

## The Gods 861

Chapter 861: You Play Yourself — I'll Play Yu Xi

"You... playing Yu Xi again?" Zhen Xin stared at Cheng Shi, her gaze unreadable.

Hearing the word "again," Zhang Jizu's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "When did you impersonate Him before?"

"..." Cheng Shi's expression stiffened briefly.

'Too many times. Which one are you asking about?'

But Mi Laozhang wasn't done. "I recall you encountered Him at the end of month four. So you've impersonated Him since then?"

'End of month four?'

The specific date froze both Cheng Shi and Zhen Xin.

Zhen Xin had Cheng Shi's trial memories from his first six months. She could easily deduce that any encounter with Yu Xi could only have occurred in the most recent two months. Zhang Jizu's timeline was impossible.

Cheng Shi was even more baffled by why Mi Laozhang had suddenly fabricated this lie. It couldn't resolve Zhen Xin's curiosity or form a coherent story. The only explanation: Old Zhang had helpfully helped... and made things worse.

He didn't know Zhen Xin had Cheng Shi's memories, so the lie leaked. And the leak might trigger a chain reaction.

Cheng Shi's heart lurched.

'Bad. Walk along the river long enough and your shoes get wet. But I never expected the water to seep up from inside the shoe itself.'

'Now what?'

Despite the awkwardness, Cheng Shi held his composure. He shot Zhang Jizu a hollow smile. And when he caught a glint of scrutiny in those slitted eyes, he realized: Mi Laozhang's remark wasn't accidental. He was probing.

'Does Mi Laozhang know something?'

Cheng Shi was too sharp. He immediately thought of the War Supervisor — who'd vanished from this trial — and the identity he'd exposed before her. That let him recalibrate "end of month four" to "end of month three."

He remembered telling Mi Laozhang that Yu Xi had guided his personality split. So if Mi Laozhang had obtained the timeline from the War Supervisor, then from his perspective, the split had already happened by the time Cheng Shi fooled Ai Si.

But that was fake.

Zhen Xin also knew it was fake.

If this wasn't resolved today, the Yu Xi timeline would conflict, and two sharp allies would detect holes in his Yu Xi cover story.

'Too many lies. Impossible to patch them all.'

He sighed inwardly.

'Can't hide it from Mi Laozhang anymore. My hesitation just now was probably already noted. Priority is no longer two-way damage control — it's sealing Mi Laozhang's lips and letting him think whatever he wants, as long as Zhen Xin doesn't get suspicious.'

So Cheng Shi immediately flashed Zhen Xin a "liars understand" smile, signaling he'd merely told Mi Laozhang a harmless white lie in an emergency. Then, while Zhang Jizu retreated into composed silence, he addressed Zhen Xin's original question.

"Ms. Magician — what do you consider devotion?"

"?"

'What does that have to do with Yu Xi?'

Zhen Xin frowned but didn't waste time debating. She gave him a "go on" look.

Cheng Shi didn't hold back, reciting the mental draft he'd long prepared:

"For any deity, devotion should mean faithfully executing Their will.

Therefore, when we practice Deceit's art, it is naturally the greatest offering to Him.

Especially since Lord Yu Xi is the existence closest to Him. Acting in His name to commit deception is itself an enormous act of piety.

Of course..."

Mid-sentence, Cheng "Steady" patched a safeguard against the magician — or the magician's sister — borrowing his logic.

"This devotion requires one condition: Yu Xi's consent.

When I first met Him, I asked: What can I learn from You?

Lord Yu Xi was very generous. He said I could learn whatever I wished.

So by that reasoning, imitating His appearance should be... not wrong?"

"..."

Zhen Xin had grown up steeped in sophistry. Rarely did brigand logic surprise her. But right now she had to admire Cheng Shi's shamelessness.

He was absolutely a clown — and one with supreme trolling ability.

She didn't fully buy it though, especially after Mi Laozhang's reaction. The meeting between Yu Xi and Cheng Shi likely had more to it. But as a newly minted ally who'd just exchanged innermost secrets, there was no need to call him out on the spot. So she agreed, adding only one question:

"You want to use that identity to pressure Long Jing into spilling something?"

Smart angle. But... how will you impersonate Yu Xi?

Long Jing isn't Poison. Without real tricks, he won't blindly believe you."

Cheng Shi gave a mysterious smile.

"Relax. I have a clever plan."

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The two Dragons had, naturally, been played.

When Li Jingming stopped and told Long Jing that the "Cheng Shi" they'd been chasing ahead — pursuing Zhen Yi and Mi Laozhang — was a fake, the Acrobat still refused to accept it.

Perhaps he'd spotted the flaw ages ago. But being strung along was simply too humiliating. He couldn't bring himself to "expose himself."

Because he knew: by the time you realize you've been fooled, the scales have long tipped toward someone else. No point scrambling for time anymore — and no need to confront his own foolish act.

But Li Jingming was different. He hadn't just now realized the chase was a decoy. He'd been playing along with Long Jing's charade the entire time. His true focus had never been on this illusory pursuit — it had remained on the stage where Crown was torn apart!

Though physically absent, he'd been monitoring that stage all along. How?

Praise the power of Memory.

Remember how Li Jingming had rearranged body parts to cover Crown's corpse before leaving the stage? During that moment, he'd slipped a tiny Memory artifact into an unidentifiable NPC's remains. Even after departing, he could track every development on stage.

The technique wasn't flashy — but it was silent and hard to detect. The only drawback was transmission delay: only when the present became the past did events convert into memory.

So when Dragon King received every memory from the stage and "witnessed" Cheng Shi ultimately besting Zhen Xin, he decided it was time to return and find his teammates.

He hadn't managed to snatch the Secret Peeping Ear from Cheng Shi. But the clown's swap trick had given him a genuinely fresh idea.

'What a brilliant memory that was.'

As for this embarrassing chase...

Who was truly embarrassed remained debatable. At the very least, it was an amusing memory — one about an overeager Acrobat who'd lost part of his judgment in his enthusiasm.

Long Jing stood still, studying Dragon King's meaningful expression, his own face a riot of emotions.

He felt he'd been duped again. Not just by Cheng Shi and the never-appeared Zhen Yi, but potentially by Dragon King himself.

Yet in every other trial, he was always the one doing the duping. Even in this trial — hadn't he strung that 2,400-point War Supervisor around like a puppet?

Think about it: in this Faith Game, which player dared impersonate an Envoy — a Servant God?

His genius impersonation had elevated the art of Deceit to historic heights. A feat worthy of the Deceit hall of fame. And yet, despite such "perfection"... he'd ended up the clown.

'Why? They're the clowns. I'm just an acrobat.'

His emotions churned. Something like "if only you'd never been born" gnawed at him.

He'd already guessed the answer. The truth likely lay in Crown's body on that stage. His obsession with Lord Yu Xi's ear had caused one misjudgment — and that single error cost him everything, with no chance to recover.

A loss was a loss. Long Jing didn't dwell on it. Now he just wanted to slightly restore his image the next time he met Lord Yu Xi — at least rescue evidence of his efforts. Let the Lord know that one of the ears used to resurrect Him had been found by His most loyal follower, Long Jing.

What he never expected was how soon that "next time" would come!

When the smirking Dragon King and the dejected Long Jing re-entered the theater, they found the stage's victor hadn't left. But the current scene far exceeded all expectations.

Because on the stage stood a tall, gaunt, masked man — wearing an eerie grin and emanating an imperious aura — looking down at the three players beneath him.

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Chapter 862: Yu Xi!

Those three players were the self-congratulating "Zhen Yi," the visibly embarrassed "Cheng Shi," and the uninvolved Zhang Jizu.

Think about it — under what circumstances would three peak players of this caliber stand bowing before an unknown NPC?

No thinking required, actually. The scene spoke for itself. The masked man's identity was obvious.

'Yu Xi?'

'Yu Xi!'

'It's Lord Yu Xi!'

Long Jing froze. His sharp eyes swept over the man again and again. His gaze was cautious — afraid of being disrespectful — yet equally afraid of not looking carefully enough and being fooled again. So he could only sneak a glance, avert, glance, avert, glance, and...

He stopped. Because the masked man had turned to look at him.

The grin on the pure-white mask stretched to a height that could only be called terrifying. Then the man spoke in an eerie, sharp voice, chuckling:

"Long Jing — what are you looking at?"

The voice made everyone jump. Even the two allies on stage flinched.

Because it was identical to the phantom's voice from the Devout Land's fog!

So the ghost was actually Lord Yu Xi!?

Long Jing's eyes went wide.

'It all fits! Everything fits!'

'Why did finding the Secret Peeping Ear require sacrificing your secrets? That wasn't sacrificing — Lord Yu Xi was toying with everyone!'

'He was playing the players. So He must have already recovered His ears. This trial was exactly what I suspected — His way of tempering them all!'

The realization made Long Jing even angrier. The Lord had been right here, and he'd failed right under His gaze!

'Does that mean my "rating" in Lord Yu Xi's eyes just dropped?'

'Are these three ugly clowns on stage about to receive the Lord's rewards?'

'NO!'

'This can't stand!'

Panic set in. His only thought: even without a reward, he had to account for the "one ear" he'd found. Otherwise, San Dales' biggest clown wouldn't be Crown — it'd be him!

