

## The Gods 351

### Chapter 351: Scorpio's Narrow Escape

Once again with Cheng Shi in the lead, the two descended the staircase one after the other, faces etched with solemnity.

Halfway down the spiral stairs, they spotted a blood-drenched figure who'd crashed into a filing shelf and was struggling feebly on the ground.

Their gazes sharpened. They recognized the injured person at once.

Scorpio—the Another Day Assassin!

And they could guess who'd wounded him, because the little assassin's body was practically covered in residual [Oblivion] energy.

But even with a dying, critically wounded man downstairs, Cheng Shi didn't rush over. He walked while watching all sides. Zhang Jizu trailed behind, raising his hand to toss a healing spell down—keeping the little assassin alive.

Only after both confirmed there was no immediate danger did they slowly approach Scorpio, hoisting the poor teammate—right shoulder blown through, flesh and blood ruined across his body—off the floor.

Scorpio's face was deathly pale. Seeing his two teammates rescue him, gratitude flickered in his eyes, but despite opening his mouth for a long while, no sound came out.

Zhang Jizu raised his hand again, casting a Purification spell. Its glow was slightly different from standard purification—Cheng Shi couldn't immediately identify the talent behind it.

He could only tell it was highly effective, because the instant the light faded, Scorpio immediately found his voice.

"Watch out for Mo Shu! Something's wrong with him!"

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow. Though facing Scorpio, his eyes kept sweeping the surroundings.

"Why did he attack you?"

"Don't know."

"?"

The two looked at Scorpio in surprise. His face was grim as he continued:

"I truly don't know."

"I was the first into the compound. I stood in the shadow of the courtyard wall, waiting for the rest of you. The Chieftain dropped down next to me. We exchanged a look and watched each other's backs."

"Mo Shu appeared right after. He approached us with zero signs of hostility—then attacked without any reason whatsoever. One punch blew through my right shoulder!"

Cheng Shi's brow furrowed deeply. This didn't make sense.

Assassins were the most alert profession by nature. Especially on a trial's first day, when everyone had just met—how could Scorpio possibly have let his guard down?

Scorpio clearly saw through Cheng Shi's doubt. His face turned even darker:

"He's strong. Far stronger than I expected."

"Not to sound harsh, but before you two saved me—I didn't trust a single person in this trial. I'm an assassin who lives in [Time]'s corners. I don't trust easily. So I was wary of everyone."

Cheng Shi studied Scorpio with a half-smile: "Even now?"

Scorpio's voice hitched. He nodded stiffly: "Yes. Even now."

Truth be told, Cheng Shi and Zhang Jizu had already noticed Scorpio's vigilance. His right shoulder was wrecked, yet his left hand had never pressed the wound—instead staying behind his back in an awkward posture as they'd pulled him up.

He was guarding against both of them. Understandably so—he'd just been obliterated by a seemingly harmless pastry chef.

"Stop wasting time. Keep going—faster."

Zhang Jizu was an exceedingly practical man. He healed Scorpio while urging him to lay out the full story.

"That's what I mean when I say Mo Shu is powerful. I've never encountered a Scavenger in this tier who could annihilate their own killing intent."

"The vast majority of [Oblivion] followers I've met have powerful [Oblivion] techniques, but because of a personal talent of mine, I can sense their destructive urges—and thus cautiously avoid them."

"But this man was different. He had every sign of being alive and human, yet was completely devoid of destructive urges. So when I sensed him approaching 'without hostility,' I didn't think twice."

"But then..."

"Then he ambushed you and Gou Feng. You instantly fled into a projected future, while Gou Feng was chased into the inner hall."

The rest could be pieced together from the scene. Scorpio nodded, confirming Cheng Shi's deduction.

"It's my automatic defense mechanism. You should know that Another Day Assassins get only one chance per day to escape into a projection. As an assassin, unless I have a target that absolutely must die, I always save that chance for the last possible moment—a contingency."

"But today's 'contingency' came way too suddenly."

Cheng Shi's eyebrow rose at this.

"So you're saying you're out of backup plans now?"

Scorpio jolted, then scrambled half a step backward in fright. Even Zhang Jizu shot Cheng Shi a startled look, wondering if he was considering murder and robbery.

But then Cheng Shi flashed a roguish grin and spread his hands, silently mouthing:

"Just lightening the mood. Relax."

"..."

Scorpio nearly burst into tears. 'Lighten the mood?! I was perfectly calm before—now my legs are jelly!'

"Since you projected into the future here, tell me—what did you see?"

Scorpio studied Cheng Shi for a long moment, inching slightly closer to Zhang Jizu, then shook his head:

"Nothing. The [Oblivion] energy in Mo Shu's attack was too terrifying. I burned through every defensive measure I had. It took thirty-one projections before I barely managed, on the last one, to withstand the [Oblivion] power eroding my entire body. I barely clung to life and overwrote that projection onto the present."

"During all of that, I couldn't pay attention to my surroundings at all. But I can confirm there was definitely no one here—at least not on the first floor."

"Because if even one stranger had been present, I might have died inside the projection and never returned."

"That's odd." Cheng Shi's frown deepened. He looked at squinty-eyes in confusion: "Why didn't he attack the two of us?"

Zhang Jizu was clearly pondering the same question.

At the moment everyone had split up to enter the compound, Mo Shu had been the third to move. If he wanted to annihilate teammates as an offering to his Benefactor, he could easily have chosen the priest and mage outside the wall instead of the warrior and assassin inside.

After all, the professions outside appeared far easier to deal with—and Zhang Jizu was his faith rival.

By that logic, Mo Shu should have gone for Cheng Shi and Zhang Jizu first.

Even if the Gravekeeper could keep someone alive, if Mo Shu had truly hidden his strength—as Scorpio described—he could have banished them both into the world of [Oblivion] to fend for themselves until their last drop of mental energy was spent.

But he didn't.

Even stranger: during self-introductions, Mo Shu hadn't lied. The Master of Deception hadn't flagged any hidden scores or false identity.

Given all that, Mo Shu was either a high-ranking [Oblivion] warrior with means to bypass the Master of Deception, or a [Deceit] or [Chaos] follower who possessed powerful [Oblivion] techniques.

Cheng Shi leaned toward the former. An impersonator would typically emit some destructive intent deliberately—otherwise they'd draw suspicion. Someone like Mo Shu who led with a faith-contradicting persona would get flagged immediately. That wasn't a con artist's playbook.

'High-ranking... [Oblivion]... warrior...'

Cheng Shi's brow creased. He looked at Zhang Jizu:

"That janitor—you should know him, right?"

Squinty-eyes blinked, then narrowed his gaze further and nodded:

"You suspect it's him? Not impossible. He should have those capabilities."

Cheng Shi was taken aback: "What do you mean 'not impossible'? If you know him, can't you recognize him?"

"Knowing him is just knowing he exists."

"He's extremely secretive. You should know—his ID is 'Complete Deletion.'"

"I only know he's a Scavenger. As for his real name, his face—not only do I not know, no one else probably remembers either. Among us, probably only Li Jingming would know, since he remembers everything."

"?"

'Hold on—Dragon King is currently our [Deceit]'s Chosen One. Talking about him like that is a bit disrespectful to the Fun God.'

Cheng Shi grumbled internally but wasn't particularly shocked. The name, however, hit Scorpio like a thunderbolt.

'What? Who? Li Jingming?'

'Isn't that the former [Memory] Chosen One—now the [Deceit] Chosen One?'

'How'd the conversation end up on him?'

He blinked in bewilderment, asking hesitantly: "You just mentioned... Li Jingming? The Chosen One who broke his oath from [Memory] to [Deceit]?"

Zhang Jizu nodded: "Yes. Though he broke his oath, he still walks his path of memory."

"But what does Li Jingming have to do with any of this?" Scorpio was lost.

Cheng Shi smiled: "I'd like to know too. And speaking of which—as a fellow Chosen One, haven't you ever been matched against that janitor?"

Zhang Jizu nodded, then shook his head:

"I have been matched with him. But all I remember is that such a person exists. Everything else—his appearance, his personality—is extremely blurry."

!!!

That one sentence told Cheng Shi exactly what squinty-eyes meant.

[Memory]!

The [Oblivion] Chosen One had likely chosen [Memory] as his secondary faith!

'Well, well, well. Truly impressive!'

Bai Fei had once said she walked the path of [Oblivion], endlessly giving away her own memories in pursuit of rebirth through others' memories.

This [Oblivion] Chosen took the exact opposite approach—constantly annihilating others' memories of him, maintaining his own mystique.

'Two diametrically opposed practices, both earning His favor? How does that work?'

'Could this be another [Prosperity]-type situation?'

'Wait, that doesn't track—didn't He try to swoop in when [Truth] besieged [Prosperity]? If the two of Them are similar... born from the same root, why the rush to burn each other, brother?'

While Cheng Shi's thoughts meandered, Scorpio's brain was overheating.

He'd clearly connected "fellow Chosen One" with the [Death] Chosen One's ID "Cemetery Management" and the [Life] priest standing before him.

And when it all clicked... his CPU exploded.

'Zhang Jizu is the [Death] Chosen One?'

'Mo Shu is possibly the [Oblivion] Chosen One?'

'What??'

'What did I do to deserve getting hunted by the [Oblivion] Chosen One, then rescued by the [Death] Chosen One?'

'Is a little 2,100-point assassin supposed to be caught up in a clash between gods?'

At this thought, Scorpio swallowed hard, nervously straightened his back, and turned his gaze toward Cheng Shi.

If those two were both on the list, then what about this one?

Who was he?

A [Prosperity] follower...

'Could he possibly be... Bald Uses Rejoice?'

...

Chapter 352: Bro, Are You Serious Right Now?

"Did you know Gou Feng is dead?"

Zhang Jizu looked at Scorpio, carefully studying his expression.

Scorpio blanked, shaking his head in confusion. Then his face went another shade paler.

"That [Oblivion] Cho—... Scavenger attacked me first. I immediately fled into a projected future. I had no idea what happened to Gou Feng—I only learned from Bal—... the Wood Elf that he'd been attacked too."

"He's dead?"

Cheng Shi caught the aborted "Bald" and found his expression shifting to something exceedingly strange.

'What—does he think I'm Baldy?'

'Not entirely unreasonable. But if I impersonate Big Cat, she's not going to beat me up afterward, is she?'

Mulling this over with a faint smile, he casually continued:

"Mm. Struck from the front, one-hit kill. Death by short spear. Doesn't look like an [Oblivion] technique—more like... an assassin's."

