

The Gods 771

Chapter 771: Chaos, Crisis, Desperation

The aberrant mother-tree should have arrived long ago. But disengaging mid-fight was never easy.

Most opponents, seeing a foe retreat in fury, would proceed with caution, wary of deceit. But its opponent was Big Cat. Big Cat didn't think that hard. She only knew: if the enemy runs, you chase!

And that pursuit slowed the abomination's return to a crawl, nearly dragging it into a second brawl along the way.

But compared to fighting an opponent she couldn't beat, protecting her "external wombs" clearly took priority. So the mother-tree did make it back — and in front of the gathered players, it demonstrated power that could only be described as horrifying.

As it turned out, an enemy Big Cat could tank wasn't one everyone could. A few players who hesitated just a beat too slow were whipped into paste by the sky-blotting tentacles.

Cheng Shi's group of three was fortunate. Or, to be more precise, Cheng Shi was fortunate — none of the tentacles struck where he stood. And the moment they fell, two people simultaneously saved him.

Hu Wei's expression hardened. He slashed backhanded, drawing a blazing arc of flame, erecting a scorching firewall that blocked the mother-tree's assault.

The doctor moved even faster, his face taut as he seized Cheng Shi and shadow-shuttled them out of the area.

Perhaps Wang Mou acted out of goodwill. But more likely, it was curiosity about the answers Cheng Shi held.

When the Grand Marshal realized the team's "brain" had absconded with the team's "priest," his eyelid spasmed violently. He quickly rode the fire toward the perimeter to break out.

A bad feeling struck him. He sensed he'd been played — that after Lord Ultraman's encouragement and direction, he'd gotten hot-headed and jumped straight into 0221's pit.

Even without knowing exactly what the Truth follower was after, the doctor's claim that no divinity-assembly clues existed here meant 0221 had let all these players in deliberately. The chaos itself was probably another variable baked into the experiment!

The Grand Marshal's insight wasn't born of inflating 0221's intelligence through speculation. He simply knew Truth followers well enough — those lunatics would do anything for an experiment.

And given the current situation, Wei Mu's mass distribution of tickets probably wasn't innocent either. Had the Puppeteer already guessed everything, and that was why he'd been so willing to push things along — to fan Truth's experimental flames even higher, giving himself a front-row seat to the grandest show imaginable?

After all, Folly's Wise Men considered themselves wiser than Truth's scholars. Even if that was self-proclaimed.

Hu Wei's expression darkened at the thought.

'Since everyone's just watching the show... since everyone wants chaos... then let's make this chaos even grander.'

And so, seizing a moment when no one was watching, he stowed his War greatsword, his aura shifted completely, transforming from a general staging a breakout into... a tentacle!

Yes. A tentacle!

His appearance didn't change. But in the eyes of other players — and in the mother-tree's perception — the Grand Marshal Hu Wei, who'd just been swinging a greatsword, had suddenly become a tentacle.

This was the true power of Chaos's warrior class: Alien Blood Compatriot.

'In the heat of battle between two armies, I will forever be your ally — no matter which side you're on!'

Disguised as a tentacle, Hu Wei frowned, quietly drew a second greatsword emanating Chaos energy, and rode the tentacle surge back into the underground lab. Then, right under the mother-tree's nose, he shattered every tank in sight, releasing every last captive the tree had been protecting.

That sent the mother-tree into an absolute frenzy!

It lashed its own tentacles in a mindless rampage, attacking everything around it indiscriminately.

And right at that moment, Mo Li was leading a group of players back along Big Cat's original path toward her landing zone — but he found neither Wei Mu nor Cheng Shi.

With nowhere to go and a mother-tree growing more frenzied by the second, they had no choice but to set up a defensive position again and hold against the maddened tentacles.

But this standoff was nothing like last time. With the mother-tree's fury at its peak, tentacle attacks came faster and harder. Soon the entire area echoed with screams and cries of terror.

And it only got worse.

Suddenly, the massive flesh-tumor rose beside the underground lab again — this time swollen by a full quarter larger than before. Countless splaying tentacles blotted out the sky, murmuring, humming, looking every bit like the crown of a colossal tree thrashing in a gale.

And in that moment, the name "aberrant mother-tree" was finally, definitively proven apt.

The sky-raining tentacles grew more relentless. The tumor kept expanding. The canopy of tentacles spread along the air walls until it had blacked out the entire sky, plunging the vast central district into utter darkness.

Even the scattered blazes of fire could barely illuminate this twisted, nightmarish reality anymore.

The standoff between players and the mother-tree had turned decisively against them. Beyond a handful of peak players and elite squads still finding moments to breathe, the so-called cannon fodder Wei Mu had sent in had long since been reduced to pulp, smeared across the experiment site.

As for Wei Mu himself...

He was broken too.

Shattered in some unremarkable corner of the experiment site.

No one knew how he'd gotten there. No one even saw how he'd died. The surrounding tentacles simply registered chunks of dismembered puppet drifting through, and in their charging, scrabbling advance, swept the fragments into the ocean of tentacles.

The only organized team wasn't faring well either. Mo Li's singers had sung their throats raw buffing the main attackers. Every last priest had burned through their spiritual reserves.

Now the front line wasn't manned by ranged hunters and mages but by the dwindling assassins and warriors. And the attrition wasn't from critical injuries or exhaustion — it was from... impending labor and childbirth.

Staying inside the Prisoner's aura meant only taking hits. Charging out to attack meant getting "pregnant." Caught between these two impossible options, the assassins and warriors cursed the fact that they weren't ranged classes. Even after throwing every weapon they had, they couldn't hold much longer.

The position was on the verge of collapse.

And then — finally — Hong Lin came back!

The tower-sized giant bear let loose a roar and plummeted from above, crashing directly into the sea of tentacles outside the perimeter. Every swipe of those razor claws sent showers of shredded flesh flying. Every stomp of those massive paws ground clusters of tentacles into paste.

She was a wolf loosed upon sheep, venting the full fury of her killing desire across a battlefield that was nothing but enemies.

Seeing this, players inside the perimeter breathed silent sighs of relief. Even Mo Li and the Prisoner's expressions warmed slightly. But Tao Yi, at Mo Li's side, went pale and screamed toward the berserk giant bear deep in enemy territory:

"Where's Cheng Shi? You lost him?!"

"???"

The giant bear froze mid-motion.

She crushed the tentacle in her paw, then slowly turned her gaze toward the perimeter, eyelids twitching maniacally. The expression seemed to say:

'One more word like that and I stop killing tentacles and start killing people! Starting with you, you noisy woman!'

"Watch your back! Hey, don't just fight — SAY something! The Fate Weaver is missing!"

"..."

"ROAAARR—!!!"

The giant bear let loose a howl, matching the mother-tree's own intensity — growing every bit as berserk.

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Chapter 772: The Con Man and the Doctor

Did Hong Lin know Cheng Shi was missing?

She did. She'd lost track of his aura a while ago.

But she wasn't worried in the slightest. She knew a destined one would live to see the world's final act. Though she couldn't say where that final curtain call would be, she knew it wasn't here.

So she let the Fate Weaver go — let him put on whatever show he pleased.

She believed that even if the destined one wasn't truly destined, the Fate follower who'd led her onto destiny's path surely was.

In that belief, Big Cat trusted Cheng Shi more than Cheng Shi trusted himself.

As for the man in question — he was doing alright. Thanks to the doctor's combat prowess, the two had used the blanket of shadows to escape without major injury.

Of course, under tentacle lashes dense as stormclouds, hoping for a "no-damage achievement" was delusional. Both of them were battered.

Initially, having a priest along, the doctor hadn't been concerned. But when he noticed Cheng Shi didn't even heal himself, this typically unflappable Truth follower felt a sudden, inexplicable surge of panic.

"Fate Weaver, don't let suspicion become the absurd reason we both end up dead. I did deceive you, yes — but that deception caused you no harm, did it?"

"?" Cheng Shi snorted derisively. "Whether it caused harm isn't for you to decide. You should've known this day would come the moment you abused my trust."

"Fine. I'll apologize for the ulterior motives behind my actions. But I must clarify two points:

First — I never 'abused your trust.' You don't seem to trust anyone. It was your own fool—... your own blindness that deceived you.

Second — if the 'harm' you speak of is regarding the Fate Chosen, then from my observation, you seem to get along even better with An Mingyu, who comes from my world. If that is the 'harm' you mean, then I'd argue the impact has been positive, wouldn't you say?"

"..."

Cheng Shi was numb. He could tell the doctor bore no malice, but seriously — was this really the time for a measured debate?

'What am I supposed to say? "Sure, there was impact — thanks to your help, the Blind One is now my ally. I should really be thanking you"?'

