

The Gods 841

Chapter 841: Faith Is Never Too Late

When the divine name of Deceit echoed through the theater, every gaze turned to the stage was filled with shock and anticipation. Even Ai Si and Cheng Shi felt a glimmer of "finally, things are getting interesting."

Only Zhang Jizu narrowed his eyes, finding everything profoundly strange. His memory told him that during Professor Gluo's failed experiment, the Tower of Logic scholars had discovered Deceit's existence — but had never learned His divine name.

So this Crown had... issues!

But Crown himself wasn't the biggest problem. The biggest problem was what lay hidden behind the curtain he'd pulled aside!

Just as every San Dales resident expected to see a true god — just as the three Players expected perhaps a mask —

The most jaw-dropping thing happened. As the red curtain swept back, a second Crown appeared before them all.

"WHOAAA—"

The audience erupted.

"A trick? A gimmick? At a time like this, this idiotic clown is still performing?"

"Why are there two Crowns? Who is he — Crown's twin?"

"That's Deceit? So what is Deceit — an optical illusion? How does that help against the cold?"

"I think I get it — if we just fool ourselves, we can pretend the cold doesn't exist?"

"?"

'Oh no — that one actually has high comprehension.'

The three Players almost laughed — but couldn't. Because the instant the curtain was drawn, they'd felt the same eerie fluctuation from behind the fabric as the ghost in the fog outside the Devout Land.

So this second Crown was the very specter that roamed the Devout Land, harvesting invaders' secrets!

But right now it was far staler than the fog version. It resembled a true puppet — mechanical and stiff, head rotating jerkily, blank-eyed as it surveyed the audience. Then its gaze slowly, very slowly, followed Crown's movements.

"This is..."

None of the three were fools. The same bold hypothesis struck all three minds at once.

Cheng Shi's eyes sharpened. "The No-Faith... God?"

Exactly. The other two had reached the same conclusion. In a place like San Dales, the only faith-adjacent aberration that could spontaneously emerge was the No-Faith God — the entity the Tower of Logic had inadvertently created.

After unveiling his double, Crown's spirits visibly rallied. He walked to the duplicate's side and began circling it — round and round.

"Friends, I truly suffered a blow. The truth I exposed was treated as a performance by my own people. That helplessness nearly suffocated me. I was terrified that my revelation would shatter San Dales' peace — and even more terrified that my people would be deceived forever.

I was lost for a time. Frightened day after day. Until I found Him — no, It — here in this theater..."

Crown's face flushed red — the glow of a dying candle's last radiance.

He took his duplicate's hand and, like introducing a new troupe member, proudly presented it to the crowd below.

"The moment I saw another me, I knew He had already cast His gaze upon me.

But the impact was immense, my friends. Like you, I've never had faith. Yet when I learned my behavior aligned with a faith, I was ecstatic — because I thought I'd found a life-saving straw.

But when the power of a true deity manifested before my eyes, I felt the ultimate terror from within.

A god... A god who brought the apocalypse!

Even though the apocalypse never existed, the fear of it was already wired into my flesh and soul.

I didn't know how to approach Him. Didn't know how to please Him. Didn't know how to worship Him. Certainly didn't know how to avoid angering Him.

So I hid. Shut myself inside this theater. Until I found a way to save San Dales, I couldn't go back onstage to play the clown who only tells funny stories.

To be honest, even now — even with you all flooding in — I still don't understand.

But I think there's no need to figure it out alone. One mind is never stronger than many pooling their wisdom, right?

Everyone — friends — San Dales' salvation may be right before us. I don't know what other beings exist beyond this world, but I know that the only one casting His gaze our way right now is Him.

This other me must be His guidance to us. So what you need to do is not attack me — but believe in Him. Not fear Him — but have faith.

And yes, this guidance — this new Crown — is still sluggish and dull. I don't know how to make It more responsive, but I believe it's all tied to faith.

It... perhaps lacks sufficient faith. Let me put it more plainly: in a world brimming with faith, It probably views San Dales' current state as... not yet worth protecting.

Do you think... I'm right?"

Silence fell. For faithless San Dales, this bordered on heresy. But Crown spoke with such ironclad conviction that many nearly believed him.

If it wasn't real, what was the clown performing? Mocking everyone in San Dales' final hour to avenge years of contempt?

No — that made no sense. If the cold continued, he would die too!

If he hadn't witnessed the truth and found a lifeline, why would he say these things?

Even if the deity's name sounded... bizarre — San Dales had no other options.

After a long silence, the same official asked, voice trembling:

"Crown... can you tell us how you discovered the observers?"

Crown nodded. He held nothing back — energized by his people finally believing — and recounted everything he'd experienced.

The official who heard it all didn't rest San Dales' future on his own judgment. He sent people to the shaft in that alley to verify whether observers truly existed below.

But even that single step was agonizing. Nobody wanted to face their fears, let alone true unknowns.

In the end, it took Crown and the official together to lead a few brave souls down the shaft.

They only intended to peek — even one glance would do. But the moment San Dales was abandoned, the shaft's far end had been sealed.

That was enough. The people who saw the freshly bricked wall weren't fools — they recognized a passage had once existed here.

In a way, better this way. San Dales avoided the discomfort of confronting terror directly, yet confirmed the clown's claims.

But in another way, worse — because the moment people saw the truth, the real San Dales ceased to exist.

Everything had been an experiment. And now this "inconclusive" experiment had been abandoned by its mysterious creators.

San Dales faced its true apocalypse. But at least it also found its true hero.

Crown — the clown who'd tried so hard to bring joy to the town — had at last, before the end, brought San Dales genuine joy.

"Crown, will it even work if we start following Him only in a crisis?" the residents asked, anxious and uncertain.

The clown who'd reclaimed his stage wasn't sure either. But he smiled — radiantly.

"Of course it'll work. Because faith is never too late."

...

Chapter 842: A Hilarious Comedy Often Ends as Tragedy

With Crown's rallying cry, San Dales' residents saw a beam of light — divine radiance that might scatter the cold.

The entire town mobilized. They spread faith. They worshipped Deceit. Everyone pinned their hopes on Deceit bringing warmth to this place forsaken by the gods. Even Crown himself believed it.

This was probably the happiest stretch of his clown career. He practiced Deceit's will with every fiber of his being, preaching the Benefactor's name to all who came to the theater. Under his leadership, when the people gathered for collective prayer, it was Crown's wooden sculpture and portrait that stood at the very front!

In this abyss that had never known faith, Crown became the person closest to the divine in everyone's eyes — Deceit's emissary descended upon San Dales. His living spokesperson.

"It really is Him."

Now Ai Si was certain: she'd found Lord Yu Xi's past — or perhaps the past Lord Yu Xi.

Cheng Shi and Zhang Jizu offered no comment on her excitement. They simply watched in silence.

Soon, faith swept the town. So did an even fiercer blizzard. Everyone's face bloomed with joyful smiles — even though their hearts held no certainty, even though their minds brimmed with dread. They had to smile, because He was the god of joy.

But soon, they couldn't smile anymore.

Because as faith consolidated town-wide, the divine gift that had stood on the Joy Theater's stage — the second Crown — grew more and more transparent.

Crown noticed first. When he saw the Benefactor's "gaze" seemingly fading away, he panicked. He locked the theater's new doors, barred all worshippers, and tried everything he could think of to reclaim the Benefactor's attention.

Every attempt failed.

Bewildered, he knelt before his other self. No tears. No wailing. Only reflection — had he done something wrong? Had his petty vanity in claiming the identity of divine emissary caused his Benefactor to look away?

He swore to the deity he would confess to everyone that he wasn't an emissary. He'd assumed the title solely to spread Deceit's name and save his homeland. He begged forgiveness and offered to accept any punishment for his "blasphemy." But no matter how he pled, confessed, or prayed —

Nothing worked.

The other Crown's form grew fainter with each passing hour. Crown truly panicked now.

But it was far from over.

Locked out for days, the San Dales residents couldn't hold their worship gatherings. Worry crept in. The sky hadn't cleared. The blizzard only worsened. They believed their recent laxity had displeased Him. So once again they broke down the doors — this beautiful new entrance the entire community had donated timber for — and "stormed" the stage.

