

The Gods 831

Chapter 831: Someone Died

The gale couldn't scatter the fog, and it certainly couldn't scatter the doubts in the Players' hearts.

The Devout Land was indeed anything but simple — far more treacherous than the scavengers let on.

Halfway through the fog, Zhang Jizu had completely lost all sense of direction. He couldn't confirm whether he was still heading toward the Faith Theater.

To stay on course, he calibrated by the howling wind, maintaining a fixed angle relative to its direction as he pressed forward.

But direction was the least of his problems. The real problem was...

Cheng Shi had vanished.

Cheng Shi had been close behind him, yet somehow — while both had their eyes wide open — they'd separated. Even the trail of firefly lamps scattered along the way had been snuffed out and swept away by the wind. In this eerie fog where visibility barely reached a dozen paces, all contact was severed.

Zhang Jizu couldn't tell whether the fog had severed their link or Cheng Shi had deliberately slipped away. Regardless, he was alone now, advancing toward the Theater by himself.

The distance shouldn't have been long, yet he walked and walked and walked — until he stopped mid-stride, brow furrowed, increasingly convinced that merely progressing in silence would never reach the other side. There had to be additional rules hidden in this twisted fog.

That was when a figure re-entered his field of vision.

Ai Si!

That towering wine-red ponytail swayed through the mist like a beacon.

But the War Supervisor wasn't walking toward him. She was approaching him backwards — in a thoroughly absurd reverse-walking posture.

She'd been watching the sides, paying no attention to what was behind her. Only when a powerful arm pressed against her back did she jolt, hoisting the great sword in a reflex slash.

Zhang Jizu squinted. A single small scalpel caught the savage chop.

Seeing that cold-glinting scalpel, Ai Si's eyes flew wide. She spun around.

'Surname Cheng!?'

'Oh — Zhang Chosen. Also good.'

She was about to open her mouth to express relief — then snapped it shut, blinking furiously, apparently telegraphing her anxiety through some kind of eye-code.

Strangely enough, Zhang Jizu deciphered the random blinking. He decided she was saying: 'We can't get out.'

He didn't respond. Instead, he studied her with guarded eyes, and wrote a number in the frozen snow with his toe: 30.

The question: the thirty seconds are long past. Why do you still have the Silence effect?

But Ai Si had no idea what he meant. She dragged her blade across the ground, writing:

?

Seeing the question mark, Zhang Jizu smiled. He'd identified her.

She wasn't the fake Ai Si — she was the genuine War Supervisor. Because nobody else in this team would be reckless enough to walk backwards through a fog with zero guard up.

Her logic was easy to guess. 'If walking forward doesn't reach the end, try going backward.'

Not wrong, exactly. Just... not brilliantly right. Classic War-follower thinking.

But encountering an Ai Si beat encountering a Cheng Shi. So he smiled, erased the "30" and the "?", and wrote instead: Where's Long Jing?

A flicker crossed Ai Si's face. She didn't dare reveal Lord Yu Xi's involvement. So she wrote what she could.

"Couldn't beat him. But he deliberately staggered his timing from yours. After he entered, I followed."

The written word wouldn't trigger the Master of Deception. But Mi Laozhang's sharp eyes had already caught the momentary tension on her face. He filed it away silently.

'The War Supervisor and the Acrobat have struck some new deal. The question is what Long Jing promised her.'

Zhang Jizu didn't dwell on the minutiae. Staying alert, he and Ai Si exchanged notes — but both were equally lost, only cross-referencing paths they'd each already walked.

Before long, their expressions turned grim.

The endless fog was a dead end. Everyone was trapped.

Seeing Zhang Jizu motionless for too long, Ai Si had a flash of inspiration and scrawled on the ground: "Let's find Surname Cheng. He has more tricks."

Zhang Jizu read it and smiled. True — Cheng Shi wanted that artifact badly enough that there was no chance he'd simply give up halfway. So where was the Fate Weaver now? And how would he break this deadlock in a fog that defied all orientation?

'Silence. Deceit. Truth...'

'Fog. Secret Peeping Ear. No-Faith Experiment.'

If the fog existed to bar outsiders from the Theater, and the "Wild God" holding the Secret Peeping Ear was hiding inside, then the current situation was clear: "It" had rejected every Player's visit.

What could convince "It" to open the door? What was the ticket for admission?

Zhang Jizu fell into contemplation again — but not for long. He suddenly looked up, eyes narrowing as though struck by an idea. He wrote in the snow at their feet:

"I might have a method. Are you brave enough to try?"

'Am I brave enough to try?'

Ai Si froze, realizing he probably wanted her as a test subject.

Expression shifting, her hand behind her back quietly closed around a vial of... Never-Falling potion.

Truthfully, she didn't want to try. Whatever he had in mind was almost certainly dangerous. But she was more afraid he'd force her — in peak-tier games, strong-arming weaker teammates happened all the time.

Zhang Chosen had been perfectly normal until now. But here and now was different — because no one was watching.

Order never sprouts in fetid soil.

So the War Supervisor's nerves pulled taut. She even held the suspect potion Cheng Shi had given her in her other hand.

But Zhang Jizu read her hesitation. He was no monster of cold logic. After a thoughtful nod, he wiped his writing away and wrote something new:

"Then we wait."

'Wait? For what?'

'For the answer to walk in on its own?'

Ai Si was baffled. But she learned what the Death Chosen was waiting for almost immediately.

Because that same distorted voice — the one that had shrieked "God Concubine" — exploded in their ears without warning.

And this time it carried a line that was utterly confusing yet instinctively chilling.

"So it's afraid too..."

'Afraid?'

'Who's afraid!?!'

'Who is "it"?'

Ai Si stood stunned — then her eyes went wide. She stared at Zhang Jizu in horror, pupils quaking:

'Someone... died?'

Indeed. Someone had died.

And not just one — because the moment that secret was broadcast, a second one followed immediately.

"I think it's lying to me, but I still want to know what's inside."

The voice faded. Zhang Jizu squinted hard, face grave, mulling over whose deepest secret each statement could be.

And he confirmed one thing: someone had finally arrived at the same conclusion he had.

The ticket to open the Theater's doors might be surrendering your greatest secret.

Why else would the specter roam the fog, harvesting invaders' lives?

It didn't want the lives themselves. It wanted what those lives carried — the secrets no one else knew.

Someone had found the key to breaking through.

But the question was: who were these two trailblazers?

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Chapter 832: Six Secrets

Ai Si snapped back to focus. She suddenly realized Zhang Chosen's "method" was probably exactly what that broadcast secret implied: you had to die.

Zhang Jizu saw that she understood. He nodded and pointed at his own mouth. The gesture was aimed at himself, but the implication was clearly for Ai Si.

"Break the silence, offer a secret" — that might be the key to escaping the fog. And with a Gravekeeper present, no one would truly die.

Zhang Jizu wasn't pressuring Ai Si. He was reassuring her. He could see she was tense.

The War Supervisor felt the Death Chosen's consideration. But... she still stepped back, shaking her head with an apologetic look.

She didn't want to die.

Zhang Jizu squinted, immediately wondering if she was angling to hear his post-death secret. But after studying her for a while, he concluded that wasn't it. The War Supervisor genuinely "feared death."

Not death itself — with him present, nobody would stay dead. What she feared was its aftermath.

That realization led the priestly Zhang Jizu to an insight. This War Supervisor was a priest by class. Why did she have such formidable combat power?

And from the very start she'd been seeking life-prolonging potions. That meant staying alive mattered enormously — or more precisely, lifespan was critical to her.

Was it possible she'd traded life force or longevity for her current strength?