'Now that would be pointless!'

Cheng Shi pursed his lips and snapped: "Wrong. I don't care for this An Mingyu. I had a close relationship with the previous one. Your little swap scheme has severely damaged my interests. So I..."

Wang Mou's brow furrowed with utmost seriousness. "Understood. I need to compensate you for the losses I've caused. I owe you reparations. Is that right?"

"..."

'Being smart is one thing, but being this blunt about it is hard to stomach, Doctor...'

'If I say "yes," it'll make me look way too greedy.'

"Yes!"

Cheng Shi's reply was crisp and clear.

"Understood. Once this is over and I've escaped 0221's control, I'll provide satisfactory compensation."

"Ha — your pie-in-the-sky promises are almost as good as my dear big bro's. What, I'm supposed to keep you alive for the sake of my future compensation?"

"BOOM—"

Wang Mou dragged Cheng Shi clear of another barrage of tentacles, his expression unwavering:

"It's mutual cooperation, not one-sided protection. I can provide extensive experimental intelligence to help you find the answers you seek, and along the way, my abilities can keep you safe.

But the prerequisite is: set aside your prejudice and heal me!

I respect all priests. And therefore, I respect you."

Cheng Shi blinked, then laughed despite himself. "Nice words — almost unlike you. But Doctor, aren't you washing your hands a bit too clean? Don't tell me you don't want to know this experiment's secrets yourself?"

"I do. But finding answers ranks below survival. You, however, are different, Fate Weaver. I can tell — you came here specifically for answers.

Without the divinity-assembly method, I can still walk my own path toward Truth. But you...

You can't. Your behavior tells me that if this trip yields nothing, you'll die of regret over your own greed.

Of course, uncovering this experiment's true purpose is also one of your goals. You hold clues I don't, but you lack a partner. So I chose to approach you again.

You can trust me. The same way you trust An Mingyu.

After all, we have no conflicting interests. On the front of opposing 0221, we're already on the same side."

"..."

Honestly, this playbook was all too familiar. Cheng Shi used the same "persuasion" techniques on teammates all the time. Of course, his version was genuine manipulation — whereas every word from the doctor was genuine "truth."

The Truth follower's analysis was spot-on. Cheng Shi's optimal play right now was to team up with the doctor, unravel 0221's purpose, and then extract the divinity-assembly secret from within it.

In reality, after all the groundwork he'd laid inside the experiment site, Cheng Shi could handle any danger here solo. But the doctor was right about one thing: he was hopelessly ignorant of the Tower of Logic's various experimental methodologies. Even with Master of Deception on his side, he could easily walk into 0221's traps while chasing the truth.

So after weighing everything extensively, factoring in multiple considerations, Cheng Shi agreed to the partnership.

Though he didn't say yes right away. Instead, he switched to Cheng-the-Greedy and squeezed his temporary partner for a few extras.

When the doctor learned that even healing came with a price tag, he briefly wondered whether this world's basic social contract was radically different from his original one. How could camaraderie between teammates be this cold? They'd already struck a deal, and he still had to pay?

'Fine. I deceived him first. If healing costs money, consider it part of the reparations.'

So Wang Mou nodded, accepting with a sigh.

Cheng Shi was finally pleased — but his grin lasted exactly one second before it died. Because he'd suddenly remembered he wasn't actually a priest right now. An "Another Day Thief" couldn't heal teammates.

Seeing Cheng Shi do nothing for an uncomfortably long time, the doctor's expression slowly darkened.

"What do you want now?"

"..."

Cheng Shi felt a pang of awkwardness, but his skin was thick enough. With a dry laugh, he fished a bottle of Prosperity of Yesteryear from his pocket and pressed it into Wang Mou's hand.

It stung to part with it, but it was the best way to show sincerity.

Wang Mou frowned at the potion, puzzled. "My injuries hardly warrant wasting something like this. Besides, wouldn't a basic healing spell be more economical? Fate Weaver, what are you eyeing now?"

"..."

'Great. Once truth gets polluted with prejudice, it stops being truth.'

Cheng Shi pursed his lips and said nothing, sighing internally:

'Doctor, oh Doctor. Stop assuming everyone's as greedy as you think.'

'I don't refuse to heal you because I won't — I can't!'

'An assassin doesn't have healing spells, alright?!'

'Also — you think the tentacles aren't hitting you because of your good looks?'

'Wrong!'

'It's me!'

'All of it is me!'

'If I weren't burning through every ounce of my fate-weaving, constantly overwriting the present with the scenario most favorable to us both — do you really think we'd be running this smoothly?'

'Across those hundreds of possible futures, the doctor and the Clown took who-knows-how-many critical hits. It's thanks to me that you even have the luxury of bargaining with me. Don't be grateful — fine — but you dare mock me on top of it?'

'Who do you think you are, Folly?!'

'Damn. I'm furious.'

But fury or not, he needed the doctor to uncover 0221's purpose. So Cheng Shi swallowed his complaints, wiped every emotion off his face, and tucked the Thorn Weeping Rite — which had been coiled around his forearm like a bone-serpent, greedily drinking his blood — back beneath his sleeve. Then he resumed his meticulous fate-weaving.

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Chapter 773: You Fused with Deceit?!

The deductive ability granted by Time to the Another Day Assassin was a truly extraordinary experience for a player.

As Big Cat had described when recounting the settlement of her Prosperity trial — when deduction begins, the user rapidly cycles through every possible outcome of the near future. Without additional

talent augmentation, of course, the speed, duration, breadth of deduction, plus the range, completeness, and external influence of overwriting were all merely passable.

But for a Fate follower who worshipped the concept of Fixed Destiny, having it was infinitely better than not.

At minimum, with Time's deduction backing him, Cheng Shi no longer needed to rely on other means to ensure his "destined" path. But deduction had limits — mental energy reserves being the primary constraint on how many times it could be used.

So even with the Thorn Weeping Rite's assistance, Cheng Shi couldn't use deduction at will. He could only activate it upon sensing extreme danger, and even then, deduction wasn't time reversal. He couldn't relive a traveled path with full memories. He could only choose the most advantageous branch from among countless forks he'd already passed through.

Fortunately, both the doctor and his assassin self were nimble enough, leaving plenty of "safe futures" to choose from.

And so, working in tandem, Cheng Shi and the doctor quickly escaped the underground lab and reached another area with sparse tentacles.

Not much time had passed since the Grand Marshal shattered the mother-tree's external wombs, yet the abomination stitched together from who-knew-how-many newborns had plunged into total, apoplectic rage. It relentlessly hunted every living thing in the experiment site — it didn't even spare the "wombs" now stirring awake in the broken tanks.

If something didn't belong to it, if it was out of control, then everything it could perceive as alive was now its enemy.

Countless tentacles cascaded from the cloud-like canopy, coiling and grinding, their hoarse rasping playing eerie hymns to Birth. Beneath that sinister melody, the omnipresent tentacles lashed indiscriminately at everything. Within breaths, the entire experiment site had devolved into an utter inferno!

In that moment, the aberrant mother-tree's horror was on full, unrestrained display.

Innumerable players scattered in every direction, each looking out for themselves. But some couldn't escape the dense onslaught no matter how hard they fought, dissolving into pulp that fertilized the locust-swarm-like tentacle clusters.

Under this assault, even Cheng Shi — armed with deduction — found things tricky. They hadn't yet reached the control center, so his only option was to reveal a few more cards and dive into the shadow plane with the doctor.

But explaining how a priest could use assassin abilities... was its own headache.

Just as Cheng Shi was racking his brain for an excuse, Wang Mou acted first.

The Truth follower grabbed Cheng Shi, planted his feet, and faced the storm of incoming tentacles head-on. Expression hardening, he raised a hand and, with a sweep, a familiar divine power surged forth — shaping itself into a massive hand that wiped both of them clean out of reality.

The charging tentacles lost their targets mid-strike, twitching in confusion before screaming off toward another source of life.

The instant they were safe, Cheng Shi seized Wang Mou's shoulder, disbelief carved across his face:

"Deceit's power?!"

Indeed. Wang Mou had used the power of Deceit. He didn't know Cheng Shi was currently an assassin. While he could shadow-shuttle them through darkness, he lacked the talent to conceal someone within it. So in this crisis, he'd had no choice but to reveal his second faith — to save both himself and the Fate Weaver.

The new talent proved effective. But it well and truly shook Cheng Shi.

"You fused with Deceit?!"

"Mm. I fused with Deceit." The doctor didn't hide it. Despite having Master of Deception — which could have papered over the situation — he chose transparency.

Or rather, outside of necessity, he rarely lied.

