

The Gods 761

Chapter 761: The Silent Tao Yi

Reality. The center of a district in some unknown province and city.

This had once been a thriving commercial zone, home to many players. But gradually, for reasons unknown, the players here began dying off one by one — silently, as if they'd inhaled some lethal, imperceptible gas.

Soon the entire area returned to stillness. And while no one was paying attention, a grand spatial merger quietly unfolded. Once all the spaces had converged into one, the area grew bustling again.

Only now, the source of activity was no longer the Faith Game's players, but... them. Strand upon strand, stalk upon stalk, cluster upon cluster of... it.

Take, for instance, a certain skyscraper in the corner of this area, wrapped tightly in what appeared to be "ivy." From a distance, the abandoned tower seemed to have been claimed by vegetation, transformed into a paradise of unchecked growth. But only up close could one see that the dense tangles covering the building's surface weren't plants at all — they more closely resembled clusters of gnarled, knotted... tentacles!

They were alive. And they were writhing.

What's more, twisted, raspy sounds would occasionally drift from within that mass of tentacles. Most resembled unconscious murmurs, but to the human ear, they sounded unmistakably like ravings from the abyss!

Such ravings should have inspired terror. And indeed, there were people here — this building still had living humans inside. Yet at this moment, these huddled survivors showed no signs of overwhelming panic. Each face was grim as they watched their surroundings, vigilant against any tentacle that crept too close.

Whenever a "branch" slithered their way, someone would grit their teeth, step forward, and launch an attack against the endless murmuring and ravings, blasting the thin tentacles back from a distance.

After completing a round of defense, they'd be pulled back into the "position" by ropes and straps held by teammates, then undergo a "debridement procedure."

As for what these "wounds" actually were...

Inside the perimeter, a female player deftly twirled a blade and precisely lanced a "pustule" on the back of a male player lying beneath her. Another player, expression tight, swiftly pinned down the tentacle that oozed out of the burst pustule, nailing it dead to the floor.

Just like that, one simple "debridement" was done.

But not everyone was so lucky. Some players were covered in "pustules," and the process of excising these eerie "newborns" didn't always go smoothly. Some of the faster-growing ones had already developed survival instincts — the instant they were attacked, they'd burrow deep into their "mother's" body seeking shelter, wholly unaware that this behavior did nothing but kill their "host" and invite even fiercer attacks from outside.

And so, after a fire set to eliminate future threats, the faces inside the perimeter grew grimmer still.

"Report casualties. Scouts, rotate. Priests, begin healing. Second shield line, advance. Singers, top off all buffs. Free agents, inspect the formation core. Wounded, rest while you can."

Commands flowed methodically from the golden-haired, golden-eyed man at the center. Every player sprang into motion the moment they heard his orders.

Before long, the hunters on the outer perimeter completed their rotation. Healing light bloomed across the position in rippling waves. The second row of mages stood behind the front-line hunters, resting. They too wore ropes — looking no different from the wounded who'd just been pulled back. They were the reserves, ready to "deploy" at a moment's notice. Several singers harmonized in unison, and multicolored holy light showered over everyone again and again.

Everything appeared orderly — the picture of a well-drilled army. Except for... the woman checking the formation core, who'd been seized by it and couldn't break free no matter which way she pulled.

So she could only shout in exasperation: "Formation core intact! But I'm not doing so great — could someone come rescue me?"

The surrounding players' faces darkened. Every last one of them turned away, pretending they hadn't heard. Even the commander in the center twitched at the first four words before deliberately ignoring the rest.

Nobody, it seemed, wanted to deal with her.

That said, she wasn't entirely ignored. The formation core, at least, had been talking nonstop since the moment she came over.

"I know you! You're a big celebrity — the one from that TV drama!

Why'd you dye your hair pink? I don't think pink suits you. Have you thought about going with a different color?"

Though the previous free agent had warned her not to respond to any of the formation core's chatter, Tao Yi was ultimately grateful to this person for saving all their lives. So she forced out a smile and replied with slight awkwardness:

"What color?"

"Transparent!"

"?"

"Like mine! Don't you think a shaved head is your true calling?"

"..." Tao Yi froze, blinking furiously as she stared at this bald formation core in bewilderment. "Are you... serious?"

"Of course!

You're an actress, right? Shaving your head makes it way easier to wear all kinds of wigs. Just like in that drama of yours — you switched hairstyles so many times, it must've been such a hassle. But if you just shave it all off, everything becomes simple.

If I remember right, you played Song Xiaoxiao."

"...That was the female lead."

"Oh, right right — you were the second female lead. You played that annoying princess-cousin, Qin Wanxi! You actually nailed that role, honestly. I got annoyed just watching."

"..." Tao Yi's eyelid twitched violently. She struggled against the grip on her arm, failed to break free, and could only fall silent as she turned away.

"Wrong again?" The bald formation core furrowed his brow and studied Tao Yi's back. After a moment, his face lit up with realization. "Oh — you're not Tao Yi! Sorry, I can't believe I got confused."

"...I am Tao Yi." Tao Yi was numb. She tugged at her arm again, wanting nothing more than to escape this soul-crushingly silent place.

"You are Tao Yi? Then which role was yours? Don't tell me you played the Princess Consort who was in love with Song Xiaoxiao?"

Tsk tsk, to portray a same-sex love story so compellingly — you must have really immersed yourself.

Though I typically don't pay much attention to the leads when I watch dramas. I've got an eye for discovering beauty — I always spot the hidden gems among the supporting cast.

Actually, I was really interested in that little handmaiden in your drama who kept playing matchmaker for you and Song Xiaoxiao. I thought her acting was quite good, and she's young with real potential. Are you close with her? Tell me about her?"

"..."

Tao Yi's mind went blank. She turned around, jaw hanging, staring at the bald formation core. She raised her free hand and pointed at herself, wanting to say "that was me" — but after opening and closing her mouth for what felt like an eternity, she gave up.

Because she realized that ignoring the warning and engaging this person had been a mistake from the very start. This silence was her just reward.

And so, completely dead inside, Tao Yi crouched in place and closed her eyes to rest.

Free agents weren't always free. During the team's rest intervals, they too needed to catch what sleep they could, so they'd be ready to fill any gap in the mage formation the instant one appeared. Otherwise, relying on just a hundred-odd ranged mages and hunters, this precarious position would sooner or later be overrun by the tentacles.

After all, the tentacles never stopped. They didn't seem to need rest at all.

Seeing that the celebrity in front of him had stopped responding and worry had crept across her face, the chattering bald man suddenly fell quiet. After a moment of silence, he looked at Tao Yi again and said:

"Don't be afraid. As long as I'm here, none of you will die."

Hearing this, Tao Yi's eyes snapped open. She looked at him, gratitude and hope flickering in her gaze.

"You're... not like the rumors say..."

"Like what? Whose rumors? Someone's been badmouthing me in front of you? Who? Do I know them? Have we been in the same trial? Do they know me? Are they just jealous of my good looks and trying to slander me?"

You have to trust me. I'm not that kind of person. On the contrary, I'm very dependable.

Because I'm a pass—"

"A pass-what?" Tao Yi's brain couldn't keep up with his mouth.

"A passionate drama critic. Your Princess Consort was actually quite good."

"..."

Never in her life had Tao Yi wanted to flee a place as desperately as she did right now. And what drove her to that decision wasn't the encircling danger, but the man who had saved them all — this... motor-mouthed Chosen One!

...

Chapter 762: The Captured Experimental Consumables

Indeed — the so-called formation core was none other than the Prisoner.

Seeing that the pink-haired girl before him had stopped engaging, the Prisoner contentedly let go of her hand. He was satisfied that he'd recruited yet another player of extraordinary aptitude for his Benefactor.

The last time he'd felt this kind of hunter's thrill was when he'd run into his brother-in-law at the Mediocre Person Society.

'Good times. I wonder how the brother-in-law's doing.'

It wasn't surprising that the Prisoner missed Cheng Shi, because everything he was currently experiencing was still a continuation of that Mediocre Person Society affair. While Cheng Shi had been out participating in trials, the Prisoner remained mired in the aftermath — inexplicably joining the Torchbearers, inexplicably fighting Lao Deng, then inexplicably discovering a piece of distorted divinity during a trial, and then inexplicably...

Actually, that last one wasn't inexplicable. He'd done it willingly.

The Prisoner was, after all, one of the sixteen Chosen Ones. His instincts were keen. He'd noticed something was off about that piece of divinity he'd chanced upon, and his curiosity about what secret lay "painted over" within it grew overwhelming.

That curiosity compounded with each passing trial until, finally, he could no longer resist the urge to peer behind the curtain. He sealed the divinity into his own body.

Under normal circumstances, an ordinary player doing so simply meant they couldn't tell the divinity was tampered with and just wanted to absorb the windfall. But the Prisoner was different — he recognized the problem. He simply wasn't worried about any trap that might await him, and the source of that confidence was the talent system his Benefactor, Silence, had bestowed upon him.

