

## The Gods 821

Chapter 821: If the Living Can't Get In, Send the Dead

"I don't know... I really don't know."

Ber To broke. Tears and snot streaming, he shook his head, then all at once the desperate struggling drained out of him like a deflated ball. He hung limp from Cheng Shi's grip, going still.

Only his mouth kept mumbling: "Don't kill me... I don't know... don't kill me... I really don't know."

"..."

True.

Embarrassingly true.

Cheng Shi had assumed the deputy would be useful, but it turned out that aside from his "armrest" duties, the man was genuinely useless.

'What now?'

Cheng Shi frowned, dropped Ber To at his feet, thought for a moment, then began questioning the surrounding scavengers about the current situation.

He wasn't holding out much hope. If even Well Si's armrest didn't know Well Si's secrets, what could these underlings possibly add?

His plan now was to squeeze out every scrap of intel he could and then hustle to the nearest stronghold — east or west — to find other scavenger leaders who understood the Devout Land and the Faith Theater, and pry secrets from their mouths.

What he hadn't expected was that this round of questioning actually turned up something.

A scrawny young man wrapped in layers of cloth scraps — dressed like a barrel — poked his head out from behind a heap of scrap metal near the barbed wire. Eyes anxious, voice trembling:

"I know of a way..."

"!?"

Cheng Shi's brows shot up. Zhang Jizu's eyes narrowed. Ai Si whipped around. All three fixed on the thin youth.

"Come here and talk. What's your name?"

"My name is... Pro To." The youth clearly didn't dare approach. He ducked lower and murmured, "I'll tell you, but... I have one condition."

Cheng Shi smiled. He strode behind the scrap heap, hoisted the terrified Pro To upright, and grinned at the brown-haired, blue-eyed scavenger.

"As long as you've got a way to get us in, I'll grant any condition.

Hmm, let me think — the southern stronghold just lost its owner. How about you become the new boss?

Sound good, Mister Pro To?"

Despite Cheng Shi's gentle tone, Pro To was thoroughly spooked. He sensed overwhelming threat from all three of them and almost regretted showing himself. But thinking of his long-held wish, he bit down on his fear, drew a deep breath, and spoke.

"I don't want to be anybody's boss. I only ask that you three lords grant me one request."

"Good. I like people who know what they want." Cheng Shi smiled, set the shivering Pro To on the ground, patted his shoulder, and straightened the young man's crooked collar. "But before your request — why not share the method first, so I can inspect the goods?"

Pro To was clearly a green scavenger. Between mortal fear and seamless coaxing, he never once questioned why he had to show his hand first. He blurted the answer out.

"Well Si used to say — if the living can't get in, send the dead.

He and Ye Nuoli, the eastern district scavenger boss, had a plan. They were trying to restore Tower of Logic Mechanical Engineering constructs from the waste, and use those constructs to push open the Theater doors.

I know where those mechanical constructs are hidden..."

Before he could finish, Cheng Shi and Ai Si both turned to Zhang Jizu.

'The dead?'

'We happen to have a man who's very well acquainted with the dead.'

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow with a grin. "Zhang-lao, care to put on a show for us?"

Zhang Jizu studied Pro To for a long moment before nodding. "A show requires props..."

Before he could finish either, Ai Si moved. She drove her sword straight through Ber To's chest, then tossed the liberated deputy's corpse at the Death Chosen's feet.

"There. Fresh."

"..."

Zhang Jizu's eye twitched. He was increasingly certain he was the person furthest from Death in this group.

"I can indeed create undead puppets through props, but it's extremely taxing — both in energy and time.

Cheng Shi, you have a simpler method. Your turn this time."

"?" Cheng Shi's expression stalled. He squinted at Zhang Jizu for a long suspicious moment, tempted to ask 'Are you really Mi Laozhang?' but ultimately held his tongue.

Stiffly, he nodded. He extended a hand toward the corpse and unleashed a massive bolt of lightning.

BOOM —

Blinding purple light and deafening thunder sent every scavenger in the vicinity to their knees. Pro To, closest to ground zero, went white and scrambled backward on all fours.

Under terrified gazes, a skeleton peeled free from the corpse, leapt up, and charged straight for the barbed wire.

It cleared the barrier with agility, plunging headfirst into the fog. But moments later — without warning — it collapsed in a heap of shattered bones on the ground of the Devout Land.

Cheng Shi's face turned grim. Processing the skeleton's feedback, he spoke in a low voice.

"Even a dead creature tainted by the living fails. Its consciousness wasn't fully independent, but it apparently still counted as a 'living thing.' The moment it entered, I lost contact.

It seems we have no choice but to try Well Si's mechanical construct plan. Let's hope... it works."

"Lead the way, Pro To. Take us to see your 'new assets.'"

Cheng Shi shoved the stunned Pro To forward and set off. The scavengers left behind watched the four disappear, a flicker of heat in their eyes. Not envy for Pro To's new status as boss — but burning curiosity over whether these powerful outsiders might actually push open that door.

After all, whether the motive was escaping this "garbage pit" called San Dales or satisfying the hunger for godhood, every veteran scavenger's single hope was the same: open the Theater door.

That door stood within plain sight, tantalizingly close. But the gap between here and there was a chasm — one that had swallowed countless scavenger lives over the years.

The roaming specter was the gatekeeper of godhood, mercilessly turning away every uninvited guest.

Cheng Shi had no intention of being an uninvited guest. So he figured it was time to give the traditional, old-fashioned Theater a taste of the Tower of Logic's technological shock.

With Pro To leading, the trio traversed the stronghold. The town center's scope was genuinely impressive — clearly this had once been a thriving place.

Only now, all former glory lay frozen under heaps of refuse and waste, reduced to the most conspicuous stain in this world of ice and snow.

...

Chapter 822: Say: "I Am Zhen Xin"

They hadn't walked far before arriving at a stretch of ruins. Looking at the nearly leveled rubble with zero storage space, Cheng Shi's brow rose in surprise.

"Mister Pro To, please don't tell me these mechanical constructs are in the..." He watched the scavenger's reaction. When those thin eyes widened slightly, Cheng Shi snapped his fingers.

"Underground pipes?"

"You... you know about the pipes?" Pro To flinched, suddenly afraid he'd "sold" a worthless bit of intel.

"Just learned. But relax — it won't affect our deal. Your unspoken condition still carries weight. Though I do wonder: why is there such a massive underground pipe system here?"

Given San Dales' surface footprint, even a large city shouldn't need subterranean infrastructure this sprawling. It's clearly overkill — wastefully extravagant."

The question was also one Zhang Jizu wanted answered, though the Death Chosen wasn't looking at Pro To. His peripheral vision had drifted to Ai Si.

He sensed the War Supervisor might know the answer. Sure enough, the instant she heard Cheng Shi's words, a flicker of unease crossed her face. She hefted her great sword, stepped two paces forward, and pretended to scan the area — clearly not wanting to betray her thoughts.

Pro To shook his head and whispered, "Those aren't pipes. According to Well Si, what's down there is a Tower of Logic experimental observation station."

"?"

'An observation station? Built beneath an experimental-waste dump?'

'Observing what? Garbage price fluctuations?'

Cheng Shi was stunned — but quickly realized the "observation" in question wasn't about the present. It was about... San Dales' past!

Before being abandoned, this place was likely no ordinary abyss suited for dumping trash. It had very possibly been one of the Tower of Logic's experiment grounds!

'That does sound like something the Tower of Logic would do.'

Reasonable enough, but doubts lingered. How did this timid-looking scavenger know so many of Well Si's secrets?

Back at the stronghold, Pro To's position had been clearly distant from Well Si and Ber To's "love nest." Standing that far away meant he was almost certainly not part of their inner circle.

So how had a marginalized nobody learned what the bosses' own lieutenants didn't know?

Cheng Shi's gaze sharpened. He was about to make a move — but someone was faster.

Zhang Jizu's scalpel materialized at Pro To's throat, nearly sending the scrawny scavenger toppling straight into Mi Laozhang's arms.

Zhang Jizu held him by the shoulder with one hand, blade pressed close with the other, and asked calmly:

"Who are you?"

Pro To was on the verge of tears. "I'm... just a scavenger, my lord. Don't kill me. I don't want to be boss anymore. I take back my condition."

"Is your name really Pro To?" The scalpel pressed a fraction harder, drawing a thin red line across the scavenger's goose-bumped neck.

As a hot droplet of blood traced the cold skin of his throat and soaked into his collar, Pro To was nearly struck mute. He clawed at Zhang Jizu's wrist, choking out: "Yes — I'm Pro To!"

"Tell me a lie?"

