

The Gods 791

Chapter 791: This Is Birth We're Talking About — You Can't Be Too Careful...

Regardless of whether the Players scavenging through the ruins found anything worthwhile, the biggest winner was certainly not among those present in reality.

At the same time, elsewhere.

On the familiar terrace in Dolgod, a fully alert Cheng Shi snapped his eyes open.

In truth, the moment he'd entered Go Lis's grudge, Aph Ros had already unbound him. But Cheng Shi had been fighting with his nerves wound taut for so long that both his mind and body were utterly spent. The instant he reached "safety," he simply collapsed into sleep.

Yet even this peaceful slumber was no cause for celebration — because he knew full well that no matter how exhausted he was, falling asleep in a place like Dolgod should have been impossible!

Setting aside how desperately his "dear brother" the Gate of Joyous Lust craved merging desires with him, the mere fact that Hu Xuan was nearby should have been enough to keep the ever-cautious Cheng Shi on high alert.

But he'd fallen asleep anyway — which meant his slumber hadn't been the body's natural response to fatigue. It had been induced by an external force!

Someone had tampered with him!

The instant consciousness returned, Cheng Shi bolted upright, eyes darting in every direction. But what he saw sent cold sweat erupting across his entire body, soaking through his clothes in an instant.

Hu Xuan!

The woman stood before him with a radiant smile, her entire being exuding a rich, dense aura of Birth. The last time Cheng Shi had seen her like this was in Far Dusk Town, in that modest courtyard, right after he'd delivered her baby!

Back then, the newborn Hu Xuan had carried this same scent. So...

Who had she given birth with?!

Or rather — who was Hu Xuan's "Birth-father" right now?!

Cheng Shi's heart lurched. He blinked frantically, staring down at his trembling hands, praying it was all an illusion. But Hu Xuan's next words confirmed his worst suspicions.

"It seems you've already guessed..."

Yes, I've just completed my metamorphosis. I gave birth to myself.

Although, saying it that way isn't quite right at this point. I should say I was born from myself. The me who became the mother fulfilled her purpose and has exited the stage."

"..."

'Please stop talking. I'm terrified.'

'Let me exit this stage too — this Birth stage that ordinary people have no business standing on...'

Yet as Cheng Shi processed her words, he actually felt a wave of relief. Judging by her phrasing and demeanor, he was fairly certain that Hu Xuan's "Birth-father" wasn't him.

This half-truth scare tactic might work on most people, but against a born liar, it was — well, amateur hour.

Waving an axe at the master carpenter's door.

Cheng Shi snapped out of his panic, gulped down two ragged breaths, and shot Hu Xuan an irritated sideways glance.

"You don't bother learning the good habits, but you pick up the bad ones instantly. Who taught you to lie like that?"

What — don't tell me you're planning to fuse with Deceit too?"

Seeing that Cheng Shi had seen through her little game, Hu Xuan pressed her lips together in a coy smile and regarded him meaningfully.

"Deceit... Deceit... What a fine thing, Deceit.

Now that you mention it, I'd nearly forgotten. Should I be addressing you as...

Lord Yu Xi?"

"..."

The moment he heard the name "Yu Xi," Cheng Shi knew Hu Xuan must have had a thorough exchange with Aph Ros. Only their shared status as children of Birth could provide the foundation of mutual trust for such a conversation. After cycling through every possibility, Cheng Shi concluded that no one else would have told Hu Xuan that name.

"Your Birth-father isn't Aph Ros, is it?!"

Cheng Shi's mind raced at blinding speed. From that single clue, he realized that Hu Xuan and Aph Ros's "thorough exchange" might have been far more thorough than he'd imagined. But Hu Xuan didn't address the question directly. Instead, she countered with an enigmatic half-smile.

"So the Fate Weaver who saved me and guided me to where I stand today — is he Cheng Shi, or Yu Xi?"

Is he a Player, or a deity who lost His memories?"

"..."

The question silenced Cheng Shi. He could hear the doubt underlying Hu Xuan's words — doubt about his identity.

And this was a question he couldn't afford to answer carelessly. One wrong word might cost him this "arm of Birth."

The more holes you dig, the harder they are to fill. Every lie the Clown had ever spun about his identity would come back to haunt him, requiring excruciating effort to maintain.

Fortunately, lying was the Clown's greatest skill. He opened his mouth without hesitation. "I am—"

But just as he was about to weave together the various identity breadcrumbs he'd planted as contingencies, mixing truth with fiction for Hu Xuan's benefit, the Eternal Sun cut him off with a smile.

"I finally managed to scare you, Cheng Shi.

You don't need to waste any more brain cells crafting your next lie. It doesn't matter who you are, because to me, you'll always be the man who lifted the Eternal Sun into the sky with his own two hands.

I don't care who you are. I only want to know — are you still you?"

"..."

The words gave Cheng Shi pause.

Of course. This was Hu Xuan through and through. What she clung to was never an identity — it was the person himself.

Put another way, if he truly were Yu Xi, she wouldn't have minded in the slightest. In fact, she might even have been more eager to share Birth's authority with him, given his status as an Envoy...

What a pure-hearted God Upholder she was. Apart from her methods of drawing closer to the divine being "slightly flawed," her devotion was beyond reproach.

Cheng Shi fell silent for a moment, then gave a firm nod.

"Yes. I've always been me. Always Cheng Shi."

He paused, then added with a hint of awkwardness, "And also Yu Xi. I..."

Hu Xuan shook her head, cutting him off once more.

"I don't care how you became Yu Xi, or how Yu Xi became Cheng Shi. I only want to know — now that I've learned the truth, might I have the honor of discussing the path of Birth with Lord Yu Xi — no, Lord Cheng Shi..."

just for a moment?"

Hu Xuan smiled and extended her hand toward him.

Cheng Shi retreated — a full three meters in a single step.

"Stop. Don't even start. Talk about serious matters. Why did I fall asleep?"

Hu Xuan gave Cheng Shi a deeply meaningful sidelong glance, then withdrew her hand with a wistful sigh.

"I think you've already guessed. Yes — it was Her.

But She didn't do it on purpose. Go Lis's power imbalance sent Her into a period of labor pains. She's adjusting to her new body."

'New body...?'

A chill raced down Cheng Shi's spine.

He couldn't help where his mind went. Go Lis had just captured Zangier, and now She needed to adjust to a new body — She wasn't trying to inhabit Zangier's body, was she?!

Wait.

She hadn't seen that 0221's physical specs were similar to her own and decided to steal a Player identity from 0221 the way Zangier had tried to, had she?

So the master and student had been fighting to the death... and Aph Ros ended up being the real winner?

Cheng Shi was reeling. He wasn't sure whether an Aph Ros who had obtained a Player identity would still be an asset to him. Brow furrowed, he asked quietly.

"Where is She? Has She completed the fusion?"

"Fusion?"

That's not inaccurate, I suppose. It should be almost done. I'll take you to Her now." Hu Xuan turned elegantly, extending one hand behind her back toward Cheng Shi and curling her fingers in a beckoning gesture. "Come~"

At that single word, cold sweat drenched Cheng Shi. He didn't dare move a muscle.

'Sis, could you maybe use a different word when inviting someone along? I'll be honest — that particular word might be giving me genuine trauma...'

Seeing that the Fate Weaver hadn't taken the bait, Hu Xuan glanced back at him, pursed her lips with a faint twinge of regret, and began walking ahead with light, airy steps.

Cheng Shi waited until she was well ahead before he dared to breathe again. Then he followed at a cautious distance, eyes scanning wildly, ears perked high, terrified that something else might go wrong along the way.

This was Birth, after all — you couldn't be too careful!

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Chapter 792: Containment and Containers

"Funny how things work out — I was actually in the middle of communicating with Her when you summoned Go Lis."

"..."

Cheng Shi's footsteps faltered. He cleared his throat and muttered under his breath, "If you don't mind me asking, is this the kind of 'communicating' I think it is?"

Hu Xuan smiled with easy candor.

"Yes. Devout and effective Birth communication.

I did indeed conceive a child with Go Lis, but the matter is not as simple as you imagine.

She's probably already told you — with Zhen Xin's help, I successfully retrieved Lu Xia for my Lord.

I don't know what Birth is scheming. All I can sense is that She loves Her children — especially the most outstanding ones. She has always wanted a reunion. A reunion that belongs to Birth.

So I recovered the Birth Holy Voice for Her, and as a reward, I received a tremendous boon from my Benefactor."

"How tremendous?" At the mention of rewards, Cheng Shi perked right up.

Hu Xuan stopped walking, turned to face him, and spoke with visible gravity. "I was granted a Container."

"?"

