from audience members.

When coincidences pile up enough, they stop being coincidences and start being red flags. If anyone thinks the clown doesn't know something, well—I doubt anyone would buy that."

Hu Wei tossed the clown aside and sat down to wait for results.

He knew that with these three around, there was no way the clown could hide anything.

Bursting with curiosity, all three converged on Masford at once, backing him into a corner.

Fortunately, being an "NPC," Masford had no concept of what the three deceivers before him truly represented. So aside from some alarm, he wasn't particularly frightened.

After all, he couldn't imagine who would dare lay hands on him in Morning Joy's territory—especially on a day when a royal performance was taking place.

Was there anyone in this land who could withstand the wrath of the royal court?

No.

So he believed himself perfectly safe.

Cornered against the wall, Masford asked with mild unease: "Who are you?"

Cheng Shi answered casually: "Golden House. Mr. Masford should have heard of us."

Masford froze, incredulous:

"You're Blacks's people?"

But isn't he a fan of the Sun—the circus? Why would he send you here to cause me trouble?"

Cheng Shi smiled warmly, crouching down to meet the clown's eyes:

"Don't be nervous, Mr. Clown. We're not here to cause trouble—we're here to investigate something.

Someone hired us to find a person. We're clueless, so we thought we'd ask if you have any leads."

Masford's expression shifted visibly. He was trying his hardest to stay composed, but the four pairs of eyes watching him were—each and every one—sharper than an eagle's.

They instantly noticed that the clown's facial muscles had stiffened. Clearly, he'd already guessed who they were looking for.

Cheng Shi smiled and pressed on:

"It seems Mr. Masford does know something. Then let's talk—about what you know."

The clown shrank further into his corner, pitiful and helpless. He shook his head, holding firm:

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Cheng Shi was amused.

"Perhaps you've misunderstood something. We had more convenient methods at our disposal to verify everything. The reason we didn't use them is because—out of respect for a fellow clown—we're giving you some courtesy.

But if Mr. Masford insists on being difficult, then don't blame us for getting rough."

With that, Cheng Shi rose to his feet, beckoned with a wave, and called out:

"Bring him in—unleash Old Zhang."

"?"

...

Chapter 1266: Who Can Tell If I'm the Clown?

Zhang Jizu, whose eyes had narrowed to nothing, wore a dark expression as he channeled all his displeasure onto Masford. With a casual flick, his scalpel embedded itself in the wall three inches above the clown's head.

The clown flinched and ducked, his face draining of three shades of color.

He shrank his neck down further, his voice trembling: "I'll talk, I'll talk—whatever you want to know, I'll tell you."

Cheng Shi shot Zhang Jizu a peculiar glance, thinking that Old Zhang was being surprisingly cooperative today. Then he turned back with a grin:

"I ask, you answer. Get it wrong, and next time this gentleman's scalpel won't miss by so much.

Lake's disappearance—you're involved?"

Masford's entire body went rigid. After a moment of visible hesitation, he gave a heavy nod: "Yes."

"Good. Second question—he's dead, isn't that right?"

"...Yes."

The instant those words left his mouth, two scalpels simultaneously embedded themselves in the wall two inches above the clown's head. The trembling blades hummed, resonating at the exact same frequency as Masford's fraying nerves.

Both Cheng Shi and Zhang Jizu had struck. Old Zhang was playing his part in the interrogation, while Cheng Shi's was pure reflex—his hand was itching.

An interrogation just didn't feel right without a certain edge of menace.

Of course, the reason both of them reacted so swiftly was that the clown before them had just told a lie!

Lake wasn't dead?

Cheng Shi blinked, closed the distance by two steps, and pressed with a frown:

"Then what was the cenotaph about? Why were you 'mourning' someone who's still alive? Where did Lake go?"

"He..."

For some reason, the moment he heard this question, the fear in Masford's eyes vanished for an instant. A strange look crossed his face as he stared blankly at the ground, and after a moment of silence, he murmured:

"He left. He left the Sunset—left the place that had broken his heart and crushed his hopes."

"?"

Judging by his reaction, could these two clowns from rival camps actually be on good terms?

'But buddy, do you even remember where you are right now?'

'This is an interrogation, not a trip down memory lane!'

Cheng Shi let out a cold laugh and moved the scalpel's target point another inch lower—embedding it right against Masford's scalp, pinning itself to the wall.

"Like a tube of toothpaste—nothing comes out unless we squeeze."

Does Mr. Clown think we're being too friendly?"

Masford shrank his neck down again, trembling from head to toe: "It's... it's you who said 'I ask, you answer'... I didn't dare say more than you asked..."

"???"

'Alright then!'

Cheng Shi was genuinely laughing with anger now. He whipped out three scalpels in one motion, leveled them at the clown's nose, and said icily:

"Then tell us everything you know about Lake.

Remember—no lies. Otherwise...

Nobody knows whether the Sunset's clown is dead or alive, but Morning Joy's clown will definitely die first."

Whether it was Cheng Shi's threat or some specific word that struck a nerve, Masford fought down his terror, stared at the blade tips mere inches from his face, and shakily told them everything he knew.

His very first sentence left all four players thunderstruck.

"I am Lake."

"!!??"

Before the players could even process that revelation, the clown's second sentence brought an eternal silence to the room.