He bowed from the aisle between seats, face radiating devotion.

"To behold Your esteemed visage once more is the greatest reward for today's piety.

Praise the Benefactor. Praise Lord Yu Xi.

Bathed in Your radiance, I sense the universe's unreality. Pressing forward under Your guidance, I draw ever closer to fundamental falsehood.

Your follower Long Jing — from San Dales' past, from the Joy Theater's present — sends his regards."

"..."

"..."

"..."

"..."

The entire theater went silent.

Li Jingming had been considering whether this sudden Yu Xi was a hoax staged by the three vanished players. But seeing Long Jing's utter conviction, even he wavered.

Yet Long Jing's words were so... absurd that Li Jingming couldn't follow up with his own greeting. He wanted to suppress a laugh but feared seeming disrespectful. So he could only smile, nod, and acknowledge the figure on stage as neutrally as possible.

The two beside Yu Xi had it worse.

Yes — on stage there were only two. "Zhen Yi" was Zhen Xin in disguise. "Cheng Shi" was a conjured illusion. Only Mi Laozhang was playing himself. Hearing Long Jing's flattery, one was thunderstruck; the other squeezed his eyes shut even tighter.

For a split second, Zhang Jizu even suspected that Long Jing down there was Cheng Shi, and the Yu Xi up here was the real deal — because a faint whiff of Deceit's divinity emanated from Him.

This wasn't something you could fake just by holding a piece of divinity. In the past, Zhang Jizu had only barely sensed this from Them.

So how had Cheng Shi made his Yu Xi impersonation this convincing?

'Does He... really exist?'

Mi Laozhang sank into thought.

Cheng Shi — playing Yu Xi — wasn't having a great time either. He'd thought their first meeting was already peak shamelessness from Long Jing. Yet after a brief absence, the acrobat's bootlicking had leveled up.

Zhen Xin was witnessing this flavor of "audience" among Deceit followers for the first time. She discreetly glanced at Long Jing, then at the towering "Yu Xi" before her. Silently, she mouthed:

"Is this how you act during your own audiences?"

'?'

'Absolutely not.'

'I'm famously tough-boned. I'd never do anything this shameless before a god.'

Lord Yu Xi — no, Cheng Shi — snorted with disdain. It served as both a reply to Zhen Xin and a warning to Long Jing that the fawning was excessive and needed to dial back.

But Long Jing didn't think so.

He thought it wasn't enough — he hadn't even gotten to his main point!

The acrobat was utterly indifferent to the bizarre atmosphere. He promptly wove his "one ear" achievement into his praise with surgical precision, then declared that although his trial performance had been slightly inferior, his devotion was second to none.

Cheng Shi's face nearly went black. Even Brother Mouth couldn't take it anymore. The instant Long Jing finished speaking, the Lips' half-laughing voice cut in:

"Does the Lord know I got played by that pest? If He does — He won't favor that pest because of it, right? Even His inspection target Cheng Shi got played. Doesn't that make the Zhen family the real winners of this trial!?"

Total silence.

Long Jing's smile froze on his face.

Though his "little secret" had also mentioned himself, Cheng Shi nearly burst out laughing.

'Well, well — this world has no shortage of clowns!'

But within two seconds, Long Jing panicked. Ignoring the low laughter from surrounding players, he shook his head frantically, desperate to clarify:

"My Lord, that's not what I meant—"

The Fool's Lips continued — courtesy of Yu Xi's mouth:

"Oh no — the Lord's power can read my inner thoughts? What do I do!?"

"My Lord — please see clearly! My devotion is beyond question!"

"I mean, even if I have a few selfish thoughts, that's only human, right?"

"My Lord, I—"

Long Jing went quiet. Not because he didn't dare continue — but because Dragon King, unable to watch any longer, had finally clamped a hand over his mouth.

Good thing Dragon King acted when he did. Otherwise the three Jokers on stage would have broken character entirely and died laughing right there.

Consider: if even Mi Laozhang was clenching his jaw to suppress laughter, the scene had to be terrifying. Even the perpetually composed Zhen Xin's expression had warped beyond recognition.

Soundless hysteria — practically the finest tribute to Silence the present Jokers could offer.

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Chapter 863: Rewards from Lord Yu Xi

Fortunately, Cheng Shi wasn't playing Yu Xi for laughs. He had a plan. So after a few clearing coughs, he broke the silence and said with practiced gravitas:

"I have observed all of your performances today.

You may have had your petty calculations...

But your devotion to Him is adequate."

He swept a meaningful gaze across every player, projecting an aura of "I've seen through everything." In truth, the only one being fooled was Long Jing.

Because the moment Long Jing lowered his head, too reverent to look up, our Lord Yu Xi had already started winking at Dragon King.

And when Li Jingming saw Yu Xi signaling him, the clever Memory Chosen immediately understood: the stage had become nothing more than a clown circus.

As for who was the clown... that didn't have to be limited to those on stage.

But Li Jingming had plenty on his mind. Recalling the memories from the stage, he had to wonder: what role had Zhen Xin played in this deception, and what deal had she struck with Cheng Shi?

And how had Cheng Shi made his Yu Xi impersonation so convincing?

This Fate Weaver had clearly secured the Secret Peeping Ear. A step behind again — but ultimately, for Li Jingming, memories were worth more than artifacts. This trip wasn't a loss. At minimum, he'd learned Yu Xi's past.

Crown was surely Yu Xi's former self!

And that was probably this trial's greatest secret.

As for whether the current Yu Xi was an Envoy or simply a mask bearing that name — that remained for Him to decide.

Without the Secret Peeping Ear, he lacked the entrance ticket to the Jokers. He'd need another approach — something else to satisfy this Fate Weaver's insatiable appetite. Otherwise, impersonating Cheng Shi to sneak into San Dales would never be forgiven.

With that reasoning, Li Jingming cooperated smoothly with Cheng Shi's performance. The two on stage were background props with zero lines. So for a while, the entire theater became Cheng Shi's stage — just like Crown before him, the clown stood center where he belonged.

Cheng Shi reviewed each player's performance with playful commentary. At the end, he credited the Secret Peeping Ear's discovery to Zhen Yi, offering her a small reward.

The normally unruly Zhen Yi was docile as a kitten before Lord Yu Xi. Following the "script," she made a bold and impudent request:

She asked Lord Yu Xi to guide her sister's second faith!

Look at the sisterly love! During a rare divine audience, this Deceit follower still thought of her dear sister.

Anyone unfamiliar with her would think Zhen Yi was a thoughtful, caring sibling.

But Long Jing, hearing this, practically mourned for Zhen Xin on the spot.

'She's not your sister — she's your overlord.'

'Listen to what your sister just said! She's asking a Deceit Envoy to find another faith for a Deceit follower!'

'Sure, the gods promote faith fusion. But you can't openly tell your company's board of directors you want a side gig at a competitor!'

Zhen Yi hadn't said that, of course. She was too clever. So she said it was for her sister — finding sis a side job.

This way: she could push faith fusion to "curry divine favor"; maintain her own piety; use her sister to test whether their dual personalities could both fuse; and all it cost was... one Zhen Xin.

'What a steal.'

'After all, if Zhen Xin runs into trouble — that's got nothing to do with me, Zhen Yi.'

Long Jing nearly laughed at the thought. 'No wonder you bring bad luck wherever you go.'

In truth, when Cheng Shi had handed this script to Zhen Xin, her expression had been spectacular. She'd even muttered, "You and Zhen Yi are really alike..." — but Cheng Shi hadn't heard, pressing on with his plan.

He wasn't setting up Zhen Xin's future second faith. As a former Deceit Chosen, she didn't need anyone's permission to fuse whatever she wanted. This was all for... fishing.

He was waiting for Long Jing to take the bait.

Because he was certain: the moment his Yu Xi agreed to Zhen Yi's request, this power-hungry Acrobat would scramble for his own benefit — perhaps copying Zhen Yi, using his "meager" credit to make a wish.

And that was Cheng Shi's true aim.

He didn't want ordinary intel from a peak player who'd never had a divine audience. He wanted to use Long Jing to probe his other Benefactor — Time!

Whatever Long Jing asked for, Cheng Shi would refuse. But to honor a "follower's" devotion, he could generously point the way — toward a second faith fusion. And that direction was Time!

Remember: the Fun God had impersonated Time before. So if a former Deceit number-two attempted to approach Time — what would happen? How would Time react? Would the fusion succeed? All information Cheng Shi wanted.

He needed to reconfirm the alliance boundary between Deceit and Time, and determine whether he could freely leverage Time's power going forward.

Time not having time to refuse versus Time actively supporting were fundamentally different attitudes. If the former, even with Time fusion, Cheng Shi could only tiptoe around borrowing divine prestige. But if the latter...

'I'm showing my hand. I am the cheat code.'

'While you're grinding through this game, my sights have already ridden Time's winds across dimensions into the real slice universe.'

So on-stage Cheng Shi theatrically granted Zhen Yi's reward, promising to guide her sister's second faith.

The illusory Cheng Shi jumped in, also making a rare spoken wish. Under Long Jing's stunned observation, Lord Yu Xi agreed again — like a wish-granting tycoon scattering generosity.

Watching this, Long Jing could hold back no longer.

'I contributed one ear! Merit like that can't be left out of the rewards!'