Just as Pro To was about to pass out from fright, Cheng Shi gently tapped Zhang Jizu's hand, signaling him to ease up. He pulled the limp scavenger upright.

"What lie should I tell... please don't kill me, I'll say whatever you want." The man was begging for his life with everything he had.

Cheng Shi's lips curled into a loaded smile.

"Simple. Four words:

'I am Zhen Xin.'"

Both other Players shot Cheng Shi looks of genuine admiration.

It was, in fact, the perfect method for confirming identity.

Their concern was the vanished teammate who resembled Zhen Yi. As long as they could verify that the person before them was neither Zhen Xin nor Zhen Yi, they could safely follow the scavenger's lead.

The key: Zhen Xin could borrow Zhen Yi's talent to scramble her identity, achieving the effect of "a Master of Deception who can speak lies." So if the person was truly Zhen Xin, that statement would have to register as true.

And if it came out false, it meant the speaker was neither Zhen Xin nor Zhen Yi.

The question sealed every possible escape route!

All three watched Pro To's reaction like hawks. In truth, the answer barely mattered — just the speed of cooperation would tell them whether this was one of the Zhen sisters.

Obviously not.

The instant Cheng Shi posed the question, the scavenger blurted "I am Zhen Xin" as fast as his mouth could move, terrified that a half-second delay would mean dying in this frozen wasteland.

A lie. Definitely a lie.

That effectively ruled out Zhen Xin and Zhen Yi. Ai Si exhaled softly. Zhang Jizu's squint relaxed a fraction. But Cheng Shi wasn't satisfied — because those other two impostors were just as capable of disguising themselves as NPCs.

Without running into them again, nobody could guarantee they were still behind.

So he continued: "Now say: 'I am Li Jingming.' 'I am Long Jing.' 'I am Zhang Jizu...'"

"?" Zhang Jizu twitched. Face darkening, he glared sideways at Cheng Shi. "Having fun?"

"Not really. But if any of those statements come out true... then it'd be very fun."

Cheng Shi beamed, eyes expectant on Pro To. Unfortunately, all three statements came out false.

"Alright, game over. Let's continue, Mister Pro To — how exactly does an ordinary scavenger come to know so many of Well Si's secrets?"

Pro To, realizing he'd narrowly escaped death, collapsed onto the ground. Clutching his neck, gasping, he answered:

"Once I was slacking off in the snow... basically digging a snow hole and burying myself underground. It kept me warm and hidden from everyone.

That time, I accidentally overheard two people approaching. The voice was unmistakable — one was Well Si. The other I'd heard before too: Ye Nuoli, the eastern district scavenger boss.

They... rolled around together in the snow near me. During their 'fight,' they mentioned the plan. Well Si swore up and down to Ye Nuoli that he had a new plan, already in its final stages, and wanted Ye Nuoli's help.

I heard every word. After that, I never dared show my face near Well Si's house again, afraid I'd give myself away with an unnatural reaction...

That's the truth. I didn't lie. They named the exact location, and I know this entire area by heart..."

"Why do you know the area so well? You don't look like a veteran scavenger." Zhang Jizu squinted.

"Because I... frequently slack off in different spots. Finding good hiding places is my specialty. Over time..."

"..." Cheng Shi couldn't hold it in. He laughed out loud. "See? Laziness is the number-one driver of productivity."

Well done. But I still have one question — this Well Si... was he always so keen on charging head-on into men?"

The pun sailed clean over Pro To's head. He thought hard, wondering when the hesitant Well Si had ever charged head-on into anything.

Watching the scavenger's befuddlement, all three shook their heads and grinned.

'As expected — NPCs don't appreciate homophone humor.'

"Stop spacing out, Mister Pro To. Lead us down. I want to see what treasures Well Si dug up in this junkyard."

...

At the same time, elsewhere — the southern stronghold received another visitor. Only this one slipped in under cover, alerting no one.

He saw crowds wrestling over loot in a warm building. Scavengers squaring off in shouting matches outside. Stragglers fleeing with armfuls of food. A frozen-stiff corpse lying by the building entrance.

Order here had clearly collapsed.

The visitor frowned, followed an unnoticed path straight to the barbed wire, and felt the boiling fog beyond. He paused.

"Smoke?"

Why does the dark gray rolling inside this fog look so much like... smoke?"

No sooner had he spoken than his ears twitched. Expression sharpening, he stepped aside and reached through a small gap under the wire, pulling out a naked, skeletal young man buried in the slush beneath it.

The youth was rail-thin, rigid, practically dead from hypothermia. The visitor smelled conspiracy on him. He fished out a potion and poured it down the young man's throat, dragging him back from the edge of death.

When the youth opened his eyes, his pupils dilated with shock. He scrambled backward in horror.

The visitor blinked, intrigued. "Who are you?"

The youth was terrified. Through sobs: "I already told you everything! Please don't kill me — I can leave!"

"I asked who you are."

"I'm... I'm Pro To. A scavenger."

"Pro To?" The visitor frowned. "Who buried you here?"

At that, the scavenger bolted like a startled animal. Scrawny as he was, he was surprisingly quick — but the visitor was quicker. His arm stretched like rubber, extending nearly double its length, and snatched the fleeing man back.

Seeing no escape, the scavenger surrendered to despair.

"It was you! The one who interrogated me, knocked me out, and buried me — all you! Please just let me go! I don't know anything else! I confessed everything!"

The visitor raised an unsurprised brow and pushed back his trench-coat hood, revealing — in the driving blizzard — a face that was...

Cheng Shi's.

"Interesting. The 'me' you're talking about — which me?"

...

Chapter 823: Return Underground

Pro To pointed out the passage leading underground. The Players had expected something like a hidden-base door with a mechanism — but instead it was a... "looter's tunnel" buried in the snow.

Clearly dug by hand. The tunnel's shape was bizarre, and it was extremely well-hidden. Without a guide, even if the trio had reached this area, they'd likely have spent considerable time searching.

Seeing the single-person-wide opening, Cheng Shi smiled and stepped back in sync with Zhang Jizu.

The message was obvious: they'd take the rear — no scouting for them.

Ai Si's face darkened. Somehow she'd been conscripted as point again. But her reaction wasn't too intense — she'd grown used to these two priest-teammates' rhythm. Whenever the unknown loomed, you'd never walk behind them.

Luckily, Ai Si had realistic self-awareness about her role. She'd been living by her opening declaration: know when to advance, know when to retreat.

Now was the time to advance.

So the War Supervisor raised her great sword, preparing to "renovate" the narrow passage — but Cheng Shi caught her arm, halting a very War-like impulse.

"Too obvious. The marks would give us away. I still don't know where those two mutts impersonating me are. Just go in as is. If you'd be so kind, Lady War Supervisor, to lead the way."

Before the echo died, Zhang Jizu pushed Pro To one step forward with a serious face: "Let him go first. Safer that way."

"?"

Pro To shuddered.

Cheng Shi paused, turned to Zhang Jizu with a meaningful smile.

"I'd say putting the guide in the middle is the steadiest approach. That way we prevent him from triggering traps or pulling something sneaky up front, while also cutting off his retreat. Zhang-lao, I refuse to believe you didn't think of that. So what's the real reason you want this scavenger out front?"

You're protecting the War Supervisor?

When did you two get so close?"

At this, Zhang Jizu's squint tightened. He was about to respond — but Ai Si rolled her eyes, put away her sword, and jumped into the hole without a word.

Cheng Shi shrugged — the gesture clearly saying 'See? She doesn't need it.' Then he pushed Pro To in after her.

Zhang Jizu brought up the rear. He scanned the area with narrowed eyes, swiftly erased all traces of their presence, and left behind a simple teleportation array before following them down.

The passage was long, winding through the underground before connecting to the wall of a thick underground pipe.

This was clearly not a standard route. The half-meter-thick pipe wall was riddled with corrosion and tool marks — someone had spent serious time carving through it. The four squeezed in single-file and emerged into the underground pipe network, confirming it was identical to where they'd first arrived.

No observation equipment. No experimental space. Just endless branching pipes and countless junctions.

Realizing Pro To's description didn't match, Cheng Shi's face turned dark. But before he could speak, Pro To was already baffled.

"How is this possible?! They specifically said it was here!"

"You've never been down here?" Zhang Jizu frowned.

"No — I didn't dare. If Well Si caught me, he'd exile me to the Devout Land."

"Heh — but isn't your whole dream to pass through the Devout Land and push open the Theater door?"

If everyone just loiters at the perimeter, how will any of you ever become gods?" Cheng Shi scoffed.

Pro To shook his head, face ashen. "I don't know about the others, but I don't want to become a god. I fell down here by accident. My only wish is to leave this place — to escape this fire-pit of god-chasers."