A jolt ran through Cheng Shi at the word.

In any other context, "container" was perfectly mundane. But coming from the mouth of a Birth follower — especially one like Hu Xuan — it was downright terrifying.

'Sis, please tell me this Container isn't for holding... "babies.'"

Cheng Shi didn't dare open his mouth, swallowing his curiosity. Hu Xuan smiled faintly, as though reading his thoughts, and shook her head gently.

"No, you're wrong. It's not a game item. It's a 'Divinity Forge.'

This Container allows me to produce fragments of divinity on my own. And when enough of the correct fragments accumulate, I can find a way to assemble them and obtain the authority my Benefactor bestows.

In other words — She has fully recognized my standing.

Cheng Shi, have you considered that the Life Sage you once helped is about to become the true Eternal Sun?"

"Holy..."

He'd anticipated it. This was the future Hu Xuan had always been headed toward. Yet hearing it spoken aloud in this moment still stunned him.

It wasn't that he'd never considered the possibility — after all, the Prosperity follower he'd helped was practically half a Prosperity deity by now. So if this were merely about becoming an Envoy, there'd be nothing to marvel at.

But a "Divinity Forge" — that was extraordinary. Possessing such a thing meant Hu Xuan had obtained directly from a deity the very experimental breakthrough the Tower of Logic had spent millennia trying to achieve!

Apparently, the recognition and gifts of the gods brought progress and elevation far more "easily" than self-exploration and research ever could.

Of course, the prerequisite was getting close to Them.

And for mortals, getting close to the divine was incomparably harder than any amount of exploration or research — a difficulty of an entirely different magnitude.

Still... could someone else use this thing?

Cheng Shi blinked rapidly, turning to Hu Xuan, about to ask — when she beat him to it, her eyes shining with anticipation.

"If you want — come." She extended her hand once more.

"..."

The silence arrived so abruptly that Cheng Shi nearly choked on his own saliva.

'Sis, can we please act normal for five minutes? Can we keep exclamations and verbs separate?'

'If not, I'll moonlight as a grammar teacher and give you a refresher.'

"The word here — this one — is an interjection. It expresses shock and astonishment," Cheng Shi said, face rigid.

"I know. But I'd prefer it weren't an interjection."

"..." Cheng Shi fell silent for a moment, then let out an exasperated laugh. "You wouldn't happen to have a brother named The Prisoner, would you?"

Hu Xuan clearly knew The Prisoner by reputation. She shook her head with a helpless chuckle.

"Fine, today's Birth solicitations are hereby concluded. Let's talk about something you're actually interested in.

The Container.

I'm sure you're dying to know what it is. Honestly, I'd love to share it with you, but I can't — it has no form, no shape.

I can feel it existing within my consciousness, but I cannot manifest it physically. That's hard to grasp, I know. I found it baffling myself when I received it. It's probably something that belongs to Their dimension.

I'll try to explain it with my current understanding, but... don't take everything I say at face value."

Hu Xuan locked eyes with Cheng Shi, her expression earnest and sincere.

"Cheng Shi, I've never been a clever person. I just had a tiny bit of luck — and that luck was your gift to me.

If you are Yu Xi, then consider this a new Envoy sharing her insights with a senior Envoy about what lies beyond that threshold. But if you are Cheng Shi...

Don't believe everything blindly, because I can't be sure my understanding is correct. The sensation is too profound, too elusive. As a Life Sage who hasn't yet fully become one of Them — I'm sorry, but my ability to articulate it is extremely limited."

Her honesty moved Cheng Shi. He nodded, smiling warmly.

"Don't be nervous. You're the real Envoy here.

Speak. I'll listen. If I understand, it's fate. If I don't... then this road simply wasn't meant for me."

And silently, he appended: 'By "this road," I mean the path of Birth — not the path of Deceit, or Fate, or Void.'

"The origin of divinity is completely different from what we imagined. It was never crafted by the gods according to some set of laws or rules. Rather... it is distilled from the chaotic amalgam of faith."

"Distilled?!"

"Yes. The Container can hold faith. Faith accumulates within it, gradually pooling together, and then crystallizes into droplets of divinity inside the Container."

Cheng Shi froze, brow furrowing.

"Wait — that doesn't add up. Faith can't exist without a carrier. How does it accumulate?"

"That's why I said it's an almost mystical sensation. For instance, if someone has faith in me, their devotion trickles in like a tiny stream, slowly building up. When that devotion grows large enough, the trickle becomes a creek of faith that flows into the Container.

The Container receives this faith, distills it into divinity, and lets it drip down.

Each droplet of divinity varies depending on the concentration and purity of the faith it came from. Once I've gathered all the divinity fragments required for one of Birth's specific authorities, I can have my Benefactor assemble them for me, and then be granted the qualification to wield that authority on Her behalf.

That is what an Envoy is.

And this is also why Envoys have their own followers — because their divinity likewise requires vast quantities of faith as 'raw material.'

From this, we can see that the gods spread faith not merely to impose their will, but to collect divinity. This is precisely why they possess such enormous surpluses of it.

Over millions of years, the power of faith has been ceaselessly converging, crystallizing into countless fragments of divinity, allowing Them to sit firmly upon those sixteen Divine Thrones.

And I believe that the 'containment' we often speak of is most likely this very Container...

Perhaps only divinity you've personally distilled can truly be contained. Methods like the Tower of Logic's approach to containment... can only produce Pseudo Gods.

Of course, when you factor in that unspeakable existence, I suspect that all Containers may ultimately be manufactured by Him. The true gods simply share a portion of the Container they receive with their own Envoys — and thus the Servant Gods of each path are born."

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Chapter 793: You Birth People...

So to contain divinity, you first needed a Container?

But something like that reeked of Origin — could a mortal even find one?

If not... could they build one?

Wait. It seemed like... maybe they actually could?

Cheng Shi froze, his expression suddenly becoming spectacular. He realized that the Tower of Logic hadn't entirely failed to discover a method for creating Containers — the method simply had no follow-up. And the person who'd cut that thread... was none other than himself!

Remember the Selius Slice Experiment carried out beneath Montelani?

In that experiment, Selius's slices had experienced such overwhelming terror under Cheng Shi's pressure that they'd spontaneously germinated a sliver of Corruption's new authority. That brief moment implied that Grand Scholar Selius — or at least his slices — had stumbled upon a method for "forging Containers."

But only for that fleeting instant. No experimental conclusions survived, because every researcher and specimen involved had been killed by Cheng Shi.

They had perished at the hands of the Hero of Today. Fate had extinguished the lamp on that flash of inspiration from Truth.

"..."

'Right, it was definitely Fate's slip-up. Surely it couldn't have been mine.'

Cheng Shi's expression stiffened for a moment.

He filed the thought away, wondering if he should find an opportunity to meet with the Doctor again and compare notes. Then, after pondering for quite some time and organizing his thoughts, he asked:

"Is that why you needed to conceive another version of yourself with Go Lis?"

"Yes. The current me is trying to figure out how to pour faith into this Container, but that step is incredibly difficult. Without my Benefactor's guidance, I can't make an inch of progress.

So I sought out Go Lis. What I needed wasn't Her power or authority, but Her understanding and memories regarding the collection of faith.

So She and I gave birth to the me that exists now."

"..."

'Well, well, well. I take one nap and Aph Ros is Hu Xuan's mommy now.'

'Isn't that just lovely.'

But Hu Xuan wasn't finished.

"And as repayment, I gave Her the memories of this current era.

So She and I gave birth to the Her that exists now."

"..."

'Hold on, what?'

'Why is your method of exchanging memories so different from everyone else's?'

'It's really hard not to suspect that you Birth followers deliberately wanted to have a child and just used "memory exchange" as a convenient excuse...'

Cheng Shi's head was buzzing.

"So when you said She was fusing, you meant the new Go Lis is fusing with the old Aph Ros — not that She's fusing with 0221?"

"Of course. Why would She fuse with 0221? Go Lis is utterly devoted. How could She possibly fuse with a mortal who blasphemed Her Benefactor?"

Your earlier nap was caused by the Corruption aura that leaked out during Her fusion. Interestingly, that Corruption energy should have ignited your most primal desire. But as it turned out, your desire at that moment was... to sleep?

Well, actually, that makes sense. The extreme fatigue probably triggered your body's self-preservation instinct. So it wasn't a desire for sleep — it was the instinct to survive.

Cheng Shi, you truly do value your own life."

"..."

'Indeed. Especially when I'm around Birth followers — I value it even more.'

"After you received that Container, you became able to resist the influence of Aph Ros's Corruption aura?"

"No. She's a dual Envoy, after all. I can't resist it. So while you were sleeping, I had to... again with myself..."