"The one who died isn't me—it's Masford.

Morning Joy's clown is indeed dead... and I cannot escape blame for it."

"!!!???"

Cheng Shi's brain went blank.

The clown before him was actually Lake!?

Only now did he realize that every player had overlooked a critically important detail: none of them had ever actually seen Masford. Simply because they'd found a clown inside the Morning Joy Circus, they'd assumed he must be Morning Joy's clown—Masford.

But beneath the full stage makeup, what kind of person the clown truly was—that, they had never seen.

Cheng Shi blinked rapidly. With the tip of his blade, he flicked off the clown nose, removed the wig, and wiped away the makeup to reveal the unfamiliar face beneath.

He confirmed this wasn't Lake's face—he'd seen Lake's true appearance in his tent.

But Cheng Shi's blade didn't stop. He keenly noticed faint shadows along the jawline of this unfamiliar face—precisely the spots most convenient for concealing flaws. He'd been playing with these techniques since childhood, and at this close range with a clear purpose, nothing could escape his eyes.

He peeled back the outer layer of fake skin, finally revealing a face identical to Lake's.

He really was Lake!!

In that instant, a torrent of thoughts cascaded through Cheng Shi's mind, his imagination erupting like a volcano to match the most plausible scenario to the clown's two sentences.

'Why "cannot escape blame"?''

'Could it be that Lake had killed Masford, only to be caught by Morning Joy's people? Had Madame Freud then threatened Lake into impersonating Masford in order to win against the Sunset?'

This seemed like the most logical theory—it aligned with every clue they'd found. The four of them exchanged glances, their expressions vivid. They'd clearly arrived at the same conclusion. But once again, events defied their expectations.

"You killed him?" asked Zhen Xin, who looked as though she were watching a circus act. The smile on her face hadn't faded since the beginning.

Masford—no, Lake—shook his head, denying Zhen Xin's "accusation."

"It wasn't me. I didn't kill anyone..."

"I just had the wrong drink, with the wrong person, at the wrong time."

He "regretfully" clutched his own hair and sank into his memories.

Even though it had only happened a few days ago, those days had felt like half a lifetime to Lake.

In preparation for the showdown with Morning Joy, Lake had been racking his brains for new tricks and fresh ideas. But audiences—whose expectations and humor thresholds had already been raised sky-high by every novelty under the sun—wouldn't reward effort alone. They only cared about who was funnier and who was more entertaining.

Lake had no confidence he could win the final showdown. In his frustration, he snuck out of the circus and made his way to a small bar on the outskirts of the city to drink his worries away.

As it happened, Masford had come to the very same bar that day, carrying the same burden, drinking alone and miserable.

Two half-drunk clowns met by chance.

They recognized each other immediately. At first, both were wary. But as the drinks kept flowing and their vision blurred, the two gradually drifted to the same table like old friends from the same troupe, pouring out the pressures weighing on each of their hearts.

When each learned the other also lacked confidence in winning the final act, two unconfident clowns somehow found confidence in each other again.

And because they were both the nation's premier clowns—supremely skilled performers—the conversation naturally turned to their craft. You talk, I listen. I perform, you watch. That night, they felt as though they'd found kindred spirits, engaging in an exchange that resonated with the very soul of what it meant to be a clown.

They regretted having met so late. They drank until not a drop remained.

Late at night, the two parted reluctantly, each carrying in their hearts a renewed resolve to defeat their rival fair and square on the final stage.

But what Lake never expected was that the very next morning, a mysterious figure infiltrated the Sunset, found him, and told him that last night's drinking session had handed him the victory outright.

The mysterious figure spoke thus:

"Is this the victory you wanted, Lake?"

Your fear, your insecurity, your twisted desire to win—it all buried a clown who could have gone much higher and much further.

Everything you've done is contemptible. Through your actions, you've shown the world:

You, Lake, truly are a clown—and you only deserve to be a clown!"

"..."

In that instant, Lake's world collapsed.

...

Chapter 1267: The Death of Masford

The mysterious figure told him Masford was dead. Right after their drinking session, he had been strangled to death inside his tent.

Someone had tailed the inebriated Masford back into the circus grounds and struck while he was defenseless. In his muddled state, Masford hadn't even cried out or struggled—he simply died, quietly, in his own bed.

When Lake heard the news, his first reaction wasn't shock—it was grief, and a devastating sense of loss.

Last night's encounter had made him believe he'd found a friend he'd met not too late but wished he'd known sooner. Even though they stood on opposing "sides," on the wavelength of clownhood, the two had resonated perfectly.

Yet who could have imagined that in just one night, that resonance had been silenced forever?

Lake refused to believe it. Terrified that someone was using the drinking session as ammunition to upset him, he insisted the mysterious figure reveal their identity before he'd consider believing a word.

The figure was silent for a long time, then quietly pulled back their hood.

When those curls tumbled free, the horrified Lake recognized the person before him.

Madame Freud!

Morning Joy's ringmaster had come to him at the break of dawn, bearing terrible news that shattered the calm surface of his heart.

"Do you still think this is a prank?"

Madame Freud's eyes brimmed with tears.

"Masford died in the night. I didn't have to come here. All I needed to do was report everything to the royal court, and the public's vitriol and abuse would have nailed the Sunset to its pillar of shame.

