

The Gods 781

Chapter 781: You Are Me, I Am Him, He Is You

Cheng Shi's words were harsh — and profoundly incisive. Both Truth followers present fell silent, one dark-faced and one puzzled, each sinking into contemplation.

They were chewing on Cheng Shi's meaning. But they'd likely never fully understand, because only Cheng Shi could work through the implications. After all, neither of them knew what Origin was, nor what it meant to be "named by *Him."

Truth was part of the Approach Faction. He had always used His own methods to draw closer to Origin. And so His followers conducted all manner of insane experiments in Truth's name.

Think about it: Truth was essentially mining inspiration from His followers' experiments, applying those insights to Himself, and thereby inching toward the universe's ultimate — that *Him!

And yet Zangier and 0221 had the audacity to use "a god's power" to assemble divinity. Even if they succeeded, what reference value did this "shortcut" have for Truth?

'Use Origin's divinity to approach Origin?!'

'If Truth could get His hands on Origin's divinity, why would He bother sponsoring all these experiments?'

'He'd have gotten His wish ages ago!'

After all, mortals looked up at the gods and could see pseudo-gods and wild gods existing between them. But in the gods' own upward gaze, beyond Origin, there was no such thing as a "pseudo-Origin"!

So if Truth was truly approaching Origin, then in His eyes, everything Zangier and 0221 had done — every last bit of it — was meaningless garbage.

In Folly's words: a foolish act.

'Wait. Hold on!'

'Damn. Was Wei Mu's "foolish act" precisely this?!'

'Had that man seen through 0221's method and immediately realized this entire Truth game was pointless?'

'Was the guy really that godlike, or was Cheng Shi overthinking?'

For a moment, even Cheng Shi fell silent.

The vast space went quiet. But gradually, 0221's expression turned ugly.

"There is no point communicating with fools. I retract the assessment that 'you are a clever man.'

No matter how far a mortal sees, they are merely amusing themselves in one corner of time's great river. How can they claim to survey past and future? Without drawing close to Them — without becoming Them — even the straightest path is wrong!

Your filthy slander means nothing to me. You have no idea how difficult the road I've walked has been!"

The half-jowled, half-desiccated scholar's eyes were bloodshot now, his face contorted with resentment. He raised his equally desiccated hand and pointed at his own starkly bisected body, howling as if nursing some profound grievance:

"All of this was supposed to be mine!

I endured the agony of faith-tearing day after day to house my mentor — and he just changed his mind and chose you!

Why? Tell me, Fate Weaver — why?!"

"!!!!!"

Though 0221's outburst was only a few sentences, the information it contained was staggering — so overwhelming that both Cheng Shi and Wang Mou were struck dumb, plunging into complete stupefaction.

What did "housing the mentor" mean?

What was "the agony of faith-tearing"?

And what did "chose you" mean?!

'Did this mean 0221's grotesque form wasn't from experimenting on himself — but from forging a vessel for Zangier in the mortal world?!'

'What was he trying to do? Or rather — what was Zangier trying to do?'

'Had this mad Grand Scholar sensed the opportunity presented by the Void era and decided to leap out from the Faith Game's "backdrop" and become... a player? A Truth player who would replace 0221's identity?!'

'Insane!'

'This maniac!'

'Was there anything he wouldn't do?!'

'No wonder 0221's body was half Prosperity, half Decay. It had all been prepared for Zangier!'

'Right — Cheng Shi remembered now. After that Stars Dagger trial concluded, the "accidental consumables" Birth and Corruption had been replaced by Prosperity and Decay. So Zangier was already adapted to an environment where two opposing faiths coexisted.'

'But here was the problem: even the Tower of Logic, backed by the Erudition Presidium, could barely create a single Hanged Man of Doomsday. If 0221 just shoved divinity into his own body, wouldn't he explode?'

'How was a mortal withstanding that violent divinity conflict?'

'The intensity of divinity tug-of-war didn't diminish just because the quantities were smaller!'

Just as Cheng Shi reached that point, the doctor beside him suddenly laughed — a laugh shot through with self-mockery.

"I thought I'd already imagined my original body as crazy enough. But clearly, compared to his actual madness, my assessment was meaningless.

Fate Weaver — you're wondering how a mortal body can harbor divinity, correct?

Let me tell you: it isn't divinity containment at all. It's... faith stitching.

No wonder he was so familiar with the banned faith-stitching experiment. He'd already applied its principles to himself!"

Halfway through, Wang Mou raised his head toward 0221, his tone heavy, each word deliberate:

"So — are you truly the slice everyone assumes? The one designated 0221?

Or are you merely a composite — a stitched-together amalgamation of a Prosperity slice and a Decay slice?!

Is even the '0221' in your name stitched together, just like your body?

Number 02 and Number 21? Or are there more?!

How many people... are you?!"

"..."

'What?'

Cheng Shi's brain detonated. He stared at the doctor in shock, then — pupils contracting — swung his gaze to 0221, as if trying to rebuild his sanity and worldview from scratch.

'So the Truth follower standing before him wasn't a single slice, but a combined slice — stitched together from a Prosperity slice and a Decay slice?'

"Heh heh heh — clever.

You're cleverer than any previous version of you. Clearly, you experienced something interesting and acquired abilities I didn't know about, contaminating the memories that should have been uploaded.

No matter. Your purpose has been served. Deploying you inside — using your knowledge to amplify these fools' covetousness, thereby accelerating my experiment...

At least in that regard, you helped me.

But from here on, the rest is no longer your concern.

After today I shall remake you. I quite admire you, and I hope the next you will be just as clever."

"..."

Facing this unquestionable original-body voice looking down from above, Wang Mou's expression turned grave, every nerve taut. In the doctor's judgment, the more confident 0221's tone, the more terrifying the backup measures built into this experiment.

He could no longer imagine a way out. Everything before him screamed that this was simultaneously an experiment and a scam — a deception co-authored by a Truth follower existing in the present and a Truth scholar lost to history!

These two brilliant madmen had squeezed every last drop of value from every consumable in the experiment site. And now, it seemed the experiment was reaching its conclusion.

So — would he survive? Would the Fate Weaver? Would any of the players brought in by whatever means still have a chance?

Wang Mou's heart was a tangle of emotions. He didn't know the answer. But he wanted one — an answer to a question that had gnawed at him since the day he'd learned his true identity.

"Why did you name me Wang Weijin?"

"?"

Even the heavily frowning Cheng Shi was startled out of his thoughts by this seemingly random question. 0221, above, burst into laughter — laughing until he was gasping for air before "generously" answering.

"You really are identical to me. Come to think of it — after the consciousness war of the stitching experiment, the only surviving me was also named Wang Weijin.

I was just as curious as you — wondering why I'd been given that name.

Later, I investigated our pitiful original body's past and discovered that in his slice experiment, every slice's name was taken from the people in the laboratory where he'd worked before the Faith Game descended — students, teachers, colleagues.

And as it happens, Wang Weijin was his real name.

So — you are me. I am him. He is you. We have always been the same person.

And only the slice that inherited his name has earned the right to inherit a peak player's power.

Heh heh heh... We've talked long enough. Time's up. Gentlemen — are you ready to embrace evolution and push open that door alongside me?

The experiment... is about to end!"

...

Chapter 782: Over? This Show Has Barely Even Started!

In that instant, Cheng Shi realized with sudden clarity: the bargaining chip the other side wanted from the so-called "deal" wasn't Zangier's finger at all. It was...

Himself!

Cheng Shi himself!

'Damn — they're after the authority I carry!'

Cheng Shi's expression darkened.

He was right — at least half right.

Zangier had indeed set his sights on Cheng Shi. But the Grand Scholar hadn't actually detected the authority. In the end, Zangier was just a thief who'd stolen divinity and "assembled" himself into a pseudo-god. Until he truly crossed the threshold of godhood, he couldn't sense genuine authority.

All he'd noticed was that Cheng Shi's body was far more suitable for his "descent" than 0221's faith-stitched form. So he'd changed his plans on the spot, aiming to take Cheng Shi's vessel instead.

What Zangier perceived as "suitability" was, unbeknownst to him, the harmony of the Prosperity and Decay authorities acting within Cheng Shi! He couldn't detect the authorities themselves — but he could absolutely sense how these two forces coexisted in perfect balance within Cheng Shi's body. That harmony was infinitely more refined than the crude faith-stitching in 0221's frame. If Zangier merged with Cheng Shi, the power accumulated in his Hanged-Man-of-Doomsday form might be preserved far more completely.

So you couldn't blame Zangier for getting ideas.

Any Truth follower who spotted superior "data" at the experiment's final juncture would probably make the same choice. So Zangier altered the experiment in real-time — manipulating the tentacle swarms' attack frequency and position to gradually funnel this "more suitable vessel" right here. And that was why 0221 had revealed himself earlier.

Of course, there'd been nothing "candid" about that candor. It was pure calculation. Zangier had no intention of asking Cheng Shi's consent. Once he'd confirmed the Fate Weaver wasn't an ally, he'd already begun the vessel-transfer sequence. 0221's appearance had been nothing more than a stalling tactic for Zangier's final preparations!

Yes — Zangier was already in the real world. This Grand Scholar of Creation Alchemy, who should have been lost to the Land of Hope's history, was now after one thing: seizing Cheng Shi's body!