The aura you see on me right now is from just a moment ago."

"..."

Cheng Shi had long given up on commenting on the various behaviors of Birth followers. But after a long pause, he still couldn't help himself. His expression turned strange. "So now you two are... each other's mothers and daughters?"

"Strictly speaking, it should be:

The past Her was my 'father,' and the current me is Her 'father.'

Of course, if you go purely by the singularity of consciousness, 'each other's mothers and daughters' isn't wrong either. But I think 'each other's fathers and daughters' might be more fitting, since each of us served as our own mother."

"..."

'Magnificent!'

'The word "ethics" just straight-up doesn't exist in your Birth followers' dictionary, does it!'

Cheng Shi shut his mouth. He decided that continuing this conversation would only subject him to further shocks. So he followed Hu Xuan in silence, obediently trailing behind until they arrived at the atrium of the Theocracy of Growth.

At that moment, the about-to-explode Zangier was hanging upside down from the atrium ceiling, a literal "doomsday hanged man."

When the two of them pushed through the doors, Aph Ros was pacing the hall, gazing upward at the blasphemer dangling in the air, lost in thought.

The instant She sensed Her brother's arrival, She broke into a brilliant smile, spread Her arms wide, and strode toward Cheng Shi.

"We meet again, my brother. You—"

But before She'd even finished and before Cheng Shi could retreat, the smile froze on Aph Ros's face. Those eyes — swirling with Corruption's hallucinatory hues — turned suddenly sharp, scanning Cheng Shi from head to toe as if She'd detected something that displeased Her.

"You always manage to bring me new surprises.

Setting aside the fact that you've found yet another sinner who blasphemed my Lord...

Lord Yu Xi, would you care to explain why I detect the scent of Time on you?"

"!!!"

'Damn — I forgot about that!'

His Fate had already fused with Time!

And as it happened, Time was the very jailer who had imprisoned Aph Ros here for eternity!

How was he supposed to explain this?

Before, when he was merely a Fate follower, he could claim that Yu Xi was walking the path of Fate in pursuit of Void. But now? He could hardly tell Her he'd contracted Existence and come to serve as Time's warden, could he?

If those words came out of his mouth, someone was going to die today...

In every possible sense of the word.

Cheng Shi's clothes were drenched in cold sweat. He took a small step back as his mind went into overdrive. Facing Aph Ros's interrogation — and Hu Xuan watching from the side with an amused smile — the Clown deliberated for a moment, found his excuse, and plastered on a smug expression.

"Well? It seems my performance fooled even you, Aph Ros."

"Performance?"

Aph Ros halted. She frowned, studying Cheng Shi with suspicion, and slowly shook Her head.

"No. This is no performance. I can feel genuine Time power flowing through you.

Don't doubt my senses, brother. I've spent long enough in Time's prison. My sensitivity to that aura is probably akin to your Miss Sun's distaste for the Corruption scent clinging to me.

You've... defected to our enemy?

I haven't forgotten — your mask was shattered by Time."

...

Chapter 794: Know Your Enemy to Defeat Your Enemy, Isn't That Right?

By this point, Aph Ros's tone had turned distinctly frigid. She truly couldn't conceive of another explanation — She simply hadn't torn the mask of brotherhood off yet, out of deference to their current alliance.

But Cheng Shi refused to follow Her tempo. He showed no trace of alarm. In fact, he threw his head back and laughed.

"No, no, no. Aph Ros, you're wrong.

While I do possess Time's power, this is still a performance.

Let me put it to you this way — I am indeed getting closer to Time."

The instant the words left his mouth, Aph Ros's expression turned ice-cold. Even the tendrils of Go Lis's grudge coiled around the rafters overhead let out a bewildered howl, their tentacles snaking downward toward Cheng Shi.

Even Hu Xuan's face changed. She frowned, sidestepping to block Go Lis's grudge descending from the ceiling, then glanced at Cheng Shi with a look of undisguised confusion that plainly asked:

'Since when do you have Time's power? Whose follower are you, exactly?'

But Cheng Shi was warming up now. Lips curled in a smirk, he sauntered in a slow circle around Aph Ros, explaining his motives as he walked. In that moment, Aph Ros and Hu Xuan — who watched his every step — seemed more like guests in this Theocracy of Growth in Dolgod, while he seemed the master of the house. A man who held all the strings: a liar in total control.

"Your memory serves you well. My mask was indeed shattered in my gamble with Time.

And on that score, you and I are the same — I've never let it go.

But Aph Ros, there is a difference between us. I wasn't imprisoned by Her. Or rather, I still have my freedom."

The temperature in the hall dropped another few degrees. Hu Xuan's heart clenched; she half-expected to find herself fighting her own "child" and "father" in a fratricide right here, today.

But Cheng Shi was far from finished.

"So I must use this freedom to reclaim some dignity — for myself... and for you.

I am the Envoy of Deceit, a Servant God of Void. To lose to Existence like that — and not even to our true rivals in Memory — is something I simply cannot accept!

So I devised a plan. I found a path to win one back. And the prerequisite of that plan is...

Getting close to Time."

"..."

Hu Xuan couldn't keep up with Cheng Shi's logic and furrowed her brow in confusion. Aph Ros, on the other hand, actually softened after hearing those words. Her gaze gradually thawed.

She could certainly smell the thick scent of lies clinging to Cheng Shi — but an Envoy of Deceit was supposed to smell like that, wasn't She?

And besides, Cheng Shi wasn't doing this just for himself. He'd just said it was for "me and you."

So the Gate of Joyous Lust rediscovered both joy and lust, and a smile crept back onto Her face. She watched Cheng Shi in silence, waiting for the rest of the explanation.

Though the situation was improving, Cheng Shi didn't dare let his guard down for a second. He knew Aph Ros was clever enough that a sloppy explanation could trap them both.

Fortunately, he'd already mapped this out.

"My brother, I'm very curious. What method could possibly require you to first approach our common enemy?"

"Ahem — well, the specifics are still being researched. But don't worry!

As the saying goes: to defeat your enemy, you must first understand your enemy. If you know nothing about your foe, how can you ever hope to overcome Her?

And She was once the ruler of an entire era — one of the sixteen throne-holders personally appointed by Him.

So my approach right now is an attempt to understand Time.

And when I've truly grasped Time's essence, that will be the day you and I defeat our nemesis."

"..."

Dead silence filled the hall.

'I betrayed my ally to help my ally. I defected to the enemy so I could destroy the enemy.' If you called it wrong, it did sound vaguely reasonable. If you called it right, something about every word screamed "problem."

Aph Ros was stunned. Her expression froze as She mulled it over, then She slowly shook her head, still dubious.

"Even so — if Time is willing to grant you Her power, how can you be sure She isn't counter-scheming against you?"

"Sigh, Aph Ros, even for an Envoy of Deceit, I think you give me too much credit.

Yes, I want to win one back against Time. But She could hardly just sit there completely unsuspecting while I sidled up to Her, right?

If She were that easy to fool, I'd never have lost our gamble in the first place.

So you're wrong. The Time power within me wasn't bestowed by Time. It was...

A gift from my Benefactor, Deceit!

She stole a portion of Time's authority and approved my plan. That's why I say I'm only performing. I use this stolen Time power to play the part of a Time follower, and from the faintest whispers of faith, I slowly deduce Her true will.

That is the road by which I approach Time.

And the interesting part is that this former ruler of an era doesn't seem to have rejected my approach in this current era of Void. It makes me wonder — could They be trying to get closer to Void as well?

For example..."

Cheng Shi paused, pointed upward at Go Lis's grudge and then at Hu Xuan, and smiled.

"You and her — the two of you have been growing close to me. Isn't some of your Benefactor Birth's will mixed in with that?"

At these words, Aph Ros furrowed Her brow and fell into deep contemplation.

Her own friendship with Cheng Shi stemmed partly from admiration for the "guide" who had once steered Her toward Corruption — but there were naturally also ulterior motives involving proximity to this current era. What She had never considered was whether Her Benefactor shared those motives.

But judging by Hu Xuan's attitude, Cheng Shi's words didn't seem wrong.

And so Aph Ros's smile returned. She looked at Cheng Shi and said:

"It seems you've recently gleaned a few interesting tidbits from beneath the era's grand curtain. Otherwise you wouldn't have arrived at such an insight. My brother, might I have the pleasure of hearing the freshest rumors from the crest of the era's tide?"

"Of course!

Don't forget — we're allies. It's nothing more than what I already promised you.

But before that, Aph Ros, let's deal with our guest hanging from the ceiling first.

There are some thoughts I'd like to discuss with you, and they include what to do with this mad Grand Scholar of the Tower of Logic — Zangier.