His words rang with extraordinary sincerity — even without the Master of Deception, no one would have doubted him.

But Cheng Shi sensed something behind the words. He arched a brow. "So your condition is — you want us to take you out of here? Free you from this frozen abyss?"

"Yes... is that possible, my lord?" Pro To's eyes brimmed with hope, though his body shrank.

Ai Si shook her head with a weak smile. "That wish is probably—"

"Of course it's possible." Cheng Shi cut her off, gave her a look, and turned to Pro To with a dazzling smile.

"As long as what you've told us is correct and we find traces of that experiment here, I can personally guarantee that when we leave, we'll take you with us.

But only if you haven't lied."

"I haven't! I really haven't! Let me look — it has to be here! It must be here!" The excited scavenger launched himself into a frenzied search.

Watching the harmless scavenger throw himself into it, Ai Si rolled her eyes. "You just love deceiving people, don't you, surname Cheng? Sometimes honesty could achieve the same result. Why insist on lying?"

Cheng Shi shot her a strange look.

"You know perfectly well I'm His follower. I express devotion to my Benefactor at every moment. Is that wrong?"

Besides, War Supervisor — you seem trigger-happy with that sword, but at the end of the day, the only person you've killed is Ber To. I even suspect you stabbed him not to fulfill War's will, but to put a man too ashamed to live out of his misery.

You're so kind and so restrained... Your Benefactor..."

He trailed off.

'Actually — don't even say it. War is way more "restrained" than His followers.'

"Forget it. Let's just speed up. All I want to know is what secret these pipes are hiding, and whether it can get us through the Devout Land."

The three split up to search the pipes. To mark their path, Zhang Jizu produced countless firefly lamps — magical lights the size of buttons that stuck to the pipe walls with a press, illuminating a small area. Using this method to "draw" a map, they swept the vicinity clean in short order.

Soon, they found something.

Pro To pressed a lamp too hard against one section of wall, punched straight through, and tumbled into a hidden chamber. The three Players rushed over. Seeing the darkened room — unmistakably styled like a Tower of Logic laboratory — they finally exhaled.

'At least it wasn't a dead end.'

This was clearly a secret archive room. But most of the documents had been burned for warmth. Even the bookshelves had been chopped up and tossed into the brazier as firewood. In place of the shelves stood a patchwork War Machine Pawn, crudely assembled.

But "assembled" was generous. When Cheng Shi saw that the critical joints were held together with wooden pegs, his face went pitch-black.

Good news: Pro To hadn't lied.

Bad news: Well Si had been bluffing.

His plan was nowhere near its "final stage." It was barely past the concept phase. This was just a big toy to con someone with...

And he'd actually succeeded.

'Ye Nuoli must be a real fool not to come verify this himself.'

The lead was dead again. The impenetrable fog remained a wall before them.

With nothing better to do, Cheng Shi salvaged whatever scraps of paper remained in the brazier, trying to piece something together — anything to understand what had happened here and recover some loss.

While puzzling fragments together, he asked casually: "Zhang-lao, can you fix war machines?"

Zhang Jizu hadn't spoken yet when Ai Si beat him to it with a laugh.

The War Supervisor cast a loaded glance at Cheng Shi, a hint of mockery in her eyes.

"That's rich — asking a Truth follower if he can fix war machines?"

Even if Zhang Chosen isn't part of the Mechanical Engineering Department, just based on Truth followers' innate talents, making this big toy move shouldn't be too hard.

Right, Zhang Chosen?"

"..."

'Truth?'

'What Truth?'

'Who's a Truth follower?'

Cheng Shi blinked, staring blankly at Mi Laozhang.

Zhang Jizu went rigid. His eyes squeezed into the thinnest of slits.

'This is bad. This trial — it's aimed at me.'

...

Chapter 824: The Tower of Logic's Terrifying Experiment

Ai Si's single remark combined with Cheng Shi's pointed look cornered Zhang Jizu completely.

He couldn't just shamelessly say "Oh, that 'Truth follower' line was a joke" the way Cheng Shi would. That'd erase the reputation he'd built across countless trials — all ruined by Deceit's influence.

Yes — ruined by Deceit's influence.

Mi Laozhang had always suspected that his occasional habit of telling white lies was a "contamination" from spending too much time near Cheng Shi and the Deceit path.

But his second faith was already a done deal. He couldn't show cracks in front of a 2,400-point War Supervisor. So after a moment's thought, Zhang Jizu slowly nodded.

"Not difficult. But I'll need certain materials — materials that aren't in this room."

"What do you need? I'll go look."

The instant Zhang Jizu spoke, Ai Si perceptively understood: these two peak Players had something to discuss privately. She didn't find this problematic — empathy told her that if she were matched with lower-ranked teammates, she too would prefer conferring with equals.

That was precisely why, upon recognizing this trial was above her tier, she'd kept her posture low from the start.

Searching for materials, she figured, was just the Death Chosen's excuse to send her away. Fine by her — she also wanted to explore what these vast underground pipes were hiding. So she'd helpfully asked the question.

She expected him to rattle off something vague. Instead, Zhang Jizu listed genuine mechanical-construction materials with a straight face.

"High-density bonding metal. Pseudo-tendon soft alloy. Extension-muscle controller... The last one is a multi-layered metal composite capable of holding inscribed arrays. If you absolutely can't find it, just bring plenty of thin metal sheets."

Both Cheng Shi and Ai Si were stunned.

Cheng Shi, internally: 'Wait — you actually know this stuff?!'

Ai Si just blinked, automatically filtered out everything she didn't understand, and latched onto one sentence:

"If you absolutely can't find it, bring plenty of..."

'Got it. She should take her time and come back later.'

'These two have a lot to discuss.'

She nodded tactfully, turned, and left the chamber — thoughtfully knocking out the bewildered Pro To on the way out so the scavenger wouldn't become an unwanted eavesdropper.

After Ai Si left, Cheng Shi stared at Zhang Jizu, unable to suppress a teasing grin.

"Zhang-lao, since when do you have this skill?"

Did you steal techniques from Truth's people?"

"Steal? No — I always knew." Zhang Jizu smiled serenely, totally serious.

"Oh?" Suspicion crept into Cheng Shi's gaze. "You're saying your logical thinking aligns with Truth because you studied their materials early on?"

"Not exactly. I was referring to this." Zhang Jizu pointed at the broken War Machine Pawn and explained earnestly. "Completing this is actually simple. Find the right materials, then stitch it together like stitching a corpse."

"?" Cheng Shi was dumbfounded. Tiny eyes filled with enormous confusion. "Stitch... a corpse?"

"Hold on — since when are you the Fate Weaver and I'm not?"

You think you can just sew this thing and it'll work?"

If that's all it took, what has the Mechanical Engineering Department been researching for all these years?"

You might as well tell me Truth is useless."

Cheng Shi laughed in disbelief. Today's Mi Laozhang was definitely different from the usual model.

Zhang Jizu smiled, shaking his head.

"Truth is certainly useful. But... Death is equally useful.

What's the difference between a corpse and a lifeless war machine?

The shells differ, sure. The only real distinction is that flesh once housed a soul, while machinery only ever received commands.

But as long as something was once a 'vessel,' it qualifies as a dead husk.

I've told you — I joined a small group called the Undead Salvation Society. Those people were obsessed with making corpses stand again. Some of them devised unthinkable methods to awaken bodies that couldn't be awakened — making them move puppet-like, yet not as puppets, and devoid of all consciousness.

The drawback: the awakened husk only lasts five or six minutes, and beyond basic movement, it has virtually zero combat capability.

But we don't need combat capability right now.

Five or six minutes is more than enough for a completely inert 'dead thing' to walk to the Theater and push open the door.

And once we have one of our own tools inside that Theater, 'swapping' ourselves in shouldn't be too hard. Wouldn't you agree, Cheng Shi?"

Cheng Shi mulled it over, eyes lighting up. "If conditions inside the Theater differ from the Devout Land — if there are no such rules in there — then yes, it's feasible... Impressive, Zhang-lao. What other tricks are you hiding from me?"

Zhang Jizu was about to laugh when he sensed the Fate Weaver digging a trap. He wiped the smile and pivoted, pointing at the paper fragments in Cheng Shi's hand.

"I've done my part. Time for you to do yours.

Cheng Shi, how long are you planning to keep puzzling over scraps?

Just pull out your tool. I know you have something that can restore this scene."

"..."

Under Zhang Jizu's knowing half-smile, Cheng Shi's eyelid hammered.

'Crap. Mi Laozhang's got me pegged.'