At this most critical juncture, who would kill Masford?

The answer is obvious!"

Lake panicked, shaking his head and backing away.

"It wasn't me! I didn't kill him—it really wasn't me!"

The hatred in Madame Freud's eyes was plain, but she didn't lash out at Lake. Fighting back her grief, she took a deep breath and said:

"Perhaps it wasn't you. But can you deny that the killer came from the Sunset?"

"I..."

Lake couldn't distance the Sunset from this. He put himself in the opposite position: if he had been the one found dead, would his friends at the Sunset—Ringmaster Fate—believe the killer wasn't from Morning Joy?

No!

Their very first thought would be Morning Joy.

Lake was terrified, desperate—because he knew that once news like this broke, whether or not the killer truly came from the Sunset, the circus's reputation and legacy would be finished.

People only believed what they wanted to believe. They couldn't care less about the truth. Even if the royal court investigated and cleared the Sunset's name, who would actually buy it?

And could such a clearing even be obtained?

Lake himself didn't believe the killer could be anyone else. He just couldn't fathom who among them would be bold enough to cross over and commit murder.

Still, as a member of the Sunset, he made one attempt to defend its honor:

"Fate once said that no one is allowed to use underhanded tricks to harass Morning Joy. The Sunset would win fair and square..."

Madame Freud's laughter was frigid:

"He told you not to use dirty tricks. But what if he used them himself?"

"!!!" Lake was stunned. "You're saying the killer is Fate? No! Absolutely impossible! I'll admit there are people in the Sunset who'd rather not see Morning Joy win, but Fate would never do something like this!"

Madame Freud said nothing more. She stared at Lake for a long time, her expression full of anguish:

"I will find the evidence. Until then, I ask you not to make this public.

For your own sake—and for the dead Masford—please, let us all keep some dignity."

With that, Madame Freud turned to leave. But Lake instantly called out to her, his expression conflicted:

"Why tell me all this? Why not go straight to the royal court?"

Madame Freud stopped in her tracks, her shoulders trembling, her voice choked with sobs:

"Why...?"

Yes—why!

Perhaps because I, too, was once part of the Sunset!

If I hadn't been stifled, if I hadn't been suppressed, if I hadn't been unable to accept watching circus artistry sink like a dying sun beneath the horizon—who would willingly leave 'home' and stand against it?

The Sunset... is no longer the Sunset that once was.

To win, they would even kill a prodigiously gifted clown...

Their eyes have long since lost any reverence or pursuit of art. All that remains is corrupt hunger for power and the complacent rot of those who rest on past glories.

But you're different."

With that, Madame Freud turned back around, her eyes reddened.

She gazed at Lake, her eyes holding both fury and gratitude.

"Honestly, I didn't come to notify you. You were my first suspect—I wanted you to be the killer!

That way, I could have seized you and made the Sunset lose its clown as well!

But I can't. Because I can see it—you didn't know. And you wouldn't do something like that.

Like Masford, you have the purest love for circus arts. You hold a genuine, heartfelt respect for the art of the clown. You're a good soul—you're nothing like them...

Someone like you doesn't belong in the Sunset. You belong in Morning Joy.

They're like rotting leaves in a swamp of mud... unworthy of someone as vibrant as you."

And then Madame Freud was gone, leaving behind a deeply shaken Lake, standing there as the storm inside him raged on and on.

But she came back soon.

That very night, she found the killer.

Lake had been cooped up in his room all day when he heard a sound outside the window. He dragged himself over and pushed it open, only to see the hooded Madame Freud standing in the moonlight, slapping a sheet of paper onto his desk.

Lake stared at the footprint on the paper in confusion, not yet understanding what it meant—when her voice reached him:

"No plan is airtight.

The killer erased every trace inside and outside the room. But what he didn't know was that Masford, in order to perfect his footwork rhythm, had replaced the carpet in his tent with a special material that could retain imprints.

He used it to constantly refine his footing and weight distribution. But who could have guessed that before he'd mastered the lightest step, that very carpet would record the killer's footprint!

The entire long path from tent to circus—not a single trace left behind. Only this carpet captured the killer's true form!

Though I despise the Sunset to the bone, I can't accuse anyone without evidence.

So I had to come to you.

Lake, for the sake of that one night you and Masford shared over drinks, please—help me. I'm begging you. Tell me whether the killer really is someone from the Sunset.

Does this boot print... belong to the Sunset?"

Madame Freud's tears streamed down unchecked.

And so did Lake's.

Because he had already recognized whose footprint it was. The killer was indeed from the Sunset!

Ringmaster Fate!

The killer really was Fate!

He knew this footprint intimately—not because of the Sunset's standard-issue boots, but because of an incident long ago when the clown had been playing a prank on a performer and accidentally spilled a plume of fire onto Fate's feet. Fate hadn't dodged in time, and the flames had scorched a divot into his boot sole.

But since the shape of that divot happened to resemble the Sunset's emblem, Fate had declared it an auspicious omen—a sign that the Sunset was ever more grounded—and decided never to replace those boots.

This piece of trivia was known to no one outside of Lake, Fate himself, and a few of the acrobats who had been there...

Confronted with the evidence laid bare before him, Lake could no longer contain the psychological pressure that had been building all day. He broke down and wept.