With that, Cheng Shi also narrowed his eyes at Scorpio.

Zhang Jizu internally marveled that not a single honest word left a liar's mouth, yet had to admit that this half-truth, half-bluff technique was genuinely useful.

Scorpio's pupils contracted at Cheng Shi's words. He hadn't expected Gou Feng to have been killed not by [Oblivion]'s power, but by a thrust. But he quickly realized the two big shots were pressuring him to clear himself.

Since he hadn't done it, he had nothing to fear. He grimly drew his weapon—a miniature circular blade resembling a curved dagger.

"The Arc of Time Restoration. My weapon. A [Time] curved blade that can delay opponents. I also use it to excise my own flesh to mitigate pain. Before healing me, the Gravekeeper should have sensed this blade's residual energy on my wounds."

Cheng Shi didn't even glance at Zhang Jizu for confirmation, because he knew Scorpio wasn't lying. But if the little assassin truly was a victim, then that Scavenger was also a kill specialist no less deadly than an assassin.

"Since you're cleared, Gou Feng's death gets interesting."

"After killing Gou Feng, why did the Scavenger deliberately leave [Oblivion]'s residual energy behind?"

"Does he want everyone to know it was him?"

"If he doesn't mind being exposed, then why has he vanished?"

These were the biggest questions on everyone's mind. Zhang Jizu squinted hard, thinking for a long while before shaking his head:

"If it really is him, probably no one can guess what he's planning."

"We can't spend too much energy on the investigation and manhunt. Staying here isn't safe either. If you think there are still clues here, we could take the archive books. We'll find another location to study them. If there aren't any clues, we leave first."

"A murderous teammate plus an abandoned Inquisition—two negatives stacked together work against us."

Zhang Jizu was indeed a pragmatic man. He disliked wasting time and was cautious by nature—no dancing beneath crumbling walls.

But he didn't realize this suggestion froze Cheng Shi right where he stood.

'What do I do? He wants to take the files. If Brother Mouth keeps refusing to help and I have to fabricate translations for all these archives by myself—wasting saliva is one thing, but leading the team astray is way worse.'

'But if I don't take them, this might be the trial's only lead. Leave it rotting on the ground and then what?'

'Hmm? Wait—hold on!'

Cheng Shi suddenly realized he'd overlooked something: who said these crumbling archives were the trial's only clue?

This seemingly-abandoned Inquisition still had staff members who visited regularly!

Furthermore, the hanging dead infants on the second floor could be another lead. So rather than hauling away unreadable files nobody wanted, it'd be faster and more accurate to track down those staff members directly.

Interrogating people would yield better intel than poring over books he couldn't read.

Having thought this through, Cheng Shi spoke with absolute seriousness:

"Let's head out. Go back to Dolgod's church and ask around about who's assigned to this place—one person or several. Then we work them over."

"As for Gou Feng's corpse... just leave it."

"If whatever's on the second floor was secretly set up by a staff member, they'll clean it up for us. But if it's the church's hidden secret, then the church will quietly try to find whoever broke into the second floor—and the killer."

"Maybe they'll get lucky and find our two missing teammates before we do?"

Zhang Jizu nodded approvingly. The two immediately started walking.

The freshly-healed Scorpio blanked, then hurriedly fell in behind them with maximum caution.

Sensing the little assassin's non-hostile reaction, Cheng Shi quietly relaxed his grip on the ring.

'Tsk—shame. Didn't get to kill a [Time] follower to entertain the Benefactor.'

'Then again, having a [Time] tool running errands is more efficient than just him and the Gravekeeper.'

The three proceeded cautiously until they reached the Inquisition's sealed front gates. Just as they prepared to leave, they spotted a familiar figure creeping through the alley shadows toward them, visible through gaps in the iron gate bars.

Cheng Shi stopped. His lips curved upward.

'What a coincidence—running into him here!'

'Then again, given a [Folly] follower's intellect, finding this place in such short time isn't surprising.'

Indeed—the figure emerging from the alley shadows was none other than the [Folly] follower who'd looked down his nose at everyone in the lounge before storming off alone.

And the instant the three spotted him, that ever-vigilant Nostrils likewise noticed his "teammates" behind the gate.

What he hadn't expected was that these foolish teammates had somehow gotten ahead of him—and appeared to have already finished exploring this mysterious, little-known Evil Infant Inquisition.

'How... is that possible?'

And just as the [Folly] follower froze in shock, the three inside the gate were equally rooted to the spot.

Scorpio, standing behind the two big shots, mumbled in bewilderment:

"Uh, guys—I'm pretty sure our [Folly] teammate... was a man?"

Zhang Jizu studied the figure through narrowed eyes for a long while, his gaze traveling from head to toe over the [Folly] follower's now noticeably more... curvaceous frame. He let out a strangely-toned "Mm."

Cheng Shi's jaw nearly hit the floor—but a moment later, his grin stretched ear to ear.

'Bro, are you serious right now?'

'Even if it's for a disguise, did you have to go this far?'

'And if it's not for a disguise, then why on earth did you sneak off to the Prayer Room?'

'Don't tell me you walked into the wrong door. The Prayer Masters in there listen to the full prayer and triple-confirm before granting anyone the right to change sex.'

'So...'

'You just betrayed your little buddy downstairs?'

'Tsk. No comment.'

But credit where credit was due—[Folly]'s follower was genuinely clever. He—no, she.

She had managed to identify both of Dolgod's church institutions in such a short time, personally experienced one of them, and then found her way to the other's doorstep.

Cheng Shi had no idea what this [Folly] follower had been through or why—he only knew that the spectacle before him was too good to pass up. If he didn't play along, he'd be disgracing the Fun God's blessing.

So he shook his head emphatically and addressed his two teammates with perfect solemnity:

"You're seeing things. This trial always had five men and one woman. Our teammate here has been female from the very start. A flawless woman."

"It's simply that her roomy robe hid her figure, and she happens to have slightly androgynous features—which is why you didn't notice."

"?"

Zhang Jizu was long since accustomed to Cheng Shi's nonsense. But Scorpio's forehead was plastered with question marks—at least until he caught Cheng Shi's drift. His eyes lit up and he nodded enthusiastically:

"Right—totally right, big bro!"

Cheng Shi was instantly overjoyed.

'This little assassin—he gets it.'

...

Chapter 353: The Soloist Who Plays to an Empty Hall

When an awkward person doesn't realize they're awkward, the awkwardness inevitably falls on everyone else.

The four of them stared at each other through the closed iron gate. After a moment, the [Folly] follower walked up as if nothing had happened, chin tilted slightly, nostrils scanning the three people behind the gate. Her tone carried a faint sneer:

"I didn't expect you to actually find this place. That was beyond my expectations."

"But I suppose stupidity is temporary. Even the dullest person has their bright moments."

It had to be said—after becoming a woman, this [Folly] follower's voice had become much more pleasant. Not the content, of course—the timbre. A crisp, dulcet tone that immediately evoked an alluring woman. Who could have guessed that this woman had been a nostrils-raised man just an hour ago?

Cheng Shi was having the time of his life. With equally biting sarcasm, he fired back:

"I'd say [Folly] is far more underwhelming. Looking down on everyone all day, but I don't see His followers being all that smart."

"We finished exploring the whole place and you've just found the door?"

"Is it hard to see when you're navigating with your nostrils?"

"Why not use your eyes? Don't like them?"

"Oh right—I forgot. Your eyes are busy venting. Otherwise you'd suffocate, right?"

"Tsk—weird. Swapping the functions of your nose and eyes. I don't think you follow [Folly]—you follow [Chaos]."

"Why are you glaring at me? Am I wrong?"

"Even if I am, tough luck. Endure it. You're outnumbered."

"..."

"..."

"..."

After that barrage, all three present fell silent.

Scorpio stared at Cheng Shi as if witnessing divine descent. Zhang Jizu thought this liar's deception skills were matched only by the venom of his tongue. The [Folly] follower's face turned liver-red, fists clenched at her sides—but she wisely kept her mouth shut.

Because Cheng Shi was right. Three against one—she couldn't win.

Cheng Shi, never one to show mercy, leaned against the gate and knocked twice with a grin:

"Not bad. A wise deity once said everyone must learn patience. I see great potential in you."

"Want to know what happened inside?"

"Tell me what you've gathered. If the intel's useful, I can authorize an information exchange."

The [Folly] follower stared at Cheng Shi with an iron expression. After a long silence, she spoke gravely:

"You didn't find any clues either. Otherwise you wouldn't look like that. No need for mind games—I'll share intel. But first, tell me: where are the other two?"

Cheng Shi's expression stiffened. Inwardly, he was deeply impressed by the [Folly] follower's razor-sharp observation.

However insufferable these [Folly] worshippers were, under their Benefactor's blessing, they were genuinely intelligent. Extraordinarily so.

Cheng Shi didn't press the point. He openly conceded:

"Yes, we came up empty. But aren't you in the same boat?"

"If you had even one piece of useful intel, you'd have turned and walked away by now with your chest out. Why would you stand here swallowing your pride, seeking to cooperate again?"

"Am I wrong, miss?"

"Oh—by the way, I don't even know your name."

Hearing this, the [Folly] follower uncharacteristically didn't counter-attack. She raised an eyebrow with a touch of surprise and regarded Cheng Shi with slightly elevated respect.

But in the next instant, her gaze slid past the three, peering deeper into the compound. She studied the bloodstained Scorpio, then sneered again:

"Looks like someone betrayed you. Heh—though 'betray' is generous. You were just strangers temporarily huddling for warmth. Some people were simply following their own will, and you happened to be in their way."

"It involves that Scavenger, doesn't it?"

"I said it before: warmth that can't be categorized often harbors ulterior malice. I didn't expect it to come true so quickly."

"And the Chieftain?"

"Hollow brotherhood wouldn't fall apart this fast. So—he's dead, isn't he?"

"Your face looks terrible. I suppose I'm right. Those pastries really were problematic."

At this, a sharp glint passed through Cheng Shi's eyes. But he said nothing, because the [Folly] follower wasn't done.

"I'm willing to cooperate. On the condition that none of you act excessively foolish."

"I'm Gao Ya. Singer. 2,377."

'Oh—no wonder the attitude's so lofty. A Soloist who plays to an empty hall!'

Soloist—the singer profession of [Folly].

Cheng Shi didn't immediately accept, nor did he immediately refuse. He just studied Gao Ya with an amused smile:

"I'm curious—what gives you the nerve to propose cooperation?"