'Draining the pond to catch the fish' was short-sighted, sure. But without today's catch to sustain her, this War Supervisor might not have survived this long at all.

With that thought, Zhang Jizu smiled softly, set a potion at her feet, and retreated into the fog. A wordless goodbye to the War Supervisor.

Since she'd chosen to live, he couldn't die in front of her — that would directly expose his secret.

He needed a solitary spot to face death openly, then let his innermost secret become unknown whispers in someone else's ears.

But honestly, once that secret was broadcast... wouldn't everyone figure out it was his?

So — wait a little longer. Wait for the right companion and go together.

Zhang Jizu squinted, fox-like, and dissolved into the fog. He listened intently to his surroundings.

What he hadn't expected was that the wait would stretch to a full hour.

Nobody else died.

Was everyone afraid of death?

No — death wasn't frightening. Public embarrassment was!

Every "Cheng Shi" in the fog understood that death was almost certainly the key to that door. But none possessed the first Player's desperate courage.

Not just because they feared having their secrets exposed. They were all waiting — waiting for someone else to go second. Because that way they could "freeload" another person's secret.

If someone held out until the very end, they could potentially harvest everyone's secrets, then reverse-engineer who their teammates were and what each one most wanted hidden.

So it was no longer about finding the way out of the fog. It wasn't even a simple trial with a clear objective. It was a game of patience versus curiosity.

Everyone waited.

Without that first Player's attempt, the stalemate might have lasted forever. But because someone had potentially already crossed the fog and entered the Theater — achieving total advantage — a countdown had been forced onto this standoff.

Eventually, someone would crack under the pressure of chasing the leader versus guarding their secret. They'd make their desperate throw and become the second person through that door.

Zhang Jizu couldn't predict who, but he knew it wouldn't be him.

Sure enough — after two or three more grueling hours, someone broke. The twisted, distorted voice rang out again, delivering a fresh secret to the living.

"Yes, I lied..."

And the instant that secret went public, the same voice spoke again.

"Could they be my opportunity?"

Zhang Jizu's eyes narrowed. The time was right. Four secrets had been broadcast. Adding Ai Si — who refused to trade death for progress — he was the only one left.

So he cleared his throat and immediately whispered: "Praise Death."

The words left his lips. The Gravekeeper's body hit the ground. And moments later, the fog carried a third secret:

"I can't die yet — otherwise how will I bury them...?"

Before long, the Gravekeeper lying on the ground opened his eyes as though he'd never died. Cautiously, he rose — and the instant he stood, the fog before him detonated outward. A frozen plain of ice and permafrost materialized, along with a town's buildings encased in solid ice.

And the Faith Theater — the building rumored to hold the secret of godhood — stood alone at the town's center. The sole structure untouched by the blizzard's fury.

It was indeed a theater. More specifically, a circus theater.

The red eaves and yellow walls were patchy with peeling paint, but against this world of blue and white, it still radiated warmth.

Through the cracks of its great doors, warm golden light spilled out.

Something was performing inside!

Zhang Jizu's eyes narrowed to slits. Scalpel drawn, he crept toward the theater...

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Elsewhere — deep within that fog from which everyone had vanished — Ai Si stood frozen, still wrestling with herself.

She wanted to approach Lord Yu Xi and help Long Jing temper Cheng Shi. But until she could confirm that drawing near Deceit actually offered tangible benefit, she couldn't gamble a "life" on what might come next.

If the fog were simply a matter of getting lost and finding a way, she'd gladly search for a breakthrough. But her life...

She truly couldn't do it.

Life was too precious to her.

So Ai Si was left behind. Face heavy, she tightened her collar, gripped her great sword, and scanned the fog warily — beginning the countdown to her own failure.

She was already waiting for the trial to end.

But the War Supervisor wasn't entirely idle. She collected every broadcast secret — at least that counted as her greatest haul from this trial.

When the fourth secret rang out, she knew only one teammate remained. She'd been guessing the last holdout was the Death Chosen — and then the fog gave her the answer.

And... more than one answer.

Alongside the "burial" secret came another, simultaneously:

"It seems to have lost a piece of its memory. Interesting — why would even it lose memories?"

'Memory?'

Ai Si went rigid. If someone's deepest secret revolved around memory, who could it possibly be?

The answer seemed obvious. But the real question was: why were there six secrets?

She hadn't died. So the extra one belonged to... who!?

Despite the warm fur lining and a War follower's resistance to cold, Ai Si felt a deep chill wash over her.

This trial had gone far beyond her imagination. Impersonation, body doubles, Envoys, and now a mysterious seventh person... The bewildered War Supervisor's mind buzzed. All she could do was grip her great sword harder and pray for the trial to end safely.

And as Ai Si prayed in silence, the blizzard within the fog grew fiercer still.

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Chapter 833: Opening the Faith Theater's Doors

The ice-encrusted frozen ground was treacherous going. It took Zhang Jizu a long time to finally reach the Theater's perimeter and climb the long staircase leading to its entrance.

Before him stood a door so massive it rose two stories high. The strange warm light leaked through the gap between its halves.

Two people were already there.

As it happened, a Fate Weaver was rolling his eyes while griping at a War Supervisor. Only when Zhang Jizu approached did the Fate Weaver turn around and click his tongue.

"Well, well — who do we have here? Oh, Zhang-lao! What's this — am I calling you 'old' and your body actually took it literally? What took so long?"

Zhang Jizu squinted, gaze bouncing between them before scanning the surroundings for anyone else. Seeing no one, he smiled.

"I'm not slow. I arrived at exactly the right time."

Cheng Shi pursed his lips. "Can't take a joke, can you? I'm ribbing you — don't mistake it for praise. Do you have any idea how long we've been waiting? Time's precious, Mi Laozhang."

"Oh? If time were truly precious, neither you nor the War Supervisor would be standing here.

The fact that you waited means you couldn't open this door without me.

So yes — I arrived at exactly the right time. Now tell me: what do I do?"

Zhang Jizu's pragmatism kicked in immediately. Cheng Shi gave him a strange look, but didn't belabor the point. He pointed at the right-hand door.

"You push right. War Supervisor pushes left. I stand in the middle. That gets us in." Cheng Shi moved into position, spread his arms, puffed his chest — looking every bit like a clown preparing to welcome his audience.

"?"

Zhang Jizu blinked, frowning. "If only two people need to push, what's your role in the middle?"

"Ceremony."

Cheng Shi's grin was insufferable. But Zhang Jizu didn't buy it. If it were really just ceremony, those two wouldn't still be here. This door needed three people — simple as that.

So the others had realized the same thing, refused to cooperate with Cheng Shi, and gone looking for alternatives?

Even so — with Cheng Shi's resourcefulness, why would a single door stop him?

Couldn't he have cooked up something?

Unless this door held some... trick?

Zhang Jizu peered through the gap. He'd hoped to see what lay beyond, but the warm light was sourceless — radiant void. Only light, no substance.

He gave up on looking and, frowning, elbowed Cheng Shi aside to take Cheng Shi's original position.

Now Cheng Shi wasn't happy.

"?"

"Mi Laozhang, your thinking has been dangerously bold lately. Do you realize what you just did?"

"Mm. I know. I'm enjoying the ceremony."

"...Has it occurred to you where your ceremony came from?" Cheng Shi laughed in disbelief.

"Stole it from you. So — thank you. Now go push the door. Stop wasting time.

Time is precious. Your words."

"..." Cheng Shi was speechless. He squinted at Zhang Jizu for a long moment in imitation of the man's signature look. "You really have changed."

But he didn't argue. With a resigned sigh, he positioned himself at the door and prepared to push.