Are you familiar with him?"

Aph Ros tilted Her head, studying the body She'd strung up, and let out a light laugh.

"Not particularly. But I should point out — the one dangling in Go Lis's grudge isn't just the Grand Scholar you mentioned."

Cheng Shi blinked. "I know. There's also a Truth-faith Player, but he's not very important. I initially thought he was a genius on par with Wei Mu, but now it's clear he was merely Zangier's proxy in the real world."

"No, no, no. The one you're referring to has essentially merged with the Grand Scholar at this point. The one I mean is a different person entirely — a stowaway who was hiding inside the Grand Scholar's eye."

With that, Aph Ros raised Her hand gently, directing the endlessly roiling tentacles to squeeze a mangled marionette out of the tumor-like mass of Zangier's right eye.

When the dead-fish-eyed puppet clattered to the ground, Cheng Shi's pupils shrank to pinpoints and his expression became truly spectacular.

Wei Mu!

The Chosen One of Folly had actually followed them here — by that method!

...

Chapter 795: Wait, You Actually Have One?

Had he heard everything?

That was the first question that surged through Cheng Shi's mind. He stared at Aph Ros with furrowed brow, hoping to hear an answer from this domain's master — but before Aph Ros could respond, the answer... revealed itself.

The marionette trembled unsteadily and rose from the ground.

It was still alive!

Or rather, neither the cocoon of Zangier's flesh nor the embrace of Go Lis's grudge had managed to destroy the puppet.

Yet why was it covered in damage — looking more like something reassembled from fragments?

"It seems our guest is in fine spirits. My dear brother, won't you introduce this trespasser who snuck into my home?"

Though Aph Ros's words carried an edge, Her tone held no genuine reproach. After all, every outsider was a window through which She could glimpse this era. She had no objections.

Far from it — the moment She'd laid eyes on the marionette, She seemed to have already guessed something. To confirm Her suspicion, She tossed the question to Cheng Shi.

Cheng Shi had no interest in courting trouble, so he quickly deflected the question to the puppet itself.

"Hey — you. Who are you?"

"..." The marionette's dead-fish eyes wobbled slightly. Then, manipulating its battered limbs, it performed an impeccably elegant bow before the three of them and spoke in a tone of unruffled calm.

"What a thrilling performance. I have never underestimated anyone. And yet... I still underestimated You.

A humble mortal vessel. The World-Viewing Fool. The man behind the curtain. Wei Mu — paying his respects to three Envoys.

It is my great honor to have been invited to Dolgod, to witness the final curtain on this absurd foolish act."

Wei Mu was Wei Mu, through and through — a single glance had told him this was Dolgod.

But... three Envoys?

Cheng Shi's eyebrow twitched, and he cut a sidelong glance toward Hu Xuan.

Clearly, Wei Mu had already counted Hu Xuan as a Birth Envoy. Not only that, he'd heard every word of their earlier conversation — and had classified Cheng Shi himself as an Envoy too.

The Deceit Envoy, Yu Xi.

A thought sparked in Cheng Shi's mind. Suddenly, Wei Mu's "stowaway" act didn't seem like such a bad thing at all.

Think about it — what could possibly be more entertaining than having the Player universally acknowledged as the game's most intelligent mistake your identity?

If he truly wanted to play the part of Yu Xi, then winning the belief of the Folly Chosen was unquestionably the most effective way to spread the cover story. Nothing else even came close!

If even Wei Mu believed Cheng Shi was Yu Xi, then who else in the game would dare doubt it? Who had the right to doubt it?

'Could you possibly be smarter than Wei Mu?!'

At the thought, Cheng Shi grinned.

Aph Ros smiled too. The puppet's bow was so graceful, its introduction so impeccable, that after hearing it through, She broke into applause.

"Ah, this era is brimming with fascinating people — as many as the stars. Tell me, brother — is this wise man your friend, or your enemy?"

Cheng Shi let out a dry chuckle and shrugged. "All who arrive are guests. He and I have no quarrel. So why not become friends right here and now?"

The puppet abruptly dropped its head in an exaggerated nod.

"The honor is mine."

"Splendid. Since we're friends, it would be poor hospitality to receive a friend in a place like this." With a casual wave, Aph Ros transported everyone back to the terrace draped in the red glow of sunset.

Servants filed in and set the dining table in order. Aph Ros settled into the head seat and extended an inviting hand. Cheng Shi and Hu Xuan exchanged a glance, pulled back their chairs, and sat on opposite sides of the long table. Only the puppet remained standing near the railing at the far end, staring at a servant who had just withdrawn. Its gaze was rigid.

Cheng Shi glanced back and grinned. "What — you know Gao Ya?"

The puppet snapped back to attention, scrambled up onto a stool and then onto the table with exaggerated movements, sat cross-legged on its surface, and gave a gentle nod.

"I once studied the results of a certain experiment she conducted. She left an impression. I'd intended to find an opportunity to exchange ideas with her. I hadn't expected her to be here."

"Interesting. With her ranking, the fact that she produced results worth your interest must mean the experiment itself was quite compelling, no?"

Cheng Shi had laid his curiosity so bare that even a fool could see it. The puppet emitted a rough, mechanical laugh and explained in its characteristically deliberate cadence.

"It's nothing remarkable, really — far less noteworthy than Wang Weijin's experiment. It was merely a hypothesis, one that mortals lack the means to verify due to cognitive limitations. Now that I've had the honor of being invited here, I'd like to consult the three of you. Might Wei Mu be so privileged as to receive your guidance?"

"..." Cheng Shi pursed his lips. Wei Mu was certainly clever, but there was always something insufferably aloof about him — probably the result of spending too long behind the curtain and not seeing enough people. No matter how the conversation went, it never quite felt "close."

Aph Ros, however, was thoroughly fascinated by Players. She smiled and raised her goblet.

"Let's hear it."

"Thank you for the opportunity. I once heard that Silence is a pure observer who never participates in the struggles among the gods and has no intention of faith fusion. Gao Ya's experiment validated precisely this. So I wish to ask the three of you — was her conclusion correct?"

Aph Ros gave a soft laugh. Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow. Both spoke at the same instant:

"Naturally, it's correct."

"Completely and utterly wrong."

"?"

When the two contradictory answers rang out simultaneously, the puppet's expression became exaggerated and spectacular.

Its anticipatory gaze clearly said: 'I knew it — the real knowledge lies in Their mouths.' But... whose knowledge would prove right?

Cheng Shi's response caught Aph Ros off guard. She tilted Her head, studied him for a moment, and then Her eyes lit up as She realized that the new era must have brought changes. She smiled at Cheng Shi and said:

"My brother, have you recovered your memories?"

The line was an absolute assist — from that point on, Cheng Shi could ask questions and play the curious child with zero reservations. He'd been wracking his brain for a way to let Wei Mu know about this without leaving a trace, but all his scheming paled next to the effortless revelation from his good "sibling."

And so Cheng Shi smiled even wider.

"Partially, yes. But this has nothing to do with recovered memories." He turned to Wei Mu, his expression playful. "Perhaps the behavior of Silence followers led you to believe Gao Ya's research was correct. But remember — every experiment has its limitations.

For certain reasons, I cannot tell you too much. However, in light of the help you once gave Hong Lin, I'll share this with you: Silence is not a pure observer. At the very least, She will tacitly permit fusion with Decay.

Of course, today's Decay is not yesterday's Decay either. The era moves forward, the gods change with it. And if you want to know what those changes look like...

Wei Mu, show me what you're capable of. I can grant you information that no mortal could possibly obtain."

The puppet contemplated in silence for a moment, then looked up. "What kind of capability?"

"For example, start by telling me..." Cheng Shi curled his lips, stole a glance at Hu Xuan, then fixed Wei Mu with a laden stare. "Where did the Container on you come from?"

"!!!"

The moment the words left his mouth, the entire table froze in shock. The gazes of the other two present snapped toward the puppet with razor-sharp intensity. The puppet itself dropped its jaw — literally — and went completely rigid.

Cheng Shi half-expected the man to bolt. But after a long, long pause, the puppet slowly retrieved its fallen jaw, reattached it, and sighed in genuine admiration.

"Impressive.

How... did You see through it?"

"?"

'Wait — you actually have one, man?!'

...

Chapter 796: Wei Mu's Explosive Revelation

Cheng Shi was obviously bluffing — but the bluff happened to rest on a perfectly reasonable guess.

0221 had used Zangier's hand to complete his assembly of divinity — an opportunistic shortcut, certainly. But Wei Mu had also achieved this kind of assembly. Had his success been an opportunistic shortcut too?