Still, the response left Cheng Shi reeling. Last trial, the man had been a single-faith player. Now he'd suddenly fused faiths, and — of all gods — it just had to be the Fun God's faith.

'Seriously, Benefactor? Don't tell me You rewarded a Truth follower with a second faith because he managed to con Your Clown in the last trial?'

'Is that fair?'

'Is that even right?!'

'So humiliating the Clown comes with rewards, huh?!'

Cheng Shi's face was ugly. But he quickly realized this wasn't simple.

He remembered vividly: during the Assembly of Gods — the one he and Big Cat had attended — the Fun God and Truth were as antagonistic as could be. How could two deities with diametrically opposed motives agree to fuse?

Sure, in the current climate of Fate–Time fusion, non-opposing fusions weren't impossible. But would the Fun God really agree to fuse with Truth just for a laugh?

Truth accepting this wasn't surprising — He had pushed for faith fusion. In that Civilization deity's eyes, perhaps all faiths merging was the ultimate goal.

But the Fun God?

Would He really be kind-hearted enough to give the opposition a hand?

Absolutely not!

Anyone who claimed the Fun God did everything "just for fun" was, in Cheng Shi's opinion, the real joke. Deceit never acted without purpose. Even though He was the embodiment of meaningless Void — remember: He was the Void's illusion!

Everything He did concealed what lay beneath!

So... was this His guidance?

Using a second faith bestowed upon a Truth follower as a signpost for His own follower's path?

Cheng Shi sank deep into thought, brow furrowed. Seeing his expression, the doctor assumed he was being suspected again. In this life-or-death situation, this "fragile" partnership couldn't survive another round of distrust. So Wang Mou paused, then laid out his experience plainly.

"I did receive His blessing. But I don't enjoy dealing in lies."

"Pff — can you say that with a straight face?"

"As I said, in that trial, the one who deceived the Fate Weaver was your own blindness—"

"Okay, okay — enough." Cheng Shi rolled his eyes, thinking: 'Is there really someone who enjoys flogging a dead horse this much? I made one small mistake, and it's about to become the stain on my entire con-artist career?'

Wang Mou wasn't mocking him. He was, with total solemnity, making a logical point:

"It's just that Deceit told me that drawing closer to Him is how one draws closer to Truth. So I..."

"Pff — don't flatter yourself. Even if He hadn't said that, would you dare refuse?"

"..." That one hit home. The doctor's face stiffened and he had no reply.

Seeing a Truth follower finally "lose" for once, Cheng Shi felt a rush of vindication.

"So what was that Deceit talent just now? I don't think I've heard of it before."

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Chapter 774: I Just Don't Care for Traitors

"Eye No One. Wait — don't get violent. I'm not insulting you. That's literally the talent's name: Eye No One.

I know it sounds like a Folly talent, but it genuinely is a gift from Deceit. Its effect is to make me and a chosen target invisible to others' cognition.

Simply put — cognitive invisibility.

Very effective, but highly limited. For instance, if we want to maintain this state, we can't leave this immediate area for quite some time.

It's a zone-restricted skill that only works within a very small radius.

Which puzzles me, because it doesn't behave like what I understand Deceit to be. It feels more like a hybrid of Deceit and Chaos — even leaning predominantly toward Chaos.

I can't make sense of it. The best I can figure is that the gods are still embroiled in innumerable conflicts on planes beyond our sight, and Deceit perhaps... stole a piece of Chaos's authority in one of those conflicts."

Hearing this, Cheng Shi was impressed.

'Truth followers really do have something upstairs.' From a single talent's effect, the doctor had basically deduced what the Fun God had been doing behind the scenes.

But Cheng Shi certainly wasn't going to chat about his Benefactor with a Truth follower. So he probed in a roundabout, stop-and-go fashion, trying to ferret out the rest of the man's talents.

The doctor was candid but not stupid. And so, during the long wait for the mother-tree's berserk assault to subside, the two spent their time under Deceit's protection engaged in a subtle bout of verbal tai chi.

One probed relentlessly; the other gave away nothing. After enough rounds, Cheng Shi felt they could've opened an actual tai chi seminar. Setting aside the slice identity, Wang Weijin was genuinely talented — a well-rounded individual with no real weaknesses.

'Letting someone like that roam free as a lone wolf... wouldn't that be a waste?'

'Perfect — only I and the Blind One know about the doctor's otherworldly origins. On the "knowing each other's deepest secrets" front, even if there isn't full "heart-to-heart trust" yet, we at least "know the dirt." Factor that in...'

'This talent rightfully belongs with me.'

This wasn't a fleeting whim. Cheng Shi was genuinely, seriously evaluating the feasibility.

Of course, raw ability and identity weren't the main reasons he had designs on the doctor. The Fun God's "divinely inspired" second faith was the real catalyst.

'So... should I follow this guidance and pull Wang Weijin into the... Joker Alliance?'

'Not the Destined Ones — Doctor Fraud has about as much connection to Fate as a tin can.'

'Is it feasible?'

Cheng Shi thought for a moment. Picturing Mi Laozhang, the Dragon King, and the doctor all sitting together "discussing philosophy," his scalp tingled.

Sure, the Joker Alliance was full of liars playing their parts. But that mental image looked suspiciously like a Truth followers' debate forum.

'Would that count as blasphemy against Truth?'

'Hmm. Probably. And if it would — then this is absolutely worth doing!'

With that thought, his gaze toward the doctor shifted. The wariness in his eyes faded, replaced by a spark of interest.

'In the name of Deceit — the Clown was about to start conning again.'

Between keeping watch on their surroundings and plotting his approach, he'd just begun thinking about how to steer the conversation toward organizations and alliances when an unexpected situation arrived first.

The two of them were temporarily safe in their hiding spot, but the experiment site held far more than just the two of them. Panicked, survival-driven players were everywhere, and before long, three mud-caked, barely clothed players stumbled into their area.

Their bodies bore scars from various experimental tubes — clearly escapees from the underground lab's tanks.

All three were in terrible shape, but the worst off was the woman trailing behind. Half her body was gone, yet she was still gritting her teeth and casting heals — not on herself, but on the two male players ahead of her.

'Smart.' She knew that healing herself wouldn't save her life in these conditions. But demonstrating value to others? That might.

And her two male companions weren't fools either. A healer meant they could last longer. So the three had dragged each other this far in a mutually parasitic survival pact.

But luck always runs out eventually — like right now. Behind them surged a tidal wave of tentacles from above and below, and given the scale of the oncoming swarm, in the next second, forget those three — even Cheng Shi and Wang Mou's hiding spot would get pounded into the dirt.

The doctor's expression turned pitch black. This was pure collateral damage. But the situation wasn't unsolvable.

The simplest solution: kill all three before the tentacles arrived. Once the tentacles lost their targets, the crisis would resolve itself.

After all, in a moment like this, the line between good and evil blurred. No one could criticize the doctor's choice. Ultimately, every tragedy in today's experiment site was 0221's doing.

Even if the doctor took action, the blood debt could be laid at 0221's feet — because Wang Weijin was 0221's slice.

'In Chaos, life is cheap.'

'When Order isn't watching, justice only shows on the victor's blade.'

Then again, the doctor hadn't thought it through that far. He was a pragmatic, efficient Truth follower. Unable to trust these newcomers on short notice, his first instinct was to draw his weapon.

But just as Wang Mou was about to strike — Cheng Shi moved first.

Cheng Shi snapped his arm up and fired a terrifying bolt of Lightning Punishment straight at the player running in front. The roaring thunder consumed the man instantly, and from his charred remains, a brand-new Screaming Servant sprouted.

But in the next heartbeat, the second male player's expression suddenly froze — replaced by a look of sheer terror.

His wildly distorted face didn't look like someone startled by a surprise attack. It looked as though he'd become an entirely different person!

He hadn't seen where the attack came from. But he recognized the technique. He recognized the thunder that haunted his deepest nightmares.

So he slammed to a halt. Without a second thought, he reversed direction and sprinted toward the female priest behind him, screaming as he retreated:

"Cheng Shi! I have no grudge against you!"

"Oh? Is that so?"

Then why are you running?"

Cheng Shi let out a cold laugh and casually lowered his hand — but the instant his arm dropped, a second and third bolt of thunder roared out in rapid succession.

He hadn't aimed. But the howling plasma streaked through the air as if guided, striking the fleeing male player and dropping him on the spot.

The instant the charred body hit the ground, the female player bringing up the rear jerked to a halt, her face flooding with an even more profound terror.

Her eyes bulged, veins bloodshot. She seemed to want to say something, but before her mouth could open, the third flash of lightning blazed in and reduced her to a charred husk as well.

This time Cheng Shi didn't summon another Screaming Servant. He let the lone existing one retrieve the two corpses.

