

The Gods 76

Chapter 76: A Thin Line Between Life and Death

The current kept accelerating.

Before long, the players were completely separated, swept deeper one by one.

The water ahead was no longer the familiar blue of the ocean but instead turned into swirling streams of bright yellow.

The moment the two distinct currents made contact, Cheng Shi felt an inexplicable force pressing in from all directions, rapidly corroding his skin.

Acid?

How was that possible?

Given the vast volume of seawater, how could there still be acid this concentrated?

“Stomach acid from the giant beast?”

“No! This isn’t acid! It’s a pull from the void!”

Vortex Devourers!

How is this possible?

These creatures thrive at the boundary between reality and void—[Void]’s favored creations. How can they be here!?

No, wait! How could they be dead!?!?”

Hearing Gao Yu's frantic exclamations, Cheng Shi's heart sank.

The Vortex Devourer wasn't unfamiliar to him. These creatures were born from the edges of the Void, existing to swallow Existence itself.

They had invisible tendrils atop their heads, which allowed them to sense where reality was weakest. By traveling through the void, they could reach those areas and devour them, transforming them into part of the void.

Anything swallowed by a Vortex Devourer would slowly fade from existence, pulled apart by the forces of the void.

As for how one of these void-bound creatures could die...

Well, this was an [Oblivion] trial, after all.

Though they might not have a traditional concept of life, [Oblivion] certainly applied to them. After all, even vague boundaries between Existence and Void could face annihilation.

But that wasn't the important thing right now. This wasn't the time to ponder such mysteries.

Cheng Shi stopped overthinking and quickly cast two Heal spells, targeting all the nearby teammates he could still see.

Unfortunately, the situation didn't improve despite the healing spells.

The vines that had formed the raft were rapidly dissolving, and the players' skin had begun to fester and rot.

[Void] was dissolving them into nothingness, turning them into part of the endless void.

“We can’t keep moving forward! The pull of the void is increasing! Everyone, we need to push outward!”

Zhao Qian’s shout echoed through the water. His body flushed red and hot as he furiously rotated his arms like propellers, pushing himself against the current to swim back the way they had come.

“Elder Cui, stay close!”

Cui Dingtian responded immediately, following Zhao Qian. However, his pace was much slower—not just because of his age, but because he was dragging someone with him.

Su Yida!

At some point, Su Yida had latched onto Cui Dingtian and hadn’t let go since.

Tao Yi and Gao Yu were also struggling, but mages weren’t nearly as efficient in this kind of situation compared to warriors and hunters.

No matter how hard they tried to cast spells, they couldn’t stop being pulled deeper into the void.

By now, the group was in terrible shape. Their clothes had long been dissolved, and even their hair and skin were beginning to peel away in large chunks.

The void’s pull was like a razor-sharp blade, cutting through them indiscriminately, leaving deep wounds.

“Pull me up!”

Gao Yu, panicking, yelled as he desperately pulled out a piece of metal from his bag and furiously hammered it underwater.

Tao Yi, whose face had become almost unrecognizable, gritted her teeth, grabbed hold of him with one hand, and continued summoning whatever nearby materials she could with the other. Unfortunately, everything she conjured was corroded faster than she could use it.

“Hurry! I can’t hold on much longer!” Tao Yi cried out, her voice filled with despair. Gao Yu’s eyes turned bloodshot as he quickened his pace.

His small hammer, too, was slowly dissolving in the void’s pull, but with a mixture of blood and effort, he managed to shape his material into a long, spiral drill and jammed it into the wall of the giant beast’s stomach.

“The pressure is too great! We can’t swim out! Come on! We’ll dig our way out of here!”

These creatures evolved from the void—they’re not like traditional lifeforms. Their body walls are thin. There’s hope!”

The duration of Underwater Heal was nearing its end, and the rate at which everyone’s skin was rotting had accelerated.

Those who had been trying to swim forward felt the intense resistance and quickly gave up, huddling closer to Gao Yu.

Seizing the opportunity, Cheng Shi grabbed onto Gao Yu’s leg and, in the same motion, reached out to snag Tao Yi, who was being dragged deeper by the current. He mustered his strength and cast another Heal over the entire group.

Seeing that Gao Yu’s efforts weren’t fast enough, Cui Dingtian snatched the drill from his hands and began boring into the beast furiously.

Zhao Qian pressed himself against the giant beast’s inner walls, attempting to tear open another exit with his bare hands.

But neither their hands nor their tools could make much of a dent in the monster’s body.

And yet, this desperate struggle was only draining their energy faster.

“Priest!!!”

Zhao Qian screamed at the top of his lungs, begging Cheng Shi to pull through and at least keep everyone alive until they broke through the beast’s inner wall.

But Cheng Shi didn’t respond.

Instead of casting another Heal, he gritted his teeth, clamping Tao Yi securely between his legs to free his right hand.

“Priest!!! Heal me!!!”

“Shut up, I’m busy!”

Cheng Shi roared, making up his mind. He clenched his fist and slammed it into the fleshy “wall” in front of him.

But he wasn’t trying to compete with Zhao Qian for brute strength—he had a trick up his sleeve.

A 3.5S-rank subordinate relic:

Bone Servant Le Le’er’s Ring!

The moment Cheng Shi’s blood-red ring made contact with the beast’s inner wall...

“Boom—”

A deafening crack of thunder exploded in everyone's ears.

Lightning roared from the ring, shooting out and tearing through the thin wall of the beast, lighting up its entire inner cavity for a brief moment.

Everyone flinched at the sudden thunderclap, but when they saw fresh seawater pouring through the hole in the beast's flesh, they were overjoyed. With a final surge of strength, they rushed toward the opening.