"That missing pastry chef is the [Oblivion] Chosen One. He's currently roaming around searching for offerings to his Benefactor. I'm guessing you deduced his motive but not his identity. No matter—I'm generous. That intel's free."

"So—are you scared?"

"And setting him aside, standing before you is an Another Day Assassin, a Gravekeeper, and a Wood Elf. What makes you think you can take on all three?"

"That rock-hard mouth of yours?"

At this point, Cheng Shi chuckled inwardly. 'Hard-mouthed indeed—though at this point, her mouth is the only thing still hard...'

Gao Ya's face went pitch dark. She had correctly deduced many things from observation and exchange—which was precisely why she'd stayed to seek renewed cooperation. But being talked down to so bluntly genuinely infuriated her.

"I may not be able to defeat the three of you. But neither could you keep me here. Wasted effort only slows down the trial—a supremely foolish act."

"Also—the Another Day Assassin and the Gravekeeper might be real. But you—hah—are absolutely no Wood Elf."

"I can tell. You're—"

Gao Ya was gearing up for another analytical flourish, but Cheng Shi had lost patience. They'd come here to leave—four people chattering through an iron gate wasn't exactly productive.

He shot Zhang Jizu a look and discreetly beckoned Scorpio with a finger behind his back.

Both caught his meaning instantly. Smiles curling their lips, they moved.

Gao Ya saw Cheng Shi's subtle gestures. She'd started frowning and retreating mid-sentence—but it was too late. The other two were far faster!

Scorpio vanished into the wall's shadow in the blink of an eye. Zhang Jizu raised a hand and fired a healing spell saturated with overwhelmingly dense restorative energy straight at the [Folly] follower.

Who said healing couldn't be crowd control?

When the healing energy was too massive, it became an attack in itself.

A beam of pale green-tinged white light slammed into Gao Ya, instantly flooding her with so much vitality that her legs buckled. Then Scorpio materialized beside her and drew his Arc of Time Restoration lightly across both her ankles, opening two shallow cuts.

[Time]'s power erupted, binding Gao Ya in place like chains.

Cheng Shi, thoroughly entertained, pulled the rope ladder from his spatial storage to climb out.

Zhang Jizu saw this, sighed, grabbed Cheng Shi's shoulder, and hurled him over the high wall and iron gate like a hammer throw.

'That's some serious strength!'

Cheng Shi was stunned. He frantically adjusted his posture in midair, aiming for a proper tumble-landing. But the moment he straightened up, squinty-eyes had already sailed over the iron gate just as Gou Feng had done earlier, landing right in front of him.

"..."

'Hold on—you call this "hand-to-hand combat"?''

Cheng Shi looked up at Zhang Jizu and suddenly realized he'd misjudged.

What squinty-eyes had meant by "surviving" was surviving in trials involving peak players under extremely complex conditions. In normal trials without peak players, aside from staying alive—he apparently... wasn't exactly incapable of fighting?

"Why are you looking at me like that? Your [Prosperity] methods are too slow. We need to be more efficient."

'Right, right, right—whatever you say, big bro!'

...

Chapter 354: Unofficial History, Baby — Now We're Talking!

Cheng Shi stood up and glanced back one more time at the Inquisition's gate. Sensing no hidden eyes within, he frowned slightly:

"Let's go. Back to the lounge first. He chose to strike where people were scarce—meaning he doesn't want to cause a huge commotion. The church interior is crowded. Staying there might be safer than these desolate alleys."

As he spoke, he pulled several thick ropes from his spatial storage and trussed Gao Ya up tight, then grabbed her hood and dragged her along the ground back the way they'd come.

Zhang Jizu followed in silence, watching the "resigned" Soloist with great interest, lost in his own thoughts.

Scorpio voluntarily took on the role of the squad's eyes and ears, darting between shadows ahead and behind, maintaining maximum vigilance. Granted, such vigilance was utterly useless against a Scavenger who could annihilate his own killing intent—but the cooperative gesture still earned him some goodwill from the other two.

Cheng Shi watched the [Time] assassin, thinking that since he was here as a clown this round, the little assassin's teamwork deserved a carry. No harm in lending him a hand.

After all, [Fate] always forgave. Even if it didn't forgive rival-faith players, it would forgive the act of carrying a rival-faith player to victory.

'So—why not praise [Fate]?'

It wasn't long before the group returned to the church's main hall. They'd crossed numerous alleys and boulevards, passed the bustling church entrance—and even with all these Dolgod citizens, church personnel, and law enforcers watching, Cheng Shi's act of dragging Gao Ya drew zero questions or inquiries.

Only upon returning to the spot where players had originally spawned did Cheng Shi finally explain to his two bewildered teammates with a grin:

"Dolgod is a remarkable place. Every law and religious ordinance here protects exactly one thing: everyone's equal right to procreate."

"So, as long as you haven't stripped anyone of their reproductive ability, you can do anything outrageous, twisted, or downright deranged—and nobody will bat an eye."

"I once—ahem, never mind. Let's get to business."

Cheng Shi's face shifted oddly at some memory. He swallowed whatever he'd been about to say. Zhang Jizu raised an eyebrow and pressed with interest:

"Once what? Do tell."

Scorpio was nodding vigorously off to the side: "Share, big bro! I love hearing you high-level mages talk history."

"...This isn't exactly official history. More like unofficial lore."

"Unofficial history, baby—now we're talking!"

"..." Cheng Shi shook his head with a laugh, organized his wording, then rephrased what he'd been about to say.

'Can't exactly tell them these stories came from clients I personally delivered babies for.'

"I once read a story in the unofficial annals of Dolgod. The exact year is unverifiable. The gist was:"

"A citizen of Dolgod, while stealing from her neighbor's property, discovered that the neighbor had dismembered her husband and buried him in the backyard. Terrified, the citizen reported the neighbor to the church."

"On the day of the trial, the neighbor argued that she hadn't deprived her husband of his reproductive rights—so the church couldn't sentence her for blasphemy. The judges demanded evidence. So she brought out a porcelain jar, opened it, and produced..."

"Her husband's 'reproductive instrument.'"

"She claimed it was from the Uda Rioters' God Reproduction technique. This way, she could be rid of her husband's detestable face without committing the crime of blasphemy."

"The judges didn't take her word for it and demanded proof. So then..."

Scorpio was dumbstruck. He'd never dreamed that unofficial history could be this wild. He unconsciously swallowed, asking in a dry voice:

"Then what?"

"Then she was acquitted."

"Huh?" Scorpio was profoundly shaken. His eyes blinked rapidly, mouth opening and closing, face plastered with disbelief. "Huh? But—"

Even the perpetually composed Zhang Jizu's pupils contracted slightly. He let out a discreet cough.

"Ahem... unofficial history is indeed... unofficial."

Cheng Shi also looked deeply moved.

'Yeah. If I hadn't personally delivered a baby for that story's protagonist, who'd have believed it was real?'

Reality was far more absurd than fiction. And the reality of the Land of Hope—no, the reality of the Life Era—was built entirely out of absurdity.

As the three standing people wore their various expressions, Gao Ya, lying on the ground, let out a cold laugh:

"Ignorance. That's not unofficial history. It's real."

Zhang Jizu narrowed his eyes, looking down at her. Cheng Shi blinked, then raised an eyebrow with a smile:

"Oh? And how would you know?"

Gao Ya glanced at Cheng Shi, looked away to avoid his gaze—and Zhang Jizu's—and instead fixed her haughty stare on Scorpio, as if condescending to bestow her knowledge:

"Anyone who's studied the history of the Life Era's Three Wu Tribes would know this story has to be true."

'Three Wu Tribes?'

Cheng Shi frowned. The term didn't seem to exist in his memory. He turned to Zhang Jizu, who raised an eyebrow—clearly having heard of it—but his silence meant he didn't know much either.

Time for another history lesson, it seemed. Only this time, the teacher was...

Cheng Shi glanced at Gao Ya, chuckled, and crouched down, methodically untying her bonds.

"Alright, quit the mutual contempt."

"You messed with my head specifically so I'd bring you back here. Since you want to cooperate, then cooperate properly. Put away that [Folly] look-down-through-the-nostrils routine."

"Otherwise, we have no room for a diva like you."

"But I don't have the Scavenger's level of destructive urges either. If you don't want to cooperate, just leave."

"Of course—if you're willing to cooperate, how about telling us about these Three Wu Tribes?"

At this, everyone froze.

Gao Ya stared at Cheng Shi in surprise, apparently not expecting her little scheme to be exposed.

Zhang Jizu's lips curved. He shook his head with a smile: "So you knew all along."

Scorpio, on the other hand, was momentarily confused. But after studying everyone's reactions, it clicked—the Soloist had wanted to come back with them all along!

Yes—that was exactly Gao Ya's intent.

During their earlier encounter, she'd spotted the three inside the Inquisition even before they'd noticed her. By the time she saw them, she'd already deduced roughly seventy to eighty percent of what this little squad had been through. She'd decided then to rejoin the group rather than risk going solo.

But she had self-awareness. Setting aside her ingrained [Folly] personality, the reputation of [Folly] followers alone made it nearly impossible to integrate into any player group.

So she'd been laying groundwork from the start—and her method was the Soloist's talent: subtly influencing the squad's leader, Cheng Shi!

The Soloist was a fascinating support class. [Folly]'s blessing to singers was the ability to make those influenced by the Soloist's melody feel a sense of agreement toward a designated target.

In simple terms: making one person's words and decisions more persuasive and rallying.

So she'd begun playing her melody ahead of time, subtly affecting the three and designating Cheng Shi as the target. Then she'd slipped some variations into the tune—reducing Cheng Shi's hostility toward her while amplifying his emotional swings.

That was why Cheng Shi had been so "verbally vicious" in his rebuttal at that moment, and why he'd so "undemocratically" decided to drag her back.

Zhang Jizu had sensed the [Folly] melody's influence early on. But since it merely amplified Cheng Shi's emotions without any other negative effects, he'd let it slide.

The little assassin Scorpio hadn't noticed a thing.

As for Cheng Shi—initially, he hadn't realized he'd been affected. His personality was naturally like this; he frequently made inflammatory remarks. Today had just been a bit more "intense" than usual.

He only realized he might have been influenced when they were already halfway back—a delayed realization that the [Folly] follower had wanted to cooperate all along.

But his epiphany hadn't come from spotting a flaw in the Soloist's melody. It was because of Zhang Jizu!