Ai Si had been ready ages ago. Seeing the two finally settle down, she rolled her eyes. "I'll count one, two, three and we all —

??? Surname Cheng, I haven't even started counting!"

"?" Cheng Shi heaved suddenly, shoving the door open a crack. He blinked with fake innocence. "Aren't you done?"

"You —"

"Stop 'you-you-you'ing. Door's open. Let's go, both of you. Time to see what secrets this theater is hiding."

He squeezed sideways through the gap. Ai Si followed on his heels. Zhang Jizu lingered at the threshold, frowning at the ground. The array inscribed here looked ancient — and yet it also felt... recently laid.

'An illusion, or a temporal distortion?'

'And this atmosphere — who was responsible for it?'

He mulled it over. Said nothing. Filed everything away. Then followed them in.

The instant all three Players stepped into that warm glow —

HUMMMM —

Every field of vision flared blinding white, then snapped back to normal. But before their eyes could adjust, a torrent of noise crashed over them.

Carriages, pedestrians, ladies, gentlemen, conversations, arguments... the cacophony erupted from every direction without warning. It felt less like entering a theater and more like stepping into a marketplace.

Sure enough — when their vision cleared, what they saw confirmed it.

They'd arrived in a market. An icy bazaar belonging to San Dales!

And the theater they'd just walked through? It now stood at the far end of this bazaar, facing them from a distance. It looked as though space had been twisted and stretched, dragging them back outside the Theater.

"This is...!?"

Ai Si's eyes went wide. Disbelieving, she looked back — the three-person door was still right behind her. So what was all of this?

A second theater?

Another San Dales?

Her pupils contracted. She quietly tightened her grip on the great sword.

The other two were equally stunned. But after a moment's shock, Cheng Shi's gaze sharpened. He shook his head with a chuckle.

"The San Dales of the past?

Heh — interesting. Who would've guessed the theater doesn't hide a stage, but San Dales' own history?

Then again, this is a stage of sorts. Whether the actors are the variables who lived in San Dales, the Tower of Logic scholars hiding underground, or some teammate who got here first...

That much, we can't say."

Hearing this, Ai Si's gaze darkened too — but she wasn't scanning for external threats. From the corner of her eye, she was watching Zhang Jizu on the other side.

Zhang Jizu's eyes had all but vanished into slits. He was seeing far more than the other two.

Inside his sleeve, his fingers rubbed together for a moment. Then he confirmed it: within this "magnificent performance," he could smell traces of divine power.

And as luck would have it — that divine power was Memory.

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Chapter 834: The Joy Theater and Crown

That San Dales' past was steeped in Memory's aura should have made perfect sense — all pasts belong to Memory, after all. But the strange part was... let's not forget why certain people were here.

The Secret Peeping Ear!

That was clearly a Deceit artifact. Why would it exist within a Memory of the past?

Nobody knew. But this was undeniably San Dales' past.

So to understand why the Theater was staging Memory's play, they'd have to follow the "plot."

But Cheng Shi had no intention of being "led by the script." He spun on his heel and squeezed right back out through the gap in the Theater door.

Seeing this, Ai Si and Zhang Jizu exchanged glances, foreheads darkening with exasperation.

"Zhang Chosen, please don't tell me you're going to follow Surname Cheng and crawl back out through that crack."

Zhang Jizu squinted at Ai Si with a meaningful smile.

"You're brave. More so than I expected."

And with that, he followed Cheng Shi through the door.

Ai Si frowned, watching Zhang Jizu's retreating back with a thoughtful look. After a moment, realization dawned and she snorted. Rather than following the two, she chose to cross the marketplace and walk toward the theater at the other end.

The distance wasn't far, but she moved cautiously — observing every NPC's movements, expressions, speech, and posture, trying to determine whether these apparent background characters were truly real.

At one point she ducked into a narrow alley and killed several residents to confirm.

When their warm blood spilled onto her hands, she knew: this was genuinely San Dales' past. The real past.

She picked up the pace, sprinting toward the theater's staircase. But when she looked up at the grand entrance above —

She froze. Every muscle seized.

Because there at the top of those long stairs stood two figures, gazing down at her with amused expressions.

Cheng Shi. And Zhang Jizu.

They'd gotten ahead of her!

Ai Si was stunned. She whipped around to look at the door she'd come from — still intact, right there. But before her stood another identical door.

Her brow furrowed. Something clicked. She climbed the stairs to join her teammates and looked past the second theater's entrance.

Of course!

The second theater's door was absolutely identical to the first — same angle of opening, same width of gap.

Her pupils contracted. "So..."

"So the direction doesn't matter." Cheng Shi was smiling but his eyes were dead serious. He surveyed the surroundings. "What matters is the 'plot.' We seem to have missed something, and now this memory has us trapped. Am I right?"

Easy enough to verify.

Ai Si, stubborn, dragged her sword through the door — and emerged from the original entrance, once again facing Cheng Shi and Mi Laozhang from across the bazaar.

Undeniable now.

Brow tight, she crossed back to join them. "How did you know it was the 'plot'?"

"A guess. War Supervisor — we saw what you did. You'd better pray the residents you killed weren't key characters. Otherwise..."

Actually, maybe not. Those three mutts are probably stuck somewhere too.

Let's go. Search-and-sweep method — simple and effective. Speed it up."

Cheng Shi shot a look at Mi Laozhang, ready to send him ahead to scout — but Zhang Jizu didn't budge. Instead he pointed down the stairs at a young man standing perfectly still.

"Perhaps it's him."

The other two blinked. They followed Zhang Jizu's gaze.

"Why?"

"Everyone is moving, no matter what they're doing — even the market vendors never stop or zone out. Only this fellow is standing there motionless, as if all of San Dales has forgotten he exists.

When things defy the norm, there's always a reason. We should talk to him."

Zhang Jizu drifted behind Cheng Shi and gave him a push. Down the stairs they went.

Ai Si tried to dodge — failed. Cheng Shi grabbed her and dragged her to the front. Once again: point woman.

The three descended in their absurd formation and surrounded the youth. Only up close did they realize: the young man was asleep on his feet.

"..." Cheng Shi nearly choked on a laugh. He pointed at Zhang Jizu, then at the boy, cracking up. "'When things defy the norm, there's always a reason.' Indeed — sleeping standing up is pretty damn abnormal."

"..."

Zhang Jizu's eye twitched. Ignoring the jab, he shook the young man awake.

The youth startled, snatching a cap off his face. He blinked blearily at the three strangers. Seeing their travel-worn appearance, he scrubbed his eyes, forced a textbook smile onto his face, smoothed his collar and messy brown hair, produced a stack of flyers from his pocket, and — with practiced flair — handed one to each of them.

"Here for the show?"

The Joy Theater has a performance tonight! Bring a friend with this flyer, and the second ticket is twenty percent off — great deal. Interested?

Um... there are three of you. The third is full price. But...

I'll cover the third discount out of my own pocket. How about it? The show is fantastic — absolutely worth it."

Cheng Shi took the flyer, gave it a lazy scan, then looked at the young man — clearly a theater employee — and grinned.

"What's your name?"

"Crown, sir. My name is Crown. I'm an actor at the Joy Theater."

"Crown..."

Cheng Shi sampled the name, eyebrows raised, and nodded approvingly.

"Good name. You look a lot like someone I used to know. If I didn't already know you weren't lying, I'd have mistaken you for her.

Her name was Shaman. Do you... know her?"

Crown's smile stiffened. He scratched his head awkwardly. "Sir, that sounds like a girl's name."

Cheng Shi laughed. He clapped the young man's shoulder.

"Don't be so rigid about gender. Who says a woman can't be a man?"

Right, Zhen Xin?"