Just as he'd demonstrated when teaming up with Qin Xin and the Blind One to ambush Lao Deng outside the Mediocre Person Society, he only needed to stand in place to generate an aura of silence that muted every specified target within range.

And that was precisely why Qin Xin and the Blind One had been able to defeat a resourceful Another Day Assassin before the trial even began!

Qin Xin hadn't placed absolute trust in the Prisoner's joining, of course. He knew it was merely a mutual compromise and cooperation. That was why he'd assigned the Prisoner the simple role of a silencing formation during the hunt for the Time Chosen — afraid that this Silence follower might pull some stunt and bury both him and the Blind One.

But the Prisoner's performance ultimately won Qin Xin's approval for this unreliable new teammate. What nobody expected, however, was that after the special trial, this key collaborator in the Lao Deng hunt would vanish without a trace.

The Prisoner himself hadn't anticipated being yanked by a mysterious force into a completely unfamiliar stretch of reality the instant the trial ended. Fortunately, he'd activated his Silence Domain in advance, intending to continue fighting after the trial.

So the instant he was pulled into this space, his silence aura muted every surrounding array, preventing the machines that captured players from successfully stuffing their latest batch of "experimental material" into the breeding containers they were meant for.

This serendipitous first strike proved to be a stroke of divine genius. It saved this group of incoming players from being controlled, allowed them to band together, and carved a bloody path through a tentacle-infested hellscape to reach this building.

But as everyone knew, peak players had their own agendas, high-scoring players watched each other warily, and low-scoring players hesitated and wavered. How could this ragtag "mob," thrown together without warning, possibly form an effective united front — let alone fight their way out in unison?

A silence aura alone was far from enough for that.

This group also needed an outstanding commander — someone who could bind these scattered grains of sand into a cohesive whole and harness the team's collective power to find the single path of survival through this horrifying world of tentacles.

And that outstanding commander was the golden-haired, golden-eyed "Light of Order" at the center of the formation — the man peak players jokingly called the Chief Grand Secretary... Mo Li!

Yes, Mo Li was here too. And like the Prisoner, he hadn't been captured. He'd noticed the anomaly in the divinity and come to investigate of his own volition.

Unfortunately, he'd overestimated himself this time. If not for a chance encounter with the Prisoner, this Chief Grand Secretary might well have been carted off by the machines and stuffed into a breeding container as a genuine experimental consumable.

On that note, the Prisoner had actually needed the newly reckless Order Chosen on their way here. His exact words:

"I've seen golden-haired warriors go berserk and pummel enemies into the ground, but I've never seen someone specifically dye their hair gold to hand-deliver themselves to the enemy's chopping block. Mo Li, oh Mo Li — you're no Chief Grand Secretary. You're the Chief Grand Chopping Block! Think that little neck of yours can handle all these tentacle axes?"

"..."

If not for the fact that the entire team depended on the Prisoner's silence aura to bypass every array along the way, the black-faced Mo Li would have happily abandoned the Prisoner right there as tentacle food.

Mercifully, the Prisoner's chatter eventually found new targets. Once the spotlight shifted, the commander's mental state recovered slightly, and he led the players to their current breakthrough point.

But the tentacles outside pursued at speed, and after several skirmishes and a handful of losses, Mo Li had no choice but to bring everyone inside the skyscraper, establish a defensive perimeter, and try to buy time for a moment's respite.

Every last array blanketing this space had locked down all forms of spatial movement aside from divinity-based entry. The group couldn't tear through the Void to escape. Their only hope was that someone on the outside might notice the anomaly and come to the rescue.

But honestly, Mo Li held out little hope. He knew that in this world — at least in his circles — even Order followers would be hard-pressed to go to great lengths investigating the disappearance of a "friend" they'd merely cooperated with a few times.

Let alone risk their lives.

Especially as the fighting with the tentacles dragged on and he realized this appeared to be some kind of Birth experiment site. The reason he didn't suspect it was a Birth player's lair was that the sheer volume and variety of arrays far exceeded anything a Birth player could wield.

After running through every possibility, only a few figures from Truth and Folly possessed the capability to build such a massive experiment site in reality — and to use divinity itself as bait to lure this many people in. Given the magnitude of the operation, the identity of the mastermind hardly needed guessing.

0221!

It could only be him.

But if that was truly the case, things were even worse. Who would risk provoking a figure as enigmatic as 0221 just to save others?

Mo Li fell silent. In fact, during that stretch, nearly everyone was merely clinging to the instinct to survive, never seeing any real hope — until a certain Wood Elf approached him and told him something.

And it was that Wood Elf's encouragement that rekindled Mo Li's confidence.

'Someone will come!'

That was what he told himself. Yet he never imagined that the "someone" he'd hoped for would turn out to be... this many someones!

Because right as the entire team was buckling under pressure, casualties mounting and morale sinking, a chorus of startled shouts erupted across the central district.

A swarm of bold players — rallied by a Clown and "bankrolled" by a Behind-the-Scenes Puppeteer — descended like a heavenly army, clutching their admission tickets.

"???"

Wait — where the hell did I just land?!"

...

Chapter 763: The Beast Unleashed

Cheng Shi had indeed come — though a small episode occurred before he reached 0221's experiment site.

After meeting Hong Lin, he handed over all his divinity. All of it, that is, except the Deceit divinity.

Not because he didn't want to — Hong Lin hadn't asked for it.

According to her, Wei Mu never used Deceit divinity in his experiments or replications, because it most likely couldn't guarantee reliable results.

Understandable as that was, Cheng Shi couldn't help laughing for a good while when he heard the reason. Apparently, the Fun God's reputation for being "universally annoying among the gods" was now trickling down to His followers.

He'd hoped to use this opportunity to meet the Road to Ascension's top-ranked player, but Wei Mu proved even more enigmatic than Cheng Shi had imagined. He never appeared in person, communicating with Hong Lin solely through a dead-fish-eyed puppet at long range.

This Behind-the-Scenes Puppeteer seemed inexplicably committed to never stepping out from behind the curtain — playing his class description's role to the letter.

So when Cheng Shi learned he was supposed to hand all that divinity over to a marionette, the prudent Clown was flabbergasted. He kept turning to Hong Lin, asking again and again whether this was a scam. Hong Lin, however, was utterly certain — she simply dumped all the divinity into the puppet without hesitation.

"You trust him that much?" Cheng Shi asked, curious.

"No. I trust myself. I'm betting he doesn't dare cross me."

"..."

Cheng Shi felt helpless — but he had to admit, Hong Lin's bet paid off.

Lucky-girl's luck was still going strong.

Nobody expected Wei Mu to work that fast. In just a single day, he'd converted every last piece of divinity into admission tickets, and — in a feat that defied comprehension — optimized 0221's divinity fusion scheme, slashing the divinity cost of each teleportation component to the bare minimum.

On top of that, he'd thoughtfully handled the ticket distribution himself, informing Hong Lin and Cheng Shi that all tickets had been delivered. At least a third of the recipients were obsessive enthusiasts of the Tower of Logic's various experiments. Their presence would maximally disrupt 0221's work, since every single detail inside would be worth endless scrutiny and study to these people.

Another third were friends Hong Lin had called in, plus a number of capable, motivated peak players who wanted a piece of the action. They had the strength to cause 0221 serious trouble, creating enough openings for Hong Lin's rescue.

The remaining third were pure cannon fodder. A grand show couldn't do without extras, Wei Mu insisted — and Hong Lin and Cheng Shi weren't in a position to argue.

Cheng Shi's only request was to save a ticket for the Dragon King. Wei Mu agreed, saying he could forget anyone else but never Li Jingming.

Cheng Shi wasn't surprised the two knew each other. He was simply curious how the man had pulled all of this off so quickly. In a single day, the Folly Chosen had paved every road, and that road led straight to the Truth Chosen's real-world experiment.

Hard to say personal grudges hadn't played a part, but as long as the job was done.

Now they only needed to wait for the appointed time, and every player holding a divinity ticket would enter 0221's experiment simultaneously, letting Hong Lin complete her "rescue" amid the chaos.

Wei Mu had made one request: that Hong Lin take his immobile marionette proxy along.

This was hardly an unreasonable ask, so she naturally agreed. After collecting the tickets belonging to herself and Cheng Shi, the two settled in to wait for the transmission time.

In the interim, Cheng Shi prepared multiple contingencies. He couldn't help worrying that the whole thing was a ruse by Wei Mu — especially the possibility that Wei Mu and 0221 were in cahoots. But Big Cat didn't overthink it. She simply handed the puppet to Cheng Shi with a reminder:

"Protect yourself. I'll bring Tao Yi back as fast as I can."

"But have you considered — what if the tickets don't work?"

Hong Lin's gaze hardened as she stared icily at the puppet in Cheng Shi's hands. "Either Tao Yi lives, or Wei Mu dies. There is no third option."