And when they saw that the Deceit guidance behind the curtain no longer looked blank and puppet-like, but had grown more vivid and animated — thunderous cheering erupted.

Deceit had acknowledged San Dales!

How else to explain it? This was clearly the deity's response to the town's growing faith. Why else would the puppet-Crown have become so full of vitality?

They chanted Deceit's divine name, praised the Benefactor's gaze, and thanked the hero who'd brought San Dales hope. They roared Crown's name in unison —

But Crown was nowhere to be found in his own theater.

Someone suggested that perhaps their faith had earned Crown an audience with the god, and He had summoned him. It fit the narrative. Many believed it.

But all three Players' hearts sank with a thud.

Seeing this development, they already glimpsed the ending.

"The clown's in trouble." Zhang Jizu squinted, voice heavy with rue.

Cheng Shi said nothing, but his grim eyes said everything. Indeed — a hilarious comedy often ends as tragedy. Yes, the clown was in deep trouble.

The residents didn't know what that figure behind the curtain was. But the three Players did — because it was clearly not Deceit's gaze. It was the "No-Faith God" that faithless San Dales had once nurtured.

So when the town's faith shifted to Deceit... the No-Faith God lost its soil. It dissipated before their eyes.

What the townspeople now saw behind the curtain wasn't a more vivid "divine guidance." It was the real Crown himself.

He had no way to stop his other self from vanishing. But he couldn't bear to crush San Dales' hope. So he fell back on his old profession — impersonating his other self, standing behind the curtain at center stage.

He wanted to give people hope this way, buying time to figure out what had happened. But he'd overlooked one thing: people in extremis are sensitive. Their nerves are fragile.

They didn't dare go back outside to brave the storm. They'd rather huddle near the deity and beg for more protection. So they moved in — into the theater, pressed together for warmth, waiting for the divine emissary Crown to return.

All so "heartwarming." Until... Crown truly "returned."

The Crown on stage — standing too long — stumbled and collapsed. The crowd panicked, forgetting the boundary between mortal and divine. They leapt onto the stage to help the "divine guidance" — and the moment the first person touched Crown's wrist and felt real flesh —

San Dales' sky collapsed!

"You... He... You're not the Benefactor's gaze — you're... Crown?"

In truth, had this happened anywhere else — any place with established faith — devout followers who discovered something "wrong" with their deity would never have questioned it openly. They'd protect divine authority. Guard their own theological interests.

But this was San Dales. This faithless land had only adopted Deceit for a handful of days. People hadn't yet internalized their new faith as genuine personal conviction.

So the worst-case scenario unfolded. The first accusation may not have been the loudest, but it sounded the horn for a mass assault.

As more and more people realized everything Crown had built might be a fraud, the Joy Theater went mad.

They seized Crown's hair, clothes, limbs. They demanded to know why the deity's blessing hadn't arrived. Why he was standing here while "divine guidance" had vanished. Why the god's name was Deceit — of all things, a name dripping with mockery.

Every suppressed doubt and every swallowed suspicion detonated at once. The tidal wave of fear capsized the little boat again. Only this time, the boat's luck ran out.

The wave crashed. The shoals broke through the hull.

The boat was swallowed by its own confusion and the world's terror.

So the three Players saw only a spray of crimson — repainting the dark red curtain anew. The Joy Theater's master, Crown the clown, was on the very stage he'd been so proud of just days ago —

Torn apart. Literally. Limb from limb.

Three sets of eyes blew wide. Pupils contracted to pinpoints. The truth of the "fracturing" had become visible.

Cheng Shi's heart churned with five flavors.

Faith truly had nothing to do with timing. It only mattered whether it was sincere.

And the irony was — San Dales' sincerity had been aimed at the wrong place.

But there was even greater irony to come.

Because just as the bloodied curtain fell halfway from the stage's chaos — the deity truly descended.

Right there at center stage. Right atop the pool of blood where the clown had become splinters.

A pair of starlit eyes from the Void...

Slowly opened!

...

Chapter 843: The Story Stops Short — The Past Becomes the Past

You know what's the scariest thing about office culture?

Getting caught by the boss while eating up juicy gossip about the executives.

Who could have imagined that within a Memory, Deceit would actually descend!

So was this descent a replay of the past? Or a twist that existed only inside the trial?

Nobody knew. Nobody had time to think about it, either — because all three Players had a far more pressing problem than figuring out why Deceit had appeared:

The Benefactor Himself was here. Did you dare not say hello?

To a deity, past and future were meaningless. Wherever He appeared was the present. So the Players weren't facing some phantom echo of the past — this was Deceit in person.

Which created another dilemma: when you finally had an audience with your Benefactor, would you identify yourself by your true name... or the skin you were currently wearing?

Not greeting Him was suicide. Greeting Him was self-exposure. Die physically or die socially — just like the Devout Land before, the true test of devotion had arrived.

Ai Si and Zhang Jizu were sizing each other up from the corners of their eyes. Only Cheng Shi stood unmoved, staring at those starlit pupils in thought.

Silence fell.

But most of the silence came not from the three Players, but from the San Dales residents — frozen stiff on and around the stage. Even the most thick-skinned, the most furious, could feel the terrible pressure radiating from the Void. They knew exactly whose eyes those were.

But why... did He actually exist?!

San Dales' sky collapsed again.

This time it had been patched by the clown and torn back open by the crowd.

Everyone was stupefied. Fear bound them in place like rope. They didn't even dare bow to the deity before them.

What were they supposed to say?

'Praise Deceit — Your timing is impeccable, we just tore Your emissary apart?'

Ha. As if they'd dare.

They didn't dare — because they feared death. Otherwise Crown wouldn't have died.

But those stellar eyes held no malice. Stars flickered and spirals unwound as the gaze swept the room, pausing briefly on the three silent followers, before releasing a single sarcastic snort:

"Tch—

Interesting... but useless."

And then He left.

No punishment for the "blasphemers." No blessing for the dismembered follower on stage. The piercing red still stained the dark curtain — the arc of blood spatter curving like that parting sneer.

But doing nothing was probably His greatest punishment. Stripped of divine protection, their last hope shattered, the moment Deceit vanished, San Dales' residents lost their minds completely.

Truly lost them.

First their faces went paper-white, then blood-red. They glared at the first person who'd questioned the divine emissary Crown — as if killing that one person could win back the deity's gaze and earn forgiveness.

A second arc of crimson mockery splattered the curtain. Then a third. A fourth. Fifth. Sixth... On and on, without end...

Until the warm liquid saturated the fabric, and the ropes holding the curtain finally gave way beneath the weight that no longer belonged solely to cloth — dropping the brand-new drape in its entirety.

And so the absurd play of San Dales reached its finale before three pairs of stunned eyes.

Everyone was dead. The Joy Theater was carpeted in body fragments. Not a single corpse was whole — mirroring the quartered clown at center stage. All of "San Dales" had shattered to pieces.

Then time accelerated. Memory rewound. The vivid red darkened and dried. The broken limbs rotted and decomposed. Outside, the blizzard grew even wilder, carrying bizarre experimental waste of every shape and size.

The Tower of Logic was accelerating the site's decommission.

In just a few breaths, San Dales' past became past once more.

The story seemed over. But don't forget — it was San Dales' story that had ended. The Players who'd witnessed everything now stood before a rusted stage, rotted chairs, desiccated remains, and freeze-dried bloodstains, lost in thought.

Cheng Shi especially. From the moment the Fun God descended, his eyes hadn't left Crown's remains on the stage. He suspected those fragments might be similar to the Tongue of Eating Lies — shards of something — but he'd watched and waited and nothing had stirred.

That didn't stop him. A bold idea had already formed.

Suppose Yu Xi's fragments truly existed. Suppose they'd evolved from the clown's dismemberment. Then if the clown were resurrected on this very stage — could that method be used to collect all the fragments...

All at once?

Was there really such a windfall to be had?

'Maybe. Maybe not!'

Cheng Shi's eyebrow twitched. His mind crackled to life.

He still remembered the Fun God's loaded parting glance. Think about it — even if the deity dismissed the San Dales mortals, why would He ignore a follower that devoted?