Crown blinked again, looking at the three oddball strangers with a puzzled expression. Mustering some courage but clearly anxious, he corrected:

"It's 'Joy,' sir. This is the Joy Theater. Not the 'True Heart' Theater."

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Chapter 835: Theater Actor: Crown

"Oh? Is that so? My memory must be terrible — I forgot the moment I heard it."

Cheng Shi smiled and reached out to straighten Crown's collar — the only remotely clean patch on the youth's threadbare cotton jacket. Except the collar had been perfectly fine; Cheng Shi deliberately set it crooked.

And as he moved, two scalpels "accidentally" slid from his left and right sleeves, burying their tips into the ground barely a centimeter from Crown's toes. The cracking-ice sound drew cold sweat down Crown's face.

Crown got the picture: these three strangers were not to be trifled with.

But he knew how to read a room. Right now, resistance was futile. So he stayed put and let them do as they pleased.

It wasn't until Cheng Shi clattered out several more scalpels — reducing Crown to trembling legs — that Zhang Jizu sighed and rescued the young man from Cheng Shi's clutches.

"We have more convenient ways to verify your identity. But considering you might be the key... we'll give you a chance.

Repeat after me: I am Zhen Xin.

Say it right, and you're free to go."

Crown was terrified. His whole body shook — yet he still clutched his flyers. Looking into Zhang Jizu's slitted eyes, he swallowed his fear and repeated:

"I am Zhen Xin."

A lie. An expected lie.

None of them looked surprised. Cheng Shi glanced at Zhang Jizu with a grin. "You already knew he wasn't Zhen Xin?"

Zhang Jizu gave a pragmatic nod. "Anywhere I can think of, she'd never hide. But we still need to be careful — she had a considerable head start. Since she wasn't at the entrance, she's already inside.

The question is... how many doors deep she's gone."

"Zhang-lao, you think there are doors behind doors?"

Zhang Jizu didn't answer — just nodded. He believed their target lay beyond the Theater's true door. They just didn't know how many doors they'd have to pass through first.

With that thought, Zhang Jizu released Crown. The youth scrambled free, face ashen, and crawl-climbed up the staircase before bolting into the Theater without hesitation.

Three raised eyebrows followed him. When the flyer-youth plunged through the door, iridescent light flashed across the grand entrance — as though a new change had been triggered.

"It really was him." Ai Si nodded and dragged her blade toward the entrance. One step in, she realized both men were staring at her expectantly — volunteering her as the team's guinea pig, yet again.

Her face darkened. But she didn't refuse. With a cold snort, she squeezed through the gap — seemingly determined to at least claim the honor of going first.

After the War Supervisor vanished, Cheng Shi raised a brow. "What I'm curious about now is where the real War Supervisor went. What do you think, Dragon King?"

A glint passed through Zhang Jizu's eyes. He looked at Cheng Shi. "You're certain Li Jingming is here too?"

Cheng Shi tossed him a casual glance. Seeing the denial, he chuckled, patted Zhang Jizu's shoulder, and stepped through the gap first.

Zhang Jizu looked at his patted shoulder, shook his head with a wry smile, and followed.

This trial was getting more interesting by the hour. Deceit and Memory intertwined. Lies and truth coexisted. Every identity seemed fake — but how much was actually false? Perhaps nobody could say.

When Cheng Shi and Zhang Jizu came through, Ai Si was already well ahead. The marketplace had transformed into a web of narrow streets deep inside the town.

Passersby hurried along, murmuring about "survival" and similar words. Listening as they walked, the three learned that today was San Dales' Day of Gratitude — when residents gave thanks for their survival in this world.

Each month they held a gathering, celebrating the greatness of life. In truth it was nothing more than everyone huddling together for warmth, finding scraps of comfort in an endless winter.

A fine occasion, with sincere hearts all around — but even among the sincere, there were oddballs. Such as... the theater's flyer-distributing actor, Crown.

The young man ignored the crowd's procession. Instead he stood firm on the windswept stairs, handing out his flyers.

Passersby shot him dismissive looks. Not a single person took one. But Crown wasn't fazed — grinning, full of energy.

Until... he spotted the three strangers approaching again. His expression shifted and he clapped his hands over his face, fleeing into the Theater — as though that building was his only safe haven.

The three followed at their own pace, crossing the third door.

The scene changed again. Heavier snow. Fewer people. The town seemed to have entered "winter."

Yet even in these brutal conditions, Crown remained at the Theater's entrance, distributing flyers.

This time, at Cheng Shi's suggestion, they didn't walk straight up to Crown. Instead they bundled into bulky local coats and passed the Theater entrance posing as residents.

As they drew near, Crown was pitching a flyer to a bearded man. The man took it, scanned it, and sighed.

"Little Crown, still drumming up an audience for that boring comedy of yours?"

Give it up — nobody enjoys your performances. You'd be better off helping in my shop. The pay's way more than the two silver coins people toss your way. What do you say?"

Crown's smile didn't waver. He seemed genuinely proud of his profession.

"Tips from the audience are enough for me to survive. Thank you, Mel Vade. I don't run a theater to make money. I want to spread joy."

"But your jokes don't make people happy — they just make people feel colder."

"They're called cold jokes. It's a new form of comedy. I think it has great potential, and I'm planning to introduce it throughout San Dales."

"..." The bearded man gave up persuading him. With a chuckle, he stuffed the flyer back into Crown's arms. "San Dales is cold enough already. Maybe think about how to warm people up instead."

He walked off.

The moment the beard disappeared, Crown's smile froze — literally, in the wind. He turned away, deflated, and trudged back into the Theater.

After three scenes, the Players were beginning to get it. They exchanged looks without a word, then silently followed — continuing to witness this theater actor's... life.

Crown persevered through San Dales' snow and wind, greeting everyone with that relentless smile. And time after time, his warmth was met with cold shoulders.

Nobody patronized the Joy Theater. Given the choice between joy and warmth, people chose warmth every time. They barely had the energy to seek happiness.

Crown never complained — except about his own comedy skills, which he felt weren't good enough.

Day after monotonous day, door after identical door — until the three Players' faces went numb. At one point they almost believed they were truly trapped in San Dales' past.

Eventually Ai Si dropped all pretense. She tossed her great sword aside, scratched her head in frustration, and snapped:

"Is this ever going to end?!"

Aren't you two sick of this?

Surname Cheng, Zhang Chosen — did we come here to watch a TV drama?"

Neither was surprised by her outburst. Cheng Shi eyed the impatient War Supervisor. "Then leave?"

"..." Ai Si faltered.

'Leave? Impossible. The sunk cost was too high. After squeezing through this many door-cracks, walking away now would be a total loss.'

So they pressed on. And after several more unremarkable "days" — the change finally came.

It was another Day of Gratitude. With the streets nearly empty, Crown ducked into an alley and slipped into the shadows to relieve himself.

While his back was turned, a manhole cover behind him suddenly flipped open. A stranger dressed in local San Dales clothing scrambled out of the shaft, too rushed to check his surroundings, and hurried away.

The three Players watched from the alley's mouth as the stranger sprinted toward the crowd. A spark finally lit their dulled eyes.

"A Tower of Logic scholar... So this is how they manipulated the town.

But this time, they slipped up."

Three pairs of eyes turned to the improperly sealed manhole cover.

And at the same moment, Crown — hiding in another shadow patch, frozen stiff after hearing the noise — quietly turned around and discovered the anomaly behind him.

...

Chapter 836: The Adventures of Crown

Why had someone crawled out of the alley's manhole?

Who was he?

What was he doing down there?

What was down below? Treasure, or... secrets?

Crown froze. He tugged up his trousers, face drawn with indecision. He obviously wanted to go down and look — he just lacked the final ounce of courage.