"..."

That shut Cheng Shi up. He could see it plainly — the Prosperity Agent's fury had reached the breaking point. All Big Cat needed now was a playground to rampage in.

And the moment the teleportation activated...

"ROAAARR—"

Cheng Shi felt his body go weightless. Before he could even open his eyes, the ground beneath him was caving downward at a terrifying rate, a howling gale nearly knocking him off his feet. When his eyes snapped open, he realized it wasn't some spell — it was the shockwave of air rippling outward from a colossal bear launching itself off the ground!

Big Cat had moved!

Within this shared experiment site, she had finally sensed that Tao Yi was alive.

The instant her feet touched down, she shifted into her bear spirit form and bolted in a single direction. Days of worry and rage transformed her into a rampaging siege engine, smashing forward with devastating force toward wherever Tao Yi was.

Nothing could stop Big Cat in her near-frenzy state. Whether it was tentacles dense as curtains of rain or immovable reinforced concrete, everything was torn to shreds in the wake of her fury-fueled charge.

In the time it took Cheng Shi to steady himself, a perfectly straight "tunnel" had appeared before him — unobstructed, running all the way to the end. And beyond the tunnel...

Rivers of blood, mulch of flesh, nothing but ruins.

Even the puppet in his hand, witnessing this, clacked its jaw open and shut in utmost admiration:

"It seems Fate has smiled upon this Druid. Interesting. Perhaps drawing closer to the Void truly is the answer?"

"?"

Cheng Shi frowned and glanced at the puppet in his hand. That remark didn't sound like it was about Hong Lin — more like it was probing him.

He didn't take the bait. Instead, he began carefully surveying his surroundings.

This was clearly a merged city-center district. Skyscrapers towered on every side, and every building was draped in writhing tentacles.

Anyone suddenly confronted with this nightmarish sea of tentacles would probably feel their scalp crawl. Cheng Shi, however, not only felt no fear — he actually experienced a faint sense of familiarity.

Because he recognized what these tentacles were at first glance!

Birth!

To be precise: newborns influenced by Birth's power. These particular newborns had all grown together, making them look even more grotesquely twisted, but in essence they were no different from the things he'd delivered back in Dolgod.

'Old friends, these tentacles.'

And the moment Birth crossed his mind, Cheng Shi recalled everything the Dragon King had told him. So 0221 really was replicating the Stars Dagger here?

He'd even matched the original's divinity selection to the letter!

The only question was: how had he fabricated the Corruption pseudo-god that was supposed to contest the Eternal Sun for Authority?

Still, for such a massive, covert operation, wasn't it strange that the mastermind placed no restrictions on who entered via divinity ticket?

If everyone charged in like Big Cat did...

Even without Big Cat's raw power, if every individual caused a bit of havoc, how could the experiment possibly continue?

Cheng Shi frowned in suspicion. His eyes swept the area, searching for traces of arrays. Seeing his expression, the puppet in his hand chuckled and spoke:

"No need to look. The arrays here have already been destroyed by the divinity tickets I modified.

That was the easiest thing to reverse-engineer. If I were running this experiment, I'd definitely set traps to prevent anyone from leaving — to stop the experimental material from exhibiting changes I didn't want to see.

So when crafting the tickets, I'd already accounted for that. Within my improved spliced divinity, I embedded two teleportations. When the first teleport initiates, a redundant divinity bomb arrives here a step ahead of you. Stimulated by the various arrays, it... 'boom' — annihilates every array-trap in the area. Only then are you transported in.

Furthermore, to guard against multiple contingency mechanisms on his part, I offset the teleport coordinates slightly, making each ticket's destination unique. While this risked sending some people outside the target zone...

It maximizes the preservation of the entrants' strength. And I trust that regardless of how quickly or slowly your rescue goes, you'll need their help — at the very least, to cause disruption.

I'm a smart man who values efficiency. I always think a few steps further than everyone else.

Good plan, no? From what I can see, it's going rather smoothly."

"..."

...

Chapter 764: The Replicated "Eternal Sun"

Smart didn't even begin to describe it. This Wei Mu was nothing like what Cheng Shi had imagined.

Most Folly followers stared down their noses at everyone with their nostrils practically grafted onto their eyes. But Wei Mu... not a single sentence was overtly mocking, yet somehow every sentence felt like mockery.

It was the kind of self-evident disdain that made listeners feel ashamed of their own inadequacy from the very depths of their being. As he laid out truth after truth in that unhurried tone, you could only conclude your brain had been given to you by mistake.

That was exactly how Cheng Shi felt right now. He'd thought his preparations were thorough enough, but thorough at best amounted to "reacting." The Folly Chosen was cut from entirely different cloth — his method wasn't "reacting" but "deconstructing." He'd predicted 0221's setup and reverse-engineered its destruction, delivering everyone safely in the most direct, efficient way possible.

'So this is what it looks like when a Wise Man and a Scholar clash?'

'Wielding knowledge as a sword and learning as a shield, fighting a battle that belongs purely to wisdom and intellect?'

"..."

'Yeah — underachievers should keep their distance. Otherwise there's always this inexplicable sense of inferiority hanging around.'

Cheng Shi pursed his lips and stared at the puppet for a moment, then his eyes glinted. "Where are you headed next?"

The puppet was quiet for a beat.

"The 'birth place' — the original teleportation coordinates before I altered them.

If the experimental material encounters an emergency, then in an environment this conducive to fear, their instinct will be to flee outward. So if I were 0221, I'd place the experiment's control center where the material least wants to linger.

And that, I believe, would be the teleportation entrance.

I'd like to go take a look. But I should remind you — the Druid told you not to move around. So, Fate Weaver...

Are you interested in that place? Will you carry me there?"

'Lure or provocation?'

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow, glanced at the puppet's broken legs, and finally rediscovered a shred of confidence.

Though the source of that confidence was so absurd it made him laugh at his own strange emotions. Still chuckling, he nodded. "I'm interested. Which direction? How do we get there?"

"Based on where you're facing now — three o'clock. Roughly one city block.

But I should warn you: these life-extension simulacra regenerate quickly. If you don't pick up the pace, once the Druid's lingering impact fades, this seemingly short stretch could become rather difficult to traverse.

Of course, safety isn't a concern. My proxy may be just a marionette, but protecting one person is well within its capabilities."

"Good. So you can keep yourself safe."

"?"

The puppet froze, slowly swiveling its head to look at Cheng Shi — and in that instant, Cheng Shi smiled, gently set the puppet on the ground, and walked away alone in the direction it had indicated, picking up speed as he went.

He was genuinely interested in this experiment. But traveling alongside someone far too clever? Not interested in the slightest.

So he chose to be a lone wolf.

Watching Cheng Shi's silhouette shrink into the distance, the puppet sat stunned for a moment. Then its jaw dropped with a clack, and like a clown performing absurdist comedy, it let out a creaking, teeth-grating laugh:

"Interesting. The Fate Weaver is every bit as interesting as the rumors say."

And at that same moment, Cheng Shi — now well out of sight — was thinking the exact same thing:

'Interesting. This Behind-the-Scenes Puppeteer is truly interesting!'

'He didn't even blink at a ruse that simple. Does that mean he's so overconfident that he doesn't believe anyone would dare fool him?'

'Or has it simply been too long since anyone tried a con on the Road to Ascension's number one, and that's why I found a gap?'

Regardless, the satisfaction of tricking a Wise Man was rather pleasant. But Cheng Shi hadn't done it for something as childish as "getting even." He literally could not walk alongside that man.

This was reality, not a trial — meaning as long as Cheng Shi had enough masks, he could continuously swap professions and faiths to handle any risk or crisis!

But none of that could be revealed to Wei Mu. He was far too perceptive.

Unlike Big Cat — if he slipped up in front of her, a bit of fast talking could salvage the situation. But if the Puppeteer caught even a single glimpse, Cheng Shi didn't dare imagine how much the man could deduce!

So parting ways was the optimal play.

Originally, out of gratitude for Wei Mu's help, Cheng Shi had wrestled with how to give the little puppet some protection inside the experiment site. But the moment he heard the man claim he was perfectly safe, the urge to leave crystallized.

'Goodbye and good luck — going our separate ways is best for both of us.'

And so, the instant he left the puppet's line of sight, Cheng Shi smirked and donned a new mask.

The Clown had once danced with the wild wind. Now he wanted to dance again — only this time, he wasn't the Clown. He was that gale the Clown had once sent soaring.

"Whoosh—"

A blast of wind tore through the area, and Cheng Shi's figure vanished.

This wasn't his first time becoming a Wind Taming Ranger. Long before meeting Hong Lin, during his preparations on the rooftop, he'd tested every combination of Time and Fate professions. He needed to understand each one's strengths and weaknesses so he could shift on the fly whenever the need arose.