"How did you—" He started to ask, then swallowed it with a pained expression. Sighing, he extended a clenched fist — something bulky hidden in his palm.

"This is going to cost me big. Zhang-lao, if your method doesn't work, the loss comes out of your share."

He activated the tool. Everything around them began to blur and shimmer, dreamlike. Moments later, the archive room's entire history unspooled like a revolving lantern through their minds — ages of events compressed into pages, flipping one by one.

Cheng Shi and Zhang Jizu watched with bated breath. From fragmentary conversations among research staff and their study of documents, the two pieced together the horrifying Tower of Logic experiment that had taken place in San Dales.

When the vision ended, they locked eyes. Each saw shock and disbelief mirrored in the other's pupils.

"What do you mean, 'No-Faith Experiment'...?"

If the world's people had no faith, how could they possibly create a so-called 'God Without Faith'?

Mi Laozhang — use that Truth brain of yours and explain this to me. Is this even something I can comprehend?"

Zhang Jizu was equally floored. Everything in this experiment exceeded his understanding. His squinting eyes narrowed to threads as his mind raced, yet he still couldn't fathom why the Tower of Logic would conduct — no, dare to conduct — such an absurd experiment.

And the most absurd part? They'd actually succeeded?!

"So the 'path to godhood' the scavengers talk about is the result of this experiment?"

That so-called 'God Without Faith' — is it locked inside the Faith Theater?

And the Secret Peeping Ear you're searching for may be in Its hands.

Judging by the Devout Land's rules, those ears have most likely already become a recognized... 'authority' of that entity.

Cheng Shi, I must warn you: even if the Tower of Logic's descriptions are somewhat exaggerated, your opponent could be an experimental creation approaching 'Pseudo God' status. It may be something mortals cannot resist — like Zangier was. And what you seek may have already merged with It.

Of course, that's the worst case...

On the bright side, the experimental creation could have been destroyed long ago. Everything we're seeing might just be the Secret Peeping Ear's doing.

Regardless, the situation is far more complex than we imagined.

And from this moment on, we can't casually discuss deeper secrets like this. Because I can feel it — we're getting close to the truth."

...

Chapter 825: What Sharp Intuition, What... Revolting Calculation

On another front, Ai Si dragged her great sword through the underground pipes, circling as she explored. She was searching, yes — just not terribly efficiently.

Unlike Cheng Shi and Zhang Jizu, this War Supervisor had done thorough research on San Dales before coming. Thanks to a certain Truth experiment, she knew that a "faithless" experimental product had once emerged here.

Even the Tower of Logic's scholars couldn't confirm exactly what the thing did, but under her coercive questioning, the frightened scholars admitted it might be related to broadening one's faith range.

At the time, Ai Si hadn't understood what that meant. But when the faith-fusion trend began trickling down from the peak circle, she suddenly realized her chance to leapfrog the competition had arrived.

So she'd prayed her way into this trial — only to find it was far less simple than she'd imagined.

She suspected surname Cheng was here for the same thing. But if so... what was she supposed to do about the man who'd once saved her life?

Ai Si ran her hand along the wall, thinking as she searched for new chambers and so-called "repair materials" to verify her theories. As she walked, something felt off.

She'd been sticking a firefly lamp to the wall at regular intervals to prevent getting lost. But now the brightness around her seemed dimmer than before.

Her brow darkened. She drew her blade in a reverse slash, snapping: "Who?!"

No figure appeared behind her — but every firefly lamp she'd placed along her route had vanished!

"!!!"

Someone was behind her. Watching her.

The atmosphere turned eerie. But Ai Si handled it with cold composure. She didn't shout for Cheng Shi or Zhang Chosen. She didn't retreat along her path either, fearing she'd get lost in the complex pipe network. Instead she stood perfectly still, hand resting on her sword, and spoke with measured displeasure.

"If you want to talk, come out. Lurking in the shadows is no way to say hello. Wouldn't you agree..."

Her trailing tone hung long — she didn't know who was following her. But when a familiar figure rounded the corner of a nearby junction, her voice hitched, and she let out a wry laugh.

"...Zhang Chosen?"

Indeed — the person before her was Zhang Jizu.

But the Death Chosen had absolutely no reason to be here right now. The moment he appeared, Ai Si saw through his identity.

Well — she saw through the false identity. As for who they really were...

That depended on whether they dared say.

Ai Si smiled, shaking her head.

"I'll give credit where it's due — whoever you are, the performance is excellent and the thinking is clear.

Once you realized impersonating surname Cheng wouldn't achieve your goal, you decisively dropped that identity and assumed someone else's. Clever way to fish in troubled waters. But...

Dear teammate, you seem to have overlooked one thing. Every action follows logic. The fact that I'm alone here means I have a reason to be separated from the other two.

But your version of Zhang Chosen has no reason to appear in front of me.

So what do you want — cooperation or silencing witnesses?

If it's the latter, we fight first. If it's the former and you're trying to use me to break up this team — then show some sincerity, please. My dear liar-teammate?"

The Zhang Jizu at the junction didn't respond. He merely observed her with squinted eyes. Only after her mockery had fully landed did he nod with interest and say a single word:

"Interesting."

Then he slipped back into the junction and vanished.

Ai Si frowned. 'This teammate's mental game is that weak? One call-out and they clam up?'

'With that kind of nerve, how do you expect to compete with surname Cheng?'

Though every word had been barbed, if the impersonator had actually proposed cooperation, she might not have refused outright. She genuinely wanted something from this trial.

Zhang Jizu had fused with Truth. Surname Cheng had apparently fused with Fate. And she...? She'd fallen too far behind.

Back when Cheng Shi was "1,501," their combat power had been roughly comparable. How had the gap grown this wide?

The realization sharpened her hunger for power. Combined with her current physical condition, this trial was one of her few remaining chances.

She had to fight for it. As for the life-debt... she'd repay that after securing her second faith.

Sighing, Ai Si pulled some scrap metal from her storage, dunked it in the muck at the pipe's bottom, and carried the mud-caked bundle back the way she'd come.

The walk was long, but her memory was decent. Even without the firefly lamps, she retraced the correct route after a bit of effort.

'That should be enough time for those two to finish their private chat.'

'Hopefully they've actually found a way through the Devout Land.'

Half-expectant, she entered the archive room — only to find it empty. Apart from the ash-stained brazier, there was no trace of Cheng Shi, Zhang Jizu, Pro To, or the War Machine Pawn.

They'd vanished. Silently. Taking the war machine and Pro To with them.

"You...!!??"

Ai Si nearly lost it. She hoisted her great sword — then froze mid-motion, a realization crashing over her.

Brow tight, she leapt clear of the doorway. Pulling out a bright flashlight, she swept the ground inside and outside the door. Among the jumbled, overlapping muddy footprints, she studied the marks for a long time. Then she spotted it.

Three blurred sets of prints led away in the direction they'd originally come. One was undeniably Cheng Shi's. Another — smeared by dragging marks — looked like Zhang Jizu's. The third set of prints was heavier than expected — not the war machine walking under its own power, but someone carrying the machine.

That third set of footprints was painfully familiar. Ai Si, face black as night, gingerly placed her own foot over one.

A perfect match.

'Of course.'

The person who'd left with Cheng Shi and Zhang Chosen was... herself.

Someone had impersonated her, taken her place on the three-person team, fooled the other two, and led them away. And that someone was almost certainly the same "teammate" who had just come to observe her.

Their target was never her. It was the other two!

They'd come to study her — to learn how to play her!

'I've been robbed blind!'

Worse still, she hadn't noticed a thing at the time. She'd even been mocking them. And they'd turned around and thrown that mockery right back in her face.

'Fine! FINE!'

'Let's see who this so-called "teammate" really is!'

Ai Si drew a deep breath and, with utmost caution, followed the footprints.

Shortly after she left, another Ai Si appeared in the archive room.

She — or rather, he — surveyed the already-ransacked chamber and the chaotic footprints at the entrance, then sighed softly.

"This game is unplayable. Everywhere I go, the meal's already been eaten...

But I've got a few tricks of my own. Heh — Memory. Who can't scavenge memories?"

"Dragon King, oh Dragon King — are you really in this game?"

As she spoke, this Ai Si produced a sheet of paper and flicked it into the air. Like a projection, the recent past of this room replayed before her eyes. She listened to Cheng Shi and Zhang Jizu's analysis word by word, eyes glittering, deep in thought.

But toward the end, something felt wrong — because the two had actually left a message. For whoever came next.

Of course, when they'd recorded it, they may not have known who would hear it. But they'd deliberately left a little something for the next visitor.