So he stood rooted in the wall's shadow, staring at the improperly sealed manhole, his mind at war.

The three Players watched. All of them wanted to give him a push — yet with uncanny consensus, they held back. When a mundane life reaches its turning point, nobody wanted to force the narrative. They wanted to see what Crown would choose.

Crown didn't choose... The coward seemed to give up.

He stood motionless for so long that the scholar finished his task and returned to the alley — and Crown was still huddled in his corner, frowning.

Now they had no choice but to act.

The returning scholar would certainly notice the poorly sealed cover. The instant he realized the experiment's greatest secret might have been discovered by a variable, he'd comb the area. Crown was too close. A hurried glance might miss him — but a careful look would not.

So the Players intervened — but left no trace.

Cheng Shi pointed at a thin patch of ice beneath his feet, then glanced at Ai Si. She understood immediately. Picking up the ice sliver, she leapt soundlessly to the alley's heights, hung upside-down from a window ledge in an impressively acrobatic pose, and planted the slightly palm-melted ice shard precisely under the scholar's foot.

The scholar rounded the corner, stepped on the ice, and slipped. As he fell, Ai Si dropped from above and slid a thick chunk of ice beneath his skull. The back of his head slammed into it.

Knocked out cold. The scholar never knew what hit him. Ai Si smirked and flowed back to her "prime viewing seat."

Watching her stunning performance, Cheng Shi and Zhang Jizu's expressions were something to behold. They applauded silently — for her. Or rather, for him.

Cheng Shi's teasing eyes found Ai Si. The look said it all: 'Not even pretending anymore?'

Ai Si accepted the ribbing without explanation. Just rolled her eyes and went back to watching.

The scholar's crash echoed through the alley, startling Crown. When he saw the stranger unconscious at his feet, the scales of hesitation finally tipped.

Curiosity blazed in his eyes. He dragged the stranger into the shadow behind the staircase stones, swapped clothes with practiced speed, and — once he confirmed everything checked out — transformed himself into a "scholar." He slid the cover aside and carefully climbed down.

Three exchanged glances. They followed like invisible bodyguards flanking Crown.

True invisibility required proper tools, of course. Just as Ai Si prepared to drop down first, Zhang Jizu caught her arm and pressed a small inscribed page onto her.

"Memory's power? Heh, interesting." Ai Si turned and descended. Cheng Shi gave Mi Laozhang a loaded look, applied his own tool, and followed.

The underground was unmistakably the Tower of Logic's observation post. At first, Crown was staggered by the labyrinthine sewer system. Even seeing people moving through the tunnels — wearing clothes utterly different from San Dales' style — he didn't grow suspicious. He simply assumed it was some secret organization run from the town center.

It wasn't until two young scholars approached and asked whether today's operation had gone smoothly that Crown realized things might be nothing like what he'd imagined.

But Crown was sharp — and clever. He kept them from touching him, used the hat to obscure his face as much as possible, and offered vague half-answers. His instincts were keen enough that he even managed to deliver the operation report orally.

The two scholars bought it. They left with the report and dropped off a scholar's robe for him.

Crown was already sensing something was very wrong. He hurriedly changed into the robe and began... openly investigating the place.

Yes — openly. Because he understood that skulking around would draw far more suspicion. The robe on his back was his passport; the scholars didn't question him — didn't even deign to question him.

In their eyes, a San Dales variable could never be this smart.

And so the Adventures of Crown began. After traversing several corridors and meeting a few people, the "scholarly aura" he projected grew denser. Eventually he started spiritedly critiquing other scholars' operations and correcting their positions on the San Dales experiment.

Yes — by now he knew his entire world was an experiment. But down here in the tunnels he couldn't afford to show fear. Swallowing his terror, he threw himself into his performance talent with abandon.

Crown was genuinely gifted. In the art of impersonation, he was virtually flawless.

Following behind, Zhang Jizu chuckled. "He's a lot like you."

"?" Cheng Shi squinted, expression strange. "I hope you're not being sarcastic, Mi Laozhang."

"I'm complimenting you. Clowns really do share common traits."

"..."

No arguing that. Through those earlier "days," they'd all seen it — Crown's "actor" was really just a clown.

And when clown and underground sewer connected in his mind, Cheng Shi startled. He turned to Mi Laozhang.

"The nose — the clown nose!"

A spark flashed in Zhang Jizu's eyes. He immediately produced the nose Cheng Shi had once handed him. But instead of passing it over, he stared at it — struck by a dawning realization.

And right then — because Crown's heated argument with the other scholars had escalated into a mildly physical scuffle — a small red ball tumbled from beneath his scholar's robe.

The surrounding scholars noticed. "What's that?"

Crown froze mid-motion. Quickly he kicked it aside, spread his palms, and squeezed out a smile.

"Passed by that boring little theater — picked it up off the ground near the clown. Found it funny, so I kept it.

Looking at it now, that clown really is a clown. He doesn't even know what makes him one."

The inexplicable punchline cracked up every scholar. They doubled over, clutching shoulders — and the confrontation dissolved into laughter.

Perhaps even Crown hadn't anticipated that his greatest performance as a clown would come at the moment he truly became one.

His jokes were no longer cold. But his heart would never be warm again.

...

Chapter 837: First Hearing the Venerable Name

Of everyone watching, the one most deeply moved was the other clown.

If you've never been looked down upon, you may never understand what lives inside a clown's heart.

Cheng Shi stared at the scene. He didn't rush forward to slaughter the oblivious scholars. He didn't pity Crown or harbor any impulse to pull him out of his "sea of suffering." He simply... curled his lips and started laughing — right there between Ai Si and Mi Laozhang — like a man possessed.

The laughter carried layers too complex to parse.

Ai Si's expression was strange too. She turned away, a five-flavor storm on her face. Zhang Jizu alone seemed unaffected — though his sidelong glance at Cheng Shi now held a probing edge.

He sensed that Cheng Shi's past, while perhaps not warm, had certainly been spectacular.

But he reined in his curiosity. This wasn't the time to ask. He turned his attention back to the "plot."

After that encounter, Crown's demeanor shifted noticeably. His disguise as a scholar grew more convincing, but something bright that should have lived in his eyes had guttered out.

He wandered the underground tunnels like a walking corpse, learning everything by instinct. He'd banter with scholars he met, draw laughs — all on autopilot.

Nobody could tell whether he was performing out of sheer muscle memory or consciously trying to claw his way back to the original Crown — the one who didn't know so many "secrets."

After exploring the tunnels for some time, Crown had "had enough." The scholar in the alley above could wake any moment; invisible pressure reminded him that his little adventure needed to end.

But never in his life had he loathed his own curiosity so bitterly.

If he'd never climbed down, would none of this have happened?

That wasn't the Players' speculation — it was written all over Crown's face.

The San Dales clown turned a corner, found himself alone, and crumpled to the ground, hugging his knees, sobbing.

He couldn't hold it together anymore.

"Crown's broken," Zhang Jizu sighed. Brilliant as this memory was... brilliance didn't equal warmth. "Inhuman cold" was its own brand of brilliance.

But Cheng Shi shook his head.

"He hasn't broken."

"?"

"Because he's a clown. He's been fighting the cold all along. This blizzard is just harsher than usual.

Don't worry — he'll pull through."

The words barely landed before a turning point appeared — one nobody had foreseen.

Another sobbing scholar stumbled around the corner. When he spotted Crown hunched on the ground, crying, the young man lurched forward as if he'd found family. He threw his arms around Crown, and the two wept together in a tangled heap.

Crown was dumbfounded.

Through tear-blurred eyes he looked up at the young scholar. "You too...?"

Five simple syllables — and the young scholar cried harder.