Honestly, however saintly Crown may have been, his every move aligned perfectly with Deceit's will. Every performance struck the very essence of falsehood. He spread the divine name through absurdity and expanded belief through deception. A follower far more "devout" than Cheng Shi himself — no reason the god would simply discard him.

Unless...

He never intended to discard Crown. He'd long since left the chance to save the clown for... someone who was prepared.

'So that's where it all led. A clown saves another clown — just like the scene onstage where Crown tried to save San Dales with his double.'

Future and past had woven themselves into a circle tinted with Deceit's colors.

And what about the ears — the artifact that never appeared through the entire story? Could they be the reward for saving Crown?

With that thought, Cheng Shi moved.

He couldn't explain his reasoning aloud — that might trigger the Silence trial's settlement mechanism. So he launched himself at the stage with everything he had.

The other two weren't fools. All top-tier liars, they'd each arrived at their own conclusions. Three figures hit the stage simultaneously, each seizing something different.

When the three Players stood in a triangle standoff once more — each studying what the others held — they all fell into deep thought.

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Chapter 844: A Miracle

Ai Si had seized a left ear. Zhang Jizu held a right ear. And Cheng Shi... was holding the clown's mangled head.

When Ai Si and Zhang Jizu saw the head in Cheng Shi's hands, one pair of eyes blew wide while the other narrowed to thread — both pupils contracting in sudden understanding.

"As expected of you, Cheng Shi.

While we went for the ears, you went for the whole package."

Zhang Jizu shook his head with a wry smile, apparently having deduced Cheng Shi's thinking. He looked at the dried-out ear in his hand, then suddenly tossed it to Cheng Shi.

"Interesting. I'm suddenly curious myself.

If we truly 'reassemble' Crown here — or even resurrect him — will we witness His birth... or their reunion?

This is too interesting. It'll be one spectacular Memory.

Go on. Do it. We'll wait and see."

Hearing this not-even-trying-to-pretend speech, Ai Si's eye twitched. Her conflicted gaze fell on Zhang Jizu — or rather, on Dragon King.

By now, everyone's identities were essentially open cards.

Long Jing wasn't like a certain traveler whose faith was called Deceit but was really Memory — someone who profited as long as he collected enough memories.

He was a pure Deceit follower. He'd come solely to find the ears Lord Yu Xi needed and offer them.

And now he already had a lead on one ear. If he handed it over now for some unknown outcome — one led by Cheng Shi —

Then everything he'd told the real Ai Si outside the Devout Land about "tempering Cheng Shi" would be a joke.

'I risked my life impersonating Lord Yu Xi, conned my teammates to boost my own odds — only to end up donating an ear to Cheng Shi's glorification?'

'What have I been doing this entire time?'

'Who's been played in this trial?'

'And where did the real Ai Si go?'

'Does she have the Master of Deception too?'

'We had such a nice talk outside about giving Cheng Shi a hard time, and then she vanishes the minute we're inside...'

'Little Skull and that pest too — where'd they all go?'

Long Jing's mind was a mess. The more he thought, the less he could keep his composure. And Dragon King's words did make some sense.

Though at this point, even if they hadn't made sense, Cheng Shi and Dragon King clearly intended to make them make sense — their looks had already turned predatory.

But Long Jing didn't want conflict with them. Because he, too, wanted to witness Lord Yu Xi's "rebirth." Even if it was just a fantasy — what if the lord actually appeared and rewarded contributions?

He'd at least contributed one ear, right?

So, after an agonizing internal battle, Long Jing sighed, decided to buy a share in this grand project of resurrecting Crown, and — dark-faced — tossed his ear to Cheng Shi.

"Don't disappoint Lord Yu Xi, Cheng Shi. You owe it to His guidance."

"..."

Cheng Shi gave Long Jing a strange look. The Acrobat had a real gift for playing the wronged partner — where was all that vinegar coming from?

"What are you waiting for? Start. I want to know if I'll have the honor of witnessing a miracle — a miracle belonging to... Lord Yu Xi."

Long Jing began picking up Crown's pieces from the floor. Li Jingming smiled and joined in. So did Cheng Shi.

Three shrewd "liars" had been eyeing these fragments from the start. Not a single piece was missed. Before long, countless shards of remains were reassembled into a rough human form atop the stage.

"Cheng Shi — time to show us that Fate Weaver power. Oh, wait — I almost forgot. It should be a clown's power, right?"

Long Jing's tone dripped sarcasm. He even snuck a glance at Dragon King — and when he saw zero surprise at Cheng Shi's Deceit faith, his eye twitched violently again.

'I was the only one who didn't know...'

'Everyone probably figured out that Cheng Shi was Fused. Everyone except me — and I had to extract it from a 2400-rated priest's mouth. Is that even fair?'

'How many clowns are there on this stage?'

Long Jing was practically gnashing his teeth. But Cheng Shi ignored all of it, focused on whether he could actually bring back this pile of remains.

Li Jingming noticed Cheng Shi's hesitation. Maintaining his squinting disguise, he pressed with suspicion:

"I don't know where the real Zhang Jizu went, and I don't know where Zhen Yi is. But you don't seem to be either of them — and you definitely aren't that naive War Supervisor. So what are you waiting for, Cheng Shi?"

You're not expecting me to hand over my revival item, are you?"

Li Jingming's face twitched in a reflexive spasm. "Fine — I'll admit I had competitive intentions. I wanted to take the Secret Peeping Ear from right under your nose as a..."

He stopped mid-sentence, side-eying the overly curious Long Jing, and smiled as he closed his mouth.

Cheng Shi glanced at Dragon King, then at Long Jing, maintaining Silence throughout. At this critical juncture, he wouldn't allow himself a single mistake.

And so — the clown's moment had finally arrived. No more deflection. He extended one ring-bearing hand toward the body at his feet, lightly clenched, and a dense torrent of healing light cascaded downward.

That power, surging with vitality, made the countless dead fragments sprout anew. Flesh-buds writhed and wove together, slowly re-forming the full body —

But only forming it.

No matter how strong the recovery, it couldn't seem to awaken this dead clown.

Seeing this, Cheng Shi's brow furrowed tight. The other two looked equally grave. This meant their gamble was wrong — the Secret Peeping Ear might not be a reward for Crown's resurrection. It was likely still hidden somewhere in this theater they'd never properly explored.

"It looks like—"

Long Jing hadn't finished his sentence when a sharp crack echoed from beyond the audience seats. All three jolted, looked up — and saw two figures clash and separate, then bolt simultaneously toward a side door. Something extraordinary seemed to be behind it.

The leading figure even waved at the stage, leaving behind a laughing "Hee~"

That single syllable electrified all three.

Zhen Yi!

She'd come after all!

Bold as ever — completely unconcerned about giving away her position.

But aside from narrowing pupils and darkening faces, the three on stage didn't react to her greeting.

After all, nobody here was a fool. "Lure the tiger from the mountain" was useless against liars at this level.

The only problem was: she wasn't alone. Someone else was chasing her toward that door — and that someone was none other than...

Death's Chosen, Zhang Jizu!

Zhang Jizu, eyes slitted, was in dead pursuit. Seeing Zhen Yi about to plunge through the side door, he had no choice but to shout at the stage:

"Cheng Shi — the item is behind the door! Help!"

That single line sent a spark through Cheng Shi's eyes. He vanished from the stage instantly, diving after Zhen Yi and Mi Laozhang through the side door.

With things spiraling this way, Long Jing bit his teeth and charged after them. Li Jingming frowned, glanced at the body on the floor, listened carefully for any lurking presence, confirmed no oriole waited behind the mantis, hastily covered Crown's reassembled body with other remains — and then grimly gave chase.

Zhen Yi was in the lead again.

But just as everyone poured out and the theater fell silent — a smiling figure slowly solidified on the stage, right where Cheng Shi had "vanished."

Cheng Shi hadn't left. Or rather — he'd come back.

Right now, there was room in the clown's eyes for nothing but the body at his feet. He remained certain that Crown was the true answer.

After all, no one understood a clown like another clown.

And the previous revival hadn't failed because Crown couldn't be revived. The clown casting the spell had done it on purpose.