The entire sequence seemed drawn-out in the telling, but in reality it was over in an instant. The tidal wave of tentacles hadn't even arrived when it lost all its targets. They thrashed their limbs in maddened howling, then shifted course and surged off elsewhere.

Once silence returned, the doctor glanced at Cheng Shi with curiosity. "He had a grudge against you?"

"Doctor — there were three people. Which 'he' are you asking about?"

"The first one, obviously. I could see he'd planted parasitic resurrection mechanisms on his two companions. You had no killing intent toward the latter two — you were only after him.

Also, your lightning packs a punch."

Wang Mou casually eyed the ring on Cheng Shi's finger and sighed wistfully.

He had no designs on such items. He simply felt that a teammate in possession of equipment like this should have deployed it far earlier — the delay was inefficient.

Cheng Shi scoffed:

"Less of a 'grudge,' really. I just don't care for traitors."

The words had barely left his mouth when the Screaming Servant dropped the two charred corpses at their feet. And alongside them, clattering to the ground, was a long sword shaped unmistakably like a clock hand.

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Chapter 775: Xie Yang, Long Time No See

"A Pointer Knight, I see. So you're devoted to faith opposition too."

"No, no, no — I think all that 'opposition' talk is nonsense. It's just the gods giving themselves something to do. Otherwise, why would opposing faiths be able to fuse?"

"?" Wang Mou froze, frowning sharply. "How can opposing faiths possibly fuse?"

"You didn't know, Doctor?"

'What am I supposed to know?'

Wang Mou's brow furrowed, curiosity blooming across his face.

Seeing this, Cheng Shi grinned inwardly. 'Finally found the bait!'

"Not knowing is fine — so, do you want to know?"

If so, I'll have to introduce you to a certain platform where this kind of intelligence gets exchanged.

But before that, let me finish up here first. One of these two is a friend of mine, so I have to ask — Doctor, if I resurrect them, they won't turn back into that traitor, will they?"

Wang Mou shook his head quickly. "Prosperity's 'Seed-Life Graft' only temporarily revives the seeder. To fully hijack a new body requires an incubation period. You dispatched them so quickly that the 'traitor' likely didn't have time to take over either vessel. So resurrect away. Though — are you sure one of these two is actually your friend?"

"I may often fail to see through illusions, but my eyes work just fine when it comes to seeing what's real."

Cheng Shi chuckled, casually touching his own face to remove the assassin mask. Then, hands behind his back, he produced the Lush Horn Crown and cast a clean healing spell on the male player's corpse.

The healing did its work beautifully. Moments later, the charred shell sloughed away entirely, and a pair of sharp, bright eyes snapped open — locking immediately onto the two figures before him. His gaze settled on Cheng Shi.

First came shock. Then something complicated. And finally, gratitude.

"Bro... I never thought you'd be the one to save me."

Cheng Shi smiled — a brilliant, unguarded smile.

"Xie Yang. Long time no see."

"Yeah. Long time no see. You... really are a necromancer after all."

As he spoke, Xie Yang's eyes drifted to the Screaming Servant standing beside Cheng Shi.

"..."

Seeing both Xie Yang's grateful expression and the doctor's puzzled one, Cheng Shi's smile froze on his face.

"Necromancer?" Wang Mou looked between Cheng Shi and the servant in bewilderment, then shook his head. "He's actually not—"

"Not important." Cheng Shi cut the doctor off, hauled Xie Yang to his feet, and seeing the man looking far less wretched in his new body, grinned again. "I'd always assumed you died for love over Xiao Yuan. Turns out you just got captured. Good — you're one of the few neighbors I have left. Without you, the whole block felt quieter."

Xie Yang's mind still seemed a bit foggy. He stood, surveyed the area, and only when he noticed the surrounding tentacles ignoring their position entirely did he accept that he truly might be saved.

A storm of mixed emotions churned behind his eyes — his gaze toward Cheng Shi growing ever more complicated.

"You're even stronger than I thought..."

"Thank you. I didn't expect you to still remember me. I really did pay the price for my own greed this time."

"...?" Cheng Shi blinked, sensing an odd undercurrent. 'Is he alluding to someone?'

"But actually — who's Xiao Yuan?"

"???"

'Are you serious, dude?'

'That's your soulmate! Even I, just a neighbor, haven't forgotten — and you have?'

'What happened to the love? The happiness? You playboy!'

Cheng Shi's lips twitched in disbelief. Having an existential conversation about Xiao Yuan in the middle of this hellscape felt surreal, so he coughed twice and pointedly changed the subject, pointing at the corpse at their feet.

"Her. You know her?"

Xie Yang's gaze dropped — and the instant he saw the charred remains, his entire expression transformed. It shifted into something heartbreakingly familiar — the exact same look Cheng Shi

remembered from a certain afternoon, when Xie Yang had stood on the opposite rooftop begging Cheng Shi for just one glimpse of what Xiao Yuan looked like.

Identical. Down to the last detail.

For a fleeting moment, Cheng Shi couldn't tell whether Xie Yang had fallen for this girl or for this girl's corpse.

"..."

'Indeed. Only the absurd survive long in an absurd world.'

Xie Yang seemed to realize he was losing composure. He jerked his head up and declared with total solemnity: "Xiao Li is an incredible girl. She's strong, brave, decisive, and beautiful. She's practically my white moon—"

'White what? White moonlight? More like white cataracts!'

'Any girl unlucky enough to catch your eye is already wasted on you!'

Cheng Shi snapped. He raised his hand.

Xie Yang saw it and immediately shut his mouth.

"Good. Good, fine. Then your precious Xiao Li is all yours to revive. I'm sure you wouldn't want a heroic-beauty-rescue moment going to anyone else.

Listen up, Casanova — I'm only saying this once. Seven o'clock behind you, about two or three blocks out, there's a survival convoy. Make it there, and you live.

Don't ask me how. Don't ask me anything else stupid. Neighbor's privilege — this is all I can do.

I have business. I'm not walking you out. Before I change my mind — go. Now!"

Under different circumstances, Cheng Shi might've lingered for the entertainment. But he and the doctor had pressing matters, and there was no time for an absurdist variety show.

Besides, a leopard never changes its spots. Cheng Shi was thoroughly numb. He didn't even bother collecting a fee — he just wanted the man gone.

If Xie Yang's luck held and he survived, Cheng Shi could treat it as keeping a "performing parrot" on the opposite rooftop for future amusement.

But to his surprise, even though Cheng Shi hadn't asked for anything, Xie Yang turned out to be the grateful type.

Perhaps sensing he was being a nuisance, Xie Yang's expression turned sheepish. He nodded, then reached into his personal storage space, pulled out a small piece of charcoal, and offered it to Cheng Shi. For once, his demeanor was genuinely solemn.

"Bro — no matter what, you saved my life. I'll remember that forever.

Most of my gear was lost, but none of it would've repaid you anyway. After thinking it over, this is the only thing that might suit you.

I know it doesn't look like much. I just want you to know — Xie Yang is not an ungrateful man!

I'm going. I'll make it to the end. Take care of yourself, bro — see you on the rooftop!"

With that, Xie Yang pressed the charcoal into Cheng Shi's chest.

Cheng Shi froze. He took it, examined it — and realized it was an S-rank item. A spatial-type War artifact called the Molten Coffin.

In that moment, his opinion of this War-following neighbor shifted just a fraction.

'Xie Yang really is a good guy!'

...

Chapter 776: An Absurd Comedy and an Even More Absurd Tragedy

But the very next second — after discovering what the item did and what was stored inside — Cheng Shi decided he'd re-evaluated too soon.

Molten Coffin (S): Sacred Artifact. Blood-charcoal smelted from War's fierce flames. The space forged within can hold exactly one corpse.

Special Effect — Subdued by Flame: This space can hold one — and only one — unconscious flesh vessel. Storing other objects will incinerate them. Storing a living person will burn away their consciousness.

Currently stored: 1.

Cheng Shi knew about Xie Yang's habit of collecting corpses — he'd borrowed from that stash often enough. That War followers had creative methods for preserving bodies wasn't surprising either. What he absolutely could not accept was that this Molten Coffin currently held a corpse — and that corpse just happened to be Xiao Yuan, the very person Xie Yang had been carrying on a long-distance romance with!

The beer-bellied man lay perfectly still inside the artifact, and the single glimpse Cheng Shi caught of the interior grossed him out something fierce!

'What?!'

'WHAT THE HELL?!'

Cheng Shi's brain short-circuited. He flicked his wrist, dumped Xiao Yuan out of the charcoal case, then pointed at his corpse — now lying neatly beside Xiao Li's — and laughed in sheer disbelief:

"Casanova, I'd like to ask: if Xiao Li is your white moonlight, then who's he?"