In the projection, Cheng Shi curled his lips into a loaded grin and said to Zhang Jizu:

"Zhang-lao, you think our little discussion might be overheard later? After all, there could very well be a Memory follower in this trial."

"You're worried someone will find the memories here?"

"Worried? Me? The innocent have nothing to fear from peeping dogs. But since someone's eager to listen, why not leave the mangy mutt a message? What do you say?"

"You think that's useful? You'll only stoke their fighting spirit and make the identity game even messier..."

"Void was never about meaning.

But this? This has meaning. What if they get scared off?"

With that, Cheng Shi turned — and looked directly at the spot where Ai Si was standing.

"Wouldn't you agree... eavesdropping teammate?"

"..." Staring into those eyes that seemed to see through everything, the Ai Si standing in this room stopped breathing. Goosebumps erupted head to toe.

'This Fate Weaver even predicted exactly where I'd be standing.'

'What sharp intuition. What... revolting calculation.'

...

Chapter 826: This Is Bad — We've Been Duped!!

Cheng Shi and Zhang Jizu had indeed left first.

Their discussion hadn't gone very deep. After learning the experiment's truth, both had sunk into private contemplation. Before long, Ai Si returned. She hadn't found any materials and reported that the underground pipes contained nothing but sludge and wastewater.

But she hadn't come back entirely empty-handed. She'd brought one thing.

When Ai Si extended her fist, neither of the two steadfast types in the archive room moved to look. They adopted nearly identical defensive postures — chin up, wary — the message clear: whether it was intel or a prank, they wouldn't bite until safety was confirmed.

The perfectly synchronized caution made Ai Si feel like the only outsider on this team.

"Do you really need to be this guarded against me?"

Even if I tried something clever, could I actually fool either of you?"

She opened her hand, revealing a grimy black ball corroded with mud.

Cheng Shi blinked. "What's that?"

Next second, Ai Si smiled and slowly rotated the ball. One patch still showed its original color beneath the grime. Cheng Shi squinted at it — and one glance told him what it was.

"..."

A clown nose!

This grubby little ball was a red clown nose.

"Great — so while I'm in here cracking codes, you go out, dip a ball in sewage, and bring it back to mess with my head!"

Cheng Shi snatched the ball and lunged for Ai Si's nose. She ducked, scrambling backward.

"Hands off! Yes, it's funny — but I need to clarify: I didn't bring this. I genuinely found it in the pipes.

Look carefully — this clown nose is old."

"?"

Cheng Shi paused. Frowning, he studied the red nose, then tossed it to Mi Laozhang. Zhang Jizu examined it and nodded.

"Indeed. The fuzz is almost entirely gone, and the shell is brittle from corrosion. It's been here a while.

War Supervisor, where exactly did you find it?"

"On my exploration route. These tunnels are barren — literally nothing in them. If I hadn't bumped it with my foot, I never would have noticed.

But I'm curious — why would something like this be down here?"

"..."

Cheng Shi was curious too, but his instinct was to deflect.

"Could've blown in from outside. Maybe Well Si brought it. Or some bored scholar used it as a fidget toy — what's the big deal? War Supervisor, you went out there and came back with nothing useful. How do you even show your face?"

Of course we know the tunnels are empty. But how can you be sure there aren't other hidden rooms like this archive?

You're suspicious. Do you know something?"

Cheng Shi pressed the attack. A flash of hard-to-mask panic crossed Ai Si's eyes.

Seeing it, Cheng Shi chuckled and backed off.

"Fine — nothing found, nothing found. I suspect there's more material above ground than below. Let's head to the stronghold and have the scavengers help.

But since you're the only one with zero contributions, you — War Supervisor — you're carrying the war machine up."

Ai Si's face darkened but she couldn't argue. With a withering glare at Cheng Shi, she hoisted the machine and left.

Cheng Shi and Zhang Jizu hung back. Watching her slender frame carry a war machine twice her size as though it were nothing, Cheng Shi clicked his tongue.

"Our War Supervisor knows more about this place than we thought.

She didn't even ask what we'd discovered. Didn't even bother with a 'Silence trial restrictions' excuse. Zhang-lao, you don't think she came here for the 'Faithless God,' do you?"

Zhang Jizu had doubts of his own, but he squinted silently and shook his head — indicating he wasn't sure.

His unease, though, wasn't about Ai Si's motives. Something about this Ai Si simply felt... off. She'd been nervous, yet somehow exuded newfound confidence. Why?

On his way out, Zhang Jizu glanced back at the direction Ai Si had explored, then down at the tangled footprints by the door. His eyes narrowed a fraction.

"Zhang-lao, why are you just standing there? Keep up."

"Mm. Coming."

At Cheng Shi's urging, Zhang Jizu smiled, dragged Pro To along, and followed — but didn't breathe a word about what he'd just noticed.

The trio quickly "retraced" their steps to the surface, heading straight for the southern stronghold. But before they'd gotten halfway, all three Players' expressions turned grim.

Because there — before their eyes — the barbed-wire perimeter came into view. And the fog that had been boiling and churning earlier was now perfectly calm.

The Ghost Frenzy had subsided!

Worse: pressing against the wire and peering through the not-quite-dense fog, they spotted several fresh corpses lying just inside.

Clearly the scavengers who'd charged in earlier.

Corpses in the fog weren't surprising — scavengers who couldn't stay silent would naturally die inside. But strangely, wisps of smoke still seeped from these bodies' waists and chests, and the color of that smoke bore an eerie resemblance to the dark gray vapor that had been churning through the fog before.

Any fool could piece it together.

Three faces went simultaneously black.

'This is bad. We've been duped!'

'The Ghost Frenzy was fake!'

These scavengers had indeed charged into the Devout Land. They'd indeed died inside. But—

Zhang Jizu's squinted eyes flashed with keen light.

"Their numbers probably weren't enough to trigger a real Ghost Frenzy. Someone used smoke devices to fabricate one. And they killed Well Si — the one person in this area who understood the Frenzy's patterns best.

The plan wasn't even sophisticated. Crude, really. But it worked because they were one step ahead — exploiting the information gap with speed. A simple yet effective deception. As for the purpose..."

"Obviously — to slow us down." Ai Si's face was a study in astonishment. She clearly hadn't expected this ruse either. "Our teammate seems to be more than one step ahead."

Connecting every anomaly, Cheng Shi finally grasped that the teammate who'd gotten the head start had played them with a massive feint.

Three days of trial time — and half a day had been burned on a smoke screen!

'Fine. FINE. The only person capable of this, besides that vanished Surname-Zhen woman, is nobody.'

"Still, even with her head start, she couldn't have reached the southern stronghold much earlier than us. Well Si's secrets falling into her hands was just a twist of fate that massively slowed us down.

She's most likely already slipped inside using the gap!

And she definitely has Silence tools on her.

Zhang-lao — we're running out of time. This person..."

Cheng Shi's brow furrowed, clearly pondering what to do with Pro To, who'd led them on a detour. Pro To wasn't stupid; he read the intent. Terrified, he clapped his hands over his mouth and mumbled: "I won't say a word."

But his begging was useless. Zhang Jizu squinted, stepped forward, and drove his scalpel straight into Pro To's chest.

One quiet squelch — and the light faded from Pro To's eyes. He died in Zhang Jizu's arms.

"?"

Cheng Shi blinked, turning to Zhang Jizu. "Since when are you this decisive?"

"This isn't decisiveness — it's pragmatism. Since the Ghost Frenzy was fake, our priority is catching the lone wolf who's gotten ahead. No time to babysit NPCs.

Cheng Shi — don't forget why we're here."

Zhang Jizu pointed at the Devout Land beyond the wire.

"Before we go in, we need to consolidate every piece of intel we have. We can't afford a second misjudgment like this one. So... after you, Fate Weaver."

He gestured for Cheng Shi to take the lead.

Cheng Shi glanced at the corpse on the ground, smacked his lips, and started moving. Mi Laozhang followed close behind, steadily half a step back.

Ai Si didn't rush after them. She cast a meaningful look in the direction they'd come from, then casually swept Pro To's corpse into the snow and erased the surrounding footprints and traces. Only then did she chuckle softly and follow.

Wind swept. Snow fell. Within moments, the area returned to silence.

...

## Chapter 827: Ye Nuoli

The three Players hustled back to the stronghold, practically hugging the barbed-wire boundary.

By the time they reached the southern stronghold, the chaos had subsided. The scavengers had reverted to cowering — as if a new leader had emerged, reasserting control through brute force.

Reality was less straightforward. When the three Players entered the shack that served as the southern stronghold's seat of power, they found a hulking man — nearly a full size larger than Well Si — smashing furniture, roaring with furious grief.