He would bring a pseudo-god's will, stolen divinity, a thirst for Truth, and madness encoded in his very DNA — merging them all with this perfect vessel to complete the experiment!

Afterward, the world would have one fewer Clown — but one more scholar who'd drawn ever closer to Them!

And so, the moment preparations were complete, the signal went out, and 0221 moved. Or rather, the mother-tree moved. In this instant, the massive tumor vanished from Big Cat's sight and materialized beside Cheng Shi. It had always been capable of instantaneous teleportation within the experiment site — yet when returning to defend earlier, it had feigned being slowed and obstructed!

Perhaps every act of concealment had been for this ambush. The tumor's sudden appearance left both the Fate Weaver and the doctor no time to react.

"BOOM—"

The tumor detonated without warning.

Its sudden materialization was terrifying enough, but 0221 gave the two men zero chance to respond — detonating this thing the size of a terrestrial sun right before their eyes.

Both were blown away. The doctor coughed a gush of blood, immediately downed the Prosperity of Yesteryear Cheng Shi had given him, then grabbed the Fate Weaver and plunged into the blood-and-flesh-filled shadows.

But when he emerged in the shadow plane — he realized he'd grabbed... nothing?

No one was beside him! Cheng Shi was gone!

Wang Mou's eyes flew wide. His brow sank as he burst out of the shadows, searching frantically. But amid the sky-filling debris and blood-fog, even finding his bearings was nearly impossible — let alone a person. And what made things worse was that where the tumor had detonated, the space wasn't empty. At some point, a colossal tree had sprouted — towering into the sky.

The explosion hadn't annihilated the tumor. Rather, it seemed to have released its enormous internal pressure, letting countless tentacles fully extend from within and knot together into massive, gnarled trunks that connected every tentacle in the sky to every tentacle in the ground.

In that moment, infinite tentacles shuddered and spread in unison, interweaving and interlocking, forging themselves into a cage that sealed the entire real-world space inside.

And it didn't stop there. The Birth-born horror wasn't done. Because Wang Mou could clearly see — on every twisted, writhing tentacle — eyes and mouths opening by the thousands. These humanoid organs weren't the deformed mutations of stitched newborns. They looked more like remnants from actual players!

In that moment, he finally understood how this so-called aberrant mother-tree had been stitched together.

It wasn't purely a composite of Birth newborns. It was stitched from numberless Birth players as well!

So every murmur in this experiment site, every whispered raving, every shriek — all of it might have been the death-dirge those Birth players sang for themselves, eyes unshut in death.

The doctor's expression worsened. He could see neither path nor hope. The road to Truth seemed blocked by a contaminated "truth."

And then — just as despair closed in — a familiar voice sounded behind him.

"Tsk. Doctor, are you fighting or not?"

"If you're not fighting, could you move a little? You're standing in my way."

Wang Mou snapped awake and spun around — only to see Cheng Shi standing behind him, materializing from who-knew-where. He was drenched in blood, face covered in wounds, looking thoroughly wretched — but the blazing battle-intent in his eyes was impossible to hide.

"You..."

"Me what?"

Think I was dead?

Heh — give me a break. If I went down here, what kind of... Joker would I be?

Relax. This show? It's barely even started!"

With that, Cheng Shi scoffed, stomped the ground, and launched himself skyward — the explosive force of his takeoff making it abundantly clear he was no longer an Another Day Thief, but a Pointer Warrior!

Yes — Cheng Shi had swapped masks.

In the split second of the explosion, he'd ducked into the shadows, torn off his face-mask, and slapped on a new one. In a combat situation like this, the Hero of Today was the most ferocious option available.

Especially after fusing with Pointer Knight. Cheng Shi's combat instincts skyrocketed. He could pick out the gaps between every tentacle-cluster strike, pre-positioning or dodging at speed. Under the storm of tentacle assaults, he was a small boat tossed wildly by towering waves — lurching into the air again and again, yet never once capsizing!

He charged up the tentacle staircase toward 0221 in the building's mid-level. And facing this suddenly powered-up Cheng Shi, 0221 showed no alarm.

He simply grew more and more intrigued by the vessel his mentor had chosen. So intrigued, in fact, that he began to wonder whether — before this experiment concluded — he could squeeze in one extra experiment of his own. Namely...

Stitching this "perfect" vessel together with himself!

That way, on the road toward Truth, he might walk "shoulder to shoulder" with his mentor once more.

"Heh heh heh... Welcome! Welcome indeed!

Fate Weaver — I have never needed you more than I do right now."

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Chapter 783: Battle! Crisis! Turning Point!

The moment 0221 finished speaking, countless living tentacles surged from before him, intertwining into two colossal hands. One reached for Cheng Shi; the other pulled 0221 slowly toward the mother-tree's trunk. It seemed that before "stitching" with Cheng Shi, he intended to merge with the mother-tree first.

Cheng Shi's expression darkened. Facing the giant hand that had sealed off practically every forward direction, he snapped his fingers — retreating three steps in the blink of an eye. He dodged the hand's leading edge, then planted a foot on one of its tentacle-formed fingers, stomping through countless tentacles at once. Using the recoil, he rocketed toward the airborne 0221.

In that instant, he was a hunting falcon — eyes locked on 0221 as his sole prey.

Simultaneously, Wang Mou moved. Shaken into action by Cheng Shi's relentless offensive, the Truth assassin finally snapped to, his expression hardening as he matched the rhythm of Cheng Shi's assault. He shadow-leaped through the omnipresent darkness, vaulting skyward, and in the blink of an eye arrived at 0221's position.

A Likeness Dagger — a short blade — sliced out of the shadow plane, aimed straight for his original body's throat.

The doctor's assassination angle was expertly chosen. He'd deliberately avoided targeting the bloated, obese half of the body, fearing the abnormal fat deposits might throw off his judgment of human weak points. But he'd underestimated his original body.

0221's other half looked like skin and bone, but its hardness was virtually identical to a mummy blessed by Decay. The doctor's blade tip struck 0221's desiccated neck and sparked violently — and in that instant of contact, a thick wave of Decay power began creeping along the dagger, corroding up toward the doctor's arm.

Wang Mou's face changed. He spun to flee. But then — Cheng Shi arrived.

The Pointer Warrior did nothing to 0221. He didn't even acknowledge the seemingly victorious Chosen. Instead, he grabbed the doctor's leg right as Wang Mou was about to dive into the shadows — and bodily hauled him out!

"???"

'He's attacking his own teammate now?'

Wang Mou was dumbstruck. But what shocked him more was what followed!

Without explanation, Cheng Shi simply smirked, flung the doctor backward by his leg, then lurched forward himself — letting the contaminated blade-tip graze his own arm. The instant that Decay-laced edge broke his skin, a more vigorous, purer Decay power detonated outward, transforming Cheng Shi's left arm into a withered, desiccated "Decay hand" — identical to 0221's!

The Faded One's authority blazed to life once more!

Both scholars on the scene were stunned. 0221's pupils contracted — then he burst into delighted laughter.

"Heh heh heh!

Good, good, good! No wonder he chose you — so you've also stitched Decay into yourself!

Cheng Shi, you are magnificent. Now show me where your stitched Prosperity is hiding!"

The words had barely left his mouth when the giant tentacle-hand beneath 0221 split open a fissure. From it, countless figures burst forth.

They were "players" — all wearing murderous expressions, apparently brainwashed by 0221. Cheng Shi initially assumed this was another inhumane Truth experiment, but when he spotted familiar faces in

the charging army — Li Zhi, Wang Weijin, Yan Chun — he realized these weren't players at all. They were...

0221's slice army!

He'd unleashed every last one of his slices.

In that instant, a deluge of talent-based attacks swept toward the near-point-blank Cheng Shi. Truth-walls sealed his retreat; shadow-locks froze the surrounding space-time; blades and pikes harmonized with tentacles; longbows rained arrows like falling forests; every conceivable debuff stacked wildly atop his body. Against such ferocity, even the Hero of Today — brave as he was — had to take a hit.

Indeed, if Cheng Shi were only a Hero of Today, he might have stumbled. But don't forget — he wasn't blessed by Fate alone. Time had equally shown its favor. So he felt no panic whatsoever. The Pointer Knight's abilities had already identified the optimal moment to break through. He just had to weather the initial suppressive fire with Vitality, and soon he'd sweep these garbage slices away.

But then — something neither side expected happened!

A great sword wreathed in blood and fire suddenly flew out from within the slice formation, plunging into the air before Cheng Shi ahead of every other attack. Then — click — something like a seal released, and a cataclysmic blaze erupted before Cheng Shi's eyes.

Searing flames detonated across the sky. Terrifying tongues of fire branched outward like limbs, growing wildly in every direction. In an instant, the earlier spectacle of tentacles forming a world-tree repeated — only this time, the tree wasn't made of Birth's newborn flesh. It was War's fire!

In a flash, an "apricot tree" engulfed in world-ending flames "bloomed" beside Cheng Shi, incinerating every incoming attack to nothing.

Cheng Shi was "saved" — rescued by a wall of fire.

His eyelid twitched. He knew who'd come, but hadn't expected them to emerge from inside 0221's slice army!

'Wait — Hu-bro, what were you doing in there?!

'Actually... that's exactly where he should be.'

Because Hu Wei wasn't War's Chosen Grand Marshal. He was Chaos's Chosen — an Alien Blood Compatriot whose allegiance could never be pinned down!