Was it possible that he also possessed one of Zangier's fingers?

Cheng Shi harbored deep suspicions about this, and during the confrontation with Zangier, he'd been paying careful attention.

He'd noticed that when Zangier merged into 0221, the latter's fingers were indeed reduced by two due to the descent's effects. That meant Zangier had only lost two fingers — Wei Mu hadn't acquired any of those gruesomely absurd implements.

And out of sheer prudence, Cheng Shi had even verified 0221's toes during the fusion, confirming all ten were intact and ruling out another unlikely possibility.

That only made Wei Mu's ability to assemble divinity more intriguing. How had a mere mortal pulled off such a feat?

Did he possess a tool similar to Zangier's limbs?

Possible — but it didn't feel like something Wei Mu would do.

A man who relished watching others commit foolish acts would never embrace so-called foolishness himself.

Cheng Shi had been completely stumped until he heard Hu Xuan's account of the Container. Only then did a faint glimmer of a hypothesis form.

Later, when Wei Mu appeared and greeted three Envoys with such unflinching composure, a bolder conjecture had crystallized:

Could he possibly have a Container?

After all, even the likes of Hu Wei and Long Jing couldn't maintain this kind of tranquility when facing an Envoy. No matter how naturally composed a person was, none had managed to display what Wei Mu was displaying — mere politeness in his tone and nothing more.

So where did that confidence come from?

Just because he was the most intelligent Player in the game?

No — absolutely not. Intelligence only mattered when the gap in power and status was manageable. When that gap widened to the point of looking up from below, cleverness counted for far less.

Wei Mu's bearing reeked of something to fall back on. And as for what that "something" might be, Cheng Shi had formed a hypothesis — one he didn't dare believe. So he bluffed.

He did it so naturally that even Wei Mu fell for the trick.

"Interesting. You even know that a Container can't be detected by outsiders. But I'm different from others. Though I've lost some power and memories, not much in this universe can escape my eyes.

Even without having recovered my true sight, what remains of my 'vision' tells me your experiences have been anything but ordinary.

Go on, then. Tell me where your Container came from."

The entire table went silent.

Aph Ros's gaze sharpened, now regarding this mortal, Wei Mu, with keen interest. Hu Xuan chuckled softly but said nothing, lowering her head to hide the gleam flashing through her eyes. As for the puppet — it rose once more, standing on the tabletop, and executed a slight bow toward Cheng Shi.

"I have never doubted the power of Deceit. Today, You have proven it to me once again.

However, Lord Yu Xi — before I recount this matter, I have one question."

"Heh." Cheng Shi rapped the table idly and shook his head with a wry smile. "You don't have the standing to ask extraneous questions. The only reason you're here at all is that the three of us happen to be in the mood for conversation, and you have some tangential connection to this Zangier affair.

Before my curiosity runs dry, you still have an opportunity to earn the right to stay.

But the moment I lose interest in you — tch — no one's going to apologize for the loss of one little puppet."

"..."

The puppet fell silent, standing frozen for a moment before turning its head to the domain's true master, Aph Ros. She read its meaning and laughed lightly.

"My brother speaks true. Evasiveness is hardly a commendable way to treat people.

And looking to me is useless. The master here is my brother, Yu Xi. I'm merely a prisoner. And He has become that warden's guard.

If He loses interest in you, then I'm afraid — to curry favor with the guard — I'll have to find a way to escort you out."

"..."

The puppet's silence stretched on. Wei Mu felt the weight of their combined pressure bearing down on him. He had confidence, yes — but his confidence stemmed from his understanding of certain things. And right now, even if he was sure he understood Aph Ros, he couldn't say the same about this Yu Xi.

Because he had never once heard that name. He hadn't even known that Deceit had an Envoy!

And consider this: the Envoy of Deceit — a Servant God who had reached the absolute pinnacle in the arts of deception and cunning. How could such an entity possibly be easy to deal with?

So after a moment's thought, Wei Mu chose to cooperate.

Not compromise — cooperate. He believed he needed to remain here, at this long table that seated three Envoys, and listen to Them discuss things about this game, about this universe, from perspectives he'd never had access to.

"Please forgive my overstepping. I understand. I'll strive to earn the chance to stay."

The puppet lowered itself stiffly back onto the tabletop, head bowed, as though entering some kind of confession mode.

Cheng Shi rejoiced inwardly, a smile curling the edge of his lips as he turned an eager ear. He was finally going to hear something interesting from Wei Mu's mouth. What he didn't expect was that the man's very first sentence nearly crashed his brain.

"My Container was bestowed by my Benefactor, Folly. When She summoned me, I scorned Her incompetence and demanded Her authority. Unfortunately, She had no authority. So all I received was this one Container."

"..."

"..."

"..."

Silence — the evening breeze of Dolgod today.

The hush arrived so abruptly that the three present gained a profound understanding of a truth: Folly truly was destined to walk toward Silence.

'Dude — do you even hear yourself?'

"Scorned Her incompetence." "Demanded Her authority." "She had no authority." "All I received was one Container."

Any single one of those statements was explosive enough on its own. How had he managed to string them all together?!

Seriously?

These Folly followers — why did they always radiate this kind of higher-dimensional, abstract insanity?

This was the first time Hu Xuan had lost her smile at this table. Beneath its surface, her fists were clenched white — apparently the only way to keep her facial expression from crumbling.

Aph Ros was stunned. Her eyes flew wide, a terrifying Corruption aura billowing from Her entire form. She stared at the puppet in disbelief, murmuring to Herself.

"She... has no authority? How can She have no authority? Where did Her authority go?"

"Heh. Squandered it."

The one who answered wasn't Wei Mu — it was Cheng Shi.

The moment the bombshell dropped, the sharp-witted Clown seized the opportunity and put on the biggest show he could.

Lord Yu Xi let a snort of laughter escape him, idly swirling the goblet in his hand — tilting it endlessly but never letting a single drop spill over the rim. Then, a heartbeat later, his hand gave a deliberate twitch and sent every last drop of wine cascading onto the table. He gazed at the spreading stain on the cloth and smiled.

"See? That's exactly how She squandered it."

...

Chapter 797: Folly!

To be fair, Wei Mu only knew that his Benefactor had lost Her authority. He had no idea how it happened.

Now it seemed that sitting at this table really could broaden one's horizons — at the very least, this Envoy of Deceit appeared to know precisely how his Benefactor had squandered Her authority.

But Wei Mu didn't dare ask. He'd already grasped the "rules" of this table: he could listen to what others said, but he had no standing to ask about what he didn't understand.

So the puppet kept its head bowed in silence, waiting for the dual Envoy across from him to serve as his mouthpiece and inquire how his Benefactor had managed to waste all of Her authority.

Sure enough, Aph Ros was utterly beside Herself with curiosity. She lunged forward, practically flattening Herself against the table, Her eyes boring into Cheng Shi with a craving so intense it was nearly dripping.

Never mind what kind of craving — the point is, it was craving.

Cheng Shi's eyelid twitched. He straightened up and pressed his back flat against his chair, putting as much distance between them as possible, then flashed a cryptic smile.

"Don't ask me. If you ask, I don't know. Even if I knew, I wouldn't dare say."

The line was pure fabrication. Cheng Shi had his suspicions, but without confirmation, he refused to breathe a word about Folly — especially with a Folly follower present. So he tossed the answer into the void of the unknown.

But the speaker's offhand remark landed heavily on the listener's ears. Hearing this response, Aph Ros instantly reined in Her expression and sat ramrod straight. A flash of reverence passed through Her eyes, and She smiled with faint rigidity.

"It's related to... Him?"

Cheng Shi hadn't expected Aph Ros to pick up even that thread. He nodded with a helpless, bemused expression. "Yes."

"Very good. My brother, it seems you're recovering your memories far faster than I anticipated. Your understanding of Him is accelerating as well."

"I couldn't have done it without your help, Aph Ros. I will forever treasure this friendship."

The moment the words left his lips, the brilliant moon soared into the sky.

The sudden transformation left the puppet at the far end of the table momentarily stunned. Its jaw worked open and shut a few times before it chose silence.

Nothing particularly remarkable, really. Didn't the aristocrats of the Land of Hope always love putting on a show at dinner? As an Envoy born from the Land of Hope, Aph Ros's behavior wasn't exactly worthy of criticism.

But what was this "Him" they kept referring to?

Wei Mu's curiosity deepened. Just then, Cheng Shi cleared his throat, averted his gaze, and turned back to the puppet.

"I had assumed you were a one-in-ten-thousand genius, yet it turns out all that assembled divinity of yours simply dripped from a Container.