Since the trial began, squinty-eyes had been watching Cheng Shi most of the time. But on the way back, Cheng Shi noticed his gaze frequently drifting to Gao Ya—and that shift told him the [Death] Chosen One was guarding against the Soloist.

As for why he'd guard against a singer—obviously because she'd been meddling.

Replaying his own behavior, Cheng Shi quickly realized his emotions had been manipulated. Manipulated by the Soloist's silent melody.

'Got careless?'

'Not really. In a situation with a psycho teammate on the hunt, teaming up with a "smart person" isn't such a bad deal.' It was precisely because Cheng Shi hadn't been overly hostile toward the [Folly] teammate from the start that Gao Ya's little scheme had found an opening.

Having untangled this covert skirmish, Cheng Shi had said what he'd said.

He smiled at Zhang Jizu without answering directly. Getting outplayed by a Soloist wasn't exactly something to brag about.

But Zhang Jizu read his response and naturally assumed Cheng Shi had known all along—and had counter-maneuvered accordingly.

Gao Ya stood up with a complicated expression. She was about to speak when Cheng Shi cut her off:

"You get one chance. Remember to drop the [Folly] act."

"Otherwise, we go our separate ways."

"..."

The [Folly] follower gritted her teeth, fighting the urge to look down through her nostrils. She redirected her gaze sideways to a table in the lounge.

After pouring all her disdain onto that innocent table, Gao Ya finally felt comfortable enough to speak.

...

## Chapter 355: History of the Three Wu Tribes

"The Three Wu Tribes were the earliest recorded human civilization in the long history of the Life Era. They fanatically worshipped [Birth] and spread His will across the entire Land of Hope."

"For a lengthy period, the Three Wu Tribes ruled virtually the entire northern Land of Hope. Keep in mind—back then, the south was plagued by natural disasters and uninhabitable. The Abyssal Volcano hadn't erupted yet, and the Underworld remained unexplored. So ruling the north was essentially ruling everywhere life existed."

"But such glory didn't last. At some point, an unknown upheaval split the Three Wu Tribes from within—over disputes of faith, they fractured."

"The once-mighty Three Wu splintered into three groups: the well-known Ulun, the sparsely documented Uda, and the nearly forgotten Uma."

"The Ulun tribe roamed the nomadic north, becoming the Ulun Herdsmen. Wild-spirited but pragmatic, after casting off the shackles of faith, they never devoutly followed a single deity. Instead, they constantly chased the strongest one, seeking protection for their tribe's survival."

"Their faith traversed the entire [Life] Path, and their footprints appeared in the historical records of every era within the Life Era."

"Even in the Civilization Era, large numbers of people who embraced their ideology and followed their footsteps attempted to re-establish the Ulun tribe."

"The Uda tribe self-proclaimed as the Children of [Birth]. They believed not all life deserved His gaze—only those of Uda bloodline were noble enough to be considered His personally birthed creations."

"This rhetoric was deemed blasphemous heresy by countless [Birth] followers. The remnants of Uda blood were branded as 'rioters' by all and subjected to mass expulsion and slaughter, teetering on the brink of extinction."

"To preserve their 'divine bloodline,' they created the God Reproduction technique—sealing all of a living being's vitality into specific limbs and organs. This way, even if the individual died from external causes, those severed parts retained the power to reproduce."

"However, any life birthed through this heretical art would carry the bloodline memories of the Uda tribe and would consider themselves pure-blooded Uda Rioters."

"And so they perpetuated their line through this unthinkable method, enduring across history."

"As for the Uma tribe—very little was recorded about them. I only know they called themselves the Uma Sinners and created a bizarre faith artifact called 'Umbilical Blood Shackles.'"

"When someone is shackled with fetters forged from umbilical cords, they revert to the state of their own birth—losing all strength and becoming a dead infant."

"This was their ritual of atonement. Few know why they did it. But I have personally seen these eerie artifacts... and nearly died beneath their bindings."

!!!

'Umbilical Blood Shackles?'

Cheng Shi and Zhang Jizu's pupils contracted simultaneously at these words. Both recalled the scene on the Inquisition's second floor.

Those dead infants dangling from the ceiling like wind chimes—the things wrapped around their ankles were clearly "shackles" fashioned from umbilical cords!

They'd assumed that was simply how Dolgod dealt with evil infants. But who could have imagined that those human wind chimes...

...weren't actually dead?

So those infants blanketing the ceiling were living Uma members?

Could that place be an Uma gathering point?

'Wait!'

Since rescuing Scorpio, Cheng Shi had been turning over one question: if Scorpio hadn't died, then who had Gou Feng killed? Whose corpse had he used to birth his tribesman?

Now, hearing about the Three Wu Tribes, a possibility finally clicked: the Uma tribespeople!

This [Birth] warrior likely knew about the Uma. He'd recognized the inverted infants blanketing the ceiling, freed some "lucky soul" from their bonds, killed them, and then birthed a new self from the corpse.

But the suspended infants hadn't appeared to have any conspicuous gaps when he'd looked... so...

Cheng Shi and squinty-eyes locked gazes. The same thought erupted in both their minds: Gou Feng never left!

He'd audaciously strapped the so-called Umbilical Blood Shackles onto his own ankles—and hung himself from the ceiling!

He'd chosen to surrender all his power and blend in with those wind-chime dead infants, thereby evading Mo Shu's pursuit and fooling the teammates who'd come to examine the scene!

'What a bold, meticulous Chieftain!'

'What a gamble!'

But the real question remained: why had the so-called Uma Sinners appeared in Dolgod, and what were they after?

By the time the Life Era developed imperial civilizations, all three gods of the [Life] Path had long since descended. That meant roughly a thousand years had passed since the Three Wu Tribes' schism.

In current understanding, aside from the Ulun Herdsmen still roaming the north, the other tribes should have been extinct.

Why would they congregate at the Evil Infant Inquisition? What was the connection?

And why had an institution meant to punish blasphemers fallen into such ruin?

Cheng Shi's mind was brimming with questions demanding answers—which meant he needed to gather more intelligence, fast. He exhaled heavily and extended his hand toward Gao Ya.

"Pleasure working with you."

Seeing the grave expressions on Cheng Shi and Zhang Jizu's faces, Gao Ya could tell they were hiding something. Connecting it to the Inquisition, she vaguely guessed what it was. Frowning, she looked away and asked:

"That Inquisition is connected to the Three Wu Tribes, isn't it?"

"Tsk—I really am starting to respect you [Folly] folks. How'd you figure that out?"

"Heh. Fools never can hide what's on their minds."

'Here we go again.'

Cheng Shi scoffed and fired back: "Then may I ask, clever Soloist miss—can you hide the contempt you feel for everyone?"

"..." Gao Ya's face instantly darkened.

But Cheng Shi wasn't done. He added one more sarcastic jab:

"Heh. Fools never can hide the contempt on their faces."

"..."

Off to the side, Zhang Jizu watched with amusement, squinting: "Influenced again?"

Cheng Shi pursed his lips: "Nope. Genuinely wanted to roast her."

"..."

Gao Ya was well and truly livid. Not because someone had mocked her—[Folly] followers routinely tore each other apart when gathered. Getting choked up a couple times was nothing.

What infuriated her most was that the two people before her were absolutely not the fools she described. They were far too shrewd—leaving her precious few opportunities to look down on them.

When a [Folly] follower loses all opportunities to display superiority, they feel as if their Benefactor is about to abandon them.

Because [Folly] was precisely that kind of god—He despised all stupidity and abhorred all ignorance.

Seeing that Gao Ya had no intention of shaking hands, Cheng Shi didn't press. He withdrew his hand and continued:

"Arrogance is truly a disease. Anyway, I'll stop ragging on you. Miss Soloist, before we begin our next phase of action, could you tell me what you prayed for?"

"I need to reassess the risks in this trial—to figure out how to deal with the intrusion of a lunatic and draft a new exploration plan."

Gao Ya said nothing to this. She furrowed her brow slightly, quickly schooled her expression back to cold neutrality, and let her gaze drift aside—clearly unwilling to answer.

But that fleeting frown and evasive gaze-shift made both Cheng Shi and Zhang Jizu freeze simultaneously.

'Wait, hold on—'

'Don't tell me you came here specifically to... become a "sis"?''

'I can't be reading this wrong, can I?'

Cheng Shi blinked in bewilderment and glanced at squinty-eyes, who wore the same uncertain expression directed right back at him. When the two doubtful minds met each other's gaze, the doubt vanished.

A misjudgment might exist in one clever person's mind. But not simultaneously in two.

So this [Folly] bro—no, this [Folly] sis—might have already... achieved her trial objective?

'Ha. No wonder she doesn't want to die out there. She doesn't want to rejoin the squad to win the trial—she wants to hitch a ride with the main group until it's over and pass safely.'

'What else can I even say?'

Cheng Shi clicked his tongue repeatedly, thinking: 'It's the apocalypse. Everyone deserves the right to pursue gender freedom.'

"You're all experts. Absolute experts. I'm starting to think I've been too conservative."

"..."

...

Chapter 356: Good News — Found the Staff. Bad News —...

The group wasted no time. Driven by their speedrun mentality and pragmatic approach, they quickly left the lounge and headed into the church to find information about the Evil Infant Inquisition's staff.

Ideally, they'd split up to cover more ground. But for Zhang Jizu, efficient intelligence-gathering was trivial compared to his real purpose for being here. He prioritized safety above all else—so he stuck right behind Cheng Shi.

Scorpio, seeing both big shots traveling together, wasn't about to wander off alone either. He followed suit.

Gao Ya's whole objective was to avoid being isolated, so she wasn't leaving the group.

In short—four people became conjoined twins.

Cheng Shi was exasperated but resigned. He'd just have to be more creative with his questioning techniques to make up for the lost efficiency.

Although the Inquisition looked abandoned, the church staff clearly knew about the institution and understood how it operated.

So Cheng Shi identified a church worker who looked gullible, posed as a colleague, offered petty incentives, pulled him into a secluded corner, and extracted everything he knew about the Inquisition.

"The Inquisition was never dismantled—but it's not operating normally either."

"There are indeed some staff members living inside. But take my advice: no matter how curious you are, don't go in and disturb them."

"Why?"

"You really haven't heard? That shouldn't be possible. On your first day in the church, the old-timers should have warned you. Did you... also join just for the paycheck?"

"Huh?" Cheng Shi blanked, then nodded hastily. "You read people well!"