And as the player who'd walked farthest down the Chaos path, where else would he appear but in the most chaotic place imaginable?

The sword's owner was, of course, Hu Wei.

Ever since shattering the experiment site's tanks and driving the mother-tree into total frenzy, the Grand Marshal had been far from idle. While Big Cat and Mo Li confronted the tumor, while Cheng Shi and Wang Mou "negotiated" with 0221, Hu Wei had relied on talents that made him completely undetectable, weaving left and right through the tentacle sea until he'd melted into it entirely. Then, riding against the tentacle current, he'd pushed toward the experiment's most critical, most vital nexus.

As the saying goes: a master of defense hides beneath the earth. Since chaos was everywhere in this experiment site, this Chaos follower followed his gut straight to the one place that wasn't chaotic — and there, he believed, would be the experiment's core.

Credit where it was due: he succeeded. But what Hu Wei hadn't expected was that the "core area" he'd found wasn't the control center at all. It was... the temporary anchor point where Zangier had been residing since leaving the Stars Dagger!

In other words — while everyone else fought until their heads cracked open, the Grand Marshal had used his talents to silently infiltrate the experiment's true heart: right in front of Zangier!

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Chapter 784: Today's Druid and Her Weapon

Not even Zangier had expected anyone to infiltrate his position. So when he discovered a player practically breathing down his neck, he flew into a rage. That was when the furious Grand Scholar sent 0221 the signal to end the experiment — and simultaneously launched a kill-pursuit against Hu Wei.

So if you were to say Hu Wei had saved Cheng Shi — yes, technically he did. But rescuing Cheng Shi hadn't been his intention.

This pragmatic big brother had simply realized his own strength couldn't match Zangier's onslaught, so he'd fled in a panic. After countless allegiance shifts, he'd resurfaced in the ground-level experiment site — and stumbled upon the besieged Cheng Shi.

The instant he saw his good brother surrounded, the dutiful big brother knew it was time to act.

Whether it was saving a "comrade" of Chaos or using overwhelming force to rally other players against the experiment site's monstrosity, he had to step forward and demonstrate his true capabilities.

And so, War's flame once again stunned Cheng Shi — while the ever-burning "apricot tree" darkened even 0221's expression.

"Hah — I've long suspected the great sword in your hands is the Blood Apricot from the War Nation's royal court, the tree that burned a thousand years and never charred. Now I see I was right.

But Grand Marshal — no matter how stubbornly War's flame refuses to die, this world must eventually fall silent.

If today I could witness this Blood Apricot extinguished... heh heh heh, that would be quite the spectacle.

I know one man's strength is limited, and rallying many is even harder. But before Truth, there's always a solution, isn't there? So allow me to show you... the latest fruit of my research."

With a casual wave from 0221, the previously scattered slices converged once more. But this time, they didn't attack. Instead, each one gripped a weapon and carved wound after wound into their own flesh. Then...

They stripped bare and, bathed in streaming blood, stitched themselves together!

These slices, grouped by profession and faith, merged into one right before Cheng Shi, Hu Wei, and the doctor's eyes!

Their flesh fused. Their consciousnesses merged. Their power skyrocketed. Their auras twisted.

The scene was so shocking that all three were struck utterly, literally dumbstruck.

Even the burning Blood Apricot overhead swayed for a heartbeat, its flames dimming a fraction.

"You..."

Cheng Shi wanted to swear, but spent a full second and couldn't locate these slices' mother.

Then again — they'd never had one.

So he gave up, turning to his big brother with an expression that clearly read: 'Who's the Chaos follower here — you or 0221?'

Hu Wei's face was grave. He, too, was lost for words. The scene was certainly surreal, but for someone who'd seen it all, it was... manageable. What truly had his nerves taut wasn't 0221 in front of them — it was the far more terrifying thing buried beneath the experiment site.

He couldn't figure out how to explain any of that to Cheng Shi and the doctor without looking bad, and the freshly merged slices didn't give them time to chat. The instant flesh unified and consciousness synchronized, these same-faith, same-profession stitched monstrosities launched their most savage assault!

"Don't just watch what's in front of you — watch what's below!" Hu Wei bellowed, pulling his great sword back and whirling into the fray. The doctor, face stern, tangled with twisted assassins in the shadows.

Only Cheng Shi was busiest, because the majority of fused abominations were targeting him. But for a Pointer Warrior carrying divine authority, no matter how many came, they were nothing but stepping stones.

As long as the enemy count didn't reach a crushing threshold, this caliber of combat couldn't hurt him.

So despite facing the most opponents, Cheng Shi won the fastest.

This stunned both Hu Wei and the doctor. They'd never imagined a priest — no, he definitely wasn't a priest anymore — but how had this transformation happened?

Hu Wei's gaze hardened. He thought of his Benefactor's private audience with Cheng Shi, and his pulse quickened.

The doctor blinked, recalling Cheng Shi's earlier recruitment pitch.

'The Joker Alliance... was this organization really that miraculous? Could it turn a priest into a warrior more ferocious than the Grand Marshal?'

Just as the three were battling the endless sea of tentacles and slices, the situation shifted again — Big Cat had finally arrived!

The moment she'd felt the tumor vanish, she'd known something big was happening. And the only person capable of causing trouble on this scale, aside from herself, was probably that missing Fate Weaver friend of hers.

So she'd immediately handed Tao Yi off to Mo Li and charged toward the area with the biggest commotion.

When Cheng Shi spotted a bear-shaped shadow smashing into the sky-reaching tentacle trunk, he shouted:

"Big Cat — stop hitting the tree! Below us! There's something below! Smash through the ground!"

Hong Lin froze. Her assault stuttered — and then her entire being, no, her entire bear's aura, erupted upward as if ignited by the surrounding inferno.

"CHENG! SHI! What did you just call me?!"

"I said smash below! How do you not understand?!" Cheng Shi was frantic — and also guilty.

'Don't understand?'

'How could she not understand?!'

'Fine, fine — not even pretending anymore, are we?!'

Big Cat snapped. Fueled by the rage of being called "Big Cat" yet again, she roared, clenched her fists overhead, and smashed downward with everything she had.

"BOOM—"

The earth-shaking blow set the entire experiment space trembling — but the ground didn't crack.

"Something's reinforcing it from below! Can't break through! Help me!"

The giant bear pounded several more times to no avail. Cheng Shi swatted aside the stitched monstrosities in front of him and frowned. "Okay — what if we eat some honey first, then smash?"

"..." That sentence nearly choked Hong Lin to death. In that moment, the giant bear raised her head with murder in her eyes — the same look she reserved for a certain bald Silence follower.

She launched off the ground like a cannon, rocketed to Cheng Shi's side, wordlessly shredded every surrounding monstrosity with her bare claws, then grabbed Cheng Shi and hurled him like a hammer at the airborne 0221.

'Cut the head off the snake.' In Hong Lin's assessment, even if danger lurked below, killing 0221 first couldn't possibly be wrong.

Cheng Shi agreed in principle. But in his version, he was the protagonist who killed 0221 — not a weapon being swung by a giant bear.

Still, he knew Big Cat was venting her anger, so pushing back now would be unwise. And so the iron-hard Pointer Warrior played along for a few minutes, quietly guest-starring as a "clock-hand" weapon for Today's Druid.

Unfortunately, neither the earlier tumor nor the current tree was easily destroyed. Under Birth's influence, Hong Lin's fury was once again derailed by her swelling body mass.

The giant bear roared in frustration and retreated. She casually tore open several bulging lumps on her body, crushed the newborns inside, then stabbed Cheng Shi upright into the ground and demanded furiously: "Why aren't you affected?!"

Cheng Shi's head hit dirt first. He blinked, innocent-faced. "Sis — is this any way to talk to a person?"

"..."

Hong Lin irritably flipped Cheng Shi over and swatted the gore from his head — though the swipe was so savage it nearly gave the Clown a concussion.

Rubbing his skull, Cheng Shi pointed at her accusingly: "Equipment! Do you know what equipment is?! You charged in so fast at the start I didn't even have time to slip it to you!"

He produced the Silent Infant Bell from his hand and placed it in the bear's paw.

Yes — it was this artifact from Hu Xuan that had protected Cheng Shi from Birth's hymn the entire way. Before today, even he hadn't known this thing had that effect.

Hong Lin glanced at the bell, frowning. "Only one?"

"What else? You think this is a wholesale market? One not enough for you?"

"What about you?"

"You've got more fighting power. Take it and beat him down!"

"..." Hong Lin's fury stuttered. She shoved the bell back into Cheng Shi's hand, then looked up at 0221 — who was gradually merging with the mother-tree — and roared: "I've got more fighting power! I don't need that thing to beat him!"

With that, she launched skyward again, hurtling toward 0221.

"..."

Cheng Shi paused, staring at the bell in his hand, and shook his head with a quiet laugh.

'That's Big Cat for you. Always, always thinking of her friends.'

But Hu Wei was right. The real danger wasn't above — it was below. So the threat that had the Grand Marshal on high alert, the one he'd explicitly warned about... was it the Zangier who'd escaped from the Land of Hope?

Staring at the ground — soaked in black blood and minced flesh — Cheng Shi's brow furrowed tight.

Until that man showed himself, this battle would never end.

So they needed to... find him.

But if even Big Cat couldn't break through the ground, how was he supposed to?