He buried his face in Crown's chest, gasping between sobs.

"I knew it — you're one of us too. I knew you had to be.

Why is this world so unfair? Why does it treat us like this?!"

Not just Crown — all three Players were baffled.

'Who is this?'

Three uncertain glances confirmed it: this was no stray San Dales resident. He was a genuine scholar.

But Crown didn't see it that way. This was the only comfort he'd found today. So he clung to the young scholar and they wept together, offering each other consolation.

By the time the question marks floating above the Players' heads clogged the entire underground pipe system, the two men's emotions finally settled. The young scholar wiped his face, looking slightly embarrassed.

"Sorry — I got your clothes dirty. I feel much better now. And I'm sure you do too.

Friend, Truth stands right before us. Even if a deity's mockery stands in our way, nothing can halt our pursuit of Truth!

Old Professor Gluo may not have proven his theory in the end, but he blazed a new trail for us younger scholars and led us to a new deity.

The Void Mass-Energy Department's research must not stop — will not stop. Once my secondment here is finished and I return to Gasmira, I'll rebuild the void experiments and continue validating the professor's hypothesis — until the day the results let me discover Truth!

And you, my friend — what about you?"

'Me?'

'I think I cried at the wrong funeral...'

Crown's expression froze. So did the three Players'.

Jaw hanging open, tears and snot dripping into his mouth, Crown tasted salt — then swallowed it all with a convulsive gulp. He nodded frantically.

"Right — I won't give up either.

Who would have thought that even deities mock mortals?"

Crown's answer was razor-sharp. He'd latched onto one keyword and kept the absurd, completely-off-topic crying party rolling.

The young scholar nodded fervently, eyes gleaming.

"I know saying this betrays Professor Gluo's memory — but that's precisely Their allure! Only by walking the path of Truth to the very end can we hope to understand what They truly are.

But before we see through that essence, I'll make a bold guess: this newly discovered deity... must be one who holds dominion over 'mockery' and 'joy.' Only such a god would pull the kind of childish pranks we've seen. Don't you agree, friend?"

"!!!"

'Agree?!'

'Yes — absolutely yes!'

'This couldn't be more right!'

In that instant, the light in Crown's eyes — nearly extinguished — blazed back to life. Fierce. Untamed.

He seized the scholar's hands as though he'd found the one lifeline in an abyss of despair.

"You're saying... there's a deity who holds dominion over 'joy'?"

The young scholar jumped at Crown's inexplicable fervor, but recalling that his companion was another soul from the ill-fated Void Mass-Energy Department, he supposed it was understandable. He nodded, then shook his head.

"It's only my guess. Until it's been verified, we—"

"Yes! No verification needed — it's exactly that! It has to be!"

Crown cut him off, too excited to contain himself.

"Everything is a lie! Life is a lie! The gods' apocalypse is a lie! There is no apocalypse — which means this world was always supposed to have faith! And I...

I'm no longer a clown nobody wants!

At the very least, my instincts tell me I've been enacting His will.

He rules over joy. I spread joy to people. Even my theater is named 'Joy.' How is that not instinctive devotion?!"

Everyone in earshot was stunned.

The three Players were rocked. Now they finally understood how San Dales' past connected to Him.

So this was where it all began.

The moment Crown realized he was a true clown, he found his faith. He found his Benefactor. He found the deity so much like himself — despised by the other gods, yet spreading mischief throughout the cosmos...

Deceit!

...

Chapter 838: A Grand Performance at the San Dales Market

"You..."

The speech was right — but strange coming from a scholar.

The young scholar wasn't stupid. His eyes went wide, catching something off in Crown's fervor. But in that conflicted moment, he chose not to expose Crown's identity. Instead, a darker thought slithered through his mind:

'If the Void Mass-Energy Department's experiment failed, why can't the Consciousness Faith Department's experiment fail too?'

'Professor Gluo's experiment lost to a deity. San Dales' experiment is about to lose to a mortal. And that mortal looks suspiciously like one of That deity's believers.'

'Doesn't that prove the Void Mass-Energy experiment — which failed because of a higher existence — was far closer to Them than the Consciousness Faith experiment, which threw massive resources at the problem only to be undone by a single commoner?'

Whether or not this logic honored Truth, in that moment the young scholar's bitterness outweighed his commitment to Truth's will. So he said nothing. He lowered his head and left.

He couldn't convince himself the man was a real scholar — but he could pretend he'd never seen this experimental variable.

Crown obviously realized his excessive excitement had blown his cover. But the crisis resolved itself.

He glanced at the scholar's retreating back, then scrambled up the shaft ladder and returned to San Dales.

The unconscious scholar in the alley hadn't been found. Crown swapped clothes back and retreated to his theater.

The three Players had climbed out well ahead of him. When Zhang Jizu saw Crown carefully repositioning the manhole cover to hide his incursion, he chuckled, shook his head, and lifted the cover once more — setting it at exactly the same careless angle the scholar had left it. Identical. Flawless.

Cheng Shi teased: "Impressive memory, Mi Laozhang."

Zhang Jizu smiled. The other two didn't press it. All three moved quickly, re-entering the theater doors.

This time the time-skip was clearly larger. When Cheng Shi's trio emerged into the marketplace, Crown had already assembled a makeshift stage at the market's center and was standing on it, surrounded by an ocean of curious residents.

Everyone was intrigued by the clown's antics. But the cold drained their patience. A chorus of heckling demanded he hurry up, while a few spirited hecklers cheered him on and deliberately obstructed the municipal enforcers trying to drag him off the platform.

As the crowd swelled, Crown's heart hammered harder.

He couldn't be sure whether underground scholars or observers were out there among them. But he could no longer endure the torment eating him alive. The time had come to speak the truth.

Even if today would be his last. He was ready.

He refused to let San Dales' people live under deception. He refused to let his "dear audience" inhabit a false world. The reason he'd built this open-air stage was to reveal San Dales' greatest secret to all!

So his opening line was:

"Friends — we've been deceived!"

We live in a fake world. We're nothing but observed test subjects — pitiful wretches being manipulated without even knowing it."

The entire market fell silent. Even mid-transaction vendors froze, turning to look at him.

The clown stood tall atop the tallest plank, brave unto death. He looked down at the crowd and cried from the bottom of his heart:

"San Dales isn't a city — it's a cage!

Beneath our feet, deep under the permafrost, observers — the most brilliant scholars alive — are studying our lives, monitoring our every move.

Everything we know is what they want us to know. The world we perceive is the one they fabricated for us.

There is no apocalypse. Faith is not a dead end.

The outside world is blessed by the gods. Only here... only San Dales was abandoned — a wasteland no deity deigns to visit."

Crown choked up. A lifetime of deception crashed over him at once, nearly drowning his voice. But nobody anticipated that his brief pause would give the audience...

An opportunity to cheer and applaud.

"Brilliant!"

"Magnificent!"

"My God — my soul is trembling! I've never heard such an incredible story!"

The crowd erupted!

Nearly everyone present was cheering for the fresh new tale pouring from Crown's mouth. Wide eyes devoured its novelty and horror. Others hopped with joy, thrilled to finally hear something genuinely entertaining. Still others were already spreading the word:

"See? I told you Crown had potential. He hasn't been handing out flyers lately — all that saved time finally produced this phenomenal story!"

"We're prisoners? Ha — praise the imagination!"

More voices piled on: "This is the greatest story born on San Dales soil since the apocalypse. I apologize for my earlier disdain — Crown of the Joy Theater is a master storyteller. Perhaps I should take my family to hear one of his shows."

The crowd was euphoric. In the numbness of survival and the frost of existence, they'd finally found — in a clown's mouth — something that jolted their frozen nerves awake.