Xie Yang first blanked — then slowly went wide-eyed. He seemed to genuinely have forgotten the man, remembering only upon seeing the corpse. But what absolutely no one expected was that, the instant his memories rushed back, this War follower threw himself onto Xiao Yuan's body and burst into tears.

Seeing this, it wasn't just Cheng Shi — even the perpetually serious doctor couldn't keep a straight face.

"Fate Weaver, we're on limited time."

"..."

Cheng Shi's eyelid twitched madly. He understood the doctor's meaning. He was about to shut this farce down when Wang Mou cleared his throat and added:

"Let him give the abridged version."

"???"

'Seriously, Doctor? Even you — the deadpan Truth fanatic — are interested?'

'Fine, fine. Guess rubbernecking really is the universe's ultimate purpose!'

Xie Yang didn't cry for long. He knew this was no place for extended wailing. So he lifted his head and gave them the "abridged version":

"Xiao Yuan was my bro too. As good a bro as you."

'???'

'That comparison is a bit much!'

'I haven't sinned that badly, man!'

'And wait — wasn't he your white moonlight? How'd he become your bro?'

Cheng Shi's ears were ringing. He felt like his neighbor had taken every drop of absurdity accumulated during his absence and forcibly poured it into Cheng Shi's brain. The flood was so violent it nearly extinguished the flame of his sanity.

"His name is Yuan Meng. A sophomore. Originally a Memory follower — until a Beast Tamer turned him into a pet.

That Beast Tamer got off on driving humans into beast-form. He even tried to use Yuan Meng to 'capture' me. But one day, Xiao Yuan regained clarity for a single breath and warned me to run. The shattering of the Deceit illusion on his body stunned me for a moment. That moment cost me. I didn't get away either.

The Beast Tamer dragged me into a pocket-dimension water prison and tried to break me daily. But thanks to my innate talent, I kept a sliver of awareness. To survive, I worked on reaching Xiao Yuan, helping him find himself again, while enduring humiliation and biding my time.

Finally, my chance came. Xiao Yuan regained consciousness again and freed me. But the Beast Tamer returned too quickly and noticed something was wrong.

So we ran for our lives. With our last ounce of strength, we tore open the Void and jumped into the rift-current. But Xiao Yuan — shielding my escape — took an arrow. That arrow dropped him, mortally wounded. And I... I had nothing left to save him with. I could only watch as he died in front of me.

Before dying, he tried to erase my memories of everything — all the torment and suffering. He said the world shouldn't hold so much absurd cruelty and tragedy. That people should live brightly, beautifully.

But I couldn't accept that. So he settled for erasing only my memories of him. Then he smiled... and died.

I couldn't understand him. I couldn't understand how someone who'd suffered so much could still believe in people, still help them. But I'd forgotten him by then. So all I could do was store this stranger's corpse, recover from my wounds, and then storm back to that Beast Tamer's pocket dimension.

Unfortunately, he was already gone. Whether out of caution or foresight, he'd left behind nothing but torture instruments and a bunch of bottles and jars.

I ransacked his lair and among those bottles found that damned Truth divinity that I regret to my core.

I thought it was Fate's compensation for this absurd tragedy. I never imagined that behind that divinity lay countless tragedies identical to Xiao Yuan's — no, even worse.

I was captured again. Many of us were. We couldn't escape, locked day and night in those experiment tanks, forced to birth things for that disgusting mother...

Until you all came."

Xie Yang wept again.

This time, neither spectator was laughing.

Wang Mou rubbed his temples. Cheng Shi sighed.

'Indeed — behind every absurd comedy lurks an even more absurd tragedy.'

So the beautiful love story had been a brotherhood laced with tragedy all along. This Xiao Yuan — Yuan Meng — was a genuine standup guy.

With that thought, Cheng Shi frowned and raised his hand, intending to resurrect this good person who'd endured suffering yet still yearned for something beautiful.

But just then, Xie Yang seemed to read his intent. He rose and caught Cheng Shi's wrist, shaking his head firmly:

"Bro... you don't owe me anything, and you definitely don't owe Yuan Meng anything. You've got your own mission. Don't waste your strength on this.

He's my brother. A brother's life — I'll save it myself!"

Xie Yang hoisted Yuan Meng's corpse onto his shoulders and turned to them. "Take care. Be careful!"

Cheng Shi was awash in complicated emotions. He didn't know what to say, so he simply nodded. But beside him, Wang Mou suddenly spoke up, pointing at the other corpse on the ground: "What about your white moonlight?"

"..." Cheng Shi's face went blank. 'Doctor, your timing for precision really could use some work.'

"..."

Xie Yang froze too. He looked down at Xiao Li, clenched his jaw, and heaved her corpse onto his back as well.

Seeing this, Cheng Shi knew: the absurd, at its core, remains absurd. Solemnity is just a mask draped over the absurdity.

"Take care. Be careful!"

This time Xie Yang really left. He bound both bodies to himself with tough silk threads, then sprinted with the wind toward the direction Cheng Shi had pointed.

Watching his figure shrink into the tentacle sea, the two observers wore different expressions.

Wang Mou, deadpan serious: "Gap Light Iron Thorn. So he's actually an assassin. In that case, he does have a chance of surviving."

Cheng Shi hadn't expected Xie Yang to be an assassin. He'd always assumed the man was a warrior.

'But assassin works. At least it's enough for self-preservation.'

"The tentacles have calmed in this area. Doctor — let's move too. Target: the control center. You lead. Don't worry — I can keep up."

With that, Cheng Shi donned a mask right in front of Wang Mou. A perfectly ordinary, unfading mask.

Wang Mou eyed the white mask on Cheng Shi's face. "That's...?"

"Nothing deep. Just boosting the visual intimidation. In other words — looking cool.

0221 went big with this whole thing. Without some theatrics of our own, I'm afraid we won't outshine him. Let's go."

And with that, Cheng Shi charged ahead — toward the direction the doctor had indicated.

Wang Mou followed in surprise. Once he confirmed Cheng Shi could indeed shadow-shuttle, he remarked, "You've got quite the gadget collection," and then took the lead.

Trailing behind, Cheng Shi smirked to himself. 'The essence of Deceit lies in misdirection. When you see me put on one mask, you don't realize I've hidden a second underneath.'

And so, the "forgotten" Fate Weaver had swapped back to Another Day Thief — right under a con-artist doctor's nose, switching professions in plain sight.

But not long after the two departed, the long-gone Xie Yang suddenly doubled back — carrying both bodies. He looked down at the tracks on the ground, then gazed toward the direction Cheng Shi had vanished, his expression flickering between light and shadow.

After a moment, he stowed Yuan Meng's corpse in an unknown artifact, then gripped Xiao Li's charred remains with one hand and drove a dozen iron needles into her body.

Moments later, the broken Xiao Li reopened her eyes. But this time, there was no light in them. Only blood.

"Sorry, Xiao Li. There are things in this world far more important than love."

With that, Xie Yang took hold of his War puppet and shadow-shuttled after Cheng Shi.

...

Chapter 777: Do You Fear Me, or Fear Drawing Close to Truth?

Meanwhile, elsewhere.

After the vast majority of cannon fodder had perished under the tentacles, the surviving players in the sprawling experiment site began converging toward a single point.

Anyone still standing by now was no amateur. They'd quickly deduced, by observing the tentacle swarms' patterns of movement, that the experiment site still possessed one safe zone.

That meant a group of players had already formed an effective fighting force amid the crisis. So one by one, scattered survivors began desperately charging toward that location, hoping to reach shelter before total exhaustion.

Under those circumstances, Mo Li's team kept growing. The player count had reached a critical mass — enough to hold the position with minimal expenditure.

Of course, the mainstay of their defense was still Big Cat. She alone shouldered ninety percent of the onslaught, going blow for blow with the sky-blotting tentacles. The other players mostly served as her rapid "wound-cleanup" support team — though with the growing number of singers, their combined hymns were finally beginning to neutralize the abomination's whispered ravings.

But achieving that balance wasn't just a matter of headcount. At minimum, the team needed a sharp-minded, clear-headed, decisive, and strategically gifted commander.

And that commander was still Mo Li.

Truthfully, as a player at the absolute frontier of their respective faiths, neither Mo Li nor the Prisoner would have just died at 0221's hands even without Big Cat's protection. They could have revived elsewhere or survived on the battlefield — their bag of tricks was deep enough for self-preservation. They simply couldn't match Big Cat's ability to hit the other side with shock and awe.

So why had they fallen into the creeping trap of failing to break free and accumulating injuries?

Simple. Because they chose differently!