As he was thinking, an excited shout rang from the distance:

"Brother-in-law?!"

Finally found you, brother-in-law! Why are you here alone — where's my sister?"

"???"

Cheng Shi looked up. When a bald head swam into view, his face fell immediately.

'Seriously — why is he here too?!'

...

Chapter 785: "Yesteryear" Reprised

There was no way the Prisoner had arrived here on his own.

The moment Big Cat left the team and bolted toward the new battlefield, Mo Li — whose situational judgment was razor-sharp — had concluded that their way out lay in pushing forward, not waiting. So he'd ordered the entire team to move, decisively leading everyone to catch up.

Of course, when everyone was fighting for survival, crisis made cohesion easy. But once the surrounding danger evaporated and the group found itself charging toward fresh peril, plenty of people lost interest in risking their necks for strangers.

Players trickled away from the formation, halting where they stood, their expressions varied. Clearly, they had no intention of answering Mo Li's call.

For these people, their choice wasn't wrong — they simply trusted their own instincts over Mo Li's judgment.

As a commander, Mo Li had witnessed this scenario countless times. He didn't even leave the departing players parting words. He just led the rest straight toward the place he believed offered the best chance of survival.

There would certainly be sacrifice. But fighting to live beat sitting around waiting to die.

And so the Prisoner had accompanied the team to this new battlefield. They'd fought their way through with minimal casualties, since virtually all tentacles in the region were occupied with Cheng Shi's group. But once they arrived and laid eyes on the even more grotesquely twisted mother-tree and 0221's slice army, every face turned grim.

Mo Li immediately directed the team to engage. The Prisoner, serving as the formation's anchor point, glanced around idly — and locked eyes with Cheng Shi.

He was initially delighted to spot his extraordinarily perceptive brother-in-law. But when Cheng Shi grinned even wider than him and came charging over, the Prisoner's face stiffened, and an inexplicable flutter of panic rose in his chest.

He still remembered how, back at the Mediocre Person Society, this man had turned everything upside down and left him utterly speechless. And now he knew Cheng Shi was a friend of the Torchbearers — while he himself happened to be one...

Cheng Shi could freely "go on the offensive" without knowing the Prisoner's affiliation, but the Prisoner couldn't pick fights the way he used to. In other words, they were invisible one-directional allies. Even if Cheng Shi was oblivious, the Prisoner had to carefully navigate this relationship.

So for once, the Prisoner was the tongue-tied one.

Cheng Shi, on the other hand, had charged over for exactly this reason.

He'd been slightly nervous seeing the Prisoner at first. But remembering the man was a Torchbearer, that reliable sense of "you can trust a Torchbearer" flooded back. Coupled with a sudden flash of inspiration, the Clown had hit upon a way to break through the ground beneath them.

So, dodging tentacle attacks on the run, Cheng Shi sprinted toward Mo Li's team and bellowed:

"Prisoner! Your moment to showcase your Benefactor's glory has arrived — silence the ground beneath us and everything below it, and I'll convert on the spot! Same faith as you!"

Cheng Shi didn't actually need such a roundabout excuse to ask the Prisoner for help. But he knew the Prisoner had no public connection to him. So he had to set the stage for the Torchbearer's response — worried the Prisoner might be too enthusiastic and blow his cover, yet equally worried he might play it cool and ignore the request entirely. His only option was to open with something that matched the Prisoner's established personality, giving the man a natural way to respond that would convince everyone watching — and withstand scrutiny after the fact.

The plea was absurd, of course. The players in Mo Li's team exchanged baffled looks — discussing something this frivolous in such a tense battle seemed utterly pointless. But even so, three voices responded.

The first was Mo Li himself, whose eyelid was twitching in fury at the current situation. Seeing the swarm of enemies trailing Cheng Shi, he bellowed, face dark:

"Flanking approach! Do you understand 'flanking approach'?! Fate Weaver, you're blocking our firing lanes — change direction! Now! Immediately!"

The second was Tao Yi. She blinked, seized the Prisoner's arm, and asked: "Who's your sister?"

Third, naturally, was the Prisoner himself. He had a nagging feeling Cheng Shi had figured out his identity, but he had no proof. Logically, the man shouldn't know — yet this uncanny intuition told him there was a hidden message in Cheng Shi's words.

But whether the words were sincere or deceptive, the Prisoner understood the meaning. So he first turned to console Tao Yi:

"Given your age, you're probably quite a bit younger than me. So by that logic — you're my sister too.

Your boyfriend is amazing."

Then, under the wood elf's earthquake-inducing stare — unsure whether to be pleased or appalled — he shouted back at Cheng Shi:

"You serious?"

Cheng Shi leaped high, dodging the friendly fire clearing his pursuers, landed to the side, and laughed:

"Dead serious! Silence the ground and everything beneath it, and from now on, whenever we meet, I won't say a single word!

Deal?"

The Prisoner's brow arched. He was tickled pink. With the perfect excuse in hand — whether as a favor to a Torchbearer's friend or as fulfilling a wager — he had no reason to refuse.

So he strode forward past the team's edge, rubbed his bald head, raised a fist, tipped his chin up, glanced sidelong at the ground, and smirked:

"Easy. Watch closely.

All things fall silent. The universe speaks no sound. Everyone and everything — shut...

Your mouths!"

"BOOM—HUM—"

"....."

The instant the Prisoner's devastating punch struck the ground, Cheng Shi felt as though he'd gone deaf.

The shrieks, the whipping wind, the cacophony, the shouting — every sound vanished instantly. No transition whatsoever. Everything in his field of vision became a blood-spattered silent film. Even people's movements seemed to stutter, frozen for a heartbeat by the "purge-all-sound" shockwave.

The sheer impossibility of it made Cheng Shi's pupils contract. In this moment, he finally grasped the true terror of the Silence Chosen — and understood that real Silence wasn't merely a verbal gag order. It was the cessation of expression across every dimension.

Not just him — every living and non-living thing in the entire space, including 0221 and whatever was hidden below the ground, even the Prisoner himself — all halted for a single breath under the might of that blow.

True silence of all things!

Good news: the opening Cheng Shi had been waiting for had arrived.

Bad news: he couldn't use it.

Because right now, he physically couldn't turn around and shout to Big Cat — who was tangling with the mother-tree mid-air — "Now! Smash downward!"

Watching this once-in-a-lifetime window rapidly slipping away, Cheng Shi nearly lost his mind. His brain raced — but under Silence's influence, no expression of his could reach anyone.

So the quick-witted Clown devised another plan.

Since Silence had temporarily claimed dominion here, the only way to accomplish anything within His power was to surrender everything to Fate. So he frantically tried to snap his fingers. Triggering Fate Has Divergence.

And finally — just as the Prisoner's Silence was about to dissipate — the Clown's snap rang out. In that single instant when no one had yet recovered, Fate veered onto a divergent path. Big Cat, who had suddenly lost her balance mid-air, plummeted — with all her brute force — conveniently toward the ground.

Hong Lin sensed the interference. She was about to course-correct when Cheng Shi screamed from below:

"Don't pull up — SMASH DOWN!"

Hong Lin's body jolted. Instant comprehension. She rode the momentum, accelerating her descent into a devastating dive.

Everyone had barely blinked back to consciousness when they heard a thunderous "BOOM—"

The ground collapsed.

In that sliver of a moment before whatever lurked below could recover — Big Cat shattered the uncanny surface. But...

Under Fate Has Divergence's influence, it wasn't only the ground beneath her feet that caved in. The cracks radiating from the giant bear's landing point expanded wider and wider, and within a second, countless fractures raced in every direction. Then everyone felt the earth vanish beneath their feet as the entire central zone's surface crumbled and began to fall.

In an instant, every surface structure collapsed in succession, kicking up billowing dust. Rubble and debris tumbled alongside tentacles and players, and screams and shrieks exploded out of silent-mode, all of it swallowed into the endless abyss beneath.

The scene was achingly familiar — so much so that Cheng Shi faltered mid-fall. But what he hadn't expected was that something even more familiar was waiting below.

Through the curtain of dust and debris, a colossal tree crown suddenly unfurled — its branches and leaves growing wild, spreading in concentric rings. In moments, a vast canopy of emerald green spread out like a world-saving umbrella, gently catching him — and every living soul in the experiment site.

"Yesteryear" reprised...

Cheng Shi blinked. Sitting atop the crown, he looked toward its center — and there stood a figure with pink-dyed hair, staff raised high, countless branches erupting from her limbs. Those very branches formed the Prosperity crown that had just saved everyone, plucking every player from the brink of the abyss.

The pink-haired girl's face was drained of color, lips pressed bloodless — clearly pushing herself to the limit. But even so, a smile lingered at the corner of her eyes. The same smile the person who'd saved her had worn, back then.

As Cheng Shi looked at her, she was looking back. When their gazes met, the Fate Weaver saw in the wood elf's eyes a glimmer of nostalgia — and resolve.

Those eyes said, plain as day: 'I'm growing too. Now, I can save even more people.'

...

Chapter 786: "Yester-Sun" Reprised

How wonderful — the wood elf could hold her own in a battle of this caliber now.

A flash of warmth flickered through Cheng Shi's heart. He'd barely started to greet the girl who'd rescued everyone when his expression sank again.

Because the crisis was far from over!