The results had been deeply satisfying. Every profession synergy opened a window onto uncharted territory.

Take this combination — Wind Taming Ranger plus Pen of Finality. Fate's blessing let him see others' deaths, while his gale-force body could push a person toward or away from the place where death awaited them.

Along the way, he'd used this ability to save who-knew-how-many players on the verge of being skewered by tentacles. Not out of the Clown's goodness — he simply had no idea how many of Hong Lin's friends were mixed in here.

If he could save one in passing, he did. And if someone was beyond saving... well, this wind could outrun anyone.

Of course, his smooth progress owed everything to Wei Mu's strategy succeeding. The mass influx of players had scattered the tentacles' attention, giving someone like Cheng Shi — slipping through the zone — ample openings to exploit.

So Cheng Shi was flying high — literally flying, for real, by himself!

As for his destination, it wasn't the "birth place" Wei Mu had predicted.

Cheng Shi had never intended to explore the experiment's control center. Even if he wanted to, steady as he was, he would never go without Big Cat. For now, he was merely skirting the experiment site's perimeter, continuously studying the horrifying tentacles, silently calculating something.

No matter how invincible Big Cat was, no matter how flawless Wei Mu's plans — Cheng Shi never staked his survival on someone else. So he was devising a failsafe that would, at minimum, guarantee a safe exit for himself, Big Cat, and whoever they wanted to save.

And then, as he surveyed and skirmished with the scattered tentacles — from a distant corner of the vast experiment site came a violent explosion.

Cheng Shi whipped his gaze toward it and saw tentacles being torn apart and flung aside by some monstrous force. The spectacle was staggering.

But an instant later, every last tentacle retracted into the ground, collapsing an entire skyscraper in the process. From beneath the rubble, a colossal flesh-tumor — worthy of the word "wonder" — began to swell upward like a rising sun. It inflated into a hemisphere, its blood-mottled, uneven surface contracting rhythmically, like a heart pumping something in every direction.

No one knew what secret this flesh-pump harbored — until, seconds later, the massive tumor erupted with a deafening boom into countless spine-tingling "tentacle rays." Dense as beams of light, tentacles shot toward the open ground before the tumor, grinding the entire area to dust.

Watching this, Cheng Shi's pupils contracted violently.

In that moment, he finally understood what 0221 was using to replicate the Stars Dagger's "Eternal Sun."

This madman had actually created a sentient abomination of flesh — and that abomination was the "mother" of every single newborn tentacle!

...

Chapter 765: Not Lethal — But Fertile

He had to admit: this flesh-tumor abomination bore a certain resemblance to the Eternal Sun. But the resemblance wasn't to the celestial Eternal Sun that had hung over Far Dusk Town during the Stars Dagger experiment. Rather, it reminded him of...

A certain player who now held the candidacy for Envoy.

That's right — Hu Xuan.

For some reason, the colossal tumor brought back vivid memories of the distended belly he'd seen when delivering Hu Xuan's "offspring."

'What a... terrifying memory.'

Few patients had earned a lasting place in Dr. Cheng's mind. The Life Sage was definitely one of them.

Cheng Shi frowned toward the tumor's direction, noting that Big Cat had headed there to rescue people. The Prosperity Agent had clearly hit trouble. But rather than rushing to help, Cheng Shi swept farther away from the tumor, apparently intent on using the wind's traces to measure the entire experiment site inch by inch.

He wasn't worried about Big Cat at all. After all, this was a Druid who could go toe-to-toe with Eposka. After fusing with Fate, she'd only grown stronger. No way she couldn't handle some man-made abomination.

And indeed, just as Cheng Shi guessed, Hong Lin could beat it. But the fight was far from easy.

At the end of the day, Eposka was an undead brute that only knew brute force — perfectly suited to Big Cat's fighting style. This new opponent, however, was an intelligent being with a talent for "magical" attacks.

Its strikes might not be lethal, but they were extremely... fertile.

After all, it was presumably created by 0221 to replicate the Eternal Sun. Every murmur, every roar, every lash, every gaze could plunge its enemy into a nightmare of being swarmed by "newborns."

Hong Lin was the living proof. After trading blows for just a few rounds, the enemy kept shrinking while she kept growing. Eventually she had no choice but to pull back and deal with the "children" sprouting across her body first.

Infuriating. Absolutely infuriating.

Hong Lin's seething rage was like a foreign object lodged in her throat — couldn't spit it out, couldn't swallow it down. The thing's reproductive speed was staggering, and her own "conception" rate was right up there. The back-and-forth left her with no option but to abandon the brute-force approach and think of something else.

The moment Hong Lin fell back from the fight, the players she'd rescued swarmed to her side, beginning to treat the "wounds" of this equally terrifying giant bear.

Yes — Hong Lin had already saved Tao Yi. And not just Tao Yi. Everyone, including Mo Li and the Prisoner, had been rescued. Before the giant flesh-tumor appeared, mere tentacles were no match for a modern-day Druid's fury. But once it showed up, even this unrivaled warrior found herself stalled.

As the saying went: you could never predict where Birth would next shock you.

Hong Lin was genuinely shocked. She squinted at the tumor, unable to shake the feeling that she wasn't fighting a single abomination, but an army of Birth numbering in the tens of thousands.

The players were shocked too. Apart from Tao Yi, who had some grasp of Hong Lin's prowess, even Mo Li was stunned by the sheer destructive force she'd displayed.

Consider: he and his team of peak players — the Prisoner included — had barely managed to hold their own against the endless sea of tentacles. And now...

This Prosperity Chosen, supposedly the most combat-capable player alive, had single-handedly smashed through every tentacle in the vicinity.

Nobody expected that "good at fighting" meant this good!

'Can a player even do this?'

Mo Li's gaze toward Hong Lin was impossibly complicated. Were it not for the scent of Fate he detected on her, he might have assumed she'd defected to War, just as he had.

"Hong Lin, you..."

He directed every member of the team to pitch in, then walked to the foot of the giant bear and craned his neck upward at the terrifying beast. He was about to say something when the Prisoner cut him off from behind.

The Silence Chosen stroked his chin thoughtfully for a moment, then uttered a sentence that left every person present slack-jawed.

"Hey big bear — if you just birth all those bear-cubs and bear-grandcubs, can't we drown that thing with our own bear-swarm tactic?"

The words had barely left his mouth.

"BOOM—"

Whether the giant bear lost her footing and her paw dropped instinctively, or Hong Lin casually slapped the ground without noticing someone at her side — one unlucky soul ended up flattened into the dirt.

She didn't bother checking who it was. Breathing heavily, her expression grave, she looked at Mo Li:

"Getting out doesn't necessarily mean fighting our way through. Some scores can be settled later. With so many arrays disabled, we might already have a way out.

Mo Li, don't worry about me. Head the way I came from and find Wei Mu. He probably knows how to get you all out.

And — if you feel any gratitude for me saving your lives — take your people and look after Cheng Shi for me.

The Fate Weaver is over there too. Help me get him and Tao Yi out."

"Wei Mu — he's here too?" Mo Li's expression shifted to surprise.

"How else do you think I got in? Let's see how much longer 0221 can keep this experiment running, now that he's used so many players as consumables. Today — I want to see this site crumble!"

With that, the giant bear let out a thunderous roar, shoving every helping player behind her. Then she rose to full height, leveled a claw at the distant flesh-tumor, and threw a provocative gesture.

The tumor, however, showed no reaction. It didn't seem capable of anger. It simply continued bombarding the bear with tentacles, murmuring its ravings as before.

In an instant, the giant bear was even bigger than before.

...

Meanwhile, elsewhere.

Thanks to the mass distribution of tickets, the players who'd entered the experiment site numbered far more than just a handful. Beyond Cheng Shi and Hong Lin, many peak players had joined this "Truth Game" — and Hu Wei was among them.

The Grand Marshal's network was truly vast. Not only had he secured a ticket from Wei Mu, but within an incredibly short time he'd assembled a squad of "soldiers" willing to explore the control center with him.

He'd originally been investigating this affair to find Da Yi. But after receiving Lord Ultraman's guidance and learning about O221's progress in divinity assembly, he'd made the snap decision to check out the experiment's control center first.

If Da Yi happened to be imprisoned there — a double win. If not... he trusted that a peak assassin could protect himself.

So Hu Wei moved out. Swinging a greatsword wreathed in blazing flame, he carved a path and led a contingent of determined, grimly excited players toward what he believed to be the control center.

And that place happened to be the area with the fewest tentacle traces in the entire zone.

"Those skilled at defense hide beneath nine layers of earth" — basic military doctrine. Hu Wei didn't believe O221 would place his most critical facility somewhere prone to intense combat. So he skirted the conflict's epicenter and felt his way toward the quietest, most silent region.

Before long, he and his entourage arrived. And at that very moment, Cheng Shi — having completed a full circuit of the perimeter — happened to reach the same spot.