He pretended not to care, carefully crafting a seamless interjection to bring up his request.

Finally, after waiting for the right moment, he seized upon the phantom Cheng Shi's thank-you and launched into a torrent of praise — about how the Lord's guidance helped Deceit followers go further, how His presence strengthened the camp. And as one of that camp's members, Long Jing simply wished to contribute...

Blah, blah, blah — he talked until his mouth went dry before reaching the point: might he also have the honor of receiving Lord Yu Xi's guidance?

Cheng Shi nearly dozed off. He'd thought Mi Laozhang and Zhen Xin's serious modes were dense enough. Turns out Long Jing's was even denser — almost rivaling the Prisoner.

He snorted, looked at Long Jing, cut off the rambling, and said with layered meaning:

"Fine. Your performance left something to be desired... but your devotion has a touch of novelty.

Speak — what guidance do you seek?"

'It's happening!'

'Lord Yu Xi agreed!'

Long Jing's eyes blazed. He straightened his back, devotion intensifying.

"Lord Yu Xi — I too wish to find my second faith!

Of course, everything I do is for Deceit and Void. So that the Benefactor's glory may blanket the universe. So that Your will may reach the world. I can endure hardship — even misunderstanding."

Already Cheng Shi sensed something off. 'Wait — this guy isn't about to pick... Existence, is he?'

"Indeed — You must have guessed. So that Existence may also be written in Void's name, I seek Your guidance. For Your humble but devout follower — a path toward Time!"

"?"

Cheng Shi froze.

'Bro — did you steal my script?'

...

Chapter 864: I Happen to Have an Old Friend Named... Shi Zhen

Long Jing's desire to fuse Existence was hardly new.

He was a smart man with a clear growth plan. Every faith had its merits, but Existence and Void undeniably represented the pinnacle of the arcane, wielding extraordinary power.

So the moment he'd learned about faith fusion, he'd started plotting how to merge his Deceit with Existence. And since he wasn't sure opposing faiths could fuse, his first target had always been Time.

An acrobat renowned for agility paired with a Pointer Knight famed for seizing the perfect moment — the combination was enough to set one's blood pumping.

He'd even been positioning himself near the mysterious Time Chosen, Lao Deng.

Tragically, before the plan could advance, Lao Deng died. Nobody knew how. Long Jing lost his path to Time. But Fate's wheel turned again, bringing him back before Lord Yu Xi — and this golden opportunity.

On stage, Cheng Shi hadn't seen this coming either. He thought: 'Now I genuinely must praise Fate. I don't even need to explain — I can straight-up send Long Jing to Time.'

As for how to arrange it...

Lord Yu Xi — no, Cheng Shi — suddenly went rigid. Then an aura eerily close to Theirs erupted from his body. The intensity made Zhen Xin and Zhang Jizu, standing closest, shudder. Even the illusory Cheng Shi flickered from the overwhelming density of Deceit's essence.

Zhen Xin and Mi Laozhang exchanged grave looks, each reading shock in the other's eyes. Then both looked up at "Cheng Shi." In that instant, through the mask's eye-slits, they glimpsed a pair of "utterly inhuman" laughing eyes.

Something was wrong with Cheng Shi's Yu Xi. In this moment, it was as though a real Yu Xi had possessed his body!

This terrifyingly potent Yu Xi swept his gaze — frigid and eerie — across all four players, stage and audience alike. Then He looked at Long Jing and chuckled:

"A Void walker eyeing Existence. Good — guiding Existence toward Void is indeed your duty.

I happen to know a very dull old friend. Long Jing, I can give you an opportunity — take you to meet Him. If you can persuade Him, I believe busy Time may not refuse Deceit's approach.

After all, Memory has already fallen. Time's compromise is merely a matter of time."

Every face in the room changed color. Everyone furrowed their brows, parsing the layers of meaning — everyone except Long Jing, who was simply overjoyed.

"My Lord — this old friend of Yours is...?"

"Shi Zhen. You may call Him Shi Zhen.

He is the first clock hand that Time personally crafted after descending. While Time's attention wanders from the present, Shi Zhen devoutly marks every moment's temporal footnote for his Benefactor."

"Shi Zhen..."

Long Jing repeated the name, internally stunned. It sounded like an Envoy's name. So Time also had an Envoy?

Why hadn't anyone known? Why were Envoys of Void and Existence suddenly appearing in droves?

Was the Faith Game changing?

He looked uncertainly toward Dragon King — whose brow was knotted even tighter.

If the Yu Xi who'd winked at him earlier was definitely Cheng Shi, then whatever now inhabited Cheng Shi's body... was genuinely uncertain.

Impersonating someone wasn't hard. Fooling a crowd wasn't hard. Mimicking a demeanor wasn't hard. What was hard: a mortal radiating an aura rivaling a true Servant God's.

The initial Cheng Shi had a similar feeling, attributable to the Secret Peeping Ear's influence. But now?

An existence this reminiscent of a deity — could it still be called acting?

Not just Li Jingming. On stage, Zhen Xin and Zhang Jizu were also thinking. Especially Zhen Xin — she was nearly certain Cheng Shi had been replaced. She was too close, bathed in that Deceit-grade divine aura.

If Yu Xi hadn't descended personally, she couldn't imagine Cheng Shi mastering this level of perfect impersonation. To date, the universal player consensus — the game's fundamental rule — was that no talent could generate divinity from nothing. Even with three Deceit creations, Cheng Shi couldn't possibly have this power.

Because once he had it, he'd stop being "him" and become "Him"!

At that point, whether he was Cheng Shi or Yu Xi wouldn't matter — he'd have transcended playerhood into something indistinguishable from a Servant God!

Moreover, if Cheng Shi already possessed such power, he'd have no need to scheme with the group. No need to write scripts to fool a dispensable Long Jing. He'd simply have revealed it to her earlier and seized far more through "commands."

But he hadn't.

So... what had changed on stage?

'The Jokers' performance caught the real Yu Xi's eye — drawing His attention!?'

'If He'd been watching all along, what was this sudden descent for!?'

'Or had the three assembled artifacts awakened Him, seizing Cheng Shi's body?'

The situation turned complex. Every liar present was stunned.

Only Cheng Shi continued his flawless performance. Secretly elated, outwardly impeccable — because this was always part of his script. A yin-yang script designed to fool everyone again.

The surface script: end the trial, divert trouble, and close San Dales' farce with a satisfying question mark.

But beneath the script he'd shared with Zhen Xin and Mi Laozhang, he'd embedded a one-man show all his own.

Its purpose: deepen one impression in everyone's mind — Yu Xi truly exists. And He is right here!

Cheng Shi had found the perfect method of playing Yu Xi. With this method, he was certain that barring the sixteen true gods in person, he could fool even dual-Envoys like Aph Ros.

Because he'd uncovered this trial's greatest secret. One no other player knew — one even Mi Laozhang hadn't noticed:

The faithless deity!

Remember the faithless god behind the stage curtains?

It hadn't vanished. Cheng Shi had pocketed it immediately.

Rewind to the moment Cheng Shi kicked open the Joy Theater doors. When he'd charged the stage and helped Mi Laozhang abduct the real Crown, he'd noticed the anomaly behind the curtain.

It looked exactly like Crown. But it radiated an unknown divine glow that prevented immediate identification.

Regardless of what it was — if Cheng Shi found it, it was Cheng Shi's.

So the clown shoved "Crown" into... the Molten Coffin.

A perfectly logical move. Facing a humanoid non-living entity, the Molten Coffin was its only home.

But the instant he touched it, "Crown" disintegrated — dissolving into a ripple of nothingness that sank directly into Cheng Shi's consciousness.

Terror. He feared parasitic contamination. But when the thing slowly solidified inside his mind, all fear evaporated. What remained was... boundless shock and indescribable elation.

Because in that moment, he finally understood what Hu Xuan had meant by "Container."

Yes — what had entered his consciousness was a Container.

A Container tinged with the color of Deceit!

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## Chapter 865: The Container Cheng Shi Secretly Stole

By this point, the entire San Dales story was essentially clear to Cheng Shi.

The Tower of Logic's no-faith experiment had failed. The scholars had "nurtured" this city behind the scenes for over a century, creating a "faithless god" for this place without faith.

Then the Erudition Presidium abandoned the city for reasons unknown to outsiders. The clown Crown, wanting to save his hometown, guided all citizens to convert to [Deceit]. And it was precisely this massive faith transfer that tainted the "faithless god" — born from collective belief — with [Deceit]'s color, gradually twisting its "faith."

So from the very beginning, this so-called "faithless god" was actually a container. A container dripping with "faithless" divinity. It only became a container for [Deceit]'s divinity after the faith transfer — hidden in San Dales's past by the Fun God. It had to be the Fun God and no other deity.

He used [Memory] as camouflage, the Secret Peeping Ear as cover, burying the true "essence" beneath San Dales's snow. Until this trial brought the player who could find it. Until Cheng Shi used a "Return of the Past" to summon the memories of this place — then it was "dug" from the frozen earth once more, returned to the world.

And this was the greatest secret of this [Silence] trial!

So aside from Cheng Shi, everyone had gotten it wrong.

The "death-fearing" War Supervisor only heard his teammates' secrets.

Long Jing thought he'd witnessed Lord Yu Xi's past.