Remember — he'd had Big Cat smash through the ground not because the exit lay below, but to expose whatever unknown risk was hidden in this zone.

So the situation wasn't improving. It was deteriorating. The tentacles adhered to the sky's air-walls all drooped toward the players in a frenzy of lashing — and from the bottomless abyss beneath their feet, iridescent light began rising in wisps.

Reflected in their eyes, these lights were like a hallucinogenic potion, relentlessly stimulating every player's nerves. More than a few peered curiously over the edge, and a single glance at the swelling sea of light left their minds in chaos, every desire threatening to erupt at once.

"Don't look! It's Corruption!"

Indeed, the pressure felt similar to Corruption's pull on desire — but the source bore no relation to actual Corruption. This was a desire vortex 0221 had manufactured to replicate the "Desire Ravine" experiment!

And when Cheng Shi saw that the vortex had fully taken shape, his eyes blazed. He was certain — his guess was correct!

This was never about the Stars Dagger. It wasn't some precursor experiment for replicating the Stars Dagger either. This was a descent site — built by 0221 so Zangier could arrive in the real world. The aberrant mother-tree overhead, mimicking Birth's nature, and the rising desire vortex below — they were clearly what 0221 had prepared for Zangier...

A pair of eyes!

Remember: the Eternal Sun and blood moon seen at Far Dusk Town had been the Hanged Man of Doomsday's eyes. When Zangier escaped the Stars Dagger, he couldn't possibly have brought the Tower

of Logic's pseudo-god along. So the eyes that should have been set in the Hanged Man's sockets had vanished.

Cheng Shi didn't know what losing those stellar simulacra meant for Zangier. But given the current situation, perhaps without those eyes, Zangier couldn't perfectly merge with 0221.

And now, his star pupil in the real world — 0221 — was fabricating a new pair for his mentor!

He'd stitched together Birth players and their countless birthed newborns to forge the mother-tree. Then he'd manipulated the desires of every "invited" player, channeling them into a desire vortex. These two, as eyes, would restore light to his mentor — the Creation Alchemy Department's most deranged Grand Scholar, Zangier!

And 0221 himself had been meant as Zangier's descent vessel. But since Zangier had chosen Cheng Shi instead, 0221 was now marshaling every weapon in the experiment site, trying to break him.

From the look of things, though, 0221 had failed. He hadn't captured Cheng Shi quickly enough. And now that the desire vortex had been exposed — Zangier awoke!

This scholar who'd stolen divine authority and forged himself into a pseudo-god, seeing his experiment site careening toward chaos, finally revealed himself.

"Careful! Zangier is here!"

Cheng Shi couldn't explain further. All he could do was shout so everyone understood they'd reached a life-or-death threshold.

Hearing his cry, everyone fell back, encircling Mo Li and Tao Yi at the center. Mo Li allocated what limited resources remained to stabilize the wood elf's platform. The Prisoner stood before them both, expression unchanged.

Hu Wei drew his blade and retreated, standing alone at the front. Big Cat abandoned her bear form, shifted into a leopard, bit Cheng Shi by the collar, and dragged him back.

Then — the heavens and earth shifted color. Space collapsed. The mother-tree, which had been madly lashing at the players moments ago, had somehow reverted to that enormous tumor — but now more than double its original size.

The tumor seemed fixed in some anchor point. As the space shook violently, it drifted from above the players to directly before them.

The desire vortex from the abyss below rose in tandem, pulling away from beneath their feet and quickly aligning horizontally with the tumor.

In that moment, everyone saw it clearly: to their right, a pulsing, swollen Birth tumor; to their left, a floating, desire-streaked Corruption vortex.

And the instant these two seemingly balanced tangles of faith reached perfect alignment—

"Hsssss—"

The entire space emitted nausea-inducing howls and shrieks. Everyone felt an explosion in their ears, and blood seeped from their nostrils and mouths.

But this was merely the beginning. Because the instant the tumor and vortex achieved total alignment, the mother-tree shed its vitality, the desire vortex evaporated its hallucinogenic quality, and both began to solidify. Sheets of reality peeled away — and from the Void, an enormous, terrifying silhouette gradually materialized.

The sight hurled Cheng Shi back to the Stars Dagger. He felt as though he were seeing the Hanged Man of Doomsday floating in the Void once more — except this time, the Hanged Man wasn't inverted. He was facing the platform. Looking at them.

No — looking at Cheng Shi.

Zangier!

This Grand Scholar who'd "broken out" of the Land of Hope's history in league with 0221 — had fully opened his eyes.

The instant He did, every player in His presence was seized by infinite desire. Against their will, their mouths opened and they began chanting Birth's hymns.

Even with the Prisoner's aura still active, even though many players carried various anti-debuff items — their resistance was pathetically futile.

A pseudo-god was still a pseudo-god. Even if the stolen authority was merely unclaimed scraps of Birth and Corruption, the sheer magnitude of that divine might was not something mortals could withstand. The scene erupted into chaos.

Faced with this "colossus" that mortals had no right to call an enemy, Mo Li's commands stalled, the Prisoner was struck dumb, Hu Wei dragged his sword further back, and Wang Mou's face went rigid.

Only Big Cat moved. The Prosperity agent shifted back into bear form, crossed the distance in a single stride, and planted herself in front of Cheng Shi. Staring down Zangier's covetous gaze, expression deadly serious, she declared:

"I don't care who you are. You will not touch my friend.

I am..."

Truthfully, after tanking Eposka head-on and brawling with Inquisitors at the Grand Tribunal, Big Cat had always itched to test herself against a servant god or envoy. But now, face-to-face with a pseudo-god, she suddenly realized she had no real confidence.

With "Vitality" on her side, she wouldn't lose. But against something this formidable... winning wasn't happening either.

A pseudo-god was nothing but cobbled-together divinity and stolen authority — an existence below even a servant god. Yet it was enough to make her heart pound. Imagine, then, how overwhelming the envoys gradually awakening from history's depths must truly be.

But she couldn't retreat. Her friend was behind her. She would not let her friend die here.

So she prepared to reveal her identity — to use the title of Prosperity's agent to make the entity reconsider its actions.

But just as Hong Lin was about to speak the name "Frazor" — Cheng Shi grabbed her.

He couldn't reach her hand. So he patted the giant bear's ankle, pushing the words back down her throat.

Hong Lin frowned tensely, looking back — and saw Cheng Shi smiling faintly, somewhat moved, shaking his head.

"No need. Not that extreme.

I didn't have you smash the ground so you could tank for me.

Using your identity against this thing would be a waste. Remember: come and go, all paths destined.

So long as even one Destined One has yet to enter the game, this cannot be Fate's endgame."

Then he turned toward those impossibly eerie eyes and scoffed:

"Zangier. Long time no see.

Didn't expect you to regress with age.

What — the lesson Hu Xuan taught you wasn't enough?

There's something you've never understood. When you covet others, there is always someone more deranged who covets you.

Why do you think I've been stalling this long?

You didn't actually believe I was out of options and waiting to die, did you?

I was waiting for you to show yourself, Zan! Gi! Er!"

Before he'd even finished speaking, Cheng Shi scoffed again and snapped his fingers — the last snap to echo through this experiment site.

'Even if you've desecrated Birth to the very limit, unless I tag you face-to-face, how can I gamble that you'll be judged as the "Sinner" who defiled Birth?'

Yes — Cheng Shi had triggered Sinner Redemption. Every tentacle he'd measured with his winds earlier? That hadn't been idle movement. It had been to ensure that every single tentacle visible within this space was tagged!

In a situation this dire, he couldn't afford a shred of luck. So he'd used the brute-force method — painstaking, inch-by-inch groundwork to build his steady foundation.

And now, having tagged the final target — Zangier himself — the moment of judgment for this monstrous feast of Birth-desecration had finally arrived.

'Tsk. I don't know if Birth will be angry. But I know the one who punishes all blasphemers on Birth's behalf — Go Lis — will absolutely be furious when she sees this.'

'Because no one understands Go Lis better than I do!'

The snap fell. And the sky of this experiment site — which had blocked all external divine power, even sealed off trial prayers — finally changed.

A colossal rift tore open through the Void. From within, countless dark tentacles — far more horrifying and twisted than the mother-tree's — began slithering out.

Simultaneously, a soft huff sounded from inside the rift. Then a terrifying great sun rose from within, replacing the existing one, illuminating every shadow in this shattered reality.

The true Eternal Sun and the Sin Brood Mother who punishes all blasphemers...

In this moment — descended together.

...

Chapter 787: Fate May Have Divergent Paths, But Truth Has No Feelings

Honestly, when Cheng Shi saw the Eternal Sun, he was stunned too — because he'd never rung the Silent Infant Bell. Hu Xuan shouldn't be here at all.

But the sight wasn't inexplicable. Judging by the direction Hu Xuan had appeared from, she'd clearly been visiting Aph Ros in the time-prison of Dolgod. And Cheng Shi had just happened to summon Go Lis at that exact moment. So both of Birth's children had... conveniently arrived on stage together.

And when Go Lis appeared in this space — wreathed in the purest Birth power and boundless fury — the newly awakened Zangier let out his first scream since regaining sight:

"Impossible!

How could you possibly bypass His protection and reach this place — this is impossible!"