The Pen of Finality's Wind Taming Ranger had just swapped to a new mask in a corner. Before he could even act, he saw his good "big bro" descending before him in a blaze of firelight.

No brotherly greetings, no pleasantries between old acquaintances. No startled double-takes of surprise. Cheng Shi managed a textbook smile and hadn't even opened his mouth before Hu Wei hit him with a question straight from the soul:

"Who are you THIS time?!"

Cheng Shi's smile froze. He absolutely hadn't expected his identity to have become one of Hu Wei's triggers.

'Hu-bro, oh Hu-bro... I already told you as Ultraman that you could trust the Fate Weaver. Why are you still this guarded around me?'

'But who else could I possibly be? I'm obviously the last person you want to see.'

'Hee~'

...

Chapter 766: We Meet Again, Doctor Fraud

Giggling was out of the question — he'd get beaten to death.

In this race-against-time situation, Cheng Shi had zero desire to waste time on another round of "Guess Who I Am" with his dear big bro. So he quickly donned an expression of total shock and stared at Hu Wei:

"Hu-bro! You're here too?"

Hu Wei's aggressive momentum faltered. This time, the voice genuinely sounded like his brother. But Cheng Shi had far too many "identities," and Hu Wei couldn't be certain which version of Cheng Shi he was dealing with. He could only provisionally treat this Cheng Shi as Cheng Shi.

"Cheng Shi — it really is you! Ha!"

Hu Wei strode over, slapped Cheng Shi's shoulder hard, and grinned broadly, though his eyes remained sharp with caution:

"What are you doing here? For O221's experiment?"

You're well-informed. Who told you about this?"

While questioning, Hu Wei studied Cheng Shi's reactions closely. Noticing how Cheng Shi's expression shifted and how he kept craning to see who was behind him, the Grand Marshal realized the man's identity couldn't be discussed openly here.

He knitted his brow, his eyes darted, and he pressed on: "You, a priest, charging solo into the tiger's den? Perfect — my team..." He glanced over his shoulder at the several priests already in his squad, his eye twitching. Gritting his teeth, he finished: "...needs another priest. Come with me, brother — it's safer!"

He even stepped forward, using his imposing frame to block the others' view of Cheng Shi, then murmured under his breath: "Fabricated laws, the universe's joke."

"?"

'Seriously, Hu-bro — you're not even trying to be subtle, are you?'

The code-exchange felt so cloak-and-dagger it made Cheng Shi cringe. But he wasn't Ultraman right now, so he had to play along. Eyes widening dramatically, pretending he couldn't believe what he'd just heard, he studied Hu Wei for a beat, then replied with: "Fabricated laws, the universe's joke."

Hearing the correct response, Hu Wei finally confirmed that this was the Cheng Shi his Benefactor had granted an audience. His pupils contracted sharply. Unsure whether Lord Ultraman had revealed his own identity to Cheng Shi, Hu Wei decided to play it safe and maintain his cover while nodding vigorously:

"That lord wasn't lying to me! Cheng Shi — I had no idea you'd joined Chaos too!"

"...Hu-bro, I didn't exactly—"

"Relax, I won't tell a soul. Because I've... already fused with Chaos. From this moment on, we're true brothers!"

"..."

'Okay, which one of us is the liar here?'

'I swear you actually do want to fuse with Deceit — you've taken the fraud act all the way to your own Envoy.'

Cheng Shi groaned internally. He truly didn't want to play these "house pretend" disguise games, but for his cover's sake, he had no choice. So he plastered on another shocked face and stuttered: "Hu-bro, you actually..."

"Shh! Faith fusion is the tide of the times. I know you've already found your chance, but don't say it here. I came because I discovered the anomalous divinity and wanted to see what Truth's followers were up to. And you? That lord has mentioned you to me multiple times. Were you sent here on an assignment?"

'Oh, great — using the intel I gave you to turn around and intimidate me. You've really mastered the information-gap play, haven't you?'

But Cheng Shi didn't want to stay joined at the hip with Hu Wei, because he knew that in his big bro's team, you might get a decent cut — but never the best cut.

Fine to explore together, but before the loot got divvied up, he needed to be gone.

So he quickly shook his head:

"No, that lord didn't assign me anything. I'm here because..."

Midsentence, he stalled. He realized that no matter who he named, he'd need a long explanation to dispel the Grand Marshal's suspicions. To save time and give himself an excuse to leave later, inspiration struck:

"...my neighbor went missing. I'm here to find him."

"Neighbor? Your rest-area neighbor?"

Hu Wei clearly found this unconvincing. But Cheng Shi immediately put on a pained expression:

"He's... done so much for me. We've trusted and supported each other to survive this long. So when he's in danger, I can't just stand by. Even knowing how dangerous this 'Truth Game' is, I came anyway — because I owe it to my conscience, and I owe it to his trust!"

"Excellent!"

A flash of admiration lit Hu Wei's eyes. He clapped Cheng Shi's shoulder again, his grin broadening.

Who wouldn't be glad to have a loyal, righteous brother?

Of course, if this brother hadn't been personally summoned by that lord or by his own Benefactor, Hu Wei's reaction would have been mere casual approval — nothing this enthusiastic.

Now, having confirmed that his new ally was as trustworthy as he'd hoped, the gloom over Da Yi's disappearance finally eased a fraction.

"That's my man! I knew Hu Wei's judgment in people was never wrong!"

Cheng Shi, stick with the team. Truth has plenty of tricks up its sleeve.

But no amount of tricks will save them. Every trace of Truth in history has been burned to ash in War's flames!

And today — I intend to see exactly what sick game this phony 0221 is running in this experiment of his!"

With that, Hu Wei raised the flame-licked greatsword and bellowed at the ruins ahead:

"A War fanatic comes to pay his respects! Will the little Truth brat dare show his face?"

"..."

The bravado was magnificent. The silence was deafening. The awkwardness was immediate.

Hu Wei's impassioned challenge received precisely zero responses, and Cheng Shi — who'd initially thought the man had spotted something — nearly burst out laughing on the spot.

But he held it together and stepped into the role of tension-breaker.

"Hu-bro, forgive my poor eyes, but... is there actually someone down there?"

Hu Wei wasn't embarrassed in the least. He'd genuinely sensed a cluster of chaotic auras buried beneath this location, hence the "diplomacy before violence" opening. Seeing no response, he laughed heartily and raised the greatsword, apparently ready to tear the disguise apart by brute force.

Just then, a figure stepped out of the ranks and shook his head at Hu Wei.

"That won't work. The arrays here redirect all attacks to a different area.

In other words, the moment you swing that blade, Grand Marshal, the ones absorbing the blow won't be the experimental material buried below — it'll be the newly arrived players fighting the aberrant mother-tree somewhere else.

To open this place, brute force is the worst option.

If you trust me, let me try. Ten minutes is all I need to strip the camouflage, dismantle the arrays, and let everyone here see the missing players."

"!!!"

'There's someone this capable in our squad?!'

Every eye in the group locked onto the speaker. Hu Wei and Cheng Shi spun around, faces painted with shock and suspicion, staring directly at him.

"You are...?"

Hu Wei frowned. He couldn't find this person in his memory. As he scrutinized the stranger, trying to place him, Cheng Shi's expression abruptly shifted. Brow twisted, he let out a cold laugh:

"His name is Wang Weijin. He's a slice of 0221 — the mastermind behind this experiment — and an extremely shrewd Assassination Doctor."

"???"

Every weapon in the group swung toward the figure instantly.

Wang Mou, however, remained perfectly composed. He looked at Cheng Shi and gave a nod of acknowledgment. "We meet again, Fate Weaver."

"Indeed we do, Doctor Fraud.

So how are you planning to trick people this time?"

...

Chapter 767: The Aberrant Mother-Tree

"Doctor Fraud?"

The moment Hu Wei heard that, he knew Cheng Shi had history with this slice. Normally, when such things threatened his interests and his team's, the Grand Marshal would never show undue favoritism — he'd side with whatever benefited everyone.

But things were different now. With Lord Ultraman's instructions fresh in mind, Hu Wei had come to see Cheng Shi as his window to approaching the Void and as a brother in the Chaos camp. So his first instinct was to heft his greatsword and rest it on Wang Mou's shoulder.

Seeing Hu Wei's "thoughtful" gesture, Cheng Shi suppressed a smirk. But his gaze toward Wang Mou remained cold and sharp — because he couldn't ignore what schemes this truth-warping doctor might be running.

Others didn't know, but Cheng Shi was acutely aware: this doctor was no slice of the current world's 0221. He came from another world entirely. An outsider with designs on this world was something Cheng Shi had to be wary of.

Wang Mou, however, was entirely unfazed by the group's reaction. He showed no fear of Hu Wei's blade and, shouldering the burning-hot greatsword that was searing his flesh, spoke with perfect solemnity:

"I am indeed his slice. That's an irrefutable origin, and I've never intended to deny it.