People laughed. They chanted Crown's name. "More! More!"

This was everything Crown had ever dreamed of. But now...

Surrounded by the adoring audience he'd yearned for his entire life, the clown wept.

"What are you doing?"

Why won't you believe me?

I'm telling the truth! This world is fake! We're nothing but disposable test subjects!

Please believe me!"

He wept on stage until his heart and lungs cracked. Below, the audience — witnessing such raw, masterful acting — cheered even louder.

"My God, his performance is so real — I'll never forget this moment. Crown is a born actor."

"The script, the dialogue, the craft — he could fill an entire theater on his own!"

"Crown, I'll be your fan from now on. If you have more stories like this, please let me know — I promise I won't toss your flyer in the trash this time. I'll be there. Really!"

"..."

The praise rained down like a blizzard. But none of it warmed Crown's heart. It was ice — through and through.

Crown's mind broke. His brain hummed without ceasing. He couldn't understand how an utterly sincere exposé had turned into... this. All he knew was that the courage he'd gathered over two weeks had become a joke — a comedy he could never have achieved before today, on a plane he could never have reached.

Today didn't become the last day of Crown's life. But it became the most "successful" day of his career as a clown.

The absurdity was so total that Ai Si, black-faced, wanted nothing more than to kill every fool in sight.

Cheng Shi caught her arm just in time. His expression defied description; he couldn't muster a trace of laughter either.

"You can take this?" Ai Si turned on him.

"Taking it or not taking it isn't up to me. It's up to him.

Long Jing — this is his story. Not ours."

Ai Si — no, Long Jing's face shifted several times before he reined in his fury and stepped back.

He was angry, yes — but within limits. It wasn't pure empathy for a fellow clown. He suspected this clown might very well be Lord Yu Xi before ascension.

So his impulse wasn't just shared despair — it was a calculated "approach," an attempt to draw nearer to the lord. But in front of these two, the maneuver had no chance of succeeding.

Zhang Jizu was also lost in thought — wondering whether Crown was the former Yu Xi, or whether it was this clown's existence that made the mask called "Yu Xi" possible in the first place.

If Cheng Shi was right, then everything about Yu Xi suddenly made sense — including why the Secret Peeping Ear was here. Because San Dales was the birthplace of "Yu Xi."

Zhang Jizu's eyes narrowed. He grew more eager for what lay beyond the next few doors.

"You seem moved?" He smiled, glancing at Cheng Shi.

Cheng Shi nodded, his tone heavy with rue.

"This clown... is truly a clown."

...

Chapter 839: They Praise You When Happy, They Curse You When Afraid

The perfect "show" ended with Crown collapsing at center stage.

When the clown fell, the cheering didn't stop. They even praised the way he fainted. "Daring to take a fall like that on solid ice — Crown is a dedicated, committed actor."

But as the blizzard intensified and Crown showed no signs of an "encore," the audience's expressions gradually shifted. Smiles faded. They savored the aftertaste of their fun, then drifted away — back to whatever they were doing before.

The administrative officers who'd been about to shut down the spectacle also paused. A thought struck them: if Crown had worked himself to death, that nicely located theater of his could be seized as public property.

So the officials left too, glancing at the darkening sky, praying the storm would blow a little harder.

The market fell quiet. People retreated indoors to escape the storm. Before long, the outdoor world emptied. Only Crown remained — ghostly pale, lying atop his jerry-rigged plank stage, a blanket of thin snow settling over him. Sleeping soundly.

But sleep much longer and today really would be his last. Time for the Players to step in, it seemed.

Yet the three Players — hidden in a market stall — didn't move. They were waiting. Hard to say whether they expected a miracle or just a turning point. But in that moment, their thoughts were rare harmonics of one feeling.

They felt the clown's fate shouldn't end like this.

Sadly, reality was crueler than any script. In San Dales' howling blizzard, no "miracle" came.

No higher existence smiled upon the clown. But at least there was a turning point.

The bearded man who'd once offered Crown a job appeared. He gestured for his family to wait, then strode to the stage, lifted Crown like picking up a sheet of paper, and carried him toward the clown's theater.

Three Players followed with various expressions. Passing alongside the beard, they heard him murmur to the unconscious clown:

"So you really are talented, Crown. Good thing you didn't agree to come work for me — your gift would've been wasted.

But your talent will only bring you more pain...

Because San Dales doesn't need joy. What people need is warmth — an undying fire to survive this brutal weather. Not some... leaping, dazzling spark."

The beard carried Crown inside the theater, then emerged moments later, scooped up his daughter, took his wife's hand, and went home.

This time the three Players didn't rush through the door. Instead they followed the bearded man, curious whether this NPC was another key character in the story of the past.

They were disappointed. The beard was just an ordinary man trapped in his own cognitive cage.

Because they heard the little girl in his arms tugging at her father's beard, chirping:

"Father, was Crown telling the truth? Are we test subjects?"

The beard smiled warmly, brushing snow from her forehead. "That's right — we're all test subjects. I'm a big one. You're a little one."

The girl giggled. "Then I want to be a big test subject too."

"Soon enough. Just a few more winters, and the little test subject becomes a big one."

Hearing this, the girl's mother paled. She tugged her husband's sleeve, expression clearly asking: 'You believed that nonsense Crown spouted?'

The beard rubbed his daughter's head, looked back at his wife, and gave a quiet wink.

That single wink put the wife's heart at ease — and stopped all three Players dead in the snow.

Watching the family of three disappear into the blizzard, Cheng Shi laughed at himself.

"Should've known. A good person isn't necessarily a smart person. And a smart person isn't necessarily a good person.

Come on, you two. Binge-watching is addictive — fast forward to the next episode."

The other two snorted. Three Players raised their collars and hurried toward the silent theater.

When they passed through the door once more, the next scene caught them slightly off guard.

The day after Crown was carried back to his theater, San Dales' sky... fell.

The already biting cold plummeted further. The leaden sky seemed punched through by an invisible fist, and howling wind and snow poured — no, flooded — downward. At this rate, in a matter of days the entire city would freeze into a solid block of ice.

The violent storm the officials had wished for had arrived. But this storm didn't look like it would only kill one clown — it would freeze every soul here.

San Dales panicked. People hoarded firewood and barricaded their doors. When that wasn't enough, they braved the blizzard to pool ideas — only to reach one conclusion: human power couldn't fight an act of nature.

They had no choice but to sit and wait for death.

Every delegate fell into despair. The officials lost their former swagger, wilting into their chairs.

And then — a "clever" person had a flash of inspiration.

"Maybe humans truly can't fight nature. But what if this cold... isn't natural?"

Remember what Crown said? He said observers are hiding beneath our feet — mysterious people using us as an experiment.

If that's true, then Crown's exposé angered them. This is their punishment.

Otherwise..."

The room froze. Under every strangely shifting gaze, his voice shrank.

"...why did this weather hit the day after he spoke?"

Indeed — the timing was too perfect. Without that coincidence, nobody would've believed Crown's ravings.

But now...

Desperate people clutching at straws will believe anything: conspiracy theories, mysticism, even theology.

Even on San Dales' soil, where faith had never truly taken root.

"It's a lead. Let's go ask Crown — find out how he 'discovered' all this."

'Discovered.'

Three Players embedded in the crowd snorted simultaneously.

'Discovered' — what a word. Just days ago, the same concept had been called 'invented.' No — 'fabricated.'

And now the clown's fabricated story counted as discovered truth?

Fools had a special talent for warping words. They didn't just swap "fabricated" for "discovered" — they demonstrated through action the true meaning of "inquire."