Nobody knew how many secrets Yu Xi carried. Cheng Shi only knew that secrets were called secrets because very few people knew them.

So now he could have those secrets all to himself.

Cheng Shi's lips curved. He extended his hand once more and, smiling, resumed the interrupted resurrection.

His method proved effective. Bathed in holy light, Crown's body gradually filled with substance. Color returned. Vitality surged. Until, at last, his eyes slowly opened.

And the instant the clown on the ground opened his eyes — he shot out a hand and grabbed the wrist that was casting the healing spell above him.

Two clowns' gazes collided. The standing one raised a surprised eyebrow. The lying one grinned with dazzling brilliance.

He smirked:

"Caught you...

Zhen. Xin!"

...

Chapter 845: Cheng Shi? Or Zhen Xin?

Hearing the name "Zhen Xin," Cheng Shi scoffed, shook off Crown's hand, stepped back two paces, and offered a sarcastic round of applause.

"Clap, clap, clap."

"Impressive. Truly impressive.

I've told myself countless times not to underestimate your trickery, and yet... your wild imagination still blindsided me.

A perfect plan. No — I should say flawless.

Since you performed Crown's role in the San Dales drama, the real Crown was probably hidden by you ages ago.

Those extra hours of head start gave you all the time you needed.

A bulletproof scheme!

You risked death — literally dying in front of us — precisely for this moment. You calculated that someone wouldn't be able to give up on your corpse. That someone would come back to revive you. So you staged that chase to draw everyone irrelevant away.

I'm guessing Mi Laozhang and Ai Si cooperated because of me, right?

You impersonated me in front of them, didn't you?

You've had my memories. You understand me. You knew I'd come back. You knew that even if I suspected the body was a trap, I'd never pass up the opportunity.

But the moment I returned and appeared here, everyone else in this trial would hear — from your mouth — that I'd snuck back to take Crown's corpse. What they wouldn't know is that Crown was already swapped out long ago.

You found every truth, then pinned every crime on me.

And when I finally caught on, you mocked me with your sister's name...

Heh, you little pest. Am I right, Zhen. Yi!"

After this tirade, Cheng Shi frowned slightly. He'd instantly connected all dots from today — except one. Why would she "mock" him at this exact moment? He understood the motive — the pest was chaotic by nature, maximum annoyance at all times.

But the timing?

The timing made no sense.

The trial wasn't over. He still had a chance to turn things around. How did the Zhen girl dare lay her cards on the table right in front of him?

Wasn't she afraid he'd find the hidden Crown?

Doubt crept across Cheng Shi's face. He sank into thought.

While Cheng Shi brooded, the Crown on the ground stood up with a peculiar expression. He dusted himself off, looking deeply conflicted.

"Zhen Xin, please don't do this. You're scaring me.

Fooling other people is one thing, but don't fool yourself too.

You really think you're me? You—"

Mid-sentence, Crown froze. Something clicked. With a stunned look, he pulled out a mirror and stared at his reflection.

The mirror showed Cheng Shi's face. Messy hair, raised brows, round eyes, contracted pupils — all indicating that the person holding the mirror was Cheng Shi. A very startled Cheng Shi.

But if his disguise had already ended... then why was the "Cheng Shi" across from him still performing?

Performing for whom?

There was no audience left. And he certainly couldn't be the audience for a con artist pretending to be himself.

When everything becomes unreasonable, the most unreasonable option becomes the answer. And so Cheng Shi immediately understood one thing: Zhen Xin, like Zhen Yi, must have a disguise talent. But Zhen Xin's was even more terrifying, because—

She'd even fooled herself!

That "Zhen Xin" comment had been an accidental bullseye. This "Cheng Shi" didn't believe she could be Zhen Xin — because she'd deceived herself completely. She truly believed she was the real "Cheng Shi": with Cheng Shi's memories, his personality, his perspective, and the Zhen sisters' talents.

Crown's expression grew even more spectacular.

That's right — the Crown on stage was actually Cheng Shi. The real, genuine Cheng Shi. And to explain how this had happened, we'd need to go back to before the trial.

Cheng Shi hadn't come to San Dales for sightseeing or a side gig. He'd come for the Secret Peeping Ear.

And to harvest anything from a trial this close to Deceit's artifacts, he needed serious preparation. So before the trial, Cheng Shi called in many helpers and devised his plan well in advance.

That plan was actually borrowed from Zhen Yi: fake a Player's death at the start, use the opportunity to slip away from the team, blend into the trial's background, and approach the truth from the shadows while the "enemy" stayed in the light.

Yes — the corpse at the beginning wasn't left by the Zhen sisters. It was Cheng Shi's doing. As for where the body came from...

Remember Cheng Shi's deal with Big Cat?

He'd asked Big Cat to find him something — a body he could use to stage his setup in the next trial!

Combined with the Molten Coffin from Xie Yang, he'd effortlessly smuggled in an unrevivable corpse.

This was his insurance policy. First, he was carrying the Fool's Lips and the Tongue of Eating Lies — who knew what "guidance" or "sabotage" those two might pull when he drew close to the ears? Any strange behavior in a group might blow his cover.

He'd called in plenty of help, but nobody could guarantee that teammates who prayed simultaneously would enter the same trial. And the clown had enough self-knowledge to know not every trial would go his way.

Second, this golden-cicada-shedding-its-shell trick had fooled him once before — which proved the technique worked. "Learning from the barbarians to beat the barbarians" was a principle Cheng Shi understood well. The art of deception grew through constant refinement.

What he hadn't expected was that this trial would actually feature the "barbarian" herself. The Zhen girl had come too — and she'd impersonated him.

But all of that came later. Cheng Shi only discovered his teammates' antics after running into them.

Back to the real Cheng Shi's perspective: after planting the corpse and leaving the underground tunnel, his first move was to surface and find a group of scavengers huddling for warmth.

Infiltrating an NPC community was child's play for a con artist — easier than eating and drinking. Before long, a "new scavenger" had blended in and gathered the full picture of San Dales.

And when Cheng Shi heard that the Devout Land was shrouded in fog, he nearly burst out laughing.

'What's going on?'

'Is this trial... a freebie?'

'Why is there fog blocking outsiders, with the secret hidden right at its heart? You're basically leaking the answers. Don't you realize that for someone with the Muddied Waters talent, this is practically cheating?'

'Oh — nobody else knows?'

'Never mind then.'

'Keep cheating. Keep having fun!'

...

Chapter 846: "Cheating"

But for Cheng "Steady" Shi, even with the answer right in front of him, blatant copying was off the table. Same answer, different handwriting — in a world full of change, nothing stayed constant.

So for insurance, he didn't bet everything on the Muddied Waters talent. Instead, he built an extremely steady double-insurance plan to make better use of it.

The plan: con the local scavengers into strapping smoke devices to themselves and charging into the fog.

Once enough smoke saturated the fog, even if his talent couldn't merge with the mist, the blanket of smoke should let the clown "smuggle" himself to the other side one step ahead.

Cheng Shi was pleased with his scheme. The scavengers were easy marks — the moment he proved he could revive them, these loose acquaintances became blood brothers, swearing to bring a new dawn to a San Dales carved up by four factions.

Then...

They failed.

The assault plan rattled the South Stronghold slightly, but nearly everyone died near the Devout Land. They couldn't even smoke-blanket the area.

And it wouldn't have mattered — because Cheng Shi, who'd also approached the fog, discovered that within its range, his Muddied Waters talent simply didn't work.

He couldn't cheat his way to a perfect score.

'Of course. The fog isn't a cheat-code highway — it's a special countermeasure against clowns.'

Cheng Shi stood awkwardly outside the wire fence, completely stumped.

That was when his "eyes" told him: the teammates behind him were getting closer.

Eyes — literally.

Credit to Big Cat again. Her generosity had expanded Cheng Shi's operational space considerably.

When Cheng Shi first entered the South Stronghold, he'd already planted an "eye" along the route.

The Tree Spirit Prayer Contract!

This item — which let the user bind a plant as a tree spirit and share partial vision — Cheng Shi had slapped onto a mutant plant dangling from an icicle. When that eye showed three other "Cheng Shis" approaching, he knew time was running out.