Li Jingming confirmed that this so-called "Yu Xi" was collecting broken mask fragments.

And Zhen Xin had verified Yu Xi's existence, believing she'd seen through the relationship between the Jokers and Yu Xi.

As for Squinty Zhang...

He seemed to have seen more than the others, but was ultimately still confined to the "Yu Xi" perspective.

Only Cheng Shi — he didn't just uncover Brother Mouth and the others' past. He'd seized the one treasure buried beneath the Joy Theater.

So a visiting clown, on a stage where clowns once also performed, executed a breathtaking [Silence] trick — slipping the only secret into his own consciousness without anyone noticing.

And this was exactly why he could continue performing this drama on the Joy Theater's stage in San Dales's past.

When he pulled back the curtain, he'd activated the container's aura, fabricated eerie fluctuations, and made everyone believe this was a faithless god. He then wrote an ending that told the other players:

This deity, "fed" by "faithlessness," had already... "fallen" during the faith transfer.

He didn't dare gamble on whether other historical records mentioned it, so he couldn't fully hide the faithless god's traces. Instead, the clown used one small, clever trick to slip past every watchful eye — snuffing out the faithless god's traces within the memory of history.

The method he used to fabricate the faithless god was equally simple — another tool from [Memory]:

Past Reflection.

The Dragon King's generosity was still paying dividends!

Cheng Shi used Past Reflection to conjure a mechanical, blank-faced copy of himself on stage, then let it slowly dissipate.

Since all of San Dales was one massive "Return of the Past," in this space where overwhelming [Deceit] and [Memory] powers intertwined, Li Jingming didn't grow suspicious over minor [Memory] fluctuations.

More importantly, the Dragon King's attention had been entirely commandeered by Cheng Shi's performance. He was puzzling over the cause and effect of this eerie deity's appearance, overlooking the most surface-level details.

Just like that, Cheng Shi manufactured a perfect excuse for the faithless god's dissolution — then swallowed whole that [Deceit]-tinted container.

As for the so-called "Yu Xi possession," he had merely activated every last drop of the container's aura, letting the divine pressure — one that only existed in actual deities — help him create a flawless deception.

Cheng Shi did this to leave himself an escape route for his guidance.

The existence of Shi Zhen, honestly speaking, was hard to explain given Cheng Shi's identity. But if it was the real Yu Xi speaking, that would spare him an entire chain of further lies.

Not that it was entirely hassle-free. At the very least, he'd need to hash things out with Squinty Zhang, who'd already grown suspicious.

This Steady Faction member had definitely noticed something. The Fun God might have even confided something to him. Since Squinty Zhang could hide one passage, he could hide countless more.

After the real Crown's death, nobody could know what messages he'd received from the Fun God. The only thing Cheng Shi was confident about: no matter what, with that gentleman's standing, Squinty Zhang was absolutely reliable. That's why he'd dared to perform so freely on stage, pursuing maximum advantage.

Whether guiding Zhen Xin toward [Chaos] or introducing Long Jing to Shi Zhen — every move Cheng Shi made was a probe against Them.

Before, he would never have been this aggressive. But now he'd obtained a container "of his own." Add to that his troublesome Benefactor apparently itching to test the [Origin] beyond sliced universes — Cheng Shi had no choice but to quicken his own pace.

On the small scale: he needed to secure the Chosen position before the Fun God made His move.

On the grand scale: on the path to exploring the universe's true nature, the things he'd seen and heard had genuinely sparked his curiosity. He wanted to know what this world actually was. On the Fun God's road of upward probing, could he — a mere mortal — actually help?

And if not, then after the Fun God "met with trouble," could he leverage his cards to inherit His status and authority — just as Big Cat had done?

People change. Under [Deceit]'s influence, little greedy Cheng Shi's mindset had shifted from passive acceptance to active aggression. His opponents were no longer limited to fellow players. They'd become the servant gods buried in history's past — and even those who sat upon the sixteen divine thrones, high above all!

These operations after picking up the container were his very first step.

The trial's remaining time was winding down. After Lord Yu Xi "reasonably" rewarded everyone, He seemed to depart from Cheng Shi's body.

A bewildered Cheng Shi jolted, eyes wide with disbelief as he stared at the Magician and Squinty Zhang before him. But he quickly masked his shock, turning his head away and acting as if nothing had happened.

Seeing this, Zhen Xin grew even more certain of her suspicions. She frowned slightly, using an illusion to cover Yu Xi's departing figure, then concealed herself and Zhang Jizu within the stage's false imagery — making it appear as though they'd left the trial directly.

Li Jingming smiled and cloaked himself similarly.

Long Jing had received a promise but not guidance on how to approach Lord Shi Zhen. He was anxious but knew urgency wouldn't help now. So with a shifting expression, he left — becoming the first to clear this trial as a... "clown."

Once they sensed Long Jing's departure, the four Jokers, as if sharing the same thought, reappeared in the theater named Joy. They exchanged glances, then turned — each with a different expression — toward Cheng Shi.

Cheng Shi's face was stiff and uncomfortable. After a long silence, he sighed with utmost resignation:

"I hate to admit it, but what happened just now really wasn't me. It was Him.

I don't know when He came. I don't know why He came. I only know He didn't take the Secret Peeping Ear from me — but He rewrote my script.

I'd only planned to squeeze some useful intel out of Long Jing. But He... agreed to Long Jing's request and introduced him to that Shi Zhen.

So, everyone — this ignorant fool wants to ask: has any of you ever heard of an existence called Shi Zhen?"

As his words fell, silence reclaimed the room once more.

...

Chapter 866: The First Joker Society Meeting?

The players, of course, had never heard of "Shi Zhen."

Among this group of Chosen Ones, the only player who had known about Shi Zhen was already dead—and had died at Shi Zhen's own hands.

The identity Cheng Shi had fabricated was likely known only to the Fun God, since the Universal Clock Platform at the time had been the Fun God's incarnation. Even Time itself probably had no idea that one of its "devout servants" was still wandering around out there.

Cheng Shi hadn't revealed this identity because he was confident he could find Time's true Temple and impersonate Shi Zhen within it. He simply wanted to probe whether he could extract the same treatment from Time that he'd gotten as the Chaos Envoy Ultraman.

After all, Time didn't have a time-management "corporation," so finding an "outsourced heir" wasn't entirely unreasonable, right?

This opportunistic probe might not succeed, but Cheng Shi knew that if you never tried, you'd definitely never succeed.

Fate above—what if it worked?

Change was something no one could predict. He was gambling on a no-risk, all-reward probability!

The other players present had already been led astray by Cheng Shi's little script. They began pondering why Yu Xi had suddenly appeared and why he'd agreed to Long Jing's request to guide an Acrobat closer to Time.

The scene looked more like the mysterious Yu Xi had taken a liking to Long Jing and tossed this sole "devout" follower in the performance a piece of candy. Beyond that, only Zhen Xin's thinking was bold enough to guess that Lord Yu Xi might be using Long Jing to probe Time.

The relationships between gods were far too complex—especially when the Fun God was involved, doubling the complexity. So after thinking it over for a long time without reaching any conclusions, everyone simply gave up and turned their attention to the current situation.

The trial had entered its countdown. Once each person was certain they understood the secret of this trial, they could leave at any time. Yet none of the four made a move.

They studied one another. The Dragon King in particular was not only sparring with Zhen Xin through glances, but also observing Zhang Jizu with keen interest while watching Cheng Shi's reactions. Before long, he confirmed something:

Everyone present was a Joker.

It was a guess with zero evidence, but Li Jingming trusted his instincts.

And if this guess was correct, it meant that these people's little charade just now had been an open scheme to undermine Long Jing—only to have their plan disrupted by the arrival of the real Yu Xi.

Now that was interesting. A Joker performing plays for Void hadn't recruited the "devout" Acrobat, but had instead enlisted a follower of Death who had nothing to do with Void. By that logic, this squinty-eyed Gravekeeper must have... merged with Deceit?

The eyes of clever people speak volumes. Despite the silence in the room, four gazes swept back and forth as though a heated debate were raging.

Before long, Zhen Xin let out a soft laugh. "Why so serious? Shouldn't this be a time for internal discussion?"

She'd noticed the Dragon King's curiosity about Mi Laozhang's presence and guessed that the Dragon King was a relatively recent addition himself. So when she spoke, she deliberately concealed her own newcomer status and broke the silence with an attitude of "I know we're all on the same side."

The moment the Dragon King heard this, he immediately realized why, when he'd asked who was in the Joker Society in front of Cheng Shi, the other man had dodged the question and refused to give a straight answer.

Because everyone knew that Zhen Xin and he didn't get along.

Indeed—he should have guessed. How could a troupe of tricksters performing for Void possibly not include the long-reigning number one on the Deceit rankings?

Li Jingming figured Cheng Shi probably hadn't wanted him to refuse the organization because of Zhen Xin, but that was an unnecessary worry.

Honestly, while he was at odds with Zhen Yi, it was limited to Zhen Yi alone. Toward Zhen Xin, curiosity had always outweighed antagonism. He was deeply interested in how Zhen Yi had come into being and wanted to collect memories related to the Zhen sisters.

Unfortunately, Zhen Xin had always been somewhat guarded around him because of her sister.