"Reading people is the foundation of surviving in the church. I could tell from the start you're not a devout believer. But don't worry—I won't rat you out. Because I'm not one either."

"Don't look at me like that. Loyalty matters. I respect anyone who's not devout. The people behind us have long lost themselves in fanatical faith—abandoned their wisdom. People like you and me, who just go through the motions insincere—we're the truly independent, truly free ones!"

"After all my years in the church, I've come to one conclusion:"

"Humanity, wisdom, and faith—you can only have two of the three."

"You and I both abandoned faith, chose wisdom and humanity. So we're the smart ones."

"But smart people need to eat too. Putting on a mask of devotion to eat—I don't think that's so unreasonable. Do you?"

Cheng Shi was stunned. He'd thought he'd randomly picked a fool, but this man turned out to be a surprisingly eloquent philosopher.

'Master, you speak the truth. I'm enlightened.'

Under Cheng Shi's increasingly worshipful gaze, the "philosopher" got carried away. He babbled on, spilling secrets:

"That person in there is a cursed sinner. You could ask anyone else and no one would tell you—because barely anyone knows."

"If I hadn't... shh, you can't tell anyone. If I hadn't snuck into the Head of Church's room, I wouldn't know either."

"The Inquisition's founding actually had nothing to do with so-called evil infants. It was a decision made a hundred years ago by a certain Head of Church—out of a sliver of personal compassion."

"The institution wasn't originally called by that name. It was called the Blasphemy Confessional. Explaining the connection between the two is somewhat complicated. Break time's limited, so I'll keep it short."

Cheng Shi nodded to himself, thinking this man was admirably forthcoming. But he soon realized the man wasn't forthcoming—he was an incurable chatterbox.

He hadn't shared his secrets with anyone in ages. The moment he found an interested listener, he grabbed Cheng Shi and talked the entire afternoon.

Cheng Shi didn't want to interrupt, because the man's words genuinely contained substance. It was just buried under mountains of nonsense—roughly at a 10:1 ratio: ten sentences of filler per one sentence of history.

Cheng Shi's head was pounding, but he endured it all. Finally, as the sun was about to set, he pieced together the full story of the Evil Infant Inquisition.

Coincidentally, he was somewhat personally connected to it.

Remember the female citizen who'd used the God Reproduction technique to have a baby—the one Cheng Shi had delivered?

Though Cheng Shi's deliveries were merely in-game projections of Life Era history, in true history, that woman really did give birth to that child. And that child grew up to become the Head of Church the chatterbox philosopher had described.

As the child matured, he gradually recognized himself as an Uda Rioter. But he felt zero resistance to this identity. In fact, he leveraged the God Reproduction technique to steadily raise his standing among [Birth] followers, successfully infiltrating the church and becoming its rising star.

He used every means to broadcast his devotion, while simultaneously scattering offspring across the city. The church believed he was physically embodying [Birth]'s will. In truth, he was only expanding the Uda bloodline.

Years later, this Uda Rioter at the peak of his prestige was elected Head of Church. But it was then that his and his kin's identities were accidentally exposed—not to the public, but to the homeless, perpetually wandering Uma people beyond the Dol Empire's borders.

These Uma people learned that their ancient kin had acquired new power in Dolgod. They flocked to him.

The Head of Church—who'd lost historical memory and retained only blood memory—took pity and sheltered them. But he couldn't override objections to feed a bunch of idle mouths with tax revenue. So he founded the Blasphemy Confessional.

Since the Uma Sinners had been perpetually atoning for their historical blasphemy, the Head of Church began using the Confessional to brainwash citizens—channeling all their non-reproductive energy into repentance, thereby maintaining social stability.

But this policy predictably enraged the populace. Under intervention from a Dol Empire Bishop, the Head of Church was deposed.

On the day of his removal, he publicly revealed his identity and furiously denounced the Dol Empire's decision as the greatest sacrilege against Him. But this only intensified the citizens' fury. They grabbed stones from the roadside and stoned him to death in front of the church.

With the Head of Church dead, the Uma Sinners he'd sheltered should have been executed too. But the succeeding Head of Church discovered the Confessional's stabilizing effect on society and found a pretext to keep them alive.

The new head tweaked the Blasphemy Confessional: universal repentance became individual condemnation. Using the label of "evil infants" and fabricated blasphemy charges, he sentenced every dissenting citizen to death.

And so the Theocracy of Growth's golden age arrived. Dolgod experienced unprecedented stability. Every citizen respected and adored the Head of Church—because all dissenters had already been sentenced to death for blasphemy.

Later, this Head of Church was promoted to Bishop within the Dol Empire. Dolgod's Inquisition fell silent once more.

This should have been the Bishop's shameful stain—to be erased upon departure. But he unexpectedly died shortly after assuming his Bishopric. Without the Bishop's support, the Evil Infant Inquisition became dormant. The next Head of Church knew full well how dangerous public exposure would be, yet couldn't bring himself to demolish it—given the late Bishop's lingering influence. And so the Inquisition was simply... left to decay.

Therefore: Dolgod never had such a thing as "evil infants." There had never been a life that shouldn't have been born.

Upon hearing this, the teammates behind Cheng Shi were all stunned.

Squinty-eyes widened. Gao Ya frowned. Scorpio looked baffled. Cheng Shi had a cryptic half-smile.

He regarded the "philosopher" before him and asked in an amused tone:

"All this historical insider knowledge... I doubt you got it just from sneaking into the Head of Church's room."

"Interesting. Who exactly are you?"

"You're not one of my dear teammates, are you?"

The "philosopher" shook his head, clearly not understanding what "teammates" meant. But he was indeed no ordinary church worker. Seeing Cheng Shi question his identity, he grinned:

"Honestly, it's rare for me to meet someone who doesn't recognize me. But even rarer to find someone willing to talk to me."

"My name is Turadin. Since you clearly don't recognize me even face-to-face, you've probably never heard my name."

"But there's another name you should know."

"My father is Berios. Ring a bell now?"

Cheng Shi laughed dryly and shook his head. The "philosopher's" expression froze instantly.

At that moment, Gao Ya behind him let out a cold snort:

"Berios. The current Head of Church of Dolgod's Theocracy of Growth."

"How interesting. Your so-called 'found a good mark for intel' turned out to be the current Head of Church's son?"

?

Cheng Shi whipped around, looked at Gao Ya, then turned back to stare at Turadin with genuine disbelief:

"You spent all afternoon bashing fanatical faith and blasphemy—and now you're telling me your father is the Head of the Theocracy of Growth?"

Turadin didn't see anything wrong with this. He shrugged:

"Precisely because he's the Head of Church, I despise everything here."

"His fanatical devotion has turned Dolgod into a hell of faith. These people see nothing but procreation. From birth to death, their minds hold one single thought: faith. They don't realize they've already died—spiritually."

"They've lost their individuality, their freedom, everything beyond religious fervor."

"This existence is suffocating and terrifying. If humans exist only to mechanically worship the almighty [Birth] enthroned above—then why, when He bestowed new life, did He also grant humanity thought and wisdom?"

"So it's wrong. All of it is wrong."

"I can't articulate exactly what's wrong. But I know that continuing like this means people cease to be people."

"I've always hoped someone would come and destroy everything here—then build, on the ruins, a new Dolgod without Him."

"And today, at last, I've found you."

"Truth is, I inducted every new recruit in the entire church. But I've never seen any of you—so you're clearly not church people."

"Who are you?"

"No—that doesn't matter. What matters is..."

"Do you need help?"

...

Chapter 357: A Life That Shouldn't Be Born? No — That's Our Holy Infant!

"Yes, we do!"

A glint flashed through Cheng Shi's eyes. His gaze shifted as something clicked, and he accepted without hesitation.

Zhang Jizu's eyes narrowed further but he remained noncommittal. It was the [Folly] follower who, upon hearing Cheng Shi's immediate reply, snapped coldly:

"Hmph. You seem to have forgotten my warning yet again. Warmth that can't be classified often harbors ulterior malice. I've reminded you repeatedly, and yet you—"

Before she could finish, Cheng Shi cut her off with a cold smile:

"If you know Dolgod and the Theocracy of Growth better than he does, then by all means, keep yapping."

"If you don't—shut up."

The second half of Gao Ya's sentence died in her throat. Her face reddened progressively under everyone's gazes until she swallowed it all back.

She shut up.

[Folly] once again walked toward [Silence].

Cheng Shi scoffed with a couple of clicks of his tongue, then turned back to Turadin:

"How can you help us? And what do you want in return?"

Turadin laughed heartily:

"You've got it wrong, brother. I don't want anything. As long as what you promised earlier still holds, I'll do everything in my power to help you."

"I don't need to know who you are or what you're after. I told you—I have no attachment to this place. I just want to see it destroyed as soon as possible."

"Whatever you're doing—since you're doing it in secret, it means Dolgod wouldn't allow it. And that means your actions will accelerate this place's downfall."

"That's enough. That's my ultimate purpose."

"So I'm telling you—the promise you made is already payment enough."

"..."

Cheng Shi studied him with a peculiar expression, thinking: 'Buddy, you were born in the wrong era. If this were a later epoch, you'd absolutely be a champion of [Oblivion].'

The teammates behind Cheng Shi wore even stranger expressions—they still had no idea what promise Cheng Shi had used to recruit the Head of Church's son.

After pondering without result, Zhang Jizu finally couldn't restrain his curiosity. He lowered his voice:

"What exactly did you promise him?"

Cheng Shi shook his head with an amused smile, saying nothing.

Turadin—standing right in front of the players—overheard the question. He smiled suggestively, then casually glanced over at Gao Ya standing nearby.

The [Folly] follower, still fuming from her shut-down, was busy pouring disdain onto a stone pillar—missing the glance entirely. But squinty-eyes caught it. He choked involuntarily, breaking into a cough.

"..."

"Don't let your imagination run wild."

Cheng Shi patted his shoulder meaningfully, then addressed Turadin:

"Then I'll get straight to the point."

"We've been to the Evil Infant Inquisition. Found lots of dead infants hanging from the ceiling. Do you know about that?"

"Your target is the Uma Sinners?" Turadin looked surprised. "That's their method of atonement. As for why they atone—ancient history, not worth rehashing. But I'm not being dramatic: you really shouldn't provoke them."

"If they truly are your target, I suggest you give up. Isn't being alive good enough?"

'Hm? These Uma Sinners are that formidable?'

Cheng Shi frowned in thought, then rubbed his chin:

"I'll level with you. Our target isn't them—it's a newborn that's about to enter this world."