This trial had suddenly become a "Cheng Shi Civil War."

'Hilarious. Fine — since you all love making trouble, let me make it bigger.'

Cheng Shi moved. First he scanned the stronghold inside and out, locating a scavenger whose shifty eyes and furtive movements screamed "carrying a secret." That person was Pro To.

Cheng Shi treated the pitiful scavenger well — then extracted the secrets about Well Si from his mouth.

But time was too short for Cheng Shi to personally explore Well Si's underground weapon scheme. So he used Chaos Acting to become Pro To, quietly killed Well Si, and hid inside the South Stronghold as an NPC, waiting for the Players to arrive.

The rest was straightforward. The fake Cheng Shi began questioning Pro To's identity. And when he forced "Pro To" to say, "I am Zhen Xin" —

Brother Mouth stepped in.

The Fool's Lips had ignored Cheng Shi the entire way. But at that moment, Cheng Shi struck a deal to keep the performance going.

He promised: if Brother Mouth truly didn't want the Secret Peeping Ear, Cheng Shi would withdraw from the trial entirely and let the three fake Cheng Shis have it.

But if Brother Mouth did want it, then after obtaining the ears, Cheng Shi would follow all of Brother Mouth's arrangements — including acknowledging the Fool's Lips' "supreme elder brother" status.

Whether the flattery hit Brother Mouth's sweet spot, or whether Brother Mouth simply wanted a family reunion — the Fool's Lips accepted the deal and spoke for Cheng Shi: "I am Zhen Xin."

And so, right under two Chosen Ones' noses, Cheng Shi slipped through. He joined the trio and descended into the underground tunnels.

Later, when Mi Laozhang sent Ai Si away over the Truth faith issue, Cheng Shi wasn't actually knocked unconscious by a low-level priest. He faked it, lying on the ground at zero cost, and listened to the entire No-Faith Experiment's cause and effect crystal clear.

Let's not forget — he'd once seen through the Blind One's faking unconscious trick. That made him an expert faker himself. Whether or not he'd fooled Zhang Jizu, he'd at minimum fooled the "Cheng Shi" present.

When Mi Laozhang dragged him back to the surface — when the trio discovered the smoke assault was a hoax — the most brilliant and seamless moment arrived.

Zhang Jizu finally confirmed: this Pro To was Cheng Shi. He promptly stabbed him to "death" — though during the process, Mi Laozhang not only kept Cheng Shi alive, but also slipped a Silence-inscribed page into his pocket.

All because Pro To, played by Cheng Shi, had said one helpless line in front of everyone: "I won't say a word about any of this."

Saying nothing equals silence.

Mi Laozhang caught the hint. Delivered the assist.

From there, the Death Chosen took control of the game's tempo, becoming the new "director." He led the trio back to the stronghold — buying Cheng Shi enough time to enter the Devout Land first. All his subsequent suspicions and challenges to the others were simply delays for the real Cheng Shi.

As for how Mi Laozhang identified Cheng Shi...

Simple. Cheng Shi had left plenty of breadcrumbs.

Look back at the abandoned Player corpse from the opening.

First: a priest's body — pointing suspiciously at Cheng Shi's class.

Second: a dead follower of Order. And it just so happened that on Cheng Shi's one and only visit to Mi Laozhang's graveyard, the two of them had stood before Order's grave — whether Order the Chosen One or Order the deity herself, it was still Order.

Third: the cause of death was Oblivion. The only one present who had ties to Oblivion was Oblivion's opposite number — Death's Chosen, Zhang Jizu.

Fourth: the corpse had been hollowed out by Oblivion — an empty shell. Now, if Mi Laozhang hadn't fused with Deceit, he wouldn't have thought twice. But from Deceit's perspective, a body that existed on the surface but was void inside — wasn't that the very definition of illusion and falsehood?

So upon seeing the corpse, the sharp-eyed Zhang Jizu had already formed a hypothesis about the missing member. But with so many "Cheng Shis" running around, he couldn't be certain.

Under normal trial conditions, Zhang Jizu wouldn't have looked deeper — he'd have pegged Cheng Shi as the hidden seventh person immediately.

But this trial's "Cheng Shi Situation" was absurdly complex. It took him a long time to verify that the one who'd "escaped" wasn't some Zhen sister, but Cheng Shi himself.

And Cheng Shi's request to Big Cat for that corpse had always been about leaving a trail for Mi Laozhang. He wasn't sure he'd be matched with Zhang Jizu, but the setup was the same regardless — hit: massive win; miss: no loss.

Before the trial, the only people he trusted were Zhang Jizu and Big Cat. Expecting Big Cat to decode these breadcrumbs was... wishful thinking. The hints were meant for Mi Laozhang from the start.

And Mi Laozhang hadn't let him down. At the most critical moment before entering the Devout Land — the sprint for position — the sharp-eyed Joker delivered a decisive killing blow, buying Cheng Shi a lead on everyone.

The Steady faction took the opening move.

...

Chapter 847: The Truth Within the Fog

So while Zhang Jizu was still leading the others in circles at the South Stronghold, the resurrected Cheng Shi had long since used the Silence page and infiltrated the fog.

But he hit the same problem as Mi Laozhang: inside the fog, all sense of direction vanished. He explored for ages — all the way until the others entered the fog — and still couldn't find the exit.

When he'd exhausted every method without reaching the Faith Theater, Cheng Shi had no choice but to think about where the puzzle's key lay.

And naturally, the moment the clown treated the Devout Land's fog as a riddle rather than terrain, the answer surfaced quickly — because his reasoning aligned almost perfectly with Zhang Jizu's.

The fog was clearly demanding an entry ticket from outsiders. And that ticket was almost certainly the secrets in people's hearts.

Cheng Shi was deeply conflicted.

He had far too many secrets. He had no idea which one the fog would broadcast — and none were secrets he wanted to share.

So he decided to skip the test and negotiate with Brother Mouth again.

He told the Fool's Lips: since we've struck one deal, why not another? Brother Mouth, is there any way to bypass this mandatory public-humiliation phase?

The Fool's Lips said yes — it could take Cheng Shi's place and pay the secret. But the condition was that all trial loot would go to it.

Cheng Shi blinked. What besides the Secret Peeping Ear could be valuable enough to make Brother Mouth this serious?

The clown couldn't figure it out. But he reasoned: whatever belongs to his own mouth belongs to him, right?

So he agreed without hesitation. Brother Mouth then told him: just go ahead — the secret, I'll handle.

The deal was struck so easily that Cheng Shi felt uneasy. His heart lurched — he spent a long time worrying he'd been conned again.

But no matter how many times he pressed, the Fool's Lips stayed silent. Out of options — and out of time — Cheng Shi chose to trust those cursed lips one more time.

He faced another problem, though: without the Gravekeeper, how could he safely pay the ticket?

Simple. If nobody could revive him, he'd revive himself.

Thankfully, Cheng "Steady" Shi always kept insurance. When he'd first entered the fog, he'd stumbled across the bodies of the scavengers he'd recruited. Just in case, he'd stuffed one into the Molten Coffin. Now it was time for that corpse to earn its keep.

He propped the body at a fixed position, walked backwards until the corpse was barely visible — at a distance where one healing chain's round-trip time was just enough — and stopped. He donned the Lush Horn Crown and fired a healing chain imbued with recovery energy at the distant corpse.

Simultaneously, he chuckled aloud — breaking silence — and "sacrificed" his secret to the fog.

According to Cheng Shi's script: he would drop dead, and the returning healing chain would strike his body, reviving him cleanly.

Spending one revival charge from the Lush Horn Crown was a pity — but against the prize of the Secret Peeping Ear, one life was an acceptable trade.

Per the deal, Brother Mouth would also surrender its own secret upon Cheng Shi's death, earning the fog's passage ticket. But... as mentioned, that was the scripted version.

Reality was slightly more complicated.

When he broke silence and spread his arms in surrender, the eerie presence did appear behind him — but then stuttered to a halt. It didn't kill Cheng Shi. Instead, it skipped the life-harvesting step and went straight to broadcasting the secret in his heart.

And so — Cheng Shi's deepest secret was announced to the world.