This attitude puzzled the Dragon King. After all, by everyone's account, Zhen Xin was someone who excelled at cooperation and wasn't excessively influenced by her sister's emotions. So was her wariness because the sisters harbored memories they didn't want him to record?

Li Jingming pondered for a moment, regarded the people before him, and responded with a smile:

"An unexpected encounter, but not unexpected people—that makes for an interesting memory.

"I've gained quite a lot from this trial. Although in the end I still lost to a certain someone, I'll keep my promise.

"This isn't the place for conversation. Silence's influence is still in effect. I look forward to our next meeting.

"I hope that when that time comes, we can exchange some more interesting experiences."

With that, he looked at Zhen Xin and Cheng Shi in turn, then nodded to Zhang Jizu before his figure slowly faded and he departed the trial.

Zhen Xin let out a soft laugh and glanced at Cheng Shi. "What Li Jingming said doesn't sound like a veteran Joker. Hmph—now I'm wondering if the only real Jokers here are just you two."

"Cheng Shi, is there a single honest word in that mouth of yours?"

Cheng Shi blinked, then pouted. "How are the things Cheng Shi says not honest?"

"Besides, Miss Magician, when you ask that question, don't you wonder if there's any honesty in your own mouth?"

"..."

That wasn't an easy question to answer. Zhen Xin shook her head with a wry smile, then waved to the two remaining people and prepared to leave. She could tell these two still had things to discuss.

"You know how to reach me. Wait for my message—I'll come find you with the results of my audience, Cheng Shi. I hope by then there'll be a few genuinely honest words in that mouth of yours."

With that, Zhen Xin departed as well.

In an instant, only Cheng Shi and Zhang Jizu remained in the theater, facing each other.

Cheng Shi knew Mi Laozhang must have noticed something, but he couldn't be sure how much the other man had figured out. Yet Zhang Jizu didn't interrogate Cheng Shi about anything. Instead, he asked a baffling question:

"Do you have an item that can erase memories?"

"?"

Cheng Shi had no idea what Zhang Jizu was planning, but he still nodded with a strange expression and produced the Remembrance Needle he had swiped from Qin Xin of another world.

"Got something weighing on your mind?"

Zhang Jizu's eyes narrowed as he studied Cheng Shi for a moment, then took the syringe from his hand. His tone carried a hint of gravity. "I've figured it out."

Cheng Shi's heart lurched, but his expression remained unchanged. "Figured what out?"

"Hold on—Mi Laozhang, in this little time you've already merged with Fate again?"

"Why do you love speaking in riddles so much?"

Zhang Jizu's eyes narrowed even further. It wasn't that he didn't want to speak—he didn't dare!

He believed he'd uncovered Yu Xi's secret, but he wasn't sure whether bringing it up directly would cause trouble for Cheng Shi. So he couldn't bring himself to say it. He even wanted to forget the whole thing, lest he blurt something out and drag the person in question into dangerous depths.

Cheng Shi felt his skin prickle under Mi Laozhang's gaze, but soon he realized the other man's ambiguous attitude wasn't him playing a guessing game. There was simply something he couldn't say.

Connecting the dots—the only issue between them right now was the question of Yu Xi's authenticity—it suddenly dawned on Cheng Shi that Mi Laozhang's concern likely stemmed from "the real Yu Xi."

Good news: he apparently didn't need to rack his brain explaining Yu Xi's authenticity anymore, because Mi Laozhang's reaction already showed he believed such a Servant God existed.

Bad news: the man seemed to have jumped to the wrong conclusion—who knew where his thoughts had wandered.

Cheng Shi was conflicted. He felt there was no need for Mi Laozhang to worry this much, but his own web of lies made it difficult to speak up. Yet the ever-steady Zhang Jizu ultimately took a small risk for the sake of his friend. He produced another slip of paper and placed it in Cheng Shi's hand, then said with a solemn expression:

"Drawing close is a risk. Embracing is a risk. Devotion is an even greater risk.

"There's truly nothing absolutely steady in this world, but Cheng Shi... be yourself.

"Being yourself is the steadiest course through these countless dangers."

With that, Zhang Jizu used the Remembrance Needle in his hand.

Cheng Shi had absolutely no idea what Mi Laozhang meant—until he read the words Deceit had spoken to Mi Laozhang about "Yu Xi," written on that slip of paper:

"He never appeared, nor did He ever vanish.

"When you learn of Him, you do not truly know Him.

"When you understand Him, you do not truly understand Him.

"Only He knows and understands Himself. And once an outsider truly knows Him, truly understands Him, then He...

"...ceases to be Himself."

After reading it, he immediately understood what Zhang Jizu had been wary of.

Consider everything Cheng Shi had told Mi Laozhang about Yu Xi:

Yu Xi had sought him out → he'd split off a second personality → the second personality was Deceit → he'd acquired a creation of Deceit, a fragment of Yu Xi → he'd attempted to impersonate Yu Xi → Yu Xi had descended upon him...

This chain of revelations, combined with Deceit's deliberately ambiguous "guidance," had likely led Mi Laozhang to a terrifying possibility: the long-vanished Yu Xi seemed to be resurrecting itself through a method akin to "seizing a body."

And the method of resurrection was to find the shell most suited to Deceit's divinity, have that shell voluntarily collect every fragment of Yu Xi, and then, once all the pieces were united...

...Yu Xi might truly be reborn.

As for what would happen to that shell afterward... no one could foresee the ending. No one could say for certain.

This was Zhang Jizu's greatest fear. He suspected that what Yu Xi had guided Cheng Shi to split off wasn't Cheng Shi's own personality at all, but a Yu Xi personality that was slowly restoring itself!

Mi Laozhang had gotten it entirely wrong, misled by Cheng Shi's own fabrications—Cheng Shi had no second personality, and the name "Yu Xi" was something he'd made up on the spot. But Mi Laozhang's line of thinking still sparked a realization:

Even without a second personality, wouldn't the real "Yu Xi" still descend?

Once all the fragments were gathered and that possibly-existing mask was restored, would he still be himself when that moment came?

Were so-called "Collections" nothing more than shells prepared for other "beings"?

How else could he explain why Fool's Lips had bound itself to him through fusion?

Was Brother Mouth the beginning of everything—the starting point of this resurrection plan?

At this thought, Cheng Shi's heart clenched. Honestly, he didn't want to believe it was a conspiracy.

Though his stance with the Fear Faction made him feel sufficiently close to his Benefactor, he had to remember that when he'd first acquired Brother Mouth, he hadn't been a member of the Fear Faction at all.

At that early crossroads of fate—when his "devotion" was yet unblossomed and his fear still shallow—had the Clown's role truly been nothing more than that of a clown?

Cheng Shi was no longer certain. After a long internal struggle, he decided to ask Brother Mouth in the most direct way possible—even though that mouth had never spoken a single honest word.

"Brother Mouth, if all the fragments are gathered, what happens?"

Fool's Lips stayed silent for a long time. Cheng Shi's heart sank slowly, but eventually it replied—though the answer sent his heart plummeting to rock bottom.

"You finally figured it out..."

"!" Cheng Shi clenched his fists, every nerve taut. But he still feigned nonchalance, allowing a light laugh to cross his mind, as though the matter were nothing but a passing breeze. "I'm just a shell?"

"Yes..."

"...A shell meant to contain Yu Xi? He truly exists?"

"No, this has nothing to do with Yu Xi."

"Nothing to do with Yu Xi? Then what does it have to do with?" The words burst from Cheng Shi's mind, but his expression shifted an instant later as realization hit. It was too late, though—Fool's Lips had already finished speaking.

"It has to do with an idiot, because inside this stinking hide of yours dwells the soul of a brainless clown.

"A clown and a fool."

"..."

Ha. Ha.

I, Cheng Shi, am the clown.

Though Brother Mouth had just roasted him with dripping sarcasm, Cheng Shi actually found himself smiling with genuine amusement.

He knew Brother Mouth was using mockery to dissolve his doubts. Still, he didn't discard his unease entirely. A sliver of wariness remained buried in his heart. Until he understood the true purpose of the "Mask," caution was still necessary.

Meanwhile, Zhang Jizu emerged from the Remembrance Needle's effects. He looked at Cheng Shi and slowly narrowed his eyes.

"What did I just forget?"

Cheng Shi's grin widened, even more radiant than before. Behind his back, his hand crumpled the slip of paper to dust. Since Mi Laozhang hadn't wanted to cause him trouble, he might as well let the man forget completely.

"Laozhang, you said you owe me a hundred S-rank items. Remember?"

"?"

Zhang Jizu's eyes narrowed to slits, his eyelids twitching wildly. "Good thing I forgot."

"Forgetting means you don't have to pay up?"

"How am I supposed to pay for something I don't remember? If you really want to cash in, I'll settle the debt with grave plots.

"I'll reserve a hundred burial sites for you in the Cemetery."

"???" Cheng Shi laughed despite his indignation. "What, I die and then have to relocate ninety-nine times?"

"You don't have to relocate. Just put a little piece in each one."

The moment those words left his mouth, both men froze and stared at each other before sinking into silence.

This time, even Fool's Lips went quiet.

"..."

'Somehow it feels like I was just insulted by proxy... what do I do?'

Chapter 867: San Dales Is a Clown Factory

The trial's remaining time was running out. After that exchange of anxieties, Cheng Shi had nothing else to convey to Mi Laozhang.