However, I expected that once you realized I was his slice, you'd choose to stand with me and extend a degree of trust. After all, a slice with independent consciousness typically doesn't see eye to eye with the original.

And the rift between us has reached the point of total incompatibility.

Rest easy, Fate Weaver. I know what you're guarding against. But I'm not lying this time. I truly do possess the method to dismantle these arrays — or rather, I'm the one who provided these arrays to him in the first place.

Not here, mind you. In the place you already know about."

Wang Mou gave Cheng Shi a meaningful look, then continued:

"I became aware of my identity long ago, but I harbored no resentment. My thinking is simple: I only want to draw closer to Truth. If cooperating with him accelerated that, I was more than willing.

But after two days of exchanges, I discovered that his approach to Truth diverges wildly from what I envisioned. So I had no choice but to step away and seek my own path."

At this point, the vast majority of those present were confused. Even the few who seemed to understand had merely invented plausible details to convince themselves. Only Cheng Shi — only this Clown who knew Wang Mou's true origins — genuinely grasped what the doctor was saying.

This doctor from another world had probably discovered, after arriving, that this world's 0221 was no pushover either. Worse, the other's approach to Truth was gradually eroding his own path. Even collaboration couldn't keep the two roads running in parallel. So he'd been forced to break with his original body, seize a chance to escape control, and become a truly free, independent individual.

The reasoning held up. But the timing of his appearance was far too convenient.

A slice of the experiment's mastermind just happens to appear inside the experiment site, just happens to become the group's key to unlocking it? That plot development reeked of problems!

Factor in the "con" from the last trial, and Cheng Shi's expression hardened. He clearly wasn't buying what Wang Mou was selling.

But Wang Mou didn't stop explaining his position. He addressed the group with apparent sincerity, pointing at the ruins before them:

"If you're looking for the control center, I'm afraid you've come to the wrong place. Based on my understanding of him, the control center is most likely at the entry point where experimental material was deployed.

But if you want a detailed understanding of this experiment — congratulations, you've found the critical facility.

What's buried below isn't research data or observation panels. It's this experiment's most crucial experimental material!

I carefully tracked several players and found they were all buried down here.

And that sentient aberrant mother-tree deliberately disguised this area to look calm and undisturbed, diverting outsiders' attention."

The listeners furrowed their brows. A knowledgeable player in the group immediately challenged:

"The aberrant mother-tree — that's the tentacle cluster from before?

How was it even created?

Without a century-long faith chain or millions of faith anchors, it's impossible to pile mundane matter into something resembling a demigod. Your story is hard to swallow, Doctor."

Wang Mou was honest. Rather than wildly speculating, he shook his head:

"I'm searching for answers too. What I told you earlier is what I learned while collaborating with 0221 after deceiving him.

But he was far more cautious than I expected. After barely half a day of gathering experimental intelligence, he threw me in here as part of the experimental material.

Thanks to my rough understanding of the experiment, I escaped from the deployment entrance. But with the mother-tree's tendrils everywhere, I had no capacity for exploration beyond self-preservation — not until you arrived.

Now, with your help, I believe I can offer this team significantly greater efficiency.

So then, Grand Marshal — have you made your decision?

Time waits for no one."

With that, Wang Mou's gaze drifted toward the ongoing battle raging in the distance — the message clear: if they stalled much longer, the thing he called the aberrant mother-tree would realize these players posed a threat to its turf.

Hu Wei frowned and glanced at Cheng Shi. By now he'd essentially made his judgment: even if this slice had his own motives, his claim about dismantling the arrays was almost certainly true. The man's agenda didn't lie at the surface level. At least until they entered the experimental-material storage, Wang Mou's interests aligned with the team's.

The only issue was his good brother here... What grudge existed between those two?

After a moment's deliberation, Hu Wei decided to trust Wang Mou this once for the sake of advancing their exploration. But he wouldn't let his good brother concede for nothing — so he resolved that once they found the experiment's key data, Cheng Shi would get the lion's share.

That way, he could both appease Cheng Shi and build goodwill to further his goal of approaching the Void. At least for himself, it was a win-win.

Having settled on this, Hu Wei prepared to talk Cheng Shi around — only to discover that Cheng Shi had no intention of refusing, nor of leveraging the situation for personal gain.

For one thing, he knew Hu Wei's deferential attitude came from Ultraman's instructions. But that secret relationship couldn't justify the Grand Marshal publicly soliciting his opinion, and Cheng Shi didn't want to draw too much attention in this team. Too many eyes on him would hinder his use of professional talents.

For another, he genuinely wanted to know what Wang Mou was up to. Two players from outside this world had appeared in that trial — the Blind One's intentions were mostly clear to Cheng Shi, but this enigmatic Wang Mou remained opaque. This was a golden opportunity to reassess the man, so Cheng Shi had no reason to refuse.

Catching Hu Wei's questioning look, Cheng Shi merely arched a brow and quietly stepped back — a clear signal that he had no objections. Hu-bro's call.

Hu Wei smiled. His appreciation for this tactful brother deepened. Seeing no opposition, he lifted the greatsword off Wang Mou's shoulder and laughed heartily:

"Doctor — go ahead and give it a try.

History's lessons tell me that Truth's civil wars are the beginning of Truth's downfall.

As a follower of War, I look forward to witnessing that today."

...

Chapter 768: They're Not Experimental Material — They're the Mother-Tree's External Wombs

Wang Mou moved — and his efficiency far exceeded expectations.

He stepped past Cheng Shi and Hu Wei, summoned his Truth power, and began tracing the arrays across the rubble. In moments, the group could feel the arrays dissolving and shattering — one after another, fast as lightning, almost too quick to follow.

The players were stunned not only by the sheer density of arrays in this place, but also by the doctor's masterful technique. Virtually every array-enthusiast in the group pressed in to observe his dismantling

process up close. Wang Mou, for his part, didn't guard his methods. While working with effortless grace, he even found time to answer queries from nearby scholars. Had the situation not been so urgent, it would have felt less like a raid and more like an academic conference for Truth followers conducted in the field.

Even the Folly followers in the group fell silent. Everyone could see that, at least in terms of Truth-array expertise, this slice was in no way inferior to his original.

But the more eagerly Wang Mou performed, the more suspicious Cheng Shi became.

He didn't believe the doctor was simply opposing his original body. Unable to figure out what Wang Mou was really after, he could only watch and wait — meeting unpredictability with composure.

This encounter raised Cheng Shi's danger assessment of Wang Mou another notch. This Truth follower was bold. He seemed absolutely certain that his origins were a secret neither he nor Cheng Shi could reveal publicly. And Cheng Shi had indeed been outmaneuvered — whether out of a desire to protect the Blind One or an inability to publicly discuss the slice-universe hypothesis, he couldn't explain Wang Mou's true origin to anyone here.

And so, a stalemate between scholar and con artist was born.

This experiment was full of such stalemates. That massive tumor couldn't put Hong Lin down, but Hong Lin had no answer for a monster that could make her "gain weight" with every attack. The distant commotion grew quieter and quieter, approaching a stall.

Just then, Wang Mou cracked the final critical array. The illusion overlaying the ruins collapsed in sequence, revealing a passage leading underground. In an instant, the vast rows of enormous tanks in the subterranean laboratory appeared before everyone, virtually unobstructed — and faces lit up.

Everyone's except the doctor's and Cheng Shi's. Their brows tightened. Neither looked pleased.

And the moment the arrays fell, the distant battle went completely silent. Every tentacle in the experiment site snapped taut simultaneously, orienting toward Hu Wei's group, and an ear-splitting shriek tore through the air!

"Hiss—hiss—"

"ROAAARR—"

The giant tumor erupted tentacles in every direction, once again batting away Hong Lin's advance. Then, like a deflating balloon, it plunged underground, tearing through the labyrinthine web of subterranean tentacles.

Its movement was violent enough that even from far away, everyone in the experiment site could see a bulging trail snaking across the earth toward a specific destination.

Players with sharp senses immediately realized something major was happening. Most who'd entered had designs on the experiment, so upon seeing the abomination charging somewhere at full speed, they cautiously followed its trail.

Meanwhile, Hu Wei's group recognized their window was closing fast. Hearts hardening, voices boomed:

"The mother-tree is heading back! No time — move in now!"

"There are players inside those tanks! Crack a few open and take them — that'll keep us busy for a while!"

"This place holds the method for 'god-making'! Don't hesitate!"

Under the crushing pressure of the mother-tree's impending return, the already loose-knit team dissolved on the spot, scattering like streaks of light into the underground lab.

Hu Wei's eyes narrowed. He didn't try to stop them. Instead, he grabbed Cheng Shi and Wang Mou, hurled his greatsword forward, and let its blazing trail carry the three of them deep into the facility's lowest level.

"Where might the divinity-assembly method be hidden?"