The Eternal Sun's aura was far too faint. Compared to Zangier, Hu Xuan was nothing more than a "junior" still piecing together her divinity — hardly worth mentioning. But Go Lis was different. She was

the complete form of a Birth envoy — a true servant god of the Life path — and she even carried another servant god's divine power. This was a status and height that no pseudo-god could ever reach through "effort" alone.

If scholars' experiments actually worked, the Tower of Logic would have produced true gods instead of pseudo-gods. Zangier understood this perfectly. He knew that plodding silently along Truth's path would never make him one of Them. That was precisely why he'd gone so far as to forge himself into a pseudo-god, then escape history into reality — seeking new opportunity.

But never in his wildest nightmares had he imagined that this "new experiment" — protected by Truth — would fail now!

Yes, this experiment absolutely had Truth's protection. Otherwise, after Mo Li and the Prisoner escaped the containment, they'd never have cowered inside that building waiting for rescue.

This was reality. Players could pray freely in reality and transmit information through those prayers. But they hadn't succeeded.

Why? Because a deity had intervened!

And disrupting the most fundamental function of the Faith Game couldn't be done with simple meddling. That deity had to have methods for circumventing the Convention on some level!

Few deities could and would do such a thing — but Truth was certainly one of them.

And it was precisely because Zangier and 0221 had received Truth's answer to their prayers that these two madmen from different eras had dared to orchestrate such a brazen scheme in reality.

What they hadn't anticipated was this: at the experiment's final hour, a single step from success, the Benefactor who'd "promised" them had withdrawn His protection — allowing a Birth servant god to break through the barrier and appear before them.

And not just any servant god — the Sin Brood Mother, the one who despised blasphemers most!

'How is anyone supposed to fight this?'

Zangier's expression turned hideously dark. Meanwhile, from within the crowd, Cheng Shi was grinning ear to ear.

"Heh — what's so impossible? I told you: your path was wrong.

Sure, taking the wrong path might not affect your personal achievements. But have you considered — you've stopped walking Truth's road entirely. Why would He bother protecting you?

Not every god is Fate. Fate's divergent paths can still loop back to the destined course, thanks to His tolerance. But Truth...

Someone once told me: Truth is an eternal, immutable law. It carries not a shred of feeling.

So wrong is wrong. And you, Zangier, are spectacularly, catastrophically wrong.

Accept your fate. Your collector has arrived."

Cheng Shi delivered this monologue from behind Big Cat's protection, every word dripping with sarcasm — each one a dagger in Zangier's chest.

Zangier's eerie twin eyes glared furiously at Cheng Shi, but he made no retaliation — verbal or physical.

Scholars had always been pragmatic. Even when experiments failed due to uncontrolled variables, they'd always try to salvage something at the final moment. So, facing this rapidly collapsing situation, Zangier furrowed his brow and began calculating how to piece this wrong path... back together.

With a top-tier scholar's intellect, it took only moments before he actually found a way.

He'd learned about this era from 0221. He'd learned about the Faith Game. He'd deduced that the Audience with God must be extraordinarily important — which was why the gods had implemented this game in reality. So he believed that if he obtained a player identity, he might be able to forge a new path in this new era.

That was why he'd lured 0221 into cooperation. But now, facing Birth's judgment, 0221 — as Truth's so-called Chosen — could at least invoke his player status to argue his case. But Zangier?

As a "jailbreaker" from history, he had no ground to stand on.

So for Zangier, the only path to survival was: endure the pressure and merge with 0221 as fast as possible!

If he descended into 0221's body, he would become 0221. In this game of faith-based conflicts, as the player who'd walked farthest on Truth's road, Zangier refused to believe Truth would simply abandon him over some minor setback!

Because he had always believed — his own madness, his mother's madness, his ancestors' madness — it was all due to Truth's will!

That lofty deity must Himself be an extraordinarily mad existence among the gods. Only that could explain why He had protected Zangier time and again.

And so, having found his "opportunity," Zangier expelled 0221 from his right eye. Before 0221 could even take stock of the situation, a torrential wave of consciousness erupted from Zangier's titanic body and slammed into 0221.

0221's eyes bulged — seemingly comprehending what was happening. But he showed no panic, no fear. Instead, he laughed wildly, cheered deliriously. In that moment, he saw his destination not as death, but as... true Truth.

"He chose me!

Fate Weaver, he chose me in the end!

I am the one who walks shoulder to shoulder with my mentor, treading the path of Truth together!"

"..."

Watching this deranged scene, Cheng Shi glanced at 0221's hands and smirked inwardly.

He could tell 0221 genuinely wanted to merge with Zangier. But... Zangier didn't look like some pure-hearted research-focused scholar.

What kind of Kool-Aid had Zangier fed 0221 to make the number-one player on the Ladder of Ascent for Truth become this... "foolish"?

And what was Go Lis doing? Just watching? Not making a move?

Cheng Shi frowned, gazing at the myriad tentacles hanging from the sky.

Go Lis truly was doing nothing. She had merely, quietly, surrounded the area — then waited in silence for Zangier's fusion to complete.

The scene suddenly went "quiet" again. The entire space was left with nothing but 0221's manic laughter and the sound of everyone sucking in sharp, horrified breaths.

Everyone was stunned.

Yet the universe beyond was far from calm. At least here — in the depths of the Void that no player could perceive — a dark, churning game of power was already in play.

...

Chapter 788: The Mantis Stalks the Cicada — But the Cicada Is the Oriole

Rewinding slightly — before Zangier had opened his eyes.

When Big Cat plummeted with devastating force and shattered the ground, exposing the Desire Ravine experiment beneath — the corresponding Void above this patch of reality also suffered a collapse.

A pair of eyes, etched with stellar points and spirals, quietly opened amid the destruction. They quickly began observing this stretch of Void, which shimmered with the flowing light of stars.

This was the Void, not the starry sky. There should never be this many brilliant stars here. Yet these stars were shifting positions in perfect order, each movement seemingly revealing some cosmic truth.

The eyes observed for a moment, then let out a cold huff:

"Respect the Convention when it suits you, trample it when it doesn't. Heh — is this the truth you've sought for the universe?"

As the scorn faded, those countless stars trembled and converged, linking together in wondrous patterns. Before long, a book radiating Truth's essence formed before the watching eyes.

The Book of Stars.

He appeared with an easy smile: "I expected the other Void would come. I didn't expect you."

The eyes glanced at Him coldly — a tone like glacial winds slicing through a frozen abyss:

"He wouldn't deign to deal with you. And He would never tell you the answer you want. Your calculations have failed.

But I have a piece of business I'd like to conduct. So call Him out. I know you have a connection."

"There is only me here. On the road to seeking Truth, there has only ever been me. I'm afraid I don't know who you're referring to."

The eyes grew colder still, the tone sharpening into pure derision:

"Do you truly think yourself the omniscient Truth?"

Without His consent, your followers could never have been taken from His Collection Hall. At the last Assembly of Gods, you two were probably already scheming this. So — summon Him. I won't say it again."

The words fell. Truth chuckled softly. And Memory... manifested.

Two ancient stars dissolved before the two deities. Those fragile bodies crumbled to dust, carried away by time's current — yet reappeared from nothingness moments later. Only now, their weathering was unworn, their gravity unbound. Instead, they shimmered faintly with cerulean light, as though returned to the instant of their birth.

Memory opened His eyes. Within His pupils was written the entire history of those two star-bodies' interconnected past.

"We meet again, Fate."

Fate cast Memory a cold, sidelong glance — neither joy nor sorrow in His gaze:

"Spare the pleasantries. This time, I came..."

He briefly peered through the infinite Void at His follower — trapped in crisis below — then closed His eyes again and continued:

"...to propose a trade."

Memory said nothing. He seemed to be studying the history of those two ancient stars. After an unknowable stretch, His pupils regained their focus, and He smiled:

"What a coincidence. I was just thinking of making an exchange as well."

Fate seemed to have anticipated this. He nodded:

"Then let us begin. My memory — in exchange for the fate you desire."

Memory smiled. He had no objection to this deal. But before beginning, He respectfully glanced at Truth beside them. After all, this was Truth's domain. Conducting business behind the "host's" back was somewhat... improper.

Yet Truth raised no objection. In fact, after Fate finished speaking, Truth also proposed a deal to Memory:

"History deserves respect, but Existence has upheavals of its own. I respect everything you've curated in the Collection Hall. But not everything in the universe is controllable.

I contaminated your collection. I have no standing to request this deal.

But you should know how critical this deal is to me. It determines how my path of seeking Truth can continue.

So, Memory — name your price."

Memory sank into thought once more. After a while, He gazed at the Book of Truth and smiled:

"Many have contaminated my collection. But you're the first to willingly pay the price.

It's a simple matter, really. You and War share the Civilization path. Borrowing a few trinkets from Him on my behalf shouldn't be too much trouble."

Truth's fluttering pages froze — then He burst into laughter:

"Interesting. So Existence is capitulating to Void?

I watched Time submit to Fate. And now you — are you also preparing to bow to Deceit?"

"Bow? That's a stretch. I simply find that sometimes, His machinations make for rather interesting memories.

At the end of the day, both Fate and I are acting for our followers. Whereas you...

Having abandoned so many followers — are you growing numb?"

"Those who walk a different path from mine can no longer share my heart.

Let us begin the deals, everyone. Any more chatter and the Void presence here will lose His temper."

Both deities looked toward Fate. Those stellar eyes — for once — held no derision. And they remained closed.