A single Yu Xi identity had already provoked such wariness from Mi Laozhang. If he revealed the truth about obtaining the Container, in the other man's eyes he'd probably already be on the verge of being replaced by Yu Xi...

Cheng Shi's emotions churned—a bittersweet mix. Touched by his friend's concern, yet wondering when this endless chain of lies would finally reach its end.

But so what if it never did? To spare his friend from ever feeling "deceived," all he could do was press forward, burying his sincerity beneath even more falsehoods.

Just like Zhen Xin. If one day the lies he'd woven fooled the entire world—even himself—would those lies still be lies?

No. That would be Cheng Shi's honest heart.

In this peculiar atmosphere, Cheng Shi bade farewell to Zhang Jizu. He expressed genuine gratitude for Mi Laozhang's help in San Dales and stated plainly that his promises remained in effect—whenever the man needed assistance, he could come straight to him. He even said mobilizing the entire Joker Society wasn't out of the question, since the group's cards were already on the table.

Zhang Jizu only smiled at that, then extended his hand and pointed toward a direction beyond the theater.

He hadn't forgotten that there was still a teammate in this trial—and the Fun God had even bestowed a special "guidance" upon that teammate.

"The way I see it, as long as the secret hasn't been broadcast to the masses, that cautious War Supervisor is probably still in the Devout Land. So as for Deceit's little homework assignment...

"Are you going, or am I?"

Cheng Shi checked the time and smiled. "I'll go. The trial's practically over—we can't very well not let her meet the real Cheng Shi.

"Besides, I might as well borrow Lord Yu Xi's prestige while I'm at it. Maybe I can squeeze out a few more secrets."

That was what he said, but Cheng Shi didn't actually care much about the intelligence or secrets Ai Si might hold. He simply didn't want to let the Fun God's chess piece out of his sight, so he planned to use certain methods to develop her as an off-the-books asset.

Of course, the remark wasn't entirely about Ai Si. By deliberately mentioning "Yu Xi" by name, Cheng Shi was testing what exactly Mi Laozhang had forgotten. He knew that if the man had chosen to forget everything related to Yu Xi, he'd inevitably learn of His existence again during future Joker Society discussions. Since the truth would come out sooner or later, he might as well seize this chance to probe.

To Cheng Shi's surprise, Mi Laozhang showed no unfamiliarity with Yu Xi at all. He simply nodded, apparently having forgotten only his own suspicions and concerns.

And he'd clearly guessed what Cheng Shi was up to. But those secrets in his heart—Cheng Shi had probably figured them out long ago, so there was nothing left to hide.

"Mm. Let's leave it at that then. I may need to go ahead and report this matter to that Lord—otherwise I have a feeling Deceit is scheming against my Benefactor again."

A smile tugged at the corner of Cheng Shi's lips. "That's a funny thing to say, Mi Laozhang. The Fun God isn't your Benefactor too? How impious of you!"

"Even if I'm impious, it's not for certain clowns to judge.

"Before worrying about others' piety, worry about your own.

"I'm off."

With that, Zhang Jizu left the trial without another word.

"..." Cheng Shi was speechless.

He wasn't sure if it was because he'd reaped the biggest rewards and exhausted all his luck, but how come everyone kept getting the last word in?

He shook his head with a rueful laugh and scratched his nose. Taking one last look at the stage behind him, he offered a quiet round of applause for Crown and San Dales' past, then strode toward the theater doors with an expression that betrayed neither sorrow nor joy.

It was time to see this old acquaintance—and to find out whether she'd figured out who the real Cheng Shi was.

Meanwhile, outside the theater, in the Devout Land.

Ai Si hadn't moved an inch. She hadn't dared budge even when violent upheavals shook the Devout Land around her. At some point, she felt the roiling fog beside her recede like the tide, leaving nothing but a lone theater standing in the near distance.

That had to be the trial's final destination, harboring this trial's greatest secret. Yet she still didn't dare approach, because the fog's sudden retreat felt wrong.

Even those Chosen Ones and peak-level players had been forced to surrender their own secrets to earn entry—and she was just a 2,400-point Priest. What made her worthy of the fog parting to welcome her in?

Driven by this simple survival instinct, Ai Si dug a coffin camp into the frozen ground right where she stood and settled in. She stayed there for two full days.

During those two days, she wanted nothing more than for the trial to end quickly. But just before it did, her coffin camp finally received a visitor.

Ai Si felt someone stomp twice—hard—on the ventilation hole above her head.

"War Supervisor, are you part mouse? What are you doing burrowing holes in San Dales?"

"?" Ai Si started. That snarky tone sounded an awful lot like—

"Cheng?!"

Her spirits surged as she thrust her greatsword upward through the frozen earth and crawled out of her tiny camp.

Seeing this old acquaintance living in such "cramped" conditions, Cheng Shi laughed. "If I call you steady, well, one word was enough to bait you out.

"But if I call you careless, you did manage to sit tight through an entire trial without moving.

"What, fallen in love with this place? Planning to settle down in San Dales?"

"..." Definitely him. Absolutely him!

Ai Si glared at Cheng Shi in exasperation. She was about to fire back, but then remembered she'd been helping Long Jing "temper" Cheng Shi earlier, and a twinge of guilt crept in. "You... who won?"

"?" Cheng Shi arched an eyebrow. 'So the War Supervisor does have something up her sleeve.' He flashed a cryptic smile and gave an ambiguous reply. "Guess."

"You're the one who came to find me, not Long Jing—so I suppose he lost..."

"That's not surprising. If he'd had the better odds, Lord Yu Xi would never have sent me to boost his chances..."

"I... Sigh. In the end, I never did manage to latch onto Lord Yu Xi's coattails."

Ai Si sighed, then turned to Cheng Shi with a complicated look. "And I wasn't any help to you, either. But don't worry, Cheng—I won't forget this kindness."

She squeezed the "Never Defeat" potion in her hand. "Make that two kindnesses."

"..."

Hearing these words and watching Ai Si's reactions, Cheng Shi had no idea where to even begin pitying this follower of War.

'Sis, exactly how far off the deep end did you get scammed?'

'Everyone else came here treasure-hunting. You came here purely to get swindled, didn't you?'

'This is San Dales—the ancestral home of clowns—not some MLM den or telecom fraud compound. How did you fall for this many tricks in just three days?'

'What Yu Xi would've told you to help Long Jing?'

'And what on earth is that thing in your hand?'

Cheng Shi's mind was reeling. Thank goodness he'd come out to check, or this old acquaintance would've truly become a clown.

Then again, San Dales really was a clown factory.

Chapter 868: Trial Cleared, Memory's Secret

Cheng Shi shook his head with a smile. 'So Long Jing's bold and careful too—saw Yu Xi just once and dared to impersonate Him. That kind of unbridled imagination isn't far off from my own.'

Still, it worked out. At least it saved him from having to fabricate an elaborate backstory for Yu Xi.

"Whether or not you've latched onto Lord Yu Xi's coattails isn't for you to decide.

"Some people might be a bit timid, but they're reasonably sharp. Most importantly, they're lucky. Why are you glaring at me? I'm just talking—don't take it personally.

"Lord Yu Xi thinks you're reasonably interesting, so He told me to deliver a piece of guidance.

"He says to remember what He told you. That's all."

Ai Si stared blankly, but in the next moment her expression lit up. She grabbed Cheng Shi's arm and asked urgently, "What did Lord Yu Xi say?"

Cheng Shi's lip twitched. "What He said to you—how would I know?"

"Oh, right. What did He say back then?" Ai Si furrowed her brow and began to think. After a moment, she murmured to herself, "He said He didn't need servants—just someone to watch the show with Him... Cheng, help me figure this out. Could Lord Yu Xi be—"

"???"

'Hold on, what?'

'What exactly did Long Jing say to her?'

Cheng Shi blinked in bewilderment. He was about to say something when Ai Si continued:

"—unimpressed by my competence?"

"Even if followers of War don't have the best reputation, I like to think I'm disciplined and efficient. How am I not qualified to be a servant?"

"..."

'False alarm, sis. War is really, truly War, huh!'

Cheng Shi barely suppressed a laugh. He patted Ai Si on the shoulder and consoled her. "Don't doubt yourself. You must have something going for you—otherwise why would Lord Yu Xi send me to find you, right?"

"What do I have going for me?" Ai Si's brain was clearly short-circuiting; the compliment sailed right over her head.

This put Cheng Shi on the spot. He forced an awkward laugh, glanced at Ai Si's fuzzy collar, and said with a perfectly straight face, "Well, your collar is very warm."

"...?"

'That counts as something going for me?'

Ai Si had merely been flustered by the revelation that "Yu Xi still remembered her." She wasn't actually stupid. Once she realized Cheng Shi was teasing her, the shrewd, capable War Supervisor snapped back into focus.

She hoisted her greatsword, ready to bring it down hard on Cheng Shi. But when she saw him standing his ground without flinching, wearing that half-amused smile, she caught her breath, drove the blade into the ground instead, and said stiffly:

"Forget it. In the end, it's my own fault for being impure of heart and greedy for quick gains. I'm sorry, Cheng—I..."

"You're rambling. Do you want to hear the guidance or not?"

"Yes!" Ai Si froze mid-step, her answer crisp and immediate.