"Who killed my lover?! Talk! Where did these outsiders come from — where did they go?!"

"..."

Three stunned looks were exchanged. For the first time, the word "lover" felt profoundly... abstract.

Who was this?

Could this be the eastern district's boss — Ye Nuoli?

They blinked. Not because the romance blossoming in this frozen abyss was too absurd — they'd seen wilder things. They were simply taken aback by the man's physique, struggling to imagine what Pro To's description of "rolling around together" actually looked like in practice.

As the trio zoned out, the scavenger dangling from Ye Nuoli's grip caught sight of Cheng Shi. Eyes lighting up like he'd found a lifeline, the man jabbed a finger outside and screamed:

"It's them! Them! Lord Ye Nuoli — they killed Lord Well Si!"

The scavenger knew perfectly well these three hadn't killed his boss. But weighed against his own neck, letting strangers take the blame was an excellent deal.

Ye Nuoli, of course, wasn't truly mourning Well Si. Losing a partner was sad, yes — but what truly pained him was Well Si's meticulously hidden war-machine plan!

He'd come today with freshly found metal materials for Well Si, counting on the repairs that would push open the Faith Theater's doors.

Full of anticipation, he'd arrived — only to find Well Si dead.

How could he not grieve?

But Ye Nuoli was no "love-brained" fool. He seized the opportunity, channeled his sorrow into a hostile takeover of the leaderless southern stronghold, deliberately killed several promising successors to cow the rest, and tearfully swallowed the south camp whole.

Now three Players had walked right in — handing him the perfect chance to consolidate authority.

Imagine: if he could bring Well Si's "killer" to justice, Ye Nuoli's reputation for loyalty would spread across all of San Dales. More "visionaries" would rally to his banner, and with everyone pooling efforts, completing Well Si's unfinished plan wasn't out of the question.

In Ye Nuoli's eyes, these three Players weren't outsiders — they were the golden key to seizing southern power and building a legend.

They had to die today!

The scavengers had called their combat power extraordinary, sure — but calibrated against Well Si? What kind of extraordinary was that?

All of San Dales knew: apart from the Devout Land's specter, the tower-like Ye Nuoli had no equal.

Riding that confidence, Ye Nuoli dropped the half-dead scavenger, malice on his face, and strode toward the doorway cracking his knuckles.

"You three are going to pay for my lov—"

He didn't finish. He was already on his knees before Cheng Shi.

No warning.

Silky smooth.

Ai Si hadn't even drawn. Two scalpels — one left, one right — from Cheng Shi and Zhang Jizu, had severed Ye Nuoli's leg tendons, dropping him into an involuntary kneel.

Feeling the overwhelming threat, Ye Nuoli instantly discarded the ferocity. His eyes went crystal-clear, and through gritted teeth he purred:

"I wish to sincerely apologize to you three lords for any inconvenience caused by my late lover. Should you have need, the southern stronghold's scavengers and the eastern district's Scavenger Alliance are at your complete disposal.

I assure you — we are professionals."

Then he whipped around to the surrounding scavengers, bellowing: "How dare you treat such esteemed guests this way — kneel down and apologize, all of you!"

But the scavengers weren't stupid. They'd already identified the three outsiders as the real power here. Without orders from them, nobody was listening to Ye Nuoli anymore.

Cold sweat beaded on Ye Nuoli's forehead. He never could have imagined outsiders this strong — and deeply regretted not divining his fortune before stepping out today.

Cheng Shi, however, had no time for theatrics. He appreciated the weather-vane opportunism, but right now the priority was extracting intel about the Devout Land and catching up to Surname-Zhen.

He seized Ye Nuoli by the hair and asked with a pleasant smile:

"I ask. You answer. Say too much or get it wrong, and you go keep your lover company.

First question: on your way here, did you see anyone enter the Devout Land, or notice anything happening there?"

"No. Nothing. I'm sure of it." Ye Nuoli's face was ashen; he didn't dare add a single syllable.

"The earlier Frenzy — did you see it? How does it compare to a real Ghost Frenzy?"

"The east didn't see it at all. I only noticed dense fog near the south, but in this wind the fog is hard to read at the best of times. I hurried here specifically to confirm it with Well Si... to see whether the southern Devout Land had undergone some new change."

'That reckless trick worked, but it's not Surname Zhen's usual polish.' Cheng Shi couldn't quite figure it out. Brow darkening, he pressed on.

"How do you normally explore this area? Any methods to avoid the specter's kill?"

"Stay as silent as possible. Beyond that — nothing we've found.

Oh — right, Well Si once mentioned using Tower of Logic war machines to explore the fog. That's what I came to deliver materials for. But he's..."

Ye Nuoli's face went whiter still — whether from anguish or blood loss. He looked up at Cheng Shi with eyes that distilled into two words: mercy.

Cheng Shi snorted and ignored the plea.

"Outside the instant-death zone, how could a war machine outperform a person? Are there other rules in this area?"

"No more, my lord. Even if there were, we wouldn't know. Every scavenger who's explored has died nearby. We've tried everything to push the boundary farther, but on this frozen soil and howling wind, making zero noise is simply impossible..."

For scavengers — true. But for Players? Silencing tools and talents made it trivial.

Unfortunately, this team had no Silence follower. But each of them likely carried their share of tools.

Cheng Shi glanced thoughtfully at Mi Laozhang and Ai Si, smacked his lips, and squeezed every last drop of intel from the eastern boss before Ye Nuoli passed out from blood loss.

The three returned to the barbed wire. Cheng Shi gazed at the fog — buffeted by wind yet stubbornly unyielding — and mused in a peculiar tone.

"Whose faith does the Faith Theater enshrine? Whose devotion does the Devout Land test?"

If faithlessness can be a faith, then perhaps irreverence is just another form of reverence.

Enlightenment has struck, my friends. How about you?"

"..." Zhang Jizu ignored him. Ai Si only smiled and stayed quiet.

Eyeing the remarkably composed Ai Si, Cheng Shi raised a brow.

"A Silence trial indeed — you've already stopped talking. Well then, let's get to the point. Ladies and gentlemen — who goes first?"

Without asking who carried Silence tools, his "who goes first" made it clear he didn't. Zhang Jizu squinted and shook his head too. Both turned simultaneously to look at Ai Si.

An odd move — because Ai Si was a War follower. Silence was War's polar opposite. War believers almost never kept Silence tools for fear of blasphemy.

Of course, experts with unconventional views on blasphemy and faith were the exception.

And this Ai Si appeared to be exactly such an expert.

The War Supervisor set down her great sword with a sour expression. From her storage she produced three vials and introduced them curtly.

"'Dumbstruck.' B-rank Silence specialty potion. Half a bottle enforces muteness. A full bottle eliminates all sound a living being produces. Three bottles turn a living being into a mute, rigid puppet.

Extremely effective, but the duration is abysmal — only thirty seconds. And I only have three.

So, gentlemen — if you don't have a better plan, are you ready to sprint to the Faith Theater's doors in thirty seconds?"

...

Chapter 828: Calculations

Ready. But nobody drank.

Cheng Shi and Zhang Jizu each took a bottle, exchanged a glance, and then fixed their gazes on Ai Si. The message couldn't be clearer: until the War Supervisor drank first, neither cautious man would touch a drop.

Ai Si's eyelid twitched. She raised the vial with a faintly mocking look.

"Bit paranoid, aren't we? This potion is genuine.

Sure — I'll drink first. But let me state upfront: the moment I drink, I have to start running immediately to maximize the effect. I'll reach the Theater ahead of both of you.

That said, I have zero expectations for this trial. So what I want to stress is — if you catch up and find something wrong with the Theater's 'treasure,' please do your due diligence. It won't be my handiwork."

With that, Ai Si tipped her head back and downed the vial. Blade leading, she slashed the barbed wire open and launched into a dead sprint toward the Theater.

Her explosive stride cracked the frozen ground beneath her feet — yet produced not a whisper of sound.

She was fast. In seconds, the fog swallowed her whole.

'Potion's genuine then.' Cheng Shi raised a brow and gestured for Mi Laozhang to go first. Zhang Jizu chuckled softly, poured his vial onto the ground, and shook his head.

"The potion may or may not be real. But the person is definitely fake."

Cheng Shi showed no surprise. Lips curving, he asked: "What makes you say that?"

"She was too eager. If she truly had no expectations for this trial, she could have downed the potion and tested it on the spot, then waited for us to return from the Theater. Why rush to be first inside — and top it off with a 'no-silver-buried-here' disclaimer?

I've suspected her for a while. Now I'm certain: under that War Supervisor skin is you, Cheng Shi."