Granted, being able to control the type of faith that crystallizes into the specific divinity you need — that kind of manipulation is genius in its own right. But compared to doing it all yourself from scratch, it's slightly less impressive.

Still, what truly puzzles me is this: you're a Player. Where does your faith come from?

I refuse to believe your white-eyed Benefactor handed over all of Her own faith. That's the very foundation of the gods."

He'd asked the question on Hu Xuan's behalf. Cheng Shi was using the information gleaned from Hu Xuan's lips to extract Wei Mu's "findings." Wei Mu didn't suspect a thing — after all, it was perfectly natural for an Envoy to understand how Containers worked. So, eager to keep the exchange flowing smoothly, the puppet explained in its characteristically measured cadence.

"A humble opinion, offered as a brick to attract jade.

I don't know what faith looks like from your perspective. All I know is that from observation in reality, faith is nothing more than life's pursuit of a particular thought or will.

All living beings pray for equality, and so Order descends. All living beings thirst for true knowledge, and so Truth manifests. All living beings express themselves, and thus War rages.

This holds for Civilization. It holds equally for Chaos.

So I often wondered: if I, too, became something that all living beings pursued, would their acknowledgment of me also qualify as a form of faith?

And so I began acting toward that goal. I reached the number one spot on the Road to Ascension. When I broadcast my fame as a Folly follower, people started... flattering me.

Flattery isn't kindness. But what I didn't expect was that even flattery is a form of acknowledgment — and that acknowledgment is precisely the 'faith' I sought!

The only problem was that this 'faith' was full of impurities — the divinity it produced was virtually unusable.

But once you have raw material, no matter how contaminated, there's nothing that can't be refined through experimentation. And so, bit by bit, I mastered the method of distilling divinity. I spent a very long time studying it.

It was only recently, through the opportunity presented by 0221's experiment, that I revealed this assembled divinity to others.

This way, 0221 became the genius who discovered the method of assembling divinity, while I was merely someone who reverse-engineered his technique and replicated his work. Far from becoming a public target, I can quietly remain behind the curtain — distributing divinity outward while steadily earning more 'flattery.'

This is how I obtained my faith. Lord Yu Xi — do you find any of this... illuminating?"

"..."

'Yes. Profoundly illuminating. Not only illuminating, but it makes me feel something dangerously close to self-loathing.'

That, of course, was not the Clown's thought — it was Hu Xuan's.

The Clown was thinking the same thing, but he forced himself not to dwell on it. Instead, he cheerfully turned his gaze toward Hu Xuan.

The Birth follower, for once, averted her eyes from Cheng Shi. Her expression momentarily froze as she silently committed everything to memory.

Seeing this, Cheng Shi's amusement only grew. But there was still one thing nagging at him. According to Wei Mu's account, the man had only explained his research into faith — he still hadn't addressed why he'd received the Container so early.

So this was yet another Player who, like the Blind One, had "had an audience with a god" at a remarkably early stage?

'How is it that all of you have these incredible encounters?'

Perhaps sensing the group's lingering questions — or perhaps proactively sharing his story to earn the right to remain at this table — Wei Mu preempted Cheng Shi's next question and filled in the missing pieces himself.

"I was indeed summoned by my Benefactor very early on. As early as the moment I first realized that conquering this game required studying faith — that's when She summoned me.

At the time, I was obsessed with cracking the Faith Game. So naturally, when I met my Benefactor, I asked the question that mattered most to me.

And when She demanded to know whether I thought my Oracle Act had an answer, I countered with my own question:

'If You are so wise, why have You allowed the other fifteen gods to stand as Your equals?''

"..."

"..."

"..."

'Magnificent!'

'You Chosen Ones — each more ferocious than the last.'

'I thought the Blind One was reckless enough, since she didn't know whether prophesying about her own Benefactor would get her killed. But you, Wei Mu — you genuinely have no fear of death.'

"Interesting." Cheng Shi shook his head with a grin. "It seems that even back then, you'd already figured out your Benefactor's temperament. You knew She wouldn't punish you for it."

"Yes. Once I began studying the meaning of faith, I discovered that the more closely you align with Their will, the greater the chance of drawing close to Them. That's why I dared ask that question."

"And what did your Benefactor say?"

"She said: 'Becoming a god is itself a foolish act.'

I said: 'If that's the case, then why did You personally enact a foolish act?'

She said: 'If I had not been foolish first, how would I know that this was a foolish act? Even if it was always a foolish act, I am still the universe's first fool — and the first to know that this was folly.'"

"!!!"

Cheng Shi felt the words hit him like a shockwave. His face flooded with emotion.

So this was Folly!

Even in the practice of foolish acts, She had to be first.

But that wasn't what shook Cheng Shi the most. What truly unnerved him was that these words seemed to suggest Folly had already known something!

Could She have already known about the Slice Universe? Was that why She went around asking everyone, "Do you think your foolish act will have an answer?"

Cheng Shi's brow locked tight, a sharp light flashing through his eyes.

It was possible. Don't forget — Her authority was gone. So could it be that Folly had lost Her authority in the process of uncovering this truth?

No — perhaps not "lost." Perhaps it was the very Convention that the Fun God had pushed the gods to sign that gave Folly the confidence to go all in. That's why She dared pay such a price to investigate.

After all, She had told Brother Mouth that She'd once paid a heavy cost.

And the news today might mean that the loss of Her authority had already bought the answer.

That answer being:

The gods and the current universe were nothing more than a microcosm of another, far grander Slice Experiment.

...

Chapter 798: Aph Ros, How Do You Feel About Being a Boss?

Hearing all this, a thought suddenly formed in Cheng Shi's mind.

When you're not clever enough to solve a problem yourself, why not hand the problem over to someone who is? Case in point: if Wei Mu learned about Origin, would he try to approach Him the way he'd once approached Folly?

Almost certainly yes — because he seemed like the type who "climbed the highest peak."

So Cheng Shi's eyes darted, and he turned to the puppet with a smile, ready to voluntarily disclose a little something.

But before revealing anything, he needed to confirm that the Wei Mu entering the game was the real deal — not some mouthpiece marionette speaking on someone else's behalf.

He rapped the table and smiled.

"I admire you — just as I admire the Fate Weaver I'm currently playing. You've earned the right to stay here and hear things that ordinary Players never could. But there's one condition.

A marionette... doesn't get a seat at this table."

The puppet heard this and froze. It lowered its head and pondered for a moment as if steeling itself for a decision, then stood on the tabletop, gave another slight bow, and spoke with solemnity.

"Esteemed sirs, if my physical form is a concern, then I must make a confession.

This puppet is not my puppet. It is, in fact...

my true body."

"?"

The first to furrow her brow wasn't Cheng Shi — it was Aph Ros. While She detected no scent of lies on him, She also detected no emotional aura at all!

That wasn't strange in itself — a puppet shouldn't carry the aura of a living being. But when Wei Mu declared that he was the puppet, things got strange very quickly.

"You converted yourself into a puppet?"

Cheng Shi was mildly startled, though not truly shocked. He'd seen plenty of this sort of thing — whether it was Ardos, Kataro, or the Blind One's Puppet Master relative, An Jing. All masters of the art.

Come to think of it, the first two were even Zangier's students. The world was simply too small — everywhere you turned, the Creation Alchemy Department's fingerprints were there.

"Correct. I spent a period deeply studying puppetcraft, then later refined my techniques, blending creation alchemy with mechanical engineering to construct this body for myself."

"But I've heard you have a flesh-and-blood body." Hu Xuan frowned.

The moment she asked the question, Wei Mu realized that among the three Envoys at the table, if he ever needed to find a weak link, the Eternal Sun would probably be the easiest to coax information from.

But now clearly wasn't the time for scheming. The puppet nodded and turned to Hu Xuan.

"Correct. I do possess a physical body, but that, too, is one of my puppets — a puppet that doesn't house my core consciousness.

I placed my true self in harm's way and hid the actual puppet somewhere supremely safe. That way, if someone goes to extraordinary lengths to find 'me,' who would believe that what they found in such a well-hidden location wasn't the real person?

It's the safest method of self-preservation. Of course, after leaving Dolgod, I may change my appearance again.

But if I could earn a ticket to the terrace banquet, I believe that — for the sake of keeping my seat — I'd be willing to preserve my favorite puppet shell for your sakes.

What... do you think?"

'What do I think?'

'Heh — of course, the strongest Players in this game are all born liars.'

Cheng Shi snorted and looked toward Aph Ros. He said nothing, but his attitude already signaled agreement.

Aph Ros smiled and didn't refuse. She found the Wei Mu across from Her worthy of the number one spot on the Road to Ascension. Moreover, She felt he might be the second window — after Her brother Yu Xi — through which She could observe this era.