"Good. Listen carefully. When the time is right, offer your prayer to Him—to the Lord who sits upon the Bone Throne, sovereign over every departed soul in the universe.

"This is the best ending Lord Yu Xi has arranged for you.

"Since you need your life, rather than relying on others, rely on yourself.

"However, Lord Yu Xi has one additional request: if anything interesting happens during the faith fusion process, make sure to tell Him so He can get a good laugh out of it too. Understood?"

"..."

'Understood. Completely understood!'

'She hadn't accomplished anything at all, and yet she'd earned a chance at faith fusion?!'

'Not even many peak-level players had ever initiated a faith fusion, and she'd only crossed paths with Lord Yu Xi once—and that was enough for an opportunity like this?!'

'Then just how many benefits had Cheng Shi—the one who'd actually won this trial—received?'

'His relationship with Lord Yu Xi...'

'Right—tempering!'

'Lord Yu Xi was tempering Cheng Shi. Had He already marked Cheng Shi as the core force for the Deceit faction?'

'And she herself...'

The shrewd Ai Si was back. She studied Cheng Shi with a complicated gaze, choosing not to ask anything more about his relationship with Yu Xi. Instead, she spoke with genuine sincerity:

"I'll remember. I'll notify you of any news."

Cheng Shi laughed. "Why notify me? Tell Lord Yu Xi directly."

"Cheng, I know my place. Setting aside whether I'm even qualified for regular audiences with that Lord—your help alone entitles you to take whatever amusement you want from me.

"I can't read a god's mind. I don't know what He's plotting. But from my shallow perspective, He's definitely collecting entertainment, and the changes during faith fusion are probably a kind of entertainment.

"Honestly, even if I offer up these amusements, they won't bring me any closer to Him. But for you, they're an excuse to communicate with Him regularly.

"I've figured it out. The coattails I need to grab aren't Lord Yu Xi's—they're yours, Clown Cheng Shi.

"I should've seen it in that very first trial. Cheng, you're a good man—it's just that nothing out of your mouth is honest."

"..."

'Even this gets me a "good guy" card?'

For a moment, Cheng Shi was completely speechless at Ai Si's response.

'Went full circle and I'm the good guy again. I wonder if Long Jing ever considered that the Yu Xi he painstakingly portrayed would end up pushing all the benefits my way.'

'San Dales really is a clown factory.'

Ai Si's expression continued to shift as she seemed to wrestle with something internally. After a moment, she appeared to reach a decision. She turned a grateful look toward Cheng Shi, and in the final moments before the trial ended, rattled off at breakneck speed every secret she'd overheard in the fog.

Truthfully, when Cheng Shi learned that Ai Si hadn't entered the theater, he'd briefly considered pumping her for these secrets. But then he'd thought better of it—these secrets ultimately belonged to his "allies," so he'd dropped the idea.

He never expected them to come full circle, delivered by Ai Si of her own volition.

Interesting.

The other three people's secrets were easy to guess and match to their owners. But the Dragon King—who was the person in his heart whose memories had been lost?

It couldn't be Memory... could it?

Tch. That would be too delicious. Did the Fun God know about this?

As these thoughts swirled, the two of them locked eyes in the trial's final second, exchanged a knowing smile, and exited the Silence trial—one brimming with secrets—together.

San Dales no longer had its snowstorms, and its poor clown had lost his home.

[Wish Trial (Hearing Is Deceiving, Seeing Is Believing — Silence) Challenge Successful]

[Evaluating performance and calculating rewards...]

[Player: Cheng Shi, Performance Rating: S]

[Item Obtained: Self-Deceive Mask (S) x1]

[Item Obtained: Witness Mask (S) x1]

[Item Obtained: Oblivion Mask (S) x1]

[Item Obtained: Envy Mask (S) x1]

[Item Obtained: Surprise Mask (S) x1]

[Road to Ascension +19]

[Ladder of Ascent +3]

[Current Road to Ascension Score: 2,261 — Global Rank: 340,391]

[Current Ladder of Ascent Score: 184 — Path Rank: 35]

[Trial Cleared. Exiting now.]

Chapter 869: Zeroed Out

Reality. A theater in some unknown province.

This theater was undeniably dilapidated—perhaps "dilapidated" was even too generous, seeing as the roof had collapsed long ago, three of the four outer walls had been demolished, and only the wall behind the stage still stood, solitary, as though guarding the stage's last remaining purpose.

But in truth, this place had lost its purpose ages ago. The two leads who had once graced the stage were dead—had been for more than a decade.

Long Jing didn't know why he'd chosen to return here. He only felt that perhaps this was the one place in a world where he walked a tightrope that occasionally gave him the sensation of solid ground beneath his feet. So he'd followed his instincts and come back.

He awoke on the one remaining chair amid the rubble below the stage. The moment his eyes opened, his brow furrowed tightly.

Zero points.

Road to Ascension score: zero.

It wasn't as though Long Jing had never experienced a zero-point trial before. But this time, he'd believed he'd uncovered the ultimate secret. Apparently, he'd been too naive.

Could San Dales have held yet another secret?

It had to. Otherwise, there was no explaining why his Benefactor—the Fun God—had added three points to his Ladder of Ascent...

The Fun God rarely gave him three points. When He did, it was because Long Jing had performed brilliantly, fooling everyone. But on those occasions his Road to Ascension scores were usually high as well.

A situation like today—zero on the Road to Ascension but maxed out on the Ladder—honestly didn't look like approval at all. It looked more like... mockery.

Long Jing felt a devastating blow from his Benefactor.

But why?

'Even if I didn't personally resurrect Lord Yu Xi, even if I fell one move short against Zhen Yi or Cheng Shi, I still earned credit for the ear—and I even received Lord Yu Xi's "recognition." Could that have been fake?'

Long Jing reflected for a long while, then gave up reflecting, and finally arrived at an enthusiastic conclusion:

This wasn't his Benefactor's mockery—it was His praise. Praise for drawing closer to His sole Envoy, for taking another monumental step along the new path of Deceit, one worthy of being recorded in history.

Having consoled himself this way, Long Jing produced a pocket watch and studied its hour hand intently.

'Lord Shi Zhen...'

Lord Yu Xi had called Shi Zhen a "boring old friend," but Long Jing disagreed. He found anything that could grant him power interesting—so he was already eager to pay his respects to this Lord Shi Zhen who represented Time.

The only question was how to arrange an audience. Lord Yu Xi hadn't exactly left instructions...

And would the Fun God even approve of fusing Deceit with Time?

Probably. After all, Lord Yu Xi more or less represented Him, didn't He?

For the moment, Long Jing was caught between elation and worry, his expression cycling through a colorful array of emotions as he sank into thought.

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Reality. A Taoist temple in some unknown province.

The altar candles still flickered; below them, a figure in hemp robes was about to wake.

Li Jingming had actually returned some time ago, but he sat motionless on his meditation cushion, lips moving faintly as though speaking to someone.

This was a rule he'd set for himself since the Faith Game's descent. He never knew when he might forget everything, so he'd devised a method: one by one, he narrated every story he'd witnessed to the ancestral masters of ages past.

Let these long-departed spirits hear what kind of spectacular world this era had become.

Only when the incense smoke curled and thickened did he rise, bow to each ancestral master, then walk step by step to the entrance, gazing out at rain striking the moss-covered stones. Slowly, his brow creased.

Zero points.

Road to Ascension score: zero.

Not only the Road to Ascension—even his Ladder of Ascent score was zero.

Why?

Li Jingming was stunned. Since the Faith Game's descent, this was the first time he'd received a double zero.

So what did it mean? Were the memories he'd just shared with the ancestral masters wrong?

But where were they wrong?

Li Jingming replayed the last trial, analyzing every detail meticulously. His final conclusion:

There was nothing wrong!

Cheng Shi had deceived everyone to obtain the Secret Peeping Ear, then used it to summon Yu Xi's descent. This not only proved that this sentient creation of Deceit was collecting its own fragments—it also proved that the Fate Weaver had a close relationship with Him.

From the surface to the substance, from fact to logic, this particular memory appeared utterly flawless. So why had he scored zero?

Silence hadn't given him points, which meant the secret he'd believed he'd seen through was wrong—but not egregiously so.

And Memory hadn't given him points either... which could only mean the memories he'd recorded were meaningless—though not truly false.

So what other secret had this trial hidden from him, left undiscovered?

Was it something that had happened during the time Zhen Xin and Cheng Shi had vanished? Or had Zhang Jizu—who had disappeared from the very start—been concealing something?

Or, to push his speculation further, had there been a problem with that sentient creation of Deceit itself?

At this thought, Li Jingming's gaze began to flicker. He wasn't questioning Yu Xi's authenticity—rather, the mention of "sentient creations" reminded him that he happened to have one of his own.

The only issue was that the thing was somewhat unnerving, and he instinctively preferred not to get too deeply involved with it.

Then again, using it occasionally to verify certain things shouldn't be a problem, right?

After a moment's deliberation, Li Jingming retrieved the mirror from his spatial storage.

It was a full-length mirror as tall as a person, ornately framed in an antique style. The mirror's surface churned with deep azure radiance, its edges etched with serene, sleeping smiles. Only the back stood in jarring contrast to the front—a mass of protruding humanoid figures, eyes shut, faces contorted in terror, mouths agape in silent screams.