Remember — 0221's divinity tickets weren't like Wei Mu's targeted replicas, distributed to specific players. He'd cast a wide net through his slices, and the "fish" he caught were overwhelmingly ordinary players.

Granted, after this long in the Faith Game, no seasoned player was truly "ordinary" anymore. But reality retained one indisputable law: in this game, the exceptionally talented remained a minority.

Which meant most of these "fish" couldn't protect themselves in this experiment.

So there lay the answer. These two Chosen Ones could have ignored the experimental material and saved only themselves — but they didn't. They'd brought along every willing cooperator and fought their way out together.

Mo Li, as an Order follower — observing tradition, treating everyone equally, respecting all and leading them toward a shred of hope — that aligned perfectly with Order's ethos. No surprises there.

But the Prisoner's choice... was genuinely unexpected.

Even Mo Li hadn't anticipated such willing cooperation. Which proved his membership in the Torchbearers was no fluke.

As the Blind One had said, Qin Xin never misjudged a person. The Torchbearers' founder's eye for character was beyond question.

And so, with Big Cat marauding ahead and the Prisoner anchoring the rear, Mo Li — the player known as the Chief Grand Secretary — finally demonstrated his peerless support capabilities.

His read on the battlefield was razor-sharp and utterly unique. Unlike a peak player's instinctive self-assessment, his strength lay in global coordination: precisely determining where every ounce of force should go, how every bit of stamina should be replenished, how much power to commit to strike the enemy's weak points, and how much defense to pull back to minimize internal casualties.

Directing operations from the center — fed intelligence by countless hunters and assassins serving as his eyes — he functioned like an overclocked central processor, distributing granular commands to every individual. Under his direction, this ragtag assembly of strangers coalesced into a seamlessly synchronized unit, operating like precision machinery.

In that moment, he was the experiment site's most radiant beacon of "Order" — and everyone moved in accordance with his will.

But as the battle wore on, the Prisoner — anchoring the formation — began to frown. He sensed the escalating aggression in the group, the growing itch among many to switch from defense to offense. Scratching his chin, he remarked:

"Axe-Bearer, your aura feels off.

I get the impression the axe didn't land on your neck — you grabbed it for yourself instead.

Your style was never this aggressive. I'm not saying your command is wrong, but... you might want to check Big Bear's location. She hasn't come back in a while.

Are you trying to lead us all the way into 0221's lair?"

At his words, nearby players' lips twitched uncomfortably, turning their heads in silence. Mo Li's eyelid jumped violently. A flash of red light flickered through his eyes before his pupils settled back to gold.

His agitated aura gradually stabilized. He scanned the battlefield in all directions, his brow furrowing slightly as he said in a low voice:

"Something does feel off. The enemy's Birth hymn has weakened. Could something unexpected have happened somewhere else?"

'Unexpected?'

Tao Yi, standing at Mo Li's side, snapped her head up, eyes sharp and cunning as she peered into the distance.

If anything "unexpected" could happen in this experiment site, it was probably... him.

...

The little fox's sixth sense was spot-on.

The mother-tree's weakening assault was indeed linked to Cheng Shi — though he hadn't diverted the abomination from another flank. Rather, he'd unknowingly advanced the experiment's progress, pushing this Truth game into its next phase.

Rewinding slightly: while players from all directions had been frantically converging on Mo Li's team, Wang Mou had led Cheng Shi to the experiment's control center.

Wei Mu had been right. This was the deployment point where experimental material had been sent in.

The moment they arrived nearby, the building — wrapped tight in tentacles — suddenly opened a passage through its exterior wall. A path that looked like a clear road straight to the control center.

One look, and Cheng Shi turned on his heel without a word.

His reasoning was simple: if the experiment's mastermind had already anticipated their arrival and was literally rolling out the welcome mat, then anyone who believed there weren't traps inside was delusional.

As a card-carrying member of the "steady" school, Cheng Shi absolutely wasn't about to stupidly walk into the jaws of the trap. So at the doorstep, he chose retreat — pulling Wang Mou into a rapid withdrawal.

Unfortunately, since their location was compromised, leaving was no longer their choice to make.

Countless tentacles plunged from the sky and erupted from the ground simultaneously, weaving into a cage that locked the two inside.

Under normal circumstances, a cage like this would have crumbled at the snap of Cheng Shi's fingers. But their captor had no intention of forcing them. The cage merely bought a chance to speak.

And it wasn't a "person" speaking — it was the tentacles themselves.

The tentacles forming the prison walls ground and twisted against each other, producing a skin-crawling sound:

"Heh heh heh... You've come all this way. Why don't you dare enter?"

Do you fear me? Or do you fear drawing closer to Truth?

The method for divinity assembly — I've placed it right at the end of that corridor. Come in, and I guarantee you'll get everything you want."

Wang Mou's brow knotted tight.

The voice unmistakably belonged to his original body, 0221. But why was he being so... courteous toward the two of them?

This wasn't like him at all. Wang Mou knew exactly what kind of person his original body was. The more accommodating 0221 acted, the bigger the problem lurking inside.

So the doctor frowned deeply, searching for weak points in the cage and attempting to break free. Meanwhile, Cheng Shi seemed to have realized something. He suddenly smiled, gazed calmly at the passage gaping open in the building's mid-level, and asked:

"Our fear should please you, shouldn't it, 0221?"

You set up this grand chess game precisely to harvest our desires and emotions, didn't you?

Or do you feel the chaos hasn't yielded enough — so you want to squeeze a bit more from us personally?

Since you've shown yourself so brazenly, does that mean your experiment is nearing success?

Is that why you're so eager to see us walk in? Isn't that right?

Heh. How interesting. So let me ask — who exactly do you want walking in?

Both me and the doctor? Or... just me?"

...

Chapter 778: You Wouldn't Happen to Be His Lapdog, Would You, 0221?

The tentacles woven into the cage froze in unison — then emitted a skin-crawling laugh.

"Heh heh heh... Clever. Worthy of you.

Of course, Weijin is welcome too. After all, he is me. I am him.

We are both Truth's followers. There is fundamentally no difference between us."

"The differences couldn't be bigger." Cheng Shi snorted, lips curling with distaste. "I see. So you already know.

I'm guessing this invitation didn't come from you — it came from him, didn't it?

What's the matter — has Zangier sensed that his finger is on me?"

The instant Cheng Shi finished speaking, the doctor's face contorted. His entire body shuddered. He stared at Cheng Shi in disbelief:

"What... did you say? Who?

Zangier?!

He's... here?" In that moment, Wang Mou's perpetually composed, serious tone fractured.

"Heh heh heh... I enjoy dealing with clever people.

But I do not enjoy those cleverer than me.

Still — he's taken an interest in you. So you've earned the privilege."

As 0221's voice grew clearer, the cage of tentacles gradually dispersed — re-weaving themselves into a staircase that stretched from the duo's feet up to the passage gaping in the building's mid-level.

Cheng Shi eyed the slick, squirming steps, his eyelid twitching violently.

'The "clever person" wouldn't happen to be me, would it?'

'Let's not. Don't build me up to knock me down. This Clown has plenty of self-awareness. A dash of cunning, sure — quick thinking, maybe — but wisdom on par with Truth or Folly...'

'Sorry. I'm the class dunce. Not that sharp.'

Cheng Shi chuckled self-deprecatingly. He didn't take the first step. Instead, he tossed out another question: "So what about Wei Mu — do you like him?"

It was an exquisitely crafted probe. As Truth's arch-nemesis, Folly's Chosen Wei Mu was widely regarded as the ceiling of player intelligence. If 0221 acknowledged that, it would cost him three notches of momentum in the face of Cheng Shi's offhand question. But if he refused to acknowledge it, that meant he was confident in his own intellect — and also proved that Wei Mu was not an accomplice in this Truth game, but merely someone who'd forced his way into the equation.

The question also sealed off the option of not answering, because deflection was, in many ways, tantamount to concession — and would cost momentum all the same.

Even the frowning doctor beside him recognized Cheng Shi had posed an exquisitely pointed question. But he also knew his original body would never take the bait or step into the pit. Even if 0221 genuinely considered himself inferior to Wei Mu, he would never admit it in front of Cheng Shi — not here, not now.

So what they heard was this:

"Heh heh heh... Interesting question.

Comparisons without controlled variables are false propositions to begin with. But I'm happy to answer outside an academic framework.

I like how he scurries about hiding like a filthy rat — very clever of him. But I don't care for that lofty, nostril-gazing attitude of his.

People always have two sides. When you see someone being helpful, Fate Weaver, have you ever considered that beneath that help might lurk lethal intent?"

"..."

Cheng Shi had, of course, considered that — otherwise he wouldn't have parted ways with Wei Mu so decisively. But he hadn't figured out where the "lethal intent" lay.