"Memory, you're wrong.

Only you are doing this for your follower. I... am doing this for myself.

Begin. This memory is too heavy. It's pressing me off my destined path."

...

Reality. 0221's experiment site.

The fusion between Zangier and 0221 went fast, thanks to thorough preparation. In short order, the eyes — woven from the mother-tree and desire vortex — shrank dramatically and embedded themselves in 0221's half-bloated, half-desiccated body.

The physical merger was complete. All that remained was unification of consciousness.

And then — a sudden reversal. 0221, who had joyfully embraced total fusion with Zangier, abruptly broke his oath. He turned on Zangier — attacking his mentor's consciousness!

Though this battle played out entirely within their intertwined minds — invisible to outsiders — when 0221's body began thrashing wildly, his expression twisting, one hand even drawing a dagger to self-mutilate, everyone knew something had gone terribly wrong.

"HOW DARE YOU!!!"

Zangier was furious. He hadn't been this enraged when his own mother abandoned him, or during the centuries of imprisonment inside the Stars Dagger — because back then, he'd already been secretly siphoning divinity to build his pseudo-god body. He'd known he wouldn't die in that prolonged cage.

But now — deceived by a so-called "player," a mortal he'd dismissed as an insect — how could he not be enraged?!

And the scheme's linchpin was something he'd never imagined: a... Concentric Dagger!

Yes — the very same Concentric Dagger created by Life Extension Department Grand Scholar Selius!

Remember: 0221 possessed a Concentric Dagger. It was the "gift" his personality slice Li Zhi had "given" him — the version that excised the dominant personality.

He'd used that very dagger to kill Li Zhi — the personality slice stronger than himself.

And now he attempted the same method: kill Zangier's personality and seize the pseudo-god's power — along with those painstakingly crafted pseudo-divine eyes!

But how could a mortal outwit a pseudo-god? The Concentric Dagger only eliminated one's own personalities. Zangier and 0221 were clearly two different people. How could a same-personality dagger work?

The answer was actually simple.

The doctor had explained it: 0221 obtained this body through faith-stitching. He'd fused untold numbers of himself — across different faiths — until the Prosperity-Decay coexistence of 0221 was achieved.

0221 had also admitted that the Wang Weijin personality was the sole survivor of the stitching experiment's consciousness war. But...

0221 possessed the Master of Deception card!

Nobody knew how many personalities — how many conscious selves — truly lurked inside that body!

And that was how 0221 had fooled Zangier. He'd offered up his dominant, externally communicating consciousness for seamless fusion. Then, once the merged consciousness inherited his memories and cognition...

Who was to say the current "Zangier" wasn't just another 0221?

And so, in this very moment — the instant Zangier's consciousness became the strongest personality — the other personas hidden within 0221's body erupted. Concentric Dagger in hand, they thrust at the dominant personality.

If this strike landed, it would end the Grand Scholar's life!

And then — this cicada, caught in the mantis's jaws, would tear free and become the oriole — swallowing the mantis whole!

This was 0221's true "path to godhood"!

He had spent six painstaking months scheming toward this moment.

And right now — he was closer to success than ever before.

...

Chapter 789: The Experiment Ground's Finale!

Cheng Shi knew all too well what a Concentric Dagger was.

After all, he had once helped his teammate excise some unnecessary personalities. Whether they were primary or secondary personalities hardly mattered — the point was, they were excised...

So the moment Cheng Shi saw 0221 pull out that dagger, he froze, instantly grasping every facet of the man's plan. Then he promptly resumed hiding behind Big Cat, hurling barbs from the safety of her shadow.

"What did I tell you, Zangier? When you covet what belongs to others, there's always someone even more unhinged coveting what's yours.

Did you ever imagine that one day, your so-called student would come for you?

Ha, how pathetic. Your mother denied you your rights, your student plots to take your life. Perhaps your madness was meant to bring you closer to Truth, but...

In their eyes, you've gotten a bit too close to Truth — and they'd rather be the one standing there instead."

The verbal blow landed like a sledgehammer, plunging Zangier into total fury. But 0221 had placed far too many restrictions on this body — so many that even Zangier couldn't break free of every shackle in time. All he could do was thrash in impotent rage, pouring every ounce of his will into wrestling 0221 for final control.

Yet the Concentric Dagger in front of everyone's eyes crept closer and closer to the heart. The grin on 0221's face twisted into something increasingly deranged. The scales of victory seemed to be tipping in his favor.

And just as 0221 was about to become the first Player ever to slay a god, Cheng Shi furrowed his brow and spoke again.

"Seriously, Go Lis — what are you waiting for?"

Even if the Sin Brood Mother can't speak, could Lady Eternal Sun perhaps shed some light on the situation?"

Hearing this, Big Cat raised an eyebrow and turned her gaze toward the enormous sun blazing within the rift in the Void.

"You know this 'Eternal Sun'?"

Cheng Shi nodded, about to explain, when the colossal sun slowly faded away, leaving only a vast solar phantom in its place. Then Hu Xuan descended with graceful steps, drifting down from the sky as though walking on air.

She was elegant as always — her lithe figure, her serene smile, her featherlight stride — utterly at odds with the blood-soaked carnage that littered the canopy platform.

Her gaze swept across everyone present before she stopped in front of Cheng Shi, looking up at the massive bear with curiosity.

"This Druid... is Bald Uses Rejoice?"

Cheng Shi blinked. "You two have never been matched together?"

"Unfortunately, not yet." Hu Xuan smiled and extended her hand toward Hong Lin. "Hu Xuan. Life Sage."

Her identity was obviously far more than just a Player. Hong Lin was no fool — after seeing Hu Xuan's attitude toward Cheng Shi, she immediately realized this was likely another Player who had benefited from the Fate Weaver. The only question was why this Birth follower was dressed so much like... a Corruption devotee.

Big Cat frowned slightly. Sensing the situation was finally becoming "manageable," she instantly dropped her bear form, gave Hu Xuan a brief nod of acknowledgment, and extended her hand for a shake.

But at that very moment, Cheng Shi's reflexes kicked in. He slapped a hand onto Big Cat's shoulder and yanked her stumbling backward.

'Are you insane, girl? You'll shake just anyone's hand? Do you even see who's standing in front of you? A handshake's one thing, but have you thought about whose last name the kid would take?'

Big Cat certainly hadn't thought about that. Startled by Cheng Shi's sudden defensive maneuver, she whipped around with a deadly serious expression toward Hu Xuan, suddenly suspecting the woman was an enemy rather than an ally.

Hu Xuan herself seemed momentarily taken aback, then fixed Cheng Shi with a peculiar look.

"Cheng Shi, you shouldn't deprive this lady of her right to freely reproduce."

Cheng Shi's face darkened. He eyed the still-extended hand, his eyelid twitching violently. "What — you're actually serious? I'm asking you what the situation is right now, and you come down here to give birth in public?"

Can we maybe get our priorities straight?"

'Give birth? She wants to have a baby with who?'

Big Cat's brain short-circuited at the words. But then, seeing Hu Xuan's unfading smile, the Prosperity Agent's hackles immediately rose.

This Eternal Sun woman actually wanted to have a baby with her?!

How dare she?!

Could she be Zhen Yi in disguise?!!

The thought sent Big Cat's blood rushing to her head. Her outstretched hand clenched into a fist and rocketed forward.

"..."

The swing nearly scared the life out of Cheng Shi. He had no idea why Big Cat had reacted so violently. Luckily the Pointer Warrior's reflexes were sharp enough to grab her in time — otherwise Hu Xuan would've been punched straight into the abyss.

"Stop! Can you people please get a grip? And what's gotten into you, Hong Lin — what set you off?"

Nothing's even happened yet!

And you, Hu Xuan — tell me, what is Go Lis waiting for?"

Hu Xuan stared at the bristling Big Cat with a look of mild astonishment, then seemed to think of something and barely suppressed a laugh.

"Relax. She's merely waiting for an outcome."

"What outcome?"

"She's waiting to be born."

"???"

The words had barely landed when events took another unexpected turn nearby.

The Concentric Dagger, gripped in a single hand, had nearly broken through the skin over 0221's chest. Just three more millimeters and it would kill Zangier. At that instant, Zangier abruptly abandoned all resistance, letting the blade plunge into his chest. But in the split second before the Concentric Dagger could erase his consciousness, the Grand Scholar of the Creation Alchemy Department let out a cold laugh and flung wide the one bloated arm he still controlled — then chose to embrace... Death!

No — more accurately, he chose to embrace Prosperity.

Because in that moment, he made the same choice Prosperity had made.

Zangier self-destructed!

"No!!!" The distorted, warping voice of 0221 brimmed with despair and terror. Watching certain victory crumble to ash right before his eyes — no one could accept such an ending.

Worse still, it was no longer a question of failure. 0221 was about to die. The handful of personalities he had left stood no chance of surviving a Pseudo God's self-detonation at point-blank range!

But at that very moment, Go Lis — who had remained motionless all this while — finally moved!

A barrage of tentacles shot downward from the sky, forming nooses that coiled around 0221's twisted neck, hoisting the enigmatic Truth follower into the air like a dead dog before swiftly dragging him into Go Lis's grudge.

0221 vanished from everyone's sight in an instant — and with him disappeared Hu Xuan, smile still serene, and Cheng Shi, wearing a look of utter bewilderment.