"A newborn?" Turadin looked baffled. His eyes filled with surprise and curiosity as he studied Cheng Shi.  
"What kind of newborn? Are you from the Child Stealing Brotherhood?"

'Child Stealing Brotherhood? What on earth is that?'

Cheng Shi's face stiffened. He shook his head, then squeezed out a mysterious smile.

"I don't know any Child Stealing Brotherhood. But what you're asking touches on our secrets. If you want to know everything, you'll have to join us. Otherwise, this is all I can share."

Turadin jolted. His gaze swept across the players. After a moment's appraisal, he shook his head with a wry laugh:

"Faith again. I see the shadow of fanatical devotion in all of you."

"So—turns out you're not a smart person after all?"

"Could it be you're also one of those monsters who chose wisdom and faith?"

"Don't get nervous. What I'm saying is that faith isn't monolithic. Not all fanatics are monsters. If you're confident you're a smart person who won't be swayed by faith, why not hear our ideology first?"

"If you find any problems, feel free to stop me. Then our cooperation stays limited to the earlier promise."

"But if you don't reject our creed, I'll take that as willingness to join us. Deal?"

Cheng Shi worked the man like a seasoned cult leader. Turadin frowned, thought for a moment, then gave a light nod.

He had confidence in his commitment to "selfhood" and "freedom."

Watching his resolute expression, Cheng Shi shook his head with a smile—then wiped all humor from his face and began today's sermon with perfect, solemn composure.

"As it happens, we're very much like the Uma Sinners. A group abandoned by Him—completely stripped of His protection. But we've always believed that the deity watching over this land might not be Him alone."

"We've sensed the call of another existence. And we're preparing to welcome His descent with the grandest ceremony imaginable."

"You look shocked. Don't be afraid. The reason I'm telling you all this is because I sense your spirit aligns perfectly with my Lord's will. That's why I want to bring you into our fold."

"You said it perfectly: people shouldn't live for the sake of pure faith, nor twist their true will for purposes they despise."

"And that is also our creed."

"Follow your heart. Face your desires head-on. Savor everything the present offers. Live free and unfettered."

"The union of flesh between living beings should not be an offering to [Birth]—it should be for the pure enjoyment of pleasure."

"Just like you, my brother. I can read you. You're someone who truly understands the pursuit of physical pleasure. That's why I say: your will aligns with ours."

"But it's not just physical pleasure. We humans possess so many emotions. Until now, faith has suppressed, shackled, and strangled every one of them. Just as you said—if these emotions serve no purpose, why did He bestow upon us thoughts and consciousness?"

"So after being cast out, we realized this world may not be as simple as we imagined. Perhaps the one who gifted us these thoughts and desires wasn't the [Birth] we blindly followed—but another One we've never seen, yet who has always been watching us!"

"He doesn't suppress emotion. He doesn't strangle desire. He's like a loving mother, letting His people live freely, without restraint—savoring every aspect of their lives!"

"And that is why we worship Him, respect Him, and follow Him."

"We need Him. No—every living being in this world needs Him. Their paths of faith are wrong, so it falls to us to welcome His descent and guide the lost onto a brand new path."

With this freshly-angled faith manifesto, Turadin's expression shifted gradually—from contempt to composure, from gravity to astonishment, from shock to elation. His reddened eyes were finally wide with fervor.

This "embrace your desires" doctrine—unprecedented in this era—seemed to fling open the doors to a new world for Berios's son. He'd never imagined that following your heart and doing what you wanted could actually align with some deity's will.

'Among those lofty gods above, there's actually one like this?!

'This is incredible!'

'This is what a true god should be—one who doesn't force faith or restrain desire!'

Suppressing his excitement, he asked with nervous anticipation:

"He truly exists?"

"He doesn't require faith? He doesn't require offerings?"

"How can He be so lenient and open-minded?"

"If He truly exists... then who... is He?"

Seeing this reaction, Cheng Shi beamed radiantly—though the radiance carried a distinctly mischievous edge. He hooked his index fingers together and held them horizontally before his chest, bowing his head in "devout" prayer:

"Cast off your shackles. Face your heart's desires."

"We indulge, we embrace desire, we surrender to pleasure. As long as everything you do follows your desires, that itself is the greatest offering to Him."

"Great [Corruption]—we thank You for Your guidance, for leading us to yet another kindred soul who dares to pursue selfhood."

"My brother—now that you know His Divine Name, from this moment forward, you are one of us."

"[Corruption]?... [Corruption]!"

When Turadin heard that Divine Name, he felt as if dawn had broken.

No longer was there only the dreary sky shrouded by [Birth] above his head. [Corruption]'s will was like a beam of light piercing through the dark heavens and illuminating his very soul!

'So there IS such a being!'

'So people CAN live not for faith, but to bravely pursue desire!'

'So acting on impulse CAN earn a god's attention!'

At these thoughts, Turadin was overcome with elation. He wanted to dance and shout—but remembered he was deep inside a [Birth]-worshipping church. He could only press his hand over his mouth, letting his trembling body express his acceptance and joy.

"Great [Corruption]! Praise [Corruption]!"

Cheng Shi watched his expression and smiled softly:

"Yes. Great [Corruption]."

"And the newborn we seek is the Holy Infant—the embodiment of His will, arriving in this world any day now."

"The Holy Infant's birth will be heralded by omens. The Theocracy of Growth will never allow such a blasphemy against [Birth] to be safely born."

"We must safely deliver the Holy Infant into this world. Then, under the Holy Infant's guidance, spread His will to every corner of the Land of Hope—and free all of humanity from the shackles of thought and desire."

"This is the grand aspiration of us, the followers of [Corruption]!"

At this scene, every one of Cheng Shi's teammates fell silent.

Not one of the other three had spoken a word since this started.

Before, whenever Cheng Shi pulled a scam, Zhang Jizu could at least chuckle internally. But now—watching this [Deceit] follower use [Corruption]'s ideology to crack a [Birth] trial—he couldn't laugh anymore.

'That Lord sent me here... surely not to protect Cheng Shi from [Birth]?'

'Setting aside whether I even could—this Master of Trickery... how does he dare?'

'Using this approach, even if he wins the trial—will he earn points?'

'If not, then why go to such extremes?'

'Also—since when did the solicitation gesture from the Land of Hope's pleasure houses become [Corruption]'s prayer gesture? Isn't that blasphemy on both counts?'

Scorpio's mind was even more of a mess. He was starting to suspect this supposed Bald Uses Rejoice Wood Elf had already given up on winning the trial altogether.

Only Gao Ya's head remained clear. She saw through Cheng Shi's plan and genuinely admired his courage to stake his life on this approach.

It had to be admitted: this pretense not only bound Turadin to their ship, but gave a perfectly reasonable excuse for this newly recruited church insider—now hell-bent on building merit for [Corruption]—to hunt down the so-called "life that shouldn't be born" with everything he had.

Of course, they couldn't call it that anymore. Now it was the Holy Infant.

[Corruption]'s Holy Infant.

After spending a long moment in ecstasy, Turadin turned to Cheng Shi. His eyes blazed with fanaticism. He seemed to have already absorbed himself into this mysterious [Corruption] organization, shouldering the "grand aspiration" from Cheng Shi's speech without the slightest reservation.

He suddenly felt his life had meaning again!

"The Head of Church's room contains a record of citizens' expected delivery dates. It must list citizens due to give birth soon. I'll go find it immediately. Before long, we'll be standing guard beside the Holy Infant—my brothers!"

"..."

'Brothers...'

'《How to Get the Head of Church's Son to Call You Brother in Under Thirty Minutes!》'

Cheng Shi's expression was indescribable as he watched this "smart person" who'd just been pontificating about "humanity, faith, and wisdom—pick two, and I chose humanity and wisdom."

'See? If someone truly chose to abandon faith in that pick-two question and called themselves smart—it only means they haven't met the right faith yet.'

Turadin right here was the finest proof. Only now, he'd found his true lord:

[Corruption]!

Under desire's guidance, he was finally walking the "correct" path.

As for whether that path was truly correct...

Who could say? After all, [Fate] was full of [Change].

Even Cheng Shi hadn't expected that simply mentioning [Corruption]'s Divine Name and ideology could rouse a faith-starved human to this degree.

'Faith, it seems, is always fanatical.'

...

Chapter 358: The Unexpected Arrives — Where's the Holy Infant?

The Evil Infant Inquisition being a shell organization had nearly driven the players' investigation into a dead end. But Turadin's unexpected appearance—combined with Cheng Shi's masterful con job—had turned the trial on its head.

This was great news. No more sneaking back to haul evil infant files overnight. No more worrying about whether the evil infant "history" he'd improvised was accurate. After all, the entire Inquisition was fake—Dolgod had never had any "legitimate" evil infants.

Cheng Shi exhaled heavily. He glanced at squinty-eyes. The two exchanged a knowing look but neither mentioned the possibility that Gou Feng might still be hanging from the second-floor ceiling of the Inquisition.

Both steady players had no desire to venture back into danger, nor to investigate the relationship between the Three Wu Tribes and Dolgod. They just wanted to clear the trial quickly and finish their respective missions.

Turadin left in high spirits—off to the Head of Church's room to find those childbirth records. He told the players he'd have the list stolen by midnight, so they should hold tight and wait.

Watching Turadin leave, Cheng Shi clicked his tongue and addressed the group:

"I suggest everyone change their appearance and disguise their identity. Although I believe the Head of Church's son genuinely has the talent for being a [Corruption] follower, who knows what countermeasures the Theocracy of Growth might have. So as a precaution—get some disguises."

"Once he's actually secured the list without being caught, we can show ourselves."

"And don't forget—there's still an [Oblivion] warrior hunting out there. Changing our look might buy us some safety."

Everyone nodded and agreed to find rooms within the church to alter their appearances, then reconvene in the small courtyard outside the lounge.

For once, the group briefly scattered. Scorpio vanished into the shadows. Gao Ya cautiously blended into the church crowd. Zhang Jizu didn't budge—he had zero intention of leaving Cheng Shi's side.

Cheng Shi said somewhat helplessly: "Bro, do you have a crush on me?"

Zhang Jizu laughed and shook his head: "You sent them away. Where are you going?"

"You caught that?"

"Your intent was obvious. You didn't even try to hide it. Everyone could tell."

"Otherwise Scorpio and Gao Ya wouldn't have left at this moment. You hold the team's authority, so they cooperated and gave you personal time."