Under this pressure, Hu Wei dropped all pretense. He'd come for exactly this. It wasn't the control center, but every aspect of the experimental theory should be reflected in the experiment itself — so surely secrets lurked here too.

But Cheng Shi didn't share that view. The moment he'd seen the underground tanks, he knew all his previous assumptions were wrong.

This was absolutely not a replication of the Stars Dagger!

After all, the only reason the Stars Dagger experiment had succeeded was that the monstrous genius Zangier had devised an impossibly imaginative solution. He'd used the faith-clashes between mortal lives as a buffer to deflect the divinity tug-of-war between pseudo-gods, buying himself breathing room in the violent faith-struggle and becoming the thief who sliced open the gods' pockets.

But now? Setting aside whether the aberrant mother-tree even qualified as a "pseudo-god," and never mind the blood-moon that still hadn't been located — even if both existed, how was 0221 handling the divinity tug-of-war between pseudo-gods?

The intensity of that tug-of-war didn't diminish just because the divine "mass" was smaller. Even with all of 0221's divinity-assembly knowledge, there was absolutely no way a mortal body could survive that maelstrom.

So this experiment was wrong. Wrong in every way!

Cheng Shi frowned deeply, scanning everything around him. He watched the players inside the tanks, their bodies threaded with various tubes, machines intermittently extracting... something. He'd assumed the extraction was flesh and blood, but the longer he looked, the more he noticed the oddity.

The machines only activated their extraction when a bump swelled on the subject's body — meaning they weren't siphoning flesh and blood at all, but rather... the subjects' "children"?!

Were those bumps incubating Birth newborns?

All three men's pupils contracted violently in unison. They exchanged glances and realized they'd all been wrong about this experiment.

Even Wang Mou, who'd been so confident in his understanding, was shaken by this sight.

In a rare display, his expression twisted with shock. He broke free of Hu Wei's grip and scrutinized the surroundings closely. Moments later, this well-read doctor's brow furrowed with grim heaviness:

"I was deceived.

This is absolutely not the Stars Dagger, and it isn't the Selius slice experiment I'd assumed. This is clearly the faith-stitching experiment — the one the Life Extension Department banned and abolished!

He's making a god, yes. But not a 'self' that steals unattended divinity like Zangier did. He's making...

Something that truly resembles Birth!

My unfathomable original may actually be constructing a new Birth!"

"..."

"..."

Hearing this, Hu Wei and Cheng Shi exchanged confused looks, their expressions freezing before both furrowed their brows. The same thought crossed their minds simultaneously:

'Great. He's a bad student too.'

'Uh...'

Cheng Shi's eye twitched. No time for embarrassment. He hastily asked: "What do you mean? What is the faith-stitching experiment, and what do you mean by 'a new Birth'?"

Wang Mou walked several more steps deeper, surveyed the scene, and spoke gravely:

"In the era when the Tower of Logic was first founded, the Erudition Presidium simply didn't have the resources to sustain every major experiment. So each department scrambled to find its own approach to Truth.

The Life Extension scholars, having awakened as Truth followers from the Life path, had already accumulated considerable research on various life forms. The Tower's very first 'god-making' project was their brainchild — except back then, the god they tried to create wasn't a pseudo-god. It was a real god!"

"?"

"Those scholars had already realized that faith was an essential ingredient for godhood. So they made a bold conjecture: if enough faith could be stitched together, could the accumulation produce a quantitative-to-qualitative shift, turning a composite being into a true deity?

Of course, we now know that finding the correct divinity-assembly method is the true road to godhood. But the Tower didn't have that conclusion back then. So they put conjecture into practice and launched what can only be called a faith massacre — the stitching experiment."

"Faith massacre?"

"Precisely. The faith-stitching experiment didn't just stitch faith. Because faith depends on a vessel — unlike divinity, it ceases to exist once separated from its carrier. So the simplest, most effective method of stitching faith was to...

Stitch the vessels of faith — that is, the flesh of the gods' followers!

Merge the flesh of same-faith believers into one, keep them alive, and test whether the resulting amalgamation could become a new vessel for faith's qualitative transformation, thereby birthing a true deity.

That was the first 'question in pursuit of truth' ever posed by the Life Extension Department.

To answer it, Tower scholars ravaged virtually every Nature Alliance tribe within their borders — especially those worshipping Birth. These Birth followers were not only numerous but fertile. Corral them, and you'd have an endless supply of experimental material...

Just like what we see now. The people in these tanks probably aren't the true experimental material. In my judgment, they're manufacturing machines for experimental material.

Though perhaps that term is a bit cold. Out of humanitarian warmth, we could instead call them...

The aberrant mother-tree's external wombs.

They weren't captured to serve as consumables. They're bearing the mother-tree's 'children!'"

"..."

'How very warm.'

'And how very hellish.'

'You mean these players trapped here have all been birthing 'babies' for that mother-tree-thing?'

Hearing this, staring at the sprawling rows of tanks, Cheng Shi's eye twitched. He wasn't laughing anymore.

...

Chapter 769: A Hellish Joke from the Tower of Logic

This was unquestionably a hellish joke courtesy of Truth's followers. It wasn't funny — but it was definitely hellish.

Cheng Shi's ears were ringing. He'd thought the Creation Alchemy Department had already taken "being inhuman" to its limit, but apparently the Life Extension Department had dark horses of its own?

'This near-genocidal... no, this faith-genocidal slaughter — didn't it provoke resistance from the Nature Alliance?'

Wang Mou was perceptive. He clearly read Cheng Shi's confusion. But his answer made this already-unfunny hellish joke considerably more hellish.

"Resistance?"

There was certainly resistance. But only Prosperity's followers fought back in earnest.

Birth's followers were imprisoned, yes, but under the Tower of Logic's catalytic methods, their reproductive rate far surpassed anything they'd achieved naturally. Before long, a new generation of Birth followers emerged — ones forged under Truth's oppression. They came to believe that this oppression wasn't necessarily a bad thing; at the very least, it was hastening their path toward their Benefactor. So these people gradually chose acceptance.

Of course, you could also understand it as them becoming more devout under 'persecution.'

Death's followers... go without saying. Thanks to their own cooperation, those congregations vanished from Tower of Logic territory in short order.

As for Prosperity — scattered resistance without allies was far too insignificant against the entire Truth state apparatus.

Their one stroke of luck was that once the Tower chose Birth followers as experimental material, they spared the remaining uncaptured Prosperity believers. Those survivors seized the breathing room,

migrating en masse to the southwest, far from the Tower, where they merged with the local rainforest tribes and avoided the subsequent series of calamities.

So sometimes resistance is futile. Only by leaping clear of the crisis-ridden environment can one earn a sliver of respite. Wouldn't you agree, Fate Weaver?"

Cheng Shi arched a brow. 'This Wang Mou does love his metaphors. Perhaps that's why he wanted to leave that other world?'

'Is the 0221 of that world even more radical than this one?'

But compared to some intangible parallel-world 0221, Cheng Shi was far more interested in this experiment's outcome. Mortals could not create a god. Even if they could, they certainly couldn't create one sanctioned by Origin.

After all, no matter how convoluted the timeline, no matter how many slices the universe held, Origin was unquestionably the ultimate. It was He who bestowed Authority and divine names, giving rise to the current sixteen true gods.

So the experiment had definitely failed. But if this ancient Life Extension experiment was doomed from the start, why was 0221 replicating it?

Cheng Shi was baffled. He could only try linking the reason to whatever else had caused the historical experiment to fail. So he asked again:

"How did the experiment fail?"

Wang Mou was a scholar who never hoarded knowledge. As he put it, he had always practiced true Truth doctrine: knowledge should circulate.

"You're sharp, Fate Weaver — jumping straight to the crux. But I haven't been able to find his logic for replicating this experiment in those reasons either.

Because this faith-massacre experiment wasn't halted by internal disagreement. It was forcibly terminated by external pressure.

Yes — you've probably guessed it. The Grand Tribunal.

As the largest power in the Land of Hope at the time, the Grand Tribunal had long wanted to reclaim the 'lost territory' where Truth's faith had taken root. But constrained by so-called 'faith equity,' they hadn't found an opening — until this experiment began. With the Nature Alliance's accusations and support, the Iron Law Knights rode straight through the Tower of Logic's borders.

Under Order's encirclement and pressure, the Erudition Presidium — feeble as it was — had no choice but to abandon the experiment and hand over the lead researcher as the sole 'criminal.'

This chapter of history is deeply buried. Very few know it. Both the Tower of Logic's records and the Grand Tribunal's archives blurred the deal that was struck. Had I not personally lived through that era, I wouldn't know any of this, nor would this experiment have left such a profound impression on me.

His knowledge of this experiment most likely came from me, as well.

You understand what I mean — every prior version of me had to surrender our memories."

Wang Mou showed no bitterness over his past treatment. He recounted it all in a flat, matter-of-fact tone.

"So I can't figure out why he's replicating this experiment. Perhaps we're overlooking something."