When Cheng Shi heard the broadcast, his face went utterly black. Fists clenched, he demanded: why was it still his secret that got aired?

The Fool's Lips responded indignantly: "That wasn't your secret. It was... mine."

"..."

Cheng Shi short-circuited.

Call it right? Nothing about it felt right. Call it wrong? It kind of... had a point.

Brother Mouth was sentient. Which meant Cheng Shi's experiences were Brother Mouth's experiences. So calling it "my secret" wasn't technically wrong.

But this felt an awful lot like freeloading, Brother Mouth!

"If I'd known this would happen, why would I have made the deal?" The clown was furious.

"I saved your life at the very least."

"But what I wanted to save was the secret!"

"I told you — that's my secret."

"..." Cheng Shi's face stayed dark. But when he heard "I saved your life at the very least," a barely perceptible glint flashed through his eyes.

The Fool's Lips definitely had a connection to this fog. Or rather — "fragments" like Brother Mouth were all connected to this place. They were clearly hiding something. And the ability to stop the fog's specter from harvesting a life was the strongest evidence.

Cheng Shi's curiosity about the Faith Theater's treasures intensified.

He gathered himself, stepped over the scavenger's corpse, and walked toward the now-visible Faith Theater.

Yes — the scavenger had died again. The second secret the fog broadcast wasn't a Player's secret at all, but this scavenger's.

Clearly a clever man. He'd seen through Cheng Shi's lie — but compared to living meaninglessly on the periphery, he preferred to make his life spectacular just once.

He'd managed it. Spectacular twice, even.

After clearing the fog, Cheng Shi finally arrived at the Faith Theater's entrance. The great door stood before him — seemingly a single push away.

But just as he reached for it, he stopped. His raised hand lowered.

For some reason, his heartbeat felt too fast. His thoughts too scattered. He sensed that whatever lay behind this door wasn't as simple as he'd imagined. A fear born from the desire-to-know crept through him.

So he asked Brother Mouth one more time. This time:

"Should I open this door, Brother Mouth?"

The Fool's Lips was silent for a long time. Cheng Shi didn't rush him — he waited patiently. He had a feeling Brother Mouth would respond.

Sure enough, after an age, the Fool's Lips sighed.

"Why did you come?"

"?" Cheng Shi raised a brow. He mused: "To reunite you, Brother Tongue, and the ears..."

"Clown."

"???"

'Don't just randomly insult me. I can tell the difference between a professional title and a put-down.'

Face blackening again, Cheng Shi frowned and reconsidered. "To piece together the mask that might exist. To uncover the story of what happened to you..."

"Do you believe that yourself?"

"I..." Cheng Shi stalled. His expression shifted several times. He said nothing more.

"Figure it out before you go in. They're still going in circles in the Devout Land. The clown has plenty of time."

"..."

Cheng Shi fell silent. But not for long. Soon his eyes hardened with resolve. He pushed open the door and walked straight in.

...

Chapter 848: Inside the Theater, Upon the Stage

Behind the theater doors: empty, dark, foreboding. No warm glow to catch the eye.

Only when Cheng Shi pushed the door open and let the outside light flood in could he make out the performance underway on stage — and the densely packed audience watching it.

In that instant, Cheng Shi's pupils trembled. He froze on the spot.

His face was ashen. He didn't dare move.

Because he could clearly see that every seat in the orderly auditorium was occupied — each chair holding a floating, severed ear.

The ears were raw and bloody, dripping dim, foul-smelling black ichor. The moment Cheng Shi pushed open the door, they all contracted — then slowly rotated, turning countless cochlea toward the intruder who'd interrupted the performance.

When this beyond-imagination tableau unfolded before him, Cheng Shi's scalp went numb. Goosebumps erupted head to toe.

He silently screamed at Brother Mouth — what is this!?! But it wasn't his own mouth that answered. It was... the performer on stage.

Also an ear. No different from the others in the audience — except perhaps a touch more animated than the rigid crowd below.

When it saw — no, that's too weird — when it heard Cheng Shi burst in, it smiled. It waved at him in greeting.

"You're back," it said.

Cheng Shi was terrified. He'd never imagined that after the con-artist mouth and the absurd tongue, the ears would be this horrifying.

But he responded. Of course, the one answering wasn't the brain-buzzing clown, but the clown's uncontrollable mouth.

"He wanted to come. I couldn't stop him."

Brother Mouth was clearly distancing himself from the whole affair. But the ear on stage instantly shot back:

"Having found the path forward, how could I not come show off? Rotten Ear — stuck in this theater, you were never as resourceful as me."

"..."

"..."

The tone was ninety percent Brother Mouth. The remaining ten percent matched the invisible specter roaming the fog.

So... the ear had peeked into Brother Mouth's heart and used the Fool's Lips' actual inner thoughts to respond to the Lips' spoken pretense?

Cheng Shi blinked in bewilderment. He'd been duped again.

Brother Mouth hadn't resisted meeting the ear at all. He'd been dying for the day he could return to this theater and flaunt his accomplishments.

The Lips' and the Tongue of Eating Lies' previous silence wasn't genuine reluctance — it was an act. Afraid that Cheng Shi's resolve might waver, they'd used reverse psychology to goad him all the way to San Dales!

'Fine. Just fine.'

'There will always be a seat for me, the clown, on this stage!'

Cheng Shi laughed with exasperation — but that flustered grin quickly shifted into something radiant.

Because he realized: the Secret Peeping Ear's ability was perfectly to his taste.

Wasn't this exactly what the Fun God had used against him during his audience? If he possessed the ears, wouldn't that mean he'd also gain the ability to read people's innermost secrets?

'Now that's fantastic.'

His gaze toward the ear on stage suddenly turned blazing hot. Even the sanity-corroding audience-ears below began to look... adorable.

But Cheng Shi's attention wasn't solely on the stage. He was still thinking — about Brother Mouth's so-called "path forward." What had the Lips been showing off to the ear?

This wasn't the first time he'd encountered this thread. Back at Aph Ros' gate, inside the Time prison in Dolgod — when he'd met Time before the deity became his Benefactor — Time and Brother Mouth had a similar exchange.

Time had asked: Did you find it?

Brother Mouth's answer: Yes, I found it.

Was that "found it" the same as the ear's "path forward"?

What could this path be?

'It couldn't be...'

Cheng Shi's gaze sharpened. He stopped that thought cold. Seeing Brother Mouth rendered speechless for once, Cheng Shi decided it was time to give these two old acquaintances — old familiar features, rather — a graceful exit.

He nodded elegantly toward the stage, closed the door behind him, walked to the nearest row, and plucked the ear "seated" there. With a plastic smile, he placed it on the adjacent chair.

"I'm a big guy," he said. "Buddy, scoot over — squeeze in."

Then he plopped onto the moldy, rotting audience chair and, dead-serious, became a proper theatergoer.

Every ear in the house froze. The Fool's Lips tried to say something, opening several times — but no words came.

The ear on stage clearly hadn't anticipated that the person fused with the Fool's Lips would be this... unique. But on their stage, the more unique you were, the more the spotlight favored you.

Or perhaps — this was always how it was supposed to be. A clown's mouth belonged on a clown's face.

The ear laughed. Then it bowed to the audience. "Performance concluded. Please exit in an orderly fashion. We hope to see you again."

"..."

As the words fell, so did the curtain. The ears around Cheng Shi — as if hearing the dismissal bell — snapped from their rigid stupor into frolicking life. They bounced off their seats, scattered to every corner of the theater, then gently dropped to the floor, withering and decaying.

They seemed to have fallen asleep.

And only then did Cheng Shi notice the floor near the front rows: piles of rotted remains and scattered limbs heaped in drifts.

He swallowed hard. Creeped out — and embarrassed.

'Seriously? All that effort I put into my dramatic entrance was for nothing?'

'You're messing with the clown, aren't you?'

'If the show was ending, why didn't you say so sooner?'

'What kind of show conveniently wraps up the exact second I walk in? Unless...'

'Wait!'

The so-called "show" — was it a bunch of ears gathered here, listening to the invaders' secrets broadcast through the fog?

'Huh?'

Cheng Shi blinked blankly. "Brother Mouth, what's going on?"