"Perceptive bunch." Cheng Shi remarked as he began walking—in the same direction Turadin had gone. "Turadin's appearance was too convenient. Why does the insider we found in the church just happen to know all this? Aren't you curious?"

Zhang Jizu narrowed his eyes with some surprise.

"But you picked this target yourself. I was right behind you watching you deliberate between several marks before choosing him."

"So why do you think there's a problem?"

"Why? I don't know why myself." Cheng Shi laughed self-deprecatingly. He could hardly say he'd been conned so many times that he'd developed a conditioned response—every coincidence looked like a scam now.

"What I can confirm is that choosing him as my angle was based on observation. But I can't be sure who placed him in my line of sight."

"This also relates to what I prayed for. I need to understand what He actually wants me to know."

Zhang Jizu's pupils contracted. He whispered: "What exactly did you pray for?"

Cheng Shi answered while walking: "I prayed for a trial to have an audience with my Benefactor. Instead, I got matched into a [Birth] trial."

"You wanted an audience with [Deceit]?"

"What does the Fun God have to do with anything? I'm a Wood Elf, remember? So my Benefactor is [Prosperity], big bro."

'Right, right, right—your Benefactor is [Prosperity]...'

Zhang Jizu was speechless. He thought: 'If [Prosperity] had a follower who talked this much nonsense, He'd probably die of fury.'

'But why did [Birth] intercept [Deceit]'s trial?'

'Does He truly want to tell Cheng Shi something through this trial?'

'Why not just summon him directly?'

'Why have all the gods become so cryptic lately? [Deceit] wants to protect His follower but won't act personally. [Birth] has something to say but won't summon him directly...'

'What's going on with Them?'

'Has something happened that I don't know about?'

Zhang Jizu followed Cheng Shi with a deeply furrowed brow, watching him circle out of the main hall and start scaling walls toward the Head of Church's room on a higher level. He immediately understood.

"You're planning to shadow Turadin? Make sure he gets the list without a hitch?"

"Not exactly. I have a feeling more people will conveniently wander into my field of vision—just like Turadin. So I want to see if he's the only insider."

"..." A novel rationale.

But Zhang Jizu said nothing and followed anyway—the very picture of a dutiful bodyguard helplessly watching his client court death.

The two clung to the outer wall of the church compound's tallest building like geckos, inching upward centimeter by centimeter. Before long, they reached just below the window balcony of the Head of Church's room.

They dangled beneath the balcony, peering carefully inside. Currently, only Turadin occupied the room.

He clearly knew his father's schedule—certain the Head of Church wouldn't be here at this hour. That's why he'd rushed over.

With practiced ease, he reached to the top of a cabinet, fished out a key, unlocked a drawer beneath the Head of Church's desk, and pulled out stacks of documents. With expert efficiency, he counted to a specific page and extracted a single sheet.

Watching this, Cheng Shi remarked with a strange expression:

"He's definitely done this more than a few times."

Squinty-eyes hummed softly: "A father can never hide from his son."

Just as both assumed everything was going smoothly—that Turadin would tuck the list into his shirt and leave—an unexpected development unfolded.

Turadin was gripping the birth record sheet with whitened knuckles, his arm trembling slightly. His eyes swept back and forth across the page again and again, his face shifting from blank to disbelieving.

"This doesn't make sense. How is this possible?"

"Where's the [Corruption] Holy Infant? Why aren't there any citizens expecting to give birth soon?"

"Could everything they said be lies?"

"No, no—they clearly don't follow [Birth]. What they said should be true. But where's the Holy Infant?"

Turadin was panicking. He frantically flipped through other documents, desperately searching for a sheet with the "Holy Infant's name." But there was nothing. No matter how carefully he searched, not a single additional birth record turned up.

Watching this scene, both Cheng Shi's and Zhang Jizu's expressions darkened.

'Just as I suspected. This trial was never going to be that simple. Dolgod has no officially documented citizens due to give birth anytime soon.'

Which meant they had absolutely no way of finding the so-called "life that shouldn't be born" through this approach.

"I knew it. Getting matched with people like you couldn't possibly make for an easy mission."

"No wonder He gave seven days. Looks like a speedrun is out of the question."

"..."

...

Chapter 359: Splitting Up

Despite Cheng Shi's words sounding deflated, his tone carried more mockery than disappointment. Seeing he wasn't truly discouraged, Zhang Jizu asked curiously:

"What's your plan?"

"I'm thinking: since the church has no records, it means there are two scenarios."

"One—illegal pregnancy. The expecting mother we're looking for must have gone into hiding long ago, undiscovered by the church. Perhaps in the coming days, she won't be able to hide anymore."

"Based on my experience, it's also possible that our search itself is what exposes her. Fate can be unpredictable like that."

"Two—supernatural birth. This one's trickier. It means someone in Dolgod might have the ability—like our Chieftain teammate—to impregnate others and trigger rapid delivery. That kind of scenario is impossible to predict; the entire pregnancy and birth might happen in an instant. Missing it means total trial failure."

"I'm hoping for the first scenario. But my gut says it's probably the second."

"Either way, we need to be fully prepared."

"Squinty-eyes—I don't want to lose. So... help me out?"

Zhang Jizu's expression turned extremely strange. He turned to Cheng Shi, studied him for a moment, and said: "What did you just call me?"

Cheng Shi jolted. 'Crap—said the quiet part out loud.' He hastily laughed it off: "Nickname. It's a nickname."

Zhang Jizu narrowed his eyes, lips twitching: "The last person who called me that was..."

"..."

Some things didn't need to be finished for Cheng Shi to understand. They exchanged a look, mutually averted their gazes, and simultaneously thought: 'Bad omen.'

"Ahem... let's not talk about that. I genuinely need a favor."

Zhang Jizu shook his head and flatly refused—without even hearing the request.

Cheng Shi blanked again. His gaze sharpened as he studied the other man. After a moment of thought, he asked quietly:

"Did that Lord send you?"

This wasn't a far-fetched guess. Zhang Jizu's behavior all day had been indistinguishable from a bodyguard's.

Zhang Jizu hadn't planned to hide it. After half a day of traveling together and getting a read on Cheng Shi, he felt concealment was pointless.

First, the man was clever enough to figure it out eventually. Second, setting aside the lying, this Master of Trickery was genuinely worth befriending—his cautiousness, at least, was right up Zhang Jizu's alley.

So he nodded and said concisely: "Yes."

Cheng Shi frowned, wondering what was going on—was he about to run into trouble?

But then Zhang Jizu continued: "I prayed to [Deceit] for a trial, and He personally delivered me here."

"The Fun God? The Fun God sent you?"

Cheng Shi blinked in bewilderment, then dipped his head in thought. Some time later—as Turadin inside the room began dejectedly sorting documents and preparing to leave—he looked up at Zhang Jizu:

"I don't know what the Fun God is planning. But believe this: before the show He wants to see has played out, He absolutely won't let its lead actor get into trouble."

"To be clearer—I'm probably that lead actor. Do you understand?"

Zhang Jizu looked at Cheng Shi with a peculiar expression, then nodded.

"Good. Right now the situation is unclear. I need a backup plan to prevent this trial from failing. Squi—... Old Zhang, I really do need your help. I can't trust anyone else. Only you. And only you can keep him alive."

Zhang Jizu frowned: "Who?"

"Gou Feng!"

"?" Zhang Jizu's pupils contracted slightly. He repeated: "The Chieftain?"

"Exactly. To win this trial safely, we need to keep him alive first. I can't confirm he's still living, but I want you to check. If he is—keep him alive at all costs."

"Don't worry about me. I definitely won't die. Trust me—and if you don't trust me, trust that Lord. Think about it: if He agreed to send you here, that means I'm at least somewhat in His good graces, right?"

"So as long as the gods Themselves don't make a move, I'll survive. Even if it means becoming a skull."

Normally, no matter how eloquently Cheng Shi argued, Zhang Jizu wouldn't have agreed. But when he heard "skull," he stared at Cheng Shi in astonishment:

"You've been to the Fishbone Hall?"

Cheng Shi blinked rapidly: "Yep. Had the honor of being summoned once."

Zhang Jizu's eyes narrowed, his gaze intensifying:

"They're pushing their faiths toward fusion, aren't they?"

"[Death] and... [Deceit]?"

'Huh?'

'Are They?'

Cheng Shi was caught off guard, but didn't show it. Instead, he ran with Zhang Jizu's hypothesis:

"That's my guess too. Otherwise, that Lord wouldn't have summoned me, and you wouldn't have been thrown beside me by the Fun God."

"So this is most likely Their test. They probably want to see how a Master of Trickery and a Gravekeeper cooperate—hoping our performance sparks fresh ideas for the faith fusion. Sound right?"

Zhang Jizu fell silent. It made some sense, but his Benefactor's words still echoed in his ears. He'd been told to protect Cheng Shi—not to generate "fresh sparks."

Seeing an opening, Cheng Shi pressed on:

"So we don't just need to win—we need to win beautifully. Now is exactly the time to join forces. You go find Gou Feng. I'll guide Turadin."

"Trust me. We'll win."

Zhang Jizu's eyes had nearly squinted shut. He studied his protection target again and again without asking a single question about the plan. Instead, he suddenly asked:

"If [Deceit] and [Death] do walk side by side in the future—will your other [Fate] personality agree?"

?

'What other personality? I'm not Zhen Xin.'

But Cheng Shi blurted out without thinking: "I'm a Wood Elf... sorry, force of habit. I'm a Master of Trickery. What's my connection to [Fate]?"

Zhang Jizu snorted a squinting laugh and shook his head:

"Not a single truthful word leaves your mouth. I'm even starting to doubt your Master of Trickery identity."

"Stop lying. That Lord told me you carry both [Deceit] and [Fate]."

!!!

'It's over. I hid it for so long, and my identity leaked through [Death]'s mouth.'

'Bones without lips can't keep secrets—that's just unreliable. Boss! How could You just sell me out like that?!'

Still, the "alternate personality" angle made a convenient excuse. Since Zhen Xin had an alter ego, it shouldn't be too strange if he had one too.

Seeing concealment was pointless, Cheng Shi came clean:

"You're right. Like Zhen Xin, I have an alternate personality that follows [Fate]. But he's a complete lunatic. I'd suggest keeping your distance."

"I already have a method to separate him. When the time comes, [Deceit] will be [Deceit] and [Fate] will be [Fate]—no longer connected."