"That's none of my business." Cheng Shi pursed his lips, gazing at the spot where the figure had vanished. "The one standing in front of you is me. As for which Ai Si ran in there... who cares."

"Another 'you' has gotten ahead of you. Zhen Yi might be ahead too. And you're not worried?"

"Worrying won't help. As long as Zhen Yi hasn't popped up to go 'hee~' at me, it means she hasn't gotten what she wants yet.

Besides, I don't think a Zhen Yi who's fooled everyone would slip up against one impersonator. That fake War Supervisor probably can't beat her.

Ideally, those two wear each other down, we arrive, and the fisherman profits."

Cheng Shi beckoned quickly at Zhang Jizu. "The goods — hand them over. I know you have something."

"My tools aren't as useful as yours. Cheng Shi, it's time to pull out your ace." Zhang Jizu smiled with squinted eyes, looking exactly like a sly old fox.

"?"

That set off alarm bells. Cheng Shi narrowed his eyes in imitation of Mi Laozhang's signature squint, scrutinizing the man.

"Mi Laozhang — I see what you're doing. You're probing again!

How splendid. Revolutionary bonds always fracture from the inside first. We've been attached at the hip this entire time, and you can still doubt me?

That makes me wonder whether you've been the Mi Laozhang I know from the very start!

I distinctly recall — before we linked up with the War Supervisor, all three other teammates had disappeared at some point.

So — are you really Mi Laozhang? Or are you the Dragon King? Or perhaps... Surname Zhen?"

Zhang Jizu laughed, shaking his head.

"Your suspicion comes too late. Raising it now looks more like cover for yourself.

But since you mentioned 'revolutionary bonds' — let me ask: Cheng Shi, what kind of revolutionary bonds do we actually share?"

His squint tightened further. A scalpel tip glinted between his fingers. He'd clearly reached peak suspicion of this Cheng Shi.

Yet the next words dialed it back.

"The one upon the Bone Throne, and the one within Void. Need I be more specific?"

Tch —

Trying to bait me into revealing secrets?

Let me turn it right back at you, Mi Laozhang. What kind of revolutionary bonds are ours?"

That final counter froze Zhang Jizu for a beat. And in that beat, Cheng Shi seized the opening — eyes flashing, his scalpel lashed out for Zhang Jizu's throat.

Vicious. Even Zhang Jizu couldn't dismiss a point-blank ambush like that.

But as he started to pull back — one great sword, no, two great swords came hurtling from opposite directions, slamming into the space between them.

Cheng Shi's brow rose. Zhang Jizu squinted. Both retreated — and turning, saw two Ai Sis glaring at each other across a stretch of open ground, neither giving an inch.

'Now that's interesting. Three Cheng Shis have turned into three Ai Sis.'

Zhang Jizu's eyes squeezed to their narrowest yet. After a moment's thought, disbelief lingered. "You're actually real?"

Cheng Shi, face dark, rolled his eyes.

"Obviously. Zhang-lao, has your Truth brain short-circuited?"

If those two Ai Sis hadn't shown up, your behavior today would've given me serious reason to question your motives."

"..."

Zhang Jizu's mouth twitched. Without another word, he produced two pages inscribed with Silence techniques, handed one to Cheng Shi, and addressed the two Ai Sis.

"War Supervisor — your chance has arrived.

Our teammate's worst mistake was impersonating you. I know one of you is real.

All you need to do is stall the impostor long enough to fulfill the promise you made me at the start.

Don't worry — you absolutely won't die. I give you my word."

With that, Zhang Jizu activated his page and stepped into the fog a beat ahead of Cheng Shi.

"The inscribed Silence talent is unlimited in duration. It silences every sound a living being produces. It breaks the moment you speak voluntarily. Let's go — we can't fall too far behind."

The ever-steady Zhang 'Steady' volunteering to go first was itself the sincerest apology he could offer. Cheng Shi clearly felt it. He pursed his lips, muttered a few choice words about Mi Laozhang under his breath, then used his own page and followed.

After the two vanished into the fog, Ai Si faced her doppelgänger. She dropped the stern mask and shook her head with a wry smile.

"To complete my assignment, I'll only stall you for thirty seconds.

But you should know that's no real delay. Rushing in now risks running into them.

I'm guessing you've been a step behind on purpose — avoiding direct confrontation and creating chaos, planning to be the last one standing.

Relax. I have a sense of proportion. I won't get in your way — after all, the one who ditched me by playing dress-up wasn't you.

But I would love to know which peak... liar my teammate actually is."

"Heh — you've got a little something. But not much.

Remember: strict adherence to 'proportion' can trap you in a quagmire of inaction.

A dash of desire is the seasoning of life. Especially for mortals whose time is so brief — strive to make it interesting."

As she finished, the smiling Ai Si slowly shed the disguise. Cheng Shi's face emerged before the real Ai Si's widening eyes.

A Cheng Shi in a casual blazer.

Watching Ai Si's escalating shock, Cheng Shi beamed.

"You can call me Cheng Shi. Or keep calling me 'Surname Cheng.' A name's just a label.

But if you want to stand on a higher vantage point and see a wider horizon, then perhaps you could call me...

Yu Xi.

Fool's play. Mockery and jest.

To fool and to jest — that is Yu Xi."

...

Chapter 829: My Ears Fell Here

"Yu Xi? You're...!?"

Ai Si's eyes flew wide. Cheng Shi laughed through his nose and nodded.

"Exactly what you're thinking.

Allow me to introduce myself. I am the Envoy of Deceit, a Servant God of Void who walks the mortal world. You see me here because my ears fell in this place. I've come to retrieve them."

Cheng Shi spoke as though discussing the weather. Ai Si listened with her heart in her throat.

'Surname Cheng is claiming to be an Envoy?'

'No — whether he's actually "Surname Cheng" is another question. But an Envoy... does Deceit even have one?'

'She'd never heard of such a thing.'

Ai Si frowned. A 2,400-point War Supervisor was no rookie. From the game's descent until now, she'd never once heard of a Servant God within Void.

And given the indisputable fact that whoever this person was, they were a Deceit believer of some sort, she cautiously chose to watch and wait.

But she couldn't deny: the appearance of "one of Them" was enormously tempting for a player in her bracket. Peak Players had no chance of an audience with their god; 2,400 was light-years from that privilege. An Envoy became the only conceivable bridge.

From the Descent Faction to the God Worship Society, plenty of mid-to-high-tier players were pragmatic. Knowing a divine audience was hopeless, they poured themselves into trials for one reason — to find a living god's Envoy, in hopes of earning divine recognition.

Ai Si wasn't among them. But if she could actually connect with an Envoy in this trial... she'd take it in a heartbeat.

Even if the Envoy served Deceit. Even if this deity was a better liar than Surname Cheng — someone who'd decimate her sense of direction. So what? Sometimes being deceived was a better gamble than waiting around to die.

After several silent seconds, Ai Si's cautious posture softened a fraction. She deliberated, wavered, and finally asked a question.

She knew that probing was the signal of taking the bait — that it would pull her into the other's rhythm. But if she let this chance slip, she'd walk away from this trial with nothing.

'Are you really going to try snatching that one treasure from three Cheng Shis?'

'Impossible. Absolutely impossible.'

So she bit — even if the hook was poisoned.

"You... Your Excellency and Surname Cheng's relationship is...?"

Yu Xi laughed softly, gazing casually toward the fog where the two figures had vanished.

"Cheng Shi? Hmm — he's a player with a very interesting fate. I often assume interesting personas to observe people like him up close.

And this Fate Weaver is more interesting than I expected."

"Fate Weaver?" Ai Si blinked. "Isn't he a Clown?"

?

"...Which is precisely why I find him interesting."

A flicker of undetectable shock crossed Lord Yu Xi's eyes — followed by instant comprehension. Masking the anomaly, he continued with breezy nonchalance. "I once guided him onto the path of Deceit. In hindsight, it suits him far better than Fate."

"???" Ai Si was even more confused. "You mean — by the end of month three since the game's descent, Surname Cheng had already fused Deceit and obtained his second faith?"

"!!??"

'Month three? That early?!'

Lord Yu Xi's expression froze. Behind his back, his fists clenched bone-white. An unmistakable flash of envy darted through his eyes. But he concealed it flawlessly — not a single crack.

And after that, he refused to say another word on the subject.

Watching the Envoy smile enigmatically, Ai Si suddenly felt he might actually be genuine. No player she'd ever met could replicate this "toying with the mortal realm" attitude.

Besides, the thirty-second stall window had long since passed. If this were really a player, wouldn't he be desperate to catch up with Cheng Shi and claim the Faith Theater's treasure?