He didn't dwell on it. He simply found 0221's answer amusing, so he went on the offensive with sarcasm:

"I've done some research on Folly. I understand He worships the principle of 'seeing is knowing.' So have you considered: when you think Wei Mu is looking down his nose at you... maybe it's actually you who's placed yourself beneath him?"

You knew full well Wei Mu had designs on your experiment, yet you still relied on him to funnel all these players inside so you could complete it. Doesn't that kind of 'burying your head in the sand' imply you'd already 'lost'?

A gracious, wholesale loss!

Hmm? Am I right?"

"Hah — noisy!"

The Truth follower seemed rattled. He was nowhere near as composed as his Benefactor, Truth, had been when facing Deceit at the Assembly of Gods. Which proved he still had a ways to go before reaching true Truth.

But whether or not 0221 was near "Truth," Cheng Shi was getting very close to "truth."

Because the sky-blotting tentacles were lashing toward him again. If he just stood there much longer without reacting, he'd soon be meeting "truth" in person.

And at that moment, Wang Mou acted first. The man who was "no different" from 0221 launched with zero wind-up. His nimble silhouette darted between countless tentacles, trails of white luminance — condensed from Truth's power — linking together around Cheng Shi in a brilliant web. Moments later, pure white blazed and blood sprayed through severed flesh.

A peak player was a peak player. Wang Mou rarely resorted to violence, but that didn't mean he couldn't fight. At this level, brainpower alone wasn't always enough to convince teammates to believe in Truth.

Especially as an Assassination Doctor — the class among all assassin specializations most steeped in the art of traditional killing. He excelled at identifying an enemy's weak points and delivering the most precise, perfectly timed strike.

Tentacles fell in sliced segments like rain. In moments, a wall of minced flesh rose half a man's height around Cheng Shi's feet.

Cheng Shi raised an impressed eyebrow at the doctor's handiwork — his first time seeing Wang Mou in combat. He hadn't expected such clean work. But clean or not, no one could hold off an infinite tide of tentacles. Not everyone was Big Cat.

So before long, tentacles from every direction swallowed Cheng Shi and Wang Mou entirely.

Wang Mou's expression grew grave. His back against the wall, dagger flashing like a butterfly, he never stopped cutting. But Cheng Shi — from the attack's very beginning — hadn't resisted, hadn't supported, hadn't done anything. He just stood there, apparently waiting for the tentacles to reach him.

The charging tentacles obliged. They swept around Wang Mou and finally arrived at Cheng Shi. Each one sharpened to a needle-point or crack of a barbed whip, all poised to slam into him simultaneously — but the instant they were about to graze his skin, the entire space froze.

Of course, as an Another Day Thief, Cheng Shi hadn't used a single ability. He simply watched with a faint smile as the tentacles stopped of their own accord.

That was right — the freeze had nothing to do with Time. It was 0221's tentacles that stopped themselves.

And Cheng Shi's smile deepened.

"What — you think I can't die yet? Still want to wring a few more drops of desire and emotion out of me?"

Not gonna lie — you might be even greedier than I am."

With a contemptuous scoff, Cheng Shi stared at the tentacle-tip nearest his pupil. Then without warning, he snapped his head forward — lunging to impale himself on it.

Arrogant as the move was, it was functionally suicide.

Yet to everyone's shock — as he lurched forward, every tentacle in his path recoiled instantly, as if electrified, pulling back to avoid his charge and narrowly "saving" the Clown's life.

Confirmation received. Cheng Shi's face twisted into pure mockery as he threw his head back and laughed.

"I really did think you and Zangier would have a collaborative relationship. But now? Pfft—

I overestimated you.

You wouldn't happen to be his lapdog, would you, 0221?"

...

Chapter 779: Fate Weaver, Let's Make a Deal

Hearing Cheng Shi's brazen response, the blood-soaked Wang Mou beside him finally caught up.

Zangier was actually here!

He'd appeared in reality — far from the Land of Hope, far from the Stars Dagger, far from the Erudition Presidium!

How had he managed it?!

Setting that aside — so the great leader of the Creation Alchemy Department was searching for his finger?

How had he known his finger would appear inside this experiment site?

Was it premeditated, or a spur-of-the-moment decision?

Given the current situation, 0221 was clearly wary. He didn't dare attack Cheng Shi — apparently fearing that the Fate Weaver had done something to the finger. If killing Cheng Shi meant losing the finger forever, the risk was too great!

So this finger was supremely important to 0221. And the Fate Weaver had realized that before Wang Mou had — leveraging it as a bargaining chip to protect them both!

'What a sharp Fate Weaver!'

Wang Mou looked at Cheng Shi with newfound astonishment, feeling he'd once again underestimated this seemingly carefree Fate Weaver.

But had Cheng Shi really planned this far ahead?

Not at all!

Cheng Shi had just said it himself: he possessed quick thinking, but in terms of true wisdom, he couldn't match 0221.

So no matter how cautious and calculated he was, he hadn't been able to guess 0221's intentions. He knew the Zangier finger in his possession would connect to the experiment, but without more information, he'd had no idea how to use it proactively.

Not until moments ago — not until he sensed the other party's hunger for the finger. From that instant, the Clown's quick wits kicked in.

He'd impulsively tested the depth of 0221's desire. He probed how far the man's need went — whether it was enough that he wouldn't gamble even the slightest chance of an "accident."

Of course, Cheng Shi would never truly put himself in mortal danger. He'd had a finger on the trigger — his mental snap-of-the-fingers — the entire time.

If the tentacles hadn't retreated, Cheng Shi would have. Even losing an eye, he could use the combined power of Fate and Time to extricate himself from the tentacle encirclement, then heal at his leisure.

So he wasn't being reckless. He'd kept an escape route open all along.

Throughout their journey here, he'd kept a die in his pocket. Every trajectory that die had traveled was the die's past.

And as a dual follower of Fate and Time, Cheng Shi was the one person who knew best how to return to the past!

Fortunately, that contingency went unused. The probe yielded satisfying results: 0221 was indeed terrified of anything happening to that finger. Even his attacks had been pure bluff.

Once Cheng Shi confirmed this, his formerly clueless position in this standoff suddenly flipped — and he became the one successfully "bluffing."

"What — afraid to kill me?"

You won't know if the finger disappears unless you try."

"..." The writhing tentacle mass froze once more, then receded like a tide.

And as the sky-blotting tentacles vanished, a figure appeared in the building's passageway — one half bloated, one half withered.

0221!

The Truth Chosen had finally shown himself. He gazed down at the two with an amused expression, his raspy, grating voice calling out:

"Fate Weaver — let's make a deal. I'm certain the terms will satisfy you."

'Don't count on it.'

Cheng Shi rolled his eyes, feeling a twinge of internal conflict.

He absolutely wanted to extract maximum benefit from this deal. But he'd also guessed that 0221 was harvesting desire and emotion from this experiment site's chaos. So his dilemma was whether to rein in his own greed.

After wrestling with it for about half a second, he acknowledged his true nature and returned to form.

"Toss the divinity assembly method down first. Once I've verified it's genuine, we can discuss the rest."

Even Wang Mou found this speechless. Who opens a negotiation by demanding the other party's trump card?

But to his amazement, 0221 agreed. The man actually threw down a manuscript detailing the divinity assembly method — and did so with a smile on his face.

Seeing his original body's smile, Wang Mou's heart sank. He couldn't laugh.

Such "generosity" could only mean one thing: 0221 wasn't worried about them grabbing the manuscript and leaving. Which meant the situation was far worse than he'd imagined. Even with multiple Chosen Ones in the field, 0221 showed no fear whatsoever.

What was his ace?

It had to be Zangier — the Grand Scholar who'd stepped out of the Land of Hope's history. But if that legendary figure was truly here, why hadn't he shown himself?

Could it be that Zangier was the experiment's true mastermind?!

Cheng Shi wasn't nearly as worried as Wang Mou. He arched a brow, watched the manuscript land at his feet, and — prudently not touching it — turned to the doctor with a grin:

"Doctor — seeing me in a new light today?"

Curious why I have so much first-hand intelligence?

Wondering how Zangier escaped from history, and what he's doing here?

Eager to know what's actually written in that divinity assembly manuscript?

If all of those questions pique your curiosity, then perhaps consider joining us.

Once you're one of us... the path toward Truth becomes considerably more efficient."

"?"

Wang Mou was dumbfounded. He'd never imagined that in such a crisis — right in front of his original body — a teammate who already knew his origins would recruit him into some impossibly mysterious-sounding organization.

'What kind of play is this?'

His brow furrowed. He glanced up at 0221, then back at Cheng Shi:

"Are you sure you're inviting me to join an organization, and not trying to get me to walk into a trap — test the manuscript for booby-traps and verify its accuracy for free?"