He couldn't understand why Fate would do such a thing.

Did he not trust the Sunset? Did he not trust the clown!?

In his eyes, was the Sunset's clown really that much worse than Morning Joy's?

Why else had he specifically targeted Masford?

And by doing this, what regard did he have for the art of the circus?

The Sunset's century of pursuit—was it truly about reaching the pinnacle of artistry, or was it only about winning?

Lake was lost. He had always thought Fate was the person who understood him best in the world. But now, Fate felt like a stranger—less familiar, even, than a Masford he'd only known for one night and shared one evening's friendship.

But Masford was dead. Dead at Fate's hands.

How ironic. How utterly absurd.

...

Chapter 1268: Doubts and Clues

The two wept across the windowsill, neither making a sound.

Madame Freud could clearly see Lake had his answer. She slumped against the window ledge, her anguished expression even more complicated than Lake's.

She growled under her breath and pounded the desk:

"Why? Why would you do this to me? Why would you do this to Masford? Why did it really have to be the Sunset!

I just love this art—what have I done wrong!

Why must destiny punish me like this!"

Madame Freud wept heart-rendingly—torn between the gratitude she owed her former home and the injustice of Masford's tragic death.

Lake watched her struggle and turmoil play out before him. After a long while, he took a deep breath, stilled his grief, and spoke to Madame Freud with solemn deliberation:

"Madame Freud... this may sound selfish, but the Sunset is my home—and it was once yours. It cannot fall... At the very least, it cannot fall because of Fate's mistake, nailed to the pillar of shame for the circus arts!"

Madame Freud was seething. She hissed:

"Then what about Masford—he died for nothing!?"

And what about Morning Joy?

What about all those performers who worked so hard, so diligently, to reach the pinnacle of their art!?

Did they deserve this!?"

Lake hung his head, his voice a low drone:

"No—they don't deserve any of this. They deserve to win.

The Sunset's failure was entirely Fate's doing. He should bear all the consequences. But the Sunset itself is innocent.

Madame Freud, I have a way to resolve everything—but only if... please, I'm begging you, give the Sunset a chance.

I can't watch the Sunset collapse. Even if it loses to Morning Joy—even if it's condemned to second place forever—it cannot fall in disgrace!"

Hearing this, Madame Freud scoffed:

"Second place? Morning Joy's clown is dead! Your ringmaster killed him with his own hands!

What right does Morning Joy have to compete for first? Are you suggesting I come out of retirement and take the stage again?

Yes, I was brilliant once—but it's also true that years away from the stage have left me rusty.

Morning Joy isn't the Sunset. We won't accept an ambiguous victory.

Even if you intend to throw the match, I won't agree.

Masford is already dead. I won't let a second clown who's devoted to the art die on that stage.

I will report everything to the royal court. Fate should pay with his life.

As for the Sunset... history will give it a verdict. Good or bad, let posterity decide. If you want someone to blame, blame yourselves for choosing a ringmaster who kills without blinking!"

With that, Madame Freud turned to leave.

But Lake caught her arm, his plea written all over his face:

"No—Morning Joy will win. And it will win fair and square.

Please, hear me out.

Masford did nothing wrong. He shouldn't be absent from this circus festival. The ones who were wrong are Fate, the Sunset, and... me!

Fate can pay with his life. I can pay with mine too. All I ask is that the Sunset not be destroyed.

Madame Freud, I have a plan that can bring Masford back to the stage—but only if you spare the Sunset."

"You can bring him back to life!?" Madame Freud's eyes lit up with desperate hope.

"I'm sorry—I can't..."

"You're toying with me!?"

"No, you've misunderstood. What I mean is... I will impersonate Masford and complete Morning Joy's final performance.

And Lake... that coward will 'vanish' because he was too afraid to compete, causing the Sunset to lose.

Would a disgraced clown be enough to quell your anger and convince you to spare the Sunset?"

"You!?" Madame Freud's eyes went wide with disbelief. "...What did you say!?"

"Please—this is the last solution I can think of.

I know Fate. If the century-old Sunset loses to Morning Joy, he, as ringmaster, will take his failure and end his own life.

We will pay the price for Masford's death...

Is that an ending you can accept?"

Shock registered on Madame Freud's face, quickly giving way to inner conflict.

Considering Morning Joy's honor, weighing the bonds of her Sunset origins—this seemed like the best possible solution. There was truly no better compromise.

Fate's mistake should not cost the entire Sunset.

After long deliberation, Madame Freud's expression shifted through countless changes before she finally agreed—for the sake of both the Sunset and Morning Joy.

"But this way, your reputation..."

"Heh, I don't deserve a reputation. I misjudged someone, so I should pay the price.

Please give me some time, Madame Freud. Let me say my goodbyes here, and then I will become Morning Joy's new clown...

The dead can't be brought back. But if we can win this—perhaps it will offer some comfort to Masford.

I... owe him."

That night, Lake and Madame Freud struck their deal. The next day, to confirm his suspicions, Lake disguised himself as another performer and casually brought up the fire-scorched boots when crossing paths with Fate.

Fate laughed heartily and said the boots were gone—probably stolen by a visitor.

In that moment, Lake's heart turned to dead ashes.