So Aph Ros actually gave Wei Mu an entry ticket: a Dolgod silver coin.

"Drop the coin into wine, and you'll find your way back here."

The puppet picked up the coin from the tabletop, bowed in gratitude, then swallowed it into its mouth.

With everything settled and the Folly contestant successfully aboard, Cheng Shi finally began revealing the existence of Origin to Wei Mu.

He didn't dare say too much — he merely revealed Origin's divine name and told Wei Mu that Folly's loss of authority was connected to Him. When the puppet heard this, its jaw clattered onto the table once more.

"Ori... gin."

He was hooked.

Cheng Shi could see it at a glance. Even on an expressionless puppet, the obsession was unmistakable. The feeling reminded him of the Blind One's first divination of Origin — that faint hint of madness, still small but with no telling when it might explode into something spectacular.

"Given that you're a latecomer, I should warn you — keep your distance from Him.

Good. My brother, we've spent enough time on tangents. Let's get to the point.

You brought that blasphemmer here — so what do you intend to do?"

Finally, the real topic. Truth be told, milking information from Wei Mu was just a happy bonus. Cheng Shi's true purpose here had always been dealing with the mad Grand Scholar and the 0221 who'd attempted to fuse with him.

"Will they die?"

"No. At least not within Go Lis's warm embrace — they're sleeping as peacefully as infants."

"..."

Cheng Shi's eye twitched. He thought to himself that Go Lis's embrace had absolutely nothing to do with "warm."

"Right. I did have an idea at first.

I figured that since even Zangier was able to descend into 0221's body to steal his Player identity, then you — who already embodies both Birth and Corruption — could easily do the same. Become a Player and leave this place.

But Hu Xuan told me that someone as devout as you would never fuse with a blasphemmer of such vile caliber, so I dropped that plan."

At these words, Aph Ros went completely still. Stiffly, She turned to look at Hu Xuan.

Hu Xuan met Her gaze with utter seriousness, her devotion-filled expression plainly asking: 'Was I wrong?'

"...No." Aph Ros heaved a deep sigh and nodded with a bitter smile.

As a prisoner, if She could temporarily escape Her cage, a touch of blasphemy — the responsibility routed through Go Lis and borne by Aph Ros alone — wasn't entirely out of the question.

But She had just managed to establish some contact with Her Benefactor, Birth, through Hu Xuan. If She now performed an act of blasphemy in front of the Eternal Sun, who knew what "little sister" would whisper to Mother once she got home?

So Aph Ros abandoned the idea with a rueful smile. She drained a goblet of wine in one wild gulp and gestured for Cheng Shi to continue.

She knew that if Cheng Shi had only one impractical idea, he wouldn't have lingered this long.

And Cheng Shi did indeed have another idea — one that, to certain parties, might be considered... somewhat inhumane.

"Ahem — naturally, I have another angle.

Aph Ros, how would you feel about being a boss?"

"?" Aph Ros blinked again. "What kind of boss?"

"A boss of drudges.

I've already found you the perfect workhorse — he's the one dangling from the church ceiling up there.

The way I see it, having a Grand Scholar, an intellectual powerhouse like that, doing off-the-books labor for you — well, ahem, for us — is a rare opportunity, wouldn't you say?"

...

Chapter 799: Laying the Groundwork for Void's Curtain Call

"Work?"

"That's right. Work."

Cheng Shi laid out a detailed account of Zangier — the man himself and every one of his exploits within the Tower of Logic — then clearly explained the origins of their conflict. After that, he tapped the table, choosing his words carefully while thinking aloud.

"The tide of faith fusion can no longer be stopped. I can hazard a guess at what Truth is thinking, but as Folly said, it's most likely a foolish act.

The problem is, even if it is a foolish act, we can only ride the wave. Because only by standing atop the crest can you see what lies beyond the horizon — and only then can you judge whether we, as beings beneath the true gods, should embrace the folly or flee from it.

Otherwise, cowering beneath the waves while the era races forward will only leave us further behind.

Of course, Aph Ros, you could choose the latter. You're already behind the times, after all."

"..."

"But if you want to keep up — if you want to do something in this era of Void — then Zangier is an excellent choice.

The man may be deranged, but he excels at research. Even if his methods are, shall we say, unorthodox — no, that's not quite right — unconventional. But your path is unconventional too, isn't it?

His experiments require both Birth and Corruption. You happen to possess both faiths. That means right here, on your home turf of Dolgod, you can provide this Grand Scholar with everything he needs.

Your status far surpasses any Pseudo God. Your divine power is genuine. This would allow the Grand Scholar to apply centuries of research experience to your actual divine power, building a platform on a higher plane to explore... the possibility of opposing-faith fusion.

I can state with confidence that in the era of Void, opposing faiths can fully merge.

Isn't that exactly what you want?

There's no need for excessive disruption of reality or risky attempts to approach Void. You can fulfill your wish and find the balance point between your two Benefactors' wills. And as a bonus, this blasphemer gets to atone for his sacrilege through sheer intellectual and physical labor!

This way, the struggling researcher gets a proper meal, you — unable to find faith balance in the real world — gain a new experimental direction, and I only need to collect some inspiration and records from the experiment... no, I don't even need that."

Cheng Shi slammed his palm on the table and pointed straight at Wei Mu, grinning brilliantly.

"Give it to him. Give it to this wise man who once scorned his own Benefactor. Let him 'distill' from the Grand Scholar's vast experimental data a divinity assembly method suitable for non-divine constitutions. If this succeeds, we will have personally raised the curtain on a brand-new era."

Aph Ros was tempted. Cheng Shi's proposal genuinely carried nothing but benefits for Her. Yet She didn't agree immediately, instead frowning with suspicion.

"My brother, you're lying to me again, aren't you?"

You only lost your memories and power — not your status. Why would you need to extract from this research a divinity assembly method for non-divine constitutions?

Could it be that... your identity..."

"Exactly!" Cheng Shi's heart lurched and cold sweat prickled his skin. He cut Aph Ros off, rose to his feet, and countered with a mask of deadly seriousness. "It is precisely my identity that has led me to hear certain... unfavorable prophecies from Her mouth. That's why I've started paying attention to these matters.

Remember what I said? I intend to lay down as many contingencies as possible for Void before the era comes crashing down.

Those who fail to plan ahead will find trouble at their doorstep.

When the Existence era ended, the universe restructured existence itself. Does that mean when the Void era ends, everything will collapse into nothingness?

From your perspective, that void might signal the dawn of the next era. But in the eyes of my Player-identity Benefactor — Fate — the void that follows the era's conclusion may very well not be the Void the gods imagine.

I can't reveal too much before the path ahead becomes clear. But I can tell you this: Folly's loss of authority is almost certainly connected to the coming void.

Think about it. If even a true god has lost Her authority, then where does that leave Servant Gods like us?

I haven't experienced an era's reset before, so I approach the coming future with caution.

That's why I'm not laying the groundwork for the present me — I'm laying the groundwork for a future that may offer no way out."

"..."

The speech carried enough weight to shake everyone present. Though Cheng Shi's words weren't entirely transparent, the implications about the era's curtain fall plunged Aph Ros into deep contemplation.

She could dismiss Yu Xi's speculation, but She couldn't ignore a prophecy from the ruler of an era.

Of course, She was only considering how to minimize the impact during a void that even Fate — ruler of the era — viewed with apprehension. Because in Aph Ros's eyes, no matter how terrifying that void might be, the next era would inevitably begin. After all, She had personally lived through several resets. She was firmly convinced that Origin's appearance would steer every anomaly back onto the proper course.

The other two, however, didn't share Aph Ros's composure. Even Wei Mu, for all his brilliance, hadn't closed his jaw once since Lord Yu Xi's lengthy address began.

In that moment, he realized that Players weren't the only ones playing this game — even these Envoys, it turned out, were also players.

He was infinitely grateful that his earlier proactive disclosures had earned him the chance to listen. Everything he'd just heard was the kind of secret he could have spent a lifetime in Player circles without ever uncovering.

'Eras... What exactly is an era?'

'If both Existence and Void have their own eras, does that mean every other path also has a corresponding era?'

Wei Mu began rapidly cross-referencing every memory tagged "era" in his brain, deconstructing the information against what he'd heard. Before long, he struck upon a revelation buried in countless contradictory historical records: eras and epochs were a paired set of interdependent concepts.

'So that's how it is! Beyond the epochs, there exist eras.'

'But then — why do Existence and Void have no corresponding epoch?'

Wei Mu's questions were multiplying faster than he could count. His hunger for this "divine knowledge" had reached unprecedented levels.