Their hands clutched their own throats as if suffocating. Their gaping mouths and nostrils twisted grotesquely, as though desperately gasping for one last breath of air.

The design was profoundly unsettling. It looked nothing like a mirror belonging to Memory, and far more like a work of art from Corruption.

The moment this mirror appeared in the Taoist temple, Li Jingming's expression turned exceptionally grave. He gazed at his reflection—at the version of himself that stared back with mocking eyes—and asked his first question of the day:

"Do you know Yu Xi?"

The Li Jingming in the mirror let out a soft laugh, pulled out his hairpin and let the topknot unravel, hair cascading loose. He shook his head casually, and a flicker of something inscrutable passed through his eyes before he replied with a derisive hum:

"Of course I do. You know where I lead to—so you should know that the memories I hold are far more numerous than you could imagine.

"However, Li Jingming, until you agree to our terms, I won't answer a single question more.

"Freeloading doesn't befit a follower of Memory who values the fair exchange of memories."

Li Jingming arched a brow, a playful smile on his lips. 'Even if you don't want me freeloading, I already have.'

This trick was indeed effective.

But he said nothing in reply. Instead, he carefully averted his gaze, refusing to look at the mirror's surface that kept tugging at his emotions.

And remarkably, the moment his gaze departed—even though he still stood directly in front of the mirror—the reflection inside simply vanished.

Just like that, Li Jingming turned his back, reached behind him, and felt along the mirror's frame. Murmuring a prayer to Memory, he was instantly pulled from reality by the mirror's surface and deposited within a vast, magnificent... Collection Hall.

The Collection Hall of Memory!

This was where Li Jingming's Benefactor kept His prized possessions.

It wasn't Li Jingming's first visit. He'd come here the very first time he'd investigated the mirror's purpose, and it was during that visit that he'd inadvertently stumbled upon a secret about his Benefactor.

Specifically...

Within this Collection Hall, there was a painting that no mortal could approach—and it had been painted over. Li Jingming could tell that the one who'd done the painting over was Memory Himself.

Because that canvas pulsed with the purest, most concentrated power of Memory imaginable. Even he—Memory's own Chosen One—was shaken, even faintly frightened, by the sheer intensity of that refined force.

He dared not imagine how many memories had been aggregated into it, but he could guess that any collection piece His Benefactor kept here under such tight seal could not be a simple memory.

Though the painting's content had been obscured, its shape remained visible. And as it happened, that shape looked exactly like...

Li Jingming silently produced his mask and raised it slowly, aligning it between his eyes and the painting. The comparison:

A perfect match. Not a fraction off.

"Interesting. Could this be the reason I scored zero, Lord Benefactor?"

"But why would You share this secret with me?"

Chapter 870: Still Zeroed Out

Reality. A museum in some unknown province.

Zhen Xin stood before an exhibit composed of twelve scalpels arranged into a figure, her brow slightly furrowed.

Zero points.

Road to Ascension score: zero.

But interestingly, her Ladder of Ascent score was three—meaning the Fun God had highly praised her performance in the last trial, yet Silence had been less than pleased.

Why?

Was the secret wrong? Where was the mistake?

Zhen Xin replayed each scene from her recent memory, reviewing them one by one. After the review, she once again highlighted the two points of doubt in her mind. One was the timing of Yu Xi's descent. The other was Zhang Jizu's concealment—no, questioning—of Cheng Shi's identity.

The Death Chosen had clearly noticed something, which was why he'd mentioned such a precise time as "the end of the fourth month." But looking back through Cheng Shi's memories, all he'd done at the end of the fourth month was participate in an utterly ordinary special trial—one that had nothing to do with Deceit whatsoever. His teammates had been completely unremarkable, and it couldn't possibly have been the moment he'd first encountered Yu Xi.

Or rather, across all of Cheng Shi's memories from the first six months of the Faith Game, he'd never even known the name "Yu Xi." He must have encountered Yu Xi only within the last two months. So why had Zhang Jizu asked that kind of question?

Had Cheng Shi deceived him?

Interesting. If so, the composition of the Joker Society was quite telling.

Everyone appeared to treat each other with sincerity, yet each of them still harbored lies. This organization that drew ever closer to Yu Xi seemed to have inherited Deceit's signature style—impossible to trust unconditionally.

But none of that particularly bothered Zhen Xin. After all, what connected her and Cheng Shi wasn't the Joker Society. It was that eerily similar yet completely opposite past they shared—and An Mingyu, who didn't belong to this world.

She was deeply curious about the world Ming Yu had gone to. Even more so about what other worlds beyond this one looked like, beyond the projections of Time. The mere thought of those cosmic layers—so disorienting that even a second of contemplation scrambled one's thoughts—held an irresistible allure for her. It was like being a child again, discovering the world outside the orphanage bit by bit alongside Ming Yu.

Speaking of Ming Yu...

Zhen Xin's brow creased slightly. After several recent exchanges, she could clearly sense that Ming Yu was hiding something from her. She didn't think that was inherently problematic, but she worried it might conceal risks that Ming Yu herself hadn't recognized—especially regarding... faith fusion.

When Fate drew close to Death, Zhen Xin couldn't help feeling it was an ill omen.

That was precisely why she'd agreed without hesitation when Cheng Shi offered her a direction. She wanted to confirm that faith fusion wouldn't bring any harm to the individual, so she could put her mind at ease and focus outward on whatever other pressures Ming Yu might be facing.

Zhen Xin hadn't yet grown familiar with the Ming Yu from the other world, but as she'd said—regardless of which Ming Yu, she was still Ming Yu.

Managing the relationship with the new Ming Yu wasn't the hard part. The real difficulty was solving her biggest immediate problem: she'd already made bold promises, but in truth she had no idea how to secure an audience with Chaos.

Should she simply pray to the Fun God, asking Him to send her to meet Chaos?

No—that was far too direct. No entertainment value. Zhen Xin knew her Benefactor all too well. You could blaspheme His faith, but only if the blasphemy was amusing.

So Zhen Xin began to think, and before long she'd landed on a method—an entertaining form of blasphemy.

She produced a notebook and began scribbling, and shortly afterward brought over a large number of archived records from the History School, rummaging through them. Of course, all of this was theater—just props to make the "scene" more convincing.

Once she'd finished, she let out a soft laugh and turned her gaze to the scalpel exhibit.

"A young lady doing such shameless things all the time—that's really no good."

With that, Zhen Xin removed the third "leg" from the exhibit and repositioned it in the scalpel figurine's hand.

"Show enemies the blade, show friends the lie—this little clown has never been honest..."

"But no matter. When one can't approach a trickster with lies, perhaps it's time to try sincerity instead."

"Just like Hong Lin..."

"She truly was a druid blessed by good fortune. Following her own heart, she stumbled onto the softest spot in the clown's soul."

"Indeed, falsehood is never truly false. It merely yearns to be real."

"And so does the clown."

After that little reverie, Zhen Xin closed her eyes with a smile. When she opened them again, the corners of her lips were already curled upward, her entire demeanor transformed—becoming... playful.

Those bright, mischievous eyes darted around, and it was as though a fountain of ideas had erupted inside that head brimming with wild fantasies.

"Hee-hee~

"Finally out! Let me see what my dear sister's been researching now."

No sooner had Zhen Yi spoken than she spotted her prized exhibit tampered with. She froze, her expression twisting into something bizarre. While restoring the scalpel to its original position with one hand, she dialed her sister with the other.

With practiced ease, she tapped Zhen Xin's name on the phone screen, and before the call even connected, she launched into a merciless barrage of snark:

"You've changed, Sis. No matter how desperate you are, you can't just go touching a strange man's third leg without his permission.

"Maybe you're ready for that, but I'm certainly not."

"...Zhen! Yi!" The line was still ringing, yet from Zhen Yi's own mouth came a voice of an entirely different tone. "So now you'll admit we share a body? Then when someone... that time..."

"Someone what?"

"I don't recall anyone getting their little melons groped. Oooh, I know—a maiden's spring has finally arrived!

"Hee~

"If you really want to sink into a sea of desire with little Cheng Shi, your sweet and considerate little sister absolutely won't object. But you'll have to take all those memories with you, okay? Don't want to corrupt the children.

"I'm the child, by the way."

"Zhen Yi!" Zhen Xin's voice was now grinding through clenched teeth. "We agreed on a schedule—this is still my time!"

"What? Bad signal—can't hear you—gotta go, bye!"

With that, Zhen Yi decisively hung up, her eyes sparkling with gleeful brilliance.

She surveyed the scattered books around her, flipped through her sister's notes, and before long found records pertaining to faith fusion in one of the notebooks.

So her sister had been listing all the options, weighing faith fusion.

Though Zhen Yi was adamant that she herself would never undergo faith fusion, she had no objection to her sister doing so. And when she saw that her sister had crossed out Chaos first as an elimination pick, a grin instantly spread across her face.

"Why not Chaos?"

"Chaos is wonderful! The more chaotic, the more fun— isn't it?"

"Hee~"

"Sis just hasn't thought it through. Well then, let her adorable little sister lend a hand."

With that, Zhen Yi plopped down cross-legged on the floor and began her prayer.

"Cannot distinguish true from false, need not debate real from illusory.

"Come quick, Benefactor—Zhen Yi misses you!"