He looked at this friend who had accompanied him, encouraged him, and fought alongside him for over a decade—and the longer he looked, the less he recognized him.

That night, he packed a few clothes and left the place that had broken his heart.

Lake finished telling everything in silence. None of them had expected this turn of events.

He had come here to impersonate Masford out of disappointment in the Sunset and as penance toward Morning Joy?

The story was internally consistent—almost impossible to poke holes in.

But that depended on who was listening. In the ears of several deceivers, the story was riddled with flaws.

First, the most obvious question: how exactly had Masford died?

Fate had killed the rival circus's clown?

Was it possible? Not impossible—after all, none of the players present knew Fate personally. If even Lake thought it plausible, then Fate clearly wasn't some paragon of virtue.

But if Fate had personally killed Masford, why had his first reaction to Lake's disappearance been to contact the Golden House to search for him? Why hadn't he immediately suspected that Morning Joy had retaliated by using the same method to eliminate Lake?

Could the ringmaster have wanted to use the Golden House's involvement to expose Morning Joy's dirty tactics?

But then, how could he be so confident that the Golden House's investigation wouldn't uncover his own crime?

Consider: if a murderer discovers that his victim's side has apparently used the same method to "remove" his own clown, shouldn't he immediately realize his scheme may have been exposed and prompted retaliation—making him even more cautious?

How could he possibly bring in a third party and put himself in the crosshairs?

Moreover, even though the Lake that Fate met was Long Jing in disguise, Fate's reaction to seeing "Lake" couldn't have been faked. He cared only about where Lake had gone—he hadn't once mentioned whether Lake's disappearance might be connected to Morning Joy. That was completely unlike how a killer would react.

Even if he were deliberately avoiding the topic to deflect suspicion, there should have at least been some probing. Yet he'd done nothing. It defied all logic.

With that in mind, Cheng Shi frowned slightly and asked:

"Where is Masford's body?"

Lake shook his head: "I don't know... Madame Freud must have buried him secretly. News of his death can't get out."

"You've never seen his body?"

"No... but seeing it or not—what difference does it make?"

A strange glint passed through Cheng Shi's eyes. The corner of his mouth curved: "It makes all the difference. Without seeing it with your own eyes, how can you know how Morning Joy's clown actually died?"

Lake blinked: "He was strangled by Fate."

"Oh? Really?"

Then let me ask you this: if you were the one committing the crime, after meticulously erasing every trace inside and out, would you choose to strangle Masford with a rope that's covered in evidence?

The victim was already dead-drunk and unconscious. Since there was no resistance at all, why not pick a more discreet method?

Don't tell me that Fate—who has connections to Blacks—can't even procure a single bottle of colorless, odorless poison."

"I..." Lake was stunned.

"And another thing—what exactly was Masford strangled with?

I said 'rope,' but what was the actual murder weapon? Do you know?"

"I..." Lake wasn't stupid. From Cheng Shi's tone, something occurred to him, and his face drained white:
"...I don't know. Madame Freud didn't say."

Hearing this, Zhang Jizu narrowed his eyes and said coldly:

"In other words, everything you know about the murder came entirely from Madame Freud's account. You never saw the crime scene, never saw the so-called murder weapon, didn't even see the body—and simply believed her word for it?"

"..."

Those words shattered Lake's defenses completely. He wanted desperately to say that Madame Freud's tears had been genuine—that couldn't have been faked, could it?

But he also knew that proved nothing. It hadn't seemed suspicious at the time, but in hindsight, questions were everywhere.

And yet, Lake couldn't bring himself to believe he'd been deceived.

Even if he didn't know the murder weapon, what about the footprint? The footprint was unmistakably Fate's—he'd even discarded his boots to cover his tracks.

At this point, even the Grand Marshal started sighing.

He shook his head repeatedly, sitting in his chair with a rueful laugh: "I may not kill with that much flair, but even I know assassination hinges on the word 'covert.' If Fate knew enough to discard his boots afterward, why on earth would he wear such a conspicuously identifiable pair to commit the crime in the first place?"

He could've just grabbed any random pair from Morning Joy, and he'd have been in the clear."

"..."

Indeed—the story was full of holes!

Lake—Masford—was dumbfounded. He curled up in the corner, a cascade of expressions flashing across his face—shock, fear, worry, dread—his chaotic mind unable to settle on a single thought. He only wished the last few days had been a dream, and that he could wake up now.

But for him, the nightmare had only just begun.

All three deceivers present scoffed in unison, and Zhen Xin stepped into the role of "chief villain."

She looked down at the clown, a meaningful smile curving her lips.

"If everything you know came from Madame Freud, and you never witnessed any of it firsthand—how can you be sure Masford is actually dead?"

"!!??"

Lake shuddered violently and collapsed to the ground.

He felt like his world had truly fallen apart.

...

Chapter 1269: An Invitation from "Su Yida"

While Lake was drowning in a mire of self-doubt, still wondering whether Madame Freud had deceived him, the deceivers on the scene were busy pondering where Madame Freud might have hidden Masford.

They weren't certain whether the clown was dead or alive. Him being alive was merely a conjecture—and the most troublesome one at that.

Clowns excelled at performance. If this truly was Morning Joy's scheme, then any performer in the circus—even a visitor—could potentially be Masford in disguise.