Hu Xuan, meanwhile, merely furrowed her brow, trying to determine whether Cheng Shi's speech had been lies or truth. She couldn't ask outright — not here, not now. She could only commit everything to memory and wait for Professor Cheng's after-class tutorial.

And so, after Cheng Shi's impassioned address, the terrace fell into silence. Aph Ros deliberated for a long time, but no matter how She looked at it, Cheng Shi's proposal carried zero risk for Her. She nodded.

"You truly never fail to bring surprises, my brother.

This does sound like it could provide some new amusement. At the very least, it would help me kill time in Dolgod, where time is the one thing I don't lack.

However, I'd advise you not to pin too many hopes on the experiments here. Even if that Grand Scholar is as brilliant as you say and discovers a method — even if faith fusion becomes possible in the new era — don't forget, matters of faith are ultimately decided by Them.

Without Their consent, fusion is out of the question."

"That's easy." Cheng Shi snapped his fingers, looking between Aph Ros and Hu Xuan with a deeply meaningful smile. "If They don't consent, then we make Them consent.

Corruption never refuses — She requires no persuasion.

And as for your Benefactor, Birth — if there's a chance, I'm willing to personally lobby Her on your behalf, brother. The only condition is that you two find a way to grant me an audience with Her.

I believe this is hardly a losing deal for either of you. What do you say?"

"!!!"

"You want an audience with my Lord? Cheng Shi, are you serious?"

...

Chapter 800: First Voluntary Audience — Birth

Aph Ros and Hu Xuan were both stunned — Hu Xuan especially so.

Aph Ros was, after all, a prisoner. Even though She had recently reconnected with Her Benefactor, the gulf between a "prince banished to the cold palace" and a "princess who stands before the throne" was vast.

So Cheng Shi's words were directed less at both Birth followers and more at Hu Xuan, under the convenient pretense of addressing them together.

He'd simply calculated that if he asked Hu Xuan privately, she'd agree to try without hesitation — and that would cost him the opportunity to extract leverage from Aph Ros. But here and now, as long as Aph Ros wanted a response from Her Benefactor, She'd first have to make things right with Hu Xuan and coax this "little sister" of Birth into securing the opportunity.

That said, Cheng Shi's request wasn't really about leverage or helping Hu Xuan. He genuinely wanted an audience with Birth.

This wasn't a spur-of-the-moment whim. He'd been planning it for some time.

Up until now, everything Cheng Shi knew about Origin was limited to Aph Ros's descriptions and Fate's warnings. Beyond a vague impression — one he wasn't supposed to dwell on too deeply — he had virtually no real understanding of this "true Creator."

And yet, everything he'd learned pointed to Him as the "experimenter" behind this entire Slice Universe. So Cheng Shi desperately wanted to know: what exactly was He in the gods' eyes?

Asking the two Void deities would never yield answers. And conveniently enough, the other two Benefactors he'd fused with since were each busier than the next.

As for the one seated upon the Bone Throne... She hadn't contacted him in a while. He wasn't sure if it was because She was upset about Mi Laozhang getting swindled away by the Fun God...

In short, after countless audiences with the divine, Cheng Shi didn't have a single deity he could casually broach this topic with.

So after much deliberation, he set his sights on Birth.

The reason he'd singled out Birth was that, in Cheng Shi's estimation, She was the only remaining god with whom he shared enough of a connection.

First, Birth belonged to the Life path. Of the Life path's other two gods, one had their posthumous authority currently being wielded by his friend — with Cheng Shi himself sharing a portion in his body — and the other was that particular entity, his constant protector and boss.

With relationships like these, Cheng Shi figured She shouldn't make things too difficult for him.

Second, while Aph Ros had described Birth as an "Approach Faction" deity, Her approach to Origin didn't seem particularly aggressive.

Decay was rotting itself away to beg for mercy. Truth was frantically assembling divinity in a mad pursuit of truth. Memory was guarding Her Collection Hall, refusing to let Her records be tainted. These were the "outstanding representatives" of the Approach Faction. But Birth? What had She done?

Apart from having children and finding children — nothing at all.

Even among Her followers... Cheng Shi still hadn't heard of a single one who'd undergone faith fusion.

That didn't look like approaching. It looked more like minding Her own business.

Lastly, Cheng Shi remembered that the reason Zangier's experiments had originally used the divinity of Birth and Corruption as templates was because one was stable and the other was sluggish.

So after weighing countless factors, Cheng Shi decided to seek an audience with Birth — to see whether he could coax some information about Origin from Her lips.

Even if he came away empty-handed, at least he'd have met Her. A close encounter with Her true will would allow him to more accurately categorize Her position among the divine factions.

Naturally, there was risk. No one knew whether Birth would slap him with a charge of blasphemy.

But Cheng Shi figured that with four Benefactors sheltering him overhead, he surely wouldn't die in front of Birth, even if he struck out completely.

Besides, given the Fun God's machinations, He surely wouldn't stand by and let Cheng Shi walk to his death.

After all, even this "sole member of the Fear Faction" had begun fusing with the Approach Faction's core representative, Truth. With Benefactors testing boundaries this aggressively, what was wrong with taking a slightly bigger step himself?

Miss this chance, and a pretext this convenient might never come again!

So Cheng Shi seized the moment to voice the request. But this wasn't merely a bold move — it was also a test of his two Void Benefactors.

He wanted to test whether the Fun God actually cared if other deities learned about the Slice Universe. And he wanted to test whether Fate had already deduced from past clues what his fate looked like in other slice universes.

"Of course I'm serious. I said I can try to make the case, but the prerequisite is that the two of you have the courage to recommend me to Her."

Seeing that Cheng Shi's tone was no joke, Hu Xuan's eyes widened with realization. She nodded once and vanished from the table on the spot.

Cheng Shi's eye twitched. 'Sis, you don't need to be that eager. I haven't even squeezed any concessions out of Aph Ros yet.' But before he could open his mouth, a force he couldn't refuse tore him straight out of Dolgod.

"???"

In an instant, only Aph Ros and the puppet Wei Mu remained at the long table, staring at each other. After a beat, Aph Ros threw Her head back and laughed.

"My brother probably wouldn't lie to me about this. So — in this brave new era, does that mean I can finally have my wish granted?"

The puppet didn't dare reply carelessly, but after a moment's thought, decided to seize the chance and ask what eras were — and what the era's curtain call meant.

Faced with this familiar line of inquiry, Aph Ros smiled with genuine delight.

"Since you're so hungry for knowledge, then, Mr. Puppet, why don't we make a deal?"

You heard just now — my brother wants to leave as many escape routes as possible before the coming void. So cooperate with me, study this Truth material properly, and hand over your complete research to him.

In return, I'll tell you some things you'd find interesting."

"Lord Aph Ros, I appreciate your generosity, but this arrangement doesn't benefit you at all."

"I don't need benefits. I'm just a prisoner."

It was my brother who showed me this era, who brought me so many surprises. It's time I returned the favor with a few of my own."

The puppet paused, lowering its head. "This may sound petty of me, but my rational mind tells me that an Envoy of Deceit's words aren't necessarily true."

"You are indeed petty." Aph Ros snorted a laugh and pointed at Wei Mu. "At least in size — quite a bit smaller than a normal person."

Remember: when someone is willing to deceive you, it means you still have value.

Perhaps that sentiment doesn't resonate with you now. But for me — after being forgotten for countless eras in Time's prison — being deceived actually feels rather nice.

Besides, how do you know he isn't indulging his own craving for deception, using it as a way to draw closer to the Gate of Joyous Lust, Aph Ros?"

"..." At that, Wei Mu knew it was time to shut his mouth.

"Good. Get moving. I'm not well-versed in Truth's subject matter, so taking the first step — getting the blasphemer's experiment up and running here in Dolgod — will require your help."

I hope that by the time I next see my brother, we'll have brought some new changes to Dolgod.

Oh, right — let's name the new tribunal... the Honesty Court. Let's hope this scholar tells fewer lies and commits less fraud during his atonement."

The puppet's gaze froze. It had a strong suspicion that remark wasn't aimed at Zangier, but at him.

...

Meanwhile, in the endless Void, Birth's Divine Pillar lashed against the surrounding space, its friction emitting ravings that made one's skull throb.

"Why — do — you — seek — Me —"

Cheng Shi stood with his head bowed, expression awkward.

'Wait — the Silent Infant Bell doesn't work here?'

Well, yes and no — the real issue was that his current state was a little... off. Cheng Shi forced down the chaos in his mind, plastered on his standard audience-with-a-god smile, and raised his head with "devout" reverence.

"Praise—"

"Get — to — the — point —"

"..."

'You talk even slower than that other one, yet Your temper is considerably more impatient.'

...