"???"

Cheng Shi's turn to freeze.

'Dude. Can you not be this smart? People are better off a little dumb.'

'Look at Big Cat. She's adorable.'

Cheng Shi's smile petrified on his face. He couldn't shamelessly say "yes," but he couldn't brazen out a "no" either, so he chuckled vaguely:

"We're all family here — don't talk about walking into traps. I'd love to do it myself, but I can't read the thing.

There's a saying: 'the capable should do more.' That philosophy actually brings you closer to Truth, doesn't it, Doctor? And you're already walking toward Truth. So — the capable should do more, right?"

"..." Wang Mou fell silent. He gave Cheng Shi an odd look, deliberated for a moment, and nodded. "Fine."

The doctor was nothing if not pragmatic. The word had barely left his lips before he bent down, picked up the manuscript, and began leafing through it. But as he read, this Truth follower's expression grew stranger and stranger. By the last page, he'd broken composure entirely — and laughed.

But the laughter was drenched in mockery and contempt, as if whatever the manuscript contained was utterly worthless.

Laughing alongside him, up at the passage entrance — 0221.

"Heh heh heh... So — the real from the fake has been ascertained. Now then, let's talk about our deal."

"Shut up." Cheng Shi cut him off, frowned, and turned to the doctor. "It's real?"

Wang Mou flipped back a couple of pages, closed the manuscript, and nodded with a sigh of keen emotion:

"Real enough, I suppose.

But I never imagined the method for assembling divinity would be this absurd. And this... simple!"

...

Chapter 780: Too Bad — You Took the Wrong Path

"What do you mean, 'simple'?"

Cheng Shi froze. If it were truly simple, then what had thousands of years of the Tower of Logic's efforts on the Land of Hope amounted to?

What about the players' tireless trials and research?

Hadn't 0221 been the only one to discover the secret of divinity assembly? If something that significant could be called "simple," why had no one else ever figured it out?

"Explain!"

In that moment, Cheng Shi's curiosity about the method far overshadowed his desire to deal with 0221.

"In truth, his so-called 'method' barely qualifies as research. I never expected that 0221 — the one who'd walked furthest on the path of Truth — would bow down to 'god-worship.'"

"Hah — the path of venerating gods is itself a form of knowledge. Mortals are simply blinded by the leaf before their eyes, lost in their own egos."

"Shut up. One more word and the deal's off." Cheng Shi pointed at Wang Mou. "You — keep going!"

"As everyone knows, only deities possess 'faith blueprints' — the schematics for assembling divinity. Scholars at the Tower of Logic spent millennia and never found a way in. Not because they hadn't thought of 0221's approach, but because they wanted to forge a path through mortal hands alone, thereby drawing closer to the gods.

But his method... hah. He merely borrowed 'a god's hand' — routing what the gods could already do through his own process!

Fate Weaver — the manuscript describes a specific tool absolutely necessary for divinity assembly. Do you know what it is?"

Seeing the doctor's disdainful expression and connecting it to this experiment and his own guesses, Cheng Shi's pupils contracted. Something clicked. He spoke in stunned disbelief:

"It wouldn't be... Zangier's finger?!"

"Exactly! Zangier's finger!"

My original body also possesses one of Zangier's fingers!

Which means he'd established contact with the Grand Scholar trapped inside the Stars Dagger far earlier than anyone knew — even before the wider player base discovered Zangier's existence."

The doctor raised the manuscript and shook it:

"This documents his entire experimental journey. Starting from a certain day, half a month after the Faith Game's descent, he began attempting various Truth-based experimental protocols. The ideas were novel and bold — but without exception, they all failed.

Then, past the second month, the recorded approaches suddenly transformed — becoming far more radical and uninhibited!"

Cheng Shi frowned, venturing cautiously: "Was that when your original body became 0221?"

"Precisely!"

This slice designated 0221 somehow discovered his true identity and eliminated his original body during that month. Not only that — he possessed knowledge even the original never had, and his divinity research began advancing at breakneck speed!

Everything you see here wasn't developed recently. He'd been working on this project for half a year — he simply hadn't implemented it until one month ago!

And the reason he could sustain such lengthy experimental preparation and divinity research was all because he'd found a severed finger of Grand Scholar Zangier!

Can you believe it? Months ago — when 0221 replaced our original body as the new host — he already had Zangier's finger!

And back then, in my understanding, the vast majority of players didn't even know who Zangier was!

So I don't think he discovered his identity by accident. He recognized himself through the Grand Scholar's words!

He probably stumbled into the Stars Dagger during some trial, was fortunate enough to receive Zangier's guidance, and with that support found the opportunity to replace the original body!

And those wild, imaginative ideas aren't products of his own genius. He's most likely just the Grand Scholar's hands — nothing more than an operator executing ancient experimental concepts!

Because this manuscript is riddled with references to the finger's use. His ability to assemble divinity relies entirely on this tool. But the critical element isn't the finger itself — it's Zangier!

Because Zangier had secretly forged himself into a pseudo-god, his finger acquired the power to manipulate divinity!

A pseudo-god is pseudo, sure — but it's still a 'god'!

Use a 'god's' finger plus a 'god's' will to reassemble fragments carved from actual deities — how could it not succeed?!

So rather than crediting 0221, the real success belongs to Zangier. Because this 0221 is nothing but a tool Zangier uses to enact his will!

Fate Weaver, you were right — my original body, the one called Truth's Chosen, is probably nothing more than Zangier's dog!

Everything he's done has been for that Grand Scholar who stole the gods' authority!

If what you say is true, then this entire experiment wasn't prepared by 0221 for himself — it was prepared for Zangier. And the reason the Grand Scholar managed to escape from the Land of Hope's history is inseparable from 0221's assistance!"

"!!!"

Cheng Shi was shaken. He'd anticipated some connection between 0221 and Zangier, but he hadn't imagined it dated back that far.

Yet what shocked him even more was this: if 0221's breakthrough came from borrowing "a god's power," then what about Wei Mu?

What was the Folly Chosen's successful replication based on?!

Did he also have divine power to draw on?

Or had that true genius — inspired by 0221 — actually cracked divinity assembly for real?!

'God damn... no way...'

Cheng Shi went numb. And just then, 0221, perched above, burst into wild laughter.

"Heh heh heh — correct. Your deductions are all right. Had I not encountered Lord Zangier in a trial, I might never have known I was merely a slice.

But so what if I'm a slice?

The distinction between original and copy isn't decided by individual consciousness. It's the consensus of the collective that matters — and Truth's consensus above all.

So when I'm close enough to Him, those who look up to me will naturally accept me as the original."

Cheng Shi's eye twitched. He glanced at the doctor, thinking: 'You finally sound a little like 0221. On this point, at least, you two really are cut from the same cloth.'

"Hah — Lord Zangier is the mentor who guided me toward Truth!

Standing on a giant's shoulders, one sees farther. And standing on the Hanged Man of Doomsday's shoulders, I can draw ever closer to Truth!

So what if I borrow a 'god's' hand? Once I break through that limitation and reach Their heights, I can still... deconstruct the underlying logic, reconstruct the assembly clues, and through my own effort, step by step...

Become one of Them!"

0221's laughter turned manic. His bloated half shook uncontrollably; his withered half twitched and spasmed. In that moment, the Truth Chosen looked every bit the genuine lunatic — howling with deranged abandon from the building's midsection.

Watching this spectacle, Cheng Shi sneered and spat.

"Too bad. You took the wrong path."

"?" O221 went still. His expression turned dark as he glanced down, sneering in return: "What the hell would you know."

Cheng Shi's smile only deepened. He showed no anger — just shrugged indifferently:

"I don't know anything. But I do know this: if Truth's will were as you describe, the Tower of Logic wouldn't have gone thousands of years without producing a single god.

Were all those Grand Scholars throughout history dumber than Zangier?

Could they truly not conceive of borrowing a god's hand to achieve a god's work?

Of course they could. They were brilliant. Yet they never used this method. Why do you think that is?

Or let me rephrase: they'd already assembled a pseudo-god, yet none of them ever tried that same assembly method on themselves. Why?

I think your master Zangier probably never intended to go down this road either. But his experiment failed. He was even abandoned by his own mother. It's hard to say whether that bitter, broken life warped his personality — driving him onto a crooked path.

But consider: a road that millennia of Truth followers' collective wisdom never dared to walk — what kind of road could that possibly be?

Still think you've got a bright future?

Heh. 'Becoming a god'?

If there were such a thing as a God of Clowns, I'd say you fit the bill.

You haven't... fused with Deceit too, have you?"

"..."

"..."

...