Finding him would be like looking for a needle in a haystack.

But this was no challenge for players who'd been steeped in trials for as long as they had. If they couldn't find Masford, they'd find Madame Freud instead. Regardless of whether Masford's disappearance was a long-plotted scheme, Madame Freud certainly knew everything.

And right now, Madame Freud was in the Imperial City of Kurd.

Cheng Shi glanced at Zhang Jizu. This moment in Canlival was just like that moment in Dolgod. In their unspoken understanding, he once again placed this trial-critical NPC—Lake—into the Gravekeeper's hands.

He trusted Old Zhang to keep the clown in check.

He himself would head to the Imperial City with his good big brother and Zhen Xin to find the other key figure in this trial—Madame Freud.

Ringmaster Fate was undoubtedly another crucial NPC in this chain of clues, so Cheng Shi intended to contact Long Jing—still lurking in disguise—and have him return to the western district to secure Fate.

But when he reached out, not only did he fail to summon Long Jing using their prearranged method—he instead received a summons from Long Jing, asking Cheng Shi to come to him in person.

And he emphasized: alone.

Cheng Shi's brow furrowed slightly. 'What is that acrobat up to now?'

He knew Long Jing always wanted to one-up the other deceivers in some scheme. Being called out alone like this at a time like this—could it really be payback for the earlier "beatdown"?

'Had the acrobat spent all this time setting a trap specifically for him?'

'That would be impressively petty.'

Then again, President Gong probably wasn't that petty—just a bit "dense." With so many dense people in the world, was it really his fault?

Besides, even if it were payback, the one who should be walking into the trap wasn't him but Zhen Xin!

After all, he'd only twisted the acrobat's nimble limbs—no lasting damage whatsoever. It was Zhen Xin's nets that had beaten the man bloody...

'Tsk—the magician is truly wicked.'

Thinking this, Cheng Shi casually stole a glance at Zhen Xin—only to find that Zhen Xin seemed to have already sensed someone was talking behind her back. She was looking right at him, wearing an expression that wasn't quite a smile, clearly implying something.

Cheng Shi smoothly shifted his gaze away, pretending nothing had happened and preparing to ignore Long Jing's summons and proceed with the original plan. But Zhen Xin immediately taunted:

"Maybe he's got even more important clues to share with you 'privately.'

Wouldn't it be a shame to miss out?

What if he found Masford?

Don't worry—the palace is covered. The Grand Marshal and I will bring Madame Freud back."

With that, Zhen Xin shot Hu Wei a look. Hu Wei understood, swept his gaze over the group, and left with Zhen Xin, laughing.

On the way, Hu Wei's expression turned peculiar. He held back for a while before finally asking:

"Rival?"

"?" Zhen Xin blinked, not following the Grand Marshal's meaning.

Seeing that Zhen Xin's confusion appeared genuine, Hu Wei blinked too. Then his expression turned awkward: "Sorry—I thought you and your sister and Cheng Shi hadn't yet—"

Before he could finish, Zhen Xin's face darkened. She was clearly the victim in all of this, yet everyone kept treating her as the "perpetrator"...

And the incident had been ages ago, yet people still brought it up. Clearly, anything that embarrassed Zhen Yi was immensely popular.

Zhen Xin was also "reaping what she'd sown," in a sense.

"Who's that teammate?" Hu Wei asked next.

Zhen Xin's eyes shifted. Following the trio's plan, she gave Su Yida's name and even mentioned that he was a friend of Jie Shu's.

Hu Wei hadn't heard of this particular Master of Trickery, but he knew Jie Shu. Thinking about the purity of Jie Shu's faith, he once again marveled in admiration.

"Those with iron will are rare. Those with pure faith are rarer still. Every Folly follower is like this—which goes to show that from the heights of Folly, one has already seen every vista and no longer needs the stepping stones of other faiths to climb higher."

Hu Wei's words overflowed with longing for faith fusion. Zhen Xin heard it but didn't engage.

Seeing that Zhen Xin wouldn't take the bait, Hu Wei was more direct.

"Zhen Xin—you don't want to fuse with another faith either?"

Zhen Xin gave the Grand Marshal a meaningful look, the corner of her mouth curving:

"I already have."

"???"

Hu Wei's pupils contracted. He'd never heard this before. He stared at Zhen Xin in astonishment, carefully probing for fluctuations of divine power—but detected nothing.

Just as he was about to investigate what she'd fused with, Zhen Xin posed a question that wiped the expression clean off his face.

"Grand Marshal—have you ever considered the possibility that someday the real Grand Marshal will see through you?"

"!!!"

Hu Wei's expression shifted. He stopped in his tracks.

Sensing the towering battle intent behind her, Zhen Xin turned around with a playful grin:

"Hmm?"

"What's this—Big Bro Flatbread wants to fight me?"

Hu Wei's eyelids twitched violently:

"You're not Zhen Yi. You really are Zhen Xin.

Now I see it clearly—your sister has been taking the fall for you all along.

But I am curious—when did you figure out my identity?"

Zhen Xin's eyes darted playfully. She dropped Zhen Yi's mannerisms, smiling gently: "Probably because..."