Hong Lin had already thrown her arms wide to shield Cheng Shi the moment she sensed the threat, but those dark, writhing tentacles simply bypassed her and snatched the Clown away. All that lingered was Hu Xuan's parting reassurance.

"Don't worry. It's a good thing."

Hearing the words "good thing" from a Birth follower's lips, Hong Lin couldn't help but feel this so-called good thing might not be all that good. Her expression in that moment was spectacular.

'Let's hope it really is a good thing...'

But regardless of whether Cheng Shi's abduction was good news or bad, at least the immediate crisis was finally over.

Deprived of its architect, the Experiment Ground ground to a complete halt. The grotesque anomalies withered away, desires receded like a tide, and the survivors stood on the only remaining foothold — the canopy platform — exchanging glances before turning their gazes toward the reality that had been twisted nearly beyond recognition around them.

Under the influence of Existence, reality began slowly mending itself. And the moment the original control center materialized, countless streaks of light soared from Mo Li's team, racing toward the ruins still teeming with experimental data.

Hong Lin retreated to Tao Yi's side, scooping up her exhausted best friend and watching the scene with a contemptuous scoff.

"So this is human desire. Truly... endless."

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Chapter 790: When Did This "Neighbor Trend" Start Sweeping the Game?

Everyone has desires — the only difference is that some people's desires are for themselves, while others' desires are for... other people, once their own cravings have been satisfied.

Among the countless streaks of light racing toward the control center, the most blazing belonged to Hu Wei, and at his side flickered a symbiotic glow — none other than Da Yi, who had hidden within Mo Li's team from start to finish without ever revealing his identity!

These two Chaos followers had finally reunited. Hu Wei didn't ask what Da Yi had found, and Da Yi didn't ask why Hu Wei had come. The two simply fell into step with instinctive coordination, then began combing through the ruins for whatever secrets might remain.

Da Yi was a practical man. When he saw that the experimental equipment and panels had been ground to powder, he cursed under his breath.

"Damn it all, there's nothing left to find. Lao Hu, quit wasting your time."

Hu Wei snorted a laugh, ignored him, and kept searching. Da Yi had been bottling everything up through the entire ordeal, and now that the lid was finally off, he was desperate to pour out every thought that had been fermenting inside.

He ranted about 0221, then pivoted to Zangier, then unleashed a tirade against the Tower of Logic and the Erudition Presidium. By the end he'd even spat a few choice words at Truth itself before reluctantly circling back to the matter at hand.

"What exactly are you looking for, Lao Hu? Wouldn't it be better to spend that energy figuring out what snatched Zangier away?"

I assumed the Fate Weaver who led us out was the big boss pulling strings again, but turns out it really was that Cheng Shi?

What the hell did he summon?

I've seen Hu Xuan before, but that tentacle thing that looked like 0221's appendages — what was that?"

"Birth's Envoy — the Sin Brood Mother, Go Lis. First time I've seen her too. Forget about all that and come help."

"The Birth Envoy?"

A Fate follower managed to get a Birth Envoy to help?

Void is that powerful?

Damn, no wonder Lord Ultraman was impersonating him — turns out the guy's the real deal."

"..." Hu Wei sighed, straightened up, and looked Da Yi squarely in the eye. "This Fate Weaver is no ordinary man. While you were away, I went to see the boss. He said Cheng Shi is already one of us."

"???" Da Yi froze, eyes going wide. "He fused with Chaos?"

"No, but close enough. Point is, Cheng Shi isn't just a brother to me now — he's our ally. And regardless of what he did at the end, just remember that he played his part in getting us out of this mess.

So drop the complaints and help me search. If we find anything useful, we'll set a portion aside for him."

"But 0221 already got dragged off by the Envoy Cheng Shi summoned. Anything we find can't possibly match what he's getting."

"This isn't about who gets more. I know you took a lot of grief in there, but rein it in. There's still work ahead."

That shut Da Yi up. He spat viciously on the ground and bent down to search in earnest.

Before long, he actually unearthed some tattered manuscripts in the rubble. But just as he reached to pocket them, a shadow materialized before him, snatched the manuscripts in an instant, and melted back into the darkness.

"Son of a — you dare snatch food from a tiger's jaws?!"

Da Yi was furious. His expression darkened and he gave chase, but he'd barely moved a step when an attack came from the flank. His forward momentum died instantly, and three Iron Thorns from his right hand screamed toward the assailant's position.

The three thorns hurtled outward, weaving into a lethal net — but three sharp clinks rang out, and all three were deflected straight back. The thing that deflected them... was also Iron Thorns!

Gap Light Iron Thorns!

His opponent also wielded Gap Light Iron Thorns — and was a master at it!

Da Yi's gaze sharpened. He emerged slowly from the shadows, six Iron Thorns dancing between his fingers, his expression grim as he studied the man across from him — another practitioner casually juggling six thorns of his own.

The other combatant had retreated the instant he struck, already putting distance between them. Only a handful of War assassins could pull off a move like that, and as it happened, Da Yi recognized this one.

"Doomsday Crucible?"

Well damn, you got captured too? Funny — I didn't see you in the Premier's team. So you've been...

bred by 0221, have you?"

"..."

The one who had stolen Da Yi's find was Xie Yang, and Doomsday Crucible was his player ID.

The remark sent a wave of nausea through him. His eyelid twitched hard, but he said nothing. Instead, he directed the War Puppet behind him to tuck the manuscripts into his coat and spoke in a grave tone. "My apologies. I need these."

"And I'm sorry too — what you need happens to be mine!"

Da Yi smirked coldly, raising his hand to charge — but Hu Wei had materialized behind him at some point and clamped a hand on his shoulder, shaking his head.

"Da Yi, don't be rash."

Da Yi faltered, glanced at Hu Wei, then at Xie Yang, and held his tongue.

Seeing the Grand Marshal arrive, Xie Yang's expression shifted. But he didn't retreat. Instead, he drew four more Iron Thorns, sending ten thorns shuttling between his hands and his puppet like threads on a loom.

At the sight, Hu Wei laughed. "You want to fight me? What — interested in my Grand Marshal title?"

"Maybe someday, but not now. I've got a long way to go before I reach your level. But today, no matter who shows up, these manuscripts are mine."

Xie Yang showed no fear, though his stance leaned conspicuously more toward defense than offense — a clear sign he wasn't confident he could beat both of them.

The standoff quickly drew the attention of other Players, but the moment they spotted the Grand Marshal on one side, they wisely backed away.

They did spare a few appraising glances at Xie Yang before leaving, silently marveling at War followers' sheer audacity — the man was actually tweaking the Grand Marshal's whiskers.

Hu Wei frowned, planting his greatsword in the ground before him.

"Brother, there's no need for this. These manuscripts are just a couple of scraps of paper. We each copy one, share the contents, and call it even.

Besides, Da Yi found them first. You can't seriously expect to hog everything right under our noses."

Xie Yang's expression shifted, as though he might relent — but then he shook his head and said in a low voice, "Even if I could agree, I'd still need to ask my neighbor first."

"???"

The answer left both Hu Wei and Da Yi completely baffled.

Neighbor? What neighbor?

So this peak-level War assassin had snatched loot from Da Yi... for the sake of his neighbor?

Word had it that "Doomsday Crucible" was an emotional deviant who liked forging whoever he called his "beloved" into War Puppets. Looking at it that way...

Hu Wei cast an idle glance at the puppet behind Xie Yang, wondering if the man had found a new target and was looking for a change of flavor.

And that target was his neighbor?

But wasn't that a bit too absurd?

Whatever your relationship with your neighbor, that's enough justification to snatch manuscripts from under our noses?

Perhaps he'd been spending too much time scheming and too little fighting, causing the Grand Marshal title to lose its bite among same-faith Players. Apparently anyone felt bold enough to provoke him now.

Hu Wei sneered inwardly, but he didn't make a move. A thought had suddenly struck him — Cheng Shi had come here for his neighbor too. Since when had this "neighbor trend" become the craze in the game?

When exactly had this strange wind started blowing?

Da Yi's thought process was considerably less nuanced. When he heard the absurd excuse, he burst into an incredulous laugh.

"Damn, you think you're some kind of—"

He'd barely gotten half the insult out before Hu Wei grabbed his shoulder again, brow furrowed, and asked with some uncertainty:

"Hold on — your neighbor wouldn't happen to be Cheng Shi, would it?"

"?" Xie Yang froze. He'd never imagined anyone could guess that. "You know him?"

"..."

It really was?

Hu Wei laughed — a deep, hearty laugh. He nodded, then clapped Da Yi on the shoulder, and dragged his greatsword behind him as he walked away without looking back.

"It's yours. Let's go, Da Yi. Next time, be quicker on the draw."

"Damn it all..." Da Yi shot Xie Yang a strange look, then cast a covetous glance at the War Puppet behind him. "The guy's nothing special, but his taste in neighbors isn't bad."

With that, he fell in behind the Grand Marshal and left.

Xie Yang watched their retreating figures with a complicated expression. His neighbor really commanded that kind of respect?

Enough for the Grand Marshal himself to swallow the "humiliation" of having spoils stolen right from under him?

Then had he repaid the favor he owed... or just dug himself deeper into debt?

Clutching the manuscripts he'd secured, Xie Yang furrowed his brow and sank into an agonizing spiral of thought.

Could this debt ever truly be repaid?

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