The Fool's Lips stayed silent. Cheng Shi sighed and turned to the ear on stage. Slightly awkward: "Ear... Bro?"

The ear laughed. It floated before the curtain, seeming to study Cheng Shi for a long time. Then it nodded — and dissolved into a wisp of white light that settled into his palm.

"?"

'That's it?'

'Handed to me on a silver platter?'

Cheng Shi was genuinely stunned. He rubbed the Secret Peeping Ear in his hand, incredulous.

"This isn't a dream, is it?"

Did I fall for Zhen Yi's trick?"

Brow tightening, he pulled out the Tongue of Eating Lies and flung it outward. The tongue materialized on a nearby seat-back, stretched lazily, and drawled:

"Home sweet home. Cozy — though the housekeeping's gone to hell. Pretty filthy."

Then it hopped around twice, flipped over, and fell contentedly asleep on the chair-back.

"..."

Now it all clicked.

He recalled Brother Mouth's reaction when he'd first heard "San Dales" from Dragon King:

"San Dales, huh... a distant memory."

Looking at it now — the mouth, the tongue, the ears... everything that composed the mask... could all of it have been "born" right here, in this very theater in San Dales?

"Did I guess right, Brother Mouth?"

He didn't say it aloud, but he knew Brother Mouth could hear his thoughts.

"Brother Mouth?"

Brother Tongue? Brother Ear?

Come on, one of you say something."

"Wrong," the Tongue of Eating Lies mumbled dismissively.

But the next second, the sleepy tongue snapped upright in alarm — because the moment its word fell, the ear in Cheng Shi's palm murmured:

"No — it's right. Right here!"

Cheng Shi's eyes blazed. The smile on his lips couldn't be contained.

'What a magnificent Secret Peeping Ear. What a magnificent San Dales!'

Perhaps... he truly was closing in on their truth.

...

Chapter 849: Return of the Past!

The Secret Peeping Ear was quite interesting. Within the Devout Land it could strip invaders' secrets by sound alone, but inside this theater it could only expose lies when someone lied.

A perfect counter to Brother Mouth — which explained why the Lips might genuinely resent the ears. At least right now, the Fool's Lips' absolute refusal to utter another word proved the ears' power.

But with both "brothers" clamming up, Cheng Shi searched the entire theater without finding a single clue about the "birth of the mask" or the "birth of the features."

All he had were countless torn bodies. The carnage told of a massive battle, but why it happened and what it led to — total blank.

So to uncover the truth behind Brother Mouth, to learn what really happened in San Dales, and to find leads on the other "parts," Cheng Shi frowned and pulled from his pocket... the Chronicle of Time.

Yes — the very notebook Dragon King had once practically forced on him. A Memory artifact granting one use of "Return of the Past."

He actually had a second Memory tool — a small hammer-shaped Memory Sea Insight that could give him historical hints about the area. But he suspected the story of the Fool's Lips was far from simple — a few sentences wouldn't cut it.

If the Memory Sea Insight came up empty, he'd end up using Return of the Past anyway. So Cheng Shi chose the most efficient option — skip the hammer, go straight to the heavy artillery.

Solid plan. Shaky execution.

As the Chronicle of Time dissolved before him, the past did return — just not the way the clown expected.

Memory's power inexplicably entangled with the Deceit energy saturating the theater. The resulting force shoved Cheng Shi straight out the door. He could only stare as lights flickered through the gap — some story clearly unfolding inside — but in that instant, he missed it entirely.

"You—"

He nearly cursed. But considering that a certain Benefactor might be watching for entertainment, he held his tongue. Wouldn't do to blaspheme to His face.

Still, even without seeing it, he'd already figured it out. The moment he felt Deceit's divine power surge, he knew: San Dales had been claimed by Deceit long ago!

They really were born here!

The only question: how?

Cheng Shi wasn't the type to sit still after a rejection. Most people would reflect on what they'd done wrong. Clowns, however, first asked whether the other party was hiding something too big to share.

Already thinking, already moving — back to the door, trying to push it open again.

No luck. A seal now required two people to open it simultaneously. But that kind of trick was nothing. Remember — Cheng Shi wasn't just a Deceit follower. He was also a Chaos follower.

As long as smoke could seep through the crack, a door was the same as no door.

He cracked a smoke bomb into the gap and, using his talent, swam through.

When he discovered the theater's interior had been replaced by San Dales' past, he knew: the real play had finally begun.

The Fun God wasn't rejecting his viewing — He was preparing a bigger stage!

That stage surely held secrets about Brother Mouth and the others. And those secrets were most likely tied to the clown-like NPC at the bottom of the theater steps.

Yes — Cheng Shi had only glanced at the marketplace once before identifying the lead: Crown, the Joy Theater's performer.

Don't ask how the clown knew Crown was a clown. Clown's intuition.

Cheng Shi badly wanted to explore this place — to understand another clown. But a more pressing problem loomed: his teammates were almost here.

Before secrets, he wanted exclusivity. Before danger, he refused to be someone else's canary. So to squeeze remaining value from his teammates, his eyes glinted — and he began setting up.

He tried to slip back out through the door crack and set an ambush. But he found himself teleported to the far end of the theater doors. This place — like a Memory cage — trapped a Deceit follower whose head buzzed with too many clever ideas.

But every cage has gaps. Cheng Shi eyed the immovable door and scoffed. He switched faiths, became a Fate Weaver, snapped his fingers, and let the dice carry him back to the outside — the door's "past," this place's "future."

'If Memory and Deceit teamed up to imprison me, I'll use Time and Fate as my keys. Prison break — right through the front door.'

Success. Back outside, Cheng Shi raised both hands in devout praise to his various Benefactors. Except, of course, that particular one.

First priority: find Mi Laozhang!

Zhang Jizu in the same trial was the clown's biggest safety net. Cheng Shi disguised himself as a plant hanging from the highest icicle above the theater entrance, surveying everything, waiting.

When he spotted two Zhang Jizus arriving simultaneously, he didn't hesitate a single second. He beelined for the one crouching to examine whether the permafrost posed a threat.

'Obviously. Steadiness is bone-deep. Plain caution can't replicate Mi Laozhang's brand of prudence.'

Confident he'd found the right man, Cheng Shi shed his disguise, transformed into... ahem, Dragon King, and crept toward Mi Laozhang.

Finding him was the easy part. Explaining his identity took time.

When Zhang Jizu heard movement behind him and saw Li Jingming approaching, he squinted and calmly reasoned:

"The Acrobat can't impersonate Li Jingming — his disposition would give him away fast.

Li Jingming wanting to find me would only appear as Cheng Shi.

The War Supervisor values her life too much to enter the fog, let alone arrive before me.

As for the Zhen girl — whoever she is, impersonating Li Jingming wouldn't be to borrow his identity; it'd be to cause him trouble. You didn't attack on sight, which means you're not them.

So...

Cheng Shi — you got here three hours and twenty-seven minutes before me. What did you find?"

"..."

See? That's where all Cheng Shi's wasted time went.

"Master, please spare me the lecture. Let's save time..."

Eye twitching, Cheng Shi hoisted Mi Laozhang and ran toward the doors along a route he'd scouted to avoid everyone. Before any other teammates could arrive, they pushed the door open together and re-entered San Dales' past.

When Zhang Jizu saw what lay before him, his eyes slitted hard.

"This is...?"

"San Dales' past. Fun, right?"

Memory distorts here. Deceit becomes truth. I'm not even sure whether those two deities were an item before Dragon King fused."

"?" Zhang Jizu blinked. "Li Jingming's condition is... fusion?"

Cheng Shi ran and grinned. "My payment's been delivered, Old Zhang. The rest is up to you."

"What are you planning?" Zhang Jizu's heart lurched.

"Relax. That door has a trick — needs two people. But I think two isn't enough. Change it so it needs three.

Since the War Supervisor didn't come in, I'd love to see three other 'mes' forced to team up just to push a door. The comedy potential is immense.

This stage can't have just one clown, right?

Oh — sorry, almost forgot. You're a clown too."

"..."

In that instant, Zhang Jizu's eyelid twitched violently. He finally understood how Cheng Shi felt during certain moments.

'You'd better be talking about my class.'