She didn't finish her sentence. Instead, she condensed a mass of turbid, yellow Chaos energy before her, spun it into bowstrings, and used a magic card balanced on her fingertips as a bow. She performed a brief, pointedly satirical melody right there for the Grand Marshal.

"!!!"

Hu Wei's pupils shrank to pinpoints: "You fused with Chaos!?"

Zhen Xin nodded, bowing as the music ended:

"Indeed. Under the performance of Lawless Magic, would you say you and I—right now—are alien-blood compatriots?"

"..."

...

After Zhen Xin and Hu Wei departed, Cheng Shi set off with Zhang Jizu to the meeting point outside the park.

Long Jing had told him to come alone, but how could he possibly leave Old Zhang out of something that smelled like a trap?

You don't get a meat shield every round. Having one and not using him was the same as not picking up free money.

So Cheng Shi buried Lake in the dirt for safekeeping, pushed Zhang Jizu out front as a shield, and headed off to spring the "trap."

Zhang Jizu, resigned, asked who this teammate was. Cheng Shi didn't hide it—he said it was an old friend named Su Yida.

Except the words "old friend" were spoken through gritted teeth, which told Zhang Jizu all he needed to know: this wasn't an ally, but an enemy.

Cheng Shi didn't elaborate on Su Yida. Instead, he asked about the other missing teammate and whether Zhang Jizu had encountered them.

Zhang Jizu thought of Poison telling him "Cheng Shi is Yu Xi" and all the rest. After a moment's consideration, he narrowed his eyes and answered honestly:

"No."

Cheng Shi wasn't surprised. In a segmented trial like this, a lone wolf who didn't show themselves couldn't be identified by anyone.

The two walked in silence to the meeting point. Rounding a hill, two figures came into view in the distance.

Cheng Shi's pupils contracted. He never in his wildest dreams expected the battered person sitting beside "Su Yida" to be... Poison!?

And from the looks of it, this Corruption Chosen One had been beaten up?

...

Chapter 1270: Reuniting with Poison

To explain everything before them, one had to rewind the clock a bit—back to the moment Poison and "Su Yida" confronted each other.

A teammate who skulked behind Cheng Shi, hiding from sight, probably wasn't a friendly. What's more, Poison had detected a faint "hostility" from the figure directed at Cheng Shi and Zhen Xin.

So the otherwise "idle" Poison had seized an opportunity to intercept this skulking enemy, intending to lighten the burden for her little priest.

But when she actually engaged the opponent, she realized this was no ordinary fighter.

Indeed—in a trial with this many Chosen Ones, the remaining teammate could never be ordinary. The problem was this one was far too formidable.

As the cream of the crop, her identity as an Another Day Assassin compensated for the villainess's weakness in head-on combat. Yet even after running so many simulations within "another day," her opponent had seen through every single one of her moves, escaping from every stranglehold and ambush with ease—and even counterattacking.

This kind of godlike timing and fluid physical responsiveness simply didn't seem possible for a "mage."

That's right—the opponent hadn't revealed his true identity. He was still clumsily pretending to be a "mage," deploying those inconsequential illusions in an apparent attempt to confuse her.

After several exchanges, Poison finally realized she wasn't facing a Time follower disguised as a mage, but a master of another faith who had fused with Time.

And given the target's physical flexibility and reaction speed, the most likely identity was—an acrobat!

An acrobat blessed by a Pointer Knight?

No wonder he was this strong.

But if a deceiver was trailing the little priest... what was his aim?

Who could possibly deceive the little priest—himself a deceiver?

Poison wasn't stupid. She immediately realized this might not be Cheng Shi's enemy at all, but one of his arrangements. So she lowered her weapons, pretended nothing had happened, and casually asked:

"The little priest's helper is impressive, as expected. Might I know your name?"

"Su Yida" was equally baffled. He knew his cover was blown—the half-baked Master of Trickery role sustained by a single Memory artifact couldn't possibly withstand Poison's assault. He'd given it everything, and while he couldn't lose, he hadn't won either.

At minimum, his disguise had failed—every trick in his arsenal was now exposed.

Long Jing of course recognized Poison, but the Poison he'd known was never this strong.

In the past, Long Jing had rarely engaged with Poison—not because he couldn't win, but because he steered clear of all things Corruption. Yet today's Poison was clearly no ordinary villainess. She, too, wielded the power of Time!

'Strange—since when did Time become so common?'

'My Time was personally guided by Lord Yu Xi, granted by the grace of Lord Shi Zhen—the most orthodox Time there is. Surely you can't top that?'

Poison was thinking along the same lines.

She had found the method of fusing with Time through Aph Ros, guided by Yu Xi. So how had this acrobat been so lucky?

The number of acrobats capable of being placed in a trial like this was extremely limited. Factoring in the wild rumors swirling about the tangled relationships among deceivers, Poison connected the dots. She raised an eyebrow: "You're President Gong?"

Long Jing coughed lightly: "Ahem—long time no see, Miss Villainess. Your progress has been remarkable."

"Likewise." Poison's eyes spun. She laughed gently. "You're following Your Lordship around like this—are you also repaying His Lordship's kindness?"

"?" Long Jing froze. "What lordship?"

"You don't know?" Poison feigned surprise, delicately covering her mouth. "Then I won't say anything."

"..."

'Is your surname Cheng or Zhen?'