Zhang Jizu stared at Cheng Shi, thinking: 'You [Deceit] folks sure play wild. The Chosen One splits into a lunatic—fine. But the person [Deceit] chose also splits into a lunatic—and that lunatic even hooked up with the previous one.'

'Your esteemed [Void] circle really is... void.'

He shook his head with a smile, deciding that overthinking was pointless.

Cheng Shi's logic held up. If the entire trial revolved around a single objective, it did seem petty. How that Lord would view such behavior was uncertain.

Moreover, for the sake of future faith fusion, he was willing to take Cheng Shi at his word and give it a try.

Though his preference leaned toward [Prosperity] rather than [Deceit], sometimes preference alone didn't determine outcomes.

So instead of refusing Cheng Shi's proposal, he reached into his spatial storage and pulled out a palm-sized, oddly-shaped but fleshy little figurine, placing it in Cheng Shi's pocket.

Cheng Shi, bewildered by the still-squirming "little living person" in his pocket, asked in shock:

"What is this?"

"A Substitute Death Doll, made by a Backstage Puppeteer. Those [Folly] followers really do research divine wonders more deeply than [Truth]'s—but in far more twisted directions."

"This item is extremely rare. Few know what it does. It can save your life once. But never let anyone resurrect it—because it dies in your place, assuming your identity. If it's revived, your identity gets stolen."

"So after you unexpectedly die and come back—even before running, burn it first. I don't need to explain how terrifying identity theft is."

"This is the only lifesaving tool I have that works passively and can be given to others. Usage is simple: just keep it on your person. It doesn't bond to a master—it bonds to the nearest life form. Guard it well, and be careful."

"I'll head to the Evil Infant Inquisition. I'll return as quickly as I can. Until then—don't blow up the sky."

With that, Zhang Jizu let go of the wall, about to drop straight down from the tall building.

But just then, Cheng Shi freed a hand and grabbed him. As Zhang Jizu stood there utterly stupefied—half-wondering if Cheng Shi had changed his mind—a die slid out from Cheng Shi's sleeve like a magician's trick.

The die rolled along their clasped wrists and tumbled into Zhang Jizu's work-uniform sleeve.

"This is...?"

"Fair's fair. You be careful too. And—bye-bye, not seeing you out."

He released his grip, letting the self-proclaimed unkillable squinty-eyes plummet straight down.

BOOM—

Something slammed into the ground below.

The tremendous noise startled Turadin inside the room. Cheng Shi flashed a mischievous grin, vaulted over the balcony into the Head of Church's room, and walked toward the son who'd already put all the documents back.

"How are you here—?!"

...

Chapter 360: Artificial Holy Infant

Turadin never dreamed these people could be this bold—barging straight into the Head of Church's office.

'I can come in because he's my father. What's your excuse?'

'Is he your father too?'

But now wasn't the time for such concerns. Compared to finding no expecting citizens, what terrified him more was these followers of the new god [Corruption] being discovered by church personnel and subjected to brutal interrogation.

They were the hope for spreading the new faith—they couldn't fall here!

So Turadin hurried forward, pulled Cheng Shi into the room, and ducked behind a massive bookcase, drawing the nearby curtain closed.

This created a narrow space behind the curtain, concealing them both.

Watching these practiced maneuvers, Cheng Shi smiled.

"You're still smiling? You're insanely reckless. Do you know what happened to the last person who broke into the Head of Church's office?"

Turadin's tone was genuinely anxious, tinged with anger—not at Cheng Shi's recklessness, but at himself for failing to find news of the [Corruption] Holy Infant.

Cheng Shi, seeing his state, showed zero panic. Still wearing his light smile, he asked with raised eyebrows: "What happened?"

"What happened?"

"Stripped of reproductive rights, then skinned alive and lacquered with gold paint!"

"You don't want to know how they treat blasphemers. And you, my friend—trespassing into the church compound is already a crime of blasphemy!"

Turadin's expression during the punishment description carried genuine fear, but he quickly shook it off:

"Never mind that. We have a big problem. Where did your information about the Holy Infant's imminent birth come from?"

"From me."

Turadin blanked, then snapped irritably:

"I know it came from you. Stop wasting time with word games. I mean—where's the original source of your intelligence?"

"Was it a divine oracle He delivered?"

"Or some form of divination?"

"When did you receive this information? Most importantly—is it verified?"

Cheng Shi's expression was strange. He pointed at himself and said with perfect composure:

"I'm not playing word games. The source of the information is me."

"He delivered no oracle. We performed no prophecy regarding the Holy Infant. The source is me—I personally stated the Holy Infant's imminent birth."

"..." Turadin was dumbfounded. Infinite confusion rose in his eyes. "What? You just said it? If there's no divination, no prophecy, no oracle—doesn't that mean the Holy Infant's birth is something you made up?"

"You tricked me?!"

"What are you really after?"

"Why would you use secrets of a new god and this beautiful ideology to deceive me?!"

Turadin was crying. Cursing and crying simultaneously.

This same "smart person" who'd been scorning fanatical faith just that afternoon had, by evening, become a devout [Corruption] follower—now weeping over a fake Holy Infant.

His reverence for [Corruption]'s ideology was clearly genuine, as was his desire for its true arrival.

But such a stark contrast still left Cheng Shi feeling a pang of emotion.

'A life of [Birth] about to descend into [Corruption]. Hard to say whose fault that is.'

'But whoever's fault it is, it's definitely not mine...'

Cheng Shi sighed internally. All he needed was a tool—someone who could make a Holy Infant appear and ensure the entire church knew about it. Turadin fit perfectly. That's why he'd come.

Watching Turadin sob furiously, Cheng Shi gradually dropped his smile. His face turned serious:

"What constitutes deception?"

Turadin wiped his tears, aggrieved beyond words: "The Holy Infant's birth is fake—fabricated out of thin air! How is that not deception?!"

"Who said the Holy Infant's birth is fake?"

"?" Turadin's eyes were practically shooting fire. He grabbed Cheng Shi's collar, snarling: "You said it yourself! You said there was no oracle, no divination, no prophecy! You fabricated the whole thing out of nothing! How much more are you going to toy with me?!"

Cheng Shi didn't resist. With a calm, cold smile, he answered:

"Yes, I said it. But why does something I said have to be fake?"

"???"

Turadin froze. He sensed Cheng Shi's words held deeper meaning. Brow furrowed, he locked eyes with Cheng Shi, trying to decipher what this self-proclaimed [Corruption] follower was really saying.

Cheng Shi snorted softly and continued:

"Let me ask you a question. Why do we need a Holy Infant?"

"Why?"

"Naturally—to spread the new god's name under the Holy Infant's banner! To fill every corner of the world with His will and radiance! To save these people whose minds have been corroded by [Birth]'s ideology!"

"Those were your words!"

Turadin answered through gnashing teeth. Cheng Shi nodded approvingly:

"Correct. That's exactly right. Now, second question:"

"What does the Holy Infant look like?"

Turadin paused, then grew more furious: "The Holy Infant is fake—who knows what He looks like? Even if He were real, He hasn't been born yet, so how could anyone—"

Mid-sentence, Turadin choked on his own words. He seemed to suddenly grasp Cheng Shi's meaning. His eyes went wide with disbelief as he stammered:

"You... you... you want to fabricate one?!"

"You want to fabricate a Holy Infant?!"

"Smart!" Cheng Shi flicked Turadin's trembling hand off his collar and straightened his clothing. "But wrong word choice. It's not fabrication—it's creation. Spreading a new god's will requires a symbol. We lack that symbol. So we're going to craft one ourselves."

Turadin's mind was roaring. He stared at Cheng Shi in shock, barely able to form words:

"You... this is blasphemy!"

"Blasphemy?" Cheng Shi shook his head with devout serenity. "No, no, no. You're wrong. This isn't blasphemy. This is following my own desires. And embracing desire is the greatest possible offering to Him!"

"So I'm not blaspheming against Him—I'm... making an offering to Him!"

BOOM—

Turadin's brain exploded.

His entire body trembled at this rebellious yet electrifying interpretation of [Corruption]'s will. Cheng Shi's words echoed in his skull as his lips moved uncontrollably, murmuring:

"Not blasphemy... but offering..."

"Embrace desire... embrace desire... craft a Holy Infant... carry His will to the world..."

"Cast off shackles... face your heart's desires..."

As he murmured, the chaos in Turadin's eyes cleared once more. A devout, resolute light glinted through as he solemnly hooked his index fingers together before his chest, proclaiming with ringing conviction:

"Cast off shackles! Face your heart's desires!"

"..."

'I should never have used that gesture here!'

But the mood had already been built to this crescendo. Cheng Shi couldn't very well slap his own face. So he reluctantly joined in with the full gesture.

'Way too weird. Two men doing this to each other. Way too weird...'

After the "prayer," Turadin wiped the tears and snot from his face and said with absolute seriousness:

"The Holy Infant must be born soon?"

'Oh? He's already got a plan?'

'I didn't even say anything and he's already extrapolating?'

Cheng Shi was pleasantly surprised. He nodded rapidly: "Yes. We have a full [Corruption] ideology promotion campaign ready. But the prerequisite is—a Holy Infant."

"Understood. I have a way. The church library's third floor still has the Uma Sinners' Descent Technique under seal. Once we get it, we can have the 'Holy Infant' born within days!"

'Descent Technique?'

Cheng Shi raised an eyebrow, thinking: 'As expected—the Theocracy of Growth knows something about the Uma Sinners.'

But that wasn't the key issue. Making someone give birth was simple. The real question was how to convince people this was [Corruption]'s Holy Infant. That was the reason he needed Turadin.

No one understood how to enrage [Birth] followers better than someone who despised [Birth]. No one understood the church's internal information networks better than the Head of Church's own son. If he could use Turadin's methods to establish the fabricated Holy Infant's identity—then rescue it—wouldn't that complete the trial?

And this was precisely Cheng Shi's solution for clearing the trial!

Since Dolgod didn't have a "life that shouldn't be born"—he'd just create one. When everyone believed a particular baby was [Corruption]'s Holy Infant, saving it would fulfill the trial's requirements.

As for whether Dolgod truly had such a life...

Maybe. But he hadn't found it.

'Whose fault is it for hiding so well...'

Cheng Shi smiled and listened carefully for any movement nearby, then pulled the curtain open.

No word yet from squinty-eyes. So securing the Descent Technique as a backup plan remained the priority. He pointed out the window:

"Then... lead the way?"

Turadin gave a firm nod: "Follow me!"

...