...

Chapter 850: Only When Reality and Illusion Blur Does a True Con Exist

Under Cheng Shi's prodding, Zhang Jizu added a small formation to the door's seal — one extra, utterly meaningless "audience seat."

Then Cheng Shi led him into the marketplace crowd.

Mi Laozhang was sharp. Before the other three arrived, he too spotted the problematic young man at the foot of the stairs. But what puzzled him was that Cheng Shi apparently had no plan to abduct the NPC — the clown was actually waiting for three other "clowns" to clear the path.

"Aren't you worried they'll snatch the key figure and use him to track you down — or take what you want directly?"

Cheng Shi, I found the right person, but the other 'Cheng Shi' is equally flawless.

Most importantly, this Zhen-family disguise you're wearing is too perfect. Aside from the real Zhen player, the other three haven't spotted a crack. Aren't you afraid they'll help the other 'you' find the Secret Peeping Ear?"

"I have a rough guess why Dragon King came. He probably wanted the Secret Peeping Ear as an entry ticket to the Jokers.

As for Long Jing — heh, let him bounce. Not worth worrying about. Acrobats do love hopping around.

But Zhen Xin... I'm sure she's Zhen Xin. If it were Zhen Yi, I wouldn't have been the only one who arrived ahead of everyone else.

Though her state is curious. She rigidly follows 'performance protocol' — a completely different beast from her chaos-mongering sister.

Still, the Zhen family is absurdly overpowered. Two personalities but two sets of talents? That's blatant cheating."

The moment the words left his mouth, Zhang Jizu hit him with a "listen to yourself — aren't you a dual personality too?" look of withering contempt.

"Indeed, such people could be called cheaters. Pity that Order never did punish cheaters."

"?"

'Mi Laozhang — are you taking a shot at her, or at me?'

Cheng Shi side-eyed Zhang Jizu, certain there was a subtext.

Zhang Jizu smiled and moved on. "I assumed you'd impersonate that NPC — like you did with Pro To."

Cheng Shi waved it off. "Seem real when fake. Seem fake when real. If I don't give them a genuine NPC, how will they believe the lead hasn't been tampered with?"

Patience. A vanishing act on an empty stage earns no applause.

Only when you fool the audience right before their eyes do you earn genuine cheers."

Cheng Shi had reason to be confident. The Secret Peeping Ear was already in hand. He was here solely to probe the secrets about Brother Mouth's origins hidden in San Dales.

But Mi Laozhang didn't know that. He assumed Cheng Shi had spent three hours planting an elaborate trap, waiting for the other three clowns to walk in.

Speaking of Pro To — now that their identities were clear, Cheng Shi was curious: when exactly had Mi Laozhang confirmed the escaped person was him?

Before the hint, or after?

He asked. Zhang Jizu squinted and glanced over.

"Before Pro To appeared, I could only confirm the Cheng Shi in front of me definitely wasn't you — but I didn't know where you were. After Pro To showed up, I figured it was probably you."

Cheng Shi's lip twitched. "So that's why you held the dagger to my neck — giving yourself a chance to verify?"

"No. I just thought it was inefficient of you to leave without saying hello, so I wanted to stab you. You were the one who lost patience and tapped Morse code into my arm with your fingertips to tell me you were the real Cheng Shi.

Cheng Shi — I know Morse code. I know you tapped profanity.

But I must warn you: the fake Cheng Shi was watching your every move. That behavior was not steady."

Cheng Shi's face went completely dark. Dripping sarcasm:

"I'm not steady?"

If I'd stayed quiet any longer, you'd have offed me for real.

How do I know your current smugness isn't covering for the fact that you didn't actually see through me at the time?"

Zhang Jizu shot him another withering glance — the kind reserved for watching a baboon throw a tantrum.

"Finding the real you might have been tricky. But spotting the other Cheng Shi's flaws wasn't hard.

You've never once spoken that lord's divine name aloud. So the moment 'he' said 'Death,' he couldn't be you.

And that wasn't his only slip.

His performance was excellent — even nailed your Fate personality's talents. But he was an actor, not a director. He could demand perfection of himself but couldn't control every extra sharing the stage.

On the way here, we ran into a scavenger scout who, in his panic, bumped into 'you.'

I later examined the scavenger. He was old and feeble, barely any strength. So I concluded that the collision was an illusion.

That stumble was the fake Cheng Shi's last-ditch effort to avoid 'clipping through.'

He didn't use dice to swap positions — he used an illusion to mask his body and jumped down manually. He just hadn't reached the 'stage' in time and showed a brief crack when reacting to the unexpected.

That was when I suspected that Cheng Shi was being impersonated by the Zhen family."

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow, acknowledging Zhang "Steady"'s terrifying eye for detail. But then suspicion crept across his face.

"Sharp brain. But Mi Laozhang — you didn't secretly fuse Truth behind my back, did you?"

Zhang Jizu's face darkened. "I've already fused Deceit. How could I also fuse Truth?"

'Who said he fused...'

Cheng Shi blinked, instantly went "oh," and clamped his mouth shut.

But that single-syllable "oh" made Zhang Jizu's eyes narrow. A massive question mark bloomed in his mind.

'Could there be... a third faith in this game?'

Cheng Shi said nothing more. Zhang Jizu followed his silence. They played San Dales NPCs, tailing the other "selves" when they arrived, witnessing San Dales' past scene by scene.

When they saw Crown sobbing helplessly on his makeshift market stage, Cheng Shi's face tightened. "The moment is coming."

He'd connected every thread — past and present — and finally deduced how that theater had ended up carpeted with torn bodies.

Sure enough, the residents soon stormed Crown's Joy Theater to denounce the clown. And at the very front, the person who kicked down the door first — was Cheng Shi himself!

He charged in first. Mi Laozhang followed, creating a brief commotion at the entrance to buy time for Cheng Shi to find his target.

When Cheng Shi located Crown on stage, the two liars — right under the noses of a furious mob and before the three teammates could follow — pulled off a brazen switcheroo. A live-swap, performed in broad daylight.

Cheng Shi took Crown's place on stage, becoming the clown. The real Crown was spirited away by Mi Laozhang. The rhythm mirrored Dolgod, where Cheng Shi had entrusted Turadin to Mi Laozhang — once again making the Death Chosen the trial's linchpin.

The reason for abducting Crown: they were theorizing that Crown was Yu Xi's predecessor. That was what Cheng Shi told Mi Laozhang, at least. For himself, he leaned more toward Crown being the "original body" of Brother Mouth and the others.

Throughout the Return of the Past sequence, Cheng Shi had repeatedly asked Brother Mouth about Crown's true identity. No answer ever came.

Not from the Lips. Not from the Tongue. Not from the Ears. Total silence.

Which only hardened his suspicion. So before the final curtain, he wanted to pull one last move.

Honestly — he and the other "himself" had arrived at the same idea.

Zhen Xin's Cheng Shi wanted to resurrect Crown and test whether it was possible to collect all mask fragments painlessly. The real Cheng Shi wanted exactly the same thing.

If Brother Mouth and the others were born from Crown's fragmentation, then saving Crown inside the Return of the Past might complete all the fragments at once!

The more he thought about it, the more it made sense. So he'd pulled Mi Laozhang into this grand heist: Mi Laozhang took the real Crown; Cheng Shi took the clown's place and died amid San Dales' historical fury.

He didn't even ask Mi Laozhang for a revival contingency. This supremely clever clown had already calculated that somebody would revive him.

That somebody was the person impersonating him who refused to break character: Zhen Xin.

So ultimately, this performance's finale was woven from countless liars' lies, threaded together by a single clown.

Cheng Shi simply stood on higher ground, pointing the other swindlers in a direction — then waited quietly for the last act.

And now the last act had arrived. The "Cheng Shi" who'd been fooled throughout the entire story had, at the final moment, personally resurrected the real Cheng Shi.

What ending could be more fitting for this absurd theater?

And when facing Zhen Xin directly, his curiosity was finally answered. She hadn't been adhering to any "performance protocol" — she'd simply fooled herself too.

"Have you always been like this?" The clown's expression was strange.

"Like what?"

"I mean — have you always been fooling yourself like this?"

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