Because at the theater's entrance, just as a gaunt and haggard Crown poked his head through the crack in the door, what greeted him wasn't merely bitter wind and snow.

It was the entirety of San Dales'... malice.

"Crown — this is all your fault! You angered the observers outside our world! You brought this cold upon San Dales!

Do you want to destroy your own home, clown?!"

"..."

Crown had lost his spirit, not his brain. Seeing the crowd venting their terror at him, he slammed the door shut and retreated into the theater.

Trailing at the rear, the three Players watched this unfold — unsure whether to admire the clown's quick thinking or pity his fate.

"Can you take this?" Ai Si's eyes burned.

Without even looking at her, Cheng Shi and Zhang Jizu answered in unison: "Can't take it. Go ahead — we're rooting for you."

Ai Si's aura shifted. She drew her great sword decisively. Seeing neither man actually stopping her, she raised the blade in fury... and then —

Held it above her head to block the snow. Acting as if nothing had happened, she grumbled: "This snow... is getting a bit much, huh?"

"Pff—" Cheng Shi scoffed. "The experiment failed."

Zhang Jizu nodded. "The Tower of Logic probably discovered that No-Faith God earlier and abandoned this place entirely. This storm isn't a natural disaster..."

He looked up at the darkening sky, eyes narrowing to slits.

"It's a man-made catastrophe.

The dumping has begun. From this moment, San Dales' status changes forever — from a carefully constructed experiment ground to a landfill fit only for waste."

"Makes sense," Cheng Shi scoffed again, eyeing the crowd outside the theater. He clicked his tongue. "After all, everyone living down here — every last one of them..."

Is garbage."

...

Chapter 840: The Most Perfect Unveiling

How could a theater door hold back the fury of a mob?

Even though these people didn't actually know why their anger was aimed at Crown — well, since nobody was saying it was wrong, it had to be right. So everyone wanted to confront the clown.

They kicked down the theater doors and surged inside, shouting Crown's name, denouncing his "crimes."

And it was precisely then that the three Players finally got their first look at the real Joy Theater — the first time after crossing so many doors.

The layout was actually quite simple. At the end of the audience corridor stood a round stage draped in red curtains. Semi-circular rows of seats rose in tiers behind it — enough to seat perhaps a hundred.

But today, a flood far exceeding a hundred souls crammed every inch of space, cornering Crown on center stage.

He had probably never imagined his Joy Theater would host so many "audience members." Sadly, none of them were seated. None held anticipation for the next act.

Their eyes held only fear, panic, fury, and confusion. When those emotions collided, they needed an outlet to stay calm.

And in that process, Crown the clown became the chosen lucky one.

Everyone hurled abuse from below the stage, but nobody dared climb up and confront him face to face. Perhaps deep down they knew that such a confrontation was itself too "clown-like" — they refused to set foot on the clown's stage and risk becoming clowns themselves.

They could only ride the wave of public outrage, venting the fear they had nowhere else to put.

Crown huddled at center stage, terrified. He'd barely left his theater in days. Beyond noticing the cold getting worse, he had no idea what was happening outside.

Only when he pieced together fragments from the cacophony of insults did the full picture form: his puncturing of that window-paper had truly brought disaster upon San Dales.

His face went whiter. His terror deepened. The helpless clown was a leaf of a boat beneath a tidal wave — about to capsize.

This time Ai Si genuinely couldn't stand it. She shoved past the residents, about to charge the stage and give San Dales the truth — but Zhang Jizu moved. Bypassing Cheng Shi, he caught her hand and shook his head with absolute calm.

"Can you still stand this?"

"History's course doesn't change for one person's anger. By the time you hear this past, its future is already written.

So if you're unsure whether He would approve of your tampering with His past... then hold on a little longer.

Unless you're certain it would please Him."

'He...'

Zhang Jizu didn't name anyone. But all three knew who He meant. At the word, Cheng Shi's lips curled into a loaded smile.

The argument calmed Ai Si down. She had her share of self-interest, and Zhang Jizu was right — she needed to consider that lord's feelings about this chapter of history.

Would He welcome someone "rescuing" Him?

Was Crown's helplessness merely a façade — was that lord orchestrating something?

Once that thought took root, action became impossible. Frowning, she slapped the San Dales resident who'd turned to question her behavior, then quietly fell back in line to witness this ice-preserved history.

Predictably, mob fury blazed hot but cooled fast. When the crowd realized that screaming at a clown who offered zero rebuttal would do nothing to reverse San Dales' crisis, the abuse inside the Joy Theater gradually died down.

Anger ebbed from every face. Despair crept back into every pair of downturned eyes. Sighs rose and fell. The "heated" theater seemed blown out by a blizzard — leaving only helpless cold and a deep, marrow-deep terror.

San Dales appeared to have lost all hope. The world's last "pure land" seemed finally ready to embrace the so-called apocalypse of the gods.

But then — the clown on stage raised his head.

He looked at his despairing "countrymen." He looked at the sorrow etched on his "friends." And he staggered to his feet.

Weak but resolute, step by step, he walked toward the red curtain.

His movement quickly captured the entire room's attention. Every stunned gaze followed him. Nobody knew what the clown was doing — yet his actions drew them in, making them want to see what lay behind the curtain.

Crown was desperately weak. And yet, of the three priests down below, not one threw him even a fraction of a healing spell.

As he stumbled forward, he rallied what strength he had left.

Yes — even after being pummeled by a tsunami of terror, he gritted his teeth and continued spreading... joy and hope.

"Don't be afraid, everyone... Even though our world... is fake... San Dales... is fake...

That means... the apocalypse of the gods... is fake too... doesn't it?

Since the gods never brought an apocalypse... that means... faith still works... right?

So friends... if we can reclaim our faith... then as believers of some deity... wouldn't He bestow His blessing... and help us... help San Dales survive this catastrophe?

After all, no matter how wise the scholars beneath our feet... they can't fight a god, can they...? Especially when they themselves worship one... a god called Truth..."

As he spoke, Crown reached the curtain's edge. One hand clutching the fabric, he was about to pull it aside — when a voice rose from the crowd. An official-looking figure asked the question nobody dared ask.

"Crown — these observers you spoke of... do they really exist?"

The three Players scoffed simultaneously.

'Oh, the irony.'

'If the question still had no answer at this point, then on what pretext had the mob stormed this theater?'

But Crown didn't quibble. He nodded, deeply solemn.

"Yes... they truly exist... right beneath our feet.

I stumbled in among them once and saw it all... I — we — the whole of San Dales... even at double the population... couldn't hope to resist them...

They belong to a vast nation called the Tower of Logic... they spent millennia of wisdom creating San Dales to harvest insights that would bring them closer to their Benefactor...

If so... friends... why can't we have a Benefactor of our own?

Under a Benefactor's protection... San Dales will never fall, will it?"

"But we've never believed in any god — who would protect us?!" someone shrieked in terror from below.

If not for the raw fear in that voice, the three Players would have assumed Crown had planted a shill.

The cue was almost too perfect. The momentum was entirely in the clown's hands now.

Crown gripped the curtain and smiled — a standard clown's smile pasted onto his ashen face. He looked out over the sea of "audience members." And in this moment — this moment when San Dales was cloaked in fear, a moment that future historians would surely record — he performed the most perfect unveiling of his life.

"This is what I wanted to tell you... Next... allow me to introduce... a deity...

He... is my Benefactor... who holds dominion over 'joy' and 'trickery'...

He has... a bit of history with Truth... and once brought the Tower of Logic's experiment to ruin...

He... is the only god who can save San Dales... and the destination of our faith...

He is..."

Crown tore back the curtain — revealing the theater's most precious treasure to every soul present.

"My Lord — Deceit!"

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