What possible benefit could there be in wasting time showboating in front of her?

No — there were no such fools among peak Players. They knew exactly what they wanted.

So everything pointed to one conclusion: Lord Yu Xi already had the recovery of his ears well in hand. This so-called "performance" was simply watching these Players scramble for ears that already belonged to Him!

The realization hit like lightning.

"My lord — they're all searching for those ears... to get close to you?"

The War Supervisor had instinctively switched to formal address. Hearing "my lord," Yu Xi's smile brightened.

And reading that increasingly loaded smile, Ai Si understood.

'No wonder. No wonder this lord trailed behind without a hint of urgency. While everyone else sprinted toward the answer, He strolled at the rear.'

'Because those ears would be His regardless. He was merely observing the Players. And among them, Surname Cheng probably wasn't the only one who'd caught His eye.'

'So who else?'

Regardless, for Ai Si this was a golden opportunity. If everyone was chasing the ears to approach Yu Xi, then she was already standing right beside Him.

She hadn't even broken a sweat. Just got outplayed by a teammate — and landed a chance to meet an Envoy. Who said fortune and misfortune don't walk hand in hand?

Excitement surged through her. But she knew she had no standing to ask an Envoy for anything. Keeping her proportions, she targeted her goal and began to work toward it.

And the first step was... a pledge of loyalty.

"Lord Yu Xi... what can I do for you?"

Yu Xi turned, appraising the War Supervisor with a scrutinizing, amused gaze. After a moment, he spoke.

"What I need is an audience member who'll watch the show with me and share in the fun — not a servant who runs errands.

I have no shortage of servants. Only a shortage of amusement."

That answer shut one door. Ai Si's expression faltered; a shadow of disappointment crossed her eyes.

But swiftly, Lord Yu Xi offered the carrot.

"If you're not comfortable sitting in the audience... then go on stage.

Join this performance. Compete alongside these fascinating Players. Fight for the chance to stand in the spotlight."

Hearing this, Ai Si thought 'I knew it.' This Envoy was indeed observing Players who interested Him. But besides Cheng Shi — who else?

She hesitated before asking. She knew that once she joined the fray, her sympathies would naturally lean toward the man who'd saved her life. But she didn't want to inadvertently undermine Yu Xi's other subject of interest, so she needed to confirm first.

Lord Yu Xi glanced at the Devout Land. His tone was loaded.

"So you're cautious too. In this era, who isn't?

He's a lot like you, actually — another little schemer looking for a way to get close to me.

His name is Long Jing. You probably know him. He's the one who stole your original spot beside the Clown.

I'm growing more and more interested in this Acrobat. Hmm... the Clown's path has been too smooth; he lacks tempering. In that case...

Here's what you do: go help Long Jing. Tell him I want to raise the difficulty for the Clown.

If the two of you can retrieve my ears during this trial, I'll consider what's in your heart.

Provided, of course, that you're willing to embrace Void."

"!!!"

'Willing? Of course she was willing!'

At her bracket, what choice did she have? Seeing faith fusion dangling before her eyes, Ai Si's breath hitched. Excitement blazed.

"I will not fail your trust, my lord."

She lowered her head. A flash of guilt crossed her eyes.

'Sorry, Surname Cheng. Once I've gotten what I need, I'll make it up to you.'

'Besides — this is a test from a Servant God. He doesn't test anyone else, only you. That can only mean one thing: you truly are Deceit's darling.'

...

Chapter 830: The No-Faith Experiment

"But my lord — if I go now, will it be too late?"

"Of course not. This fog isn't as simple as it seems." Yu Xi chuckled, the words laden with implication.

'Not as simple...'

Ai Si knew perfectly well it wasn't simple. The moment she'd stumbled upon evidence that the Tower of Logic had conducted an unthinkable experiment in San Dales, she'd known nothing here would be straightforward.

It was called the "No-Faith" Experiment — designed to prove whether the world could survive without faith. In those days, on the Land of Hope, virtually every living being had a faith to call their own.

As pioneers pushing faith's boundaries, Tower of Logic scholars conceived this audacious hypothesis and put it into practice.

The first step: carve out an entirely new "world." San Dales.

So San Dales' Ice Abyss wasn't natural at all — the Tower of Logic created it through Truth's methods. They forged a "pure land" sealed off from the Land of Hope, then dumped endless waves of memory-wiped refugees into it.

And then a century-long observation began.

To survive, the refugees gradually adapted to the bitter cold, developed a unique Cold Abyss Culture, and truly put down roots. Before long, population growth stabilized.

That was when — precisely as the Cold Abyss Culture was exploding into development — the Tower intervened again. They systematically spread the belief that "Gods bring apocalypse; faith is a plague." They hammered home that the absence of faith was the sole means of preserving this last pure land. This extinguished any possibility of faith ever taking root.

The countless underground pipes? Control channels through which the scholars observed and manipulated town life!

Without authorization, no scholar could enter the town. They could only manage everything from within the control tunnels — monitoring and eliminating any explorer who attempted to leave and seek a wider world.

With authorization, they could infiltrate the town through designated access points, pose as residents to spread information, or alter memories to serve various experimental objectives.

And so, San Dales was watched and studied like fish in a bowl for a hundred years.

The Cold Abyss "natives" probably never imagined — it wasn't just their dreams; even their daily lives were lies. They were flesh in a petri dish. The only difference was that these "specimens" had individual consciousness — but were as helpless as fish on a cutting board.

The entire town was one enormous experiment ground. Every busy resident, no matter who, was a variable.

Under normal circumstances, this experiment would have concluded with "tremendous success." The Consciousness Faith Department scholars were all but certain that faith was neither the sole pillar of existence nor the cosmic destination that life inevitably pursued. Before the Erudition Presidium, they'd argued fiercely with Grand Scholars of other departments, demanding that this "blasphemous" conclusion be written into the Tower of Logic's textbooks for the ages.

But then the experiment's greatest anomaly appeared.

Nobody could have predicted that in a pure world where every living being was convinced of faithlessness, a Wild God named "No-Faith"... would be born.

Well — calling it a "Wild God" wasn't quite right. It could also be a Pseudo God. Whatever it was, this faith-aggregate resembled the various Pseudo Gods that the Tower of Logic had spent massive resources constructing — yet it was far more pure.

The entire Tower of Logic erupted.

When faithless beings believed fervently in faithlessness, that conviction birthed a "No-Faith" deity!

Nobody could say whether this absurdity was a mockery of divinity or a blasphemy against faith. But it was unarguably a repudiation of the experiment's results.

The Grand Scholars started screaming at each other again. The Erudition Presidium went so far as to invoke a God Descent, asking Truth directly: where does the road of faith truly lead?

After that, nobody knew what happened. All Ai Si had managed to learn was that the Tower of Logic gradually forgot the whole affair. The only certainty was that San Dales was abandoned, becoming the dumping ground for all of the Tower's experimental waste.

From then on, this bitter frozen land faded into oblivion.

Until... the ghost stories of San Dales slowly seeped outward from the bottom of the abyss, and Players gradually learned of this forgotten corner of the Tower of Logic's domain.

Ai Si combed through her memories, trying to identify what Yu Xi meant by "not simple."

She had indeed come for the No-Faith God. Supposedly, finding that entity could broaden one's faith range. She didn't know how, but searching for it first couldn't hurt.

Now, however, with Yu Xi's vague promise, she had a more concrete goal: help Long Jing — the teammate she'd never met — find the lord's ears, and make this "performance" spectacular.

As for what had transpired between those ears and the No-Faith deity... the answers likely lay in the Faith Theater at the town's heart.

So Ai Si moved. Accepting the tool Yu Xi bestowed, she stepped cautiously into the fog.

Watching this "only" teammate set off on the "correct" path, Yu Xi — no, Long Jing — grinned.

Yes. This Yu Xi was Long Jing in disguise. He didn't consider the impersonation blasphemous — after all, every piece of information he'd conveyed was factual, not exaggerated.

Besides, deceiving others under Yu Xi's identity could itself be an offering to Lord Yu Xi.

He'd identified every Player in this trial and guessed why several of them were here. Since they all shared the same objective... borrowing Lord Yu Xi's persona to tilt the odds in his own favor — how could that be wrong?

"Fate Weaver, Dragon King, that pest, Little Skull..."

The trial isn't over. At whose hand the deer dies remains unknown.

I hope you fight hard in there. I refuse to believe Lord Yu Xi's ears are easy to claim.

Finding the tongue cost someone a mask. Then a pair of ears... shouldn't that cost at least a pair?

Ha — I wonder whose masks will be left behind here."

With that, Long Jing downed a potion and strode into the fog.

...