Long Jing was speechless. He'd been chased down and fought for no apparent reason, and now the attacker was playing riddler. 'Do you really think President Gong is a pushover?'

He squared up, his gaze darkening: "Talk. Otherwise, we keep sparring."

Poison naturally refused. She looked toward where Cheng Shi had disappeared, thought for a moment, then looked up:

"You're working together?"

"Cut the nonsense. Either talk business or fight."

"Relax—you're so jumpy."

I've got a plan. Help me lure the little priest out here, and I'll tell you what 'lordship' he is. I'll even toss in a big Corruption secret as a bonus. Sound fair?"

"?"

Long Jing's pupils contracted. He looked at Poison: "You're serious?"

"I'm not a deceiver. And besides—could I really fool you, President Gong?"

'Ah, true enough.'

Long Jing agreed.

And so this scene had come to be.

...

The two weren't putting on a particularly convincing performance, nor were they trying to fool anyone. It was merely an excuse to summon Cheng Shi. Anyone who fell for it was an idiot; anyone present would find it awkward.

So when the black-robed "Su Yida" saw two people arrive instead of one, his tone turned odd: "Didn't I say to come alone?"

And the "captive" Poison beside him, upon seeing arrivals, first brightened—then immediately paled. Her eyes reddened as she turned her face away, choking back tears:

"Little priest, go! Leave!

Don't worry about me—he's too strong, you can't beat him. Run! Get out of here! Go!"

"Oh."

From a considerable distance away, Cheng Shi—extremely compliant—turned on his heel and walked off without a second's hesitation.

The decisiveness of it startled even Zhang Jizu. He narrowed his eyes, certain Cheng Shi would come back. To avoid wasting effort, he stayed put and lazily stood his ground.

But the scene still left both "Su Yida" and Poison completely dumbfounded.

"?"

"Su Yida's" face darkened. He gnashed his teeth and threw his voice: "This is the 'close relationship' you were talking about?"

"..."

Poison was momentarily stunned—then she dropped face-first onto the ground and started laughing.

"As expected of the little priest.

See? I told him to go and he went. If that's not a close relationship, what is?"

"!!!"

"Su Yida" was livid. "Poison! We're running a con here, not putting on a clown show to make him laugh! Get him back!"

Poison's eyes rippled with amusement, her laughter unstoppable: "Alright, alright—I'll get him back. But could you please stop talking to me with your butt?"

"???"

"Su Yida" whipped his head around, grinding every word through his teeth: "This is ventriloquism. Ventri. Lo. Quism!!!"

"Well, I don't want to talk to your stomach either." Poison freed herself from her bindings without even pretending anymore, stood up, waved a greeting to Zhang Jizu in the distance, then called out toward the hill Cheng Shi had ducked behind:

"Little priest, I know you haven't left. I have something here you'd find interesting.

Come over. Take me with you. We'll find somewhere private and have a little talk—I'll tell you whatever you want to hear."

So the person who had arranged this meeting wasn't Su Yida at all—it was Poison.

Unfortunately, in response to such a brazen invitation, the hill gave no reply. Zhang Jizu stood there on standby. "Su Yida's" face looked constipated.

Seeing Cheng Shi ignore her, Poison's eyes spun. She smiled again: "If you don't come out, I'll reveal your Yu—"

Before she could finish, Shadow Chengshi materialized behind her without warning.

As the game's top-tier assassin, Poison's perception was razor-sharp. The instant she sensed someone behind her, Dance With Desire shot toward the intruder's heart, and she simultaneously melted into shadow.

But mid-thrust, when she realized the dark figure behind her actually carried Cheng Shi's aura, she was startled. She rotated the dagger 180 degrees and drove it into her own shoulder instead, then let out an "Ah!" and swooned toward Shadow Chengshi's arms.

Shadow Chengshi, expressionless, stepped aside. Poison crumpled to the ground. Once the dust settled, he clamped a hand over her mouth and said softly:

"I've never committed any foolish act.

And you can't name one either."

Poison blinked her eyes, smile brimming, tacitly accepting Cheng Shi's statement.

But nobody present was foolish enough to believe the "Yu" she'd been about to say was "foolish act."

The farce had gone far enough. "Su Yida's" disguise was completely untenable now. Long Jing shot a disgusted glance at the two on the ground, thinking: 'Fine, you don't need to find somewhere private—I'll leave. I'm the one who'll leave, okay?'

'Chat about whatever you want. This place is unbearable.'

'Absolutely revolting.'

"Ptoo!"

"Su Yida" stalked off with his chin high, and as he passed Zhang Jizu, he tossed out:

"Just because your eyes are small doesn't mean you should lack all awareness. You coming or not?"

"?"

Zhang Jizu had watched the entire spectacle from start to finish. He couldn't help but feel this "Su Yida" bore no resemblance to the enemy Cheng Shi had described—he seemed more like a certain lively "clown" from the Joker.

He narrowed his eyes, nodded, turned around, and walked alongside "Su Yida." After a few steps, he asked with a smile:

"Su Yida?"

"Pleased to meet you. And you are?"

"Long Jing." Zhang Jizu smiled, his eyes nearly invisible slits, completely ignoring the person beside him whose steps had faltered. "You can also call me clown, because I'm exceptionally good at making people laugh."

"..."

...