They were free!

Cheng Shi mentally sighed in relief.

Thank you, teammates, for your generous donation of fear.

And thank you, Fear Mother Tree Le Le'er, for saving my life on your very first day on the job.

As the opening drew closer, Cheng Shi held back, ensuring everyone's safety first.

He cast another Underwater Heal to stabilize the group, then used his remaining strength to cast a few mental recovery spells, directing them all toward Cui Dingtian.

Why Cui Dingtian?

Because Cheng Shi had noticed that, despite everyone else's bodies being nearly stripped to the bone, the old man's injuries were surprisingly few.

The void's corrosion seemed to have slowed as it reached Cui Dingtian's body.

And for that reason, Cheng Shi knew he had to heal him first.

When everyone is sinking in the mud, the first person you save shouldn't be the one closest to being swallowed. It should be the one who's most likely to make it out.

That way, the one who escapes can pull the others out too.

No amount of struggling in the mud beats a helping hand from someone on solid ground.

Feeling his strength rapidly returning, Cui Dingtian immediately understood Cheng Shi's intention.

Suppressing his coughs, he flicked his right hand, sending out a thin white rope through the hole in the beast's flesh.

Then, with his left hand, he flicked again, sending another rope darting out to wrap around Cheng Shi, Gao Yu, and Tao Yi, binding them all together.

Just as Cheng Shi was about to snap Gao Yu's ankle or crush Tao Yi's waist, Cui Dingtian had bundled them up tightly like a giant dumpling with his ropes.

"Zhao Qian, grab on!"

Cui Dingtian shouted as he charged toward the opening.

Zhao Qian twisted his body, kicking off the inner wall with all his strength to propel himself toward the old man, wrapping his arms tightly around Cui Dingtian's waist.

But as soon as his hands touched Cui Dingtian's waist...

He froze in shock.

He couldn't feel any skin on Cui Dingtian's abdomen—it was as if the void had already stripped it away completely.

But just moments ago, Zhao Qian had clearly seen that Cui Dingtian's body was unscathed!

How could this be?

Stunned, Zhao Qian looked up and saw that Cui Dingtian's entire body was nearly stripped bare, his muscles and sinews fully exposed.

Only his wrists were still covered in a thin layer of skin.

And that skin...

Zhao Qian's gaze followed the rope that was holding the three players together.

The white "rope" in front of him was taut and straight.

No matter how murky the water, anyone who looked closely could see that the rope wasn't rope at all—it was a long, thin strand of...

Skin.

Cui Dingtian had peeled off the skin from his entire body, creating a makeshift cord to bind everyone together!

His unnaturally extended skin and his rock-hard flesh seemed to offer some resistance to the void's corrosion.

"Hold tight! This old man's about to kick it into gear!"

The skin rope he had tossed out of the opening seemed to have found a stable anchor. With a look of joy on his face, Cui Dingtian's muscles contracted as he began pulling everyone toward the exit, fighting the pressure of the current.

As the void's pull eased and the three players bound together could feel the weight lifting from their bodies, they let out exhausted, relieved smiles.

They were in rough shape.

The void's relentless tearing had left their wounds deep enough to expose bone. The rotting flesh clung together, making it hard to tell whose flesh belonged to whom.

Cheng Shi, utterly drained from the excessive energy expenditure, still forced himself to cast another Heal spell for the two players in front of him.

Their skin, hair, and flesh began to visibly regenerate.

Seeing their wounds start to close, Gao Yu finally relaxed.

But Tao Yi's expression grew increasingly strange.

At that moment, she was pressed tightly against Cheng Shi's back. As her body slowly regained feeling, she muttered:

"Cheng Shi... you..."

Cheng Shi, who had been on high alert the entire time, finally allowed himself to relax. He hadn't yet realized what was going on.

He smiled, thinking Tao Yi was checking on his condition.

“Don’t worry, I’m fine. I can still manage.”

“I... sigh, never mind...”

Cheng Shi blinked in confusion, then suddenly realized that Tao Yi might be worried about [Birth] watching over them. He laughed and reassured her:

“Relax, you’re not going to get pregnant.”

But as soon as the words left his mouth, he realized he had misunderstood her completely.

With the effects of Shared Divine Grace, his sense of touch had begun to return to his back.

And with it came a very distinct pressure.

“.....”

“.....”

Gao Yu, tied up in front of Cheng Shi, had no idea what was happening behind him. Noticing the odd expressions on both their faces, he anxiously asked:

“What now?”

Cheng Shi smirked, barely able to hold back his laughter.

“Nothing.

I was just thinking... Some celebrities look pretty good on TV, but in reality... it's kind of disappointing.

Would you call that false advertising?"

"Huh?"

Gao Yu seemed confused by Cheng Shi's sudden change in topic, but Tao Yi, who had been tense moments before, felt her nerves settle thanks to the banter.

She shot Cheng Shi a glare and rolled her eyes.

"So, you like celebrities?"

"Never followed them. Don't really care one way or the other."

"Well, there you go. If someone isn't your target audience, why bother caring?"

"....."

Fair enough. Not my problem.

I'm just blowing the whistle for all the fans who've been deceived. And if you're really not that celebrity, then why are you pinching me!?

Gao Yu wasn't stupid. Hearing the strange conversation between Cheng Shi and Tao Yi, he started to piece things together, his face turning awkward.

"Just like the books said—disasters are a catalyst for romance."

"....."

“.....”

You little brat, what do you know about romance?

As the trio exchanged nonsensical banter to lighten the mood, a shout came from up ahead!

“Heads up, we’re about to breach the surface!”