'Overlooking something?'

Cheng Shi furrowed his brow too, racking his brain alongside the doctor for the answer — convinced that it was the key to understanding the current experiment. But Hu Wei clearly had other priorities. He stopped in his tracks, his expression severe:

"Enough. We've learned plenty. We're not here to study experiment types or history lessons. We're here for the divinity-assembly method.

Doctor — you know this place best. Where do you think we'll find leads?"

Wang Mou shook his head earnestly:

"This experiment contains no divinity-assembly component. What it has is merely physical amalgamation of faith vessels. So we've been misled — his inspiration didn't come from this experiment.

What I still can't figure out is why he captured such a massive number of players for this. He turned what could have been a covert operation into something this conspicuous.

He only needed to quietly abduct a batch of players, and they could have bred endlessly — completing the experiment right under everyone's noses, assuming it could ever produce results...

And from what we've seen, he's clearly using these near-mindless Birth newborns to stitch together the deity he wants to create. That does improve efficiency — these almost purely faithful newborns would never think to abandon their faith, letting the stitched aggregate become more cohesive.

But... everything has pros and cons. The Tower scholars rejected this approach precisely because they feared the resulting 'deity' would be uncontrollable. These newborn-like lifeforms have virtually no intelligence to speak of.

Case in point: the mother-tree now charging our way is a product of faith mutation. It doesn't deserve the title 'deity.' It can't even pass for a wild god. It's nothing more than an abomination — a contorted aggregate of Birth's will. It resembles the kind of monstrosity described in the ancient records of the Life Era: something akin to Go Lis, the Life servant-god, before her initial ascension."

"!!!"

'Who?!'

...

Chapter 770: The Blood of Madness and Its Genetic Legacy

Cheng Shi blinked. "Who did you say?"

"Sin Brood Mother Go Lis. It's a very ancient chapter of history. She..."

'Of course I know it's Go Lis!'

'Who in this world could possibly know Go Lis better than me?'

But that wasn't what Cheng Shi meant. Something had just clicked!

A bright flash sparked in his eyes. He raised a hand and cut the doctor off, asking urgently:

"Just answer this: was the creation of the Eternal Sun connected to this experiment?!"

The Tower of Logic did eventually create a pseudo-god. So did their experience in making pseudo-gods originate from this experiment?"

"?"

Wang Mou froze. He hadn't expected Cheng Shi to circle all the way back to the Stars Dagger after everything they'd discussed. What did any of this have to do with the Stars Dagger now?

Though puzzled, the doctor answered honestly.

"I'm not certain. All the data from that experiment was lost when the lead scholar was hauled away by the Grand Tribunal.

But I can confirm one thing: if you insist on finding a link between the two experiments, the Stars Dagger does have some connection to the stitching experiment. Perhaps not the academic kind you're imagining, but rather... a connection of blood.

The initiator of the faith-stitching experiment — Kov De, Grand Scholar of the Life Extension Department — was a maternal ancestor of Zangier, the mastermind behind the Stars Dagger. And Zangier's own mother was likewise a Grand Scholar of Life Extension, and even a member of the Erudition Presidium.

Madness has always coursed through that family's veins. It was she who brokered the deal — persuading her son to surrender his seat on the Presidium in exchange for the chance to conduct an experiment. And it was she who personally approved the Stars Dagger's feasibility study, letting Zangier transform the mad vision in his head into an even madder reality!"

"???"

'Wait — so Zangier is basically academic royalty?'

Cheng Shi was stunned. The flood of information derailed his thinking, and before he could follow through, he blurted out:

"His mother was on the Erudition Presidium — how could she agree to the Presidium sacrificing her own son?"

But the instant the words left his mouth, Cheng Shi realized his mistake. Someone that deep into the Truth faith had probably drowned their humanity in obsession long ago.

"Correct — I see you've guessed it, though I think you're still underestimating the truth.

Some mothers are mothers only in a biological sense. They may never have fulfilled a single maternal duty. Take the great and mad Lady Clo Yer. No one knows why she was so supportive of her child's experiment. All I know is that midway through — when the Erudition Presidium still had the means to rescue Zangier from his Hanged-Man-of-Doomsday state...

It was she who vetoed the rescue plan first, declaring that the experiment's cost of blasphemy was too great not to see through to a proper conclusion.

And the rest you know. Zangier was trapped in the Stars Dagger, never to emerge."

"..."

Cheng Shi had never imagined such an absurd story lurking behind the Stars Dagger experiment. So the doctor was right — Zangier's entire family carried the gene for madness. From the founding of the Tower of Logic, they had been first-echelon Truth zealots!

But the aftermath of the Stars Dagger wasn't as simple as Zangier being trapped. At the very least, in the present day, the Hanged Man of Doomsday had escaped!

And very likely into reality!

And that was the real reason Cheng Shi had asked whether the stitching experiment was linked to the Stars Dagger. He was theorizing: could 0221's entire endeavor be connected to Zangier? Or, to be bolder — was this Truth follower perhaps running an experiment doomed to fail specifically to prepare for Zangier's arrival?

After all, even if Zangier had escaped, he couldn't possibly have taken the Tower's pseudo-gods with him. Zhen Xin had said Zangier vanished during a consumable replacement, meaning he must have found a window to slip past the Erudition Presidium's surveillance and leave undetected.

Otherwise, with the Presidium's resources, even handing Zangier two extra pseudo-gods wouldn't have let him escape their grasp.

So the question was: if Zangier truly wanted to replicate the experiment in reality, could he scrounge up the massive resources the Tower of Logic had accumulated as a nation?

No. Obviously not.

Reality didn't have those kinds of resources. Even with 0221's entire fortune, he was just a decently skilled scholar compared to the Tower — a single household's wealth versus a nation's treasury. Not even close.

So to continue the experiment, Zangier would have to start from scratch. And that "scratch" was... perhaps precisely the interrupted faith-stitching experiment!

True, that experiment appeared to have no viable outcome. But the person running it could very well be the most insane Grand Scholar in the Land of Hope's history, partnered with reality's most ambitious and capable Truth Chosen. What opportunities those two powerhouses might seize in this new age of faith fusion was anyone's guess.

So this nightmarish Truth experiment was definitely not a replication of the Stars Dagger — but it could very well be the prerequisite for replicating it!

0221 was using this experiment to create a new "Eternal Sun" for Zangier!

At that realization, Cheng Shi's heart dropped.

'Not good. We've been played!'

If this experiment was truly just a prelude — the "Eternal Sun" was accounted for. But what about the "Blood Moon"?

'Where is the Blood Moon?'

The Blood Moon represented Corruption. Creating such a thing required exposure to vast amounts of desire. And conveniently, this experiment site was overflowing with all manner of freely coursing desires!

Survival, curiosity, dominance, greed, rage, fear...

Wherever the mother-tree's tentacles reached, it wasn't just Birth's paradise — it was also desire's inferno.

'So — is 0221 killing two birds with one stone?'

'He designed this experiment, then let outsiders find the trail and flood in by the hundreds, wreaking havoc and exploring freely — thereby feeding desire into a second, hidden experiment?'

'Did he calculate this scene from the very beginning, spreading the net wide and waiting for the players to jump in?'

'If that's real, his read on human nature is terrifyingly precise.'

'But even if it is — what about Wei Mu? Wouldn't that mean the Folly Chosen fell for it too?'

'No!'

'He didn't!'

Cheng Shi's heart sank as he suddenly recalled what Hong Lin had relayed from Wei Mu before they'd set out: "He said he wants to witness the grandest act of folly under the heavens."

'Foolish act...'

'I really did become the fool!'

Cheng Shi's expression darkened by several shades. He desperately hoped every one of his deductions was wrong — that he wouldn't end up the actual clown. But as his understanding of the experiment sharpened, he knew it was a done deal.

And so, brow knotted tight, the Clown asked one final question.

"How did the Tower of Logic create the Blood Moon used in the Stars Dagger?"

Wang Mou had already gleaned pieces from Cheng Shi's line of questioning. He simply didn't know Zangier had escaped, so he hadn't made the deeper connections. Hearing this question now, he thought for a moment:

"I'm not sure.

But I do know that during the same era as the faith-stitching experiment, the Tower had another noteworthy experiment. It was called 'Desire Ravine.'

That was the Void Mass-Energy Department's first step toward exploring Truth — and the experiment's objective was to strip the desires from the experimental material in the adjacent experiment, then use those desires to carve an abyssal channel toward Corruption."

"!!!"

The instant the doctor finished, Cheng Shi's face changed completely.

Not only because he'd finally connected every last thread — but because they'd stalled too long, and the returning aberrant mother-tree had finally arrived!

Dense tangles of tentacles erupted throughout the underground laboratory, and the very first thing they unleashed was a barrage of fury-laced lashes.

In that instant, tentacles rained down from above like a storm, smashing toward every person in the underground lab!

...